

Al-Shaykh Abu al-Khayr: illustrious scholar and pious friend of God

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The city of Timbuktu is regarded as one of the most prominent centres in West Africa for the diffusion of knowledge by virtue of the attention and patronage that its scholars received from some of its rulers. This diffusion of knowledge saw periods of change that oscillated between growth and decline. However, Timbuktu remained a pioneer in the transmission of knowledge due to the prominence and status of its scholars, whose fame spread far and wide.

In this chapter I address one of the luminaries of Timbuktu and Arawan – Shaykh Abu al-Khayr ibn ‘Abd-Allah al-Arawani al-Timbukti. He, as with many other scholars, has not enjoyed any serious and scientific study except for a few general biographies. It is hoped that this chapter will whet the appetite of researchers and encourage them to embark upon a serious study of the shaykh (and other neglected scholars) to highlight his prominent role in, and contribution to, Islamic civilisation. I will introduce the shaykh by undertaking a study of his life and his activities, as well as a discussion of his written works.

Abu al-Khayr: lineage, education and knowledge genesis

Shaykh Abu al-Khayr² ibn ‘Abd-Allah ibn Marzuq ibn al-Hill, follower of the Maliki legal school and adherent of the Qadiri,³ Dardayri and Shadhili⁴ Sufi orders, was born in Arawan at the turn of the fourteenth century of the Islamic *hijri* calendar⁵ and died there in 1397 (AD 1975). He was buried in the mosque of Sayyid Ahmad ibn Salih ibn al-Wafi ibn Ad (d.1772).

Not much is known about Shaykh Abu al-Khayr’s early childhood or of his youth except that he hails from a scholarly family that instilled in him a love of knowledge and learning. He began the recitation of the Qur’an at the hands of his brother ‘Ali ibn

Opposite: Chalkboards like this one have been used by generations of students to practice writing in Arabic.

Abu al-Khayr memorised the Qur'an in his early childhood with Shaykh al-Talib al-Habib after only one reading, with no revision. It was a feat which many of the *'ulama* found hard to believe and they therefore doubted his retention of the holy book. However, when the *'ulama* of Mauritania came to Arawan to test him, they found him fluent and erudite not only in his rendition of the Qur'an but in his writing of it as well.

'Abd-Allah ibn Marzuq ibn al-Hill (d.1944), an illustrious shaykh among those who taught the recitation of the Qur'an in Arawan. He then read under the tutelage of Shaykh al-Talib al-Habib (d.1972), who was a witty scholar and well versed in the science of the correct rendition of the Qur'an, its calligraphy, the perfection of its ruling and rendition of its different modes of reading. He was arguably the greatest scholar of the sciences of the Qur'an of his time.

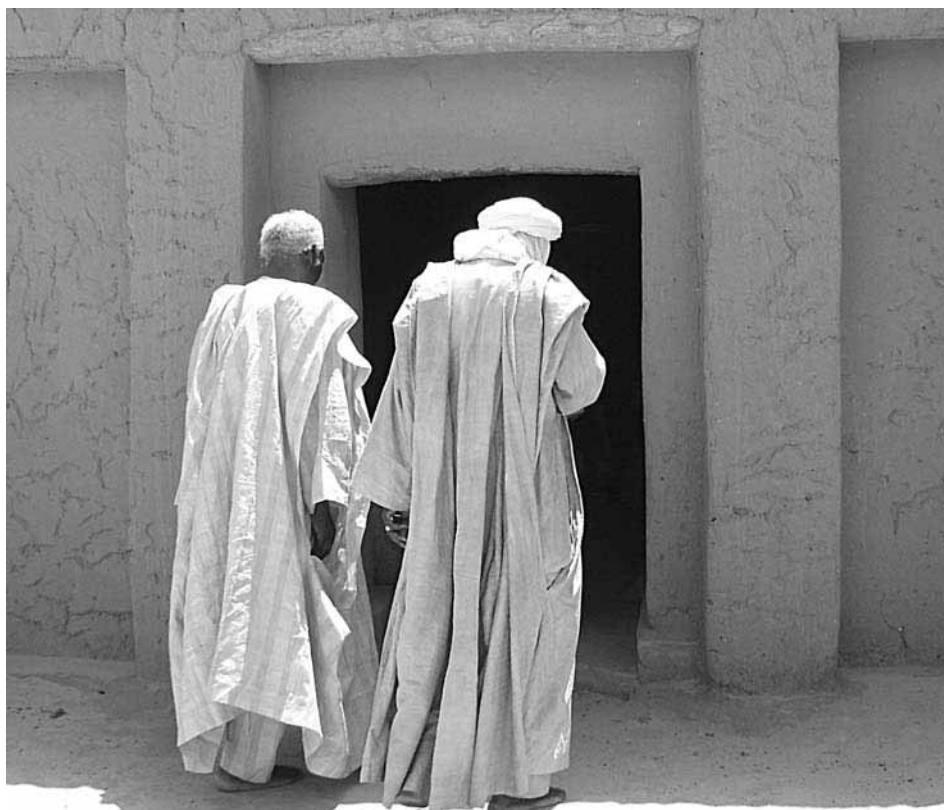
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Shaykh Abu al-Khayr had many students, including: Mawlay Ahmad Babir al-Arawani (d.1997);¹¹ Mawlay al-'Arabi ibn Mawlay Hashim; Mahamane Mahamoudou,¹² popularly known as Hamu, who at the time of writing is still alive;¹³ Muhammad 'Abd-Allah ibn Ahmad ibn Abu 'l-'Araf al-Takni;¹⁴ al-Shaykh 'Umar Nasiri from the village of Tayi next to the city of Jenne; Sidi Muhammad al-Rahmah (d.2004); Sidi Ould al-Qadi, who at the time of writing is still alive; Bu 'Ali ibn Sidi Bubakr; al-Shaybani ibn Muhammad al-Mukhtar; and Imam Ansunughu.

The shaykh's activities

Shaykh Abu al-Khayr shuttled between Arawan and the city of Timbuktu, spending six months of the year in each. He devoted his life to worship and learning. His typical day, even in his old age, began after the dawn prayers with a complete reading of a fifth of the Qur'anic exegetical work of *al-Jalalayn*,¹⁵ and a complete reading of al-Jazuli's *Dala'il al-khayrat* (The Proofs of the Good). He then undertook the rest of his worship activities and mundane tasks.

After sunrise he taught *hadith*, *tafsir*, *fiqh*, *mantiq* and other sciences. A group of *'ulama* used to attend these gatherings, where each took his lost gem,¹⁶ gaining knowledge in Qur'anic exegesis, prophetic traditions, substantive law, syntax and the other sciences. These gatherings were forums for disseminating knowledge, characterised by silence



At Sankore Mosque
in Timbuktu.

and the absence of polemical debates except when the *'ulama* asked the shaykh something.¹⁷ His ethic was that of al-Imam al-Shafi'i (d.820 *hijri*): 'A scholar, unless asked, remains silent.'¹⁸

During the day he also passed judgment in disputes and attended to the giving of legal verdicts (*ifta*). At times he simply sent his rosary (*sibhah*) to the litigants (specifically the Bedouins) for them to reconcile and they willingly accepted his call for peace and reconciliation. Thus he solved problems and complexities which his peers among the *'ulama* and other notables were unable to solve. For example, the people of Mauritania invited three scholars – two from Mauritania and one from Mali – to solve the problem of Basikunah (a dispute concerning the rights of usage of a certain well which a few tribes in Mauritania were fighting for). However, it was when Shaykh Abu al-Khayr dealt with the issue that the Mauritians unanimously agreed that he alone was able to solve the problem, which he did with cogent proofs that all the disputants accepted.

It would appear that Shaykh Abu al-Khayr's role in giving legal verdicts caused him tremendous worries, not merely because he was a 'lone orphan' among ignorant people but also because of the confusion that pervaded scholarly circles – the contradictory views and verdicts that left a *mufti* (jurisconsult) perplexed as to which standards he should use to judge by.¹⁹ In a letter to Muhammad Yahya ibn Salim al-Wallati (1851–1936),²⁰ Shaykh Abu al-Khayr raised the following issues:

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As for what follows: from the writer to the great illustrious scholar, the pious jurist, the pure God-fearing one, the aware and cleansed, our master and pole of our age Muhammad Yahya ibn Salim. The purpose of my writing to you is to ask about that wherein lies my salvation for the day when [people] will be seized by the feet and foreheads. Times have coerced me to fulfilling the duty of *ifta'* as I am one and alone among ignoramuses except for a few by the grace of God, therefore enrich me with a verdict that will free me. The matter has become complicated due to the proliferation of differences between the views of the scholars (May God be pleased with them and us). Is it then not permissible or necessary for any one of us to issue *fatwas* except in accordance to the well-known [views] stated in the books of the [Maliki] school? Or do we have the right to practise *ifta'* taking into account every strong [opinion] in the *madhhab* or not? And is it permissible for us to give verdicts subject to the prevailing customs (*'urf*) of our time knowing that we are ignorant regarding its reality, condition, and who instituted it? The establishment of all that is an almost impossible task. And can the intentions and aims of the people of our time in their [practice of] divorce and giving oaths be regarded as custom? And should custom, where it contradicts an explicit text of Malik [ibn Anas], be discarded and given no consideration as al-Zurqani said or not? And what if it [the *'urf*] contradicts a Qur'anic text, or prophetic tradition, and the majority opinion of the school? Give us an answer wherein there is a soothing for our chests. Or is it preferred to discard the institution of *ifta'* in our time? And with the scarcity or even the non presence of [true] scholars who should sit, or be appointed, for *ifta'*?²¹

At night he resumed his educational sessions. None of this prevented him from reading the *al-Shifa'* of al-Qadi al-'Ayad (d.1145) and spending much of his night in additional acts of worship.

Allah had blessed Shaykh Abu al-Khayr with a bright and luminous intellect and a retentive memory, which he used to memorise the books of jurisprudence and law, and which granted him a deep understanding of them. He was well acquainted with all the commentators on these works and even memorised the *tafsir al-Jalalayn*. As with many of the scholars of his day, he was a walking encyclopaedia, carrying his knowledge with him wherever he travelled. He was brilliant in *tafsir* and *hadith*, excelling in both. The author of *al-Sa'adah al-abadiyya* aptly described him thus:

Our jurist *shaykh*, the standard bearer, the master of the art, the exegete, the unrivalled scholar of Takrur,²² its jurist, teacher and *mufti* whose only concern is how to benefit from knowledge and benefit others...he reached the pinnacle in the science of *tafsir* and *hadith* in which he was unequalled.²³

Likewise, his student Mahamane Mahamoudou, known as Hamou Muhammad Dedeou, described him in these words:

'Abu al-Khayr was a scholar, a retainer [of texts], the proof of trustworthy reliability, the master who was depended on to respond with religious guidance to incidents and



events and in the issuing of *fatwas*. He was a luminary in the sciences of *hadith* and all its techniques; completely capable in discerning authentic traditions and spurious ones, its paths and its finer hidden points. He was a genius in the knowledge of the rulings [deduced] from prophetic tradition and its meanings as well as its complications. He was strong and well versed in the knowledge of its vocabulary specifically the difficult ones, a master in the biographies of its narrators, the precise form of their names – including titles, patronyms, etc. – their deaths, births, information, tales, and holy acts (*karamat*). He was an *imam*, an authority, a firm foundation [of knowledge], a judge, pious, thorough and meticulous in his views and actions; what he said, ruled or commanded was not marred by hesitation or mixed feelings. He was a paragon of patience, tranquillity, clemency and endurance.²⁴

Muhammad al-Khalifa ibn al-Mustafa, one of Shaykh Abu al-Khayr's contemporaries, not only acknowledged the shaykh's virtue, testified to by his many visits to him in order to be blessed, but declared him the undisputed master for solving problems and

A modern-day scholar teaching at a school in Timbuktu.

Shaykh Abu al-Khayr composed a poem in praise of the wealthy Ahmad bin Abi 'l-'Araf, describing him as one inspired with intense love for the collection of manuscripts and books, and who spent all his wealth and valuables to possess them, thereby preserving this priceless Islamic heritage.

complex questions at the end of the fourteenth century *hijra* in the land of Takrur. In this regard he composed a poem wherein he made a supplication to God for the benefit of the shaykh. The poem extolled the virtues and the status of Shaykh Abu al-Khayr and the esteem in which people, both scholars and laity, held him.

The shaykh's poetry

Shaykh Abu al-Khayr and other early scholars were polymaths and not limited by specialisation in certain disciplines only. It is thus no wonder that the shaykh composed beautiful poetry that evoked and awakened sentiments. Most of his poems were commendations, encouragements and eulogies.²⁵ One poem in didactic form lauds the didactic poem of Ibn Salim al-Wallati, in which the latter summarised the *Mukhtasar*²⁶ of Khalil (d.1365). In the poem Abu al-Khayr compares this work of Ibn Salim to the sun and the moon in its illumination and clarity. He also composed a poem in praise of the wealthy Ahmad bin Abi 'l-'Araf (1864–1955),²⁷ describing him as one inspired with intense love for the collection of manuscripts and books, and who spent all his wealth and valuables to possess them, thereby preserving this priceless Islamic heritage. In another poem, which was an addition and decoration to a poem by al-Shaykh al-Tijani ibn Sayyid Muhammad, he eulogises the great and erudite scholar Ahmad bin Abi Bakr ibn Muhammad al-Sayd (d.1921).

The shaykh's contemporaries

Shaykh Abu al-Khayr was a contemporary of many scholars and a significant number of jurists. His relationship with most of them was good. The few sour relationships that did exist sprang from jealousy, rancour and rivalry. Among his contemporaries were al-Shaykh Bhai ibn Sayyid 'Amar al-Kunti (1865–1929), with whom he corresponded on matters of *ifta* and the judiciary; Shaykh Muhammad Yahya ibn Salim al-Wallati, who acknowledged the virtue of and his preference for Shaykh Abu al-Khayr to the extent that he became the only one allowed to write the prefaces to his books and book collections; and Shaykh al-Tijani ibn Muhammad al-Amin (d.1947) – Shaykh Abu al-Khayr's teaching colleague in Arawan – who said to his students regarding Shaykh Abu al-Khayr: 'Do not ask me [about anything] as long as this jurist is among us for indeed we found our shaykhs acknowledging his virtue and superior knowledge.'²⁸ Also among his contemporaries was Shaykh Muhammad al-Salik ibn Khayyi al-Tanwajiwiyy, the pious scholar who wrote more than 20 books. He heaped endless praise on Shaykh Abu al-Khayr in the prefaces of some of his books.

Then there was Shaykh Antat or Antut (d.1946), the jurist and scholar acknowledged by the scholars of his day as the authority in syntax and who wrote a commentary on the *Manzuma* of Ibn Salim, commented upon by Abu al-Khayr. Other contemporaries were Shaykh Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn 'Abidin, second only to Shaykh Abu al-

Khayr in the passing of *fatwas*, and Muhammad al-Amin and his brother Muhammad Tahir titled Addah. Between them, these scholars ran quite a few schools in substantive law and source methodology in jurisprudence. There was also the great shaykh ‘Alin ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad Ber al-Arawani (d.1921), who used to revoke his *fatwas* in favour of those of Shaykh Abu al-Khayr. Then there were Shaykh Akk Halawin, his friend and colleague in executing the office of *ifta*; al-Shaykh ibn al-Zayn al-Jabhi; Shaykh Muhammad Mahmud ibn Shaykh al-Arawani (1910–72); Shaykh Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Sharaf; al-Qadi Baba ibn Sidi; Muhammad Yahya wuld Yakan al-‘Ayshi; and, finally, ‘Abd-Allah ibn Badi ibn al-Munir al-‘Alawi, the master scholar of morphology (*sarf*) who, whenever he did commentary on any verse of the Qur’an, did so only after applying all the rules of morphology and those of many other pious scholars.

In summary then, Shaykh Abu al-Khayr enjoyed a strong relationship with many people: black and white, of the desert and of the Niger Bend. The gatherings to discuss Qur’anic exegesis and prophetic traditions, and the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, were all occasions when the ties of love, solidarity and mutual care were strengthened and consolidated.

Written works

Tarikh Arawan wa Tawdeni

THE HISTORY OF ARAWAN AND TAWDENI

The manuscript²⁹ consists of four folios written in a modern Sudani script. Sidi ibn Muhammad al-Rahim and ‘Abdan al-Sultan started writing the manuscript. It was completed by Shaykh Abu al-Khayr who also collated it in 1962. Two pages on the history of Tawdeni are attached to the manuscript. The manuscript deals with the history of the establishment of the city of Arawan, transmitting Sidi ‘Urwah’s knowledge of when Arawan was established, by whom, and its subsequent growth and development. Sidi ‘Urwah clarifies that Ahmad ibn Add ibn Abi Bakr built Arawan after he left al-Suq, one or two years before the latter’s destruction. Ahmad ibn Add travelled to numerous places such as Adrar, Tadararat and Talik before finally settling in what became Arawan. There he married a woman called Fatima bint al-Firdaws from the Amaqsharan tribe, who owned the land. However, the Amaqsharan quarrelled amongst themselves over land rights, so Shaykh Ahmad ibn Add ‘cursed’ them and they dispersed into splinter groups.

The manuscript also refers to those families that came and settled in Arawan, such as the Wasratawhu from al-Kabal, al-Wali al-Hashimi al-Mukhtar, the grandfather of Idwa’il, the family of Bu ‘Aliyu, Ahmad al-Sa’ih and the Barabish. Construction in Arawan reached its peak with the arrival of Lahib ibn Sidi ibn Muhammad ibn ‘Ammam, as many of his devoted followers joined him so as to receive his *baraka* (blessings) as well as those of

his predecessors. Assisted by the shaykh of the Barabish, Ahmad La'bid, they built houses and dug over 140 wells. The many traders from Ghadamis who descended upon Arawan and Tuwat revived the city with commerce, trading in different commodities. Cows, sheep, oil and other merchandise came from Timbuktu in the south.

The epilogue of the manuscript is an exhortation to the inhabitants of Arawan to follow and obey their rulers.

Maktub fi al-waqf

TREATISE ON ENDOWMENTS

This manuscript³⁰ is a treatise on religious endowments and consists of four folios written in small but clear script. Some parts of the manuscript have been water damaged. Shaykh Abu al-Khayr mentions the numeric value of the letters of the Arabic alphabet (for example, the *alif* [corresponds to the sound 'a'] equals 1, the *ba* ['b'] equals 2, the *waw* ['w'] equals 6, the *ha* ['h'] equals 5), delineating the difference in calculation between the Islamic West³¹ and the Islamic East. For example, in the word *ayqash* the last letter (the shin ['sh']) equals 1 000 in the Islamic West whilst in the Islamic East the letter *ghayn* ('gh') – not *shin* – equals 1 000, hence the word *aykagh* instead of *ayqash*.

Then, he deals with Indian numerology whose calculation of the value of letters was similar to that of the Arab West (Maghribi) calculation. He also dwells upon the benefit of *Sura al-Ikhlās* (the Qur'anic chapter on the uniqueness of God) and how to employ it in order to procure one's wishes and desires.

Fath al-karim 'ala' manzuma Muhammad Yahya ibn Salim al-musammah nahwi shahrayn

THE NOBLE ACCOMPLISHMENT ON (ELUCIDATING) THE DIDACTIC POEM 'TOWARDS TWO MONTHS' OF MUHAMMAD YAHYA IBN SALIM

Classical Muslim scholars had the habit of stating their motive for writing a text, a practice which Shaykh Abu al-Khayr upheld. Regarding his writing of *Fath al-karim*,³² he says:

Some brothers requested me to write a lucid and clear commentary on the didactic poem by the ascetic and famous servant of God Muhammad Yahya ibn Sidi Muhammad ibn Salim on the science of Arabic [language]. This in order to analyse its words and complexity, to clarify its ambiguous meanings in the best possible manner in a commendable and pleasant style that pleases the loving, affable author and offends the jealous wrongdoer. I, given the meagre resources and my ill qualification in this art, responded to this request because of the reward in that and the great virtue, requesting from Allah acceptance and guidance and to lead me to the straightest path.

The manuscript consists of 86 folios and is original, that is, written by the author in the Sahrawi font. The date of its authorship and copying is not mentioned nor, as far as I

know, has it been printed. The manuscript contains most if not all the rules on the precepts of the Arabic language, such as the particles (prepositions, particles of accusativeness, particles of abrogation, etc.) and nouns (definite and indefinite, masculine and feminine, etc.). It also discusses verbs and their different cases, such as plain (root) and derived forms. Thus the manuscript is an invaluable commentary for anyone wanting comprehensive knowledge of the precepts of the Arabic language. One criticism that can be directed against it is the illegibility of the handwriting on some pages. In spite of this, the manuscript remains a source worthy of attention, reading and study.

Al-jawab al-muskit fi radd hujjaj al-mu'tarid 'ala 'l-qa'ilin bi nadbiyya al-qabd fi salah al-nafl wa 'l-fard

THE IRREFUTABLE REPLY IN REBUTTING THE CLAIMS OF THE OBJECTOR TO THOSE WHO ARGUE FOR THE PREFERENCE OF FOLDING THE ARMS IN OBLIGATORY AND SUPEROGATORY PRAYERS

This accredited manuscript³³ consists of ten folios of which the last two are a commentary and reiteration of the authenticity and correctness of the proofs that Abu al-Khayr forwarded to Muhammad ibn Khayy al-Tinwaji al-Tinbukti and Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn 'Abidin ibn al-Tahir al-Kunti. Abu al-Khayr wrote the manuscript in 1952 and Muhammad al-Tahir, called Sharaf Baba, copied it in a beautiful Sahrawi script. In it Abu al-Khayr deals with an issue – the practice of dropping the hands or folding them during prayers – that divided Muslims (and still does), splitting their unity, leading at times to infighting and conflict. The author states that the folding of hands is narrated in authentic prophetic traditions and is obligatory. He addressed this question in order to convince those scholars who rejected the particular *hadiths* on the practice of folding the hands saying:

When we saw the views of some of the learned people of our day and gauged from their views the same objection to the authentic, straightforward, beautiful *ahadith* going back in a continuous chain to the Prophet regarding the folding of the hands in prayers and we being commanded to do so we, with certainty, saw it as our obligation to defend the *sunnah*, ourselves, our dignity and our actions in prayers.

Abu al-Khayr demonstrated that the prophetic traditions on folding the hands during prayers are authentic and sound, and mentioned in all the primary *hadith* compilations such as al-Bukhari, Muslim, the *Muwatta* of Malik, *Sahih* of Ibn Khuzayma, al-Nasa'i, al-Tabrani in his *Kabir*, Ibn Hibban in his *Sahih*, al-Tirmidhi in his *Jami'*, Abu Dawud, Ahmad ibn Hanbal in his *Musnad*, and others.³⁴

Therefore, he claimed, most of the companions of the Prophet who resided in Medina, as well as the successors,³⁵ only reported the practice of the folding of hands. As for the practice of the people of Medina³⁶ (which those who object to the folding of hands in prayers cite as proof), it was not established as a normative practice and subsequent source of legislation during the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs,³⁷ but came into effect only after their death and after the end of the era of the companions.

His compilations

Shaykh Abu al-Khayr wrote on almost all subjects, from law (more than 30 works), jurisprudence and history to literature. Although the shaykh was a great exegete and scholar of *hadith*, we have not seen any work by him on Qur'anic exegesis nor have we come across many authorisations granted by him to his students.³⁸ Among his many written works are *Miftah al-falah fi adhkar al-masa' wa 'l-sabah*³⁹ (The Key to Success in the Remembrance of Morning and Night). He wrote the following poems: a eulogy,⁴⁰ a praise of Yusuf⁴¹ and a condemnation of the world.⁴² In one treatise he responds to a question about sleeping in the mosque;⁴³ in another he mentions some of the virtues of Abu 'l-'Abbas Sidi Ahmad ibn al-Salih al-Suqi.⁴⁴ There are written authorisations (*ijazat*) that he gave to Muhammad ibn al-Siddiq⁴⁵ and Alfa Salim Baber al-Timbukti,⁴⁶ and a single authorisation in *hadith*.⁴⁷ There are numerous letters: a letter to the judge Muhammad al-Amin ibn Ahmad Baba ibn Abi 'l-'Abbas al-Hasani;⁴⁸ a letter to the judge Ahmad Baba b. Abi 'l-'Abbas b. 'Umar b. Zayan al-Hasani;⁴⁹ a rebuttal of the view that regarded the wealth of those Muslims who accepted and dealt with the colonialists as permissible;⁵⁰ a letter on agency;⁵¹ a letter to Muhammad Yahya ibn Muhammad Salim al-Wallati;⁵² a response to doubt around the mandatory waiting period for women after divorce in the instance of remarriage; a letter on the selling of meat in exchange for stitched skins (leather);⁵³ questions; and a *fatwa*.⁵⁴ Among the many *fatwas* there is one directed to Ahmad ibn Abi Bakr ibn al-Sayyad;⁵⁵ one on secret marriage;⁵⁶ another on *zakat* (alms);⁵⁷ and others on *hiba* (gifts)⁵⁸ and the issue of *imama* (delivering the sermon and leading of prayers) of the two festivals (*al-'Idayn*).⁵⁹ Then there are *fatwas* on what transpired between the desert dwellers with regard to their trading in sheep;⁶⁰ on reconciliation;⁶¹ on bartering and commercial trade;⁶² on inheritance;⁶³ on delegation of power and authority;⁶⁴ and on agency.⁶⁵ There is a *fatwa* that addresses the problem that transpired between the children of Buhan and the children of 'Imran around the well called al-Hass al-Abyad.⁶⁶ There is also a set of *fatwas*⁶⁷ and responses,⁶⁸ and the responses of Muhammad Yahya ibn Salim to the questions of Abu al-Khayr.⁶⁹ There is a commentary by Ibn 'Ashir on the *Ajrumiyya*⁷⁰ and a commentary of *Maraqī al-su'ud*⁷¹ which he did not complete. He also gives information about *munawala*,⁷² and many other *fatwas* on incidents that transpired.⁷³

It is clear that Shaykh Abu al-Khayr was not only an active scholar, but also an exemplary personality in the peaceful resolution of disputes. His death left a vacuum in the region, specifically in Timbuktu and Arawan.

NOTES

- 1 Translated from Arabic by Mohamed Shaid Mathee.
- 2 Ahmad ibn Abi 'l-'Araf al-Takni calls him Abu 'l-Khayrat (the father of all goodness), indicating that he was alive in 1935. He wrote a rather short biography of him which barely whets the appetite. See al-Takni (2000: 67). In this chapter I too am unable to give an elaborate biography of him with regards to his lineage, as he himself mentioned no one higher than his immediate great-grandfather in all of his writings that I was able to read.
- 3 He received the Qadiri order (its rendition) from al-Shaykh al-Ghawth al-'Azam al-Shaykh al-Tarad ibn Abi 'l-'Abbas Muhammad Fadil ibn Mamin al-Na'mawi al-Wallati, whom he used to be in correspondence with and whose advice and counselling he sought. See al-Takni (2000: 99).
- 4 I do not think it far-fetched to suggest that al-Shaykh Abu 'l-Khayr was a Tijani as well, since he expressed his desire and wish to belong to the order with the following words: 'Let it come to your knowledge dear *faqih* that I am a devoted adherent of the Shadhili order and the Order of al-Shaykh Mawlaya 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaylani and should I be granted the opportunity to combine between them through the Tijani Order [I would]. So please do give me the permission to do so as I wish for you to be one of my *ashyakh* [leaders/guides in Sufism] so that I am with your group and holding fast to your side, and Salam to you.' This he wrote in a letter to Muhammad Yahya ibn Salim al-Wallati. See manuscript number 5828 in the Ahmed Baba Institute.
- 5 Although researchers agree that the date of the demise of Shaykh Abu al-Khayr is 1975 they disagree on his date of birth. John Hunwick holds that he was born at the beginning of the fourteenth century of the Islamic calendar: 'He was born in the early years of the 14th century of *hijra*' (2003: 155). Hunwick does not give a source for this view, although I am certain that he depends on Mahamane Mahamoudou (known as Hamou Muhammad Dedeou) – the only possible source, according to my knowledge, who possesses an almost complete biography of Shaykh Abu al-Khayr. Hamu says in his manuscript entitled *Nawazil al-Shaykh Abi al-Khayr ibn 'Abd-Allah al-Arawani* (The Verdicts of al-Shaykh Abi al-Khayr ibn 'Abd-Allah al-Arawani), 'He was born in the beginning of the 14th century *hijri*,' without giving an exact date.
- 6 Al-Arawani, Muhammad Mahmud ibn al-Shaykh. *Kitab al-tarjuman fi tarikh al-Sahra' wa 'l Sudan wa balad Timbukt wa Shinqit wa Arawan wa nabdh min tarikh al-zaman fi jami' 'l-buldan* (The Book on the Narrating of the History of the Sahra and the Sudan, the Land of Timbuktu, Shinqit and Arawan and a Synopsis on the History of the Time of all Countries), Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript number 762, page 25.
- 7 This is a book in prosody (*al-'arud*), a science that studies the endings and rhymes of verses in Arabic poetry, by Abd Allah ibn Uthman al-Khazraji.
- 8 He was 'Abd al-Rahim ibn al-Husayn b. 'Abd al-Rahman Abu 'l Fadl Zayn al-Din, known as al-Hafiz al-'Iraqi (d.1404). The poem is called *alfiyya* which literally means 'the thousand' as it refers to a didactic poem with a thousand verses or couplets. The *Alfiyya* in this case is a work on the science of the prophetic traditions in the form of a didactic poem.
- 9 Al-Arawani, Abu al-Khayr. *Maktub fi dhikr fada'il al-Shaykh Abi 'l-'Abbas Sidi Ahmad ibn al-Salih al-Suqi* (A Treatise on Enumerating the Virtues of Shaykh Abi 'l-'Abbas Sidi Ahmad ibn al-Salih al-Suqi), Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript number 1034.
- 10 He is the judge (was the Chief Justice), the erudite and intelligent scholar Sidi Ahmad ibn Bubakr ibn al-Sayd ibn al-Faqih Sulayman ibn Taliban ibn al-Faqih Sulayman ibn Muhammad Aghan ibn al-Shaykh Sidi Ahmad ibn Add (d.1921). He also composed impromptu poetry.
- 11 He is the author of the book *al-Sa'ada al-abadiyya fi ta'rif bi 'ulama Timbukt al-bahiyya* (The Perpetual Bliss in Introducing the Scholars of Glorious Timbuktu).
- 12 It is apt here to mention that Shaykh Mawlay al-'Arabi is Hamu's actual and direct teacher. However, his teacher taught him that everyone who learned at the hands of Shaykh Abu al-Khayr would be blessed in his knowledge and therefore Mawlay al-'Arabi used to 'coerce' Shaykh Abu al-Khayr to teach some works to his student Hamu.
- 13 Hamu is an able copyist and an illustrious scholar who read the *Risala* of Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani and some of the books of *hadith* at the hands of Shaykh Abu al-Khayr.
- 14 Abu 'l-'Araf was accepted by the *'ulama* of his day as the undisputed authority in Arabic grammar.
- 15 This exegetical work was compiled by the famous fifteenth-century scholar 'Abd al-Rahman al-Suyuti and his teacher Jalal al-Mahalli.
- 16 A weak prophetic tradition recorded by al-Tirmidhi (1991: 301, *hadith* number 2611) and by Ibn Majah (1996: 205, *hadith* number 4159). In full it reads the word of 'wisdom is the lost property (gem) of the believer, wherever he/she finds it he most deserves to take it'. 'Lost gem' is a metaphor for knowledge that a Muslim must look for and, upon finding it, take it. In this case, Shaykh Abu al-Khayr's knowledge was that gem.
- 17 Translator's note: It is not clear whether it was only when the shaykh asked or when anyone else asked.
- 18 Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (1999: 168).
- 19 Translator's note: This issue around confusion and ignorance reveals the important epistemological reality in which the Muslim world finds itself at all times, specifically in the era of European colonialism and post-colonialism.

- 20 Muhammad ibn Yahya ibn Muhammad ibn Salim, born in Walata and lived and died in Na'ma. Of his more than 70 compilations are *al-Taysir fi ahkam al-tanzil* (The Rulings of the Revelation [the Qur'an] Made Easy), in which he mentions the rulings of the Qur'an; a beautiful synopsis of *Sahih al-Bukhari*; a synopsis of Malik's *Muwatta* and others. See the biography of Muhammad Yahya by al-Takni (2000: 132–141). Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript number 9207.
- 21 See Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript number 5828, titled *Risala 'ila Muhammad Yahya b. Salim al-Wallati* (Epistle to Muhammad Yahya ibn Salim al-Wallati).
- 22 Takrur was originally a kingdom in Senegal that was a kind of successor 'empire' to the great Ghana Empire after the collapse of the latter. However, later it was used to designate the whole of black Africa, specifically sub-Saharan West Africa, and thus came to be used interchangeably with Bilad al-Sudan (Sudanic Africa).
- 23 See Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript number 2752, titled *al-Sa'ada al-abadhiyya fi 'l-ta'rif bi 'ulama Timbukt al-bahiyya* (The Perpetual Bliss in Introducing the Scholars of Glorious Timbuktu), pages 58–59.
- 24 Mahamane Mahamoudou, *al-Nawazil*, page 4 (unpublished paper in author's personal collection).
- 25 Due to insufficient time I was unable to collect and collate all his poetry.
- 26 The *Mukhtasar al-Khalil* is a standard text in the Maliki legal school and one of its most referred to sources. It was written by Ishaq ibn Khalil.
- 27 Ahmad ibn Ambarak b. Bark ibn Muhammad, called Abi 'l-'Araf – from the tribe of Takn, born and reared in Kalmim (Morocco) from the district of Sus and Wadanun, settled in Timbuktu. He was born into a family of knowledge, judiciary and commerce. He studied in his village then moved to the Shinqit then to Timbuktu, where he stayed most of his life. He established a library that played a pioneering role in the preservation of manuscripts, whether through copying, purchasing or exchange. See '*Khazzanah Ahmad bib Abi 'l-'Araf*', an unpublished and uncatalogued manuscript in the private collection of Mahamane Mahamoudou. See also al-Takni (2000: 6–8, 81).
- 28 Oral information passed on by Hamou, Abu al-Khayr's student, who heard it directly from a student of Shaykh al-Tijani ibn Muhammad al-Amin.
- 29 Copied by Sidi Muhammad and 'Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Sultan, Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript number 621.
- 30 Al-Arawani, Abu al-Khayr. See Mamma Haidara Library, manuscript number 2264.
- 31 The term *al-Maghrib al-Islami* refers geographically to that area which today stretches from Libya to Morocco, including Mali and Mauritania. This is in contrast to the *al-Mashriq al-Islami*, which refers to the eastern Islamic and Arab lands such as the Levant (*Bilad al-Sham*), the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, etc.
- 32 Al-Arawani, Abu al-Khayr ibn 'Abd-Allah ibn Marzuq, in Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript number 419, and Mamma Haidara Library, manuscript number 3247.
- 33 Al-Arawani, Abu al-Khayr, in Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript numbers 632 and 2812.
- 34 In these works are collected the traditions ascribed to the Prophet and at times to the companions. *al-Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, *Sunan ibn Majah* and *Sunan al-Nasa'i* are known as the six canonical books of *hadith* compilations, although the others – numbering at least 15 – are regarded as reliable sources.
- 35 The second generation of Muslims that came after the generation of the companions; they saw, met and lived with those who were companions of Prophet Muhammad.
- 36 In the Maliki school the living practice of the people of Medina was regarded as a source of law and part of the legal epistemology of that school. The Malikis argue that since the Prophet – and most of his companions – lived in Medina, it stands to reason that their practice would best reflect that of the Prophet.
- 37 The era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs refers to the first four caliphs after the demise of the Prophet from the eleventh year of the Muslim calendar until the year forty (AD 632–660), that is, roughly a period of 30 years.
- 38 Authorisation (*ijaza*) is the phenomenon where the expert teacher in Islamic scholarship – specifically in the science of prophetic traditions and other sciences, as well as in the recitation of the Qur'an – gave students permission to teach those sciences from his books and ideas.
- 39 Manuscript numbers 8368 and 9530, Ahmed Baba Institute.
- 40 Manuscript number 9533, Ahmed Baba Institute.
- 41 Copied by the author, al-Arawani, Abu al-Khayr. See manuscript number 3085, Ahmed Baba Institute.
- 42 Copied by the author, al-Arawani, Abu al-Khayr. See manuscript number 4730, Ahmed Baba Institute.
- 43 Copied by the author, al-Arawani, Abu al-Khayr. See manuscript number 1034, Ahmed Baba Institute.
- 44 Manuscript number 1033, Ahmed Baba Institute.
- 45 Manuscript number 3442, Ahmed Baba Institute.
- 46 Manuscript number 6355, Ahmed Baba Institute.
- 47 Manuscript number 3930, Ahmed Baba Institute.

- 48 Manuscript number 3728, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 49 Manuscript number 3884, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 50 Manuscript number 5286, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 51 Manuscript number 5609, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 52 Manuscript number 5828, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 53 Manuscript number 650, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 54 Manuscript number 1545, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 55 Manuscript number 1546, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 56 Manuscript number 3959, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 57 Manuscript numbers 2623 and 2624, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 58 Manuscript number 3443, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 59 Manuscript number 3247, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 60 Manuscript number 3533, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 61 Manuscript number 5918, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 62 Manuscript number 5962, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 63 Manuscript number 5981, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 64 Manuscript number 5991, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 65 Manuscript number 7953, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 66 Manuscript number 8047, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 67 Manuscript number 10, Mamma Haidara Library.
 68 Manuscript numbers 8, 3245 and 3268, Mamma Haidara Library.
 69 Manuscript number 5113, Ahmed Baba Institute.
 70 This is a work in Arabic grammar.
 71 There is an original copy in the hands of al-Shaybani, the *imam* of Ansongo (a village near Gao). He was the student of Shaykh Abu al-Khayr.
 72 *Munawala* refers to a certain method or form in the way the student receives (called *tahammul* in Arabic) prophetic traditions from the teacher or the one who knows the particular prophetic tradition(s). See al-Takni (2000: 67); Mahamane Mahamoudou, *al-Nawazil*, page 4; Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript number 2752, titled *al-Sa'ada al-Abadiyya fi 'I Ta'rif bi 'Ulama' Timbuk al-Bahiyya*, page 59.
 73 Hamu (Shaykh Abu al-Khayr's student) has thus far compiled the 35 *fatwas* under the title *Nawazil al-Shaykh Abi 'I-Khayr bin 'Abd-Allah al-Arawani* (The Verdicts of Shaykh Abi 'I Khayr ibn 'Abd-Allah al-Arawan). He is continuing in this task.

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