Nonfiction

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The Holy War of Amadou Koufa

In 2013, on a hot January afternoon in Konna, a fishing port on the Niger River of central Mali, an obscure fifty-two-year-old Islamist preacher named Amadou Koufa paraded past buildings turned to rubble under rocket fire, leading his fighters in an alternating chant of "*Mali est mort*" in French, followed by the Arabic "*Allahu Akbar!*" Smoking husks of army pickups and armored cars littered the streets. Some fifty Malian soldiers lay dead. Koufa's forces suffered, too, though numbers are unknown. People said the stink was awful. Flies hovered in clouds. His soldiers—men and boys—pumped their guns overhead. "*Mali est mort . . . Allahu Akbar!*"

I've never seen Amadou Koufa, who in recent years has become one of the most dangerous and mysterious jihadist leaders in Mali. The French army claims its troops killed him this past November, though jihadist groups deny it. I put together the events in Konna while visiting that town in 2014, more than a year after Koufa's victory stroll. I'd already been traveling the Mopti region of central Mali for four years, visiting villages and larger towns to learn about the rising tensions of Mali's civil war. People in Konna told me how Koufa, on that day in January 2013, struggled to keep up with his own people, coughing from inky smoke pouring out of wrecked vehicles and buildings. He was no soldier, but a man who held the title of *marabout*, a wandering Muslim preacher who taught children the Quran at a madrasa, a primary school for Quranic study. Some called him the "fat man" for his sedentary ways. For years his sermons have played clandestine radio across northern Mali. "The government of Mali follows false gods," he pleaded. "The Quran is the only law."

For over two decades Koufa preached around the Mopti region. He promised to erase nation states whose borders the French and British drew one hundred and thirty years ago. He promised to replace them with a caliphate modeled on a nineteenth-century Fulani jihadist empire that rose from this same countryside. I first heard of Koufa in May 2012. I was in Mali on a magazine assignment to cover the civil war that cut the country in half between the jihadist north—where al Qaeda and its allies had just taken territory the size of France, including Timbuktu, Mali's spiritual capital—and the government in the south. In villages of central Mali, people talked about a wandering cleric who boasted he would soon rule the country. A farmer translated for me a line from a prerecorded radio broadcast of a Koufa sermon: "I am chosen by God. Death to those who do not hear me." People worried Islamists like Koufa would invade the south and take the rest of the country. They built bonfires to burn papers, books, photographs, music CDs, clothing, anything of western culture that might anger the rebels.

It looked as if Islam was turning on itself. But over thirty years traveling in West Africa, I saw how Islam calms life in the harsh desert: every meal and greeting, every business transaction, pauses to praise Allah. Days begin with the muezzin's call to prayer in Arabic, the language of Islam, repeated across the day to keep the faithful on the path to God. The call lent substance to the air. For eight hundred years, since Arab merchants brought Islam across the Sahara, this prayer has awakened every village and town of the African Sahel and kept the beat day and night without fail.

Allahu akbar! God is great. *Ashhadu alla ilaha illa Allah.* I bear witness that there is no lord except God. *Ash-hadu anna Muhammadan Rasulu Allah.* I bear witness that Muhammed is the Messenger of God. *Hayya 'ala al-salat.* Make haste toward prayer. *Hayya 'ala al-falah.* Make haste towards welfare. *Assalatu khayru min an-naum.* Prayer is better than sleep. *Allahu akbar . . .*

People in Konna said the muezzins were calling the faithful to prayer by these words as Koufa stalked the streets, calling Mali a "pagan state." Mali, a country of thirteen million Sunni Muslims that he accused of embracing false gods. He denounced Mali's Sufi orders and their traditions of music and poetry as "evil" distractions.

Koufa demanded residents "bury their dogs," his words for the slain Malian soldiers who were Muslims, too. He preached and his men and boys echoed: "*Mali est mort . . . Allahu Akbar.*" They wore farmer's garb, kaftan over ankle-length leggings. This was the same clothing the Prophet Muhammed wore some fourteen hundred years ago in a cave near Mecca when God, through the Angel Gabriel, spoke the Quran to Muhammed in Arabic. Koufa's words flowed in French, Arabic, and his native Fulani. He declared, "I am the greatest scholar of the Quran in all of Mali. I am a messenger of God," a title reserved for Muhammed himself.

Koufa controlled Konna for eighteen hours before the French stopped him on January 11, 2013. Back in the United States I read how air strikes and paratroops liberated northern Mali in days. I read about a preacher who led chants of "*Mali est mort*" in a parade through Konna hours before the French strikes. The reports identified the preacher as Amadou Koufa, the man I'd heard so much about on my reporting trip at the start of the war. In the summer of 2014, I returned to Mali to learn what happened to him. I had no leads, only a newspaper photograph of a thinner man sitting in serene study, Quran open in his lap, ankles crossed, wearing a white kaftan and turban. He had a gray goatee and slightly pockmarked face. His turban was wrapped high on his forehead revealing that his head was shaved, a traditional Muslim gesture of cleanliness and respect for God.

In the US, no one knows of Amadou Koufa. But my reporting about Mali's Islamist rebellion led to an invitation to speak at the Masjid Al-Farooq mosque in Pullman, Washington, where I told Koufa's story. The mosque consists of two small cubed buildings the color of the desert with a modest dome from which rises a metal crescent moon atop a pole to show the way to God. The congregation of three hundred is mostly students and faculty from Washington State University (where I teach), and their families from thirty countries. The evening I spoke at the mosque, a few dozen men gathered in the prayer hall on a green Turkish rug. Veiled women looked on from a second-floor balcony while others mixed with the men. The

imam of the mosque asked me to discuss what I saw in Mali "to help Muslims and non-Muslims get beyond dehumanizing each other."

But I also wanted to talk about Islam's most feared notion—jihad—an Arabic word that means "strive" or "struggle" and which Western media equates to "holy war." The Quran refers to jihad in vague terms of struggle over one's relationship to Allah. Extremist groups like al Qaeda and the Islamic State speak of jihad as the struggle by any means to return Islam to the ideals of the Prophet Muhammed and his closest advisors—known in Arabic as the "salaf," or, in English, "the predecessors." This is Amadou Koufa's ambition: to roll Islam back to the seventh century, down to how Muhammed wore his beard and the length of his pants. At the mosque, a video monitor displayed a message that addressed such ambitions and the concerns of Muslims and non-Muslims alike: "The concept of jihad has been hijacked by many political and religious groups over the ages in a bid to justify various forms of violence. In most cases, Islamic splinter groups invoked jihad to fight against the established Islamic order."

So, I told a story about a jihadist.

I arrived in Konna with my friend Yusuf (not his real name) in a Land Cruiser early on a searing June morning in 2014 to interview Konna's elderly chief imam, Seydou Kampo, who'd known Koufa since the jihadist was a boy. Seydou Kampo reportedly resisted Koufa's pressure to join his movement, many of whose members are Fulani tribesmen, like Koufa himself. Kampo is from the Bozo tribe, a tribe that survives off fishing and trade on the Niger River. I heard the story of Kampo's resistence from Malian journalists and arranged to interview him through the Konna mayor's office, which I'd been in contact with by telephone.

Yusuf drove us the twenty miles from Mopti city, capital of the Mopti region, to Konna, which rests on the river at Mali's narrow waist, a zone that is two hundred miles wide from Mauritania to Burkina Faso. We planned to spend the day and be back in the city, with its large army garrison, by dark. Yusuf was born and raised in

the Mopti region and we'd been friends since 2002, when I hired him to interpret for me on another assignment. We'd traveled all over Mali together but neither of us had experienced the country in a state of civil conflict. On this trip I saw in Yusuf a new distrust of his fellow Malians. I was startled when he showed me war pornography on his cell phone, local media pictures of the mutilated bodies of jihadist fighters from the Fulani tribe killed by the Malian army. "You can't trust these people," he told me of the Fulani, who make up 14 percent of Mali's population and live mostly in the central and northern parts of the country. After a few days back on the road with Yusuf for my return trip in 2014, I didn't know who to trust either.

Before 2012, when the war began, Mali was known as a country whose many ethnic groups lived together in mutual respect. But things had changed. Centuries-old ethnic and religious grievances had resurfaced, and Mali's celebrated openness had crumbled. To talk to any religious figure, I had to go through official channels. Konna fell inside the Red Zone, which is territory in the center and north of the country the government has identified as vulnerable to attack, and where imams and mosques are under surveillance. Human Rights Watch has reported dozens of extrajudicial army killings in central Mali, including executions of alleged jihadist sympathizers in Konna and nearby towns. Villagers have found bodies in wells.

"Don't tell the police you're going to see the imam," Yusuf said as we set out for Konna.

"We have the mayor's permission," I said. "The police won't bother us."

Yusuf grunted. "We'll see."

Yusuf is Dogon, tribe of the Mopti highlands known for building villages in the sandstone cliff country of the Bandiagara escarpment, a popular climbers' destination. The cliffs protected the Dogon from centuries of Arab and Tuareg slave raiding, not to mention waves of jihad. "No one in my family has been a slave," Yusuf insists. He speaks Fulani, French, Bambara, and Dogon. He was fifty years old, not especially religious, and often on his phone in four languages managing a makeshift import business. He argued with a contact in Paris, with Malian customs, his five brothers and

sisters, and clients, trading in electronics and used clothing. He's a good fixer.

Over three weeks in June 2014, visiting villages across the Mopti region and from my conversation with Seydou Kampo, Koufa emerged as someone we all know in some part of our lives. He is the predator who uses flattery and threats: the neighbor, family member, co-worker, teacher, priest. In 1999 Koufa showed up penniless in the village of Sara Koro-Dogon, a few miles from Mopti city. A village elder gave him a bed and food. Koufa repaid him by spreading rumors that he insulted the Quran. The old man banished Koufa from his home. But Koufa bullied villagers into giving him land for a madrasa and house, one of several homes he kept around the region. Villagers caved in, afraid of being labeled bad Muslims.

We found the house in Sara Koro-Dogon, a two-story mud building in a courtyard beside a goat pen strewn with old hay and dung. Koufa's boys slept there. Some were preteen boys and others in their mid to late teens. They were innocents to begin with, but after weeks under Koufa's tutelage they became enforcers, manipulated by promises of food and shelter and the threat of God's wrath. Around the region, Koufa gradually built his following by going to people's homes to recruit their youngest sons for his madrasa. Some boys were surrendered to Koufa's care by parents too poor to raise them. The boys were not yet soldiers or jihadists. They were kids, which made them more vulnerable to someone like Koufa, and more dangerous. By day the boys patrolled the village and others nearby, demanding food and money and threatening villagers Koufa disliked. He left for weeks at a time, returning to Sara Koro-Dogon with more boys. The man who gave Koufa shelter would not meet me, but his eldest son, a high school student, was eager to talk. "Koufa was the wealthiest man in the village," he said. In December 2011, weeks before the civil war began, Koufa left for good. "He left like he came," the boy said. "He appeared and disappeared." Until he resurfaced at the battle of Konna a year later.

Some believed "the hand of God" doomed Koufa in Konna on January 11, 2013, the morning after his victory stroll through the town. French helicopters strafed Koufa's men as they headed south in a convoy of vehicles mounted with rocket launchers, intent on

capturing Mopti city. Fighter jets hit Konna, where people saw Koufa unconscious and bloodied as his men loaded him into an SUV to flee.

Rumors flew: He died. He went to Pakistan for medical treatment. He recovered in refugee camps in Burkina Faso. Koufa finally surfaced, undeniably alive, in a 2017 video with other jihadist leaders, announcing a new alliance of Islamist groups called *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin*. This new group, which translates from the Arabic as Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, includes Koufa's own organization, the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), al Qaeda, and others. France announced its troops finally killed Koufa on November 22, 2018 with dozens of his fighters in the Wagadou Forest of western Mali, near the border with Mauritania. Weeks later, al Qaeda, in a statement through the Mauritanian News Agency, accused France of falsifying Koufa's death to distract public attention from problems at home. But dead or alive, Koufa is the spirit of an effort to revive a Fulani-led, nineteenth-century jihadist movement that once ruled a swath of West Africa roughly the size of the state of Idaho for forty years. His men haunt central Mali, sowing landmines, raiding villages and hotels, killing soldiers, mayors, shopkeepers, and dissident imams. Some are beaten to death before their families. People have reported Koufa meeting lieutenants in one village, preaching in another. Captured fighters carry his sermons on their phones.

The government forbids recordings of Koufa's sermons, which makes them more in demand. A few days before our meeting with Seydou Kampo in Konna, Yusuf and I visited a village market a couple of hours drive northeast of Konna. The market was an outdoor bazaar of wooden stalls, where we found an electronics dealer who had Koufa cassettes he could duplicate for a fee. Stacks of Chinese batteries, transistor radios and Arab music CDs crowded his stall beside traders who sold cloth, raw salt, jerky, hardback Qurans piled beside prayer booklets and baskets of dates. Spices and sweat stung my eyes.

The dealer made a copy on a rickety boom box as the sermon played loud. Yusuf translated Fulani to French while we waited on a bench, listening to Koufa's steady nasal voice. "We must bring back the rule of God. Follow Allah and you will find

paradise." In the countryside, especially among the nomad families of Koufa's own Fulani tribe, there has been growing sympathy for Koufa's movement. For many Fulani, jihad offers a way to power blessed by God, so I was not surprised to see men gathering to listen to Koufa, nodding their heads in agreement with what they were hearing. Some men studied me. "To protect Allah in our hearts we must respect the sacred Quran." I saw accusation in their eyes and worried the ring of Koufa's voice might bring out the man himself. When the recording finished, I paid for the cassette and we hurried away.

Yusuf and I discovered a pattern in villages where Koufa stayed. He showed up, threw himself on the grace of his hosts, then overwhelmed them with his knowledge of Islam. He accused dissenters of blasphemy. Some village imams fled. In Sara Koro-Dogon, he insisted on exclusive access to a well near the house where he lived. His boys taunted anyone who approached the well. Many of these boys went on to become soldiers in Koufa's Macina Liberation Front. Late in 2014, Koufa's followers claimed the shooting death of an imam who resisted him. And in the years since, many hundreds of civilians have died in violence between Fulani herders and sedentary farmers, much of it fueled by the MLF. Koufa's boys, in other words, have grown up.

During our travels, in the weeks leading up to our visit to Konna, we returned to a friend's home in Mopti city every night. Yusuf kept saying, "This man is a bad spirit." One villager told us he'd refused Koufa's request to marry his thirteen-year-old daughter. "He condemned me to hell."

Koufa married her.

The more I learned about Koufa, the more I believed he wore Islam like a disguise. His spirit crept under my skin. Hives swelled over my body. At night Yusuf packed my hands in cool mud and put a wet cloth on my neck. Mornings I sat on my sleeping pad beneath a mosquito net, pulling myself together. Some of my fears were rational. I worried about kidnapping. For twenty years, al Qaeda affiliates in Mali and across the Sahel have been paying villagers and gangs to spot kidnap targets. They already held many foreigners across North Africa and my mind was full of the details.

In November 2011, weeks before the start of Mali's civil war, two French geologists were kidnapped from their hotel in a town not far north of Konna. A few days after that, a German tourist was shot to death in Timbuktu, and three of his friends seized. So, during my travels to Konna and across central Mali, my rational fear turned darker. I suspected every person with a cell phone of reporting my location to Koufa. I convinced myself Yusuf was plotting to give me up for money. When he wasn't looking, I read his phone texts. One night, I dreamt I came upon him reciting Quranic verses like a madrasa student. This is painful to admit about a man I'd known for twelve years and who had been nothing but generous and honest with me. Yusuf opened his home to me, fed me, and risked his life to help me do my work. I've tried to rationalize this to myself as a side effect of malaria pills which amplified my dreams in disturbing ways. But it's hard not to see racism in my paranoia. I've never spoken to him of these things.

But I confessed them aloud at the Pullman mosque. I stood in the *mihrab*, a rounded nook in the east wall where the imam leads the prayers, looking upon dozens of furrowed brows and hands thoughtfully covering mouths. So much worry in one room. Only a handful, including the imam, wore beards as Muhammed did. A few women wore the hijab, a veil covering their heads to the shoulders. Some did not. Some members found themselves trapped in the US after completing their studies, unable to return to homelands like Libya or Sudan, riven by ethnic strife and competing Islamist fiefdoms. As I spoke, one young man compulsively bit his lower lip until it bled. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. All of them seemed to me like travelers stranded between two Islams.

The imam of the Pullman mosque told me he moved to the US from Jordan twenty years earlier to attend college, earned American citizenship, and was finishing his PhD in education. "In America," he said, "many of us worship more freely than we can at home." In some Muslim countries, including Mali, fear of radical Islam fuels restrictions on religious fervor. Egypt, for a

time, discouraged beards, which some wear to imitate the Prophet Muhammed. Fear has motivated mosques like the one in Pullman to organize public events to calm the worries of non-Muslims. "Anyone can visit us," the imam told me, "but the people who dislike us most will never come to talk."

I harbored my own prejudice. Quietly, I wondered who in the audience might belong to a terror cell, scanning their faces while knowing how bigoted and clichéd my reaction was. I was disappointed to find that while women attended meetings with men in the main prayer room, they prayed separately in a basement room. Separation of the sexes in public Muslim life is something I've never understood. But there are things about the Catholic Church, in which I was raised, that disappoint me, too, like abuses of children and how a man called "father" holds sway over every congregation. I didn't reveal these interior thoughts to the audience, but I admitted aloud my fears of terrorism, my paranoia in Mali and shameful suspicions about Yusuf, knowing that most Muslims fear radical Islam as much as non-Muslims. Christianity, I said, has its own problems. Amadou Koufa has a Christian counterpart in East Africa, Joseph Kony, leader of the Uganda-based Lord's Resistance Army, who recruits children and has killed thousands, including Muslims, in the name of the Bible. Some in the audience nodded when I mentioned Kony.

And yet I believe in Islam's decency. I talked about an incident in Mali in 2002. I was in the north with Yusuf on a magazine assignment. We arrived in a village where the chief gave us food and shelter. After midnight, we had a visit from the village imam, an elderly man in white kaftan and turban. He asked to see me. I greeted him half asleep in t-shirt and shorts, and he took my right hand in both of his. "I don't understand the attack on America," he said, referring to 9/11. "The attackers are not Muslims."

My audience in the mosque didn't necessarily know the history behind Mali's war with Islamist terror groups. But most came from countries plagued by conflict within Islam and they understood the context of Mali's situation. I hoped they would also understand that in Mali, I counted on the good faith of Muslims.

The morning Yusuf and I drove into Konna to see Seydou Kampo, we pulled over for a French army convoy, more than one hundred vehicles: eighteen-wheelers loaded with tanks, artillery, armored cars. Dozens of Humvees and trucks carried troops. Later, back on the road, we passed remains of the jihadist convoy that French aircraft destroyed in January 2013. Burnt out pickups and armored cars were strewn along the roadside.

At the checkpoint outside town I left the car to talk to the Malian soldiers sitting beneath a corrugated metal awning. I kept in mind Yusuf's advice not to mention our appointment with the imam. The man in charge called himself Major Touré. He reclined in a plastic chair, wearing Ray Bans and desert camouflage. Two soldiers sat nearby, rifles leaning against their knees. Touré offered me a chair and we talked under the gaze of a statue built in the middle of the road to honor a French helicopter pilot killed during the airstrikes. The pilot's head and torso in blue UN beret and green shirt rested atop a concrete pedestal. The artist intended a smile but the pilot's face looked corpselike, dark smudges beneath his eyes, perhaps stained by blowing dust. He grimaced as if aware that the Malian army, thirteen thousand UN Peacekeepers, and a thousand French troops were losing their hold on the country. Jihadist attacks were spreading in a slow bleed, making Mali the world's most dangerous UN post. To date, shootings and bombings have killed more than one hundred and seventy peacekeepers and hundreds of Malian soldiers.

Major Touré removed his sunglasses. "You journalists wander like children. More for me to worry about."

I glanced at Yusuf, leaning against the Land Cruiser. He was on his phone, eating peanuts from a plastic bag.

Touré followed my gaze. "Who's he?"

"A friend. He interprets for me," I said.

"Hire me," he said. "I speak Songhai and Fulani and French."

I smiled.

"*Je suis Songhai.* My people ruled West Africa before the French." Touré claimed to be descended from a fifteenth-century

Songhai emperor. "What brings you to Konna?" he said, shades dangling from his fingers.

"I'm here to write about the battle."

Touré squinted as I explained why the world needed to know about Mali's fight with jihad. "I'd like to photograph the monument," I said, producing a camera from my shoulder bag. "I hope you don't mind."

"Take all the pictures you like."

"And the battlefields?" I asked. "Is it possible to see them?"

Touré drew a breath. "There are unexploded shells. You'll need a guide." He suggested the mayor's office.

I said, "I hear Amadou Koufa died here. But some say he's alive."

"That's the song, he's dead, he's alive, he's here, he's there." Touré tossed his head right to left. "My friend if you get close to a man like Koufa, you'll be kidnapped or worse. Your embassy will ask me to explain." He studied me as if determining what I might really be, aside from a tall, overly thin, bespectacled, fifty-ish white man with short gray hair. CIA? French intelligence?

"You're here to see the battlefield?" Touré asked. "Nothing else? I don't want you talking to villagers. They've endured a lot."

"Right."

"Go to the mayor's office. I'll know if you don't." He looked across the road at Yusuf and shouted, "Chauffeur!" While I snapped pictures of the monument, Yusuf walked over to see Touré.

Later, in the car, I asked what Touré said to him. Yusuf punched the gearshift. "He asked my religion and where I'm from. I said I'm Malian. I'm as Malian as he is." He shook his head. "This war divides us."

On our way to the Konna mayor's office, Yusuf nosed the car through pedestrians, donkeys, motorbikes, the occasional camel, trucks piled with grain sacks. We passed the destroyed prefect's office. Rubble had not been cleared, though UN sappers cleaned up eighteen thousand spent and unexploded rockets, grenades, and

bullets. We passed a few wrecked buildings. The fishing port, where hundreds of Koufa's men had camped, remained a cratered mess of shattered concrete and twisted steel. The rest of the town looked intact.

The mayor assigned an aide named Tidiani to take us to the battlefields, and then to the imam. Tidiani (not his real name) was a lean young man fresh from Mali's École Normale d'Administration civil service school in Bamako. He dressed oddly for remote Konna: khakis, a blue shirt, sandals. Konna was Tidiani's birthplace and not remote to him. He had been home from school during the battle and witnessed the whole thing. Weeks before the attack, jihadists infiltrated Konna posing as traders and fishermen. The night of January 10, 2013, they assaulted army posts, keeping soldiers busy until dawn. The attack was a distraction for the arrival of dozens of jihadist vehicles bearing rocket launchers and reinforcements from bases in the north. Soon Malian soldiers were fighting for their lives under rocket fire. Fleeing villagers crowded roads and fishing skiffs. Some capsized. People drowned.

I told Tidiani about meeting Major Touré and that my appointment with the imam had to be discrete. "I know Touré," Tidiani said. "It's fine." He took us to the northern edge of town, where fighting had been intense. We found the wreck of an armored car, a boxy steel hulk on eight wheel rims, back end jammed against an abandoned mud farmhouse. When I tried to look inside, Tidiani gripped my shoulder. "Let it be," he said. I squatted to pick up a bullet shell. He grabbed me again. "A friend died touching things like that. Many in Konna have been killed." Tidiani walked with me, thumbing prayer beads and murmuring in Arabic. I asked him to translate. "God's peace be upon Muhammed and his people," he said. He waved a hand. "There were a lot of bodies here."

Yusuf was on his phone, pacing. Tidiani and I climbed to the farmhouse roof. He pointed to a grove of eucalyptus trees a mile off. Behind them I saw farmhouses. "When the rockets came, we crossed the fields. I have uncles in that village. We stayed three months." We stood for a while, silent but for soft wind and the clicking of his prayer beads. Tidiani said, "I lost friends. You cannot imagine."

We found Seydou Kampo at home near the mosque, an hour after noon prayers. A policeman stood guard in black beret and fatigues, rifle slung over his shoulder. Yusuf and I waited in the Land Cruiser while Tidiani spoke to him. The policeman listened, cigarette pinched between thumb and forefinger. He said something and shook his head.

Tidiani walked back to us. "He can't let us in."

The compound door opened and a wiry old man in faded blue kaftan and white skullcap stepped out. He'd heard the conversation. The policeman dropped his cigarette. Tidiani touched his chest in respect. "The imam," Yusuf whispered. Tidiani looked at the ground and spoke to him in Fulani. Seydou Kampo nodded and invited us inside. After we closed the door, I heard the policeman make a cell phone call, though I couldn't make out the conversation. Now that we were here, I hoped Major Touré would think us too unimportant to bother with.

Kampo and his family lived in a two-story white-washed building with a tin roof. In the shade of a wall, a stool crouched in the dirt at a knee-high wood table where a leather-bound Quran lay open. Kampo was thin, with a white goatee, and a farmer's sinewy arms. His face bore the deep lines of a man in his seventies who'd spent a life on the river and in his fields. Nearby his two teenage daughters pounded grain. They drove a heavy wooden pestle into a mortar in alternating blows, tossing the pestle back and forth with practiced precision. Kampo shook our hands, accepting our greetings in Fulani. When Yusuf introduced me, he took my hand and called me, *"Mon comarade."* A boy brought water and more stools. Tidiani and Yusuf translated from the Fulani.

Kampo told us that by the evening of January 11, 2013, the guns had fallen silent in Konna when Amadou Koufa and his men arrived at the mosque, looking for him. The old imam had been inside praying since the fighting started. Seydou Kampo said he heard shouting as Koufa and his men approached the mosque. With the help of Tidiani's translation, he imitated Koufa in a squeaky

pitch: "God protects you. The mosque is your governor's palace. The imam is your leader."

Kampo described how Koufa had come to talk to him and also to pray at the mosque as a symbolic act, to claim territory as if planting a flag. After prayers, he approached the imam, who knelt at the *mihrab*. Koufa sat down, feet crossed at the ankles, muzzle of his Kalashnikov against his shoulder. The men faced each other: Koufa, the marabout, to Kampo, the imam.

"Koufa appointed me Islamic governor of Konna," Kampo told me. "He claimed to be the rightful spiritual voice of the land."

I asked, "Are you afraid?"

"Of what?" Seydou Kampo leaned forward in his chair, prayer beads draped over his knee.

"Of Koufa, of the police and army."

He rested his hand atop the Quran. "I fear God. Koufa has no authority."

But Koufa, dead or alive, draws power from the madrasa, a ubiquitous institution in West Africa, one of the world's poorest regions. For parents who leave their children in the care of a madrasa, the marabout's authority is hard to question. Kampo said that for some parents, defying Koufa was to defy God and risk the lives of their sons. "A Muslim," Koufa declared in a radio sermon, "must show his children the way."

"Do you know what happened to Koufa's boys?" I asked.

He shrugged. "We recognized some from Konna and other villages among his soldiers. Some were killed. The army arrested many. The rest are in the north."

Seydou Kampo claimed Koufa was never his student, though they crossed paths. "He was restless. He moved among schools. He'd get caught stealing food, then move on." Kampo smiled at the memory. "He said he deserved more food because he understood Arabic and the Quran better than anyone."

But in Konna, the Quran haunted Koufa. The harder he tried to be a purist, to reconcile his war and Islamic law, the more he boxed himself in. Someone had to bury the Malian soldiers his men had killed. Koufa's men were already busy burying their own dead. The Quran dictates Muslim dead be buried immediately, that only

Muslim men bury other Muslims—though women wash female dead before burial—and that bodies be wrapped in sheets, no caskets, to hasten the return to the earth. They tried press-ganging villagers into burial crews but people wouldn't leave their homes, even when threatened.

"He was in a hurry," Seydou Kampo said. "He wanted to pray in Mopti the next day," a Friday, the high Muslim holy day. Koufa planned to appoint himself sultan on the day God created Adam and then expelled Adam from paradise for his sins. Friday is when all Muslims, as the Quran states, "hasten to the remembrance of Allah." Koufa asked the imam to recruit townspeople to bury the soldiers.

"If his men could not force people with threats," Seydou Kampo said, "people were not going to obey me." Koufa accused him of disobeying the Quran. "I told him the Quran forbids Muslims from killing Muslims and that Malian soldiers were Muslims, not dogs. That angered him." Kampo said that Koufa left, but promised to return. Then, in Arabic, our host recited a verse from the Quran's fourth sura: "A believer would not kill another believer except by mistake . . . and whoever kills a believer intentionally, his punishment is hell."

Seydou Kampo's eyes drooped. We'd been talking for two hours and he had to prepare for evening prayers. "Some believe Islam must destroy nonbelievers," he said, "but the Quran does not allow that. They forget Muhammed was a forgiving man."

I ended my talk at the Pullman mosque with these words: "The last thing Seydou Kampo said to me was, 'You must read the Quran.'" I added, "I remain a humble student." I walked to the back of the hall and the imam took my place at the *mihrab* to lead the evening prayer facing east toward Mecca, the city that rejected Muhammed and his followers but capitulated to them around the year 630, after a decade of war. Muhammed is said to have granted amnesty to the population. I listened to the soothing call of the muezzin and the whispered hush of prayer, sounds I hadn't heard in two years.

Afterward, a middle-aged man introduced himself to me as an engineering student from Pakistan. He wore brown corduroy trousers and a collared shirt. "I have a question," he said, after shaking my hand. "Why do you say *holy war* in the title for your lecture?" He raised his index finger. "Jihad is not holy war."

He was right. The word *jihad*, writes the Quranic scholar Caner K. Dagli, "has entered common English usage in a way almost indistinguishable from the word 'crusade,' a term of purely Western origin," as is the term *holy war* which can be traced to the biblical Book of Joshua. I have at best a layman's understanding of the Quran. To read it without guidance is to swim an intellectual ocean alone. I own four translations, each a stage in my search for a Quran that is easier to understand. I've sifted their pages in vain for the *Ah ha!* connection between jihad and holy war, or to verify claims associated with jihad, like this one: Allah promises Muslim men seventy-two virgins upon death in battle. The Quran says no such thing.

On the advice of members of the Pullman mosque, I now use *The Study Quran*, an English translation published by HarperCollins with scholarly annotations. It's where I found Dagli's article, "Conquest and Conversion: War and Peace in the Quran." The book, he points out, prescribes military force in a handful of situations, including when Muslims have been "expelled from their homes," or "persecuted," or forced to "renounce" Islam. Muhammed himself, Dagli stresses, advises nonviolence. Dagli quotes him, "'The best struggle (*jihad*) is to speak the truth before a tyrannical ruler.'"

I conceded the Pakistani man's point—that jihad is a complex notion, not permission to kill unbelievers. Still, questions remained for me. I blurted one out with unintended emotion: "How do you explain the actions of Islamist purists like Amadou Koufa? They believe the Quran justifies killing non-believers. And they're killing a lot of people."

He looked sad. "To be purist does not mean you must be violent," he said. "This man Koufa is not a purist. If his understanding of the Quran were pure, he would not need violence." He touched my shoulder. "I've been studying the Quran my whole life. I don't

understand it completely, but I know in my heart it is the word of God and a book of good will. You must read it and decide for yourself."

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