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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*¹⁷¹ 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.¹⁷² 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 1666.¹⁷³ 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 1730.¹⁷⁴

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

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

¹⁷² Ibrāhīm Šāliḥ, 433.

¹⁷³ 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.

¹⁷⁴ 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).¹⁷⁵ 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.¹⁷⁶ 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.¹⁷⁷ 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.¹⁷⁸

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.

¹⁷⁵ 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.

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

¹⁷⁷ 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.

¹⁷⁸ *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.¹⁷⁹ 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.¹⁸⁰ 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.¹⁸¹

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*.¹⁸² It also refers to another famous text on the subject by al-Ājurrūmiyya (d. 1223), whose work was distributed widely in West Africa.¹⁸³ 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.¹⁸⁴ The photocopies of manuscripts of both texts that I have received are

¹⁷⁹ 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.

¹⁸⁰ 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.

¹⁸¹ 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

¹⁸² GAL II 140.

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

¹⁸⁴ 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.¹⁸⁵ 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.¹⁸⁶ ‘*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.¹⁸⁷

‘*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,

¹⁸⁵ 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.

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

¹⁸⁷ 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.¹⁸⁸ 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.'¹⁸⁹ 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'.¹⁹⁰ 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.¹⁹¹

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.¹⁹² It was *their* misunderstanding and misuse of Islam which

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

¹⁸⁹ 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.

¹⁹⁰ Brenner 1985a, 110.

¹⁹¹ 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.

¹⁹² Hiskett 1962, 581.

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

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.'¹⁹⁴ 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)¹⁹⁵ 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.'¹⁹⁶ 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.'¹⁹⁷ 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

¹⁹³ 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.

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

¹⁹⁵ 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.).

¹⁹⁶ 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.

¹⁹⁷ 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.¹⁹⁸

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 group¹⁹⁹ and one of them, Muḥammad Bello, wrote in the first decade of the 19th century that al-Wālī was 'of our tribe'.²⁰⁰ Whether Bello had a professional or also an ethnic group in mind, would be difficult to establish.²⁰¹ 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.²⁰²

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'.²⁰³ 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.'²⁰⁴

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,

¹⁹⁸ For Ṣāliḥ al-Fulānī see Levzion 2007, VII, 7.

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

²⁰⁰ من قبيلتنا Or. 14063, 3r.

²⁰¹ See also H.J. Fisher 1966, 346.

²⁰² Lapidus 1988, 508-523.

²⁰³ 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.

²⁰⁴ 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.²⁰⁵ 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.²⁰⁶ 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.²⁰⁷ 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.²⁰⁸ 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.

²⁰⁵ 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.

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

²⁰⁷ Bobboyi 1992, 17.

²⁰⁸ 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,²⁰⁹ 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.²¹⁰ 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.²¹¹ It is possible that al-Wālī lived in Katsina for some time too, as many scholars from Bornu did.²¹² 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.²¹³ 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.²¹⁴

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?'²¹⁵ 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.²¹⁶ 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).²¹⁷ 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.²¹⁸ It is conceivable – though there is no written record to support this – that al-Wālī travelled west to cities such as

²⁰⁹ Brenner 1985a.

²¹⁰ Al-Jabartī, 1880. I, 159.

²¹¹ Bivar & Hiskett 1962, 117.

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

²¹³ Bobboyi 1992, 19, 38 (note 90), 143.

²¹⁴ 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.

²¹⁵ Translation from L. Brenner 1985a, 108.

²¹⁶ 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.

²¹⁷ Al-Sanhūrī: GAL S II, 416. Al-Laḡānī: GAL II 316, 317.

²¹⁸ 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.²¹⁹ 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.²²⁰ 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.²²¹

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.²²²

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’.²²³

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

²¹⁹ Ibrāhīm Ṣāliḥ, n.d., 433.

²²⁰ 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.

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

²²² All four versions I saw use the same phrase.

²²³ 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.²²⁴ 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.²²⁵ 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*²²⁶, 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.

²²⁴ 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.

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

²²⁶ 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.²²⁷ 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.²²⁸ 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.²²⁹

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

²²⁷ And see Paques 1967 for a similar version.

²²⁸ 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.

²²⁹ 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.

