

A man of letters in Timbuktu: al-Shaykh Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti

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As has become clear in Chapters 13 and 14, the Arabophone *qabila* (tribe) of the Kunta were present from at least the sixteenth century in a large section of the western and Central Sahara – from the Wadi Dar'a region in Morocco to the Taganit in Mauritania, and from the Al Tuwat in Algeria to the upper Niger River basin – and played a significant role in the religious, economic and political history of Timbuktu and its hinterland.

The Kunta, largely involved in trans-Saharan trade (they controlled the Idjil saltworks in Mauritania²), were a strong presence in caravans circulating between Taoudenni, Arawan and Timbuktu.³ Due to their mobility, they were essential in the transmission of the propagation of the Qadiriyya brotherhoods throughout the Sahelo-Saharan, having been involved in a large number of regional 'tribal' and 'political' conflicts. The Kunta were spiritual mentors, chaplains and mediators to the principal groups (Tuaregs, Peuls, Arma, Moors) involved to various extents in the public biography of Timbuktu, and even appeared to exercise a quasi-sovereignty (at least spiritual) over the city at the time of Sidi Ahmad al-Bakkay (d.1866). Between Sidi Ahmad al-Bakkay and his grandfather, al-Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar (d.1811) – the true initiator of Kunta 'wealth' in the Timbuktu region – was al-Shaykh Sidi Muhammad (d.1826), the father of al-Bakkay and chronicler of the family.

Shaykh Sidi Muhammad left behind a considerable number of writings that have largely remained unpublished, even if they nourished many works devoted to the religious and political history of the region.⁴ To my knowledge, the only fairly significant university work written about him is the doctoral thesis presented in 1977 by Abdallah wuld Mawlod wuld Daddah, at the Université de Paris-IV Sorbonne.⁵

In this chapter, I will first provide a brief overview of the Kunta and then deal more specifically with the religious, intellectual and political role of Shaykh Sidi

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Muhammad, whose influence was widespread in Timbuktu and its region, extending from the Atlantic to the Chad–Nigerian borders in the east and from the Wadi Dar'a and the Touat in the north to the depths of the African Sahel.

The Kunta and Timbuktu

The earliest written references that we have of the Kunta and of their presence in north-west Africa date back to the middle of the fifteenth century,⁶ but the traditions of this Saharan tribe endeavour to connect it with a distant and prestigious Arabic origin, specifically the descendants of 'Uqba ibn Nafi' al-Fihri.⁷

An epistle written by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad in 1824 called *al-Risala al-ghallawiyya* provides a kind of reference 'visiting card' of the Kunta, describing their genealogy, their historical journey across the whole of the western Sahara and their division. We also find scattered and widespread details on the history and genealogical organisation of this *qabila* in various other sources: other texts of Sidi Muhammad (in particular in his *Kitab al-tara'if* [The Book of the Rare (Knowledge)] which will be dealt with further on, as well as in his many letters), those of his father Sidi al-Mukhtar (*Kitab al-minna* [The Book of the Accomplished Desire]), and even in the writings of their disciples.⁸

Let us briefly summarise the account provided by *al-Risala al-ghallawiyya*, without being overly concerned about the uncertainties and contradictions affecting its historical content. The important thing is that it provides the foundations of legitimacy, the 'explanation' of the genealogical and geographic subdivisions of the Kunta and the journey that led a large number of them to settle in the hinterland of Timbuktu.

According to *al-Ghallawiyya* the Kunta had a single ancestor, 'Uqba ibn Nafi', the Muslim conqueror of North Africa and the founder of Qayrawan. Still according to this source, 'Uqba conquered Ghana and seized the town of Biru – the future Walata, well-known centre of trans-Saharan trade and one-time rival of Timbuktu – where two major ancestors of the Kunta were buried (al-'Aqib, son of 'Uqba, and Sidi Ahmad al-Bakkay al-Kabir). The Tuwat is presented as an essential point of reference in the movement south-west of the ancestors of the Kunta. *Al-Ghallawiyya* repeatedly cites the tombs of the Kunta's ancestors along their journey until the tomb of Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti al-Kabir, who was buried, according to this account, in Fask in the north-west of present-day Mauritania. It seems that it is from Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti al-Kabir that the *qabila* gets its name (Kunta), which he owes to his maternal grandfather – Alam b. Kunt – from the Sanhaja tribe of the Abdukkil to which the name 'Kunt' belonged.

It is nonetheless from Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti al-Kabir, and mainly from his son, Sidi Ahmad al-Bakkay, whose death is recorded in the epistle of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad as being in 920 *hijra* (about 1514), that the story of the Kunta began to shift from myth to plausible genealogical and factual consideration.

The three sons of Sidi Ahmad al-Bakkay – Sidi ‘Umar al-Shaykh, Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti al-Saghir, Sidi Abu Bakr al-Haj – are given as the basis for the entire geological structure of the Kunta.⁹ The same account tells us that from the beginning of the eighteenth century a territorial separation came between the descendants of Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti al-Saghir, the Kunta ancestor in the west who settled in the Taganit, Agan and Adrar in Mauritania, and the Kunta of the Azawad, who mostly came from Sidi ‘Umar al-Shaykh.

The reason given by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad¹⁰ for this separation was a conflict which broke out between the Awlad Malluk al-Bid and the Awlad Malluk al-Kihil and which gradually mobilised the whole tribe into two rival groups around Sidi Ways, the son of Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti al-Saghir (ancestor of the Awlad Bu-Sayf), and Sidi al-Wafi, the son of Sidi ‘Umar al-Shaykh (ancestor of the Awlad al-Wafi, to which Shaykh Sidi Muhammad belonged, hence the *nisba* of ‘al-Wafi’¹¹ he sometimes gave himself).

For fear that the rivalry between these two camps would degenerate into a civil war with unforeseeable consequences, a territorial divide was decided upon. ‘Sidi ‘Umar al-Shaykh and his descendants travelled from the Sagya al-Hamra’ and its Atlantic shore (Zbar) to the Hmada and to the Argshash, as far as Wadi al-Shabb in the east of Tuwat. They devoted themselves to trade in the lower Sus, the Dar’a and the Tuwat as far as Sijilmasa. When they settled in the Argshash and its vicinity, they organised caravans to the country of the blacks (*al-sudan*), some of them going to Timbuktu and to the ‘black Sudan’ (*al-sudan al-kihil*): Katsina, Gobir and Hausa.¹² The descendants of Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti al-Saghir settled around the southern border of the Sagya al-Hamra’, in Tiris and in the Adrar, as far as the Taganit and the Agan.

The Kunta of the east, particularly the Awlad al-Wafi to which the family of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad belonged, were naturally the most directly involved in the economic, cultural and political life of Timbuktu, even if on the surface the movement of the tribal ‘*asabiyya*’ networks and their interweaving quickly spread alliances, enmities and exchanges throughout the Kunta world wherever its Saharan fabric was involved. The spread of the economic and religious influence of the Kunta within the hinterland of Timbuktu, and their increasing hold over the trade of salt from Taoudenni, did not fail to produce clashes. The ‘diplomatic’ ability of the initiators of their regional wealth – Sidi al-Mukhtar, Sidi Muhammad, al-Bakkay – which was mostly based on their ‘scientific’ and religious authority, enabled them to successfully face their adversaries. Committed to defending the interests of their close community and to preserving what they believed to be the good of the whole Muslim *umma*, the shaykhs of the Kunta also deployed a large-scale activity of intercession and mediation within the groups which exercised some form of influence in the region of Timbuktu and in both its nearby and remote hinterland.

Having mostly been educated in Tuareg camps and introduced to the Qadiriyya by a noteworthy religious scholar belonging to this community (Sidi ‘Ali b. al-Najib¹³), Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar, and his son Sidi Muhammad after him, also became involved

A contemporary Tuareg man preparing tea outside his tent. The Kunta were spiritual mentors, chaplains and mediators to the Tuaregs, Peuls, Arma and Moors, all the principal groups involved in the biography of Timbuktu.



in the internal affairs of the Tuaregs (intertribal wars, inheritance disputes, etc.), as well as in their relationship with Timbuktu and with the groups that had formed part of its history, especially the Arma–Songhay and the Peuls.

The Tadmakkat Tuaregs were held in a position of quasi-vassalage by the Arma for a long period of time but they managed to reverse the power relationship in their favour beginning with the harsh defeat inflicted on the Arma in Taghia in May 1737.¹⁴ From this date, and for several decades, they asserted themselves as major participants in the politics and military life of Timbuktu and its hinterland in the upper Niger River basin. The assassination of their chief, Ughmar, by the Arma resulted in the siege of Timbuktu in 1755. Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar successfully assisted the Tadmakkat in lifting the siege. He had intervened in the inheritance disputes that arose after the deaths of Ughmar and his son and successor Abtiti, and for this reason Sidi Muhammad's *Kitab al-tara'if* presented him as the true orchestrator of the complicated system of successions within the Iwillemmeden (the different Tuareg tribes). Sidi Muhammad also credited Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar with a decisive influence over the devolution of the chieftainship among the Brabish, with whom the Kunta sometimes had a difficult relationship, mainly because of the 'tax' pressure they placed on trade to Timbuktu.



The Tuaregs were not always peaceful and intense friction existed, particularly with the Kal Antasar, well after the death of Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar and the accession of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad. It was with the latter that the Kunta's contacts with the other ethno-cultural communities of the region, particularly with the Peuls of Macina, experienced their most significant development. The Peuls were more distant geographically than the nearby Tuaregs but this did not prevent Shaykh Sidi Muhammad from interceding with the leaders of the Peul *jihads* at the beginning of the nineteenth century – the *jihads* took place in Sokoto and Macina – in order to respond to legal concerns they raised, to pacify a conflict involving his customers or disciples, or to advise them. Thus, in the work entitled *al-Futuhat al-qudsiyya bi al-ajwiba al-Fullaniyya* (The Blessed Triumphs or the Fulani Responses), written in response to 24 questions asked by Ahmadu Lobbo, Sidi Muhammad provided the outline for a kind of Islamic constitution for the Peul state that was being established. These letters to influential lineage chiefs such as Hammadi Galadio and Nuhum Tahiru (Nuh b. at-Tahir) regarding their disputes with Ahmadu Lobbo demonstrate the extent of his influence, and the importance of the mediation activity he conducted among the Peul groups gravitating around the armed preaching of the founder of the Peul Islamic state of Macina. The

Books formed a crucial item of trade throughout West Africa. This highly annotated manuscript would have been greatly prized.

letter that Shaykh Sidi Muhammad sent to the leaders of the Sokoto, with whom he also seemed to have had a relationship, will be discussed later in the chapter.

This chapter will not, however, explore the many occasions on which the Sidi al-Mukhtar family became involved in disputes between the Kunta and the western Moorish world – where certain of their disciples played a significant role¹⁵ – due to the relative geographical distance of this area from Timbuktu. We turn instead to some considerations regarding the life of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad and his works.

Al-Shaykh Sidi Muhammad: the man and his works

The complete education of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad, and significant moments in his career, took place behind the scenes and under the supervision of his father, Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar. While it was traditional in this area for young students to take a long journey to visit the most well-known teachers and schools in the region and to make the pilgrimage to the holy places of Islam, gleaning lessons and *ijazat* along the way, Sidi Muhammad never seems to have left his native Azawad and the only teacher he recognised was his father.

Even if we do not have any accurate information on his curriculum, it was most probably based on that of his father, of which he gives us an ample description at the beginning of the monumental biography he wrote on him. These were the studies recommended by all the Saharan–Sahelian schools of the time: science of the Arabic language (grammar, lexicography, metrics, rhetoric, literary history); the Qur'an and its interpretations; the *hadith*, taught mainly around six *sihah* (authentic compilations of prophetic traditions) in the Sunnite tradition; Malikite Ash'arite *fiqh*, based on classic works (mainly the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil b. Ishaq and the *Risala* of Ibn Abi Zayd) and their commentators; and the history of 'classical' Islam, where the *sira* plays a prominent role. Sufism and the works of the great inspirers of brotherhood movements (al-Junayd, Ibn 'Arabi, al-Ghazali, al-Suhrawardi, etc.) also formed a part of the education of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad, whose father was responsible for introducing the Qadiriyya into Saharan–Sahelian Africa. Works on *adab* and on wisdom, elements of arithmetic, logic, medicine and astronomy completed an education that was in full compliance with the educational heritage of his pious ancestors.

But the most precious education that Sidi Muhammad received from his father was undoubtedly the practical side of managing a brotherhood establishment, the learning of patience and wisdom and also the mindfulness to be used when conducting the many mediation sessions and interventions required of brotherhood leaders in a particularly unstable universe that mostly escaped the power of any centralised authority.

The works of Sidi Muhammad largely reflected the place that the aforementioned political and ethical concerns took in his life. The most significant part of the legacy

written by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad consists of the monumental hagiographic biography he dedicated to his father, *Kitab al-tara'if wa al-tala'id min karamat al-shaykhayn al-walida wa al-walid* (The Book of Original and Inherited Knowledge on the Miracles of Two Shaykhs, My Mother and My Father). This work, which appears incomplete, aimed mainly at establishing the moral example of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad's father and his concern for the 'public' good. As far as the rest of his work was concerned, and apart from a few very traditional exegeses,¹⁶ most of the writings of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad consist of his many letters about refutation or combat aimed at establishing legitimacy from a theological¹⁷ or, more frequently, from theological and political points of view.¹⁸

Abdallah ould Mawlud¹⁹ provides a succinct description of these letters, collected by al-Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabir. I am using the same corpus, which consists of 47 letters copied by, or at the request of, this eminent disciple of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad, and the original of which is preserved in the manuscript library of Ahl al-Shaykh Sidiyya in Boutilimit.

These letters, very rarely dated but all probably chronologically situated between 1811 (the date of his father's death) and 1826 (the date of his own death), are varied in length and in subject matter. They range in length from half a page, in which a disciple is asked to hasten the return of an expected caravan, to a 60-page treatise on power in which the shaykh provides an explanation to his addressee on the proper code of behaviour that a Muslim emir should observe. An appreciable number of these letters were sent to high-ranking Peuls, especially to Ahmadu Lobbo, the founder of the Muslim state of Macina. In a long epistle (23 folios) sent to Lobbo in 1823, Shaykh Sidi Muhammad pretended to be an enthusiastic defender of the *jihad* which would soon cause the partisans of Lobbo to seize the upper Niger River basin and Timbuktu.²⁰ In other instances, Shaykh Sidi Muhammad wrote to Lobbo asking him to enforce the judgment of a *qadi* in favour of one of his Peul disciples regarding the sharing of a controversial inheritance, and to attempt mediation in favour of his politico-religious client, Galadio.

He also wrote to noteworthy Tuaregs for various reasons: to al-Nur, sultan of Kal Away', for instance, to request the return of plundered property, and a long epistle sent to the 'sultan' of the Iwillemmeden, Kawa b. Amma b. Ag ash-Shaykh b. Muhammad al-Bashir and his *qadi*, al-Salih b. Muhammad al-Bashir, to alert them to the machinations of al-Jaylani – a religious agitator who appeared among the Kal Dinnig in around 1800²¹ – and his claims that he was the long-awaited *mahdi*.

The close and distant relatives of the shaykh, particularly his brother Baba Ahmad, who left to settle among the Moorish tribes of the Hawz, were also largely involved in his epistolary activity. These tribes, and the many disciples that the shaykh included in them, also received a significant number of his letters. Shaykh Sidi Muhammad thus wrote a very long letter to the *jama'a* (congregation) of the Aghlal of the Hawz to denounce the aggression of Ahl Sidi Mahmud, together with the Idaw'ish, against his



The covered courtyard of Jingerey-Ber Mosque.

Kunta cousins in the Tagant. In this letter he developed his vision of the history of the Kunta, and energetically denied the claims attributed to the chief of Kunta's adversaries – 'Abd Allah wuld Sidi Mahmud (d.1839) – to make himself *imam*, at the same time specifying what qualities a candidate for the imamate should have, as well as the essential prerequisites for the legitimacy of his candidature. He also wrote to the *jama'a* of the Funti,²² within the framework of the same conflict, to request their intervention on the side of the Kunta. Still in the interest of the factions of his tribe that migrated west of the Azawad, he wrote a long letter to the *jama'a* of the Ahl Buradda to refute their claims to monopolise the control of these regions to the detriment of the Kunta.

Al-Shaykh Sidi Muhammad took over from his father as the head of the *zawiya* Qadiriyya that his father had created in the Malian Azawad, around the wells of al-Mabruk and Bujbayha, some 300 kilometres north-east of Timbuktu. Trans-Saharan trade was essential to the survival of this undertaking. The political autonomy given to him by his position, unusual in relation to all the powers that exercised some form of influence in the region, gave his *zawiya* a role of intercession and mediation which, in addition to the moral obligation connected with his spiritual vocation, would constitute, together with actual teaching, one of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad's main concerns. The power of influence that he endeavoured to generate and maintain was

aimed mainly at individuals with power, tribal chiefs or founders of states such as Ahmadu Lobbo in Macina or 'Uthman dan Fodio within the present-day Niger–Nigerian borders. To give an idea of his position as moralist and adviser to the prince, I will look specifically at one of his texts, addressed to 'Uthman dan Fodio, to his brother 'Abdullahi and to his son, Muhammad.

Moralist and adviser to the prince

The position of shaykh of the *tariqa* al-Qadiriyya, passed on by Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar to his son Shaykh Sidi Muhammad, conferred on the latter the status of moral priest in his own community of disciples. It obliged him, on many occasions, to intercede with all the close and distant authorities he felt the need to influence in order for them to reconcile their behaviour with the higher interests of the Muslim *umma* and, secondly, with the interests of the shaykh himself and of his community. A letter addressed to the leaders of the Sokoto, one which features among the body of letters mentioned earlier, will enable me to illustrate this aspect of the intellectual and political activity of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad.

It is a document of 28 folios. It is handwritten in an elegant, narrow Maghribi script and has 30 lines per page, in a 16 cm x 11 cm format. It is undated but our guess is that it was probably written between 1811, when Sidi Muhammad took the reins of the brotherhood establishment created by his father, and 1817, the year of the death of his principal addressee, 'Uthman dan Fodio.

As in all the other writings of Sidi Muhammad, this letter reflects a sound knowledge of the history of classical and even contemporary Islam, from which he took his examples and found his models for political and moral behaviour. However, he failed to display the least originality in relation to the literature dealing with the same themes – 'the mirrors for princes'²³ – and from which he borrowed all his *topoi*.

Moderation and balance, associated with the fundamental values of fairness (*'adl*) and compassion towards the weak and oppressed, within the framework of a strict adherence to legal standards defined by Sunnite Islam, is the dominant tone of this document, which is completely marked by the Islamic duty of sound advice (*nasiha*).

The letters addressed to dan Fodio, to his brother 'Abdullahi and to his son Muhammad, just like the classical texts that inspired them – particularly *al-Tibr al-masbuk fi nasa'ih al-muluk* (The Found Pure Gold or The Wise Advice Given to the Kings) of al-Ghazali, *al-Ahkam al-sultaniyya* (The Government Rules) and *Adab al-dunya wa al-din* (The Right Behaviour in Mundane and Religious Affairs) of al-Mawardi and *Siraj al-muluk* (The Kings' candelabra) of al-Turtushi – first insist on the duty of *nasiha*, which is incumbent on the '*alim* (scholar) towards the prince and towards the *emir*. The celebration of knowledge and scholars and of their role among

The celebration of knowledge and scholars and of their role among the leading political authorities of a Muslim state goes hand in hand with a respect for the role of each of the two 'guilds' – the '*ulama* and the *umara* – in the Muslim city, and of the rules of behaviour that each group should ideally adopt towards the other. The ideal is that the princes seek the good advice and the company of the '*ulama* when necessary, rather than the other way around. A *hadith* quoted by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad says, 'The best (*khayru*) sovereigns (*al-umara*) are those who frequent scholars ('*ulama*); the worst scholars (*sharru al-'ulama*) are those who frequent sovereigns.'

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The epistle then continues with canonical examples of a good ruler/prince taken from the tradition of certain venerable figures of the political past of the Muslim world (the Prophet himself, the *rashidun* – specifically 'Umar b. al-Khattab, 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, etc.), and goes on to reveal a collection of commonalities in the paradigmatic vision of the ideal Muslim political authority and its methods of intervention as elaborated by both the scholarly and the popular traditions of Muslim societies.

I wrote elsewhere²⁴ of this vision of legitimate political authority and of its methods of legitimising the 'sultanic culture' in Islamic countries. By this I refer to something that goes beyond politics and religion and encompasses the entire scope of norms and values of the societies concerned, as it is reflected mainly in the proverbs, tales, poetry, works of ethics and wisdom, and so on. I would even suggest that this scope contains a certain unity, of which the text by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad, who mentions the predecessors cited earlier, shows the continuity. The unity in question is particularly expressed in a collection of commonalities (the rules of good princely behaviour) that has been repeated indefinitely since at least the eighth century,²⁵ the model for which is provided by the Qur'an, the canonical collections of *hadith*, the accounts of the edifying and marvellous lives of the 'great beings' before Islam (somewhat mythical and individualised giants, genies, kings and 'elders' of long ago), prophets and legendary figures from the Old and the New Testament, and from Islam ('companions', caliphs, viziers, generals, recognised interpreters of the dogma, mystics and aesthetes of renown), and tales and legends (*Kalila wa dimna*, the *1001 Nights*). The 'lesson' that Shaykh Sidi Muhammad teaches his correspondents of Sokoto falls completely within this heritage.

The letter addressed to dan Fodio mentioned earlier thus opens very classically with a development devoted to the theme of the relationship between 'scholars' and 'princes', around the duty of giving the sort of advice that would lead to, or revive, good Muslim behaviour. Sidi Muhammad refers to the *hadith* which says that 'religion is sound advice' (*al-din al-nasiha*). Leaders are reminded to 'return' the good that Allah gave them when he gave them power, by treating the 'flock' (*ra'iyya*) he entrusted to them with fairness. And al-Shaykh Sidi Muhammad specifies that it is the *'ulama's* duty to fulfil their religious obligation by reminding the leaders of the advice above.

The ideal, however, is that the princes seek the good advice and the company of the *'ulama* when necessary, rather than the other way around. A *hadith* quoted by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad says, 'The best (*khayru*) sovereigns (*al-umara*) are those who frequent scholars (*'ulama*); the worst scholars (*sharru al-'ulama*) are those who frequent sovereigns.' So the good *'alim* should flee the court and its 'corruption' and the good sultan is he who continues to hire the scholar and imitate him in his quest for (religious)

knowledge and its rigorous application. The figure of the pious sovereign, a contradictory character, who should in some way shift his focus away from this role (as pious *'alim*) in order to fulfil his fundamental vocation as instrument of the law, is presented as a possible point of synthesis between the antithetical requirements managing men. This goes hand in hand with the responsibility of sovereignty, on the one hand, and with the ascetic and unselfish quest for actual knowledge of the *'alim*, on the other.

This aporia leads al-Shaykh Sidi Muhammad to celebrate the figure of the sovereign 'in spite of himself', of the legitimate heir of power with a passion for study and complete devotion to his pious practices who, against his will, as it were, must confront his 'curse' (*baliyya*) represented by the exercise of power. Mawlay Sliman, the 'alawite contemporary sovereign of Sidi Muhammad, and particularly reputed to favour brotherhood movements, is given as an example of a position of this kind, and to which the *rashidun* and 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz supply his initial models. The pious sovereign, annoyed by the impossibility of escaping his royal responsibility, may, following the example of Mawlay Sliman, continue practising his pious exercises in secret, away from the greedy and corrupt eyes of the courtesans.

The exercise of power, wrote Shaykh Sidi Muhammad to his Peul readers, is not merely laying down a set of pernicious restrictions with necessarily disastrous moral consequences. In principle, it is an ambiguous activity, which can be both a source of perdition and/or a channel for exceptional moral elevation. This is because power is both useful and dangerous. The 'general nature' of the sovereign's mission – in other words, the responsibility he exercises towards his subjects – makes him an operator of accumulation, of summation, of virtues and of vices which he contributes towards promoting among these subjects. Because, as Shaykh Sidi Muhammad says, quoting an old Arabic–Muslim refrain, 'subjects take on the behaviour of the prince'.²⁶ The sultan is the moral seat of authority, directly accountable for the behaviour of his subjects; he multiplies his own wrongs by favouring their bad behaviour and, in reverse, increases his merits if he encourages them to adopt proper behaviour. Hence the celebration of the fair sultan (*'adil*) and of historical characters whom he is supposed to incarnate: 'Umar b. al-Khattab and 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, in particular. Al-Shaykh Sidi Muhammad repeats that after the various 'mirrors for the prince' that inspired him, there is no higher moral position or greater proximity to Allah – apart from the prophets and angels – than that of sultan *'adil*. A *hadith* he quotes compares the efficiency of the fair sovereign to that of the Qur'an: 'Allah separates (*yazi'u*) with the sultan [that] which he does not separate (*ma la yazi'u*) with the Qur'an'.²⁷

The considerable privilege and dignity conferred on the fair prince through his upright behaviour and the rewards in the afterlife to which they are supposed to open the way, have their opposite in the terrible threats weighing down on the iniquitous sovereign who allows himself to be guided in his behaviour by his bad tendencies, his instincts for pleasure or, even worse, by the pernicious advice from people in his court. Here Shaykh

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Sidi Muhammad, quoting another cliché from sultanic literature, reminds those to whom he addresses his epistle that all *umara* – be they fair or tyrannical – will arrive in chains on the day of the final judgement and the iniquitous among them will be fed to snakes as big as dunes and to scorpions as big as mules.

Moreover, this danger (abundantly illustrated) is presented as almost inevitable given the progressive exhaustion of virtue in the world, especially since the demise of the first of the Prophet's companions. The theme of millenarianism is associated here, as it was elsewhere in sultanic literature, with the indirect exercise of power by the *imam*, now a sultan, and with the benefits of public levies to individuals of doubtful origins (*a'jam*, mainly, and other *mamalik* [slaves; in Muslim history the white slaves and elite soldiers who ruled Egypt and parts of Syria from 1252 to 1517]) and morals. The increase in the number of iniquitous sovereigns is itself given as a sign of the 'end of time', of the 'coming of the hour' of which the Sokoto leaders are invited to take heed. The 'hour is coming', writes Shaykh Sidi Muhammad to impious sovereigns (*fajara*).²⁸

Shaykh Sidi Muhammad advises the princes to refuse luxury and ostentation and to mistrust their entourages. He denounces, as did those who inspired him from the 'mirrors of princes', *tahajjub* (hiding away), or the temptation to remove themselves from the sight of their subjects/dependants (*ra'iyya*), at risk of becoming the prisoners of the chamberlains and other not always reliable intermediaries.

And if the sultan is 'the shadow of God on earth' – another *topos* of the sultanic vision of the world – it is because he imposes a cosmic order where people are merely indirect agents. In places, sultanic literature – in whose wake Sidi Muhammad speaks to the emirs of Sokoto – suggests a proto-Hegelian way of reading history, around the themes of imminent justice and of the history of the world as the trial of the world. It suggests that, after all, people ordinarily only have the governments they deserve. Kings are independent of people and are instruments in the hands of Allah, 'sovereign of sovereignty'. A *hadith* of the Prophet attributed to Malik b. Dinar and quoted by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad says:

I am the king of kings (*malik al-muluk*). I hold the hearts of kings in my hand (*qulub al-muluk bi-yadi*). If you obey me, you invite mercy (*ja'altum 'alaykum rahma*), if you disobey me, you bring punishment on yourselves (*niqma*). Do not busy your tongues with abuse against kings, but instead repent before Allah, he will 'fold' them (*yu'tifuhum*) over you.²⁹

People may certainly play a part in the 'softening' that Allah, the only holder of power, wishes to imprint in the heart of the princes governing them, but they have no direct influence over their management of 'public' matters, if this adjective has meaning in this context.

Somewhat linked to the 'supervision' of kings by God, who features as a divine concession to the exercise of a sultanic authority that is partly outside divine action, is the affir-

mation, fully developed by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad and the works that inspired him, of the 'rotating' nature, necessarily limited in time, of the maintenance of the power of a given group or individual. This is not an internal restriction, connected with some form of institutional regulation, but the inexorable precariousness, the transitory way of manifesting all the things of this base world (*dunya*), in contrast to the permanence and the inalterability of pleasures and beings of the afterlife (*al-akhira*). The sultan's court is the place par excellence where the infidelity of time, the ruthless blade of fate, plays its 'tricks' and transforms the blind waltz of individual itineraries into a kind of universal lottery.³⁰

Alongside this divinely inspired model is the model of royal wisdom, of time immemorial, the wisdom of the 'guild' of the *salatin* or *muluk* (*diwan al-muluk*), which exemplifies a 'moderate' art of good governance across time and countries and on which time has no hold. Solomon and Alexander the Great, the kings of pre-Islamic Persia, of China and of India provide him with his heroes and legendary figures.³¹

The 'secular' theme of '*adl*, of fairness, an essential theme throughout sultanic literature as well as in the epistle of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad, is more specifically linked to this timeless power of the sultan, to the perpetuity of this power, regardless of the religious nature of the person exercising it. It is expressed, with variations, in the following circular expression, written by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad:³²

No *sultan* without an army (*jund*), no army without resources (*mal*), no resources without taxes (*jibaya*), no taxes without prosperity (*imara*), no prosperity without justice ('*adl*), no justice without a *sultan*. Justice thus appears as the foundation of all foundations (*asas li-jami' al-usus*).

Hence celebration in all its forms, directed at the addressees of the shaykh, of the *fair sovereign*, be it a Muslim leader or a prince of another denomination. Hence the intimate association established between his physical and moral state and the good health and balance of the world. A true shaker of the cosmos, the ideal sovereign of the sultanic representation of power is both the moral sum of all the princes of the world before him and a physical centre of the universe of which he adjusts the rhythm of time. After so many others, Shaykh Sidi Muhammad wrote *al-Sultan al-zaman* (The Sultan is the Age),³³ to mean that history is subject to the behaviour and good will of the sovereign of the moment. The theatre of the state of which he is both the great impresario and the only star, and the celebrations and commemorations he organises, aim to tune the ('public' or 'private') events of his life to match the cosmic deployment of the universe. The epistle of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad offers a metaphor of the world as a human organism of which the sultan would be its 'brain'; the vizier, 'the heart'; the vizier's subordinates, 'the hands'; and the masses (*al-ra'iyya*), 'the feet'; with fairness ('*adl*) making up its 'soul'.³⁴ It is not surprising that the sultan is presented as the operator of the failure or of the universal ruin of his time, the guarantor of the fertility or the channel of the misery of his kingdom.

Shaykh Sidi Muhammad advises the princes to refuse luxury and ostentation and to mistrust their entourage. He denounces *tahajjub* (hiding away), or the temptation to remove themselves from the sight of their subjects (*ra'iyya*), at risk of becoming the prisoners of the chamberlains and other not always reliable intermediaries.

The sultan's mind is therefore not only the essential mediator of the 'adl, it is also his entire body.³⁵ The sultan is the emanation of an arbitrary and invisible power; he must remain visible and his body, the physical seat of fairness, must remain accessible to the *ra'iyya*. Hence, another commonplace of sultanic literature: the denunciation of the 'ihtijab (concealed), of the confinement of the prince by the viziers and the chamberlains, which is compared to a divine prerogative because God alone may escape the eyes of his creatures. Yet, and for the same reasons, according to the clichés of the same literature quoted by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad, his duties include omniscience and omnipresence, which makes him similar to a celestial authority. This is the theme of the 'unremarkable sovereign'³⁶ and of incognito: the sultan is a night wanderer or lost hunter taken in by humble folk, far from his retinue and his palace, and hears truths hidden from him by his entourage; he assesses his image rating among his *ra'iyya*, and in the making of startling decisions, demonstrates his generosity and his sense of 'adl (extravagant gifts to the needy or admirers, spectacular promotions of an anonymous 'fair man', or the brutal and sudden punishment of those failing to obey sultanic 'laws'). Ideally, he should be able to say to each of his subjects: I know what you ate last night and how you obtained the clothes you wear.³⁷

As in all sultanic culture, the epistle of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad shows the sultan's periodic incursions into the world of ordinary people in the form of a duplication of the sultan himself, appearing as a kind of Janus of the social condition, leading a luxurious public life among the 'important people' of his court, and an ascetic and parsimonious private life on the underside of this gleaming decor, where he sometimes takes on small jobs to earn an honest living without violating the resources of the 'treasury chamber' (*bayt al-mal*).³⁸

The image of the pastorate, combining the idea of belonging to the flock and the shepherd's intimate knowledge of it with the shepherd's responsibility to show it the right way without denying himself the use of its products, summarises a large part of this vision of power, and it also returns like a leitmotif in sultanic literature. Shaykh Sidi Muhammad quotes a well-known *hadith*:³⁹

You are all shepherds (*kullukum ra'in*) and all accountable for the object of your protection (*wa kullukum mas'ul 'an ra'iyyatih*): the *imam*, who is the shepherd of men ('*ala al-nasi ra'in*) is accountable for this 'sheepfold' (*ra'iyya*); a man is the shepherd (*ra'i*) of the members of his family (*ahla baytih*) and he is accountable for his 'sheepfold'; the woman is the shepherdess (*raa'iyya*) of the members of her husband's household (*ahla bayti zawjiha*) and of her children (*waladiha*) and she is accountable for it (*wa hiyya mas'ula 'anhum*); a man's slave ('*abd al-rajul*) is the shepherd (*ra'i*) of his master's property and he is responsible for it. You are certainly all shepherds and are all accountable for your sheepfold.

Here, as in other passages in the epistle of Shaykh Sidi Muhammad and of the ‘mirrors’ before it, the pastoral theme becomes intermingled with household management and the hierarchy of sex, age and ranking within the family, which is an extension of the smooth running of public matters by the sultan/shepherd.

As a shepherd, the sultan must naturally endeavour to protect his ‘flock’ against predators. And, of course, the herd will be on the road to ruin if – an assumption explicitly envisaged by Sidi Muhammad – its care falls into the hands of ‘wolves’;⁴⁰ in other words, if the sultan himself and his subordinates become agents of the destruction of the *ra’iyya*. This is because salvation cannot come from the flock and no effective resistance can come from it; the flock is the obedient and passive instrument of its shepherd.

In succinct form, the above were some of the essential lines of the letters written by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad to the emirs of Sokoto. The political moral it presents may not be original in relation to the whole of what we have called sultanic literature, but it nevertheless demonstrates both the scope of the Qadiri master’s knowledge of this literature and the position of *murshid* (guide) and of *nasih* (one who gives advice) which, in compliance with the clichés of this literature, the good ‘*alim* must portray towards princes who are likely to hear his advice and take his recommendations to heart.



NOTES

- 1 Translated from French by Davina Eisenberg.
- 2 MacDougall (1980).
- 3 Genièvre (1947).
- 4 In particular Hamet (1910); Marty (1920–21); Batran (1971); and the thesis by Wuld Mawlud (1977).
- 5 wuld Mawlud (1977).
- 6 The earliest mention of the Kunta made available by sources is a letter from the ruler of Borno dated February 1440 and sent 'to all the *murabitun*, to the descendants of al-Shaykh al-Mukhtar and Sidi 'Umar al-Shaykh and to their brothers among the Darma 'aka' (or Dirim'ka, according to Norris) in the Tuwat and quoted by Martin (1908: 122–123). Compare with Batran (1971: 54). In a second work by Martin (1923: 33–34), quoted by Batran (1971: 56), the year 1551 is given as the date of the arrival of a Kunta army in the Tuwat which forced a tribute of 100 *mithqal* on the inhabitants of Timmi. Norris (1986: 130) evokes the problems raised by the information provided by Martin when they are confronted with the historical and genealogical traditions of the Kunta from Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar.
- 7 With telescoping between the latter and another 'Uqba, known as al-Mustajab al-Jahmi, a 'companion' who died in Cairo. Compare Norris (1986) with Wuld Mawlud (1977): genealogical discrepancies claimed from the same ancestor – 'Uqba – one leading towards the Banu Umayya, the other towards the Fihrites. The claim of descent from the founder of the Qayrawan is commonplace among the Saharan–Sahelian populations (Peuls, Moors, Tuaregs, etc.).
- 8 Withcomb (1975) gave a critical assessment of these different sources.
- 9 Sidi Muhammad, *al-Risala al-ghallawiyya* (manuscript), page 59, personal copy.
- 10 Sidi Muhammad, *al-Risala al-ghallawiyya* (manuscript), page 66, personal copy.
- 11 These Awlad al-Wafi of the Azawad are not to be confused with the Awlad Sid al-Wafi of the Mauritanian Taganit.
- 12 Sidi Muhammad, *al-Risala al-ghallawiyya* (manuscript), page 66, personal copy.
- 13 Compare with Sidi Muhammad, *Kitab al-tara'if wa-t-tal-a'id min karamat al-shaykhayn al-walida wa al-walid* (manuscript), personal copy.
- 14 Wuld Mawlud (1977: 90).
- 15 I refer here particularly to Shaykh Sidiyya b. al-Hayba al-Intisha'i. See in particular Stewart (1973) and Ould Cheikh (1992) on this character and his influence.
- 16 A commentary from the *fatiha*, an exegesis of the *waraqat* of al-Juwayni, and so on. These texts remained unpublished to date.
- 17 Particularly its text entitled *al-Sawarim al-hindiyya fi hasm da'awi al-mahdiyya* (c.1811/1226), aimed at the notable monk of the Kal Dinnig, al-Jaylani who, at the turn of 1800, claimed to be the *mahdi*.
- 18 See, in particular, his *Risala al-ghallawiyya*, in which he defends the Kunta of the Tagant against the Ahl Sidi Mahmud and their chief 'Abdallah w. Sidi Mahmud, to whom he attributes the claim of wanting to make himself *imam* of Moorish communities of the region concerned.
- 19 Wuld Mawlud (1977).
- 20 Brown (1969).
- 21 On al-Jaylani and the politico-religious context and its preaching, we can particularly look at the details provided by Nicolas (1950: 56–59).
- 22 Part of the warrior tribe of the Awlad Mbarik, made up between the regions of ar-Rgayba (present-day Mauritania) and the Bakhounou of Mauritania–Mali. This is the 'Lucama kingdom' (deformation of the name of their chief at the time, A'li wuld A'mar) of Mungo Park.
- 23 'The mirrors for princes' is literature dealing with the qualities, attributes and education of princes/rulers in the Islamic world.
- 24 Ould Cheikh (2003).
- 25 See the edition by Muradi (1981) for the main references in Arabic on the subject.
- 26 '*Al-Ra'iyya 'ala din al-malik.*' My copy of the manuscript, folio 13, 1.
- 27 '*Inna Allah yazi'u bi-s-sultan ma la yazi'u bi al-qur'an.*' My copy of the manuscript, folio 16, 2.
- 28 My copy of the manuscript, folio 12, 1.
- 29 My copy of the manuscript, folio 21, 1.
- 30 The millennialist theme which feeds this rolling representation of 'fortunes' is sometimes associated with the theme of the *circle* and the *cycle*, which in Ibn Khaldun (1981) takes the form of a biogenesis or the birth and youth of dynastic education, followed by periods of maturity, which in turn precede senility and death.

- 31 Note the places of the epistle of Sidi Muhammad where they are evoked. See al-Muqaffa (1982).
- 32 My copy of the manuscript, folio 8, 2.
- 33 My copy of the manuscript, folio 10, 1.
- 34 My copy of the manuscript, folio 10, 2.
- 35 Compare with the story told by Shaykh Sidi Muhammad about a 'Chinese' ruler who lost his hearing and whose subjects were upset, as was he, because he could no longer hear their complaints and bring them justice. He ordered that from then on all those who had a complaint to lodge should dress in red and he travelled around to see the complaints of all who he could no longer hear. Manuscript, folio 14, 1 and 2.
- 36 Expression used by Dakhliia (1998).
- 37 My copy of the manuscript, folio 12, 1.
- 38 My copy of the manuscript, folio 9, 1.
- 39 My copy of the manuscript, folio 5, 2.
- 40 Sidi Muhammad quotes the following line: 'The shepherd protects his beasts against wolves. What would happen if the sheep were entrusted to the wolf keeper?'

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