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

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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, ṭarīqa, 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 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

ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ġilānī (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 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 (gūgal), 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 Qādiryya 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-Šakīr b. Yūsuf of Harar (d. 1794) had a mosque called ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Gīlānī 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 Qādiryya.

‘Abd al-Qādir al-Gīlānī 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.

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with the names of local Ethiopian holy men. The text collection recited during the mawlid ceremony in Harar contains a poem attributed to ʿAbd al-Qādir (Ṭuf bi-ḥālī sabʿan) and a long pious supplication to ask for his help (Yā ṣufū yā rabbānī al-hayakal al-nūrānī ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ǧīlānī). In many Ethiopian Muslim regions, famous Qādirī centres exist: Anna in Rayya Qobbo (Wällo), Dana in Yəğū (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. Ǧamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Annī, d. 1882; Ahmad b. Ādam al-Dānī, d. 1903; ʿĪsā b. Ḥamza al-Qatbara d. 1947, ʿUmar b. ‘Alī al-Ǧalamsī, 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, silsilas, handbooks of doctrine, litanies and devotional texts) are still to be located, collected and critically published.

11 Dirk Bustorf, s.v. “Qatbære,” in EAE.
12 Mohammed Hassen, s.v. “Gālāmso,” EAE.
It is often repeated in scholarly literature\(^\text{14}\) 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.\(^\text{15}\) 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 *Qādiriyya*. While carrying out some field work in his native region, he came to know a local *silṣila* of the *Qādiriyya* that sheds light on the spread of the brotherhood from Harar into Wällo in the 19th century.

The *silṣila* published by Hussein Ahmed runs as follows:

\[
\text{Sayyid Musāfir} – \text{faqīḥ Hāṣim} – \text{Ahmad b. Šāliḥ} – \text{faqīḥ Zubayr} – \text{ṣayḥ Muhammad Šāfī} (d. 1814/15)\(^\text{16}\) – Muhammad b. faqīḥ Zubayr – ṣayḥ Ğamal al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Anṭā – Ahmad b. Ādam (d. 1903) – Muḥammad Yasin (d. 1924); sayyid Ibrāhīm (d. 1956).\(^\text{17}\)
\]

According to Hussein Ahmed’s informants, *sayyid* Musāfir was of Yemeni origin\(^\text{18}\) 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 faqīḥ Hāṣim” of Harar who in his turn entrusted the *ṭarīqa* to Ahmad b. Šāliḥ. 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 *Qādiriyya* is still unclear as some sources point instead to his affiliation to the *Ṣāḥīliyya* (Oscar Lōfgrén, 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, ṣayḥ Muḥammad Wale said that *sayyid* Musāfir came from a not well-specified “West” and that faqīḥ Hāṣim received the *qādiri wird* 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-hāğ Buṣrā 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 faqih Ḥāsim with the Harari learned man and member of the Harari emir family Ḥāsim 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 wīrd 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


20 For some introductory information on him see Ewald Wagner, s.v. “Ḥāsim b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz,” in EAE. The affiliation of faqih 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)\textsuperscript{21} the Nağāşî printing press, the main Islamic publishing house of the country based in Addis Ababa,\textsuperscript{22} published the \textit{Iqâz himam al-ağbiyā’ bi-raš ṣaṭra min tarāğim al-‘ulamā’ wa-al-awliyā’ fi ġumhūriyyat Iyyūbiyā}, a collection of short biographies of holy men written by the renowned Wâllo šayḥ Muḥammad Wale.\textsuperscript{23}

Among the saints whose manāqib were published in the book there is also šayḥ Aḥmad b. Šâliḥ, \textit{trait d’union} between the Harari and the Wâllo branches of the Qâdirīyya. No factual detail about the life of šayḥ Aḥmad b. Šâliḥ is recorded in the short biographical note of the \textit{Iqâz}.\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. Šâliḥ “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 karāma which he himself seems to consider unbelievable. It is said that Aḥmad b. Šâliḥ on his way to Yâḡğu where he was to give the ʻiǧāza 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 ġikr: she was actually the mother-to-be of šayḥ Gamâl al-Dîn Muḥammad al-Annî. 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, \textit{Iqâz 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 iḫāza in absentia to someone who is not (yet) alive.\textsuperscript{25}

Notwithstanding its scanty amount of information, the section of the Iḫāz is very interesting because it records the complete silsila of Aḥmad b. Ṣālīḥ. The spiritual genealogy connecting šayḥ Aḥmad back to ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḡīlānī 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-Ḡīlānī) down to ‘Alī al-Hāṣimī, 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.\textsuperscript{27}

In particular, the \textit{nasab} of this šarīf group almost literally confirms the section of the Ethiopian \textit{silsila/nasab}: ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Ḡīlānī –

\textsuperscript{25} Ibidem, p. 139.
al-sayyid Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Razzāq – qāṭī al-qudāt al-sayyid Nāṣir (called al-Naṣr in the Syrian source) – al-ṣayḥ Abū al-Naṣr al-sayyid Muhammad – al-ṣayḥ Žahīr 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-Ġilānī to settle in Ḥamā in 685/1286-87 on his way back from the ḥaqq (hence his nickname naṣīl Ḥamā) and from him the whole Āl Kīlānī group originated. The names from Sayf al-Dīn Yahyā 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. 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 šayḥ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kīlānī, naqīb al-āṣrāf in Damascus (d. ca. 1172/1758-59).

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

The Ḥaqq also contains a cursive mention of the line of Qādirī spiritual descendency initiated by šayḥ Aḥmad b. Šāliḥ. The silsila 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 silsila 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 silsila, already recorded by J. Spencer Tringham 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 ʿΑḥmad al-Dār ṣayḥ al-Karamī 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 Muḥammad Wale, Ḥaqāʾiq himam al-aḫbāriyyāʾ, p. 139.
32 Muḥammad Wale, Ḥaqāʾiq himam al-aḫbāriyyāʾ, p. 139.