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Ecce Homo; Ecce Waliyo: Kombo Sillah – A Hero on a West African Stage

Abstract

On the 29th September 1875, after twenty-five years of bloody jihad, Ibrahima Touray, commonly known as Kombo Sillah, proclaimed the Islamic State of Kombo. Situated in the western part of nowadays Gambia, he is considered there as a national hero today, due to his efforts in establishing Islamic structures and his success in converting the people of the region to Islam. In the present time, *Kombo Sillah Drive*, one of the conurbation's arterial roads is named after him. Despite his heroisation and his impact on Gambia's religious topography, so far there is no more than one short biographical work done on Kombo Sillah, scratching his extraordinary personality, and his socio-political setting in transition, only on the surface. My PhD-thesis attempts to fill this gap in the historiography of Islamising Africa by placing Kombo Sillah's strive for power and his strong willed efforts in defending it against any arising opposition by any diplomatic and military means in his variously changing political, religious and social environment of the long nineteenth century.

My main question of interest is why Kombo Sillah was assigned the role of military commander of the Muslim army while being an Islamic scholar and not a soldier. The hypothetic answer is to be found in Kombo Sillah's social position as a saint, which was justified by the doctrine of West African Sufism, and the spiritual powers attached to this function. Predictions, miracles, and spiritual attacks, and likewise protection against such attacks, played key roles in contemporary warfare. Looking at other jihad-movements in the greater region of West Africa, it seems that sainthood and leadership were closely linked in comparable cases as well. Consequently, Kombo Sillah's role as a saint takes centre stage in my PhD-thesis, as I try to reconstruct its significance to the society by analysing a rich corpus of oral traditions. Another focus will be laid on Kombo Sillah's changing relations, conflicts, and battles with non-Muslim societies, with the British settlement bordering his emirate, and also with other jihad-leaders and Muslim-towns. This I do by studying the colonial records and oral traditions, which offers many clues to explain his attempts to implement a new understanding of political power.