

Ramatoulaye

Brotherhood in Transition

FELICE DASSETTO &
PIERRE JOSEPH LAURENT

Ramatoulaye is a town of about 5,000 inhabitants, situated some 30 kilometres from Ouahigouya, the former capital of the Moaga Empire, regional headquarters of the French colonial administration. Ramatoulaye was first founded as a simple village, around 1920 by Aboubaker Savadogo, a man who had received the Tidjani Order *wird*. The present-day city was built by his son Mohammed, who succeeded Shaykh Aboubakr at his death in 1945. Ramatoulaye, since then, has been steadily growing. The site has acquired a considerable symbolic dimension, becoming one of the central shrines of Islam in Burkina and, beyond that, in western Africa.

Today, however, Ramatoulaye has to meet a number of challenges if it is to sustain and augment its spiritual centrality and socio-political legitimacy. On the Islamic front, it faces competition from the “twelve bead” Tidjani Order and from Wahhabi currents. It also finds itself caught up in a religious bidding war, especially with active Christian evangelical movements. Above all it has to play its hand wisely in its relationship with the semi-authoritarian Burkinabé regime, which uses religion as well as tribal social forces to consolidate its popular legitimacy. Accordingly, the Ramatoulaye brotherhood has carried out a series of redeployments, which can best be seen in the light of modern African history and the presence and role of Islam.

Colonization and the Tidjani Order

The colonization of Western Africa, which picked up speed in the second half of the nineteenth century, was a major cause of the destruction and de-legitimization of existing social structures, thereby, creating the conditions for an increase in the legitimacy of Islam as a means of collective identity. In addition, unification of territories, road building, and modernizing means of communication allowed faster and wider circulation of persons and ideas. The result was a new phase of the expansion

of Islam during the colonial period between 1850 and 1950. During this turbulent period, the Tidjani Order took up different positions in regard to the colonizing power. Some leaders originated jihadist movements, like that of Hajj Umar in the mid-nineteenth century. In reaction to the catastrophic results of this jihad, which led to armed conflict between Muslims, some leaders collaborated, within certain limits, with the colonizing power.

One branch of the Tidjaniyya, in the Volta basin, distanced itself from this political context. It strongly emphasized the spiritual nature of the Sufi message and practised a sort of “spiritual” resistance as a protest against the colonizers. At Niore in the Sahel, Shaykh Hamallah, who had received the Tidjani *wird*, initiated a variant (at the beginning of the 1920s) referred to as the Tidjaniyya of the “eleven beads.”² Through reciting 11 times the *Jawharat al kamâl* (pearl of perfection) in the *dikhr*, he distinguished his variant from the classic Tidjani practice of reciting it twelve times. According to the Hamallist tradition, it was Shaykh Tidjani himself who recited the pearl of perfection 11 times. This return to 11 recitations thus signifies a return to the sources of the Tidjaniyya and its spirituality. An esoteric in-

Religious movements are playing a new role of social consolidation in many African countries. In these contexts of “insecure modernization”¹ religious groups and images provide followers new bases for social solidarity, as well as identity and moral references. Similarly, new expressions of African Islam which, while founding themselves on the old tariqas, carry out modernizing transformations in an attempt to respond to contemporary situations and expectations. This is the case for the “eleven bead” variant of the Tidjani Sufi Order, whose spiritual centre is the “city” of Ramatoulaye in western Burkina Faso.

terpretation reported by Hampate Bâ also indicates that the figure 11 is that of pure spirituality, of communion with God, whereas the figure 12 is that of the temporal engagement. This symbolic gesture indicated that it was necessary to spiritualize the Tidjaniyya path and relieve it of all terrestrial encumbrances.

The French colonizers would term this variant “Hamallist,” and the term remains in use today. The French saw Hamallah and the Hamallists as dangerous opponents of colonial policy. Their repressive response increased after 1940 under the Vichy regime. Hamallah

was imprisoned, later deported to France, where he died in 1943. Hamallism boasted important figures in Western Africa such as Diarno Boka Tall, the “sage of Bandiagara,” a title bestowed by Hampaté Bâ, who had himself converted to Hamallism. In Upper Volta, Hamallism was spread through three people who received the *wird* and who were designated *muqaddem* (representatives) by Hamallah himself. One was Moussa Aminou, established in Diori in the northern part of Upper Volta, in the Sahel region. He launched a jihad in 1949, which lasted exactly 24 hours before being bloodily put down and he himself killed. The second was Abdoulaye Doukouré who introduced Hamallism among the Peuls from his base in the town of Djibo. The third was Aboubaker Savadogo who received the Tidjani *wird* and was then named *muqaddem* of the “eleven beads” by Hamallah in 1923.

The construction of a Shaykh and a utopia

Shaykh Aboubaker, the founder of Ramatoulaye, completed his Quranic studies in 1908. After a ten-year pilgrimage, which led him to the holy places and later to Ghana, he returned to his village having received the Tidjani *wird*. He was thrown out by the animist chiefs, whose prestige had been shaken by Aboubaker’s preaching, which they felt undermined ancient beliefs (ancestor cults, foundations of traditional power). Aboubaker then began to formulate the project of building a holy city for pure Muslims, which he called Ramatoulaye.³ Numerous of the faithful joined the Shaykh.

Ramatoulaye underwent colonial control and repression, especially after the Shaykh’s adoption of Hamallism. Shaykh Aboubaker was imprisoned, his adepts were dispersed and Ramatoulaye was destroyed. Aboubaker was freed in 1947 following changes in French colonial policy. As described in one of the interviews, “He was given (a sentence of) ten years. They took five of them. God took the rest.” Aboubaker died a few months after being released. His successor and son, Muhammad Savadogo, successfully imposed his authority in 1945 just before his father’s death and instituted a new phase of the brotherhood, which consisted of a complete institutionalization of the charismatic nature of the founder. First, Shaykh Muhammad changed the patronym Savadogo (very current in Yatenga province) to that of Maïga, in reference to a Muslim ancestor. He thus constructed a long Islamic lineage and at the same time inaugurated a dynasty of Shaykhs. He then redesigned the city and the zaouyya, which includes the tomb of the founder. In 1962, he set up the great mosque, which can hold a thousand persons, copied from the mosque of Niore, and designated it for Friday prayers. The city was divided into four quarters whose names all refer to the Islamic world: Mecca, Medina, Fez, Dar as Salaam.

Today Ramatoulaye, the “city of the Shaykh,” ruled by the Shaykh’s justice has in its population third and fourth generation residents. These residents are very vocal about Ramatoulaye’s attractions: “We came to find the truth.” “We came to follow the Master.” The Shaykh “had Islam.” Follow-

[T]he attraction of
Ramatoulaye [is]
the city’s ability
to present itself
as a successful
social model, quite
apart from its holy
character.

ing the Shaykh also bears fruit: "When we converted to Islam, parents refused (us) their daughters. So the Shaykh provided a woman," as the story of a first-hour adept is told. If one comes here, one must do "what is commanded," for "the Shaykh has instituted the law." "We have peace in our hearts" because the Shaykh has offered "a paved road to salvation." The city is made holy by the presence of the Shaykh, as by the rhythm of prayers and the dhikr held in the purest Tidjani tradition. However, this local holiness is male. Women are confined to the domestic sphere, even excluded from the daily agricultural work so many African women perform. In September 2003 we saw TV antennas appear on the roofs of a few houses. It is as if the masculine (and Shaykh) power was obliged to bend a little to accommodate modern needs.

Present challenges

The proclamation of Burkinan independence in 1960 led Ramatoulaye, along with many other religious forces, to take a position in the new order of an independent nation-state. Its resistance to colonization gave the brotherhood credibility, but nonetheless several years were needed before Ramatoulaye understood how it should position itself in the context of a new state. In 1985, under Sankara's regime, the brotherhood was suspected of plotting. The other Hamallist branch, led by Abdoulaye Doukouré from Djibo, a few dozen kilometres from Ramatoulaye, rapidly gained a foothold in the capital of the Burkinabe State, close to the new power. Only upon the death in 1987 of Mohammed Maïga did the current Shaykh launch a strategy of gaining visibility in Ouagadougou, the capital. From that point, a true political exchange took place. Ramatoulaye contributed to the legitimization of the regime ruling Burkina Faso, and in turn was legitimized by the central government. The change of status was reflected in the participation of the President—a Catholic—in the Mawlid festivities in 1990. Conversely, in 2002 the Shaykh was part of a delegation received by the President on the occasion of the "day of pardoning," a critical moment in recent Burkinabe history.

Education is the new concern that Ramatoulaye is eager to take advantage of. It poses interesting questions since education is situated at the intersection of different contemporary logics. The weakening of the Burkinabe State, following sanctions imposed by international agencies, created new incentives for privatization of the educational system. The state, which has become a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, has agreed to recognize "Franco-Arab" schools in response to pressure from Muslim associations. Ramatoulaye hastened to use these new possibilities. With financial assistance from the Libyan Islamic Call, a "Franco-Arabic" high school was opened at Ramatoulaye, which included a teacher-training programme. In 1998, the government accredited the school. The teachers, young inhabitants of Ramatoulaye, have finished their studies in various Islamic universities (al Azhar, Zitouna, Damascus) through grants offered by the Libyan Islamic Call. Participation in this "modern" form of education, in contrast to classical forms of Quranic education, has placed the brotherhood in the mainstream of the country's efforts toward development, while also confirming its membership in the new "locality" which is the nation-state.

Through the development of these schools we see at Ramatoulaye a process, often observed in African countries, of an increasing Arabization among intellectuals and middle-level white-collar workers. This is only partly attributable to the role played by the Quranic schools and the classical madrasas. It is also a matter of Arabization accompanied by literacy. Arabic is no longer *only* a means of oral expression in symbol and ritual, and Arabic script and writing a devotional form transmitted by the perishable calligraphy of Quranic schools. Arabic is now a spoken language and, even more importantly, a written language which has become a source of normativity. This process of globalization of a written sacred language introduces new dynamics and challenges to the charisma of the Shaykh, traditionally rooted in the person of the Shaykh, and sets him in competition with scholars of the written word and daily pragmatic norm.

Furthermore, the growth of the population and the presence of institutions of learning raise the question of whether the city should be enlarged, or should be restricted to its current size, of about 5,000 inhabitants. An enlargement of the city would seem to require more mosques. But "there must be only one path, therefore one single mosque" in the words of an interviewee. Making the city larger would imply an increase in various ac-



PHOTO BY FELICE DASSETTO, 2004

View at Ramatoulaye from the Mosque

tivities, thereby creating a risk that norms which govern the unity of the city might be disturbed. Certainly, with the arrival of the third generation, the question will be to see if Ramatoulaye will be able to respond to the needs of the young men of today and to the suppressed aspirations of its women. This is perhaps the greatest challenge of the future, now that the pioneers of the Shaykh's generation are disappearing gradually.

Finally, the Tidjani, like all the brotherhoods, are typical participants in the dynamic of globalizing Islam, which while procuring their own expansion as a brotherhood introduces innovative features. One novelty, for example, is their introduction to global networks of the Libyan Islamic Call, just as the other branch of Hamallism is integrated into the wider Saudi network. Ramatoulaye itself appears to be at the beginning of a process of globalization properly so called. The radial influence of Ramatoulaye has begun to affect various localities and even to go beyond Burkina. Members from neighbouring countries (like Mali, Niger, Ghana, Benin) participate in the pilgrimage of Mawlid, one of the greatest moments in the life of Ramatoulaye. Diplomatic representatives of these countries also attend, as well as members of other branches of the Tidjani. It is certainly not to be attributed solely to the mystical aura of the current Shaykh, who appears to be more a nimble political figure than a mystic. Rather, the attraction of Ramatoulaye may lay in the city's ability to present itself as a successful social model, quite apart from its holy character: "If you come in clear-minded fashion, you will obtain that which you seek. And then you will testify to others..." It is precisely these very challenges and opportunities that will determine Ramatoulaye's future prosperity or its mere survival.

Notes

1. See: P. J. Laurent, *Les pentecôtistes du Burkina Faso. Mariage, Pouvoir et guérison* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 448.
2. Hamallism has often been studied by colonial administrators as well as academic researchers. See for example: B. Savadogo, *Confréries et pouvoirs. La Tijaniyya Hamawiyya en Afrique occidentale (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger): 1909-1965* (Aix en Provence: University de Provence, 1998).
3. Research on Ramatoulaye is directed and administered by Felice Dassetto and Pierre Joseph Laurent (CISCOW/CISMOC and LAAP) at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve with the collaboration of Tasseré Ouedraogo. The project has included several site visits and a hundred interviews made between 2003 and 2006. See: <http://www.cismoc.ucl.ac.be/>.

Felice Dassetto is Professor at the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Prospective (LAAP) and the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Islam in the Contemporary World (CISCOW/ CISMOC) at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

Email: dassetto@anso.ucl.ac.be

Pierre Joseph Laurent is Professor at the Unité d'anthropologie et sociologie and the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Prospective at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

Email: laurent@anso.ucl.ac.be