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

Dalen, D.A.M.E. van

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Author: Dalen, Dorrit van
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On writing

Chapters 5 and 6 have presented a close reading of al-Wālī's major texts, highlighting the exchange we find in them between popular culture and Muslim learning, between local concerns and theological discussions in the Middle East, and between a regional tradition and books that belonged to the canon of global Islamic culture.

This chapter returns to the writer himself. It sets out to understand the character of his personal contribution to these texts and to scholarship in central sudanic Africa. Muḥammad al-Wālī has reached these pages because he was an author. But to what extent was he an original, individual author? Does he deserve the title 'author' in the first place? His near-contemporaries respected him especially for a translation from Fulfulde into Arabic. Why did he create that translation? Was it to disassociate the text from its original, from the oral *kabbe*? The question leads to the awareness that al-Wālī lived and worked on an intersection between orality and literacy.

1. Author and authority

It is striking that almost nothing in al-Wālī's entire oeuvre seems to show any great originality. Rather, this oeuvre consists mainly of commentaries, compilations, and versifications. *The peerless method*, the most widely read of his larger texts, is a commentary, as are *Muʿīn al-ṭālib wa-mufīd al-rāghib*, a commentary in the field of grammar, and the second part of *Valid proofs,* the treatise against smoking, which uses more of al-Laqānī's (and al-Aqhiṣārī's) formulations than it explicitly acknowledges. Other works include versifications of the *Ṣughra* or of *The peerless method*. The poem about the creation of the world is presented as a versification 'relying on' a text by a certain Muḥammad b. Yūsuf.[515] Moreover, *The peerless method* is even presented, not as al-Wālī's own commentary but as his translation of existing comments. Of the preserved works, it seems that only the first part of *Valid proofs* and the short poem ʿ*Awṣikum yā maʿshar al-ikhwān* were conceived primarily by al-Wālī himself. How could such as derivative collection of works win him the reputation of an important author, whose work was then frequently and carefully reproduced and preserved? For answers to these questions, we will start by turning our attention to the field of comparative literature, where the question of what makes an author has been discussed in a general way.

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[515] Verse 9: 'I rely on the words of Muḥammad Ibn Yūsuf', i.e. al-Sanūsī?

In 1968 Roland Barthes declared that the author, thought of as single source of meaning, was dead—whereupon Michel Foucault asked, in an essay whose brevity was matched by its influence, 'What is an author'?[516] One of the first elements of his answer was that the author is not the same as the writer, and that it is more apt to speak of an author function. The point is most clearly captured in the following passage:

> Everyone knows that, in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly either to the writer or to the moment in which he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance.
>
> One might object that this is a characteristic peculiar to novelistic or poetic discourse [...]. In fact, however, all discourses endowed with the author function[517] do possess this plurality of self. The self that speaks in the preface to a treatise [...] and that indicates the circumstances of the treatise's composition, is identical neither in its position nor in its functioning to the self that speaks in the course of a demonstration, and that appears in the form of "I conclude" or "I suppose". In the first case, the "I" refers to an individual without an equivalent [...]; in the second, the "I" indicates an instance and a level of demonstration which any individual could perform, provided that he accepted the same system of symbols, play of axioms, and set of previous demonstrations.[518]

The author function operates in between these selves. The one who signs a text is not the only one who gives meaning to it. The signatory shares this function, for instance, with context, tradition, sometimes a patron, and always the reader. Someone is considered an author because the audience acknowledges the author function in work. The author function is then identified by the name of this individual author.

Many literary critics have agreed with Foucault's analysis. Nevertheless, his views have especially inspired further research—primarily with western literatures, and hardly at all in Arabic studies—to move in a direction that is fundamentally different from his own. Foucault's ultimate aim was to investigate 'how, under what conditions, and in what forms something like a subject appears in the order of discourse? [...] In short [the investigation] is a matter of depriving the subject of its role as originator and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse.'[519] Foucault's concepts, however, are often used—as they are here—to explore the authorship of individual writers and notably the relationship between the authority of texts and that of authors in different periods and cultural environments. Questions include: Who deserves the title 'author'? Must he or she be 'original', or can one borrow, copy, compile, scribble notes in margins and yet be an *auctor*, that is a creator and an authority? What is the relationship between the author's intentions and the meaning of the text he or she wrote down, or the significance attributed to it by others? And what contributes to, and what establishes, the author's authority?[520]

As I have noted, the scholars of classical Islam set greater store by authenticated tradition than by originality, and this was also true of literary production in a wider sense. An important part of literary

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[516] R. Barthes, 'The death of the author.' In R. Barthes, *Image-music-text*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977. M. Foucault, 'What is an author?' In *The Foucault reader. An introduction to Foucault's thought*. Ed. P. Rabinow. London: Penguin Books, 1984. 101-120.

[517] Not all texts have the author function, notes Foucault. Most private letters e.g. have a signer, not an author; a contract has a guarantor, graffity has a writer.

[518] Foucault 1984, 112.

[519] Foucault 1984, 118.

[520] For overviews of the ongoing discussion see M. Zimmermann, 'Ouverture du Colloque.' In M. Zimmermann (ed.), *Auctor et autoritas. Invention et conformisme dans l'écriture médiévale. Actes du colloque de Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (1999)*. Paris: Ecole des Chartes, 2001. Also M. Biriotti and N. Miller (eds.), *What is an author?* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.

authority[521] was based on the role accorded to tradition. Even the (supposedly) pre-Islamic poet 'Antara, regarded in Arabic culture as one of the fundaments of literary expression, referred to what the ancient poets before him had said, in the very first line of his poem (هل غادر الشعراء من متردد , have the poets left anything [unsaid]?) 'Antara is aware, writes A. Kilito in an exceptional essay about the relationship between the author and his authority in Arabic literature, that *'[i]l ne sert à rien de composer des vers qui ne feraient que répéter d'autres vers. Mais que seraient des vers qui se désolidariseraient et se dissocieraient des vers anciens?'*[522] In fact, respect for tradition was so strong that it would be hard to identify authors by their individual style, because they did not aim to have one.[523] It was usually the genre that set the rules for the style of a text. At the same time, convention dictated that a name be attached to a text, especially a scholarly one. But it was not uncommonor for the producer of a text to bring it out under the name of a distinguished dead colleague, or ascribe it to an anonymous 'ancient' author.[524] Both options were chosen by one of the greatest authors of the classical period, al-Ǧāḥiẓ, when he wished to be spared the jealousy of the intellectuals of his own generation.[525] The past itself conferred authority on those texts, and much more so than the name of any author. It was by borrowing and quoting from predecessors, and showing that one could occupy a place in a venerated tradition, that an author could build up his authoritativeness.

Also, in the Islamic tradition, with its strong roots in the oral transmission of hadīth and poetry, the idea of transmission was linked to the possibility that the transmitter would improving the material by correcting elements and adding others. Thus, written texts were often collective works, in which the roles of copyists, editors, commentators and authors were virtually indistinguishable.[526] It was common practice that someone published a work which consisted to a large extent of text that he had not composed himself, but to which he had made his own contributions. Ideas about plagiarism or forgery were very different from modern ideas on the subject, at least as long as an author did not put his name under the text of one of his own contempories (as al-Maqrīzī, for instance, was accused of doing). These cultural values explain why, in classical Arabic culture, which provided the model for al-Wālī's writing, the authority of comments or even glosses was not fundamentally different from the authority of an 'original' text.

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[521] Authority here may be defined as the qualities - in the first place veracity and sagacity - which made a literary work worthy of imitation or implementation. Cf A.J. Minnis, *Medieval theory of authorship. Scholastic literary attitudes in the later Middle Ages*. London: Scholar Press, 1984. Chapter 1.

[522] A. Kilito, *L'auteur et ses doubles. Essai sur la culture arabe classique*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1985. 19.

[523] F. Rosenthal, *The technique and approach of Muslim scholarship*. Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1947, 48 ff; See also R. Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 (4th ed), 135.

[524] Kilito 1985, 72-80.

[525] Al-Ǧāḥiẓ, *Quatre essais*. Traduction française par Charles Vial. Caire: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire. 1976-1979. I, 159-162. To a certain extent, Arabic culture shared this respect for the authority of past *littérateurs* with European medieval culture. Michel Zimmermann, summarizing views from contributors to the book *Auctor & auctoritas*, wrote that the desire of the European medieval author was to participate '*à l'oeuvre de création continue qui est la destinée de l'homme; d'où le souci de se soumettre aux modèles et précédents qui donnent autorité au discours. Le poids des* auctoritates *est déterminant; l'auteur s'efface derrière l'*auctoritas.'[525] It sounds idealistic compared to the words of one who sometimes made the choice of giving up his voice altogether, that is of Adélard of Bath. His considerations were similar to those of his contemporary al-Jāḥiẓ, but he was more conscise when he wrote, in J. le Goff's translation:

> Notre génération a ce défaut ancré qu'elle refuse d'admettre tout ce qui semble venir des modernes. Aussi quand je trouve une idée personele si je veux la publier je l'attribue à quelqu'un d'autre et je déclare: 'C'est un tel qui l'a dit, ce n'est pas moi.' Et pour qu'on me croie complètement, de toutes mes opinions je dis: 'C'est un tel l'inventeur, ce n'est pas moi.' Pour éviter l'inconvenient qu'on pense que j'ai, moi, ignorant, tiré de mon propre fond mes idées, je fais en sorte qu'on les croie tirées de mes études arabes. Je ne veux pas que si ce que j'ai dit a déplu à des esprits attardés ce soit moi qui leur déplaise. Je sais quel est auprès du vulgaire le sort des savants authentiques. Aussi ce n'est pas mon procès que je plaide, mais celui des Arabes. (J. le Goff, *Les Intellectuels au Moyen Age*. Paris: Editions du Seuil. 1985, 60.)

[526] See G. Schoeler 2006, 65-72.

In al-Wālī's case, however, we need to understand not only why an *oeuvre* consisting mainly of commentaries and versifications gave him any authority in the first place, but also how he was able to build up so much of it. Let us return for a moment to Foucault. He identified a specific kind of author, whom he called founders of discursivity. 'They are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts.'[527] Foucault gives Marx and Freud as examples. They were not only the authors of famous books—they also established further discursive possibilities, both in their own and numerous other fields.

These remarks are not meant as a first step to try to raise al-Wālī to the level of a Marx or a Freud. It is simply that the concept of discursivity gives us a tool with which to understand his success. One of the theorists who adopted it was Edward Saïd, although in a way his approach is also the opposite of Foucault's. In *Beginnings,* Saïd asks, not about the author as a function of discourse, but about how and where one can identify the beginnings of a historical movement or a realm of thought. By contrast with Foucault, he looks for agents. To identify a beginning is to identify an actor with outstanding authority, and to find out how this authority was created. Authority, for Saïd, lies in a unique and 'original achievement that gains in worth, paradoxically, precisely because it is so often repeated thereafter.'[528] Repeated, that is, by others; this is where he adopts Foucault's term, discursivity. This new achievement, however, must be connected to tradition, to established authority. Continuity and conformity with tradition constitute one part of the authority of an author. Discontinuity (giving the tradition a new twist) distinguishes a great author from others who worked in that tradition, and makes for the second part of his authority. The third part, the proof of the pudding, lies in discursivity, in the possibilities that others find in an author's work to elaborate on it and to transpose it to other realms of communication, outside literary or scientific discourse. Al-Wālī did these three things, and all of them in *The peerless method*. Let us turn to him again, beginning with a look at his authority and his authorship.

Al-Wālī vested his authority in the first place in God. As had been the convention in Islamic writing since the beginning, all his works open with the basmallah and salutations addressed to the Prophet, his family and companions. In *Mu'īn al-ṭālib* he adds soon after that: 'I have written this purely for God. May anyone who comes across it with a peaceful heart benefit from it. Success is with God; to Him I turn.'[529] Similar remarks are made in other texts, and this of course is in keeping with the convention among writers, especially on religious matters, in the pre-modern Muslim world.

In none of the works that have been preserved does al-Wālī mention a patron or a *destinataire*. But that does not mean that he had no links to power at all. Although he lived far from Birni Gazargamu, it may be assumed that he received some 'presents' from its royal court and, of course, from the sultan of Baghirmi, whose predecessor had also given the community of which al-Wālī was a religious leader its land, in return for religious support for his political authority. But these resources were most probably not enough to sustain a living on the one hand, or, on the other, to dictate what al-Wālī wrote. It seems that in writing his work he was quite independent from patrons. Rather than his work's deriving its authority from them, it was the other way round: *it* bestowed authority on *them*.

Al-Wālī sought to derive authority from the classical tradition in which he placed his own work, and writing commentary was perhaps the best way to do this. It has been suggested that, in Islamic scholarship and literary culture, writing a commentary, whether on grammar, theology, law or another science, entailed claiming status and authority within a particular field. In the absence of rites of passage or rules establishing the status of scholars (considering that an *ijāza* did nothing more than bestow authority to transfer knowledge of a particular book), writing a commentary may have had the function of passing a public examination, thus giving proof of one's capacity to understand, interpret

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[527] Foucault 1984, 114.

[528] E.W. Said, *Beginnings. Intention and Method.* London: Granta Books, 1997. (Second ed. First ed. 1995), 32.

[529] Kaduna N/AR2/47, first page of copy after basmallah (p 2), line 14.

and discuss a work of repute. The ideal acknowledgement of this claim was someone else's commentary on the commentary.[530]

As a genre, commentary writing in Arabic has not been widely studied. As I have mentioned, western scholarship long regarded its thriving as a sign of cultural stagnation and intellectual decline. Challenging that notion, R. Wisnowsky argues that commentaries were in fact a motor of intellectual innovation starting in the ninth century, and he reckons that, from 1100 to 1900, roughly half of the philosophical activity in Islamic intellectual history was expressed in some form of exegetical work.[531] The Arabic term for commentary, *sharḥ*, is fluid. There were no rules that determined how commentaries should be written, and the art was never taught in formal institutions.[532] Commentaries may rearrange the text that they are responding to, and select from or add to it, and the results may range from simplifications of the original text (although a commentary is distinct from an abridgement, *mukhtaṣar*) to fundamentally new texts, with a new character, new content, and new goals. In all cases the commentary was accepted as entirely the product of its composer.[533]

Trying to distinguish, then, between al-Wālī's personal voice and those of the earlier authors of a text that carries his name—in this case we will focus again on *The peerless method*—is a modern concern, *pace* Foucault, and was not a concern for al-Wālī's contemporaries. It is relevant here because we wish to understand how al-Wālī positioned himself as a scholar in his environment, and because a possible distinction between his and others' voices will affect our evaluation of this particular text and its significance. Al-Wālī the individual, living in a particular period, allows us to verify when and in what context the meanings in his work have crystallised. So we will try to determine how much of *The peerless method* he actually formulated. The first element of the answer is simple: al-Wālī wrote an Arabic version of a text or pieces of text and ideas that existed in Fulfulde. To paraphrase Zimmermann, writing in a language that one does not speak creates in itself a 'way of writing', an *écriture*.[534] Moreover, transferring a text from one language to another is itself a statement about the value one wishes to attribute to it in a new environment. As such, the mere act of translating in the first place can be a sort of commentary, meant to influence opinions.

Then things become a bit more complex. Since the precursors of *The peerless method* were oral texts, we cannot hope to know just what was translated: was it only the idea of commenting on the *Ṣughra*, or a type of text with certain features, or complete sentences? In any case, while he was writing, translating and committing an oral text to paper, al-Wālī himself made many choices regarding the text. At the same time, parts of *The peerless method* so much resemble explanations from other texts by al-Sanūsī, that it seems unlikely that they were not taken directly from the original Arabic source, without the 'interference' of Fulfulde, by the author of the Arabic *Peerless method* himself. Although the Fulani used a peculiar word-by-word method to translate canonical texts[535], translation from Arabic to Fulfulde and back again would certainly have led to much more variation in those paragraphs.

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[530] This idea was elaborated by L. Conrad in 'Commentary Culture and the shaping of Academic Culture in Medieval Islam.' Lecture during the conference *Beyond Hadith: Writing the Tradition of Early Islam*, in memory of Gautier Juynboll and organised by Leiden University Centre for Islam Studies (LUCIS), dec 2011.

[531] Wisnowsky 2004, 149-191.

[532] D. Gutas notes that in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, *sharḥ* is considered as a form of *tafsīr* (explanation), next to *ta`līq* (annotation) and that Ibn Rushd made the distinction between *al-sharḥ `alā'l-lafẓ* (ad litteram) and *al-sharḥ 'alā l-ma'nā* (ad sensum). In this classification *The peerless method* would count as a commentary ad litteram. D. Gutas 1993, 33.

[533] Sometimes authors wrote a commentary to their own text or poem, especially when the first text made liberal use of the most uncommon phrases, to prove the erudition of the author. It was a popular habit in west-Africa. Al-Sanūsī also wrote a comment to his own *Ṣughra*.

[534] '[...] la période est parcourue par deux mouvements de sens contraire qui ne manquent pas d'avoir des incidences sur l'expression: dans un premier temps, écrire une langue qu'on ne parle pas; dans un second, se risquer à écrire la langue qu'on parle. Dans les deux cas, il s'agit bien d'inventer une écriture.' 2001, 11.

[535] P. Eguchi, *Notes on the Arabic-Fulfulde translational reading in northern Cameroun*. Kyoto: Kyoto University African Studies, 9 (1975), 177-250.

And there is more. As we saw in chapter 5, commentaries on the *Ṣughra* began to be composed soon after this work appeared, very early in the sixteenth century, and the roots of the Fulfulde text that al-Wālī translated may indeed go back that far. Some elements in *The peerless method,* however, were definitely added well after 1600. There are no physical elements in the manuscripts that indicate this. Each of the versions I have seen is written entirely in one hand, without marginal notes. In the text, however, a reference to tobacco ('the venerable and righteous scholar is he who does not commit corruption, adultery, theft, slander and defamation, or tobacco-smoking' [536]), is certainly from after 1600. The same is true of references to al-Laqānī (d. 1631) and the historian and poet al-Maqqārī (d. 1631). At a number of points, sentences in *The peerless method* are followed by 'here ends what I have added'. This 'I' who added bits of text is an individual writer 'without equivalent' in Foucault's terms. What we would like to know is whether 'I' is al-Wālī or another contributor to the text, whose words al-Wālī translates, because the additions tell us something about the character of this 'I'. The nature of the insertions is sometimes legal (description of the *mukallaf* in legal terms, f16) and, more often, logical (explanation of the relation between substantive and ideal attributes, f23; explanation of the impossible attributes of God in logical steps, f 32; explanation of the attributes of prophets and the faults that would contradict these attributes, f 39, 40). Most often the additions are anecdotes or quotes that expand on information for the reader *and* indicate the erudition of the author. The first addition, in the preface, is the statement that an anecdote about al-Sanūsī also occurred in the life of Abū Zaid al-Qurṭubī. Then, showing his familiarity with various scholarly sources, 'I' adds: 'And I say that this commentator remains silent about things that other comments mention and that indicate his holiness'. The next addition is an anecdote (about how al-Sanūsī turns into a stone to avoid meeting a sultan) for which the source is not given, but which probably comes from the North African al-Abbadī. In the second half of the text, many quotes are added from verses by al-Maqqārī, and two phrases (about the attributes of the messengers of God) of which 'I' says that he took them from what al-Maqqārī wrote.

Who is the person who added these learned references? In theory, 'I' could have been anyone. Even copyists could add to a text they had at hand, although it was not considered best practice in their profession.[537] But these marked additions in *The peerless method* are the same in all four versions, which means that they were not made by *different* copyists. They may have been made by a single early copyist, a possibility which cannot be ruled out. However, if the author of the additions was another contributor to the text or a copyist, and not al-Wālī, it was nevertheless someone who was contemporary to him, and who shared his passions for study and against smoking. Ockham's razor suggests that it was al-Wālī himself. He was demonstrating his capacity to read the *auctores* of Islam, as a means to reinforce his own authority. Other strategies he employed in his *oeuvre* as a whole include the demonstration of his capacity to engage with authoritative works by means of commentary, of his mastery of various branches of the Islamic sciences and his choice of al-Ajhūrī – a scholar of the highest status – as an adversary.

As mentioned in chapter 5, by contrast with commentaries on the *Ṣughra* by al-Laqānī or by al-Sanūsī himself, *The peerless method* did not discuss abstract concepts such as *kasb*, causality or predestination. On the other hand, it did refer to prominent authors and theological discussions in the heartlands of Islam, for instance on the question of whether existence is a divine attribute or the essence of God; or the question of whether God punishes 'at will' or according to a law; or the question whether the shahāda is part of the Muslim faith or a condition of being a believer. Two approaches are at play in *The peerless method*: one of bringing a theological text to ordinary people, the other of integrating the commentary back to into scholarly discourse. While the first was the approach taken by the oral Fulfulde commentaries, the latter seems to have been al-Wālī's.

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[536] Hunwick 178, 9.

[537] Rosenthal 1947, 22. Cf. P. Burke and R. Po-Chia Hsia (eds.), 'Cultures of translation in early modern Europe.' In *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 31, 34.

The question remains whether *The peerless method*'s most outstanding element, that is its discussion of the 'imitator' and the idea that faith and adherence to the norms of a group of convinced Muslims can be tested with the help of a series of simple questions, was incorporated into it by al-Wālī himself or had already been part of the Fulfulde commentary. It would be difficult to answer. The notion that a lack of knowledge of the philosophical approach to *tawḥīd* amounted to unbelief also occurred in the western Sahara, among an unidentified group of 'ulamā' in Sijilmasa, in a period—when al-Yūsī (d. 1691) was alive—that does not predate al-Wālī's.[538] We do not know to what extent the notion had developed before that. What we *can* say is that it was 'in the air' in the second half of the seventeenth century, and that it was a concern of certain scholars of al-Wālī's generation. Although the themes of doubt and imitation do not seem to be mentioned in the twentieth-century *kabbe* versions, and was perhaps no part of this oral tradition, the repeated formula adressing the imitator does suggest that it arose in some oral environment, before al-Wālī wrote it down. He captured it, and incorporated it into a large commentary with a long tradition, which he raised to the level of mainstream scholarship by translating it into Arabic. It subsequently spread. By 1800 the testing of knowledge of the Muslim religion had developed into a popular practice in central sudanic Africa, as we saw in chapter 5.[539] Another way of saying this is: the idea that one's degree of faith could be and had to be tested in this way had been discursively enabled. In chapter 6 we discussed one reason why the theme of 'imitation' versus 'knowing' became so popular: it was linked to a concern among ordinary believers with the instability of their Muslim identity—an instability that threatened to relegate them to the status of pagan, black, filthy, and enslavable people. Another reason why the theme was important for al-Wālī and other 'ulamā' is investigated below.

2.   Why did al-Wali translate *The peerless method*?

To raise it to the level of mainstream scholarship – was that what motivated al-Wālī to translate a text for the instruction of Islam from Fulfulde into Arabic? To translate (from Latin *transferre*) means to bring something across, from one place to the next. What did al-Wālī cross, and to address whom? For centuries, the Fulani had translated the other way around: from Arabic to Fulfulde and other languages, the mother tongues of people they aimed to teach and convert. The earliest written religious educational poems in Fulfulde date from the eighteenth century, but they had circulated orally long before that.[540] Although not considered as sacred as Arabic, Fulfulde had the status of a language of learning and no objection was felt against its use for religious text. Around 1800 Dan Fodio and his co-jihadists wrote much of their work in Fulfulde and also in Hausa, so that their message could reach a majority of the people in the Hausalands.

In al-Wālī's time, the autochthonous inhabitants of Bornu and Baghirmi, whether Muslim or not, spoke Kanuri, Barma, Hausa and other local languages. Some Shuwa Arabic may have been spoken in the region, because, as we know from the oral history about the foundation of the village of Abgar, there were Arabs there in the beginning of the seventeenth century. But they were not there for long. In Bornu, west of Lake Chad, Arab tribes did not arrive before the second half of the eighteenth century.[541] It is not likely that many others spoke their language in the first period of their presence. And even then, those who did speak Shuwa Arabic did not speak *fuṣḥā'* Arabic, the language of the study of Islam. Al-Wālī's translation must therefore have been intended not so much for the benefit of new converts, but on the one hand for a local audience of people who were already rather advanced in their studies of Islam, and on the other hand to reach a wider audience of people who did not understand Fulfulde, that is for instance of colleagues in the Middle East. Their appreciation of this particular commentary would support the status of the Barnawi and Fulani scholars there, and also further enhance the status of the text in its original environment.

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[538] Al-Hajj 1974/77, 7.

[539] What we do not know is whether the questions were put in Arabic, the language of learning about Islam, or in Kanuri, Fulfulde or another language of daily oral communication.

[540] Haafkens 1983, 8-11, 25; Hiskett 1975.

[541] J.-C. Zeltner 2002, 7-20.

If learned colleagues and advanced students in al-Wālī's own environment formed the largest audience of the translation, the next question is what the Arabic language meant to them. It is a tenet of Islam that, in order to obtain a thorough understanding of theology (and religion), one has to be well versed in *fuṣḥā'* Arabic. Al-Wālī was well aware of this. Other languages are an obstacle to learning about religion, a source of innovation and confusion, he said. That was the reason he wrote two texts of instruction of various aspects of the Arabic language. In one of them, *Tadrīb al-ṭullāb ʿalā ṣināʿat al-iʿrāb*, he writes: '[acquiring] the knowledge of inflection (*iʿrāb*) is a duty of students, an instrument to understand preaching and to distinguish bad from good, and a condition for the study of all other sciences, notably of *tawḥīd*, hadith and *fiqh*.'[542] In *Muʿīn al-ṭālib* he is even sharper: 'He who is ignorant of grammar (*naḥū*) is scorned among scholars. Verily, all sciences require the science of grammar'.[543] For those who might still shrug their shoulders, he quotes an anonymous poet who states that 'the student of hadith who does not know grammar and does not master it is like a donkey with a nosebag attached to its head without any barley in it.'[544] Indeed, the study of grammar, syntax, morphology and rhetoric had an elitist aspect. Classical works on these subjects, such as those by al-Wardī (d. 1290) and Ibn Ājurrūm (d. 1223), on which al-Wālī's two language books are based, are steeped in the idea of distinguishing an intellectual elite, who knew how to speak and write the language correctly, from common people. A recurring theme in these works is that of *laḥn al-ʿāmma*, the mistakes that are made by ordinary people, which intellectuals should avoid. With his books *about* the Arabic language, al-Wālī was certainly addressing a social elite of well-educated, pious Muslims, which he also hoped to reinforce

So *The peerless method*, in Arabic, was not primarily addressed to run-of-the-mill believers, but rather to relatively advanced students of Islam. More precisely, it was addressed to students who envisaged a career as preachers and leaders of Muslim communities, and who would recite and explain it to ordinary believers. However, this does not answer all the questions regarding the translation. For instance, there had been advanced students and future 'ulamā' before, even if not as many as there were now. If the Arabic language was so important for the study of Islam, then why had the Fulani scholars' commentary not been put into Arabic a century-and-a-half earlier? The moment the Arabic version was in fact written falls in the period when Islam was starting to spread outside the cities and royal courts to rural populations. Is there a relationship between the two? But why would students from a peasant background be more in need of Arabic than more urban Muslims? We can come closer to an answer if, instead of asking, 'Why did al-Wālī translate this text?', we ask, 'Why did he write it down?' The fact that he wrote *in Arabic* is, in a way, of secondary importance. To write, one had to write in Arabic. Other languages were not written.[545] The fundamental question, then, is why al-Wālī transformed an oral 'textbook' into a written textbook.

3. From orality to literacy

An obvious goal would have been to promote literacy, as the vehicle *par excellence* of the values and norms of the religion of the Book that Islam is. If the 'ulamā based their authority over people on their understanding of the holy texts and the long tradition of scholarship about them, it meant that they needed an audience of –partially?- literate believers to recognise and appreciate the significance of that understanding.

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[542] Kaduna N/AR2/47. p 2, line 10, 11, 12.

[543] Kaduna D/AR7/4. p 4, line 13.

[544] Idem, p 3, line 19, 20.

[545] Other languages—primarily Hausa—could be written in Arabic script, but the first time this was done, was a century later. In Birni Gazargamu Old Kanembu was written, in Arabic script, early in the 17th century and perhaps before. However, this language was used exclusively for Qur'ān exegesis. It translated words and grammatical structures on a one-to-one basis and did not exist without the source Arabic language. Bondarev, 2006, 142-153.

However, since the 1990's the groundbreaking work of scholars like G. Schoeler and S. Leder has made us realise with more clarity than before how complex the relation is in the Muslim tradition between literacy and the transmission of knowledge, between literacy and orality.[546] Schoeler has demonstrated that in the formative period of Islam a combination of writing and lecturing characterised the model of transmission of knowledge. The publication of literary works was oral. Reciting these works (or poetry, or any other genre of *adab*) was by preference done from memory. Written texts functioned as mnemonic aids and for the preservation of texts in order to transmit them further, but not in the first place for learning or reading individually. The standard methods of teaching consisted of lecturing (from memory) by a teacher while students listened (*samāʿ*) or of students reciting (from memory) after which a teacher would correct them (*qirāʾa*). It has remained the model of teaching in Islam until today, in many places.[547] And we saw in chapter 5 that *The peerless method* was also taught orally. 'Wake up from your sleep, rouse your brain and understand what I say,' the teacher would instruct his audience, 'so that the beginning of the speech does not escape you, for he who lets the beginning slip and [then] listens to the middle or another part, will not understand a thing.'[548] There was no question of leafing back, and al-Wālī and subsequent copyists retained the warning in the written version. Apparently, the text was not written to substitute its oral teaching.

What else may have motivated al-Wālī? There is the possibility that literacy represented to him an attitude towards knowledge that was fundamentally different from that pertaining to the oral culture of his wider environment; an attitude which, in that case, he wanted to enhance. The transition from primary orality to literacy – from the situation of cultures that are totally unfamiliar with writing to that of cultures in which literacy dominates – has been regarded as one of the most sweeping transitions in the history of different civilisations, at various moments in time. Shortly after the middle of the twentieth century (perhaps not surprisingly in the period when an interest in human consciousness pervaded many realms in western societies) social scientists have given much attention to the meaning of this transition for cognitive processes and the organisation of knowledge, at a philosophical level as well as the social level. Questions regarding such issues were first raised within the field of literary studies, and since then they have been discussed throughout the humanities, from anthropology to psychology and history.[549]

Pioneers in the field have proposed that where literacy spread widely among a previously illiterate population, it changed the character of consciousness of time and historicity, of subject, object and objectivity and of 'logic', and that it did this not only for those who were actually literate, but for cultures at large.[550] The anthropologist Goody illustrated the latter point with the example of an illiterate American who is asked to name the states of his country and starts with 'Alabama, Alaska, Arizona...'. It showed, he argued, how literacy determines cognitive processes and the representation

[546] G. Schoeler, 'The relationship of literacy and memory in the second/eighth century' in *The development of Arabic as a written language*. (Supplement to the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 40.) M.C.A. Macdonald (ed.) Oxford: Archaeopress 2010. 121-130; *The oral and the written in early Islam*. London: Routledge, 2006. S. Leder, *Muʿǧam al-samāʿāt al-Dimašqiyya: al-muntaḵaba min sanat 550 ilā 750 H/1155 ilā 1349 M*. (With an introduction in German, French and English) Damascus: Institut Français d'Études Arabes de Damas, 1996.

[547] See e.g. R.W. Hefner 'Islamic Knowledge and Education in the Modern Age,' In *New Cambridge History of Islam, Vol. 6*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. R.A. Lukens-Bull, 'Two Sides of the Same Coin: Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia.' In *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 32 (2001): 350-372.

[548] Hunwick 178, 14.

[549] Foundational works are: M. Parry, *L'Ephithète traditionelle dans Homère*. Paris: Societé Editrice Les Belles Lettres, 1928; E.A Havelock, *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, Massachussets: Harvard University Press, 1963. J. Goody, 'Restricted Literacy in Northern Ghana.' In J. Goody (ed.) *Literacy in traditional societies*, (Cambridge, 1968), 198-265. J. Goody, *The domestication of the savage mind*. (Cambridge, 1977). W.J. Ong, *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. (London and New York, 1982).

[550] Havelock 1963; J. Goody and I. Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy' in J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in traditional societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968c. And *The domestication of the savage mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; Ong 1982.

of the world in modern cultures—that is the way in which a literate or illiterate member of a literate society 'segments events, groups them or organises, condenses and transforms them.' Literacy is understood by these authors as the essential technique that facilitated abstract and analytic discourse, a feature unknown in cultures of primary orality. Therefore, the transition from orality to various stages of literacy offered better explanations of cultural shifts that had been labelled before as shifts from magic to science, or from the so-called 'pre-logical' to the increasingly 'rational' state of consciousness, or from Lévi-Strauss's 'savage' mind to domesticated thought.[551]

This understanding of the relationship between literacy and a change in the attitude towards knowledge was much inspired by a reading by the historian and classicist E. Havelock of Plato's *Republic*. Living in the time (fifth to fourth century BC) when literacy had begun to dominate orality in Hellenic culture, Plato wrote about his ideal system of education. It would form an elite of people who could think critically, rationally and as autonomous individuals, a system he juxtaposed to the role of poets, and of the emotional, uncritical, automatic identification with the message in their poetry, which they summoned from their audience. The oral art of poetry belonged to ancient society and should play no significant role in his envisaged modern republic.

Explaining Plato's objection to poetry in terms of orality and literacy, Havelock put forward that in oral society the transmission and preservation of knowledge depended on acoustics, that is on an evanescent phenomenon. Retrieving such knowledge depended on ritualised performance, on memory facilitated by rhyme and rythm, and therefore on collective forms of consciousness of the tradition and on the automatic identification (or 'imitation', incidentally) by each member of society with it.[552] Aphorisms, verse, stories, were constantly present with him in his acoustic reflexes and also visually imagined before his mind's eye. In short, he went along with tradition.[553] An individualistic and critical attitude towards knowledge was not possible. Knowledge written down, however, could be literally objectified, seen as a physical object and as part of a 'body of knowledge' that was separate from the human body. Its transmission did not depend any more on hearing and performances that linked one to other keepers of a tradition. With a book at hand, or even the idea of a book, one could literally 'take a second look' at things and reflect on them as autonomous critical individuals.

One of the implications of this concept of knowledge, that Goody and Watt hypothesised, was that in societies where literacy first became widespread (such as Plato's Greece), it could have the effect of reducing social stratification, because it introduced a new possibility of achieved status besides the ascribed status of traditional chieftanship.[554] However, they did not see this happening in traditional societies they studied, such as that of Muslim societies in Northern Ghana. There, this potential was curtailed by what Goody termed 'restricted literacy'. This referred to a situation in societies where the technology of writing is known, but where the spread of literacy is restricted by other factors, and he indicated first, the cultural limitation of literacy to sacred uses (for instance in amulets, *'ilm al-ḥurūf*, or the practice of keeping the Qur'ān hidden from believers and showing it only once a year); secondly, a restricted social distribution of literacy skills in a specialist group (as was the case for the

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[551] Goody 1977, chapter 5.

[552] In Plato's treatise, *mimesis* (imitation) plays an important – negative – role. In Arabic commentaries, by Ibn Rushd e.g., it was translated as *takhyīl*. (See *Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*. Translated, with introduction and notes, by C.E. Butterworth. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

[553] Havelock 1963, 199.

[554] Goody and Watt 1968, 55. These views have been criticized by anthropologists and sociolinguists of a next generation, among whom B. Street is prominent. The main objection of these protagonists of New Literacy Studies is that an over-emphasis on a cultural divide between orality and literacy, by the focus on cognition, is not useful. It is evolutionist, they say, in that it assumes a cognitive advance in the transition, and sustains a dichotomy between languages and cultures, often between the literate cultures of western civilisation and those that were mainly oral, in countries that were colonised in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To them, a more important issue to study when literacy and orality are concerned, is power and the fact that literacy practices, their acquisition, use and meaning, 'are saturated with ideology'. B. Street, 'Introduction: the new literacy studies.' In B. Street (ed.) *Cross-cultural aspects to literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 1-21: 9.

Dyula and the Fulani scholarly 'clans' in West Africa. Goody called it a 'guru system'[555]); and thirdly, the guarding of the skills and knowledge pertaining to literacy as the secrets of the literate few, the idea, that is, that there were layers of learning that were suitable for different layers in society, and that not all knowledge can be 'handled' by just anybody. As Ibn Rushd wrote, there was a difference between the class of men whose religious belief was based on the result of reasoning from syllogism, and those whose faith must be based on the authority of the teacher.[556] In short, in traditional societies, literacy was often restricted precisely because it was religious literacy: having been introduced together with Islam, it had great attraction as a means of communication with the supernatural and was thus associated with priesthood, while at the scholarly level it was dominated by the study of the Qur'ān. Although Goody did not argue that the restrictive factors were only found in Islam, his and other case studies in the same volume, as well as studies inspired by it, emphasised the relationship between Islam and restricted literacy.[557]

This final aspect raised perhaps the main objection against the widely adopted concept, or at least one that is of significance for the study of al-Wālī. It was formulated by B. Messick, who argued that restricted literacy did not so much pertain to Islamic culture, but rather to another characteristic of the situation Goody and other contributors to his influential book studied, notably the fact that literacy occurred there in a foreign language (Arabic), in societies on the margin of the Muslim world.[558]

It all leads to the question how al-Wālī understood the relation between writing and knowledge, religion and social roles, and whether he wished to somehow influence it with his conversion of a well-known oral text to a written book. Can a certain concept of knowledge be discovered in his work? With all his insistence on reason, did he want his students to adopt a more autonomous and critical attitude towards knowledge? Or did he think of literacy as a secret skill that was to be restricted to specialised groups of people?

4. Knowing and the knower

Al-Wālī's interest in literacy is not a sign of an intention to promote a critical attitude towards knowledge among ordinary Muslims. And when he demanded that people do not 'imitate', but use reason or intellect, he did not mean that they should use reason autonomously, but rather that they use it to follow the reasoning of the specialists. It was not just literary convention that demanded that, in *The peerless method,* all the answers to questions about God's attributes be dictated: 'if you are asked this and that, then answer, so that you are not an imitator: ...'[559] For al-Wālī, the relationship these specialists had to religious knowledge was exclusive, and the ordinary believer could not master it independently. Knowledge was not at all separate from the knower, but tightly linked to the ʿulamā', the specialists of knowing. This is not something he expounds on explicitly, but he gives it away in a revealing passage in *The peerless method* that was intended to explain a different issue, that is the distinction between the substantive and ideal attributes of God:

> If you ask about the difference between substantive and ideal [attributes], I say: substantive attributes are those that determine the essence. That by which the essence is named, is ideal. It is like weaving and the weaver, or knowing (ʿalima) and the scholar (or 'knower', ʿālim). Weaving is the description of an act, not of an essence. I have finished. A substantive attribute

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[555] Goody 1968a, 13.
[556] Goody 1968b, 238.
[557] I. Wilks, 'The transmission of Islamic learning in the Western Sudan.' In *Literacy in traditional societies*, ed. J. Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968. 161-198. I.M. Lewis, 'Literacy in a nomadic Society: the Somali Case.' In *Literacy in traditional societies*, ed. J. Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968. 265-277. C.H. Bledsoe and K.M. Robey, 'Arabic Literacy and Secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone.' In *Man, New Series 21,2* (1986): 202-226.
[558] B. Messick, 'Legal documents and the concept of 'restricted literacy' in a traditional society.' In *International Journal of Social Linguistics, 42* (1983): 41-52.
[559] In fact, the formula 'if you are asked ..., then say' goes back to the Qur'ān.

is a condition, an ideal attribute is conditional. The conditional cannot exist without the condition, and this is necessarily so for the seven [ideal attributes of God's Being].[560]

Here, al-Wālī has added an example (ending with the words 'I have finished') to the text he translated, to illustrate the relation between condition and the conditional. But his remark discloses two more fascinating insights. First, the comparison reveals how he sees the relation between knowledge and the knower: knowing is conditional, meaning that it cannot exist without the ʿālim. Knowing is not what makes the knower—it is the other way around. Knowing is what the knower does, it is his profession, and knowledge is what he produces, just as the weaver produces textiles. Knowledge is not something one can attain independently or intuitively, and not a truth to which one can assent incidentally. It is to have an expalanatorily based understanding of the 'why' of facts and truths. And it is exclusively up to the ʿālim, the professional knower, to hand that knowledge down. And, if we think of the identification of the scholar with the weaver in terms of the manual work each does—imagining the weaver weaving and the scholar writing—we can say that, as textile is what is woven, knowledge is what is written.[561]

Perhaps al-Wālī did want to drive a wedge between believers and a sort of automatic identification with the traditions of their predominantly oral culture. But he did not want people to change their attitude towards knowledge such. In fact, his concept of knowledge is not unlike that in traditional African cultures. Authors in different fields have pointed out that in pre-colonial and in pre-Islamic societies in Africa, knowledge was not available to everyone in the same way.[562] Much of it was hidden to ordinary people. Knowledge was conceived of as existing at different hierarchical levels, the highest of which are in the supernatural realm of spirits and deities. It could be obtained from them only by specialists—of religion but also of medicine, hunting, midwifery or other fields—through the intervention of ancestors or other spirits. The specialists could then produce this knowledge for others, to whom it could be transmitted by initiation. To the uninitiated, specialised knowledge remained secret, invisible, hidden. The division between manifest and secret knowledge marked the esoteric episteme of many traditional African cultures. Religious specialists held the monopoly over the knowledge that was most important to a community, the knowledge they received from the supernatural realm, for instance about causes and remedies for illness and other threats to the community's welfare. The difference between 'ulamā' and the priests of local religions was that the knowledge of the former did not come from communication with spirits through divination, trance or sacrifices, but from the communication through study with the scholars of global Islam, in the Arabic language that was in this region almost completely restricted to this study. Like traditional priests however, and partly like the spirits and ancestors themselves, they kept control over the knowledge the believer needed for his personal welfare and that of the community, and transmitted it piecemeal to an elect group of followers.[563] Without the 'ulamā', in al-Wālī's view, there was no knowledge in a transmissible form.

In other words, my argument here is, that al-Wālī's 'knower' is one who belongs, not to the logical category of (just) anyone who knows, but to the social category of the scholar. It was the status of a particular model of the scholar that al-Wālī wished to promote. As I argued in chapters 2 and 4, the authority of 'ulamā' as men of undoubted moral standing who possessed unique religious knowledge was challenged on a number of fronts, and in *The peerless method* al-Wālī seems to be offering an answer to their need to renegotiate their role. Basically, his solution was that, to be a Muslim, one had to have knowledge 'from reason' and thus could not do without the 'ulamā', who were the only

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[560] Hunwick 187, f 23:

وان س(أ)لت عن الفرق بين المعانى والمعنوية نقول المعنى كل صفة تقوّ بالدات فتتصف بها هى المعانى تسمية الدات بها هى المعنوية كالنسج مع الناسج قلت الصواب تمثيله بالعلم مع العالم اذا النسج صفة فعل لا صفة ذات انتهى المعانى شرط والمعنوية مشروطة ولا يوجد المشروط بدون وجود الشرط وهى ملازمة للسبع

[561] Al-Wālī's comparison must be related to the Latin culture where the word text, from the Latin textum, is derived from texere, weaving.
[562] Paden 1973; R. Shaw, 'Splitting truths from darkness: epistemological aspects of Temne divination.' In *African Divination Systems. Ways of Knowing*. P.M. Peek (ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991; Brenner 2000, Chapter 1.
[563] Cf Levtzion 1985, Last 1979, Brenner 2000.

dispensers of it. In his work it becomes quite clear who he believes deserves the title, *'ālim*: not just any popular preacher, nor a healer or a diviner using the technology of writing without having a good command of the Arabic language, but a classically schooled *mutakallim*, who has read the foundational books of Islamic learning (whichever ones these were considered to be), who is precise in his references, verifies opinions, stories and ḥadīths (as he himself did, for instance, concerning the story of the Negus and some of the biographical information about al-Sanūsī in *The peerless method*, and the ḥadīth about the origin of tobacco in *Valid proofs*), who operates in a cosmopolitan environment, and who is a specialist in the most highly intellectualised fields of scholarly practice, such as that of ḥadīths, *kalām, taḥqīq* and *naẓarī* knowledge. These norms defined the model that scholars themselves pursued. For the general public, literacy, as a skill and an intellectual orientation, was the one emblem that distinguished this type of *'ālim* from other types of specialists of Islamic knowledge, whose numbers rapidly increased in the seventeenth century. In this context, transferring the Fulfulde commentary on al-Sanūsī's *Ṣughra* to written text was a way of claiming it for this class of 'ulamā'. This claim emphasised that only they had access to the meaning of religious literature, and were therefore most able to be complete Muslims. In times of social changes related to the popularisation of Islam, it was part of a movement to assert the 'ulamā's social status.

In al-Wālī's view, literacy skills were not restricted to a 'sacred' use in amulets or *'ilm al-ḥurūf*, and script was not an artefact with supernatural powers in itself, whereby their meaning was partly hidden to those who benefitted from them. On the contrary, the use of literacy for openly communicating and studying the meaning of the Qur'ān and ḥadīths was much more important. But in al-Wālī's work we can recognise something of an ideological foundation under the historical fact that literacy was socially restricted to a group of specialists, and was used as a means to keep a religious hierarchy in place in which the literate ranked highest. Decisive for the choice of literacy to this end, I suggest, was the need of the social class of 'ulamā' to defend its position in this particular period in the history of central sudanic Africa.

The precise extent to which al-Wālī was regarded as a spokesman by his colleagues, and the degree to which his work reflected the strategy of a regional group of 'ulamā' to collectively maintain their power, would be difficult to establish. Not enough texts by other scholars from the same period are available for comparison, and in Abgar, al-Wālī lived an isolated life for much of the time. But his understanding of the scholar's authority over believers was certainly welcomed by the many copyists of his work.

Al-Wālī's almost chance remark comparing knowledge with woven material raises the question of how he related to previous discussions about the nature of knowledge in Muslim scholarship. As I mentioned in chapter 4, the questions of how intellectual cognition comes about, how human understanding relates to God's truth, and what the relations are between knowledge, faith and reason, were extensively discussed starting in the first century of Islam.[564] However, al-Wālī does not seem to have had much opportunity to study the subject in detail. None of the authors or book titles that Rosenthal designates as leading in these discussions is to be found in Hall and Stewart's 'core curriculum' or in the WAAMD. A faint trace, however, of his reading in this field may be recognised in the few verses at the end of Ibn Zakrī's *Muḥaṣṣil*, quoted in chapter 3. If they are indeed by al-Wālī, they demonstrate that he thought about the differences and correspondences between Ash'arism and the Māturīdīya, two schools that are in many respects not far apart. A marked difference between them concerned the sources of knowledge of God, but also the obligation to acquire knowledge in general, a subject to which al-Māturīdī himself attached considerable importance. He was, as far as we know, the first to begin a treatise on theology with a consideration of the theory of knowledge.[565] For the Māturīdīya, as well as the Mu'tazila, we must ultimately believe in God because reason forces us to.

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[564] For a study of the debates see F. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant. The concept of knowledge in medieval Islam.* Leiden: Brill, 2007. Black, D. 'Psychology: soul and intellect' in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*. P. Adamson and R.C. Taylor (eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
[565] Rosenthal 2007, 210, 211.

For Ash'arism we must believe in God because it is written in the holy sources, and 'knowing God through revelation is possible', as is asserted in the lines attributed to al-Wālī.

As we saw in chapters 5 and 6, al-Wālī did attach considerable importance to the study of these sources. But the scriptures were to be approached with reason, logic and verification. Like the revivalists in circles of al-Bābilī, he was of the opinion that the meaning of the Qur'ān and the ḥadīths is not hidden and should not be sought out by intuition or metaphorical interpretation, but can always be understood intellectually. And even in instances where the divine sources are silent, reason could be their ventriloquist: 'although evidence (for the prohibition of tobacco) is not present in the literal text of the Qur'ān and the Sunna, it is not hidden from all those who possess reason,' as the author states in *Valid proofs*.[566]

5. Conclusion

This chapter has focussed on two things: first, it has sought an explanation for al-Wālī's reputation as an author of renown, in terms of literary criticism and by considering how he positioned himself as a scholar on a supra-regional level. Second, it has argued that in a time when Islam, and therefore literacy, were popularising, al-Wālī wrote *The peerless method* down as part of an effort to ascribe the 'best' knowledge of Islam to the 'ulamā', the only ones who *could* write books, because they had a full command over the medium of communication with the elite of global Islam, and in popular views with God himself.

In previous chapters I have shown that al-Wālī's reputation 'at home' was important because of his excellent appreciation of what concerned ordinary believers and because of the way in which he reflected and addressed those concerns in his work. But his talent lay not only in addressing the right audience on the right issues: as my readings of Foucault and Saïd have made clear, it also lay in his capacity to formulate new ideas and link them to established traditions, and in his ability to combine continuity and discontinuity in a way that others elaborated and transposed to other realms of communication. This last is most visible in *The peerless method*. It derived its authority from the *Ṣughra* and employed the *kabbe* tradition for a new beginning. In it, al-Sanūsī's notion of the duty of the *mukallaf*, who should learn about the attributes of God and the prophets, was reformulated in terms of questions to be answered by those who do not want to be accused of imitation and cast out as unbelievers. The idea, based in the concept of the imitator, that true believers could be distinguished from unbelievers posing as Muslims, was emerging in an oral environment in various regions, including in the western Sahara, but its formulation in written Arabic, and in terms that echoed a theological discussion among revivalists in the historic heartlands of Islam, allowed a new discourse to gain ground—a discourse on testing the religious knowledge of people who claimed to be Muslims.

The peerless method does not have one specific author. The text is a composite work to which many have contributed, and its authorship is distributed. To use Foucault's term, however, it was the author function in al-Wālī's work, and the meaning this had for its audience, that were important in central sudanic Africa at the end of the seventeenth century—and later, when it was often copied. Al-Wālī's genius—and his interest for the historian today—lie in the way he registered significant social and cultural shifts. At the same time, if 'only' a versifier, a commentator and a 'scribe who recorded' existing oral comments, he had a hand in the course of history, because he turned sentiments and elements of oral discourse into elements of scholarly discourse. While other influential scholars in the region wrote especially about governance and law (addressing in the first place the elite who were in the position to govern, control and judge), al-Wālī chose to write about beliefs and behaviour, about the cultural picket poles of Muslim society as a whole. And because society was as at that time taking new shapes – Muslim society primarily, but since it involved a separation of waters, traditional society was affected as well – his writings were significant.

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[566] Or. 8362, 8r.

When in the seventeenth century Islam spread farther into rural areas of west and central sudanic Africa, it also brought with it a modest spread of literacy. Al-Wālī lived in an environment that was marked as much by orality as by literacy. Society at large, including small Muslim communities, functioned as primarily oral societies. The author's own education, profession and ambitions were rooted in literacy. His work is situated at the intersection of orality and literacy. In his versifications, he made available to orality what was written before. With his works on grammar, he taught literacy. In *The peerless method* he wrote down what had been oral. He must have done so in response to a demand from believers. But most of all he wished to channel that demand, and restrict it within the frame-work of classical Muslim learning. Quoting from the *Ṣughra* as well as from al-Sanūsī's *Muqaddima* and adding numerous references to other literary sources and scholarly discussions, he transposed the oral commentary from an environment of vulgarisation to an environment of literacy and learning.

His thoughts about literacy may have served al-Wālī as a stepping stone to thinking more generally about modes of knowing and learning. It is possible that he saw literacy as a wedge that could pry believers loose from their automatic identification with traditional cultures and *their* religion. With his insistence, in several of his works, on the need to study, he may have juxtaposed two modes of cognition, that of the imitator and that of the Muslim student; that of the member of oral culture and that of the literate individual. However, al-Wālī did not promote a new mode of cognition or a sceptical attitude towards knowledge. In fact, he offered only an alternative source of identification. Instead of the cultural code of the traditional ethnic community, he offered the knowledge that members of his class of 'ulamā' had produced and controlled, to be memorised by their followers. Making *The peerless method* less available to the illiterate proved the middle term of the dialectical thesis that is central to it: if one's status as a believer depended on knowledge, and if knowledge depended on the *'ālim*, then one's status as a believer depended on the *'ālim*.