

TEXT-CENTRED RESEARCH: *FITNA* AS A CASE STUDY
AND A WAY FORWARD FOR GUESTS IN THE HOUSE OF
AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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John Hanson and David Robinson have made an important contribution to text-centred publication in their 1991 volume, *After the Jihad: the Reign of Aḥmad al-Kabīr in the Western Sudan*, a collection of 37 documents, mostly complete, from the period 1855 to 1893 or a little later, relating to the reign of Aḥmad al-Kabīr, son and principal successor of the Muslim reformer and conqueror in the western Sudan *al-ḥājj* °Umar al-Fūṭī, who died in 1864. *After the Jihad* has been carefully reviewed in *SAJHS*¹ by Timothy Cleaveland. The book raises, however, a number of far-reaching issues, which could find no place within the narrow confines of a review, and these have prompted me to return to it again, in a larger room.

My purpose is threefold: firstly, to point out two basic themes (one highlighted by Hanson and Robinson, the other powerfully implicit throughout their volume), among many others, which may be drawn out of even this relatively small sample of the surviving original documentation; secondly, and most extensively in this present paper, to focus upon a single word, *fitna*, and to explore—admittedly tentatively—some of the exegetical potential of such a term; and thirdly, to suggest that text-centred research and publication, as so valuably exemplified in *After the Jihad*, is presently undervalued, and deserves thoughtful reappraisal, and substantial promotion within the hierarchy of Western academic priorities with regard to black Africa.

1 4, 1993, 223-8

Sudanic Africa, 5, 1994, 225-260

*Two basic themes**The Umarians and the French*

The documents include local chronicles and poetry, official documents (both Muslim and French), a *fatwā* or judicial opinion (or perhaps two), and a great deal of correspondence—amongst Muslims themselves either within the western Sudan, and between them and their co-religionists in North Africa, or the French.

It is particularly the letters to the French which I should like to consider here. Some are included in *After the Jihad*, and there are more. But it is striking how relatively little attention is given to the French in these documents: no. 5, for instance, a letter to Tijāniyya colleagues in Morocco, summarising the Umarian *jihād*, does not mention the French at all. Even when the Umarians were writing directly *to* the French, the general tenor of this discourse is aloof, with the Muslims looking towards separation, *hijra*, more or less turning their backs on the French intruders pressing in from the west. Hanson and Robinson rightly stress that such evidence does not back up the picture, preferred alike by French colonialists and historians on the one hand, and on the other by modern Islamic and some nationalist authors—a picture of the *jihād* as primarily defending local independence against European encroachment. Nor, indeed, does the evidence bear out ‘the images of fanatic Muslims and a large empire ... which inform much of the existing literature and the French archival sources upon which that literature depends’ (p. 2).

Population mobility and demographic resources

This, the second theme I should like to mention, is perhaps the most persistent and fundamental strand running throughout *After the Jihad*. Indeed, I am convinced that a demographic history of Islam in black Africa would be a most rewarding exercise.

Overwhelmingly the most important form of Umarian migration was eastwards, from Futa Toro and elsewhere in Senegambia, into the conquered Bambara realms of Karta and Segu, even into Masina, already a Muslim Fulani theocracy but overt-

brown nonetheless by the Umarians. Karta was the most accessible and attractive region; tens of thousands of Umarian colonists settled there (p. 8). Much effort was expended on persuading,² and in some instances even forcing,³ people to leave their homes and go east. Or farther east, for Aḥmad tried constantly, albeit with what the editors call notable lack of success, to persuade people to move on from Karta to the middle Niger (p. 12; see also 94, 100 note 48, 102 ff.). Action was sometimes needed also to prevent recruits and volunteers from having second thoughts, and attempting to escape back to Karta or to the Senegal valley (pp. 48, 191). Any defeat suffered by the Umarian forces, such as that at Saga Fondo in February 1895, with a thousand *jihād*ist casualties, might provoke damaging defections (p. 259 note 43; see also 273).

As far as the French were concerned, in the early days of the Umarian movement they may have regarded emigration eastwards as a convenient safety valve, removing over-ebullient spirits from the immediate stage (p. 241). Relatively good relations between Umarians and French at this period depended upon the freedom of Umarian supporters to emigrate; as late as 1869-70, Aḥmad was writing in quite friendly terms to the French, asking them not to hinder emigration and *hijra*, neither to let the local authorities—who were naturally anxious at the prospect of losing people: food-producers, tax-payers, military recruits, and similar—in Futa Toro interfere with such movement (pp. 167-70; see also 10-11, 47).

Nevertheless, in the longer term the French were as interested as the Umarians in conserving demographic resources for themselves (as well as denying such resources to their enemies, actual or potential), as illustrated by the way in which they

2 The whole of Section 8, 'Correspondence east-west', concerns migration (p. 106-21; see additional references on pp. 4-5, 13, 49, 51, etc.).

3 See, for example Document 8B, 'Umar's own letter to eastern Futa, in contrast to 13D, an emigrant's letter which is noticeably tolerant of stay-at-homes. 'Umar orders his lieutenants at home to use force to drive named recruits eastwards; if the recruits do not comply, they will be cursed. The second letter mildly solicits the prayers of those stay-at-homes unable to join the *jihād*.

appointed as *lam toro*, ruler of the principal province of Futa Toro, a prominent local Muslim of whom they did not altogether approve, but who had forced their hands by threatening to lead a massive emigration to the east (p. 115). In 1878 the Governor of Senegal was writing about the dangers of depopulation (pp. 182-3). Towards the end of the saga, in 1891, a French decree forbade any further movement eastwards towards Karta, of whatever kind, even by people going in search of missing kinsfolk, but at the same time setting up elaborate arrangements to encourage and facilitate the return to Futa Toro of earlier emigrants. In February of that year, large groups of Umarians, including about 7,500 captured by the French commander Archinard, returned from Niore in Karta to their homes in Futa Toro.⁴

There had also been some movement of people away from the Umarians, and into the French sphere. °Umar himself complained bitterly about this in a letter of 1855 to the Senegambian Muslims (p. 110); Muslim-owned slaves might seek emancipation at French posts, to the dismay of their erstwhile masters (p. 182 note 11).⁵

Hijra, that symbolic act by which Muḥammad separated himself from the unbearable circumstances which he found in Mecca, and which has been emulated again and again by pious and discontented Muslims ever since, is clearly a highly significant category of population mobility, adding to the demographic calculation an ideological imperative, and condemning utterly the

4 David Robinson, *Chiefs and Clerics: the History of Abdul Bokar Kan and Futa Toro: 1853-1891*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975, 157-8 and n. 4. Apparently, though it is not quite one hundred percent clear from Robinson's account here, or from *After the jihad* (241-2 and n. 2), the French were deliberately repatriating such people. That would fit with the demographic theme.

5 The quantity of demographic data far exceeds the bounds of even a full-length article. One further snippet, which it would be a pity to overlook, is this description, by an Umarian cleric, of the curse which he had called down upon an opponent of the *jihād*: 'O God, kill Du and destroy him. Break his unity and scatter his people from around him and bring his power to an end' (*After the Jihad*, 215; my italics).

context from which the *muhājir* withdraws. An index entry would have been very helpful indeed; the actual index in *After the Jihad* is the most disappointing component in the book. *Al-hājj* ʿUmar had made *hijra*—or *fergo*, in the Pular language⁶—from the French-contaminated Senegambian region in the west a cardinal principle in his recruitment policy, a scathing, even if partly implicit, indictment of those regions and their French overlords. The editors make ʿUmar’s policy clear in this respect, though it seem that neither of the two documents which they cite in this connection mentions *hijra* explicitly (p. 51; see also 10-11). The difficulties of Aḥmad’s position, after his father’s death, prevented him from recommending as persuasively and emphatically as ʿUmar had done the *hijra* option to potential *jihādists* still sluggishly accommodating themselves to French influence in the west. In his 1869 letter to the French, urging free movement of population, he said that all the territory from Médine to the coast belonged to the French—‘a very strong admission’ on his part, as the editors rightly remark (p. 168 and note 6). But, since Aḥmad in the same sentence uses the term *hijra*, he is making clear (to those with eyes to see) just how unacceptably French control had defiled all that area. Whether the French picked up such textual vibrations in full I rather doubt.⁷ It is significant that Aḥmad, when he had himself to embark upon renewed *hijra*, towards Sokoto and away from the remorselessly advancing French, became for the first time a ‘unifier and symbol of the Umarian movement’ (p. 9), though even then ‘more as an icon of their common enterprise than as a ruler with real authority’ (p. 12; see also 15, 256, 261 and note 56).

Slavery, and raiding and trading in slaves, constituted another important means of mobilising demographic resources, and of ensuring the organised mobility of population; a means, however, often over-emphasised both in local chronicles and in secondary sources. It is perhaps significant that the present documents pay relatively little attention to the slavery theme. Also

6 ‘Flight’, used on p. 117 interchangeably with ‘migration’ and ‘emigration’ is not really a satisfactory translation.

7 For a similar *double entendre* which may have been lost upon the French, see the discussion of *jizya*, below.

significant may be the fact that one of the principal references is an attempt to undo the wrongful enslavement of free Muslims (pp. 159-62), a fundamental and recurrent theme in the development of Islam in western Africa:

Endeavour to send back the freeborn [who have been seized]... If you know [where they are], send them back [immediately]. If you do not know, try hard to find them so that you can send them back.	[Raiders] have snatched away some of our free people... So pray send to all your territory ... [to] look and search and discover... When the truth is clear to you release them. Restore them to their freedom and to Islam.
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The left-hand passage appears in *After the Jihad*, the right-hand comes from a letter to the sultan of Egypt from Borno. Identical sentiments: yet almost 500 years separate the two appeals, about 1874 and 1391 respectively. The Borno letter is the earliest surviving Arabic document to emerge from within western Africa.⁸

Such transgression, manifestly illegal in theory, gained added piquancy in practice from the fact that it violated two of the major principles of Islamic development in western Africa, the definition and preservation of the Muslim community, and the mobilisation of demographic resources on behalf of that community. A particularly painful instance of wrongful enslavement is referred to in one of the documents; in 1890, the commentators explain, when Segu fell into French hands, 'members of the royal family were taken and distributed to the indigenous captors as wives or slaves' (p. 247 and note 32). When the shoe is on the other foot, naturally, the tune changes, as in these lines from a triumphalist poem celebrating a victory of the Umarian soldiery:

They are brave and patient youth
 who have fought the heathen for a long time.
 Many tyrants deserted their wives

8 For its full text in English and some discussion see J.F.P. Hopkins and N. Levtzion (trans. and ed.), *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981, 347-8.

and let all their lands and people be inherited [by Muslims].
(p. 99)

The rough and ready treatment of these unfortunate womenfolk, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, is a pointer to the highly important sexual dimension of local slavery, highlighted in the request in one letter for ‘a fine and precious slave girl’ (pp. 174 (English), 357 line 9 from the bottom (Arabic); see also p. 214, and elsewhere).

In-fighting amongst Muslims, leading to the acquisition of additional slaves by the victors, did not necessarily involve enslavement of freeborn co-religionists, for the slaves of the vanquished might be seized; the phrasing of one report, ‘He fell upon the village of Tinkuni and put it to flight, and seized all that was in it of slaves and possessions’—*jamī^c man fīhā min al-^cabīd wa’l-amwāl*, here (p. 164) translated as ‘all of their slaves and wealth’—might conceivably carry the implication that the people of Tinkuni were not so unambiguously non-Muslim as to be eligible themselves for direct enslavement. Another document mentions Aḥmad ‘forcibly taking with him twelve slave villages, invaluable contingents for future wars’, but it is not specified exactly whose slaves these were originally.⁹

Fitna

As a single example of the technical Islamic terms imbedded—alas, not always very accessibly—in the documents of *After the Jihad*, let us examine *fitna*, translated in Cowan and Wehr’s great dictionary as ‘temptation, trial; charm charmingness, attractiveness; enchantment captivation, fascination, enticement, temptation; infatuation; intrigue; sedition, riot, discord, dissension, civil strife’. It is but one of a considerable number of such terms in *After the Jihad*, but it is an especially good instance, not only

9 P. 220; this is from an Arabic chronicle which survives today only in two French translations; see also p. 115, where the commentary mentions many slaves given to a distinguished leader in the conquest of Karta in 1855.

being an essential element in this specific body of evidence, closely interwoven into the material which Hanson and Robinson have marshalled for us here, but also raising subtle and difficult questions, and, I believe, casting a new and clearer light over the whole vista of Muslim development in black Africa. We may tackle *fitna* from various angles: what is its meaning, in the Qur^ʿān, in its early Muslim development, and in some of its later contexts? How is it used in the Umarian documents, both those gathered by Hanson and Robinson, and other such documents? And what are some instances of other, non-Umarian, West African usage? And what general conclusions may be drawn?

*The meaning of fitna in the Qur^ʿān*¹⁰

The term is prominent in the Qur^ʿān, appearing specifically as *fitna* 34 times, and 26 times in a variety of verbal forms drawn from the same root, *f.t.n.* The overwhelming majority of these passages have the sense of a ‘trial’ or ‘temptation’, of ‘testing’ someone.¹¹ L. Gardet in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2) article on

10 The role of the Qur^ʿān in moulding and directing Muslim belief and behaviour in western Africa is clearly a subject of great importance and interest, but equally clearly, so far as I know, relatively little studied. I have myself toyed with the idea of gradually building up a commentary, or *tafsīr*, on the text of the Qur^ʿān, simply by bringing together the explanations offered by West African scholars for specific verses on specific occasions. But, despite good intentions, and even now and then an occasional spasmodic beginning, I have never carried this work through to any appreciable extent. Another approach is to carry over a particular Qur^ʿānic term into the West African context: in a tiny way, this is what I do here for *f.t.n* derivatives. For a slightly more elaborate analysis of Qur^ʿānic elements applied in Western Africa, using *s.j.d* derivatives, see my ‘*Sujūd* and symbolism: a case study in the ambiguity of symbolic ritual action in the Quran and western Africa’ in Otakar Hulec and Miloš Mendel, *Threefold Wisdom: Islam, the Arab world and Africa*, Prague 1993, 72-88.

11 It is primarily God Himself who tries and tests people in this way. When someone else is the subject, then English versions prefer alternative translations ‘to persecute’, ‘to seduce’, ‘to attack’, ‘to give trouble’, ‘to mislead’, and so on (4: 101, 5: 49, 7: 27, 10: 83: 17: 73, 37: 162, 85: 10). The seriously negative connotations of the term, when it is applied to human behaviour, will continue uppermost

fitna speaks of many Qur^ʿānic occurrences ‘with the sense of temptation or trial of faith’;¹² Gardet refers here to R. Blachère’s French translation, *tentation d’abjurer*, being tempted to apostatise, to forswear or to abandon the faith. This French rendering, as we shall see, has been taken up with enthusiasm by two of *al-ḥājj* ʿUmar’s other major editors, Mahibou and Triaud, and made a lynchpin—not altogether persuasively, in my view—of their interpretation of ʿUmar’s theology.¹³

But what of discord *within* the Muslim community, which is more than hinted at by Cowan and Wehr, and which is clearly of paramount importance in West Africa? Particularly among the verbal forms, it is difficult to find any in the Qur^ʿān which lend themselves easily to the idea of such internal dissonance. When we turn to the noun *fitna*, however, we see a handful of passages which do in some measure point in such a direction. In one passage, those—and it seems that they must be Muslims, albeit errant Muslims—who misinterpret certain Qur^ʿānic verses are condemned for seeking *fitna*, discord (3: 7). In two other passages, *fitna* is associated with the hypocrites, who are, almost by definition, either within the Muslim community, or claiming to be so. The first of these two passages discusses the possibility that the hypocrites might succeed in sowing dissension, *fitna*, amongst the committed Muslims (9: 47-8).¹⁴ The second passage linking hypocrites with *fitna* is 33: 14.

In a fourth passage the reference is to people who, while not going so far as to declare themselves Muslims, had indeed made

throughout such of the West African *corpus* as we shall be able to examine here.

- 12 Gardet goes on to say that the most frequent Qur^ʿānic usage is ‘a test which is in itself a punishment inflicted by God upon the sinful, the unrighteous’, and he cites 51: 14. It is a good example, and there are many others, but I am not sure that this particular Qur^ʿānic usage is the *most* frequent.
- 13 Sidi Mohamed Mahibou and Jean-Louis Triaud (eds.), *Voilà ce qui est arrivé: Bayān mā waqaʿa dʿal-Ḥāḡḡ ʿUmar al-Fūṭ: plaidoyer pour une guerre sainte en Afrique de l’Ouest au XIX^e siècle*, Paris: C.N.R.S. 1983. See also below.
- 14 Interestingly, this passage, in the very next verse, refers to *fitna* in the more common Qur^ʿānic sense of trial or test.

friendly overtures to the Muslim community, but who later showed hostility, *fitna*, against it (4: 91). These people, though not Muslims, not even errant or hypocritical Muslims, were nevertheless in some kind of special relationship with the Muslims: they were in a Muslim context.¹⁵

There is also a trio of instances (2: 191-3 and 217, 8: 39) in which persecution—by implication persecution of Muslims by non-Muslims—has become a popular modern rendering. But it has not always been so,¹⁶ and there seems just a chance that internal strife, within the Muslim community, might be hinted at.¹⁷

Early development of the term

Somewhat surprisingly, it is this idea, so very subordinate in the Qurʾān, of internal dissension within the Muslim community, which has come to dominate the subsequent theological use of the term. The events beginning with the murder of ʿUthmān,

- 15 A fifth passage which might just hint at *fitna* as internal discord is 8: 25. This is a warning that *fitna* may strike not only those among the Muslims who are unjust. The most likely meaning here seems to be that God may send a trial or test upon a people, in some form such as pestilence or natural disaster, which will affect the just and unjust alike. But there seems also just the germ of the possibility that this might again be *fitna* as discord, which may draw even the just into the confrontation.
- 16 George Sale, in the early 18th century, gives ‘temptation to idolatry’ and ‘opposition in favour of idolatry’ (pp. 20, 23 and 129 in my undated edition, published by Frederick Warne in London and New York); Sale uses italics as in older editions of the English Bible, to indicate words not present in the original but introduced in the translation to clarify the meaning. N.J. Dawood gives simply ‘idolatry’ in all three cases (pp. 307, 341 and 344 in the 1959 Penguin edition). A few translators use ‘persecute’ in 8: 73, as Arberry (see below) and oddly Dawood.
- 17 The first two of this trio of passages state that *al-fitna* is worse (*ashaddu* or *akbaru*) than killing (*al-qaṭl*). Gardet in the *EI* entry cited above, refers to these two verses, and comments cryptically: ‘The idea of scandal is associated with it [*fitna*] (VII, 3 [? 3: 7]), to such an extent that to take a part in this putting to the test is for a man a very grave fault: “the fitna of believers is worse than murder”.’ But the words ‘of believers’ are not in the Arabic of either of the two verses.

third of the four rightly-guided caliphs, and culminating in the seizure of power by Mu‘āwiya, founder of the Umayyad dynasty, all within a few years of the Prophet Muḥammad’s death, came to be known as the first or great *fitna*, the *fitna par excellence*. Perhaps recalling how rapidly *fitna* had thus convulsed the early Muslim community, Usuman dan Fodio, *al-ḥājj* ‘Umar’s great precursor and model, in Hausaland about 1800, wrote that only the life of the Prophet amongst the *umma*, or nation, of Islam, preserved it from *al-fitna* (a plural form of *fitna*)—‘discord’ is the equivalent chosen by Usuman’s Nigerian translator here.¹⁸ *Fitna* became a basic concept, of great symbolic value in the preoccupation of the early Muslim community with questions of continuity and survival—*fitna*, disintegration, representing of course failure to preserve the harmony of the community.¹⁹ Just such questions were of critical urgency in western Africa, a remote frontier of the Muslim world, and one exposed to many temptations and dangers. Gardet citing a considerable range of historical illustrations of *fitna*, defines it in these cases as ‘disturbances or even civil war involving the adoption of doctrinal attitudes which endanger the purity of the Muslim faith’.²⁰

Various contexts

The phenomenon of *fitna* may emerge in a very wide variety of different contexts. Wansbrough, speaking of the very early days of the development of Islam, says that the term symbolically enshrined ‘hostility, or at least ... tension, between secular authority and the ethical demands of a pious minority’.²¹ Or, to move into a very different area, *fitna* may describe the destabilis-

18 Ismail A.B. Balogun, *The Life and Works of ‘Uthman Dan Fodio*, Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau 1975 (reprinted 1981), 71, lines 7-8 (Arabic), 75-6 (English).

19 See for example, John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1978, 139-40. See also p. 119-20, where Wansbrough emphasises that the first or great *fitna* was a crisis concerning the concept of authority within the Muslim community.

20 ‘Fitna’, *EI* (2); see also III, 494b and 495b.

21 Wansbrough, *Sectarian milieu*, 99.

ing effect of women upon society.²²

A very unusual, interesting, and apposite example of *fitna* as internal discord of a religious kind comes from the historical novel, *City of Wrong: a Friday in Jerusalem*, written by a Muslim about the events immediately leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. In the story, the prosecutor calls upon the Jewish assembly to ‘cut off this disruptive evil’, referring to Jesus, and the word used in the Arabic original is *fitna*. The prosecutor speaks also of heresies, which threaten to undermine the Jewish people and faith from within. This is exactly right as an illustration of the common Muslim understanding of *fitna*; and I imagine that it may also be a fairly shrewd assessment of Jewish reactions at the time of Jesus’ trial.²³

- 22 See, for a modern example, Donal B. Cruise O’Brien and Christian Coulon, *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988, 117. There, Coulon writes: ‘The fact that fundamentalist Islamic discourse considers strict moral standards for women an essential cure for economic and social ills reveals an institutionalized mistrust of women. Much Islamic literature describes both Arab and African women as potentially dangerous and a source of disorder (*fitna*) and alleges that some are particularly vulnerable to Western habits, associated in purist minds with decadence and perversion. Although Coulon himself uses ‘disorder’ here, such views seem also to echo the primary Qur’ānic concept of *fitna* as temptation, testing, trial. See also F. Mernissi, *Sexe, idéologie, islam*, Paris: Éditions Tierce 1983.
- 23 M. Kamel Hussein (trans. Kenneth Cragg), London: Geoffrey Bles 1959, xvii and 30. Cragg comments: ‘... *Fitnah*, a Qur’ānic expression of considerable complexity. In some sense it means merely ‘trial’ or ‘test of loyalty’ as when, for example, the early Muslim fighters found the wish to stay safely with their children and evade battle duty a ‘temptation’ ... (Sura viii.28). But in other more frequent contexts the word has the implication of sedition and civil strife which jeopardise the political progress of Islam. Such *Fitnah* is to be forcibly countered until it surrenders. This selfsame plea of *Fitnah*, the enormity to be smashed and broken, is used against Jesus ...’. If the ‘more frequent contexts’ refer to the way in which the term is used in the Qur’ān, then Cragg is mistaken, for as we have seen the overwhelming majority of references there are to ‘trial’, ‘test of loyalty’, ‘temptation’. But he is right for later development, when the term *fitna* became more and more closely associated with ‘sedition and civil strife’—not always, not even mostly, political, I think—

However, in whatever particular context *fitna* may be perceived, it is almost always a context within the Muslim community, setting believer against believer. *Fitna* seems not to occur between the Muslim community on the one hand, and independent non-Muslims on the other; though, as will become clear a little further along in the argument, and as we delve into the data supplied by Hanson and Robinson, I suggest that *fitna* may indeed occur between Muslim and *dependent* non-Muslims, whose status is fundamentally defined (at least in Muslim eyes by their position as *dhimmīs* (protected, albeit second-class, persons) within an overall Muslim hierarchy.²⁴

Fitna in the Umarian documentation

In After the Jihad

If we apply this understanding of *fitna*, as internal Muslim dissension often of a religious kind, to the passages employing this term in the sources assembled by Hanson and Robinson, we shall find, first of all, that it is there immediately confirmed—and then, as we proceed, that it raises rather interesting questions, and throws, perhaps, new light on the way in which events, and

within the Muslim community. Page 30 refers to the undermining heresies.

24 Another Christian-related example, following on from the previous note, but illustrating also the *dhimmī* theme, may occur in the anti-Christian apologetic of the Aḥmadiyya founder, Ghulam Aḥmad, in nineteenth-century British India. He believed it his duty to save the Muslim community from the *ṣalībī fitna*, or *fitnat al-naṣārā*, the Christian *fitna*, or *fitna* of the Christians. Yohanan Friedmann (*Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Aḥmadi Religious Thought and its Medieval Background*, University of California Press 1989, 108) translates *fitna* here as calamity. But there may also be a twofold overtone of internal dissonance: first because traditional Islamic theology regards Christians as, in origin, lapsed or corrupted Muslims; and secondly, because Ghulam Aḥmad claimed to be the Promised Messiah, the returned Christ, of a purified Christianity, placing, I suggest, those Christians who reject his claims in a redoubled state of *fitna*.

the interrelationships of different groups, were being interpreted in Muslim western Africa a century and more ago.²⁵

Describing the conflict between Aḥmad al-Bakkāy of Timbuktu and *al-ḥājj* ʿUmar in the 1860s, a letter written by a Mauritanian scholar to colleagues in Morocco reports, 'the fire of civil war was rekindled after it had abated and the union of Muslims was torn asunder after it had been created.'²⁶ Here, 'civil war' translates *fitna*—*fitna*, clearly, with a vengeance. The Mauritanian observer provides us with almost a perfect nutshell definition of *fitna*.

A second instance concerns grave military conflict within the local Muslim community further west, in the Senegal valley,

25 I have already remarked upon the absence of any index help in *After the Jihad*, for such specific points as *fitna*, and as a consequence my harvest of references from the volume may be a little random. Robinson's own book, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: the Western Sudan in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1985) admirably indexed, alas reveals only a very cursory interest in *fitna*. The term appears, I believe, only once, as a complaint by Masina and Timbuktu against ʿUmar. The reader is directed to the much fuller index entries of '*jihād*' and 'civil war'. I do not think that *jihād* is properly an equivalent: however much the dividing lines of lexicographic definition may become blurred in the sound and fury of present crisis, *jihād* remains essentially directed against those *outside* the Muslim community, while *fitna* is essentially situated *within* that community. As for 'civil war', there are eleven entries, almost all of them referring to fighting amongst Muslims in Senegambia. There is, however, little or no indication of any religious dimension to these controversies, and in fact one passage, referring to civil war in Segu in the mid-18th century, seems distinctly non-Muslim. Robinson does not divulge whether his Arabic sources use the term *fitna* for any of these instances. John Ralph Willis, on the other hand, refers frequently to the *fitna* between Masina and the Umarians, though it is in some cases not quite clear to his reader whether the term emerges itself from the historical record at this or that specific point, or is being introduced and employed by Willis as a diagnostic tool of his own (*In the Path of Allah: the Passion of al-Hajj ʿUmar an essay into the Nature of Charisma in Islam*, London: Frank Cass 1989, 166 (wrongly indexed as 167), 176, 180, 185, 195, 205, 220 ff). See also Willis' Glossary entry (229): 'Civil war amongst Muslims; temptation; persecution'.

26 *After the Jihad*, 318 line 4 from the bottom (Arabic), 86 (English).

between a local leader, Aḥmad Maḥdī, who claimed that his father was the *maḥdī* and that he himself was ‘Isā, the returned Jesus, on the one hand, and on the other Aḥmad’s Muslim opponents, supported in this instance by the French. The translation refers to ‘a real civil war’; the Arabic is *al-ḥaqīqa bi’l-ḥaqīqa*, truly *ḥaqīqa*.²⁷

A third similar passage concerns a returning pilgrim, who finds even the brethren, *al-ikhwān*, indulging in ‘strife’—here the Arabic is *al-ḥikwān*, another plural form.²⁸ Dismayed, he crosses the Senegal river, cutting himself off from such company—‘I fled with my religion’, *ḥarartu bi-dīnī*.²⁹

Of the three passages just cited, the second and third both link *ḥikwān* in one way or another with *shirr* or *sharr*, translated as ‘enmity’ and ‘iniquity’ respectively—I think the context prefers ‘enmity’.³⁰

In all these three instances, *ḥikwān* clearly refers to serious tension, explicitly or probably of a religious kind, *within* the Muslim community, exactly as our brief introductory discussion of the evolution of the term would lead us to expect. Two further passages in *After the Jihad*, however, suggest a somewhat different setting for *ḥikwān*. In one, ‘their *ḥikwān*’ is rendered as ‘their rebellion’, and the reference is to rebellious Soninke subjects of the conquering Tokolor state.³¹ In the other, Aḥmad al-Kabīr, eldest son and principal successor to *al-ḥājj* ‘Umar writes to the

27 *After the Jihad*, 358 line 8 (Arabic), 175 (English).

28 *Ibid.*, 389 line 9 (Arabic), 236 (English).

29 Hanson and Robinson (p. 236, n. 26) describe this as ‘an oblique reference to a *ḥadīth* cited in al-Bayḍāwī’s commentary on the Qur’ān 4:98’; the passage was well-known in nineteenth-century Western Africa, quoted for example by ‘Uthmān ibn Fūdī [Usuman dan Fodio], *Bayān wujūb al-hijra ‘alā ‘l-‘ibād* (ed. and trans. F.H. El Masri), Khartoum University Press/Oxford University Press 1978, 23-4 (Arabic), 58 (English). The verb in 4: 98 is in fact from the root *h.j.r.*, which has strong pious overtones; the root *f.r.r.* is more ambiguous, as in Qur’ān 33: 13, where *fīrār* refers to the desertion of the hypocrites.

30 Pp. 358 line 5 and 389, line 9 (Arabic), 175 and 236 (English). For a Qur’ānic linkage of the two terms, see 21: 35. For another *sharr* reference, see below.

31 *After the Jihad*, 371 line 7 from the bottom (Arabic), 204 (English).

French in 1886, urging better relations between the two sides, and protesting against *fitna*, here translated four times as ‘discord’, and once as ‘strife’. Three times Aḥmad reiterates to the French, ‘We do not wish discord between us and you’.³²

Are these two passages exceptions to the rule of internal discord? Or, if we use that rule as a kind of magnifying glass through which to examine the evidence more minutely, might we find that some of the main connotations and implications in local thinking at that time, of the situation are thereby more clearly delineated? In each case, I believe, there is a double strand of internal unrest, which may be reflected, probably quite consciously, in the use of the term *fitna*.

One strand is provided by the possibility that the specific trouble—between the non-Muslim Soninke and the Muslim Tokolor, between the non-Muslim French and the Muslim Umarians—may escalate into confrontation between rival Muslim groups. In the first instance the problem was not only the very understandable reluctance of the half-subdued Soninke to pay taxes to the conquering invaders, but also a dispute amongst the Muslim invaders themselves about who should receive those taxes, and in what proportions: in this particular instance, the horrid spectacle of *fitna* between one Muslim ruler and another, squabbling over the spoils, would have been rendered still worse by the fact of the rivals being brothers. Much the same development was possible in the second instance. Here, although the tense relationship was initially that between the French and the Muslims, there was a real chance that this might engender *fitna* proper amongst the Muslims themselves, should some choose to side with the French. We have already seen one instance of such confrontation, in the case of Aḥmad Maḥdī, opposed by the French together with their Muslim colleagues.

The second strand of internal unrest involves the hypothesis that both groups—that is to say, the Soninke in the first case, the French in the second—who were at odds with the Muslims were regarded by the Muslims as already incorporated *within* the theo-

32 P. 388 lines 13, 12, 4-3 all from the bottom (Arabic), 233 (English—see also p. 231).

retical, ideal Muslim framework in western Africa. Both groups were almost certainly viewed, by the Muslims, as *dhimmi*s, protected persons, second-class clients of the Muslim authorities, to whom they paid *jizya*, the tax of abasement. In the Soninke case, this was presumably explicit. The French, on the other hand, would I imagine have been astonished at the idea that they were paying a tax of abasement to anyone. Yet the Arabic texts of the Franco-Senegalese commercial treaties, governing tolls and customs payable in Futa Toro, on the middle Senegal do use the word *jizya* for payments by the French.³³ ʿUmar shared the implications of this terminology:

on the basis of his training and his experience with the French in the early nineteenth century, the shaykh expected them to conform to a commercial vocation and the obligations of a *dhimmi* community, a non-Muslim group subordinate to but protected by the Islamic state.³⁴

In whatever way the French themselves might have understood the presents, or tolls or customs, or bribes, which they paid to the Muslims, nothing could prevent the Muslims from receiving such offerings as *jizya*. In his letter of 1855 to the Senegambian Muslims, ʿUmar announced, quoting the Qurʾān (9: 29), that he would compel the French to pay *jizya* as a token of their inferiority.³⁵

If there be any substance in the suggestion made in the preceding paragraph, that the use of the word *fitna* implies that both parties are already locked into a Muslim context, then Aḥmad's repeated protestation—we do not wish *fitna* between ourselves and you—despite its outward garb of pacific friendliness, might to the more discerning Muslim eye also re-affirm the essentially subordinate position of the non-Muslim Europeans.

Other references

The *fitna* references in the documents which Hanson and Robinson have gathered here are sufficient to suggest the impor-

33 Robinson, *Holy war*, 145-7.

34 Hanson and Robinson, in *After the Jihad*, 5; see also 109 and n. 9.

35 *After the Jihad*, 328 line 3 from the bottom (Arabic), 110 (English).

tance of the term in the Umarian context. And we may be confident that the term was not being loosely used, without due consideration, for, if we look at other Umarian documents we shall find the concept of *fitna* even more brightly highlighted.

For Umarians, *fitna* had a profound, Janus-faced significance. On the one hand, it was in Umarian eyes an objective fact, something in which other Muslims, not the Umarians themselves, were entangled. At an early stage in ʿUmar’s career, and in the highly impressionable, liminal context of the pilgrimage, he had himself witnessed *fitna* between the Fulani caliphate of Sokoto, and the ancient Muslim empire of Borno. Not only had he witnessed it, he had attempted, unsuccessfully, to heal it.³⁶

And, on the other hand, *fitna* was for the Umarians a highly subjective affair also in their violent confrontation with the Muslims of Masina and Timbuktu. ʿUmar’s opponents accused him of stirring up *fitna*; he hurled the accusation back in their teeth. This is a principal theme in a major composition by ʿUmar, the *Bayān mā waqaʿa*, published in Arabic and French under the title, *Voilà ce qui est arrivé*.³⁷ Happily, from our point of view today, ʿUmar quotes, apparently *verbatim*, some of the accusations of Aḥmad b. Aḥmad, ruler of Masina, against him, so we do have to some extent both sides of the argument. A relatively straightforward charge which Aḥmad advances is to quote the tradition of the Prophet, that whoever awakens dormant *fitna* is cursed (*malʿūn*).³⁸ Aḥmad also argues that it would be better for ʿUmar to go elsewhere and fight the enemies of God rather than provoking *fitna*.³⁹

Entirely concordant with our discussion thus far, both these

36 See for example, Willis, *In the path*, 87ff. Willis mentions also (p. 95) the prospect of *fitna* within Sokoto itself, had ʿUmar contested the succession to Muḥammad Bello, the ruler there who died during ʿUmar’s long stopover on his way home. A cautionary word: as mentioned above (note 25), it is not always clear from Willis’ text whether the actual word *fitna* is built into his original source, or how far it is a term introduced by Willis himself.

37 Mahibou and Triaud, *op.cit.*

38 *Voilà ce qui est arrivé*, 96; see also 137.

39 *Ibid.*, 103; this passage is mentioned also in the editors’ Introduction, 41, and in the nn. 250-6 on p. 67.

instances of *fitna*—Sokoto *v.* Borno, the Umarians *v.* Masina and Timbuktu—are firmly rooted within the Muslim community, one faction against another. °Umar himself laments that forbidden *fitna* which divides various kinds or parties—*aṣnāf*, *ṭawāʿif*—of Muslims.⁴⁰

This prominence for *fitna* as internecine strife seems, to me at least, maintained in part in °Umar’s own preferred *fitna* touchstone, verse 73 in chapter 8 of the Qurʾān—though °Umar himself may not have been conscious of this; I add part of the previous verse, in order to provide a fuller context:

[Emigrant believers are] friends [*awliyāʾ*°] one of another. And those who believed and did not emigrate [the root is *h.j.r*]—there are no claims upon you of relationship [*walāya*, the same root as *awliyāʾ*°] with them in anything until they have emigrated. And if they seek your help in religion, there is a claim on you to help, but not against a people between whom and yourselves there is a treaty.

As for the unbelievers, they are friends one of another. Unless you do this, there will be persecution [*fitna*] in the land and great corruption.⁴¹

My inclination is to interpret this fairly straightforwardly. First, the committed emigrant believers, who are themselves bonded together, are told that they have no obligation towards those who, although believing, have not performed *hijra*, that is, who have not emigrated from Mecca to Madina. Then, lest this seem too severe, some positive obligation, on the part of the emigrants towards the stay-at-homes, at least in religious matters, is restored. Finally, admitting that unbelievers are friends together just as are Muslims (the Arabic phrase for ‘friends one of another’ is identical in both verses), the text goes on to warn that, unless Muslims do ‘it’, there will be *fitna* in the land, What is the

40 *Voilà ce qui est arrivé*, 86, 91. Interestingly, °Umar’s phrasing here (folio 7 *recto*, line 7), about a particularly bad form of *fitna*, seems to imply that there might also be other, dissimilar, forms; but I have not found this potential divergent line of argument developed anywhere in the black African material known to me.

41 Arberry’s translation. ‘Persecution’ is unusual here: see above, nn. 16-17, and below.

reference of ‘it’, or ‘this’ according to Arberry? Apparently the friendship which exists even amongst unbelievers: unless Muslims do ‘the same’, or ‘as much’, there will be dissension—I presume between the emigrants and those who have stayed at home. The text, if this understanding be correct, thus moves through three distinct advices: one, no friendship between emigrants and stay-at-homes; two, limited friendship, in religious matters; and three, full friendship, to match the unbelievers, and to avoid internal discord.

Al-hājj °Umar, who quotes verse 73 repeatedly, concurs with the understanding that Muslims are being exhorted to stand firmly together. Whether he understood this as referring specifically to ties between emigrants and stay-at-homes seems unclear: this was Blachère’s opinion, and Mahibou and Triaud (p. 84) quote what is in effect Blachère’s gloss to this effect, but °Umar is not so explicit.⁴² Rather what °Umar does is to introduce a second, equal command, to be drawn from this text, the vital importance of standing utterly aloof from the unbelievers. He quotes various earlier authorities who support this exegesis.⁴³ This was clearly a vital point in °Umar’s case against Aḥmad of Masina, whom he was thus able to criticise for associating with Soninke unbelievers.⁴⁴

This emphasis on the need for separation between Muslims and non-Muslims has, it seems likely, grown up here because unbelievers are mentioned. But that mention is rather innocuous: unbelievers are friends together. Indeed, the implication seems clearly to be that Muslims should emulate them in this. The commentators have, I believe, beefed up the alleged import of

42 A likely reason why °Umar apparently failed to appreciate the evolving Qur’ānic focus here particularly upon reconciliation between emigrants and stay-at-homes may have been his own disgruntlement with those of his fellow countrymen who preferred to stay safe and sound in Futa Toro (see above, note 3).

43 See for example p. 84. Usuman dan Fodio, also marshaling the opinions of past scholars, had adopted the same view (*Bayān wujūb*, 58 (English), 23-4 (Arabic)).

44 The theme of Aḥmad’s guilty association with infidels recurs elsewhere in *Voilà ce qui est arrivé* (for example pp. 98-9), though without this particular Qur’ānic reference.

these gentle words by bringing in other Qurʾānic references, which are much more condemnatory of unbelievers, and which warn against Muslim friendship with them—ʿUmar himself does this for example on p. 122. This promotion of the unbelievers, in this particular instance, as objects of disdain—quite unwarranted, in my view, given the context of these words, which come as part of a discussion of relations between emigrant and non-emigrant Muslims—has, perhaps, completely obscured the nature of *fitna* here. Some commentators even identify it as ‘the power of the unbelievers’.⁴⁵ This seems to me off-beam. Very tentatively, indeed, for I am assuredly no Qurʾānic scholar, I prefer to regard verse 8: 73 as another of that small category of passages, within the Qurʾān, referring to internal discord (see above); in this instance between emigrants and stay-at-homes.

There seems, however, nothing whatever to suggest that ʿUmar himself interpreted *fitna* in 8: 73 in this way. He was deeply conscious of *fitna* as inter-Muslim division—he deplored such discord amongst the divers parties of Muslims, as we have seen—and just such *fitna* was the fulcrum of the mutual recrimination between ʿUmar and Aḥmad of Masina. But, with regard to 8: 73, *fitna* as the power of the unbelievers seems to have been ʿUmar’s understanding. And this seems to tie in well with ʿUmar’s citation of two of the three ‘persecution’ verses mentioned above. I remarked there that ‘persecution’ in these cases is a popular modern rendering, and Mahibou and Triaud accept it. ʿUmar does not. He follows earlier commentators, who expect fighting to continue, not until there is no more persecution, but until there is no more *shirk*, no more polytheism.⁴⁶

ʿUmar’s editors in *Voilà ce qui est arrivé*, Mahibou and Triaud, argue that ʿUmar, in his use of 8: 73, reverts to the

45 *Voilà ce qui est arrivé*, 122 (folio 21 verso, line 11 from the bottom).

46 The verses are 2: 193 and 8: 39. See *Voilà ce qui est arrivé*, 99 (folio 12 verso, line 6 from the bottom), see also 102. Only *des musulmans et des gens pacifiques—muslim aw musālim*—will then remain, according to ʿUmar’s analysis. What lot hangs on a single word: a world free from persecution sounds a paradise of toleration; a world without *shirk* suggests global conquest, maybe even global thought control.

original Qurʾānic sense of the word *fitna*, which as have seen was temptation, trial, or test. Accordingly, they translate *fitna*, in this specific instance as *tentation (d'abjurer)*—following Blachère, see above—that is, ‘temptation (to apostasy)’.⁴⁷ And they seek to find the distinction between *fitna* as discord amongst Muslims, and *fitna* as temptation to apostasy, reflected in the controversy between *al-hājj* ʿUmar and Aḥmad of Masina. Admitting that the invasion of Masina by ʿUmar might make him appear the aggressor, the provoker of *fitna* as inter-Muslim strife, they explain that it was essential for ʿUmar to make this accusation redound upon Aḥmad’s own head—which ʿUmar does, they say, by identifying Aḥmad with a form of *fitna* far more grave, not just internal discord, but leading to apostasy, to the abandonment of the faith.⁴⁸ This distinction is reiterated in the Glossary entry, on p. 234, which reads:

Fitna, au sens premier, signifie ‘tentation’. Le mot est plus souvent utilisé dans son acception dérivée: ‘trouble’, ‘sédition’, ‘guerre civile’—c’est-à-dire ‘rupture de la paix communautaire’. Aḥmad III accuse ʿUmar de *fitna*: ‘division’ entre les croyants. ʿUmar lui répond en l’accusant de *fitna*: ‘tentation’ d’apostasie.

This seems to me too ingenious and elaborate.⁴⁹ I would argue rather that each side accused the other of *fitna*, internal discord, and that ʿUmar added to this the accusation that Aḥmad was also guilty of associating with unbelievers. It is precisely at this point that ʿUmar’s insistence that verse 8: 73 from the Qurʾān means, not only Muslims standing together, but also Muslims standing aloof from unbelievers is crucial. The additional sin, of which ʿUmar accused Aḥmad, and which quite outweighed (in Umarian eyes) Aḥmad’s charges of *fitna* against ʿUmar, was not apostasy

47 See pp. 84, 117, 122, 126; also pp. 22 and 34 in the Introduction, and p. 234 in the Glossary.

48 *Voilà ce qui est arrivé*, the Introduction, p. 34.

49 Another instance of what seems to be translation difficulty arising from the wish to see more ‘temptation’ than I think is really there, occurs on p. 137, where *fitna* is translated, within a single passage, as *tentation* twice, and *discorde* and *malheurs* once each (with another *discorde* in a separate passage, a few lines further on).

as an alternative expression of *fitna*, but guilt by association, ‘mixing’, *takhlīṭ* or *ikhtilāṭ*.⁵⁰

One final *fitna* illustration from *Voilà ce qui*. The editors’ Introduction quotes an Umarian poem which seems to classify Masinan mistreatment of Tijāniyya Muslims (the Umarians were Tijānīs, and members of this brotherhood were not unreasonably regarded as subversive by the majority Qādiriyya Muslims of Masina) as *fitna*.⁵¹

Fitna in non-Umarian West African sources

There is a very interesting clutch of *fitna* references in published Arabic materials of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from the Muslim principality of Gonja in what is now the modern state of Ghana.⁵² We may place these alongside the corresponding material from Hanson and Robinson, both for confirmatory comparison, and also because the Gonja material indicates some additional ramifications of the symbolism of *fitna*, ramifications which in turn shed light on, among other things, the potential mediatory role of pioneer Muslims. The earliest *fitna* mention—that I noticed, at least, for the term is unindexed, and is not always identifiable from the English translations—refers to an internal dispute, at the end of the seventeenth century, which led to so much killing that the kingdom of Gonja never regained its full strength. Peace was restored after twelve years.⁵³

In the middle of the eighteenth century another internal dispute (over the killing of a servant or slave, a *ghulām*) threatened

50 For a very brief discussion of this strand in *Voilà ce qui est arrivé*, see my ‘Many deep baptisms: reflections on religious, chiefly Muslim, conversion in Black Arica’, *Bulletin S.O.A.S.*, lvii, 1994, 1, 69 and n. 9.

51 P. 51.

52 Ivor Wilks, Nehemia Levtzion, Bruce M. Haight, *Chronicles from Gonja: a Tradition of West African Muslim Historiography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986.

53 The Arabic *al-fitna* ‘the *fitna*’ occurs on p. 77 line 6; this is translated as ‘a dispute’ on p. 95, with commentary on pp. 117-8 (see also p. 122) suggesting that ‘intergenerational conflict was at the root of the matter’.

to degenerate into a nationwide *fitna* comparable to ‘the first *fitna*’. Fortunately, reconciliation was achieved through the peaceful intervention of one of the Muslim leaders.⁵⁴ The mediating influence of one of the Muslims is interesting: just as Muslims were able to diagnose internal social discord as *fitna*, so they could also, sometimes at least, prescribe and supply a peaceful remedy.

A third *fitna* reference, which apparently continues the strand of mediation, comes from a letter of the early nineteenth century, giving instructions for various religious precautions (not all of them visibly Islamic) to be taken for health, security and the like. One item specifies a donation of seven *riyāls*, ‘because of the virgin woman and because of the civil strife (*fitna*)’. We are not told whether this particular intervention was effective, but it seems likely that the intention was reconciliation.⁵⁵

The fourth and final *fitna* reference in these Gonja documents, in a letter written probably in the first half of 1804, concerns *fitna* which God has inflicted upon Asante, the major power in the immediate neighbourhood of Gonja, and referred to in this letter as ‘the land of the unbelievers’. In this sense—being applied to non-Muslims—the Asante *fitna* is comparable to the two Umanian examples which we have already considered, insofar as the latter involved non-Muslims, whether Soninke or French. The Asante governing council, seeing their country wracked at this time not only by *fitna* but also by a variety of other misfortunes as well, thought that all this might be God’s punishment upon Asante for having treated Muslims wrongfully—many Muslims had in fact been captured and enslaved in the local fighting. The council resolved to free and repatriate all such abused Muslims. This suggests that not only could Muslims

54 The Arabic is on p. 86, the English—this time ‘*fitna*’—on p. 104, and commentary (which does not mention the term) on p. 137.

55 The Arabic is on p. 211, line 6 from the bottom, the English on p. 222, with commentary on pp. 234-5. Although the phrasing is not explicit—*ghulām*, in the previous instance, might mean a free servant, and the virgin woman here might likewise have been free—there is nevertheless the possibility that in both these cases of incipient or actual *fitna* the root cause was the murder or other mishandling of slaves.

diagnose *fitna*, and heal or forestall *fitna*—they could (or God could, on their behalf) also inflict *fitna*.⁵⁶

Exactly what happened as a result of the council's decision is unclear: the same letter describes how two Muslims, to the agonised disgust of the writer of the letter, intervened with the council, advising, apparently as an alternative curative regime, the ritual sacrifice of a number of slaves. The letter-writer exhorts his fellow-Muslims to 'pray against' the two miscreants. The episode is a fascinating example of the extent to which some Muslims in western Africa might go in 'mixing' Islamic and un-Islamic elements, and also of the way in which 'reform' attitudes emerged amongst other local Muslims, who sought to curb such abuses. This particular division is not called *fitna* in the surviving documentation about the incident. The documentation, admittedly, is exceedingly brief, but the failure to classify the incident as *fitna* may have occurred precisely because the two offenders were adjudged to have put themselves irredeemably beyond the pale of Islam.

Fitna, however, is said to have occurred in Asante, 'the land of the unbelievers': can this in any way be reconciled with the idea of *fitna* as dissension *within* the Muslim community? I think it can. In fact, very much the same two basic arguments may be applied here, as seemed relevant to the two Umarian instances of *fitna* involving unbelievers. In the first place, internal and external war involving Asante had resulted in Muslim protégés of Asante—for immigrant Gonja Muslims were prominent in that society—finding themselves ranged on the battlefield against independent Muslims. Indeed, in one celebrated instance, the Muslim corps of the Asante army refused to fight, in effect deserting. So, however the troubles afflicting Asante might be

56 This religious power to harm as well as to help, two sides of a single coin, very characteristic of many peoples' beliefs about religion, I have elsewhere nicknamed the Gehazi factor, recalling how the Old Testament prophet Elisha, having cured his visitor Naaman of leprosy, was then able to inflict that same leprosy upon Gehazi, Elisha's guilty servant—see 2 Kings 5, and (for another very brief discussion) my 'The juggernaut's apologia: conversion to Islam in black Africa', *Africa*, lv, 1985, 2, 171, n. 4 (referring to p. 158).

classified, they certainly involved setting Muslim against Muslim.

And in the second place, the previous ruler of Asante, Osei Kwame, whose recent overthrow had been one element in the general unrest, had been very sympathetic towards Islam, this sympathy being one factor contributing to his overthrow. It might well have seemed to local Muslims that Asante had been so close to having a Muslim ruler, so close to becoming a part of *dār al-Islām* that the thwarting of that hope might properly be called *fitna*.⁵⁷ Though the Asante case is not as clear cut as that of the Soninke or the French, it does nonetheless preserve some indications of *fitna* as internal Muslim conflict.

The Gonja and Asante examples of *fitna*, just as the Umarian encounters with the Soninke and the French, come from the interface between Muslim and non-Muslim in western Africa, though with a crucial implication of Muslim dominance. Let me add one further example which, although still from a remote area, Mauritania, is unequivocally within the Muslim sphere. A seventeenth-century author, referring to quarrels amongst Muslims concerning special insights and information connected with a particular tomb, condemns one participant for causing 'feuds and dissensions' (a somewhat expansive translation of *fitna*), and asks God to save us from 'the evil [*sharr*] of his impiety [*fitna*]', and from 'the evil [*sharr*] of all dissensions [*futun*]'.⁵⁸

57 The best study of Asante history about this time is still Ivor Wilks' magisterial (if somewhat intricate) *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975.

58 Quoted by H.T. Norris, *The Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara*, Harlow/Beirut: Longman/Librairie du Liban 1986, 42-3. Another *fitna* reference comes from the career of Karamokho Ba, c. 1730-1824, the outstanding Senegambian Jakhanké Muslim scholar who, in Lamin Sanneh's words, 'led a somewhat rootless life at the beginning of his religious career'. Sanneh quotes from one local account which explains such movement on the sage's part, from town to town, country to country, as arising from 'fear of violent strife (*fitna*) and of political oppression', a disappointingly unelaborated remark; Lamin O. Sanneh, *The Jakhanké: the history of an Islamic clerical people of the Senegambia* London: International African Institute 1979, or *The Jakhanké Muslim clerics: a religious and historical study of Islam in Senegambia*, Lanham/New York/London: University

Conclusions

The main emphasis of the discussion about *fitna* thus far has been on its negative and divisive nature. This has been, and perhaps still is, potentially damaging particularly in western Africa, where the Muslim community has been, so often and in so many different places and circumstances, closely involved with local, non-Muslim faiths. Division within the Muslim community all too easily merges into alliance with non-Muslims, witness the severity with which *al-ḥājj* ʿUmar accused Masina of *fitna* and also of association with unbelievers. The responsibility for *fitna* may be two-sided, with both parties equally guilty, but that is always *fitna* in another place, or at another time, objective *fitna*. *Fitna* here and now is always subjective *fitna*, something which only ‘they’ commit, never ‘we’: the Umarians and the Masinans accused each other of *fitna*, neither party would of course admit to indulging in it themselves. Whether objective or subjective, *fitna* is clearly a bad thing.

There is, however, another dimension to *fitna*, which likewise has special relevance for western Africa, and which is considerably more positive. The phenomenon of ‘mixed’ Islam, with Muslim and non-Muslim faith and practice interwoven, implies also the presence of many professing Muslims whose religion—in the eyes of better educated fellow-believers—left much to be desired. Such disparities in the understanding and observance of Islam in western Africa often led to controversy, and controversy to violence. But, as long as the reformers could place the blame for ruptured relations upon the mixers (or upon any other Muslims with whom they might disagree—and human nature and human wit have never found such transferral a difficulty), then the charge of *fitna* might be levelled against the backsliders, but stopping short of the perils of *takfīr*, of anathematisation, of declaring one’s opponent an unbeliever. There were, to be sure, perils in *fitna* too, perils both immediate and relating to the Day of Judgement, but not so deep and dangerous as in *takfīr*.

Press of America 1989, 110. The 1989 volume is very little more than a reprint, plus an appendix, of 1979.

There is an interesting, albeit very brief, allusion in the *Taʿrīkh al-sūdān*, written in Timbuktu in the seventeenth century, which may be relevant here. Referring to the pilgrimage of a distinguished fifteenth-century Timbuktu scholar, the chronicle reports that he returned home ‘during the *fitna*’ of Sonni Ali, the most famous ruler of Songhay.⁵⁹ Now Sonni Ali’s Muslim record and reputation were decidedly unsteady, and he was indeed the subject of elaborate and searing Muslim condemnation. But his enemies always stopped short of declaring him an unbeliever: *fitna* therefore, was just right, to describe the turmoil and unrest which his allegedly (the chronicles and other scholarly writing surely did not give him a balanced and dispassionate hearing) wayward and wanton actions stirred up within the Muslim community.

It is my belief that the concept of *fitna*, which allows for divergences within the Muslim community, while at the same time disapproving of these and of the strife which they generate, is in a sense balanced by another concept, *amān*, often meaning ‘security’, an arrangement allowing for some sort of Muslim protection, or at least of formal guarantee, to be extended to people outside the Muslim community.⁶⁰ In this way, relations both with deviant Muslims within the community, and with prospective Muslims-to-be still outside, may be defined and in some measure controlled—considerations of special importance in so fluid a religious situation as that obtaining in much of western Africa, and over so long a period.

59 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Saʿdī, ed. and trans. O. Houdas, Paris 1898-1900 [and/or 1913-4?], reprinted 1964 and 1981, 37 and 70 (Arabic), 61 and 115 (French); John O. Hunwick is preparing a new English translation.

60 My belief must be tentative, for I have not attempted even the most cursory study of *amān*, a project which I am sure would be fruitful within the study of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. I noticed one, not very relevant for this purpose, reference in *After the Jihad*, 358 line 6 (Arabic), p. 175 line 5 from the bottom (English). There are a number of more pertinent passages indexed in the English translation of Gustav Nachtigal’s *Sahara und Sudan* (London 1971-87).

Give us the tools and we will finish the job (Churchill 1941)

I hope that the foregoing discussion of *fitna* will prove interesting and helpful to students of Islam, of sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. I cherish no illusions whatever that it will prove a definitive discussion. There are many scholars, both outside and inside Africa, better qualified than I to extend such an analysis more widely, and to probe more deeply. I will have done my bit if this preliminary survey stimulates some such scholars to go further, correcting and (in some points at least, I hope) confirming my suggestions.

In the context of the present article, however, *fitna* is primarily an illustration of the way in which quite far-ranging exegesis may be built upon such textual material as Hanson and Robinson have provided, even upon just a few words within such material, even a single word. It must be admitted, however, that such themes and terms do not spring out at us from the pages of *After the Jihad*. Some rather unsteady critical apparatus is partly to blame. The index is one of the book's weakest links, confined to personal names of 'the principal actors discussed in the documents, as well as the authors, recipients and witnesses of the documents', and giving only document numbers, no page references. There are just about a hundred individual word entries in the index (compared with, I reckon, some 1,200 in David Robinson's *Holy war*). For themes and terms, nothing. There is a useful but modest glossary, not quite four pages of brief entries, but without any cross-referencing back to the main body of the volume. *Fitna*, and many other such terms—*amān*, *dhimmī*, *du'ā'*, *fatwā*, *istikhāra*, *khalwa*, and I know not how many others—are missing from the glossary, and, of course, from the index. Another useful device to help knit together such a book as this is the direct cross-reference, the footnote which directs the reader to a parallel or contrasting passage elsewhere. There are very few cross-references like this in *After the Jihad*, and where they do occur they tend to be visibly of the kind added at an early stage of composition, and not updated later.⁶¹

61 For example, n. 42 on p 175 reads, 'See the Introduction to Section II, note

The relationship between Arabic text and English translation, as far as user-friendly layout is concerned, also leaves a good deal to be desired. The original texts are photocopies, for the most part of manuscript originals. The manuscript hands vary considerably, some comfortably large, some cramped, some clear, some difficult to decipher. Only a few words of all the Arabic here are printed; none have been specially set for this volume. Ideally, we should have manuscript, printed Arabic, and English translation, the reader being led painlessly from one to another by clear marginal or other markers.

So much for specific points. Overall, a great deal of work has gone into the commentary, and the reader is enabled to set the documents within quite an elaborate historical context. This does not, I believe, compensate for the failure to make the documents themselves as fully accessible as possible, which should be the priority, even if this means leaving more of the general commentary for readers to provide for themselves.

Much the same problem of choice confronted my father and myself, when we embarked thirty years ago upon the first complete translation of Gustav Nachtigal's *Sahara und Sudan*. Rightly concentrating on the accessibility of the text, we devoted much time and effort to an extensive index (perhaps approaching 2,000 headings per volume), as well as, less elaborately, to a glossary, for each of the four volumes. But the bulk of our commentary—introductions, footnotes, chapters sketching events since Nachtigal's time—was of a supplementary, contextual kind, enlarging, but not concentrating, upon the original text. Looking back now, I can see that we made a mistake. All such commentary goes inevitably, and more or less rapidly, out of date, as more information and better analysis become available.

4'. But the heading 'Section' is nowhere used, nor are there any Roman numerals in the Table of Contents. A little rummaging will reveal that 'I. The early years', beginning on p. 41, is intended, this appropriate n. 4 coming on p. 43. Again, in n. 24 on p. 215, *khalwa*, an especially potent form of prayer, is mentioned, with the further instruction, 'See Document 5'. But Document 5, pp. 79-90 and 318-9, does not I think mention *khalwa*; the nearest connection I can discover is *istikhāra*, mentioned in n. 22 on p. 83.

Had we simply excluded almost all general annotation, and provided instead full details of all the parallel accounts which flowed from Nachtigal's indomitable pen—newspaper reports, journal articles, letters, and so on, all sent back while Nachtigal was himself still in the heart of Africa, and pre-dating (often by many years) the final book account—had we, in short, prepared a fully text-centred format we would have produced a much richer resource for future historians, and made a more fully permanent contribution.⁶² In its own way, *After the Jihad* has also missed the challenge, and opportunity, to make a more lasting, more wholly text-centred, contribution.

Text-centred volumes, done with the necessary painstaking care, and at the necessary expense, do exist—*Chronicles of Gonja*, used extensively in the *fitna* discussion above, is an admirable example. Even here, however, some corners have been cut: the index is limited to personal and place names and in my copy is now cluttered with marginal jottings for *amān*, *baraka*, cowries, *du'cā'*, eclipses, *fitna*, guns, horses, and so on. Indeed, gathered together such text-centred books constitute quite a formidable array.⁶³

But, impressive though this array may be, standing on its own, how scanty it seems when placed alongside the sagging shelves of secondary historical studies. We can see the relative importance attached, by the scholarly establishment in the west, to text-centred and secondary studies, if we compare David Robinson's *Holy War*, with the utmost care lavished upon every detail, with *After the Jihad*, which, though it is indubitably a very

62 A possible fifth volume, added to the English translation and remedying these omissions, is one of the more attractive retirement projects beckoning in the near, increasingly the imminent, future.

63 It would be impossible here to list them all. Another impressive example is *After the Millennium: Diplomatic Correspondence from Wadai and Dar Fur on the Eve of Colonial Conquest 1885-1916* by Lidwien Kapteijns and Jay Spaulding, monograph no. 18 of the Committee on Northeast African Studies at Michigan State University, and published in the well-known *Fontes Historiae Africanæ*—with excellently legible Arabic, but no manuscript examples, and indexed only for proper names and only as these appear in the documents.

valuable contribution and most warmly to be welcomed, looks almost threadbare by contrast. Is it time to think of evening out our priorities in this respect, even perhaps of reversing them?

A text-centred study has two great advantages. It is a permanent contribution. The very best secondary analysis—unless one writes like Gibbon or Macaulay—will almost certainly be superseded within a generation. A volume which preserves and makes available original historical texts will be read as long as history is studied. Who amongst those reading this article can confidently hope that any of his or her own writing will outlive its author? But the documents in *After the Jihad* have certainly outlived their authors, and will surely outlive now their editors and translators, just as Nachtigal lives on in his writing (roughly contemporaneous with the documents of Hanson and Robinson), and just as the English *Sahara and Sudan* has already outlived my father, and will outlive me.

A permanent contribution: that is the first great advantage of text-centred work. The second is more complex, but no less important: such work is a service. When I first joined the staff of the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1962, over thirty years ago, we were consciously and confidently expecting that we would help to train a new generation of *African* Africanist historians, who would in due course take over the leading responsibility for African historical research, writing, publication and teaching in the future. That has certainly not happened to the extent that we expected. Possibly it has hardly happened at all. Such things are extremely difficult to calculate, but is the work of Africanist historians who are themselves Africans a substantially greater proportion today of the total currently being published for the world market than it was in the early 1960s? I wonder. Of the first 100 articles and review articles in the *Journal of African History*, which began in 1961, two were written by Africans; of the latest 100 to appear, going back nearly to the beginning of 1991, nine are by black Africans living in Africa. A shift, indeed, but hardly a dramatic shift. If we add almost as many white South Africans, and several black Africans living outside Africa, the total rises to about 20.

Western Africanist historians are people of principle. We are

motivated by a love of our subject. But, whether we wish it or not, whether we are conscious of it or not, we are practising a form of academic neo-colonialism. We are writing the history of Africans for them. In the long run, this cannot be good. And maybe the long run is already running out.

I do this as much as anyone. The bulk of this paper, all the *fitna* discussion, is written about Islam by a non-Muslim, about Africa by a non-African. Ideally, this is right. It is more than right, it is essential. For if I cannot do this, and if African Muslim scholars cannot write equally about my faith, and my country, then the world of intellectual discourse disintegrates, and everywhere the barriers go up, between faith and faith, nation and nation, race and race, class and class, gender and gender, generation and generation. Yet, while the ideal remains clear and fixed, the intervening stages require some degree of balance and proportion, and that is precisely what we have not yet achieved. What would readers of this paper, in Bergen or in London or in the USA, think if the leading, internationally recognised, historical journals of their respective countries were 80 per cent (or by some calculation 90 per cent) written by foreigners.

Text-centred studies go some way, even if it be a very small distance only, towards righting the balance. *After the Jihad* has opened to African historians who do not read Arabic a body of important historical evidence; it has put the original texts into the hands of African historians who do read Arabic; and it has immeasurably increased the mobility and dissemination of this material. And it has done this without imposing a particularly analytical point of view (even if the editorial commentary does necessarily adopt certain attitudes) in the all-embracing way which no secondary study can escape. *After the Jihad* leaves space for the independent judgement of African readers, while providing data upon which such judgement may be founded. This is a service, and a particularly appropriate one for outsiders, for guests in the house of African historiography.

Can we do more to encourage text-centred research? I think we can, particularly—and here I have in mind chiefly the British experience, this being what I know best—if we will reconsider

some of our working presuppositions about the nature of the Ph.D. exercise. A doctoral candidate in African history in the University of London could offer as his thesis a translation from the Arabic—Haim Shaked's *Life of the Sudanese Mahdi*⁶⁴ is an excellent example, though its indistinguishable mélange of summary and verbatim translation, makes it somewhat unsatisfactory as a working text. The prospective candidate would have great difficulty in offering a translation from the German in the same way. Yet the number of people within Africa who can read the life of the Mahdi in the original Arabic is infinitely greater than the number able to read Nachtigal in the original German. Do we give enough attention to the needs of African readers and scholars, at the receiving end so to speak? Or are we still too firmly bound by our own inherited preconceptions about the proper form and content of academic research? If we are going to look, in the field of African history, for increased flexibility in defining suitable Ph.D. exercises, maybe this is a good time to do so, when Ph.D. arrangements in Britain in general are already in flux, with increased emphasis on taught components and the like.

I have myself no doubt that a carefully selected, important text, scrupulously translated, where appropriate edited and compared with other records, painstakingly annotated and with full bibliographical and other scholarly apparatus, and exhaustively indexed, is an intellectually challenging exercise quite as inherently satisfactory as an old-fashioned research thesis. Of course, some translation exercises are, and will be, monumentally pedestrian; so are some research theses. If we are to make a comparison, let us compare best with best, or worst with worst; we are not politicians, whose daily bread it is to contrast their own best with their rivals' worst. That a translation exercise has a good chance of publication, that it will be of enduring value, and that it will be of direct assistance to fellow-scholars within Africa, these form a troika of further plusses.

One further crucial hurdle confronts the outside scholar, before he or she can respond in a practical way to the legitimate Churchillian plea of scholars within Africa: give us the tools.

64 Published by Transaction Books New Brunswick, NJ in 1978.

How can such books as *After the Jihad*, the English Nachtigal, the text-centred Ph.D. theses for which I am pleading, be put into the hands of scholars inside Africa. In the case of Nachtigal, a German organisation Inter Naciones, very imaginatively placed an advance bulk order for some considerable number of copies of each of the four volumes as they appeared, thus effectively subsidising the publication and reassuring the embattled publisher, Christopher Hurst of London⁶⁵—and these copies Inter Naciones then distributed, free of charge, to suitable libraries within Africa.⁶⁶ The book famine in Africa is too well known to need rehearsal here. The possibility that new technology might replace books, the likelihood of technical difficulties arising with such technology inside Africa, these are important questions, but quite beyond my competence.

After the Jihad, text-centred, is the right kind of book at the right time. Such volumes, of enduring utility, are a particularly fitting offering for those outside Africa to make. They are invaluable tools when put into the hands of scholars within Africa, though financial and other constraints may often make such transfer extremely problematic. Relatively few as text-centred studies are amongst the legions of secondary Africanist studies (already published, and still being published, for the most part outside Africa), and sometimes treated as they are a little like Cinderella before the ball in terms of time allocated, and the degree of perfection in technical presentation achieved, there is consi-

65 Christopher Hurst played a fully engaged, and utterly vital, role in the entire Nachtigal project. Sticking with it for a quarter-century, he negotiated no fewer than three successive and distinct co-publisher arrangements in the States, as first one and then another publishing firm there dropped out. His inexhaustible patience matched the endless proof correction in which my father and I indulged, and our passion for longer and longer indexes. I do not know whether books are ever dedicated to their publishers: the English Nachtigal, in retrospect, might very well, and very justly, have been thus offered.

66 Nachtigal, an exemplary gentleman, whose account may be read today without embarrassment by black African and visitor from outside alike, is even now still a splendid cultural attaché, an ambassador even, for Germany. Did Inter Naciones know this and was their distribution policy influenced accordingly?

derable room for improvement in this category of book. Such improvement would surely be encouraged if test-centred work were moved up the scale of priorities for Western scholarship, and the range of such work would be greatly enlarged if such exercises were acknowledged as fully appropriate Ph.D. work.

Finally, as a tiny indicator of the wealth of analysis, understanding and insight which may be quarried even from a tiny selection of text-centred material, I have offered some preliminary observations on *fitna*, a key concept which takes account of the deepest divisions within the Muslim community, whilst at the same time drawing back from the brink of schism and excommunication. *Fitna* is indeed a minute example, the slightest tip of the iceberg. But the iceberg, I believe, is there.

Most of those reading this article will, I imagine, be like myself guests in the house of African historiography. Text-centred studies are a fitting, and should be a major, element in our activity. Unless we do this, will there not be *fitna* in the house?