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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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 Qādiriyya is the most widespread Islamic brotherhood, ṭarīqa, in the country.

In the present paper I carry out a brief research on a spiritual genealogy (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

¹ 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. To mention only a few examples, in Harar, a famous maqâm of ‘Abd al-Qâdir and his mother Umm al-Ḥayr Fâṭîma (locally called Umma Koda) is located outside the wall of the old town (gugal), in the area known as Qurra-be limay just in front of the main bus-station. 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 (hadra). 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. Emir ‘Abd al-Šâkîr b. Yusuf of Harar (d. 1794) had a mosque called ‘Abd al-Qâdir al-Gîlânî built near the shrine of šayî Ḥusayn in the south Ethiopian region of Bale. In Asmara a modern mosque with a maqâm perpetuates the memory of the eponymous of the Qâdiriyya.

‘Abd al-Qâdir al-Gîlânî 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 1. 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.\(^9\) The text collection recited during the *mawlid* ceremony in Harar contains a poem attributed to ‘Abd al-Qādir (Tuf bi-ḥālī sab‘an)\(^{10}\) and a long pious supplication to ask for his help (Yā qūb yā rabbānī al-hayakal al-nūrānī ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḡilānī). In many Ethiopian Muslim regions, famous Qādirī centres exist: Anna in Rayya Qobbo (Wällo), Dana in Yaḡū (Wållo), 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 *Qādiriya* (e.g. Ġamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Annī, d. 1882; Ahmad b. Ġādam al-Dānī, d. 1903; ‘Īsā b. Ḥāmza al-Qatbarī d. 1947, ‘Umar b. ‘Alī al-Ḡalamsī, 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 *Qādiriya* 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, silsilas*, 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. “Qatbāre,” in *EAE*.

\(^{12}\) Mohammed Hassen, s.v. “Gālamso,” *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\(^\text{14}\) that the first introducer of the *Qādiriyā* 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 ‘Alawi *sayyid*, who allegedly brought the *ṭarīqa* to Harar. However, no evidence for this assertion has ever been shown yet.\(^\text{15}\) 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 *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:

\[
\text{Sayyid Musāfīr – faqīh Ḥāšim – Ahmad b. Ṣāliḥ – faqīh Zubayr – šayḥ Muhammad Šāfī (d. 1814/15)}\(^\text{16}\) – Muhammad b. faqīh Zubayr – šayḥ Ġamal al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Anī – Ahmad b. Ādam (d. 1903) – Muḥammad Yasin (d. 1924); sayyid Ibrāhīm (d. 1956).\(^\text{17}\)
\]

According to Hussein Ahmed’s informants, *sayyid* Musāfīr was of Yemeni origin\(^\text{18}\) and thus was a *trait-d’union* between the local Ethiopian *Qādiriyā* and the broader brotherhood network. He initiated to the *Qādiri würd* “a certain faqīh Ḥāšim” of Harar who in his turn entrusted the *ṭarīqa* to Ahmad b. Ṣāliḥ. The latter took the brother-


\(^{15}\) 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 *Qādiriyā* is still unclear as some sources point instead to his affiliation to the Šālīyya (Oscar Lōfgren, s.v. “‘Aydrūs,” 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 Šāfī,” in *EAE*.


\(^{18}\) Interviewed by Hussein Ahmed, šayḥ Muḥammad Wale said that *sayyid* Musāfīr came from a not well-specified “West” and that faqīh Ḥāšim received the *qādiri würd* 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. Śaliḥ among whose pupils also figured the much revered saint and learned man sayyid al-Bāʾ 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 Hāṣim with the Harari learned man and member of the Harari emir family Hāṣim 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 Fatḥ al-Raḥmānī [sic!]), a wird for the Qādiriyya brotherhood and a Harari poem, al-Muṣṭafā, known both in a shorter and a longer version.

2. šayḥ Aḥmad b. Śaliḥ and his silsila

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


20 For some introductory information on him see Ewald Wagner, s.v. “Hāṣim b. ‘Abd al-’Azīz,” in EAE. The affiliation of faqīḥ Hāṣim 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 Nağāši printing press, the main Islamic publishing house of the country based in Addis Ababa,\textsuperscript{22} published the İqāz himam al-ağbiyā’ bi-raṣḥ qaṭra min.tarāğim al-’ulamā’ wa-al-awliyā’ fi ḡumhūriyyat Īyūbiyyā, 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, 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 İqāz.\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 Kubr” 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 Yaqğu where he was to give the iğāza to faqih 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 ǧikr: she was actually the mother-to-be of šayh Ǧamāl 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. 10\textsuperscript{th} 2005).


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

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

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

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-Ḡilānī al-Ḥamāwī, the descendants of ‘Abd al-Qādir in the Syrian town of Ḥamā.\textsuperscript{27}

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

\textsuperscript{25}ibblem, p. 139.
al-sayyid Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Razzāq – qāḍī al-qudāt al-sayyid Naṣīr (called al-Naṣr in the Syrian source) – al-ṣayyih Abū al-Naṣr al-sayyid Muhammad – al-ṣayyih Zāhir al-Dīn al-sayyid Āḥmad – 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-Ḡilānī to settle in Ḥamā in 685/1286-87 on his way back from the haṣṣ (hence his nickname nazīl Ḥamā) and from him the whole Āl Ḥilānī group originated. The names from Sayf al-Dīn Yahyā back to al-sayyid ʿAlī al-Hāšimī 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-Qādir who, however, could be an avatar of Ibrāhīm b. Šaraf al-Dīn b. Āḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Hāšimī who appears in the nasab of ʿAYy ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kūlānī, naqīb al-ašrāf in Damascus (d. ca. 1172/1758-59).29

As for sayyid Musāfir al-Mağribī, who should be the person who practically introduced the tarihā 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 Kūlānī 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 silsilā with Ethiopia.

The Ḩaqāṣ also contains a cursive mention of the line of Qādirī spiritual descendency initiated by ʿAYy Āḥmad b. Śalih. The silsilā 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 silsilā 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 Hussein Ahmed.31 From the al-Dānī al-Ṭānī, the Ethiopian Qādiriyya apparently managed to spread widely in every corner of Ethiopia. Among the most famous disciples of the “second” al-Dānī ṣayḥ, Muḥammad Wale mentions:

al-ṣayḥ al-Sayyid b. al-sayyid Ibrāhīm al-Ṭālī; ṣayḥ Abū al-Baṣṭ – ṣayḥ Mahmūd Kanz – ṣayḥ Ṣahīḥ al-Dār ṣayḥ al-Karāmī who was, in his turn, master of al-ḥāǧǧ Muḥammad Zayn al-Dānī (the third Dānī).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 Muhammad Wale, Ḥāḏī al-gāhiyyā’, p. 139.
32 Muhammad Wale, Ḥāḏī al-gāhiyyā’, p. 139.