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

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8

Certainties in times of choice

Working in times of political unrest and economic decline, spending a good part of his life in a village far removed from any centre where ‘history’ was made, and producing mainly commentaries and versifications of pre-existing texts, Muḥammad al-Wālī nevertheless became one of the most important scholars of the region in his day. With so many odds against him, how did he do it?

First, he devoted his work to themes that appealed strongly to his audience while he was alive, and that would continue to do so in the centuries that followed. Second, he made excellent use of his position on the boundary between different cultures. He was a fine translator, especially in the sense of transferring meaning from one context to another. In so doing, he answered the needs of his home audience and presented himself as someone who could operate at a cultural level that was beyond the grasp of most of its members. Third, he was eclectic and chose from various Muslim schools and trends what he found useful for his own work.

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The themes that pervade al-Wālī’s commentaries and his one original poem have to do with the Muslim identity: with the unity of the Muslim community, the firmness of belief (truth versus falsehood), and the fight against doubt. These themes corresponded to a social need of Muslims around him—some whose families had been Muslim for generations, while others were new converts—who experienced the changes in identity and loyalty that were occurring on a large scale in that period, as Islam spread out of the town centres to rural areas, and as economic and political certainties were declining.

The problems around Muslim identity were in themselves not new. One challenge to that identity was the attractiveness of the traditional religions, which were so interconnected with social life, values, views on life after death and the fertility of land and other resources, that it was hard to give up one of the elements without losing the others. Islam could only compete with this complex of identity, security and welfare, when all the stops were pulled out on its side too: when economic benefit, social and political security and a new worldview went hand in hand. But the mix of benefits was often not decisive, and many new converts returned to their old beliefs. However, what was new in the seventeenth century were scale and urgency. Over five centuries Islam had developed from one of

several sources of authority into the main or even the unique source of legitimacy for the ruling classes in Muslim states. As a result, growing numbers of peasants outside the urban centres of these states saw a political interest in having a Muslim identity. Consequently, Islam spread to rural areas, where many converted. At that point, lapsing back into old belief systems, that is, the instability of the Muslim identity—which in West Africa was a collective identity—became a social problem. And in Bornu and its surroundings, where slaves (as a commodity) and slave labour formed the basis of the economy, it became an urgent social problem. The Muslim identity gave some protection against slave raiders to rural communities in or near the state of Bornu, because, in principle, those with a firm Muslim identity were not raided and robbed of their strongest people. Communities that had a Muslim identity had a serious interest in not letting it be contaminated by doubt, be it their own or that of others. What al-Wālī offered were certainties in times of choice, and—for the reader on whom he has not made a favourable impression—tools to draw new lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

A second theme lived among a group of people even closer to al-Wālī: the authority of the ‘ulamā’ of the type to which he belonged, the scholars of the old school, who could boast a classical education of book-learning in which the canon consisted of books from the Middle East and North Africa. Of course, ‘ulamā’ had always had a special place anywhere in Islam, but in seventeenth-century West Africa the status of their profession was affected in a number of ways. First, as a result of the spread of Islam to rural populations, there were an increasing number and variety of Muslim storytellers, healers, diviners and teachers who lacked the classical education of the ‘ulamā’, but who competed with them as specialists of religious knowledge. Secondly, the ‘ulamā’'s moral leadership was challenged by a new trend in mysticism that played down the role of book-learning. Thirdly, as a result of political instability in Bornu, their relations with the ruling class became less self-evident.

A close reading of al-Wālī's work shows that he made the ‘ulamā’'s concerns his cause, and related it to the first theme, of separating true Muslims from others. He emphasised that one could be counted a true Muslim only if one followed the ‘ulamā’, because being a true Muslim was not just to confess belief, but to understand the intellectual foundation of what one confesses. What that was, was only taught by those ‘ulamā’ who specialised in knowledge that comes from reason (*‘aql*) and reflection (*nazar*). In fact, he said, there was no religious knowledge without them, just as there is no cloth without a weaver.

Reason, or intellect, is al-Wālī's third major theme. The fact that the intellect could be damaged by smoking tobacco, as many believed, gave him an extra motive to fight that habit, and lent a remarkable coherence to his *oeuvre*.

Underneath these themes, another is hidden: boundaries. To become a Muslim was ‘to enter Islam’ (*dakhala fī dīn*), that is to cross a threshold. Al-Wālī's environment was one in which rapidly increasing numbers of people were confronted with this moral, social, and cultural border between the religion of their ancestors and the new religion of Islam. Some crossed it, while others did not, but regardless—they all had to consider the consequences of choosing or being obliged to follow this way or that. This was an environment in which the new religion brought its adherents new norms and the notion of a different centre of civilisation, geographically as well as culturally; in which rural populations could win opportunities for emancipation and better relations with the ruling classes; and in which literacy started to play a role next to orality, not only as the skill of a small minority of learned Muslims, but as a mark of Islam and of new social attitudes, and perhaps even as the fundament to a different mode of cognition.

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Borders were not discussed explicitly by al-Wālī. But he was a master at joining elements from different cultural realms: popular culture and Muslim learning, local concerns and theological discussions in the Middle East, tradition and idiosyncrasy. Al-Wālī's strength as a scholar and more particularly as an author lies in the way he was able to negotiate between the elements in these realms, always retaining what he found most valuable.

With *The peerless method*, the text that more than any other made his name, al-Wālī based himself on two great traditions of teaching Islam—the first embodied in a text that was successful throughout the Muslim world, the second with its point of origin near the coast of West Africa, and having, since the sixteenth century, conquered other West African regions stretching all the way to Lake Chad. From both, al-Sanūsī’s *Ṣughra* and the Fulani *kabbe*, al-Wālī took what he needed: their pedagogical approach and their canonical renown. But where the latter were intended to include as many people as possible in the community of believers, his *Peerless method* aimed to define who belonged to it and, even more pointedly, who did not, because this was a deep concern in his own local environment. The central message that *The peerless method* added to the texts that it translated and discussed was that the *muqallid*, the ‘imitator’—someone who does not seek religious knowledge but mimics and goes through the motions of Islam without conviction—was without any doubt an unbeliever. That was an unorthodox point of view for any school of thought with a firmly established status in Islamic history.

Al-Wālī invented neither this notion of the imitator, nor the idea that faith should be tested. It emerged at about the same time among a group of fanatical Muslims in the Western Sahara, and seems to have been part of the oral discourse of ‘ulamā’ in central sudanic Africa, too, before he wrote it down. But his capturing it in the framework of a written canonical tradition made it suitable for debate among scholars and common people alike, an accepted tool, both to renegotiate the role of the ‘ulamā’ and to distinguish between true and false Muslims. In this form, it stimulated the development of questioning believers’ knowledge and judging their faith so that this practice became a habit that was widespread in the eighteenth century (too widespread, according to ‘Uthmān dan Fodio) and that persisted to the present day. Unfortunately, it also contributed to firmly linking ideas about the imagined inferiority of ‘others’ to religious doctrine – an effect that was also realised in the text against tobacco.

The exchange between popular culture and a ‘high’ culture of learning is even more pronounced in al-Wālī’s *Valid proofs for announcing the prohibition of smoking*. This plea mixes elements generated by popular anguish with state-of-the-art tropes taken from theology, logic, verification and the independent study of the Qur’ān and of ḥadīths as sources of jurisdiction. Among common believers in Bornu and Baghirmi, the importance of single-minded loyalty to Islam was expressed through the stigmatisation of smokers as unbelievers, and of tobacco as demonic. Since its introduction, Muslims here saw tobacco as a tangible sign of disturbance and *fitna*, of a changing world in which the religion and cultures of Jews, Christians and ‘*Jebel Inklīz*’ were approaching and creating a new challenge to their dearly won Islamic culture. That a majority of mainstream ‘ulamā’ in the historic heartlands of Islam as well as farther west in sudanic Africa had no problem with tobacco, did not impress them. Al-Wālī’s treatise against tobacco reflects the function that shunning tobacco had in his home environment for the self-representation of new Muslims as not filthy and uncontrolled, but united in an exclusive top layer of society and firmly dedicated to their new community. He must have hoped that he could help end the *fitna* that threatened his followers, if only he could tackle the problem of tobacco at its root—that is, if only he could convince important jurists at al-Azhar to counter the opinion of the late Mālikī authority al-Ajhūrī, who had allowed tobacco. Therefore he collected the best arguments and addressed the scholarly elite in their own terms, with a treatise of irreproachable scholarly quality.

Another border over which al-Wālī deliberately crossed back and forth is that between orality and literacy. Although there was a small group of (mostly male) Muslims who could read, societies in the region had a fundamentally oral culture. Educated as he was in the long-standing Fulani tradition of reading, writing and oral teaching, al-Wālī worked at the intersection between literacy and orality. He translated oral works and ideas in which he himself was deeply imbued, into written text, for the benefit of the learned audience that was the guarantor of his scholarly status. At the same time, with his versifications of important theological texts, he made literary works available for oral recitation—that is, for memorisation by preachers and teachers who could repeat them to the ordinary, illiterate Muslims, for whom the versifications functioned as a gateway to the literate culture of Islam.

The question is: Why was it important for al-Wālī to transfer oral discourse to written? Straddling two cultures, as he did, he may have felt that the power of orality, with its memorisation, its performances

and the collective experience of language, tied people to the collective consciousness of their language community, and that this was an important obstacle to the unity of the overarching Muslim community. More certain is that he wanted to strengthen the image of the kind of scholar he was, the kind that had studied the canonical texts of Islam, and could operate at the highest level of contemporary scholarship, and not least because he had mastered an impeccable Arabic; more particularly, he helped to articulate the model of the scholar as a highly lettered expert of Islam who had been trained in the methods of *kalām*, was up to par with the movements of *ijtihād* and *taḥqīq*, and could discuss topical issues with peers among the cosmopolitan elite in the historic heartlands of the religion. It was the duty of such a scholar to be a moral guide to other Muslims, no matter where they lived. Writing—that is, producing knowledge—was the emblem of these ‘ulamā’, which distinguished them from popular preachers, mystics and other types of specialists of Islam.

That he did his best to conform to this model of the scholar is clear from most of his works, and indeed from his *oeuvre* as a whole, situated as this was in the core fields of Islamic learning: *tawḥīd*, language and jurisprudence. With his choice of books for commentary and versification, and with his references to numerous authors, both of the stock of books that had long been part of the canon of West African Muslim learning and of some famous contemporary works, al-Wālī placed himself in a tradition of global Islamic learning, from which he derived authority. At the same time, he had the courage to be eclectic.

Like most learned Muslims in West Africa of his day, al-Wālī adhered to the Ash‘arī school of theology and the Mālikī school of jurisprudence. However, he did not follow all of their tenets indiscriminately. In accordance with Ash‘arism he did believe that reason *and* tradition provide proof of God’s being, and also, for instance, that God does have substantive attributes. His profound interest, however, in the role of reason and knowledge in theology may be the reason why he was never dismissive of the Mu‘tazila, as greatest examples (al-Sanūsī and al-Laḡānī) were. He was interested in their point of view, as well as in that of the Mātūrīdīs. For both these schools, reason was in the end more important than tradition as a source of knowledge about God and his laws. The ultimate reason why we must believe in God, they argued, is that intellect forces us to. This dove-tailed with al-Wālī’s ambition to strengthen the authority of the ‘ulamā’, which was based on their professional monopoly when it came to supplying both reason and knowledge based on its use. It is remarkable, also in view of the lack of enthusiasm that Maghribī Malikism had for *kalām*, that *The peerless method* and especially *Valid proofs* reveal such an interest in this approach, in which appeals to reason reign supreme.

Indeed al-Wālī takes a critical position towards Malikism too. Some aspects that mark West African or Maghribī Malikism, and that distinguish it from Malikism in the Mashriq, such as a very strict interpretation of social and legal principles, may be recognised in his thought. However, unlike the majority of scholars in the Hausalands (or later in the Sokoto caliphate) and farther west, al-Wālī does not draw exclusively on sources from the Mālikī school. And unlike other West African Mālikī scholars, notably from a generation that succeeded his (and to which the Bornu scholar al-Hajrami and the leaders of the Sokoto jihād belonged), he was not interested in matters such as taxes, inheritance or the question of whether men and women could mix during funerals. He was certainly interested in the formation of Muslim society—and more than he was, ultimately, in scholastic ruminations about God’s attributes- but at a more fundamental level. He was concerned with questions such as who belonged to the Muslim community and who did not, and why was it up to him, as a scholar, to determine that.

For his interest in reason and his rejection of ‘imitation’ (*taqlīd*) al-Wālī found inspiration in the theological discussions in circles of religious revivalists in the Middle East, who reviewed the relation between the believer and religious knowledge. The members of a circle around Muḥammad b. ‘Alā al-Dīn al-Bābilī in particular, a Shāfi‘ī scholar of ḥadīth with whom al-Wālī spent an unknown period of time, propagated *ijtihād*—that is, the effort to return to the sources of the revelation themselves, independent of the thick volumes and long traditions of exegesis that separated believers from them. *Ijtihād* and *taqlīd* were to them communicating vessels: as the first was advanced, the second was

suppressed. They also criticised forms of mysticism that tended to deny the importance of the study of the outer truths and laws of God's creation. Students of al-Bābilī came from all four legal schools, and it may have been there that al-Wālī also learned more of Ḥanafī puritans whose writings underpinned an aversion to tobacco and whom he quoted in his treatise against it. Another reason he was interested in Ḥanafī views may of course have been the association of this *madhab* with the highest level of political authority in the Muslim Middle East, that of the Ottoman rulers. His orientation was toward the Middle East, more than toward the West African centres of learning. We do not know to what extent al-Wālī's interest was exceptional among Bornu scholars of his time, but his advance towards the Ḥanafī school and his putting Malikism into perspective must have facilitated the political orientation of Bornu's later elite, which turned to Istanbul in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a counterweight to the threatening dominance of Sokoto.

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This study has taught us that learned Muslims in seventeenth-century central sudanic Africa—al-Wālī himself and his direct audience—participated in the Muslim scholarly culture of that time, on a small scale perhaps, but at a level that shows less limitation than might be expected considering the distance between their homeland and the metropolitan centres where hundreds of scholars were concentrated. Al-Wālī, for one, participated in the trend that developed in global Islam in the seventeenth century, favouring logic, other rational sciences and the verification of received scholarly opinions (trends that still need analysing in terms of their relation to what was simultaneously happening in Europe, where theologians also turned back to reading the works of the Church fathers to go beyond the exegeses from the Middle Ages and verification was deployed against scholasticism, but where knowledge came to be seen as based on personal observation and understanding, and humanism was kindling the first sparks of the Enlightenment). It is fascinating to see how al-Wālī was part of these developments. But he participated on his own terms. He borrowed from the library of global Islam, from the 'sections' of *kalām* and story-telling, from Ḥanafīs and Mālikīs, whatever was relevant for his own work. Ultimately, his choices were inspired by the circumstances of his immediate environment, and most of all by the need of 'ulamā' of that time to reassert their authority and their power.

A limitation of this study is that al-Wālī could hardly be put in the perspective of contemporary peers. It is difficult, therefore, to say to what extent he was exemplary for his environment. On the other hand, we do know that his contemporaries and his later readers considered his work to be highly relevant as well as of outstanding quality. I hope that the examination of how he positioned himself as a scholar in this environment has contributed to our insights into social processes in the central sudanic Africa of al-Wālī's day, and that it has thrown more light on the complex history of Islam in the region in the seventeenth century, a century that has been relatively hidden from the modern historian's view, but was crucial, because of the increasing number of Muslims and the shaping of the debate about what that meant.

In particular, al-Wālī has afforded us a view of the interaction between global Islam and local Muslim identity in the context of a local society situated between traditional culture and a globalising economy and culture. The conclusion in this respect is not surprising: precisely on the frontiers of a cultural realm, and at the moment when new boundaries were being formed, the development of thought regarding identity was intense and laid the basis for oppositions that are still being unearthed in the region today.

