

## Salafi revolution in West Africa

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the ways in which a revolution inspired by Islam emerged in the few decades in West Africa, mainly through the intervention of Salafi actors, institutions, and reform practices. Salafism as an Islamic discourse became popular in the region at the end of the 20th century as Islam acquired a renewed interest and became a potent discourse, restructuring from within, formulating new political agendas and mobilising for social change and radical reconfigurations of social order. The paper calls for attention to context, noting the varieties of Salafism, while problematising the views promoters of this Islamic trend have expressed in relation to state institutions, in particular the secular school system. Emphasising the role of the Salafi preacher, the paper argues that Salafism has had a crucial impact not only on the religious, but also on the public spheres. A social and political critique, Salafism proves a major challenge while it promotes alternative moral and political orders including a Jihadi regime.

### Concept and elements of context

How does Salafism as a reform discourse and practice affect social and political interactions in West Africa? How does it relate to established moral order and political regimes in the region? These basic questions are at the core of the attempts at analyzing Salafism this paper undertakes. What I refer to as Salafi in this context is a conglomerate of actors, discourses, and institutions which, in attempting to reform Muslim practices, have actually triggered a social and political process which is nothing short of revolution. Salafism restricts the authentic sources of Islam to the Qur'an and the tradition of the prophet Muhammad (*Sunna*). At the same time it insists on the oneness of Allah

and following the model of Muhammad and his companions. It became popular in the region while Islam acquired a renewed interest and became a potent discourse, restructuring from within, formulating new political agendas and mobilising for social change and even radical reconfigurations of social order. The manifestations of these new dynamics are now spread across the Sahel-Sahara and can be seen in the religion-driven violence that has reached southward to countries such as Côte d'Ivoire. The demands and impositions of a new and radical order is what make Salafism revolutionary.

As a conceptual construct, Salafism is both complex and eclectic (Wiktorowicz 2006; Gilsaa 2015), building on various historical trajectories, inspirational figures, social categories and models. It claims both to revive and follow Islamic practices based on the models of the forefathers (such as Salaf al Saleh). One of its core arguments is built around the rejection of what it views as unlawful innovation (*bid'a*) and destruction of the tradition as understood and practiced by the first three generations of Muslims. Somewhat restorative, Salafi efforts aim at maintaining the purity of practice and protecting Islam from destructive innovations (Kobo 2013; Iddrisu 2013; and Sounaye 2009). To this end, it promotes an anti-Sufi discourse and a de-Africanisation of Islam which takes ritual, theological, sociopolitical, and epistemological forms. Theologically, asserting the oneness of God (*tawhid*) against all forms of association with what are called African traditions and customs, it promotes exclusive reliance on the scriptures, the Qur'an and the *Hadiths*, referred to in terms of *Kitab* and *Sunna*. Ritually, it rejects and condemns Sufi practices such as tomb visitation and Mawlid (celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muham-

mad), which it claims are mere *bid'a*. Socially, it engages a social engineering activism that has now established across the region a network of communities and groups clearly redesigning politics and their relationship to major institutions such as the state. The political ideal of living together regardless of ethnic or religious identities, and which justifies the erection of the state as the main political institution, is increasingly problematic and clearly no longer given.

In most of West Africa, Salafism emerged and expanded mainly through *da'wa* (call to Islam) and Islamic learning institutions. As a mobilising platform, preaching was a central piece of the Salafi *da'wa* supported by global Salafism, but also locally. From Senegal to Nigeria and Guinea to Ghana, the Graduates of Medina played a significant part in this development as they become in many contexts the agents of a Salafi mission (Kobo 2013; Loimeier 2012). Because of their financial resources that give them social and political influence, traders were also important vectors of Salafism, as they proved to be key figures of the trend and the first to adopt it. Grégoire (1993) and Warms (1992) make the same argument for two commercial towns, Maradi in Niger and Sikasso in Mali, where, as in many other contexts, merchants and *Ulama*<sup>1</sup> established an alliance, a pattern that is historically established in the expansion of Islam in Africa (Ostebo 2015; Sounaye 2009; Kane 2003).

Thus, if Salafism is a religious phenomenon, what makes it worth investigating is the fact that it brings new understandings of the world, society, and politics. In this sense, I will argue against a closure of the category of Salafism itself, noting that change and transformation are of its history. And like most historical constructs, it is not stable; it is subject to time and appropriations and therefore contextually defined. In West Africa, it provides new ways of engaging social and moral orders; and as I argue, it has become not only challenging, but revolutionary. The continuum Salafi-Jihadi could be discussed and still needs to be empirically contrasted and complicated, but there seems to be a clear connection between the Salafism that we see today and the jihadism triggered in the region by many factors, including the desire to emancipate from political regimes, combat westernisation, and end imperialism, both cultural and economic. What comes to mind in this context is the 19th century jihads that transformed both the moral and the political economies of West Africa, especially in its most Islamised parts.

However, it is important to note that not all Salafi end up embracing violence and political

activism.<sup>2</sup> To draw a parallel with William James' famous book (James 2013), West Africa illustrates aptly the varieties of Salafi experience. Salafism is not homogenous and Salafi are not a monolithic entity. On the contrary, they are a spectrum and comprise groups, communities, and organisations that identify as Salafi by claiming the Qur'an, the tradition of Muhammad (*Hadith*), and the forefathers. At the same time, as a religious discourse and political view on the self and the society, Salafism is too diverse to follow one script. Therefore, the reader should expect a degree of simplification in the present discussion. Actually, the idea is neither to present a complete and exhaustive picture of Salafism, nor to determine which Salafi is most authentic, but to point to some of Salafi major claims, features and what makes Salafism a significant factor in the life of millions of people across West Africa. The attempt is made to think beyond categories and research the ways in which Salafism has now become the ideology of a transformative process that affects social, cultural, political, and even economic institutions. For this reason and since a major goal of this paper is to shift attention to context, I would suggest that we examine Salafism through its agents and the discourse it articulates on both social and political institutions.

Approaching Salafism in context means then being aware of its varieties, contradictions, and fragmentations. But this also implies paying attention to interactions within and without Salafism itself. In that perspective, it is worth noting, for example, how Salafism relates to secularism, as one may see it in francophone West Africa (Holder 2014; Diouf 2013), where *laïcité*, French secularism, has been at the core of state ideology, and central to Islam-related controversies in the last three decades. At some point, we don't even need mention secularism, but look only at the sharianisation debates across the region, the different forms they have taken and the implications these formulations have had for policymaking and for Islam. Obviously, secularism and sharianisation are related as illustrated by the case of Nigeria where the two issues have taken formal politico-institutional dimensions with the adoption of Shari'a as state law across the Muslim north (Kendhammer 2016; Ostien 2007; Harnischfeger 2008; Chesworth and Kogelmann 2013). But, in other countries, too, sharianisation has been at the center of public debate and a mobilising motive for what I call the Islamic civil society, a conglomerate of organisations and actors - generally authorised by the state, but not always - which aim to influence governance, espe-

<sup>1</sup> Scholars who hold significant sociopolitical influence in Muslim context. There are also thought to be the spokespersons of the Islamic tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Hence the category Salafi-Jihadi which refers specifically to the groups similar to those which fight the state in Northern Mali and Nigeria. An abundant literature already exists on that dimension of Salafism in West Africa.

cially by rejecting what it views as un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic norms and values. Mali, Niger, and Senegal are countries where the Islamic civil society has become influential and vied to defend Islam against attempts at reforming and codifying family law it viewed as too secular (Brossier 2016, 2004; Sounaye 2005; and Miran 1998).

Salafism developed and is carried out within a web of relations which affect and inform societal power structures. For one thing, it has become a discourse of dissent, the voice of the discontented and one of the main modes of protest. But, it has also become the framework of imagining the future of oneself and the community. How Salafism relates to social and political environment, including other religious discourses is important to analyze in order to grasp the significance of this trend in contemporary West Africa. Emphasising its relations means also looking at this trend in its various manifestations, including political, economic, societal and cultural, that is, looking beyond the exclusive confines of the *religious* as traditionally understood.

Obviously, there will not be enough space in this paper to elaborate on all the dimensions of Salafism I have sketched out. I will limit my examination to only a few points which help illustrate the shifting paradigm that comes with the sociopolitical and cultural transformation processes this trend has triggered. I will equate this whole process to a revolution which managed to make religiosity a major factor in social interactions, political agendas, and life aspirations. In fact, Salafism introduces a reform which has clearly revolutionised not only religious practices, but also how people simply live, think about themselves and their institutions, and construct others. Setting up a new universe of discourse, it has produced a paradigm that redefines almost all aspects of public and personal lives.

The invitation is therefore to open an eye on religiously inspired processes that shape social, political, and cultural dynamics in Africa. While these processes affect everyday life, they are also changing the meaning of Islam and being Muslim, particularly among youth and women in the region. These developments have major implications for governance, coexistence, and the future of the state in the region. Compared to the 19th century Jihads (Lovejoy 2016; Robinson 2000; Hiskett 1994; Last 1967), contemporary appropriations of Islam through political Salafism have to deal with a major institution, the modern state, which, in addition to its universalist discourse of citizenship, law, and order, usually claims the power to dominate or regulate all political subjects and bodies. But, it is one thing to have power, and another thing to have the authority to govern. The ongoing developments that come out of the appropriations and forms of Salafism in Africa and across the globe, speak to the current reality of the political terrain.

What I will point to as a link, however, is the continuities and the ruptures that have shaped jihadi aspirations. The 19th and 21st centuries are different times, and, to some extent, raise different questions and show different *modus operandi*; but they have similar preoccupations.

One important thing that the last two decades demonstrate in West Africa is certainly the fact that religion, or more precisely Salafism, has not only gained visibility; it has become a dominant force and a powerful resource. The Shari'a controversy, the morality debate, the »Islamic state« issue, and the search for a pious subject and community are all instantiations of a desire to be different, a cry for an alternative, and an aspiration to emancipate from incapacitating and alienating social, political, and cultural structures. It is from that perspective that I understand the development of Salafism in the region as transformative of the ways in which people conceive of their being individuals, collective bodies, and citizens of a state. This, I contend, is a revolutionary process that is reshaping Islam, but may also end up affecting the political configuration of the region, both its conceptual and geographical maps, and even the future of the state.

In other words, while it is important to show that Salafism has grown into a political, cultural, and societal factor, how it translates and acquires materiality in historical context is, for example, one of the most important questions. As Boko Haram has captured the attention of the media and has become today the center of most of the talk about Islam in the region, we must not forget that it is only one of the multiple possible outcomes of Salafism. It is one among many possibilities. Understanding Boko Haram, for example, is very important, but understanding the ways in which it becomes central and is appropriated for diverse reasons, and in very different ways seems to me even more crucial. This is a question that one cannot afford to overlook if one seeks to understand developments in the Sahel and West Africa, and possibly in the global context today.

In the remainder of the paper, I discuss what I term the Salafi challenge, the way in which Salafi becomes problematic and unavoidable, not only as a discourse that articulates a critique of the society and other Islamic practices, but as a game changer which entered the religious and the public arena to stay. The challenge lies not only in what Salafism says, but how it does things and organises itself. In the second section, I move to examine the case of preaching and preachers and how they have become central figures of the Salafi revolution. Numerous preachers across the region could help illustrate the point here. Focusing on Albani, a popular Salafi figure in Zaria, Nigeria, I show how he exemplifies the Salafi religious entrepreneur whose preoccupation is to engineer

a new order. Then, in a third section, I introduce the notion of the Salafi moral order, highlighting how the Salafi project intends to form a new society, a new subject, and an alternative sociopolitical order. In the current context, a discussion on moral order can hardly do without factoring in the state and its various, complicated, and ambivalent perceptions and status. This brings to the fore the issue of jihad. The fourth section of the paper then attempts to map some key ideas and positions that have emerged in relation to the state and its status in the current sociopolitical configuration, in particular with the experience of *boko*<sup>3</sup>. Thus instead of keeping the discussion to the organisation which has become well known because of its radical approach, I attempt to complicate the issue by introducing *boko* as a social category, a cultural model, and a political regime.

### The Salafi challenge

There is no doubt that one of the key developments with Islam in West Africa has been the emergence of Salafi actors who have challenged the social order across the region. This process is better understood by focusing on their interventions in political debates and their push for democratisation of religious authority, but also in the ways they have become social entrepreneurs, seeking to build communities in opposition established orders and hierarchies. Izala, Boko Haram, Ansar Dine, MUJAO<sup>4</sup> illustrate this development.

As in many parts of the Muslim world, in West Africa, too, one needs take into consideration the Saudi factor and the conflict Sufi/Salafi or the Shia/Sunni opposition, which are part of global dynamics (Sirriyeh 1999). In the Sahara-Sahel region in particular, part of the reality of Salafism is the loss of confidence in sources of norms and values that until recently proved to be successful and effective in maintaining order. Religious ideas have their social life and as such, are affected by both processes of reproduction of social institutions and ideological shifts. The rise of Salafism in West Africa has followed diverse and differentiated paths, as already noted. However, it will suffice here to say that when dissatisfaction arose in the

<sup>3</sup> *Boko* here refers to the western-educated elite and its norms. In Hausa context, it is also associated with secularism.

<sup>4</sup> Ansar Dine is a jihadi organisation operating mainly in northern Mali and which emerged in 2012 out of the reconfiguration of the jihadi forces following the collapse of the state in Libya. It is said to be dominated by ethnic Tuareg. MUJAO, Mouvement pour l'Unité du Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest, operating along the border regions of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. However, one should note that this process is not exclusive to Islam because across West Africa, Christianity too has become a major mobilising force, a counter-power and transformative factor (cf. Meyer 2015, Piot 2010, Marshall 2009)

1990s, Salafism became one of the major religious discourses to cash in, portraying the world and the order it offers as the best alternative now and in the future. In fact, when the state failed to provide social services, Salafi organisations stepped in to »serve people«, as a preacher in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, observes. Many organisations, sometimes with international support, developed initiatives that provided water, mosques, education (such as madrasa, scholarships, reading materials, etc.), food and healthcare, in both rural and urban areas. But, one tells only part of the story with these limited materialistic and utilitarian explanations.

Political rearrangement of economic orders following the 1980s Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and neoliberal measures to liberalise, open-up, and leave the economy to private investments, cut funding for education, promote competition, etc. The state exiting these domains created a vacuum that civil society, comprising also influential religious organisations and actors, quickly found ways to fill. I have used the category of Islamic civil society to refer to that segment of organisations and associations that aspire to check governance and hold the state and the government accountable on religious grounds, referring to Islamic principles. In more than one case, these claims and aspirations have structurally changed the Islamic sphere; they have also transformed Muslim politics, in particular how Muslims interrelate, as well as how they relate to other religious traditions, state officials, and foreigners. They have even affected how Muslims situate themselves in regional and global contexts while setting new stages and standards for politics and governance.

Salafi are not only well connected regionally; they also project themselves beyond their local contexts, establishing networks, and becoming models of how to live and operate in a global context. Many Salafi of West Africa, for example, are well connected to Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Egypt (Ahmed 2015), becoming local figures of a global religious discourse that seeks to counter its traditional foe, Sufism, but also new actors such as the Shia, the Pentecostals, and the Ahmadiyya. It is worth noting, for example, how the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is gradually reshaping the Islamic sphere in Nigeria and in Mali, as local Salafi and Shia become proxies in a global war of words. Under such circumstances, Salafi have become actors in and between many places, constantly remaking and reworking their connections. They enjoy transnationalism and translocality.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Many preachers and Muslim actors, from the region but also from other regions (North Africa, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Central Africa) have built on that disposition.

Highly mobile, Salafi crisscross borders and have also become media savvy. Their mediation strategies have radically changed while their means of communication have diversified, allowing them to escape the controlling eye and hand of state institutions. As a result, the mobile phone, for example, has become a powerful tool capable of disrupting the logic of the state. Media houses such as Sunna TV, a channel that promotes Salafism globally and one of the most active in West Africa, have clearly complicated the forms, but also the content of broadcasting in the region that have made governing the Salafi subject challenging, for both state and social institutions.

In fact, one of the first targets of the Salafi discourse was the gerontocratic order which until recently informed the social organisation of Islam in most of the region. Rejuvenating the Islamic sphere, this discourse has also introduced new institutions which have now inscribed various sociopolitical dynamics to the region. In reaction to these and similar developments, several countries (Mali, Niger, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania) have designed and launched training programmes for preachers and Imams, whose renewed political and social influence state governance has to reckon with.

Theorisations of these developments have argued as if the Salafi were autonomous agents, occluding the fact that they are part of the society and often agents of the state administration. In any case, how to deal with Salafi rhetoric, but also how to accommodate Salafi expectations and aspirations, seems to be a key preoccupation for states and governments, but they have certainly not developed efficient strategies and policies to this end. In the last four years, initiatives from the states in the region, the United Nations, and Europe have sought to counter Salafi-Jihadi violence and restore the rule of state institutions and lawful order. Because law and order are no longer given, states have had to develop new approaches and policies. Security concerns have been at the center of these policies, especially with Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, and MUJAO and Aqmi in Niger, Mali, Algeria, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. But the Salafi challenge transcends security and includes basic daily concerns.

My framing of the Salafi challenge in the terms I have privileged so far is an attempt at comprehending new, Islam-related developments in West Africa, as Salafism conquers terrain and becomes a major player in the cultural and sociopolitical life of the region. A conclusion easily drawn is that Salafism has been transformative of social norms, political discourse, and cultural interaction. At the same time, it has created a new way of thinking about present and future West African societies. Its embrace of violence has spotlighted a region that is increasingly militarised, especially as both

Europe and the USA have cast the region as a major breeding ground for terrorism. That the Sahel has become a topic in geopolitical discourse is evident; but the basis of this status is the Salafi challenge and what it has introduced as new dynamics.

Once appropriated and invested in political projects, Salafism has appeared very much disruptive of the logic of the state, especially its social and political dynamics, while setting new (dis)orders. The claim of bringing a God-sanctioned order and a law abiding community is one of the recurrent discursive devices that made the popularity of Salafism. Appealing to many, especially disenfranchised citizens disappointed by the state, it challenges established orders and promises freedom, emancipation, and autonomy. Youth and women become carriers or agentive power (Alidou 2005) as never seen before. In northern Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, or Senegal, the articulation of these promises of a better future has had a major impact on what I will refer to here as epistemic communities, those groups and circles that build on learning and knowledge in their attempts to establish a new social order (Kobo 2012; Miran 2006; Brenner 2001; Amselle 1985). Jihadism in northern Mali from 2012 and sharianisation in northern Nigeria at the beginning of the 2000s, are distinctive marks of this trend that has made the quest for this new order a political matter. Within Muslim contexts, Salafism galvanises and provides a purpose for life and existence that more and more Muslims no longer find in traditional institutions. The Ibadou Rahmane discourse in the outskirts of Dakar illustrates this feature. A reform project and powerful conceptual resource, Salafism has helped Muslims frame their worlds, actions, and desire to be modern, and helped them make sense of the ideological, moral, and material conditions of their lives. In these ways, Salafism has reenergised Islamic reform and the religious spheres in general.<sup>6</sup>

But, of course, once we look beyond the regional focus of this paper, ISIS and Al Shebaab are illustrations of the tendency to seek a new political order, too. How contemporary Salafism has affected dynamics within the Islamic tradition, and affected Muslim and global politics, are questions gradually getting scholarly attention (Cavatorta and Merone 2016; Bonnefoy 2012; Lauzière 2015). In relation to West Africa, perhaps one of the institutions to look at is preaching and its professionals.

### **Preaching Salafism: Albani and his Salafiyya *da'wa***

In Africa, there is probably no country where preachers have thrived like Nigeria. The anecdote is that through their efforts religion has taken over

<sup>6</sup> Scholars have discussed these dimensions in various ways. (Umar 1993; Gregoire 1993; LeBlanc 2000; Dumbe 2013; Kobo 2013; Iddrisu 2012)

oil as the primary export-product of the Nigerian economy. But then, United Nations must have their numbers wrong since they hardly consider religious goods and markets in their statistics. For anyone familiar with recent developments in West Africa, this characterisation makes sense and certainly illustrates the significance of what may be termed a religious rent, in the last twenty years. In Muslim context, the number of preachers has multiplied since the 1990s and particularly after the 2000s, following the adoption of Shari'a as a state law in northern Nigeria and the reenergised Saudi religious diplomacy. Although all Islamic trends have regularly used sermons to promote their ideas and agendas, the most active and dynamic are the Salafi who quickly became the face of religion in the public sphere and the voice of the people as they claim authenticity and therefore legitimacy. I recall conversations in Zaria in 2015 during which my interlocutors suggested that in Northern Nigeria, politics start and end with religion. This may not be always the case, but it is certainly a distinctive mark of Nigeria, in both Muslim and Christian contexts. A similar formula could certainly apply, for example, to Senegal (Diouf 2013).

What is striking is how voicing authenticity and defending Islam have become the task and the obligation of preachers, many of whom have, for that reason, acquired the status of pop stars. In Nigeria, the story of the political preacher goes back at least to the Izala movement with its two charismatic figures, Sheikh Abubakar Gumi and Idriss Ismail (Ben Amara 2013; Loimeier 2011), the founding fathers of the Salafi movement, who have in many ways shaped the course of this trend in Nigeria and to some extent in West Africa. What started with Izala led to Boko Haram, the most mediated of all Salafi organisations in West Africa today. Because of the indiscriminate killings added to its already violent rhetoric, Boko Haram has become known worldwide essentially because it took into the political arena issues that were floating in the society and adopted tactics and modes of opposition never seen before. Thus, it is not enough to say that Boko Haram is a jihadi organisation; one needs to add how it captures Muslim dissent and the modes through which it expresses and mobilises it. Most Muslims in the region, in particular, have rejected Boko Haram tactics, many going as far as to delegitimise it as Islamic and disown it as local. Many have also described it as the product of Western, French, or American conspiracies against Muslims, Nigeria, and Islam. Regardless, what is clearly visible and documented is that preaching is at the root of its emergence, including its call to reinstate authentic practice of Islam exemplified by the first Muslim community that formed around the Prophet Muhammad. Functionaries of *da'wa* and cadres of a new moral order, preachers

have become influential agents of a movement ambitious to spread Salafism and make it the region's primary ideological frame. Preachers took the lead of what I have already termed the Salafi challenge, as they illustrate the transformative power of preaching in contemporary West Africa (Miran 1998; Savadogo and Gomez-Perez 2011).

To understand the significance of preaching in this context, one has to look at individual preachers, especially how they establish themselves as voices of Islam and promoters of a religiously inspired moral order. I propose to discuss the case of a charismatic Salafi figure known as Sheikh Muhammad Awal Albani, who emerged in Zaria, Nigeria, at the end of the 1990s and quickly became the epitome of the Salafi preacher. Caught up in several polemics and controversies, he was a challenge to virtually any form of authority in Zaria and northern Nigeria. Thus, when he was gunned down on February 1, 2014 on his way back home from a nightly sermon he delivered in his hometown of Zaria, many of his followers were not surprised. They had imagined such a tragedy happening, and the only question was when. Among Salafi, the act was the culmination of a series of killings that targeted spokespersons of a trend that had become dominant, and, for many religious and political authorities, simply inconvenient. In fact, before Albani, several preachers had already been assassinated (Thurston 2016b; Bala 2014; Brigaglia 2012), silenced for good, as one of my interlocutors in Yola, Nigeria, argued.

Perhaps in no context other than Nigeria has the rise of Salafi resulted in such radical modus operandi. To silence criticism or eliminate a competitor on the open market of ideas, assassination became the ultimate weapon. Albani's case illustrates the significance preaching has acquired in contemporary Muslim societies, in particular in Sub-Saharan Africa, as *da'wa* becomes the primary medium for religious activism. To promote their anti-Sufism, Salafi have focused on this Islamic institution which helped them popularise theologies and political views primarily directed against the most organised Islamic trend in the region: Sufism. In Niger, Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon, they used this hostility to build their communities and carve a space for themselves. Preaching proved instrumental in those contexts, for Salafism would not have spread as it did across West Africa without this practice.<sup>7</sup>

For Sheikh Albani Zaria, as for the model he emulated, Sheikh Nasir al-Din al-Bani (d. 1999), the famous Syrian-born Salafi and *Hadith* scholar, from whom the former picked up the nickname Albani, the science of *Hadith* is the mother of all sciences.

<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the same could be said of Pentecostals, for whom preaching has also become a primary technology of public making in West Africa.

This explains why Albani named his headquarters the *Dar al Hadeeth*. Hadith open in practice by informing about the ways in which Muhammad lived a paradigmatic life. In Nigeria Albani managed to establish himself as one of the most respected scholars of *Hadith*. In his arguments and disputes, he has constantly resorted to that expertise, promoting more reliance on that source of Islamic norms in Nigeria and West Africa. When he got entangled in an argument with the *ulama* and the traditional authority of Serkin Zazzau in Zaria, he was summoned to an assembly and asked to present his claims and provide justification for performing the Friday congregational prayer in the morning instead of early afternoon, as people usually do in Zaria and across Muslim Africa. On that occasion, many accused him of inciting unrest and corrupting their children, and demanded that he be forced to renounce his alternative practices and conform to tradition. An indefatigable preacher who had become popular beyond Nigerian borders, he continued to challenge social, political, and religious order until his death. In Niger and Nigeria, for example, his sermons are among the most listened to and shared within Salafi circles.

As Albani's community shows, Salafism is not only a rhetoric or a set of apprehensions and musings. It is an engagement with the world and its politics. It is a social formation<sup>8</sup> and as such, needs social materiality. Thus, for Salafism to establish itself, it needs to be socially produced and maintained. Again, preaching played a key role in that process. It proved instrumental for Albani's community, in the making of the Izala movement, and in the rise of many Muslim leaders across West Africa (cf. Holder 2012, Schulz 2011, Sounaye 2009). One needs only look at Mohamed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, or Ahmadou Koufa of Mali<sup>9</sup>, who have used preaching to establish and expand their communities, in particular against what they viewed as state corruption and injustice. Similar cases could be made about Senegal, Burkina and Ghana (Gomez-Perez and Madore 2013; Dumbe 2013).

Perhaps more than any other charismatic preacher in the Hausa speaking Africa, Albani was convinced of the necessity of preaching to »change Muslim behavior and protect Islam« (Albani, sermon Matasa, no date). Hence his social entrepreneurship and efforts to set up a community in Zaria for what he called *da'wa salafiyya*. In a local context dominated by rivalry among religious traditions and groups, part of Albani's ambition was to contribute to the grandeur of Islam and unify Muslims, reconciling them against the »enemies

of Islam and northern Nigeria«, as he puts it (Albani, sermon *bid'a*, no date). Beyond Nigeria, his Salafism promoted pan-Islamism, laying an elaborate discourse on »Algeria's so-called democratisation« as he points to the »injustice Muslims are subject to in that country« (Albani, sermon Matasa). This is a reference to the 1990s »revocation of the victory« of the Front Islamic du Salut (FIS), the Islamist political party whose banning propelled Algeria into a continuing cycle of violence. Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and the Shia, the other foe of Albani's Salafism, were all central topics of his preaching.

Theologically and socially, Albani promoted an uncompromising Salafism that stresses the need for Muslims to emancipate themselves from an international and imperialist order. In calling the faithful to follow in the footsteps of Muhammad and the Pious Forefathers, he promotes a Muslim nationalism and targets international organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), which he accused of having an anti-Muslim agenda. For example, he played a major role in the anti-polio immunisation campaigns in the 2000s as the WHO and the Nigerian Government teamed up to eliminate the virus. Then, Albani was also caught in several controversies as he claimed that the polio immunisation campaigns were actually an operation to spread infertility among Muslims. Outspoken on various other social and political issues, he was courted by local authorities, traders, and political leaders seeking to gain his support in both local and general elections.

In a dynamic field dominated by communitarianism, Albani stands as a loner, exemplifying a type of religious entrepreneurship that goes beyond the classical model of the *ulama* and at the same time contradicting the Izala model, which had been the region's first and most significant Salafi organisation. Albani constantly rejected invitations to take part in the Izala movement, although on various occasions he claimed to share the same creed and ethos with Izala.<sup>10</sup> For him, authentic Islam, i.e. *Salafiyya*, had nothing to do with *Kungiya* (association), a model of organisation exemplified by the Izala and the Sufi organisations. Organisations do not serve the unity of Islam; on the contrary, they divide Muslims, he argued. In fact, he thought he was proven right with the fragmentation of the Izala movement that started at the end of the 1980s and continued through the 1990s and resulted in Boko Haram. Undeterred, he associated Boko Haram with an unacceptable corruption of Salafism.

One of the features of Salafism that scholars have emphasised is precisely the fact that it is both global and local (Meijer 2009; Ostebo 2015). Preachers have contributed significantly to make

<sup>8</sup> Group, community.

<sup>9</sup> Yusuf was killed by the Nigerian army in July 2009. In 2015, Koufa founded the jihadi group Front de libération du Macina in Mali.

<sup>10</sup> He also refused to be part of the Ulama council of Zaria.

this so. West Africa easily serves to document that phenomenon. While I focus on Albani in this section, it is evident that part of his popularity can only be understood in situating him in his local context, but at the same time by examining him as a regional actor. Albani finds inspiration in figures of Salafism beyond West Africa (cf. his nickname) and in the 19th century Jihadi movement that brought the Sokoto Caliphate. The founder of this theocracy, Usman Dan Fodio and his family, and the jihadism that dominated the 19th century West Africa are frequent references in his sermons. This local model of a polity where Islam became the major source of norms for the region inspired Albani's political imagination and action, in particular his social engineering efforts to build a community. Interestingly, he is not a Graduate of Medina, the model that has been instrumental in spreading Salafism in West Africa in the last two decades.

The point here is that the power of the word and the symbolic weight of religion, or the claims of religiosity, have given preachers the opportunity to engineer communities and to influence, if not initiate, political change. As I have suggested above, Albani's influence has earned him more than sympathy and supporters. In Zaria, his harsh criticism of political authorities, other religious communities, in particular the Tariqa, the Shi'a whose headquarters are in the same city, and Boko Haram, have regularly put him under the spotlight (Thurston 2016a, 2016b; Sounaye, forthcoming). Resolute and fearless critique of political practice and the Nigerian Federal government, Albani exemplified the Salafi preacher who challenges established orders and champions a new awakening of Islam and Muslims for an era of Qur'anic rule, *Zamanin al Qur'ani*.

Taken within this socioreligious context, what Albani encapsulates is a trend of democratisation of religious discourse and authority, the coming of age of a generation of Muslim figures who build their influence by protesting and challenging conventions of the state and traditional power structures. In other terms, what is striking is how Salafi communities have gradually built not only organisations, but communities they rely on to promote an anti-establishment discourse. They have appropriated the democratic ethos of freedom of speech and religion to promote alternative orders. Interestingly, many of these alternative groups and communities have related to the state and the political sphere only in antagonistic terms. Salafism in many ways grew out of the engagement with these new realities of political society and the religious and public spheres. It took shape in that context of liberalisation and along the way, diversified, fragmented, and, as the trendy concept puts it, radicalised. It challenges traditional configurations of power and champions qualitative and radical changes as it gradually remakes both

habitats and habitus, to borrow Meyer's formula.<sup>11</sup> In the end, and going back to my main argument, we must note that Salafism and its charismatic spokespersons have become popular not only because they are *protestant* voices, but also because they embody a revolutionary trend and the promise of a new political rule and moral order which, in many cases, focuses of the modern state.

### **The Salafi moral order: a revolution that comes through reform**

Salafi presence and initiatives in the public arena across West Africa have transformed social dynamics and state governance. Current anxieties with security and violent jihadism do not belie this assessment. On the contrary, they confirm the ways in which Salafism has significantly affected interactions and seeks to establish a new moral order. What I call the Salafi moral order here is simply the value system which takes Salafism as the ultimate reference point for individual behavior, governance, and social interactions. The principles for this order address four main questions: What is right? What is good? What is appropriate? And what is just? They constitute the moral basis that governs human choice and political action. Even though Salafi are minority among Muslims in West Africa, it is important to note that in many contexts, they have managed to set a powerful moral agenda which aspires to rule all domains of social life. Its search for defining the truth and the common good has been to some extent successful. I am referring not only to Jihadists who claim Salafism, but also to the various organisations, groups, and communities that have adopted this Islamic reform discourse simply for themselves, with no interest in imposing it onto others. Let's not forget that among Salafi, there are certainly Jihadi who found in violence a means to achieve political change; but there are also quietists who abhor violence and argue that the use of violence to promote Islam is un-Islamic.

Two of the ways Salafism was able to create and impose this moral order are transnationalism and translocalism, as I have already noted with Albani. But these features are not exclusive to Salafism. Many other Muslim trends and organisations are known for operating and dealing beyond their local contexts and outside of the state realm, often negating state borders and contradicting its logic. Thus, in their quest to reform Islam and Muslim practices, Salafi have heavily relied on transnationalism (Ahmed 2015; Dumbo 2013). Translocality defines Islam in Africa, in particular among Sufi, both before and with the advent of the state (Loimeier 2003).

<sup>11</sup> See, [https://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte\\_2008\\_2013/Habitats\\_Habitus\\_e.html](https://www.zmo.de/forschung/projekte_2008_2013/Habitats_Habitus_e.html), accessed August 22, 2017

In his documentary, *Devoir de Mémoire* (2014), on the Jihadi takeover in Northern Mali in 2012, Mamadou Kotiki Cissé shows a young Boko Haram fighter who claims to have come from Northern Nigeria to support the freshly established Jihadi rule. Ahmed (2015) notes the longstanding networks of Salafism between Saudi Arabia and West Africa. The roots of intellectual Salafism have also sprouted in West Africa, from Niger to Libya or Cameroon to Northern Nigeria, relying on new learning institutions and pedagogy. The Islamic University of Say, in Niger, is among those institutions that have contributed to the making of a regional Salafi identity while creating the conditions for Senegalese, Beninese, Malians, and Nigerians to develop affinities and alliances. As one may see with the Graduates of Medina (Sounaye 2015; Lomeier 2012), being trained in the same institution creates a shared identity that overrides the micro-nationalism characteristic of the postcolonial states. This is illustrated by what I will call the Jos alumni, a network of Salafi spread across the Lake Chad basin and who were trained in the city of Jos, Nigeria, the birth place of the Izala movement.

In addition to these communities of learning, one of the major actors in illustrating the regionalisation of the Salafi moral order is the preacher. Salafi preaching has been effective in reaching out and popularising religious ideas and practices, and in the process shaping the local translation of the Muslim imagined community (*Umma*). The result has been the opening up of spheres of influence and authority for a new and younger generation of leaders, the restructuring of the Islamic sphere (Madore 2016; Gomez 2013), and the constitution of various Salafi communities across the region (Sounaye 2016; Kobo 2015; and Iddrisu 2012). These phenomena have all been supported by practices and actors that found ways to get beyond borders and inspire the formation of a regional Islamic sphere. One may even argue that the new Salafi order renders the state irrelevant, as we will see in the next section. More than regional, the Salafi moral project is actually global, given the various connections averred or simply imagined between Salafi organisations across the globe (Meijer 2009). The claims of organisations such as al-Shebab to be the representative of al Qaeda in the Horn of Africa, or of Boko Haram to be a branch of ISIS in West Africa, support that point.

The issue of the moral order, as I examine it here, relates directly to the moral subject. What kind of citizen is expected to sustain and maintain this moral order? In other words, what kind of subject is needed for the society? This question has usually been deferred to the secular schooling system, an institution at the core of the moral fabric of the society. However, public educational systems have come under heavy criticism, espe-

cially in francophone context where secularism is usually understood as an anti-religious ideology. Hence the emergence of alternative learning institutions with Salafi leanings. This explains in part why Salafi activism has concentrated primarily on learning institutions and the introduction of Islamic subjects in the public education curriculum. Against the secular system, Salafi emerged as the guardians of an Islamic moral order for which the school system is not only a major symbol, but also the institution any reform agenda should target. When governments fail to meet activists' demand to reform curricula so that Islam is offered the status they believe it deserves, a profusion of private learning institutions followed, transforming the landscape of Islamic learning (Sounaye 2016; Id- drisu 2012; Kobo 2012; Brenner 2001).

Salafi criticism of secular schooling has emphasised the inability of this institution to inculcate the moral and political values they see as key to social life. Boko Haram anxieties about schooling and its ransacking of public schools in northern Nigeria, for example, denote the significance of this issue for the Salafi political agenda and moral order. But, we should be careful and point to the fact that the criticism leveled against schooling is exclusive to neither Boko Haram, nor Salafi. In general, Muslims have regularly criticised secular schooling because of the allegedly anti-Islamic values it transmits. Beyond the Islamic sphere, in colonial and even recent postcolonial contexts, resistance to schooling was not uncommon. In Northern Niger, there are still communities that reject schooling despite the efforts by the state and development agencies to convince them to send their children to school. Across West Africa it is also known that schooling, especially from the beginning of the colonial rule, was rather for the underprivileged and commoners as the nobility and aristocratic class rejected it. In those instances, schooling was perceived to be destructive, carrying political subjugation and cultural extroversion (Hountondji 1997). Therefore, the war on secular schooling illustrated by cases in northern Nigeria, Cameroon and now along the Mali-Burkina border has a taste of *déjà vu*.

In broader terms, what is at stake is an unwanted cultural model Salafi fears will disorganise their life and dismantle their society. Similar discourses and views about the obligation to preserve one's authenticity are found in various contexts where the issue has been colonisation and subjection of the kind Mbembe refers to in his theorisation of the *commandement* (Mbembe 2000). Obviously, schooling was instrumental to the colonial project and the modern state, its main institution; it was the most efficient way to produce subjects willing to accept the logic of the state and its vision for nation-building. Understandably, for the proponents of a Salafi moral order, the classical public school

system in particular is not viable because »it destroys our youth, and promote *turanci*« (Bachir Nyandu Ghana, preacher).<sup>12</sup> In the current context, which finds high prestige in Arabo-Islamic culture, these convictions lead to a building spree, so to speak, of mosques and learning institutions devoted to combatting colonial imposition and preventing cultural domination.

Therefore, the anti-imperialist and anti-western sentiments Salafism has promoted find justification in the emancipation and authenticity agenda of which Boko Haram ideology has become the best illustration in the last ten years. Resorting to religious resources and arguments to set the ground for its anti-imperialist fight complicates the picture of Salafism, in particular because it has regularly coalesced Christianity, the West, and Neoliberalism. Pan-Africanist, cultural, and political movements across the region have often articulated an emancipation agenda, but most of the time in a rather secular way. The resort to religion and a particular religiosity is indicative of a turn that we should pay attention to, especially in a context where the state has struggled to deliver social services and to maintain its authority. Thus, the key question is not whether the state is failing or has failed, but what, as an institution, the state means to the various communities and subjects it is supposed to serve.

What I want to stress in this section is that Salafism rests on a call for nationalism which is not grounded in the logic of a state that portrays itself as a neutral institution, but in a religious discourse that promotes a particular vision of governance. Of course, sometimes, Salafi accommodate the state logic, but they also seek to repeal it in their search for a new moral order. Is this the sign that for Salafism to be so appealing and attractive, something must be wrong with the state and what it has to deliver? Not entirely.

Salafism spread so easily and became a powerful ideological mantra precisely because it mirrors a new order and offers the prospects of improvement, if not materially, then at least morally. Its promise of a reformed moral order in line with people's ideals has made it a powerful discourse that has transformed the moral economy of many communities, not only in West Africa, across the globe in the south, but also in the north, and even in parts of the world that are not traditionally viewed as Islamic. After all, Europe and America, for example, are two regions where Salafism has been growing and recruiting some of its staunch supporters (Pall 2013; Inge 2016).

In West Africa specifically, Salafi claimed rupture in contexts where, as it contends, Islam is

forgotten and rendered insignificant. To change this state of affairs, they championed a reform of practices and institutions as the condition for the new and corrective order, feeding into a political and revolutionary agenda that aims now to remake the state, society, and, most importantly, the very principles on which governance rests.

In that regard, Salafi criticism of secular schooling should not surprise. It is in line with most of the critiques that saw in educational institutions the very basis of socialisation and the making of a citizenry. Whether among quietist or jihadi, public secular schooling is still criticised for its incapacity to emancipate itself from Western and foreign values. According to this nationalism that takes religious forms, public education is part of a colonial project that intended to produce literate subjects, but only for bureaucratic regimes and norms, which actually turned out to be detrimental to Muslims.<sup>13</sup> Once coopted by the regimes, these subjects grow into an upper-class out of touch and insensitive to the concerns of the broader society. In Hausa speaking context, this elite is referred to as *yan boko* (trained in Western educational institutions) or more pejoratively, *yan takarda* (those who use paperwork), in reference to the colonial and state bureaucracy. Put in those terms, public education corrupts because it disorients. Hence the Salafi challenge to the modernity that is centered around the state and its main norm-producing apparatus: public education.

The issue of the educational institution has been problematic for a long time in West Africa. It is certainly one of the recurring topics that have preoccupied postcolonial debates in Africa, in both religious and secular contexts. It is not then surprising that it became a major issue among contemporary Salafi eager to shift to a new *episteme* and submit all knowledge to Qur'anic principles. Education is an important target precisely because it is the institution through which social norms and structures are produced and transmitted. The fate of the state is somewhat set on the premises of the classroom. Because schooling produces subjects, it has become an important tool in the war against dependency, extroversion, and alienation. It then acquired a particular role and position within the nationalist agenda of Salafi groups, particularly those who systematically reduce public schools to vectors of westernisation.

However, while many Salafi effectively throw off the state/western model, many others come up with a middle ground position, recognising the value of science and promoting a school model that takes into consideration both the need for science and technology, regardless of their origins,

<sup>12</sup> *Turanci* is the Hausa word for westernisation, being modern. In most contexts, it is rather pejorative as it connotes uprootedness and loss of identity.

<sup>13</sup> This explains why, in March and April 2017 and following Boko Haram actions, new Jihadi groups along the Mali-Burkina border have targeted secular public schools.

and the necessity to train and protect subjects morally. The ideal citizen in that regard should be learned in Islam and equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage the materialist, technical and scientific world. Even Mohamed Yusuf, Boko Haram's first ideologue, when pressed on the need for technology and modern science, responded: »scientific knowledge is not the exclusive property of the West; it is given to all of us by God to use« (Yusuf, sermon, no title, no date). In a way, any depiction of Boko Haram's ideology as a mere rejection of science and technology is therefore inaccurate. Boko Haram is not against the modernity that came out of science and technology, but the political modernity that centers around the state and its institution; it is against a governance that secularises life and impedes religiosity. Thus, perhaps the first response I should have given the student who asked, what is Boko Haram, should have been: which Boko Haram are you talking about?

### **Against the *boko* state: a Jihadi regime?**

The social critique Salafism articulates usually refers to the state, depicted as an un-religious institution. In their arguments and polemics, Salafi have adopted contrasting and even contradictory positions with regard to the postcolonial state (cf. Khosrokhavar 2016; Elischer 2015). Amid the eroding confidence in the state to assume its role and accomplish its mission, Salafi appeared as another group of critics ready for a new type of governance. They add a new layer to the ongoing debate about the state and its relevance. Some Salafi actually went beyond criticism to reject the postcolonial secular state and replace it with a Shari'a state. Across the region, groups and leaders have voiced that option, but are yet to gain significant support. Is the state then in trouble? Any response to this question will have to take into consideration the need for radical transformation of state-centered politics, the dialectic between authenticity and foreignness that shape political discourses and subjects today.

Salafism, I have argued, has been a game changer with a crucial structural impact, despite the fact that Salafi, I will quickly add, hold diverging views on the state as the regulator of public life. What role should the state play? What should be its source of norms? How is it to serve the common good? What should be its institutional make-up? These are major questions that have preoccupied Salafi in their quest to establish a new political order. Obviously, these issues could be approached beyond single and specific cases. And a comparative approach is certainly needed to grasp the complicated and ambivalent relationship Salafi have developed overtime with the postcolonial institutions. At times, they have resorted to the state as they seek, for example, to »protect Islam against its enemies«; and at other times, they have

rejected it altogether. As these issues stand, they are not only about religion, Islam, or Salafi. I read them as new articulations and formulations of the postcolonial condition on a new terrain.<sup>14</sup>

What must be underlined in this context is that Salafi politics have tested the state and unveiled many of its contradictions, contributing to the possibility of a Salafi-Jihadi political order of the kind experienced in Northern Mali and Northern Nigeria, especially from 2009. Like most Salafi political organisations, the goal of Boko Haram, for example, is to remedy what it sees as an unjust rule and overthrow corrupt, un-Islamic rule. The vicissitudes of Nigerian politics and what often amounts to chaotic governance have given Salafi reasons to promote an anti-state agenda and a Muslim nationalist and populist discourse. Against the federal state, they have usually promoted resistance and opposition.

To mitigate that picture, it is worth noting that Salafi have also at times encouraged peaceful and positive engagement with political processes, urging their fellows to register for and participate in elections, for example. Sheikh Gumi himself has claimed that »*Siasa tahi Salla*« (participation in election is more important than prayer), as he tries to mobilise Muslims to vote and defend the interest of Muslims in a federal system where they feel marginalised and abused. Political participation in that sense is crucial for the Salafi engagement with the state and its mode of governance.

Postcolonial West Africa is yet to experience a Jihadi state, but, perhaps, not for long. Less than two centuries ago, Jihadism was a popular ideology which materialised in many theocracies across the region (Djata 1996; Echenberg 1969; Glover 2007; Babou 2007; Curtin 1971; Last 1967; Robinson 2000a and 2000b). One of the most significant resulted in the Sokoto Caliphate, a political entity formed and ruled by Usman Dan Fodio and his followers. It covered most of the territory that later became Nigeria, Niger, Benin, Cameroon, and Burkina. The rise of a Salafism and the resurgence of Jihadism today understandably lead to the question whether a Jihadi state is a political possibility. Considering the course of events in the last few decades, this is a legitimate question.

A Jihadi state may not be part of the near future, not only because Jihadi forces in the region lack the technology, the administrative personnel, and the infrastructure needed to establish and defend such an institution, but because the model of a governing body called the state in its logic and history within the region has not been politically convincing. Beyond the region, Somalia happened; Libya is still happening; and there is no end in sight for North-

<sup>14</sup> Obviously, one needs more than a paper to satisfactorily examine that proposition.

ern Mali or the Lake Chad insurgency. To complicate matters, Jihadism is now increasingly entangled with ethnic politics, especially as managing resources becomes a major issue with the state. Perhaps, the time has arrived to rethink the state as an institution and to ponder the type of governance needed in many parts of that region. From this perspective, the Salafi challenge is not just about the ideology of the state, but about the state itself as a governing body.

The Jihadi experience in the region has been mainly precolonial, and originated from particular Islamic social formations and political configurations that predated the state. For one, in the areas where Islam was practiced, the political order was organised around authorities who, although they took Islam as a major source of norms, were hardly promoters of an Islamic moral order of the kind the region is experiencing today. Islamic norms and values were part of the resources available to chieftaincy and political regimes in place, but they were less significant than today and certainly not the primary references.

Reading Sufi dynamics in the 19th century, one may argue that what made their appeal is precisely their new discourse and a reform narrative that became the main framework within which people articulated emancipation, aspiration for social progress, and becoming. Offering alternative paths and visions of the political and moral order, the Sufi reform received wide support and eventually became the discourse of a revolution (Lovejoy 2016; Robinson 2000b). Whether this revolution was coming from organisations or figures inspired by Sufism didn't matter. However, their alternative character and the promises they had for a new order, expected to be lawful, just, and in service to the common good, did matter. It mattered also that they were part of an organised ideological structure that relied on Islam to overthrow an order.

Today, the proponents of Jihadism are neither Sufi nor followers of *tariqa*, but Salafi. That is, they are mainly anti-Sufi, who build on an Islamic reform discourse that looks primarily toward Saudi Arabia for institutional and political support, but is ideologically grounded in ideas and values modeled by the Prophetic era. Furthermore, sociologically, as they rely on youth movements and organisations, they have redefined the modes of production of authority.<sup>15</sup> Saudi invested billions to help Salafism win souls and dominate the religious sphere by training West Africans and setting up educational infrastructures; but there have been also local and independent trends of active appropriation that often had nothing to do with Saudi intervention (Kobo 2013; Iddrissu 2012; Sounaye

<sup>15</sup> Youth's agency in this process has taken over that of any other segment of the society.

2012). Thus, the story of Salafism in West Africa has not been one of a passive acceptance of Saudi *da'wa* diplomacy. Power struggles along ideological lines (Muslim/Christian), ethnic differences (Umar 2015), and regional politics (north/south), as well as individual aspirations, all factor in to shape Salafi discourse. If we lose sight of this complexity, we miss significant factors that constitute most of the Salafi and religion-based dynamics driving contemporary Muslim West Africa.

Whether influenced by Saudi global ambitions or not, the celebration of the Jihadi state in West Africa resonates in many contexts as a fascination for a life filled with religiosity, articulated by an insurgent modernity, cultivated within various circles, and contributing to anti-western narratives. This form of *boko haram* is not specific to the organisation which has claimed global popularity by now. It relates primarily to a cultural model which is perceived as unfit and even dangerous for the state and the order it serves. One need only look at the debates over morality and the norms of state rule across the region to understand how *boko* could be portrayed as deceptive, lacking authenticity, and based primarily on imported values. If the West has become the privileged target of the Salafi-Jihadi discourse in the region, it is also because first, *boko* has turned into the symbol of a deceptive modernity, and then, the westernised elite has become the illustration of how corruptive western values could get. *Boko*, in that sense, is ruse and ambivalence, and for that reason also deceptive. And deception somehow engenders insurgency.

A critique of the society and its ideologies, as I have argued, Salafism is then a rejection of a political regime it deems perpetuating what Holton refers to in terms »entrenched regimes of inegalitarian citizenship« (2008: 4). Joining the widespread criticism of the postcolonial regimes, Salafism builds on the loss of confidence in state institutions. For example, in many of his sermons and like many other preachers in the region, Albani lamented the end of trust in both political authorities and state governance. Voicing the marginalisation of the north (Arewa), mostly Muslim, he challenged leaders to delegitimise the state system and open their eyes to the suffering of the Muslim north. His acerbic criticism of leadership in the north earned him support among youth, mostly disenfranchised, but also and understandably the wrath of many politicians who did not hesitate to threaten and imprison him. In fact, in 2009, he was accused of being part of the Boko Haram organisation, a case that sent him again to court after he fell out of favor with the Vice-President Namadi Sambo, a Muslim politician he previously helped get elected as Governor of Kaduna, his home state.

However, although critical of *boko*, Albani resisted rejecting it altogether. He claimed to be *dan*

*boko*<sup>16</sup> himself because he was trained in the modern and western-oriented system, in particular at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria and Modibo Adama University of Technology in Yola. Like Sheikh Jafar (Brigaglia 2012), he acknowledged the benefit of modern sciences, technology, and enlightenment. Even though he criticised the *boko* regime, he remained optimistic regarding its moral improvement and progress. In one of his sermons, laying out his plans to build the Albany Science Academy, he emphasised the necessity of *boko* in order to be fully immersed in his time (*zamani*). »There is nothing you could do without *ilimin boko* (modern knowledge/western education); *zamani* brought this reality; it's a necessity of our times«. Thus, even the corrupt *dan boko* can redeem himself because »what is to blame is not the *boko* itself, but how you use it«. Thus, »*boko* is needed and can produce good citizens« (Albani, sermon Matasa).

In contrast, Mohamed Yusuf, the ideologue of Boko Haram, takes a radical position in his critique of *boko*, which he blamed for all the ills of the society. For Albani, *boko* was not quintessentially a bad and corrupt attribute; it had become so only because of contingent historical circumstances. In the evocations of *boko* as Boko Haram made popular, what gets lost is the fact that *boko* is not exhausted by western education. *Boko* refers to a way of life, a set of norms and manners that shape the conduct of life, and a social category which, in francophone Africa, is referred to as *les Evolués*. These may be associated with the West as a cultural entity, but do not determine the *dan boko* subject. In fact, many of the Salafi, those who could rightly claim the status of *yan addini*,<sup>17</sup> or good Muslims, are *yan boko* themselves and have managed to counter the negative influence of *boko*. Exposed to *boko*, they have managed to reconcile *boko* and *addini*, a move the Jihadi can hardly imagine, let alone achieve.

The issues *boko* brings up in West Africa must be further researched as we try to make sense of the ways in which religiosity not only goes public, but creates the conditions for rethinking the society, the state, and their norms. What is left now is for history, anthropology and sociology to take on the task of further engaging with this process I have portrayed as revolutionary.

## Conclusion

One of the main conclusions to be drawn from the complex religion, state, and society in contemporary West Africa is that Salafism has begun a revolution. And in that sense, it is not only an external force that imposes on the societies in the

region a specific course. It is an internal process that finds inspiration in moments and figures that mark the history of the region. The Salafi *da'wa* has been a major factor in this revolution. It has relied on three types of actors: the Salafi movement, the Salafi group/organisation, and the Salafi entrepreneur, all players that seek to create a new moral order primarily based on what they perceive as the original message of Islam.

The influence Salafism has acquired in Muslim West Africa can be also explained by an unprecedented social demand for religion and religiosity. The idea that religiosity functions only for a private subject doesn't tell the story of the recent religion-related developments in the world and West Africa. While many refer to this phenomenon in terms of resurgence, it is important to note that in many cases, the drive is not only private and personal; it is also very much public and often part of a quest for social status and position. It is political, communal and entrepreneurial. What matters then is not necessarily that people are religious.

Furthermore, the demand for religion has also led to a diversification of the offer, so to speak. Religious organisations have not only multiplied, they have also become more creative in their approach to the public and religious subject. They have engineered social formations that respond to the need to be part of a group, a community, or a collective. Jihadi organisations such as Boko Haram, Ansar Dine, MUJAO and the Front de Libération du Macina are again good illustrations of this mode, especially when one takes into consideration the role ethnicity played in their emergence. Within that context, what is at stake, as several Jihadi organisations in the region have shown, is the future of the state as a social and political institution, but also as a site and a pretext of political culture.

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<sup>16</sup> Belonging to *boko*, in Hausa.

<sup>17</sup> Those who are religious.

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