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Chapter 3

The Rise of Clerical Lineages in the Sahara and the Bilad al-Sudan

Masters of talismanic knowledge are either members of the Kunta Clans or Fulbe.

—*A Mauritanian saying*¹

THE CENSUS of independent African states inherited the colonial system of ethno-racial classification. For the purpose of administration, the colonial state divided native peoples into “tribes” and “ethnic” groups, assuming that these were primordial sources of self-identification for them. In Nigeria, for example, the dominant groups are classified as ethnic Hausa (sometimes Hausa/Fulani), Yoruba, and Igbo. In Senegal, they are named Wolof, Sereer, Joola, Tukulor, Mandingo, etc. Often based on linguistic criteria, such a system of classification differed from the more flexible precolonial notions of communal belonging. The colonial census was to a large extent the legacy of nineteenth-century Western epistemologies deeply influenced by the European rise to global supremacy and ambition for imperial hegemony. To dominate the rest of the world, imperial Europe developed race theory as an epistemological tool. Based on physical attributes such as skin color or hair types, people were classified into racial groups. Classification implied hierarchy and, thus, superiority and its corollary, inferiority. By showing that some “races” are superior to others in terms of aesthetic and intellectual sophistication, or that some nations were more refined than others, race theory provided an intellectual justification for colonization as a civilizing mission.

Likewise, ethnology, the science of ethnic groups, was invented in the late eighteenth century, the heyday of European imperialism. Its conceptual apparatus included terms such as tribes, clans, natives, indigenes, customary law, bush, and vernacular languages or dialects—terms that typically were not used in the anthropological study of European societies. In his *Citizen and Subject*, Mahmood Mamdani argues that the colonial state in Africa, regardless of its

nationality (French, Portuguese, English, Dutch) or underlying colonial philosophy (assimilation, indirect rule, apartheid) or location (East, West, southern Africa), had a generic form that Mamdani dubbed “decentralized despotism.” It also had a similar *modus operandi* in the entire continent. It was a bifurcated state that mediated racial and imperial domination using different categories for whites and native peoples. Mamdani argues that:

What we have before us is a bifurcated world, no longer simply racially organized but a world in which the dividing line between those human and the rest less human is a line between those who labor on the land and those who do not. This divided world is inhabited by subjects on one side and citizens on the other; their life is regulated by customary law on one side and modern law on the other; their beliefs are dismissed as pagan on this side and bear the status of religion on the other; the stylized moments in their day-to-day lives are considered ritual on this side and culture on the other; their creative activities are considered crafts on this side and glorified as arts on the other; their verbal communication is demeaned as vernacular chatter on this side but elevated as linguistic discourse on the other; in sum, the world of the “savages” [is] barricaded, in deed as in word, from the world of the “civilized.”²

The colonial state, however, did not invent a racist discourse or racial prejudice against black people. Regarding the Muslim Sahel, Bruce Hall has argued that contemporary constructions of race owed a great deal to ideas of racial classifications developed in the region before the arrival of European colonial forces at the end of the nineteenth century.³ Focusing on Morocco, Chouki El-Hamel’s work has shown that the encounter between black Africans and Arabo-Berbers from the Sahara and northern Africa has benefitted the latter to the detriment of the blacks, against whom strong racial prejudices have existed and continue to exist.⁴ Islam, according to Hamel, was surely a powerful social dynamic, but “other cultural and ethnic factors figured prominently into how Islam was engendered in particular social settings.” Blackness was often associated with unbelief and even slavery in North Africa. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, there is strong evidence that enslaving free-born black Muslims in blatant violation of Islamic law was commonplace.⁵ However, precolonial identities remained fluid, and assimilation to another ethno-cultural identity was possible and did happen. The institution of concubinage, or sexual relations with slave girls, produced racially mixed Muslim societies in many parts of the Sahel. In addition, interethnic and interracial marriages, which incidentally were not completely free from racial stereotyping, were common for the

merchant families in trading towns in particular and less so for peasant families living in agricultural villages.⁶ In the following discussion of the teachers and messengers of Islam in the precolonial Bilad al-Sudan, I will highlight the relative fluidity of precolonial racial and ethnic identities compared to the post-colonial ones.

Our knowledge of the intellectual life of the Sahara is limited for the period from the demise of the Almoravid state in the twelfth century to the sixteenth century. According to Ould el-Bara, the main reason is the absence of any state control in large parts of the Sahara, which created a favorable ground for war, famine, and insecurity. All this induced several waves of migration from the north to the south of the Sahara.⁷ This post-Almoravid period witnessed the Arabization of major Berber tribes. The Sanhaja, who were the backbone of the Almoravid movement, were the first to adopt the Arabic language and create new genealogies tracing their origins to the Arab world.⁸ In addition to the Berbers, several other groups participated in this process of ethno-racial transformation and genealogical “sophistication.” Scholarship and clericalism (religious service as imam, qadi, and Qur’anic teacher) attracted a variety of groups, including dark-skinned Africans from the Atlantic Coast, the Sahara, the Sahel and the Savannah; Saharan and sub-Saharan Tuaregs; and nomadic Arabs who came to the Bilad al-Sudan from North Africa, Egypt, and the Swahili Coast.⁹ Some of them intermarried and/or coalesced, forming new racial/tribal configurations.¹⁰

Of the greatest medieval cities of Islamic learning, Shinqit and Walata, both in present-day Mauritania, figure prominently. Each of them has witnessed a process of miscegenation and reconfiguration of identities. The etymology of the name Shinqit is *Sun giti*, which means “sources of horses”¹¹ in an old Soninke dialect and suggests that the first inhabitants of that city were Sudani (blacks). Located at the periphery of the Ghana Empire, and peopled by Mande agriculturalists, Walata was originally named Biru, a Malinke name meaning “roofs made of straw supported by a wooden stick.”¹² Its name was changed subsequently to Iwalatan during the Mali and Songhay periods. By the sixteenth century, the name was Arabized as Walata,¹³ which also comes from the Malinke word *wala*, meaning a “shady spot.” Timothy Cleaveland has shown that Timbuktu and Walata grew as prosperous trade and intellectual centers in the medieval period and as melting pots in which Arabs, Berbers, and darker-skinned Africans merged, thereby producing new Arabo-Islamic identities. In the process, some Soninke families were assimilated into dominant

Arab(ized) clans.¹⁴ An eloquent illustration is the Lemhajib clan. Pre-eighteenth-century historical sources for this region, such as the Timbuktu seventeenth-century chronicles¹⁵ and Ahmad Baba's biographic dictionary *Nayl al-Ibtihaj* (Gaining happiness), which is a very important bibliographical resource for the study of Islamic scholarship in the Islamic West,¹⁶ do not mention this clan. Post-eighteenth-century sources, however, such as the *Fath al-Shakur* by a-Burtuli¹⁷ and the *Bilad al-Takrur*, mention several scholars associated with the tribe of Lemhajib. By the time this tribe came into full existence in the eighteenth century, some black Soninke families of Iwalatan had disappeared. In all likelihood, Cleaveland concludes, they were assimilated into the Lemhajib Arabized clan.¹⁸

Bachir Diagne notes in his discussion of the Islamization of the Mande that "conversion is not only entering a new religion with its creed, dogmas, and rituals. As the Latin etymology indicates, to convert is to get totally turned around. That means a new self-reappraisal following the adoption of the new cosmology. One visible aspect of conversion has been a radical change in the discourse of identity."¹⁹ Similar ethnic identity change has been documented in many areas of the precolonial Bilad al-Sudan, including in Timbuktu, where some prominent families (Anda Ali, Baba Misru, Ali Sila) were of mixed Arab and Soninke ancestry.²⁰ The Fulani scholar Shaykh Musa Camara documented the fluidity of ethnic boundaries in the region of the Senegal River valley during the precolonial period.²¹

Being Muslim was a marker of status in urban centers located in the axes of the trans-Saharan trade prior to the arrival of Europeans. Merchants trading with Arabs built strong relationships based on trust, gained by belonging to the same religion. Other sources of prestige associated with being Muslim include the pilgrimage to Mecca. Now the Holy Lands are just a few hours of flight away, but imagine those who performed the pilgrimage several centuries ago, when it took years to reach the Holy Lands, and many candidates either never made it to Mecca or did not return.²²

Like pilgrimage, literacy was also a source of great prestige. Regardless of their religion, rulers in Sudanic Africa have traditionally surrounded themselves with literate Muslim clerics. This clerisy performed various administrative tasks for rulers before the rise of self-designated Islamic polities in the eighteenth century. Literacy became a greater source for emancipation in Sudani societies in the nineteenth-century period of Islamic reform and state building. In the present-day Senegal River valley, for example, the nobility is

represented by the so-called Torodbe, which means “literates.” Originally from a humble social background, the Torodbe rose to the top of the class hierarchy thanks to the prestige of knowledge of Islamic sciences.²³

Students of African Islam distinguish between two Islamization paradigms, each one associated with an emblematic scholar of the western Sudan. Representative of the first paradigm is al-Hajj Salim Suwari.²⁴ Very influential among the Jakhanke, Salim Suwari, himself a Jakhanke, held the view that unbelief was the consequence of ignorance and that God’s grand design for the world is that some people will remain longer in the “state of ignorance” than others. Conversion will occur in due course according to God’s plans. Consequently, both proselytizing and military jihads were unacceptable interference with God’s will. Suwari also taught that non-Muslim rule was not only acceptable to Muslims, but should be supported by them insofar as it enabled them to follow the Sunna of the Prophet.²⁵ Above all, Suwari believed that Muslims should pursue the search for education and provide “unbelievers” with a model that they could emulate until, in due course and according to God’s plan, the time of conversion came.²⁶ Such a worldview enabled the Djula to engage in peaceful trade with non-Muslims for centuries.²⁷

The second paradigm is associated with a seventeenth-century Berber scholar, Awbek b. Aschfaghu, known as Imam Nasir al-Din,²⁸ who belonged to the maraboutic tribe of Banu Dayman. An advocate of military jihad, Nasir al-Din rebelled against the domination of the Banu Hassan, Arabic-speaking warrior peoples whom he portrayed as bad Muslims. The key ideas that influenced Nasir al-Din were the anticipation of the end of time, the arrival of a Muslim eschatological figure known as the awaited Mahdi, and the notion of the Prophet Muhammad as a perfect human being (*insan kamil*), which provided ideological justification for perfection to be realized through Islamic reform.²⁹ Nasir al-Din’s goal was to set up a unified community that lived according to Islamic Shari’a, under the leadership of an imam, namely Nasir al-Din himself. He recruited Wolof and Fulbe followers in the Senegambian region, who in 1670 succeeded in overthrowing the ruling dynasties in the neighboring Senegambian states of Cajoor, Jolof, Walo, and Futa Toro.³⁰ The reform movement led by Nasir al-Din is known as Shurbubba, a term that refers to the war of clerics to establish a state governed by Islam. Early efforts for reform were not successful in establishing lasting Islamic entities in the western Sudan, because Nasir al-Din was killed in a battle and the Banu Hassan reasserted their dominance in southwestern Mauritania. Likewise, his

followers' domination over Senegambian kingdoms lasted barely ten years; former rulers of these kingdoms garnered support from the French to reconquer their lands. However, the jihadist impulse in the spirit of "Shurbubba" remained alive among some disciples of Nasir al-Din, who strove to communicate their vision of an ideal Islamic society to future generations. It was above all among the Fulbe scholars that the teachings of Nasir al-Din found their realization, with several jihads leading to the establishment of Islamic states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will identify the groups that contributed most to the spread of literacy prior to European colonial rule. My classification is based on a mix of ethnic, racial, religious, and genealogical criteria that are not mutually exclusive, as some of these groups have over time moved from one category to another. But each of the terms is analytically useful in that it captures the ways in which these groups might have self-identified at a given historical time. Those overlapping groups are the Ibadi Berbers, the post-Almoravid Sanhaja Berbers, the Zawaya, the Djula Wangara, the Fulbe, and the Wolof of Senegambia.

The Ibadi Berbers

The Ibadis are a subgroup of Kharijites, the first Muslim sect in history. When 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, succeeded to the political leadership of the nascent Muslim nation in 656 CE, members of the family of his murdered predecessor, 'Uthman b. 'Affan, disputed his legitimacy. Facing dissent from one of them, Mu'awiya b. Abi Sufyan, the Muslim governor of Syria, Caliph 'Ali marched to Damascus to depose him. At the suggestion of some Muslims who wanted to prevent dissension, 'Ali agreed to submit to arbitration. Following his decision, a group of his supporters withdrew support from him on the grounds that, as a legitimate successor to the caliphate, he should not have accepted any arbitration. Called "those who withdrew" (Kharijites), they are found in Oman and Algeria. According to Ibn al-Saghir, an Arab geographer who wrote in the ninth century, Ibadis dominated the southern Algerian town of Tahert in the early ninth century when Islamic ideas were being introduced in the Sahara and the western Bilad al-Sudan from North Africa. Tahert, a major center in the gold trade, was then linked to the Bilad al-Sudan by a commercial route.³¹ Historians agree that the Ibadis were the first groups to spread Islamic teachings in the Sahara, as well as

south of the Sahara, including medieval Ghana. The early Muslim communities in Kumbi Saleh, the capital city of Ghana mentioned by Al-Bakri, seem to have practiced Ibadī Islam. Ibadī scholars were also influential in Mali, the successor state of Ghana. In his *Kitab tabaqat al-mashayikh* (Book of Ranks of Shaykhs), the Ibadī scholar al-Darjini claimed that his great grandfather converted the king of Mali to the Ibadism.³² According to Yahya Ould el-Bara, there is no region in the Islamic world in which Ibadī influences were as strong as among the Saharan Berbers and in the Bilad al-Sudan.³³ The egalitarian social structures of the native peoples of these regions fit Ibadī beliefs. Ould el-Bara dismisses the charge that Berbers in this region were superficially Islamized and not familiar with Islamic teachings prior to the rise of the Almoravids. This claim might have been informed by the Almoravids' propaganda, which justified their movement of religious reform and state building as an effort to eradicate syncretism and establish a pure Islam among Berbers.

The Post-Almoravid Sanhaja Berbers

After the Ibadīs, the post-Almoravid Sanhaja Berbers had the strongest impact on Islam in the medieval Sahara and Bilad al-Sudan. The interactions between Sanhaja Berbers and Sudani people started before Islam and continued with the expansion of the trans-Saharan trade, which brought them into closer contact. At times, Sudani/Berber interactions were peaceful, but at other times, Berbers competed with their Sudani neighbors for land and tended to push them farther south into the savannah.³⁴ With the rise of the Almoravids, scholarship developed in the Sahara to an unprecedented extent.³⁵ They unified large parts of the region around Maliki jurisprudence. Through the educational institutions they created, the Almoravids deepened the knowledge of Islam in the region and sent missionaries to teach throughout the Sahara. The theological and political unity resulting from the Almoravid expansion greatly facilitated the movement of commercial caravans and pilgrims.³⁶ After the fall of the Almoravids and the rise of the successor state of the Almohads, the Sanhaja lost their political and military might, but not their religious zeal. Through intermarriage and various other interactions with Hassaniyya Arabs (Banu Hassan warriors of Mauritania), most of them gradually lost their Sanhaja identity, to become integrated into the larger group of the Zawaya, described later. But regardless of the degree of assimilation to other groups and cultures, some Sanhaja remained attached to their tribal origin and signed their scholarly

works with their tribal name—al-Sanhaji. One such scholar is Muhammad al-Busiri al-Sanhaji (d. 1296), who is the author of the much-celebrated poem titled “al-Burda” (The Mantle).³⁷ Al-Busiri, so the story goes, suffered a stroke and became partially paralyzed. One night, he dreamed of the Prophet Muhammad covering his paralyzed side with a mantle. Awake, he found himself miraculously cured. As a token of his gratitude for the miraculous prophetic intervention, Al-Busiri composed this poem, which is chanted to this day at festivals in West Africa celebrating the birth of the Prophet. In some regions, the poem is collectively recited every day during the entire month in which the Prophet Muhammad was born.

Ardent proselytizers, the post-Almoravid Sanhaja Berbers contributed for several centuries to the dissemination of Islam and Maliki jurisprudence throughout West Africa. Many sources point to the intellectual influence of the Sanhaja Berbers in the medieval Saharan towns of Walata, Takedda, and Timbuktu.³⁸ The intellectual development of Timbuktu, and notably the establishment of the famous Sankoré College, is credited to post-Almoravid Sanhaja scholars.

The Djula Wangara

Another group known for its contribution to the spread of Islamic scholarship in the Bilad al-Sudan is the Wangara. African historians have long debated its origin, as well as its trading and religious activities in various West African contexts (medieval Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Hausaland, and the Voltaic Bassin).³⁹ The name Wangara (Land of Gold) was mentioned under different spellings in early historical sources to refer to either a people or a country. As the land of gold, Leo Africanus locates Wangara in Hausaland.⁴⁰ Modern historians believe that what Arab geographers referred to as Wangara were the Bambuk Bure goldfields. McIntosh suggested an alternative location in the inland Niger delta.⁴¹ As a linguistic group, the Wangara name is spelled Gangara by Al-Bakri,⁴² Guangara by Leo Africanus,⁴³ Wangara by al-Idrisi,⁴⁴ and Wanjarata by Ibn Battuta.⁴⁵ The seventeenth-century Timbuktu chronicles (*Tarikh al-Fattash*, *Tarikh al-Sudan*, and *Tadhkirat al-Nisyan*) used several variant spellings: Wakoré, Wankori, Ouankori, and Wangarbe,⁴⁶ based on the name given to them in different languages spoken in medieval Mali (Soninke, Songhay, and Fulani). They are called Jakhanke in Senegambia (probably after the famous city of Dia or Diakha),⁴⁷ and in Hausaland they are called “Wangarawa,” with the Hausa suffix *wa* as a plural

marker added to their name. Historically, the Wangara have been active in the entire West African region, from the Senegal River basin to present-day Northern Nigeria.

In 1963, Mallam Nasiru Kabara, a prominent scholar and Sufi leader from Kano, supplied the late historian Muhammad al-Hajj from the Republic of Sudan with the only known copy of a local but anonymous seventeenth-century chronicle retracing the origins and missionary activities of Wangarawa in Hausaland.⁴⁸ Unlike the Kano Chronicle,⁴⁹ which dates the arrival of the Wangara in Kano to the rule of Sarkin Yaji between 1349 and 1385, the anonymous chronicle dates their arrival to that of Emir Muhamad Rumfa (1463–1499).⁵⁰ The Wangara introduced two key Maliki texts⁵¹ in the region: the *Mukhtasar* (Concise Handbook) of Khalil Ibn Ishaq and the *Mudawwana* (Compendium of Legal Opinions) of Sahnun, which Shaykh Zagaiti, the leader of the Wangara missionaries to Hausaland, committed to memory.

Historians diverge over the main common denominators of the Wangara. In a comprehensive article analyzing from both a historical and a geographical perspective the dispersion of the Wangara in the medieval states of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay—and later in Hausaland and the Volta Region—Andreas W. Massing has shown that the Wangara have retained two main characteristics: trade and scholarship. Lamin Sanneh, whose study focuses on the Senegambian branch of the Wangara known as Jakhanke, argues that Wangara might have welcomed traders in their communities, but they were essentially a clerical group that lived predominantly from subsistence agriculture. Sanneh thus refuted earlier arguments about the centrality of trade in the political economy of Jakhanke communities.⁵² M. A. al-Hajj suggested that the factors that precipitated their movement varied according to periods and Wangara groups and that “commercial and missionary motives were often mixed.”⁵³ Sometimes they migrated for mainly political reasons—for example, fleeing insecurity due to state collapse—sometimes in search of economic opportunities, and sometimes their migration was primarily for missionary motives.⁵⁴

Originally Soninke speakers, the Wangara who moved westward became linguistically assimilated into their receiving communities, such as the Songhay, Hausa, and Fulani, among others. Massing believes that they adopted the Songhay language between the turn of the fifteenth century and the late sixteenth century, which coincides broadly with the rule of the Askya dynasty in the Songhay Empire.⁵⁵ In Hausaland, where their missionary zeal was notable, they have been linguistically assimilated as well. Those Wangara or Jakhanke

who remained in Senegambia where Soninke is widely spoken, however, have used the Soninke language in their teaching of Islam (particularly the exegesis of the Qur'an) alongside other Senegambian languages, such as Fulani or Wolof, to communicate with other populations.⁵⁶

The Zawaya

The origins of the Zawaya can be traced partly to the Banu Hilal and the Banu Sulaym, two Arab tribes that invaded the Maghreb from Egypt in the eleventh century. In the aftermath of their invasion, the overwhelming majority of the people of the Maghreb adopted the Arabic language and culture.⁵⁷ From the Maghreb, some of these Arabs migrated southward to the Sahara and/or intermarried with post-Almoravid Sanhaja to form the Zawaya. In the western Sahara, from the seventeenth century on, the Zawaya specialized in the production, reproduction, and dissemination of Islamic knowledge,⁵⁸ in contrast with the warrior groups of the Sahara known as Hassan. This dual pattern of specialization is also found among other Muslims in West Africa, including the Fulbe of the Senegal River valley, for example, where the subgroup of Torodbe specialized in learning, unlike the warrior groups of the *sebbe* (singular: *ceddo*), and the Djula-speaking people among whom the subgroup of Mori specialized in learning in contrast with the warrior clans of Tun Tigi.⁵⁹

From the eighteenth century on, the contribution of the Zawaya to the spread of Islamic knowledge was second to none⁶⁰ in West Africa. In addition to their scholarly works, which make up the bulk of the manuscripts preserved in the collections of the region, their intellectual influence on the western Sudan is also reflected in the high demand for Zawaya teachers in Islamic centers of learning all over the western Sudan. The Zawaya were reputed to teach correct pronunciation of the classical Arabic language to Sudani Muslims, an art that many Muslim scholars among native speakers of the Niger Congo languages did not master. Another aspect of the intellectual influence of the Zawaya is their introduction of Sufism, which later became the dominant expression of Islam in West Africa. The two most influential Zawaya tribes of what is present-day Mauritania (the Kunta and the Idaw 'Ali) initiated Sudani Africans into the two dominant Sufi orders of sub-Saharan Africa, the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya.

From the twelfth century on, the Qadiriyya tariqa, which was founded in Baghdad by 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaylani, spread throughout Asia, the Balkans,

and North Africa. The famous North African scholar 'Abd al-Karim al-Maghili, whose teachings had long-lasting influence in the medieval and modern Bilad al-Sudan, is believed to have introduced it in the region.⁶¹ Al-Maghili arrived in Kano in 1491, during the rule of Muhammad Rumfa.⁶² He sojourned several years in Kano during the rule of Muhammad Rumfa and wrote his famous *Crown of Religion: On the Obligation of Princes*, advising the latter on how to rule according to Islamic principles.⁶³ He also stayed in Songhay, where he issued a series of fatwas in response to questions of Emperor Askya Muhammad of Songhay,⁶⁴ to whom he provided similar advice. In the early sixteenth century, Al-Maghili initiated Sidi Ahmad al-Bakka'i of the Kunta tribe, whose descendants became the flag bearers of the Qadiriyya in the Sahara and the Bilad al-Sudan in subsequent centuries.

One of the wealthiest Arab clans in Sudanic Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁶⁵ by the end of the nineteenth century, the Kunta⁶⁶ were well established throughout the region, from the shores of the Atlantic to Borno in the central Sudan⁶⁷ and from Tuat in southern Morocco to Tagant in Mauritania.⁶⁸ They are also one of the most intellectually prolific families of the region.⁶⁹ Kunta scholars produced juridical verdicts (fatwas), chronicles (*tarikh*), and advice to princes. They recorded trade documents and arbitrated disputes among traders. They also wrote an abundance of devotional literature in praise of the Prophet Muhammad, Sufi saints, and simply friends. The two most famous Kunta scholars are Sidi Mukhtar al-Kunti al-Kabir (1729–1811 CE) and his son Sidi Muhammad (d. 1826 CE). It was under their leadership that the Kunta became the most influential clerical group of the Bilad al-Sudan. The hegemony of the Kunta rested on their versatility. They were very learned scholars in the exoteric sciences, and notably in Islamic jurisprudence. The Kunta also had a great mastery of talismanic sciences. Finally, they were very wealthy. This multipositional type of leadership enabled the Kunta to provide a range of services that no other single group could deliver: from knowledge of the Islamic sciences and the Arabic language to the teaching of esoteric sciences, from the initiation to Sufism to the mediation of political conflicts between various racial and ethnic groups, including Tuaregs, Armas, Berbers, and black people in the western and southwestern Sahara.

The other Zawaya tribe, of Idaw A'li, played an equally important role in spreading exoteric knowledge and Sufism. They were the flag bearers of the Tijaniyya,⁷⁰ a Sufi order founded by Ahmad al-Tijani in the nineteenth century, which spread throughout the entire world, but more specifically in sub-Saharan Africa, where tens of millions of people joined the order. Most

chains of transmission of the Tijaniyya go back to Muhammad al-Hafiz (1759/1760–1830) of the Idaw A‘li tribe.

The Tijaniyya claimed to be the synthesis of all Sufi teachings and to abrogate all pre-existing orders. This claim appealed to large segments of the population of West Africa, which joined the new order and included former adherents of the Qadiriyya over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Through various institutions (mosques, Sufi lodges, schools), the Zawaya spread Islam, Sufi orders, and talismanic knowledge throughout the Bilad al-Sudan.⁷¹

The Fulbe

Called Fulani in Northern Nigeria, Peul by the French, and Fellata in Borno and the Nilotic Sudan,⁷² the Fulbe are speakers of the fourth most spoken African language after Arabic, Kiswahili, and Hausa. Originating in the Senegal River valley, they spread throughout the West African savannah between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries.⁷³ They are now present from Senegal to the Nilotic Sudan, with strong concentrations in Northern Nigeria. Although they converted to Islam after the Wangara, they became no less ardent messengers and teachers of Islam. From the eighteenth century on, many Fulbe specialized in scholarship,⁷⁴ and Pulaar became an important language for the transmission of Islamic learning, second only to Arabic in the western Sudan. This was so much the case that many aspirants to clerical status among the Wolof, Soninke, and other ethnic groups of the Senegal River valley assimilated to the Haal Pulaar ethnicity in order to become scholars. In the process, some of them adopted Haal Pulaar patronyms.⁷⁵ But it is in Hausaland that their teaching had the strongest impact in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Under the leadership of Uthman Dan Fodio, a community of scholars was founded that toppled all the Hausa states and founded the Sokoto Caliphate. Known as Fodiawa, the community of Uthman Dan Fodio produced scholarly works at a scale comparable to that of the Kunta Zawaya. In the formative stage of the Fodio community,⁷⁶ Uthman Dan Fodio (d. 1817), Abdullahi Dan Fodio (d. 1829), and Sultan Muhammad Bello (d. 1837) produced over three hundred scholarly works in Arabic, Hausa, and Fulfulde. Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd have documented the role played by women in the intellectual and political life of the Sokoto Caliphate. Uthman Dan Fodio himself belonged to a clan in which women received religious instruction. His mother and grandmother were learned scholars,⁷⁷ and his daughter Nana

Asma'u⁷⁸ (d. 1864) wrote nine poems in Arabic, forty-two in Fulfulde, and twenty-six in Hausa.⁷⁹ Like her father,⁸⁰ Nana Asma'u was strongly committed to educating the larger community, and particularly Fulbe women. She produced more work in Ajami than in Arabic. Her many achievements in the field of education include the establishment of a literary circle of educated women, known as Yan Taru, in the mid-nineteenth century to promote the Fulbe.⁸¹ We do not know much about the level of erudition and intellectual production of the Yan Taru in general, but we do know that some of Asma'u's sisters had solid intellectual credentials. Her sister Khadija translated the *Mukhtasar of Khalil* from Arabic into Fulfulde in the late nineteenth century.⁸² Her other sisters—Habsatu, Fadima, Safiya, and Maryam—also composed various writings.⁸³

From Senegambia to Mali—including in the Islamic theocracy in Futa Djallon,⁸⁴ in Futa Toro,⁸⁵ and among the Dina in Masina—the Fulbe also contributed decisively to state building in nineteenth-century western Bilad al-Sudan.⁸⁶ Particularly remarkable among them was Umar Tall.⁸⁷ Initiated into the Tijaniyya in his homeland of northern Senegal, Tall travelled to Mecca, where he spent three years studying. He was appointed representative of the Tijaniyya in the Bilad al-Sudan by the Tijani shaykh Muhammad al-Ghali. On his way back to his native Futa, he sojourned seven years in Sokoto as the guest of Sultan Muhammad Bello and produced one of the most important texts of the Tijaniyya order.⁸⁸ When he returned to his native land, Umar Tall led a jihad to Islamize his country and succeeded in establishing a state that was brought down by French colonial rule in the late nineteenth century.

By the end of the nineteenth century, states established by the Fulbe Muslim scholars had, on an unprecedented scale, promoted Islamic institutions, including Qur'anic and higher Islamic studies schools and Sufi lodges. Just like other groups, some Fulbe clerical families also became assimilated to other ethnic groups. In Senegambia, for example, though some families such as the Tall kept their identity as Fulbe, other Fulani clerical families such as the Sy of Tivawane were assimilated into the Wolof in the twentieth century while they recruited a predominantly Wolof following.

The Wolof of Senegambia

Senegambia refers to an area of West Africa straddling Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, and Mali, most of which was colonized by the French at the turn of the twentieth century. Modern Senegambian culture is the product of

centuries of cultural, economic, and political interactions between Arabs, Europeans, and black Africans. Wolof speakers, who are among the dominant ethnic groups of Senegambia, are among the teachers and messengers of Islam. They have contributed to spreading and teaching Islam, often in collaboration with rulers. We have seen that West African kings had a long tradition of collaboration with Muslim clerics, to whom they gave privileges in exchange for spiritual protection. Senegambia was a notable illustration of this situation. Typically, *serin* (Muslim scholars) were given a land grant to pursue agricultural and educational activities under the military protection of a king. Serin reciprocated by offering a variety of services to the kings—among others, praying and providing talismans for the protection of the ruler, his kingdom, and his general population from natural disasters, diseases, and external or internal aggression. There were instances of ambitious serin who sought political power and attacked kingdoms. In such cases, kings retaliated against clerical communities. But the dominant pattern was one of collaboration to the mutual benefit of the serin and the rulers. Serin contributed not only to the Islamic education of Senegambia, but also to rural colonization. After successfully completing their Islamic education, many scholars would seek to establish their own school. To do so, many serin established new villages with their students to devote their time to agriculture and education. More than any other occupational group, it was the serin who created new settlements in Senegambia, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁸⁹ In central Senegal, a major center of Islamic education that attracted students from Senegambia and beyond was created in the seventeenth century at Pir Saniokhor.⁹⁰ More recently, the Sufi order of the Murids, founded by Ahmadu Bamba in the late nineteenth century, has created dozens of religious enclaves. The most impressive among them is Touba, the capital of the Murids. Touba was a hamlet at the beginning of the twentieth century. Within a few decades, it rose to prominence and became the second-largest city of Senegal.⁹¹

The claim to be of Arabic or prophetic descent has been an important marker of status among Muslims from the Bilad al-Sudan and elsewhere in the wider Muslim world.⁹² The overwhelming majority of groups that acquire the reputation of knowledge, holiness, and piety claim to be sharif (plural: *ashraf* or *shurafa*). This is particularly true of teachers and messengers of Islam discussed in this chapter, most of whom claimed sharifian descent and produced genealogies linking them to the Prophet or the Arabs. Those genealogies do not withstand analytical scrutiny. As rightly noted by David Robinson:

It was simply not possible for most of the Arabs to be descendants of Muhammad, the Quraysh or early companions, and it was even less likely that Persian, Turkish, Berber, Swahili, or Mandinka would have genealogical ties to the Hijaz. But that was not the point. Those who made the claims and who had quality of personal command, learning, or military leadership to reinforce the claims, came to be believed and their descendants in turn drew upon these genealogical credentials to build their career.⁹³

Indeed, the belief in such claims produced powerful social effects. The legitimacy of shurafa is largely based on the assumption that their sharifian origin gives them supernatural powers to harm their adversaries, to cure the sick, to predict the future, and to bestow good luck and happiness on those who venerate them. This has made such claims pervasive in the Bilad al-Sudan.

The early twentieth-century debate on race relations between Arabs and blacks in countries such as the prepartition Republic of Sudan and Mauritania suggests radical otherness between the two “racial groups.” In these two countries, so-called Arabs are accused of having continued the centuries-old practices of enslaving and oppressing so-called black people. Even if the demands for social justice and social emancipation for subordinate groups are well founded, they should not blind us to the fact that neither in the past nor in the present have these groups been separated by a color line of any kind. On the contrary, they have maintained sustained interactions at various levels.

Ibadi Berbers, post-Almoravid Sanhaja, Zawaya, Djula, Fulbe, and Wolof have above all been the main teachers and messengers of Islam. The Islamic archive available in the libraries and private collections bears testimony to their intellectual contributions. They taught classical Maliki texts and abridged some of them to make them more easily understood to their students. They issued juridical verdicts to arbitrate trade disputes. They mastered talismanic knowledge, which they could use to heal various diseases, bring luck, and provide protection against real and presumed enemies. The Mauritanian proverb at the beginning of the chapter, which states that masters of talismanic knowledge are either the Kunta Zawaya clans or the Fulbe (*al-hikmatu kuntiyyatun aw futiyyatun*), shows how two of these groups contributed to the creation of precolonial Islamic epistemologies. I will further highlight their contribution to the production of Islamic knowledge in Chapters 4 and 5 when I look at the historical core curriculum and analyze some of the main debates documented by the Islamic archive.