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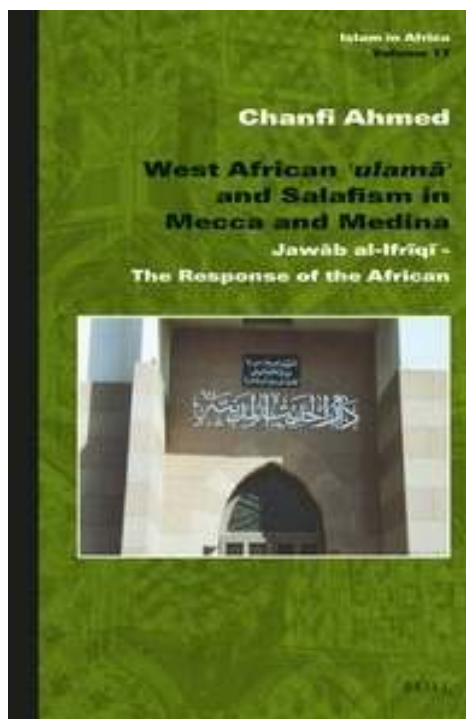
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Ahmed, Chanfi (2015) *West African `Ulamâ' and Salafism in Mecca and Medina: Jawâb al-Ifrîqî, the Response of the African*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 213 pages.

1 This book presents the lives of West African fundamentalist Muslim scholars who studied and taught in the Holy Cities of Arabia, where they oversaw important religious institutions. It is of interest to researchers specialised in South Asia because it goes beyond the relations between West Africa and the Holy Cities of Arabia: its pivotal theme is the connection between West Africa on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and Yemen on the other, then indirectly with India through the Salafi school of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth (Ahl-i Ḥadīth),¹ which originated in India, and to which the central chapter (chapter 4) is in great part devoted.



- 2 The book's author had an unusual career. He was born in 1963 in the Comoros, where the French colonial administration registered his surname, *Chanfi* (i.e. belonging to the *Shāfi'ī* school of law), as his first name; and his first name, *Ahmed*, as his surname. He had a dual education: a modern secular one under the French system in his native island of Grande Comore and in Paris; and a traditional Islamic one in the Comoros and Saudi Arabia. In Paris he studied at the School of Oriental Languages (INALCO) and the University of Paris III before completing his PhD under my supervision at the EHESS in 1996, with a thesis on "Islam and politics in the Comoros" (Ahmed 2000). He then moved to Berlin where he conducted several research projects on Islam in East Africa, which resulted in two other books (Ahmed 2002, 2008), and one on West African 'religious scholars (*ʿālim*, pl. *ʿulamā*)' in Saudi Arabia, the subject of the present work. He is fluent in East African languages (Comorian and Kiswahili), French, classical Arabic, German and English.
- 3 The present book is the result of fieldwork and library research conducted in Saudi Arabia in 2008 and 2010 and in West Africa (Mali, Niger and Mauritania) in 2009. It investigates and evaluates the roles of the Muslim scholars who left West Africa at the beginning of the 20th century, after the failure of the anticolonial 'holy wars (*jihād*)', and eventually settled in the Holy cities, where they were particularly active after the Saudi conquest of 1925–26. Did they come only to lead a studious and pious life in a Muslim country? Or did they take a more active part in the elaboration and dissemination of Salafi thought? How did they relate to the religious and political agenda of the Saudi dynasty? Which contacts did they establish with Muslim brethren in other parts of the world?
- 4 The primary sources and secondary studies used here are both written and oral. The bibliography contains an almost equal number of books and articles in European languages (66) and in Arabic (65). But if we also take into account the material gathered through interviews in Saudi Arabia and in Western Africa, the balance is undoubtedly in favour of the Arabic language. And among these sources in Arabic, pride of place is given

to biographies (*tarjama*, pl. *tarâjim*) and autobiographies (*tarjama dhâtiya*), a fact emphasised and commented upon in the last chapter we will analyse below.

- 5 A preliminary chapter describes the 'Sudan route (*tarîq al-Sûdân*)' used by West African Muslims for 'pilgrimage (*hajj*)' or definitive 'emigration (*hijra*)' to Mecca. This Southern itinerary, which has been known since the 16th century, gained importance in the beginning of the 20th century when Muslim reformist leaders, who had waged Holy Wars (*jihâd*) to create Islamic states (Robinson 2000) and had been defeated by French and British armies, used it with their followers to emigrate. Starting in Shinqit in central Mauritania, or in Timbuktu and Jenne (Djenné) in present day Mali, this route crossed Hausaland (Niger, Nigeria) and Chad to reach Darfur in Eastern Sudan. Some of these 'emigrants (*muhâjir*)' stopped and settled on their way in Chad or more often in Sudan where they were seduced by the eschatological discourse of the Mahdists.² Others crossed Sudan to reach the ports of Sawakin (later replaced by Port Sudan) or Massawa (in Eritrea) where they took sail for Arabia (chapter 1, pp. 13–23, and map p. 23).
- 6 The book is chronologically structured around three chapters devoted to three generations of West African `ulamâ who migrated to the Holy Cities. Chapter 2 (pp. 24–31) studies the 'forerunners', *i.e.* the first generation of pioneers who settled in Medina and taught in the Mosque of the Prophet and in the Madrasat al-`Ulûm al-Shar`iyya (School of the Sciences of the Law) in the first half of the 20th century. Two important figures dominate this first wave of emigration. The first is Alfa Hâshim al-Fûtî (c. 1866–1931), a nephew of Hâj `Umar Tall, the founder of a short-lived empire covering most of present day Senegal and Mali. Fleeing the colonial armies who had overtaken West Africa by 1903, he migrated to Medina where he taught until the end of his life. For a time, he was the representative of the powerful North and West African Tijâniyya mystical order, but in the end he rejected most of the Sufi observances. He was appointed as the official head of the local 'black African' community. In 1919 he finally accepted the colonial presence in Africa, as well as, in 1925–26, the Saudi take-over in Arabia. The second figure is Muḥammad `Abdallâh ben Maḥmûd al-Madanî (alias Ag Maḥmûd Abdullahi) (c. 1901–51), a Tuareg from Timbuktu who studied and taught in Medina from 1906 to 1938. He was both a scholar and a trader. He went to India in 1934–35 to study the Prophetic Traditions (*ḥadîth*) with teachers of the Ahl al-Ḥadîth school in Benares, confirming a connection between West African and Indian Salafî scholars, which was already in place at that time and which continues to this day. After his return to Africa, he propagated the Wahhabi doctrine in Mali, Niger, Northern Nigeria and Ghana.
- 7 'The `Ulamâ' of the second generation, heirs of the *hijra* and teachers in the first Islamic institutes in Saudi Arabia' (chapter 3, pp. 32–79), are represented by two more scholars who were active after World War II. Ḥammâd al-Ansârî (1925–97), also a Tuareg and a student of the above-mentioned al-Madanî, who had arrived in Arabia in 1947, studied and taught in Medina where he ended his career as a teacher and a librarian at the Islamic University (see below); many of his students were influential in West Africa. `Abd al-Raḥmân Yûsuf al-Ifriqî (1908–57), known in French scholarship as `Abd al-Rahman l'Africain (Triaud 1986), was famous among the francophone elite of Mali. Having gone on pilgrimage in 1926, he remained to study and to teach in Mecca, and then Medina, as the head of the Dâr al-Ḥadîth. Through his numerous students, he contributed largely to the dissemination of Salafî doctrine in West Africa, where he remains famous for his book refuting the Tijâniyya Sufi order. He also had links with India (pp. 70–79): as an answer to questions asked by Muslims from Kerala, he published a book in Arabic, *Jawâb al-Ifriqî/The*

Response of the African (a title used as the sub-title of the present book), in which, in 58 pages, he answers, according to Salafi doctrine, precise questions concerning Islamic ritual, theology and canonical Law.

- 8 The 'third generation' of West African scholars, who taught from 1950 onwards in what the author calls 'the first Islamic universities of Saudi Arabia', is represented by two figures analysed in chapter 5 (pp. 115–31). 'Umar Fallâta (1926–98) was, as his surname indicates, a Fulani. He was born in Mecca from parents who had connections in Mali and Nigeria, and was educated in Medina. His teachers were mainly West Africans, particularly 'Abd al-Rahmân Yûsuf al-Ifriqî under whom he studied in the Dâr al-Hadîth. He became director of that institution and secretary general of the Islamic University of Medina (see below); in this last capacity, he travelled every two years to Nigeria to recruit students. In 1983 he became the chairman of the Council of Da'wa Affairs, in charge of 'proselytism (*da'wa*)' to propagate Salafi Islam all over the world: he had the opportunity 'to carry out *da'wa* in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Pakistan, India, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Africa, Europe, Australia, and the United States' (p. 122). Muhammad al-Amîn al-Jakanî al-Shinqîti (alias Âb Wuld Ukhtûr, 1907–73) was an erudite Arab Mauritanian. Having arrived as a pilgrim in 1947, he gained the patronage of the Saudi royal family and was allowed to teach in Medina and in Mecca. He was a founding member of the Council of the 'ulamâ' of the kingdom and of the Muslim World League (Râbiṭat al-`Âlam al-Islâmî). In addition to books on Islamic law and Qur'anic exegesis, he published an account of his travel from Mauritania to Arabia.
- 9 The chronological sequence outlined above is interspersed with two thematic chapters. The first one, in the middle of the book, is entitled 'The Dâr al-Hadîth in Medina and the Ahl al-Hadîth' (chapter 4, pp. 80–114). It is an analysis of the collaboration of three groups of ulamâ coming respectively from India, Arab countries and West Africa; it is the most interesting chapter for specialists of South Asian Islam. Chanfi Ahmed sums up its aim and content as follows: it 'address[es] the role played by the scholars of the Dâr al-Hadîth College (named after the Ahl al-Hadîth movement in South Asia) in Medina and its branch in Mecca in the consolidation of Âl Sa`ud power. The Indian 'ulamâ' of the Dâr al-Hadîth would not have succeeded without the support they received from the West African and Middle Eastern 'ulamâ' [...]. The collaboration among these three clusters of 'ulamâ' best illustrates the encounters in question' (pp. 80–81). The Dâr al-Hadîth in Medina was founded in 1931 by an Indian scholar, Ahmad al-Dihlawî (d. 1955), a supporter of the Sâ`ud dynasty, who belonged to the Ahl-i Hadith school and who had emigrated from India in 1926. He 'established his institution as a private (not governmental) institution to be financed by donations [...] Most benefactors were Indian pilgrims [...] Thus in Medina, the Madrasa Dâr al-Hadîth occupied the second place, just after the Madrasat al-'Ulûm al-Shar`iyya founded in 1340/1921 by [an] Indian Deobandi. Therefore we can say that the Indians of both the Deoband School and of the Ahl al-Hadîth, who taught the Salafi doctrine, supported King 'Abd al-'Azîz against his rival Sharîf Husayn' (p. 88).³ Before his death, Ahmad Dihlawî had designated an African scholar as his successor, the famous 'Abd al-Rahmân Yûsuf al-Ifriqî, thus imposing West African leadership at the head of this institution.
- 10 It is high time to explain what is meant by 'Salafi doctrine'. The word is derived from the Arabic term *salaf*, designating the 'pious ancients', i.e. the first three generations of Muslims who were believed to have preserved the pristine purity of Islam. Their 'doctrine involves a full rejection of the schools of law (*madhâhib* [sing. *madhhab*]), as in the case of

the Ahl al-Ḥadīth) or a partial rejection of them (as in the case of the Wahhābīs who follow the Ḥanbalī *maddhab*) and a complete, or in the second case, a heavy dependence on the Qur'ān and *hadīth*. Popular rituals such as the *mawlid* (celebration of Muḥammad's birthday), visiting the tombs of the saints, and *dhikr* ceremonies of the Sufi orders [...] are considered as un-Islamic practices and blameworthy innovations (*bida'*, sing. *bid'a'*)' (pp. 2–3). The greater part of chapter 4 uses the biographies of its main proponents to explain the origins of this doctrine and its development and spread since the 18th century. The author rightly recalls that the ultimate origin of the Salafī doctrine dates back to early 14th century Damascus and the ultra-orthodox branch of the Ḥanbalī school of law headed by Ibn Taymiyya (pp. 3, 91–102). It was reinterpreted in the second half of the 18th century and in the first half of the 19th century in two main centres of intellectual renewal in the Middle East. The first and most important was in Mecca and Medina, where Muḥammad Ḥayāt al-Sindī (d. 1750), an Indian as his surname indicates, influenced a large number of Indian scholars and had as his most important local student Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–92), the founder of Wahhabism. The other centre was Yemen, with the towering figure of Muḥammad b. 'Alī l-Shawkānī (1760–1832) whose lasting influence, from India to West Africa, has been enormous, although long underestimated (Haykel 2003).

- 11 Chanfi Ahmed then follows the development of Salafī thought in the East and in the West. He outlines the history of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth in the East through Walī Allāh Dihlawī (1703–63), Nadhīr Husayn Dihlawī (1805–1902), Ṣādiq [in fact Ṣiddīq] Ḥasan Khān (1834–90) and Sanā'ullāh Amrīstarī [*sic!* In fact: Thanā'ullāh Amrītsarī] (1868–1948). Regarding the West, he gives a dense biography (pp. 92–96) of the most outstanding African scholar, Sālih al-Fullānī (1752/3–1803). Al-Fullānī was born in Futa Jalon in Guinea and studied first in Mauritania and Morocco, before going to Timbuktu, Tunis and Cairo, where he met the famous Murtada Zabīdī (1732–91), a lexicographer of Indian origin who had studied in the town of Zabīd in Yemen. He finally settled in the Hijaz in 1774. He was first and foremost a scholar of Prophetic Traditions. His way of relying only on the Qur'an and Prophetic Traditions, to the exclusion of the schools of law, is very similar to that of the Indian Ahl al-Ḥadīth whom he probably influenced through his many Indian students—as J. O. Hunwick (1978, 1984) suggested long ago. Chapter 4 ends with a brief history of the Hijaz in the 19th and 20th centuries and of the educational institutions founded during that period by the Ottomans and the Saudi dynasty (pp. 103–14); a shorter version of this section would have served better as an introduction to the sixth chapter.
- 12 Chapter 6, entitled 'Africa in the Islamic University of Medina' (pp. 132–75), describes an institution which, though often described in derogatory terms by Western scholars, has a strategic importance in the proselytizing policy of Saudi Arabia. It also attracts dedicated Muslim students from all over the world thanks to its reputation of efficiently teaching classical Arabic—Chanfi Ahmed himself got his traditional Islamic education and his proficiency in Arabic from that university. This chapter gives a history of the foundation of this university and a summary of its statutes. Established by royal decree in 1961 and funded by the Saudi State, it is dedicated to the promotion of Islam, and provides free teaching and accommodation, and gives free travel. Ahmed analyses the real nature of this university, which the Saudi monarchy conceives of as a tool of *da'wa*, i.e. of 'propagation' throughout the world of its fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, technically called *wahhābī*, which falls in the general category of *salafī* thought. The first target of this propaganda was Sub-Saharan Africa where several delegations were sent

from 1964 onwards. The Islamic University confirmed its fundamentalist orientation 'in appointing to [its] High Council [...] 'ulamâ' and intellectuals close to the Wahhabiyya-Salafiyya movement. In addition, they tried to insure that Muslims from each continent could have a 'representative' among the members of the High Council of the university. But ultimately, the majority of the members of the High Council came from the Arab world. The non-Arabs were Abû Bakr Gumi (northern Nigeria), Muḥammad Yûnus (Jakarta, Indonesia) and three figures from South Asia: the Pakistani Mawdûdî (founder of the Jamâ'at[-i] Islâmî), Dâwûd Ghaznâwî (a leader of the Ahl al-Ḥadîth, Lahore), and 'Alî Abû-Ḥasan al-Nadwî [in fact Abû-Ḥasan 'Alî al-Nadwî] (Secretary General of Nadwat al-'Ulamâ', India)' (p. 156). The Islamic University also publishes a journal: *Majallat al-Jâmi'a al-Islâmiyya*. We cannot conclude the account of this institution without mentioning a curious but controversial figure who taught at the Islamic University between 1968 and 1974: the Moroccan Taqî i-Dîn al-Hilâlî (1893–1987), a globetrotter and agitator who can be compared to Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî (1838–97). Ahmed rightly devotes a long excursus to him (pp. 158–75). Al-Hilâlî travelled, studied and taught in several places in India before World War II, particularly in the Ahl-i Ḥadîth school in Benares and at the Nadwat al-'Ulamâ' in Lucknow. He was also a speaker on the Nazi radio in Berlin in the early 1940s... It is he who introduced Tablighî Jamâ'at in Morocco in the early 1950s.

- 13 The last and concluding chapter (seven) entitled 'Biography [...] in the Islamic Tradition [...] (pp. 176–88) deals with the nature and importance of biography in Islamic religious sciences.⁴ It helps us understand the kind of exercise Chanfi Ahmed pursues throughout this book, and why he has kept some of the characters of traditional biographical compendia arranged according to 'generation', *i.e.* *ṭabaqât*, a plural noun which literally means 'generations'. He has been deliberately true to the spirit of traditional biography (*tarjama*), which presents the individuals under study as exemplary figures to be imitated, emphasizing positive features and not mentioning negative ones. As stated by Ahmed (p. 187), 'the main objective of a *tarjama* of an 'âlim [singular of 'ulamâ'] or other important personality is to present the person as a role model for the generations to come'. He makes his point by contrasting the traditional way of presenting the famous 'Abd al-Rahman l'Africain, with the picture given by Jean-Louis Triaud: 'That is why, between J.-L. Triaud, who has written that al-Ifriqî was a tormented character (1986: 174) (though he never met him), and what Shaykh 'Atiyya Sâlim has written [on him], I will not hesitate to believe the latter for [he] lived with [him] every day for years' (Ahmed 2015: 187).
- 14 In the conclusion of the book (pp. 188–96), the author reflects on the way he was inspired by the traditional method of writing biographies: 'This tradition seems to suggest also a method of historical investigation that I have taken and applied in this book. This is a method that involves studying the chain (*silsila*) of biographies as a whole' (p. 194). This conclusion is also a kind of epilogue which outlines three such chains starting from one of the scholars studied in the book and leading to important contemporary scholars and leaders of contemporary West Africa (p. 194): a 'Fullânî chain' leading to Mahmoud Dicko in Mali; a 'Tuareg'; one leading to Muḥammad Yahyâ and Mûsâ Shaddad in Mali again; and a third less organised one in Mauritania starting with Âb Wuld Ukhtûr. Some readers may dislike this choice of upholding the spirit of traditional biographies. Personally, and as a long-time expert on Islamic biographies, I find that Chanfi Ahmed has been able to convey to the reader the flavour of the original African sources, in the same way Barbara Metcalf (1982) did for the Indian 'ulamâ'. This book is therefore in my view a useful

contribution to the history of West African Islam, and more importantly to our understanding of the networks of scholars covering the greatest part of the Islamic world. The Holy Cities of Arabia were not only a meeting point, but also a melting pot where new fundamentalist doctrines were elaborated. More than just Arab scholars alone, African and Indian ones were also instrumental in this elaboration. The cooperation between African and Indian scholars, which early on was perceived only by perspicacious observers such as John O. Hunwick, is now brought into full view by this study. Incidentally, this book also confirms the important—but too often forgotten—role played by Yemen and by its most famous scholar, al-Shawkânî, in the elaboration and dissemination of fundamentalist ideas.

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NOTES

1. Arabic technical terms and proper names are transliterated as they are in the book, and according to Middle-Eastern usage, except in a few cases where I have corrected obvious mistakes. These spellings may differ from those used in South Asia, which has been influenced by Persian and Urdu: the article *al* is more frequently used and vowels may be different. For example one finds Ahl al-Hadith instead of the Persian phrase Ahl-i Hadîth; and *tarjama* instead of *tarjuma*. As I did not have access to a font with diacritical marks, I underlined the consonants which should be marked by a dot under the letter; and long vowels have been marked by a circumflex (^) instead of a macron.
 2. In 1881, Muḥammad Aḥmad ben `Abdallâh (1844–1885) had proclaimed himself the *mahdî*, the righter of wrongs who is believed to come at the end of times to restore justice on earth. He led a Holy War and created an Islamic state based on his eschatological doctrine, which has survived to this day under the name of Sudan.
 3. One will notice that the author includes the Deobandis in the general category of ‘Salafî’: this does not correspond to South Asian usage where only the Ahl al-Hadîth are labelled as Salafî (Gaborieau 2010: 282–88).
 4. For a comprehensive approach to this topic, see: Hermansen 1988.
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