
Francia. Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte
Herausgegeben vom Deutschen Historischen Institut Paris
(Institut historique allemand)
Band 48 (2021)

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and the Production of Knowledge on Marabouts in
French West Africa, 1906–1946**

DOI: 10.11588/fr.2021.1.93948

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AMADOU DRAMÉ

THE BUREAUCRAT OF THE BUSH

»Commandants de cercle« and the Production of Knowledge on Marabouts in French West Africa, 1906–1946

Throughout the colonial period, the French administration in West Africa suspected local Islamic religious figures, and in particular marabouts¹, of anti-French conspiracies, secret strategies, and collusion with countries of the Arab Muslim world and the Middle East. This suspicion led the government of French West Africa (Afrique occidentale française, or AOF) to establish the Bureau des affaires musulmanes (BAM) in 1906². Based on the model of the »bureaux arabes« in colonial Algeria, the BAM initially consisted mainly of staff from the Maghreb who specialized in the administration of Muslim populations³. It had two main missions. The first was the methodical, in-depth analysis of what the BAM considered the Muslim press, in order to provide the authorities with weekly summaries on trends in public opinion in the Arab-Islamic world⁴. The second was a policing mission: the creation and maintenance of intelligence files (*fiches de renseignement*: literally, »information/intelligence sheets«) on marabouts. The aim was to closely monitor and control Islamic religious figures who were considered obstacles to the success of the *mission civilisatrice*⁵.

This surveillance of marabouts took place in a context where the French regime seriously feared the »Islamic peril« in its colonial empire⁶. Historical studies have shown that this anxiety intensified in AOF, with marabouts leading scattered revolts against the symbols and representatives of the nascent administration⁷. The frequency of these revolts in the early twentieth century reinforced the fears of the AOF authorities, who suspected the marabouts of disseminating ideas and cultural products from other countries of the ummah. During the First World War,

- 1 In this article, the term »marabout« is used to refer both to an actor within Islam and a Muslim scholar. In the context of colonial surveillance, these individuals were leaders of Islamic religious brotherhoods, teachers in Koranic schools, and notables with scholarly knowledge of Islam. For a discussion of the concept of the marabout, see David ROBINSON, Jean-Louis TRIAUD (eds.), *Le temps des marabouts. Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française v. 1880–1960*, Paris 1997, p. 10–29.
- 2 Archives nationales du Sénégal (hereafter ANS), 19G1, *arrêté* of 8 June 1906.
- 3 Jacques FREMEAUX, *Les Bureaux arabes et Maurice Delafosse. Contribution à une étude de l'historiographie coloniale*, in: Jean-Loup AMSELLE, Emmanuelle SIBEUD (eds.), *Maurice Delafosse. Entre orientalisme et ethnographie. L'itinéraire d'un africaniste (1870–1926)*. Paris 1998, p. 193–209.
- 4 ANS, 19G3, Robert Arnaud, Report addressed to Governor-General Ernest Roume, August 1906.
- 5 Alice CONKLIN, *Mission to Civilize. The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930*, Stanford, CA 1997, p. 97–101.
- 6 Jean-Louis TRIAUD, *Politiques musulmanes de la France en Afrique Subsaharienne à l'époque coloniale*, in: Pierre-Jean LUIZARD (ed.), *Le choc colonial et l'islam*, Paris 2006, p. 271–282.
- 7 Adama GNOKANE, *Autorités religieuses et pouvoir colonial dans le Guidimaka mauritanien (1905–1914)*, in: *Islam, résistances et état en Afrique de l'Ouest. XIX^{ème} et XX^{ème} siècle*, Symposium international du 20 au 23 novembre 2000, Dakar, Rabat, p. 351–370.

the alliance between the Ottoman Empire and Germany, along with the call to jihad issued to the Muslim faithful by the sultan (the self-proclaimed caliph) suggested – in the eyes of France – a possible conjunction of forces against the French colonial empire, between what were called pan-Islamism, pan-Germanism, and pan-Arabism⁸.

The present article offers a reflection on the role of the *commandant de cercle* in the production of the colonial administration's intelligence files on marabouts. It describes these colonial officials as »administrators of the written word«⁹. Drawing inspiration from the concept of the manager as described by Norman Jones in his study on Lord Burghley, Jérémie Ferrer-Bartomeu defines this figure as a bureaucrat with a vast network of advisers and informers, upon whom he relies to write his reports, opinions, notes, and other accounts addressed to his superiors¹⁰. These networks were organized and well maintained, often off the record, in the aim of making them functional, discreet, and effective in a given context. This well describes the situation of the *commandant de cercle*, with his network of African collaborators. His status as a »broussard«¹¹ in the colonial bureaucratic system made him a »middleman«¹², at the interface between rules produced in offices in the *métropole* (Paris) or by the federal authorities (Dakar) and their application on the ground. The commander's pivotal function between hierarchical levels, on the one hand, and as a node within a network of informants, on the other hand, is evident in the intelligence files kept on marabouts in AOF that are at the heart of this study.

Each of these files was organized in the same precise, structured fashion (two columns, 20 lines) to make their reading and use as efficient and applicable as possible. They were expected to provide information on the extent of each marabout's knowledge, spiritual aura, number of students (*talibés*), obedience, travels, relations with the outside world (at the level of the *cercle*, or even of the colony and beyond), property, etc. Until 1946, these documents were the most important sources for French Muslim policy in West Africa, and served as the basis of the French colonial authorities' vision of what Robert Arnaud¹³ and Paul Marty¹⁴ called »islam noir«¹⁵.

This article is built around three key points. First, I analyse the *commandants'* stance as »receivers« of knowledge. I examine the networks around them, and show how these played an important role in the collection of the different kinds of information that influenced their writing. Jack Goody has shown that the *commandants'* written answers represented the words of

8 Ibrahim THIOUB, *Savoirs interdits en contexte colonial. La politique culturelle de la France en Afrique de l'Ouest*, in: Chantal CHANSON-JABEUR, Odile GEORG (eds.), *Mama Africa. Hommage à Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch*, Paris 2005, p. 78–80.

9 Jérémie FERRER-BARTOMEU, *L'État à la lettre. La mise en circulation de l'information politique et administrative dans les arcanes du pouvoir (Royaume de France, 1570–1610)*, in: *Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique*, no. 134, 2017, p. 41–63, p. 43.

10 *Ibid.*; Norman JONES, *Governing by Virtue. Lord Burghley and the Management of Elizabethan England*, New York, Oxford 2015, p. 71–73.

11 Maurice DELAFOSSE, *Broussard ou les états d'âme d'un colonial suivis de ses propos et opinions*, Paris 2012 (1st ed. 1923).

12 Ralph AUSTEN, Jonathan DERRICK, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers. The Duala and their Hinterland, c. 1600–c. 1960*, Cambridge 1999.

13 Arnaud came from Algeria to become the first director of the BAM, a post he occupied until 1912. Robert ARNAUD, *L'Islam et la politique musulmane française en Afrique occidentale française*, in: *Bulletin du Comité de l'Afrique française, Renseignements coloniaux*, Paris 1912, p. 142–154.

14 Paul Marty replaced Robert Arnaud as director of the BAM. Before his assignment in AOF, he was in Morocco and Tunisia. Paul MARTY, *Étude sur l'Islam au Sénégal*, vol. 1, Paris, 1917; Paul MARTY, *Études sur l'Islam et les tribus maures. Les Brakna*, Paris 1921.

15 Vincent MONTEIL, *L'Islam noir*, Paris 1964.

their collaborators¹⁶. Next, I focus on their stance as »transmitters« of knowledge. Finally, I show how the files offer a rich source for reflection on a certain »freedom of action« enjoyed by the *commandants de cercle*. Here I draw on Max Weber's writings on the bureaucrat¹⁷. Weber summarized the bureaucrat's role as an »impersonal duty«, to be discharged »without regard to person«: the bureaucrat must act in a rigorously formalistic fashion, according to rules defined as rational. However, as Michel Crozier reminds us, where these rules have not yet been established, bureaucrats participate in continual processes of negotiation within »areas of uncertainty«¹⁸.

The *commandant de cercle* as a receiver of knowledge on marabouts

In the colonial countryside, the surveillance of a marabout was a concentric process, from the village chief through the canton chief and the interpreter up to the *commandant de cercle*. First, the village chief was tasked with reporting and transmitting to the canton chief all information on any individual he considered to possess scholarly knowledge of Islam. The canton chief was then required to communicate this information to the interpreter of the *cercle*, who in turn passed it on to the commandant. It is thus clear that the production of these files followed a circuit that ran through multiple intermediaries to the *commandant de cercle*.

Researchers have taken a great interest in the trajectories of these intermediaries within colonial bureaucratic systems¹⁹. The AOF administration relied extensively on them to deal with language barriers and the lack of personnel with the requisite skills. In an inspiring article analysing the place of African agents in the colonial apparatus, historian Emily Lynn Osborn explores the unofficial bridges that reliance on African intermediaries had created within the administration²⁰. She shows how the understandings established by these intermediaries contributed to building a nearly total wall of disinformation between them and the *commandants de cercle*. They were aware of the strategic nature of their position as the principal sources of information about the colonized populations.

In reality, the *commandants de cercle* knew little about marabouts. This was due both to the language barrier and to the short period of time that each local administrator spent in a given bush station²¹. This instability in local command posts helped strengthen the positions of African intermediaries in the investigation of Muslim scholars. At the same time, these scholars were often in conflict with the intermediaries in colonial villages and cantons. Disagreements centred mainly on the political control of local populations. In predominantly Muslim *cercles*, African chiefs protested, saying that the marabouts' disciples lacked respect for them. The refusal of some disciples to accept any authority as higher than their marabout guides infuriated the chiefs²². They also criticized the marabouts' resistance to paying taxes despite their disciples' generous donations.

16 Jack GOODY, *La Raison graphique. La domestication de la pensée sauvage*, Paris 1979.

17 Cf. Hubert TREIBER, *État moderne et bureaucratie moderne chez Max Weber*, in: *Trivium* 2010, no. 7, DOI: 10.4000/trivium.3831, §8.

18 Michel CROZIER, *De la bureaucratie comme système d'organisation*, in: *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 2 (1961), p. 28–50; ID., *Le phénomène bureaucratique*, Paris 1963, p. 21.

19 Benjamin LAWRENCE, Emily Lynn OSBORN, Richard ROBERTS (eds.), *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks. African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*, Madison, WI 2006.

20 Emily Lynn OSBORN, »Circle of Iron«: African colonial employees and the Interpretation of Colonial Rule in French West Africa, in: *Journal of African History*, no. 44, 2009, p. 29–50.

21 Ibid.

22 Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM), sen. 4/127, Leclerc report, »Au sujet du marabout Amadou Bamba«, 1895.

Conflict between marabouts and African chiefs was also sparked by the marabouts' subversion of local power structures. Also, the rise of maraboutic orders (brotherhoods), especially in the colony of Senegal, also challenged traditional norms and the social status of chiefs. Marabouts were often people of a lower class, whose scholarly knowledge of Islam afforded them a degree of social mobility. The growing power of these scholars of humble origin was particularly troubling for African chiefs, above all those who claimed aristocratic ancestry²³. Letters that African chiefs sent to *commandants de cercle* feature observations to this effect.

The chiefs played a crucial role in defining whether or not a marabout would be treated as a suspect figure, as they were in a position to understand the local administrator's way of thinking, his fears and expectations²⁴. Indications of the chiefs' sway over *commandants de cercle* can be seen in the section of the file on each marabout where the colonial official gave his »personal view« (»avis personnel«). This section was crucial, because it was supposed to put the commandant's personal opinion in writing. It offered a sort of concluding summary of all the other information in the file, in a few words or sentences. In offering this view, the commandant acted as a transmitter of knowledge. This knowledge mattered a great deal in the eyes of his hierarchical superiors, who, in a number of official circulars, emphasized the value for the commandant of providing his view on marabouts²⁵. In what follows, I draw on the surveillance files of Cheikh Ibra Fall and Tierno Bokar to analyse how the commandant's »personal view« was constructed.

The *commandant de cercle* as a transmitter of police knowledge on marabouts. The files of Cheikh Ibra Fall and Tierno Bokar

Cheikh Ibra Fall's file was created in the Cayor *cercle* in 1913²⁶. It indicates that Fall was born around 1858 in the Louga *cercle*. He attended his father Amadou Fall's Koranic school before embarking on a search for knowledge, visiting various marabouts teaching across Senegambia²⁷. During this quest for knowledge, in the 1880s, he met the man who would become his spiritual guide – Amadou Bamba, the founder of the Murid brotherhood (Muridiyya)²⁸ – in Mbacké Cadior, a village in the Baol *cercle*. The founding of this brotherhood coincided with the start of the French colonial administration. Very early on, a deep hostility had developed between Bamba and the African auxiliaries of the nascent administration. This conflict cast a shadow over Bamba in the eyes of the French authorities, and eventually led them to suspect him of intense proselytism against the colonial government. Ultimately Bamba was arrested, put on trial in Saint-Louis, and sent into exile in Gabon in 1895²⁹.

23 ANS, 1G136, report by Angot, 1907, p. 11–12.

24 David ROBINSON, The Murids. Surveillance and Collaboration, in: *The Journal of African History*, 40 (1999), no. 2, p. 193–213.

25 ANS, fonds du Sénégal colonial, 10D3/0025, letter from the Lieutenant-Governor of Senegal to all colonial administrators, 1911.

26 ANS, 13G68, fiche de renseignement sur Cheikh Ibra Fall, 1913.

27 Ibid.

28 On the history of the Muridiyya and its founder, see Cheikh Anta BABOU, *Fighting the Greater Jihad. Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853–1913*, Athens, OH 2007.

29 ANS, 1G137, deliberations of the Conseil Privé du Sénégal, session of 5 September 1895.

Cheikh Ibra Fall was already living in Saint-Louis at that time because of his commercial activities³⁰. According to his file, he showed complete devotion and attachment to his guide. The file indicates that Fall was among the key interlocutors of the French after Bamba's exile, and that he showed a particular determination to secure the return of his guide³¹. Aside from the negotiations and other steps aimed at defending his spiritual guide, the information contained in Ibra Fall's file mentions no subversive behaviour towards the colonial government. The *commandant de cercle's* »personal view« nonetheless presents him as a suspect in need of surveillance:

»L'attitude de Cheikh Ibra Fall a toujours été irréprochable, il s'est toujours incliné devant les ordres de l'autorité mais il y a lieu de se méfier de lui comme de tous les mourides lesquels sont prêts à obéir aveuglement aux ordres quels qu'ils soient du Cheikh Amadou Bamba³².«

On closer inspection, the commandant's opinion was influenced more by the administration's view on a group that the French authorities considered dangerous for the colonial project than by Cheikh Ibra Fall personally. As we saw above, this view was heavily dependent on the discourse of African chiefs.

The file on Tierno Bokar, a member of the Hamawiyya branch of the Tijāniyya brotherhood, was created later, in Bandiagara (Bamako *cercle*) in 1937³³. This religious current, which had broken with the main stream of Tijāniyya doctrine, was founded by Cheikh Hamallah (1883-1943)³⁴. The leading families in the brotherhood viewed the creation of this current as a dissident challenge to the teachings of the precursors of their religious order. In the interwar period, it was the common adversary of the French administration and the Tijāniyya hierarchy. The rumours and biased interpretations of its opponents within the brotherhood contributed to reinforcing the fears of the colonial authorities, who came to see Hamallah and his partisans as dangers to be mitigated. Hamallah was considered hostile, and was exiled multiple times between 1925 and 1941³⁵. He died in exile in metropolitan France in January 1943, in Évaux-les-Bains, which at the time was under German occupation³⁶. As a member of this current, Tierno Bokar was automatically viewed as a suspect figure. The view of the Bamako *commandant de cercle* on Tierno Bokar was thus the following: »Highly erudite. Presents a danger for the administration. Currently under close surveillance«³⁷.

As in the case of Cheikh Ibra Fall, the commandant's »personal view« on Tierno Bokar was more reflective of Bokar's membership in a supposedly dangerous religious current than of his own person. From the historian's perspective, the local administrators' »views« on these two

30 Charlotte PERERIL, Histoire d'une stigmatisation paradoxale, entre islam, colonisation et »autoétiquetage«. Les Baay Faal du Sénégal, in: Cahiers d'études africaines 2008/4, no. 192, p. 791-814, p. 793.

31 ANS, 13G68, fiche de renseignement sur Cheikh Ibra Fall, 1913.

32 »Cheikh Ibra Fall's attitude has always been irreproachable, he has always submitted to the orders of the authorities, but there is reason to be wary of him as of all the Murids, who are prepared to blindly obey any orders from Cheikh Amadou Bamba«. Ibid.

33 On the history of the Tijāniyya, see Jean-Louis TRIAUD, David ROBINSON (eds.), La Tijāniyya. Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique, 2000.

34 Alioune TRAORÉ, Cheikh Hamahoullah. Homme de foi et résistant. L'Islam face à la colonisation française en Afrique de l'Ouest, Paris 2015.

35 Constant HAMÈS, Le premier exil de Shaikh Hamallah et la mémoire hamalliste (Nioro-Mederra, 1925), in: ROBINSON, TRIAUD (eds.), Le temps des marabouts (as in n. 1), p. 337-360.

36 Alioune TRAORÉ, Cheikh Hamahoullah (as in n. 34), p. 201.

37 »Erudition élevée. Présente un danger pour l'administration. Étroitement surveillé actuellement«. ANS, 13G68, intelligence file on Cheikh Ibra Fall, 1913.

marabouts reveal two perceptions specific to the colonial situation. The first concerns new interpretations of local regimes of historicity in the colonial situation. Reactions and behaviours that occurred in the colonial *cercles* often originated in social positions, practices, and relations that existed before the colonizers' arrival. The arrival of the French did not immediately abolish social conflicts or the practices that had previously organized local societies. It did, however, introduce new ways of interpreting struggles and rivalries within them. All local conflicts arising out of structures internal to African communities thus came to be interpreted from the perspective of the dominant political power: that is, as conflicts around opposition to or support for colonization. Early twentieth-century colonial intermediaries drew heavily on these registers to influence the vision of local administrators, who were often unable to grasp these complex and ambiguous historicities³⁸. It is from this angle that the »view« of the *commandants de cercle* on Cheikh Ibra Fall and Tierno Bokar must be seen.

These two marabouts belonged to religious orders that were viewed with hostility by the French colonial administration³⁹. Looking at the period of conflict between the administration and the Muridiyya (1889–1914), a striking harmony of tone and language is noticeable between the letters and testimonies of African chiefs, on the one hand, and the »personal views« of *commandants de cercle* in the files of Murid marabouts, on the other. These and other accounts within the colonial administration depicted the Murids as preparing for jihad and emphasized their hatred of the French. In reality, these claims were often fabricated by African chiefs, partly based on second-hand information, and then endorsed in surveillance files and other reports by *commandants de cercle*⁴⁰.

Writing about Tierno Bokar, Amadou Hampaté Bâ explained how he was attacked and undermined by his cousins from the other branch of the brotherhood, which had members within the administration. Bâ explains that as Tierno's disciple, his status as a colonial agent in the Bamako cercle had enabled him »to defend Sharīf Hamallah and Tierno Bokar with the Administration by putting the facts into perspective and by breaking up several intrigues that were intended to discredit Tierno Bokar, Sharīf Hamallah, and the Hamallists«⁴¹.

The second perception revealed by the »personal views« of the *commandants de cercle* is symptomatic of a feature of colonial governmentality: namely, its logic as a government of collective and community, rather than of individuals. *Indigène* politics conceived Africans as elements of communities, rather than as fully fledged individuals. These colonial representations, although they were functionally applied within the colonial apparatus, masked the complexity of these categories, which were less dual and more heterogeneous than colonial accounts suggest⁴². Marabouts were not the only ones to be systematically assigned to a category and viewed through the prism of this categorization. Colonial ethnological and anthropological research

38 Camille LEFEBVRE, Zinder 1906, histoire d'un complot. Penser le moment de l'occupation coloniale, in: *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 72 (2017), no. 4, p. 945–981.

39 The Murids became essential allies of the colonial administration in the interwar period; see David ROBINSON, The Murids. Surveillance and Collaboration, in: *The Journal of African History*, 40, no. 2 (1999), p. 193–213.

40 James F. SEARING, »God Alone is King«. Islam and Emancipation in Senegal. The Wolof Kingdoms of Kajoor and Bawol, 1859–1914, Portsmouth, NH, Oxford, Cape Town 2002, p. 130; for similar circumstances in the case of Amadou Bamba: John GLOVER, Sufism and Jihad in Modern Senegal, Rochester, NY 2007, p. 92.

41 Amadou Hampaté BÂ, Spirit of Tolerance. The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar, Bloomington, IN 2008, p. xxx.

42 Frederick Cooper has shown how, in the aftermath of World War II, colonial states were forced to rethink their categories of identity and individualize their understanding of the colonized world, in the context of the concession of political and social rights. See Frederick COOPER, Français et Africains? Être citoyens au temps de la décolonisation, Paris 2014, p. 55–60.

reflects this continually renewed concern with the systematic classification of populations⁴³. Consequently, intelligence files were also instruments for categorizing and profiling marabouts. They thus do not offer the researcher a clear view of properly endogenous mechanisms of structure and function in maraboutic networks, particularly in terms of »lineal, pedagogical, and propaedeutic relationships«⁴⁴.

Finally, an examination of these files reveals that the *commandants de cercle* enjoyed a certain freedom of action with respect to the hierarchy. As local bureaucratic agents, they had some ability to sift through information and transmit only the aspects that they deemed important. In the interwar period, they tended to rely on marabouts to satisfy demands set by the policy of »mise en valeur [economic development/exploitation] of the French colonies«⁴⁵. During these years, the commandants' production of these intelligence files was sometimes lax. It had become a routine administrative exercise, with the same information repeated year after year, in defiance of the agents and experts of the Bureau des affaires musulmanes, who in their reports emphasized the importance of improving the information in these files.

The *commandant de cercle*: A bureaucrat with freedom of action

The role of the *commandants de cercle*, in principle, was merely to execute rules and other norms dictated from above. In some circumstances, however, they consistently enjoyed a certain freedom of action. This was the case, for example, in the interwar period, after the Minister for the Colonies Albert Sarraut launched the program of »mise en valeur of the colonies« in 1921. This programme of major infrastructural investments (construction of road networks, development of economic infrastructure, increases in agricultural production capacity) was aimed at ensuring adequate supplies of raw materials to metropolitan France, and supposedly at the development of the colonies themselves. According to Sarraut, this created a need for »a considerable mass of workers in the field, demand for which will increase over time«⁴⁶.

In AOF, the desire to achieve the objectives of the programme at a lower cost contributed to increasing the scope of the tasks that *commandants de cercle* were assigned to perform in the field. While they could rely on legal mechanisms to force workers into labour on road construction⁴⁷, for agricultural labour the blessing and support of marabouts was crucial⁴⁸. This requirement weighed on the production of the intelligence files.

An analysis of these documents produced in the colony of Senegal in the interwar period shows that they contained considerably less information than those from before the First World War⁴⁹. Indeed, in the interwar period, they were almost empty. Apart from the boxes in-

43 Marie-Albane DE SUREMAIN, Cartographie coloniale et encadrement des populations en Afrique coloniale française, dans la première moitié du XX^e siècle, in: *Outre-mers. Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 86 (1999), no. 324–325, p. 29–64.

44 Shaykh Muusa KAMARA, *Florilège au jardin de l'histoire des Noirs, Zuhūr al-basātīn. L'aristocratie peule et la révolution des clercs musulmans (vallée du Sénégal)*, Paris 1998.

45 Martin THOMAS, Albert Sarraut, French Colonial Development, and the Communist Threat, 1919–1930, in: *Journal of Modern History* 77 (2005), no. 4, p. 917–955.

46 »La mise en valeur nécessite sur le terrain une masse de travailleurs considérable et dont la demande ira croissante«. Albert SARRAUT, *La mise en valeur des colonies françaises*, Paris 1923, p. 94.

47 Romain TIQUET, *Travail forcé et mobilisation de la main-d'œuvre au Sénégal*, Rennes 2019.

48 On Côte d'Ivoire, see Daouda GARY-TOUNKARA, *Migrants soudanais-maliens et conscience ivoirienne*, Paris 2008, p. 346.

49 Amadou DRAMÉ, *La Direction des Affaires politiques et administratives. Histoire d'une institution du gouvernement colonial français en Afrique de l'Ouest*, Dakar, PhD thesis, history, 2016, p. 106–116.

dicating the year in which the file was created and the marabout's first and last names, the other items were not even filled in. It is especially striking that from this point on, the commandant rarely gave his »personal view«. Later files frequently featured the abbreviation »R.A.S«, meaning »rien à signaler« (»nothing to report«). This wording is a suspicious one: there were always things to be said about a marabout. In using it, local administrators were taking a rhetorical escape route, avoiding entering into detail, leaving the recipients of the file in suspense. It seems the commandants were aware that an unfavourable opinion would mean the need to engage in a full-blown programme of surreptitious surveillance of the marabout. This could attract his attention and create mistrust and feelings of persecution.

The commandants badly needed the support of these religious figures to advance the programme of economic exploitation. Aware of the delicate position in which the commandants found themselves, Paul Marty (director of the BAM, 1912–1922) asked them to »keep abreast of all the acts and gestures of the marabouts, never breaking off contact with them, and using intelligence agents in the various brotherhoods without raising the suspicion of religious persecution«⁵⁰. The 1923 mission report of the BAM's experts ran along the same lines, emphasizing »the importance of carrying out investigations on the marabouts with tact and sensitivity«⁵¹. A circular by the Lieutenant-Governor of Senegal, addressed to all the commandants of the colony, made the same point, recalling that »the surveillance of the marabouts is a priority«⁵².

These official expert reports and circulars show that the colonial hierarchy was observing the deficiencies and omissions in the collection and transcription of information regarding marabouts. On the ground, however, the commandants had found the marabouts to be loyal and cooperative partners. Aware that under the »mise en valeur« programme, they were evaluated based on their productivity, their main objective was limited to constantly increasing agricultural output⁵³.

The two parties – the *commandant* and the marabout – thus came to terms with each other in order to achieve their respective objectives. The historian Hélène Grandhomme has shown how the dynamism fostered by the marabouts' influence over colonized populations in the field contributed to the disappearance of the African chiefs⁵⁴. In the end, marabouts themselves came to act as intermediaries, functioning as a transmission belt for colonial decisions on the ground. Occupying no official administrative office recognized by the colonial authorities – for the sake of profit and the maintenance of order and social peace – they enabled the *commandant de cercle* to mobilize rural populations.

Unlike official auxiliaries, some of whom had amply demonstrated their greed in their relations with local populations, the marabouts appeared to be better positioned to provide ideological support, legitimizing the »mise en valeur« programme. The administrator of the *cercle* of Diourbel (colony of Senegal) observed that a religious community under the influence of a

50 »[...] se tenir au courant de tous les faits et gestes des marabouts, ne jamais rompre le contact avec eux et utiliser des agents de renseignements dans les diverses confréries sans laisser croire à une persécution religieuse«. ANS, 19G4 (8), report by P. Marty, 1922.

51 »[...] l'intérêt qu'il y a de mener avec tact et doigté les enquêtes sur les marabouts«. ANS, fonds AOF, 19G5 (1), letter from the Muslim affairs department of the ministry of the colonies to the Governor-General of AOF, (reception of mission reports André and Chatelaïn), 19 November 1923.

52 »[...] la surveillance des marabouts est une priorité«. ANS, fonds du Sénégal colonial, 11D1/346, inquiry concerning Islam in Casamance addressed to the governor of Senegal, 1932.

53 Momar-Coumba DIOP, *L'administration sénégalaise, les confréries religieuses et les paysanneries*, in: *Africa Development*, 17 (1992), no. 2, p. 65–87.

54 Hélène GRANDHOMME, *Le commandant de cercle et le marabout au Sénégal (1936–1957)*, in: Samia EL MECHAT, *Les administrations coloniales, XIX^e–XX^e siècles. Esquisse d'une histoire comparée*, Rennes 2009, p. 121–135.

marabout could form a bloc capable of a collective inertia against which he was entirely helpless⁵⁵. For the marabouts, the end of the African chiefdom in the colonial bureaucratic system offered an opportunity to better structure the brotherhoods, consolidating them and imposing them as the framework for agricultural production. The surveillance of the marabouts, who had become loyal intermediaries, was no longer the priority of the *commandants de cercle*.

Conclusion

Commandants de cercle played a key role in the development and codification of a wholly French administrative culture of Muslim affairs in French West Africa. This culture practice was built around knowledge based on the needs of colonial policy. Intelligence files (*fiches de renseignement*) represented an important corpus of such administrative knowledge. These documents highlight two aspects of the colonial situation. First, they reveal a vision of Islam as a security threat, nourished by rumours transformed into certainties. In this context, the way reports and forms were formulated, the vocabulary of surveillance contributed strongly to entrenching the view that the »Islamic question« in AOF was paradigmatically distinct from the situation in the Maghreb. Second, the files offer insights into the shapes of the power relationships at work in the colonial bureaucracy. They remind us that colonial power was not a matter of straightforward, unitary domination, but above all a play of constantly evolving and reinvented power relations.

By focusing on the process through which these documents were produced, I have highlighted the importance of the *commandant de cercle*'s function as an »administrator of the written word«, shedding light on the potential agendas of his African associates. In this situation, the *commandant de cercle* moved in an intermediate space, acting as both receiver and transmitter. I have also explored how these officials had some freedom of action with respect to the colonial hierarchy. Examining their »personal views« of marabouts who were (theoretically) under surveillance demonstrates how the colonial experience was built on a set of contradictions and paradoxes. In AOF, these inconsistencies were sustained by the discrepancies between directives from the ministerial (Paris) or federal (Dakar) levels and their application on the ground. The closer these came to the ground level, the more necessary qualifications and adaptations became to the work of the *commandant de cercle*. This is the perspective from which these administrators' position under Albert Sarraut's programme of »mise en valeur« of the colonies should be understood. The implementation of this project contributed to producing misunderstandings between *commandants* and their hierarchical superiors concerning the surveillance of marabouts.

Jules Marcel de Coppet, Governor-General of AOF (1936–1938) under the Popular Front government, tried to revitalize the practice of surveillance through the adoption of specific texts on intelligence policy with regard to Islam. For de Coppet, this intelligence was to contribute not only to developing knowledge and understanding of different actors, but also to inform propaganda and counterpropaganda operations that would be used to keep emotions from running too high. He thus argued that it was important to »patiently mould a collective state of mind which, if we lose interest in it, could one day suddenly rise up against us«⁵⁶. In addition to these intelligence and surveillance directives, de Coppet developed the habit of regularly touring the local administrative districts, thereby challenging the almost total power of the *commandants de cercle* over the writing of files and other reports on Islam.

55 Centre des archives diplomatiques, Nantes (CADN), fonds AOF »Dakar«, no. 147: Schémas sur les religions et les races dans le cercle de Diourbel (1937).

56 »[...] modeler patiemment un état d'esprit collectif qui, si nous nous désintéressons de lui, pourrait un jour se dresser inopinément contre nous«. ANS, fonds du Sénégal colonial, 11D1/0049, circular from governor-general Marcel de Coppet, Dakar, 7 March 1937.