A short note on a silsila of the Qdiriyya brotherhood in Ethiopia

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Mishāh al-arwāḥ fī ʿuṣūl al-falāḥ by Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Maḡīlī (fl. late 15th cen-
tury).
Ms. 2145, Institut des Hautes Études e de Recherches Islamiques – Ahmed Baba (Timbuktu)
Timbuktu Script & Scholarship: A Catalogue of Manuscripts from the Exhibition, Cape Town,
Image courtesy of Shamil Jeppie, editor of the volume
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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contents p. V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes on Transliteration p. VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes on Contributors p. IX</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **INTRODUCTION** | A plurality of historical and linguistic experiences
Nicola Melis – Mauro Nobili p. 1 |
| **SECTION I: HORN OF AFRICA** | A short note on a *silīla* of the Qādirīyya brotherhood in Ethiopia
Alessandro Gori p. 17 |
Silvia Bruzzi p. 27 |
| **SECTION II: WESTERN AFRICA** | Aḥmad b. Fūrū, portrait d’un ʿālim soudanais du XVIᵉ siècle
Rémi Dewière p. 45 |
| | *Risāla min Maryam bt. Fūdī ila al-ibn.* A brief contribution to the study of Muslim eschatology in 19th century Nigeria
Mauro Nobili p. 71 |
| **SECTION III: OTTOMAN “PERIPHERY”** | L’emprise ottomane en Géorgie occidentale à l’époque de Süleyman Iᵉʳ
Güneş İşiğsel p. 89 |
VI

The “talking machine” affair in Ottoman Yemen (1907)

Nicola Melis p. 107

SECTION IV: MISCELLANEA

‘Voi sì che avete una religione!’ Identità e alterità alla frontiera greco-albanese

Antonio Maria Pusceddu p. 155

Il pensiero politico di Moḥammad Moṣaddeq: costituzionalismo, patriottismo e democrazia

Pejman Abdolmohammadi p. 179

“We nous n’avions pas d’autre choix.” Colonialisme et guerre de libération au Maroc à travers les témoignages des protagonistes de la Résistance

Manuela Deiana p. 199

SECTION V: NOTES

Una nota sull’apporto fornito da Sībawayhi alla grammatica araba

Ali Kadem Kalati p. 219


Michele Petrone p. 227


Evelin Grassi p. 235
A short note on a silsila of the Qādirīyya brotherhood in Ethiopia*

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Introduction

In spite of a lack of exact and reliable information on the present distribution of the Islamic mystical brotherhoods in Ethiopia (and Eritrea),1 the Qādirīyya is the most widespread Islamic brotherhood, ṭarīqā, in the country.

In the present paper I carry out a brief research on a spiritual genealogy (silsila) of the Ethiopian Qādirīyya trying to shed light on the ways the ṭarīqā followed to spread in the different regions of Ethiopia, and to contribute to the reconstruction of the history of the group in that country.

1. The Qādirīyya in Ethiopia

‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḡīlānī (m. 561/1166) is widely known and devotedly venerated in Ethiopia. His cenotaphs are scattered across the country, and mosques named after him are found in many different towns and

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* The research on which this article is based was made possible thanks to the support of the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung.

1 The Somali Qādirīyya is, on the contrary, relatively well known (see Alessandro Gori, Studi sulla letteratura agiografica islamica somala in lingua araba, Dipartimento di Linguistica, Firenze 2003, in particular pp. 28-32).
villages.² To mention only a few examples, in Harar, a famous maqâm of ‘Abd al-Qâdir and his mother Umm al-Ḥāyr Fâṭima (locally called Umma Koda)³ is located outside the wall of the old town (ḡugal), in the area known as Qurra-be limay just in front of the main bus-station.⁴ Eighteen kilometres east of Harar, in the Argobba land, a renowned sacred compound hosts the shrines of ‘Abd al-Qâdir and Umma Koda with a house for the congregational meetings of the Qâdiriyya brotherhood (ḥadra).⁵ Both locations are cherished holy sites to which the faithful of the Harar region flock in pilgrimage to seek the baraka of the saint and his mother. In Eritrea, a very famous shrine (mazâr) of ‘Abd al-Qâdir exists on the homonymous stretch of land north of Massawa and local traditions obviously claim that the saint actually died there.⁶ Emir ‘Abd al-Šâkûr b. Yûsuf of Harar (d. 1794) had a mosque called ʿAbd al-Qâdir al-Ǧîlânî built near the shrine of ṣayh Ḥuṣayn in the south Ethiopian region of Bale.⁷ In Asmara a modern mosque with a maqâm perpetuates the memory of the eponymous of the Qâdiriyya.⁸

‘Abd al-Qâdir al-Ǧîlânî is invoked in devotional poems and prayers

² Unfortunately, no exhaustive list of the cenotaphs of ‘Abd al-Qâdir in Ethiopia (and in the Horn) is available. There is no need to underline the interest and the importance that such a list could provide to clarify the dimensions of the cult of this saint in Northeastern Africa.


⁵ See Gori, s.v. “Umma Koda.”


⁷ Enrico Cerulli, Studi etiopici I. La lingua e la storia di Harar, Istituto per l’Oriente, Roma 1936, pp. 44 and 51.

with the names of local Ethiopian holy men. The text collection recited during the mawlid ceremony in Harar contains a poem attributed to ‘Abd al-Qādir (Tūf bi-hālī sab’ān) and a long pious supplication to ask for his help (Yā qutb yā rabbānī al-hayakal al-nūrānī ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Gīlānī). In many Ethiopian Muslim regions, famous Qādirī centres exist: Anna in Rayya Qobbo (Wällo), Dana in Yaggi (Wällo), Qatbare in Qabeena and Galamssoo (Gälämso) in Oromia are among the most celebrated headquarters of the brotherhood and host famous Islamic schools which attract scholars and students to teach and study not only mysticism but the whole syllabus of the Islamic traditional education.

A number of Ethiopian Islamic renowned learned men were affiliated with the Qādiriyya (e.g. Ḥamza al-Qatbarī d. 1947, ‘Umar b. ‘Alī al-Alamsī, fl. first half of the 20th century) and contributed to enhance the influence and the prestige of the ṭarīqa.

Despite the apparent rooting of the brotherhood in the country, the history of the Qādiriyya in Ethiopia has never been investigated by scholars and is therefore almost completely unknown. The ways the ṭarīqa followed in its spread into the different cultural and ethnical landscapes of Islamic Ethiopia are so far only vaguely describable. The reciprocal relationships of the various centres of the brotherhood are not precisely identifiable and the biographies of the Ethiopian qādirī masters can only be sketched. First-hand sources on the mystical group and its literature (manāqib, silsils, handbooks of doctrine, litanies and devotional texts) are still to be located, collected and critically published.

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11 Dirk Bustorf, s.v. “Qatbäre,” in EAE.
12 Mohammed Hassen, s.v. “Gälämso,” EAE.
It is often repeated in scholarly literature\textsuperscript{14} that the first introducer of the Qādiriyya in Ethiopia was Abū Bakr b. ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Aydrūs, the revered patron saint of Aden (d. 1508), member of the al-Saqqāf branch of the Ḥadrami Bā ‘Alawī sayyid, who allegedly brought the ṭarīqa to Harar. However, no evidence for this assertion has ever been shown yet.\textsuperscript{15} The first inception of the brotherhood remains thus still enshrouded in obscurity.

The late Hussein Ahmed was the first researcher to concretely contribute to the enhancement of our knowledge of the Ethiopian Qādiriyya. While carrying out some field work in his native region, he came to know a local silsila of the Qādiriyya that sheds light on the spread of the brotherhood from Harar into Wällo in the 19th century.

The silsila published by Hussein Ahmed runs as follows:

\textit{Sayyid Musāfir – faqīh Hāšim – Ahmad b. Šāliḥ – faqīh Zubayr – šayḥ Muhammad Šāfi (d. 1814/15)}\textsuperscript{16} – Muhammad b. faqīh Zubayr – šayḥ Ġamal al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Ann – Ahmad b. Ádam (d. 1903) – Muḥammad Yasin (d. 1924); sayyid Ibnāhīm (d. 1956).\textsuperscript{17}

According to Hussein Ahmed’s informants, sayyid Musāfir was of Yemeni origin\textsuperscript{18} and thus was a trait-d’union between the local Ethiopian Qādiriyya and the broader brotherhood network. He initiated to the Qādiri wird “a certain faqīh Hāšim” of Harar who in his turn entrusted the ṭarīqa to Ahmad b. Šāliḥ. The latter took the brother-


\textsuperscript{15} The personality of Abū Bakr b. ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Aydrūs is still little known and deserves more in-depth research. He is credited to have introduced the habit of drinking coffee into Arabia. His connection with the Qādiriyya is still unclear as some sources point instead to his affiliation to the Šāliyya (Oscar Löfgren, s.v. “‘Aydrūs,” in Clifford E. Bosworth et al. (eds.), \textit{The Encyclopaedia of Islam}, 2nd edition, Brill, Leiden 1960-2005).

\textsuperscript{16} On this figure see Hussein Ahmed, s.v. “Muḥammad Šāfi,” in \textit{EAE}.


\textsuperscript{18} Interviewed by Hussein Ahmed, šayḥ Muhammad Wale said that sayyid Musāfir came from a not well-specified “West” and that faqīh Hāšim received the qādiri wird also “from an unknown ‘ālim from Medina” (Hussein Ahmed, \textit{Islam in Nineteenth-Century}, p. 69).
hood to Wållo where it took root in the entire region.

The spiritual genealogy collected by Hussein Ahmed provides us with at least two important pieces of information: 1) the Qādiriyya most probably arrived in Ethiopia from Yemen, although not through the intermediation of Abū Bakr b. ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Ayyūs, whose name appears nowhere; 2) the Qādiriyya came to Wållo through šayḥ Aḥmad b. Šālīh among whose pupils also figured the much revered saint and learned man sayyid al-Bā‘ al-hāqq Buṣra b. Āy Muḥammad.19

Hussein Ahmed’s informants were not able to give further details on the personalities of the three oldest šayḥs mentioned in the silsila, so they remain nothing more than simple names. However, it is possible to identify with certainty faqīḥ Hāšim with the Harari learned man and member of the Harari emir family Hāšim b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 1765)20 who authored a much renowned Arabic collection of pious litanies and prayers in praise of the Prophet (called the Fath al-Raḥmānī [sic!]), a ṭird for the Qādiriyya brotherhood and a Harari poem, al-Muṣṭafā, known both in a shorter and a longer version.

2. Šayḥ Aḥmad b. Šālīh and his silsila

Very recently, new evidence on the silsila of the Wållo Qādiriyya has

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20 For some introductory information on him see Ewald Wagner, s.v. “Hāšim b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz,” in EAE. The affiliation of faqīḥ Hāšim to the Qādiriyya is proved by an unpublished silsila contained in the manuscript Hs. or. 10472 of the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin (see the description of the document in Ewald Wagner, Afrikanische Handschriften. Teil 2. Islamische Handschriften aus Äthiopien, “Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland 24-2,” Steiner, Stuttgart 1997, pp. 10-11.
come into light. In Ramadan 1425 (Oct.-Nov. 2004)\textsuperscript{21} the Naḡāšī
ing press, the main Islamic publishing house of the country based in Addis Ababa,\textsuperscript{22} published the \textit{Īqāz himam al-ḡbiyā’ bi-raṣḥ qaṭṭa min tarāḡīm al-‘ulamā’ wa-al-awliyā’} fi ḡumhūриyyat Iyyūbiyā, a collection of short biographies of holy men written by the renowned Wāllo šayh Muḥammad Wale.\textsuperscript{23}

Among the saints whose manāqib were published in the book there is also šayh Aḥmad b. Sāliḥ, \textit{trait d’union} between the Harari and the Wāllo branches of the Qādiriyya. No factual detail about the life of šayh Aḥmad b. Sāliḥ is recorded in the short biographical note of the \textit{Īqāz}.\textsuperscript{24} The sources of the information given in the book are not revealed. The dates of birth and death of the holy man remain unknown and the data about his genealogy are not ascertained. The fact that someone calls Aḥmad b. Sāliḥ “Aḥmad Kubrā” irritates the author/collector who deems it as a manifestation of coarse ignorance of the basic principles of the Arabic language.

Among the many prodigies which are commonly attributed to šayh Aḥmad, Muḥammad Wale reports only a single karāma which he himself seems to consider unbelievable. It is said that Aḥmad b. Sāliḥ on his way to Yāḡgu where he was to give the iǧāza to faqīh Zubayr, made a detour to Rayya. There, he noticed a girl who was playing with some boys. He stopped her and announced that she would give birth to someone who would renew his ǧīrku: she was actually the mother-to-be of šayh Gamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Annī. Besides the general skepticism of the author about karāmāt, in this specific tale

\textsuperscript{21} This is the date given on page 2 of the book. In the short biography of the author however, it is said that the text was published just a few days before his death (Sep. 10th 2005).


\textsuperscript{24} Muḥammad Wale, \textit{Īqāz himam al-ḡbiyā’}, pp. 137-140.
Muhammad Wale stresses also a general theological inconsistency: it is highly questionable whether it is legitimate to give a sort of *iğāza in absentia* to someone who is not (yet) alive.25

Notwithstanding its scanty amount of information, the section of the *İqāz* is very interesting because it records the complete *silsila* of Aḥmad b. Ṣāliḥ. The spiritual genealogy connecting ʾṣayḥ Aḥmad back to ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḡilānī runs as follows:


The reliability of the *silsila* linking the Ethiopian branch of the brotherhood to the wider Islamic world can hardly sustain critical analysis. Quite surprisingly, most of the names mentioned, from Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Razzāq (one of the sons of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḡilānī) down to ‘Alī al-Hāšimī, Šaraf al-Dīn and Baḥr al-Dīn Aḥmad, correspond to the physical and spiritual genealogy of the Āl al-Kīlānī al-Ḥamawī, the descendants of ‘Abd al-Qādir in the Syrian town of Ḥamā.27

In particular, the *nasab* of this ʾṣarīf group almost literally confirms the section of the Ethiopian *silsila/nasab*: ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḡilānī –

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25 Ibidem, p. 139.
al-sayyid Abū Bakr ʿAbd al-Razzāq – qādī al-qudāt al-sayyid Nāṣīr (called al-Nasr in the Syrian source) – al-ṣayḥ Abū al-Naṣr al-sayyid Muhammad – al-ṣayḥ Zāhir al-Dīn al-sayyid Aḥmad – Sayf al-Dīn al-sayyid Yahyā. Sayf al-Dīn Yahyā (d. 734/1333-34) was the first member of the offspring of ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ḡilānī to settle in Ḥamā in 685/1286-87 on his way back from the ḥaṛq (hence his nickname nazīl Ḥamā) and from him the whole Āl Kīlānī group originated. The names from Sayf al-Dīn Yahyā back to al-sayyid ʿAlī al-Hāṣimī are not completely identical in the Syrian nasab and in the Ethiopian silsilā but the relatively slight discrepancies between the two texts can be easily explained with some disruptions in the transmission.28 The only really missing person in the Syrian nasab is Ibrāhīm al-Qādirī who, however, could be an avatar of Ibrāhīm b. Šaraf al-Dīn b. Ṭalḥah b. ʿAlī al-Hāṣimī who appears in the nasab of šayḥ ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kīlānī, naqīḥ al-āṣrāf in Damascus (d. ca. 1172/1758-59).29

As for sayyid Musāfir al-Magrībī, who should be the person who practically introduced the tarīqa into Ethiopia, he lays in complete obscurity: one can only speculate on his nīsha which often is used in Ethiopia to refer to individuals coming or originating from Sudan. It is of course theoretically conceivable that this sayyid Musāfir al-Magrībī could have met a member of the Kīlānī family somewhere in the Near East or in the Arabian Peninsula and have been initiated to the Qādirī brotherhood by him. Such an event, however, would probably have been recorded in Ethiopian tradition with much emphasis. It is thus much more likely that sayyid Musāfir al-Magrībī is nothing but a ghost name functioning to connect the Near-eastern silsilā with Ethiopia.

The Īqāz also contains a cursive mention of the line of Qādirī spiritual descendency initiated by šayḥ Ṭalḥah b. Šāliḥ. The silsilā in this


29 How the Syrian nasab came to be known in Ethiopia so that Muḥammad Wale could insert it in his book as a silsilā is not clear. A feedback from an Arabic written source is most likely but cannot be proven.
case is:


This is once more the famous Anna-Dana sīsilā, already recorded by J. Spencer Trimingham and then studied by Hussei n Ahmed.31 From the al-Danī al-Ṭānī, the Ethiopian Ḥādirīyya apparently managed to spread widely in every corner of Ethiopia. Among the most famous disciples of the “second” al-Danī ṣayḥ, Muḥammad Wale mentions:

al-ṣayḥ al-Sayyid b. al-Sayyid ʿIbrāhīm al-Ṭālī; ṣayḥ Abū al-Baṣṭ – ṣayḥ Mahmūd Kanz – ṣayḥ Ṣahīd al-Dīr ṣayḥ al-Karamī who was, in his turn, master of al-ḥāǧǧ Muḥammad Zayn al-Danī (the third Danī).32

This local Ethiopian section of the sīsilā thus includes the names of the main representatives of the Ḥādirīyya of Wālū in the recent past and today. It provides the standard chain of spiritual descent for the whole region, highlighting the pivotal role played by the Anna-Dana connection.

This is the only Ethiopian Ḥādirī sīsilā known so far. Other sīsilās based on different Ḥādirī centres in Wālū and/or in Harar which, for sure, exist are still to be discovered. Only further research on the written local tradition of the tarīqa will hopefully allow us to make a more detailed assessment of the network of the Ḥādirīyya in the whole region.

30 Muḥammad Wale, ʿIqāẓ ḥimam al-aḫḥiyā, p. 139.
32 Muḥammad Wale, ʿIqāẓ ḥimam al-aḫḥiyā, p. 139.