

# 4 A Case of Fundamentalism in West Africa: Wahabism in Bamako

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(translated by Donald Taylor)

Even though it is not possible to trace a direct historical link between Wahabism and the phases of reform that preceded it in West Africa, it is nevertheless possible to assert that Wahabism is part of a recurrent movement in which Islam seeks to return to its origins, part of the struggle against the mingling (*shirk*) of pagan practices with Islam, and part of the rejection of any compromise between the *ulama* (learned men of religion) and holders of political power (Levtzion, 1978).

This movement which periodically reappears in Islam was started in West Africa by al-Maghili, adviser to Askia Muhammad, King of Sonrai (Cuoq, 1975). It was then taken up again by Usman dan Fodio in the north of Nigeria and by Al Hajj Umar in his struggle against Masina (Mahibou and Triaud, 1983).

If we accept that these different phases of Islamic reform constitute a unity then we can say that the unity itself is a type of fundamentalism because it is patterned in the same way.

## BACKGROUND

Wahabism originated in the Arabian peninsula in the eighteenth century. The founder was Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab (1703–93), who was born into a family of legal experts, and who had been greatly influenced by the ideas of Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taimiya. He developed a unified doctrine centred upon the oneness of God which at the same time criticised the cult of saints, Sufism and the non-Sunni sects within Islam.

Wahabism was both a religious and political movement, Arab and Islamic, that responded to the decline of the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, and the increasing acceptance of Shi'ism in Iran, on the other. It sought to set up a Sunni state among Arab countries and to

restore Islam to its original purity by driving out all innovations and superstitions and adopting a policy of expansion.

Thanks to the pact of Dariya made in 1744 between Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad b. Saud, Wahabism became the official ideology of the Saud dynasty, thus turning this bedouin principality into a theocracy. Since then the destinies of Wahabism and of the Saudis have been inseparably bound together (Laoust, 1983, pp. 321–32).

Even though its influence was no doubt felt in West Africa before the colonial period (Kaba, 1974, p. 4) Wahabism did not really make itself felt, particularly in Bamako, until after the Second World War. As Kaba (1974) and Amselle (1977) have already shown, the spread of Wahabism to Bamako, the commercial crossroads between the Ivory Coast and Senegal, is due to two major factors: first, the increase in the number of pilgrims to Mecca in the last thirty years, and second, the return of the first West African graduates in about 1945 from the Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

Pilgrimage to Mecca was made much easier from 1935 onwards when the French colonial administration adopted a favourable attitude towards it. In addition to this the advent of air travel in 1950 allowed a growing number of Muslims, especially the merchants, to go to Mecca and meet other West Africans who had already accepted Wahabism (Triaud, 1983).

Likewise, since the graduates of Al-Azhar chose Bamako rather than Kankan as the centre for their proselytising activities, it became one of the principal homes of Wahabism in West Africa.<sup>1</sup>

From the time the graduates arrived in 1945, many Muslims who were attracted by the prestige that Al-Azhar had conferred upon them came to visit and enquire about Islam. Since the graduates were not able to obtain places in the colonial educational system because of the nature of their qualifications, they decided to take up preaching and organise conferences for debates with the marabouts<sup>2</sup> whom they easily out-classed thanks to the far superior nature of their Islamic learning.

Since 1945, Wahabism has attracted more and more sympathisers, in spite of the anti-Wahabi pogrom of 1957 and the closure by Modibo Keita's government of the Islamic Cultural Union (UCM) which had been founded in 1953 to bring together into one group all the Islamic reformers. In 1970, the Military Committee of National Liberation (CMLN) authorised the reconstitution of the Islamic Cultural Union