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50 Years of Research on Islam and West African History

A Literature Review by David Robinson, Michigan State University.

In composing this, I am struck by the remarkable good fortune I had of working with so many outstanding and generous collaborators over the years; African, European and North American, as I labored on the history of Senegal and Mali. Those collaborators included informants, guides, intermediaries, translators, graduate students and fellow researchers.

Actually, I should say close to 60 years of experience, if not research, in and on West Africa. Let me explain. It began for me in a work camp in Huguenot country in southern France, midway through college. The sponsor was the World Council of Churches, and it was 1958, after my sophomore year at Davidson College. About 15 of us were rebuilding dry walls in an old refugee camp of the Huguenots, refugees from the persecution of Louis XIV and others. Among my fellow campers were an Israeli Arab and a black American student from Alabama. We spent the evenings in discussion. The Israeli talked about what it was like to live as a marginalized person in Israel. The Alabaman and I, a South Carolina white boy, were asked to talk about segregation. I really didn't know how to defend - or if it was defensible - the system in which I was schooled and lived.

The next summer I went to work for James Robinson, director of Crossroads Africa and pastor of the Church of the Master in West Harlem. Black pastor, black congregation, and the creator of a program called Crossroads Africa. He prevailed in getting one of his parishioner families to take me in as a boarder for the summer. My hosts were a railroad porter and his wife who worked at home.

After graduating from Davidson and doing a year at Union Theological Seminary in NYC, I embarked on a Peace Corps-like program in Dakar, Senegal. The sponsor was CIMADE (the Comité Intermouvement auprès des Evacués), an organization formed after World War II for settling refugees from eastern Europe in France; it was particularly active in the late 1950s at the height of the French war in Algeria. And CIMADE sent me to spend a week in Algiers and Medea, amid the curfews and explosions that marked the evening hours.

Senegal was newly independent and governed by a bicephalic administration of Mamadou Dia and Leopold Senghor. I lived in Grand Dakar in a social center, trying to teach French, learn a bit of Wolof, and do youth work. At some point I read Cheikh Hamidou Kane's best seller, *Aventure Ambigue*. I was drawn to the character of Samba Diallo, trying to live up to Islamic and Futanke ideals amid the cultural intrusion of the French and French schools. Certainly Samba's setting in Futa Toro and Kane's origins in Futa Toro had to be different from the craziness and westernness of the big city of Dakar - or at least so I thought.

The next episode in my trajectory came in 1964, in the PhD program in African History at Columbia University, and living in NYC again. I studied with Graham Irwin, a Southeast Asian historian who had done a few years in newly independent Ghana and re-treaded as an Africanist.

A few years later he was joined by Marcia Wright, a more bona fide Africanist working on East Africa. Somehow, after an African Studies conference, I also got adopted by Philip Curtin and spent a semester at Wisconsin alongside Joe Miller, Allen Isaacman, Paul Lovejoy and several others who would form the first generation of Africanist historians in the USA. Out there I started learning Pulaar and preparing for research in Futa Toro - alongside a more bona fide Curtin student named Jim Johnson.

In 1967 Jim and I shared a penthouse apartment below the Marche Sandaga in Dakar for the next year or so. We were both working on Futa. It was a time in African history when the premium was placed on doing pre-colonial history of African states and societies - before the Europeans took over. We decided to divide up the area - west for Jim, centered on Podor, and east for me, centered on Matam. He ended up writing on the early Islamic regime or Almamate of Futa from the late 18th century, while I did the later period down to the French conquest in 1890.

My inaugural trip to Futa was by boat, on the famous Abou El Moghdad, which sailed (or steamed) out of St. Louis up the Senegal River. It took several days to get to Matam. It featured a first class of Europeans and a deck class of Africans, in good old colonial style. I got off in Matam and imposed myself on two sons of the Futanke scholar Cheikh Moussa Kamara - Amadou and Moustapha. By that time, I had been working at IFAN, with the encouragement of Oumar Ba, a Mauritanian Futanke, and had been introduced to the works of Cheikh Moussa - especially the Zuhur al-Basaatiin. The Kamara sons treated me well, made me feel at home, and introduced me around town.

On my next trip I drove a bright red Deux Chevaux across the Ferlo, went to Matam and then to Thilogne, where I met Thierno Seydou Kane, *toorodo*, *hajj*, former colonial chief, and grandson of Abdul Bokar Kane, who became the focus of my research. Thierno became my adopted father and my host in Thilogne. Some years later his son Moustapha came to study with me at Michigan State. From time to time Tierno Seydou suggested I convert to Islam, join the Tijaniyya and accompany him on a pilgrimage to Medina Gonasse.

Equally or more important for me was meeting and bonding with Moussa Gueye, a *burnaajo* who had been working with Animation Rurale, the bottom-up mobilization program pushed by Mamadou Dia. Moussa became my constant companion as we drove around eastern Futa conducting interviews in Pulaar. His contacts, and his ability to inspire confidence, were invaluable as we created a precious set of interviews for the history of Futa in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Jim worked away in western Futa and together we deposited open-reel copies of our cassettes at IFAN (where they unfortunately disappeared in a year's time).

Jim and I finished our dissertations on Futa and got teaching positions at Northwestern and Yale respectively. I revised my thesis and published it as *Chiefs and Clerics. Abdul Bokar Kan and the History of Futa Toro* in 1975. It featured Abdul Bokar, a bold, pragmatic and not very pious leader, not the Samba Diallo of *Aventure Ambigue*. I had also identified my next project, a history of the military jihad of al-hajj Umar, the famous native son of Futa. I had some hesitation and reservations about embarking on a work about Umar, partly because of the massive emigration that he organized from Futa and his transformation of the Islamic practice of many Futanke in the late 19th century. I had also absorbed some of the attitude and distance of Cheikh Moussa towards the military jihad, as opposed to the greater jihad of striving that Cheikh Babou symbolizes in his book about Amadou Bamba: *Fighting the Greater Jihad*.

When I went back to Africa in 1976 and 1979, it was to Mali with only brief stops in Senegal. I was in pursuit of al-hajj Umar and his jihad, which was in areas within the confines of colonial Soudan and today's Mali. At this time my funding came from a grant from the NEH that I had obtained along with Louis Brenner, a friend and colleague since my Columbia days. It called for the microfilming of Arabic manuscripts in Timbuktu, at the Centre Ahmed Baba where Mahmoud Zouber was the director. We constructed a board with strobes and a support for a camera which I transported to Timbuktu in 1979, and wrote a manual for usage in French for the system; I don't think the system was ever used very much, but Louis and I had high hopes for it at the time. And Louis, my research companion from the days of the doctoral program at Columbia in the 1960s, went on to do his splendid work on Bandiagara and Tierno Bokar Tal. For my research on Umar, I went to Alpha Oumar Konare; then, I went to the head of the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Bamako helped me secure the services of Almamy Malik Yettara, a marvelous amateur historian with wonderful language skills and access to Niger, Segou, Mopti, Bandiagara, and the other centers where I needed to work - he filled the role that Moussa Gueye had occupied in Futa in the late 1960s. In Almamy's case, he lives on in a splendid biography by Bernard Salvaing.

In Bamako I enjoyed wonderful company and meals at the home of Alpha, his wife Adam Konare Ba and their family. In Segou I shared a house with Jim Bingen, then completing the research for his PhD in political science from UCLA, and he and I shared the wonderful meals that Madani Tal, a fourth generation descendant of Umar, would send over. I also met Richard Roberts, who was doing his dissertation research on the Middle Niger for the University of Toronto, and began a lifelong friendship with him. I had already met his mentor, Marty Klein, while doing research in Senegal.

Almamy provided the introductions, selected the informants, and provided the translation for sessions in Bamana, Pulaar and Arabic as we created an invaluable collection, the value of which you can see in *The Holy War of Umar Tal*, which appeared in English in 1985 and in French a few years later (thanks to the interest and investment of Robert Ageneau of Karthala). The hospitality of Mali and Malians was formidable for me, and it is painful for me to think of the violence and conflicts in today's Mali.

After 1979, all of my research trips were to Senegal - Dakar and Saint Louis in particular. The History Department at UCAD had, by this time, undergone a transformation initiated in part by Yves Person, who spent several years at the university in the late 60s and early 70s, before taking his post at the Universite de Paris I. Boubacar Barry, Abdoulaye Bathily, Mohammed Mbodj, and Mamadou Diouf - and a little later Penda Mbow and Ibrahima Thioub - blazed a new path in historical research on the states, societies and relations of Senegambia and the wider region. They trained a new generation of students, supervised an incredibly rich collection of senior and master's essays, and provided great insight and collaboration for budding American historians like me. I, along with Marty Klein, Lucie Colvin, Eunice Charles, Vicki Coifman, James Searing and a host of others, benefitted from their wisdom and experience. Charles Becker had by the 1980s settled into a position in Kaolack, and then Dakar and was an incredible resource for visiting scholars as well as UCAD faculty with a wonderful library that. Becker played a big role in sending Mamadou Moustapha Kane, son of Tierno Seydou, to MSU (where I had assumed a post in African history in 1979) to pursue his doctoral studies - my first student from Senegal. Moustapha wrote a very pioneering dissertation on the colonial history of Futa Toro, which had become a backwater

of Senegal (and Mauritania) in the 20th century, and took up a position in the History Department at UCAD.

One of his fellow students at the MSU program in African History was John Hanson, who wrote his dissertation on the Umarian emigration and settlement in Niore and Kaarta in the late 19th century, which became *Migrants, Jihad and Muslim Authority in West Africa*, and took the Umarian story to greater depth than I did in my book.

In the late 1980s I joined forces with Becker, Diadie Ba, and Jean Schmitz, who was working on a sociology doctorat d'état on Futa, and others to try to make available some of the work of Kamara in translation. With Schmitz's encouragement, I wrote my own article on Kamara that appeared in the *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* in 1988. At the same time, we took copies of the IFAN version of the Zuhur Al-Basaatiin to Paris, where Schmitz enlisted a team of translators and annotators, whose work appeared as *Florilege au Jardin des Noirs*, vol 1, published by the CNRS. It was an expensive enterprise, and the rough French translations of the rest of the work have still not seen the light of day. Connie Hilliard, Mbaye Lo and others have worked on other parts of the Kamara corpus since, but the true stature of this remarkable intellectual of the early 20th century has not yet been fully appreciated.

In the 1990s I teamed up with Louis Brenner and Jean-Louis Triaud, professor of the history department at Aix-en-Provence, to obtain two grants from the Collaborative Research program of NEH to study Islamic movements in West Africa. With those resources we brought together scholars for two conferences and two books. The first conference was held in 1993 in Aix-en-Provence, where Triaud was teaching, and the second in 1996 at Champaign-Urbana, where Charles Stewart had built his remarkable collection of manuscripts and resources around Mauritanian Islam. The first conference resulted in the publication of *Le Temps des Marabouts*, the second in *La Tijaniyya*, in both cases published by Karthala and Robert Ageneau. It was during that time that I was able to get to Trarza and Nouakchott, thanks to the hospitality of Abdel Wedoudould Cheikh and Dedoudould Abdallah.

By this time, several of us had joined forces with Mary Ellen Lane of the Center for American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC), based at the Smithsonian, to launch the first American center in Sub-Saharan Africa: the West African Research Center or WARC. Boubacar Barry, Mohammed Mbodj, Jeanne Tounkara and many others met in Washington for the launch, and WARC enjoyed the enthusiastic support of Mary Ellen in the years that followed. Under directors such as Wendy Wilson-Fall and now Ousmane Sene, WARC and its North American counterpart WARA (the West African Research Association), have become a real hub for research in West Africa. WARC has made the research process much more collegial, pleasant and productive.

WARC was very helpful to me as I embarked on research for *Paths of Accommodation*, in which I shifted my work from the pre-colonial to the colonial period, and to the relationships between the leading marabouts and the administration of the AOF. I created the designation Senegalo-Mauritanian zone to emphasize what I thought was a reality of the thinking of the marabouts and the French administrators. I used the terms civil society, intermediaries and Sons of Ndar to describe key institutions and personalities based in St. Louis, at the mouth of the Senegal River. This framework allowed me to treat the Sidiyya family and Saad Bou alongside Malik Sy and Amadu Bamba in one volume. The NEH sponsored volumes that Triaud and I engineered fed into this process, as well as the work of my second Senegalese student, Cheikh Anta Mbacke Babou, as he worked on the dissertation that led to *Fighting the Greater Jihad*. Cheikh and his

family hosted me in Mbacke (and Touba) during that time; it was a wonderful way to appreciate the Muridiyya movement and its strength.

I also spent a lot of time in St. Louis, the early capital of colonial Senegal and the jumping-off point for French expansion, as well as the institutional basis for Muslim Affairs and other colonial institutions. Not to mention the home of Bu El Mogdad and the Seck family. I also enjoyed the simulation of several MSU graduate students during this time. Hilary Jones focused on the Franco-Senegalese actors in St. Louis, which resulted in her book *The Metis of Senegal*. Tamba Mbayo worked on the interpreters, and then published *Muslim Interpreters in Colonial Senegal, 1850-1920: mediations of knowledge and power in the Lower and Middle Senegal River Valley*. Kalala Ngalamulume wrote a thesis on the social and health history of St. Louis. And Ghislaine Lydon helped me appreciate the richness and links of *bidaan* and Mauritanian history, which became her book *On Trans-Saharan Trails*.

After 2000, I did not do much research in Senegal or France, but became more of an armchair commentator from my base at MSU, and prepared the manuscript for *Muslim Societies in African History*, which appeared in Marty Klein's Cambridge series in 2004. By this time Mark Kornbluh and Dean Rehberger had developed the resource of Matrix, the Center for the Digital Humanities and Social Sciences. Matrix became an important stimulus for research on Africa and secured many grants for work. It was at Matrix that Catherine Foley and others created AODL, the African Online Digital Library.

It was also the time to work with my third Senegalese doctoral student, Ibra Sene, who, in addition to his work on Senegal prisons, led an effort to create an effective partnership between MSU and UCAD. I have been really blessed by my Senegalese doctoral students. Ibra is now teaching at Wooster in Ohio while Cheikh is thriving at the University of Pennsylvania. This is the time, I think, to conclude this memoir, which has already become much longer than Mbaye Lo anticipated when he first approached me. I appreciate the opportunity to reflect on my years of living in and working on West Africa.

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