

THE POWER OF KNOWLEDGE

THE LIFE OF ALHAJI IBRAHIM GONI, ISLAMIC JUDGE IN
NGAOUNDÉRE, NORTHERN CAMEROON

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In this chapter² we hope to achieve an understanding of some aspects of the transition in Fulbe³ society from an egalitarian, atheistic system⁴ to one in which the Fulbe are obliged to submit themselves to an omnipotent God.⁵ We will try to get to grips with the cultural and social transformation of a sub-Saharan African community brought about by the Fulbe's conversion to Islam as it can be observed in Northern Cameroon today.⁶ Our intention is not to chronicle the Fulbe's history since their conversion to Islam for the purpose of revealing which aspects

¹ This chapter is the result of a collaboration between Lisbet Holtedahl, professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Tromsø (Norway) and Mahmoudou Djingui, social psychologist and Ph.D. student in social anthropology at the same university.

² Since 1982 Alhaji Ibrahim Goni Bakari, the main figure discussed, has been one of Lisbet Holtedahl's close friends and informants in Ngaoundéré. In order to write this article, we have not only made use of material gathered during recent conversations with Alhaji Ibrahim, but we have also been able to resort to information accumulated over several years of research in Ngaoundéré, and to the viewpoints of other informants and of Alhaji Ibrahim's wives. We would like to thank them all and extend our gratitude to Abbo Hamidou, to the late Oumarou Nduudi and to Mobas Baba Soudi for the help they have given us during our investigations.

³ *Fulbe* is what the Fulani people call themselves in their own language, and we will mostly use this term in our article. In the text, terms which are transcribed from *Fulfulde*, the language of the Fulbe, appear in italics. In French the Fulbe are called *Peul*, a name probably derived from *Pullo*. The essay deals with Fulbe who are resident in the town of Ngaoundéré and not the nomadic Fulbe outside the town. This is simply to point out that due to inter-ethnic marriage and a high degree of assimilation of other ethnic groups, especially the Mbum, a resident *Pullo* is not necessarily an original *Pullo*, i.e. a person whose ancestors are nomadic Fulbe. He may have a *Pullo* father or mother or parents who have adopted the behavioural and moral characteristics and therefore consider themselves Fulbe (Burnham 1991).

⁴ See Stenning 1966; Dupire 1970 and 1981; Riesman 1988; Azarya 1978; Burnham 1991.

⁵ See Froelich 1954; Briesen 1994; Hino 1993; Dognin 1981; Njeuma 1978; Ahmadu Bello 1962; Gowers 1921; Hogben 1930; Smith 1966; Trimmingham 1962; Waldman 1966; Schultz 1980; Verecke 1989.

⁶ Shimada 1993: 88.

of their culture, outlook and personality led to this. Nor shall we consider Islam insofar as it offers a solution to the spiritual needs of the Fulbe. What interests us is the relationship between the Fulbe and other groups, and what we can learn about the relationship today by looking essentially at one aspect of their identity: their possession and management of Islamic knowledge. Whatever the Fulbe's objectives might have been, their *jihads* ("holy wars") always had consequences for local social organization and for the relationship between social groups. One such consequence was the transfer of power. The Islamic religion structures community practices and has therefore an essentially political character.⁷ As a result, the adoption of Islam by a community, or the imposition of Islam on that community, has been accompanied by the seizure of political power by those who possessed Islamic knowledge: the Islamic leaders. The Fulbe always took power in regions they had conquered during *jihads*.

We shall focus our attention on the Fulbe's experience of Islam at a specific place and time in their history: the town of Ngaoundéré in the 1980s. The information we have gathered since 1982 has led us to believe that the practice of Islam covers many aspects of culture and society, such as spirituality and ethnicity, which together influence the believer's devotion to the religion. In this analysis, however, we wish to illuminate one aspect only, and that is the connection between Islamic knowledge on the one hand, and its potential as a means of power, influence and social control on the other. Our hypothesis proposes that the Fulbe have turned to Islam and Islamic symbols in order to safeguard their identity and their social, political and religious leadership in light of the menacing possibility of other ethnic groups acquiring social influence. We also propose that this kind of safeguarding is becoming increasingly difficult, because today the new generations of Fulbe have their own ways of exploiting Islam and turn to different symbols.⁸

Ngaoundéré has witnessed numerous shifts of power since Islam was implanted in the town in the nineteenth century.⁹ Once part of the extensive Islamic territory of Adamawa,¹⁰ Ngaoundéré was subsequently integrated into the State of Cameroon by colonialists. After Cameroon won her independence, Ngaoundéré came under the new, secular Cameroonian administration. At the local level, the administration was run by Cameroonians, while the president was a Muslim Fulani from the north of the country, Ahmadou Ahidjo. Since 1982, the country

⁷ Weber 1963: 263; Gellner 1981: 70.

⁸ Rowlands 1993.

⁹ Mohamadou 1978.

¹⁰ Adamawa, whose capital was Yola, encompasses today's Gongola State in Nigeria, as well as the provinces of Adamaoua and part of the northernmost province in Cameroon.

has been led by a Christian president from the south, Paul Biya. With these shifts of power, there also emerged a new class of wealthy men and intellectuals educated in the West. This new class rapidly acquired social and political influence, not just locally but nationwide.¹¹

The arrival of these new factors has contributed to a fall in the Fulbe's political and religious influence. Nevertheless, Islam continues to be one of the main criteria in the definition of Fulbe identity. The terms *Pullo* (sing. of Fulbe) and *juuldo* (Muslim) have become synonymous – their meanings have coalesced and are considered one and the same in the mind of the Fulbe.¹² The fascination with Mecca and the prestige attached to both the pilgrim and to the title of *alhaji* (*al-hajji*, *Hajji*)¹³ are still very much alive. Many Fulbe would willingly spend all their savings to make the pilgrimage to the hallowed city of Mecca. Every public event is an opportunity for them to show their total devotion to their faith (worshipping in a mosque, giving alms, fasting and so forth). In their speech, their behaviour, their dress and in their attitude, we will always find the embodiment of an Islam which aspires to be pure. "For the Fulbe", said Lacroix, "religious faith is deep and sincere."¹⁴ Indeed, despite their pride,¹⁵ their concern to publicly display their independence and their free spirit beyond all weakness, they always show that the image of God is in their soul, and their way of life is marked by a resignation caused by the fear of God and by the acceptance of His will.¹⁶ The expression *Allah hoddiri dum* (God willed it so) is a common phrase in their language. Enthusiasm for Islam among the Fulbe, far from being on the wane, appears to be gaining strength.¹⁷

The hypothesis we have put forward to explain this enthusiasm incorporates the Fulbe's concern to uphold a power which they feel is

¹¹ See Miaffo and Warnier 1993; Rowlands 1993; Holtedahl 1993.

¹² One of our Fulani informants told us that the Fulbe's attitude towards Islam is such that their children could never imagine their ancestors were non-Muslims.

¹³ All Arabic words loaned by the Fulbe have been modified and adapted to the Fulfulde language. In this article we use the terms as the Fulbe themselves use them. Some of the equivalent Arabic terms will be given alongside in brackets.

¹⁴ Lacroix 1966: 402.

¹⁵ We use the word "pride" to characterize the image the local people have of the Fulbe as well as the image the Fulbe have of themselves. *Pulaaku*, which literally means "the Fulani way of life", is typified by behavioural rules concerning honour. The notions of honour strictly impose a type of behaviour which lends great importance to "pride". See Bocquené 1986; Vereecke 1989 and 1989; Riesman 1988; Schultz 1980.

¹⁶ Riesman 1977: 129.

¹⁷ Here we are alluding to public behaviour, body language and other vehicles for the communication of meaning. We are not referring to the Fulbe's inner beliefs. There will be a discussion of this aspect of them as part of personal identity later in the chapter, in connection with our dialogue with Alhaji Ibrahim Goni.

under threat. We shall clarify the hypothesis on the basis of Islam as it has been experienced by the Fulbe of Ngaoundéré throughout the life and career of one of their most influential religious figures: Alhaji Ibrahim Goni Bakari,¹⁸ *Alkaali* (*qadi*), or Islamic judge, of Ngaoundéré.

Our plan is comprised firstly of a presentation of Islam in Ngaoundéré: among other things, its place in the life of Muslims, the distribution of functional roles and how Islamic knowledge is acquired. Secondly, we shall present the central figure in our chapter, Alhaji Ibrahim Goni. We shall examine his daily life, his relationship with the townspeople and with the Cameroonian administration (through its representatives and institutions), and the role and status he has ascribed to Islam during his life in Ngaoundéré. We will then analyze our own conversations with him in order to specify how Islam relates to his life and how it might affect his relations to other people. In this way we hope to reveal that Islamic knowledge is one vital part of the current identity of the Fulbe *vis-à-vis* other populations in Ngaoundéré. To do this we shall analyze material from our field work in Alhaji Ibrahim's milieu and information we have gathered about him from his wives and various informants. We shall also exploit our own film material in which he plays a major role.¹⁹

A coexistence of several religions

Like all towns and villages in Cameroon, Ngaoundéré is secular. Several religions exist side by side in the town, the most prominent being Islam, Christianity and African religions. The religion of Christ is represented by the Catholic Church and what is known as the "Mission norvégienne", comprising the Lutheran Evangelical Church and the Norwegian Protestant Mission. The Lutheran Evangelical and Catholic denominations are practised by several local populations, especially the Gbaya, the Dii or Duru, and a few Mbum communities. The Norwegian Mission is very active in the health and education sectors. One of the largest hospitals in Ngaoundéré, known as *L'hôpital Ameerika* (American Hospi-

¹⁸ The biographical material we have is fragmented. It consists of his own reports (in different contexts) of his life history. Over the years, we have also collected material from field work, which has enabled us to construct a model of his life and career from a more analytical point of view. See Rudie 1994; Holtedahl 1993 and 1997; Okeley and Callaway 1992; Bertaux 1981.

¹⁹ In 1992 we produced an anthropological documentary entitled *The Sultan's burden*. The film follows Lamiido Issa Maigari's difficulties during the period leading up to the first "democratic" national elections. Alhaji Ibrahim Goni plays a key role in the film. He mediates between the Lamiido and the *imam* of Ngaoundéré (leader of prayer). He also explains to the audience what is special about Muslim law, gives advice to the Lamiido on local political conflicts and explains the right Muslim strategy for countering insurrections involving non-Muslims and fundamentalists.

tal), is run by representatives of the Lutheran Church. Mazonod College, established by the Catholic Mission, has produced several of the great figures from Ngaoundéré and the north of the country.

In Ngaoundéré, Islam is primarily represented by all the Fulbe and by the Hausa, Kanuri and the majority of the Mbum. The religion was introduced to the town after the *jihād* that the Fulbe waged under the direction of Moodibbo Adama.²⁰ He gave his name to today's Province of Adamaoua, of which Ngaoundéré became the administrative capital. During the *jihād*, the Fulbe were allied with the Hausa, whom they had accompanied from Nigeria. Since political power has fallen into the hands of the Fulbe, Ngaoundéré is considered a Muslim town. The way Muslim dress has been adopted by all local people gives Ngaoundéré the appearance of a homogeneous town entirely under the spell of Islam.

As far as African religious practices are concerned, it is hard to trace their presence in the town. There is no visible site of worship and no conspicuous ceremony of any kind. Islam and Christianity seem to have succeeded in edging out the former African religious practices. Nevertheless, nearly everybody still adheres to an African faith, albeit discreetly, and several monotheist individuals even practise African religions. All in all, a kind of syncretism exists.²¹ Those who uphold traditional African religions continue their practices in secluded corners of their homes, usually in their bedrooms.

Islam and its institutions

In Ngaoundéré there is an abundance of mosques. The main mosque stands near the *lamiido*'s (Sultan's) palace and dominates the town centre. Every town district has one or more mosques, often located just a stone's throw from each other.²² Annexed to most of the new private luxury mansions are mosques of admirable architectural quality, many of which seem to have a monumental function. A full mosque is a sign of prestige for its builder, so the wealthy owners offer more alms in order to attract greater masses to fill their houses of prayer. The five daily prayers are performed within a period of time prescribed by the Quran. Every mosque, for instance, must schedule its afternoon

²⁰ The title *moodibbo* is perhaps best translated as "scholar".

²¹ We are aware that the word "syncretism" may be regarded as a pejorative term. We use the word in the sense of the synthesis of various traditions or beliefs. See Stewart and Shaw 1994.

²² A former governor of Adamaoua Province has explained to us that permission must be sought to build a new mosque. Permission may be granted on the condition that the mosque be constructed a certain distance from existing mosques. This distance is reckoned as just out of earshot of the prayer-call of one *ladan* (*muadhhdhin*) from one mosque.

prayer sometime between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. In this way, prayers do not interrupt business or any other activities – in Mecca or Jeddah, by comparison, everything stops for prayer.

Ngaoundéré has a large number of Quran schools in which various teaching methods are practised.²³ In each district there are improvised schools, ranging from the teacher's private entrance-hut²⁴ to street corners. There are usually no benches, desks or blackboards. Students sit on the floor holding reading tablets inscribed with verses of the Quran. The more senior students constitute two groups which are distinguished by gender. The students one sees divided by gender in the Quran schools can be seen mingling in the Western-style schools with no sign of sexual segregation. In the Quran schools students read aloud in unison, and this is likely to give an impression of utter chaos. However, the *mallum* (teacher),²⁵ sitting quietly in his corner, keeps a close eye on each and every student and corrects any reading errors. In some schools, the students comprise several more or less separate groups, and each group is headed by a more senior student.

Young Muslims will begin by learning the Arabic alphabet, then go on to recognize letters and repeat them in speech, learn by heart some of the last suras (chapters) of the Quran, and conclude their studies by reciting the entire Quran without necessarily knowing its meaning. Throughout this period of study, they will learn all they need to know in order to say their prayers correctly. Having successfully recited the Quran, a young man may be called a *mallum* and may, if he so wishes, establish a school for beginners.

There is another type of Quran school attended only by adults and elderly people sitting reverently on mats or goatskins in front of a much older man. These people are either *mallum'en* or fairly learned people who are seeking to broaden their knowledge under the instruction of a *moodibbo*. This is where they learn to translate and comment upon the Quran and the *hadiise* (*hadith*)²⁶ as well as the philosophy of Islam, and it is also here that people establish their adherence to one of the religious denominations. It is important to note that the way the Arabic

²³ See Al-Naqib Al-Attas 1979; Santerre 1982; Unesco 1984; Kane 1961; Botte 1990.

²⁴ In a typical compound consisting of several huts, one hut is the entrance-hut that gives access to all the other huts.

²⁵ The term *mallum* (plur. *mallum'en*) means a primary school teacher. It may also be used as a sign of respect – for instance, someone called Abbo may be called *Mal* Abbo (Mal is the diminutive of *mallum*). If the person's name is unknown, he may simply be called *mallum*. This is the equivalent of "sir" in English. Cf. the Arabic term *alim* (plur. *ulama*), religious scholar or leader.

²⁶ The tradition originating with the Prophet Muhammad, namely his interpretation of the Quranic verses. *Hadiise* means all the Prophet's propositions and conversations.

language is pronounced by pupils, *mallum'en* and *moodibbe* (plural of *moodibbo*) differs very much from Arabic proper.

As for recruitment of the Quran schools, a school which is run by a Hausa, for example, is usually mainly attended by young Hausa. Far from being a matter of discrimination, this can be explained by ethnic grouping. Those who belong to the same ethnic group tend to gather in the same district. At an advanced level involving translation and commentary, the choice of both a *moodibbo* and a student teacher is made according to their academic competence. Some *moodibbe* only give courses at a very high level. Apart from this, there is no formal distinction in people's access to the various Islamic institutions. All Muslims have an equal right to practise, study and thereby fully understand their religion. Religious learning is available to everybody, and the sole limitation is the individual's intellectual capacity. No organized body coordinates the activities of Quran schools. All Muslims who feel they can teach are free to start their own schools. The position of a *mallum* is available to women, and many women carry out this role effectively. The establishment of a Quran school is not founded on ethnic adherence. Each school independently sets its syllabus and timetable according to the wishes of the presiding *mallum* or *moodibbo*. Lessons are very often given on a one-to-one basis. There is no streaming of classes into different levels of study. Thus, each student is assured individual treatment, whatever his or her level of ability.

The *mallum'en* and *moodibbe* do not have a regular income. "It is impossible to pay money for the work and effort made by those who teach God's word. Only God can honour the efforts of the Muslim teachers", says a Hausa *mallum*. However, there is a system that guarantees the welfare of the Muslim teachers. The students' parents present gifts to the *mallum'en* who teach their children. In addition, when pupils start learning particular suras at certain stages of their education, they must present gifts to their *mallum* and give alms to local people.²⁷ The student is also expected to work in the teacher's household and field.

In addition to the district schools there is a Franco-Arabian school run by the country's Ministry of Education, and a school called the *madarasa*,²⁸ established by a native of the region who was educated in Saudi Arabia.²⁹ These two schools bear all the features of a Western

²⁷ They give *cobbal*, a dough made of rice or millet, and other kinds of food.

²⁸ *Madarasa* (*madrassa*) means school.

²⁹ In the 1960s, Cameroon had an agreement with the Arab countries, especially with Saudi Arabia, concerning a number of scholarships which were given to Muslim students. The scholarships enabled a certain number of young Muslim men from Ngaoundéré to fulfil their Islamic studies in Saudi Arabia. In general, these young men had been educated by the traditional *moodibbe* because their fathers did not allow them to attend the modern school. Therefore their education was directed towards Islam and the Arab countries.

school: classrooms, benches, blackboards, fixed timetables, breaks between classes, leave and holidays, and so forth. In the Franco-Arabian school, classes are taught in French and Arabic, and the standard of general education is equivalent to that of primary school. Completion of studies here is acknowledged by the award of the *Certificat d'Etudes Primaires Élémentaires* (Certificate of Primary Education). Although no religious courses are provided by the official programme, teachers of Arabic do give basic instruction in some aspects of Islam. The *madarasa* has firmly opted for religious instruction. Here the pupils learn to read, write and speak Arabic. This means that the pupils at this school can understand the Quran when they read it, whereas the pupils in the traditional school cannot. The Holy Book and the *hadiise* are translated into Fulfulde. The students of the *madarasa* are adults, and for those who are to be converted to Islam this school offers the opportunity to quickly acquire a sound knowledge of their new religion without having to mix with children in the town district schools. Equally, the school allows Muslims who are already competent in religious matters to improve their knowledge. Certain students (not representative of the majority) wear a turban on their heads, have grown their beards, and wear trousers that tail off a couple of inches above their ankles. These people try to model their existence on the life of the prophet Muhammad. Indeed the *madarasa*, founded by Muslims with an Arabian education, has established a religious branch called Wahhabism in Ngaoundéré and in other towns. Wahhabism extols the purification of Islam. However, most Muslims in Ngaoundéré belong to the *maaliki* (Maliki) school of Islamic jurisprudence.

Islamic associations are hard to find in Ngaoundéré, but there are two Islamic movements whose aim is to kindle the spiritual life of Muslims: l'Amicale de la Communauté Islamique du Cameroun (Association of the Islamic Community of Cameroon) and l'Union Islamique du Cameroun (Islamic Union of Cameroon). Observant visitors might also spot several other organizations, such as the Tijaniyya and other Sufi orders.³⁰ These religious communities are very closed, and members of each community share a common sense of purpose.

The delegation of functional roles: from equality to partiality

In spite of equal rights in terms of access to learning, positions of responsibility within the Muslim system are allocated disproportionately. In Cameroon, though, Islam has no official framework which governs

³⁰ During the reign of the late president Ahmadou Ahidjo, the Tijaniyya movement was forbidden because its followers practised *wirdi* (*wird*) and refused to accept any other authority but God.

the life of Muslims, so it is unrealistic to talk of the allocation of positions of responsibility. Every Muslim can choose to become a disciple of any *moodibbo*. Nonetheless, the *lamiido* is regarded as the supreme leader of Islam in his *lamidat* (sultanate). He is seconded by two *moodibbe* of his choice, and these may either be locals or natives from elsewhere in the land. He will appoint one of them *imam* (prayer leader) of the central mosque, and the other he will nominate *alkaali* (judge). In Ngaoundéré the *imam* and the *alkaali* are both Fulbe. The same system of appointment applies to the helmsmen of the two branches of Islam which predominate in the town (the old *moodibbe* branch, and the *madarasa* or Wahhabist *moodibbe* branch). The two large Islamic associations of Cameroon mentioned earlier are represented in Ngaoundéré by two Fulbe. Finally, although every Muslim is free to establish his own school, the Fulbe hold more than half of religious positions with an educational function.³¹ Despite the freedom of access to learning in the country, the fact is that in Ngaoundéré the Fulbe occupy the most influential posts in Islam.

Alkaali Alhaji Ibrahim Goni Bakari: origins, education and career

In the preceding sections we outlined the background, with all its distinctions, from which Alkaali Alhaji Ibrahim Goni Bakari emerges. Born in Madumsi, a village near Ngaoundéré, Alhaji Ibrahim is a Pullo from a branch of the Yillaga.³² His parents are natives of the *lamidat* of Ray Bouba. His mother is a sixth-generation descendant of Lamiido Buuba Jurum,³³ and this makes him a distant *wajiri*³⁴ of Ray. On his father's side, Alhaji Ibrahim is born of a literate and ardently pious Muslim family. His father and grandfather were both *goni*.³⁵

Alhaji Ibrahim is father to thirty children, whom he has produced with nine wives. At present he lives with four wives and many of his children. He is highly esteemed and feared within his family and is

³¹ See A. Gondolo's doctoral thesis 1978.

³² The Yillaga are great warriors who established well-known *lamidats* such as Ray, Bibémi and Midif in Cameroon, as well as Bindir in Chad.

³³ This is Alhaji Ibrahim's maternal genealogy as he himself told us: Buuba Jurum, Asta Relli, Asto Bano, Asta Waabi, Asta Jam Diddi, Diija Bebbe, Asta Jumba Adda, Alhaji Ibrahim. He guards the list closely. Note that the branch from Buuba Jurum, the ancestor, to Alhaji Ibrahim consists only of women.

³⁴ *Wajiri* is the title given to the son of a princess. However, there is also a function called *wajiri* in the *lamiido's* *faada* (court). The holder of this post is considered the King's confidant.

³⁵ Literate people capable of faithfully reciting and flawlessly writing the Quran from memory.

addressed only in the third person plural. In strictest fashion, Alhaji Ibrahim upholds in his family a total respect for the principles of Islam: he keeps a close eye on the movements of his wives and daughters, he marries off his daughters at an early age without their consent,³⁶ and all his children are sent to Quran school. Yet he has not always succeeded in commanding complete respect from his family. Some of his daughters, for example, have refused to marry a man who is not of their own choosing. He has reacted by refusing to talk to them for a very long time. One daughter chose a husband who Alhaji Ibrahim could not accept, and she was told to stay in her own home for three years and not to visit the family during that time.

In his home, he has four bedrooms where he takes turns to sleep with each of his wives. Each bedroom contains a well-stocked bookshelf with literature of every kind: theology, history (histories of the Fulbe and the life of the prophet Muhammad), philosophical narratives from the Arab world, to mention only a few. He bought most of these books while he was a student in Yola in Nigeria. The entrance hall of his home serves both as a room where he receives guests and as a schoolroom.

Being a *moodibbo*, Alhaji Ibrahim has a far higher standard of education than his parents, who were unable to correctly translate the Quran into their own language and comment upon it. He is convinced that he owes his learning to his illustrious ancestors – he explained: “To be a *moodibbo* one has to be brought up among literate people.” In fact he had begun his training as a young boy with his father who knew well the contents of the Quran. Having completed primary school, his father helped him translate Islamic scriptures.

Later he travelled to Yola where he studied for thirteen years. At that time, Yola was renowned as a town of scholars of Islamic issues. Alhaji Ibrahim has distressing memories of hard times during this long stay, but he often repeated: “He who seeks in perseverance shall find”, implying that his hardship was not in vain. Not only did he find himself a companion in Yola, Hapsatou, with whom he first set up house and had two children, but he also acquired so much religious knowledge that he had to leave the town for fear of being nominated *alkaali* there. He wanted instead to devote himself to his studies and to teaching. Besides, he disliked the role of *alkaali*, for he was convinced that it corrupted the individual spirit. On his return to Madumsi, he took up the work of his dreams: to study and to instruct future *moodibbe*, but unfortunately this was a short-lived chapter of his career. He was called upon by Lamiido Mohamadou Abbo, who suggested he take up the position of *alkaali* in Ngaoundéré. He simply had to accept under the

³⁶ In fact the father *must* ask his daughter's opinion, but silence is taken to be acceptance.

pressure of insistence from his family and from the *lamiido*, who was determined not to abrogate his decision. Even though Alhaji Ibrahim took up the new post, he continued to study and teach, and at the time of writing he had been judge for thirty-four years.

Alhaji Ibrahim in the town of Ngaoundéré

Alhaji Ibrahim is one of the most influential people in the traditional society of Ngaoundéré. As *alkaali*, he represents traditional justice. He mediates in all social problems, personal conflicts, difficulties with inheritance and many other predicaments where the parties concerned wish to find an amicable solution to the conflict, in keeping with the doctrine of Islam and the traditional spirit. As an eminent figure, Alhaji Ibrahim is a member of the royal court and, moreover, one of the most consulted and heeded advisors to Lamiido Issa Maigari. He spends more time with Lamiido Issa Maigari than any other member of the court. We have often met them sitting alone discussing the serious issues affecting the town. In addition to his official post as judge, Alhaji Ibrahim has the unofficial role (together with Imam Hamaoude) of guardian of the town. In this role, he spends most of his nights holding oracular meetings to foretell the future of Ngaoundéré. Afterwards he reports his prophecies to the *lamiido*. Being a public figure highly regarded by the town's inhabitants, Alhaji Ibrahim is a role model and his decisions are obeyed. Thus, when he recently decided to take part in a Quran reading course organized at the mosque by Muslims with an Arabian education, many reluctant traditionalists did likewise.

The value of knowledge

Alhaji Ibrahim is a truly passionate reader. At home he does nothing but read. Every time we pay him a visit, usually at night, we find him sitting on a mat engrossed in a book. The mat lies beside the bookshelf so that an outstretched arm is enough to reach any book. Before him lies his prayer mat, facing east. Again, with a small effort he can be on the mat and ready to pray. With his arrangement, he can even say his prayers close to his books. He considers his books to be the reason for his pride and his superiority over others, because he is convinced that genuine, irrefutable knowledge is to be found in books. He accused us of having been in contact with a Hausa *mallum* from whom, he believed, we had tried to learn something about Islam. "Knowledge", he said, "is in books – you can learn nothing from someone who has no books." Alhaji Ibrahim has books, so it is through him and him alone that we can learn anything worthwhile. When speaking of Islam, he always refers to his literature. We have had difficulty trying to elicit

his own views on Islam the way it is practised in Ngaoundéré. He says that what we need is true knowledge, which we can only find in his books.

One day, while he was telling us the story of Kano, written in Arabic by a scholar from that town, a *moodibbo* came to visit. Alhaji Ibrahim went out to greet him, and on his return he said to us: "The man who has come is a *moodibbo* known and respected by everybody, but even in his home you won't find this kind of book." Alhaji Ibrahim will not deny that this *moodibbo* is respected, but he does not have the same access to learning through the literature, and this is the mark of Alhaji Ibrahim's superiority. However, the superior knowledge that he possesses cannot be widely appreciated by people. He explains that "to give a sermon in public, one must get permission from the *lamiido*", but to Lamiido Issa Maigari, Alhaji Ibrahim is the *alkaali* – a judge – and cannot give sermons as well.

Alhaji Ibrahim is not worried by the fact that people cannot appreciate his superior learning in comparison with other *moodibbe*. He sees two categories of people who seek knowledge: those who seek knowledge for the sheer pleasure of learning, and those who do so for a means of attaining higher status. He considers himself among the first of these. Remember that this was the very reason he left Yola in order not to be appointed *alkaali* there. For Alhaji Ibrahim, knowledge has an inherent value, and it is the value that interests him.

Access to knowledge

For Alkaali Alhaji Ibrahim, not everybody can gain access to knowledge, and one's eligibility depends upon several conditions. We have already heard the *alkaali*'s view that, in order to become a *moodibbo*, you must always have remained close to the *moodibbe*. On one occasion when he spoke about the conditions, he referred to Sayiidina Aliiyum,³⁷ who listed six in a song which the *alkaali* sang for us:

Keep an open mind
Be thirsty for knowledge.
Be patient.
Be relatively wealthy.
Have a good teacher who hides nothing from you.
Have a long life.

On another occasion, he told us that everything depends upon God's

³⁷ *Sayiidina* (Sayd) Aliiyum (Ali) was the first convert to the message of Islam, and son-in-law of the Prophet.

will. If He decides that a man should grow wise, He sees to it that the man possesses enough courage and patience to search for wisdom.

An encounter between two different kinds of knowledge

Since our first encounter with Alhaji Ibrahim, he has considered our meetings with him to be representative of two opposing kinds of knowledge. On the one hand there is Islamic learning inlaid with Arabian and Fulbe culture, which he symbolizes, and on the other hand there is Western knowledge, which he considers us to represent. The essence of the opposition is spirituality against materialism. In our presence, Alhaji Ibrahim did not seem to have the same self-confidence as he did when he was with his *moodibbe* colleagues. He believed he was ignorant of our knowledge, and he thought that his literature, which forms the very basis of his superiority, would be useless when he was faced with us. The impression he had of Western knowledge is that it is a figment of the colonial and post-colonial periods. We shall later see that this impression might have arisen out of Alhaji Ibrahim's anxiety: the fear that we would not recognize his knowledge, and that he would thereby lose his position as a wise man.

Thus, at an early stage in our contact we found ourselves on one side of a confrontation between the two kinds of learning. For us, this was the beginning of a long period of observation and difficult conversations, or even negotiations, with Alhaji Ibrahim. He wanted to assure himself of our intentions before opening his mind to us. Eventually, he simply accepted one of us (Lisbet) and one of our close friends, the late Nduudi Oumarou. He had presumed that Lisbet wanted to learn about Islam, and that Nduudi, being a Mborobo, did not pose any danger to him because Nduudi's Islamic learning was supposedly insubstantial. With Mahmoudou present, observation took a very long time. Alhaji Ibrahim believed that Mahmoudou, having a Western-style education, belonged to the generation which questions traditional learning. It was only in 1993 that Mahmoudou was genuinely accepted and thenceforth enjoyed a friendly relationship with Alhaji Ibrahim.

In fact, our patience and desire to work with him had the effect of justifying his self-image, namely that of a learned man. He interpreted the interest we showed for him as a kind of acknowledgment of his worth. This led him to adopt a completely different attitude towards us: he let us know when he was available, allowed us to come and see him when we pleased, kept us longer than he himself had time for, and even became irritated if a visit was overdue or if we were unable to keep an appointment. His attitude was virtually that of a solemn professor, and he felt a genuine desire to illustrate his learning. He determined the topic of our conversations and often insisted that we

write notes on things he considered important to us. Sometimes, in a roundabout way, he even asked questions about our past discussions, as if to check that we had been paying attention. At time, he went off to see one of his friends, a bookseller, to borrow a publication which he thought necessary for our information. We often had to implement a cunning ploy in order to swing the conversation towards the topic of our own choice.

His attitude, his conversation and his way of telling us what we should know all indicate that Alhaji Ibrahim had assured himself of his superiority during our various meetings, and he sometimes expressed this superiority when we were in his presence. Indeed, on a number of occasions he tried to pit his knowledge against ours. One day he told us the story of the origin of the Fulbe, in which he provided many details about Ukhba, their legendary Arab forefather. Until then, the books we had consulted on Fulbe history only mentioned the name Ukhba, with no specific reference to his surname.³⁸ Alhaji Ibrahim, thanks to his literature, has three versions of the origins of Ukhba. The first version, as told by Ceehu Usman bii Fooduye (Shehu Usman dan Fodio),³⁹ claims that a certain Ukhba Nafii'i was the ancestor of the Fulbe. The second version, told by Ahmadu Bello, son of Ceehu Usman bii Fooduye, names three Ukhbas: Ukhba Yassir, Ukhba Amiiru and Ukhba Nafii'i. The *sahaabo*⁴⁰ who converted black Africans to Islam gave one of the three Ukhbas the job of educating the locals. The third version cites twenty-seven Ukhbas and gives detailed accounts of their origins and their respective places of birth. Alhaji Ibrahim gave us all these details by consulting his books. Having told us this story, he said: "Only those who have knowledge [*jawmu anndal*] can know this."

Feeling more self-assured, there came a day when he did not hesitate to openly confront our Western learning. He spoke about the low level of knowledge in the local population and told us what a woman must know in order to be considered a *moodibbo rewbe* – a female *moodibbo* – and what a man must know to become a *moodibbo*. He also said:

³⁸ See Eldridge 1978.

³⁹ In Africa a *ceehu* or *shehu* (*shaykh*) is considered to be chosen by God. He is obliged to promulgate the purification of Islam, and he must be a Muslim. On the other hand, a *walo* (*wali*) is also chosen by God but not necessarily a Muslim. It is worthy of mention, however, that in certain regions of Africa, such as the Borno region of northern Nigeria, the local sultan is called *shehu*. Alhaji Ibrahim says that Ceehu Usman dan Fodio was appointed *walo* when he was thirty years old. He was given the *walo'en's* most magnificent gown, *alkibaare*.

⁴⁰ *Sahaabo*: Alhaji Ibrahim explains that the *sahaabo'en* are all those who converted when they met the prophet Mohammad and who contributed to the spread of Islam. When the prophet died, there were 120,000 *sahaabo'en*.

[European geographers] claim that the earth revolves around the sun; but the *moodibbe sunna*⁴¹ say otherwise. They argue that the sun has three doors. On the day of the last judgement, the sun will set and never rise again. As the last judgement draws near, one night will last as long as three nights. Wise men will then know that the end of the world is nigh.

We interpret this as a way of substantiating the superiority of Islamic learning over Western learning, which he believes us to represent.

However, we were under the impression that he often felt the need to justify or legitimize his learning for us, even to the extent of bringing between himself and us a certain connivance that is typical of the relationship between learned men. With Mahmoudou he brought down the age barrier – which would normally separate them in this kind of society – in order to be on friendly terms with him. While telling a story, he shook Mahmoudou's hand at every pause as a form of greeting that two intimate friends would use in conversation. If we happened to be dining with him in his bedroom, he would insist on serving us himself. The only thing his wife would do was to bring the food into the room. Knowledge brings down barriers between people and distinguishes them from those who lack it. Thus, Alhaji Ibrahim does not express any envy of Western intellectuals. He believes that in some fields, he has just as much knowledge as them, and in other fields he has more (for example the long list of Ukhbas). However, both he and Western intellectuals are all superior to less knowledgeable people.

Islam and Arabs

For Alkaali Alhaji Ibrahim, Islam is the absolute Truth. In this regard, everything that comes close to Islam is right and should serve as an example. He believes God gave the Arabs of Saudi Arabia many privileges. Islam came into being in their country. The man most loved by God and for whom he created the world, the prophet Muhammad, is a son of Saudi Arabia. The Quran is written in Arabic, the language in which every Muslim says his prayers. At the end of the world, Arabic will be the only language spoken in heaven. The great defenders and propagators of Islam were originally the Arabs of Saudi Arabia. Alhaji Ibrahim believes that all this makes a fine example of the Arabs, and that their example should be followed (even though in some instances it is difficult to emulate them). He considers their customs, their way

⁴¹ These are *moodibbe* who, as far as possible, emulate the lifestyle of the prophet Muhammad.

of life, their view of the world and the way they practise Islam to conform fully with Islamic principles.

On one occasion he had sadly told us that the people of Ngaoundéré do not know how to respect the Muslim intellectuals among themselves like the Arabs do. Relationships between Arabs are entirely different. "On meeting his equal, an Arab will kiss his hands. On meeting a scholar, he will kiss either his hands or his feet, and he will kiss his wife on the lips." Concerning the last of these, he passionately described how the kiss is given. No doubt he wanted to have us understand that kissing between husband and wife, a custom recently adopted in his milieu by young adults under Western influence, is a phenomenon he has always been aware of thanks to his books.

The Arabs are like you, Lisbet. They wash seven times a day and their mouths smell nice. There is nothing repulsive about them . . . This behaviour belongs to the most educated among us, and to everyone with an Arabian education. If the local wise men who know of this [kissing between husband and wife] do not practise it, it is because the Fulbe and Hausa here know nothing at all about washing and such like.

The good life, he says, can be attained through knowledge, particularly knowledge found in literature. This means a learned man is among the most cultured of men.

During his pilgrimage in Mecca, he had seen girls attending school and women working in the public services. Once back in Ngaoundéré, he astounded everyone by allowing his daughter to attend a Western-style school, something which he emphatically opposed before his pilgrimage.⁴² At that time in Fulbe society, the education of women was firmly based on housekeeping, and he was one of the first men to send his daughter to a Western-style school. This upset the most purist traditionalists because Alhaji Ibrahim was, as we have often said, among the most influential Islamic figures in Ngaoundéré.

As we have seen, Alhaji Ibrahim participated in a Quran reading course to improve his pronunciation of Arabic words. This shows that his mind is very open towards Arabian civilization, the reason being that he looks upon it as the ideal model. He explores Arabian civilization in philosophical narratives in his books, and this enables him to feel close to the Arabian way of life, though he lacks the opportunity to practise it. Feeling close to the Arabs is the same as feeling above all those who are ignorant of the Arabian way of life.

⁴² This was told us by his own daughter.

The practice of Islam

According to Alhaji Ibrahim, Islam in Ngaoundéré has several different guises depending on individual sensibility or ethnic group. Where individual sensibility is concerned, he has an expression which illustrates his view of individual practice:

Every believer is not necessarily an intellectual [in the religious sense of the word], every intellectual is not necessarily a believer, and all intellectuals who are also believers do not necessarily possess wisdom.

In fact, the *alkaali* pictures three categories of believers. The first consists of those who have religious faith but no knowledge of their religion. In this category are those he calls Muslims by *cahada* (*shahada*),⁴³ in other words those who became Muslims by allegiance to the faith. This group contains the majority of the local population and is led by the *mallum'en* who, for Alhaji Ibrahim, are more like "fetishists" than good believers.⁴⁴ He refused to say any more about this group's practice but, if we insisted, he would answer by telling us the conditions which must be fulfilled in order to be considered as having faith. The conditions are as follows:

— Believe in the Oneness of God. God is One. He is not begotten and cannot beget. He has no form and resembles nobody. The idols are the deeds of mankind and are created by those who are themselves created by God.

— Accept the Quran as the manifestation of the words of God and use the Sunna⁴⁵ as a daily guide.

— Believe in all the prophets and accept that Muhammad is the last of them. Each prophet has had his time and the appropriate means to accomplish his mission. Believe in all the Holy Scriptures and that the Quran is the total of all these Scriptures.

— Know the five pillars of Islam together with their "commandments", whether obligatory, expected, or simply recommended.

— Read books about Islamic principles. Do not hesitate to find out from learned people what you do not know.

Alhaji Ibrahim said: "Here, as soon as someone has managed to decipher

⁴³ Confession or profession of faith: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger."

⁴⁴ Alhaji Ibrahim differentiates two types of *mallum'en*: those who genuinely believe in God and respect His teachings, and those comprising the majority who only see Islam as an opportunity to get rich. The latter type practise occultism and are feared by the people.

⁴⁵ Normative practice or exemplary behaviour of Muhammad.

the alphabet on the reading tablet, he thinks he has completed his reading of the Quran [*yottini*]."

The second category of believers consists of those who, although having a good knowledge of Islam, are not necessarily good believers. This is called the category of *faasiki'en* (hypocrites). He was not alluding directly to any particular ethnic group, but if we consider the ongoing debate between the two branches of Islam, we would soon discover that he was referring to the *moodibbe* educated in Arab countries. Alhaji Ibrahim is aware of his role as *alkaali* of Ngaoundéré and therefore bluntly refuses to take a stand in this debate. One of his wives told us that he was a member of the Tijaniyya order, but that he refuses to talk about it. He is on good terms with all members of all Muslim organizations and speaks to them indiscriminately. Another young man from the Wahhabist branch told us: "Alkaali Ibrahim has not clearly stated his position, but we all know that he stands on the side of the *moodibbe* from the traditionalist, conservative school. And because Lamiido Issa listens to him, we know that he conciliates Lamiido Issa in order to support the *moodibbe*." Into the category of hypocrites Alhaji Ibrahim also places those who seek knowledge as a means of climbing the social ladder. These people are intellectuals from the Islamic or the Western-style schools. The third category is that of learned believers who have no wisdom, and this covers those who do not possess books from which they can learn about the philosophy of the Arab world.

Furthermore, there is a fourth category which Alhaji Ibrahim does not describe explicitly, but which seems to derive from the three other categories. Wise and learned believers comprise the fourth category, into which Alhaji Ibrahim places all the Arabs because they worship God the way He wishes them to, they practise Islam the way it should be practised, and because they live in the spiritual world. Members of this category may also be found in Ngaoundéré, but they are men of books — in other words, they seek knowledge for its own sake. He considers such people to be close to the Arabs.

The distinction between believers lies in their ethnic bonds, and the *alkaali* sees on the one hand those who were converted to Islam centuries ago, and on the other those who were more recently.⁴⁶ The former have a deep knowledge of Islam, while knowledge among the latter is superficial. Among those who were converted centuries ago are the Fulbe, the Hausa and the Kanuri. The Hausa practise a mystical Islam. Their religious learning is insubstantial⁴⁷ and in their midst are many

⁴⁶ See Botte 1990.

⁴⁷ As for Islam among the Hausa, an informant told us that they were good believers. "When it's time for them to pray, they pray", he said. "However, their practice is limited to what is strictly necessary. When the *imam* is a Hausa, prayers are said quickly. This *imam* only uses short verses." In Ngaoundéré, mosques where this happens are called

mallum'en who practise occultism. However, Alhaji Ibrahim stresses that the great *moodibbe* Hausa are to be found in Nigeria and the greatest number of *goni* are among the Kanuri, but he remarked: "Among ten *goni*, you will only find one who really knows Islam." The Mbum are haughtily proud, he says. They refuse to submit to the difficult conditions for learning the Quran, and this refusal is the reason for their shallow knowledge of Islam. Finally, Alhaji Ibrahim considers the Fulbe to be the learned ones. When he told us the story of the Fulbe's arrival in today's Nigeria, he specifically mentioned that they had a greater learning than the natives. In Kano, for example, the Fulbe arrived during the reign of King Yaakuuma (a Hausa). In this town, the Muslims' knowledge was limited to the Quran, the *hadiise*, the *fur'a*⁴⁸ and the *fiqh*.⁴⁹ The Fulbe knew, in addition to these, the *tawhid*⁵⁰ and the *lunnga*.⁵¹ Alhaji Ibrahim does realize that some Fulbe practise witchcraft, but he says that "there are pure Fulbe and there are mixed Fulbe, and between these two there are differences in behaviour." He infers by this statement that the pure Fulbe do not practise witchcraft, *amndal baleewal*.

One of our Fulbe informants had told us, however, that the Fulbe also practise occultism, "They mostly do it to defend and protect themselves. Now if somebody points a finger at you, then he'll see . . ." This is called *ronga*.⁵² The informant had also told us about the existence of a book called *Buubel*, written in Fulfulde, containing prayers which are sinful and dangerous to exploit. One day we also found Alhaji Ibrahim reading a book written in Fulfulde about self-protection against enemies. The book contained lyrics. He read some of the book to us and told us that the book was rare and that it came into his possession in Yola. "I would not give away this book for a million francs", he said, "I would only give it to someone I cherish."

juulurde innaa aadhaynaa — this refers to the beginning of the *al-kawsar* sura, one of the shortest in the Quran. Another nickname for such mosques is *juulurde appolo*, alluding to the speed of the American Apollo spacecraft, or *juulurde six-five*, an allusion to the game of ludo, where five and six are the highest numbers and lead to a quick victory. The informant also told us that most young Hausa attend the *madarasa*, and they no longer pray the way they used to.

⁴⁸ *Fur'a* is a study of religious practices, such as how to perform the ablutions, the prayers and so on. This study is usually taught by a *mallum* and is followed by the reading of the Quran.

⁴⁹ *Fiqh*: Islamic jurisprudence.

⁵⁰ *Tawhid*: acknowledgement of the oneness of God, of His power, and that everything which exists or happens in the world is His doing.

⁵¹ *Lunnga* is a type of learning accessible only to people imbued with deeper Islamic knowledge. The meaning of *fur'a*, *fiqhu*, *tawhiid* and *lunnga* were explained to us by Mal Dayyu Abdoulaye.

⁵² *Ronga* involves the use of certain verses of the Quran or of certain plants called *ceemmbal* or *gaadal* as a kind of "armour" to protect oneself against adversity.

Conflicts between Muslims

As we have said earlier, we had to be extremely patient to persuade Alhaji Ibrahim to speak about Islam in Ngaoundéré. He bluntly refused to speak about today's experience of Islam among the young Wahhabists or about the persistent intervention of the Cameroonian administration. Our information about this therefore stems from other informants.

Islam in Ngaoundéré is presently undergoing an important transformation. The number of disciples of traditionally-educated *moodibbe* is falling appreciably, while there is a corresponding rise in the Wahhabist branch. In general, young people from neighbouring villages tend to join the Wahhabists. They belong to ethnic communities recently converted to Islam and do not necessarily originate from the province of Adamaoua. Others who join the branch are retailers who have gone bankrupt and are trying to reinstate themselves in the local hierarchy.

There is a struggle between the two branches (Wahhabists versus old *moodibbe*). For the locals, this conflict seems to represent a simple opposition within Islam between the modern and traditional methods of teaching. The Wahhabists have classrooms, benches and desks, exercise books, chalk, blackboards and so on, and their teaching methods remind the local population of Western education. For this reason, the Wahhabists are suspected of attempting to establish a modern Western-style school. Young Wahhabist beginners learn the Quran and the Arabic language at the same time, which after a few months enables them to translate some of the last suras of the Holy Book into Fulfulde, and to give a sermon about the basic principles of Islam. Formerly, a *moodibbo* would need several years to bring his students up to this standard. Eventually, the Wahhabist students will learn to articulate words like native Arabs, and the public see this as the crux of the problem. A young Wahhabist told us:

With the current method, we are not only taught to read — and to read well — but we are also taught the meaning of what we read . . . We read better than those who began before us. Even our pronunciation is better . . . You see, Imam Hamaoude is respected and everybody recognizes his knowledge in religious matters. But today a young boy who begins to read will discover that Imam Hamaoude does not read well. He then tells himself that Imam Hamaoude and all the others don't know anything.

Although Imam Hamaoude is respected in religious issues, he is condemned for his bad pronunciation of Arabic. This is what makes some traditional teachers believe they can solve the problem by adopting both systems (the modern and the traditional). We know a teacher who has done just this. He uses a blackboard and chalk and teaches like the Arabs do. He also teaches the old way with compulsory housework

for the *mallum'en*, and discipline is severe (students are tied with chains, for example).

By approaching both sides of the conflict, one discovers that it is far more bitter than it first seems. The Wahhabists have imported new practices from Arab countries which the traditional *moodibbe* consider to be non-Muslim. "These people go there and learn things which can derail your mind and jeopardize the Islamic religion", a young Wahhabist told us in reference to the accusation which had been directed at the Wahhabists by the traditional school. In fact, the traditional *moodibbe* see the Wahhabists as nonconformists and devil's advocates. As for the Wahhabists themselves, with the help of the Quran and the *hadiise*, their self-proclaimed mission is to purify Islam in Ngaoundéré and rid it of all superfluous practices. They tell us that the main accusations they make against the traditionalists are their lack of genuine knowledge of Islam due to the language barrier,⁵³ and the incorporation of local customs and witchcraft into the religion. The most moderate Wahhabists say of the *moodibbe*:

A *moodibbo* is supposed to know the basic principles of Islam, and when he reads the Quran he should be able to understand what he reads at least superficially, even though he can't interpret it . . . They know the principles of the practice of Islam, but they don't know the fundamentals or the philosophy behind this religion.

The outspoken hardliners say that "the *moodibbe* don't know Islam. All they do is read and make mistakes."

For our purposes, the interest lies in the exploitation of Islamic knowledge in the conflict. We had seen that as far as Alhaji Ibrahim is concerned, Islamic knowledge is what distinguishes an individual, and whoever has his learning from Arabic books is superior to the *moodibbe*, who have no access to books. In this ongoing tussle between the traditionalists and the Wahhabists, learning is exploited by each party in an attempt to prove that they are on the side of the Truth. The Wahhabists base their actions on four principles:

- The possession of Islamic knowledge.
- Sensible application of this knowledge.
- Encouraging people to share this knowledge.
- Patience.

The Wahhabist intellectuals, with their theological education from Arab countries, have a much broader and deeper religious knowledge and use literature to which the traditionalists have no access. In their exploits, the Wahhabists try to highlight this distinction. A new nickname

⁵³ The Quran is written in Arabic, while the language of the Fulbe is Fulfulde.

has been given to the traditional *moodibbe*: they are called *moodibbe jawleeji* (entrance-hut intellectuals), even though the *moodibbe* call themselves *moodibbe sunna* (intellectuals conforming to the prophet Muhammad's way of life). Slogans such as "We bring a new Islam . . . It's revolution", are often heard. The emphasis is thus laid on two types of Islamic knowledge, where one difference lies in the way the two groups pray. During prayers or recitals, the Wahhabists speak loudly and articulately so that everyone can understand. They pray at a relaxed pace and look very concentrated with their hands on their chests. Anyone who watches a television programme about Mecca will see that this is the way prayers are said there. In everyday life they abide by the Sunna. The strictest of them grow their beards, wear trousers which tail off above their ankles, refuse to shake hands with women, and so on. The more moderate will distinguish themselves by saying greetings with their Arabic pronunciation. The majority of them call each other *ustaaaj* (professor), and they try to warrant this title in their discussions by quoting verses of the Quran or texts from the *hadiise*, by handling out question sheets in the *moodibbe's* entrance-hut,⁵⁴ and by their sermons in the mosques, whether in the town or in the most remote villages. Sometimes they choose a young man from the local district and ask him to preach. A young man who had been through this experience happily told us:

After the *esaa'i* prayer, when sermon was due, people were amazed at seeing me stand there and recite it. There were old people and friends of mine there. After the sermon, they no doubt wondered "this young lad, who has just started school, already knows the Quran!"

This happened in 1988.

Alhaji Ibrahim is aware of the exploitation of Islamic learning in the religious conflict. On one occasion when we talked to him about a young Wahhabist's rejection of the practice of *do'a*,⁵⁵ he justified the existence of this ceremony by harking back to Khalif Oumar (Umar).⁵⁶ This was the first time he talked to us about religion without referring

⁵⁴ In handing out question sheets, the Wahhabists know perfectly well that they will not receive any answers. The objective is simply to show the *moodibbe* that there is much they do not know about Islam. Here we see how Islam is used as a means of intimidation.

⁵⁵ A ceremony organized in honour of a young person who has completed his reading of the Quran. This young Wahhabist, by insisting on the non-Muslim origin of the *do'a*, expresses his fear that people believe the *do'a* was prescribed by the Quran or the Prophet Muhammad (in which case it would be compulsory). He is anxious about the fact that some people even believe they will go mad if they fail to perform the *do'a*.

⁵⁶ Khalif Oumar is the second person to have represented the prophet as leader of the Muslims.

to his books. In fact it was from this day that he began to tell us about Islam in Ngaoundéré. It seemed that he had found an opening to show his superiority and that this opportunity gave him the self-confidence to relax his attitude towards us and tell us what we had long been wanting to hear.

Islam and the modern state

Although the Cameroonian administration is essentially secular, it has an undeniable control over Islam. The *lamiido*, who is traditionally the spiritual leader, has become a civil servant. He is nominated by the government after consultation with local leaders. He may also be dismissed by the government and thereby lose his position as spiritual leader of Muslims. In Ngaoundéré, which is the centre of the country of La Vina, the *lamiido* answers directly to the prefect. This accountability creates a conflict in the exercise of religious authority. As a civil servant, the *lamiido* answers to his hierarchic superiors, but as a religious leader he answers only to himself. The difference between his two types of authority is not always clear, and the government representatives tend to take advantage of this lack of delineation. Thus, a Muslim minister from the north becomes a religious leader *de facto* because of his position in the hierarchy. He represents the national administration in all religious affairs and represents the Muslims at all official events. At the local level, during Friday prayers or religious ceremonies such as *juulde suumaye* (*Id al-Fitr*, the feast at the end of Ramadan) or *juulde layha* (*Id al-Adha*, "the festival of sacrifice" on the last day of the pilgrimage to Mecca),⁵⁷ the highest ranking Muslim official receives as much attention as the *lamiido* and prayers will only begin after his arrival.

The *lamiido* has no decision-making power in national issues such as Ramadan. Traditionally, the *lamiido* announces the first and the last day of the fast after consulting the *moodibbe* present at the occasion. The announcement is made when the moon is first seen by a selected person. The nominee must be a fully responsible person, be considered of good faith and have a good Islamic knowledge. The announcement can also be made if at least two God-fearing adults have seen the moon. The announcement is only valid in the *lamiido's* own *lamidat*, such that two neighbouring *lamidats* could begin and end the fast on different days. The beginning and end of the fast are now officially decided by the authorities and broadcast on national television, and apply to the whole country. The broadcast is made when the moon is first seen anywhere in the country. The *lamiido* is obliged to confirm this announcement even though the moon has not been sighted in his

⁵⁷ A sheep is sacrificed in honour of God.

lamidat. The Muslim population are very sceptical of this⁵⁸ and tend to see the *lamiibe* (plural of *lamiido*) as puppets on strings pulled by the government. Their role as spiritual leaders is debatable. For example, many people will still refuse to fast unless they see the moon with their own eyes or receive confirmation of its sighting from a *moodibbo* whom they trust. An odd situation arose in Ngaoundéré in 1993 when the first official day of Ramadan was set for Thursday, while others understood that Friday or Saturday was to be the first day. The same confusion also occurred on the last day of Ramadan, which is marked by a huge celebration (the Feast of Ramadan) that should only take place on one specific day declared by the *lamiido*. Some of the traditional *moodibbe* began fasting after the official starting day because they questioned this official date. Consequently, some *moodibbe*, loyal to the *lamiido*, celebrated the Feast of Ramadan in the middle of their fast on an empty stomach. Some *lamiibe* were accused of behaving likewise and of going to the mosque before their own fast came to an end. Also in 1993 Lamiido Issa Maigari of Ngaoundéré tried to reach a compromise with the traditional *moodibbe*, but when he gauged the extent of discord, he used his power to declare that whoever disrespected the official dates would be expelled from Ngaoundéré.

In the words of Alhaji Ibrahim, the chaotic state of affairs is the result of ignorance: "The regional leaders, administrative or traditional, have no Islamic learning. They only care about their power . . . Unfortunately, those who have both Islamic and Western learning are not given any responsibilities." When we asked him why the *moodibbe* would not meet to discuss the religious problems confronting the town, he replied that he would never attend such a meeting because there would be people present whose only function was to relay what was said at the meeting to the administrative officials, and who would only lie about what had been said.

Alhaji Ibrahim and the national judicial system

At the moment, Alhaji Ibrahim is going through a rocky stage in his relations with the administration in matters of justice. Being a traditional judge, he finds himself faced with judges of Western-style training over an inheritance case, where he himself is implicated as one of two parties competing for a house. In this confrontation he feels powerless. He cannot understand the type of justice in which there is no direct dialogue between the judge and the plaintiff due to the language barrier.

⁵⁸ The *moodibbe* say that, in Islam, ignorance can be tolerated but doubt is unacceptable. When in doubt, one should seek information. Thus, to doubt fasting but to fast nonetheless would invalidate the act of fasting.

Nor does he understand a system of justice in which you require a lawyer to defend yourself. He showed us a pile of documents from the law court which were completely unintelligible to him. Remember that this is the man whose learning forced him to leave Yola for fear of being appointed judge, but because of his learning he was then given the post of judge in Ngaoundéré against his will. Now he is in a situation where he has to call upon someone else to defend him. Disillusioned, he said to us: "If I don't come out on top in this struggle, I will leave the country with my children." Meanwhile, his conflict with the administration is proving expensive, and he is gradually losing his cattle.

For Alhaji Ibrahim, all these changes have brought about a deplorable situation. There is absolute turmoil in the community, and especially within Islam. Once after listening to him portray the sorry state of Islam, we asked what could be done to solve the problem. He replied: "To reinforce Islam, we must use whips and chains, but this is not possible any more. Today only he who is blessed by God can live according to His principles." In short, God should take charge of religion once again, since the *moodibbe* cannot cope with the challenge.

Change and continuity

While talking about his life and about Islam in Ngaoundéré, Alhaji Ibrahim does not limit himself to a description of current events. He also conveys a picture of Ngaoundéré where symbols of power (religious, economic and political) are arranged in a hierarchy. He ascribes a predominant role to religion in this hierarchy, though it is the knowledge associated with religion that is the decisive factor. We have seen time and time again that Alhaji Ibrahim always uses his religious knowledge to secure his premier position in society. If we were to sum up his thoughts, then we would see that Islamic knowledge is a means of distinguishing individual people – the more knowledge you have, the closer to God you are and the more respect you deserve.⁵⁹

However, access to religious knowledge is controlled in various ways. Alhaji Ibrahim does not state explicitly that the title of *moodibbo* is hereditary, but he implies that it does depend on one's social background. Further still, the title of *moodibbo* is bestowed by God, so nobody can become wise simply by wishing it, and Alhaji Ibrahim implies that only the Fulbe have received this blessing from God.

From what Alhaji Ibrahim has taught us, we have gathered that

⁵⁹ Here the term "respect" should be understood in the African sense, where it is associated with influence. Once somebody is respected, his words will not be doubted and he must be heeded. This is what gives such a person a controlling influence over those who respect him.

when individuals believe in the same God, they develop a common language and knowledge which transcend their different ethnic backgrounds. The religion unites them and brings them under the same set of norms. Those who have religious knowledge are heeded by the others. For Alhaji Ibrahim, religion should also be concerned with the practical side of daily life. When he complains that the region's leaders do not have the knowledge they require for their responsibilities, he does not imply that they are ignorant, but rather that they do not possess religious knowledge.

Alhaji Ibrahim makes a clear distinction among those who have wisdom: there are those who have true knowledge and those with false knowledge. By "true knowledge" he means Islamic knowledge, which he considers the absolute Truth. However, he makes no distinction between true and false knowledge as means of acquiring respect. A wise man, no matter what kind of knowledge he has (Islamic or Western), deserves consideration and respect.

Alhaji Ibrahim has acquired his knowledge from his books and from local teachers. Therefore this Islamic knowledge has a very local character. It is only put to use locally. With the coming of modernization, the trend has turned. A new knowledge has been introduced from outside and has created a fresh local perception of Islam. In order to grasp the process that has led to this change, we have to understand the situation facing young people in Ngaoundéré who have been educated in Arab countries.⁶⁰

For students finishing the Franco-Arabian schools, there is nothing to do but wander the streets with an education they cannot find recognition for. They can neither work in the administrative sector nor for the traditional *moodibbe*, who have different teaching methods than those they are accustomed to. For those who return from studying in Arab countries, the opportunities are just as sparse. To those who went to France to perfect their French, a few translating jobs are available in Arabian embassies in Cameroon and Cameroonian embassies in Arab countries. Some may work as teachers of Arabic in colleges (only one teacher per college, and no more than ten colleges have Arabic courses). Some end up as teachers in the few Franco-Arabian primary schools. Although their education carries as much weight as that of their compatriots who studied in Europe, the Cameroonians who studied in Arab countries find themselves on the street because there is nothing to suit them on the job market, which in Cameroon has a Western structure. When they return to the traditional Muslim society, they face a well-established, hierarchic system into which they cannot fit. Being well educated, their place ought to be among the *moodibbe*, but here they

⁶⁰ See Kane 1961.

are left out because they are young and have a different educational background. The way these young people see it, they are barred from modern society and have no defined place in traditional Muslim society, and so they can only enter the latter by challenging the *moodibbe*.

The young scholars, rejected both from the job market and from their traditional Muslim communities, are now fighting for recognition. Their Wahhabist movement is based on several principles. First, they have targeted the traditional *moodibbe*, from whom they adopted and slightly transformed the ideas that enabled the *moodibbe* to maintain their predominance. In short, they have taken over the *moodibbe*'s literary knowledge, as Alhaji Ibrahim would define it. The peculiar thing is that the Wahhabists do not associate this knowledge with the possession of books, but rather with the ability to pronounce Arabic. The better one can articulate Arabic, the more knowledgeable one is said to be, and this naturally stands the Wahhabists in good stead. The stress put on this aspect of knowledge serves them. The idea that knowledge is indicated by good pronunciation of Arabic is so well embedded in the popular mind that even Alhaji Ibrahim and Imam Hamaoude had to take Arabic classes and Quran reading sessions arranged by young Wahhabists. A Wahhabist leader, talking about these two very influential personalities, said: "They are keen students, but even though they try as best they can, they cannot pronounce very well because of their age." Thus, the new definition of knowledge, expressed by pronunciation of Arabic, cannot apply to the elderly. This unfortunate situation in which Alhaji Ibrahim and Imam Hamaoude are embroiled is advantageous to the Wahhabists, as it confirms their newly-attained position in society. The same Wahhabist leader also told us that "many people followed in the footsteps of Alhaji Ibrahim and Imam Hamaoude and came to these classes. This is very significant – even Imam Hamaoude, despite his age, came to these classes to learn to read the Quran." The attempt by the *alkaali* and the *imam* who wanted to brush up their pronunciation of Arabic has lent legitimacy to the young Wahhabist movement. We should bear in mind that the Wahhabist leader in Ngaoundéré belongs to the Fulbe, which makes the whole process seem more like a transfer of power from the old Fulbe to the younger ones. In a situation where locally-inherited Islamic knowledge no longer represents as important an asset as before, new forms of Islamic knowledge might appear attractive. These new forms, which the Wahhabists claim to be universal, constitute a formidable resource when confronted with the Western school system and the access it gives to new sources of income.

This understanding of the new situation comprises the basis of the second principle of the Wahhabist's strategy, which is to make Islam accessible to other people. In order to achieve this, the Wahhabists try to abolish the idea of a Fulbe monopoly. The Wahhabists now claim

that "there are worshippers of Allah, but there are no Fulbe of Allah." Islam is coming closer to everybody, and by removing the ethnic foundations, the Wahhabists expect to spread their influence and recruit more followers from other ethnic groups.

The Wahhabists are trying to come out of the ideological isolation in which the traditional Muslims were confined. At the national level, several associations run by young Wahhabists educated in Arab countries are flourishing. The global notion of refining Islam is encountered in every Islamic country and has been absorbed by the Wahhabists, allowing them to take part in the incipient Islamic fundamentalist movement. It is important to stress that the idea of purifying Islam in Ngaoundéré always takes local realities into account. The young Wahhabists must tame some of the ideas of Islamic purity and limit their practice to what is tolerable in a secular state such as Cameroon. One practice they must avoid is the strict application of Islamic law as laid down in the Quran.

The change in dynamics of Islamic knowledge has the same effect as the proceeding secularization of the Cameroonian state. In the transformed Muslim society, Alhaji Ibrahim seems to be marginalized because his knowledge is used at the local level only.

In this article we have dealt with the transformation of relations between social groups in a sub-Saharan urban society. In studying the character of the social relations, we have tried to take into account the creative efforts that have been made to design a strategy for the management of identity as expressed by one person, Alkaali Alhaji Ibrahim, belonging to one group, the Fulbe. Further, we have focused on the aspect of identity associated with Islamic knowledge.

In so doing we have tried to throw some light on the role played by specific forms of Islamic knowledge in the dynamics of change in social relations. The hypothesis we have proposed is that the Fulbe have used Islamic knowledge as a means of self-furtherance and of safeguarding their leadership, and that such safeguarding is becoming more difficult than before. To test our hypothesis, we have observed the life of a member of this group in Ngaoundéré. It has not been our intention to reduce the complexity of the mechanisms of a group's self-promotion to the life of a single person. However, some important mechanisms for the reproduction of power and influence can be revealed by the manner in which a single person behaves, expresses himself, and interacts with other people. Our goal has been to make the reader aware of the opinions of this person, his perception of social relations, and the role he ascribes to Islamic learning in these relations.

Our investigations have revealed that, as far as Alhaji Ibrahim is concerned, Islamic knowledge is firmly linked to respect, power and social status. From his own views and from what we have surmised

in our conversations with him, the link is made firstly by ethnicity (the Fulbe identity). If you belong to the Fulbe, then you are certainly a *juuldo*, and only a *juuldo* can become a *moodibbo* by the blessing of God. Moreover, a *moodibbo* must be respected. Secondly, the link is secured by his position as *alkaali*. Finally, the possession of books guarantees a superior standing in relation to other *moodibbe*. The relation can be illustrated metonymically: the Arabs are close to God, so everything the Arabs do is God's will; God himself is knowledge *par excellence*, and knowledge can only be found in books. For Alhaji Ibrahim, owning books means superiority, and in all his words and deeds he strives to perpetuate this idea, this link between knowledge and power.

However, his efforts to hold his power are greatly threatened by external events, represented by the globalization and modernization of the local urban society. Alhaji Ibrahim feels this threat, for instance, when his daughters or wives do not behave in strict conformity with the rules he sets. It seems that no single person can hope to keep a firm hold on his knowledge in order to defend his status. In the case of Alhaji Ibrahim, the threat came from the development of the colonial and post-colonial administrations, and the modernization and democratization of the country. There is also an internal threat from the Muslims themselves, a threat which seems to be the result of a more global interaction of Muslim people. Alhaji Ibrahim's Islamic knowledge has lost its predominant role in the running of public life. Young Muslims are increasingly susceptible to the more global Muslim interaction and challenge him with their superior articulation of Arabic. The *alkaali* is thus forced into a position where he has to compromise as well as to be more creative and devise more ingenious ways of maintaining his position.

Although the social transformation in Ngaoundéré has weakened the status of ancient learning, this community is still characterized by a continuity which ensures that political and religious power remain in the hands of the Fulbe. However, the ongoing religious battle, in which old Fulbe are at odds with the young Fulbe educated in Arab countries, indicates that the Fulbe are losing their monopoly on Islam. As we have understood it, their loss is expressed by the phrase: "There are worshippers of Allah, but there are no Fulbe of Allah." Islam is everybody's business and not only the concern of the Fulbe, despite the fact that their religious domination continues.

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