1 Principles of Provenance

Origins, Debates, and Social Structures of l'ḥjāb *in the Saharan West*

In knowledge, nothing is forbidden, but its uses can be forbidden.
—Ḥamden ould Tāh[1]

In June 2016, Mauritanian news outlets reported that the grave of seventeenth-century saint Aḥmad Bezeid al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 1630–31) had been desecrated by individuals described as *salafī jihādī*, or Salafi Jihadists.[2] The despoilers broke the headstone identifying the saint's burial place; they cut down the tree that had provided shade to its visitors; and they removed pieces of wood that had been placed on top to demarcate where his corpse lay. This vandalism occurred roughly eight years after another group had sermonized over the grave, declaring Aḥmad Bezeid an imposter and denouncing as mere inventions his claims to miraculous abilities.[3] Part religious guide, part healer, Aḥmad Bezeid represented a cadre of experts in the Islamic esoteric sciences who built reputations as effective advocates for their communities of disciples and relatives. When threatened by raids or undesired interventions, they could unleash retributive action. When warrior *ḥassān* pillaged animals from scholarly *zwāya* communities, these *shuyūkh* were known to furnish amulets with the objective of killing the thieves or at least preventing them from escaping with the stolen herds.[4] Among other miraculous acts, Aḥmad Bezeid himself is known to have

[1] Ḥamden ould Tāh, interview. See his entry no. 408 in Stewart and Wuld Ahmed Salem, *The Writings of Mauritania and the Western Sahara*, 440–42.

[2] See "Hal al-muʿtadūn ʿala ḍrīḥ al-walī al-ṣāliḥ Aḥmad Bezeid fī al-Trārza hum min al-jihādīn?," *al-Khabar al-sākhin*, June 15, 2016, https://tinyurl.com/3abh5cax, and "tahiʾna ʿāma wa iḥtifā' wāsiʿa bi-injāz bi'r tamghart," *Hourriya Media*, November 24, 2016, https://hourriyamedia.com/node/2053.

[3] According to Benjamin Acloque's interlocutors, the person who leveled these accusations at Aḥmad Bezeid in 2008 suddenly disappeared – a punishment the saint effected from his grave. Acloque, "De la constitution d'un territoire à sa division: l'adaptation des Ahl Bârikallah aux évolutions sociopolitiques de l'Ouest saharien (XVIIe–XXIe siècles)," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 48, no. 12 (2014): 119–43, 138, fn. 7.

[4] Al-Mukhtār ould Ḥāmidūn, *Ḥayāt Morītānyā. al-juz' al-thānī: al-ḥayāt al-thaqāfiyya* (Tūnus: al-Dār al-ʿarabiyya lil-kitāb, 1990), 84.

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provided a *jedwal* (talismanic square) to Aḥmad b. Damān, the first emir of the Trārza region, when the latter asked for help in destroying his enemy's camp.[5] Aḥmad Bezeid's own daughter, Maryam, was known to have summoned her father's mighty protective powers by reciting a poem to guard her daughters against thieves while they traveled through the Saharan desert. She did so by pronouncing verses still mobilized in contemporary Mauritania by those wanting protection (*taḥṣīn*) from physical violence.[6] The saint's *baraka* could be activated and accessed by reciting this poem as a kind of talismanic text directly invoking God's protection against real or perceived dangers.[7] We can thus see in this moment both an instance of poetry working as a kind of aural amulet and evidence of *l'ḥjāb*'s essential function in providing protection from life's uncertainties.

In 2016, Mauritanians drew parallels between the events at the saint's grave near the well of Tamghart and those in neighboring Mali where, in 2012, members of an Islamist group known as Anṣār ad-Dīn (Defenders of the Faith) had destroyed the tombs and graves of Sufi saints in Timbuktu with AK-47s and pickaxes, declaring tomb demarcation and visitation prohibited based on their readings of Islamic texts.[8] Such practices of remembrance and worship have long been criticized by Islamic reformists, and early twenty-first-century Mauritanians recognized that some of their own sites and common practices of worship and saint veneration fell into the categories of practice condemned by those Islamist groups in Mali.[9]

[5] Ould Ḥāmidūn, *Ḥayāt Morītānyā. al-juz' al-thānī*, 84.

[6] From an oral poem written down in Arabic by Yensarha mint Muḥammad Maḥmūd, interview, Nouakchott, July 11, 2012. See a version in "Qissat bint Aḥmad Bezeid waibnatihā al-muthīra," *Shebeka īnshīrī al-iʿalāmiya*, January 15, 2019, http://inchiri.net/node/2156.

[7] Hélène Artaud writes that at the time of her research in the 2010s, residents of villages on the Atlantic coast attributed miracles to Bezeid. See Artaud, *Poïétique des flots*, 156.

[8] Not to be confused with *Ansar Dine*, a popular religious movement also in Mali, but led by Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara. See Gilles Holder, "Chérif Ousmane Madani Haidara and the Islamic Movement Ansar Dine. A Popular Malian Reformism in Search of Autonomy," *CEA* 206–207, no. 2 (2012): 389–425. See "Hal al-muʿtadūn," *al-Khabar al-sākhin*, and Emily J. O'Dell, "Waging War on the Dead: The Necropolitics of Sufi Shrine Destruction in Mali," *Archaeologies* 9, no. 3 (2013): 506–25. *Tamghart*, in the Znāga and Tamashek languages, means "old woman" and is associated with spirits. Susan Rasmussen, "An Ambiguous Spirit Dream and Tuareg-Kunta Relationships in Rural Northern Mali," *Anthropological Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 635–63, 640. For more on the role of tomb visitation for Sufi Muslims, see Shahab, *What Is Islam?*, 20.

[9] For a list of practices often targeted by Salafis as reprehensible in Islam, see Alexander Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 184–85.

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In 2017, disciples of Aḥmad Bezeid and members of his tribal fraction (the Idayaʿqūb), the prominent splinter group (the Ahl Bārik Allāh), and the larger *zwāya* confederation (the Tashumsha) replaced the headstone and wood at the grave, renovated the Tamghart well, and built a library.[10] In doing so, they forcefully reinscribed a memory of this well-known miracle worker and Sufi saint into the physical and religious landscape of the southwestern region of Mauritania known as the *Gebla*, defying the efforts of those who sought to prevent visitation to his burial place. In May 2017, men gathered under a tent and read praises for Aḥmad Bezeid. They reminded those present that the saint had lived and died at a transformational moment in the history of the Saharan West, one in which the role of *l'ḥjāb* was defined as central to constructing authority and maintaining social and physical health.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the Islamic esoteric sciences – as a body of knowledge and set of practices – would be largely controlled by experts among the scholarly *zwāya* confederations. By and large, in the precolonial period, Saharan scholars did not call into question the existence of powerful and invisible spiritual and cosmological forces. Instead, they questioned the techniques used to access those forces and the social uses to which they were put. In doing so, these scholars often made epistemological distinctions that marked some methods as illicit *siḥr*, or sorcery, and others as part of religiously sanctioned knowledge. The distinctions between Islamic knowledge and *siḥr* comprised (then, as now) the central points of contention in debates about *l'ḥjāb*. Religious authority could be tied to the ability to effectively wield therapeutic and protective powers, or to convincingly argue against those powers, classifying some as permitted within Islam, and others as forbidden as *siḥr*. Who contested this knowledge and had the authority to do so, as well as the consequences of these critiques, will give shape to this and the next chapters.

The far west of the Sahara combined a difficult physical environment of periodic droughts and famine with a political context where no centralized state existed. Desert populations depended on the protective and punitive powers of *l'ḥjāb* to sustain food supplies, maintain their camel herds, and avenge theft and violence. By the time of Aḥmad Bezeid's death early in the seventeenth century, the Saharan region had witnessed

[10] "Bi-daʿūa min al-shaykh ould Babā: taẓāhira l-ilaʿāda iʿamār tamghart," *YouTube*, May 11, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpG9Svs6S9E&t=100s&ab_channel=MohamedElyDendou. For more on the Tashumsha, see H. T. Norris, "Znāga Islam during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (BSOAS)* 32, no. 3 (1969): 496–526, 496.

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the circulation of scholars, merchants, and herders between multiple major trade and educational hubs: these hubs were separated by sandy stretches of open space, rarely settled and barely regulated. From the Atlantic Ocean to the central Sahara, there developed a shared system of social organization defined by inherited occupational status and an existing tradition of matrilineality incorporated into Islamic patrilineal norms; a culture of Islamic learning; a regional economy that depended on nomadism, herding, and enslaved labor; and the absence of an overarching, dominant state. A tradition of desert learning in the Saharan *maḥaḍra*, or institution of advanced Islamic education, flourished from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries.[11] Nomadic and seminomadic students pursued high levels of understanding of the esoteric and exoteric Islamic sciences, which were both understood as central to religious worship and practice, social order, and power in a politically decentralized and segmented space.

While modern scholars have often framed Timbuktu as the Saharan city most relevant to an early history of regional and global commercial and intellectual exchange, in fact the region's center of Islamic scholarship shifted significantly to the west during the seventeenth century as the Songhay empire declined and the growing European presence on the Atlantic coast irrevocably transformed the trans-Saharan trade and its economic bases.[12] Commercial routes swerved toward the coasts, where the European demand for gold and enslaved labor reshaped markets and intensified competition for commodities. Newly emergent political entities, such as the loosely defined emirates just north of the Senegal River, sought to control the terms of trade and access to the merchants arriving at the mouths of rivers and on the ocean's shores. Over a long precolonial period, social categories demarcated by inherited occupational status rigidified as European commercial and political pressures intensified. These parallel factors together help contextualize a war in the second half of the seventeenth century, *Shur Būbba*, as well as the militarized revivalist state-building movements that would emerge in the two centuries that followed. At the center of these movements was the call to establish a state following Islamic principles that their leaders felt had been neglected. Reformers argued in some cases that certain

[11] Corinne Fortier, "Une pédagogie coranique: Modes de transmission des savoirs islamiques (Mauritanie)," *CEA* 169–170 (2003): 235–60; El-Ghassem ould Ahmedou, *Enseignement traditionnel en Mauritanie: La mahadra ou l'école à dos de chameau* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997).

[12] Elias N. Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

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practices associated with *l'ḥjāb* – such as the fabrication of *jedāwil*, or a reliance on astral forces – were a mark of weak Islamic observance and thus signaled the need for a religious reawakening. Alternatively, some argued that the miraculous acts of these religious leaders were evidence of Muslim sainthood and even legitimized a call to arms. In either case, these movements centered on the presence and management of invisible forces in the lives of Saharans. The esoteric sciences and their material signs (amulets, sand, stars) appear in sources from the region that men and women relied upon to help claim justice and ensure stability in precarious times.

What happened in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries around Aḥmad Bezeid's grave is not just a projection of contemporary religious debates back into the past. While this book will be centered on the story of *l'ḥjāb* over the long twentieth century and up to the present day, this chapter will show that contestations of *l'ḥjāb*'s role reach back into the centuries before Aḥmad Bezeid and were a crucial part of the war between *ḥassān* and *zwāya* in the century that followed his death. This is the period when the concepts and practices of the Islamic esoteric sciences can be firmly documented in local practices and were recognized as a source of both political and religious power in the region, and when early reform movements coalesced around the function of the Islamic esoteric sciences in managing the invisible. I will thus begin with the historical context that allows me to fix *in situ* the existence of esoteric practices in this region in the early modern period. I will then look back at the history of how those concepts were introduced into the region, arguing that traditional intellectual history has misled us to focus on key figures of Arab origin instead of understanding this process as more organic and produced via many points of contact, with practices appropriated in the region via merchants and scholars of non-Arab origin. I examine the early modern history of debates that engaged local political leaders and religious figures – debates whose participants often sought to distinguish between permitted and illicit spiritual practices – and then focus on the *Gebla*, a region that occupies a central position in the formation of political and social structures in Mauritania, and will thus be at the geographic heart of the chapters that follow.

On Origins

Previous scholarship most often traces divinatory and healing practices to non-Muslim traditions in ancient Persia and Greece, where priests sustained their royal patrons' privileges and power through the arts of what

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was labeled *magus* in Persian and *magike* in ancient Greek.[13] The Qur'ān also provides an origin narrative pointing to ancient Persia (specifically, the city of Babylon) as the site where *siḥr*, or sorcery, first emerged as an evil force used for malevolent ends by two fallen angels.[14] The Qur'ān clearly condemns *siḥr* as a practice, and some passages show a pre-Islamic association of soothsayers or diviners with liars or sorcerers. Yet, what methods or actual arts constituted the discipline were left undefined.[15] Collections of reports of the Prophet Muḥammad's sayings and actions, the *ḥadīth*, provide indications of what were exemplary and permitted ways of protecting and healing and, thus, how Muslims might have understood what did or did not constitute *siḥr* in the early history of Islam.[16] Importantly, no one debated whether or not *siḥr*, *jinn*, angels, or devils existed because the Qur'ān attested to their ubiquity. Demonic magic was real. Muslim jurists engaged in polemical exchanges about what exactly constituted the illicit even as their communities sought out the expertise of Muslim spiritual mediators to cope with any number of health, emotional, or security-related concerns. In the court of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, Muslim scholars in the ninth century mobilized knowledge in astrology to produce efficacious talismans that influenced the actions of humans and the outcomes of natural phenomena; they helped women in childbirth, bolstered the power of kings, fended off snakes, and quelled storms.[17] These sciences as practiced in Baghdad during the ninth century were, as Liana Saif shows, deeply "star centric," with astrology preferred as a central means of accessing

[13] Graf, "Theories of Magic in Antiquity," 93. Knight, *Magic in Islam*, 5–20; Emilie Savage-Smith, "Introduction: Magic and Divination in Early Islam," in *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, ed. Savage-Smith (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014): xiii–xlviii.

[14] Qur'ān 2:102, 21:81, 27:16–17, 34:12–13, 38:36–37. Constant Hamès, "La notion de magie dans le Coran," in *Coran et talismans*, ed. Hamès, 17–47, 24, 33, 36, and Francesco Zappa, "La magie vue par un exégète du Coran: le commentaire du verset de Hârût et Mârût (s2v102) par al-Qurtubî (XIIIs)," in *Coran et talismans*, ed. Hamès, 49–74. Listen also to Jean-Charles Coulon, "Qui sont Hârût et Mârût?" on *Questions d'islam, France Culture*, aired January 28, 2018, www.franceculture.fr/emissions/questions-dislam/qui-sont-harut-et-marut.

[15] Qur'ān 74:24, 5:120, 6:8, 46:8, 51:52, 52:29, 69:42, 23:71. Lory, "Divination and Religion in Islamic Medieval Culture."

[16] Al-Bukhārī's *ḥadīth* collection listed certain actions and substances as therapeutic or protective options for Muslims, including cupping, gulping honey, or ingesting black cumin, ʿawja dates, urine, or camel milk. These are grouped under the field of "prophetic medicine" (*al-ṭibb al-nabawī*) because the Prophet counseled or modeled their use as efficacious and permitted. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, vol. 7, Book 71, Hadith 582–673, *Kitāb al-ṭibb*.

[17] Coulon, "Qui sont Hârût et Mârût?"; Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?"; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Review Essay on Liana Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy*," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 12, no. 1 (2017): 98–112.

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powerful forces that could be harnessed through talismans and rings to effect the desired change.[18]

As Muslims brought their religion from the east to Imazighen "Berbers" in North Africa beginning in the seventh century, trading towns on the northern edge of the western desert, such as Sijilmāsa and Tāhart, served as important bases for trans-Saharan trade networks along which merchants and clerics moved as they looked for sources of gold and other commodities.[19] Early Muslims, most likely Ibāḍī in affiliation, introduced their religious traditions to Saharan inhabitants, who had their own preexisting methods of protecting their communities from physical and existential threats.[20] As Muslims from the medieval Islamic East (*mashriq*) moved to and through North Africa and Jews and early Muslim converts from the Islamic West (*maghrib*) encountered new ideas and texts through intellectual, religious, and commercial exchange, it is not difficult to imagine that methods of effectively engaging the spirit worlds were also shared.[21]

From the end of the eleventh century until 1275, two centuries of unified Muslim rule over vast distances and heterogeneous populations from the Saharan West to the southern half of Spain led to a greater adherence to the Mālikī school of jurisprudence (*madhhab*) within Sunnī Islam, with its specific forms of Islamic practice, and also facilitated a

[18] Saif, "*Ġāyat al-ḥakīm*," 313.

[19] The English term "Berber" originates from the Latin *barbarus*, or someone whose language was not understood (Ar. *ʿajamī*); it eventually came to identify the autochthonous inhabitants of North Africa. The people now identified as "Berber" did not think of themselves as one people before the colonial period and, depending on region and language, might now refer to themselves as *Imazighen*, *Kabyles*, *Znāga*, *Tamashek*, or *Touareg*. See Ramzi Rouighi, *Inventing the Berbers: History and Ideology in the Maghreb* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019). For more on this early trade, see Austen, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*; Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*; Peregrine Horden, "Situations Both Alike? Connectivity, the Mediterranean, the Sahara," in *Saharan Frontiers*, eds. McDougall and Scheele, 25–38.

[20] For more on Ibāḍī Islam, see Adam Gaiser, *Muslims, Scholars, and Soldiers: The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibāḍī Imāmate Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Paul M. Love, Jr., *Ibadi Muslims of North Africa: Manuscripts, Mobilization and the Making of a Written Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Tadeusz Lewicki, "The Ibadites in Arabia and Africa," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (1971): 51–130; Emilie Savage, "Berbers and Blacks: Ibāḍī Slave Traffic in Eighth-Century North Africa," *JAH* 33, no. 3 (1992): 351–68.

[21] Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam*, 159–62; Jean-Charles Coulon, "Sorcellerie berbère, antiques talismans et saints protecteurs au Maghreb médiéval," in *Dynamiques religieuses et territoires du sacré au Maghreb médiéval: éléments d'enquête*, eds. Cyrille Aillet and Bulle Tuil Leonetti (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2015), 103–47; H. R. Idris, "Examen des sources attestant la survivance d'un culte du bélier au magrib vers le xe siècle," *Arabica* 12 (1965): 297–305; Pâques, "L'arbre cosmique."

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flourishing intellectual environment as scholars moved to and from the centers of Islamic learning established and strengthened under the Almoravid and Almohad empires.[22] Historians of the Islamic esoteric sciences have described this period as a time of a vibrant exchange of ideas: scholars in the Mediterranean translated texts to and from Arabic and Latin, mutually contributing to European and Arab scientific and intellectual production.[23] Included in this burst of intellectual activity in the Muslim world was the development and progressive consolidation of two bodies of knowledge fundamental to the history of *l'ḥjāb* – those of Sufism and the Islamic esoteric sciences.[24] In the Saharan West, it was during the Almoravid period that individual Sufi figures were first documented in writing.[25] However, in Morocco, Sufism did not develop institutionally and theologically into a tradition characterized by hierarchical lineages, or "paths" (*ṭuruq*; sing. *ṭarīqa*), and an acknowledged spiritual and scholarly lineage, or "chain" (*silsila*), until at least the fourteenth century.[26] It is not until the early seventeenth century that members of specific Sufi *ṭuruq* – the Shādhiliyya and the Nāṣiriyya – were observed further south and as far as the Saharan caravan town of Walāta.[27] Sufism represented a significant form of devotional practice and increasingly institutionalized spiritual education in the region, articulated by a set of philosophical and applied practices, as well as a corpus of written texts. The Islamic esoteric sciences were frequently included among the public acts of devotion and piety that would bring Sufi experts, or *shuyūkh*, and saints, or *awliyā'*, closer to God – a closeness that could outwardly

[22] Bennison, *The Almoravid and Almohad Empires*; Norris, "New Evidence on the Life of ʿAbdullah B. Yasin."

[23] See Melvin-Koushki, "(De)colonizing Early Modern Occult Philosophy."

[24] For the history of Sufism in Morocco, see Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 44; Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino, *Fès et sainteté, de la fondation à l'avènement du Protectorat (808–1912): Hagiographie, tradition spirituelle et héritage prophétique dans la ville de Mawlāy Idrīs* (Rabat: Centre Jacques Berque, 2014); Sahar Bazzaz, *Forgotten Saints: History, Power, and Politics in the Making of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2010).

[25] Matthew Conaway Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love: The Nāṣiriyya Brotherhood across Muslim Africa (11–12th/17th–18th Centuries)" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2020), 6.

[26] Cornell, *Realm of the Saint*, 131; Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love," 358; and Constant Hamès, "La Shâdhiliyya dans l'Ouest saharien et africain: nouvelles perspectives," in *Une voie soufie dans le monde: la Shâdhiliyya*, ed. Éric Geoffroy (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2005), 355–75, 358.

[27] Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love," 276; Hamès, "La Shâdhiliyya dans l'Ouest saharien," in *Une voie soufie dans le monde*, ed. Éric Geoffroy, 356; Louis Brenner, "Sufism in Africa in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Islam et sociétés au Sud du Sahara* 2 (1988): 80–93.

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manifest itself through miraculous acts such as the uncanny ability to read people's thoughts, see into the future, or provide food and water during times of famine.[28] These *shuyūkh* garnered enough knowledge of both the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) Islamic sciences to be sought out as intermediaries between ordinary Muslims and God.

Sufi masters intervened in the temporal world of their communities by harnessing the forces of the spiritual and cosmic world through the Islamic esoteric sciences. These sciences are considered "esoteric" when compared with the "outward" or "manifest" sciences (*ʿulūm al-ẓāhir*) such as studies in the *ḥadīth* literature, Arabic grammar, logic, law, exegesis, and theology used to understand the more overt or straightforward messages of the Qur'ān. For some Muslims, the Qur'ān contains additional, inner layers of meaning hidden from the uninitiated and only revealed to those who pursue knowledge of the divine down to its knotted core.[29] These concealed truths are only revealed through intense study leading to a higher level of spiritual consciousness and, ultimately, unity with God, which empowers those "friends of God" (*awliyāʾ*) to serve as conduits of unseen forces and miraculous events. The object of the talisman or amulet can serve as a medium to activate astral and divine forces through its contents – here written letters and symbols meant to evoke the invisible forces of the spiritual and celestial worlds.[30]

The Qur'ān provided an Islamic blueprint for mapping evil and invisible forces. Muslim and non-Muslim *jinn* circulated, passing angels and devils, each categorized with specific terms and serving different kinds of spiritual mediators. For Muslims, the existence of these various entities moving back and forth between the spiritual and material worlds was proven by the references to them in the Qur'ān. The key distinction in Islamic jurisprudence was that those who employed demons in their

[28] Cornell, *Realm of the Saint*, 114.

[29] For more on *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, see Daniel De Smet, "Esotericism and Exotericism," in *Encylopaedia of Islam THREE*, eds. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson. 2015, accessed October 9, 2018, doi: 10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_26230. See also Maria Dakake, "Hiding in Plain Sight: The Practical and Doctrinal Significance of Secrecy in Shiʿite Islam," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 2 (June 2006): 324–55.

[30] Gardiner, "Esotericist Reading Communities," 407; Aḥmad b. ʿAli al-Būnī, *Shams al-maʿārif al-kubrā wa laṭāʾif al-ʿawārif* (Beirut: The People's Library, 1975); Constant Hamès, "Entre recette magique d'Al-Bûnî et prière islamique d'Al-Ghazâlî: textes talismaniques d'Afrique occidentale," *Fétiches II: Puissances des objets, charme des mots, systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire* 12 (1993): 187–224. Qur'ān 17:82 and 41:44 are often used to justify this claim. The verses read: "And we send down in the Qur'ān that which is healing and mercy to those who believe, to the unjust it causes nothing but loss after loss" and "And declare that [the Qur'ān] is guiding and healing for believers," trans. Yusuf Ali, www.quranexplorer.com/quran/.

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work, who relied on *siḥr*, were understood to be guilty of the greatest sin of *kufr*, or unbelief, and were to be put to death.[31] With death as the punishment for *siḥr*, the stakes were high whenever a Muslim cleric labeled certain techniques as sorcery.

Arguments about the permissibility and legitimacy of the esoteric sciences within Islam that began early on in Islamic history would later be used as supporting evidence by scholars on both sides.[32] What we can know, however, from twelfth-century sources like the Andalusian Arab geographer al-Idrīsī (d. circa 1165) is that Saharans engaged directly with invisible forces, and they were unaware (or simply uninterested when informed) that this work incited controversy in urban centers of Islamic knowledge production. Al-Idrīsī noted, in what he identified as the Wangara town of Kuga, that "[w]itchcraft is attributed to the women of that town and they are said to be expert, famous and proficient in it," while the Lamtūna Berbers were well known for their ability to manipulate rocks for magical ends.[33] Identifying an expertise more overtly linked to lettrism, he also mentioned that people among the Azqar in the Libyan desert were recognized for their writing attributed to the Prophet Daniel.

> [N]o other tribe is known to be better acquainted with this script than the people of Azqar. Indeed, any man among them, whether young or old, when he loses a straying animal or when he misses something belonging to him, delineates for that purpose a sign on the sand, by means of which he knows the whereabouts of the lost object. Then he proceeds to find his property, according to what he has seen in the script. […] It is an amazing thing that they have skill in this art, despite their stupendous ignorance and uncouth nature.[34]

This Saharan community used a form of writing associated with a prophetic figure – Daniel – to trace lines in the sand (*ʿilm al-raml*) for the purpose of finding lost things. Al-Idrīsī himself linked such a practice to an elite knowledge of literacy, expressing surprise that rural nomads claimed these powerful skills. At the same time, in North Africa, inhabitants were reportedly using the esoteric sciences to protect cities from invaders, to recuperate pillaged property, to mediate conflict between

[31] Fahd, "Siḥr."
[32] Gril, "La science des lettres"; Kenneth Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and His Revival of the Religious Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Alexander Trieger, "Al-Ghazālī's Classifications of the Sciences and Descriptions of the Highest Theoretical Science," *Dîvân: Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Dergisi* 16, no. 1 (2011): 1–32; Yahya J. Michot, "Ibn Taymiyya on Astrology: Annotated Translation of Three Fatwas," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 2 (2000): 147–208; Melvin-Koushki, "In Defence of Geomancy."
[33] Levtzion and Hopkins, eds., *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, 112, and Coulon, "Sorcellerie berbère," 105.
[34] Translated by Levtzion and Hopkins, eds., *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources*, 121–22.

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tribes, to bring rainfall, and to heal.[35] By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, across the broader Muslim world, the Islamic esoteric sciences had reached a kind of zenith. Even though some prominent religious scholars challenged the techniques of divination and protection, individuals throughout the Muslim world were seeking out the expertise of these spiritual intermediaries for material and devotional needs.[36]

The origin story for the esoteric sciences in the Maghreb and Sahara is typically recounted over a long six hundred years, with the narrative focused on three primary figures: Khalāf al-Barbarī, Tumtum al-Hindī, and Abū ʿAbd Allah Muḥammad al-Zenātī. Generally identified geographically by their nisba, or relative adjective, these three men have been linked to North African Amazigh (Berber) and to India (*al-hind*), people and regions that acquired reputations as rich in the divinatory sciences, whether Islamic or not.[37] On the Islamic esoteric sciences of divination, traditional narratives point to Khalāf al-Barbarī (d. 634), who reportedly learned these sciences from the Prophet Muḥammad, then travelled to India to study the works of the fabled Tumtum al-Hindī, who had received his own divinatory knowledge under the tutelage of the Prophet Idrīs.[38] Al-Barbarī returned to North Africa carrying the works of al-Hindī, parts of which appear in the region's first conserved Arabic treatise of geomancy, which is attributed to Abū ʿAbd Allah Muḥammad al-Zenātī (d. 1230–32).[39] The drawback with the focus on these three men is that this intellectual genealogy assumes a north-to-south dissemination of knowledge from individuals who are prioritized because they are the known authors of surviving texts in Arabic. Such an approach

[35] Coulon, "Sorcellerie berbère."

[36] Porter et al., "Medieval Islamic Amulets," 528, and Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Persianate Geomancy from Ṭūsī to the Millennium: A Preliminary Survey," in *The Occult Sciences in Premodern Islamic Cultures*, ed. Nader El-Bizri (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 151–99; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Mobilizing Magic: Occultism and the Continuity of High Persianate Culture under Russian Rule," *Studia Islamica* 111 (2016): 231–83; Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. F. Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967, 2005), 391–95.

[37] A well-known example is that of the prophetess *al-kāhina* Dihya, who used her divinatory expertise to fight against the invading Arab armies in what is now Algeria. Abdelmajid Hannoum, "Historiography, Mythology and Memory in Modern North Africa: The Story of the Kahina," *Studia Islamica* no. 85 (1997): 85–130; Fiorenza Ferretti, "Regine del Sahara," *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale di Studi e Documentazione dell'Istituto Italiano per L'Africa e L'Oriente* 63, no. 4 (2008): 658–67; Ibn Khaldun, trans. William MacGuckin baron de Slane, 198 and 340.

[38] Thérèse Charmasson, *Recherches sur une technique divinatoire*, vol. 44 Hautes études médiévales et modernes (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1980), 15.

[39] Anne Regourd, "Au sujet des sources manuscrits de l'ouvrage imprimé au Caire sous le titre d'Al-faṣl fī uṣūl ʿilm al-raml d'Al-Zanātī," *Annales islamologiques* 35 (2001): 393–407.

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erases the possibility of multiple and independent points of contact where practical information on how to manage problems might have been transmitted or knowledge of medicinal plants exchanged.

And yet the Malian anthropologist Bréhima Kassibo has questioned this cultural genealogy, arguing against claims that the first "vulgarization of classical geomancy" in West Africa occurred in the thirteenth century through al-Zenātī.[40] Instead, Kassibo posits that West African Mandé narratives about spirits revealing the esoteric sciences and geomancy to legendary Soninké and Fulbe figures demonstrate that the nature of contact between Arab Muslims and West Africans during the pre-Islamic era must have been more extensive and earlier than is acknowledged by textual sources.[41] Aside from the desert pastoral Ṣanhāja confederations whose people seem to have converted *en masse* during the Almoravid religious re-education campaign, it is also probable that the Ghana empire's Soninké or Malinké-speaking merchants (Son. *wangara*) had become, by the tenth century, among the first West Africans to enter into Islam.[42] Over the next hundred years, Islam continued to spread through trade networks, leading modern scholars to describe the Ghana empire and southern Sahara as Muslim by the eleventh century.[43] Kassibo suggests that non-Muslim spiritual mediators might have learned divination and protective spiritual techniques from Muslims who travelled across the Sahara seeking gold known to exist south of the Ghana empire.[44]

Bambuk and Buré, sites south of the Senegal River and on the Upper Niger, were the primary sources of gold which was smelted and then sold

[40] Bréhima Kassibo and Darya Ogordnikova show how Islam might have been transmitted through the Soninké language even before the people who would later consider themselves "Arab" converted to or disseminated Islam. See Bréhima Kassibo, "La géomancie ouest-africaine. Formes endogènes et emprunts extérieurs," *CEA* 32, no. 128 (1992): 541–96, 543; Darya Ogorodnikova, "ʿAjamī Annotations in Multilingual Manuscripts from Mande Speaking Areas: Visual and Linguistic Features," *Islamic Africa* 8, no. 1–2 (2017): 111–43.

[41] *Soninké* refers to the people from Sonna, an early town established in the region formerly known as Wagadu (later part of the Ghana Empire). Native speakers refer to themselves as *Soninko*, while the Wolof use the more common *Serrakolé*, and most research in English or French uses *Soninké*. Kassim Kone, "The Soninke in Ancient West African History," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. Online. March 2018, doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.160. Al-Bakrī in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 79 and Idrissa Ba, "Mythes et cultes du serpent chez les Soninkés et les Peuls: étude comparative," *Oràfrica, revista de oralidad alriana* 8 (April 2012): 159–69.

[42] Kassibo, "La géomancie ouest-africaine" and Ogorodnikova, "ʿAjamī Annotations."

[43] Gomez, *African Dominion*, 25.

[44] The first known textual identification of the empire of Ghana is attributed to al-Fazarī (d. 746/806), who mentioned its distance from the northern Saharan town of Sijilmāsa, the terminus for caravans then actively trading salt, horses, cloth, and copper with the wealthy empire in exchange for gold and enslaved persons. Nehemia Levtzion, "Ancient Ghana: A Reassessment of Some Arabic Sources," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 66, no. 242–43 (1979): 139–47.

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north through a site identified as Kumbī Ṣāliḥ. Most likely one of the first major cities of the Ghana empire, Kumbī Ṣāliḥ was eventually linked to the oasis town of Awdāghosṭ when the king of Ghana incorporated the latter into his empire at the end of the tenth century.[45] Early Arabic sources identify the inhabitants of the Ghana empire as "black" (*sūdān*) and primarily non-Muslim, describing *Ghana* as a city as well as a kingdom.[46] Awdāghosṭ became a prosperous city inhabited by Arabs and Zenāta Berbers who frequented the town's twelve mosques and sought out the advice of skilled Muslim educators and judges working there.[47] Members of the smaller but increasingly prosperous Fulbe-speaking Takrūr kingdom established further south along the Senegal River also converted early to Islam, during the eleventh century, under its ruler Warjābī b. Rābīs; these conversions, combined with a simultaneous increase in attacks as the Ṣanhāja attempted to dominate the gold trade, ended up severely weakening the Ghana empire.[48] Kassibo draws attention to early conversion by the leaders of Ghana and Takrūr, hypothesizing an accompanying shift from Soninké or Fulbe orality to writing, as learning the Arabic script accompanied the spread of Islam – at least among an educated elite – a shift which would have allowed for an early and autonomous development of the Islamic esoteric sciences in West Africa, earlier than in other parts of the Sahara. Kassibo's claim that this linguistically and ethnically pluralistic region witnessed some of Islam's earliest conversions by members of Soninké-speaking communities should also be read as a supporting argument that expertise in the Islamic esoteric sciences could belong to West Africans who did not possess or necessarily claim Arab descent. These sciences were adopted and elaborated early in the western Saharan and Sahelian space, and that elaboration is integral to the larger intellectual and social history of Islam.

[45] "Ghana" probably also referred to a major trading town located ten to fifteen days' journey from Awdāghosṭ. Ibn Hawqal, *Description de l'Afrique*, 67. Gomez also doubts whether Kumbī Ṣāliḥ was ever considered a kind of capital for the empire. Gomez, *African Dominion*, 32–33. See also Lewicki, "Lamtūna" and al-Bakrī, *Description de l'Afrique*, 369.

[46] See also entries from Al-Khuwārizmī, Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, Al-Yʿaqūbī, Ibn al-Faqīh, Al-Hamdānī, and Al-Masʿūdī in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus* and Levtzion, "Ancient Ghana."

[47] Al-Bakrī, *Description de l'Afrique*, 248. See also Abdel Wedoud ould Cheikh, *La société maure: Éléments d'anthropologie historique* (Rabat: Centre des Études Sahariennes, 2017), 303–06.

[48] For more on Takrūr, see Al-Bakrī, *Description de l'Afrique*, 377; Abdourahmane Ba, "Le Takrur historique et l'héritage du Fuuta Tooro: L'histoire politique ancienne du fleuve Sénégal," in *Histoire et politique dans la vallée du fleuve Sénégal: Mauritanie*, eds. Mariella Villasante Cervello and Raymond Taylor (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2017), 95–162; John Hunwick, "Takrūr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, et al., Publication 2012, doi: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7348. Ba, "Mythes et cultes," 162.

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By the time North African explorer Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1368–69) accompanied a caravan from Sijilmāsa to Walāta, some of the most famous trans-Saharan trading towns had been long established – Wādān (1141), Shinqīṭ (1262), Tīshīt (c. 1100 revived from eighth-century Soninké origins), Walāta (c. 1200 reestablished as a regional market town from the sixth-century Soninké market village of Bīru), and Timbuktu (c. 1100 and surpassing Walāta in size and importance c. 1500). These Saharan towns attracted a diverse set of commercial agents, merchants, scholars, clerics, and caravan employees, from Saharan Jews to *wangara*, from Arab traders to Amazigh camel guides.[49] As Saharans and West Africans entered into Islam, they increasingly traveled east undertaking the *ḥājj* (Ar. pilgrimage) to Mecca and stopping along the way in major cities where the travelers sought to expand their trade networks and their knowledge of the Islamic sciences.[50] By the time there is definitive textual evidence from the fifteenth century, one can posit that the Islamic esoteric sciences had been practiced and introduced via these multiple points of contact.

Some of these pilgrims and traders can reasonably be assumed to have returned to their Saharan communities carrying with them new methods of healing, protection, and divination: medieval Saharan merchants traded in medicinal plants, responding to demand in the Sahara and Sahel, while Muslim scholars sought to deepen their familiarity with a variety of Islamic esoteric sciences to better serve communities in their places of origin.[51] Saharans in these medieval periods presumably sought relief from the kind of health, environmental, and social problems that appear in later periods – infertility, difficult births, communicable diseases, scorpion stings and snake bites, infidelity, jealousy, physical insecurity, drought – and Muslim religious scholars and spiritual mediators can reasonably be understood to have provided solutions to some of those problems using the esoteric sciences documented as popular in the Islamicate world at the time.[52]

[49] Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*, 63–90.

[50] This is not to imply, of course, that the transfer only went from east to west. In the infamous case of Mansa Musa in the fourteenth century, we see a West African king moving through Egypt to the Arabian Peninsula, bringing impressive quantities of gold and people with him. See Ibn al-Dawādārī, Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 250. Further research is needed on Saharans' and West Africans' intellectual and cultural contributions to the Middle East over time. See Chanfi Ahmed, *West Africa ʿulama' and Salafism in Mecca and Medina: Jawab al-Ifriqi – the Response of the African* (Leiden: Brill, 2015) and Hadrien Collet, "Échos d'Arabie. Le Pèlerinage à La Mecque de Mansa Musa (724–25/1324–25) d'après des Nouvelles Sources," *History in Africa* 46, no. 1 (2019): 105–35.

[51] Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*, 78.

[52] See Marie-Laure Derat, "Du lexique aux talismans: occurrences de la peste dans la Corne de l'Afrique du xiiie au xve siècle," *Afriques* 9 (2018). doi: 10.4000/afriques.2090.

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Timbuktu Iterations

What seems to be the earliest extant manuscript from Timbuktu, recently examined by historians Rudolph Ware and Zachary Wright, demonstrates that the Islamic esoteric sciences were part of the religious culture of this region in the fifteenth century – as well as what it looked like in practice, and what kinds of problems led local people to turn to these sciences. Scholars have attributed later copies of this manuscript, known as *Bustān al-fawā'id wa-l-manāfiʿ* ("The Garden of Excellences and Benefits"), to fifteenth-century scholar Muḥammad al-Kābarī (c. 1450). The manuscript furnishes evidence of the central role that early modern Muslim spiritual mediators and saints assumed in ensuring the well-being of their communities by providing pedagogical, legal, and esoteric services.[53] *Bustān al-fawā'id* indicates how to use the Islamic esoteric sciences to heal physical illness, encourage successful population reproduction, and protect oneself or a community from misfortune. The author – whom Wright calls "Timbuktu's most significant scholar" and who most likely originated in Kābara (hence the moniker al-Kābarī), a village of Islamic learning not far from the town of Dia on the Niger floodplain – was well-known during his lifetime as a jurist and divinely aided miracle worker.[54] Taking up residence in Timbuktu in the middle of the fifteenth-century as a scholar, judicial authority, and teacher, al-Kābarī continued a longer tradition of significant and early Soninké and Mandé participation in the production of Islamic knowledge in the region (Map 1.1).[55]

Bustān al-fawā'id includes discussions on theology, Qur'ānic exegesis, and litanies of prayers, but the most significant portions are reserved for

[53] Few details on the life of al-Kābarī (fl. ca. 1450) are known. The mid-fifteenth century dating is from Hunwick and O'Fahey, while Elias Saad briefly mentions him as one of Timbuktu's early important qadis who lived sometime after 1325 or 1397. John O. Hunwick and R. S. O'Fahey, *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 4: The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 12; Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu*, 38–39; "Muḥammad al-Kābarī Abū ʿAbd Allāh," *Arabic Literature of Africa Online*, eds. Hunwick and O'Fahey. Consulted November 5, 2018, doi: 10.1163/2405-4453_alao_COM_ALA_40001_1_2; and Rudolph Ware, personal email communication, October 10, 2018.

[54] Copies of this manuscript have been identified in Timbuktu, Niamey and at Northwestern University. Zachary Wright, "The Islamic Intellectual Traditions of Sudanic Africa with Analysis of a Fifteenth-Century Timbuktu Manuscript," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa*, eds. Fallou Ngom, Mustapha H. Kurfi, and Toyin Falola (Cham, SZ: Springer Nature and Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 55–76. See also Gomez, *African Dominion*, 156–57.

[55] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAbd Allah al-Saʿdī and John O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Saʿdī's Ta'rīkh Al-Sūdān Down to 1613 and Other Contemporary Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 68–70. Al-Bartalī al-Walātī associates al-Kābarī with several other scholars listed in El Hamel, *La vie intellectuelle islamique dans le Sahel Ouest*, 274.

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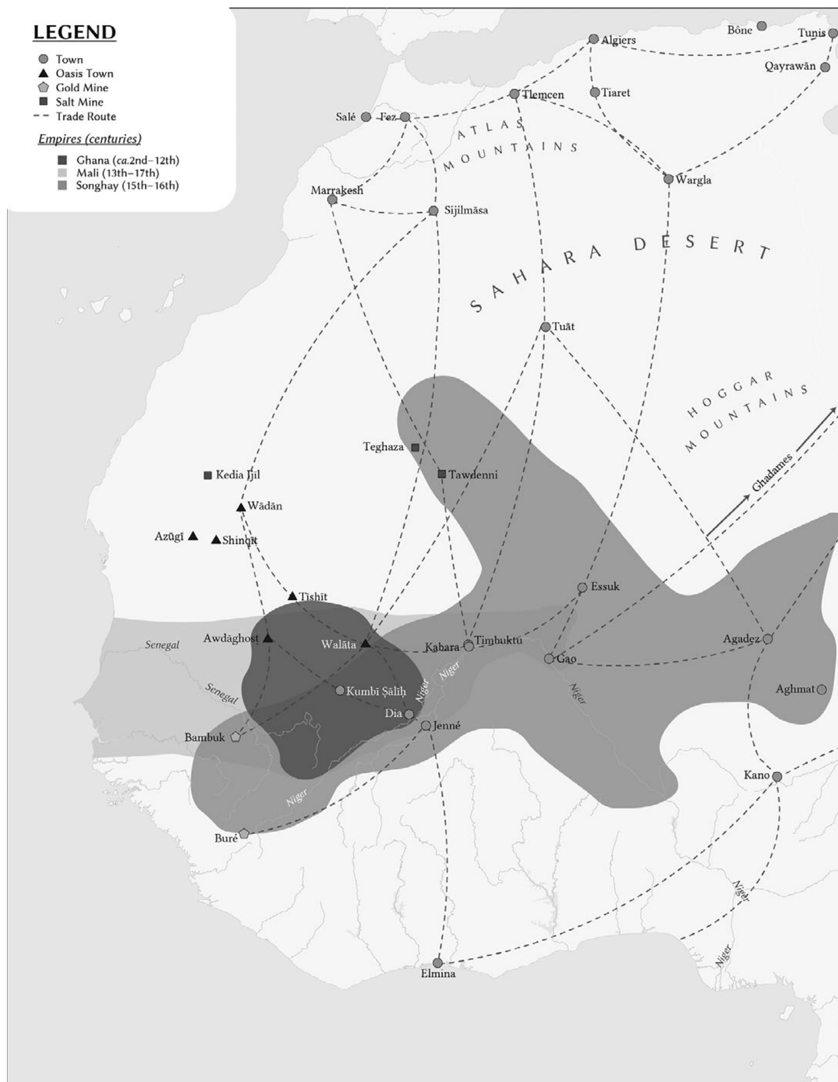

Map 1.1 Medieval empires, eighth–seventeenth centuries.
Map created by Tom Abi Samra. Based on LaGamma, *Sahel*, 110 and 10–11; Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*, 44; Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*, xxv; Austin, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*, 28–29.

the science of lettrism (*ʿulūm al-asrār*) and secret beneficial prayers (*al-fawāʾid*). The manuscript provides instructions on how to evoke God through prayer and numerological squares, or *jedāwil*, to be worn as a talisman or soaked in water then used for bathing or drinking.

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It guides the user on marshaling these same forces to help women conceive children and generate breast milk, to encourage men's virility, and to cure blindness or calm headaches.[56] Ware has indicated that this manuscript circulated in the Niger Bend region during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before its documented appearance in a collection by nineteenth-century West African Muslim scholars.[57] If that history of circulation is accurate, it means the only manuscript of pre-sixteenth-century origin that can be definitively associated with the southern Saharan region in the precolonial period is one that focused primarily on the secrets of letters. The existence of this manuscript testifies to the importance of its contents, as does the history of its circulation for almost six hundred years.[58] The preservation of this manuscript and the reputation of its author as a respected and knowledgeable Muslim scholar further confirm that in the Muslim world, from the medieval to the modern periods, Islamic esoteric practices were deeply entwined with other scientific and systematic modes of intellectual inquiry.[59]

By the time al-Kābarī compiled his collection of beneficial directions and prayers around 1450, the city of Timbuktu was attracting scholars from other regional centers of education, so that there was a near-constant circulation of erudition to and from the city.[60] These learners came to study Qur'ānic exegesis and *ḥadīth*, Islamic jurisprudence, rhetoric, grammar, astronomy, history, mathematics, and medicine, all subjects valued as vital in the education of pious Muslims who would guide their communities in religious practice. If the manuscript attributed to Muḥammad al-Kābarī realistically represents the place of the Islamic esoteric sciences in Timbuktu by the fifteenth century, the manuscript would seem to indicate not only that these sciences constituted an important part of one prominent scholar's knowledge repertoire, but also

[56] Rudolph Ware, personal email communication, October 11, 2018.
[57] Ware cites nineteenth-century scholar Muḥammad Tukur. Ware, email, October 10, 2018.
[58] Ware, email, October 10, 2018.
[59] Saif and Leoni, "Introduction," 7; Gubara, "Al-Azhar and the Orders of Knowledge," 305; Pierre Bonte, *Récits d'origine*: *Contribution à la connaissance du passé ouest-saharien (Mauritanie, Maroc, Sahara occidental, Algérie et Mali)* (Paris: Karthala, 2018), 232; Zachary V. Wright, *Realizing Islam: The Tijaniyya in North Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Muslim World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Melvin-Koushki, "(De)colonizing Early Modern Occult Philosophy"; and Melvin-Koushki, "Mobilizing Magic."
[60] Élise Voguet, "Tlemcen – Touat – Tombouctou: Un réseau transsaharien de diffusion du malikisme (fin VIII/XIVe–XI/XVIIe siècle)," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 141 (Juin 2017), http://journals.openedition.org/remmm/9963 and Bruce Hall "Rethinking the Place of Timbuktu in the Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa," in *Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past: Essays in Honour of Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias*, eds. Toby Green and Benedetta Rossie (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 238–58.

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that elite Muslim scholars of the early modern period more broadly considered lettrism and the *fawā'id* essential sciences.[61]

An exchange of letters dated 1493 both demonstrates the geographic back-and-forth of information on esoteric practices and that even before 1500 these practices were controversial. In 1493, the Egyptian religious scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (1445–1505) received a set of questions in a letter from someone who self-identified as Muḥammad bin Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Lamtūnī, writing from a location described as *al-Takrūr*.[62] Al-Lamtūnī listed the ways he claimed his home community was failing to follow the basic rules of Islamic governance.[63] Primarily seeking permission to declare as immoral a leader or political system, the letter's author accused local authorities of enslaving Muslims, taxing unfairly, and engaging in corrupt behavior.[64] Al-Lamtūnī especially criticized the occupational group of musicians and storytellers, the *griots*, and the local custom of allowing women to play instruments in mixed company.[65] The letter thus suggests not only that a basic hierarchical division of labor (warriors, scholars, musicians) was already well established by the end of the fifteenth century, it reveals a desert curmudgeon who criticizes behaviors he sees as un-Islamic among rulers, their clerics, warriors, and rural subjects. On the topic of esoteric spiritual practice, Al-Lamtūnī condemns the business of selling for profit the talismans and amulets used for protection in times of war, for success in love and commerce, for the healing of health problems, and for accessing political power.[66] Grouping these practices – from public singing by women to the

[61] Saad omits the science of letters from the section on "academic pursuits of scholars" in his social history of scholarship in Timbuktu. See Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu*, 74–81.

[62] E. Geoffroy, "Al-Suyūṭī" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman et al., 2012, doi: 10.1163/1573/3912_islam_COM_1130.

[63] The letter, *Risāla ila mulūk at-takrūr*, held at the Egyptian National Library, is translated by Hunwick in "Notes on a Late Fifteenth Century Document Concerning al-Takrūr," in *African Perspectives: Papers in the History, Politics and Economics of Africa Presented to Thomas Hodgkins*, eds. Christopher Allen and R. W. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 7–33. See E. M. Sartain, "Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti's Relations with the People of Takrur," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16, no. 2 (October 1971), 193–98; Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique," 163–80; and H. T. Norris, *The Tuaregs: Their Islamic Legacy and Its Diffusion in the Sahel* (Wilts: Avis and Phillips, 1975).

[64] See also Al-Lamtūnī in Hunwick, "Notes," 13 and Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam, et pouvoir politique," 171.

[65] Abdel Wedoud ould Cheikh, "Revisiting a Hunwick translation on the Southern Sanhaja Society in the XVth Century," unpublished paper from the *Sacred Word: The Changing Meanings in Textual Cultures of Islamic Africa. A Symposium Dedicated to the Memory of Professor John O. Hunwick*, Northwestern University, April 21–22, 2016, paper shared by author, 3 and al-Lamtūnī in Hunwick, "Notes," 15.

[66] Al-Lamtūnī in Hunwick, "Notes," 16, 19, 20.

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sale of amulets – as evidence of a superficially converted society in need of religious reeducation, the letter asks what pious Muslims should do to withstand such moral corruption.

Al-Suyūṭī, who had long corresponded with rulers from West Africa, responded that he did not see anything especially sacrilegious in the use of amulets, as long as they contained the Qur'ān; this reply reflected his generally tolerant position on beneficial prayers and the use of devotional texts, such as Moroccan scholar Muḥammad al-Jazūlī's (d. 1465) *Dalā'il al-Khayrāt*, known for its thaumaturgic properties.[67] The great Cairene scholar's legal opinions and Qur'ānic exegesis were remarkably widespread in West Africa and likely influenced the positions of generations of Muslim scholars in the Sahara toward the application of the Islamic esoteric sciences – sciences that, in the Saharan West and by the end of the fifteenth century, ordinary people typically saw embodied in the form of amulets and to have been used for a variety of social, political, and medical needs.[68] In other words, at work here is not only general evidence of cultural exchange between north and south that facilitated multiple points of entry for information about esoteric practices, but also evidence that the practice of and attitudes surrounding the Islamic esoteric sciences in the Saharan West were specifically guided by teachings that were tolerant of their application.

In the Saharan West of the fifteenth century, evidence can be seen of the esoteric religious arts at work and evidence that successful practitioners were translating their mastery into spiritual and political power. The Timbuktu saint al-Kābarī, for example, was said to have punished a scholar from Marrakesh who had insulted him by inflicting his attacker with leprosy.[69] Al-Kābarī was also known to have demonstrated his spiritual connection to God by walking on water. After his death, disciples visited the cemetery where his body lay buried to absorb the blessings emanating from his grave.[70] Although in the era of al-Kābarī and al-Lamtūnī, Timbuktu was hardly the region's only location of advanced Islamic learning, generations of the city's Muslim scholars had benefitted, since the time of the founder of the Mali empire, Mansa Musa, from

[67] See Sartain, "Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti's Relations with the People of Takrur" and Hunwick, "Notes," 25; and Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 79.

[68] A *sultan* who had studied in Cairo with al-Suyūṭī brought the jurist's works to West Africa around 1477/8. Sartain, "Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti's Relations," 194; Norris, *The Tuaregs*, 41; and Geoffroy, "Al-Suyūṭī."

[69] As reported by ʿAbd al-Raḥman al-Saʿdī (1594–c. 1655), the author of the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 70.

[70] Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 70 and 73.

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funding to advance religious studies, build mosques, and publicly celebrate Muslim holidays. The blessings of Muslim saints buried in the city's cemeteries protected the city as its affluence grew and the city did indeed become a major commercial and educational center for the region.[71] Here, Muslim holy men were also known to exert influence over state representatives and other scholars through their ability to muster God's divine forces to enact miracles and to punish misdeeds.

The century that followed demonstrated that their perceived spiritual power could work to the religious experts' detriment as well as to their benefit. Sonni ʿAlī Ber's (d. 1492) 27-year rule as the founder of the Songhay Empire (1464–1591) profoundly destabilized what had been the comfortable position of Muslim scholars in Timbuktu: some were imprisoned or executed; others fled. Inhabitants and rulers of Songhay later understood that abused and displaced Muslim scholars had accelerated the death of the widely reviled Sonni ʿAlī, enacting a kind of divine retributive justice through the science of letters.[72] Muslim scholars returned to Timbuktu as the city flourished under the reign of Sonni ʿAlī's successor Askiya Muḥammad (d. 1538). Muslim scholars also maintained their influence in Songhay by providing protective amulets to ensure success in war, healing illness, and maintaining the health of a community. In return for the spiritual protection and even bureaucratic service that only those literate in Arabic could perform, the Songhay rulers offered exemptions from taxes and gave gifts of land, enslaved persons, and commodities.[73]

Even though he welcomed the return of Islamic scholars, Askiya Muḥammad was a reformer who challenged his predecessor, not least, according to a distinction between allowed and forbidden practices that resonated over the next 500 years. His inquiries demonstrate that the aforementioned openness advanced by Al-Suyūṭī did not go unchallenged, even at this early date. A now-famous set of responses to the askiya's legal questions by the fifteenth-century Saharan jurist Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī (d. 1505) provides additional information about what therapeutic and spiritual mediation practices might have been like in this mid-imperial state in the southern Sahara.[74]

[71] Gomez, *African Dominion*, 288–97. [72] Gomez, *African Dominion*, lv and 100.

[73] Hunwick, Secular Power and Religious Authority in Muslim Society: the Case of Songhay," *JAH* 37, no. 2 (1996): 175–94, 179 and 192.

[74] Al-Maghīlī was criticized for his attacks against Jewish inhabitants of the oasis of Tuāt, especially because his writings incited the violent destruction of the Jewish community there. See Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay*; Warscheid, *Droit musulman*; and Abd al-Aziz Abdallah Batran, "A Contribution to the Biography of Shaikh Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Muḥammad (ʿUmar) al-Maghīlī," *JAH* 14 (1973): 381–94.

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The Songhay leader's correspondence with the reformist scholar reveals a desire to portray his predecessor, Sonni ʿAlī, in an especially bad light. Emphasizing practices he describes as syncretic and reflecting pre-Islamic animism, the askiya showed concern about whether existing local rituals were consistent with Islamic jurisprudence.[75] Askiya Muḥammad asked about the legality of claiming "some knowledge of the future through sand divining and the like, or through the disposition of the stars, information gathered from jinns or the sounds and movements of birds" and of relying on talismans "to bring good fortune, such as material prosperity or love, and to ward off ill fortune by defeating enemies, preventing steel from cutting or poison from taking its effect."[76]

Al-Maghīlī responded categorically that anyone who claims to be able to predict the future using the methods listed "is a liar and an unbeliever and whoever gives him credit is an unbeliever." More radically than Egyptian scholar al-Suyūṭī, al-Maghīlī reproached those who used talismans or amulets. Extending this assessment to punishment for such apostasy, al-Maghīlī then condemned to death anyone who relied on methods he identified as sorcery.[77] Those convicted of *siḥr* or fortune-telling were to be given the opportunity to repent through a public denunciation of such practices; however, if they continued to practice either in secret or after such public atonement, they would then be killed as non-believers.[78] The severity of these rulings seems, as Hunwick notes, to "have generally been ignored," at least if we take the continued widespread reliance on amulets and *jedāwil* as any indication.[79]

These methods al-Maghīlī strongly opposed – sand divination, astrology, communicating with birds and *jinn*, using talismans – as well as the problems to be solved, like poverty in money and love, war, and poisoning, were consistent with the methods and goals of the esoteric sciences as practiced in the Sahara. And these methods do seem to have withstood calls from some Muslims, including al-Maghīlī, for their suppression. First, al-Maghīlī wrote his responses as *fatāwā*, or non-binding legal opinions that would have shaped behavior only if enforced. While Askiya Muḥammad had initially posed the questions to al-Maghīlī, it is not evident that the Songhay ruler necessarily then mobilized the state to implement laws backing the expert's conclusions. More likely, he used these *fatāwā* to discredit his predecessor Sonni ʿAlī – who had publicly

[75] Hunwick, *Sharī'a in Songhay*, 70 and 118.
[76] Hunwick, *Sharī'a in Songhay*, 89.
[77] Translation by Hunwick, *Sharī'a in Songhay*, 91.
[78] Hunwick, *Sharī'a in Songhay*, 91, fn. 3 and 124.
[79] Hunwick, *Sharī'a in Songhay*, 124.

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relied on lettrism and amulets – to legitimize his own appropriation of power through claims of religious superiority.

Having overthrown Sonni ʿAlī's son, the askiya needed to convince his subjects, especially those living in newly acquired regions, that his was a righteous sovereignty while his precursor's had been illegitimate. Askiya Muhammad sought to prove that Sonni ʿAlī was also guilty of *takfīr*, or unbelief, to justify seizing his and his supporters' property and goods. In this line of argument, Sonni ʿAlī had been a cruel and violent emperor – but he had also permitted his own subjects to disregard the basic precepts of Islam. It was the latter failing that allowed for the askiya's takeover of power and the appropriation of property. Askiya Muḥammad's questions, like those of al-Lamtūnī a decade earlier, were aimed at eliciting from al-Maghīlī a strong condemnation of local religious traditions and social practices.[80] Hunwick argues that al-Maghīlī's responses to Askiya Muḥammad sought to validate the Askiya's coup d'état "by representing it as a jihād against an infidel rule."[81] And, while Askiya Muḥammad was likely sincere in his wish to see a broader reform of religious and ritual practice in the territory under his control, he was more concerned with expanding his power than with expending the resources to regulate local spiritual mediation and the trade in amulets, an action that might have generated resistance among his new subjects. Here, at the turn of the sixteenth century, the esoteric sciences appear in a formal denunciation and illustrate the shifting ground of tensions around their application: when and as politically expedient, knowledge of the Islamic esoteric sciences could be used either to support or to discredit a political rival.[82]

The new emperor invested in Timbuktu's Islamic credentials, financing educational institutions and mosques. Nevertheless, the city's fall to the Moroccan army two generations later, in 1591, led to a steep decline in intellectual production. Political instability and violence during a period of drought at the beginning of the seventeenth century caused disruptions in agricultural production and subsequent famines while the disintegration of what had been a well-regulated empire meant that trade

[80] Gomez, *African Dominion*, 201–19. [81] Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay*, 25.

[82] Mauro Nobili has examined this phenomenon at length in his study of a nineteenth-century forgery of the chronicle the *Tārīkh al-fettāsh*. The forgery claims that the askiya consulted with al-Suyūṭī, al-Maghīlī, a well-known *jinn* named Shamharūsh, and the fictional Hassanid sharif Mūlay al-ʿAbbas who declared him the true leader. We know now that the chronicle was written by both Timbuktu scholar Maḥmūd Kaʿtī (d. 1593) and later (around 1664) edited by his descendants, with revisions made by Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir al-Fulānī (d. 1857). Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph and the Renewer of the Faith: Ahmad Lobbo, the* Tarikh al-fattash*, and the Making of Islamic State in West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Mahmoûd Kâti, *Tārīkh al-fettāsh*.

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diverted in other directions away from the risky region.[83] Serious scholarship and the provision of Islamic education subsequently shifted to the Saharan West to cities such as Wādān, Walāta, Tīshīt, and Shinqīṭ. The tombs of important saints and teachers remained sites of visitation for those in need of beneficial and curative blessings in the form of *baraka*, but Timbuktu itself was no longer the intellectual or commercial center of West Africa.

Zwāya Values

The *Gebla* today comprises the southwest administrative region of the Trārza, which in turn sits bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and the Senegal River Valley. Historically, the *Gebla* exemplifies the environmental and cultural changes that took place from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, changes that determined the place of the Islamic esoteric sciences in modern Mauritania. Increasing dryness in the region prompted changes in settlement patterns, an escalation in violence and an expansion of the trade in enslaved people.[84] While the nomadic Banū Ḥassān increasingly migrated south from the northern desert following receding pastures for their herds, agricultural communities also moved progressively toward the river valleys, both migratory trends meant a tightening of competition for water resources but also a greater mixing of linguistic and ethnic communities. The grafting of Ḥassāniyya, the Arabic dialect of the Banū Ḥassān confederations, over the Amazigh Znāga language followed, albeit at a slower speed, the gradual domination of its speakers over preexisting communities.[85] By the sixteenth century, arid lands had shifted 200 to 300 kilometers to the south. Cultural and linguistic norms identified with the *ḥassān*, or Arab warriors – such as the use of the Arabic language and patrilineal systems of descent – were now increasingly appropriated by Amazigh and riverine populations.[86]

[83] Michel Abitol, "The End of the Songhay Empire," in *UNESCO General History of Africa, vol. 5 Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (Oxford: James Curry, 1999), 153–65. See also Abitol, "Une élite soudanaise des XVII–XVIIIe siècles: les Arma de Tombouctou," *La Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 64, no. 237 (1977): 445–55.

[84] Webb, *Desert Frontier*.

[85] As Raymond Taylor points out, this shift in language use and cultural dominance took place over the span of at least five centuries and could not have been as rigid in its categories of status and ethnicity as older narratives of "an Arab invasion" seem to suggest. Taylor, "Of Disciples and Sultans," 25.

[86] Taylor, "Of Disciples and Sultans"; Webb, *Desert Frontier*, xv; and H.T. Norris, *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 16.

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An additional critical development during this period was an intensification in the trade in enslaved people in both the long-standing trans-Saharan and the developing trans-Atlantic trade networks. By the mid-seventeenth century, European traders were probing the coasts and river estuaries and paying their first levy customs to the *ḥassān* tribal representatives who served as points of contact for pricing and access to the most desired commodities – enslaved people, gum arabic, and gold.[87] The luxury goods given as gifts to regional *ḥassān* leaders in return for their assistance in securing commodities for the European market enriched these men and also served as the basis of new local and regional relationships as the tribal representatives distributed the luxury items to ensure support among their dependents. Horses and weapons procured through customs levy also became the means to attack and pillage militarily weaker groups for captives, animals, and foodstuffs. Access to trade and the weapons of war on the Atlantic coast – especially combined with the demographic shift south, continued efforts of Morocco to interfere in local politics, and unrest in the polities south of the Senegal River – meant that the *Gebla* was at the heart of the region's various political, environmental, and economic pressures.[88] The Tashumsha tribal confederation of the saintly Aḥmad Bezeid had itself migrated from southern Morocco in the fourteenth century, invoking God through the esoteric sciences to defeat antagonistic *ḥassān*. Aḥmad Bezeid was also, as we have already seen, known for having used his knowledge of the esoteric sciences to protect leaders of the embryonic *ḥassān* emirate of the Trārza.

The definitive subjugation of the Ṣanhāja *zwāya* by the ʿ*arab* Banū Ḥassān in a civil war known as *Shur Būbba* (1673–77) is largely understood to have determined how power would be shared in the region between these two dominant occupational groups, the *ḥassān* and the *zwāya* followed by tributary herders, craftspeople, and enslaved persons, in descending order of status.[89] In 1644, in a declaration of armed

[87] The first emir to establish trade and contact with Europeans was the *ḥassān* leader Haddi ould Aḥmad b. Damān (d. circa 1684–87). Most scholars see this leader as the etymological origin of the coastal trading point that came to be known as Portendick from the Portuguese *Porto d'Addi*, to *Portendie* to *Portendick*. See Geneviève Désiré-Vuillemin, "Aperçu historique de la Mauritanie du XIXe siècle à l'indépendance" in *Introduction à la Mauritanie*, eds. Centre de recherches et d'études sur les sociétés méditerranéennes et Centre d'étude d'Afrique noire (Aix-en-Provence: Institut de recherches et d'études sur les mondes arabes et musulmanes, 1979), 67–100; and Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique," 265.

[88] Christiane Vanacker, "La Mauritanie jusqu'au XXe siècle," in *Introduction à la Mauritanie*, 45–65.

[89] Scholars have downplayed the war's function in determining current social structures, arguing that these occupational divisions were earlier to emerge and historically more

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struggle, the *zwāya* religious leader Nāṣir al-Dīn (d. 1674) called for the establishment of a state framed around Islamic principles.[90] Accusing the *ḥassān*, specifically the Trārza emir, of un-Islamic behavior, the holy man – who came from the same Tashumsha confederation as Aḥmad Bezeid – claimed that the warriors preyed on other Saharan populations through illegal taxation, raiding, and enslavement during a period of drought and famine.[91] Nāṣir al-Dīn and the *zwāya* lost the war, but its aftershocks were far-reaching. Neighboring Wolof and Halpulaaren states to the south experienced their own clerical revolutions while the *zwāya* loss in *Shur Būbba* solidified the pre-existing social divisions between warriors and scholars: the *ḥassān* claimed political power and the right to extract tributary taxes, drink, and lodging when demanded. The *zwāya*, however, affirmed their religious authority and established themselves as the guardians and interpreters of Islamic law, an indispensable role in a desert that was routinely crossed by cosmopolitan

fluid than later local and colonial narratives of the war have acknowledged. Some sources seemed to indicate the war itself lasted over thirty years, from 1644–74, but the scholarly consensus now considers that these thirty years most likely correspond to the length of Nāṣir al-Din's educational and reformist activities in the region, while the battles of the war itself lasted from 1673–77. Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir"; Bonte, "L'émirat de l'Adrar"; Timothy Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*. Stewart, "Southern Saharan Scholarship"; and Mariella Villasainte-de Beauvais, "Genèse de la hiérarchie sociale et du pouvoir politique 'bidân'," *CEA* 37, no. 147 (1997): 587–633. See also Tal, *Les castes de l'Afrique*.

[90] Some historians have used the term *jihād* to categorize the *zwāya* scholar's movement, while others have preferred "religious revolution" to describe what inspired a series of later reformist movements that took place in West Africa from the end of the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries in West Africa. Philip Curtin, "Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Inter-relations in Mauritania and Senegal," *JAH* 12, no. 1 (1971): 11–24; Jean Schmitz, "*Jihād*, soufis et salafistes, ou les flux et reflux de l'émancipation islamique (XVIIe-XXe siècle)," *Le Sahel musulman entre soufisme et salafisme. Subalternité, luttes de classement et transnationalisme*, eds. Jean Schmitz, Abdel Wedoud ould Cheikh, and Cédric Jourde (Paris: Karthala, 2022), 31–77. Notably, Michael Gomez and Amir Syed reject the argument that *Shur Būbba* necessarily served as a model for later revolutions in the region. Gomez, "The Problem with Malik Sy and the Foundation of Bundu (La Question de Malik Sy et la Fondation du Bundu)," *CEA* 25, no. 100 (1985): 537–53 and Amir Syed, "Re-conceptualizing the Islamic Revolutionary Movements of West Africa," in *Handbook of Islam in Africa*, eds. Fallou Ngom, Mustapha Kurfi, Toyin Falola (Cham, SZ: Palgrave Press), 93–116.

[91] Historians of the region still debate what motivated Nāṣir al-Dīn to declare war against the *ḥassān* as the pressures on his Saharan community were multifaceted and reflected a mix of material and spiritual concerns. Webb, *Desert frontier*; Boubacar Barry, *La Sénégambie du XVe au XIXe siècle: Traite négrière, Islam et conquête coloniale* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988), 82–95; Pierre Bonte, *L'émirat de l'Adrar mauritanien: harîm, compétition et protection dans une société tribale saharienne* (Paris: Karthala, 2008), 200–81; Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir," 880; Ould Cheikh, *La société maure*, 122; Syed, "Between Jihād and History"; Ware, *The Walking Qur'an*.

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merchants and caravans but lacked a centralized state with power to determine the terms of trade and movement.[92]

To understand how Nāṣir al-Dīn was able to mobilize members of his own Saharan community and people living in and south of the Senegal River Valley to rise up and overthrow their political leaders, this chapter turns to the broader role of the Islamic esoteric sciences in the *Gebla* and Nāṣir al-Dīn's specific role as spiritual mediator. Nāṣir al-Dīn was known to have manifested signs of an intimate connection with God and a serious command of divine knowledge. The strength of his *baraka* was revealed when he made the dead speak, accurately predicted future events, and recounted dreams in which sacred figures visited him. His followers ingested his spit to imbibe his blessings and spiritual righteousness.[93] Nāṣir al-Dīn claimed that he could put an end to the arbitrary exactions and violence of the *ḥassān* by applying Islamic law more stringently in a Muslim theocratic state. He signaled his ability to overcome *ḥassān* power by performing miracles and exhibiting extraordinary powers of divination.[94] A French nobleman working in the region at the time saw the talismanic arts as a fundamental aspect of the war's appeal, explaining that the Muslim reformists and "*jihadistes*" promised that their amulets and prayers would miraculously ensure generous millet crop harvests without anyone having to lift a finger.[95] The Frenchman also described Nāṣir al-Dīn's region as "without a king," meaning without a centralized state, but he added that the warriors showed great respect for Muslim holy men and Islamic law. This respect, he concluded, resulted from a fear of the divine formulas written and folded into amulets by these experts in Islamic knowledge.[96] These Muslim authorities provided protective and healing services but their capacity to seek vengeance and to punish via the same knowledge equally explained the deference shown them.

In the wake of the region's late seventeenth-century political instability, inhabitants of the Senegal River Valley openly attached what French observers described as *gris-gris* – or leather-encapsulated written prayers – to their bodies and hair to ensure fertility and marriage and

[92] Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*.
[93] Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique," 897 and Al-Yadālī, trans. by Ismail Hamet in *Chronique de la Mauritanie-Sénégalaise. Nacer Eddine* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1911), 167–73.
[94] Ould Cheikh, *La société maure*, 121.
[95] Michel Jajolet de la Courbe, *Premier Voyage du Sieur de la Courbe Fait à la Coste d'Afrique en 1685* (Paris: Édouard Champion, 1913), 133.
[96] de la Courbe, *Premier Voyage du Sieur*, 147.

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productive harvests, or to facilitate escape from enslavement.[97] A French commercial agent wrote that purveyors of these *gris-gris*, whom he called "witches and diviners," had generated an atmosphere of fear:

> these poor people don't feel safe if they haven't weighed their bodies and clothes down, and there are some more weighed down than adorned especially when they go to war, they also put on their animals and goat necks, even putting in their fields believing this will prevent their grains from being damaged by birds and grasshoppers.[98]

Other French travelers observed that villagers sought out the protective services of Muslim holy men in their communities, exchanging cattle, horses, or human captives for powerful prayers to ensure invincibility in war.[99] This heavy reliance on esoteric practice existed as part and parcel of what these non-Muslim Europeans identified more easily with Islamic practice – regular prayers throughout the day, shaved heads, and a command of the Arabic language.[100]

Those European observations that portray Sufi Muslim figures as manipulating the desperate naivety of their followers need to be interrogated: Chapters 3 and 5 will consider the persistent incapacity of European observers and, eventually, French colonial authorities to comprehend the Islamic esoteric sciences other than within this limited framework of manipulation and ignorance, and the implications this incapacity would have on colonial policy. And yet prominent *zwāya* themselves contested the veracity of narratives circulating about Nāṣir al-Dīn's miraculous feats and his claims to being the *mahdī* (renewer of Islam) whose war was legitimated by his visions of mystical Muslim figures. Not long after *Shur Būbba*, a Shinqīṭī *qadī* (jurisconsult), Muḥammad ould al-Mukhtār ould Bilʿamesh (1626–95/96), and the

[97] Louis Moreau de Chambonneau in Carson I. A. Ritchie, "Deux Textes sur le Sénégal (1673–1677)," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (BIFAN)* XXX B, no. 1 (1968): 289–353, 313 and Jacques-Joseph le Maire, *Les voyages du Sieur le Maire: aux îles Canaries, Cap-Vert, Sénégal et Gambie* (Paris: J. Collombet, 1695), 146–48. On the origins of the French usage of the term *gris-gris*, Constant Hamès writes that the *Petit Robert* mentions 1637–57 as the years when the term was first explained as having an unknown origin but can be found written in the preceding century. He speculates that the term comes from the French *guérir*, meaning to heal or protect, as in "guéris-guéris (moi)" – heal, heal (me). Constant Hamès, "L'art talismanique en Islam d'Afrique Occidentale. Personnes. Supports. Procède. Transmission. Analyse Anthropologique et Islamologique d'un Corpus de Talismans à Écritures" (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, Sorbonne, 1996–97), 72–73.

[98] De Chambonneau cited in French by Ndiaye, *L'enseignement Arabo-Islamique au Sénégal*, 17 and 25.

[99] De la Courbe, *Premier Voyage*, 178 and 36 and le Maire, *Les voyages du Sieur le Maire*, 147–49.

[100] Ritchie, "Deux Textes sur le Sénégal," 314.

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Aṭār *walī* (saint), Muḥammad ould Aḥmad ould Ḥusayn ould Bū Shaq ould Aḥmad ould Shams al-Dīn (dit ould Majdhūb, "the Illuminated") (d. 1687), debated whether or not Nāṣir al-Dīn was theologically permitted to declare a *jihād* at all.

For Bilʿamesh, whose descendant appeared as a spiritual mediator in this book's Introduction, such declarations could only be made about a prophet, and as Muḥammad was the last and most righteous prophet, Nāṣir al-Dīn was illegitimately asserting his ability to serve as a spiritual intermediary for God.[101] Ould Majdhūb, on the other hand, defended the possibility of such extraordinary events and capacities. A descendant of the *sharīf* Shams al-Dīn through the well-known Sharīf Bubazūl – who had himself experienced miraculous events to be detailed in Chapter 6 – this saint made the amazing discovery of the long-lost tomb of the Mālikī jurist al-Murādī al-Ḥaḍramī, mentioned in the previous chapter.[102] Ould Majdhūb identified the location of the Almoravid-era saint's remains by the mysterious rocks and tree that sat atop his burial ground. Calling for a sheep to be slaughtered in sacrifice over the tomb, the Smāsīd saint watched as the blood shed by the slain sheep rose up into the sky and the tree shook on its own without apparent explanation.[103] Taking these as signs that he had rightly identified the spot as the burial site of al-Ḥaḍramī, Ould Majdhūb then experienced two additional miraculous events. Not only did al-Ḥaḍramī visit Ould Majdhūb in his sleep but the Almoravid saint also caused Ould Majdhūb to suffer an intense fever that in turn sparked a tremendous swelling of his right hand. This massive inflammation only diminished as the illiterate Ould Majdhūb wrote out what would become a three-volume set of prayers and religious knowledge.[104] Because he had himself been chosen as a conduit for God's miracles, and because his Smāsīd tribal identity affiliated him with related groups who fought alongside Nāṣir al-Dīn in the war, Ould Majdhūb defended the legitimacy of Nāṣir al-Dīn's struggle.

[101] Ould Cheikh and Saison, "Vie(s) Et Mort(s) de al-Imām al-Ḥaḍrāmi," 70; Ismail Warscheid, "The West African Jihād Movements and the Islamic Legal Literature of the Southwestern Sahara (1650–1850)," *Journal of West African History* 6, no. 2 (2020): 33–60 and Norris, *The Arab Conquest*, 41–43. Ould Cheikh characterizes Ould Bilʿamesh as one of the first Ash'arī scholars and as "proto-salafi" in part because of this aversion to attributing miracles to anyone but the Prophet Muḥammad. Ould Cheikh, "La lettre et/ou l'esprit? Soufisme et proto-salafisme dans l'espace mauritanien (XVIIe-XXe s.)," in *Le Sahel musulman entre soufisme et salafisme*, eds. Schmitz, Ould Cheikh and Jourde, 81–105.

[102] Ould Cheikh and Saison, "Vie(s) et mort(s)," 60.

[103] Ould Cheikh and Saison, "Vie(s) et mort(s)," 65. Sacred trees and serpents are often understood as spiritual holdovers from a pre-Islamic period. See Norris, "Znāga Islam," 498.

[104] Ould Cheikh and Saison, "Vie(s) et mort(s)," 66.

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A treatise entitled *Shiyam al-zwāya* ("Zwāya values") written in the decades after *Shur Būbba* reflects on what the loss of this war meant to the scholarly occupational group, the *zwāya*, as a defeat that simultaneously cemented their claims of privileged access to the Islamic esoteric sciences through their near-monopoly on religious knowledge. Written by Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār b. Maham Saʿīd al-Daymānī (1685–1753), better known by his gentilic al-Yadālī, whose father had also fought alongside Nāṣir al-Dīn in the war, the treatise was meant to outline the "morals" of the authors' *zwāya* ancestors.[105] Al-Yadālī was himself an expert in the Islamic sciences, both exoteric and esoteric, and had written some thirty works on *fiqh* (jurisprudence), history, astrology and philosophy, and lettrism.[106] Stories circulated about al-Yadālī's command over unseen forces and demonstrated his deep knowledge of the sources of Islam as well as the Sufi sciences transmitted through the Shādhiliyya Sufi network, to which he claimed affiliation.[107] His recorded extraordinary acts included killing a ferocious dog simply by pointing a finger at the animal, transporting people a week's distance in the span of an hour, finding lost things, and providing water during times of drought in the desert.[108] He was also known to have healed illnesses and to have protected his wife from unsavory men through miraculous means.[109]

Shiyam al-zwāya reads as a defense, following its defeat in the war, of the larger Tashumsha confederation's *zwāya* cultural values and social norms. Al-Yadālī saw authoritative knowledge of the *sunna* as central to the *zwāya* way of being. The *zwāya* were known for their hospitality, providing water and pastures to warriors and passing strangers, and they also saw themselves as noble defenders of justice in a hostile environment.[110] The Tashumsha confederation's history is peppered

[105] Al-Yadālī's tribe, the Idaw-Da, was affiliated with the Tashumsha confederation. Al-Yadālī, trans. by Hamet in *Chronique de la Mauritanie-Sénégalaise*, 219.

[106] Al-Yadālī's *farāʾid al-fawāʾid fī sharḥ qawāʿid al-ʿaqāʾid* specifically addresses the esoteric sciences. See F. Leconte, "al-Yadālī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman et al., 2012, accessed March 27, 2019, doi: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7936. Abubakar Sadiq Abdulkadir has presented on the links al-Yadālī sought to establish between the esoteric and exoteric sciences. See his 2018 African Studies Association of the United Kingdom paper. Abstract online, March 27, 2019, https://coms.events/ASAUK2018/data/abstracts/en/abstract_0130.html.

[107] For more on the Shādheliyya, see Constant Hamès, " La Shâdhiliyya ou l'origine des confréries islamiques en Mauritanie," in *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* 3, ed. Jean-Louis Triaud (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2013), 73–89 and Hamès, "La Shâdhiliyya dans l'Ouest saharien," in *Une voie soufie dans le monde*, ed. Éric Geoffroy.

[108] Norris, "Znāga Islam," 503 and 510.

[109] Norris, "Znāga Islam," 505.

[110] Al-Yadālī's mother, together with other *zwāya* women, had been taken hostage in the war. Al-Yadālī would plausibly have grown up hearing about his father's efforts to free the women and about the seemingly erratic physical and material violence enacted by

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with examples of the group's inherited and acquired miraculous powers.[111] The Tashumsha and the tribal groups that made up their coalition were God's conduits in difficult times, conjuring rain during droughts, summoning meteors to strike adversaries, and transporting Saharans remarkable distances in the blink of an eye.[112] In one narration, the Tashumsha specifically used the Islamic esoteric sciences to protect their community in the desert's precarious political landscape. Hearing that the Awlād Rizg, a warrior group, planned to attack and pillage their encampment, they recited the *sūrat Ṭāḥā* from the Qur'ān over a piece of camel excrement, which they then buried.[113] When the Awlād Rizg warriors arrived, their leader unknowingly dug the heel of his foot into the sand-covered turd, an act which ensured his death – and thus justice – the following morning.[114]

Such techniques for enacting punitive vengeance or prevention by marshaling divine and unseen forces were known by the Znāga term *tazzuba*, a method of protection the *zwāya* used to protect their communities' interests. The *zwāya* were the only group in the region able to activate *tazzuba*, as a kind of "immanent justice" that hinged upon deep spiritual knowledge, and they did so when they felt threatened or cheated.[115] Summoning invisible armies of *jinn* or God's divine powers, a Muslim holy person could use *tazzuba* to protect an encampment from a *ḥassān* raid and to kill the thieves who rode off with camels and other property. Al-Yadālī saw *tazzuba* as the last weapon left for the *zwāya* after losing the *Shur Būbba* war and agreeing with the *ḥassān* victors they would surrender the right to defend themselves with swords and guns. The terms of surrender dictated that *zwāya* were thereafter obliged to house and provide water and animals to passing warriors, to wash their dead, to provide prayers, and to formally renounce any claim to temporal

the *ḥassān* who demanded heavy payments in return for protection from other pillaging warriors. Al-Yadālī, *Chronique de la Mauritanie Sénégalaise*, 220–25.

[111] One Tashumsha confederation member was remembered to have moved his books and family south from Shinqīṭ, at some point between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, on the back of a docile and obliging elephant. Saharans in the early seventeenth century also healed skin ailments by applying the multi-colored leaves of a wondrous tree that grew out of a Tashumsha descendant's tomb; the leaves could be obtained only by bypassing, with the confederation's permission, the snake that guarded the tree's saintly roots. Norris, "Znāga Islam," 497–98.

[112] Norris, "Znāga Islam," 498.

[113] The twentieth chapter of the Qur'ān.

[114] Al-Yadālī in Hamet, *Chronique de la Mauritanie- Sénégalaise*, 222. Bonte, *L'émirat de l'Adrar*, 271.

[115] Ould Cheikh provided this translation in "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique," 924–37 and Muḥammad Maḥmūd ould Aḥmad Sīdī ould Sīdī Yaḥyā, *al-mujtamaʿ al-faḍfāḍ: Mulāḥaẓāt sūsyū naqdiyya ḥawl al-mar'a wa-l-ṣulṭa wa-l-thaqāfa fī al-mujtamaʿ al-morītānī al-muʿāṣir* (Muʾassasat al-thiqa lil-mʿalūmātiyya, 2002), 103–04.

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power.[116] Thus while the *ḥassān* warriors theoretically claimed a monopoly on physical violence – a privilege they exploited in asserting dominance over tributary and subordinate *laḥma* groups – the *zwāya* could defend themselves against *ḥassān* profiteering through a kind of spiritual violence, *tazzuba*, that could likewise cause serious physical harm.[117] When *zwāya* tax obligations were enforced rather than suspended, or when *zwāya* communities were subjected to *ḥassān* pillaging, these failures or deference were met with *tazzuba* and its immediately tangible effects, often extending to the unexpected deaths or illnesses of assailants. For the *zwāya* who fought in *Shur Būbba*, the war was the moment they claimed the Islamic sciences, both esoteric and exoteric, as the weapons they would use to maintain a form of political and cultural authority in the Sahara.[118]

Conclusion

Forty years after he passed away, the dead al-Yadālī visited the Fouta Tooro Halpulaar Muslim leader ʿAbd al-Qādir Kane (1726–1806/07) in a dream.[119] Kane had helped to overthrow the Denyanke dynasty in 1776 alongside Souleyman Baal (d. 1775–76); he had established an Islamic state in the Fouta Tooro, a region just southwest of the *Gebla*, and was now the *almāmī*, or Muslim ruler, of a state threatened by the Kajoor *damel* (Wolof: king) Amary Ngoné Ndella.[120] Both Baal and Kane were products of *Shur Būbba* in that they had been students in

[116] Bonte, *L'émirat de l'Adrar*, 280–81.

[117] Roughly a century later, the spiritual leader of the Kunta confederation, Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad ould Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (1769–1826), wrote the emir of Tagānt, Muḥammad ould Muḥammad Shayn (d. 1822), to warn him against Idaw'ish *ḥassān* pillaging his community. The Sufi leader threatened the Tagānt emir with *tazzuba* as punishment if he failed to respect their previous agreement, which protected the Kunta from *ḥassān* raids. Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique," 929–30 and Abdallah ould Khalifa, *La région du Tagant en Mauritanie: L'oasis de Tijigja entre 1660 et 1960* (Paris: Karthala, 1998), 243.

[118] See Ismail Warscheid's body of work where he argues that Islamic jurisprudence was the primary vehicle through which the *zwāya* developed a discourse and politics of authority. Warscheid, *Droit musulman et société*.

[119] Norris, "Zenāga Islam," 506. For more on Abdel Kader Kane and Souleyman Baal, see Oumar Kane, *La première hégémonie peule: le Fuuta Tooro de Koli Tenella à Almaami Abdul* (Paris: Karthala, 2004); David Robinson, "Abdul Qadir and Shaykh Umar: A Continuing Tradition of Islamic Leadership in Futa Toro," *International Journal of African Historical Studies (IJAHS)* 6, no. 2 (1973): 286–303; and Roy Dilley, *Islamic and Caste Knowledge Practices among Haalpulaar'en in Senegal: Between Mosque and Termite Mound* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

[120] See David Robinson, Philip Curtin and James Johnson, "A Tentative Chronology of Futa Toro from the Sixteenth through the Nineteenth Centuries" *CEA* 12, no. 48 (1972): 555–92.

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villages that were founded as part of the religious revivals that swept the region subsequent to the war. These villages, Pīr and Kokkī, were important sites of Islamic education in the Kajoor and had strong intellectual links to the *Gebla* region through teachers from confederations, who make up Chapter 6 – the Awlād Daymān, Idaw al-Ḥajj, and Ahl Guennar – who, like al-Yadālī, had familial and tribal links to those who fought in the war on the side of the *zwāya*.[121] In 1796, al-Yadālī appeared to Kane in a dream to provide him with a talismanic square as a safeguard against anticipated attacks from the Kajoor kingdom. Even though the *damel*'s forces would go on to capture Kane and detain him for months, the ephemeral apparition of one of the Saharan West's earlier religious scholars is remembered as a signal of Kane's religious authority.[122]

In the almost two centuries separating the death of Aḥmad Bezeid from the political activities endorsed from beyond the grave by al-Yadālī, then, the center of Islamic knowledge shifted west away from Timbuktu and the esoteric sciences associated with *l'ḥjāb* emerged as a key factor in the region's power dynamics. This chapter examined contestation over what constituted Islamic orthodoxy writ large, but it also argued that the miracles and talismans of *l'ḥjāb* more specifically were driving factors in the major regional conflict that was *Shur Būbba*, which hardened the power boundaries between the occupational groups of *ḥassān* and *zwāya*.

As a war of religious renewal, an attempt to establish a theocratic state that would oversee Islamic re-education on both sides of the Senegal River, *Shur Būbba* ultimately failed. In the *Gebla*, the embryotic Trārza emirate led by Haddi b. Aḥmad Damān defeated the saintly scholar Nāṣir al-Dīn. From then on, the *ḥassān* warriors loosely governed eponymous emirates in the southwestern Sahara, the first two of which – the Trārza and Brākna – took shape in the seventeenth century and the second two – the Adrār and Tagānt – in the century that followed. The *ḥassān* subjugation of the *zwāya* completed a division of power that had long been evolving between the former, who dominated through military strength, and the latter, who enforced justice through their mastery of jurisprudence and their knowledge of the Islamic esoteric sciences. Modern scholars have demonstrated that in regions of the Saharan West outside the *Gebla*, these occupational roles were less rigid. But here, historians have described the war's effects on social hierarchy and political

[121] Jean Boulègue, *Les royaumes wolof dans l'espace sénégambien (XIII–XVIIIe siècle)* (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 282–85, 432–37 and Kamara, *Florilège au jardin de l'histoire des noirs*, 314–15.

[122] Kamara, *Florilège au jardin*, 467.

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configurations as far-reaching and determinative of social patterns observed in later periods.[123] In the *Gebla*, starting in the eighteenth century, the emirs claimed the war drum as a symbol of their military authority, something they pounded when going into battle and at moments of communal ritual.[124] By this period, the amulet became the image most identified with *zwāya* religious experts who also mobilized their pens and paper to compose protective and punitive formulae as well as legal opinions and directives in the interest of their communities. The esoteric sciences became a crucial instrument, if not weapon, of *zwāya* authority to be used against the militarily powerful *ḥassān*.

[123] I would also caution against assuming that the *Gebla*'s bifurcation of power between the *ḥassān* and *zwāya* extended in the same way to other regions. The Kunta, Laʿrūssīn, Awlād Bū Sbaʿ, and Ragāybāt are among the prominent examples of tribal confederations whose members identified interchangeably as warriors and scholars. Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*; Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais, *Parenté et Politique en Mauritanie: Essai d'Anthropologie historique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998)*;* Hall*, A History of Race in Muslim West Africa*; Philippe Marchesin, *Tribus, ethnies et pouvoir en Mauritanie* (Paris: Karthala, 2010), 237; Alberto López Bargados, *Arenas Coloniales: los Awlad Dalím ante la colonización franco-española del Sáhara* (Castellano: Bellaterra, 2003), 242; Rahal Boubrik, *Saints et Société en Islam: La confrérie ouest-saharienne Fâdiliyya* (Paris: Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques, 1999), 37; and Sophie Caratini, *Les Rgaybat: 1610–1934*, 2 vols. (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1984).

[124] Ould Cheikh, *Éléments d'histoire de la Mauritanie.* (Nouakchott: Institut Mauritanien de Recherche Scientifique, 1991), 79.

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