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Sources, Discourses, and Mediators of Knowledge

THE SOURCES USED IN DOCUMENTING this book were generated under the very special conditions of French conquest, colonial rule, and the successor states of Senegal and Mauritania. The French, like other Europeans, relied heavily on local informants—often their key allies—for information. They acquired greater knowledge of the indigenous societies, or at least thought they did, and this in turn gave them greater confidence in the solidity of colonial rule. They framed the acquisition and the knowledge in certain forms or discourses. Since they were dealing with Muslim societies, the frameworks were strongly influenced by the “orientalism” of the “occident”—the French experience in the Maghrib. To understand and write the history of this period, it is vital to understand these sources, discourses, and the mediators of both.

The same analysis is critical for understanding materials generated outside of the colonial framework, particularly the sources created by Muslim leaders and followers, in Arabic, Pular, Wolof, or French. Across roughly two generations, these Senegalese and Mauritians were forced to acknowledge the growing intensity and apparent permanence of European rule. The leading marabouts adjusted their conceptions of what it meant to be a Muslim society, a part of the Dar al-Islam. They sustained the old patterns of study and composition; apart from declarations for or against the jihad of the sword, one might not immediately recognize the new imperial fact in their writing. But the concentration on devotional literature, Sufi affiliation, and the meaning of the good Muslim life are indications of a shift in emphasis, a reordering of priorities.¹