Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara on the Obligation to Venerate the Prophet and His Family in Contemporary Mali (*En Islam contemporain* iv)

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When Mali became independent from France in 1960, its Islamic religious landscape was structured around the Sufi brotherhoods (*ṭuruq*), principally the Tijāniyya and the Qādiriyya, around the founding families (especially in the big cities), and around the Wahhābī movement whose presence in the country goes back to the 1940s.1 2 The parts played by the Sufi orders and Wahhābīsm have been analysed, but the structural role of the founding families remains to be evaluated; they are fundamental to any complete religious history of the country’s big cities. Let us examine the example of the city of Bamako, founded, according to local accounts, at the end of the seventeenth century3 by three families: the Niaré, the Dravé, and the Touré. The ancestor of the Touré family is said to have been Sayyid Muhammad al-Tuwātī (Sīdi Mohamed Touati), a marabout from the Algerian Tuat, who is said to have contributed to the foundation and, along with his descendants, Islamisation of Bamako.4 According to local accounts, Tuwātī’s descendants later changed their surname to Touré.5

Be that as it may, their status as founders of the city allowed all three families,

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1 This chapter is part of a series of studies by the author, entitled *En Islam contemporain*, which aims to analyse contemporary reinterpretations of Islamic sources by scholars and thinkers.

The first version of this chapter benefited immensely from the critical advice and relevant suggestions of Nelly Amri, Rachida Chihi, and Stefan Reichmuth. Here I express my full gratitude to them while underlining that I remain fully responsible for the contents of this chapter and any insufficiencies therein.


5 According to Meillassoux, a French anthropologist who died in 2005, the “Tuwati changed their name to Touré” towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, the presence of the “Tuwātī/Touré” in Sudan (Bilād al-Sūdān) goes back farther, according to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (eighth/fourteenth century), who writes: “Among their own people [the inhabitants of Bilād al-Sūdān], the white Mālikī Sunnis are called Turi (Touré).” See Meillassoux, “Histoire et institutions du kafoil”, 19814; and Cuoq, *Recueil des sources arabes*, 299.
Sangaré, Dravé, and Touré, to have a say in the selection of its imams, starting at the end of the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the first “Great Mosque” was built there, the three families chose a Mālikī imam called Massiré Koromagan. When he died in 1912, they unanimously chose to offer the imamate of the Great Mosque to the Kallé family. As a result, this imamate has remained in the same lineage (one that is allied to the three founding families) since that time, despite the many reconstructions of the building. To this day, only these families can revoke or question the imamate of the Great Mosque.

Throughout the twentieth century, the influence of these founding families extended beyond the power to name the town’s imams. They were also involved in organising religious festivals, especially the Prophet’s birthday (mawlid). Whereas in towns such as Nioro (the cradle of Ḥammālīsm), Timbuktu, and Mopti, mawlid celebrations took place in zāwiya, in Bamako until the second half of the twentieth century these celebrations remained occasions for members of the founding families to get together and reinforce their bonds. During this time the mawlid in Bamako was fundamentally a clan event and a celebration of alliance. Meillassoux describes it as follows:

Relations between the two Moorish and Muslim clans are elsewhere very close, and this is particularly evident during the celebrations of the birth and baptism of the Prophet. When the moon that precedes the festival of Mouloud appears the two clans get together every evening for twelve nights in the old mosque of Dabanani to sing the Prophet’s praises. Every fourth night the gwa-tigi of each clan make offerings to

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6 Concerning the Niaré in Bamako’s history: “The first inhabitants were the animists or Bamanan Niaré”. See Kouma, “Organisation de l’espace et paysages urbains”, 27.

7 “According to the Drave, they came from the Ouad Dra’a in southern Morocco via Timbuktu” (Perinbam, Family Identity, 134).

8 Its most recent reconstruction dates from 1976, and since 2017 the Great Mosque of Bamako bears the name of the Saudi king Faysal b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (r. 1964–75).

9 In June 2020, having judged the morality of Imam Koké Kallé to be dubious, the founding families revoked his status and replaced him with one of his brothers.

10 Constant, “Cheikh Hamallah”.

11 For more on the structure of religious life around the zāwiya in these cities, see the thesis by Boly, “Le soufisme au Mali”.

12 That is, the Touré and the Dravé (two of the founding families of Bamako).

13 In other words, the giving of Muhammad’s name.

14 This was the first mosque constructed by Sayyid Muhammad al-Tuwätî. See Philippe, “Les premières mosquées de Bamako”, 12.

15 This Bambara term does not, as Meillassoux claims, mean “traders” in this context, but rather the oldest members of each clan. For more on this term, see Panella, “L’éthique sociale du damansén”, 351n8.
the marabouts. The morning after the twelfth night of prayer the Touré visit the eldest of the Dravé in order to pray together. The marabouts and their priests are then invited to eat at the Dravé-kin-tigi (kin = neighbourhood). Cola is distributed by the Dravé to the gwa of the Touré of Twatila. Dishes prepared by the Dravé women are carried to the Dabanani mosque and shared out by the griots among the families of the Touré clan. At the festival of the Prophet’s baptism a week later, it is the Touré who bring the food of neighbourly friendship to the Dravé. This custom, which strengthens the bonds between the two groups, is still observed today.

This celebration of the mawlid, reserved for an elite, was still occurring in Bamako at the beginning of the 1970s, when Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara was starting his career as a preacher. His most violent critiques were formulated in opposition to this religion of elites and alliances, which he called “the Islam of the imams”: a private religion for the few. This he opposed with the “Islam of the Prophet”. In opposition to an idea of devotion to imams and local notables, Haïdara put forward a theology of the obligation to venerate the Prophet and his family. He developed this theme further during the 1980s, while preaching at mawlid celebrations of the Prophet’s birth. What are the scriptural foundations on which he bases this obligation to venerate the Prophet and his family? In order to answer this question, the present study will be in large part based on analogue cassette recordings of Haïdara’s preaching during the relevant periods. There are more than forty of these cassettes, containing recordings touching on the mawlid and other, more or less related, themes; these constitute Haïdara’s principal output on this subject, for he produced no writings, and until the 2010s his religious thought was diffused exclusively through such analogue cassette recordings. As a result, an analysis of this corpus of cassettes allows us to grasp the evolution of the themes that concern us in Haïdara’s discourse. It will also allow us to fill the gaps in existing studies on this Malian religious figure by closely examining his preaching (almost always in the Bambara

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16 The Touré priests, those who officiate in mosques administered by the Touré.
17 Neighbourhood headman of the Dravé.
18 The neighbourhood where the Touré lived.
20 Obviosly, Haïdara has recorded and released hundreds of audio cassettes on the most diverse subjects imaginable: the veil, marriage, the education of children, the Prophet’s Companions, etc. It is still possible to buy cassettes of Haïdara’s preaching (from the 1970s to 2000) in the markets of Bamako.
21 It was during this decade that his preaching began to be diffused more widely: via the Internet and, from January 2015, on his TV channel (Chérifla TV).
language) over a long duration. The Arabic-language textbooks used in the schools founded by Haïdara's organisation have also been important resources for our research; they allow us to observe how the obligation, underlined by Haïdara, to venerate the Prophet and his family, is expressed in his network of schools. There are many academic studies of Haïdara's religious thought, but the present chapter is the first to cast light on his arguments in favour of the necessity of veneration, and on the religious references he uses to support these. Having chosen to focus on the question of devotion to the Prophet and his family, we will not give much space to other organisational or political aspects of Haïdara's predication.

### 1 The Ascension of a Critical Preacher

A major figure in Malian Islam, Chérief Ousmane Madani Haïdara was born in 1955 in Tamani, in a region that was influenced by the Umarian Tijāniyya. He learned about religious sciences mostly at the madrasa of Saada Oumar Touré (d. 1997), a Tijāni master who had stood against Wahhābism. When he began his preaching during the 1970s, modelling himself on the Egyptian ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk (d. 1996), Haïdara was confronted by the hostility of

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22 No academic work has heretofore proposed such an approach to Haïdara's religious thinking.

23 Schools that were almost all established in Côte d'Ivoire, where they are called (in Arabic) al-Madāris al-namūdhajiyya sharīflā (French: Écoles confessionnelles Chérifla). In Mali and Burkina Faso such schools have a variety of names. The schools in Côte d'Ivoire are the most well-organised, and the first Chérifla school there was established in the northern town of Tortiya, in 1997. Lacina Koné, director of the Chérifla religious schools in Côte d'Ivoire, told me in an interview that in 2020 there were 251 Chérifla schools in Côte d'Ivoire, with 41,103 students, of whom 19,909 were girls. These are all primary schools; there is a plan to begin opening middle schools in the coming years. For the time being, pupils who finish their primary schooling in Chérifla schools move on to state middle schools. In these religious primary schools, the leadership has decided to put together its own appropriate textbooks, validated by Haïdara; such textbooks do not exist in the schools created in Mali or Burkina Faso by members of Haïdara's organisation.

24 Many texts and studies cast light on these aspects. For example, see the bibliography of Boly's doctoral thesis, "Le soufisme au Mali", and the works of Holder and Soares, respectively.

25 A branch of the Tijāniyya started in West Africa by ‘Umar b. Sa‘īd al-Fūtī (al-Ḥājj ‘Umar al-Fūtī) during the nineteenth century. For more on this, see, for example, Robinson, The Holy War of Umar Tall.


27 Holder, “Chérief Ousmane Madani Haïdara”, 413.
the political powers of the time, and he was rejected by certain scholars and prominent Malians. This was because of Haïdara’s consistent critiques of the marabouts and imams, who had, he said, departed from true Islam and taken advantage of the naivety of believers in order to enrich themselves. Balla Kallé (d. 2009), the imam of the Great Mosque of Bamako, was one of Haïdara’s main targets, whom he criticised at times for his proximity to earthly power and at others for the way he acceded to the imamate, which he had inherited. Balla Kallé was depicted by Haïdara as the emblematic figure of the “Islam of the imams”, the very men (he underlined) who had reduced Islam to an empty rite of prayer and had, because of their self-interest, never been able to convey the true message of the Qurʾān. If Malian Islam was decadent, according to him, the primary culprits were these imams:

People do not understand our religion; there is a single reason for this: the religious chiefs (karamoko, in Bambara) have abandoned God in favour of earthly life ... As the Prophet said, “The Final Day will not arrive until scholars appear in my community whom God detests more than [He detests] Satan and Pharoah”.32

In a country where the military dictatorship had until then been able to control religious discourse, Haïdara’s critique of imams and corruption, and of the people’s precarious social conditions, and so on, struck the powerful as a breach in the established order. While the military regime held power, and until it fell in 1991, Haïdara was several times banned from preaching, and his public appearances sabotaged by officialdom. These actions were implicitly or explicitly supported by the historic religious leaders of the country, who considered Haïdara to be calling the entire traditional religious order into question. From 1991 the control of the press was liberalised and official censorship ended; a democratic government was installed; the audio-cassette industry developed – all of these factors meant that Haïdara was now able

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28 Under the regime of General Moussa Traoré (r. 1968–91).
29 Without always naming him. See, for example, the analogue cassettes, “Haïdara, Mechi donni – Dis ablī” (Wearing locks of hair and the hijāb), 1988.
30 Thanks to the alliance between the founding families, in 1977 Balla Kallé became the fifth imam of the Great Mosque of Bamako after the death of the fourth imam, his father, Amadou Kallé.
31 See his preaching from 1989, on an audio cassette called “Iṣa ka nali” (The return of Jesus).
32 See his preaching from 1989, on an audio cassette called “Iṣa ka nali” (The return of Jesus).
33 Power cuts, last-minute cancellations of permission to preach, etc.
34 Djebbari and Olivier, “Des ‘religions du terroir’”, 351.
to become known in Mali as the most important predicator and critic of society, its morals, its political elites, and its religious figures and institutions. His association, Ançar Dine (Anṣār al-Dīn), was created in this context in order to provide a structure for his followers (anṣār); it became a major player in the "social and spiritual, even civilisational" competition that characterised this period.

2 The Mawlid: A Key Moment (during the 1980s and 1990s) for the Recentring of Islam around the Figure of Muḥammad

2.1 Quest for Legitimacy and the Prophet as Mirror

In order better to grasp Haïdara's evolution from his beginnings as a marginal figure to his eventual status as central in Malian Islam we must examine his celebration of the mawlid. In order to support his critique of a religious landscape dominated by imams and the founding families (especially in Bamako), Haïdara has made the mawlid a pivotal point in recentring Islam around the figure of Muḥammad – whom he presents as antithetical to Mali's imams.

From the end of the 1970s through the beginning of the 1980s, Haïdara's preaching in celebration of the Prophet's birth is dominated by a defence of the canonical legality of the mawlid. It is clear, as we have said, that this was because until then the celebration of the mawlid had remained limited to certain circles: in zāwiyas and among the founding families. Thus, it was necessary to justify celebrations of this kind, and to respond to the Wahhābī critiques that were already, at this time, characterising such celebrations as innovations to be censured. One of the sources used by Haïdara in his defence of the celebration of the mawlid is al-Nī‘ma al-kubrā, which he presents as follows:

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35 Not to be confused with the jihadist group of the same name, founded by Iyad Ag Ghali in 2012 in northern Mali.
36 "At first it was an association created by this leader in 1991 under the name of 'Malian Association for the Support of Islam' [Association malienne pour le soutien de l'islam (AMS1)]" (Diallo, Le Mali contemporain, 72).
37 Holder, "Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara", 390.
39 Where Haïdara lived.
40 We will see below that for Haïdara it is a religious obligation to celebrate the Prophet (and his family). Therefore, the term "canonical legality" is justified.
41 See the work by Kaba, The Wahhabiyya. My thanks to Stefan Reichmuth for calling this reference to my attention.
al-Ni‘ma al-kubrā is a work of reference that lays out the [favourable] opinions of Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿAlī on the celebration of the mawlid. Thus, even if it is a bidʿa to celebrate the birth of the Prophet, we must admit that it is a good and ancient innovation ... Therefore, be proud to mark the mawlid. Your joy and celebration will be proofs in your favour on the Day of Judgement. No one will taste the fires of hell if he carries true love for the Prophet in his heart, and makes it manifest.43

During these years, Haïdara presents the mawlid as the occasion for each Muslim to manifest openly his or her love for the Prophet. However, he starts to include new themes at the beginning of the 1990s, as the number of his listeners increases: the mawlid is becoming an occasion on which Haïdara speaks of the acts of the Prophet to compare them to the behaviour of the imams (i.e. the local religious chiefs). He describes the imams, seen in this light, as corrupt; taking advantage of the innocence of believers; incapable of fulfilling their mission of transmitting Prophetic heritage in its original purity. The Prophet is presented as the one man who was able to free himself from all of society's alienating alliances in order to fully embrace the path of his Lord. Haïdara says that the Prophet never hesitated, in the name of this truth, to call into question society's elites and their privileges.44 By setting up and methodically describing this correspondence, the preacher hopes to call into question the charisma attached to religious figures and notable families. In fact, this was the only option available to Haïdara if he wanted to set himself apart in the Malian religious scene, where religious figures (especially in the big cites, as we have seen) were also invariably co-opted figures. In the Prophet, Haïdara finds a substitute figure to offer for the emulation of the faithful, in order to weaken the influence and hold on power of the local religious authorities.

When we examine the religious sources called upon by Haïdara in his 1990s mawlid preaching, one Prophetic tradition and one element of the sīra dominate.45 According to this Prophetic tradition, Muḥammad said, “I was sent only to perfect noble character”. This tradition is a constant refrain in Haïdara's mawlid preaching and upholds the following concept: the Prophet affirmed that the ultimate aim of his mission was to re-establish virtue; however, in the present day religious chiefs are contributing to the drift away from morality, and therefore their path is not the Prophet's path. This reproach addressed to local religious chiefs and families is based on several observations. For Haïdara,

43 See analogue cassette no. 1, “Chérif O. Haïdara, Maouloud 1986”.
44 See analogue cassette no. 1, “Chérif O. Haïdara, Maouloud 1986”.
45 See the analogue cassette “Haïdara, Maouloud 1991”, in two volumes.
these members of an elite are closing their eyes to the country’s crisis of general corruption, and this constitutes tacit approval thereof and a violation of Prophetic teachings. In addition, he denounces the reluctance of the imams and leading families to tell the faithful the truth about Islam: that it cannot be reduced merely to cultural practices, but also demands an ethical commitment and a certain social virtuosity. The Islam of the imams, as Haïdara calls it, could not emphasise the moral dimension of Prophetic teachings because (he says) the imams were not of an irreproachable probity with regard to the political authorities and the nation’s wealthy and important people. Far from being the Prophet’s religion, the Islam of the imams is, above all, a social elevator for a few individuals and their families.\(^{46}\) Now we can see the importance of the re-actualisation of the above-mentioned Prophetic ḥadīth, which effectively becomes a call, during each mawlid, to break with this Islam of the imams in favour of the Islam of the Prophet. In order to make this break with local figures and move towards the figure of the Prophet, the faithful must know who Muḥammad was, that they may model their daily lives upon him; it is here that a particular event from the sīra enters Haïdara’s discourse: when Muḥammad was six years old, his mother, Āmina, took him to Yathrib (Medina) to visit members of her tribe. As they were travelling back to Mecca, she passed away. However, before dying, she offered her son a single piece of advice: “Kun rajul yā Muḥammad” (O Muḥammad, be a man).\(^{47}\) For Haïdara this advice is fundamental and is addressed not only to Muḥammad but to all those who seek to follow his path. To be a man means keeping to one’s word and one’s convictions absolutely.\(^{48}\) For a Muslim, adhering to Islam should include a primary engagement to respect the moral values dictated by the Qurʾān. Here, “being a man”, like the Prophet, means adopting a radical intransigence on the subject of these values. For example, when addressing imams, Haïdara explains as follows: to be a man, like the Prophet, requires one to urge political power to the path of righteousness and justice for the poorest and least powerful populations, and to denounce the corruption of elites and of morals, even at the risk of being silenced.\(^{49}\)

\(^{46}\) Diallo, *Le Mali contemporain*, 73.

\(^{47}\) This account is absent from works of sīra such as Ibn Hishām’s (d. 213/828), but it can be found in the poems and letters of the Moroccan Sufi al-Dargāwī al-Illāhī (d. 1328/1910) or, more recently, in Kishk. See ‘Abd al-Wāfī al-Mukhtār al-Sūsī, *al-Nūr al-mabghī*; and Kishk, “Waṣiyyat Āmina”.

\(^{48}\) This is not a reference to the murū’a of pre-Islamic Arabia, but to an insistence on the moral values celebrated elsewhere by Haïdara as traditional Malian values that conform completely to Prophetic teachings.

\(^{49}\) See analogue cassette “Haïdara, Maouloud 1991”, in two volumes.
2.2 The Obligation to Venerate the Prophet: The Bases of a Notion Expressed through the Mawlid al-Munāwī

The mawlid provides more than just an opportunity to assess the inadequacy of the local imams’ mirroring of the figure of the Prophet. This is also the occasion for Haïdara to elaborate, bit by bit, the bases and justifications of what, for him, will later evolve into the obligation (fārīda/wājib) to venerate the Prophet. These justifications are a key part of his mawlid preaching during the second half of the 1980s and into the beginning of the 1990s. Here he relies enormously on Mawlid al-Munāwī, a text by the Cairene scholar ʿAbd al-Raʿūf al-Munāwī (d. 1031/1621), a disciple of the Sufi ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī (d. 973/1565).50 Munāwī was a prolific author,51 one of whose works is Mawlid al-nabī ʿallāh ‘alayhi wa-sallam, better known as Mawlid al-Munāwī. Haïdara’s choice of this text is significant. It confirms that his Sufi roots go well beyond the Tijāniyya, the connection to which university researchers have, to date, paid most attention. Haïdara’s repeated commentaries on the Mawlid al-Munāwī also indicate that his training, or at least his religious thought, is the product of a dynamic of knowledge-sharing between regions north and south of the Sahara. This allows us to observe that Haïdara’s sources and influences go far beyond those highlighted by any academic study to date (these remain restricted to such subjects as, for example, local figures of Malian Islam, or his interest in the style of the preacher Kishk). This is easier to understand when one takes into account the fact that current studies of Haïdara take very little interest (or none at all) in the scriptural texts on which he provided abundant commentaries, and of which he composed vulgarised versions, from the 1980s to the 2000s.52 Without an exhaustive examination of these numerous texts, any attempt to construct a religious filiation for Haïdara appears fraught with hazards. Such an examination would require, as a minimum, a knowledge of both the Arabic language (to uncover and identify the texts) and of Bambara (to understand Haïdara’s commentaries).

In order to pursue the important themes we have brought up it appears fundamental to us that we should examine the commentary on the Mawlid al-Munāwī made by Haïdara during the celebration of the Prophet’s birth in 1986. This commentary gives one a clear view of his arguments, and later of the evolution of his discourse, in favour of the obligation to venerate the Prophet. It also allows one to grasp certain elements of his theological thinking, especially with regard to the bay’a.

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50 For more on this Sufi figure, see Winter, Society and Religion.
51 For more on the life and writings of Munāwī, see Chouiref, Soufisme et hadith dans l’Égypte ottoman; and Lewicka, “Challenges of Daily life”.
52 I have been unable to discover any studies referring to these texts.
Before we discuss this commentary, we will describe it. First, this is not an exhaustive commentary on the Mawlid al-Munāwī, but on a long passage that Haïdara selects within it, which deals with Muhammad’s birth. Haïdara presents this passage as the perfect summing up of the grandeur of the Prophet, and of his martaba (rank) with God. There are commentaries concerning this single passage from the Mawlid al-Munāwī on the analogue cassettes of his mawlid preachings from 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, and 1991. The commentaries from 1986 are by far the most detailed. Second, even if Haïdara’s commentaries sometimes seem to stray from the text of the Mawlid al-Munāwī, they nevertheless allow us to glimpse his representation of the Prophet, and to understand his justification of the mawlid and of the obligations that flow from it. This is why these commentaries have been and are to this day regularly and repeatedly listened to by members of Haïdara’s organisation, and re-broadcast via Chérifla TV, his television channel.

Here is the relevant passage from the Mawlid al-Munāwī, in our translation, followed by Haïdara’s commentaries from 1986. We have chosen not to reproduce Haïdara’s many digressions, which would have made the text hard to read while requiring from the reader a profound knowledge of Malian religious figures and context during these years.

When, like a brilliant sun, he [Muḥammad] came forth from his mother’s belly, he fell between the hands of the mother of ‘Abd al-Rahman b. ‘Awf, one of the pure and virtuous ones. Then he prostrated himself and, with his eye, made a sign towards the heavens. There is in this elevation [of the eyes towards the sky] a sign of the elevated rank and of the spiritual status [that is his].

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54 I refer to the edition of the Mawlid al-Munāwī by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Hawārī.
55 See analogue cassette “Chérif O. Haïdara, Maouloud 1986 Kt” and “Chérif O. Haïdara, Maouloud 1986 K2”. These cassettes are now available on YouTube in a single video called “Seid C.C.O.M. Haïdara sur l’histoire du Prophète MOHAMED (SWWSL)”. Except where otherwise indicated, please refer to these cassettes for Haïdara’s commentary.
56 A reference to the Qur’ānic expression “it [the Qur’ān, according to Muslim exegesis] is a Reminder (and whoso wills, shall remember it) upon pages high-honoured, uplifted, purified by the hands of scribes [who are] noble, pious” (83:13–16, trans. Arberry).
Haïdara's commentary:

Let us pray upon Aḥmad al-Mukhtār [Muḥammad], the last of the prophets. Some have said, “It is through love for the Prophet that God created the world”. Is this true? My knowledge and my humility do not allow me to answer this question. But I can speak as follows: Muḥammad, without a shadow of a doubt, is better than we are. Although we cannot affirm with certainty that God created us out of love for the Prophet, we can allow that His affection for Muḥammad is very much stronger than the affection He bears us. Muḥammad was doubtless a man like us, but a man whom God preferred, and whom He preferred to us. So beware of detesting he whom the Creator loves, as demonstrated by [the circumstances of] his birth.

Then he sneezed, and in the clearest Arabic language declared, “Praise be to God”. The angels said to him, “May your Lord have mercy on you, O best of creatures”.

Haïdara's commentary:

At his birth Muḥammad sneezed and rendered praise unto God in an Arabic language that was clear and pure. Muḥammad was an Arab, and Arabic is therefore his language. ... This is where some people have exaggerated the status of the Arabic language. ... They have gone so far as to say, “The language of God is Arabic”. There is no word of misbelief that is worse than this one. Be careful! Arabic is neither the language of God nor that of Islam. Arabic is the language of the Arabs, no more nor less. How can one choose a language among all those that exist and say, in a way that lacks awareness, here is the language of God? If this were the case, that would mean that all other languages were those of Satan and of kufr. Here we find the complex from which some people suffer with regard to the Arabs ... For the purposes that concern us, it is neither the Arabic language nor the Arabs that we celebrate, but the Prophet and his path. These are not the same things. God cares nothing for your colour, your language, or your race. The only thing that matters to God is “who has followed My path?”. 
Then a cloud of light enveloped him. And angels took him then, hid him from his mother's eyes for an hour's duration, and visited all creatures with him. Thus, the denizens of the heavens and the lands knew him. They all loved him passionately. After this, the angels brought him back to his mother wrapped in clothing of green silk. 

An angel spoke: “O glory of this world and nobility of the other, he who proclaims thy word and bears witness to thy profession of faith shall be beneath thy banner on Judgement Day.”

Haïdara’s commentary:

Aḥmad is a child who is blessed and honoured by God from the moment of his birth. Bearing witness to Muḥammad, that is what Islam is. It has been said that the *shahāda* is the condition of entry into Islam. This is true, but one must grasp the meaning of the *shahāda*. ... Anyone can utter the words of the *shahāda*, Satan does it every day. Our women singers make a refrain of it in their shows. And you say that just saying these words is enough to make you a Muslim? O imams and marabouts, retrace your steps. Don't you see that in bars we can find people who say the *shahāda*? And you say the *shahāda* is enough? Don't you see that corruption is fortified by the very people who say the *shahāda*? Yes, of course it's true that “There is no god but God and Muḥammad is His prophet”. That is the *shahāda*. This implies three things: (1) one must believe it firmly from the bottom of one's heart, (2) one must say it aloud, and (3) one must put it into practice. According to the Qurʾān, this practice means respecting six engagements or oaths of allegiance: (a) abstaining from associationism (*shirk*); (b) abstaining from theft; (c) abstaining from adultery; (d) abstaining from killing one’s children; (e) avoiding all shameful actions, concealed or overt; (f) never disobeying the Prophet. This is how a person enters into Islam: by this oath (*bay’a*). Deliberate refusal to utter the *bay’a*, sticking just to the *shahāda*, leads to *kufr*. ... Muḥammad is...
great, and this oath aims to lead us to imitate his moral behaviour. This is what bearing witness to Muḥammad means. It must not be taken lightly. ... After the angels said to Āḥmad: "May your Lord have mercy on you, O best of creatures", he was wrapped in the light of grace. Carried by the angels into the divine presence (al-ḥaḍra al-ilāhiyya), Muḥammad was purified and washed clean of all human weakness. This is how God protects His good servant. Muḥammad is a purified being.

According to Ḥaḍara, this bayʿa ‘alā l-islām (the oath of allegiance to Islam) comes from Q 60:12. However, this renewed emphasis on the bayʿa can also be explained by the context of Malian Islam. As Holder rightly says, when religious institutions are controlled by a religious aristocracy such as a lineage of imams and notable families, then underlining the importance of such an oath of allegiance allows one to incite the faithful to engage “not with a master or a guide”, but with “Islam as a religion”. The bayʿa is thus another facet of the mirroring process of which we have already spoken. This use of the bayʿa is not unique to the Malian context: during the early centuries of Islam this oath of allegiance was a fearsome political instrument. With Ḥaḍara the bayʿa becomes a lever in the push for religious authority.

Let us return to Ḥaḍara's commentary on the Mawlīd al-Munāwī. It continues thus:

Our Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, was born beautiful, circumcised, joyous; with the kohl of divine solicitude around his eyes; he has perfect beauty, veiled by reverential awe and perfect majesty; his character has the qualities of a prophet's character: eloquence, wisdom, generosity, strength, continence, benevolence, and excellence of stature.

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59 This reactivation is not specific to Ḥaḍara's movement; for example, it can be found among the Āḥmadiyya. See, for example, Valentine, Islam and the Ahmadiyya Jamaʿat, 212.
60 See Holder, “Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara”, 417.
62 This contention for religious authority, and specifically around the figure of the Prophet, occurs in other contexts. See Reichmuth, “Aspects of Prophetic Piety”, 140.
63 As a mirror of inner perfection.
Haïdara's commentary:

Our Prophet had therefore, when he was born, been purified by God Himself. There is nothing here to astonish us, for the Prophet is al-Mukhtār, the One who was chosen by God Himself. Every being chosen by God is an honoured being. It is thus for all of the prophets. And yet, today Muslims come and tell us that “celebrating Muḥammad [through the mawlid] is ḥarām [illicit, forbidden]”. They have understood nothing. And this is not surprising, since these people believe that Islam can be reduced to the ritual practice of prayer. ... But when the Prophet tells us to honour the other prophets, such as Jesus, this is, in fact, an implicit invitation to celebrate him, too. The elevated rank of each of the prophets is an indicator of Muḥammad's pre-eminent place among them. Eminent beings do not celebrate themselves, they honour others. Such is the very greatness of Muḥammad [in his celebration of other prophets]. This is what some people have not understood. ...

Children are born crying, except Muḥammad. He was born with his eyes full of awe and the witnessing of Unicity ... He was born hidden by the light that protected his privacy ... He was born with a prophet's character, that is to say, he spoke little and when he did it was to say something useful; he was always true to his word. ... He was born strong. We are not speaking of the physical strength to overpower his enemies, but of strength of spirit, and determination. He was born courageous. A believer cannot be a coward. ... He was born benevolent, not only towards believers but also towards non-believers. This benevolence (samāḥa) is the reason there were never conflicts between him and his Companions.64

Haïdara's commentary on the rest of this passage consists essentially of paraphrase and pointing out phrases that underline the singularity of Muḥammad. On the subject of these passages, Haïdara addresses those who oppose the celebration of the mawlid: “Look! Whether you celebrate the Prophet or not, he was already celebrated by all of creation.” For him, these marvellous events demonstrate that the

64 In several sermons Haïdara emphasises this benevolence by referring to a Qurʾānic verse: “It was by some mercy of God that thou wast gentle to them; hadst thou been harsh and hard of heart, they would have scattered from about thee. So pardon them, and pray forgiveness for them, and take counsel with them in the affair; and when thou art resolved, put thy trust in God; surely God loves those who put their trust” (3:159, trans. Arberry).
mawlid must not be celebrated only on a single day, it should be a permanent festival, a source of joy. How could it be otherwise? Muḥammad is the one who came to set us free; the one who showed us that a woman had value, when among the Arabs she was an object. ... For all these reasons, we must celebrate Islam and celebrate the man whose birth was its beginning. Yes, we must celebrate this man who was full of humility, who removed his shoes when visiting his mother’s tomb. This man, who, from respect and veneration (bogna, in Bambara), dismounted from his camel each time he passed near his mother’s tomb. Every eminent being offers particular attention to his mother. And the Prophet did this. Do not listen to those people, accursed by their mothers, who come tell us not to celebrate him.

Here is Haïdara’s central idea: using signs manifest throughout creation, God revealed that the birth of Muḥammad was no ordinary event. The universe celebrated his birth through extraordinary signs. This being the case, how does one counsel someone who claims to follow Muhammad’s path? Should not he follow the example offered by this cosmic and celestial celebration of the Prophet? At the beginning of this commentary on the Mawlid al-Munāwī, Haïdara answers this question thus:

God created us neither to increase His power nor to keep Himself busy, nor so that we could be useful to Him. He created us solely that we might adore Him ... But we cannot adore God without knowing Him. How does one know God? In order truly to know Him, we need the Muṣṭafā [Muhammad]. He is the one who came to show us the path of adoration of God. But how can you follow the Prophet if you do not even know how, nor where, he was born? How [can you] follow the Prophet if you do not know the content of his character? This is the goal of the mawlid celebration. To say the mawlid is a blameworthy innovation is to admit that he who is celebrated is not worth the trouble, that there is no reason to seek to know who he was. How can we say “We love God” (ambé Alla fei, in Bambara) and yet refuse to celebrate the one who teaches us about God? ... Only an insignificant person (Ma ni, in Bambara) refuses to honour an eminent being (Ma ba, in Bambara). He who does not celebrate the

These characteristics of the Prophet are also mentioned in the textbook of the Chérifla schools, called al-Durūs al-anwaliyya fi l-tarbiya al-islāmiyya li-l-ṣaff al-thālith al-ibtidāʾī (CE1), 35–42.
Prophet is an ingrate (fisirwalé, in Bambara). Know that ingratitude is one of the signs of the unbeliever (kufr).

The fantastical events that Haïdara presents below, through his reading of the Mawlid al-Munāwī, are, for him, arguments in favour of this obligation to celebrate, of this duty of gratitude to Muḥammad. He reads this section without further commentary:

Strange and marvellous events occurred on the night of his [Muḥammad’s] birth, signs of glorification for his arrival, reverence for his lordly status, and exceptional honour. Among these events: the heavens were decorated, they were preserved from being overheard [by hidden listeners (muṭarriqū l-sam’)]. Anyone who, after this, secretly eavesdropped, was set upon and crushed by a brilliant meteor. When Jesus was born, the son of Mary, three heavens were veiled to demons as a sign of his spiritual greatness.

All of the heavens were veiled to them, centuries later, when our Prophet was born. [In the same way] creatures shone brightly with lights, and stars were suspended everywhere along the horizon. Disbelief disappeared and Islam appeared. Paradise took on the most

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66 These passages of the Mawlid al-Munāwī bring together various elements from accounts of the Prophet’s birth by Ṭabarī (among others). See Ṭabarī, Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk, 2:155–66.

67 Those who listen for the mysteries of the heavens, as in this (fairly lengthy) tradition from Bukhārī: “When God, in heaven, has decreed something, the angels beat their wings as a sign of submission, while they await His words, which make a noise like that of a chain on stone ... Then the hidden listeners hear those words.” See Bukhārī, L’Authentique dal-Bukhārī, 3:462–63 (hadith no. 4701). See also Q 15:18.

68 A reference to Q 15:18.
beautiful decorations and graces. The cup-bearers\textsuperscript{69} glorified, and paraded before the Houris, who stayed in their tents.\textsuperscript{70} The palace of Khosrow [Anōšarwān] split apart, its galleries fell down. Thus appeared the religion of the truth [Islam], abolishing the adoration of idols. The fires that had been adored in the jāhiliyya went out; for more than one thousand years they had never been extinguished. In the land of the Persians, Lake Sāwa dried up ...\textsuperscript{71}

In the place where he was born, even to this day, a sweet smell rises up. Happy is the one who salutes this place by embracing it, and honours it with a kiss. On the day of his birth, the sun was draped in sumptuous morning light. The moon became light upon light\textsuperscript{72} and the gloom of the night disappeared. [On this day] pregnant women gave birth to male children, glorifying the advent of his Muḥammadan essence. The earth turned green, the trees bore fruit, abundance was everywhere, and blessings surged forth.

\textsuperscript{69} See Q 56:17.
\textsuperscript{70} A reference to Q 55:72.
\textsuperscript{71} Here Haïdara leaves out some of the details of Muḥammad's birth that are mentioned by the author of the book. This choice is doubtless motivated by his desire to make known the marvellous events described later in the same passage.
\textsuperscript{72} A reference to Q 24:35.
\textsuperscript{73} Read "جَل مِزِّي أَجِلِّ" and not "جَل مِزِّي أَجِلِّ" as we find in the edition mentioned.
With this final passage, and after more than an hour and a half of preaching, Haïdara's commentaries come to an end. Now begins a religious chant celebrating the Prophet, in Bambara. A few sections of this chant:

Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; This world is that of adoration;
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; This world is that of hard labour (senéké yoro);
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; If you live one hundred years;
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; One day you will be wrapped in a shroud (kasanké);
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; That day nothing will be to your advantage;
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Death is a promise from God (Alla kalékan don);

[...]  
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; O God, let death find us on the right path (sira gnouman);
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; O God, let death find us celebrating the ashrāf;
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; O God, let death find us celebrating the saints;

[...]  
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; O God, let death find us celebrating the Prophet, His saint (Alla ka walidjou).
Lā ilāha illā Allāh; Lā ilāha illā Allāh; May God assist us, by the grace of the Prophet's birth;

[...]  

2.3 **In Search of baraka**  
It is not only in the hereafter that living and dying in celebration of the Prophet will be rewarded; there are also rewards in the here and now: the *baraka*, or blessing that springs from all celebration of the Prophet. As it marks the arrival of the Prophet in this world, celebrating the *mawlid* allows one access to this *baraka*. During *mawlids* since the 1980s, Haïdara has spent time and effort offering advice to people who would like to benefit from the *baraka* they may receive here below. Especially during the 1980s, the *mawlid* season allowed Haïdara to encroach on the domain of traditional religious guides, some of whom earned a living, and authority, by providing amulets and advice to the faithful. Haïdara propagates the idea that it is possible to establish one's
own amulets, in order to protect oneself or improve one’s lot, without having recourse to marabouts or imams. It is sufficient, for example, to follow this reply to a canonical prayer (ṣalāt) to the letter:

Four rakʿāt [units] to be accomplished during the night of mawlid celebration. For each rakʿa, read the Fātiḥa [Q 1] one time, and al-Ikhlāṣ [Q 112] ten times in the first, twenty times in the second, thirty and forty, respectively, in the third and fourth. At the end of the fourth rakʿa, say the taslīm [final salutation of the prayer] and, without getting up, make your request of God. The person who accomplishes this prayer correctly shall have the protection of God for himself and his family until the next mawlid. ... Listen well to this advice, for with it you need not consult any marabout or imam. In the face of hardship, turn to God alone. It is very likely that God detests, more than He does your shoes, the marabouts and imams whom you consult. They are not closer to God than you are. It is by our moral behaviour that we come closer to God. Therefore be honest, believe in God and in yourself (ayé da allala ani aw yeréla).74

By giving this kind of advice Haïdara also attracts numerous merchants who have migrated from rural districts to Bamako to make good fortune. They hope they can obtain, for free, the secrets of a baraka that will allow them to make their fortunes, without having to consult any marabouts or imams. According to Haïdara, believers would be much better off investing their money in celebrations of the mawlid than spending it on marabouts. He also said that the mawlid should become a family celebration, so that the Prophet's baraka could cover all homes and the entire country. For this reason, he invites families to prepare a feast when they celebrate the birth of the Prophet.

Through such speeches, Haïdara demonstrates the concrete spiritual and material benefits (fawāʾiḍ) to his listeners of celebrating the mawlid. It is up to each believer to give of himself, to celebrate, and to put into practice Haïdara's advice in order to receive the benefits of these fawāʾiḍ. Here Haïdara diverges from the approach adopted by Malian zāwiya of the same period, where it is the religious guides who bless the faithful at the end of the mawlids.75

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74 See analogue cassette “Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara – Maouloud 1985”. See also “Fatidas donnés lors des Maoulouds” (this video brings together several of the recommendations offered by Haïdara during mawlids in the 1980s and 1990s).
On the subject of blessings that could follow in the hereafter for those among the faithful who celebrate the Prophet, Haïdara cites the following account during a sermon preached in Abidjan (Ivory Coast) in 1994:76

A man died in the time of Moses, among the sons of Israel. His body was thrown on the village rubbish heap. When Moses heard of this, he came and recovered the body, washed it, prayed over it, and buried it. When the people asked him, “Why did you do this?” he replied: “God asked me to perform this action, for when this man was looking through the pages of the Torah and came across the name of Muḥammad, he kissed it”. Because of this gesture, God decided to forgive all the man’s sins.

Through this account and others like it, Haïdara aims to show that to honour a “person loved by God” is an act of piety that permits the absolution of sins. For, he says, “In His creation, God has raised some higher than others. Those who say ‘we are all equal’ are in error.” In support he cites the following passage from the Qur’ān: “And those messengers, some We have preferred above others” (2:253). If even prophets are not equal before God, what should we say about common mortals? Thus, one cannot refuse to celebrate the Prophet, nor argue that he is “a human (bashar) like any other”.77 Muḥammad is certainly a human, but one on whom, says Haïdara, “God and His angels pray”,78 who is “the best of creatures” (aka fousa ni Alla ka danfin beyé, in Bambara). Each Muslim must seek salvation through the manifestation of his love for the Prophet. In this way Haïdara laid the foundation during the 1980s and 1990s for what he would subsequently support, the obligation to venerate the Prophet. We will return to this subject.

3 Honouring the Prophet and His Family: Festive Manifestations and Canonical Obligation (from 2000 to the Present)

Haïdara’s critical speeches (especially with regard to the religious authorities) and his popularisation of the celebration of the mawlid (especially through

76 See analogue cassette “Silameya” (Islam), a sermon preached in Abidjan in 1994. The video is consultable on YouTube: “Haidara à Abidjan 1994 et Maouloud Bapteme 1999”. Except where otherwise indicated, please refer to this video for citations from preaching.
77 The Qur’ān essentially says that Muhammad “is a human (bashar) like any other”; see, for example, Q 6:53, 7:188, 18:110, 21:34.
78 A reference to Q 33:56.
preaching in public and, later, in football stadia) brought him nationwide notoriety. During the 1990s he appeared as the leading critical voice denouncing elites (especially the religious elite) and the corruption that plagues public administration. He also offered an alternative to the Wahhabism that was on the rise in the country. This rise occurred in the context of intense religious rivalries expressed in part through the crisis in Malian schools during this time, and of an explosion of corruption and social injustice. At the beginning of the 2000s, Haïdara becomes an important figure in Malian Islam, and his celebration of the Prophet’s birth becomes one of the major religious events in the country. As a result of this popularisation of the mawlid, and of the influence of Haïdara’s organisation, in 2005 the Malian parliament votes to set aside two days’ national holiday for the celebration of the mawlid. This vote occurs at a time when numerous families, in Bamako and the interior, are already following Haïdara’s recommendations and feasting through the night to celebrate the Prophet’s birth.

Another important aspect of this period is the progressive evolution of the organisation of the mawlid itself: it now takes place over a week, with two nights of preaching in a Bamako football stadium seating more than 50,000 people. The week of the mawlid plays out according to a programme that had already been adopted by Haïdara’s association. From 2012 (at the latest) it takes in the following activities:

- Two evenings of preaching celebrating the birth and name-giving of Muḥammad. During these evenings Haïdara or one of his disciples reads, explains, and comments upon several passages from the Mawlid al-Munāwī;
- Readings from the Qurʾān;
- A conference on health (discussing issues of prevention and cleanliness);
- “Zikr [dhikr] presentations” (featuring religious songs celebrating Muḥammad’s glory and written by Haïdara or other Ançar Dine leaders);
- Games and contests for children;
- Sporting activities (traditional wrestling, races, etc.);
- A period for giving blood;

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80 Harmon, Terror and Insurgency, 35.
82 Holder, “Maouloud 2006”, 284.
84 One for the mawlid (birth) and the other for the tasmīya (name-giving) on the seventh day after birth.
– Clean-up activities on main roads or water-channels in Bamako;
– Conferences run by women, during which questions considered to be specific to women, such as the proper education of children and good behaviour towards one’s husband, are discussed.85

For Ançar Dine all of these activities have a religious purpose. Sport, healthcare, and giving blood are ways of putting into practice Prophetic statements on cleanliness, well-being, and help for those in need.

3.1 From the Figure of the Prophet to the Figure of Haïdara

Despite the above, the real evolution of the mawlid during the 2000s took place not at the organisational level, but in Haïdara’s religious discourse. Having succeeded in overturning old religious hierarchies, his preaching during the mawlid now began, in addition, to construct his own legend. Where he had formerly criticised the filiation of local imams, Haïdara begins to advance his own: he is said to be a descendant of the Prophet, a sharīf (pl. ashrāf). Having spent years admonishing the oldest religious families of the country, now, for Haïdara, the mawlid also signifies the celebration of the descendants of the Prophet. By giving pride of place to the ashrāf and emphasising their merits and the purity of their religious practice, Haïdara puts himself at the centre of a religious landscape that is competitive and always evolving. He is implying, rather than openly stating, his own merits, but this is enough to make those who praise him celebrate their master’s uniqueness, along with that of his family and his wisdom.

For example, in 2004 the mawlid preaching opens with the following refrain, repeated several times by the public:

Some cross the Bridge (al-ṣirāṭ) on a horse.
Haïdara will cross it in the blink of an eye.
God, this man will not walk, he will cross the Bridge in the blink of an eye.

85 It would be a mistake to think that because Ançar Dine puts women in the spotlight it is an organisation committed to equality, or to feminism. Haïdara has always preached that entry to paradise for a married woman depends on her obedience to her husband. He and his organisation remain educated conservatives in their conception of society and its values, especially as regards the place of women. For example, since the 1990s he has always publicly supported, in the name of Malian tradition, the genital mutilation of girls, even while admitting that there are no religious texts that consider it compulsory. One of his 2017 declarations on the subject, “L’excision”, can be found on the Mali Actu website (“Mali-MGF: ‘Dieu n’aime pas l’excision’”).
Then the *Folikan* (Salutation, in Bambara), a panegyric to Haïdara by one of his praise-singers, Nouhoum Dembélé, is sung. Here in an extract in which Haïdara's filiation is celebrated along with his religious training:

This is the salutation of the Ançars. It is addressed to *sharif* Ousmane Madani Haïdara.

O Ançars, you are grateful. You thank the Prophet's grandson. It is Ousmane who will come to serve humanity. [...] Bani, you have studied the Qurʾān. Allāh. Ousmane has this knowledge. Bani, you have studied the *ḥadīth*. Allāh. Ousmane has this knowledge. Bani, you have studied the *balāgha*. Allāh. Ousmane has this knowledge. If you speak of knowledge, call Bani. If you speak of *fiqh*, call Bani. Have you not seen the many proofs (dalilou) drawn from the Qurʾān? From the Qurʾān he has drawn the *bayʿa*. He has drawn from it the proofs of Nasāʾī's *Sunan*. He has drawn from it the proofs of Ibn Māja's *Sunan*. He has dealt with the question of Jesus, referring to Ibn Māja. He has drawn from it the proofs of Bukhārī. He has dealt with the question of the *bayʿa*, referring to Bukhārī.

The same year a panegyric on Haïdara and his mother (Bassitan), sung by Bourama Diallo, was played at the beginning of some prayer gatherings:

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86 Holder, “Salutation”.
87 A Bambara name for Haïdara, indicating his filiation from the Prophet. It comes from the Arabic *ibn* (pl. *banū*, sons, children). This name signifies that Haïdara belongs to the Prophet's clan, the Banū Hāshim.
88 Haïdara's theological discourse on the question of Christ's Second Coming is controversial. He rejects the Prophetic traditions and the consensus in Islamic sources on Christ's Parousia, and considers that although Jesus escaped crucifixion, God nevertheless made him die. This is the reading that he proposes of Q 3:55. See 1989 analogue cassette, “*Isa ka nali*” (The return of Jesus).
Ousmane Haidara, I will not be thy enemy.
God does not love thy enemies.
Grandson of Muḥammad, I will not be thy enemy.
God does not love the enemies of pious men.

[...]

Bassitan, woman of light (*Muso noroman*).
The mother of Haidara is a pure woman (*Muso saniman*).
Bassitan, thou who hast not got mixed up with things that do not concern thee.
Bassitan, thou who hast not got mixed up with discussions that do not concern thee.
Bassitan, thou who hast not got mixed up with things that do not concern thee.
Bassitan, thou who hast known how to preserve thyself from men.89
Bassitan, thou who hast no eye for money.
Bassitan, thou who hast no eye for gold.
Bassitan, thou who hast never been jealous of those who have many children.
The mother of Haidara is a pure woman (*Muso saniman*).

Since this date – and still today – the preaching at every *mawlid* is introduced by a celebration of Haidara and his filiation. This allows a direct link to be made between the preacher and the object of his discourse, a link that constitutes an argument in favour of his legitimate entitlement to speak of the Prophet. This idea was clearly expressed in 2007 by Mahmoud Bandé, a “charismatic figure of Islam”90 in Burkina Faso, who had come with a large delegation to the *mawlid* organised by Haidara. On this occasion, the Shaykh al-Islām, whose name is Bandé, advanced the idea that one must seek to know the Prophet by going to the source, that is to say, by approaching his descendants. Before finishing his short speech, he declares, “We must continue to support the Prophet as did the inhabitants of Medina, and we must support his descendants, such as Haidara”.91

89 This takes up a theme that recurs in Haidara’s discourse on women: like men, women must be chaste. However, unlike men, a mother’s infidelity will rebound on her children, who, because of her, will not succeed in life. This amounts to saying that since Haidara has succeeded, this is thanks to the fact that his mother preserved herself. See, for example, analogue cassette “Dankadeya” (Cursed child), 1990.


91 See “Haidara Baptême 2007”.
During the same *mawlid*, in 2007, a praise-singer had announced Haïdara’s arrival thus:

Thanks to Bani, we have known God.
Thanks to Bani, we know the Prophet.
The son of Bassitan [Haïdara’s mother] will explain to us what religion is.
Thanks to Bani, we have known God.
Thanks to Bani, we know the Prophet.
The son of Bassitan [Haïdara’s mother] will explain to us what religion is.

These words sum up the position adopted by Haïdara in the Malian religious landscape: that of the person who has truly taught Islam and made known the figure of the Prophet.

3.2  *The Obligation to Venerate the Prophet and His Family: The Formal Statement of a Notion*

Haïdara’s celebration of the Prophet’s descendants would gradually bring him closer to Shi‘ism. This is particularly clear in his annual preaching for Achoura (*'āshūrā*), during which Haïdara not only celebrates the memory of Moses, but also the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn. In 2007, for this purpose, he dresses in black for his Achoura discourse, and devotes a large part of it to the charisma and martyrdom of the *sayyid al-shuhadā’,* al-Ḥusayn. During Ançar Dine’s 2009 celebration of Achoura, the director of the Iranian Training Centre in Bamako gave a speech glorifying the *ahl al-bayt,* followed by Haïdara, who stood beside him and denounced the pseudo-Muslim betrayal of ‘Ali and his people.92

In addition to Achoura, Haïdara also celebrates ‘Ali’s *mawlid* in the seventh month of the lunar calendar (Rajab). As with other religious festivals, this celebration takes the form of an evening of Qur’anic readings and prayer, followed (or sometimes preceded) by a collective meal. Until this period Haïdara had not spoken specifically about the religious status of these observances (the Achoura and ‘Ali’s *mawlid*), but it is now clear that for him it is a religious obligation to venerate the Prophet and his family. He affirms this on the occasion of ‘Ali’s *mawlid* in March 2020:

We are not celebrating a *sunna* here, and still less a *mustaḥabb*93 [in Arabic in the text]. Here we are celebrating a *fariḍa*. What is a *fariḍa*? It is imposed by God on His servant, who will go to hell unless he follows

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92 The video of this speech is available on YouTube, “Haïdara Achoura 2009”, in two parts.
93 An act recommended by religious texts.
Canonical prayer is a farīḍa, like fasting, pilgrimage, and zakāt. What we are celebrating here is also a farīḍa. What does that mean? In the Qurʾān, God says to the Prophet: “Say: ‘I do not ask you for any recom pense for this, except love for the kinsfolk’” (Qullā asʾalukum ʾalayhi ajran ilā l-mawaddata fi l-qurbā).

This verse was revealed when some of the Companions were questioning the Prophet about works that would please him. The Prophet, since he was a man just as they were, did not want to reply. So the angel Gabriel came to him and said, “Answer them this: Love my people, love my family.” That is the meaning of this Qurʾānic passage. Therefore the Qurʾān calls on us to love the Prophet’s family. Know that the Prophet and ʿAlī are from the same family. To celebrate the birth of ʿAlī is therefore a manifestation of our love for the Prophet’s family. To celebrate ʿAlī is to render homage to a man who never bowed down before an idol.95

Some months after this declaration, Haïdara clarified these words on the occasion of the Achoura celebrations,96 providing significant specifications and details that, according to him, related to the very notion of the Prophet’s sunna. To say one was following the Prophet would be meaningless unless one recognised the eminent and unique place of the ahl al-bayt:

Sunni sources say that the Prophet said: “I leave you two things: the book of God, and my sunna”. But among the Shiʿa, they say that the Prophet said, “I leave you two things: the book of God, and my family.”97 When one refers to specialists in the jarḥ wa-taʿdīl [critique of the ḥadīth], all of them authenticate the second version. In fact, these versions mean the same thing. For those who proclaim, “No, the Prophet only said: the Qurʾān and the sunna”, do they know what the sunna means? The sunna is the behaviour and moral virtues of the Prophet. Who better than the Prophet’s family to know this sunna? ... I repeat: loving the family of the Prophet is a Qurʾānic commandment and not a Prophetic ḥadīth. God

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94 Q 42:23.
95 The video of this speech is available on YouTube, “Haïdara, Mars 2020”.
96 Friday, 28 August 2020.
97 For more on these arguments, we could cite the ḥadīth preserved by Muslim, which, despite being a Sunni reference, reports the second version that Haïdara mentions. Here is the tradition as Muslim relates it: “I have left you two important things (thaqalayn): the first is the book of God, which contains guidance and light. Follow the book of God and keep to its words.” Then he says “and [the second is] the people of my house”. See Muslim, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, 41873 (ḥadīth no. 2438).
Himself says to us: “Love the family of the Prophet”. Just as prayer is an obligation, so love for the Prophet's family is also an obligation (farīḍa). Why? Did not God say “Accomplish prayer”? He said it, and so we pray. Did He not say “Fast”? He said it, and we fast. Is this not the same God who said in the Qurʾān: “Say: ‘I do not ask you for any recompense for this [my predication], except love for the kinsfolk’” (Q 42:23). In other words: “Say: ‘I have come to free you from sin, I have re-established the brotherhood, ... But I do not ask you for any recompense for this. You cannot pay me for all I have brought you. The only thing I ask of you is love for those who are close to me, al-mawaddata fi l-qurbā.” This is an explicit Qurʾānic verse. It is true that we cannot, today, save the Prophet's family any longer, but within our hearts we can manifest our disapproval of their persecution. We can say, with all our hearts, that if we had been present in their time, we would have supported them.

To love the Prophet's family, Haïdara says, one must first love and revere the Prophet. Honouring the Prophet and his family by, for example, gathering together around a meal during an evening of prayer, or even simply by honouring them in one's own heart, is therefore a religious obligation that should transcend the doctrinal disagreements between Sunnīs and Shiʿa. This explains Haïdara's attitude towards Shiʿism. In a Malian context, the Wahhābī currents do not hesitate to criticise such attitudes, saying that Haïdara is lost, and that he promotes Shiʿism. Haïdara sweeps these critiques aside by arguing that the devotion of the Shiʿa to the ahl al-bayt conforms to Qurʾānic instruction. All devotion to the ahl al-bayt has underlying it a devotion to the Prophet; one cannot separate the Prophet from his family.

This kind of discourse on the Prophet's family and its unique status is completely novel in the Malian religious landscape. Before this, the very small Shiʿa minority in the country had a monopoly on such rhetoric. At this stage it is hard to say how far Haïdara's discourse will evolve, but it's already clear that he rejects a certain sort of Sunnī theology and apology on this point. For example, in 2018 he replied to those who accused him of leaning towards Shiʿism in his celebration of ʿAlī and of the Prophet's grandsons as follows:

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98 In his French translation of the Qurʾān, for the Qurʾānic expression “illā l-mawaddata fi l-qurbā” Masson has “if it is not your affection for those close to you”. This translation makes the passage hard to understand. Berque translates: “but only the sympathy that is due to those who are close”. Kazimirski proposes a translation that is closer to that used by Haïdara in the Bambara language: “Tell them: I ask no reward for my predications, only love for my family.”

99 See “Haïdara Achoura 2020”. 
Now they [our adversaries] say that we have become Shiʿīs because of our celebration of al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, and Fāṭima. Know that we are not like other religious guides. We are free (honron, in Bambara). We celebrate whom we want, for we depend on no one ... The Shiʿīs themselves are better than those who criticise us. I am not of the Shīʿī madhhab [in Arabic in the text]. We live and will die in the path of Imam Mālik. But I must add: we love and venerate the Prophet and his descendants. Only hypocrites refuse to honour the Prophet's descendants. For us, ‘Alī, al-Ḥasan, al-Ḥusayn, and Fāṭima are models, qudwa [in Arabic in the text].

Without being doctrinally a Shīʿī, Hāïdara still invites believers to express devotion to the Prophet's family. This may be Hāïdara's new challenge, as a Malian religious guide: to re-organise Islam around the Prophet's family, the shurafāʾ. It is significant that for several years his organisation has been celebrating what they call in Bambara Chérfifla Douba (The Sharīfian Great Family). Reverence for the Prophet widened to become devotion to his descendants, and today tends towards embracing the entire shurafāʾ in an imprecise way (both Sunnī and Shīʿī).

The school textbooks we mentioned at the beginning of the present chapter underline the obligation to venerate the Prophet and his family, arguing along the same lines as Hāïdara does above, and with hadīth cited in support. The school textbook that goes over these arguments most exhaustively is for the CM2 class (al-ṣaff al-sādis al-ibtidāʾī, for ten- to eleven-year-olds), in the section devoted to theology/doctrine (al-ʿaqīda). Here one finds the following lines:

The Muslim believes firmly (yaʿtaqidu al-muslim) in the obligation to love the people of the family of God's Messenger and of his Companions (bi-wujūb maḥabbat ahl bayt rasūl Allāh wa-aṣḥābihi). [He believes firmly] in their superiority (afḍalīyya) over other believers, and in their elevated rank in Islam. Veneration (al-iḥtirām) and respect (al-tawqīr) for them are an obligation, for they are the guides of religion (aʾimmat al-dīn). They are the ones whom the Muslim imitates (bihim yaqṭadi l-muslim) and, after the Messenger, it is among them that the Muslim seeks knowledge of religion (maʿārif al-dīn). Obedience (al-ṭāʿa) and allegiance (al-muwālāt) to them are an obligation for every Muslim. God says, “Say:

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100 See “Hāïdara Achoura 2018”.
‘I do not ask you for any recompense for this [my predication], except love for the kinsfolk’ (Q 42:23). He also says, “And the Outstrippers, the first of the emigrants (muhājirīn) and the helpers (ansār), and those who followed them in good doing – God will be well-pleased with them and they are well-pleased with Him; and He has prepared for them gardens underneath which rivers flow, therein to dwell forever and ever, that is the mighty triumph” (Q 9:100).102

4 Conclusion

Devotion to the Prophet and to his family is an obligation. This is one of the principal ideas in the theology elaborated by sharif Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara. Before arriving at this conclusion and elaborating the theoretical framework supporting it, this major figure in Mali’s contemporary religious landscape spent many years during the 1980s and 1990s emphasising the celebration of the mawlid, in order to highlight Muḥammad’s grandeur and unparalleled spiritual importance. According to Haïdara, this grandeur is demonstrated particularly strongly by the celestial and cosmic celebrations that occurred at the birth of Muḥammad. Must not those who follow Muḥammad imitate this reverence for him? For Haïdara, there is no doubt: devotion to the Prophet is a religious obligation (farīḍa), and this devotion also extends to Muḥammad’s family, the ahl al-bayt. Some might object, “Is not the Prophet a man like other men? So why should we revere him?” To such voices, Haïdara replies that although Muḥammad is a man like other men, according to the words of the Qurʾān he was also, unlike other men, chosen by God to transmit His message; in addition, the Qurʾān says: “God and His angels bless the Prophet. O believers, do you also bless him, and pray him peace.”103 To honour such a figure is to recognise his superior dignity and, by speaking up for him thus, to ensure his proper elevation before God. As for the Prophet’s family, Haïdara uses a Qurʾānic verse as the foundation for the requirement to venerate them: “Say: ‘I do not ask you for any recompense for this [my predication], except love for the kinsfolk’” (Q 42:23). This devotion to the Prophet’s family should not be jeopardised by, or made a pawn in, a doctrinal quarrel between Sunnis and Shi’a. Because of this and his celebrating the Prophet’s mawlid each year, Haïdara also celebrates the births of ‘Ali, Fāṭima, and al-Ḥasan, and commemorates the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn. This is how Haïdara understands the

102 Translation by Arberry.
103 Q 33:56, trans. Arberry.
notion of venerating the Prophet and his family: an annual remembrance and celebration of their births or martyrdom. The anniversary of the birth of each is a festive time, but also a time of meditation on their specific moral values, in order to be inspired by their examples. The veneration of the Prophet and his family should also bring about an increase in moral values and in their manifestation in the public sphere, especially at the times of the mawlids.

Finally, it might be surprising that these aspects of Haïdara’s religious thought have never, until now, been illuminated or examined by academic research. But this applies not only to Haïdara, but to many of the doctrines, tendencies, and figures of sub-Saharan Islam, which are mostly absent from Islamological studies. As a result, Islamic texts produced in this region (and a text can also be an oral discourse recorded on analogue audio cassette) are little known or examined in the field of Islamology, or Islamic studies. For example, we note that in The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology, a “splendid and hefty volume (832 pp)”, 104 figures from many other areas of Islamic culture are featured, with no mention of any religious figure from Africa south of the Sahara. But the regions south of the Sahara, like those to its north, contain their own interpretive and theological dynamics very relevant to today’s Islam. The obligation to venerate the Prophet and his family, as affirmed by Haïdara, bears this out. 105

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104 Jaffer, “Sabine Schmidtke”, 1045. 105 Here I refer not to the abundance of monographs on Islam south of the Sahara, nor to the publishing of Islamic texts, but to the Islamological approach, and the academic publications in which dialogue and debate are set up between Islamic doctrines from across the Islamic world. The absence of sub-Saharan Islam from these publications of reference contributes to the marginalisation and invisibility of this Islam and of the history of these Muslim worlds. This is a legacy of the colonial period and of its attitudes in studies of Islam south of the Sahara. Triau’d’s unhappy observations still hold true. See Triau’d, “L’islam au Sud du Sahara”.

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