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Divergent Interpretations of Jihād in West Africa: a Historical Analysis of the Al-Muridiyyah and Boko Haram Movements

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Abstract
This paper explores the divergent interpretations of *jihād* in contemporary West Africa through a comparative study of two Islamic movements: *Boko Haram* in Nigeria and the *Al-Muridiyyah* order in Senegal. While *jihād* is often misrepresented in global discourse as synonymous with "holy war," this concept encompasses a broader range of meanings in Islamic tradition, including ethical self-discipline and spiritual struggle. Nigeria has become one of the most affected countries by Islamist terrorism, with Boko Haram's violent jihadist ideology causing tens of thousands of deaths, targeting both Muslims and Christians. In contrast, Senegal has remained free from jihadist attacks, despite being a majority-Muslim country. This exceptional stability is attributed largely to the influence of Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the *Al-Muridiyyah*, which promotes a peaceful, work-centered, and spiritual understanding of *jihād*, rooted in the teachings of Amadou Bamba (1853-1927), Woerner-Powell (2025). Through this comparative analysis, the article highlights how religious interpretation, historical context, and sociopolitical factors shape divergent trajectories within Islamic societies, and how localized spiritual traditions can serve as effective cultural buffers against religious extremism.

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Keywords: *jihād, senegal, nigeria, al-muridiyyah, boko haram*

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi interpretasi yang berbeda tentang jihad di Afrika Barat kontemporer melalui studi perbandingan dua gerakan Islam: Boko Haram di Nigeria dan tarekat Al-Muridiyyah di Senegal. Meskipun jihad sering disalahartikan dalam wacana global sebagai sinonim dengan "perang suci," konsep ini mencakup berbagai makna yang lebih luas dalam tradisi Islam, termasuk disiplin diri etis dan perjuangan spiritual. Nigeria telah menjadi salah satu negara yang paling terdampak oleh terorisme Islam, dengan ideologi jihadis Boko Haram yang penuh kekerasan menyebabkan puluhan ribu kematian, yang menargetkan baik Muslim maupun Kristen. Sebaliknya, Senegal tetap bebas dari serangan jihadis, meskipun merupakan negara mayoritas Muslim. Stabilitas luar biasa ini sebagian besar disebabkan oleh pengaruh persaudaraan Sufi, khususnya Al-Muridiyyah, yang mempromosikan pemahaman jihad yang damai, berpusat pada kerja, dan spiritual, yang berakar pada ajaran Amadou Bamba (1853-1927), Woerner-Powell (2025). Melalui analisis komparatif ini, artikel ini menyoroti bagaimana interpretasi agama, konteks sejarah, dan faktor sosio-politik membentuk lintasan yang berbeda dalam masyarakat Islam, dan bagaimana tradisi spiritual lokal dapat berfungsi sebagai penyangga budaya yang efektif terhadap ekstremisme agama.

Kata Kunci: *jihad, senegal, nigeria, al-muridiyyah, boko haram*

INTRODUCTION

Jihād is one of the most discussed and controversial concepts specific to the Islamic tradition. In the Western public sphere, and even in some academic circles, jihad is understood as “holy war,” being associated exclusively with violence and terrorism. This reductionist, simplistic way of defining *jihad* ignores not only the etymology of the term, but also the plurality of its connotations in Muslim sources. According to Professor Reuven Firestone, the correct meaning of the Arabic word *jihād* is “striving,” “effort,” not “holy war”, Firestone (1999). Thus, the meanings the term can take on in Islamic literature, including in the Qur’an, are extremely varied. A medieval scholar, Ibn Qayyim (1292–1250), mentioned fourteen meanings of *jihād*, of which only one is related to physical violence – the well-known *jihād bil sayf* (“effort by the sword”). The other

meanings are associated with the effort to acquire knowledge, to guide and teach others, as well as with *jihād bil nafs*, or "the struggle with the ego," with temptations, and with the Devil, Kabbani (2010). Moreover, expressions such as "holy war," *la guerre sainte*, or *heilige krieg* are creations of European literature and do not appear anywhere in Islamic sources, Ghandour (2002). Therefore, equating *jihād* with "holy war" or reducing this concept to the idea of physical combat is a first obstacle to understanding it and the complex ways in which it has been defined throughout history.

METHODS

Through the present study, we aim to investigate the practical consequences of these divergent interpretations of *jihād*, taking as a case study two Islamic movements from two different regions of West Africa: Al-Muridiyyah in Senegal and Boko Haram in Nigeria. We believe that these two movements are the most representative for exemplifying the radically opposing ways in which *jihād* can be understood and applied. Nigeria is a state that has faced, in recent decades, severe political instability, insurgency, organized crime, violence, and terrorism. One of the most active destabilizing factors is the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram, which emerged in the early 2000s. According to statistics from 2015, Boko Haram was recognized as the deadliest terrorist organization in the world, with 6,644 people killed in its attacks in 2014 alone, Rusin (2021). Considering the destructive nature of this extremist movement, as well as the activity of other organized crime and insurgent groups in Nigeria, this state can be considered one of the most unstable in Africa, MacEachern (2018).

In contrast to Nigeria, Senegal is known for its climate of interreligious tolerance and security. It is the only Muslim-majority African state (over 95% of the population) on whose territory there has never been an Islamist attack in its history, and where no terrorist organization operates, Sambe (2010). This socio-political reality has been influenced by the existence of powerful Sufi brotherhoods, especially the Al-Muridiyyah brotherhood, founded by Amadou Bamba (1853–1927) in the second half of the 19th century. This brotherhood is renowned for its pacifist and inclusive message.

Thus, the present study starts from this fundamental opposition between two different interpretations of *jihād* and even of Islam itself. Our analysis focuses on the comparative method of the two movements – Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Muridiyyah in Senegal – and can offer us a new, valuable perspective for understanding that Islam is not a "monolith," that *jihād* cannot be reduced to the idea of "holy war," and that there can be numerous divergent interpretations, all inspired by the same sources: the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet.

DISCUSSION

Amadou Bamba and *Tariqa Al-Muridiyyah*

At the beginning of the 19th century, in the territory of present-day Senegal, there were several political-state entities at different stages of development. The Kingdom of Waalo, located in the area where the Senegal River flows into the Atlantic Ocean, was the northernmost of these entities. South of Waalo there were four other small kingdoms along the Atlantic coast: Cayor (Kajor), Bawol, Sine (Siin), and Saloum (Salum). To the east, in the more arid desert area, lay the Kingdom of Jolof and the Imamate of Futa Toro. The inhabitants of these African states belonged to the Wolof, Fulani, Tukulor, Serer, and Mandinka ethnic groups, Glover (2007).

Amadou Bamba, founder of the *tariqa* (Sufi brotherhood) Al-Muridiyyah, was born around 1853 into a family of Wolof scholars from the town of Mbacké in the Kingdom of Bawol. His entire life was influenced by the political and social context created by the establishment of French administration in most of West Africa, Rusin (2024). For this reason, in order to understand the ideas and origins of his brotherhood, it is necessary to make a brief foray into the history of French colonialism in Senegal and its relations with the local population.

The French presence in this geographical area began to be felt in the first half of the 17th century, when they arrived on the island of Ndar (1634). There they built a series of forts and later established the port of Saint-Louis (1659), Radian (1966). Later, during the Franco-Dutch War (1672–1678), the French managed to take control of Gorée Island in 1677. Saint-Louis and Gorée marked the

beginnings of French colonialism in Senegal. The French were primarily motivated by economic interests, particularly the slave trade and the trade with gum arabic from the region. However, the protracted conflicts in Europe, the Revolution of 1789, and especially Napoleon's wars pushed these African interests into the background. This resulted in great political instability and a lack of coherence in French administration, as evidenced by the large number of governors who succeeded one another in a very short time: between 1816 and 1854, there were 30 governors in Saint-Louis. The year 1854 brought stability to the French colonial project in Senegal with the appointment of General Louis Faidherbe (1818–1889) as governor. As both a soldier and governor, Faidherbe initiated an ambitious program of colonial expansion by waging war against the northern kingdom of Waalo, located east of Saint-Louis. In 1855, Waalo was conquered, and its villages were looted and burned by the French colonial army. The territory of the kingdom was annexed to the colony of Saint-Louis. Around the same time, Faidherbe occupied the area of present-day Dakar at Cape Verde and attacked the eastern kingdom of Jolof, Joos (1966).

French expansion met with local resistance, led by charismatic religious leaders such as Al-Hajji Umar Tall (1794–1864) of Futa Toro and Maba Diakhou Ba (1809–1867) of Saloum. Umar Tall, the first of these, came from a respected Tukulor family. After completing the pilgrimage to Mecca, he received the title of *Al-Hajji* ("The Pilgrim") and was initiated into the Tijaniyyah Sufi brotherhood, founded by the Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani (1735–1815). Upon returning to West Africa, he lived for several years in Sokoto, the capital of the famous caliphate, and then settled in Futa Jallon, between Senegal and Guinea, gathering a large number of followers as the main missionary (*muqaddam*) of the brotherhood in the region. Around 1852, in Dinguiraye, south of Futa Jallon, he launched a *jihād* or struggle against the "unbelievers" in the surrounding area, Murphy (1981). Until his death in 1864, Al-Hajji Umar Tall fought numerous wars against both animist tribes and the French. He created a state the size of present-day France, known in historiography as the "Tukulor Empire," named after his ethnic group, which played a major role in forming his army. However, the empire was annexed to the French

colony of Senegal after Umar Tall's son, Ahmadu Sekou Tall (1836–1897), was defeated by the governor's forces from Saint-Louis, Joos (1966).

The other charismatic leader mentioned, Maba Diakhou Ba, was a disciple of Al-Hajji Umar Tall and initiated the war against the French in the southern kingdom of Saloum. He managed to conquer much of the coastal area, bordering French possessions in northern Senegal, including Saint-Louis. In 1864, he granted political asylum to the king of Cayor, who had been defeated by the French. A year later, in 1865, Maba Diakhou Ba and his allies from Cayor were defeated by the army of the new French governor, Émile Pinet-Laprade (1822–1869). On the eve of these events, Amadou Bamba was about twelve years old and had recently moved with his father to Saloum, Rusin (2024).

According to hagiographies written by his own disciples, Amadou Bamba received an excellent education from the age of seven. His uncles, and later the scholars of Saloum, initiated him into nearly all the traditional Islamic sciences – from the study of the Arabic language and grammar to Maliki jurisprudence and Qur'anic exegesis. At the age of twenty, his family moved to Cayor, where his father obtained a position at the court of the animist king. Uninterested in these matters, the young Bamba decided to embark on an initiatory journey northward to the region of Mauritania, which was recognized at that time by the Wolof as a center of knowledge and Sufism. There he completed his studies, being initiated into the Qadiriyyah Sufi brotherhood, which traced its lineage back to the great Shaykh Abdul-Qadir al-Jilani (1078–1166) of Baghdad. Upon returning to Cayor, he worked as a teacher at the school founded by his father. His austere but calm demeanor, simple diet, modest Sufi-style clothing, and sermons made him very popular, attracting numerous supporters. Moreover, he began to write various works, both short and long, demonstrating deep knowledge of the writings of renowned Muslim authors such as al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Ibn Ata Allah al-Iskandari (d. 1309), al-Sanusi (d. 1490), and al-Yadali (d. 1753). However, his refusal to engage in politics or to pay homage to the king like the other *marabouts* (muslim teachers) at court made him disliked and envied by the elite.

Because of these conflicts, Amadou Bamba decided to return to his birthplace, Mbacké in Bawol, around 1883, where he began to initiate his *murids* or disciples into Sufi practice, Babou (2007). However, new conflicts arose with the *marabouts* of Mbacké – who feared his prestige and influence – forcing Amadou Bamba into exile, where he founded a new settlement, Daaru Salam, around 1886. A year later, in 1887, Amadou Bamba founded the famous holy city of Touba, which became the center of his future brotherhood, Babou (2007).

In March 1889, Tautain, director of political affairs in the French colony of Senegal, received a report about this new settlement in the wilderness where a *marabout* and his disciples lived. A month later, in April 1889, the authorities conducted an investigation in Njambur and Bawol to learn more about Amadou Bamba. In general, the information obtained portrayed him positively, but it was discovered that some of his disciples had engaged in certain illegal activities. Although the report was favorable, the authorities began to harbor growing suspicions about Amadou Bamba's activities, Glover (2007). Their fears were based on past experiences with charismatic religious leaders who had organized revolts against the French. Besides Al-Hajji Umar Tall and Maba Diakhou Ba, who had led the first armed anti-colonial opposition in the region, there had also been the 1887 uprising of Al-Hajji Mahmadu Lamine. Could Amadou Bamba become another threat to the French colonial project in Senegal? The *marabout* was only thirty-six years old when he drew the attention of the French authorities, who decided to monitor his activities. To dispel any suspicion, and after an exchange of letters with the governor, Amadou Bamba traveled to Saint-Louis in 1892 and appeared before the colonial office. He assured them that he was not interested in worldly matters, but only in the worship of God. At that time, the authorities were convinced by his plea and allowed him to leave freely, Babou (2007).

The conflict flared up again in 1895, when Amadou Bamba decided to move to Jolof to establish a school, leaving his disciples in Touba. The pro-French elite of Jolof, led by the king and the *marabouts* at court, opposed his arrival. The governor's collaborators sent him a series of false reports claiming that King Samba Laobe of

Jolof himself had become Bamba's disciple and that they were planning a major revolt. Allegedly, Bamba's disciples had purchased numerous firearms, horses, and donkeys to form an army. None of these accusations could ever be proven, but they were enough for the governor to issue an arrest warrant for Amadou Bamba. The event, which took place on August 10, 1895, holds great importance in the history of the Al-Muridiyyah brotherhood, marking the exile of its Shaykh. It seems Bamba offered no resistance when arrested. He was tried and found guilty of organizing a revolt, despite his denials. Ultimately, the authorities decided to send him into exile in the southwest of French Equatorial Africa, specifically Gabon, far from Senegal, where he could no longer influence the local Muslim population, Glover (2007).

The ship carrying Amadou Bamba to Gabon departed on September 21, 1895. His final destination was Mayumba, an island a few kilometers off the southwest coast of Gabon. He spent five years under arrest on this island and another two on Lambaréné Island. His official hagiographies claim that he lived the entire period of exile convinced that these trials were meant to strengthen his faith. The same hagiographies are filled with accounts of numerous miracles Bamba allegedly performed in Gabon. All these stories, related by his disciples, resemble the tales of saints and religious founders, serving to highlight the sacred nature of their leader, Seye (2013).

In 1902, thanks to the efforts of his disciples who campaigned for his release, Amadou Bamba was able to return to Senegal. However, very soon new rumors emerged about the organization of a possible uprising under his leadership. The French authorities ordered Bamba to present himself again in Saint-Louis. The situation probably would not have escalated if he had not refused to come, stating that he was not interested in politics. His attitude angered the governor, who ordered that he be brought in under warrant. As in 1895, Bamba offered no resistance and asked his disciples to follow his example. In 1903, the authorities in Saint-Louis decided to send Bamba into another exile, this time in Mauritania. The conditions were not as harsh as those in Gabon. While in Mauritania, following a supposed mystical experience in 1905 in which the Prophet Muhammad

appeared to him, Amadou Bamba founded the Al-Muridiyyah brotherhood, Babou (2007).

In 1907, after four years of exile, he returned to Senegal but was placed under house arrest in the town of Ceyeen. The French intended to continue monitoring the *marabout*, as Ceyeen was led by a pro-French local elite who would report any suspicious actions on Bamba's part. There he was allowed to open an Islamic school to educate and initiate his supporters and former disciples into his new brotherhood. However, the school was closed a year later, in 1909, due to suspicions. Bamba's opposition to the outbreak of the revolt led by *marabout* Ma al-Aynayn (1830–1910) in northern Mauritania in 1910, and the *fatwa* he issued forbidding his disciples to join the so-called *jihād*, earned him a favorable image in the eyes of the French authorities, Babou (2007).

In January 1912, Amadou Bamba moved to the town of Diourbel, still under house arrest, in the European quarter near the police station and the commander's residence. The French still wanted to keep him under surveillance and control his activities. A year later, in 1913, he was given a plot of land and allowed to build a house outside the European quarter. Moreover, the authorities allowed several dozen *murids* and their families to settle in the new district, whose population kept growing. By the end of 1915, the neighborhood had about 1,000 inhabitants. Bamba and his disciples built there a large wooden mosque and a Qur'anic school, Babou (2007). It was there that the *marabout* spent the last years of his life until 1927. His body was buried in the holy city of Touba, which became the center of the Al-Muridiyyah brotherhood. Even after his death, the French continued to take an interest in the development of this movement, ensuring that it would maintain its non-violent character and not organize any armed insurrection, Glover (2007).

Over time, the brotherhood developed its own economic and social organization, placing emphasis on prayer and work, much like the medieval Cistercians: *ora et labora*. Young *murids* agreed to live in small rural settlements called *daras*, a type of farm where, in addition to religious studies under the *Shaykh*, they also performed agricultural labor. After a minimum of 7–8 years of work, each *murid* received a plot of land from the *Shaykh*, along with permission to build

a house and start a family. This system demonstrates the brotherhood's ability to be self-sufficient through the large-scale sale of agricultural products resulting from the labor of the *murids*. The main crops cultivated by the *murids* are peanuts and yams. Thanks to this ingenious system, the city of Touba managed to develop economically, becoming the second largest city in Senegal after Dakar, Rusin (2024). All thanks to the Al-Muridiyyah brotherhood, a religious movement with a history and ideas very different from the other case study: Boko Haram.

Boko Haram: Origins and Ideology

As we stated in previous studies devoted to this subject, the terrorist group Boko Haram did not give rise to religious extremism or Islamist ideas in Nigeria. On the contrary, it is the result of their early presence there. The group's core message is anti-Western, hostile to European culture and education. The name "Boko Haram" by which the movement is known reflects this message. The word *boko* comes from the Hausa language and refers to Western-style education, while the Arabic term *haram* means "forbidden." "Boko Haram" is, in fact, more of a slogan used by the group's followers; its official name is *Jamāʿat Ahlal-Sunnahli-l-Daʿawah wa al-Jihād* ("Group of the People of the Sunnah for Preaching [Islam] and Jihād"). This slogan ("Western education is forbidden") must be understood in the context of the emergence of anti-Western ideas and attitudes in post-colonial Nigeria, which shaped the biography of Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of the terrorist group, Zenn (2014).

Muhammad Yusuf is believed to have been born in 1970 (or, according to another version, in 1967) in Jakusko, in the eastern part of Yobe State, northeastern Nigeria, the son of Kanuri farmers. Born into a poor environment, Yusuf could not attend school. Nevertheless, he received a basic form of traditional education, learning the Qur'an under the guidance of a local Muslim scholar. Later, Yusuf himself managed to gain recognition in the community as a Qur'an reciter. After a few years, probably in the late 1980s, Yusuf moved to Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, in search of a better life. There, he met Baba Fugu Muhammad, a well-known local merchant and

landowner. Yusuf married his daughter, and the two became very close, Smith (2017).

During this period, Muhammad Yusuf came into contact with the *Islamic Movement of Nigeria* (*IMN*) led by Ibrahim Al-Zakzaky (b. 1953) - a critic of Western culture and education, and a supporter of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) and the *Muslim Brotherhood* in Egypt - and became a member of the organization. By the mid-1990s, however, Yusuf switched to the *Jamāʿat Tajdid Al-Islam* (*JTI*), a group of former *IMN* members who remained faithful to Sunnism after Al-Zakzaky and most of the *IMN* embraced Iranian Shiism. Within these organizations, Yusuf was first exposed to the ideas of Sayyid Qutb and later rose to the position of "emir" of the JTI in Borno State, Smith (2017). After 1999, when the *JTI* merged with Nigeria's largest Wahhabi-oriented organization, funded by Saudi authorities - *Jamāʿat Izalat Al-Bid'a wa Iqamat As-Sunnah* ("Group for the Removal of Innovations and the Establishment of the Sunnah") - Yusuf became one of its new members, Rusin (2023).

In the early 2000s, Yusuf began attending the organization's gatherings at Indimi Mosque in Maiduguri, particularly those of the famous Medina-trained preacher Ja'far Mahmud Adam (1960–2007), Smith (2017). Alongside Adam and other scholars, Yusuf expanded his studies of works by prominent authors promoted by the Wahhabi movement. These included Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350), Ibn Kathir (1300–1377), and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792). The final step in Yusuf's religious education came with his participation in *Hajj*, first in 2003, where he is believed to have acquired works by controversial contemporary theologians from Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, Kassim & Nwankpa (2018). Among them Abd ar-Rahman ibn Nasir as-Sa'di (d. 1957), Ahmad Shakir (d. 1958), Ali al-Tantawi (d. 1999), Bakr ibn Abdullah Abu Zayd al-Ghayhab (d. 2008), Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz (d. 1999), Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani (d. 1999), and Muhammad ibn al-Uthaymin (d. 2001), Kassim & Nwankpa (2018), Ulph (2013). Drawing on these readings and the ideological legacy of the organizations he had joined, Yusuf developed his own beliefs about the incompatibility between Islamic principles and Western education and culture, Rusin (2021).

Marginalized for his views, Yusuf stopped attending Indimi Mosque and founded another: *Masjid Ibn Taymiyya* ("Ibn Taymiyya Mosque"), named after the famous 13th–14th century Damascene scholar, highly valued and often quoted by radical Islamists for his rigid positions, Rusin (2021). The mosque became the place where Yusuf propagated his ideas under the message "Boko is Haram." By *boko*, however, he meant not only Western education, but also Western culture and civilization as a whole, which, in his view, were incompatible with Islam and must be rejected. These foreign "innovations" also included democracy as a political system, a "satanic" system, in his words, that had to be overthrown by force, Forest (2012). For this reason, his sermons increasingly targeted the government and state institutions, Umar (2012). Western education and culture, on which the state relied, were blamed as the sole cause of ordinary Nigerians' problems. These, he argued, had to be eliminated and replaced with Islamic education and a political system based solely on the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. It is easy to see why this radical populist message attracted so many followers, especially among the poor and uneducated, Rusin (2021).

By the time of his death in 2009, Muhammad Yusuf had adopted an increasingly violent rhetoric toward Nigerian authorities. In June 2009, conflict erupted. Some members of the group attended a funeral near Maiduguri. According to a government report, on the way they saw another known member in a dispute with policemen from a special anti-banditry unit. His companions intervened, using the opportunity to try to seize the policemen's weapons. The police opened fire, wounding 17 Boko Haram members involved. In response, Yusuf urgently convened a meeting of his followers and presented a letter to the government criticizing the authorities and giving his own version of events, Smith (2017).

A month later, on July 26, a group of Boko Haram followers in Bauchi State attacked a police station. The authorities prevented them from accessing the armory. Subsequently, police raided a notorious area in Bauchi where Boko Haram supporters lived. A violent confrontation followed, leaving 55 dead and 200 arrested. Yusuf issued another statement claiming his followers had been attacked without cause, insisting that harassment must end, and

calling for democracy and Western education to be permanently abolished in Nigeria, Rusin (2021).

In the following days, Boko Haram members launched attacks on police stations in various towns across four states: Borno, Yobe, Bauchi, and Kano. Authorities were unprepared for the attackers' level of coordination. The most intense clashes between security forces and Boko Haram took place on the streets of Maiduguri. On July 28, the Borno State army, supported by forces from central Nigeria, advanced with six tanks and five military trucks toward *Markaz* ("the Center"), the group's headquarters. The mosque and annex buildings were demolished, and those who resisted with firearms were killed. Yusuf managed to escape but was captured on July 30 while hiding in his father-in-law's barn. He was then taken to Maiduguri police headquarters for questioning. After answering several questions and claiming innocence, Yusuf - approximately 39 years old - was executed. The July 2009 uprising left around 700–800 dead across the four states mentioned, the majority in Borno, Rusin (2021). This marked the beginning of the deadly Boko Haram insurgency which, under Yusuf's successor Abubakar Shekau (1973–2021), went on in the following years to carry out hundreds of attacks, causing tens of thousands of deaths and contributing to Nigeria's insecurity, Agbiboa (2013) and Solomon (2015). These attacks, however, cannot be separated from Boko Haram's view of *jihād* - radically different from that of the peaceful Murid followers of Amadou Bamba.

Jihād in the Vision of the Two Movements

The concept of *jihād* holds a central place in both movements – Al-Muridiyyah and Boko Haram – yet the meaning each assigns to this term is profoundly different. We will briefly analyze below the discourse and ideas of the founders of these movements regarding *jihād*.

The *Shaykh* of the Al-Muridiyyah brotherhood, Amadou Bamba, developed a unique conception of jihad, grounded in a "mystical" experience. According to his hagiographies, in the spring of 1895, while still in Touba, Amadou Bamba is said to have had a vision in which the Prophet Muhammad appeared to him, along with the most important of his companions (*sahaba*) who had fought in the Battle of

Badr in 624 CE, the first battle in Islamic history. In a state of ecstasy, Bamba is said to have asked the Prophet how he could become one of his close ones in Paradise, like those who fought alongside him at Badr. In response, the Prophet is said to have told him that "the era of bloody *jihād*," *jihād* by the sword, had ended, and that the true *jihād* must be waged against one's own self ("the *jihad* against the soul"). This is "the greater *jihād*" (*jihād al-akbar*), and if Bamba were to endure with patience all the trials to which he would be subjected without resisting, he would be saved and would be among the most honored believers in Paradise, Babou (2007). The vision he had in Touba before his arrest explains the reason behind Amadou Bamba's passive, non-violent attitude – an attitude he also instilled in his disciples.

In Amadou Bamba's writings there are several references to *jihād*. First, in *Masalik Al-Jinan* ("The Paths to Paradise"), probably his most important work, in which he synthesizes in verse the teachings of earlier Sufi masters, Amadou Bamba states, Bamba (2009):

> "Indeed, the toughest *jihād* consists in hindering one's mind from ever involving in aught that is not proper."

In other words, this refers to *jihād bil-nafs*, the effort to master the ego and fight the satanic temptations that can cloud a believer's mind. As for *jihād bil-sayf*, armed, bloody *jihād*, Amadou Bamba was critical, Bamba (2009):

> "Others have been deluded by their *jihād*, for they wage war against human beings. They set themselves against their fellow creatures and make regular assaults in the sole order to gain more glamour and more spoils of war They pretend thus raising ALLAH's Word whereas their sole objective is rising to fame and nay something else! So do they come back from their so-called *jihād* covered with sins and a host of misdeeds with all their troops…"

Through these verses, Amadou Bamba questioned the sincerity of the *mujahideen* of his time, those who claimed to fulfill the command of armed *jihād* exactly as in the time of the Prophet. Based

on his 1895 vision, Bamba believed that this type of *jihād* was no longer valid, as the Prophet had said after one of his last military campaigns: “We are returning from the lesser *jihād* (*jihād al-asghar*) to the greater *jihad* (*jihād al-akbar*)”, Niasse (2014). This meant renouncing the *jihad* of the sword in favor of the *jihād* of the soul. In this sense, Amadou Bamba considered that the battles of the Prophet’s time had an expiatory character – the fact that Muhammad and his companions fought the polytheistic Arabs of their time to ensure Islam’s survival absolved future generations of Muslims from bearing the sword. This is reflected in the following verse of his poem *Mawahib al-nafi’ fi mada’ih al-shafi’* (“Gifts to the Benefactor in the Praise of the Intercessor”), dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad, Ware (2018):

> “He (Prophet Muhammad) saved the people, absolved us from battle”.

Based on these ideas, Amadou Bamba rejected the use of the sword, arguing that the era of *jihād* by the sword had passed, and that the historical context of the Prophet’s battles was radically different: the Muslim community was then united under the authority of the Prophet or a legitimate caliph, and faced persecutors who prohibited the practice of Islam. Fighting was a necessity for Islam’s survival. By contrast, in colonial Senegal, the French – though Christians – were “People of the Book”, did not prevent Islamic worship, and differences had to be addressed with patience and tolerance. In his 1910 *fatwa* against Ma al-Aynayn’s *jihād*, Bamba stressed that the absence of a caliphate and the fragmentation of the Muslim community made a legitimate *jihād* impossible, and that the French shared the same God, citing Qur’anic verses (Surah 29:46 and Surah 42:15) to support peaceful coexistence, Rusin (2024). This interpretation transformed the Al-Muridiyyah brotherhood into a religious movement centered on prayer, work, and spiritual progress, not military confrontation. Instead of the sword, Bamba promoted “the *jihād* of the pen,” the struggle through study and agricultural work, using the Sufi brotherhood model and his own spiritual authority to ease tensions between Muslims and the colonial administration, Ware (2022). Even today, his disciples are

recognized as true peace activists in Senegal, fostering a climate of tolerance and mutual understanding, Woerner-Powell (2025).

In contrast, *Jamāʿat Ahlal-Sunnahli-l-Daʿawah wa al-Jihād* ("Group of the People of the Tradition, the Propagation [of Islam] and Jihād"), or Boko Haram, built its ideology around armed *jihād*, presented as an absolute religious obligation, both defensive and offensive, against the Nigerian state and any "unbeliever" or "apostate." For this purpose, founding leader Muhammad Yusuf, and his successor Abubakar Shekau, used numerous Qur'anic verses (many taken out of context) and *hadiths* to legitimize violence and portray Nigeria as an illegitimate state, imposed by colonialists and led by "apostates" who do not enforce *Sharia*. Qur'anic verses referring to the defense of Muslims against aggression are reinterpreted to justify a permanent war – not only as a reaction to attack, but as a constant obligation to "purify" the community. The causes of these violent interpretations lie primarily in the political and social context – namely, the perception that Muslims in Nigeria are persecuted by a corrupt, pro-Western state hostile to Islam, a perception fueled by local religious conflicts and the trauma of incidents such as Kafanchan (1987) and Zangon Kataf (1992), Rusin (2019). Other contributing factors include doctrinal influences from international "Salafi-jihadist" and Wahhabi ideology, the extensive application of the *takfir* doctrine (allowing the declaration of any Muslim who collaborates with the state or rejects Boko Haram's ideas as an unbeliever), and religious propaganda that selectively uses the Qur'an, *hadiths*, and Islamic history for the emotional mobilization of followers and the promise of martyrdom, Zenn & Heras (2013).

The group's leaders frequently invoked battles led by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, presenting them as precedents for current *jihād*. While traditional sources emphasize the defensive nature of those fights and impose strict ethical rules (prohibition of killing women, children, the elderly, destroying crops, etc.), Boko Haram ignores these restrictions and uses the historical model as propaganda, extracting verses and episodes from the 7th-century Arabian context to incite hatred and legitimize attacks in 21st-century Nigeria, Rusin (2021). One relevant example illustrates this.

In a recorded sermon from the spring of 2008 transcribed by Kassim & Nwankpa (2018), Muhammad Yusuf cites verse 13 from Surah 9 of the Qur'an:

> "Will ye not fight people who violated their oaths, plotted to expel the Messenger, and took the aggressive by being the first (to assault) you ? Do ye fear them ? Nay, It is Allah Whom ye should more justly fear, if ye believe!"

In traditional Islamic commentaries, such us *Tafsir Al-Jalalayn*, this verse refers to the polytheist Arabs of Mecca who sought to expel the Prophet Muhammad, the Messenger of God, and then attacked the Muslims of Medina, Al-Mahalli & Al-Suyuti (2007). Yusuf, however, reinterprets the verse, stripping it from its historical context to demonstrate Western hatred for Islam. Those who "plotted to expel the Messenger", who did not honor him, are associated with the authors of the 2005 Danish cartoons. By their actions, they rejected the Prophet as if they had expelled him, and "being the first (to assault) you", meaning they attacked Muslims by insulting their religion. Yusuf's conclusion, starting from this verse, was that Muslims must show hostility both toward the West and toward the pro-Western Nigerian authorities, headed at that time by Christian president Goodluck Jonathan. Furthermore, Yusuf believed that the only solution for Muslims to live safely in Nigeria was to fight the government, Kassim & Nwankpa (2018).

In shaping this vision, the group draws on several key figures from Islamic history. One of these is Ibn Taymiyya, who justified fighting against the Mongols who had formally converted to Islam but were considered apostates for not enforcing Sharia, and who developed the *takfir* doctrine applied to those accepting non-Islamic laws. Boko Haram adopted these ideas and applied them to the Nigerian state and its collaborators. In a recorded sermon transcribed by Kassim & Nwankpa (2018), Muhammad Yusuf compared the plight of Muslims in Nigeria persecuted by the government to earlier historical events:

> "Should we sit and remain quiet, when all carnage that occurred in Iraq during the time of the Mongols is exactly what they will replicate here?"

In addition to Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhab (1703–1792), founder of the Wahhabi movement, Usman dan Fodio (1754–1817), leader of the *Fulani Jihād* (1804–1903) who founded the Sokoto Caliphate, is used as a local precedent for overthrowing an illegitimate regime and establishing a legitimate Sharia-based state. Other figures referenced by the group include Sayyid Qutb and Abu A'la Al-Maududi (1903–1979). In the second half of the 20th century, they promoted the idea of *jihād* as a means to globally overthrow non-Islamic regimes and establish God's laws, both defensively and offensively – ideas that Boko Haram integrated into its rhetoric of global Islamic solidarity and support for external causes (Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan, etc.). For Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda also provides an organizational and tactical model – suicide bombings, use of explosives, kidnappings for ransom, global propaganda – with documented evidence of cooperation with its North African branch, including financial and logistical support, Zenn (2014) and Rusin (2021).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion to our brief presentation on the divergent interpretations of *jihād* in West Africa, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the comparison between the Sufi brotherhood Al-Muridiyyah in Senegal and the Islamist group Boko Haram in Nigeria shows that *jihād* can be interpreted in radically different ways depending on the geographical, social, historical, and doctrinal context. Under the influence of Amadou Bamba, the Murids transformed *jihād* into an inner spiritual struggle focused on self-purification, work, and religious discipline, rejecting armed violence and strengthening peaceful coexistence. By contrast, Boko Haram redefines *jihād* as a permanent war against "unbelievers," the Nigerian state, and Western modernity, using selective interpretations of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition to legitimize violence.

Second, the practical consequences of these doctrinal-ideological redefinitions are highly significant. While the Al-Muridiyyah brotherhood has turned the concept into a tool of social cohesion and peaceful resistance, creating a climate of tolerance and security in Senegal, Boko Haram has instrumentalized it to justify violence and chaos, leading to destabilization and massive loss of life in Nigeria. These divergent interpretations show that Islam is not a monolithic block and that, depending on leaders, doctrines, and social conditions, the same notion can lead either to stability and progress or to radicalization and destruction.

Lastly, the comparative historical analysis has been very useful in understanding these differences: the colonial and postcolonial context, the personal experiences of religious leaders, and the doctrinal legacy have shaped divergent interpretations of the same concept, demonstrating that history is an indispensable interpretative key in the study of contemporary Islamist phenomena.

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