Journal of African History, **49** (2008), pp. 281–304. © 2008 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0021853708003666 Printed in the United Kingdom

'TO NEVER SHED BLOOD': YACOUBA SYLLA, FÉLIX HOUPHOUËT-BOIGNY AND ISLAMIC MODERNIZATION IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

SEAN HANRETTA
Stanford University

ABSTRACT: After an ill-fated religious revival, the Sufi teacher Yacouba Sylla and his followers became wealthy and politically influential in post-Second World War Côte d'Ivoire. They argued for an understanding of democratization and development that defined both ideas in terms of their community's own mystical experiences and world-historical significance, rather than in terms of modernity. As a way of making sense of their own past and defending their place in an increasingly tense political environment, these efforts achieved their most explicit articulation in a powerful story about Yacouba Sylla's refusal of a gift from Ivoirian President Félix Houphouët-Boigny.

KEY WORDS: Côte d'Ivoire, African modernities, decolonization, development, Islam, political culture, religion.

IN 1929, the colonial administration in the Mauritanian town of Kaédi arrested a young man named Yacouba Sylla, deported him, and, in early 1930, placed him in detention in Sassandra, far to the south in the colony of Côte d'Ivoire. Yacouba Sylla was a Muslim Sufi teacher (*shaykh*) who had provoked local officials and fellow Muslims by preaching a series of far-reaching reforms and leading a visible religious revival. A student of a controversial *shaykh* named Ahmad Hamallah, who came from the town of Nioro-du-Sahel in French Soudan (now Mali), Yacouba Sylla had preached social equality, attacked certain women's clothing and dance styles as immoral, advocated the elimination of bridewealth and banned the wearing of all gold. He claimed religious authority out of proportion to his age (a mere 23 years at the time) and his rather minimal formal education, instead basing it on his intense personal devotion to Shaykh Hamallah.[1] Yacouba's followers had come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Most were from Kaédi, though a few had come with Yacouba from his home town of Nioro. Some were merchants, a few were important scholars, many were slaves or former slaves, others belonged to stigmatized occupational castes, and some were merely poor. In Yacouba's absence, his followers continued to spread his ideas and the religious revival became more intense. By January 1930 it involved over 600 people who came under frequent and increasingly violent attack by other residents of the town. The situation reached a crisis on 15 February 1930 when the *gardes de cercle* shot dead at least 30 of Yacouba's

[1] For the history of Yacouba Sylla and his followers, see Sean Hanretta, 'Constructing a religious community in French West Africa: the Hamawi Sufis of Yacouba Sylla' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 2003).

followers. A few days later, the administration imprisoned over 100 and exiled them to all corners of French West Africa.

After this nadir, Yacouba Sylla and his followers experienced a reversal of fortunes. In the late 1930s the administration began releasing the 'Yacoubists' from detention and were surprised when most of them decided to gather in Côte d'Ivoire rather than return to Kaédi or Nioro. Yacouba set up his household in the Ivoirian town of Gagnoa in 1938 and turned his attention to commerce and plantation agriculture. Gathering his followers around him to form a new community, Yacouba slowly accumulated great wealth and became involved in Ivoirian politics at the highest levels. He used his resources and influence to improve the quality of life for other residents of Gagnoa and, during the political jostling after the Second World War, he and his followers mobilized Muslim voters in southwest Côte d'Ivoire to support Félix Houphouët-Boigny's Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI). During Houphouët-Boigny's subsequent presidency (1960–92), the Yacoubists served as important spokespersons for the regime, bolstering its legitimacy among Muslims and in turn receiving informal patronage.[2]

The community formed by Shaykh Yacouba Sylla and the role of his followers in the discursive and material evolution of the Ivoirian state pose a challenge to both Eurocentric and 'alternative' models of modernization and development. Most ways of understanding the twentieth century in Africa emphasize the role of colonial projects in setting the terms within which social change took place. For French officials committed to a single, European modernity, the Yacoubists' religious fervor was *ipso facto* a sign of the need to modernize them. As a movement of former slaves and members of castes, the Yacoubist story can easily become that of the French abolition of slavery and the weakening of social control in the face of expanding economic opportunities. As members of the rural and small-town poor, their stories can be about the emergence of networks of patronage, entrepreneurialism and wealth redistribution centered either on the state or on an emerging civil society. Or Yacouba can be seen as an African 'intermediary', responsible for brokering these changes, capable perhaps of displacing colonial intentions but not fully able to escape them. Taking Islamic reformism rather than European imperialism as a starting point, Yacouba Sylla's followers appear to be engaged in an anti-modern revolt against the outcome of the dialectic encounter between Muslim intellectuals and Western power.[3]

[2] Yacouba's followers disagree over whether the community constitutes a coherent spiritual entity or is rather a subset of the larger Hamawiyya-Tijaniyya Sufi order. I use the term 'Yacoubist' only as a short-hand for 'the community of followers of Yacouba Sylla', and do not intend to imply the existence of a distinct 'Yacoubist' order or a philosophy of 'Yacoubism'. See also the discussion of the politics of the 'Yacoubist' name in Boukary Savadogo, 'La communauté "Yacouba Sylla" et ses rapports avec la Tijâniyya hamawiyya', in Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson (eds.), *La Tijâniyya: une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique* (Paris: 2000), 269–87.

[3] For the 'new colonial' approach to development, see Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Princeton, 1994); Frederick Cooper, 'Conflict and connection: rethinking colonial African history', *American Historical Review*, 99 (1994), 1516–45; Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge, 1996); and Cooper, *Colonialism in*

All these approaches imagine Yacouba's followers as targets of modernizing projects, with varying capacities to shape those projects to their own needs. By contrast, the rethinking of development and modernity in Africa generally associated with Jean and John Comaroff provides a way of seeing the Yacoubists as the architects of an 'alternative modernity', a mode of appropriating certain of the benefits held out by the colonial project in its guise as *mission civilisatrice* but from within the framework of Muslim institutions and hermeneutics. While West African Sufis, particularly the kind who lead dramatic revivals, have often been seen as the primary defenders of traditionalism against modernizing anti-Sufi *ahl al-Sunna* reformists, recent research has highlighted the very modern uses to which Sufi practices could be put and their extensive incorporation into the institutions of governance in Muslim Africa.[4]

None of these theoretical frames, however, adequately captures how the Yacoubists understood their own history. They saw themselves neither as brokers between 'western' and 'African' values nor as pioneers of cultural hybridity. Indeed they rejected the entire set of assumptions about agency and historical contextualization that underpin both traditional and alternative conceptions of modernity. The intellectuals of the community certainly generated simulacra of civilizing discourses and saw themselves as playing an important role in modernizing and developing their (involuntarily) adopted country of Côte d'Ivoire. But they also firmly embraced their status as both objects and subjects of a much greater transformation that produced modernity but was not part of it. They saw themselves as actors in a spiritual drama in which they were symbols of God's ability to use Sufi *shaykhs* as vehicles for his grace to transform personal suffering into universal redemption.

In this imagining, Yacoubist intellectuals domesticated questions of progress and development within a spiritual project that they believed was incompatible with politics as such. In this sense, their practices and discourses generated not alternatives to Western modernity, but rather a set of translations

---

Question: Theory, Knowledge, History (Berkeley, 2005). On anti-Sufism and Islamic modernism in Francophone Africa, see Jean-Loup Amselle, *Négociants de la savanne* (Paris, 1979); Amselle, 'Le Wahabisme à Bamako (1945–1985)', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 19 (1985), 345–57; Richard Warms, 'Merchants, Muslims and Wahhâbiyya: the elaboration of Islamic identity in Sikasso, Mali', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 26 (1992), 485–507; Réné Otayek (ed.), *Le radicalisme islamique au sud du Sahara* (Paris, 1993). See also Louis Brenner's thesis associating Sufism with an 'esoteric episteme' that gave way to the rationalism of European and Islamic reformist conceptions of knowledge. Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington IN, 2001). On intermediaries, Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn and Richard L. Roberts (eds.), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa* (Madison, 2006).

[4] As a starting point, see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, 1993); Jan-Georg Deutsch, Peter Probst and Heike Schmidt (eds.), *African Modernities: Entangled Meanings in Current Debate* (Portsmouth NH, 2002); Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago, 1999); and James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copper Belt* (Berkeley, 1999).

between Yacouba's actions and the discourse of modernity that was (and is) the currency of international and domestic politics. They thus created a space from which they could participate in what the outside world considered political activity and exercise moral, tutelary power while simultaneously remaining apart from the world, uncorrupted by that which they sought to reform. In this they drew on an old but discontinuous understanding of the relationship between Muslim ritual specialists and experts in governance that was part of the heritage of West African Sufi thinking transmitted by Yacouba's teacher, Shaykh Hamallah. This was not a well-trodden path in the twentieth century, and their attempts to invoke these specific precedents in this context generated numerous conflicts with other Muslims and other disciples of Hamallah; but in the context of post-Second World War Côte d'Ivoire it proved feasible.[5] What it depended upon was, on the one hand, the production of a hermeneutics whose starting point was not coloniality and its effects, but rather the explicitly esoteric history of the transmission of Sufi knowledge and authority, and, on the other, a state in which creative forms of spiritual authority could be put to immediate political use.

MODERNIZATION AND RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATION

The classic narrative within which the Yacoubists would play the role of Muslim agents of economic development turns on a series of conversions of forms of capital. Yacouba begins with a quantity of spiritual capital (its origin is taken for granted) and converts it into social capital in the form of followers who enable him to accumulate economic capital. He uses this economic capital for two purposes: to fund certain modernizing initiatives for his own community and for his neighbors in the town of Gagnoa (allowing him to accumulate moral capital in the form of good will), and to purchase the patronage of Houphouët-Boigny which provided him both access to non-capital forms of power (state coercion) and a way to 'launder' his wealth through the logics of nationalist anti-colonial struggle and African unity (more moral capital). The assumption that it was in fact possible to exchange all of these forms of capital against one another like so many currencies is axiomatic here, and it grounds French colonial perceptions of religious leaders, social scientific discourses on religious communities, models of Islamic development and other, 'alternative', modernities. It is, as we shall see, precisely this fungibility that the Yacoubist discourse itself calls into question.

Central to the classic narrative is a functional interpretation of Yacoubist success that equates it with pragmatic accommodation. The conflicts over Yacouba's religious reforms had earned his followers the scorn of high-ranking members of the Sufi order to which Yacouba and Hamallah belonged, known as the Tijaniyya, as well as the suspicions of French administrators.[6]

[5] The details of Yacoubist theology are far beyond the scope of the present essay, but see Hanretta, 'Constructing a community', chs. 4–8.

[6] See the important documents reproduced in Boukary Savadogo, 'Confréries et pouvoirs. La Tijaniyya Hamawiyya en Afrique occidentale (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger): 1909–1965' (thèse de doctorat, Université de Provence, 1998), 538–81. See also Benjamin F. Soares, 'The spiritual economy of Nioro du Sahel: Islamic discourses and practices in a Malian religious center' (Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern University, 1997), 147; Colonel Joseph Rocaboy, 'Le cas hamalliste: les événements de Nioro-Assaba

From the late 1930s, Yacouba and his followers pursued a number of complex strategies to secure themselves politically and economically, building patronage networks and establishing their community's financial security. They strove to become less insular while still maintaining a 'low profile' in the world of Muslim politics.[7] They responded to the chaos of the Second World War by affirming their patriotism, making a public declaration of support for Vichy in the face of the Allied invasion of North Africa and donating F1,500 from the proceeds of sales of dried bananas to the Légion Française des Combattants de la Côte d'Ivoire, a resolutely pro-Vichy organization that raised money for prisoners of war held in Germany.[8] Yacouba cultivated close relationships with several French administrators both during and after his detention, and they encouraged him to pursue petty commerce and commercial agriculture, advised him on economic strategy and facilitated his recruitment of labor.[9] Yacouba also benefited from more institutional connections with the colonial enterprise, financing his operations through loans from European companies such as the Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale (CFAO), the Société Commerciale de l'Ouest-Africain (SCOA) and the Compagnie Française de Côte d'Ivoire (CFCI). He contracted to purchase coffee, bananas and other cash crops from small farmers and sell them to his creditors, giving them a virtual monopoly over the export of produce from African-owned plantations in the area. Yacouba in turn cemented his close relationship with local small-scale farmers by extending credit at favorable rates and retailing imported manufactured goods.[10]

These efforts paid off. French surveillance documents praised Yacouba's plantations as models of efficiency, with healthy, well-fed workers, and by 1943 he had established a thriving transport company with at least seven

(août 1940)', in Edmond Bernus *et al*. (eds.), *Nomades et commandants : administration et sociétés nomades dans l'ancienne AOF* (Paris, 1993), 41–8; Vincent Joly, 'L'administration du Soudan français et les événements de "Nioro-Assaba" (août 1940)', in Bernus *et al*. (eds.), *Nomades et commandants*, 49–60; Rapport politique mensuel, Côte d'Ivoire, March 1943 (Archives Nationales du Sénégal [hereafter ANS] 2G-43 v. 99) and Archives Nationales de la France: Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer (hereafter CAOM) 1Affpol 2258/3 dossier 10 and dossier 16.

[7] 'Bulletins de renseignements, cercles du sud, Mauritania', July, Aug., Sept. 1941 (ANS 9G-31 v. 17).

[8] Rapport politique annuel, Côte d'Ivoire, 1939, 149–50 (ANS 2G-39 v. 3). Cmdt. Cer. Sassandra (Colombani), 10 Feb. 1940; Chef Subdiv. Gagnoa (Teyrical), 10 Feb. 1940 (ANS 19G-43 v. 108). On the Yacoubists during the war: 'Bulletins de renseignements, cercles du sud, Mauritania', Nov. 1942 (ANS 9G-31 v. 17); teleg., M. Beaumont, Chef (Sassandra-Soubré) de la Légion française des combattants de la Côte d' lvoire to Lieut. Gov. Côte d'Ivoire, n.d.; *La Côte d'Ivoire française*, no. 651 (20 Apr. 1942), 2 (Archives Nationales de la République de la Côte d'Ivoire, XV-4-6 [5355]).

[9] Yacouba Sylla to Gov. Gén. AOF, 14 June 1943, and Rapport Commiss. de Police Rortais, 18 June 1943, both reprinted in 'Annexe no. 18' of Savadogo, 'Confréries et pouvoirs', 604–17. Yacouba operated two butchers' shops in Sassandra and Gagnoa at a loss in order to provide the administrative and colonial communities with beef. For the supply of cattle, Yacouba relied on his contacts with the north, with Fulbe and Soninke cattle herders in Soudan and Upper Volta.

[10] Rapport Rortais; see also Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'L'impact des intérêts coloniaux: SCOA et CFAO dans l'Ouest Africain, 1910–1965', *Journal of African History* (hereafter *JAH*) 16 (1975), 595–621.

trucks and one passenger vehicle. Success continued after the war. In 1947, Yacouba received permission to purchase two lots, one a 6·25-acre parcel for a prayer center (*zawiya*) and residential compound in Sassandra, and the other a 1,122m^2 lot for a coffee refinery in Gagnoa. Later that year the Lieutenant-Governor of Côte d'Ivoire authorized Yacouba to purchase and operate an electric generator for five years, which Yacouba used to provide low-cost electricity to his *zawiya* and the surrounding communities – a service that did much to endear him to his non-Muslim neighbors. In 1949, Yacouba formally re-established a presence in Kaédi, opening a branch of his business there and paying for Mauritanian disciples to come to Gagnoa to train as masons or in automotive repair.[11]

According to French sources, it was on the basis of his commercial success that Yacouba became involved in the political activities that dominated the public life of Côte d'Ivoire between the end of the war and independence in 1960. Sometime before 1946, Yacouba made the acquaintance of the young politician and doctor, Félix Houphouët-Boigny.[12] Until then there had been a few unsubstantiated rumors of Yacouba's involvement in local politics, stretching back to disputes over the Imamate of Gagnoa and the election of a new *chef de quartier* for the 'dioula' (merchant) neighborhood there in 1942.[13] But Yacouba's close relationship with Houphouët-Boigny's political party, the PDCI, and its parent, international party, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), marked a turning point in the history of the community, as accommodation became active participation in temporal power.[14]

Houphouët-Boigny's power base was his union of African plantation owners, the Syndicat Agricole Africain (SAA), and the SAA's main strength came from the areas in the middle of the colony inhabited by Houphouët's Baoulé co-ethnics. But a considerable quantity of coffee and cacao was produced outside that region, in the forest belt where Yacouba was perhaps the most important African merchant and planter. Yacouba thus made an

[11] *Journal Officiel de la Côte d'Ivoire* (hereafter *JOCI*), 31 Jan. 1947, Avis de demandes de concessions, no. 3188 and no. 3206, 36; *JOCI*, 1 Sept. 1947, no. 3991 TPM, 284. Bureau Technique de Liaison et de Coordination (BTLC), 'Note de renseignements: le Yacoubisme', Dakar, Oct. 1949 (CAOM 1Affpol 2259/3). Yacouba Sylla, Sassandra, to Cmdt. de cercle Kaédi (*sic*), 1 July 1939 (Archives Nationales de la République Islamique de la Mauritanie E2-34); I am grateful to Professor Adama Gnokane of the Université de Nouakchott for providing me with copies of these and other documents. See also Ruth Schachter Morgenthau, *Political Parties in French-Speaking West Africa* (Oxford, 1964), 174.

[12] One of West Africa's most important intellectuals, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, left a detailed examination of Yacouba's relationship with Houphouët, emphasizing the respect Houphouët had for Yacouba's spiritual power and for his ability to simultaneously use and transcend materialism. Louis Brenner, 'Amadou Hampâté Bâ: Tijânî francophone', in Triaud and Robinson (eds.), *La Tijâniyya*, 289–326.

[13] Rapport Rortais.

[14] The RDA, founded in Bamako in October 1946, was officially a union of regional parties; but in terms of its organization and basic principles, it was 'an extension of [Houphouët-Boigny's] PDCI to the superterritorial level'. See Aristide R. Zolberg, *One-Party Government in the Ivory Coast* (rev. edn., Princeton NJ, 1969), 108–12; Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization?* (Oxford, 2002), 16, 63–4, 76.

attractive ally for Houphouët-Boigny and the RDA.[15] By 1946 the RDA had established itself as the premier party of francophone West Africans on the strength of Houphouët-Boigny's leadership, but 1948 and 1949 saw widespread anti-RDA campaigns by French administrators. The PDCI responded by intensifying its recruitment of African plantation owners and Western-educated civil servants, while simultaneously trying to tap into important sources of wealth and patronage held by the colony's Muslim merchants. In 1948, French intelligence reported that the RDA was attracting many of Shaykh Hamallah's followers, principally in Niger but also in the adjacent areas of Upper Volta. Yacouba Sylla served as a bridge between these Muslim networks and the predominantly non-Muslim planters. In early 1948, *Le Réveil*, an RDA mouthpiece, propagandized against Lebanese traders who dominated the warehousing and distribution of African-grown crops and who had a major presence in the small-goods trade. These were common sources of grievances among local merchants as well as among the PDCI's key planter constituency. Yacouba's reputation as a Muslim African planter who himself competed with Lebanese wholesalers and merchants may have given him added symbolic value.[16] Despite these efforts, the RDA suffered several electoral defeats in 1949, including in Gagnoa. As a result, the following year the PDCI selected Gagnoa, and particularly the Muslim and immigrant neighborhood of Dioulabougou, as the site of a major campaign. Party agents worked to make sure the plantation towns of Daloa, Sassandra and Gagnoa had many active supporters. These were all locations of important Yacoubist *zawiyas* and the administration considered his *zawiyas* to be Ivoirian outposts of the RDA–Hamawi alliance already engineered in Niger and Upper Volta.[17]

In the early 1950s, perhaps sensing, as the administration believed, that the support of the region's Muslims for the RDA was slipping away, the PDCI redoubled its efforts. The party's newspaper, *Le Démocrate*, explicitly tried to court the colony's Muslim populations, and in April 1950 a party

[15] Houphouët-Boigny's SAA had its origins in the efforts of post-war administrators to undermine the political position of the largely pro-Vichy French planters. Zolberg, *One-Party Government*, 66–77; Chafer, *End of Empire*, 44–63.

[16] Hamawi support for the RDA seems to have been the result of concerted efforts by the *zawiyas* led by Imam Muhammad Djibrila Maiga. But the party's efforts to attract Muslim supporters seem to have been fairly ecumenical, for at the same time the RDA tried to ally itself with anti-Sufi *ahl al-Sunna* movements in Soudan and Guinée. Rapports trimestriels sur l'Islam en AOF, 1948, 1949 and 1950 (CAOM 1Affpol 2259/1). The report for the second and third trimesters of 1948 gives the following summary of the administration's theories on Hamawi–RDA connections: 'One notes a tendency among the Hamallists to turn towards the leaders of the RDA from whom they await help and protection from the attacks of the Administration', 5. See also Chafer, *End of Empire*, 105; Lansine Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa* (Evanston IL, 1974), 169–252; and Morgenthau, *Political Parties*, 174.

[17] Memos, Service de la Sûreté, 19, 24 and 28 Jan., 2 and 7 Feb. 1950 (ANS 5G-63 v. 144). BTLC, 'Le Yacoubisme'; Rapports trimestriels sur l'Islam en AOF, 1948, 1949 and 1950 (CAOM 1Affpol 2259/1). The details describing Yacouba's efforts on behalf of the RDA are excised from the version of the document that is held at CAOM (3e tri. 1949). One of Savadogo's interviewees reported even closer cooperation between Yacouba and the PDCI; Savadogo, 'La communauté "Yacouba Sylla"', 282.

leader circulated propaganda in Gagnoa claiming that Houphouët-Boigny had the sanction of religious leaders in Mecca. The party tried to court both Sufi groups like the Hamawiyya and *ahl al-Sunna* or 'Wahhabi' groups who tended to see Sufis as peddlers of superstition and corrupters of Islam. This delicate balancing act received a set-back when Shaykh Muhammad Fanta Mady of Kankan, one of the most widely respected Sufi *shaykhs* in the zone between Guinée and the Gold Coast, revoked his previously expressed support for the RDA. Mady was a highly visible defender of Sufism and the loss of his support left the RDA open to accusations of being a pro-Wahhabi party. Perhaps in an effort to restore an image of ecumenicalism, Yacouba, who was one of the most famous Tijani Sufis in the colony, began to receive a higher profile in the party's propaganda. Yacouba's past history of conflict with the administration, which he had downplayed during the 1930s and 1940s, became an important asset in this era of more open criticism of colonial authority. A French intelligence officer noted at the time that 'the RDA … was able to successfully exploit local disputes in which the detention of the Hamallist leader Yacouba Sylla is presented as a machination of imperialist colonialism'.[18]

From 1950 on, Houphouët-Boigny took increasing control of party strategy, culminating in the disaffiliation of the RDA from the French Communist Party. This helped allay French suspicions and perhaps also mollified some Muslim leaders who objected to communism's 'materialism'. Putting their past as a 'protest party' behind them, the PDCI claimed that its organization was better equipped to govern than was the Dakar-based colonial bureaucracy, and better able to play the game of international diplomacy in the new post-war atmosphere of self-determination. This pro-French, anti-administration stance put local officials in a difficult position. Administrators recognized their dependence on leaders like Yacouba and Houphouët-Boigny to maintain order. In early 1950, for example, Yacouba's followers in Kokolopozo helped protect an administrator who was threatened by a local mob. But officials nonetheless hoped they could still influence which elites played this role. They sought to weaken the PDCI's position in Paris, hoping to enable other, more easily controlled parties to enter into the brokerage space between the local population and metropolitan government, and they worked to disrupt the party's organizing and campaigning for the important elections to the National Assembly in June 1951. Intelligence reports indicating that Yacouba planned to stand for election on the PDCI–RDA's slate for Gagnoa made him a serious threat to the administration's plans for the *cercle*, in which the strength of the Bété–Dioula

[18] Houphouët-Boigny also involved himself directly in local Muslim politics, famously supporting local *bras-croisés* in Bouake against criticisms by traditionalists, an action widely perceived as an attempt to solicit reformist voters (and Soninke/Dioula voters more generally) for the RDA. Rapports trimestriels sur l'Islam en AOF, 1950, 1951, 4e trim. 1954 and 1e trim. 1955 (CAOM 1Affpol 2259/1). On Shaykh Fanta Mady, see Lansiné Kaba, 'Cheikh Mouhammad Chérif de Kankan: le devoir d'obéissance et la colonisation (1923–1955)', in Robinson and Triaud (eds.), *Le temps des marabouts*, 277–97; and Kaba, *Cheikh Mouhammad Chérif et son temps, ou, Islam et sociéte à Kankan, Guinée, 1874–1955* (Paris, 2004).

alliance party, the Union Républicaine, played a key part in their overall goal of keeping the PDCI from securing two seats in the Assembly.[19]

Yacouba did not, in fact, stand for election, and he disappears from the available administrative record at this point. The majority of confidential administrative reports and correspondence from the late 1950s remain sealed, and so while the most important events leading up to decolonization are fairly well known, the archival record sheds little light on the particular role Yacouba Sylla and his followers played in that drama. There is no shortage of rumor or oral sources, however, and it is tempting to use them to supplement the written silences. Indeed, they seem to confirm the documentary picture of the Yacoubist enterprise. For the non-Muslim Bété population of Gagnoa, which had strongly resisted the RDA from the mid-1940s, Yacouba became a symbol of Houphouët's party and of 'outsider' political and economic dominance in general. In 1955, in the first of what would be a series of xenophobic and separatist uprisings in the region, a group of young Bété men attacked 'Dioula' homes and descended on Gagnoa with the intent to destroy Yacouba's compound in Dioulabougou.[20] Others focused on his regional significance. In 1959, his son, Ahmadou Sylla, was elected to the Legislative Assembly of the short-lived Federation of Mali on the ticket of Mali's RDA-affiliate party, the Union Soudanaise, a victory that was popularly seen as the result of Yacouba's having 'purchased' the seat away from the locally dominant Parti Progressiste Soudanais.

Stories and archives alike depicted Yacouba as a stereotypical religious leader who used his spiritual clout to support a powerful politician, receiving in return influence and a reputation for patriotism. Yacouba's post-1938 activities bore little obvious stamp of any particular religious teaching, and seemed instead straightforward attempts to maintain his personal authority and to protect his community's autonomy. Following the paths of accommodation blazed by contemporaries like Seydou Nourou Tall or the Murids of Senegal, he appeared as one who achieved political influence by using locally meaningful discourses like religious reform or spiritual transformation to support projects that were framed in the languages of international political discourse. But compared to the Tall family or the Murids, Yacouba was paradoxically more conspicuous in his participation in political life and more insistent in his claims of aloofness from temporal power. As a Sufi leader in a predominantly non-Muslim country, he imagined his role less as a broker and more as a teacher. Making this role meaningful depended on conceptualizing Sufism itself as the engine of a *mission civilisatrice* that may have had politics as its means but whose goal was very much to change the soul.

[19] Rapports trimestriels sur l'Islam en AOF, 1950 (CAOM 1Affpol 2259/1); Memo, Service de la Sûreté, 2 Feb. 1950 (ANS 5G-63 v. 144); Administrateur Mangin, Chef du Bureau des Affaires Musulmanes, 'Rapport de mission en Côte d'Ivoire, 10–18 février 1952', (CAOM 14Miom 2126 [5G-47]). Chafer, *End of Empire*, 106–7, 118; Zolberg, *One-Party Government*, 134–9. Sowing the seeds for later conflict, French agents targeted Mossi migrant workers as potential dissidents from the PDCI and encouraged their affiliation with other parties.

[20] Barbara Caroline Lewis, 'The Transporters' Association of the Ivory Coast: ethnicity, occupational specialization, and national integration' (Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern University, 1970), 289–90.

The anthropologist Benjamin Soares has done much to illuminate the networks of material and symbolic patronage that linked Muslim West African religious leaders and political elites in the late-colonial and postcolonial eras. Soares has detailed the increasing commodification and concomitant personalization of religious authority in Nioro across the twentieth century. In Nioro, believers gave gifts to holy men or 'saints', and in return holy men acted as conduits for the divine recompense, or *baraji*, merited by the gifts. Such blessings brought profound benefits of both a visible and invisible nature, and through their distribution, as well as the redistribution of gifts themselves, saints bolstered their followings, increasing their attractiveness. The growth of the cash nexus during and after the colonial period opened up this field of authority to competition by religious entrepreneurs; the range of gifts and givers expanded, pilgrims flocked to Nioro, religious guidance became indexed to wealth, and the competition to give became as intense as the competition to receive. The benefits individual believers derived from this 'prayer economy' included confirmation of salvation, assistance with personal problems, and victory in political struggles or business ventures. Soares notes that the independent Malian state has relied on Nioro's Muslim specialists, not only to help broadcast its authority outside the capital but also as central figures of the networks of personalized power that constitute public life itself. At the same time, relations between Nioro's saints and Mali's civil servants have frequently involved conflict and competition. As a result, both the benefits Muslim leaders could confer on the state and their ability to extract considerations from political figures have depended on the size of the prayer economy they manage, leading to ever more competition for followers and for patrons.[21] In many ways Yacouba Sylla and his followers can be seen as playing a similar role in the spiritual political economy of Côte d'Ivoire. There, as with Soares's Nioro saints, their importance clearly rested on a combination of material and symbolic benefits offered to both the state as a whole and individual political figures. In turn their political visibility became a valuable commodity that individual followers could possess, inheriting their leader's anti-colonial cachet and nationalist credentials. As with Soares's protagonists they were Sufis who found no difficulty navigating political modernization or capitalist exchange.

Yet Yacouba Sylla and his most articulate followers did not primarily see themselves as agents of anything modern, but rather as the vehicles for God's extension of civilization to Africa, a mission with a restorative rather than progressive purpose. This difference was not merely 'phonemic' or phenomenological; it had at least two direct implications for how the Yacoubist community managed its relationship with purportedly modern institutions. First, the Yacoubists cultivated an attitude towards the colonial state that highlighted contestation and resistance, and which carried over into a suspicion of all political authority, even that of nationalist heroes; and secondly, they emphasized an approach to gift giving that resisted inscription into the logic of capital, whether social capital, spiritual capital or any other kind.

[21] Benjamin F. Soares, *Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town* (Ann Arbor, 2005).

According to the tradition in which they saw themselves taking part, Muslim leaders prized aloofness from political power, reserving the right to exercise moral tutelage over rulers but refraining from taking direct responsibility for statecraft itself. The appropriate attitude of a religious leader towards power had been summed up by the well-known aphorism, attributed by some to the towering twelfth-century Sufi master al-Ghazali, that a *sultân* (ruler) may visit a *shaykh* (Sufi teacher) but a *shaykh* should never visit a *sultân*.[22] But in the twentieth century, with the state more powerful than ever and with Muslim elites fully co-opted as intermediaries of colonial and postcolonial regimes, such ideas did not seem very practical.[23] The experiences of Yacouba Sylla's teacher, Shaykh Hamallah, stood as a clear example. Though little is known about Hamallah's personal attitudes towards the French, he had tacitly refused to participate in the process of political brokerage with the administration, despite early indications that the French were well disposed to so use him.[24] This made him vulnerable to any number of rivals, and he spent over ten years in detention, eventually dying in French custody.[25] Regardless of how Hamallah or his successors understood these actions, for Yacouba Sylla and his followers they signaled the power and righteousness of a conscious disdain for political pragmatism, and revealed the suffering that would necessarily accompany such righteousness.

The Yacoubists brought this moral equation into the heart of their understanding of gift giving in a way that differed considerably from the prayer economy Soares observed. First of all, the Yacoubists placed little value on the accumulation of followers per se; they refrained from direct competition with other Sufi *shaykhs* and accepted few converts from among their non-Muslim neighbors. As a result the community remained very small (only a few thousand people) throughout the colonial and postcolonial eras. Secondly, they surrounded the acts that symbolized the transmission of grace (*baraka*) or overflowing abundance (*fâ'ida*) to political and economic

[22] Though the distinction between 'religious' and 'secular' is not particularly useful, John Hunwick's essay 'Secular power and religious authority in Muslim society: the case of Songhay', *JAH*, 37 (1996), 175–94, also emphasizes the power of this normative difference. For an overview of the period, see John Ralph Willis, 'The Western Sudan from the Moroccan invasion (1591) to the death of al-Mukhtar al-Kunti (1811)', in J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds.), *History of West Africa*, vol. I (3rd edn., New York, 1985), 560–5. For a more theologically sophisticated approach to the problem, see Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge*.

[23] This is the main thesis of David Robinson's *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880 to 1920* (Athens OH, 2000), though Robinson places less emphasis on the ways accommodationist elites used the colonial system to enforce a particular version of Islamic orthodoxy.

[24] On the evidence of Paul Marty's famous description of Hamallah published in 1920. Marty, *Etudes sur l'Islam et les tribus du Soudan*, vol. IV, *La région de Kayes – le pays Bambara – le Sahel de Nioro* (Paris, 1920), 218.

[25] The standard reference on Hamallah, relying largely on archival materials from Mauritania and France, is Alioune Traoré, *Islam et colonisation en Afrique: Cheikh Hamahoullah, homme de foi et résistant* (Paris, 1983). Three more recent studies draw instead on oral history collected in and around Nioro and on the archival documents available in Senegal, Mali and France: Seïdina Oumar Dicko, *Hamallah: le protégé de Dieu* (Bamako, 1999), Soares, *Prayer Economy*; and Amadou Ba, *Histoire du Sahel occidental malien: des origines à nos jours* (Bamako, 1989).

elites with qualifiers that attempted to restrict the convertibility of these benefits into fungible forms of capital. The gifts that in Nioro lubricated the prayer economy were, for the Yacoubists, much less functional.

The meanings they attached to giving drew less on Islamic legal norms[26] than on esoteric cosmology and the theology embedded in social practice. For many Sufis the archetypal gifts were God's act of creation, an ongoing process that was part of the theophany in which God becomes manifest, and the related act of prophetic revelation. All gifts thus reflected the super-abundance of God's grace.[27] When such weighty significance overlapped with the complex social relations and norms that gift giving mobilized, the result was widespread anxiety about status, subordination, usury and dependence.[28] In Soninke households in Mali and Mauritania, religiously meaningful gifts could be made to the poor, to Qur'anic students and teachers, or to Muslim ritual specialists for their assistance at life-cycle rituals and annual holy days.[29] Spiritual and social states were both reproduced and put at risk in such exchanges. Giving alms was widely interpreted as influencing the salvation of one's ancestors, while gift giving was, along with military prowess, one of the defining features of membership in a noble lineage and legitimated the political domination of scholarly lineages by nobles. The entire *hooro* class, which included the nobles and the scholars, was in turn obligated to give to the members of the occupational castes (*nyaxamalo*) and slaves (*komo*).[30] All these forms of generosity were explicitly uneconomic, their excesses serving as guarantees of the hierarchical nature of power, whether the power of one set of individuals in society over another or of

[26] E.g. *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edn., Leiden, 1960–2002), 'hiba', ii:343 (F. Rosenthal); *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 'sadaqa', viii:715 (T. H. Weir and A. Zysow); and Soares, *Prayer Economy*, 165–7.

[27] See, for example, the opening of the *Jawâhir al-maᶜânî*, where the *awliyâ'* are described as those who 'min fayd bahrihi yaghtarifûn', those who 'ladle out from the overflowing of his [Muhammad's] sea'. ᶜAlî Harâzim ibn al-ᶜArabi Barâdah, *Jawâhir al-maᶜânî wa bulûgh al-amânî fi fayd sîdî Abi ᶜAbbâs al-Tijânî* (Beirut, 1997), 5. See also William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, 1989), 287.

[28] Compare Paul Dresch, 'Mutual deception: totality, exchange, and Islam in the Middle East', in Wendy James and N. J. Allen (eds.), *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute* (New York, 1998), 120.

[29] Eric Pollet and Grace Winter, *Société Soninké* (*Dyahunu, Mali*) (Brussels, 1971), 472–8, 490–3; Aliou Kissima Tandia, *Poésie orale Soninké et éducation traditionnelle* (Dakar, 1999), 212.

[30] Asymmetrical giving was central to maintaining distinctions among Muslim specialist, rulers and warriors, and among free, casted and slave households. Pollet and Winter, *Société Soninké*, 208–10; J.-H. Saint-Père, *Les Sarakollé du Guidimakha* (Paris, 1925), 19–25; Mamadou Diawara, *La graine de la parole: dimension sociale et politique des traditions orales du royaume de Jaara* (*Mali*) *du XVème au milieu du XIXème siècle* (Stuttgart, 1990), 33–9; Boubakar Ly, 'L'honneur et les valeurs morales dans les sociétés ouolof et toucouleur du Sénégal' (thèse, Paris 1, 1996), cited in Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa* (Cambridge, 1998). Diawara particularly stresses the obligatory, excessive aspect of the generosity attached to social hierarchy: 'Le patron subvient à tous les besoins matériels de son protégé même s'il doit se ruiner. Le bienfaiteur doit se surpasser et offrir à son client plus de cadeaux qu'il n'en reçoit de lui, car l'aisance du second reflète la prodigalité et la fortune du premier' (39).

God over his creations.[31] At the same time, this way of understanding gifts provided an important tool for holding elites accountable. Even today, one of the most common ways by which one West African *shaykh* (or more typically a *shaykh*'s followers) can try to discredit another is to claim that a particular 'marabout' abuses the piety of his students by accepting gifts from them in greater quantity than he redistributes. 'Our *shaykh*', by contrast, always gives away far more than he receives. To be at the bottom of the chain of gifts is a betrayal of the closeness to God and his divine gifts that a pious leader is expected to possess.[32] These intellectual traditions left few traces in the French surveillance documents that provide most of the traditional evidence on Yacouba Sylla's relationship with Houphouët-Boigny. But they are highly visible in the community's own hagiographic tradition and in the rumors that surround the two men.[33] These sources emphasize the centrality of Yacouba's identity as a Sufi reformist in his efforts on behalf of the economic and political emancipation of Côte d'Ivoire. In so far as Houphouët's goals appeared compatible with his own, Yacouba lent him the weight of his reputation and prestige (and purse), while always doing so in a way that emphasized his own moral superiority.

Yacouba's followers assert that their own history began with the giving of a gift. According to an oft-told story, in the years when Yacouba and Hamallah were still living in Nioro, Yacouba was invited to be formally initiated into the Tijaniyya by one of Hamallah's deputies, Demba Nimaga. As Nimaga began listing the conditions for authorization to recite the Tijani prayers, young Yacouba listened attentively. When Nimaga came to the requirement that the Tijani disciple love and accept the authority of the *shaykh*, taking him as his master, and also pledge permanent allegiance to the *shaykh*'s successor, to his family and to his sons, taking all as his potential masters, Yacouba stopped the ceremony, refusing to agree to the condition. Stunned, Nimaga and the other witnesses asked what Yacouba's objection was. Yacouba replied: 'you have asked me to accept Hamallah's sons and those who come after him as my masters. I cannot do so, as I do not know for certain that they will not depart from the path that Hamallah has laid out'. Incredulous, Nimaga brought him to Hamallah, where Yacouba again refused. 'What, then', Hamallah is said to have asked him, 'is it that you want, Yacouba?' Yacouba responded that he wanted only that which Hamallah had to give him, that which was destined for him. Hamallah repeated the question and Yacouba gave the same answer, through three repetitions. Finally, Hamallah consented approvingly, saying 'If that is truly

[31] See Tandia's discussion of the murder believed to be at the heart of the obligation to feed students; *Poésie orale*, 235. Brenner notes the connections in the Fulbe societies of the Futa Toro among receiving gifts, Islamic piety and low political status *vis-à-vis* the warrior *ceddo* lineages. *Controlling Knowledge*, 26.

[32] This kind of debunking is distinct from the critiques certain reformists make of the giving of gifts to religious persons in general. See, for example, Soares, *Prayer Economy*, 175–7.

[33] For recent restatements of the reasons why rumor is not just a useful historical source but an indispensable one, see Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000), and Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (New York, 2004), esp. 7 and chs. 1 and 2.

what you want, I give it to you'. Decades later, when Demba Nimaga came to visit Yacouba in Gagnoa, he is said to have brought up this event and to have asked Yacouba what precisely it was that Hamallah had given to him on that day. Yacouba pointed to the many disciples that surrounded him, all gathered to work and praise Hamallah at the *zawiya*.[34] Other stories describe the same underlying act of transmission. At the Tabaski (*ʿîd al-adha*) feast held in Mederdra in 1929, Hamallah is said to have repeatedly placed food into Yacouba's mouth in an act of deeply symbolic generosity.[35]

It was through gift giving that Yacouba would reassert his ties to Hamallah after he had achieved prosperity. Most famously, in 1939 he gave a new Ford Mercury to Hamallah (an extravagant gift at the time), and the way the exchange was carried out brilliantly dramatized the significance that both parties attached to the reciprocal flow of vertical prestations. When Yacouba sent his gift to Nioro, he did not send just one automobile, but two, one named Salam (Peace) and the other Salat (Prayer). He asked Hamallah to keep whichever car he preferred (or both if he so chose) and to send the other one back to Gagnoa with his blessing. According to the Yacoubist account, Hamallah chose Salat; but before sending Salam back to Yacouba, he had his driver take him around Nioro in it, allowing it to be saturated with his presence. A gift in the form of the car thus became the cause for a gift in the form of Hamallah's blessing back to Yacouba.[36]

It was in the light of these stories that Yacoubist intellectuals explained their leader's relationship with Houphouët-Boigny. The center of gravity of all the rumors and documented facts about Yacouba's friendship with Houphouët is a story that purports to recount the first time Houphouët asked Yacouba for his support and the conditions Yacouba placed on helping him. The story is well known in Abidjan in general, and was repeated to me numerous times by various members of the Yacoubist community. It appeared in print for the first time in a work of reportage on Houphouët by the

[34] This is a composite version based on Ahmadou Sylla, Treichville, 12 Apr. 2001 and 7 June 2001; Maître Cheickna Sylla, Deux Plateaux, 21 May 2001; and the historical committee of the Fondation Cheikh Yacouba Sylla (FOCYS), Deux Plateaux, 24 May 2001. The version of the story published in the FOCYS's history of the community states merely that Yacouba refused to take the *wird* from an unnamed *muqaddam* and that he 'insisted that his direct initiator be the Sharif [Hamallah], who, faced with such a demonstration of faith and love, became filled with a sense of love and great admiration for him; they had many lengthy discussions together, meditating on many subjects'. Privately circulated draft of FOCYS, 'Cheikh Yacouba Sylla ou le sens d'un combat (1906–1988)' (Abidjan, 1999), 24.

[35] FOCYS, 'Sens d'un combat', 54. There is some evidence that the tensions that currently surround the precise definition of the relationship between Yacouba and Hamallah are reflected in these stories. At stake was the debate between Ahmadou Sylla and Maître Cheickna Sylla as to whether Yacouba should be seen as a *shaykh* in his own right, the founder of his own *tarîqa*, or rather as simply a prominent disciple of Hamallah. The most extravagant tales of generosity to Hamallah, which appear in Cheickna's hagiography, come close to implying that the gifts between Nioro and Gagnoa were given among equals. Ahmadou, by contrast, made it clear that Nioro, as the 'pole', had greater obligations towards Gagnoa than Gagnoa did towards Nioro. But he too stressed the return gifts given to Hamallah's sons. Ahmadou Sylla, Treichville, 3 May 2001.

[36] Aliou 'Mama' Sylla and Fodie Doukoure, Gagnoa, 28 Apr. 2001; Cheickna Sylla, 21 May 2001; Ahmadou Sylla, Treichville, 6 July 2001.

journalist Siradiou Diallo. According to Diallo's version, which he claims to have received from a 'reliable source', when members of the SAA approached Houphouët in 1945 and asked him to stand for election to the French Constituent Assembly, he agreed on the condition that he receive the support of two men: the Moro Naba of Ouagadougou and Yacouba Sylla. The support of the Moro Naba having been secured,[37] Houphouët traveled to Gagnoa, arriving in the middle of the night, and obtained an audience with Yacouba. 'Papa', Houphouët is reported to have said, 'my friends have pressed me to declare myself a candidate for the next elections to the French Constituent Assembly. I have thought about it a lot, but I cannot accede to this request unless I have not only your permission, but also your complete support and your prayers'.[38]

Houphouët-Boigny then presented Yacouba with an offering: two small jars filled with gold nuggets. Yacouba accepted Houphouët's request for support, but not this considerable present, telling him:

I am sorry, but I cannot accept your gift. Keep it, you will have greater need of it than I. As for the rest, I want you to know once and for all that our excellent relationship can be founded neither on gold, nor on silver, nor on any kind of material good. I encourage you to present yourself for the election and my prayers will accompany you. However many opponents confront you, have no fear, you will carry the day. And you will go far, for that is your destiny. Your enemies will not stop you for this is the will of Allah the All-Powerful. The only compensation I want from you is a personal pledge before God. Promise me that no matter what the circumstances, and however high you may be placed one day, that you will never shed human blood.[39]

Granting that the story may be apocryphal, it is of considerable significance for what it tells us as a myth about Yacouba's role in the political culture of post-war Côte d'Ivoire. Read against the cultural texts of Baoulé elites who dominated politics in Côte d'Ivoire for nearly four decades, its meaning is fairly clear. Within the symbolic repertoire of Akan culture and religion, gold was a very special substance. In his famous discussion of Asante political culture, T. C. McCaskie described gold as the fundamental symbol of accumulation in general, conceptualized as a social act that helped constitute 'the fragile defensible space called culture', and that expressed the very essence of humanness. The 'assimilated presence' of wealth, and most sublimely gold, 'was part of the most fundamental equation, the strengthening of culture (the realm of man) against nature (the realm of non-man)'. Insofar as gold also symbolized the systems of political authority and the prerogatives of personal power, the gift of gold was an act of patronage that conferred authority and obligation even as it established the superiority of giver over receiver.[40] In a sense then, Houphouët-Boigny's offer of gold

[37] In fact, the story collapses a complex series of events, including two separate ballots, in which Houphouët was forced to defeat Tenga Ouedraogo, the 'Mossi' candidate with strong support in the Haute-Côte districts. See Zolberg, *One-Party Government*, 69–71.

[38] Siradiou Diallo, *Houphouët-Boigny: le médecin, le planteur et le ministre* (*1900*(*?*)*-1960*) (Paris, 1993), 92–3.

[39] *Ibid*. 93. The most detailed version of this story that I heard from a member of the community came in an interview with Cheickna Sylla, Abidjan, 12 Mar. 2001.

[40] See T. C. McCaskie, 'Accumulation: wealth and belief in Asante history: I: To the close of the nineteenth century', *Africa*, 53 (1983), 23–43, and 'Accumulation: wealth and

to Yacouba was an offer of patronage, an assertion of the kind of political culture Houphouët intended to inaugurate and, for the Yacoubists, a dramatization of Houphouët's Baoulé-ness. Yacouba's rejection of this gift thus stood as an assertion of his independence from both Houphouët's authority and a particular civilizational code.

The story takes on a different meaning, however, when read alongside the signs that clustered around Yacouba and his community. Gold as substance and symbol had been central to Yacouba's moral reforms during his early preaching career in Kaédi. As the centerpiece of his attack on inequalities of wealth, he had banned the wearing of any gold. Since gold was also often an important symbol of Soninke women's status and power, such a ban also participated in a broader critique of women's comportment. Both critiques were extended into an attack on bridewealth and on the use of commodities to negotiate kinship and belonging, so that the absence of gold became a visible sign of membership in the community. In stories that circulated in West Africa as well as among African emigrants in France, rumors about gold were used to mock Yacouba and his followers. People claimed he had banned gold among his followers only to depress its value and acquire it more cheaply on the side. In an inversion of Yacouba's attacks on gold, the metal became a sign of Yacouba's fraudulence, of his use of his spiritual authority to trick his followers out of their wealth, and thus of his interest only in self-aggrandizement.[41] Both within the community and among its critics, then, gold was a corrupting sign that could taint even those who claimed to reject it. Accepting or trading in gold was to become nothing more than a 'marabout'; it was to partake in the uncontrolled conversion of a spiritual figure's spiritual power into wealth and influence.[42]

Yacouba's rejection of Houphouët-Boigny's gift was thus able to condense a set of overlapping but divergent meanings. The rejection of gold carried with it echoes of the abolition of bridewealth; it resonated with the community's claims that its labor and accumulation had purely spiritual meanings; it was a rejection of the moral rhetoric according to which acquisition represented the triumph of the human over the natural. Refusing this particular gift from Houphouët also served to assert a particular definition of giving – an unequal exchange in which moral authority rested with the giver – and defined other kinds of transactions as false gifts, as forms of corruption. It was with this distinction that Yacouba asserted his independence from the crass realm of political competition. The conditions Yacouba placed on helping Houphouët were similarly overdetermined. Though an obvious plea for Houphouët to act with constraint in his quest for power in general, they also gestured at the practice of human sacrifice, seen by many northerners, then as now, as a key feature of Akan or more generally

---

belief in Asante history: II: The twentieth century', *Africa*, 56 (1986), 3–24. The quotation is from 'Nineteenth century', 28.

[41] Marie-Thérèse Abela de la Rivière, 'Les Sarakolé et leur emigration vers la France', (thèse de troisième cycle, Paris, 1977), 118–35.

[42] It was of course gold's similar position as the general equivalent value form that intrigued Marx. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1: *The Process of Capitalist Production*, ed. Frederick Engles, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York, 1967).

'southern' political authority.[43] Yacouba's rejection of Houphouët's gift and his setting forth of new rules governing exchange and friendship thus asserted the superiority of one type of culture over another, with the two men standing in as symbols for the north–south cultural divide as a whole.

But that was not all it did. The idea that Islam or any other 'modern' religion should come to replace Akan 'customs' and the rule of ostentatious acquisition harmonized well with Houphouët-Boigny's post-independence rhetoric about religion and public culture and proved easily turned to the President's own ends. In 1961 and 1962 a series of bombings and assassination attempts on Kwame Nkrumah in neighboring Ghana had occasioned that nation's official transformation into a one-party state. Soon afterwards Houphouët denounced a series of similar conspiracies against himself and his administration, and quickly moved to imprison his perceived rivals and clamp down on dissent. This political crisis provided Houphouët with an opportunity to lay out his vision of the role of religion in the state. Rumors spread that witchcraft was at work in these shadowy attacks. Houphouët encouraged this line of thinking, and elaborated it into a statement of policy. In a wide-ranging speech made to high-ranking officials, diplomats and the families of those detained (some of whom had already died in detention), Houphouët explained that many of those who had conspired against him had consulted 'marabouts' and made use of 'fetishes'. Such practices were not, he insisted, to be dismissed casually as superstitious or backward. Instead, they reflected a deep moral crisis in the country:

> Our foreign brothers, notably the westerners, see all problems through their western judgment, with their western reasons. But we are in Africa. It is time that we recognize the motivating forces in certain actions that do not coincide with the forces that motivate action in countries outside black Africa. We all have behind us, from the African archbishop to the lowest Catholic, from the Imam to the smallest believer, from the pastor to the smallest Protestant, nothing but animism and, at most, 2, 3 or 4 generations of Christians or Muslims.

He himself, he noted, was 'born into an animist family'. But it was not animism or traditionalism itself that was to blame for political obscurantism, cruelty and instability. For, he insisted, 'animism is tolerant … A fetishist never kills in cold blood'. The 'great evil' was rather 'atheism, for formerly the fear of fetishes gripped society, and so there were no thieves'. But today, 'we have destroyed animism without replacing it with the serious practice of our religions … We go to Mecca hiding the truth; there is no believer if there is no decency (*honnêteté*)'. Fetishism without the coherent social order that had supported animism was nothing other than immoral anarchy. The only

[43] Most Asante did not conceptualize ritual or judicial killings as 'sacrifices', with all the connotations of such a term in Judeo-Christian-Muslim contexts. It is not clear that this held for Asante's Muslim communities. The apparent lack of open criticism of the practice could indicate that Kumasi's *malams* found a more accommodationist solution to the relationship between religious authority and state power. See Clifford Williams, 'Asante: human sacrifice or capital punishment? An assessment of the period 1807–1874', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* (hereafter *IJAHS*), 21 (1988), 433–41, and Ivor Wilks, 'Asante: human sacrifice or capital punishment? A rejoinder', *IJAHS*, 21 (1988), 443–52.

possible solution in the modern world was to 'place God at the heart of all our concerns' so that the malevolent forces of fetishes could be controlled.[44]

This was not quite the role that Yacouba had envisaged for Islam in the new democracy. Rather it reflected the way Houphouët-Boigny – and no doubt others – perceived the fungibility of the moral and spiritual support Yacouba had offered him and the guarantee of civilization he had provided in turn. The Yacoubists did try to reassert control over their *shaykh*'s tutelary authority. According to the community's semi-official hagiography, Yacouba attempted to temper the President's repressive measures, reminding him of his pledge. He 'asked Houphouët-Boigny not to take the lives of those suspected or presumed of being the authors [of plots against him]. The Cheikh reminded him of the advice that he gave him never to spill human blood, man being the most beloved of God's creatures'.[45]

But Houphouët was a master rhetorician. In the very same speech in which he denounced those who plotted against him, Houphouët-Boigny playfully offered his audience two jokes that echoed (who knows how intentionally?) the rumors about his gift to Yacouba Sylla and those about the origin of Yacouba Sylla's own wealth. In an aside that superficially jarred with the overall message of his performance, Houphouët mocked the acquisitiveness and duplicity of his own Baoulé forebears, to the reported laughter of his audience: 'I remember how during the difficult days I was told … that the bankrupt chief of Daboukro wanted to sell his gold. The gold that the Baoulés had sold to his ancestors. I immediately went to Dabou to acquire this treasure. How great was my surprise: it wasn't gold, but copper'. Then, in discussing the ways venal 'marabouts' had corrupted his closest advisors by predicting futures for them that were in excess of their true destiny, he joked: 'If a marabout had predicted for me an outrageous destiny, to become the President of France, or of the UN, or of Africa, I, Houphouet, who knows about fetishism, would not have given him the opportunity to make such predictions for someone else'.[46]

Houphouët gave effect to his moral rhetoric in dramatic fashion when, in 1967, his maternal aunt died and he organized a state funeral for her in Yamoussoukro. Using the event as an opportunity to demonstrate how 'traditional' beliefs were to be handled at the highest, most visible level of the polity, Houphouët explained that he had cleansed the ritual of all objectionable features, leaving only the minimum necessary to signal the respect a 'son' was expected to provide for his 'mother'. His aunt had 'forgone her [biological] son's right to inherit from the President', as would have otherwise been the case in a matrilineal Akan family. Furthermore, 'there were no human sacrifices at the funeral; the ceremonies were celebrated in broad daylight and in the presence of strangers; [and] the burial was not carried out by family members but by a public undertaker'.[47]

This funeral sketched the limits of acceptable public religious practice. As with his response to the reported plots, Houphouët's decision may have been

[44] Transcript in André Boyer, 'L'exposé complet du Président', *Abidjan-Matin*, 16 Apr. 1964, 3, 2. See also Samba Diarra, *Les faux complots d'Houphouët-Boigny* (Paris, 1997); Zolberg, *One-Party Government*, 352–5.

[45] FOCYS, *Cheikh Yacouba Sylla ou le sens d'un combat* (Abidjan, 2002), 97.

[46] Boyer, 'Exposé du Président', 2–3.

[47] Zolberg, *One-Party Government*, 366.

informed by regional political rhetoric: only a year before his aunt's funeral the coup leaders who overthrew Nkrumah in Ghana had made much of their claim to have found embarrassing evidence of Nkrumah's long-rumored dependence on human sacrifice.[48] Usefully for the Yacoubist imagination, this 'reformed' version of a Baoulé funeral removed most of those features that would have been in conflict with the practices of Ivoirian Muslims. Secrecy and family involvement in the burial were codes for the invocations of the powers of ancestors. Matrilineal inheritance was similarly an unpalatable symbol of Akan distinctiveness, subverting both the *sharîʿa* and Sudanic conceptions of masculinity.[49] By reinventing the 'extravagant' funerals that served as an important cultural marker of Bété and Baoulé identities and that stood as one of the most commonly remarked-upon dividing lines between the 'north' and the 'south', Houphouët was able to retain this cultural marker while deflecting criticism that he relied on witchcraft to stay in power.

The stories about Houphouët's and Yacouba's gold have, then, been creatively ambiguous, their meanings shifting with the context in which they are told. For those outside the community they help make the case that the President succeeded in 'capturing' the moral assertion Yacouba put forth. The Yacoubists in turn use them to take credit for the eschewing of human sacrifices and the broader moral transformation it symbolizes, enabling a vision in which Yacouba is firmly in the vanguard of Houphouët-Boigny's project of 'modernizing' the country's political culture. This line of thinking was also present in Yacouba's own reflections on his role in the development of Côte d'Ivoire and on his relationship with the other inhabitants of Gagnoa. In 1970, the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the independence of Côte d'Ivoire was held in Gagnoa. During the festival, considerable attention was focused on Yacouba Sylla and his friendship with Houphouët-Boigny, and the government newspaper *Fraternité Matin* gave Yacouba the opportunity to discuss his life and the history of his community with the public for the first time. His relationship with 'the Bété' (the 'autochthons' of the area around Gagnoa) featured prominently in this self portrait, and he firmly if subtly asserted his civilizing influence over them:

> Our community is defined by unity, by faith, by work and by discipline. If the Bété define themselves in relation to me, I define myself in relation to them! Since my definitive establishment here, I have found among the Bété people understanding, tolerance, great fraternity, which has enabled my community and me to live in great harmony with them, conforming to our philosophy.[50]

These last words established the asymmetry that he saw in his relationship with his neighbors: harmonious co-existence and ethno-religious tolerance were qualities shared by the Yacoubists and the inhabitants of Gagnoa, but it was Yacouba who elevated this ecumenicalism to a philosophical level that enabled it become a political project.

[48] Ellis and ter Haar, *Worlds of Power*, 90–1.

[49] Which themselves typically sought to subvert the *sharîʿa* from the opposite direction by finding ways to arrange for effective male primogeniture or gerontocratic inheritance.

[50] *Fraternité Matin* (Abidjan), 7 Aug. 1970, vii. It is not clear whether these quotes came directly from Yacouba or from his son Ahmadou Sylla, who was already acting as his father's *porte-parole*. The interviewer noted that Ahmadou had been his interlocutor, but he presents the quoted material as coming from Yacouba himself.

This gesture was made more explicit later on in the same interview, when Yacouba discussed his role in mobilizing local sentiment in favor of independence:

> I knew that the Bété people would come to grasp and understand the necessity of Ivoirian unity. Just now I spoke to you of my religious philosophy whose essential theme is unity. When you consider that this religion that we practiced in Côte d'Ivoire embraced Ivoirians, Voltaics, Malians, Senegalese, Mauritanians, to the point that the Ivoirians in [the community] spoke perfect Soninke, which is our original language. That seems to me to be a good definition of African unity.[51]

This suggestion, that the religious philosophy of the community was itself the model on which Ivoirian unity was based, and which utterly conflated unity and assimilation, was more than just self-aggrandizement. In this context it was nothing less than a claim to co-authorship of the Ivoirian state's modernity.

YACOUBA SYLLA'S LEGACY

The rise of religious tension and ethnic nationalism in contemporary Côte d'Ivoire has forced members of the community to make claims about Yacouba's contribution to the modernization and civilization of Côte d'Ivoire that are much more explicit than Yacouba's were in 1970. In particular, they present Yacouba's decision to stay in Côte d'Ivoire and dedicate himself to economic activity as part of a self-conscious, modernizing, democratizing, civilizing mission. Two of Yacouba's sons, Maître Cheickna Sylla and Cheick Ahmadou Sylla, presented Yacouba's educational and philanthropic relationship towards the population of Gagnoa in paternalistic terms that relied heavily on cultural typing. Yacouba selected Gagnoa as his new home because there was 'so much that needed to be done there'. He wanted to set an example for those around him: his economic success was a demonstration of self-sufficiency and 'race pride'; the cinemas he opened were intended to 'inform and educate' the residents of Gagnoa; and the wealth he generated enabled him to 'feed, lodge, dress and heal' the children and indigents of the town. Even the transport company that he established was inspired by the plight of 'the Bété'. Yacouba observed them 'moving around' frequently, visiting neighboring villages for commerce or socializing, but noted that they were blocked by the dense forest in which they lived, and that they carried their heavy loads themselves. He decided that facilitating their movement would not only help them in the short term, but would contribute to their becoming more civilized, following the example of the cultures of the mobile Muslims to the north.[52]

[51] *Ibid*. 7 Aug. 1970, viii. There is an explicit echo here of Houphouët's policy of 'African Unity'.

[52] FOCYS, *Sens d'un combat*, 67, 90–5. Aliou 'Mama' Sylla, Fodie Doukoure and Tijane Sylla, Gagnoa, 28 Apr. 2001. Cheickna Sylla, 12 Mar. 2001, 19 May 2001 and 21 May 2001. This was also the way in which Yacouba viewed his locally infamous 1966 price war with the Ivoirian Transporters' Association: by undercutting the Association's prices and even operating at a loss, he provided a 'public service' for the local community.

A tension runs through this rhetoric, involving the precise nature of Yacouba's relationship with Houphouët-Boigny and the politics of the 1940s and 1950s. On one hand, Yacouba's civilizing influence over Ivoirians in general is presented as being something particular to his religious background, associated with his 'northern' cultural heritage, and part of the uplifting effect he had on Houphouët. On the other hand, Houphouët's project is made an equal companion to Yacouba's, sometimes even subsuming the latter in the larger push for African dignity. Part of this tension derived from the complications of expressing Yacouba's own interests – which were primarily religious and, insofar as they had social expression, were concerned with the dignity of his own followers – as part of an unfolding world-historical (religious) project of social reform that both enabled and problematized the articulation of his community with various secular political projects with analogous but not identical goals. In that sense it revived the old problem in reformist Sufism of the relationship between the *shaykh* and the *sultân*.

Part of this uncertainty also came from the difficult political atmosphere that has hung over Côte d'Ivoire since the mid-1960s. Gagnoa and the nearby *canton* of Guébié were centers of 'Bété' opposition, seeing attacks on 'Dioula' neighborhoods and Yacoubist compounds in the 1950s and a major secessionist movement in 1970.[53] These events became memorialized as foundational moments in Bété consciousness during the declining economic fortunes and political instability of the 1990s. Côte d'Ivoire's political deterioration after 1999 capped a period of rapid acceleration in the political instrumentalization of ethno-religious identities. Houphouët's rhetoric of cultural nationalism founded on political unity, hospitality and mutual enrichment – given the ill-fated name of '*ivoirité*' under President Henri Konan Bédié – quickly gave way to fierce rejections of Akan supremacy, accusations of anti-immigrant xenophobia and counter accusations of foreign meddling on the parts of various mobilized groups. Three political parties (Bédié's PDCI; the neo-liberal Rassemblement des Républicains [RDR], led by Alassane Dramane Ouattara [popularly known as 'ADO'] and frequently associated with the interests of the north; and the center-left Front Populaire Ivoirien [FPI] led by long-time Gagnoa-based dissident and historian Laurent Gbagbo) emerged as the leading conduits for such rhetoric. Political posturing was paralleled by frequent outbreaks of violence against Burkinabé and other northern immigrants and by a series of heated debates in which certain politicians called into question the ability of *ivoirité* to integrate the country's northern populations.[54] The situation deteriorated further with the *coup d'état* of 24 December 1999, the invalidation by the Supreme Court on 6 October 2000 of all RDR and PDCI presidential candidates (which included all of the Muslim candidates for the office), and the presidential election itself on 22 October. Violence continued through the

---

For the quite different interpretation that was given to this conflict by the Transporters' Association, see Lewis, 'Transporters' Association', 415–21.

[53] See, among others, Diarra, *Les faux complots*.

[54] See Pierre Kipré, 'Les discours politiques de décembre 1999 à l'élection présidentielle d'octobre 2000: thèmes, enjeux et confrontations', in Marc Le Pape and Claudine Vidal (eds.), *Côte d'Ivoire, l'année terrible: 1999–2000* (Paris, 2002), 81–121.

next few months, particularly surrounding legislative elections and various rulings concerning Ouattara's eligibility for high office.

In the midst of this crisis the leaders of the community reassessed their claims to moral authority, and their responses illustrate both the flexibility of the Yacoubist attitude towards modernization and its limits. Yacouba's second-oldest son, Cheick Ahmadou Sylla, linked the community directly to reformist Islam and took upon himself the task of explaining Islam's relationship with democracy to the readership of *Le Jour*, an independent newspaper in Abidjan. His article, entitled 'Islam has no candidate' and published on 22 August 2000, was, on the surface, intended to disrupt what Ahmadou, a faithful PDCI member, called the 'amalgamation' in popular discourse of 'ADO = Dioula = Muslim'. On a deeper level, however, Cheick Ahmadou believed explaining Islam to the Ivoirian population was crucial at a moment when anti-Muslim sentiment was poised to drag the nation into chaotic civil strife. After cataloging the historical and current abuses of all religious traditions by demagogues he proceeded, in his own inimitable style, to describe what he took to be the nature of Muslim social identity and its political expression. At the same time, he restated the major themes of the Yacoubist community's historical memory – Sufism, moral reform and the wisdom of a persecuted people – and wove them into an argument about the appropriate relationship between religious and political authority:

> The worship (*culte*), I mean to say the culture of solidarity [in Islam], is the magnificence of the relation between the believer and his All-powerful God … Muslim solidarity is the exigency of rigor and morality. Samuel Taylor Coleridge speaks of the 'inflexible correctness of the man of Islam'. We say Sufism and not alchemy. Islam (Submission) consists almost entirely of that esotericism so well incarnated by our well-loved mother Rabia Alhadawiya. At first a slave woman, she was then freed and took up residence in Bassora in the eighth century after a long wandering in the desert. Her conception of the spiritual life allowed for neither fear of hell, nor the reward of heaven, but sought instead a disinterested love of God: 'Oh Lord! If it is the fear of hell that pushes me to love you, throw me into hell; if it is the desire for heaven, do not let me enter therein; but if I approach you for you alone, do not hide your eternal beauty from me!' That is our religion.

Lest the political point be missed, he continued (a bit) more explicitly:

> In the same category of ideas, when it comes time to select an imam, any person who declares himself a candidate is ipso facto disqualified. This goes for all other elected positions. The procedure for selection is the choice by consensus of a person on whose intellectual, physical and moral capabilities (so far as required by the position) all are in agreement. If, therefore, we choose to take part in electoral mechanisms that issue from a civilization and a culture so different from our own that they are in opposition, it is as citizens concerned to maintain laicism and respectful of the unity of our country.[55]

Ahmadou Sylla's younger brother, Maître Cheickna Sylla, mobilized Yacouba's legacy quite differently. With a new, Gagnoa-based president in power and the ascension of the more xenophobic strands of *ivoirité*, the memory of the old hostilities in Gagnoa between the PDCI and various Bété

[55] Cheick Ahmadou Yacouba Sylla, 'L'Islam n'a pas de candidat', *Le Jour* (Abidjan), 22 Aug. 2000.

political figures was an unpleasant and even dangerous specter. Cheickna thus subsumed his father's alliance with Houphouët-Boigny into a broader campaign 'for the liberation of black Africans'.[56] He highlighted Yacouba's claim in 1970 that the French administration had used colonial settlers in Gagnoa to turn the Bété against the RDA and, by extension, him, implying that such internal conflicts were only a ploy of colonialist or neo-colonialist forces.[57] He similarly reinterpreted the initial conflicts around Yacouba's teachings in Kaédi in 1929 and 1930 as an example of colonial divide-and-rule tactics, giving the Yacoubists a long pedigree as African nationalists.[58]

Both efforts to mobilize Yacouba's legacy sought to preserve the moral authority that derived from not being corrupted by the more sordid aspects of political competition. Although Ahmadou openly supported the PDCI and Cheickna was associated by many with the RDR, both cultivated an air of independence allowing Ahmadou to speak publicly against violence and allowing Cheickna to serve on the Commission for National Reconciliation put into place following Gbagbo's election. In their efforts to establish their vital role in the country's economic development and democratization, the Yacoubists followed the same strategy that Marie Miran observed among other Sufis in Abidjan: in an era of an increasing public discourse about 'modernity', and with *ahl al-Sunna*-style reformists and other religious modernizers frequently able to present Sufis as superstitious or backward, Sufis had to adopt a modernizing posture themselves or risk political obsolescence.[59] At the same time, though, the Yacoubist affirmation of their place in Ivoirian modernity existed in irresolvable tension with a sense of detachment from some aspect of the host society, whether its culture, its religion, its political mechanisms or its party. They thus confirmed their *shaykh*'s normative independence as a religious leader, an independence well symbolized in Yacouba's insistence on his autonomy as the gift giver and Houphouët's obligations as the gift receiver, rather than the equality of the partners in an exchange.

One of the most perceptive historians of Africa has suggested that modernity always appears to the outside observer as an unpredictable, discontinuous 'solvent of past histories' and as a Weberian 'disenchantment of the world'.[60] But historians may find it more useful to abandon modernity as an objective fact, whose origins and modalities of appropriation can be debated, and think instead about modernization as a figure of rhetoric that informs a set of strategies, as a conceptual tool used by the people in our narratives

[56] FOCYS to author, 3 June 2001. In my interview with the historical committee of FOCYS on 24 May 2001 the committee made an even greater attempt to minimize the importance of Houphouët-Boigny in Yacouba's work.

[57] *Fraternité Matin*, 7 August 1970, vii.

[58] FOCYS, 'Sens d'un combat', 35–6; Cheickna Sylla, 21 May 2001. In this Cheickna's rhetoric also parallels the 'nationalist' historiography of Alioune Traoré and others who present the history of the Hamawiyya in general as an example of French 'divide-and-rule' machinations.

[59] Marie Miran, 'La Tijâniyya à Abidjan, entre désuétude et renaissance? L'oeuvre moderniste d'El Hâjj Ahmed Tijânî Bâ, cheikh tijânî réformiste en Côte d'Ivoire contemporaine', in Triaud and Robinson (eds.), *La Tijâniyya*, 439–67.

[60] T. C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village, 1850–1950* (London, 2000), 116.

rather than as something that happens to them. From this vantage-point not all modernizations are predicated on rupture, dissolution or disenchantment. Yacouba Sylla's followers spoke to one another about economic and political development and addressed themselves to Houphouët-Boigny, the Ivoirian government and their neighbors using the rhetorical and intellectual repertoire of West African Sufism and not the vocabulary of, for example, free labor or citizenship or the circulation of capital. For them, modernity was a confirmation of both the presentness of the past and of God's firm presence in past and present alike. The Yacoubist vision of modernity emerged not from the West but from the North (of West Africa), and not as a de-centering alternative to Western techno-politico-economic transformations, but as its own self-contained, fully centered project. In any case its place of origin mattered less than the fact that space itself was nothing more than a means by which God could demonstrate his ability to transcend what appeared to humans as binary oppositions. It was a vision in which modernity mattered, but only as the most recent manifestation of God's grace, channeled via the endlessly repeated transmission of blessings from one Sufi teacher to another.