

## A Contribution to the History of the Wahhabi *Daʿwa* in West Africa: The Career and the Murder of Shaykh Jaʿfar Mahmoud Adam (Daura, ca. 1961/1962–Kano 2007)<sup>1</sup>

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DOI: [10.5192/21540993030101](https://doi.org/10.5192/21540993030101)

### ABSTRACT

*Shaykh Jaʿfar Mahmoud was one of the most popular voices of the Salafi/Wahhabi mission (daʿwa) in contemporary West Africa. This article reconstructs his career, from his studies in Nigeria and Saudi Arabia through the time of his teaching and preaching in Kano and Maiduguri, until his dramatic assassination in April 2007. After detailing the many conflicts and debates that accompanied his career as a public preacher and surveying the several hypotheses that have been advanced so far to explain his murder, the article considers the career of Jaʿfar Mahmoud in light of the rise of Wahhabism in the densely populated West African nation through the last three decades (1980s–2000s).<sup>2</sup>*

The exact date of birth for Jaʿfar Mahmoud is controversial. He himself used to indicate it at times as 1961 and at times as 1962, as mentioned by his friend and biographer Muḥammad al-Thānī ʿUmar Mūsā, *Ayyāmī maʿa dāʿiyat al-jīl wa-mufasssīr al-tanzīl al-Shaykh Jaʿfar Maḥmūd Ādam* (Kano: Dār al-Ḥikma lil-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 2011), 7. I am thankful to Alex Thurston for making a copy of this book available to me just a few days before I submitted the final version of this paper. As for his name, the correct transliteration from Arabic would be Jaʿfar Maḥmūd Ādam. In this paper, however, I have preferred to adopt for his name (as well as for several other Nigerian names) the spelling that is usually found in the Nigerian press in English, in order to facilitate to the reader the search and consultation of the relative sources.

<sup>2</sup> My thanks are due to Susan O’Brien, to Alex Thurston, and to an anonymous reviewer for their precious comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

**Keywords:** Nigeria; Islam and Politics; Islamic movements; Wahhabism; Salafism.

When I first met Shaykh Jaʿfar Mahmoud in September 2002, I was surprised by the unusual security measures displayed around the relatively young northern Nigerian scholar, at that time at the peak of his popularity. Before meeting with the Shaykh, I had to go through several interviews with his security staff, which delayed appointments for three consecutive days. On the last of the three days, the security staff reiterated the denial of the appointment due to the fact that I had not shown any official letter of introduction from my university, a requirement that may seem obvious in other contexts, but for which I was unprepared. I had never been required, in fact, to show any documentation before or after any of my interviews with other Kano religious scholars, which had always taken place in a pleasantly informal atmosphere.

When I was finally able to meet him, the fact of interviewing him alone in the closed space of the quiet, first-floor office of the Islamic institute he was directing—instead of meeting him sitting on a mat in front of a private house, surrounded by a few students and by the movement of women, children, and goats from and into the compound, as had been more common during my meetings with more “traditional” scholars in Kano—confirmed the initial concern, which was only partly softened by the gentleness, the openness, and the simplicity of the manners of the Shaykh himself. I interpreted these formal procedures as the sign of a conscious attempt by the Shaykh to display an explicitly “official” outlook and distinguish himself from his fellow ulama, especially those educated in the local, informal circles of Islamic knowledge. I could not but have the additional impression, however, that there were also some deep tensions and anxieties running in the environment that surrounded and sustained the scholar.

Less than five years later, the news of the cold-blooded assassination of the Nigerian scholar would prove that the security measures around him were not, in fact, unjustified. Jaʿfar Mahmoud was murdered on Friday, 13 April 2007 by a commando equipped with automatic guns, in the Friday mosque (known as *masallacin al-Muntada*) of the densely populated area of Dorayi, where he had been serving as imam since the late 1990s. In the immediately previous days, the imam and preacher had received several anonymous threatening messages, including a burial garment sent to his house. To add to the dramatic effect of the event, his assassination occurred while he was leading the early morning (*fajr*) prayer. Later that day,

his name would resonate, mentioned as that of a martyr, in the words of the imam of the sacred mosque of Mecca, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sudays, during the latter’s weekly world-broadcast Friday sermon, in acknowledgment of the international recognition that the murdered Nigerian imam had gathered in the previous years within the circles close to the Saudi establishment.

### ***The Making of the Imam: From Almajiri, to Boko, to International Islamic Institutions***

Ja‘far Mahmoud Adam was born in 1961 or 1962 in the northern Nigerian town of Daura (Katsina State). In his childhood, he pursued the standard, informal system of Islamic instruction under the mentorship of local teachers, as a result of his parents’ refusal to register him in a *boko* (government secular) school. At that time, an attitude of mistrust towards formal modern education, sustained by cultural and economic reasons but expressed mainly in religious terms, was the norm in the Muslim peasant society of northern Nigeria. After completing his elementary Qur’anic studies in Koza, near Daura, in his early teens Ja‘far migrated to the city of Kano. There he spent several years leading the customary, harsh life of a migrant Qur’anic student (*almajiri*), living out of charity (*bara*) and petty jobs in the then booming northern Nigerian metropolis and dwelling in the neighborhood of Fagge, hosted with other students in the residence of Malam Abdullahi Dan Zarmo, a Qur’anic teacher originating from the neighboring republic of Niger.

A talented and hard-working student, he memorized the Qur’an in 1978 during a sojourn in the town of Hadejia, where he studied with another Qur’anic teacher, Malam Sufyan. The young Ja‘far was also endowed, though, with a curious, inquisitive mind, and upon his return to Kano, at the sight of some of his peers attending the then rapidly developing government schools, he resolved that he would forsake all his free time to acquire the basic *boko* skills. With this resolution, he registered for government-sponsored adult evening classes. The *boko* educational system (either from the English word “book” or from the Hausa word *boko*, meaning “a mimetic costume” and indicating the inauthenticity of the cultural practices associated with modern education), which had remained during colonization out of favor in the Muslim north, was quickly expanding in the late 1970s, following the fast social changes triggered by independence in the 1960s and the launching of the Universal Primary Education program by the Nigerian government in 1976.

The late 1970s were also the years in which the religious polemics between the “traditionalist” ulama of the Sufi brotherhoods and Izala (Jamā‘at ‘Izālat al-Bid‘a wa-Iqāmat al-Sunna), a religious movement of contestation inspired by a combination of Wahhabi theological purism and Salafi reformist ideas, were inflaming and dividing the northern Nigerian Islamic community.<sup>3</sup> This led the young Ja‘far, fascinated by the radio speeches of the chief intellectual advisor of Izala Abu Bakr Gumi (d. 1992), to resolve to learn how to master Arabic as a spoken language, his ultimate goal being to gain “a better understanding of religion.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to his adult evening *boko* class, then, between 1978 and 1983 the untiring Ja‘far also attended private Arabic classes at the Kano Egyptian Cultural Center, where he impressed his Egyptian teacher, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ‘Alī al-Muṣṭafā, with his perfect Qur’anic memorization. The latter, however, advised his young student of the need to complement his Qur’anic memorization with the study of *tajwīd* (rules of pronunciation and recitation), and offered him additional private tutoring in the subject. This would be remembered by Ja‘far as the first step in his effort to go beyond the perceived limits of local traditional scholarship (where *tajwīd* was often neglected or considered as secondary), a process that would deeply transform him and eventually expose him to a global perspective on the state of the Muslim world and its current challenges.

After completing his primary *boko* education, in 1983 Ja‘far enrolled in a secular secondary school, while at the same time pursuing higher studies in Islamic law and hadith in the traditional system, by attending the houses of some scholars of Kano (Nuhu Dandago, Muhammad Shehu Lokoja, Abubakar Jibril). During the 1980s, he also started to build a solid relationship with some young activists of Izala in Kano, especially a circle that was then starting to grow around the Triumph Mosque: Sani Umar

<sup>3</sup> On Izala and its conflict with the traditional ulama in Northern Nigeria, see Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Post-Colonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Reinstatement of Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Interview (Kano: September 2002). Shaykh Abu Bakr Gumi’s radio program of Qur’anic exegesis was popular in particular among the new elite formed in the *boko* system. For a reconstruction of the oral exegesis of Gumi and of his Sufi opponents, see: Andrea Brigaglia, “The Radio Kaduna Tafsīr (1978–1992) and the Construction of Public Images of Muslim Scholars in the Nigerian Media,” *Journal for Islamic Studies* (Cape Town), 27 (2007): 173–210.

Musa (who would later write his biography), Ibrahim Khalil, Muhammad bin ʿUthman. It was in this mosque that, still in his twenties, he staged his first regular teaching activities, focusing on the book *al-Faṭḥ al-Majīd* by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥasan Āl al-Shaykh, a commentary of the foundational text of Wahhabi theology, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, written by Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Waḥḥāb (d. 1792).

The real asset of Jaʿfar in his early career, however, was his memorization of the Qurʾan and his effort in developing his skills in its recitation. As a part of Izala's harsh campaign against traditional Qurʾanic education, in fact, the emerging elite of the movement was very keen on emphasizing the rules of Qurʾanic *tajwīd*, in particular if coupled with Middle Eastern styles of intonation. Patronized by his Egyptian teacher and by the local branch of Izala, Jaʿfar successfully participated in successive competitions of Qurʾanic recitation. In 1988, he was awarded the first prize in a national competition and subsequently, he traveled to Saudi Arabia to participate in an international competition, where he was awarded the third prize. The event constituted an important success not only for him personally, but for the whole leadership of Izala, until then often accused by its rivals, the ulama of the Sufi orders, of being composed of *ʿyan boko*, youth with secular education and little authentic credentials in “proper” religious knowledge.

The trip to Saudi Arabia and the success in the Qurʾanic recitation contest was only the beginning of Jaʿfar's association with the ulama of the kingdom. Encouraged by the Kano leadership of Izala, obviously keen on strengthening the link with its Saudi patrons, Jaʿfar had already sent many applications to the Islamic University of Medina—always unsuccessfully because, having not yet obtained his secondary school diploma, he did not fulfill the formal admission requirements. In 1989, the young student and promising Izala preacher was finally able to realize his dream after an encounter with a Saudi official named Dr. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh Zarbān al-Ghāmīdī.

Dr. Zarbān was visiting Nigeria to scrutinize prospective students to sponsor and send to Saudi Arabia, as part of a strategy by the Saudi kingdom to spread the influence of the Wahhabi reformist mission (*daʿwa*) in local—often Sufi-oriented—Muslim communities around the world, and particularly in Africa. Impressed by the enthusiastic and hard-working *ḥāfiẓ*, Dr. Zarbān offered him a grant to enroll at the prestigious Saudi university, with the condition of repeating his secondary studies in Saudi Arabia. In a time of intense ideological confrontation in northern

Nigeria between concepts of knowledge and value systems, the young Ja'far probably saw in an international career in a Saudi center of religious learning the prospect of bridging the gap between the two competing educational systems ("informal Islamic" and "formal Western") to which he had been exposed in Nigeria, and of integrating an otherworldly and a worldly sphere. The Islamic University of Medina, in fact, combined an aura of religious authority and the prestige of the old system of learning with the organizational structure, methodology, and certification of learning (a modern, "rational *episteme*," to use Louis Brenner's terms)<sup>5</sup> that northern Nigerians at that time associated with the *boko* concept of schooling.

In Medina, Ja'far Mahmoud obtained a BA in Qur'anic and Islamic studies before moving back to Kano in 1993. Here, he enrolled in a MA program in Islamic Studies at Bayero University Kano. He was never, however, able to submit his thesis, and he eventually had to withdraw from the University.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Preacher in Kano and Maiduguri: Supporters and Opponents***

Though still pursuing his formal education (he finally enrolled for an MA at the International University of Africa in Khartoum, Sudan), after his return from Medina Ja'far devoted most of his time and energies to an extensive activity as a Wahhabi *dā'ī* (preacher), which were destined to spark much controversy in the town. The base of his preaching activities in Kano was the Uthman Bin Affan Islamic Trust, a newly established institute in the affluent neighborhood of Gadon Kaya, built thanks to the support of the businessman and patron of Izala Alhaji Yusuf Abdullahi.

Seventeen years after the establishment of Izala and the beginning of its campaigns against Sufism and the traditional religious scholars, Kano had continued to remain the stronghold of the Sufi brotherhoods in Nigeria. While Izala had been immediately successful among the new elites of urban centers of recent Islamization like Kaduna and Jos, its spread in the oldest centers of the north like Katsina, Kano, Sokoto, and Maiduguri, was hindered by the opposition of the influential traditional

<sup>5</sup> See Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> According to Ja'far's friend and biographer Sani Umar Musa, Ja'far's withdrawal from Bayero University was due to his conflict with unspecified "extremist Sufis" among the Department's staff (Muḥammad al-Thānī b. 'Umar Mūsā, *Ayyāmī*, 41).



Photo courtesy of Fauziyya Ibrahim Fiji

scholars, promoters of Ash‘ari theology and Sufism, and organized in two main orders (*tarīqa*)—the Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya. Reformist circles in Kano had only been able to flourish, in the form of the *Da‘wa* movement led by Aminuddeen Abubakar, by softening Izala’s anti-Sufi theological critiques and focusing on the social dimension of reformism (the critique of traditional political authority), which found many echoes in the town’s rich history of popular movements of protest. Moreover, Izala had been suffering since the late 1980s from a profound internal fracture between a section that supported leaders of the movement based in Jos, and a second one rallied behind some of Abu Bakr Gumi’s students in Kaduna.<sup>7</sup> The fracture was so serious that the leaders of the Jos faction had started to accuse their

<sup>7</sup> On the history of Izala’s internal split, see Ramzi Benamara, “*Jama’at Izalatul Bid’a Wa Iqamatis Sunnah* in Nigeria between Reforming Islamic Education and Emergence of Internal Bid’a”, an unpublished paper presented at the conference on Islamic Reform and Public Life in Africa, University of Cape Town, 12–14 October 2011. After years of negotiations, the two sections finally reunited during a recent summit held in Abuja in December 2011.

Kaduna counterparts of *bid'a* (heretical innovation). For an organization that had been founded with the aim of uprooting the heretical innovations that—it was argued—were being promoted by the Sufi orders and the traditional scholars, the emergence of an internal accusation of *bid'a* involving the two leading sections of the movement constituted a major setback after a few years of important achievements. The Kano section of Izala was also affected by the same internal fracture. In the 1980s, when Ja'far had started to teach in the Triumph mosque, the community was already divided into two groups, to the point that one group, affiliated with the Jos faction, refused to follow imams affiliated with the other faction during the ritual prayer, and had started to set its own independent congregation, praying in the outer precincts of the mosque.<sup>8</sup>

After an initial hesitation, Ja'far openly declared his support for the Kaduna faction. However, due to some of the positions that Ja'far and some of his close associates among the younger members of Izala in Kano (Sani Umar Musa, Ibrahim Khalil, etc.) had taken on certain controversial issues, people were in fact talking of three Izala factions in Kano: a Jos faction (headed by Abba Koki), a Kaduna faction (headed by Abdullahi Pakistan), and an independent faction. The formation of a circle of younger Izala leaders in Kano, who were perceived as partially independent from the national leadership of the movement, was the fruit of their attempt to relatively soften the implications of the indiscriminate *takfir* (excommunication) of all the followers of the Tijaniyya and the Qadiriyya that had been maintained by the traditional leadership of Izala since its foundation in 1978. The issues of contestation included, in fact, the legitimacy of eating the meat of an animal slaughtered by a follower of a Sufi order and of praying behind an Imam affiliated to a Sufi order: while the traditional position of Izala was that these actions were both prohibited, due to their understanding of the status of a Sufi as that of a *kāfir* (unbeliever), the young Kano leaders were open to consider the followers of the Sufi orders as mere *mubtadi'* (innovators), and therefore to allow eating their meat and praying behind them—though only under certain circumstances, like the unavailability of other meat or of other Imams to pray behind. Two main reasons pushed the Kano section to develop this, slightly more accommodating, position: firstly, the new Kano elite had been exposed, through their studies in Saudi Arabia, to later commentaries of the earlier Wahhabi canon that offered less restrictive

<sup>8</sup> Muḥammad al-Thānī 'Umar Mūsā, *Ayyāmī*, 19.



interpretations of the statements that the founder of the Wahhabi school, Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb had formulated in his *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*; secondly, the nature of the religious environment of Kano, dominated by religious scholars affiliated to the Sufi orders, had resulted in a thorough isolation of Izala, that was ultimately going against the interest of the movement.

In fact, the name of Izala was so deeply associated with a negative perception in Kano that when Jaʿfar Mahmoud and the new generation of Saudi-trained Wahhabi missionaries who were trying to make inroads in the northern metropolitan center restarted their activities in the 1990s after their sojourn in Medina, they decided to limit as much as possible their public references to the name of Izala, and to operate under the new denomination of *Ahlus-Sunna*.

Notwithstanding his opening on the issues of the consumption of meat and of the possibility of following a Sufi imam, Shaykh's open embrace and teaching of the Wahhabi theological canon and his denunciation of many of the beliefs and practices of Sufism, including the celebration of *mawlid* (yearly recurrence of the Prophet's birth), inevitably led him to engage in regular disputes with the city's traditional ulama. In particular, he clashed bitterly with other young and emerging scholars like Malam Abd al-Jabbar, a son of the celebrated Qadiri leader, scholar, and poet Shaykh Nasiru (Muḥammad al-Nāṣir) Kabara (d. 1996), and Ustaz Yusuf ʿAli, an influential Sharia judge and popular television preacher specializing in esoteric Qurʾanic medicine, whom the Ahlus-Sunna Jaʿfar scholars accused of encouraging "superstitious practices" and of colluding with a corrupt political elite (the then governor of Kano, Rabiū Kwankwaso). At the same time, and always in line with the agenda promoted by the Wahhabi mission worldwide, Jaʿfar also attempted to respond strongly to the emergence of a Shia Islamic critical discourse in the country.<sup>9</sup> His engagements in public debates with emerging Shia leaders of Kano like Malam Awwal Tal'udi also became legendary, and are still sold in widely circulated tapes and DVDs.

Jaʿfar Mahmoud's scholarly activity remained mainly oral. Some of his audio and video lectures, including Hausa translations and commentaries

<sup>9</sup> A good (though not very updated) introduction on the genesis of the Shia movement in Nigeria is Muhammad D. Sulaiman (1998), "Shiaism and the Islamic Movement in Nigeria 1979–1991," in *Islam et Islamismes au sud du Sahara*, ed. Ousmane Kane and Jean-Louis Triaud (Paris: Karthala, 1998), 183–95.

of classical and contemporary books of the Wahhabi and Salafi schools of thought like Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s *Kitāb at-Tawḥīd* (*The Book of Monotheism*) and Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī’s *Ṣifāt al-ṣalāt ‘alā al-Nabī* (*How to Address Supplications to the Prophet*), are today marketable Islamic religious items in the country. The first is a short theological handbook written by the founder of the Wahhabi school, which is especially known for its denial of some points of doctrine of the classical Sunni school of theology (Ash‘arism) on the issue of the attributes of God and, maybe more importantly, for its branding of a number of traditional practices of the Muslims (such as visiting graves of saints for *tabarruk*, i.e. acquiring blessings, as well as using qur’anic written formulas for protection) as *shirk* (polytheism). The second is a book on the “appropriate” ways of addressing supplications to the Prophet, on the basis of which many of the devotional practices of Sufism centered on the Prophet’s status as supreme intercessor are outlawed. These two books provided the expanding audience of the Wahhabi mission in the country with the theoretical background to formulate a critique of the theology (the first) and the practices (the second) of traditional northern Nigerian Muslims. Shaykh Ja‘far also published oral Hausa translations of uncontroversial classical collections of hadith used as references by all Sunni Muslims, like Nawawī’s *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn* (*The Gardens of the Virtuous*) on ethics and Ibn Ḥajar’s *‘Umdat al-aḥkām* (*The Foundation of the Legal Rulings*) on law. These oral translations are, however, regularly preceded by short comments that specify that these classical authors are to be respected, but should not be followed in their profession of Ash‘ari theology. To understand the import of these statements one must consider the fact that Ash‘ari theology has been unanimously professed and taught by the Nigerian ulama—mainly through the works of north African scholars such as Muḥammad al-Sanūsī (d. 1490) and ‘Abd al-Salām al-Laqqānī (d. 1667), but also through works of Nigerian scholars like Dahiru Feromma (d. after 1745) and Abdullahi Dan Fodio (d. 1828)—right from the inception of Islam in the region to the present age.

Among the works of Ja‘far Mahmoud that are distributed in the market, however, the most popular is certainly the recordings of his Hausa oral Qur’anic commentary. Shaykh Ja‘far started to give weekly public lessons of *tafsīr* (Qur’anic commentary) on Friday evenings at the Uthman Bin Affan institute. Later on, his *tafsīr* was also hosted by the Beirut Road mosque, always in Kano. The success of Ja‘far’s *tafsīr* in Kano led an influential businessman and supporter of Izala, Alhaji Muhammad Ndimi,

to invite the emerging Kano scholar to give tafsīr lectures in the mosque attached to his private house, located in the capital state of Borno, Maiduguri. This was also, with all probability, a move by the leadership of Izala/Ahlus-Sunna to work towards extending the influence of the movement in another region which, like Kano and probably to a greater extent than it, had been previously almost impermeable to the influence of the Wahhabi/Salafi mission. All the major religious scholars of Borno in the twentieth century, in fact, like Shaykh Aḥmad ‘Alī Abu al-Faṭḥ, Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Miskīn, Sharīf Ibrāhīm Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥusaynī, were affiliated to the Tijani order, and had a vast following in neighboring Chad and Cameroon. The beginning of the tafsīr in Maiduguri and the opening of a new frontier under the protection of a local sponsor was the occasion for Shaykh Ja‘far to re-harshen his attacks against Sufism.

Shaykh Ja‘far’s commentary was largely inspired by the legendary one of his predecessor, Abu Bakr Gumi, who had influenced him in his youth through his radio speeches, drawing him into the sphere of Izala. In fact, Ja‘far’s tafsīr was often based on the text of the latter’s published exegesis *Radd al-adhhān*. If compared to the latter, however, the tafsīr of Ja‘far can be considered as a more mature one: systematically didactic, rich in grammatical explanations of the verses and in quotations from a larger body of tafsīr sources (al-Qurṭubī, al-Ṣābūnī, etc.), full of precise references to the theological corpus of the Wahhabi school, and punctuated with frequent comments on current issues of public concern, including local and international politics (with common references to the conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir etc.).

### *Islamism and National Politics*

Divided by doctrinal affiliation from the mainstream Sufi scholarly circles of Kano and from the more marginal but vocal Shia movement, Ja‘far Mahmoud was also drawn into a vigorous argument about the meaning and political implications of Islamic identity with Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, a Muslim intellectual who is also a member of the Kano royal family and an influential banker, and who has been appointed in 2010 as the governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria. The two (who, coincidentally, had both studied at the International University of Africa in Khartoum) had come to a bitter disagreement over the question of the calls for “Sharia reforms” in the penal system of the northern Nigerian states, about which Sanusi had started to express a critical view, articulated mainly from a human

rights perspective.<sup>10</sup> The criticism of Sanusi was voiced in several publications, most of which were republished online by the northern Nigerian website *Gamji.com*, quickly becoming the object of heated debates in Nigerian public opinion.<sup>11</sup> Ja'far Mahmoud had thus decided to accuse him and other intellectuals branded as "Westernized" of having disowned their "Islamic identity," and of promoting a secularist agenda under the slogan of "unity and diversity" in Nigeria, an agenda allegedly incompatible with the interests of Islam in the country. Sanusi responded with a harsh article published by the website *Gamji*, where he dismissed in his turn the Saudi-trained imam, branding him, with a reference to his life as a migrant student in Kano and his rapid transformation from an *almajiri* to a Medina graduate, as "an ambulant who grew up without stability or parental care; a charm maker who turned into a fanatical wahhabite; an alien and settler in his place of abode."<sup>12</sup> The exchange between the two influential and ambitious Kano scholars sparked an interesting, heated debate, with several contributions by the general public being published on the website during the following months. In the short term, this exchange enhanced the popularity of Ja'far among the city's Islamist youth, promoting his image, in a time of heated debates that followed the local Sharia bills in the north and

<sup>10</sup> For a rich collection of documents related to the Sharia reforms in northern Nigeria after 1999, see Philip Ostien, ed., *Sharia Implementation in Northern Nigeria 1996–2006: A Sourcebook* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2007). See also Philip Ostien, Jamila M. Nasir, and Franz Kogelmann (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Shari'ah in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2005). The issue of Sharia was an old bone of contention in the country. For background on an older phase of the controversy (the late 1970s debate on the place of Sharia in the constitution), see David Laitin, "The Sharia Debate and the Origins of Nigeria's Second Republic," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 20 (1982): 411–30. On some of the internal debates that took place within the Muslim camp following the implementation of Sharia reforms, with many insights on Kano state, see Susan M. O'Brien, "La charia contestée: Démocratie, débat et diversité musulmane dans les 'États charia' du Nigeria," *Politique Africaine* 106 (2007): 46–68.

<sup>11</sup> Among Sanusi's earlier contributions on the topic are the following: Sanusi L. Sanusi, "The Hudood Punishments in Northern Nigeria: A Muslim Criticism," originally written in October 2002 for *ISIM Newsletter* (Leiden: Institute for the Study of Islam in Modernity), published online at <http://www.gamji.com/sanusi/sanusi30.htm>; Sanusi L. Sanusi, "Shariacracy in Nigeria: The Intellectual Roots of Islamist Discourses," originally published in *Beyond Abacha: Companion Essays*, ed. Akin Osuntokun (Lagos: Intelconsult, 2001), also published online at [http://www.nigerdeltacongress.com/sarticles/shariacracy\\_in\\_nigeria.htm](http://www.nigerdeltacongress.com/sarticles/shariacracy_in_nigeria.htm). See also Sanusi L. Sanusi, "Politics and Sharia in Northern Nigeria," in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, ed. Benjamin Soares and René Otayek (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 177–88.

<sup>12</sup> Sanusi L. Sanusi, "Identity, Political Ethics and Parochialism: Engagement with Ja'far Adam," <http://www.gamji.com/sanusi/sanusi49.htm>.

the global U.S.-led “war on terror,” as that of the defender of Islamic authenticity vis-à-vis a perceived global attack against Islam.

Though actively engaged on several fronts of polemical ideological exchanges, Ja‘far Mahmoud possessed a remarkable capacity to maintain a modest and unpretentious manner. The combination of bitter oratory with an outlook that, despite being a man of humble origins, remained self-confidently composed, contributed much to his charisma, endearing him to a sector of the city’s youth. His personal charisma, his capacity to remain active in multiple fronts of doctrinal polemics with coherence, his commitment to disseminate at all costs the knowledge he had acquired in Medina, and the protection and support he received from both his Saudi sponsors and the national leadership of Izala and Ahlus-Sunna, were the ingredients of his surprisingly quick ascent to fame. To many sympathizers of Izala it seemed that the reformist/Wahhabi camp in Nigeria, orphan of the leadership of Abu Bakr Gumi and weakened after the death of the latter by internal splits, had finally found the new charismatic leader it was desperately searching for.

An activist in the ranks of Ahlus-Sunna and the director of the Usman Bin Affan Islamic Trust, Ja‘far Mahmoud also held the position of imam of a mosque financed by the British/Saudi Islamic NGO Al-Muntada al-Islāmī, an affluent organization whose branches all around Africa would soon become one of the targets of the American-led “war on terror” for their alleged role in covering networks of support to international, al-Qaeda-linked terrorism. It must be said that from the onset of Al-Muntada’s activities in the late 1990s, the ulama circles of Kano had been very vocal in expressing their hostility towards the foreign-sponsored NGO. In June 2003, a delegation of representatives of the two major Sufi orders of the town had presented an official letter of complaint to the state governor against the “foreign connection” running “a camp called Al-Muntada,” and warned him that the activities of the group in the city might “lead to such a serious crisis that the Maitatsine violence would be a child’s play.”<sup>13</sup> In 2004, the Sudanese director of the Kano branch of Al-Muntada, Muhyi d-Din ‘Abd Allah,

<sup>13</sup> [www.thisdayonline.com](http://www.thisdayonline.com), visited June 7, 2003. The mention of Maitatsine refers to the tragically famous crisis of 1980, when the Nigerian Army crushed an Islamic sect that had grown around a Cameroonian preacher, Muhammad Marwa, nicknamed Maitatsine by Kano residents due to his frequent exclamation, in a poor Hausa that betrayed his foreign origins, *Allah ta tsine!* (Allah may she curse!) . See Alan Christelow, “The ‘Yan Tatsine Disturbances in Kano: A Search for Perspective,” *The Muslim World* 75, no. 2 (1985); and Mervyn Hiskett, “The Maitatsine Riots in Kano: An Assessment,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 17, no. 3 (1987).

was arrested by the Nigerian police, accused of having channeled funds to an emerging militant group (later to be known by its nickname “Boko Haram”) based in Yobe state (east of Kano), and accused of being involved in episodes of interreligious violence. After this event, the Kano governor Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso ordered the dismantling of the local branch of Al-Muntada. The organization, however, would continue to operate in north-eastern Nigeria (states of Yobe, Bauchi, Borno) and neighboring Chad.

Despite existing opposition to Al-Muntada, by the early 2000s, at the peak of the popular enthusiasm for the Sharia bills in the northern states, Ja'far Mahmoud had succeeded in becoming one of the most popular religious leaders in the north of the country, and his preaching had been able to win significant ground for Izala in the traditionally hostile territories of Kano and Maiduguri. If for his opponents Ja'far was a tool in the hands of a powerful foreign connection, used to divide the Kano Muslim community, to his supporters he had come to embody the independent scholar who has the courage to speak the truth in the face of power and customary authority.

### *Mounting Tension: Local and Global Interests*

From the late 1990s, and increasingly after 9/11 and the U.S. campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Muslim Nigerian public displayed a growing anti-Western sentiment. This sentiment, though generally shared by many Muslim northern Nigerians, was most vocally embraced and ideologically articulated by the new generation of Ahlus-Sunna, for whom Shaykh Ja'far was becoming an important point of reference.

The well-known campaign against the polio vaccination program in northern Nigeria in 2003/2004, represented by the southern Nigerian as well as by the Western media as yet another expression of bigotry sustained by the “traditionalism” of the Muslim scholars and their alleged aversion to science, was in fact promoted, for political and not religious reasons, by a modern educated physician, aspirant Islamic scholar, and former presidential candidate, Dr. Ibrahim Datti Ahmad, together with the Kano state governor, Ibrahim Shekarau. Dr. Ahmad was also a supporter of Ahlus-Sunna. The leaders of the campaign alleged that the vaccine was part of a Western plot to undermine the fertility of Muslim women.<sup>14</sup> On the opposite side, the aged Tijaniyya Sufi leader Shaykh Dahiru (Tāhir)

<sup>14</sup> On the polio vaccination issue in Nigeria, see Elisha P. Renne, *The Politics of Polio in Northern Nigeria* (Indiana University Press, 2010).

Usman Bauchi, a celebrated bastion of religious traditionalism whose sermons, since the late 1970s, had routinely dismissed Izala reformism by describing it as a deceptive form of Western culture in Muslim garb,<sup>15</sup> was leading the delegations of Muslim scholars, traditional leaders, and UNICEF medical staff that tried to promote the vaccination program in Nigeria and Niger.<sup>16</sup> In what is only apparently a paradox, showing how this debate had very little to do with a clash between a “modern Western” and a “local Islamic” culture, and much to do with the political climate of the time, a university-educated medical doctor was at the forefront of the opposition to the program, while a representative of the religious scholars entirely educated in local traditional networks was leading the campaign to promote the vaccine. In the end, however, the anti-vaccine campaign would end up undermining the credibility of those who had sponsored it.

The interest of Ibrahim Datti Ahmad and the Ahlus-Sunna movement in disseminating the panic of the Western plot was linked to the internal competition between the many divisions of the Islamic camp (Izala and Ahlus-Sunna vs. Tijani and Qadiri traditional ulama) trying to promote themselves as the champions of Islamic authenticity under an external aggression and to eventually control the implementation of Islamic law reforms in Kano. Ibrahim Datti Ahmad, in fact, was also the president of the SCSN (Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria), a group constituted in the wake of the 1999 democratic elections, when the governor of Zamfara state, Ahmed Sani Yerima, implemented for the first time Sharia-inspired reforms in the northern state’s penal code. The SCSN was a lobbying group formed by political circles close to the leadership of Izala and Ahlus-Sunna in order to pressure the governments of other Nigerian states to adopt reforms similar to those implemented in Zamfara.

While the leadership of Ahlus-Sunna and Izala had been the most vocal in lobbying the governments of the northern states to implement the reforms, the “traditional” ulama of the Tijani and Qadiri networks, together with the emirs, were also active in promoting themselves as the authentic

<sup>15</sup> For an account of Dahiru Bauchi’s activity as a public preacher in the context of mounting Izala vs. Sufi polemics, see Brigaglia, “The Radio Kaduna Tafsr̥.” In one of his most famous speeches against Izala in the 1980s, reproduced in tapes with the title *Barkonon tsofuwa* (*Tear Gas*), Dahiru Bauchi describes the origin of Izala and Wahhabism as the “wooden handle” which is joined to an “iron blade” (Western culture), in order to form the axe that will be used to hit “the tree” (Islam): the outward appearance of the handle is wood, just like the tree, but its function is only to assist the blade in undermining the latter.

<sup>16</sup> [www.thisday.com](http://www.thisday.com), visited August 30, 2004.

representatives of the legal and intellectual legacy of Islam in the region and, therefore, as the natural leaders of any Islamic legal system. Again, ulama like Shaykh Dahiru Bauchi were coming out publicly, taking a harsh stance against the SCSN in the name of the religious scholars. In the introduction to his oral Ramadan *tafsīr* of 2002, Dahiru Bauchi claimed that the SCSN did not represent the interests of the Muslim scholars, being only a “self-appointed group of ‘*yan boko* [modern-educated elite] and politicians” knowing little, if anything, of Islamic law.<sup>17</sup>

Already embedded in the historical rivalry between the reformist camp and the Sufi one, the issue of the Sharia penal code reforms had also assumed heated political connotations in Kano during the gubernatorial elections of 2003, when the Ahlus-Sunna and the SCSN had taken an open stance against the then Kano governor Rabi'u Kwankwaso (1999–2003) of the PDP (People's Democratic Party). Besides being accused of corruption, Kwankwaso was judged as being too timid, if not reluctant and hypocritical, in his implementation of Sharia reforms in the key state of Kano. On the other hand, the SCSN had openly supported the candidate of the ANPP (All Nigerian Peoples' Party), Ibrahim Shekarau, promoting him as the authentic champion of Sharia. In this context of competition between religious and political groups, the polio vaccine campaign was thus an attempt to spread panic, enhance the popularity of the Ahlus-Sunna leadership and of Ibrahim Shekarau as champions of Islam, and ultimately advance the role of the SCSN in the administration of Sharia in a strategically important state such as Kano.

Ja'far Mahmoud's initial fortunes with the local political leadership, however, were destined to fluctuate over the years. When Shekarau was elected as governor of Kano state in 2003 and proceeded with the promised intensification of the Sharia reforms started by his predecessor, Ja'far was first given a position of responsibility as a member of the Hisba Board, a state-run body entrusted with security matters, public morality, and with ensuring the implementation of the new code of law in public life. Gradually, however, Ja'far started to become critical of the management of Sharia by the new government, which he accused of corruption, especially in the administration of the Hisba Board.<sup>18</sup> More generally,

<sup>17</sup> Al-Shaykh Ṭāhir 'Uthmān Bauchi, *Tafsīr 2002*, Introduction (tape recording).

<sup>18</sup> On the role of the Hisba in the administration of Sharia in northern Nigeria, see Murray Last, “The Search for Security in Muslim Northern Nigeria,” *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute* 78, no. 1 (2008): 41–63. See also Rasheed Olaniyi, “Hisba



Ja'far was starting to become disillusioned with the political environment that had been close to the leadership of Ahlus-Sunna in the previous years. This led to tensions with Governor Shekarau who, at the same time, was gradually diversifying his links with other Islamic networks of the town. The tension with Shekarau's government rose until Ja'far ultimately resigned from the Hisba Board.

In the last part of his life, Shaykh Ja'far probably started to feel that he was losing some of his old friends and some of the national and international protectors who had contributed to his earlier, rapid rise to prominence, and he became more isolated within the leadership of the Ahlus-Sunna movement itself. The Daura-born scholar certainly knew how to be outspoken and—at times—confrontational in his speeches, but he probably never liked intrigues. His sermons, without losing their characteristic outspokenness, reflected this inner change, becoming somewhat more meditative and less self-confident and optimistic. It was in this atmosphere that, during the 2007 campaign for the new Kano state government, while publicly advising his followers to vote freely for their favorite candidate, the Kano preacher had expressed very openly his criticism of Shekarau's government, letting everyone understand that he was not favorable to a second mandate of the former political champion of Sharia in Kano state. His was probably more a pessimistic statement on the general state of affairs of Nigerian politics than an enthusiastic shift of political affiliation.

### *Murder*

The murder of Shaykh Ja'far Mahmoud occurred on the eve of the April 2007 elections that would see Shekarau ensure a second term among widespread accusations of irregularities. This has led some voices in Nigeria to speculate about a possible involvement of the Kano government in the killing. More than two years later, however, the murder remains a mystery, and notwithstanding important progress in the investigation, it might be destined to remain so, buried under a thick layer of national (and international?) interests and collusions.

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and the Sharia Law Enforcement in Metropolitan Kano," *Actes du colloque sur conflit et violence au Nigeria, 16–19 Novembre 2009*, (Zaria: IFRA [Institut français de recherche en Afrique], 2009), online conference proceedings at [http://www.ifra-nigeria.org/IMG/pdf/Rasheed\\_Olaniyi\\_-\\_Hisba\\_and\\_the\\_Sharia\\_Law\\_Enforcement\\_in\\_Metropolitan\\_Kano.pdf](http://www.ifra-nigeria.org/IMG/pdf/Rasheed_Olaniyi_-_Hisba_and_the_Sharia_Law_Enforcement_in_Metropolitan_Kano.pdf).

Several plot hypotheses have been advanced by the Nigerian media and public opinion. On the basis of the existence of a well-known, open rivalry between the murdered imam and the town's Sufi circles, the Nigerian police initially arrested and kept in custody for a few days some young Sufi *ṭarīqa* leaders who had previously challenged the arguments of the Wahhabi scholar against the practice of *mawlid*. In particular, a few days before the killing, an angered delegation of followers of the Qadiriyya order had stormed an independent radio station (Freedom Radio) considered close to the murdered cleric, protesting against the speeches that Ja'far had launched from the radio against a religious celebration (*mawkibi*) of the Qadiri order. Kano citizens also remembered that years before Abd al-Jabbar Nasiru Kabara, a representative of the Qadiriyya, publicly announced that he would be ready to kill Ja'far Mahmoud, after the latter had allegedly declared in one of his public speeches that the father of the former, the famous scholar Shaykh Nasiru Kabara, had died as an unbeliever.<sup>19</sup> The hypothesis of a Sufi-sponsored plot, however, would be soon dismissed by most, even among the murdered imam's followers.<sup>20</sup> The automatic guns used by the commando—people commented—were too sophisticated for the circles of local Tijanis and Qadiris. Moreover, it seemed implausible that, even with all the existing animosity between the two groups, leaders of the Sufi orders, symbols of Islamic piety in the town, could have planned the murder of a rival imam in a mosque, during ritual prayers.

The coincidence of the timing of the scholar's murder with the Kano gubernatorial elections, along with the growing strain in the relations between Ja'far Mahmoud and his former associate Governor Ibrahim Shekarau, fueled the rumor that the murder could be the result of local electoral games. Insistently rumored initially, this theory resurfaced in the Nigerian media in 2009, when, in spite of the official policy of the circles close to the murdered imam of not indicting anybody in public, the website of *Sahara Reporters* published an online report written by an unidentified

<sup>19</sup> I have not been able to source the original speech with Ja'far's quotation, but the incident has been related to me by many sources in Kano.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with Shaykh Ja'far's followers (Kano, July 2008). I have also discussed the incident with one of the young Tijani scholars who had been arrested in the wake of the killing, Malam Tijjani Dan Fari, who also interpreted his arrest as being only an attempt by the police to distract the public from its inability to identify (or to arrest) the real culprit. Tijjani Dan Fari used to preach and lead *mawlid* celebrations in a mosque in Dorayi, only a few hundred meters from the Al-Muntada mosque.

supporter of the imam. This report alleged that the killing had been orchestrated by the Kano state governor and the emir of Kano in collaboration with the cleric's friend and vice-chairman of Freedom Radio, Ado Mohammed. The report sparked much debate and led to the temporary arrest of Ado Mohammed, but was later dismissed as a fabrication.<sup>21</sup> After all, the coincidence with the elections may have also been deliberately planned by a third actor, in order to give the impression of an association between the two events, while covering at the same time other motives.

Other voices in Nigeria pointed to the hand of the CIA, and speculated about the possibility of a "targeted killing" in connection with the global "war on terror." Ja'far Mahmoud had no known link to al-Qaeda, of course, and was considered close to the official Saudi establishment, rather than to the many dissident groups which emanate from the Saudi kingdom and fuel insurrectionist movements. The relation between the networks of the Wahhabi mission (*da'wa*) sponsored by the kingdom and its dissident splinter groups has often been considered as an ambiguous one. The thesis that identifies in the Saudi Wahhabi mission the source of the entire phenomenon of radical Islamist violence has often surfaced in the U.S. media, sustained by works such as those of the journalist Stephen Schwartz.<sup>22</sup> Though the problem does exist, the analysis of Schwartz seems to be too one-sided and superficial. More recent and better-researched works on the topic have provided a much more nuanced picture of the political history of Islamist violence in the Saudi kingdom and of the ambiguous relations between the official Salafi-Wahhabi *da'wa* and its dissident offshoots.<sup>23</sup> At any rate, after the events of 9/11 several transnational networks or charities linked to a Saudi connection have indeed, and understandably, come under scrutiny by security agencies worldwide. The activities of the British-based NGO Al-Muntada that sustained the activities of Ja'far Mahmoud in Kano during the 1990s have been targeted in recent years all over Africa. After the closure of the offices of Al-Muntada in Kano in 2004, the government of Chad, where Al-Muntada was an active, successful and well-funded Islamic organization, has also taken a similar initiative.

<sup>21</sup> [www.dailytrust.com](http://www.dailytrust.com), visited July 31, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Sa'ud from Tradition to Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2010); David D. Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

Al-Muntada's bureaus in Chad closed down without official justification, following a governmental decree enacted by the official Islamic institution of the state (the Conseil Supérieur des Affaires Islamiques).<sup>24</sup> While the local staff of the NGO interprets the move as a plot by the Chadian Muslim establishment which controls the official institutions of the state and is close to the traditional ulama and the Tijaniyya, other voices have suggested that the move was in fact dictated to the Chadian government by the U.S. embassy in the country.<sup>25</sup> In other parts of the continent as well, Al-Muntada's activities have been curtailed by national governments. In Kenya, the Sudanese director of the local branch of Al-Muntada has been deported in 2004 over alleged terror links, and in Mozambique, where Al-Muntada used to be one of the most flourishing and richly funded Islamic NGOs, its activities have suddenly disappeared during the last few years.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, no evidence suggesting the existence of a link between the NGO and international terrorist networks has been made public in any of these countries, at least to my knowledge.

### *Al-Muntada, Ahlus-Sunna, and Boko Haram*

The involvement of local extremist groups in the murder of Ja'far first emerged when the Nigerian media tried to put the killing in relation with yet another coincidence, namely the attacks that occurred in Kano a few days before, and again after the killing of Shaykh Ja'far, on the police stations of Sharada and Panshekara (both suburbs of Kano), where an armed group killed several police officers and seized weapons and ammunitions. The attacks had been organized by a mysterious network of local and foreign (Arab and Chadian) Islamic militants, probably members of a group active in Borno and Yobe states and previously labeled by the Nigerian press as the "Nigerian Talibans" but known to the Hausa public by its nickname, "Boko Haram." Indeed, the emergence of this militant group in northeastern Nigeria might have some links with the previous activities

<sup>24</sup> Field research by author in Ndjamen (Chad), July 2009.

<sup>25</sup> When I was doing research in Ndjamen in July 2009, this topic was still highly controversial, and the people I interviewed on the subject (state officials and staff members of Al-Muntada and other Islamic NGOs) asked for their comments to be kept anonymous.

<sup>26</sup> On Kenya, see an article published by The Standard in March 2004 (online at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200403080651.html>, last checked January 2012). On Mozambique, Prof. Liazzat Bonate (Seoul National University), personal communication.

of Al-Muntada in northern Nigeria and Chad. At that time still a relatively unknown group, the so-called Boko Haram were a militant Salafi group that emerged in Nigeria as a dissident branch of Ahlus-Sunna, and whose real name is Jamā'at Ahlus-Sunna lil-Da'wa wal-Jihad 'ala Minhāj al-Salaf ("Association of the People of the Sunna for the Missionary Call and the Armed Struggle, according to the method of the Salaf"), which I will abbreviate into AS-DJ. AS-DJ would get the full attention of the national and international press two years later, when they would be crushed by the Nigerian army in another crisis in July 2009, and then again in 2011 and 2012, when they would suddenly reemerge in a tragic series of bomb attacks targeting the Nigerian security forces, and to a lesser extent, Christian churches.<sup>27</sup>

The attackers of Sharada and Panshekara were mostly killed or dispersed during the incident, and their precise identity remains unknown. According to some of the earliest reports, however, they were linked to the AS-DJ, as the latter had claimed responsibility for the second of the two attacks as a revenge for the killing of Shaykh Ja'far.<sup>28</sup> Gradually, however, the Nigerian police seemed to gather evidence pointing towards an opposite solution to the enigma, and indicting the extremist group as the actual responsible for the cleric's murder, rather than as his self-declared avenger.

<sup>27</sup> Events related to the so-called Boko Haram group are still dramatically unfolding. In August 2011, AS-DJ has claimed responsibility for a chain of political murders in Borno and Gombe states, culminating in a suicide bombing operation in Abuja that has killed twenty-three people. More recently, in December 2011, while the last version of this paper was being reviewed, a series of bomb blasts that have occurred on Christmas day in several Nigerian churches and markets have been claimed by the movement as a revenge to the 2011 killings of Muslim civilians in Zonkwa (Kaduna State) and in Jos (Plateau State), in a video message posted on YouTube. Less than a month later, in January 2012, the movement claimed responsibility for a series of blasts in several Kano police stations that have killed more than 200 between civilians and police staff. On the Boko Haram, see Abdulkareem Mohammed, *The Paradox of Boko Haram* (Moving Image, 2010). See also Murray Last, "The Pattern of Dissent: *Boko Haram* in Nigeria, 2009," *ARIA (Annual Review of Islam in Africa)* 10 (2008–2009): 7–11, as well as, by the same author, "Who and What Are Boko Haram?" *Royal African Society*, July 14, 2011. (<http://www.royalafricansociety.org/component/content/article/937.html>). See also Alex Thurston, "Nigeria's Terrorism Problem," *Foreign Policy*, August 26, 2011 ([http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/26/nigerias\\_terrorism\\_problem](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/26/nigerias_terrorism_problem), last checked 23 Nov, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.nigerianpilot.com/oldsite/nigerianpilot/nigerianpilot/?q=content/who-killed-sheikh-jaafar>. (visited 6 January 2012).

The ambiguity of the two versions, one claiming an involvement of AS-DJ as the avenger of Ja'far Mahmoud's killing, the other claiming the responsibility of the former for his murder, reflect the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the two movements, AS-DJ and Ahlus-Sunna. AS-DJ founder Muhammad Yusuf, in fact, initially was a student of Ja'far's from Maiduguri. The two had apparently been very close, to the point that, according to some sources, Muhammad Yusuf had even hosted Ja'far Mahmoud during the latter's sojourns in Maiduguri. For reasons that are not yet entirely clear, Muhammad Yusuf later decided to found a splinter group of his own. Though Muhammad Yusuf's movement was, as Ahlus-Sunna, rooted in the ideology of the Salafi/Wahhabi *da'wa*, the strategies of the two movements were divergent, and this divergence might have been, in fact, the origin of the split. Ja'far Ahlus-Sunna was in fact engaged in pushing towards an increased Islamization of the political institutions of the country, while Muhammad Yusuf's AS-DJ advocated the necessity of a radical withdrawal from anything related to the Nigerian state, including working for the police, participating in the government, working in the administration of Sharia within the framework of the state, and studying in formal educational institutions (hence the nickname Boko Haram, i.e., "modern education is forbidden," that the movement involuntarily gained after it started to preach against attending government schools and universities). Troubled, and maybe embarrassed, by the emergence of the extremist preaching of his former student and associate, Ja'far Mahmoud had already deemed it necessary to distance himself publicly from the new rival movement by publishing a tape-recorded speech on the permissibility of studying in public institutions and working for the government, under the title *Boko da aikin gwamnati ba haramun ba ne*. One cannot, however, see it as an eccentric twist of fate that the reformist *da'wa* that had started in the country, with the foundation of Izala, as a critique voiced mainly by modern-educated Muslims against the traditional religious scholars, was now confronted by a group that, under the inspiration of the very same Salafi *da'wa*, was now declaring a radical ban on all kinds of modern education.

If the hypothesis of the responsibility of Muhammad Yusuf and his AS-DJ group for the murder of Ja'far Mahmoud is based, as it now appears, on solid evidence, the real motive of the murder remains obscure. Though certainly not to be counted among the friends of the sect, Ja'far Mahmoud was not one of its worst enemies either. Unfortunately, the cold-blooded killing of Mohammed Yusuf by the Nigerian police, after his capture in

the wake of the infamous incidents of July 2009, makes it today all the more difficult to shed some light on the rivalry between the two defunct religious activists. If it is ever to be disproved, the claim of the accusation would leave one with the impression that a discredited and rather unpopular (albeit tragically active) extremist group such as so-called “Boko Haram” might have played the role of the classic scapegoat, used either to cover the inability of the police to discover the real identity of the planners and executors of Shaykh Ja‘far’s murder, or to bury the deep layers of collusion that might have been at work behind both the quick rise and the tragic end of the Daura-born imam. If proven, on the contrary, the murder of Ja‘far Mahmoud would be an emblematic example of the precarious dynamics of the global Salafi-Wahhabi mission, suspended between *realpolitik* and utopianism, and destabilized by the extremist splinter groups that its own puritanical preaching (albeit often unintentionally) generates. Considering the allegation of the involvement of Al-Muntada’s network in al-Qaeda activities in several African countries, and the 2004 arrest of the Sudanese leader of Al-Muntada in Kano for his alleged role in sponsoring the activities of the emerging AS-DJ (Boko Haram), one wonders whether the 2007 murder of Ja‘far—who, in all likelihood, was aware of the growth of the AS-DJ training camps in the country, as well as the role of a sector of Al-Muntada in sponsoring its activities—might have been the result of his attempt to disentangle himself from the extremist drift that he realized the group was increasingly taking.

Whatever the exact role of AS-DJ in the murder, the hypothesis that the murder of the Imam might in fact be the consequence of some intrigues involving the local as well as the international sponsors of Ahlus-Sunna, and that the people responsible for the death of Ja‘far might in fact belong to the scholar’s former friends, rather than to his enemies, appear today as much more than a mere speculation.

Ja‘far Mahmoud has left two wives, seven children, and an indelible mark in the memory of his many followers as well as his many opponents. His short but intense, passionate, and dramatic public scholarly activity in Kano from 1995 to 2007 embodies all the ambiguities inherent in the rise and the demise of the Wahhabi reformist “call” (*da‘wa*) in the populous West African state.