Exploring the history and religious community of a group of Muslim Sufi mystics who came largely from socially marginal backgrounds in colonial French West Africa, this study shows the relationship between religious, social, and economic change in the region. It highlights the role that intellectuals – including not only elite men, but also women, slaves, and the poor – played in shaping social and cultural change and illuminates the specific religious ideas on which Muslims drew and the political contexts that gave their efforts meaning. In contrast to depictions that emphasize the importance of international networks and anti-modern reaction in twentieth-century Islamic reform, this book claims that, in West Africa, such movements were driven by local forces and constituted only the most recent round in a set of centuries-old debates about the best way for pious people to confront social injustice. It argues that traditional historical methods prevent an appreciation of Muslim intellectual history in Africa by misunderstanding the nature of information gathering during colonial rule and misconstruing the relationship between documents and oral history.

Sean Hanretta is currently Assistant Professor of History at Stanford University. He received a B.A. in history from the Colorado College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in African history from the University of Wisconsin. He has published research on precolonial Zulu history, on mining camps in the Belgian Congo, and on the history of Islam in West Africa. His work has appeared in the Journal of African History and Comparative Studies in Society and History. His current research focuses on wedding and funeral reform efforts among Muslims in Ghana.
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Islam and Social Change in French West Africa

HISTORY OF AN EMANCIPATORY COMMUNITY

SEAN HANRETTA

Stanford University
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None of these people has incurred any debts, obligations, or responsibilities in relationship to this text – those are all reserved to the author. In the words of Georg Simmel: “to be allowed to contribute is itself a gain . . . the response of the other, an unearned gift.”

Note on orthographic conventions

I have used Anglicized versions of the names of former French colonies (e.g., Upper Volta, Senegal) except in the case of Côte d’Ivoire, which is the official, untranslatable name of the modern state. Other geographic names have been standardized to accord with current spellings, with the exception of Kaédi (rather than Kayhaydi or other variants). For the transcription of Arabic words I have adopted a modified version of the system used in *Sudanic Africa*, dropping diacritics from consonants but keeping those for vowels. For other West African languages I have tended to adopt the most recent transcription conventions but have simplified spellings for typographical ease (eg. “ng” for the Mande “ŋ”, “ny” for “ɲ”, “b” for the Pulaar-Fulfulde “ɓ”). With a few exceptions (eg. Sn: *modini*, Ar: *hadāyā*), nouns from Arabic and West African languages are pluralized as if they were regular English nouns. Since most proper nouns used are best known in their French forms, I have so written them, unless there is no standard French spelling, in which case I simply transliterated. Ethnonyms have not been pluralized. I have standardized the spelling of the name of the “Tal” family so as to make obvious the connections among its various members. I have preferred Hamallah over Hamahu’l-lah because that is the way he is best known to Mande-language speakers. Although Yacouba Sylla himself is best known to his community as Yaxuuba (only rarely as Ya’qūb), he and his community have always used “Yacouba” in communicating with outsiders. Spelling in quotations has been left unchanged. All translations are my own, except where otherwise indicated.
Abbreviations used in references

AHR: American Historical Review
ANCI: Archives Nationales de la République de la Côte d’Ivoire, Abidjan
ANM: Archives Nationales de la République du Mali, Koulouba
ANMt: Archives Nationales de la République Islamique de la Mauritanie, Nouakchott
ANS: Archives Nationales de la République du Sénégal, Dakar
BCEHS-AOF: Bulletin du Comité d’Études Historique et Scientifique sur l’Afrique Occidentale Française
BSOAS: Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
BTLC: Bureau Technique de Liaison et de Coordination
CAOM: Archives Nationales de la France: Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence
CEA: Cahiers d’Études africaines
CHEAM: Centre des hautes études d’administration musulmane
CSSH: Comparative Studies in Society and History
FOCYLS: Fondation Cheick Yacouba Sylla
IJAHS: International Journal of African Historical Studies
ISSS: Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara
JAH: Journal of African History
JOAOF: Journal officiel de l’Afrique Occidentale Française
JOCI: Journal officiel de la Côte d’Ivoire
MAMMP: Yale Malian Arabic Manuscript Microfilming Project
SA: Sudanic Africa
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization