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## Islam and public piety in Mali

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## CHAPTER NINE

## ISLAM AND PUBLIC PIETY IN MALI\*

BENJAMIN F. SOARES

Since the late nineteenth century and the onset of colonial rule in West Africa, scholars, including colonial scholar administrators, have devoted considerable attention to the study of what has been assumed to be the main institutional form for the practice of Islam in West Africa: the Sufi orders, the mystical paths. In an almost unending stream of studies, various scholars—political scientists, sociologists, geographers, historians, and those in religious studies—have focused on Sufi orders in various countries of the region. It is important to note, however, that Sufi orders have never had the importance in large parts of West Africa—in Mali, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire—that they may have had, say, in Senegal or elsewhere in the Muslim world (cf. Soares 1997, 1999). When scholars in West Africa have not focused on Sufi orders, they have tended to study the critics of the Sufi orders—so-called "reformists," Salafis, or, more recently, Islamists (for example, Rosander and Westerlund 1997). Most West African Muslims I have encountered during the course of my research—and,

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I claim, many of those I have learned about through reading colonial archives—are neither formally affiliated with any of the Sufi orders present in West Africa nor are they “reformists” or Islamists. Moreover, many West African Muslims categorically reject such appellations. This is not to deny the importance of Sufi orders, Sufism, or “reformism” in Mali. Rather, since all of these objects of study are so thin on the ground, it would seem to follow that we should shift our attention away from preoccupations with such presumed forms of Muslim social activism, not least since the events of September 11, 2001.

In this chapter, I do not privilege such categories in my analysis. During the course of fieldwork in Mali in the 1990s, it would have been difficult to avoid, let alone ignore, the many discussions Malian Muslims were having about Islam. Some of these discussions focused on questions of doctrine and “correct” ritual practice—for example, whether Friday communal prayers had to be performed in a mosque. Others focused on Muslim politics—for example, whether Muslims should be opposed on principle to the Gulf War and subsequent U.S. and British air strikes against Iraq in the 1990s. However, many of the discussions about Islam in Mali centered on more general questions of piety and the “correct” ways of being a pious Muslim. Indeed, there seemed to be considerable concern with—and often debate about—the public signs of piety.

On numerous occasions during my fieldwork, Malian friends and informants asked me whether I had noticed the mark or sign on a particular person’s forehead. They used the term *seere* in Bamana/Bambara, Mali’s most important lingua franca (or *seede* in Fulfulde/Pulaar), which some of my informants told me derives from the Arabic, *shahāda*, meaning testimony or witness, as in the Muslim profession of faith. This term, *seere*, refers to the sometimes circular spot or mark on some people’s foreheads. Many Malians note that such a mark indicates regular prayer—even beyond the obligatory five ritual daily prayers—and presumably appears from touching the forehead to the ground. For many, such marks index piety. By all accounts, these marks are much more prevalent than they used to be. I myself have noticed the appearance of the marks on the foreheads of several friends and acquaintances between different periods of fieldwork in Mali, sometimes to my astonishment. What follows is an attempt to make sense of such signs. However, I must first

present quite a bit of background information in order to understand the link between piety and some of its public signs in Mali.

### *Islam in Malian History*

Although Islam has been practiced in Mali for at least a millennium, it was only in the twentieth century that Islam became the religion of the majority. It has largely been through the development of a public sphere that this Islamization has occurred. Arguably, a public sphere has been developing in Mali that differs considerably from the idealized bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas (1989 [1962]; cf. Calhoun 1992), in which there is a space for so-called rational critical debate, and religion clearly has no place. Elsewhere, I have traced some of the elements of such a public sphere in Mali back to the colonial period, when the spread of newspapers, publications, political parties, associations, and organizations opened new spaces for political and social debate and deliberation (Soares 1996, 1997). Following John Bowen, who has written about Aceh in Indonesia, I would argue that in Mali there is a “public sphere of discourse that combines religious, social, and political messages” (Bowen 1993: 325). By considering the development and contours of this public sphere, I explore here some of the enduring paradoxes that have accompanied the spread of more standardized ways of being Muslim in Mali.

First, let us examine briefly the features of Islam in the region (cf. Launay and Soares 1999). Although it is difficult to speak with great precision about the nature and extent of Islamization before the twentieth century, we do know that in the precolonial and early colonial periods (at least until the first decades of the twentieth century), religious practices often reflected membership in hereditary social categories. That is, whether people practiced Islam and the way in which they did so often had to do with their hereditary social status. Certain lineages were known as Muslim religious specialists or *marabouts* in French colonial parlance. They historically had control over Islamic religious knowledge, education, and sometimes trade. The hereditary transmission of both learning and sanctity has been historically very important here. Members of lineages of religious specialists and their descendants were generally those who performed

the ritual daily prayers, fasted during the month of Ramadan, and abstained from consumption of alcohol. In short, they exhibited some of the outward signs of the practice of Islam. Other lineages, sometimes even members of the political/military elite who were Muslims, did not—nor were they expected to—conform to the standards of piety that were typical of clerics.

If before colonial rule Muslim elites had almost a monopoly on Islam, transformations of the entire political economy during colonial rule would change this. The increased movement of persons and commodities rendered some of these elites obsolete and helped to facilitate the Islamization of large segments of the population. Indeed, the period of French colonial rule in West Africa—from the late nineteenth century until 1960—witnessed the rapid spread of Islam in new areas and among groups that had historically not been Muslim. Many non-Muslims, including urban and agricultural laborers, conscripts to the army, students in colonial schools, and increasingly their village kin were converting to Islam. At the same time, more standardized ritual norms were spreading among virtually all Muslims, including those Muslims who had previously not been expected to conform to such norms. Thus, people from all sectors of society (members of the precolonial political/military elite, recent converts to Islam, and those of marginal social status—hereditary “caste” and servile status) began to emulate the religious practices of Muslim clerics. Religious practices, such as regular prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan, became ritual norms for all Muslims regardless of social distinctions, hereditary or otherwise. This helped to make the practice of Islam—especially in its public ritual forms—more uniform across space and time. It is striking that today one of the most commonly used terms for Muslim in Bambara, *selibaa* (most likely from the Arabic, *ṣalāt*), means quite literally “one who prays.” To ask “do you pray?” or “does he pray?” is the ordinary way to inquire whether someone is a Muslim.

Although it is important to look to the colonial era to understand such changes, there are also generally overlooked antecedents for the public sphere in nonsecular discursive forms in this part of West Africa. Prior to colonial rule, debates between Muslim religious figures—a small educated elite for whom classical Arabic was the main language of written communication—often centered on such questions as the legitimacy of rule by particular Muslims and non-Muslims, including the French, the licitness of trade with non-Muslims, and

so forth.<sup>1</sup> We have evidence of such debates in the form of various treatises in Arabic and oral histories and narratives from the pre-colonial and early colonial periods.<sup>2</sup> During the colonial period, the French administration sought the “loyalty” of virtually all Muslim clerics to whom ordinary Africans were assumed to owe allegiance.<sup>3</sup> Although during colonial rule some Muslims migrated for politico-religious (not to mention economic) reasons to areas beyond French control and argued that others should do the same, most did not. Most Muslim elites accepted the fact that they were living under non-Muslim rule and did not deem flight or migration (*hijra*) from such rule necessary.<sup>4</sup> Acceptance of French rule occasionally came enthusiastically and, at other times, grudgingly. As the decades of French rule passed, for those least enthusiastic about the French presence there was resignation if not acceptance. Debate and deliberation between Muslims about political and economic issues such as the legitimacy of non-Muslim rule was, on the whole, attenuated during the colonial period. This was more or less the case until the 1950s, the decade leading up to independence.

### *Muslim Preachers and Public Sermons*

There was an important development in the propagation of information about Islam during the colonial period that is useful for helping us to understand the emergence of more uniform ways of being Muslim. Drawing upon preexisting discursive forms and particularly written forms, Muslim preachers during the colonial period began to address sermons on specifically Islamic themes to the public outside the context of the mosque. Such preachers came to constitute

<sup>1</sup> For examples of such debates in the precolonial period, see Mahibou and Triaud 1983 and Hunwick 1996. For discussion of one such debate under French colonial rule, see Soares and Hunwick 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Many from the region can be found at the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmad Baba in Timbuktu and in private collections. See Hunwick 2003 for an extensive list of some of the extant documents and published works from the region.

<sup>3</sup> On French colonial policy toward Islam and Muslims in West Africa, see Harrison 1988; Launay and Soares 1999; Robinson and Triaud 1997; Brenner 2000; and Soares 1997, 2000b.

<sup>4</sup> Certain Muslims did migrate, for example, to the Middle East. See Ould Cheikh 2000 for a discussion of a West African living in Palestine who condemned West African Muslims for accepting life under French “infidel” rule.

in effect a new category of religious personality. In large parts of French West Africa, public sermons came to be known in various vernacular languages as *waaju* (or *warate* in Wolof) from the Arabic *waʿz*, meaning sermon (cf. Launay 1992). Such sermons became an increasingly popular form of communicating to large groups of people, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Although it is not possible to date the arrival of this discursive form in West Africa or to trace its relationship to developments elsewhere in the Muslim world, it certainly existed prior to colonial rule. The expanded public sphere under colonial rule facilitated the spread of public sermons, however, and they became one of the principal means for facilitating the spread of Islam and for the standardization of Islamic practices, with implications for public piety in Mali.

It is important to note that there were various kinds of Muslim preachers who used the public sermon. In fact, preachers from the colonial-authorized Muslim establishment sometimes gave public sermons on subjects of interest to the colonial administration. French colonial attempts to use Muslim clerics to exert influence over Muslims in this part of Africa are perhaps best exemplified in the career of one religious personality, Seydou Nourou Tall. From the 1930s onward, Seydou Nourou Tall was the Muslim religious leader in West Africa closest to the French, perhaps even the embodiment of the colonial-authorized Muslim establishment.<sup>5</sup> A grandson of al-Ḥajj ʿUmar Tall, the leader of a nineteenth-century state who had clashed militarily with the French, Seydou Nourou traveled thousands of kilometers across French West Africa on behalf of a succession of colonial administrations, encouraging colonial subjects not only to obey the French and its representatives but also to pay taxes, to work in colonial projects, to ignore calls to strike, to use colonial health facilities, not to immigrate to neighboring colonies, and to perform their Islamic "religious duties."<sup>6</sup> Many of Seydou Nourou

<sup>5</sup> Seydou Nourou Tall's colonial-era activities are discussed in documents throughout colonial archives in Mali, Senegal, and France. See, for example, the collection of documents compiled upon his behalf in the Archives Nationales du Sénégal (Dakar), 19G 43(108), *Oeuvres de Seydou Nourou Tall en AOF, 1923–1948*. For discussions of his career, see García 1994, 1997; Soares 1997; and Seesemann and Soares n.d.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Archives Nationales du Mali, Koulouba (hereafter ANM), 4E 2382 (I) Traduction des conseils donnés par El Hadj Seydou Nourou Tall à tous les musulmans June 25 1941

Tall's public pronouncements—usually in the vernacular language of his audience—took the form of a public sermon in which he related the topic at hand to the discursive tradition of Islam, and especially the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth*. In one of his sermons in the 1940s, he spoke about such "civic" duties as obedience to French authority and the need to fulfill one's religious obligations as Muslims, which he stressed were much easier given the conditions of colonial rule (see also Chailley 1962). In any case, this new form of public sermon—*waaju*—that sometimes linked Islam with the objectives of the state spread throughout French West Africa. Such public sermons also helped to spread a more standardized Islamic culture premised on the notion that all Muslims should have similar duties and ritual obligations. Eventually, such preachers would widen their appeals to encourage those who could afford to do so to perform the *ḥajj* and to contribute funds toward the construction of new Friday mosques in colonial centers, such as Bamako, the Malian capital.<sup>7</sup> But these public sermons were not to remain the preserve of the colonial-authorized Muslim establishment, nor were members of this establishment the only ones to use such sermons to promulgate the idea that regular prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan were to be ritual norms for all Muslims.

Paradoxically, the new colonial public sphere created a space in which various kinds of Muslim preachers flourished and made public pronouncements about the practice of Islam that were nonpolitical (at least from the perspective of the French). That is, they did not contest French authority. In colonial archives, one can read about individual Muslims—I want to call them freelance Muslim preachers—who gave sermons and sometimes traveled around to do so. Many of these preachers actively sought to convert non-Muslims to Islam; they also admonished people to give up their un-Islamic practices. In many reported cases, they tried to get people to relinquish or to destroy their allegedly un-Islamic ritual objects—"fetishes" in the colonial lexicon. It was usually when such preachers disrupted the colonial "public order" that they came to the attention of the French and were sometimes arrested and even sent into exile—hence traces in the colonial archives. Indeed, colonial reports document numerous cases in which conversion to Islam and the destruction of

<sup>7</sup> See Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (hereafter CAOM) 1 Aff Pol 2259/4 L'Islam au Soudan, Rapports Trimestriels 1954.

ritual objects in various places led to open conflict, often along generational lines.<sup>8</sup> That is, younger people, frequently migrants, contested the authority of non-Muslims, who were quite often their elders. Issues of gender were also important here, since most of the first converts seem to have been men. There are also reported cases of certain preachers haranguing those who considered themselves Muslims for failing to practice Islam correctly. For example, some preachers openly criticized African colonial civil servants for drinking alcoholic beverages and/or for exceeding the maximum of four wives permitted according to the rules of Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>9</sup>

Many of these freelance preachers, some not discussed in detail in the colonial archive or discussed only in passing, carried out the work of spreading Islam. Sources here include triumphalist oral narratives and hagiographic accounts in Arabic (and sometimes in French). One of the freelance preachers frequently discussed today, who also left considerable traces in the colonial archives is Cheikh Salah Siby (ca. 1888–1982), a Dogon convert to Islam, largely credited with spreading Islam among the Dogon.<sup>10</sup> Although those familiar with the Griaule school of French ethnology might find the idea of a Dogon Muslim an oxymoron, Cheikh Salah is just one of many such Dogon converts to Islam. During the colonial period, Cheikh Salah actively began to instruct people in what he took to be proper Islamic religious practice—ritual daily prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan, getting people to slaughter animals according to the rules of Islamic jurisprudence (*halāl*), and so forth—some of the outward signs of Islam. From the 1940s on, he mainly directed his attention to two groups of socially marginal people: first, his fellow Dogon, many of whom took him to be a living Muslim saint, and second,

<sup>8</sup> Documents in ANM and CAOM list many cases from the twentieth century that are too numerous to mention here. For example, see CAOM 75 APOM 4/4, Haut-Sénégal-Niger, Internement de Fodé Ismaila et consorts, Rapport, September 25, 1911. Early published colonial accounts include some of Paul Marty's writings (for example, Marty 1920), whereas later colonial accounts include one of Griaule's rare discussions of the spread of Islam in West Africa (1949) and Cardaie 1954. See also Manley 1997.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, ANM, 1B 150, Letter, Fama Mademba, Sansanding, to the Administrator, Ségou, April 23, 1909. I am grateful to Richard Roberts for bringing this document to my attention.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, CAOM 1 Aff. Pol. 2259/4, Soudan français, Direction Locale des Affaires Politiques (hereafter Aff. Pol.), Bulletin No. 2 (Confidential), November 1953, "Note sur l'Islam au Macina."

some of the many former slaves in the region. These were sizeable groups whom their Muslim neighbors often treated with disdain. In any case, such people—mostly recent converts to Islam—were beginning to emulate the conventions of religious practice, as well as standards of piety, of those with claims to Islamic religious authority—the Muslim elites. Most of the newly Islamized also abandoned other public signs—such as long braided hair for men and certain forms of facial scarification for their children—that indexed them as non-Muslims. In any case, this particular preacher was helping to facilitate the emergence of a more generally shared way of being Muslim. Such developments were only possible given the complex transformations occurring under French rule and with the expansion of the public sphere.

It would be hasty, however, to assume that the adoption of outward—indeed public—signs of Islam meant that allegedly un-Islamic traditions were no longer important. Over time, various kinds of such "traditions" were desacralized and made into local and regional folklore. In some cases, the therapies or medicines of non-Muslim healers were also desacralized and, therefore, rendered licit for Muslims who might seek to use these along with or as an alternative to the increasingly available Western biomedicine. Other "traditions," such as certain masking traditions, were not so much desacralized as made into children's games held at certain points in the Islamic calendar, and, therefore, rendered "harmless." Still yet other allegedly un-Islamic "traditions"—forms of spirit possession and the use of certain non-Islamic ritual objects—have been increasingly relegated to private or at least semipublic venues, that is, out of the view of potential critics, Muslim or otherwise.<sup>11</sup> It is here that one can see some of those excluded from the expanding public sphere in which Islam dominates.

### *Muslim Associations and New Muslim Intellectuals*

In contrast to the freelance Muslim preachers, new Muslim associations were founded in urban areas, increasingly from the 1930s onward. These new Muslim associations ostensibly admitted all

<sup>11</sup> Since such "traditions" are often not public or are only semipublic, the analytical optic of "counterpublics" is arguably applicable here.

Muslims as members, but tended to attract those who were colonial civil servants, former soldiers, and others involved in the new colonial urban centers of economic activity (cf. Loimeier 1999; Meillassoux 1968; and Gomez-Perez 1991, 1997). Some of these early associations sought to encourage and facilitate the *hajj*, which increasingly became a goal of an expanding and aspirant African Muslim bourgeoisie.<sup>12</sup> Several of the associations organized public meetings where invited speakers, including prominent African Muslim intellectuals, talked about such topics as Muslim unity and morality.<sup>13</sup> Working with one association, Fraternité Musulmane, Mahmoud Ba, a West African educated in Mecca in the 1930s, gave public addresses in which he condemned Muslim youths for being more drawn to drink and pleasure than to practicing religion.<sup>14</sup> According to French accounts, such meetings were decidedly nonpolitical or at least generally avoided political issues. In 1948, however, after developments in Palestine, one organization made public statements that "this dispute" did not concern West African Muslims living under French rule.<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that the public meetings of these associations generally ended with speakers thanking France for her "civilizing mission," however perfunctory such statements might seem.<sup>16</sup>

By the early 1950s, certain West African Muslim intellectuals began to enter the public arena in new ways. In contrast to those Africans who had engaged in French-language secular schooling, such as many of the members of the early Muslim associations, these intellectuals were part of a newly emergent, highly educated Muslim elite, who had undergone advanced Islamic education, whether in Mali, elsewhere in West Africa, or abroad, at institutions like al-Azhar in Cairo

<sup>12</sup> On the *hajj*, see Cardare 1954 and Chailley 1962.

<sup>13</sup> For example, in the late 1940s, a new organization, Fraternité Musulmane (founded in 1936), organized "des réunions publiques où les mêmes thèmes de morale, sociale et religieuse, sont développés: condamnation du gaspillage à propos de mariage; union des musulmans, respect du Coran; condamnation de la fréquentation des salles de bal." See CAOM, 1 Aff. Pol. 2259/1, L'Islam en AOF, Aff. Pol. Musulmanes, Rapport Trim., 2d & 3d trim., 1948. These same themes are among those discussed by many Muslim associations in Mali today.

<sup>14</sup> See CAOM, 1 Aff. Pol. 2259/1, Aff. Pol. Musulmanes, Rapport Trim., 2d trim., 1950; see also Kane 1997: 447ff. for a discussion of Mahmud Ba's preaching from the 1940s onward, and Brenner 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See CAOM 1 Aff. Pol. 2259/1, L'Islam en AOF, Aff. Pol. Musulmanes, Rapport, 2d & 3d trim. 1948.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, CAOM 1 Aff. Pol. 2259/1, Aff. Pol. Musulmanes, Rapport Trim. 3d trim. 1950.

or the Dar al-Hadīth in the Hijaz. Inspired by the nationalism sweeping the Arab world, the independence of British colonies, most notably, India and Pakistan in 1947 with their large Muslim populations, and the independence of Libya from Italy in the early 1950s, some of these Muslim intellectuals sought to connect anticolonialist ideas with more reformist ideas about Islam. Given that their activities were under constant surveillance, they were not able to act as freely as the colonial-authorized Muslim establishment. Indeed, some "reformist" preachers were subject to harassment after making their own public pronouncements that were deemed insulting to the French or other Muslim clerics; they sometimes had their schools closed and were occasionally imprisoned for allegedly disrupting public order (see Brenner 2000; Kaba 1974).

In the early 1950s, "reformist" Muslim intellectuals<sup>17</sup> in what is present-day Mali (together with intellectuals from the neighboring French colonies of Senegal and Guinea) founded the Union Culturelle Musulmane (the UCM, Muslim Cultural Union), a voluntary organization whose stated objectives included "the establishment of a reformed Islam [*un Islam renoué*], education, and the liberation of the African Man [*l'Homme Africain*]" (cited in Chailley 1962: 46).<sup>18</sup> Some of these reform-oriented intellectuals also published pamphlets in French and Arabic that explicitly expressed anticolonial views. In the introduction to one such pamphlet, Cheikh Touré boldly identified "the trio" of the "Capitalist, Marabout [Muslim cleric], [and] Colonialist," who "exploited, misled, and oppressed" people in West Africa (Touré 1957: 1). This author even decried "the collaboration with the [colonial] authorities carried on even in our mosques, meetings, and [during] religious holidays" (Touré 1957: 9–10; see also Diané 1956 and Chailley 1962). In 1954, after the outbreak of war in Algeria, some of these intellectuals demanded that West African Muslims not be sent to serve in North Africa. In some of their public pronouncements and published writings, these reformists criticized

<sup>17</sup> During the colonial period in West Africa, French colonial administrators used "Wahhabi" rather loosely to refer to "reformist" Muslims, and this terminology continues to be used there today in both French and in the region's vernaculars. On such "reformists" in Mali, see Kaba 1974; Hamès 1980; Amselle 1985, Triaud 1986; Niezen 1990; Brenner 1993, 2000; Soares 1997; and Hock 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Mali's first postcolonial socialist regime of Modibo Keita disbanded the UCM. Following the overthrow of the regime in 1968, the UCM was allowed to reorganize, but disbanded a second time in 1971. On the UCM in Sudan/Mali, see Kaba 1974 and Amselle 1985.



certain Muslim clerics for what they considered to be un-Islamic practices. They condemned in particular their use of the Islamic esoteric sciences, those areas of secret or mystical knowledge ("magic" by most anthropological definitions), as well as for the pedagogical style of "traditional" Islamic education centered on the memorization of texts. In general, these new Muslim intellectuals sought to change the way Islam had long been practiced in West Africa in order to bring it more in line with what they deemed to be more "correct" practices, modeled on the presumed center of the Islamic world, the Arab Middle East. Toward this end, a number of them set up their own "modern" Islamic educational institutions in some of the largest towns, borrowing their pedagogical style from the colonial French-language secular schools (see Brenner 1991, 2000).<sup>19</sup>

When these "reformists" entered public debate, they helped to animate discussions about what it meant to be Muslim—what was the proper way to be Muslim. And since the 1950s, some of the ongoing debates and sometimes conflicts about Islam in Mali have been between the heirs of some of these urban-based reformists and those we might call "traditionalist" Muslims, who are more closely identified with Sufi orders and traditional Islamic education. Over time, there have been heated debates between these groups about religious doctrine and practices—for example, about whether to cross one's arms across the chest during prayer. What is remarkable, however, is the actual convergence between such reformists and those they criticize about the practice of Islam and piety over the past few decades. In fact, "reformists" and "traditionalists" generally agree that all Muslims should practice a more standardized Islam—regular prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the *hajj* whenever possible. They are frequently in agreement about the kinds of "traditional" or "magico-religious" practices—most notably, spirit possession and the use of un-Islamic ritual objects—that they find objectionable (Soares 1999). Moreover, they are also sometimes united in their opposition to the secularism of the postcolonial state.

<sup>19</sup> See Brenner's discussion of the colonial-backed "counterreform movement" (2000). There were also other Muslim intellectuals whose perspectives might be called pro-French "modernist" Muslim.

*The Public Sphere, Standardization, and Difference*

The public sphere that developed under colonial rule and through which public sermons spread has only continued to expand in the postcolonial period, in which the Malian state is ostensibly committed to the principle of *laïcité*. Today the public sphere is animated by religious education, sermons, print and audio-visual media, and the country's Islamic organizations, all of which have been influenced by transnational and global interconnections (cf. Bowen 1993; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; and Anderson 1991). This public sphere has helped to make information and ideas about Islam (not to mention other areas of knowledge), including that from beyond the immediate area, more readily available to the public. Although this public sphere is perhaps more vibrant in urban areas, it also extends into some of the far reaches of the country where for many people to be Malian means to be Muslim. The public sphere has, if anything, helped to foster a supralocal sense of shared Muslim identity in Mali, an imagined community of Muslims often linked to the Malian state whose members are to varying degrees attentive to the broader Islamic world that lies beyond the state boundaries.<sup>20</sup> There are of course those excluded from such a sphere, most notably, Christians and other non-Muslims in Mali. Although some Malians see themselves as participating directly and unambiguously in the global Islamic community—the *umma*—many other Malian Muslims recognize differences between themselves and others that cannot be elided in the imagining of such a transnational community.<sup>21</sup> This imagined community of Muslims in Mali helps shape the way ordinary Muslims practice Islam. This public sphere has helped to create pressures to standardize Islamic practices, especially in their public ritual forms.<sup>22</sup>

With the shift to more standardized norms of piety and the rise of an ostensibly more uniform way of being Muslim, what Eickelman has called a "generic Islam" (1989b), one might suspect that there

<sup>20</sup> This formulation of a Muslim community has been influenced by van der Veer's (1994) discussion of religious nationalism in India.

<sup>21</sup> This is not in any way to suggest the existence of anything like the African Islam ("Islam noir") of the colonial imagination.

<sup>22</sup> The debate about "orthopraxy" in Islam is relevant here. Cf. Smith 1957, Asad 1986, and Eickelman 1989a.



would no longer be any place for the hereditary transmission of learning or hereditary sanctity or charisma. This is not, however, the case. In many places in Mali, including western Mali, lineages of religious specialists have been able to retain control over Islamic religious education and leadership positions such as imam, not to mention roles in the various Sufi orders. This has also been the case in some urban areas where people have objected to recent converts to Islam and even their descendants acting as imam.<sup>23</sup> Members of lineages of religious specialists continue to have reputations for their knowledge and use of the Islamic esoteric sciences.<sup>24</sup> Almost without exception, Muslim saints and other esteemed living or deceased religious personalities come from these same lineages thought to have access to such secret knowledge. In some cases, certain living Muslim saints have flourished along with the expansion of the public sphere (Soares 1997, 1999, 2000a).

If these might seem to be examples of all that is "traditional" in contemporary Mali, it is useful to consider one of Mali's—may I dare say—more postmodern religious personalities to understand how differences between Muslims continue to be so important. Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara (b. 1955) is the head (or "spiritual guide") of *Ançar Dine* (in Arabic *Anṣār al-dīn*), one of the more successful of the many new Muslim organizations that have proliferated in Mali since the overthrow of President Moussa Traoré's authoritarian regime in 1991 (see Hock 1999 for an extensive, though necessarily incomplete, list of such new organizations). He is perhaps Mali's most controversial and flamboyant Muslim media personality. Ever since being arrested and banned from preaching on several occasions in the late 1980s for allegedly insulting remarks, Haïdara has managed to garner considerable public attention.<sup>25</sup> He states quite emphatically that he

<sup>23</sup> See Chailley (1962: 29–31) for a discussion of a case from the mid-1950s when groups of Soninke and Toucouleur founded their own mosque in Bamako rather than accept an imam who was Bambara. I learned about similar contemporary cases during field research.

<sup>24</sup> Such knowledge and its use are no less important to what it means to be Muslim for many whose lives are increasingly associated with the modern—here higher rates of literacy and secular schooling.

<sup>25</sup> Some of the Malian newspaper coverage of Haïdara and his followers include Sidibé 1993; Traoré 1996; Coulibaly 1999, 2000; and Diarra 2003. He is invariably mentioned as among the country's most influential preachers in recent newspaper coverage of "Islamic" issues in Mali.

fashions himself after the Egyptian preacher 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk (see Kepel 1986), and that Kishk's sermons have provided inspiration for his own. Haïdara appeals to a mass public—including many who are illiterate—in Mali and among Malian migrants elsewhere in Africa and in Europe largely through his sermons (in Bamana/Bambara) on audiocassette and video that circulate widely.<sup>26</sup> Haïdara has received considerable media attention for provocative public statements he has made about the immorality and dishonesty of politicians (much like Kishk), merchants, and other clerics, as well as for his interventions in debates about public morality and the correct practice of Islam. His is a project focused on the shaping of moral subjects in the public sphere, a very public Islam that also includes a social agenda. In this way, he is not unlike such colonial-era Muslim preachers as Seydou Nourou Tall. In his sermons and other public pronouncements, Haïdara has insisted that Malian Muslims—many of whom know little Arabic—can perform the ritual daily prayers (*ṣalāt* in Arabic) in whatever vernacular language they speak. The discussions and controversy about this and other subjects raised in his sermons have undoubtedly helped to spread his reputation, even notoriety.

Although the media have been central to the making of Haïdara's career, his ability to receive a forum—even to enter public debate about morality and Islam—seems to relate in no small part to his status as a member of a lineage claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, his patronym, Haïdara, indicates sharifian descent here, as it does in large parts of Muslim West Africa. However important his personal charisma, which includes his skills as a talented orator and his media savvy, authoritative hereditary charisma seems to be the condition of possibility for the making of his career. Furthermore, Haïdara—whom some consider an Islamist—is often venerated much like a "traditional" Sufi saint. I have watched as people have approached him to kiss his hand or be touched by him, that is, in exactly the same way many Malian Muslims approach descendants of the Prophet Muhammad or other saintly Muslim figures. Although I have witnessed Malian "reformist" and "modernist" Muslims react to such displays toward Haïdara with dismay,

<sup>26</sup> In 1999, Haïdara told me that he had been making sermons on audiocassettes for more than sixteen years.

sometimes even utter disbelief, most Malians do not find the veneration of Haïdara in any way surprising.

### *Islam in Public*

Ritual daily prayer and particularly communal Friday prayer have become perhaps the most public of all signs of piety in contemporary Mali. Fasting during Ramadan and the breaking of the fast at sunset have increasingly become public acts, especially in urban Mali. The *hajj*—the pilgrimage to the Holy Cities—is also a public act, when pilgrims embark on their voyage and upon return. Such public signs have not, however, guaranteed the probity of everyone's piety. It is interesting to note that those of "caste" and servile status and recent converts to Islam were among the first to finance the construction of large and imposing mosques in their natal villages throughout Mali. Even these acts, perhaps the most visible and therefore public acts of piety, have not erased individual actor's marginal status in relation to Muslim elites—clerics and marabouts—as far as matters Islamic go. Even today, when such people have been able to perform the *hajj* their motives have been questioned. More generally, as the number of those from broad sectors of the society going on the *hajj* has increased, so have suspicions that many ordinary Malian Muslims might have less than pious motives for performing the *hajj*. Many Malians joke about their compatriots performing what they call "the business *hajj*," that is, traveling to the Holy Cities under the pretext of the *hajj* with the real objective being commerce—to purchase consumer items such as electronics, jewelry, and so forth to resell at a substantial profit in Mali.

At the beginning, I mentioned one public sign of piety that is especially important. This is *seere*, the dark, sometimes circular, spot or mark on some Muslims' foreheads. As I have noted, some state that the mark indexes regular prayer beyond the obligatory five ritual daily prayers and presumably appears on the forehead from touching the ground during prayer. Many Malians readily note that the Prophet Muhammad's close companions had such a mark. Those with formal Islamic education can easily identify textual sources where this mark and those close people to the Prophet Muhammad are discussed—most importantly in one of the *suras* in the Qur'an (*al-fath*, 48: 29).

It is instructive to focus on these publicly visible signs of piety not only because they were the subject of considerable discussion in Mali but also because they are not limited to any one group of Muslims. That is, they are not limited in the way that, say, beards and black veils might be limited to reformists or so-called Islamists. In a sense, they concern all Muslims and the more standardized set of norms that have become widespread in this setting.

When some of my Malian informants and friends spoke about the marks on people's foreheads, they did so as a way to refer to how much a particular person apparently prays as a Muslim. In this way of thinking, the mark indexes piety. Or, at the very least, it indexes performance of prayer that is regular, even out of the ordinary in its regularity. Many Malians think and state otherwise, however; they note that many of the most pious Muslims they know do not have this mark, though admittedly some do. Some refer mockingly in French to those with the dark spot as having *le tampon noir*, the black stamp—the ubiquitous bureaucratic seal the French colonial state introduced—on their foreheads. Many state that certain Muslims will go to great lengths for people to think they are pious. Indeed, some even speculate that many Malians will rub something on the forehead—even a stone—until such a mark appears. Several people told me that they too could easily have one of these marks if they wanted.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I began to notice these marks on various people's foreheads, almost all of whom were adults. They were from all sectors of society, from schoolteachers and civil servants to market traders, the unemployed, and Muslim clerics. They included some of my male friends in their thirties and forties, and relatives of my informants, including a few adult women. Although some of those who have these marks were esteemed religious leaders, including some with saintly reputations, they were clearly not the overwhelming majority. In fact, the overall pattern was, at least for me, entirely unexpected.

Prominent Muslim religious leaders aside, many of the Malian Muslims whom I know with these marks fall into two categories (what follows draws on conversations with some of my more sociologically minded informants). First, there are those of relatively marginal social status, who, despite the performance of the practices of a standardized Islam that has become more widespread through the public sphere or even the financing of new mosque construction, are not readily accepted as Muslims on par with the descendants of the

hereditary Muslim clerics. For example, former slaves, members of "castes," and descendants of recent converts.<sup>27</sup> A subcategory here would be some of the ordinary Muslim women I know who are childless and have these marks. The exemplary piety of such women and the mark that indexes this piety, I suspect, relate to their inability to bear children in a setting where childbearing is greatly valued. Second, there are various persons from all sectors of society whose moral character is in question, usually because of charges of corruption, embezzlement, or illicit sexual activities; or because of the amassing of considerable wealth under economic conditions that are very precarious. For example, I know several civil servants—some of whom are members of prominent lineages of Muslim religious specialists—who have been charged with stealing public funds upon whose foreheads the marks have appeared. In one case, the mark appeared after a period in prison. Similarly, there is the case of one friend accused of embezzling money from his father's prosperous import company who also had a mark appear. I also know young well-to-do businessmen—French-educated in some cases—with reputations as notorious womanizers with these marks.

One might read the appearance of such marks as attempts to clear one's name after public embarrassment or to safeguard one's reputation. But it is perhaps unwise for the anthropologist to speculate about the intentionality of actors. Indeed, it might even be churlish to read these signs as acts of deliberation—that is, actions of mindful bodies. Be that as it may, it is clear that there is no better way to prove one's piety than through signs that are publicly recognized as valid.<sup>28</sup> Whether the individual actor uses such signs consciously is perhaps beside the point. What is important to note is that actors exhibit their piety according to certain accepted norms and they do so publicly, that is, in ways that the public sphere encourages. As I have suggested, some of these signs of piety, and the marks in particular, are not unlike what linguists have called hypercorrection

<sup>27</sup> See Ahmed 1981, who discusses low-status Bengali Muslims whose strategies of "upward mobility" included claiming descent from high-status Muslim groups in Bengal and emulating their practices. I am grateful to Naveeda Khan for bringing this source to my attention.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Salvatore's discussion of "staging virtue" in Egypt (1998) and Hirschkind on the ethics of listening (2001).

in language use, or the quest for what Bourdieu (1984) has called "distinction."

Unlike Habermas's view that "public opinion" is key to the public sphere (1989 [1962]), the "consensus" (*ijmāʿ*) of the Muslim community is what seems to be of paramount importance in Mali. After all, on the one hand, there does seem to be "consensus" about proper Islamic religious conduct, the appeal of a more "generic Islam," and identifiable processes of the standardization of religious practice and public piety. On the other hand, there are real differences, which belie the existence of any such publicly proclaimed or tacitly accepted "consensus." As I have argued, hereditary sanctity and distinction remain very important factors in how Islam is practiced in post-colonial Mali. Moreover, the "consensus" about proper public conduct and piety excludes all of those whose actions in private or in semipublic venues do not partake of the consensus. It is the much-discussed *seere* that helps to illustrate some of the paradoxes of the "consensus" about public piety within the broader public sphere in Mali. Some of those Muslims with such an ostensibly visible sign of piety on their foreheads actually risk publicly betraying their inauthenticity—in short, their very lack of piety—to other Muslims. This has been a topic of much discussion, both in public and in private, among many, if not all ordinary Malian Muslims for whom piety and its public signs have become in recent years matters of considerable concern.

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## CHAPTER TEN

FRAMING THE PUBLIC SPHERE:  
IRANIAN WOMEN IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC\*

FARIBA ADELKHAH

It is possible to understand the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic that emerged from it in terms of the formation of a public space. The successive crises that the regime experienced should then be read according to the splits that such a process creates. Major political scandals, such as the trial of the former mayor of Tehran, Gholamhossein Karbashi (1998), or more recently the Sharam Jazaeiri Arab affair (2002), originated with the private appropriation of public funds, although the distinction between private and public was hardly clear from the perspective of the different protagonists. The repression of Islamic intellectuals critical of the Republic, such as Mohsen Kadivar or Hassan Yossefi Eshkevari, was justified not for what they thought but because they expressed their views in public rather than within the "qualified" circles of the clerical establishment. Not all truths are good to say in public. The conflict between "conservatives" and "reformers" turns in large measure on the definition of public space and the modes of legitimate action within it. The polemics and repression engendered by student demonstrations, the use of satellite dishes, and women's presence in sports stadiums exemplify this conflict.

For over forty years the relation between the private and public spheres has been a subject of constant debate in Iran. It was shaped by the issue of social being (*adām-e ejtemā'i*), characterized by committing oneself to others in the public domain and redefining one's relations with others. Secular and religious thinkers, as well as social movements, have been major contributors to this process. Beginning in the 1960s, this theme was developed in the struggle over what has been called the "modernization" of Iran. It has concerned the

\* Dale F. Eickelman translated this chapter from French into English, and Gene R. Garthwaite provided assistance in transliterating Persian technical terms.