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## **There is no doubt. Muslim scholarship and society in 17th-century Central Sudanic Africa**

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THERE IS NO DOUBT  
Muslim scholarship and society  
in 17th-century central sudanic Africa.

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***Bibliography***

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Writing a dissertation never seemed a natural thing for me to do, but this is the part I have been looking forward to for years: the part where I can express my gratitude to the people who have helped to realise it, by sharing with me their knowledge, skills, brainwaves and wisdom. At the very beginning of my research, in a stage when the road ahead was quite obscure, Rüdiger Seesemann discussed with me a number of possible paths of exploration into the history of Islam in Africa, and also into the Herskovits Library. Along the way, the references, interest and critical questions from Hamid Bobboyi, Dmitry Bondarev, Geert Jan van Gelder and Murray Last have been of much help, and it is a joy to thank them here. Walter Young I thank for his interest and his explanations of the terminology of logic that the subject of this study, Muḥammad al-Wālī, sometimes used. To all of them I am grateful for their practical help and inspiration.

If, in the past years, I have not become a true historian, I have at least come to share a sentiment that is fundamental to that profession, that is gratitude for the kindness of librarians. For their hospitality, trust and endless variety of services, I wish to thank the librarians of the Melville Herskovits Library of Northwestern University in Evanston (Illinois), David Easterbrook and Esmeralda Kale and their staff, as well as the staff of the Leiden University Library, especially of the Special Collections Reading Room, and Salisu Bala, co-ordinator of the Nigeria Arabic Manuscript Project of the Centre for Historic Documentation and Research at Ahmadu Bello University in Kaduna, Nigeria. The library of the Africa Study Centre in Leiden is a category in itself, thanks to the indefatigable helpfulness, going far beyond professionalism, of Ella Verkayk and her colleagues. They deserve many, many thanks and high praise.

This book is not only the result of hard labour. Sheer luck, godsend and happy coincidences have played an important role, and I would like to mention three. Coming across the rare manuscript - Or. 3862, here in Leiden - of a scholarly text from the region to which I have pledged my heart about twenty-five years ago, was the first. Then came the friendship of Djimet Seli, now dean of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of N'djamena, whom I met in a different context. I am deeply indebted to him for arranging meetings for me in the Chadian village of Abgar, where al-Wālī once lived, and even more for the many discussions we have had and will hopefully continue to have on issues of culture in Chad. Perhaps the most surprising coincidence was that my good friend Maḥmūd Nasr, accountant and entrepreneur in Cairo, turned out to be a disciple of the ṣūfī shaykh and Nigerian historian Ibrāhīm Ṣāliḥ Yūnus al-Ḥusayni, who has a home in Cairo too. I thank Maḥmūd for his initiative to interview Ibrāhīm Ṣāliḥ on topics he knew were of interest to me, and the shaykh himself for sharing his knowledge again in this way.

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This book is dedicated to him who said to me: 'Let us go then, you and I'. That is all.



### **A note on transcription and dates**

The transliteration of Arabic words follows the system that is used by many journals such as the Journal of Islamic Studies and the Journal of Islamic Africa. This includes words that have been incorporated in the English language, such as jihād, ‘ulamā’, ḥarām and ṣūfī, which are printed in roman type. Words that are foreign to the English language are printed in italics, including for instance the singular of the word ‘ulamā’, that is ‘*ālim*’ (scholar). In order to not distract the reader with formal matters any more than necessary, I have chosen to write ḥadīth as an Arabic word known in the English language, and use the anglicised form of ḥadīths as its plural. Finally, the names of some places and persons in contemporary Chad – such as Abgar Alim or Ahmat Saleh – are written in the way people there usually spell them today, in Latin script without diacritics.

The dates in this book are dates of the Common Era. This complies with a convention in modern scholarship on Islamic history in West Africa. The manuscripts which have formed the point of departure for my research are, almost without exception, not dated.



## Preface

### 1 The question

The subject of this study is the work of Muḥammad al-Wālī, a seventeenth-century Muslim scholar from central sudanic Africa. The scope is well defined; the period, it would seem, conveniently removed from ours by the transformations wrought by modernity and colonialism. But it is not. Today 'Islam' in Sahelian countries is associated with serious problems. Interpretations of Islam are used to underpin the political ideology of groups in northern Mali, northern Nigeria, the Central African Republic, and Darfur who feel that it is high time to 'restore' the religion and relations of power in these countries to what they imagine them to have been in a pre-colonial past, when Islam stood for cultural and social superiority, supra-regional exchange, and civilisation. These groups pursue their goals by the most violent means and in some cases the reactions to this violence have been no less extreme. Across the region, relations between those for whom a Muslim identity is paramount, and those alongside or among whom they live have reached unprecedented levels of tension. One question that has inspired this research, then, is: What is the background to these present relations?

The seventeenth century was important in the history of Islam in the region. During it, after having been present for centuries on a much smaller scale among elites, the religion spread to many more people in the countryside. This vulgarisation changed relations and forms of social life, and led to shifting identities and forms in which Islam was professed. In spite of this significance, little research has been done into this period, partly because of the paucity of archaeological and textual sources. Those textual sources that *have* been preserved are one-sided: they were written only by Muslims, for the simple reason that non-Muslims had no script. Moreover they were written almost uniquely by learned men. All the same, these learned men, who were often also religious leaders of their communities, worked not in isolation but in a historical, social and scholarly context that is thus reflected in their work. They can therefore be 'addressed' to give us more insight into the motivations of others and the development in their environment, and that is what this study intends to do, at least regarding one of them.

Muḥammad al-Wālī b. Sulaymān b. Abī Muḥammad al-Wālī al-Fulānī al-Baghirmāwī al-Barnāwī al-Ash'arī al-Mālikī (fl. 1688) was a relatively prolific author, who was regarded as one of the most important scholars in his own time and place. At a time when the frontiers of Islam were shifting, his success was forged in work he did on the boundaries between cultures, between Muslims and non-Muslims, of learned peers and unlettered believers, of cosmopolitan and local attitudes, and oral culture and literacy. Much of the scholarship by his contemporaries and predecessors in West Africa was in theology, and so was al-Wālī's. I approach theology not as a clearly delimited field of scholarship, but as a product of the society in which it develops, in the way Josef van Ess considers it in his monumental *Theologie und Gesellschaft*.<sup>1</sup> Theology is directly related to the religious expressions – expressions which have to do with human interactions with a culturally postulated, unfalsifiable reality<sup>2</sup> – on the part of people in certain cultural and historical circumstances. The emphasis of the present study is on the cultural postulation and the historical circumstances, not on the relation between religious expression and religious experience. Thus al-Wālī is studied more as a scholarly author, than as a theologian.

<sup>1</sup> J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991-1997.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Van Beek and Blakely's definition of religion from an anthropological point of view in W.E.A. van Beek and T.D. Blakely, 'Introduction' in W.E.A. van Beek, T.D. Blakely and D.L. Thomson, *Religion in Africa*. London: James Currey, 1994.

And as an author he is seen as a spokesman for his cultural environment. Defining culture is a precarious enterprise, as we know ever since Kroeber and Kluckhohn for instance counted 150 definitions of the concept.<sup>3</sup> Many of these refer to a community's ways of living and notably to the ways in which they ascribe meanings to their life and society, their symbols, values, institutions and practices. What is important for us here is the relationship between, on the one hand, a culture that is collectively formed and exists in a collective consciousness and in related representational form and, on the other, an individual author.

Al-Wālī's interest for us lies in his dual role in registering social and cultural shifts on the one hand, and, on the other, of contributing to the collective self-representation of seventeenth-century Muslims. It is for this reason that a study of al-Wālī's work can yield a better understanding of his time and environment. Thus, although I concentrate on Muḥammad al-Wālī, it is not he himself that is the ultimate object of this study. Indeed, while I do look at his strategies as an author, I do not regard him in the first place as a causal agent in history, but as a mirror of social developments, including conflicts, and of changing values.

This approach is based on the idea that all scholars who wish to be recognised as such, do two things: they address issues that are of relevance to their environment and seek recognition of their scholarly qualities on the highest possible level. The question this study asks can therefore be more explicitly formulated as follows: What was it that gained al-Wālī a reputation as a great scholar in his immediate environment? How did he position and fashion himself as a scholar; in other words, how did he treat local concerns as well as the standards and traditions of scholarship? How did he pick his role on the boundary between cultures? What, in al-Wālī's view, were the issues relevant to his audience, and to what extent can his work provide insights into the worldview of common people in his immediate environment?

The answers I fashion will help us to get to know the work of a significant scholar who has remained obscure until now. A close analysis of his two main texts will demonstrate how al-Wālī skilfully combined elements from theological and logical trends in global Islam with the *hic et nunc* motives of his local environment. In particular, a focus on two things will be uncovered: a preoccupation with defining who was a bad (rather than a good) Muslim, and a concern with the status of 'ulamā' or of Islamic learning.

## 2. Coordinates

The focus of the questions I have formulated above is guided by the paths that have been opened by scholars working over the last fifty years in particular. For instance, when I say central sudanic Africa, I refer to the region J. Hunwick indicated in the second volume of *The Arabic Literature of Africa* (ALA) as comprising today's northern Nigeria and Cameroun, southern Niger and (western) Chad.<sup>4</sup> This region shares an ecological system (as R. Loimeier emphasises), a history and indigenous cultural traits.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most remarkable feature here is the domination, over a period of a thousand years, by rulers from a single dynasty that had its capital first north of Lake Chad, in Kanem, and then west of it, in Bornu. The main local languages in the region (such as Kanuri, Kanembu, Barma) belong to

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<sup>3</sup> A.L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, *Culture. A critical review of concepts and definitions*. Papers of the Peabody Museum no 47, 1952.

<sup>4</sup> J.O. Hunwick e.a. *The Arabic Literature of Africa. II: The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa*. Leiden: Brill, 1995. 1-15.

<sup>5</sup> Studying the history of Islam in Africa as a whole and over the longue durée, Loimeier distinguishes four ecological regions, 'all oriented toward a major system of rivers or lakes: the lands in the Atlantic west, oriented toward the rivers Senegal and Gambia [...]; the lands converging on the Niger, the nīl ghāna of the Arab geographers [...]; the lands converging on Lake Chad and the Shari [...] and, finally, the lands converging on the Nile [...]. R. Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa. A historical anthropology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. 3.

the Nilo Saharan language group, as distinct from the populations from neighbours who speak Afro-Asiatic languages (such as Hausa, Kotoko, Buduma or Tubu). Islam reached these parts as early as the ninth or tenth century, via the Fezzān in the north and via Berbers from the Sahara to the northwest.

Historians often consider central sudanic Africa to be part of West Africa—that is, the band of savanna lands south of the Sahara, from the Atlantic coast to Lake Chad; that part of Africa that Arabic geographers called *Bilād al-sūdān* (the land of the blacks). There are good reasons for that. West Africa has known a number of great empires (more than the regions to the east of Lake Chad), that were sustained by and at the same time stimulated the exchange of goods and knowledge with North Africa, but also with each other. Along the trade routes, the influence of the Almoravids, who ruled the Maghrib and al-Andalus in the eleventh century, expanded as far eastwards as Lake Chad, but no farther. This vast inland sea, as well as the rivers (notably the Chari and the Logone) that feed into it, flowing from south to north, formed a natural border that was not easily crossed. Until the eighteenth century the groups of Arabs who came from east Africa with their cattle, did not venture west of Lake Chad.<sup>6</sup> Modern researchers have consequently stressed the relations between central sudanic Africa and West Africa. However, there were of course contacts with neighbours to the east. Although there were no important trade routes from the Lake Chad region eastward, pilgrims to the Ḥijāz travelled not only via the Fezzān and Tripoli, but also along a route through Darfur and Sinnār, that is cutting through today's Republic of Sudan. These contacts have been researched only sporadically. Exceptions are for instance articles by J. Lavers and by R. Seesemann<sup>7</sup>, which make clear that there is certainly more to be learned in this respect. The cultural unity we now perceive around Lake Chad, and the separation we apply in academic studies, is partly coloured by our modern bias, and notably by a divide that was sharpened by colonial practice, between the geographical 'spheres of influence' of the French and the British empires. These turned central sudanic Africa into the extreme and not too representative margin of both realms. However, when, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Muḥammad Bello wrote the chronicle of his own homeland in what is today northern Nigeria, he did refer to Wadai en Fūr, in the east of today's Chad and the west of modern Sudan. As for al-Wālī, at least as much is known about his orientation towards Cairo, the Ḥijāz and Ottoman scholarship as about the influence that scholars from West Africa and the Maghrib had on him. Nevertheless, the present study does reflect the bias just described, in that it approaches Bornu and Baghirmi predominantly as part of West Africa, and the correspondence in the learning traditions of West Africa – including central sudanic Africa – that Hall and Stewart and many others have examined, are also a point of departure for the study of al-Wālī's work.<sup>8</sup>

Until 1950 little was known about the Arabic writings of Africa south of Egypt and the Maghrib, Hunwick wrote in a paper about the background to the publication of the four volumes of *The Arabic Literature of Africa*, and he referred primarily to a lack of knowledge among western Arabists and historians.<sup>9</sup> As for central sudanic Africa, however, in the last decades of the colonial period and shortly thereafter it the curiosity of Europeans was aroused – and there also arose excellent opportunities for cooperation with African experts. Their shared enthusiasm resulted in a small

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<sup>6</sup> J.C. Zeltner, *Histoire des Arabes sur les rives du lac Tchad*. Paris: Karthala, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> J.E. Lavers, 'Diversion on a journey or the travels of Shaykh Ahmad al-Yamani (1630-1712) from Halfaya to Fez.' In: Y.F. Hasan and P. Doornbos eds., *The Central Bilād al-Sūdān*. Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1981, 216-233. R. Seesemann, 'Where east meets west: the development of Qur'anic education in Darfour.' In: *Islam en sociétés au sud du Sahara. Revue annuelle pluridisciplinaire*. No 13/décembre 1999. Maisons des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris 1999.

<sup>8</sup> B. Hall and C.C. Stewart, 'The historic "Core Curriculum" and the Book Market in Islamic West Africa.' In: Krätli & Lydon, *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> J.O. Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa: Project and Publication*. Evanston: Northwestern University Program of African Studies, Working Papers, 2005; See also B. Soares, 'The Historiography of Islam in West Africa: an Anthropologist's View' In *The Journal of African History* 55, 1 (2014), 27-36, for a recent, broad and challenging overview of themes and interests in the studies of historians, Arabists and anthropologists.

outburst of publications by men (all were men) whose names still dominate the field, around the towering presence of Hunwick himself.<sup>10</sup>

In that period A. Bivar and M. Hiskett were the first to publish a very thorough survey of Arabic literature from Nigeria, covering the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the enormous literary production by the leading family of the Sokoto jihād heralded a new phase, ‘The Arabic Literature of Nigeria to 1804’.<sup>11</sup> It is a review of genres and topics in central sudanic scholarship, and it indicates influences from writers and schools in other regions of the Muslim world. The emphasis is on the late-fifteenth-century al-Maghīlī (who was in fact not from the region, but who had considerable influence on it), on al-Hajrāmī (fl. ca 1700) and on the late eighteenth century shaykh Jibrīl b. ‘Umar, the most important teacher of ‘Uthmān dan Fodio, the leader of the Sokoto jihād in the first years of the nineteenth century. Bivar and Hiskett had not come across Muḥammad al-Wālī. A logical follow-up to their survey was Hiskett’s article on a tradition of reform that he saw unfolding over centuries among scholars in the region. His analysis is particularly useful for an understanding of al-Wālī. Fifty years later, Hall and Stewart presented another survey, on a larger scale. Based on the catalogues of libraries in all of West Africa, from Mauritania to Nigeria, they determined what the ‘core of the core curriculum’ was in the teaching tradition of Islam in the region. A brilliant by-product of their research was the online publication in the first decade of the twenty-first century of the West African Arabic Manuscript Database, which brings together the catalogues of eleven West African collections (almost 20.000 manuscripts) and which will no doubt stimulate future research.<sup>12</sup>

Since the start of the colonial period, many orientalist and historians have been especially interested in the medieval West African states, in the different *jihāds* that took place there, and in the transition to colonial rule. The availability of sources, too, has led to a strong emphasis on the ruling elite and on the nineteenth century. For central sudanic Africa in particular, much attention has been paid to the Sokoto sultanate and to the Hausa kingdoms that were incorporated in it in the first decade of the nineteenth century, as well as to the enormous collection of chronicles, treatises and sermons produced there.

The oldest centre of power and learning in the region, Kanem and then Bornu, has received less attention. The history of the early centuries of its Sefuwa dynasty, starting with the ninth century, was unearthed by Dierk Lange, through a most penetrating analysis of its so-called king-list.<sup>13</sup> L. Brenner supplemented this history with a study, based on a variety of sources from historical accounts to songs of praise in different languages, and of travel reports from European explorers. The study concentrated on the last century of the dynasty’s rule, starting with when the scholar al-Kanemī successfully led the diplomatic as well as the military resistance against Sokoto’s expansion, and ending just at the end of the nineteenth century, when Bornu was, first, overrun by locusts and then overrun by Rabah, the famous warlord from present-day Sudan.<sup>14</sup> One type of written source that is unique to Bornu, the *maḥrams* (charters of privilege) that the Sefuwa rulers granted to Muslim scholars, allowed Hamid Bobboyi to investigate the relations between Muslim scholars and power.<sup>15</sup> Most recently Dmitri Bondarev has published a number of studies on the calligraphed and annotated Qur’āns for which

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<sup>10</sup> For instance M. Hiskett, Emir Abdullah Ibn Muḥammad, A.D.H. Bivar, M. Last, the wazir of Sokoto Junayd b. Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, L. Brenner, M.A. al-Hajj, P.E. Lovejoy. Cf H.J. Fisher, ‘The Fulani Jihād’. (Review of Tazyīn al-Waraqāt by ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad, transl. M. Hiskett.) In *Journal of African History*. 7, 2 (1966), 344-347.

<sup>11</sup> A.D.H. Bivar and M. Hiskett, ‘The Arabic Literature of Nigeria to 1804. A provisional account.’ In *Bulletin for the SOAS, University of London*. Vol. 25, 101/3 (1962) 104-148.

<sup>12</sup> www.westafricanmanuscripts.org

<sup>13</sup> D. Lange, *Le diwan des Sultans du (Kanem)-Bornu: chronologie et histoire d’un Royaume Africain (de la fin de X<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu’à 1808)*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977.

<sup>14</sup> L. Brenner, *The Shehus of Kukawa. A history of the al-Kanem dynasty of Bornu*. London : Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>15</sup> H. Bobboyi, ‘Relations of the Bornu ‘ulama’ with the Sayfawa rulers: the role of the maḥrams’. In *Sudanic Africa*. IV, 1993; 175-204.

Bornu has been famous in a good part of the Arabic world, and on the particular tradition of *tafsīr* that developed there.<sup>16</sup>

A specific field of interest, almost naturally since it concerns those who first speak to the historian, has been formed by Muslim scholars. It has yielded studies, from which the present one will draw extensively, of the social and political roles they played (for instance, Levtzion 1985, and Bobboyi 1992 and 1993), of their status and professional practice (for instance Wilks 1986, Hunwick 1970, Lavers 1981, Stewart 1976, and H.T. Norris 1990), of their modes of thought (for instance, Brenner 1980, 1985a, 1985b, and 1987) and of their use and acquisition of books (Last 2011). Nevertheless, relatively little of the central sudanic tradition of Arabic writing has been examined from the point of view of intellectual history, the perspective that the present study will explore.

The way in which the Sokoto jihād has been studied illustrates how approaches have developed, to the point where intellectual history is a logical next step. At the end of the colonial period, the character and the motives behind the jihād were a central topic of discussion. Were the motives purely religious and social, as the revolutionaries themselves claimed, or were they political and even racist (Dan Fodio's family and the Sokoto elite were Fulani and dethroned Hausa kings), as Y. Urvoy or J.S. Trimingham (1949 and 1962 respectively) would have it? After Nigeria gained independence, views changed. Paden and Hiskett both saw the jihād as a social conflict.<sup>17</sup> The latter especially argued that the jihadist accusations against the Hausa rulers that they had abused the population, were well founded, and that their ambition to right social wrongs by enforcing Islamic law was sincere. J. Willis went a step farther and said that the Fulani were everything but racist, and that in fact they were the first among whom African Islam began 'to shed some of its ethnic particularism, and the brotherhood of Islam took precedence over bonds of kinship'.<sup>18</sup> It was quite an idealistic point of view, but by then the question had lost its attraction.

A new question was taken up: whether the Sokoto jihād and a series of others that took place in different places in West Africa between 1675 and approximately 1850, were part of a larger revivalist movement in the Muslim world of that time. Yes, said N. Levtzion, they were part of a world-wide wave of renewal and reform in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He rejected – as had Hiskett before him – the suggestion that they were all linked to the Wahhabiya movement, but argued that all of them were part of the development of *ṣūfī* networks, which were themselves a driving force behind the reform movements. The Fulfulde speaking jihadists were Qadiriyya *ṣūfīs*. Levtzion held that, just as in India, Egypt and elsewhere, the grievances of peasants in the Hausalands were articulated by new *sufist* leaders, their devotion expressed in mystical verse. Thus 'the history of Islam in Africa becomes more meaningful when viewed in a worldwide context, and not in isolation.'<sup>19</sup> Others however, such as Hiskett and later K. Vikør, have been more interested in understanding the particular social, political and intellectual background of the African reform movements. In a short article on the topic Vikør argued that, even if a worldwide pattern of reform existed, the jihāds of Dan Fodio in the Hausalands and that of 'Umar Tall in West Africa a few decades later, were in the first place inspired primarily by local situations, but that their scholarly leaders and their followers drew elements from

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<sup>16</sup> D. Bondarev, 'Qur'anic Exegesis in Old Kanembu: Linguistic Precision for Better Interpretation' In *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 15 (2013): 56-83. D. Bondarev, 'Multiglossia in West African Manuscripts: The Case of Borno, Nigeria.' In *Manuscript Cultures: Mapping the Field*, eds J.U. Sobisch, J.B. Quenzer, D. Bondarev. Berlin: De Gruyter (in press).

<sup>17</sup> J.N. Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973. M. Hiskett, 'Introduction' In C.L. Temple, *Native Races and their Rulers*. London: Frank Cass & Co, 1968, A *History of Hausa Islamic Verse*. London: University of London, 1975.

<sup>18</sup> J.R. Willis, *Studies in West African Islamic History. I: The Cultivators of Islam*. London: Frank Cass, 1979. 3.

<sup>19</sup> N. Levtzion, 'Islam in African and Global Contexts: Adventures in Comparative Studies of Islam' (first presented in 2001). In *Islam in Africa and the Middle East. Studies on Conversion en Renewal*. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2007. VII, 12.

the global 'library' of Muslim models and ideas.<sup>20</sup> This is a metaphor that perfectly fits the study of al-Wālī. Al-Wālī's particular case could never be exemplary for any model of the historical development of Islam in Africa. But if we try to understand his intellectual choices, he can nevertheless, throw more light on his own historical period.

### 3. Intellectual history and philology

Not many studies that have been published of particular works or authors from central Sudanic Africa try to link their ideas to social and intellectual developments at the local and the more global levels, or to place such works and authors in the global traditions of Islamic learning. (See the works by 'Uthmān dan Fodio, and by his brother and his son, which are once again an exception.) It is in this connection that the present study aims to make a contribution to our understanding of a period that is shrouded in mist. My aim is to interpret the relations between texts by al-Wālī and their various contexts. Interpreting texts is the business of different disciplines such as literary criticism, philosophy and history, notably intellectual history, when 'great texts' are concerned. I will forego a consideration of definitions of 'text' and limit myself to the simple fact that our starting point here lies with written, scholarly treatises, while popular and oral narratives and discourse are involved as part of the context. In assigning 'greatness' to one and another text, a distinction is often made between documentary texts and 'worklike' texts, whereby the documentary text is factual and constative, while a worklike (or performative) text is, in the words of D. Lacapra, 'critical and transformative, for it deconstructs and reconstructs the given, in a sense repeating but also bringing into the world something that did not exist before in that significant variation, alteration or transformation. With deceptive simplicity, one might say that while the documentary marks a difference, the worklike makes a difference.'<sup>21</sup> Intellectual history works with both aspects, but with a strong preference for the second. Thinking of authors such as Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, LaCapra argues that the greatness of worklike texts lies not so much in the confirmation or reflection of common concerns, but more in the exceptional way in which they address commonplace themes, employ and contest ordinary assumptions, reinforce and subvert tradition.<sup>22</sup> Seen through this lens, al-Wālī's work *has*, I believe, made a difference, even if it does not stand the test of 'greatness' in all respects. However, the purpose of consulting intellectual history here is not to weigh al-Wālī, but to draw inspiration from its methods in order to understand the history of ideas in society.

Because of its focus on 'great texts' or the work of intellectuals, intellectual history has been accused of elitism, of assuming that intellectual activity is the exclusive domain of great thinkers and that it is only to be found in great books.<sup>23</sup> As a response, the discipline was sometimes understood as applying to all cultural production, in which case, however, it would just be another name for cultural anthropology. The debate in the last two or three decades about what intellectual history should take as its domain has resulted in formulations that are widely shared. First, intellectual history works with texts that have been influential, whether they have been read by many people or not, and the idea that text, or what an author was doing, can only be understood in context – political, social, linguistic, literary and so on.<sup>24</sup> It is interested, not in the history of thought, not as a history of concepts abstracted from text (tracing ideas over time, as a form of history 'in the air'), but in a history of thoughts and ideas of individual thinkers, speakers and writers, who, making conscious choices, created, transmitted

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<sup>20</sup> K. Vikør, 'Jihad in West Africa: A global theme in a regional setting'. In L. Manger (ed.), *Muslim Diversity. Local Islam in a Global Context*. Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999. 80-101.

<sup>21</sup> D. LaCapra, *Rethinking intellectual history: texts, contexts, language*. London: Cornell University Press, 1983. 30.

<sup>22</sup> LaCapra 1983, 28-29.

<sup>23</sup> A. Brett, What is Intellectual History Now? In *What is History Now?* D. Cannadine ed. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 113-114.

<sup>24</sup> Q. Skinner, On intellectual history and the history of books. In *Contributions to the history of concepts*. I, I, (2005), 29-36.



and transformed them.<sup>25</sup> It is the transmission that is especially productive, notes A. Grafton.<sup>26</sup> In the following pages, al-Wālī appears as someone who made his own choices, and was informed and motivated by traditions, his travels, his education, social environment and so on. His intentions can of course not be fully understood, but there is enough information to enable and encourage an interpretation.

Secondly, intellectual history is concerned with collective representations and practices, with *mentalité*. It starts from the notion that we perceive the world we inhabit through a particular structure of cognition, that can be recognised in written text, but also in the context of concepts, images and 'states of perception'. If it is assumed that social groups construct reality in their own way, by means of intellectual configurations, and that they tend to perpetuate them in institutionalised forms, a good way of tracing this social imagery is by examining the motives in text and context.<sup>27</sup> It is at this point that intellectual history is most related to social history. Central representations that this study will investigate are that of the central truth of a global religion versus the certainties of local religions, as well as that of the 'imitator' - the superficial Muslim who is insufficiently devoted to a certain type of religious authority - as an unbeliever (in chapter 5), and that of the unbeliever as filthy and unable to control his whims and passions (in chapter 6).

The intellectual history of what may be called the Cambridge school adds to this, thirdly, a fundamental inspiration that is lucidly expressed by Q. Skinner, who speaks for me when he remarks that we are interested in such an approach, because 'we are interested in the history of the moral and political concepts that are nowadays used to construct and appraise our modern world.'<sup>28</sup> 'To understand such concepts [...] we need to find out when and how and why the vocabulary in which they are expressed arose, what purposes this vocabulary was designed to serve, what role it played in argument.'<sup>29</sup> If ideological forces that were at work in the original construction of concepts can be uncovered, that can be of great practical value, because it can enable us to rethink their meaning now. An important question in the present study is how the image of the Muslim in central sudanic Africa developed or how in text and textualised reality the Muslim was distinguished from others.

Now let us move from the practical value to the practical questions that intellectual history proposes to ask. In his essay 'Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts' Lacapra lists six particular questions and discusses their meaning for historical understanding. Four of them are especially relevant to this study. They are not repeated explicitly in the following chapters, but their influence will be easily recognised. The first has to do with the relation between the author's intentions and what the text actually does, or discloses or brings about, paying strict attention to the possibility of tension or even contradiction between the two. Secondly, there is the question about the relation between the author's life and his texts, not just about the people who may have influenced him, but about his known or unknown motivations. This 'psychobiographical' perspective is a hazardous one that harbours the risk of speculation, but it is in fact a common assumption in all sorts of studies that feature a biographical chapter about an author. The third question concerns the relation between social processes and the origin and the interpretation or impact of texts, including the relation between written text and more or less formalised modes of discourse. The fourth addresses the relation between text and levels of culture, and leads, for instance, to the investigation of attitudes in a text towards the values of a culture. It entails attention to communities of people who shared a certain discourse. Great texts typically circulate on the level of 'high' culture or an elite. This is certainly true of al-Wālī's texts, since common people, without a thorough Muslim education, did not read (or speak) Arabic.

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<sup>25</sup> Brett 2002, 113-119; Lacapra 1983, 34.

<sup>26</sup> A. Grafton, 'Introduction: Notes from Underground on Cultural Transmission' in S. Blair and A. Grafton (eds.), *The Transmission of Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990; 1-8.

<sup>27</sup> Brett 2002, 124-126. The idea that a culture is an ensemble of texts and can be understood by reading and analysing meanings, symbols, references etc as if it were a text, comes from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of cultures*, 1973.

<sup>28</sup> Skinner 2005, 33.

<sup>29</sup> Skinner 2005, 34.

But, as will be discussed below, there are always relations between texts and ideas from different levels of culture.

### Philology

The questions above could not be answered without a close reading of the Arabic manuscripts, or without the *Theorie der Aufmerksamkeit*, as Roman Jakobson lovingly described the art of philology. 'This now defunct field', Michael Dutton called the discipline in 2002.<sup>30</sup> He was referring to philology in its older forms, when the aim of textual criticism and text edition was to dissect language in order to discover a genealogy of languages that would ultimately lead back to God's own language and truth, and later (towards the end of the nineteenth century) to provide more scientific means to translate God's truth into other languages, an ambition even more closely associated with 'the epistemic violence of imperialism'.<sup>31</sup> Dutton also indicated the possibilities that another type of philology might open up, which would start from the need to 'enter into the people's way of thinking and feeling' (as had already been argued one hundred years earlier) and from the need for contextualisation and attention to processes of signification.<sup>32</sup> He was not the only one to think in this direction. In the same year, philosophers and classicists in Heidelberg raised the question 'What is a philological question?'<sup>33</sup> Two direct pleas, however, for the revaluation – or rescue – of philology as the best method for access to the past, really struck a chord across the literary sciences: Sheldon Pollock's essay 'Future Philology?' and Edward Said's lecture 'The Return to Philology'.<sup>34</sup> For both, philology must be about not jumping to conclusions, but making oneself aware of the meaning of texts, words, metaphors in the context of other texts, genres, rhetorics, historical development and so on, because they all influence the meanings of a text one seeks to understand, and have all influenced the author's choices. The importance of this approach lies in its being the ground of humanistic practice, in the words of Said, who (with the same idealism as Skinner) argued forcefully for an attitude of attentively 'receiving' texts and investigating their meaning in order to resist the 'prepackaged and reified representations of the world that usurp consciousness and preempt democratic critique.'<sup>35</sup>

The basis of the theory of philology is the notion of a strong relationship between words and reality. In 1970 Franz Rosenthal began his book *Knowledge Triumphant* by stating that '[c]ivilizations tend to revolve around meaningful concepts of an abstract nature'.<sup>36</sup> He concentrated on the concept of knowledge or '*ilm* in Arabic and, the true philologist that he was, he often returned to the various meanings that have been attached throughout the formative centuries of Islam to the root of that word. Thirty years later, Said pushed farther and asserted that 'words are not passive markers or signifiers standing in unassumingly for a higher reality; they are, instead, an integral formative part of the reality itself.'<sup>37</sup> This idea of the link between words or text and reality makes for a seamless match between

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<sup>30</sup> M.R. Dutton, Lead Us Not into Translation: Notes toward a Theoretical Foundation for Asian Studies. *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 3, 3 (2002), 495-537. 507.

<sup>31</sup> Dutton 2002, 501. NB, the approach is still very much alive among the linguists of SIL International.

<sup>32</sup> Dutton 2002, 519. The point about the need to enter into the people's way of thinking was made by the philologist Michel Bréal in 1897.

<sup>33</sup> See J.P. Schwindt (ed.), *Was ist eine philologische Frage?* Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> S. Pollock, 'Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World. In *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2009), 931-961. E.W. Said, 'The Return to Philology' in *Humanism and democratic criticism*. Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. The Berlin research programme '*Zukunftphilologie*' was directly inspired by these appeals, while pathbreaking studies such as K. Hirschler's *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands* (2012), about aspects of the history of reading and its popularisation, reflect the same renewed interest. See also D. Thouard, 'Einleitung. Die Folgen der Philologisierung'. In *Philologie als Wissenschaftsmodell*. D. Thouard, F. Vollhardt, F. M. Zini (eds.) Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010. 1-21.

<sup>35</sup> Said 2004, 71.

<sup>36</sup> F. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant. The concept of knowledge in medieval Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 2007. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Said 2004, 59. Cf W. Hamacher, 'Für – die Philologie.' In *Was ist eine philologische Frage?* J.P. Schwindt (ed.) Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2009, 21-61; 36.

philology and the approach taken in intellectual history. But there is also a significant difference between the two.

The correspondence, first, is evident when we look at the methods of philology: from the more philosophically inclined German philologists to practical Pollock, there is considerable agreement about what the practice of the modern philologist is. First, they agree that it pertains to the theory of textuality as well as the history of textualised meaning. Textuality refers to the place of a text in a genre, its relation with other texts, to the structures that were chosen for it and the motives found in it, which all bear on its meaning. Therefore, philology may encompass the study of 'the history of manuscript culture, print culture, the logic of text transmission, the nature and function of commentaries, the contests between local and supralocal forms of textuality and the kind of sociotextual communities and circulatory spheres thereby created.'<sup>38</sup>

However, the theory of philology uncovers a problem in the relation between philology and history that intellectual history leaves untouched, a problem Pollock explains in terms of the distinction (first made by al-Wālī's contemporary Giovanni Battista Vico) between *verum* and *certum*. Where *verum* stands for absolute, 'unadulterated' truth, the 'original' meaning of a text, *certum* points to 'the certitudes people have at the different stages of their history and that provide the grounds for their beliefs and actions',<sup>39</sup> to the meaning of a text for historical actors. For Vico *verum* was the realm of philosophy, *certum* the realm of philology. Pollock stresses that philology is involved with both, but admits that *certum* is the preferred field. The problem now is that the objects of study which tell us about these certitudes, i.e. words and their meanings, change through time, between author and audience and between one audience and the next. To understand the meaning of words in a particular context, one studies other texts, practices, social relations, and so on. But the aim of a philological study is precisely to gain a deeper understanding of that context. It is the trap of the 'sprachhermeneutischer Zirkel'.<sup>40</sup> One of the questions raised above is what the basis for al-Wālī's reputation was - that is, why he was important to his audience. One reason, we can assume, is that his ideas were relevant to them. This implies that exploring his work will tell us something about his environment, while at the same time, we need to know about the environment to interpret his work. That is the permanent interaction the philologist has to deal with. There is no way to cut corners. Going back and forth is what interpreting is all about. Moreover, warns W. Hamacher, every advance towards the essence of a historical text leads to another step back from it as well. Each meaning found leads to further questions regarding ideas and views that may lie behind it.<sup>41</sup> And these are only two of the various difficulties philologists acknowledge between our understanding of text and their meaning in history. A final one is our own historicity, the fact that we can not read texts from the past as neutral recipients, because they have a meaning for us in our own life and times. Well, so much the better, says Pollock.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4. Peripheries

Intellectual history carries not only the risk of elitism, but also of orientalism, that dark cloud that any work in the field of Islamic studies wants to avoid. One of the orientalist flaws on which Said put his finger, has been the tendency to study Islam as a product of text, not of people, and to describe the view from a writing elite at best, of a history of canonical Islam. In the case of central sudanic Africa it is an important warning, for two reasons: first because it is easy to see Muslims in Africa as twice removed from us, as living (or having lived) far from canonical Islam, on the margin even of otherness; and second, because in the conditions of little literacy and very little archival material that

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<sup>38</sup> Pollock 2009, 949.

<sup>39</sup> Pollock 2009, 951.

<sup>40</sup> K. Bremer and U. Wirth, 'Die philologische Frage.' In *Texte zur modernen Philologie*. Bremer und Wirth (eds.) Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010; 7-49, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Hamacher 2009, 29.

<sup>42</sup> Pollock 2009, 957.

we encounter in seventeenth-century Africa, it is not easy to avoid relying on scholarly texts. There are also two answers to this: the 'view from the edge' and popular history.

Al-Wālī's home environment was in the kingdom, now the Chadian province, of Baghirmi (or Baguirmi). From there he travelled to Cairo and the holy cities, but he came back to live and be buried in Abgar, now and then a remote village that was and is south-east of Lake Chad. But in the seventeenth century it was not as remote as we might think. For decades, western scholars have examined Muslim societies largely within an area studies paradigm. The Arab world was seen as the centre, local forms of Islam as derivations. In between *bilād al-sūdān*, the land of the black, and North Africa and the Middle East, they perceived the Sahara as a barrier. As a result, African studies have been conducted in isolation from the northern 'white' part of the continent, while Islamic studies and Middle Eastern Studies have taken little account of links with 'sub-Saharan Africa' or 'black Africa'. It is a view that is now being corrected, for instance by Eric Ross, who points to the fact that the Sahara was for centuries intersected by trade routes, that were also travelled by scholars and migrating groups, and that it was only in colonial times, when these trade routes ended, that the Sahara became more of a barrier than it had ever been. For in fact the history of the region was marked by exchange across the Sahara, and most of all in the domain of religion and Islamic scholarship.<sup>43</sup> Al-Wālī and his audience were indeed active mediators between models from global Islam and motifs and motivations from the local environment.

Mediating between these levels, they did not derive a version of Islam from an 'ideal' model, but contributed to forming Islam, as R. Bulliet makes us realise in *The View from Edge*. Speaking of 'the edge of the Muslim world', for which the book asks our attention, Bulliet does not refer to any geographical peripheries. The edge, he says, 'exists wherever people make the decision to cross a social boundary and join the Muslim community, either through nominal Muslims rededicating themselves to Islam as the touchstone of their social identity, or recasting their Muslim identities in a modern urban context.'<sup>44</sup> He argued that the questions of new converts, who try to determine how best to live as Muslims, and the questions of Muslims from communities of longer standing in the umma who sought to refine their understanding, together with the answers from those endowed with varying forms of religious authority, have perpetually formed Muslim societies and Islam. The question-and-answer motif was also part of other religions, he admits, but what makes it distinctive in Islamic religious history is the variability over time of the parties deemed capable of answering questions authoritatively. 'No one was uniquely gifted, by virtue of office or sacrament, with the right answers. This absence of incontrovertible religious authority at the local, quotidian level distinguished Islam from other religions in the conquered lands; but the examples of those other religions, particularly as felt by Muslims newly converted from them, continually restimulated the desire for authoritative answers to questions.'<sup>45</sup> Muslims on the edge would seek the centre, one could say, and that is what Muslims in central sudanic Africa did. The story told in the following pages is of Muslims who disentangle themselves from a non-Muslim or not-very-Muslim environment and strive for a perceived ideological centre, and of a scholar who addresses them and speaks for them. Between them, they are forming Islam and the Muslim society of central sudanic Africa.

The society in which al-Wālī lived was complex and socially stratified, and had many links to the outside world. We hope that al-Wālī's texts will inform us about more than the values of his own social group (other educated Fulani who shared his ambition of promoting Islam), and assume that in his work the concerns and attitudes of the majority of people around him, of common peasants, must also show through. A good example of the influence of popular culture in a scholarly text can be found in al-Wālī's treatise against smoking. In chapter Five this treatise will be linked to texts from very learned people in the Middle East, but also to texts that stem from oral discourse and that were

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<sup>43</sup> E. Ross, 'A Historical Geography of the Trans-Saharan Trade.' In G. Krätli and G. Lydon (eds), *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade. Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa*. Leiden: Brill 2011.

<sup>44</sup> R.W. Bulliet, *Islam. The View from the Edge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

<sup>45</sup> Bulliet 1994, 180.

preserved by oral tradition (until today) and which I therefore call popular, as distinct from bookish. But to what extent does that really give access to popular culture? And what is popular culture, for that matter? Where does one look for it? Is it the culture of separate, socially inferior groups? Or, if it is at times also the culture of the elite, do we define it for instance by certain textual characteristics, such as the use of colloquial language?<sup>46</sup> Since the anthropologist Robert Redford made a distinction, in his study of early modern Europe, between the 'great' tradition of the learned, the clergy and the nobility, a tradition that was cultivated in schools and temples, and the 'little' tradition of what might be termed 'the rest', historians have deepened their understanding of the many ways in which these traditions are interdependent. For some, it has led to the conclusion that it is impossible to draw lines between cultural phenomena and socioeconomic groups. Others have asked how the ideas or worldview of people who did not write could ever be discovered. 'We want to know about performances [behavior, habits, festivals, the performance of oral literature and so on], but what have survived are texts; we want to see these performances through the eyes of the craftsmen and peasants themselves, but we are forced to see them through the eyes of literate outsiders,' as P. Burke puts it.<sup>47</sup> And outsiders had their own reasons for selecting and preserving elements of popular culture, in their own context. Such considerations have made historians and anthropologists wonder whether the study of popular history is possible and, if it is, whether it is useful at all.<sup>48</sup>

Burke's own answer to the question was that it is possible. While it is inevitable that information about popular culture in history comes to us in a distorted way, it is, he argued, not unique to popular history: it is in fact the historian's traditional business to allow for some distortion. We can nevertheless gain an understanding of the culture of common 'craftsmen and peasants', because there is not only a mutual dependence between 'great' and 'little' traditions, but also because the elite participates in the 'little' tradition. Nobles in Europe have participated in festivals, kings have watched clowns, clergy have dressed up for carnival, and the learned have enjoyed popular songs and stories told in marketplaces. The same was true, in general, of the ruling class and the scholars of Bornu. And while the common people did not understand the Latin or the *fuṣḥā* Arabic of the elite, the elite did speak the vernacular. 'They were amphibious, bi-cultural, and also bilingual.'<sup>49</sup> Popular culture in bygone ages can therefore be reached via witnesses or brokers between the learned and the illiterate, such as preachers and travellers, people who did write. But the approach will always be oblique, to use Burke's term. For instance, the texts of spoken sermons were sometimes recorded and can give information about the way in which they were delivered. And the sermons of preachers about attitudes they denounced or commended, tell us about attitudes they observed. Another 'oblique' method to which Burke devotes some space is what he calls (with the historian Marc Bloch) the regressive method. It is natural, he explains, that fewer sources should have been preserved from centuries farther back in history, because less people were literate, they had less writing material, and less paper has survived. Of the same period as ours, Burke wrote: 'There is therefore a strong case for writing the history of popular culture backwards and for using the late eighteenth century as a base from which to consider the more fragmentary evidence from the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries.'<sup>50</sup> That method will also be modestly employed in the following pages.

A masterly and thrilling example of where an oblique approach can lead, is the story that C. Ginzburg tells us of Menocchio, a miller from Friuli, near Bologna, in the sixteenth century. In *The cheese and the worms*, Ginzburg examines the worldview of Menocchio and the peasants among whom he lived, based on the records of his trial as a heretic. Comparing the conversations between Menocchio and his inquisitors with the records of other court cases, and also with the text of the books (about a dozen) the miller is known to have read, Ginzburg succeeded in unravelling how he read them, and through what

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. K. Hirschler's approach in *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012; 24-25.

<sup>47</sup> P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. London: Temple Smith, 1978. 65

<sup>48</sup> For an overview of the discussion see B. Scribner, 'Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?' In: *History of European Ideas*, 10, 2 (1989), 175-191.

<sup>49</sup> Burke 1978, 28.

<sup>50</sup> Burke 1978, 82.

sort of lens. There was, writes Ginzburg 'a screen that he unconsciously placed between himself and the printed page: a filter that emphasized certain words while obscuring others, that stretched the meaning of a word, taking it out of context, that acted on Menocchio's memory and distorted the very words of the text.'<sup>51</sup> This screen leads back to a worldview contained in the oral tradition of the class of common and illiterate people to which Menocchio belonged, even though millers lived (literally and socially) on the edges of village societies, and there were some of them who, such as Menocchio, could read. Menocchio's answers to the inquisitors, and his distorted memories of the books he read, uncover the worldview of the European countryside at the time, which was characterised by 'a peasant religion intolerant of dogma and ritual, tied to the cycles of nature, and fundamentally pre-Christian' and anti-clerical. Menocchio projected the ideas he had drawn from this culture onto some of the 'great' texts of Christian literature, producing a synthesis of 'high' and popular culture. In doing so came near the ideas of progressive reformers such as Lutherans, which was probably the reason why he was eventually convicted. Al-Wālī's approach (and his fate) were quite different. Forging his own synthesis of high and low culture, he chose to represent the more orthodox views of his time, and as far as we know he died in his home town, peacefully and still commanding the respect of his community. But for the spectator of about four hundred years later, there is a resemblance between the two men, which encourages us to search for a similar spyhole (or screen leading back to a popular worldview) in the African's work. Where Menocchio negotiated between the little and the great traditions of his time as a reader who speaks to us, al-Wālī negotiated between the traditions of common people - Muslims and non-Muslims - and the learned elite of global Islam as a writer.

Another issue with respect to the relationship of central sudanic Africa with the historical heartlands of Islam concerns the question of the character of the religion in these regions. In the twentieth century increasing attention has been paid to the fact that practices, traditions and beliefs of Muslims in Indonesia for instance, are different from those of their co-religionists in Morocco, and that those of illiterate believers are different from those of scholars, and so on. From this awareness followed an idea of 'African Islam' as opposed to a 'pure' Islam, that can exist in Africa but that is modelled on practices in the region where the religion originated. The terms 'African Islam' and *Islam noir* were coined in colonial times by ethnologists who described it as friendlier and more open towards western ideas than Islam in the Middle East, but also as less 'correct'. R. Seesemann has shown in detail how this image of African Islam was linked to that of rural and marginal Islam. He warns that the notion of African Islam versus 'real' Islam in Africa conceals a dichotomy of what is pure and what is syncretist, and what is orthodox and popular, or militant and tolerant, puritanical and emotional, or global and local; on closer examination these dichotomies do not fit the actual practices and interpretations of different groups of Muslims in Africa. They should be avoided, he writes, because 'what is at stake here are the pictures we draw of the development of both Islam and Africa.'<sup>52</sup> The matter is all the more sensitive, because views of African Islam as marginal and deficient have also been propagated by missionary policies from countries such as Libya, Sudan and Saudi-Arabia, which have used 'the call to Islam' (*al-da'wa al-islamiyya*) as a political tool in the twentieth century, in much the same way as Christian missionary work was used by western colonialism. For them, Africa has been *dār al-ṣulḥ*, the territory of 'compromise' between the land of Islam and the land of war, where Islam must be strengthened.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> C. Ginzburg, *The cheese and the worms. The cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980. 33

<sup>52</sup> R. Seesemann, African Islam or Islam in Africa? Evidence from Kenya. In: *The Global Worlds of the Swahili. Interfaces of Islam, Identity and Space in 19th and 20th Century East Africa*. R. Loimeier and R. Seesemann (eds.) Berlin: Literatur Verlag, 2006. In another article Seesemann demonstrates how the idea of 'African Islam' developed within the context of French and British colonial politics. 'Ein Dialog der Taubstummten': Französische vs Britische Wahrnehmungen des Islam im spätkolonialen Westafrika.' In *Afrika spectrum* 2 (2002): 109-139. A similar development took place in the second half of the 20th century in the Middle East, where the perceived impurity of 'African Islam' became the motivation for politics of religious and political domination from countries like Sudan, Libya and Saudi-Arabia. See e.g. B.F. Soares and R. Otayek, *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*. New York: Palgrave, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> R. Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Islamischen Weltliga*. Leiden: Brill, 1990; R. Schulze, 'La da'wa Saoudienne en Afrique de l'Ouest.' In: *Le*

It is evident that such views of Islam in Africa or African Islam need to be avoided when writing about centre and periphery, global and local, popular and literate and other oppositions. However, any analysis or discourse – let alone reading it - would be difficult if all of these terms always had to be circumvented, defined or nuanced by scare quotes. And that will not be necessary as long as we realise that this study is precisely about the interconnectedness between a scholar and his more popular milieu, and about the exchange between forms of Islam that are recorded in written culture and lived in daily life in an oral environment. Terms such as popular and scholarly, local and global may serve the analysis, as long as they are not reified.

Finally, it should be noted that in the history of Islam in Africa, Muslims there have often regarded the region where the religion originated, and its contemporary political centre (Istanbul in the seventeenth century) as a cultural and normative centre. African Muslim rulers have ascribed to themselves a Middle Eastern ancestry or asked for legitimisation and counsel from sultans and scholars in Turkey or the Middle East, and African scholars went there to study with specialists. The distance between themselves and this centre was sharply felt, primarily because the journey there took about three months. But in al-Wālī's time and later - perhaps more than in the first centuries of these relations - a cultural distance was also felt. Scholars from West Africa who attended lectures in mosques and houses in Cairo, met with a depreciatory attitude, and their colleagues from present-day Sudan were called 'barrī', provincials.<sup>54</sup> In the nineteenth century, the German traveller Heinrich Barth met the son of an influential man in Bornu who was about to leave for Egypt where he hoped to get a glimpse of a higher state of civilization, but also to have the opportunity to show 'the Arabs near the coast that the inhabitants of the interior of the continent are superior to the beasts.'<sup>55</sup>

Africans were aware of the views that existed in the Middle East of the Land of the Black as removed from civilization, a view that they not only fought, as Barth's interlocutor did, but also replicated. The Fulani jihadists were certainly not the first who thought of themselves as people who, guided by the stars of Islam, had struggled out of a darkness that was still very nearby. 'We live on the margin of the inlands,' wrote the jihād's chronicler Muḥammad Bello, 'in the *bilād al-sūdān*, whose people are dominated by barbarity and the shadows of ignorance and passions.'<sup>56</sup> But 'margin' is not the best translation for *ṭaraf* here. The ancestors of the Fulani scholars of Dan Fodio's family - Muḥammad Bello was his son – including our hero al-Wālī, were nomads and aspects of their culture were still cherished by the sedentarised Fulani who promoted Islam. They did not think of themselves as living on a margin, but as living on the frontier of Islam, a frontier that was a 'limite provisoire d'une espace civilisée avec une zone barbare à conquérir.'<sup>57</sup> It was a heroic position, imposing a heavy task. Frontiers are always fixed by priests, says Debray, and al-Wālī knew it too. For the militant religious authorities of the *jihād*, it involved establishing military stations to fight the pagans on the other side;<sup>58</sup> for al-Wālī, a hundred years before, it involved the establishment of symbolic sign-posts.

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*radicalisme au sud du Sahara. Da'wa, arabisation et critique de l'Occident.* R. Otaeyek (ed.), Paris: Karthala, 1993. The religious understanding behind it is that 'religious maturity is the integration of the individual with the norms of his religion and culture', something that is only possible in an entirely Muslim society, and therefore not in many places in Africa.

<sup>54</sup> A.A. Batran, *Tobacco Smoking under Islamic Law. Controversy over its Introduction*. Beltsville: Amana Publications, 2003; 102, 105; Muḥammad al-Nūr Ibn Ḍayf Allāh, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt fī khuṣūs al-awliyā al-ṣāliḥīn wa-l-'ulamā al-shu'arā fī-l-sūdān*. Khartoum: University of Khartoum, Maktabat al-dirāsāt 1971; 53 (note 9). I thank prof. dr. R. Seesemann for pointing out this passage to me.

<sup>55</sup> J.H.C. Barth, *Travels and discoveries in North and Central Africa, being a journal of an expedition undertaken in the years 1849-1855*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1857. II, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Muḥammad Bello, *Infāq al-maysūr fī ta'rīkh bilād al-Takrūr*. Or. 14063, 2verso :

ونحن في طرف المغارة وفي بلاد السودان التي غلب على أهلها العجمية وظلمات الجهل والهوى

<sup>57</sup> R. Debray, *Éloge des frontières*. Paris: Gallimard, 2010. 44.

<sup>58</sup> M. Hiskett, 'Kitāb al-farq : a work on the Habe Kingdoms attributed to Uthman dan Fodio.' In: *BSOAS*, 23, 3 (1960), 558-579; 570.

## 5. Sources and structure

Most of the primary sources for this study originally come from Nigeria, but many of them can now be consulted in the Herskovits Library of Northwestern University in Evanston (NU, Michigan), where the collections that were assembled by and named after John Paden, Umar Falke and John Hunwick, are kept. Libraries in Nigeria also preserve thousands of manuscripts, and I have been very fortunate to have had the help of Salisu Bala who has provided me with copies of a number of manuscripts. Manuscripts that have been collected in Segou and other places in Mali, are now part of the collection 'Arabe' of in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF). Manuscript collections in Chad are small and not yet catalogued.<sup>59</sup> The character of the manuscript collections will be discussed in chapter 3.

The manuscripts used for this study were presumably written in the nineteenth century, which means that at least the ones with texts by al-Wālī are copies of manuscripts from the seventeenth century or later, and that we have no autographs by al-Wālī. By contrast with conventions in the Middle East, manuscripts in sudanic Africa, even the administrative and official documents from the nineteenth century, were seldom dated, and more often than not their age can only be estimated with the help of watermarks, textual and palaeographic information.<sup>60</sup> Many of the manuscripts I studied have a watermark showing either three moons – sometimes with faces and in different sizes – or the name of Andrea Galvane Pordenone. They come from different batches of paper produced by one Venetian firm that existed from 1836 to 1880, and whose Tre Lune paper was popular from Egypt to West Africa.<sup>61</sup> So popular was it, that, according to Last, other producers, Italian as well as Ottoman, copied the watermark.<sup>62</sup> The handwriting on all these manuscripts is in the style that Brigaglia and Nobili identify as Barnāwī, a peculiar script that was and still is used in an area encompassing the modern states of Cameroun, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. It originated before the twelfth century, they argue, from a style directly linked to Kufic, and not derived from the Maghribī style that was long thought to be its precursor.<sup>63</sup> It testifies to the ancient roots of an independent tradition of learning in this part of Africa.

Exactly what this tradition was like exactly can never be determined with certainty. All our investigations must be affected by doubts created by the ever-recurrent stories of the destruction of books. It is commonly believed that during the Sokoto *jihād*, the revolutionaries destroyed the chronicles of the Hausa kingdoms they conquered.<sup>64</sup> Bornu's leader al-Kanemī blamed Dan Fodio for the fact that his warriors also destroyed books in Bornu with the pretext that they contained un-Islamic ideas, and Dan Fodio's son Muḥammad Bello in his turn accused one of the Hausa kings of burning

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<sup>59</sup> The principal guide to all these manuscripts is the second volume of *The Arabic Literature of Africa*.

Unavoidably, a few mistakes seem to have crept into its list or into the lists of the collections it refers to: a) Hunwick 196 (NU) is not *Manḥal mā' 'adhb li 'ilm asrār šifat al-rabb*. b) Paris 5362, 39b-47b is recorded in ALA as al-Wālī's *Manzūmat al-hafīda*, but it is *Ḥudūth al-'ālam*. c) Paris 5461, 1a-14b is recorded in ALA as *Manḥal mā' 'adhb*, and is in fact about al-Sanūsī's *Umm al-barāhīn*, but seems to be by a different author named al-imām al-Wālī al-šāleh abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī, (the text is not the same as Paris 5532, 54b-73b and 5669, 133a-148a).

<sup>60</sup> A.D.H. Bivar, 'Arabic documents of Northern Nigeria.' In: *BSOAS* XXII, I, 1959, 324-349; 327, 336, 339.

<sup>61</sup> A. Gacek, *Arab Manuscripts: a vademecum for readers*. Leiden: Brill 2009, 291, 292. Paper was never produced in sudanic Africa, but always imported. Cf. J. M. Bloom, 'Paper in Sudanic Africa' in *The meanings of Timbuktu*. S. Jeppie and S.B. Diagne (eds), Cape Town: HRSC, 2008. Also note Hall and Stewart's remark that the life-span of paper in West Africa generally does not exceed two hundred years. 2011, 113. Others experts however, point out that this is so for paper that contains bleach, but that in the right circumstances paper without bleach can survive much longer. Bleach was not used until the very end of the 18th century. It means that some manuscripts from the 17th or 18th century might have survived, although the great variations in sudanic Africa between damp and dry air, as well as the presence of insects, reduce the chances. Personal communication by Dr. Karin Scheper, book conservator at Leiden University Library.

<sup>62</sup> M. Last 2011, 185.

<sup>63</sup> A. Brigaglia and M. Nobili, 'Central Sudanic Arabic Scripts (part 2): Barnāwī.' In *Islamic Africa* 4, 2 (2013). 195- 223.

<sup>64</sup> J.S. Trimingham, *A history of Islam in West Africa*. London: Oxford University Press, 1962; 6, 109. Cf Barth 1857, II, 255.



books as an act of war.<sup>65</sup> Some decades later, Umar, the son of Bornu's extra-dynastic leader al-Kanemī, was said to have burned the royal chronicles of Bornu.

Several explanations have been offered for this vandalism. Hiskett for instance explains that for the Sokoto jihadists Islamic history began only with 'the Shehu', 'Uthmān dan Fodio, and what had come before it was unworthy of their attention. Once they were in power, the Fulani aristocracy tried to recreate 'the ethos of an exotic, Middle Eastern, Arabic speaking society' to supplant the Hausa or other more local interpretations of Islamic culture. Even more outspoken, O. Meunier puts the point even more forcefully, arguing that Dan Fodio and his followers, who were Qadariyya ṣūfīs, destroyed enormous quantities of books because they wished to wipe out all traces of other 'confessional' networks, whose competition they also resented in the field of trade. Whatever was left was of course not safe. Wars and upheavals have perturbed life in the region frequently, right up to the present day, and, as one scholar in Chad said to me: "when people flee, they don't carry old books". Unfortunately, the value of these 'old books' has been lost to many people, because in the past decades they had no idea of the content. In 1911 writing in Arabic was officially banned in the French colonies in sudanic Africa.<sup>66</sup> It was still taught in Quranic schools, but only at the most basic level, and most Muslims in Chad, Cameroon and Niger in the twentieth century could not read or write it well. It was only at the end of the century that reading and writing Arabic returned in the regular primary and secondary school curricula of (Muslim) schools in Chad. In Nigeria, where thousands of manuscripts have been preserved, Arabic continued to be taught throughout the colonial period.<sup>67</sup> It is certain that numerous written treasures were lost, torn up or burned over the centuries. However, the stories about the destruction of books also show the signs of myth, and they are at least a literary trope with meanings that reach beyond the facts.

### *Structure of this study*

The next chapter of the present study will discuss issues in the history of Islam in West Africa that are relevant to the analysis of Wālī's work. According to his nisbas, Muḥammad al-Wālī came from Bornu and Baghirmi, two neighbouring states near Lake Chad, in regions which still bear the same names. The information in chapter 2 focusses on Bornu, which has a long and rather well documented Muslim history. After a historical overview, it highlights two specific issues, the meeting of Islam with traditional religions in Africa, and the social and cultural meanings of slavery.

Historical facts about al-Wālī's personal life are few and far in between. Chapter 3 presents the factual data about his origin and his works and then moves on to a discussion of his reputation, and a first evaluation of how that might be interpreted. It will be argued that the image that has survived of him today, of a great mystic, reflects a trend in Islam that was gaining increasing importance in the region, but that it is not the image al-Wālī wished to leave. He saw himself as a *mutakallim*, a scholar of logical theology.

To ask how al-Wālī fashioned himself as a scholar is to ask how he positioned himself with respect to his environment, that is on the one hand with regard to what other scholars did or had done and on the other, with regard to the various models that prevailed of what it took to be a learned Muslim. Chapter 4 is about the cultural, social and intellectual influences that are likely to have played a role in al-Wālī's choice of a particular model of scholarship. Some of the themes that were discussed notably among Ash'arī theologians, to whom al-Wālī's texts are in one way or the other related, are explained in this chapter, as background for his own point of view towards them. Regarding the social position of 'ulamā' who could boast a training in classical book-learning it is proposed that their authority as men of undoubted moral standing who possessed unique religious knowledge was challenged in this

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<sup>65</sup> Whitting 1951, 103, 105.

<sup>66</sup> Brigaglia 2005, 2.

<sup>67</sup> S. Reichmuth, Islamische Bildung und Emanzipation der Muslime. Shaikh Ādam al-ilūrī, Nigeria, und Seine Schriften. In *Die Welt des Islams* XXX (1990), 201-210.

period. A further hypothesis ensuing from this, is that al-Wālī's prestige was partly built on the fact that he had an answer to this problem.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the relation of al-Wālī's two most informative texts with other scholarly texts on the one hand, and with traces of discourse from the local environment on the other. These two texts are *The peerless method to gain knowledge of the science of theology* and *Valid proofs to prohibit the smoking of tobacco*. The first is the work that has, judging from the number of extant copies, most marked al-Wālī's status as a scholar in a considerable part of central and West Africa. The second, of which only one copy has been found so far, is the most idiosyncratic of those of his works that have been preserved. Both texts will allow us to get closer to the author as well as his environment. Chapter 5, which focuses on *The peerless method*, demonstrates how the status of two canonical text traditions was used to frame a new message that was particularly relevant to believers in central sudanic Africa. Highlighting an almost diametrically opposed process, chapter 6 shows how local, popular notions about tobacco inspired a scholarly treatise, in which al-Wālī addressed an urgent warning against the herb at the theological experts in the great Middle Eastern centres of learning. Both chapters show al-Wālī negotiating between the different levels of Muslim culture in which he was at home.

In the first place, however, his work responded to social dynamics in his own environment. Al-Wālī's sensitivity to his local environment allows us a view of what was going on in the popular culture of people who did not leave written records themselves. What we see is that globalisation – the spread of the religion of Islam, but also for instance the globalisation of the trade in commodities such as tobacco – created the need to demarcate new boundaries, while, and at the same time procuring the notions and the narratives with which this could be realised. Al-Wālī supported the desire to distinguish, without complex subcategories and without any doubt, between Muslims and others, faith and disbelief, truth and falsehood.

While chapters 5 and 6 analyse the content of al-Wālī's major texts, chapter 7 concentrates on the fact that they were written in the first place and explores the significance of the fact that the author was situated on the intersection of orality and literacy. In particular, it investigates how he conceives of the relation between knowledge and the 'ulamā'.

By way of conclusion, chapter 8 reviews the elements that explain al-Wālī's success: first, his choice of themes – firmness of belief and the Muslim identity, authority of the 'ulamā', and reason - that resonated with his audience; secondly, the way in which he negotiated between different levels of Muslim culture, demonstrating his grip on all, making new knowledge available for his readers and deriving authority from established traditions. Finally, it identifies al-Wālī as an eclectic author, whose borrowing from the different schools and traditions of Islam was remarkably free.

## *Dramatis loci*

This chapter describes historical developments in the environment where al-Wālī lived, paying extra attention to two issues in the social organisation of life there, that have a bearing on his work: the relation between slavery and the Muslim identity and the competition between Islam and traditional religions. The picture that arises is one of troubled times marked by political instability, droughts, a movement of Islam from the urban centres to rural areas, and a changing position of scholars.

### **1. A history of Bornu and Baghirmi as Islamic states**

A contemporary of al-Wālī, the Timbuktu historian al-Sa'dī wrote in 1655: 'We have heard it said [...] that there are four sultans in the world [apart from the sultan in Constantinople]: in Baghdad, Cairo, Bornu and Malli'.<sup>68</sup> The glory of al-Sa'dī's own country, 'Malli', was in fact bygone, but that of Bornu was at its zenith. The sultanate of Bornu was situated – as the province Bornu is today in a sahelian landscape, with mountains and plains, and soils of sand or clay.<sup>69</sup> Through it runs the river Yobe, from west to east, and empties in Lake Chad. The northern part, where vegetation is sparse, is suitable for cattle. Nomadic Fulani and Shuwa Arabs lived there in the rainy season, from June to September and then moved south some time after the rains. To the south the land is more wooded, marked here and there by spectacular Baobab trees, and the agricultural season is somewhat longer. During the rainy season millet and sorghum and some vegetable crops were grown, but the soil did not produce much, and stocking methods did not always protect against mould, rodents or insects. At the end of the hot and dry season (March, April, and May), stocks would often run out, as they still do, and people went hungry.

Bornu was populated by speakers of Afro-Asiatic (e.g. Kotoko, Buduma) and Saharan (e.g. Kanuri and Kanembu) languages, but starting in the fifteenth century there was a gradual convergence of ethnic identities into the Kanuri identity.<sup>70</sup> Villages were typically composed of eighty to two hundred families when the German explorer Gustav Nachtigal (d. 1885) travelled there in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and the continuity of this size into modern times allows for the assumption that it was probably the same in the seventeenth century. Peasants who lived there handed over part of their crops to the village chief, who paid the village's taxes to the king in Birni Gazargamu, in return for protection in case of attacks.

Birni Gazargamu was a walled town. When Barth described its ruins in 1852 (it fell to ruin after it was conquered by the Fulani in the Sokoto jihad, and was replaced by Kuka as the capital of Bornu in 1814), he noted that the perimeter of the walls of 'Birni Kadīm' (literally the old walled city) measured 'little more than six' miles and had six or seven gates.<sup>71</sup> At the centre was the palace of the *mai* or king, a 'very large' building of red brick.<sup>72</sup> There were four Friday mosques and the town was divided in wards for people from different clans or villages, each of which had their own chief.

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<sup>68</sup> Mahmūd al-Katī, *Tarikh es-soudan*. Edité & traduit par O. Houdas and M. Delafosse. Paris: Adrien Maissonneuve, 1964, 65.

<sup>69</sup> For a more extensive description of the geography and social organisation of Bornu in the 19th century, see L. Brenner 1973.

<sup>70</sup> D. Gronenborn, 'Kanem-Borno - a brief summary of the history and archaeology of an empire in the central Bilad-El-Sudan.' In *West Africa during the Atlantic slave trade: archaeological perspectives*. C.R. DeCorse ed., New York: Leicester University Press, 2001: 108-136.

<sup>71</sup> Brenner (1973, 20) reports that the perimeter of the walls was about two miles.

<sup>72</sup> Barth 1857, III, 29-30.

Common people lived in houses made of banco (mud and dung) with thatch roofs, the same as were built in villages. Some court-yards were lined with straw mats that were renewed every dry season, giving golden accents to the neighbourhoods. Evergreen trees provided shade in the streets. Within the town walls there was also space to raise crops in times of danger. The town's society was stratified. The elite was formed by people who held a function at the royal court – positions that were all hereditary - and by scholars. Below them ranked specialised artisans, then people who had no other income than from farming. In all of these groups most people owned slaves, who, in principal, ranked lowest, although some held court positions and therefore power.

The market of Birni Gazargamu was a final destination for caravans from Tunis, Tripoli and Cairo in the north, from Timbuktu, Awdaghust, Agades and Gao in the west, from Kordofan and the Nile regions in the east. There, labourers unloaded silk, carpets, weapons and books from the Middle East, paper and glass beads from Venice, leather products, copperware and tobacco from the Maghrib and gold and kola nuts from Asante in the south. For weeks and months on end dozens of camels, horses and cattle were parked on the edge of the market place. In the central sections of the market local goods were offered on grass mats on the ground such as vegetables, oil and household tools of calabash, wood and straw, baskets filled with sorghum and millet, and calabashes with milk and butter that cattle herders would bring in. Economic success was one of the pillars of Bornu's grandeur.

In al-Wālī's time, Bornu was a kingdom or a sultanate (the ruler was called *mai*, a Kanuri word, as well as sultan) with an ancient Muslim history, which had started in the tenth or eleventh century in Kanem, northeast of Bornu. Our knowledge of those first traces of Islam south of the Sahara comes from Arabic authors in the Middle East and al-Andalus, who collected their data from travellers - mostly merchants - and recorded them on to serve commerce as well as the science of geography. They reveal that almost as soon as the first generations of Muslims had conquered Egypt, they started to explore the opportunities for trade with people on the other side of the desert, in *bilād al-sūdān*. From Egypt, a number of trade routes passed west through Ifriqya (North Africa) before turning to the kingdoms of Ghana in the westernmost part of the continent, and Mali in the bend of the Niger. This region was also referred to as 'Takrūr', a name that has led 'a very mobile existence' in Arabic literature, as Hunwick remarked, but gradually came to signify the western part of sudanic Africa.<sup>73</sup> What attracted the Muslim traders most to the western routes was gold. They sold textiles, horses and copper. Another route descended from Tripoli straight through the desert, via the market towns of Kavar and Zawīla in the Lybian region of the Fezzan, to end in Kanem, which was to become the cradle of the dynasty that is said to have ruled in the Lake Chad region for a thousand years, from the ninth to the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> Al-Ya'qūbī (d. 872) and al-Bakrī (d. 1094) knew of the existence of Kanem (or Kānim), south of Zawīla<sup>75</sup>, as a place that was pagan. In the ninth century Kanem was ruled by Zaghāwa, nomads from the Sahara who had moved south towards Lake Chad and become semi-sedentarised when the Sahara desiccated. They subjected and mingled with the local, sudanic population and based their new wealth on the sale of slaves, salt and natron which they sold in Zawīla, where the people 'are Muslims, all of them, and go on pilgrimage to Mecca.'<sup>76</sup>

Ibn Sa'īd (d. 1286) was the first author to mention that Kanem was Muslim and was ruled by a sultan, but the actual change seems to have taken place earlier, in the eleventh century. It was a result of commercial contacts, but how it came about exactly is not certain. The most important caravan routes crossing the Sahara were maintained by North African Berbers. The form of Islam they practised in those first centuries was Ibadism, a more moderate doctrine within Kharijism. The population of

<sup>73</sup> J.O. Hunwick, 'Notes on a late fifteenth-century document concerning 'al-Takrur''. In *African Perspectives. Papers in the history, politics and economics of Africa. Presented to Thomas Hodgkin*. Ch. Allen & R.W. Johnson ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, 9.

<sup>74</sup> The history of the origin of the dynasty is not certain, see below.

<sup>75</sup> According to Yāqūt (d. 1229) Kānim was 'forty stages' away from Zawīla. For a great number of descriptions of peoples and rulers in the *bilād al-sūdān* by these authors and many others, see J.F.P. Hopkins and N. Levzion eds., *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000.

<sup>76</sup> Al-Ya'qūbī in Hopkins and Levzion 2000, 22.

Zawīlā was Ibāḍiyya and although very few direct written sources of their movements have survived<sup>77</sup>, it is likely that Ibāḍī Berbers, alongside their trading relationships with merchants from Kanem, converted the elite of Kanem. However, Kanem also had relations to the Maghrib, from where the Almoravids (r. 1071-1147), suppressing Ibadism, propagated an austere form of Malikism, one of the four main the legal schools of Islam and the one that has been dominant in Africa ever since.<sup>78</sup> Somewhere in the eleventh century Kanems ruling dynasty adopted Malikism as well. Perhaps concomitantly it claimed descent from an ancestor from the Ḥijāz, Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, and from then on was called Sefuwa (or Sayfuwa) after him. The Sefuwa dynasty's history was put down in a king-list, the *Dīwān al-salāṭīn*, which was recited and added to for centuries as an oral tradition, before it was written down, probably for the first time in the sixteenth century.<sup>79</sup>

The increasing dominance of Islamic networks on the trade routes stimulated the development of the states of Ghana, Mali and Kanem, all three of which were, by the eleventh century, nominally Muslim: their rulers had Muslim names and professed adherence to Islam, but often retained traditional religions too, while common people were hardly knew of the new religion. The origins of the Hausa states, in between Songhay and Bornu, also stem from this period, but Islam seems to have arrived there later. Until the end of the eighteenth century, when 'Uthmān dan Fodio (d. 1817) incorporated them in his grand Sokoto caliphate, the historical role of the Hausalands had been limited by the fact that they were never united and were at times tributary to Songhay and at times dominated by Bornu-Kanem.

At its apogee in the thirteenth century, Kanem's power reached from the province Bornu in the west to the Fezzan in the north. However, the state suffered from continuous attacks by the Bilala, its neighbours who lived near Lake Fitri to the east. Unable to put an end to the assaults, the Sefuwa dynasty finally moved westward, towards the end of the fifteenth century, to Bornu. In 1472 they established a new capital there, on the river Yobe, and named it Gazargamu or Gasreggomo or Birni Bornu. Kanem-Bornu, as it is often called in the literature, soon became one of the most important states in west and central Africa. Via Tripoli, it was connected to Egypt and other centres of what had been, since 1517, the Ottoman Empire, and via Songhay – successor to the state of Mali in the fifteenth and sixteenth century – it was connected to the routes to the Maghrib. Around 1500 al-Hassan al-Wazzān (d. ca 1554), also known as Leo Africanus, travelled through west and central Sudān. He explained that all the kingdoms of the region were in fact subject to only three kings, that is to the king of 'Tombuto', whose territory was the largest, to the king of Bornu, and to the king of Gaoga (presumably the kingdom of the Bilala), who ruled over 'the rest'.<sup>80</sup>

'Tombuto' or Timbuktu was one of the wealthy cities of Songhay, indeed the greatest empire when Leo Africanus made his journey. Centred in the region just east of the bend of the Niger, it stretched from the Gambia estuary in the west to the Hausa states and often even further, to the frontiers of Bornu in the east. To the north, many Berber speaking, nomadic populations in the Sahara were tributary to Songhay. Its major cities – Timbuktu, Djenné, Gao - were situated on crossroads on the routes of the gold trade from Akan (in present day Ghana) and were also linked to the networks –

<sup>77</sup> There are some archeologic traces, which J. Schacht exploited in an article entitled 'Sur la diffusion des formes d'architecture religieuse musulmane à travers le Sahara.' *Travaux de l'Institut de Recherches Sahariennes*, xi (1954), 11-27.

<sup>78</sup> For a discussion of Almoravid history in the Maghrib and its influence in sudanic Africa, see N. Levtzion, 'Abd Allah b. Yasin and the Almoravids.' In *Studies in West African Islamic History*. J.R. Willis ed. London: Frank Cass, 1979. I. And see O. Meunier who argues that Ibadism may have been important in the region for a much longer period, until the sixteenth or seventeenth century. O. Meunier, *Les routes de l'Islam. Anthropologie politique de l'islamisation de l'Afrique de l'ouest en général en du pays Hausa en particulier du VIII<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997.

<sup>79</sup> This tradition seems to place the first Muslim sultan of Kanem in 1067. See D. Lange 1977, 67. Meunier (1997) argues that this sultan Hāwā was perhaps not the first Muslim ruler, but the first one who was Mālikī.

<sup>80</sup> R. Brown ed., *The History and description of Africa and of the notable things therein contained, written by al-Hassan Ibn-Mohammed al-Wezaz al-Fasi, a Moor, baptised as Giovanni Leone, but better known as Leo Africanus*. London: Hakluyt Society, 1896. I, 128.

commercial and scholarly - of the Mediterranean, from al-Andalus to Cairo. Songhay's welfare and learning, and then its collapse had significant impacts on political, social and cultural developments throughout West Africa. Both when it was wealthy and afterwards, its most remarkable contributions were perhaps in scholarship, in particular theology and history.

In the field of theology, Songhay has left its mark on the region in various ways – firstly because the rich libraries and scholars of Djenne and Timbuktu attracted seekers of knowledge from other sudanic regions<sup>81</sup>, and secondly because one of its early rulers, Askia Muḥammad (r. 1493-1528) sought advice regarding good Muslim governance and good Muslim behaviour from two important theologians from abroad: the prolific Egyptian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. ca 1505) and the renowned North African jurist and exemplary exponent of austere Maghribi Malikism Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī (d. 1504). The requests paved the way for their far-reaching influence in the region. Both scholars grasped the chance, also to promote their ideas to other Muslim kings in Africa. Al-Suyūṭī did so only in writing, al-Maghīlī wrote and travelled to Gao himself to explain his views in person.<sup>82</sup> He warned his interlocutors that mixing pagan practices with Islam amounts to *shirk* or polytheism, and that jihād against people who are guilty of 'mixed Islam' is better than jihād against unbelievers. He preached against illegal taxes and other exploitative practices of the political elite, but also against music, and when the case presented itself, in favour of jihād against Jews. On his journey he also spent time in the Hausalands of Kano and Katsina, and he sent two epistles to Kano's ruler Muḥammad Rumfa (d. 1499).

Songhay's great prosperity ran out when, in 1591, the Moroccan ruler Mawlay Aḥmad al-Mansūr (r. 1578-1603), in need of income, sent his soldiers to the gold-markets of Timbuktu, subjected Songhay and placed the sultanate under military rule in 1591.<sup>83</sup> With that intervention, political, economic and ecological developments that had been building up for a long time but hidden behind the apparent stability of Songhay, were kindled and flared up.

For a time the Moroccan army commanders kept the trade routes open and commerce continued to function. However, conflicts among them weakened their control and they lost power, on the one hand to Berber (notably Tuareg) neighbours who succeeded in seizing tracts of Songhay land, and on the other to mercenaries on whom they depended to fight the Tuareg. The absence of state control along the trade routes made way for brigands and bandits, and the lack of security seriously impeded local as well as long-distance trade. In the same period the Ottoman trade along the routes of northern Africa suffered from fierce competition around the Mediterranean with Christians from the coast of France and the Italian city states. Now these routes, which had been linked to the Maghrib and Songhay, were often cut off by conflicts and banditry. With the commercial foundation of their power gone, Songhay's old ruling class could not regain authority. The cities on the western trade routes in and beyond Songhay saw an exodus and a decline of urban culture as a result of the declining trade.

Another development that culminated in this period was desiccation. In the seventeenth century severe droughts were recorded. Over centuries, increasing aridity changed the relations between farmers and herders on the southern edge of the Sahara and gave mobile pastoral groups tactical advantages over

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<sup>81</sup> B.S. Hall and C.C. Stewart 2011.

<sup>82</sup> The Askia's questions and al-Suyūṭī's answers to him and to the kings of Agades, Katsina, Sūdān and Takrūr in general, are a rich source of information about local practices there. See Hunwick 1988. Also J.O. Hunwick, 'Askia al-Ḥājj Muḥammad and his successors: the account of al-imām al-Takrūrī.' *Sudanic Africa* Vol I (1990): 85-89; Also J.O. Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay: the replies of al-Maghīlī to the questions of Askia al-Ḥājj Muḥammad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. And H.T. Norris, *The Tuareg – Their Islamic Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1975, 41-48. Regarding al-Maghīlī, see J.O. Hunwick, 'Al-Mahīlī and the Jews of Tawāt: the demise of a community.' *Studia Islamica*, 61 (1985): 155-183. 177.

<sup>83</sup> That event itself was the result of the collapse of al-Andalus and of the shift of the global economic landscape in the sixteenth century, after the European discoveries of the routes around the Cape of Good Hope and to the new world. It was a period when the Islamic world lost terrain to European powers, something that was certainly noticeable in al-Andalus and reverberated as far as central sudanic Africa. Morocco was directly affected by the economic and political changes, and looked for new opportunities in the African hinterland.

sedentary communities. When the state of Songhay disappeared, the vacuum was filled by smaller political formations of pastoral Southern Saharan, Arabic or Berber speaking groups, who came to dominate the sedentary peoples. Among the Berber populations, relations changed as well. At an ideological level, the competition for authority led to a separation between ‘warrior’ and clerical lineages, in which the former were socially superior, while both were superior to ‘black’, non-Muslim and non-Arabic speaking groups.<sup>84</sup> The clerical lineages increasingly founded their authority on their specialisation in Islamic religious knowledge. Politically, the changing relations in the Southern Sahara led to the migration of some Berber groups, who left their traditional territorial and political realm and turned to the south, for instance to Bornu, to look for new pastures.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, small pagan kingdoms on the southern borders of the old empire of Songhay, whose rulers had for centuries been subjected to and exploited by the urban Muslim elites, regained their independence.

The historical period after the conquest of Songhay is commonly regarded as a watershed in the history of West Africa. Initially however, the floods did not affect Hausa and Bornu-Kanem, or rather, they were at first beneficial. As a result of the decline in stability along the western trans-Sahara routes, part of the trade moved to the safer eastern routes. The Hausa states were relieved from the frequent invasions from Songhay and notably Kano and Katsina flourished, also as cities of learning. For the ruling elite of Bornu, the sixteenth century was a time of further expansion of its authority. After continued trouble with the Bilala in the early sixteenth century, Mai Idrīs Alūma (r. 1580-1617) was able to conquer their land as well as most of Hausaland, and to beat the Tuareg of Aïr in the Southern Sahara as well as the Tubu of Bilma and Tibesti. The conquest of the latter gave Bornu full control of the central Saharan trade routes. Diplomatic relations were maintained with Tunisia, Tripoli and the Ottoman rulers in Egypt. At the same time, trade to the south, to the land of the Asante, became more regular.<sup>86</sup> Bornu’s conquests, but also the reinforcement of Islamic rule and the peace and prosperity of the time, were laid down in a chronicle by a scholar in the mai’s service, Ibn Furtū (fl. 1576, 1578). The first three quarters of the seventeenth century, up to and including the reign of Mai ‘Alī b. Umar (r. 1636-1676) was a period of consolidation, of power and prosperity.

In this period Bornu was organised as a full-fledged Muslim state, with a Muslim administration in which scholars were engaged as judges, ministers and members of the advisory council to the sultan (who was also called caliph) and where the function of the *imām al-kabīr*, or imam of the central mosque, was a state office. Birni Gazargamu was a centre of higher learning which attracted ‘ulamā’ from the entire Niger-Chad region.<sup>87</sup> Especially Mai ‘Umar b. Idrīs (r. 1619-1639) and his son Mai ‘Alī b. ‘Umar supported Muslim learning in several ways. They invited scholars to their court, and gave others land in more remote parts of the country, where they could settle with their pupils and propagate Islam. The scholars not only received financial support, they were also supported by the interest the Mais took in their work and their participation in scholarly discussions.<sup>88</sup> According to the *Diwān al-salaṭīn* Mai ‘Alī himself was not only pious, but also ‘a courageous man and a great thinker’. His personal learning led to the belief that he could bring books from al-Azhar whenever he needed them, just by stretching out his arm.<sup>89</sup> The strong scholarly network in the capital also made

<sup>84</sup> B. Hall, ‘The Question of “Race” in the Pre-colonial Southern Sahara.’ In *The Journal of North African Studies*, 10, 3-4 (2005) 339-367.

<sup>85</sup> C.C. Stewart, ‘Southern Saharan Scholarship and the *Bilad al-Sudan*. In *Journal of African History*, XVII, 1 (1976): 73-93. 78; Gronenborn, 125.

<sup>86</sup> Bornu exported slaves and imported kola nuts and cowry shells from Asante, which were used as money. P.E. Lovejoy, ‘Islamic Scholarship and Understanding History in West Africa before 1800.’ *Oxford History of Historical Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 214. See also R. Law and P.E. Lovejoy, ‘Borgu in the Atlantic Slave Trade.’ *African Economic History* 27 (1999).

<sup>87</sup> See e.g. J.E. Lavers, ‘Islam in the Bornu Caliphate, a survey.’ *Odu* 5 (1971): 35.

<sup>88</sup> Lange 1977, 56 and 81. M.N. Alkali, *Kanem-Borno under the Sayfawa*. Maiduguri, 2013. 255-258; 286-292.

<sup>89</sup> J.E. Lavers 1981, 216-233. Likewise, the fact that he made the pilgrimage four times translated in the belief that he could fly like a bird.

room for the activities of specialists such as calligraphers, and the fame of the beautiful Qur'āns they produced spread far and wide.<sup>90</sup>

But the tide began to turn. In Aïr, a rival faction of one that Bornu had supported in an attempt to suppress Tuareg animosities, regained power and control over the trade route to Tripoli, and resumed its attacks on Bornu. In 1667 – when al-Wālī must have been a young man – Birni Gazargamu was actually besieged at the same time by Tuareg from the north and by warriors from the pagan Jukun of the Benue valley south of Bornu. The city withstood the attacks, but this was a sign of the beginning of the political decline of Bornu's power. Constant attacks from outside weakened its government and its control over vassal kingdoms and chieftaincies. As the authority of the Sefuwa dynasty dwindled, the power of the leaders of subjected people in the countryside increased. Having no interest in the trans-Saharan trade, they used their force to raid their neighbours to increase their income. The breakdown of security was a burden to Bornu's peasants. Those who were not already employed by the government to defend the borders, had to defend their own villages and not many hands were left to till the land. It led to famine and there was a particularly severe one near the end of the rule of Mai 'Alī.<sup>91</sup>

Bornu maintained its reputation as the most powerful kingdom in central Africa until the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>92</sup> Then the state came under considerable pressure from the new sultanate of Fulani Muslim reformers established to the west of Bornu, with Sokoto as its capital. The Sokoto sultanate attempted to incorporate Bornu as well. The Sefuwa dynasty almost succumbed, but was saved by the scholarly pleas – that Bornu was not a pagan country – as well as the military leadership of a shaykh, Muḥammad al-Kānemī (r. 1810-1837). Not long afterwards however, the last Sefuwa *mai* was put to death in the power struggle between the dynasty and al-Kānemī's son and successor, shaykh or 'shehu' 'Umar (r. 1837-1880), the man who would later be such a generous host to the German travellers Adolf Overweg and Heinrich Barth (in 1851) and Gustav Nachtigal (between 1870 and 1873). Having a new ruling family, however, did not change Bornu's fate. Already before the arrival of the colonial powers, the state was losing its grip on vassal kingdoms such as those of Baghirmi, Kotoko, Logone and Musgu.

### *Baghirmi*

Even more than Bornu, Baghirmi was the area where al-Wālī was at home. However, as opposed to those that Bornu suffered through, its historical vicissitudes up to the nineteenth century remain obscure. Written sources of information about or from the region from before that time are rare. Like Bornu, Baghirmi is a region of savanna land and almost entirely flat. From the south two large rivers, the Logone and the Chari flow to Lake Chad, merging before they reach the Lake. Trees to the south are numerous, but to the north there is a barren land of 'sand and emptiness', wrote Muḥammad Bello, and 'nobody lives there, except, for part of the year, Berbers and Arabs with their cattle'.<sup>93</sup>

Due to the relative impermeability of the soil, large parts of Baghirmi are inundated and marshy for six or seven months every year (from the start of the rainy season in July until the end of the high water of the Logone in February), so that communities there were and are isolated during that time. Long

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<sup>90</sup> In the 19th century these Qur'āns sold in North Africa for forty or fifty *thaler*. D. Denham, H. Clapperton, W. Oudney, *Narrative of Travels and discoveries in northern and central Africa, in 1822, 1823 and 1824, extending across the great desert etc.* London: John Murray, 1831: II, 161-62. Some copies, collected by Hiskett, are now at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London and were described by D. Bondarev, 'The language of the glosses in the Bornu quranic manuscripts.' In *BSOAS* 69, 1 (2006). 113-140.

<sup>91</sup> The famine called *Dāl Dāma* in the *Dīwān al-salāṭīn*. See also M. Hiskett, *The course of Islam in Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994.

<sup>92</sup> Brenner 1973, 22.

<sup>93</sup> Or. 14.063, 3r. A modern edition of Bello's *Infāq al-maysūr* was published was made by C. E. J. Whitting, *Infaku'l Maisuri*. London: Luzac & Company, 1951. It is however not always accurate. For this quote see Whitting, page 4.



distance traders had no business in Baghirmi and right up to the present day there have been no important markets in the region. In the seventeenth century, the only foreigners who ventured there were slave-raiders from Bornu and sometimes preachers.

The populations of the region lived in villages with village-chiefs, but without political authority on a more central level until the beginning of the sixteenth century. From oral history it appears that the kingdom was founded at the beginning of the sixteenth century.<sup>94</sup> The first *Muslim* king or sultan was ‘Abdallāh (r. 1568-1608). According to a tradition recorded by Nachtigal, he invited four learned Fulani, who had designed and consecrated his palace in Massenya for him, to settle in four different villages, in order to attract people and teach Islam in his small country.<sup>95</sup> Two of these villages were called ‘Abger Fellati’ and ‘Abger Shuwa’—that is, Fulani and Arab Abgar. That repartition reflects the historic arrival, more or less simultaneously with the Fulani, of Arabic speaking people described as Baggara Arabs or Shuwa Arabs, who migrated from the east (a wide area in today’s Sudan) and settled in Baghirmi as semi-nomadic inhabitants. (Compare the narrative in section 4 of chapter 3.) Eventually, their colloquial Arabic would form the basis of the Arabic spoken throughout the region, but in the seventeenth century, it had not yet spread to other populations.<sup>96</sup> However, Baghirmi started to be gradually written into Islamic-Arabic history: for instance, the name of the land of its most important ethnic group, the Barma or Bagharma, was explained as deriving from Arabic *baggar mī*, meaning ‘a hundred cows’.<sup>97</sup>

The sultanate of Baghirmi became a vassal kingdom to Bornu on an irregular basis, and a ‘sub-contractor’ for slaves who had been captured among the populations living south of Baghirmi.<sup>98</sup> At times it was virtually independent, but towards the end of the eighteenth century the small sultanate was overpowered by Wadai, another young sultanate to the east, which Muḥammad Bello believed had God’s support in this action, because the Sultan of Baghirmi was extremely sinful and had married his own daughter.<sup>99</sup>

#### *Relations with the Ottoman Empire.*

African scholars, merchants, pilgrims – roles that were often held by one and the same person – travelled to Mecca and Medina, to Cairo and other Middle Eastern cities on the route, which since 1516 had belonged to the Ottoman Empire. (Slaves also travelled this route, but they have left hardly any traces, to their contemporaries or to us.) One of the successes Ibn Furṭū reported in the *Diwān al-salaṭīn* was the visit of a diplomatic delegation from the Lord of Istanbul to Birni Gazargamu. For both parties, the Ottomans and the Sefuwa, the visit must have been of great symbolic significance, but it did not lead to further official relations between them. Bornu did not become a part of the Ottoman Empire. However, its rulers, scholars and believers, like those of other Sudanic Muslim regions, did recognise the Ottoman state as the leader of the Muslim world, its sultan as the keeper of the keys of the two holy cities. An undated manuscript from Bornu (Paden 76), refers to a decree that was issued by the sultan of Iṣṭanbūl, probably early in the seventeenth century, in which he prohibited smoking. It was dispatched to ‘all the places under his dominion’ (*fī mulkihi*), not only to the inhabitants of places that did fall under his rule, such as Mecca, Medina, Kufa and Basra, but also to Fez, Sind, India and

<sup>94</sup> For a comparison of sources and their data see A. Vivien, ‘Essay de Concordance de cinq tables généalogiques du Baguirmi (Tchad).’ In *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 37, 1 (1967): 25-40.

<sup>95</sup> Nachtigal 1974, III, 401 ff. Cf Barth 1857, II, 549 and III, 115, where he writes that two Fulani settlements were founded in Baghirmi in the second half of the 16th century.

<sup>96</sup> U. Braukämper, ‘The origin of Baggara Arab Culture.’ In *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika* 14 (1993), 13-46. And J.C. Zeltner, *Histoire des Arabes sur les rives du lac Tchad*. Paris: Karthala, 2002; 7-20.

<sup>97</sup> According to one story a hundred cows were sacrificed for the miraculous survival in a fire of a baby who was to become king of Baghirmi. See V. Pâques. ‘Origine et caractères du pouvoir royal au Baguirmi.’ In: *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 37, 1 (1967), 183-214; 186.

<sup>98</sup> S. MacEachern, ‘State formation and Enslavement in the Southern Lake Chad Basin.’ In *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade. Archaeological Perspectives*. C.R. DeCorse (ed.) New York: Leicester University Press, 2001.

<sup>99</sup> Or. 14.063, 3r.

Rūm, and to Adar ('*Adhar*'), a name that might refer to a Tuareg town in the Southern Sahara. It is not quite clear how the writer of this manuscript interpreted the authority of the Ottoman Sultan, but apparently it did make a big impression, at least in Bornu. Ottoman politics, including the state's choice of a religious ideology, must have influenced the possibilities and interests of African scholars to some extent.

Recent scholarship has dismantled the narrative of the decline of the Ottoman Empire after the 'classical age' (1300 to 1600) and demonstrated that until the nineteenth century, the Ottoman state successfully adjusted to political, social and institutional changes within its own borders and in the world around, and was economically and politically on par with Europe. Nevertheless, Karen Barkey observes that the seventeenth century was a period of doubt about the strength of the empire, in which the Ottomans fought many wars and lost a lot of territory.<sup>100</sup> Internally, they encountered widespread heterodox Muslim religious and sectarian dissent, with some forces pushing for more syncretism and less imperial domination, and others, notably the Kadizadeli religious reformists, pushing for puritanism. Barkey argues that the organisational system of the Ottomans had most trouble with amorphous movements, and therefore, while it had a tradition of tolerance towards non-Muslim populations, vigorously persecuted mystical orders. At the same time, for strategic reasons, the state tended to side with the puritanists. Its legitimacy became increasingly based on orthodox Sunni Islam.

## 2. Spread of Islam to rural areas

Ever since the introduction of Islam in sudanic Africa, the rulers of Muslim states had invited scholars and religious men to settle near their courts, to add prestige and *baraka* to their kingship. Others were offered land rights in rural regions, where they were instrumental in the rulers' strategy to attract new settlers to underexploited land and to control remote areas. From contracts or *mahrams* from Bornu specifically, we know that 'ulamā' there were granted privileges such as the right to levy taxes from their villages, and were themselves exempt from the payment of taxes and other civic duties.<sup>101</sup> For a long time, however, the influence of the 'ulamā' on the religion of the local population, in towns or rural areas throughout the region was limited. In general, rulers did not expect commoners to convert. Although sometimes common people may have witnessed rituals of prayer, consecration or healing, and may have sought to be involved in them for their own interest, they usually remained pagan.<sup>102</sup> At the same time, the devotion of kings and vassal kings who employed literate Muslims, controlled Muslim trading activities and did professed Islam, was most often partial. Of overriding importance was the fact that their authority over their own people remained firmly rooted in traditional religions, and in their relations – directly or via priests - with territorial spirits. When they accepted support from Islam, they did not renounce their original religion. This implied that 'ulamā' who depended on these elites – could not avoid compromise. Presenting their patrons with a diluted form of Islam, they accepted a role in which they accommodated their authority.<sup>103</sup>

This pattern, too, changed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when three important, interrelated and simultaneous developments took place throughout West Africa: first, a call for reform of uncompromising Islam was made; secondly, Islam began to spread from urban centres and elites to more rural populations; thirdly, there was the popularisation of a strain of Islam that was propagated

<sup>100</sup> K. Barkey, *Empire of Difference. The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008. Chapter 5.

<sup>101</sup> H. Bobboyi 1993.

<sup>102</sup> Only the sultans of Kanem, as soon as they adopted Islam in the eleventh century, appear to have urged their population to convert to Islam too. (Although Lange suspects that even to them, 'l'Islam importait peu face à la raison d'Etat.' Lange 1977, 72, n. 6.) The result was that in the thirteenth century enough students and pilgrims from Kanem travelled to Mekka to inspire the African sultan to open and finance a madrasa – school and hostel – for them in Cairo, where they could stay and study with respected teachers for long periods. Al-Maqrizī in Hopkins and Levtzion 2000, 353. It was still in existence in the seventeenth century, reports Lavers 1971, 35.

<sup>103</sup> Cf M. Hiskett, 'An Islamic tradition of reform in the Western Sudan from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.' In *BSOAS*. XXV, 3 (1962): 577-596.

by less learned religious experts. These developments mark the intellectual and social context of al-Wālī's work. How the changes took place and how they were related, have hardly been explored yet, but a good way to start is by looking at the 'ulamā', who, as Levtzion pointed out, were principal agents of all three changes.<sup>104</sup>

Until these changes, and for the sake of analysis, two types of 'ulamā' (including imams, quranic teachers, qāḍīs and scholars) can be distinguished. On the one hand there were the 'compromising' ones, who lived in the political centres and rendered religious services to the ruling and royal class. On the other hand were those who aimed more exclusively to represent normative Islam, and could do so because they functioned more independently from the courts, deriving their income from commerce<sup>105</sup> or from the agricultural labour of students and slaves, in the case of 'ulamā' who lived in autonomous Muslim communities outside of urban centres.<sup>106</sup> The main orientation of this second group was towards Islam as it was taught in scholarly literature produced especially in the Middle East and North Africa. Through their travels, correspondence and reading, the 'ulamā' of normative Islam often 'maintained a high standard of Islamic scholarship, had connections with other centres of learning in the Muslim world, and were concerned with the application of the Islamic law.'<sup>107</sup> To the local socio-political systems, however, their theology and religious practice were marginal. Now, these 'ulamā' became increasingly pre-occupied with the gap they perceived between normative Islam and 'popular', 'compromising', 'corrupt' or 'mixed' Islam, and it inspired them in their attempts to achieve reform.

Reform, indeed, became the catchword of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The theologians' ambition to reform, to change the habits of believers so that they would comply with what the theologians saw as pure Islam and to shape society in accordance with an Islamic model could be combined with a desire for social change among commoners, and so become the ideological core of the movement that led to the establishment, from Futa Toro in the south western Sahara to the Hausalands, of new Muslim states that were led by religious authorities.

As mentioned, until then Islam had been marginal to the socio-political systems of states that were Muslim in name. One result, however, of the upheavals of the seventeenth century was the articulation of new ideologies of social organisation. B. Hall described in some detail how for instance the Arabic or Berber-speaking populations of the Southern Sahara started to emphasise their Arab-Islamic identity when they saw the chance to gain power after the collapse of Songhay, as the ideological basis for their authority. A preferred way to do this was by creating genealogies that linked them to Islamic ancestors.<sup>108</sup> Foundational myths, for instance about the mythical character of 'Uqba al-Mustajab,

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<sup>104</sup> N. Levtzion, 'Patterns of Islamization in West Africa.' In *Conversion to Islam*. N. Levtzion, ed. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979. The point is repeated in N. Levtzion, 'Sociopolitical Roles of Muslim Clerics and Scholars.' In: E. Cohen e.a. eds. *Comparative Social Dynamics. Essays in honor of N. Eisenstadt*, Boulder Colorado: Praeger, 1985; and in 'Islam in the Bilād al-Sūdān to 1800' in N. Levtzion, *Islam in Africa and the Middle East. Studies on Conversion en Renewal*. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2007.

<sup>105</sup> The involvement of scholars in trade networks is particularly well explored by G. Lydon. (See G. Lydon, *On Transsaharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth Century Western Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Especially chapter 7.) Although her work is focussed on West Africa in the nineteenth century, it explains the situation of scholars in an earlier period and in central sudanic Africa as well. In the first place, she argues, long-distance traders needed all sorts of legal services, for which they hired legal specialists (*fuqaha* sg. *faqīh*) resident in the main cities of the trade routes. Secondly, on the family level, the commercial success of some members allowed others to devote themselves to learning. Finally, scholars escorted caravans as judges and religious men, and many used these journeys for some own trade, and their profits to collect books for their own libraries.

<sup>106</sup> Of course, the religious ideas of the more independent scholars could be influenced by practical and commercial too. It is interesting for instance to note that Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, whose family was very successful in trade, immediately adopted a positive attitude towards the religiously contested commodity of tobacco.

<sup>107</sup> Levtzion 1979, 215.

<sup>108</sup> Hall 2005.

originate in this period.<sup>109</sup> The same happened in other parts of West Africa: first Islam gained importance for the identity of politically dominant communities. It was partly the success of ‘ulamā’ who had been able to promote Islam as the only source of legitimacy for rulers. Then, more commoners moved towards Islam, ‘because it was the way to identify oneself with the socio-political system and its values. Those who remained pagan, irrespective of their numbers, were relegated to the lowest status and to the fringes of society.’<sup>110</sup>

For new converts, Islam came to represent the civilisation of luxury goods and knowledge that merchants and scholars brought from across the desert. It presented a culture of global dimension, supported by a God of global power, sustained by sciences, techniques (related to writing) and prayer of superior effectivity. At a practical level, Islam offered the members of the community of believers, the *umma*, access to networks of trade, to prestige and social emancipation. So more people converted. The *rapprochement* between ‘ulamā’ and peasants provided the former with social and political arguments for reform, and with the strength that lies in numbers.

But the developments also involved gradual changes that did not only strengthen the position of ‘ulamā’. For one, as more commoners became Muslims, Islam popularised and a new variety of religious specialists responded to popular demands. It sometimes had a negative influence on the image of the profession of the scholar (‘*ālim*’), as we will see in the next chapter. Also, as Islam gained political importance, rulers tended to grow suspicious of its specialists, who might always find causes to cast doubt on the justness of the formers’ governance. As mentioned, the rulers of Bornu had themselves installed ‘ulamā’ in rural communities to stimulate the growth of Islam there. However, these *mallemtis*, as such communities led by scholars were called, attracted more followers than they had foreseen, and were also places where ‘ulamā’ who refused to compromise with the ruling class and their religious views withdrew. Their growing influence in rural areas became disconcerting to the political establishment. At a time when the state of Bornu was under continual attack from outside, the authorities in Birni Gazargamu became weary of many religious experts. Losing their footing, they came to fear the urban ‘ulamā’ for the metaphysical powers they might use against patrons who could no longer offer them what they had been able to offer before. And they were even more concerned about the activity of preachers who lived beyond their direct control, among heavily taxed peasants ready to jump at the opportunity to cast off the yoke of their exploitation by the royal urban elite. Early in the seventeenth century, one generation before al-Wālī, there seems to have been a movement of political preaching against the Sefuwa that resulted in the withdrawal of support for the dynasty by local chiefs and other government ‘officers’.<sup>111</sup> It led sultan ‘Umar b. Idrīss, incited by scholars around him, to order the arrest of two ‘ulamā’, one of whom (the Tuareg shaykh al-Jirmī) was killed, while his friend, shaykh al-Waldīdī (more commonly known as al-Waldede), was banned to Baghirmi.<sup>112</sup>

### *Sufism*

Another factor that played a role in the spread of Islam and affected the position of ‘ulamā’ is mysticism. Two ideas are characteristic of mysticism in Islam: surrender of the soul to God, and striving to achieve a gnostic comprehension of religious knowledge or truth. Let’s start with the second, gnosis. In principle, it does not exclude the approach of rational comprehension of another type of religious knowledge, and in practice mysticism and ‘orthodox’ religious scholarship have often been combined by Muslims throughout the ages.<sup>113</sup> The two approaches are based on the understanding in Islam of reality and knowledge as divided in two – existing in both the natural and

<sup>109</sup> Cf. M. Nobili, ‘Back to Saharan Myths: Preliminary Notes on ‘Uqba al-Mustajab.’ In *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*, 11 (2012).

<sup>110</sup> Levtzion 1979, 215.

<sup>111</sup> Alkali 2013, 256.

<sup>112</sup> Lavers 1971; H. Bobboyi, *The ‘Ulama of Borno: A Study of the Relations between Scholars and State under the Sayfawa, 1470-1808*. Dissertation. (Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1992): 99 ff. The fate of the shaykhs al-Waldede and al-Jirmī was described in *Infāq al-maysūr*, Or. 14.063, 4r.

<sup>113</sup> For West Africa in particular this point is made by C. Stewart 1976, 87 ff, and R. Seesemann 2011.

the supernatural world, the manifest (*ẓāhir*) and the hidden (*bāṭin*) realms. In this view, religious knowledge of the natural world is pre-eminently knowledge of God's laws, and therefore the field of jurists and specialists of hadith, while hidden knowledge was the realm of mystics or *ṣūfīs*. It was commonly accepted that the natural and the supernatural worlds are connected in a way that is explained by Ibn Khaldūn: the natural world that is perceived by the senses, comprises a hierarchy of spheres, whose elements can be transformed into the next sphere, from the most substantial to the least substantial, that is from earth, matter, man and animals to water, then to air, then to fire. We perceive that this visible world is influenced by an invisible spiritual force—that is, the soul. The soul is in principle connected with another invisible level, that of angels, where it can acquire supernatural perceptions.<sup>114</sup> This is what explains prophecy for instance, for prophecy is the state of direct and independent contact between the essence of a prophet and the angels. Knowledge at this level can also be attained by others, when their soul lingers in a transitory phase, for example in dreams or on the verge of death. Some people, such as diviners and *ṣūfīs*, use spiritual exercise or other methods to access this stage, that is to temporarily let their soul transform pass from the stage of humanity to that of angels and perceive what is supernatural, and sometimes called intuitive knowledge.

Nevertheless, in the history of Islam, mysticism has also been regarded with at least a frown by the majority of more rationally inclined theologians, who sometimes pointed out, as Ibn Khaldūn did, that Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) started as a tradition of asceticism and pietism, and that striving towards intuitive knowledge should always be secondary to *ṣūfīs*. What the true *ṣūfī* seeks is the perception of a 'state' of complete devotion, which he reaches via a fixed path. In the final state of devotion the soul is transformed from its human to an angelic state, where it can behold divine truth. As the 'veil' of sensual perception is gradually removed from him, it becomes possible to perceive hidden truths. However, perceiving hidden knowledge is not the primary aim of the real *ṣūfī*, although it may come to him. There are those who seek removal of the veil of sensual perception, through hunger or ecstasy for instance, for reasons that are not 'straightforward', for instance because they do have personal prestige as a goal. What they perceive will be distorted in the manner of an image in a distorted mirror. Their utterances are suspect, and can lead believers astray. By definition *ṣūfī* knowledge can never be verified by others, since it depends on a subjective experience, expressed in a terminology that *ṣūfīs* do not share with the uninitiated. Therefore, as long as a *ṣūfī* is not known to be of excellent character, his utterances in a state of ecstasy deserve censure.

One concept in Sufism especially raised eye-brows among non-*ṣūfī* theologians - namely the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the unity of creation. It implies that God is one with His creation, that He is incarnated in it. All the particulars of matter, colour, substance, heat and cold are there only because we perceive them with our senses, but if we were not there to perceive them they would not exist, because the world, God, and all existence would appear as one. The objections of other theologians ranged from the accusation that this came very close to denying God His own One uniqueness to the argument that it was scientific nonsense to say that something is not perceived at any given time, does not exist.

But, as said, the *ṣūfī* aim of surrender to God was generally respected, and since the twelfth century it was not separate from Islamic religious life in general.<sup>115</sup> Surrender to God can be reached along a path (*ṭarīqa*, pl. *ṭuruq*) of purification of the heart or self-annihilation (*fanā'*), to make room for God. Ideally, *ṣūfīs* travels this path guided by a spiritual leader or shaykh to whom they obey and who is the focus of their mutual solidarity. They are often organised in hierarchically structured brotherhoods, also called *ṭuruq*, around a leading shaykh. Many *ṣūfī* shaykhs, anywhere in the Muslim world, chose to live among people away from the centres (and books and libraries), where they responded to their needs for teaching, ritual and authoritative opinions, with the resources available to them. The fact that they were more responsive to the realities of life in different communities than to doctrinal assertions,

<sup>114</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History. Translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, I, 194-202.

<sup>115</sup> J. Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam. The Caliphate of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 88.

along with the appeal of this organised solidarity has played an important role in the vulgarisation of Islam in all parts of the Muslim world.<sup>116</sup>

However, the history of Sufism in sudanic Africa before the nineteenth century is still largely obscure. For instance, although believers in the region today accord much importance to Sufism and its contribution to the history of Islam there, the number of works on Sufism extant in West African libraries is surprisingly small.<sup>117</sup> Researchers do agree that from the fifteenth century on, *ṣūfī* brotherhoods existed in the southern Sahara among Berbers, who developed a strong tradition in which mysticism and jurisprudence were combined. In their nomadic communities, where a central political authority was lacking, the authority to mediate in conflicts lay with jurists who had knowledge of the written law as well as intuitive knowledge of God's intentions.<sup>118</sup>

Via Aïr and other regions in the Sahara the study of Sufism, notably the Qadiriyya form (inspired by the Persian mystic 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī, d. 1166) appears to have spread to other parts of the *bilād al-sūdān*. It is believed that al-Maghīlī, who advised a number of African rulers late in the fifteenth century, may have been affiliated to the Qadiriyya or the Shādhiliyya *ṭarīqa* - perhaps to both - and that he also propagated Sufism in Kano and Katsina when he was there. Chronicles and religious texts indicate that individual 'ulamā' practised asceticism and had cherished gnostic ideas since the fifteenth century.<sup>119</sup> In the sixteenth century, the work of the *ṣūfī* al-Shādhilī (d. 1258) was known in Timbuktu, through the comments of Aḥmad al-Zarrūq (d. 1493), a Maghribi author who also commented on the work of the Andalusian mystic Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240).<sup>120</sup> And in the seventeenth century, in Bornu in particular, there may have been a shift in the tradition of Qur'ān exegesis towards more *ṣūfī* oriented *tafsīr*.<sup>121</sup>

The traces of *ṣūfī* brotherhoods become slightly more distinct in the seventeenth century. Some indicate the existence of communities of *ṣūfī* scholars in Bornu and in the sources we find contacts between these communities and *ṣūfī* shaykhs of the Kunta in the Aïr region, and Qadiriyya communities in the Nile valley.<sup>122</sup> The most well-known of these communities in Bornu was that of Kalumbardo, a place about fifty miles northeast of Birni Gazargamu, which attracted increasing numbers of people who came there to study or receive religious services and advice. The men who lived in Kalumbardo were reported to meditate in the morning, and in the afternoon to pray and repeat the shahada, 'beating their hands on their thighs', which suggests rhythmical movement to reach ecstasy or trance.<sup>123</sup>

It was in the nineteenth century, with the emergence of the community around Aḥmad al-Tijānī (1737-1815),<sup>124</sup> that Sufism became so important in the region that for many believers their identity as Muslims was inextricably bound up with some form of adherence to a *ṭarīqa*. In the twentieth century, it was rare to find a Muslim here who did not profess adherence to the Tijaniyya or the Qadiriyya brotherhood, although in practice many would not have a shaykh or be initiated to the *wird* of either.

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<sup>116</sup> See e.g. R. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period. An Essay in Quantitative History*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979: 61 ff.

<sup>117</sup> Hall and Stewart 2011, 139-140. Also Norris, H.T., *The Tuareg – Their Islamic Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1975; *Sūfī mystics of the Niger Desert: Sīdī Maḥmūd and the Hermits of Aïr*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

<sup>118</sup> Stewart 1976, 87. I.M. Lapidus, *A history of Islamic societies*. Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 500, 501.

<sup>119</sup> N. Levtzion, *Islam in African and Global Contexts: Adventures in Comparative Studies of Islam*. In *Islam in Africa and the Middle East. Studies on Conversion and Renewal*. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2007, VII, 6. J.-L. Triaud, *Le thème confrérique en Afrique de l'ouest*. In *Les ordres mystiques dans l'Islam*. Paris: Ed. De l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1985.

<sup>120</sup> Hall and Stewart 2011, 140.

<sup>121</sup> D. Bondarev, 'Tafsīr sources in four annotated Qur'anic manuscripts from ancient Borno.' (Forthcoming)

<sup>122</sup> Hiskett 1994, 103-106; Lavers 1981; Alkali 2013, 255, 290.

<sup>123</sup> Lavers 1971 and 1981, 221.

<sup>124</sup> N. Levtzion 1985; Stewart 1976, 90.

What is important to note is, that in this context and for common believers, to consider someone a great Muslim scholar meant to consider him a great ṣūfī scholar, or a great ṣūfī *tout court*.

As we have noted, the different approaches to and methods of acquiring knowledge, of manifest and hidden laws, were not, in principle, mutually exclusive. In the course of time, however, more emphasis was placed on the mystical path to truth as a form of counterknowledge – that is knowledge that came not from books but from inspiration or divine guidance. M. Last has suggested that such counterknowledge offered a solution to a scarcity of books in Bornu, Kano and Timbuktu in the late seventeenth and in the eighteenth centuries, and at the same time that it was a way to escape the power of those who controlled access to key books, on law and jurisprudence, for instance.<sup>125</sup> Mysticism as counterknowledge could drive a wedge between ṣūfīs and ‘official’ clerics and create a distance that was increased by the fact that ṣūfī communities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tended to settle on the borders of the territory that was controlled from the capital. Thus, Kalumbardo as well as another ṣūfī community in Gaskeru were on the ecological border between settled zones and nomadic life in the desert. They were uncomfortable places to live in and they were chosen to emphasise the renunciation of worldly concerns. However, as Bobboyi notes, they were also conducive to distrust *by* the world.<sup>126</sup> The above mentioned shaykhs al-Waldede and al-Jirmī, who were persecuted by Bornu’s Sultan, had lived in Kalumbardo and are associated with political dissension from a ṣūfī background. Based on readings of written historical sources, such as those of Bello and M.A. Landeroin, as well as on interviews with modern keepers and transmitters of oral history in the region, the Nigerian historian Alkali believes that the Sefuwa rulers, desirous ‘to suppress any form of religious faction that might be detrimental to the established position of the government’, ‘were against the development of Sufism’,<sup>127</sup>

Apart from geographical distance and political dissension, there was perhaps another reason for discomfort among rulers and the ‘ulamā’ who were associated with them. Although Sufism and book learning had long gone hand in hand, and would continue to do so in many cases, the beginnings of a parting of their ways can also be discerned in this period. Lavers described ‘what can only be called “extreme” manifestations of sufism’ in seventeenth century Bornu, that were anti-intellectualist or that at least advocated the possibility of the displacement of scholarship as a result of the development of ecstatic practices.<sup>128</sup> He explains his observation with the example of a shaykh called ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abd al-Jalīl (d. ca. 1677), an immigrant (Tubu according to Lavers, Koyam according to Alkali and The Cambridge History of Africa Vol IV) who had been allowed to settle in the remote village of Belbelec around the middle of the century. He was a Qadiriyya ṣūfī who was known to be favoured by God with miracles that sometimes happened to him. His large group of followers believed that his knowledge came directly from God, because he claimed that he never studied or read, but only meditated and prayed. He was reported to be a very humble and kind man, who converted great numbers of people. In this case, the established ‘ulamā’ in Birni Gazargamu seem to have been concerned, not so much about political dissension that ‘Abd al-Jalīl fomented, but more about the success of his religious practice. They may have felt that the basis for their own position – their knowledge of the Islamic texts, even if some of them were illiterate and relied entirely on memory – was under attack. They convinced Mai ‘Alī to arrest him. This ‘complot’ of the Gazargamu scholars failed, but ‘Abd al-Jalīl was killed by Tuareg a few years later, in 1677 or 1678.<sup>129</sup>

Al-Wālī was not a member of the social group of clerics in Bornu’s capital. But he had studied there and he must have maintained contacts with the city. News about ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abd al-Jalīl, who lived and died in his life-time, must have been part of his exchanges with visitors and travellers, and the competition for religious supremacy was part of the background to his own thinking.

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<sup>125</sup> M. Last 2011, 175-211.

<sup>126</sup> Bobboyi 1992, 155.

<sup>127</sup> Alkali 2013, 257; 290. M.A. Landeroin, *Documents Scientifiques de la Mission Tilho*. Paris: 1910.

<sup>128</sup> Lavers 1981, 217.

<sup>129</sup> Lavers 1971, 3.3; Alkali 2013, 288-290.

### 3. Ethnicity, religion and slavery

The growth and wealth of states such as Songhay and Bornu were to a large extent based on the work of slaves and the profits of the sale of slaves. Leo Africanus noticed that the king of Bornu had indeed no other source of income to speak of than the slaves he procured from neighbouring countries.<sup>130</sup> Much later, European travellers learned that slaves constituted the main and indispensable labour force for agriculture in the region, and in some cases even served as valuta.<sup>131</sup> It had been so for hundreds of years, partly for a simple and technical reason: land in the Sahel has a thin top soil, which produce poor yields. To feed a community, a relatively large surface of land must be tilled. What was scarce in this situation was manpower. It was complemented by the labour of people who were forced to work for the benefit of others.<sup>132</sup> In general, rulers could enslave and sell people from among their own subjects, but more often slaves were taken from neighbouring peoples.

To this existing African practice were added ideas about slaves from the religion and the laws of the prophet Muḥammad. In Sunni Islam a slave had no individual rights and no honour, and although it was recommended, it was not obligatory to manumit slaves who converted to Islam.<sup>133</sup> Various authors have pointed out that the status and living conditions of domestic slaves in central sudanic Africa were often not so bad. For those who lived with peasants – and in Bornu it was common for peasants to own one or more slaves – daily life was not different from that of free men who were poor and bound to supply a part of their harvest, their yields from fishery or hunting or their services to a local chief or a king. They lived with a free family, laboured together with their owner, could marry into his family and earn prestige through their work.<sup>134</sup> At the Muslim court of Gazargamu, slaves could attain high positions and be appointed to administrative offices which gave him authority over free men and women. In practice, the social division in Bornu between slaves and free men was vertical, and cut through the classes, as it had done in pre-Islamic Kanuri society.<sup>135</sup>

On the other hand, the high status of some slaves did nothing to change the view held of those who were considered to be their 'kind' as inferior. Nor did it mitigate the disaster suffered by village communities which lost members to slavery, or the extremely harsh fate of those who were sold and made to walk through the desert to the Maghrib or the Middle East. The fear of being caught was ever-present. Numerous sources reveal how tribes throughout central sudanic Africa carried out yearly raids on their neighbours, to supplement poor harvests or even just to celebrate someone's homecoming.<sup>136</sup> In the longer term, it led to the disappearance of communities and ethnic groups, and to the movement of populations that sought refuge from raids to peripheral and hard-to-access areas such as the Mandara Mountains or the flood plains of Baghirmi.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Levtzion, 'Slavery and the Slave trade in the Early States of Bilād al-Sūdān.' In: N. Levtzion, 2007.

<sup>131</sup> Barth 1857, II, 228.

<sup>132</sup> R.A. Austen, 'Imperial Reach versus Institutional Grasp. Superstates of the West and Central African Sudan in Comparative Perspective.' In *Journal of Early History*, 13 (2009): 509-541; 516. Cambridge History of Africa, III, J.D. Fage and R. Oliver eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 273.

<sup>133</sup> Since the beginning of Islam there were different attitudes towards slaves and slavery. However, until modern times increase of commerce in the Islamic world went together with an enormous increase in the trade and use of slaves. For a discussion of the status of slaves in Islam through history, see W.G. Clarence-Smiths, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*. London: Hurst and Company, 2006.

<sup>134</sup> Lovejoy 1978; M. Hiskett, 'Introduction' In C.L. Temple, *Native Races and their Rulers*. London: Frank Cass & Co, second ed. 1968.

<sup>135</sup> Brenner 1973, 89, 90; R. Cohen 1970, 'Social Stratification in Bornu.' In *Social Stratification in Africa*. A. Tuden and L. Plotnicov, eds. New York: The Free Press, 1970.

<sup>136</sup> E.g. G. Nachtigal, *Sahara and Sudan*. Transl. by A. G.B. Fisher and H.J. Fisher. London: C. Hurst & Company, 1974, III, 29.

<sup>137</sup> MacEachern 2001, 144-145.



Slave-raids were a constant danger especially for non-Muslim populations living on the margins of Muslim countries. The Sharī'a stipulated that only non-Muslims could be enslaved - in theory when they were captured during a jihād and refused to convert to Islam. This seemingly simple rule however, was not unequivocal in the African situation. The problem was to determine who was Muslim. In principle, the religion of the ruler was the religion of his people, and an individual was Muslim when his king was an acknowledged Muslim. Muḥammad Bello formulated this early in the nineteenth century, but the idea was much older and valid in all of West Africa. But it left much room for variation and discussion. On the one hand, people who maintained non-Islamic practices could often pass for Muslims. On the other, the Muslims of certain ethnic groups could not shake off an ambiguous status.<sup>138</sup> For instance, 'Muslim' villages that did not pay their taxes to a Sultan, were easily accused of 'kafirring' (practising paganism) and not saying their prayers. '[This] is however', wrote the British traveller Dixon Denham in the first half of the nineteenth century, 'a fault which is generally laid to the charge of any nation against whom a true Musselman wages war, as it gives him the power of making them slaves.'<sup>139</sup> In practice then, Muslim communities were not entirely safe from slave-raiders.<sup>140</sup>

The relation between religion and being a slave was further confused by the issue of skin colour. An informative illustration comes from an anecdote about a man from Tuwat, who wrote to Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī asking him to shed light on the matter.<sup>141</sup> He asked whether it was allowed to own slaves originating from Bornu, Kano, Gao or Katsina, lands that were known to be Muslim. His doubt came from the fact that slaves from these countries were being sold in the market in Tuwat. Had they been captured by pagans, or had Muslims enslaved each other in conflict? And did it not matter whether people had converted voluntarily or by force. That is, was it not the case that Muslims who had been converted by force had less of a right to be spared from enslavement than others? 'You should know that the reason for slavery is non-belief,' answered al-Tinbuktī. 'Whoever is captured in a condition of non-belief, it is legal to own him, but not he who was converted to Islam voluntarily, from the beginning, whether it (the nation he belongs to) be Bornu, Kano, Songhai, Katsina, Gobir, Mali or some of Zakzak.'<sup>142</sup> In his view too, one's religious identity was linked to that of the group or 'nation' one belonged to, and to what was known of the history of its conversion, with or without the sword. A slave who can prove that he is from a known Muslim country should be freed. Next, Aḥmad Bābā explained that the status of peoples who are enslavable, is not related to the colour of their skin. Apparently, this view was not commonly shared.

Explaining his confusion, the letter-writer had also referred to a ḥadīth which is often invoked in this context. It relates how the black skin colour *and* slave status of the descendants of Noah's son Ham were the result of a curse Noah had laid upon him. Did this justify the slavery of black people, Muslim or not? No, it was an unsound ḥadīth, wrote Aḥmad Bābā – before ending his letter with a list of peoples from which it was legal to take slaves, because they were considered unbelievers.

<sup>138</sup> Indeed, communities sometimes 'converted' to Islam hoping that this would save them from raids, but without religious conviction. Conversion to Islam as a strategy to escape slavery is explicit e.g. in D. Denham e.a., 1831, II, 40- 41.

<sup>139</sup> Denham e.a. 1831, I, 92. See also Hiskett 1975, 100. Living in a village in stead of a town was never very helpful for a Muslim reputation. Reading Hiskett's translations of parts of al-Hajrāmī's *Shurb al-zulāl* (1962; see Chapter 3) or 'Uthmān dan Fodio's *Naṣā'ih al-ummat al-muḥammadiyya* (ms Hunwick 151, NU), one realises that proper Muslim behaviour as these authors saw it was difficult in any village: it implied for instance that women could not go to their garden to cultivate or to fetch wood nor go the market.

<sup>140</sup> V.N. Low, *Three Nigerian Emirates*. Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1972. 124.

<sup>141</sup> Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Mi'rāj al-ṣu'ūd ilā nāyl ḥukm majlūb al-sūd*. See for a translation B. Barbour and M. Jacobs, *The Mi'rāj: a legal treatise on slavery by Ahmad Baba*. In *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*. Ed. J.R. Willis. London: Frank Cass, 1985, I.

<sup>142</sup> In the translation by Barbour and Jacobs 1979, 129. Two centuries later, Muḥammad Bello also published a work on the classification of peoples by their degree of Islam, *Taṣnīf al-qabā'il bi l-islām*. Ms Niamey 247 (WAAMD).

#### 4. Islam and traditional religions

Numerous European authors, from Heinrich Barth to Murray Last, have remarked that many inhabitants they met of 'Muslim' regions indeed claimed to be Muslim, but adhered to customs as blatantly pagan as worshipping idols, trees and stones or eating pork.<sup>143</sup> Denham observed that in Bornu many outward signs that are usually associated with Islam had not been accepted in all parts of society, even in the capital. In the capital many women went about almost naked and those who dressed to go to the market left their heads uncovered. He noted that the entire population was addicted to gris-gris (amulets), and believed that the ridiculously large turbans worn at the royal court had to do with status and not religion. And he observed that throughout the long reign of the Sefuwa dynasty, kingship retained traits of the divine character it had had in pre-Islamic Kanem, where the mai was venerated like a god and was believed, for instance, never to need any food. Later scholars remarked that traditional beliefs and institutions were also integrated with Islam in more subtle ways. A good example is a custom of Fulani nomads that Paden learned about in the twentieth century, which combined the traditional age-grade system (regulating solidarity and social obligations according to membership in age groups) with the status of a believer. It stipulated that a man was not allowed to pray five times a day, and thus could not be a full Muslim, before he had a son old enough to herd cattle.<sup>144</sup>

As for Baghirmi, when Barth visited its capital Massenya, in the middle of the nineteenth century, he found that Muslim institutions were hardly in place at all, and he commented on the population: 'Their adoption of Islam is very recent and the greater part of them, even at the present day, with more justice be called Pagans than Mohammedans. They possess very little learning, only a few natives, who have performed the pilgrimage, being well versed in Arabic [...].'<sup>145</sup> In al-Wālī's time, the influence of Islam there was of course of much more recent date.

The 'mixing' (*ikhṭilāṭ*) within social and religious practices of traditional beliefs and habits with Islam was a thorn in the flesh of the leaders of the Sokoto *jihād*. Addressing his flock, 'Uthmān dan Fodio explained extensively what sort of behaviour, apparently hard to give up, was unacceptably unislamic or an unauthorised 'innovation' of Islam.<sup>146</sup> Among the dozens of examples he gives are the social mixing of the sexes, the dancing of women at weddings, women going to the market, the greeting of high-ranking persons by prostration and putting dust on one's head, wailing and other rituals at funerals, inheritance by the female line, and relieving oneself in the manner of unbelievers.<sup>147</sup> Equally condemned were the use of Qur'anic verses for charms or cures, and the activities of so-called mallams (the term is reserved for popular 'ulamā', see the next chapter) who performed divination

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<sup>143</sup> For examples of and reflections on the persistence of traditional customs among Muslims in the region see e.g. Nachtigal 1974, III, 112-113, 163, 168; Last 1967, lxviii; Levzion 2007, I, 19; H.J. Fisher, 'Conversion reconsidered: some historical aspects of religious conversion in black Africa.' In *Journal of the International African Institute* 43, I (1973): 20-40 (30, 33, 37); L. Manger ed. *Muslim Diversity. Introduction in Muslim Diversity*. Richmond UK: Curzon Press, 1999. lxi; Hiskett 1975, 17.

<sup>144</sup> Paden 1973, 49.

<sup>145</sup> Barth 1857, II, 561.

<sup>146</sup> Given the fact that people like Dan Fodio spoke of mixing these practices with Islam, can we also say that there existed a form of 'mixed' Islam? The problem is that the term has often been used to characterise 'African Islam' as discussed in the previous chapter, as a deficient form of 'real' Islam. Of course, it would be equally problematic to describe what this 'pure', 'real' or even 'orthodox' Islam was or is. Islam never had a set of beliefs that was regarded as dogma, nor synods or a papacy to define and defend it. In the early period of Islamic history, before the great Muslim empires formed a state 'orthodoxy', theology was, as A. Knysh writes, a 'perpetual collision of individual opinions over an invariant set of theological problems that eventually leads to a transient consensus that already contains the seeds of future disagreement', a never ending dialogue between equally legitimate interpretations. Heresiography, or more neutrally, doxography (the description of beliefs), was an important genre in classical scholarship, of assembling and comparing interpretations of theological questions, without judging them by a standard of true Islam. See A. Knysh, "'Orthodoxy" and "heresy" in medieval Islam: an essay in reassessment.' In *The Muslim World*, Vol 83, I (1993) 48-68, 53.

<sup>147</sup> Hiskett 1962, 587, 588; ms Hunwick 151.

much in the same way as traditional religious specialists had done before them.<sup>148</sup> According to Muḥammad Bello the situation was much worse in Bornu, where Muslims, he says, prostrated before their kings, sacrificed to rivers, stones and trees and consecrated the gates of their towns with blood.<sup>149</sup> The information is of course biased - this was after all the justification for the *jihād* against Bornu – but not in the sense that these things did not happen in Bornu, but rather that they also happened in the Sokoto sultanate. Authorities in Bornu saw the ‘mixing’ of Islam and non-Islamic habits as a problem in the rural hinterland especially. They sent mallams out to the villages to correct such behaviour, but to little avail.<sup>150</sup>

Most of our information comes from the nineteenth century and later. What is important here, is that from this information and the fact that the vulgarisation of Islam was more recent in the seventeenth century, we can deduce that the religious practices and beliefs in Muslim communities in al-Wālī’s time were quite diverse. Conversion seldom involved (and nowadays seldom involves) complete abandonment of previously held beliefs. R. Bulliet distinguished two aspects of conversion to Islam, namely formal conversion (‘a matter of eight words’: *lā ilāh illa Allāh, wa Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*) and social conversion, by which he meant the movement of people from one religiously defined community to another, thus entailing changes in the composition of the Muslim population and its position in relation to adherents of other religions, with or without the development of Muslim institutions.<sup>151</sup> This social conversion in central Sudanic Africa (as in so many places) was a far from linear process. For F. Fuglestad, who looked at different types of political authority that were based either on traditional religions or on Islam, the competition between them is one of the processes that heavily mark the social history of central Sudanic Africa, especially from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth.<sup>152</sup>

The question of what made this competition so tough, or conversion to Islam so difficult, is fascinating. As we saw, there were good reasons to join the Muslim community. What were the equally good reasons not to do so? Of course, as Van Beek and Blakely point out in their overview of approaches to religion in Africa, religious experience and expression are always deeply rooted in tradition and bound with other aspects of culture and society, including politics, economics, social processes, illness and healing, art, music, dance and speech.<sup>153</sup> They are not easily discarded without ripping apart a whole system in which identities are rooted. But in order to understand more of the cultural context in which al-Wālī worked, it will be useful to try to say a bit more about the competitive strengths of traditional beliefs in Africa. Many authors have drawn attention to two themes that they consider as central in the religion of many people throughout Africa, namely the communal aspects and the reality and importance to them of spirits for human life.

To start with the first, the relation between the subject or the individual and his community (which includes the spirits of deceased ancestors) is crucial, more so than the relation between subject and God, and religious action is therefore action closely linked to social interaction.<sup>154</sup> Van Beek adds that notions of evil in these religions concur with characteristics of the social structure of the community of believers, and ways of coping with evil (the causes of disorder) reflect the stress of living with and at the same time without others.<sup>155</sup> At the same time, it is widely believed that the social structure reflects

<sup>148</sup> Hunwick 1970, 20; Paden 1973, 45.

<sup>149</sup> In many places in *Infāq al-maysūr*.

<sup>150</sup> Lovejoy 1980, 40.

<sup>151</sup> Bulliet 1979.

<sup>152</sup> F. Fuglestad, ‘A reconsideration of Hausa History before the *jihād*.’ In *Journal of African History* XIX, 3 (1978), 319-399. See also Levtzion’s article about the integration of Islamic elements into African societies, Levtzion 1985.

<sup>153</sup> W.E.A. van Beek and T.D. Blakely 1994; 1.

<sup>154</sup> Van Beek and Blakely 1994, 18.

<sup>155</sup> W.E.A. van Beek, ‘The Innocent Sorcerer: Coping with Evil in Two African Societies (Kapsiki & Dogon).’ In Blakely, van Beek and Thomson 1994, 197-228.

order and disorder on a cosmological and moral level and that the members of a community must play their part in maintaining order on all levels. Religions and moral obligations are social obligations.<sup>156</sup>

Secondly, one of the most important characteristics of religion in Africa 'is the widespread belief in the existence of an invisible world populated by spirits of various sorts' write S. Ellis and G. ter Haar, who include the 'surviving remnants of those who have already passed through life'.<sup>157</sup> They are considered to be real and indeed more powerful than the living members of a community, because they are closer to God or the gods, and to have great influence on the welfare (health, success of crops and so on) of their descendants in this life, rewarding them for maintaining the religious and social order, and punishing them if they harm it. Correct relations among the living are not only a matter of social order, they are also a condition for the performance of many rituals—that is, for maintaining good relations with the spirits. One can not keep them up on one's own. This means that on the one hand, those who are different, pose a threat to the community, as many authors on witchcraft for example have pointed out.<sup>158</sup> On the other hand, the ultimate punishment for an individual is exclusion from the community here and now (which includes the phase of life as a spirit), and not in a hereafter as in Islam and Christianity present.

Such exclusion was and often still is achieved by a method that is deeply rooted in moral systems around the world, and that has attracted much attention from anthropologists, psychologists and others in the past decades, notably ostracising, which is justified by linking impurity and disgust to normative ethics.<sup>159</sup> Thus, the Kenga in Chad for instance, most of whom converted to Islam in the 1970s of the twentieth century, maintain that people who do not contribute to society because they are lazy or thieves or possess witchcraft which they do not control, must be completely excluded from communal life so that they have no other option than to leave the village. They believe that a thief will be punished with leprosy, blindness or a bad harvest, depending on the value of what he or she has stolen. Someone who lies too often will be given away by the fact that his tongue will swell until he always slobbers and becomes so repulsive that people will turn their backs on him. Similar examples can be found among all non-Muslim populations in rural Chad and Nigeria, and we will recognise one also in al-Wālī's direct environment.

Finally, another example from al-Wālī's own village today explains another way in which membership of an ethnic community that shares religious responsibilities offers practical security and protection. In January 2012 a Barma inhabitant of Abgar, a Muslim with non-Muslim ancestors, explained why the Barma of his generation were not scarified, contrary to the habits of many other ethnic groups in Baghirmi. It was not so much because Islam regarded scarification as a pagan custom, he said, but rather because scarifications were not needed anymore. 'They were a mark of who you were, like a passport. Before, when people were kidnapped and brought to a strange place as slaves, other people there, members of their own ethnic group (*naḥar*) perhaps, or a related one, might recognise them by their scars and decide to help them. When we became Muslims we could not be enslaved anymore, and there was no more need for scarification.'

This complex of ethnic identity, security and welfare that traditional religions offered, was what Islam asked people to give up, in return for three promises that were not always water-tight or were just very abstract: protection against slave-raiders, reward in the hereafter and the glory of a global religion. This explains, briefly, why conversion to Islam was often a long process of going back and forth. This meant that where groups of people had converted or even where Muslim government had been installed, the unity of these Muslim societies was often unstable. Even in the Sokoto caliphate, and a

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<sup>156</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. New York: Heinemann, 1969; L. de Heusch, 'Myth and Epic in Central Africa' In Blakely, Van Beek and Thomson 1994, 229-239.

<sup>157</sup> S. Ellis and G. ter Haar, 'Religion and Politics in Africa' In *Afrika Zamani* 5 (1997) and 6 (1998), 221-246;

<sup>158</sup> E.g. Van Beek 1994, 205; P. Geschiere. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997.

<sup>159</sup> See e.g. W.I. Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997; D. Kelly, *Yuck!: The nature and moral significance of disgust*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011.

fortiori in Bornu, Baghirmi and other regions in present-day Chad Muslims (and later Christians) would cherish the belief in the continuing involvement of ancestors in their life.

In the context of this struggle between traditional religions and Islam, the relation between those who identified themselves as Muslims and others whom they considered as not Muslim enough was especially sensitive. One form it took was that preachers of a radical and exclusivist sort questioned people on their knowledge of religion or the oneness of God (*tawhīd*) and accused them of unbelief if this knowledge was found to be insufficient. ‘Uthmān dan Fodio called them *mutakallimūn*, *theologians* but, although he disapproved of mixing pagan habits with the Muslim belief, he disliked these Pharisees even more.<sup>160</sup> A few years later his son Muḥammad Bello had lost all respect for them and described them as members of roaming ‘bands’ or ‘sects’ (*tā’ifa*).<sup>161</sup> They were ‘focussed on philosophical argumentation (*kalām*) and warned against ignorance and imitation’ in such an aggressive way, that people they questioned would ‘stutter and stammer’ with alarm, unable to produce the answers, even if they knew them. By the turn of the eighteenth century, this had gone to such extremes that, according to Bello, these fanatics accused anyone who could not read or write of unbelief. It all seriously troubled ‘Uthmān dan Fodio, who devoted an important part of his preaching and writings to opposing this type of mallams and their practices – without much success, because numerous manuscripts from the nineteenth and twentieth century testify to the continued practice of testing people’s knowledge of the Muslim faith.<sup>162</sup>

Our concern here is that in Dan Fodio’s time there existed a need among Muslims to mark the boundaries between themselves and those who were not Muslim enough. The writings of al-Wālī and anonymous popular texts that will be considered in the following chapters will show that the attitude already existed in his days. One reason for this, I suggest, is that conversion was a communal affair and ‘Muslim’ was a collective label. As we saw in the previous section of this chapter, a population was Muslim when its rulers were Muslim, and an individual was considered Muslim if his whole community had a firm Muslim identity. Much was at stake here, because of the ‘simplistic equation’<sup>163</sup> described above, of non-Muslim and black and slave and inferior. Populations in central sudanic, especially those living near the centre of power in Bornu, therefore needed the image of Muslim communities, if they wanted to be left alone by slave-raiding neighbours. The Muslim identity of convinced converts was weakened, however, by those who were not unambiguously Muslim, and this signified the threat of enslavability to them.

Among Muslims as well as the adherents of a traditional religion the worldview in al-Wālī’s time was mystical and reading the nineteenth century travelogues, one realises that this worldview was pervaded by awe before natural phenomena, but even more by fear, not only in the minds of the foreign travellers, but also in those of the people whose warnings and worries they recorded. The dusk, the dark and the world outside the towns and villages were dangerous places, inhabited by lions, tigers, witches, demons, robbers and enemies.

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<sup>160</sup> In *Ḥisn al-afḥām*, quoted in M.A. al-Hajj, ‘The writings of Shehu Uthman dan Fodio: a plea for dating and chronology.’ In *Kano Studies*, NS 1 (2) (1974/77):7.

<sup>161</sup> Citations from Bello in this paragraph are from Or. 14063, 22r.

<sup>162</sup> Cf D.M. Last and M.A. al-Hajj, ‘Attempts at defining a Muslim in 19th century Hausaland and Bornu. In *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* III, 2 (1965), 231-241. The format of questions and answers has been popular in classical Islam as well as in Christianity. In central sudanic Africa innumerable texts are still being composed and memorised on this scheme. E.g. ‘Aqīdat ‘Alī b. Abū Ṭālib (ms Falke 2415) containing the passage: if you are asked: what is His name, then say: He is God and there is no god but Him. He knows what is hidden and what is evident. He is the merciful, the forgiving. If you are asked, what are his attributes, then say: He is the one God, he negates the many and their number, He is eternal and negates what is incomplete. He is not born, nor generated and He dismissed weakness and deficiency. Not one is like He. He negates all that is like Him. If you are asked: what is His essence? The say: nothing is like Him, he is the hearing the seeing. If you are asked: what are His deeds, then say: all days are His. If you are asked: what are the words of witness, then say: [etc]’. The ‘*aqīda* reads as a short excerpt of the Ash‘arī doctrine on *tawhīd*. Two manuscripts I copied in Chad in 2012, on ‘questions on theology’ (*musallat al-tawhīd*) are 20<sup>th</sup> century examples of the genre.

<sup>163</sup> Hunwick 1991, 15.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the political and social turmoil, the drought and insecurity that had affected the populations of important parts of western sudanic Africa in the decades before, had reached Bornu too. S. Diagne, observing the reflections of this confusion in the historical works from Timbuktu, especially *Ta'riḫ al fattash* and *Ta'riḫ al-sudān*, remarks that there the philosophy of the time implied 'that the inobservance of the laws of God inevitably leads to decline and chaos'.<sup>164</sup> Pessimism and prophecies of doom. Hiskett still observes these in the religious sentiments of Hausa poets of the eighteenth century. This partly stemmed from an ancient ascetic tradition in Islam, he writes, but it also had to do with the experience of great changes in a world in which there were increasing challenges to till-then apparently valid assumption that the Muslims enjoyed God's protection.<sup>165</sup>

For educated Muslims, paganism became a symbol of decline and disarray.<sup>166</sup> For the less educated, the imagined fundamental difference in the lifestyle of neighbouring unbelievers only encouraged their fears. This still comes through, for instance, in the work of Urvoy, when he writes about the struggle against '*paiens farouches*' and '*agressifs*'.<sup>167</sup> Before him, Barth had mentioned that north of the Benue lived 'warlike pagan tribes'.<sup>168</sup> Nachtigal heard that pagan peoples south of Bornu were cannibals, and met the leader of a Kanembu tribe who asked unquestioning support from his Arab allies 'against everything with a dark skin'.<sup>169</sup> More direct witness of such fears can be found in the manuscript collections, which are full of prayers and charms (*fā'ida*) to protect those who had to travel through pagan lands.<sup>170</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The seventeenth century was a time of profound upheaval and great change in West Africa, from what is now Mauritania to Lake Chad. In the first half of the century, around the time when al-Wālī was born, Bornu had reached the zenith of its power. The scale of its trade was larger than ever. On the markets one could find goods and hear names and ideas that testified that the kingdom was part of a world that reached via Timbuktu and Tlemcen (in today's Algeria) to al-Andalus and via Tripoli and Cairo to Istanbul, the centre of the Ottoman Empire.

Along with the blossoming of the economy however, insecurity had increased as well. The political instability that had been caused by the collapse of the empire of Songhay, and which had initially benefitted trade along the eastern trans-Saharan route, now began to undermine the welfare of Bornu too. Groups of nomadic Berbers from the Southern Sahara were displaced and were forced to look for new routes for their cattle, while some farming populations to the south of Bornu recovered their strength. Throughout the seventeenth century, continuous attacks on Bornu by Tuareg from the north and from pagan Jukun from the south were a growing burden for peasants, merchants, ruling classes and scholars. When al-Wālī was growing up, the impact of the collapse of Songhay and of concomitant social changes were already clear.

Among 'ulamā' a need developed to change the attitude of compromise with the ruling elites that had been the habit of many, and to either withdraw to relatively isolated communities where they could practice what they saw as pure Islam, or to help organise governance and public life according to Muslim rules of governance. With the help of changes in the hierarchy of lineages and ethnic groups,

<sup>164</sup> S.B. Diagne, 'Towards an intellectual history of West Africa: the meaning of Timbuktu.' In *The meaning of Timbuktu*. S. Jeppie and S.B. Diagne eds. Cape Town: HRSC Press, 2008. 22.

<sup>165</sup> Hiskett 1975, 87-88.

<sup>166</sup> See e.g. Hiskett 1960, 567.

<sup>167</sup> Y. Urvoy, *Histoire de l'empire de Bornou. Memoires de l'institut français d'Afrique noire*, no 7. Paris: Librairies Larose, 1949. 80.

<sup>168</sup> Barth 1857, II, 191.

<sup>169</sup> Nachtigal 1974, III, 27 and 55.

<sup>170</sup> See also P.E. Lovejoy, *Caravans of Kola*. Zaria, Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello Univ. Press, 1980. 104.

groups of 'ulamā in the region succeeded in establishing Islam as the only source of legitimacy for dominant political formations. As a consequence, Islam also became more important for commoners who wished to have the best possible relation with those in power. These developments fostered what was perhaps the most profound and far-reaching change of this period: the adoption of Islam by important numbers of common people in the rural areas, and the movement of increasing numbers of 'ulamā' there.

As a result the social position of 'ulamā' changed. On the one hand, their relation with the rulers was modified. In Bornu, 'ulamā' had supported the political authority of the Sefuwa dynasty for centuries. Now members of this dynasty often felt threatened by 'ulamā' who preached in rural areas, and sometimes they even persecuted them. The scholarly profession also faced changes from another side. Growing demand among rural populations for religious experts in Islam gave room to a variety of specialists who all claimed some status as *'ālim*, but often did not have a scholarly education, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Moreover, the image of the scholarly and intellectual religious specialist may have come under some pressure from a third direction. While mysticism and scholarship had long been complementary aspects of the education and the role of 'ulamā', the merit of intellectual knowledge was now sometimes put into perspective by *ṣūfīs* some of whom even prided themselves in religious knowledge and authority without the intermediary of any book-learning, suggesting that their divine inspiration was superior to it.

Another consequence of the vulgarisation of Islam was a certain confusion of identities. Conversion was rarely a linear process, and very often the pull of traditional religions in which social organisation and morals were firmly bound together, remained strong. Individuals and groups who had adopted Islam, retained habits and loyalties to their old religions, so that the boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims were blurred.

Those who chose for Islam and the Muslim identity – still a minority in Baghirmi, Bornu and even in its capital Birni Gazargamo – had good reasons for their choice: not only did it offer them a new link to the dominant socio-political values, to trade networks and to a global culture, it also offered protection, in principle, against the threat of being captured as slave. Slavery was of great importance to the economy of Bornu, both for agriculture and as a commodity. Slaves were captured for and sold by Muslim merchants in conjunction with the Muslim ruling elites. The principle that only non-Muslims could be enslaved was the reason why some communities saw an extra political and economic interest in defining themselves or others as Muslim or not, which rather obscured the matter. At the same time, more ambiguity added to the need to mark boundaries between the two. The question of how Muslims went about this, and how they construed their own identity, will be addressed in following chapters (5 and 6). Here we saw already that their emancipation and their consciousness of a new identity within a context of political decline, disarray and insecurity eventually led to the 'othering' of non-Muslims. 'Pagans' or unbelievers came to symbolise threats and chaos.

This was the age in which al-Wālī worked. These were the outlines of the world to which he responded and contributed, and which will emerge more sharply through a reading of his works.





### *Muḥammad al-Wālī*

Historical facts about al-Wālī's personal life are few and far between. This chapter will scrape them together, gradually moving from the most basic data regarding his origin and his works to a discussion of his reputation, and a first evaluation of how that might be interpreted. One element of his reputation is enveloped in a narrative about him that has survived in oral history until today, as an indication of his significance for the generations who have cherished his memory. In the twenty-first century al-Wālī is regarded, in the village where he once lived, as a learned man with outstanding mystical qualities. I will argue, however, that this is more indicative of later and current images of great religious men than of al-Wālī's own priorities.

#### 1 Facts of life

Oral tradition, and its written reflection in the twentieth-century historical work *Kitāb al-istidhkār*<sup>171</sup> have it that al-Wālī lived and was buried in the village of Abgar, in Baghirmi. Today, this same village is some distance away from any main route in Chad, 135 kilometres southeast of the capital N'djamena. In al-Wālī's time, it was at least as remote from what was then the seat of Baghirmi's sultan, Massenya, and much more so from the more important political, cultural and commercial centre of Birni Gazargamu, the capital of Bornu, to which Baghirmi was tributary.

Whether al-Wālī was in fact born in Abgar, and when he was born, are not certain. Al-Wālī's father was a Fulani, member of an ethnic group with origins in West Africa, many of whom travelled eastward as scholars, propagating Islam. He came from Kebbi to Bornu and then left there, perhaps because of the social unrest and the rising costs of living, or also because of declining relations with the ruling elite, to finally settle in Baghirmi.<sup>172</sup> No work by him has been preserved, and no titles are known. There is some information that can help to give al-Wālī not a date but a decade of birth. One of his works, on grammar, is dated 1688 in at least one manuscript. In the Arabic scholarly culture, grammar was generally considered a thorny and prestigious topic, and not one that one would broach early in one's career. If al-Wālī was about fifty when he wrote the text, he would have been born around 1640. That would mean that he was about twenty-six or younger when he first travelled as a pilgrim to Mecca, because he is reported to have stopped in Cairo and to have studied there with Muḥammad b. 'Alā' al-Dīn al-Bābilī, a man who died in 1666.<sup>173</sup> Twenty-six is young, but not an impossible age to go on a pilgrimage, and it may be assumed that al-Wālī was born between 1635 and 1645. This guess would tally with the age of a man who seems to have been his son, Sulaymān b. Muḥammad al-Wālī al-Abqarī, who wrote a versified work on grammar in 1730.<sup>174</sup>

In manuscripts Muḥammad al-Wālī is most often referred to as Muḥammad al-Wālī ibn Sulaymān al-Fulānī (or al-Fallātī). Many other *nisbas* (names referring to one's geographical or ethnic background or affiliation), linking him to different places in central sudanic Africa, occur once or twice. In Arabic

<sup>171</sup> Ibrāhīm Šāliḥ Yūnus al-Ḥusaynī, *Kitāb al-istidhkār l-'ulamā' Kānim Burnū min al-akhbār wa-l-athār*. Manuscript Hunwick 209, Northwestern University. 433.

<sup>172</sup> Ibrāhīm Šāliḥ, 433.

<sup>173</sup> H. Bobboyi found this information in a manuscript he obtained from shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad Hillu in Kousseri (now a small town in Cameroun, near the Chadian capital N'djamena and on the border of the Chari). The manuscript, entitled *Al-nubdhat al-mufīda 'alā manzumat al-ḥafīda* is a commentary on al-Wālī's *Manzūmat al-ḥafīda*. See Bobboyi 1992, 38, n 94. For more information on al-Bābilī see chapter 4, and B.M. Nafi, 'Taṣawwuf and reform in pre-modern Islamic culture. In search of Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī.' In *Die Welt des Islams*. 42/3 (2002), 307-355.

<sup>174</sup> ALA II, 37.

literature and society, it was not unusual for people to be identified, depending on the context, by different nisbas. More than one nisba could also be used at the same time. As a rule, such identification was attributed to authors by students who copied a work of their master and gave his name, together with the customary praise, at the beginning. The most extensive identification for al-Wālī is found in the copy of his treatise against tobacco, which was produced in 1755, most probably in Egypt. It informs us that the author came from Bornu and from Baghirmi, that he followed the Ash‘arī doctrine and the Mālikī *madhhab*. The last two specifications occur more often, and always together. Bornu is not mentioned in other manuscripts of al-Wālī’s text, but in Egypt it was no doubt a more meaningful reference than Baghirmi. A copy of *Mu‘īn al-ṭālib* (Kaduna 62, P/AR2) bears a note added in a different hand, which links the author to Baghirmi and to Kebbi. But that al-Wālī had a son in Abgar (note the nisba was al-Abqarī) is an additional indication of his connection – perhaps attachment is not too strong a word-, in spite of his travels to more cosmopolitan places, to this village, where he is also believed to be buried.

The name al-Wālī is most often written as shown here, with ā (alif).<sup>175</sup> It is curious that precisely in the manuscripts Or. 8362 and Hunwick 178, the ones most intensively studied for this dissertation, the name is written as al-Walī, with a short a. The difference is not without significance, since al-Walī would refer to a man who is close to God, a ‘saint’, although the name was sometimes given to a child to remember and honour a grandfather or other relative who had deserved the name. In these pages the spelling al-Wālī is used, following the majority of manuscripts, the information from Bobboyi’s fieldwork, and the choice made in *ALA*.

## 2. Oeuvre

An author’s reputation lies in the responses to his or her work and in the image his audience (or readers) maintains of him. But of course the reputation is built on his or her *oeuvre*, so let us start there. A first indication of al-Wālī’s importance is that his works reached readers far from his own region and copies can still be found in libraries in Niger, Ghana, Timbuktu and Algiers.<sup>176</sup> Al-Wālī is known to have written ten or eleven texts. This is more than most of his contemporaries are known to have produced, and some of his works are also longer than what was usual at the time.<sup>177</sup> As a whole, the oeuvre covers the fundamental fields of Muslim learning - theology, the Arabic language and jurisprudence - with an emphasis on theology (*tawhīd*). That was clearly most important to al-Wālī. We know that he wished to be seen as a professional theologian, because he once referred to himself as *al-mutakallim*, the ‘theologian’ who follows the method of *kalām*, that is of speculative or philosophical theology, the theology which seeks to defend the Muslim faith with ‘proof’ from logical reasoning.<sup>178</sup>

Two texts form the basis of this study. The first is al-Wālī’s most copied work, a prose piece on God’s attributes entitled *Al-manhaj al-farīd fī ma‘rifat ‘ilm al-tawhīd*, that is *The peerless method to understand the science of theology*. It is a commentary on al-Sanūsī’s (d. ca 1490) famous *Al-‘aqīda al-ṣughra* (*The small creed*), which is also known as *Umm al-barāhīn* (*The mother of proof*). At least thirty-two copies of *The peerless method* are extant in public and private collections, mostly in or from Nigeria. The methods of composing it will be analysed in chapters 4 and 6. As I mentioned above, one of al-Wālī’s most original, but least known works was his treatise in the field of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) against tobacco, in which he also refuted the opinion of a Mālikī authority in Cairo regarding smoking. It will be analysed in chapter 5. An edition of it and a translation appear in Annexes I and II.

<sup>175</sup> E.g. in mss Ibadan 82 and 48 (*The peerless method*), Hunwick 174.2 (‘*Awsikum*), Paris Arabe 5650, Kaduna D/AR7/4 (grammar), Kaduna N/AR2/47, Kaduna 62P/AR2.

<sup>176</sup> For a list of extant copies of al-Wālī’s works, see *ALA* II, 34-37.

<sup>177</sup> Fourteen entries are listed in J.O. Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa, (ALA). Vol. II: The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa*. Leiden: Brill, 1995. 34-37. However, one of these (no. 10, *Qaṣīda rā’iyya fī dhamm al-munajjimīn* in *ALA*) is not by al-Wālī, while I consider the two texts on tobacco as one work. Both these remarks will be explained below. The final entry in *ALA* is about six lines in another text, which are attributed to al-Wālī, and which I do not count as a full work.

<sup>178</sup> *Valid Proofs*, folio 2v.

Apart from these texts, al-Wālī wrote mostly versifications and explanations of existing texts, most of which I have also read for this study.<sup>179</sup> In the category of theology, the first is *Manhal mā* ‘*adhb li-‘ilm asrār šifāt al-rabb*, (Sweet water source of the inmost attributes of the Lord), a concise versification of *Al-manhaj al-farīd*. Of this text too, thirty copies were preserved, in Nigeria, Niger and Mali. The second is another versification on the attributes of God, of a text by al-Suyūfī, but this is lost. The most difficult text in the category of theology is a versified ‘arrangement’ (*naẓm*) of a pre-existing text about the creation of the world, called *Urjūza fī ḥudūth al-‘ālam*. It rephrases ideas that had been part of mainstream thinking about the topic since the ninth century.<sup>180</sup> Then there is a poem on the fundamentals of faith (*uṣūl al-dīn*), of which I have not been able to obtain or see a copy. Finally in this category, six verses on the main differences between the theological views of the closely related Māturīdīya and Ash‘arī schools of theology are also attributed to al-Wālī.<sup>181</sup>

Al-Wālī wrote two works on different aspects of grammar. One is called *Tadrīb al-ṭullāb ‘alā šinā‘at al-i-rāb*, (Training for students in the practice of inflection). Most likely, considering the topic, it is derived from an existing text, but I have not been able to determine from which. Only one copy of the text has been preserved, in Kaduna. (The photocopy I have of it shows much water damage.) The other is called *Mu‘īn al-ṭālib wa-mufīd al-rāghib* (Instrument for the student and instruction for the amateur) and is an explanation of Ibn al-Wardī’s (d. 1290) text on ‘the problems of inflection’, *Al-tuḥfa al-Wardīya fī mushkilāt al-i-rāb*<sup>182</sup>. It also refers to another famous text on the subject by al-Ājurrūmiyya (d. 1223), whose work was distributed widely in West Africa.<sup>183</sup> This text is dated 1099 Hijra, that is 1688 Common Era. It seems to have been a bit more popular than the former: seven copies have been preserved and it served as a text book for the linguistic studies of ‘Uthmān dan Fodio and his brother ‘Abdallāh.<sup>184</sup> The photocopies of manuscripts of both texts that I have received are

<sup>179</sup> The following manuscripts were studied:

- *Al-manhaj al-farīd fī ma‘rifat ‘ilm al-tawḥīd*: Hunwick 178, Ibadan 82/48, Paris 5650, Paris 5541.
- *Al-adilla al-ḥisān fī bayān tahrīm shurb al-dukhān*: Leiden Or. 8362.
- *‘Awṣikum yā ma‘shar al-ikhwān*: Falke 1687, Falke 862, Falke 1850, Hunwick 174.2.
- *Manhal mā* ‘*adhb li-‘ilm asrār šifāt al-rabb*: Hunwick 196.
- *Mu‘īn al-ṭālib wa-mufīd al-rāghib*: Kaduna D/AR7/4, Kaduna P/AR2/62.
- *Tadrīb al-ṭullāb ‘alā šinā‘at al-i-rāb*: Kaduna (NA) N/AR2/27.
- *Urjūza fī ḥudūth al-‘ālam*: Falke 2414.

<sup>180</sup> See H.A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. Some verses of al-Wālī’s poem were translated by Hiskett: 1975, 15-16.

<sup>181</sup> The lines are added to a copy of the *Muḥaṣṣil* by al-Zakrī (d. 1494), ms Arewa House (Kaduna) 1/25/130. I am grateful to dr. Salisu Bala for sending me copy. In these lines seven main differences are mentioned between Ash‘arism and Māturīdīyya. They concern *istithnā* (the ‘formula of exception’, i.e. the question whether it is allowed to add the words ‘God willing’ after one has said ‘I am a believer’), happiness and misery (?), *kasb* (man’s participation in what is predestined), knowing God, creation as one of God’s attributes of act, divine justice, and blessing for the unbeliever:

هذا الايات نظمها شخنا محمد والى بن الشيخ سليمان الفلانى رضى  
الله عنهما وارضاهما ونعمنا بركاتهما وبركات علومهما امين  
فى السبع قد خالفت الاشعارى الماتريديّة (...)\*  
الاولى الاستثنا فى الإيمان للاشعرى لا لذاك الثانى  
□م السعيد ليس شقى والشقى بالعكس عند الاشعرى المتقى  
والكسب قد□بت عند الاشعرى والعلم بالله بشرع قادرى  
□م الحدوث لصفات الفعل وقدر للماتريدى العدل  
والاشعرى بجواز الاصغرى للانبياء قادر هذا واحذر  
وليس للكافر نعمة فذا خلفهم لاخير قادر الماخذ  
\*unreadable

<sup>182</sup> GAL II 140.

<sup>183</sup> GAL II, 237/238. See also Hall & Stewart 2011, 121.

<sup>184</sup> Hiskett 1957, 565, 571.

dark and difficult to read. For that reason, and because both works seem to keep closely to their subject, I have not yet studied them in detail, except for their introductions.

Apart from these scholarly works al-Wālī composed a short and simple poem urging young believers not to waste their time in idleness. Opening with ‘*Awṣikum yā ma‘shar al-ikhwān* (*I urge you, O brethren*), it became quite popular and was still being published in Kano in 1965. A translation is given in the next chapter, a version of the Arabic text can be found in Annex III.

ALA also attributes to al-Wālī another title, *Kitāb al-naṣā’ih*, apparently an exhortation to a certain sultan Sūt or Sūta of Yauri (south of Bornu). The addressee of this advice has not been identified. Unfortunately, the text itself has also not been found and the only reference to it comes from Muḥammad Bello, who writes that ‘master’ (*ustādh*) Muḥammad al-Wālī wrote it. It is possible that this *ustādh* Muḥammad al-Wālī is not the same as the scholar to whom Bello had until then consequently referred as shaykh Muḥammad al-Wālī.

Before we consider how al-Wālī was seen by his contemporaries and later readers, we must look at an important issue: whether al-Wālī was, as is stated in ALA, the author of a poem condemning astrology, ‘*ilm al-awfāq* and ‘*ilm al-ḥurūf* or was, on the contrary, interested in these sciences and even taught them himself. The poem in question is quoted in Bello’s *Infāq al-maysūr* in a way that has led to its attribution to al-Wālī.<sup>185</sup> There is reason however, to say that the attribution is incorrect. The question whether al-Wālī really is the author is of particular interest, because it regards a central theme in this book—that is, his attitude towards knowledge, learning and scholarship.

Astrology, ‘*ilm al-awfāq* and ‘*ilm al-ḥurūf* can be described as esoteric sciences, sciences which relate to knowledge that is conceived of as organised in a hierarchical system of which the highest levels are made available to a few specialists only and remain secret to all others.<sup>186</sup> ‘*Ilm al-awfāq*, literally the science of correspondences, is based on the belief in the conformity between God and elements of His creation. These conformities are represented in combinations of letters, numbers or words in grids of – usually - three by three. In the right combination they are believed to be able to mobilise the spiritual energy vested in the elements of creation, and this is why they function as talismans or amulets, which can protect, ensure good health, and so on.<sup>187</sup>

‘*Ilm al-ḥurūf* is a special branch of ‘*ilm al-awfāq*. It is the science of letters, of their numerical value and of their correspondence with other elements of creation. It can be used merely as an instrument to study the hidden meanings in creation and ultimately to come nearer to knowing God himself. But it can also serve to make talismans to ward off harm or evil. The interest in these sciences is strongly associated with Sufism and the notion of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the unity of existence or creation. Theologians of a more literalist and traditionalist inspiration have usually rejected these sciences, in the first place because they often conceal the idea that God’s intentions can be influenced. In Dan Fodio’s Sokoto ‘*ilm al-awfāq*, ‘*ilm al-ḥurūf* and astrology were popular among large groups of believers, but fiercely condemned by others such as ‘Uthmān dan Fodio himself, as activities of ‘venal ‘ulamā’ who cheated people with their tricks, and only for their own material interest.

L. Brenner referred to al-Wālī’s attitude towards esoteric sciences in an article in which he argued that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these were studied within the most sophisticated circles of scholarship of the region. This is in itself an important point to make, but there is not enough evidence to demonstrate a particular interest on al-Wālī’s part in esoteric sciences. Brenner wished to illustrate his argument with the example of three scholars, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Kashnāwī (from Katsina) a certain Muḥammad Bindū and al-Wālī. Al-Kashnāwī went to Cairo where he came to teach astrology, ‘*ilm al-ḥurūf*, ‘*ilm al-awfāq* and divination at al-Azhar. He befriended al-Jabartī, the father of the famous historian and died in his house in 1741. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥasan al-Jabartī, the son,

<sup>185</sup> In ALA (II, 36) it is called *Qaṣīda rā’īya fī dhamm al-munajjimīn* and also attributed to al-Wālī. The poem is quoted in Bello’s *Infāq al-Maysūr*, Or. 14063, 3v. Apparently, M. Last found a manuscript of the poem which also bears a note attributing it to al-Wālī. See Brenner 1985a, 112, n. 44.

<sup>186</sup> I am here paraphrasing a description by L. Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge*. London: Hurst & Company, 2000. 18.

<sup>187</sup> Dorpmüller 2005, 25 ff gives a good explanation of such beliefs.

reported al-Kashnāwī's death in his *Ajā'ib al-athār fī l-tarājim wa l-akhbār*, together with a biographical note, in which Muḥammad Bindū and Muḥammad b. Sulaymān b. Muḥammad al-Wālī al-Barnāwī al-Bagirmāwī are mentioned as teachers of his.<sup>188</sup> All the subjects that al-Kashnāwī read with Bindū are listed and they include the esoteric sciences. Al-Wālī, however, is named as one of the emigrant's teachers without a mention of the subjects he taught. In a document in which he listed the *isnād* of teachers who instructed him in the esoteric sciences, al-Kashnāwī himself did not say Muḥammad al-Wālī was one of them. He wrote that he was taught by Muḥammad Bindū, who was taught by Sulaymān b. Muḥammad al-Fulānī, the father of 'our shaykh Muḥammad b. Sulaymān, known as al-Wālī, whose achievements cannot be mentioned enough.'<sup>189</sup> Al-Wālī is mentioned for no other reason than that he was more famous than his father, and not because he taught al-Kashnāwī '*ilm al-awfāq*. Indeed, it is rather striking in this context that he is *not* mentioned as a specialist of such knowledge at all.

That al-Wālī too was interested in esoteric sciences, is suggested, wrote Brenner, by circumstantial evidence, 'for example, references to them in his writings, and the fact that his father transmitted them to M. Bindū and that he himself taught al-Kashnāwī'.<sup>190</sup> But this circumstantial evidence is mainly based, as in fact Brenner also noted, on sources that are not very clear. A major cause of the confusion is the poem that is quoted in *Infāq al-maysūr*, against astrology, '*ilm al-awfāq* and other secret knowledge, and that has been attributed to al-Wālī. Brenner wondered if the attribution could be a mistake, based on a misreading of the passage concerned in *Infāq*, or if the poem should be interpreted as condemning only the abuse of esoteric sciences and not the sciences themselves. I believe the former. Where Muḥammad Bello writes that 'the shaykh' wrote the poem he is about to quote, he was referring to his own father, 'Uthmān dan Fodio, in the way he usually did, and not to al-Wālī, whom he had mentioned earlier in the text. Moreover, in the sentence preceding this reference to 'the shaykh' Bello had already clearly stated what the relation between al-Wālī and esoteric sciences was in his view. His intention in this paragraph was, I believe, to emphasize that al-Wālī and his father had been respectable scholars in an environment – that of Bornu, which Sokoto was trying to conquer at the time – that was otherwise ridden with bigotry. He wrote that the excellent Muḥammad al-Wālī produced works that indicate the abundance of his intelligence and knowledge of the sciences, notably in the field of theology, in prose and verse, and continues:

وكان قرأ هذه البلاد وما قرب منها معتنين بعلم الاوافق والحروف وعلم النجوم ومستغرقين في طلبها حريصين على ذلك حتى هجروا علم الكتاب والسنة والشرعية اصلا رغبة في الدنيا.<sup>191</sup>

The crux is in the meaning of the first *wa*. Here it is not 'and', but 'whereas' and thus the translation reads: '... whereas the 'reciters' of these lands and surroundings were interested in '*ilm al-awfāq* and '*ilm al-ḥurūf* and astrology and absorbed by their study to the point of abandoning the science of the Qur'ān, the sunna and the law, because of their desire for worldly things.' Bello distinguishes these people from 'ulamā', learned people such as al-Wālī and his father, by using the word reciters for them. At least since the end of the fifteenth century, this term referred to people who read or recited the Qur'ān, but most often without understanding Arabic, and without much literate education. It was a pejorative term, suggesting the misuse of the holy texts. Al-Maghīlī had written to Muḥammad Askia that such reciters were no more than 'venal 'ulamā' ('*ulamā' al-sū*'), who condoned the illegal behaviour of rulers and were harmful to the Muslims. Since then, the notion of 'reciters' and venal 'ulamā' had turned into a strong tradition.<sup>192</sup> It was *their* misunderstanding and misuse of Islam which

<sup>188</sup> 'A al-R. al-Jabartī, *Ajā'ib al-athār fī l-tarājim wa l-akhbār*. Cairo: Bulaq, 1880. I, 159.

<sup>189</sup> Al-Kashnāwī, *Bahjat al-āfāq wa-īdāḥ al-labs wa l-ighlāq fī 'ilm al-ḥurūf wa l-awfāq*. SOAS Library ms 65496, f 11a. Cf Brenner 1985a, 112, appendix I.

<sup>190</sup> Brenner 1985a, 110.

<sup>191</sup> Whitting 1951, 5 and Or. 14.063, 3r, 3v. Where Or. 14.063 has '*ilm al-kutub*, Whitting has '*ilm al-kitāb* here, which seems to be the better term in this context.

<sup>192</sup> Hiskett 1962, 581.

had provided a major motivation for reform and one of the justifications for the Fulani jihād in the region.<sup>193</sup>

What may have added to the misinterpretation of Bello's statement is the English 'paraphrase' of the paragraph by Arnett, via a Hausa translation, as follows: '[Mohamadu Alwali] wrote a treatise on Toheid in verse, of unimpeachable orthodoxy. He wrote certain other verses which are read in Bagharmi, concerning divination, magic, and astrology. These subjects are much studied in these parts.'<sup>194</sup> There is nothing like that in the original text.

To summarise, al-Wālī did not write a poem against esoteric sciences or their abuse, but neither is there enough indication to associate him with this field of study. To the leaders of the Sokoto jihād, he was a most outstanding and respected scholar.

### 3. Education

Al-Wālī was a Fulani, and he also identified predecessors on whose work he built as Fulani. This name does not refer to a place, but to a group of people that is usually thought of as an ethnic group. Fulānī or Falātī is the Arabic spelling of the name that has been adopted in European languages as Fulani, Fellata, Fulbe, Peul, Peulh, Pulo and more, a variety that reflects the great mobility of the people designated. It is certain that groups of Fulani have played a central role in the Islamic history of west and central sudanic Africa, from the first propagation of the religion to the reforms and revolutions that succeeded each other from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth.

The Fulani are generally considered to have had their origins in West Africa, in the region of Futa Toro in present-day Senegal, from where they have migrated over the centuries along the plains of the Sahel, up to Bornu, Kanem and Wadai. Some of these groups or clans have always retained their nomadic lifestyle as well as their original religion, while others converted to Islam and combined the new religion with their traditions. There was however one particular group of Fulani who identified themselves primarily as students and educators of knowledge of Islam. The Kano Chronicle (the written account of the oral list of kings of the Hausa from the tenth century to the nineteenth)<sup>195</sup> relates how learned Fulani arrived in Kano during the reign of Sarkin Yakubu, from 1452 to 1463. They came from Mali 'bringing with them books on Divinity and Etymology. Formerly our doctors had, in addition to the Qur'ān, only the books of the Law and the Traditions.' Then, after some time, 'the Fulani passed by and went to Bornu, leaving a few men in Hausaland, together with some slaves and people who were tired of journeying.'<sup>196</sup> A group of Fulani is believed to have arrived in Bornu in the sixteenth century.

These Fulani who travelled as teachers and scholars of Islam are often called Torodbe (or Torodo). Based on an extensive comparison of sources, J.R. Willis came to the conclusion that the labels Fulani and Torodbe may not designate strictly ethnical categories, but that the people referred to were drawn from diverse strains of sudani society. Torodbe, he demonstrated, was the word for the *métier* of Muslim learning. It referred to a 'clerisy evolved out of that mass of rootless peoples who perceived in Islam a source of cultural identity.'<sup>197</sup> Many of them came from oppressed groups, or were individual runaway slaves or outcasts of different ethnic backgrounds, for whom the study of Islam with a Torodbe shaykh was a way to obtain a new social role. This role was associated, in practice and in

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<sup>193</sup> This reading of the paragraph concerned would also imply that Bello did not regard al-Wālī's father, Sulaymān b. Muḥammad al-Fulānī as involved with esoteric sciences in a way that was offensive to the jihadists, although we know from al-Kashnāwī that he did pursue these sciences. However, the father lived a hundred and fifty years before Bello, was never as well-known as his son and no works by him have been preserved.

<sup>194</sup> E.J. Arnett, *Rise of the Sokoto Fulani*. Kano: n.d., 1922. 4.

<sup>195</sup> H.R. Palmer, *Sudanese Memoirs: being mainly translations of a number of Arabic manuscripts relating to the western and central Sudan*. London: Frank Cass, 1967 (2nd ed.).

<sup>196</sup> H.R. Palmer transl., 'The Kano Chronicle'. In *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 38 (1908), 58-98; 76-77.

<sup>197</sup> Willis 1978, 196.

people's minds, with that of beggars. Many of these shaykhs and their students lived of the charity of others, from whom they asked for food in a calabash. In time however, the Torodbe extricated themselves from a minority position, to emerge as the dominant ruling group in several societies of the western Sudan. Some Fulani came to teach in the most prestigious institutes in the Middle East. As we saw, al-Wālī's pupil al-Kashnāwī, also a Fulani, taught at al-Azhar, while a certain Ṣāliḥ al-Fulānī (1752-1803) taught in Mecca and Medina.<sup>198</sup>

As a scholar, al-Wālī seems to have belonged to the Torodbe section of the Fulani. The leaders of the Sokoto jihād were members of this group<sup>199</sup> and one of them, Muḥammad Bello, wrote in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that al-Wālī was 'of our tribe'.<sup>200</sup> Whether Bello had a professional or also an ethnic group in mind, would be difficult to establish.<sup>201</sup> In any case, with or without a (presumed) common ancestor - the usual criterion for an ethnic group - all Fulani, including the Torodbe, did share a language, Fulfulde, and a culture, in which some of the values and social customs of the pastoral Fulani remained prominent. When they settled in a new region to make their living as specialists and teachers of Islam among the pagan inhabitants of rural areas, it was most often in camps and then villages separate from the autochthonous villages. They have not fully integrated into the host populations, even today. On the other hand, these 'scholarly' communities maintained contacts with Fulani cattle-herders, whose core values they shared and among whom they took their wives, even though they were usually non-Muslims. Not all of these specialists of Islam settled. Some kept moving from one village or nomad camp to the next, offering teaching, religious services and amulets to Muslims as well as non-Muslims.

In the seventeenth century these 'scholars among the people' acquired a political role of increasing importance. The Torodbe who lived in rural areas and a growing number of religious men who shifted their attention away from the towns, assumed a role in articulating the grievances of peasants against heavy taxation by their rulers, lamentations they larded with their own expressions of longing for the peace and glory of the old empires. As mentioned in the previous chapter, between 1650 and 1800 this alliance of scholars and common people led to a series of revolutions, movements against oppression, that were all framed as religious reforms or jihāds. The most well-known are the revolutions led by Nāṣir al-Dīn, in the south western Sahara around 1675, and others in Bondu in 1690, in Futa Jallon about 1725, in Futa Toro about 1775, and the most successful of all in Sokoto from 1804 to 1806. All but the first were led by Torodbe.<sup>202</sup>

The community of family-members and pupils around al-Wālī's father was essentially a community of Muslim Fulani. Young Muḥammad, therefore, would have been raised with values that were not exclusive to Fulani culture, but which, according to many anthropologists, were explicitly defined among them in a code of conduct (often referred to as *pulaaku*) that emphasised reserve and self-control – the control of any physical desire, but also of anger and other strong emotions – as well as patience, respect and the duty to 'subdue sentiments by means of reason'.<sup>203</sup> Another norm is the fear of shame, and the knowledge that shame and honour are never individual but are vested in the community. 'For the proper manifestation of *pulaaku*, the whole society should be sane and proper to a maximum and this is only possible when every member conforms to conventional norms [...] in terms of authority, rights and obligations.'<sup>204</sup>

Most likely Muḥammad's mother-tongue was Fulfulde. He probably also spoke Kanuri, the lingua franca of the region. It is unlikely that he spoke the Arabic dialect, called Shuwa or Baggara Arabic,

<sup>198</sup> For Ṣāliḥ al-Fulānī see Levzion 2007, VII, 7.

<sup>199</sup> Last 1967, lxxiii. There the Torodbe are designated by the Hausa form of the name, Toronkawa.

<sup>200</sup> من قبيلتنا Or. 14063, 3r.

<sup>201</sup> See also H.J. Fisher 1966, 346.

<sup>202</sup> Lapidus 1988, 508-523.

<sup>203</sup> A. Issa & R. Labatut, *Sagesse de peuls nomades*. Yaounde: Editions Clé, 1974, 208. Cf P. Riesman, *Freedom in Fulani Social Life. An Introspective Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. See also A. Breedveld and M. de Bruijn, 'L'Image de Fulbe. Analyse critique de la construction du concept de *pulaaku*' in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 144, xxxvi-4 (1996) 791-821.

<sup>204</sup> A. Abu Manga, 'BaaJankaro. A Fulani Epic from Sudan.' In *Series Africana, Marburgensia* 9 (1985), 22.

which is spoken in the region today by people of many different ethnic backgrounds, but was not introduced there before the early seventeenth century, when it was still exclusively the language of the Baggara Arabs. Traces of this dialect can sometimes be found in manuscripts from the region from the nineteenth and perhaps the eighteenth centuries, but I have not found any in the writings of al-Wālī.

The language of religious education was *fuṣḥā* Arabic. Children (mostly, but not exclusively, boys) started to learn it around the age of seven, when they learned to memorise and recite the Qur'ān. Many authors have written about the organisation of Islamic studies in West Africa.<sup>205</sup> Of course, their descriptions show variation over time and space, but some of the main characteristics are constant: a first phase or cycle was devoted to learning to recite the Qur'ān (according to the Warsh tradition) and to the ḥadīths. Then followed the writing of Qur'ānic texts, then learning the basics of jurisprudence according to the Mālikī doctrine, as well as – only then – basic Arabic grammar, to better understand the language of further instruction and exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Qur'ān and ḥadīths.

The method of instruction – that is of the transmission of written texts in particular – was similar at all levels and, in accordance with the tradition of teaching since early Islam, it combined writing, reciting and listening. The shaykh would read sentences or parts of the Arabic source to his students and then explain it in a local language, and sometimes, at higher levels, in Arabic. Students literally formed an audience, and memorised what they studied. At an advanced level, they would also write down what they had heard, producing their own copy of a book, which was then submitted to the teacher for his approval. However, to be learned meant in the first place to have memorised many books. The transmission of knowledge was also personal. Lessons or 'assemblies' (*majālis*) took place in (or in front of) the home of a shaykh, rather than in institutes, class-rooms or even mosques. In Islamic culture in general true knowledge was seen to derive from personal contact with learned masters, and those who attempted to rest their education only on the written word were seen as arrogant.<sup>206</sup> For the teacher the transmission of knowledge was (and is) an act of piety and of worship. Both teaching and studying were activities that, like prayer, could only be undertaken effectively in a state of ritual purity – one of the reasons why the hours directly after sunrise were considered best for it.

In al-Wālī's case, his first teacher may have been his own father. After a few years, around the age of ten, pupils would be sent to another teacher, preferably in a place away from home, so that they would not be spoilt by the tender feelings of their closest family. They would pay for a good part of their own tuition by working on the teacher's land. (Teachers also received presents from the pupils' parents.) At some point, as a boy or a young man, Muḥammad went to Birni Gazargamu, where his father had lived and where Islamic learning was much more advanced than in Baghirmi. It was more than seven hundred kilometres away from home. Contemporary oral tradition in Bornu has it that he studied there with the Fulani Booro Bindi and with Buba Njibima (of Kanembu background), two renowned shayks in the capital.<sup>207</sup> He is said to have been one of the 'twelve stars' of the latter, although the information is not too reliable, as Bobboyi explained. There are not many facts about Buba Njibima and he is reported to have had students who would in fact have been too far apart in age to have known him all. Collective memory seems to have appointed them as his students as an expression of their excellence. Among the twelve stars who are remembered by name were also al-Wālī's father and Muḥammad b. al-Hajj 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barnāwī (better known as al-Hajrami), who wrote an important treatise on jurisprudence, *shurb al-zulāl*, and whom we will meet again.<sup>208</sup> If the data seem confused, the important thing to keep in mind is that the second half of the seventeenth century in Bornu knew so many scholars who deserved to be remembered as stars. It was an age when scholarship was particularly important in social life.

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<sup>205</sup> E.g. Bobboyi 1992, 45-64; D. Eickelmann, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: the Education of a Twentieth Century Notable*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985; G. Mommersteeg, *Het domein van de Marabout*. *Koranleraren en magisch religieuze specialisten in Djenné, Mali*. Proefschrift Universiteit Utrecht, 1996; J. Goody 1968.

<sup>206</sup> J.P. Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo. A Social History of Islamic Education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. 26.

<sup>207</sup> Bobboyi 1992, 17.

<sup>208</sup> Bobboyi 1992, 15-19.



Booro ('repository of knowledge' in Fulfulde) Bindi is interesting, because one wonders whether he is the same person as Muḥammad Bindū, who was close to al-Wālī in more than one way. He seems to have married al-Wālī's mother after his father had died,<sup>209</sup> and he was one of the teachers of al-Kashnāwī, who also studied with al-Wālī. In other ways however, Bindū's path diverged from the one al-Wālī took. As we saw, according to the information al-Kashnāwī gave al-Jabartī, Bindū's special interest concerned various '*ulūm al-asrār* or esoteric sciences.<sup>210</sup> He also taught the work of Ibn Zakrī (d. 1494), who was a contemporary fellow townsman but a staunch opponent in the field of theology of Yūsuf al-Sanūsī, whose work was most important to al-Wālī (see chapter 5). Could it be that the relation between Bindū and al-Wālī mirrored that between Ibn Zakrī and al-Sanūsī? It is tempting to let one's mind wander in the direction of a domestic rivalry between al-Wālī and his mother's new husband, but the reader would have to do so on his or her own.

According to Bello's *Infāq al-Maysūr*, al-Wālī also studied with an unidentified shaykh al-Bakrī, perhaps the al-Bakrī who lived in Yandoto, near Katsina.<sup>211</sup> It is possible that al-Wālī lived in Katsina for some time too, as many scholars from Bornu did.<sup>212</sup> And perhaps he went there especially to study with a ṣūfī shaykh, because his father had studied in Katsina with Abū 'Abdallāh al-Tadhilī, a student of the Maghrebian (Mālikī) scholar of *fiqh* and Sufism Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Naṣr al-Dar'ī (1603-1674), who was in turn associated with the Shādhilī (ṣūfī) centre of Wādī Dar'a.<sup>213</sup> The spiritual father of this centre, Abū al-Ḥassan al-Shādhilī (d.1258), is mentioned in the preface of *Al-manhaj al-farīd* as one of four people who were blessed with three *karamāt*, who were *sharīf*, *wālī* and '*ālim* (of the family of the prophet Muḥammad, close to God and learned) at the same time. (The others were Muḥammad b. Yūsuf (al-Sanūsī), Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī and Abū Ishāq al-Isfarā'īnī.<sup>214</sup>

What do we know about al-Wālī's later journeys? Travel has always been highly commended in Islam, for the pilgrimage but also in search of knowledge. 'Those who go out in search of knowledge will be in the path of God until they return' said the founder of the Mālikī school, Anas b. Mālik (d. 712). And al-Wālī's student al-Kashnāwī said to his host in Cairo: 'If not to elevate my aim and the sincerity of my purpose in pursuing the religious sciences, then why should I have abandoned my family, my people and my country and forsaken the comforts of home... for a life of travelling abroad and loneliness and anxiety?'<sup>215</sup> A further reason for scholars to go out into the world, was that they were expected to contribute to the establishment of an Islamic order, and therefore had to have experience of the affairs of the Muslim community. It is reported that al-Wālī made the journey to Mecca, apparently even twice, and on his way there also spent some time in Cairo to study, as did many learned pilgrims from sudanic Africa.<sup>216</sup> Here and in the two holy cities al-Wālī also met with students and scholars from other schools than the Mālikī school to which he adhered by convention. Among them was the jurist and scholar of ḥadīth Muḥammad b. 'Alā al-Dīn al-Bābilī (d. 1666), a Shāfī'ī who had also studied jurisprudence with the Mālikī scholars al-Sanhūrī (d. 1606) and Ibrāhīm al-Laḡānī (d. 1631).<sup>217</sup> The latter would become one of al-Wālī's heroes. (See chapter six.)

Various authors have drawn attention to the considerable mobility that existed by the seventeenth century among scholars between the southern Sahara, Bornu and Hausaland and also between these regions and Timbuktu and Fez in the west, Tlemcen, Tripoli and Cairo in the north.<sup>218</sup> It is conceivable – though there is no written record to support this – that al-Wālī travelled west to cities such as

<sup>209</sup> Brenner 1985a.

<sup>210</sup> Al-Jabartī, 1880. I, 159.

<sup>211</sup> Bivar & Hiskett 1962, 117.

<sup>212</sup> Katsina's popularity: Hunwick 1997. Hunwick notes that al-Wālī lived in Katsina for some time. 1997, 211 and 215.

<sup>213</sup> Bobboyi 1992, 19, 38 (note 90), 143.

<sup>214</sup> In *Al-manhaj al-farīd fī ma'rifat 'ilm al-tawḥīd*, ms Hunwick 178, 13. Nb, it is likely that al-Wālī only translated this remark in the preface of the text.

<sup>215</sup> Translation from L. Brenner 1985a, 108.

<sup>216</sup> For spending time in Cairo, see M.N. Pearson, *Pious Passengers. The Hajj in Earlier Times*. London: Hurst & Company, 1994, 47. Others took the shorter road to the Red Sea and crossed it to Jedda or Yanbo, the port of Medina.

<sup>217</sup> Al-Sanhūrī: GAL S II, 416. Al-Laḡānī: GAL II 316, 317.

<sup>218</sup> E.g. Hunwick ALA II, 17; Lavers 1981; Stewart 1976.

Agades, Timbuktu, Gao and Djenné. He did mention and quote from works of which no copies have been found in the libraries of Bornu and Hausaland, but which were available in Timbuktu and farther west, such as the ḥadīth collections of al-Naysabūrī, al-Ṭabarānī and al-Bayhaqī, work by al-Tirmidhī (fl. ninth century), the thirteenth-century jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī and ‘Abdallāh al-Manūfī (fl. fourteenth century). But all of these were of course also available in places such as Cairo and Mecca. In any case, al-Wālī travelled enough to observe and experience the culture of Islam in cosmopolitan places like Cairo and Mecca and to set his opinions alongside those of scholars in the heartlands of Islam.

#### 4. Reputation

At first blush, there is not much to go on if we wish to judge the reception of al-Wālī’s work. No contemporary discussions of or references to his work are known. In his *Kitāb al-istidhkār*, a biographical dictionary of the shaykhs of Bornu and Kanem, Ibrāhīm Ṣāliḥ mentions that a certain Khātīb b. Adam Jaber Muḥammad al-Barnāwī wrote a commentary on al-Wālī’s *Ḥudūth al-‘ālam*, but I have not been able to find this commentary, or more information about its author.<sup>219</sup> A biography of al-Wālī by his pupil al-Kashnāwī, which could no doubt reveal in what terms and context his near-contemporaries spoke of him, has likewise not been found.<sup>220</sup> And apart from the short entries in twentieth-century overviews nothing is known to have been written about al-Wālī’s work by other scholars. However, the same is true of most other sudanese authors. It may be claimed that compared to them al-Wālī enjoyed a very positive reputation in his own time and later. In the Arabic literary tradition scholars and shaykhs used to be introduced in text by adjectives referring to their qualities, like *epitheta*. The more adjectives that were used, by a copyist or by the student who wrote down the text his master taught, the more attention a scholar was considered to deserve.<sup>221</sup>

The Middle Eastern copyist of the treatise against tobacco praises al-Wālī for his moral qualities: he calls him truthful, magnanimous and generous. The copyists of *The Peerless Method* state – or perhaps repeat what al-Wālī himself wrote – that the author is humble and in need of God’s mercy.<sup>222</sup>

Praise for al-Wālī’s qualities as a scholar and a theologian comes from the copyist of a version of *Mu‘īn al-ṭālib* (Kaduna D/AR7/4) who called him the most learned, a renewer of faith (*mujaddid*), and a knight of sciences and judgement. He supported these choices by mentioning the year in which the text was written: 1099 (hijra). It was not at all customary for authors or copyists to give dates in literary works, but that al-Wālī was active on the threshold of a new century increased the likeliness that he was a renewer of faith, sent by God, and perhaps therefore the copyist considered it worth mentioning the year.

The most remarkable reference to his scholarly reputation is the one by Muḥammad Bello, who lived more than a century after him and moreover in a sultanate that was at that time in conflict with Bornu. Wishing to describe the state of Islam and its shortcomings in Bornu, he started with information about its scholars. Al-Wālī and his father are the first he mentioned. Bello called Al-Wālī ‘the excellent (*al-naḥīb*) Muḥammad al-Wālī whose works indicate the abundance of his knowledge and intelligence and skill in the sciences’.<sup>223</sup>

For later western scholars in the field al-Wālī has been less important, perhaps because he was not a direct precursor of the Sokoto jihād and did not write about social injustice or examples of ‘mixed Islam’. Brenner is one of the few of this generation who has been more attracted to the author, also

<sup>219</sup> Ibrāhīm Ṣāliḥ, n.d., 433.

<sup>220</sup> We know that this work, entitled *Bughyat al-mawālī fī tarjamat Muḥammad al-Wālī*, has existed from a note in I. al-Baghdadī, *Hadiyyat al-‘arifīn asma’ al-mu‘allifīn w-athār al-musannifīn*, Istanbul: 1955. II, 325.

<sup>221</sup> D. Bouwman, *D. Throwing stones at the moon: the role of Arabic in contemporary Mali*. Dissertation, CNWS Leiden University, 2005. 99.

<sup>222</sup> All four versions I saw use the same phrase.

<sup>223</sup> Or. 14.063, 3r. Another indication of al-Wālī’s good name in his own time is the fact that (according to Bobboyi) a certain shaykh Gargarma or Shettima ‘Abd al-Qādir, member from an old family of Birni Gazargamu, that held the hereditary rights to the office of the imām al-kabīr, is remembered as having been one of his direct students. Bobboyi 1992, 21 and 181.

because of his interest in a specific method of teaching Islam, which he traced back to al-Wālī's comment on al-Sanūsī's creed.<sup>224</sup> In Nigeria, al-Wālī's name is kept alive among a few specialists of Islamic history. There, the memory is clearly influenced by the history of Sufism and the importance it gained in West Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In an oral interview, Ibrāhīm Šālīḥ remembered al-Wālī primarily as a great šūfī.<sup>225</sup> The same is true of today's inhabitants of his own village, as I discovered during a visit to Abgar in 2012. And they also regard al-Wālī as one of the founders of the village:

The name Abgar, the villagers explained, is derived from 'Abū Gara' because this was once the home of 'him of the calabash', *gòdraa* meaning calabash in Hausa. The description refers to an 'ālim, since learned men and their students would ask the people among whom they lived and for whom they performed religious services to give them food in a calabash they carried with them. Based on the great reputation of this mythical figure, descendants in the village still boast of an exceptionally good Islamic pedigree and see themselves as *muhajirīn*<sup>226</sup>, a word they understand as 'emigrants for the sake of Muslim knowledge'.

Abgar, or Abgar Alim Wali in full, is now a village of about sixty houses and one small mosque. Its chief, Saleh Ahmat, one of the few here who can read, is also an out-reach health-worker, but because his motor broke down, today he has time for a story. Surrounded by half a dozen men who share his mat under a large neem-tree, he confirms that in the old days Ahmat Silé Fullata al-Wali and his son Silé and many other *fuqara* (literally 'poor', the word for religious men in Chad) lived here. The name Ahmat or Aḥmad is an alternative form of Muḥammad, derived from the same Arabic root ḥ-m-d. Silé is short for Sulayman. Ahmat Silé Fullata al-Wali is Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Fulātī al-Wālī. Tea arrives and a few small glasses, to be used in turn. While the older men nod at Saleh Ahmat's words, more and more boys silently join the group, and the chief narrates:

There were two friends, two shaykhs. One was an Arab called Ahmat Badawi, the other was Ahmat Silé Fullata. Together they set off on a journey to Egypt. When they arrived there, they alighted at a mosque where they found an inscription on stone or earthenware saying *alif mishlak*, 'there are a thousand like you'. They broke it and kept the shards. But some people had seen them doing it and they warned the Sultan of Egypt, that there were travellers with their *muhajirin* who had shattered that text. The two friends understood that they were in danger and they threw the shards into the river. But these did not sink, they floated, and the Egyptians who saw it said: 'these people have hidden powers'. Now the Sultan wanted to know who they were and how strong their powers and their knowledge were. So he sent for them and asked them: 'Who are you? Tell me who your ancestors are up to twelve generations back.' The Arab and the Fulani both did so, but the Sultan himself could not name more than four of his ancestors. Then the Sultan decided to organise a test. He ordered a white cow and a white calf to be put in a house that was entirely closed and then asked shaykh Badawi: Shaykh Badawi, you know much. Tell us the colour of the cow and the calf that in that house.' And Badawi answered: 'the cow is white and the calf is white.' The Sultan asked Ahmat Fullata the same question, and he answered: 'the cow is grey and the calf is grey.' Then the house was opened and the cow and the calf were grey. The Sultan understood that both shaykhs were right, because the cow and the calf had indeed been white when they were enclosed, but now they were grey. He became frightened, for the knowledge of these shaykhs was powerful and they might be a threat to him. He decided they must leave, and told them that his soldiers would accompany them on their journey back. But he instructed the soldiers to kill them and their *muhajirin* on the way. They all set off and after a while the soldiers tried to grab the shaykhs. But they escaped and when the soldiers came after them, they never succeeded in catching up with them. Finally the soldiers gave up and returned to Egypt.

<sup>224</sup> L. Brenner, *Originality of thought & method in West African Islamic teaching: a Fulfulde Example*. Paper presented at the African Studies Centre, Boston University, 24 March 1980. L. Brenner, *West African Sufi: the religion heritage and spiritual search of Cerno Bokar Saalif Tall*. London: C. Hurst, 1984. See also chapter 4 below.

<sup>225</sup> Personal interview by Mahmūd Nasr with Ibrāhīm Šālīḥ Yūnus al-Ḥusayni, in Cairo, April 2011. The tape is in my possession.

<sup>226</sup> In Arabic dialects the nominative case ends on -īn.

What stands out in Ahmat Saleh's story is the image of the Fulani Shaykh Ahmat Silé and his Arab friend as men whose knowledge astonished even the learned men of Egypt. Part of it is knowledge of a *ṣūfī* character: they could see things that were hidden from the eye. However, for people in Abgar today, there is not really an alternative: most of them are illiterate in Arabic or French, and cannot read the wooden slates with Quranic verses that lean against the neem-tree. They are there as relics of the community's unique Islamic past, but its members have not inherited the scholarly tradition in which al-Wālī stood out. Their idea of an outstanding Muslim is that of an outstanding *ṣūfī*, and necessarily their historical ancestor is to them a great seer.

There is a second part to Saleh Ahmat's story, that explains why there are today (as in Gustav Nachtigal's time, see Volume III, Chapter 2, section 1) two villages, now named Abgar and Abgar Alim Wali.<sup>227</sup> It pictures the shaykh as one of the founders of Abgar.

After a long stay in Sennar (in today's Sudan), where the two shaykhs found the legitimate heir to the kingdom of Baghirmi, they all returned together, the shaykhs, the heir and a group of followers that increased in every place along the route where they stopped. When they arrived in Baghirmi, the heir to the kingdom, the new sultan, proceeded to Massenya and established a dynasty. Ahmat Silé wished to settle in another place, where he had seen animals with one horn.<sup>228</sup> Sometime afterwards the two friends, the Fulani and the Arab shaykh, wished to return to Mecca. They told their students to live together in one community, during their absence. The students however soon had a conflict and split up. Far away from them, Badawi understood, as soon as he saw that his horse wanted to take a different route, that something must be wrong at home. But he said to Ahmat Silé Fullata: 'even if our students do not get along and are in conflict, we will continue together and fortune will always be with us'. And indeed Abgar has always been prosperous and was even spared by the terrible army of Rabah [the slave-raider from Sudan at the end of the nineteenth century].'

If the figure of the Fulani shaykh who helped to install the first legitimate (Muslim) ruler on the throne of Massenya was one of the Fulani who supported Sultan 'Abdallāh (r. 1568-1608) according to Nachtigal's data, he may represent al-Wālī's father. In Saleh Ahmat's version the founding father and his more famous son Ahmat Silé have merged into one person – another indication of the mythical rather than the historical character of the stories about the latter.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Muḥammad al-Wālī was a worthy representative of the Fulani (Torodbe) tradition of teaching Islam on the frontiers of the religion. In one of his texts, he refers to himself as a *mutakallim*, a scholar in the field of rational or philosophical theology. The famous Muḥammad Bello remembered him as one who was most learned in the religious sciences, distinguishing him and his father from other scholars who practiced astrology, '*ilm al-ḥurūf*' and the like. Al-Wālī's *oeuvre* as a whole treats all the classical subjects of Ash'arī scholarship and handbooks: the creation of the world, God's attributes from the *kalām* point of view, grammar and syntax and *fiqh*. It all yielded him an enormous reputation, at least in central sudanic Africa. One copyist of *Mu'īn al-ṭālib*, the work on grammar that was written in the Hijra year 1099, even called al-Wālī a *mujaddid*, a renewer of the faith, a learned man such as God would send at the beginning of every century.<sup>229</sup>

In Chad and Nigeria today, most common believers have forgotten al-Wālī. The inhabitants of his village Abgar, however, do remember him, as one of the founders of their village and as a man of great learning who travelled to Cairo, where his knowledge was superior to that of the authorities in

<sup>227</sup> And see Paques 1967 for a similar version.

<sup>228</sup> Saleh Ahmat did not say that this was Abgar, but an alternative explanation of the name Abgar is that it is short for Abu Qarn – *qarn* is Arabic for horn.

<sup>229</sup> Kaduna D/AR7/4. See Chapter 3, 4.

place. In popular memory, and also in that of the twentieth-century Nigerian historian Ibrāhīm Ṣāliḥ, this was knowledge of a magical or mystical character. This reminiscence, however, seems to have been determined by the importance that Sufism acquired in the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the following chapters I will show that al-Wālī's own works provide no basis for assuming that he claimed to be an expert in what are often called the esoteric sciences. In fact, he did quite the contrary.



## *The scholar's habitat*

To ask how al-Wālī fashioned himself as a scholar is to ask how he positioned himself with respect to his environment—that is, with respect on the one hand to what other scholars in his social and intellectual environment were doing or had done, and on the other to the various prevailing models of what it took to be a learned Muslim. This chapter is about the cultural, social, and intellectual influences that are likely to have played a role in al-Wālī's choice of a particular scholarly persona. Over the past decade or so, the concept of the scholarly persona has been developed to analyse when and why, and under what circumstances particular models of the scholar—of the 'scientist' as opposed to the 'natural philosopher', or of the 'experimentalist' as opposed to the *savant*—have developed in one and another culture.<sup>230</sup> Although I will not attempt here to follow the development through time of models of scholarship in central sudanic Africa, the concept of the scholarly persona helps us realise that an individual scholar may opt for the role of a particular persona, even as he is shaped by it. The model the scholar chooses determines what virtues and skills he is to have, as well as what attitudes and disposition he is to have towards moral goods (such as righteousness or goodness) and epistemic goods (knowledge, understanding), for instance.

This chapter will first look briefly at models of Muslim scholarship in al-Wālī's environment. It will present outlines both of the scholarly genres that were most frequently practiced and of some theological themes that were widely debated, such as the attributes of God, the relation between God's power and man's will, and between faith and 'imitation' or *taqlīd*. This presentation will help us determine, in the final chapters, the ways in which al-Wālī did and did not fit in with mainstream ideas.

### **1. Scholarship and religious leadership**

The '*ālim*, the 'knower' has always had an essential place in Islam: while there are no priests in Islam who might have a more direct relationship with God than others, or a claim to have the right answers to religious questions by virtue of a sacrament they have received, some Muslims do have better knowledge than others. As Rosenthal notes in his study of the concept of knowledge in medieval Islam, *Knowledge Triumphant*, various verses in the Qur'ān imply that those who believe are those who have a certain knowledge and that those who 'know' are the best believers. What it means to 'know' and by what means one knows, were (and are) contested. There could be an emphasis on cognitive knowledge ('*ilm*) of the manifest and 'knowable', or on intuitive knowledge (*irfān*) about God that is less easily shared with others. Regarding the former, there is a basic agreement that '*ilm* is closely linked to faith (*īmān*) and the word of God. Therefore it is conceived of as 'the most precious treasure' of the community,<sup>231</sup> as having an importance that has been 'unparalleled in other civilisations'.<sup>232</sup> Scholarship—in the sense of producing and transmitting culturally valued, specialised knowledge—has been valued concomitantly.

The knowledge that the 'ulamā' transmit is knowledge they have inherited from the Prophet. It is religious, and lies primarily in the field of theology and law, both of which are based on knowledge of

<sup>230</sup> L. Daston and H.O. Sibum, 'Introduction: Scientific Personae and Their Histories' in *Science in Context* 16, 1-2 (2003), 1-8. H. Paul, 'What is a scholarly persona? Ten theses on virtues, skills, and desires' in *History and Theory* 53 (2014), 348-371.

<sup>231</sup> Abdou Filali-Ansary, 'Preface' in *Organising Knowledge. Encyclopædic Activities in the Pre-Eighteenth Century Islamic World*. G. Endress (ed.). Leiden: Brill, 2006, ix.

<sup>232</sup> Rosenthal 2007, 334.

the Qur'ān and the ḥadīths. Moreover, the 'ulamā' have an understanding of how religious knowledge is obtained—with much emphasis on the transmission by reliable sources of knowledge ultimately originating from the Prophet—and of how it relates to God's own truth. Because of this, they can also find answers to new questions that are not answered in the holy sources, questions that arise for the first time in the moral and social life of their own time. It gives them both the right and the duty to guide others, as spiritual as well as political leaders, in the role of an 'ālim who avoids worldliness and the corruption of power or who issues authoritative opinions (fatwas) on matters of daily life, or in some role combining aspects of these two.

A number of quite stable norms, values and attitudes applied to those who claimed a role in the production and transmission of Islamic knowledge, regardless of local forms of Islam. Humility and piety, virtues that were attributed to al-Wālī (possibly by the author himself) in the introductory lines of at least some copies of *The peerless method*, were important. However, a norm almost diametrically opposed was also in force—one that certainly influenced al-Wālī, as we shall see: that of correcting other believers, ordinary as well as scholars, who were considered to be erring from the straight path. In theory, the duty of commanding good and forbidding wrong was (and is) incumbent on all legally competent Muslims. In practice, it falls especially on the shoulders of the 'ulamā'. Instructions for carrying out this obligation were discussed at some length. A division of tasks that was ordinarily agreed upon held that, while political authorities could forbid wrong 'with the hand', and anyone could do so 'with or in the heart', it was up to scholars to forbid wrong 'with the tongue'—that is, with language.<sup>233</sup> Al-Ghazālī was one of the theologians who thought about ways of addressing those who have violated religious law that would be just as well as effective. An unwitting lawbreaker, he explained, must be gently informed and corrected. Those who realise that they do wrong need exhortation, and those who understand their offense and have already reacted with obduracy and contempt to earlier advice, deserve harsh language.<sup>234</sup>

Another idea underpins the duty to correct other scholars when necessary: the idea that the knowledge of the 'ulamā' is ultimately collective. Every single scholar is fallible, but collectively they unite all the guidance that God bestows on the community of believers. This is why consensus (*ijmā'*) among 'ulamā' is important. When the 'ulamā' agree and reach *ijmā'*, that is a sign that they have arrived at a true judgment or interpretation. But there are no formal procedures that can be followed to reach *ijmā'*. Shared norms regarding the professionalism of those involved in the process are therefore all the more important. Key to all other values is the moral imperative of the scholars' commitment to the 'truth'. The prime concern of classical scholars was not to be original but to transmit faithfully, to authenticate their material, and to contribute both to the collective body of knowledge and ultimately to better judgement on the part of the Muslim community. Accuracy in writing, copying and quoting was central to trustworthy transmission, and all the extensive quoting was not done for the sake of names-dropping, but to demonstrate a scholar's painstaking care in taking into account the relevant sources in the correct manner.<sup>235</sup> True scholarship also implied excellent mastery of the Arabic language, without which all the sciences would give one trouble and one would run a serious risk of misinterpreting the Qur'ān and other sources.<sup>236</sup> The norm corresponded with the idea that the highest authority in Islam was in the Arabic-speaking Middle East.

On the other hand, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, it was not considered correct to found one's knowledge exclusively on written sources. The best way to learn was to seek out an expert in the field one wished to study, and study the relevant books with him personally. It implied that travelling in search of knowledge was an ideal in itself. It was greatly facilitated by the fact that these values also formed the basis of solidarity among members of the profession in all corners of the Muslim world.

In at least one of his texts, al-Wālī called himself a *mutakallim*. This means that he saw himself as a specialist of *kalām*, which is usually translated as 'philosophical theology' or 'speculative theology'

<sup>233</sup> M. Cook, *Forbidding Wrong in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 17.

<sup>234</sup> Cook 2003, 28.

<sup>235</sup> See Rosenthal 1947. 41-48.

<sup>236</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*. Translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958. Vol III, 315. L. Brenner and M. Last, 'The role of language in West African Islam.' In *Africa* 55, 4 (1985), 436.



because its topic is often abstract. For medieval Muslim scholars, the word referred to the defence of the religion by means of reason, argumentation and disputation.<sup>237</sup> *Kalām* was used in both *tawhīd* and jurisprudence. A preferred method, in both fields, was to refute a (supposed) opponent through logic, notably dialectic (*jadal*) and syllogism (*qiyās*). The style of disputation was ideally marked by an equanimity of tone, but in practice the language could be pugnacious.<sup>238</sup> *Kalām* was founded by the Mu‘tazilis and also had a central place in Ash‘arism. But in the latter case it was also seen as dangerous, especially when applied to dogmatic theology, because reasoning independently from the holy sources could easily lead anyone astray and certainly harm the faith of simple souls.<sup>239</sup> It was better restricted to those who knew their way in its labyrinths and would not get lost in the abstractions. And even then, one had to take great care when swimming in ‘the ocean of speculation’, as Ibn Khaldūn calls it.<sup>240</sup> The Maghribi school of Malikism, in contrast to Malikism in the Mashriq, was pre-eminently suspicious of *kalām* and syllogism. We will, however, see that al-Wali was conversant with *kalām*, in both theology and jurisprudence.

In the foregoing paragraphs we have looked at values and expectations that were formulated in some of the most classical texts of Islam, and that ‘ulamā’ throughout the Muslim world took account of. These values received a further interpretation at the local level. For instance, solidarity among members of the scholarly profession, no matter where they came from, was a recurring trope in the Islamic literature that we also find in Muḥammad Bello’s *Infāq al-maysūr*. Bello reminds his readers of a certain learned man who would ask people he met which country they came from. Wherever that was, he would reply: ‘I am from among you, from the people of learning and piety.’<sup>241</sup> Among the Fulani and also the Berbers of the southern Sahara, the scholars’ social distinction from others was even more pronounced. Their scholarly communities in the early modern period have often been described as caste-like, because clerical status tended to be restricted to hereditary lineages specializing in the arts of reading, writing and teaching, while they also had their own system of initiation, marriage patterns, ritual observances, prohibitions, and obligations.<sup>242</sup>

However, the ideal of social coherence and solidarity among ‘ulamā’ was increasingly put into perspective, on the one hand by stories of jealousy among them, and, on the other, by the variety of religious specialists who presented themselves as ‘ulamā’.<sup>243</sup> Indeed, not all Muslim specialists were learned or even literate. In the late fifteenth century the North African theologian al-Maghīlī had already complained of ‘ulamā’ or ‘reciters’ whose schooling was insufficient. When Islam gained influence in rural areas, the demand for experts of the religion increased. New converts turned to Muslim clerics simply to know how they should behave as Muslims, but also with a need for ritual and intercession between them and God. It offered opportunities to increasing numbers of people who were interested in that role, but lacked much literate education. By the nineteenth century, when European travellers recorded the local words in use for Muslim clerics, there was a wide range of them who were called ‘*ālim*, *shaykh*, *goni* (Kanuri for a learned person) *walī*, *mallam* (derived from

<sup>237</sup> Al-Farabi, *Kalām*. EI 2.

<sup>238</sup> G. Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990, 92.

<sup>239</sup> al-Farabi, EI2. G. Makdisi, ‘Ash‘arī and the Ash‘arites’ in *Islamic Philosophy and Theology II. Revelation and reason*. I.R. Netton, London: Routledge, 2007. 255-295.

<sup>240</sup> Ibn Khaldūn 1958, III, 36.

<sup>241</sup> Or. 14.063, 2v.

<sup>242</sup> Levzion 1985; Hunwick 1970; Stewart 1976; I. Wilks, ‘The transmission of Islamic learning in the Western Sudan.’ In: *Literacy in traditional societies*. J. Goody (ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

As a social group, scholars ranked below the nobles and above artisans.

<sup>243</sup> Lavers 1971, 33; Jealousy among shaykhs in the early seventeenth century is also highlighted in I. S. al-Ḥusayni’s *Kitāb al-istidhkār*, Vol II; Cf A. Brigaglia, ‘Two published Hausa translations of the Qur’an and their doctrinal background.’ In *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 35, 4 (2005), 444.

*mu'allam* and mostly associated with clerics of lesser academic learning)<sup>244</sup>, *imām* or *faqīr*, with book-oriented theologians on one end of the spectrum and magico-religious practitioners on the other.

The book-oriented theologians distinguished themselves in the first place by their insistence on writing excellent literary Arabic. Their role—and the source of their income—was to provide teaching and advice to communities of ordinary believers as well as to rulers. They also settled disputes, in local courts organised more or less according to the Muslim model, or in a role that combined Islam with elements and rituals from traditional beliefs—a practice that's still common today. They would also give authoritative opinions on questions that were put to them.

On the other end of the spectrum were the popular religious practitioners who often assumed the role of priests of traditional religions. They provided all sorts of supernatural services of a more or less Islamic character, offering healing and protection to Muslims as well as non-Muslims.<sup>245</sup> The idea of the Muslim 'holy man' (*faqīr*) included healers, diviners, writers of charms, and other specialists besides scholars. The variety of their expertise is matched by the number of modern authors who have written about them. One of the first was Dixon Denham, who remarked about some village clerics he met in Bornu: 'In these untraversed climes, a very little learning indeed is sufficient to raise a man's fame and fortune to the highest pitch. Persons who have been to Mecca, of the meanest capacities, who amuse them with tales of the countries and people they have seen on the road, are treated with the greatest respect, and are always provided for.'<sup>246</sup>

These mallams and 'holy men' played an important role in the propagation of Islam, because they appealed to so many people, irrespective of their religion. However, by the eighteenth century the popular mallams had also acquired a reputation among ordinary believers that was just the opposite of the respectable image presented to Denham. In some folktales they were presented as crooks.<sup>247</sup> Moreover, the activities of Muslim leaders with a minimum of learning or a maximum of tolerance towards non-Muslim habits were grist to the mill for puritans. Reformers such as 'Uthmān dan Fodio and Sīdī Mukhtār al-Kuntī in Timbuktu saw them as the fundamental cause of the laxity of Muslims in their time. It will be remembered, however, that Dan Fodio also objected to people whom he described as *mutakallimūn*, who had sectarian tendencies of which he deeply disapproved (see chapter 2.4). The term al-Wālī had proudly applied to himself more than a century before had by then taken on negative connotations. Although al-Wālī was associated with Bornu, while Dan Fodio lived in Sokoto, places with slightly different Muslim histories, this point illustrates that in the intervening period, models of what was to count as 'the learned Muslim' were changing.

## 2. The influence of social surroundings

Al-Wālī's position on the spectrum from least to most learned was without doubt somewhere near the latter end. His ambitions on this front will be discussed in chapter 7. However, he did not live in an ivory tower, but was in various ways involved with the concerns of unlettered people in his direct social environment, as a teacher, a religious leader and simply as a father. His main income probably came from the labour of his students on his fields, and from payment for his teaching and his books.

It should be noted that al-Wālī seems to have been relatively unconcerned about the political elite, and could work fairly independently from them. As a scholar of repute, there were surely moments when he interacted with the political authorities in Massenya and Birnu Gazargamu. Moreover, both al-Wālī and his father may have held a function at the legal court of Massenya, with the title of *ngol*.<sup>248</sup> But,

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<sup>244</sup> Although the word mallam could and can also be used for highly educated scholars, depending on the background of those who use the word, and although labels such as these are subjective and never absolute, I will use the word here to designate less educated clerics with a relatively large popular appeal, in order to avoid unnecessary prolixity.

<sup>245</sup> Levzion 1985, VII, 99. Brenner 2000, 25.

<sup>246</sup> Denham 1822, II, 131.

<sup>247</sup> Lavers 1971, 39.

<sup>248</sup> Bobboyi 1992, 18.

living far from the courts, he did not operate among the political elite. Moreover, those of his writings that have survived indicate little interest on his part in political matters or governance.

However, his involvement with the quality of the religious life both of his pupils and of ordinary believers appears in several of his works and in the fact that he versified some texts to make them more easily available (by memorisation) to a wider audience. Most clearly it comes across in the following short poem he wrote, and which has continued to appeal to believers for many generations. It was printed in Nigeria in the twentieth century.<sup>249</sup> (See annex III for the original text.)

I urge you, oh brothers, to heed the Merciful.  
And I warn you: if you don't mind your time, you will one day regret the waste.  
The wealth of mankind is his youth; his loss lies in neglecting  
the benefits to the young of complying. Brothers, seek piety towards God!  
Spend your time being obedient and prepared, every moment and hour,  
for he who fritters away an hour of his life must face the loss in his grave.  
He who says, 'I am young. Just wait—I'll grow up and fear God',  
Iblīs will mislead him and so will his cheated and prejudiced heart.  
There's no good in him who is reckless and does not repent when young.  
So turn to your Lord, o people, before time is up.  
Choose for companion who's on the straight path, for a fellow will follow in the steps of his friends.  
The company of the excellent is medicine to man, and strengthens with vigour and power.  
The company of the idle is sickness and blindness, and increases vile illness in the heart.  
Pursue the path of the Prophet and avoid associating with hoodlums.  
Oh, you who are oblivious and distracted from your Lord, consider the deeds you will show Him.  
Don't you know that death arrives in a hurry, while man has nothing [to speak for him] but the things he has done?  
And after death he has only the works done before.  
He who wastes his life in idleness—oh, what has he done?  
But the bliss for him who invests it in works that please his Lord!  
Oh, fooled one, what is this? Till when will this recklessness and dawdling go on?  
Why must I see that the lessons don't help you? That rather, your heart is harder than stone?  
If only people would come to grips with the limits on their time, with how [futile] it is in all of eternity, out of their control.  
Oh, the poor man, who puts his hopes off, wastes his time and does little good.  
His days he spends in idleness, his nights in sleep. What misery.  
The blessing of God, the glorified Lord, on the chosen prophet Muḥammad  
and his family and companions for all eternity. They are the guiding stars forever.

The exhortation may serve as a first indication of al-Wālī's sensitivity (chapter 6 will give another example) to the feelings and reasoning of his students. Presumably he was also sensitive to the various images they held of clerics. The increasing influence of barely literate village preachers and magico-religious practitioners, as well as the growing trend to view such specialists as crooks, must have affected the position of 'ulamā' such as himself, whose authority and income depended on their classical scholarly training. This was the first of three threats to the position of 'ulamā'.

Their position was also affected, I would suggest, by two other developments. One was the growing popularity of Sufism, which may have been embraced at times as a form of counterknowledge by those who did not have access to books, as we saw in chapter 2. The other was the result of the success of the 'ulamā's own teaching, in a process to which K. Hirschler, writing about the heartlands of Islam, recently drew attention. With the expansion of Islam from urban to rural environments,

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<sup>249</sup> Apart from the five manuscript copies listed in *ALA*, two more were found in the Herskovits Library at NU: Falke 862 and Falke 1687. The poem was printed in Kano in 1965.

increasing numbers of ordinary people became familiar—some through their own reading, and many more through oral transmission—with forms of narratives, laws and other written knowledge, which had for centuries been the monopoly of the ‘ulamā’ and the core of their expertise. Reading became more popular, and scholars were no longer the only ones who owned written texts. Between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries, when more and more people became familiar with some of the important writings of the religion, there arose a feeling among ‘ulamā’ in Syria and Egypt, which feature in Hirschler’s case studies, that they were being challenged. Hirschler remarks that ‘it would be surprising if a similar transformation had not occurred in other regions of the Mediterranean during the Middle Period, such as al-Andalus and North Africa, and also farther to the east in those regions that came under Mongol rule.’<sup>250</sup> And the same goes, I would argue, for farther south in central sudanic Africa in the seventeenth century.

### 3. Intellectual environment: the canon

The first cataloguing by western scholars of Arabic literature that was studied and produced in central sudanic Africa was done by Hiskett. His point of departure was ‘Abdallāh dan Fodio’s *Ida’ al-nusūkh man akhadhtu ‘anhu min al-shuyūkh*, a list of what the erudite brother of ‘Uthmān dan Fodio had learned from his teachers (including ‘Uthmān), and thus of what was taught in the region.<sup>251</sup> Hiskett and A.D.H. Bivar then published a ‘provisional account’ of the Arabic literature of Nigeria based on other works of the Dan Fodio clan and on Aḥmad Bābā’s *Nayl al-ijtihād bi taṭrīz al-dībāj*. Shortly before the *ALA* volume on central sudanic Africa was published, one of the contributors, Bobboyi, also devoted a chapter of his dissertation to a detailed description of the organisation of learning and the curriculum of studies in the region.<sup>252</sup> Most recently, B. Hall and C. Stewart organised and analysed the West African Arabic Manuscript Database. From its 21,000 manuscript titles they distilled what they call the core curriculum of learning in all of west and central sudanic Africa between the beginning of the seventeenth and the end of the eighteenth centuries: a list of books of which they found at least four copies dispersed across three libraries in sudanic Africa.

All of these authors agree that the literature they reviewed demonstrates a predominant interest in texts from outside the region—especially by authors based in North Africa and Egypt—and from what they call the classical period: from the beginning of Islam until about 1500. The majority of books in African libraries, and all the titles in the ‘core curriculum’, are related to religion. Even in Timbuktu, the number of books about empirical sciences such as geography or mathematics was relatively small.

*Tafsīr* (explaining Qur’ān and ḥadīths) and ḥadīth were popular genres. A canonical work such as the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* by Jalāl al-Maḥallī (d. 1459) and Jalāl al-Suyūtī (d. 1505) was much quoted, as was al-Bukhārī’s (d. 870) *Jāmi‘at al-Saḥīḥ*, in the field of ḥadīth. More widespread were copies of the anthology of ḥadīths by al-Nawāwī (d. 1277), *Arba‘ūn ḥadīthan*. In theology the ‘creeds’ (*‘aqā’id*, sg. *‘aqīda*) by Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī dominated the field. His smaller (not the smallest) creed, *Al-‘aqīda al-ṣughra* or *Umm al-barāhīn*, was available in all the libraries in Hall and Stewart’s study.

In the West African libraries, legalistic works had pride of place. Among the books on religious observance, inheritance, marriage, governance and so on that were studied and quoted over generations, were the *Kitāb al-Shifā’* by the Almoravid qāḍī Iyāḍ (d. 1149), a number of basic works of Mālikī law, such as Mālik b. Anas’ *Muwaṭṭa’*, the *Mudawwana* by Saḥnūn (d. 854), al-Juwaynī’s (d. 1085) *Waraqāt* and the *Mukhtaṣar* by Khalīl b. Ishāq (d. 1374), along with commentaries on them, and works by al-Qarāfī (d. 1285) and al-Qurtūbī (d. 1172).

Corresponding with a relatively negative attitude in Maghribī Malikism towards kalām, logic and personal reflection (*ra’y*), one category is poorly represented in the collections: logic (*manṭiq*). Only libraries in Boutilimit and some other towns in today’s Mauritania include some texts on logic, but

<sup>250</sup> Hirschler 2012, 199.

<sup>251</sup> Hiskett 1957.

<sup>252</sup> Bobboyi 1992, chapter 3.

none are classified as such in other libraries in the West African Arabic Manuscript Database.<sup>253</sup> No copies of the books on logic by Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), Al-Fārābī (d. 950), Ibn Rushd or Najm al-Dīn al-Kātibī (d. 1276), some of the great Arabic philosophers who elaborated on Aristotelian thought, were found in any of these collections.<sup>254</sup>

Few of the aforementioned books were widely available. Several researchers have remarked that, especially in the eastern parts of the region, certainly in Bornu, many of even these classical works were known only via commentaries on them. This is true, for instance, of the *Muwatta* and of al-Tirmidhī's ḥadīths, al-Juwaynī's *Waraqāt* and al-Razī's *Al-maḥṣūl fī uṣūl al-fiqh*.<sup>255</sup> An incident that Heinrich Barth once witnessed illustrates the status of books as veritable treasures to the scholars who owned them. On one of his journeys, Barth came to a place on the river Benue where he wished to cross. On its bank he met a pilgrim who was returning from Mecca, with the books he had acquired in the illustrious cities across the desert. They boarded a pirogue together, and the boatman stowed the pilgrim's luggage on the bottom, in the back of the boat, where some water was standing. When the traveller realised this, it was already too late. The books were spoiled and the man shed bitter tears.<sup>256</sup>

Up until the sixteenth century the scale of book production in West Africa as a whole was modest, but it increased at the beginning of that century. The writings of a number of historians from Timbuktu stand out as examples.<sup>257</sup> For central sudanic Africa, the names of only a handful of scholars (some of them born in the Maghrib) who worked there before the sixteenth century survive, it was not until the end of the century that scholarship there picked up. From then on a lot of attention was devoted to educational texts (versifications, explanations and exhortations). Many fields of learning were touched upon, but here, too, *fiqh* and texts on worship predominated, thus filling a felt need on the part of new believers to know how to behave as Muslims. Numerous and voluminous commentaries were written on Khalīl's *Mukhtaṣar*, as well as countless smaller texts on family law, marriage and inheritance, on the things the Qur'ān forbids or allow, and on the application of *hudūd*, the punishments that are established in the Qur'ān for capital sins. Jurisprudence was predominantly from the Mālikī school—that is, of the Maghribī and sudanic versions of it. As mentioned, these differed from Malikism in the Middle East, in that it was rather averse to reason and personal reflection as sources of knowledge, very strict regarding the exclusive observance of the regulations and traditions of its own authorities, and much more austere than the Mashriqī version in matters of religious observance and social life.<sup>258</sup>

The West African Mālikī literature showed an increasing attention to Islamic rules of administration against the abuse of power and illegal taxation, for example. In time, the scholars' awareness of a gap between 'real' Islamic rules as they thought it should be and that of kings or sultans who took from the religion what suited them, became a leading theme. The best known example of works on this subject is perhaps 'Uthmān dan Fodio's *Kitāb al-farq*, one of the central texts in the social and political reform of the Fulani, which criticises practices of 'pagan' governments in the Hausa kingdoms and sets out the principles of Muslim governance and public expenditure.<sup>259</sup> An earlier example is *Shurb al-zulāl* ('a drink of sweet water'—that is, the water in heaven), a didactic *fiqh* poem from about a century

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<sup>254</sup> Logic, that is the forms of systematic reasoning the Muslims inherited from the Greek philosophers, and notably from Aristotle, often played an important role in the sciences of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, grammar and *kalām* in the Muslim world at large. Its influence may appear within such texts, and not from the titles. (See J. Walbridge, *God and Logic. The Caliphate of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 107-120.) Nevertheless, the scarcity of books on logic in West Africa, apart from the region of present-day Mauritania, is remarkable.

<sup>255</sup> Hall and Stewart 2011. Cf M. Last 2011.

<sup>256</sup> Barth 1857, II, 96, 170.

<sup>257</sup> For an interpretation of the flourishing of historical scholarship in the region soon after the collapse of Songhay, see P.F. de Moraes Farias, 'Intellectual innovation and reinvention of the Sahel: the seventeenth century Timbuktu chronicles.' In *The meanings of Timbuktu*. S. Jeppie and S. B. Diagne (eds.), Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008.

<sup>258</sup> Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 105-106.

<sup>259</sup> For an edition and translation, see Hiskett 1960.

earlier, in 1707, by Muḥammad b. al-Ḥajj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barnāwī (d. 1755), who was better known as al-Ḥajramī or shaykh Hajramī.<sup>260</sup> It first sets out the rules of Muslim life, with much emphasis on the dietary laws, and then criticises, mildly but in detail, all sorts of illegal appropriation, especially by authorities and traders, who were typically Muslims. *Shurb al-zulāl* was a much-copied text, which Hiskett regarded as one of the forerunners of the reformist movement of the nineteenth century.<sup>261</sup>

Searching for the motivations of the Sokoto jihād, not in social history, but in theological literature, Hiskett identified five themes that played a role in the writings (and sermons, no doubt) of reformers in the region, ever since the Almoravid movement of the eleventh century: the ‘disobedience’ (*al-mu‘āsī*) of Muslims who continued practices stemming from traditional religions or the mixing of pagan beliefs with Islam; the ‘venal ‘ulamā’ who accommodated mixed Islam and supported the illegitimate conduct of ‘Muslim’ rulers; the differentiation between true and false Muslims; the belief in the necessity of holy war against false Muslims; illegal taxation by Muslim rulers, and the belief that renewal (*tajdīd*) of religion is necessary.<sup>262</sup> These themes also occur in the correspondence of al-Suyūṭī and al-Maghīlī with the rulers of Songhay and Kano (see chapter 2). Al-Maghīlī’s letters were copied and over and over in Timbuktu and elsewhere, and still served as guidance to the leaders of the Sokoto revolution of 1800, which took place in what is now northern Nigeria.<sup>263</sup> By that time, many reformers had become quite outspoken in their condemnation of non-Islamic habits among Muslims and in their assertion of the need for stricter compliance with Muslim rules.

But perhaps the tradition was not as strong in Bornu as in more-westerly regions. Hall and Stewart remark that, because of the scarcity of books in central sudanic regions, there is a ‘distinct possibility that Islamic learning in the Central Sudan followed a slightly different (more original?) trajectory’ and they left it up to future research to shed more light on that trajectory.<sup>264</sup> I hope to show below that one of these themes is strongly present in al-Wālī’s work—that of distinguishing true from false Muslims. At the same time, the practices of mixed Islam and the compromising ‘ulamā’ seem to be present in the background to his work, but he does not address these issues explicitly; neither does he speak about matters of governance or *tajdīd*. His interests lie in the more theoretical questions of Muslim theology.

#### 4. Intellectual environment: themes

Al-Wālī lived in a time that western scholarship has long regarded as one of cultural stagnation and apathy among Arab-Muslim civilisations, after a period of decline that was supposed to have definitively set in in the thirteenth century (with the Mongolian invasion of the Abbasid empire) if not earlier. It has been seen as a time when men of letters composed anthologies, scholars wrote commentaries and compilations, and scarcely an original idea flowed from their pens. Even from a

<sup>260</sup> Little is known about al-Hajrami, but he seems to have been rather close to al-Wālī. There is some confusion about the question whether al-Hajrami is the same person as Abū Bakr al-Bārikum or al-Bākum (see Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 117). If he is, this means he would have studied with someone who may also have been one of al-Wālī’s teachers, shaykh al-Bakrī of Yandoto. Bobboyi recorded that al-Hajrami was also remembered as a pupil of Buba Njibima, like al-Wālī, although there is a difference in age between them of about a generation. Another difference is that while al-Wālī lived mostly in the village of Abgar, al-Hajrami held a central position in Bornu, as preacher (*khātib*) and imam of one of the Friday mosques in Gazargamo.

<sup>261</sup> Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 131. A translation of *Shurb al-zulāl* is included in their article.

<sup>262</sup> ‘Uthmān dan Fodio read this correspondence and made an excerpt from it. The term venal ‘ulamā’ (*‘ulamā’ al-sū’*) seems to have been coined by al-Maghīlī, and was on the lips of many by the end of the eighteenth century. See Hiskett 1962.

<sup>263</sup> Al-Maghīlī’s letter, quoted in ‘Uthmān dan Fodio’s *Tanbīh al-ikhwān*, was first translated by H.R. Palmer, in *Journal of the African Society*, XIII (1913-14): 407-414; XIV (1914-15): 53-9 and 185-192. In *īdā’ al-nusūkh man akhadhtu ‘anhu min al-shuyūkh* Abdallāh dan Fodio describes his education, and the list of books he read reflects the influence of Timbuktu. See M. Hiskett, ‘Material relating to the state of learning among the Fulani before their Jihad.’ *BSOAS*, XIX, 3 (1957): 550-578. 573.

<sup>264</sup> Hall and Stewart 2011, 146.

wider perspective, al-Wālī's age was part of what is usually called the 'early modern' or 'pre-modern' period, which historians have mostly described as a period that lay in wait for the radical changes that were to culminate in modern society, with its worldwide exchange of goods, dependence on fossil fuels, and a worldview in which 'religion is a lifestyle choice, not an inescapable and uniform discipline'.<sup>265</sup> A growing number of researchers in the field of Muslim culture now take a different view, arguing that intellectual debate was not suppressed or at a standstill and that commentaries or anthologies were not signs of a moribund culture but products of creativity with different building blocks from those we are now used to seeing.<sup>266</sup>

One of the views that has been adapted has to do with the debate among Muslim theologians on *taqlīd* versus *ijtihād*—that is, on the 'blind acceptance' of religious truths or of the authority of the great interpreters of divine law from the past versus the exertion of maximum mental effort in search of a legal opinion independent of centuries of exegesis and possible human error. It was argued in the first half of the twentieth century that in the thirteenth or fourteenth century 'the doors of *ijtihād*' were 'officially' closed by religious authorities, and that this was generally accepted. Recent studies, however, have demonstrated that this was never the case, and that the traditions of both *ijtihād* and *taqlīd* have continued throughout Muslim history, not as exclusive modes, but rather as competing hegemonies.<sup>267</sup>

It is possible that our understanding of both *taqlīd* and *ijtihād* has been warped by the representations of theologians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as 'Abd al-Wahhāb, who renewed the call for *ijtihād*. They emphasised reason as the means to get closer to the religious truth, and therefore their views are often supposed to be 'rationalist' or 'modernist', even though they tended to go hand in hand with a radically scripturalist and anti-scholastic stance. To sustain their call for *ijtihād*, they represented the theologians of the period before them as unthinking imitators, and perhaps it is true that their view, which saw stagnancy in the intellectual climate preceding their time, has been too uncritically adopted by modern scholars.<sup>268</sup> In reality, however, while in Europe rationalism reigned supreme and formed the basis for its Scientific Revolution, in the Muslim world, too, rational sciences such as logic and grammar, and the trend of verification through detailed logical analysis of received scholarly opinions were becoming increasingly popular.

For al-Wālī too, reason was an important theme, and he often invoked the 'reasoning' person as the yard-stick for any argument. What did 'reason' mean in pre-modern Islam? Obviously, it was unlike the Enlightenment idea of substituting individual thought for inherited religious authority, but as a principle reason and rationality in the service of a non-rational revealed code, the Sharī'a, was central to Islamic intellectual life, argues J. Walbridge, who traces the use and understanding of reason in the main currents of pre-modern Islamic thought. As a working definition, he characterises reason as 'the systematic and controlling use of beliefs, arguments, or actions based on well-grounded premises and valid arguments such that another person who has access to the same information and can understand the argument correctly ought to agree that the premises are well-grounded, that the logic is sound, and that the resultant beliefs, arguments, or actions are correct.'<sup>269</sup> As in European scholasticism, then, reason was applied to expound revelation as the ultimate source of authority, sometimes in the service of theology, sometimes equal to it. For some philosophers and theologians (Ibn Sīna is one of the most

<sup>265</sup> J.A. Goldstone, 'The Problem of the 'Early Modern' World.' In *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, 3 (1998), 249-284. 249.

<sup>266</sup> E.g. R. Wisnowsky, 'The nature and scope of Arabic philosophical commentary in post-classical (ca 1100-1900 AD) Islamic intellectual history: some preliminary observations.' In *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 47, S 83, part 2 (2004), 149-191; B. Orfali, 'A Sketch Map of Arabic Poetry Anthologies up to the Fall of Baghdad.' In *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43 (2012), 29-59.

<sup>267</sup> See notably W. al-Hallaq, 'Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed? In *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 16, 1 (1984), 3-41.; R. Peters, 'Idjtiḥād and taqlīd in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Islam.' In *Die Welt des Islams*, 20, 3/4, (1980), 131-145. J. Voll, 'Muḥammad Ḥayyā al-Sindī and Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb: an analysis of an intellectual group in eighteenth-century Madīna.' In *BSOAS*, 38, 1 (1975), 32-39;

<sup>268</sup> As K. El-Rouayheb argues in his article, 'Opening the Gate of Verification: the Forgotten Arab-Islamic Florescence of the seventeenth Century.' In *Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38 (2006), 263-281.

<sup>269</sup> J. Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam. The Caliphate of Reason*. Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press 2013, 16.

outspoken examples), God was the ultimate intellect and therefore also must be knowable by reason. In all periods and currents, reason was strongly present especially in the sciences of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, grammar and *kalām*. However, as in European philosophy, *kalām* or scholasticism was in time being pushed too far, in the eyes of opponents, who felt that it decayed when the means of casuistic logical reasoning came to obscure the end. Reactions to it were framed as revivalism—that is, as a call to return to the scriptures.

The themes of reason, mysticism and revelation as mutually complementary but distinct sources of knowledge, and of verification and *ijtihād* as opposed to *taqlīd*—coincide with major elements of al-Wālī's thought. Before we turn to his work, I will introduce them below, emphasising the perspective of Ash'arism and, more specifically, views from al-Sanūsī, who was one of the pillars of this school in West and central sudanic Africa.

### *Source of knowledge*

An issue that has pervaded Muslim theology since Greek philosophy was introduced into it in the ninth century, was that of the sources of knowledge. The debate on the question pitted traditionalists against rationalists—that is, those who relied primarily on the transmission (*naql*) of divine revelation against those who relied primarily on reason ('*aql*').<sup>270</sup> For traditionalists, the principal source of knowledge of God's truth, apart from the Qur'ān, lies in the 'traditions' or ḥadīths that record the words and deeds (the *sunna*) of the prophet Muḥammad and his earliest followers, and in the consensus of the community of early scholars. They are the *ahl al-sunna wa l-jamā'a*. For rationalists, reason was never the sole authority in the attainment of religious truth, but they did regard it as indispensable (notably in matters on which the Qur'ān and the sunna are silent) and ultimately as superior to tradition. Some argued that the Qur'ān and the sunna often seem to contradict each other, so that reliance on them as the leading principle in the religious sciences gave rise too easily to conflict. A more fundamental argument was that God cannot be known intuitively or by the senses, but that only speculative reason can lead to knowledge of Him, and that it is therefore the first duty of the believer.

Speculative theology, *kalām*, was the stronghold of the rationalists. Its stock in trade was to provide logical proof for what was believed as a matter of faith, in the first place that God is One. Its practitioners, the *mutakallimūn*, found most freedom in thinking about issues that were not touched upon by revelation or sunna, such as God's essence and his attributes. The tools and terminology of their thoughts on the subject were to a large extent derived from the source that has directed generations of thinkers around the Mediterranean—that is, the philosophy of Aristotle, notably his metaphysics and his logic. From this tradition, which was perpetuated by philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), we have such ideas as the distinction between substance (that is, what can be or what can exist in different forms; *dhāt* in Arabic) as the basis of changing matter, and the contingent, the 'accidental' or changing matter itself ('*araḍ*'). The Arabic philosophers also adopted and elaborated on the distinction between, on the one hand, perception, which is not independent of an object—that is, of external matter—and, on the other, the perception of the soul or intellect, which can reach the pure form of things without the help of an image or some other phenomenon based in materiality. And they wholeheartedly adopted Aristotle's concepts and technical terms of logic, such as the syllogism and its conclusion, negation and affirmation, and the three logical options of necessity, impossibility and contingency.<sup>271</sup> Examples of this influence will be recognised in the work

<sup>270</sup> A most interesting discussion of the opposition between traditionalists and rationalists is that by G. Makdisi, who describes it as a discussion between scholasticism and humanism. G. Makdisi, 1990. See also R.M. Frank, *Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism in Medieval Islam. Texts and Studies on the Development of Kalam*, Vol. I. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2005; R.C. Martin and M.R. Woodward, *Defenders of Reason in Islam. Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997.

<sup>271</sup> D. Black, 'Psychology: soul and intellect' in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*. P. Adamson and R.C. Taylor (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. R. Smith, 'Logic' in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, J. Barnes (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.



of al-Sanūsī, which we will look at in the next chapter. The theological school that relied most exclusively on reason was that of the Mu‘tazilis, but a good measure of rationalism was also characteristic of the Ash‘aris and the Māturīdis.<sup>272</sup> The Māturīdis were never as influential as the former, but they are mentioned here because, as we saw in the previous chapter, al-Wālī is thought to have considered the main differences between their school and his.

The Mu‘tazilis and the Māturīdis shared the view that, ultimately, we must believe in God because reason forces us to—that one cannot have faith without the use of reason. In order to acquire knowledge about God, man was considered capable of rational speculation, based on reason and evidence, and independently of revelations or prophets. This stance was criticised by traditionalist as well as Ash‘arī theologians, both of whom said that we must believe in God, not because reason forces us to, but because it is written.

Related to the preference for ‘*aql* or ‘*naql* is the question of where knowledge is situated or produced. An interpretation that was commonly accepted in Ash‘arism was first formulated by the Mālikī Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013). He saw knowledge as existing in two forms: the uncreated knowledge of God and the created knowledge of man. The knowledge of man is again divided in two sorts, in necessary or intuitive (*darūrī*) knowledge and speculative or reflective (*nazarī*) knowledge. The former is knowledge that we cannot doubt, such as the fact that a body is impenetrable, to give an example that al-Wālī also uses (see next chapter). Speculative knowledge is, for instance, the knowledge that God is eternal. It depends on the understanding of logical proof.

The discussion among philosophical theologians was about the relation between this speculative knowledge and the object speculated about, or the truth. Does reflection or speculation enable us to grasp knowledge or truth that already exists, or does it generate knowledge? Here Ash‘aris and Mu‘tazilis had different opinions. Many among the former maintained that all knowledge was created by God in the world and in men, even if He created some of it only after man has engaged in speculation, in the way He creates a child after a coition.<sup>273</sup> In the Ash‘arī epistemology, reflection leads to knowledge—sound or unsound, depending on the soundness of the reflection itself—but it does not generate it. The Mu‘tazila (and the Māturīdiya) view was that rational speculation generates knowledge.<sup>274</sup>

A preference for either ‘*aql* or ‘*naql* also led to different points of view on issues such as God’s essence and His attributes, or free will versus predestination, or God’s omnipotence and natural laws. And long after Ash‘arism had become the dominant creed in Sunni Islam, the need its adherents felt to counter Mu‘tazila opinions on these matters barely subsided, if at all. Some of al-Wālī’s heroes, such as Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 1490) and Ibrahīm al-Laḡānī (d. 1631), rarely missed an opportunity to explain why Mu‘tazilism was wrong. And remarkably, al-Wālī never repeated their criticism.

Heading the list of issues of contention between the two schools was the ontological status of God’s essence or self (*dhāt*) and of his attributes (*ṣifāt*)—that is, the question of how God existed, and how, being One, He related to his multiple attributes.<sup>275</sup> In the Qur’ān, God is described as powerful,

<sup>272</sup> The founder of the Ash‘arī school himself, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 936) had a Mu‘tazilī background. He came to consider its theology as too abstract, too separate from the holy sources and too much removed from what ordinary believers could comprehend. He developed his own theological system to reconcile rationalism with more literalist, or scripturalist views. Soon after its genesis, Ash‘arism entered into a relation with the Shāfi‘ī madhab, because, as G. Makdisi argues, it was at the time the least unsuitable way for Ash‘arism to be accepted as a theological school of thought. Shāfi‘ism however was staunchly traditionalist, and Ash‘arism adapted to some of its stances, giving historians the impression of a double ‘face’. Ash‘arism’s most ordinary view on the method to obtain religious knowledge, expressed by al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), was that traditionalism and rationalism were both valid methods, to be used for the study of different issues, or complementary.

<sup>273</sup> J. van Ess, ‘The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology’ in *Islamic Philosophy and Theology. Vol II Revelation and Reason*. London: Routledge, 2007, 31-55. 42-43.

<sup>274</sup> Rosenthal 2007, 209-218.

<sup>275</sup> A good overview of such issues can be found in the introduction and notes to Al-Sanūsī’s *Muqaddima* in J.-D. Luciani, *Les prolégomènes théologiques de Senoussi. Texte arabe et traduction française par J.D. Luciani*. Alger: Imprimerie Orientale Pierre Fontana, 1908.

knowing, willing and so on, as well as sitting on a throne, for instance. These can be considered as some of His attributes. For pure traditionalists, observance of the revelation meant that such Quranical assertions must be accepted without searching for ‘hidden’ meanings (*ta’wīl*), because God had nowhere called for such a search. Mu‘tazilis, on the other hand, argued that God does not ‘sit’ or possess any other of these attributes in the way a human being can possess them, and that it is almost heretic to believe otherwise, because it implies *tashbīh* (resemblance)—that is, an anthropomorphic conception of God. To avoid that, their doctrine held that His sitting is a metaphor and that He is knowing ‘by a knowledge that is He’, powerful ‘by a power that is He’, and so on. But here, they soon realised, there lurked another problem. If God’s existence lies in these various aspects, that opens the door to perceiving Him as multiple, instead of One. Therefore, as early as the ninth century the idea was reformulated and now stated that God is knowing because of His essence. The same was true of His living, His existence and His power—the attributes of essence (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*), which were distinguished from attributes of act (*ṣifāt al-fi‘l*, hearing, seeing, and so on). Eventually they denied that God has knowledge and power as substantive attributes at all.

For leading Ash‘aris, this view strayed too far from what is written about God in the Qur’ān. As always seeking the middle ground between extreme rationalism and obscurantist traditionalism, they held onto all the attributes (He has power *and* is powerful, is knowing *and* has knowledge, and so on) and maintained that God’s essence is one, but that His attributes are multiple, even unlimited. They saw no contradiction between God’s oneness and His multiple attributes, because attributes in general were characteristics that are within the being it qualifies. They defined eight of the divine attributes: power, knowledge, life, will, hearing, sight, speech and everlastingness—all substantives that exist within God’s essence.<sup>276</sup>

Ibn Sīna found another way out of the struggle with an essence that is one and multiple at the same time: he introduced the further distinction between (God’s) essence and existence, between necessary and possible existence, and between ‘the necessity of existence in itself’ and the ‘necessity of existence through another’. These distinctions were all eagerly taken up by thinkers such as al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209).<sup>277</sup> Al-Juwaynī and al-Ghazālī elaborated a subdivision of real or substantive attributes (*ṣifāt al-ma‘ānī* or *ṣifāt nafsīya*) and ideal attributes (*ṣifāt al-ma‘nawīya*). God has power (a real attribute) and can also be characterised by words meaning that He is powerful, knowing, living, willing, hearing, seeking and eternal (ideal attributes). These are not essential to God but have significance only in relation to an object. For instance, God has knowledge, but He is knowing only where there is an object to know of. This classification of essential and qualitative attributes was taken up by Ash‘arism.<sup>278</sup> It was a central part of the doctrine in West Africa of God’s attributes, which had spread there through the creeds in which al-Sanūsī had formulated it.<sup>279</sup> One of the objections of the traditionalists against this type of *kalām* and against *ta’wīl* and the

<sup>276</sup> Some Ash‘aris not only turned against the Mu‘tazili view on the divine attributes, but also against their intellectualism in general. R. Bulliet notes that one strand of Ash‘arism ‘simplified its tenets and grew into a real popular movement’, serving the needs of the simple faith of the masses. Another aspect of this position was that Ash‘arism emphasised God’s close guidance of human affairs, where Mu‘tazilism stressed the individuals responsibility. (Bulliet 1979, 60.)

<sup>277</sup> For a short discussion of the role of especially Ibn Sīna’s logic and metaphysics in theological commentaries, see R. Wisnowsky 2004.

<sup>278</sup> In time, the number of divine attributes that were described, increased. After al-Ghazālī had formulated that God’s attributes are all pre-eternal (*qadīma*) as well as subsistent (*qā’ima*), subsistence and pre-eternity were added to the list of substantive attributes in al-Sanūsī’s creeds, bringing it to ten. Completed with their qualitative pendants, the total number is then twenty. Al-Wālī also counts twenty attributes, but the twentieth century Malian theologian Tierno Bokar mentions twenty five. See Brenner 1984.

<sup>279</sup> Al-Sanūsī diverged from the most ordinary Ash‘ari doctrine on one point, notably the question whether God’s existence is equal to His substance, as Ash‘arism had it, or an essential attribute. Al-Sanūsī chose the latter. To him, existence was the modality (*ḥāl*) that necessarily belongs to a substance as long as the substance exists, and this modality is independent of another cause. This is how al-Sanūsī, following Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, formulates it in his own comment to the ‘*Aqīda al-ṣughra*’ and how al-Wālī repeats it (Hunwick 178, f 18), but it can be said simpler: existence is the attribute without which a substance would not exist. God is a substance which does not depend on any other substance, or substratum (*mukhaṣṣis*), that defines Him or grants Him existence. See G. Delphin, ‘La philosophie du cheikh Senoussi’ in: *Journal Asiatique* 1 (1897), 356-370.

preference of reason over revelation in general was that it easily leads to anathematising ordinary people (*takfīr al-‘awāmm*), who, without specialist theological training, would hardly understand the theology based on it.

### Causality

An important matter that Ash‘aris, including al-Sanūsī, kept debating with the Mu‘tazilis in particular was the extent of—or, rather, the limits to—man’s own will in view of God’s omnipotence. Does man have a free will, and is there any causality invested in him that is outside God? No, said the most orthodox traditionalists and determinists (called Jabriyya by their opponents): there is no other power or cause than God himself. God is the ultimate cause of everything, and all of creation depends on His will to produce any effect. This is, indeed, the proof of His existence, for God’s will depends on His knowing the effect of it, and both His will and his knowledge depend on His Living. Therefore God lives.

Yes, said the Mu‘tazilis and other believers in man’s free will (so-called Qadaris, derived from *qadar*, free will): man does make certain choices of his own, through a power that God has created in him. How else could he be held responsible for his sins? Not everything is predetermined by God. If someone were predetermined to be an unbeliever, how could God punish him for that? It would mean either that God was unjust in relation to the absolute ethical principles of good and bad, which the Mu‘tazilis believed existed, or that He would act arbitrarily. And in the end, God’s justice (*‘adl*) mattered more to the Mu‘tazilis than His omnipotence did—something the Ash‘aris deeply resented. That God was not the sole cause of everything could also be observed in nature, where natural laws rule processes of cause and effect, such as fire and burning. These processes are apparently, said the Mu‘tazilis, caused by forces outside God.

Ash‘aris, who disagreed with the extreme fatalism they called Jabriyya, also opposed this view of the Mu‘tazilis, who, they argued, made a logical mistake, because what they observed or experienced in nature were not natural causes and effects, but the incidental co-occurrence of two events ‘willed’ by God each time. They came up with a solution in between determinism and free will, between God as the only cause and man’s responsibility for his sins. This lay in the concept of *kasb* or acquisition, which states that the moment a human being does something that God has pre-ordained, he appropriates (*kasaba*) the value of that act and assumes responsibility for it.

The discussion about causality as experienced in the natural world was carried on for centuries and often revolved around the example of the ‘fiery furnace’. It would be too much of a distraction to go into it in detail here—after all, al-Wālī’s *The peerless method* does not accord nearly as much importance to causality as al-Sanūsī did—were it not for the fact that the example resonates with an anecdote in the preface to *The peerless method*. An explanation is therefore in place. The story of the ‘fiery furnace’ clarified the central issue—the amount of agency accorded variously to God, man and nature—by asking whether it is possible that a prophet, if he were thrown into a fiery furnace, would *not* burn. ‘Philosophers’, as al-Ghazālī calls the pure rationalists in his discussion of the question, maintained that this is never possible. Ash‘aris were certain that it is possible, because the effect of fire that we usually observe to coincide with it is not necessary, but depends on God’s will.<sup>280</sup> Al-Sanūsī used a simple example to explain the idea. He said that the relation between putting food on a fire and its getting cooked is coincidental every time—that is, that it is willed by God.<sup>281</sup> The link to an anecdote about al-Sanūsī, which was told in his hometown and which comes up again in the preface to *The peerless method*, cannot be missed.<sup>282</sup> It is about a man who had just bought some meat in the market, which he wanted to eat the same evening. On his way home, he heard the call to prayer and

<sup>280</sup> Al-Ghazālī refined this view, in *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, by saying that God has initially ordained burning to always be an effect of fire, but since He has the ability to interdict any rule, He can indeed do so on special occasions.

<sup>281</sup> Luciani 1908 (*Muqaddima*), 34-35 and 92-93.

<sup>282</sup> Muḥammad Ibn M. Ibn Maryam, *Al-Bustān fī ḍikr al-Awliyā’ wa-l-‘ulamā bi-Tilimsān*. Algiers, 1908.

stopped to enter the mosque from which it came, where al-Sanūsī happened to be the imam. When he came home, he put his meat on the fire, but it did not cook, even after hours. Puzzled, the man went to al-Sanūsī the next day, and asked him if there was an explanation. Perhaps, said the saint, this meat was present where I prayed? For all who pray behind me are protected from fire (*nār*, also the word for hell), and it will not affect them.<sup>283</sup> It is a beautiful translation of a philosophical point of view into a popular tale.

### *Faith and taqlīd*

Throughout the history of Islam, theologians have debated what faith (*īmān*) consists of. A fundamental view they have shared was that faith is not a matter of ‘believing’ in the sense of thinking (*ẓanna*) without knowing for sure, but of totally accepting (*taṣdīq*) the truth of God and revelation. In this view, the intellectual challenge is to determine exactly how man related to that truth, and what the character of his knowledge of it was.<sup>284</sup> Widely shared among theological schools, too, was the notion that faith consists of three parts: internal conviction (*i’tiqād*), verbal expression (*iqrār bi’l-lisān* or *bī l-qawl* of the *shahāda* in the first place), and prescribed works or deeds (*‘amal*), with different schools emphasising different parts.

Conviction was understood in turn as knowing, based on understanding, about religious principles; the extent to which God Himself can be known was another discussion). The positions regarding the acquisition of knowledge oscillated between two extremes: on the one hand, traditionalists believed that religious knowledge comes only from revelation. For rationalists, the only knowledge that counted as the basis for *taṣdīq* was knowledge obtained through the rational consideration (*naẓar*) of evidence (*adilla* or *barāhīn*) by means of arguments offered by the ‘ulamā’.<sup>285</sup> Just parroting the religious tenets and theological terms was not enough—that was considered to be *taqlīd*: imitation or ‘blind acceptance’ as it is often translated. The risk of *taqlīd* was that it implied a lack of conviction and could make faith unstable.

In the early history of Islam, the fiercest opposition to *taqlīd* in the matter of faith—*taqlīd al-īmān*—came from the Mu’tazilis, who accused the *muqallid* of sinning (*fasaqa*)—although not of unbelief.<sup>286</sup> In a reaction to this verdict, al-Ash‘arī had been one of the most influential advocates of moderation regarding the weakness of imitation. His view, that rational consideration was one of the sources of religious knowledge but not the only one, was adopted by the school that developed in his name. Later, al-Juwaynī and his pupil al-Ghazālī agreed that the fundamental issue was the stability of faith. A deep understanding of the principles of faith was certainly conducive to true and stable faith, they argued, but they also believed that this could be reached by means of *taqlīd*. Al-Ghazālī went so far as to say that the faith of most Muslims, even that of most ‘ulamā’, was in fact based on *taqlīd*. Only very few understood all the theological knowledge and could be said to have real knowledge, independently of the great scholars from Islam’s formative period. The imperfect understanding of most scholars was basically ignorance as well, although at a different level from the simple ignorance of ordinary people. At the same time, common people and *muqallidūn* were almost synonymous in his discourse. Al-Ghazālī paid much attention to the social circumstances in which people came to the Muslim faith, and to the influence on the stability of a believer’s faith of people whom he admires, trusts or distrusts.<sup>287</sup> If the social environment did not inspire doubt in the ordinary believer, his faith could be as stable as anyone’s. On the other hand, going along with others could be positive if the others were good

<sup>283</sup> In his great study of Sufism in Africa in the time of Ibrahim Niasse, Rüdiger Seesemann interprets the same anecdote in a very different way, as a metaphor for the transformation of the soul for which the ṣūfī strives, while his body remains unchanged. As metaphors go, it is well possible that it has this meaning too, without contradicting my interpretation. See R. Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a twentieth century Sufi revival*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; 225.

<sup>284</sup> W.F. Smith, *Faith and belief: the difference between them*. Oxford: One World, 1998. Chapter 3.

<sup>285</sup> Frank 2005, Vol. I, X, 208.

<sup>286</sup> Van Ess, vol IV, 671 ff.

<sup>287</sup> Frank 2005, Vol. I X, 230 ff.

believers. In the eyes of al-Ghazālī, accusing common believers of a defective faith just because they ‘accepted’ certain tenets, could lead to *takfīr al-‘awāmm*, unjust anathemising of ordinary believers. He accused a certain class of theologians of making this mistake, who ‘make paradise depend on the custody of the *mutakallimūn*’.<sup>288</sup> Of course al-Ghazālī is well known for his moderation. But if we take the opinion of someone of a reputedly stern inclination, such as Ibn Taymiyya, we see that it was the same on this issue. Many people were simply incapable of understanding the details of theological principles, he wrote, and that this did not make them unbelievers.<sup>289</sup>

*Taqlīd al-īmān* is sometimes explicitly distinguished from *taqlīd fī l-madhhab* or *taqlīd fī l-fiqh*, which was in general understood as ‘accepting an opinion concerning a legal rule without knowledge of its bases’.<sup>290</sup> This form of acceptance had long been the preferred or even the prescribed attitude for laymen as well as scholars. It was, for the famous jurist al-Qarāfī, for instance, what held a legal school together.<sup>291</sup> The discussion in this case was, on the one hand, about whether one could follow an imām in matters that fall outside his jurisdiction as well as outside the perimeters of the *madhhab*, and whether one could in such cases follow one’s own judgment in the effort to derive opinions concerning a legal rule from the fundamentals of the law. On the other hand, theologians attempted to define what conditions a *mujtahid* had to fulfil in order to make independent decisions about legal principles. After centuries of discussion, the interpretation of the notion of *taqlīd* changed. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fundamentalist views gained ground, and it was argued that even the opinions of the founders of the legal schools, humans like anyone else, were liable to error. Therefore believers had to go back directly to the Qur’ān and the Sunna as their sources, and exert *ijtihād*, using their intellect, to understand the rules they found there.

## 5. Conclusion

In al-Wālī’s time, various models were in force and still developing, to which the specialist of Muslim learning could choose to conform, and which in turn would shape his functioning and his values. They varied from the ‘*ālim* to the storyteller, from the *mutakallim* to the *faqīr*, from those most oriented towards the scholarly standards of sunni Islam as formulated in the historic heartlands of Islam, to the popular religious practitioners, who combined with Islam elements from the roles of traditional priests or diviners. Al-Wālī operated on the most learned end of this spectrum. However, partly as a result of the expansion of Islam to rural areas, these models of scholarship were adrift. Learned scholars tended to regard popular mallams as ‘bad’, West African Malikism was wary of *mutakallimūn* who indulged too much in logic, and some ṣūfīs claimed that they could do without intellectual learning or scholarship anyway. This leads to the hypothesis that, in this period, the authority of ‘ulamā’ as men of undoubted moral standing who possessed unique religious knowledge, was challenged, and that this in turn forced those of a scholarly, ‘book-learning’ orientation to renegotiate their role and their authority.

A further hypothesis following on from this is that al-Wālī’s prestige was partly built on his having an answer to the question of how to go about it. Apparently, he struck the right chord in negotiating between changing demands from believers, on the one hand, and, on the other, views on religious learning and authority. In the following chapters I will investigate how he did this.

As mentioned, *kalām* was not popular in the Mālikī tradition that had developed in West Africa. This tradition was more concerned with the social aspects of Islamic law, and its scholars were growing particularly attentive to the gap between the ideal of Islamic governance and the practice of Muslim rulers—an attentiveness that would lead to the politico-religious reforms of the eighteenth and early

<sup>288</sup> Rasā’il al-Ghazālī 140/3, [www.alhadeeth.com](http://www.alhadeeth.com).

<sup>289</sup> I thank dr. U. Ryad for pointing this out to me, and referring to Th. ‘A. al-Hallāq, ‘Dawābiṭ al-takfīr fī l-fikr al-islāmī’ in *Majla jāmi‘at Damashq li ‘ulūm al-iqtisādiyya wa l-qānūniyya* 28/1 (2012): 431-460; 432-35.

<sup>290</sup> Peters 1980, 135.

<sup>291</sup> S.A. Jackson, *Islamic Law and the State: the constitutional jurisprudence of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī*. Leiden: Brill, 1996. 139.

nineteenth centuries. Al-Wālī, however, did regard himself as a *mutakallim*, and indeed had somewhat different interests. The last part of this chapter has focussed on some of the matters that were discussed in theology, notably among Ash‘aris in North Africa and the Middle East. The themes of knowledge, causality and *taqlīd* were selected to form the background of al-Wālī’s own views, which will appear from an analysis of his major works in the next chapters.

## *Method and message*

At this point we can take up the question to be answered in the next three chapters, namely, how al-Wālī fashioned himself as a scholar and made his work significant for his environment. As a first step, this chapter will present an analysis of the most important pillar of his reputation, *The peerless method for understanding the science of theology* (*Al-manhaj al-farīd fī ma'rifat 'ilm al-tawhīd*). This text has been highly regarded in more quarters than any of the other texts that bear his name, both in his own time and later. Thirty-two copies of it are still extant. Most of them are kept in libraries in Nigeria, while some are in Niger, Ghana, and Mali. A number of copies that were collected in Segou are now in Paris.<sup>292</sup> The fact that *The peerless method* (and al-Wālī's own versified abridgement, *Sweet water source of the inmost attributes of the Lord*) has been passed on and preserved so often demonstrates that it has answered the needs of audiences that have discussed, appraised, and cited it.

The origin of the text—of which al-Wālī was not the sole author—is complex, and this makes it a rich source of information. In the first place, it is a text that is situated in the heart of the field of Ash'arī theology, or more specifically *tawhīd*, the science of God's oneness.

Secondly, *The peerless method* is a commentary on a canonical text, the '*Aqīda al-ṣughra* or 'small creed', (hereinafter 'the *Ṣughra*'), by the North African theologian al-Sanūsī. Composing a commentary is a specific way of translating and passing on selected knowledge from one environment to another. In general, commenting concerns knowledge with authority, which is deemed important as a point of reference in the social or intellectual life of the commentator. It is about the explanation and interpretation of canonical texts (or music or painting) in terms of the specific culture of a different time, place, ethnic background or class; about linking canon to cultural identity. As such, commentaries say as much about the culture of the interpreters as about the interpreted text. In an exceptional essay on the genre of commentary writing, A. Hughes argues that, while negotiating between two worlds, interpretations of canonical religious texts present an authoritative view of the basic values of the community for which they are written; they are intended to be normative for a new community which they provide with their own code and legitimacy. In the relation between canonical text and commentary, the former facilitates the latter. 'Commentary may think *with* the text it interprets; it is almost never *about* it.'<sup>293</sup> The aim, then, of this chapter is to uncover what *The peerless method* really is about, and how it links canon to the cultural and political environment of central sudanic Africa in the seventeenth century. It will allow us, in chapter 7, to discuss al-Wālī's relation as an author to this message of *The peerless method*.

Thirdly, this commentary stems from a Fulfulde oral tradition of teaching Islam, which was based on al-Sanūsī's *Ṣughra* and had existed since the sixteenth century, and which al-Wālī claims to have only translated. In the nineteenth century this tradition was known as the *kabbe*, a name which, for convenience, will also be used here, although it is certain neither whether the term was used in the seventeenth century, nor to what extent today's *kabbe* versions correspond with the earliest forms. The composers of predecessors of *The peerless method* are anonymous, but the reader must be warned that I will often speak in the plural of the *authors* of *The peerless method*.

The method in this chapter is twofold. First it will analyse the relation between *The peerless method* and the traditions on which it is based. It will then explore the meaning and intention of the resulting

<sup>292</sup> ALA II, 35, 36.

<sup>293</sup> A. Hughes, 'Presenting the Past: the Genre of Commentary in Theoretical Perspective', in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 15 (2003), 164-165.

text. A close comparison of *The peerless method* with the *Ṣughra* on the one hand and with what we know of the *kabbe* tradition on the other, will reveal the choices that were made, and the ideas that were either adopted or left out. The adaptations will uncover motivations that were relevant to the cultural, social and historical environment of seventeenth-century central sudanic Africa.

For the present study, I used copies of four manuscripts. I closely studied manuscript Hunwick 178 (kept at NU) and another that is kept in the library at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, catalogue number 48.<sup>294</sup> I later compared these with two manuscripts from the Segou collection in Paris, numbers 5650 and 5541. Mistakes that were made in copying both Hunwick 178 and the Ibadan manuscript suggest a direct relation between these two. In both versions the number of mistakes (not always the same ones) increases towards the end. Both copyists seemed to become less and less captivated by the text as it became more repetitive. Although Hunwick 178 has more mistakes than Ibadan 48, my references are to the former, because this copy is more easily available, and its handwriting is in general clear. The manuscript is not an original but a photocopy. References are to numbers I gave the photocopied pages, starting with 1 where the text starts with the *basmallah*, and ending with 57.

## 1. Roots: al-Sanūsī's *Ṣughra*

In al-Wālī's lifetime al-Sanūsī's *Al-‘aqīda al-ṣughra* had been a canonical text in North and West Africa for quite a while: very soon after it was written, the West African Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥawḍī (d.1505) produced a versification, copies of which are now in libraries in Boutilimit, Segou and Timbuktu.<sup>295</sup> A few decades later, one of the most respected scholars of Timbuktu, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr b. Baghayogho al-Wangarī (1523—1594), made another versification,<sup>296</sup> and dozens of copies of the *Ṣughra* itself were found in almost all of the West African collections. In the nineteenth century, commentaries and versifications were also made in other languages, such as Hausa, and numerous commentaries written in the Mashriq.<sup>297</sup>

Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī was born in 1428 near Tlemcen, a town in the mountains in today's Algeria, which had been one of the main cultural centres of the Maghrib since many centuries. He died there in 1486. He wrote about law, algebra and medicine, but was most famous, perhaps even during his own life-time and certainly soon afterwards, for his ‘creeds’, the *‘Aqīda al-kubra* (or *‘Aqīdat ahl al-tawḥīd wal-tasdīd al-mukhrija min ḡulamāt al-jahl wa-raḡbat al-taqlīd*), the *‘Aqīda al-wusta* (also called *Al-jumal* or *al-murshida*), and the *‘Aqīda ahl al-tawḥīd al-ṣughra*, which is also called *Al-ṣughra* or *Al-Sanūsīyya* or *Umm al-barāhīn* (‘Source of proofs’). They are all similar in content, treating the same theme of the Ash‘ari doctrine on the attributes of God and of the prophets. The *Ṣughra*, as it is referred to in *The peerless method*, is elementary, while the longer texts, including a separate ‘introduction’ and commentary by al-Sanūsī (*al-muqaddima*), discuss more topics more extensively and polemically, criticising Christian, Mu‘tazili, and other points of view. All these texts have played an essential role in teaching theology in North and West Africa (as well as in Egypt and Asia) up to the twentieth century, but the *Ṣughra* was and is by far the most popular and the

<sup>294</sup> My copy bears two numbers: 82 and 48.

<sup>295</sup> *Wāsiyat al-sulūk*. Hall & Stewart 2011, 170; GAL S II, 355.

<sup>296</sup> For the author see ALA IV, 33. Ms Arabe 5484 (Paris) was consulted.

<sup>297</sup> Hall & Stewart 2011, p. 137; See also A. Berbrugger, ‘Abd Allah Teurdjman, renégat de Tunis en 1388.’ In *Revue Africaine* 5 (1861), 262; Hiskett (1975, 68, 69) writes about a poem in Hausa that shows much similarity with the *Ṣughra*. I found two short poems (in Arabic) that resemble the *Ṣughra* or *The peerless method* in Chad, copies of which are kept in the library of Leiden University. For comments from the Mashriq see GAL II, 250.



most highly respected.<sup>298</sup> In *The peerless method* it is presented as a text that al-Sanūsī found on the ‘preserved tablet’ (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) that is believed to contain all books of the Revelation.<sup>299</sup>

Al-Sanūsī’s theological work was that of a scholastic, a master of *kalām*. It deals with God’s ontology from an axiomatic point of view, from where His attributes are deduced. From there the logical implications for the relation between God and man are deduced. Al-Sanūsī’s thought is permeated with the terms and concepts of Aristotelian logic, usually designated by the Arabic term *manṭiq*. His ‘proofs’ are indeed *barāhīn* (sg *burhān*): they follow from a methodical argument within the logical framework. The word is to be distinguished from another type of ‘proof’ (*adilla*, sg *dalīl*), which is the unmistakable sign of something else, the way smoke is the sign of a fire.<sup>300</sup> The *Ṣughra*’s nickname *Umm al-barāhīn* was deserved.

By contrast with the abstract character of this work, as a person al-Sanūsī was remembered as an ascetic, as a pious and humble man, and as a good teacher with special sympathy for the poor and those who lacked formal education, but also as someone who shied away from social interactions, especially whenever the authorities were involved.<sup>301</sup> His lifestyle helped to win him the reputation of a ‘walī’, a ‘friend of God’. Al-Sanūsī was often held to know things that could not be known by reason, to see truths the eye cannot perceive, and to be blessed with the ability to perform miracles.<sup>302</sup> Moreover, he was said to be descended from al-Ḥassan, the son of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and grandson of the prophet Muḥammad. *The peerless method* presents him as one of four men in history who possessed three exceptional blessings, being *sharīf*, *walī* and ‘*ālim* (descending from the Prophet, ‘holy’ and learned).<sup>303</sup> After his death, people would appeal for his intervention in heaven, for instance to ask God for rain.<sup>304</sup>

Even a short while after his death, al-Sanūsī’s writings were already held in high regard. There once was a man who upon his death appeared before God with al-Sanūsī’s *Ṣughra* in his hand. Because of that book God saved him from hell, so a friend of this man was told, when the dead man appeared to him in a dream.<sup>305</sup> The flip side of the coin was that, according to the author’s biographer, a man who admitted to the angels Nakir and Munkar that he had never read any of al-Sanūsī’s creeds, was immediately beaten by them with iron rods.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> E.I.; Hall and Stewart, in Krätli & Lydon 2011, 137. Today in northern Nigeria the text is best known as *Umm al-barāhīn*, and it is taught in secondary schools. In Indonesia it is still in print as *Al-‘aqīda al-sanūsiyya*, in a popular series of booklets called *kutub kuning* or yellow books. I thank dr. N.J. Kapteijn for showing me some copies printed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>299</sup> Hunwick 178, 9.

<sup>300</sup> See J. van Ess, ‘The logical structure of Islamic theology’ in I.R. Netton (ed.) *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, II. London: Routledge, 2007, 35-38.

<sup>301</sup> In 1519 Sīdī Aḥmad al-Abbadī sent information about al-Sanūsī to a colleague in Fez. The text was found and translated by C. Brosselard: ‘Les Inscriptions Arabes de Tlemcen.’ In *Revue Africaine* 3, 16, (1859), 241-248. And ‘Les Inscriptions Arabes de Tlemcen. Retour à Sidi Senouci. Inscriptions de ses deux Mosquées.’ In *Revue Africaine* 5, 28 (1861), 241-260. Other biographical information comes from a biography by his pupil Muḥammad al-Mallālī, a resume of which was spread in west Africa by Aḥman Bābā al-Tinbukṭī (*Al-la’ālī al-Sundusiyya fi-l-faḍā’il al-Sanūsiyya*. Bibliothèque Générale et Archives, Rabat, D984. Now Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc) and from Ibn Maryam (d. 1602) who devoted a long paragraph to al-Sanūsī in *Al-bustān fīdhikr al-awliyā’ wa-l-‘ulamā’ bi-tilimsān*. Algiers, 1908.

<sup>302</sup> Ibn Maryam 1908, 244, 245. Ibn Maryam says that there are many anecdotes about al-Sanūsī’s miracles and relates two of them. The first is the miracle of the meat that would not cook, which is also told in *The peerless method* and was mentioned in the previous chapter. The second is about a woman who had lost the key to her house. She desperately tried to enter the house, but did not succeed, until she laid her hand on the lock, crying ‘by the glory of my lord Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī!’ Then, when she pulled, ‘the house gave way’. The image of unlocking doors and knowledge again emphasises al-Sanūsī’s educational gift.

<sup>303</sup> Hunwick 178, p. 13. The other three are Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, Abū Ishāq al-Isfarā’īnī and Abū al-Ḥassan al-Shādhilī.

<sup>304</sup> Brosselard 1861, p 247.

<sup>305</sup> Brosselard 1861, p 247.

<sup>306</sup> Berbrugger 1861, 264.

*Al-‘aqīda al-ṣughra* is an excerpt of a work on *tawḥīd*. It presents the quite abstract main issues of this field of learning without much explanation. The lack of clarification, however, is perhaps compensated for by al-Sanūsī’s concluding remark that this entire theology is contained in the *shahāda*, the testimony that there is no other god than God and that Muḥammad is His prophet. Each of the two parts of the *shahāda*, he wrote, embodies knowledge of the attributes of God and the prophets, which can and should be internalised by repeating the words often, ‘until they mingle with one’s flesh and blood’. One wonders whether the phrase is one of the reasons for the *Ṣughra*’s great popularity in many parts of Africa and Asia, because it may have been read as a ‘free’ offer of all this philosophical knowledge to each Muslim: even if a believer could not reproduce the logical arguments, this paragraph seems to suggest, still, as long as he remembers the *shahāda*, he or she is always a vessel and a custodian of such knowledge, and thus a respectable member of the community of Muslims.

Another reason for the *Ṣughra*’s popularity was undoubtedly its brevity. All over the Islamic world, short texts were more often commented on than longer ones.<sup>307</sup> The entire text of the *Ṣughra* takes up no more than eight or ten pages in modern print, but it is useful to give an even shorter paraphrase of it, and I do this below. The excerpt is actually based on three editions: J.D. Luciani’s edition, with a translation and a selection from comments by al-Sanūsī himself and by al-Dasūqī (d. 1815) and al-Bajurī (d. 1861)<sup>308</sup>; an edition of al-Sanūsī’s own *Sharḥ Umm al-barāhīn*;<sup>309</sup> and an edition and translation by M. Wolff with primarily grammatical and philological notes and a translation by M. Wolff.<sup>310</sup> Other sources that help to understand the text are Luciani’s introduction and notes to al-Sanūsī’s *Muqaddima* and to al-Laḡānī’s *Jawharā*.<sup>311</sup>

After the *basmallah*, al-Sanūsī immediately comes to the point:

Know that judgement concerns three categories: the necessary, the impossible and the possible. The necessary is that of which non-existence cannot be thought; the impossible is that of which existence is incompatible with reason; the possible is that of which existence as well as non-existence can be thought of. Every adult is held by Law to know what is necessary, impossible and possible concerning God and the prophets.

God has twenty attributes that are necessary to Him, starting with the following six: existence; existence without beginning; eternity (existence without end); being unlike temporal things; existence by itself without the need for anything to define that existence (without *mukhaṣṣis*); oneness—that is, not being composed of elements and having no equal. The first of these attributes is essential (*naḡsīya*), while the other five are negative (they define what He is not).

God has seven necessary attributes that are ‘substantive’ or ‘real’ (*ma‘ānī*)<sup>312</sup>: power and will (which have as object everything that is possible), knowing (which has as object everything that is necessary, possible and impossible), life (which has no object), hearing and vision (which have all that exists as their object) and speech (without word or voice and having the same object as

<sup>307</sup> Wisnowsky 2004, 159.

<sup>308</sup> J.-D. Luciani (translation and annotation), *Petit traité de théologie musulmane par Abou Abdallah Mohammed ben Mohammed ben Youssef Senoussi*. Algiers: Imprimerie Orientale Pierre Fontana, 1896.

<sup>309</sup> Al-Sanūsī, *Sharḥ umm al-barāhīn*. Cairo: Maṭba‘āt al-istiḡāma, 1932.

<sup>310</sup> M. Wolff, *El-Senusi’s Begriffsentwicklung des Mohammedanischen Glaubensbekenntnisses*. Leipzig: FCW Vogel, 1948.

<sup>311</sup> J.-D. Luciani, *Les prolégomènes théologiques de Senoussi. Texte Arabe et traduction Française par J.D. Luciani*. Algiers: Imprimerie Orientale Pierre Fontana, 1908.

<sup>312</sup> Delphin and Luciani translate the term صفات المعانى with ‘idées réelles’. The term *ma‘āna* played a role in the philosophical discussion about ‘meaning’ as ‘a form or essence insofar as it is apprehended by any cognitive faculty [senses or intellect] and serves as an object for that faculty.’ Modern philosophers speak of ‘intentionality’. This notion of ‘intentionality’ built on Aristotle’s understanding of cognition. See D. Black, ‘Psychology: soul and intellect’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*. P. Adamson and R.C. Taylor (eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 311 ff.

knowing). God has seven necessary attributes that are ideal (*ma'anawiya*), related to the first seven: he is powerful, willing, knowing, living, 'hearing', seeing' and 'speaking'.

God has twenty impossible attributes, the opposites of the first twenty: non-being; having been created; being finite; being like temporal things and taking up space, being limited in space and time or having interests; depending on something else to define Him; not being one; having no power to create, and an attribute such that it is impossible that anything exists that was created without his willing or knowing it. It is impossible that he should act as a natural force, causing things involuntarily (*bi l-ta'līl*) or with the force of a law of nature (*bi l-ṭabā'*). It is impossible for God to be unknowing or defective in any way concerning anything that can be known. It is impossible that He dies, or is deaf or blind or without speech.<sup>313</sup>

It is possible for God to do or not do anything possible.

The proof of God's existence without beginning is the creation of the world. If the world had come into existence by itself, from a situation where being and non-being were equal, there would have been a moment where being had gained precedence over non-being, without the interference of an external cause. The proof of the necessity of His eternity (without end) is that if He could be non-existent in future, then His existence without beginning would have to be denied too, because His being would then be only possible, not necessary. The proof of God's being different from temporal things, is that if He were similar to them, He would have to exist in time, which is unthinkable. The proof that He exists by himself, is that if He depended on something to make him appear, He would be an attribute, and an attribute cannot have other attributes. And if He needed a creator, He would have had a beginning. The proof of His oneness is that if He were not one, nothing would exist, because He would be powerless. The proof that God necessarily has power, will, knowledge and life is that, if He lacked one of them, none of the created things would exist. The proof that He necessarily has hearing, vision and speech is in the Book, in the sunna, and in the unanimity of the first Muslims (*ṣahāba*). Also, if He did not have them, He would have imperfections, whereas it is impossible that God has imperfections.

The proof that it is possible for God to do or not do what is possible, is that if one could imagine that realising or abandoning something possible were necessary or that it is impossible for God, the possible would become necessary or impossible.

God's prophets have the following necessary attributes: truthfulness (*ṣadaq*), faithfulness (*imāna*), and being transmitters of what they have been commissioned to transmit. The contrary is impossible: they cannot lie or betray their mission by doing something forbidden or disapproved of by religious law, or hide anything they have been commissioned to transmit. What is possible for the prophets is all events that can befall people, such as illness and other accidents, as long as they do not harm their dignity.

The proof that the prophets are necessarily truthful is that, if they were not, God would have lied when he confirmed by miracles (*mu'jiza*) the truthfulness of His messengers. The proof that they are necessarily faithful is that, if they did something forbidden or disapproved of, those things would be acts of obedience, for God has ordered us to imitate the prophets, and He does not order what is forbidden or disapproved. The proof that human events can befall them is that it has been observed to be so. This may happen either to assure them of greater rewards in the hereafter, or to establish an example for others, or to inspire people to accept their fate or to show that worldly things are contemptible in God's eyes, and that He does not mean that this world should be the place where prophets and saints receive their reward.

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<sup>313</sup> Thirteen impossible attributes are listed. The last seven are the opposite of the seven necessary real attributes. If the opposites of the seven ideal attributes had been added, the text would have been more than repetitive, but the total number of impossible attributes would add up to twenty.

All this is included in the words ‘There is no god but God, and Muḥammad is His prophet’, because they mean: there is no creature that is in need of nothing outside him, or is needed for everything outside him, except God. ‘There is no god but God’ encompasses the necessary, the impossible and the possible, which every adult must know. ‘Muḥammad is His prophet’ encompasses belief in the other prophets and angels and books of revelation and the Day of Resurrection, because Muḥammad has brought belief in all these. Although they have only a few letters, the two expressions of the *shahāda* encompass all the knowledge that a Muslim adult must have. The adult who is of sound mind (*al-‘āqil*) must repeat the *shahāda* often, so that its meaning mingles with his flesh and blood. Then, God willing, he will behold many secrets and wonders.

The second, and main, part of *The peerless method* comments on the *Ṣughra* by explaining and illustrating each statement in the original, as I will discuss below. In a few instances, the explanations are drawn directly from al-Sanūsī’s own commentary (*Sharḥ*) and introduction (*Muqaddima*), which were apparently known to the author(s) of *The peerless method* or of its precursor.<sup>314</sup>

For instance, the *Ṣughra* distinguishes between the cognitive categories of the necessary and the impossible, of ‘that which the mind cannot think of as absent’ and ‘that which the mind cannot conceive to exist’, but it does not elucidate this. In *The peerless method* (*PM*), however, the point was considered important enough to be worth expanding on. The necessary is divided in two, it states, and paraphrasing al-Sanūsī’s *Muqaddima*, it explains

that which is self-evidently necessary (*ḍarūrī*) and that which is necessary after rational consideration (*nazarī*). What is self-evidently necessary is, for instance, the impenetrability of a body. What is necessary after consideration is, for instance, the prior existence of God. You don’t perceive this necessity until you consider what would follow from the negation. The impossible is what the mind cannot conceive of as existing. [*PM* adds:] The impossible is divided in two: [*PM* quotes from *Muqaddima*:] that which is self-evident and that which is impossible after rational consideration. It is self-evidently impossible, for instance, for a body to be free from movement and immobility at the same time. What is impossible upon rational consideration is, for instance, the existence of an idol next to our Lord, the majestic and powerful. [*PM* adds again:] You do not perceive the necessity until you consider what would follow from the negation.<sup>315</sup>

This passage is all the more significant in that it gives a first glimpse of *The peerless method*’s views on knowledge. In his longer text, which is addressed to other scholars of theology, al-Sanūsī had given a place to this typically *kalām* distinction between self-evident knowledge and insights that can be reached only after a thought process, but apparently he did not consider it essential in the context of the shorter, more popular creed.<sup>316</sup> For the author(s) of *The peerless method*, by contrast, the distinction was important to the message they wished to transmit. The examples of *nazarī* knowledge

<sup>314</sup> Passages that are quoted from al-Sanūsī’s *Muqaddima* occur in Hunwick 178 notably on p 14 (‘judgement is the assertion or the negation of a thing’) and on pp 15 and 16, when the categories of judgement based on experiment and rational judgement are discussed: *The peerless method* comments:

‘There are four categories of experimental/custom-related judgement (*‘ādiyya*)  
- that which relates the existence of something to the existence of something else  
- that which relates the non-existence of something to the non-existence of something else  
- that which relates the existence of one thing to the non-existence of another  
- that which relates the non-existence of one thing to the existence of another

The link of existence with existence is like the link between the presence of food and the presence of satiety; the link between absence and absence is like the link between the lack of food and the lack of satiety; the link between existence and absence, is like the link between the presence of hunger and the absence of food; the link between absence and existence is like the link between the absence of hunger and the presence of food.

Cf. J.D. Luciani 1908. 38, 39.

<sup>315</sup> Hunwick 178, 15, 16. Cf. Luciani 1908, 48-51.

<sup>316</sup> See Van Ess 2007, 42,43.

that are given make one realise that the topic of the *Ṣughra* and *The peerless method* falls entirely within this category of things that are essential to the religion and need to be turned over and over in the mind.

Given the awareness of al-Sanūsī's other theological work on the part of the author(s) of the commentary, it is interesting that some of the themes and explanations that al-Sanūsī discussed there at length were not incorporated into *The peerless method*, such as the relation between legal judgement and divine law, and the concepts of 'appropriation' (*kasb*) and unbelief (*kufr*). Al-Sanūsī's views on these last two are closely related, and they are particularly relevant for this study: as I will argue below, *The peerless method* rejects them on purpose. Let us look more closely, then, at al-Sanūsī's understanding of *kasb* and unbelief.

Regarding *kasb* al-Sanūsī expressed the prevailing Ash'arī view. He rejected both the determinist view of the Jabrīya, that all human acts are like trembling, over which man has no influence at all, and the opposite view, of the Mu'tazila and the Qadarīya, which held that a human being has his own independent will in all acts in which he feels no constraint—voluntary movements for instance—and can produce certain effects himself through a force he has received from God. This would imply, said al-Sanūsī, that God produced only what we cannot produce ourselves, such as colours or trembling. The correct, Sunni doctrine was, he argued, that all acts come from God, whereas 'voluntary' acts coincide with a human being's incidental force, which does not produce these acts nor has any effect in and of itself. The human being is free in the sense that he generally does not feel compelled either to act or not to act. He has 'a share' in his acts, consisting of the relationship between his incidental force and the act produced in him. Through that relationship he appropriates (*yaksabu*) the effect of the acts within himself, but not their effects outside of him. The effects outside of him are concomitant with God's will, the effects within himself are the basis of his responsibility for the law.<sup>317</sup>

A belief that human beings are free to produce certain acts and their effects themselves, so that there exists causality outside of God, amounts to associating something else with God, and is therefore a form of polytheism (*shirk*).<sup>318</sup> Al-Sanūsī lists six forms of *shirk*<sup>319</sup>:

1. Believing that there exist two independent Gods (as do the magians)
2. Believing that God is composed of more than one deity, as Christians do
3. Adoring others than God with the aim of coming closer to Him, as the pagans of the first *jahaliyya* period did (*shirk al-taqrīb*)
4. Adoring others than God, in imitation of others, as the pagans of the last *jahiliyya* period did (*shirk al-taqlīd*)
5. Believing that causes that we experience have effects of their own, as philosophers do
6. Doing anything for reasons other than God

He continues with a list of seven sources from which innovation (*bid'a*) and unbelief can develop<sup>320</sup>:

1. The belief in an 'essential necessity' that makes God act through a logical causality or a natural force, and not by divine will
2. The belief, held by the Mu'tazila, that God's acts depend logically on interests or motivations (*al-aghāḍ*) to realise what is good and prevent what is bad
3. Imitation by clinging (to one's *madhhab*; *ta'assab*) without searching for the truth
4. Experimental induction, i.e. the belief, based on experience, in inevitable relations between certain things
5. Complex ignorance, that is, not knowing the truth and ignoring the fact that one does not know it
6. Attaching supreme importance to what the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth seem to mean, without a distinction between what is possible and what is impossible

<sup>317</sup> Luciani 1908, 58-72.

<sup>318</sup> Luciani 1908, 237.

<sup>319</sup> Luciani 1908, 96-108.

<sup>320</sup> Luciani 1908, 112.

7. Not knowing the rules of reasoning that allow one to know what is necessary, possible, and impossible, as well as not knowing the Arabic language, including lexicology (*'ilm al-lughā*), inflection (*i'rāb*) or rhetoric (*bayān*).

It is especially important that a good part of al-Sanūsī's views on possible sources of unbelief revolves around the relationship between God's omnipotence and free will or causality. The Fulani commentary, on the contrary, does not (except in one instance<sup>321</sup>) refer to this matter because, as we will see, the view on unbelief expressed there is linked, not to an understanding of causality, but to social issues.

Al-Sanūsī's dialectic mostly uses the Mu'tazila as the party to whose views he opposes his own. Apart from their 'false doctrine' regarding causality and man's free will in certain cases, as well as God's obligation according to logic to consider the well-being of people, al-Sanūsī also discusses, in his *Muqaddima* and his *Sharh*, the Mu'tazilis erroneous belief that it is impossible that God would punish someone who has not transgressed any of His laws; the idea (based on a grammatically wrong interpretation of a phrase in the Qur'ān) that there are things that God has not created; the notion that God has no real (*ma'ānī*) attributes, and a few other Mu'tazila errors.

It is also noteworthy that *The peerless method* refers to the Mu'tazilis only once, where the first of God's necessary ideal (*ma'anawiya*) attributes, His being powerful, is explained: 'It is related to the first of the substantive attributes, power. This is different from the point of view of the Mu'tazila, who say that it is [directly] related to [God's] essence. But if it were linked to the essence, as they claim, the essence would be substantive, and his uniqueness would be denied.'<sup>322</sup> Otherwise, al-Wālī leaves the Mu'tazilis in peace.

## 2. The *Kabbe* tradition

In the first lines of *The peerless method*, Al-Wālī wrote that he translated commentaries in Fulfulde that several learned Fulani before him had made on al-Sanūsī's *'Aqida al-ṣughra*. These commentaries existed most probably only as oral texts,<sup>323</sup> but if they were anything like *The peerless method*, they must have been the beginning of a long tradition of religious teaching. In its form, *The peerless method* strongly resembles texts from a Fulani tradition of teaching *tawhīd* that is still alive, in a region stretching from today's Senegal to Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Niger. At least since the nineteenth century, this teaching has been called the *kabbe* in Fulfulde, a word that is derived from a root that means 'to tie', just like *'aqida* in Arabic.<sup>324</sup> The translation of the Arabic word into Fulfulde covers the cultural translation of al-Sanūsī's text to the context of the Fulani's 'missionary' work. In the *kabbe*, the idea of the purpose of the *Ṣughra* was transmitted, and concepts were explained in a way that was appealing to a new audience, and were organised and presented in ways that joined in with the discursive culture of the Fulani.

The roots of the *kabbe* must lie early in the sixteenth century, when al-Sanūsī's *Ṣughra* was already circulating in its original form and in versified versions in the most western part of West Africa, as manuscripts show, from where Fulani brought it eastward. What the content of the *kabbe* was in al-Wālī's time can only be guessed at, because its oral transmission has always been an important

<sup>321</sup> See Hunwick 178, 49, where an explanation is offered of the words in the *Ṣughra* 'This must be the case if you presume that one of the existing things has an effect through its own nature. If you presume that [something] has a self-working [causal] effect through a force that God has made in it, as many of the 'ignorant' claim...' Here al-Sanūsī's sentence is broken off, in order to give three different categories of 'ignorant philosophers' and their ideas of cause outside God. The passage is abruptly ended by the remark that this (cause outside of God) 'is also impossible'.

<sup>322</sup> Hunwick 178, 23.

<sup>323</sup> As far as we know, Fulfulde prose was hardly ever written down, until the 19th century. Brenner and Last 1985, 434.

<sup>324</sup> Brenner 1984, 79.

characteristic, and up until the twentieth century it was indeed the only way in which the text was preserved.<sup>325</sup> And even of the recent expressions of the *kabbe* not much has been committed to paper. But there are some sources that describe the tradition. To begin with, a short description by Paul Marty from 1921 tells us that in some of the most western regions of Africa the *kabbe* is a form of teaching *tawhīd*, based on al-Sanūsī's *Umm al-barāhīn* and preceded by an introduction which includes information about the Qur'ān as the first of four holy books, before Pentateuch, Psalms and Gospel.<sup>326</sup> These three elements - *Umm al-barāhīn* as the core of the text, its didactic character (for instance introducing new topics with the phrase 'what is the meaning of...?' and the use of metaphor and repetition), and an added introduction about more general aspects of the Muslim faith - are also found in other *kabbe* versions, as well as in *The peerless method*. A few other versions have been discussed in detail by L. Brenner, both in his book about the Malian *ṣūfī* shaykh Tierno Bokar (d. 1940), who was the author of the 'catechism' called *Mā al-dīn* ('What is religion?'), and in an article about one of the latter's pupils, the Malian historian and world-famous author Amadou Hampâté Bā (d. 1991), who collected several versions of the *kabbe* and also made a new version of it himself in Fulfulde.<sup>327</sup> Brenner also found references to the *kabbe* in the archives of two French colonial officers from Senegal and Niger.<sup>328</sup> And, together with a Fulani colleague, he wrote down a version of the *kabbe* that had been recorded on tape in the 1960's by Boubou Hama in southern Niger. They translated part of the Fulfulde text into English.<sup>329</sup>

The traces and descriptions of *kabbe* versions from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries confirm much continuity especially in their educational aspects. As oral texts they were aimed at an illiterate audience: non-Muslims who were candidates for conversion, as well as members of the broader Muslim community who wished to expand their understanding of their religion. In stories about its origin the *kabbe* is often presented as a recent discovery by a specialist of religion who wishes to make difficult information available to people without (much) formal education. More than once the stories also mention the instruction to and by women, who were often excluded from formal education.

The *kabbe*'s teaching methodology is very well adapted to the purpose of including as many common believers as possible. Like religious poetry in Fulfulde, the *kabbe* was clearly marked by techniques to facilitate memorisation, like repetition and the use of pairs or phrases.<sup>330</sup> Most remarkable is the version developed by Tierno Bokar, who supported the teaching of his *Mā al-dīn* to illiterate people by means of a pattern of lines and dots, each of which represented an item in the catechism. The *kabbe* versions also share a devotion to the clarification of abstract theological concepts, through metaphor and analogies with elements of daily life.

Another characteristic of the recent versions is the association with Sufism. Especially in the teachings of Tierno Bokar and Amadou Hampâté Bā, the mystic element is strong. The older, oral Nigerien version says that the *kabbe* concerns one branch of the study of *tawhīd*, of which 'there are two branches,[that of the study of] the manifest and the hidden' The manifest has to do with the knowledge of jurisprudence and other Islamic sciences and of what is permitted and forbidden. 'What is hidden

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<sup>325</sup> As far as I know they are still transmitted only orally, in some quranic schools in various West African countries where there is a strong Fulani influence.

<sup>326</sup> P. Marty, *L'Islam en Guinée*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1921, 351-355.

<sup>327</sup> Brenner 1984. L. Brenner, 'A Living Library: Amadou Hampâté Bā and the Oral Transmission of Islamic Religious Knowledge.' In *Islamic Africa* 1, 2 (2010), 45-93.

<sup>328</sup> The first report is entitled 'Islam dans la Résidence de Dori', 31 july 1899. Archives Nationales du Sénégal, AOF Série G, 15-G-186. Professor Brenner has generously given me a copy of his own handwritten copy of part of this report. The second report is quoted at some length in his *West African Sufi*, 83.

<sup>329</sup> Brenner did this work together with Almamy Malik Yattara. Unfortunately the translation could not be finished and was never published, but I am much indebted to professor Brenner for kindly allowing me to photocopy his drafts.

<sup>330</sup> Cf. Seydou 1966 op. cit. in Haafkens, J., *Chants Musulmans en Peul. Textes de l'héritage religieux de la communauté musulmane de Maroua, Cameroun*. E.J. Brill, Leiden 1983, 27.

concerns purification... it is *ṣūfī* knowledge and it is called the knowledge of truth.<sup>331</sup> That may not prove that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Sufism was as important in the *kabbe* tradition as it later became. It may be that it has gained importance in these texts since the nineteenth century, when the influence of Sufism in the region as a whole increased.<sup>332</sup> On the other hand, since many elements of the *kabbe* tradition are quite constant, there is no reason to doubt that from the beginning it accommodated—in its text or context—an approach to religious knowledge through mysticism.

The status of the *kabbe* has not always been the same across times and places. Marty, for instance, described it in Futa Djallon in the beginning of the twentieth century, as part, not of popular Islam but of formal Islamic education, in which it was taught only in the superior cycles, which only a minority of students followed. In other regions, mastering the text came to function as a rite of passage that must have been widespread among Fulani: Marty and French-colonial reports, as well as Boubou Hama, mention that in certain communities from Senegal to Niger, a Fulani man could marry, or slaughter an animal, after he had finished his study of the *kabbe*. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at least, it was this study that made him a full Muslim and an adult member of his community.<sup>333</sup> It is plausible that, as Brenner suggests, such practices had already developed into a sectarian cult by the end of the eighteenth century and that the advocates of the *kabbe*, the *kabbenkoobe*, were the *mutakallimūn* against whom ‘Uthmān dan Fodio raised serious objections, because they excluded faithful believers for no valid reasons, and spread confusion and dissension among Muslims.<sup>334</sup> Though he was admired by Dan Fodio’s son, al-Wālī seems to have had a hand in turning an inclusive educational tradition into a tool of partition.

### 3. *The peerless method builds on both*

And then: some Fulāta have commented on the *Ṣughra* by shaykh al-Sanūsī in their own language. I have wished to put that in Arabic in order to study the lessons from it. I have named this *The peerless method to knowledge of the science of theology*.

This is how al-Wālī starts his work, which, at first sight, indeed seems to be nothing but an Arabic translation of a model example of the *kabbe* tradition. Like the modern examples, *The peerless method* is divided into two parts, a preface about other issues than the *Ṣughra*, and the actual commentary on al-Sanūsī’s text on God’s attributes. The preface takes up slightly more than a quarter of the entire

<sup>331</sup>The passage in Brenner’s notebook is: ‘The religion which the Prophet brought us is divided in two parts, the fundamentals and the commands. Fundamental religion consists of faith, and the knowledge [of/and] upright behaviour. It is the knowledge of *tawhīd*. It is called the *kabbe*. It is called the knowledge of essence, it is called the knowledge of attributes. One who [understands] the attributes will come near to what he seeks. There are two branches [to this study]: the manifested and the hidden. The manifested is Islam and the knowledge of doing what is right in Islam. It is the knowledge of *fiqh*, and is called the knowledge of the branches, or knowledge of the permitted and knowledge of the prohibited. And it is called the knowledge of practice.’

<sup>332</sup>Even so, the versions recorded in the twentieth century have given rise to different interpretations of this aspect. Marty and Brenner for instance have opposite views of the meaning of ‘*ilm al-ḥurūf*’ in the *kabbe*. Marty writes that, using knowledge that is transmitted through the *kabbe* (for instance that the *shahada* is contained in the name Allah, and that the letters of this name correspond with the number 66, which is therefore sacred) many cultured Fulani are devoted to combining words, letters and numbers, but that there is nothing mystical about such activities; that they are *au fond* not different from the ‘intellectual recreation’ favoured by European scholars in the Middle Ages or offered on the last pages of our own journals and magazines. (Marty 1921, 352) Disagreeing with Marty, Brenner explains that the manipulation of numbers and letters is more than recreation, that it reflects an elaborate religious understanding of creation and of the relation between the visible and the invisible world. (Brenner 1984, 91) While both interpretations seem right for different groups of people, their different understandings must also be seen against the background of their work. Marty was partly responding to French colonial officers and travellers who saw students of the *kabbe* as members of a secretive sect and the *kabbe* itself as an obscure sort of ‘Kabbala’, an image he wished to correct. One of Brenner’s intentions is to correct an image of African Sufism as being devoid of the spiritual dimension.

<sup>333</sup> Brenner 1985, 83-86.

<sup>334</sup> Brenner 1987, 47.



text. The second part comments on—al-Wālī uses the verb *sharaḥa*—or rather explains *Al-‘aqīda al-ṣughra* in the peculiar way in which commentaries were often composed: al-Sanūsī’s entire creed is wrapped up in it. It is followed word for word, and the comments are added in a way that sometimes even disturbs the syntax and the logic of the original sentences.<sup>335</sup>

Below I will first discuss textual characteristics that seem to be part of the oral *kabbe* tradition: the introduction, the organisation of the text in order to facilitate memorisation, and the translations of abstract concepts to the life-world of an audience that had no education in theology. As a written text, *The peerless method* still shows clear traces of this oral tradition, and it was intended to be not only read, but also to be heard, as is vividly evoked at the end of the preface: ‘Know! That is, be aware of your foolishness, wake up from your sleep, rouse your brain and understand what I say, so that the beginning of the speech does not escape you, for he who lets the beginning slip and [then] listens to the middle or another part, will not understand a thing.’<sup>336</sup>

In the past decades, increasing attention has been given to the ways in which oral and written practices have complemented each other in the transmission of knowledge in different fields of literature and scholarship in Islamic culture. Within that field of interest, S. Ali has focussed on the influence of orally transmitted traditions on written texts.<sup>337</sup> His work—like that of J. Vansina and W. Ong before him in the wider field of intellectual history and literary studies—shows that two main principles underlie oral traditions in cultures of primary orality, that is among people who had no writing at all: performance and memory, whereby performance is related to the adaptability of traditions, and memory to continuity. In orality, narratives must be organised in a way that makes it easy to remember them and pass them on—for instance, through repetition and the use of parallel terms and phrases, antithetical phrases, epithets and formulas; and they must be composed in a way that allows the narrator to hold the attention of his audience, for instance by assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings; through narration as opposed to more abstract ideas in written texts; through the use of an agonistic tone, celebrating physical behaviour, featuring both violence and praise, in a highly polarised world of ‘good and evil, vice and virtue, villains and heroes’.<sup>338</sup> All of these figures of style will be recognised in the formal analysis of *The peerless method* below.

Later, in the section ‘Tradition with a twist’, we will turn our attention to a specific element in the content of the text: the point where *The peerless method* diverges from both the *Ṣughra* and the *kabbe*.

### *An introduction for new Muslims*

The preface to *The peerless method* shares many similarities with other expressions of the *kabbe* tradition. It reads like an introduction, not so much to the topic of God’s ontology, but to the culture and society of Islam at large. It is not directly related to the text of the *Ṣughra*, but it is in a way true to the character of al-Sanūsī’s creed, in that it presents Islam to a wide audience. Thus, *The peerless method* opens with remarks about the conventions of Islamic text, such as starting by invoking the name of God. It asserts God’s power over Muslims and non-Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs (as is done in the Nigerien *kabbe* version in Brenner’s notebook). Then it places Islam in the context of other religions of the Book and tells us that the basmallah contains all the knowledge God has revealed to the various prophets, both in a way that is almost identical to what Marty described in writing of the

<sup>335</sup> This suggests that the first written version was noted as two texts: al-Sanūsī’s as the main text, with the comment added between the lines.

<sup>336</sup> Hunwick 178, 14.

<sup>337</sup> G. Schoeler, 2006; K. Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands. A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012; S. Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages. Poetry, Public Performance and the Presentation of the Past*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2010.

<sup>338</sup> J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*. London: James Currey, 1985; J.W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982, chapter 3. Quote: Ong 1982, 44.

*kabbe* versions he knew.<sup>339</sup> There then follows a brief distinction between believers and unbelievers: all have God's compassion and mercy in this world, but believers can also count on these in the hereafter, a notion which is thereby casually introduced. This again resembles a paragraph in the Nigerien version. The same is true for the discussion of the meaning of 'companionship' of the prophet Muḥammad, with special reference to the conversion and companionship of the Negus of Ethiopia. Whatever the direction of influence between different versions has been, it shows that *The peerless method* is part of the wide *kabbe* tradition.

There are a few topics in the introduction to *The peerless method* for which I have not found parallels in the other *kabbe* versions, but these may well have existed. This is true, for example, of a paragraph on blessing (*ni'ma*) and notably the blessing of the *shahāda*, which can protect against murder, abduction, theft and even hell.<sup>340</sup> Other examples are details about the prophet Muḥammad's status among people, and the concept of *sharīf*. Much later in the text—not in the preface, but also rather separate from the abstract discussion of God's attributes—there are explanations of the essence of angels and *jinn*s (they are made of ethereal substance, finer than wind; less ethereal than wind is water, and after that comes earth and the substance of human beings), as well as a presentation of the archangels and their various realms of authority.<sup>341</sup> And throughout the text various other concepts and social roles belonging to a Muslim culture are introduced, such as *ahl al-bayt*, *ṣaḥaba*, *shurafā'*, different types of shaykhs, the *faqīh* and other leaders, and the 'saint who knows God', *al-wālī al-ʿarīf bi Allāh*. The importance of praise, prayer and worship is emphasised. All together, the text touches on everything one needs to know to act as a good Muslim. *The peerless method*—especially the introduction—is a shop-window full of samples of law, ḥadīths, Sufism, terminology, mythology, classical poetry, folklore and more.

The preface ends with sixteen tales about miracles that al-Sanūsī is said to have performed or witnessed, thus bearing witness to the special blessing he received from God, and therefore to the value of his *Ṣughra*. These were evidently part of the original text that al-Wālī had translated, because he noted twice (indicating the addition with the phrase 'here ends what I added') that he had come across a similar story elsewhere, where it was told about someone else. Such narratives do not seem to be part of the more recent versions of the *kabbe*, but they are rooted in the ṣūfī lore about 'holy men' in the Maghrib. Some of the miracles have other people as beneficiaries: through mediation by al-Sanūsī they find gold (symbolic of course for God's truth), or peace, either in the hereafter or in this world. According to other anecdotes, hidden knowledge was unveiled to the shaykh and God favoured him in other ways, for instance by lifting him up into the sky one day, when pupils asked whether holy men could fly.

Two of these anecdotes deal specifically with causality. Apart from the story about the meat that would not cook (see chapter 3), there is one about a *jinn* who came, in the form of a snake, to where al-Sanūsī was sitting with some pupils, and wrote the words: 'Nothing in all of creation has any effect.'<sup>342</sup> In other words: the only cause of anything there is, is the uncreated God. To West African

<sup>339</sup> Hunwick 178, 1,2: (About the reason why the orthography of the *bā* in the opening word of religious texts, *bismallāh*, is usually long) 'Some say that it is long to substitute the *alif* that is suppressed, and some say it is long because it contains all the knowledge (*jamī' al-'ulūm*) that God has sent down. It constitutes a hundred and four books. He sent ten down to the prophet Adam and fifty to the prophet Seth (peace be with him), ten to the prophet Idrīs (peace be with him), ten to the prophet Ibrāhīm (peace be with him), the Psalms to the prophet Dāwūd (peace be with him), the Torah to the prophet Mūsā, the Gospel to the prophet 'Isā (peace be with him), the Furqān to the prophet Muḥammad, God bless him and grant him peace and honour and nobility. A hundred books are contained in three books and three books are contained in the Furqān, and all of the Furqān is contained in sūrat al-baqara and sūrat al-baqara is contained in the fātiḥa, the fātiḥa is contained in the basmallah and the basmallah in its opening and its meaning (*ma'nāhā*) 'in Me was what was, and in Me will be what will be'. Therefore it is called the connecting *bā*: it connects all knowledge. Cf Marty 1921, 352.

<sup>340</sup> In Ash'arī theology man is not predestined for heaven or hell. It is one of the differences al-Wālī mentions between Ash'arism and Matūridiyya.

<sup>341</sup> Hunwick 178, 51, 52..

<sup>342</sup> Hunwick 178, 10: فكتب لا يابى لشيء من الكائنات

Muslims, these two little stories were signs of the powers God invested in the ‘saint’. We may also recognise them as translations of an abstract scholarly theme for an audience without philosophical training. As we saw, the subject of causality played an important role in al-Sanūsī’s theology and in his discussions with other theological schools. One of the anecdotes that translates his stance on causality into a narrative, and translates the metaphor he used—of the prophet untouched by fire—into a meal that remains raw over the fire, originates from the region where he lived, as do many of these stories. It can be assumed that the same is true of the story of the snake. Apparently, when the *kabbe* originated, the stories were considered to be part of a fixed corpus of tales about al-Sanūsī, designed to demonstrate his closeness to God (*wilāya*) and to explain a theme that was important in his theology, the theme of causality. However, in the course of time, causality faded into the background in the *kabbe*, and for al-Wālī the theme was not a priority, as will be argued later in this chapter. That said, the presence of these anecdotes in al-Wālī’s version is an example of how elements that had lost their original meaning and function nevertheless survived for quite some time and even after the text had travelled quite some distance, because the text as a whole had a special significance of its own. The same may be true of other elements in the text that we will come across below.

### *Organisation of the text*

After the preface to *The peerless method*, the *Ṣughra* is followed sentence by sentence. Despite this tight framework, the commentary manages to introduce some independent ideas and push others to the background, by not giving them much, or any, attention. Many of the choices that were made are related to the organisation of the text and determined by the oral context, not only of the *kabbe* tradition, but also of *The peerless method* itself. As mentioned in chapter 2, in central sudanic Africa the transmission of the culture of Islam has in the first place been oral. Even written, scholarly texts were produced to be recited from memory or read aloud to students and to be memorised by them.

Memorisation was important, not only because many people were illiterate or had limited access to written sources, but also because memorisation and reciting from memory were highly respected, not only in Islam. In the Middle Ages and the pre-modern period, even when writing was in principle available, memorisation was regarded, not as a passive method of learning but, on the contrary, as an art that was also essential for the creation of new knowledge. Ideas about this art and its methods influenced the organisation of long texts.

These ideas were based on the understanding of the working of the brain by Aristotle and some of his commentators in the Muslim as well as the Christian world, such as Ibn Sīna, Ibn Rushd, Galen, and Thomas Aquinas. In their view, the brain receives impressions from the senses. These are brought together by the image-forming ability into an ‘image’ that has a likeness to the observed things, and into an instinctive ‘feeling’ that colours the images. Then thinking makes these images available to the mind, so that it can use them to form thoughts and ideas. Since thoughts are made of mental images, which are stored and recalled in memory ‘locations’, memory is the basis of the inventive powers of the mind. Memory storage was to be undertaken in such a way that images were readily and immediately accessible. This meant they had to be organised. The basic principles for that arrangement were division and composition. A sophisticated technique was to divide text into verses and paragraphs that could be linked to particular markers and that could also serve as markers for more text such as glosses. The markers were composed into numbered sequences or linked to the alphabet or to a picture of a house with rooms, a hand with fingers that had joints, an angel with wings that had feathers, and so on.<sup>343</sup>

In *The peerless method*, division and composition were applied *con gusto*. For example, where the actual commentary on the *Ṣughra* starts, and includes a quote to the effect that rational judgement

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<sup>343</sup>M. Carruthers, ‘Mechanisms for the Transmission of Culture: The Role of ‘Place’ in the Arts of Memory.’ In *Translatio or the Transmission of Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. L.H. Hollengreen ed. Turnhout: Brepols, 2008. 1-27.

comprises three categories, it adds that ‘altogether there are twelve fundamental principles: five of sharī‘a, four of experience,<sup>344</sup> three of reason.<sup>345</sup> The five principles of the sharī‘a are given in an oppositional pair: ‘*Wājib* (obligatory) and its ‘next in line’ *mandūb* (recommended), and *ḥarām* (forbidden) and its ‘next-in-line’ *makrūh* (disapproved of), and in the middle *mubāh*’ (allowed or neutral).<sup>346</sup>

*The peerless method* then arranges into seven chapters all that a Muslim adult should know: that God’s essence does not lack anything; that it is different from other beings; and that He is described by attributes of which none is lacking; what His substantive, negative and ideal attributes are (three separate chapters), and what the consequences of the 20 attributes are.<sup>347</sup> And when al-Sanūsī adds—not in the *Ṣughra*, but in his *Muqaddima*—that the necessary refers to either what is evidently necessary or what appears to be necessary upon reflection, *The peerless method*, typically, spells out that the necessary refers to *two things*: what is evidently necessary and what appears to be necessary upon reflection.<sup>348</sup> Sometimes it is as if the author (or authors) get carried away by the habit of dividing and numbering, to the point that the didactic benefits seem doubtful. Thus the impossibility of God’s lack of oneness is subdivided into six sorts; the impossibility of a lack of will on His part into four sorts.<sup>349</sup> These divisions surpass al-Sanūsī’s discussion of God’s impossible attributes, and are also more detailed than the corresponding paragraphs in the Nigerien oral version of the *kabbe*.

The most conspicuous way in *The peerless method* of ‘explaining’ or reorganising statements from the *Ṣughra* is to follow and note down every logical step in the argumentations behind them, even when only small variations occur. This technique is also applied in the *kabbe* version from Niger, but not as exhaustively as in *The peerless method*. The examples below also illustrate the way in which the explanations are inserted into the text of the *Ṣughra*. The phrases in italics are from al-Sanūsī’s base text.

*Impossible with regard to the truth of God are twenty attributes. They are the opposites of the first twenty necessary attributes: non-existence—non-existence is the first of the twenty attributes that are impossible regarding the truth of God the Exalted, and it is the opposite of the first of the twenty necessary attributes, which is existence. The necessity of existence negates non-existence of His being and attributes. Being created—being created is the second of the twenty attributes that are impossible regarding the truth of God the Exalted. It is the opposite of the second of the twenty necessary attributes....*<sup>350</sup>

And so on until the twentieth attribute. The fourth impossible attribute, *resemblance to temporal things* (*al-mumāthala li l-ḥawādith*), touches on an issue that was central to the Ash‘ari doctrine—namely, the reconciliation between God’s incomparability to anything created and Quranic expressions about God’s hands, vision, throne, and so on that do leave room for some sort of

<sup>344</sup> *Hukm al-‘ādiya* refers to judgement based on observation or experience notably when causality is explored. The four principles in this category concern that which relates the existence of something to the existence or the non-existence of something else, and that which relates the non-existence of something to the existence or non-existence of something else. For instance relating the absence of hunger to the presence of food, etc. J-D. Luciani translates ‘*ādiya* with *experimental*.

<sup>345</sup> The judgement of what is necessary, impossible and possible.

<sup>346</sup> Hunwick 178, 15.

<sup>347</sup> The choice of the number seven is of course not unique to the *kabbe* tradition. The north African scholar and poet Aḥmad al-Maqqārī al-Tilimsānī (d. 1632), whom al-Wālī quotes a few times, had written that ‘the student’s efforts with the pursuit [of these matters] is not finished until he knows of seven issues he needs to know’. Hunwick 178, 33.

<sup>348</sup> Hunwick 178, 16. Cf. Luciani 1908, 48, 49.

<sup>349</sup> Hunwick 178, 30-31.

<sup>350</sup> Hunwick 178, 26. Compare e.g. with al-Laḡānī, who says nothing more about the impossible attributes than: *Les contraires de ces attributs sont impossibles à l’égard de Dieu. Il est impossible par exemple, qu’il occupe un coté d’un objet, c’est à dire qu’il soit dessus, dessous, devant, derrière, à droite ou à gauche*. Luciani 1908, 14.

resemblance (*tashbīh*) between God and created beings. Al-Sanūsī gives some explanation for this attribute (see in italics below), and *The peerless method* also puts in an extra effort:

A question was asked, ‘What is resemblance to temporal things?’ and the shaykh [al-Sanūsī] answered *that He would be like a body*. It was asked, ‘What is a body?’ and the shaykh answered, ‘[It would mean] *that His exalted essence would take up a measure of the empty space*. Being a body, however, is the first kind of the ten resemblances that are impossible regarding the reality of God, because of the necessity of His being different from temporal things. The necessity of His being different from temporal things negates that, *or that He would be incidental, needing a body*. Being incidental and needing a body, however, are the second kind of the ten impossible resemblances regarding the reality of God, *or He would be in the realm of bodies*, and would be above a throne or below it, or to the right or the left of it. But being in the realm of bodies is the third kind of the ten impossible resemblances regarding the reality of God. The necessity of His being different from temporal things negates that, *or He would have spatiality* and the throne would be above that [spatiality] or under it or to the right or the left of it. But spatiality to Him is the fourth sort of the ten resemblances that are impossible regarding the reality of God, because of the necessity of His being different from temporal things, and the necessity of being different from temporal things negates that, *or that He would be confined by place*. It is said that He is in paradise or on a throne or a chair, or in the heavens or on earth, but confinement to a place is the fifth sort of the ten impossible resemblances regarding the reality of God....<sup>351</sup>

Some methods of organising information have been associated especially with Sufism. For instance, *The peerless method* introduces a new classification of the twenty attributes, dividing them between God’s divinity (*ulūhīya*) and His lordship (*rubūbīya*). There are eleven attributes of divinity and nine of lordship. Why this partition into nine and eleven is appealing is not explained. But, while nine and eleven play no significant role in Sufism in other cultures,<sup>352</sup> both numbers are significant in the *kabbe* of the twentieth century. There, nine represents matter and materiality—the realm of God’s lordship or governance,<sup>353</sup> while eleven, as Amadou Hampâté Ba explained, represents the spiritual world. It is the mystical light of God’s essence and the key to the name of Allāh, since eleven is the added numerical value of the letters that make up ‘huwa’. To know the secret of the number eleven ‘is to know how to make God smile’.<sup>354</sup>

The authors of *The peerless method* were obviously familiar with ‘*ilm al-ḥurūf*, the science of letters (also called *sīmīya*), which is related to ‘*ilm al-awfāq*, the science of ‘correspondences’ between the laws that govern the manifest universe and those that govern the hidden reality. These branches of learning could be used for divination, a contested practice, but they were solidly based on the generally accepted understanding that the manifest and the hidden worlds are interconnected. The rules that govern the one are assumed to be similar to those that govern the other. Therefore, the study of rules in the manifest world of humans and animals, minerals, stars, numbers and letters can bring one closer to the hidden truths regarding God. God himself cannot be known, but His laws and His attributes can. Although ‘*ilm al-ḥurūf* and ‘*ilm al-awfāq* are sometimes described as magic, the techniques were studied in the framework of the regular Islamic sciences.’<sup>355</sup>

<sup>351</sup> Hunwick 178, 27-28. Cf. Cambon, J. et J.-D. Luciani. *Petit Traité de Theologie Musulmane, par Abou Abdallah Mohammed Ben Mohammed Ben Youssef Senoussi*. Alger: Imprimerie Orientale Pierre Fontana, 1896. 7 and the page numbered 4 in Arabic. The question whether God’s throne should be understood as metaphor or fact continues to be an issue of popular discussion in Chad in the 20th century, see Seesemann 2003 and Brigaglia 2005.

<sup>352</sup> A. Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: a Phenomenological Approach to Islam*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

<sup>353</sup> Brenner 1984, 96.

<sup>354</sup> Brenner 2010, 67, 71. *Hā’* = five, *wāw* = six.

<sup>355</sup> See P. Marty 1921, 85. L. Brenner 1985a, ‘Three Fulbe scholars in Bornu.’ In *The Maghrib Review*, Vol. X, 4-6 (1985): 107-113; 107. S. Dorpmüller, *Religiöse Magie im Buch der probaten Mittel. Analyse, kritische*

*The peerless method* explains, for instance, that God has sent 313 or 314 or 315 messengers, numbers that corresponded with the numerical value of the name Muḥammad.<sup>356</sup> The preface also presents a number of terms of which each radical is linked to an idea that explains it. The word *al-shaykh*, for example, receives the following treatment: Alif stands for being close (*‘alifa*) as in the words of the prophet ‘those who will be near me on the Day of Resurrection are those of good deeds’. *Lām* is softness (*līn*) of the heart in obedience to God, *shīn* is thankfulness (*shukr*) for His blessings, *yā* is commending what is good and prohibiting what is bad (*ya‘amar bi l-ma‘rūf wa yanhī ‘an al-munkar*) and *khā* is fear (*khawf*) of sinning against divine law. The words Allāh, Muḥammad and *al-faqīh* are explained in a similar way. The interpretation of the orthography of the letter *bā* as the first word of a text (see note 339 above) is another example.

Playing with the first letters of words fits into an old tradition, probably going back to pre-Islamic Indian cultures, that was especially popular among mystics and poets, to convey the deeper meaning of concepts to their readers. The meaning accorded to the letters that make up ‘Allāh’, for instance, is the same as that proposed by the school of the great mystic Ibn ‘Arabī.<sup>357</sup> But the method was used more widely than that. It was also applied at a didactic level, where it was elaborated, for example, into the ‘golden alphabet’, a genre of poetry designed to make it easier to learn the alphabet.<sup>358</sup> It is suggested here that, in *The peerless method*, too, the practical purpose of this playing with words and numbers was at least as important as the mystical one, and that it served here as a mnemonic aid rather than a method of esoteric science.<sup>359</sup> That is the function of the method in this text, which places its primary emphasis on reason, as we will see below.

#### *Metaphor and closeness to the human lifeworld*

What is especially interesting here is the way in which some concepts from the scholarly culture within Islam were translated to the lifeworld of common people, through the use of metaphors and analogies with local practices. It is at this level that cultural translation is most explicitly at work, and again I suggest that *The peerless method* inherited this from its Fulfulde model. For example, one impossible attribute of God is (al-Sanūsī’s sentences in italics, PM in roman type.)

*that His exalted essence would be clad by incidental things, like hunger and repletion, or illness and health, or skinniness and fatness, or sadness and happiness. Attributing incidental things to His exalted essence [involves] the seventh sort of the ten impossible resemblances regarding the reality of God. Or that smallness like a speck of dust...or that greatness like an elephant could be attached to His exalted essence.*<sup>360</sup>

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*Edition und Übersetzung des Kitāb al-Muḡarrabāt von Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf as-Sanūsī (gest. um 895/1490).* Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2005, 25.

<sup>356</sup> The name has three *mīms*. Each word *mīm*, consisting of the letters *mīm*, *ya*, *mīm*, has a numerical value of 90. The numerical value of one *mīm* is 40, the value of the *yā’* is 10. Therefore three *mīms* make 270. The three letters of the name of the letter *dāl* add up to 35: *Dāl* is 4, *lām* is 30, *alif* is 1. The value of the *hā’* is 8. 270 plus 35 plus 8 makes 313. If the letter *hā’* is counted as *h* plus *alif*, 8 plus 1, the outcome is 314 and if the *hamza* is also counted, it makes 315. Hunwick 178, 39. The letters are discussed in this sequence, as in ancient Arabic dictionaries: the first, then the last, then the middle radical.

<sup>357</sup> A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975. 422; L. Schaya, *La doctrine soufique de l’Unité*. Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1962. 47, 83.

<sup>358</sup> See Schimmel 1975, 421-423.

<sup>359</sup> Maribel Fierro makes a similar point in an article about the Andalusian sufist Ibn Masarra (d. 931). He was a philosopher who, she argues, was interested in showing the practical concordance between the Qur’ān and philosophy. ‘[His] *kitāb al-ḥurūf*, in which he deals with the letters found at the beginning of some Koranic verses, does not aim at magical interpretation or predicting the future, but intends to show that the Koran is nothing less than an explanation of creation.’ M. Fierro, ‘Opposition to Sufism in al-Andalus.’ In *Islamic Mysticism Contested*. F. de Jong ed. Leiden: Brill, 1999. 179.

<sup>360</sup> Hunwick 178, 26-29.

Aspects of the human and the bovine body, which the cattle-herding Fulani know so well, are used to clarify the very abstract notion that God's oneness is incomparable to anything earthly.

The oneness of His being negates three 'defects': the composition (*tarkīb*) of His being, manifoldness (*ta'addud*), and the number of components and parts (*kamīya ittiṣāl wa infīṣāl*). Composition of being concerns six things: skin, blood, flesh, sweat, bone and marrow. Multiplicity of being concerns the multiplicity of members, from head to toe. 'Number of components' concerns the parts of substance. Every created body exists by the composition of substance in relation to its example. The oneness of being means that God's being is not composed of two or more substances. And number of parts would imply that there is a[nother] being like God's being, but the oneness of His being negates that. The oneness of His attributes negates three deficiencies as well: composition, manifoldness, and the number of His attributes.

Composition, where attributes are concerned, regards, for instance, fat, skinny, long, short, beautiful and ugly. Manifoldness, where attributes are concerned, regards, for instance, white and the like. A single cow can be white-footed, or be white from breast to belly, or have a white tail, or a white back. The oneness of His being negates all that.<sup>361</sup>

Other abstract concepts are translated into terms of social life in central sudanic Africa. This happens, for example, when the prophet Muḥammad's status among people is considered. In more-mainstream theology, his status is also discussed, but there the discussion revolves around the issue of 'iṣma, the eminence or infallibility of prophets—that is, the quality that God gives to certain souls so that at times they can rise to a spiritual level where they can hear divine speech. A question often discussed in that context is whether Muḥammad had been without sin all his life, or only after he took up his mission; and if he *had* sinned before that, to what extent? But this is not how his authority is discussed in *The peerless method*. Here, the question of the extent to which the Prophet is like other people is answered with the information that he was different in the sense that he could marry whomever he wished, without paying a bride-price, and that he did not even pay a bride-price if he wished to give a woman in marriage to someone else.<sup>362</sup> The notion is not without a basis in the Qur'ān, which says, 'We have made lawful unto thee [the prophet Muḥammad] thy wives unto whom thou hast paid their dowries ... and a believing woman if she give herself unto the Prophet and the Prophet desire to ask her in marriage—a privilege for thee only, not for the (rest of the) believers'. (Q. 33:50) There is also a ḥadīth about the Prophet's taking the 'slave girl' Safiyya after a battle, in order to marry her. When asked what he had paid her as dowry, he answered that her manumission served as her dowry.<sup>363</sup> Finally, there is the ḥadīth related by Aisha that the prophet did not die before God allowed him to marry whatever woman he wished.<sup>364</sup> The sources are irrefutable, but the choice of this privilege to describe Muḥammad's standing among men is nevertheless remarkable. In particular, the assertion in *The peerless method* that he could forfeit paying a dowry for a woman whom he wanted to give in marriage to someone else, seems to have been made with a view to local circumstances, and is in contrast with what the Qur'ān says.

Most informative are the elucidations regarding the *shahāda*. As we saw, Al-Sanūsī had considered the confession of faith to comprise, in a symbolic way, all there is to know about God and the prophets (each part represents part of the doctrine of the attributes) and perhaps also in a mystical way: frequently repeating the *shahāda* could lead one to behold 'boundless secrets and wonders'. More or less in line with this thought, in its comment on this statement *The peerless method* gives examples of the blessing the *shahāda* can bestow on the person uttering it, notably when used in *dhikr*—that is, 'remembrance' or repeated utterance as practiced in Sufism but also by non-ṣūfī Muslims: one man who had performed *dhikr* with the *shahāda* had a son who was born with the parts of the *shahāda* written on his left and right shoulder. Another, who had done the same, proved to be blessed when he

<sup>361</sup> Hunwick 178, 19.

<sup>362</sup> Hunwick 178, 5.

<sup>363</sup> Al-Bukhārī Vol. I, book 8, no 367.

<sup>364</sup> Al-Nasā'ī, kitāb 26 Nikāh. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Kitāb 41, 180, 201.

was killed, and when his blood was shed it formed the words of the *shahāda*.<sup>365</sup> (On the other hand, *The peerless method* warns that someone who repeats the words just because he believes they can guarantee him a place in paradise and rescue him from calamity in this world and the next, is an unbeliever.<sup>366</sup>)

However, the preface also presents a remarkably practical view. First it states, in line with the conventional Ash‘arī view, that, as long as it is pronounced by someone who firmly believes in *and* complies with the sunna *and* acts as a Muslim should, the *shahāda* is the key to paradise. But the authors of *The peerless method* are aware that, for their audience, more than paradise is at stake, and that the idea of paradise (and hell) is part of the Muslim religion that does not resonate deeply with believers in the sudanic culture. Their audience of relatively new believers wishes to know what is in it, here on earth, for the person who pronounces the double creed. The answer to that question is that he who pronounces the *shahāda*, even if his faith is defective, will not be murdered, or enslaved (or abducted: *lā yustaraqu*<sup>367</sup>), and that others will not consume what is his. Murder, enslavement and theft were the real-life terrors in a society suffering from unrest. To be enslaved was a threat to everyone, but specifically to those who were considered non-Muslims. The passage shows clearly that the message of *The peerless method* was addressed to people who felt that threat, much more than the threat of suffering in hell.

### *Mysticism and reason*

It is not easy to gauge the attitude of *The peerless method* towards mystical understanding. The word *ma‘rifa*, which appears in the title, is often translated by modern scholars as gnosis, and might be interpreted as an indication of a ṣūfī approach. However, in Arabic theology and philosophy the word was just as often synonymous with ‘ilm.<sup>368</sup> In *The peerless method*, both approaches to knowledge—the mystical and the rational—are represented. The text pays its respects, in the introduction, to the ṣūfī al-Shādhilī; there is the list of miracles associated with al-Sanūsī, which are characteristic of the ṣūfī tradition in the Maghrib. In the last pages, the stages on the path towards surrender to God are mentioned, and there is a reference to the existence of a sort of reality that is beyond ordinary perception, notably in the context of an elucidation of the character of the prophet Muḥammad. The Prophet has a perfection of beauty that is hidden from common people. It is so bright that they cannot see it, but God has created a stronger perception in us, through which some do behold it.<sup>369</sup>

Bobbayi is of the opinion that *The peerless method* ‘strives to attain a synthesis between *Tawḥīd* and *Ṭaṣawwuf*’.<sup>370</sup> But the question is: could it not be the other way around? Could it be that al-Wālī, with the political climate of Bornu in mind, tried to undo the synthesis between *tawḥīd* and *ṭaṣawwuf* that we find in the original oral *kabbe* and that was developed further in its modern oral expressions, with the aim of privileging the rational study of God’s oneness? It is striking how, in *The peerless method*, the logical demonstrations of God’s oneness are all spelled out in detail, and how quotes from al-Sanūsī’s *Muqaddima* are introduced to stress that an understanding of the truth about God’s eternity or uniqueness can only be had by rational consideration, while references to mysticism are more cursory. When, at the end of the text, the question is asked, ‘how it is that all knowledge just presented is contained in the words of the *shahāda*?’, the answer is a sort of excerpt of what preceded, but does not speak, for instance, of a relation between words and divine truth. Neither is there an explanation of the doctrine of the unity of creation (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), which makes it possible to gain knowledge about divine truths by observing phenomena in the physical world. And in his versified ‘abridgement’ of *The*

<sup>365</sup> Hunwick 178, 55.

<sup>366</sup> Hunwick 178, 55.

<sup>367</sup> Hunwick 178, 5. If *yustaraqu* is a form X of the verb *raqqa*, the meaning here is ‘he will not be enslaved’. If it is a form VIII of *saraqa*, the meaning is ‘he will not be stolen, abducted’.

<sup>368</sup> Rosenthal 2007, 211.

<sup>369</sup> Hunwick 178, 51.

<sup>370</sup> Bobboyi 1992, 100.



*peerless method*, *Sweet watersource of the inmost attributes of the Lord*, al-Wālī does not mention any elements that are specifically related to Sufism.

The best way to make the point, in the end, is not to highlight what is missing. However, before we move on to more positive indications of the separation of, rather than a synthesis between, two modes of religious exercise, one thing must be underlined. *The peerless method* does not deny that there is knowledge of an esoteric quality that can be acquired only through spiritual understanding. The existence of two types of truth—the one to be attained by spiritual, the other by intellectual effort—was commonly accepted. As in other parts of the Muslim world, Sufism had been a part of religious experience and practice for many centuries. In West Africa, moreover, Sufism was beginning to be organised into brotherhoods and special communities in the seventeenth century, but was not yet as separate, culturally and socially, from other forms of Islam as it was later to become. *The peerless method* does not contest the mystical road to understanding—rather, it attributes to it only minor significance for the ordinary Muslim. That al-Wālī did not suppress the references to mysticism is understandable. The Fulfulde text he translated was too well known as it was, which was exactly why it served his purposes, as I will argue in chapter 7. A canonical text cannot be altered too much without losing its authority. The primary indicator of al-Wālī's ambivalence towards mysticism is the much greater emphasis in the rest of the text on rational cognitive learning. That is the subject of the next part of this chapter.

#### 4. Tradition with a twist

There is one important issue on which *The peerless method* diverges significantly from the content of the *Ṣughra* and introduces its own views. This is where ignorance and imitation (*taqlīd*) are concerned, and the person who is 'guilty' of it, the *muqallid*. The theme does not occur in the modern *kabbe* versions, so we can concentrate on a comparison of the issue as it is discussed in *The peerless method* and by al-Sanūsī.

As we have seen, the latter had said that every legally competent Muslim adult (the *mukallaḥ*) is held by divine law to know what is necessary, impossible and possible with regard to God. The *Ṣughra* presented this knowledge as essential to one's faith or religion. It could be obtained by reading the *Ṣughra* and by reciting the *shahada*, which contained it all. *The peerless method* starts to unfold its own view of knowledge at the end of the preface:

knowledge ('ilm) is essential to the doctrine of faith. It relates to the truth, by means of proof (*dalīl*). Because, if people do not know, it does not matter whether this is from simple ignorance or complex ignorance, or whether they are doubting or mistrusting, or mislead or blindly accepting [imitating].

Farther on in the text, *The peerless method* comments on al-Sanūsī's statement that it is possible for God to do whatever He wishes ('As for that which is possible to the Exalted, it is doing or refraining from everything possible') by remarking that God can judge in whatever way He wishes. Therefore a Muslim adult must know a number of things, and 'it is no excuse [to say]: "I have worked hard, but I am not capable."' That is rather a sign of disqualification.<sup>371</sup> Apparently this remark about the duty to study was so important that it was squeezed into the commentary in a place where at first sight it does not seem to belong. For what do the earthly dweller's intellectual efforts have to do with God's capacity to judge? The remark makes sense only if the intention is to say that God will judge believers first and foremost for the intellectual knowledge they have acquired.

What else did al-Wālī say about the relation between belief and knowledge or ignorance? As was the convention, he distinguished between simple and complex ignorance. Simple ignorance (*al-jahāl al-basīṭ*) was that of the person who, when asked about God's being, says, 'I do not know', which means

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<sup>371</sup> Hunwick 178, 32.

that he is willing to learn. There was nothing wrong with that.<sup>372</sup> Complex ignorance (*al-jahal al-murakkab*) was the ignorance of people who do not recognise that they do not know the truth, and was a source from which unbelief could develop. *The peerless method*, however, expresses quite a different view. Here, ignorance in any form, simple or complex, is categorically condemned as unbelief. Four types of *unbeliever* are identified, two of which are ignorant, while for the other two their ignorance or understanding is unstable: first, there are those who neither have nor ask for knowledge, because their ignorance is ‘flat like the grass’; second, there are people whose ignorance is complex—that is, who are ignorant without knowing it; third, there is the doubter (‘he who is equal to both sides shifting all the time and equally between truthfulness and lying. [Each time], whenever one side prevails, the other is mistrusted’); and fourth, there is the imitator. The short description of each category is concluded with the words, ‘there is agreement that he is an unbeliever’. The text does not further discuss the first three categories. Rather, all attention goes to the imitator.

The imitator is he who pledges the twenty attributes without [their] proof (*dalīl*), and it is said that the imitator is he who accepts the words of the ‘ulamā’ without proof and [then] falls back to blind acceptance’.

And again: ‘There is agreement that he is an unbeliever.’<sup>373</sup>

Was there in fact such a consensus? It is useful here to stop and consider the question in some detail, before evaluating the assertions of *The peerless method*. First of all, al-Sanūsī himself had never suggested that the verdict regarding *taqlīd* was a matter that had been decided. It is true that he was convinced of the need to keep pondering the ontology of God, but his view on imitation seems to be more nuanced than is sometimes assumed.<sup>374</sup> His ‘*Aqīda al-ṣughra*’ starts by stating that every believer has the duty to use reason to understand the proofs of God’s reality that are provided by the science of theology. In his own commentary (*Sharḥ umm al-barāhīn*) on the *Ṣughra*, al-Sanūsī says that, when he wrote that every *mukallaf* must know what is necessary, impossible and possible with regard to God, he specifically said ‘know’ (*innahu ya‘rifu*) and not ‘settle for’ (*innahu yajzamu*). What one needed for faith, he said, was knowledge based on proof.

‘*Taqlīd* is not sufficient. It is a resolution that corresponds with the principles of belief, but without the proof for it. [The word ‘know’] refers to the duty of knowing and the fact that *taqlīd* is not sufficient. That is the opinion of numerous experts such as shaykh Abū al-Ḥassan al-Ash‘arī and the qāḍī Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, Imām al-Ḥaramayn (al-Juwaynī), and Ibn al-Qiṣār also relates this on account of Mālik. But there are various interpretations regarding the obligation of knowing. Some say that the imitator is a believer, although he is disobedient, because he leaves aside the knowledge which is produced by true understanding. Others say he is a believer and is not disobedient, except when he is capable of understanding the right meaning [and yet leaves it aside]. Others say: the imitator is fundamentally not a believer, but yet others criticise that.’<sup>375</sup>

He then mentioned famous scholars—al-Qushayrī, qāḍī b. al-Wālīd b. Rushd, Ibn al ‘Arabī, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and his followers—who believed that knowledge of God could also come from faith or inspiration and that one could be a good Muslim without independent intellectual reflection, by ‘blindly accepting’ the knowledge of religious experts. In his *Muqaddima*, al-Sanūsī simply termed these people competent (*muḥaqqiqūn*) and left it at that.<sup>376</sup> In the *Sharḥ* he added more critically, ‘but

<sup>372</sup> Luciani 1908, 112- 125.

<sup>373</sup> Hunwick 178, 14.

<sup>374</sup> K. el-Rouayheb e.g. in his inspiring article mentioned before (‘Opening the gate of verification’) regards al-Sanūsī as someone who was unambiguous and outspoken in his condemnation of *taqlīd*. El-Rouayheb 2006, 269.

<sup>375</sup> *Sharḥ*, 1932, 14, 15.

<sup>376</sup> Luciani 1908, 121. For al-Ghazālī’s point of view, see R.J. McCarthy, ‘Al-Ghazali, The clear criterion for distinguishing between Islam and Godlessness.’ In *Deliverance from Error. Five key texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography, al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. Translated and annotated by R.J. McCarthy. Louisville: Fons Vitae, Louisville, 1980, 146.

this is in most cases (*fī aghlabin*) not true<sup>377</sup>—that is, in most cases it is not true that firm belief can be reached or maintained without sustained reflection on God’s being.

By the way, this may also be seen in the context of al-Sanūsī’s ongoing discussion with Aḥmad Ibn al-Zakrī, his fellow townsman whom I referred to above and who defended the view that one could have faith without a perfect understanding of the theological arguments behind religious tenets. Indeed Ibn Zakrī argued along with al-Ghazālī that the faith of ‘simple’ souls and old women was the most sincere and solid of all, and that honest worship was enough for those who lack the education or understanding that the learned possess.<sup>378</sup> The discussion between the two men and their followers may have accentuated their differences and put more emphasis on al-Sanūsī’s insistence on reason and intellect. In any case, al-Sanūsī wrote that the risk one runs in trying to do without reflection is that one will lapse from faith into doubt and unbelief. He regarded *taqlīd* as a weakness that could eventually lead to unbelief, but not as a form of unbelief in its own right.

In fact, in keeping with Ash‘arism, al-Sanūsī was rather careful when it came to defining what unbelief is at all.<sup>379</sup> He mentioned only two unambiguous forms of *kufr*: consciously adoring other divinities than God, and denying that Christians and Jews are heathens. A substantial part of his *Muqaddima* is devoted to explaining that only he who adores an entity other than God is an unbeliever, and that it is very difficult to define any other categories of unbelievers. Even the greatest theologians—and he gives examples of qaḍī Iyāḍ, Malik and al-Bāqillānī—could not say anything definitive about it. The exclusion of anyone who professes Islam, he argued, must be avoided at all cost, for ‘it is better to forgive a thousand unbelievers than to spill one drop of blood of a believer’.<sup>380</sup> He enumerated a number of excuses for those who follow a certain opinion without being aware that it implicitly leads to denial of the truth. Among his examples are the view that voluntary acts are brought forth by an independent force in man, and the ideas that God resembles a body, and that He has ideal but not substantive attributes.<sup>381</sup> All those who hold such erroneous opinions on topics that are central to al-Sanūsī’s theology are nevertheless excused, he says, if they do not realise that the logical consequences would affect the concept of God’s oneness. It is true that al-Sanūsī stressed the necessity of studying *tawḥīd* and the rules of reasoning, but he does not judge that harshly those who went by the wrong information out of ignorance.

That al-Sanūsī’s view of *taqlīd* was nuanced, or at least complex, is also confirmed by the distinction he makes in his *Muqaddima* between vicious and praiseworthy imitation (*al-taqlīd al-radī* and *al-taqlīd al-ḥasan*). He understands the former as the adoration of others than God, in mimicry of parents and ancestors, as the pagans of the ancient period did.<sup>382</sup> Yes, such imitators were unbelievers. But the imitators—perhaps ‘followers’ would be a better translation here—of Mu‘tazilis and Murjī‘is, whose theology he disputed vigorously, were not unbelievers, let alone ‘imitators’ of his own doctrine, people who subscribed to it without understanding it completely.<sup>383</sup> On the contrary, al-Sanūsī approved of praiseworthy imitation, ‘such as the imitation by believers of the sunni scholars in the field of applied law’. This imitation ‘is considered by most authors to be sufficient, if a person is firmly convinced of the Truth, or if he lacks the capacity to understand the evidence’.<sup>384</sup>

In spite of all this, if al-Wālī derived his categorical rejection of *taqlīd* from al-Sanūsī, he was not the only one. Some of al-Sanūsī’s commentators, for instance a certain Yaḥya al-Shawī (d. 1685) and ‘Isā al-Saktanī (d. 1652), both theologians in the Maghrib, shared a disparagement of imitation, which they

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<sup>377</sup> *Sharḥ* 1932, 16.

<sup>378</sup> Brosselard 1861, 255.

<sup>379</sup> Knysh 1993. Only for the Kharijites, *takfīr* was rather central to their ideology, but they also chose the only position towards society that was compatible with that stance, namely outside of it. See Van Ess 1991-1997, IV, 671, 674.

<sup>380</sup> Luciani 1908, 102, 103.

<sup>381</sup> Luciani 1908, 98-106.

<sup>382</sup> Luciani 1908, 88, 89.

<sup>383</sup> Luciani 1908, 120, 121.

<sup>384</sup> Luciani 1908, 120, 121.

based on the opinion of the master from Tlemcen.<sup>385</sup> In the same period, a group of ‘ulamā’ in the west Saharan town of Sijilmasa apparently indulged in ‘inquisitory practices’, based on the view that those who could not produce the answers to philosophical questions regarding *tawhīd* were unbelievers.<sup>386</sup> It seems, then, that the idea of the ‘imitator’ as an outsider circulated in West Africa on a wider scale.

But we know this because a contemporary of these inquisitory ‘ulamā’, al-Ḥasan b. Mas‘ūd al-Yūsī (d. 1691), criticised them sharply, explaining that one who did not know all the desired details could certainly be a true believer.<sup>387</sup> Aḥmad b. ‘Isā al-Anṣārī (d. 1826 in Sudan) was hesitant: he wrote a commentary on the *Ṣughra* in which he remarked, of the duty to know what is necessary, possible and impossible with respect to God, that one must avoid calling others doubters, and that there are different opinions about the imitator; that al-Bāqillānī for instance says that the faith of an imitator is true.<sup>388</sup> Another commentator, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dasūqī (d. 1815), was more explicit. Commenting on al-Sanūsī’s own commentary, he wrote: ‘The words that the imitator is not a believer are regarded as dubious, because it would imply *takfīr* on the part of most common believers, and they are the majority of the umma.’<sup>389</sup> Of course these commentators are from other regions, and partly from a later period than al-Sanūsī or al-Wālī. But their opinions serve to demonstrate that among Ash‘arī theologians, *taqlīd* was never an issue that had simply been decided. Against that background, the insistence in *The peerless method* that it had been so decided is striking, and draws our attention to the central importance of the theme of ‘blind acceptance’ versus learning and knowing in this text.

The position of *The peerless method* is clear: Muslims had to gather intellectual, as opposed to intuitive, knowledge about their religion, and to use their intellect (‘*aql*’) to understand it. This point is emphasised by a stylistic turn. Where al-Sanūsī wrote ‘know that rational judgement consists of three categories’, *The peerless method* repeats (words from the *Ṣughra* in italics): ‘*Know*, you who are eager to enter the group of friends of God, that al-‘aḳīda al-ṣughra teaches you what you must know of *tafsīr*, ḥadīth and *fiqh*. *Rational judgement consists of three categories.*’ The word ‘know’ has been cut loose from al-Sanūsī’s sentence and appropriated by the commentary, emphasising the essential importance it has for its authors. *I‘lam* (know) is of course a very common word in texts about religious doctrine. It has been used for centuries almost as a conjunction, to posit a thesis and begin a sentence. The literal meaning in those cases fades to the point that in translations the word often disappears altogether. Here, however, the imperative is anything but casual. Isolated in terms of both syntax and quotation, it takes on a solemn character and recalls the sacred word of the archangel Jibrīl to the prophet Muḥammad, *iqra*’, recite! At the same time it is linked to the idea of people entering, as if it were transferred from the abstract categories of judgement of the *Ṣughra*, to a place where it stands as a heavy gate, guarded by ‘ulamā’ who will ask for the password.

As the text of *The peerless method* progresses, the figure of the imitator is ever more present. There is increasing emphasis on the exhortation to learn, ‘so that you are not an imitator’. Starting about halfway through the text of the commentary, sentences from the *Ṣughra* (in italics in the example below) about God’s necessary ideal and real attributes are time and again expanded by the added formula,<sup>390</sup> ‘if you are asked about proof—according to reason/according to revelation—of [x], then say [y], so that you are not an imitator.’ For instance:

<sup>385</sup> El-Rouayheb 2006.

<sup>386</sup> Al-Hajj 1974/77, 7. al-Yūsī, al-Ḥ. b. Mas‘ūd. (no title) Arabe 1273, BN.

<sup>387</sup> El-Rouayheb 2006. For the Magrhebian al-Yūsī see GAL II 455, S I 675.

<sup>388</sup> A. b. Isā al-Anṣārī, *Sharḥ umm al-barāhīn ‘alā al-Sanūsīyya*. Al-Qāhira: n.d. 1962, 9.

<sup>389</sup> M. b. A. al-Dasūqī, *Ḥāshiya ‘alā sharḥ Umm al-barāhīn*. Al-Qāhira: n.d. 1912, 67.

<sup>390</sup> W. Ong describes the formula as a ‘more or less exactly repeated set of phrases or expressions [...] in verse or prose, which [...] have a function in oral culture more crucial and pervasive than any they may have in a writing or print or electronic culture.’ Ong 1982, 26.

‘If you are asked about the proof of the existence of God the Exalted, according to reason, then say, so that you are not an imitator: *‘as for the proof of God’s existence according to reason, that is the creation of the world.*’<sup>391</sup>

At times, the proof from reason that the believer is supposed to be able to reproduce is quite complex, like this example about the creation of the world (which is part of the proof that there is a Creator):

And if you are asked about proof for the world’s creation, then say: *‘the proof of the creation of the world, that is of this earthly world, is its being inseparable from properties that are accidental in time, like movement and rest and such things, for instance uniting and dividing; and that which is inseparable from properties that exist in time, is itself temporal.*

If you are asked about the creation of the accidental, then say: *‘the proof of the creation of the accidental is the observation of its transformation from non-being to being and from being to non-being.’* If the accidental properties were eternal, then they could not be non-existent. But their non-existence has been observed in numerous bodies, just like their opposite, existence. So the observation of the transformation of occasional things is proof of their creation, and the link to temporal occasional things is proof of their creation, and their creation is proof of their existence in time, and their existence in time is what is pursued. Praise God who guides us when we desire this proof of existence according to reason.<sup>392</sup>

The reasoning reflects the standard *kalām* argumentation for the existence of the Creator.<sup>393</sup> It was well known among scholars in the historic heartlands of Islam, who had studied works on such topics as *uṣūl al-dīn* by al-Bāqillānī (*kitāb al-tamhīd*) or al-Ash‘arī (*kitāb al-luma’*). But, judging from Hall and Stewart’s ‘core curriculum’, not many West African scholars can have been familiar with such works, and even if they had been, the reasoning seems hardly fit for testing the basic religious knowledge of the common believer. For al-Wālī however, basic knowledge was really not enough. Whoever wrote this paragraph—an earlier Fulani scholar or al-Wālī himself—was interested in science at a high level. As usual in Ash‘arī *kalām*, the proof from reason is followed by proof from revelation (in this case Q 14:10: ‘Can there be doubt concerning Allāh, the creator of the heavens and the earth?’). Then follows a most suitable verse from ‘the poet’, that is Abū l-‘Abbās al-Maqqārī, who wrote: ‘Our proof for the existence of the world is, when you are learned, that the world was created.’<sup>394</sup>

The point is that in *The peerless method* al-Sanūsī’s connection between the *shahāda* and knowledge is, if not entirely replaced, nonetheless overshadowed by a connection between imitation and unbelief, because the intention of *The peerless method* was to draw a line between ‘imitators’ and believers. It maintained that the person who, when asked, could not reproduce the required proof, would be considered an imitator, and therefore an unbeliever—and that was that. Where did this intransigent view come from? I suggest three influences: first, a local concern with obedience, notably to the ‘ulamā’; second, the sudanese tradition of reform described by Hiskett; and third, a contemporary reform movement in the Middle East.

#### *Obedience to ‘ulamā’*

<sup>391</sup> Hunwick 178, 33.

<sup>392</sup> Hunwick 178, 33.

<sup>393</sup> See H.A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 134-143.

<sup>394</sup> Hunwick 178, 33: دليلاً على وجود العالم ان كنت عالماً حدوث العالم Abū l-‘Abbās A.b.M. al-Maqqārī al-Tilimsānī al-Mālikī al-Ash‘arī b. al-Tatā’ūnī Shihāb al-Dīn (GAL II 296, S II 407) was born at the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century in Tlemcen. He taught history in ḥadīth in Fez, then went on to teach in Mecca, Damascus and Cairo. His *Manẓūmat idā’at al-dujjuna fī i’tiqād ahl al-sunna*, from which this line is taken, is a profession of faith in fivehundred verses. It is part of Hall & Stewart’s ‘core curriculum’. Two thousand copies of it appear to have been made during his lifetime.

As we saw in the previous chapter, things were changing for ‘ulamā’ in this period: the spread of Islam to rural areas, the rise of popular Islam, and an increasing number of specialists of the religion, not all of whom had the same scholarly education, fed the idea that ‘ulamā’ could be ‘bad’. At the same time, some influential ṣūfīs claimed that the intellectual learning of ‘ulamā’ was not the only way to gain knowledge of the truth. Moreover, the good relationship between ‘ulamā’ and the ruling class, which had lasted more than five centuries, now appeared to be less strong. Now, the rejection of the imitator dove-tailed with, and may, indeed, have originated in the collective concern of ‘ulamā’ with classical book learning, who were losing some of their status among Muslim communities. At the same time, this rejection answered the needs of rural communities, which were struggling to define their new Muslim identity. Both factors—the latter will be further explored in the next chapter—belong to the social history of central sudanic Africa.

In accordance with Ash‘arism, al-Sanūsī had written in his *Muqaddima* that any truthful doctrine must be in agreement with both reason and tradition, but he had left it to his readers to find examples from revelation to support his tenets. In many cases, *The peerless method* does supplement proof from reason (*dalīl al-‘aql*) with citations from tradition (*dalīl al-naql*)—that is, the sunna or the Qur’ān. For the student of theology, proof from reason and proof from tradition functioned in the same way at a cognitive level; only the source or method of proving were different. As we have seen, *dalīl* is proof in the sense of an unmistakable sign. ‘Proof from reason’ did not mean that the student was supposed to ‘invent’ his own logical proof, but that he must remember and be able to reproduce the proof that had been established before by authoritative scholars, just as he had to learn which Quranic verses or ḥadīths proved certain theses. Both types of information depended on the specialised knowledge of scholars.

Against this background, the imitator in *The peerless method* is not someone who follows pagans or the wrong ‘ulamā’, but someone who does not pay due attention to the ‘ulamā’ and what they stand for at all. He is someone who repeats single phrases from the Muslim tradition and who merely *poses* as a believer—someone who has picked up scattered details about Islam but who cannot reproduce enough propositions and proofs regarding the attributes of God and the Prophet, including quite complex philosophic lines of reasoning from the Mu‘tazila repertoire.

In contrast, the believer was the person who had memorised—in Arabic, not in his mother tongue—parts of text on the subject of *tawhīd*. In actual practice this was the person who was regularly spending time with an *‘ālim*, sitting at his feet to hear the text and memorise it. Indeed, popular texts from a tradition that expounded ‘the benefits of learning’ tell students that ‘he who is not present at the place of a scholar for 40 days in a row is [one of the people who side] with Pharaoh.’<sup>395</sup> The believer, then, was the person who visited the ‘ulamā’, paid his respects to them, and submitted to their authority. In the preface of *The peerless method* it says, intricately but tellingly:

Verily, God created four kingdoms. One in the east, one in the west, one in the south and one in the north. They never stop exclaiming, each morning and evening. Those who are in the east [exclaim]: If only we had not been created! And those in the west: If only we knew, when we were created, why we were created! Those in the south [exclaim]: Alas, if we knew why we were created, we would act according to what we knew. And those in the north: Alas! If only we had *not* acted according to what we knew, we would have resigned from what the ‘ulamā’ prohibit us!<sup>396</sup>

What this means is that the knowledge that ordinary human beings have is always insufficient. Only the ‘ulamā’ have the knowledge that can bring salvation. And relevant salvation in this cultural context

<sup>395</sup> See e.g. Falke 11 and Falke 269.II

<sup>396</sup> Hunwick 178, 8 has ‘north’ again where other manuscripts have ‘south’. Hunwick 178 and Ibadan 82/48 mix up the verbs *عمل* and *علم* in the sentences about the people in the south and the north. Apparently the passage did not appeal much to the copyists. But mss Arabe 5541 and 5650 (Paris) solve that problem, and are the sources of the translation given here.

was in this life, here and now. It was to be a member of the Muslim community and not an outcast. And it was the knowledge of the ‘ulamā’ that made the difference.

### *Bad Muslims*

The distinction between good and bad Muslims, and therefore the discussion about the grounds for anathematising (*takfīr*), had long been a central theme for reformers in all parts of the Muslim world, including West Africa. Here, qāḍī Iyāḍ (d. 1149) had written, in his famous *Kitāb al-shifā’*, that unbelief was in the first place ignorance of God. He differentiated between three kinds of unbelievers: born unbelievers (such as Jews and Christians), apostates, and those who were to be adjudged unbelievers on account of their actions and beliefs. Committing a sin, even a capital one such as murder, adultery or treating the prophets with levity, made one a sinner, but not necessarily an unbeliever. But denying revelation and divine law by doing things that only an unbeliever would do, or saying things only an unbeliever would say, like declaring the drinking of wine or other sins lawful, did make one an unbeliever.<sup>397</sup>

As we know from his letters to Askia Muḥammad and Muḥammad Rumfa, al-Maghīlī adopted this view. He also discussed other grounds for *takfīr* that were related to diverging intellectual positions. Maintaining, for instance, that God is knowing but has no knowledge, as did the Mu‘tazila, while being aware of the logical implication that God is thus denied one of His necessary attributes, made one an unbeliever in the eyes of some, said al-Maghīlī, although he acknowledged that there was no agreement on the matter.<sup>398</sup> He also warned against the mixing of the Muslim faith with practices related to traditional beliefs.

The next discussion of the theme that is well documented and preserved is that between ‘Uthmān dan Fodio and his teacher, shaykh Jibrīl b. ‘Umar. It took place more than a century after the period in which al-Wālī was active, but it responds to developments that had been building up in the eighteenth and possibly the seventeenth century. It can therefore add to our ‘oblique’ view of the second half of the seventeenth century, and it will allow us to compare al-Wālī’s ideas with those of one of his readers. Shaykh Jibrīl maintained that people who were disobedient by virtue of having committed a grave sin were unbelievers, and that even those who refused to listen to what ‘an intelligent person says’ while they themselves were ‘of little knowledge’ and befuddled by ‘fanciful opinions on their Islam’ were unbelievers.<sup>399</sup> What intelligent people would say, according to Jibrīl, was that someone who commits sins such as having more than four wives, not veiling his womenfolk, partaking in or allowing the mingling of men and women, taking women in tribal warfare and depriving orphans of their rights, necessarily becomes an unbeliever.<sup>400</sup> Arguably, this view was in keeping with the idea that doing things that only unbelievers would do made one an unbeliever. Hiskett commented ‘the teaching of Sheikh Jibrīl b. ‘Umar set off a controversy in the Sudanese towns, centred round the relation of “disobedience” (here synonymous with non-Islamic local custom) to unbelief.’<sup>401</sup>

Dan Fodio was much troubled by the extremely judgemental attitude of his venerated shaykh and of many others around him, and referred to al-Maghīlī and al-Suyūṭī to justify his view that a sinner was not an unbeliever. In the course of his career, he wrote a few dozen sermons and treatises warning against anathematising. He specifically rejected the practice, which had become quite popular by then,

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<sup>397</sup> See Hunwick 1985, 118-120. Ibadis too accepted the idea that sinners are not unbelievers. Ibadism was important in the region for at least the early history of Islam. See Chapter Two.

<sup>398</sup> Hunwick 1985.

<sup>399</sup> The text of a poem on the subject by Shaykh Jibrīl is rendered in Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 141-143.

<sup>400</sup> Hiskett, 1962, 588-9.

<sup>401</sup> Hiskett 1962, 591.

of questioning people on their knowledge of religion and accusing them of unbelief if this knowledge was insufficient.<sup>402</sup>

Nevertheless, obedience was an issue for Dan Fodio too. In his *Nur al-albāb* he wrote that there are Muslims, unbelievers and groups about whose status there is no agreement. He divided unbelievers into the same two categories: al-Maghīlī and qāḍī Iyād. Believers were also found in three groups: they were the ‘ulamā’, the students (*talaba*) and those who listen to the ‘ulamā’ and follow their example—almost a social category. One of the groups about which there was no agreement was made up of the ignorant who had entered Islam but did not understand on what it is based, and yet did *not* pursue *taqlīd*; ‘they pronounce the *shahāda* without sound belief, but do not study or question the ‘ulamā’ or attend their gatherings, because of their lack of interest: in the eyes of God they are unbelievers, but insofar as they do nothing in word or deed that reflects unbelief, their fellowmen must accept them as Muslims.’<sup>403</sup> As a great social leader, Dan Fodio was more moderate than his teacher regarding sin and much more moderate than al-Wālī regarding *taqlīd*. But even for Dan Fodio the decisive matter, the question that made one an unbeliever or not ‘in the eyes of God’, was whether one studied and attended the ‘ulamā’’s lessons. By this time, the ‘ulamā’’s grip on the Muslim community was a major issue.

Hiskett, Hunwick and Brenner have convincingly demonstrated the continuity of reformist themes, terminology and quotations from qāḍī Iyād to al-Maghīlī and then to ‘Uthmān dan Fodio. How this tradition developed in between these landmarks, which are each three centuries apart, is still largely unknown, but *The peerless method* adds another link to the chain of its transmission. It demonstrates that the promotion of anathematising was not so much initiated, as Hiskett remarked, but rather elaborated on by shaykh Jibrīl, because before him, in al-Wālī’s time, it was already a burning question. ‘Uthmān dan Fodio rejected the austere stance in the matter of unbelief his shaykh Djibrīl, of al-Wālī, and of the sectarian ‘*mutakallimūn*’ who used the knowledge recorded in *The peerless method* to test people’s devotion. But he shared al-Wālī’s idea that faith and loyalty to the ‘ulamā’ were as good as synonymous.

Fundamentally, *The peerless method* is preoccupied with determining what sorts of people did or did not belong to the community of believers. The commentary, in spite of the many lines that were added to the *Ṣughra*’s ruminations about God’s attributes, is in the end not so much about abstract principles of faith or theology, but about the practical matter of sifting the wheat from the chaff in daily life. Within this tradition, the theme of *taqlīd* served as the litmus test that demonstrated whether a self-professed Muslim was wheat or chaff.

### *Influence from the Middle East*

It has been suggested that, from the late eighteenth century onwards, the movement of reform in central sudanic Africa was influenced by Wahhabism.<sup>404</sup> It is a fact that Wahhabism also explicitly rejected imitation of medieval scholarly opinions and propagated the doctrine that disobedience in religious matters involve unbelief. Nevertheless, *The peerless method* shows that, in sudanic Africa, a rigorous position regarding the imitator had developed well before Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-1792) was born. On the other hand, African theologians such as al-Wālī were evidently influenced by discussions in the Middle East, notably in the holy cities, where pilgrims from the far

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<sup>402</sup>Brenner and al-Hajj; Brenner 1984, 84-85; Brenner and Last 1985a, 436. In this light, Bello’s and Dan Fodio’s admiration of al-Wālī is the more remarkable. One ground for it was al-Wālī’s work on grammar. Dan Fodio also agreed with al-Wālī that listening to the ‘ulamā’ was crucial for the status of a believer. But he disagreed with the tendency expressed so strongly in *The peerless method*, to exclude people on account of not having all the answers to theological questions.

<sup>403</sup>Brenner 1987, 52-53.

<sup>404</sup>Hiskett rejected this view in 1962, 593 ff., and later wrote that ‘the western sudan was not immune to intellectual and spiritual currents from the Islamic world beyond the Sudan. Powerful among these currents was the rise of Wahhabism’. See *The Course of Islam in Africa*, 1994, 109.



corners of the Muslim world met ‘to imbibe the doctrines and ways of recentered Sunnism.’<sup>405</sup> In al-Wālī’s day, a lively debate was taking place there about the relation between *taqlīd* and *ijtihād*, of which he must have been well aware. On one of his journeys to Mecca, he was reported to have visited Muḥammad b. ‘Alā al-Dīn al-Bābilī (1592-1666). This remarkable man, a Shāfi‘ī, published only one book, because modesty held him back from writing anything that would not add significantly to what others had already done before him. But he had a great reputation as a jurist and a teacher of ḥadīths, and many of his students would go on to earn fame in their own right. One of these was Muḥammad Ḥayyā, who was to become one of the teachers of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. Al-Bābilī studied not so much the chains of transmission of ḥadīths, as had been the vogue for centuries, but rather the texts themselves and their meaning as sources of law. This formed the core of his reformist ideas. John Voll identified al-Bābilī as one of the focal points of a network of revivalist ‘ulamā’ in Cairo, Madīna and Mecca, who all shared this pursuit to return to the sunna and the Qur’ān as the direct sources of sharī‘a, by way of individual unrestricted *ijtihād* instead of *taqlīd*.<sup>406</sup>

Students and scholars who participated in this network were from various geographical regions, including Persia, North Africa and India and also from various legal schools. Some of them were Ḥanafī, more were Mālikī, but most were Shāfi‘ī. Strict adherence to one of the schools or its legal doctrine was not as important to them as it had been in earlier periods. Moreover, many of these revivalists subscribed to a ṣūfī *ṭarīqa*, and often to more than one. They were not opposed to mysticism as such. But as Voll pointed out, there was certainly a tension within their circles, between their appreciation of the popular ways of the *ṭuruq* and the ‘ulamā’’s struggle to uphold the more formal tenets of religion.

This tension is further analysed in the previously mentioned article on reform in pre-modern Islam by B.M. Nafī. He shows how sentiments in these circles turned against the excesses of popular Sufism, but also against the ṣūfī understanding of two separate fields of knowledge, one concerning inner truth, the other, the rules of outer truth, to which the sharī‘a belongs. These scholars objected in particular to the idea that knowledge of inner truth could be gained without a good measure of knowledge of the outer truth or strict compliance to the sharī‘a. Others among them accused Sufism of asserting too close an association between the divine and the contingent in their doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. On the other hand, the reformers felt that many philosophical systems, including the Ash‘arī interpretation of God’s attributes, had gone too far over the centuries in their abstraction. In any case, the position of the Qur’ān and the Sunna as the fundamental sources of religion and law had to be reasserted.

Al-Wālī was clearly interested in this reconsideration of the Qur’ān and the sunna. Many examples from both sources were added in *The peerless method* as proof of God’s attributes, and many were also included in *Valid arguments*. It is possible that al-Wālī also heeded the concerns discussed in the court-yards of al-Bābilī, about extravagant ṣūfī customs and the excessive importance that some ṣūfis accorded, in the eyes of the reformers, to the intuitive path to the knowledge of inner truth. Listening to and participating in these discussions, al-Wālī can hardly have missed the link with what he had heard or seen himself of ṣūfī’s such as shaykh ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abd al-Jalīl in Kalumbardo, the shaykh who was so proud of the knowledge he obtained without learning, and was moreover suspected of preaching disobedience to Bornu’s ruling class. The opinions of al-Wālī’s Caireen and Middle Eastern peers must have strengthened his own conviction that the value for religion of cognitive learning—that is, of the type of (*ẓāhir*) knowledge in which the ‘book-learned’ ‘ulamā’ were specialists—had to be emphasised. And that is exactly what he did in his version of *The peerless method*.

## 5. Conclusion

<sup>405</sup> Bulliet 1994, 177.

<sup>406</sup> Voll 1975, 32-39. See also Levzion 2007, XII.

*The peerless method* builds on two traditions of canonical texts: al-Sanūsī's written *Al-ʿaqīda al-ṣughra*, and the oral commentaries on it that Fulani 'missionaries' transmitted to new Muslims in a large part of West Africa, and which were called the *kabbe*. Comparison between *The peerless method* and these other traditions offers an opportunity to investigate why the former was composed in the first place. Two questions arise: Why did al-Wālī write his version, and what was its message? I will explore the first question in chapter 7. The second was the subject of this chapter.

The second part of *The peerless method* follows the *Ṣughra* sentence by sentence, so that there seems to be little room for independent ideas. Nevertheless, I have argued in this chapter that the Fulani commentators, ending with al-Wālī, did more than just explain a canonical work in their own language. The first *kabbe* commentaries had translated the *Ṣughra* in a double sense: linguistically and culturally, from Arabic to Fulfulde and from the North African environment, where Islam had been the religion of the majority much longer and was taught in numerous madrasas, to the religion's frontier in sudanic Africa. They added ideas stemming from their experience as educators about the organisation of a text in order to facilitate memorisation; from previous discussions they raised certain issues and left others out, and they inserted new notions. In short, they adapted al-Sanūsī's text for their own audience.

However, the purpose or the general drift of the first Fulfulde comments was comparable to that of the *Ṣughra*. Al-Sanūsī's 'small creed' was a scholastic work, with an educative aim. It was meant to impart to believers more knowledge of the philosophical foundations of the doctrine of the attributes of God, the central doctrine of Ash'arism. Written in an environment where *fushā* Arabic was widely understood, the *Ṣughra* was intended to imbue Muslims with the sense of duty needed to understand basic principles of their religion, and to make better Muslims out of the majority of believers. The final lines of al-Sanūsī's text take into account that intellect was not the only route to the knowledge of religious truth, and declare that it could also be reached by methods of mysticism, in particular by internalising the knowledge represented by the words of the *shahāda*. Essentially, al-Sanūsī's aim was the commitment to Islam of as many believers as possible. It was an inclusive goal, with an aspect of emancipation.

The same can be said of the oral *kabbe* tradition. It reformulated the *Ṣughra* and expanded it, explaining it to Muslims in West Africa and adding general information about the culture and the religion of Islam, so that new converts would know what Muslims do. It did so in Fulfulde, the language of the 'missionaries' and their first audience. *Kabbe* versions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to address a very broad audience. They, too, present their content as one of two equally important ways to obtain religious knowledge—notably, knowledge about the manifest laws and principles, and knowledge about hidden truths, which could be obtained by following the path of the mystic.

In *The peerless method*, however, the first characteristic that the *kabbe* and the *Ṣughra* share—inclusiveness—is replaced by its opposite. A further characteristic of the *kabbe*—its presentation of rational knowledge along with a recognition of the equally valid possibility of mystical knowledge—seems to be pushed into the background in *The peerless method*. The result is a marked tension between an approach to religious knowledge as esoteric and the more orthodox approach to knowledge as something that can be had by means of reason.

The text features various references to Sufism. However, one of the supposed indications of Sufism, the literary method of explaining concepts by attaching meaning to each letter of the word that represents them, may well have served the practical purpose of a mnemonic aid. As I have argued, the method does not necessarily signal an interest in *ʿilm al-ḥurūf*, the mystical means to discover hidden truths through the study of values that letters share with other realms of creation. Other references to Sufism are weighed down by the strong emphasis, throughout the text, on reason, on *nazarī* knowledge obtained through intellectual reflection, and on the transmission of *ḥadīths* and knowledge of the Qur'ān—all sorts of knowledge that only cognitive learning can impart.

*The peerless method* does not address believers who aspire to reach the exalted level of friends-of-God, and not even individuals who seek salvation in the hereafter. It addresses individuals who need to know the basics of Islam, so that they are not considered ‘imitators’, unbelievers, or outcasts. Apart from knowledge of God, these basics include knowledge of Islamic social life, in which one must know one’s place, and that of the shaykh, the faqīh and the imam. In other words, the objective of the authors of *The peerless method* was the transformation, not of the soul (as with Sufism), but of society.

In the society thus envisaged, there is no place for imitators, because they are unbelievers, without exception and without doubt. This notion of the imitator as an unbeliever is the most idiosyncratic element that *The peerless method* adds to the *Ṣughra*. The idea does seem to be related to the practice that the Maghribī scholar al-Yūsī recorded in the same period, of testing people’s knowledge of *tawhīd*. But it had not, up until then, been integrated in a serious scholarly work. And surely, *The peerless method*’s pronounced stance against *taqlīd* fits into a trend, which grew in the seventeenth century, whereby the rational sciences grew in popularity. It was also in keeping with the insistence on *ijtihād* in certain circles in the Middle East. But in *The peerless method*, all the inspiration is put to this specific use of defining the *muqallid* in a way that no other sunni theologian had followed. That the imitator is an unbeliever is far from a casual idea. The author or authors rather hammered away at it with a repeated formula. The ‘imitator’, who does not accept the importance of study and reason, is the motor that turns the inclusive character of the *Ṣughra* and the *kabbe* into exclusiveness, into a method of defining who does and who does *not* belong to the community of Muslims.

The aim of this chapter has been to find out what *The peerless method* is *really* about. Commentaries, Hughes wrote, use canonical sources to express the basic values of a new community. A basic value of the new Muslim communities in the central sudanic countryside of the second half of the seventeenth century was firmness of belief, as opposed to doubt or ambiguity about religious and therefore social loyalties. Another text by al-Wālī begins with greetings to the Prophet, his companions and ‘those who consolidate faith and are steadfast in certainty’.<sup>407</sup> Firm belief and commitment were at the core of a new Muslim identity, which was expressed by a communal lifestyle with new daily routines of prayer and formal learning. *The peerless method* reflects and reinforces this identity, because it is about marking the cultural boundary between dedicated Muslims and ‘doubters’, between people who

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<sup>407</sup>*Tadrīb al-ṭullāb ‘alāṣinā‘at al-i‘rāb*. Kaduna (National Archive) 47/2. Folio 1.

sit down with an *‘ālim* to learn and others who do not and who are therefore suspected of loyalty to their traditional religion. The role of the *‘ālim* was crucial: in a time when Islam expanded to the countryside and the position of the *‘ulamā’* was changing, their specialised knowledge was presented as indispensable for the ordinary believer who does not want to be mistaken for an unbeliever.

The analysis of *The peerless method* has also shown that the author of its final version, al-Wālī, negotiated between different levels of Muslim culture. To begin with, his basic material—consisting of the ‘mainstream’ *Ṣughra* and the regional tradition of the *kabbe*—had a hybrid character. I have argued that al-Wālī himself was inspired on the one hand by ideas he had discussed with peers in Cairo or Mecca, in the circle of the Shāfi‘ī scholar of ḥadīth al-Bābilī. On the other hand, his *Peerless method* responded to social dynamics at the local level—that is, to the need of both *‘ulamā’* and ordinary believers to rethink their role as Muslims in a time when Islam was spreading to new populations. This last issue will be further explored in the next chapter.

## 6

### *Demonising smokers*<sup>408</sup>

The previous chapter demonstrated how *The peerless method* used the status of a text from an important centre of Muslim learning not only to vulgarise Islam, but also to promote a view of particular concerns on the part of Muslims in the region—that is, on the definition of the believer and the position of ‘ulamā’. Knowledge, and reason or intellect (*‘aql*), were central themes in both matters. This chapter continues the discussion of these themes in three ways. First, it focusses on something that could harm the intellect, in the perception of the ‘ulamā’: the new commodity, tobacco. Second, it looks at the interaction between popular culture and a scholarly text, exploring how al-Wālī transposed an argument against smoking from the context of ordinary local believers to Middle Eastern establishments of learning. Third, it shows al-Wālī commenting on *kalām* and practising *ijtihād*. *Valid proofs for proclaiming smoking forbidden* is an ambitious text, written in reply to one of the most respected scholars at al-Azhar, the Cairene institution of religious studies. The topic was relatively new, and al-Wālī searched for new arguments in the sunna and introduced rather unscholarly notions to a treatise addressed to his peers in this leading centre of learning.

The following pages will first present a short history of tobacco in the Muslim world, and of the debate about it in the seventeenth century. This is the background against which al-Wālī’s maverick opinion on the issue can be outlined. It raises the question of what inspired him to defend this opinion in the Middle East. I will argue that his motivation was twofold: that, on the one hand he was deeply convinced that he was right, and that he shared this conviction with people in his direct cultural surroundings, not so much Fulani scholars, but new Muslims from other social backgrounds, the indigenous people in the region. This is, indeed, the main theme of this chapter. I will also argue that, on the other hand, he wished to raise his scholarship to the level of that in the traditional centres of Islam, to attract the attention of his peers there, and to show that he was active at a supra-national level—an ambition that I discuss further in chapter 7.

#### **1. How tobacco conquered the Islamic lands**

Tobacco crossed the Atlantic Ocean from the Americas to the Old World sometime in the last decade of the sixteenth century. Initially, it was hailed as a medicine, in Europe and the Islamic world. The

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<sup>408</sup> A shorter version of this chapter was published as ‘This Filthy Plant. The Inspiration of a Central Sudanic Scholar in the Debate on Tobacco.’ In *Islamic Africa*, 3, 2 (2012), 227-247.

leaves were applied to wounds as a healing plaster, an infusion of tobacco was drunk, and the leaves were smoked as a laxative or against tuberculosis and cancer. In line with Galen's theory of the humours, smoking tobacco was considered to be especially beneficial for those who had a predominantly humid temperament. ('But how do ordinary people know what their temperament is?', asked al-Wālī.<sup>409</sup>) Soon, however, smoking tobacco became fashionable with men and women for pleasure, and it started to arouse deep aversion among many others. The product, the habits, the tools (pipes of wood, stone or bone, and the water pipe) were all new, foreign or addictive, and that was more than enough to cause social unrest, authoritarian violence, and intellectual debates that went on for decades.<sup>410</sup>

In Europe as in the Ottoman Empire, the weapon of the fiercest opponents was religious indignation: smoking or chewing tobacco transgressed the laws of God. Although, in order to use this weapon, these opponents sometimes had to be quite imaginative. In 1661, Christians in Switzerland, for instance, succeeded in passing a law that made smoking punishable as a violation of the seventh Commandment, thou shall not commit adultery.<sup>411</sup> For Muslims it was somewhat easier to find rules against which smokers were sinning. A principal objection of opponents in the Ottoman Empire was that tobacco 'obscured' or 'clouded' the mind (*yughayyibu/yughaffī al-'aql*) like wine does, and was therefore forbidden by divine law (*ḥarām*). By the end of the seventeenth century, however, after a few decades of heated discussion, most Muslim jurists in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Maghrib had come to the conclusion that obscuring the mind only happened to some smokers, when they inhaled great quantities of tobacco smoke, and that no legal principle applied to proclaim tobacco forbidden. In sudanic Africa, Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī (who came from a family of important merchants, the Aquits, and possibly had the commercial interests of his brothers in mind) had already set the tone in favour of tobacco before 1607. The herb had medicinal properties, he wrote, that cured anything from flatulence to scorpion bites.<sup>412</sup> These were views that al-Wālī opposed vehemently.

Many seventeenth-century treatises on tobacco start with a short history of the herb in the Islamic world, and say that it was introduced there towards the end of the tenth century—that is, the end of the sixteenth century CE.<sup>413</sup> Although there has been some discussion of whether tobacco may have been known in Persia and India a century earlier, modern historians agree with the view of these authors that tobacco leaves and the tobacco plant were first brought to Syria, Morocco and Egypt by Portuguese and British seamen and traders, who obtained it from the New World.<sup>414</sup> According to Al-Laqānī, the English carried the drug to Egypt, and the first who imported it into the Maghrib was a Jew.<sup>415</sup>

<sup>409</sup> Or. 8362, 14b.

<sup>410</sup> In Africa tobacco was chewed or smoked. The word for smoking in Arabic is *shurb* (literally: drinking, the word many languages use for smoking). Texts from central sudanic Africa also speak of 'eating' or chewing ('*akl*') and 'using' (*ista'amāl*) of *tinbāk*, *ṭibgh*, *ṭaba* (a Hausa word, see Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 132) and other synonyms. The word *tutun*, most ordinary for tobacco in the Ottoman centres, is not used. The question of whether henbane, hashish or betel were also *smoked* before the introduction of tobacco is not quite resolved, but it is at least accepted that this never happened on a large scale before people smoked tobacco. See P. Ozanne, 'The diffusion of smoking in West Africa.' In *Odu* 2 (1969), 29-42. J.E. Philips, 'African smoking and pipes.' In *Journal of African History* 24 (1983), 302-319. Philips mentions the possibility that the Kotoko in central sudanic Africa smoked. Rosenthal believes that hashish was eaten in the Middle East since the 11th or 12th century, but not smoked before the introduction of tobacco. F. Rosenthal, *The Herb. Hashish versus Medieval Muslim Society*. Leiden: Brill, 1971, 65; Cf R. Matthee, *The pursuit of pleasure: drugs and stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, Ch 4; R. Matthee, 'Tutun' in *EI* 2; J. Grehan, 'Smoking and "Early Modern" Sociability. The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries).' In *American Historical Review* 3 (2006), 1352-1377. 1356.

<sup>411</sup> J. Walton (ed.) *The Faber Book of Smoking*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000. 42.

<sup>412</sup> Al-Tinbuktī's treatise is entitled *Al-lam' fī l-ishāra ilā ḥukm ṭibgh*. See Batran 2003, 169-90.

<sup>413</sup> Among these are the essays on the subject by al-Laqānī, al-Karmī, Hajj Khalifa en al-Nābulṣī. See below.

<sup>414</sup> Matthee, *E.I.* 2; Grehan 2006, 1354, 1355.

<sup>415</sup> Or. 8288, 120v.

In the Middle East, the drug seems to have been quickly accepted among certain *ṣūfīs*. They had already learned to appreciate coffee, which had been introduced shortly before tobacco, because it helped with vigils and meditation. It may be that this smoothed the way for the new stimulant too.<sup>416</sup> Whether the association of smoking with *ṣūfīs* was justified or not, most opposition to smoking or chewing tobacco came from the religiously orthodox, and it seems quite plausible that this had to do, as J. Grehan argues, with the radical social changes these habits entailed. Grehan points out that the initially forcible and cruel repression of smoking by Ottoman sultans was caused by consternation over social and cultural transformations that it was accelerating. Smoking was enjoyed predominantly in coffeehouses, which were also new at the time. 'In the long term, smoking would help to redefine patterns of social interaction, promoting more relaxed attitudes about pleasure and opening up new avenues for leisure and escapism.'<sup>417</sup> Clerics feared the breakdown of moral restrictions in coffeehouses, and rulers feared that what smouldered there was not only coffee and tobacco, but political opposition as well. The Persian Shah Abbās (r. 1587-1629) had those who violated his ban on tobacco tortured and killed, including foreigners and sellers of tobacco.<sup>418</sup> In Istanbul, sultan Aḥmad I (r. 1603-1617) and later sultan Murad IV (r. 1623-40) did the same. The latter was particularly fanatic about it, as Katib Chelebi (d. 1657) relates.<sup>419</sup> At least one of the Ottoman decrees that prohibited smoking reached central sudanic Africa in some form at some time: an undated manuscript collected in Nigeria informs us that 'the Prophet has prohibited [tobacco]. The proof of that is that the sultan of the believers, the sultan of Istanbul, sent a messenger to all places under his reign, to the people there, to China and India, to Rūm and 'Adhar<sup>420</sup>, to Zaytūn and the Yamīn, to Mecca, Madīna, the Shām, Baghdād, the land of Mīl (?), Kūfa, Iskanderiya, Miṣr, Fez, Faris and every part under his reign.'<sup>421</sup> However, even in the lion's den, in Istanbul itself, the punishments were ineffectual. Katib Chelebi wrote, 'Gradually His Majesty's severity in suppression increased, and so did people's desire to smoke, in accordance with the saying "Men desire what is forbidden", and many thousands of men were sent to the abode of nothingness.'<sup>422</sup> Many more became addicted. Eventually, Katib Chelebi believed, there were more smokers than non-smokers, and rulers acquiesced.

Of course some circles persisted in their aversion. As late as 1699 a group of North Africans in Cairo became so enraged by people who were smoking in the vicinity of the procession carrying a new cloth to the Ka'ba, that they turned to violence and were put in jail, where some of them died.<sup>423</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century Wahhabists had taken up preaching against smoking, but governments no longer forbade it. On the contrary, muftis in Istanbul, Damascus and Cairo officially permitted tobacco in the late 1710s.<sup>424</sup>

One question concerning the history of the introduction of tobacco on this side of the Atlantic remains. By what routes was it transmitted within Africa? There is no consensus among historians and archaeologists.<sup>425</sup> Another unresolved question is: Who were the first to bring the stimulant to

<sup>416</sup> Grehan 2006, 1358. Nb hashish was also associated with *ṣūfīs*, who were said to appreciate it because it stopped desires. Its popularity among *ṣūfīs* was the main reason for Ibn Taymiyya's disapproval of hashish, writes Rosenthal 1971, 53.

<sup>417</sup> Grehan 2006, 1353. His remark reminds one of what Edward Lane had written at the end of the nineteenth century: 'In the character of the Turks and Arabs who have become addicted to [tobacco's] use, it has induced considerable changes, particularly rendering them more inactive than they were in earlier times. E.W. Lane, *Manners and customs of modern Egyptians*. (first ed. 1836) London: Dutton, 1954, 338.

<sup>418</sup> Grehan 2006, 1363.

<sup>419</sup> For sultan Aḥmad: Batran 2003, 202. For sultan Murād IV: Ḥajj Khalīfa, *The balance of truth*. Edited and translated by G. Lewis. London: Allen and Unwin, 1957, 51; Grehan 2006, 1363. See also Matthee 2005, 138.

<sup>420</sup> Perhaps the Targui town west of Gobir, northwest of Sokoto?

<sup>421</sup> Ms Paden 76, 1r.

<sup>422</sup> Ḥajj Khālīfa 1957, 51.

<sup>423</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥasan al-Jabartī, *Ajā'ib al-āthār fī l-tarājīm wa l-akhbār*. Cairo: Maktabat al-madbūlī, 1997, I, 143.

<sup>424</sup> Matthee 2005, 144, n. 115; L. Berger, 'Ein Herz wie ein Trockner Schwamm. Laqanis und Nabulisis Schriften über den Tabakrauch.' In *Der Islam*. 78, 2 (2001): 249-293.

<sup>425</sup> J. Goodman, *Tobacco in history. The cultures of dependence*. London: Routledge, 1993. 51-52.

Morocco—English or other European sailors, as Ozanne wrote, or, as Philips believes, Africans from the west coast south of the Maghrib, who had had it for a few years already? One indication in favour of the latter view is found in a Maghribi source, according to which tobacco was smoked by the African keepers of an elephant that was sent to Mawlay Aḥmad al-Mansūr (r. 1578-1603) in Marrakesh in 1597. According to this source, they were the first who possessed tobacco. Where did they find it? Perhaps in Wādī Dar‘a, on the southern slopes of the Anti-Atlas, where there was a sugar plantation, and where the caravan had made a stop. What is certain is that, around 1600, tobacco quickly became popular among sudanic slaves on the Moroccan sugar plantations, as a drug that stilled hunger and thirst. An English trader already noted a significant demand for tobacco in ‘Barbary’—that is, Northwest Africa—in 1612.<sup>426</sup> From there it may have spread to Timbuktu and beyond.<sup>427</sup> Whatever the route was, from the beginning there was a strong association—we see the reflections of it in *fatwas* for instance—of tobacco with ‘pagan’ black Africans,<sup>428</sup> as well as with unconventional behaviour such as dancing and ‘wild hilarious conduct’.<sup>429</sup>

### *The debate in the Middle East*

Everyone in this period had an opinion about smoking, it seems, and many wrote it down, as we shall see from quotations in the texts considered below. In the seventeenth century over 70 *fatwas* on smoking were produced in North Africa alone.<sup>430</sup> The majority of those that have been preserved present arguments about why tobacco should be allowed or why it could not be forbidden.

Because neither the Qur’ān nor the traditions of the Prophet and his companions mention tobacco, and because it was an issue on which consensus (*ijmā‘*) could not have been reached among the classical jurists (because tobacco was not known in their part of the world in their lifetime), Muslim jurists in the seventeenth century had to figure out themselves whether this novelty was allowed. Generally, they applied the method of *qiyās*—that is, analogy or syllogism—to derive the implications of textual sources beyond the scope of their immediate and literal rulings. These jurists used this logical method to extend to tobacco the validity of verdicts on other drugs or stimulants, and to determine whether tobacco should be prohibited, tolerated or accepted—that is, to see which of the five categories of judgement (*aḥkām*, sg. *ḥukm*) applied.

An important source was the principles that the thirteenth-century Mālikī scholar al-Qarāfī (d. ca. 1283)<sup>431</sup> had established about substances that were intoxicating, corruptive or soporific. In an effort to clarify the discussion of products such as hashish and henbane (*banj*), he had described as intoxicating (*muskir*) that which ‘absents’ or clouds the mind and at the same time gives joy (*nashwa*) and self-confidence (*qūwat al-naḥs*). Corruptive (*muḥsid*) products were those that cloud the mind without promoting joy. Soporific (*murqid*) were products that cloud both the mind and the senses. These categories, and whether and to what extent the items falling within them were allowed or prohibited, have since then always played a role in Muslim discussions about various drugs and alcoholic drinks. These discussions, notably about hashish and, later, coffee, informed the deliberations of the jurists who wrote about tobacco. Some of these wrote about coffee and tobacco in a single treatise.<sup>432</sup> There

<sup>426</sup> Goodman 1993, 137, 138.

<sup>427</sup> To what extent tobacco was grown in different parts of Africa in the seventeenth century is not known. In the nineteenth century it was grown in various – mostly non-Muslim – parts of the central Sudan. (See e.g. H. Barth 1857, III, 90.) The plant yields well on different types of soils, even on poor sandy soil. However, it needs much water in the first two or three months, which means that it is preferably grown close to home-steads.

<sup>428</sup> Pagan: *majūs* in Arabic or *maguzawa* in Hausa. Ozanne 1969; Philips 1983, 303-319.

<sup>429</sup> Al-Fakkūn translated in Batran 2003, 240. Batran’s book contains a translation of six seventeenth-century texts about smoking, from Egypt and the Maghrib, unfortunately without the Arabic texts.

<sup>430</sup> Batran 2003, 46.

<sup>431</sup> Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Idrīs al-Qarāfī al-Ṣanhājī (*GAL* I, 385 and *S I* 665). The *qā’ida al-qarāfiyya* are laid out in chapter 40 of his *Kitāb anwā’ al-burūq fī anwār al-furūq fī uṣūl al-fiqh*.

<sup>432</sup> E.g. ‘Alawī b. Aḥmad al-Saqqāf: *Risāla fī qām’ al-shahwa ‘an tanāwul al-tunbāk wa l-kafta wa l-qāf wa l-qahwa*. *GAL* SII, 743.



was general agreement that what intoxicates is impure (*najis*), and therefore ḥarām. If it was assumed that it gave pleasure, the principal task of the first jurists to consider tobacco was to establish whether it also affected the mind. The Mālikī shaykh al-Sanhūrī (d. 1606), for instance, thought that it did.<sup>433</sup> That left unanswered important questions, however, such as in what circumstances a substance is actually intoxicating: only from the moment in which it affects the mind, or also before that, when it is potentially intoxicating? And in what quantity? Many jurists maintained that a quantity that did not cloud the mind was not impure, and some said this was even so for wine, so that a small amount of it could be taken, for instance as medicine.<sup>434</sup> In fact, the analogy between wine and tobacco did not make things much easier for those who pleaded for a prohibition on smoking.

Faced with such legal intricacies as well as doubts about any ‘mind-obscuring’ effect of tobacco, opponents tried another approach: a more prosaic demonstration of impurity. They embraced the rumours of how this luxury was often covered, kneaded, or sprinkled with wine or pig fat, either because the Christians who traded tobacco liked the taste, or because they intended to harm Muslims. Other stories relate how tobacco was polluted by human or dog’s urine, and mixed with or even replaced by dung.<sup>435</sup> Certain jurists replied that even if this was so, it did not necessarily make tobacco impure, because wine, for instance, could be rinsed from the tobacco so that the impurity would also disappear, or because the smoke of something impure was not itself impure.<sup>436</sup> It was hearsay versus logic. The advantage of the former was that the concerns about dirt mixed with tobacco dove-tailed nicely with the worries that some clerics and rulers had about immorality or rebellious sentiments in coffeehouses and among smokers in particular. Both groups had an interest in depicting smoking as a habit of the lowest classes, of riffraff.<sup>437</sup> The coffeehouses offered them another argument, of guilt by association: a pipe was often passed around, just like a wine cup, while the Prophet had said that even water should not be drunk that way.<sup>438</sup>

Another argument in between fear and law was derived from the belief that tobacco made one lazy, stingy, hungry (for sweets especially), effeminate and numb or weak (*futūr*). Opponents of tobacco as well as hashish often repeated the ‘ḥadīth of Aisha’, in the *Sunan* of Abū Dawūd, according to which Muḥammad said that everything that is intoxicating is ḥarām. They claimed—although there is no mention of this in any of the authoritative ḥadīth collections—that, when the Prophet had said this, he had added that anything that numbs one or saps one’s energy (*mufattir*) was also ḥarām.<sup>439</sup> Others brushed this aside, saying that such a ḥadīth was not authentic.<sup>440</sup> If it were true, said the ṣūfī shaykh and rebel Ibn Abū Mahallī (d. 1613), a Maghribī jurist, the verdict should also apply to taking a bath, having sex, or eating butter on a hot afternoon.<sup>441</sup> Al-Ajhūrī, the first target of al-Wālī’s zeal on the subject, repeated the argument, replacing sex with the use of laxatives.<sup>442</sup>

Al-Wālī directed his gaze to opinions in the east, and so will we, although many of the texts involved are, frankly, rather dull. Very often, their style followed that used in other legal debates of the time, which featured a lot of *qīla wa qāla*—one said this; the other, that—with quotes from every single person of supposed significance, regardless of how tediously repetitive that became. The arguments of authors such as al-Karmī and al-Laḳānī, for instance, follow this method so faithfully that it is well-nigh impossible to discern a logically coherent point of view on their own part. Now a number of modern historians have written about the first reactions to tobacco in the Muslim world, and this has

<sup>433</sup> GAL II 316, S II 416. For a short discussion of al-Sanhūrī’s fatwa see Batran 2003, 24–25.

<sup>434</sup> Rosenthal 1971, 106, 107.

<sup>435</sup> Al-Karmī Or. 6275, 51; Al-Laḳānī, Or 8288, f124v.

<sup>436</sup> Al-Ajhūrī held this opinion, see Annex II, folio 16r.

<sup>437</sup> Cf. Matthee 2005, 137–138.

<sup>438</sup> Al-Fakkūn as well as al-Laḳānī use the argument. Batran 2003, 35, 36, 143, 240.

<sup>439</sup> This argument is still used in African Tijaniyya texts from the nineteenth century. E.g. Falke 1101, f 12 en f20: tobacco causes ‘weakness of the soul and turning yellow [cowardly]. It turns a lion into a scarab.’

<sup>440</sup> See Rosenthal 1971, 105.

<sup>441</sup> See Batran 2003, 100–141.

<sup>442</sup> Batran 2003, 154.

made some of these texts more accessible.<sup>443</sup> One thing they show clearly is the tension in the Ottoman centres in the seventeenth century between religious puritans and liberals. The latter also took on the issue in order to discuss the limits to the sultan's powers.

There is no indication that al-Wālī read one of the first treatises on the topic, by Mar'ī al-Karmī (d. 1623)<sup>444</sup>, but this text deserves special attention because it offers very thorough and reasonable explanations. Al-Karmī was born in Nablus and had studied in Jerusalem and Cairo, where he became a professor of Ḥanbalī law at al-Azhar. Personally, he detested smoking, but he saw no legal grounds for a prohibition. His *Tahqīq al-burhān fī shurb al-dukhān* (*Verification of the proofs regarding smoking*) is an essay—twelve pages in Or. 6275—that considers the rules that apply to the practice.<sup>445</sup> It begins by enumerating what opponents of smoking asserted: that it was repulsive (*karīh*, so that the legal category of *makrūh*, disapproved, would apply to it), that the breath of smokers stinks like that of people who have eaten onion (and whom the Prophet forbade to enter a mosque when others were praying there<sup>446</sup>), that smoke is what will pervade heaven and earth on the Last Day, and that the habit of smoking is *bid'a*, a prohibited novelty. That tobacco was repulsive was hard to maintain, al-Karmī understood, because it was a matter of taste. As was often done in such cases, he took the people of Mecca and Medina as a standard and it so happened that many there rather liked tobacco. As for the last assertion, al-Karmī argues that, when considering a novelty, the possibility of allowing it must always be the point of departure. To declare a novelty prohibited, it must be proven harmful for normal people in normal quantities, or there must be a clear analogy with other prohibited things. He finds it hazardous that some jurists base their prohibition of tobacco on its supposedly 'foul' (*khabīth*) nature.<sup>447</sup> Another accusation was that tobacco was an excuse for idleness, and there the opponents had a point, al-Karmī thought. It was also true, he held, that the drug came from the countries of the Christians and that one could not know what they put in it. Rumour had it that wine and pig fat were among these secret additives. But tobacco grown in Muslim countries did not have these impurities. Although the drug could be disapproved of in certain circumstances, nothing indicated that it should be forbidden in principle. Al-Karmī said it all, and nothing really new was ever added.

‘Abd al-Nāfi’ (fl ca. 1600), a Ḥanafī who lived in Medina, argued that tobacco was to be prohibited because God prohibited what was foul. (Q: 7:157) He seemed to realise, however, that the legal grounds for this argument were not very firm, and that it would be difficult to maintain that smoking was ḥarām. F. Klein-Franke believes that this is why ‘Abd al-Nāfi’ described smoking as *karīh* and then tried to bring the categories of *makrūh* and *ḥurma* closer together.<sup>448</sup> ‘Abd al-Nāfi’ is mentioned in a text against tobacco that was written in Bornu in al-Wālī's time (Falke 1850, see below), and it is not unlikely that al-Wālī was informed about his arguments.

Another Ḥanafī scholar, a partisan of the revival of Islam who worked in Anatolia, was Aḥmad al-Aqḥṣārī (d. perhaps in 1615). He was convinced that tobacco was harmful to the human body, and therefore, he wrote in his *Epistle on tobacco* (*Risāla dukhāniyya*):

[t]he principle in it shall thus be that it is prohibited. But even if there was some doubt about the matter, the side of prohibition would still prevail, as asserted by the Legal rule. [The Prophet] has indeed said, blessing and peace be upon him: ‘What is lawful is clear, what is prohibited is clear and, between the two, there are unclear things that are not known by many

<sup>443</sup> Among others Rosenthal 1971; F. Klein-Franke, ‘No smoking in paradise: the habit of tobacco smoking judged by Muslim law.’ In *Le Muséon* 106 (1993), 155-192; Berger 2001, Matthee 2005; Y. Michot, *Against smoking. An Ottoman Manifesto*. Oxford: Kube Publishing, 2010.

<sup>444</sup> Mar'ī b. Yūsuf b. Abū Bakar b. al-Karmī Zainaddīn al-Maqdisī al-Ḥanbalī. *GAL* II 369.

<sup>445</sup> Or. 6275, ff 49-55. According to Brockelmann it is a plea for smoking tobacco, but that is putting it a bit strong.

<sup>446</sup> See for instance al-Bukhārī, *kitāb al-ṣalā*, 1147 and Muslim, *kitāb al-ṣalā*, 1141-1151.

<sup>447</sup> Michot 2010, 38.

<sup>448</sup> Klein-Franke 1993, 162.

people. Someone fearing these unclear things preserves his religion and his honour whereas someone falling in these unclear things falls within what is prohibited.<sup>449</sup>

Smoking was therefore *ḥarām*, he held, even if ‘ulamā’ had different opinions. To reinforce his point, al-Aqḥiṣārī quotes a number of *ḥadīths* that Y. Michot, who translated and edited the epistle, describes as belonging to two categories: *ḥadīths* about the Prophet’s dislike of bad smells and his prohibiting people who had eaten garlic or onion to enter a mosque, and *ḥadīths* in which smoke and fire are associated with hell. The epistle ends with the (negative) views of earlier jurists on hashish, *banj*, coffee, opium and other drugs, from which a prohibition of smoking can be deduced. In jurisprudence, the Ḥanafī approach was firmly based in reasoning and strongly associated with Mu‘tazilism. Al-Aqḥiṣārī argues that, although some maintain that independent reasoning or *ijtihād* is not allowed any more, this is not a tenable point of view, especially if the reasoning is done by deduction from general principles to particular rules (*takhrīj*), which is a more ‘modest’ way of legal reasoning than by syllogism. It is quite possible that al-Wālī read al-Aqḥiṣārī’s *Risāla*—a possibility I will discuss more fully below.

It is certain that al-Wālī read *Naṣīḥat al-ikhwān b-ijtināb al-dukhān* (*Advice to the brothers to avoid smoking*), by the highly respected dean of the Mālikīs and Azhar professor Ibrāhīm al-Laḡānī.<sup>450</sup> He had also read al-Laḡānī’s commentary on al-Sanūsī’s *Ṣughra*, and he was an admirer of his work. The ‘advice’ is a short but fiery treatise that, also through the propagandising on the part of al-Laḡānī’s sons, inspired the next generation of opponents and is even quoted in a twentieth-century pamphlet from Indonesia.<sup>451</sup> Written in 1616, it brings to bear all the arguments that al-Karmī wanted to invalidate. The text is divided in 11 paragraphs (*fuṣūl*), but that seems to have been inspired more by the moment the author took up his pen than by any thematic principle. Central throughout the treatise is the theme of clouding the mind or intellect. Just like hashish and *banj*, tobacco can harm the mind and body, al-Laḡānī writes. He knows that some users argue that it does not always have that effect, but when it does, it is obviously an intoxicant, according to the categories of al-Qarāfī, and therefore *ḥarām*. He quotes a whole list of authorities, including many anonymous Ḥanafis, who he says find tobacco repulsive, a waste of money and the cause of physical weakening, and point out that smoke is associated with hell. He comes to the conclusion that tobacco is an innovation from the Christians, notably from ‘Jebel Inklīz’ (the English mountain), from where a Jew brought it to the Maghrib.<sup>452</sup> Although it may be beneficial as a medicine for people with a humid humour, it is a satanic inspiration (*nazaghat al-shayṭān*). However, al-Laḡānī’s popularity among the anti-smoking lobby is somewhat surprising, because ultimately he argued that the legal category applying to smoking was only that of ‘doubtful’ (*shubha*) matters, not disapproved (*makrūh*) or *ḥarām*. But it is true that it is not easy to unearth this precise legal conclusion from his rambling presentation.

After the first two decades of the seventeenth century, the tone of most of the texts about tobacco changed, certainly among Mālikīs. The most important scholarly rival of al-Laḡānī was Nūr al-Dīn al-Ajhūrī (d.1656).<sup>453</sup> After the death of the former, al-Ajhūrī succeeded him as dean of the Mālikis in Cairo and beyond. During their life, the two men were diametrically opposed, among other issues on the matter of tobacco. One day, the story goes, they were discussing it, when al-Laḡānī ended the debate, saying, ‘Whoever of us is wrong, may he become blind’. And lo and behold, at the end of his

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<sup>449</sup> Michot 2010, 51.

<sup>450</sup> Leiden University keeps a manuscript of the text, Or. 8288h (ff 117-138). See Batran 2003, 191-208 for a translation. Abū-l-Imdād Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. Ibrāhīm b. Ḥasan b. ‘Alī al-Laḡānī al-Mālikī (d. 1631). *GAL* II, 316.

<sup>451</sup> I thank dr. N.J.G. Kapteijn for showing me *Irshād al-ikhwān li-bayān shurb al-qahwa wa’l-dukhān*, by Ihsān Muḥammad Dahlān al-Jampasī al-Kadīrī. It bears no place or date of publication, but the author lived in east Java from 1901 to 1952.

<sup>452</sup> Or. 8288h, 121v.

<sup>453</sup> Nūr al-Dīn ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. ‘Alī al-Ajhūrī al-Mālikī (1559–1656) *GAL* II 317, S II 437. See Batran 2003, 149-168 for a translation of his ‘*Ultimate explanation of the legality of the amount of tobacco that does not absent the mind*’.

life (he died at 90) al-Ajhūrī was blind.<sup>454</sup> In his opinion tobacco was not an intoxicant, because even if it did distract the mind—which, he said, was not always the case—it did not generate joy. As for al-Qarāfī's criteria, al-Ajhūrī argued that, while consumers should be denied tobacco when they were harmed by it, tobacco could not be prohibited on the basis of its essential properties. He remarked that even al-Laḡānī had considered tobacco unlawful only in amounts that would influence an individual's mind, and that he had not objected to smoking in principle, provided that it did not distract from the observance of religious duties, and that the tobacco was not soaked in wine. But it was well known, said al-Ajhūrī, that in most cases wine can be rinsed out of tobacco.<sup>455</sup> In the second part of his treatise *Ghāyat al-bayān li-ḥilli ma lā yughayib al-'aql min al-dukhān* (*The ultimate demonstration of the legality of the amount of tobacco that does not 'absent the mind'*), he counters a number of al-Laḡānī's arguments. Later, al-Wālī would do the same with al-Ajhūrī's treatise.

Two more treatises from this period may be mentioned, not because al-Wālī read them—we do not know whether he did—but because they demonstrate that, by the second half of the seventeenth century, the discussion about the legality of smoking tobacco among scholars in the Middle East was petering out. The first, and the most agreeable to read for modern readers, was written by Muṣṭafā b. al-Ḥajj Khalīfa<sup>456</sup> (1609-1657), a scholar at the Ottoman court in Istanbul, who is better known as Katib Chelebi. His *Mizān al-ḥaqq* (*The balance of truth*),<sup>457</sup> published in 1656, contains a number of articles about major issues that concerned the elite in the cultural centres of the time: issues that were bones of contention between a number of Ottoman theologians and mystics, such as dancing, shaking hands and the chances of salvation for the parents of the prophet Muḥammad. Smoking was another example, but for Katib Chelebi it also provided a test case through which to demonstrate where the limits to the sultan's powers should be drawn. Tobacco, or anything else, should not be proclaimed ḥarām solely because it pleased the sultan to forbid it. Legally, he argued, one could prohibit tobacco, but only as far as it was consumed in the public space. At home, people could smoke. Moreover, it was not certain that smoking was bad for the mind, nor that it harmed physical health. He concluded with a radical recommendation to the sultan: not only allow tobacco, but have the state cultivate it and levy taxes on its sale. Somewhat later, in 1682, the famous Syrian jurist 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī (d. 1731) published his tract *Al-ṣulḥ bayna al-ikhwān fi ḥukm ibāhat al-dukhān* (*Reconciliation between the brothers regarding the judgment on smoking*).<sup>458</sup> When he wrote it, he disliked tobacco, but saw no reason for a prohibition. He denied that the herb necessarily causes harm and decay, and he dismissed other arguments—that tobacco was disgusting and weakening, that it was associated with hell, and that it involved a waste of money. Like Katib Chelebi, al-Nābulūsī argued that smoking could not be labelled evil merely because the sultan had forbidden it. Ten years later, by then an inveterate smoker himself, he remarked that the whole discussion was really futile and that intellectuals should address themselves to real problems such as bribery and corruption.<sup>459</sup>

These tracts and pamphlets include both new and well-worn arguments, which in time were more or less sorted out in terms of their legal substance. The argument against tobacco that had carried the most legal weight was the claim that it was harmful and even impure because it 'obscured' the mind—and should therefore be classified as an intoxicant. A majority of jurists, however, argued that a capacity to obscure the mind was not inherent to tobacco. In the end, things happened as al-Karmī had predicted in the first quarter of the century, when he wrote:

I have considered the matter of this smoking, and the differences of opinion about it, and have seen that there is a similarity to the introduction and authorisation of coffee. Some then said

<sup>454</sup> M. al-Nūr b. Ḍayf Allāh, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt fi khuṣūṣ al-awliyā' wa-l-ṣāliḥīn wa'l-'ulamā' wa'l-shu'arā' fi l-sūdān*. Khartoum: University of Khartoum, 1971. 53, 54.

<sup>455</sup> Annex II and Batran 2003, 163.

<sup>456</sup> GAL II 428, 429; S 635-637.

<sup>457</sup> Al-Ḥajj Khalīfa 1957.

<sup>458</sup> Al-Nābulūsī: GAL II 345, S II 473. Al-Nābulūsī, *Al-ṣulḥ bayna al-ikhwān fi ḥukm ibāhat al-dukhān*. Muḥammad Aḥmad Dahman, ed. Damascus: n.d. 1924.

<sup>459</sup> Grehan 2006, p. 1365 en 1369.

that it was forbidden, and they had no support for that but their own opinion. Law did not support it, and syllogism produced no evidence for it. Others said it was allowed, based on a consideration of the principles in matters of allowing and authorising. Then the voice of those who pleaded for prohibition grew weaker. In our times there is plenty of agreement about allowing it and I think for smoking the outcome will be the same.<sup>460</sup>

## 2. Al-Wālī's point of view

By the end of the seventeenth century, most jurists in the centres of the Middle East as well as the Maghrib, and certainly most Mālikī jurists, had come to the conclusion that smoking tobacco was allowed. Not those in Bornu, however. One of them was al-Wālī's contemporary al-Hajrami (see chapter 2), author of the didactic poem *Shurb al-zulāl*, which lists foodstuffs that, according to the Sharī'a, may or may not be consumed. In this text, he wrote that al-Laḳānī and others had classed tobacco as dubious, and argued that it should not be smoked and not be traded.<sup>461</sup> In *The peerless method*, al-Wālī went farther and categorised smoking tobacco as one of the capital sins, together with adultery, stealing, slander, and defamation. (Listing different types of leaders, in the preface to the commentary, he wrote: 'The venerable and righteous scholar is he who leaves behind corruption such as adultery and theft and slander and defamation and smoking.')<sup>462</sup> That was a rather extreme view, which he did not repeat – assuming that he wrote his anti-tobacco tract later—in the more legalistic discourse of *Valid proofs to proclaim smoking forbidden*.

*Valid proofs* is in two parts. The first—folio 1 recto to 7 verso—presents ten reasons why smoking is ḥarām; the second—folio 8r to 23v—continues with a refutation of al-Ajhūrī's *Ghayat al-bayān*. (See the translation and edition in annex I and II.) In the first part al-Wālī presents himself as the defender of al-Laḳānī. His illustrious predecessor had already sufficiently demonstrated that smoking should be prohibited, he wrote, but since then information had accumulated and al-Wālī would help him, as God had commanded. It must be assumed that al-Wālī thought he was not just supporting, but actually improving al-Laḳānī's argumentation in 'Advice to the brothers to avoid smoking'. In fact he did, with regard to three aspects: first of all, he added clarity. Al-Wālī himself said that his list of arguments is concise ('*alā wajh al-ikhtiṣār*, f 1b)—and so is his style. Second, he added a great number of ḥadīths and some Quranic citations to support the argument. A number of these ḥadīths had not been put forward before by other opponents of tobacco. Other ḥadīths (for instance about the Prophet's dislike of bad smells, the association between smoke and the Day of Judgement) had been cited before, but generally without giving any sources. By contrast, al-Wālī always informs us where a ḥadīth he quotes can be found. It is evident that he made a thorough study, for this treatise, of many ḥadīth collections.

Third, al-Wālī asserted that tobacco had a foul essence and that it was associated with the devil. Throughout the text, but especially in this first part, there is a conclusory, 'and that is the end of it' element. 'This is the ultimate report', are the first words, echoing the title of al-Ajhūrī's treatise, and promising a clarion call. Al-Wālī's aim was to put an end to the endless disputations about legal conditions and degrees of disapproval or prohibition. For him, it was a matter of truth versus falsity<sup>463</sup>, of clarity 'like the morning sun and the full moon at dusk' versus obscurity<sup>464</sup>, and of God's path versus erroneous ways.<sup>465</sup>

<sup>460</sup> Al-Karmī Or. 6275, ff 54r-55v. I thank prof. dr. G.J. van Gelder for the copy he gave me of an unpublished paper he wrote as a student at Amsterdam University ('Juridische diskussies over innovatie in de islamitische wereld: koffie en tabak.' Amsterdam 1972) in which he used this informative passage.

<sup>461</sup> See Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 119-130 for the Arabic text and English translation. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Fulani rulers and scholars in Masina (part of the Sokoto state) were also opposed to tobacco. See L. Melzer e.a. (eds), *Timbuktu Script and Scholarship*, Bamako: Institut des Hautes Etudes et de Recherches Islamiques, 2008. 72-73.

<sup>462</sup> In *The peerless method*, Hunwick 178, 9.

<sup>463</sup> Or. 8362, 1v, 8v.

<sup>464</sup> Or. 8362, 3v, 15r.

<sup>465</sup> Or. 8362, 8r.

Al-Wālī listed ten objections to smoking: it was *bid'a* (an illegal innovation); it led to idleness and copied a habit of unbelievers (who had introduced it; the smell of tobacco was offensive and filthy; the habit of smoking distracted from religion and was promoted by the devil; tobacco harmed the body and was a soporific or corruptive substance ('and that is enough to prohibit it') as well as a waste of money. Smoke was one of God's punishments on the Day of Judgment (and who would want to associate with that?) and finally, smoking was incompatible with 'manliness' or decency (*murū'a*) – and if we realise that tobacco was much stronger then than it is now, and led to running noses and snorting, we may imagine that to al-Wālī, with his Fulani's aversion of lack of self-restraint, this was not the least of his objections.<sup>466</sup> All these arguments had been mentioned by others, although few listed so many in one text. But none of the arguments had been sufficient to convince a majority of jurists to proclaim that tobacco was forbidden. Al-Wālī is aware of this and presents these objections not for the sake of a legal argument, but to ask rhetorically: would an intelligent or rational person (*al-āqil*) doubt the prohibition to consume this herb? However, the core of his plea, and the basis for all of his objections, is that tobacco is foul, *khabīth*. In the first part of the treatise (covering 16 pages), the words *khabīth* and its synonyms *shanī'* and *qabīḥ* occur 15 times. Others such as al-Laḳānī and al-Nāfi' had also called tobacco foul, but al-Wālī hammers it in, perhaps because he felt that piling on the *khabīths*—not a legal category—would amount to 'impure' (*najis*), a legal category entailing prohibition. At the same time, he does not once use the synonym *karīḥ*, which had been al-Nāfi''s strategy to make at least the legal category of *makrūh* applicable. Perhaps it is because al-Wālī aimed only for the highest, for total condemnation as *ḥarām*.

As we have seen, even al-Laḳānī admitted that tobacco did not obscure the mind, and deduced from it that it was not an intoxicant and therefore was not impure. At this point, al-Wālī did not agree (although he hid the fact that al-Laḳānī's view was different from his). Whatever jurists said about the intoxicating nature of tobacco, al-Wālī wanted to secure a consensus that tobacco was impure. 'Surely,' he explains, 'the things that necessitate its prohibition are other than distraction (*ghaibūbiya*) of the mind caused by smoking it.'<sup>467</sup> And in answer to al-Ajhūrī's statement that tobacco is not impure *because* the mind is not clouded by it, he says, '[T]here is no connection between a substance's clouding the mind and its being impure.'<sup>468</sup> What he had on the tip of his tongue was that tobacco *was* in fact impure. That was essential to him, because impurity or foulness was the middle term, in philosophical jargon, in the syllogism on which he had based his reasoning. The middle term of a syllogism is the basis for the validity of a proof. The syllogism was: tobacco is impure; what is impure is *ḥarām*; therefore tobacco is *ḥarām*. Finding the middle term of a syllogism was a pre-eminent method of verification (*taḥqīq*).<sup>469</sup> The problem for al-Wālī was that foulness could not be legally established, which may be one reason why he did not make his logic more explicit. (The second part of the treatise would have been the place to do so.) But foulness could be so strongly implied that one could not get round it, and this is the goal of the first part of *Valid proofs*.

The second part of *Valid proofs* is very different. In its first lines, al-Wālī is as pugnacious as in the first part. Soon, however, he presents himself as a scholar of ḥadīth and of legal science who is well versed in *kalām*. He shows his sophistication and awareness of the norms of scholarship, not only in the arguments he adduces, but also in his style. For instance he is quite formal and polite to al-Ajhūrī, and he quotes three poets, two of whom enjoyed widespread fame in the Muslim world (al-Mutanabbī

<sup>466</sup> Al-Laḳānī had also ended his tract with the idea that smoking is incompatible with 'manliness', but it is possible that it did not mean exactly the same for both men. *Murū'a* is a complex term that is associated with the honor of an individual or a tribe, with the observance of duties connected to family ties, and—notably in West Africa—with self-restraint and the control of emotions. When the term occurs in later central sudanic manuscripts about smoking (Falke 1040, 15; Falke 1101, 19), it is in contrast with such antisocial behavior observed among smokers as fooling around and dancing, lowering oneself, being inferior for having substituted one's brains with smoke, eating in public (all mentioned in Falke 1101 and 1040), and indulging in calumny and wild hilarious conduct (al-Fakkūn)—in short, the behavior of ruffraff (*al-ra'ā'*).

<sup>467</sup> Or 8362, 9v.

<sup>468</sup> Or 8362, 12v.

<sup>469</sup> See D. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition. Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works*. Leiden: Brill 1988. 187-191.

and al-Buṣīrī), while the third, al-Maghīlī, was especially famous in West Africa. Demonstrating his schooling in the logic of jurisprudence, al-Wālī starts with some preliminary remarks on the possibility of drawing conclusions about issues that are not addressed in the Qur’ān, by using syllogisms in the correct way (ff 8 r,v). He uses an example that was quite commonly used in the instruction of *kalām* to explain the relation between *dalīl* and *madlūl*, between ‘proof’ and what is proven. Then he starts his disputation in the classical style of the genre (‘If you say x, then I say y’), in which al-Ajhūrī functions as the opponent, giving his opinion about statements in the order in which the prominent Mālikī presented them.<sup>470</sup> And while in the first part of the treatise al-Wālī had offered support, especially from sunna and Qur’ān, for the correctness of his judgement, he now concentrated on logic, following with what his adversary had done. At times al-Wālī’s comment draws heavily on al-Laḳānī’s formulations (see Annex II), here and there giving the commentary the aspect of a compilation of texts as well.

From al-Wālī’s comments, we can deduce that there are three pillars in his own legal reasoning. The central idea is again that smoking is ḥarām, not because of, or only in case of the occurrence of negative effects such as harm, corruption, or clouding the mind, as al-Ajhūrī would have it, but because it is *intrinsically* foul. (And because it was foul, and therefore ḥarām, he argued in a roundabout way, it always corrupted the consumer.) Impurity, the middle term in al-Wālī’s reasoning as a *mutakallim*, is the ‘illa in his legal *kalām*, the attribute of smoking that leads to the legal category ḥarām.<sup>471</sup>

The second pillar is the analogy between tobacco and hashish, which had been judged ḥarām by the jurist ‘Abd Allāh al-Manūfī<sup>472</sup> (d.1348/49), because in his addiction, the consumer of hashish behaved like a drunk. Al-Wālī supported this judgement with the words that opponents of tobacco used to attribute to the Prophet the idea that every intoxicant was ḥarām and that every soporific was an intoxicant.

Third, al-Wālī put quite some emphasis (on ff 13r, 14v, 15v and finally 23v) on a principle that was in line with his wish for a clear-cut choice between truth and error: that in case of doubt among the jurists about the legality of something, one should abstain from the matter, to avoid the risk of doing something prohibited. This, he wrote, was a point that had been made by ‘a certain friend of God from among the Byzantines, in an essay that sīdī Ibrāhīm al-Laḳānī has transmitted’. This jurist had argued that when ‘there is disagreement about things that the sharī‘a does not give a judgement about, it is preferred to prohibit what is harmful, and not other things.’<sup>473</sup>

This last phrase recalls a passage in the *Epistle on tobacco* by Aḥmad al-Aqḥiṣārī, who was indeed born a Byzantine: he was born in 1570 in Cyprus, to a Christian family. As a child he was abducted by Ottoman conquerors and he converted to Islam.<sup>474</sup> A little detour is useful here. It seems beyond doubt that al-Aqḥiṣārī is indeed the friend of God to whom al-Laḳānī referred, and the Egyptian Mālikī borrowed quite a lot from this Ottoman and Ḥanafī colleague, without ever mentioning his name.<sup>475</sup> Not only much of the argumentation, but also, for instance, the colourful description of the head of smokers becoming ‘like a roasted, that is a grilled head’ on the Day of Resurrection is from al-Aqḥiṣārī, as is the quote from Galen, that without the harm of soot and smoke, man would live a

<sup>470</sup> Al-Ajhūrī himself had reacted to al-Laḳānī in the same style, and Aḥmad Bābā to al-Mahallī.

<sup>471</sup> On ‘illa, see Van Ess, ‘The Logical Structure of Islamic Theology’ in *Islamic Philosophy and Theology. Vol II Revelation and Reason*. London: Routledge, 2007. 31-55. 38. Also R. Peters 1980, 135.

<sup>472</sup> According to A. Batran he died in 1348. (2003, 153, 192) However, Al-Ajhūrī mentioned that he was a shaykh of Shihāb al-dīn al-Qarāfī, who lived from 1228 to 1283 or 1285.

<sup>473</sup> Or. 8362, 12v, 13r.

<sup>474</sup> Michot 2010, 1; and 51 for al-Aqḥiṣārī’s view on prohibiting harmful things.

<sup>475</sup> Why did al-Laḳānī nor al-Wālī quote his name? Perhaps they thought a Ḥanafī jurist in Istanbul was not the best source to lean on, in their debate with Mālikis. Or perhaps they thought al-Aqḥiṣārī was not authoritative enough because he was ‘only’ a contemporary, or because he was not born a Muslim.

thousand years.<sup>476</sup> Such phrases are again repeated by al-Wālī, perhaps without his realising that al-Aqḥṣārī was the source. On the other hand, in a number of cases al-Wālī skipped exactly those passages that al-Laḳānī had added to al-Aqḥṣārī's *Risāla*. It could be that al-Wālī read the *Risāla* himself, and that like al-Laḳānī he did not see the point in mentioning the name of a scholar who had not yet acquired the patina of history.<sup>477</sup>

If we return to the legal reasoning, we see that the rejection of a matter when there is doubt about its legal status, is the main point of the second part of al-Wālī's treatise. Here, the reasons presented in the first part are described as 'minor evidence', while 'major evidence' comes from the analogy of tobacco with the judgement on hashish by al-Manūfī—a judgement that leads al-Wālī to say, 'Indeed, if this substance is not intoxicating, it is [nevertheless] corruptive and soporific, and its use is prohibited except for the amount that is confirmed not to influence the mind. But this amount is not known for smoke. Therefore the procedure is to reinforce the prohibition as a precaution' (15v).<sup>478</sup> In legal terms, this sentence represents the most refined view of al-Wālī.

It must be admitted that in many other places in this second part of the treatise, too, the legal reasoning is not very sharp. Most awkward is the fact that he has no reply to al-Ajhūrī's argument that smoking can be allowed, because it does not obscure the mind. He had used the most basic syllogism to make his point: smoking does not obscure the mind; what does not obscure the mind is allowed; *ergo*, smoking is allowed. Al-Wālī cannot get a word in edgewise. Instead of trying to demonstrate the invalidity or insufficiency of the second proposition of the syllogism, which would have been the obvious thing to do, he weakly replies: 'I say: what he wrote here, God bless him, in the manner of logic (*bi shakl al-manṭiqī*), does not lead to authorization to smoke tobacco; it would merely indicate that it does not have an intoxicating essence. But there is no relation between the lack of intoxicating properties and allowing it' (15r).

Al-Ajhūrī had introduced this passage with the remark—which al-Wālī duly quoted—that 'it is not possible for an intelligent person to say that [smoking] is ḥarām in essence, unless he were ignorant of the *kalām* of the legal schools, or arrogant'. Al-Wālī's answer is: no, he is ignorant who firmly believes what the arguments contradict, and arrogant is he who knows the truth but refuses to accept it (15r). And this is not the only time he uses this gauche stylistic figure. On folio 17, in answer to al-Ajhūrī's line that the claim that tobacco is essentially harmful is unsustained by proof, al-Wālī writes: 'I say that *his* words are a claim without proof.' In other cases, al-Wālī's only reply to al-Ajhūrī is that he is just not interested in a certain argument (ff 16r, 16v, 20r) or that what al-Ajhūrī says is simply not true (18r).

No, al-Wālī was not a great jurist, nor a great master of *kalām*. But this is the field in which he tried to frame his objections against smoking as a legal plea. The second part of *Valid proofs* was evidently written in reaction to the opinion of al-Ajhūrī and based on a study of texts by authors such as al-Laḳānī and older legal sources, most likely also after lively discussions with other jurists who may have pointed out the weaknesses in the argumentation of the 10 'proofs'. The first part, on the other hand, reflected arguments that came from al-Wālī's home environment in Baghirmi and Bornu.

<sup>476</sup> Cf. Michot 2010, 77 and Or. 8288, 129b for the roasted head, and Michot 2010, 81 and Or. 8288, 123a for Galen.

<sup>477</sup> There are too many correspondences between the three texts to point out here, but two examples where al-Wālī seems to keep closer to al-Aqḥṣārī's text is where the analogy between tobacco and garlic, onions and leeks are discussed and where Ibn Sīnā and Galen are quoted. For tobacco and smelly vegetables cf Or. 8362, 4v and Michot 2010, 78-79 and Or. 8288, 125b-126b. For Ibn Sīnā and Galen cf Or. 8362 and Michot 2010, 81 and Or. 8288, 123a-b.

<sup>478</sup> Al-Wālī and al-Ajhūrī both seem to have used the terms '*ṣughra*' and '*kubra*' in a different way than was usual in the juridical dialectic based on Aristotelian logic. Usually 'minor' and 'major' referred to premises—that is, to the extreme terms or propositions (qāḍiyyāt) A and C of an argument. Al-Ajhūrī and al-Wālī use *ṣughra* and *kubra* in more quotidian manner, to indicate arguments of minor and major importance.



### 3. A folktale about the devil's pee

Near the end of the treatise, al-Wālī mentions a strange story about tobacco that had been presented as a ḥadīth. This story was first told—as we know from the Maghribi al-Fakkūn—in the region of Algeria, early in the seventeenth century.<sup>479</sup> Al-Fakkūn had not written it down in its entirety, but had described it in 1616, mentioning four elements: Tobacco was created from the urine of Iblīs;<sup>480</sup> the Prophet has said that smokers do not belong to his umma; the Prophet predicted smoking to either his companion Abū Hurayra or Abū Ḥudhayfa<sup>481</sup>; it was when God told Iblīs that he would have no authority over His people and would be an outcast (for instance Q 7:11-13, Q 15:42) that Iblīs urinated in shock.

The first two elements form the core of the narrative, and in other versions they are combined: it is the Prophet himself who says that tobacco grows from the devil's urine. This last statement 'is simply arbitrary and nonsensical', says al-Fakkūn.<sup>482</sup>

Al-Wālī says he believes that al-Ajhūrī refers to this story when he writes that 'the oft-repeated traditions [to refute tobacco] are fabrications... concocted in contemporary times'<sup>483</sup> and he confirms his opinion. However, unlike al-Ajhūrī, he repeats the information concerning the relation between tobacco and the devil, together *with* the unquestioned context of the Quranic verse. And instead of denouncing the ḥadīths as false, he says, 'We do not know their source':

Among [the ḥadīths that are fabricated] we must mention the derogation of tobacco as coming from the urine of Iblīs, may God curse him, when he was terrified after hearing the words of the Highest, 'As for My servants, you have no power over them',<sup>484</sup> and he was shocked and urinated, and this plant sprang up from his urine. And also the ḥadīth related by Ḥudhayfa ibn al-Yamān, who said: 'I went out with the Prophet, God bless him, and he saw a plant and shook his head. I asked: 'Oh messenger of God, why do you shake your head?' He told me: A time will come to the people when they will drink from the leaves of this plant.' And more ḥadīths like these are being related, of which we do not know the source.<sup>485</sup>

Although he agrees that these ḥadīths are unsound, al-Wālī is taking the feelings of those who do believe them very seriously. Is it because, practically speaking, he can use the narratives in his argument that tobacco is intrinsically foul and disgusting, or is it also because he has really taken these stories to heart himself? If so, what was their appeal for him? As far as I know, the story about tobacco's origin in the devil's urine has not survived in the Maghrib or the Middle East. But there are a number of undated versions of it in the Kano collection of Arabic manuscripts from the region of Bornu and Baghirmi, where the story still survives today.<sup>486</sup> The question is thus more specifically why it survived *there*, and what its appeal was there. To answer that, we will dive deeper into it.

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<sup>479</sup> Al-Fakkūn refers to a certain al-Sūsī as his source for the story. This was probably Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Sūsī, who died in 1614. See Batran 2003, 216.

<sup>480</sup> Iblīs is an alternative name for the Devil, especially associated with the story of the creation of the world. See P. W. Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblis in Sufi Psychology*. Brill: Leiden, 1983.

<sup>481</sup> Both are interesting choices by the composers of the story: ever since the end of the eighth century the name of Abū Hurayra had lent itself to be inserted in *isnād* strands that originally contained no companion of the Prophet. Abū Ḥudhayfa was a companion who played a very minor role as a transmitter of ḥadīth. See G.H.A. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of canonical ḥadīth*. Leiden: Brill, 2007. 45, 724-25.

<sup>482</sup> Batran 2003, 253.

<sup>483</sup> Batran 2003, 157.

<sup>484</sup> Q 15:42

<sup>485</sup> Or 8362, 19r.

<sup>486</sup> See Falke 2017 (two folio's, writing on both sides), Paden 204 (two folio's, writing on both sides), Paden 76 (four folio's, writing on both sides). All three are separate texts, and undated. However, there is some overlap in their content. The paper of Paden 204 has the watermark of 'Beniamino Arbib', which was produced at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. (Bloom 2008) The text seems to originate from at least

The shortest compilation of these ‘ḥadīths’ runs as follows:

Bismillah and greetings to our lord Muḥammad, his family, companions, wives and slave-girls. This text is communicated by the noble [Prophet], [who was] consulted by ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. By the authority of the Prophet, God bless him and grant him salvation: all inanimate nature is pure, except this one plant that grows in the urine of Iblīs and is from the bottom of the hell. It is more reprehensible than wine. He who eats of this plant, the Prophet says that he rejects him and that he is not of his umma. For he who chews it is an unbeliever. There is no peace for him, nor religion, nor jihād, and he is damned in the Torah as well as in the Gospel, in the Book of Psalms and in the Furqān.<sup>487</sup>

God, the benevolent, the exalted, said that vicious things are forbidden to them: wine, gambling, calumny and pigs and adultery and slander. These are the first things that are evil to him. By the authority of Abū Hurayra<sup>488</sup>, may God be pleased with him, and from the prophet who said, “Beware of this plant.” He said it is [like] wine, more than wine. It is told, on the authority of Abū Ḥudhayfa, may God be pleased with him, that Abū Ḥudhayfa said that he went out with a party of the Messenger of God and [said], “I saw this plant and [the Prophet] said: “This is from Iblīs’ urine.” He also said: “A time will come after me, when they will drink this plant and be drunk from it and will err from the path of God. They will be punished according to the verse from the Book of God. And he who says to them, ‘Leave this plant!’, he will be an enemy to them.”<sup>489</sup> But they are the worst of people and I have nothing to do with them.”

‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib said: “The Messenger from God, peace be upon him, said, ‘He who eats from this plant belongs to the depths of hell. May God, the Exalted, curse him—He does not care.’”

‘Alī said, “There is no peace for them, do not befriend them, do not sit down with them, do not greet them, do not help them, do not laugh with them.”<sup>490</sup>

The rest of this manuscript is lost, but another version adds to this list of forms of social interaction that should not take place with smokers: ‘Do not eat with them from one dish, do not drink with them or smile at them and do not talk with them except when it is necessary.’<sup>491</sup> The element of the original version, where the Prophet said that smokers do not belong to his umma, is here converted into an order *to* his umma to actively exclude users of tobacco.

Although this story about the origin of tobacco is fantastical, these ‘ḥadīths’ would have made a truthful impression, because of the many authentic elements. They were fabricated, but they were not invented from scratch. For instance, Abū Hurayra had indeed been reported to have said ‘The Prophet said: beware of the green [plant], for it is the greatest wine’. It is just that he was apparently talking of hashish. His words were quoted in a work on hashish by the fifteenth-century author Taqī al-Dīn al-Badrī,<sup>492</sup> which reported the ḥadīth on account of Ibn Ḥudhayfa, who said: ‘I went with the Prophet into the countryside. He saw a tree and shook his head. I asked him why he was shaking his head, and he replied: ‘A time will come for my nation when they will eat from the leaves of this tree and get intoxicated, and they will pray while intoxicated. They are the worst of the worst. They are the *birā*’ of my nation, as God has nothing to do with them (*minhum bari*).’<sup>493</sup>

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two centuries earlier, because it mentions a message from the sultan in Istanbul, in which he prohibited the use of tobacco in all regions under his reign. See p. 31 above. Oral versions of the story still circulate in todays Chad.

<sup>487</sup> Synonym of Qur’ān, see below.

<sup>488</sup> A companion of the prophet Muḥammad. In canonical ḥadīth collections, he is one of the transmitters of the Prophet’s words ‘he who eats of this plant (garlic) should not approach our mosque and should not harm us with the odour of it’, which was used as an argument against smoking.

<sup>489</sup> Cf. the words of al-Fakkūn who wrote in 1616 that when he admonished people not to smoke, he was mocked and scandalized. See Batran 2003, 209.

<sup>490</sup> Falke 2017.

<sup>491</sup> Paden 76, 3r, 3v.

<sup>492</sup> d. 1503. GAL II 132, S II 164.

<sup>493</sup> The translation is by F. Rosenthal, 1971, 46.

Even more creativity was invested in the story of the devil's micturition, but here too ready-made elements lay at the bottom. The Qur'ān does indeed describe the devil's reaction when God told him he would be an outcast, as one of shock: the devil first asks for reprieve and then promises revenge, by misleading people (Q 15:30-33, Q 7:11, Q 38:73,74). And since then Iblis had been understood to interfere with religion, not only in the matter of prayer but also of hygiene.<sup>494</sup> There are a number of ḥadīths that tell the story of how the devil urinated in someone's ear, so that the victim forgot his morning prayer. Al-Nawāwī explained that some understood this symbolically, while others laughed about it, but that al-qāḍī 'Iyād, the celebrated Mālikī jurist, had argued that it was quite possible, since the ear is the organ of our attention, so that the devil's choice would be understandable.<sup>495</sup>

If the variants of these ḥadīths originated in the Maghrib (where, as we saw, tobacco was initially associated with 'blacks', pagans and riff-raff) they must have travelled via caravan routes and markets to the central sudanic region, where apparently they touched a chord: in Bornu and Baghirmi they were told again and again, in versions that were slightly adapted, and sometimes written down, until today. With their repetition, irregular handwriting, and spelling mistakes, the manuscripts are clearly records of stories that were passed on orally, among people who were not very skilled in Arabic. In two versions (Paden 204 and 76), tobacco is described not only as worse than wine, but as amounting to idolatry, the summit of sin. In later texts about tobacco from central Sudanese authors from the Tidjaniyya *ṭarīqa* (therefore originating from the second half of the nineteenth century, for instance Falke 1040 and Falke 1101) the story of the devil's urine no longer figures but is replaced by references to, and comparisons of smokers with, dung beetles, the stench of an anus, riffraff, uncivilised behaviour and not heeding the law, while yellow pus is said to ooze from the corpses of smokers. Even today tobacco is sold in the outer section of the markets in Baghirmi, the section where barbers, with their indispensable but ambiguous trade of cutting hair and prepuces, also have their place.<sup>496</sup>

Altogether, it seems that, over time, no means were spared to demonise tobacco, to label smoking as a capital sin and, for those who were not sufficiently sensitive to the threat of punishment in the hereafter, to depict tobacco not merely as soaked in urine, but as intrinsically soiled by it. Likewise—that is, in a manner more attuned to an African worldview than to Muslim ethics—violation of the sanction on smoking was not punishment in the hereafter, but ostracism in the here and now. Whether this was also a characteristic of the versions al-Fakkūn heard in the Maghrib, is not known. In all the versions from Bornu, however, the sanction of expulsion from the community here and now is spelled out in detail. It suggests that these societies felt deeply threatened by tobacco-smoking. The next step, then, is to find out what this threat was.

As we saw, in the Middle East tobacco caused fears of social disruption when it was first introduced. In the nineteenth-century accounts of European travellers in central sudanic Africa, there is no mention of coffeehouses or smoking holes such as those that could be found in Ottoman centres or the Maghrib, where vagabonds were thought to be wasting away and an urban underclass could concoct schemes against its masters. But some of the same worries seem to have troubled people here, too. This appears from an undated manuscript from Bornu, which contains another text arguing against tobacco, which will be further discussed in the next section. On the social effects of tobacco it says:

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<sup>494</sup> Awn 1983.

<sup>495</sup> The ḥadīth can be found in al-Bukhārī kitāb 19, bāb 13 and 59, 11; also in Muslim kitāb 6, 205, with al-Nawāwī's exegesis.

<sup>496</sup> The same was the case in markets of northern Nigeria around 1900, see the annex in Low 1972. A. Cohen (1970, 249, 252) notes about barbers in Bornu that they are at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy in Kanuri society, because 'they are ignorant', they know 'bad things' (related to sorcery), and they are ambiguous because they deal with blood when they perform surgical operations like circumcision, removing of the uvula and scarification. Cohen. On the other hand, tobacco was an important plantation crop in Sokoto (Lovejoy 1978, 356), while in Futa Djallon on the west coast pupils of Quranic schools even used it to make the ink with which they copied verses. (Marty 1921, 346.)

[Smoking tobacco] keeps the mind from caring about matters. If a person is learned, it keeps him away from learning and work and from seeking refuge [with God]. If he is a worshipper, it keeps him from worship. If he is a slave, it keeps him from serving his master. If he is a merchant, it diminishes what is his and keeps him from his occupations. For the smoker drowns his heart with love for it and drowns his time night and day with smoking and with craving for it. [...] Is there worse fitna than this?<sup>497</sup>

Smoking, in this text, perturbs the social order and it leads to *jāhiliya* (idem, ff 2a and 4b), to chaos. In later texts from the region against smoking, the theme of *jāhiliya* is elaborated in all its aspects of ignorance, immorality and primitiveness. Smoking is frequently associated with riff-raff (*al-ra'ā'*), as was also done in texts from the Maghrib, North Africa, and the Middle East. In all these regions, riff-raff or people of the lowest standing were African slaves. A certain al-Ishāqī, for example, said that smoking was the habit of contemptible sudanese and people of low standing.<sup>498</sup>

As we saw in chapter 2, the idea of sudanese or black was equated with that of inferiority, slave status and paganism. At the same time 'pagan' or 'Muslim' were collective labels. The Muslim identity of an individual depended on a firm Muslim identity with his community. The passage from a non-Muslim to a Muslim identity was not easy, and rarely a linear process. In the seventeenth century Islam started to spread to larger parts of the population and to rural areas, but the attraction of traditional religions remained very strong. Still, these populations needed to be seen as Muslim communities, if they wanted to be left alone by slave-raiding neighbours. They had to make a choice between a culture of Islam and their old customs and be clear about it, in a society where being Muslim or not had such serious implications. I am not suggesting here that refraining from smoking was enough to present a community as Muslim. But in this context, the struggle against tobacco, in a region where slaves were the basis of the economy, may be understood as a struggle against the temptation for Muslims to fall back to non-Islamic loyalties.

At a different level, smoking lent itself to the development of the narrative motif of smokers as people of the *jāhiliya*, as opposed to non-smokers as people of Islam. The 'ḥadīth' about tobacco helped to create an identity for the umma. It did so not only in religious terms, but also in terms of actual customs. Other options to do the same were limited. For instance, Muslims were allowed and sometimes ordered to wear a turban, but otherwise the clothing of (rural) Muslims and non-Muslims was the same. Muslim women had the same tasks as others, and remaining in their house or courtyard, as Muslim preachers commanded, was something rural women could not afford to do. Changing burial rites was psychologically and socially difficult,<sup>499</sup> and even praying five times a day, one of the pillars of Islam and a religious obligation, was and is not easy to fit into the rhythm of farming. Smoking, however, was something one could choose not to do. Indulging in it—which must have happened, or we would not have so many texts on the topic—could be seen as a penchant for a novelty that came, literally and figuratively speaking, from the other direction, from the Christians and Jews in the West. Using tobacco could therefore serve as a sign of diminishing loyalty to a community under construction.

The threat from tobacco-smoking was the threat of the attraction of an alternative identity. The rejection of smoking offered an opportunity to mark the boundary between Muslims and others. The practice of ostracising smokers gave an opportunity to strengthen the unity of these communities against those who opted out. The description of tobacco as filthy and stinking was an opportunity to defend the choice of Islam. Together the ḥadīths about tobacco may be seen as what J. Vansina, in his pioneering work *Oral Tradition as History*, has called an etiological story of origin, a narrative of how a group of people—not an ethnic group in this case, but the new Muslim communities of central sudanic Africa—became as they are, and a narrative that represents their worldview. Such stories are

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<sup>497</sup> Falke 1850, 6v.

<sup>498</sup> Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Mu'tī al-Ishāqī. Batran 2003, 58.

<sup>499</sup> From a text about *bid'a* by 'Uthmān dan Fodio (ms Hunwick 151) it appears that even in Sokoto people were not very willing to give up their traditional ways of burying.

typically accounts that are built up out of pre-existing material of the same nature in which history is used to relate a group to the overall worldview of the community to which they adhere. These pre-existing materials may have to do with gods descending to earth, people turning into animals or hitting heaven while pounding sorghum, or tobacco eternally springing from the devil's urine. 'At some point', writes Vansina, 'we no longer know whether people take them seriously or not.'<sup>500</sup> With this last remark, he doubted not the value of these narratives for a people's identity, but their belief in the related events as facts. It is a point on which the anthropologist D. Sperber developed a view that complements Vansina's. Sperber argued that people do not 'really' believe in dragons or an ancestor who hit heaven, or other fantastic examples. More precisely, he explained that such beliefs are not factual, and therefore there is no point in dismissing them as irrational. Such beliefs *are* rational if they are understood as representing a social truth. They are '*des croyances culturelles, autrement dit des représentations acquises par le biais de la communication sociale et acceptées en fonction de l'affiliation sociale*' ('cultural beliefs, or representations that have come about through social communication and that have been accepted in accordance with social affiliation').<sup>501</sup> This helps to understand how the cultural belief that smokers and what they symbolise must be separated from Muslims, was crucial to the representation of the emergence Muslim communities.

A few more details can confirm the suggestion that the narrative about tobacco's demonic origin and the other ḥadīths that were told in combination with it, were about making the choice for Islam. The theme of choosing, of separating good from evil, is amply represented in all the versions we have. The person who tells Abū Hurayra or Abū Ḥudhayfa that the Prophet said that tobacco grows in the devil's urine and that smokers should be excluded from the community is 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. 'Alī was not only a close relative of the Prophet Muḥammad—he is also known and usually depicted as the man with the double-edged sword that separates Muslims from unbelievers: Dhū al-Faqār, the Purifier. In one of the manuscripts, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is nicknamed al-Karār, the Assaulter, 'because he slew heathens with a sword in jihād.'<sup>502</sup> Second, in all versions of the narrative, the word Furqān is used instead of Qur'ān. Furqān is a synonym for Qur'ān, but is used to evoke the meaning of the Book that distinguishes (from *faraqa*) good from evil. A deeply felt need to distinguish is also conveyed in the last lines of *Valid proofs*, where al-Wālī quotes al-Bukhārī—'Leave that which makes you doubt for that which does not make you doubt'—and concludes: 'I have clarified for you what we have resolved in refutation of said doubt.' Just as in *The peerless method*, firmness of belief is the central value that is at stake in *Valid proofs* and the yardstick by which social boundaries are marked.

#### 4. From Abgar to al-Azhar

In *ALA*, the two parts of *Valid proofs* are mentioned as separate texts. Indeed, it is true that the two parts of the work feature a fundamental mutual difference, thus suggesting that two different audiences—one consisting of local ordinary believers, the other of highly educated jurists—were originally envisaged. The first part bears clear traces, as we saw, of popular opinion about smoking in central sudanic Africa. Apart from that, its style is quite different from that of the second. It is written in simple words, short sentences, with repetitions and a host of references to prophetic traditions. One could almost imagine its being read out by a public crier in a market. The second part includes a polemical discussion of the treatise by al-Ajhūrī, but now in a scholarly style in which the syntax is often as complex as the logical and legal argumentation. However, al-Wālī started the second part with the words 'I have just presented ten good reasons', a direct and unambiguous reference to the first part of the work. It was therefore clearly meant as one text. And because of the content and the style of the second part, and because no copies of the text were found in west African libraries, it may be assumed that the treatise as a whole was specifically addressed to an audience of learned jurists in the Middle East, and perhaps was even produced there.

<sup>500</sup> Vansina 1985, 134.

<sup>501</sup> D. Sperber, *Le savoir des anthropologues*. Paris: Hermann, 1982, 78.

<sup>502</sup> Paden 76, ff 4 and 6. Herskovits Library.

Al-Wālī's ambition to be heard among those scholars is clearest in *Valid proofs*. Comparison with another essay against smoking that resembles the first section of the latter in some respects, indicates the adaptations that were made. This other essay is preserved in a manuscript (Falke 1850) that comes from the same region and is entitled *Letter of enlightenment and advice to the brothers concerning the prohibition on smoking and on using tobacco as it has appeared in these times* ('*Risālat al-anwār wa-naṣīḥa li l-ikhwān fī l-nahī 'an shurb al-dukhān wa-isti'māl tibgh alladhī ḥadatha shānha fī hādhā al-zamān*'). It bears no date, but it gives the names of al-Ajhūrī ('the only *faqīh* who did not speak out against tobacco'), al-Laḳānī (who is quoted with approval) and many other, mostly older, authors. The latest scholar who is mentioned is al-Kharāshī (a commentator on Khalīl b. Ishāq's *Mukhtaṣar*, who is also mentioned in *Valid proofs*), who died in 1689.<sup>503</sup> There is therefore reason to believe that the text was written at about the same time as *Valid proofs*. The Barnāwī (Bornu) handwriting is large, and the paper measures 16 x 22 cm (see picture, annex IV).

The manuscript gives the impression that it is a draft: it has many spelling mistakes, several of which have been corrected by the same hand, but with a thinner pen. (This hand was hesitant about the layout of the text: sometimes a *nūn* at the end of a word that did not fit on the line and had been written on the next line, was added again to the word to which it belonged, in the margin.)

The resemblance to *Valid proofs* lies in the content and the organisation of the text, not in the style. First, whereas the first part of *Valid proofs* is tightly organised in a grid of ten proofs, *The letter of enlightenment* is composed in five different chapters. Such a tight organisation was rare among other writers on the subject anywhere, and it certainly distinguishes *The letter of enlightenment* from the nineteenth century anti-smoking texts from the region that we have seen. The first chapter gives the names of 'ulamā' who prohibited smoking, the second presents legal arguments, the third is about ḥadīths that support the condemnation of smoking, the fourth consists of 'questions and answers', and the fifth offers advice that will make people stop smoking. Unfortunately, this advice is lost: part of the text, from the third chapter (folio 8v) to the end, is missing.

The author of *The letter of enlightenment* also travelled to the Middle East, as he notes in his first chapter:

I have travelled to Miṣr and travelled the blessed lands from Bulāq to Jirja, al-Wākh<sup>504</sup> and Nala and to the sea and its shores and boundaries, in the land of Yemen, Mekka and Medina, and I never stopped asking about tobacco. I met pilgrims from Miṣr, Shām, Yaman, the Maghrib, Baghdād and Baṣra. I went round and inquired what they thought of tinbāk. I have not seen anyone among the *fuqahā* who allowed it, except imam 'Alī al-Ajhūrī.

Like al-Wālī, this author especially intends to counter the influential opinion of al-Ajhūrī. Many of his arguments are the same as those in *Valid proofs*, namely that smoking is disgusting, harmful, distracting and 'unmanly'. *Letter of enlightenment* is more outspoken about tobacco's being an intoxicant, and adds that it leads to social unrest (*fitna*).

Again like al-Wālī, the author of *Letter of enlightenment* is concerned with two things he sees as interrelated: social order and the use of the intellect. Smoking, he writes, is a sign of *jāhilliyya* (f 2r, 4v): it harms the intellect and therefore threatens the order of Muslim society. Chapter 2 gives 'irrefutable proof from the famous books of law', each of which contains 'proof like the shining sun' that 'there is no path there [where smoking is condoned] except for the ignorant. There is no contesting the evidence of their justness.' It is because of malfunctioning intellects that the order of Muslim society is perturbed (see the citation in 5.4). Very cunningly, the devil therefore targets precisely the intellect. It is in this chapter on law—but without reference to a source—that we find the explanation that

<sup>503</sup> GAL II, 318. Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 145.

<sup>504</sup> Cf A.I. al-Ghabbān, *Les deux routes syrienne et égyptienne de pèlerinage au nord-ouest de l'Arabie Saoudite*. Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2011.

when tobacco came into being, it grew from the urine of Iblīs, may God curse him, and it appears of his [the devil's] nature and his domain.<sup>505</sup> The cursed one presented it in an attractive form to people who desired it, so the smell would go to their brain and cloud their minds and cut their minds off from what the intellect requires. Because everything that has a bad, forbidden smell is from the domain of Iblīs. Desiring it harms the intellect like poison. Everything that has a good smell increases the intellect. (f 7v)

Finally, it is remarkable that the treatise opens with al-Wālī's poem 'Awṣikum yā' ma'shar al-ikhwān. The fact that it fills the recto side of the first folio, on whose verso side the text against smoking begins, means that the poem was intended by the writer (a copyist or the author?) to serve here as an introduction to the prose that follows. Could it be that this text was written by al-Wālī himself, literally as an essay for his later treatise? That would mean that he had at first tried to argue that tobacco was intoxicating, but that he had abandoned this particular argument when he understood its weakness in a legal context, because the intoxicating nature was difficult to prove, while he elaborated other arguments. In any case, the relationship between the authors of both texts is so close that the differences are meaningful as well.

These differences can be summarised by saying that *Letter of enlightenment* is less sophisticated than *Valid proofs*. Although the former gives the names of twenty 'ulamā' who were against smoking (many of whom were Shāfi'i), it does not quote as many book titles as the latter. In the second chapter, legal arguments are mentioned in a haphazard way and are not developed. As we have seen, *The letter* has many spelling mistakes, and some of these seem to be based on the influence of the local pronunciation of Arabic words rather than slips of the pen. For example, *rasāhil* is written instead of *rasā'il*, *tabīhi* instead of *tabī'hi* and *qanāzir* instead of *khanāzīr*, reflecting the absence of guttural sounds in the African pronunciation of the language. *The letter* is also less sophisticated when it talks rather extensively of Zaqūm, the forbidden tree in the Qur'ān, only to conclude that the tobacco plant is not the same; not the smartest way of structuring an argument. Describing sputum running from smokers' noses (f 8r) would also have been considered less civilised by sophisticated 'ulamā' than just saying, as *Valid proofs* does, that smoking is disgusting.

Then there are a number of terms for which *Letter of enlightenment* uses synonyms that are correct but different from those in *Valid proofs*. In the first place, it uses the words *dukhān* (smoke) and *tinbāk* (tobacco) only once—*dukhān* in the title, and *tinbāk* when the author says that on his travels in the Middle East he has asked 'ulamā' about it. In the rest of the text he speaks of *tibgh* or *ṭāba*, the word that is also most common in other manuscripts from the region. *Valid proofs* employs *tinbāk*. For 'amusement' *The letter* takes 'abath instead of *la'ab*; for 'clouding the mind' it uses *tasarruf al-'aql* and *ghashī al-'aql* instead of *ghayyib al-'aql*. And it uses *mamnū'* instead of *ḥarām*. Apparently these synonyms were common in the local discourse on tobacco. But they are not the words that are employed by Middle Eastern authors, from al-Nāfi' to al-Nābulūsī. They use the words of *Valid proofs*—or rather, al-Wālī has chosen in *Valid proofs* to use terms that correspond with the conventions of discussions on tobacco that were taking place in the Middle East, while *The letter of enlightenment* is close to the discourse of ordinary people.

The point of this comparison is that it highlights the fact that, while they share a cultural background and an approach to smoking that sees it as a threat to the order of Muslim society, *Valid proofs* is situated at a cosmopolitan level, different from and more learned than the discourse reflected in the *Letter of enlightenment*. The author of the former, Muḥammad al-Wālī, seems to have made a conscious effort to adapt his style and argumentation to the standards of the heartlands of Islamic learning.

It is difficult to determine whether al-Wālī's ambitions and talents brought him the status and the audience he sought in Cairo and other places in the Middle East. As mentioned, only one copy of the

<sup>505</sup> This origin of tobacco had already been noted as *khavar*, information, on folio 6v.

*Valid proofs* is extant, and no references to it are known.<sup>506</sup> When, a decade or two later, the Bornu scholar al-Hajrami wrote that smoking was dubious according to al-Sanhūrī, al-Laḡānī and al-Kharāshī, he did not mention al-Wālī—whose opinion, although appreciated by ordinary people, diverged from that of most Mālikī jurists. Ironically, it was al-Hajrami’s single remark that was taken up in the nineteenth century by the Egyptian Muṣṭafā al-Būlāqī (d. 1847), an opponent of tobacco, who learned about it from ‘the community of worthy persons from the Sūdān’.<sup>507</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bornu and Baghirmi, the spread of Islam led to new demarcations between populations. At the same time, Islam provided the narratives that helped to define new loyalties. From a combination of extant manuscripts with ḥadīths or folktales about the origin of tobacco, and references to these tales by al-Wālī, al-Ajhūrī and al-Fakkūn, we can deduce what role smoking played in this process. Confronted with the arrival of the new foreign commodity of tobacco, in a time allegiances were being redrawn, rural people in central Sudanic Africa used these narratives to help them construct their identities as Muslims.

The core of this chapter is about the exchange between popular and ‘high’ culture. Al-Wālī was deeply familiar with opinions about tobacco that represented the cultural views of Muslim society in his home environment. The absoluteness of these views, which literally demonised tobacco, inspired him with the courage and the sense of duty to proclaim among his peers in the Middle East a point of view that was by then long obsolete to them. The ḥadīths about tobacco provided the fundamental inspiration for al-Wālī’s endeavour to write a conclusive argument against smoking, intended to refute even the opinion of one of the most prominent leaders of his own *madhhab*.

This analysis of the role played by narratives in Bornu and Baghirmi on the origin of tobacco does not explain why tobacco and smoking *did* fit in Islam as it was understood in neighbouring regions, at least in a slightly later period. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, ‘Abdallāh dan Fodio, the most learned theologian of the Sokoto jihād, wrote a chapter on tobacco in which he listed the health benefits of smoking or chewing it. In the same period Aḥmad Bābā’s *Al-lam’ fī l-ishāra li ḥukm tibgh*, in which he had explained that smoking (not chewing) tobacco was allowed as long as it did not harm the mind, was copied in Sokoto. One wonders whether, here too, distinction may have been the aim, this time not social distinction, but political: Dan Fodio entitled his chapter on tobacco ‘Teasing’ (*tankīt*) and that must have been addressed to the opponents of tobacco, many of whom lived in Bornu, the state that stubbornly withstood the power of Sokoto.<sup>508</sup>

Among ordinary believers, the ambivalence towards tobacco remained, in the Sokoto sultanate too. The attitude towards the herb of those among them who identified with Qadiriyya sufism (to which the Sokoto leaders as well as Aḥmad Bābā adhered) began to change in the nineteenth century, but Heinrich Barth still saw tobacco being cultivated mainly in pagan territories, and was surprised to find a field of tobacco in the neighbourhood of Muslim Katsina.<sup>509</sup> Later, when the Tidjaniyya *ṭarīqa* rapidly gained popularity, while Qadiriyya sufism became more organised, tobacco once more became the object of passionate disputes between the adherents of both. The Qadiriyya then agreed that all plants of God’s creation, including tobacco, are lawful to man (referring to Q 2:29), while the Tidjaniyya fulminated that tobacco was demonic, disgusting and a source of doubt (Falke 1040, Falke 1101). In the 1950s and 1960s, the controversy led to serious conflicts between adherents of the

<sup>506</sup> The Leiden University Library bought the manuscript in 1949 from an auction of manuscripts collected by the orientalist P. Herzsohn, and catalogued it as Or. 8362. See Annex I.

<sup>507</sup> Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 132, 133. For al-Bulāqī see GAL S II, 705.

<sup>508</sup> I thank dr. M. Last for drawing my attention to this chapter in *Ḍiyā’ al-siyāsāt wa-fatāwī l-nawāzil mimma huwa fī furū’ al-dīn min al-masā’il*. Cairo: Al-zahrā’ li l-‘ilām al-‘arabī, 1988.

<sup>509</sup> Barth 1857 III, 90. Cf. Low 1972, 64.



rivalling *turuq* in the northern Nigerian city of Gusau, conflicts that were referred to as the ‘tobacco crisis’.<sup>510</sup>

Al-Wālī’s attitude regarding the use of tobacco was inspired from two directions, even in a literal sense: from his home environment and from ideas that lived in the centres of the Ottoman Empire. As for the latter, he aligned himself with the objections of scholars in the traditional centres of Muslim learning, such as al-Laḳānī, and with the outright rejection of tobacco among reformists such as Ibn Nāfi’ and al-Aḳḥiṣārī, both of whom were Ḥanafis. There are indications that al-Wālī had read the latter’s *Epistle*. Al-Laḳānī’s remark that a number of honourable and virtuous Ḥanafis had followed the (Mālikī) shaykh al-Sanhūrī when he had given a fatwa in which he ‘proclaimed tobacco unlawful’<sup>511</sup> may have been an incitement for al-Wālī to study Ḥanafī views in particular, in order to find support for his personal views. Another attraction of the Ḥanafī school was perhaps the authority it derived from its association with the Ottoman centre of power. Whatever it was that sparked al-Wālī’s interest, his attention to Ḥanafī scholars deserves consideration, because of a suggestion by J. R. Willis regarding the contacts of ‘ulamā’ in Bornu with Ḥanafis in the Ottoman centres. Willis proposed that, in the nineteenth century, these contacts may have been of more substance and consequence than historians had been able to demonstrate up to then, and that they can explain the conflicts between the Fulani founders of the Sokoto caliphate, with their long tradition of Maghribī Mālikī reformism, and Bornu under shaykh Muḥammad al-Kānemī (d.1837), who defended its inhabitants against Sokoto’s puritanism.<sup>512</sup> Political rivalry and differences in religious orientation would have reinforced each other. Al-Kānemī was certainly ‘in the Turkish sphere of influence’. When he drew up a treaty with the British, he did so ‘according to the stipulations of the Ḥanafī religion’.<sup>513</sup> Other indications of such relations, from this or earlier periods, have been scarce.<sup>514</sup> The more-than-fortuitous correspondences between al-Wālī’s views and writings on tobacco and those of Ḥanafī scholars may serve as an indication of the interest that scholars in Bornu had in their Ḥanafī colleagues abroad as early as the seventeenth century.

It is likely that, during his two pilgrimages, more-direct and more-personal contacts with revivalists in the Middle East also influenced al-Wālī. His studies with al-Bābilī would likely have increased his interest in the independent and thorough study of the traditions of the Prophet. To support the legal argument against tobacco, he proposes a number of ḥadīths and some Quranic verses in *Valid proofs* that I have not found in other older texts on the subject. It shows the importance he attached to *ijtihād*, to find sources in scripture for the definition of a legal rule concerning the new legal and social problems that smoking presented. The issue of smoking was a framework in which revivalist ideas from scholars from various schools of law in the Middle East were transmitted to Bornu and surroundings. What al-Wālī’s contribution to the tobacco debate illustrates quite clearly is that the reception of these ideas was determined by local culture and conditions.

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<sup>510</sup> Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 135. Personal communication M. Last.

<sup>511</sup> Al-Laḳānī was manipulating here. In fact al-Sanhūrī seems to have avoided to express himself at all in the matter, in which he was pressed shortly before he died. See Batran 2003, 44, 45.

<sup>512</sup> J.R. Willis 1979, 3. Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 131

<sup>513</sup> R.A Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria*. London: Longman Group, 1971. Appendix I, 331.

<sup>514</sup> One of them is the fact that the fiqh poem *Shurb al-zulāl* by the Bornu scholar al-Hajramī (which itself quotes almost exclusively Mālikī authorities, was known and commented on early in the nineteenth century by a Ḥanafī scholar named Muṣṭafā al-Bulāqī. (d. 1847. *GAL* SII, 705) See Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 132-134. Hiskett 1962, 592.



## *On writing*

Chapters 5 and 6 have presented a close reading of al-Wālī's major texts, highlighting the exchange we find in them between popular culture and Muslim learning, between local concerns and theological discussions in the Middle East, and between a regional tradition and books that belonged to the canon of global Islamic culture.

This chapter returns to the writer himself. It sets out to understand the character of his personal contribution to these texts and to scholarship in central sudanic Africa. Muḥammad al-Wālī has reached these pages because he was an author. But to what extent was he an original, individual author? Does he deserve the title 'author' in the first place? His near-contemporaries respected him especially for a translation from Fulfulde into Arabic. Why did he create that translation? Was it to disassociate the text from its original, from the oral *kabbe*? The question leads to the awareness that al-Wālī lived and worked on an intersection between orality and literacy.

### 1. Author and authority

It is striking that almost nothing in al-Wālī's entire oeuvre seems to show any great originality. Rather, this oeuvre consists mainly of commentaries, compilations, and versifications. *The peerless method*, the most widely read of his larger texts, is a commentary, as are *Mu'īn al-ṭālib wa-muḥīd al-rāghib*, a commentary in the field of grammar, and the second part of *Valid proofs*, the treatise against smoking, which uses more of al-Laḳānī's (and al-Aḳḥiṣārī's) formulations than it explicitly acknowledges. Other works include versifications of the *Ṣughra* or of *The peerless method*. The poem about the creation of the world is presented as a versification 'relying on' a text by a certain Muḥammad b. Yūsuf.<sup>515</sup> Moreover, *The peerless method* is even presented, not as al-Wālī's own commentary but as his translation of existing comments. Of the preserved works, it seems that only the first part of *Valid proofs* and the short poem '*Awṣikum yā ma'shar al-ikhwān*' were conceived primarily by al-Wālī himself. How could such a derivative collection of works win him the reputation of an important author, whose work was then frequently and carefully reproduced and preserved? For answers to these questions, we will start by turning our attention to the field of comparative literature, where the question of what makes an author has been discussed in a general way.

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<sup>515</sup> Verse 9: 'I rely on the words of Muḥammad Ibn Yūsuf', i.e. al-Sanūsī?

In 1968 Roland Barthes declared that the author, thought of as single source of meaning, was dead—whereupon Michel Foucault asked, in an essay whose brevity was matched by its influence, ‘What is an author?’<sup>516</sup> One of the first elements of his answer was that the author is not the same as the writer, and that it is more apt to speak of an author function. The point is most clearly captured in the following passage:

Everyone knows that, in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly either to the writer or to the moment in which he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance.

One might object that this is a characteristic peculiar to novelistic or poetic discourse [...]. In fact, however, all discourses endowed with the author function<sup>517</sup> do possess this plurality of self. The self that speaks in the preface to a treatise [...] and that indicates the circumstances of the treatise’s composition, is identical neither in its position nor in its functioning to the self that speaks in the course of a demonstration, and that appears in the form of “I conclude” or “I suppose”. In the first case, the “I” refers to an individual without an equivalent [...]; in the second, the “I” indicates an instance and a level of demonstration which any individual could perform, provided that he accepted the same system of symbols, play of axioms, and set of previous demonstrations.<sup>518</sup>

The author function operates in between these selves. The one who signs a text is not the only one who gives meaning to it. The signatory shares this function, for instance, with context, tradition, sometimes a patron, and always the reader. Someone is considered an author because the audience acknowledges the author function in work. The author function is then identified by the name of this individual author.

Many literary critics have agreed with Foucault’s analysis. Nevertheless, his views have especially inspired further research—primarily with western literatures, and hardly at all in Arabic studies—to move in a direction that is fundamentally different from his own. Foucault’s ultimate aim was to investigate ‘how, under what conditions, and in what forms something like a subject appears in the order of discourse? [...] In short [the investigation] is a matter of depriving the subject of its role as originator and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse.’<sup>519</sup> Foucault’s concepts, however, are often used—as they are here—to explore the authorship of individual writers and notably the relationship between the authority of texts and that of authors in different periods and cultural environments. Questions include: Who deserves the title ‘author’? Must he or she be ‘original’, or can one borrow, copy, compile, scribble notes in margins and yet be an *auctor*, that is a creator and an authority? What is the relationship between the author’s intentions and the meaning of the text he or she wrote down, or the significance attributed to it by others? And what contributes to, and what establishes, the author’s authority?<sup>520</sup>

As I have noted, the scholars of classical Islam set greater store by authenticated tradition than by originality, and this was also true of literary production in a wider sense. An important part of literary

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<sup>516</sup> R. Barthes, ‘The death of the author.’ In R. Barthes, *Image-music-text*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977. M. Foucault, ‘What is an author?’ In *The Foucault reader. An introduction to Foucault’s thought*. Ed. P. Rabinow. London: Penguin Books, 1984. 101-120.

<sup>517</sup> Not all texts have the author function, notes Foucault. Most private letters e.g. have a signer, not an author; a contract has a guarantor, graffiti has a writer.

<sup>518</sup> Foucault 1984, 112.

<sup>519</sup> Foucault 1984, 118.

<sup>520</sup> For overviews of the ongoing discussion see M. Zimmermann, ‘Ouverture du Colloque.’ In M. Zimmermann (ed.), *Auctor et autoritas. Invention et conformisme dans l’écriture médiévale. Actes du colloque de Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (1999)*. Paris: Ecole des Chartes, 2001. Also M. Biriotti and N. Miller (eds.), *What is an author?* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.

authority<sup>521</sup> was based on the role accorded to tradition. Even the (supposedly) pre-Islamic poet 'Antara, regarded in Arabic culture as one of the fundamentals of literary expression, referred to what the ancient poets before him had said, in the very first line of his poem (هل غادر الشعراء من مترد) 'Antara is aware, writes A. Kilito in an exceptional essay about the relationship between the author and his authority in Arabic literature, that '[i]l ne sert à rien de composer des vers qui ne feraient que répéter d'autres vers. Mais que seraient des vers qui se désolidariseraient et se dissocieraient des vers anciens?'<sup>522</sup> In fact, respect for tradition was so strong that it would be hard to identify authors by their individual style, because they did not aim to have one.<sup>523</sup> It was usually the genre that set the rules for the style of a text. At the same time, convention dictated that a name be attached to a text, especially a scholarly one. But it was not uncommon for the producer of a text to bring it out under the name of a distinguished dead colleague, or ascribe it to an anonymous 'ancient' author.<sup>524</sup> Both options were chosen by one of the greatest authors of the classical period, al-Jāhīz, when he wished to be spared the jealousy of the intellectuals of his own generation.<sup>525</sup> The past itself conferred authority on those texts, and much more so than the name of any author. It was by borrowing and quoting from predecessors, and showing that one could occupy a place in a venerated tradition, that an author could build up his authoritativeness.

Also, in the Islamic tradition, with its strong roots in the oral transmission of hadīth and poetry, the idea of transmission was linked to the possibility that the transmitter would improve the material by correcting elements and adding others. Thus, written texts were often collective works, in which the roles of copyists, editors, commentators and authors were virtually indistinguishable.<sup>526</sup> It was common practice that someone published a work which consisted to a large extent of text that he had not composed himself, but to which he had made his own contributions. Ideas about plagiarism or forgery were very different from modern ideas on the subject, at least as long as an author did not put his name under the text of one of his own contemporaries (as al-Maqrīzī, for instance, was accused of doing). These cultural values explain why, in classical Arabic culture, which provided the model for al-Wālī's writing, the authority of comments or even glosses was not fundamentally different from the authority of an 'original' text.

<sup>521</sup> Authority here may be defined as the qualities - in the first place veracity and sagacity - which made a literary work worthy of imitation or implementation. Cf A.J. Minnis, *Medieval theory of authorship. Scholastic literary attitudes in the later Middle Ages*. London: Scholar Press, 1984. Chapter 1.

<sup>522</sup> A. Kilito, *L'auteur et ses doubles. Essai sur la culture arabe classique*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1985. 19.

<sup>523</sup> F. Rosenthal, *The technique and approach of Muslim scholarship*. Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1947, 48 ff; See also R. Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 (4th ed), 135.

<sup>524</sup> Kilito 1985, 72-80.

<sup>525</sup> Al-Ġāhīz, *Quatre essais*. Traduction française par Charles Vial. Caire: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire. 1976-1979. I, 159-162. To a certain extent, Arabic culture shared this respect for the authority of past *littérateurs* with European medieval culture. Michel Zimmermann, summarizing views from contributors to the book *Auctor & auctoritas*, wrote that the desire of the European medieval author was to participate 'à l'oeuvre de création continue qui est la destinée de l'homme; d'où le souci de se soumettre aux modèles et précédents qui donnent autorité au discours. Le poids des auctoritates est déterminant; l'auteur s'efface derrière l'auctoritas.'<sup>525</sup> It sounds idealistic compared to the words of one who sometimes made the choice of giving up his voice altogether, that is of Adélard of Bath. His considerations were similar to those of his contemporary al-Jāhīz, but he was more concise when he wrote, in J. le Goff's translation:

Notre génération a ce défaut ancré qu'elle refuse d'admettre tout ce qui semble venir des modernes. Aussi quand je trouve une idée personnelle si je veux la publier je l'attribue à quelqu'un d'autre et je déclare: 'C'est un tel qui l'a dit, ce n'est pas moi.' Et pour qu'on me croie complètement, de toutes mes opinions je dis: 'C'est un tel l'inventeur, ce n'est pas moi.' Pour éviter l'inconvenient qu'on pense que j'ai, moi, ignorant, tiré de mon propre fond mes idées, je fais en sorte qu'on les croie tirées de mes études arabes. Je ne veux pas que si ce que j'ai dit a déplu à des esprits attardés ce soit moi qui leur déplaise. Je sais quel est auprès du vulgaire le sort des savants authentiques. Aussi ce n'est pas mon procès que je plaide, mais celui des Arabes. (J. le Goff, *Les Intellectuels au Moyen Age*. Paris: Editions du Seuil. 1985, 60.)

<sup>526</sup> See G. Schoeler 2006, 65-72.

In al-Wālī's case, however, we need to understand not only why an *oeuvre* consisting mainly of commentaries and versifications gave him any authority in the first place, but also how he was able to build up so much of it. Let us return for a moment to Foucault. He identified a specific kind of author, whom he called founders of discursivity. 'They are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts.'<sup>527</sup> Foucault gives Marx and Freud as examples. They were not only the authors of famous books—they also established further discursive possibilities, both in their own and numerous other fields.

These remarks are not meant as a first step to try to raise al-Wālī to the level of a Marx or a Freud. It is simply that the concept of discursivity gives us a tool with which to understand his success. One of the theorists who adopted it was Edward Saïd, although in a way his approach is also the opposite of Foucault's. In *Beginnings*, Saïd asks, not about the author as a function of discourse, but about how and where one can identify the beginnings of a historical movement or a realm of thought. By contrast with Foucault, he looks for agents. To identify a beginning is to identify an actor with outstanding authority, and to find out how this authority was created. Authority, for Saïd, lies in a unique and 'original achievement that gains in worth, paradoxically, precisely because it is so often repeated thereafter.'<sup>528</sup> Repeated, that is, by others; this is where he adopts Foucault's term, discursivity. This new achievement, however, must be connected to tradition, to established authority. Continuity and conformity with tradition constitute one part of the authority of an author. Discontinuity (giving the tradition a new twist) distinguishes a great author from others who worked in that tradition, and makes for the second part of his authority. The third part, the proof of the pudding, lies in discursivity, in the possibilities that others find in an author's work to elaborate on it and to transpose it to other realms of communication, outside literary or scientific discourse. Al-Wālī did these three things, and all of them in *The peerless method*. Let us turn to him again, beginning with a look at his authority and his authorship.

Al-Wālī vested his authority in the first place in God. As had been the convention in Islamic writing since the beginning, all his works open with the basmallah and salutations addressed to the Prophet, his family and companions. In *Mu'īn al-tālib* he adds soon after that: 'I have written this purely for God. May anyone who comes across it with a peaceful heart benefit from it. Success is with God; to Him I turn.'<sup>529</sup> Similar remarks are made in other texts, and this of course is in keeping with the convention among writers, especially on religious matters, in the pre-modern Muslim world.

In none of the works that have been preserved does al-Wālī mention a patron or a *destinataire*. But that does not mean that he had no links to power at all. Although he lived far from Birni Gazargamu, it may be assumed that he received some 'presents' from its royal court and, of course, from the sultan of Baghirmi, whose predecessor had also given the community of which al-Wālī was a religious leader its land, in return for religious support for his political authority. But these resources were most probably not enough to sustain a living on the one hand, or, on the other, to dictate what al-Wālī wrote. It seems that in writing his work he was quite independent from patrons. Rather than his work's deriving its authority from them, it was the other way round: *it* bestowed authority on *them*.

Al-Wālī sought to derive authority from the classical tradition in which he placed his own work, and writing commentary was perhaps the best way to do this. It has been suggested that, in Islamic scholarship and literary culture, writing a commentary, whether on grammar, theology, law or another science, entailed claiming status and authority within a particular field. In the absence of rites of passage or rules establishing the status of scholars (considering that an *ijāza* did nothing more than bestow authority to transfer knowledge of a particular book), writing a commentary may have had the function of passing a public examination, thus giving proof of one's capacity to understand, interpret

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<sup>527</sup> Foucault 1984, 114.

<sup>528</sup> E.W. Saïd, *Beginnings. Intention and Method*. London: Granta Books, 1997. (Second ed. First ed. 1995), 32.

<sup>529</sup> Kaduna N/AR2/47, first page of copy after basmallah (p 2), line 14.

and discuss a work of repute. The ideal acknowledgement of this claim was someone else's commentary on the commentary.<sup>530</sup>

As a genre, commentary writing in Arabic has not been widely studied. As I have mentioned, western scholarship long regarded its thriving as a sign of cultural stagnation and intellectual decline. Challenging that notion, R. Wisnowsky argues that commentaries were in fact a motor of intellectual innovation starting in the ninth century, and he reckons that, from 1100 to 1900, roughly half of the philosophical activity in Islamic intellectual history was expressed in some form of exegetical work.<sup>531</sup> The Arabic term for commentary, *sharḥ*, is fluid. There were no rules that determined how commentaries should be written, and the art was never taught in formal institutions.<sup>532</sup> Commentaries may rearrange the text that they are responding to, and select from or add to it, and the results may range from simplifications of the original text (although a commentary is distinct from an abridgement, *mukhtaṣar*) to fundamentally new texts, with a new character, new content, and new goals. In all cases the commentary was accepted as entirely the product of its composer.<sup>533</sup>

Trying to distinguish, then, between al-Wālī's personal voice and those of the earlier authors of a text that carries his name—in this case we will focus again on *The peerless method*—is a modern concern, *pace* Foucault, and was not a concern for al-Wālī's contemporaries. It is relevant here because we wish to understand how al-Wālī positioned himself as a scholar in his environment, and because a possible distinction between his and others' voices will affect our evaluation of this particular text and its significance. Al-Wālī the individual, living in a particular period, allows us to verify when and in what context the meanings in his work have crystallised. So we will try to determine how much of *The peerless method* he actually formulated. The first element of the answer is simple: al-Wālī wrote an Arabic version of a text or pieces of text and ideas that existed in Fulfulde. To paraphrase Zimmermann, writing in a language that one does not speak creates in itself a 'way of writing', an *écriture*.<sup>534</sup> Moreover, transferring a text from one language to another is itself a statement about the value one wishes to attribute to it in a new environment. As such, the mere act of translating in the first place can be a sort of commentary, meant to influence opinions.

Then things become a bit more complex. Since the precursors of *The peerless method* were oral texts, we cannot hope to know just what was translated: was it only the idea of commenting on the *Ṣughra*, or a type of text with certain features, or complete sentences? In any case, while he was writing, translating and committing an oral text to paper, al-Wālī himself made many choices regarding the text. At the same time, parts of *The peerless method* so much resemble explanations from other texts by al-Sanūsī, that it seems unlikely that they were not taken directly from the original Arabic source, without the 'interference' of Fulfulde, by the author of the Arabic *Peerless method* himself. Although the Fulani used a peculiar word-by-word method to translate canonical texts<sup>535</sup>, translation from Arabic to Fulfulde and back again would certainly have led to much more variation in those paragraphs.

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<sup>530</sup> This idea was elaborated by L. Conrad in 'Commentary Culture and the shaping of Academic Culture in Medieval Islam.' Lecture during the conference *Beyond Hadith: Writing the Tradition of Early Islam*, in memory of Gautier Juynboll and organised by Leiden University Centre for Islam Studies (LUCIS), dec 2011.

<sup>531</sup> Wisnowsky 2004, 149-191.

<sup>532</sup> D. Gutas notes that in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, *sharḥ* is considered as a form of *tafsīr* (explanation), next to *ta'liq* (annotation) and that Ibn Rushd made the distinction between *al-sharḥ 'alā l-lafẓ* (ad litteram) and *al-sharḥ 'alā l-ma'nā* (ad sensum). In this classification *The peerless method* would count as a commentary ad litteram. D. Gutas 1993, 33.

<sup>533</sup> Sometimes authors wrote a commentary to their own text or poem, especially when the first text made liberal use of the most uncommon phrases, to prove the erudition of the author. It was a popular habit in west-Africa. Al-Sanūsī also wrote a comment to his own *Ṣughra*.

<sup>534</sup> '[...] la période est parcourue par deux mouvements de sens contraire qui ne manquent pas d'avoir des incidences sur l'expression: dans un premier temps, écrire une langue qu'on ne parle pas; dans un second, se risquer à écrire la langue qu'on parle. Dans les deux cas, il s'agit bien d'inventer une écriture.' 2001, 11.

<sup>535</sup> P. Eguchi, *Notes on the Arabic-Fulfulde translational reading in northern Cameroun*. Kyoto: Kyoto University African Studies, 9 (1975), 177-250.

And there is more. As we saw in chapter 5, commentaries on the *Ṣughra* began to be composed soon after this work appeared, very early in the sixteenth century, and the roots of the Fulfulde text that al-Wālī translated may indeed go back that far. Some elements in *The peerless method*, however, were definitely added well after 1600. There are no physical elements in the manuscripts that indicate this. Each of the versions I have seen is written entirely in one hand, without marginal notes. In the text, however, a reference to tobacco ('the venerable and righteous scholar is he who does not commit corruption, adultery, theft, slander and defamation, or tobacco-smoking'<sup>536</sup>), is certainly from after 1600. The same is true of references to al-Laḳānī (d. 1631) and the historian and poet al-Maqqārī (d. 1631). At a number of points, sentences in *The peerless method* are followed by 'here ends what I have added'. This 'I' who added bits of text is an individual writer 'without equivalent' in Foucault's terms. What we would like to know is whether 'I' is al-Wālī or another contributor to the text, whose words al-Wālī translates, because the additions tell us something about the character of this 'I'. The nature of the insertions is sometimes legal (description of the *mukallaḳ* in legal terms, f16) and, more often, logical (explanation of the relation between substantive and ideal attributes, f23; explanation of the impossible attributes of God in logical steps, f 32; explanation of the attributes of prophets and the faults that would contradict these attributes, f 39, 40). Most often the additions are anecdotes or quotes that expand on information for the reader *and* indicate the erudition of the author. The first addition, in the preface, is the statement that an anecdote about al-Sanūsī also occurred in the life of Abū Zaid al-Qurṭubī. Then, showing his familiarity with various scholarly sources, 'I' adds: 'And I say that this commentator remains silent about things that other comments mention and that indicate his holiness'. The next addition is an anecdote (about how al-Sanūsī turns into a stone to avoid meeting a sultan) for which the source is not given, but which probably comes from the North African al-Abbadī. In the second half of the text, many quotes are added from verses by al-Maqqārī, and two phrases (about the attributes of the messengers of God) of which 'I' says that he took them from what al-Maqqārī wrote.

Who is the person who added these learned references? In theory, 'I' could have been anyone. Even copyists could add to a text they had at hand, although it was not considered best practice in their profession.<sup>537</sup> But these marked additions in *The peerless method* are the same in all four versions, which means that they were not made by *different* copyists. They may have been made by a single early copyist, a possibility which cannot be ruled out. However, if the author of the additions was another contributor to the text or a copyist, and not al-Wālī, it was nevertheless someone who was contemporary to him, and who shared his passions for study and against smoking. Ockham's razor suggests that it was al-Wālī himself. He was demonstrating his capacity to read the *auctores* of Islam, as a means to reinforce his own authority. Other strategies he employed in his *oeuvre* as a whole include the demonstration of his capacity to engage with authoritative works by means of commentary, of his mastery of various branches of the Islamic sciences and his choice of al-Ajhūrī – a scholar of the highest status – as an adversary.

As mentioned in chapter 5, by contrast with commentaries on the *Ṣughra* by al-Laḳānī or by al-Sanūsī himself, *The peerless method* did not discuss abstract concepts such as *kasb*, causality or predestination. On the other hand, it did refer to prominent authors and theological discussions in the heartlands of Islam, for instance on the question of whether existence is a divine attribute or the essence of God; or the question of whether God punishes 'at will' or according to a law; or the question whether the shahāda is part of the Muslim faith or a condition of being a believer. Two approaches are at play in *The peerless method*: one of bringing a theological text to ordinary people, the other of integrating the commentary back to into scholarly discourse. While the first was the approach taken by the oral Fulfulde commentaries, the latter seems to have been al-Wālī's.

<sup>536</sup> Hunwick 178, 9.

<sup>537</sup> Rosenthal 1947, 22. Cf. P. Burke and R. Po-Chia Hsia (eds.), 'Cultures of translation in early modern Europe.' In *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 31, 34.



The question remains whether *The peerless method*'s most outstanding element, that is its discussion of the 'imitator' and the idea that faith and adherence to the norms of a group of convinced Muslims can be tested with the help of a series of simple questions, was incorporated into it by al-Wālī himself or had already been part of the Fulfulde commentary. It would be difficult to answer. The notion that a lack of knowledge of the philosophical approach to *tawhīd* amounted to unbelief also occurred in the western Sahara, among an unidentified group of 'ulamā' in Sijilmasa, in a period—when al-Yūsī (d. 1691) was alive—that does not predate al-Wālī's.<sup>538</sup> We do not know to what extent the notion had developed before that. What we *can* say is that it was 'in the air' in the second half of the seventeenth century, and that it was a concern of certain scholars of al-Wālī's generation. Although the themes of doubt and imitation do not seem to be mentioned in the twentieth-century *kabbe* versions, and was perhaps no part of this oral tradition, the repeated formula addressing the imitator does suggest that it arose in some oral environment, before al-Wālī wrote it down. He captured it, and incorporated it into a large commentary with a long tradition, which he raised to the level of mainstream scholarship by translating it into Arabic. It subsequently spread. By 1800 the testing of knowledge of the Muslim religion had developed into a popular practice in central sudanic Africa, as we saw in chapter 5.<sup>539</sup> Another way of saying this is: the idea that one's degree of faith could be and had to be tested in this way had been discursively enabled. In chapter 6 we discussed one reason why the theme of 'imitation' versus 'knowing' became so popular: it was linked to a concern among ordinary believers with the instability of their Muslim identity—an instability that threatened to relegate them to the status of pagan, black, filthy, and enslavable people. Another reason why the theme was important for al-Wālī and other 'ulamā' is investigated below.

## 2. Why did al-Wali translate *The peerless method*?

To raise it to the level of mainstream scholarship – was that what motivated al-Wālī to translate a text for the instruction of Islam from Fulfulde into Arabic? To translate (from Latin *transfere*) means to bring something across, from one place to the next. What did al-Wālī cross, and to address whom? For centuries, the Fulani had translated the other way around: from Arabic to Fulfulde and other languages, the mother tongues of people they aimed to teach and convert. The earliest written religious educational poems in Fulfulde date from the eighteenth century, but they had circulated orally long before that.<sup>540</sup> Although not considered as sacred as Arabic, Fulfulde had the status of a language of learning and no objection was felt against its use for religious text. Around 1800 Dan Fodio and his co-jihadists wrote much of their work in Fulfulde and also in Hausa, so that their message could reach a majority of the people in the Hausalands.

In al-Wālī's time, the autochthonous inhabitants of Bornu and Baghirmi, whether Muslim or not, spoke Kanuri, Barma, Hausa and other local languages. Some Shuwa Arabic may have been spoken in the region, because, as we know from the oral history about the foundation of the village of Abgar, there were Arabs there in the beginning of the seventeenth century. But they were not there for long. In Bornu, west of Lake Chad, Arab tribes did not arrive before the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>541</sup> It is not likely that many others spoke their language in the first period of their presence. And even then, those who did speak Shuwa Arabic did not speak *fushā*' Arabic, the language of the study of Islam. Al-Wālī's translation must therefore have been intended not so much for the benefit of new converts, but on the one hand for a local audience of people who were already rather advanced in their studies of Islam, and on the other hand to reach a wider audience of people who did not understand Fulfulde, that is for instance of colleagues in the Middle East. Their appreciation of this particular commentary would support the status of the Barnawi and Fulani scholars there, and also further enhance the status of the text in its original environment.

<sup>538</sup> Al-Hajj 1974/77, 7.

<sup>539</sup> What we do not know is whether the questions were put in Arabic, the language of learning about Islam, or in Kanuri, Fulfulde or another language of daily oral communication.

<sup>540</sup> Haafkens 1983, 8-11, 25; Hiskett 1975.

<sup>541</sup> J.-C. Zeltner 2002, 7-20.

If learned colleagues and advanced students in al-Wālī's own environment formed the largest audience of the translation, the next question is what the Arabic language meant to them. It is a tenet of Islam that, in order to obtain a thorough understanding of theology (and religion), one has to be well versed in *fuṣṣḥā* Arabic. Al-Wālī was well aware of this. Other languages are an obstacle to learning about religion, a source of innovation and confusion, he said. That was the reason he wrote two texts of instruction of various aspects of the Arabic language. In one of them, *Tadrīb al-ṭullāb 'alā ṣinā'at al-i'rāb*, he writes: '[acquiring] the knowledge of inflection (*i'rāb*) is a duty of students, an instrument to understand preaching and to distinguish bad from good, and a condition for the study of all other sciences, notably of *tawḥīd*, hadith and *fiqh*.'<sup>542</sup> In *Mu'īn al-ṭālib* he is even sharper: 'He who is ignorant of grammar (*naḥū*) is scorned among scholars. Verily, all sciences require the science of grammar'.<sup>543</sup> For those who might still shrug their shoulders, he quotes an anonymous poet who states that 'the student of hadith who does not know grammar and does not master it is like a donkey with a nosebag attached to its head without any barley in it'.<sup>544</sup> Indeed, the study of grammar, syntax, morphology and rhetoric had an elitist aspect. Classical works on these subjects, such as those by al-Wardī (d. 1290) and Ibn Ājurrūm (d. 1223), on which al-Wālī's two language books are based, are steeped in the idea of distinguishing an intellectual elite, who knew how to speak and write the language correctly, from common people. A recurring theme in these works is that of *laḥn al-'āmma*, the mistakes that are made by ordinary people, which intellectuals should avoid. With his books *about* the Arabic language, al-Wālī was certainly addressing a social elite of well-educated, pious Muslims, which he also hoped to reinforce

So *The peerless method*, in Arabic, was not primarily addressed to run-of-the-mill believers, but rather to relatively advanced students of Islam. More precisely, it was addressed to students who envisaged a career as preachers and leaders of Muslim communities, and who would recite and explain it to ordinary believers. However, this does not answer all the questions regarding the translation. For instance, there had been advanced students and future 'ulamā' before, even if not as many as there were now. If the Arabic language was so important for the study of Islam, then why had the Fulani scholars' commentary not been put into Arabic a century-and-a-half earlier? The moment the Arabic version was in fact written falls in the period when Islam was starting to spread outside the cities and royal courts to rural populations. Is there a relationship between the two? But why would students from a peasant background be more in need of Arabic than more urban Muslims? We can come closer to an answer if, instead of asking, 'Why did al-Wālī translate this text?', we ask, 'Why did he write it down?' The fact that he wrote *in Arabic* is, in a way, of secondary importance. To write, one had to write in Arabic. Other languages were not written.<sup>545</sup> The fundamental question, then, is why al-Wālī transformed an oral 'textbook' into a written textbook.

### 3. From orality to literacy

An obvious goal would have been to promote literacy, as the vehicle *par excellence* of the values and norms of the religion of the Book that Islam is. If the 'ulamā based their authority over people on their understanding of the holy texts and the long tradition of scholarship about them, it meant that they needed an audience of –partially?– literate believers to recognise and appreciate the significance of that understanding.

<sup>542</sup> Kaduna N/AR2/47. p 2, line 10, 11, 12.

<sup>543</sup> Kaduna D/AR7/4. p 4, line 13.

<sup>544</sup> Idem, p 3, line 19, 20.

<sup>545</sup> Other languages—primarily Hausa—could be written in Arabic script, but the first time this was done, was a century later. In Birni Gazargamu Old Kanembu was written, in Arabic script, early in the 17th century and perhaps before. However, this language was used exclusively for Qur'ān exegesis. It translated words and grammatical structures on a one-to-one basis and did not exist without the source Arabic language. Bondarev, 2006, 142-153.

However, since the 1990's the groundbreaking work of scholars like G. Schoeler and S. Leder has made us realise with more clarity than before how complex the relation is in the Muslim tradition between literacy and the transmission of knowledge, between literacy and orality.<sup>546</sup> Schoeler has demonstrated that in the formative period of Islam a combination of writing and lecturing characterised the model of transmission of knowledge. The publication of literary works was oral. Reciting these works (or poetry, or any other genre of *adab*) was by preference done from memory. Written texts functioned as mnemonic aids and for the preservation of texts in order to transmit them further, but not in the first place for learning or reading individually. The standard methods of teaching consisted of lecturing (from memory) by a teacher while students listened (*samā'*) or of students reciting (from memory) after which a teacher would correct them (*qirā'a*). It has remained the model of teaching in Islam until today, in many places.<sup>547</sup> And we saw in chapter 5 that *The peerless method* was also taught orally. 'Wake up from your sleep, rouse your brain and understand what I say,' the teacher would instruct his audience, 'so that the beginning of the speech does not escape you, for he who lets the beginning slip and [then] listens to the middle or another part, will not understand a thing.'<sup>548</sup> There was no question of leafing back, and al-Wālī and subsequent copyists retained the warning in the written version. Apparently, the text was not written to substitute its oral teaching.

What else may have motivated al-Wālī? There is the possibility that literacy represented to him an attitude towards knowledge that was fundamentally different from that pertaining to the oral culture of his wider environment; an attitude which, in that case, he wanted to enhance. The transition from primary orality to literacy – from the situation of cultures that are totally unfamiliar with writing to that of cultures in which literacy dominates – has been regarded as one of the most sweeping transitions in the history of different civilisations, at various moments in time. Shortly after the middle of the twentieth century (perhaps not surprisingly in the period when an interest in human consciousness pervaded many realms in western societies) social scientists have given much attention to the meaning of this transition for cognitive processes and the organisation of knowledge, at a philosophical level as well as the social level. Questions regarding such issues were first raised within the field of literary studies, and since then they have been discussed throughout the humanities, from anthropology to psychology and history.<sup>549</sup>

Pioneers in the field have proposed that where literacy spread widely among a previously illiterate population, it changed the character of consciousness of time and historicity, of subject, object and objectiveness and of 'logic', and that it did this not only for those who were actually literate, but for cultures at large.<sup>550</sup> The anthropologist Goody illustrated the latter point with the example of an illiterate American who is asked to name the states of his country and starts with 'Alabama, Alaska, Arizona...'. It showed, he argued, how literacy determines cognitive processes and the representation

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<sup>546</sup> G. Schoeler, 'The relationship of literacy and memory in the second/eighth century' in *The development of Arabic as a written language*. (Supplement to the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 40.) M.C.A. Macdonald (ed.) Oxford: Archaeopress 2010. 121-130; *The oral and the written in early Islam*. London: Routledge, 2006. S. Leder, *Mu 'ġam al-samā' āt al-Dimašqiyya: al-muntaḳaba min sanat 550 ilā 750 H/1155 ilā 1349 M.* (With an introduction in German, French and English) Damascus: Institut Français d'Études Arabes de Damas, 1996.

<sup>547</sup> See e.g. R.W. Hefner 'Islamic Knowledge and Education in the Modern Age,' In *New Cambridge History of Islam*, Vol. 6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. R.A. Lukens-Bull, 'Two Sides of the Same Coin: Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia.' In *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 32 (2001): 350-372.

<sup>548</sup> Hunwick 178, 14.

<sup>549</sup> Foundational works are: M. Parry, *L'Ephithète traditionnelle dans Homère*. Paris: Société Editrice Les Belles Lettres, 1928; E.A Havelock, *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963. J. Goody, 'Restricted Literacy in Northern Ghana.' In J. Goody (ed.) *Literacy in traditional societies*, (Cambridge, 1968), 198-265. J. Goody, *The domestication of the savage mind*. (Cambridge, 1977). W.J. Ong, *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. (London and New York, 1982).

<sup>550</sup> Havelock 1963; J. Goody and I. Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy' in J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in traditional societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968c. And *The domestication of the savage mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; Ong 1982.

of the world in modern cultures—that is the way in which a literate or illiterate member of a literate society ‘segments events, groups them or organises, condenses and transforms them.’ Literacy is understood by these authors as the essential technique that facilitated abstract and analytic discourse, a feature unknown in cultures of primary orality. Therefore, the transition from orality to various stages of literacy offered better explanations of cultural shifts that had been labelled before as shifts from magic to science, or from the so-called ‘pre-logical’ to the increasingly ‘rational’ state of consciousness, or from Lévi-Strauss’s ‘savage’ mind to domesticated thought.<sup>551</sup>

This understanding of the relationship between literacy and a change in the attitude towards knowledge was much inspired by a reading by the historian and classicist E. Havelock of Plato’s *Republic*. Living in the time (fifth to fourth century BC) when literacy had begun to dominate orality in Hellenic culture, Plato wrote about his ideal system of education. It would form an elite of people who could think critically, rationally and as autonomous individuals, a system he juxtaposed to the role of poets, and of the emotional, uncritical, automatic identification with the message in their poetry, which they summoned from their audience. The oral art of poetry belonged to ancient society and should play no significant role in his envisaged modern republic.

Explaining Plato’s objection to poetry in terms of orality and literacy, Havelock put forward that in oral society the transmission and preservation of knowledge depended on acoustics, that is on an evanescent phenomenon. Retrieving such knowledge depended on ritualised performance, on memory facilitated by rhyme and rhythm, and therefore on collective forms of consciousness of the tradition and on the automatic identification (or ‘imitation’, incidentally) by each member of society with it.<sup>552</sup> Aphorisms, verse, stories, were constantly present with him in his acoustic reflexes and also visually imagined before his mind’s eye. In short, he went along with tradition.<sup>553</sup> An individualistic and critical attitude towards knowledge was not possible. Knowledge written down, however, could be literally objectified, seen as a physical object and as part of a ‘body of knowledge’ that was separate from the human body. Its transmission did not depend any more on hearing and performances that linked one to other keepers of a tradition. With a book at hand, or even the idea of a book, one could literally ‘take a second look’ at things and reflect on them as autonomous critical individuals.

One of the implications of this concept of knowledge, that Goody and Watt hypothesised, was that in societies where literacy first became widespread (such as Plato’s Greece), it could have the effect of reducing social stratification, because it introduced a new possibility of achieved status besides the ascribed status of traditional chieftanship.<sup>554</sup> However, they did not see this happening in traditional societies they studied, such as that of Muslim societies in Northern Ghana. There, this potential was curtailed by what Goody termed ‘restricted literacy’. This referred to a situation in societies where the technology of writing is known, but where the spread of literacy is restricted by other factors, and he indicated first, the cultural limitation of literacy to sacred uses (for instance in amulets, ‘*ilm al-ḥurūf*’, or the practice of keeping the Qur’ān hidden from believers and showing it only once a year); secondly, a restricted social distribution of literacy skills in a specialist group (as was the case for the

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<sup>551</sup> Goody 1977, chapter 5.

<sup>552</sup> In Plato’s treatise, *mimesis* (imitation) plays an important – negative – role. In Arabic commentaries, by Ibn Rushd e.g., it was translated as *takhyīl*. (See Averroes’ *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Poetics*. Translated, with introduction and notes, by C.E. Butterworth. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

<sup>553</sup> Havelock 1963, 199.

<sup>554</sup> Goody and Watt 1968, 55. These views have been criticized by anthropologists and sociolinguists of a next generation, among whom B. Street is prominent. The main objection of these protagonists of New Literacy Studies is that an over-emphasis on a cultural divide between orality and literacy, by the focus on cognition, is not useful. It is evolutionist, they say, in that it assumes a cognitive advance in the transition, and sustains a dichotomy between languages and cultures, often between the literate cultures of western civilisation and those that were mainly oral, in countries that were colonised in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To them, a more important issue to study when literacy and orality are concerned, is power and the fact that literacy practices, their acquisition, use and meaning, ‘are saturated with ideology’. B. Street, ‘Introduction: the new literacy studies.’ In B. Street (ed.) *Cross-cultural aspects to literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 1-21: 9.

Dyula and the Fulani scholarly ‘clans’ in West Africa. Goody called it a ‘guru system’<sup>555</sup>; and thirdly, the guarding of the skills and knowledge pertaining to literacy as the secrets of the literate few, the idea, that is, that there were layers of learning that were suitable for different layers in society, and that not all knowledge can be ‘handled’ by just anybody. As Ibn Rushd wrote, there was a difference between the class of men whose religious belief was based on the result of reasoning from syllogism, and those whose faith must be based on the authority of the teacher.<sup>556</sup> In short, in traditional societies, literacy was often restricted precisely because it was religious literacy: having been introduced together with Islam, it had great attraction as a means of communication with the supernatural and was thus associated with priesthood, while at the scholarly level it was dominated by the study of the Qur’ān. Although Goody did not argue that the restrictive factors were only found in Islam, his and other case studies in the same volume, as well as studies inspired by it, emphasised the relationship between Islam and restricted literacy.<sup>557</sup>

This final aspect raised perhaps the main objection against the widely adopted concept, or at least one that is of significance for the study of al-Wālī. It was formulated by B. Messick, who argued that restricted literacy did not so much pertain to Islamic culture, but rather to another characteristic of the situation Goody and other contributors to his influential book studied, notably the fact that literacy occurred there in a foreign language (Arabic), in societies on the margin of the Muslim world.<sup>558</sup>

It all leads to the question how al-Wālī understood the relation between writing and knowledge, religion and social roles, and whether he wished to somehow influence it with his conversion of a well-known oral text to a written book. Can a certain concept of knowledge be discovered in his work? With all his insistence on reason, did he want his students to adopt a more autonomous and critical attitude towards knowledge? Or did he think of literacy as a secret skill that was to be restricted to specialised groups of people?

#### 4. Knowing and the knower

Al-Wālī’s interest in literacy is not a sign of an intention to promote a critical attitude towards knowledge among ordinary Muslims. And when he demanded that people do not ‘imitate’, but use reason or intellect, he did not mean that they should use reason autonomously, but rather that they use it to follow the reasoning of the specialists. It was not just literary convention that demanded that, in *The peerless method*, all the answers to questions about God’s attributes be dictated: ‘if you are asked this and that, then answer, so that you are not an imitator: ...’<sup>559</sup> For al-Wālī, the relationship these specialists had to religious knowledge was exclusive, and the ordinary believer could not master it independently. Knowledge was not at all separate from the knower, but tightly linked to the ‘ulamā’, the specialists of knowing. This is not something he expounds on explicitly, but he gives it away in a revealing passage in *The peerless method* that was intended to explain a different issue, that is the distinction between the substantive and ideal attributes of God:

If you ask about the difference between substantive and ideal [attributes], I say: substantive attributes are those that determine the essence. That by which the essence is named, is ideal. It is like weaving and the weaver, or knowing (‘*alima*’) and the scholar (or ‘knower’, ‘*ālim*’). Weaving is the description of an act, not of an essence. I have finished. A substantive attribute

<sup>555</sup> Goody 1968a, 13.

<sup>556</sup> Goody 1968b, 238.

<sup>557</sup> I. Wilks, ‘The transmission of Islamic learning in the Western Sudan.’ In *Literacy in traditional societies*, ed. J. Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968. 161-198. I.M. Lewis, ‘Literacy in a nomadic Society: the Somali Case.’ In *Literacy in traditional societies*, ed. J. Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968. 265-277. C.H. Bledsoe and K.M. Robey, ‘Arabic Literacy and Secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone.’ In *Man, New Series* 21,2 (1986): 202-226.

<sup>558</sup> B. Messick, ‘Legal documents and the concept of ‘restricted literacy’ in a traditional society.’ In *International Journal of Social Linguistics*, 42 (1983): 41-52.

<sup>559</sup> In fact, the formula ‘if you are asked ..., then say’ goes back to the Qur’ān.

is a condition, an ideal attribute is conditional. The conditional cannot exist without the condition, and this is necessarily so for the seven [ideal attributes of God's Being].<sup>560</sup>

Here, al-Wālī has added an example (ending with the words 'I have finished') to the text he translated, to illustrate the relation between condition and the conditional. But his remark discloses two more fascinating insights. First, the comparison reveals how he sees the relation between knowledge and the knower: knowing is conditional, meaning that it cannot exist without the 'ālim. Knowing is not what makes the knower—it is the other way around. Knowing is what the knower does, it is his profession, and knowledge is what he produces, just as the weaver produces textiles. Knowledge is not something one can attain independently or intuitively, and not a truth to which one can assent incidentally. It is to have an explanatory based understanding of the 'why' of facts and truths. And it is exclusively up to the 'ālim, the professional knower, to hand that knowledge down. And, if we think of the identification of the scholar with the weaver in terms of the manual work each does—imagining the weaver weaving and the scholar writing—we can say that, as textile is what is woven, knowledge is what is written.<sup>561</sup>

Perhaps al-Wālī did want to drive a wedge between believers and a sort of automatic identification with the traditions of their predominantly oral culture. But he did not want people to change their attitude towards knowledge such. In fact, his concept of knowledge is not unlike that in traditional African cultures. Authors in different fields have pointed out that in pre-colonial and in pre-Islamic societies in Africa, knowledge was not available to everyone in the same way.<sup>562</sup> Much of it was hidden to ordinary people. Knowledge was conceived of as existing at different hierarchical levels, the highest of which are in the supernatural realm of spirits and deities. It could be obtained from them only by specialists—of religion but also of medicine, hunting, midwifery or other fields—through the intervention of ancestors or other spirits. The specialists could then produce this knowledge for others, to whom it could be transmitted by initiation. To the uninitiated, specialised knowledge remained secret, invisible, hidden. The division between manifest and secret knowledge marked the esoteric episteme of many traditional African cultures. Religious specialists held the monopoly over the knowledge that was most important to a community, the knowledge they received from the supernatural realm, for instance about causes and remedies for illness and other threats to the community's welfare. The difference between 'ulamā' and the priests of local religions was that the knowledge of the former did not come from communication with spirits through divination, trance or sacrifices, but from the communication through study with the scholars of global Islam, in the Arabic language that was in this region almost completely restricted to this study. Like traditional priests however, and partly like the spirits and ancestors themselves, they kept control over the knowledge the believer needed for his personal welfare and that of the community, and transmitted it piecemeal to an elect group of followers.<sup>563</sup> Without the 'ulamā', in al-Wālī's view, there was no knowledge in a transmissible form.

In other words, my argument here is, that al-Wālī's 'knower' is one who belongs, not to the logical category of (just) anyone who knows, but to the social category of the scholar. It was the status of a particular model of the scholar that al-Wālī wished to promote. As I argued in chapters 2 and 4, the authority of 'ulamā' as men of undoubted moral standing who possessed unique religious knowledge was challenged on a number of fronts, and in *The peerless method* al-Wālī seems to be offering an answer to their need to renegotiate their role. Basically, his solution was that, to be a Muslim, one had to have knowledge 'from reason' and thus could not do without the 'ulamā', who were the only

<sup>560</sup> Hunwick 187, f 23:

وان س(أ)لت عن الفرق بين المعانى والمعنوية نقول المعنى كل صفة تقو بالذات فتتصف بها هي المعانى تسمية الذات بها هي المعنوية كالنسيج مع الناسج قلت الصواب تمثيله بالعلم مع العالم اذا النسيج صفة فعل لا صفة ذات انتهى المعانى شرط والمعنوية مشروطة ولا يوجد المشروط بدون وجود الشرط وهي ملازمة للسبع

<sup>561</sup> Al-Wālī's comparison must be related to the Latin culture where the word text, from the Latin textum, is derived from texere, weaving.

<sup>562</sup> Paden 1973; R. Shaw, 'Splitting truths from darkness: epistemological aspects of Temne divination.' In *African Divination Systems. Ways of Knowing*. P.M. Peek (ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991; Brenner 2000, Chapter 1.

<sup>563</sup> Cf Levtzion 1985, Last 1979, Brenner 2000.

dispensers of it. In his work it becomes quite clear who he believes deserves the title, *‘ālim*: not just any popular preacher, nor a healer or a diviner using the technology of writing without having a good command of the Arabic language, but a classically schooled *mutakallim*, who has read the foundational books of Islamic learning (whichever ones these were considered to be), who is precise in his references, verifies opinions, stories and ḥadīths (as he himself did, for instance, concerning the story of the Negus and some of the biographical information about al-Sanūsī in *The peerless method*, and the ḥadīth about the origin of tobacco in *Valid proofs*), who operates in a cosmopolitan environment, and who is a specialist in the most highly intellectualised fields of scholarly practice, such as that of ḥadīths, *kalām*, *taḥqīq* and *nazarī* knowledge. These norms defined the model that scholars themselves pursued. For the general public, literacy, as a skill and an intellectual orientation, was the one emblem that distinguished this type of *‘ālim* from other types of specialists of Islamic knowledge, whose numbers rapidly increased in the seventeenth century. In this context, transferring the Fulfulde commentary on al-Sanūsī’s *Ṣughra* to written text was a way of claiming it for this class of *‘ulamā’*. This claim emphasised that only they had access to the meaning of religious literature, and were therefore most able to be complete Muslims. In times of social changes related to the popularisation of Islam, it was part of a movement to assert the *‘ulamā’*’s social status.

In al-Wālī’s view, literacy skills were not restricted to a ‘sacred’ use in amulets or *‘ilm al-ḥurūf*, and script was not an artefact with supernatural powers in itself, whereby their meaning was partly hidden to those who benefitted from them. On the contrary, the use of literacy for openly communicating and studying the meaning of the Qur’ān and ḥadīths was much more important. But in al-Wālī’s work we can recognise something of an ideological foundation under the historical fact that literacy was socially restricted to a group of specialists, and was used as a means to keep a religious hierarchy in place in which the literate ranked highest. Decisive for the choice of literacy to this end, I suggest, was the need of the social class of *‘ulamā’* to defend its position in this particular period in the history of central sudanic Africa.

The precise extent to which al-Wālī was regarded as a spokesman by his colleagues, and the degree to which his work reflected the strategy of a regional group of *‘ulamā’* to collectively maintain their power, would be difficult to establish. Not enough texts by other scholars from the same period are available for comparison, and in Abgar, al-Wālī lived an isolated life for much of the time. But his understanding of the scholar’s authority over believers was certainly welcomed by the many copyists of his work.

Al-Wālī’s almost chance remark comparing knowledge with woven material raises the question of how he related to previous discussions about the nature of knowledge in Muslim scholarship. As I mentioned in chapter 4, the questions of how intellectual cognition comes about, how human understanding relates to God’s truth, and what the relations are between knowledge, faith and reason, were extensively discussed starting in the first century of Islam.<sup>564</sup> However, al-Wālī does not seem to have had much opportunity to study the subject in detail. None of the authors or book titles that Rosenthal designates as leading in these discussions is to be found in Hall and Stewart’s ‘core curriculum’ or in the WAAMD. A faint trace, however, of his reading in this field may be recognised in the few verses at the end of Ibn Zakrī’s *Muḥaṣṣil*, quoted in chapter 3. If they are indeed by al-Wālī, they demonstrate that he thought about the differences and correspondences between Ash‘arism and the Māturīdīya, two schools that are in many respects not far apart. A marked difference between them concerned the sources of knowledge of God, but also the obligation to acquire knowledge in general, a subject to which al-Māturīdī himself attached considerable importance. He was, as far as we know, the first to begin a treatise on theology with a consideration of the theory of knowledge.<sup>565</sup> For the Māturīdīya, as well as the Mu‘tazila, we must ultimately believe in God because reason forces us to.

<sup>564</sup> For a study of the debates see F. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant. The concept of knowledge in medieval Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 2007. Black, D. ‘Psychology: soul and intellect’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*. P. Adamson and R.C. Taylor (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

<sup>565</sup> Rosenthal 2007, 210, 211.



For Ash‘arism we must believe in God because it is written in the holy sources, and ‘knowing God through revelation is possible’, as is asserted in the lines attributed to al-Wālī.

As we saw in chapters 5 and 6, al-Wālī did attach considerable importance to the study of these sources. But the scriptures were to be approached with reason, logic and verification. Like the revivalists in circles of al-Bābilī, he was of the opinion that the meaning of the Qur’ān and the ḥadīths is not hidden and should not be sought out by intuition or metaphorical interpretation, but can always be understood intellectually. And even in instances where the divine sources are silent, reason could be their ventriloquist: ‘although evidence (for the prohibition of tobacco) is not present in the literal text of the Qur’ān and the Sunna, it is not hidden from all those who possess reason,’ as the author states in *Valid proofs*.<sup>566</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter has focussed on two things: first, it has sought an explanation for al-Wālī’s reputation as an author of renown, in terms of literary criticism and by considering how he positioned himself as a scholar on a supra-regional level. Second, it has argued that in a time when Islam, and therefore literacy, were popularising, al-Wālī wrote *The peerless method* down as part of an effort to ascribe the ‘best’ knowledge of Islam to the ‘ulamā’, the only ones who *could* write books, because they had a full command over the medium of communication with the elite of global Islam, and in popular views with God himself.

In previous chapters I have shown that al-Wālī’s reputation ‘at home’ was important because of his excellent appreciation of what concerned ordinary believers and because of the way in which he reflected and addressed those concerns in his work. But his talent lay not only in addressing the right audience on the right issues: as my readings of Foucault and Saïd have made clear, it also lay in his capacity to formulate new ideas and link them to established traditions, and in his ability to combine continuity and discontinuity in a way that others elaborated and transposed to other realms of communication. This last is most visible in *The peerless method*. It derived its authority from the *Ṣughra* and employed the *kabbe* tradition for a new beginning. In it, al-Sanūsī’s notion of the duty of the *mukallaf*, who should learn about the attributes of God and the prophets, was reformulated in terms of questions to be answered by those who do not want to be accused of imitation and cast out as unbelievers. The idea, based in the concept of the imitator, that true believers could be distinguished from unbelievers posing as Muslims, was emerging in an oral environment in various regions, including in the western Sahara, but its formulation in written Arabic, and in terms that echoed a theological discussion among revivalists in the historic heartlands of Islam, allowed a new discourse to gain ground—a discourse on testing the religious knowledge of people who claimed to be Muslims.

*The peerless method* does not have one specific author. The text is a composite work to which many have contributed, and its authorship is distributed. To use Foucault’s term, however, it was the author function in al-Wālī’s work, and the meaning this had for its audience, that were important in central sudanic Africa at the end of the seventeenth century—and later, when it was often copied. Al-Wālī’s genius—and his interest for the historian today—lie in the way he registered significant social and cultural shifts. At the same time, if ‘only’ a versifier, a commentator and a ‘scribe who recorded’ existing oral comments, he had a hand in the course of history, because he turned sentiments and elements of oral discourse into elements of scholarly discourse. While other influential scholars in the region wrote especially about governance and law (addressing in the first place the elite who were in the position to govern, control and judge), al-Wālī chose to write about beliefs and behaviour, about the cultural picket poles of Muslim society as a whole. And because society was as at that time taking new shapes – Muslim society primarily, but since it involved a separation of waters, traditional society was affected as well – his writings were significant.

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<sup>566</sup> Or. 8362, 8r.



When in the seventeenth century Islam spread farther into rural areas of west and central sudanic Africa, it also brought with it a modest spread of literacy. Al-Wālī lived in an environment that was marked as much by orality as by literacy. Society at large, including small Muslim communities, functioned as primarily oral societies. The author's own education, profession and ambitions were rooted in literacy. His work is situated at the intersection of orality and literacy. In his versifications, he made available to orality what was written before. With his works on grammar, he taught literacy. In *The peerless method* he wrote down what had been oral. He must have done so in response to a demand from believers. But most of all he wished to channel that demand, and restrict it within the frame-work of classical Muslim learning. Quoting from the *Ṣughra* as well as from al-Sanūsī's *Muqaddima* and adding numerous references to other literary sources and scholarly discussions, he transposed the oral commentary from an environment of vulgarisation to an environment of literacy and learning.

His thoughts about literacy may have served al-Wālī as a stepping stone to thinking more generally about modes of knowing and learning. It is possible that he saw literacy as a wedge that could pry believers loose from their automatic identification with traditional cultures and *their* religion. With his insistence, in several of his works, on the need to study, he may have juxtaposed two modes of cognition, that of the imitator and that of the Muslim student; that of the member of oral culture and that of the literate individual. However, al-Wālī did not promote a new mode of cognition or a sceptical attitude towards knowledge. In fact, he offered only an alternative source of identification. Instead of the cultural code of the traditional ethnic community, he offered the knowledge that members of his class of 'ulamā' had produced and controlled, to be memorised by their followers. Making *The peerless method* less available to the illiterate proved the middle term of the dialectical thesis that is central to it: if one's status as a believer depended on knowledge, and if knowledge depended on the 'ālim, then one's status as a believer depended on the 'ālim.



## 8

### *Certainties in times of choice*

Working in times of political unrest and economic decline, spending a good part of his life in a village far removed from any centre where ‘history’ was made, and producing mainly commentaries and versifications of pre-existing texts, Muḥammad al-Wālī nevertheless became one of the most important scholars of the region in his day. With so many odds against him, how did he do it?

First, he devoted his work to themes that appealed strongly to his audience while he was alive, and that would continue to do so in the centuries that followed. Second, he made excellent use of his position on the boundary between different cultures. He was a fine translator, especially in the sense of transferring meaning from one context to another. In so doing, he answered the needs of his home audience and presented himself as someone who could operate at a cultural level that was beyond the grasp of most of its members. Third, he was eclectic and chose from various Muslim schools and trends what he found useful for his own work.

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The themes that pervade al-Wālī’s commentaries and his one original poem have to do with the Muslim identity: with the unity of the Muslim community, the firmness of belief (truth versus falsehood), and the fight against doubt. These themes corresponded to a social need of Muslims around him—some whose families had been Muslim for generations, while others were new converts—who experienced the changes in identity and loyalty that were occurring on a large scale in that period, as Islam spread out of the town centres to rural areas, and as economic and political certainties were declining.

The problems around Muslim identity were in themselves not new. One challenge to that identity was the attractiveness of the traditional religions, which were so interconnected with social life, values, views on life after death and the fertility of land and other resources, that it was hard to give up one of the elements without losing the others. Islam could only compete with this complex of identity, security and welfare, when all the stops were pulled out on its side too: when economic benefit, social and political security and a new worldview went hand in hand. But the mix of benefits was often not decisive, and many new converts returned to their old beliefs. However, what was new in the seventeenth century were scale and urgency. Over five centuries Islam had developed from one of

several sources of authority into the main or even the unique source of legitimacy for the ruling classes in Muslim states. As a result, growing numbers of peasants outside the urban centres of these states saw a political interest in having a Muslim identity. Consequently, Islam spread to rural areas, where many converted. At that point, lapsing back into old belief systems, that is, the instability of the Muslim identity—which in West Africa was a collective identity—became a social problem. And in Bornu and its surroundings, where slaves (as a commodity) and slave labour formed the basis of the economy, it became an urgent social problem. The Muslim identity gave some protection against slave raiders to rural communities in or near the state of Bornu, because, in principle, those with a firm Muslim identity were not raided and robbed of their strongest people. Communities that had a Muslim identity had a serious interest in not letting it be contaminated by doubt, be it their own or that of others. What al-Wālī offered were certainties in times of choice, and—for the reader on whom he has not made a favourable impression—tools to draw new lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

A second theme lived among a group of people even closer to al-Wālī: the authority of the ‘ulamā’ of the type to which he belonged, the scholars of the old school, who could boast a classical education of book-learning in which the canon consisted of books from the Middle East and North Africa. Of course, ‘ulamā’ had always had a special place anywhere in Islam, but in seventeenth-century West Africa the status of their profession was affected in a number of ways. First, as a result of the spread of Islam to rural populations, there were an increasing number and variety of Muslim storytellers, healers, diviners and teachers who lacked the classical education of the ‘ulamā’, but who competed with them as specialists of religious knowledge. Secondly, the ‘ulamā’'s moral leadership was challenged by a new trend in mysticism that played down the role of book-learning. Thirdly, as a result of political instability in Bornu, their relations with the ruling class became less self-evident.

A close reading of al-Wālī's work shows that he made the ‘ulamā’'s concerns his cause, and related it to the first theme, of separating true Muslims from others. He emphasised that one could be counted a true Muslim only if one followed the ‘ulamā’, because being a true Muslim was not just to confess belief, but to understand the intellectual foundation of what one confesses. What that was, was only taught by those ‘ulamā’ who specialised in knowledge that comes from reason (*‘aql*) and reflection (*naẓar*). In fact, he said, there was no religious knowledge without them, just as there is no cloth without a weaver.

Reason, or intellect, is al-Wālī's third major theme. The fact that the intellect could be damaged by smoking tobacco, as many believed, gave him an extra motive to fight that habit, and lent a remarkable coherence to his *oeuvre*.

Underneath these themes, another is hidden: boundaries. To become a Muslim was ‘to enter Islam’ (*dakhala fī dīn*), that is to cross a threshold. Al-Wālī's environment was one in which rapidly increasing numbers of people were confronted with this moral, social, and cultural border between the religion of their ancestors and the new religion of Islam. Some crossed it, while others did not, but regardless—they all had to consider the consequences of choosing or being obliged to follow this way or that. This was an environment in which the new religion brought its adherents new norms and the notion of a different centre of civilisation, geographically as well as culturally; in which rural populations could win opportunities for emancipation and better relations with the ruling classes; and in which literacy started to play a role next to orality, not only as the skill of a small minority of learned Muslims, but as a mark of Islam and of new social attitudes, and perhaps even as the fundament to a different mode of cognition.

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Borders were not discussed explicitly by al-Wālī. But he was a master at joining elements from different cultural realms: popular culture and Muslim learning, local concerns and theological discussions in the Middle East, tradition and idiosyncrasy. Al-Wālī's strength as a scholar and more particularly as an author lies in the way he was able to negotiate between the elements in these realms, always retaining what he found most valuable.

With *The peerless method*, the text that more than any other made his name, al-Wālī based himself on two great traditions of teaching Islam—the first embodied in a text that was successful throughout the Muslim world, the second with its point of origin near the coast of West Africa, and having, since the sixteenth century, conquered other West African regions stretching all the way to Lake Chad. From both, al-Sanūsī's *Ṣughra* and the Fulani *kabbe*, al-Wālī took what he needed: their pedagogical approach and their canonical renown. But where the latter were intended to include as many people as possible in the community of believers, his *Peerless method* aimed to define who belonged to it and, even more pointedly, who did not, because this was a deep concern in his own local environment. The central message that *The peerless method* added to the texts that it translated and discussed was that the *muqallid*, the 'imitator'—someone who does not seek religious knowledge but mimics and goes through the motions of Islam without conviction—was without any doubt an unbeliever. That was an unorthodox point of view for any school of thought with a firmly established status in Islamic history.

Al-Wālī invented neither this notion of the imitator, nor the idea that faith should be tested. It emerged at about the same time among a group of fanatical Muslims in the Western Sahara, and seems to have been part of the oral discourse of 'ulamā' in central sudanic Africa, too, before he wrote it down. But his capturing it in the framework of a written canonical tradition made it suitable for debate among scholars and common people alike, an accepted tool, both to renegotiate the role of the 'ulamā' and to distinguish between true and false Muslims. In this form, it stimulated the development of questioning believers' knowledge and judging their faith so that this practice became a habit that was widespread in the eighteenth century (too widespread, according to 'Uthmān dan Fodio) and that persisted to the present day. Unfortunately, it also contributed to firmly linking ideas about the imagined inferiority of 'others' to religious doctrine – an effect that was also realised in the text against tobacco.

The exchange between popular culture and a 'high' culture of learning is even more pronounced in al-Wālī's *Valid proofs for announcing the prohibition of smoking*. This plea mixes elements generated by popular anguish with state-of-the-art tropes taken from theology, logic, verification and the independent study of the Qur'ān and of ḥadīths as sources of jurisdiction. Among common believers in Bornu and Baghirmi, the importance of single-minded loyalty to Islam was expressed through the stigmatisation of smokers as unbelievers, and of tobacco as demonic. Since its introduction, Muslims here saw tobacco as a tangible sign of disturbance and *fitna*, of a changing world in which the religion and cultures of Jews, Christians and '*Jebel Inklīz*' were approaching and creating a new challenge to their dearly won Islamic culture. That a majority of mainstream 'ulamā' in the historic heartlands of Islam as well as farther west in sudanic Africa had no problem with tobacco, did not impress them. Al-Wālī's treatise against tobacco reflects the function that shunning tobacco had in his home environment for the self-representation of new Muslims as not filthy and uncontrolled, but united in an exclusive top layer of society and firmly dedicated to their new community. He must have hoped that he could help end the *fitna* that threatened his followers, if only he could tackle the problem of tobacco at its root—that is, if only he could convince important jurists at al-Azhar to counter the opinion of the late Mālikī authority al-Ajhūrī, who had allowed tobacco. Therefore he collected the best arguments and addressed the scholarly elite in their own terms, with a treatise of irreproachable scholarly quality.

Another border over which al-Wālī deliberately crossed back and forth is that between orality and literacy. Although there was a small group of (mostly male) Muslims who could read, societies in the region had a fundamentally oral culture. Educated as he was in the long-standing Fulani tradition of reading, writing and oral teaching, al-Wālī worked at the intersection between literacy and orality. He translated oral works and ideas in which he himself was deeply imbued, into written text, for the benefit of the learned audience that was the guarantor of his scholarly status. At the same time, with his versifications of important theological texts, he made literary works available for oral recitation—that is, for memorisation by preachers and teachers who could repeat them to the ordinary, illiterate Muslims, for whom the versifications functioned as a gateway to the literate culture of Islam.

The question is: Why was it important for al-Wālī to transfer oral discourse to written? Straddling two cultures, as he did, he may have felt that the power of orality, with its memorisation, its performances

and the collective experience of language, tied people to the collective consciousness of their language community, and that this was an important obstacle to the unity of the overarching Muslim community. More certain is that he wanted to strengthen the image of the kind of scholar he was, the kind that had studied the canonical texts of Islam, and could operate at the highest level of contemporary scholarship, and not least because he had mastered an impeccable Arabic; more particularly, he helped to articulate the model of the scholar as a highly lettered expert of Islam who had been trained in the methods of *kalām*, was up to par with the movements of *ijtihād* and *taḥqīq*, and could discuss topical issues with peers among the cosmopolitan elite in the historic heartlands of the religion. It was the duty of such a scholar to be a moral guide to other Muslims, no matter where they lived. Writing—that is, producing knowledge—was the emblem of these ‘ulamā’, which distinguished them from popular preachers, mystics and other types of specialists of Islam.

That he did his best to conform to this model of the scholar is clear from most of his works, and indeed from his *oeuvre* as a whole, situated as this was in the core fields of Islamic learning: *tawḥīd*, language and jurisprudence. With his choice of books for commentary and versification, and with his references to numerous authors, both of the stock of books that had long been part of the canon of West African Muslim learning and of some famous contemporary works, al-Wālī placed himself in a tradition of global Islamic learning, from which he derived authority. At the same time, he had the courage to be eclectic.

Like most learned Muslims in West Africa of his day, al-Wālī adhered to the Ash‘arī school of theology and the Mālikī school of jurisprudence. However, he did not follow all of their tenets indiscriminately. In accordance with Ash‘arism he did believe that reason *and* tradition provide proof of God’s being, and also, for instance, that God does have substantive attributes. His profound interest, however, in the role of reason and knowledge in theology may be the reason why he was never dismissive of the Mu‘tazila, as greatest examples (al-Sanūsī and al-Laḡānī) were. He was interested in their point of view, as well as in that of the Mātūrīdīs. For both these schools, reason was in the end more important than tradition as a source of knowledge about God and his laws. The ultimate reason why we must believe in God, they argued, is that intellect forces us to. This dove-tailed with al-Wālī’s ambition to strengthen the authority of the ‘ulamā’, which was based on their professional monopoly when it came to supplying both reason and knowledge based on its use. It is remarkable, also in view of the lack of enthusiasm that Maghribī Malikism had for *kalām*, that *The peerless method* and especially *Valid proofs* reveal such an interest in this approach, in which appeals to reason reign supreme.

Indeed al-Wālī takes a critical position towards Malikism too. Some aspects that mark West African or Maghribī Malikism, and that distinguish it from Malikism in the Mashriq, such as a very strict interpretation of social and legal principles, may be recognised in his thought. However, unlike the majority of scholars in the Hausalands (or later in the Sokoto caliphate) and farther west, al-Wālī does not draw exclusively on sources from the Mālikī school. And unlike other West African Mālikī scholars, notably from a generation that succeeded his (and to which the Bornu scholar al-Hajrami and the leaders of the Sokoto jihād belonged), he was not interested in matters such as taxes, inheritance or the question of whether men and women could mix during funerals. He was certainly interested in the formation of Muslim society—and more than he was, ultimately, in scholastic ruminations about God’s attributes— but at a more fundamental level. He was concerned with questions such as who belonged to the Muslim community and who did not, and why was it up to him, as a scholar, to determine that.

For his interest in reason and his rejection of ‘imitation’ (*taqlīd*) al-Wālī found inspiration in the theological discussions in circles of religious revivalists in the Middle East, who reviewed the relation between the believer and religious knowledge. The members of a circle around Muḥammad b. ‘Alā al-Dīn al-Bābīlī in particular, a Shāfi‘ī scholar of ḥadīth with whom al-Wālī spent an unknown period of time, propagated *ijtihād*—that is, the effort to return to the sources of the revelation themselves, independent of the thick volumes and long traditions of exegesis that separated believers from them. *Ijtihād* and *taqlīd* were to them communicating vessels: as the first was advanced, the second was

suppressed. They also criticised forms of mysticism that tended to deny the importance of the study of the outer truths and laws of God's creation. Students of al-Bābilī came from all four legal schools, and it may have been there that al-Wālī also learned more of Ḥanafī puritans whose writings underpinned an aversion to tobacco and whom he quoted in his treatise against it. Another reason he was interested in Ḥanafī views may of course have been the association of this *madhab* with the highest level of political authority in the Muslim Middle East, that of the Ottoman rulers. His orientation was toward the Middle East, more than toward the West African centres of learning. We do not know to what extent al-Wālī's interest was exceptional among Bornu scholars of his time, but his advance towards the Ḥanafī school and his putting Malikism into perspective must have facilitated the political orientation of Bornu's later elite, which turned to Istanbul in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a counterweight to the threatening dominance of Sokoto.

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This study has taught us that learned Muslims in seventeenth-century central sudanic Africa—al-Wālī himself and his direct audience—participated in the Muslim scholarly culture of that time, on a small scale perhaps, but at a level that shows less limitation than might be expected considering the distance between their homeland and the metropolitan centres where hundreds of scholars were concentrated. Al-Wālī, for one, participated in the trend that developed in global Islam in the seventeenth century, favouring logic, other rational sciences and the verification of received scholarly opinions (trends that still need analysing in terms of their relation to what was simultaneously happening in Europe, where theologians also turned back to reading the works of the Church fathers to go beyond the exegeses from the Middle Ages and verification was deployed against scholasticism, but where knowledge came to be seen as based on personal observation and understanding, and humanism was kindling the first sparks of the Enlightenment). It is fascinating to see how al-Wālī was part of these developments. But he participated on his own terms. He borrowed from the library of global Islam, from the 'sections' of *kalām* and story-telling, from Ḥanafīs and Mālikīs, whatever was relevant for his own work. Ultimately, his choices were inspired by the circumstances of his immediate environment, and most of all by the need of 'ulamā' of that time to reassert their authority and their power.

A limitation of this study is that al-Wālī could hardly be put in the perspective of contemporary peers. It is difficult, therefore, to say to what extent he was exemplary for his environment. On the other hand, we do know that his contemporaries and his later readers considered his work to be highly relevant as well as of outstanding quality. I hope that the examination of how he positioned himself as a scholar in this environment has contributed to our insights into social processes in the central sudanic Africa of al-Wālī's day, and that it has thrown more light on the complex history of Islam in the region in the seventeenth century, a century that has been relatively hidden from the modern historian's view, but was crucial, because of the increasing number of Muslims and the shaping of the debate about what that meant.

In particular, al-Wālī has afforded us a view of the interaction between global Islam and local Muslim identity in the context of a local society situated between traditional culture and a globalising economy and culture. The conclusion in this respect is not surprising: precisely on the frontiers of a cultural realm, and at the moment when new boundaries were being formed, the development of thought regarding identity was intense and laid the basis for oppositions that are still being unearthed in the region today.





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Arabe	Collection Arabe, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
Falke	Part of the collection of Arabic manuscripts from West Africa of the John Melville Herskovits Library of Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.
Hunwick	idem.
Paden	idem.
Or.	Oriental manuscripts, Leiden University Library.
SOAS	Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

### Abbreviations

ALA	<i>The Arabic Literature of Africa</i> . (J.O. Hunwick and R. Abubakre)
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i> , London University
GAL	<i>Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur</i> . (C. Brockelmann)
NU	Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.
NA	National Archive, Kaduna, Nigeria
WAAMD	West African Arabic Manuscripts Database ( <a href="http://westafricanmanuscripts.org">westafricanmanuscripts.org</a> )

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*Names that start with al- are placed according to the first letter that follows it. Thus, al-Laḳānī can be found under L.*

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