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

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The scholar's habitat

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

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

1. Scholarship and religious leadership

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

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

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

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

²³² Rosenthal 2007, 334.

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

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

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

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

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

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

²³⁴ Cook 2003, 28.

²³⁵ See Rosenthal 1947. 41-48.

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

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

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

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

²³⁷ Al-Farabi, *Kalām*. EI 2.

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

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

²⁴⁰ Ibn Khaldūn 1958, III, 36.

²⁴¹ Or. 14.063, 2v.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. The influence of social surroundings

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

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

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

²⁴⁵ Levtzion 1985, VII, 99. Brenner 2000, 25.

²⁴⁶ Denham 1822, II, 131.

²⁴⁷ Lavers 1971, 39.

²⁴⁸ Bobboyi 1992, 18.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Intellectual environment: the canon

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

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

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

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

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

²⁵⁰ Hirschler 2012, 199.

²⁵¹ Hiskett 1957.

²⁵² Bobboyi 1992, chapter 3.

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

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

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

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

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

²⁵⁵ Hall and Stewart 2011. Cf M. Last 2011.

²⁵⁶ Barth 1857, II, 96, 170.

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

²⁵⁸ Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 105-106.

²⁵⁹ For an edition and translation, see Hiskett 1960.

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

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

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

4. Intellectual environment: themes

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

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

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

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

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

²⁶⁴ Hall and Stewart 2011, 146.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Source of knowledge

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁷⁴ Rosenthal 2007, 209-218.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Causality

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

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

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

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

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

²⁸¹ Luciani 1908 (*Muqaddima*), 34-35 and 92-93.

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

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

Faith and taqlīd

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

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

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

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

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

²⁸⁵ Frank 2005, Vol. I, X, 208.

²⁸⁶ Van Ess, vol IV, 671 ff.

²⁸⁷ Frank 2005, Vol. I X, 230 ff.

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

²⁸⁸ Rasā’il al-Ghazālī 140/3, www.alhadeeth.com.

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

²⁹⁰ Peters 1980, 135.

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

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