FUTA JALLON AND THE JAKHANKE CLERICAL TRADITION*

Part I: The Historical Setting

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The historical role of clerics as scholars, teachers, healers, diviners and men of religion constitutes an under-valued subject in the study of Islamic penetration into Black Africa. Bearing fair comparison in range and scope to the much better appreciated exploits of long-distance traders and militant theocrats, pacific clerics have on the whole received less than their full deserts. A previous study examined the origins of pacific clericalism in West Africa, where it was suggested that the figure of al-Ḥājj Sālim Suware is the key to the subject. Two articles now, of which this is the first, carry that clerical pacific line of enquiry some steps further. In Part II following this one we shall be looking at a chronicle, much quoted in several works and first mentioned in a published source over half a century ago, but never before available in its Arabic version. In Part II of the present study also the figure of al-Ḥājj Sālim Suware is relevant, for the main subject of the chronicle is his namesake al-Ḥājj Sālim Gassama, better known to history as Karamokho Ba of Touba in Guinea.

The Jakhanke Clerical People

Who are the Jakhanke? Only a brief account can be attempted here. The Jakhanke trace their descent from the ancestor of the Soninke of ancient Ghana. Local traditions claim that after the Soninke were islamized by the descendants of 'Uqbah b. Nāfi', the affairs of religion were left in the hands of a specialised religious elite. Patronized by affluent trading populations and powerful local chiefs this religious élite developed into a separate caste, living by religion and tillage. The man who established the professional identity of this religious élite was al-Ḥājj Sālim Suware, a twelfth or
thirteenth century figure. Beginning in Diakha-Masina he led his religious followers first to Jafunu and then to Diakha-Bambukhu on the River Bafing where he created a clerical republic of enduring fame and prestige. In the heyday of the Mali empire Diakha-Bambukhu was respected as a holy centre over which the king’s edict had no force. The political autonomy of the town was reinforced by a reputation for pacifism which al-Hājj Sālim Suware emphasized as a principle of the clerical life. From Diakha-Bambukhu the Soninke clerical specialists came to be identified as ‘the people of Diakha’, i.e., Jakhanke (‘Diakhanke’ as it occurs in French sources). This appellation completed their formal clerical identity and henceforth they came to be regarded as an independent branch of the Soninke people from whom they sprang, as well as being distinct from their Manding Muslim neighbours whose language they came to speak. For the sake of greater clarity I have referred to the people called Soninke as Serakhulle, a name by which they were called in a sixteenth century source.

Such an early reference to the nominal identity of the Serakhulle, when combined with the fact that Muḥammad Bello, the nineteenth century Fulani Muslim reformer of Hausaland, calls them by the same name (‘Sarankulli’), is enough to show how it was widely used in pre-colonial West Africa, whatever the truth in the claim that it was invented by their Wolof neighbours of Senegal, a claim first made in the 19th century and repeated since. Serakhulle is not open to the same misunderstanding as Soninke evidently is. The leading Jakhanke clerical personalities today refer to themselves as of Serakhulle extraction. It is possible that the pejorative use of the name ‘Soninke’ by Muslim protagonists did not exist in areas where the jihād was weak or non-existent, and consequently the people we are describing here as Serakhulle continued to be identified as Soninke. However in Futa Jallon and the Senegambian region Soninke carried negative connotations.

The Jakhanke clerical centres developed on the peripheries of Serakhulle political and commercial locations. Once al-Hājj Sālim Suware had established the principles of political autonomy and neutralism and of military pacifism the Jakhanke adhered steadfastly to that tradition and based the clerical vocation on a disavowal of politics and war. The Jakhanke became characterized by widespread dispersions and the creation of clerical enclaves along pilgrimage and commercial routes. Religion, rather than the