The Role of Sufism in Islamic Reform in West Africa

Africa

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Abstract: This paper is a review of how the rise of a new form of Islamic mysticism called Sufism was a major factor in shaping Islamically integrated cultures and political structures throughout West Africa in the 18th century. As the trans-Atlantic slave trade and imperialism resulted in the region becoming more militarized and destabilized, Islamic reformers embraced Sufism and viewed it as a unifying force amongst Muslims against European conquest.

The spread of Islam to West Africa in the early eleventh century CE initially had few consequences on existing political structures in the region. The great empires in the region (Ghana, Mali, Songhay) had robust Muslim populations, and some adopted Islam as the state religion, but few Muslims had interest in claiming political sovereignty in the region.[1] During the sixteenth century, the region began a shift towards militarization and political instability as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This regional shift towards militarism and instability affected the relationship between Islam and governance, as political rule became increasingly less secular in the region. Along with anti-imperialism being a driving force behind Islamic reform, the rise of charismatic leaders propagating Sufism, or the spiritual and mystical component of Islam. Long

term efforts of Islamic reform and revolution coalesced around Sufism, and influential Sufi orders like the Qadiriyya brotherhood were instrumental in making not only Sufism popular, but also at creating Islamic governments like the Sokoto caliphate. The rise of Sufism throughout West Africa, along with long existing attempts at Islamic reformation and revolution, resulted in the creation of integrally Islamic cultures and political structures throughout the region.

Prior to the emergence of the era of Islamic reform in West Africa during the sixteenth century, Islam played a much smaller role in government and the every day lives of most people. In some parts of the region, like present-day Mali, Muslims remained a minority until the twentieth century.[2] Instead of seeking political sovereignty, Muslim traders and clerics in the region exchanged commodities with

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[1] SOARES, BENJAMIN F. "ISLAM AND AUTHORITY BEFORE THE COLONIAL PERIOD." In *Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town*, 25-43. Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

[2] Soares, 25.

political states like the Songhay Empire in return for safe passageway and the payment of taxes.[3] The onset and rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade prompted a new era of political instability that fundamentally changed Islamic thought and practice in the region. The concept of *jihad* (Ar. struggle) was popularized by Muslim leaders and clerics, and in this context *jihad* entailed armed expansionist Islamic movements. In the book *Sufism and Modern Jihad in Modern* Senegal, the author John Glover notes that the rise of armed *jihadist* movements were not religious holy wars, but rather "critiques of the social, political, and economic conditions within West Africa that were significantly impacted by the Atlantic slave trade."[4] During the same time period that expansionist Islamic movement propagated throughout the region, Sufism

began to rapidly spread and gain in popularity. This can largely be attributed to the Sufi leader Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti, and the founding of the largest and most influential Sufi order, the Qadiriyya brotherhood.

When Sufism began to spread throughout West Africa, the teachings and beliefs of Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti were consolidated to form the Qadiriyya order of Sufism. The order advocated for the study of the *tasswuf*, which is the Arabic term for the inner-dimensional and mystical aspect of Islam. In the Qadiriyya order, the study of the *tassawuf* was stressed so heavily that the leader even claimed it was more important than the study of the Qur'an itself.[5] The order also advocated for the concept of *jihad,* but broke with Muslims who advocated for a expansionist and armed

[3] Soares, 28.

[4] Glover, John. "SOCIOPOLITICAL CHANGE, ISLAMIC REFORM, AND SUFISM IN WEST AFRICA." In Sufism and Jihad in Modern Senegal: The Murid Order, 24. Boydell and Brewer, 2007.

[5] Batran, Abdal—Aziz. "AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE ON THE IMPACT OF SIDI AL-MUKHTAR AL-KUNTI (1729–1811) ON WEST AFRICAN ISLAM IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, no. 4 (1973): 347

jihad. Instead, Sidi al-Kunti advocated for *jihad* to be directed inwards, calling for a "*jihad* against the carnal soul."[6] He called for Muslims to detach themselves from any excessive desire for the world, and advocated taking up a profession as means to acquire wealth and achieve dignity and social standing. The Qadiriyya order's successes in spreading Sufism throughout West Africa were achieved through sending missionaries to rural towns and villages that had become disaffected with the current state of Islamic royal courts (e.g. excessive taxation, violations of Shari'a, etc.). The Qadiriyya order is largely responsible for Sufism's widespread popularity in West Africa, which prompted a revolution in Islamic governance and ideology throughout the region.

Though the spread of Sufism and its rising popularity in the region can be attributed to the Qadiriyya order, the ambitions of creating a sovereign political entity rooted in Sufism were taken up by the leader Usman dan Fodio in the 18th century. Usman de Fodio was an Islamic scholar who also advocated for Sufism within Islamic practice. He recognized the potential of Sufism to usher in an age of Islamic reform in West Africa, and began traveling throughout the regions, from the Hausa city-states to rural villages. He was not only interested in spreading Sufism, however. Usman de Fodio saw the political instability and lack of cohesion in the Islamic community as an opportunity for broad Islamic reforms, and the establishment of a permanent Islamic caliphate in West Africa. Though Sufism was not the direct reason for de Fodio's attempts at reform and revolution within Islam, Sufism was an integral part of his identity and his teachings. In *Sufism and Jihad in Modern Senegal,* the author John Glover establishes why Sufism caught on in

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[6] Batran, Abdal -Aziz.

the region: "In the ensuing social and political turmoil, mysticism provided an inner consolation to many Muslims and the organization of the Sufi orders came to replace the imperial bureaucracy as a firm and identifiable source of social and political structure."[7] This illustrates that while the beliefs associated with Sufism were not the direct causes for Usman dan Fodio's ambitions, his mission to create an establish the Sokoto caliphate was greatly helped by the existing political and social structures that Sufism provided.

Usman dan Fodio's relevance and status continued to increase throughout his time working as a missionary. He gained additional legitimacy within the Qadiriyya order when he had a vision of the Qadiriyya founder, Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani, who designated Usman dan Fodio as his earthly representative and instructed him to continue his *jihad* and to use the "The

Sword of Truth" against any opponents of his work or Islam.[8] Usman dan Fodio is also an important figure because he believed in the internal *jihad* that Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti advocated for, but also embraced the armed and expansionist *jihad* that allowed him to successfully form the Sokoto caliphate, which lasted for nearly a century before falling to British conquest in the 20th century. His work in establishing Islamic reform as a means to social and political change in the region was influential, as later reform movements within Islam used the Sokoto caliphate as a template for revolution and reform.

As previously established, the concept of *jihad* takes on different meanings and evolves throughout history and Islamic scholarship. Following the rise of armed *jihad* in response to the political and social conditions in West Africa, the concept of *jihad* became more controversial in certain

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[7] Glover, John. 47.

[8] Glover, John. 51.

Muslim communities in the region. The muslim cleric al-Bakkay was a critic of *jihad* (at least in its expansionist forms), which he argued by claiming "*jihad* leads to kingship and kingship to oppression; our present situation is better for us than *jihad,* and safe from the error to which *jihad* leads."[9] This criticism of *jihad* inside Islamic circles prompted a retreat from the expansionist and violent tendencies of people like Umar Tall. However, many of Umar Tall's successors "invoked Islam for the basis of their authority"[10] and used Islam as a unifying, anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist force against the French conquest in the 19th century. The variations in Islamic governance and ideology in the region illustrate how the reforms instituted by the Sufi orders can evolve and change over time.

Islam's arrival in West Africa during the era of the great empires (eleventh century) and its evolution and reforms during the sixteenth century are a reflection the region's political and cultural climates at the time. During the era of political instability as a result of the growth of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Islamic reformers saw the integration of Sufi Islam and governance (i.e. Islamic theocracy) as the solution to the region's instability. The Qadiriyya order was influential in bringing organization and structure to a loose set of religious beliefs established by Sufism. Furthermore, the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate was the result of Muslims in the region seeking reform and structure to a previously unstable and ineffective ruling class. In a modern context, Sufism continues to be popular and widely practiced throughout the Islamic world, especially in African countries. Sufis have been the target of persecution from religious extremists and hardline Sunnis, who view adherents to

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[9] Soares, 29.

[10] Soares, 30.

forms of Islamic mysticism as eccentric

heretics who are out of step with Islamic

fundamentalism. The introduction of

Sufism into the reformist Islamic world in

West Africa helped to foster the creation of

integrally Islamic cultures and political

structures throughout the region.

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