The ‘Emergence’ of the Verse Tradition in Mauritania: Intellectual History and the Culture of Islamic Scholarship in the “Land of Million Poets.”

by

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Abstract

This study focuses on the vibrant literary-intellectual tradition of the classical Arabic poetry of Mauritania and the role it has played in Saharan knowledge production and transmission. It attempts to illuminate an important and understudied facet of Afro-Islamic intellectual and artistic history: the Arabic poetic tradition that embodied and popularized the intellectual thought and doctrines of Saharan (and West African) Muslim scholars and continues to shape the culture of Islamic scholarship in the region. Despite its outsize influence throughout the region, this intellectual tradition has received scant Europhone academic attention. Studies on the Sahara generally and Mauritania specifically have largely focused on the political and socio-economic dimensions of the region's history, thereby neglecting its important and widely influential intellectual traditions and their history. While a few excellent scholarly works have been published on the history, Islamic texts, and prominent Muslim intellectuals of Mauritania, other works have examined the poetic and Islamic scholarly writings as literary productions and important sources for social history. However, despite these contributions, there is still no comprehensive study on the history of Mauritania's and the Sahara's rich Arabo-Islamic intellectual/literary traditions *as such.*

This study addresses this lacuna through a historical investigation into the so-called 'emergence' of Mauritania's celebrated Arabic poetic tradition that reportedly emerged in the seventeenth to eighteenth century. Specifically, the project seeks to understand why and how this tradition reportedly emerged, when and where it did, and how it has shaped the region's culture of Islamic scholarship and Mauritanian culture ever since. Firstly, it explores the socio-political, economic, religious, and intellectual milieu of seventeenth to eighteenth-century Mauritania, expanding its focus to the broader West African context. Furthermore, examining the lives and contributions of key figures such as Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-ʿAlawī (d. 1731/2) and Muḥammad ibn Saʿīd al-Yadālī (d. 1753), recognized as founders of this poetic/intellectual tradition, alongside later eighteenth to nineteenth century scholars, the research illuminates the intellectual landscape and social factors that led to the reported emergence and eventual dominance of this poetic tradition. In other words, by way of a literary archaeology of texts among other dynamics, this study is a critical examination of how specific political, economic, and intellectual trends of the region came together to create the conditions for the rise and perpetuation of this intellectual and social tradition.

Dedication

To my beloved father, rest on.

For Irfan Bux, my dearest brother—still on the journey with me.

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
صَلَّىٰ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَآلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ

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Contents

CHAPTER I: MAURITANIA: THE "LAND OF MILLION POETS" AND ITS ARABIC POETRY TRADITION

In eloquence there is magic, in knowledge ignorance,
in poetry wisdom, and in speech heaviness.[1]
- Prophet Muḥammad

Some poetry contains wisdom.[2]
- Prophet Muḥammad

Introduction

In 2008, I departed Damascus, where I had been studying various Arabo-Islamic disciplines, for Mauritania, where I ended up spending several years to continue my studies as a student of sacred knowledge. I had chosen to study at a celebrated and reputable traditional centre of Islamic learning (*Maḥḍara*) in al-Nabbāghiyya, one of several desert villages in Mauritania dedicated to Islamic and Arabic education. On one occasion, a fellow student and friend named ʿAbd al-Malik fell ill. One of our shaykhs, a master teacher at the *Maḥḍara*, noticed his absence and, upon learning of his illness, paid him a visit after class.

Seated by the ailing student for a little while, the Shaykh, after a moment of silent supplication (*duʿāʾ*) for the student requested a pen and paper. Upon delivery, he remained in his sitting position for a few seconds in what looked like a state of silent contemplation. Finally, he brought his pen onto the paper, scribbling as we watched. When he had finished writing, he handed the sick student the piece of paper. In those few minutes, the Shaykh had composed some poetic verses in a short metre (*rajaz*) on the student's state of health, invoking God for his

[1] Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ashʿath al-Sijistānī, *Sunan*, Ḥadīth 5012, Book 42. Available at What Has Been Narrated about Poetry

[2] Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukharī, *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Ḥadīth 872, Book 36, Available at Poetry

healing (*shifāʾ*) him. Those of us who were at the time unfamiliar with the tradition of poetry and verse-making were astonished by the Shaykh's composition of the verses in beautiful prosodic form. We were, in fact, so impressed that we took to committing the verses to memory immediately. The initial couplet of the poem went as follows:

> Narjū bi faḍl al-Maliki
> Shifāʾan li ʿAbd al-Maliki
>
> Wa lā yazālu baytuhu
> yanfukhu bi ʿarf al-zaki
>
> We seek in the graciousness of *al-Malik*
> Healings for *ʿAbd al-Malik*
>
> And may his dwelling place
> Exude pure sweet fragrance.

At a later instance, a similar scenario unfolded with a different teacher when I found myself unwell. I had gone to his house for my daily lessons of the Egyptian Jamāl al-Dīn b. Hishām al-Anṣārī's (d. 1360) Arabic grammar text, *Qaṭr al-Nadà wa-Ball al-Ṣadà.* Sensing my ailment during our lesson, he took a moment to compose some poetic verses, offering prayers for my recovery.

During my stays with and visits to different people in Mauritania, I encountered numerous instances of poetic expressions, ranging from scholarly exhibitions to exchanges among students and moments of leisure. In contemporary contexts in other parts of the Arabo-Muslim world, during occasions like the ones described above, the most likely recommendation of a Muslim scholar would be the recitation of certain prayers based on transmitted supplications from the Qur'an, Ḥadīth (prophetic traditions), and litanies by Sufi scholars and saints. Mauritanian scholars, however, would compose verses or versify supplications or prayers on a regular basis.

Poetry or the art of verse-making is a fixture in the lives of Mauritanians—an important medium of intellectual and scholarly discourse.[3] It is a rarity for a Mauritanian scholar not to have composed a collection of poetry, and even rarer it is not to find gatherings of students where some form of poetry and verses are sung, chanted, or recited.

[3] In the Arabic language, poetry (*shiʿr*) literally means "to feel" from the etymological root *sh-ʿ-r*. It also means "to know" (*ʿalima* from the root *ʿ-l-m,* i.e., *ʿilm* - knowledge). According to Arabic lexicographers such as Muḥammad ibn Mukarram ibn Manẓūr (d. 1312) in his *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Tongue of the Arab), the word *shiʿr* is used in the Qur'an to mean "to have knowledge" of a thing. In some cases, it is used to refer to one's astuteness, intelligence (*faṭna*) (See http://www.baheth.info/ entry word *sh-ʿ-r*). However, in a comprehensive context, Ibn Manẓūr defines *shiʿr* as structured words or those with inherent structural harmony (*manẓūm al-qawl*). He posits that the word takes on this extended meaning due to its association with meters and structured rhyming patterns. To illustrate, he points to words like "*fiqh*," which originally signifies "understanding/knowledge," yet through elevation, it becomes commonly recognized as Islamic jurisprudence/law. Similarly, the term "*najm*," initially referring to stars, extends to encompass galaxies in orbit. Ibn Manẓūr cites Abū Manṣūr Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Azharī (d. 980), an Arabic lexicographer, philologist and grammarian who also explains the word *shiʿr* to mean "defined composition" *al-qarīḍ al-maḥdūd* with distinct features without violating stipulated rules (*lā yujāwizuhā*). He adds that a *shāʿir* (pl. *shuʿarā*) is described as a poet because he or she feels or possesses knowledge of what no other feels or has knowledge of. It is important to mention here that *qaṣīda* and *naẓm* are words or concepts that can be – and are – oftentimes used interchangeably with *shiʿr* because they encompass and connote similar meanings. While *qaṣīda,* literally from the root *q-ṣ-d,* is "to mean or intend" something, "to go toward something, to endeavor to reach an end", it is, however, the composition of poem through the application of poetic rules such as meters, scales, and rhymed ends in verses. *Naẓm,* from the root *n-z-m* literally means arranging words to have "compositional harmony". That is, to have "structural orderliness." It also means "to versify." In other words, it is the compositional harmony of ideas, thoughts, or even transferal of literary contents from prose forms to possess poetic features and structures. In the Arabic language, one can use the word *naẓm* in different constructions like: *naẓamtu baʿḍ abyāt* (I composed some poetry verses) or *naẓamtu shiʿran* (I composed a poem).

In different parts of Mauritania, an extensive spectrum of written compositions: — encompassing book introductions and forewords, religious and educational texts, panegyrics (*madāʾiḥ*), *responsa* (*radd*), political campaigns, polemics, and even correspondences (*rasāʾil*) are either composed in poetic forms or presented in verse. Hence, it is no wonder that Charles C. Stewart observed that approximately over half of the 10,000 manuscripts noted in *Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of Mauritania and the Western Sahara* are composed in verse.[4] This is also notable in catalogues of literary works by Mauritanian scholars such as Ulrich Rebstock's *Maurische Literaturgeschichte*.[5] The tradition of Arabic poetry and verse-making in Mauritania is said to have 'emerged' relatively late in the later part of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. In other words, the earliest poetry from the region surfaced during this later timeframe. This raises some crucial inquiries: What does this "emergence" (*nashʾa*) of the

[4] Charles C. Stewart and Sidi Ahmed ould Ahmed Salim, *Arabic Literature of Africa, Vol. 5, The Writings of Mauritania and the Western Sahara* (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 8.

[5] See Ibid.; Charles C. Stewart, *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts among the Ahl al-Shaykh Sidiyā, Boutilimit, Mauritania* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991); Ulrich Rebstock, *Maurische Literaturgeschichte* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2001). The same applies to other Saharan and West African countries ranging from the ones at the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmed-Baba (CEDRAB) in Timbuktu, Mali to the Nigerian National Archives Kaduna, Nigeria. See Sidi Amar Ould Ely, *Handlists of Manuscripts in the Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Historiques Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu*, Vols. 1-10 (ed.) Julian Johansen (London: al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 1995) and Baba Yunus Muhammad, *Handlists of Manuscripts in the Nigerian National Archives of Kaduna*, Vols. 1-3, (ed.) John Hunwick (London: al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 1995). See also Bruce S. Hall and Charles Stewart, "The Historic "Core Curriculum" and the Book Market in Islamic West Africa" in *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa*, (eds.) Graziano Kratli and Ghislaine Lydon (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2011): 109-174.

classical Arabic poetry tradition in this later period truly signify?[6] What characterized the landscape of poetry and verse-making in Mauritania before these earliest works surfaced? Could this emergence phenomenon be seen as a "renaissance" (*nahḍa*) or a "revival" (*tajdīd*) of an older intellectual tradition that lay quiet or unexpressed? If so, what factors contributed to the scarcity or inactivity of poetic expressions in the region's literary history beforehand? Unraveling these inquiries involves understanding the poets behind these works, their motives, and the contextual factors that influenced their composition. What socio-political, economic, and religious shifts occurred during this time that may have propelled this literary emergence? How did the intellectual climate of the seventeenth to eighteenth century contribute to this phenomenon? Furthermore, what impact did these developments have on the culture of Islamic scholarship in the region? Can we understand the emergence of this poetic phenomenon through the culture of Islamic education and scholarship in the region as reflected in the intellectual pursuits of Mauritanian scholars and students within their Islamic institutions (*Maḥḍara*)?

These inquiries, coupled with my personal experiences in Mauritania, motivated a deep interest in delving into the historical exploration of Mauritania's Arabo-Islamic intellectual traditions with a particular focus on the reported emergence of the Arabic poetic tradition of the region. It seeks to comprehend the reasons and factors behind the reported emergence, its temporal and geographical context, the role it played in reshaping intellectual and literary landscapes, and why these poetic genres have remained the favoured medium for the articulation

[6] *Nashʾa* (emergence), as distinct from "*nahḍa*" (renaissance) and "*tajdīd*" (revival) is employed by scholars of Mauritanian poetry and literary heritage such as Mohamed El Mokhtar ould Bah (d. 2023) in Mohamed El Mokhtar ould Bah, *al-Shiʿr waʾl-Shuʿarāʾ fī Mūritāniyā* (Rabat: Dār al-Amān liʾl-Nashr waʾl-Tawzīʿ, 2003).

of Islamic scholarship in the region ever since. My approach will be to critically examine the complex relationships between the material, socio-political, literary, and intellectual contexts to understand how these factors came together in specific historical circumstances to create a new, vibrant, and enduring intellectual and literary tradition in Mauritania.

Mauritania, the Muslim World and Arabic Poetry

Mauritania, in contemporary terms, is a geographic concept or expression, but in centuries past, before the imposition of colonial borders by the French, it bore a multitude of names and descriptions, each rooted in distinct historical events and trajectories. Historians and scholars of Mauritania, including al-Khalīl al-Naḥwī in his work *Bilād Shinqīṭ al-manāra wa'l-ribāṭ*,[7] and al-Mukhtār wuld Ḥāmidun (d. 1993) in his *Ḥayāt Mūrītāniyā*,[8] have elucidated some of these names in their works. One of them is *Bilād* Shinqīṭ, meaning, the Lands of Shinqīṭ, as reflected in the title of Aḥmad al-Amīn's book, *al-Wasīṭ fī Tarājim Udabāʾ Shinqīṭ*.[9] In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Shinqīṭ (Chinguetti), a city in northern Mauritania, located on the Adrar Plateau east of Atar was renowned for its exceptional Islamic scholarship, making it a crucial hub for scholars and students seeking sacred knowledge. Historically, it also served as a significant assembly point for pilgrims journeying to and returning from the Hijaz, the site of Mecca and Medina, and as a hub along the caravan and trans-Saharan trade route. In earlier

[7] Al-Khalīl al-Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīṭ al-manāra wa'l-ribāṭ. ʿArḍ li'l-ḥayāt al-ʿilmiyya wa'l-ishʿāʿ al-thaqāfī wa'l-jihād al-dīnī min khilāl al-jāmiʿāt al-badawiya al-mutanaqila* (*al-maḥāḍir*) (Tunis: al-Munaẓẓama al-ʿarabiyya li-tarbiya wa'l-thaqāfa wa'l-ʿulūm, 1987).

[8] Mukhtār wuld Ḥāmidun, *Ḥayāt Mūrītāniyā ḥawādith al-sinīn Arbaʿat qurūn min tāʾrīkh Mūrītāniyā wa jiwārihā,* (ed.) Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Aḥmad Sālim (Nouakchott: Maktabat ʿAskar*,* 1993).

[9] Ahmād al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī, *al-Waṣīṭ fī Tarājim Udabāʾ Shinqīṭ* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Khānijā, 1911); al-Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīṭ al-manāra wa'l-ribāṭ,* 20

times, Shinqīṭ was primarily inhabited by the Zawāyā Īdaw ʿAlī tribe. However, due to the city's historical fame, the inhabitants of Mauritania, both then and now, are often referred to as "the People of Shinqīṭ" (al-Shanāqiṭa in plural, al-Shinqīṭī in singular).

Mauritanians pronounce the place name Shingīṭ, and because the sound "g" does not have a letter in Arabic, it is represented differently in different parts of the Arabic-speaking world. Because *qāf* is often pronounced as "g" in Mauritanian and many other dialects of Arabic, Mauritanians generally write the name with a *qāf*. However, in most texts authored by Mauritanian scholars before the nineteenth century, the spelling "Shinjīṭ" with the Arabic letter *jīm* was traditionally observed. These shifts in the alphabets used remain uncertain in its origins.

The decline in Shinqīṭ's prominence began in the seventeenth century due to conflicts among the Īdaw ʿAlī, prompting many to relocate to Tijikja.[10] Such feuds were common features in the lives of medieval and pre-colonial Moorish communities, leading to the abandonment of their lands and migrations to new territories. This phenomenon gave rise to the descriptor "*al-Bilād al-Sāʾiba*" (Land of Anarchy or outside of organized state structure) for certain areas in Mauritania.[11] This term was frequently employed by nineteenth-century scholars like Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh wuld al-Hājj Ibrāhīm (d. 1816/8), Maylūd ibn Mukhtār Khay al-Bārikī al-Daymānī (d. 1872), and Shaykh Muḥammad al-Māmī ibn al-Bukhārī al-Bārikī (d. 1875). Shaykh Sīdiyā Bābā (d. 1868) referred to the region as "*al-Bilād al-Maghribiyya al-Ṣaḥrawiyya al-Bayḍāniyya*" (The 'White' Saharan Maghrib Lands).[12] Moreover, what is now recognized as Mauritania shared

[10] Harry T. Norris, "Muslim Sanhāja Scholars of Mauritania," in *Studies in West African Islamic History, The Cultivators of Islam,* (ed.) John Ralph Willis, (London: Frank Cass, 1979): 149.

[11] al-Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīṭ al-manāra wa'l-ribāṭ,* 18-19.

[12] These terms and their references can be found in al-Naḥwī's *Bilād Shinqīṭ*.

historical connections with the ancient Ghana Kingdom (*Mamlakat Ghānā*) or the Ghana Empire (*Imbirāṭūriyya Ghānā*), straddling from southeastern Mauritania to western Mali between the tenth and the early thirteenth centuries. Following the fall of Ghana, these regions were at times considered part of the Mali Empire (*Mamlakat Mālī*) from the thirteenth century, covering modern-day Senegal, southern Mauritania, Mali, northern Burkina Faso, western Niger, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, and northern Ghana. Furthermore, parts of contemporary Mauritania were also associated with the territory of "*Bilād al-Takrūr*" (the Lands of Takrūr) as reflected in the title of the prosopography, *Fatḥ al-Shakūr fī Maʿrifat Aʿyān ʿUlamāʾ al-Takrūr*, written by the Mauritanian scholar al-Ṭālib Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr al-Ṣiddīq al-Bāritaylī al-Walātī (d. 1805).[13] Takrūr, an entity from the ninth to thirteenth centuries, was situated in the Senegal valley, bordering present-day Mauritania and Senegal. However, from the thirteenth century onward, the term was misused by Arab writers from the East to refer

[13] al-Ṭālib Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr al-Ṣiddīq al-Bāritaylī al-Walātī, *Fatḥ al-Shakūr fī Maʿrifat Aʿyān ʿUlamāʾ al-Takrūr*, (eds.) ʿAbd Wadūd wuld ʿAbd Allāh and Aḥmad Jamāl wuld al-Ḥasan (Cairo: Dār Najībawayh li'l-Barmajat wa'l-Dirāsāt, wa'l-Ṭibāʿat wa'l-Nashr, 2010). There are other names Mauritania was known by including "*Bilād al-Maghāfira*" due to the arrival of the Banū Maghfar, an Arab tribe from North Africa to the Sahara.[13] Another term is "*Ṣaḥrā al-Mulaththamīn*," used to refer to the Berber tribes of Lamtūna, Masūfa, and Gudāla inhabiting various Sahara regions, key to the Almoravid movement. These Ṣanhāja people donned blue-dyed woolen cloaks safeguarding them from the sun and desert sand. Wrapped in turban-like head coverings, they also veiled their faces with a cloth (*talthīm*) from above the nose downward, earning them the name "*mulaththamūn*" (singular: *mulaththam*, meaning "those who cover the face"). This tradition, attributed to the patriarch Ḥimyar of the Banū Lamṭūna, has been passed through generations. Some say it is also associated with a historical event that brought them shame. Other names were *Bilād al-Mankab al-Barzakhī* and *Bilād al-Fatra* because it was known as the partition from the other parts of the world.

to individuals of present-day Mauritania to Darfur origin.[14] Beyond its association solely with Mauritania, the term Takrūr persisted in some form well into the nineteenth century among West African writers. Muḥammad Bello (d. 1837), son of ʿUthmān ibn Fūdī (d. 1817), the founder of the Sokoto caliphate in present-day Nigeria, titled one of his works *Infāq al-Maysūr fī Tārīkh al-Takrūr*, further extending the use and reference to this term within West African historical narratives.

In recent times, Mauritania has become known by the epithet the "Land of Million Poets" (*Balad al-milyūn shāʿir*). This bonmot was coined by Muḥammad Tāhā al-Ḥājirī (d.1994) sometime in April 1967 in *al-ʿArabī*, a Kuwaiti monthly cultural magazine. He gave the country this epithet after observing Mauritanians' deep-rooted love for and preoccupation with poetry and its role in their social, political, and intellectual lives.[15] The term "million" was a nod to the country's population at that time, a figure he had inquired about, implying the extensive reach of poetry throughout the populace. This nickname swiftly found its way into media discourse as a succinct reference to Mauritania's poetic heritage.

Poetry in the lives of Mauritanians is described as an "essential bread" (*khubz jawharī*) consumed by the people who never feel satiated by it, and some describe poetry as the alchemy of happiness for every Mauritanian.[16] While the "one million" might refer to a statistical number at the time, it is also plausible that it was triggered by some symbolic events of the time in the

[14] For comprehensive information on the origins of the name, see Umar al-Naqar, "Takrur: The History of a Name," *Journal of African History*, vol. x, 3 (1969): 365-374.

[15] Sakīna Aṣnib, "["The Land of Million Poets:" Media Exaggeration Sparks Debate in Mauritania: The Proliferation of Poetry Supports it, While the Scarcity of Publication Refutes it](), " *Alarabiyya News*, January 04, 2011.

[16] Ibid.

Arab world, specifically in North Africa. For example, post-colonial Algeria became known as the "Land of Million Martyrs" (*balad al-milyūn shahīd*), a sobriquet birthed as a consequence of the rise of the Algerian liberation revolution fighting for independence in the late 1950s to early 60s against the French colonial occupation which reportedly led to the massacre of a million or more Algerians. Algeria's neighbour, Libya, is sometimes called the "Land of Million Memorizers" (*Balad al-milyūn ḥāfiẓ*) in reference to many memorizers of the Qur'an.[17]

Today, Mauritania's recognition extends well beyond Aḥmād al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī's (d. 1906) seminal anthology of Mauritanian poets, *al-Waṣīṭ fī Tarājim Udabāʾ Shinqīṭ*.[18] This significant literary work, the first of its kind from Mauritania, was written during al-Amīn's residency in Egypt in the early twentieth century. During his stay, his host al-Sayyid Muḥammad Amīn al-Khānajī, impressed by al-Amīn's vast knowledge and remembrance of his homeland's noteworthy literary legacy, requested him to compile a collection showcasing the poetry of the Mauritanian people.[19] With al-Khānajī's support and printing capabilities, the work was published in Egypt, marking the initiation of Mauritanian literary heritage's introduction to audiences in Egypt and the broader Muslim world. Nevertheless, in recent decades, Mauritania has gained recognition and acclaim across the Arab and Muslim world for its remarkable 'discovery'—a treasure trove of poets, a rich tradition of poetry, and adept verse-making.

While I will not draw direct parallels with Mauritania, the historical developments, undercurrents and significance of Arabic poetry across the Muslim world hold tremendous

[17] Raḥma al-Hamādī, "This Morning - The Tablet and the Inkwell...for Memorizing the Holy Quran in Libya," *Al-Jazeera News*, March 16, 2018.

[18] Ahmād al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī, *al-Waṣīṭ fī Tarājim Udabāʾ Shinqīṭ* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Khānijā, 1911).

[19] Ibid., 11-12.

relevance in shaping the narrative and history of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania prior to and during its reported emergence in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century.[20] Arabic poetry has maintained a significant role in the broader historical context of Islamic culture. From the inception of Islam, poetry has held a profound and essential place within the Muslim world. It originated within the culturally rich oral landscape of Arabia. Ancient Arabic poetry, being the oldest artistic expression in Arab culture, held significant prominence, and appealed to both popular and elite circles alike.[21] Prior to the emergence of Islam, Arabia celebrated its rich poetic tradition through an annual cultural festival hosted at the famous Sūq al-ʿUkāẓ, a vibrant seasonal market nestled between Nakhla and al-Ṭāʾif in present-day Saudi Arabia. This gathering served as a platform for poets to recite and showcase their poetic mastery. It elevated exceptional verses composed by distinguished poets to a realm of celebration.

Among the ancient Arabs, the words of the poet known as *shāʿir* (pl. *shuʿarāʾ*) wielded an ominous power believed to carry fatal consequences upon his targets. Comparable to arrows, his verses bore the weight of a solemn curse like prophetic or priestly declarations, their potency akin to that of divine inspiration.[22] The *shāʿir*'s most profound prowess lay in the realm of satire (*hijā*): to mock adversaries, publicly shaming and dishonouring them. Furthermore, these poets

[20] To maintain focus and relevance, this discussion restricts itself to the developments of poetry within specific time frames and geographical contexts pertinent to the subject under examination, while also acknowledging the significant historical developments in core Arab regions and other parts of the Muslim world.

[21] Elisabeth Kendall, "Jihadist Propaganda and its Exploration of the Arab Poetic Tradition," in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage,* (eds.) Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 2016): 223.

[22] Arthur John Arberry, *Arabic Poetry: A Primer for Students* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press: 1965): 3.

employed their mastery in producing structured verses and rhymes to convey messages steeped in tribal fervour, boasting, vulgarity, and other societal themes.[23]

The profound impact of poetry and verse-making reverberated deeply within the collective consciousness. Their influence stretched to elevating or diminishing authority, disseminating ideas, demonstrating intellectual prowess and eliciting emotions. In contemporary parlance, their power resembled the "viral" spread of content, reaching and resonating widely across society. Endorsement from a celebrated poet bestowed enduring fame, respect, and commemoration upon individuals, families, tribes or even objects.[24] Equally, becoming the subject of derision in the verses of distinguished poets led to enduring shame and detriment

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[23] Arberry, *Arabic Poetry,* 3.

[24] To illustrate this point, the case of Maymūn ibn Qays al-Aʿshā al-Kabīr, one of the prominent pre-Islamic poets who came close to accepting Islam ("*kāda al-Islām*") and a poor Arabian man by the name of al-Muḥallaq al-Kilābī comes to mind. It is reported that al-Kilābī had eight grown daughters with no man expressing marriage interest in any of them due to his extreme poverty. Upon hearing about the news of al-Aʿshā traveling through the desert, al-Kilābī's wife, a woman of sound knowledge, suggested to him that they should take advantage of it. She proposed to her husband to make a campsite on the poet's way so they could host him, serve him nice wine, and slaughter their only camel for him in the hopes that when the poet was drunk, and in appreciation of his hosts' benevolence, he would compose poetic verses in praise of al-Kilābī and his family. They did as planned, offering him the best parts of the camel and copious amounts of wine. Over drinks and food, they struck up a conversation and al-Kilābī answered all the poet's questions about his family and life. Al-Aʿshā would later compose a few verses of eloquent poetry in praise of al-Kilābī and his family. The verses would afterward be heard in all of Arabia and recited at the famous Sūq al-ʿUkāẓ. In no time, things turned around for the man and his family, thereby making him famous and attracting different suitors from the noble families of Arabia seeking the hands of his daughters in marriage. He was offered hundreds of camels as dowry (See Maymūn ibn Qays al-Aʿshā al-Kabīr, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Aʿshā al-Kabīr,* (ed.) Mahdī Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn*,* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿilmiyyah, 1993). This narrative, taken as it stands, eloquently heralds the importance of poetry, emphasizing its profound role in ancient Arab consciousness. It vividly illustrates the authority wielded by poets and highlights the resounding impact of poetic expression in their society.

across generations.[25] This is why poets in ancient Arabia were lavishly hosted, receiving abundant food and unparalleled hospitality wherever they journeyed. Poets were both adored and dreaded. People trod cautiously, fearful of offending them due to the potential destruction their verses could wreak—their eloquence and venom holding immense power.[26]

It was within this richly oral and poetic society that the Qur'an was revealed. This revelation struck the people profoundly, presenting a challenge due to its distinct nature. While not strictly poetry, its language resonated poetically, presenting a structural uniqueness that captivated even the most adept poets of ancient Arabian society. The Qur'an's distinctive form posed a challenge to poets, beckoning them to match its eloquence and style. Yet, beyond its aesthetic prowess, the Qur'an fundamentally called for the abandonment of pagan Arab practices and a transition towards monotheism, urging a departure from tribal codes in favour of Islamic ethics.[27] In essence, the Qur'an's Author scrutinized and at times critiqued the customs and beliefs entrenched within ancient Arab society, including their perceptions on poets and poetry.

There are several mentions of poetry and poets in numerous places in the Qur'an. For example, Qur'an 21:5 is about the rejecters of Islam's description of the Prophet Muḥammad as a poet (*shāʿir*). Qur'an 52:30 and 69:41 also relate similar descriptions ascribed to the Prophet. But

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[25] An interesting case was the superiority battle between two prominent early classical era poets, Hammām ibn Ghālib al-Farazdaq (d. 728/730) and Jarīr ibn ʿAṭiyyah al-Khaṭfī al-Tamīmī (d. 728) which another contemporary, al-Rāʿī al-Numayrī of Banū ʿAmir bn Ṣaʿṣaʿa interfered in support of the former which led Jarīr to compose verses disparaging al-Numayrī and his tribe. The impact of the verses did generational damage to the tribe to the extent of them denying their affinity to it. See a short narration of it on "Arab poet destroys entire tribe for offending him – with a single line".

[26] See the two footnote examples above for reference.

[27] Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007): 28-116.

Qur'an 36:69 mentions poetry (*shʿir*) and rejects the claim of the Qur'an being a work of poetry. Several other verses like Q. 52: 29 reject the ascriptions of the Prophet Muḥammad being a soothsayer, a madman, and possessed by *jinn,* qualities that were associated with poets in the pre-Islamic time and early days of Islam. Chapter twenty-six of the Qur'an is titled the "Chapter of Poets" (*Shuʿarāʾ*); verses 221-227 in the same chapter counter the beliefs held by the polytheists of Arabia who ascribed supernatural abilities to poets and speak against poets who fabricate lies and propagate untruths.

In some Qur'an exegetical literature such as the *al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, the author Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273) explains the place of poets and verse-making in Islam. Poetry, he writes, is of three categories in Islam: the permissible, the disliked, and the prohibited.[28] He writes that in some narrations, the Prophet Muḥammad asked a companion if he could recite verses from the composition of Umayya ibn Abī Ṣalt, an older contemporary of the Prophet. Al-Qurṭubī writes that this event is a proof of the permissibility of memorizing poetic verses as long as it contains wisdom and good meanings. He argues that composing verses that contain remembrance, praises, and glorification of God are recommended and praiseworthy. He adds that Ḥassān ibn Thābit (d. 659/70-4), a companion of the Prophet Muḥammad composed verses in praise and defense of the latter. The Prophet Muḥammad is recorded to have praised Ibn Thābit for deploying his verses in defense of the Muslims against the Meccan polytheists. The Prophet Muḥammad noted the swiftness and potency of his companion's verses, likening them to precise arrows striking their targets.[29] A designated spot

[28] Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān wa'l-Mubayyin limā Tadammanahu min al-Sunna wa Āy al-Furqān,* (ed.) ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 2006): 86.

[29] al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 94.

was set for Ibn Thābit to stand and verbally defend the Prophet Muḥammad, with the latter invoking God's support through the Angel Jibrīl to aid him in these moments.[30]

However, composing defamatory, maligning, or slanderous poetry is not permissible, and those who engage in such acts are blameworthy. According to al-Qurṭubī, such individuals propagate vanity to an extent where they might elevate a coward over the courageous ʿAntara ibn Shaddād, the renowned pre-Islamic era poet and horseman, or portray a greedy person as more generous than the late sixth century Ḥātim al-Ṭāʾī, an Arab chieftain and poet whose name has become synonymous with generousity. The actions of poets can lead to false accusations against the innocent, discrediting the righteous, and exaggerating deeds that were never done—all in pursuit of self-amusement and beautifying their speech.[31]

Al-Qurṭubī, in his commentary, draws on some statements of the Prophet Muḥammad on the latter's views about poetry. He writes that the Prophet said, "poetry holds a status similar to speech. A good poem resembles good speech, while an offensive one resembles indecent and offensive speech." Interpreting this, al-Qurṭubī said that "poetry itself is not inherently disliked or prohibited. Rather, it is the content within poetry [that determines its acceptance or disapproval]." He adds that this is because there is a deeply held worldview among the Arabs that says: "the harm inflicted by the tongue is similar to that caused by the hand (*wa jurḥ al-lisān ka jurḥ al-yad*)."[32] Thus, while the damage caused by the tongue may not be physical, it equals the kind of harm, and physical damage that the hand can cause.

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[30] Abū Īsā Muḥammad ibn Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *al-Shamāʾil al-Muḥammadiyya wa maʿahu al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyya ʿalà al-Shamāʾil al-Muḥammadiyya,* (comm.) Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Bājūrī, (ed.) Muḥammad ʿAwwāma (Jeddah: Dār al-Yusr wa Dār al-Minhāj, 2007): 406-407.

[31] Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān,* 90.

[32] Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān,* 89-94.

In his work *al-Shamāʾil al-Muḥammadiyya*, a collection of numerous *aḥādīth* on the character, attributes, and features of the Prophet Muḥammad grouped in different chapters, the author Abū Īsā Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsà ibn Sawra al-Tirmidhī (d. 892) notes the Prophet's relationship with poetry. Like al-Qurṭubī, al-Tirmidhī writes that the Prophet Muḥammad admired verses of prominent pre-Islamic-era poets such as Labīd ibn Rabīʿa, of which he, the Prophet stated, "the most truthful word a poet ever said is Labīd's" or "the most poetic word any Arab ever said is the statement of Labid."[33] The verse in question was "anything other than God is vain."[34] Al-Tirmidhī also adds that he, the Prophet Muḥammad would imitate (*yatamaththalu*) by reciting the verses of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Rawāḥa (d. 629), another poetic panegyrist and defender of the Prophet.

In another narration, the Prophet Muḥammad, while walking with his companions asked one of them who had recited a poem to "take away the *shaytān* (satan)" or "hold off the *shaytān* because it is better to fill the belly of a man with purulent matter than poetry."[35] Al-Qurṭubī writes that some Muslim scholars interpret this to mean that the Prophet Muḥammad knew something particular about this man's state and his interaction with poetry, hence his statement.[36]

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[33] Abū ʿUmar Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd RabbiH (d. 328/939-40), author of the famous *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, and prominent compiler of pre-Islamic odes, lists Imruʾ al-Qays ibn Ḥujr, Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmà, Ṭarafa ibn al-ʿAbd, Labīd ibn Rabīʿa, ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm, ʿAntara ibn Shaddād, and al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥilliza as the seven standard pre-Islamic-era poets. The *al-ʿIqd al-farīd* is a comprehensive source encompassing various subjects including the history of Muslim communities and Arabs, genealogy, wars, Arabic literature, poets, sermons and speeches, prosody, rhetoric, music, and more. See Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd RabbiH, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, (ed.) ʿAbd al-Majīd al-Turḥīnī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1983): 188-218.

[34] Al-Tirmidhī, *al-Shamāʾil al-Muḥammadiyya,* 392-395.

[35] Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʾān,* 92.

[36] Ibid., 92-93.

Verse-making in the early Muslim community predominantly centered on praising and celebrating Prophet Muḥammad, his community, and the ideals of Islam. There were four prominent figures who were foremost panegyrists who praised the virtues of the Prophet. These include the two earlier mentioned poets, Ḥassān ibn Thābit and ʿAbd Allāh ibn Rawāḥa, and Kaʿb ibn Mālik (d. 670/3), and Kaʿb ibn Zuhayr, author of the famous *Bānat Suʿād* (Suʿād has departed).[37]

Classical Arabic poetry of the ancient Arabs follow the *qaṣīda* pattern derived from the Arabic root *q-ṣ-d* (*qaṣada*) which is an endeavour, effort to reach an end or "to go toward something".[38] The *qaṣīda*, like its meaning, possesses features where the author does not go straightforward with the intent of the poem but rather starts in a complex way then jumps to the subject matter of the poem. The *qaṣīda* genre generally embodies panegyric poetry with the tripartite ritual or thematic elements: the *nasīb* (elegiac prelude), the *raḥīl* (journey), and the

[37] It is reported that Ibn Zuhayr's poem was composed on his journey to conversion to Islam. It is "a poem of apology after his attacks on the Prophet Muhammad…" which Suzanne P. Stetkevych describes as "a poem of incorporation, bringing the errant poet, who had clung to the tribal beliefs of the *Jāhiliyyah,* into the polity, now the Islamic fold, and into the inner circle of the *mamdūḥ*: that is, the poet seeks forgiveness and incorporation into the community of believers." The account goes on: "It is reported that after he recited the poem, the Prophet Muḥammad conferred upon him his mantle (*burda*). It is to this that the poem owes its sobriquet, *Qaṣīdat al-burda* (Poem of the Mantle)." See Abubakar S. Abdulkadir, "Devotional Poetry and Religious Authority: Muḥammad al-Yadālī and the *Ṣalāt Rabbī Maʿa al-salāmi* in Praise of the Prophet Muḥammad*," Journal for Islamic Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2020): 83. See also Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010): 13; Stetkevych, "From text to talisman: Al-Būsīrī's Qasīdat al-Burdah (Mantle Ode) and the Supplicatory Ode," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 37*,* 2 (2006): 159.

[38] Ignaz Goldziher, *A Short History of Classical Arabic Literature*, (Trans.) Joseph Desomogyi, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966): 10.

madīḥ/fakhr (praise/brag). Each element is a window into the societal backdrop that profoundly influences pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. The *nasīb*, for instance, evokes powerful emotions by mirroring the forsaken encampment symbolizing the once-vibrant abode of the beloved now engulfed in desolation. It agonizingly reminisces cherished moments shared with the beloved. Transitioning through the *raḥīl*, the poet embarks on a journey replete with encounters where the desert landscape, various animals, and people encountered are vividly described and likened to the attributes of the beloved. Finally, the *madīḥ/fakhr* glorifies the virtues of the beloved, highlighting their superiority over those who fall short, extolling their greatness above all others.

As Islam expanded and solidified within early communities, Muslims diversified their poetic expressions, delving into various genres. They composed panegyric pieces, self-glorifying verses, love poems, descriptive compositions, lampoons, elegies, and laments. Competitions among poets were commonplace and served as arenas for showcasing intellectual prowess and command over the Arabic language and its artistic distinctions. These poetic duels also played a role in promoting and solidifying Arabo-Islamic literary culture and heritage. However, these contests often sparked heated debates and polemics among competing poets.

The spread and consolidation of Islam in al-Andalus sparked a cultural renaissance, merging diverse cultural influences and backgrounds. In a way reminiscent of early Islam's encounter with varied cultures, the literary traditions of the Arabian Peninsula intersected with new elements in al-Andalus. Diverse cultural elements, including Arabian, Andalusian, and Berber traditions, converged, interacted, and mutually influenced one another, and constructed a unique cultural atmosphere. These multifaceted developments greatly enriched the intellectual pursuits in

the Iberian Peninsula and heightened the prominence of verse-making within the newly established Islamic emirate of the far Muslim West.

Verse-making enjoyed a good reputation on the Iberian Peninsula. Poets were favoured in princely courts and earned the pleasure of being in the company of rulers and aristocrats.[39] Princes and ministers were not immune to the allure of composing poetry. The evolution of verse-making in the Iberian Peninsula was shaped by two major factors: the advent of *Badīʿ* poetry championed by figures like Ḥabīb ibn Aws al-Ṭā'ī (d. 845), better known as Abū Tamām, and its introduction to al-Andalus by Muʾmin ibn Saʿīd (d. 880).

While the Andalusian literary community acknowledged the significance of classical poetry and its creators, they held a stronger affinity for contemporary verse. They were drawn to the artistic styles, thematic depth, and the eloquent creativity demonstrated in the works of their contemporary poets.[40] Hence, it is no wonder that their dedication to an ideal, paired with their creative endeavours, sparked an artistic revolution culminating in the emergence of two poetic forms: *al-muwashshaḥ* (strophic/girdle-poem) and *al-zajal* (melody), both perfected in al-Andalus during the late tenth/early eleventh century.[41] *Al-muwashshaḥ* facilitated the composition of poetry in refined literary Arabic, whereas *al-zajal* allowed for a more colloquial and vernacular Andalusian Arabic.[42] These poetic forms, *al-muwashshaḥ* and *al-zajal*, departed

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[39] Amidu Sanni, "Arabic Literary History and Theory in Muslim Spain," *Islamic Studies,* vol. 34. no. 1 (1995): 92.

[40] See J. A. Abu-Haidar, *Hispano-Arabic Literature and the Early Provencal Lyrics,* (London: Routledge: 2001).

[41] James T. Monroe, "Zajal and Muwashshaha: Hispano-Arabic Poetry and the Romance Tradition," in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, (ed.) Salma Khadra Jayyusi, (Leiden: Brill, 1992): 398-419

[42] Gerard Schoeler, 'Muwashshaḥ,' in *Encyclopedia of Islam,* Vol. 6 (MAHK–MID), 2nd Edition, (eds.) P. Bearman et al, 1991. Available on http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0826

from the typical distichs of classical Arabic poetry, adopting instead a musical and song-like structures divided into stanzas.[43] This departure, though not entirely in post Islamic poem signifies a significant shift from the conventional *qaṣīda* genre which typically centers on panegyric poetry delineated by three core themes: *nasīb* (elegiac prelude), *raḥīl* (journey), and *madīḥ* (praise). Furthermore, in contrast to the Andalusian poetic elements replete with urban settings and imagery that were atypical in the Saharan desert lifestyle, the traditional *qaṣīda* contains references to pre-Islamic and early Islamic desert and Bedouin existence, often featuring camels, satires, among other themes. Dwight Reynolds reminds us that the *muwashshaḥ* and *zajal* poetic forms are indistinguishable musically.[44] During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, these poetic forms and musical genres spread across the Arabic-speaking world extending from Morocco to Yemen and Iraq, and persisting in various regional traditions today.[45] This spread followed by its recognition in the Muslim world was not solely due to the embraced literary creativity and expertise; it was also attributed to the melodies or tunes that complemented the poetry, and allowed for its smooth adaptation to various metrical subtleties and the generation of new poems following its pattern.[46]

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[43] Dwight Reynolds, "From Sawt to Muwashshaḥ: A Musical Revolution," in *The Study of Al-Andalus: The Scholarship and Legacy of James T. Monroe*, (eds.) Michelle M. Hamilton and David Wacks (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2018): 35; See also Goldziher, *A Short History of Classical Arabic Literature*, 135. See also Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Andalusi Poetry: The Golden Period," in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, 317-366.

[44] Reynolds, "From Sawt to Muwashshaḥ: A Musical Revolution," 35.

[45] Ibid., 35.

[46] Teresa Garulo, "Some Andalusī muwashshaḥāt and Their Eastern Imitations," in *The Study of Al-Andalus: The Scholarship and Legacy of James T. Monroe*, 53.

One prominent feature in this poetry style was the *muʿāraḍa*, a method of emulating or imitating a previous poem using the same meter and rhyme.[47] This practice held a significant place in a poet's development and skill. It served as a means of honouring great poets, learning from their works, and even surpassing their achievements.[48] From the twelfth century in al-Andalus, poets gained inspiration from *muwashshaḥ* love and wine poems, often imitating or emulating them, and occasionally, adapting the original poems into different poetic genres.

These historical background, developments and dynamics briefly discussed above are crucial vis-a-vis the discourse on the reported seventeenth to eighteenth century emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania, and will be explored and reflected in the upcoming chapters of this dissertation.

The Intellectual Traditions of Seventeenth to Eighteenth Century Mauritania and Wider West Africa

According to anthologists and scholars of Mauritanian literary heritage such as Aḥmād al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī (d. 1906) and Mohamed El Mokhtar ould Bah (d. 2023), as found in their respective works *al-Wasīṭ fī Tarājim Udabāʾ Shinqīṭ*[49] and *al-Shiʿr waʾl-Shuʿarāʾ fī Mūritāniyā*,[50] the Arabic poetry tradition for which Mauritania is now celebrated, reportedly 'emerged' (*nashaʾa*) relatively late, from the later part of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. This tradition was nurtured by scholars such as Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad (Maḥḥam) ibn al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī (d. 1731-2), commonly known as Ibn Rāzikah, Muḥammad ibn

[47] Garulo, "Some Andalusī muwashshaḥāt and Their Eastern Imitations," 53.

[48] Ibid.

[49] al-Amīn, *al-Waṣīṭ fī Tarājim Udabāʾ Shinqīṭ* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Khānijā, 1911).

[50] Mohamed El Mokhtar ould Bah, *al-Shiʿr waʾl-Shuʿarāʾ fī Mūritāniyā,* (Rabat: Dār al-Amān liʾl-Nashr waʾl-Tawzīʿ, 2003).

Mukhtār ibn Maḥḥam Saʿīd al-Yadālī al-Daymānī (d. 1752-3), famously known as al-Yadālī, al-Muṣṭafā Aḥmad (al-Buḥamdī) al-Majlisī, also called Abū Famayn (Bū Famayn), and Muḥammadun ibn Abī al-Mukhtār, known as al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr al-Ḥasanī.[51] The period is widely considered a watershed in Saharan history, coinciding with protracted conflicts and revolutions across various Saharan cities, and lasting several decades.[52] The primary conflicts such as the *Shurr Bubba* war discussed in Chapter II involved different racial and ethnic groups in the region, particularly the Arab Ḥassānī and the Zawāyā. In the fourteenth century, the Arab Ḥassānī, a subgroup of the Banū Maʿqil, commenced migration from southern Morocco across the Sahara and into the Senegal Valley. By the late seventeenth century, their influence had extended throughout various regions of Mauritania, establishing dominance over significant areas. The Zawāyā descend from the Ṣanhāja, also pronounced Znāga, of Berber origin. The Ṣanhāja Berber groups includes tribes like the Lamṭūna, Massūfa, and Gudāla who are believed to have commenced settlement in Mauritania as early as the eighth century. The arrival of Arab Ḥassānī groups in the region sparked interactions with the Zawāyā and other indigenous communities. This blending, especially between the two major groups - the Ḥassānīs and Zawāyā, would later spark identity issues. Some individuals from these groups began identifying as Berberized Arabs or Arabized Berbers due to this fusion of cultures. The profound transformations witnessed in the Sahara and Sahel during the seventeenth century led to identity

[51] See brief discussion in Mohamed El Mokhtar ould Bah, "Introduction à la poésie mauritanienne (1650-1900)," *Arabica,* 18, 1 (1971): 1-48; Catherine Taine-Cheikh, "Le pilier et la corde: recherches sur la poesie maure," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* vol. 48, no. 3 (1985): 516-535.

[52] For the events of seventeenth century Mauritania, see El Mokhtar M. ould Saad, *Harb Shurbubba. Azmat al-qarn 17 fi-l-janûb al-gharbi al-mûrîtânî. La guerre de Shurbubba (ou la crise du XVII° siècle au Sud-Ouest mauritanien*) (Nouakchott: Institut mauritanien de la recherche scientifique, 1993); Abdel Wadoud ould Cheikh, *Elements d'histoire de la Mauritanie* (Nouakchott: Centre Culturel Francais, 1988).

shifts among the populace, a topic further explored in subsequent chapters. Nevertheless, the Banū Ḥassān became recognized as the warrior group due to their military exploits and political authority, while the Zawāyā, known for their specialization in Islamic religious knowledge, were identified as the clerical group. However, as emphasized by Charles C. Stewart and Bruce Hall, this dichotomy in social roles often failed to fully reflect actual societal practices or the dynamic historical reality wherein the identity and status of specific groups could evolve over time.[53]

The seventeenth-century conflicts resulted in population displacements thereby furthering a mingling of diverse Saharan people and their cultural practices. These wars and revolutions not only restructured the social scene but also instigated significant shifts in the region's political, religious, and economic domains. They imprinted a lasting impact that endures to this day.[54] In the wake of the upheavals, Islamic scholarship and literary production in the region also underwent a major paradigm shift. For example, people began to compose or transform scholarly texts on jurisprudence, theology, Islamic spiritual and mystical tradition, and even Qur'an exegesis into verse forms, away from the previously dominant prose genres. This shift led to a considerable number of religious and educational texts, typically studied and taught at various Mauritanian nomadic Islamic institutions (*maḥḍara*) being composed in verse or transformed from their prose originals into poetic forms. Simultaneously, the production of literary poetry not

[53] Charles C. Stewart, "Southern Saharan Scholarship and the Bilad al-Sudan," *Journal of African History,* vol. 17, no. 1 (1976): 78-81; Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600-1960,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2011): 56.

[54] ould Cheikh, *Elements d'histoire de la Mauritanie,* 1988.

only thrived but also left a lasting legacy by shaping the cultural ethos of Islamic scholarship and literature in the region ever since.[55]

During this period, certain regions in the Muslim world such as Morocco and Egypt experienced noticeable shifts in the themes and preferences found in Arabic poetry. These changes in poetic expression and imagination during the seventeenth century and preceding eras are well-documented in Roger Allen and Donald S. Richards's *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*.[56] Interestingly, during that same era, West African scholars, exemplified by the aforementioned seventeenth to eighteenth-century Mauritanian Muḥammad al-Yadālī (d.1752-3) were actively reshaping intellectual activities, particularly in the realm of Arabic poetry, as will be explored in the forthcoming chapters. However, this intellectual renaissance among West African scholars unfolded during an era often labeled as an alleged period of intellectual 'stagnation' or 'decline' (*ʿaṣr al-inḥiṭāṭ*) in the wider Muslim world. Khalid el Rouayheb, highlighting this notion of 'stagnation' or 'decline,' presents it as contentious and problematic. He writes:

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[55] ould Bah, "Introduction à la poésie mauritanienne (1650-1900)," 1-48; al-Amīn *al-Waṣīṭ* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Khānijā, 1911).

[56] Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Arabic Poetry in the Post-Classical Age," in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, (eds.) Roger Allen and Donald S. Richards, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006): 23-59. Also in the same volume, Muhammad al-Yousfi, "Poetic Creativity in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, (eds.) Roger Allen and D. S. Richards, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 60-73; and Margaret Larkin, "Popular Poetry in the Post-Classical Period, 1150-1850," in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, (eds.) Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 189-242. See the chapters in the section on "Languages and Literature" in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *The Legacy of Muslim Spain,* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992): 307-553.

> Scholars of Arabic literature and thought were inclined to view the seventeenth century as yet another bleak chapter of cultural, intellectual, and societal "decadence" (*inḥiṭāṭ*) that began with the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and came to an end only with the "Arab Awakening" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historians who studied self-styled Islamic "reformist" and "revivalist" movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have often portrayed the immediately preceding centuries as marked by unthinking scholarly "imitation" (*taqlīd*), crude Sufi pantheism, and "syncretic" and idolatrous popular religious practices.[57]

El Rouayheb alludes to figures like Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), Muḥammad Rashīd Ridā (d. 1935), and Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938) as the prominent Muslim reformers who were studied by historians and advocated the narrative of 'intellectual decadence' in the Muslim world.[58] These reformers' perspectives gained further traction and endured over time due to the reinforcement, endorsement and canonization by scholars such as Halil Inalcık, Stanford J. Shaw, Reynold Nicholson, and Gamal el-Din el-Shayyal, among others.[59] El Rouayheb adds that "such assessments are no longer accepted unquestioningly in academic circles. But their influence is still felt in the woefully underdeveloped state of research into the intellectual history of the

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[57] Khalid El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century*, *Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 1-2.

[58] Ibid., 2.

[59] Halil Inalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1973), 179–185; S. J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, Vol. 1: Empire of the Gazis: The Rise and Decline of the Ottoman Empire, 1280–1808* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); R. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930); G. El-Shayyal, "Some Aspects of Intellectual and Social Life in Eighteenth-Century Egypt," in *Political and Social Change in Modern Egypt*, (ed.) P. M. Holt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968): 117–132, and P. M. Holt, "The Later Ottoman Empire in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent," in *The Cambridge History of Islam*, I, (eds.) P. M. Holt, A. K. Lambton, and B. Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977): 374–393.

seventeenth century in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa." If such an assessment of the Arabo-Islamic intellectual history in the seventeenth century was the case with the regions often purported as the "heartlands" of the Islamic/Muslim world, one would expect an even more dire situation in the regions considered by many academics "peripheral" such as the Sahara and, by extension, the broader West Africa.

Scholars like John Spencer Trimingham (d. 1987) have also claimed that this perceived 'decline' or 'stagnation' in intellectual activities and knowledge production was not any different in the Sahara and the broader West African region.[60] Like Trimingham, Peter B. Clarke calls seventeenth to eighteenth century West Africa the age of "Islamic stagnation and pagan reaction."[61] However, this assertion overlooks crucial historical realities, much like those highlighted by El Rouayheb. During the latter part of the seventeenth century and beyond, vibrant intellectual activity thrived across numerous Saharan and West African cities and towns such as Bornu and Katsina in present-day Nigeria and the Gebla region of present-day Western Mauritania.[62] Within these locales, al-Yadālī's pioneering intellectual efforts, as mentioned earlier, were emblematic of a larger trend where eminent figures like Muḥammad ibn Masanih

[60] John Spencer Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa,* (Glasgow: Oxford University Press, 1970):151-154.

[61] Peter B. Clarke, *West Africa and Islam, A Study of Religious Development from the 8th to the 20th Century,* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, 1982): 77; Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa,* 151.

[62] See Zachary V. Wright, "The Islamic Intellectual Tradition of Sudanic Africa, with Analysis of a Fifteenth-Century Timbuktu Manuscript*"* in *The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa*, (eds.) Fallou Ngom, Mustapha Kurfi and Toyin Falola (London: Springernature, 2020): 55-76. As for the Gebla, it is the southwestern part (mostly the Trarza) of Mauritania comprised of many Arabs and Zāwāya clans. The most famous of them were the Idaw ʿAlī, Awlād Daymān, Midlish, Tandagha, Awlād Antshāyt.

(d. 1667),[63]Muḥammad al-Wālī ibn Sulaymān (d. 1668/9)[64] and Muḥammad al-Ṣabbāgh (fl. 1640)[65] engaged in intellectual activities and produced high-quality literary works encompassing Logic, Philosophical Sufism, and other fields. Despite their prominence within the region and the reach of their works into influential knowledge circles in cities like Cairo and Damascus, the scholarly output of these luminaries and their era has largely remained unexplored and obscure within academic discourse. Recent scholarly works are beginning to delve into this landscape, challenging the notion of 'decline' in Arabo-Islamic intellectual history by shedding light on the literary production and scholarly culture of Saharan and West African Muslim intellectuals.[66] It is within this context and more that this endeavour aims to contribute significantly by shedding

[63] See "Muḥammad b. Masanih b. ʿUmar b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Nūḥ al-Barnāwī al-Kashnāwī," in *Arabic Literature of Africa Online*, (eds.) John O. Hunwick and R.S. O'Fahey. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2405-4453_alao_COM_ALA_20001_1_11 (Last Accessed December 9, 2023).

[64] See Dorrit Van Dalen, *Doubt, Scholarship and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa,* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[65] See "Muḥammad b. al-Ṣabbāgh b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥājj b. Baraka b. Ibrāhīm al-Kashnāwī al-ʿArabī," in *Arabic Literature of Africa Online*, (eds) John O. Hunwick and R.S. O'Fahey. Available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2405-4453_alao_COM_ALA_20001_1_12 (Last Accessed December 9, 2023).

[66] While the works referenced below focus on nineteenth to twentieth century intellectual figures, they also mention and shed light on the problematic notion of 'stagnation' of intellectual pursuits in West Africa. See Rudolph Ware, "In Praise of the Intercessor: *Mawahib al-Nafi fi Mada'ih al-Shafi* by Amadu Bamba Mbacke (1853-1927)," *Islamic Africa*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2013): 225-248; Oludamini Ogunnaike's Ogunnaike, "Philosophical Sufism in the Sokoto Caliphate: The Case of Shaykh Dan Tafa," *Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts*, (Suffolk & Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2021):136-168; Zachary V. Wright's "The Islamic Intellectual Tradition of Sudanic Africa, with Analysis of a Fifteenth-Century Timbuktu Manuscript" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa*, (eds.) Fallou Ngom, Mustapha Kurfi and Toyin Falola, (London: Springernature, 2020): 55-76; Wright: "The Kāshif al- Ilbās of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse: An Analysis of the Text," *Islamic Africa*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2010): 109; Amir Syed, "Al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tāl and the Realm of the Written: Mastery, Mobility, and Islamic Authority in 19th Century West Africa," PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2017.

light on an understudied yet vibrant intellectual and artistic tradition: the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania, with particular emphasis on its reported emergence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This tradition holds substantial influence in shaping the articulation of Islam and molding the culture of Islamic scholarship within the region as will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Literature Review

This work is particularly important because of the general neglect of the intellectual and literary traditions of the Sahara, Mauritania specifically, in Europhone scholarship. One reason for this lacuna is because Mauritania straddles the historiographical division of Africa into imaginary zones shaped by medieval North African Muslim writers, geographers and travelers, later intensified by the French colonial experience—and namely the 'White,' Arab North, and the 'Black,' indigenous, sub-Saharan. This imaginary geographical and cultural division of 'Africa' literally erased Mauritania (and its Saharan neighbours) from scholarly consideration; in so doing, it rendered their Arabo-Islamic intellectual traditions invisible or 'coloured' them through invented notions of racialized Islam – most infamously '*L'Islam Noir*' (Black Islam) and *L'Islam Maure* (Moorish Islam).[67] E. Ann McDougall throws some light on this, writing:

> A generation-long unsuccessful struggle against a Berber *jihad* in Algeria (*c*. 1830–1880s) created in the French psyche the idea of racialized Islam.

[67] Vincent Monteil, *L'islam Noir* (Paris: Seuil, 1964); Paul Marty, *Etudes sur l'Islam et les tribus du Soudan: Les tribus Maures du Sahel et du Hodh, Collection de la Revue du monde musulman,* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1921); Ghislaine Lydon, "Saharan Oceans and Bridges, Barriers and Divides in Africa's Historiographical Landscape, " *Journal of African History*, 56 (2015): 3-11; Christopher Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860-1960* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press : 1988); David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*: *Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

> Saharans practiced a "white Islam" (*Islam maure*) that was dangerous and should be closely watched; moderates were to be supported, non-moderates to be dealt with proactively. The Islam practiced south of the Sahara was "black Islam" (*Islam noir*); as an "Africanized" version of the volatile religion, it was seen as less threatening to French interests. This understanding of West African Islam, bifurcated by race and geography, erased the realities of Saharan–Sahel relations and the integral—indeed, at times intimate—associations formed through recent centuries of religious, social, and political integration.[68]

Furthermore, studies of Saharan and Mauritanian history specifically were relatively late arrivals on the post-colonial historiographical roster. Existing literature on the Sahara in general and Mauritania in particular have largely focused on the religio-political,[69] socio-religious[70] and socio-economic[71] dimensions of the region's history. Over the past five decades, scholars like

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[68] E. Ann McDougall, "Saharan People and Their Societies," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019):13. See also Ghislaine Lydon, "Saharan Oceans and Bridges, Barriers and Divides in Africa's Historical Landscape," *Journal of African History*, 56 (2015): 3–22.

[69] Marty, Etudes sur l'Islam et les tribus du Soudan, 1921; Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, *Précher dans le désert. Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie*, (Paris : Karthala, 2013); Ould Ahmed Salem, "Controlled Democratization, Institutional Reforms and Political (In)-stability in Mauritania" in *Democratic Struggle, Institutional Reform and State resilience in the African Sahel*, (eds.) Rahmane Idrissa and Leonardo A. Villalon (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020): 27-54; Ould Ahmed Salem, "The politics of The Haratins Social Movement in Mauritania (1978-2014)" in *Social Currents in North Africa*, (ed.) Osama Abi-Mershed (London & New York, Hurst Publishers, 2018).

[70] Erin Pettigrew, *Invoking the Invisible in the Sahara: Islam, Spiritual Mediation, and Social Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[71] Abdel Wadoud ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique dans la société maure precoloniale (XIème siècle-XIXème siècle): essai sur quelques aspects du tribalisme" (theses de Doctorat d'Etat, Université de Paris V, René Descartes, 1985); ould Cheikh, *Elements d'histoire de la Mauritanie* (Nouakchott: Centre Culturel Francais, 1988); E. Ann McDougall, "The View from Awdaghust: War, Trade and Social Change in the Southwestern Sahara, from the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century," *The*

Charles Stewart, Mohamed El Mokhtar ould Bah, Harry Norris, Ulrich Rebstock, and Ismail Warscheid have contributed significantly to the understanding of Mauritania's history, Islamic texts, and influential Muslim intellectuals. For instance, Stewart's *Islam and the Social Order* comprehensively details Mauritania's societal framework, shedding light on the intellectual and economic life of Shaykh Sīdiyā Bābā, a prominent nineteenth-century scholar from Boutilimit.[72] Similarly, ould Bah's *La Littérature Juridique et l'évolution du Malikisme en Mauritanie* provides a comprehensive exploration of the evolution of the Mālikī school of Islamic law and its textual heritage within Mauritania.[73] Also, Ulrich Rebstock's *Maurische Literaturgeschichte* stands as a pivotal work documenting the intellectual and literary productions associated with Mauritanian scholars.[74] Nevertheless, the academic literature in Europhone languages on Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition remains scarce. One of, or the earliest studies of this tradition, Louis Massignon's introductory article, *Un poète saharien: la qasidah d'al Yedâlî*, offers a brief insight into the poetry of al-Yadālī (d. 1753), considered one of the reported 'founding fathers' of Mauritania's classical Arabic poetry tradition.[75] Ould Bah's *Introduction à la poésie mauritanienne* (*1650-1900*) presents a little more introductory discussion into the

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Journal of African History, vol. 26, no. 1 (1985):1-31; McDougall, "Salt, Saharans, and the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade: Nineteenth Century Developments," *Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1992): 61-88; McDougall, "The Sahara Reconsidered: Pastoralism, Politics and Salt from the Ninth through the Twelfth Centuries," *African Economic History,* no. 12, (1983): 263-286.

[72] Charles C. Stewart, *Islam and the Social Order* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973); Stewart "Southern Saharan Scholarship and the Bilād al-Sūdān." *Journal of African History*, 17/1 (1976): 73–93.

[73] Mohamed El Mokhtar ould Bah, *La Littérature Juridique et l 'évolution du Malikisme en Mauritanie* (Tunis: Publications de l'Université de Tunis, Faculté des Sciences et Lettres, 1981).

[74] Ulrich Rebstock, *Maurische Literaturgeschichte* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2001).

[75] Louis Massignon, "Un poète saharien: la qasidah d'al Yedâlî," *Revue du monde musulman* 8, No. 6 (1909): 199–205.

reported emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania covering over three centuries, discussing poets, and excerpts from their works. Norris's *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song* delves deeply into the folk culture and literature of Mauritania, touching upon folk traditions interlinked with the Arabic poetry tradition and examining works of Mauritanian poets and scholars.[76] Moreover, Catherine Taine-Cheikh's numerous articles[77] and Dustin Cowell's publications[78]focus on the Ḥassāniyya and *ghinā'* (folk songs) poetic genres, offer profound insights into the origins, poets, and subtleties of Ḥassāniyya poetic expressions. Oludamini Ogunnaike's work stands as a comprehensive exploration of West African *madīḥ* (devotional) poetry. The study purposefully challenges prevailing misconceptions regarding the depth and intellectual richness of the West African Arabic poetry tradition. While highlighting its connection to Sufism and Sufi doctrines, among others, it delves into the genre's lyrical nature, rooted in the Qur'an, Hadith, pre-Islamic, and early Islamic poetry. Although not the central theme, Ogunnaike references prominent West African *madīḥ* figures such as the earlier mentioned Mauritanian Muḥammad al-Yadālī in some sections of the text.[79] Other literature

[76] Norris, *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

[77] Taine-Cheikh, "Le pilier et la corde : recherches sur la poésie maure," *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies*, XLVIII/3 (1985): 516-535; Taine-Cheikh, "Pouvoir de la poésie et poésie du pouvoir - le cas de la société maure," *Matériaux arabes et sudarabiques*, 6 (1994): 281-310.

[78] Dustin Cowell, "The Tebra of Moorish Women from Mauritania: The Limits (or Essence) of the Poetic Act," *Research in African Literatures,* vol. 24, no. 2, (1993): 79-88.

[79] Oludamini Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection: A Study of West African Arabic Madih Poetry and its Precedents,* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2020).

tends to draw on Mauritania's poetic tradition as a repository of historical or socio-political information without making it a primary area of focus for study.[80]

The lack of a comprehensive scholarly exploration into Mauritania's Arabo-Islamic intellectual history, as well as the classical Arabic poetic tradition and its impact on the articulation and the culture of Islamic scholarship makes Stewart's decades-old statement valid till today. He writes that the "rich historical materials in Mauritania, in particular, have not yet been tapped by students of North and West African history" despite the existence of its "well-known and lengthy tradition of literacy and scholarship".[81] I envision this project, exploring the reported historical emergence of the classical Arabic poetry tradition—an incredibly vibrant and artistic intellectual heritage in Mauritania and, by extension, Muslim West Africa—as a crucial effort to fill the existing gap in scholarly understanding. While some references may touch upon Mauritania's Ḥassāniyya poetic tradition, it falls beyond the scope of this project's focus.

Relevance and Rationale

This project sheds light on an important scholarly and literary tradition that has received little scholarly attention and will contribute to our knowledge of not only Mauritanian history but the history and evolution of Saharan Arabo-Islamic intellectual traditions. Arguably, the understanding of Mauritania's Arabo-Islamic and intellectual history lies in its art, namely its poetry. Elisabeth Kendall writes that the "classical poetic tradition, in its capacity as a repository of history and not simply as a canon of aesthetic works, presents an important tool for

[80] This includes works such as Stewart, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, 2016; Ghislaine Lydon, "Inkwells of the Sahara: Reflections on the Production of Islamic Knowledge in Bilād Shinqīṭ," in *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa,* (ed.) Scott Reese (Leiden: Brill, 2004): 39-71.

[81] Stewart, *Islam and the Social Order*, 4.

appropriating the past and reconfiguring it."[82] For Mauritania, poetry and verse-making contains the story of the intellectual and educational connections of the region. It informs – and is, in turn, informed by – the currents and flows of the ideas and images that constitute the collective thought of the region. Beyond entertainment, it is through poetry that ideas, images, and attitudes are expressed and shared. The verse tradition unleashes new ontologies and new ways of perceiving realities.

Research Methodology and Sources

To answer the central questions raised earlier, this dissertation relies on and thoroughly draws upon two distinct categories of source materials: primary and secondary sources. Primary sources, exclusively in Arabic, encompass various texts such as biographical literature, anthologies, *Dawāwīn* (collections of poetry, sing. *dīwān*), particularly those authored by Mauritanian scholars and poets from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, chronicles (*tārīkh*), selected verses from the Qur'an, Ḥadīth and *fiqh* literature, unpublished Arabic manuscripts, among others. The anthologies, chronicles, biographical literature, and *Dawāwīn* offer indispensable insights into events, the lives of intellectual figures, their contributions, and poetic expressions pertinent to this project. Meanwhile, the secondary sources, available in both Arabic and Europhone languages, encompass published articles and books, dissertations, blog posts, online essays, and more. They help to synthesize significant studies related to the political, economic, religious, and intellectual histories of Mauritania and West Africa.

[82] Elisabeth Kendall, "Jihadist Propaganda and its Exploration of the Arab Poetic Tradition," in *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition: Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage,* (eds.) Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 2016): 225.

My research methodology draws inspiration from scholars like Ghislaine Lydon and Elias Saad who meticulously drew upon internal sources—Arabo-Islamic manuscripts and archival documents—to comprehend specific historical events and practices within medieval and early colonial Sahara and West Africa. In line with this approach, this study drew upon relevant references from the lives and literary contributions of some of Mauritania's reported 'founding fathers' of the Arabic poetry tradition. These figures include the aforementioned Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad (Maḥḥam) ibn al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī (d. 1731-2), famously known as Ibn Rāzikah; Muḥammad ibn Mukhtār ibn Maḥḥam Saʿīd al-Yadālī al-Daymānī (d. 1752-3); al- Muṣṭafā Aḥmad (al-Buḥamdī) al-Majlisī, also called Abū Famayn (Bū Famayn) and Muḥammadun ibn Abī al-Mukhtār, known as al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr al-Ḥasanī. These selections are not solely based on their acknowledgment as 'founding ancestors' but also on their unparalleled eminence in Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition as emphasized in Al-Amīn's anthology. Their influential roles as mediators of cultural, social, and intellectual attitudes and values in their historical context make them indispensable in addressing the central queries of this project.

Subsequently, examination of some of their odes (*qaṣāʾid*) and literary works ensued, recognizing that these scholars and their works were products of specific historical and societal landscapes. Their compositions serve as reflections of social and cultural transformations, and are embedded within historical, social, and scholarly contexts. Thus, by situating them within the amalgamation of socio-political, economic, cultural, religious, and intellectual dynamics, their works illuminate the world they inhabited and significantly influenced. Furthermore, this study critically incorporates references from those who succeeded these founding fathers of Arabic poetry of Mauritania and carried their legacy forward. These includes the likes of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥājj Ḥimā Allāh al-Ghallāwī (d. 1794), al-Mukhtār ibn Būnā al-Jakanī (d. 1805/6),

Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Nābigha al-Ghallāwī (d. 1829/30), and Muḥammad ibn Ṭulba al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 1856).

Complementing these examinations are Arabo-Islamic manuscripts relevant to this study, serving as essential components for engaging with and interpreting historical events transmitted over centuries. These sources serve to illuminate uncertainties or validate prevailing textual details within manuscripts and books. They function as elucidative tools, providing explanations for diverse historical events, delineating ruptures and continuities within societies, regions, and periods.

Similar to Ghislaine Lydon's approach in scrutinizing 19th-century Saharan commercial activities, cross-referencing various internal sources aids in integrating and contextualizing archival materials within a broader historical framework. This methodology aids in collating and corroborating information from various manuscripts and primary sources, elucidating obscure details, and interpreting historical events, thereby offering clarity on the region's historical past and intertwining textual sources within this context.[83] She supplements these insights with secondary literature, offering further illumination and a deeper understanding of the extensive research conducted on the subject.

In essence, this work represents a literary archaeology and scrutiny of a corpus of written texts (both manuscripts and published works) and transmitted knowledge, unveiling how specific political, socio-economic, and intellectual developments of the region came together to create the conditions for the rise and perpetuation of the intellectual and social tradition of poetry in Mauritania.

[83] Lydon, "Writing Trans-Saharan History: Methods, Sources and Interpretations across the African Divide," *Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3–4 (2005): 293-324

I looked at these selected texts to identify and reveal possible points of interest, trace explicit and implicit evidence of events, attitudes, developments, and transformations through discontinuities and continuities to understand why and how the poetic tradition emerged where and when it did. Furthermore, by comparing sources, I tried to find connections and gaps that could shed light on the events leading to the birth of this influential artistic and intellectual tradition.

This methodological approach centered on amalgamating various internal written sources is essential for contextualizing and exploring the emergence of the Mauritanian poetic tradition. It is crucial not only for comprehending internal histories but also for bridging past methodological gaps. It aims to unveil an underexplored facet of the Saharan intellectual tradition by providing visibility to voices previously unheard. This approach allows us to rely on internal voices to understand the history of the Sahara and, by extension, West Africa, rather than relying solely on external sources such as the writings of North African medieval and colonial scholars, historians, merchants, and travelers like ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldūn al-Ḥaḍramī's (d. 1406) *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*, Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Baṭṭūṭa's (d. 1369) *Tuḥfat an-Nuẓẓār* (known as *al-Riḥla*), and Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Abī Zarʿ al-Fāsī's (d. 1310-20) *Rawḍ al-Qirṭās*.

As numerous scholars such as Lydon note, many of these Arabic external accounts may contain biases toward West Africans and lack nuanced knowledge of their culture and geography. Similarly, colonial sources in European languages frequently exhibit racial prejudices and biases against black individuals, Islam, and Muslims.[84] These scholars, including Lydon

[84] Lydon, "Writing Trans-Saharan History," 299-300.

have also pointed out that the misconception, misperception, and misinterpretation of Africa's past stem from the way "African history has been written and understood"[85] based on external perspectives and "narratives built on information tainted by language and cultural barriers."[86] Thus, this method of drawing upon internal sources can illuminate the agency and actions of local actors, even as it examines how they are moved by and respond to broader circumstances, developments, and trends. Chinua Achebe's oft-cited maxim, "until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter", is a poignant reminder of the importance of drawing on internal perspective.[87]

Building on the groundwork laid by Lydon, I also leveraged Saad's thorough historical analysis focusing on the social history of Timbuktu during the fourteenth to eighteenth century. Saad's analysis, aligned in some ways with the insights of scholars like Stewart and Norris, posits that Timbuktu reached the pinnacle of its intellectual and social influence between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries across the Sahara and the Sūdān. This era coincided with the genesis of the Arabic poetic tradition in Mauritania. The tradition's reported emergence, development, and sustained existence over centuries were facilitated by the scholarly contributions of the ʿulamāʾ, who not only authored verses but also transmuted various texts into

[85] Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 14.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Though I have no direct reference for this quote but is often attributed to Chinua Achebe, a doyen of Nigerian [and African] literature. It seems its exact source is not from any of Achebe's written works. It also often attributed to him in speeches and interviews, and sometimes cited as an African proverb. It is a metaphorical expression that highlights the importance of silenced, marginalized or underrepresented voices in shaping historical narratives.

poetic forms to move forward their scholarly and academic pursuits. My research investigates and examines the roles that the seventeenth to eighteenth century Mauritanian (and by extension Saharan) ʿulamāʾ played in the emergence of this poetic tradition which would in turn shape the culture of Islamic scholarship.

For this work, Saad's examination of Timbuktu's social history from the fourteenth to eighteenth century proves invaluable for contextualizing and methodologically understanding the activities of a group of Saharan scholars within their historical milieu. This analysis offers not only contextual depth but also methodological insights crucial in framing the genesis of Mauritania's poetic tradition. The study scrutinizes how the Muslim scholars of Timbuktu leveraged their knowledge as cultural capital to contribute to the region's prestige, wealth, and political influence across multiple centuries. Considering the cultural and intellectual affinities shared between Mauritania and Timbuktu during that period, and recognizing the important role played by the ʿulamāʾ in the intellectual tradition, I utilized Saad's work as a paradigm. This model aided in dissecting seventeenth to eighteenth-century Mauritanian writings, particularly those attributed to the 'founding fathers' of the poetic tradition. Through this approach, I sought to decipher the reported emergence of this tradition and its impact on Islamic scholarship. That is, I sought to understand the intersections of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, investigated the shifts and enduring threads in intellectual and social traditions within realms of interconnected histories and cultures. My focus was on understanding the region's evolution—its models, conceptual frameworks, and the interplay between societal changes and the compelling drive for new ideas and expressive forms. This examination involved assimilating key figures, texts, and societal evolutions that profoundly influenced the poetry tradition of the region.

Lastly, Amir Syed's methodology has been influential in inspiring part of my approach. Syed's exploration, drawing from British historian of Ghana Ivor Wilks' unpublished field notes, which Wilks titled "Conversation about the past, mainly from Ghana, 1956-1996," elucidates the role of mobility, migration, and travel among specific Muslim communities in Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso.[88] Wilks is widely acknowledged as a pioneer in modern African historiography particularly for his emphasis on power dynamics and leadership within the Asante (Ashanti) Empire, now modern-day Ghana. His work is highly acclaimed for its significant contribution to the decolonization of West African history.[89] Syed's analysis showcases how these movements facilitated the transmission of Islamic scholarship, and later led to the creation of new knowledge and the establishment of Muslim diasporas and settlements.

Syed's discussion digs into the historical narratives of these Muslim communities, emphasizing the complex relationship between mobility, knowledge transmission, and the construction of scholarly authority. In a similar vein, my investigation examines the impacts of developments in the sixteenth to eighteenth-century Sahara and broader West African regions.[90] These historical shifts triggered not only the movement of scholars but also the migration of texts and knowledge across different parts of the region under study. The interplay between these

[88] Amir Syed, "Mobility, Knowledge Transmission, and Authority in West Africa: Re-Reading Ivor Wilks' Fieldnotes "Conversations about the Past," *History in Africa,* vol. 0 (2023): 1-34. See also Amir Syed, "Al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tāl and the Realm of the Written: Mastery, Mobility, and Islamic Authority in 19th Century West Africa," (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2017).

[89] See Nancy Lawler, "Ivor Wilks: a Biographical Note," in *The Cloth of Many Colored Silks: Papers on History and Society, Ghanaian and Islamic, in Honor of Ivor Wilks*, (eds.) John Hunwick and Nancy Lawler (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996): 5–13.

[90] Syed, "Mobility, Knowledge Transmission, and Authority in West Africa," 1-34.

historical dynamics, particularly mobility and migration, played a crucial role in reshaping religious and social expressions. This transformation, tied to the concepts of mobility and migration, significantly influenced the reported 'emergence' of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition.

The manuscript research for this project involved an exploration of archives and manuscript collections housed in various research centers and institutions. In the summer of 2016, I dedicated a month to exploring the "Charles C. Stewart Papers: Mauritanian Manuscripts Collection" at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. This collection comprises microfilm copies totaling over 100,000 leaves of Arabic manuscripts sourced from the private collection of Shaykh Sīdiyā Bāba's family, a highly regarded scholarly lineage known for its extensive private holdings in Mauritania.[91] These microfilm copies represent the most substantial collection of Mauritanian manuscripts found in any university beyond the country's borders. They contain numerous influential intellectual and literary works and illuminate the rich tradition of Islamic scholarship prevalent in the region.

Housed at the University of Freiburg, Germany, the Oriental Manuscripts Resource (OMAR) database offers online accessibility to the manuscripts of the Institut Mauritanien de Recherche Scientifique (IMRS) in Nouakchott, Mauritania. This repository contains around 2,500 Arabic manuscripts presented in full text, equating to 134,000 images, accompanied by relevant bibliographical metadata. The database's scanned manuscripts originate from microfilms gotten during the several research visits to Mauritania by Ulrich Rebstock, Rainer Oßwald, and

[91] The Charles C. Stewart Papers: Mauritanian Manuscripts Collection, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Tobias Mayer. Rebstock's three volumes *Maurische Literaturgeschichte* furnishes comprehensive descriptions of these collections.[92]

My search for specific and relevant manuscripts was steered by the "West African Arabic Manuscripts Database" (WAAMD) which is interconnected with the previously referenced Stewart's papers.[93] WAAMD which originated at the University of Illinois in the late 1980s was initially made to catalog a compendium of Arabic manuscripts from southern Mauritania (Boutilimit). Over time, its scope expanded to compile a comprehensive union catalogue encompassing diverse West African collections, incorporating manuscript libraries across West Africa, Europe, and the United States. Currently, this invaluable resource finds its home at the Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

The collaboration of personal friends, West African Arabic manuscript enthusiasts, researchers, and former colleagues played a vital role in sourcing manuscript copies from various collections across Mauritania, and by extension, Mali. Their assistance greatly contributed to the availability of these valuable resources.

Moreover, the regional diversity evident in the works studied in this project holds great significance. It provided insights into the geographic distribution and evolutionary trajectory of this poetic tradition by offering clues that enrich our understanding of its development.

I also undertook an archival research trip to Mauritania spending nearly six months. This extensive journey proved very valuable in various ways. In addition to granting me access to consult original manuscripts, some of which were available in microfilm or digitized copies, the

[92] The Oriental Manuscripts Resource (OMAR) database, University of Freiburg

[93] The West African Arabic Manuscripts Database (WAAMD) and WAAMD

trip facilitated informal discussions with a diverse spectrum of individuals. These included academic and traditional scholars (ʿulamāʾ), students from various institutions of learning such as the Université Moderne Chinguetti and Maḥḍara al-Nabbāghiyyah, as well as local Mauritanians. These engagements were helpful as they provided insights into where and how to locate relevant manuscripts, published works and acquiring market editions of Arabic manuscripts obtainable at numerous bookshops throughout the country. Some of these scholars generously shared works from their personal libraries and collections that are directly relevant to my research.

Accessing literary works authored by Mauritanians, particularly those written by traditional Muslim scholars indigenous to the region often poses significant challenges, with such materials being only sporadically available outside Mauritania. This trip played a crucial role in circumventing potential impediments that could have hindered progress in this project.

Yet, this project encountered methodological limitations stemming from a scarcity of manuscripts authored prior to and during the seventeenth to early eighteenth century. Those available scarcely touch upon the subject under scrutiny. Moreover, a multitude of works remain beyond reach for scholars, researchers, and students due to the challenging terrains of the country's deserts. Furthermore, many manuscripts have been concealed to preserve and transmit family heritage, making them elusive to outsiders. Countless important works have also succumbed to loss, casualties of the harsh climatic conditions prevailing in the desert and the nomadic lifestyle marked by continual movement between temporary settlements.

Despite the brevity of my archival research trip to Mauritania, it is crucial to note that, preceding this expedition, I had spent several years studying Islamic and Arabic disciplines at

traditional centers of learning (*maḥḍara*) under the guidance of Mauritanian scholars. This formative period as a student served as the primary impetus for my pursuit in this area of research and subsequent work. My extensive experience in Mauritania afforded me profound familiarity with its people, culture, and reservoir of knowledge. This background facilitated convenient access to libraries, schools, and bookshops, enabling seamless navigation within these spaces. Furthermore, my academic foundation in Islam, Arabic language, and translation, coupled with hands-on experience proved instrumental for this project. My tenure as a researcher in the Department of Religious Studies and the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project (TMP) at the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA), University of Cape Town sometime in 2013, 2014 and 2015 added to my expertise in manuscript studies. Throughout this period, I studied, analyzed, and cataloged Arabic manuscripts sourced from important West African libraries and collections. These experiences enriched my understanding and proficiency in this domain.

Finally, unless otherwise specified, all Arabic to English translations in this work have been personally undertaken by me.

Division of Chapters

Following this introduction which laid the groundwork for this study, Chapter II offers an overview of the historical, political, economic, and religious dynamics within the Sahara and the Sūdān, specifically in connection to Mauritania during the 8th to the 18th century. It discusses major events that have profoundly influenced the intellectual and social traditions of the region. Furthermore, it examines their implications for the reported emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania. These events encompass the transformative emergence and reform of the Almoravids in the eleventh century, the migration of Andalusian itinerant and refugee scholars,

the Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu, the arrival of the Arab Ḥassānī group in the region, and their resultant conflicts, particularly with the Zawāyā clerical group. Chapter III thoroughly investigates the state and importance of poetry and verse-making in the Sahara and Sūdān from the earliest known times to the reported emergence period in late seventeenth to eighteenth-century Mauritania. Employing a long durée perspective and a literary archaeological approach, it illuminates the pre-emergence era of verse-making by exploring historical ruptures, continuities, and traces of poets and poetry. Furthermore, it delves into the factors that contributed to the silence, inactivity, or quietude of poetry and verse-making in the region until its sudden prominence during the reported emergence period. It concludes with the argument that the sudden prominence and surge in poetic expression during the seventeenth to eighteenth century was not an absolute emergence but rather a regeneration of a known tradition that had been relatively quiet, unexpressed and not widely spread in different parts of Mauritania due to various factors. Furthermore, the emerging dynamics stirred the composition of new poetic themes, styles and forms that were unknown in the region. Chapter IV expands upon the insights presented in Chapter III. Instead of focusing on the concept of reported emergence, it delves into the factors that contributed to the regeneration or sudden prominence of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition, distinguishing the period of its reported emergence. By examining the dynamics of mobility and migration, it analyzes how the infiltration and subsequent dominance of the Zawāyā and other indigenous groups of Mauritania by the Arab-Ḥassānīs resulted in power struggles and debates on identity and authority. Various groups sought legitimacy through lineages of esteemed Arab and saintly Muslim figures leading to emphasis in Arabic language proficiency, particularly rooted in Arabic poetry. Moreover, the transformations in the modes of religious and social expressions, driven by the emergent structures in Mauritania increased the

need for a profound grasp of Islamic law and principles which, in turn, fueled an interest in studying Arabic language and its associated tools, specifically its poetry. Additionally, the sixteenth-century Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu not only devastated the ancient West African scholarly city but also facilitated the movement of its scholarship, scholars, and texts to various areas of Mauritania. Somehow, it played a crucial role in the renaissance of the poetry tradition in Mauritania. Chapter V continues to examine the factors that contributed to the surge and prominence of poetry and verse-making in seventeenth to eighteenth century Mauritania. By delving into the intellectual life and works, especially the odes of two founding ancestors of the poetry tradition, the chapter explores how various internal and external cultural and intellectual dynamics, chiefly from Morocco, influenced the compositions of these scholars. More so, it demonstrates that the novelty in the themes, styles, and forms of the works of these scholars played a significant role and served as distinctive features in the arguments regarding the seventeenth to eighteenth-century prominence of the Arabic poetry tradition in the region. Chapter VI, the final chapter, emphasizes the correlation between the purported emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition and Mauritania's Saharan Islamic institutions of learning (*maḥḍara*). It expounds on how scholars, including the founding fathers of the poetry tradition, within these institutions not only shaped Islamic scholarship but also championed the verse tradition through knowledge transmission and literary production. The chapter argues that the transition from dominant prose genres to poetic forms in pedagogical works, signifying a paradigm shift in the medium of knowledge production, was a key aspect of the emergence phenomenon. Finally, the Conclusion section succinctly synthesizes the study's findings. It presents responses to the central research questions and offers insightful recommendations for future investigations. It concludes the in-depth exploration into the history of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition.

CHAPTER II: THE SAHARA AND THE SŪDĀN: ISLAM, PEOPLE AND KEY HISTORICAL EVENTS.

Introduction

This chapter delves into the political, economic, social, and religious histories and landscapes of the Sahara and areas of the Sūdān as they relate to Mauritania.[94] It explores the historical interconnectedness and relationship of these areas with other parts of the Muslim worlds, referencing historical developments and dynamics in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. Spanning from the eighth to the eleventh century and onwards to the seventeenth century, it examines key events shaping the region's religious, intellectual, and social traditions. In general, it provides a framework to understanding the intellectual and social landscape of the region in discussion as it relates to the subject of this work.

Islam in the Sahara and the Sūdān

Beyond Egypt, the influence of ʿUqba ibn Nāfiʿ (d. 683) in propagating Islam extended to Qayrawān and the broader Maghrib region. According to various oral traditions and documented accounts, ʿUqba's impact was not confined solely to the Maghrib but purportedly expanded the reach of Islam to the Sahara and beyond. Stories narrate that through ʿUqba's associations, Islam ventured into the Sahara and eventually reached the Sūdān. His military campaigns penetrated the 'Sea of Sand'—the Sahara—southern territories, and reportedly advanced as far as the

[94] The term "Sūdān," historically used, refers to the "Lands of the Blacks" as in Bilād al-Sūdān. However, in this context, it should not be confused with the country Sudan. Instead, it encompasses the broader West African regions.

Sudanese frontiers.[95] While it cannot be definitively stated that his presence directly instigated Islam's spread in the Sūdān as it did in the Maghrib, traces of Islam in the Sūdān emerged as early as the eighth century. The debate over the early penetration of Islam into the western parts of the Sūdān often intertwines with assertions of religious authority and power. Various ethnic groups in the Sahara and western Sūdān sought to establish or claim ancestral connections to prominent [Qurayshī] lineages of the early Muslim community.[96]

While debates persist regarding these narratives, scholars generally concur on the early advent of Islam in the Sahara and its southern regions dating back to the eighth century. This emergence was largely attributed to extensive trade interactions involving Ibāḍīs, among them were Berbers from North Africa, in addition to the inhabitants of the Sahara and its southern counterparts, such as the Sūdānese from the ancient kingdom of Ghana. These interactions revolved around lucrative trades in gold and slaves within the Sūdān. Nehemia Levtzion highlighted the existence of Ibāḍīs of Black origin who held prominent positions in North Africa and were referred to as the *Ijnāw*, possibly derived from the term *Ignaun* (sing. *Agnaw*), translating to 'Blacks.'[97] Key trading centres in the western Sahara was occupied by various tribes including the Lawāta, Zanāta, and the Nafūsa, among whom, according to Tadeusz Lewicki, were adherents of Ibāḍism.

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[95] Nehemia Levtzion, "The Sahara and the Sudan from the Arab Conquest of the Maghrib to the Rise of the Almoravids," in *The Cambridge History of Africa*: *c. 500 BC – 1050AD*, (ed.) J. D. Fage (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008): 637-684.

[96] Timothy Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation,* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002).

[97] Levtzion, "The Sahara and the Sudan," 643.

Throughout the eighth to the mid-eleventh centuries, the Ibāḍīs and the Fāṭimī Shīʿas held considerable presence in the Maghrib and Saharan regions. This era was marked by internal political conflicts and religious divisions among the Muslim communities in the Muslim West. Their influences were substantial and left lasting imprints on the polity and power dynamics of the region. However, conflicts were rampant across these regions. The pursuit of centralized or caliphal leadership within and beyond the Maghrib led to revolts that significantly influenced the religious and political structures of the Western desert areas, the Islamic West, and the Iberian Peninsula. These upheavals also affected the relationships of indigenous Ṣanhāja Berber tribes in these regions. The internal conflicts, political divisions and religious schisms from the ninth to the eleventh century contributed to disunity, instability, and insecurity along trade routes, impacting the local populace.[98] Various local sub-sects and revolts emerged, fueled by dissatisfaction among the Berber population due to their marginalization in leadership roles, despite their significant contributions to Islam's establishment in the Maghrib and beyond the Straits. Additionally, the Muslim communities in al-Andalus, governed by fragmented and weakened *Ṭāʾifa* kings, faced intense pressure from Church leaders in France and northern Spain. These leaders urged their knights to launch crusades into Spain, aiming to seize control and expel Muslims from the region.[99]Amidst these unfolding events and circumstances, the Almoravids, a reformist movement among the Ṣanhāja Berbers surfaced in the mid-eleventh century.

[98] McDougall, "The Sahara Reconsidered: Pastoralism, Politics and Salt from the Ninth through the Twelfth Centuries," 272.

[99] Ronalda Messier, *The Almoravids and the Meanings of Jihad,* (California: Praeger, 2010): XV

The Murābiṭūn (Almoravids)

The Almoravids, a reformist movement that emerged around 1042 in the western Sahara, was founded by ʿAbd Allāh ibn Yāsīn (d. 1059) and Yaḥyā ibn Ibrāhīm, both belonging to the Ṣanhāja tribe. Ibn Ibrāhīm, leader of the Gudāla, brought Ibn Yāsīn to the western Sahara around 1039 upon the former's return from pilgrimage. His intent was for Ibn Yāsīn to teach Sunni Islam that aligns with the teachings of scholars from Qayrawān. Initially, Ibn Yāsīn reportedly encountered resistance due to his perceived radical approach particularly regarding legal interpretations that clashed with established local practices. Despite that, his influence and authority became firmly established, marking the actual inception of the Murābiṭūn movement in the Sahara. The core objective of the movement was to restore pure teaching of Islam and eliminate heresy, ignorance, and unlegislated taxes not sanctioned by the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet Muḥammad. Much of that was successful through the movement's educational framework, and subsequently, military campaigns. They facilitated a unification of the knowledge tradition by spreading the Mālikī law across the Sahara and the Sūdān, curtailing Ibāḍī influence which played a crucial role in the Islamization of the area.

The movement expanded its reach beyond the High Atlas Mountains and took over key Moroccan cities.[100] These campaigns marked the passing of Ibn Yāsīn in 1059. His successor, Abū Bakr ibn ʿUmar (d. 1087), relocated the movement's center to Marrakesh.[101] Yūsuf ibn Tāshufīn (d. 1106), governor of Sijilmasa, gained control over numerous Maghrib cities,

[100] Messier, *The Almoravids and the Meanings of Jihad,* 35-36; Erin Pettigrew, "The History of Islam in Mauritania," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 5. Also available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.628.

[101] Messier, *The Almoravids and the Meanings of Jihad,* 35

including Fez, Tlemcen and Oujda in present-day Algeria. His rule established mosques and standardized Mālikī school teachings, aligning with the teachings of Qayrawān's scholars.

The triumphs of the *Murābiṭūn* reached al-Andalus where various Muslim rulers (*mulūk al-ṭawā'if*) were beset by the expanding Christian kingdoms. The Murābiṭūn successfully took over Seville, Cordoba, Granada, Valencia, Saragossa and other cities sometime between 1070 and the century's end.[102] They continued to consolidate their powers and spread in the Sahara and the Sūdān, under the religious guidance and leadership of scholars such as Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Murādī al-Ḥaḍramī (d. 1095), a great al-Ashʿarī and Mālikī *faqīh*.[103] Apart from the Mālikī legal manuals of Ifrīqiyan scholars such as the *Risālah* of Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 996) that was taught in the Islamic West, scholarly texts by Andalusian scholars, especially in the fields of law and Arabic literature, became staples of the Sunni curriculum in the Almoravids enclaves of Morocco, southern Sahara, and western Sūdān.

It is claimed that because most of the armies and supporters of the reform movement were people of lowly class and learning, it led to a stifling of intellectuals.[104] This reportedly also includes the regulation of poetry and verse making in the new Almoravids controlled al-Andalus. As Linda Fish Compton puts it, "unlike the *mulūk al-ṭawāʾif* whom they replaced, the North

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[102] Amira K. Bennison, *The Almoravids and the Almohads*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 2016): 42-61.

[103] Pettigrew, "The History of Islam in Mauritania," 6. According to ould Cheikh, al-Ḥaḍramī was trained in Granada and reportedly the first "teacher" of the Moorish literate tradition of the Sahara. He adds that there is not an established authoritative documentation of this claim to prove the link between him and the first known authors of the western Saharan area. See ould Cheikh, "Théologie du désordre Islam, ordre et désordre au Sahara," 2.

[104] Messier, *The Almoravids and the Meanings of Jihad,* 145

African Almoravids did not appreciate the subtleties of classical Arabic poetry so the poets suffered accordingly."[105] The strength of this claim on the regulation of poetry will be examined in the next chapter.

Despite numerous challenges, the Almoravids successfully controlled Andalusia, the Islamic Maghrib to the Sahara, its western side and down to the southern areas of the desert. The movement played a significant role in the spread and consolidation of Islam among the numerous communities of these regions and unified them under one leadership. It was the first time that vast areas and a mix of people and cultures would successfully exist under one umbrella since the emergence of Islam beyond Ifrīqiyā.

Under the Almoravids' control and regulations, commercial exchanges and crafts between the people under these areas were strengthened. They created an avenue for cultural and intellectual exchanges which later opened doors for Islamic scholarship and movement of scholarly literature between al-Andalus and the Maghrib, then to the Sahara and finally the Sūdān. People were taught Islam and Arabic literature, and Muslims communities blended as a nation under the leadership of the Murābiṭūn. This culture of Islamic scholarship and Arabic literature that would be birthed in the western Sahara and the neighbouring regions under a Ṣanhāja controlled Muslim reform movement would later be called the "Ṣanhāja Islamic literature" by Norris.[106] They reigned until 1147, after about a century of its reign and power,

[105] Linda Fish Compton, *Andalusian Lyrical Poetry and Old Spanish Love Songs: The Muwashshaḥ and its Kharja* (New York: New York University Press, 1976): 130.

[106] Norris, "Muslim Sanḥāja Scholars of Mauritania," *in Studies in West African Islamic History, The Cultivators of Islam,* (ed.) John Ralph Willis, (London: Frank Cass: 1979):148

before they were overthrown by *al-Muwaḥḥidūn* (Almohads), literally, the Unifiers under the oneness of God, led by Muḥammad ibn Tumart (d. 1130), a Masmūda Berber Muslim scholar.[107]

Post Almoravids Western Sahara and the Sūdān

The Arab Banū Maʿqil, originally part of the Banū Hilāl, undertook early migrations to Ifrīqiyā during the initial conquest periods. Subsequently, they established settlements in Morocco. However, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, these Arab nomads initiated a southward emigration. By the early fourteenth century, the Arab Ḥassānī (Awlād Ḥassān) of the Banū Maʿqil launched a significant migration, infiltrating the al-Sāqiyat al-Ḥamrà (Saguia el-Hamra), the northern region of Western Sahara. This movement served as the springboard for future conquest and the control of parts of what is now Mauritania and portions of the western Sūdān.[108]

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[107] Pettigrew, "The History of Islam in Mauritania," 5.

[108] This migration stemmed from the desiccation of the northern regions where escalating aridity compelled nomads and pastoralists to move southward into the Saharan and Sahelian zones, as discussed by Ould Cheikh in ould Cheikh "Herders, Traders and Clerics: The Impact of Trade, Religion and Warfare on the Evolution of Moorish Society," in *Herders, Warriors and Traders: Pastoralism in Africa*, (eds.) John G. Galaty and Pierre Bonte (Oxford: Westview Press, 1991): 202. Their influx and southward migration marked the initiation of a gradual cultural transformation among the local population through processes such as intermarriage with other ethnic groups and the establishment of dominance via military control. Key works exploring this transformative period include Bruce Hall's *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600 – 1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and James L. Webb Jr.'s *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel, 1600-1850* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), particularly pages 3-22. For further insights into the spread of Islam in West Africa and its historical dynamics, see Margari Hill, "The Spread of Islam in West Africa: Containment, Mixing, and Reform from the Eighth to the Twentieth Century," *Spice Digest*, (2009):1-4.

During this period, the Empire of Mali emerged from fragmented kingdoms, encompassing present-day Mali, parts of eastern Mauritania, Guinea, and Senegal. Established by Sunjata Keita, the empire gained international recognition under the rule of Mansa Musa. Throughout Mansa Musa's reign (1307-32), Timbuktu rose to prominence as a center of Islamic scholarship and commercial town.[109] Under his leadership, Islam was declared the official state religion.[110] Islamic and Arabic scholarship flourished, especially among Ṣanhāja nomads across the Adrār and Tāgānit caravan towns from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. This intellectual renaissance owed much to the lasting legacy of the Almoravids and, the teachings of the movement's Imam, Abū Bakr al-Murādī al-Ḥaḍramī (d. 1095).[111]From the Sāqiyat al-Ḥamrà

[109] Hill, "The Spread of Islam in West Africa," 1-4; Brent D. Singleton, "African Bibliophiles: Books and Libraries in Medieval Timbuktu," *Library Faculty Publications,* (2004): 1-22.

[110] Levtzion, "Islam in the Bilad al-Sudan to 1800," 69, highlights the profound impact of a pilgrimage to Mecca undertaken by a remarkably affluent Black Muslim king. This pilgrimage not only note his prominence but also served as a testament to the elevated status of Islam and Muslims in Sudan. Upon his return, the king brought back Muslim scholars from Andalusia and Egypt, demonstrating his commitment to intellectual advancement. His support extended to fostering the education of Malian scholars in Fez. He successfully conquered Gao, a city that would later, after facing ruins and internal conflicts, emerged as the formidable Songhay Empire. During the first half of the fifteenth century, Timbuktu reached a pinnacle of scholarly achievement, attracting recognition from one Hijāz scholar by the name Sīdī ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Tamīmī, mentioned by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Saʿdī in his chronicle, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Saʿdī, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Saʿdī's Tarikh al--Sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, (trans. and ed.) John O. Hunwick (Boston: Brill, 1999). See Nehemia Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali,* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1980): 202. It surprised al-Tamīmī that scholars of Timbuktu excelled in and even surpassed him in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). This revelation led him to embark on a journey to Fez for further studies before returning to establish his residence in the intellectually vibrant city of Timbuktu.

[111] Al-Ḥaḍramī was known to have facilitated the teaching of dogma and jurisprudence among Saharan Berbers in the region. Even though the popular language of the Berbers was Znāga, "classical Arabic works on many subjects were studied and cherished even if the grammar books and standard texts were

and various regions of the Sahara, a highly sophisticated educational curriculum flourished. The study of jurisprudence, Qur'an, Arabic language, and creed thrived in numerous trading centers and cities, including Shinqīṭ, Tājakant, Tīshīt, Timbuktu, Wādān, and especially, in the Saharan nomadic school of Islamic learning, *maḥḍara* (pl. *maḥāḍir* – see last chapter for comprehensive discussion).[112]The region of Shinqīṭ boasted some of the finest scholars and centers for Islamic knowledge production, earning a reputation for high-level scholarship among respected Muslim scholars across the Islamicate world.[113] Tinīgi in the Adrār, specifically the Lamṭūna Tājakant, became recognized for their learned men and served as a prominent learning hub for hundreds of students, both male and female, who committed the *Muwaṭṭa'* of Imām Mālik ibn Anas to memory.[114] The Jakanī people of Tinīgi earned a remarkable reputation for learning, leading to the descriptor "*ʿilm Jakanī*," signifying that knowledge resided among the Jakanīs. In some northern settlements under the Midlish group (*Majlis al-ʿilm*), the *al-Mudawwana* of Abū Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Salām ibn Saʿīd al-Tanūkhī, known as Saḥnūn (d. 854/5), a Mālikī manual and reference book, was memorized by the youth.[115] Groups like the Idaw al-Hājj and the Midlish (Majlīsī)

few." Norris, "The Znāga and Islam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1969): 498.

[112] Chouki El Hamel, "The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society from the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century," *Journal of Religion in Africa,* vol. 29, 1 (1999): 62-87.

[113] SSee Pettigrew, "History of Islam in Mauritania," 7.

[114] Norris, "Muslim Sanhāja Scholars of Mauritania," 149.

[115] Mālikī law triumphed across various regions of North Africa and Islamic Iberia, overcoming initial challenges posed by the Hanafis and the Khawārij. In Ifrīqiyā and al-Andalus, scholars placed significant emphasis on the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* and the *Mudawwana*. The latter, a crucial 'reworking' of the Asadiyya—a compendium of Mālikī *fiqh* by Asad ibn Furāt, a Qayrawānī jurist and predecessor of Saḥnūn—gained prominence after Saḥnūn's journey to the East. During this expedition, he sought proper validation of the transmitted reliable opinions of the School from senior Mālikī scholars, as documented in the Asadiyya. As the Mālikī School extended its influence southward from North Africa, the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* and the

gained fame for Islamic scholarship. [116] However, these regions faced conflicts and internal dissensions among the people of the Sahara and the Sūdān.

Fourteenth to Seventeenth Century: Influential Developments

Building upon the earlier discussions, I explore subsequent developments in the region. I emphasize the importance of three events spanning from the latter part of the fourteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century. These events, I argue, were not only transformative but revolutionary in their impact. They profoundly shaped various facets of the Sahara and the Sahel, particularly influencing the landscape of Islamic scholarship and intellectual traditions.

Mudawwana found widespread use and became integral components of instruction at various centers of Islamic learning. See Bennison, *The Almoravid and Almohad Empires*, 234-235.

[116] Numerous scholars from this group established themselves in cities such as Wādān, with some even being recognized as the founders of these urban centers. For instance, al-Sharīf ʿAbd al-Mūmin ibn Ṣāliḥ ʿUthmān, a disciple of Qāḍī Iyāḍ, is acclaimed as a founding figure of Wādān in the southeastern part of present-day Mauritania, a historical attribution noted in Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sīdī Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr ibn Anmbūja al-ʿAlawī al-Tīshītī, *Ḍāllat al-Adīb Tarjamat wa Dīwān Sīdī Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr ibn Anmbūja al-ʿAlawī al-Tīshītī*, (ed.) Aḥmad wuld al-Ḥasan, (NP: Manshūrāt al-Munaẓẓama al-Islāmiyyat al-ʿarabiyya li'l-tarbiya wa'l-ʿulūm wa'l-thaqāfa, 1996):19. Their intellectual movement not only contributed to the establishment of new hubs for Islamic learning but also facilitated the formation of scholastic networks and commercial activities (McDougall, The Economics of Islam in the Southern Sahara: The Rise of the Kunta Clan" *Asian and African Studies,* vol. 20, 1, (1986): 46-49. However, these regions were not immune to conflicts and internal dissensions among the inhabitants of the Sahara and the Sūdān. Cities like Shinqīṭ and Tinīgi in the north faced recurrent feuds among the Moorish populace, leading to disorder and, in some cases, the abandonment of these settlements. The disputes in these areas had a profound impact on Islamic education, resulting in a decline in scholasticism in certain centers and a constrained revival in others. Despite the challenges, Mauritania's early Arabic and Islamic Ṣanhāja scholastic legacy endured. While some aspects perished due to ethnic turmoil, Islamic learning not only survived but also experienced rekindling, albeit at varying levels, as documented in Norris, "Muslim Sanhāja Scholars of Mauritania," 149.

Furthermore, these events are crucial in understanding the emergence phenomenon of the classical Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania. The following passages outline three important events, while the subsequent chapters delve into a comprehensive discussion and analysis of their impact on shaping the emergence phenomenon of the Arabic poetry tradition in the "Land of Million Poets" during the latter half of the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries.

The first of these events was the fall of Granada in 1492. Although movements from Iberia to the Maghrib, the Sahara, and parts of the [western] Sūdān had occurred prior to this time, this event was significant and, in some respects, facilitated more pronounced southward immigration of Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula. It stimulated the settlement of refugee and emigrant scholars from Spain [and the Maghrib] into specific areas of the Sahara and the Sudan. According to Paul Lovejoy, this era came to be known as the 'Andalusia period,' as viewed from the perspective of western and central Sudan, reaching its climax during the Songhay's dominance in both regions. These movements significantly impacted Islamic learning and scholarship in the southern Sahara.[117] He adds that, "[t]his tradition of scholarship that connected Andalusia, the Maghreb, and western Sudan became associated with an indigenous class of Muslim scholars in western and central Sudan who were known locally by various names."[118] Scholars in Timbuktu, besides their connections to Andalusian and Maghribian Islamic intellectual traditions, were also exposed to the scholastic traditions of Egypt. Some of them established contacts with and studied under Egyptian scholars during travels for pilgrimage. This

[117] Paul E. Lovejoy, "Islamic Scholarship and Understanding History in West Africa before 1800," in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, Volume 3: 1400-1800,* (eds.) Jose Rabasa et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 224.

[118] Ibid., 223

exposure broadened their knowledge beyond theology and Mālikī jurisprudence, which they were familiar with and subscribed to in the Sahara and the Sudan.

The second event unfolded with the rise of a Sharif dynasty in Morocco. Under the rule of Sultan Aḥmad al-Manṣūr al-Saʿdī (d. 1603), the Dynasty orchestrated the invasion and sacking of the Niger Valley region, specifically the city of Timbuktu in 1591. This marked the onset of a significant transformation in the Sahara and western Sūdān. During this episode, numerous Timbuktu scholars and jurists, including Qāḍī ʿUmar and the celebrated Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Aḥmad ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad (d. 1627), widely known as Aḥmad Bābā, were shackled and forcibly relocated to Marrakesh. While some died in captivity, others were never permitted to return to Timbuktu, with the exception of Bābā, who returned after two decades in exile. Scholars contend that Timbuktu never fully recovered its former glory after al-Saʿdī's sixteenth-century invasion of the Songhay Empire, as it wreaked havoc on the city's commercial activities and intellectual hub. During this period, Timbuktu was at the zenith of its Islamic scholastic tradition, attracting scholars, students, and traders from neighboring towns for learning and commerce. McDougall notes that the seventeenth century ushered in significant transformations in Timbuktu's economic, religious, and societal dynamics, with some of these changes stemming from the earlier invasion.[119]

As a consequence of this invasion and the ensuing transformations, scholars and students—whether residents, itinerant, or refugees—migrated from Timbuktu to other Saharan commercial towns and intellectual hubs. This process also accelerated the ongoing 'decentralization' of Islamic learning and scholarship from urban centers to rural areas. This

[119] McDougall, "The Economics of Islam in the Southern Sahara," 49-50.

shift, coupled with Timbuktu's fame as an intellectual hub and a vital commercial junction, triggered the dissemination of its intellectual capital across the Sahara and the Sudan.

Amidst the unfolding events, a third transformative occurrence in the Sahara and Sudan was the infiltration of the Arab Ḥassānī from the Banū Maghfar clan, significantly influencing the region's structure. This infiltration spanned from the southwestern Mauritanian region of Gebla (Qibla)[120] to the Senegal River, the meridian of Timbuktu, and the Atlantic Ocean during the fourteenth to the first part of the seventeenth century.[121] The Arab Ḥassānī wielded so much political power and dominated the region over the centuries. Over the centuries, the Arab Ḥassānī wielded significant political power, asserting dominance in the region. The profound interweaving of Arab-Ḥassānī culture and language with non-Arabs in the area subsequently shaped and influenced the tribal and cultural structure of the people.[122] Consequently, there was a significant increase in Arabic literacy and literary production. The Ḥassānī vernacular, Ḥassāniyyah, gained prevalence and was spoken in southwestern Mauritania as well as other cities and towns including Walata, Wādān, and Timbuktu. This linguistic shift displaced local

[120] The Gebla is the southwestern part (mostly the Trarza) of Mauritania comprised of many Arabs and Znāga clans. The most famous of them were the Idaw ʿAlī, Awlād Daymān, Midlish, Tandagha, Awlād Antshāyt.

[121] Ould Cheikh, "Herders, Traders and Clerics; The Impact of Trade, Religion and Warfare on the Evolution of Moorish Society," 202.

[122] Chouki El Hamel, "The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society from the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century," 64; In some literature, some scholars use the word 'Arabization' for their discussion of the arrival and dominance of the Arabs thereby leading to the transformation of the people and cultures of the Sahara and the western Sudan. It is important to note that the region, before the arrival of the Arabs, had been Islamized and had a presence of Arab culture through economic activities with some Muslim and Arab merchants long before the Almoravid and spread of the Banū Maʿqil in the southern parts of Morocco. See Norris, *Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara,* xxi.

Berber languages (*kalām Aznāga*), particularly Znāga and Azer.[123] The displacement of the Znāga Berber language not only led to the relegation of their relatively small literary tradition and cherished culture of short poems/odes but also resulted in their suppression by Ḥassāniyya poetic and folk traditions. Erin Pettigrew echoes the impact of this linguistic shift expressing that:

> In the southwestern Sahara, the use of Arabic as both a written and a spoken language began to displace Zenega and Azer, the primary languages spoken among populations there, between the 14th and the 16th centuries. Taking the form of Hassaniya, this was a vernacular form of Arabic named after the Banu Hassan, descendants of the nomadic Arab Banu Maʿqil confederation….[124]

This transformation was not confined solely to linguistic changes but represented a singular phase among several transformations—comprising "linguistic process (arabicization), and cultural transformation (arabization), mitigated by an ideological ethos (Islam)." These reached their peak, or more aptly, 'completion' in the seventeenth century.[125] Concurrently, during this period, particularly in the seventeenth century, the Gebla, the southwest region, bore witness to numerous intense conflicts. These conflicts would leave a lasting imprint, extending far beyond its immediate boundaries. The competition for survival—economically, politically, and religiously—intensified among the Arab Ḥassānī, Berber Zawāyā, and other ethnic groups in the Sahara and Sahel. Simultaneously, there was a redefinition of matters pertaining to permissibility and prohibition. Awbak ibn Abūhum ibn Alfagha Abhand, later known as Imām Nāsir al-Dīn (d. 1673-4), emerged as an influential Tashumsha Zawāyā Muslim cleric and leader

[123] ould Cheikh, "Herders, Traders and Clerics: The Impact of Trade, Religion and Warfare on the Evolution of Moorish Society," 203.

[124] Pettigrew, "History of Islam in Mauritania," 6

[125] Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sudan," 3.

of the indigenous population. He advocated for a return to correct Islamic practices rooted in a profound understanding and interpretation of Islamic law. Identifying a perceived deficiency in societal adherence to these principles, especially after the arrival of the Arab Maghfar in the region, he called for the establishment of a three-year state of repentance (*dawlat al-tawba*).[126] During this time, he initiated the "Tuubenaan/Toubenan" movement, grounded in a return to pure Islamic practices and understanding. This movement emerged in response to the injustices perpetrated by the ruling elites, actions that contradicted Islamic principles such as the killing, and the enslavement of Muslims. The movement also pushed for the Islamization of the region. It gained traction from the southwest region of modern-day Mauritania down to the Senegal

[126] Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sudan," 4

River.[127] According to several scholars including Norris,[128] Stewart,[129] McDougall,[130] and others, the region experienced numerous conflicts before the movement's inception. The Battle of Titam (*Maʿrakat Intitām*) in 1630, where Banū Maghāfar overpowered the Awlād Rizq (Razg),[131] and the *Shurr Bubba* or *Sharr Babba*, which reportedly lasted for several years, were among the

[127] Louis Chambonneau, a French colonial figure, reportedly named the movement 'Toubenan' from the Wolof word 'Tuub' (Tuubanaan), which translate to "conversion." Some scholars suggest that it might have been derived from the Arabic word "*Tawba*," meaning "repentance." It is noteworthy that the Wolof and Arabic terms in question share an etymological connection. Essentially, the Wolof term "tuub" is a variation derived from the Arabic root word "tawba." Therefore, the arguments regarding the two words and their origins are not mutually exclusive. The initiation of this movement by Imām Nāsir al-Dīn was prompted by a deep-seated mistrust in the ruling elites, as they were perceived to be complicit in actions contrary to Islamic principles, such as killing, pillaging, and enslaving their own people. Imām Nāsir al-Dīn actively opposed the transatlantic slave trade involving Muslims and advocated for the Islamization of the Senegal Valley. He vehemently argued that kings were not permitted by God to engage in pillaging, killing, or enslaving their subjects; instead, their duty was to maintain and protect them against external threats. Despite its brevity, his movement successfully mobilized ordinary Muslims who felt disenfrachised, leading to the overthrow of their rulers. This transformative initiative began in the Sahara and extended into Senegambia. A major aspect of his resistance was directed against the Arab Ḥassān, whom he labeled as raiders and "cutters of the road," a term denoting highway robbers. See Amir Syed, Between *Jihād* and History: Reconceptualizing the Islamic Revolutions of West Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa*, (eds.) Fallou Ngom, Mustapha Kurfi, and Toyin Falola (London: Palgrave, 2020): 93-95. See also Philip Curtin, "Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Inter-relations in Mauritania and Senegal," *Journal of African History* 12, no. 1 (1971): 11-24 and Paul E. Lovejoy, *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

[128] Harry T. Norris, "Znāga Islam During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* vol. 32, no. 3 (1969): 507.

[129] Charles C. Stewart, *Islam and the Social Order* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973): 14.

[130] McDougall, "The View from Awdaghust," 1-31

[131] al-Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīṭ al-manāra wa'l-ribāṭ*, 22.

significant conflicts in the region prior to the movement.[132] The origins of the conflict have been a subject of debate among scholars, with varying perspectives on whether it was primarily religious, 'secular' (motivated by political and economic interests), or a combination of both. One prevailing account, which has gained prominence over others, attributes the war to a disputed case involving an individual named Bubba, hence its designation as the "war of Bubba." Babba ould Aḥmad ould Āsūr al-Sgayʾī, a client of the Tāshidbīt Lamṭūna, a Zawāyā tribe, became embroiled in the conflict when he refused to pay the *zakāh*.[133] Initially, this disagreement remained an internal matter within the Zawāyā tribe. However, the situation escalated when Haddi ibn Aḥmad ibn Dāmān, the Ḥassān prince of Trarza, intervened. This interference is reported to have sparked military hostilities between the Ḥassān and the Zawāyā clan, with Imām Nāsir al-Dīn assuming leadership of the latter. A scholar like al-Yadālī who was born shortly after this time presents an alternative narrative about the origins of this event. In his work "*Manāqib Imām Nāsir al-Dīn*," which focuses on Nāsir al-Dīn, also a Tashumsha like al-Yadālī himself, he contends that "Shurr Bubba" or "Sharr Babba" was a rallying cry for the subjugated Zawāyā against the Banū Ḥassān. According to al-Yadālī, Nāsir al-Dīn would address his followers in the Aznāga Berber dialect, saying "Shurrbubbīh!" during recruitment, urging them to stand up.[134] Various dates have been proposed for the commencement and conclusion of the disputed war. Some scholars place the beginning in 1645 and its conclusion in 1675. Others

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[132] For detail examination of Shurr Bubba, cf. M. M. ould Saad, *Ḥarb Shur Bubba* (*la guerre de shurbubba ou la crise du 17e siècle au Sud-Ouest mauritanien*), (Nouakchott: IMRS, 1993). See also Stewart, *Islam and the Social Order*, 14-16, 20; and Boubrik, "Hommes de Dieu, homes d'épée: Stratification sociale dans la société bidân," 102.

[133] Ould Cheikh, "Herders, Traders and Clerics: The Impact of Trade, Religion and Warfare on the Evolution of Moorish Society," 203.

[134] Ibid., 204.

argue that this 30-year period marked the extended duration of Nāsir al-Dīn's religious movement from southern Mauritania to Senegal.[135] It was also during this time that the Arab Ḥassān exerted dominance over these regions, defeating the Imām and quelling his jihād movement.[136] Regarding Shurr Bubba, Stewart suggests that "there are indications this may have been only the last of several conflicts between autochthons and immigrants, which have become telescoped into a single event."[137] This perspective raises the possibility that the narratives surrounding the war may have amalgamated various events into a major conflict, as suggested by Zawāyā scholars like al-Yadālī in their hagiographical narratives. While this may invite scrutiny, it is essential not to dismiss al-Yadālī's account outrightly considering that his record is one of the earliest and most comprehensive narratives of the war compiled shortly after its conclusion. Furthermore, members of al-Yadālī's family reportedly participated in the wars which, in some ways, adds a personal and firsthand dimension to his historical account.

The conflict supposedly culminated in a decisive Hassānī victory over the Zawāyā. It marked the inception of a reshaped social order. This transformation propelled the Ḥassānīs,

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[135] Norris, *The Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara,* 35-36; Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sudan," 4.

[136] Norris makes a crucial observation saying "ShurrBubba appears to have been a war cry, although the name Sharr Bubba also denotes this war, there is a disagreement as to which of the two is more accurate. A Sharr among the Tuareg indicates a war between tribal factions and people while a simple raid for booty (*ghazw*) is known as an *annemensi* or *amdjer.*…ShurrBubba embraced both type of warfare. The Moor distinguish between a *jihād* 'holy war' and a sharr, a war without religious significance. It seems clear that during its course it seems Shurrbubba had some of the features of both, although most Zwāya regard it as primarily a religious war. This emphasis may account for the scepticism which associates it with an ethnic conflict sparked off by a tributary called Bubba." Norris, "The Znāga and Islam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," 500.

[137] Stewart, *Islam and the Social Order*, 14.

often identified as warriors, to ascend to the pinnacle of societal hierarchy. In contrast, the Zawāyā, whose identity became linked with their scholarly pursuits assumed a position of "respectable subordination" within this new social framework.[138] The repercussions of this event reverberated across various dimensions of Mauritania's landscape, exerting a great influence on its economic, political, social, and religious spheres. It stands as a central moment in modern Mauritanian history, contributing significantly to the shaping of the nation's political structure.[139] However, it is crucial to acknowledge as Bruce Hall highlights that the "dichotomy established between the so-called warrior- and clerical-status groups and their respective social roles does not fully reflect actual social practice or the historical reality that the status of particular groups sometimes changed over time."[140]

Undoubtedly, the seventeenth century and its aftermath, particularly the post-Shurr Bubba period ushered in new social, political, economic, and religious frameworks, and ignited intense competition among various Saharan factions for dominance in each domain. However, the critical inquiry revolves around the impact of the events delineated—before, during, and after Shurr Bubba—on the purported emergence of the Classical Arabic verse tradition in Mauritania during the latter part of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. How did this phenomenon of poetic tradition emergence influence the articulation of Islam and the culture of scholarship in

[138] El Hamel, "The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society from the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century," 64-65.

[139] ould Cheikh, "Herders, Traders and Clerics," 203; Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sudan," 4.

[140] Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600* – 1960, 56.

Mauritania? To address these questions, the ensuing chapters in the second section of this work aim to provide comprehensive insights and analysis.

CHAPTER III: FINDING TRACES OF POETRY AND VERSE-MAKING IN THE SAHARA AND THE SŪDĀN

Introduction

Mauritanian biographical works and historical sources, ranging from the early nineteenth-century anthology *al-Wasīṭ* by al-Amīn to contemporary works like those by ould Bah, collectively identify certain intellectual luminaries who thrived from the mid-seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries as the pioneers (*ruwād*) and 'founding fathers' of the Classical Arabic verse tradition in Mauritania. Ould Bah contends that, prior to the arrival of these pioneering figures in classical Arabic poetry, the region lacked a substantial tradition of poets and poetry in the true sense, with only sporadic instances of versifications dedicated to intercession (*al-tawassul*), prayers for rainfall (*al-Istisqāʾ*), and a few scattered versifications.[141] He claims that the seventeenth century marked a sudden emergence of eloquent voices of poetry with an abundance of beautiful vocabulary and excellent prosodic applications reminding us of the era of al-Mutanabbī and Ibn Hāniʾ. He references the earlier mentioned Mauritanian pioneer scholars and poets such as Ibn Rāzikah, Muḥammad al-Yadālī, al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr and Bū Famayn as those with the distinct voices who exemplified this model of poetry and verse-making starting from this period.[142]In other words, like al-Amīn in his historical biographies and collections of poetry *al-Wasīṭ*, ould Bah also regards these scholars and poets as foundational figures in the reported emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania. Therefore, if we acknowledge that the earliest poetry in the region emerged or gained prominence from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, it raises questions about the pre-existing landscape of poetry and verse-making in

[141] Ould Bah, *al-Shiʿr waʾl-*Shuʿarāʾ, 51.

[142] Ibid., 51

Mauritania's literary history. What defined poetic expression before this era? As previously raised in the introduction of this work: did the Classical Arabic poetry tradition emerge in this later period, and what does this "emergence" (*nashʾa*) truly signify? Could this phenomenon be seen as a "renaissance" (*nahḍa*) or a "revival" (*tajdīd*) of an older intellectual tradition that lay quiet or unexpressed? If so, what led to the prior scarcity of poetic expressions in the region's literary history?

Given these questions, a thorough literary excavation and analysis of Arabic poetry and verse-making across the Sahara and broader West Africa become not only necessary but the most apt lens to frame this investigation concerning the emergence of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition. Hence, this chapter, divided into two sections, digs into a quest for answers, with efforts to unravel historical events, phenomena, and interpretations to comprehend the genesis—whether it was an 'emergence,' 'revival,' or 'renaissance/rebirth'—of Mauritania's classical Arabic poetry tradition. The first section examines the historical landscape of Arabic poetry and verse-making across Mauritania and wider West Africa, tracing its origins from the earliest known records until the reported emergence in the second half of the seventeenth to early eighteenth century. Meanwhile, the subsequent section explores factors and influences that might have contributed to the scarcity of poetic expressions in Mauritania's literary history before the reported emergence of this tradition.

This exploration of such an extensive geographical area over an extended period stems from existing literature, including the works of Catherine Taine-Cheikh[143] and Harry Norris,

[143] Taine-Cheikh, "Le pilier et la corde: recherches sur la poésie maure," *Bulletin of S.O.A.S.* XLVIII/3, (1985): 516-535; Taine-Cheikh, "Pouvoir de la poésie et poésie du pouvoir - le cas de la société maure," *Matériaux arabes et sudarabiques* (G.E.L.L.A.S.) 6 (1994): 281-310.

which, while significant in contributing to the understanding of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition, have limitations. Their focus tends to lean towards potential influences behind the emergence dynamics of poetry without going deep into the intricate *hows* and *whys* in the reported period of emergence. While these studies shed light on certain triggers leading to the efflorescence of intellectual and literary activities starting from the seventeenth century, they overlook placing the emergence of poetry within the context of the broader Sahara, particularly in present-day Mauritania, adjoining territories like Timbuktu, and the vast western Sūdān. These regions, preceding the formation and advent of modern nation-states, as discussed in Chapter I, had shared heritage and formed a cultural, economic, religious, and intellectual zone. From the medieval period to the early colonial era, these areas shared linguistic affinities, origins in certain regions, and predominantly studied similar Arabo-Islamic texts. Yet, they comprised distinct entities—cities, settlements, and regions—sometimes autonomous but interconnected. Governed by unique socio-economic, political, and religious structures, understanding these settings is crucial to examining the reported evolution of Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania.

Thus, this chapter, through historical scrutiny and textual analysis, navigates through the realms of poets, poetry, and verse-making in the post-Almoravid Sahara and the Sūdān, unraveling the emergence phenomenon. The exploration encompasses chronicles, biographical literature, selected verse of the Qur'an, Ḥadīth and *fiqh* literature, verses, and works of the pioneering figures of this poetic culture of Mauritania, among others. It sheds light on materials, socio-political contexts, and the intellectual landscape to unearth the historical context behind the acclaimed era of emergence, revealing why it became synonymous with the inception of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition. Given the interconnected historical transformations in these territories, instigating changes that mirrored each other, this way of investigation uncovers

historical ruptures, continuities, and connections. It illuminates the rich intellectual and social structure of these culturally interwoven regions during the post-Almoravid epoch.

Scholars such as Norris and ould Cheikh have discussed the presence of Arabic-speaking trading communities and scholars in towns and commercial cities like Ancient Ghana and Awdaghust. Though limited, this legacy of scholarship left its mark on indigenous Ṣanhāja nomads and the Sudanese.[144]The Almoravid Movement played a crucial role in further spreading Classical Arabic, despite many of its members lacking mastery, as Znāga and other local languages held prominent positions as vernacular tongues. The Movement became a catalyst for the explosive growth of Arabic culture among the people, supporting Islamic learning in the region.[145] This movement eventually led to a rich scholarly tradition that benefited from close commercial, political contacts with neighboring cities in the Sūdān, including Timbuktu, as well as with Morocco, Spain, and the Middle East.[146]Moreover, the infiltration of the Banū Ḥassān and other major agents facilitated the wider spread and establishment of Arabic culture in the region. Despite these historical accounts and our understanding of the Arabic and Islamic literary heritage and tradition in extant literature, they do not tell us enough about the Arabic poetry tradition of the region. To grasp the depth and origins of this intellectual and artistic tradition, our exploration begins with the following section.

[144] Norris, "Muslim Sanhāja Scholars of Mauritania," 147.

[145] Ibid., 147

[146] Ibid., 148

Poets/Versifiers and Verse-Making in Saharan Mauritania and the Sūdān

At present, our knowledge of the oldest literary verses originating from the Sahara and the broader West Africa is attributed to Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad ibn Fāris ibn Shakla ibn ʿAmr ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Sulamī al-Dhakwānī al-Kānimī, commonly known as Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī (d. 1212/3). A seminal figure, al-Kānimī, a distinguished twelfth-century Black grammarian and poet hailing from the Kanem-Borno Kingdom on the northern shores of Lake Chad, holds a distinct position in literary genesis. His Arabic literary works, likely the first from the sub-Saharan region to be known in North Africa, distinguish him as the pioneering scholar whose Arabic writings have been presented as originating from the southern region and written in Arabic. Two of al-Kānimī verses that seem to extol Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb al-Manṣūr, the Almohad Sultan found resonance in the court of the Sultan in Marrakesh.[147]

> He removed his veil of me, yet my eyes,
> Out of awe [of him], saw him through a veil.
>
> His favour drew me near but being near,
> Out of awe, I found myself distant.[148]

Although pinpointing the exact context in which these verses were composed and recited in the presence of the Sultan remains challenging, Mohammed Bencherifa offers his own insights. He suggests that al-Kānimī recited these verses as an expression of awe towards the Sultan, given the unique opportunity to meet him face-to-face without any barriers. This stood in

[147] John Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," *Research in African Literature* (2004): 83. See also Hunwick, "The Arabic Qasida in West Africa: Forms, Themes and Contexts," in *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa: Classical Traditions & Modern Meanings,* (eds.) Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle (Leiden: Brill, 1996): 83.

[148] I differed in some of Hunwick's wordings in the translations in Hunwick, "The Arabic Qasida in West Africa: Forms, Themes and Contexts," 83.

contrast to the prevailing tradition in the Sūdān (and his homeland) where direct communication with kings, even by princes, was typically conducted behind veils or barriers. Bencherifa's proposition draws on reports and personal experiences of writers like Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and al-ʿUmarī, who were familiar with the traditions of the people of the Sūdān from the region.[149] However, through the poetic artistry evident in its Arabic composition, the verses of al-Kānimī demonstrate a structural cohesiveness that attests to his profound knowledge of the science of Arabic prosody, dispelling any notion of the work being the creation of a novice. These verses, among others composed by him act as compelling evidence of the flourishing mastery of the Arabic language and its advanced level of maturity within the temporal and contextual confines of the poet.

Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī, as recorded in biographical literature, hailed from Bilma in present-day Chad.[150] According to Saʿd al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-Muʾayyad ibn Ḥammuwayh al-Dimashqī (d. 1252/60), an ambassador of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī to Marrakech who had developed a friendship with the poet, al-Kānimī revealed that he pursued his studies and graduated in the ancient kingdom of Ghana.[151] Although the names of al-Kānimī's teachers and his knowledge chain (*sanad*) remain

[149] Muḥammad Ibn Sharīfā*,* "Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī: Anmūdhaj Mubakkir li-'l-Tawāṣul al-Thaqāfī bayna al-Maghrib wa Bilād al-Sūdān," *Silsilat al-Muḥāḍarāt* (5), Rabat: Manshurāt Maʿhad al-Dirāsāt al-Ifrīqī, Jāmiʿat Muḥammad al-Khāmis, (1991): 20. The conference paper also has a second title in French: Mohammed Bencherifa, *"*Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī (m. 609/1212–1213), figure illustre dans les relations culturelles entre le Maroc et Bilād al-Sūdān*,*" *Publications de l'Institut des Études Africaines,* Rabat: Université Mohammed V (1991): 20.

[150] B. G. Martin, "Kanem, Bornu, and the Fazzan: Notes on the Political History of a Trade Route," *Journal of African History,* 10, 1, (1969): 15–27.

[151] Bencherifa questions the accuracy of Ibn Ḥammawayh's reference to Ghana, asserting that many Eastern biographers of that era were primarily acquainted with the kingdom of Ghana. Consequently, they often attributed neighboring cities to it, considering it the oldest and sole known Black kingdom to outsiders. However, other Eastern biographers contend that Kanem was situated on the outskirts or border areas of

undocumented in extant sources, he was recognized for his proficiency in Arabic grammar (*naḥw*) and his extensive memorization of Arabic poems, excelling in both areas.[152]

Enchanted by the poetic panegyric of al-Kānimī, Sultan Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb drew the poet into closer proximity with the nobility and courts of the Almohads, even extending the offer of marriage to a 'White' woman named Zahrāʾ from the noble class.[153] These gestures, however, invited envy from both the populace and fellow poets who held a disparaging view of al-Kānimī. Numerous derogatory verses targeting his 'blackness' ensued, prompting a spirited response from al-Kānimī through his own verses. While Bencherifa contends that these exchanges were typical of historical poetic banter rather than rooted in racial bias, this perspective overlooks the societal context of racial prejudice against Black people.[154] Moreover, given that Black people in that era were often thought to be from syncretistic Islamic background, defending one's colour

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the Kingdom of Ghana. It is plausible to suggest that al-Kānimī received his intellectual training in Kanem, a region that, during the medieval period, saw exposure to Islamic scholarship and learning through trans-Saharan trade. The people of Kanem were known to travel to Egypt for study, establishing tents and hostels in Cairo where they operated a school dedicated to teaching the Mālikī school of Islamic law and hosting traveling delegates. (Ibid. 17; Qalāʾid al-Jummān, vol. 1, 39)

[152] al-Kānimī memorized and taught various books on the Arabic language, including the *Kitāb al-Jumal* by ʿAbd al-Rahmān ibn Isḥāq al-Zajjājī (d. 950/2). *Al-Jumal* held the distinction of being the first book taught in the Maghrib based on the standard traditional curriculum before and during al-Kānimī's time. Additionally, he delved into the study and teaching of the *Maqāmāt* by Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim ibn ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿUthmān al-Harīrī (d. 1121) in Marrakech, demonstrating a profound understanding of the literary work. Ibn Sharīfā (Bencherifa), "Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī: Anmūdhaj Mubakkir li-'l-Tawāṣul al-Thaqafī bayna al-Maghrib wa Bilād al-Sūdān," 17-19.

[153] He mentioned her in some verses that he composed.

[154] Ibn Sharīfā (Bencherifa), "Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī: Anmūdhaj Mubakkir li-'l-tawāṣul al-thaqafī bayna al-Maghrib wa bilād al-Sūdān," 20-27

through extensive verses suggests the prevailing attitudes of the time. In a recent comment about al-Kānimī posted by scholar Andrea Brigaglia, he says:

> Al-Kanemi visited the Almohad court of Morocco and engaged in a poetic challenge with the court poets of Marrakesh. Now, in one of his poems, he defies the views held by his Moroccan counterparts according to which Blackness of skin is associated with negative traits of the soul. While this confirms that racist views about Blacks were indeed common in Morocco at the time…[155]

[155] Andrea Brigaglia, "Anti-Blackness in the Arab World and the Violence that Doesn't Get a Hashtag," on Research Africa Listserv, July 15, 2020. See also Andrea Brigaglia, "Sufi poetry in twentieth-century Nigeria: A Khamriyya and a Ghazal by Shaykh Abū Bakr ʿAtīq (1909-1974)," *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 6, 2, (2017): 191.

Al-Kānimī's fame became more pronounced after accompanying the Almohad Amir Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm to Andalusia where he spent some time in Seville. During his sojourn to Morocco and Andalusia, he interacted with scholarly figures and accomplished poets who admired and recognized his intellectual broadness. They frequented his house and narrated from him among whom were Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn al-Ṣafār famously known as al-Barnāmij and Abū Zayd ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Yakhlaftan ibn Aḥmad al-Fazāzī (d. 1230) author of the famous *al-Wasāʾil al-Mutaqabbala* also known as *Qaṣīdat al-ʿIshrīniyyat fī madḥ Sayyidinā Muḥammad* or *al-ʿIshrīniyyat* (discussed below). See Werner Diem and Marco Schöller, *The Living and the Dead in Islam: Epitaphs in Context*, (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004): 64; Ibn Sharīfā (Bencherifa), "Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī: Anmūdhaj Mubakkir li-'l-Tawāṣul al-Thaqafī bayna al-Maghrib wa Bilād al-Sūdān," 30.

Owing to his illustrious reputation, al-Kānimī finds a place in prominent bibliographical dictionaries chronicling distinguished figures in the Muslim world.[156] Regrettably, a significant portion of his poetic oeuvre has been lost to posterity.[157]

We also possess limited but noteworthy records of the presence of poets and glimpses of literary poetry and verse-making in the Sahara and the Sūdān from the fourteenth to the sixteenth/early seventeenth centuries. After his well-known pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, Mansā Mūsā was accompanied back to Mali by the Andalusian Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Sāḥilī al-Anṣārī al-Gharnāṭī (d. 1346).[158] Known by the epithet *al-Ṭuwayjin*, meaning the small casserole, al-Sāḥilī was reportedly born into a family of learning and piety in Granada.[159] His father, a scholar of jurisprudence and a specialist in the law of inheritance, also held the esteemed position of head of spice and perfume sellers (*Amīn al-aṭṭārīn*). The dominant narrative surrounding al-Sāḥilī regarding Islam and Muslim societies in West Africa often

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[156] *Wafayāt al-Aʿyān wa anbāʾ abnāʾ al-zamān* of Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Abū Bakr ibn Khallikān, *Nafḥ al-ṭīb min ghuṣn al-Andalus al-raṭīb wa dhikr wazīrihā Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb* of Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Maqqarī and *Kitāb al-Wāfī bi'l-wafayāt* of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 1363). The latter exaggeratedly said about al-Kānimī: "no poet was known from his land except him" in Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-Wāfī bi'l-wafayāt,* (eds.) Aḥmad al-Arnāʾuṭ and Turkī Muṣṭafā (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2000): 170.

[157] In his *Kitāb al-Takmilat li-kitāb al-ṣila,* Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Abū Bakr al-Qudāʿī al-Balansī (Ibn Abbār) (d. 1260) describes him as "a man of letters, impeccable poet with deep understanding and mindfulness, and sincerely regarded model." Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Abū Bakr ibn Abbār, *al-Takmilah li-kitāb al-ṣila*, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995): 215; Bencherifa, "Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī: Anmūdhaj Mubakkir li-'l-Tawāṣul al-Thaqafī bayna al-Maghrib wa Bilād al-Sūdān," 37

[158] Nehemia Levtzion, "Islam in the Bilad al-Sudan to 1800," in *The History of Islam in Africa,* (eds.) Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000): 68-69.

[159] John Hunwick, "An Andalusian in Mali: A Contribution to the Biography of Abū Isḥāq al-Sāḥilī, c. 1290-1346," *Paideuma,* 36, II (1990): 60

characterizes him as an architect and a poet, with disproportionate attention paid to his architectural achievements. This emphasis has somewhat obscured the primary fact that he was fundamentally a man of letters with a foundational training in Islamic law. Al-Sāḥilī came from an urban milieu in Andalusia, matured during the zenith of the Nasrid dynasty when poetry, belles-lettres, and the fine arts were cultivated to a sophisticated degree.[160] This cultural and intellectual backdrop greatly influenced al-Sāḥilī's literary journey. Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Saʿīd al-Tilimsānī al-Lūshī al-Gharnāṭī al-Andalūsī (d. 1374), a celebrated Andalusian scholar, historian, and linguist, also known as Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb,[161]writes in his *al-Iḥāṭa fī akhbār Ghanāṭa*—an account chronicling the people and events in Granada—that al-Sāḥilī distinguished himself in both prose and verse.[162]

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[160] Hunwick writes: "The interest which has hitherto been focused on al-Sāḥilī's achievements (real or presumed) as an architect, has tended to obscure the fact that he was, first and foremost, a man of letters with primary training in Islamic law. He was a product of an urban milieu in Andalusia who grew up during the high period of the Nasrid dynasty when poetry, belles-lettres and the fine arts were cultivated to a high degree of sophistication." Ibid., 59. See also Paul Lovejoy, "Islamic Scholarship and Understanding History in West Africa before 1800," 220.

[161] Ibn al-Khaṭīb was originally from Granada but migrated to Tlemcen (in today's Algeria) after the "Reconquista."

[162] Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Saʿīd al-Tilimsānī al-Lūshī al-Gharnāṭī al-Andalūsī (Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb), *al-Iḥāṭa fī akhbār Ghanāṭa,* (ed.) Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh ʿAnān (Cairo: NP, 1955): 337. In his *al-Iḥāṭa*, Ibn al-Khaṭīb provides information on al-Sāḥilī's birthplace, his poetry, and rhyming prose (*sajʿ*). He also provided some information about al-Sāḥilī in his other work, *al-Kaṭībat al-kāmina*, a collection of biographies of Andalusian poets. Another author, Ismāʿīl ibn Yūsuf ibn al-Aḥmar (d. 1404/5 or 1407/8), who documented poets that he had interacted with and who recited poetry to him, includes biographical information about al-Sāḥilī and his poetic contributions. Drawing from these sources, it is accurate to assert that before leaving Andalusia, al-Sāḥilī had already established himself as a scholar proficient in various Islamic disciplines, including derivative legal matters (*al-masāʾil*) and literary prose and poetry. See Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *al-Iḥāṭa fī akhbār Ghanāṭa,* 337.

It was during his journey to the Hijaz to perform the pilgrimage around 1324 that he crossed paths with Mansā Mūsā. The Mansā's interest in al-Sāḥilī likely stemmed from the latter's recognized knowledge of jurisprudence. Mansā Mūsā had a history of inviting and bringing Mālikī jurists to Mali to educate his subjects.[163]

Al-Sāḥilī fathered children during his time in Timbuktu. His offspring chose to settle in Walāta, where they were warmly received. At that time, Walāta held greater prominence than Timbuktu, serving as a significant cultural and intellectual center.[164] Despite this information about

[163] Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Masālik El Abṣār fī Mamālik El Amṣār, I: L'Afrique moins l'Egypte,* (Paris: 1927): 53; Hunwick, "An Andalusian in Mali," 61. During his stay in Mansa Musa's realm, al-Sāḥilī was entrusted with the significant responsibility of overseeing the construction of mosques, the Mansa's palace, and the open audience chamber (*Mashwar*) in Gao and Timbuktu, including the Great Mosque (*al-Masjid al-Kabīr*) of Timbuktu. While discussions persist about the extent of al-Sāḥilī's involvement in designing specific parts of these buildings, scholars have noted architectural elements reminiscent of Andalusian influences in some structures. The *Mashwar*, for instance, is a square building adorned with a dome featuring intricate, multicolored designs, resembling the aesthetics of Granada's Alhambra. Similarly, the Great Mosque of Timbuktu exhibits Andalusian characteristics, such as rounded arches and a flat top with right-angled corners, contributing to the distinctive architectural imprint in the mosque. Despite the dearth of explicit details about al-Sāḥilī's activities during his prolonged residence in Timbuktu, historical records affirm that he was crucial role in the city's architectural development. He was honoured with the responsibility of supervising construction projects, leaving a lasting spot on the city's skyline. See Levtzion, "Islam in the Bilad al-Sudan to 1800," 69.

[164] Levtzion, "Islam in the Bilad al-Sudan to 1800," 68-69. Limited information is available about al-Sāḥilī's brief sojourn to the Maghrib, his audience with Abū'l-Ḥasan, the Marinid Sultan (1331-48), and his encounter with an Alexandrian merchant named Sirāj al-Dīn al-Kuwayk, who unfortunately passed away during his visit to Timbuktu, causing a potential predicament for al-Sāḥilī. Records also indicate that he received gold rewards from the Mansā for his contributions. Through letters, preserved by Ibn al-Khaṭīb, al-Sāḥilī maintained correspondence expressing his yearning to return to his native city, Granada, although this desire remained unfulfilled until his demise. See J. F. P. Hopkins and Nehemia Levtzion, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press:

al-Sāḥilī, there are no records of his involvement in teaching or active participation in Islamic intellectual or literary endeavors in Timbuktu. In essence, there is no conclusive evidence of him transmitting or instructing in poetry or the art of verse-making in Timbuktu. However, it is documented that he composed a poem encouraging Abū'l-Ḥasan to confront Abū Tāshufin, the Zayyanid ruler of Tlemcen.[165] Nevertheless, there is no mention of him creating verses praising the Mansā or expressing gratitude for the ruler's generousity.

From the period covering the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, the surviving evidence of interaction with literary poetry and verse-making from areas of Mauritania, the Sahara to the Bilād al-Sūdān, both by local and non-local figures, appears to be predominantly concentrated in the regions of Tuwāt, Timbuktu, and Walāta. This concentration could be indicative of the prevailing Islamic educational framework in these areas. For example, the Islamic educational structure of Timbuktu during this era was broadly bifurcated into two main categories. The first category, deemed crucial, comprised four branches of Muslim sciences interconnected by their subject matter. These branches included the science of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad (*ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and the origins and methods of jurisprudential rulings (*uṣūl*).[166]

While many students engaged with these sciences, jurisprudence stood out as a discipline pursued primarily by the most learned and ambitious individuals within the scholarly community.[167] The second category, apart from addressing doctrinal theology (*Tawḥīd*),

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1981): 295; Hunwick, "An Andalusian in Mali," 62-3; Levtzion, "Islam in the Bilad al-Sudan to 1800," 68-69.

[165] See Hopkins and Levtzion, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History,* 295.

[166] Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu*, 74

[167] Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu*, 74.

encompassed practical sciences and tools such as grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Of these, the study of grammar held particular significance in scholarly pursuits. Saad claims that other fields were designed to enhance a scholar's skills and contribute to their "versatility in juristic deductions and in Muslim doctrine."[168] Proficiency in the Arabic language was highly esteemed, prompting scholars to delve deeper into the study of grammar and literature to navigate the complexities of Qur'anic commentaries. Influential scholarly families like the Aqīts and And-Agh-Muḥammad played a prominent role in the pursuit of knowledge, especially in the fields of grammar, literature, and jurisprudence. However, the sciences of Arabic prosody and rhetorical stylistics were not obligatory for all scholarship candidates; they were embraced primarily by those seeking refinement of knowledge and a broader range of scholarly capabilities.

Based on available sources, though not necessarily the oldest, evidence suggests that the mid-fifteenth century Timbuktu witnessed local poetic expression attributed to Shaykh Sīdī Yaḥyā al-Tādilisī al-Sharīf (d. 1461/2) who served as an Imam in Timbuktu from 1431 to 1461. He composed an elegy dedicated to his revered master and teacher, Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Abū Bakr ibn ʿAlī ibn Mūsā al-Kābarī (d. 1450).[169]Al-Kābarī was an erudite fifteenth century Sūdānī scholar and saint from Kabara in present-day Mali.[170] He was also the teacher of ʿUmar

[168] Ibid.

[169] Ibid., 81

[170] See John Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Saʿdī's Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān Down to 1613 and Other Contemporary Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 2003): lv; al-Kābarī's work, *Bustān al-fawā'id wa'l-manāfiʿ* is presently the oldest extant manuscript from West Africa. See Zachary Wright, "The Islamic Intellectual Traditions of Sudanic Africa, with Analysis of a Fifteenth-Century Timbuktu Manuscript," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa*, (eds.) Fallou Ngom, Mustapha Kurfi, and Toyin Falola (London: Palgrave, 2020): 55–76.

ibn Muḥammad Aqīt who was an ancestor of the Sanhāja Timbuktu scholar Aḥmad Bābā. Due to al-Tādilisī's scholarly reputation and piety, the Sīdī Yaḥyā mosque in Timbuktu bears his name. Al-Tādilisī's elegy, cited in Muḥammad al-Gharbī's *Bidāyat al-Ḥukm al-Maghrib fī al-Sūdān al-Gharbī*, begins with the following verse:

> Recall, for within remembrance, abundant benefits reside, and
> It enfolds a source of blessing for all who come to it.[171]

In the sixteenth century, Timbuktu boasted a vibrant corps of praise-singers (*maddāḥūn*) assigned with the noble task of reciting odes in honour of the Prophet Muḥammad (*madīḥ al-Nabawī*), particularly during significant occasions such as the celebration of the Prophet's birth (*Mawlid*).[172] However, our knowledge of the exact list of works or odes recited for this purpose remains limited. Nonetheless, there are accounts of interactions with poetry and verse-making during the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries that revolve around two prominent *madīḥ al-Nabawī* compositions by non-local scholarly figures. The first, *al-Kawākib al-durriyya fī madḥ Khayr al-bariyya* (Pearly Stars in Praise of the Best of Creation), more commonly known as the *Qaṣīdat al-Burda* (Poem of the Mantle), authored by the Egyptian Sharaf al-Dīn al-Būṣīrī (d. 1259).[173] The second is the famous *al-Wasāʾil al-Mutaqabbala* also known as *Qaṣīdat al-ʿIshrīniyyat fī madḥ Sayyidinā Muḥammad* or *al-ʿIshrīniyyāt*—"The Twenties" by the

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[171] Muḥammad al-Gharbī, *Bidāyat al-Ḥukm al-Maghrib fī al-Sūdān al-Gharbī: Nashʾatuhu wa Āthāruhu*, (al-Kuwait: Muʾassasat al-Khalīj li'l-Ṭibāʿat wa'l-Nashr, 1982): 543-544. The elegy is also mentioned in Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr al-Ifrānī, *Nuzhat al-Ḥādī bi-Akhbār Mulūk al-Qarn al- al-Ḥādī*, (ed.) ʿAbd al-Laṭīf al-Shādhilī, (Casablanca: Maṭbaʿat al-Najāḥ al-Jadīda, 1998). My translation is fussed with Hunwick's.

[172] John Hunwick, "The Arabic Qasida in West Africa: Forms, Themes, and Contexts," 92.

[173] According to Hunwick the *Burda* "is perhaps the most celebrated and most widely recited, copied and published panegyric of the Prophet in the Islamic world. It is much appreciated for its devotional use, but also because it can serve as a sort of talisman." in Hunwick, "The Arabic Qasida," 85. See also Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," *Research in African Literature,* 28, 3 (2004): 210-223.

Andalusian Abū Zayd ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Yakhlaftan ibn Aḥmad al-Fāzāzī (d. 1230). The poem consists of sets of twenty rhyming verses for each letter of the Arabic alphabet. According to Bencherifa, al-Fāzāzī was one of the scholarly figures and accomplished poets that frequently visited the house of the aforementioned al-Kānimī during the latter's visit to al-Andalus in the company of the Almohad Amir Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm.[174] Al-Fāzāzī admired and recognized al-Kānimī's intellectual broadness and transmitted from the latter.

The *Burda* and *al-ʿIshrīniyyāt* have earned widespread acclaim and hold a significant place in the hearts of the people straddling from Mauritania to the wider Bilād al-Sūdān, Timbuktu included. While not as widely celebrated as the two mentioned above, Hall and Stewart, in their "Historic 'Core Curriculum'" include the fifteenth-century Tlemcen scholar Ibn Marzūq's (d. 1439) *al-Qaṣīda al-mīmiyya*[175] and al-Būṣīrī's *al-Hamziyya* as other praise poems that are widely dispersed in numerous major scholarly manuscript throughout West Africa—from Mauritania to Nigeria.[176] The *Burda*, especially, gained fame among the people of Mauritania for its spiritual and talismanic qualities since at least the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century. The Mauritanian al- Yadālī recited it to heal his camel who "had a brutal fracture, its shoulder bone protruded from its skin," highlighting the ode's recognized talismanic efficacy.[177] As

[174] Bencherifa, "Ibrāhīm al-Kānimī: Anmūdhaj Mubakkir li-'l-Tawāṣul al-Thaqafī bayna al-Maghrib wa Bilād al-Sūdān," 30.

[175] He was a prominent scholar and hagiographer who had expertise in Islamic law. He lived in Muslim Spain for several years as a Khatib of the Great Mosque of al-Hamra, Granada, and was an advisor and teacher of Abu'l Hasan, the Marinid Sultan where he played the role of negotiator between rulers in Algeria and Spain.

[176] Hall and Stewart. "The historic 'Core Curriculum' and the book market in West Africa," 22-25.

[177] See Al-Nābigha al-Ghallāwī, *al-Najm al-Thāqib fī baʿd mā li'l-Yadālī fī Manāqib*, or *al-Sanad al-ʿĀlī fī Taʿrīf al-Yadālī*, in OMAR *http://dl.ub.un-freiburg.de/omar/mfmau0120/0004*; Harry T. Norris, "Znāga

Hunwick notes, the *Burda* is "much appreciated for its devotional use, but also because it can serve as a sort of talisman."[178] For these reasons and more, the *Burda* enjoys an unparalleled

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Islam During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* 32 (1969): 503.

[178] Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," *Research in African Literature,* 28, 3 (2004): 210-223. Muḥammad ibn Shākir al-Kutubī (d. 1363), in his *Fawāt al-wafayāt wa'l-dhayl ʿalayhā,* discusses the widely known background to al-Buṣīrī's *al-Burda*: "Al-Būsīrī said: I had composed poems of praise to the Messenger (God bless him and give him peace), among them those that al-Ṣāḥib Zayn al-Dīn Yaʿqub ibn al-Zubayr had suggested to me. Then it happened after that that I was stricken with hemiplegia that left me half paralyzed, so I thought of composing this Burdah poem, and I did so. And with it I asked for intercession with Allāh the Exalted for Him to forgive me, and I recited it over and over again, and wept and prayed and entreated. Then, when I had fallen asleep, I saw the Prophet (God bless him and give him peace). He stroked my face with his blessed hand, then threw a mantle over me. When I awoke, I found my health restored [*wajadtu fiyya nahdah*], so I arose and went out of my house, and I had not told a soul about this. Then a Sufi mendicant met up with me and said to me, "I want you to give me the poem with which you praised the Messenger (Peace upon him)." "Which one?" I replied. "The one you composed when you were sick" he said, and recited the beginning of it. And he continued, "By Allāh, I heard it yesterday night when it was recited before the Messenger of Allah (God bless him and give him peace), and I saw the Messenger of Allāh (God bless him and give him peace) sway with delight at it, and throw a mantle over the one who recited it." So I gave it to him, and the Sufi mendicant mentioned this and the dream became widely known." Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, "From Text to Talisman: Al-Būṣīrī's "Qaṣīdat al-Burdah" (Mantle Ode) and the Supplicatory Ode," *Journal of Arabic Literature,* vol. 37, no. 2 (2006): 152. For a comprehensive discussion on the ode, see ibid., 145-189. The widely known title of *al-Burda* is based on an event that in al-Būṣīrī wrote about his dream where the Prophet Muḥammad threw his mantle (*burda*) over him (al-Būṣīrī) while he was sick. This action of the Prophet Muḥammad throwing his mantle over a person is reported to have a precedent which was during the event of Kaʿb ibn Zuhayr's apology to him by composing and reciting the panegyric ode *bānat Suʿād* as discussed in the second chapter. With reference to the translation of al-Bājūrī's commentary on al-Būṣīrī's *Burda*, Stetkevych writes: "Because when he composed it, seeking a cure from the disease of hemiplegia which afflicted him leaving him semi-paralyzed and baffling his physicians, he saw the Prophet, may Allah bless him and give him peace, in his sleep. Then [the Prophet] stroked him with his hand and wrapped him in his mantle, so he was cured immediately, as the poet mentions in his comment [on the poem]. Some say that it is more appropriate to call it "*Qasidat*

eminence in the wider Muslim world. The exact arrival time of the *Burda* in Mauritania and the broader Bilād al-Sūdān seems unknown. However, it might have arrived through connections between Timbuktu scholars and Egypt, possibly during the sixteenth century before moving to Mauritania. The dynamics of movement of texts in these regions will be discussed in the next chapter.

Since the second half of the fifteenth century until now, the second ode, the *ʿIshrīniyyāt*, has enjoyed and still maintains widespread reception and significant popularity among Muslims in various regions of West Africa. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Saʿdī (d. 1656) noted in his chronicle on Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire, *Tāʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, that Abū al-Qāsim al-Tuwātī (d. around 1530), Imam of the grand mosque in Timbuktu, regularly recited a single ode of the *ʿIshrīniyyat* after every Friday (*Jumuʿa*) prayer.[179] Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥājj Aḥmad ibn ʿUmar (d.

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al-Burdah" ("Poem of the Cure") because its composer was cured by it, and that the poem that is rightfully called "*al-Burdah*" is "*Banat Suʿād*" ("*Suʿād* has Departed"), the poem by Kaʿb ibn Zuhayr, because the Prophet, may Allah bless him and give him peace, rewarded him (*ajāzahu*) for it with a mantle when he recited it before him. (al-Bājūrī, pp. 2-3)" in Stetkevych, "From Text to Talisman," 151. Although the *Bānat Suʿād* is not generally known for talismanic purposes, the *Burda* of al-Būṣīrī became synonymous with healing and cure, ascribed with possessing talismanic power. An example of this is Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām's commentary on verses 152-160 of the *Burda*: "The special property of these verses is that if they are engraved on a silver signet ring when the moon is out, they are beneficial for all bodily ailments from the head to the navel: they will cure ailments of the head and face, the eyes, nose and ears, the teeth, neck, shoulders, flanks, stomach, chest and heart, with the permission of Allah the Exalted; [this is] tested and sound. However, if they are engraved on an iron signet ring, then they are beneficial against all diseases from the navel to the foot: they will cure numbness, colic, and trembling, ailments of the kidneys and spleen, hemorrhoids, pains of the uterus, diarrhoea, all diseases of the male and female genitals, and everything in the thighs. [All of this is] tested and sound, without a doubt. You put the [silver] ring on the head and the iron ring on the belly. (Ibn ʿAbd al-Salam, folio 253b)" in Stetkevych, "From Text to Talisman," 148.

[179] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿAbd Allāh Saʿdī, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Saʿdi's Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān down to 1613*, (trans. & ed.) John O. Hunwick (Leiden: Brill, 1999): 61.

1536), the grandfather of Aḥmad Bābā has a commentary on Abū Bakr ibn Mahīb's (Muhīb, Muhayb, Muhayyab) *takhmīs* of the poem.[180] Ibn Mahīb's identity remains a subject of ongoing research. *Takhmīs* is the addition of three new stanzas/hemistichs to a verse. In his prosopography *Fatḥ al-Shakūr fī Maʿrifat Aʿyān ʿUlamāʾ al-Takrūr*, al-Bāritaylī notes Aḥmad Bābā's grandfather's proficiency as a scholar of prosody (*ʿarūḍiyyan*), underscoring his comprehensive understanding of metrics and poetics. Additionally, Ibn ʿUmar actively engaged in the recitation of praise poetry (*qaṣāʾid al-madḥ*), further showcasing his multifaceted involvement in literary and poetic pursuits. [181] The reasons behind the scholarly engagement and broad acceptance of the *ʿIshrīniyyāt* within Timbuktu's scholarly community remain uncertain. It is possible that the scholars in this region were aware of al-Fāzāzī's esteem for al-Kānimī, who shared roots with the peoples of West Africa. Alternatively, the *ʿIshrīniyyāt* might have been the earliest or the inaugural praise poem in a distinctive form to emerge in Timbuktu. Overall, these scholarly involvements with the ode suggest its influential role in shaping the poetic imagination of Timbuktu's intellectuals.

Beyond the above-mentioned scholars, numerous Saharan and West African Muslim scholars have provided commentary on this ode, employing different techniques to enhance its literary depth. The Tijāniyya scholar and founder of an Islamic polity in 19th-century West Africa, al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Fūtī Tal (d. 1864), wrote and completed a *taʿshīr* on the *ʿIshrīniyyāt* titled

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[180] Raji, "The Influence of the ʿIshrīnīyat on Arabic and Islamic Culture in Nigeria*,"* (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1982): 129-130; Also see Hunwick, "A New Source for the Biography of Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī (1556-1627)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* vol. 27, no. 3 (1964): 569.

[181] al-Ṭālib Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr al-Ṣiddīq al-Bāritaylī al-Walātī, *Fatḥ al-Shakūr fī Maʿrifat Aʿyān ʿUlamāʾ al-Takrūr*, (eds.) ʿAbd Wadūd wuld ʿAbd Allāh and Aḥmad Jamāl wuld al-Ḥasan, (Cairo: Dār Najībawayh li'l-Barmajat wa'l-Dirāsāt, wa'l-Ṭibāʿat wa'l-Nashr, 2010), 48.

"*Safīnat al-saʿāda li-ahl ḍuʿuf wa-l-najāda*."[182] *Taʿshīr*, meaning decastichs, is the addition of eight new stanzas/hemistichs to a verse. Additionally, Muḥammad Gibrima al-Dāghirī (d. 1975), a Nigerian scholar from Nguru, Yobe State, in 1969 published a handwritten extensive interlinear commentary on Ibn Mahīb's *takhmīs* of the *ʿIshrīniyyāt* titled "*al-Nawāfiḥ al-ʿIṭriyya*" (*al-Mukhtaṣar min al-Nafḥat al-ʿanbarriya fī ḥall alfāẓ al-ʿIshrīniyyat*).[183]

On the popularity, social and religious place of the *ʿIshrīniyyāt* in Nigeria, the scholar Rasheed Ajani Raji writes in his dissertation:

> [b]eggars chant it to ensure their daily bread, the traditional learned Muslims…chant it for protection and to assure a clientele…the hunter to prevent his bullet from erring…and Muslim market women to attract customers. A copy of the 'Ishrīniyyāt in a house is sufficient protection against fire, burglaries, hurricane, snake bites and termite invasion.[184]

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[182] For a comprehensive article on this work, See Amir Syed, "Poetics of Praise: Love and Authority in al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tal's *Safīnat al-saʿāda li-ahl ḍuʿuf wa-l-naǧāda,*" *Islamic Africa,* 7, 2016, pp. 210-238; and Amir Syed "Al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tāl and the Realm of the Written: Mastery, Mobility, and Islamic Authority in 19th Century West Africa," (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2017). There are also extensive works on the life and movement of the scholar. See David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), John H. Hanson, *Migration, Jihad and Muslim Authority in West Africa: The Futanke Colonies in Karta* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), Madina Ly-Tall, *Un Islam Militant en Afrique de l'Ouest au XIXe Siècle: La Tijaniyya de Saiku Umar Futiyu contre les Pouvoirs traditionnels et la Puissance coloniale,* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991); Fernand Dumont, *L'anti-Sultan ou Al-Hajj Omar Tal du Fouta, Combattant de la Foi (1794 1864)* (Dakar-Abidjan: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979); John Ralph Willis, "The Writings of al-Hājj ʿUmar al-Fūtī and Shaykh Mukhtār b. Wadī'at Allāh: Literary Themes, Sources and Influences" in *Studies in West African Islamic History: The Cultivators of Islam*, vol. 1, (ed.) John Ralph Willis (London: Frank Cass, 1979): 147-159.

[183] Muḥammad Gibrima, *al-Nawāfiḥ al-ʿIṭriyya (al-Mukhtaṣar min al-Nafḥat al-ʿAnbarriya fi Ḥalli al-Fāẓ al-ʿIshrīnīyāt* (Beirut: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 2003).

[184] Rasheed Ajani Raji, "The Influence of the ʿIshriniyat on Arabic and Islamic Culture in Nigeria," 19. Also cited in Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition," 83.

In other words, aside from its devotional and literary significance, the *ʿIshrīniyyāt*, much like the *Burda*, is sought after for its talismanic benefits in various regions across West Africa.

Going back to the sixteenth century, it seems that this period began to witness a burgeoning interest among Timbuktu's scholars, those in the Sahara, and the wider Sūdān region in literary poetry and verse creation. While we cannot exclusively attribute this development to the availability of sources or documentation from this period, it is apparent that this trend can be linked to internal needs within the scholarly context, alongside external influences. These factors contributed to a heightened awareness and increased enthusiasm for learning the sciences of Arabic prosody and rhetoric among intellectuals. The proficiency in these two disciplines became integral to the education of accomplished scholars such as Muḥammad Bābā ibn Muḥammad al-Amīn, based on the works they began to produce from this time.[185] Scholars immersed themselves in the study, mastery, and creative application of Arabic prosody and rhetoric in their literary and intellectual pursuits. As an illustration, Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥawḍī (d. 1505), a scholar from Walāta in the Ḥawḍ (Hodh), had earlier undertaken the versification (*naẓm)* of *Umm al-barāhīn* by Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 1486), a comprehensive compendium of Ashʿarī creed. Walāta, during his time, functioned as a crucial center for immigrant Andalusian, Maghribian, and sub-Saharan Sūdānese scholars, contributing to the city's intellectual vibrancy and economic vitality. Over a century after the passing of al-Ḥawḍī, the erudite seventeenth-century jurist, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Maḥmūd ibn Abī Bakr ibn Baghayūghu (Baghayuʿu/Baghayogho) al-Wangarī (d. 1655), nephew of the Timbuktu scholar Muḥammad Baghayogho (d. 1594) and mentor to the previously mentioned Aḥmad

[185] Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu*, 81

Bābā, continued this tradition by producing another versification (*manẓūma*) of the *Umm al-barāhīn*, thereby perpetuating the poetic legacy of the preceding century.[186] A *Manẓūma* finds its roots in the word *naẓm* (*n-ẓ-m*), meaning versification, elucidated in Chapter I of this work. It is an original composition or transformation of a prose text or ideas into verse form. A *manẓūma* is a nuanced form of verse intellectual exercise that encapsulates or mirrors the intricacies of poetics, particularly prosody. Unlike traditional *qaṣīda* used for satirical, panegyrical, or romantic expressions, the *manẓūma* is crafted primarily for educational purposes, earning the label "*al-shiʿr al-taʿlīmī*" (didactic poetry). Most *manẓūmas* utilize the *rajaz* meter, known for its simplicity, and often have internal rhymes between hemistiches. Some are composed in different poetic meters like *ṭawīl*, *basīṭ*, among others, can be in single end-of-line *qāfiyya* similar to *qaṣīdas*.

Opening verses of *manẓūmas* typically invoke God's name (*basmala*) and prayers for the Prophet Muḥammad [and sometimes his household and companions]. Authors occasionally include their names, humbly describe themselves, and assign titles to their compositions. Versification (*naẓm*) is a specialized skill undertaken by adept individuals—poets and scholars proficient in the literary craft of poetics and metrics. *Naẓm* or *manẓūma* is at times used interchangeably with *shiʿr*, and a poet, *shāʿir*, can be referred to as a versifier, *naẓẓām*, and vice versa. In retrospect, the presence of *manẓūma* during this period corresponds with ould Bah's

[186] Hunwick, "A Contribution to the Study of Islamic Learning Traditions in Western Africa: The Career of Muhammad Boghayogho," *Islam et Societes au du Sud du Sahara,* 4 (1990): 155-160; Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu,* 72-73. Copies of al-Wangarī's commentary are found in the libraries of 19th century Boutimilit scholars in Mauritania, and Timbuktu and Segou, Mali (see Dorrit Van Dalen, *Doubt, Scholarship and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa*, 109.

submission that verse-related activities were primarily linked to specific contexts, including intercessory verses (*al-tawassul*), prayers for rainfall (*al-Istisqāʾ*), and versifications of texts.[187]

Continuing the exploration to uncover traces of poetry and verse-making across Mauritania, the Sahara and broader West Africa during the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries, there is evidence suggesting the presence of these intellectual and creative domains across some parts of the regions. For instance, records indicate that Aḥmad Bābā composed verses expressing his deep yearning for his hometown, Timbuktu while enduring captivity in Marrakech. These verses were sent through people traveling to his city of origin. In this poetic expression, he conveyed his sentiments of longing while extending warm greetings to his loved ones. The opening two verses of his composition read:

> O traveller to Gao, take a turn to my city
> Whisper to them my name, and extend salutations to my loved ones,
>
> Fragrant greeting from an exiled person yearning
> For the homeland of beloved ones, companions and neighbours.[188]

These verses enjoy widespread recognition and celebration in Timbuktu, resonating across Mali, and are prominently displayed at the entrance of the Aḥmad Bābā Research Institute—a visible testament to their significance.

[187] Ould Bah, *al-Shiʿr waʾl-Shuʿarāʾ*, 51.

[188] al-Gharbī, *Bidāyat al-Ḥukm al-Maghrib fīʾl-Sūdān al-Gharbī*, 544.

Fig. 3:1 Aḥmad Bābā Research Institute. Photo by Saadou Traore

Despite being written during his time in Marrakech, Aḥmad Bābā had already acquired knowledge of Arabic prosody and metering, essential components of his scholarly training, prior to the Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu where he was captured. Scholars such as Aḥmad Bābā in his *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj li maʿrifat man laysa fī'l-dībāj*, al-Saʿdī in his *Tāʾrīkh* and al-Bāritaylī in the *Fatḥ al-Shakūr* reveal that the science of Arabic prosody, encompassing poetry, verse-making, and its related field, Rhetoric, were well-established and taught by Timbuktu scholars during this era. In detailing his educational pursuits under his father and scholars like Baghayūghu, Bābā mentions some of the texts that he studied, with whom and how. These texts include the Andalusian ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUthmān al-Khazrajī's (*fl. c*. 1220) *al-Rāmizat al-Shāfiya fī ʿilm al-ʿarūḍ wa'l-qāfiya*, commonly known as *Matn al-Khazrajiyya* for Arabic Prosody, and Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Qazwīnī al-Khaṭīb al-Dimashqī's (d. 1338) *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ*, a condensed commentary on Saʿd al-Dīn Masʿūd ibn ʿUmar al-Taftazānī's (d. 1359) *Miftāḥ al-ʿulūm* on Arabic Rhetoric and Semantics.[189] Additionally, he was taught didactic poems on numerous other sciences including Arabic grammar, jurisprudence, and logic. Prominent among these texts were the *Alfiyya* of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Ḥusayn al-ʿIrāqī (d. 1404), the *Tashīl* of the Andalusian Abū ʿAbd Allāh Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Mālik al-Ṭāʿī (d. 1274), and the *Tuḥfat al-Ḥukkām fī nukat al-ʿuqūd wa'l-aḥkām* (known as al-ʿĀṣimiyya) of Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-ʿĀṣim al-Andalūsī (d. 1426), along with its commentary by his

[189] Aḥmad Bābā, *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj li maʿrifat man laysa fī'l-dībāj*, (ed.) Muḥammad Muṭīʿ (Morocco: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa'l-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya, 2000): 239-240, 281-286; al-Bāritaylī, *Fatḥ al-Shakūr*, 60-74. List of the texts Bābā studied are translated by Hunwick in his article, Hunwick, "A New Source for the Biography of Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī (1556-1627)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* vol. 27, no. 3 (1964): 568-593.

son. Also was the *Rajaz Manẓūma* of the Algerian Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm ibn Muḥammad al-Maghīlī al-Tilimsānī. (d. 1504).[190] The Aqīt family, to which Bābā belonged, not only exemplified knowledge of prosody and verse-making in its literary form but also in practical performance. For instance, Muḥammad ibn al-Faqīh Sīdī (Muḥammad) ibn Aḥmad Bābā, Bābā's grandson, earned the title "*Shaykh al-Maddāḥīn*" (master of praise-singers) in the Sankore quarter, acknowledging his proficiency and association with panegyric odes.[191]

[190] Aḥmad Bābā, *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj*, 239-240, 281-286.

[191] *Tadhkirat al-Nisyān fī akhbār Mulūk al-Sūdān,* (trans. & ed.) O. Houdas*,* (Paris: Adrien-Maissonneuve, 1899-1901): 64, 72. From the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century, scholars, many of whom were Fulanis from Walāta, Timbuktu and Mali were indeed a major catalyst in the establishment of several centres of Islamic learning in different parts of the Sūdān. They carried along with them their teachings and exported their knowledge of numerous Arabo-Islamic sciences to these new knowledge centres of Kano, Katsina, Borno, Kanem, Bagirmi, among others. The dynasties of these cities which were major commercial centres had adopted Islam recently. Though the major focus of their teachings were in the areas of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*tawḥīd*), and Arabic language, they also taught and engaged in "considerable literary activity in the poetry of eulogy, elegy, satire, and pietism." Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," *Research in African Literatures: Arabic Writing in Africa,* vol. 28, no. 3 (1997): 211. Poetry works such as the *ʿAṭiyyat al-Muʿṭī*, a poem on Islamic praxis and piety by ʿAbd Allāh Suka (fl. 1660), an immigrant Fulani scholar was taught and continues to be reproduced in Nigeria to date (Ibid).

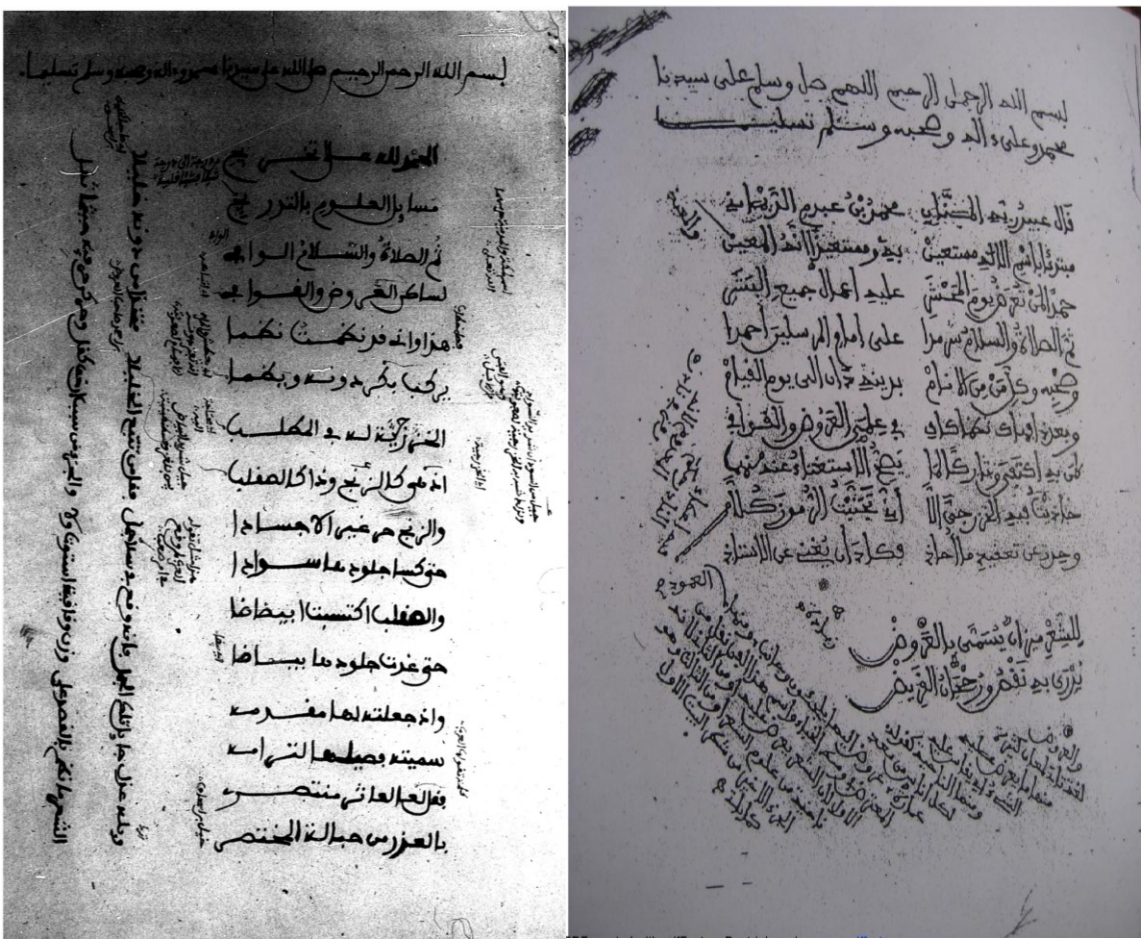

Fig. 3:2. A manuscript on Arabic Prosody, complete with marginal notes, authored by an unidentified writer, is preserved in Charles Stewart's Sīdiyā Bābā Microfilm Copies, housed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.[192]

Fig. 3:3 *Matn Ibn ʿ*Abdam al-Daymānī on Arabic Prosody with Marginal notes.[193]

One can delve deeper into the literary contributions of scholars from the same era who actively engaged in verse-making. A prominent figure among them is al-Ṭālib Ṣiddīq ibn al-Ṭālib

[192] Charles C. Stewart Papers, University of Illinois Archives at Urbana Champaign, Record Number 1271, Collection No: 99/2. Available at https://archon.library.illinois.edu/archives/index.php?p=collections/controlcard&id=1592&q=mauritania

[193] It is one of the major texts on Arabic Prosody studied at the Islamic institutions of learning in Mauritania.

al-Ḥasan ibn Alfagha Maḥḥam al-Jummānī (d. 1663), a revered and devout scholar.[194] Among his various compositions, the only known work is "*Maktūb ḥawla ḥukm al-tadkhīn*," a treatise on smoking, a contentious issue prevalent in the Sahara, western, and central regions of the Sūdān during that period.[195] Another noteworthy scholar from the 17th century, Saʿd ibn Ḥabīb Bābā ibn Muḥammad al-Hādī ibn Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Wādānī, a son of Aḥmad Bābā's sister, contributed legal responsa, also in verse form regarding the rulings on tobacco consumption. Bearing the epithet al-Wādānī, signifying an affiliation with the city of Wādān—the original homeland of the Aqīt, Aḥmad Bābā's family—Saʿd ibn Ḥabīb's work offers valuable insights into the scholarly perspectives of that time. His presence in Wādān likely stemmed from the aftermath of the Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu. Following the fall of Timbuktu, scholars, including members of the Aqīt families found refuge in other cities, including Wādān and Shinqīṭ within the Gebla region. Ibn Ḥabīb's poetic legal responsa on tobacco remains one of the few surviving literary pieces from that era, and in the opening verses of the poem, he writes:

> I start firstly by glorifying God, with gratitude and exaltation of Him
> Followed by the purest salutations throughout existence
>
> On the chosen and sent one from the offspring of al-Hāshim
> The accepted intercessor for all creatures at the place of gathering
>
> And may the choicest pleasure [of God] and my best salutations
> Be upon his family and companions, people of capability
>
> O petitioner, inquiring on the ruling on smoking tobacco
> Know that it is permissible by the consensus of scholars, the skilled ones.[196]

[194] Stewart, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, 1007-1008

[195] Al-Ṭālib Ṣiddīq was recognized for his proficiency in exchanging correspondences in both prose and poetry, showcasing his multifaceted literary skills.

[196] Manuscripts copies of this work can be found at the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu and the Bibliotheque Nationale of France. The manuscript is titled *al-Damlūk ʿalā hadhayān al-Hashtūq*. See

Fig. 3:3 Image of the manuscript of Ibn Ḥabīb's *al-Damlūk ʿalā hadhayān al-Hashtūq*[197]

their numbers: Manuscrit No de L'institut Ahmed Baba, P: 1, 13, 16, 24, 35; Ms BnF Arabe 6399, f205r; Arabe 5257, f, f; Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) BNF, Fonds Arabe, 5619, 1b-70a References to them can be found in: Ulrich Rebstock, *Maurische Literaturgeschichte*, I, 42; Stewart, *Arabic Literature of Africa,* 1526. In the ALA V, his name is spelt as Saʿdī b. Ḥabīb and alternatively as al-Imām Saʿd (Saʿīd). However, in the manuscript, Saʿd is the name used at the end of the text.

[197] Regarding the normative status of Tobacco during the era of discussion, see Aziz A. Batran, *Tobacco Smoking Under Islamic Law: Controversy Over Its Introduction* (Maryland: Amana Publications, 2003). Ibn Ḥabīb's legal opinion on Tobacco was in line with the ruling of scholars of Egypt at the time, as well as those of later prominent Saharan scholars like Sīdī Mukhtār al-Kuntī al-Kabīr. However, Muḥammad al-Wālī ibn Sulaymān al-Fulānī al-Barghimāwī, his contemporary from present day region of Baghirmi, southeast of Lake Chad of the Kanem-Borno empire had written an epistle prohibiting tobacco

There are a few important didactic poems from this period, shedding light on diverse intellectual pursuits and verse-making. Among them is a *qaṣīda* on *Kalām* (theology) by ʿUmar al-Wālī ibn Shaykh Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Maḥjūbī al-Walātī (d. 1659), also known as Aʿmar Lūlī.[198]Additionally, *Rawḍat al-afkār fī ʿilm al-layl wa'l-nahār,* a *manẓūma* on astrology by al-Aʿmash al-Shinqīṭī (d. 1695). In the upcoming section and chapter, delving into the life and contributions of this scholar is important, particularly with regard to his expertise in poetry composition. His role as one of Ibn Rāzikah's teachers, acknowledged as a foundational figure in Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition, holds significant importance. Such insights into his life and that of his student illuminate the diverse and vibrant literary environment of that era, warranting an in-depth exploration.

To conclude this section, I would say that the works that I have discussed above, though not exhaustive to avoid excessive details, drawn from sources like manuscript collections and catalogues, biographical literature, chronicles, among others, provide valuable insights. It is crucial to highlight that while the examples provided mostly represent versified texts aimed at educational ends, there is evidence of a robust poetry culture in Timbuktu extending beyond these didactic pieces. In contrast, the landscape of poetry and verse-making in what is now modern-day Mauritania, before the latter part of the seventeenth century, seemed to be marked by a relative lack of such literary pursuits. The primary areas where this tradition of poetic expression seemed to have thrived were in the eastern region of Mauritania, particularly in

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consumption and even called it "filthy plant." See van Dalen, "'This Filthy Plant': The Inspiration of a Central Sudanic Scholar in the Debate on Tobacco," *Islamic Africa,* 3.2 (2012): 227-247. On the life and scholarship of Muḥammad al-Wālī, see a comprehensive work: van Dalen, *Doubt, Scholarship and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa*, 2016.

[198] Stewart, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, 1562-1563

Walāta in the Ḥawḍ and Wādān. These areas historically shared some intellectual as well as human connections with Timbuktu, possibly influencing the prevalence of literary poetry in the east in contrast to the west of Mauritania.

Timbuktu's prominence in literary poetry and verse-making stemmed not only from its internal intellectual activities but also from the movements and settlement of scholars from various cities, including Walāta. Before its destruction, Walāta was an important commercial center and refuge for refugees, itinerant scholars, and immigrants from different parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Spain, and the Maghrib.[199] This prominence preceded Timbuktu's rise to fame as an intellectual hub. The credit for transforming Timbuktu into a conducive environment for both scholarship and commerce goes to Askiyā Muḥammad (Ture), whose leadership attracted scholars and facilitated vibrant intellectual exchanges.[200] The prevalent ethnic conflicts and feuds in various Saharan and Sūdānese towns and cities created a need for scholars, students, and caravanners to seek refuge in Timbuktu. Prominent scholarly families, like the Aqīṭ family of Aḥmad Bābā, migrated to Timbuktu where they would end up possessing strong political power and religious authority, illustrating the complex connections between different Islamic centers and their significant role in shaping the intellectual and political landscape of the region.[201]However, before establishing roots in Timbuktu, the Aqīṭ family had migrated from Wādān to Walāta, seeking refuge from conflicts with Fulanis and other tribes. Their sojourn in Walāta was not only a sanctuary but also an educational haven, where they delved into various

[199] McDougall, "The Economics of Islam in the Southern Sahara," 46; Norris, "Sanhaja Muslim Scholars of Mauritania," 147-151.

[200] Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1984): 34

[201] al-Bāritaylī, *Fatḥ al-Shakūr,* 48; McDougall, "The Economics of Islam in the Southern Sahara," 46.

Arabic and Islamic sciences.[202] Wādān, their previous abode, held significance as an Islamic center of learning, and served as a key Trans-Saharan entrepot with caravan routes transporting salt slabs from the Ijil mines.[203] Timbuktu, the epicenter of Arabo-Islamic scholarship, attracted scholars like Baghayūghu and al-Kābarī from the Sūdān. Equally, scholars from Walāta traveled to Timbuktu, contributing significantly to the city's intellectual tapestry. These interactions between diverse scholarly groups played a pivotal role in elevating Timbuktu's intellectual prominence.[204] An example is the case of the Walātan scholar and qāḍī Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī Sall al-Walātī (d. 1640), fondly known as "al-Tinbuktī," whose grandparents journeyed to Timbuktu before returning to Walāta. His epithet, "al-Tinbuktī," epitomized his embodiment of Timbuktu's Arabo-Islamic intellectual tradition in his Walātan homeland.[205] It is crucial to acknowledge that these movements, resettlements, and knowledge exchanges likely fueled an awareness of and interest in literary poetry and verse-making in the region. The arrival of Maghribī and Andalusian scholars in Walāta, partly due to instability in their countries, pursuit of intellectual and commercial ventures in Walāta, might have brought along the rich traditions of Andalusian poetry and verse-making. This influx likely added to the evolving literary setting in that region. As evidenced by the scholars, education, literary works, and historical periods and geographical locations examined, Timbuktu's scholarly elites possessed a profound appreciation for literary poetry and verse-making, showcasing the enduring vibrancy of their Arabo-Islamic intellectual traditions. It can be posited that their Arabo-Islamic

[202] al-Bāritaylī, *Fatḥ al-Shakūr,* 48.

[203] For a comprehensive study of the Ijil mines, see E. Ann McDougall, "The Ijil Salt Industry: Its Role in the Pre-Colonial Economy of the Western Sudan" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham, 1980).

[204] Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam,* 44.

[205] al-Bāritaylī's *Fatḥ al-Shakūr,* 114

intellectual traditions arrived relatively early and exhibited remarkable vitality in Timbuktu, thus contributing to the rich dynamics observed.

An important observation of this exploration into poetry and verse-making from the western Sahara to the Sūdān is the genealogy of this knowledge, interlinked to a specific chain of scholars and individuals—from al-Tādilisī to the older Aqīts, and from Baghayūghu to Bābā and his family. Stewart argues that the intellectual landscape of sixteenth-century Timbuktu was predominantly shaped by two influential scholarly lineages, namely the Baghayūghu and the Aqīts.[206] Considering this intellectual heritage is crucial in understanding Timbuktu's impact on Islamic intellectual culture, particularly in Mauritania, where Bābā is occasionally referred to as "*Shaykh al-Shanāqiṭa* (Shaykh of Mauritanians/the people of Shinqīṭ." As noted earlier, after the Saʿdī invasion, members of the Aqīt family, heirs of Timbuktu's scholarship, migrated to cities such as Wādān and other emerging and neighbouring intellectual and caravan cities in Mauritania. This genealogy of knowledge raises important questions about its influence on Mauritania's Arabic-Islamic intellectual culture and educational frameworks, including its poetry and verse-making tradition, a topic to be further explored in the upcoming chapter.

Exploring the Silence on Poetry and Verse-Making in Mauritania

This section, while containing some overlap, establishes a foundational link for the treatment of the next chapter.

[206] Stewart, "Calibrating the Scholarship of Timbuktu" in *Landscapes, Sources, and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past: Essays in Honour of Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias*, (eds.) Toby Green and Benedetta Rossi (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 220-38; Ahmed Salem, "Global Shinqīṭ: Mauritania's Islamic Knowledge Tradition and the Making of Transnational Religious Authority (Nineteenth to Twenty-First Century," *Religions,* 12 (11) 953 (2011): 5.

As demonstrated in the preceding section, which explores relevant sources illuminating the people, intellectual milieu, and backdrop of the Sahara and the Sūdān concerning poetry, it becomes evident that the practice of verse-making was not prevalent in the broader expanse of Mauritania, particularly in the Gebla region, prior to the reported emergence of the tradition. If such was indeed the case, what factors might have contributed to this occurrence? In the following passage, I examine potential catalysts that could, in various respects, be linked to this development.

Limited Presence of Arabic Linguistic Tools and Sciences

The literary archaeology of texts studied and transmitted from the post-Almoravids era to the end of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century suggests that scholars from this region predominantly focused on theology/creed, jurisprudence (in the forms of *fatāwā* and *fiqh* manuals), and Arabic grammar and literature. In some instances, the *Sīra* was also studied, possibly due to the historical presence of students of Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ (d. 1149) teaching the *Kitāb al-Shifā.*[207] Moreover, it was not until early seventeenth century onwards that the region experienced an influx of texts on the Islamic spiritual tradition and books of Ḥādīth from Egypt and Morocco, spreading to various parts of present-day Mauritania, the broader Sahara and the Sūdān.[208] However, Timbuktu stood in stark contrast where scholars like Aḥmad Bābā

[207] The *Kitāb al-Shifā* was authored by the Moroccan Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ ibn Mūsā (d. 1149), reportedly the teacher of the earlier mentioned al-Ḥaḍramī. It was taught by the likes of Ibn Yāsin, al-Ḥaḍramī and Ibrāhīm al-Umawī.

[208] Levtzion claims that it was in the fifteenth century that the Islamic spiritual tradition was brough to Timbuktu from Maghrib and the northern Sahara (Levtzion, "Bilad al-Sudan," 73). However, Norris writes that in the sixteenth century, scholars of Timbuktu continued to have more contacts with Sufi scholars from Egypt. People of the city, like other parts of the western Sahara and the Sūdān venerated

documents his and his teachers' study of texts on numerous Arabic linguistic sciences, including Arabic Prosody (*ʿilm al-ʿarūḍ*), Rhetoric (*balāgha*), and Grammar (*Naḥw*), among others. Ould Bah's argument asserting the absence of poets and poetry in the prevailing sense in Mauritania before the reported emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition hinges on these observations. He contends that the limited evidence of poetic activities, which were mostly versifications (*manẓūma and al-shiʿr al-taʿlīmī*), did not attain an exceptional level. His reasoning extends to suggest that Mauritania, before the era of the reported emergence of Arabic poetry, lacked exposure to the numerous Arabic linguistic tools and sciences such as Arabic Grammar (*Naḥw*) and Prosody (*ʿilm al-ʿarūḍ*).[209] This argument is partly based on the claim that the prose text *al-Muqaddimat al-Ājurrūmiyya*, authored by the fourteenth-century ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd al-Ṣanhājī (d. 1323), known as Ibn Ajurrūm, was the primary Arabic grammar text among Mauritanians before this time. Ould Bah writes that, according to al-Yadālī, Muḥammad Saʿīd ibn Takkadi, a sixteenth century Saharan scholar was the first to initiate the study of Arabic grammar in the Gebla.[210]Additionally, the oldest known reported Mauritanian commentary on the *Ājurrūmiyya* is attributed to Anda ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sayyid Aḥmad al-Maḥjūbī al-Walātī (al-Wadānī) (d. 1520/31).[211] He hailed from the Ṣanhāja tribe and might have migrated from Walāta to Wādān, hence the appellation al-Wadānī. While ʿAbd Allāh wuld Muḥammad Sālim argues against the status of the *Ājurrūmiyya*, suggesting proficiency among the local

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saints and 'holymen' or miracle works. These people were considered as possessors of supernatural powers (*karāmāt*), which were manifest in the ability of these people to heal the sick, resolve crises, and perform other feats (Norris, "Znāga Islam During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," 500).

[209] Ould Bah, *al-Shiʿr waʾl-Shuʿarāʾ fī Mūritāniyā,* 38

[210] Ibid.

[211] Ahmad ould Mbarek, "Nashʾat al-Shiʿr al-Shinqīṭī wa ʿAmaliyyat al-Taʿarrub," *Ḥawliyyat Jāmiʿat Shinqīṭ al-ʿAṣriyya*, vol. 1 (2008): 224.

population in advanced works, particularly in jurisprudence, his argument lacks substantial evidence countering Ould Bah's assertion.[212] While the argument about limited exposure to Arabic linguistic studies and verse-making activities before the reported emergence phenomenon in Mauritania holds some plausibility, it seems problematic in other aspects. Particularly, when considering the refined quality of the odes (*qaṣāʾid*) from the reported founding fathers and pioneer poets, ould Bah's arguments prompt concerns about a lack of comprehensive contextualization regarding the environment in which their poetry arose. For example, upon careful examination of the *Dawāwīn* (collections of poetry) in al-Amīn's *Wasīṭ*, featuring the reported pioneer poets of Mauritania, it becomes clear that these poets possessed an exceptional command of Arabic prosody and literary finesse. Their mastery of the subtleties of prosody challenges the notion that the poets and their poetry were in a formative stage during the reported period of emergence. Even within the verses of Ibn Rāzikah, there exists a subtle interrogation and commentary on the phenomenon of emergence. In these elegiac lines from a *qaṣīda* in his *dīwān*, he alludes to the art of verse-making, skillfully embodied by a certain Muḥammad al-Karīm, offering a nuanced perspective on the level of poetic expression:

> Before your poetry, we were deprived of a universe of poetry
> The rhymes of which were made from peerless gems,
>
> The response to which is one of a deficient brother
> Just like gold dust is better than soil.[213]

[212] ʿAbd Allāh wuld Muḥammad Sālim, "Dirāsat fī tārīkh al-Shiʿr al-Shinqīṭī: Qirāʾat fī Ishkāliyyat al-nashʾat waʾl-taṭawwur," *Ḥawliyyat Jāmiʿat Shinqīṭ al-ʿAṣriyya*, vol. 1 (2008): 243-273.

[213] Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh ibn Maḥḥam ibn al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh ibn Maḥḥam ibn al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī al-Shahīr bi-Ibn Rāzikah*, (ed.) Muḥammad Ibn Dahāh, (Nouakchott: Dār al-Isrāʾ, 2021): 56.

The interpretation of these verses unfolds in two potential ways: 1) indicating the existence of poetry and verse-making before the *Shurr Bubba* era, preceding Ibn Rāzikah and the reported period of poetic emergence, albeit of inferior quality; or 2) suggesting that al-Karīm's verses, who was Ibn Rāzikah's contemporary or was probably older than him were unparalleled due to his prosodic prowess, surpassing the compositions of poets and scholars of his time. Despite Ibn Rāzikah's high regards for this Muḥammad al-Karīm, there seem to be an absence of the latter's verses in primary and often cited Mauritanian biographical literature and poetry collections such as al-Amīn's *al-Wasīṭ*. Similarly, there is a conspicuous absence of the earlier mentioned Muḥammad ibn Mukhtār ibn al-Aʿmash (Bil-aʿmash) al-ʿAlawī al-Shinqīṭī (d. 1695) verses in these sources, despite his foundational role in introducing Ibn Rāzikah to the art of poetry composition (*taqrīḍ al-shiʿr*), an art in which al-Aʿmash excelled. Interestingly, these sources do not characterize al-Aʿmash as a poet or expert in verse-making, despite his reported intellectual qualifications that would fit such a categorization. These include versifications (*manẓūmāt*) like the previously mentioned *Rawḍat al-afkār fī ʿilm al-layl wa'l-nahār* on astrology and his *manẓūma* of the *Mughnī al-Labīb*, a book on Arabic grammar by the Egyptian grammarian and theologian, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Hishām al-Anṣārī (d. 1360). Instead, he is commonly depicted as a jurist (*faqīh*), scholar (*ʿālim*), imam, grammarian, and litterateur, among others.

The aforementioned references offer valuable insights into the presumption of pre-existing verse-making before our focal era. Essentially, the poetic works of our pioneering poets and scholars likely emerged within an already 'flourishing' regional Arabic language tradition marked by refined literary prowess and conceptual sophistication. Recognizing the intertextuality inherent in the poetic genres, it is reasonable to infer that the literary voices of these scholars were integral components of a broader, richer heteroglossic tradition. Therefore, asserting that

the tradition of poetry in West Africa, especially in Mauritania, had already taken root during a period for which our direct knowledge is limited, is not without merit.[214] Based on available literature and studies, we currently lack conclusive evidence to definitively pinpoint the beginning of the period when the art of poetry and verse-making commenced in the region.

Furthermore, despite the absence of absolute references to requisite linguistic tools and books or texts used for the study of Arabic prosody (*ʿilm al-ʿarūḍ*) and verse-making in most parts of Mauritania prior to the reported period of emergence, there are indications of connections to elements related to poetry and verse-making preceding and during the early days of pioneering poets and scholars. The presence of the study of *ʿilmā al-bayān wa'l-maʿānī* (the Sciences of Rhetorical Elucidation and Meanings) and the teaching of verse composition serves as evidence. The aforementioned al-Aʿmash, who instructed Ibn Rāzikah in the art of verse composition (*taqrīḍ al-shiʿr*), might have acquired understanding of the knowledge and skills in Mauritania, or through contacts in the Maghrib during his transit there, and later passing on the knowledge to his student. Alternatively, Ibn Rāzikah could have acquired knowledge in Arabic Rhetoric from his teacher, Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Yaʿqūb al-Walātī al-Maḥjūbī (d. 1713), a scholar from Walāta and specialist in semantics-rhetoric who wrote a commentary on Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Qazwīnī's (d. 1338) *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ*. This Sīdī Aḥmad al-Walātī, in turn, was a student of the Moroccan jurist and theologician Sīdī Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Mayyāra (d. 1662), who received his education under the tutelage of Shihāb al-Dīn Abū

[214] Abdul-Samad Abdullah also argues that the limited resources available to us cannot direct us to the exact period of when poetry and verse-making activities started in West Africa. See Abdul-Samad Abdullah, "Arabic Poetry in West Africa: An Assessment of the Panegyric and Elegy Genres in Arabic Poetry of the 19th and 20th Centuries in Senegal and Nigeria," *Journal of Arabic Literature,* vol. 35, no. 3 (2004): 375.

al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā al-Maqqarī (d.1632), a distinguished scholar, biographer, poet, and belletrist of his era. Al-Maqqarī established himself as a scholar of repute in Marrakesh, then Fes (Fez) where he held the position of imam at the Qarawiyyīn Mosque. His mention in Ibn Rāzikah's intellectual lineage holds significant importance, as will be elaborated in chapter V.

Based on the above, Ibn Rāzikah acquired the skills in verse-making and rhetoric that laid the foundation for his versification (*naẓm*) of al-Qazwīnī's *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ*, titled *Nuzhat al-maʿānī*, composed at the age of twenty-five. The work, consisting of 548 verses, became a pioneering didactic poem on Rhetoric from the region, as discussed in Chapter Six. Some of the verses read:

> The servant of his Lord, Ibn al-Qāḍī, the one who seeks
> The beautiful goodness of the One True Executioner says,
>
> All glory to Allāh who eloquently informs of His existence
> And about His favours and munificence.[215]

He goes further to say:

> This is a short versification
> Most of which is wholly from the *Talkhīṣ*
>
> I have titled it "*The Pleasant Walk through*
> *The Two Sciences of Meanings and Elucidation*."[216]

He then prays for the widespread acceptance of his work, *Nuzhat al-maʿānī*, hoping it resonates with people just as the original text, the *Talkhīṣ*, did. It is plausible to imagine that the

[215] al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh,* 6

[216] Ibid., 7

widespread acclaim and acceptance of Ibn Rāzikah's work inspired al-Yadālī, also one of the reported founding fathers of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition, to compose an ode extolling Ibn Rāzikah and acknowledging his esteemed position in the realm of knowledge. In his verses, he expresses:

> In the sciences of grammar and creed, his stature soared high,
> And a versification on Arabic Rhetoric, adorned with acceptable charm.[217]

The *Nuzhat al-maʿānī* is arguably, not just the first text on Arabic Rhetoric written by a Mauritanian scholar, but absolutely the first didactic poem on Rhetoric from the region as will be discussed later. Although the exact time when al-Qazwīnī's *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ* reached Mauritanian scholars before Ibn Rāzikah is uncertain, earlier sources confirm its presence and teaching in Timbuktu. The text likely moved from Egypt to Timbuktu through the exchanges and networks of scholars. Possibly, it traversed from there to regions like Walāta and Shinqīṭ in Mauritania.[218] Alternatively, it is conceivable that the text made its way to Shinqīṭ, Ibn Rāzikah's homeland, originating from the Maghrib. The mobility of texts, including the *Talkhīṣ*, had a fundamental influence on shaping the curriculum of various Arabo-Islamic sciences in Mauritania, particularly influencing the areas of verse-making and prosody, a topic that will be

[217] Ibid., 6

[218] Perhaps, it was Ibn Yaʿqūb al-Walātī who was a scholar of Rhetoric that taught Ibn Rāzikah the original text of the *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ* after migrating from Walāta to the western side of Mauritania. There are three other possibilities too: that Ibn Rāzikah might have had access to and studied the original book while growing up as a student in homeland of Shinqīṭ. It also might be that he was taught the book while studying in Wādān where verse-making was common at the time as seen in the example of Saʿd ibn Ḥabīb Bābā, the nephew of Bābā. The third possibility is that he encountered the book when he moved to the Gebla to study in the *maḥḍara* of his grandfather, ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Ṭālib. This third speculation is farfetched because he had become a fully grown scholar before his departure to the Gebla.

thoroughly examined in the next chapters. The study of al-Qazwīnī's work and Ibn Rāzikah's poetic interpretation indicates the incorporation of sciences closely linked to poetry during Ibn Rāzikah's early years.

Additionally, our access to comprehensive sources detailing the Arabic linguistic tools available and studied in Mauritania before the reported emergence era is limited. The lack of these source materials or their absence in discussions of these tools within biographical literature, chronicles (*tāwārīkh*), collections of poetry and other texts by Mauritanian scholars prior to this period adds complexity to our investigation. These sources, crucial for understanding historical phenomena, might have been lost due to various factors:1) the nomadic lifestyle, characterized by frequent movements and relocations, potentially contributing to the scarcity of evidence; 2) destruction amid prolonged wars and conflicts that ravaged the region; or 3) a potential disruption in oral knowledge transmission within a society reliant on preserving knowledge and information orally. In addition to being a pedagogical system adopted among Muslims over centuries, the region's dependence on oral transmission, well-suited for their nomadic lifestyle, could also be partly attributed to the absence or scarcity of writing paper.[219] Norris notes that the pre-eighteenth-century era in Mauritania had a scarcity or absence of abundant manuscripts.[220] Stewart underlines that it was only until the period surrounding the Shurr Bubba war that the literate tradition was initiated. It also allowed for not only documentation of the conflict but also enriching our understanding of social dynamics within Moorish society.[221]

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[219] al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh*, 11

[220] Norris, "Muslim Sanhāja Scholars of Mauritania," 148

[221] Stewart writes that the rise of a literate tradition coincided with the era of Shurr Bubba, partly chronicling the war and, more significantly, initiating the preservation and expansion of our insights into

The absence of writing about history and biographical literature could also be attributed to ideological blind spots and oversights by earlier historians and scholars. However, exceptions like Aḥmad Bābā in his *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj li maʿrifat man laysa fī'l-dībāj*,[222]al-Saʿdī in his *Tāʾrīkh* and al-Bāritaylī in the *Fatḥ al-Shakūr* provide valuable sources that offer insights into the lives of scholars, the core curriculum, and the role of poetry and verse-making in their societies. Aḥmad Bābā's own accounts, as also referenced by al-Saʿdī and al-Bāritaylī provide relevant details about his exploration of fundamental sciences and tools relevant in the study of poetry and verse-making such as Arabic prosody, rhetoric, grammar, among other sciences. These sources specifically reference texts like the *Matn al-Khazrajiyya* on prosody and the *Talkhīṣ* on rhetoric that likely played a significant role in shaping the understanding of these literary disciplines in Timbuktu, and possibly in neighbouring cities like Walāta. Interestingly, al-Yadālī, despite his comprehensive writings on the people, cultures, and geography of Mauritania, offers no early accounts or relevant information about Arabic prosody, verse-making and the texts studied on the subjects under discussion. Wālid ibn Muṣṭafā ibn Khālunā (also wuld Khālunā) (d. 1797), al-Yadālī's most prominent student and a poet, also does not seem to mention the texts studied on Arabic prosody, verse-making and composition in his comprehensive list of some known Arabic texts and their authors that were studied by the Zawāyā people during and before the eighteenth century. We cannot presume that the people of

social relationships in Moorish society. See Stewart, "Political Authority and Social Stratification in Mauritania, in *Arabs and Berber: From Tribe to Nation in North Africa* (eds.) Ernest Gellner and Charles Micaud (London: Duckworth, 1972): 375-393. This argument is also made in Hall and Stewart, "The Historic "Core Curriculum" and the Book Market in Islamic West Africa," 109-174.

[222] Aḥmad Bābā, *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj li maʿrifat man laysa fī'l-dībāj*, (ed.) Muḥammad Muṭīʿ (Morocco: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa'l-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya, 2000).

southwestern and central Mauritania studied the *Matn al-Khazrajiyya*, a text used in Timbuktu for Arabic prosody, before the seventeenth century solely based on the assumption of a shared Islamic intellectual culture in the Sahara and the broader Sūdān. Ould Bah's argument, while carrying valid historical points and emphasizing the lack of exposure to specific Arabic linguistic tools, seems directed more towards the developments within the Gebla region: this region which later emerged as the primary representative of Arabo-Islamic intellectual traditions in Mauritania from the later part of the seventeenth century. However, his examination, though very useful lacks a comprehensive assessment of the diverse cities, enclaves, and regions of the time that collectively form modern-day Mauritania. Specifically, it overlooks the intellectual and scholarly activities in the eastern Ḥawḍ region, particularly Walāta, and their ties with Timbuktu, which had a vibrant presence of poetry and verse-making activities. Having said that, it is important to highlight that the seventeenth century, and most importantly, the period of this reported poetic emergence witnessed significant transformations in Arabic language sensibilities. These changes not only reshaped the discourse surrounding the study of Arabic language but also influenced the evolution of Arabic poetry and verse-making. They marked a crucial shift in poetic imagination, which continued to evolve through subsequent eras. They will be discussed in greater details in the next chapter.

Zawāyā Fuqahāʾ, Almoravids and Islamic Authoritative Sources on Poetry

The perspectives and influence of the Zawāyā *fuqahāʾ* might have been a significant factor that contributed to the initial absence of poetry and verse-making in early Mauritania. Additionally, the legacy of the Almoravids, who held a degree of skepticism towards poets and verse-making, could have played a role. Furthermore, the cautionary notes and admonitions found in Islam's most authoritative sources such as the Qur'an, Ḥādīth, and *fiqh*, might have

contributed to this initial silence and inactivity in poetry until its sudden prevalence and heightened prominence from the second half of the seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries.

Some scholars such as Aḥmad ould Mbarek highlight the attribution of the near absence or limited presence of poetry and verse-making to the Zawāyā *fuqahāʾ*'s concerns and their criticism of its use and performance. These jurists, motivated by religious scruples, viewed interactions with poetry and verse-making as frivolous, sometimes considering those involved as 'possessed.'[223] Their opposition aimed to block avenues (*sadd al-dharīʿa*) that could lead to acts of vanity, slandering, backbiting, and defamation through satires (*hijāʾ*) and lies.[224]Acts such as backbiting were likely construed and allegorically linked to the metaphorical concept of consuming the flesh of deceased brethren, reminiscent of the Qur'anic verse 49:12.

> O Believers! Avoid many suspicions, for indeed some suspicions are sinful. And do not spy, nor backbite one another. Would any of you love to eat the flesh of their dead brother? You would despise that! And fear Allah. Surely Allah is the Accepter of repentance, Most Merciful.

This verse strongly emphasizes the need to steer clear of suspicions, spying, and backbiting. The striking analogy it uses, likening these actions to consuming the flesh of a deceased brother, vividly illustrates the repugnance of such behavior. It highlights the severity of these actions and urges believers to avoid harming others through slander or baseless suspicion—themes echoed in

[223] Aḥmad ould Mbarek asks if the Ṣanhāja historical feuds with the Arab Ḥassān make them have hatred for the Arabic language thereby not pursue the study of poetry and verse-making. He also asks if their non-pursuit of poetry had anything to do with their understanding of the Qur'an's negative comments about poetry and poets. See Ahmad ould Mbarek, "Nashʾat al-Shiʿr al-Shinqīṭī wa ʿAmaliyyat al-Taʿarrub," 220-221

[224] ʿAbd Allāh wuld Muḥammad Sālim, "Dirāsat fī tārīkh al-Shiʿr al-Shinqīṭī: Qirā'at fī Ishkāliyyat al-nash'at wa'l-taṭawwur," 248-249.

poetic verses. The guidance in this verse echoes, to some extent, the teachings of the Zawāyā *fuqahāʾ* regarding ethical conduct and relationships among believers.

These Zawāyā *fuqahāʾ*'s disapproval drew a little from the Qur'ān's caution about poets, poetry, and verse-making, as well as various warnings mentioned in different aḥādīth. Some scholars referenced the ḥadīth narration that deems it better to fill a man's belly with pus than to be preoccupied with poetry. Devout Mālikīs, these *fuqahāʾ* adhered to the warnings and admonishments found in canonical texts like the *Risāla* of Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 966), cautioning against excessive engagement with poetry.[225] Furthermore, there is a reported incident where the seventeenth century Zawāyā reformer Nāṣir al-Dīn penalized a young boy named Ḥabīb ibn Bullā Yaʿqūbī tribe (Idayqub) for reciting verses of *ghazal*.[226] This event, coupled with a broader intention of religious scrupulousness, contributed to the reluctance or absence of known poets from specific tribes and villages in Mauritania in composing *ghazal* verses to this day.

These historical details provide us with valuable insights. Firstly, they highlight the existence of poetic imagination and the practice of verse-making among certain communities in Mauritania, particularly in the Gebla region, leading up to the seventeenth century. Secondly, there existed a plausible sense of apprehension and suspicion, particularly directed towards certain genres of poetry such as *ghazal* and *hijā*, or even a general disapproval of poetry and verse-making, evident in Nāṣir al-Dīn's response to the incident mentioned above. Although the punishment he administered to the young man was linked to the recitation of *ghazal* verses, it is

[225] Ould Mbarek, "Nash'at al-Shiʿr al-Shinqīṭī wa ʿAmaliyyat al-Taʿarrub," 221

[226] Jamāl Ḥasān, *al-Shiʿr al-ʿArab al-Faṣīḥ fī Bilād Shinqīṭ*, 117; wuld Muḥammad Sālim, "Dirāsat fī Tā'rīkh al-Shiʿr al-Shinqīṭī," 248.

conceivable that a similar reaction might not have occurred if the performance involved other genres like *madīḥ* (praise poetry) or *tawassul* of the Prophet Muḥammad and the righteous. It remains unclear whether Nāṣir al-Dīn and his followers utilized verses in praise of him to mobilize and propagate their reformist movement and military campaigns, a practice observed in other West African reformist movements such as the Sokoto Jihād scholars: ʿUthmān Fūdī (d. 1817), ʿAbd Allāh ibn Fūdī (d. 1828) and Muḥammad Bello (d. 1837) and al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Fūtī Tāl (d. 1864). Notably, al-Yadālī, a member of the Zawāyā Tashumsha group like Nāṣir al-Dīn, composed verses despite Nāṣir al-Dīn's disapproval of *ghazal* poetry. Al-Yadālī's family members reportedly participated in Nāṣir al-Dīn's reform movement. Al-Yadālī himself wrote the most comprehensive reference work and historical account on the life, rank, time and activities of Nāṣir al-Dīn and the nobles of Tashumsha titled *Manāqib al-Imām Nāṣir al-Dīn*, *Amr al-Walī Nāṣir al-Dīn* and *Shiyam al-Zawāyā*. Despite reports of Nāṣir al-Dīn disapproving of *ghazal*, al-Yadālī, a staunch supporter of his, has some works in poetry, primarily centered around *madīḥ* (praise poetry) dedicated to the Qur'an and the Prophet Muḥammad.[227]

[227] Stewart et al, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, 1576-1581

Fig. 3:4: Image of the first page of al-Yadālī's *Amr al-Walī Nāṣir al-Dīn*[228]

However, al-Yadālī, despite his exemplary poetry, held a critical view towards certain forms of verse-making, likening it to "wasting time describing male and female camels." He says:

[228] See gallica.bnf.fr - Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Arabe 7036

Certainly, my tongue has never satirized any Muslim,
And I will not satirize until I am covered in the dust.

Such verse composition is lowly for every Muslim,
Except in praise of the Chosen Prophet, his family, and companions.[229]

This discerning attitude towards verse-making was not unique to al-Yadālī. In his *Fatḥ al-Shakūr,* al-Bāritaylī notes that his teacher, al-Ṭālib al-Amīn al-Ḥarashī (d. 1753), "did not recite poetry except about two verses in accordance with the Sunnah." This choice could be a reflection of al-Ṭālib al-Amīn's adherence to al-Qayrawānī's counsel in the latter's *Risāla* cautioning against unnecessary preoccupation with poetry.[230]

Considering the above, it can be argued that before the reported emergence era, the prevalent stance towards verse-making and poetic expression was complex, with a blend of acceptance, conditional limitations, and even suspicion or disapproval directed at specific poetic genres like *ghazal* and *hijāʾ*. This attitude could be linked to a legacy from the Almoravids and select jurists who resided among the Saharan Ṣanhājas until the latter part of the seventeenth century.

For example, it is reported that certain leaders of the Almoravids, along with *fuqahāʾ*, embraced what some perceived as stringent positions in their teachings and interpretations of the Qur'an and jurisprudence. This approach, perhaps, in some ways, reportedly influenced their perspective on the role of the art of poetry and verse-making, leading to its regulation and potential censorship. Understanding this regulation requires contextualizing it within the broader goals of the Almoravids' movement and in the context of a primarily oral Muslim society. For the

[229] wuld Muḥammad Sālim, "Dirāsat fī tārīkh al-shiʿr al-Shinqīṭī," 264

[230] Ibid., 262; See also al-Bāritaylī's *Fatḥ al-Shakūr.*

Almoravids, similar to many other empires and Muslim societies, poetry, whether performed, spoken or transmitted, possessed the capability and wielded the authority to legitimize both religious and non-religious endeavours. The expansive range of topics covered in verses, particularly in an oral Muslim society steeped in a vibrant Arabic and Islamic literary culture, perhaps, raised fears for the Almoravids. It is possible that they were concerned about the potential spread of inappropriate content in poetic verses, necessitating measures to uphold the integrity of the reformist principles that drove the Almoravids' movement. This concern could partly have been influenced by certain poets like the Andalusian Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Īsā ibn ʿAbd Malik ibn Quzmān (d. 1160), known for composing verses that celebrated and promoted prohibited activities such as drinking wine and for satires aimed at Muslim scholars. He frequently satirized the Almoravids' prohibition of vices he championed in his verses in the public domain.[231] However, it is crucial not to overstate the notion that the Almoravids completely stifled poetry in al-Andalus, the region whose poetic tradition later influenced the literature of the Maghrib, the Sahara, and the Ṣūdān. This perspective overlooks the fact that some Almoravid leaders, particularly during the reign of ʿAlī ibn Yūsuf ibn Tāshufīn (d. 1143), the fifth Almoravid emir supported and enjoyed panegyrics (*madīḥ*) and received praises from poets such as Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Qaysī (d. 1126), famously known as al-Aʿmā al-Tuṭīlī (the Blind Poet of Tudela), and Abū Bakr Yaḥyā ibn Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf. In one poem, al-Tuṭīlī expresses:

> O the exalt of the exalted, every day anew
> One whose aspiration is not the throne

[231] See Amila Buturovic, "Ibn Quzmān," in *The Literature of Al-Andalus*, (eds.) Maria Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin and Michael Sells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2000): 298-9.

O spring of the lands, cloud of the world, so vast
Between gatherings and Assemblies

O the echo of time in every Mosque
Descendant of valour with dignity and honour

For you, whether from Tāshufīn or my father, Jacob
Remembered for noble qualities and deeds.[232]

Such types of praises were not uncommon in the courts and circles of Muslim and Arab leaders in various times and places.[233] It is well-documented that the leadership of the Almoravids would selectively recruit secretaries and civilian administrators with strong Arabic language skills to facilitate the transmission of instructions and information to the public, as well as to provincial governors. Once provided with the necessary content, these secretaries would skillfully compose missives in eloquent literary Arabic. These compositions often took the form of *sajʿ* (rhyming prose), resembling the style and structures of verses.[234] However, there were also poets like Abū Bakr Yaḥyā ibn Sahl al-Yakkī (d. 1164-5) who regularly satirized certain Almoravid leaders and *fuqahā*. In some verses, he expresses:

So base is everyone from those who veil their faces
Even if they tower above the highest star or planet

Their honour rests in being carried
From a prostitute's belly to a steed's back

They are of the noble Himyarite lineage,
Yet they place horns in positions of crowns,

[232] al-Ḥayāt al-ʾAdabiyya wa'l-ʿilmiyya fī Dawlat al- Murābiṭīn: al-Shiʿr wa'l- Shuʿarāʾ fī Dawlat al-Murābiṭīn, *al-Tārīkh al-Islāmī*, February 1st, 2015 on https://islamstory.com/ar/artical/23918/-الحياة-الأدبية-العلمية-دولة-المرابطين

[233] wuld Muḥammad Sālim, "Dirāsat fī tārīkh al-Shiʿr al-Shinqīṭī,", 263.

[234] Bennison, *The Almoravids and the Almohads*, 53

Do not seek any chaste *Murābiṭ*,
And seek the flame of fire in deceitfulness.[235]

Perhaps, some of the positions maintained by the Almoravids and their scholars in the Sahara continued to exert influence on local perspectives regarding poetry and verse-making in the aftermath of the Almoravid decline, in addition to other factors.

Writing Paper

Beyond its traditional role as a key pedagogical medium in Muslim societies, the reliance on oral and mnemonic traditions in Mauritania was significantly influenced by the nomadic context.[236] It can also be asserted that this dependence on orality and memorization in the Mauritanian context was reinforced, in part, by the restricted access to writing materials. Perhaps, the lack of access to and scarcity of paper might have hindered the documentation of traditions, histories, and intellectual activities, contributing to the perception of inactivity and silence in Mauritania's poetic and intellectual cultural tradition. This is because it contributes to limiting our understanding of the state and reach of Arabic poetry and verse-making in the region before their reported emergence in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. An old Mauritanian saying underscores this limitation: "*illī marrga ar-raʾs mā yumarrg ak-kurrās*", meaning,

[235] Al-Ḥayāt al-ʾAdabiyya wa'l-ʿilmiyya, 1st February, 2015 on https://islamstory.com/ar/artical/23918/الحياة-الأدبية-العلمية-دولة-المرابطين (Last Accessed on October 26, 2023).

[236] Reliance on oral tradition, especially in religious teachings, also aligns with the nomadic lifestyle because nomads are less likely to be literate, though they are not the only ones. However, the Mauritanian case seems to be different as will be discussed in the next chapters.

"whatever leaves the head does not leave the paper."[237] This adage could imply that information not documented on paper may have been lost or can possibly be disrupted in transmission, leading to potential gaps in crucial historical knowledge.[238]

Adding context, it is reported that Mauritania and the broader West African regions grappled with challenges concerning the availability and cost of writing paper. These resources were primarily sourced from Morocco and Europe via the Atlantic coast of Senegal. Furthermore, the restricted availability of paper was heavily influenced by the perspective of certain Muslim scholars. Their views revolved around a jurisprudential debate concerning the permissibility or prohibition of using papers produced by non-Muslims. This stance was deeply rooted in the notion of paper purity, focusing on concerns regarding the materials used in paper production and the religious symbols imprinted on them. For instance, papers provided by Dutch Christian merchants bearing inscribed crosses raised substantial concerns. Various Mālikī scholars, including the Tlemcen jurist Ibn Marzūq al-Ḥāfiẓ (d. 842/1438), issued legal rulings addressing this matter.[239] The scholarly debates surrounding the permissibility of using papers made by non-Muslims in pre-eighteenth-century Mauritania discouraged many scholars from

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[237] Lydon, "A Thirst for Knowledge: Arabic Literacy, Writing Paper and Saharan Bibliophiles," in *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa*, (eds.) Graziano Kratli and Ghislaine Lydon (Leiden: Brill, 2011): 35.

[238] For comprehensive discussion on written word, in relation to orality, see Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000).

[239] See Leor Halevi, "Christian Impurity Versus Economic Necessity: A Fifteenth-Century Fatwa on European Paper," *Speculum* 83 (2008): 917-45. See also Janina M. Safran, "Rules of Purity and Confessional Boundaries: Maliki Debates about the Pollution of the Christian," *History of Religions,* (2003): 197-212.

recording their works on paper.[240] In other words, it is conceivable that lack of access to and limitation in paper availability, combined with debates over the acceptability of using non-Muslim sources due to purity concerns, and the reliance on oral tradition which aligns with the nomadic way of life may have hindered the recording, preservation, and dissemination of literary poetry. This could parallel the challenges encountered by other written forms of expression. Consequently, the absence of evidence of poetry works from earlier times in the region could, in part, be attributed to these factors.

Conclusion

The above examination aims to contextualize the factors possibly responsible for what can be described as a period of quietude, inactivity or scarcity in poetry and verse-making before the second half of the seventeenth century. Among the key factors discussed, one significant argument, presented by ould Bah, centered on the absence and limited exposure to essential Arabic linguistic tools like prosody, rhetoric, and grammar. While acknowledging the plausibility of ould Bah's argument to a certain degree, it is essential to note its narrow focus on Mauritanian society, which may overlook the broader geographical context preceding the reported emergence of Arabic poetry tradition.

Another influential aspect was the stance taken by the Zawāyā *fuqahāʾ*, who, across centuries, expressed caution, scrutiny, or even discouragement regarding the practice and

[240] Reflecting on Halevi's insights, Lydon also discusses the discourse on the permissibility of writing paper by non-Muslims in the era and region in focus in Lydon, "A Thirst for Knowledge: Arabic Literacy, Writing Paper and Saharan Bibliophiles," 46; In my conference paper, I also highlight this debate on the purity of writing paper as a possible factor that challenged the production of literary poetry until the reported period of its emergence in Mauritania. See Abdulkadir, "Verse Tradition, Muslim Scholars, and Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Mauritania, The "Land of Million Poets," 16-17.

involvement in literary poetry and verse-making. This cautious approach aimed to prevent the propagation of vices, aligning with the prohibitions outlined in Islamic authoritative sources like the Qur'an, Ḥadīth, and *fiqh*. Beyond the potential influence of these sources, their outlook may have also been shaped by the doctrines of their predecessors, the Almoravids, who similarly demonstrated a certain level of caution regarding poetry and verse-making activities.

Additionally, I posited that the lack of access to and scarcity of writing paper might have, in part, led to the not much documentation and preservation of written works, including poetry, and its activities in the region before the reported emergence phenomenon.

Considering the historical context and nuances explored, I argue that the transformative phenomenon of emergence was not absolute; rather, it represented a regeneration, consolidation, and a moment of creativity (*ibdāʿ*) and variation (*tabdīʿ*) in the realm of Arabic poetic expression, encompassing its themes and forms in the later part of seventeenth to eighteenth-century Mauritania. In other words, the reported emergence of the classical Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania in the seventeenth to eighteenth century was a rekindling of an existing tradition—relatively quiet, unexpressed, scarcely documented, and less embraced due to earlier discussed dynamics and more.

This development mirrored the changing and evolving religious and social expressions in the seventeenth to eighteenth century, contributing to the growth of Mauritania's intellectual milieu. Crucially, a convergence of Islamic intellectual ideals with new principles, reasoning, metaphors, worldviews, and cultural sensibilities transformed the social, political, economic, and religious spheres. This confluence led to the reconfiguration of the region's intellectual

landscape, paving the way for the so-called emergence of the classical Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania.

By comprehending these complex dynamics, we can now delve into fundamental inquiries: What were the catalysts behind the reported emergence, or better said, renaissance, regeneration, and consolidation of the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania? What were the reasons and mechanisms that brought about it? Who were the key figures driving this transformation, and what specific roles did they undertake in this development? These questions will act as guiding principles, shaping our discussions and analyses in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV: THE REGENERATION AND CONSOLIDATION OF POETRY AND VERSE-MAKING TRADITION

Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I contended that Mauritania did not witness an emergence of the classical Arabic poetry and verse-making tradition, but rather a regeneration, renaissance and consolidation of an existing tradition that had been relatively quiet, less widespread in certain areas, and viewed with suspicion among segments of its population until the latter half of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century.

Moving beyond mere rhetoric and claims, this chapter aims to delineate the root causes and complex mechanisms behind this renaissance or rebirth, exploring why this reported era set the stage and sparked a sudden and remarkable flourishing of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania. This is particularly crucial because, despite valuable insights provided by scholars like Harry Norris,[241] Catherine Taine-Cheikh,[242] Charles Stewart, Ibn Ahmed Salim,[243] and ould Bah, many of these works only scratch the surface of the factors that contributed to this rebirth. While these scholars point out various phenomena believed to have influenced the rise of this intellectual and artistic tradition, three are repeatedly emphasized as the driving forces and pivotal factors behind this phenomenon. For instance, Norris highlights that:

> …the form of Ḥassānīya poetry…derived from zajal and muwashshaḥāt. Andalusian influences came into the country through cultural and commercial connexions, and especially the invasion of the Banū Ḥassān from the Maghrib, where they had remained for many centuries and were influenced by the environment; likewise through the Almoravids, although no example of theirs

[241] Norris, *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968

[242] Taine-Cheikh, "Pouvoir de la poésie et poésie du pouvoir – le cas de la société maure," 281-310.

[243] Sidi Ahmed b. Ahmed Salim, "L'influence de dialecte hassaniyya syr la poesie d'arabe Classique en Mauritania," *al-Wasit*, IMRS, 2, 1988.

> survives locally; and from Timbuctoo and the Saʿdian rulers who opened up direct communications between inner Africa and Morocco.[244]

In his Introduction to "*The Literature of the Western Sudan*" in the *Arabic Literature of Africa*, Stewart, a distinguished and pioneering scholar in the field of Mauritanian history, presented a parallel argument regarding the historical and contextual aspects of the Classical Arabic poetry tradition. Here, he stated that the poetry of the people of Mauritania holds an important pedagogical role in their Islamic educational system of learning. He adds:

> Of parallel importance to classical and Andalusian form that can be traced to at least the 13th century…was the emergence of Hassaniyya poetry that utilized classical subjects (like eulogy, satire, love) but created its own metres, "exclusively syllabic and rhythmic and…eminently sited to partner the music for which it was composed." Hassaniyya verse was not only influenced by classical poetry, but it, in turn, influenced classical verse and Hassaniyya verse was further popularized by local musicians whose talents and local celebrity not infrequently put them at odds with the scholar-writers of their lyrics.[245]

Similar viewpoints have been expressed by scholars like Taine-Cheikh, and therefore, it is not necessary to quote them extensively here. Credit is particularly due to Norris for providing the most comprehensive studies and foundational information regarding both the Ccassical Arabic poetry tradition and Ḥassāniyya poetry (*leghna*) in Mauritania. While this work

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[244] Norris, *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song*, 49.

[245] Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sahara," 9. In an electronic mail correspondence I had with him, Stewart repeats the same argument saying: "The ways in which Hassaniyya verse interacted with classical form (and how each influenced the other), the importance and legacy of pre-Islamic verse obvious in the numbers of commentaries in the Mauritanian literature, the influence of Andalusian form from the 13th century evident in Mauritanian writing, and the complicated relationship between the poets and local musicians who popularized the poetry - any and all of these themes await serious treatment." (January 26, 2015).

acknowledges certain parallels with the dynamics outlined by scholars concerning their impact on Mauritania's poetry tradition, they do not provide us with a holistic understanding of the reasons and mechanisms behind these influences. Furthermore, there is a seeming absence of substantive details about the key figures responsible for these transformations. To address this gap, building upon the groundwork laid in the previous session, I undertake a careful examination and discussion of the factors and processes/mechanisms that precipitated the sudden rise and embrace of classical Arabic poetry in seventeenth to eighteenth century Mauritania.

Drawing from the exploration in the preceding chapter, which covered historical ruptures, shifts, and continuities across various geographical locations and historical epochs, I discern numerous multifaceted influences. They encompass a wide range of subjects and factors, and could be summarized to the following: essential role of the Arabic language, claims of superior genealogical heritage (i.e. tracing one's lineage to Prophet Muḥammad, his companions, and revered Muslim personalities), necessitated migration due to changing climatic conditions and the Moroccan invasion of the Niger Bend region as well as its dominion over the Sahara, the establishment and spread of new Islamic centers of learning, especially from urban to rural areas, and the scholastic needs of Muslim jurists striving to propagate pristine Islam grounded in a profound understanding of Islamic law and other essential intellectual tools, the adoption of novel ideas and forms of expression by diverse individuals, the synthesis of a dynamic Islamic weltanschauung, social changes, and intellectual heritage. Together, these contributed to the development of Arabic poetry and verse-making tradition during this period and explain how these expressions became the most fitting and felicitous mediums for intellectual and artistic endeavours in the region. Moreover, the convergence of people from diverse backgrounds significantly impacted the cultural and intellectual landscape of the era. While these

developments and influences may take distinct forms, they are intricately interconnected, with varying degrees of impact; some exerted more pronounced effects than others.

Central to my exploration in this chapter are two key dynamics: the first revolves around identity and authority, while the second accentuates the significance of the Arabic language. Both these dynamics converged through a common catalyst: mobility and migration. Firstly, I delve into the realms and issues of identity and authority during the transformative seventeenth-century period in Mauritania. The arrival of the Arab Ḥassānī reshaped the region drastically, relegating indigenous groups like the Zawāyā and establishing Arab dominance, which marginalized other languages and cultures, and solidified Arabization. This era was marked by conflicts—both religious and political—altering the religious and social fabric of the region. Similar to historical episodes in other Muslim regions, like the power struggles within the Almoravids, debates arose over genealogy, with communities making claims to 'sacred' and noble lineages linked to early Islam.[246] Such a backdrop could have triggered the need for a new form of expression and a common language of understanding. Because periods characterized by

[246] There were similar power struggles within the Almoravids—featuring Arabs, Berbers, Andalusians, and other factions—different groups sought validation through authoritative religious and Muslim lineage. They employed these lineages not only to justify their rightful leadership roles but also to position themselves within the broader Arabo-Islamic historical framework. Bennison writes that the "myth of Arab origin was probably irrelevant to the majority of the Maghrib's Berber speakers, but it reveals a need felt by ruling elites such as the Almoravids – or their chroniclers – to appropriate Arab ancestry as a mark of nobility in the Islamic environment and to differentiate themselves from other Berbers." Bennison, *Almoravid and Almohad Empires,* 124. See also pages 25-26 of the same book. For a good discussion on the topic, see Helena de Felipe, "Berber Leadership and Genealogical Legitimacy: Almoravid Case," in *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understanding the Past,* (eds.) Sarah Bowen Savant and Helena de Felipe (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014): 55-70.

social upheaval and transitions often lead to the development of new conceptual languages and social imaginaries to comprehend, sustain, and articulate the emergent ideals or eidos.[247]Thus, the pursuit of superior and noble lineage for religious and political validation necessitated a common expressive language, leading to the adoption of Arabic eloquence, particularly poetry, as a tool to validate Arab or noble Muslim ancestries in claims for legitimacy.

Secondly, I delve into the shifts in religious and social expressions, compelling the need for a profound understanding of Islam. Arabic, fundamental for comprehending Islamic doctrines and sources, became highly sought-after. The demand for Arabic language and its associated tools escalated, promoting its study and exposure to various linguistic nuances, prominent in poetry. I argue that this study was facilitated by the movement of scholars and texts in the post Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu, despite the invasion causing significant damage, it paradoxically 'opened' up the region, including Mauritania to broader intellectual traditions, scholars, and new linguistic texts.[248] It also led to an increase in transregional interactions between Morocco and its southern neighbours. These interactions introduced Mauritanians to Arabic linguistic texts hitherto unfamiliar, ultimately shaping the poetic expression of the people.

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[247] For some debates on Social Imaginaries, see Suzi Adams et al, "Social Imaginaries in Debate," *Social Imaginaries* 1.1 (2015): 15-52

[248] The migration and mobility of scholars and texts gave rise to the establishment of new Islamic centers of education. This expansion extended from urban to rural areas, fostering the dissemination of scholarly works and pedagogical texts. It also facilitated the development of a dynamic intellectual network among scholars from the northern Maghrib to the Sahara and Sudan regions. See relevant discussions in Mohamed Lahbib Nouhi and Stewart, "The Maḥazra Educational System" in *Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of Mauritania and the Western Sahara*, 2016: 18-48, as well as Van Dalen, *Doubt, Scholarship, and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa*, 2016.

They innovatively applied these linguistic tools to cater to Mauritania's specific internal needs and milieu.

Identity, Religious and Political Authorities: Genealogies and Ethnicity

As highlighted above, Mauritania, during the seventeenth up to the eighteenth century saw a multitude of developments in the Sahara, including increased interactions among people from diverse backgrounds due to [forced or necessary] migrations spurred by a variety of factors, such as warfare and climatic changes. These interactions were driven by economic competition, religious authority, and political dynamics. This period also witnessed the zenith of what is often referred to as the "Arabicization" and "Arabization" of the Sahara, a phenomenon attributed to the increasing influence and infiltration of the Ḥassānīs in the region. Consequently, this led to their dominance over indigenous cultures and populations. Undoubtedly, these developments would have led to shifts in worldviews and modes of expression within the diverse and fragmented sedimentary and pastoralist society covering various regions of the Mauritanian Sahara.

The region saw fierce competition for religious and political dominance among various groups, particularly the Arab Ḥassānī and the Zawāyā. In their quest for authority, each faction leveraged crucial tools to assert superiority. Identity emerged as a crucial tool, and gained considerable traction during the tumultuous seventeenth century.[249] It led to the adoption of

[249] Abubakar Sadiq Abdulkadir, "Verse Tradition, Muslim Scholars, and Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Mauritania, the "Land of Million Poets,"" *Reassessing Intellectual Connections in the 21st Century*, Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, USA, September 2018: 1–24. On the 17th century genealogy debates developed particularly among the newly constructed Saharan clerical groups, see Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa*, 346-355.

revered and 'sacred' genealogies and illustrious traditions as means to solidify claims to political and religious authority. This trend was not isolated to this specific people and period but rather echoes earlier instances in various Muslim regions. The struggles for recognition and authority, akin to the power conflicts among the Almoravids, involving Arabs, Berbers, Andalusians, and other factions, illustrate how groups vied for validation through religious and Muslim lineage when their leadership credentials were challenged on genealogical grounds.[250] For instance, an Almoravid amīr sought recognition from the Abbasid caliph to solidify his legitimacy as the Islamic community's head.[251] Some scholars also contributed genealogical arguments to bolster the Amir's status describing him as a champion of Islam, and highlighting his Himyarite lineage—Arab ancestry tracing back to southern Arabia, in present-day Yemen.[252] This contrasted with the Almoravids' Ṣanhāja genealogy, a subject that Harry Norris referred to as the "Himyari myth."[253] In this context, the Arabic tongue was essential. As Helena de Felipe notes that, "[i]f the Almoravids did not speak Arabic, their Arab origin and therefore their legitimacy as rulers could be questioned."[254]

Like Norris, scholars ranging from Charles Stewart to Abdel Wadoud ould Cheikh, from Thomas Whitcomb[255] to Timothy Cleaveland, as well as Bruce Hall to others, have also conducted extensive analyses that delve into the authenticities, transformations, and ambiguities

[250] de Felipe, "Berber Leadership and Genealogical Legitimacy: Almoravid Case," 58.

[251] Ibid.

[252] Ibid., 59. See also Norris, *The Berbers in Arabic Literature* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1982): 35–39.

[253] Norris, *Saharan Myth and Saga,* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972): 26-73.

[254] de Felipe, "Berber Leadership and Genealogical Legitimacy," 63.

[255] Thomas Whitcomb, "New Evidence on the Origins of the Kunta," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* vol. 38, no. 1 (1975): 103-123

inherent in claims of genealogies within the Sahara and the broader Sahelian segmentary societies. In these works, the authors scrutinize the assertions made by specific families, shedding light on the suspicions surrounding their genealogical claims and the period when these claims gained prominence. They also point out how some Sahelian scholars and families reworked lineages by drawing on important family chains in classical Arabic literature. This was done as part of a process of Arabization.[256] Some people and families subjected to this scrutiny include Sīdiyā Bābā, the Tuaregs, the Kuntas, and the Walātans.

One of the noteworthy works in this field is by Norris, who authored comprehensive works like *Saharan Myth and Saga*[257] and *The Tuaregs: Their Islamic Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel*.[258] These works dissect the multifaceted dimensions of developments and shifts in the genealogy of the Ṣanhāja. In the latter work, Norris explores the complex identity of an individual named ʿUqba ibn Mustajāb in relation to the historically recognized figure of ʿUqba ibn Nāfiʿ al-Fihrī (d. 683), who is renowned for his role in spreading Islam in the Far Maghrib.

The exact origin of the dynamic genealogical shifts and debates remains uncertain; yet these debates clearly emerged as a consequence of the multifaceted developments of the seventeenth century. These developments played a constructive and transformative role in shaping the Sahara and the broader Sahel region. It is plausible to argue that this context played at least a modest role in the emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition. When viewed within a

[256] Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600 – 1960*, 39.

[257] Harry Norris, *Saharan Myth and Saga* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

[258] Harry Norris, *The Tuaregs: Their Islamic Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel* (Warminster, Wilts: Aris & Phillips, 1975).

broader framework, it becomes evident that these genealogical debates were somehow linked to discussions surrounding the status of the Arabic language among the people.

Though an ongoing gradual process over many centuries, however, it was during the seventeenth century that numerous groups intensified or began to lay claim to genealogies and lineages connecting them to revered Arab Muslim figures. This was not merely a matter of historical documentation but also served as a means to assert political authority and ensure that their religious influence was firmly intertwined with esteemed lineage. Hall notes that, the genealogical claims put forth by nearly every prominent Arabic- or Berber-speaking 'noble' group in the Sahel assert an Arab Muslim heritage. It is noteworthy that the relative strength of these genealogical claims varied significantly, indicating historical rivalry for power and prestige among these diverse groups. Furthermore, the prominence of Islamic religious knowledge and the so-called clerical-status groups or lineages were particularly emphasized in the "social charters" of the seventeenth century. In other words, "Islam itself was becoming a more important component in Sahelian life. The entering ever more fully into the world of Arab Islamic culture, and constructing and elaborating connections to important Arab Islamic ancestors…"[259] This trend was a significant component of the competition for superiority, both in the religious sphere and, to some extent, in secular matters as well.

The model of genealogical (re)construction found traction even among non-Arab communities in the region. For instance, the Berbers of the Zawāyā, whose traditional lineage practices were rooted in matrilineal structures, began the process of reconstructing a patrilineal genealogy connecting them to Arab Muslim roots. In a similar vein, noble lineages among the Iwellemmedan community asserted their claim, contending that their founding ancestor was a

[259] Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600 - 1960,* 57.

Ḥassānī Arab born in southern Mauritania during the mid-sixteenth century.[260] This shift in genealogical narratives highlights the broader trend of communities across various cultural backgrounds vying to establish links with Arab Muslim heritage as a means of asserting prestige and religious significance.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that not all the clerical Zawāyā, Inesleman, and status groups sought to establish new Arab genealogies. Some of these groups pursued a distinct avenue of religious authority, emphasizing their lineage from celebrated and saintly Muslim figures. In doing so, they chose to connect themselves to a genealogy anchored in religious knowledge and spiritual authority, rather than relying solely on claims of Arab heritage.[261] Equally, the Tashumsha, a prominent Zawāyā group to which the reformer Nāṣir al-Dīn belonged, put forth an interesting assertion. They asserted their lineage traced back to Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, the foremost companion of the Prophet Muḥammad and the first Sunni caliph of Islam. Hall notes that the Kel Entaṣār based "their authority on their connection to Ahmad ag Adda and his descendants" by claiming a "prestigious Sherifian genealogy through ʿUqba ibn Nāfiʿ (d. 683)," and to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661), cousin of the Prophet Muḥammad.[262] The same was true for the Kel Es Suq. These debates and shifts or reconfiguration of genealogies continued up to the nineteenth century among scholarly families and personalities. The nineteenth century witnessed more of this kind of claim to sharīfian, Arab, and religious authority. The most prominent among was the Kuntas: Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811) and his son, Sīdī

[260] Ibid., 59.

[261] Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600 - 1960,* 60.

[262] Ibid.*,* 61. See also, No Author, *Khabar al-Sūq,* Iheriab Ms. 4604; Harry T. Norris, *Arab Conquest of The Western Sahara: Studies of the Historical Events, Religious Beliefs and Social Customs Which Made the Remotest Sahara a Part of the Arab World,* (London: Longman, 1986): 83.

Muḥammad ibn Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (1826), with claims of ancestry to ʿUqba ibn Nāfiʿ. During that period, the Fulbes employed a similar argument to assert their Arab lineage through the figure of ʿUqba. ʿAbd Allāh ibn Fūdī (d. 1826), in his works "*Īdāʿ al-nusukh*" and the introduction to his *tafsīr*, "*Ḍiyāʾ al-taʾwīl fī maʿānī al-tanzīl*," referenced various accounts of Fulbe lineages, some of which were linked to ʿUqba. It is important to note that he refrained from making an absolute claim of direct descent from ʿUqba b. Nāfiʿ.[263] In his "*Infāq al-maysūr fī tārīkh bilād al-takrūr,*" Muḥammad Bello (d. 1837), the son of ʿUthmān ibn Fūdī (d. 1817) and the caliph of the Sokoto caliphate, on the other hand, explains a historical genealogy to ʿUqba. He complicates this claim by mentioning three different ʿUqbas and seems to be unsure the one they were linked to: ʿUqba ibn ʿĀmir, or ʿUqba ibn Yāsir or ʿUqba ibn Nāfiʿ.[264]

[263] In one account, he wrote that the "Fulanis are also reported to be descended from ʿUqba b. ʿĀmir (d. 58/678). Ibn ʿĀmir was reported to have married the daughter of the king of a tribe of African Christians after his embrace of Islam." See Ibn Fodio, *Diyāʾ al-taʾwīl fī maʿānī al-tanzīl*, n.d., 10.

[264] ʿUqba ibn Nāfiʿ al-Fihrī played a significant role in the early spread of Islam through North Africa, where he ultimately passed away and was buried. However, the relationship between ʿUqba ibn Nāfiʿ and other historical figures named ʿUqba, such as ʿUqba ibn ʿĀmir al-Juhanī and ʿUqba ibn Mustajāb, with the people of the Sahara and broader Sahel underwent a complex evolution, shaped by various socio-political, cultural, and religious factors. Several Saharan sources, particularly those related to the Kunta group, have put forth claims about Ibn Nāfiʿ al-Fihrī's actions after his conquest of North Africa. According to some accounts, he traveled south to the ancient Ghana Empire, near the region of present-day Walāta, and brought back with him a conquered Berber chief named Kusayla. This chief feigned conversion to Islam and joined forces with Ibn Nāfiʿ al-Fihrī, only to be killed during Friday prayers. Before these events unfolded, Ibn Nāfiʿ al-Fihrī left his son, al-ʿĀqib, in Walāta, who would later become one of the ancestors of the Kuntas. In another version of the account, it was Ḥabīb ibn Abī ʿUbayda ibn ʿUqba, the grandson of Ibn Nāfiʿ al-Fihrī, who ventured southward, raiding Sūs and crossing the Sahara into the lands of the Sūdān. Through him, the ancestry of certain Saharan groups was traced. See Mauro Nobili problematizes the complexities of these claims and their development through exploration of

It is important to note that the purpose of discussing this discourse is not to validate or dismiss any ancestral claims to prominent Arab or saintly Muslim figures made by specific groups or individuals. Instead, this is tied to the discourse on the reported emergence of poetic expression in Mauritania. It is argued that the reconstruction of genealogies, in a broader context, represented efforts to establish both religious and political authority. Consequently, this phenomenon significantly influenced the social fabric and collective consciousness of the people, and served as a response to the evolving dynamics of religious and political expressions. It acted as a catalyst for the means through which individuals, most especially scholars and poets, articulated their thoughts on contemporary events.

The discourse on identity and scholarly authority provided a platform for people to establish connections, question established narratives, and engage in discussions about their lineage and traditions. For those who claimed Arab ancestry or scholarly ethnic backgrounds, it was imperative to have the necessary tools to substantiate these claims. This often involved asserting their superiority and legitimacy grounded in their command of the Arabic language, showcasing their literary skills, Islamic knowledge registers, and discrediting others perceived as or lacking the same eloquence or connection to Arab (Muslim) figures or intellectual traditions.

In a historical context reminiscent of similar developments among Muslims in places like al-Andalus, Baghdad, Damascus, and beyond, the medium of poetic language naturally emerged as a primary channel for such purposes. For the Zawāyā, debates and argumentation replaced physical conflict; words became their weapon against adversaries. They employed cryptic

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relevant Arabic manuscripts among other works. See Mauro Nobili, "Back to Saharan Myths: Preliminary Notes on 'Uqba al-Mustajab," *Annual Review of Islam in Africa,* No. 11 (2012):79-84.

speeches devoid of satire and violence to convey messages they deemed more powerful and effective, as noted by the nineteenth century Mauritanian scholar and poet al-Maʾmūn al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 1819/20).[265] This preference for poetry is understandable in this context, where the comprehension of verses and poetry is considered the epitome of Arab skill and artistic expression. Moreover, it represents the most effective method for deconstruction and regeneration in such a milieu, allows for the introduction of innovative themes, ontologies and worldviews and reshapes thought through an ever-expanding vision.

An example to showcase this genealogical claim by tying one's lineage to their Arabic eloquence is illustrated in the verses of Muḥammad Fāl ibn ʿAynīna boasting about his Ḥassānī lineage of the Īdā Bulhasan tribe, their fluency in the Arabic language and their poetic skills. He proclaims:

> Indeed, we are the offspring of Ḥassān, and our eloquence is a proof,
> We are of the noble Arab lineage, the foremost in pedigree,
>
> If there is no clear evidence of our 'Arabhood'
> Then by the eloquence of our tongue, is a clear proof that we are Arabs.
>
> Look at the patterns of every poetic rhyme we have
> Spread apart like tall nice and well-arranged branches of palm tree.[266]
>
> We are especially the children of Fāṭima, the daughter of the Messenger,
> through whom proximity was bestowed upon us.
>
> We attribute ourselves to her, and know no other,
> and our affiliation is recorded in the books.

[265] al-Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīṭ,* 35.

[266] Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī*, Aḍwāʾal-bayān fī īḍāḥ al-Qurʾān bi'l-Qurʾān*, (Beirut/Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1995): 480-481. Also available on *Islam Web* – www.islamweb.net. Entry word: *Aḍwāʾal-bayān*.

In these verses, beyond extolling Arabic eloquence to the Īdā Bulḥasan tribe, he emphasizes their superior Arab lineage over others. He emphasizes the significance of their proficiency in correctly metering their poetry, a clear indication of their connection to Arab traditions. Most significantly, his tribe's lineage traced back to Prophet Muhammad through his daughter, Fātima. In the social hierarchy of honour, respect, and authority prevalent in that society, such a lineage stands out distinctly. By proclaiming this heritage, the poet asserts a position that demands respect and authority from opposing individuals and groups within that society.

Ibn ʿAynīna's content delves into themes that harken back to the core issues of identity and proficiency in the Arabic language. These themes had deep roots in the seventeenth to eighteenth century Mauritanian milieu and continued to resonate well into the nineteenth century, even maintaining their relevance into the twentieth century. Ibn ʿAynīna was not the sole scholar and poet of his era to address these themes; others before and after him also composed verses on similar subjects. Muḥammad Mubārak al-Lamtūnī (d. 1873), in praise of the Īdā Bulhasan tribe proclaims:

> Among them is the Īdā Bulhasan tribe,
> The most eloquent of God's creation in this era.[267]

Al-Lamtūnī's verse also stresses Ibn ʿAynīna's claim of his tribe's eloquence. In Mauritania, the tribe is also known for their scholarly credentials in the areas of Arabic literature and has produced belletrists and litterateurs.

> We possess the pure Arabic language, and we are,
> Indeed, the most entitled among to uphold it.

[267] al-Mukhtār ibn al-Maʿlā, *Dīwān*, (ed.) ʿAbd Allāh al-Sālim ibn al- Maʿlā (UAE: Dār Yusuf Tāshufīn – Maktabat Imām Mālik, 2005): 25-26.

From our books, you acquire knowledge
And nurture and benefit from their contents.

In a manner similar to the previous instances, an anonymous poet challenged people questioning their Arab Himyarite lineage with these words:

O Sayer contesting our claim of being Arabs,
Verily, our tongue and colour have proven you wrong.

The marks of our 'Arabness' are apparent in our features
And in our ancestors is pride and strong faith

The lions from the tribe of Himyar and heroes of Muḍar
With blazing swords, neither have they ever been disgraced nor humiliated.[268]

Recognizing the significance of Arabic verse composition as a hallmark of scholarly achievement, particularly evident from the seventeenth century onward, sheds light on the key role these scholars played in shaping intellectual dynamism and promoting poetic consciousness.[269] Through their verses, these scholars not only demonstrated their poetic prowess but also articulated the connection between their knowledge and their ancestral lineages. An illustrative instance of this concept can be found in the poetry of the grammarian and logician Mukhtār ibn Būnā al-Jakanī (d. 1805), reported as one of Ibn Rāzikah's students. He praises the excellence of his tribe and lineage in the realm of Islamic knowledge and authority through verses.

We are an organized people from among the nobles,
Highly esteemed in this age, and without equals,

We are linked to the Himyarite, and people attest to this.
Our ancestors are illustrious from the Qaḥṭān family

[268] al-Shinqīṭī, *Aḍwāʾal-bayān*, 480.

[269] Hunwick, "Arabic Poetry of West Africa," 84; Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection*, 4.

> We have made the backs of our mounts our schools
> Through which we teach the religion of Allāh in clear explanation.[270]

The Jakanī people, to which Ibn Būnā belonged, were previously mentioned as earning the distinctive title of "*ʿilm Jakanī*," signifying that knowledge found its home among them. He traces his ancestry back to the Himyarites of Yemen and specifically to the Qaḥṭān lineage, renowned for their association with Arabic excellence, often referred to as "*al-ʿArab al-ʿĀriba*," meaning, "The Pure Arabs" due to their historical significance in Arab heritage. Despite being nomads, Ibn Būnā emphasizes that their nomadic lifestyle does not hinder their pursuit and transmission of knowledge, which they prioritize for religious education and teaching.

All the above claims and literary endeavours were taking place at a time when the matters of identity and the study of the Arabic language, along with its various branches, were integral components of a more comprehensive discourse that permeated academic, public, and social arenas of the seventeenth to eighteenth century in the region. Naturally, this type of proud expression and self-presentation often led to spirited exchanges between opposing groups through the poetic medium, as succinctly noted by Lydon:

> Poetic expression was a favourite pastime with family members competing in the art of creating best rhymes and lines…about quarrels between archenemies... Battles were lost and won through pen and rhymes, and poets sometime spent years trying to outsmart their enemies with their pointed verse.[271]

[270] al-Shinqīṭī, *Aḍwāʾal-bayān,* 481

[271] Lydon, "Inkwells of the Sahara," 51.

Lydon's statement echoes a historical trend present in the Muslim world, resonating with the Saharan Mauritania's relationship with poetry. Comparable to Ibn ʿAynīna's prideful verses, Mauritanian scholars also composed verses to assert their superiority. These verses were not just words—they were weapons used to attack individuals, tribes, and factions, honed through years of dedication and ink. Poetry's significance lay in its power: it could immortalize individuals, families, or tribes with fame, respect, and praise when composed by celebrated poets. Conversely, becoming the subject of derision in the verses of esteemed poets led to long-term shame and detriment across generations. This dark potential of poetry led Mauritanian *fuqahāʾ* to caution against its excessive pursuit and forbid its misuse, particularly for satirical purposes. However, despite these warnings, the 'misapplication' of verses as weapons against individuals was not uncommon among Mauritanian scholars and poets starting from the second half of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, a reflection of the internal dynamics of the time. Renowned among the first-generation poets, Muḥammadun ibn Abī al-Mukhtār, known as al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr al-Ḥasanī, and al-Muṣṭafā Aḥmad al-Majlisī, also called Bū Famayn, engaged in spirited exchanges and satirical encounters. Hailing from the celebrated Idā bulḥasan tribe, al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr's tribe is known for their mastery of the Arabic language and poetry particularly from the eighteenth century. On the other hand, Bū Famayn, another first-generation poet, was acclaimed for his profound prosodic expertise and notably, his satirical prowess. According to ould Bah, people harboured fear of Bū Famayn due to the biting nature of his words.[272] Despite both poets' reputation for producing beautiful panegyric verses and exploring various poetry genres, a reported incident between them left an impact on public perception and the image of poetry. Although the exact origin of the conflict remains unreported, it is recounted that al-Dhiʾb al-

[272] Ould Bah, *al-Shiʿr wa'l-Shuʿarāʾ fī Mūritāniyā,* 40.

Kabīr visited the residence of Bū Famayn, where he encountered the latter's slave girl. Al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr inquired about her master's negative traits, she responded by stating, by God, she knew nothing bad of him except that he acknowledges his two daughters only when he is in a state of wealth but denies them when in difficulty. She added that he had a wife whom he does not expend his wealth on, as obligated by the *Sharīʿa*. Upon hearing this, al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr reportedly composed two verses and entrusted the slave girl to convey them to Bū Famayn. The verses read:

> Neither can your attack on me vilify nor bring me down,
> Instead, put your efforts to expending on Umm Īsā her rightful obligation.
>
> He busied himself composing countless verses of poetry,
> In every verse of poetry composed, daughters are left starving.[273]

It is plausible to say that the verses in question revealed a matter previously unknown to the public, which al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr became privy to. It is reported that upon receiving the message al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr departed with the slave girl to her master, Bū Famayn was left heavyhearted and despondent, and succumbed to death in the following days. Although the circumstances of his passing might seem trivial by today's standards, during his era, like historical episodes, such occurrences held substantial weight. Given his status as a master satirist, events like these could have been pivotal, particularly considering the impact of perceived rivalries. Perhaps he felt eclipsed by another poet, even one he might have underestimated, which could have contributed to his demise. Moreover, as highlighted earlier, verses held the power to either build or destroy individuals and tribes. Bū Famayn's case likely revolved around the latter–a poetic tool used for his destruction. This event might have also underscored the public's awareness of the potency of

[273] Udabāʾ Shinqīṭ, "al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr al-Ḥasanī," *ʾAṣālat Waraqī*, October 22, 2016

poetry, and contributed to the prominence of this intellectual tradition in the period under discussion.

The migration of the Arab Ḥassānī from southern Morocco to the Sahara and Sahel regions between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries wielded immense influence over the social fabric of the area. Their eventual dominance over indigenous groups reshaped cultural norms and language dynamics profoundly. This dominance sparked power struggles, particularly between the newcomers and indigenous Zawāyā clerical clans, each vying for authority. Each faction leveraged crucial tools to assert superiority over the other. Central to this struggle was identity. These groups leaned heavily on esteemed and 'sacred' genealogies, often tied to revered Arab Muslim lineages and saintly origins, to establish their religious and political legitimacy. To substantiate their Arab heritage, they needed to prove their mastery of the Arabic language. Thus, they employed poetry as the finest means to demonstrate the language's excellence. As shown in the discussions above, influential Muslim figures strategically utilized the eloquence of the Arabic tongue by way of expressive poetry to demonstrate genealogical superiority and proudly exhibit their lineages. This concerted effort not only cemented their claims to authority but also played a crucial role in the resurgence and elevation of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition.

Simultaneously, during this period, as genealogy and identity took center stage in establishing authority, discourse surrounding the Arabic language and its associated tools emerged as a focal point within the religious sphere. This discussion forms the core of our second exploration, as introduced at the outset of this chapter.

Arabic Linguistic Tools: Mobility and Migration of Scholars and Texts

During the seventeenth up to the eighteenth century, Mauritania witnessed a multitude of developments including increased interactions among people from diverse backgrounds. These

interactions were driven by economic competition, religious authority and political dynamics. This period also witnessed the zenith of what is often referred to as the "Arabicization" and "Arabization" of the Sahara, a phenomenon attributed to the increasing influence and infiltration of the Ḥassānīs in the region. These transformations prompted a profound reconfiguration of its social fabric. Undoubtedly, these developments would have led to changes in worldviews and modes of expression within the diverse and fragmented sedimentary and pastoralist society straddling various regions of the Mauritanian Sahara.

For the Zawāyā, whose background was steeped in religious traditions, the solution to the restive atmosphere and multiple transitions lay in Islam, as their ancestors had sought when they introduced the faith to the region. This was the motivation for religious scholars who held significant influence in the Mauritanian Sahara, like Zawāyā reformer Nāṣir al-Dīn. He decided to establish an ideal society through reform and the practice of an authentic form of Islam rooted in sound interpretations, teachings and understanding of Islamic law. Jurists, primarily of Zawāyā background, from the western Sahara to the Senegal River regions, proclaim a need to immerse themselves in the study of Islamic law to achieve this objective. However, mastery of the Arabic language was indispensable to unlock the Islamic sources required for deriving legal rulings and comprehending Islamic law.[274] In essence, a profound understanding of the Arabic language and Islamic law became essential tools in the social and religious contexts of the time. The bourgeoning interest in the Arabic language studies and its associated tools was significantly bolstered by the enhanced access of Mauritanians to erudite scholars, scholarship and texts encompassing this essential knowledge. This heightened accessibility can be traced back to two

[274] ould Bah, *La littérature juridique et l'évolution du Malikisme en Mauritanie* (Tunis: Publications de l'Université de Tunis, 1981).

primary channels. Initially, the mobility and spread of scholars and texts were prompted by compelled or necessary migrations resulting from warfare and climatic changes, primarily originating from the northern and eastern borders. This dissemination gradually diffused essential knowledge across the broader region. Moreover, another influx of scholars and texts originated specifically from Timbuktu and the eastern Ḥawḍ regions, diffusing into various Mauritanian cities and enclaves, further contributed to the dissemination of Arabic language scholarship. This mobility was stimulated by the aftermath of the Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu. The invasion inadvertently 'opened' pathways for transregional interactions between Morocco and the Mauritanian populace. As will be established in the passages below, I argue that through the unfolding dynamics of these events and subsequent exchanges, Mauritanians encountered unfamiliar Arabic linguistic texts. This encounter profoundly influenced the resurgence of poetic expression within Mauritanian society during the reported era of emergence. The innovative application of these linguistic tools bespoke a tailored adaptation to meet the specific needs and cultural context of Mauritania.

To begin our examination and analysis, I start by drawing contextual parallels between seventeenth-century areas of modern-day Mauritania and Timbuktu, where we find that practical sciences and tools such as Arabic grammar, poetics, and rhetoric played a pivotal role in the lives of jurists. These tools constituted the most essential components of Timbuktu's scholarly pursuits. The acquisition of this knowledge was not merely optional but, in fact, a prerequisite for refining a scholar's capabilities and achieving the highest level of proficiency in juristic deductions and understanding Muslim doctrine.[275] This emphasis on acquiring linguistic and

[275] Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu*, 74

rhetorical skills to excel in Islamic scholarship was equally pronounced in the seventeenth-century Mauritanian context.

A further illustration of the significance of these prerequisites is provided by Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Nābigha al-Ghallāwī (d. 1829/30), an Aghlālī Walātan scholar who lived in the Gebla region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, known for his biographical work on the life of al-Yadālī and the prevailing circumstances of his time. In his prominent work, the *Būṭulayḥiyyah*, written primarily in verse form and encompassing matters related to Islamic law- and a wide range of subjects, al-Ghallāwī elaborates on the conditions that had to be met to be recognized as a scholar of jurisprudence. These conditions were indispensable for one to become proficient in issuing authoritative legal rulings.[276]

[276] The text is name *Būṭulayḥiyyah* from Abū Ṭulayḥiyyah which the author was nicknamed by. This was because he composed the text under a small acacia tree which in Arabic is *Ṭalḥ* and *Ṭulayḥiyya* in its diminutive form (*taṣghīr*).

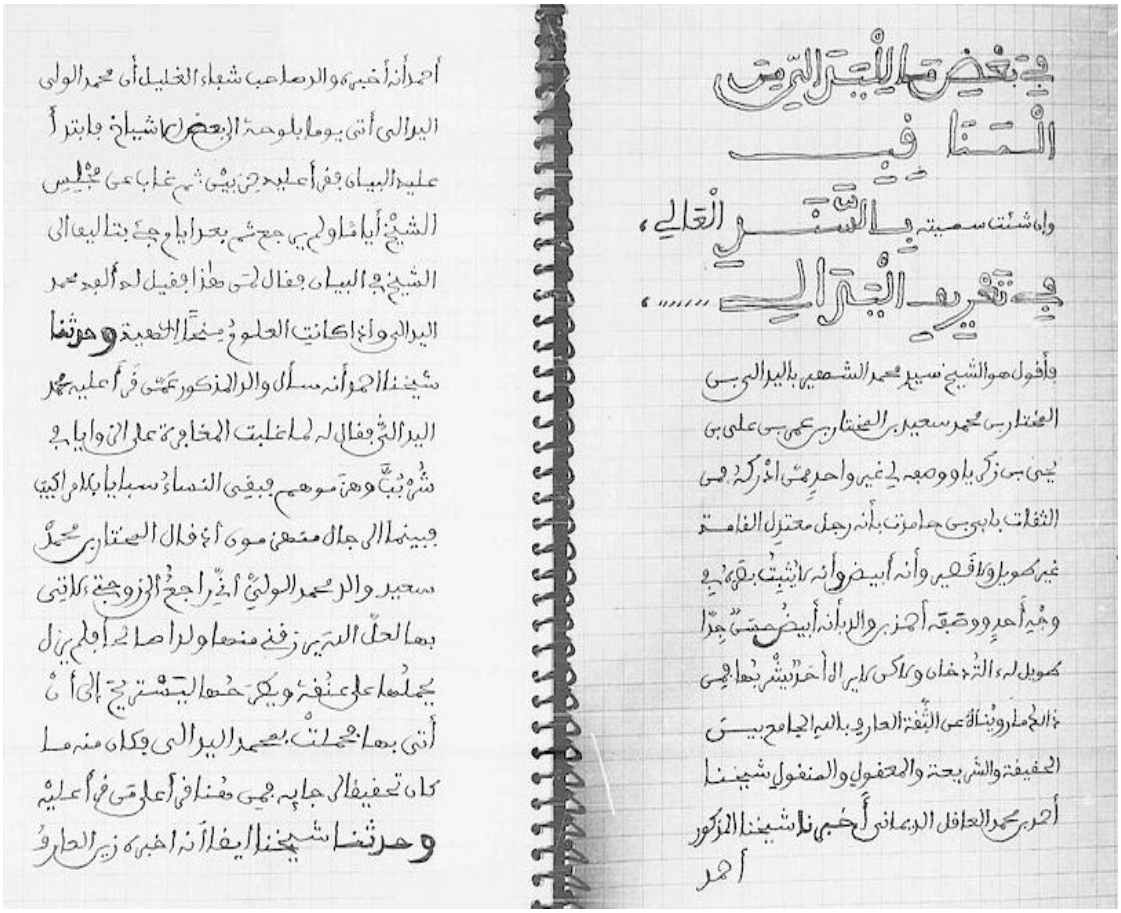

Fig. 4:1 A page from al-Nābigha al-Ghallāwī's *al-Najm al-Thāqib fī baʿḍ mā li'l-Yadālī min al-Manāqib* also known as *al-sanad al-ʿālī fī taʿrīf al-Yadālī*.[277]

Al-Ghallāwī demonstrated a profound familiarity with the intellectual developments of his era and the one that came before, which likely motivated him to compose this work. In a verse about his maternal uncle and teacher, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥājj Ḥimā Allāh al-Ghallāwī (d. 1794), who was a younger contemporary of the pioneering figures of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania such as Ibn Rāzikah and al-Yadālī, he stated:

And our Shaykh, my uncle, the servant of God

[277] See manuscript on OMAR on http://dl.ub.uni-freiburg.de/omar/mfmau0120/0004 (Last Accessed on October 25, 2023).

Said, about his time.[278]

This verse provides evidence that al-Ghallāwī received first-hand information about the era preceding his from his uncle. In certain verses of the *Būṭulayḥiyyah*, al-Ghallāwī elaborates on the characteristics of pseudo-jurists and outlines the prerequisites for becoming a competent *faqīh*:

> How puzzling that they issue legal ruling, yet
> Lack the grasp of the syntax and parsing of *BismiLlāh*
>
> They are not specialists in the Arab tongue's finesse
> Nor mastery in its foundational rules.
>
> In their ignorance of grammar guidance they lack,
> Unfit to be leaders, thus we caution.
>
> Learn Arabic grammar, because it is
> The center of intelligent speech, it forms the glue and substance
>
> Don't you see, a *faqīh,* proficient in proper linguistic application
> Verily motivates in the highest form of inspiration.
>
> That is why, when he reads with understanding and care
> Confusion dispels, misinterpretation laid bare.[279]

The verses above hint at a contention during the author's time, and perhaps even earlier, regarding the necessity of a *faqīh* having a profound grasp of the Arabic language, including its intricacies such as grammar, to effectively issue Islamic rulings. Those lacking this expertise risk causing confusion in legal interpretations, emphasizing the crucial need for comprehensive

[278] Muḥammad al-Nābigha ibn ʿUmar al-Ghallāwī, *Būṭlayḥiyyah min Nuṣūṣ al-Fiqh al-Mālikyya,* (ed.) Yaḥyā wuld al-Barāʾ (Beirut: al-Maktabat al-Makiyya wa Muʾassasat al-Rayyān, 2004): 24

[279] al-Ghallāwī, *Būṭlayḥiyyah,* 143-144

knowledge of Arabic language and grammar. Overall, these verses highlight the profound significance of the Arabic language in the intellectual discourse of eighteenth to nineteenth-century Mauritania.

To further make his argument about the necessity of jurists studying grammar, al-Ghallāwī quotes two verses from the *Alfiyya* of the Andalusian Ibn Mālik:

> Grammar, the language's rightful tool,
> It is, like a soul; when hope expires,
>
> This knowledge unveils meanings,
> Bringing clarity to the minds of the faithful ones.[280]

Possibly, his allusion to the *Alfiyya*, a well-known text in Arabic grammar and morphology composed by a figure esteemed not only for linguistic expertise but also for legal scholarship, aimed to reinforce his argument regarding the necessity of possessing comprehensive Arabic knowledge to be a sound *faqīh*.

Bear in mind that *ʿilm al-bayān* (science of elucidation) is sometimes mentioned in a way that denotes the science of rhetoric (*balāgha*), similarly *ʿilm al-ʿarūḍ* (science of prosody) sometimes includes *ʿilm al-qāfiyya* (science of meters), while *ʿilm al-naḥw* (Arabic grammar) is at times mentioned in a way that signifies the Arabic language—a linguistic concept where the preponderance (*ghalaba*) of a specific term is utilized to refer to the generality or entirety of things or subjects.[281] And the Arabic language, inherently bound to its literary richness (*ādāb*), is, at its core, poetry, because poetry (*shiʿr*) is the anthology (*dīwān*) of the Arabs.

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[280] al-Ghallāwī, *Būṭlayḥiyyah,* 145.

[281] Shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Qāsim, *al-Dalīl ilā al-Mutūn al-ʿIlmiyyah*, (Riyāḍ, Dār al-Ṣamīʿī li'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzīʿ: 2000): 20-21

Muḥammad ibn Ṭulba al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 1856), a contemporary of al-Ghallāwī, author of the *Būṭulayḥiyyah*, in the opening of his *Naẓm fī'l-lugha*—a poem on the importance of Arabic language-—echoed a similar notion though different in form. In two verses, he conveyed:

> The first duty upon those tasked with religious obligation
> Is to learn the Arabic language in order to know
>
> The meaning and the being of God in the Arabic tongue
> For it is the key to attain all needs.[282]

Al-Yaʿqūbī's verses hint at the crucial importance of proficiency in the Arabic language concerning comprehension of Islamic religious duties. Much like al-Ghallāwī, al-Yaʿqūbī's literary work is presented in poetic form. Perhaps, this signals the intellectual centre that poetry occupies in the study of the numerous Arabic language sciences.

From two literary works attributed to Ibn Rāzikah, regarded as one of the pioneering figures of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition, it appears that the discussion surrounding the Arabic language and its associated tools held significant relevance in his era. These works are "*Jawāz qirāʾat al-ḥadīth li-ghayr dhī al-naḥw*" and "*Risāla fī 'l-ḍāḍ wa ḥukm nuṭqihā dhālik*." The first addresses the question of whether individuals lacking the necessary linguistic skills can engage in the reading and study of Ḥadīth. The latter, on the other hand, delves into the details of the pronunciation and usage of the Arabic letter *ḍāḍ*. In a broader sense, this letter, known to be challenging to pronounce, serves as a metaphor for the entire Arabic language, signifying that only native Arabs can truly articulate it correctly. For this reason, the Arabic language is often nicknamed "*lughat al-ḍād.*" Unfortunately, no manuscripts of these works are available to my

[282] Muḥammad ibn Ṭulba al-Yaʿqūbī, *Dīwān*, (ed. & comm.) Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Shabīh ibn Abbūh, (Nouakchott: Manshūra Aḥmad Sālik ibn Muḥammad al-Amīn ibn Abbūh, 1999): 29.

knowledge. Therefore, it becomes challenging to assess the context of the latter work concerning the argument on Arab ethnicity as discussed in the preceding section. Overall, the acquisition and understanding of Arabic knowledge and its diverse disciplines clearly held significant importance during this time, for scholars, and jurists in particular.

The Arabic language is an indispensable tool for Muslim scholars because of its function as the foundational cornerstone of various sciences and a practical domain. As aptly emphasized by one Mauritanian scholar, "devoting oneself to the Arabic language sciences and attaining mastery in it is an integral aspect of the Islamic faith." Hence, from the seventeenth century onward, scholars from the Saharan, and by extension West African regions, demonstrated remarkable proficiency in the field of Arabic language sciences. It is, therefore, no surprise that jurisprudence and poetry, a significant linguistic component, emerged as the "two genres of literature" that "dominated literary production among Zawāyā scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries."[283] These literary works were reflective of the intellectual milieu of their time, primarily addressing the fundamental juridical dilemmas and challenges of the era.[284] A comprehensive inventory conducted by Hall and Stewart across several major scholarly libraries in the Sahara and West Africa revealed an extensive collection of literary works dedicated to linguistic sciences, with a significant portion presented in the form of verses.[285] Stewart's introduction to the *Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of Mauritania and the Western*

[283] Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sahara," 8.

[284] Ibid.

[285] Hall and Stewart, "The Historic "Core Curriculum" and the Book Market in Islamic West Africa," 109-174. These works can be accessed via The West African Arabic Manuscript Database (WAAMD) which contains the records of numerous manuscript libraries in modern-day Mauritania, Mali, Nigeria and Niger. See: West African Manuscript Database. See https://waamd.lib.berkeley.edu/about/index

Sahara highlights this, noting that, probably more than half of the 10,000 manuscripts in the volume are composed in verse form.[286] This prevalence of poetic composition is indicative of a significant shift in Mauritania's literary culture, particularly starting from the latter part of the seventeenth century. This transformation reinforces the theory of a literary rebirth, suggesting that specific catalysts converged during this period to spur the emergence of Arabic poetic expression, a phenomenon further explored in the following examination.

Following an exploration of the significance of the Arabic language and the historical backdrop during the seventeenth to eighteenth century in Mauritania, the following discussion delves into how the imperative for mastering the Arabic language, in conjunction with other significant developments during this period, played a crucial role. These factors were not only instrumental in promoting intellectual and literary growth in the region, but they also served as vital catalysts for the emergence and dissemination of the verse-making and poetry phenomenon within the specific timeframe under consideration.

The concepts of mobility and migration were intrinsically linked to transmission and production of new forms of knowledge, and the change in the modalities of religious and intellectual expressions.[287] Through the establishment of diasporas and new settlements of immigrant Muslims, they acted as pivotal drivers behind the transformation and propagation of the poetry tradition, transitioning it from regions with a strong poetic tradition such as Timbuktu and the Maghrib, to areas with relatively lower poetic presence and imagination. These processes were instrumental in shaping the contexts which highlighted the importance of mastering the

[286] Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sahara," 8.

[287] Syed, "Mobility, Knowledge Transmission, and Authority in West Africa," 1-15

Arabic language and gaining in-depth knowledge of Islamic law. Consequently, these developments collectively contributed to the emergence of verse-making and poetry during the seventeenth to eighteenth century in Mauritania. Two of these crucial dynamics which merit closer examination are: 1) forced or necessary migrations prompted by a variety of factors, such as warfare and climatic changes; and 2) the movement instigated by the Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu which later facilitated transregional interactions between Morocco and the Mauritanian people.

Mobility and Migration: Climatic Changes, Conflicts and Economic Survival

This initial significant dynamic, characterized by the movements and migrations of various groups, including local residents, itinerant, refugee and local scholars were often triggered by factors such as ethnic and tribal conflicts, as well as natural events, including the search for economic opportunities vital for survival. While this dynamic played out differently in various regions, it was interconnected with the second dynamic. Scholars like Thomas Whitcomb identified these migrations as contributing factors to the decline of the economic prosperity of certain Saharan cities and the Sūdān.[288] In contrast, McDougall presented a counter argument based on an economic analytical perspective. She contended that the movements resulting from the challenges of the time had a positive impact on economic growth and led to the expansion of commercial activities within regional and inter-regional spaces.[289] Furthermore, McDougall argued that these migrations did not negatively affect Saharan Islam; instead, they triggered an

[288] Thomas Whitcomb, "New Evidence on the Origins of the Kunta," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* vol. 38, no. 1 (1975): 103-123

[289] McDougall, "The Economics of Islam," 49-50

evolutionary process characterized by economic and scholarly growth, and rooted in a developing pastoral economy.[290]

This viewpoint aligns with the historical hypothesis of Mohamed Lahbib Nouhi and Stewart which emphasizes that the resources generated from pastoral activities played a crucial role in sustaining Arabo-Islamic scholarship during the seventeenth century. These resources facilitated the growth of scholars and students, and contributed to the spread and establishment of Islam, along with its centers of learning throughout the Sahara and the Sūdān.[291] Hence, I align with the perspectives shared by Nouhi, Stewart, and McDougall on Timbuktu's fate. I also agree with McDougall on her assertion that the city experienced not only a discernable decline in its economic activities due to several factors, including the Moroccan conquest and occupation of the Niger Bend, but also a complete erosion of its intellectual eminence previously prominent from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth century, an important period marked by significant transformations in the city. It was not until the emergence of the Kunta family in the Azawad region in the early nineteenth century that Timbuktu's scholarly prominence was revitalized. Based on firsthand accounts, Sīdī Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811) recounted his journey to Timbuktu in his work, *al-Ṭarāʾif wa'l-Talāʾid*, revealing that he did not encounter any scholars or educational institutions in the city during his visit.[292]

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[290] McDougall, "The Economics of Islam," 50.

[291] Nouhi and Stewart, "The Maḥaẓra Educational System," 21.

[292] Also cited in al-Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīṭ al-manāra wa'l-ribāṭ*, 69. Hunwick briefly discusses about the state of the Middle Niger during this period and how its scholarly activities became devastated. He argues that this might have been partly because of the rigors of the Arma administration which took over Timbuktu after the Saʿdian invasion of the city (Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, 8-10).

The implications of these migrations, shaped by natural events and conflicts discussed earlier, extended beyond the mere physical movement of people. They encompassed the transfer of knowledge, both in the form of texts and scholars, which ultimately gave rise to the establishment of new centers of Islamic learning that were dispersed and extended across various parts of the Sahara. Furthermore, these migrations nurtured a broader culture of Islamic scholarship that transcended the constraints of geographical boundaries. During the seventeenth century, a pattern emerged as intellectual and literary activities, including the traditions of Arabic poetry and verse-making. It transitioned from the eastern regions of Mauritania, which encompassed areas like Walāta, and Timbuktu, to the western territories of the Sahara, a transition that will be further explored in the following sections.

Mobility and Migration: Moroccan Invasion of Timbuktu

The second dynamic, pertaining to mobility and migration in the context of knowledge transmission, and its relevance to the prominence of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania, was the momentous event of the Moroccan al-Saʿdī's invasion and the subsequent sacking of the Middle Niger. I consider this dynamic to be the more influential of the two. As discussed in the previous chapter, I contend that one of the most pivotal events with far-reaching consequences leading up to the mid-seventeenth century, which greatly influenced the emergence of the Arabic poetry phenomenon, was this invasion. The incursion by the Saʿdians in the late sixteenth century severely impacted the economic and intellectual heart of medieval Timbuktu. At the time, the city stood as a pinnacle of Islamic scholastic tradition in the region. As Matthew Conaway Schumann notes that prior to the Saʿdī conquest of Timbuktu in 1590-1, Islamic scholarship in the Sahara and Sahel was primarily dominated by the centralized urban tradition

centered in the Songhay capital.[293] Scholars, students, and traders from neighboring areas congregated in the city for both educational pursuits and commercial activities. The aftermath of this invasion and the resultant transformations manifested in the emigration of itinerant and refugee scholars from Timbuktu to other Saharan towns, villages and nomadic camps.[294] This displacement and exile of Timbuktu's scholars also led to the establishment of a new scholarly tradition which started forming in burgeoning caravan cities such as Walāta, Wadān, and Shinqīṭ, alongside the pastoral tribes residing in the Gebla and Ḥawḍ regions.[295] Among the scholarly families that relocated was the Aqīts, Aḥmad Bābā's families to Wādān.

Despite the substantial adverse impact it had on the town, including its decline in fame as an intellectual center and a vital commercial route, the invasion somehow marked Timbuktu's period of great intellectual and social influence in the Sahara and the Sahel. The movements and population relocations resulted in the spread and replication of Timbuktu's scholarly tradition. This facilitated the establishment of close-knit connections traversing across regions, giving rise to a scholarly diaspora. Through this diaspora, there was an effective transmission of Arabo-Islamic knowledge, encompassing poetry and verse-making sciences, during this significant period.[296] Scholarly families, like the Aqīts, Aḥmad Bābā's family relocated from Timbuktu to Wādān during this period. It is not surprising, then, that copies of aforementioned nephew of Aḥmad Bābā, Saʿd ibn Ḥabīb Bābā's versified response about tobacco originated from Wādān or that he chose to use and identify with the "al-Wādānī" locational designation. Perhaps, this is

[293] Matthew Conaway Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love: The Nāṣiriyya Brotherhood across Muslim Africa 11th-12th/17th-18th Centuries," (PhD. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2020): 267

[294] al-Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīṭ al-manāra wa'l-ribāṭ*, 70-73.

[295] Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love", 267.

[296] Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu,* 71

also the very reason why the designation of Bābā as "*Shaykh al-Shanāqiṭa*" by some Mauritanians was a signification of the continuation of his chain of intellectual scholarship into the regions of Mauritania. Similarly, Shams al-Dīn ibn al-Qāḍī who was one of Timbuktu's judges at the time also relocated to Wādān somewhere around 1593. Another prominent figure was ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb (d. 1655) who migrated and rose to prominence, eventually becoming the chief judge among the Barākna Banū Hassān, in the southwestern region of Mauritania.[297] Muḥammad al-Timbuktī (d. 1640), mentioned in Chapter Three, moved to Walāta where he served as *qāḍī* of the city until his death.[298] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Saʿdī (d. 1656), author of the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* and Timbuktu native, who was young during the invasion moved to embark on an itinerant scholarly career among the Southern Sahara tribes.[299] Schumann notes that several contemporaries of al-Saʿdī followed similar paths.

In response to these events, Norris notes that a substantial number of the scholars who migrated and lived in tents and *qsar* were accomplished poets and literati.[300] Wuld Muḥammad Sālim enumerates in the *Fatḥ al-Shakūr* over forty poets, including Hassānīs, who migrated from diverse regions, predominantly to the western Sahara, in response to the myriad events of the seventeenth century. Concurrently, there was a significant surge in Arabic literacy among Mauritanians attributed to the arrival of the Banū Hassān and the subsequent Arabization of the regions of their new settlements.

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[297] Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love," 272.

[298] Ibid., 271-272.

[299] Ibid., 271.

[300] Norris, *The Berbers in Arabic Literature* (London: Longman, 1982): 199.

My argument on the replication of Timbuktu's scholarship finds support in Norris's assertion that Mauritanian townships, including Walāta, Wādān and others, were not only geographically and socially proximate to Timbuktu but also grew closer in terms of academic outlook and approach during this period.[301] Stewart adds that this era also led to Mauritania sharing cultural and intellectual heritage with Timbuktu. Most importantly, he concludes that "the true locus of scholarship long identified with Timbuktu rather resides in the Saharan nomadic schools," the *maḥāḍir* of Mauritania and western Sahara.[302] This mobility of scholars fostered the emergence of a new Saharan network for Islamic scholarship, firmly rooted not just in cities but also in the rural regions of Mauritania. These developments were direct outcomes of the events in the seventeenth century that prompted the movement and resettlement of scholars and textual resources.

All of these multifaceted developments would eventually mark the onset of a fully flourishing and evolving spread of intellectual cultivation, scholarly advancement, and literary productivity in what is now Mauritania. From the seventeenth century onwards, Mauritania witnessed a burgeoning scholarly culture and literary activity that brought about a paradigm shift, characterized by a heightened interest and expertise in major religious sciences such as jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and practical disciplines like linguistic sciences, including Arabic grammar (*naḥw*), morphology (*ṣarf*), rhetoric (*balāgha*), prosody (*ʿarūḍ*), and literature (*lugha*). This transformation, which predominantly became more noticeable from the latter half of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, revitalized and expanded the intellectual literary

[301] Norris, *The Berbers in Arabic Literature,* 197.

[302] Stewart, "Calibrating the Scholarship of Timbuktu," 238.

atmosphere for scholars and students. It left a deep-rooted mark on the religious curricula of Islamic centers of learning across various geographical regions.

A significant proportion of texts that experienced mobility and scholarly transmission within the Mauritanian intellectual sphere during this period were poetry and didactic poems. These texts, primarily of Andalusian origins, followed by Maghribian, and some with Ifrīqiyan and Egyptian origins, met the pressing educational and intellectual needs of the time. Prominent among the didactic texts directly relevant to our examination are Ibn Mālik's (d. 1274) *Alfiyya*, *Lāmiyat al-afʿāl*, *Muthallāth al-quṭrub*, and *Tuḥfat al-mawdūd fī al-maqṣūr wa'l-mamdūd*. Additionally, *Naẓm Muwaṭṭaʾat al-faṣīḥ*, a versification of al-Thaʿlab's *Kitāb al-faṣīḥ* by the Malaga-born poet and scholar Mālik ibn Muraḥḥal al-Sabtī (d. 1299), also played a crucial role in these developments. Furthermore, the *Tuḥfat al-ḥukkām* (also known as *al-ʿĀṣimiyya*), a juridical text for Mālikī judges (*qāḍīs*) authored by another Ibn al-ʿĀṣim (d. 1426), and the *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ* of al-Qazwīnī played essential roles in this intellectual environment. Al-Nābigha al-Ghallāwī's earlier mentioned reference to Ibn Mālik's *al-Alfiyya* in his *Būṭulayḥiyyah* and Bābā's documentation of the texts he studied serve as further confirmation of the significance of these texts, which had originally been integral to Timbuktu's curriculum, in shaping the emerging scholarly traditions of Mauritania after as result of the mobility and movements of scholars and textual resources.

What, then, was the significance of these didactic poems in the various Arabo-Islamic sciences taught within these Saharan nomadic Islamic schools, and how did they contribute to shaping the poetic presence and imagination of the Mauritanians at the time who received them? Before directly addressing the question at hand, it is important to reiterate, as highlighted in the

preceding chapter, that according to ould Bah, the principal Arabic text studied and taught among Mauritanians before the seventeenth century was the prose grammar *al-Muqaddimat al-Ājurrūmiyyah*, authored by the 14th-century scholar Ibn Ajurrūm. Intriguingly, Mauritanians later turned to a transformed version in verse format popularly known as "*ʿUbaydu RabbiH*," composed by Muḥammad ibn Ābbah al-Tuwātī al-Ghallāwī (d. 1708-9).[303] The term "*ʿUbaydu Rabbih*" is derived from the poem's opening line where the author identifies himself as the "small servant of His Lord."[304] This alignment is not mere happenstance, as it corresponds with the burgeoning rise of the poetic tradition and imagination that began to sweep across the Mauritanian Sahara during the author's era. This connection will become even clearer as we explore additional examples in Chapter Six.

Regarding the influence of such didactic poems in the realm of Arabic and its related sciences on the development of poetic presence and imagination among the Mauritanians who received them, contemporary Mauritanian scholar Shaykh Mukhtār wuld Ḥammāda succinctly articulates this significance. After some sentences discussing their role in aiding memorization and facilitating further content transmission, he continued by stating that:

> Mauritanians, especially students of *maḥāḍir*,…have a deep affinity for verse-making (*naẓm*), which is considered a distinct branch of poetry. It is akin to one of the numerous poetic meters (*min buḥūr al-shiʿr*), as some might describe it. Within the practices of *maḥāḍir* students, verse-making holds a significant position within the realm of poetry (*al-ʿināya bi'l-shiʿr*), and they passionately engage in the art of crafting verses……Perhaps, one could argue that *Rajaz* (the trembling meter) is the simplest among the poetic meters (*shiʿr*). Hence, they commence their poetic journey by mastering

[303] Muḥammad ibn Ābbah al-Tuwātī al-Ghallāwī, *Naẓm al-Ājurrūmiyya*, (ed.) Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Jaddū al- Shinqīṭī, (Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Malik Fahd al-Waṭniyya, 2007).

[304] The first verse of the poem reads: *Qāla ʿUbaydu Rabbihi Muḥammad – Allāh fī kull al-ʾumūr Aḥmadu,* translated as "Muḥammad, the small servant of Allāh says, I glorify Allāh in all matters (Ibid., 1).

> *Rajaz*, which serves as a foundation for their advancement to other metrical forms. This approach greatly contributes to their proficiency and skills in the domain of poetry, preparing them to potentially become poets right from the outset of their pursuit of knowledge. I believe this unique approach explains the Mauritanian educational system, characterized by a surplus of *manẓūmāt*, in comparison to other systems.[305]

This statement holds particular significance as it offers insights from the perspective of an individual deeply entrenched in the tradition and provides valuable firsthand knowledge and historical understanding. Wuld Ḥammāda highlights that imparting knowledge through didactic poems holds profound pedagogical implications, particularly contributing to cultivating a poetic mindset and deepening comprehension of verse-making and poetry, as evidenced among Mauritanians from the seventeenth century onwards. Initially, students are introduced to *rajaz*, known as the simplest meter among poetic metrics. This foundational step sets the stage for their journey toward mastering poetry, equipping them with essential tools crucial for proficiency and skill acquisition in the poetic domain. Students engage in frequent studies and memorization, allowing them to familiarize themselves with the forms and structures of various meters, thereby becoming acquainted with poetic rhythm. Ultimately, this process of learning not only prepares them but also cultivates the potential for students to evolve into poets or adept practitioners of poetry and verse-making.

The migration of scholars, students, texts, and individuals from the eastern regions, particularly Timbuktu, then Walāta, Wādān, and to the western regions of Mauritania has been emphasized. This demographic shift provided the fertile ground for the flourishing of these literary forms. An essential catalyst in this transformation was the swift establishment of Islamic centres of learning in different parts of Mauritania. Without a doubt, the proliferation of these

[305] Personal Communication with the scholar on September 25, 2021.

centers played a vital role in the emergence and dissemination of Arabic poetry and verse-making throughout various regions of the Mauritanian Sahara during the period under consideration. Nouhi and Stewart's exploration of the creation and expansion of new centers of Islamic learning and scholarly networks elucidates the critical role these changes played in propagating the intellectual and literary traditions of the region. Their analysis attributes this transformation to the 'decentralization' of the location of the centres of Islamic education, signifying a shift from urban *qsars* to rural settlements and desert villages (*bawādī*, singular: *bādiya*).[306]

These remote areas and nomadic camps eventually evolved into prominent intellectual hubs for Arabo-Islamic education and laid the foundation for centuries of advanced literacy, starting in the seventeenth century. What is particularly intriguing in this transformation is how it challenges Ibn Khaldūn's sociological perspective on the cultural and societal differences between rural/nomadic populations and sedentary communities. He suggests that urban dwellers, due to their advanced education, possess higher levels of *adab* (cultured behavior) but tend to have weaker interpersonal bonds. In contrast, rural people, with their limited access to formal education, may be perceived as less cultured, yet they exhibit strong social bonds, referred to as *aṣabiyya*.[307] Thus, according to Ibn Khaldūn, nomadic societies, due to their nomadic and

[306] This urban to rural concentration of intellectual activities was not happening in the Sahara alone but also in other parts of the Central Sūdān at the same time (See Van Dalen, *Doubt, Scholarship and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa,* 2016).

[307] Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History,* (trans.) F. Rosenthal, (ed.) N. J. Dawood, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): 343; Nouhi and Stewart, "The Maḥaẓra Educational System," 18.

pastoral lifestyle, typically lack extensive education and exhibit less *adab* compared to their urban counterparts, who benefit from developed culture and civilization.

Interestingly, the outcome of this historical development reveals a paradox. Even without the characteristics and structures of urbanization, the nomadic and pastoral societies settled in camps and rural regions across the western Sahara and neighboring regions emerged as crucial hubs for intellectual activities following the Timbuktu invasion and various natural occurrences. These events, such as desert desiccation and the pursuit of economic sustenance and survival, prompted widespread migration. It was within these rural settings that significant intellectual endeavors thrived, especially from the seventeenth century onward.[308] This transformation challenges conventional sociological assumptions and reflects the complexity of the cultural and educational dynamics in the region.

As previously emphasized, the Moroccan invasion of the Middle Niger bore significant and far-reaching consequences. Although initially devastating, particularly during Sultan Aḥmad al-Manṣūr's reign, it eventually led to some unique interactions between the Saʿdian rulers and Timbuktu.[309] Furthermore, it established various channels of communication between Morocco and the inner regions of Africa, specifically the Sahara, and the Sahel, particularly during the rule of the ʿAlawī sultan, Mawlay Ismāʿīl ibn Sharīf (d. 1727). This exchange facilitated the sharing of cultural and intellectual heritage and fostered transregional mobility between these regions. With secure Trans-Saharan trade routes and alliances with the Banū Ḥassān tribes from Wādī

[308] Nouhi and Stewart, "The Maḥaẓra Educational System," 18.

[309] Norris, *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968): 49. See also Lansiné Kaba, "Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes: The Moroccan Invasion of the Sudan and the Songhay Resistance (1591-1612)," *Journal of African History* (1981): 457–75.

Nūn, stability increased, bolstering a vibrant caravan economy that encouraged movement across cities and borders—from Marrakech, Fez, Sūs, Sijilmāsa, Darʿa, Tuwāt, Shinqīṭ, Tīshīt, Timbuktu, to Walāta.[310] This environment facilitated the mobility of itinerant scholars, playing a crucial role in establishing new networks, Islamic educational centers, and welcoming Maghribian merchants. As a consequence, similar to the circulation of texts earlier from Timbuktu to Mauritanian cities and villages, books predominantly of Andalusian and Maghribian origins but also some from Egypt, found their way into various parts of Saharan Mauritania. Didactic verse texts, poetic works, and related materials inundated the intellectual and religious landscape, stretching from the Maghrib to the Mauritanian Sahara regions, particularly the Gebla.

Some scholars traversed between the Maghrib and Saharan cities like Shinqīṭ, forged exchanges and contacts with scholarly and Sufi networks and introduced previously unknown works to the Mauritanian region. One noteworthy example from the Maghrib to the Sahara was by one newcomer Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, referred to as "the young noble" by al-Walātī in his *Fatḥ al-Shakūr* and as "the active youngster" by al-Amīn in *al-Wasīṭ*. A *Sharīf* from the lineage of Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Sharīf al-Tilimsānī, one of the teachers of the Andalusian jurist Ibn ʿĀṣim (d. 1426), this young noble introduced books of Andalusian origin to Shinqīṭ previously unfamiliar to the area.[311] Another remarkable instance occurred during the journey of Ibn Rāzikah, one of the reported founding ancestors of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania, to the Maghrib in

[310] Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love," 288; Michel Abitbol, "Le Maroc et le commerce transsaharien du XVIIe au début du XIXe siècle.," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 30, no. 1 (1980): 8.

[311] al-Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīṭ al-manāra wa'l-ribāṭ,* 73-74.

the early eighteenth century. He reportedly acquired over 5,000 manuscripts through a unique exchange involving captives he had been gifted. This feat resulted from his encounter with Sultan Mawlay Ismāʿīl in Marrakech. On this trip, Muḥammad al-ʿĀlim (d. 1738), the son of Mawlay Ismāʿīl and the vizier in Sūs, generously gifted him a vast collection of books, many of which comprised rare collections not previously found in the regions of Shinqīṭ and Walāta.[312] This impressive act was particularly noteworthy, considering the scarcity and high cost of writing materials during that era.

It is entirely plausible and well-founded to suggest that the books scholars such as Aḥmad al-Dhahabī and Ibn Rāzikah brought to Mauritania, which they both studied and taught, encompassed a broad array of subjects. These likely included rhetoric, poetry, and the science of verse-making, thus contributed to the expansion and enrichment of the *maḥāḍir* curriculum. Given their predominantly Andalusian origins, these collections may have included a good number of didactic verse texts and poetry authored by scholars such as Ibn Mālik, ibn Muraḥḥal and Ibn ʿĀṣim, along with other Andalusian and Maghribian scholars.

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[312] Ibid., 151. When Shaykh Sīdiyā al-Kabīr (d. 1868) journeyed to Marrakech, he acquired and transported camel loads of books to Mauritania. Upon his return, a scholar crafted verses in his honour, underscoring the profound importance of the books he brought with him:

> The West (southwest Mauritania) has become illumined by what you brought,
> And it is crying over your departure from the other West
>
> You brought books so weighty that overwhelm beasts when carried
> Within you, knowledge dwells, where books are disavowed.

Stewart documents these books found in the library of the Shaykh's family in: Stewart, "A New Source on the Book Market in Morocco in 1830 and Islamic Scholarship in West Africa," *Hespéris Tamuda,* 10, (1970): 209-247.

Over the course of a century, this contributed to enhancing the quality of libraries and exposed Mauritanian scholars to a wider array of works on various Arabo-Islamic intellectual sciences, including the Arabic language sciences and Islamic law. These dynamics also catalyzed indigenous literary production and fostered innovative phenomena, influenced by both internal dynamics within the regions of Mauritania and external influences from the Moroccan context. Within this native literary output, the tradition of Arabic poetry would later hold a prominent position, thus encouraging the growth of poetic imagination and capturing the public's attention.

Further exploration of these dynamics of transregional contacts and exchanges between Morocco and Mauritania, Ibn Rāzikah's visit to the Maghrib in relation to the emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition in his homeland, among others, is essential and inevitable to provide the necessary context and background for a proper analysis. This exploration continues in the next chapter.

In conclusion, while the Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu left a devastating impact on the Middle Niger Bend region, it also marked the period of Timbuktu's major intellectual and social influence across the Sahara and the Sahel. It led to the mobility and migration of scholars who established a scholarly diaspora in Mauritanian cities and villages where its intellectual tradition became replicated. Furthermore, the invasion, while adverse, also 'opened' channels of communication between Morocco and other parts of Mauritanian Sahara which facilitated contacts and exchanges between the people of the two regions. It led to the movements of previously unfamiliar books in the Sahara some of which may have been works of poetry and verse-making, considering their mostly Andalusian and Maghribian origins. And over the course of time, it supported transmission of different Arabo-Islamic sciences in Mauritania, and indeed

impacted the rebirth of the poetry tradition of the region. These dynamics in many ways shaped the literary and poetic awareness and culture of the people thereby springing the verse-making tradition into prominence in its reported era of emergence.

CHAPTER V: THE *QAṢĀ'ID* OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS OF MAURITANIA'S ARABIC POETRY TRADITION

Introduction

This chapter is structured into two sections, aiming to explore the distinct dynamics that influenced and characterized seventeenth to eighteenth century Mauritania, particularly in its poetry and cultural expression, giving rise to an emergence of new literary forms and themes. My argument is centered on the role played by two trailblazing poets and scholars in introducing new themes, styles and forms of poetry that were previously unfamiliar within Mauritanian scholarly circles and the broader populace. These *madīḥ* (praise poems), dedicated to the Prophet Muḥammad, were composed by Ibn Rāzikah and al-Yadālī. I contend that the composition of their *madīḥ* odes during their era contributed significantly to the arguments supporting the reported emergence phenomenon. In addition to the above, I focus on these two scholars and poets in this chapter due to their revered status as pioneers and founding fathers who played a crucial role in shaping Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition. Understanding the lives and works of these scholars, esteemed as torchbearers of this tradition, becomes paramount for comprehending and grasping the essence of this intellectual and artistic heritage. An analogous example is Dorrit Van Dalen's methodology in her *Doubt, Scholarship, and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa.* Van Dalen utilizes the oeuvres of Muḥammad al-Wālī ibn Sulaymān (d. 1668/9), a seventeenth-century Baghirmi scholar of the Kanem-Borno Empire, to comprehend some developments in his communities and time. By scrutinizing the contents of al-Wālī's works, Van Dalen sheds light on crucial historical, social, and scholarly contexts,

providing a nuanced understanding of the undercurrents of the scholar's milieu.[313] In a similar vein, drawing upon the works of scholars and poets designated as pioneers of the classical Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania serves as a guide for investigating the reported emergence of this intellectual tradition. These scholars, though individual beings, were shaped by a collective context. Described as spokespersons of their social, intellectual, and cultural environment, their works mirror the collective consciousness of their time and offer insights into the social developments, conflicts, and changing values of that era. This approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of the historical roots and contextual dimensions of the reported emergence of the classical Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania during the latter part of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century.[314]

Thus, in the first section of this chapter, I delve into Ibn Rāzikah's *madīḥ* poem dedicated to the Sandals of the Prophet Muḥammad. This particular composition stands out as arguably the first of its kind across the Sahara and Sahel regions. Its inspiration stems largely from the seventeenth-century Moroccan milieu that deeply influenced Ibn Rāzikah. His exposure to Moroccan Islamic intellectual and cultural influences transpired during his travels to the Maghrib, where he engaged with the scholarly and literary culture of the region and interacted with its prominent scholars. While my primary focus is on Ibn Rāzikah's *madīḥ* poem, I draw insights from his broader collection of poetry (*dīwān*) to enrich my examination and analysis.

[313] She demonstrates, using al-Wālī, how we can use people's works to get "more insight into the motivations of others and into the development in their environment." (Van Dalen, *Doubt, Scholarship and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa,* 2016): 2.

[314] Ibid., 2-3

The second section of this chapter delves into al-Yadālī's celebrated praise poem, the *qaṣīdat* "*ṣalātu Rabbī maʿa al-salāmi*." What distinguishes this poem is its departure from the typical baroque *muʿāraḍa* (imitation) of praise poetry dedicated to the Prophet or revered Muslim figures like the *Burda*. Al-Yadālī innovatively merges a non-classical Arabic meter into a classical genre by drawing inspiration from the Andalusian and Ḥassānī poetic traditions, defying standardized prosodic rules.

To explore the first section of this chapter, I provide a concise biography of Ibn Rāzikah, to offer contextual insights into the historical dynamics of the Moroccan poetry and *madīḥ* tradition, and analyze their influence on Ibn Rāzikah's intellectual pursuits, praise poetry, and contributions within his *Dīwān*.

Ibn Rāzikah

Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad, also known as Maḥḥam, ibn Qāḍī al-ʿAlawī, hailed from the town of Shinqīṭ.[315] He was also well-known as Ibn Rāzikah (also written Ibn Rāzga, Ibn Rāzqa), a name derived from his mother's name, Rāzikah bint Aḥmad, meaning son of Rāzikah. He was also called Qāḍī al-Brākna (judge of the Emirate of Brakna)[316] and earned the epithet "father of Mauritanian poets."

Belonging to the Īdaw ʿAlī tribe, Ibn Rāzikah was born into a distinguished scholarly family. His father, Muḥammad, imparted a comprehensive education encompassing various Arabic and Islamic disciplines such as jurisprudence, grammar, and literature.[317] Ibn Rāzikah

[315] Stewart, *Arabic Literature of Africa,* 254-255.

[316] al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh*, 25.

[317] Ibid., 26-27.

received his foundational Arabic and Islamic education in his father's *Maḥḍara* in Shinqīṭ, where his father served as one of his teachers. Furthermore, he studied under the aforementioned scholar Muḥammad ibn Mukhtār ibn al-Aʿmash (Bilaʿmash) al-ʿAlawī al-Shinqīṭī (d. 1695), who significantly influenced his intellectual development. Under al-Aʿmash's guidance, Ibn Rāzikah delved into various works, including texts on *fiqh* and literature. [318] It was during this period that he commenced the study of poetry composition, an art in which al-Aʿmash excelled.

Ibn Rāzikah furthered his studies in Wādān at the *Maḥḍara* of the Idaw al-Ḥājj tribe. Due to conflicts and unrest in Shinqīṭ, he later relocated westward to the Gebla, where he continued his education at his grandfather's *maḥḍara* and received instruction from other scholars in the region.[319] Subsequently, he joined the Idā Bulḥasan tribe.[320] He also studied under various Mauritanian scholars including Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Yaʿqūb al-Walātī al-Maḥjūbī (d. 1713) a specialist in semantics-rhetoric. As mentioned in the previous chapter, al-Walātī acquired knowledge from the Moroccan jurist and theologian Sīdī Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Mayyāra (d. 1662). Mayyāra was a student of Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā al-Maqqarī (d.1632), a prominent scholar for his expertise in biography, history, poetry and Arabic literature.[321] Al-Maqqarī's scholarly endeavours played a crucial role in Ibn Rāzikah's intellectual life, as will be elaborated upon in the forthcoming passages.

[318] al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh*, 26-27

[319] Ibid., 28

[320] Ibid., 28.

[321] Stewart, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, 254-255

Ibn Rāzikah embarked on numerous journeys to the Maghrib. During one of these journeys, Ibn Rāzikah was hosted by the Sharīfian Sultan, Mawlay Ismāʿīl, and later his son, Muḥammad, also known as al-ʿĀlim. Furthermore, while in the Maghrib, he engaged with and studied under numerous scholars such as Sīdī Aḥmad al-ʿAṭṭār, Abū Madyan al-Qāḍī al-Akbar.[322] While there, he delved into works on creed (*ʿaqīda*) and the sciences of expression and semantic-rhetoric with his Maghribī counterparts. Engaging in scholarly correspondences, he exchanged verses with them.

Ibn Rāzikah had students who became great scholars such as the eighteenth century Tijikja scholar al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm.[323]Al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm was the father of the famous eighteenth to nineteenth-century jurist and scholar, Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh wuld al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm (d. 1818) (discussed in Chapter VI).[324] Another prominent student of Ibn Rāzikah was Sīdī Aḥmad ibn Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Mūsà al-Walātī, who served as the Shaykh of the Mauritanian biographer and historian, al-Ṭālib Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr al-Bāritaylī (d. 1805), author of the *Fatḥ al-Shakūr fī maʿrifat aʿyān ʿulamāʾ al-Takrūr*.[325]

Aḥmad al-Amīn, the author of *al-Waṣīṭ,* the Mauritanian anthology of poets described Ibn Rāzikah as one of the four scholars whose level of knowledge was unrivaled in his time. He is revered for his brilliance and profound understanding.[326] Al-Amīn also described him as one of the founding fathers of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania. Ibn Rāzikah left a enduring

[322] Stewart, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, 254

[323] Ibid.

[324] Ibid., 246-247.

[325] al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh,* 27-29

[326] al-Amīn, *al-Wasīṭ*, 1.

impact with his diverse contributions to various sciences. One of his noteworthy works is *Nuzhat al-maʿānī fī ʿilmay al-bayān wa'l-maʿānī Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ*, a versification (*naẓm*) of al-Qazwīnī's *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ*. This work serves as an abridgement of the third part of Yūsuf ibn Abī Bakr al-Sakkākī's (d. 1229) *Miftāḥ al-ʿulūm*, focusing on *ʿIlm al-maʿānī wa'l-bayān*. Ibn Rāzikah also has works on the sciences of logic and the Islamic spiritual tradition.[327]

Influence of the Moroccan Intellectual Milieu on Mauritania

To provide a clearer understanding of the discussion of the influence of the Moroccan intellectual milieu on Mauritania, and as it relates to Ibn Rāzikah, it is necessary to establish some contextual background.

The reign of the al-Saʿdī Sultans marked a significant period in the evolution of the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania. Aḥmad al-Manṣūr (d. 1603), a highly celebrated figure of this dynasty, was not only a patron of poetry but also exhibited a deep appreciation for poetic aesthetics and actively promoted them. He was also a man of profound Islamic learning. During their rule, poetry and Arabic literature enjoyed recognition and flourished in the palaces and courts of these rulers.[328] They rekindled a passion for poetry and Arabic literary activities, generously rewarding scholars, poets, and litterateurs for their contributions. The Saʿdī rulers also initiated the practice of engraving poetic verses on the graves of their family members, palace walls, domes, doors, and mosques, mirroring the artistic traditions and architectural styles

[327] al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh,* 30-31.

[328] On the contributions of the Saʿdīs to the intellectual thought of the Maghrib, see Muḥammad Ḥājjī, *al-Ḥaraka al-Fikriyya bi-l-Maghrib fī ʿahd al-Saʿdiyyīn*, (Rabat: Dār al-Maghrib li'l-Ta'līf wa'l-Tarjama wa'l-Nashr, 1976).

of Granada.[329] Moreover, they facilitated the establishment of libraries and repositories, many of which housed literature from Andalusia, the Maghrib, and the East. These libraries, located in border cities such as al-Muḥammadiyya, Sijilmāsa, and Darʿa, served as crucial links for acquiring and transporting books and manuscripts to the Sahara.[330]

The courts and palaces of the Sultans and princes in Morocco were graced by the presence of accomplished poets including Abū Fāris ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Fishtālī (d. 1621), a Ṣanhāja scholar, prolific poet, and official historiographer of al-Manṣūr. He was highly regarded and drew comparisons to Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1374), reflecting his immense talent and influence.[331]Al-Khaṭīb was an Arab Andalusian polymath, historian, poet, philosopher among other areas of expertise. His poems are part of the decorations on the walls of the palace of Alhambra in Granada.[332] Other than al-Fishtālī, the prominent poet, ʿAlī ibn Manṣūr al-Shayāẓamī (d. 1603) of Marrakech, composed a collection of panegyrics (*madīḥ*) to honour the Prophet Muḥammad and al-Manṣūr himself. Al-Manṣūr, along with other al-Saʿdī leaders, and Muḥammad al-ʿĀlim regularly organized *majālis* (gatherings) for poetry composition and recitation, especially during the celebration of the *mawlid* of the Prophet Muḥammad. Poets and litterateurs would craft poems of exceptional quality, showcasing various poetic aesthetics, finesse, and technical prowess, performing them at these events.[333] These

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[329] Ibid.

[330] al-Saʿīd al-Darwīsh, "al-Shiʿr zaman al-Saʿdiyyīn" *al-ʿArabī al-Jadīd*, 07 October, 2020. For extensive discussion of these subjects, particularly poetry collections during the al-Saʿdī ea, see the author's, al-Saʿīd al-Darwīsh's *al-Muʿallaqāt al-Shiʿriyya fī al-ʿAṣr al-Saʿdī*

[331] Ibid.

[332] www.muslimheritage.com Entry Word: Ibn al-Khatib. Available at Ibn al-Khatib

[333] ʿAbd Allāh Binṣir ʿAlawī, "Majālāt al-Harakat al-Adabiyya fī al-ʿAsr al-Saʿdī," *Majallat Daʿwat al-Ḥaqq*, December 1996.

gatherings featured poetic exchanges, rebuttals, satires, and competitions, and enriched the art of poetry and verse-making in both private and public spheres. The involvement of the respected Tlemcen (Tilimsānī) scholar, poet, biographer, and historian Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā al-Maqqarī (d. 1632), who was a close friend and intellectual companion of al-Fishtālī, likely contributed to the growing popularity of these *majālis* and *mawlid* events among scholars and the general population. Al-Maqqarī, a student of his uncle, Saʿīd ibn Aḥmad al-Maqqarī, the Mufti of Fez at the time, was also taught by the Timbuktu scholar Aḥmad Bābā. His multifaceted expertise played a significant role in shaping the Islamic intellectual and literary landscape of the era. Two of his verse works are particularly relevant to our discussion: his *madīḥ qaṣāʾid*, which celebrated the Prophet Muḥammad, with a focus on his sandals (*niʿāl*), and the earlier mentioned *Iḍāʾat al-Dujunna fī ʿAqāʾid Ahl al-Sunna*, a didactic poem on creed.[334] Their impact on Ibn Rāzikah and seventeenth to eighteenth century Mauritanian intellectual milieu will be discussed in the passages below.

The Saʿdī dynasty maintained a significant and meaningful relationship with al-Zāwiyat al-Dilāʾiyya initiated by Abū Bakr ibn Muḥammad (d. 1612).[335]The Dilāʾiyya is a branch of the the Shādhiliyya Jazūliyya Sufi brotherhood initiated by its founder Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān

[334] He authored *"Nafḥ al-Ṭībb min Ghuṣn al-Andalus al-Raṭīb wa dhikar Wazīrihā Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb*." He also wrote another work on the fragrances and recollections of his encounters with scholars in Marrakech and Fez. In addition to the works on the praise of the Prophet Muḥammad, he authored the celebrated "*Fatḥ al-Mutaʿāl fī al-niʿāl*" during his sojourn in Cairo, later expanding the work upon his arrival in Medina. This elaborate composition provides a detailed account of the sandals of the Prophet Muḥammad, and it gained widespread recognition and popularity in Morocco.

[335] On the role of this order in the Moroccan religious and political spheres, see Muḥammad Ḥājjī, *al-Zāwiyat al-Dilā'iyya wa-Dawruhā al-Dīnī wa-l-ʿIlmī wa-l-Siyāsī*, (Casablanca: Maṭbaʿat al-Najāḥ al-Jadīdah, 1988).

ibn Abū Bakr al-Jazūlī al-Simlālī's (d. 1465).[336]Al-Jazūlī is the author of the famous *Dalāʾil al-khayrāt wa-shawāriq al-anwār fī dhikr al-ṣalāt ʿalá al-Nabī al-mukhtār*, a collection of praises and prayers on the Prophet Muḥammad.[337] Its origin story has it that one day, while seeking water to no avail for ablution to perform his morning prayer, al-Jazūlī encountered a young girl who was aware of his piety and devotion. Curious as to why a religious figure like him struggled to find clean water, she spat into a well, causing pure, sweet water to gush forth. Later, after his prayer, al-Jazūlī inquired about her remarkable spiritual attainment. The girl revealed that her spiritual station was attained through ceaseless prayers to God, invoking blessings upon Prophet Muḥammad by the "number of breaths and heartbeats." Motivated by this, al-Jazūlī composed his famous *Dalāʾil al-khayrāt*. While reverent love for the Prophet has been a significant aspect of various Sufi traditions, the Jazūliyya stands out for its distinct emphasis on praising, praying for, and loving Prophet Muḥammad. This particular focus on reverent love characterizes the Jazūliyya branch of the Shādhiliyya, and the inclusion of *Dalāʾil al-khayrāt* in their devotional practices highlights its centrality. The Jazūliyya's dedication to the Prophet's love played a crucial role in popularizing diverse expressions of love and praise for the Prophet Muḥammad across Morocco.[338] Their rituals involved recitations, prayers, and compositions praising the Prophet, deeply ingrained in their devotional routines.[339]Al-Jazūlī, himself a *sharīf*, supported the

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[336] Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998).

[337] Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān al-Jazūlī, *Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt wa Shawāriq al-Anwār fī Dhikr al-Ṣalāt ʿalā al-Nabī al-Mukhtār* (Cairo: Dār al-Wābil al-Ṣayyib li-l-Ṭabaʿ wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 2017).

[338] Ḥasan Jallāb, "al-Jazūlī, Maḥammad b. Sulaymān," in *Maʿlamat al-Maghrib* (Rabat: Dār al-Amān, 1998).

[339] Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love," 15.

sharīfian leadership thereby strengthening its legitimacy. ʿAbd Allah al-Ghazwānī (d. 1529), the third Shaykh of the Jazūliyya, publicly endorsed the Saʿdī dynasty as the rightful rulers of Morocco, which enhanced a strong affinity between the dynasty and the followers of the Jazūliyya branch within the Shādhiliyya *ṭarīqa*.[340]

Like the Zāwiyat al-Dilāʾiyya, the Saʿdī dynasty's affinity to Sufi brotherhood also extended to the Nāṣiriyya branch of the Shādhiliyya *ṭarīqa*, founded by Muḥammad ibn Nāṣir al-Darʿī al-Tamaghrūtī al-Aghlābī (d. 1676). Muḥammad ibn Nāṣir was a scholar of Islamic law, theologian, poet among other expertise. Besides his proficiency as a scholar of Islamic law, theologian, and poet, Ibn Nāṣir was instrumental in revitalizing the Zarrūqiyya tradition, a branch of the fifteenth-century Shādhiliyya founded by the Moroccan Sufi and Jurist, and contemporary of al-Jazūlī, Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿIsā al-Barnūsī al-Fāsī, more widely recognized as Zarrūq (d. 1493). Zarrūq advocated against what he saw as excessive practices, urging a return to a more pious form of Sufi practice grounded in the Qur'an and Sunna.[341] During this period, the seventeenth century, two influential figures within al-Dilāʾiyya and al-Nāṣiriyya branches: Muḥammad al-Ḥājj ibn Muḥammad (d. 1691), a grandson of Abū Bakr ibn Muḥammad al-Dilāʾī, and Muḥammad ibn Nāṣir al-Darʿī, emerged as prominent scholars of their time. These scholars shared a warm and collegial relationship with the aforementioned al-Maqqarī, marked by admiration and respect. In a remarkable gesture, al-Maqqarī composed a *madīḥ* poem in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad and included it as the concluding part of his work, "*Fatḥ al-Mutaʿāl fī al-niʿāl*." Al-Maqqarī was not only raised in a setting where deep reverence for Prophet Muḥammad was widespread, he was also associated

[340] Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love," 19.

[341] Ibid. 23.

with scholars and the Saʿdī leadership closely affiliated with diverse practices honoring the Prophet. Al-Maqqarī's poem gained special recognition and was presented to Ibn Abī Bakr al-Dilāʾī who played a key role in popularizing it.[342] Owing to the profound love for the Prophet Muḥammad within the al-Dilāʾiyya's discourse stemming from the Jazūliyya, and Ibn Abī Bakr al-Dilāʾī 's prominence in Moroccan society, this poem gained widespread recognition across the Maghrib.[343] For Sufis, poetic verses serve as the most fitting means to convey their deep reverence and affection for the Prophet Muḥammad. These verses are powerful expressions of devotion used for seeking forgiveness, offering supplications, seeking intercession, invoking protection, and ultimately facilitating spiritual closeness and the unveiling of divine mysteries.[344] During his stay in al-Madīna, al-Maqqarī once again showcased his poetic prowess by composing a *madīḥ* poem. This ode, comprising 320 verses and following the *Rajaz* form, was dedicated to the turban (*al-ʿimāmah*) of the Prophet Muḥammad. Subsequently, he presented this poem to Ibn Abī Bakr al-Dilāʾī.[345]

Members of al-Zāwiyat al-Dilāʾiyya and Nāṣiriyya orders were known not only for their mastery of Islamic sciences but also for their exceptional skills in poetry and verse-making. They

[342] The al-Dilāʾiyya was also fond of organizing *majālis* and *mawlid* events where poets come compose and perform poems in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad. See Wuld Ākāh, *al-Ṭarīqa al-Shādhiliyya fī Bilād Shinqīṭ*, 152.

[343] Muḥammad Ḥajjī, *al-Zāwiyat al-Dilāʾiyya*, 112; ʿAbd al Fattāḥ Maghfūr, *Qaṣīdat fī madḥ al-Nabī ṣallā Allāh ʿalayhi wa sallam li-Abī al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Maqqarī al-Tilimsānī*, al-Rābiṭat al- Muḥammadiyya li'l-ʿulamāʾ, December 27, 2016. Available at https://www.arrabita.ma/blog/قصيدة-في-مدح-النبي-صلى-الله-عليه-وسلم/،

[344] See extensive discussion on the use of *madīḥ* poem in Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection,* 2020.

[345] Ibid.

made significant contributions to the popularization of this art form, which also aligned with al-Saʿdī's efforts to rekindle Arabic literature and poetics.[346] Among these scholar-poets, Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥasan ibn Masʿūd al-Yūsī (d. 1691) stands out as one of the most revered Moroccan scholars of the seventeenth century. Al-Yūsī, a recipient of the order's *baraka* from Ibn Nāṣir al-Darʿī, engaged in both study and teaching in al-Zāwiyat al-Dilāʾiyya.[347] Muḥammad al-ʿĀlim, a prince in the Sūs region, and son of sultan Mawlay Ismāʿīl ibn Sharīf (d. 1727) enjoyed substantial backing from followers of the Nāṣiriyya and Dilāʾiyya Sufi branches.

As previously mentioned, Ibn Rāzikah, one of the scholars and pioneers of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania visited Muḥammad al-ʿĀlim in Tārūdant and other Moroccan cities in the early eighteenth century. These visits enabled his interactions with Maghribī scholars, possibly exposing him to Nāṣiriyya and Dilāʾiyya scholars, many of whom were accomplished classical poets. It is quite likely that Ibn Rāzikah might have cultivated an affinity for the Shādhiliyya-Nāṣiriyya Sufi order during these visits. However, there is no concrete evidence to definitively confirm this affiliation. However, there are proofs that scholars from the Sahara, particularly in Mauritania, began establishing connections with the Nāṣirī Sufi network during the seventeenth century.[348] Murtaḍa al-Zabīdī (d. 1790), an eminent Islamic scholar and lexicographer, in his accounts, reminisces about meeting with al-Ḥabīb ibn al-Mukhtār ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Qāḍī, grandson of Ibn Rāzikah, during the year 1778. He described him as an individual who exhibited certain spiritual experiences reminiscent of the Shādhiliyya-

[346] al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh*, 37-38.

[347] For a brief discussion on al-Yūsī, see Kenneth L. Honerkamp, "al-Hassan ibn Masud al-Yusi," in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography*, (eds.) Roger M. A. Allen et al (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009): 410-428.

[348] Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love," 289-317.

Nāṣiriyya traditions. Furthermore, al-Zabīdī lauded his exceptional skills in Arabic wordplay through an extemporized poem in his honour.[349]

During the same period of Ibn Rāzikah's visits to the Maghrib, Mauritanian scholars, particularly those from Shinqīt, his homeland, embarked on journeys northward to study in Nāṣirī centers located in southern Moroccan cities such as Tafīlālt, Sūs, and Darʿa.[350] They also came into contact with Nāṣirī scholars through their travels for pilgrimage (Ḥājj) and commercial activities.[351] Upon their return to the Sahara, some of these scholars established *maḥāḍir* (singular: *maḥḍara*), religious schools or institutions. Around this time, al-Yadālī, a prominent figure in this narrative and one of the founding fathers of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition, became affiliated with the Shādhiliyya-Nāṣiriyya Sufi order. He received the order's *wird*, a litany of association, from his teacher and cousin, Shaykh Nakhtār ibn al-Musṭafà al-Yadālī.[352] Shaykh Nakhtār had acquired the *ṭarīqa* from Aḥmad al-Ḥabīb al-Sijilmāsī, who, in turn, had received it from Aḥmad (d. 1717), son of the Nāṣiriyya founder Muḥammad ibn Nāṣir Darʿī while on his way to Ḥājj. Shaykh Nakhtār played a crucial role in introducing the Nāṣiriyya chain in the Gebla region.[353] The order continued to gain influence in Mauritania through figures like Sīdī Muḥammad ibn Sīdī ʿUthmān ibn Aʿmar al-Walī al-Maḥjūbī al-Walātī (d. 1719), Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sīdī Bū Bakr al-Tinwājīwī, and al-Ṭālib al-Amīn al-Ḥarashī (d. 1753), who was

[349] Stefan Reichmuth, "Murtaḍa al-Zabīdī (1732-91) and the Africans: Islamic Discourse and Scholarly Networks in the Late Eighteenth Century" in *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, (ed.) Scott S. Reese (Leiden: Brill, 2004): 128

[350] Reichmuth, "Murtaḍa al-Zabīdī," 128.

[351] Ibid. See also wuld Ḥāmidun, *Ḥayāt Mūritāniyā,* 45

[352] Wuld Ākāh, *al-Ṭarīqat al-Shādhiliyya fī bilād Shinqīṭ*, 155; wuld Bābāh*, al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Yadālī,* 101-102.

[353] Schummann, "A Path of Reverent Love," 289; wuld Bābāh*, al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Yadālī,* 101-102.

the teacher of al-Bāritaylī, the compiler of the *Fatḥ al-Shakūr*.[354] Al-Maḥjūbī al-Walātī was one of the earliest Saharan Mauritanian poets of Walātan extract and is mentioned in the previous chapter. Members of the Shādhiliyya-Nāṣiriyya order had a significant impact on the people and the intellectual and literary domain of the region. Al-Yadālī's works, particularly his commentary on his own *Khātimat al-Taṣawwuf*, demonstrate his connection to Shādhilī-Nāṣirī discourse.[355] Furthermore, the *Qaṣīdat al-Dāliyya*, authored by al-Yūsī in praise of his teacher, Ibn Nāṣir al-Darʿī, has, since the seventeenth century enjoyed popularity and patronage among Mauritanian, and by extension, West African scholars and students. This poem, with its emphasis on spiritual development, made a substantial contribution to the poetic and literary culture in the region.[356] The work, after the *Duʿāʾ al-Nāṣirī* was arguably the most important work in the order.[357] Al-Ṭālib al-Amīn, Ibn Rāzikah's student and an early Nāṣirī of Walātan extract, is reported in the *Fatḥ al-Shakūr* to have taught the Walātan al-Bashīr ibn al-Hājj al-Hādī al-Yalabī (d. 1783), al-Yūsī's *Dāliyya* which he called "*al-Yūsiyya*." The *Qaṣīdat al-Dāliyya*, while primarily a "*sulūk*-oriented" poem, has continued to be taught and studied not only for its spiritual content but also for its remarkable literary qualities, as observed by Oludamini Ogunnaike.[358] This dual emphasis

[354] Wuld Ākāh discusses these chains and connections extensively in his *al-Ṭarīqat al-Shādhiliyya fī bilād Shinqīṭ*.

[355] Muḥammad ibn al-Mukhtār al-Yadālī, *Khātimat al-Taṣawwuf wa Sharḥuhā*, (ed.) al-Rājil Aḥmad al-Sālim al-Yadālī, (Rabat: Dār al-Qalam, 2011); Schumann, "A Path of Reverent Love," 303-305.

[356] Stefan Reichmuth, "The Praise of the Sufi Master as a Literary Event: Al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī (1631–1691), his Dāliyya (Qaṣīdat at-tahānī), and its Commentary (Nayl al-amānī)," in *Ethics and Spirituality in Islam: Sufi Adab*, (eds.) Chiabotti, et al (New York: Brill, 2016).

[357] See Aisha Bewley's translation of "The Nasiri Duʿa" at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5edcb48b5436bd2f0c62e380/t/609a85fdd5624944b53f17ba/1620739642486/The+Prayer+of+the+Oppressed+%28Dua+Nasiri%29+-+Imam+Muhammad+al-Dar'i+.pdf

[358] Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection,* 101.

on spirituality and literary merit has played a crucial role in nurturing an understanding of poetry and verse-making, making it an essential element of pedagogy in the region. Furthermore, this appreciation for the *Dāliyya*'s literary aspects aligns with the growing interest in acquiring a solid foundation in the Arabic language and practical sciences. This was a necessity for gaining profound insights into the multifaceted Islamic sciences, particularly in the western regions of the Mauritanian Sahara, starting from the seventeenth century. The practice of teaching texts beyond their primary genres and subjects, as exemplified by the *Dāliyya*, reflects an emerging pedagogical trend. It suggests a broader interest in instructing various books and texts in verse forms, which will be further explored in Chapter VI, focusing on the development of teaching verse texts in Mauritania.[359]

[359] The poem, along with its commentary authored by the same individual, *Nayl al-Amānī fī Sharḥ al-Tahānī*, is widely accessible in various libraries across different West African countries. These include locations ranging from Nouakchott to Boutilimit, extending to Timbuktu, Segou, and Kano. The impact of this work resonates clearly in the poetic compositions of numerous West African scholars. A notable example is Mervyn Hiskett, the scholar of the Sokoto caliphate trio's works, who, in his introduction to ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Fūdī's *Tazyīn al-Waraqāt*, illuminates the discernible influence of al-Yūsī's *Dāliyya* on Ibn Fūdī's verses. Additionally, it is worth noting that the title of al-Ḥājj Maʿabdu Niang's poem, *Nayl al-Amānī*, dedicated to his shaykh, the Senegalese scholar Ibrāhīm Niasse, could have been inspired by al-Yūsī's commentary. The influence of the work is evident in the poetic works of many West African scholars. The late scholar of the works of the Sokoto caliphate trios, Mervyn Hiskett, in his introduction to ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Fūdī's *Tazyīn al-Waraqāt*, demonstrates the *Dāliyya*'s influence on Ibn Fūdī's verses. Perhaps, the title of al-Ḥājj Maʿabdu Niang's *Nayl al-Amānī*, a poem in praise of his shaykh, the Senegalese scholar Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1975) was borrowed from al-Yūsī's commentary. See https://waamd.lib.berkeley.edu/titles?fieldName=authorId&query=1944&page=1. The Segou copy 5443 is found on Bibliothèque nationale de France: http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9065356x/f226.image.r=Yūsī (Last Accessed October 7, 2023)

While concrete evidence of Ibn Rāzikah's connection to the Shādhiliyya-Nāṣiriyya Sufi order is lacking, it can be argued that both he and al-Yadālī, along with their Mauritanian contemporaries, were deeply entrenched in the intellectual and literary currents of their era, reflecting the prevalent Saharan intellectual milieu. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the intellectual climate in Saharan Mauritania was, to some extent, significantly influenced by the broader intellectual environment of the Maghrib and its religious discourses. This contextual background has been provided to shed light on the relevant developments discussed subsequently. This influence is evident in the sources referenced by Mauritanian scholars of the seventeenth century, which bear the unmistakable imprint of Maghribī scholarship, including both didactic poems and odes.

Maghribī Didactic Poems and Odes: Impact on Mauritanian Intellectual, Educational Framework and Ibn Rāzikah's Poetic Expressions.

Building upon the premise established in al-Yūsī's *Dāliyya* and influence of Moroccan Sufi networks on Mauritania's Islamic intellectual culture, I go further to illustrate how Maghribī scholarship, and to some extent Andalusian literary culture, significantly contributed to the surge of poetry and verse-making tradition in the second half of seventeenth to eighteenth-century Mauritania. My argument focuses on didactic poems and odes of Maghribī origin. I connect this argument to wuld Ḥammāda's assertion regarding the significant role played by the memorization and study of didactic poems in shaping and enhancing poetic knowledge and skills. To exemplify this influence, I begin by examining al-Maqqarī's *Iḍāʾat al-Dujunna fī*

ʿAqāʾid Ahl al-Sunna, a poetic work centered on Islamic creed.[360] The text stands out as one of the earliest non-indigenous didactic poems on creed studied in Mauritania since the seventeenth century. Al-Aʿmash, Ibn Rāzikah's teacher, authored the first Mauritanian commentary on this work entitled *Futūḥāt dhī al-Raḥma wa-l-Minna fī Sharḥ Iḍāʾat al-Dujunna*, demonstrating its significance in the intellectual landscape of the time.[361] Al-Aʿmash was gifted a copy of the text and authorized (*ujīza*) to teach it by the seventeenth century Moroccan al-Ḥājj ʿAbd Allāh ibn Bū al-Mukhtār al-Ḥasanī on his return from the Ḥājj pilgrimage.[362] This in part marked a crucial juncture for networking and knowledge exchange between the Shādhiliyya affiliates and Saharan scholars. Having acquired the knowledge from al-Aʿmash, who was also his teacher in composition of poetry, Ibn Rāzikah further propagated the teachings of *Iḍāʾat al-Dujunna* to his students, including al-Ṭālib al-Amīn al-Ḥarashī (d. 1753), who became a pivotal figure in this intellectual tradition. Al-Ṭālib al-Amīn, as evidenced in the *Fatḥ al-Shakūr*, taught various texts from the Nāṣiriyya curriculum, many of which were composed in verse forms. Al-Yadālī mentions the *Iḍāʾat al-Dujunna* in his *Farāʾid al-Fawāʾid*, a commentary on his *Qawaʿid al-ʿAqāʾid* also on creed.[363] Subsequently, the *Iḍāʾat al-Dujunna* became an integral text within the *Maḥḍara* system giving rise to over thirty local Mauritanian commentaries crossing centuries

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[360] al-Shaykh Aḥmad al-Maqqarī al-Mālikī al-Ashʿarī, *Iḍāʾat al-Dujunna fī ʿAqāʾid Ahl al-Sunna,* (comm.) Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Mulaqqab bi'l-Dāh al-Shinqīṭī, (Casablanca: Dār al-Rashād al-Ḥadīth, 2003).

[361] Silsilat Aʿlām al-ṣaḥrāʾ: Muḥammad ibn al-Mukhtār al-Aʿmash al-Jakanī (1285h), *al-Mamlakat al-Maghribiyya al-Rāṭat al-Muḥammadiyya li'l-ʿUlamāʾ*, December 28, 2022.

[362] He took the *wird* from Muḥammad ibn Abū Bakr al-Dilāʾī on his way to Ḥajj. See Wuld Ākāh, *al-Ṭarīqa al-Shādhiliyya fī Bilād Shinqīṭ*, 152.

[363] See https://waamd.lib.berkeley.edu/titles/216?fieldName=authorId&query=2903 (Last Accessed October 9, 2023)

and geographical locations. This served to replace the relatively short-lived influence of al-Sanūsī's *ʿAqīda* prose text which had been studied in the region for a limited time following its introduction to the western flank of the Sahara, most likely through the Timbuktu and Walāta route. As previously discussed in Chapter III, Timbuktu's Baghayūghu and Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥawḍī had already versified al-Sanūsī's *Umm al-barāhīn* long before the events that disrupted the stability in the eastern parts of Mauritania and Timbuktu.

Before the arrival of the *Iḍāʾat al-Dujunna* from Morocco to the Sahara, Mauritanians had been using the prose *ʿAqīda* chapter, particularly the "*Mā tanṭiqū bihi al-alsina wa taʿtaqiduhu al-afʾida min wājib ʾumūr al-diyānāt*," from Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī's *Risāla* text in their study of creed. However, the Aghlālī scholar ʿAbd Allāh Wuld Ḥimā Allāh al-Ghallāwī (d. 1779) transformed this *ʿaqīda* chapter into a didactic poem entitled "*Naẓmʿaqīdat al-risāla*."[364] As previously mentioned in the case of the *Dāliyya*, these examples further highlight the evolving pedagogical landscape, reflecting the paradigm shift in the prevailing intellectual milieu during this era—the emergence of the poetry and verse-making tradition. I would say three significant aspects mark the shift from prose to the poetic genre during this period: 1) Didactic poems offered greater ease of memorization compared to prose compositions. 2) Poetry showcased mastery of the Arabic linguistic tools, allowing for the exhibition of what Umar Sheikh Tahir termed as the 'sophisticated Arabic heavy style,' integral to the aesthetics of

[364] The seventeenth-century Moroccan Ibn ʿĀshir's section on *ʿAqīda* in his *al-Murshid al-Muʿīn fī ḍarūrat li-ʿulūm al-dīn* was another didactic poem on creed that surfaced in Mauritania around the same time.

verse-making.[365] 3) This era underscored the crucial importance of Arabic language knowledge and its associated tools within both intellectual and general societal circles. Arabic poetry emerged as "one of the vital agencies for the Arabic literary development" in the Saharan and Sahelian regions, as noted by Sheikh Tahir.[366]

Building up the significant influence of al-Maqqarī and the broader Maghribī intellectual atmosphere influence on the evolution of Mauritanian scholarship, particularly in the domain of Arabic poetry during the period in focus, another compelling example, in part, is found in al-Maqqarī's *madīḥ qaṣāʾid*. Recall that al-Maqqarī is an integral part of Ibn Rāzikah's intellectual heritage. This connection criss-crosses through Ibn Rāzikah's aforementioned teacher, al-Walātī al-Maḥjūbī (d. 1713), who was a student of Mayyāra (d. 1662), directly linked to al-Maqqarī. His *madīḥ qaṣāʾid*, specifically those celebrating the virtues of the Prophet Muḥammad and his sandals, such as his *Rajaz fī'l-niʿāl al-Nabawī*, provide a clear testament to this influence. These *qaṣāʾid* may have indirectly influenced Ibn Rāzikah's inspiration for his extensive ode dedicated to the same subject.[367] Nevertheless, while al-Maqqarī undeniably played a prominent role in shaping the poetic landscape surrounding the veneration of the Prophet's sandals during his era, it was the profound influence of Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad al-Shāmī al-Khazrajī al-Fāsī, a

[365] Umar Sheikh Tahir, "Linguistic Localization of Sufi Poetry in Northern Nigeria: A Synopsis of Composition and Performance from the 20th Century," Paper presented at the African Studies Association (ASA) Conference, San Francisco, (November 30 - December 2, 2023): 1.

[366] Ibid., 3-4.

[367] See the poem in al-Amīn, *al-Wasīṭ*, 3-6 and al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh,* 82-85. Al-Maqqarī's *Fatḥ al-Mutaʿāl fī al- niʿāl* was one of the books Shaykh Sīdiyā al-Kabīr bought in his travel to Morocco. See Stewart, "A New Source on the Book Market in Morocco in 1830 and Islamic Scholarship in West Africa," 219.

distinguished Maghribian poet and belletrist, that loomed large in Ibn Rāzikah's composition. The Prophet's sandals bear a profound connection to him, representing an external yet intimate link to his essence. Among the Prophet Muḥammad's immediate community, interactions with his sandals held great significance. Companions like ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿud were known to take off the sandals and carry them under their arms. Across centuries and regions, these sandals have been revered as objects through which blessings are sought (*al-tabarruk*). For many Sufis, venerating the Prophet Muḥammad includes a deep sense of servitude, expressing their profound need and aspiration to tread and be the same paths that his sandals once graced. This sentiment, in part, similar to that expressed by al-Maqqarī, is part of the motivation for poets like al-Shāmī and Ibn Rāzikah, who composed in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad's sandals.

Al-Shāmī, renowned for his distinctive school of poetic thought owed his reputation to his profound understanding of the subtleties and nuances of Arabic semantics, rhetoric, and the art of expression. He shared a significant relationship with both al-Maqqarī and al-Fishtālī. Al-Shāmī corresponded with al-Fishtālī following al-Maqqarī's works on the *Niʿāl*. Al-Maqqarī's scholarly eminence and interactions with the Dilāʾiyya and Nāṣiriyya branches, known for their profound reverence for the Prophet Muḥammad, significantly contributed to the broad appreciation of poetry dedicated to the Prophet's sandals within the brotherhood and the general populace. This admiration was also amplified by the Saʿdī dynasty's patronage of works honouring the Prophet, which facilitated the widespread recognition of al-Maqqarī's praise poems. However, al-Shāmī's own compositions, replete with odes venerating the Prophet's sandals, had a direct impact on motivating Ibn Rāzikah to compose his own praise poem dedicated to the sacred Sandals of the Prophet Muḥammad. One of al-Shāmī's succinct poems reads:

Through the Sandals the ailing is healed from distress,
With them, misfortunes and afflictions depart.

They are a cure, however, sipping their remedy,
Is sweeter than all the delights and blessings.

Come, let's kiss their dust, for who knows,
Perhaps, from the spark of their footprint, a fire glows.

For many a patient, upon their physician's arrival,
Fears and complaints vanish.[368]

In an extensive poem in a *ṭawīl* meter concluding each stanza with the Arabic letter *fāʾ*, al-Shāmī says abouts the sandals:

Let the parched lips of the yearning be their cure,
And let them sip from the traces of guided footsteps, pure.

And their guise veiling like a noble sandal's grace,
From which time draws its rain and finds healing.

Do not reprimand them, for blame only intensifies their passion
And continually feeds their desire, extravagantly.

The tears have dried up within, but deep inside they reside,
For those who chided through the lips softly, they remained more attached

If distance veils her from them, their virtues remain,
They left no veil or shelter.

And if that day comes when the rendezvous appears,
Here is a breath of kindness, drawing near, dispelling fears.[369]

[368] Entry: Dīwān Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad al-Shāmī al-Khazrajī al-Fāsī, on *Mawsūʿat al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī*. Available at Arabic Poems – https://arabicpoems.com

[369] Ibid.

Then he ends the poem with the hope of reaching his aspirations by the blessings of the sandals through the owner.

> Just as I have in my praise of the sandals,
> By them, one reaches the heights of aspiration.
>
> Indeed, my verses cannot fulfil the praise that befits their beauty
> How can they be sufficient, because by them we attain abundant guidance
>
> For you, my prayers like the radiant moonlight shine,
> And for the longing heart, your divine promise.[370]

This particular poem rhyming on the Arabic letter *fāʾ* shaped Ibn Rāzikah's poem composition in praise and depiction of the sandals of the Prophet Muḥammad. Like the Andalusian poetry style of *muʿāraḍa*, a method of emulating or imitating a previous poem using its meter and rhyme, Ibn Rāzikah imitated al-Shāmī's poem by composing his poem in the same meter and concluding each stanza with the letter *fāʾ*. In his praise poem from his *dīwān*, Ibn Rāzikah says:

> Love has watered my heart like an unadulterated wine
> Not minding or paying attention to any blame
>
> A love judge declared the heart to be abandoned
> Since it suffers a malady without a cure or remedy
>
> My days are filled with tears like a river between my eyelids and sleep
> My nights are like a sea covered with veil
>
> Left wounded by the arrows of love, devastated by passion
> It revealed what was hidden, and concealed what was obvious
>
> He is left longing in the depths of his heart,
> Elevating sometimes, lowering other times by its circumstances
>
> Friends try to console and ease the pain of abandonment
> Alas, can one who lost a loved one be pacified

[370] Entry: Dīwān Abū al-Hasan ʿAlī ibn Ahmad al-Shāmī al-Khazrajī al-Fāsī on *Mawsūʿat al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī*. Available at Arabic Poems – https://arabicpoems.com

We stayed awake while they slept, then they criticized our drowsiness,
But they are right, an eye without kohl is not the same as a hairy one

For a sincere lover, his heart is afflicted,
His complaint is the bitterness that cannot be concealed.

The ropes of love, though strong, do not strengthen the hopes,
The hope of a lover's union, its habits are feeble.

If the sight of the beloved is missed, it is only
By his beautiful traits that one finds contentment.

If you do not see the blessed sandal, then lower yourself
To the likeness of them, and occupy yourself kissing its tracks

Stand with intention of perceiving its fragrance
Like a soul about to say farewell to its body

Do not agree to kiss your beloved once,
when you can do that a thousand times or more

A fragrant garden appeared in its finest, for its fragrance
Make the eye envy the nose for perceiving it

Can the mouth close without the lips touching,
Or can the eyelid lower without the eyes?

Closeness of his affliction averts destruction
and if not for predestination it could avert death

It brings forth instant gains to the earning,
and it prevents every difficulty in the process

A spear from Rudayna with a curved arrow,
and a big wide sword from Surayj

Therefore, reveal all the secrets you conceal
and beware of poor explanation or omission

The self-seeker engages the judgement of three judges
Namely *sharīʿa*, the *ʿaql* and *ʿurf*.[371]

[371] al-Amīn, *al-Waṣīṭ,* 4-5; al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh*, 82-85.

In the same poem, Ibn Rāzikah goes further to say:

> Righteous predecessors served the blessed sandal,
> So be a good follower of their footsteps, and do not stray[372]

The "predecessors" who honored the blessed sandal that Ibn Rāzikah is referring to is no other than al-Shāmī. Though al-Shāmī's name is not mentioned explicitly in the verse, another verse in Ibn Rāzikah's *dīwān* clearly confirms this where he explicitly proclaims of his emulation of al-Shāmī's poem ending in the Arabic letter *fāʾ*. He says:

> I followed al-Shāmī's example in his *fāʾiyyah*, knowing,
> That I am weak, and indeed far below his level of intellect.[373]

The above poem by Ibn Rāzikah in praise and description of the sandals of the Prophet Muḥammad is not his only *madīḥ* poem. Ibn Rāzikah's *madīḥ qaṣāʾid,* as well as those of his Saharan contemporaries, were motivated, in part, by the Maghribī intellectual and religious milieu as demonstrated in the context of the works of al-Maqqarī and al-Shāmī. Furthermore, like al-Maqqarī and al-Shāmī, Ibn Rāzikah's *qaṣāʾid* mostly follow the Andalusian literary forms and poetic patterns in four explicit ways one of which I have mentioned above *muʿāraḍa* (imitation of a previous poem). Secondly, it does not follow the traditional *Jāhilī* or pre-Islamic and early Islamic era forms where the quest is first defined by the *naṣīb,* elegizing the beloved campsite, the *raḥīl*, an embarkment of the journey with the almighty caravan to the beloved, and the *fakhr/madīḥ,* the praise and celebratory boasts in gratitude for the incomparable beauty of the

[372] al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān*, 85.

[373] Ibid., 48.

one or thing praised/described. Ibn Rāzikah explicitly acknowledges the Andalusian influence himself in some verses in his *dīwān*. In one, he writes:

> I empower him with pure virgin-like eloquent poetry
> A product of a meticulous thought, a well-linked chain of good nature
>
> Like a cheerful Arabian maiden in stylish Andalusian apparel
> Described in the literature, gentle and gracefully nurtured.[374]

Lastly, Ibn Rāzikah explicitly notes the profound influence of the Andalusian poet Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdūs ibn Zaydūn al-Makhzūmī al-Qurṭubī (d. 1071), describing his style as akin to having been imbued with wine from Ṣarkhad, a Damascene town renowned for its winemaking. The impact of Andalusian poetry on the Sahara likely endured over an extended period due to the migration of itinerant scholars and refugees, contributing to its historical presence in the region. However, it became especially prominent in the seventeenth to eighteenth century due to the mobility and migration of individuals who embodied Andalusian intellectual traditions and the proliferation of texts of Andalusian origin. Scholars such as Ibn Rāzikah and even al-Yadālī, as will be shown later in this chapter, incorporated this influence into their works. It was only after the era of first-generation poets such as Ibn Rāzikah, al-Yadālī, and Bū Famayn that subsequent generations of scholars and poets began to integrate classical pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetic forms. These second-generation scholars, which included prolific poets and belletrists like Aḥmad al-Maʾmūn ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣūfī ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 1819) and the aforementioned Ibn Ṭulba al-Yaʿqūbī, assumed a central role in not only advancing and solidifying the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania but also in refining it. According to some Mauritanian literary critics, al-Maʾmūn al-Yaʿqūbī was the first Mauritanian to compose poems

[374] al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān*, 107.

in the classical pre-Islamic forms.[375]These developments could be attributed to the increased exposure and interactions of eighteenth to nineteenth-century Mauritanian scholars and poets with a wider array of literary and intellectual sources, which became more accessible during this period. In this context, Mauritanian scholars like Shaykh Sīdiyā al-Kabīr played a key role, as mentioned earlier. Their contributions are highlighted through documented accounts, such as Shaykh Sīdiyā's journey to Morocco, where he acquired substantial volumes of books and manuscripts previously unknown in Mauritania, as meticulously documented by Stewart.[376]

The Maghribī intellectual community was crucial in Ibn Rāzikah's scholarly pursuits to the extent that he composed a poem aimed at gaining clarity on various aspects of *fiqh*, semantic-rhetoric, and *uṣūlī* matters. In this poetic inquiry, he initially addresses it to a broad spectrum of scholars without specifying any individual by name.

> *Shuyūkh al-bayān* who have tasted the real sweetness
> of knowledge, which isn't fed to any other than its possessors.
>
> Greetings, from an unknown and noble being
> May the blessing and mercy of God engulf you.[377]

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[375] Unlike the poetry of first-generation Mauritanian poets, which sometimes showcased Andalusian poetic elements portraying urban scenes and imagery uncommon to Saharan desert life, the odes composed by second-generation poets embraced themes of pre-Islamic and early Islamic desert and Bedouin life, frequently highlighting camels, satirical content, and other related motifs. See Muḥammad al-Ṣūfī ibn Mukhtār, "al-Mabāḥith al-fiqhiyya fī al-Qaṣīdat al-sharafiyya li'l-Imām al-Ṣūfī ibn Umkhaytīr," (Risālat takharruj, al-Maʾhad al-ʿālī li'l-Dirāsāt wa'l-buḥūth al-Islāmiyya, Nouakchott, 2009-2010). See his odes on *Qaṣāʾid al-shiʿr* al-Maʾmūn al-Yaʿqūbī (Last Accessed 5th January 2024). Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Māʾ al-ʿAynayn also edited his *Dīwān shiʿr* Aḥmad al-Maʾmūn al-Yaʿqūbī.

[376] Stewart, "A New Source on the Book Market in Morocco in 1830 and Islamic Scholarship in West Africa," 209-247.

[377] al-Qādī al- ʿAlawī, *Dīwān*, 177.

He then proceeds to explicitly name Abū ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Zukrī al-Fāsī, saying:

> And you, Ibn Zukrī, are a leader (*imām*) and verifier (*muḥaqqiq*),
> Unrivaled you are in this world, without any match.[378]

Ibn Zukrī served as a significant source of reference for al-Yadālī, especially in his *tafsīr*, *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz*. The influence of Ibn Zukrī extended to numerous Mauritanian scholars from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century. For instance, Muḥammad Mawlūd al-Yaʿqūbī al-Mūsawī in his work *Maṭharat al-qulūb* drew extensively from Ibn Zukrī's commentary on the *al-Naṣīḥat al-Kāfiya*, originally composed by earlier mentioned Zarrūq (d. 1493). This interconnectedness of scholarship demonstrates the enduring impact of these intellectual interactions.

External and Internal Dynamics on the Arabic Poetry Tradition

In this section, I explore the fusion of Maghribī influences, Andalusian literary heritage, and the internal dynamics characterizing the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. I argue that this blend cultivated not merely a resurgence or revival but a definitive emergence of an aspect of the poetry and verse-making tradition of Mauritania. It served as a catalyst for inventive tropes and a display of literary sophistication. To illustrate this, I narrow focus to al-Yadālī's work, specifically his *qaṣīdat* "*ṣalātu Rabbī maʿa al-salāmi*," a creative ode in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. To commence this exploration, I provide a concise biography of al-Yadālī.

[378] al-Qādī al-ʿAlawī, *Dīwān*, 178.

Al-Yadālī

Muḥammad al-Yadālī (d. 1752-3), an eminent figure and prolific scholar, stands as one of the most influential contributors to the Islamic intellectual and literary history of Mauritania. Born in 1684-85 into a revered scholarly family in the Qibla (Gebla), the southwest region of Mauritania, he lived through the late seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth century, passing away in 1752-53. Al-Yadālī hailed from the Ahl al-Maḥḥam Saʿīd faction of the Idawdāy tribe, an important sub-division of the al-Daymānī clan within the Tashumsha Zawāyā people of Mauritania.[379] His mother, Fātima bint Sīdī al-Amīn b. Bāraka Allāh al-Daymāniyya, was a righteous woman. In his anthology, Aḥmad al-Amīn recognized al-Yadālī as one of the four foremost Mauritanian scholars comparable to Ibn Rāzikah.[380] Al-Yadālī was known for his profound understanding, exceptional memory, and moral rectitude.[381] His education was enriched by the teachings of prominent scholars of his time, including Shaykh Nakhtār ibn al-Muṣṭafà al-Yadālī (his paternal cousin, from whom he received the Shādhiliyya order), Shaykh Alfagha ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿUmar al-Abhamī (who instructed him in the sciences of the Qur'an), Aḥmad ibn al-Mukhtār ibn Bāba al-Yadālī (another paternal cousin, his mentor in *fiqh*), and al-Qāḍī al-Mukhtār ibn Ashfagha Musā al-Yaʿqūbī al-Mūsawī, among others.[382]

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[379] The Zawāyā clan, popularly known as the Tashumsha, is divided into five with the Awlād Daymān as one of the top clans.

[380] al-Amīn, *al-Wasīṭ*, 223.

[381] Ibid.

[382] Muḥammadhan wuld Bābāh*, al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Yadālī: Ḥayātuhu wa Āthāruhu al-ʿIlmiyya,* (Nouakchott: Dār al-Riḍwān, 2018); wuld Bābāh, *al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Yadālī: Nuṣūṣ min al-tārīkh al-Mūrītānī* (Carthage: al-Mu'assasa al-waṭaniyya li'l-tarjama wa'l-taḥqīq wa'l-dirāsāt, Bayt al-Ḥikma, 1990).

Among his students, Wālid ibn al-Muṣṭafà ibn Khālunā (d. 1797), a scholar of profound knowledge, emerged as the most representative and famous. Much like his teacher, Wālid excelled as a poet, composing works in both classical Arabic and "the then-spoken Znaga Berber dialect of the *gibla.*"[383]

Al-Yadālī is credited with an extensive literary legacy, boasting over fifty works covering religious (Islamic) and non-religious disciplines, encompassing both verse and prose genres. His prolific output in diverse fields reflects his deep engagement with scholarly pursuits. In expressing his dedication to literary scholarship, al-Yadālī compared himself to Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), the Egyptian polymath famous for producing at least one work in numerous Islamic sciences and disciplines. Al-Yadālī remarked on his own body of work, stating, "had I not been a nomad, I would have written as many works as al-Suyūṭī," underscoring the richness of his intellectual contributions despite the challenges of nomadic life.[384] Al-Yadālī's *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz* stands as the first completed and comprehensive Qur'an exegesis (*tafsīr*) across the Sahara and West Africa. This work marked a significant revolution in the region's scholarly sphere, particularly in the field of *tafsīr*. Furthermore, al-Yadālī's *Khātimat al-Taṣawwuf* is among the earliest manuals on Islamic spirituality and mysticism in the region and exerted a profound influence on subsequent intellectual movements. It became an model beacon for scholars within the Islamic mystical traditions of the Sahara and West Africa, leaving an incredible legacy on the spiritual sphere of the region.[385] As a pioneer, he belonged to the inaugural wave of adherents associated with the Shādhiliyya Sufi order in the Mauritanian

[383] Harry T. Norris, "Muslim Sanhaja Scholars of Mauritania," 155.

[384] Norris, "Znāga Islam During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," 507.

[385] See Kota Kariya, "Khātima (fī) al-taṣawwuf: An Arabic Work of a Western Saharan Muslim Intellectual," *Journal of Asian and African Studies,* no. 81, (2011):133-146.

context.[386] He is a key figure among the pioneers of the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania and is particularly distinguished in the realm of rhetorical poetry.[387] He composed two major devotional odes (*madīḥ*) in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad: the *Kubrà* (the grand ode) and the *Ṣughrà* (the small ode), both concluding with the Arabic alphabet's *mīm* (m). However, the *Ṣughrà*, also known as the *Ṣalātu Rabbī*, is 46 verses and more known. This ode significantly inspired the West African poetic tradition, influencing the stylistic composition of numerous well-known panegyric (*madīḥ*) poems dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad. Its impact resonates across the Sahara and West Africa, a topic I explore in the following passages.

Qaṣīdat "Ṣalātu Rabbī maʿa al-Salāmi"

Just as the Andalusian artistic influence persisted in shaping the intellectual endeavours of Mauritanian scholars and poets, the migration of the Banū Ḥassān tribe across the Sahara was concurrently impacting the Zawāyā and other indigenous communities. Reportedly reaching its zenith in the seventeenth century, Banū Ḥassān's growing dominance led the Zawāyā and other indigenous communities to adopt the Arabic tongue and culture. This cultural assimilation had a profound impact on the emerging expressions and socio-rhetoric of the Mauritanian people, as well as on the individuals recognized as the founding fathers of the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania.

This assimilation represented a unique synthesis of the people's intellectual and literary creativity and resulted in a distinct poetic cluster with the distinct prosody of the Arabic language. This evolution was characterized by the harmonious fusion of two distinct poetic

[386] Kariya, "Khātima (fī) al-taṣawwuf," 133-146.

[387] Ould Bah, "Introduction à la poésie mauritanienne," 36.

traditions namely the Andalusian and the Ḥassāniyya. While not identical, the driving force behind these changes shared some similarities with the intellectual and cultural transformations occurring in the Maghrib between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, largely influenced by the Saʿdian dynasty. The Saʿdian rulers' contribution to the revival of Morocco's poetic traditions would subsequently manifest in a distinct form within the emerging trend in Mauritania.

Much like the revival of classical Arabic poetry in the Saʿdian era, this cultural shift also witnessed the popularity of a particular type of poetry known as the Maghribī rhythmic or "*malḥūn*" (melodic) verse. These verses became a common feature in the Moroccan courts, especially during celebrations marking the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad. The roots of this tradition can be traced back to the sixteenth century with some of the earliest compositions credited to poets like Abū Fāris ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Maghrawī, who was closely associated with the Saʿdī sultan Aḥmad al-Manṣūr (d. 1603), and a few before al-Maghrawī.[388]

During this period, a remarkable wave of poets who specialized in composing verses in the *malḥūn* style emerged, with many hailing from the Sijilmāsa region which shared borders with the Sahara. A distinctive feature of these poems was the incorporation of Bedouin dialects, setting them apart from the classical Arabic poetry of the time, which bore a significant Andalusian influence. The *malḥūn* style quickly gained traction among singers and found widespread popularity in Morocco, particularly during the Saʿdī era.[389] Drawing inspiration from

[388] Norris, *The Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara: Studies of the Historical Events, Religious Beliefs, and Social Customs which Made the Remotest Sahara a Part of the Arab World,* (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1986): 55.

[389] Norris, *The Arab Conquest of the Western Sahara*, 55

the Andalusian form of poetry (*al-muwashshaḥ* and *al-zajal* poetic forms), it adopted a musical quality and flourished among the communities residing in the southern border regions and cities who eagerly embraced and incorporated it into their religious and cultural activities.

Around the same timeframe, the Ḥassānīs, too, developed a poetry style that mirrored the performance-based characteristics of Andalusian music. This Ḥassāniyya poetry, known as "*leghna*," assumed a musical form and was performed by troubadours in both private and public settings.[390] These troubadours, known as "*īggāwen*," composed and performed *leghna* pieces, frequently dedicating their verses to praise the ruling princes (Ḥassānī Amīr) of Mauritania's Emirates. The Saʿdī dynasty's alliance with the Ḥassānī authority developed close interactions between the two regions and facilitated the exchange of ideas and the flow of intellectual, social, and religious expressions. The burgeoning popularity of poetry during this era could be seen as one of the significant outcomes of these cross-cultural interactions.

Examining him and his ode as a crucial case study, particularly in the context of the foregoing and the so-called poetry emergence phenomenon, al-Yadālī's composition of the famous *qaṣīdat* "*ṣalātu Rabbī maʿa al-salāmi*" was no arbitrary act; instead, it mirrored the circumstances of his era. This noteworthy poem surfaced at a time when a surge of spiritual interest and the propagation of Sufi brotherhoods gained momentum. This trend began in the sixteenth century and grew particularly pronounced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, extending its influence across the Sahara and into the southern and eastern Sahel regions. Sufi saints and scholars during this era were regarded as bearers of supernatural powers

[390] Ibid., 57-61

or "*karāmāt*," which manifested in their ability to heal the afflicted, resolve crises, and perform other extraordinary feats.[391]

These developments provided fertile ground for diverse expressions of spirituality aimed at drawing individuals closer to God and nurturing a profound love for the Prophet Muḥammad. Many of these expressions found inspiration in poetic eulogies dedicated to the Prophet, Muslim saints, and scholars. For instance, Ibn Rāzikah composed his *madīḥ* ode on the sandals of the Prophet Muḥammad during this period. Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter III, al-Nābigha al-Ghallāwī noted the profound spiritual impact of al-Būṣīrī's "*Burda*", a praise poem on the Prophet Muḥammad, on Muḥammad al-Yadālī. After reciting verses from the poem, al-Yadālī healed his ailing camel which had suffered a brutal fracture and visible shoulder bone protrusion.[392] This Sufi approach, channeled through *madīḥ* poems, served as a most fitting conduit for developing divine closeness, deep veneration for the Prophet, and unwavering devotion.[393]

It is important to highlight that al-Yadālī did not merely passively experience these developments. He, along with contemporaries in the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania,

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[391] Norris, "Znaga Islam During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," 500.

[392] Ibid., 503. As Hunwick claims, the ode is "much appreciated for its devotional use, but also because it can serve as a sort of talisman." in Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," *Research in African Literature,* 28, 3 (2004): 210-223. See also Al-Nābigha al-Ghallāwī, *al-Najm al-Thāqib fī baʿd mā liʾl-Yadālī fī Manāqib*, or *al-Sanad al-ʿĀlī fī Taʿrīf al-Yadālī*, in OMAR *http://dl.ub.uni-freiburg.de/omar/mfmau0120/0004*; Norris, "Znāga Islam During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," 503.

[393] For discussions on these ideas, see Andrea Brigaglia, "Sufi Poetry in Twentieth-Century Nigeria: A Khamriyya and a Ghazal by Shaykh Abū Bakr ʿAtīq (1909-1974)," *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 6 (2017): 190-232.

including Ibn Rāzikah and al-Dhiʾb al-Kabīr, in turn, actively contributed to shaping these cultural and spiritual shifts. These poets composed their *madīḥ* poems on the Prophet Muḥammad, playing a critical role in adding to the burgeoning poetic and spiritual atmosphere of their time.

As per al-Yadālī's commentary on the poem titled *al-Murabbīʿ alā ṣalātu Rabbī*, he cited his inspiration for crafting the *ṣalātu Rabbī* as follows:

> While on a journey one day, I passed by a group of musicians with stringed instruments repeatedly playing and singing a melodiously delightful and beautiful Ḥassāniyya-metred song. I felt enthused by it as it buzzed into my ears. I immediately felt it would be beautiful to compose a praise poem on the Prophet Muḥammad – blessings and peace of God be upon him – in the same style/form of the song which I did in the same pattern. [394]

The Ḥassāniyya-metred song mentioned by al-Yadālī in his commentary on the *ṣalātu Rabbī* is an ode in praise of Aḥmad wuld Hayba (d. 1762), the Amīr of Brākna Emirate in the southwest region of Mauritania. This composition, tailored for the Ḥassānī Arabic dialect, adheres to the Ḥassāniyya poetic meter (*baḥr,* in Ḥassāniyya 'equivalent' *batt*) known as *ḥadhw-ijrād*, named after the manner in which locusts disperse dust and is typically sung by *Īggāwen* (griots).[395] In this meter form, unvocalized consonants are introduced and centrally placed in the hemistich in a way that the poem's *batt* is a *ṭalʿa* (c c c b c b) and concludes with a *gaaf* (a b a b).[396] The poem begins as follows:

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[394] al-Yadālī*, al-Murabbīʿ alā ṣalātu Rabbī* (Nouakchott: Maṭbūʿāt al-Rābiṭat al-ʿĀlamiyya li'l-Shurafāʾ al-ʾAdārisa wa ʾAbnāʾ ʿumūmatihim, 2010): 90.

[395] Norris, *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song*, 37, 45

[396] Norris, *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song*, 46

My question comes with no surprise
As I seek for some reward

Who is a gallant young Arab
Other than Ibn Hayba?

In the same commentary, al-Yadālī elaborates further stating:

> When I recited this ode, imitating the Ḥassāniyya poem, one of the chiefs of Banū Maghfar was wroth against me on account of that imitation, because the poem was in praise of him. In their view, that is the most telling way of angering one of them. If a poet composes a *kerza* (a Ḥassānīya ode) in praise of a man, then distorts part of it or imitates it with another, in measure and in rhyme, and with it praises another man, then he is exposed to his anger. Men say such and such a person has robbed the *kerza* of so and so, and has given it to someone else. In their view it is as though he has all but slain him. I continued to hear that he was angry with me on account of that, until he heard one night of my arrival at one of the tribes. When he encountered me, his face betrayed his anger, and he said to me, 'why have you stolen my *kerza* and treated me thus?' I said to him, 'Yes, I have taken it, and I have given it to one who is superior to both of us.' All he did was to lower his gaze, pensively, for a while, then he raised his head and said, 'You have spoken the truth.' At that time he gave me a number of clothes, then he made that gift a charge on his part.[397]

In other words, al-Yadālī composed the *ṣalātu Rabbī*, an ode in classical Arabic style mirroring the Ḥassāniyya-metred poem, originally dedicated to the Amīr but changed the one praised (the subject – *al-mamdūḥ*) by replacing it with the Prophet Muḥammad. This poetic substitution was something frowned upon by the local Ḥassān community, causing the Amīr's initial displeasure.

[397] al-Yadālī*, al-Murabbīʿalā ṣalātu Rabbī*, 101-102. This translation is by Norris in Norris, *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song*, 38.

Eventually, the Amīr accepted the modified ode upon realizing it honoured someone of higher authority than himself.

In the *ṣalātu Rabbī*, al-Yadālī departed from Ḥassāniyya wordings and instead utilized classical Arabic vocabulary. He introduced a newly constructed meter tailored to the Ḥassāniyya ode (in the *ḥadhw-ijrād* form) and incorporated rhyming patterns and short hemistichs, reminiscent of the Andalusian *muwashshaḥāt* associated with courtly love. That is, except for the first verse, each verse of the ode is composed of four short/partial tetrastichs. The first three partial tetrastichs in every verse conclude with the same rhyming letter/sound, while the fourth concludes with a different letter/sound. The end of the fourth tetrastich in the first verse rhymes or have a shared *qāfiya* with the fourth tetrastichs of all the other verses.

In his commentary on the poem, al-Yadālī writes that the construction of the *ṣalātu Rabbī* renders it a unique genre of [*madīḥ*] poetry as it deviates from the established fifteen Arabic poetry meters codified by Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāḥīdī (d. 786/791)[398] or the additional sixteenth meter introduced by ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd ibn ʿAbd al-Majīd (d. 793),[399] also known as al-Akhfash al-Akbar.[400]Yet, scholars such as Hunwick and Abdullah assert that West African

[398] These metres are as follows: the *Ṭawīl* (long), *Madīd* (protracted), *Basīṭ* (spread out), *Kāmil* (complete), *Wāfir* (abundant), *Hazaj* (trilling), *Rajaz* (trembling), *Ramal* (trotting), Munsariḥ (quick-paced), *Khafīf* (light), *Muqtaḍab* (untrained), *Mujtathth* (cut-off), *Muḍāriʿ* (similar), *Sarīʿ* (swift), and *Mutaqārib* (nearing). al-Farāḥīdī is also credited with the current standard for Arabic alphabets diacritics.

[399] The sixteenth is the *Mutadārik* (overtaking).

[400] al-Yadālī*, al-Murabbī ʿalā ṣalātu Rabbī*, 98-100.

Muslim scholars' literary poetry lacked "originality" and "philosophical depth."[401] However, "they recognize the 'mastery of Arabic language,' the 'eloquence' and the 'high levels of linguistic skill' of West African authors of Arabic poetry, as well as the 'very high standard of technical skills' demonstrated by their use of various classical meters."[402]

Al-Yadālī's literary and poetic genius, most likely deeply rooted in the dynamics of Saharan society, afforded him the freedom to explore new concepts, metaphors, and worldviews. His creative adaptation of a non-standard meter and strophic form with formal Arabic gave birth to a fresh genre of *madīḥ* poetry, surpassing the baroque *muʿāraḍa* style seen in the *Burda*. Despite its depth, the poem remains accessible, allowing anyone to sing along with it. Furthermore, it invites extensive commentaries through its references to various Islamic disciplines including *Sīra* (biography of the Prophet Muḥammad), *Ādāb* (Arabic literature), *Balāgha* (Arabic rhetoric), *Taṣawwuf* (Islamic spiritual tradition), *Kalām* (theology), and *Shamāʾil* (characteristics, and habits of the prophet Muḥammad) literature.

In his commentary *al-Murabbīʿalā ṣalātu Rabbī*, praising the exceptional brilliance of his poem, al-Yadālī elaborates on its unique classical Arabic prosodic style, replete with the subtleties of the Arabic language and impeccable construction.[403] He asserts that the poem's profound rhetorical intricacies, characterized by antitheses (*ṭibāq*), parallelism, paronomasia (*jināṣ*), and more, can be truly appreciated by those with profound literary experience and refined

[401] Hunwick, "The Arabic qasida of West Africa," 84; Abdullah, "Arabic Poetry of West Africa," 368-9; Hunwick, "The Arabic qasida of West Africa," 84. Ogunnaike challenges these stereotypical assertions in Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection*, 4.

[402] Brigaglia, "Sufi Poetry in Twentieth-Century Nigeria,"192.

[403] al-Yadālī, *al-Murabbīʿalā ṣalātu Rabbī*, 90-91.

taste, including individuals versed in the two sciences of rhetorical meanings (*ʿilmay al-maʿānī*).[404]

Al-Yadālī's commentarial emphasis on the linguistic implications featured in the poem may stem from the growing significance of Arabic language expertise during his era. They also reflect the ongoing discourse on scholarly excellence in the Islamic sciences and the power struggles among diverse groups, each vying for dominance in political, religious, intellectual and other dimensions. It highlights how shifting modes of expression was vital in shaping the religious and social attitudes of his time. One can also say that al-Yadālī's emphasis on the poem's linguistic implications might be an attempt to showcase and cement his standing as a poetic authority, emphasize his scholarly influence, and demonstrate the wealth of knowledge nurtured in his environment. Because his ode captures the complex dynamics of aesthetic elegance, poetic finesse and literary prowess in the world of Arabic poetry of seventeenth to eighteenth century Mauritania.

This poetic finesse and aesthetic elegance are also replete in his other major *madīḥ* poetry known as *qaṣīdat al-kubrà* "the big ode." Take, for instance, these two verses:

> Fadam al-fujjār jār
> wa najīʿ al-hām hām
>
> Kāmil al-awṣāf ṣāf
> wāfir al-aqsām sām
>
> So, the blood of the wicked flows,
> And we gather the inspirations of whims.
>
> Complete in description, and pure,
> Abundant in divisions, like poison.

[404] al-Yadālī*, al-Murabbī ʿalā ṣalātu Rabbī*, 95-96

Any individual with Arabic poetic inclination and an eye for mastery in antitheses (*ṭibāq*), parallelism, and paronomasia (*jināS*) would easily recognize the stylistic dexterities employed by al-Yadālī in various verses of the "big" and "small" odes. Traditionally, these elements or constituents, inherent in the Arabic linguistic tradition, symbolize scholarly authority and mastery of Arabic eloquence.

Ṣalātu Rabbī and its Talismanic and Spiritual Significance

Due to the growing spiritual inclination of society and the significance of miraculous qualities attributed to scholarly individuals, especially those with Sufi backgrounds, a phenomenon observed in the seventeenth-century Western Sahara, the *ṣalātu Rabbī* poem acquired a profound talismanic and spiritual significance, reminiscent of similar poems in the Maghrib and Egypt, such as al-Būṣīrī's *Burda*. Al-Yadālī, in his commentary *al-Murabbī ʿalà Salāt Rabbī* on the *Ṣalātu Rabbī*, recounts an incident during a journey on a ship owned by Christians heading to Agādīr Dūma. As night fell, a powerful windstorm threatened to wreck the vessel, and panic spread among the passengers. While al-Yadālī stood quietly on one side of the ship, unbeknownst to anyone else on board, he overheard someone reciting a particular verse repeatedly. That is, the first verse of the *ṣalātu Rabbī*.

> Prayer of my Lord, and His peace
> Be upon my dearly beloved, the best of humankind.

Intrigued by the man's action, al-Yadālī inquired about the poet behind these profound words which the man told him that the author was a Zāwī (Zawāyā person) from Gebla. To the man's amazement, al-Yadālī disclosed that he was, in fact, the poet in question. In an attempt to

employ the talismanic power of his poem and ward off potential disaster, al-Yadālī recited his verses to the people on the ship. As he did, a sense of calm gradually enveloped the ship safely guiding it to its destination. Overjoyed, the crew and people on the ship hoisted al-Yadālī onto their shoulders and conveyed him ashore.[405] At a lavish reception at a nearby palace, he was showered with gifts including camel-loads of writing papers, estimated to weigh between 150 and 200 kilograms.[406] It was thanks to these generous donations that he was able to produce his extensive works such as his *tafsīr*. This could explain why the nineteenth century Muḥummadhun ibn Aḥmad al-Daymānī (d. 1864-5) somewhat exaggeratedly claimed that al-Yadālī was the first to write in Mauritania, and possibly due to the scarcity of written records during that period.[407] However, a more plausible argument might be that al-Yadālī was the most prolific scholar of his time who benefitted from unparalleled access to writing paper that distinguished him from his contemporaries and enabled prolific creations. In Chapter III, we explored how Saharan societies grappled with a scarcity of paper which primarily stemmed from concerns about its origins from non-Muslim sources, thereby causing debates regarding its purity. Despite its Christian Dutch origins, al-Yadālī's recognition of their paper as a "divine gift" possibly encouraged his contemporaries to engage writing scholarly works and composing poetry. Concurrently, this era saw heightened commercial interactions with European merchants across West Africa, primarily via the Senegal Atlantic routes. Mauritania began importing writing paper from European traders along the Atlantic coast, as well as from mills in Morocco, Libya, and Egypt. Notably, Timbuktu emerged as a key distribution center in West Africa owing

[405] al-Yadālī*, al-Murabbī ʿalā ṣalātu Rabbī*, 100-101.

[406] Lydon, A Thirst for Knowledge: Arabic Literacy, Writing Paper and Saharan Bibliophiles, 55

[407] Norris, *The Berbers in Arabic Literature,* 208.

to its international prominence as a hub for scholars and trade caravans.[408] Pilgrims, traders, and returning students to Mauritania brought along manuscripts and paper supplies. Local Saharan traders and scholars like Shaykh Sīdiyā al-Kabīr (d. 1868) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries engaged in trading Gum Arabic, abundant in Mauritania, with European merchants in exchange for paper. The increased accessibility and affordability of paper in the Sahara and Sahel regions significantly boosted literacy rates and promoted a culture of writing. By the latter part of the eighteenth century, the challenges posed by high costs and scarce writing materials had substantially diminished, making these resources more attainable for the region's inhabitants. In essence, the availability of writing intellectual devices and technology in the region not only facilitated the documentation of poetry and other literary genres but also supported their memorization. Dale F. Eickelman, in his studies on Islamic education in Morocco, argues that the presence of certain tools such as writing materials boosts memorization process. He further suggests an elaborate connection between oral and written systems in knowledge transmission where information is initially written down for oral conveyance and then reciprocally written and memorized.[409]

Beyond cultivating a culture of writing and increasing the memorization of texts, including poetry and versified works, the accessibility of writing materials facilitated their recording.[410] This development likely played a role in propelling Mauritania's Arabic poetry and verse-making into prominence during this period of reported emergence.

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[408] Lydon, "A Thirst for Knowledge: Arabic Literacy, Writing Paper and Saharan Bibliophiles," 47-50.
[409] Dale F. Eickelman, "The Art of Memory: Islamic Education and its Social Reproduction," *Society Studies in Society and History,* vol. 20, 4, (1978): 485-516.

[410] The widespread availability and accessibility of writing paper in Mauritania led to heightened interest in writing and memorization. This stands in contrast to developments in other parts of the Muslim world,

Going back to the *ṣalātu Rabbī*, despite recognizing the poem's spiritual and talismanic potency, al-Yadālī did not attribute the blessings and favours he received through it to himself but to the person whom he praised in his verses.[411] By establishing a connection with the authority of the Prophet Muḥammad, it elevated his own status. Thus, when al-Yadālī was positioned in a particular section of the ship, he symbolically shared some degree of similarities with the individual extolled in the poem.[412] It was a signification of his knowledge and closeness to the praised.[413] In other words, the memory, status and authority of the Prophet Muḥammad is invoked, recognized and routinized by al-Yadālī in the poem. Below is the first nine verses of the poem:

> Prayer of my Lord and His peace
> Be upon my dearly beloved, the best of humankind
>
> Of manifest translucence, nigh and within reach is he,
> The kind, compassionate, a courageous lion
>
> That is the Prophet of the Hashemite clan
> The exalted, the guide, from Tihāma
>
> The elevated one, the provider of relief, the indomitable
> The intercessor on the day of resurrection

---

such as Egypt, the Middle East, and Central Asia. In those regions, expanded paper production facilitated extensive marginal notes, increased production of commentaries and original works, thereby reducing the emphasis on memorization of texts, including literary poetry and versified works. Essentially, with paper becoming readily available and affordable, memorization gradually fell out of favour in these areas.

[411] al-Yadālī*, al-Murabbī ʿalā ṣalātu Rabbī*, 100-101; also in wuld Bābāh, *al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Yadālī: ḥayātuhu wa ʾāthāruhu al-ʿilmiyya,* (Nouakchott: Dār al-Riḍwān li-ṣāḥibihā Aḥmad Sālik ibn Muḥammad al-Amīn ibn Abbūh, 2018): 76-77.

[412] Abdulkadir, "Devotional Poetry and Religious Authority," 90.

[413] Ibid.

The essence of perfection, essence of beauty
The axis of majesty, axis of honour

The negator of error, provider of abundant shades
[He is, like] pure fresh water for every thirst

Possessor of beautiful character and countless lofty qualities
Abundant in giving, bountiful magnanimity

Most graceful qualities, most handsome of men
Most beautiful deeds, most beautiful names

Most elevated of the point of light, and of lofty glory
Most exalted of lineage and the highest of station[414]

Al-Yadālī's approach to the composition of the poem eschews the conventional erotic prelude commonly found in traditional *madīḥ qaṣāʾid*, where the poet often expresses sentiments of longing for a place or lost love. This deviation from tradition is in accordance with the Andalusian influence seen in the poem's form, particularly the *muwashshaḥāt*, which lends itself to oral dexterity and enhances the dramatic and performative aspects of the piece, as was the case in the original poem that inspired it.[415]Moreover, it serves as evidence of the enduring influence of Andalusian artistry in shaping Mauritania's intellectual sphere prior to and during the noted surge in the seventeenth to eighteenth century. This surge was largely propelled by the mobility

[414] In this work, I use Oludamini Ogunnaike's translation of the poem on his blog with my minor changes: Translation of al-Yadālī's qasīdat "salātu Rabbī maʿa al-salāmi (Last Accessed October 11, 2023). The complete audio recitation of the poem can be found in the following link: Ṣalāt Rabbī maʿa al-salāmi (Last Accessed January 8, 2024).

[415] Abdulkadir, "Devotional Poetry and Religious Authority," 90.

of scholars and texts embodying the rich Andalusian tradition, defining the intellectual landscape of the era.

The literary renaissance of the era, sparked by both external influences and internal dynamics, paved the way for poetic growth and regeneration and further solidified the significance of al-Yadālī's ode. This recognition extended beyond the general populace to encompass revered scholars of the time. For instance, al-Yadālī, in his commentary, *al-Murabbī ʿalà Salāt Rabbī* writes that Ibn Rāzikah was once asked to identify the most eloquent poet among the Zawāyā of Gebla. In response, Ibn Rāzikah referred to the verse below from the *ṣalātu Rabbī*, saying that he did not know any poet except the one who authored it.[416]

Āyāt Ṭāhā laysat tubāhā Wa lā tanāhā ʿalā 'l-dawāmi

The miracles of Ṭāhā, are never matched
and never ceasing, ever in continuity.

This anecdote of a scholar of Ibn Rāzikah's rank recognizing the value and impact of al-Yadālī's composition did more than just elevate al-Yadālī's poem; he breathed life into the art of verse-making at a time when literary poetry and poetic creativity were beginning to be on the rise. This period was marked by developments that encouraged creativity, and supported a poetic renaissance. It also paved the way for scholars to engage in poetic exchanges, with friendly banter between Ibn Rāzikah and al-Yadālī becoming commonplace. Composing verses became a symbol of intellectual and literary prowess, as Hunwick aptly notes, "the ability to compose

[416] al-Yadālī*, al-Murabbī ʿalā ṣalātu Rabbī*, 92-93.

Arabic verse came to be regarded as the hallmark of the scholar, even if relatively little of the verse output was of what one might call a literary nature."

These exchanges among scholars and poets, an uncommon occurrence not widely recognized before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when shifts in social and religious expressions were reshaping the cultural landscape of the region. Considering the historical skepticism of jurists about verse-making which was aimed at preventing the potential misuse of poetry through satires and other forms of profanity, the active involvement of respected scholars well-versed in Islamic law in these poetic exchanges likely played a significant role in cultivating a poetic consciousness among the people. It might have also established the foundation for preserving and transmitting poetry, thus contributing to our documentation of a distinct period of poetic emergence in the region.

It is also worth noting that since poetry is typically sung, and considering that the *ṣalātu Rabbī* was adapted from a Ḥassāniyya-metered poem originally praising wuld Hayba, the Amīr of Brākna, and later popularized by Īggāwen (griots), al-Yadālī's ode likely enjoyed a similar mode of dissemination. This observation brings us back to Stewart's assertion regarding the relationship between poets and local musicians who played a significant role in popularizing poetry.[417] In other words, in a semi-literate and predominantly oral society like Mauritania, al-Yadālī's ode, along with others from his era, likely found popularity through local musicians who performed and disseminated them to a broader audience and subsequent generations. This phenomenon resembles the rise of the *malḥūn* style in Morocco and the Ḥassānī *leghna* musical

[417] Personal email exchanges with Stewart (January 26, 2015). See also Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sahara," 9.

form, both of which echo the performance-based nature of Andalusian music. This parallel trend, wherein poetry gained extensive popularity among the populace through the efforts of local musicians, can be said to be connected, in part, to the reported emergence phenomenon of the eighteenth century. Perhaps, it stimulated the continued composition of panegyric odes for royal courts and special occasions such as the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

Ṣalātu Rabbī and West African Madīḥ Tradition

The composition of the *ṣalātu Rabbī*, if for nothing else, serves as on major example available to us that supports the argument for the reported emergence phenomenon of the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania during the era under investigation. With no precedent, this poem was likely the driving force that paved the way for the composition of similar forms of *madīḥ* poetry among prominent Mauritanian and, by extension, West African scholars and adherents of Sufi orders, echoing throughout the Sahara and broader West Africa. The ode gained immense popularity especially during important events such as the commemoration of the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad. Prominent examples of this include the Mauritanian Baddi wuld Sīdīnā's (d. 1847-8) *Tahniʾat al-Rabīʿ bi-madḥat al-shafīʿ*, the Senegalese Aḥmadū Bamba's (d. 1927) *Mawāḥib al-nāfiʿ fī madāʾiḥ al-shāfiʿ*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse's (d. 1975) *Ahlan bi-shahr al-mawlid*, and others. The impact of al-Yadālī's *ṣalātu Rabbī* on these scholars goes beyond merely composing *madīḥ qaṣāʾid* (devotional poetry); it encompasses the style and form of the original ode they emulated and other works of the scholar. I will illustrate the form and structure of the *ṣalātu Rabbī* using three verses as a sample:

Dhāka al-Rafīʿ**u**	al-Ghawth al-Munīʿ**u**	dhāka al-Shafīʿ**u**	yawm al-Qiyām**i**
ʿAyn al-Kamā**li**	ʿAyn al-Jamā**li**	Qutb al-Jalā**li**	Qutb al-Kirām**i**

Nāfi al-ḍalāl**i** ḍāfī al-ẓilāl**i** ṣāfī al-zulāl**i** li-kull al-ẓām**i**

That Exalted One, the Granting Helper, the Intercessor, on the Day of Resurrection.

The source of perfection, the source of beauty, the axis of majesty, the axis of honour.

The negator of error, provider of abundant shade, [he is] like pure fresh water for every thirst.

The structure of the verses follows a consistent pattern. Each verse consists of four short segments or hemistiches. The first three segments within a verse conclude with the same rhyming sound or letter in Arabic, while the fourth one concludes with a different sound or letter. Furthermore, the final segment of the fourth verse mirrors the ending of the fourth segment in each of the other verses, creating an interconnected rhyme scheme throughout the composition.

Alternatively, the second pattern sees the "first couple of tetrastiches of each stanza as the two hemistiches of an independent verse, with a rhyme repeated at the end of every couplet." [418]

Dhāka al-Rafīʿu al-Ghawth al-Munīʿu
Dhāka al-Shafīʿu yawm al-Qiyāmi

ʿAyn al-Kamāli ʿAyn al-Jamāli
Quṭb al-Jalāli Quṭb al-Kirāmi

Nāfi al-ḍalāli ḍāfī al-ẓilāli
ṣāfī al-zulāli li-kull al-ẓāmi

Starting with Baddi wuld Sīdīnā's (d. 1847-8) *Tahniʾat al-Rabīʿ bi-madḥat al-shafīʿ*, I show how his composition mirrored the style, form, and pattern of al-Yadālī's work. Baddi wuld Sīdīnā was a Mauritanian scholar from the Idawʿ Ali tribe renowned within the Tijāniyya Sufi tradition. He was as a student and brother-in-law to Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn al-Mukhtār

[418] Abdulkadir, "Devotional Poetry and Religious Authority," 92.

al-ʿAlawī al-Shinqīṭī (d. 1831-2), one of the eminent disciples of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijanī (d. 1815), the eponymous figure of the Tijāniyya Sufi order. The first two verses of his ode read:

Tahniʾat al-Rabīʿi bi-madḥat al-shafīʿi
bi'l-manṭiqi al-badīʿi Abghi bihā muʾammali

Yā Rabbanā ṣalli ʿalā khayr al-anām man ʿalā
ʿalā al-samāwāt al-ʿulā bi-idhn Rabbihi al-ʿAli

Welcome on the arrival of the month of Rabīʿ,
with praises of the intercessor,

in eloquent of speech,
Through it, my hopes and needs shall be realized.

O our Lord, send blessings on,
the best of creations, who rose,

Beyond the highest heavens,
by the permission of his Lord, the Most High.

Like al-Yadālī's ode, Baddi wuld Sīdīnā's first three segments within a verse conclude with the same rhyming sound or letter and the fourth verse mirrors the ending of the fourth segment in each of the other verses.

The *Mawāḥib al-nāfiʿ fī madāʾiḥ al-shāfiʿ* of the Senegalese Aḥmadu Bamba's (d. 1927), founder of the Murīdiyya Sufi order follows this same pattern as the examples above.

Ḥamdan li-Rabbi khayr Murabbi qad ramma qalbī bi-l-iqtidāʾ
Lahu shakūrī bi-lā kufūri wa'h(u)wa naṣīrī minhu fidāʾ

Praise be to my Lord,
the best of nurturers,

who has directed my heart,
to worthy emulation.

I'm grateful to Him,
without disbelief,

He is my Protector,
from Him I seek redemption.

The last example is from the *Ahlan bi-shahr al-mawlid* of the Senegalese Tijānī Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1975) famously known as the *ṣāḥib al-fayḍa* (the Bringer of Flood).[419]

Ahlan bi-shahr al-mawlidi	dhakkaranā bi'l-muḥtadi
Aṣl al-uṣūli al-sayyidi	ḥabibinā al-mubajjali
Qad kāna khayra mursali	qabla al-wujūd al-awwali
Wa lam yakun min jandali1	li-aṣlinā al-muʾaṣṣili

Welcome to the month of the Prophet's birth,
reminding us of the rightly guided

The origin of origins, the master,
Our belove, the revered one.

He was indeed the best of messengers,
Even before the existence of the first

He was not who could be brought down,
for he is our origin, deeply rooted.

[419] For a detailed discussion of his life and meaning of *ṣāḥib al-fayḍa*, see Ruediger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2011).

Fig. 5: 1 Copy of the Aḥmadu Bamba's *Mawāḥib al-nāfiʿ*[420]

Al-Yadālī's influence extended on West African scholarly figures beyond the *ṣalātu Rabbī* ode; it also encompassed his prose work *Khātimat al-taṣawwuf*, which Bamba transformed into verses titled *Masālik al-jinān fī jamʿ mā farraqahu al-Daymān*.[421] In his magnum opus, the *Kāshif al-Ilbās*, Niasse drew extensively from al-Yadālī's commentary of his *Khātima*.[422] Al-

[420] See link: http://khassidaenpdf.free.fr/khassida_pdf/Mawahibou%20Nafi-ou.pdf (Last Date Accessed October 22, 2023)

[421] See complete translation of the poem in Amadu Bamba Mbacké, *Masālik al- Jinān*, (ed. & trans.) S. Sam Mbaye (Casablanca: Dar el Kitab, 1989). It can be found on https://www.kinti.se/mamediarra/downloads/files/Masalik_en_A5_aminta.pdf. See also Rudolph Butch Ware's part translation of the poem on https://www.hub-foundation.org/assets/downloads/Pathways-of-Paradise.pdf

[422] Zachary Wright, "The Kāshif al- Ilbās of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse: An Analysis of the Text," *Islamic Africa*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2010): 109-123

Yadālī's tafsīr, known *as al-Dhahab al-ibrīz*, was an important source of reference in Niasse's exegetical exercises and performances.[423]

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed and examined how various external influences and internal shifts, including the Moroccan connections forged through scholarly interactions, the revival of Arabic poetic traditions under the Saʿdī leadership, the Maghribī educational framework, and the extensive Sufi network, alongside other local Saharan dynamics, collectively ignited a surge and regeneration in poetic expressions and traditions in Mauritania from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. These dynamics gave room for the development of novel ideas, expression of intellectual registers and prowess. By examining the lives and works of two scholars, Ibn Rāzikah and al-Yadālī, acknowledged as foundational figures in shaping the Arabic poetry tradition, I have demonstrated how their odes praising the sandal and persona of the Prophet Muḥammad were pivotal in reshaping the discourse around Arabic poetry during the seventeenth to eighteenth century in this region. Al-Yadālī's style and genre of praise poetry had a more conspicuous impact, evident in how it influenced the poetic compositions of several influential West African Muslim scholars, particularly those within the Sufi tradition.

This facet of this Arabic poetry tradition, its inception and development, and its resonance with the public consciousness starting in the latter part of the seventeenth century, and

[423] See Abubakar Abdulkadir, "An Analytical and Comparative Study of Jews in the Qur'an in Two West African Tafsīrs," MA Dissertation, University of Johannesburg, South Africa (2015): 34. See link at https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/vital/access/manager/Repository/uj:13788?site_name=GlobalView; Andrea Brigaglia, "Learning, Gnosis and Exegesis: Public tafsīr and Sufi Revival in the City of Kano (Northern Nigeria), 1950-1970," *Die Welt des Islams*, vol. 49: 3-4 (2009): 355-356.

firmly developed in the eighteenth century, was predominantly nurtured, disseminated, and cultivated through the platform of the Mauritanian nomadic Islamic center of learning known as the "*Maḥḍara*." It was within these educational institutions that we came to recognize the pioneers of this Arabic poetry tradition, and it was under their guidance that these poems, texts, and literary works were made accessible. In this light, it is imperative to conduct a comprehensive examination and discussion of the *maḥḍara*'s central role in advancing the poetry tradition and the texts that facilitated the study of this tradition.

CHAPTER VI: CULTURE OF ISLAMIC SCHOLARSHIP IN MAURITANIA

Introduction

This chapter offers an exploration and discussion of the culture of Islamic scholarship and its connection to the so-called emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania, as well as the transmission of Arabo-Islamic knowledge. In this chapter, I argue that a crucial and often overlooked aspect in understanding the reported emergence of the poetry and verse-making phenomenon in Mauritania is its intricate link with the *maḥḍara,* and the paradigm shift in knowledge transmission pedagogy, which commenced around the seventeenth century. This shift subsequently reshaped and reconstructed the culture of Islamic scholarship and the medium of knowledge dissemination in Mauritania's nomadic centers of learning. Gradually, this educational system embraced the poetic form as a primary means of expressing Arabo-Islamic scholarship. It witnessed a transition from predominantly prose genres to verse texts across various Islamic disciplines, and was effectively incorporated tem into the system for transmitting knowledge. I contend that this development in the culture of Islamic scholarship and knowledge transmission played a significant role in the rebirth of the Arabic poetry tradition during the latter part of the seventeenth to eighteenth-century Mauritania.

During this transformative phase, there was an intensification in activities such as Qur'an memorization, mastery of Arabic language, and the study and practice of Islamic jurisprudence.[424] These developments in turn led to a surge in poetic creativity and vision, rooted in an environment where a strong emphasis on a sound understanding of the Arabic language and

[424] Ould Ahmed Salem, "Global Shinqīṭ: Mauritania's Islamic Knowledge Tradition and the Making of Transnational Religious Authority (Nineteenth to Twenty-First Century," *Religions,* 12, 11 (2021): 5

its various disciplines resulted in the composition or transformation of scholarly texts. These texts on jurisprudence, creed, Islamic spiritual traditions, Arabic grammar, and prosody transitioned from the traditional prose genres to verses. The ability to compose Arabic verse became a hallmark of scholarship and studying texts in their *naẓm* (metrical) form prepared students to be not only scholars but also poets with comprehensive knowledge of Arabo-Islamic sciences. Subsequently, literary poetry flourished and came to dominate and define the element of Islamic scholarship, literature, and the medium of knowledge transmission in the region, a phenomenon that has persisted since the seventeenth century. These adaptations of the Islamic classics were tailored to suit or customized to align with the unique characteristics of the northwestern Saharan environment. They resonated with the needs and intellectual aspirations of these pioneering poets and scholars.

To understand why verses evolved as the predominant medium for conveying Islamic scholarship and transmitting knowledge in Mauritania, it is crucial to trace its roots in the underlying currents and developments that preceded and characterized seventeenth-century Mauritania, setting the stage for the reported emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition. This narrative is particularly significant because the acclaimed pioneers of this tradition, often referred to as the founding fathers, were the very figures responsible for catalyzing a monumental shift in intellectual production and the widespread adoption of verse as the pedagogical medium for transmitting Arabo-Islamic knowledge. Their legacy was upheld by their students who ensured the endurance of this tradition across centuries. All of these developments occurred within the unique environment of nomadic centers and institutions of learning known as *maḥḍara* in Mauritania.

The Maḥḍara System

The term *Maḥḍara* refers to Mauritania's nomadic Islamic educational institutions or centers of learning. Debates among Mauritanians have revolved around the term's origin and etymology. In his *Bilād Shinqīṭ*, Khalīl al-Naḥwī presents various theories regarding the term used for this Islamic institution. Among these theories is the suggestion that it stems from the root *ḥ-ẓ-r*, leading to the term "*maḥẓara*" (plural: "*maḥāẓir*"). In this context, a "*maḥẓara*" resembles a yard or an enclosed space where nomadic pastoralists, living in tents, settle and rear their camels, goats, and other animals. These nomadic communities accommodate students from various regions who come to study with them. Thus, the term "*maḥẓara*" signifies the place where students gather to seek knowledge from nomads who tend to their animals in enclosed spaces and surroundings.[425]

Another group argues that the name is from the root *ḥ-ḍ-r* making it *maḥḍara* (pl. *maḥāḍir*). This is from the words/phrase "to attend", "to be present" for lessons/lectures (*muḥāḍara*).[426] It is argued that this description has a long history in the Muslim world. Al-Naḥwī cites a poetry verse attributed to Labīd ibn Rabīʿa (d. 661) who made a reference using the word *maḥāḍir* suggesting a place where people come together or gather. He also cites another reference attributed to Ibn Manẓūr where he describes the mosque space as a "*maḥḍara*" where children are taught lessons. From these and other examples he cites, the word "*maḥḍara*" is used

[425] al-Naḥwī, *Bilād Shinqīṭ: al-Manāra wa'l-Ribāṭ,* 61.

[426] Ibid., 61

in the context of a place of learning like a *madrasa*.[427] There is another group that argues that *maḥẓara* is originally from the root of *maḥḍara* but was changed to the former by way of the Ḥassāniyya pronounciation. Based on this development, some people call refer to it as '*maḥaẓra*' rather than '*maḥẓara*' as evidenced in Mohamed Nouhi's article titled "*The Maḥaẓra Educational System*."[428]

In the Sahara, including areas of modern-day Mauritania, the *Maḥḍara* system started with the Almoravids where people attended or gathered in the knowledge circle of scholars of the movement. Some of these scholars includes the likes of al-Ḥaḍramī and al-Umawī (al-Amawī). Though there were traces of this phenomenon earlier before the rise of the Almoravids in cities such as Koumbi Saleh and Awdaghust, it transformed centuries later in cities such as Azugī.[429] Al-Umawī was known as a teacher who taught in the *majlis* of the Amīr. His *majlis al-ʿilm* was so popular that people from his family line (and educational training) became known as Majlisī, and later Midlish. As time went on, these knowledge circles (*majālis al-ʿilm - maḥḍara*) became established in other cities that would later become famous for Islamic knowledge. These cities include Tīshīt, and Wādān then followed by the third, Shinqīṭ. Walāta remained prominent during these times—before Timbuktu's fame—because it was an important commercial center and a refuge and settlement point for itinerant and immigrant scholars of sub-Saharan, Maghribī, and Andalusian origins. The *Maḥḍara* education system in its early time was mostly urban but later became a largely rural phenomenon due to some developments in the seventeenth century that have been covered in the chapters above.[430] It played an important role in the intellectual

[427] Ibid., 62.

[428] Nouhi and Stewart, "The Maḥaẓra Educational System," 18–50.

[429] al-Naḥwī's *Bilād Shinqīṭ: al-Manāra wa'l-Ribāṭ,* 48.

[430] Ibid., 64-67.

production and literary culture of the region. And it continues to be a channel through which Arabo-Islamic scholarly is produced and knowledge transmitted.

At this juncture, an overview and concise discussion of the literature on Mauritanian traditional Islamic education system and its cornerstone institution, the *Maḥḍara*, would be beneficial.

Literature on Traditional Islamic Education and the Maḥḍara

For over a century, Europhone literature has explored the culture of Islamic scholarship in Mauritania, with contributions from scholars, researchers, explorers, colonial administrators, and others. Works from the early 20th century to the early 1990s predominantly offer general discussions about Mauritania's Islamic education and its institutional framework. In contrast, recent publications tend to delve into more specific topics. The exploration began with Paul Marty (d. 1938), a French colonial official who briefly touched on the subject in his work on Islam in the Sūdān and Moorish societies.[431] Charles Stewart deserves much credit, especially from the early 1970s, for producing numerous articles, chapters, and books on intellectual figures, libraries, and the study of manuscripts that shaped the *maḥḍara* curriculum.[432] His works extend to the intellectual and spiritual life of the Boutilimit scholar, Sīdiyā Bābā al-Kabīr (d. 1868),[433] his books/library[434] and cover southern Saharan scholarship, its influence, actors and

[431] Paul Marty, *Etudes sur l'Islam et les tribus du Soudan: Les tribus Maures du Sahel et du Hodh, Collection de la Revue du monde musulman* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1921).

[432] Hall and Stewart. "The Historic "Core Curriculum"" 109-174.

[433] Stewart, *Islam and the Social Order*, 1973

[434] Stewart, "A New Source on the Book Market in Morocco," 209-247.

forms.[435] In the 1980s, significant literature emerged that discussed various activities in the *maḥāḍir*. Works by ould Bah on the evolution of Mālikī jurisprudence in Mauritania and the texts taught,[436] as well as ould Cheikh's comprehensive doctoral work[437] and its reworked *Elements d'histoire de la Mauritanie*, provide important reference materials with valuable insights into the *maḥāḍir* educational system.[438] Ould Cheikh's research was historical, sociological, and rooted in personal experiences growing up in a Mauritanian clerical clan during the colonial era. The works of these scholars remain crucial sources of information and reflections on social perspectives. M. Sufi's contributions[439] and El-Ghassem ould Ahmedou's work offer additional insights into the characteristics of the *maḥḍara* system and its role in Mauritanian society.[440]

In subsequent years, articles and book chapters have delved into various aspects of the *maḥāḍir*, exploring its people, origins, texts, memorization and tools. Evolving discourses on methodologies and sources have prompted scholars to adopt new approaches, considering

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[435] Stewart, "Southern Saharan Scholarship and the Bilād al-Sūdān," *Journal of African History*, 17/1, (1976): 73–93

[436] Ould Bah, *La Littérature Juridique et l 'évolution du Malikisme en Mauritanie* (Tunis: Publications de l'Université de Tunis, Faculté des Sciences et Lettres, 1981).

[437] Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique dans la société maure precoloniale (XIème siècle-XIXème siècle): essai sur quelques aspects du tribalisme" (theses de Doctorat d'Etat, Université de Paris V, René Descartes) 1985.

[438] Ould Cheikh, *Elements d'histoire de la Mauritanie,* (Nouakchott: Centre Culturel Francais, 1988).

[439] M. Sufi, *The Mauritanian Mahdaras and Its Educational Implications on the Mauritanian Society,* (Riyadh: University of Imam Saud Publication, 1986).

[440] El-Ghassem ould Ahmedou, *Enseignment traditionnel en Mauritanie: La mahadra ou l'ecole 'a dos de chameau* (Paris: Le Harmattan, 1997).

orality, knowledge, power, and other concepts.[441] While some of these contributions provide insights through fieldwork in the *maḥāḍir* system, some literature tends to rehash older works, and errors or misinformation may be present. For example, Tarek Ladjal and Benaouda Bensaid write that students in advanced stage who study "Islamic law" "read '*maraqi al-suud*' by al-Mukhtar Shinqiti (d. 1907)", '*Talat al- anwar*' by al-Mukhtar ShinqiṬi (d. 1907) for Ḥadīth[442] and '*al-wasīlah'* by Ibn Bun al-Jakan (d. 1805)." However, their claims are inaccurate. The *marāqī al-suʿūd* is a text on *uṣūl al-fiqh* authored by Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh wuld al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm al-ʿAlawī (d. 1816/8). He also authored the *Ṭalaʿat al-anwār*. Additionally, the correct reference for "Ibn Bun al-Jakan" should be al-Mukhtār ibn Būnā al-Jakanī (d. 1805/6).

Recent works by Zekeria ould Ahmed Salem and Corinne Fortier explore different facets of the *maḥāḍir* system, its personalities, and modes of knowledge transmission. Ahmed Salem's "Global Shinqīṭ" scrutinizes Mauritanian scholarly traditions and the transnational dissemination of intellectual capital since the nineteenth century. Against the backdrop of a problematic "center/periphery framework," it investigates how Mauritanian scholars export their intellectual contributions beyond national borders. Furthermore, he examines the historicization of the rise

[441] M. B. Muḥammadhn, "Mauritanian Mahdara: The Mobile Nomadic University," *Journal of Islamic History,* 7, 2 (1996): 49–71; Lydon, "Inkwells of the Sahara: Reflections on the Production of Islamic Knowledge in Bilād Shinqīṭ," 39-71; El Hamel "The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society from the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century," *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 29, No. 1 (1999): 62-87; Nouhi and Stewart, "The Maḥaẓra Educational System," 18–50.

[442] Tarek Ladjal and Benaouda Bensaid. "Desert-Based Muslim Religious Education: Mahdara as a Model," *Religious Education,* 112:5 (2017): 529-541.

and mythologization "of Mauritania as a peerless center of traditional sacred scholarship."[443] Fortier's extensive research focuses on the Qur'an, its memorization, and orality within the *maḥāḍir* of Mauritania.[444]

Europhone literature has greatly benefited from and heavily relied on four key works. Two of these are early biographical and hagiographical pieces that offer extensive insights into the lives of precolonial-era scholars, institutions of learning, and historical events shaping the region and its intellectual activities. These are al-Amīn's *al-Waṣīṭ* and al-Bāritaylī's *Fatḥ al-Shakūr*. The other two, written in post-independence Mauritania include al-Naḥwī's *Bilād Shinqīṭ: al-Manāra wa'l-Ribāṭ* and Mukhtār ould Ḥāmidun's *Ḥayāt Mūrītāniyā*. Similar to the earlier works, these delve into internal perspectives on general histories, covering aspects such as people, towns, politics, economy, and education. Importantly, they dedicate substantial sections to Mauritania's nomadic Islamic education system.

Versification and Memorization of Texts

In most, if not all, of these Europhone academic works, especially the recent ones, there is a consistent mention and reference to literary poetry and verse-making as crucial pedagogical tools in the culture of Islamic scholarship at these learning centers. Nouhi, for example, notes

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[443] Ould Ahmed Salem, "Global Shinqīṭ," 1-30. See also Ould Ahmed Salem, "Islam in Mauritania: Between Expansion, Globalization and Networks," in *Islam and Muslim Politics*, (eds.) Benjamin Soares and René Otayek (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2007): 27– 46.

[444] Corinne Fortier, "Orality and the Transmission of Qur'anic Knowledge," in *Mauritania, in Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, (ed.) Robert Launay, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016): 61-78; Fortier, "Une pédagogie coranique. Modes de transmission des savoirs islamiques (Mauritanie)," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 43 (1–2), 2003: 235-70; Fortier, "Mémorisation et audition: L'enseignement coranique chez les Maures de Mauritanie," *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, 11 (1997): 85–105.

that "[t]he pedagogical system depended heavily upon locally-written didactic poems (*anẓām*)…"[445] However, these studies lack a comprehensive exploration of the *how* and *why* behind the adoption of poetry and verse pedagogy as the preferred and dominant medium for knowledge transmission and scholarly exchange in the region since the reported emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition. Furthermore, they fail to provide an origin story detailing how developments in the seventeenth century molded, constructed, and reconstructed the intellectual, social, and cultural dynamics of modern-day Mauritania. Moreover, they tend to oversimplify the implications of using literary poetry and verses, overlooking their profound impact on the methods and processes of knowledge dissemination. For instance, Fortier simplifies the role of versification in these texts, framing it as a tool to enhance memorization and oral transmission within the bounds of Arabic prosody (*ʿarūḍ*). According to her, "[t]exts are versified based on the rules of Arabic prosody (*'arud*) to facilitate their memorization and oral transmission." This perspective finds resonance among scholars, including Stewart, who highlights that "[p]oetry held an important pedagogical role in that system of learning in which memorization was central." So, the adoption of versification for commentaries and abridgments of classical works, was to transform poetry into an effective educational instrument and a mechanism to ease the memorization of texts.[446]

This rationale behind composing or transforming pedagogical texts into poetry or verses, as previously discussed in the context of the Mauritanian *maḥāḍir* system is affirmed by Ibn

[445] Nouhi and Stewart, "The maḥaẓra Educational System," 39.

[446] Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sahara," 9.

Ābbāh al-Ghallāwī in two verses of his didactic poem *ʿUbaydu RabbiH*, a versification of Ibn Ajurrūm's *Matn al-Ājurrumiyya*:

> After the foregoing, the objective of this versification
> Is to make ease the prose of Ibn Ajurrūm
>
> For whoever wants to memorize it, but
> Found it difficult to do so in the text's prose form[447]

To further elaborate on this reasoning, one could argue that in the Mauritanian context, didactic poetry or verse texts, with their musical and rhyming structures, are sometimes composed to be easily memorized. Some scholars employed this form to facilitate memorization and the oral transmission of knowledge which aligns seamlessly with the nomadic lifestyle prevalent in the region. Given the frequent movements and relocations characteristic of nomadic life, the practicality of transporting large libraries was limited. Additionally, the majority of the population lacked access to ample paper, especially in earlier times. Consequently, the pedagogy of verse serves as an important mnemonic device in disseminating knowledge from teacher to student.

Wuld Ḥammāda's observations, as previously mentioned, emphasize, in part, a similar rationale regarding the conversion of prose texts into verse formats and the utilization of didactic poems as essential tools for knowledge transmission at Mauritanian Islamic centers of learning. However, these insights, focusing solely on the condensation of substantial knowledge into a concise form and for ease of memorization, aligning with the oral knowledge pedagogy characteristic of nomadic life, do not fully capture the diverse motivations behind the adoption of

[447] Ibn Ābbah al-Tuwātī al-Ghallāwī, *Naẓm al-Ājurrūmiyya*, 1.

poetry/verse as the predominant means for knowledge dissemination in these Mauritanian Islamic educational institutions. Moreover, attributing the versification of texts solely to memorization based on nomadic characteristics overlooks the fact that Islamic Andalusian society was prominent in the Muslim world for versification and the production of didactic texts, despite being urban. It is also essential to note that part of Mauritania's verse-making tradition and poetic expressions were influenced by the Andalusian intellectual and literary milieu. Additionally, an examination of *al-mutūn al-maḥḍariyya* (*maḥḍara* texts) reveals that, despite three distinct poetic adaptations of Khalīl Ibn Isḥāq's "*Mukhtaṣar*" by three distinguished Mauritanian scholars from the late 18th to the 19th and 20th centuries—namely Ibn Ṭulba al-Yaʿqūbī's "*Naẓm al-Shaykh Khalīl*," Shaykh Muḥammad al-Māmī's "*Manẓūma al-Shaykh Khalīl*," and Shaykh Muḥammad Sālim wuld Addūd's "*al-Tashīl wa'l-takmīl*"—the original prose format of the "*Mukhtaṣar*" remains the primary teaching medium in Mauritania. Moreover, if the purpose of versification was solely to aid memorization, it raises questions about why Mauritanian scholars chose to versify commentaries and exegeses of the Qur'an. Commentaries and exegeses aim to provide systematic (concise) and comprehensive interpretations of the Qur'an through additional sentences and passages, rather than mere condensation into verses. Therefore, I argue that the twentieth-century Mauritanian Aḥmaddu ibn Muḥammaddu ibn Aḥmadhī al-Ḥasanī's 8,300-verse Qur'an exegesis titled "*Marāqī al-Awwāh ilā tadabbur kitāb Allāh*" was not only produced for memorization purposes, but for various reasons, as elaborated later in this chapter.

Thus, while the versification of texts, with its focus on ease of memorization and oral transmission holds validity, particularly in the [semi] nomadic Mauritanian context, it is not exclusively pursued for this purpose. In addition to wuld Ḥammāda's insights, there are other

numerous motivating factors supporting the prevalence of poetry and verse texts in Mauritania (and by extension, the broader Muslim world). Memorization of texts itself is rooted in deeper epistemological religious positions among Muslims. That is why, Muslim scholars across the centuries have articulated guiding principles that stress the paramount importance of memorizing texts and the transmission of knowledge, reinforcing the profound significance of these practices in the Islamic scholarly heritage. For instance, the sayings "*al-ʿilm fī'l-ṣudūr*" (knowledge is stored in the breasts (of men), not in the pages of books)," "*man ḥafiẓa al-mutūn ḥāza al-funūn*" (the one who memorized texts truly acquired knowledge of the sciences), and al-Raḥbī's "*fa-iḥfaẓ fa kullu ḥāfiẓ imām*" (memorize! because those who memorize are indeed ahead of others) reflect the significance placed on memorization in embodying and transmitting knowledge.[448] The act of memorization transforms the learner into a living vessel through which knowledge is disseminated and brought to life.[449] Therefore, the act of memorizing texts extends beyond verses to include works in prose forms, both short and extensive. Al-Naḥwī highlights this by pointing out the presence of substantial literature in prose formats such as lexicons and Qur'anic exegesis, which are committed to memory by *maḥāḍir* students. While Nouhi emphasizes that memorization in such a context may be regarded as a practical necessity, especially in regions

[448] See Ogunnaike, Islamic Philosophies of Education in Africa, in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Education and Indigenous Knowledge,* (eds.) Jamaine M. Abidogun and Toyin Falola (AG: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 429 for similar references and narrations with regards to memorization. See also similar references in Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016): 200; Zachary Valentine Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam*: *The Sufi Community of Ibrāhīm Niasse* (Boston: Brill, 2015): 35.

[448] See extensive discussion on this as it relates to West Africa in Rudolph T. Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 2014).

[449] See extensive discussion on this as it relates to West Africa in Ware, *The Walking* Qur'an, 2014.

where writing materials were scarce, he also acknowledges that it is crucial to recognize that memorization transcends mere utility. Moreover, this pedagogy of memorization and oral transmission continues to thrive in Mauritania, despite the shift to a knowledge transmission system primarily based on printed materials in most parts of the Muslim world. Nonetheless, Nouhi presents another argument highlighting that the pedagogy of memorization aligns with the profound tradition of oral transmission that traces its origins back to the direct reception of knowledge from the carriers that is rooted in the rich Islamic pedagogical heritage, including the oral transmission of prophetic Ḥadīth.[450] This tradition also extends to encompass the Qur'an that has been transmitted through the oral memory of generations.

One could also argue that, driven by the demands of seventeenth to eighteenth-century internal dynamics and developments in Mauritania, including the need for a profound understanding of the Arabic language for nuanced interpretations of Islam and its authoritative sources, the adoption of the Arabic language and its associated tools, particularly poetry for its linguistic depth, became a strategic choice. Since then, it has evolved into an integral aspect of the intellectual tradition and a coveted literary credential sought by scholars, especially within the *maḥḍara* system for knowledge acquisition and dissemination.

Implications of Studying Verse Texts

The examination of the aforementioned references provides us with useful insights into the use of verses and adoption of didactic pedagogical texts in Arabo-Islamic knowledge transmission in the Mauritanian context. However, while these references hold valid explanation to these dynamics, they also reveal two significant factors frequently disregarded when analyzing

[450] Nouhi and Stewart, "The Maḥaẓra Educational System," 40-41.

the use of verse pedagogical texts for the transmission of Islamic knowledge in the Mauritanian context: the insights of the practitioners, including scholars and students, and the embodiment of knowledge. To gain a deeper understanding of this practice, it is essential to consider these aspects from the perspective of those directly engaged in the process. This, once again, emphasizes the importance of revisiting the insights of Mauritanian scholar wuld Ḥammāda regarding the motivations behind Mauritanians' preference for employing pedagogical texts in verse form as the primary means of knowledge transmission. In contrast to other regions in the Muslim world where the curriculum at Islamic universities and Islamic studies programs outside of the Muslim world predominantly centers on prose manuals, there is often a lack of adoption of classical works in verse. Instead, they are frequently substituted with classical prose and modern texts and manuals as shown in some studies.[451]

While acknowledging the aid verse texts provide in memorization compared to prose, wuld Ḥammāda emphasizes that verse-making within *maḥāḍir* practices occupies a significant place in poetry. Unlike in other parts of the Muslim world where texts taught mostly at Islamic universities or Islamic studies and related programs largely based on prose manuals, and in some cases, the classics, many of which are in verse have been discarded for modern texts and

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[451] See Bernard Botiveau, *Loi islamique et droit dans les societes arabes* (Paris, Aix-en-Provence: Karthala, IREMAM, 1993) on modern manuals on Islamic law and legal theory at universities in the Muslim world such as Cairo University and Damascus University. Monique C. Cardinal in Monique C. Cardinal, "Islamic Legal Theory Curriculum: Are the Classics Taught Today?"*, Islamic Law and Society,* Vol. 12. No. (2005): 224-272, also explores the Islamic legal theory curriculum taught at al-Zaytūna, al-Qarawiyyīn, al-Azhar, Damascus University and Jordan University.

manuals. These texts not only aid students in memorization but also play a vital role in their journey toward mastering poetry. They serve as the foundation, nurturing students until they attain proficiency and requisite skills in the art of poetry. Engaging with verse texts from the outset prepares students for potentially becoming poets themselves. Starting with the simpler *rajaz* meter and progressing further, these texts lay the groundwork for their poetic development. In essence, wuld Ḥammāda highlights how the prevalent use of *manẓūmāt* within the Mauritanian Islamic educational system distinguishes its students and sets them apart within the broader landscape of Islamic education. His firsthand insights, gained from deep immersion in this tradition, provide invaluable firsthand knowledge and enriches our understanding of this unique educational approach. Therefore, simplifying the motivations behind composing religious pedagogical texts in verse form to solely facilitate students' chanting and memorization overlooks the complex reality, particularly within the context of Mauritania. This conventional notion neglects the intellectual rigour, sophistications, and literary finesse involved in creating these texts. Both scholars and students aimed to demonstrate their distinctiveness, expertise, and linguistic prowess by skillfully employing rhymes, wordplay, and intricate linguistic structures. Throughout history, the motivation for composing poems, regardless of their form and genre, has consistently encompassed these elements.[452] Moreover, this straightforward explanation overlooks the fact that composing a page of prose can be considerably simpler than creating an equivalent amount of content in verse form, particularly when adhering to the strict rules of prosody. Additionally, it prompts the question of why the tradition of versifying pedagogical

[452] For comprehensive discussions on this subject, see Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

texts and their usage is not widespread in other regions of the Muslim world, unlike Mauritania where it is a consistent practice, eventually earning it the epithet the "Land of Million Poets."

The prevalence of this pedagogical medium is evident in the fact that more than half of the approximately 10,000 manuscripts documented in the *Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of Mauritania and the Western Sahara* are composed in verse.[453] Nouhi asserts that Mauritania stands as a unique hub for locally produced scholarship, boasting a surplus of significant verse works. These phenomena can be traced back to the dynamic developments of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries, a period when the intellectual landscape of the Mauritanian Sahara demanded scholars to possess a profound understanding of the Arabic language and its practical sciences, serving as the essential key to unlocking various other sciences. Scholars of that era in Mauritania, deeply versed in the minutiae of the Arabic language, poetics, and verse-making, ranging from prosody to literature, proactively embarked on composing or transforming pedagogical texts used in the *maḥāḍir* into verse form. They embraced the verse pedagogical method and engaged with poetry and verse-making in their intellectual and literary pursuits in diverse ways. It is worth noting that this practice was relatively uncommon in most regions constituting modern-day Mauritania at the time. This approach exerted a profound influence on educational practices within Mauritanian Islamic institutions and intellectual circles. The founding fathers of the Arabic poetry tradition from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, particularly those hailing from the Gebla region, played a central role in popularizing the use of *manẓūma* texts in the *maḥāḍir*. Ibn Rāzikah versified al-Qazwīnī's *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ*, titling it *Nuzhat al-maʿānī fī ʿilmay al-bayān wa'l-maʿānī*, a work

[453] Stewart, "Introduction: The Literature of the Western Sahara," 8.

focused on the Sciences of Elucidation and Meanings. He also composed a didactic poem, *Naẓm fī al-Taṣawwuf* in the Islamic spiritual tradition.[454] Similarly, al-Yadālī versified the *Risāla* of Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī, a foundational Mālikī jurisprudential text.[455] In parallel, another contemporary scholar, wuld al-Ḥājj Ḥimā Allāh al-Ghallāwī (d. 1795) also versified the *Risāla*. He additionally produced the aforementioned *ʿUbaydu RabbiH*, a versification of Ibn Ajurrūm's *Matn al-Ājurrūmiyya*.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the tradition gained momentum, spreading through the continuous movement of scholars and the establishment of Islamic institutions in villages and camp tents. This intellectual and cultural current permeated various Mauritanian cities and towns, thriving along the way. Influential scholars of this period closely connected to the founding fathers of the Arabic poetry tradition played vital roles in consolidating the *maḥāḍir* traditions. For instance, al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm al-ʿAlawī, a student of Ibn Rāzikah, had a son named Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh wuld al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm (d. 1816/8). This son authored *Marāqī al-suʿūd* and *Ṭalaʿat al-anwār*, didactic poems widely used in the fields of *Uṣūl al-fiqh* and *Muṣṭalaḥāt al-ḥadīth*, respectively. Ibn Būnā al-Jakanī (d. 1805), a prominent teacher of Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh wuld al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm, and a student of Ibn Rāzikah, emerged as one of the most distinguished scholars of his time. His work, *al-Jāmiʿ bayna al-tashīl wa'l-khulāṣa* famously known as the *Iḥmirār Ibn Būnā* (the Red-Verses of Ibn Būnā), stands as an advanced resource in Arabic grammar and morphology.[456] The *Iḥmirār* is essentially a combined summary of the Andalusian Ibn Mālik's

[454] Bābāh, *al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Yadālī*, 78.

[455] Stewart, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, 1579.

[456] al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār ibn Būnā al-Jakanī al-Shinqīṭī, *Kitāb al-Iḥmirār: al-Jāmiʿ bayna al-tashīl wa'l-khulāṣa,* (ed. & comm.) ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Faqīh (Beirut: Dār ʿālam al-kutub, 2003)

Alfiyya and *al-khulāṣa* supplemented with marginal commentaries (*ṭurra* – the meaning of *ṭurra* is explained below). Ibn Būnā's contribution is his added verses presented in red, hence the name *al-Iḥmirār*. Also is al-Nābigha al-Ghallāwī (d. 1829/30), the author of the *Būṭulayḥiyya*, nephew of the earlier mentioned wuld al-Ḥājj Ḥimā Allāh al-Ghallāwī who versified the *Risāla* and *al-Ājurrūmiyya*. The period of the students of these pioneer poets known as the golden age of Islamic scholarship in the region witnessed a prolific literary output, with scholars producing original works that Ahmed Salem notes came "to rival and replace their Andalusian and Middle Eastern predecessors in local curricula."[457] These works not only signaled the indigenization of classical Islamic literature but also showcased the intellectual prowess of Mauritanian scholars.[458]

Categories of Verse Texts Engagement in Mauritania

Scholars from Mauritania, from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries up to the present day, have interacted with poetry and verse-making within the context of Islamic scholarship and its role in knowledge transmission. To categorize these engagements, I have divided them into six distinct, non-consecutive categories.

The first category emerged in the latter part of the seventeenth century and extended into the first half of the eighteenth century when Mauritanian scholars embarked on the task of transforming original prose texts into verse forms. This does not discount the few instances of scholars from Shinqīṭ to Walāta who had versified some texts prior to this period. In this first category, the practice was predominantly undertaken by scholars who were also often regarded

[457] Ahmed Salem, "Global Shinqīṭ," 5.

[458] Ibid.

as the pioneers of the expressive Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania. As mentioned earlier, three examples of such transformation were discussed, including the works of Ibn Rāzikah, al-Yadālī, and al-Ghallāwī, who versified the original texts authored by non-Mauritanians predating the seventeenth century. This period also saw the use of didactic poems composed by non-Mauritanians based on original prose works. An example of this is the Egyptian Sharaf al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Imrīṭī al-Shāfiʿī's (d. 1595) *Tashīl al-ṭuruqāt fī naẓm al-Waraqāt*, a versification (*naẓm*) of the Iranian (Neyshabur) Abū 'l-Maʿālī Ḍiyāʾ al-Dīn ʿAbd Mālik ibn Yūsuf al-Juwaynī's (d. 1085) *Matn al-Waraqāt*, a text on the science of *Uṣūl al-fiqh*.[459]

The second category encompasses the direct composition of new texts in verse forms. Famous examples include Al-Nābigha al-Ghallāwī's *Būṭlayḥiyya*[460] and Shaykh Muḥammad Mawlūd's *Kafāf al-mubtadiʾ*,[461] both of which are in the science of jurisprudence. We also have wuld al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm's *Marāqī al-suʿūd*.[462] This category features countless works particularly from the nineteenth century.[463]

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[459] Sharaf al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Imrīṭī, *Sharḥ fī naẓm al-Waraqāt fī uṣūl al-fiqh,* (al-Mansoura: Dār al-Ghad al-Jadīd, 2016)

[460] Muḥammad al-Nābigha ibn ʿUmar al-Ghallāwī, *Būṭlayḥiyyah min Nuṣūṣ al-Fiqh al-Mālikyya,* (ed.) Yaḥyā wuld al-Barāʾ (Beirut: al-Maktabat al-Makiyya wa Muʾassasat al-Rayyān, 2004).

[461] al-ʿAllāma Muḥammad Mawlūd ibn Aḥmad Fāl al-Yaʿqūbī al-Mūsawī, *Naṣṣ al-kafāf wa fatḥ Maqfalihi bi- sharḥ Muʾallifihi* (Nouakchott: Dār al-Riḍwān, n.d.)

[462] Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh wuld al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm al-Shinqīṭī, *Matn al-manẓūmat al-musammāt Marāqī al-suʿūd li-mubtaghī al-ruqī wa'l-ṣuʿūd fī uṣūl al-fiqh,* (ed.) Muḥammad wuld Sīdī wuld Ḥabīb al-Shinqīṭī, (Jeddah: Dār al-Manāra li'l-nashr wa'l-Tawzīʿ: 1995)

[463] Daddūd wuld ʿAbd Allāh, *al-Ḥarakāt al-Fikriyya fī Bilād Shinqīṭ ḥattā nihāyat al-qarn al-thānī ʿashar al-hijr al thāmin ʿashar al-milād* (Rabat: Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Ifriqiyyā, 2016).

In the third category, Mauritanian scholars and students embraced and utilized original didactic poems texts composed by non-Mauritanians. This category stands distinct from the first one previously mentioned. While the former involves the conversion of original prose texts composed by non-Mauritanians into verse format, this third category involves original poetic compositions without prior prose sources. Some examples include the *Alfiyya* of the Kurdish and Egypt resident al-Ḥāfiẓ Zayn al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-ʿIrāqī (d. 1403), which focuses on *Muṣṭalaḥāt al-ḥadīth*, and the *Jamʿ al-jawāmiʿ* by the Egyptian polymath ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), primarily dealing with *Uṣūl al-fiqh*. Additionally, scholars often make use of *al-Murshid al-Muʿīn ʿalā ḍarūrat minʿulūm al-dīn* authored by the Moroccan ʿAbd al-Wāḥid ibn Aḥmad ibn ʿĀshir al-Anṣārī (d. 1631), a prominent text covering creed, jurisprudence, and the Islamic spiritual tradition.[464] Ibn ʿĀshir was of Andalusī ancestry but born in Morocco.

In the fourth category, Mauritanians expanded upon original didactic poems by adding more verses to them. This was done to provide further elaboration on subjects or chapters that were deemed insufficiently detailed. This trend was particularly prominent in the nineteenth century. For instance, Ibn Būnā's *Iḥmirār* is an addition of over 2,000 verses to the grammar text, the *Alfiyya* by the Andalusian Ibn Mālik. Another illustration is found in the work of Mauritanian scholar Aḥmad al-Badawī, who augmented the *Lāmiyyat al-Afʿāl*, also by Ibn Mālik, a text on Arabic morphology.

In the fifth category, scholars in Mauritania engaged in the condensation and abridgement of original verse texts, resulting in the creation of entirely new didactic ones. One example is

[464] al-ʿAllāma Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Wāḥid ʿĀshir, *Matn ibn ʿĀshir al-musammā biʿl-Murshid al-Muʿīn ʿalā ḍarūrat minʿulūm al-dīn*, (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, n.d.)

Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh wuld al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm's *Ṭalaʿat al-anwār*, which is based on the original *Alfiyya* of al-ʿIrāqī. Another instance is the work of the late eighteenth century Mauritanian scholar Ibn ʿAbdam al-Daymānī, who produced *Manẓūmat al-ʿarūḍ wa'l-qawāfī* based on *al-Khazrajiyya*, a text on Arabic prosody.

In the sixth and final category, scholars in Mauritania demonstrated their appreciation for didactic poems by both Mauritanian and non-Mauritanian authors. This appreciation was manifested through the writing of commentaries, taking two distinct forms. The first form involves Mauritanian commentaries on verse works authored by non-Mauritanians. Examples include Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Khadīm's commentary, *Muqarrib al-maqṣūd fī tuḥfat al-mawdūd* on Ibn Mālik's *Tuḥfat al-mawdūd fī maqṣūr wa'l-mamdūd*, which focuses on Arabic literature. Several other Mauritanian and Timbuktu scholars have also written commentaries on this verse work. Some Mauritanian commentaries include *Tashīl al-wurūd* by Muḥammad ibn Abī Madyān al-Daymānī and *Saʿd al-suʿūd* by Aḥmad Maḥmūd ibn Yaddād al-Ḥasanī. On al-Maqqarī's *Iḍāʾat al-Dujunna fī ʿAqāʾid Ahl al-Sunna*, there are over 30 indigenous Mauritanian commentaries on it.

In the second form of this category, Mauritanian scholars wrote indigenous commentaries on didactic poems composed by fellow Mauritanians. Examples include Sīdī ʿAbd Allāh wuld al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm's commentary on his own work, *Marāqī al-suʿūd*, titled *Nashr al-bunūd ʿalā marāqī al-suʿūd*. Additionally, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amīn ibn Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Shinqīṭī penned *Nathr al-wurūd ʿalā marāqī al-suʿūd*, and Muḥammad Yaḥyā ibn Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Walātī (along with Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿĀṣim al-Andalusī) authored *Fatḥ al-Wadūd ʿalā marāqī al-suʿūd wa nayl al-sūl ʿalā murtaqā al-wuṣūl*.

In this sub-category, another genre of commentary or marginal notes, known as *Ṭurra*, is prevalent, mostly focusing on non-indigenous verse works. The pioneer of the *Ṭurra* tradition in Mauritania was Shaykh ʿUmar ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar (d. 1776), widely recognized as Ashfagha al-Khaṭṭāṭ or Ābbayh, who lived during the eighteenth century.[465] He was a Sufi scholar proficient in Arabic grammar, prosody, literature, and jurisprudence. He was nicknamed al-Khaṭṭāṭ for his beautiful Arabic scripts. His initial *Ṭurra* was on Shaykh Khalīl's *Mukhtaṣar*, on *fiqh*. According to Shaykh Muḥammad Sālim wuld Addūd, the *Ṭurra* (pl. *Ṭurar*) is "a thin Arabic script in an inverted or slanted form written under the sentences of texts."[466] He explains that the term "*Ṭurra*" is synonymous with "*hāshiya*" (marginal commentaries/notes) in linguistic terms. The notes are written to serve the purposes of explanation, elucidation, critique, and footnotes. Wuld Addūd explains that this terminology is rooted in books of Mālikī *fiqh*, including well-known works such as *Ṭurar al-Mudawwana* and *Ṭurra Ibrāhīm al-Aʿrajī*. They are written with the aim of aiding in understanding the content of texts and facilitating revision.[467]

[465] YouTube Video with title (in Arabic script): *Kitāb Ṭurrat Ashfāgha al-Khaṭṭāṭ* - interview with Shaykh Muḥammad Sālim wuld Addūd.

[466] Ibid.

[467] Ibid.

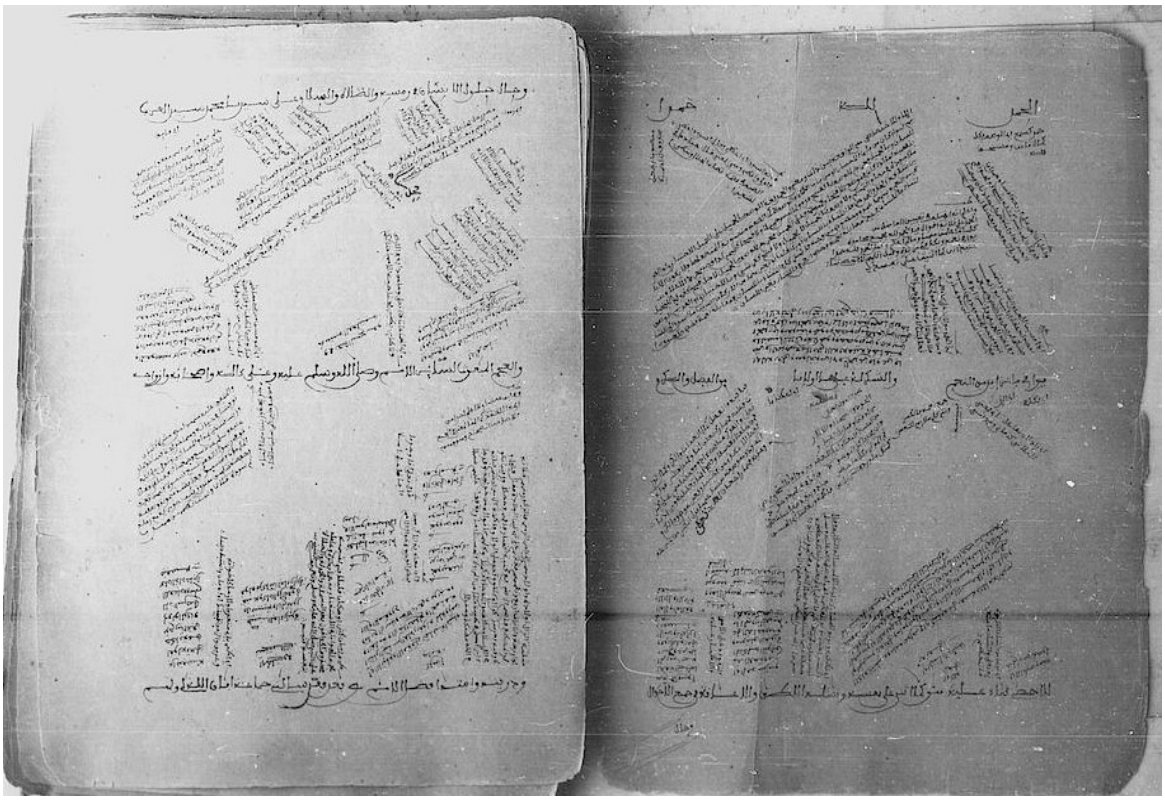

Fig. 6:1 Image of the *Ṭurrat Mukhtaṣar al-Shaykh Khalīl* by Ashfagha al-Khaṭṭāṭ on OMAR[468]

Although the initial Mauritanian *Ṭurra* focused on explaining prose, the tradition has evolved over the centuries into a practice primarily centered on notes and commentaries related to verse texts. Noteworthy examples include the *Ṭurrat Ibn Būnā* on the *Alfiyyat Ibn Mālik* and *Ṭurrat lāmiyyat al-Afʿāl* by Ḥasan ibn Zayn al-Shinqīṭī on the *Lāmiyyat al-Afʿāl* of Ibn Mālik. Currently, scholars from various *maḥāḍir* in Mauritanian villages and cities contribute to this tradition by focusing predominantly on Arabic linguistic sciences such as grammar, rhetoric, and morphology. Examples include *Ṭurrat al-Nabbaghiyya* on Arabic grammar and morphology by Shaykh Muḥammad Saʿīd from the village of Nabbaghiyya in the Trarza region, *Ṭurrat*

[468] See link: https://dl.ub.uni-freiburg.de/omar/mfmau2023/0004?sid=518ac5f9f47d6cb5014d64061ed08deb (Last Accessed October 16, 2023).

Tungamājik on Arabic grammar from Tungamājik, a village southeast of Nouakchott, and *Ṭurrat al-Maymūn* from the village of Maymūn, specializing in the six major odes of the pre-Islamic era (*dīwān al-Sitt*).[469]

In conclusion, Mauritanian scholars have composed numerous didactic poems for Islamic education, drawing inspiration from Andalusian, Maghribī, Eastern, and local sources. Through their admiration for and imitation of the legacies of predecessors, and the resulting intellectual engagement, they diligently produced didactic scholarly verse works that significantly influenced literary discourse from the latter part of the seventeenth century to date. These scholars produced a significant number of didactic works on creed (*ʿaqīda*), including versifications of chapter headings from the *Iḥyāʾ* and the *Iqtiṣād* of al-Ghazālī. During the 18th century, Ibn Būnā authored *Waṣīlat al-saʾāda fī nashr al-shahāda* and *naẓm fī masāʾil al-aqāʾid* which gained popularity in 19th-century curricula. ʿAbd Allāh Wuld Ḥimā Allāh al-Ghallāwī composed the *Naẓmʿaqīdat al-risāla*, a versification of the *aqīda* chapter of the *Risāla* by Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī. Additionally, ʿAbd al-Qādir ibn Muhammad Sālim al-Majlisī authored the *ʿAqīda, al-Wāḍiḥ al-Mubīn fī aṣl ʿulūm al-dīn*. Aḥmad ibn Muḥamdī ibn al-Najīb al-Ḥājjī wrote *al-Durrat al-farīda fī mā tazkū bihi al-ʿaqīda* in over 550 *rajaz* verses, alongside a treatise on the temporal origination of the world titled *al-ʿĀlam al-ḥādith*. He also penned *al-Waṣīlat al-riḍwān*, a Hassānī dialect *qaṣīda* to teach theology to the less literate. In the 20th century, Shaykh Māʾ al-ʿAynayn al-Qalqamī (d. 1910), the prolific Sufi and anti-colonialist, composed a poem on creed titled *al-Manẓūmat fī'l-tawhīd*.

[469] These works exist in handwritten formats and are reproduced through photocopying for students' utilization.

Fig 6:2 Images of the manuscript copy of Ibn Būnā's *Waṣīlat al-sa'āda fī nashr al-shahāda*.[470]

There are several noteworthy works on Arabic grammar, including Shaykh Muḥammad Buttār's *Badhl al-nadā fī naẓm qaṭr al-nadà wa balla al-ṣadà*, a versification of Ibn Hishām al-Anṣārī's *Qatr al-nadà*. Wuld Ḥimā Allāh al-Ghallāwī's *ʿUbaydu Rabbih* on *al-Ājurrūmiyya*, and the *Iḥmirār* of Ibn Būnā.

In the realm of jurisprudence, Mauritanian scholars demonstrated their expertise through verse texts. Shaykh Muḥammad Mawlūd composed the *Kafāf al-mubtadiʾ*, a work of 3,747

[470] Manuscript on OMAR: https://dl.ub.uni-freiburg.de/omar/mfmau2593/0001?sid=1212989756d53937410d8bcac9d5c718 (Last Accessed October 17, 2023)

verses addressing jurisprudential issues mostly relevant to rural and Bedouin contexts.[471] Additionally, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Māmī versified the entire Mālikī compendium, the *Mukhtaṣar* of Khalīl ibn Isḥāq, in approximately 10,000 verses—a feat said to have been accomplished in a single night. Muḥammad al-Māmī, known for his prominence in scholarship and poetry, effectively communicates complex ideas in everyday language.[472] He has many works in verse forms in Ḥassāniyya. Another scholar, Shaykh Muḥammad Sālim wuld Addūd, contributed to this tradition with *al-Tashīl wa'l-takmīl*, a versification of Khalīl's *Mukhtaṣar* and its commentaries. This work also took from the *Mudawwana*, *ʿUṭbiyya*, and key Mālikī texts, such as al-Qarāfī's *al-Dhākira*, and expansive books like the *al-Nawādir wa'l-ziyādāt* of Ibn Abī Zayd. Similar in length to al-Māmī's versification, it provided a comprehensive exploration of Mālikī jurisprudence.

Sīra works like Qāḍī Iyāḍ's *al-Shifāʾ bi taʿrīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafà* were commonly found in major libraries across the Sahara and West African countries. Mauritanian scholars, however, took a unique approach by writing works in the *sīra* genre in verse form. Some relevant examples include Shaykh Aḥmad al-Badawī ibn Muḥammad al-Majlisī's *Naẓm al-Ghazawāt*, focusing on military campaigns, al-Murābiṭ ibn Matālī's *Naẓm al-Akhlāq al-nabawiyya*, Muḥammad Maḥmūd ibn ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Abyayrī's *Naẓm fī al-Shamāʾil*, and the versification

[471] Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Khadīm al-Shamshawī al-Yaʿqūbī, *Marām al-Mujtadī min sharḥ Kafāf al-Mubtadī*, (Egypt: Dār al-Taysīr, 2009).

[472] See ould Cheikh, *Nomadisme, Islam et Pouvoir Politique dans la société maure précoloniale,*" 799-808; Lydon, "Inkwells of the Sahara: Reflections on the Production of Islamic Knowledge in Bilād Shinqīṭ," 67.

of Imām Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsà al-Tirmidhī's *al-Shamāʿil al-Muḥammadiyya* by Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ al-ʿAlawī.

Works on Islamic spirituality (*Taṣawwuf*) and Qur'anic exegesis, traditionally composed in prose emerged in verse forms. Some examples of *taṣawwuf* literature include Shaykh Muḥammad Mawlūd wuld Aḥmad Fāl al-Yaʿqūbī al-Musawī's *Maṭharat al-qulūb* and *Maḥārim al-lisān*, contrasting with prose works like Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī's *Risālat al-mustarshidīn* and Sīdī Aḥmad Zarruq al-Barnūsī al-Fāsī's *Qawāʿid al-taṣawwuf*. Additionally, various scholars versified the *Khātimat al-taṣawwuf* of al-Yadālī.[473] Noteworthy examples include al-Shafīʾ ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Maḥbūbī al-Yidālī's *Zawāhir al-walīy jāmiʾat jawāhir al-walīy*.

For Qur'anic exegesis, works like Aḥmaddu ibn Muḥammaddu ibn Aḥmadhī al-Hasanī's *Marāqī al-ʿAwwāh ilā tadabbur kitāb Allāh* and Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Yūrah al-Daymānī's *Naẓm al-rāqiʿat fī sharḥ al-wāqiʿa* stand out among many others.

These didactic poems, from introductory to advanced levels, constitute the curriculum at Mauritanian *maḥāḍir*, profoundly influencing the poetic imagination and expressions of students and the populace in the "Land of Million Poets" from the seventeenth century to the present day.

[473] The Senegalese scholar Aḥmadū Bamba (d. 1917) also versified it in a work entitled *Masālik al-jinān fī naẓm mā natharahu al-mansūb ilā Daymān*

CONCLUSION

This work currently stands as the most thorough exploration of the history of the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania, a tradition that is purported to have emerged in the later part of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. The assertion of this comparatively late onset of the poetic tradition and cultural expressions in Mauritania, despite the longstanding presence of Arabo-Islamic intellectual traditions, combined with my personal observation of the vibrant nature of this poetic tradition among the people, particularly within the Islamic institutions of learning in the region, propelled me into this comprehensive investigation.

These considerations prompted me to dig into a series of questions. Scholars and anthologists of Mauritania's intellectual, literary, and poetic heritage, including Aḥmad al-Amīn and ould Bah contend that the earliest poetry in the region that reportedly emerged in the seventeenth to eighteenth century was composed during this period. I asked, if this holds true, what characterized the poetic landscape in Mauritania before the advent of these earliest works? The notion of "emergence" (*nashʾa*) in the classical Arabic poetry tradition during this later period raises questions about its true significance. Is this emergence a "renaissance" (*nahḍa*) or a "revival" (*tajdīd*) of an older intellectual tradition that was dormant or unexpressed? If so, what factors contributed to the scarcity or inactivity of poetic expressions in the region's literary history before this reported emergence? I further asked who were the key figures that fostered this reported emergence, and what were the intellectual, socio-political, and economic conditions of the time that led to it. Can we partially attribute the reported emergence to the adoption of verse as the dominant pedagogical tool in the *maḥāḍir* educational system? Lastly, what impact did this reported poetic emergence and verse-making tradition have on the culture of Islamic scholarship in the region?

In response to these inquiries, my work serves as a comprehensive exploration, shedding light on the historical investigation into the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania. I critically examined the complex interplay between material, socio-political, literary, and intellectual contexts with the aim to understand how these factors converged in specific historical circumstances, and give rise to a new, vibrant, and enduring intellectual and literary tradition in Mauritania.

Part of my motivation for undertaking this project stems from the scarcity of scholarship on the Arabo-intellectual history of Mauritania, particularly the Arabic poetry tradition that has significantly shaped the lives, cultures, and intellectual spheres of the people, especially since the seventeenth to eighteenth century. This period, often regarded as a watershed moment in the region's history played a central role in establishing the strong intellectual and literary tradition not only in Mauritania but also across broader West Africa. Interestingly, this epoch, termed by some scholars as an age of intellectual stagnancy in the Muslim world, and labeled the age of "Islamic stagnation and pagan reaction" in West Africa, has been a subject of misrepresentation and stereotyping. Such misconceptions have not only influenced academic discourse but have also fueled deeply ingrained assumptions about the intellectual depth, substance, and originality of the works of the people of West Africa. For the Sahara and by extension the broader West Africa, these preconceived notions largely rooted in a racialized understanding of Islam in the region were created, in part, by the French colonial narrative.

This dichotomy, influenced by both race and geography, has impacted serious scholarly studies on the intellectual and literary tradition of Mauritania and the broader West Africa for decades. As shown, most existing work on Mauritania's intellectual and literary tradition

primarily concentrates on the religio-politico-socio-economic dimensions of the region. While scholars like Charles Stewart, Harry Norris and ould Bah have made noteworthy contributions to Mauritania's intellectual history, literary heritage, and the exploration of influential Muslim figures, as well as introductory works on classical Arabic poetry, none of these studies have given full attention to Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition as a primary focus of investigation. This project, first of its kind, rectifies this oversight by digging deep into the history of the Arabic poetry tradition, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the intellectual landscape in Mauritania and West Africa.

The focus on poetry is warranted as, for Mauritanians, understanding of Mauritania's Arabo-Islamic and intellectual history lies in its art, namely its poetry. Poetry serves not only as entertainment but also as a powerful medium through which ideas, images, and attitudes are expressed and shared. The verse tradition in Mauritania unveils unique ontologies and shapes novel perceptions of reality among the people.

To explore the questions presented in this study, I started with the following inquiry: if the earliest poetry in the region is reported to have emerged (*nashʾa*) in the seventeenth to eighteenth century, what defined the poetic landscape in Mauritania before the appearance of these initial works? Considering the early existence of Arabic-speaking communities in the Sahara, and extending to broader West Africa, wherein the Almoravid Movement played a fundamental role in disseminating classical Arabic and Islamic intellectual traditions, can the emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition be viewed as a "renaissance" (*nahḍa*) or a "revival" (*tajdīd*) of an older intellectual tradition that lay dormant or unexpressed? If so, what factors contributed to the previous scarcity of poetic expressions in the region's literary history?

Based on the presented findings and explorations, I contended that the notion of "emergence" concerning the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania during the latter half of the seventeenth to eighteenth century should not be viewed as an absolute or a moment of complete inception of the tradition in the reported era. Instead, it signifies a phenomenon of regeneration, consolidation, and strengthening of the intellectual and artistic tradition influenced by a multitude of internal and external developments covering the investigated period to the present day. In essence, specific socio-political, economic, religious, and intellectual factors converged, instigating the ascendancy of poetry and verse-making during the investigated period. Moreover, certain factors molded the poetic expressions in the region's literary history and caused it to remain relatively subdued, unexpressed, inactive, minimally documented, and less widespread prior to the era of its reported emergence.

So, I undertook an extensive literary archaeological inquiry to unearth the earliest manifestations of poetry and verse-making activities in the Sahara and the Sūdān. Furthermore, I delved into numerous historical conditions and events aiming to comprehend the factors that contributed to the inactivity, silence on, or limited dissemination of poetry before the reported emergence. I found that while indications of this intellectual tradition were concentrated in Timbuktu and areas like Walāta in eastern Mauritania, other regions exhibited presence but with limited evidence until the reported emergence era. I then investigated the contributing factors behind these developments which include prohibitions imposed by some Zawāyā *fuqahāʾ* against engaging in poetry and verse-making, lack of prominence of the Arabic linguistic tools and sciences, the absence of historical records possibly lost due to wars, the Saharan nomadic lifestyle marked by frequent movements and relocations, and the potential disruption in oral

knowledge transmission within a society reliant on preserving information orally, or its non-documentation due to the absence, limited access to, or scarcity of writing paper.

The prohibition by Zawāyā *fuqahāʾ* against engaging in poetry and verse-making, which played a fundamental role in the possible inactivity, silence, and limited spread of such activities in some areas of Mauritania, was likely motivated by Islamic sources such as the Qur'an, Ḥadīth, and *fiqh*, as well as their conscientious adherence to Islamic practices. These sources, in some aspects, caution against some of the activities of poets and interaction with poetry. Furthermore, these Zawāyā *fuqahāʾ* might have inherited their understanding and interpretations of these sources' caution about poets and verse-making activities from the legacy and cautious stance of the Almoravids, who were a major force in the spread and teachings of Islam in the region. Over the centuries, verses have consistently been used as a medium through which profane attitudes were promoted, a way of life that was also against the reform goals of the Almoravids. Hence, their skepticism toward poetry and its activities may have negatively impacted its prevalence in Mauritania over the centuries. However, I cautioned against the absolute claim that the Almoravids stifled poetry and verse-making, as reported in some quarters, because there were members of the movement's ruling class who also used, supported, and promoted it.

I observed that the intricate history of poetry and verse-making in Mauritania might have also suffered disruptions or losses in transmission, particularly through the oral tradition. As detailed in the chapters of this work, I highlighted the reliance on orality for preserving and transmitting knowledge, deeply rooted in Islamic pedagogy and the nomadic lifestyle of Mauritania. Moreover, the absence of writing and high cost of paper in the region, influenced in part by debates among Mālikī *fuqahāʾ* regarding purity and the permissibility of using non-

Muslim-produced paper, perhaps, hindered documentation of poetry and its associated activities. However, as literacy rates surged and the 'Arabization' of the region intensified with the influx of the Arab-Hassānī which reported reached its zenith in the seventeenth century—a period coinciding with the reported emergence of the Arabic poetry tradition—followed by increased accessibility and affordability of paper, there seemed to be a significant upsurge in both the creation and documentation of literary poetry. This process of documentation, facilitated by the availability of paper, allowed us to access some of the oldest works of poetry in the region, authored by scholars such as al-Yadālī, as explored in the chapters of this work.

In other words, like an "intellectual device" analogous to the wooden tablets used for learning in the region, the increased access to paper not only supported writing and documentation but also facilitated and enhanced the memorization of poetry, subsequently transmitted orally. This stands in contrast to other parts of the Muslim world where the abundance and affordability of writing paper shifted focus to commentarial works and marginal notes, leading to a decline in the practice of memorization. However, in Mauritania, in accordance with the pedagogical method of knowledge dissemination and the nomadic character of oral preservation and transmission of knowledge, the abundance of paper promoted more poetry writing, facilitating both memorization and the traditional oral transmission of poetry.

Building upon some of the examples provided above, which I posited as potential explanations for the prior quiet, silence, and limited presence and dissemination of poetry and verse-making activities, I contended that there are other specific factors that played key roles in the sudden and remarkable flourishing of the Arabic poetry tradition in Mauritania during the latter part of the seventeenth to eighteenth century, eventually recognized as the emergence

phenomenon. Firstly, I explored two key dynamics that I identified as crucial in these developments: the first revolves around identity and authority, while the second emphasizes the significance of the Arabic language. Both these dynamics converge through a common catalyst: mobility and migration. I argued that the influx of the Arab Ḥassānī and their subsequent dominance in the region triggered power struggles, particularly with groups like the Zawāyā. These groups, in turn, sought to legitimize their claims to religious and political authority by drawing on different markers, including 'sacred' Muslim and noble Arab genealogies. Validation of such claims necessitated claims to Arab ancestry, and eventual demonstration of proficiency in an expressive language, leading to the widespread adoption of Arabic eloquence, especially in the form of poetry. Verses were composed as tools to promote and validate Arab or noble Muslim ancestries in the quest for religious and political authority and legitimacy.

The second dynamic can be traced to the Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu, prompting the mobility and migration of scholars and texts towards central and western Mauritania. As previously noted, the Arabic poetry and verse-making intellectual tradition was active and prominent in Timbuktu and areas like Walāta in eastern Mauritania, in contrast to other regions that displayed a relative presence but limited substantial evidence until the reported emergence era. The movement and migration of people, scholars, and texts, coupled with other factors, brought about shifts in religious and social expressions, created a heightened demand for a deep understanding of Islamic principles, laws and ethics to guide the interactions and complexities of emerging societies marked by diverse and opposing backgrounds in the region. Consequently, there arose a need for the Arabic language and its associated tools to facilitate the understanding of the needed Islamic guidance of the people. The focus on Arabic language, particularly its core in poetry, emerged as crucial in this context, to help in shaping and guiding understanding and

interpretations. This intellectual environment was significantly shaped by the traditions of Timbuktu which had a vibrant poetic and verse-making heritage, as mentioned earlier.

Furthermore, despite the invasion causing devastation to Timbuktu's intellectual and commercial strength within the region, it facilitated increased interactions between Timbuktu, then Mauritania, and Morocco. The Saʿdī dynasty invasion 'opened up' new channels of communication and commercial routes between the northern and southern regions. These connections, facilitated by Sufi brotherhoods through pilgrimage and educational systems, resulted in increased mobility and migration of scholars, along with repositories of texts that predominantly embodied Andalusian intellectual traditions, including its poetry and associated tools. Furthermore, there were poetry and verse-making works originating from Maghribī and Egyptian sources that traversed the Sahara too. These transformative developments, particularly in the Sahara and modern-day Mauritania, not only facilitated knowledge transmission but also encouraged innovation, especially in the realms of poetry, intellectual and literary output. Concurrently, the Saʿdī leadership's revival of the Arabic literary and intellectual tradition, especially in poetry, in Morocco would later influence the poetic tradition of Mauritania in the seventeenth to eighteenth century.

I contended that the surge in transregional interactions between Morocco and Mauritania, combined with ongoing internal dynamics within the Sahara from the sixteenth century, culminated in significant intellectual and scholarly developments in seventeenth to eighteenth century Mauritania. This period witnessed the emergence of novel ideas, themes, and forms of intellectual literary production previously unknown in Mauritania. The seventeenth century, extending into the eighteenth century, stood out as a distinctive era marked by remarkable

literary and intellectual advancements, and contributed to the argument for an emergence phenomenon.

To buttress my argument on the impact of the Maghribī intellectual milieu on the sudden surge and prominence of poetic expressions in Mauritania in the period of investigation, I delved into the verses of Ibn Rāzikah, acknowledged as one of the pivotal figures in establishing the Arabic poetry tradition of Mauritania. Specifically, I focused on his *madīḥ* poem on the sandals of the Prophet Muḥammad as an illustration. In introducing a novel theme to Mauritanian poetry, his *madīḥ* poem on the Prophet's sandals, Ibn Rāzikah showed the influence of the Moroccan milieu, shaped by his associations with Moroccan scholars, Sufi networks, and intellectual genealogy. This influence was further exemplified through an exploration of additional verses from his *dīwān*.

Furthermore, I explored the verses of al-Yadālī, another scholar considered a founding father of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition. However, in his case, I illustrated how the combination of the Moroccan milieu with internal dynamics of his time, prompted the composition of his *qaṣīda* "*ṣalātu Rabbī maʿa al-salāmi*." This panegyric ode on the Prophet Muḥammad represented a new form and style of poetry not known in Mauritania prior to his work. Al-Yadālī creatively merged a non-classical Arabic meter into a classical genre, drawing inspiration from the Andalusian and Ḥassānī poetic traditions. This new approach defied standardized prosodic rules, marking the beginning of a praise poetic tradition resonating in Sufi circles and the works of prominent West African scholars across time and geographical locations.

I delved further into addressing additional questions posed by this work, such as whether we can attribute the reported emergence partially to the adoption of verse as the dominant pedagogical tool in the *maḥḍara* educational system. What impact did this reported poetic emergence and verse-making tradition have on the culture of Islamic scholarship in the region? I argued that to comprehend the reported phenomenon of emergence of Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition —an enduring intellectual and artistic literary pursuit ingrained in the people from the latter part of the seventeenth to the early eighteenth century—it is crucial to connect it with the intellectual and literary activities within the *maḥḍara* system. This educational setting was fundamental in establishing the presence of this tradition in Mauritania. It served as the crucible where its founding fathers honed their poetic skills, studied poetry and verse-making, and taught subsequent successors who carried the knowledge forward. The dynamics and developments of seventeenth to eighteenth-century Mauritania, demanding in-depth knowledge of the Arabic language and its poetry, were located in these centers of Islamic learning. Furthermore, the didactic pedagogical texts taught in this environment, in part, exposed scholars to poetry and verse-making, encouraged their engagement and composition of numerous works. Against the backdrop of the era's dynamics, the use of verses emerged as the predominant medium for preserving and transmitting Arabo-Islamic sciences and knowledge.

In conclusion, I maintain that the adoption of verses in knowledge transmission, informed by various factors, including insights from key figures in the *maḥḍara* educational system, differed from prevailing notions in scholarly literature. Contrary to the widespread belief that the preference for verses was solely driven by ease of memorization, I argued that other significant considerations were crucial in this choice too. Among these, I demonstrated that incorporation of verse pedagogy served numerous purposes: it provided a foundational platform for students to

evolve into poets while also acting as a stage for scholars to exhibit their intellectual prowess and distinction. My comprehensive exploration of this argument delved into works of poetry, scholarly discourse, and other pertinent sources to illuminate the multifaceted nature of this practice.

Future academic endeavors can significantly benefit from shifting the focus from the often-studied aspects of polity, economic dimensions, and social structures in Mauritania. A closer examination of the seventeenth to eighteenth century period in Mauritania offers a unique opportunity to unravel influential dynamics and developments that shaped the intellectual, scholarly, and literary heritage of the region. During this period, the foundational elements of the scholarly tradition in Mauritania were established and strengthened, providing a critical juncture for understanding the roots of the country's intellectual history.

A crucial aspect of future research involves the in-depth study of poetry and writings by key figures in Mauritania's Arabic poetry tradition, such as al-Yadālī and Ibn Rāzikah. Exploring their contributions could fill gaps in the scholarship on the Arabo-Islamic intellectual history of Mauritania. Furthermore, examining the scholarly tradition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century may provide insights into how Mauritania's intellectual activities strongly influenced and was connected to neighboring regions, as exemplified by al-Yadālī's impact on Senegalese scholars.

The preservation and teaching of poetry, especially since its so-called reported emergence, warrant careful investigation. An exploration of the relationship between increased paper and printed work and their role in facilitating writing, learning, teaching, transmitting, and memorization of poetry, similar to Dale Eickelman's work on Islamic education in Morocco, presents a valuable avenue for research.

Understanding the Islamic framework of education in Mauritania, particularly its reliance on poetry as a significant medium of intellectual expression and knowledge transmission, can be enriched by examining the perspectives of actors within their institutions of learning as shown in this work. Future works could explore why, though synonymous, the "Ṭurra" tradition in the broader Islamic educational framework of Mauritania is different from what is known of the "hāshiya" literary genre. Study of important works of the Ṭurra tradition such as the Ṭurra of Ibn Būnā can shed light on some of the unique intellectual endeavours of Mauritanian scholars that are different from other parts of the Muslim world and a good point of future avenues of research.

While catalogues have documented the vast intellectual traditions and literary heritage of Mauritania, there is a need for more comprehensive studies of the contents of these works. This could help to contribute to and address debates on the "core" and "periphery" dynamics. By exploring deeper the intellectual and Islamic activities of these regions positioned as "peripheries," scholars can gain insights into how these spaces were connected to the broader Muslim world, often influenced by internal dynamics.

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