

**The Fulbe *shaykh* and the Bambara “pagans”:  
contemporary campaigns to spread  
Islam in Mali**

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This essay looks at a high-profile Fulbe Muslim religious leader from Mali and explores his relations with the people of the Mande.<sup>2</sup> This Muslim religious leader or *shaykh* (Fulfulde, *seeku*)<sup>3</sup>, El-Hadj Cheikh Sidy Modibo Kane Diallo<sup>4</sup> of Dilly in the circle of Nara, is perhaps one of the most influential religious leaders in present day Mali.<sup>5</sup> The essay focuses on this man, considered by many to be a friend of God (*wali*),<sup>6</sup> and examines the development of his “career” as a *shaykh*

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<sup>2</sup> Amselle (1990) argues that the Fulbe should be included within the Mande cultural area. I have no objections to this but choose in this discussion to use local ideological constructs about who is/is not Mande/Fulbe.

<sup>3</sup> *Seeku* (from the Arabic *shaykh*) is considered higher in rank than a *moodibo* (pl. *moodibaaɓe*), another loan word in Fulfulde from the Arabic, *mu'addib*, meaning teacher. *Moodibo* is used to refer to a broad range of Muslim religious specialists, including scholars, teachers, and diviners. It is equivalent in meaning to *ceerno* (pl. *seernaabe*) in the Pulaar dialect of Fulfulde spoken in western Mali and in the Senegal River valley. Like *seeku*, *moodibo* can be used as a proper name.

<sup>4</sup> Here I follow the orthography used by Sidy himself, for example, on the stamp he puts on his correspondence in French. In the rest of the essay, I will refer to him as Sidy, as many do.

<sup>5</sup> “*Chef religieux*” (Religious leader) is Sidy’s self-appellation in French, found, for example, painted on his automobiles. Religious leader is also the most satisfactory translation of *seeku/shaykh*.

<sup>6</sup> *Wali* is the Arabic word used in Fulfulde (pl. *waliyaabe*). I translate *wali* here as friend of God rather than saint to avoid confusion with the latter’s Christians referents (cf. Denny 1988, Cruise O’Brien 1988).

and a *wali*.<sup>7</sup> I show how this career has been constructed in large part through ideological oppositions between Fulbe and Mande/Bambara, as well as through the *shaykh*'s interactions with actual Bambara people, particularly his efforts to spread Islam among the country's non-Muslim ("pagan") rural Bambara population and to eradicate the widespread practice of spirit possession. As I suggest, it is in such conversion campaigns that one can see most clearly how individuals — both Fulbe and Mande/Bambara — deploy such ideological oppositions. Ultimately, however, the results of such campaigns to spread Islam remain rather ambiguous.

### The sufi: his life and the making of a career

Sidy was born in 1925 into the Kane Diallo family, a Fulbe family with a long and illustrious reputation as learned and pious Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, several members of the Kane Diallo family have been considered *walis*.<sup>9</sup> And a considerable amount of the family's prestige comes from the reputations of such celebrated ancestors, with two of these undoubtedly the most famous. The first, Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad, came from a *tooroddo* family, originally from the Matam area of the Senegal River. He studied with a leading Kunta *shaykh* in Timbuktu, taking the Qadiri *wird* (litany of prayers) from him. He then went on to become the first prominent *shaykh* of the sufi order, the Qadiriyya, in the family with many followers (*taalibo*, pl. *taalibaabe*), beginning a tradition of sufism and spiritual leadership that has continued in the family to the present. After having had very close ties with the rulers of Maasina during Seku Amaadu's *jihad*, Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad moved out of the orbit of Maasina.<sup>10</sup> He died shortly before the French conquest in the town of Diina in the Bakounou where his tomb is an important pilgrimage site.

The second of these famous ancestors is Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad's sole child to live beyond infancy, his daughter, Oumou.<sup>11</sup> Although she developed a reputation as a *wali* like her father before her, this occurred under considerably changed circumstances. French colonial rule brought improved transportation and communications, as well as new networks of colonial civil servants and soldiers from throughout the colonies, all of which contributed to the spread of her reputation and that of her family in the French Sudan and beyond into the other colonies in French West Africa. Until her death in 1942, countless people made

<sup>7</sup> I refer here to the "career of sainthood" used by Triaud (1988).

<sup>8</sup> I have provided more detailed biographical information about Sidy and his family elsewhere (see Soares 1995, cf. Marty 1920).

<sup>9</sup> Kane is an honorific used among the Toorodbe (sg. *tooroddo*) clerisy by those with the pullo patronym Diallo if they are scholars or members of a scholarly lineage (see Willis 1978). The Kane Diallo family reports that they are Toorodbe.

<sup>10</sup> See Sanankoua (1990) for a discussion of Maasina and its successive rulers.

<sup>11</sup> There is considerable discussion of Oumou in the archives, especially after 1941. See *Archives Nationales du Mali*, Koulouba (ANM.) 4E-42,4 (Fonds Récents).

appeals to Oumou for petitionary prayers and blessings (*duwaawu*).<sup>12</sup> Soon after her death, her tomb in Dilly became a major pilgrimage site.<sup>13</sup>

Dilly is presently home to a large concentration of Kane Diallo family members, including Sidy, whom Oumou designated from among her grandsons as spiritual head of the family. The presence of the Kane Diallo family with its reputation gives the town a special aura. Indeed, Dilly is commonly referred to as the town of *walis* (*wuro waliyaabe*).<sup>14</sup> While not all Kane Diallo family members are considered *walis*, many, nonetheless, believe that all descendants of Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad have *baraka* (God's favor or blessing).

Although *baraka* is conceived of as heritable within this family, people frequently point out that such *baraka* is something that must also be continually worked for.<sup>15</sup> That is, even within a family as blessed as the Kane Diallo family, heredity is not enough. This is precisely what is said about Sidy. In the past few decades, his reputation has spread throughout Mali, with many active followers or disciples (*taalibaabe*) and representatives (*muqaddams*) from various ethnic groups, Bambara, Fulbe, Soninke, Moor, etc.<sup>16</sup> People stress that his numerous followers and his tremendous popularity are an index of *baraka*. That he has worked for *baraka* can be seen in his comportment and in such personal characteristics as his modesty, generosity, and directness.<sup>17</sup>

Sidy, being born into a family of *walis*, has, in a sense, claimed the title and reputation of *wali* as his birthright. But this does not accurately describe local understandings. What Sidy has claimed is the title of *shaykh*, a title in the Malian context that is usually reserved for very few Muslims.<sup>18</sup> This claim is announced on all of his vehicles, where he has painted "El-Hadj Cheikh Sidy Modibo Kane, chef religieux à Dilly". To his followers, he deserves this title, which is accorded only to those *moodibaabe* who enjoy a considerable following.

His reputation for being a *wali* follows from a different set of understandings. A *wali* never openly proclaims himself as such. As elsewhere in the Muslim world, Malian Muslims generally acknowledge that the state of being a *wali* is conferred by

<sup>12</sup> Many Malians are named after Oumou of Dilly. Frequently, childless people make an oath (Fulfulde, *takke*; Bambara, *dafale*) that if they have a child, they agree to name the child Oumou or Modibo, after her father and her son.

<sup>13</sup> This is reported by the French colonial administration as early as 1945. See ANM: 1E-104,3 (F.R.), "Rapport de la tournée effectuée par le Commandant, cercle de Niore, 8-13 nov. 1945, subdivision de Nara".

<sup>14</sup> Dilly is even referred to as the town of *walis* in a recently recorded song in Fulfulde about Sidy by the Malian singer, Ina Baba Coulibaly.

<sup>15</sup> In Dilly, this was also stated by one of Sidy's *muqaddams* (representatives) from Jenne over a loudspeaker at the official opening of the yearly *ziyara* (Arabic, visit; Fulfulde, *juraade*, to visit a *wali*) coinciding with the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (Arabic, *mawlid al-nabi*) in August 1994.

<sup>16</sup> The *muqaddams* appointed by Sidy number literally in the hundreds. They are his local representatives and are authorized to give people the Qadiri *wird*.

<sup>17</sup> Similarly, those people who are his followers (*taalibaabe*) are supposed to work for him as their *shaykh*, by performing physical labor or giving gifts of money and kind. In so doing, they are said to work for *baraka*.

<sup>18</sup> In those areas of Mali (and neighboring Mauritania) where Arabic or Hassaniyya is spoken, the word *shaykh* is used more frequently.

God (Denny 1988). Although one may be a *wali* without oneself or others being aware of it, ordinary Muslims may be able to identify a particular *wali* by certain signs. One regularly cited sign is the ability to predict unforeseen events. In the case of Sidy, some of these signs are his actions or behavior and, especially, his reputation for being associated with wondrous or astonishing things (Fulfulde *kawde*; Bambara, *kabako*).<sup>19</sup>

Sidy's reputation for being associated with wondrous things has grown from countless stories and legends, including some eyewitness accounts detailing things that have occurred around him, some rather astonishing and others more mundane. As elsewhere in the Muslim world, people are often predisposed to identify particular events or happenings around the *shaykh* as miraculous (see e.g. Gilsean 1982). This leads those around him to watch his actions very closely. Additionally, many of the people in Sidy's entourage tie their own destiny to his. Several people say that their reasonably good standard of living and health are all because of Sidy, his *baraka*, and his closeness to God. These people are the individuals who employ the term *wali* the most readily.<sup>20</sup> And they are the ones responsible in large part for spreading his reputation. From the perspective of those Malians who say Sidy and other contemporary *shaykhs* are not *walis*, however, such individuals are just trying to bolster the reputation of their *shaykh*.

When asked about the so-called wondrous events identified around him, Sidy is generally unwilling to discuss them.<sup>21</sup> What others call astonishing, he says, is not so for him. Rather than discuss these wondrous events, Sidy points to a prediction made by his grandmother Oumou. One day, she said, he would have many followers around him, and each year the number would increase. By all accounts, this has come true. Although Sidy never employs the word *wali* in relation to himself, he often uses the term to refer to his ancestors. For those inclined to believe that he is a *wali* and not just a *shaykh*, the evidence is convincing.

### The conversion campaigns among "the Bambara"

Perhaps the single most important factor that has contributed to Sidy's development of a supra-local reputation is his effort to spread Islam, particularly

<sup>19</sup> Muslims learned in Arabic give *kawde* the gloss *karamat* in Arabic, which translates loosely as astonishing things and not as miracles — hence my reticence in using this latter term.

<sup>20</sup> To give an idea of some of the things said about Sidy, perhaps to be construed as hyperbolic by some, I offer the following example. One *taalibo* that I know who travels regularly with Sidy praises Sidy publicly in a rather loud voice, calling him "Energy" and saying that he is like a motor. The *taalibo* explained to me that this was because Sidy had power very much like one sees with electricity. And, furthermore, he said, when one was around Sidy, all problems were solved, and all things worked like a motor.

<sup>21</sup> In the interviews and conversations I had with Sidy in the circle of Niore, April 1994 and Dilly, August 1994. His family and entourage confirm this unwillingness to talk about these events. They suggest it is part of his modesty.

among non-Muslims in Mali and elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> Although by most accounts islamization was one of the unintended consequences of French colonial rule, there remain to this day areas of Mali with considerable non-Muslim populations.<sup>23</sup> Estimates of Mali's non-Muslim population range from 20 to 30%. A small percentage of these non-Muslims are said to be Christians (Brenner 1993: 71). It is among the others — that is, the rural non-Muslims who are not Christians — that Sidy has concentrated his conversion campaign efforts. Often he focuses on some of the same areas covered by the Maasina and Umarian states and *jihads* associated with the Fulbe as well as areas under the control of Samory in southern Mali.<sup>24</sup>

Before considering Sidy's campaigns, it is essential to examine the ideas about the Mande and the Bambara that set the context for Sidy's activities. Amselle has pointed to the existence in ethnological writings of an opposition between Bambara and Muslim, where Bambara are seen as both pagan or non-Muslim and autochthonous (1990: 80). This opposition can also be seen in local ideological constructs, where Muslim is often equated with Fula (in the Bambara language) or Fulbe/Futanke, who are sometimes seen as foreigners or invaders.<sup>25</sup>

This opposition between non-Muslim Bambara and Muslim Fulbe can be directly related to another opposition between *bamanaya* and *silameya* in the Bambara language, as described by Bazin for both pre-colonial Mali and, to some extent, the contemporary situation (1985: 121f.). *Bamanaya* refers to what can be considered the expert knowledge of the Bambara, or those magico-religious practices involving, among other things, blood sacrifices and the manipulation of religious objects or power objects.<sup>26</sup> Such expert knowledge also includes "traditional" medicine, often derived from plants (cf. Bazin 1985). *Silameya*, on the other hand, is the knowledge of Islam, that is, the expert knowledge of Muslim religious specialists, including petitionary prayers, blessings, alms-giving, and amulet confection.

As Bazin points out, these two systems of knowledge have often been rivalrous. Indeed, Muslims in Mali frequently criticize "the Bambara" for engaging in practices deemed non-Islamic and/or for being unbelievers. Fulbe Muslims, including many in Sidy's entourage, often point to *anndal Bamarankooŋe*, literally the expert knowledge of the Bambara, as the source of their transgression.<sup>27</sup> Among the many things for which "the Bambara" are criticized is the use of power

<sup>22</sup> Somewhat similar conversion campaigns in Northern Nigeria are discussed by Paden (1986).

<sup>23</sup> On the expansion of Islam during the colonial period, see Harmon (1988). On French colonial policies toward Islam and Muslims, see Harrison (1988).

<sup>24</sup> The literature on these *jihads* and states is vast. The most important monographs include Robinson (1985) for the Umarian *jihad*, Sanankoua (1990) for Maasina, Person (1968-75) for Samory, and Roberts (1987) for a history of the successive states of the Middle Niger.

<sup>25</sup> This is especially the case for the Futanke. See Hargreaves (1966) and Robinson (1985). In other contexts in Mali, Muslim gets identified with Soninke, Dyula, Moor, etc. Bambara, however, often remains equated with non-Muslim.

<sup>26</sup> Such objects are called *baŋi* and *boli* in Bambara, the so-called fetishes in English. Sidy's entourage frequently uses the Bambara word, *boli*. The term "power objects" is used by Bazin (1985) and McNaughton (1988).

<sup>27</sup> They also mention *anndal balewal* (literally, black knowledge), illicit non-Muslim knowledge/practice among the Fulbe, though much less frequently than *anndal Bamarankooŋe*.

objects, and particularly the practice of "treating these objects as gods" — a rather serious charge from a Muslim perspective. But, at the same time, it is important to note that not all the "knowledge of the Bambara" is considered illicit by the people making such critiques. Many people who consider themselves pious Muslims frequently use "traditional" medicines made by the same experts in *bamanaya*, all the while vilifying their other practices.

Drawing on Bazin's analysis, Brenner has recently argued that Muslim religious leaders or experts in *silameya* have been marginalized in Mali in recent years because of "development" ideology, which has its own coterie of experts, who view "development" as the panacea for all problems (1993: 77f.). While this is certainly occurring, Muslim religious leaders still have an important place in the society, especially in those rural areas where development ideology has made less of a direct impact. As I have argued elsewhere (Soares 1995), it seems that religious authority has in part become personalized in figures like Sidy.<sup>28</sup> So despite marginalization of the expert knowledge Muslim religious leaders are said to possess, a *shaykh* with a reputation like Sidy's is able to operate supra-locally.

As noted above, Sidy's widespread reputation as a religious leader rests in large part on his efforts to spread Islam, that is, in those areas seen as "Bambara" or non-Muslim/pagan that were the targets of the jihadists in the pre-colonial period. He launched his first conversion campaign during the colonial period, in 1944, when he visited a group of nine Bambara villages in the Segou area (Kane Diallo n.d.). It was not until the 1980s that he organized several large-scale trips — sometimes lasting for months on end — during which he encouraged people to give up their indigenous religious practices and to embrace Islam (Kane Diallo n.d.). Major campaigns have been undertaken in the Kaarta, Beledougou, the area around Sikasso, as well as in Côte d'Ivoire, among other places.

Sidy and his entourage emphasize that his efforts to spread Islam have always been peaceable. In fact, he agrees to enter only those villages to which he has been invited by the village chief. Such initial invitations, however, often come from younger people, who have been involved in the migration process as laborers or traders elsewhere in Mali or further afield.

There is a long tradition of Malians, predominantly though not exclusively young males, migrating seasonally. During the colonial era, many were seasonal migrants to the peanut basins in the Senegambia while others labored or traded in, or, to and from other neighboring French or British colonies, returning to their home areas for the agricultural season. More recently, vast numbers of Malians, often propelled by drought, have gone as migrant laborers to southern towns in Mali, to more prosperous countries such as Côte d'Ivoire or to Central Africa, not to mention the long term Malian, and especially Soninke, migration to France. Much of this migration, although now less seasonal in nature, is by people who continue to maintain ties with rural-based kin.

In the course of lengthy stays within the larger political economy, migrants from

<sup>28</sup> There are indeed several marabouts in Mali who like Sidy have a national reputation and, in some cases, reputations that extend into neighboring countries such as Mauritania, Senegal, Burkina, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea. See Launay (1992) for a discussion of Muslim scholars with national reputations in Côte d'Ivoire.

different areas are exposed to their fellow workers' conceptions of Islam which may differ from what they are familiar with.<sup>29</sup> Islam has become a unifying element for migrants, especially in places such as Côte d'Ivoire where Muslims constitute a minority.<sup>30</sup> This seems to be the case even for those from areas without a long history of islamization. In many cases, migrants are exposed to a standardized or normative model of Islamic practice in which sufi leaders are valued highly as intermediaries between people and God (cf. Launay 1992) and "traditional" religious practices are denigrated (Hefner 1993).

A fair number of migrants return to their villages after travel, work, and capital accumulation, bringing new ideas with them. And some, with their new-found political economic power, are able to challenge local people and their practices. Some of the migrants, who may have met the celebrated *shaykh* on his extensive trips or heard about his reputation, select him as the agent of change. They invite him to rid their villages of religious objects and practices — "fetishes" and spirit possession — which they now find objectionable. What this usually amounts to is a generational conflict. After having accumulated resources as migrants, members of the younger generation are able to take the upper hand. Instead of deferring to their elders, migrants appeal to external sources of power and authority which, in this case, are the sufi *shaykh* and Islam.

In conversations with Sidy, he always referred to those villages in which he has conducted conversion campaigns as "Bambara".<sup>31</sup> He claims that he does not force people to convert to Islam. After he has been informed that people in a particular village are not Muslims, he then contacts the village chief to say that he has heard that this is the case. He tells them that they should convert to Islam and then asks whether they are ready to convert. If the village chief agrees to allow him to visit the village, he travels to the village with his sizeable entourage and exhorts villagers to embrace Islam. In many such "Bambara" villages, numerous people — sometimes whole villages — are reported to have converted to Islam following Sidy's visit.

During a village conversion campaign, Sidy teaches the *shahada* (the Muslim profession of faith) and the obligatory prayers. A member of Sidy's entourage shaves the heads of those adult men who undergo conversion. And people are given Muslim names. Villagers are also told to give up their religious objects to members of Sidy's entourage who count and then burn them outside of the village. As one member of Sidy's entourage explained, people are usually very reluctant to give up their religious objects, often saying that the objects contain some prized ingredient "from the Mande".<sup>32</sup> Others report that people are also very frightened of the potentially dangerous consequences of relinquishing such objects and allowing

<sup>29</sup> These different conceptions include sufism and the anti-sufism of Wahhabis. Many migrants have, of course, been influenced by Wahhabi ideas. On the Wahhabis, the Wahhabiyya or Ahl al-Sunna and "reformist Islam" in Mali, see Amselle (1985), Brenner (1993), Kaba (1974) and Niezen (1990).

<sup>30</sup> The classic text dealing with such issues is Cohen's (1969) study of Hausa migrants in western Nigeria.

<sup>31</sup> Although Sidy does have Bambara *muqaddams*, the most prominent of them are not Bambara.

<sup>32</sup> Those who collect the power objects on behalf of Sidy described their initial trepidation in doing so. It was explained that Sidy's being a *wali* and his special petitionary prayers assured that the collection of objects would pass without incident.

them to be destroyed. Villagers almost never agree to watch the burning of the objects.

Before leaving a village, Sidy selects someone from his entourage to remain behind in order to act as prayer leader and to teach the Koran. Kane Diallo family records list nearly 175 villages in Mali in which villagers relinquished tens of thousands of power objects, and nearly 300 mosques that were constructed under Sidy's initiative.<sup>33</sup>

When Sidy visits a village where Islam is already fairly well established, he urges people to give up those customs (*aada*)<sup>34</sup> that he says conflict with Islam. Most notably, he has campaigned against spirit possession cults (Fulfulde, *moonaankooɓe*; Bambara, *jine-don*),<sup>35</sup> which, according to members of Sidy's entourage, are found almost exclusively among those who already profess to be Muslims.<sup>36</sup> The campaigns against spirit possession are concurrent with the campaigns to spread Islam and have received nearly as much attention. Most of those involved with spirit possession in the areas of his campaigns are women, and membership is ethnically diverse. Sidy contends that being a Muslim is not compatible with spirit possession. One of the major objections is the blood sacrifices it involves, as in *bamanaya*. Such blood is often used in the confection of amulets, a practice which, people explain, is strictly forbidden according to the precepts of Islam. Another related criticism is that those involved in spirit possession treat what they do as a religion (*diina*), as in *bamanaya*, when the only true religion is supposed to be Islam. These kinds of objections lead many, including some in Sidy's family, to go so far as to say that even though those involved in spirit possession might pray and fast like Muslims, they are actually unbelievers.

In his village-based campaigns against spirit possession, Sidy generally invites people to give up such practices. When those involved in spirit possession come to see him, ostensibly to renounce their practices, he usually places one of his hands on each woman's head — purported to chase the spirits away.<sup>37</sup> Kane Diallo family records list about 200 villages that Sidy visited where people, mostly women, have given up spirit possession. In one village, people did not immediately reveal the existence of organized spirit possession cults in the village during a visit by Sidy. Shortly before his departure, someone informed him, and he proceeded to give a

<sup>33</sup> List of villages visited by Sidy Modibo Kane Diallo in the present author's possession.

<sup>34</sup> From the Arabic, *'adat*.

<sup>35</sup> Cultural bias against spirit possession is reflected in the most common word used by the Fulbe to refer to it. This word, *moonaankooɓe*, has the same root as *moonaade*, which means to feign an illness. See DNAFLA (1993).

<sup>36</sup> For recent studies of spirit possession in Mali, see Gibbal (1982, 1994). Conflicts between Muslims and those involved in spirit possession have been discussed by Masquelier (1993) and Stoller (1989) for neighboring Niger.

<sup>37</sup> I was not present for any such sessions, although Sidy's entourage played me an audio cassette which recorded some such sessions in which violent screaming could be heard. They explained that these were women spirit mediums whom Sidy was touching. The screams were said to be the sounds of the spirits he was driving away.

As far as Sidy placing his hand on the heads of spirit possession cult members, this would be consonant with cult members' conceptions of spirits and their relationship to the human body. Spirit possession adepts in Niore du Sahel claimed that spirits do reside in the head of the medium.

short sermon about the incompatibility of Islam and spirit possession.

If one considers that spirit possession is almost always identified with women (cf. Gibbal 1982), Sidy's campaigns can be seen as an assault on some women's sources of power and authority. In a way, such campaigns against non-Muslim Bambara and spirit possession amount to campaigns against those who are relatively socially and politically marginal, with little power and authority beyond their immediate local areas (cf. Stoller 1989). The two campaigns — against non-Muslims and against spirit possession — are linked in a way that perhaps escapes the notice of Sidy and his entourage. Even though those involved with spirit possession profess to be Muslims, they usually maintain close ties with non-Muslim Bambara *doma* (healer, sorcerer), almost always keeping such an expert on hand at ceremonies or summoning one for consultation in proper *bamanaya* or medico-religious practices.

### The local opposition and its muting

Why do people relinquish their religious objects to Sidy and/or give up their cherished practices? Part of the answer seems to be the sheer force of Sidy's personality and his charisma. For instance, many believe that association with such a *shaykh* or *wali* bestows blessings. Others hold that because he is close to God, he is able to gain God's favor. Concretely, this translates into all those things people want, including children, wealth, good health, and social prestige. Moreover, Muslims and non-Muslims alike are generally afraid of important religious leaders as well as anyone with a measure of power (cf. Bagayogo 1987). Sidy, with his numerous followers and national reputation, is clearly taken to be someone with a considerable amount of power.

The case can be made, however, that people give up their religious practices and objects because these things are contested or questioned on a general level. First, such objects and/or practices have arguably lost much of their value in the twentieth century. The colonial conquest reshaped the region's political economy and prepared the terrain for the widespread islamization that ensued. This was followed by the state-sanctioned expansion of Western-inspired ideas and practices relating to "development", health, and technology, especially in the post-independence period. Although the Malian state has encroached more on local sources of authority, it has remained unable to permeate fully the rural landscape. While *bamanaya* has been marginalized on a national scale, its practitioners have been isolated in small rural pockets. Even though the broader market for such non-Muslim objects has contracted, they remain important in certain realms of everyday experience, particularly in the areas of health and healing. Indigenous non-Muslim sources of power, although not completely marginalized, have been pushed into the private sphere, with individuals making use of them as needed.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, it is difficult

<sup>38</sup> This does not preclude the clandestine use of those things anchored in *bamanaya* deemed illicit.

to envision such non-Muslim sources of power becoming the basis for trans-local authority in quite the same way, for example, that Islam has, since the end of the colonial period.

Second, while religious objects deemed non-Islamic might remain relevant in localized geographic areas and in private realms, they have been overshadowed by national if not transnational sources of power, authority, and legitimacy. Despite its stated commitment to secularism, the Malian state increasingly adopted the signs of Islam during the 1980s, under the regime of Moussa Traoré (Brenner 1993). Although the relationship between the state and this religious leader is not unambiguous, the state and its representatives in the civil service have been very accommodating to him and his conversion campaigns (Soares 1995). The state has always provided him with administrative authorization for his campaigns, thereby lending legitimacy to them. Moreover, his rural trips are always facilitated by government representatives who greet his visits with much fanfare. And many government representatives publicly and semi-publicly solicit him for blessings or petitionary prayers and give him lavish gifts in return, thereby reinforcing — if not boosting — his power and authority. Regardless of intentions, each side benefits from association with the other.

While Sidy and his entourage present a triumphalist view of their campaigns which describes the inevitable march toward Islam, local opposition does exist to his efforts to spread Islam and to eliminate practices deemed non-Islamic. In a number of instances he has encountered some overt opposition. For example, one non-Muslim Bambara *soma* (healer, sorcerer or diviner) notified Sidy that any attempt to visit his village would be tantamount to war. No visit was made to this village and some others known for resistance to *jihād* in the nineteenth century. Opposition by entire villages seems to be isolated. But when asked about such opposition, Sidy and his entourage stress that they go only to villages from which they have received invitations. Those who do not convert right away, Sidy explained to me, will do so eventually.

While it is difficult to corroborate the reports of abandonment of spirit possession and handing over of religious objects, such “conversion” may in some cases be rather unlike what Sidy and his entourage have in mind. It appears that they have returned to some villages to find that people have taken up again the use of objects that they had relinquished on earlier visits.<sup>39</sup> In discussing the campaigns, Sidy’s entourage stresses that those villages that have experienced calamities such as drought will see better times once they embrace Islam. While villagers targeted in the campaigns are perhaps initially swayed by such assurances to relinquish their religious objects, the departure of Sidy and his representatives may leave a void that people then fill with what is familiar. Although local people, when faced with the *shaykh*, are afraid to refuse to relinquish their objects, many are in the end unwilling or unable to live without such objects. In at least one village, the village’s main proprietor of power objects did not give these up during a

There is of course constant speculation about this possibility in Mali.

<sup>39</sup> Informal conversations in Dilly, August and December 1994. Robert Launay (personal communication) informs me that campaigns to destroy “fetishes” were not unknown in Côte d’Ivoire during the colonial period. Their influence was also temporary.

visit by Sidy. Either the other villagers did not betray their existence to Sidy’s entourage or the latter ignored their existence. Such omissions and/or oversights, of course, do not get woven into the celebratory narratives about the campaigns.

Similarly, in some villages, women involved in spirit possession are known to have fled so as not to be present during Sidy’s visits. Other women have used dissimulation to avoid renunciation of spirit possession. One of the most renowned spirit mediums in the Kaarta organized a group of women to chant the *shahada* (the Muslim profession of faith) as Sidy arrived for a visit to her village. Such chanting is considered a pious act and would be deemed most appropriate around a Muslim religious leader of Sidy’s stature. Sidy had heard much about this woman and her alleged non-Islamic practices. But when he met the woman to ask her about her involvement with spirit possession, she denied doing anything illicit or forbidden by Islam. His reply to her was that the matter was between her and God.

Taken together, all of these local responses, if not constituting outright resistance by the weak and oppressed (Scott 1985, cf. Abu-Lughod 1990), are real though fairly diffuse forms of opposition. Ultimately, the form of local opposition is muted by the very conditions of the conversion campaigns — the *shaykh*’s reputation, the new political economic power of migrants, and the state.

#### The *shaykh*’s reputation ascendant

Opposition also exists, not against Sidy’s campaigns, but against Sidy as a religious leader. Less local in form, this opposition comes mainly from three groups of people: a small group of urban secularists; Muslim religious leaders from other sufi orders and their followers, who resent Sidy’s popularity and influence; and those associated with the Wahhabiyya or Ahl al-Sunna, who are critical of sufis and sufism.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly enough, each of the groups is united in their disdain for those things that Sidy campaigns against, indigenous rural practices and spirit possession, with the result that this potential opposition is muted as well.

The Wahhabiyya or Ahl al-Sunna are on principle opposed to sufis and their practices, which would include Sidy and the Qadiriyya, the sufi order of which he is a recognized leader. Sidy and his entourage are, in turn, very actively opposed to Wahhabi ideas and influence.<sup>41</sup> But Sidy’s campaigns to spread Islam among non-Muslims and to eliminate spirit possession are projects that the Wahhabis cannot help but approve. Giving up what is seen as incompatible with Islam is exactly what the Wahhabis continually talk about. When asked about Sidy’s activities, Wahhabis laud his efforts to spread Islam, though without failing to criticize his practice of sufism. Paradoxically enough, respect for Sidy even extends to those who are potentially his most vociferous critics.

<sup>40</sup> See Brenner (1993) for a discussion of Malian secularists.

<sup>41</sup> Sidy and his entourage note that the Wahhabis have made no inroads near Dilly, unlike other places in rural Mali.

In spite of opposition, it is nonetheless clear that Sidy's widespread reputation rests firmly on these conversion campaigns among non-Muslims, regardless of their real outcomes. Throughout Mali, Muslims, including many of those affiliated with other sufi orders, repeatedly praise him for the way in which he is said to have spread Islam. Moreover, he is always singled out as exceptional among Malian *shaykhs* for doing so much for Islam, as some people describe it. Many note that Sidy's actions distinguish him from some of Mali's other widely known religious leaders, who are interested more in material gain than in the hereafter.

For some Malian Muslims, the purported success of Sidy's efforts is one of the proofs or signs that he is indeed a *wali*. The conversion campaigns are thus interpreted as yet another wondrous phenomenon associated with him. Many Muslims, favorably disposed to Sidy or not, assert that not just anyone can disarm those engaged in non-Islamic religious practices. They often point out that it was necessary in the past to resort to armed struggle, as in the nineteenth century *jihads*, to compel people to give up such practices and objects.

In the present, as is often repeated, Sidy avoids confrontation in his campaigns to spread Islam. He asks people to accept his recommendations to embrace Islam, and they do so. The attempts of the Fulbe *shaykh* to convert Mande or Bambara "pagans" are not, however, to be seen simply as the move of an alien ethnic or religious leader into an indigenous Mande/Bambara context. Individuals in both groups are able to manipulate the situation to their advantage by using the ideological categories and oppositions: Mande/Bambara, Fulbe; Muslim, non-Muslim. The Bambara migrants use the Fulbe *shaykh* to intervene in their rural villages. Sidy, in turn, relies upon the rural Bambara "pagans" for the making of his career as a *shaykh* and a *wali*. Indeed, his "success" of working to bring Islam to "the Bambara" has been the central element in the making of his widespread reputation. While the progress of Islam is not readily observable in quite the terms the *shaykh* and his entourage use, this is in some ways irrelevant to the making of this career, premised as it is on such ideological oppositions.

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#### Résumé

Cet article décrit un chef religieux musulman peul, parmi les plus influents du Mali contemporain. Il montre comment sa carrière s'est construite en grande mesure en fonction des oppositions idéologiques entre Peuls et Mandingues/Bambaras. Cette étude analyse ses campagnes pour répandre l'islam parmi la population rurale non musulmane dite « hambara » ainsi que celles contre les cultes de possession. Ces campagnes illustrent la façon dont les individus, aussi bien Peuls que Mandingues/Bambaras, utilisent de telles oppositions idéologiques. Pourtant, l'efficacité à long terme de tels entreprises demeure incertaine.

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