

FETISHIZING RELIGION: ALLAH KOURA AND  
FRENCH ‘ISLAMIC POLICY’ IN LATE COLONIAL  
FRENCH SOUDAN (MALI)\*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article argues that an innovative religious movement in postwar French Soudan (Mali) led some French administrators and military officers to adopt a new and more open stance towards local religious practices even as they fought hard to limit conversion to Islam and to counteract Muslim reform. Meanwhile, although the founder of the movement advocated submission to local authorities, young men claiming to be his messengers attacked elders and sorcerers. The article suggests that the religious sphere in the Western Sudan was broader than historians have recognized, and that religious identities were particularly important in the troubled transition from subjects to citizens.

**KEY WORDS:** Islam, religion, colonial policy, Mali.

THE debate over the emergence of a French ‘Islamic policy’ in the first half of the twentieth century has proven crucial for historians’ understanding of the intersection of Muslim practice and colonial politics in French West Africa (AOF).<sup>1</sup> However, the development of an administrative policy towards non-Muslim – and non-Christian – practices remains to be assessed. This article argues that an innovative movement, known as Allah Koura, which emerged in central French Soudan (Mali) in the 1940s and 50s, compelled some French administrators and military officers to adopt a new and more open stance towards local practices – which they recognized as

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<sup>1</sup> The articles which set the framework of the debate are those of Donal Cruise O’Brien, ‘Towards an “Islamic policy” in French West Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 8 (1967), 303–16, and David Robinson, ‘French “Islamic policy” and practice in late nineteenth century Senegal’, *Journal of African History*, 29 (1988), 415–36. See also Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920* (Athens OH, 2000); Jean-Louis Triaud and Robinson (eds.), *Le temps des marabouts* (Paris, 1997); Christopher Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860–1960* (Cambridge, 1988); and Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington, 2001).

religious<sup>2</sup> – even as they fought hard to limit conversion to Islam and to counteract ‘foreign’ reformist tendencies in Muslim communities.

At a time of great political transition, key French policy-makers looked to a West African prophet for political salvation. By the mid-1950s, they were ‘fetishizing’ local religion by attributing inordinate power to a phenomenon of which they had little knowledge and less control.<sup>3</sup> Nothing so coherent as a policy emerged; rather, a set of compromises between opposing viewpoints evolved. Nevertheless, this ‘fetishization’ put the lie to the 1946 constitution of France’s Fourth Republic, in which colonial subjects were granted political rights equivalent to those of other members of the French Union. In the logic of fetishization, rural non-Muslims remained particular subjects, their political identities determined by religious practice. The almost talismanic emphasis on such practice underscored difference, much as the British pathologization of Mau Mau did on the other side of the continent.

Fetishization was not entirely novel; in fact, it had antecedents in the writings of such figures as François Clozel, Jules Brévié and Maurice Delafosse.<sup>4</sup> Yet newly aggressive religious politics, more sophisticated analyses and an even tighter link between ethnology, administrative policy and military surveillance mark the emergence of a new phenomenon. Anticolonial nationalism and reformist Islam – dubbed an ‘Islam de combat’ – sparked a palpable sense of urgency among certain French administrators.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the new fetishization rejected two older and intertwined articles of colonial faith: *Islam noir* – the idea that the Islam of ‘Black’ Africans was fundamentally distinct from that of their *bidan* and Arab coreligionists, and therefore immune to ‘foreign’ influence; and the *politique des races* – which held

<sup>2</sup> On the construction of religion in Africanist historiography, see Paul Landau, ‘“Religion” and Christian conversion in African history: a new model’, *Journal of Religious History*, 23 (1999), 8–30.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term ‘fetishization’ to play on the misleading and analytically vacuous term adopted by most colonial administrators, who considered local non-Muslim religious practices to be centered around objects which they took to be sacred. As I argue below, administrators and officers ‘attributed special power’ to Allah Koura, thereby fetishizing it in a different sense. See ‘Fetish’, in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Oxford, 2002), 163. Not all colonial administrator-ethnographers used the term ‘fetishism’. Maurice Delafosse preferred the term ‘animisme’, while Jules Brévié, following Durkheim, used ‘naturisme’; see Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (3 vols.) (Paris, 1912), and Brévié, *Islamisme contre ‘naturisme’ au Soudan Français* (Paris, 1923). The term ‘local religion’ serves as a short-hand for what are in fact rather porous regional repertoires; see Jean-Paul Colleyn, ‘Entre les dieux et les hommes’, *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, 144 (1996), 723–38; Patrick Royer, ‘Le Massa et l’eau de Moussa’, *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, 154 (1999), 337–66, esp. 339. I do not mean to imply that I accept Marcel Cardaire’s designation of them as ‘religions du terroir’, or of course that Islam and Christianity were not also ‘local’; Cardaire, *L’Islam et le terroir africain* (Bamako, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, and ‘L’animisme nègre et sa résistance à l’islamisation en Afrique Occidentale’, *Revue du Monde Musulman*, 49 (1922), 121–63; Brévié, *Islamisme*, esp. 257–60, which recapitulates his 1911 position, shared by Governor General Clozel. See also Harrison, *France*, 97–102, 146–50.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase ‘Islam de combat’ was used to characterize recent converts attracted to reformist or Wahhabi ideals; it appears in governor general/high commissioner, AOF (GGAOF) to minister of overseas France (MinFOM), #507 AP/3, 7-7-50, Archives Nationales (France), Section Outre-mer (ANSOM) 2256.

that each *ethnie* ('ethnicity') or *race* should be encouraged to evolve along its own independent path towards civilization. It was increasingly apparent that both these ideas were based on false premises. Intellectual currents emanating from Egypt and the Hijaz sparked intense interest and debate among some West African Muslims. Meanwhile, although Brévié had written confidently of the "'religious impermeability" of the races [i.e. ethnicities]"<sup>6</sup> that fiction had to be discarded in the face of Allah Koura, which was very widely adopted and adapted.

Analysis of this new fetishization forces a reassessment of the nature of late colonial rule and of the intersection of religion and politics under the Fourth Republic, which reconfigured political membership throughout the French empire by making subjects into citizens.<sup>7</sup> Following the new logic of fetishization, rural West Africans were to remain particular subjects, subordinate to religious and political authorities distinct from the state. In contrast, their urban counterparts witnessed significant moves towards political integration.<sup>8</sup>

Building on the work of Robert Launay and Benjamin Soares, who hypothesize the emergence of an 'Islamic sphere' in AOF,<sup>9</sup> I argue for the study of a broader religious sphere in twentieth-century Western Sudan than historical scholarship to date has recognized or come to terms with. In a context in which, as Louis Brenner wrote, 'religious experts did not necessarily conceptualize their own knowledge as being contained within bounded cultural or religious systems',<sup>10</sup> it makes little sense for historians to rely on such categories themselves. A study of Allah Koura refocuses attention from disputes (and even riots) over Muslim prayer practices; these were urban affairs, and they obscure other important social tensions of the period, particularly those most manifest in rural areas.<sup>11</sup> It also suggests that the

<sup>6</sup> Brévié, *Islamisme*, 262.

<sup>7</sup> Scholars very nearly contemporary with the Allah Koura took links between nationalist activity (then considered to be the sum of politics) and religious innovation seriously, before the rejection of such a link by a later generation of African leaders and Africanist historians, both of whom tended to see modernity as both desirable and, at least in the 1960s and 70s, secular; Georges Balandier, 'Messianismes et nationalismes en Afrique Noire', *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, 14 (1953), 41–65; Thomas Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa* (New York, 1957), ch. 3. See also T. O. Ranger, 'Connexions between "primary resistance" movements and modern mass nationalism in East and Central Africa', *Journal of African History*, 9 (1968), 437–53, 631–41.

<sup>8</sup> The categories 'rural' and 'urban' were of course much more permeable in practice than in theory.

<sup>9</sup> Launay and Soares consider this sphere to be 'conceptually separate' from both the colonial and post-colonial states, as well as from such "'particular" affiliations' as ethnicity, 'caste' or slave status; Robert Launay and Benjamin F. Soares, 'The formation of an "Islamic sphere" in French colonial West Africa', *Economy and Society*, 28 (1999), 497.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Brenner, 'Histories of religion in Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 30 (2000), 163. It is important to recognize that some experts did see their own knowledge in precisely that fashion; they are not, however, the subject of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> On the riots, see, among others, M. Chailley, 'Aspects de l'islam au Mali', in *Notes et études sur l'islam en Afrique Noire* (Paris, 1962); Lansiné Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa* (Evanston, 1974); Jean-Loup Amselle, 'Le Wahabisme à Bamako (1945–85)', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 19 (1985), 345–57; Gregory Mann, 'Old soldiers, young men: masculinity, Islam, and military veterans in late 1950s Soudan Français (Mali)', in Lisa Lindsay and Stephan Miescher (eds.),

dominant narrative of 'Islamization' needs to be reconsidered, not only as contested – that much is obvious – but as part of a political game, intensely played, which brought about a generative friction between the most macro of processes, like legal changes in the French Union, and regional, rural movements and ideas.

#### ALLAH KOURA

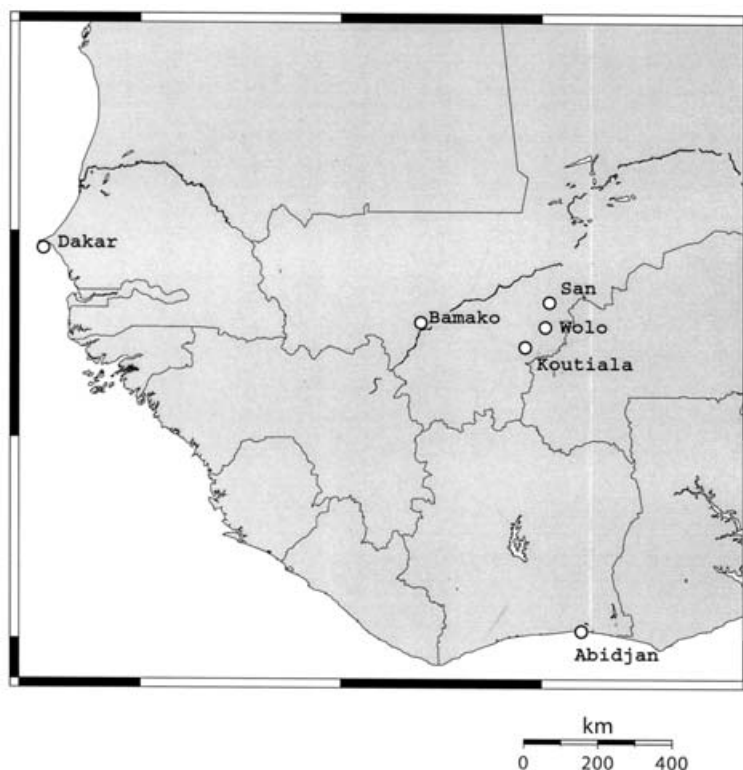
What was this innovative movement that reveals so much? Although nothing that came before it was true 'fetishism', wrote Marcel Cardaire, 'it really is fetishism this time'.<sup>12</sup> Based in the administrative district, or *cercle*, of San, the movement or its originator was known in local parlance as, variously, 'Allah Koura', 'Allah Den', 'Allah Filana', or 'Massa'. Administrators sometimes referred to it as 'the religion of San' or 'the religion of the man from Wolo', and to its founder M'Pe Dembele as 'the Man of God' or even 'the god of San'. Those who propagated or drew upon Dembele's message, with or without his consent, were branded 'the messengers of God'.<sup>13</sup>

It all began with a vision in a field in 1946 and quickly won the attention of hundreds – and eventually thousands – of West Africans and a few dozen European observers. By the late 1950s, the movement, its innovations and the ritual power objects at its core had been either discarded or domesticated by villagers in southern Soudan, Haute Volta (Burkina Faso) and Côte d'Ivoire. In the dry seasons of the 1950s, thousands of people came to consult Dembele, to hear his message or to obtain a horn, filled among other things with a bit of dirt and a sliver of wood, with which they could install Allah Koura in their villages. Some of these visitors were pilgrims, and many came

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*Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa* (Portsmouth NH, forthcoming); on earlier disputes, see Brenner, *Controlling*, ch. 2. <sup>12</sup> Cardaire, *Terroir*, 28–9.

<sup>13</sup> 'Allah Koura', 'Allah Den' and 'Allah Filana' translate as 'New Allah', 'Child of Allah', 'Second Allah', respectively. Drawing on Jean Bazin, Royer argues that the term 'Massa', could be understood to mean 'Dieu' ('Le Massa', 342). In this instance, I disagree. Around San the term is applied to Dembele himself. As Royer notes, 'massa' refers to a 'chef rituel ou roi sacré'. It may also refer to an elder male of the family first settled in a given village, who held spiritual and ritual responsibility for it, as opposed to the 'newcomers', who very often hold political power. From this line of interpretation, the term 'massa' would refer to Dembele's insistence on the recognition and restoration of ritual powers based on autochthony. Even this explanation may be overly elaborate; Dembele's contemporaries offer a simpler but parallel explanation: 'If Allah gave you peace and a reputation (lit., a name), you became *massa*' (*Ni Alla ye here a ni toko d'i ma, i kera massa ye*). Note that here 'massa' is a title applied to Dembele, and not to the 'power objects' he produced; interview, Kafa Dembele (village chief), N'to Dembele (M'Pe's younger brother), *et al.*, Wolo-(Negedugu), 17 Aug. 1999 (hereafter, interview, Wolo). For an interpretation closer to Royer's, see Youssouf Tata Cissé and Wa Kamissoko, *La grande geste du Mali* (Paris, 1988), 315; note that Kamissoko is referring to the Manden, far to the west. Closer to home, or at least to Wolo, the political leader of the venerable polity of Dâ, immediately north of Wolo, was known as *massa* or *mansa* as well; Mader, *Rapport du Tournée*, canton de Dâ, 3–6, 9–13 and 24–7 July 1947, Archives Nationales du Mali (ANM) IE38FR; see also Sadia Traoré, 'Notes sur le Dâdougou', *Notes Africaines*, 126 (1970), 33–42.



Map 1. The French Soudan within West Africa.

in delegations of men sent by their villages to bring home one of the power objects (horns). Others sought protection against sorcerers (*Bamanankan: subagaw*), and some turned out to be charlatans or troublemakers.

Responses to Dembele's message and uses of the power objects associated with it were not passive, but innovative. Indeed, only in the loosest sense can the phenomenon be described as a 'movement', and I use the term for what it implies about momentum rather than about structure. Those who came to Wolo returned home – or to other villages – with widely divergent ideas. Some displayed renewed reverence for the practices of their elders, while others set out to destroy their altars and ritual objects. Allah Koura was open to many kinds of interpretation; that was its genius. It could seduce both rural migrants and colonial military officers, and everyone could see in it what they wished.<sup>14</sup> Taken on its own terms, Allah Koura reveals major tensions within the rural societies of southern Mali and beyond. It also illustrates the dynamism and innovation characteristic of regional religious repertoires, and the often ignored intensity of rural intellectual production.

<sup>14</sup> Cardaire was frustrated by Dembele's 'absolute inability to solidly establish a doctrine': *Terroir*, 40. See also B. Holas, 'Fondements spirituels de la vie sociale Sénoufo', *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 26 (1956), 28.

After all, Dembele presented himself as a messenger, and the ideas and practices he put forward were adopted or discarded, often after fierce and even violent debate.

#### TWO VISIONARIES

Our story has two key actors, men who had little in common. The first is M'Pe Dembele, a young Minianka man, fourth son of a large family, renowned healer and adept of the regional Nya religion. Dembele was the core of the Allah Koura movement – in the beginning, he was 'Massa'.<sup>15</sup> Transmitted to him in a revelation by a spirit in the form of a tiny Minianka-speaking man,<sup>16</sup> Dembele's message seems to have been fairly simple. People were to respect tradition and the ways of the ancestors. Women should not run away from their husbands, and the authority of both patriarchs and chiefs was to be respected. 'Bamanaw' should neither cultivate nor collect on Mondays and Fridays; these were days for *numuw* (Bamanankan: blacksmiths or potters) to collect.<sup>17</sup> Most importantly for the diffusion of the message, sacrifices should be made in relation to new power objects – horns filled with a powdery paste – which Dembele would bless; the result would be rain and greater female fertility. A house should be built to shelter the power object; the house would have three doors, each oriented towards one of the cardinal directions.<sup>18</sup>

News of Dembele's message, his ability to heal others and the new power objects he offered spread quickly and far. The tiny Minianka-speaking man was not the last of Dembele's visitors; he continued to have conversations with 'angels' or spirits (Bamanankan: *Alla ka mogow*) for some time.<sup>19</sup> In the early 1950s, pilgrims, administrators and ethnographers came to him from as far away as Côte d'Ivoire, Haute Volta, Niger and Guinea, until the

<sup>15</sup> M'Pe Dembele is variously recognized as M'Peni and as Mpieni Mazanga; see Soudan, *Revue trimestrielle*, 2e trim., 1950, 21 July 1950, #332 APAS, Archives Nationales du Sénégal (ANS) 15G56v144. M'Peni is simply a diminutive; Mazanga was M'Pe's older brother. See interview, Wolo, and 'Note de synthèse sur le "Culte de San"' (hereafter 'Note de synthèse'), found in Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (Vincennes, France; SHAT) 10T191 and in San *cercle* archives. This unsigned, undated document quotes Cardaire extensively. It may be the product of an inquiry conducted by Lieutenant Bretaudeau, one of Cardaire's subordinates at the Bureau of Muslim Affairs, in 1951. Bretaudeau's mission is mentioned in E. Louveau, *Gouverneur Soudan Français (GSF)*, *Revue trimestrielle*, 1er trim. 1951, 29 May 1951, #265 APAS, confidential, ANS 15G56v144, and in GSF to commandant *de cercle* (CdC) San, *et al.*, 11 May 1951, #142/APAS, San *cercle* archives.

<sup>16</sup> Cardaire, *Terroir*, 37–8.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Wolo. Here 'Bamana' does not refer to ethnicity, but to those who were not Muslims.

<sup>18</sup> Information on which direction was excluded varies. Consistent, however, in all outside interpretations is the idea that the house should be rectangular, that only one wall should be without a door, that the walls of the house should be aligned with the cardinal directions, and that this was somehow important.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Wolo. 'Angels' may be an adventuresome translation; it was offered by Gomba Coulibaly, my assistant, who is Christian. The point is that neither 'jinè' nor 'mèlèke' (Bamanankan: angel) was used.

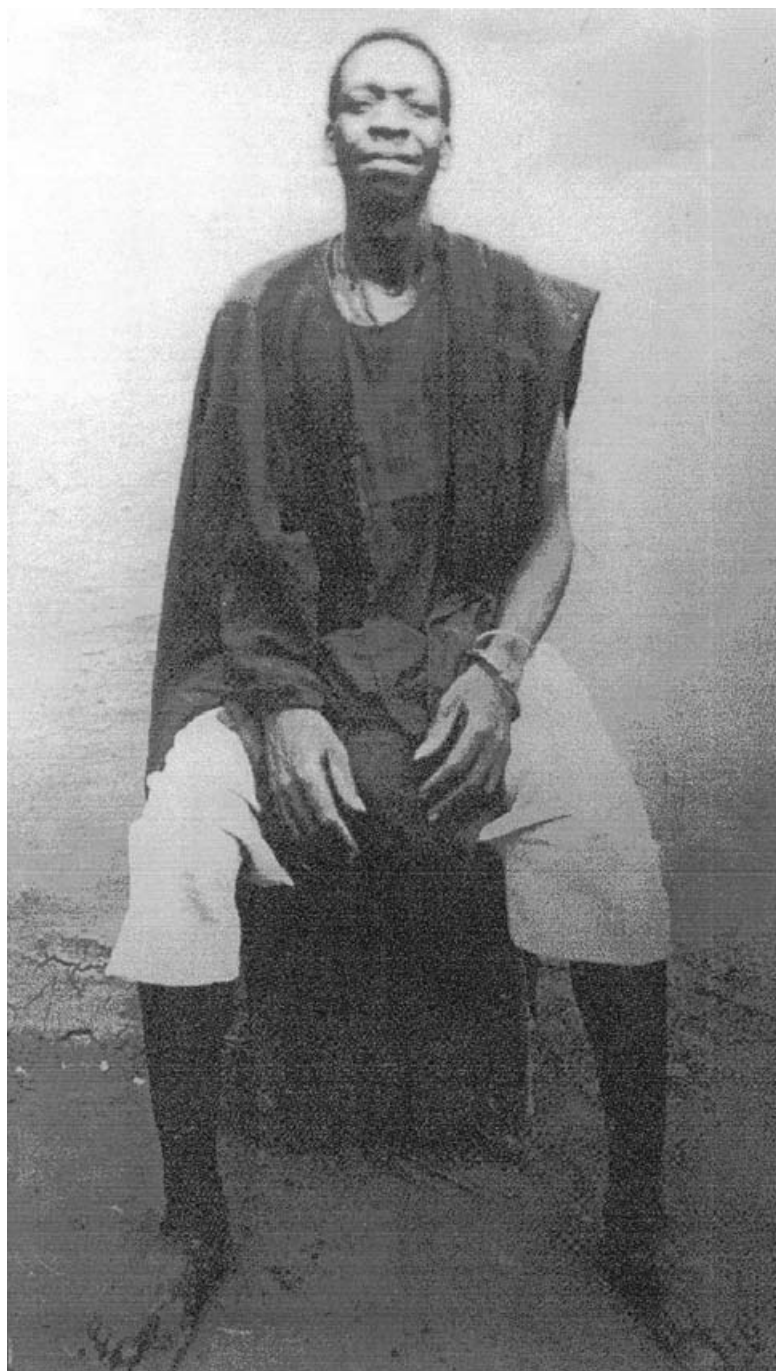


Fig. 1. M'Pe Dembele's portrait, taken at the request of Commandant Gervais; *San cercle* archives.

movement he had started took on a life of its own, independent of his ideas and even his wishes.<sup>20</sup>

Dembele remains a somewhat mysterious figure, as does a second key actor, Captain (later Commandant) Marcel Cardaire. Cardaire was a colonial military officer, intelligence agent and ethnographer.<sup>21</sup> Detached to the civilian administration, he served as the director of the Soudan's Bureau of Muslim Affairs, based in Bamako. There Amadou Hampâté Bâ was one of his subalterns and later a coconspirator in his efforts to block the spread of Muslim reformist movements.<sup>22</sup> Through the Bureau, Cardaire maintained surveillance on West African Muslims' international connections, and he supervised the state-sponsored *hajj* for several years, accompanying pilgrims to the *hijaz* and traveling himself to Egypt. His intellectual predecessors, Xavier Coppolani and Paul Marty, began their careers in North Africa and built their reputations on their work in the Maghreb, Senegal and Mauritania. Cardaire on the other hand made his mark in Soudan, and to a lesser extent in Guinea, Niger and Cameroon. His *Islam et le terroir africain* may be the most important statement of postwar French Islamic policy in sub-Saharan Africa, even as he argued that that policy was fundamentally flawed. He complained bitterly that Senegal and Mauritania tended to determine the administration's view of Islam in AOF, and that too much attention was paid to cultivating relationships with a select number of aging 'marabouts'. Worse, French policy and practice exaggerated the role of the Sufi *turuq* and underemphasized the growth of Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism, which he perceived as an immediate threat in French Africa. In 1956, with a dramatic complaint that he was tired of having to 'go it alone' ('faire cavalier seul'), Cardaire asked to be transferred from Soudan.<sup>23</sup> Most of our written sources on the Allah Koura movement were generated by Cardaire and his colleagues.<sup>24</sup>

#### OTHER VISIONS

Despite the dramatic initial success of the Allah Koura movement – measured in terms of pilgrims and acolytes – it has garnered little scholarly

<sup>20</sup> As Dembele's contemporaries make clear, there was a large disjunction between his agenda and those of his purported acolytes; interview, Wolo. See below.

<sup>21</sup> Cardaire was elected to the prestigious *Société des Africanistes* in 1951, having been co-sponsored by none other than Marcel Griaule. He was also 'diplômé de l'Institut d'ethnologie de l'Université de Paris et du CHEAM' (Centre des Hautes Etudes d'Administration Musulmane) by 1955, if not before; see *Repertoire de l'ethnologie française, 1950–70* (2 vols.) (Paris, 1990), and 'Note de synthèse'. On Cardaire see also Jean-Louis Triaud, 'Le Crépuscule des "Affaires musulmanes" en AOF (1950–56)', in Triaud and Robinson (eds.), *Le temps des marabouts*; and Brenner, *Controlling*, esp. 157–62.

<sup>22</sup> See Brenner, *Controlling*, and 'Amadou Hampâté Bâ: Tijânî francophone', in Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson (eds.), *La Tijâniyya* (Paris, 2000). Cf. Bintou Sanankoua, 'Amadou Hampâté Bâ', in Triaud and Robinson (eds.), *Le temps des marabouts*.

<sup>23</sup> He wrote: 'l'AOF n'est pas Dakar – quand comprendra t-on cela? L'Islam AOF n'est pas Abdullah ould Ch[eikh] Sidiya ou Seydou Nourou Tall'. Handwritten letter from Cardaire to 'Mon Cher Ami', 25/6(?) Apr. 1956; ANSOM 2258. Also cited by Triaud, 'Crépuscule', 504, 517. <sup>24</sup> See in particular the 'Note de synthèse'.



attention, and has never been set in its larger political context.<sup>25</sup> Early scholarship on Allah Koura invariably saw it as the manifestation of a crisis brought on as ‘old [religious and social] systems ... crumbled at contact with modern life’;<sup>26</sup> a corollary of this argument held that the movement filled a ‘spiritual void’ generated by the same forces.<sup>27</sup> I argue that rather than filling a void, Allah Koura appeared in an extremely active spiritual marketplace.<sup>28</sup> West Africa witnessed prophets and visionaries aplenty in the 1940s and 50s. Mariam Koumassi, an itinerant woman from the Gold Coast, wandered Côte d’Ivoire with a pilgrim’s baton and a Qur’an, the text of which she claimed to have learned in a revelation.<sup>29</sup> Outside Nioro du Sahel, an illiterate man had also ‘received’ a Qur’an and begun to read it.<sup>30</sup> Closer to home, a movement (*culte de possession*) known as *diourou* (Bamanankan: cord or rope), which punished sorcerers, spread quickly in Dogon communities east of San. According to an administrative inspector, the seed of the *diourou* movement was a ‘fetish’ purchased by a migrant in Koutiala.<sup>31</sup> Another version held that it had been brought from Macina by workers returning from forced labor brigades (the *deuxième portion*).<sup>32</sup> In either case, the connection with labor migration is stark. In the San region, Dembele had an important ‘colleague’

<sup>25</sup> Recent work on aspects of the movement include Royer, ‘Le Massa’, and Gabriel Massa, ‘Le “fétiche” de San en Haute-Volta, 1950–1952’, in *Burkina Faso: cent ans d’histoire, 1895–1995* (Paris and Ouagadougou, 1996). In 1959, Massa wrote a CHEAM *mémoire* on the same topic under the title ‘Le “fétiche” de San en Haute-Volta’. The 1996 version repeats its predecessor to a great degree. See also Cardaire, *Terroir*, ch. 2; J. C. Froelich, *Animismes: les religions païennes de l’Afrique de l’Ouest* (Paris, 1964); B. Holas, *Le séparatisme religieux en Afrique noire* (Paris, 1965); and J. M. Ballevre, ‘Le maraboutisme en Haute-Volta, Hamallisme et religion de San’ (thesis, Ecole Nationale de la France d’Outre-mer, Paris, 1951–2).

<sup>26</sup> Cardaire, *Terroir*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> For the ‘void’ thesis, see Cardaire, *Terroir*, ch. 1; Holas, *Séparatisme*, infra; Froelich, *Animismes*, 13. An early version appears in Paul Marty, *Etudes sur l’Islam, et les tribus du Soudan* (Paris, 1920). It is important to note the fertile intersection of ‘administrative knowledge’, produced by civilians and military officers for internal consumption, and ‘ethnographic knowledge’, produced by both professional ethnographers and some of the same military officers, for a broader public. Analytic concepts fed back and forth between the two; see for example, Holas’s use of a ‘zone’ discourse for Côte d’Ivoire; *Séparatisme*, 370ff. Such practice was of course almost a century old in the Maghreb and only somewhat more recent in Senegal and Mauritania; Harrison, *France*; Robinson, *Paths*. The ‘zone’ discourse is discussed below.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Cardaire, *Terroir*; Denise Paulme, ‘Naissance d’un culte africain’, *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines*, 149 (1998), 5–16; and Andrew Apter, ‘Atinga revisited: Yoruba witchcraft and the cocoa economy, 1950–51’, in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents* (Chicago, 1993), 111–28; as well as a large amount of French ethnographic work from the period, some of which is cited herein.

<sup>29</sup> Affaires politiques musulmanes (AOF), Rapport trimestriel, 1er trim. 1948, n.d., secret; ANSOM 2259.

<sup>30</sup> Soudan, Revue trimestrielle, 1er trim. 1951, 29 May 1951, #265 APAS, confidential; ANS 15G56v144.

<sup>31</sup> Inspector of Administrative Affairs Ortol, Rapport d’Inspection Générale, 16 Sept. 1950, #49 AA1, ANM 2D6FR. Eric Jolly suggests that the *diourou* might date from the colonial conquest, but offers no evidence for this. He notes that a very closely related movement, the *ina*, spread quickly along the Bandiagara plateau in 1950–1; Eric Jolly, ‘Diffusion de trois cultes dans le sud du pays Dogon’, *Journal des Africanistes*, 64 (1994), 9–10.

<sup>32</sup> San, Rapport du Tournée de recensement, 10–28 Jan. 1945, ANM IE38FR.

in the village of Tana, on the other side of the *cercle*, and another in Adamabougou.<sup>33</sup> Other men in the region also claimed to receive important visions, often linked to world politics and the Cold War, but none attained a stature approaching Dembele's.<sup>34</sup>

While Allah Koura has recently drawn the attention of other scholars, they have studied its ramifications outside its area of origin, where it was interpreted quite differently by both local practitioners and colonial agents.<sup>35</sup> This has led some students of the movement to overemphasize the opposition the administration offered to it. I argue, by contrast, that at least around San, such hostility was sporadic and short-lived. While repression of Allah Koura, or more precisely the messengers, could be intense, it was not the whole story. In some areas the movement benefited from the support of the colonial administration and the tacit acquiescence of the *dugutigiw* (village chiefs) and *jamanatigiw* (canton chiefs). Elsewhere, sources of opposition varied – in Haute Volta missionaries and catechists were the vanguard, while around Koutiala military veterans sought to counteract 'false gods'.<sup>36</sup> Almost everywhere, Allah Koura made commandants nervous.<sup>37</sup> However, upper-level administrators, informed by Cardaire, looked favorably on the movement (their motives will be explored below).<sup>38</sup> In San itself, Dembele was not seen as a threat, and while the commandants *de cercle* who rotated in and out of San during the period of his ascendancy were not always sure what to make of him, a working relationship tended to emerge rather quickly.<sup>39</sup> For instance, in 1954 the commandant of San declined Dembele's invitation to attend a ceremony in Wolo, but he also defended him in a letter to an

<sup>33</sup> The man from Tana, Sibiri Coulibaly, is remembered primarily as a healer, but he also had a particular power object and had received messages from 'angels'; interview, Tana, 18 Aug. 1999 (hereafter interview, Tana), and 'Déclaration de Sibiri Coulibaly (l'homme de Tana)', 1950, San *cercle* archives. As for Dembele, the relationship between his healing abilities and his vision is not entirely clear, since he was a well-known healer before the vision occurred. The prominent role accorded to healing in local memory of these figures moderates Colleyn's critique of analyses devoted to healing; Colleyn, 'Entre les dieux et les hommes'.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, letters from Oumar Traore, self-proclaimed 'resident general of God on earth, Government of Sion' to the French government, the United Nations and others, 1957; San *cercle* archives.

<sup>35</sup> Massa, 'Le "fétiche"' (1959, 1996), and Royer, 'Le Massa'.

<sup>36</sup> There was much missionary opposition in Haute Volta; see Massa, 'Le "fétiche"' (1996), and Royer, 'Le Massa'. However, for the Côte d'Ivoire, see Michel Convers, 'L'aventure de massa en pays senoufo', *Primitifs*, 6 (1991), 24–34. On veterans' involvement around Koutiala, see CdC Robard, *Revue des événements (Koutiala)*, 1951, n.d., ANM IE23FR.

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Chef de Subdivision, Macina to CdC Ségou, 7 Mar. 1951, #9/c, and CdC Bamako, *Revue des événements*, 3e trim., 1950, forwarded to CdC San, 2 Nov. 1950, San *cercle* archives.

<sup>38</sup> Chambon, Direction Général de l'Interieur (AOF) to governor, Haute Volta (GHV), 24 May 1951, #490 AP/2, forwarded to MinFOM, 30 May 1951, #845 Cab/Sc, SHAT 10T191.

<sup>39</sup> This is in sharp contrast with the reception of the *diourou* in San. In 1945, after a tour of inspection in Bobo-Oulé villages, the commandant seized all the *diourou* he could find and burned them publicly, in the courtyard of the *cercle*; Rapport du Tournée de recensement, 10–28 Jan. 1945, ANM IE38FR.

administrator in Sikasso, writing ‘The man of Wolo has confirmed ... that he lives in peace, which is correct (*ce qui est exact*)’.<sup>40</sup>

#### THE ‘MESSENGERS’

‘Up to this point, nothing reprehensible – to the contrary’, wrote M. Ortoli, Soudan’s inspector of administrative affairs, in 1950. ‘[But next] would come a certain number of new Gods, more or less sanctioned by the man from Wolo ... and [they] would deform the original idea’.<sup>41</sup> From its solitary seed in a vision in 1946, Dembele’s movement got away from him, as ‘a flowering of junior prophets (*sous-prophètes*) who call themselves “Messengers of God”’ spread a version of his message far and wide.<sup>42</sup> In 1959, Gabriel Massa claimed that, ‘If in principle these movements are independent, a sort of hierarchy has nevertheless spontaneously organized itself’.<sup>43</sup> Evidence of such a ‘hierarchy’ of prophets is scarce, at least in the San region, where the movement seems on the contrary to have been rather diffuse. However, networks, or even lineages, of power objects do exist in the region.<sup>44</sup> While Dembele’s message was fairly clear, many young men who came from afar to carry a version of the horn back to their communities used his prestige to wage their own battles against sorcerers, most of whom were women or older men. It was these ‘messengers’, many of whom were strangers to Dembele, who eventually gave the movement its negative reputation. The administration and local authorities directed their animus at them, particularly in Haute Volta, where colonial administrators, elected deputies and the Moro Naba, the powerful and widely recognized Mossi leader, strongly opposed the introduction of the messengers and of Allah Koura.<sup>45</sup>

In the dry season of 1951, when the proliferation of messengers seemed to reach its peak, a colonial administrator based in Dakar felt confident he could discern ‘Two points of the program indicated by the God of San [which] are applied with varying degrees of vigor, according to the region: sometimes the accent is on the struggle against sorcerers, sometimes propaganda against Islam is more intense’.<sup>46</sup> This analysis differs from Cardaire’s in that it sees the movement as necessarily oppositional. Cardaire, on the other hand, thought that Allah Koura faced insurmountable obstacles to the north (‘au delà de la Bani’), but was spreading with some success south of San *cercle*.<sup>47</sup> While confrontations around Allah Koura occurred in both regions, often sparked by the messengers, they were not inherent to Dembele’s vision.

<sup>40</sup> CdC San to CdC Sikasso, 8 Jan. 1954, #10/cf., San *cercle* archives.

<sup>41</sup> Ortoli, Inspection Générale du cercle de Koutiala, 10 Nov. 1950, #82/AA1, ANM 2D27FR.

<sup>42</sup> Chambon to GHV, 24 May 1951, #490 AP/2, SHAT 10T191.

<sup>43</sup> Massa, ‘Le “fétiche”’ (1959); Chambon, Direction Générale de l’Intérieur (AOF) to GHV, 24 May 1951, #490 AP/2, forwarded to MinFOM, 30 May 1951, #845 Cab/Sc, SHAT 10T191.

<sup>44</sup> Jean Bazin, ‘Retour aux choses-dieux’, *Le temps de la réflexion: corps des dieux*, 7 (1986), 253–73; Jean-Paul Colleyn, ‘The Kōnò’, in Jean-Paul Colleyn (ed.), *Bamana: The Art of Existence in Mali* (Zurich, 2001), 185–91.

<sup>45</sup> Royer, ‘Le Massa’, and Massa, ‘Le “fétiche”’ (1996), 884–7. The Moro Naba’s opposition is reported in ‘Note de synthèse’.

<sup>46</sup> Chambon to GHV, 24 May 1951, #490 AP/2, SHAT 10T191.

<sup>47</sup> Cardaire, *Terroir*, 43; see also ‘Note de synthèse’.

The messengers, or some of them, were opposed to *subagaya* (Bama-nankan: sorcery), but others were reported to oppose either Islam or local religions more broadly, and to seek to replace the Nya and other practices, ritual societies or power objects with Allah Koura.<sup>48</sup> Dembele himself would have none of it. As both Cardaire's and Dembele's surviving relatives make clear, he was a Nya adept, and he assisted in the sacrifices and possession rituals held in Wolo.<sup>49</sup> What then was the originality of Dembele? Allah Koura was different from Nya in several respects. Most importantly, Nya was (and is) based on spirit possession and on the cultivation or manipulation of power objects.<sup>50</sup> Such objects were also important elements of Allah Koura, and horns of the animals that pilgrims brought to Wolo to be slaughtered were packed with earth, blood and splinters of the tree from which the 'little man' had first emerged. However, Allah Koura was not based on possession, and Dembele was never possessed. Rather, a spirit figure – or later, a group of angels<sup>51</sup> – transmitted a message to him, and he passed it on to others. With its focus on revelation – and indeed any kind of message – Allah Koura was similar to other important religious systems active in the region, namely Islam and Christianity.<sup>52</sup>

#### REGIONAL AND TEMPORAL CONTEXT

The variety of Dembele's influences comes as no surprise, since the region in which Allah Koura began was doubly 'marginal'. Not only did it lie between zones which had been designated as 'Muslim', 'Animist' or 'Christian' by the colonial state, it also straddled a locally recognized Bamana/Minianka/Maraka frontier. Moreover, it lay on the edge of administrative vision. The southern part of the *cercle* of San was frequently ignored by local administrators preoccupied with maintaining surveillance over the productive agricultural zones, the urban area and missionary and administrative subcenters.

Allah Koura arose in the midst of very troubled times. The political reforms of the Fourth Republic and their local effects are key to understanding the origin and the spread of the movement. In administrative records, the dominant political issues of the postwar years were the reintegration of military veterans, the embattled status of the canton chiefs and the emergence of two competing political parties, the US-RDA, which presented itself locally as the anticolonial 'poor people's party', and the PSP, which was supported by the administration and was, put crudely, *pro-chef de canton*. These issues were certainly important, but they must be analyzed in light of two other arenas of contest: migration and marriage.

In 1946, the end of forced labor, prestations and the *indigénat* (code of administrative punishments) made possible increased labor migration from Soudan and Haute Volta. In the early 1950s, wages in Côte d'Ivoire

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Gabriel Clamens, 'Les nyi-kar-yi de Watyene', *Notes Africaines*, 60 (1953), 108–10; and Convers, 'L'aventure'<sup>49</sup> Cardaire, *Terroir*, 37; interview, Wolo.

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Paul Colleyn, *Les chemins de Nya* (Paris, 1988). On the use of such objects around Segou, and their meaning more broadly, see in particular Bazin, 'Retour'.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, Wolo.

<sup>52</sup> Other possible points of comparison include vocabulary, architectural styles, modes of presentation and an emphasis on the orientation of sites of ritual practice.

increased substantially, making migration even more attractive.<sup>53</sup> More mobile and independent *vis-à-vis* both their elders and the colonial administration, young men left the villages of San and neighboring *cercles* for the cocoa fields of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, or for urban opportunities in San, Bamako or elsewhere.

Dembele himself never migrated – and apparently only left Wolo in the company of an entourage<sup>54</sup> – yet rural migration was crucial to both the content of Dembele's message and the method of its diffusion. Migrants spread rumors about Dembele's visions, about the power objects or about both the objects and the message of Allah Koura. In some areas, the horns may have been used to settle local disputes occasioned by the growing inequality and autonomy generated by labor migration.<sup>55</sup> Just as labor migrants generally did, Allah Koura spread south from San, and the movement had a major impact in eastern Haute Volta and northern Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>56</sup> As the anonymous author of the 'Note de synthèse' pointed out, these were precisely the regions in which conversion of migrant laborers to Islam was a concern for the administration.<sup>57</sup>

As a result of the intersection of legal changes and local processes, conflicts over marriage also marked the 1940s and 50s. Two often overlooked French laws had a significant effect in postwar francophone Africa, and their influence on the Allah Koura is a case in point. Unlike their elders, but along with other women from all over the region, young women in Wolo in the 1940s and 50s gained first the legal power to reject arranged marriages, and later the right to marry as they chose, without regard for bridewealth.<sup>58</sup> What's more, many women in rural areas knew of the new legal context of marriage. Combined with the phenomenon of accelerating migration, the new situation meant that the power of elders was weakened. This is a familiar story. In this case, it made the conservative message of Allah Koura more appealing to many, whether as a means of protecting elders' power or of settling witchcraft accusations.

Along with a spate of prophecies, which earned Dembele both competitors and 'colleagues', the postwar years saw a burst of accusations of *subagaya*.<sup>59</sup> An increase in *subagaya* and retaliatory attacks against those accused of

<sup>53</sup> Dennis D. Cordell *et al.*, *Hoe and Wage: A Social History of a Circular Migration System in West Africa* (Boulder, 1996), 74–5. See also, e.g., Soudan Français, Rapport politique 1951, ANS 2G51-34.

<sup>54</sup> Interview, Wolo, and Cardaire, quoted in 'Note de synthèse'. However, see also CdC Antoine Guintini, Rapport trimestriel, 4e trim., 3 Dec. 1953, ANM IE38FR.

<sup>55</sup> In fact, in the wake of the abolition of the *indigénat*, Louveau thought that the cost in money and time of pursuing criminal cases under metropolitan law had increased the popularity of local practices of regulating disputes, and thereby of local religious practices as well. See GSF, Rapport politique annuel (Soudan), 1949, 1 June 1950, ANS 2G49/33.

<sup>56</sup> Allah Koura's later development west of the Bani and north of the Niger – notably at the Office du Niger – remain to be explored, as do its ramifications in southwest Mali.

<sup>57</sup> 'Note de synthèse'.

<sup>58</sup> These laws were known as the Decret Mandel and the Decret Jacquinot, respectively. Their impact on urban Muslims in San is considered in Mann, 'Old soldiers, young men' (forthcoming).

<sup>59</sup> See interview, Tana, and, e.g., CdC Koutiala, J. Quatorze, Rapport de tournée, cantons est (Ménamba, Yorosso, Mahou, Karangana), 19 Aug. 1950, ANM IE23FR, and, further afield, Bougouni reports from 1947–8, ANM IE10FR.

practicing it were seen as fundamentally connected to Allah Koura. However, it is not entirely evident from the existing administrative records that these events were related causally, or indeed that they were related at all. The dominant themes of Dembele's message were peace, tolerance and respect for authority.<sup>60</sup> However, it is important to distinguish between the message and 'the messengers'. Outside of Wolo, an increase in *subagaya* sparked a wave of repression, and in the hands of the messengers, Allah Koura may have provided a means of defense – or a line of attack – against both *subagaw* and the gerontocracy.<sup>61</sup>

Alongside the issues of marriage, migration and *subagaya*, the wavering authority of the canton chiefs characterized the late 1940s; this issue, however, was felt acutely both in the villages and in the offices of the *cercle*. The overriding concern of administrators across the French Soudan in the immediate postwar years was how to re-establish some of the authority of these chiefs, who had lost their most important powers of coercion with the suppression of the *indigénat*.<sup>62</sup> In Dielizangasso, the canton which included Wolo, the chief had been 'overwhelmed by the political changes of 1946–47', and by 1950 he was considered 'a worthless chief'.<sup>63</sup> All the better, then, that Dembele advocated submission to political authority. Indeed, this aspect of his message echoed a palaver the commandant had delivered in Dielizangasso the year of Dembele's first vision; in it the administrator attempted to explain the ramifications of the transition from subjects to citizens and the local meaning of the Fourth Republic.<sup>64</sup> Once again Dembele was just the man the administration needed, even if 'messengers' claiming his authority – or that of the power object – took an opposite line elsewhere in the colony.

In distinguishing the message from the messengers – and the phenomenon of Allah Koura from Dembele himself – it bears repeating that Dembele is an exception to almost every generalization invoked above. He never migrated; nor apparently, did his siblings. He never practiced *subagaya* or accused others; rather, he sought to defuse the kind of social tension which emerged in witchcraft accusations. Finally, although he married many times, his own junior wife – his sixth – left him, in 1957. He could not get her to come back, leading a wry administrator to comment that 'the Fetish seems to be on the wane'.<sup>65</sup> To this point, I have argued that Dembele was the generator of a movement which he never directed or led. Ultimately the appeal of Dembele, and the 'success' or 'failure' of the Allah Koura – to the extent that such a thing can be measured – was less important than the fact of its gradual

<sup>60</sup> Interview, Wolo.

<sup>61</sup> Massa reports that people sought counsel with Dembele in order to exonerate themselves of witchcraft accusations; 'Le "fétiche"' (1996), 888.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Ortolí, 'Inspection Générale du Cercle de San', 21 July 1950, #44 AA1, ANM 2D39FR.

<sup>63</sup> Zangano Dembele dossier, among 'Fiches de renseignements des Chefs de canton de San, 1908–1958', ANM 2E49FR.

<sup>64</sup> Rapport du Tournée, 21 Oct. 1946, ANM IE38FR.

<sup>65</sup> CdC DuChamp, Bulletin politique mensuel, Mar.–Apr., 25 Apr. 1957, ANM IE38FR. Here it may be interesting to note that Dembele had nine wives, according to his peers in Wolo, but that he had only four children – all of them daughters – who lived past infancy. Only three reached adulthood; interview, Wolo.

domestication in rural communities of southern Mali, Haute Volta and Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>66</sup>

#### POLICY

It is possible to imagine broadly the appeal of Allah Koura to rural West Africans; people sought Dembele and his horns believing in their power to heal physical and social maladies, to ensure fertility and to protect them from *subagaya*. Colonial fetishization of Allah Koura requires more explanation, as it represents a powerful desire apparently unaccompanied by belief. However, secular as they may have been, Cardaire and his colleagues did believe that they had found a 'fetish' that could protect one small corner of the empire from the two bugbears of nationalism and an alarming 'Islam de combat'.

Administrators had long had an interest, or more precisely a set of interests, in studying 'fetishism' or 'animism' prior to the emergence of Allah Koura, yet their concerns were usually limited to generating ethnographic knowledge, prosecuting ritual murders and most importantly, ensuring that local religious movements did not offer united resistance to colonial rule. In 1912, Maurice Delafosse mused that 'it would be best if the Soudanese populations limited themselves to perfecting the local religions', but precious little effort was expended in ensuring that they did so.<sup>67</sup> With no great sympathy for Christian missionary activity and a rather erratic recognition of Muslim leaders and their political potential, before 1946 the colonial administration maintained something of a *laissez-faire* policy towards local religions so long as they were not, in the time-honored phrase, 'contrary to the principles of French civilization'. For instance, in 1937, Governor General de Coppet urged his subordinates that even as they cracked down on ritual murders and other crimes, they should '[Respect] liberty of conscience ... it is not so much a question of destroying (*battre en brèche*) "fetishism" ... as of preventing certain fetishers from practicing their misdeeds'.<sup>68</sup> In this Popular Front era dispatch, the tension was between the civilizing mission on the one hand and local practices on the other. Tolerance was a necessary aspect of a politics of association. The political context of the 1950s demanded a more creative and aggressive approach. In previous decades some colonial administrators had funded the construction of mosques; for them the civilizing mission meant, among other things, bringing *beaux arts* to Bamako. In contrast, in the postwar era of induced modernity, the commandant of Koutiala sought to ensure the supply of chickens for ritual

<sup>66</sup> This process is admirably portrayed in Royer, 'Le Massa'.

<sup>67</sup> Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, III, 215.

<sup>68</sup> GGAOF to lieutenant governors, 1 Feb. 1937, #69 AP/2, ANM 3E12FR. This file is composed largely of information intended for a 'Commission Parliementaire sur les procès pour faits de sorcellerie, anthropophagie rituelles et actes repréhensibles commis dans le cadre des sociétés secrets', led (or informed) by 'M. Lévy-Bruhl, de l'Institut'; GGAOF, Circular, 11 Dec. 1937, ANM 3E12FR. For a fictional interpretation of the struggle between colonial administrators and those held responsible for ritual murders, see Bokar N'Diaye, *La mort des fétiches de Sénéoudougou* (Paris, 1999).

sacrifice with funds from the local Provident Society.<sup>69</sup> This local administrator saw himself as accelerating 'social progress' by battling an epizootic crisis, and thereby keeping the cost of sacrifice low. Meanwhile, those with a broader view recognized a different adversary.

Like an earlier Islamic policy, 'fetishization' emerged from fear of a perceived Muslim challenge to colonial authority. While 'Islam noir' was undoubtedly a comforting fiction for generations of colonial administrators, in the postwar period the increasingly evident integration of West African Muslims with a wider Muslim world generated a great deal of anxiety among French observers. This anxiety preceded the urban riots between Muslims of the late 1950s, but not disputes between young reformers ('the Azharists') and older figures of the maraboutic establishment like Muhammad Sharif of Kankan.<sup>70</sup>

It is in this context that the administration's reaction to Allah Koura must be understood. The movement's appeal lay in the fact that it might retard the expansion of Islam into a region which the administration had designated as a kind of liminal 'zone'. The majority of the population of this zone – which included Haute Volta, northern Côte d'Ivoire, parts of Soudan and most of Guinea – was thought to be 'partly Islamized (*islamisée*) but majority Muslim'.<sup>71</sup> The people of this region, and their neighbors to the south, were considered 'permeable' to Islam and possibly sympathetic to the RDA. While the colonial administration did not want to 'oppose Islam' in majority Muslim areas, the liminal zones were to be protected from Muslim expansion. The zone further south, including most of Côte d'Ivoire, should be kept free of Muslim influence as much as possible. This was quite explicitly seen as a holding action; the consensus seemed to be that the colonial state could only retard, not prevent, the gradual Islamization of most of West Africa.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, part of the problem with 'Islamic policy' had always been that it painted with broad strokes. While administrators saw Muslims as filling in patterns on a map, the relatively open and tolerant patchwork of Muslims, Bamanaw and Christians in rural Mali considerably complicates such a picture. Villagers in the region around San recall that Muslims were then a distinct rural minority – at least in self-styled 'Bamana' communities – but that even near the sites where Dembele and Sibiri Coulibaly flourished, conflict between Bamana and Muslims was by no means a foregone

<sup>69</sup> CdC Quatorze, Rapport de tournée, 19 Aug. 1950, ANM IE23FR. The same report is cited in Royer, 'Le Massa', 350. On the political uses of the provident societies, see Gregory Mann and Jane I. Guyer, 'Imposing a guide on the *Indigène*: the fifty year experience of the *Sociétés de Prévoyance* in French West and Equatorial Africa', in Endre Stiansen and Jane I. Guyer (eds.), *Credit, Currencies, and Culture: African Financial Institutions in Historical Perspective* (Uppsala, 1999).

<sup>70</sup> Lansiné Kaba, 'Sheikh Mouhammad Chérif de Kankan', in Triaud and Robinson (eds.), *Le temps des marabouts*; Brenner, *Controlling*, ch. 3.

<sup>71</sup> At the uppermost levels of the colonial bureaucracy, administrators disagreed over whether or not Haute Volta and northern Côte d'Ivoire should fall into the 'partially Islamized' zone of the forest or the half-Muslim zone of the savanna. Marginalia in GGAOF to MinFOM, 7 July 1950, #507 AP/3, ANSOM 2256.

<sup>72</sup> Note that Cardaire himself considered the 'zone' doctrine 'les plus dangereuses des lois (générales) ... comme si une compatibilité quelconque pouvait exister entre les concepts du Prophète et un milieu climatique': *Terroir*, 11.



conclusion.<sup>73</sup> In addition, the other important factor in the mix, party politics, was experienced quite differently in these villages and towns than in San, Bamako or Kuluba, the great hill on which the governor's mansion stood. Neither subtle shifts in rural experiences nor the complexity of intellectual and social forces could be seen from 'on high'.

Observers in Dakar continued to believe that, if handled properly, the liminal areas could offer an important bulwark against both the nationalist political parties and the expansion of Muslim influence, including that coming from abroad. Reporting to the minister of overseas France in 1950, the office of the governor general and high commissioner of the AOF argued that, 'In these regions, our resistance to Islam should rely on the "*animist resistance*" whenever this is possible; it is a delicate task to which the local administrators (*chefs de subdivision et de cercle*) should devote all their care'.<sup>74</sup> In such a context, the Allah Koura movement seemed ready made, yet at the same time, administrators on the ground were almost instinctively hostile to it. Thus it fell on Cardaire to demonstrate to his superiors – and through them to *cercle* administrators – that Allah Koura was just what they had been waiting for. He would still be attempting to do so in 1956, when in an interministerial conference, he would, according to the minutes,

Underscore the interest of protecting animist and fetishist populations. He describe[d] the means of constraint by which conversions to Islam are often obtained. We don't know enough about so-called pagan societies[ he argued]. Nevertheless, there should be some projects we could undertake: possible development of cooperatives to counter the Dioula Muslim influence, a more rapid welcoming system for seasonal workers ... We have to give back to the non-Muslim populations their pride in their ancestral [sic] beliefs.<sup>75</sup>

Cardaire could only have approved of what transpired a few years after the heyday of Allah Koura, when Dembele paid the commandant an impromptu visit. While in 1950 such a visit would have been a command performance, this one was Dembele's idea. After a short chat, the commandant told Dembele that the administration would appreciate a photograph of him. In the words of Commandant Gervais, Dembele 'went right away to have himself

<sup>73</sup> Interview, Tana, and 'Dioula' Moussa Coulibaly, Diabougou, 10 July 1998. On rural proselytization and conversion, see Andrew Manley, 'The Sosso and the Haidara', in Triaud and Robinson (eds.), *Le temps des marabouts*; Benjamin F. Soares, 'The Fulbe *shaykh* and the Bambara "pagans"', in M. de Bruijn and H. van Dijk (eds.), *Peuls et Mandingues* (Paris, 1997), 267–80; and Danielle Jonckers, 'Le temps de prier est venu', *Journal des Africanistes*, 68 (1998), 21–46.

<sup>74</sup> GGAOF to MinFOM, 7 July 1950, #507 AP/3, ANSOM 2256; emphasis added by MinFOM. This position was very widely held within the administration; see for example, a letter from the MinFOM to GGAOF, which argues that assignments to serve in the liminal zone should go to 'administrateurs les plus avertis des choses musulmanes, non point ceux qui, séduits par les formes extérieures de l'Islam ou par la science des personnages d'Afrique Noire, y cherchant [sic] seulement une satisfaction esthétique ou intellectuelle, mais ceux qui vraiment en perçoivent le danger éminent et sont aptes à vous le dénoncer et le combattre', Directeur Adjoint, Direction des Affaires Politiques (DAP), MinFOM, to GGAOF, 31 Jan. 1950, #118, ANM N1 4E1851.

<sup>75</sup> Interministerial conference on 'les problèmes musulmanes dans les territoires d'outre-mer', 2–8 May 1956, ANSOM 2258.

photographed in town, gave me two prints, kept one for himself ... [sic] [and] asked me to pay the bill – which I happily did'.<sup>76</sup>

The spectacle of having the portrait taken, in increasingly Muslim San, at the request of the commandant, was exactly the type of moderate yet public patronage which some among the administration feared would be construed as an undue favoritism to certain religious leaders over others. It was the mark of an older kind of patronage, the kind which partly characterized the *temps des marabouts*. It also suggests that in the waning years of his revelation, Dembele and the local commandant were mutually dependent. Both were increasingly out of line with a Muslim town and with Muslims in the countryside, who looked to other sources of authority.<sup>77</sup>

#### CONCLUSIONS

Like Islamic policy, policy towards local religions tended to be haphazard. Nevertheless, the shift from building mosques to providing chickens for ritual sacrifice was an important one. As it became increasingly clear that Muslims, at least, were members of a larger regional and transcontinental community, reinforcing the particularity of Muslim and non-Muslim 'Soudanese' was especially appealing to men like Cardaire. The more astute of the French observers understood that the once useful fiction of 'Islam noir' had become a dangerous delusion, as West Africans were neither isolated from nor impervious to ideas and events affecting Muslims elsewhere. The *temps des marabouts* was ending. Even two figures as opposed as Cardaire and former Governor J. Beyriès could agree on this.<sup>78</sup> The originality of Cardaire's thought lay not in recognizing the political value of local religious movements, although this is partly the case, but in seeing them as innovative and open to possibility, even if, as part of a world assured of its own modernity, he suspected that they were doomed.<sup>79</sup>

Dembele had his vision at a very interesting time. The quick expansion of the Allah Koura movement, with its acolytes and offshoots, presented the colonial state with a dilemma its agents would only later recognize as opportunity. All of this happened at the moment of a major reconfiguration of the political scene, as subjects became citizens and the Fourth Republic sought *not* to confront the limits of universalism and its inverse, exceptionalism.<sup>80</sup> The Bureau of Muslim Affairs was not a cultural exchange organization; its leadership and its agents believed they were engaged in a street fight to preserve the empire. Cardaire's championing of Allah Koura demonstrates just how bankrupt the 'civilizing mission' had become. Even in a

<sup>76</sup> CdC Gervaise to GSF (DAP), 2 May 1954, San *cercle* archives.

<sup>77</sup> Dembele's visits to the *cercle* are reported in CdC Antoine Guintini, Rapport trimestriel, 4e trim., 3 Dec. 1953; CdC Gervaise, 1er and 2 e trim., 5 July 1954; CdC Gervaise, Rapport politique annuel, 1954, 10 Feb. 1955, ANM IE38FR.

<sup>78</sup> Beyriès wrote an extensive report on 'Islam en AOF' which can be found in ANSOM 2158, d. 3. On the opposition between the two men, see Triaud, 'Crépescule', 505–6.

<sup>79</sup> Here my reading of *Terroir* differs from that of Brenner, *Controlling*, 162, 163–4.

<sup>80</sup> For an analysis of this conundrum in urban settings, see Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996).

context of emergent legal equality, assimilation and the erasure of difference were clearly victims of a political moment which advocated particularity as a panacea for nationalist and religious politics. Allah Koura also demonstrated that the administration would have to cope with a set of practices and beliefs it had long dismissed as marginal, outmoded and destined for extinction.

All of that is well and good, but what does it tell us about West Africa? Islamization in the 1950s was not all it has been presented as. The political/religious field (or 'sphere') was broader and even more dynamic than a focus on Muslim issues alone would suggest. In fact, just as Dembele began to fade from view in the mid-1950s, an incendiary reformist marabout named Ousmane Sidibe began to make his presence felt in San.<sup>81</sup> While earlier in the decade, the administration had been concerned with keeping the peace in the countryside, by 1957, the commandant would have his hands full quelling riots between urban Muslims. Were these two distinct sets of events, or can we analyze them in a single frame? Is it possible to do so while avoiding teleology – in which 'everyone' becomes increasingly Muslim?

Allah Koura and the contradictory and uneven administrative responses to it reveal the idiosyncrasy and originality of local assimilations of such global changes as the emergence of the Fourth Republic and its French Union. West African discussions of Dembele's vision took place in contexts far different from those of the political debates carried on in Paris and Dakar, but they were no less innovative and progressive for it. For historians, this raises the question of how to assess the importance, on a regional scale and in a single analytic framework, of such a diverse set of actors as Felix Houphouët-Boigny, Modibo Keita and Dembele himself. Such a comparison may appear absurd, as the first two would become presidents, while Dembele would die in relative obscurity. However in the tumult of the times, it was to Dembele and his ideas, however diffuse or misappropriated, that thousands of rural West Africans turned.

Allah Koura appeared at a crucial moment for the expansion of the divide between urban citizens and rural subjects which, argues Mamdani, so marks contemporary African politics.<sup>82</sup> While administrators managed an electoral process intended to move from the colonial system to a system of (at least) partial representation, still disenfranchised rural people engaged in an enthusiastic politics 'from below'. In Haute Volta, this phenomenon stirred the opposition of African political authorities – most notably the Moro Naba and the two Voltaïque counselors in the Assembly of the French Union – not because it usurped their roles, but because it ignored them completely, and in the case of the counselors, threatened to render them irrelevant. Dembele argued his line more persuasively and forcefully than they could do, and the messengers, whether or not representative of his vision, merely underscored the growing impotence of the administration's erstwhile auxiliaries.

<sup>81</sup> See for example, CdC DuChamp, *Revue mensuelle*, Dec. 1956, 29 Jan. 1957, ANM IE38FR. In this report, Dembele is on his way out, and Sidibe is first mentioned. In my research in urban San, no one had heard of Allah Koura, but everyone of sufficient age reacted viscerally to Sidibe's name. The conflict around Sidibe and his message is the subject of Mann, 'Old soldiers, young men'.

<sup>82</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996).

Finally, the variety of implementations and representations of Allah Koura is both a testament to the power of the message and to its appeal through versatility. As I argued above, it was a hot commodity in an active spiritual marketplace. The brilliance of Allah Koura was that it could be nearly anything to almost anyone. But no one – not even Marcel Cardaire – appeared to be immune to it. That, after all, is the nature of the true fetish.