Islam and french colonial rule in west africa history essay

Following the European conquest of Africa there was a substantial expansion in both Muslim and Christian societies. Though Christianity was perceived by some as a machine of colonialism and part of a European civilising mission, taking Islam was on the other hand viewed as anti-colonial, reflecting a form of resistance rather than collaboration. Islam offered a sense of community during colonial rule when the continent was experiencing a time of rapid change and mobility. F admin sought to systematically manage the practice of Islam in their colonies in a way of which they could bring it into alignment with the F perspective of modernity and make Islam serve as a ' bulwark' for the state's authority. At same time officials' half heartened efforts slavery, inconsistent labour cash cropping projects and arbitrary power by poorly trained and underfunded admin brought dramatic and unexpected changes in how comm. were org and how individuals understood their position in soc. West African Muslims drew creatively on centuries of Islamic thought and soc experimentation to craft new identities and comm. out of the changes brought by F. Example was how followers of Yacouba Sylla gave a new meaning to the hollow and alien terms that colonial politicians spoke about such as freedom, dev and modernisation. They made them central themes in a mystical Sufi practice that looked little like the enlightenment-based liberal republicanism governors hoped to create or like reformist Islam promoted by modernisers elsewhere. (Hanretta 2009, 3)

The terms accommodation and collaboration are commonly used by historians to describe the relationship between Islam and French colonial rule in West Africa. In Islam and Social Change in French West Africa, Hanretta states that in places like Senegal, Mauritiana and Mali, when successful in

representing their version of Islam as being compatible with the dictates of colonial rule, they were given access to metropolitan power to use against other religious leaders for clients and patronage. This relationship could be seen as a collaboration of resources between the colonisers and the Muslim colonised, to maintain order and peace (Hanretta 2009, 138-139). Another traditional Islamic community were the Sufi Brotherhoods, in particular the Tijaniyya in Senegal, Mali and Guinea, who split into branches and networks that have cultivated family networks. Of the Tijani scholars there were who actively opposed French colonial rule in the 19th century, by the 20th century many became outspoken collaborators of the colonial government (Heck 2007, 65). Heck and Hanretta mention Seydou Nourou Taal, grandson to al-Hajj Umar Taal, who contributed to and organised many Tijani jihad movements, whilst Seydou Nourou became one of France's greatest Muslim intermediaries. When colonial occupation began, many Muslim leaders accepted European administration who agreed to grant them limited control over their communities; this was what part of what the Europeans thought was an efficient and cheap system of governance (Hanretta 2009, 60). These are examples of when Muslim leaders and communities chose to cooperate with the colonial regime and shows that areas under Islamic rule decided to accommodate French colonial rule and in some parts of West Africa, Muslim leaders obtained a peaceful relationship between the two.

Brenner looks at the case of Agibu where the motivating ideology for al-Hajj Umar was reformist Islam, which opposed the ' civilising mission' of the French colonial ideology. The relationship between Islam and colonial French rule is built on clashing ideologies and conflict. Brenner states that between

the two world wars there was a confrontation between Tijani Sufism and French Islamic policy, and the major French goal with respect to Islam was maintenance of political stability. The French had realised by the second decade of the 20th century that their greatest threat to colonial rule in West Africa was Islam because it had the potential to unite large numbers of people to form resistance against European domination. The relationship therefore could be one of conflicting aims, where the French tried to impose rule among Muslims who did not want to be ruled by non-Muslims. The French were persistent, they promulgated a new " native policy" in 1909 where Governor General William Ponty expressed concerns that Muslims shouldn't govern non-Muslims and in 1911 it was decreed that all administrative correspondence, as well as judgements by native courts, should be written in French, rather than Arabic. These attempts to dissuade the spread of Islam failed however it showed that he wanted French colonial rule to monopolise the politics of Agibu and this meant reducing Islamic influence. This was similar to French Soudan where colonial military officers aimed to limit conversion to Islam (Mann 2003, 264). However, Islam grew more rapidly than ever, becoming the dominant religion of commercial centres in Soudan, where new arrivals that came to seek work in these towns converted to Islam. This chapter of Agibu's history should be described as ' Domination and the French Challenge to Islam' (Brenner 1984, 32-38). French Colonial rule in Agibu posed a threat to Islamic values and Islam posed a threat to colonial rule, creating a relationship of conflict.

Robinson's explanation of the relationship between Islam and French colonial role in Senegal is a good example of both conflict and collaboration. The

French weren't able to accommodate rule within Muslim societies, they found it difficult to adjust and through practice and trial and error they did manage to exert a form of indirect rule over the societies. Their intentions behind this form of control was to cut French costs, whereby they used the local population to grow peanuts, pay taxes and in essence, maintain order. This however caused many of the Muslims to resent colonial chiefs and persuaded them to become marabouts that although abandoned their political powers they did encourage their followers to pay tithes but provided them also with an education and welfare as well as assurance. The French recognised the importance of marabouts in maintaining order and brought back Amadu Bamba (Muslim scholar and Sufi leader) from his exile who they had previously accused of plotting to wage a military jihad against the French (Heck 2007, 61-62). This shows collaboration between the colonial French and Bamba. They believed that he would help to stabilise the colonial economy and political order, he returned realising that French colonial rule would endure and that they had but no choice to accommodate (Robinson 2004, 182-196). After Mamba died the Murids became the dominant and economic force in the peanut basin and accepted colonial rule (Searing 2002, 128-130). In his book Sufism and Politics Heck goes on to say that Bamba's return from exile not early pacified relations between his followers and the French colonial system but it developed a pattern of understanding and proved to be profitable for both sides (Heck 2007, 63). Here the relationship began by the French adjusting to ruling over Muslim societies and eventually exploiting them to grow peanuts and pay taxes to cut administration costs. This completely turned around when the French had to seek help from Bamba and other marabouts to maintain order and therefore join forces with

Muslim leaders and societies, thus forth displaying a relationship of compromise.

It is important to be aware of what earlier French Islamic policy was in colonial Africa in order to examine the relationship between Islam and French colonial rule in West Africa. The presumptions made by French colonialists of Islam and Africans had implications on their reaction towards Muslim leaders and their subjects. Hanretta states that there is no doubt that the beliefs the French held about Islam, Africans and the nature of the colonial mission deeply influenced the reactions of the officials to Yacouba Sylla and his followers. Through a working, shifting compromise, Muslim leaders were tolerated and even patronised, but also carefully scrutinised. A lot of the action taken by the French in West Africa was based on experiences they had encountered in Algeria, for example the idea that Muslim networks, particularly Sufi tariqas could be used as intermediaries provided they were small and particularised, small enough not to gain enough power to compete with regional systems and African enough to protect themselves from North African and Middle Eastern influences. Harrison agrees that if we are to find a serious and sustained development of French policy towards Islam it is necessary to look north to Algeria where a definite consensus emerged at the end of the 19th century (Harrison 1988, 15-27). French policy in the 1920s and 1930s turned on the distinction between " good" and " bad" tariqas, during this period a the " bad" tariqa was the Hamawaiyyah and naturally once Yacouba became seen as a " Hamallist" preacher the administrator's goal was to determine whether him and his followers shared the tendencies of this order (Hanretta 2009, 127-

128). The relationship between Islam and French colonial rule in West Africa could be characterised by a set of corrections the French were making from the mistakes they had made in North Africa.

Sense of cooperation was seen with the leftist Popular Front government in France and Yacouba. It is said that although they were only in power for two decades, their reformist approach abroad had last effects on French West African Policy. In 1936 the Popular Front government helped boost Yacouba's efforts to organise his entire community into a single labour pool. The government also sought to mend the rift between eleven-beads and twelve-beads to bring Hamawis under a more effective control. The most important was the dispatch of Seydou Nouro Tal to Nioro, he was grandson to the head of the powerful twelve-bead Tal family who were opponents of the Hamawiyyah. He was released to reconcile with Shaykh Hamallah (founder of Hamawiyyah) and essentially offer him and his followers minimal protection for their submission to Seydou Nourou (administration's chosen leader of West Africa's Muslim population). Thereby the Popular Front were able to change the image of the Hamawiyyah from being seen as a part of a larger ' politique musulmane' to being integrated into France's hierarchical network of Muslim clients (Hanretta 2009, 95-96). De Coppet's attitude to Sheikh Hamallah portrayed him as benevolent and liberally minded, Harrison in France and Islam in West Africa suggests that the initiative for his Muslim policy in French West Africa came from himself and the impression Islam had on him in Mauritania (Harrison 1988, 193). In Fetishizing Religion Mann speaks of how Cardaire, a military colonial officer was cautious of the growth of Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism as a threat to French Africa, serving as

director of Soudan's Bureau of Muslim affairs he supervised the state-sponsored Hajj, where he accompanied pilgrims to the Hijaz. The fact that the state sponsored people to go on pilgrimage shows that they were tolerant and didn't oppress them from continuing their religious practices (Mann 2003, 270).

Accommodation didn't take place between Muslims and a coherent colonial regime but rather was a result of temporary and local constellations of power in which religious elites and administrators shared similar goals. Muslim entrepreneurs able to take advantage of the conflict within administrative depictions of Islam. In areas where the state's control of religious institutions was strong, French officials were able to influence a process of creating an environment where certain forms of Islam and certain networks of Muslim leaderships and certain ways of responding to French presence would thrive. An important resource Muslim elites could seek to control was the production of knowledge about African Islam, knowledge that in turn directed the activities of the colonial state. It seems almost as if the relationship was defined by them using each other's resources against them and then realising how they would succeed and what methods they would use to gain power and changing it, to suit them (Hanretta 2009, 138-139).