THE SUFI TEACHING OF TIERNO BOKAR
SALIF TALL

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I.

Although numerous studies of West African Sufi orders have appeared in recent decades, the spiritual dimensions of Sufism have received relatively little attention from scholars. This situation has resulted in an unfortunate gap in our knowledge and understanding not only of Sufism itself, but also of the nature of a broad spectrum of West African Islamic belief and practice. This paper represents an effort toward beginning to fill this gap. Two primary themes are developed here: the first centres on efforts to define, conceptualize and understand Sufism both as a set of ideas and as a method of spiritual training. The second theme centres on one specific example of Sufi teaching in West Africa, that represented by Tierno Bokar Salif Tall, a Tijani shaikh who died in Bandiagara, Mali, in 1940. Born in 1875, Tierno Bokar was a great nephew of al-Hajj 'Umar Tall and was therefore an established member of the leadership of the Umari branch of the Tijaniyya order. 1) But late in his life, in 1937, Tierno Bokar publicly 'converted' to the Hamalliyya, or Reformed, branch of the Tijaniyya which had been introduced into West Africa in the late nineteenth century by Sidi Muhammad b. Ahmad b. Abdallah al-Akhdar. At the time of his 'conversion,' the Hamalliyya was led by Hamallah b. Muhammad b. Sidna Omar, the shaikh from whom the new order derived its name. 2) Tierno Bokar

1) See A. Hampaté Ba and M. Cardaire, *Tierno Bokar, le Souhe de Bandiagara* Paris: Présence Africaine [1957]. According to Ba and Cardaire, Tierno Bokar was the son of Salif b. Tierno Bokar b. Seydou Tall (father of al-Hajj 'Umar). On the maternal side he was the grandson of Tierno Seydou Hami, a Quadiri scholar who accepted Tijani initiation from al-Hajj 'Umar and was appointed a musaddau of the order. The background of Seydou Hami is vague; Ba and Cardaire say in one place he was of Torodbe background; in another they call him a Hausa. They also suggest that his first wife, the grandmother of Tierno Bokar, was a daughter of 'Uthman b. Fodiye; this statement requires confirmation. See Ba and Cardaire, 14-18; 121.

2) For background information on the Hamalliyya order, see J. M. Abun-
made this conversion after considerable agonizing over the issue, and only after travelling to Niôro to meet Shaikh Hamallah for himself. After offering his allegiance, Tierno Bokar made no effort to proselytize for the Hamalliyya, nor to criticize persons for continuing to adhere to the ūmarian form of the Tijaniyya; but because of the highly politicized context of competition among the adherents of the two branches, Tierno Bokar was ultimately ostracized by the ūmarian leadership of Bandiagara, that is by his own family. A few loyal followers continued to attend him, but he lived out the remaining months of his life virtually alone, no longer a centre of religious and spiritual attention that he had once been, forbidden even to pray in the mosque.

This, in any case, is the picture portrayed by the major published source on Tierno Bokar's life, co-authored by Amadu Hampaté Ba and Marcel Cardaire. 3) One should be aware that Hampaté Ba, himself a member of the Hamalliyya, may well have written this book for its propaganda value. A number of scholars who have read the book have dismissed it as a highly idealized and therefore not very useful portrait of a Muslim holy man. The spiritual qualities of Tierno Bokar are certainly very much emphasized in the book, and other aspects of his life are ignored. But because of this, the text and even organization of the book can lend insight into Sufi values. However, this paper does not rely on the text of the book as written by Ba and Cardaire for its data and interpretations. Rather, the ensuing analysis rests almost exclusively on traditions about, or quotations attributed to, Tierno Bokar, as collected and recorded by Ba and Cardaire in Bandiagara. 4) One major argument in this paper is that these traditions are vehicles for Sufi teaching. The justification for this contention should become more clear as the paper proceeds; various local traditions will be interspersed with references to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, whose work appears to have been a fundamental influence

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4) Professor William A. Brown, University of Wisconsin, has commented in personal communication that he considers these traditions to have been accurately recorded by Ba and Cardaire. His opinion derives from his own field work in Mali and his personal contact with Hampaté Ba.