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IN WEST AFRICAN ISLAMIC TEACHING:
A FULFULDE EXAMPLE**

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ORIGINALITY OF THOUGHT AND METHOD
IN WEST AFRICAN ISLAMIC TEACHING: A FULFULDE EXAMPLE¹

by Louis Brenner

Islamic education and Islamic thought in West Africa have not generally enjoyed a good press. Descriptions often emphasize repetitive and stultifying methods of instruction which rely heavily on memorization; and the writings of West African authors are usually criticized as lacking originality. These kinds of charges are not without foundation, and yet they do not provide a very full or balanced assessment of the situation. The primary concern of the West African scholarly community was the preservation and transmission of the Islamic religious tradition, as they understood it, in an unadulterated form. This religious tradition includes at its core a body of information: the Qur'an, the Hadith, and certain books of dogma and law almost universally studied in West Africa. But the tradition is not only knowledge; it prescribes certain modes of behavior and insists on certain conceptual patterns of thinking; in short and especially in Islam, it is meant to encompass all of life. The ideal Muslim teacher is one who is constantly seeking to help his students incorporate religious precepts into their ordinary lives. Consequently, whereas originality was unthinkable with respect to the tradition itself, there was much scope for experimentation and even innovation in the method of its transmission and explanation. This paper briefly explores the history and content of one particular teaching in the field of dogmatic theology which was susceptible to just such experimentation.

The KaBBe

Amadou Hampaté-Ba and Marcel Cardaire devote a considerable portion of their book, Tierno Bokar, le Sage de Bandiagara, to describing what they call the "Teaching" of Tierno Bokar.² This teaching was a kind of Islamic catechism which proceeded through several levels of instruction commencing with novices and concluding with a commentary connected with the Tijaniyya Sufi order, of which Tierno Bokar was a member. Instruction was given orally and was supported by a pattern of lines and dots, each of which represented an item in the catechism. This pattern, a copy of which has been appended to this paper, was a mnemonic device which aided one's memory in retaining the content of the teaching. It came to be known as the mâ dîn, Arabic for "What is religion?", the first question posed in the catechism. The mâ dîn was taught, however, in Fulfulde.

One could gain the impression from reading Ba and Cardaire that the mâ dîn was Tierno Bokar's composition. However, in an interview with Hampaté-Ba³ it became clear not only that Tierno Bokar had himself learned this oral teaching from a Pullo marabout, but that it was fairly widely taught among the Jelgooji Fulbe of Upper Volta to whom it had been introduced from Futa Jallon in the nineteenth century. In recent years several Malians working under Hampaté-Ba's direction have recorded the Jelgooji version of this teaching in Fulfulde and have produced a collated copy written in Ajami script. (Unfortunately I have not had access to this document.) One of Tierno Bokar's contributions to the development of this teaching seems to have been its presentation in association with the mnemonic pattern of lines and dots already mentioned. In Fulfulde this catechism was called either toBBe, which means "points," or more commonly kaBBe, a term derived from haBBude, "to tie" and which refers to a cord which has been tied around a package.⁴ This name did not refer to Tierno Bokar's points or dots, but to the essential points or concepts in the

doctrine of tawhid or dogmatic theology. kaBBe is therefore the Fulfulde equivalent of the Arabic word Caqīda which means "dogma" and is derived from a root which means "to tie." In Futa Jallon the toBBe or kaBBe was that part of the religious curriculum which introduced the basic fundamentals of tawhīd. Available evidence does not permit one to trace in detail the various influences which contributed to the development of the kaBBe, but its antecedents extend several centuries back in the history of Futa Jallon. There can be no doubt that the kaBBe is based at least in part on a text written by a seventeenth-century Pullo scholar called Muhammad al-Walī b. Sulaymān. (Al-manhaj al-farīd fī maʿrifat ʿilm al-tawhīd: The Peerless Method for learning the science of tawhid.) Only an Arabic version of this text is extant, but it was originally composed in Fulfulde.⁵ It is a commentary on a classic treatise in tawhīd written by Muhammed b. Yūsuf al-Sanussī (fifteenth century) whose works are studied throughout North and West Africa.⁶

Unfortunately we know nothing about the historical development of the kaBBe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. However, Tierno Bokar's mâ dīn seems to be but the most recent known version of this Fulfulde teaching whose antecedents extend back to the seventeenth-century. (Most scholars would date the origin of Fulfulde teaching and writing in Futa Jallon with the eighteenth-century jihad in the region.) In Futa Jallon it was an integral part of the standard religious studies curriculum; in Jelgooji it was transmitted orally to teach illiterate Fulbe pastoralists the principles of Islam. Tierno Bokar taught it orally to students in his school and also to Dogon converts; indeed, local accounts in Bandiagara attribute the invention of the mâ dīn to Tierno Bokar's need to instruct a Dogon convert. Although apparently simple and even simplistic in form, the kaBBe was very rich and versatile teaching because its content was susceptible to reinterpretation on ever more sophisticated levels. Its most advanced level of instruction was an

"initiation" into the esoteric interpretations of Islam which included the study of numerology. We cannot here explore in depth the many aspects of the kaBBe, but by examining the little evidence which is available about this teaching, we can gain some appreciation of the imaginative and creative thought which Muslims could apply to the transmission of their tradition in West Africa.

The KaBBe in Futa Jallon

One of the major sources of information on the kaBBe in Futa Jallon is Paul Marty's L'Islam en Guinée.⁷ Marty described the kaBBe in the context of a general discussion of the Islamic religious studies curriculum. By the time he wrote considerable excitement had been stirred up about the kaBBe by French administrators who felt it represented some form of Fullo mysticism or secret society. Marty firmly disagreed with these assertions; according to him "the kaBBe is very simply the Fulfulde translation of the Arabic word tawhīd," which was taught at a particular stage in the educational curriculum. Its supposed mystical and numerological aspects were dismissed as the mere "intellectual recreations" of those scholars who had acquired an arcane knowledge of the dogma. But let us examine these opinions more closely.

According to Marty the kaBBe was taught in Futa Jallon within the section of the curriculum called firugol, which means "translation" or "commentary." Marty implies that the firugol was an intermediate course of study preceded by Qur'anic recitation and the fundamentals of reading and writing and followed by funūn, which he described as higher studies.⁸ Funūn comprised the study of such subjects as jurisprudence and Arabic language and grammar. Firugol began with the study of tawhīd (the kaBBe) and Qur'anic exegesis and continued with the study of various West African works written in Fulfulde⁹ and also included the study of certain Sufi books, mainly the writings of al-Hajj Umar and the Jawâhir al-Ma^çânî of Ali Harazim, a major Tijani text. Since it is extremely unlikely that one would undertake the reading of these Sufi

texts prior to studying Arabic language and grammar, it seems more probable that the "stages" of firugol and funūn were undertaken concurrently and were in some fashion intermingled. The distinction between them was not level of study but linguistic emphasis: firugol was aimed at training students to become literate in Fulfulde, whereas funūn was advanced studies in Arabic. Marty comments on the Fulbe attitude to their own language:

The study of the kaBBē is accompanied by tafsīr, or exegesis and interpretation of the text of the Qur'an. For a long time the Fulbe have asserted that their language was a holy language, coming it is true after Arabic, but preceding many of the idioms of the peoples, more often fetishists than Muslim, who surrounded them. One knows that the Qur'an can conserve its sacred character only by maintaining its Arabaic form. Translation would modify its sense and composition... Nonetheless, for some time the Qur'an has been daily translated into Fulfulde, either orally or in writing. Several versions, remarkable for their precision and their elegance, circulate even today among the karamoko [teachers] of Futa. It is with the aid of these translations and interpretations that the Fulbe give their students training perhaps less based on memory and more intelligent and more analytic than what one finds in other black countries.¹⁰

We know from local sources that religious instruction was given in Fulfulde at least in part for strict pedagogical reasons; Fulbe scholars in Futa Jallon believed that students could better learn and understand religious concepts in their mother tongue.¹¹ And high value was placed upon literate competency in Fulfulde; the course in firugol concluded with a public examination during which the student was expected to translate and comment upon a verse of the Qur'an in Fulfulde.

The kaBBē, then, was that part of the firugol in which the principles of tawhīd were taught in the Fulfulde language. Marty does not provide much more information about it. He was greatly disconcerted by the numerological aspects of the kaBBē and was unable to take it seriously. No doubt he would have been able to cite numerous half-educated marabouts who employed numerology to mystify their less learned fellow-Muslims. But many advanced scholars placed a profound significance upon the study of numbers, which were seen as a medium

for understanding the relationship between the inner and outer meanings and manifestations of the created world. Marty provided one lengthy quotation from the kaBBe in order "to destroy the current opinion that makes of this teaching a mysterious 'cabala'."¹² One does not know what opinions were modified, but this quotation enables the historian to connect the kaBBe of early twentieth-century Futa Jallon with the mâ dîn of Tierno Bokar, as we will see below, as well as with the seventeenth-century Fulfulde commentary by Muhammad al-Wali b. Sulayman; his book, al-manhaj al-farīd, opens with the same text.

God has revealed 104 books to man, but 100 are unknown to us at the present time. The four which we possess are: the Pentateuch of Moses, the Psalms of David, the Gospel of Jesus, and the Qur'an of Muhammad. Moreover, the doctrines of the 104 revealed books are condensed into these last four. The last four are contained and summarized in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is entirely contained in the Fâtiha, which is its first chapter. The Fâtiha is entirely contained in its opening formula, "In the name of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate." This formula is condensed into the name, Allah. The numerical value of the letters which compose the name Allah [in Arabic] is 66 (alif: 1; lâm: 30; lâm: 30; hâ': 5). This number 66 is a sacred number which contains all the attributes of God (50) and of the Prophet (16). The divine attributes number 25 positive [i.e., necessary] namely: existence, eternity, immutability, etc., and 25 negative [i.e., impossible] namely: non-existence, contingency, changeability, etc. There are 16 similar prophetic attributes. Immediately after the Qur'an, children assimilate these teachings which are considered an introduction to the kaBBe and which are absolutely necessary, say the teachers, in order to know how to conduct oneself in life.¹³

I do not wish to place undue emphasis upon this particular quotation; its significance in our discussion is primarily historical. It provides evidence which enables us to trace at least an outline of the historical development of this teaching. But it is also representative of the kind of thought which underlay the kaBBe and for that reason I would like to analyze its content.

Marty was correct in asserting that kaBBe is a Fulfulde word for tawhīd; but he did not seem to understand the nature and role of the doctrine of tawhīd, the theology of the unity of God, in Islamic thought and practice.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines claims that in Islam the idea of unity or tawhīd overshadows all others "and remains at every level of Islamic civilization the most basic principle upon which all else depends." The goal of all Islamic sciences and methods, he claims, was "the demonstration of the interrelatedness of all things."¹⁴ In his discussion of the Ikhwān al-Safā, the tenth-century Islamic encyclopaedists, Nasr describes this "interrelatedness of all things" as a chain of being connecting God with all creation:

The chain of being essentially means that all beings in the Universe exist according to a continuous hierarchy which is ontological as well as cosmological. A particular entity has a position in the great chain of being depending upon the degree to which it participates in Being and Intelligence; or one might say, upon the degree to which it possesses the perfections and virtues which in the absolute sense belong only to Pure Being, or God, who is transcendent with respect to the chain. ...Everything exists for a purpose, the final purpose of the cosmos being the return of multiplicity to Unity within the heart of the saints.¹⁵

Similar cosmological ideas had of course been assimilated by West African scholars, as the quotation from Marty indicates. That brief passage describes a hierarchy of the revealed word of God; moving "upward" (or inward) through this hierarchy there are the 104 books revealed to mankind, the four books of the so-called world religions, the Qur'an, the Fātiha (the first verse of the Qur'an), the phrase "In the name of Allah," and finally the name Allah itself. Each successively higher level brings one closer to what we might call the pure word of God, His name, Allah. Viewed from the opposite perspective, that is, in its "downward" (or outward) movement, the name Allah is seen as the creative source of the revealed word of God in all its various manifestations. This concept should not be unfamiliar to Christians; the Gospel of St. John states: "In the beginning was the Word." This hierarchy of the revealed word of God, then, is an expression of the chain of being described by Nasr. But it also asserts an analogical relationship between the hierarchical order of the

revealed word and the hierarchical order of all creation, which was believed to proceed from God through different levels of spiritual reality to visible, manifested creation.

What interests us here is not so much the various hierarchies in the chain of being, but the principle of analogical analysis which was employed in the study of them. The methodology of analogical analysis and demonstration was a logical derivation of the Muslim hierarchical vision of the cosmos: all existence is interrelated because it shares a common source in God, the Creator. Similarly, the principles which govern, for example, the observable forces of nature are related to the principles which govern the unobservable reaches of the cosmos. By studying what is observable and by employing the principles of analogy one can gain greater understanding of what is not observable. During the classical period of Islamic scholarship virtually all the natural sciences were studied from this perspective, but the one discipline which seems to have gained and retained prominence in West Africa was numerology. The science of numbers had always enjoyed a position of prominence among Muslim scholars because of its fundamental importance to all the other sciences. Its numerological applications were derived in part from Pythagorean mathematics according to which numbers not only represent quantity but possess qualities as well. We can discern these aspects of numerology in the following quotation from Hampaté-Ba in which he describes the number one as being analogous to God:

It is the source; all numbers come from 1, but the 1 does not come from any other number. It is the symbol of supreme purity. It does not accept multiplication, $1 \times 1 = 1$. God does not emerge from His secrecy except through revelation, that is, addition. Thus, $1+1=2$, $1+2=3$, $1+3=4$, and so on up to 9, and on to infinity.¹⁶

The number 9, on the other hand, represents imperfectible materiality because it cannot change. No matter what number is multiplied by 9, if one adds the digits of the resultant number they will always equal 9.¹⁷ For example,

$9 \times 542 = 4878$; $4 + 8 + 7 + 8 = 27$; $2 + 7 = 9$. Hampaté-Ba's comments were offered to me in illustration of the numerological concepts taught in the kaBBe, but they conform closely to the views of the Ikhwân al-Safâ,

Know, brother, that the Creator, Most exalted, created as the first thing from His Light of Unity the simple substance called the Active Intellect, as 2 is generated from one by repetition. Then the Universal Soul was generated from the Light of the Intellect as 3 is generated by adding unity to 2. Then ... [matter] was generated by the motion of the soul as 4 is generated by adding Unity to 3. Then the other creatures were generated from ... [matter] and their being brought to order by the Intellect and the Soul as other numbers are generated from 4 added to what went before it.¹⁸

Following the same principles of analogy, many Muslims placed great emphasis upon the symbolism of letters, especially those placed at the beginning of certain sûras of the Qur'ân.¹⁹ Numerology became associated with this study because each letter in the Arabic alphabet was said to have a numerical equivalent. Consequently, words could be transposed into numbers and analyzed for analogical and allegorical meaning through the application of numerological methods. Here is a brief example: The Qur'anic verse, "Say, He is God" (Qul huwa Allâh, CXII, 1) can be translated into a numerical formula: Say 11 is 66. We have seen above that the numerical equivalent of Allah is 66. Huwa equals 11 because hâ' is 5 and wâw is 6. But how could this statement be true? A numerological manipulation in which the progressive digits from 1 to 11 are added together claims to prove it: $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11=66$.²⁰

These few examples give some indication of numerological practice; the possibilities are endless. Of course, certain applications of numerology were often considered superstitious by unsympathetic Muslims as well as by European observers. But despite the abuses to which this science may have been subjected, we should now be able to understand why it assumed a central role in West African scholarship. Numerological as well as other forms of analogical analysis were effective tools in teaching and demonstrating certain

relationships and concepts contained within the doctrines of tawhīd. Another important factor, which should not be overlooked, was that mastery of the principles of analogy offered a scholar the possibility of independent intellectual enquiry which was not usually acceptable in the religious sciences of the day. No West African scholar was going to set out to develop a "new" Islamic theology; the question probably never arose. The task to which creative thought could be applied was in understanding how one could better transmit the received theology so that Muslims could truly comprehend and incorporate it into their lives.

The kaBBe, based as it was upon a methodology of analogical analysis, was a flexible system of teaching with exactly these aims. In a sense the study of tawhid is a study without end, because no one can ever fully understand the relationships which exist between the multiplicity of manifested existence and the unity of God. The aim of the kaBBe was to provide the student not only with a basic understanding of Muslim theology but also with the methodological tools which could enable him to continue his personal religious search throughout his life. The fundamental concepts were introduced at an early stage in the educational curriculum. These were constantly refined during years of study and could culminate, for the most promising students, in an "initiation" into the esoteric interpretations of tawhīd. During this initiation students were trained in the methodology of analogical analysis, especially in numerology. The overall program of study contained in the kaBBe might with accuracy be described as a lengthy initiatory process. In Futa Jallon, for example, a boy or young man was required to learn the elementary doctrines of the kaBBe before he was considered ritually qualified to slaughter animals. But there was also an ultimate "initiation" which in Futa Jallon was called Allah nuuru samawaati, "God, the light of the heavens."²¹

This was a secret teaching based upon numerological and analogical interpretations of the tawhīd, and individuals so initiated were free to initiate others. Initiates apparently were also free to modify the format of the teaching based upon their personal understanding, their meditations and their numerological calculations. Reference to similar initiations occur in Jelgooji and in Bandiagara.

The KaBBe Among the JelgooBe

Sometime during the nineteenth century the kaBBe was introduced to the JelgooBe Fulbe pastoralists of Upper Volta. The sources are in complete disagreement about the name of the person who brought the teaching and even the conditions under which it arrived. One says the person responsible was a learned marabout who had left Futa Toro to perform the pilgrimage. The scholars of Jelgooji were so impressed with his knowledge they urged him to stay and teach. He agreed to delay his departure and to tour the area preaching. One of the local marabouts accompanied him and learned the kaBBe from him in this way.²² Another source states that the teacher was from Futa Jallon en route to Mecca, but adds that he could neither read nor write. He stopped among the JelgooBe and married. This account does not attribute his fame to learning, but to the fact that "he could kill an ox simply by pronouncing the name of Allah in front of it." Before continuing on his pilgrimage, "he confided the mysteries of tawhīd to his wife, and she taught them to others who were distinguished by their austerity and by their ardent piety."²³ Another account by the French resident of Dori in 1899 suggests that the kaBBe was invented by a marabout with the specific aim of introducing Islamic learning to the intractable Fulbe pastoralists. This report is worth quoting because it resembles the account given of Tierno Bokar's "invention" of the mâ dīn.

A marabout came to Jelgooji to try to preach and instruct the pastoralists while teaching them the Qur'an. He started with the most intelligent, but he encountered such difficulties

and indifference that he abandoned the procedures of instruction generally employed. He had the idea of making a resumé of the Qur'an in which he placed the most essential moral precepts. His students then committed these to memory in Fulfulde.... That is what is called the kaBBe.²⁴

The same account also adds that this marabout "added absolutely personal commentaries which differ from those generally accepted by the overall community of marabouts, the true Muslims." French accounts suggest that the kaBBenkooBe (the people of the kaBBe, as they came to be known in this region) adopted some peculiar sectarian practices in Jelgooji: only those who knew the kaBBe actually verbalized their prayers while others merely performed the movements without speaking; kaBBenkooBe could not eat meat slaughtered by non-member Muslims; and they buried their dead in a separate cemetery. These practices are reminiscent of the limitations placed on qualification for ritual slaughter of animals in Futa Jallon. A tentative explanation of the kaBBe's peculiar character in Jelgooji might be that there, among the pastoralists, it became the sole vehicle for Islamic teaching. Although introduced as a means of integrating the JelgooBe into the larger Muslim community, its initiatory aspects and its oral transmission in Fulfulde also became expressions of this group's separate identity, always closely guarded by Fulbe pastoralists. Rather than a supplement to broaden or deepen Islamic studies, the kaBBe was advocated by this group as a superior Islamic teaching, if not the only "true" teaching. This stance of course created many enemies for them.

Nonetheless, the kaBBe in Jelgooji retained its profound character as a teaching. Whoever introduced it does not seem to have compromised its basic form and content. The French accounts are confused about the history and even the nature of the kaBBe, but there can be no doubt that this is the same kaBBe found in Futa Jallon. One French report describes it as a teaching in which "religion is reduced to the meditation of the mysteries of Divine Unity."²⁵

It also retained its initiatory format. (The following quotation is misleading in stating that parts of the kaBBe were "read" in Jelgooji; all of it was transmitted orally.)

Its founder...had sought to simplify Islam and to purify it through a progressive initiation and through the exclusive teaching of these books which summarize all the principles of the faith and which are assigned to three categories of adepts. Children are allowed to read only the first, which is apparently the Qur'an; knowledge of the second, a summary of the Hadith, is the privilege of older men. The third, which appears to be the explication of a particular Sufi doctrine, is confided only to talibes or to [Sufi] disciples who aspire to become such and are considered worthy of it.²⁶

Most of the French sources tend to emphasize that the kaBBe in Jelgooji was a simplification of Islamic doctrine and consequently by implication an aberration or deviation from the "true religion." Doubtless these opinions originated with local informants unsympathetic to the KaBBenkooBe and their sectarian practices. Nonetheless, the more profound dimensions of the teaching did not escape notice; one observer pointed out that in learning the kaBBe "the dogmas of tawhīd [translated into Fulfulde] were learned word for word by the pastoral Fulbe, and were then commented upon in a series of extremely abstract deductions."²⁷

The most important aspect of the kaBBe in Jelgooji from the point of view of this paper was not the sectarian practices which emerged from it but the fact that it was introduced as a means of teaching principles of theology in a form which could be understood and retained by the pastoral Fulbe---and not only by the marabouts, but by the population in general. It was taught orally in Fulfulde. At the same time it was a progressive teaching of which a person could develop an increasingly profound knowledge. No matter how local critics came to view it, the introduction of the kaBBe into Jelgooji is an example of effective Muslim missionary work and educational innovation.

The kaBBE in Bandiagara

We have already mentioned that Tierno Bokar taught the kaBBE in Bandiagara where it came to be known as the mâ dîn ("What is religion?"). He seems to have learned it from a Pullo marabout,²⁸ very probably via Jelgooji rather than directly from Futa Jallon. He received the highest esoteric "initiation" of the kaBBE and in turn initiated several of his own most promising students. With Tierno Bokar we gain considerable insight into the wide-ranging versatility with which the kaBBE and its attendant teachings could be applied.

Although there can be no doubt that the mâ dîn is based upon the kaBBE, local Bandiagara traditions claim it was invented specifically in order to teach Islam to a Dogon convert. The story appears in Le Sage de Bandiagara²⁹ although the following partial account is collated from oral testimonies collected in Bandiagara.³⁰ The theme is that a Dogon began to question why his own religious tradition included so many different "fetishes." On the other hand, he discovered that every time a Muslim wrote the Fâtiha (the first verse of the Qur'ân) it was always exactly the same, no matter who wrote it. He decided to seek a teacher who could help him understand Islam. He was advised to go to Cissé (a Pulo name denoting a scholar) in Bandiagara. Upon finding the marabout, he said to him:

"I am searching for my religion; I was told to come to Cissé whose only concern is helping one to understand." He said he had never prostrated himself before God, not even once. Nor could he read. Cisse told him that if he was persistent he could accomplish something; his intelligence would aid him.

Cissé told the Dogon to bring some sand which he smoothed out on the earth between them. But he realized the Dogon could not grasp the Arabic letters he traced in the sand. Cissé pondered about what he might do, how he might teach him something of tawhîd. He remembered an Arabic proverb he had heard: "Don't tell your Bambara slave to take down the shahâdatain ['There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet'] in writing; it is with his tongue that he will learn it." So Cissé decided he might teach by making points [toBBE] in the sand, the pattern of which the Dogon would not forget. He explained everything without writing and the Dogon understood.

This story is interesting for several reasons. First, although the facts have been modified to conform to local conditions, the basic theme of the story is very similar to those related about the introduction of the kaBBe to the pastoralists of Jelgooji: a marabout invented the system to teach Islam to illiterate adults. Also interesting is that the appeal is to the intellect: if one is persistent, one's intelligence will aid in gaining understanding. According to Ba and Cardaire this story formed a kind of introductory teaching for the mâ dîn.³¹

Evidence is not available to determine conclusively whether a story of this sort accompanied the kaBBe or whether Tierno Bokar added it himself. Support for the latter contention comes from the fact that informants not only claim that "Cissé" was Tierno Bokar, but that the Dogon in the story was an actual historical figure called Ancamba Nandigi. Ancamba was a traditional healer who was widely respected for his knowledge of medicinal plants; he converted to Islam, became a close companion to Tierno Bokar and was with the marabout when he died. A brief glance at the relationship between these two men can lead us into a discussion of a fascinating aspect of Tierno Bokar's thought which, although we cannot attribute it directly to the kaBBe, was certainly not incompatible with it. More than one informant claimed that Tierno Bokar and Ancamba Nandigi collaborated medically, combining their knowledge of sickness and curing, one Arabic and the other Dogon, "to cure quite a few illnesses."³² "Whenever Ancamba would bring a plant, Tierno would search for its analogous Qur'anic verse. It was a kind of medicine at once physical and mental."³³ Here we see another dimension of the analogical system of thought connected with training in the kaBBe. The Dogon approach to medicine was certainly not Qur'anic; at the same time a Muslim was not prevented from employing such knowledge so long as it did not contravene Islamic law. Tierno Bokar was not merely tolerant of that part of Dogon medical practice which was acceptable by Islamic standards, he actually

embraced it. This attitude no doubt accounts for his considerable influence among the Dogon in and around Bandiagara.

Tolerance of a similar sort enjoyed a long tradition amongst West African Muslims, although it has rarely been described by most observers as such. Muslim critics, like ʿUthman b. Fodiye, spoke of "venal mallams" and implied that their lack of learning had caused them to compromise Islamic standards. Modern scholars employ terms such as "syncretism and accomodationism."³⁴ Of course, these observations are valid up to a point, but there was also a tolerance which derived from a sound scholarly training and which did not compromise Islam; this was the case with Tierno Bokar. We cannot trace all the influences which might have brought Tierno Bokar to adopt his own tolerant stance, but we can suggest some of them. They begin with the Qur'an itself which accepts the Christian and Jewish prophetic traditions and incorporates them into Islamic belief. The passage quoted by Marty from the kaBBe shows that his concept was introduced at the very outset of this teaching. Perhaps Tierno Bokar had also been affected during his youth by the atmosphere of conflict and warfare which accompanied the French conquest of the Sudan. He certainly associated warfare with intolerance. He condemned even the Muslim holy war or jihād, "the war which the sons of Adam fight in the name of God whom they claim to love so much, but whom they adore badly while destroying a part of His work."³⁵ According to Tierno Bokar warfare in defense of religion resulted from a particularly intransigent form of religious belief, suited to "the common people, the masses, and the marabouts who are attached to the letter [of the law]."³⁶ But he felt it was possible to acquire a more subtle form of religious faith which was at once more tolerant and more profound and which would elevate one above warfare. This kind of teaching was connected both to Sufi thought and to the esoteric interpretations of the kaBBe. He advised his disciples:

Observe everything with the eyes of your profound intelligence and in the light of the law of analogy which connects the events and elements of the three kingdoms of nature with one another. [the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms] Once you have discovered this secret mechanism, it will aid you in implanting within yourself the truth of divine matters which are situated beyond the letter of the Qur'an. Then you will know the significance of the verse: "(He) Teacheth man that which he knew not." [XCVI,5]³⁷

Tierno Bokar was consistently urging his disciples to "go beyond the letter." We have already seen that the kabbe "initiation" was much concerned with numerological interpretations of words and letters was a means of probing their hidden significance. In the few quotations included here we can only provide a glimpse into the kind of considerations to which Tierno Bokar was led through his meditations "beyond the letter." But they were all based upon analogical images, demonstrations and reasonings, not always numerological, and which at times achieved a striking elegance of presentation.

To return to the numerological theme of this paper, Tierno Bokar seems to have sought to assign significance to every element in both the form and content of this teaching. As we have mentioned, he is credited with inventing the mnemonic pattern of lines and dots which aided memorization of the mâ din (See the copy appended to this paper.) The pattern is based upon numerological concepts, of which only a few can be indicated here. The basic pattern consists of 99 points (corresponding to the 99 names of God) subdivided into 33 points of religious doctrine, 50 attributes of God and 16 attributes of the Prophet Muhammad (50+16=66, the numerical equivalent of Allah). The first point in the catechism is actually number 9: "What is religion? Religion is a form of worship." (The Fulfulde version says "Religion is a way.") The points continue:

- 8 How many forms of worship are there? There are 73.
- 7 What is their condition? The First 72 are ways of aberration.
- 6 Only the 73rd is the path of rectitude.

- 5 The unique attaining to God.
- 4 From our father Adam until our Lord Muhammad all have followed the same path.
- 3 It is called Islam (submission to God).
- 2 It is the path of deliverance.
- 1 It is the way of salvation, the Hanifiyyah way.³⁸

It is not without significance that this entry into theological discussion moves from point 9 to point 1, from a number representing extreme materiality to one representing the unity and spirituality of God. At the same time, these nine numbers form the basis of all numerological calculations and are consequently the fundamental elements to be employed in any subsequent esoteric study of theology. The vertical lines A, B, C, are the three basic pillars of the Hanifiyya way: Islâm, submission to God, Imân, faith, and Ihsân, comportment in the sense of upright behavior. Each of these pillars is elaborated in a number of conditions or requirements. The points under D and E represent the attributes of God; F and G represent the attributes of the Prophet Muhammad. All of these points were of course explained in detail; they constituted the elementary teaching of the mâ dîn.

The three points in the lower left of the diagram (A', B', C') are the beginning of a Sufi teaching which introduces the student to an esoteric understanding of Islam. They are: sharīḥah, the Law, tarīqah, the Sufi way, and the haqīqah, the Truth. These concepts are an expression of the Sufi hierarchy of religious experience. In the strictest dogmatic sense Islam demands nothing more of its adherents than outward conformity to the shariḥah; no Muslim need do more to achieve salvation. The religious experience of most Muslims, according to Tierno Bokar, would fall into this category. These are the Muslims "attached to the letter." However, more is possible and some Muslims, a minority, enter the Sufi way. Entry to the Sufi way is allowed only to those who have demonstrated their comprehension of and

conformity to the law. If the religion of the law can be said to be directed outwardly, the religion of the Sufi way is directed inwardly: one learns esoteric interpretations of Islamic principles and one strives to apply these principles to one's inner life. The experience of haqīqah, the Truth, was reserved to very few indeed, "an elite within the elite" according to Tierno Bokar. They were the saints of Islam who "adore God in truth." Tierno Bokar said very little about this level of attainment; he did not consider himself to have achieved it.

The Sufi way itself was subdivided into three stages or degrees which were themselves analogous to the Law, the Sufi way, and the Truth. (Triads abound in the esoteric teaching of the kaBBē.) They were taqlīd, or behavior based upon imitation of the Sufi shaikh; nazar, or comprehension of the inner meaning of religious principles; and dhawq, or the actual subjective experience of these principles.

The kaBBē was taught in a manner which conforms to this Sufi view of Islam. In its elementary form it was taught to children in the early stages of their educational formation or to Muslim converts or to illiterate Muslim adults. Mastery of this elementary teaching was marked by a change in status which varied according to local practice; qualification to slaughter animals or permission to perform prayers. The esoteric interpretations and numerological manipulations of the kaBBē were taught only to specially selected individuals, presumably those who showed promise both in terms of religious devotion and intellectual acumen. These persons were called "initiates." In the strict sense of Arabic usage this designation is correct because talqīn (initiation) connotes the transmission of secret teachings. Not only could these "initiates" initiate others, but they were also free to adapt their teaching as they saw fit, always of course protecting the received theology itself from change. The principles of analogical reasoning offered a

creative mind almost unlimited possibilities to enrich and embellish this teaching. Tierno Bokar was a master at finding the analogical religious significance of virtually every object or event which came to his attention. He may have been exceptional in this regard, but the point is that the form and structure of the kaBBe enabled and even encouraged marabouts to activate their minds in just this way and consequently to enliven their religious teachings.

One final quotation from Tierno Bokar illustrates well how in actual discussion with his disciples he employed the methods and touched upon the topics here under discussion. The precise context of this commentary is unknown, although presumably he was speaking to a Sufi adept who was perhaps also an initite of the kaBBe. (He may well have been addressing Amadou Hampaté-Ba who collected this quotation.)³⁹ He is giving advice on the "inner" or Sufi approach to the recitation of the shahâda, "There is no god but Allah." The quotation opens with a mundane metaphorical reference to the washing of laundry and ends with a suggestion to a numerological interpretation of the shahâda. But the essential theme is that proper recitation of the shahâda involves more than the mere voicing of the words. It can aid in training one's powers of concentration to the point where "the spirit is constantly occupied with reciting the name of the Lord." It can also bring an experiential understanding of certain aspects of the doctrine of tawhîd. Perhaps most importantly, this "advice" is filled with suggestions on how the disciple can deepen his personal religious search.

There are several methods for washing laundry, each of which depends upon the nature of the material, coarse or fine. A blanket of thick wool is stamped upon with the feet or beaten with a cudgel. A boubou of fine European cloth is pressed between the hands.

It is the same with human souls. The trials through which they pass in order to attain the degree where the spirit is constantly occupied with reciting the name of the Lord are more or less violent in accordance with one's

psychic state. But whatever the nature of the soul, the spoken recitation of the first formula of faith is recommended: "There is no god but Allah." It is considered the best mental devotion which one can perform in order to please God, whose primordial attribute is Being-Oneness.

Adept who comes to me,... meditate on the twelve elements of this formula of faith in its triple division.⁴⁰ This formula exalts the emanations of the Creative Entity; it establishes the differentiation of the essence and plunges the soul into communion with the Source of all existences in God. Being is One. The Creative Entity is endowed with anteriority, with eternity, with plenitude and with originality. Differentiation establishes that life, wisdom, hearing, sight, will, speech and creation belong to the Being-Oneness. Meditate on the following verse:

"He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward; and He is Knower of all things." [LVII, 3]

Conclusion

This brief discussion of the kaBBe demonstrates the kind of vitality which could inform Islamic education in West Africa. This teaching emerged from a lively heritage of Islamic studies in the Fulfulde language in which the emphasis was more on understanding than on the rote memorization of religious principles. Not only did it become a standard component of religious training in Futa Jallon, but it was exported and subsequently used for proselytizing Islam among the pastoral Fulbe and the Dogon. Its principles of analogical demonstration encouraged a certain degree of independent and creative thought and rendered the pedagogical system itself extremely adaptable. Nonetheless, those who taught the kaBBe strove to conform to the primary purpose for which it was originally devised: to preserve and transmit the Islamic religious tradition.

NOTES

¹Field research for this paper was made possible by grants from the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia and the Social Science Research Council in New York.

²Amadou Hampaté-Ba and Marcel Cardaire, Tierno Bokar, le Sage de Bandiagara, (Paris, 1957), 94ff. Tierno Bokar lived most of his life in Bandiagara, where he died in 1940.

³Interview of 2 May 1978.

⁴Alpha Ibrahim Sow, in private conversation. See also Henri Gaden, Proverbes at Maximes Peuls et Toucouleurs, (Paris, 1951), 196: kaBBol (singular of kaBBe) ... "has no equivalent in French; it is neither the cord, nor the object tied up, nor the action of tying, but the disposition of the cord around the action expressed by the verb haBBude (to tie)."

⁵John Hunwick first called my attention to this text. I have ordered a microfilm copy of it from the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, which unfortunately has not yet arrived. However, I have read enough of it to confirm: 1) that it was translated from Fulfulde into Arabic, and 2) that the numerical quotation from Marty which appears below is also found in the opening pages of this book. I have read parts of two copies: BN, Arabe 5541, fol. 130-152, and Arabe 5650 fol. 111-130.

⁶Aqīdat ahl al-tawhīd al-sughrâ, or Umm al-barahīn. This work has been translated into French by J.O. Luciani, (Alger, 1896).

⁷Paul Marty, L'Islam en Guinée, (Paris, 1921), 349ff.

⁸Ibid., 351.

⁹Marty mentions works by several local scholars including Mouhammadou-Samba Mombeya, for whom see Alpha Ibrahim Sow, ed., Le Filon du Bonheur Eternel (Paris, 1971).

¹⁰Marty, L'Islam en Guinée, 353-4.

¹¹Sow, ed., Le Filon, 30.

¹²Marty, L'Islam en Guinée, 353.

¹³Ibid., 352-3.

¹⁴S.H. Nasr, An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines (London, 1978), 4.

¹⁵Ibid., 68, 72.

¹⁶Hampaté-Ba, interview of 3 May 1976.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Translated from Rasâ'il Ikhwân al-Sâfa, I, 28 (Cairo, 1928) in Nasr, An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines 46, note 12.

¹⁹Anne-Marie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam (Chapel Hill, 1975), 411-425.

²⁰Hampaté-Ba, interview of 6 May 1978.

²¹Sow, in private conversation.

²²Hampaté-Ba, interview of 2 May 1978.

²³R. Arnaud, "Islam et la politique musulmane française en Afrique Occidentale Française," L'Afrique Française, Bulletin du Comité de l'Afrique Française, Renseignements Coloniaux, 1912, 14-15.

²⁴Archives Nationales du Sénégal, AOF Serie G, 15 G 186, "Islam dans la Résidence de Dori," 31 juillet 1899.

²⁵Arnaud, "Islam et la politique musulmane française," 14-15.

²⁶Alfred Le Chatelier, L'Islam dans l'Afrique Occidentale, Paris, 1899, 287-288.

²⁷Arnaud, "Islam et la politique musulmane française," 14-15.

²⁸Hampaté-Ba, interview of 2 May 1978.

²⁹Ba and Cardaire, Tierno Bokar, 96-97.

³⁰Alfa Baba Thimbely, marabout of Bandiagara, interviews of 1 October 1977 and 21 January 1978.

³¹Ba and Cardaire, Tierno Bokar, 96ff.

³²Dauda Maiga, retired schoolteacher in Bandiagara, became a member of the Tijaniyya order through Tierno Bokar; interview of 30 September 1977.

³³Hampaté-Ba, interview of 2 May 1978.

³⁴See for example J.R. Willis in his introduction to Studies in West African Islamic History (London, 1979), vol. I, 18.

³⁵Ba and Cardaire, Tierno Bokar, 84.

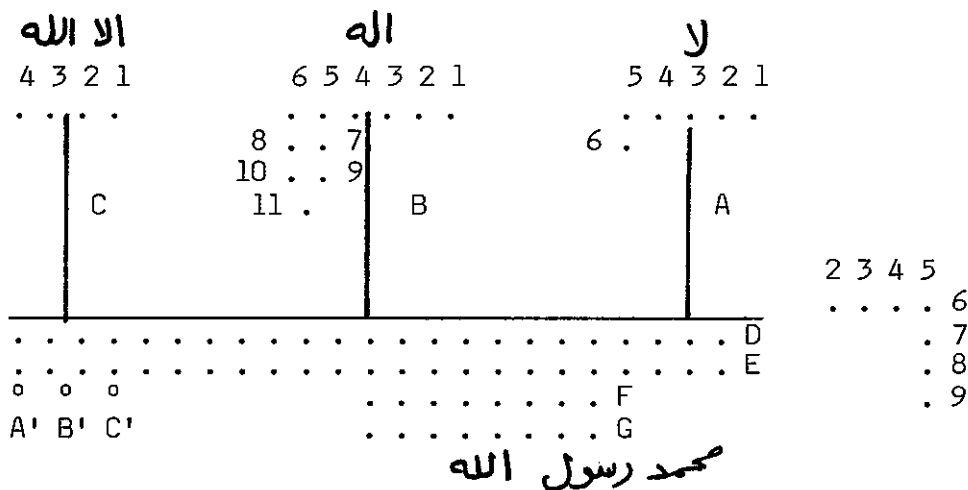
³⁶Ibid., 77-78.

³⁷Collected by Hampaté-Ba.

³⁸Ba and Cardaire, Tierno Bokar, 104. The comments which follow are derived primarily from pages 94ff., and from interviews with Hampaté-Ba.

³⁹Discussion of this commentary with Hampaté-Ba took place during an interview on 3 May 1978.

⁴⁰The words which comprise the formula: lâ ilah illâ Allâh are composed of only three different Arabic letters, lâm, alif, hâ': the entire phrase consists of twelve letters.

The mâ dîn (What is religion?)Taken from Ba and Cardaire, Tierno Bokar, le Sage de Bandiagara, p. 96.

Key:

- 9 What is religion? Religion is a form of worship.
- 8 How many forms of worship are there? There are 73.
- 7 What is their condition? The first 72 are ways of aberration.
- 6 Only the 73rd is the path of rectitude.
- 5 The unique attaining to God.
- 4 From our father Adam until our Lord Muhammad all have followed the same path.
- 3 It is called Islam (submission to God).
- 2 It is the path of deliverance.
- 1 It is the way of salvation, the Hanifiyyah way. (This point is represented by the horizontal line extending leftward from point 2.)

A Islâm, consists of five obligatory actions:

1) Articulation of the shahâdatain; 2) five daily prayers; 3) payment of alms; 4) fasting during the month of Ramadan; 5) accomplishment of the pilgrimage; 6) but the pilgrimage is incumbent only upon those who are able to carry it out.

B Imân, faith, consists of belief in six principles:

1) God; 2) the last Judgment; 3) the angels; 4) the revealed books; 5) the prophets of God; 6) one's divinely ordained fate; 7) the belief that whether this fate be good 8) or ill, 9) sweet 10) or bitter, 11) all things come to us from God.

C Ihsân, upright behavior:

1) Adore Allah. 2) Adore him as if you see Him, 3) having the certitude that whereas you do not see Him, 4) you are seen by Him.

D The 25 necessary attributes of God.

E The 25 impossible attributes of God.

F The 8 necessary attributes of the Prophet Muhammad.

G The 8 impossible attributes of the Prophet Muhammad.

A' sharīḥah, the Law; B' tarīqah, the Sufi way; C' haqīqah, the Truth