

ISLAM AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN FRENCH WEST AFRICA

History of an
Emancipatory Community

SEAN HANRETTA



CAMBRIDGE

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ISLAM AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN FRENCH WEST AFRICA HISTORY OF AN EMANCIPATORY COMMUNITY

Exploring the history and religious community of a group of Muslim Sufi mystics who came largely from socially marginal backgrounds in colonial French West Africa, this study shows the relationship between religious, social, and economic change in the region. It highlights the role that intellectuals – including not only elite men, but also women, slaves, and the poor – played in shaping social and cultural change and illuminates the specific religious ideas on which Muslims drew and the political contexts that gave their efforts meaning. In contrast to depictions that emphasize the importance of international networks and anti-modern reaction in twentieth-century Islamic reform, this book claims that, in West Africa, such movements were driven by local forces and constituted only the most recent round in a set of centuries-old debates about the best way for pious people to confront social injustice. It argues that traditional historical methods prevent an appreciation of Muslim intellectual history in Africa by misunderstanding the nature of information gathering during colonial rule and misconstruing the relationship between documents and oral history.

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Islam and Social Change in French West Africa

HISTORY OF AN
EMANCIPATORY
COMMUNITY

SEAN HANRETTA

Stanford University



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Contents

| | |
|--|---------|
| <i>List of maps and figures</i> | page ix |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | xi |
| <i>Note on orthographic conventions</i> | xiii |
| <i>Abbreviations used in references</i> | xv |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Implicit knowledge and the colonial episode | 4 |
| Traditions, repertoires, and sources | 11 |
| Structure of the argument | 22 |
| Part One: “The Suffering of Our Father”: Story and Context | |
| 1. Sufism and Status in the Western Sudan | 29 |
| The Western Sudanic tradition | 32 |
| The Middle Senegal Valley: colonial intervention and the reconfiguration of authority | 45 |
| Conclusions | 59 |
| 2. Making a Revival: Yacouba Sylla and His Followers | 60 |
| Kaédi, Nioro, and the light of a new reform | 62 |
| Yacouba Sylla | 71 |
| Revival | 74 |
| Conclusions | 82 |
| 3. Making a Community: The “Yacoubists” from 1930 to 2001 | 83 |
| A prison community | 83 |
| Fodie Sylla and the end of militancy | 89 |
| Consolidating the community | 93 |
| Return to activism | 99 |
| From history to myth | 110 |
| Conclusions | 116 |

Part Two: “I Will Prove to You That What I Say Is True”:
Knowledge and Colonial Rule

| | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 4. | Ghosts and the Grain of the Archives | 121 |
| | The grain of the archives: Islam, knowledge, and control | 126 |
| | Ghostwriters in the archives: religious competition and borrowed knowledge in the colonial library | 138 |
| | Myths of Yacouba, myths of empire | 151 |
| 5. | History in the Zâwiya: Redemptive Traditions | 159 |
| | Synecdoche and Sufism: Yacouba Sylla, tilmîdh shaykh hamahu'llâh | 162 |
| | A community of suffering | 171 |
| | God's work: the zâwiya, the plantation, and the nation | 179 |
| | Conclusions | 182 |

Part Three: “What Did He Give You?”: Interpretation

| | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 6. | Lost Origins: Women and Spiritual Equality | 189 |
| | Women as participants | 191 |
| | Mahr, adulthood, and honor | 195 |
| | The vision of Fatima | 200 |
| | Struggles for control | 204 |
| 7. | The Spiritual Economy of Emancipation | 208 |
| | Defining slavery and abolition | 210 |
| | Paths to personhood | 217 |
| | Conclusions | 224 |
| 8. | The Gift of Work: Devotion, Hierarchy, and Labor | 227 |
| | Work's gifts | 228 |
| | The gift of history | 240 |
| | Conclusions | 249 |
| 9. | “To Never Shed Blood”: Yacouba, Houphouët, and Côte d'Ivoire | 253 |
| | Defining free labor | 256 |
| | Giving and moral tutelage | 260 |
| | Moral geography | 269 |

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Conclusions | 275 |
| Gifts of the Past | 275 |

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| <i>Glossary</i> | 289 |
|-----------------|-----|

| | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| <i>Note on References</i> | 293 |
|---------------------------|-----|

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| <i>Index</i> | 295 |
|--------------|-----|

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| <i>Books in This Series</i> | 307 |
|-----------------------------|-----|

List of maps and figures

Maps

| | | |
|---|---------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | French West Africa c.1930 | <i>page</i> 30 |
| 2 | Kaédi c.1930 | 61 |
| 3 | Côte d'Ivoire c.1938 | 84 |

Figures

| | | |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | Yacouba Sylla and elders of the community, Gagnoa, 1941 (<i>Courtesy Ahmadou Yacouba Sylla</i>) | 165 |
| 2 | Yacouba Sylla and Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Abidjan, December 1977 (<i>Fraternité Hebdo</i> , 23 December 1977) | 254 |

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Note on orthographic conventions

I have used Anglicized versions of the names of former French colonies (e.g., Upper Volta, Senegal) except in the case of Côte d'Ivoire, which is the official, untranslatable name of the modern state. Other geographic names have been standardized to accord with current spellings, with the exception of Kaédi (rather than Kayhaydi or other variants). For the transcription of Arabic words I have adopted a modified version of the system used in *Sudanic Africa*, dropping diacritics from consonants but keeping those for vowels. For other West African languages I have tended to adopt the most recent transcription conventions but have simplified spellings for typographical ease (eg. “ng” for the Mande “ŋ”, “ny” for “ɲ”, “b” for the Pulaar-Fulfulde “ɓ”). With a few exceptions (eg. Sn: *modini*, Ar: *hadâyâ*), nouns from Arabic and West African languages are pluralized as if they were regular English nouns. Since most proper nouns used are best known in their French forms, I have so written them, unless there is no standard French spelling, in which case I simply transliterated. Ethnonyms have not been pluralized. I have standardized the spelling of the name of the “Tal” family so as to make obvious the connections among its various members. I have preferred Hamallah over Hamahu’l-lah because that is the way he is best known to Mande-language speakers. Although Yacouba Sylla himself is best known to his community as Yaxuuba (only rarely as Ya^cqûb), he and his community have always used “Yacouba” in communicating with outsiders. Spelling in quotations has been left unchanged. All translations are my own, except where otherwise indicated.

Abbreviations used in references

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| AHR: | <i>American Historical Review</i> |
| ANCI: | Archives Nationales de la République de la Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan |
| ANM: | Archives Nationales de la République du Mali, Koulouba |
| ANMt: | Archives Nationales de la République Islamique de la Mauritanie, Nouakchott |
| ANS: | Archives Nationales de la République du Sénégal, Dakar |
| BCEHS-AOF: | <i>Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historique et Scientifique sur l'Afrique Occidentale Française</i> |
| BSOAS: | <i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i> |
| BTLC: | Bureau Technique de Liaison et de Coordination |
| CAOM: | Archives Nationales de la France: Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence |
| CEA: | <i>Cahiers d'Etudes africaines</i> |
| CHEAM: | Centre des hautes études d'administration musulmane |
| CSSH: | <i>Comparative Studies in Society and History</i> |
| EI ² : | <i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . 2d ed. Leiden, 1960–2002 |
| FOCYS: | Fondation Cheick Yacouba Sylla |
| HIA: | <i>The History of Islam in Africa</i> , ed. by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels. Athens, OH, 2000 |
| IJAHS: | <i>International Journal of African Historical Studies</i> |
| ISSS: | <i>Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara</i> |
| JAH: | <i>Journal of African History</i> |
| JOAOF: | <i>Journal officiel de l'Afrique Occidentale Française</i> |
| JOI: | <i>Journal officiel de la Côte d'Ivoire</i> |
| MAMMP: | Yale Malian Arabic Manuscript Microfilming Project |
| SA: | <i>Sudanic Africa</i> |
| UNESCO: | United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization |

Introduction

THE CENTRAL EVENTS IN THIS STORY TOOK PLACE IN THE RIVER-side town of Kaédi in the French colony of Mauritania on February 15, 1930. That morning, two men, Mamadou Sadio and Dieydi Diagana, prayed together in a mosque in the neighborhood of Gattaga. Both members of the town's Soninke ethnic minority, Mamadou Sadio was the son of one of Kaédi's Islamic scholars, and Dieydi Diagana was the French-appointed *chef de village* for Gattaga, Kaédi's Soninke enclave. This day, in the middle of the holy month of Ramadan, was supposed to have been a day of reconciliation, for the two men had been on opposite sides of a conflict that had unsettled Kaédi for months and were praying together to demonstrate their commitment to peaceful coexistence.

The conflict had begun the previous August 1929, when a young man named Yacouba Sylla arrived in town and began preaching a message of religious and social reform that took Gattaga by storm. A Sufi teacher, Yacouba Sylla had incurred the hostility of the local representatives of the French Empire and the disdain of Kaédi's elite by calling for radical changes in social and religious practice and by claiming authority out of proportion to his age and his rather minimal formal education. He claimed instead to derive his authority from a controversial holy man named Ahmad Hamallah, from Nioro in Mali, who at the time was being detained by the French administration. Despite local opposition, Yacouba Sylla quickly gathered a large following from among Kaédi's minority Soninke population. Yacouba's supporters came from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some were merchants; a few were important scholars; many were slaves or former slaves; others belonged to stigmatized occupational castes; some were merely poor. In December of 1929, the French deported Yacouba from Kaédi and then, in January, placed him in detention in Sassandra, in the colony of Côte d'Ivoire. In his absence, his followers continued to spread his ideas, and the religious revival became more intense. By January 1930, it involved over 600 people who had come into frequent and increasingly violent conflict with other residents of the town. Largely on the receiving end of much of the violence, Yacouba's followers were attacked in the town's streets and saw their homes burned and their shops looted.

All this, however, was supposed to have been settled by the meeting in Gattaga's main mosque on the morning of February 15, 1930. Yet just hours later, apparently under the leadership of Mamadou Sadio who claimed to be acting in Yacouba's name, the revivalists staged a large demonstration, winding their way past their opponents' homes and shops and past the French administrative buildings. Though it is not clear exactly what happened during the course of that day, by the end of it nineteen men and three women, all followers of Yacouba Sylla, had been killed, shot by the town's guards. Several more died from their injuries over the next few days, while over 100 people were rounded up and arrested, sentenced to prison or detention, and exiled to the far corners of the French Empire in West Africa.¹

In the years that followed, Yacouba Sylla and his followers experienced a dramatic reversal of fortune. Despite the deaths and detentions, the group stayed in contact over the next several years, writing to one another from various prisons and assuring their families left behind that they would soon be together again. In the late 1930s, the administration gradually released the "Yacoubists"² and was surprised when most of them decided to gather in Côte d'Ivoire rather than return to Mauritania. Yacouba himself moved to the Ivoirian town of Gagnoa in 1939, established a center for Sufi devotional practices (called a *zâwiya*), and turned his attention to commerce and plantation agriculture. Gathering his followers around him to form a new community, they established a series of successful plantations and a transport company. By the 1940s, Yacouba was well known throughout much of West Africa as both a successful merchant and an important religious teacher. Relations between his followers and those of other religious leaders with ties to Hamallah in Nioro were rarely smooth, but he attracted the attention of the great intellectual, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, and became friends with the politician Félix Houphouët-Boigny, and the latter relationship brought him

1 Arrêté 225, Gouv. -Gén. AOF (Carde), 27 January 1930, pub. JOAOF, February 15, 1930. See also Gouv. -Gén. AOF (Carde) to Min. Col., Rapport #133AP/2, 13 Avril 1930 and Arrêté 807, Gouv. -Gén. AOF 11 Avril 1930 (CAOM 1Affpol 2802/6 dossier 3). "Liste de Yacoubists décédés à Gattaga: 15-2-1930," (ANMt E2-34). A copy of this last file and others from Nouakchott were graciously provided to me by Professor Adama Gnokane of the Université de Nouakchott, to whom I am deeply indebted.

2 The name of the community created by Yacouba Sylla is a very contentious issue among his followers because of the implications it has for relations with other followers of Hamallah. See Boukary Savadogo, "La communauté 'Yacouba Sylla' et ses rapports avec la Tijāniyya hamawiyya," in *La Tijāniyya: Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique*, ed. Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson (Paris, 2000), pp. 271–280. I have avoided using the term "Yacoubism," but since even those who emphatically reject the uniqueness of Yacouba's religious teachings accept that his followers' social organization was unprecedented, I have used the term "Yacoubists" to designate those who consider themselves to be members of the community of disciples of Shaykh Hamallah organized and led by Yacouba Sylla.

into political life as a symbol for African entrepreneurialism and the drive for self-rule. An ally of Houphouët-Boigny's Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) and the pro-independence Union Soudanaise-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain in Mali, Yacouba Sylla was an important, if unobtrusive, figure in Côte d'Ivoire in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Yacouba passed away on August 11, 1988, leaving behind him an influential community but little private wealth. Yacouba's followers had shunned all personal property, sharing all possessions in common and maintaining a tight solidarity. His sons inherited leadership of the community, playing significant political and religious roles in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire in the first decade of independence and remaining well-known figures throughout the region and among Francophone African Muslims in the diaspora.

Fascinating in its own right, the history of Yacouba Sylla and his followers provides a unique glimpse inside some of the most poorly understood dynamics of West African societies. Though hardly representative, the experiences of the Yacoubists refract the twentieth century in new and useful ways. French administrators had sought to systematically manage the practice of Islam in their African possessions in order to bring it into alignment with their vision of modernity and make it serve as a bulwark for the state's authority. At the same time, officials' half-hearted efforts to eliminate slavery, their inconsistent projects to channel labor into cash cropping, and the arbitrary exercise of power by poorly trained and underfunded administrators brought about dramatic and unexpected changes in the ways communities were organized and the ways individuals understood their position in society. West African Muslims were neither passive witnesses to these changes nor purely reactive. They drew creatively on centuries of Islamic thought and social experimentation to craft new identities and communities out of, among other things, the changes brought by the French. Administrators and colonial politicians spoke of freedom, development, and modernization in alien and often hollow terms; but the followers of Yacouba Sylla gave new meaning to these ideas, making them central themes in a mystical Sufi practice that looked little like the enlightenment-based liberal republicanism governors hoped to create or like the reformist Islam promoted by modernizers elsewhere. The Yacoubists used the memory of the suffering of the symbolic father whom they called "Ba Yaaxuba," "Father Yacouba," to fold the dominant ideologies of the century into a redemptive, cosmic narrative in which they themselves helped fulfill a social revolution set in motion by the Prophet Muhammad himself.

This book attempts to trace the origins and development of the "Yacoubist community" through the period of French colonial rule and up to the present. It is also an intellectual history of leaders and followers in the community that strives to illustrate the internal architecture of their thinking, its

relevance for broad moral and theoretical questions, and the social and political uses to which it was put. I argue that the social and ideational roots of the revival launched by Yacouba Sylla in 1929, as well as of the new kind of society he helped establish in the late 1930s, can be traced back several centuries before his birth. The book illustrates the way the Yacoubists drew connections among phenomena that had their own histories stretching from the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the Sufi networks established by Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti in the eighteenth century, to the violent reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to the intellectual crisis precipitated by imperial conquest. The results suggest new ways of looking at the place of women and gender in Islamic history in West Africa, at the changes in labor regimes and local political patronage in the early twentieth century, at the new forms of religious practice that emerge along with the personalization and commoditization of spiritual authority, and at the complex circuits through which discourses like modernization and development traveled in becoming the common currency of postcolonial African political culture.

IMPLICIT KNOWLEDGE AND THE COLONIAL EPISODE

In the late 1960s, the eminent scholar and leader of the “Ibadan” school of African history, J.F. Ade Ajayi, advised historians to remember that colonialism was merely “an episode” in the African past, albeit an important and traumatic one. Ajayi feared that the seductive pull of Europe’s interpretive vision and of the colonial archive as an empirical resource would drown out histories centered on “African” voices and worldviews.³ For many good reasons, Ajayi’s enjoinder and the nationalist historiographic moment of which it was a part hold little sway among current European and North American scholars of Africa. Like colonial analysts before them, nationalist historians tended to evaluate African cultures by comparing them to European ones. They deployed a series of interpretive dichotomies – between collaboration and resistance, between local and “world” religions, between capitalist and precapitalist economies, and so on – that made Ajayi’s distinction between Europe-centered histories and Africa-centered ones a distinction of essence and substance. They tended to downplay the impact of colonial transformations of political economy and ignored the way nationalist projects and their elite leaders had come to be saturated with colonialist ideologies.

In the face of these problems, a very different approach has come to dominate since the 1980s. Colonial rule is now seen as a tentative, halting

3 Jacob F. Ade Ajayi, “Colonialism: An Episode in African History,” reprinted in *Tradition and Change in Africa: The Essays of J. F. Ade Ajayi*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ, 2000), pp. 165–74.

experiment, whose subjects were able to play a decisive role by facilitating certain courses of action while blocking or raising the relative costs of others. What was thought of as the precolonial past has been revealed as, in great measure, the product of an imagination shared by colonial observers and African elites, and reference to its explanatory value is seen as romantic at best, essentialist at worst. Instead, today's historians describe the interplay between colonial "projects" and African "responses" in ways that account for, and indeed relish, moments where African initiatives "disturbed" or "changed the trajectory" of European undertakings. Under the rubric of an "imperial turn," such work has had a salutary effect on European history, helping displace its own narratives of self-contained nations and autonomous colonial metropolises. In terms of African historiography, it has directed attention to the vibrancy and "modernity" of recent African societies and assimilated recognition of the impact of European rule without endorsing the self-representations of colonialists or their apologists.⁴

Steven Feierman has, however, noted that histories that are always cautious to frame African agency within the constraints and discourses of domination – and indeed, which deem it the height of agency to "displace" or "appropriate" those constraints and discourses – can reinforce the false universalism according to which only stories that employ explanatory contexts grounded in knowledge implicitly understood to be shared by the historian and her or his audience can be articulated in professionally acceptable languages. Historical objects depend on the other histories readers are assumed to know and those that a particular study is taken to inform. Dividing up the African twentieth century into stories that reflect the fate of European concepts, beliefs, or practices – like labor, commoditization, or citizenship – generates histories that have meaning only in their "shared relationship" to such concepts, reinforcing the coherence of European knowledge and the fragmentation of all others.⁵ The very act of referring to the continent in the early twentieth century as "colonial Africa" makes it clear that one must know

4 For the African cases, good introductions are Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994), pp. 1516–1545; Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, UK, 1996); and Gregory Mann, "Locating Colonial Histories: Between France and West Africa," *AHR* 110:2 (2005). In a comparative context, see Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Princeton, 1994); Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, 1997); Catherine Hall, ed., *Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, A Reader* (Manchester, 2000); and Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005).

5 This is the powerful argument of Steven Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1999), p. 185.

something about colonialism (and thus about Europe) to understand it, while the concrete knowledge about Africa mobilized by “imperial turn” histories of Europe is comparatively thin. Knowledge of, say, French history has applicability and meaning in many locations outside the metropole, while knowledge of “local” African history is taken to gain meaning only by being connected to “broader” circuits. Regional or even continental interactions are overlooked in favor of localized studies where the interplay of appropriation and displacement can become a major part of the story, or “translocal” studies where appropriation and displacement *are* the story. Integration in African history – indeed, the meaning of the field as a whole – only comes through the colonial rubric.

One reason for this is that Africa as such has proven largely unsatisfactory as an alternative framework for historical analysis. Partially this is because the continent’s size and diversity mean that the ground that it provides for narratives is typically thin; partially it is because “Africa” as a category owes so much to Europe itself that the idea that it can provide an alternative locus of explanation is probably illusory.⁶ The choice between treating African history as part of a fully integrated, universally intelligible world history and separating it out completely, relegating it to the timeless past of the “other,” is, however, a false one, one that ultimately serves to justify the neglect of contextualizing knowledge that could build on stories centered outside the metropole. It is a duality that has particularly pernicious consequences for African intellectual history, which can be nothing other than the history of derivative discourses, and for the history of Muslim peoples in Africa, whose long-term trajectories, insofar as they are considered at all, are attached like an appendage to the Middle East. For that reason, this book adopts instead a regional approach, taking the loosely bounded area of the “Western Sudan” – roughly from the Senegal River Valley in the west to the bend of the Niger River in the east, from the desert in the north to the southernmost extent of Mande-speaking traders – as its setting, not in the sense of a culture zone that offers ready-made explanations or bounded repertoires, but as a privileged space for the interconnection and accumulation of stories.

Although the new colonial and imperial histories have generally paid little attention to questions of Islamic reform or Muslim social change, the most innovative works on Islam in twentieth-century West Africa have been broadly consonant with such approaches. They have emphasized the ways the socioeconomic and political dispensations ushered in by European rule spurred the development of new forms of religious authority and new

⁶ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN, 1988); Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, 1997), ch. 4. That “Europe” is equally tendentious a category has, of course, been one of the greatest incentives for turning instead to “empire.”

religious institutions.⁷ Even those historians who work across the colonial divide tend to privilege the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, seeing in them a profound rupture in which older, dead-end forms of Islamic authority and organization were replaced, in a kind of a “shakeout,” by modern ones better adapted to the new conditions of European liberalism and capitalist development.⁸

The same basic pattern is apparent in large-scale studies of socioeconomic change in the twentieth century, particularly in those that focus on the question of “free labor.” Abandoning older debates about whether precolonial African labor was “overexploited” or “underutilized,” or over the conditions for the emergence of a modern working class, more recent approaches have lingered over the complex, heterogeneous patterns that emerged in the twentieth century. They have highlighted the colonial use of forced labor and coercive military recruitment, which they present as an “intermediary” stage between premodern labor regimes and true labor markets. Attention is given to the political, social, and legal institutions that enabled the functioning of these hybrid forms of political economy, which in turn appear as effectively *sui generis*.⁹ Yet there has been little investigation into the meanings of work within African societies, so powerful is the implicit teleology of the inexorable progression toward liberal capitalism.¹⁰

Decades ago, Sara Berry suggested that the development of a satisfactory interpretation of the transformation of African economies during the colonial period would be best served by recognizing that economic values are the “outcome of historical interaction between practices and concepts of production” with

⁷ On the personalization of religious authority, see the contributions to Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson, eds., *Le temps des marabouts: itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française, v. 1880–1960* (Paris, 1997); and Benjamin F. Soares, *Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town* (Ann Arbor, 2005). For new institutions, see those as well as the essays in Robinson and Triaud, *La Tijaniyya*; David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920* (Athens, OH, 2000); and Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in A West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington, IN, 2001). Brenner’s earlier work generally took its frame of reference from local religious traditions rather than from French colonial policy, but *Controlling Knowledge* bears traces of the imperial turn in its focus on European conquest as marking a fundamental epistemic rupture in Islamic discourse. The most important works of the older, philological school of Islamic studies are exceptions to this trend, but they generally take very little notice of the colonial state or questions of social and political authority at all.

⁸ This is the basic thesis that David Robinson has put forth across a number of publications during the last several years. See the most mature expression of it, in Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*.

⁹ This is the overarching argument of the major work of one of the founders of the new colonial history, Frederick Cooper, although it is also a perspective shared by many historians of slavery. See Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*. See also Richard Roberts, *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912* (Portsmouth, 2005).

¹⁰ For an exception that proves the rule, see Johannes Fabian, “Kazi: Conceptualizations of Labor in a Charismatic Movement among Swahili-speaking Workers,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 13:50 (1973), 293–325.

“modes of understanding” conceived of as “objects of accumulation” (and, presumably, production).¹¹ However, historians have generally avoided investigating these “variable ideas” as part of any kind of intellectual tradition, with its own tensions and dynamics, and have rather presented them either as elements of an ideology crafted to provide legitimating cover for coexisting social relations or as an abstract “culture” whose logic can be charted and then properly inserted into standard economic models. As a result, social historians have limited the power of their insights, reducing local capitalist transformations to deviations from Western paths of development and accounting for such deviations by implicit reference either to a local or regional essence or to a global structural imbalance. In Berry’s groundbreaking *Fathers Work for their Sons*, for example, non-Western economic ways of assigning “value” became, together with colonial rule, explanations for the unproductive nature of African forms of accumulation, for the lack of “effective management” of the means of production, for the persistence of exploitation, the growth of a powerful but factionalized state, and the lack of both proletarian solidarity or any kind of alternative way to organize resistance to class structures.¹²

The same problems beset approaches that take their cue from literary theory, particularly as inflected through postcolonial theory. Brent Hayes Edwards, for example, has drawn attention to W.E.B. DuBois’s marvelous phrase that since “with nearly every great European empire to-day walks its dark colonial shadow,” one can “read the riddle of Europe . . . as a matter of colonial shadows.”¹³ Important figures in one of the most dramatic episodes in French Islamic policy in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1920s and 1930s, emblems of the success of France’s encouragement of small-scale agricultural capitalism in the 1930s and 1940s, and influential power brokers during the transition from colony to postcolony in the 1950s and 1960s, the history of the community of Yacouba Sylla can indeed stand as a kind of shadow to the history of the French endeavor in West Africa. But whereas Edwards sees a historiography perched in these shadows – indeed a history so dim as to be virtually invisible – as a way of turning from “oppositions and binaries” to the “layers” produced by tracing the adversarial networks of resistance to colonial rule, such negation simply reproduces the invisibility into which colonialism and its representations have cast African history. Tellingly, Edwards claims that such dissonant voices can only be found “within the institution, within the archive,” and, following Gayatri Spivak, that their articulation comes only “at the limit point where ‘history is

¹¹ Sara Berry, *Fathers Work for their Sons: Accumulation, Mobility, and Class Formation in an Extended Yorùbá Community* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 61–62.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 11–14, 81–83.

¹³ Quoted in Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Shadow of Shadows,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11:1 (2003), p. 41.

narrativized into logic.”” Such assertions simply reproduce the colonial fantasy that its archives were total and its power ubiquitous, along with the colonial paranoia that this power was everywhere subject to challenge. Spivak’s assumption that there is only one way that history can be “narrativized into logic” and that this is the point where metropolitan systems of explanation attempt to organize subaltern consciousness, simply reproduces the formalist desire that narratives and explanatory logic be mutually determining.¹⁴

Even those who acknowledge the heterogeneity and limitations of colonial rule reify the period itself, taking for granted its status as a distinctive and total experience in which administrative discourses and visions seeped into every facet of social life.¹⁵ Particularly powerful imaginings of coloniality have, for instance, organized their analyses not in terms of projects, displacements, and appropriations, but rather in terms of the “entanglements” that emerged as African systems of meaning and order were (often violently) taken apart and woven into new, syncretic structures. Such a method lends itself to multifaceted depictions of social change that avoid positing “European” and “local” knowledge or practices as distinct spheres. The analysis that results is, however, fundamentally synchronic; exploring the processes by which colonial knots came to be tied in the first place is eschewed in favor of “tracing” entangled objects and logics back and forth from one register to another. Change, insofar as it is present at all, is either attributed abstractly to conquest or to subsequent structural adjustments within the relationships among people and things. By shifting the scale to “micropolitics” and iterated daily practices, such studies fail to account for the purported necessary relationship between entanglement and coloniality in the first place. The narrower its temporal biography becomes, the more colonialism ironically turns into a setting detached from any specific set of actors but one that completely accounts for the actions that take place on its stage.¹⁶ Recent calls by

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 42. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1988), p. 207.

¹⁵ As with the works of Cooper cited above, or of Jean and John Comaroff, Gaurav Desai, etc.

¹⁶ Nancy Rose Hunt’s *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, 1999) is the most sophisticated example of this approach, and both its title and organization reflect its commitment to describing the assemblages of microprocesses that made up the colonial situation. To trace one subsequent genealogy, Lynn M. Thomas brought the metaphor of entanglement from the works of Nicholas Thomas, Carolyn Hamilton, and Achille Mbembe into her *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley, 2003), which in turn provided a key conceptual tool for Julie Livingston’s *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington, 2005). The impression that these studies are themselves isomorphic with “snapshots” of the large-scale processes described by Gramscianists may reflect their shared debt to Steven Feierman’s work, especially “Struggles for Control: The Social Roots of Health and Healing in Modern Africa,” *African Studies Review* 28:2–3 (1985), 73–147; and *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, 1990).

historians like Frederick Cooper to adopt this method as a way of looking at a tightly bounded colonial period without ideological “stances”¹⁷ are, in this sense, simply the displacement of the depoliticizing approaches to the post-colonial period circulated a decade ago that viewed a whole series of specific state institutions in Africa through the lens of various generalized “conditions” or systems.¹⁸ Both ultimately sustain little investigation into processes that take place outside what is assumed to be the proper domain of apparently self-evident periods.

Ongoing modifications in the theory and practice of the new colonial histories have uncovered ever more complex and subtle forms of African agency, and more intricate entanglements between various places in Africa and the rest of the world. But Feierman’s insight reveals that the contextualism that would assert the inextricability of European presence from twentieth-century processes, so that both metropole and colony are seen as constituted by a shared imperial moment (or, increasingly, a global moment), is in fact highly arbitrary. At issue is not the connectedness of sets of events – it is probably a truism that virtually any two events can be connected if we trace linkages assiduously enough – but rather the insistence with which certain connections are foregrounded as necessary for making sense of phenomena.¹⁹ Some scholars have responded by pointing to the ways the changes brought by colonial rule were limited by the persistence of African institutions.²⁰ Yet the solution is not to be found either in minimizing the impact of colonialism on African societies, or romanticizing African “agency” to the point that, as Mahmoud Mamdani has warned, “modern imperialism is – should I say celebrated? – as the outcome of an African initiative.”²¹ Without a doubt, colonial rule was a process in which elements of what social scientists might consider agency were appropriated from many individuals, and the ability of most social groups to participate fully in shaping and directing public institutions was foreclosed. But what this suggests is that the concept of agency itself is part of the problem.²² What remains invisible is the possibility of African inventions in social technology, political rhetoric, and self-fashioning

¹⁷ Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, esp. introduction.

¹⁸ Such as Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Bloomington, 1999).

¹⁹ Comp. Christopher Pinney, “Things Happen: Or, From Which Moment Does That Object Come?” in *Materiality (Politics, History and Culture)*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham, 2005), pp. 256–272.

²⁰ Thomas Spear, “Neo-traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa,” *JAH* 44 (2003), 3–27; Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

²¹ Mahmoud Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996), p. 10.

²² See Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (2003), 113–124.

that took place during the “colonial era” but which owed little to colonial institutions, discourses, or projects. It is in this sense that the dynamism of Ajayi’s metaphor of the “episode” remains useful.

TRADITIONS, REPERTOIRES, AND SOURCES

A key part of the argument of this book has to do with the materials available for reconstructing the past. [Chapters 4 and 5](#) deal with this matter from the perspective of the sociology and politics of information, but the more traditional matter of sources also needs addressing. The materials for this study were gathered from archives in France, Senegal, Mali, and Côte d’Ivoire, and in a series of formal interviews, informal conversations, and observations made during stays in West Africa in 1998 and 2001; the oral sources bear considerable weight in my analysis. From the outset, I was aware that the persecution they had experienced at the hands of French authorities as well as by other Muslims made many of Yacouba Sylla’s followers reticent to discuss aspects of their activities, particularly with regard to beliefs or practices that had been used to justify such persecution. But because of personal connections I had made with members of the community in 1998, I had hoped I would have their cooperation, and to a great extent I did. Leading members of the community agreed that our distinct ways of thinking carefully about the history of Yacouba and his followers were not utterly incompatible; but the political aspects of oral research nonetheless intervened at every turn. No mythic “rapport” can dissolve mutual recognition of the importance and dangers of controlling knowledge, and the Yacoubist community is very aware and protective of its past.²³

Certain members of the community have founded an organization, the Fondation Cheikh Yacouba Sylla (FOCYS), intended among other things to act as the official representative of the community and to control the reproduction of its history. Though the right of the FOCYS to speak on behalf of the community as a whole is far from uncontested, its members had significant influence with community leaders and so I chose to try to operate from within the channels it established even while pursuing my own lines of inquiry. Yet this help came with a price. After spending months trying to secure authorization to interview members in Gagnoa, I acceded to a request by the FOCYS that I provide a tentative list of the questions I wanted to ask and the persons I wanted to interview, so that they could make sure that all the “necessary” people would be present when I was admitted to the compound. Realizing that this could also be used to control my access to persons

²³ For an informative, and occasionally provocative, discussion of how the sociology of knowledge in one set of West African cultures poses important challenges to conventional social scientific or humanistic methodologies, see the special issue of *Mande Studies* on “Secrets and Lies in the Mande World” (2000).

with sensitive or variant information, I hesitated, and then relented, imagining this as simply a way to get my foot in the door. The surprise came a few days later when, summoned to a meeting, I was presented with the “answers” to all my questions; the FOCYS had canvassed the elders of the community, posing the questions I had provided, and synthesizing the replies into a single, unindividuated, “official” response. Having been trained in a kind of historical analysis in which the all-important factor was the variance within representations of the past, this result, which effectively elided any differentiation and provided no obvious way of engaging in serious source criticism, seemed to be a catastrophe and utterly useless.

In fact it was a catastrophe, but a productive one. Though I was never able to collect a “critical mass” of divergent traditions that could lead to detailed reconstruction, I did eventually acquire three different sets of representation of the past: highly structured, self-reflective responses from the FOCYS; the same from Cheick Ahmadou Sylla, who had remained aloof from that organization; and more informal accounts gleaned from months of constant interaction and discussion with rank-and-file members of the community. It was this last set that exercised the most influence over my thinking, and which is hardest to represent here. I have not lingered over these encounters in the text for fear of reproducing the self-centered narrative that I believe tempts most writers on colonial or postcolonial Africa. They are reflected instead in the ways I have translated back and forth between my own languages, concerns, and arguments and those of the formal sources I quote. For many members of the community, historical and contemporary events alike had (at least) two distinct types of reality: a surface meaning, corresponding to the Sufi idea of the *zâhir* level of scriptural interpretation, and a hidden, secret meaning, corresponding to the *bâtin*, or esoteric interpretation. Despite being intellectually aware of this fact, I was unprepared to encounter it so vigorously in lived experience. I was taken by surprise, for example, to find that a man with whom I had become good friends was himself considered an important relic of Yacouba’s spiritual power, having been mysteriously kidnapped and then freed under dramatic, symbolically meaningful circumstances at a young age. I was similarly unprepared to be confronted by other friends, including bankers and pharmacists, who provocatively asked me how I intended to write a history of God.

Perhaps the incidents that were most unsettling of my methodological preconceptions were the occasions on which it was explained that my research had been fully anticipated, not because I had written to the community a year in advance to try to arrange my access, but because Yacouba himself had prophesied my coming some twenty years before, in terms that I had to admit were fairly precise. Though on one hand I saw this as an attempt to disarm the threat that I posed by “reinscribing” my actions into a narrative in which the community set the terms of engagement and in which their beliefs could be

seen as the driving force, it was also a profound, uncanny reminder that everything that was going on around me, including my own behavior and words, registered on these double levels of *zâhir* and *bâtin*. After a point, I realized this was not really so different from how I myself viewed my interactions with the community. Friendly conversations, shared experiences, lengthy formal interviews, and (occasionally) proffered texts were all grist for my interpretive mill as I sifted and scrutinized everything for underlying patterns. If my own theoretical and historiographic matrices had led me to anticipate what I found in my investigations, was it not fair that members of the community performed the same intellectual operation on me?

It is not very useful to try to separate out the factual, rhetorical, and formal elements of such interactions. Partly this is because of the stakes involved. But just as importantly it is because it is the entire performance that has interpretive value. Treating all sources – and not just oral ones – as essentially performances, ways of constantly enacting an engagement between inherited repertoires of meanings and very real situations, reflects the way intellectual practices both constitute a weak structure and take their meaning from it. Representations of the past can be profitably analyzed as clusters of symbols deployed to achieve various purposes, not the least of which are rendering the world and human actions meaningful and making those meanings understood by others. Looking at behavior pragmatically but not reductively thus provides a way of linking the rhetorical aspects of discourses with the social and material conditions in which they emerge.

The stories Yacoubists told themselves and others about what was happening to them drew creatively on stories about earlier West African Muslims to form a new set of collective and individual identities. They also reveal a vast gap between their versions of the past and the dominant representations of colonial Africa that were available to contextualize the movement. When placed alongside a critique of the way stories are aggregated according to the implicit knowledge they assume, my interviews provided an opportunity to interrogate some of these broader narratives and to rethink how historians interpret the connections among phenomena at different scales of analysis. When the biographies and self-imaginings of Yacouba's followers are taken as a whole, *they* fragment histories of empire *around them*. Picturing the social changes that accompanied French occupation through the lens of a centuries-old, ongoing process of Sufism-inspired religious reform, Yacouba Sylla's followers generally did a better job of assimilating and accounting for colonial rule than coloniality does of accounting for their experiences. The same is true for most popular commentaries on the community. Yacouba Sylla has a reputation throughout francophone West Africa as a powerful Muslim leader, an occultist, and a shrewd, stereotypically "Soninke" business man; one of Mali's prominent Wassoulou singers, Sali Sidibe has written a celebratory song about him

highlighting these traits that, while hardly an objective history, integrates the locally meaningful contexts of such stereotypes within a very public language.²⁴ But it is not obvious how to handle history that fragments the interpretive frameworks that connect it to other stories, or how to tell a story in which something like an “Islamic tradition” matters without either reifying it – making it static and normative – or anthropomorphizing it, making it another way to evacuate African agency. Using popular stereotypes is even harder.

My approach to these problems is indebted to the work of the critics Kenneth Burke and Walter Benjamin who, in the 1920s and 1930s, proposed two distinct yet related alternatives to the techniques of historicism. Burke argued that, for better or worse, historians produce meaning through dramatic devices, staging action within a broader scene whose meaning emerges dialectically with the events taking place within it. Burke’s approach dissolves persistent puzzles about the relationship between structure and agency by conceiving of action as the ratio of scene to actor in any particular description of events. Rather than being a property of social scientific modeling (where abstract agency may remain a concern, but one far divorced from the realities of historical methods), it is thought of as a property of experience described. Similarly, Burke’s dramatism loosens the process of contextualization by which historians make sense out of the past without abandoning it entirely. While the dramatic structure of a historical narrative does imply an attitude toward the significance of phenomena and the mechanisms of change, in actual narrative practice a wide range of relations among actor, agent, scene, and action are possible. Settings do not specify action any more than action has meaning outside the scene of its taking place; neither relation is determining or even necessarily consonant.²⁵ Allowing for greater flexibility in the relationship between scenes and acts, and conceptualizing a category of actor distinct from agent (and thus “agency”), preserves the relative autonomy of internested, articulated stories while still allowing us to give them new meaning by changing the ways we combine those stories.

Walter Benjamin’s heterodox Marxism critiqued historicism from a different vantage. Benjamin drew attention to the points of departure in historical narratives, asserting that it was impossible to justify a particular temporal frame by reference to any empirical criteria. Origins were, rather, moments that took a jump or leap out of context and that therefore could not be explained as part of the stream of time that bound them teleologically to that

²⁴ Sali Sidibe, “Yacouba Sylla,” *Divas of Mali*, Shanachie, SHA-CD-64078.

²⁵ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (2nd ed. Boston, 1961); *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, 1969); *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York, 1955); and *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Boston, 1961). There is a key difference here from the ideas of Hayden White, who drew heavily on Burke but who favored a high degree of structural correspondence on all levels, from rhetorical structure to narrative arc to political valence.

which came before and after. By denying this, naïve historicism failed to observe the ways the sources that reached historians had been mediated at every intervening moment by the technologies of control that generated, preserved, and transformed knowledge.²⁶ Though Benjamin's thought has entered historical practice through the simplified cliché that scholars should "brush sources against the grain," what Benjamin meant by this was something very different than the "reading between the lines" that it has been taken to enjoin. Benjamin insisted that the past be apprehended as a "dialectical image," a rupture in context and continuity in which the meaning of the past and the present were put simultaneously at stake.

Taken together, Benjamin's and Burke's ideas suggest that the constant displacement of African knowledge from histories of "colonialism" is deeply connected to how scholars use broader narratives to interpret or contextualize sources. Depicting colonial policy as a set of shifting structures and African "agency" as something meaningful in the specific setting of imperial rule is only one possible staging among many, but it has become overwhelmingly dominant. Most of the reasons for doing so are those of professional convenience and reflect the circuits through which historians' own knowledge must travel to be given value. Thus even microspecializations within the field have their own "natural" stagings, which, when applied in such a way as to produce a high degree of conformity between scene and act, generate almost boilerplate colonial histories. If the privileged topic is Islam, Yacouba and his followers can be fitted into broader stories about French suppression of unruly Muslim organizations, of Shaykh Hamallah's rejection of accommodation with colonial rulers, or of the increasing personalization of religious authority in the face of expanding commodity exchange, wage labor, and state patronage of charismatic Sufi leaders.²⁷ In relation to the political or economic history of Côte d'Ivoire, Yacouba appears either as an important transporter who contributed to the displacement of the precolonial *ancien régime* by an adaptive bourgeoisie, as a possible French "collaborator," as a

²⁶ Esp. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," (trans. Harry Zohn) in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, 2003), pp. 389–400; "The Philosophy of History of the Late Romantics and the Historical School," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926 (Cambridge, MA, 1999); and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York, 1994).

²⁷ For explicit attempts to locate the Yacoubists in these depictions, see J.C. Froelich, *Les musulmans d'Afrique noire* (Paris, 1962), pp. 137, 240; Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *The Tijaniyya: a Sufi Order in the Modern World* (New York, 1965), p. 152; Pierre Alexandre, "A West African Islamic Movement: Hamallism in French West Africa," in *Protest and Power in Black Africa*, ed. R. Rotberg and Ali Mazrui (New York, 1970), pp. 503, 507–508; 'Abd Allah 'Abd al-Raziq Ibrahim, *Adwā' 'alā al-turuq al-sūfiyya fī al-qārā al-afriqiyya* (Cairo, 1990), pp. 124–126; Boukary Savadogo, "Confréries et pouvoirs. La Tijaniyya Hamawiyya en Afrique occidentale (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger): 1909–1965" (Thèse de doctorat, Université de Provence, 1998), pp. 327–365.