

THE JAKHANKE

The History of an Islamic Clerical People of
the Senegambia

Lamin O. Sanneh

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To Sandra, devoted wife
and mother, with love and admiration



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Cover photo: Shaykh Farūqi Jakhabi reading from a family history, Sutukung, the Gambia.



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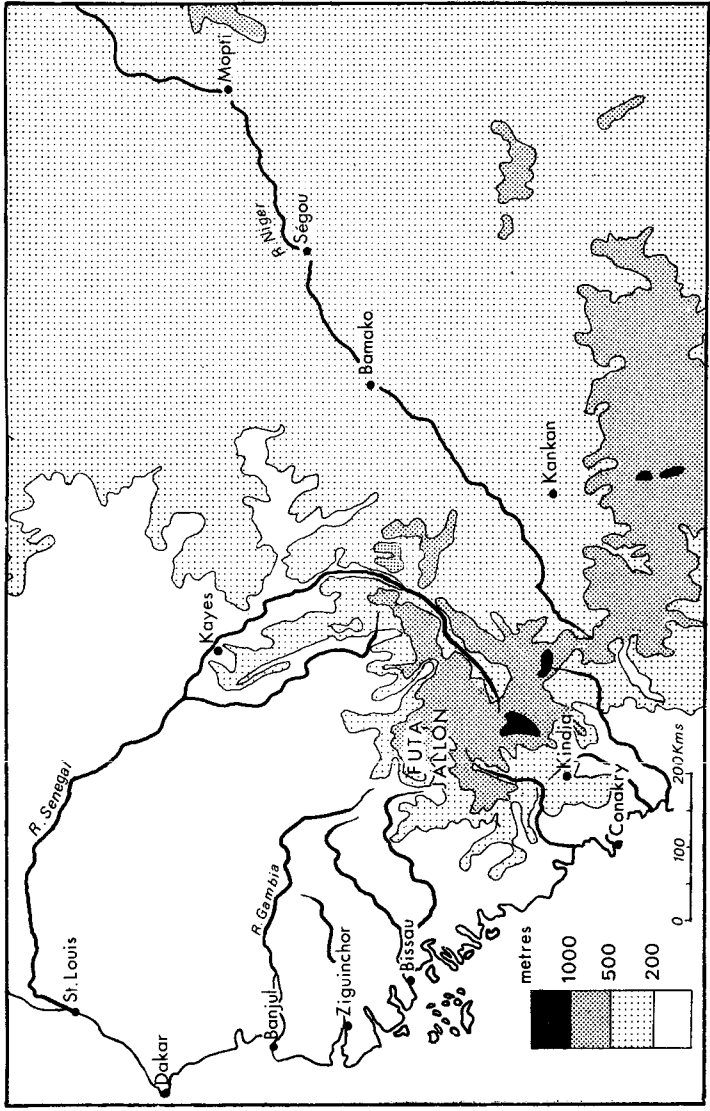
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A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHICAL AND SIMILAR CONVENTIONS

In the transliteration of Arabic I have followed in the main the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, except in the following particulars. I have written *j* for *dj*, *q* for *k*, and the *hamza* at the beginning or end of a word is not shown. Also I have disregarded the ligature for letters like *sh*, *dh* and *gh*. All Qur'ānic quotations, except where otherwise indicated, are from Arberry's translation, *The Koran Interpreted*, but his line arrangements are not followed. The verse-numbering of the Qur'ān is that of the European Flügel version. Also I have differed from the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* in writing the *tā' marbūṭah*. I have shown it by writing *yāh* instead of *yya*, as in *Tijāniyāh* and *Qādiriyāh*, rather than *Tijāniyya* and *Qādiriyya*. There are a few exceptions, like *ṣalāt*, where usage makes a variant rendition (*ṣalāh*) unwarranted. I have in general kept the spelling of names (like *Fadiga*, *Gassama*, *Momodou-Lamin*) as found in current usage rather than following the Arabic version where that is applicable. I have omitted final *é* in names (like *Fode*, *Suware*, *Serakhulle*) whether the people concerned are living in francophone or anglophone areas. Towns (like *Touba*, *Diakha*) are spelt as they appear on modern maps, in English or French style according to the country, except for certain instances (like *Futa Jal-lon*, *Bundu*, *Timbuktu*) where English spelling is more familiar to anglophone readers.



Map 1: The Senegambia Region

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION AND SOURCES

The ancient historian, in consequence of the comparative paucity of official reports and the absence of our modern organisation for collecting and circulating news, would have to be his own journalist and do all the labour of obtaining facts orally from the most likely sources; and his sources might largely depend on accidental facilities. His work would rest mainly on information obtained orally by his own inquiries, supplemented by such documents as were available, such as the texts of treaties or official instructions and letters... It is clear that the ancient conditions made the historian's task more difficult, and demanded from him greater energy and initiative. (J.B. Bury: *The Ancient Greek Historians*, Harvard Lane Lectures, 1908, reprinted, New York, 1958: 82-83)

The Jakhanke

The Jakhanke are a specialised caste of Muslim clerics and educators, now mostly Manding speaking, who traditionally look to Dia (or Diakha) in Masina (now in the modern Republic of Mali) as their origin, whence their name Diakhanké or Jakhanke (for further details on nomenclature, see p. 13). Over a period of several centuries¹ they have been identified with a vigorous tradition of Islamic scholarship, education and clerical activity. They are not an ethnic group as such and possess no language of their own. They belong to the Serakhulle (or Soninke) people, in whose language much of their clerical vocational thinking is steeped. A high percentage of Arabic loan words, however, has infiltrated their speech, further setting them apart from their Serakhulle cousins (see pp. 13-17). They are at present found in the geographical area known as Senegambia, that is, the region extending along the Senegal and Gambia rivers from their source in the Futa Jallon highlands (see Map 1). The period of their dispersion into Senegambia covers approximately four centuries, from about 1250 to 1650, with a later stream developing towards Futa Jallon proper in the latter half of the 18th century.

This book investigates their identity rather than looking for a Semitic lineal descent. This approach has allowed me to place the necessary emphasis on intellectual ties with Classical Islam as well as religious/spiritual connections with the Maghrib without necessarily claiming genetic affiliation in either instance. The advantage of this approach can also be seen in the extent to which it has enabled me to spotlight charismatic origins where these are claimed and to take special note of how interest is maintained in such accounts without necessarily attempting to peer behind the accounts, 'for then the characters rapidly assume supernatural qualities and the facts embodied in the traditions begin to lose connection with time and space and the historian's critical apparatus must...be replaced by the tools of other analysts. Otherwise Clio will stumble credulously into the realm of myth' (R. Gray 1973:192-3).

The Jakhanke rose into prominence from the missionary activities of al-Ḥājj Sālim Suware sometime around 1200.² At that time they were still part of the Serakhulle people but soon developed into a specialised clerical elite with a reputation for learning and pacifism. From their beginnings in Masina they adhered closely to the teachings of al-Ḥājj Sālim who led them eventually to Diakha-Bambukhu on the River Bafing. From this time on they spread widely in Senegambia and beyond, carrying with them a strong commitment to the peaceful dissemination of Islam. Their significance in the islamisation of much of pre-colonial West Africa is without parallel, and the Islamic educational system as it developed was largely their creation.

The pacific clerical legacy bequeathed by al-Ḥājj Sālim merged in time with Qādirī Ṣūfī teachings, giving a decisive boost to the pacific strain in their tradition as well as reinforcing the educational enterprise. This became the mode of their dispersion, and until recently schools and educational materials were concentrated at dispersion points which sponsored educational and missionary projects among adjacent peoples. Thus without resort to arms the Jakhanke were able to undertake a far-reaching reform programme in local Islam, in contrast to the nineteenth century Muslim divines, the leaders in *jihād*, who saw military measures as indispensable. The Jakhanke position on religious warfare and the conflict to which it led them with respect to their militant co-religionists is frequently discussed below.

In upholding the tradition of learning alongside a pacific and politically neutral Islam, the Jakhanke have based their professional status on the clerical sources inherited from al-Ḥājj Sālim. They are united by a close bond of solidarity based on fidelity to al-Ḥājj Sālim's charismatic legacy and sustained by strong family and professional relationships. The problem, therefore, of their so-called ethnic origin resolves itself around the form their identity took as they emerged into recorded history.

Dispersion

The phrase 'dispersal' or 'dispersion', when used in connection with the Jakhanke, needs to be explained, for it is a key concept among them. There are three main characteristics. As a general phenomenon it means a whole family evacuating one area, with a large following of relatives, and going to another area, to which they might be attracted by the reputation of a holy religious figure, and where, once established, they will regulate their lives according to the strict rules of Islam. Such contact with centres which might reinvigorate a faded Islam was much sought after by the Jakhanke, for they needed that channel of open contacts to keep alive the hope and possibility of religious reform, especially since they seem always to have ruled out as a matter of principle military *jihād* as a legitimate method of religious/political change. In such circumstances, when faced with the danger of religious or moral decay, or, conversely, when attracted by the 'scent of holiness' (Manding: *norō*) of a Jakhanke teacher, a whole section of a *qabīlah* (clan) or several families would emigrate to place themselves under his guidance and direction. Thus dispersion in general terms has come to mean the entire process of communal withdrawal (a *hiḡrah* following the Prophet's example), with the guiding aim of a search for a revitalised Islamic image through greater adherence to the *Sharī'ah* (the Law), the eventual adoption of a new religious centre, the careful provision of adequate services and incentives for the enrichment of their devotional and communal life, and the establishment of supporting links with other Jakhanke centres along the path of withdrawal. Along that same path of withdrawal, students and favour-seekers and general support would come pouring into Jakhanke communities now established at the other end. At its fullest extent, the dispersion chain enabled clusters of mutually supporting Jakhanke communities to develop and flourish as tiny enclaves widely scattered among heterogeneous populations, and this

further strengthened the reforming zeal which such communities had been desirous of preserving in the first place. Pious families, in danger of compromise, could redeem their falling stature and adopt the path of withdrawal as a purifying undertaking; the gifted or ambitious young, with little prospect of advancement, could follow the dispersion trail in search of fame. Emigration (*hi'jrah*) and renewal (*tajdīd*) were interconnected in this way within the dispersion process as discussed below in Chapter 7.

This description has been concerned thus far with one type of dispersion, namely, the voluntary type. But there is another type, the involuntary or enforced dispersion in which the Jakhinke were compelled to emigrate and seek fresh pastures elsewhere by forces and pressures over which they appear to have had no direct control. The book dwells in considerable detail on this second aspect, for which the evidence is well established. Even in the case of enforced dispersion, the pattern and the results are comparable with the effects of the first type of dispersion. There is, however, a third and final aspect of dispersion which may be briefly set out here.

The Jakhinke, though confined to definite geographical areas, have no strict territorial boundaries as such and have never been associated with one inspired ethnic ancestor. Thus the traditions which point to Dia or Diakha as their home do not directly claim a particular ethnic origin. Diakhanke or Dia'nke is a generic term and merely means, in Mandinka and Fulbe, 'people of Dia' or 'Diakha'. The Soninke (or Serakhulle) basis of Jakhinke ethnic composition is supplied independently in the sources, nearly all of which hesitate to attribute a fatherland to the Jakhinke but instead fix upon them the characteristics of a landless, immigrant people. The result is that in their multifarious dispersions the Jakhinke have never embarked on what might look like a search for an ancestral home, and the absence of such a motivating ethnic ideology has made it easier to apply Islamic religious criteria to their wanderings. The Jakhinke chose their collective professional solidarity and religious commitment as the purpose around which they organised the dispersion process. The numerous centres which they founded, and many others in which they settled as subsidiary immigrants, served to safeguard their professional interests as clerics and educators. In time those professional interests came to require further dispersions, and the standard around which people rallied was the religious one of renewing Islam and

preserving it from corruption, not, for example, the patriotic one of seeking to regain a fatherland.

The Sources

There is no full-scale comprehensive study of the Jakhanke, and the little that has been published appears in the form of articles or chapters devoted to limited aspects of the subject. The bulk of the remaining material is dispersed widely and incidentally in a variety of sources, and the treatment given is often fragmentary. The state of confusion which exists about the Jakhanke is itself a reflection of the fact that they are a far-flung community, scattered across an extensive band in the Western Sudan. Such a scattering of Jakhanke communities is, as we have now seen, a function of the life of dispersion which they have led. Hitherto, no single study has made use of the significant family and *qabīlah* (clan) *tawārikh* (sing. *ta'rīkh*) (histories) as well as the abundance of oral accounts maintained by the Jakhanke themselves, or indeed the mass of library materials contained in Jakhanke family collections. The Jakhanke are a secretive and withdrawing people, and this has further placed them behind a veil of obscurity. But this veil is not impenetrable, and field experience has proved that what has in the first place led them to cultivate a life of private devotion, with a minimum of interference from political rulers, also encourages them to lift the veil and reveal a remarkable openness and eagerness to talk which has consistently marked their lifestyle within their own communities. Being a scholarly people, they are familiar with the methodology of enquiry, and the value they place on faithfulness to the record makes them willing to produce any documents which may exist, and, where none exist, to reproduce as faithfully as they can what has been handed down from the past. The practice of recording, either on paper or by a memory technique, is highly valued among them, and even an obscure Jakhanke teacher will trace in minute detail every incident of even a casual trip. This provided an ideal situation in which to set up a critical historical apparatus, both for detailing the past and for observing present-day practices.

The early published material on the Jakhanke is concerned to trace their origin on the basis of the Semitic hypothesis. Their ties with the Serakhulle are assumed or ignored, while the Semitic argument is pressed to yield the desired results. The first serious

attempt was made by the translators and editors (O. Houdas and M. Delafosse in 1913) of the *Ta'rīkh al-Fattāsh*, by the Timbuktu scholar Maḥmūd al-Ka^cti, although recent research suggests that his grandson, ibn al-Mukhtār, completed the editing of the work in c. 1664. They argued that Maḥmūd Ka^cti was a Soninke scholar resident in Timbuktu, but who originally belonged to the circles of Banī Isrā'īla, a name they took at its literal Arabic meaning as the 'Children of Israel', a concept which may have originated with the Silla *qabīlah ta'rīkh* concerning their charismatic origins in Banī Isrā'īla, a village in Bundu (see pp. 49-51). Delafosse especially elaborates on this in a separate work, tracing the Jakhanke to a circle of fugitive elements from Cyrenaica which had originally been the destination of the descendants of Jacob, Joseph and Solomon. The dislocation and dispersal of these Semitic remnants in Cyrenaica followed ravages by the forces of Pharaoh (Delafosse 1912:I 215-6nn). André Rançon (1894a:173), perhaps drawing on a source later utilised by Delafosse, even cites a tradition which purports to go back to proto-Semitic origins. During World War II, the veteran A. Bonnel de Mézières went on a field trip to Bundu principally to test and confirm the Semitic argument, but the fragment of a Hebrew manuscript which he believed to be circulating in the region was nowhere to be found, and he died (in 1942) before he could do substantial work on his limited findings. These were later collected, edited and published, with the help of Raymond Mauny, as 'Les Diakanké de Banisiraïla et du Boundou Méridional (Sénégal)' (Mézières 1949). The original title of the article, subsequently altered by the editors, was 'Les Beni Israël du Soudan, de la Guinée, du Boundou Méridional et de la Gambie, connus sous le nom de Diakanké'. Paul Marty's works did not explicitly propound the Semitic view, discouraged in this probably by the views of his chief informant, himself a Jakhanke, al-Ḥājj Banfa Jabi (see p. 32 n. 6), but the topic crops up in modified form as he looks to Maghribian sources (1921:36-7).

The first attempt to give a composite account of the Jakhanke was made by the anthropologist, Pierre Smith. His work, 'Les Diakanké: histoire d'une dispersion' (1965a), is, however, limited in scope and subject-matter. His treatment was general, concerned merely with picking out broad themes of Jakhanke history, and in this seldom going beyond published secondary sources, chiefly Marty. Secondly, he was occupied with a Jakhanke region, namely Bundu, which

has for a long time been, through the dispersion process, a transitional area. The result is that much of the historical material he obtained in the field, and which, so far as can be seen, he made little use of, was simply copied from original manuscripts circulating in the Gambia.³ A companion study by Pierre Smith (1965b) is of very limited use for an historian, being an anthropological study of the Jakhanke of Kédougou.

Another work limited in both scope and subject-matter is the study by the French Marxist, Jean Suret-Canale, entitled, 'Touba in Guinea - Holy Place of Islam' (1970). This is an account of one religious figure, al-Ḥājj Sālim Jabi-Gassama of Touba (Karamokho Ba) (see Chapter 5). It is not a study of the Jabi-Gassama *qabīlah*, let alone of the Jakhanke as such. Much of the material is based on a version of a *ta'rīkh* said to have come originally from Karamokho Madi, the first son of Karamokho Qutubo of Touba (d. 1905), although Suret-Canale seems unaware of this. The study is important in one detail, namely, in giving us a local account of the political crisis which in 1911 led to the arrest by the French of local Jakhanke leaders, including the spiritual leader of Touba at the time, Karamokho Sankoung (see Chapter 6). But Suret-Canale was unable to gain access to al-Ḥājj Banfa Jabi, the eldest son of Sankoung, who was instrumental in obtaining his father's release from detention in Mauritania, who had been Paul Marty's informant, and much later was my own.

All these studies are consistent in attempting to present a picture of the Jakhanke based on their own accounts, partial and fragmentary though that picture is. The work of Philip Curtin, however, belongs to a different category altogether. Its paramount concern, using mostly secondary sources, is to examine the Jakhanke primarily as a trading people, expert professionals who knew all the secrets of credit facilities in long-distance trade and maintained dominance over the complexities of trade and currency transactions.⁴ It would, however, be misleading to see trade and commerce as the factors which mainly motivated the Jakhanke dispersions, or in fact as activities around which they organised themselves in any significant way. Rather, the picture we get is that of a people largely devoted to Islamic learning and clerical activity, some of whom, much closer to the commercial spirit of their Serakhulle cousins, carried on a tradition of trade, occasionally retiring to clerical Jakhanke enclaves for a period of rest and reflection. Into this group would fall the

Bajo, a part of the Silla and the Jakhite-Kabba, the Fofana-Girasi, Sedi-Mente, Danso and Bayo *qabā'il*.⁵ The clear division between the secular and the religious, as Curtin rightly points out, was always a feature of Jakhanke settlements, and there is evidence to show that where the emphasis was laid on the secular side of a settlement, the Jakhanke invariably abandoned the town and transferred their clerical practice somewhere else. For example, Sutukho, in Upper Gambia, belongs to this group. But far more deserving of consideration are the numerous clerical centres in present-day Senegambia which have been deliberately sited in rural locations and removed from any major trade artery, giving the picture of a definitive pattern of Jakhanke settlement more characteristic of them than strategically located commercial entrepôts into which some elements might occasionally drift.

The foregoing analysis is directed at trying to restore the balance against what has been a fashionable line of enquiry in some quarters, namely, the linking in a general way of the progress of islamisation with the growth of trading activities, of which Curtin's work is only one strand. Having said that, it should be pointed out that the Jakhanke have given sanctuary to traders, and took part in their own right as clerical specialists in the wider ramifications of pre-colonial trade, seeing trade in the light of the Prophet's early career, and relating themselves to it again in the light of the Prophet's subsequent active religious life. They kept close to the parallel.

There is a large body of material on clan patronymics under which the Jakhanke have been considered. The anthropological bent of much of this material restricts its use for the historian, but the chronological framework can sometimes be of value and historical interest. Two general works fall into this category. The one by Vuillet (1952) is based on work carried out in Senegambia, and his concern is to link existing Jakhanke communities to a wave of Maghribian immigrants with ultimately Classical Islamic origins. Another account, earlier and taken from a different area, is given by Pierre Humblot (1918) and is based on an Arabic manuscript of a griot (*jéli*) of Téliko. Once again the focus of this account is on the Classical Islamic background of the Mandinka-Mori people of Kankan (Guinea), among whom a number of Jakhanke patronymics are prominent. Related to Humblot's piece, though again somewhat pre-dating it, is the account by André Arcin who devotes a small sub-section to Jakhanke

patronymics (1907:308-9). André Rançon may also be mentioned in this connection (1894a). Of a different order is the paper on the Mandinka-Mori community of Baté by Lansine Kaba, himself a Mandinka-Mori from Kankan, though his study is in parts marred by insubstantial speculation (1972).

Field-work: Family Tawārikh, Library Resources and Interviews

Field-work was preceded by an extended period spent collating the existing elusive and scattered published and documentary sources. Archival sources were then examined. Not surprisingly, the archives in Paris did not yield much on the subject, although the military side of more recent events in which the Jakhanke were indirectly involved, concerning the activities of Muḥammad al-Amīn Darame better known as Momodou-Lamin (d. 1887), was well covered (see Chapter 4). As expected, the bulk of the material for this book in fact comes from my own field-notes. I spent some six months of extensive travelling and interviewing which met with a positive response in virtually all Jakhanke communities in the Senegambia area. I spent most of the time in rural areas where the Jakhanke have established centres of Islamic learning, with extensive manpower and library resources to maintain them. The library holdings in some cases turned out to be quite impressive, and it was clear that a vigorous tradition of Islamic learning, sustained over many years, was still being maintained. The love of scholarly pursuits and devotion to saintliness were being cultivated in most of these areas in the belief that that is how history has rewarded the efforts of their forefathers who are believed to have stood within the same tradition. But this self-image, very much the ideologically motivating force of Jakhanke life, will need close examination, particularly in Jakhanke attitudes to the Senegambian *jihād* wars and to slavery (Chapters 8 and 9). At the end of my field-trip I went to Dakar to look at the archives at the Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire (IFAN) and while there I had further meetings with the elderly al-Ḥājj Banfa Jabi and his son al-Ḥājj Soriba Jabi ibn Banfa.

A few themes arising out of the field-work may be touched on here. First, the definition and scope of the research. The topic is too vast to be satisfactorily treated without rigorously limiting the range of the discussion to matters that touch directly on Jakhanke history in the long process of dispersion and eventual settling down.

The practical effect of this is to cut out much of the theological and devotional material. The other way of limiting the scope was to prune the disproportionate amount of material which exists on local heroes. For example, the abundance of material on Momodou-Lamin, the subject of Chapter 4, is sifted in order to underline the essentially religious theme of his career. Secondly, the area under consideration is mainly, though by no means exclusively, Senegambia, and although the Jakhanke have dispersed to other areas it is clear that the main axis of their educational and clerical activity has consistently been shifting towards the Senegambia area, that is, westwards from Bambukhu. The study, in looking to the Senegambia area, will in that sense be following the interest and emphasis of Jakhanke history itself. Thirdly, in order to reflect the extremely rich and diverse sources on Jakhanke life and history, a good deal of attention will be directed to events in the nineteenth century and early decades of this century. The richness and diversity of sources is further illustrated in the thematic material in Chapters 7 to 9. I must, in this connection, point out a limitation of the present study. In a basically historical undertaking such as this, full justice cannot be done to the breadth and depth of many themes in Jakhanke clerical life. Yet, within that restriction, some notion of the content of that clerical life is called for, if only so that we may better appreciate the past. Comparative models based on Ṣūfī Islam are also treated in this thematic section, the aim being to suggest sources of influence and parallels with Jakhanke Islam.

The significant body of family records and *qabīlah tawārikh*, augmented from other sources, will constitute the major source for this book. The four major families who form the clerical core of the Jakhanke have in their possession accounts of their own *qabā'il* (sing. *qabīlah*). A *qabīlah* in this sense means a confederation of families who trace their descent through an identical *nisbah* or genealogical tradition and recognise through that tradition a common ancestral figure from whom they derive the sanctions for the social rules which regulate relationships among the *qabīlah* members. The four major *qabā'il* among the Jakhanke are the chief clerical and educational lines, which have kept a detailed account of themselves. They are the Suware, the Jabi-Gassama, the Jakhite-Kabba⁶ and the Silla. Some accounts include Fofana and Darame as well, but I have nowhere come across a separate supporting tradition for either of

these. Suware origins are dealt with particularly in Chapter 1; the other three in Chapter 2.

The oral accounts in published sources have been augmented with field-notes. The special memory technique developed by the Jakhanke has also meant a fairly high return on investigation into detail and comparative material as well as fine theoretical distinctions. For example, in discussions with a venerated blind Jakhanke leader I mentioned the accepted sociological maxim that endogamy has been one way in which the Jakhanke are claimed to have preserved their cohesiveness. After some thought he countered by saying that the union of two lax Jakhanke would not lead to a strengthening but a weakening of community life. First, he said, Islam and to be strong before considerations of endogamy could be relevant.⁷

I also participated in a number of Jakhanke activities. I was present at Qur'ān school evening lessons, sessions of public Qur'ānic exegesis, public discussions on consistorial judicial procedures (the Jakhanke avoid initiating law suits, and oath-taking on the Qur'ān is strictly forbidden among them), visits to holy sites such as Sutukho and numerous visits to mosque-tombs of local holy figures where prayers were said at the graveside. Most graves were on the outer perimeter of mosques, on the left side facing the *mihrab*, and some were adorned with fine cotton material suspended over the entire length of the grave.

Reverting to the question of who the Jakhanke are, field-experience would seem to lead to the following conclusion. Literacy, limited or extensive, and religion emerge as the two general criteria by which they are defined. Their original linguistic affinity with the Serakhulle has little relevance since it was weakened by the wave of islamisation, combined with arabisation, which came over them. The Jakhanke did not completely lose their Serakhulle cultural ties, of which most Jakhanke leaders have retained remnants to the present day. But what happened was that their own language ceased to be important as a way of defining them, and instead Arabic and Islam emerged as the new standards by which they assessed their cultural values. One result of this has been to divert interest from ethnic 'origins' to concern with the point at which a significant Islamic religious experience created a new Muslim consciousness among them, that is, to their formative period at Diakha-Bambukhu. For their

subsequent history, literacy and religion (Arabic and Islam) became the source of their self-identity and the basis of their relationship with other people. This is the context in which they surfaced into recorded history, and is examined in some depth in the first chapter.

NOTES

- 1 Documentary and oral sources look back to the earliest days of Islamic penetration in the Western Sudan for the emergence and identity of the Jakhanke. This long time span has forced many traditional accounts to overstretch into the precarious, but standard, Semitic breeding ground for an origin. Jakhanke lineal ties with their more recent neighbours, the Serakhulle (or Soninke), have been loosened and replaced by supposed links with Classical Islamic heroes. But a series of close investigations has recovered much of this lost Serakhulle ground.
- 2 For detailed chronological discussion, see pp. 23-6.
- 3 P. Smith 1965a: 246. The material in question was a copy of a *qabīlah ta'riḫh* on the Jakhite-Kabba lineage, which the *imām* of Kédougou, Dembo Kabba-Jakhite, copied from his teachers in the Gambia. (For the Jakhite-Kabba *qabīlah*'s history, see pp. 38-43.)
- 4 Curtin 1971b; 1972. Curtin claims that the Jakhanke 'became virtually synonymous with merchants among the Europeans on the Gambia or the upper Senegal' in the last decades of the 17th and early decades of the 18th century (1972: 10).
- 5 Al-Ḥājj Shaykh Sidiya Jabi, Brikama, 30/10/72. The involvement of the Jakhite-Kabba in commerce happened very late and they have mainly operated in the area which is now Guinea Bissau.
- 6 In both these cases the patronymics are alternatives: the Jabi are the same as the Gassama; the Jakhite as the Kabba.
- 7 Karamokho Sankoung Jabi, Nibrās, 4/12/72.

CHAPTER ONE
THE BIRTH OF THE JAKHANKE ISLAMIC CLERICAL TRADITION

c. 1200 - c. 1500

Introduction

A familiar but intractable problem in African history is the question of the identification and origin of nomenclature and ethno-linguistic groups, and the Jakhanke people are no exception. They have been ascribed various names (see p. 27) and even now some confusion remains about how to resolve the problem. Among the Jakhanke themselves the Arabic form *ahl Diakha* (or Dia) is used. The phrase means 'the people of Diakha', and refers to the ancient Sudanic town in Masina visited by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. The Jakhanke are by origin the same people as the Serakhulle, sometimes also known as Soninke,¹ and are distinguished only by a professional specialisation as Muslim clerics. The appellation 'Jakhanke' merely describes their original geographical home, Diakha-Masina, and does not relate to any theory of ethnic origins. Jakhanke sources indeed use the Arabic word *nawṣ*, kind, branch, to describe themselves, rather than *jins*, race or species. An historian need not, therefore, be overly exercised about the question of ethnic origins in order to identify and describe the community *ahl Diakha*. That is our approach in this book. It is important to stress this lest an erroneous impression be created that the Jakhanke are a distinct ethno-linguistic grouping with a language of their own. Charlotte Quinn rather hastily describes the Jakhanke as a Mandinka people 'from Futa Tuba [Touba] who spoke a dialect of Mandingo different from their neighbours in the Gambian states' (1972: 172). Jakhanke clerics have until recent times conducted Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) in the Serakhulle language, while using relevant languages, such as Susu, Fula, and Wolof in everyday contact with the people living around them. Indeed such ethnic distinctiveness as they may have acquired is usually the result of historical intermixture with adjacent peoples and not of an original linguistic affinity.