

MALI

A CONTEMPORARY MALIAN SHAYKH:  
AL-HAJJ SHAYKH SIDY MODIBO KANE DIALLO,  
THE RELIGIOUS LEADER OF DILLY

Benjamin F. Soares\*

Some recent studies have admirably tried to point to the relationships between marabouts and power in West Africa.<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup>.

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 toorodo, 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*.<sup>3</sup> 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*

\* Northwestern University

1 See, for exemple, Tidiane Diallo [Tiébilé Dramé], "Pouvoir et marabouts en Afrique de l'Ouest", *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara*, 1988, and "West Africa the man of power", *Africa Confidential*, 2 December 1987

2 The research on which this article is based was generously funded by Fulbright-Hays, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, USIA/Fulbright and the West African Research Association Centre. A version of this paper was presented to the Seminar on Contemporary Islamic Discourse in Africa at Northwestern University, February 1995

3 Interview with Sidy Modibo Kane Diallo, 21 December 1994, Dilly, Circle of Nara

tous les membres de cette famille."<sup>4</sup> Today as home to the largest concentration of the Kane Diallo family, the town of Dilly is considered by many as "*wuro waliyaabe*" (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.<sup>5</sup> Mohammed Abdoulaye Souad had gone to Masina during Sekou Amadou's jihad and had travelled from Masina to Timbuktu where he took the Qadiri *wird* 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

Sidy'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.<sup>8</sup> In theory, at any time there is always one male considered to be the spiritual head of the family who assumes this title.<sup>9</sup>

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 Sidy was to be the *khalifa*, the designated successor to his father. Until Sidy was old enough to lead the family, she

4. Archives nationales du Mali, Koulouba (A.N.M.) 4E 26-5 (F.R.) Marabouts, personnages religieux, Cercle de Nema, 1942.

5. 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. Paul Marty briefly mentions Mohamed Abdoulaye Souad. See his *Études sur l'islam et les tribus du Soudan*, vol. 4, Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1920, p. 89.

6. For a discussion of the Dina and its successive rulers see Bintou Sanankoua, *Un empire peul au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Karthala/ACCT, 1990.

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 Sidy Modibo Kane, 7 April 1994, Tourougoumbé, Cercle of Nioro du Sahel. Interestingly, Marty mentions that Mamadou Modibo Abdoullahi, i.e., Modibo, had the powers of a *muqaddam* that he received from Oumou. See Marty, *Études 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.

maintained, Mamoud would continue to assume this role in the interim.<sup>10</sup> 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 Mamoud did not have the same reputation or prestige enjoyed by his predecessor, Modibo.<sup>11</sup> Writing before Sidy 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."<sup>12</sup>

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 Sidy as the spiritual head of the family. Indeed, it is stated today that it was common knowledge that one day Sidy would head the Kane Diallo family, as Oumou had announced. There is, however, no mention in the archives of Sidy's nomination. Upon Mamoud's death, Sidy, 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 Sidy travelled to Dilly to recognize his authority. Some, but not all, of Mamoud's sons refused to follow Sidy, 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, Sidy 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 Sidy, this trip met with no reaction from the French administration. It was not until the 1980s, however, well after Sidy had succeeded Mamoud, that he organized numerous large-scale trips where he encouraged people to give up their indigenous

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.

11. See Archives nationales du Mali, 4E 26-6 (F.R.). Fiches de renseignements des personnages religieux, Cercle de Nema, 1941.

12. Archives nationales du Mali, 4E 42-4 (F.R.). T.L., 23 oct. 1941, gouv. p. 1. Soudan à gouv. gén. Dakar.

13. See David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1985.

religious practices and to embrace Islam.<sup>14</sup> As he and others stress, his efforts to spread Islam are always peaceable and non-violent. For these conversion campaigns, he only agrees to enter those villages to which he has been invited. And it seems that the invitation to such villages often comes from younger people who have worked as migrant laborers or traders elsewhere in Mali or in other towns in West and Central Africa. These people often want the marabout to rid their villages of religious practices and objects of which they do not or no longer approve. As members of Sidy's entourage explained, there is usually a generational conflict in which the younger generation, armed with greater monetary resources, takes the upper hand. But, on some occasions, Sidy's prospective visits have met with at least some overt opposition. One non-Muslim Bambara *soma* (healer/sorcerer/diviner) from a village in the Kaarta told me that he informed Sidy's entourage that a visit to his village would be taken as an act of war. Thus, Sidy did not visit this village and at least some others known for their resistance to *jihad* in the nineteenth century.

In the many villages that Sidy has visited with his sizeable entourage, countless people are said to have given up their religious objects (*boli* in Bambara) and converted to Islam. Sidy and his entourage teach people the *shahada* and the ritual prayers. Adult men have their heads shaved upon conversion, and people without Muslim names are given Muslim names. Religious objects are collected from the inhabitants, counted, and then burned outside of villages. When he leaves such a village, he designates a representative to stay behind to teach the Quran and act as *imam*. In those villages he visits where Islam is already fairly well-established, Sidy encourages people to give up customs or practices which might be in conflict with Islam. Notably, he has campaigned against spirit possession cults (Fulfulde, *moonaankoobe*; Bambara, *jine-don*). Kane Diallo family records list hundreds of villages that Sidy has visited where people have given up spirit possession, relinquished thousands of religious objects, and constructed mosques under his initiative.<sup>15</sup>

Although it is not easy to verify the reported massive conversions and the giving up of spirit possession and religious objects,<sup>16</sup> it is clear that Sidy's reputation rests firmly on this work in spite of whatever local opposition there might be to his efforts. Throughout Mali, Muslims—learned and unlearned—repeatedly praise him for the way in which he is said to have spread Islam, and he is always singled out as exceptional among Malian marabouts for these activities. Such respect for Sidy even extends to some of those Muslims, usually critical of sufi

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.

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, *kabako*) 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 Niore-du-Sahel send representatives.<sup>17</sup> 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

17. Sidy, in turn, sends representatives to the yearly *ziyara* in Niore 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 on 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 *khalifa* 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 *khalifa* 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 *wird* to those who ask for it. But, interestingly enough, Sidy refuses to give the Qadiri *wird* to anyone who is already initiated into another *tariqa*. Thus, he will not give the *wird* to people who are already Tijanis or Hamallists, explaining that he does not want to create divisions between the different *tariqa*(s). During his tenure as active *khalifa*, that is since 1974, Sidy has named literally hundreds of *muqaddam*(s) who are, in his view, to explain and to spread Islam. These *muqaddam*(s) represent him locally and give the *wird* to new members of the *tariqa*. Although there are no *muqaddam*(s) within the Kane Diallo family, all adult male members of the family as well as the family's entourage may, nevertheless, give the *wird*.

Despite the importance of the Qadiriyya for Sidy and his entourage, Sidy's status as a Qadiri *khalifa* 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 *wird* 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-Sunna* or Wahhabiyya.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 unfettered. 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 Ivoirian authorities, travelling where he liked, converting people and destroying religious objects given over to him.<sup>21</sup> While many of the people he visited there were Malian migrant

18. On the Wahhabiyya and reformist Islam in Mali, see Jean-Loup Amselle, "Le wahabisme à Bamako (1945-1985)", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 19 (2), 1985; Lansine Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya*, Evanston, Northwestern, 1974; and Ronald Niezen, "The 'Community of the Helpers of the Sunna': Islamic Reform among the Songhay of Gao (Mali)", *Africa*, 60 (3), 1990.

19. Louis Brenner makes the convincing case for this marginalization of religious experts in his "Constructing Muslim Identities in Mali", in Brenner (ed.), *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1993.

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

21. Interview in Tourougombé, 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 Ivoirian 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, *zāhir*), hidden (Arabic, *bāṭin*) 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 Nirodu-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.<sup>22</sup>

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 *ziyara*, 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

the state and its representatives as the marabout who has spread Islam, the *wali* with incredible powers, or merely one actor with the potential to mobilize people, is not so apparent. The rise of such celebrated marabouts as Sidy whose relationship to power is complex points to the changing nature of religious power as well as to the complexity of the relationship between religious and political spheres of power. And at this point, it is not yet clear how this relationship will develop under the democratically elected government in Mali.

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