Some recent studies have admirably tried to point to the relationships between marabouts and power in West Africa. The present biographical note is about one marabout, conspicuously absent from such discussions, who is perhaps one of the most influential marabouts in present day Mali. In the following discussion, I suggest that one must broaden the view to include those marabouts, not necessarily linked directly to particular regimes, whose reputations and widespread popularity put them in a complex relationship to power. The study of such celebrated marabouts contributes considerably to our understanding of the operations of power and the contemporary practice of Islam in West Africa.

Sidy Modibo Kane Diallo was born in 1925 in Dilly, in the cercle of Nara in what was then the French Sudan. The son of Modibo Kane, a tooroodo, and Sina Boly, a Sambourou peul, Sidy was born into a family with a long and illustrious reputation as learned and pious marabouts. After attending a French colonial school for several months, Sidy continued his Quranic studies with his paternal uncles, memorizing the Quran and studying some tafsir and fiqh. Many of Sidy’s ascendants have had reputations as wali(s) (Arabic, saints), including his father, paternal grandfather and grandmother, and his great grandfather, Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad, the member of the Kane Diallo family said to have the greatest reputation as a wali. By the early 1940s French administrators were writing that “cette réputation de sainteté rejaillit sur..."
tous les membres de cette famille." Today as home to the largest concentration of the Kane Diallo family, the town of Dilly is considered by many as “wuro waliyyaabe” (Fulfulde, the town of saints) with all descendants of Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad considered to have *baraka*.

Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad, the great grandfather of Sidy, was the grandson of a Futanke from the Matam area of the Senegal River who had lived and travelled between Masina and the western Sahel. Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad had gone to Masina during Sekou Amadou’s jihad and had travelled from Masina to Timbuktu where he took the Qadirid wîrd from the Kunta. After several years of close ties with the rulers of the Dina of Hamdallaye, Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad, by this time known as a very learned marabout with many followers, came to be seen as a potential rival to Amadou Amadou when he came to power in 1853. Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad fled the area and later died in the town of Dina in the Bakunu where his tomb is an important pilgrimage site. His only surviving child, a daughter, Oumou, was to develop a reputation as a *wali* with followers throughout the French Sudan.

Sidi’s father, Modibo, was Oumou’s only son. He had good relations with the French and was extremely influential among the Fulbe of the Dilly area during his lifetime. By the time he died in 1940, he too had the reputation of a *wali*. Before his death, Modibo named the oldest of his half-brothers, Mamoud, a *khalifa* of the Qadiriyya, a title which had become hereditary within the Kane Diallo family. In theory, at any time there is always one male considered to be the spiritual head of the family who assumes this title.

But, shortly before her death in 1942, Oumou, Modibo’s mother, who at this time commanded tremendous respect with her own reputation as a *wali*, announced that Sidi was to be the *khalifa*, the designated successor to his father. Until Sidi was old enough to lead the family, she maintained, Modibo would continue to assume this role in the interim. Although the express wishes of Modibo for his successor are not known, even before Oumou’s announcement in 1942, it was clear to the French that Modibo did not have the same reputation or prestige enjoyed by his predecessor, Modibo. Writing before Sidi had been named, one French administrator described the situation in the following terms:

“La ‘baraka’ que détient Oumou Modibo Kane n’a pas été transmise par elle à Mamadou [Mamoud] Kane qu’elle juge peut-être inférieur; il est vraisemblable qu’elle la transmettra au moment de sa mort à l’un des trois fils de Modibo [sic] Kane encore très jeunes et qu’elle choisira parmi eux celui qu’elle estimera le plus digne.”

From 1940 until his death in 1974, Mamoud acted as the spiritual leader of the Kane Diallo family. And during Mamoud’s tenure, Sidy submitted to his uncle’s authority although many claim that during this time numerous people nonetheless looked to Sidi as the spiritual head of the family. Indeed, it is stated today that it was common knowledge that one day Sidi would head the Kane Diallo family, as Oumou had announced. There is, however, no mention in the archives of Sidi’s nomination. Upon Mamoud’s death, Sidi, already considered by many to be the de facto, spiritual head of the family, took on this role officially. A process of *bay’a* (Arabic, act of giving allegiance) occurred whereby people who were followers of Sidi travelled to Dilly to recognize his authority. Some, but not all, of Mamoud’s sons refused to follow Sidi, causing a schism in the family which has continued in an attenuated form to this day.

Since becoming the official *khalifa* of the Kane Diallo family in Dilly, Sidi has become among the most well-known and influential religious leaders in Mali. And it is said that, as Oumou had predicted, he has become more well-known and celebrated than all previous members of the family. Today his reputation rests in large part on his efforts to spread Islam in Mali, particularly among the Bambara of Beledugu and Kaarta, areas which had been ostensibly islamized during the nineteenth century *jihad* led by Shaykh Umar Tall. The first of his trips to convert people to Islam was in 1944 when he visited a number of Bambara villages in the Segou area. According to Sidi, this trip met with no reaction from the French administration. It was not until the 1980s, however, well after Sidi had succeeded Mamoud, that he organized numerous large-scale trips where he encouraged people to give up their indigenous practices in order to maintain their Islamic faith.

7. There is a considerable discussion of Oumou in the archives after the arrest of Shaykh Hamallah in 1941 when unfounded rumors circulated that Oumou was the founder of a new sect. See Archives nationales du Mali, 4E 42-4 (F.R.). See also Centre des archives d’Outre-Mer, Soudan—Rapport politique annuel, Aix-en-Provence, 2G 41-20, 1941.
8. Interview with Sidi Modibo Kane, 7 April 1994, Touroungouni, Cercle of Nioro du Sahel. Interestingly, Marty mentions that Mamadou Modibo Abdouallah, i.e., Modibo, had the powers of a *muqaddam* that he received from Oumou. See Marty, Etudes sur l’islam..., vol. 4, p. 173 sq.
9. At the same time, the oldest living male member of the Kane Diallo family in Dilly is considered the head of the clan.
10. Interviews and informal conversations with the Kane Diallo family and entourage, Cercle of Nioro, April 1994, and Dilly, Cercle of Nara, August and December 1994.
leaders, who nonetheless laud his efforts to spread Islam. For some Malians, the success of Sidy’s efforts is one of the proofs or signs that he is indeed a wali. Many assert that it is not just anyone who can disarm those engaged in non-Islamic religious practices. Indeed, as it is often pointed out, it was necessary in the past to resort to armed struggle to compel people to give up such practices and objects. Sidy, as is often repeated, avoids confrontation, and people accept his recommendations. For many, all of Sidy’s efforts place him far above many of Mali’s other marabouts whom they criticize as being too concerned with material gain in this world.

But, in addition to his efforts to spread Islam, there are several others factors which have served to enhance Sidy’s reputation and to contribute to his popularity. These include his extensive visits to his followers in their villages, the yearly ziyara in Dilly, his reported generosity and largesse, and his role as a khalifa of the Qadiriyya. Such factors contribute to the growth in his prestige which is in turn reinforced by the many stories of the astonishing proofs (Fulfulde, kawde; Bambara, kaboko) of his status as a wali.

First, during many of his trips from Dilly, Sidy is known to include in his itinerary visits to followers in their home villages. Once a trip has begun, villagers come from all over requesting that he also visits their villages, as it is seen as a great honor and privilege to be visited by the marabout and to receive his blessings. On several occasions, a short trip has turned into a trip of several months as Sidy has visited many of the villages from which he has received invitations. The act of spending so much time in villages, accessible to villagers and attentive to some of their problems, for example, serving as mediator for village political conflicts, is regarded as rather unusual for a Malian marabout of his stature. And this has clearly contributed to his popularity.

There is also the yearly ziyara to Dilly which has contributed in no small way to Sidy’s reputation as a pious marabout able to mobilize people in the interest of Islam. The first Malian marabout to institutionalize a yearly ziyara, Sidy has hosted the ziyara each year since the late 1970s during the week celebrating the mawlid (the Prophet’s birth). Each year countless numbers of followers, coming from throughout Mali and beyond, travel to the remote Sahelian town of Dilly to seek the blessings of the marabout and to give him gifts, as well as to visit the tombs of Oumou, her husband, Baba Hama, and others. Other important Malian marabouts—and not only Qadiris—such as the Tall family of Nioro-du-Sahel send representatives. In addition to the representatives of the government who are always present at the ziyara, there are the numerous civil servants who make the journey on their own account for personal

14 “Biographie et activités du chef religieux El-Hadj Cheikh Sidy Modibo Kane Diallo, Dilly”. Typescript written by Sidy Modibo Kane Diallo, Dilly, August 1994

15 List of villages visited by Sidy Modibo Kane Diallo in the present author’s possession

16 It appears that Sidy and his entourage have returned to some villages to find that the people have taken again the use of objects that they had relinquished on previous visits. And in some villages, women involved in spirit possession are known to have fled so as not to be present during Sidy’s visits.

17 Sidy, in turn, sends representatives to the yearly ziyara in Nioro organized by Cerno Hady Tall.
concerns or interests that they wish to have addressed by the marabout who is seen to have considerable power.

Over the years, as Sidy’s reputation has grown, the number of people gathered around him and his family has also grown. Like some other grand marabouts, Sidy provides for the many around him, including the indigent who seek his aid. He and his large family and entourage are able to live on the many gifts and offerings of money and kind which they receive. Additionally, there are the many who donate, as a pious act, their labor or the labor of their kin to the family for household chores and construction, among other things. Unlike some other maraboutic families in Mali and elsewhere in West Africa, the Kane Diallo family does not engage in trade or other commercial money-making activities. Sidy’s adult sons and nephews themselves often go long trips in Mali, to Côte-d’Ivoire, Central Africa and other places where Malian migrants and workers are found. On these trips, gift collection is always a major activity. In providing for many around him and in redistributing a portion of the money and gifts that they receive, Sidy and his family have become known for their generosity, largesse, and modesty.

Thus far, this discussion of Sidy’s activities has had little to say about the fact that he is a khālīfa of the Qadiriyya. As the holder of this title inherited from his family, Sidy has also been engaged in efforts to spread the Qadiriyya. His sphere of influence as a Qadiri khālīfa is said to extend from the area around Nioro-du-Sahel to Masina. Although he does maintain contacts with the Kunta of Mali and Mauritania, he is not seen as very influential in those areas where the Kunta are concentrated. Wherever he travels, Sidy does give the Qadiri wīrd to those who ask for it. But, interestingly enough, Sidy refuses to give the Qadiri wīrd to anyone who is already initiated into another tariqa. Thus, he will not give the wīrd to people who are already Tijani or Hamallists, explaining that he does not want to create divisions between the different tariqa(s).

During his tenure as active khālīfa, that is since 1974, Sidy has named literally hundreds of muqaddams(s) who represent him locally and give the wīrd to new members of the tariqa. Although there are no muqaddams(s) within the Kane Diallo family, all adult male members of the family as well as the family’s entourage may, nevertheless, give the wīrd.

Despite the importance of the Qadiriyya and his entourage, Sidy’s status as a Qadiri khālīfa is arguably irrelevant to his broad appeal in Mali. Membership in a tariqa has never been as widespread in Mali as it has been, for example, in neighboring Senegal. Even in the Sahel where the tariqa(s) have been historically more important than in other regions of Mali, it is increasingly rare for people to take the wīrd of a tariqa. This contributes to an overall decline in the importance of the tariqa(s) on a national scale. But this is not to suggest that the young are necessarily swayed by the views of reformist Muslims, the self-styled Ahl al-Sunnah or Wahhabiyya. Instead, the decline in importance of the tariqa(s) can be seen to help to strengthen the reputation of particular marabouts like Sidy, who become known for their individual characteristics. In his case, he is known as an active campaigner to spread Islam, a marabout who is accessible and generous, and, for many, a wali. While it is true that many Muslim religious leaders or experts have indeed been marginalized in contemporary Mali with the hegemony of ‘development’ ideology and its experts, religious authority has in part become personalized in figures like Sidy. This process of the personalization of religious authority has been facilitated, if not fostered, by “modern” means of communication and transportation. In the post-colonial period, Sidy’s movements by road and by air are swift and relatively unimpeded. Radio and television are beginning to play important roles as sources of information about the marabout and his activities. Announcements for the yearly ziyara, written and paid for in the name of Sidy, are diffused throughout Mali by the national radio. At times, recordings of praises of Sidy are played on the radio to a national audience. In recognition of the power and importance of media exposure, there are considerable efforts by Sidy’s partisans to ensure that the yearly ziyara receives attention from the national media. When Malian representatives of national television have been unable to attend the ziyara, videotaped recordings of the ziyara have been made available to the television station and excerpts shown on television.

It is important to contextualize Sidy’s activities as a marabout within the context of the post-colonial state(s) in which he operates. All of his visits and circulation within Mali have been subject to authorization from the Malian state. Wherever he travels within Mali, he is received with great fanfare not only by villagers but also by representatives of the Malian state and civil service who often shower him with gifts and solicit him for blessings and for assistance with personal problems. At the yearly ziyara, as noted above, officials representing the state are always present and highly visible. Here again, gifts are made and blessings sought. Likewise, between 1988 and 1990, Sidy spent a year and a half in Côte-d’Ivoire with the permission of the Ivorian authorities, travelling where he liked, converting people and destroying religious objects given over to him. While many of the people he visited there were Malian migrant


20. It is perhaps too early to assess the role of private radio stations in these realms.

21. Interview in Tourougoumbé, 7 April 1994. Sidy has also made shorter trips to other countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Togo.
laborers and traders, many Senufo, Baule and Bete areas were visited for the purposes of conversion. In important ways, both the Malian and Ivorian states can be seen to be very accommodating, practically helping to lend legitimacy to—if not actually supporting outright—his activities, including his efforts to spread Islam. As for the Malian state, one might argue that it and its representatives attempt to profit from the marabout’s power and influence by association with him and his undertakings. But things are certainly more complicated than such statements would suggest. As many point out, all people and especially those with any power have enemies. Thus, influential marabouts, like the Prophet Mohammed before them, can expect to have people opposed to them. As some people stressed, even though the state and its representatives—like ordinary Malian Muslims—might act pleased and accommodating toward Sidy on the surface (Arabic, ḥādir), hidden (Arabic, ṣādir) might be real animosity or hostility toward him. So while Sidy’s popularity in many quarters is real, his relationship to power is not always so unambiguous.

The question remains as to why Sidy has been absent from previous discussions of marabouts and power in West Africa. The most obvious reason for this is that during the regime of Moussa Traoré, there were other marabouts, such as Mohammedou Ould Shaykh Hamallah of Niorodu-Sahel, who were known to be close to the president and his regime. Both Moussa Traoré and Modibo Keita, like other West African heads of state, are known to have solicited a whole range of marabouts for their blessings and what might be called other services while in power. The motives and interests in soliciting such marabouts might be based on beliefs in their power, the attempt to lend legitimacy to a regime, or some combination of these.22

Not closely linked to the Traoré regime, Sidy, nevertheless, was and continues to be an extremely influential marabout. And this is due to his reputation and popularity in large parts of Mali among broad sectors of the population. His potential power is not inconsequential and extends very far, to the satisfaction of his many followers but to the dismay of Malian secularists and anti-sufi Muslims, not to mention potential rival sufi leaders. The post-colonial state’s attempt to come to terms with such a personality is indexed by the very visible representatives of the government at the yearly ṭiyara, as well as the authorizing stamp that the state gives to his activities such as conversion campaigns. Arguably, the post-colonial state and its representatives cannot fail to recognize the potential benefits—for this world and the next—of association with such a marabout. And that is why at times the state might seem to act to exploit this marabout’s power and influence. But whether Sidy is seen by

22 For a discussion of some of these issues as they relate to Kano, see Murray Last, “Charisma and Medicine in Northern Nigeria”, in D B Cruise O’Brien and C. Coulon (eds), Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam, Oxford, Clarendon, 1988