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

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Mishāh al-awrāh fi usūl 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,
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A short note on a *silsila* of the *Qādirīyya* brotherhood in Ethiopia∗

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(University of Florence)

Introduction

In spite of a lack of exact and reliable information on the present distri-

bution of the Islamic mystical brotherhoods in Ethiopia (and Eri-
trea),¹ the *Qādirīyya* is the most widespread Islamic brotherhood, *ṭarīqa*, in the country.

In the present paper I carry out a brief research on a spiritual gene-

alogy (*silsila*) of the Ethiopian *Qādirīyya* 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 *Qādirīyya* in Ethiopia

*‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ġīlānī* (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

∗ 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. To mention only a few examples, in Harar, a famous maqâm of ‘Abd al-Qâdir and his mother Umm al-Ḥayr Fâṭima (locally called Umma Koda) 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. 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). 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-Ṣâkîr b. Yûsuf of Harar (d. 1794) had a mosque called ʿAbd al-Qâdir al-Ǧilânî built near the shrine of šayḫ 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-Ǧilânî is invoked in devotional poems and prayers

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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 (Ṭūf bi-ḥali sab’ān) and a long pious supplication to ask for his help (Ya ḥaṣ ḥay yā rabbānī al-haykal al-nūrānī ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Gīlānī). In many Ethiopian Muslim regions, famous Qādirī centres exist: Anna in Rayya Qobbo (Wällo), Dana in Yaqū (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 *Qādiriya* (e.g. Ǧamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Anni, d. 1882; ʿAbd al-Qādir Ǧamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Anni, d. 1903; ʿĪsā b. Ḥamza al-Qatbarī d. 1947, ‘Umar b. ‘Alī al-Ǧalāmṣī, fl. first half of the 20th century) and contributed to enhance the influence and the prestige of the ṣātiqa.

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 ṣātiqa 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 ṣādirī 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. “Qatbare,” in *EAE*.
12 Mohammed Hassen, s.v. “Gälämso,” *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\textsuperscript{14} that the first introducer of the \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{Qādiriyya}. While carrying out some field work in his native region, he came to know a local \textit{silsila} of the \textit{Qādiriyya} that sheds light on the spread of the brotherhood from Harar into Wällo in the 19th century.

\begin{quote}
The \textit{silsila} published by Hussein Ahmed runs as follows:

\textit{Sayyid} Musāfīr – \textit{faqīh} Ḥāṣim – Ahmad b. Šālih – \textit{faqīh} Zubayr – \textit{ṣayḥ} Muhammad Šafī (d. 1814/15)\textsuperscript{16} – Muhammad b. \textit{faqīh} Zubayr – \textit{ṣayḥ} Ġamal al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Annī – Ahmad b. Ādam (d. 1903) – Muḥammad Yasin (d. 1924); \textit{sayyid} Ibrāhīm (d. 1956).\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

According to Hussein Ahmed’s informants, \textit{sayyid} Musāfīr was of Yemeni origin\textsuperscript{18} and thus was a \textit{trait-d’union} between the local Ethiopian \textit{Qādiriyya} and the broader brotherhood network. He initiated to the \textit{Qādiri} \textit{wird} “a certain \textit{faqīh} Ḥāṣim” of Harar who in his turn entrusted the \textit{ṭarīqa} to Ahmad b. Šālih. 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 \textit{Qādiriyya} is still unclear as some sources point instead to his affiliation to the \textit{Ṣaḥḥāyiyya} (Oscar Löfgren, s.v. “‘Aydrūs,” in Clifford E. Bosworth et al. (eds.), \textit{The Encyclopaedia of Islam}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, Brill, Leiden 1960-2005).
\textsuperscript{16} On this figure see Hussein Ahmed, s.v. “Muḥammad Šafī,” in \textit{EAE}.
\textsuperscript{18} Interviewed by Hussein Ahmed, \textit{ṣayḥ} Muhammad Wale said that \textit{sayyid} Musāfīr came from a not well-specified “West” and that \textit{faqīh} Ḥāṣim received the \textit{qādiri} \textit{wird} also “from an unknown ḍīlm from Medina” (Hussein Ahmed, \textit{Islam in Nineteenth-Century}, p. 69).
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 Ahmad b. Šāliḥ 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 faqīh Hāsim with the Harari learned man and member of the Harari emir family Hāsim 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. Śayḥ Ahmad b. Šāliḥ 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. “Ḥāsim b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz,” in EAE. The affiliation of faqīh Hāsim 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) the Nağāši printing press, the main Islamic publishing house of the country based in Addis Ababa, published the İqāz himam al-ağbiyā’ bi-raṣḥ qaṭra min ṭarāğim al-‘ulamā’ wa-al-awliyā’ fi ǧumḥūriyyat İyūbiyā, a collection of short biographies of holy men written by the renowned Wāllo ṣayḥ Muḥammad Wale.  

Among the saints whose manāqib were published in the book there is also ṣayḥ Aḥmad b. Śāliḥ, trait d’union between the Harari and the Wāllo branches of the Qādirīyya. No factual detail about the life of ṣayḥ Aḥmad b. Śāliḥ is recorded in the short biographical note of the İqāz. 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. Śāliḥ “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 ṣayḥ Aḥmad, Muḥammad Wale reports only a single karāma which he himself seems to consider unbelievable. It is said that Aḥmad b. Śāliḥ on his way to Yəḡ̣uşu where he was to give the iğ̣aza 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 ǧīkr: she was actually the mother-to-be of ṣayḥ Gamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Annī. Besides the general skepticism of the author about karāmāt, in this specific tale

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).


Muhammad Wale stresses also a general theological inconsistency: it is highly questionable whether it is legitimate to give a sort of *iǧāza in absentia* to someone who is not (yet) alive.25

Notwithstanding its scanty amount of information, the section of the *Iqāz* is very interesting because it records the complete *silsila* of Aḥmad b. Ṣāliḥ. The spiritual genealogy connecting šayḫ Aḥmad back to ʿAbd 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 ʿAbd al-Razzāq (one of the sons of ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ḡilānī) down to ʿAḥlī al-Hāšimī, Šaraf al-Dīn and Baḥr al-Dīn ʿAḥmad, correspond to the physical and spiritual genealogy of the Āl al-Kīlānī al-Ḥamawī, the descendants of ʿAbd al-Qādir in the Syrian town of Ḥamā.27

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

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25 *Ibidem*, p. 139.
al-sayyid Abū Bakr ʿAbd al-Razzāq – qādī al-quḍāt al-sayyid Nāṣir (called al-Nāṣr in the Syrian source) – al-šayḥ Abū al-Nāṣr al-sayyid Muhammad – al-šayḥ 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 ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ḡilānī to settle in Ḥamā in 685/1286-87 on his way back from the haǧǧ (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-Hāšimī are not completely identical in the Syrian nasab and in the Ethiopian sīlīla but the relatively slight discrepancies between the two texts can be easily explained with some disruptions in the transmission. The only really missing person in the Syrian nasab is Ibrāḥīm al-Qādirī who, however, could be an avatar of Ibrāḥīm b. Ṣaraf al-Dīn b. Āḥmad b. Ṭāhib al-Qādirī who appears in the nasab of šayḥ ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kīlānī, naqīb al-ašrāf in Damascus (d. ca. 1172/1758-59).

As for sayyid Musāfir al-Maṣrībī, 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-Maṣrībī 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-Maṣrībī is nothing but a ghost name functioning to connect the Near-eastern sīlīla with Ethiopia.

The Īqāz also contains a cursive mention of the line of Qādirī spiritual descendancy initiated by šayḥ Āḥmad b. Ṣāliḥ. The sīlīla in this

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29 How the Syrian nasab came to be known in Ethiopia so that Muḥammad Wale could insert it in his book as a sīlīla is not clear. A feedback from an Arabic written source is most likely but cannot be proven.
A short note on a silsila of the Qadiryya

A short note on a silsila of the Qadiryya case is:


This is once more the famous Anna-Dana silsila, already recorded by J. Spencer Trimingham and then studied by Husseīn Ahmed.31 From the al-Danī al-Ṭānī, the Ethiopian Qadiryya 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 Ibrāhīm al-Ṭālī; ṣayḥ Abū al-Baṣṭ – ṣayḥ Mahmūd Kanz – ṣayḥ Šāhīd al-Dār 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 silsila thus includes the names of the main representatives of the Qadiryya of Wällo 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 Qadirī silsila known so far. Other silsilas based on different Qadirī centres in Wällo 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 Qadiryya in the whole region.

30 Muḥammad Wale, Ḩagā ḥimam al-ağbiyāʾ, p. 139.
32 Muḥammad Wale, Ḩagā ḥimam al-ağbiyāʾ, p. 139.