

The Interplay Of International And Domestic Factors In Mali: The Case Of Politico- Religious Actors.

Beatriz Mesa

Abstract

During the last two decades, contemporary North Africa has been an ideal vantage point from which to observe international and regional influences at play in the processes of regime change, transitions and in the evolution of religious actors. However, limited or scarce academic literature has been produced about the Sahel as a new space to observe the domestic and international arenas in the religious field.

The study of the evolution of religious actors in the Sahel region needs to take the form of a historical retrospective of North Africa due to the cultural interaction of both geographies (North Africa and Sahel) that begins with the spread of Islam through commercial exchanges in both directions before the Middle Ages. In this paper, we will see the significant effect of the international dimension and the domestic context in the evolution of religious actors in the Malian landscape that have emerged as rival political actors.

We refer to traditional brotherhoods led by Ousmane Madani Haïdara, Wahhabism (reformist tendency) led by Mahmoud Dicko, and Shiism led by Chouala Bayaya Haïdara. The three leaders, especially Dicko, have found a new window of opportunity to attain more power and be more influential. The opening of this window came to the fore following the 2012 armed insurgency in northern Mali and the drift toward insecurity, as well as the economic and social consequences of the insurgency.

Keywords: political Islam, Mali, Sahel, Sufism, Wahhabism, social mobilisation

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Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, l'Afrique du Nord contemporaine a été un scénario idéal pour observer les influences internationales et régionales lors des processus de changement de régime, de transitions et, surtout, dans l'évolution des acteurs religieux. Cependant, très peu de littérature académique a été produite sur le Sahel en tant que nouvel espace pour observer l'impact des facteurs nationales et internationales dans le domaine religieux. L'étude sur l'évolution des acteurs religieux dans la région du Sahel nécessite d'une rétrospective historique de l'Afrique du Nord en raison de l'interaction culturelle des deux géographies (Afrique du Nord et Sahel) qui commence avec la propagation de l'islam à travers les échanges commerciaux dans les deux sens bien avant le Moyen Âge.

Dans cet article, nous analysons l'interrelation de la dimension internationale et domestique dans l'évolution des acteurs religieux au Mali qui ont émergé en tant qu'acteurs politiques, rivalisant les uns avec les autres. Nous faisons référence aux confréries traditionnelles dirigées par Ousmane Madani Haïdara, au wahhabisme (tendance réformiste) dirigé par Mahmoud Dicko, et au chiisme dirigé par Chouala Bayaya Haïdara. Les trois leaders, surtout le représentant du courant wahhabite, ont trouvé une nouvelle fenêtre d'opportunité pour acquérir plus de pouvoir et être plus influents. Cette fenêtre est apparue suite à l'insurrection armée de 2012 au Nord du Mali et à la dérive sécuritaire, ainsi qu'aux conséquences économiques et sociales.

Mots clés: Islam politique, Mali, Sahel, Soufisme, Wahhabisme, mobilisation sociale

Introduction

Over the last decade, Mali has had to deal with enormous challenges to its national security. This is in part due to the rise of jihadist and secessionist insurgencies that broke out in the north of the country in 2012. This episode negatively impacted the central State, leading it to lose both territorial sovereignty and popular legitimacy. This fragile climate, characterized by growing insecurity and economic precariousness, has allowed politico-religious actors to find a niche of action from which to extend their influence and compete with central power. The politico-religious actors – Wahhabis, Shi'as, and Sufis – have penetrated in the Malian public space with respective backing from Saudi Arabia, Iran and the regional Sufi network.

This article seeks to explore the interconnections between the national and international arenas in the evolution of actors moving from a strictly religious sphere to a more political one. On the one hand, it attempts to show how international dimensions have had an impact on local religious actors, influencing their strategies and behaviors in their struggle for power. And, on the other hand, it tries to see how local factors related to the security, social and economic situation have also contributed to the emancipation of religious actors. Thus, we explore how the severely underestimated interaction of internal and international factors influences the development of contemporary religious actors in Mali in their escalation of power and popular legitimacy.

Although external influence on Sahelian religious actors, particularly on the Malian stage, can be traced back to the 1970s, it did not really become apparent until the 1990s, when the Traoré regime became more tolerant of Islam and allowed it to play a more pervasive role in political, social, and cultural affairs. However, in our analysis we argue that beyond the regime's openness to the impact of religion, in this case Islam, there are other internal dynamics that help the actors in our study to acquire greater protagonism, power and influence among Malian people. In this sense, we have observed that 2012 and the emergence of a wave of internal violence provoked by the insurgency of secessionist and jihadist actors have contributed to the fact that actors from the three religious tendencies (Wahhabism, Shiism and Sufism) have been at the forefront of the Malian society.

The inability of the government to solve complex and intractable crises from 2012 left a power vacuum, creating a gap that politico-religious actors could fill. In fact, these same actors were instrumental to the outbreak of the unprecedented social mobilisation on August 18, 2020 that led to coup d'état against the regime of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

The strength and depth of intervention of the three aforementioned religious currents in Malian public space and, therefore, in the lives of Malians, have forcefully caused a paradigm shift in political Islam. The three key politico-religious actors in Mali are Mahmoud Dicko, a Wahhabi imam supported by Saudi Arabia; Ousmane Madani Haïdara, a Sufi traditionalist supported by the Tidjaniya transnational movement, and Chouala Bayaya Haïdara, a Shia backed by Iran.

This paper uses the term “politico-religious actor”, which is more appropriate than “Islamist” because of the heterogeneity of the representatives of Mali’s religious and political spectrum, and especially because not all religious actors in our study see Islam as a political ideology and do not consider that the Islamisation of society requires the establishment of an Islamic state. Two of the key politico-religious actors, Madani Haïdara and Chouala Bayaya Haïdara, believe secularism to be the solution for Mali in order to guarantee living together in a country with different religious practices. The third politico-religious actor, Mahmoud Dicko, on the other hand, openly declares that Mali must go back to become an Islamic state, drawing from the tenets of Wahhabism that state that Islamic doctrine should guide political action, suggesting religious precepts and personal religiosity as sources for policymaking. From this, we get a first glance as to how these three separate doctrines and beliefs inform the political manoeuvres of each of these actors.

International and domestic factor(s) and their impact on religious actors: analytical framework

The Arab uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa dramatically demonstrated that an exclusively national perspective or an exclusively international perspective is not sufficient to explain the cascade of events that influenced the resurgence of Islamist actors (Azaola-Piazza, B; & De Larramendi, Hernando de Larramendi, M 2020). Both endogenous and exogenous factors are interdependent in the evolution, adaptation and resilience of actors. In the case of Mali, the central Sahel country, we also observe that the two spaces (international and domestic) cannot be differentiated because they have impacted the actors in the study with the same force, even if the consequences are different.

Thus, the international and regional dimensions must increasingly appear as an integrated theoretical argument (Schmitz and Sell, 1999). Hence, the contemporary Sahel becomes a privileged place to observe international and regional influences on religious actors evolving into political actors (Ambrosio, 2010; Cavatorta, 2009; Heydemann, 2014; Heydemann and Leeders, 2011).

To truly understand the religious actors and their agendas and the many changes that the Sahel has undergone due to the interplay of international, regional and national factors, it is necessary to look at other North African settings. In countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, the dynamics of social mobilisations, a domestic phenomenon, have been relevant because they have allowed so-called Islamist religious actors to return from exile after years of repression, to contest elections and even to govern. From a theoretical perspective, the domestic element is incorporated into external influence to better understand the adaptation, change or resilience of religious actors (Gilardi, 2012; Della Porta and Tarrow, 2012).

Thus, we observe how the Arab Spring in 2011 represented a paradigm shift for political Islam actors. As far as the Sahel is concerned, the transformative domestic dynamics of religious actors are related to the failure of governments to provide security for citizens and the galloping rise of precariousness. In this sense, in a context of double crisis, insecurity and unemployment (Nye 2017), religious actors in Mali find their window of opportunity to gain greater credibility and influence in the face of a political leadership incapable of generating trust among the people. The study of the evolution of religious actors in Mali towards a more political dimension through the interaction of domestic and international factors between 2012, when the new territorial insurgency emerged, and 2020, when the coup d'état brought Colonel Goïta to the presidential chair, is a significant contribution to the existing debate in academic studies on the inseparability of national and international space and its impact on the category of actor under study (Whitehead, 2001; Tomé, 2021). Building on other work on the impact of double factor integration – national and international – on PJD Islamists in the case of Morocco (Tome 2021), or on the case of the Islamist Nahda party in Tunisia (Cimini, 2021), this article presents a complementary approach to religious actors in the Sahel in which the relevance of the local and international factors is highlighted.

The theory of socialisation allows us to study the evolution of politico-religious actors as they apply a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness. The definition of socialization proposed by Checkel explains it as a process of induction of actors into the norms and rules of a given community (Checkel, 2005). What is interesting to see through this is not how international factors originate abroad, but how they are interpreted by local religious actors taking into account the constraints of their respective national environments.

The key – and our central focus – is to see the evolution of these actors as they follow a logic of accommodation, and how they gain the acceptance of

their various communities by the representation they offer on their behalf in their various claims against regimes far removed from the everyday problems of the citizenry. Thus, in countries with systems in which there is a huge gap between the actors (the people) and the locus of power (the regime), there are individuals who exploit this gap to achieve a higher level of popular acceptance within society than the regime. They position themselves through a religious legitimacy that can lead to a political legitimacy to compete with the central power (Checkel, *ibid*). In this sense, the space of contestation in which politico-religious actors can appropriate and give meaning to their mobilising action is largely related to religious identity because it marks the psychology of certain societies and the critique of the hardships and injustices suffered by the people.

These internal (domestic) elements legitimise and reinforce the discourse of the actors mobilising support and, by extension, the external (international) actors supporting them. The linking in this case study of the domestic and non-domestic arenas seems fundamental because it fills a gap in the understanding of both spheres. At the analytical level, while the influence of regional/international actors on domestic arenas can be easily observed or detected, it is less obvious to identify a stable causal link between externally generated influences and the decisions of individual actors. In other words, it is difficult to provide decisive evidence and identify the sources of change, especially given the numerous variables that may be involved and the alternative explanations (Tomé-Alonso, Cimini, 2021).

To be clear, international influence is not passive. Rather, to be operative, it needs the acceptance and intermediation of domestic actors who look to the international sphere for models, examples and/or support. Whereas some authors have focused on the supply-side, the passive diffusion of norms, values and models, others pay attention to the demand-side, the selective and active selection of some ideas and the rejection of others (Schmitz & Sell, 1999). This approach emphasises the role of domestic actors who select and incorporate international influences into their strategic calculus and their political actions. Indeed, this perspective focuses not on the external influences per se, but on the interaction between the international and domestic arenas (Whitehead, 2001), which is what Pridham calls 'linkage politics': factors that originated in the regional and international arena and have an impact on domestic politics (Pridham, 1991).

Methodology

In order to better situate the interplay of international and domestic in religious landscape, the article is based on the narratives of three politico-religious actors, namely Mahmoud Dicko, Ousmane Madani Haïdara, and Chouala Bayaya Haïdara, who have been influenced by organizations, associations and new movements with various religious affiliations. To understand the impact of these international agents on the evolution of the aforementioned, We conducted an empirical analysis from a qualitative perspective to explore the dynamics of interactions between Mali's politico-religious leaders of political Islam and other state actors.¹ This approach involves data collection through direct observation, interviews with the key actors of the study in order to analyse how these actors interact and influence within the political landscape of Mali. (Gobo, 2008, Jourde, 2009).

This narrative and content analysis technique is considered essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the evolution of each religious current within its context, particularly when considering the external dimension and its impact on the local scene. Although the empirical work with these actors is limited to September of 2019, the analysis is also part of the result of almost a decade (2011–2020) of study on the evolution of domestic events in Mali and the role that each of these actors have played during the country's most critical episodes.

Understanding how these politico-religious actors succeeded in accumulating their political power requires us to closely detangle the links between the influences of domestic and external factors (Pridham,1991; Cavatorta, 2009). To that end, we divide our empirical analysis on the interaction of those two factors in two phases. The first phase took place under Moussa Traoré's regime (1968–1991). The regime allowed for the proliferation of Islamic madrasas, mosques and religious private schools with close financial ties to Middle Eastern countries (international dimension). This marks the beginning of a new paradigm for a country with a secular legacy since its French colonization.

The second phase begins in January 2012 when several secessionist and jihadist groups launched an insurgency with the aim of gaining independence for Mali's most northern region, Azawad. The implications of this crisis were two-fold. On the one hand, Toumani Touré's administration (2002–2012) which was unable to bring the conflict to a swift resolution, lost popular legitimacy and this culminated in his removal from office after an army-led coup d'état.

¹ The author has been working in Mali for the past 15 years. Fieldwork for this paper was conducted in September of 2019.

Moreover, as a direct consequence of the generalised disaffection towards the political crisis and the continued social and economic degradation of the whole country, the new president, Ibrahim Boubakar Keita, relied heavily on religious leaders to mobilise his potential voters during the presidential elections of 2012. This situation favoured and empowered politico-religious actors who became mediators between the people and the State to achieve greater stability for the country.

Domestic level: religious actors, political mediators, and media celebrities

Although the presence of Islam is longstanding in Malian society, it only recently acquired a new status by occupying relevant public spaces, in part due to the presence of the three politico-religious leaders, each representing their own kind of Islam. We refer to the Salafist Mohamed Dicko (Wahhabi Islam), the Sufi Ousmane Madani Haïdara (Sufi Islam) and Chouala Bayaya Haïdara (Shia Islam). None of them represent a clear legal reference nor claim political-legal religious authority. However, they use religion as a bridge from which to extend their influence over economic, political and strategic issues. Religion is seen as a strategic resource to influence, negotiate and mobilize people to achieve more legitimacy and popularity.

Since Mali's democratic transition in the early 1990s, Islam has gained ground through the spread of religious associations and independent newspapers. About one hundred national, international and transnational Islamic associations were registered under the first democratic president, Alpha Oumar Konaré (from 1992 to 2002), and this number reached 150 by the turn of the 21st century (Nassoko, 2009; Holder, 2012). Because of this context of freedom, religious leaders benefitted from the liberalization of mass media in the country, and they were able to prosper and to gain more visibility. The media was a useful tool to express the grievances of Malian Muslim communities living in a modern and secularized state (Soares, 2007). Therefore, the end of the twentieth century constituted a new era for religious activism for Muslim reformists linked to Wahhabism, the traditional Sufism and, recently, Shi'ism. Although the Shi'ite current is peripheral compared to the other two religious' tendencies in Mali, it is worth including here because its development in the Sahelian country is also taking place in a context of integration of the international and domestic dimensions.

The propagation of sermons through radio broadcasts became a popular and easy way to reach potential followers. For the three religious actors in our study, this has been a window of opportunity, and they began to record their sermons and teachings on cassettes and DVDs. In keeping with the times, however, the use of the Internet and social networks like Facebook are now one of the main conduits to reach followers (Soares, 2009a). These technologies allowed religious actors to open public debates about “what it means to be a good Muslim” and what constituted offences against Islam. But, beyond religious prescriptive preaching about the behaviour of Muslims in their daily lives and their role in a secular society, issues related to societal precariousness, as well as issues of internal politics, corruption, bad governance, and insecurity were central themes of the discourse harangued by religious leaders.

The opening of the public space to religious actors in Mali was observed through the liberation of media. In addition to the liberation of the public space and media for Malian religious actors in a context of Malian reforms, international assistance was essential for the emancipation of religious actors, in particular financial support from Middle Eastern countries. Acceptance of financial support from resource-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia has been key (Holder, 2012). Saudi Arabia has been financing mosques and associations inspired by its Wahhabi ideology and has relied on local Malian actors such as Mahmoud Dicko (Holder, 2012). In fact, the empirical work in Mali allows us to observe the rapid expansion of this ideological current through local actors who received considerable amounts of money after spending some time in Saudi Arabia, and who, on returning to their country of origin, opened mosques inspired by this ideology (Gilardi, 2012). This dynamic persisted throughout the 1990s under Moussa Traoré’s regime that considered the religious sector as “a possible field” to gain more support from citizens.

Therefore, Moussa Traoré combined the secular state—secularism as a colonial heritage—in a Muslim country where associations and organizations claimed greater Islamization. Media support has been central to the public visibility strategy of Mahmoud Dicko and in his eagerness to accumulate power. The creation of the NIATA media group has served to spread its ideology and adhere new followers to its movement. Dicko’s main competition in the politico-religious field is Chérif Madani Haïdara, leader of Ansar Dine International (from the Arabic *ansâr al-dîn* – supporters of religion), a popular movement that, like Wahhabi NGOs, constitutes the main spaces of social transformation of Mali.

In the case of Sufi Islam actors, Chérif Madani Haidara, as the most famous and influential preacher in present-day Mali, has acquired a charisma and

popularity that has flourished thanks to the dissemination of his sermons on audio cassettes and through his use of various national languages to expand his base (Soares, 2009; Holder, 2012). This leader has become so popular that dozens of “pilgrims” journey to Chérif Haïdara’s home seeking his blessing.² A security device shields the entrance to the area where Haïdara and his co-religionists reside. An imposing mosque has been built on the same premises, as well as an Islamic madrasa that is also used as a place for social gatherings. The housing blocks are available to visitors and travellers who decide to take a spiritual trip in Bamako during sacred times like Ramadan.

His constant denunciation of the social and economic degradation in the country has boosted his popularity. His association, Ansar Dine, was among the organizations that made an impact during the Traoré regime on the distribution of basic services to those in need. Associations like Ansar Dine filled the gap left by poor government services in the face of structural adjustment programs imposed from abroad (Nievas, 2017). They played a charitable and social role that has improved the health and education of many Malians, even going so far as replacing the state in many cases. The failure of neoliberalism can generate widespread discontent among the population, especially among those marginalized or harmed by neoliberal economic policies. This discontent creates fertile ground for Islamic movements to offer political and social alternatives (Bayat, 2007).

Consequently, Chérif Haïdara as well as his main rival, the Wahhabi imam Mahmoud Dicko, have been able to relocate themselves in the public space beyond the religious sphere. For his part, the religious guide Chouala Bayaya, who embodies the leadership of the Shiite current in Mali, has also continued along the same line of gaining popularity through the conventional media and social networks that have been positioning him in the religious spectrum since the 2000s. His popularity has grown to the point where he has gathered more than 35,000 worshippers on the night of destiny, one of the most important prayers, during the holy month of Ramadan. Haïdara garners popular support through print media and radio; he also engages in support of political parties in order to raise financial support (Prud’homme, 2016). However, his proselytist efforts are more modest compared to the other two rival leaders.

2 Empirical observation by the author in the neighbourhood of the religious leader, Chérif Madani Ousmane, September 2019.

Foreign aid and locally built networks make the difference in tipping the balance of power among these three competing religious currents. For instance, Chérif Haïdara utilizes three key strategies. First, inspired by other Malian preachers, he uses traditional Sufi Bambara — the most widely spoken language in Mali — for the dissemination of prayers and sermons, which also allows him to have a deeper impact among his followers. The use of Bambara is also used as a strategy to remind his followers of the adaptation of Islam to African culture as an exogenous practice. Similarly, his followers learn the Quran in Bambara, not in Arabic. As Chérif Haïdara himself wondered in a 2012 interview: “Why not pray to Allah in other languages?” (Holder, 2012). The use of Bambara also serves a way for Malians to better understand their own religion. The use of the traditional languages by preachers is a common practice among Sahel countries. Additionally, Chérif Haïdara further expands his reach by frequently leaving the mosque to lead prayer with nomad communities.

Secondly, Chérif Haïdara’s use of mass media has been essential to boosting his teachings — something that was forbidden during the Traoré regime. His organization, Ansar Dine, has its own radio station that broadcasts through the FM frequency. The radio station, dubbed “The citizens’ voice”, is in the Kalaban Koro neighbourhood in Bamako. While most of the programming is essentially religious, the station also broadcasts non-religious content (Holder 2012). Likewise, Ansar Dine has a French web page on the Internet, which also broadcasts sermons and manages a Facebook page on which it updates followers. The use of the media is essential in the strategic action of this actor, as well as for the other two rival actors of the religious scene.

The final strategy is the showmanship style that Chérif Haïdara uses to gather thousands of his faithful, particularly on Islamic holidays. For instance, in November 2019, during the last celebration of the Maouloud, the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed, Chérif Haïdara spoke about the different economic, political and security crises facing the country³: He recalled the weakened status of the armed forces and the number of casualties at the hand of insurgents (more than fifty casualties only after the most recent terrorist attack in the region of Macinas); he pledged to make an economic contribution of more than 10 million CFA francs to the State for the funding of military units; he alluded to national cohesion and the need to implement it as a “sine qua non condition for achieving peace;” demanded explanations from international military forces on the ground as they were unable to protect civilians and the military after the last conflicts in the center of the country; and finally, he suggested that blue

3 Empirical observation by the author in the neighbourhood of the religious leader, Chérif Madani Ousmane, September 2019.

helmets from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) be allowed to use force in order to effectively engage against the enemy⁴.

These purely political messages contrast with the statements made by Chérif Haïdara that “Islam cannot be confused or mixed with politics. People want to use Islam to meet their personal agendas. But that is not Islam. Religious actors who are involved in politics are not good Muslims. They respond to your economic needs and interests.”⁵

Like Chérif Haïdara, the Shia Islam leader Choala uses social networks and conventional mass media to spread his religious sermons and teachings. Choala’s proselytizing action is grounded mainly in the clear analogies with traditional Malian Sufism that “there is not a big difference between Sufism and Shiism, neither in practice, nor in behaviour or belief. The two currents worship the saints but, in our case, they are the saints recognized by the Quran. That is why the conversion to Shiite Islam from traditional Sufism is easier for Malians.”⁶

While unconfirmed, in the Shiite preacher’s neighborhood, the population claims that he receives significant funding from Iran which allowed him to build a giant house, acquire several vehicles and buy means of communication⁷. The preacher argues that he made his fortune through the association he leads, Hizbourahamane, where he manages the money flows. During a 2016 interview with the Malian press, he stated that his prayers “are financed by the association through which receives money from friends and adherents. I also manage other professional activities such as poultry farming and self-financing (Prud’ homme, 2016).”

Wahhabism, a reformist version of Islam, directly challenges the two previously mentioned strands of Islam. In Mali, its main proponent and preacher imam Mahmoud Dicko, preaches not only on the need to “revise traditional Sufism” but also repeatedly criticises the Malian government for its weakness and inability to provide security for all Malians. His growing popularity has allowed him to gain influence in the political arena. For instance, during the 2012 crisis he served as a mediator, and a year later he supported French military intervention to bring an end to the conflict. In 2015, he partook in

4 See: Maouloud 2019: Ousmane Chèrif Haidara appelle à souvenir l’armée malienne et montre l’exemple», www.malijet.ma.

5 Interview by the author at the home of Ousman Haïdara, September 2019, Bamako.

6 Interview by the author at the home of Chouala Bayaya Haïdara, September 2019, Bamako.

7 Empirical work by the author in the Shiite preacher’s neighborhood, September 2019.

the signing ceremony for the peace agreement and by 2017 he was part of the “entente nationale” conference. Dicko’s strength lies in his number of followers, his ability to hold discourses on religious purity and societal mores in a rapidly changing world, as well as on mismanagement by the State and the pervasion of western values. Before the military leader Assimi Goïta came to power in 2020, Dicko was able to gather up to 60,000 people at his rallies⁸.

In conclusion, Islam is divided in multiple groups in Mali. Against this backdrop, money and influence from international actors like Saudi Arabia and Iran deeply impact on the national strength and power of the religious leaders and of the faction they represent. Such power is measured by the amount of money and resources they can rely upon, the followers they are able to mobilize during their official speeches, and the space they occupy in the media and other public spaces.

The international and local context behind religious growth

For Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the leading nations for the two branches of Islam, West Africa is an area of geopolitical importance. To start with, the influence of Iran -- an emerging power whose presence in this region is increasingly palpable -- is made through an “anti-Western” discourse against the United States and France particularly. Iran does not hide that the Islamic Republic can represent an opportunity for West African countries, but it is aware that its religious doctrine has a residual impact by being located in countries with a strong Sunni tradition (Greathead & Feierstein, 2017).

Despite the fact that this branch is a minority, Iran’s strategy is to continue forward with the “shīatisation” of the members of the Muslim community through economic investment, the transfer of knowledge in the country and through the exploitation of a discourse that evokes the similarities between the traditional Sufism of the Tijadniya brotherhood and Shiism, as well as the love of the Sufis for the family of the prophet or the importance of the spiritual guide in the path of the good Muslim. Mali’s Shia religious leader, Chouala Bayaya Haïdara, shared this with the author: “There is no great difference between Sufism and Shi’ism, neither in practice, nor in behavior. Neither in vision or belief. In fact, as a representative of the Shia community in Mali, we are confused with the Sufis” (conversation in Mali, June 2020).

Chouala Bayaya Haïdara has been the Malian guide and pillar for the expansion of the Shia doctrine, especially after Iranian President Ahmadinejad’s 2010 visit to Bamako and Timbuktu. This trip allowed solidarity between the two

8 Meetings of the author Beatriz Mesa, with security agents in Bamako, July, August, 2019.

countries and signed agreements for development and investment in agriculture and other sectors.

Although Sufism is what gives the most meaning to Islam in Malian society, the Muslim experience in West Africa includes the intervention of other religious doctrines. Mali was one of the four sub-Saharan countries to attend the 1969 Islamic Conference held in Rabat and one of the few sub-Saharan countries to participate in the second summit in Lahore in 1974, where Pan Islamism and common ideals for an Islamic community were objectives proposed by Saudi Arabia (Gresh, 1983).

Yet, Saudi Arabia used Wahhabism to position itself geopolitically in the Sahel. This led, as shall be seen below, to a growing doctrinal fragmentation of African Islam that resulted in a proliferation of groups professing rigorous interpretations of Islamic principles. Saudi influence and interest in sub-Saharan Africa became noticeable during the 1970s after the Arab-Israeli wars and the rupture of relations with Israel. Mali was also the second receiver, after Senegal, of development projects and investments by Saudi Arabia between 1975 and 1982 (Gresh, 1983). Other Arab countries, including Kuwait and Libya, increased their trade and financial cooperation with West African countries such as Mali, primarily through local Wahhabi businessmen.

The strengthening of Islam between Mali and Islamic Arab countries manifested through a deepening of commercial and economic relations which had an impact on the resurgence and expansion of Islamic religious fervour in West Africa (Kaba, 2000). Commercial and economic transactions were accompanied by the construction of Islamic infrastructure, such as mosques, with the approval of the Malian authorities. The country experienced an increase in the number of Islamic associations, madrasas and sacred buildings, some of them opulent mosques tailored for Friday prayers. This shows the invigoration and expansion of Islam despite the impediments faced during the first years of independence under the Modibo Keita regime.

Mali's "father of independence," Modibo Keita (1960–1968) was a secular Muslim. He mostly implemented secular policies based on Marxist socialist ideology to manage the young African country (Nievas, 2017). Keita's official position, based on his public discourse, was that religion should be restricted to the private sphere (Brenner, 1991). Thus, despite resistance from certain Muslim communities, the secularism inherited from the former colonial power (France) should be the basis of the construction of the Malian state. While

defending secularism as a building block for the new Malian Republic, he did not deny Islam as a unifying element for a Malian people that historically clung to Sufi religious traditions and orientations.

The growth of Wahhabism in Mali prompted Keita's government to take drastic measures to curb the incursion of what he perceived as a fundamentalist ideology across all aspects of Malians lives. He closed the Islamic Cultural Centre (CIC) created by civil society with the aim of fighting against the marabouts who he demeaned as charlatans that incentivised superstitious beliefs. But the marabouts considered themselves the purifiers of Islam. To cope with the spread of religious fundamentalism through Wahhabism, the Malian state supported the creation of the Malian Association for Unity and the progress of Islam (AMUPI) in the 1990s. The objective of this organization was to counterbalance the prevailing Wahhabism and preserve traditional Islam (that is, the Sufi tradition). On the one hand, Keita's government was trying to manage the conflict and tensions between Muslim reformists and those affiliated with Sufi tendencies. On the other hand, this association had the mission of coordinating international aid coming from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran and the Gulf countries to promote Islamic educational and cultural centres and mosques (Soares, 2009).

Whereas Keita argued in favour of the private nature of Islam and its exclusion from political affairs, his successor Moussa Traoré was more open to Islam permeating the political sphere. He did so to root his power in Islamic politics (Amselle, 1987). Although he never thought of turning Mali into an Islamic state, he took several measures of religious inspiration that were seen by its critics as a threat to the secular character of the state that had been maintained since independence. Traoré realised the potential of Islam to become a way of holding on to the reins of power, so he did not hesitate to open the religious spaces he had control over.

Traoré practiced his Islamic faith publicly. As head of state, he and some of his cabinet ministers regularly attended Friday prayers in the great mosque of Bamako which was built under his mandate (Brenner, 1993) and celebrated the commemorations of the end of the month Ramadan and of the Tabaski (Eid al Adha or sacrifice party) (Nassoko, 2009). Traoré understood that advancing the popularity of his regime by using religion was an effective strategy (Clark, 1999). His government took measures to increase the country's prestige as a Muslim country and it increased the visibility of Islam and its national representation. Traoré formalised madrasas by giving them the recognition of fundamental schools. This measure received harsh criticism from the secular sector of the

State (Brenner, 1991a). Indeed, Traoré's endorsement of madrasas led to their growth, which in turn gave rise to an increase of Islam in the Malian public sphere. Their expansion was mainly directed by Wahhabis. This boom was made possible by international contributions and donations from the Arab and Muslim community to build facilities and finance scholarships in Arab countries (Brenner, 1991a; Brenner, 1991b). In this way, reformists managed to cement themselves as a viable alternative to the national education system.

Another measure designed to solidify the Islamic identity of the country under Traoré's mandate was the modification of the administration's work schedule during the periods of the Muslim fasting month Ramadan. To respect the times when Muslims in Mali broke their fast, the hours for dissemination of Islamic programs in the media which involved the broadcast of preaching by Muslims leaders increased, as well as those of ORTM public television (Nassoko, 2009). Furthermore, from 1968 to 1983 Bamako experienced an increase in the number of mosques and the emergence of new Islamic associations from 77 to 203 and 106 respectively (Brenner, 2001). Then, the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM) was created in 2002 and chaired by Salafist Mahmoud Dicko, the leader of the Wahhabi group in Bamako and one of the three key actors from our study. During Traoré's regime, Muslim reformists also took advantage of the new political landscape which allowed for freedom of expression, permitting them to spread the new moral narratives and acquire a privileged position. That is how Wahhabism became more visible and increasingly shared power with traditional Islam (Sufi Tarikas). According to Amselle (1987):

Although it may be true to say that the Wahhabis have made themselves felt as a force within the population of Bamako and even within Mali as a whole, or that the Mali government seeks to find favour with Saudi Arabia, it is equally true to say that traditionalist forces, and notably the marabouts, are still powerful within the structures of the state. It is well known in Mali that President Moussa Traoré and many of his ministers make use of the services of the more important marabouts to confirm their powers (Amselle, 1987).

Wahhabism – bolstered by the commercial links between the countries in the Gulf and Mali – spread quickly in the north and south of Mali. Beyond the commercial activities, education was also deployed as a tool for the fortification

of this Islamic current, with scholarships being offered to Malian students in the countries of the Gulf with Wahhabi ideologies. In the same period, the main Islamic associations like ASILAM (Association Islamique pour le Salut) and the Ansar Dine movement led by Chérif Haïdara appeared in the public scene, after the coup d'état against Traoré. However, the arrival of democracy under the presidencies of Alpha Konaré (1992–2002) and Amadou Toumani Touré (2002–2012) liberalised the political and religious field. This opening did not, however, authorise a constitutional reform to allow a political party based on religious values in order to continue preserving the secular system inherited from colonial times.

This political decision to prevent the inclusion of religious-centred political parties created tension within the Muslim community. Following this, politico-religious actors, specifically Salafist Mahmoud Dicko flexed the influence garnered from their public visibility. This was seen in the unprecedented mobilisations by Dicko through which he successfully blocked the family code legislation in favour of new rights for women that was ratified by the National Assembly in 2009. This was a first demonstration of the influence held by Dicko which has continued to this day. He opposed 49 amendments to the family code that would eventually be adopted in 2011. Among these changes was the much debated lowering of the marriage age from 18 to 16 years old. The debate about the limits between the religious and political affairs were very blurred despite official claims.

In July 2017, Imam Mahmoud Dicko sponsored the political movement “Badenya-Ton,” a gathering of Malians from Kayes to Menaka for the protection of Malian religious and social values. Although the constitution formally prohibits any religious interference in matters of the State, Muslim associations have monopolised the political space and have been able to impose their ideas in the face of a weak government that has abandoned the governance of the country.

Another factor that influences Mali's social transformation is the existence of socio-religious NGOs. For example, the NGO Al-Farouk located in a 'chic district' in Bamako illustrates this case. The NGO works on social and cultural matters. The same NGO, whose funding comes mainly from the Persian Gulf countries, funds one of the important universities of Bamako: Sahel University of Bamako. It was created in 2012 after the outbreak of the crisis in the north of the country. In 2016, this university had a student population of 529 students (Hanne & Hamdaoui, 2006).

We observe, therefore, how the international dimension has influenced in a remarkable way the advent of Malian Shiite and Wahhabi actors with a greater

participation in the political arena. Although the traditional Sufism represented by the Tidjaniya has especially used the strategy of the local dimension in its ambition to garner more and more followers, its popularity and strong influence was achieved with the network of Sufis from the entire West African region and especially from the Malian diaspora. The continuous militancy of Tijani Ousmane Madani Haïdara, his high visibility and the moralizing project he has managed to set up have made him, during the decade of our study, one more political actor on the Malian national scene (Holder, 2013).

The impact of the 2012 conflict on the political activism of religious actors

This religious growth provoked the emancipation of religious actors in Sahel which meant that they were more visible through a process of political participation or involvement (Hamdaoui, 2017). In the case of Mali, the involvement of the Muslim Brotherhood in political affairs was more palpable at the beginning of the 21st century. The first occasion of this was when, as we saw above, Muslim leaders reacted to block approval of a family code contradictory to the traditional societal values in the Malian National Assembly in 2009.

The second major instance of this was when they demonstrated a capacity to mobilize potential voters during the 2012 elections (Boly, 2013). The election coincided with the territorial crisis in northern Mali when secessionist and jihadist insurgents expelled the security forces and bodies of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. The security and institutional crisis culminated in the coup d'état by Colonel Amadou Sanogo of March 22, 2012, which ended the "occupation" by the insurgents of the northern region and generated such instability that allowed religious leaders to have a high profile during this period.

During the 2012 security crisis, Dicko and, to a lesser extent, Chérif Haïdara were both very influential figures. They also used the worsening of the security and living conditions of the Malians to strategically position themselves and gain greater visibility across the political field. Madani Haïdara's association, Ansar Dine, treated victims from the conflict in northern Mali and offered services to assist security forces deployed in the area. He also brought caravans of basic food items and other necessities to the frontlines (Nievas, 2017). The Wahhabi leader, meanwhile, mediated the conflict by opening bridges of dialogue with a part of the jihadist insurgency (the Ansar Dine organization of Iyad Ag Gali and the MUJAO group) that had imposed their force on the main

cities and that supposedly had as their final objective the application of the Sharia in its most rigorous form.

Another evocative illustration of the involvement of religious leaders in the political arena occurred during the weeks leading up to the 2012 election call when Mahmoud Dicko decided to create a movement to mobilise the vote in favor of the candidate who defended the values of Islam – Ibrahim Boubakar Keita. The movement was called Sabati 2012 and was critical in the electoral victory of Keita as the new president of the Republic. Paradoxically, during this electoral process, the religious chief actor Choala, a member of the Sabati movement, dissociated himself from the movement by supporting the opposition candidate to IBK, Soumaila Cissé, of the URD political party.

The role of this movement was to recruit young Muslims in all regions across Mali to make them true representatives of spiritual masters and active actors in the political life of the country, with the aim of uprooting corruption in politics and elections. It should be noted that the creation of this movement has had a very tangible impact on political circles. It is now an efficient tool in the hands of the spiritual leaders of Mali which they use to subject politicians to their will. The strength of the religious leaders gained such importance as was seen during the elections, that this reality could explain the later creation of the first Malian Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship in August 2012 by the transitional government, a clear sign of the growing influence of religious leaders in the political sphere (Boly, 2013; Hamadou, 2013). These leaders also played a crucial role as mediators between the elites of armed groups. In 2012, these groups led an insurgency with secessionist and jihadist motives, which was further accelerated by the return of Tuareg separatist Malians from Libya. This return was prompted by Libya's destabilisation following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, partly due to international intervention led by France (Mesa, 2017). The French intervention, supported by NATO, resulted in a power vacuum in the region, allowing Tuareg and Arab actors to acquire weapons and military equipment. They utilised these resources to bolster the insurgency against Amadou Toumani Touré in Mali.

The link between international and domestic factors

In November 2019, RFI news reported on Mahmoud Dicko's announcement of the creation of a political movement called Coordination of Movements, Associations and Supporters (CMAS) which was heavily based on religious values (RFI, 2019). The movement was launched in Bazoumana Sissoko Hall Archicomble of the Amadou Hampathé Ba Palace of Culture under the high authority of Imam Mahmoud Dicko and in the presence of the Minister in charge

of institutional reforms, Mr. Amadou Thiam. This new movement has reopened the debate in Mali about political Islam in this secular country. According to the Malian Constitutional Court, the creation of this politico-religious movement illustrates the “failed State” as article 25 of the Constitution clearly states that “Mali is an independent, sovereign, indivisible, democratic, secular and social Republic.” Similarly, article 28 also states that “parties must respect the principles of national sovereignty, democracy, territorial integrity, national unity and the secularity of the state.”

As previously mentioned, the scope of Mahmoud Dicko’s influence began during the crisis in the north of Mali when the jihadist and separatist insurgency broke out in 2012. He played the role of mediator and facilitator in the reconciliation talks in the country following the northern conflict. After three years of the military French intervention Serval in 2013 in north of Mali, which later became known as Berkane, there has been an increase in terrorist attacks and violence in Mali. The religious leader criticized the ongoing presence of France and the international MINUSMA troops in the country, arguing that despite the military intervention, jihadist groups still persist and continue to cause casualties⁹. This deteriorating security situation, as referenced by Dicko in his sermons, is further exacerbated by his campaigns against former President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita, whom he accused of handing over security management to colonial forces and being responsible for the economic and social degradation of the country. The latest popular mobilisation campaign led by preacher Dicko took place in June 2020, when the M5 movement, an alliance between civil society and political opposition, occupied public spaces to demand Keita’s resignation. This mobilisation lasted more than two months and solidified Dicko’s role as a key actor in the country’s political life, blurring his strictly religious role and culminated in a coup d’état led by Asimi Goita supported by the population.

The same was the case with the other religious leaders, Madani Haïdara (Sufi) and Bayaya Haïdara (Shiite) who presented themselves publicly as guarantors of Mali’s stability and national unification. However, their influence as politico-religious actors is the product of years of build-up with backing from powers in the Gulf seeking to carve out a sphere of influence in the Sahel. The Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia and the Shiism of Iran are very present in Mali through these actors and their new media strategy.

9 See: <https://www.maliweb.net/societe/limam-mahmoud-dicko-lassure-france-veut-plonger-mali-chaos-2091372.html>

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Shiism, with Iranian support, has also influenced the division of the religious spectrum even though its vision of Islam coincides more with Sufism and there are grounds for an entente between the two religious' philosophies. In a conversation with Chouala Bayaya Haïdara, he stated that: "we understand each other much better with the Sufism brotherhood because we also venerate the saints. Of course, unlike them, not any Saint but those royal descendants of the Prophet Mohamed... for us the Wahhabism represents a danger..."¹⁰.

The economic force that accompanies these leaders through the incomes from abroad has allowed them, in turn, to open companies in different sectors, thus eroding and evading central power. These religious actors have progressively appropriated the political and economic field using Islam, and by so doing have clearly become rival actors in the Republic of Mali. In a conversation, Chérif Haïdara argued that: "There are people that have found politics more pleasant than religion, and they can use it to get more power. That is how [the] religious are involved in politics. It (power) explains why some religious people use Islam to meet their personal agendas"¹¹ (his comment was taking a jab at Wahhabism). If you add to this the social work that each of these actors perform in their neighbourhoods of the capital, among other areas of the country, supplanting the state role, it is easy to understand the popular legitimacy that they have been accumulating in recent years and today. Above all, the agent who has emerged as the most potent challenge to a widely discredited political establishment is Mahmoud Dicko, partly responsible for the protest movement that brought down the president of the Republic.

10 Interview by author with leader Haïdara in September 2019.

11 Ibid.

Conclusion

This paper argues the impact that local and international dynamics have had on the most influential religious actors in the Malian landscape and their transformation into political actors. By local factor, we refer to the opening of the political system to the acceptance of religious discourse in the public sphere, which has implied the liberalisation of the media; other windows of opportunity for the emancipation of religious actors have been the 2012 crisis in northern Mali and the drift towards insecurity, and the support of religious leaders for political candidates in the 2013 elections, the first elections after the armed insurgency and the coup d'état that toppled the regime of Amadou Toumani Touré. The internal sphere is not enough to explain the evolution of the three religious actors of the Wahhabi, Sufi and Shia tendencies (the latter being of lesser weight) and needs external influence, as has been the case with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The two regional powers of the Gulf (Saudi Arabia and Iran) had a strategic vision for Africa which they began rolling out in the first half of the twentieth century although its influence was only clearly visualized in the second half of the century. Both nations have financed mass media projects for ideological propagation purposes through the actors of our study. In addition to this media that contributes to the expansion of their agendas wherein the moral and economic overlap with the geopolitical, they have created a catharsis in Mali's national landscape.

The penetration of Wahhabism in the Malian scenario that began with the objective of reacting to the colonial system, and later became an element of struggle against the Sufi brotherhoods, the marabouts and traditionalism, has divided Mali's religious landscape. The growing importance of religious leaders in Mali and their ability to monopolize the political terrain and confront state authorities, the government, and the National Assembly, has been palpable in the current century. In this sense, each of these local actors have gone from progressive visibility to direct participation not only in the religious, but also political, foreign influence field.

The dependence of domestic dynamics on building up relationships with international actors or on international developments in doctrinal matters is evident, either in terms of the evolution of the Wahhabi phenomenon, Shiite or traditional Sufism. Interestingly, although all these leaders claim the separation

of religion from politics in theory, they do not hesitate to intervene in political spaces. They do so through their speeches and sermons commenting upon national policies or laws, by participating in political and diplomatic dialogues as was the case after the 2012 crisis, and by directly addressing foreign missions, among others. In this context, financial resources are key to their success and influence. And this is where the international component of this project comes into play.

The political dimension of religious actors, who in turn have woven economic networks with the state actors and the private sector, is interpreted as a paradigmatic shift of religious groups in the Sahelian scenario. The strength of religious leaders achieved through the support received from foreign agents and domestic transformations in Mali, as well as the country's drift towards insecurity and greater impoverishment, have allowed a progression of religion in public affairs as a form of conduct and reference for the Malian population. Likewise, the increasingly politicised and media friendly religious actors are running as indisputable competitors in the political realm. Their activism and their greater popular legitimacy have made them — until the arrival of Assimi Goita's regime — indispensable stakeholders in the Malian power game.

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