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

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Image courtesy of Shamil Jeppie, editor of the volume
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CONTENTS

Contents p. V
Notes on Transliteration p. VII
Notes on Contributors p. IX

INTRODUCTION

A plurality of historical and linguistic experiences
Nicola Melis – Mauro Nobili p. 1

SECTION I: HORN OF AFRICA

A short note on a silsila of the Qādiriyya brotherhood in Ethiopia
Alessandro Gori p. 17

Silvia Bruzzi p. 27

SECTION II: WESTERN AFRICA

Aḥmad b. Furṭū, 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 İşiksel p. 89
VI

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

Nicola Melis

SECTION IV: MISCELLANEA

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

albanese

Antonio Maria Pusceddu

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

Pejman Abdolmohammadi

“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

SECTION V: NOTES

Una nota sull’apporto fornito da Sībawayhi alla grammatica araba

Ali Kadem Kalati

A note on authorship in al-Suyūṭī’s works: Observations on the ‘Arf al-wardūfī ǧī ḥbār al-Mahdī

Michele Petrone


Evelin Grassi
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 dis-
tribution of the Islamic mystical brotherhoods in Ethiopia (and Eri-
trea), 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-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

* 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 maqām of ‘Abd al-Qādir and his mother Umm al-Ḥayr Fāṭima (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-Qādir and Umma Koda with a house for the congregational meetings of the Qādiriyya 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 (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. Emir ‘Abd al-Šakhr b. Yūsuf of Harar (d. 1794) had a mosque called ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ǧilānī built near the shrine of šayḥ Ḥusayn in the south Ethiopian region of Bale. In Asmara a modern mosque with a maqām perpetuates the memory of the eponymous of the Qādiriyya.

ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ǧilānī is invoked in devotional poems and prayers

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.


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 Ṭuf bi-ha‘lī sab‘an and a long pious supplication to ask for his help (Ya qūb yā rabbānī al-hayakal al-nūrānī Ṭuf bi-ha‘lī sab‘an). In many Ethiopian Muslim regions, famous Qadīrī centres exist: Anna in Rayya Qobbo (Wällo), Dana in Yağgu (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 Qadīrīyya (e.g. Ġamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Annī, d. 1882; Āḥmad b. Ġamāl al-Dīn Manṣūrī, d. 1903; ‘Īsā b. Ḥamza al-Qatbarī, d. 1947, ‘Umar b. Ḥa‘īr al-Ğalamsī, fl. first half of the 20th century) and contributed to enhance the influence and the prestige of the ṯarīqa.

Despite the apparent rooting of the brotherhood in the country, the history of the Qadīrīyya in Ethiopia has never been investigated by scholars and is therefore almost completely unknown. The ways the ṯarīqa 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, silsīlas, handbooks of doctrine, litanies and devotional texts) are still to be located, collected and critically published.

11 Dirk Bustorf, s.v. “Qatbare,” in EAE.
12 Mohammed Hassen, s.v. “Gälämso,” EAE.
It is often repeated in scholarly literature\(^\text{14}\) that the first introducer of the \textit{Qādiriy\={u}}ya 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 \textit{ṭaṟīqa} 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 \textit{Qādiriy\={u}}ya. While carrying out some field work in his native region, he came to know a local \textit{silsila} of the \textit{Qādiriy\={u}}ya that sheds light on the spread of the brotherhood from Harar into Wällo in the 19\(^{th}\) century.

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

\begin{quote}
\textit{Sayyid} Musāfīr – \textit{faqīh} Ḥāsim – Ahmad b. Ṣāliḥ – \textit{faqīh} Zubayr – \textit{ṣayḥ} Muhammad Šāfī (d. 1814/15)\(^\text{16}\) – 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).\(^\text{17}\)
\end{quote}

According to Hussein Ahmed’s informants, \textit{sayyid} Musāfīr was of Yemeni origin\(^\text{18}\) and thus was a \textit{trait-d’union} between the local Ethiopian \textit{Qādiriy\={u}}ya and the broader brotherhood network. He initiated to the \textit{Qādiri} \textit{wird} “a certain \textit{faqīh} Ḥāsim” of Harar who in his turn entrusted the \textit{ṭaṟīqa} to Ahmad b. Ṣāliḥ. The latter took the brother-
hood to Wállo 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 Wállo through šayḥ Aḥmad 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 faqīḥ Ḥāsim with the Harari learned man and member of the Harari emir family Ḥāsim b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (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 ṭird for the Qādiriyya brotherhood and a Harari poem, al-Muṣṭafā, known both in a shorter and a longer version.

2. Šayḥ Aḥmad b. Šāliḥ and his silsila

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

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²⁰ For some introductory information on him see Ewald Wagner, s.v. “Hāsim b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz,” in EAE. The affiliation of faqīḥ Ḥāsim 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)\(^{21}\) the Nağāṣī printing press, the main Islamic publishing house of the country based in Addis Ababa,\(^{22}\) published the \textit{Iqāż himam al-ağbihā’ bi-raṣḥ qātra min tarāḡim al-‘ulamā’ wa-al-awliyā’} fi ḡumhūrīyyat Ḥyūbhīyā, a collection of short biographies of holy men written by the renowned Wāllo šayḥ Muḥammad Wale.\(^{23}\)

Among the saints whose \textit{manāqib} were published in the book there is also šayḥ Aḥmad b. Šāliḥ, \textit{trait d’union} between the Harari and the Wāllo branches of the \textit{Qādiriyya}. No factual detail about the life of šayḥ Aḥmad b. Šāliḥ is recorded in the short biographical note of the \textit{Iqāż}.\(^{24}\) 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. Šāliḥ “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 šayḥ Aḥmad, Muḥammad Wale reports only a single \textit{karāma} which he himself seems to consider unbelievable. It is said that Aḥmad b. Šāliḥ on his way to Yāḡā where he was to give the \textit{iğāza} 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 \textit{ğikr}: she was actually the mother-to-be of šayḥ Gamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Annī. Besides the general skepticism of the author about \textit{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. 10\(^{th}\) 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.  

Notwithstanding its scanty amount of information, the section of the ḥalāla of Aḥmad b. Ṣāliḥ. The spiritual genealogy connecting šayḫ Aḥmad back to ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ġilānī 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-Ġilānī) down to ‘Alī al-Ḫāsimī, Šarāf al-Dīn and Baḥr al-Dīn Aḥmad, correspond to the physical and spiritual genealogy of the Āl al-Ġilānī al-Ḫamawī, the descendants of ‘Abd al-Qādir in the Syrian town of Ḥamā.  

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

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25 Ibidem, p. 139.
al-sayyid Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Razzāq – qādī al-quḍāt al-sayyid Nāṣir (called al-Nāṣr in the Syrian source) – al-ṣayḥ Abū al-Nāṣr al-sayyid Muhammad – al-ṣayḥ Zahir al-Dīn al-sayyid Aḥmad – Sayf al-Dīn al-sayyid Yahiyyā. Sayf al-Dīn Yahiyyā (d. 734/1333-34) was the first member of the offspring of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Įlānī to settle in Ḫamā in 685/1286-87 on his way back from the haγγ (hence his nickname nāzīl Ḫamā) and from him the whole Āl Kīlānī group originated. The names from Sayf al-Dīn Yahiyyā back to al-sayyid ‘Alī al-Hāšimī are not completely identical in the Syrian nasab and in the Ethiopian silsila 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-Hāšimī who appears in the nasab of ṣayḥ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kīlānī, nāqīb al-aʃrāf in Damascus (d. ca. 1172/1758-59). 29

As for sayyid Musāfīr 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 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 Musāfīr 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 Musāfīr 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 ṣayḥ Aḥmad b. Šāliḥ. The silsila in this

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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.
A short note on a silsila of the Qādiriyya 25

case is:


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

al-ṣayḥ al-Sayyid b. al-sayyid Ibrāḥīm al-Ṭalī; ṣayḥ Abū al-Basṭ – ṣayḥ Mahmūd Kanz – ṣayḥ Šāhīd al-Dīr ṣayḥ al-Kāramī who was, in his turn, master of al-ḥāḍǧī Muḥḥammad 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 Muḥḥammad Wale, Ḥiẓāṣ himam al-aḡbiyā‘, p. 139.
32 Muḥḥammad Wale, Ḥiẓāṣ himam al-aḡbiyā‘, p. 139.