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

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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*.¹ Theology is directly related to the religious expressions – expressions which have to do with human interactions with a culturally postulated, unfalsifiable reality² – 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.

¹ 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.

² 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.³ 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.⁴ This region shares an ecological system (as R. Loimeier emphasises), a history and indigenous cultural traits.⁵ 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

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

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

⁵ 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.⁶ 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. Seesemann⁷, 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.⁸

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.⁹ 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

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

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.¹⁰

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’.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Most recently Dmitri Bondarev has published a number of studies on the calligraphed and annotated Qur’āns for which

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² www.westafricanmanuscripts.org

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

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

¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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'.¹⁸ 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 *ṣūfis*. 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.'¹⁹ 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

¹⁶ 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).

¹⁷ 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.

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

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.'²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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

²⁰ 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.

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

²² LaCapra 1983, 28-29.

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

²⁴ 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.²⁵ It is the transmission that is especially productive, notes A. Grafton.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.'²⁸ '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.'²⁹ 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.

²⁵ Brett 2002, 113-119; Lacapra 1983, 34.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Skinner 2005, 33.

²⁹ 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 2002.³⁰ 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'.³¹ 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.³² 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?'³³ 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'.³⁴ 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.'³⁵

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'.³⁶ 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.'³⁷ This idea of the link between words or text and reality makes for a seamless match between

³⁰ 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.

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

³² 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.

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

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ Said 2004, 71.

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

³⁷ 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.'³⁸

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',³⁹ 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'.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

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

³⁸ Pollock 2009, 949.

³⁹ Pollock 2009, 951.

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

⁴¹ Hamacher 2009, 29.

⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.'⁴⁴ 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.'⁴⁵ 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

⁴³ 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.

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

⁴⁵ 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?⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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.'⁴⁹ 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.'⁵⁰ 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

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

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

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ Burke 1978, 28.

⁵⁰ 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.'⁵¹ 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.'⁵² 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.⁵³

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

⁵² 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.

⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.'⁵⁵

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.'⁵⁶ 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.'⁵⁷ 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;⁵⁸ for al-Wālī, a hundred years before, it involved the establishment of symbolic sign-posts.

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.

⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁶ 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

⁵⁷ R. Debray, *Éloge des frontières*. Paris: Gallimard, 2010. 44.

⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ So popular was it, that, according to Last, other producers, Italian as well as Ottoman, copied the watermark.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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

⁵⁹ 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 *Manhal 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 *Hudūth al-‘ālam*. c) Paris 5461, 1a-14b is recorded in ALA as *Manhal 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).

⁶⁰ A.D.H. Bivar, ‘Arabic documents of Northern Nigeria.’ In: *BSOAS* XXII, I, 1959, 324-349; 327, 336, 339.

⁶¹ 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.

⁶² M. Last 2011, 185.

⁶³ A. Brigaglia and M. Nobili, ‘Central Sudanic Arabic Scripts (part 2): Barnāwī.’ In *Islamic Africa* 4, 2 (2013). 195- 223.

⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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

⁶⁵ Whitting 1951, 103, 105.

⁶⁶ Brigaglia 2005, 2.

⁶⁷ 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.