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

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A short note on a silsila of the Qādiriyya brotherhood in Ethiopia*

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(University of Florence)

Introduction

In spite of a lack of exact and reliable information on the present dis-
tribution of the Islamic mystical brotherhoods in Ethiopia (and Eri-
trea),1 the Qādiriyya is the most widespread Islamic brotherhood, ṭarīqa, in the country.

In the present paper I carry out a brief research on a spiritual ge-
nealogy (silsila) of the Ethiopian Qādiriyya trying to shed light on
the ways the ṭarīqa 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 Qādiriyya in Ethiopia

ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ǧilānī (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 Qādiriyya 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.\textsuperscript{2} To mention only a few examples, in Harar, a famous maqām of ‘Abd al-Qādir and his mother Umm al-Ḥayr Fāṭima (locally called Umma Koda)\textsuperscript{3} is located outside the wall of the old town (ḡugāl), in the area known as Qurra-be limay just in front of the main bus-station.\textsuperscript{4} Eighteen kilometres east of Harar, in the Argobba land, a renowned sacred compound hosts the shrines of ‘Abd al-Qādir and Umma Koda with a house for the congregational meetings of the Ṣādiriya brotherhood (ḥadra).\textsuperscript{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 (mazār) of ‘Abd al-Qādir exists on the homonymous stretch of land north of Massawa and local traditions obviously claim that the saint actually died there.\textsuperscript{6} Emir ‘Abd al-Šakūr b. Yusuf of Harar (d. 1794) had a mosque called ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ǧilānī built near the shrine of Ṣayḥ Ḥusayn in the south Ethiopian region of Bale.\textsuperscript{7} In Asmara a modern mosque with a maqām perpetuates the memory of the eponymous of the Ṣādiriya.\textsuperscript{8} ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ǧilānī is invoked in devotional poems and prayers

\textsuperscript{2} Unfortunately, no exhaustive list of the cenotaphs of ‘Abd al-Qādir 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.


\textsuperscript{5} See Gori, s.v. “Umma Koda.”


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

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with the names of local Ethiopian holy men.\(^9\) The text collection recited during the mawlid ceremony in Harar contains a poem attributed to ʿAbd al-Qādir (Ṭuf bi-ḥalī sabʿan)\(^10\) and a long pious supplication to ask for his help (Yaṣīb yā rabbānī al-hayakal al-nūrānī ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Gīlānī). In many Ethiopian Muslim regions, famous Qādirī centres exist: Anna in Rayyy Qobbo (Wällo), Dana in Yaggi (Wällo), Qatbare in Qabeena\(^11\) and Galamssoo (Gälämso) in Oromia\(^12\) 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.\(^13\)

A number of Ethiopian Islamic renowned learned men were affiliated with the Qādiriyya (e.g. Ǧamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Annī, d. 1882; Ahmad b. ʾĀdam al-Dānī, d. 1903; ʿĪsā b. Ḥamza al-Qatbarī d. 1947, ʿUmar b. Ṭālī al-Ǧālamsī, fl. first half of the 20th century) and contributed to enhance the influence and the prestige of the ṣāriqā.

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 ṣāriqā 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 (manāqīb, silsilas, handbooks of doctrine, litanies and devotional texts) are still to be located, collected and critically published.

\(^11\) Dirk Bustorf, s.v. “Qatbarē,” in EAE.
\(^12\) Mohammed Hassen, s.v. “Gālamsō,” EAE.
\(^13\) The strict connection between the mystical brotherhoods and the Islamic traditional educational system in Ethiopia is well described by Hussein Ahmed, “Traditional Muslim Education in Wällo,” in Anatoly Andreevich Gromyko (ed.), Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies, vol. 3, Nauka, Moscow, 1988, pp. 94-106.
It is often repeated in scholarly literature that the first introducer of the *Qādiriyā* in Ethiopia was Abū Bakr b. ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Aydarūs, the revered patron saint of Aden (d. 1508), member of the al-Saqqāf branch of the Ḥadrami Bā ‘Alawī *sāyid*, who allegedly brought the *ṭarīqa* to Harar. However, no evidence for this assertion has ever been shown yet. 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 *Qādiriyā*. While carrying out some field work in his native region, he came to know a local *silsila* of the *Qādiriyā* 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:

*Sayyid* Musāfir – *faqīh* Ḥāsim – Ahmad b. Ṣāliḥ – *faqīh* Zubayr – *ṣayḥ* Muhammad Šāfi’ī (d. 1814/15) – Muhammad b. *faqīh* Zubayr – *ṣayḥ* Ğamal al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Anṭī – Ahmad b. Ḥāmid (d. 1903) – Muḥammad Yasin (d. 1924); *sayyid* İbrāhīm (d. 1956).

According to Hussein Ahmed’s informants, *sayyid* Musāfir was of Yemeni origin and thus was a *trait-d’union* between the local Ethiopian *Qādiriyā* and the broader brotherhood network. He initiated to the *Qādiri wirid* “a certain *faqīh* Ḥāsim” of Harar who in his turn entrusted the *ṭarīqa* to Ṣāliḥ. The latter took the brother-

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15 The personality of Abū Bakr b. ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Aydarūs 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 *Qādiriyā* is still unclear as some sources point instead to his affiliation to the Šāfi’iyah (Oscar Löfgren, s.v. “‘Aydarūs,” in Clifford E. Bosworth et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, Brill, Leiden 1960-2005).

16 On this figure see Hussein Ahmed, s.v. “Muḥammad Šāfi’ī,” in *EAE*.


18 Interviewed by Hussein Ahmed, *ṣayḥ* Muḥammad Wale said that *sayyid* Musāfir came from a not well-specified “West” and that *faqīh* Ḥāsim received the *qādiri wirid* also “from an unknown ‘ālim from Medina” (Hussein Ahmed, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century*, p. 69).
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hood to Wällo 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-‘Aydarūs, whose name appears nowhere; 2) the Qādiriyya came to Wällo through šayḥ Aḥmad b. Ṣāliḥ among whose pupils also figured the much revered saint and learned man sayyid al-Bā’ al-hāgg Buṣra b. Āy Muḥammad.

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. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 1765) who authored a much renowned Arabic collection of pious litanies and prayers in praise of the Prophet (called the Fatḥ al-Raḥmānī [sic!]), a ṭirid for the Qādiriyya brotherhood and a Harari poem, al-Muṣṭafā, known both in a shorter and a longer version.

2. šayḥ Aḥmad b. Ṣāliḥ and his silsila

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

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20 For some introductory information on him see Ewald Wagner, s.v. “Hāšim b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz,” 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.

Among the saints whose manâqib were published in the book there is also šayḫ Aḥmad b. Ṣâliḥ, trait d’union between the Harari and the Wâllo branches of the Qâdiriyya. No factual detail about the life of šayḫ Aḥmad b. Ṣâliḥ is recorded in the short biographical note of the Ḥimam.\footnote{Muḥammad Wale, Ḥimam al-aġbiyâ’ bi-raš qaṭra min tarāḍim al-‘ulamâ’ wa-al-awliyâ’ fi ḡumhûriyyat Ḥiyûbiyâ, pp. 137-140.} 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. Ṣâliḥ “Aḥmad Kubrâ” 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 šayḫ Aḥmad, Muḥammad Wale reports only a single karâma which he himself seems to consider unbelievable. It is said that Aḥmad b. Ṣâliḥ on his way to Ḥaṭṭ to give the iǧāza to faqīḥ 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 ḡirā: she was actually the mother-to-be of šayḫ Ḥamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Annī. Besides the general skepticism of the author about karâmāt, in this specific tale
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.\footnote{Ibidem, p. 139.}

Notwithstanding its scanty amount of information, the section of the *İqāz* is very interesting because it records the complete *silsila* of Aḥmad b. Șāliḥ. The spiritual genealogy connecting șayḥ Aḥmad back to ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ğilānī 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 ʿAbd al-Razzāq (one of the sons of ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ğilānī) down to ʿAlī al-Hāšimī, Șarāf al-Dīn and Baḥr al-Dīn Aḥmad, correspond to the physical and spiritual genealogy of the Āl al-Ğilānī al-Ḥamawī, the descendants of ʿAbd al-Qādir in the Syrian town of Ḥamā.\footnote{See Sulaymān b. Ḥālid al-Šalīḥī al-Ḥusaynī, *Išābat al-mareature fī ʿazam awāʾil niqāḥāt al-aḥrāf fī bilād al-Ṣām*, internet publication <http://www.ansabcom.com/mosabakat/rsh-sulaiman-hiraki.html>, last accessed June 5, 2011. The text is a concise but comprehensive research on the various branches of the descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad in the Near East.}

In particular, the *nasab* of this șarīf group almost literally confirms the section of the Ethiopian *silsila/nasab*: ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ğilānī –
al-sayyid Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Razzāq – qāḍī al-quadāt al-sayyid Nāṣir (called al-Naṣr 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 ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ǧilānī to settle in Ḥamā in 685/1286-87 on his way back from the ḥaqq (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 ‘Alī al-Ḥāšimī are not completely identical in the Syrian nasab and in the Ethiopian silsīla 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-Qādir who, however, could be an avatar of Ibrāhīm b. Šaraf al-Dīn b. Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Ḥāšimī who appears in the nasab of šayḥ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kīlānī, naqīb al-ašrāfi in Damascus (d. ca. 1172/1758-59).²⁹

As for sayyid Musāfir al-Mağribī, who should be the person who practically introduced the tariqa into Ethiopia, he lays in complete obscurity: one can only speculate on his nisba 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-Mağribī 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-Mağribī is nothing but a ghost name functioning to connect the Near-eastern silsila with Ethiopia.

The Īqāz also contains a cursive mention of the line of Qādirī spiritual descendency initiated by šayḥ Aḥmad b. Ṣāliḥ. The silsila in this

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


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

al-šayḥ al-Sayyid b. al-sayyid Ibrāhīm al-Ṭālī; šayḥ Abū al-Baṣṭ – šayḥ Mahmūd Kanz – šayḥ Šahīd al-Dār šayḥ al-Karamī who was, in his turn, master of al-ḥāḡḡ Muḥammad Zayn al-Danī (the third Danī).32

This local Ethiopian section of the silsila thus includes the names of the main representatives of the Qādiriyya of Wāllo 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 Qādirī silsila known so far. Other silsilas based on different Qādirī centres in Wāllo 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 Qādiriyya in the whole region.

30 Muḥammad Wale, Ḳāz ḡimam al-aḡḥiyā’, p. 139.
32 Muḥammad Wale, Ḳāz ḡimam al-aḡḥiyā’, p. 139.