

MALI

Faith and the fightback



A new group of Sufi Islamic leaders has launched a campaign to win over Mali's young Muslims, who are being courted by a wave of conservative preachers backed by money from Saudi Arabia and Qatar

By **Rose Skelton** in Bamako

Every evening, hundreds of people crowd into the courtyard of Cherif Ousmane Madani Haïdara's mosque to wait for an audience with the celebrated Sufi leader. Islamic chants reverberate in the hot night air. Haïdara's work represents a different way forward for a country that has seen economic troubles and political turmoil since the rebel takeover of the north in 2012.

His mosque is in the run-down Bankoni neighbourhood on the outskirts of Bamako. Through donations from his followers, Haïdara has built roads, a hospital, and is putting up street lights and a water tower. A football team waits

patiently to receive a blessing from the sheikh. The young players sit on white leather sofas in the opulent waiting room. Like many others, they value inspiration from their spiritual guide.

Most importantly, Haïdara leads the struggle to defend the country's Sufi Islamic traditions, which have come under heavy attack from hardline Wahhabi proselytisers who are financed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. The Wahhabites, who demand the imposition of sharia law and hudud punishments such as amputations and stoning (see box), have been setting up their own madrasas, taking control of local Islamic associations and buying political influence.



Prayer is not
enough when Saudi
petrodollars are your
enemy's best friend

BENOIT TESSIER/REUTERS

This Saturday in early June, the Bankoni mosque is busier than usual. Mali's most powerful Sufi sheikhs, who have formed the *Groupement des Leaders Spirituels Musulmans du Mali* (GLSM), have gathered to discuss a strategy to counter the rising power of Wahhabi and other groups seeking a political role for conservative forms of Islam.

ANOTHER ISLAM

Haïdara, a tall, elegant figure in flowing robes, finally arrives to join them. "The GLSM is trying to eradicate the mentality that Wahhabi groups are implanting in the future generation," Haïdara tells *The Africa Report*. His group seeks "to persuade the youth that Islam is not this

kind of extremism that they [Wahhabi proselytisers] are trying to disseminate."

Buoyed by plentiful funds, mainly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Wahhabite and other conservative Islamist groups have set up clinics and religious schools in Mali and have been winning support from communities frustrated by the lack of government backing for social welfare projects. A senior defence official in Bamako says that the government has formally asked Qatar to block funding for Islamist groups in northern Mali.

Haïdara describes the GLSM as "a counterweight against this influence. These infrastructures that you have seen, financed by the Gulf in large part, support a new ideology in our country

which is not our religion." The GLSM held its founding meeting on 23 May in Bamako's Hippodrome neighbourhood. It accuses the Wahhabites of taking advantage of the weak state to brainwash young Malians into joining Islamist factions preaching jihad.

Haïdara says his campaign against the Islamists – people who support Islam as a guiding political principle – is needed more than ever. "We are organising something so that at least once a week, in different neighbourhoods, we invite a religious leader to preach so that the population hears the message. The rise [of extremism] is increasing."

Belatedly, the Bamako government is joining the struggle. Thierno Amadou

Diallo, the minister for religious affairs, says wealthy sponsors of the Wahhabi groups are behind their growing influence. For example, the Saudi Arabian-based World Assembly of Muslim Youth has built a huge Islamic education centre in Bamako to propagate the strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.

“There has been no control of funding from religious organisations,” says Diallo. “The state is weak, so religious non-governmental organisations play their part.” One of the rising stars in government, Diallo speaks quickly, focusing on practical measures, conscious that the government has to catch up fast with the new realities.

Diallo’s ministry is just three years old. The government set it up in the same year that jihadists occupied northern Mali and imposed sharia law there. The Bamako government should guard against extremism in Mali, says Diallo: “We have to bring the support of the state to all religions, but especially the religion of Muslims in order to avoid this religion being oppressed by radical tendencies or an indoctrination.”

Mali’s ties deepened with Saudi Arabia during the oppressive rule of President Moussa Traoré, who came to power in a coup in 1968 and was overthrown in 1991. But Saudi Arabia’s financial and ideological influence has remained. It was Saudi Arabian cash that paid for the second bridge in Bamako across the Niger River. Over the past two decades, tens of thousands of Malians journeyed to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

FOREIGN IDEAS

Harber Kounta, a Malian anthropologist, explains: “A lot of students went to Saudi Arabia to study religion and to work. They came back with ideas from a religion that we don’t know. They started projects to build mosques in their villages, financed by Saudis. That’s how Wahhabism started to develop in Mali. A lot of animist villages in the past 30 years have converted to Wahhabism.”

In Ségou, a small town on the banks of the Niger River some 200km east of Bamako, a student is filling watering cans for ablutions. He attends the madrasa at the largest Wahhabi mosque in town. On the water pump there is a placard for a Turkish Islamic organisation, a sign that the competition for ideological and economic influence in Mali is intensifying.

Ibrahim Dembele, the head imam for this mosque and Islamic school, says that he learnt to preach from his father, who in turn was taught in Saudi Arabia. “Wahhabism [in Mali] is nothing new,” says Dembele, “but people didn’t use to practise it as much as they do now.”

The mosque and Koranic school are spartan. An earthen courtyard lies at the centre of a half-built shell of a building, the classrooms have concrete floors and there are wooden tables and chairs. Wo-

Along with the mosques come water towers, clinics, and training in Wahhabi doctrines

men at the mosque are required to wear full veils; the men have to wear short trousers and a beard. “A Turkish charity offered us the pump,” says Dembele. “A gift is the choice of the person who gives it. If the receiver wants to accept it, he can.”

Dembele’s mosque is one of thousands of Wahhabi mosques built in the south of Mali in recent years. Along with the mosques come water towers, clinics, Koranic schools and, of course, training in the doctrines of Wahhabi Islam for the imams who run them. In poor and overcrowded areas where clean water is a luxury, these facilities are a lifeline.

But in the eyes of many others, the rapid spread of Wahhabi Islam – an ideology they associate with the conquest of northern Mali in 2012 – is a sign that Islamists are taking over and suppressing the more tolerant Sufi Islam. In Bamako, traders complained to *The Africa Report* that Wahhabis were buying up shops to turn into mosques. Others complain that many *maquis* – the popular open-air restaurants serving food and beer and playing music – have been closed down in Bamako. Threats of violence are growing, too. In March, gunmen from the Islamist Al-Mourabitoun group at-



tacked the La Terrasse bar in Bamako, killing five people.

For the Sufi leaders in organisations such as GLSM this struggle for the heart and minds of Mali’s youth will shape the country’s future. The GLSM’s mission, says Haïdara, is to make imams understand the risks of accepting cash from the Wahhabi-controlled charities. “In the end, we will be killing each other. They spread ideas of jihadism or extremism, so either you will kill a parent, someone close to you or yourself,” he argues.

Thierno Hady Oumar Thiam, the GLSM’s vice-president, claims the Wahhabi groups have exploited Mali’s poverty. High unemployment means small amounts of cash can win over converts to Wahhabi doctrines, and illiteracy increases the likelihood of young people

WAHHABISM

Wahhabism is named for Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an 18th-century scholar whose teachings promoted a literalist interpretation of Islam. It began by calling people to restore the meaning of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and to end practices like venerating the shrines of prophets and saints – the ideology behind the jihadist destruction of shrines and libraries in Timbuktu in 2012. In 1744 Abd al-Wahhab made a pact with Ibn Saud that linked his teachings with the first Saudi state and its expansionist mission. For the past four decades, Saudi Arabia’s petro dollars have helped to spread Wahhabi doctrine, including the imposition of sharia law with hudud punishments of stoning to death and amputation. Strict Wahhabist groups such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab also want to ban music, theatre, dance and sport.



EMILIE REGNIER FOR JA

A child joins Ramadan prayers led by Mahmoud Dicko, a Wahhabi and head of Mali's Islamic council

being swayed by radical preaching in mosques and on the radio.

But the Wahhabis' success is also due to their methods: "Wahhabis preach even better than we do," says Thiam. "They do it in Bambara; we do it in Arabic. If you speak Arabic to the youth, it's as if we have not even spoken. And we have no state. The state should control what is going on in the madrasas."

Thiam is ready to admit that Sufi leaders have had a wake-up call: "Sufis have not been able to communicate with young people to keep them close. Wooden prayer boards [for learning] have disappeared. Many Sufis send their children to Wahhabi madrasas because there are hardly any Sufi madrasas. The Koranic schools have been modernised by the Gulf states. From secondary

school, they go to Gulf-financed universities like the *Université du Sahel*. We have to inform people, and we have to get funding."

Since 2007, Malian school-leavers have been able to take the *baccalaureate* exam in Arabic. When former president Alpha Oumar Konaré brought in the "education for all" programme more than a decade ago, it became possible to get a state diploma from a madrasa.

These Arabic language schools, financed by Saudi and other Gulf state charities, are required to teach French alongside Arabic and Koranic studies. They often do not. Instead, these institutions, endorsed but unregulated by

the state, are turning out adherents to Wahhabi doctrines, critics say.

"Sufis do not want to mix religion and politics. Wahhabism is political Islam," says Macky Bah, president of the *Union des Jeunes Musulmans du Mali* (UJMMMA). "They want to conquer power in the name of religion, hiding behind the flag of democracy. Political Islam is sponsored by Qatar, which also supports Islamists in Libya and the north of Mali," he adds.

Bah calls for a much more determined resistance in the face of Islamism: "We want to preserve authentic, peaceful Islam in Mali. In the mosques and madrasas financed by Gulf countries, these are the future jihadists and the future radicals [...]. Since 2012 and the coup, it has got much more serious."

HIGH-LEVEL SCHISM

Most critically, the battle for Mali's spiritual heart is being played out at the *Haut Conseil Islamique* (HCI), which represents hundreds of Islamic organisations across the country. It also negotiates on behalf of Muslims with the government. It has been able to influence laws, such as the the family code in 2009, when the HCI pressured the government to back down on proposals to allow women more rights in marriage.

The HCI's president is Mahmoud Dicko, a Wahhabi trained in Saudi Arabia and Mauritania. He has received support from President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and Moussa Mara, a former prime minister who is also a Wahhabi. Dicko's mandate expired in 2013, but Thierno Thiam and other Sufis on the HCI boycotted the 2014 election for a new board and president. They said the government unfairly supported Dicko at the head of the HCI, which was already dominated by Wahhabis. Dicko remains HCI president.

It was this and the HCI's lack of response to the jihadist occupation in the north that prompted Thiam and others to form the GLSM. "Haïdara and I asked the HCI to condemn what was happening in the north, but they didn't want to," says Thiam, "so we understood that they are in agreement with what was happening. The Wahhabis of the HCI showed their true face. We wanted to ask Muslims to help the Malian army fight the Islamists, but the HCI didn't want to give money."

Haïdara offered 10m CFA francs (\$16,600) for the fight against the jihadis and Niore notable Haïdara Bouyé pledged twice that amount. But, according to Thiam, "Dicko said it would be

SUFISM

With its origins in the mystical and esoteric practice of Islam, Sufism is not related to a particular founder or teacher. Described by some followers as a 'philosophy', by others as a 'science', it aspires to a pure Islamic life through meditation on the teachings of the Koran or emulating the life of Mohammed. Sufi preachers spearheaded the spread of Islam through Africa, Asia and across Europe in the Middle Ages, and gave rise to an intellectual and cultural golden age whose writers – such as Omar Khayyam and Al-Ghazali – remain influential within and beyond the Islamic world. Sufi Islam arrived in Mali nearly 1,000 years ago and has become the dominant form of Islam in West Africa. Characterised by tolerance, it is now under attack from Wahhabi and Islamist groups funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

giving money to Muslims to kill Muslims. The Salafists of Bamako and the Salafists of the north have the same ideology and the same politics: to take power. There is no separation between them and Islamic State," he says, referring to the rebel group seeking to impose a conservative Islamic government across the Middle East and North Africa, which has had a powerful allure for disenfranchised youth.

Dicko vehemently dismisses the GLSM's claims that Sufis have become a "marginalised group" at the HCI and denies that Wahhabi Islam is being imposed through the funding of mosques and madrasas. "We have a lot of religious organisations, Muslims as well as Catholics. Where is the problem? If the authorities think that there is a place for everyone, then there is a place for everyone. Why should there be a place for the others and not for the Islamic non-governmental organisations?" he asks.

THE MOROCCAN EXAMPLE

Although the Malian government is struggling to build up the political will and the cash to fight back against Wahhabi doctrines, Morocco has both and is using the crisis in the Sahel to assert its spiritual and diplomatic influence. In March, it opened a \$20m training school in Rabat for imams from all over the world.

Some 500 of the students are from Mali and are participating in a two-year course including instruction on how to argue against calls for terrorism and jihad. The programme also includes training on how to use the internet and social media to propagate peaceful resolution of disputes. Morocco's efforts are also seen as a bid to challenge the influence of Algeria, a regional rival.

With its military operations in Yemen and Syria, Morocco's soft power tactics are part of a wider strategy to contain organisations such as Islamic State, which is now building a power base in Libya and Egypt. Morocco also has interests closer to home: to prevent young Muslims, such as the ones who launched the deadly attacks in Casablanca in 2003, from wielding ideological and political influence.

Haïdara and GLSM vice-president Thiam want to see a similar resolve from Mali to counter the Wahhabi proselytisers, but they have doubts about the political will of the government. Pressed by partisan politics, security worries in the north and a slumping economy, President Keïta shows every sign of wanting to stay on the battle's sidelines. ●



UN peacekeepers are a constant reminder of the jihadist threat

JOE PENNEY/REUTERS

TIMBUKTU

A people undaunted

Resilient and adaptable, those who lived through the rebel takeover in 2012 are not afraid for the future

When jihadi fighters took over Timbuktu in April 2012 and imposed their version of sharia law on the town, local people showed a mixture of tolerance and defiance. Three years ago, the jihadi entered Fodé Barry's mosque, where Arabs, Tuaregs and black Malians worshipped together. "The mosque is the house of God," says Barry with a shrug, "and anyone can pray there." He described how he raised his head from the prayer mat one day to see a line of guns against the wall. The imam then intervened. "Instead of putting their guns against the wall where we prayed, they left them outside. The imam disarmed them," says Barry.

People learned to get along in the spirit of their religion, an open; tolerant Sufi Islam, the kind that would open its doors to gunmen in order to remain true to their faith. Timbuktu is one of the most important cities in the Islamic world for its ancient libraries and universities.

People also adapted, negotiated and bargained. Women were locked up for clothing judged revealing, men had their hands cut off for breaking sharia codes and state schools that taught French were closed down.

The people of Timbuktu embody the resilience and tolerance of Sufi Islam. Today, they are coping with threats from armed groups, jihadists, traffickers and Tuareg separatists. Beyond the city, roads are peppered with land mines, and West African and UN peacekeepers cautiously patrol the region.

"The history of Timbuktu is so long," says one Tuareg local with a flick of his hand as he leans against the bar of a hotel sipping a cold beer, "that no one is a stranger here." Alcohol, forbidden by Islam, is sipped discreetly in Timbuktu.

There is just one Wahhabi mosque in the city. The imam there served as a judge at the sharia court during the jihadi occupation. Most of the jihadi fighters prayed at the Wahhabi mosque, explains a young man in the area. All the women at the mosque wear full black veils. "People are a bit wary of the way they look because it is so extreme," he says.

NOT OUR RELIGION

Wahhabi restrictions on women are alien to the people here. "Timbuktu is as important a town as Mecca," says Diadié Hamadoun Maïga, a retired teacher who headed the crisis committee that negotiated with the jihadists during the occupation. "To impose a hijab on someone is not part of our religion. We had to adjust to certain things, like not drinking alcohol. We accepted things in a non-violent manner."

Sitting in a richly carpeted room in his tall mud-brick house, Maïga explains why he believes Wahhabi Islam will never be accepted in Timbuktu. "This is a form of religion imported from Arab countries. We are not obliged to accept the things they do. So we are not threatened because we have refused. Even when they were here, we managed to live together." ●

R.S. in Timbuktu