



IN FOCUS

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From persecution to peace: the resilience of Hamawi Sufis as a model for preventing violent extremism in the Sahel

In a Sahelian context marked by the rise of violent extremism, the Hamawi Sufi community of Yacouba Sylla in Kaédi (Mauritania) offers a remarkable example of collective resilience.

This Sufi brotherhood has preserved its cohesion, identity, and practices over time, despite considerable external pressures: from colonial persecution to contemporary challenges linked to extremism (Cissé, 2005; Hanretta, 2003; Traoré, 2019). How have the members of this community managed to maintain their bonds and pass them on to

new generations? This article highlights key historical, social, and spiritual mechanisms that have enabled this Sufi brotherhood to endure.

The Hamawi Sufi community of Yacouba Sylla in Kaédi

Yacouba Sylla is described as a devoted disciple of Chérif Hamahoullah. His bond with the spiritual master was based on deep respect and full commitment to the principles of the Tijaniyya Hamawiyya order.

However, while Sylla greatly honoured Cheikh Hamahoullah, he preferred to engage directly with his spiritual legacy rather than through intermediaries or hierarchical structures.

He emerged as a charismatic figure capable of mobilising followers around a clear vision. His spiritual authority stemmed from his deep knowledge of Hamahoullah's teachings and his ability to adapt them to diverse contexts.

The Hamawi Sufi movement led by Yacouba Sylla began in 1929, culminating in the events of February 1930. At the time, according to estimates by Sean (2023), the number of followers of this religious movement exceeded 600, "frequently in conflict, and increasingly violently, with other residents of Kaédi."

These events led to a wave of violence against the leaders and followers of this religious movement. Yacouba Sylla was placed under house arrest in 1930 in Sassandra for eight years; Chérif Hamahoullah was transferred from his internment in Mederdra, Mauritania, to Adzopé in 1935; and many followers were arrested, deported, imprisoned, or even killed. Despite a wounded history and longstanding conflict with the colonial authorities, the Hamawi Sufi community of Yacouba Sylla continued to strengthen itself, drawing on this past not as a

reason for revenge but as a catalyst of resilience and spiritual redemption. In a region of the Sahel plagued by extremist violence, this community has stood out for its non-violence.

Today, the community faces new challenges: some youth become distanced from the community, external ideological influences, evolving traditional lifestyles, and sometimes a lack of economic opportunities (Ebode & Njoya, 2023; RAND Corporation, 2020). Nevertheless, it persists. Youth involvement in spiritual activities remains remarkable. Even those who temporarily move



away for studies or work remain deeply connected to the community and its values. This persistent connection is a significant protective factor against radicalisation (Cachalia et al., 2016; Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, n.d.).

Resilience: a multidimensional concept

Resilience, far from being limited to individual psychology, is now understood as a dynamic process involving personal, social, and institutional factors. According to Herrman et al. (2011), it represents "positive adaptation to adversity, an interactive process influenced by personal, biological, and social factors." Grossman (2021) expands this to a "multi-systemic process involving psychological, educational, and community systems."

This holistic approach is particularly relevant for understanding the community resilience of Hamawi Sufis. As Folke (2016) points out, resilience is "the capacity of systems to persist, adapt, or transform in response to dynamic and



unexpected changes.” Adger (2000) notes that it “depends on institutions, social networks, and trust-based relationships that enable individuals to cooperate in overcoming disruptions.”

Three factors of resilience stand out in the case of the Hamawi Sufis:

1. A foundation of core values as an identity anchor

Interviews with community leaders and youth reveal that their resilience rests on three core values: fear of God (taqwa), adherence to religious precepts, and avoidance of prohibited behaviours. These prin-

ciples shape not only individual conduct but also collective cohesion (Cissé, 2000; Hamès, 1983).

“These values are not just abstract concepts,” explains one community imam. “They form a holistic moral framework that governs our daily interactions and shields us from harmful external influences.” A young leader adds: “When these values are deeply internalised, one naturally develops resistance to extremist narratives that advocate violence.”

Collective spiritual practices reinforce these values. Hadrat (group invocations) and qasidas (religious chants) create

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intense moments of communion, strengthening a sense of belonging. These daily rituals are far from mere traditions; they act as effective barriers to the social isolation often exploited by extremist recruiters.

2. Collective memory and mystical reinterpretation of trials

One particularly striking aspect of Hamawi resilience lies in their relationship with history. Stories of past persecution: Cheikh Hamahoullah's imprisonment, the February 1930 shootings in Kaédi, the November 1941 events in Yelimane, the forced exile of Yacouba Sylla, are passed down to younger generations not as causes for resentment but as testimonies of spiritual fidelity (Hanretta, 2023; Traoré, 2019).

This mystical reinterpretation of adversity transforms collective traumas into sources of spiritual strength rather than justifications for radicalization (Schmitz, 1985; Robinson, 2000). Intergenerational education and the preservation of strong collective memory thus serve as essential protective factors. The practice of endogamy, though less strict today, also historically helped maintain community cohesion and

safeguard core values (Koita, 2016).

3. Intergenerational transmission mechanisms

The transmission of values occurs through a blend of ancestral traditions and modern means (such as audio/video recordings, and social media). Families play a central role, complemented by community gatherings and the influence of spiritual leaders such as the khalifes (Jourde, 2009; Triaud, 2010). Audio and video recordings of sermons and hadrat allow young people to access teachings even when physically distant. Generational structures (known as fedde in Soninké, informal youth associations fostering peer mentoring) ensure horizontal peer transmission that effectively complements the vertical transfer from elders to youth.



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This transmission is even more crucial today, amid strong ideological influences. Some community members have expressed concern about youth who are more vulnerable to outside influences. In response, the community has developed specific initiatives: educational talks tailored to youth concerns, strengthened intergenerational ties, and the creation of a talent database to support professional integration. Cultural and sporting events, along with intergenerational discussions, are also encouraged to foster solidarity and identity anchoring.

Recommendations for preventing extremism

Lessons drawn from the Hamawi experience can be applied to other Sahelian and African contexts. These include promoting shared values, cultivating an inclusive collective memory, strengthening intergenerational bonds, and mobilizing youth as resilience actors (UNOCT, 2022; USAID, 2024). Integrating these principles into public policy and education programmes can help prevent radicalization and promote peace.

This study highlights several concrete initiatives:

- Establishing intergenerational dialogue spaces, where young

people and elders share life stories and spiritual teachings.

- Organising sessions on community history to build strong cultural and spiritual identity.
- Emphasising the education of women and girls, traditionally less involved in hadrat, to ensure value transmission within families.

- Expanding educational talks and cultural and sporting events to foster youth engagement and community cohesion.

To further strengthen resilience, it is recommended to:

- Value local cultural and spiritual resources in prevention programmes.

- Strengthen intergenerational transmission through modern tools and dialogue spaces.

- Engage youth as resilience actors by supporting their leadership and participation.

- Integrate values education into formal curricula by developing appropriate teaching modules.



- Use collective memory as a resource by encouraging constructive engagement with history.

Conclusion

The experience of the Hamawi Sufi community of Yacouba Sylla reminds us that community resilience relies on a living synergy of shared values, safeguarding practices, and adaptive responses to context. This people-centred, community-based model offers practical lessons for designing

effective interventions in communities vulnerable to extremism, thus fostering peace, stability, and sustainable development. The approaches emerging from this study provide concrete solutions for implementing resilience programmes to counter violent extremism across various environments. By promoting identity anchoring and solidarity dynamics, such programmes can prevent individual vulnerability to radical influences.

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