

9.

MUSLIM PROSELYTIZATION AS PURIFICATION

Religious Pluralism and Conflict in Contemporary Mali

Benjamin F. Soares

INTRODUCTION

Despite the long history of Islam in the region of West Africa that is the present-day Republic of Mali, it is only in the twentieth century that it has become the religion of the majority. This had hardly been the case at the time of the French conquest and the onset of colonial rule at the close of the nineteenth century. At that time, there were many in the region who were not Muslims—"animists," "pagans," or "unbelievers" in the different languages of their detractors. While perhaps the greatest waves of "conversion" by such people to Islam came during French colonial rule, there have been various efforts to convert non-Muslims to Islam and to eradicate certain social and religious practices deemed un-Islamic in the postcolonial period.¹ In this essay I begin by discussing the nature of religious pluralism in Mali, highlighting some of the practices that many Muslims find objectionable, and that, therefore, are a

Various parts of the research for this paper were funded by Fulbright-Hays, the Fulbright Program of USIA through the West African Research Association, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and Northwestern University. An earlier version was presented to the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in 1995. I am grateful to Robert Launay, Hudita Mustafa, Anna Pondopoulo, and Diana Stone for comments on that version, and to Rosalind I.J. Hackett, John O. Hunwick, Robert Launay, Adeline Masquelier, Abdullahi An-Na'im, and Patrick Royer for comments and suggestions for the present version.

major source of tension, if not outright conflict, between Islam and Muslims, on the one hand, and—for lack of a better term—traditional religions and their practitioners, on the other. I then turn to consider the proselytization activities of one of Mali's most celebrated, contemporary Muslim religious leaders, examining the actual mechanisms of his campaigns to spread Islam among non-Muslims and to extirpate allegedly un-Islamic practices, most notably, spirit possession, as well as some of the intended and unintended consequences of such proselytization efforts. Such attention to religious pluralism and proselytization activities in this region of West Africa affords a significant opportunity for reflection on some of the complexity of the ways in which different social actors construe and reconstrue phenomena as "Islamic" and "un-Islamic."

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Religious pluralism is an important defining feature of the social landscape of contemporary Mali. Although estimates of the breakdown of Mali's population by religion are unreliable, Muslims may comprise between 70 and 90 percent and non-Muslims as much as 30 percent of the country's estimated nine million inhabitants (cf. Brenner 1993). There is considerable diversity in the religious discourses and practices of Muslims, as well as non-Muslims in the country. As far as the plurality of Islamic discourses and practices, there are basically three different conceptions of Islam: the Sufi, the anti-Sufi, and a third, incipient one, which has appeared in the context of an expanded postcolonial sphere and allows Muslims to identify with the broader Islamic community. Since at least the nineteenth century, a few Sufi orders (Arabic, *tariqa*), particularly the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya (including the Hamawiyya, a branch of the Tijaniyya), have been the main institutional forms for the practice of Islam in certain parts of the country. Mali has also been the site for important anti-Sufi activities, most notably by a loose group of self-styled "Sunnis"—locally known as Wahhabis² (a term they generally reject) who, since the 1940s, have sought to bring the practice of Islam in Mali closer to "correct" practices modeled on the presumed center of the Islamic world, the Arab Middle East. Most Malian Muslims, however, are neither formally affiliated with any of the Sufi orders nor especially enthusiastic about the anti-Sufis. In Mali, there is increasingly a more generally shared (though hardly uniform) sense of being Muslim and a commitment to Islam as a religion that has developed in the postcolonial period, which allows Muslims to imagine themselves as part of the global Islamic community.³

Some of the earliest known Arabic sources about West Africa from the eleventh century describe all sorts of practices deemed un-Islamic (see Trimingham 1962). Today, as in the past, certain individuals and groups, who call themselves Muslims, engage in a range of practices, which many, if not most, Muslim religious leaders and some laypersons in the country characterize

unequivocally as un-Islamic. That is, most Malian Muslims, whether Sufi, anti-Sufi, or not, object to some of the social and religious practices of others (Muslims and non-Muslims) in the country.⁴ "Spirit possession" is perhaps the most widespread (and familiar to outside observers) of these practices. It is practiced in various forms in villages, towns, and cities throughout Mali, as in many other Muslim societies in the broader region and beyond. Indeed, spirit possession is so prevalent in so many different Muslim societies that some scholars (e.g., Boddy 1989; Lewis 1986; Lewis et al. 1991) treat it as closely related to other Islamic discourses rather than as outside the realm of Islam or as forms of what is often called "popular" Islam. Without downplaying the influence of Islam on spirit possession, I want to point to the tensions between those who declare spirit possession un-Islamic and those who deny this as well as the long history of such tensions (see Masquelier 1993a).

Although the history of spirit possession in this part of West Africa is inadequately understood, it has had a long presence in this region.⁵ Over the centuries, in a number of different Arabic texts Muslim scholars in the region have pointed to the practice of what we might today call spirit possession and mediumship.⁶ In the nineteenth century, prior to the onset of French colonial rule, some European visitors to the region documented its existence (e.g., Raffeneil 1856). In the early twentieth century, French colonial scholar-administrators collected ethnological and historical materials which suggested that certain Muslim leaders in the nineteenth-century Futanke state in Karta (in present-day western Mali) not only tolerated a form of spirit possession but even patronized those who organized it.⁷ One of the leaders of the Futanke state is said to have sought out a renowned spirit medium for the treatment of an illness. Such patronage of spirit possession by the Muslim leader was, at the time, so controversial that some of the subjects objected, complaining that the ruler had become an "unbeliever" (Arabic, *kaffir*). That is, they effectively performed *takfir* (Arabic), declared that he ceased to be a Muslim. This was perhaps the most serious charge with which to challenge the legitimacy of his rule, and, as such, may have been a crucial factor in the power struggle that ensued in Karta prior to the French conquest (cf. Hanson 1996).

Although it is not possible to trace direct links between such reported instances and descriptions of spirit possession from the past and contemporary religious practices, we can say that today spirit possession is regularly practiced in a variety of forms throughout Mali (Colleyn 1988; Gibbal 1982, 1984, 1994; Malle 1985). In parts of Mali, many of those involved in spirit possession are organized into what are locally called "spirit societies" (*jine-ton* in Bamanakan) and "the dance of spirits" (*jine-don* in Bamanakan) (Gibbal 1982; Malle 1985),⁸ the structure and organization of which are reminiscent of the Sufi orders (Lewis 1986, 102; Makris 1996). Like the Sufi orders, the spirit societies have a hierarchical structure in which spirit mediums—many of whom are women—are the leaders or organizers of the activities of the societies. For example, meetings and ceremonies are generally held only with the permission of the head spirit medium(s). The associates and followers of the mediums are

generally in relations of subordination to them; that is, much like the adepts of Sufi orders are subordinate to Sufi leaders (*shaykhs*). Some spirit mediums are known for their considerable wealth and conspicuous consumption. In this way, they are not unlike some of the leaders of the main Sufi orders in the region, who are widely known for their ostentation and lavish lifestyles (see Soares 1996b). In addition, certain spirits in the pantheon are Muslim "saints" (Arabic, *wali*)—for example, Ahmad al-Tijani, the founder of the Tijaniyya—though not any recent saints from the immediate region.

It is important to note that people seek out the services of the spirit societies for many of the same reasons that they seek out practitioners of what can be called the Islamic esoteric sciences (Brenner 1985; Soares 1997a), that is, for good health, prosperity, or simply to make sense of the world (cf. Boddy 1994). In perhaps more cases than in the use of the specifically Islamic esoteric sciences, people seek out spirit societies and mediums for their therapeutic services. Indeed, this is how some leading spirit mediums spoke to me about their clientele. This may not be unrelated to the fact that even though most of those involved with spirit possession profess to be Muslims, the spirit societies usually maintain close ties with non-Muslim healers and diviners (*doma* in Bamanakan), for their knowledge of *bamanaya*.⁹ In Bamanakan, Mali's most widely spoken language and increasingly its main lingua franca, *bamanaya* refers to the expert knowledge of the Bamana (or Bambara in French and in Arabic sources)—read non-Muslim—that includes practices involving blood sacrifice and the use of religious or power objects, as well as the use of plant-derived medicines for purposes of divination, protection against misfortune, and accumulation (cf. Bazin 1985; Soares 1997b; McNaughton 1988).

Many Malian Muslims readily assert that Islam and being Muslim are irreconcilable with spirit possession. Malian Christians (Catholics and Protestants) make similar statements about the incompatibility of Christianity and spirit possession. There are several kinds of objections that people have to spirit possession. Interestingly, the close association with non-Muslim healers is not among them. As in the nineteenth century case from Karta, many Muslims state that those who participate in spirit possession are effectively unbelievers. From this perspective, even though such people might call themselves Muslims or even act as such—through regular prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and so forth—they are not "really" Muslims. This is because those who participate in spirit possession treat what they do in communicating and interacting with spirits (Arabic, *jinn*) as a religion (Arabic, *din*). In this way of thinking, since Islam is the only true religion, it necessarily follows that all people should give up spirit possession in all its forms.

For many Malian Muslims, one of the specific problems with spirit possession centers around questions of the sacrifice of animals during possession ceremonies. Specifically, the blood in animal sacrifice is spilled for spirits and not for God, not unlike the practices associated with non-Muslims in Mali. For this reason, many Muslim religious leaders and even laypersons in Mali condemn those involved in spirit possession for "association" or polytheism

(Arabic, *shirk*), labeling such people *mushrikun*, which translates somewhat loosely from the Arabic as idolaters. According to reported "Traditions" of the Prophet Muhammad, idolatry or polytheism is the greatest of sins (see Wensinck 1927). It is likely that Malians are drawing consciously or not upon such "Traditions."

Now I want to focus on some of the allegedly blamable practices known or at least suspected by some Muslims to occur during spirit possession. From the perspective of many Muslims, not only the spilling but also the use of the blood of a sacrificed animal is clearly forbidden. In spirit possession ceremonies, an animal is ritually sacrificed, according to the precepts of Islamic law. That is, a Muslim man wields the knife and utters "in the name of God." According to the Islamic legal texts used in this region as well as local practices and conventions, meat is only licit for consumption if sacrificed in such a manner (al-Qayrawani 1975, 297).¹⁰ Since the meat of the sacrificed animal is prepared for a meal and nearly all those involved in spirit possession consider themselves Muslims, sacrifice according to Islamic legal precepts is taken for granted and generally unreflected upon. It is what happens during, or perhaps more accurately, after the sacrifice that is even more controversial. As the blood is flowing from the animal, someone, usually a spirit medium's assistant, catches some of the blood in a container, usually a calabash. Although this blood might be used in the confection of medicines, some of it may be used immediately for anointing. On some occasions, individuals might touch the fresh blood with the index finger of the right hand and put this finger in the mouth.¹¹ In some cases, this may be prelude to the onset of the dancing that accompanies possession by a specific spirit or spirits. In any case, the consumption of blood is unambiguously forbidden according to the locally used Islamic legal texts (al-Qayrawani 1975, 297). Moreover, nearly every Muslim in this context is able to articulate such a prohibition. The many Muslims who ultimately accuse those involved in spirit possession of worshiping things other than God because of such suspected blamable practices are attempting to anathematize them. As I will discuss below, many involved in spirit possession deny—sometimes quite vehemently—any un-Islamic behavior on their part.

To give some indication of the extent of the enmity toward spirit possession and its practitioners and the social pressures against them, I offer the following examples. Several Malian Muslims told me that if they happened to walk near a place where spirit possession was going on they would know from the distinctive and easily recognizable drum beats not to look and to pass by quickly. They explained that they had been instructed to do this from a very young age. One man pointed out that every step on the way to a spirit possession ceremony was quite literally a step toward hell. A friend, whom I had entreated to accompany me to spirit possession ceremonies, told me that he was unable to do so. This man, who fashions himself a very observant Muslim, worried that if he went to a ceremony he would need to fast for forty days afterward to purify himself.¹² A number of years ago, a prominent Muslim religious leader had been surprised to learn that spirit possession was occurring on a regular

basis in a compound near his own. When he asked some people in his entourage why those in the neighboring compound seemed to drum so often, they replied that it was spirit possession. They were surprised by his question, having assumed all along that he would have been aware of what was going on, if only by the distinctive drum beats. The religious leader immediately sent someone to the compound to tell these neighbors that they should move elsewhere. They did so, relocating to a part of town away from his compound.

While these examples point to the pervasiveness of spirit possession, they also suggest that most Muslims acknowledge its existence in often close proximity. At the same time, many make conscious attempts to avoid spirit possession. If this seems to suggest an attitude of relative toleration, this is not always the case. The following is an example of a direct threat of violence against those involved in spirit possession. One man told me that when he was a young student of the Qur'an he and some of his peers learned that a woman involved in spirit possession had acquired a house near the compound where they were studying. He said that they were very unhappy to learn this and sought out the woman to inform her that if she ever engaged in spirit possession in the place in question that they would proceed to stone the house. The woman never moved into the house, and it was never used for spirit possession. Although the woman and her associates did not cease their activities, they did keep away from potential critics like these young men, thereby avoiding harassment and possibly even physical violence.¹³

If those involved in spirit possession have been able to act relatively freely in some villages and towns in Mali, there continues to be considerable conflict around spirit possession in many places. In some villages, certain inhabitants have actively sought to drive out those involved in spirit possession. The women who organized spirit possession in one village I know were compelled to leave. A man with a regional reputation for the specifically non-Islamic esoteric knowledge that he employed in divination and healing for himself and a range of clients told the women that what they did (organize a spirit society) was charlatanism. He insisted that they stop their activities or go elsewhere. In this case, the women seemed to have posed somewhat of a challenge to the man's authority as a ritual specialist. After unspecified threats, the women abandoned this particular village, though not their activities in spirit possession.

In some towns in Mali, some civil servants have been known to try to halt spirit possession activities for basically religious reasons. This has not always been easy, given that those involved in spirit possession have been able to secure a measure of protection from the Malian state, which asserts its secular nature regularly.¹⁴ As an ostensibly secular entity, the Malian state is not permitted to intervene in the affairs of a particular religion. With spirit possession equated here with religion and having nearly the same status as Islam and Christianity, the state thus helps to guarantee the right to engage in religious practices like spirit possession. Although unable to officially ban spirit possession, some civil servants have taken advantage of their official roles to try to obstruct it. This has particularly been the case with a number of self-styled

pious Muslim civil servants, who, in some cases, have employed administrative means to regulate spirit possession in areas under their jurisdiction. In many cases, such efforts have hampered, if not prevented, such activities. For example, local authorities often require costly permits for making noise, as is almost inevitable in the requisite drumming in most spirit possession ceremonies.

There are also a variety of other local and regional practices that are distinct from spirit possession, but which Muslim religious leaders find no less objectionable. Some of these are also "ritual" in nature and involve "spirits." For example, I attended the annual communal "visit" by the youth from a cluster of interrelated villages in western Mali with a protective female spirit, who is said to live in a cave adjacent to one of the villages. Although nearly everyone in this village professed to be Muslim and noted that their ancestors had been Muslims for at least a hundred years, people explained to me this "visit" was not Islamic. Some people—perhaps cautious when confronted by the inquisitive, visiting anthropologist—suggested that the "ritual" was all child's play. Others hinted that it was almost akin to the "folklorization" of the practices of non-Muslim ancestors (see Launay 1992). Still yet others told me that it all might look like play drumming, dancing, and refreshments, but it was actually quite serious. For these people, this annual ritual "visit" was an obligation; the villagers had to pay homage to this spirit, who had protected them in the past. To fail to do so might bring harm to them. In this case, many people find such "traditions" and/or "customs" inappropriate.

Thus far, most of the practices discussed have been those of people who consider themselves Muslims, even though many others find such practices at least objectionable if not explicitly un-Islamic, and, therefore, best renounced. At the same time, many other individuals and groups, who generally do not identify themselves as Muslims (or Christians for that matter), engage in local and regional "religious" practices or "traditions." Since such practices have long been in contact with Islam and Muslims, I am reluctant to use the term "indigenous."¹⁵ In the past as well as in the present, it has not been uncommon for non-Muslim West Africans to use some of the signs and objects of Islam (Monteil 1924; Bravmann 1976, 1983; Launay 1992; Royer 1996). Even the above-mentioned ritual visit with the female spirit, which its practitioners do not see as an Islamic ritual, is actually tied to the Islamic lunar calendar. There are also many other practices explicitly anchored in allegedly non-Islamic knowledge, as is the case of *bamanaya*, with the manipulation of power objects, often through sacrifice. In contemporary Mali, many of the practices of non-Muslim healers and diviners, such as divination, blessings, and almsgiving, are actually quite similar in form to those of Muslims (cf. Bazin 1986).¹⁶ *Bamanaya* is not, however, the only un-Islamic knowledge that people talk about or employ. Among many groups of people in Mali, but especially among those for whom Islamization is thought to be more recent, there is special knowledge, usually characterized as secret in nature, thought to be not only outside the realm of Islam but un-Islamic. For example, in Fulfude, one of the most widely spoken languages in Mali, particularly by the Fulbe, there is the notion of

anndal balewal, literally, black knowledge, which ritual specialists employ in ways analogous to ritual specialists in *bamanaya*.

In short, there is a wide range of religious practices, knowledge, "customs," "traditions," and so forth in Mali that many people find questionable, if not exactly un-Islamic, from explicitly and usually self-consciously *Muslim* perspectives. For this reason, we might say that the terrain was in some ways well-prepared for the organized campaigns against such activities, which got underway in the 1980s.

PROSELYTIZATION: PAST AND PRESENT

If some practices like spirit possession have a long history in Mali, the attempts by certain Muslims to get others to abandon such practices have perhaps an equally long history (Hunwick 1985). In the nineteenth century, there are numerous examples of Muslims objecting to some of the practices discussed in the above section. For example, a West African scholar from Timbuktu visiting North Africa addressed a treatise to the Muslim ruler in Tunis calling for the banning of spirit possession (Hunwick 1997). As part of the *jihad* he led in the nineteenth century throughout large parts of what is present-day Mali, Umar Tall destroyed the "idols" of some of his non-Muslim adversaries (Robinson 1985; Monteil 1924). Similarly, in the late nineteenth century, before his capture by the French, Samory, another important Muslim leader in this part of West Africa, also destroyed "idols" as a prelude to the construction of mosques:

In each village where Samory was sovereign, he ordered the destruction of protective statues. He began to construct a mosque, even if rudimentary; he acted to support a priest [*imam*], even if not a very learned one, in each mosque; he forced the chiefs of his subjects to send their children regularly to Quranic school (Gouilly 1952, 81).

It is significant that these images of West African Muslims destroying "protective statues" are actually quite similar in form to the motif of the prophet Muhammad's destruction of idols in Mecca at the beginning of his mission in 610. Indeed, this prophetic model is one upon which many Muslims throughout history have drawn (see, e.g., Fischer and Abedi 1990). Undoubtedly, those engaged in more recent proselytization in contemporary Mali have also looked to this model and its more recent West African imitators. Although many scholars have emphasized the often crucial role that Muslim saints and Sufis have played in the propagation of Islam before the twentieth century in such places as India, Indonesia, and sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Levzion 1979), the activities of such religious figures in the contemporary period have not received adequate attention. If proselytization by Muslims under French colonial rule in West Africa was quite commonplace (though largely unstudied for reasons

that remain unclear) the study of such proselytization and its effects provides an important window on the anthropology and history of West African societies. I now turn to consider perhaps the most important of contemporary proselytization efforts in postcolonial Mali.

Over extended periods in the 1980s and the 1990s, Sidy Modibo Kane (1925–96), a prominent Malian Muslim religious leader, who was widely reputed to be a saint, undertook a series of long trips throughout the countryside in Mali (Soares 1996a, 1997b). It is reported that during these trips he converted thousands of non-Muslims and sometimes even whole villages to Islam and also worked to eradicate spirit possession and other purportedly un-Islamic practices. In all, he is said to have led such campaigns in nearly five hundred villages in Mali and many others in neighboring Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁷ These proselytization efforts have been extensively commented on in Mali, not least because of their scope and range.

During his campaigns, Sidy Modibo, as the religious leader is commonly known, exhorted villagers to give up what he considered un-Islamic practices. While he found nothing objectionable in a minority of the villages he visited, he found at least one thing to combat in most places. He preached basically against three things he deemed either un-Islamic or incompatible with Islam. Here, I want to highlight Sidy Modibo's rhetoric, especially the tripartite categories he used to name that which he sought to eradicate. First, he inveighed against the use of *boli* and *basi*, "idols," that is, the plurality of non-Islamic power objects commonly employed in *bamanaya*.¹⁸ Second, he condemned what he referred to as the *moonaankoobe*—which translates from Fulfulde (his first language) as "those who feign illness"—a commonly used term for those involved in spirit possession.¹⁹ Alternately, he referred to such people in writing (in French and Arabic) as "people who practice the law of the jinn [spirits]." Third, he urged people to give up those "customs" (here using a word derived from the Arabic, *adat*) that he claimed were incompatible with Islam and being Muslim. An example of such a custom is the social rule of some Malians that prevents bride and groom from cohabitating until a number of years after their actual marriage. It is striking how marked the categories used are. Most notably, "idols" for non-Islamic objects and "those who feign illness" and "the law of the jinns" for spirit possession unambiguously index the antipathy of Sidy Modibo—and many other Malians—for such objects and practices.

Sidy Modibo concentrated a considerable amount of his efforts among the country's non-Muslim rural population, particularly in some of those areas allegedly most resistant to Islamization in the past. In fact, he even went to some of the very places that were known for their firm and sustained opposition to the *jihad* led by Umar Tall in the nineteenth century. He spent time in the village, which the region's non-Muslims long considered "a holy town," according to one French colonial administrator, not least because it was "the principal boulevard of resistance in this land" against Islamization and the encroachment of Umar Tall's Islamic state (de Lartigue 1898). Unlike in earlier

efforts to spread Islam in these same geographic areas, inhabitants from some of the villages invited Sidy Modibo to visit them. In many cases, he received the warmest of receptions.

Everywhere Sidy Modibo went, he proclaimed to people that their fortune would improve once they embraced Islam, if they were not Muslims, or once they renounced un-Islamic practices, if they already professed to be Muslims. In particular, he noted that those who had faced recurring drought would see better times if they did. When among people who considered themselves non-Muslims, Sidy Modibo and members of his large entourage actually implored villagers to relinquish their non-Islamic power objects and emphasized the pitfalls of not doing so. Sidy Modibo instructed members of his retinue to collect and count the objects, and careful records were kept of the numbers and provenance of the objects. In some cases, they destroyed these objects by fire immediately after collection; in other cases, they delivered some of them in sacks to the offices of the state-run media in Bamako, the capital city, ostensibly to publicize their meritorious activities.²⁰ Sidy Modibo taught non-Muslims the *shahada* (the Muslim profession of faith) and the ritual daily prayers. In many cases, a member of his entourage stayed behind to act as *imam* (prayer leader) and to instruct the villagers in prayer and Islam.

In those villages where the people professed to be Muslims, that is, in nearly half of the five hundred villages he visited, Sidy Modibo was not concerned with locating power objects. In his way of thinking, the existence of power objects here was not even a question—indeed it was inconceivable (cf. Soares 1997b). Instead, he was intent on discouraging the practice of spirit possession. This is because many Malians note that spirit possession is generally only present in those places in Mali where the people are Muslims.²¹ In the many villages Sidy Modibo visited where spirit societies existed, he gave sermons against their practices. After doing so, he invited spirit mediums and their followers, almost all of whom were women, to renounce their practices before him. As part of the process of renunciation, Sidy Modibo placed his hands on the heads of spirit mediums. This he did to expel the spirits. Those women who agreed to this procedure usually emitted violent screams or deep moans—sounds that indexed the departure of the spirits inhabiting their bodies.²² In many cases, such women required several days of rest to recover from what was an exhausting and trying experience of what might be called exorcism.

Even though these Muslim proselytization efforts in the 1980s and 1990s seem to be quite novel in Mali, particularly in their scale and scope, their techniques and strategies are not without precedent in this region. Al-Bakri's eleventh-century description of a West African ruler's conversion is in striking ways quite similar—in form and even in some of the details—to the contemporary campaigns. As he wrote, the ruler of Malel, presumably a Mande kingdom, had become Muslim after meeting a Muslim visitor to his kingdom:

The king complained to this man about his people's sufferings [from prolonged drought]. He replied, "O king, if you only believed in God

almighty, acknowledged His unity and the mission of Muhammad, and believed in all the articles of faith, then I would pray on your behalf for relief from what you are suffering and for what has befallen you. Thus you could bring universal benefit upon the people of your country and thereby incite all your enemies and adversaries to envy." He persisted with him until he agreed to embrace Islam, and that in sincerity. . . . [Eventually, after the Muslim's prayers,] God enveloped [*sic*] the land with abundant rain. In consequence of this the king ordered the destruction of the idols and the expulsion of the magicians from his country (quoted in Tringham 1962, 61-62).

Although some of the conditions facilitating the contemporary Muslim proselytization include Sidy Modibo's widespread reputation (Soares 1997b), he operated within a climate where many Malian Muslims are troubled by certain social and religious practices that they encounter, hear about, and often avoid. While many Malians praised the activities of Sidy Modibo on behalf of Islam, there was some opposition—overt and not so overt—to his proselytization efforts. In some cases, non-Muslims in certain villages refused to allow Sidy Modibo to visit. In other villages, after the departure of the religious leader, some presumed converts to Islam simply refashioned the objects they had surrendered and which had been destroyed by Sidy Modibo and members of his entourage. Moreover, some women involved in spirit possession were purposely absent from their villages during Sidy Modibo's visits.²³

One must ask what the consequences of such proselytization have been. It is certainly the case that many Muslims in Mali continue to rely upon spirit possession, particularly, though not exclusively, for healing purposes. Despite the social pressure not to engage in spirit possession and the opprobrium surrounding it, and even such widespread and extensive campaigns against it, even some of those who do not dispute that spirit possession is unequivocally un-Islamic might, in some instances, be willing to engage with it. They do this, unremarkably, in often clandestine ways. This is particularly the case during personal crises such as serious illness. Thus, it is not uncommon for people who have been unable to find any effective treatment for serious illness—whether through the esoteric sciences of a Muslim religious figure, non-Muslim healers, or Western biomedicine—to seek out the therapeutic services of a spirit society and/or its medium. In some cases, a medium might organize spirit possession ceremonies for the purposes of treatment of a person who would ordinarily be very wary of spirit possession. I have observed self-consciously pious Muslims actually attending and participating in semi-public spirit possession ceremonies. In one case, this was because all other means of therapy had been tried to no avail. In another, a man purchased medicines from a spirit medium by indirect means; he relied on intermediaries so his dealings with the medium would not become public knowledge.

Very similar things can be said about sources of non-Islamic knowledge, as in *bamanaya* with its power objects, which Sidy Modibo also sought to eradicate.

Here too his efforts might have a limited effect because many Muslims in Mali continue to use and to rely upon the medicines and therapies of non-Muslim healers. They do so because many of these therapies are found to be efficacious, more affordable, readily available, and/or seemingly less risky than Western biomedicine. When asked about the use of such non-Muslim therapies, most Muslims are quick to note that the use of such "traditional" medicine is really no different from the use of other medicines also made by non-Muslims, particularly Western biomedicine. As long as such medicines are not tainted by illicit ingredients and practices, their use is permitted. In a sense, such things are only licit for these Muslims because they have been desacralized—at least from their perspective. But many Muslims also readily admit that it is difficult to determine with much precision whether such medicines are in fact licit, that is, made without contravening the precepts of Islamic law.²⁴

As for those who are actively involved in spirit possession, and are not simply appealing to it in times of crisis, many are unwilling to forego their interaction with the spirits despite the social pressures they face. They do not necessarily see a contradiction between spirit possession and being Muslim.²⁵ But they are fully aware that many other Muslims do see them as irreconcilable. For this reason, many do try to hide their involvement in spirit possession from disapproving friends, neighbors, and relatives, and often go to great lengths to do so. Similarly, disapproving relatives might keep their social distance from kin involved in spirit possession. For example, I know a particularly renowned spirit medium who told me that since she was a child she has had a close relationship with the spirits, as other women in her family have had. As a young woman, she married a Muslim cleric, and, over the years, he grew unhappy about her involvement in spirit possession. He finally told her that she would have to decide between the spirits or marriage to him. She decided to choose the former, and they were divorced. Since that time, she has worked as a medium and healer, establishing a regional reputation and acquiring considerable capital. Needless to say, her continued involvement in spirit possession is the source of considerable embarrassment to some of her relatives, particularly those who are Muslim clerics.

All of this points to the fact that many of those who participate in spirit possession are embattled, whether in the daily interactions with fellow Malians or the rather extraordinary encounters with a celebrated Muslim religious leader like Sidy Modibo committed to stamping out spirit possession. It is perhaps the case that those involved in spirit possession are even more embattled than "traditional" healers given the professionalization of African medicine, which the Malian state has promoted. With few exceptions, spirit possession adepts are unable to counter the rather pointed criticism they receive from the many Muslims, who charge them with un-Islamic behavior. When Sidy Modibo went to see one of Mali's most renowned spirit mediums, he asked her directly about her allegedly un-Islamic practices. In response, she categorically denied doing anything illicit in nature. As evidence of her own piety as well as probity,

this particular spirit medium indicated to her potential critics—including Sidy Modibo—that she conducts her spirit possession sessions in Arabic, that is, the language of the Qur'an. As further proof, teachers of the Qur'an not only live in but also teach in her own compound, where she organizes her activities—perhaps a good example of what some have called “debating Muslims” (see Fischer and Abedi 1990). On the whole, most spirit mediums and their followers, however, are unwilling or unable to stand up so directly to critics like Sidy Modibo. One spirit medium I know told me that her activities in spirit possession were not in any way un-Islamic. She explained that one man, who was a descendant of the prophet Muhammad, had consulted her for healing and had been effectively cured.²⁶ Needless to say, such “evidence” is unlikely to convince many Malians of the merits of spirit possession and, more specifically, her activities, which many condemn outright, even without direct knowledge of them.

One of the ironies is that the postcolonial Malian secular state, which often associates itself with Islam (Soares n.d.) and might even have encouraged “conversion” to Islam (Soares 1996a), in other instances helps to guarantee the right to engage in religious practices that are abhorrent to the majority, including spirit possession, in overwhelmingly Muslim towns and villages. Although spirit possession has remained popular, those involved in spirit possession keep a fairly low profile. In some cases, they have even been forced to modify their practices. For instance, while those involved in spirit possession might in some cases have a tradition of not convening during the month of Ramadan, in other cases it seems that this “tradition” might be a strategy to avoid too much attention from potential critics, including those part of or close to the civil service. When funds are not available for costly permits required for drumming in urban areas, those involved in spirit possession might meet and try to summon the spirits in publicly less obtrusive ways. For example, they can convene without noisy drumming—though many complain that such techniques are much less efficacious. In spite of the opprobrium and considerable pressure they face from such “modernizing”—not to mention secularizing—actors, many people continue to embrace “traditional” religious practices, spirit possession, and so forth. If some practice their allegedly un-Islamic religious traditions openly and defiantly, many others do so much more discreetly. In the end, such “traditional” religious practices may indeed be transformed, as they are increasingly relegated to private or at least semi-public venues, that is, out of the view of some of their critics.

Although Sidy Modibo's proselytization efforts might not be the direct cause of such developments, he undoubtedly profited from a general climate of hostility to spirit possession and other such “un-Islamic” religious practices and traditions. At the same time, his proselytization has also been important in focusing attention on what so many Malian Muslims find objectionable, but paradoxically not so objectionable that they will not have recourse to them if de-sacralized, and, if not de-sacralized, at least in time of crisis or covertly.

NOTES

¹ Islamization under French colonial rule in West Africa is still not properly understood. For a French colonial perspective, see Cardaire 1954. For recent studies, see Harmon 1988; Launay 1992; and Launay and Soares 1999. I have discussed the anthropological debates about “conversion” elsewhere. See Soares 1995.

² *Wahhabis* and the *Wahhabiyya* are the terms used to describe the community formed in Arabia by Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1787), whose doctrines were adopted and propagated by the House of Sa'ud of present-day Saudi Arabia. During the French colonial period, administrators applied the terms *Wahhabi* and the *Wahhabiyya* to “reformist” Muslims and anti-Sufis in West Africa, and this terminology continues to be used. Anti-Sufis, so-called Wahhabis, in Mali have received considerable scholarly attention. See, for example, Kaba 1974; Hamès 1980; Amselle 1985; Triaud 1986; Niezen 1990; Brenner 1993; and Soares 1997a. On Saudi activities in Africa, see Schulze 1993.

³ I have developed this theme elsewhere. See Soares 1997a, n.d.; cf. Brenner 1993; Launay and Soares 1999.

⁴ I am unable to address here the issue of anti-Sufis accusing Sufis of un-Islamic behavior. See the references in note 2 above.

⁵ The form of spirit possession that emerged under French colonial rule among the Songhay of West Africa captured in Jean Rouch's film, *Les maîtres fous*, is possibly the most familiar to Western scholars. On the history of spirit possession among the Songhay, cf. Olivier de Sardan 1984; Stoller 1995. See also Makris 1996 for a discussion of the history of spirit possession in the Sudan.

⁶ Such documentation of spirit possession was almost without exception a prelude to the denunciation of such practices as un-Islamic. For an example from the fifteenth century, see Hunwick 1970.

⁷ See Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France, 75 APOM 5/6, Robert Arnaud, “Du commandement chez les Diawaras. Histoire d'une tribu guerrière du Soudan,” 30 June 1918, “Note sur une pratique Fétichiste en usage chez les Diawara.” The rest of this paragraph is based on this source.

⁸ Most of what follows concerns this form of spirit possession.

⁹ On the subject of healers in Mali, see Brunet-Jailly 1993 and Diakité 1993.

¹⁰ See the discussion of “sacrifice” in chapter 29 of al-Qayrawani, a text from the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence, that is widely used in West Africa.

¹¹ For a discussion of similar practices in the Sudan, see Boddy 1989 and Makris 1996.

¹² It is interesting to compare this with the rules for “expiation” in al-Qayrawani (1975, 167-69).

¹³ For a discussion of the harassment of some of those involved in spirit possession in neighboring Niger, see Stoller 1989; Vidal 1990; and Masquelier 1993a, 1993b.

¹⁴ This is interesting to compare with rule under the Mahdists (1885-98) in the Sudan, when a form of spirit possession was suppressed. See Makris 1996, 167.

¹⁵ For a general critique of ethnological views of “paganism” and a discussion of some of the connections between Islam and other religious traditions in this part of West Africa, see Amselle 1990. For a very interesting study along these lines based on recent ethnography in Mali, see Zobel 1996. See also Matory 1994.

¹⁶ This is without mentioning reported, though unconfirmed, cooperation and collaboration between such non-Muslims and Muslim religious leaders, for example, in healing or in “cleansing” a town of malevolent spirits.

¹⁷ This information comes from a list of villages visited by the Muslim religious leader in the present author's possession.

¹⁸ Sometimes the religious leader's entourage used the French word (*fétiches*) and, other times, words in Bamanakan such as *boli* and *basi*, "power objects." On such terminology, see Hackett 1996. For a discussion of some of these issues for contemporary Benin, see Elwert 1995.

¹⁹ See *moonaade* in DNAFLA 1993. Needless to say, spirit possession adepts do not embrace such language.

²⁰ Members of the entourage informed me that the state-run media in turn sent the objects to the National Museum in Bamako. This may have been in response to a 1985 Malian law protecting the "national cultural heritage" (*patrimoine culturel national*). See Jonckers 1993, 87 n.4.

²¹ In other words, they do not consider all forms of "possession" in Mali to be spirit possession.

²² As I have noted elsewhere (Soares 1997b), I learned such details from Sidy Modibo's entourage.

²³ It is important to note that there are no known cases in which those involved in spirit possession successfully blocked a visit by the religious leader.

²⁴ It is not clear, however, what role the increased professionalization of indigenous medicine has already had in this realm. On the professionalization of African medicine, see Last and Chavunduka 1986.

²⁵ Recent discussions of "religious diversification" (Aguilar 1995), plural practices in a Muslim society (Lambek 1993), "syncretism" (Stewart and Shaw 1993), and reconsiderations of "conversion" (Royer 1996) are all relevant here.

²⁶ If this is another example of "debating Muslims," the power differentials involved in such debates are more manifest here.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aguilar, Mario I. 1995. "African Conversion from a World Religion: Religious Diversification by the Waso Boorana in Kenya," *Africa* 64, 5:525-44.
- Amselle, Jean-Loup. 1985. "Le Wahabisme à Bamako (1945-1985)," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 19, 2:345-57.
- . 1990. *Logiques métisses*. Paris: Payot.
- Bazin, Jean. 1985. "A chacun son Bambara," in *Au coeur de l'ethnie: Ethnies, tribalisme et Etat en Afrique*, edited by Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'Bokolo, 87-127. Paris: La Découverte.
- . 1986. "Retour aux choses-dieux," in *Corps des dieux*, edited by Charles Malamoud and Jean-Pierre Vernant. *Le Temps de la Réflexion*, 7:253-73.
- Boddy, Janice. 1989. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- . 1994. "Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23:407-34.
- Bravmann, René A. 1976. *Islam and Tribal Art in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1983. *African Islam*. Washington: Smithsonian.
- Brenner, Louis. 1985. "The 'Esoteric Sciences' in West African Islam," in *African Healing Strategies*, edited by B. du Toit and I. H. Abdalla, 20-28. Buffalo: Trado-Medic Books.

- . 1993. "Constructing Muslim Identities in Mali," in *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by Louis Brenner, 59-78. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Brunet-Jailly, Joseph, ed. 1993. *Se soigner au Mali: Une contribution des sciences sociales*. Paris: Karthala and ORSTOM.
- Cardaire, Marcel. 1954. *L'Islam et le terroir africain*. Koulouba: Institut français d'Afrique noire.
- Colleyn, Jean-Paul. 1988. *Les Chemins de Nya: Culte de possession au Mali*. Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.
- de Lartigue, Lt. 1898. "Notice historique sur la région du Sahel," *Bulletin du Comité de l'Afrique française, Renseignements Coloniaux*, 4:69-101.
- Diakité, Djigui. 1993. "Quelques maladies chez les Bamanan," in *Se soigner au Mali: Une contribution des sciences sociales*, edited by Joseph Brunet-Jailly, 25-48. Paris: Karthala and ORSTOM.
- DNAFLA. 1993. *Lexique (Fulfulde-Français)*. Bamako: Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale.
- Elwert, Georg. 1995. "Changing Certainties and the Move to a 'Global' Religion," in *The Pursuit of Certainty*, edited by Wendy James. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fischer, Michael M. J., and Mehdi Abedi. 1990. *Debating Muslims*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Gibbal, Jean-Marie. 1982. *Tambours d'eau: Journal et enquête sur un culte de possession au Mali occidental*. Paris: Le Sycomore.
- . 1984. *Guérisseurs et magiciens du Sahel*. Paris: A. M. Métailié.
- . 1994. *Genii of the River Niger*, translated by Beth G. Raps. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gouilly, Alphonse. 1952. *L'Islam dans l'Afrique Occidentale française*. Paris: Larose.
- Hackett, Rosalind I. J. 1996. *Art and Religion in Africa*. New York: Cassell.
- Hamès, Constant. 1980. "Deux aspects du fondamentalisme islamique: Sa signification au Mali actuel et chez Ibn Taimiya," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 50, 2:177-90.
- Hanson, John H. 1996. *Migration, Jihad, and Muslim Authority in West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Harmon, Stephen A. 1988. *The Expansion of Islam among the Bambara under French Rule: 1890 to 1940*. Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles.
- Hunwick, John O. 1970. "Notes on a Late Fifteenth-Century Document concerning 'al-Takrur,'" in *African Perspectives*, edited by C. Allen and R. W. Johnson, 7-33. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1985. *Shar'ia in Songhay*. London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy.
- . 1997. "Black Slave Religious Practices in the Mediterranean Islamic World." Paper presented to the Summer Institute, *Identifying Enslaved Africans: The 'Nigerian' Hinterland and the African Diaspora*, York University.
- Jonckers, Danielle. 1993. "Autels sacrificiels et puissances religieuses: Les Minyan (Bamana-Minyanka, Mali)," in *Fétiches II: Puissance des objets, charme des mots*, edited by Albert de Surgy. *Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire* 12: 65-101.
- Kaba, Lansiné. 1974. *The Wahhabiyya*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Last, Murray, and G. L. Chavunduka, eds. 1986. *The Professionalisation of African Medicine*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Lambek, Michael. 1993. *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery, and Spirit Possession*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Launay, Robert. 1992. *Beyond the Stream: Islam and Society in a West African Town*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Launay, Robert, and Benjamin F. Soares. 1999. "The Formation of an 'Islamic Sphere' in French Colonial West Africa," *Economy and Society*. In press.
- Levtzion, Nehemia, ed. 1979. *Conversion to Islam*. New York: Holmes and Meier.
- Lewis, I. M. 1986. *Religion in Context: Cults and Charisma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, I. M., Ahmed Al-Safi, and Sayyid Hurreiz, eds. 1991. *Women's Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Makris, G. P. 1996. "Slavery, Possession and History: The Construction of the Self among Slave Descendants in the Sudan," *Africa* 66, 2:159-82.
- Malle, Youssouf. 1985. "Le culte de possession en milieu bamanan: Le 'Jine-don' dans le district de Bamako: Etude clinique du 'Jiné-bana.'" Mémoire, fin d'études, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Bamako (Mali).
- Masquelier, Adeline. 1993a. *Ritual Economies, Historical Mediations: The Poetics and Power of Bori among the Mawri of Niger*. Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago.
- . 1993b. "Narratives of Power, Images of Wealth: The Ritual Economy of Bori in the Market," in *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, edited by J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, 3-33. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Matory, J. Lorand. 1994. "Rival Empires: Islam and the Religions of Spirit Possession among the Oyo-Yoruba," *American Ethnologist* 21:495-515.
- McNaughton, Patrick. 1988. *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Monteil, Charles. 1924. *Les Bambaras de Ségou et du Kaarta*. Paris: Larose.
- Niezen, Ronald. 1990. "The 'Community of the Helpers of the Sunna': Islamic Reform among the Songhay of Gao (Mali)," *Africa* 60, 3:399-423.
- Olivier de Sardan, Jean-Pierre. 1984. *Les sociétés songhay-zarma (Niger-Mali)*. Paris: Karthala.
- al-Qayrawani, 'Abdullah b. Abi Zayd. 1975. *Al-Risala*. Edited and translated by L. Bercher, 6th ed. Algiers: Editions populaires de l'armée.
- Raffenel, Anne. 1856. *Nouveau voyage dans le pays des Nègres*, vol. 1. Paris: Napoléon Chaix.
- Robinson, David. 1985. *The Holy War of Umar Tal*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Royer, Patrick Yves. 1996. *In Pursuit of Tradition: Local Cults and Religious Conversion among the Sambla of Burkina Faso*. Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- Schulze, Reinhard. 1993. "La da'wa saoudienne en Afrique de l'Ouest," in *Le radicalisme islamique au sud du Sahara*, edited by René Otaek, 21-35. Paris: Karthala.
- Soares, Benjamin F. 1995. "The Sufi, the Migrant, and the State." Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington.
- . 1996a. "A Contemporary Malian Shaykh," *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara* 10:145-53.
- . 1996b. "The Prayer Economy in a Malian Town," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 36, 4:739-53.

- . 1997a. *The Spiritual Economy of Nioro du Sahel: Islamic Discourses and Practices in a Malian Religious Center*. Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University.
- . 1997b. "The Fulbe Shaykh and the Bambara 'Pagans': Contemporary Campaigns to Spread Islam in Mali," in *Peuls et Mandingues: Dialectiques des constructions identitaires*, edited by Mirjam de Bruijn and Han van Dijk, 267-80. Paris: Karthala.
- . n.d. "The Public Sphere of Islam and a Cancelled Christian Crusade in West Africa." Unpublished manuscript.
- Stewart, Charles, and Rosalind Shaw, eds. 1993. *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*. New York: Routledge.
- Stoller, Paul. 1989. *Fusion of the Worlds: An Ethnography of Possession among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1995. *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Triand, Jean-Louis. 1986. "'Abd al-Rahman l'Africain (1908-1957), pionneur et précurseur du wahhabisme au Mali," in *Radicalismes islamiques*, volume 2, edited by O. Carré and P. Dumont, 162-80. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Trimingham, J. Spencer. 1962. *A History of Islam in West Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Vidal, Laurent. 1990. *Rituels de Possession dans le Sahel: Exemples peul et zarma du Niger*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Wensinck, A. J. 1927. *A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Zobel, Clemens. 1996. "Les génies du Koma: Identités locales, logiques religieuses et enjeux socio-politiques dans les monts Manding du Mali," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 36, 4:625-58.