

THE ISLAMIC SECRET SCIENCE:

Intention and conflict: orders of the in-between

By Tobias Kuhn (BIGSAS, Bayreuth)

Abstract

This working paper aims to provide an insight into my dissertation, which challenges questions of knowledge transmission, authority and conflict in the context of Senegalese Sufi Islam. My dissertation project is based on several field research periods in Senegal between 2005 and 2010. By analysing the use of different magical and spiritual techniques I looked at concepts like secrecy and intentionality. During the fieldwork I followed two approaches: first I accompanied Marabouts as an apprentice and tried to learn as much as possible about their magical science. Secondly I analyzed cases of conflicts in an inductive manner and thereby illustrated the views of the actors involved. One aim of my PhD Theses is to look from a phenomenological perspective at the tensions and relation between a concrete social dimension and an abstract esoteric dimension. After clarifying some major terms and giving an overview of the context, here I will mainly discuss two aspects of my theses: Firstly, the concept of intention as part of the Islamic secret science, secondly, the nature of the conflicts arising with regard to the application of the spiritual science used by Senegalese Marabouts.

Marabouts in Senegal act as Quran teachers, leaders of economic and politic networks, as healers, judges, mediators in conflict situations, spiritual and personal guides, magicians, Coran teachers, psychologists and religious authorities. They use different social and magical techniques in order to solve the problems of their clients. In the Senegalese society as well as in the community of Senegalese Marabouts there is an ongoing discourse about legitimate and illegitimate use of magical science. Some of the used techniques seem to be incompatible; as a result conflicts can arise, for example between indigenous esoteric knowledge and purely Islamic ones. With regard function and practice the Marabout is a rather heterogeneous figure. Therefore, using this term contains a risk because it lacks clearness and theoretical consistence. The term is questioned and criticized also for other reasons. From a historical perspective Seesemann considers the continuous uncritical application of the term Marabout as an example of the persistence of colonial notions. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when French authorities began to try to tighten their control over their Muslim citizens in West Africa, Marabout became a label for village imams, amulet makers, and local as well as regional saints. Marabout could signify anyone from a charlatan to the head of a Sufi community, and it came to describe the paradigmatic prototype of “*African Islam*” which seemed to differ from other “*Islam*”. By the 1950s, representatives of Islamic reform movements and even “*secularists*” appropriated the term for polemical purposes, using it to refer to Muslim leaders whom they saw as false saints and as collaborators with the colonial regime. For Seesemann *Maraboutism is the rhetorical device in which preconceived notions*

of “African Islam” and debased Sufism converge, it trivializes the religious experience of African Muslims, it denies their capacity to rise to the spiritual heights of the “real” Sufis of the Golden Age, and it presents them as ignorant and masses prone to superstition and exploitation at the hands of fraudulent, self-interested leaders.¹ Nevertheless, the terms Marabout and Maraboutism have been employed to characterize West African Muslim societies and expressions of Sufism in an uninterrupted chain well into the recent past². Today the term is used in the Senegalese society without a particularly negative connotation to describe an ambiguous figure between a saint and a fraudulent magician. The history of this term and particularly the existence of such actors, who consider themselves as Marabouts seemed to underscore the idea of a *(re)construction* of new Islamic identities in a transforming social and religious setting as many scientific approaches in the recent past suggest.³ At this, it is assumed that political liberalization, economic changement and increased global interconnections have all profound effects on Muslim societies and the practice of Islam. In these contributions the Marabout is often described as an adapting *religious entrepreneur* inside a changing marked. In opposition to these constructive perspectives I aim here to emphasis on some *unchanging* structural aspects with regard to the practice of the Senegalese Marabouts. Despite critics and lack of clearness I decided to use the term Marabout in my theses, mainly because the term already incorporates the ambivalences between magic and religion, between *(re)construction* and tradition, between continuity and transformation and above all the term is used by the actors themselves. Being conscious about the heterogeneity of the term Marabout I will follow a minimalistic definition in order to narrow down the term and to point out the indispensable, timeless and outstanding characteristics:

1. A Marabout is an Islamic religious specialist and a teacher who is rooted in the context of Sufi Islam.
2. He applies a distinct Islamic secret science called *ilm-al-asrar*⁴.

Even if some Senegalese Marabouts combine this science with other indigenous practices they have at least a rudimentary knowledge of the *al-asrar* otherwise they will not call

¹ Seesemann (2011), S. 14 ff

² Paul Marty in the 1910s to Fernand Quesnot and Alphonse Gouilly in the 1950s, Jean-Claude Froelich and Vincent Monteil in the 1960s, Christian Coulon and Jean Copans in the 1980s, culminating in the publication of the edited volume *Le temps des marabouts* in 1997. Lucy Behrman, Donal Cruise O’ Brien, and Martin Klein in the 1960s and 1970s (in addition to Ernest Gellner in his studies of northern Africa); Christopher Gray in the 1980s; Leonardo Villalon in the 1990s and Kuczinsky, Soares and Gemmeke between 2000 and 2010.

³ cf Soares & Otayek (2008)

⁴ *Al-asrar*, the secrets, is the plural of the Arabic word *sirr* it can be also translated as the inner heard ore the real nature, it is related to the verb *sarra/yassuru* what means being happy. So this word thus not really contains the same ambivalent aspects of the English word secrecy, which derives from the Latin verb *secenere* what means to separate.

themselves Marabout. Despite that fact, some authors use the term Marabout to describe all kind of traditional healers and other magicians settled in Nord-West-Africa⁵. In recent contributions Marabouts often also appear as actors which offer distinct Islamic services⁶ in the *occult market*. Yet, focusing mainly on economical rationalities seems to me misleading in the case of the West African Marabouts.

One reason for such one-sided interpretations is the ignorance of the nature and existence of a distinctive Islamic secret science. The “*timeless*”, semantical and structural aspects of this science are shaping the concrete and spiritual life of the Marabouts more than any changing societal or economical reality. Without understanding the nature of their practice many aspects of the Marabouts’ world remain vague. Most western scientists completely ignored the existence of a distinctive Islamic secret science. And some of those who emphasized on the weight of such an *Islamic esoteric science*⁷ reduced it mainly to its functional and economical aspects without taking in account the content.⁸ One of the aims of my dissertation was to describe the *ilm-al-asrar* in its modes of application in order to differentiate it from other practices and to put it in relation to societal and theological questions. I tried to give an insight in the *al-asrar* by looking at its cosmology, its ethics, its mode of operating and knowledge transmission and the metaphysical conception which underlies this science. It will burst the frame to go in detail. However, I will shortly point out some significant characteristics:

1. The speech and writing of the Arabic literary language stays in the centre. *La science de letter (al-simiya)* which is part of the *ilm-al-asrar* can be seen as the Islamic equivalent to the Jewish kabala.⁹
2. The central aim of the *al-asrar* is enlightening and transformation. The transformation implies all aspects of the person until the subject itself gets an element of this science.
3. Essential for the application is the knowledge about the *Names of God*. This knowledge is transmitted in a tradition chain from one person to another. It enables the subject to do spiritual research and to become a teacher.
4. The spiritual centre of this knowledge is an unbroken tradition chain of epiphany which goes back to the Prophet.
5. All real and reliable knowledge are transmitted by *rawhani* which are part of the angelic hierarchies. It exist a strict distinction between spiritual entities who belongs to the

⁵ Gemmeke (2009)

⁶ Soares (2005)

⁷ The designation *Islamic esoteric science* is coined by Brenner (1985, 2000) in order to describe different episteme of Islamic education. Afterwards the term was mainly used by Soares (2005, 2007) who was focusing on economical rationalities of the actors applying it.

⁸ Soares (2007)

⁹ Lory (2004)

category of *djinn* and those who belong to the category of angels. *Rawhani* are not created in the sense as humans or *djinns*, they exist only through the invocation of the *Names of God*.

One of the central hypotheses of my dissertation is that there are ongoing conflicts between different magical techniques as well as between different social and theological conceptions, concerning the application of the spiritual or secret science. I tried to show the nature of these conflicts on an individual, societal and theological level. On the individual level the confrontation with secrecy is a crucial point. Secrets are always something contested, so they are one possible sources of conflict. What happens with the individual being introduced in a secret and confronted with secrecy? „*Das Geheimnis*“, writes Georg Simmel in his *Soziologie*, „*ist eine der größten Errungenschaften der Menschheit*“¹⁰. He refers mainly to the relation between something secret and something what is publicly known as a constitutive element of social structures. Following this conception, secrecy is constitutive for every person, family, and for every social, political or mystical body. From a normative point of view there are good and bad secrets. The first one can constitute a positive relationship, whereas the second is the basis for negative dynamics of dependency. Concerning the practice of the Marabouts, the part which remains secret is always bigger as the part which opens up. With other words, the initiation in a secret leaves you with a new level of secrecy and uncertainty at least in my stage of knowledge. To be introduced in a secret does not mean to know the nature of the secret; it means first and foremost to get part of something. By the means of elaborating my own personal conflicts in the confrontation with secrecy I tried to go further in comparing them with general societal problems in the research setting. On the societal level I observed conflicts between different esoteric and magical practises. Examples for these conflicts are mystical fights between Marabouts or between Marabouts and other magicians. Another example are the differing attitudes towards a widely spread possession phenomenon which is called the *Rab*. A *Rab* is seen as a kind of *djinn* who attacks certain family members under certain circumstances, the ways of treating and interpreting this phenomenon differ strongly, there are healing methods which try to reconcile the victim with the *Rab* and other which are more based on a kind of exorcism. Summing up, a result of my approach is that the concrete application of the Islamic secret science remains ambivalent to the clients as well as to the Marabout himself. In my thesis I also discuss the different aspects of this ambivalence with regard to theological and moral questions.

¹⁰ Simmel (1992:406)

Especially the first part of my dissertation introduces into the requirements of such a research. I pick up the issue of the emotional conditions of that kind of apprenticeship. I try to show how different attitudes and episteme of learning affect the approach and the outcome of the learning process. I try to show what happened between me and my Marabout, how it came that I decided to become an apprentice and what are the means and conditions of knowledge transmission in this setting. By analysing this processes I become aware that their structure can be compared with Husserl's phenomenological approach. Husserl declares that mental and spiritual dimensions possess their own reality independent of any physical basis. At this, the concept of intentionality plays a crucial role. I do not want go deeper into Husserl's oeuvre because it will get too complicated. What I will do here is looking at the meaning of intention in my research setting.

Phenomenologists share the assumption that there is no consciousness without intention, but on the other hand there is a lot of intention without consciousness. With other words, there is an interest behind every act of awareness, it is this interest which structures and limits our way of becoming aware of something. Marabouts are convinced that most people are not able to be conscious about the inner motivations or interests which are pushing them. According to the Marabouts the intention is located in the heart of the person, it is not an idea but it is a kind of motivation which predetermines human thinking and action. The transformation of intention is a central concern of the *al-asrar*. The stages for this are, in a first step to become aware of your own inner intentions, in a second step to work on your own intention and to accelerate your capacity to take an intention and in the last step to design or to influence your intention or intentions of other people. This transformative process takes places by means of interaction with the spiritual entities. The Marabout act inside this framework as a mediator and guide. The transformation of the intentions of the subject is more or less something what happens and not something what is achieved or produced, the *Islamic secret science* provides only the keys necessary to connect the subject. The comparison of the work of the Marabouts with Husserl's phenomenological approach on human consciousness is inspired by the research of Knut Graw on senegambien divination practices. In his Paper, *Locating Nganiyo: Divination as an intentional Space*¹¹ he points out that the location of the intention of the client plays a central role in divination practices. Following Graw, divination is not only about knowing the future, but also about the creation of an *intentional space* which allows involving the individual in a transformative process. Graw emphasises at the positive aspects of this transformative process because he identifies the possible transformation of the perspectives

¹¹ Graw (2006)

and intentions of the individual as a way which allows the subject to develop a more positive sense of his or her future. I cannot completely share Graws optimistic view on senegambien divination practices because the so created *intentional space* also allows to manipulate and to condition the subject. Yet, I follow his phenomenological approach which makes it possible to overcome a purely descriptive view and to look at semantical and structural principles. Also Marabouts create *intentional spaces*, they can do so towards their clients in a divination session as well as they can do so towards their disciples. The means for creating such a space are concrete technical ones but also abstract and mystical ones. Within the framework of a teacher-apprentice relationship proving and transforming the intentions of the apprentice is the beginning of every secret lection. From time to time the apprentice gets confronted with his intentions, and the teacher shows simultaneously what the effects of these intentions are, but the way how the Marabout do this remains rather secret.

Theoretically, I chose a comparative and partly phenomenological approach, simplified spoken this means to overcome a purely descriptive and positivistic approach. The aim was to look from the perspective of the actors at the relations and tensions between concrete social and abstract spiritual dimensions. At the concrete social level we can observe what is described by constructivists as an increasingly pluralizing and competitive religious marked. Within the *religious market* Senegalese Marabouts are acting like *entrepreneurs* but within my research setting they were acting like humans. All of them differ in intention and acting. Despite that they share a common challenge which is determined by the rules of the *al-asrar*. By looking at the substantial aspects of their spiritual practice I tried to overcome reductive approaches which are mainly based on economical or functional rationalities. On the other hand I describe also social dynamics and follow more constructive or *(re)constructive* ideas. Personally, I feel a kind of being *in-between*, between the different approaches as well as between different realities. In one way the modern urban Marabout and the Anthropologist share something in common. Both are located between times, between cultures, between theories, between thinking and dreaming, between realities, between esoteric and science and so on. In this sense I follow the famous anthropologist Paul Stoller who recently wrote a book "*The Power of the Between*"¹². According to him it seems to be the anthropologist's fate to always be between things. But rather than lament this, Stoller celebrates the creative power of the between, showing how it can transform us, changing our conceptions of who we are, what we know, and how we live in the world.

¹² Stoller(2009)

Literature

Brenner, Louis (2000). *Controlling Knowledge. Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Society*. London: Hurst & Company.

Brenner, L (1985). *The „esoteric sciences“ in West African Islam*. In: (Hrsg) Du Toit und Abdalla. *African Healing Strategies*. Buffalo: Trado-Medic-Books.

Graw, K. (2006). *Locating Nganiyo: divination as intentional space*. *Journal of religion in Africa*, 36 (1), 78-119.

Hamès C. Hrsg. (2007) *Coran et talismans*. Paris: Karthala.

Husserl (1913). *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, Halle(Saale): Max Niemeyer Verlag.

Lory, Pierre (2004). *La science de lettres en Islam*. Paris: Édition Dervy.

Seesemann (2011). *Studying Sufism in Context*. In print.

Simmel. G. (1908 [1992]). *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot Verlag,

Soares, B. (2007). *Les sciences ésotériques des musulmanes et le commerce des amulettes au Mali*. In : Hamès C. Hrsg. (2007) *Coran et talismans*. Paris: Karthala.

Soares, Benjamin (2005). *Islam and the Prayer Economy*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Soares & Otayek (2008). *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*. New York: Palgrave.

Stoller, Paul (2008). *The Power of the Between, An Anthropological Odyssey*. Chicago: The University of. Chicago Press.