

Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

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the Americas (1600-1700)

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Louis Moreau de Chambonneau

DATE OF BIRTH	Before the mid 1650s
PLACE OF BIRTH	Unknown; France
DATE OF DEATH	1693 or later
PLACE OF DEATH	Unknown; probably Senegal, possibly in Saint-Louis

BIOGRAPHY

Louis Moreau de Chambonneau was a French agent of the Senegal Company who lived and worked in Senegal during the last three decades of the 17th century. He was first in Senegal between 1674 and 1677, when he worked as an inspector for the Senegal Company (renamed the Guinea Company in 1685). He later returned to Senegal as the company's director-general and as governor of the French colony of Saint-Louis, serving from 1684 to 1689 and from 1690 to 1693.

Chambonneau is known to have travelled extensively during his time in Senegal, visiting kingdoms in the hinterland such as Waalo, Galam and Jollof, and exploring the River Senegal. During these journeys, he made extensive notes of his observations. Many of Chambonneau's notes as well as his reports and letters have been preserved and can be found in the archives of the *Compagnie de Guinée*, located in the Archives de France in Paris. Two texts by Chambonneau from the 1670s that are of particular interest to the field of Muslim Christian relations have been edited by Carson Ritchie and published: *De l'origine des nègres du Sénégal coste d'affrique, de leur pays, religion, coutumes et moeurs* and *L'histoire du Toubenan, ou changement de souverains et réforme de religion desdits nègres, depuis 1673 son origine, jusques en la présente année*.

During his years as director-general and governor in Saint-Louis, Chambonneau developed plans to extend French influence among the Senegalese kingdoms and convert the area into a colony. Hence, he is sometimes called a 'precursor' of French colonialism in West Africa.

Apart from his work for the Senegal and Guinea Company, no details about Chambonneau's personal life are known. He must have been at least in his twenties when he first visited Senegal, which would imply that he was born before the mid-1650s. The Dominican priest and historian Jean-Baptiste Labat writes that Chambonneau died in Senegal in

early 1693 (Labat, *Nouvelle relations*, p. 30). Prosper Cultru, however, disputes this, referring to a company report that states that Chambonneau left France in September 1693 for Senegal (Cultru, *Les origines*, p. 75). The date of Chambonneau's death is therefore uncertain but may be 1693 or shortly afterwards, possibly in Saint-Louis.

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

C.I.A. Ritchie, 'Deux textes sur le Senegal (1673-1677)', *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noir*, série B sciences humaines 30 (1968) 289-353

Secondary

Ritchie, 'Deux textes sur le Senegal', pp. 289-305

P. Cultru, *Les origines de l'Afrique occidentale*, Paris, 1910

J.-B. Labat, *Nouvelle relations de l'Afrique occidentale*, Paris, 1728

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

L'histoire du Toubenan, 'The history of Toubenan'

DATE 1677

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE French

DESCRIPTION

L'histoire du Toubenan, ou changement de souverains et réforme de religion desdits nègres, depuis 1673 son origine, jusques en la présente année ('The history of Toubenan, or the change of rulers and the religious renewal of the said blacks since its origin in 1673 to the present year 1677'), about 15 pages long in print, is part of a manuscript discovered in the mid-20th century in the municipal library of Dieppe, France. The other text in the manuscript is entitled *De l'origine des nègres du Sénégal coste d'affrique, de leur pays, religion, coutumes et moeurs* (around 35 pages in print). They appear to form the draft for a 17th-century report for the governors of the Senegal Company in Paris. The manuscript has many erasures, remarks in the margin and blank spaces where text (e.g. the Arabic text of a prayer) was still to be inserted, making clear that this version is a draft. Whether it was eventually used as the basis of official reports is uncertain; no such official reports are known. How the text eventually ended up in Dieppe is also uncertain; Ritchie points out that traders from the town were active in West Africa, thus implying that they

may have carried the manuscript to Dieppe, possibly after the death of Chambonneau (Ritchie, 'Deux textes', pp. 290-1).

The manuscript is anonymous, but a remark in *De l'origine des nègres* identifies Louis Moreau de Chambonneau as its author; Hieremkodé, king of Waalo calls the writer of the text 'domé Sambonné', a Wolof expression which the author translates as 'his child Chambonneau' (Ritchie, 'Deux textes', p. 325). From the dates mentioned in the text, *De l'origine des nègres* was written between January 1675 and June 1676. *L'histoire du Toubenan* refers to events starting in 1673; the last observations were written in 1677.

De l'origine des nègres recounts Chambonneau's journey from France to Senegal and gives an ethnographic, geographical and historical account of the region, describing the people, their food, government, commerce, crafts, religion and rites of passage, flora and fauna etc. In his account, Chambonneau links the 'blackness' of Africans to the curse of Ham, rejecting climatological explanations for their skin colour and stating that 'they are thus differentiated from other human beings, serving as a reminder of their eternal curse' (Ritchie, 'Two texts', p. 310). Since a substantial part of French commercial activity on the River Senegal was the trade in slaves, this is worth noting.

In *De l'origine des nègres*, Chambonneau describes the people as being 'all Mahometans', who follow 'the law of that false prophet Mahomet, seducer of so many nations' (Ritchie, 'Deux textes', p. 314) and who, 'like the Turks', strictly observe prayer-times, Ramadan and the purity laws regarding food and drink. He writes that they have no mosques or other religious buildings ('unlike the Turks'), but rather that each village has a small piece of land demarcated by a palisade where the men gather for prayers, while the women pray at home. Chambonneau's descriptions of Muslim practices and festivals are detailed, signalling personal observation. He distinguishes between Muslim practices and the 'customs of the country' such as circumcision, funeral rites and the use of amulets.

De l'origine des nègres is somewhat ambiguous in its evaluation of Islam and Muslims. Chambonneau consistently calls Muḥammad 'a false prophet' and seems to have derived pleasure from testing the tenacity of Muslim piety: he flings pork in the bowl of food for his African servants merely to see whether they will continue eating (which they do not), and liberally dispenses alcohol to the Muslim king of Waalo. Yet despite his obvious contempt for Muslim practices, he simultaneously expresses a certain grudging admiration for Muslims, writing that their piety causes

the Christians present to be ashamed and aware that they themselves seem to live without much belief in God (Ritchie, 'Deux textes', p. 316).

L'histoire du Toubenan is Chambonneau's eye-witness account of the rise and fall of the Muslim Toubenan movement (*tub* meaning 'religious conversion' in Wolof; cf. Arabic *ṭāba, yaṭūbu*) in the kingdoms of Futa, Waalo, Jolof and Cayor. The Toubenan movement was led by Nāsir al-Dīn, a marabout from the area of present-day Mauretania, whom Chambonneau describes as a 'man of not yet thirty, naked and with a shaven head' who had 'abandoned the world to dedicate himself to God' (Ritchie, 'Deux textes', p. 339). According to Chambonneau, Nāsir al-Dīn was called *almami*, *amīr al-mu'minīn* and *bourguly* (Wolof: the great master of prayer).

Chambonneau's account begins in 1673, when Nāsir al-Dīn, who had gathered a large following among 'the Moors', invaded Futa Toro. Nāsir al-Dīn had sent emissaries to the king of Futa seven times, calling upon him to reform his life and embrace a stricter observance of Islam, but each time his emissaries were dismissed and even ridiculed. Thereupon, Nāsir al-Dīn crossed the border of Futa with a large number of his followers. He travelled from village to village, preaching and emphasising that the king was abusing and exploiting his subjects by pillaging, killing and enslaving people. According to Chambonneau, the oppressive and exploitative rule of the Senegalese elite and Nāsir al-Dīn's promise of religious as well as socio-economic reform accounted for the positive reception he received in the villages and explained why he was able to oust the king of Futa without a confrontation. Similar campaigns against the kings of Jolof, Cayor and Waalo went less smoothly and resulted in protracted battles. Eventually, however, all four kingdoms were conquered and became provinces of Nāsir al-Dīn's empire.

In 1674, Nāsir al-Dīn also sent emissaries to Saint-Louis to negotiate new forms of trade on the River Senegal to replace the slave trade, which the Toubenan movement rejected. However, rather than opening the negotiations, the director-general of the Senegal Company, de Munchin, on hearing of the death of Nāsir al-Dīn in May 1674 and interpreting the Toubenan activities as an attempt to control the trade on the River Senegal (Barry, *Kingdom of Waalo*, pp. 83-5), made an attempt to break the power of the Toubenan movement. This caused the French to be drawn into the marabout wars, resulting in casualties, loss of property and a disruption of trade, a situation from which they were only able to extricate themselves with some difficulty and military force.

Chambonneau describes how support for the Toubenan movement gradually declined after the death of Nāsir al-Dīn in 1674, being weakened by a war of succession within the movement. Waalo benefited from this internal confusion by regaining its independence during this period. The influence of the Toubenan movement also faded among the common people when they realised that the social improvements promised by Nāsir al-Dīn would never materialise: the rule of his successors proved even more oppressive than that of the traditional kings, and the incessant battles caused a famine so severe that people sold themselves voluntarily into slavery in order to survive. By 1677, according to Chambonneau, the kingdoms of Cayor, Jolof and Futa had also been re-instated and Toubenan power had vanished.

It is uncertain why Chambonneau wrote *L'histoire*. Ritchie hypothesises that he had been sent by the Senegal Company directors as an inspector to check on the governor, and that the report was meant to demonstrate the governor's inability and ineptitude (Ritchie, 'Deux textes', p. 292).

SIGNIFICANCE

L'histoire du Toubenan is unique material in that it provides a detailed eye-witness account of one of the first jihadist movements in West Africa and its strategies for rallying support. The text is the only contemporary source on the Toubenan movement, and it fills a gap in the historical records on Senegal for the period 1664-97, as the archives of the Senegalese Company for that period were destroyed.

Chambonneau's descriptions illustrate the complexity of revivalist movements such as the Toubenan. He documents how religious motives blended with socio-economic and political aspirations, for example in rebellion against corrupt traditional leadership, denunciation of the trans-Atlantic slave-trade and control over the River Senegal, which was prompted by the shift from trans-Saharan to Atlantic trade routes.

Similarly, both *L'histoire du Toubenan* and *De l'origine des nègres* also demonstrate the manifold constitutive elements of the French attitude towards Islam in 17th-century Senegal. Though French officials saw themselves, and were seen, as Christians, their attitude towards Islam and Muslims was as much shaped by commercial expediency as by religious conviction. And although people like Chambonneau were basically hostile and disdainful in their attitude towards Islam and Muslims, they also grudgingly admired Muslim piety.

Finally, *De l'origine des nègres* makes clear that, in the case of Chambonneau (and possibly other 17th-century Europeans), encounters with and representations of Ottoman beliefs and practices fashioned notions about Islam, with 'Turkish' Islam becoming the standard against which West African Islam and Muslims were depicted.

PUBLICATIONS

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S.A. Diouf, "'God does not allow kings to enslave their people". Islamic reformists and the transatlantic slave-trade', in A. Alryyes (ed.), *A Muslim American slave. The life of Omar ibn Said*, Madison WI, 2011, 162-81

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