

**This publication is part of a project that has received funding  
from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European  
Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme  
(Grant agreement No. 716467).**



**European Research Council**

Established by the European Commission

al-Bara, Yahya Ould. "The past and present of the ghu#fiyya Sufi order from the western regions of the Sahara." *State, Society and Islam in the Western Regions of the Sahara: Regional Interactions and Social Change*. Ed. Francisco Freire. London,: I.B. Tauris, 2022. 261–288. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 3 Sep. 2022. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9780755643493.ch-10>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, [www.bloomsburycollections.com](http://www.bloomsburycollections.com), 3 September 2022, 11:35 UTC.

Copyright © Francisco Freire and contributors 2022. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

# The past and present of the *ghuzfiyya* Sufi order from the western regions of the Sahara

Yahya Ould al-Bara  
*University of Nouakchott*

## Introduction

A variety of considerations sparked our interest in the *ghuzfiyya* Sufi order (*ṭarīqa*), which has played a leading role in shaping religious, political and economic life in the Sahara-Sahelian regions in the past two centuries. These include the scarcity of available sources on the *ghuzfiyya* in comparison to other religious orders; the different opinions given by Islamic theologian-jurists (*fuqahā'*) concerning the *ghuzfiyya*; its impact on religious, economic and social life in the region (especially during the colonial period); widespread secrecy concerning the principles that govern it; the blatant opposition from certain Islamic scholars (*'ulamā'*) it has encountered; and finally, speculations about the political role it may play in contemporary Mauritania.

Since its creation in the eighteenth century until the first half of the twentieth century, this arcane Sufi order has been the subject of few scholarly studies. Most of what has been written about it has emerged from disputes among local scholars: sympathizers who seek to defend the *ghuzfiyya* and critics who wish to confirm (or even intensify) the accusations commonly levelled against it. Statements from members of the order have been rare, irrespective of the harsh criticism and controversies to which they have been subject. Despite my efforts, I was unable to find any written works in defence of the order, with the notable exception of Shaykh al-Mahfūz ould Bayya's 'Epistle in defense of the *shādhiliyya*' (*Risāla fī al-Radd 'an al-shādhiliyya*; undated manuscript, c. 1955).<sup>1</sup>

The French colonial administration, for its part, gave some attention to the *ghuzfiyya*. From as far back as their early presence in the region (at the turn of the twentieth century), the French expressed their mistrust of the *ghuzfiyya* in numerous documents. The reason for this is certainly to be found in the opposition of some *ghuzfs* to the colonial project. In fact, Sīdī ould al-Zayn, responsible for the death of the French colonial administrator Xavier Coppolani in 1905, was a disciple of the *ghuzf*

Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd ‘al-Khalaf’, who was openly hostile to French colonial penetration.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter aims to contribute to the understanding of the *ghuzfiyya*’s distinctive characteristics and to make up for the deficits of previous works. The text is based on fieldwork conducted in February 2019 in a number of towns and villages in the Hodh region of eastern Mauritania, the most important of which are Timbedra, Legweirga, Adele-Bagru, Bassiknou and Nema. The chapter provides an account of the history of the *ghuzfiyya* Sufi order from its emergence in the Hodh to its later ‘resurrection’ in the second half of the twentieth century, which resulted in its expansion into numerous other countries. In doing so, this chapter will elucidate the basic moral principles and teachings of the order, identify its essential characteristics and, more broadly, locate it on the religious and spiritual map of Mauritania and the Muslim world.<sup>3</sup> The evolution of the order, over a period of two and a half centuries and spanning different parts of the Muslim world, can be divided into distinctive phases:

1. An initial phase (second half of the eighteenth century) tied to the life of the founding shaykh, Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, exclusively centred in the Hodh. The information on this early period indicates that the *ghuzfiyya* was by then (considering their basic spiritual teachings and practices) very close to the *malāmātiyya*.<sup>4</sup> A high level of discretion, close to ‘clandestineness’ (*al-takhaffī*), was also valued during this period.
2. The second phase is associated with the *ghuzfiyya*’s second shaykh, al-Mukhtār b. al-Ṭālib A‘mar, who was chosen as the sole transmitter of the *ṭarīqa* by Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf. It seems that its diffusion was by then limited to the Taganit and parts of the Rgayba (in the Assaba region of present-day Mauritania). It is marked by spiritual exercises, the elaboration of the order’s characteristic teachings and ritual recitations (*awrād*, sg. *wird*), and the pursuit of mystical rapture (*al-jadhḥ*) and ecstatic utterances (*al-shaṭḥ*).
3. The third phase is marked by the transition to dynastic leadership, transmitted through the family of Shaykh al-Mukhtār’s successor, Shaykh Sīd Aḥmad b. ‘Ammār b. al-Nāh. He was succeeded by his son Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Khalaf, who then passed the order’s leadership onto his sons Shaykh Sīd Aḥmad al-Ghazwānī and Shaykh Muḥammad Aḥmad. Under their direction, the *ghuzfiyya* expanded to the Adrar, Rgayba and Taganit. During this period, the *ghuzfiyya* acquired its distinctive social form as a ‘true’ *ṭarīqa*, valuing the spiritual education of its members, stimulating their mystical experience and valuing work for the common good.
4. The fourth phase begins with Shaykh ‘Alī b. Āffa (m. 1909 CE), who brought the *ghuzfiyya* back into the Hodh and diffused it widely throughout the region. He and his disciples also spread the *ṭarīqa* beyond Mauritania, leading to the establishment of communities in Sudan, Chad, the Hijaz in the Arabian Peninsula, Libya, Jordan and Turkey. This period is also characterized by militant proselytism and by rigorous efforts to defend the order – based in scholarly arguments – against accusations of heresy.

## The early formative period (1758–1798)

The Hodh (Ar. *ḥawḍ*) is a natural geographic space with a geomorphology that resembles a type of bowl commonly used to scoop water – whence the literal translation of the name. Shaykh Sa‘d Būh b. al-Shaykh Muḥammad Faḍil b. Māmīn (d. 1335 H/1917 CE) provides a detailed description of the region and its inhabitants:

Its extent, between Tishit and Segou, is forty days or more, and its extent between the Taganit and Nema is about a month. Among the territories created by god, it is the most peopled. Its southern part is inhabited by Blacks (*ḥabasha*, lit. ‘Ethiopians’), that is, Bambara, Fulani, Massina, Soninké (*aswānik*), and Futanké (*ahl fūta*). These people live together in a region with big cities and villages. The northern part of the Hodh belongs to *zwāya* and *ḥassān qabā’il* (‘tribes’),<sup>5</sup> to nomadic herdsmen from the countryside and the cities, and to those living in the mountains.

(*Kashf ḥijāb al-astār* (manuscript))

As this description shows, the region was populated by groups with different ethnic backgrounds, which testifies to its economic importance and the diversity of the productive activities undertaken in the region. The Hodh was profoundly influenced by the Black African empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhay; following their demise in the late sixteenth century, however, no centralized political system (comparable, perhaps, to the more recent emirates of the Adrar, Tagant, Brakna and Trarza) was established in the region. Instead, it was successively influenced by two ‘tribal chieftaincies’ (*mashyakhāt*, sing. *mashyakhā*): that of the Awlād Mubārak, and that of the Mashzūf. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the region saw a remarkable development of Islamic religious sciences and Sufi movements, giving rise to numerous distinguished scholars with notable social, religious and economic influence.<sup>6</sup> The *ghuzfiyya* is included in this landscape, the origins of which lie in the argilliferous plains of the Kūsh. As the name suggests (it means ‘stomach’ in Azer),<sup>7</sup> the topography of this agricultural and pastoral reservoir allowed it to meet the alimentary needs of a large population.

The most important community in the Kūsh is the Awlād Muḥammad (Būḥummud) community, which currently constitutes around 80 per cent of the total population.<sup>8</sup> They immigrated from the Taganit in the late seventeenth century and by the nineteenth century were already permanently established there. They are organically structured in twenty-four factions, divided into two functional groups: Those who carry arms and follow ‘warrior’ traditions (*ḥassān/‘arab*) are called Awlād Būḥummud al-‘Arab (sixteen factions); the second group, composed of the remaining eight factions, specialized in religious matters (*zwāya/ṭulba*) and are known as the Ṭulbat Awlād Būḥummud (according to Ibn Māmīn’s undated manuscript, *al-Ḍiyyā ‘al-mustabīn*).

### The life of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf

This is the social milieu in which al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, the only son of Ḥamāh Allah b. Sālim al-Dāwūdi,<sup>9</sup> was born in 1128 H [1716 CE; d. 1223 H /1808 CE]

(Ibn Maynummu 1961). Citing his patrilineal ancestors, the historian-genealogist Mawlāy ‘Abdallāh b. al-Shaykh Mawlāy ‘Abd al-Mālik b. Mawlāy Ḥasan (d. 1348 H/1928 CE) writes: ‘Sālim b. Laḥbīb b. Muḥammad b. Mūsa b. Abū Bakr b. A‘bayd b. Haddāj b. Ja‘far b. Dāwūd b. A‘rūg b. Uday b. al-Ḥāmid b. Ḥassān b. Mūsā b. Ma‘qil.’<sup>10</sup> This demonstrates that Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf belonged to the al-Ja‘āfra faction, who, together with the Awlād ‘Allūsh and Awlād Zayd, formed the Awlād Dāwūd A‘rūg *qabila* (Ibn Maynummu 1961).

Following the early death of his father (who was purportedly killed by bandits), Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf was raised by his mother, al-Quzwiyya mint al-Nagnūg, from the Yāddās *qabila*. His grandfather allegedly lived in Tishit or its surroundings, where he is said to have been one of the most eminent leaders of the al-Ja‘āfra, the owner of large palm groves, and a follower of *ḥassān* traditions. Rather than staying with his Awlād Dāwūd relatives, he lived with his Yāddās maternal uncles (*akhwālīh*). Later, having already acquired the status of a saint, he joined the Tāfullālit,<sup>11</sup> who lived between Kunayb and Adele-Bagru.<sup>12</sup> He was then married and remained there for the rest of his life.

Different sources report that Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf had multiple wives, most of them from the Awlād Buḥummud, and that he also had a ‘secret marriage’ (*tasarrā*) with the mother of his son al-Ṭālib Muḥammad. The exact number of the shaykh’s children is disputed, but we can confirm with some certainty the existence of at least twenty-five: sixteen sons and nine daughters. Only seven of his sons passed on their lineage to the present day: al-Shaykh Sīdī Ṣāliḥ, al-Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad Zarrūq,<sup>13</sup> Lujayba, Abū al-Ḥasan, Al-Ṭālib Yūsuf, Būna ‘Āli and al-Ṭālib Muḥammad. The remaining nine sons were named Sīdī Bubakkar al-Kandarī, Shaykhna, al-Ṭālib A‘mar, Abū al-Ḥasan, al-Ṭālib al-Amīn, al-Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār, al-Shaykh al-Aghzaf al-Ṣaghīr, al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir and al-Ṭālib Ṣiddīq. Six of them died at an early age, and the lineages of the other three ended before the present day. Paul Marty, writing in 1921 (1921: 91), mentions that ‘all of the shaykh’s descendants’ (the Ahl al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf; leaving out the Lujayba and Abū al-Ḥasan) lived between Bassiknou (Mauritania) and Sokolo (in present-day Mali), mainly around the villages of Madalla and Dwānkarā. Following their nomadic trails during the dry season, they approached the inlets of the Niger River towards Diawara and Macina. Today, the shaykh’s direct descendants continue to live in different locations in the eastern Hodh.

Oral tradition maintains that as a child, Muḥammad al-Aghzaf did not show any interest in the normal activities of children his age and that, showing signs of future ‘sainthood’ and confirmed sagacity (*al-ḥudhdhāq*), he was admitted to a *maḥzara* (a traditional religious school; see the chapter by Baba Ahmed and Horma in this volume) for children with similar promise. When he had proceeded to the forty-fifth subdivision (*ḥizb*) of the Qur’ān and read the two verses ‘*al-raḥmān ‘allama al-qur’ān*’ (‘the Merciful taught the Qur’ān’), he was suddenly overtaken by a powerful emotion and retreated into anxious silence. He looked to the sky and remained transfixed in this position for a long time, to the point that his eyes became red and people began to fear for his life.<sup>14</sup> His teacher (whose name is not remembered) repeatedly tried to call him back to his writing board (*lawḥ*), but to no avail (Ibn Maynummu 1961). After he regained consciousness, he left the Quranic school and adopted a solitary disposition,

remaining silent and avoiding encounters with others. He spent most of his time in the desert worshipping God and began to undertake long mystical journeys (*siyyāḥa*) that led him to all corners of his native region, and notably to Tishit, the home of his ancestors. He visited spiritual guides (*mashā'ikh*) of various traditions and led a truly ascetic life, wearing simple tunics made of rough cotton (*jif*) and renouncing all personal possessions, fully entrusting himself to the will of God. When people asked him about his habit of travelling without any provisions, he answered that birds always travelled that way. When they objected, saying that birds had been given wings, he said that 'there are beings that can fly even without wings'.<sup>15</sup> After many years on this mystical quest, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf eventually reached the stage of accomplishment (*wuṣūl*) through an ecstatic mystical experience of God (*jadhb*), without the spiritual guidance of any master.

As a saint and Sufi master, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf is naturally credited with many miracles (*karāmāt*). A distinctive feature of these, also reported by later holy men of the *ghuzfiyya*, is their relation to water. Some of the most important miracles that serve to confirm the shaykh's saintly powers revolve around Nwall, a salty well situated in the al-Rag region of eastern Hodh. Oral tradition recounts the story of Nwall as follows:

A man of the Ahl al-Ṭālib Mukhtār came to a camp of *shurfā*, where he saw a girl in a state of mental illness. He asked for permission to marry her, assuring her family that she would be cured. The girl's parents accepted but warned him that she was in the clutches of a dangerous demon. He did not believe them, and the marriage was concluded. The day of the wedding, a storm suddenly descended and lifted the couple's tent into the sky. The man shouted the magic phrase, 'Oh auxiliary men' (*yā rijāl al-ghayth*), whereupon a group of saints, including Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, immediately appeared to help. They chased the demon away until they reached Nwall. Some of the saint's companions were thirsty and asked for water, but they were told that the water from this well was poisonous, and those—both men and beasts—who drank from it would instantly die. After invoking God's name, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf spat into the well, and its water was then safe to drink. Since then, the water of Nwall has been sought by the sick, who come from afar in search of its therapeutic properties.

(Ibn Māmīn, al-Shaykh Muḥammad Fāḍil n.d.; see also al-Burtuli 1981: 5)

Another version of the Nwall miracle tells that a group of saints, including Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, camped at the well. When the time for prayer approached, they each declined to lead it, out of decency. The shaykh's rug then miraculously shifted to the imam's position, and he led the collective prayer (Ibn Maynummu 1961). This event is said to have earned him the titles 'master of masters' (*shaykh al-ashyākh*) and 'sultan of saints' (*sulṭān al-awliyā*), as he would henceforth be known.<sup>16</sup>

Būna 'Āli b. Maynummu reports that when Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf was 35 years old, Sharif Zayn al-'Ābidīn b. Sidī 'Abdallāh al-Maghribī al-Fāsī, the famous scholar from Fes, learned of his existence by divine revelation. Zayn al-'Ābidīn had a vision that he would mediate Muḥammad al-Aghzaf's ascension to gnosis

and decided to leave Morocco to meet him in the Kūsh (south of the Hodh region of present-day Mauritania). He initiated him in all the esoteric secrets leading to the divine presence, returning to Fes only once he had accomplished this task (Ibn Maynummu 1961). The expression ‘all the secrets’ (*jamī‘ al-asrār*) indicates that the master from Fes authorized Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf to pass on the secret prayers (*awrād*) of all the Sufi orders, not only those of a determined *ṭarīqa*.<sup>17</sup> This resonates with the fact that the early *ghuzfiyya* seemed to incorporate the prayers and teachings of different Sufi orders and was thus considered either an independent order, as a branch of the *shādhiliyya*, or a ‘mix’ of the *shādhiliyya* and the *qādiriyya* (Boubrik 2000: 269).<sup>18</sup>

When Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf was 40 years old, Būna ‘Āli writes, *sharīf* Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (also bearer of the title ‘master of masters’) returned once again to the Sahara to visit him (Ibn Maynummu 1961). He died shortly upon his arrival and was buried in Gnayb (in the Kūsh), the likely residence of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf at the time. Based on this information, Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s death would have occurred in the year 1168 H/1755 CE.

The filial chain of the *ghuzfiyya* is connected to the *ṭarīqa shādhiliyya nāṣiriyya*, a Sufi path that is considered to have been the most widespread among the inhabitants of the region over the past three centuries. This path is attached to ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Nāṣir al-Dar‘ī al-Tamagrūti al-Aghlāni (d. 1085 H/1676 CE), one of the most eminent Islamic scholars of his time. The *zāwiya* of the *nāṣiriyya* in Tamagrūt (in the Draa region of southern Morocco) attracted followers from far and wide and enjoyed a high reputation, not only for its intellectual influence – extending throughout the whole Maghreb and the Sahara – but also for its outstanding social and political role in the region (Gutelius 2002; Hammoudi 1980; Katz 1992).

When Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf was in his forties, he took up the task of offering education and spiritual guidance to those who came to him in search of knowledge. He received many visitors and disciples from all corners of the Hodh and from neighbouring regions. Some claim that he was the first to carry the title of ‘spiritual guide’ (*shaykh*) in this area.<sup>19</sup> He is said to have entertained close ties with other Sufi masters of his time, especially Shaykh Māmīn (1795–1869), founder of the *fādiliyya* branch of the *qādiriyya*, and Shaykh Sidī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (1729–1811), the famous ‘renewer of faith’ (*mujaddid*) who propagated and popularized the Sufi teachings of the *qādiriyya* in the western Sudan.

Apparently, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf initiated his disciples into the litany prayers (*awrād*) of the *shādhiliyya nāṣiriyya*, also adding, among others, elements from the *qādiriyya* tradition. It seems that the adepts of the *ghuzfiyya* were first introduced to the teachings of the *shādhiliyya*, considered the basis of the order’s spiritual path, and only after having demonstrated a certain degree of progress were they initiated into the *awrād* of the *qādiriyya*. It was believed that those who attained this level should always begin their ritual recitations with the *qādirī wird* and only then pronounce the *wird* of the *shādhiliyya* because, as Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf claimed, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilāni was ‘jealous’.<sup>20</sup> The adepts of the *ghuzfiyya* recited their own specific *wird* not collectively but individually after the five regular prayers of the day



and were obliged to keep it a secret. The so-called *wird al-ta'mir* (literally 'wird of filling in [time]') was to be recited between the morning prayer (*fajr*) and sunrise and between the afternoon prayer (*ʿaṣr*) and sunset. During these periods, disciples were to concentrate fully on their ritual invocations, refraining from talking. This rule explains the widespread delaying of the *ʿaṣr* prayer by the *ghuzfs*, an element that has often been a point of contention. In his comment on Khalil b. Ishāq's *al-Mukhtaṣar*, the Islamic scholar from Kifa Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Aḥmad Zaydān al-Jakanī (d. 1935) wrote:

I consulted the works of the mystics and of the authors of good advice, the books on the *ḥadīth* such as al-Bukhārī's, the treatises of *fiqh*, and the works dealing with their fundamentals and branches, in search of what could justify the conduct of these people, and I learned as an unmistakable truth that this is a Satanic doctrine.

(al-Jakanī al-Shinqīṭī (1993), vol. 1: 132–3)

The *ghuzfs* justified this delaying of the *ʿaṣr* prayer by appealing to a principle known in Maliki *fiqh* as 'moving beyond dissent' (*al-khurūj min al-khilāf*). Muḥammad b. Sīdī al-Buṣādī (d. 1972) described this point of view in a *fatwā* in which he affirms that Shaykh Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shāḍilī followed the opinion of Abū Ḥanīfa (founder of the Hanafī school of Islamic law) concerning the appropriate time for the *ʿaṣr* prayer.<sup>21</sup>

Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf reportedly prioritized the acquisition of certain behavioural and mental traits which he considered more beneficial than those espoused by most legal scholars, who argued that renouncement (of certain vices) precedes the acquisition of certain spiritual qualities. He is credited with having said to his children and disciples: 'Purify yourselves, that's of more worth than studying', 'He amongst you who wants to emulate me shall put his head under an *um-l-bayna* [a plant with leaves that touch the ground]' (alluding to the value attributed to modesty and renouncement).<sup>22</sup> These combined factors account for the particular character of the *ghuzfiyya*, whose adepts are encouraged to live in seclusion and discretion, accord high value to a working ethos and contribute to public welfare.

Another distinctive feature of the *ghuzfiyya* is their individualistic approach to the initiation of disciples, i.e. the consideration their teachers are supposed to pay to their individual character traits when guiding their spiritual development. Some are encouraged to indulge in the order's ritual practices, while those with a different constitution are advised to devote themselves to the material service of the community.<sup>23</sup> Many of the order's adepts affirm that the prophet (PBUH) himself used this pedagogical strategy with his companions.

Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf died in 1213 H (1798 CE), at the age of 84.<sup>24</sup> He was buried in al-Mabrūk (46 km south of Adele-Bagru, in present-day Mali), where his tomb still attracts visitors. According to local accounts, his last will and testament stipulated that his corpse was to be placed on the back of a camel, which was to roam free until it decided to rest, in this way determining his burial site.<sup>25</sup>

Soon after his burial, an anonymous 'Bambara of Ségou' is said to have erected a protective structure over the tomb. This man, who was a pagan, saw the shaykh in a dream in which the latter invited him to convert to Islam. He did in fact convert and decided to visit the shaykh's tomb. When he arrived at al-Mabrūk, the tomb was

elevated in the air, and he resolved to erect a structure to protect it. As there was no one living in the vicinity of the tomb, he went to Akamb, a village in the Malian *département* of Nara, to seek assistance. After accomplishing his mission, he remained in the area for some time before returning to his homeland, where he proselytized among his people.<sup>26</sup>

### The shaykh's first disciples

Among the shaykh's disciples, two deserve particular consideration for the outstanding reputation they enjoyed and the exceptional intellectual and spiritual influence they exerted on others: Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amīn b. al-Ṭālib 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1254 H/1838 CE) and Shaykh Sidī Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Aswad (d. 1259 H/1843–44 CE; Ibn Maynummu 1961).

Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amīn b. al-Ṭālib 'Abd al-Wahhāb was part of the Tāfullālit faction of the Awlād Buḥummud *qabila*. His love of knowledge is exemplified in the oral account that tells that when God revealed to him that he had just one year left to live, he took his wooden writing board (*lawḥ*) and spent his remaining time studying. He founded an important school of Islamic sciences (*maḥzara*) and wrote a number of manuscripts in different genres, including a commentary on Khalīl b. Ishāq's *al-Mukhtaṣar* (in fourteen volumes) and a long commentary on Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī's (d. 385 H/922–996 CE) *Risāla, al-Talkhīṣ al-mufīd 'alā risāla Ibn Abī Zayd*. Until recently, the latter work was the most important manual of *fiqh* used in the Hodh. Muḥammad al-Amīn b. al-Ṭālib was buried in Idrīs.<sup>27</sup> His only son, Shaykh Muḥammad Aḥmad, followed in his footsteps and was later replaced by his own son, Muḥammad al-Amīn.<sup>28</sup> It is clear, however, that this succession did not take place within the framework of the *ghuzfiyya*, as Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amīn b. al-Ṭālib did not receive Muḥammad al-Aghzaf's authorization to do so.

Shaykh Sidī Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Aswad derives his name from his clan's founding father, Sharīf Mawlāy Aḥmad b. Muḥammad 'Abdallāh b. Mawlāy 'Umar (surname 'al-Aswad').<sup>29</sup> Aḥmad al-Aswad left Tindouf (where he lived) by the mid-eighteenth century to establish himself in the Taganit, among the Aghlāl, and later in the Hodh. He died in Tashamāmit, where his tomb became a place of pilgrimage and worship. Shaykh Būna 'Āli b. Maynammu presents Sidī Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Aswad as an ascetic who took care of orphans, fasted throughout the day and prayed through the night (Ibn Maynummu 1961). He died in 1259 H (1843 CE) and is buried in Jagraga (20 km north of Djigueni, in the Hodh al-Gharbi region of present-day Mauritania).

There is no doubt that the Ahl Aḥmad al-Aswad were highly reputed in religious matters, but it is also known that with the rise of Shaykh Muḥammad Fāḍil b. Māmīn and his *ṭarīqa*, they joined his Sufi order (for the most part). Paul Marty (1921: 314) mentions that the famous saint Sidī Muḥammad b. Ahl al-Khayr, who affirmed his filiation with Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, was also a *muqaddam* ('deputy', one authorized to initiate others into a *ṭarīqa*) of the *qādiriyya* and instructed numerous disciples from the Glägma, al-Tanāgīd, Ijummān, Idawblāl, and al-Aghlāl tribal spheres. After his death in 1916, they all returned to their respective *qabila*.

Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf is also credited with having influenced Shaykh Muḥammad Fāḍil b. Māmīn: '[a]fter his death [Muḥammad al-Aghzaf] poured water over Shaykh Muḥammad Fāḍil b. Māmīn from the glass of the accomplished path of sanctification' (Ibn Maynummu 1961). Shaykh Būna 'Ālī b. Maynummu provides further details on what led Shaykh Muḥammad Fāḍil to visit Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf. He tells us that a severe drought hit the region where Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī lived, and in order to put an end to this serious problem he tried to convince Shaykh Ibn Aḥmad b. 'Uthmān al-Tinwājiwī to pray for them. He sent him a letter in which he urged him to carry out the pilgrimage to Mecca. Ibn Aḥmad complied and prepared for the journey. On his way, he visited Shaykh Māmīn, who received him with great hospitality and presented his newborn son, Muḥammad Fāḍil, to him. Shaykh Māmīn asked his visitor to pray for his son and to bestow his divine *baraka* ('grace') on him, so that God would make him one of those rendering service to Muslims. Shaykh Ibn Aḥmad did as asked and informed the child's father of the scope of the divine gifts and the sainthood that he would later manifest in his life. He also revealed that this would be achieved through the intermediation of a 'friend of the house' (*ṣāḥib al-dār*) named Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf. He then recommended the following to his host: When Muḥammad Fāḍil reaches adulthood, he should prepare a pious gift composed of a tent, some cows and various other objects and travel to Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf's tomb, where he should stay for a week; this will lead to the awakening of the powers within him.

When Shaykh Muḥammad Fāḍil reached adulthood, after the death of his father, Shaykh Būna 'Ālī b. Maynummu tells us, he fulfilled the advice given by Shaykh Ibn Aḥmad. He gathered the goods he'd mentioned and went to the tomb of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, where he stayed for some time (some accounts mention several weeks). By God's grace, he was filled with wisdom and light. When it became clear to him that he had gotten what he had come for and was allowed to return home, he composed his famous poem:

Oh God! By the grace of the man buried here  
The pillar of our times al-Aghzaf of sound advice  
(*Yā rabbunā bi-ṣāḥib al-ḍarīḥ*  
*Quṭb al-zamān al-Aghzaf al-naṣīḥ*)

Once he recited this, he received all he desired and returned home haloed by the light of right conduct, having accomplished his mystical journey (Ibn Maynummu 1961).

### **The retreat to secrecy**

During the more than forty years that Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf devoted to the instruction and spiritual orientation of his disciples, he attracted a great number of devotees, many of whom became distinguished scholars and saints. Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf himself 'confirmed' (*saddara*) the mystical accomplishments of many of his disciples, to the point that, it is said, he 'licensed' (*ajāza*) thirty-nine in a single afternoon.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, it seems that the shaykh authorized only one person

to transmit the *ṭarīqa*'s *wird*: Shaykh al-Mukhtār b. al-Ṭālib A' mar b. Nūḥ (surname 'Bū-dam'a'), who hailed from the Īdaybūsāt. The account of Shaykh al-Mukhtār's authorization to transmit the order's distinctive teachings is supported by the fact that Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf's eldest son, Sīdī Ṣāliḥ, was later initiated by Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1242 H/1826 CE) into the *qādiriyya*.<sup>31</sup> The Īdaybūsāt *zwāya* status *qabīla* produced numerous judges, saints and poets. At some point, they were established in the Gibla (the southwestern region of present-day Mauritania) but then migrated to the Taganit, the Aoukar, the Adrar and finally to the Hodh.<sup>32</sup>

It seems that the formulation attributed to Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf when certifying al-Mukhtār b. al-Ṭālib A' mar ('I hereby confer onto you the stallion's necklace'; Ibn Maynummu 1961), signals the ascription of exclusive authority over the order's propagation. The *wird* of the *ghuzfiyya* was actually not transmitted by the numerous already initiated disciples, not even by his own sons, who were widely respected as 'honourable men' (*ṣāliḥīn*) and Sufi masters (*mashā'ikh*) in their own right. This suggests that the *ghuzfiyya* was seemingly very selective in choosing its members, deciding to keep its ritual invocations (*awrād*) a secret. This surely contributes to explaining why it retained an aura of mystery and has remained an object of speculation for outside observers.

### Shaykh al-Mukhtār b. al-Ṭālib A' mar's ascension to spiritual leadership

The genealogy of Shaykh al-Mukhtār connects him to his ancestor al-Ṭālib A' mar b. Nūḥ b. al-Ṭālib 'Abd al-Fattāḥ b. Lamrābiḥ b. Ābba. His father, al-Ṭālib A' mar b. Nūḥ, left al-Bayrāt Īdaybūsāt (situated to the north of Butilimit) in 1155 H (1742 CE) and headed to the Taganit (Ibn Ḥāmidun 1970). There, he settled in a place called Tashāga, in the Tishit region, which remains the only available gateway to the Hodh, further south. This area had hitherto been known for the looters that used to take advantage of the strategic passage. It is said that he was the first person to light a fire there (travellers avoided doing so for fear of bandits). It is also said that a band of brigands were once surprised to discover that the fire they had spotted belonged to al-Ṭālib A' mar's tent, for in this location only a considerable force, one unafraid of being attacked, would have dared to light a fire. Al-Ṭālib A' mar's presence thus secured this area, making it a safe refuge for travellers. Soon, his Ahl Ābba 'cousins' and other Īdaybūsāt factions regrouped around him. They consolidated their control over the area and extended it to the Tāskāsīt.<sup>33</sup> Al-Ṭālib A' mar likely hoped to ensure the security of his relatives on their nomadic routes, which sometimes led them to distant northwestern (*al-Sāhil*) pastures in the cooler season, well into Rgaybāt-controlled areas. The Ahl Nūḥ attracted disciples from among them and consequently gained a high reputation and respect from this *qabīla*.<sup>34</sup> In addition, al-Ṭālib A' mar had to look after his relatives' security in the western Hodh, where they went with their herds in the dry season.

Oral tradition among the Ahl Nūḥ reports that al-Ṭālib A' mar had five daughters and seven sons: Muḥammad Būka, 'Abdallāh, Aḥmad Fāl, al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār, al-Ṭālib Muṣṭafā, Khalil and 'Abd al-Jalil.<sup>35</sup> Different interlocutors specified that Shaykh al-Mukhtār was the fourth of al-Ṭālib A' mar's sons and present him and his brother

Aḥmad Fāl as accredited scholars. In his search for knowledge, Shaykh al-Mukhtār travelled to Rgayba, where his mystical states intensified. His father then ordered him to look for a shaykh to guide him because, according to Muḥammad al-Amīn b. ‘Abdallāh b. Sayyid al-Qawm, those who experienced these mystical states were legally obliged to seek the tuition of a shaykh in order to learn the adequate ways to purify and free themselves of daemons. Shaykh al-Mukhtār sought a master to teach him and met a shaykh of the *shādhiliyya*.<sup>36</sup> He joined this shaykh’s camp and stayed with him until he received his ‘habilitation’ (*ijāza*) in mysticism (*taṣawwuf*) and the authorization to transmit the teachings of the Sufi order. He then returned to where his relatives were settled (between Likhshab and Tishit) to teach and guide those aspiring to spiritual development. It is said that God granted him authority over wild animals, who became tame in his presence and came to him when he called them. This explains his riding a lion on his travels.

Būna ‘Āli b. Maynummu tells that one day, when some of his disciples were digging a well and had already reached a great depth, the pit suddenly began to collapse. In unison, they exclaimed the holy invocation ‘Oh auxiliary men!’ (*yā rijāl al-ghayth*), thereby provoking God’s intervention. The collapse halted, but they were now trapped underground. Their relatives, along with the shaykh, were desperate but saw no alternative to abandoning them. When night fell, a tall, light-skinned man in white clothes suddenly appeared in the cavern and offered the group food and water. They accepted his offer without asking who he was, and he went on to offer them milk, sitting and speaking with them as if he knew them. When they finally asked his name, he answered: Muḥammad al-Aghzaf b. Ḥimā Allah b. Sālim. They committed his name to memory, and he continued to visit and to provide for them for a period of three months. None imagined they would still be alive, until Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf appeared before Shaykh al-Mukhtār in his sleep and asked him: ‘Why don’t you look for your disciples, who are trapped alive under layers of earth?’ Shaykh al-Mukhtār initially dismissed the episode as a confused dream, but every time he closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep, the shaykh re-appeared, instructing him to search for his disciples. Puzzled by this experience, he asked his visitor his name, and the latter told him he was Muḥammad al-Aghzaf b. Ḥimā Allah b. Sālim. Būna ‘Āli b. Maynummu’s account continues: ‘In the morning, he summoned the most respected scholars and notables (*ahl al-ḥall wa-l-‘aqd*) and told them of his experience. They could hardly believe what they were hearing. As they could not apprehend the divine omnipotence at work, they did not know how to answer.’ He told them: ‘Assemble the population; we are going to dig. If we discover that I was lied to, that will only strengthen our faith in the futility of dreams. And if we discover that things are as we were told, we will know that this confirms divine omnipotence.’ They agreed, and the population mobilized themselves in support. They went on to enlarge the entrance of the well and dug until the earth began to trickle onto the heads of those trapped below, who shouted: ‘Oh you up there, don’t kill us!’ People joyfully called out to the buried disciples by their names, and they answered that all of them were alive. Carefully, they continued until all had been rescued. When people asked what had happened, the disciples reported: ‘When we saw that the well was collapsing, we invoked the assistance of the good souls in

God's favour. A man called Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf appeared above our heads, as if he were supporting the rubble that threatened to crush us.'

Būna 'Ālī b. Maynummu's account continues:

From that moment on, Shaykh al-Mukhtār was convinced that he could not pretend to be either a mentor (*murshid*), or a master of education (*murabbī*), or a guide to mystical accomplishment (*muwwaṣṣil*). He decided to seek out Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf. A lion served as his mount. He prepared for the voyage, decided to ask his closest disciples to accompany him, and departed with only a few provisions, with no idea of the distance he would have to cover. The group traveled without rest until they were close to Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf's camp. Outside the camp, they met a man wearing patched-up clothes following his herd of goats and sheep. He confirmed that this was the camp of the shaykh they were seeking. They entered and asked for the tent of the shaykh. They were told that he was away, likely in the desert, as was his custom. When the shaykh returned to welcome them, they saw that it was the same man they had met outside the camp. He then began to arrange for his guests' accommodation. When night fell, Shaykh al-Mukhtār informed Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf that his lion needed to eat and that his usual diet consisted of a well-fed cow. The shaykh did not possess any cattle at the time; the only option was a young calf owned by a woman who lived nearby. Although the calf was hardly big enough to satisfy the lion's appetite, he asked her to sell it to him, but she initially refused. Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf convinced her by promising that her cow would be returned to her unharmed. He then entrusted the animal to his disciple, al-Ḥājj al-Kawrī, and instructed him: 'When you bring the calf to the lion, whisper into its ear that I command it to eat the lion, with God's permission.' Al-Ḥājj al-Kawrī did as he was told by the shaykh. In the early morning hours, Shaykh al-Mukhtār sent one of his companions to check on the lion. He returned without saying anything, and nobody interrogated him further. Then al-Ḥājj al-Kawrī went to see what had happened to the lion, but he could find no trace of it. The calf was licking its chops. The shaykh's disciple was filled with pleasure and shouted: 'The cow has eaten the lion!' By the time the sun rose, the news had reached Shaykh al-Mukhtār, leaving him perplexed. He went to Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf and told him that he could only return home on the back of a lion. The shaykh resolved to reward his straightforwardness and said to his disciple, Sīdī Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥājj b. Buradda: 'Go to this place (giving him the name), and when you have arrived there, call the lions from everywhere as loud as you can; when they come to you, there will be one with such-and-such characteristics, coming from such-and-such direction, approaching you with a wagging tail; that is the one you are to bring back.

When Sīdī Ibrāhīm arrived at the location, following the shaykh's instructions, everything happened as he had predicted, and he told the lion: 'Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf orders you to obey me.' He brought the animal to the camp, where Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf equipped it with a harness and personally handed it over to Shaykh al-Mukhtār. He requested for forgiveness for what had happened and said

goodbye, asking his guest to send his regards to his kin and to free the lion once he arrived home. Shaykh al-Mukhtār mounted the lion and left with his companions, but he soon began to feel remorse and shame, worrying about his reputation among his kin following this failure. He decided he could not return home this way and travelled back to the camp of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, becoming his disciple and integrating himself into his community. He is reported to have lived there for twenty-four years, and then for another period of sixteen years, before Muḥammad al-Aghzaf confirmed his accession to the 'divine presence' (*al-ḥudra al-muqaddasa*), to the rank of the Gnostics (*al-ʿarifīn*), ultimately entrusting him with the secret *wird* of the *ghuzfiyya*. When he transmitted the *wird* to al-Mukhtār, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf is reported to have said: 'I hereby confer onto you the stallion's necklace' (Ibn Maynummu 1961). This expression signifies the transference of absolute responsibility for the order's leadership and propagation to Shaykh al-Mukhtār. Būna ʿĀlī b. Maynammu's comment closes the account of Shaykh al-Mukhtār's ascension to spiritual leadership, confirming his saintly qualities and his importance to the development of the *ghuzfiyya*:

Without these two men [Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf and Shaykh al-Mukhtār], this Sufi order would not have come to light. But Allah does what He wants. He brought it into being. He inscribed its lights and secrets as a testimony to the creative wisdom He wished to reveal; and only the blind, those with a troubled nature, and heretics deny the miracles of the saints and the efficiency of the divine action. This account was received from the mouth of Shaykh al-Mukhtār, the leader of the *ghuzfiyya*.

(Ibn Maynummu 1961)

It was Shaykh al-Mukhtār who named the order the 'path of the *ghuzf*, and thus he became known as the 'shaykh of the *ghuzf*. He stayed with Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf at the end of his life, for sixteen years, to prepare for his cleansing and burial upon his death, as well as the performance of the ritual prayer over his remains, over which he would preside. With the initiation of Shaykh al-Mukhtār and his return to the Taganit, the transmission of the *ghuzfiyya*'s teachings in the Hodh was interrupted.

### **The return to his kin in the Taganit and the designation of his successor**

When Shaykh al-Mukhtār returned from his sojourn with the shaykh, around 1214 H/1799–1800 CE, he re-joined the Ahl Ābba, who were now established south of Tamshikit. He stayed with them as teacher and spiritual guide, leading the ascetic life of a saint (according to Ibn Maynummu's manuscript). He is considered to have laid the foundations of the nascent Sufi order and to have mapped out its mode of teaching and internal organization, to the point that some refer to him as the true founder of the *ghuzfiyya*. They justify this by appealing to the fact that he was called 'our shaykh' (*shaykhunā*) by the disciples and by the fact that it was he who was directly criticized in Shaykh Sidi Muḥammad al-Kuntī's *al-ṭarāʿif wa al-talāʿid* (Patris 1948).

It is reported that thirty-nine relatives of Shaykh al-Mukhtār joined the *ghuzfiyya*. Most of his kin, however, had reservations about the Sufi movement and denounced

its mystical excesses. The shaykh's own brothers were apparently among the first to express their opposition to his cause.<sup>37</sup> Some of the Ahl Ābba even accused him of 'unbelief' (*kufṛ*). They complained about him to the emir of the Taganit, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Shayn (d. 1236 H/1821 CE), who assured them that if they simply issued a *fatwā* proving his unbelief, he would have him executed.<sup>38</sup> They chose to ask the Idaw 'Ali Islamic scholar from Tijikja Sidi 'Abdallāh b. al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm (d. 1233 H/1818 CE) to confront Shaykh al-Mukhtār. The two men debated for three nights at Tijigja, and at the end of the third night they headed to the mosque for prayer. Sidi 'Abdallāh asked Shaykh al-Mukhtār to lead the prayer, at which point he experienced an acute mystical episode. While directing the prayer, he jolted around, flailing himself against the walls of the mosque, his tears flowing down his beard and spilling over onto those praying behind him. When the prayer was finished, Sidi 'Abdallāh said goodbye to Shaykh al-Mukhtār, who left Tijigja to rejoin the Ahl Nūḥ, who were travelling between al-Ghubba and Tishit. As soon as he turned his back to them, Sidi 'Abdallāh's disciples hurriedly asked their master about the validity of the prayer led by the strange shaykh, discussing whether they would have to repeat it. He answered: 'This is the prayer of the humble devoted (*al-khāshi'īm*). Your forefathers (in the diminutive form) have never practiced it.'<sup>39</sup>

After returning to his kin, he dedicated his life to education and the spiritual guidance of his disciples. One of the peculiarities of his teachings was his strong criticism of tobacco use, which he opposed to such a degree that he ordered that a bowl that had been used by his older brother, who used to smoke, be washed three times before he used it himself. This anecdote substantiates the claim that the *ghuzfiyya* order was strongly inspired by the (*shādhiliyya*) *nāṣiriyya*, known for its strict interdiction of tobacco.

After this period, which lasted for about two decades, Shaykh al-Mukhtār felt the need to set out on pilgrimage and to visit the prophet (PBUH). He prepared for the journey and informed his kin of his intentions. When the day of departure arrived, he assembled his disciples and called out the names of three of them, all hailing from the Īdaybūsāt: al-Shaykh Sidi Aḥmad b. 'Umāru, al-Shaykh Muḥammad and Muttār (or, according to another version, Aḥmad Billa). He asked each of them to express their wishes and promised they would be fulfilled.

Shaykh Sidi Aḥmad told him he wished to master the world of knowledge (*al-fath*) and to acquire the authority and capacity to act (*al-taṣarruf wa al-tamkīn*) in the invisible world. Shaykh al-Mukhtār assured him that his wish would be granted and appointed him as spiritual master (*murabbī*), heir to his mystical secrets and his successor. Shaykh Muḥammad told his master that he wished to achieve the highest perfection in Sufism, and this wish was also granted. He became famous for his clairvoyance (*walāya*) and his knowledge of the Qur'ān. Muttār finally asked for material well-being, which was also granted to him. He lived the life of a pious man and redistributed his wealth charitably among those in need. According to another account, the third man was named Aḥmad Billa (rather than Muttār), and he asked Shaykh al-Mukhtār to open the doors of knowledge to him. Later, he and his descendants became famous scholars in the region of Agān and west of Almiyriyya (in the Tagant region of present-day Mauritania).<sup>40</sup>



When he left, Shaykh al-Mukhtār only had one son, Laghzaf, still an infant at the time. He entrusted his care to Aḥmad Billa, asking him to teach him the Qurʾān and the weaving of ropes from alfa leaves.<sup>41</sup> Another account relates that he entrusted the care of Laghzaf to his other disciple, the scholar and saint Muḥammad al-Amīn (Yubba) b. Fāl b. Aʿmar Nūḥ (an-Na) b. Muḥammad b. al-Imām b. Ābba, who was endowed with premonitory powers.<sup>42</sup>

During his journey to Mecca, in the course of which he would die, Shaykh al-Mukhtār had a second son, named Muḥammad Mūsā Ibrāhīm, with a woman named Fāṭma b. Muḥammad Būḍrāʿ, from the Liʿwaysyāt.<sup>43</sup> Shaykh al-Mukhtār had married her before leaving. It had been revealed to him that she would attain sainthood through his guidance. She had previously led a disordered life, dominated by the distractions of youth, including smoking and listening to music. One day, the shaykh gave his coat (*ridāʿ*) to one of his disciples, instructing him to hit her with it when her attention was elsewhere. From that moment on, she changed her ways completely, correcting her religious behaviour and developing a strong aversion to tobacco and music.

Following the birth of his son, he ordered his disciple, Sidī Aḥmad, to bring the baby to his relatives in the Taganit and to take care of him until he reached adulthood. Muḥammad Mūsā became a *faqīh* and a specialist in the religious sciences, credited with having compiled a work called *Ḥamlat Muḥammad Mūsā ʿalā rasm al-qurʾān*.<sup>44</sup> Shaykh al-Mukhtār and his wife both died on the journey to Mecca. It seems that the two sons of Shaykh al-Mukhtār were not affiliated with the *ghuzfiyya*. Al-Sālik b. ʿAbdallāh b. Sayyid al-Qawm explained us that their father withheld his *wird* from them and did not want to transmit it to anyone other than Shaykh Sidī Aḥmad. Muḥammad Mūsā purportedly wanted to join the Sufi order, but his young brother Laghzaf discouraged him from doing so.

## Consolidation and dissemination of the order's teachings

To this point, the *ghuzfiyya* had remained a largely individual endeavour, unlike other Sufi orders. It promptly developed in a radically different direction under the leadership of Shaykh Sidī Aḥmad al-Kabīr b. ʿAmmār b. al-Nāh and his sons, however. Al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār had chosen his disciple al-Shaykh Sidī Aḥmad b. ʿAmmār b. al-Nāh for the task of purification. After Shaykh al-Mukhtār's departure, the *ghuzfiyya* left the Ahl Nūḥ to join another clan of the Īdaybūsāt, the Awlād Būyāḥamm. This period is marked by several qualitative changes to the *ghuzfiyya*, which began to forge a strong public presence.

The first transformation consisted in the construction of a permanent base in Awjaft, whereas its leaders and adherents had hitherto led a nomadic life. The second alteration, related to the first, was the order's strong orientation toward manual labour: digging wells, constructing barrages, commercial activity and agricultural labour. At this stage of its evolution, the *ghuzfiyya* instituted manual labour and its benefits as the first and easiest step toward approximating God. The third transformation concerns the path of transmission. Whereas transmission had hitherto been restricted to a single person, Shaykh Sidī Aḥmad al-Kabīr authorized multiple disciples to carry the title

‘shaykh of the *ghuzf* and to transmit its distinctive award, thus expanding the *ṭarīqa*’s influence throughout the western regions of the Sahara and beyond.

### Reorientation under Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad al-Kabīr

Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad (surname ‘Bū-ghuffāra’, ‘the man with the hat’) was born in a place called Arādīm, in the vicinity of Tāmshikiṭ (Patris 1948: 7–8). He belonged to the Ahl al-Nāh *fakhdh* (faction) of the Awlād Būyāḥamm *baṭn* (clan). When he returned to his kin, he propagated the *ghuzfiyya* among them. He had four brothers; two of them, Shaykh Sīdī (surname al-Jaffa) and Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, joined the *ghuzfiyya* and followed him to Awjaft, where he lived. The other two, al-Ṭālib and Sīdī al-Mukhtār, both educated scholars, rejected the teachings of their brother Sīdī Aḥmad and eventually developed an open hostility toward him.<sup>45</sup> Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad al-Kabīr was married to his *bint ‘amm* (patrilateral cousin) Ummu b. A ‘jī of the Idaghmayāma. They had two sons, Muḥammad Maḥmūd (known as al-Khalaf) and al-Tār, as well as four daughters, Fāla, Lālla, ‘Aysha and Tūttu.

The foundational myths of the *ghuzfiyya*, as noted above, seem to be associated with the symbolism of water, starting with the story of the well of Nwall and continuing with the story of the four disciples trapped alive under the crumbling well in the Taganit. This theme also runs through a tradition that is based in a miracle ascribed to Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad. When Shaykh al-Mukhtār decided to undertake his pilgrimage without informing Sīdī Aḥmad b. ‘Ammār, he resolved to continue following his master. He trailed behind him from a distance so that the shaykh would not order him to return home. Only when they were sufficiently far away from home and this was no longer an option did he finally join him. They continued along together until reaching the Fezzān (in present-day Libya), where Shaykh al-Mukhtār fell ill. He informed his disciple that his death was near and that it was his wish to be buried in this land. He ordered Sīdī Aḥmad to return home to his Ahl Ābba relatives and to wait for divine grace to fall upon him. This moment, he told him, would be announced by a sign: ‘You will be visited by a man while sitting in the desert, under an acacia tree, in the afternoon, after the prayer of ‘aṣr. You will be surrounded by camels, under a sky filled with clouds announcing rain, and a man will press the palm of your right hand and disappear.’<sup>46</sup>

Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad did as he was told and returned to the Ahl Ābba camp at Āwkār, where he is said to have spent many years – between thirty and forty – without receiving the promised sign. At the end of this period, purportedly around the year 1261 H/1845 CE, the deceased shaykh’s prophecy finally materialized, and Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad had a vision of a settlement in the Adrar named Awjaft, which was unknown to him.<sup>47</sup> After the mysterious divine messenger pressed his palm and disappeared, perfume filled the air. Full of joy, he returned to the camp, which was crowded with the students of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Jakanī (the son of Shaykh al-Mukhtār’s sister). He asked everyone he met: ‘Do you smell the perfume?’ and everyone who also smelled it was immediately seized by mystical rapture (*al-jadh*). Many people entered into this state, especially from among the *maḥzara*’s students, until the number of the ‘ravished’ (*majāḍib*) reached sixty during the night.

This collective mystical experience was met with reprobation by some of the Ahl Ābba, with their *fuqahā*’ accusing Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad of magic (*al-siḥr*) and charlatanism (*sha’wadha*). They burned his hut and ordered him to leave the camp. Some reportedly even planned to kill him, but this was revealed to him and pushed him to flee.<sup>48</sup> The shaykh departed with his disciples, heading for the unknown Awjaft. They travelled for some time until they reached the region of Butilimit, where they met a Smassid caravan on their way back to Awjaft. Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad called all of them by their names and those of their ancestors and asked them where to find their destination. Impressed by his revelations, they were convinced he was a saint and offered to take him there. They arrived in Awjaft in the year 1278 H/1861 CE (Ibn ‘Abd al-Jalīl 2014: 37, 87). The men of the caravan informed the inhabitants of the town of the arrival of a saint and his disciples, and they were received with great honour.<sup>49</sup>

Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad al-Kabīr founded a large establishment for religious education, and his influence encompassed most of the Adrar and the Taganit. He attracted disciples, men and women alike, from various regions and social backgrounds. At the end of his life, his spiritual community purportedly comprised several thousand people. Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad acquired the standing of a reputed scholar, saint, Sufi and ascetic subject to mystic states. He was given the title ‘spiritual master of the *ghuzf* (*shaykh al-ghuzf*)’ because he was the first to effectively provide a framework for the order’s teachings. He was a convincing *faqīh* who was widely heeded, and there was not a single problem or controversy in the whole Adrar that did not benefit from his elucidations. In his final years, he led a life of utter seclusion, and his son Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd assumed the leadership of the *ghuzfiyya* (Patris 1948: 7–8). Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad died on 11 Dhū l-Qa’da 1292 H (6 December 1875 CE), and was buried in al-Tayshtāya, 50 km south of Awjaft.

### Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd, ‘al-Khalaf’

Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad’s son, Muḥammad Maḥmūd, was born around 1235 H/1820 CE in Libbayrāt, near Tamchikit. Like his father, he was respected as a saint and as a scholar who had dedicated his life to studying the Qur’ān and the *sunna* (Wuld Ḥāmidun 1970). He is attributed with the saying: ‘The world is composed of three days: yesterday, which is in the past and over which you have no influence; tomorrow, which you may or may not experience; and the present day, which you should make use of’ (Ibn ‘Abd al-Jalīl 2014: 72).

It is reported that Shaykh Mā’ al-‘Aynayn once said that there is nobody in the world more qualified in the ‘science of the secret of the letters’ (*‘ilm asrār al-hurūf*) and in the orientation of people’s hearts than the shaykh of the *ghuzf* of his time (who must have been Shaykh al-Khalaf). Astonished, one of his disciples asked him: ‘How is this possible, when we know that the *ghuzf* emit sounds (during their devotions) comparable to those of camels in the rutting season (*al-hadīr*)?’ Shaykh Mā’ al-‘Aynayn said: ‘This means that the disciples saw what would lead them to make these *hadīr*.’<sup>50</sup>

When Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd assumed the leadership of the Sufi order, it had already begun to abandon the concept of the singular, individual transmission of its teachings. He had numerous disciples in various regions (the Adrar, the Taganit, the

Assaba and the Hodh) and had conferred the authority to transmit the *wird* to several of them. Among them were his two sons, Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad al-Ghazwānī and Shaykh Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Kabīr, as well as Shaykh ‘Ālī b. Āffa and Sharīf Sīdī b. Mawlāy al-Zayn.

Shaykh al-Khalaf lived a long life of nearly one hundred years. Like his father, he lived in complete seclusion in his final years. He did not present himself to the French when they established their presence in the Adrar, whereas all the other notables of the region hurried to meet them. It seems that, like Shaykh Mā’ al-‘Aynayn, he was opposed to French colonial rule in the region. He died on 6 Shawwāl 1328 H ( 10 October 1910 CE) and was buried in Labba, near Atar, in the Adrar region of present-day Mauritania. He had ten children – five sets of twins, each composed of a male and a female.

### Shaykh al-Ghazwānī and his brother, Shaykh Muḥammad Aḥmad

Shaykh Sīdī Aḥmad al-Ghazwānī took over the direction of the *ghuzfiyya* in 1305 H (1888 CE), twelve years before his father’s death (Patris 1948: 6). At the time, some of his father’s disciples had started to exhibit behaviours that went against *sharī’a*. He was a *faqīh*, perfectly versed in the history of the Arabs and their poetry, just as he was an accomplished Sufi (Ibn ‘Abd al-Jalīl 2014: 86). It was he who received the French colonel Gouraud in the Adrar on December 25, 1908, three years after the murder of Xavier Coppolani by a *ghuzf*. He pledged allegiance in the name of the *zāwiya ghuzfiyya*, thus formalizing a new stance in the relationship between the Sufi order and French colonial forces.

Following the death of Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd, Shaykh al-Ghazwānī decided to put an end to the behaviour of certain *ghuzfs*. He assembled them and announced that the shaykh of the *ghuzf* and those who recognized him followed the example of the prophet (PBUH). Those who did not agree to change their deviant behaviour would have to leave. Confronted with this choice, the disciples split up into two groups. One of them, the ‘community of the mosque and the Sunna’ (*jamā’a al-masjid wa al-sunna*), decided to stay, whereas another group, the ‘community of the ravished’ (*jamā’a al-majādhīb*), left with Shaykh al-Ghazwānī’s younger brother Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Kabīr, who established his own Sufi community in the Taganit. Shaykh Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Kabīr thus became *khalifa* of the *ghuzfiyya*. When Shaykh al-Ghazwānī sensed that his death was approaching, he vowed that Shaykh Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Kabīr would continue to lead the movement until his own eldest son, still a child at the time, reached maturity. His son, also named Muḥammad Maḥmūd (known as ‘Azrī Būmadayd’), succeeded him. When he died in 1998, his brother Muḥammad took over. Shaykh Muḥammad was replaced, following his death in 2010, by his son Muḥammad al-Mukhtār.

Shaykh al-Ghazwānī has built solid ties in the Maghreb countries and in West Africa. Under his leadership, the *ṭarīqa* developed a stronger educational vocation and advanced its expansion. Their disciples apparently tempered their devotion and avoided states of ‘deliriousness’, although Shaykh al-Ghazwānī was the only master of the *ghuzfiyya* to proclaim his own sanctity (*walāyatih*), frequently evoking and promulgating his miracles, whereas the masters who preceded him preferred to keep

them secret.<sup>51</sup> Under his leadership, the *ghuzfiyya* also pursued political and economic ambitions. The *ghuzfs* established significant commercial posts in Atar, Tijigja, and Gasr al-Barka (in the Tagant region of present-day Mauritania) and set up a successful long-distance caravan trade business between Guelmim (Morocco), Mali, the Hodh, and Senegal. The order's economic activities rested on the strict application of Islamic norms, such as a ban on engaging in commerce at night, the rejection of dubious transactions, and a methodical and precise organizational structure. Each economic sector (palm groves, caravans, agriculture, and the breeding of livestock) was entrusted to one of the disciples.

Shaykh al-Ghazwānī died in 1915 and was buried 3 km east of Tijigja (Ibn ‘Abd al-Jalīl 2014: 86). He left two young sons, Muḥammad Maḥmūd and Muḥammad Aḥmad. The French colonial authorities had planned to appoint Muḥammad Maḥmūd as the new leader of the *ghuzfiyya* once he reached adulthood, but he died at the age of 20, in 1927.<sup>52</sup> His brother Muḥammad Aḥmad was then given the allegiance of the disciples of the *ghuzfiyya* in his place and stayed on as *khalīfa* until his death in 1986. He was known as ‘Azrī Nwākshūt’ (‘the patron saint of Nouakchott’), where he lived and is now buried. After Shaykh Muḥammad Aḥmad's death, his son Muḥammad Maḥmūd took over the affairs of the *ghuzfiyya* and remains its current leader.

### Return to the Hodh and propagation in the Middle East (1895–1909)

After the death of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, the teachings and distinctive prayers of the *ghuzfiyya* nearly disappeared from the Hodh. His own sons did not follow in his path and apparently did not propagate their father's legacy among their contemporaries.<sup>53</sup> The families whose ancestors figured among the shaykh's disciples and received their education from him often joined other Sufi orders, especially the *mukhtāriyya* and *fādiliyya* branches of the *qādiriyya*. For nearly two centuries, the *ghuzfiyya* did not have a significant presence in its own birthplace. Its resurrection in the Hodh was accomplished by Shaykh ‘Āli b. Āffa, who left his native region on the current border with Mali to visit Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Khalaf in the Adrar, where he received his initiation. He finally brought the *ghuzfiyya* ‘back home’, after Shaykh al-Mukhtār had been solely authorized to transmit its *wird*, and returned to his relatives in the Taganit with this authorization.

#### The community of Shaykh ‘Āli b. Āffa al-Dulaymī

Shaykh ‘Āli was the son of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Āli b. Sīdī Bubakkar b. Yūsuf (‘Āffa’), who was himself a scholar and a teacher. He was born in 1281 H/1864 CE in the village of Sibta, the ancestral seat of his family.<sup>54</sup> His kinship group is attached to Yūsuf (‘Āffa’) b. Farba b. Sīdī b. A ‘mar b. Bukayr b. A ‘li b. al-Zwaymir b. A ‘li b. al-Shaykh, from the Awlād Dlaym.<sup>55</sup> Paul Marty (1921) reports that Yūsuf arrived in the Hodh at the end of the eighteenth century. He apparently renounced his ancestors’ ‘warrior’ traditions for the sake of seeking knowledge and religious practice. His descendants founded the village

of Sibta and were respected for their scholarly knowledge, their piety (*ṣalāh*), and their memorization of the Qur'ān.<sup>56</sup>

Shaykh 'Āli received his early education from his relatives and from *sharīf* Ja'far b. al-Mahdī and *sharīf* Ibn Ḥāmmānī al-Ghallāwī. He founded a *mahẓara* of considerable reputation in the Hodh, and his contemporaries considered him an authority on Arabic. He was also a praised poet, writing much of his scholarly texts in rhyming and lyrical form. He published multiple works in the fields of *fiqh*, the recitation of the Qur'ān (*tajwīd*), and the oneness of God (*al-tawḥīd*), and he certified students in the recitation of the Qur'ān according to the canons of Warsh and Qālūn. We also know that he authored an anthology in which he discusses (among other topics) judicial principles and moral rectitude (*ḥisba*). In this collection, he denounces established habits and traditions of his social milieu that contradict the *sharī'a*, such as the rejection of polygamy and the treatment of female slaves (*imā'*) as animals. Much of his intellectual legacy has disappeared, however, due to a fire that destroyed his personal library. Shaykh 'Āli died relatively young, in 1327 H/1909 CE, and was buried in Sanfāgha.

Shaykh Būna 'Āli reports that Shaykh 'Āli was residing in Tishit when he encountered a caravan of *ghuzfs* returning to the Adrar. Seeking spiritual development, he joined them, expecting to meet Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Khalaf and to become his disciple. He was so impressed by him that he stayed there for a long time, frequently visiting the tomb of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghẓaf. After mastering the *ghuzfiyya's* path of mystic immersion, Shaykh al-Khalaf eventually authorized him to spread the order's secret *wird*.<sup>57</sup> At this point, he returned to his native Hodh propagating the *ghuzfiyya* in the region.

The *ghuzfiyya's* return to the Hodh, however, was met with fierce resistance by certain '*ulamā'*'. Among the critics of the *ghuzfiyya* was the eminent *faqīh* Muḥammad Yaḥyā al-Walātī, who was especially harsh in his denunciation. It is reported that he issued a *fatwā* for the wife of a Tajakānīt, al-'Ālim al-Jakanī,<sup>58</sup> affirming her right to refuse to allow him to give their cows to his shaykh as a pious gift (*hadiyya*). Because of his affiliation with the *ghuzfiyya* he had forfeited all of his property rights.

When Shaykh 'Āli decided to disseminate the *ghuzfiyya* in the Hodh, he opted to leave his relatives, creating a new community together with his disciples. He is credited with having transmitted the *ghuzfiyya's* *wird* to more than one hundred people in his lifetime. He was also the first to propagate the *ghuzfiyya* beyond the frontiers of the contemporary Islamic Republic of Mauritania. The Idaw'ish, living in 'Ayn Idaw'ish, 30 km south of Sanfāgha (Mali), are considered to have furnished some of his first disciples.

When the French began to penetrate Mauritania, his disciple Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Zaynī al-Qalqamī initiated a collective exodus to the Middle East in 1322 H/1904 CE, leading about fifty *ghuzf* families on pilgrimage to Mecca. According to different interlocutors, on the way they received support from the Ottoman administration and were escorted to the sultan, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, in Constantinople. After completing their pilgrimage, the community settled in Anatolia, where Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amīn created a *zāwiya* of the *ghuzfiyya* that exists to this day. He created another *zāwiya* in 'Ammān, the current capital of Jordan, where a few tribes

from the east of the country settled nearby. His disciple Shaykh ‘Āyish al-Ḥawyān succeeded him as leader of the *zāwiya*. Shaykh Muḥammad al-Amin is thus credited with having brought the *ghuzfiyya* to the Middle East.

### Other important agents of the *ghuzfiyya*'s revival and expansion

Among the distinguished Sufi masters affiliated with the *ghuzfiyya* in the Hodh, we must also count Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad Khaṭṭārī b. Aḥmad Zaydān b. Muḥammad b. Bayya (Laḥbīb) al-Massūmī. He possessed a licence (*ijāza*) in the seven koranic lectures, which he had received from Shaykh b. Ḥāmmānī in Shinqīt, and created a large *maḥzara* in the village of Legweirga that attracted many students and visitors from different regions. He also organized numerous caravans and developed a great interest in agriculture in order to provide for his community and those in need. It is reported that he initiated the cultivation of a large area of land between Legweirga Umm Lāšu and Ghwayrgit Ahl Bayya, from which he extracted bountiful harvests.

Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd encouraged the invocation of various *awrād* from different Sufi orders. Whereas the *wird* of the *ghuzfiyya* was only to be recited individually by those who were initiated into the *ṭariqa*, others, those of the *shādhiliyya*, for example, could also be invoked collectively in obligatory ritual prayers in the mosque. He did not view visiting the tombs of saints as problematic and is credited with advanced powers of clairvoyance (*kushūfāt*) and the accomplishment of miracles. One oral tradition recounts that some of his disciples were digging a well at a location east of Djigani. At one point, they hit a rock formation that they could not break through. The shaykh told them to take a branch from the al-hajlij (*tayshiī/Balanites aegyptiaca*) tree and to hit the rock with it. The rock broke, and water began to spring from it. The well was named ‘well of the *ghuzf*/well of the fortunate’ (*bi’r al-ghuzf*).<sup>59</sup>

One of his disciples was the *faqīh* and historian Shaykh Maḥfūz b. Muḥammad Maḥmūd b. Zaydān b. Muḥammad b. Bayya (‘Laḥbīb’), referred to by the name Ibn Bayya (d. 1391 H/1971 CE). He is among the most outstanding figures in the recent history of the *ghuzfiyya*, having written, alongside many other works, one of the rare texts countering the attacks against the *shādhiliyya* (and thus defending the *ghuzfiyya*).

Another important student of Ibn Bayya was Shaykh al-Mukhtār b. Sīdī Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Yūsuf al-Tinwājiwī (d. 1360 H/1941 CE), a respected scholar, judge and Sufi master. He entertained close ties with the Ahl al-Ghazwānī and conferred licences on several disciples, among them his son Shaykh Abū Bakr (d. 1384 H/1964 CE), who became imam of the al-Ḥarām mosque in Mecca, and Shaykh Muḥammad al-Mukhtār, who emigrated to the holy land of Islam, passing through Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Soudan and instructing disciples in these regions.<sup>60</sup> After a sojourn in Mecca, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Mukhtār founded a mosque in Medina, where he instructed those who came in search of knowledge and spirituality. He then continued to travel around in the Sham (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine) and Turkey, adopting many disciples as he went.

Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd died in 1337 H/1918 CE at the age of 63. He was succeeded by his son Muḥammad al-Shaykh, who was only 15 years old but had already been guided into mystical retreat (*khulwa*) and received the *wird* of the *ghuzfiyya* from

his father. Muḥammad al-Shaykh lived for forty-two years (d. 1364 H/1945 CE) and was buried next to his father in Legweirga. His brother Sīdna (Sīdī Muḥammad) b. al-Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd then became the next shaykh in the lineage until his death in 1992, at the age of 79.

Another eminent member of the *ghuzfiyya* in the Hodh was the Sufi scholar Mawlay ‘Abdallāh (‘Būya’) b. Mawlay ‘Abd al-Mālik b. Mawlay al-Ḥasan, who hailed from the Ahl Mawlay Ṣāliḥ of Nema and whose surname was Bāba Ḥasan al-Ni‘māwī. Shaykh Bāba Ḥasan was a disciple of both ‘Āli b. Āffa and Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd b. Bayya, who had initiated him into the *ghuzfiyya*. It is reported that upon his initiation he declared that he had previously understood nothing of the true nature of the holy book and of faith (*imān*), and he therefore repeated each of the obligatory ritual prayers he had performed from the time of his adulthood up to his affiliation with the *ghuzfiyya*.<sup>61</sup> He became famous for his vast knowledge of the religious sciences (*‘ulūm al-shar‘*), the corpus of the *ḥadīth* and for dispute resolution (Ibn Maynummu 1961). Shaykh Bāba Ḥasan was promoted to *qāḍī* of Nema, but it seems that his relatives and the other *fuqahā’* reproached him for his affiliation with the *ghuzfiyya* and forced him out of office, citing his occasional practice of ritual dancing and the frequent gathering of *ghuzfs* at his home.<sup>62</sup> He died in 1348 H/1929 CE and is buried in Nema.

Shaykh Bāba Ḥasan was succeeded by his son and disciple Shaykh Mawlay ‘Ali (‘al-Dāh’). Shaykh Būna ‘Āli b. Maynummu, whose comments on ‘Ali b. Āffa’s poem have given us much insight into the *ghuzfiyya*, was one of his disciples.

## Notes

- 1 Among those who voiced their suspicions against the *ṭarīqa* were Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1242 H/1826 CE), Muḥammad Yaḥyā al-Walāṭī (d. 1330 H/1912 CE), and Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Aḥmad Zaydān al-Jakanī (d. 1335 H/1916 CE).
- 2 Sīdī wuld al-Zayn has recently become a leading figure in the eyes of many Mauritians, who consider him an icon of the *muqāwama* (‘resistance’) against French colonialism in the region (Ould Mohamed Baba and Freire 2020: 279).
- 3 This project couldn’t have been carried out without the support of a number of people, whose efforts I would like to acknowledge: al-Shaykh ad-Dadda b. Muftāḥ al-Khayr, al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Shaykh b. Muḥammad b. Daydda, Sīdī Muḥammad b. Sayyidī (head of ‘Direction du Monde Arabe’ in the ministry of the interior), ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad Qullī (responsible for the *maḥzras* in Timbedra), Muḥammad al-Amīn b. ‘Abdallāh b. Sayyid al-Qawm, Muḥammad al-Amīn b. al-Ni‘ma b. Sulṭāna, Sīdāt b. Shaykhna, Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Āffa and al-Sālik b. ‘Abdallāh b. Sayyid al-Qawm.
- 4 The *malāmāṭiyya* Sufi order originated in ninth-century Khorasan and centres its distinct philosophy on blaming and humiliating the ego (*naḥs*) to attain spiritual purification. Because of their extreme form of asceticism and the ecstatic rituals they practice, critics have accused them of deviating from orthodox Islam (Seale 1968).
- 5 The Hassaniyya-speaking populations of Mauritania can be described through a hierarchical distinction between those of free status and different tributary groups.



This design was consolidated in the second half of the seventeenth century, with a leadership role being given to ‘warrior’ (*hassān*) and ‘religious’ (*zwāya*) hereditary status groups following the Shurbubba War.

- 6 Al-Sālik b. Faḍīlī recounts the biographies of several important personalities of the region in his introduction to the *Kitāb farq al-‘ayn*. See also al-Burtulī’s *Faḥ al-shakūr* (1981) and Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abdallāh b. Bubakkar b. al-Bashīr manuscript (c. 1950, a copy of this work is kept in Sīdāt b. Shaykhna’s private library in Nouakchott).
- 7 The Azer dialect is considered a Amazigh-influenced variant of the Soninké. It was once widely spoken but is now nearly extinct.
- 8 Interview with al-Imām b. Muḥammad Faḍīl (director of Islamic affairs and education in the wilāya of Hodh ech Charqui) in Amurj, 14 February 2019.
- 9 Remembered as a saint and praised for his moral rectitude. His tomb lies in Fudr Anāq Ḥmālla, not far from Adele-Bagru.
- 10 Taken from the *Waraqā fi nasab al-shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf* (undated manuscript, c. 1920), written by the Nema historian Mawlāy ‘Abdallāh b. al-Shaykh Mawlāy ‘Abd al-Mālik b. Mawlāy Ḥasan (d. 1928 CE).
- 11 This community is currently settled in the eastern vicinity of Adele-Bagru.
- 12 Kunayb is the name of a large cemetery located some 20 km southeast of Adele-Bagru, in present-day Malian territory.
- 13 His male descendants now number around 1,400, according to Muḥammad Ni‘ma b. Sulṭāna (interview in Bassiknou, 20 February 2019).
- 14 Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Sulṭāna (a descendant of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf) details that this period lasted for forty days (Bassiknou, 20 February 2019).
- 15 Interview with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Sulṭāna (Bassiknou, 20 February 2019).
- 16 Interview with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. al-Ni‘ma b. Sulṭāna (Bassiknou, 20 February 2019).
- 17 This characteristic trait was later also adopted by the *fādiliyya*, whose teachings and principles resemble those of the *ghuzfiyya* in many respects.
- 18 Sharif Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s voyage also reveals the effective bond between the Moroccan *makhzan* and the Saharan confines. This historical episode has been used by various actors at many different levels. In the context of this chapter, we would like to highlight the interconnected nature of different networks of Islamic scholarship which have linked the broader western Saharan region, the Maghreb and West Africa for centuries.
- 19 Interview with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Nu‘ma b. Sulṭāna (Bassiknou, 20 February 2019).
- 20 This was reportedly practised by the *ghuzfiyya* shaykhs in the Adrar and in the Rgayba regions of present-day Mauritania.
- 21 The *fatwā* in question is reproduced in Supplement no. 1 of my collection *al-Majmū‘a al-kubrā* (2009: 209–10). For the Hanafi School, the time of the ‘aṣr prayer begins once the length of one’s shadow reaches more than double the height of one’s body. The period before this point, in their view, still corresponds to the preceding period of *zuhr*, or to an interstitial period between the two prayers.
- 22 Interview with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Ni‘ma b. Sulṭāna (Bassiknou, 20 February 2019).
- 23 Interview with Muḥammad b. al-Tār (Nouakchott, 22 April 2019).
- 24 This is the date remembered by his descendants, which is also mentioned in Būna ‘Āli b. Maynummu’s manuscript. Some authors have expressed different opinions, for example al-Ṭālib Būbakar b. Aḥmad al-Muṣṭafā al-Mahjūbī al-Walātī, who writes: ‘I am ignorant of the exact date of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf al-Ja‘farī’s death; it might have been in the year 1218 H or later.’

- 25 Interview with Muḥammad b. Shaykhna b. Būna, imam of the mosque of al-Mabrūk (13 February 2019). The narrative states that the camel roamed for forty days.
- 26 Interview with Muḥammad b. Shaykhna b. Būna (al-Mabrūk, 13 February 2019).
- 27 Site of a well and of a cemetery located 10 km to the north of kilometre 47 on the road connecting Nema and Timbedra.
- 28 Muḥammad Aḥmad is buried in Gabda, 5 km northwest of the Malian village of Nioro.
- 29 Marty (1921: 313) reports that the father and the grandfather of Aḥmad al-Aswad are both buried in Tindouf and that he owes his surname ('the black') to his mother, Hūriyya.
- 30 Interview with Muḥammad b. Shaykhna b. Būna (al-Mabrūk, 13 February 2019).
- 31 Hārūn b. al-Shaykh Sīdiyya is confirmed to have licensed (*ijāza*) Shaykh Sīdī Ṣāliḥ b. al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, born Ja'farī (of the al-Ja'āfra fraction), to transmit the teachings of the *qādiriyya*, as well as the invocations and orientations of Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār (in *Kitāb al-akhbār*; Nouakchott, n.d).
- 32 Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Sayyid al-Qawm affirms that before reaching the Gibla, they were established in the Adrar region of Mauritania.
- 33 A plain (*tayārit*) situated between two elevated plateaus. It is about 10 km wide and 100 km long, beginning in the Taganit, at the well of Maza, and extending to Tamshikit. Its favourable geography features numerous wells.
- 34 Interview with Sīdāt b. Shaykhna (Nouakchott, 20 April 2018).
- 35 Shaykh al-Mukhtār's brother Khalīl had a son named al-Ṭālib, who provided the murderers of Coppolani with support at Tanouchart. He refused to proclaim his allegiance to the French and authorized his followers to kill the administrator, which they eventually did, in 1905. On the persistent repercussions of this episode, see Ould Mohamed Baba and Freire 2020: 266–8.
- 36 In some versions of this oral tradition, this shaykh is reported to have been a disciple of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf, although the later encounter between Shaykh al-Mukhtār and Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf seems to contradict this account.
- 37 According to Ahl Nūḥ interlocutors I interviewed in Kiffa (22 February 2019).
- 38 Interview with al-Sālik b. 'Abdallāh b. Sayyid al-Qawm b. al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār b. Laghzaf b. al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār (Nouakchott, 19 April 2019).
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 It was this disciple whom Shaykh al-Mukhtār is said to have appointed as his successor when he undertook his mystical journey (*lammā sāḥa*; in al-Mukhtār b. Ḥāmidun's *Hayāt Mūrītānyā*, vol. *Īdaybūsāt*).
- 43 Interview with al-Sālik b. 'Abdallāh b. Sayyid al-Qawm b. al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār b. Laghzaf b. al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār (Nouakchott, 19 April 2019).
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Interview with Sīdiyya b. Muḥammad b. Sayyidī, head of 'Direction du Monde Arabe' in the ministry of the interior (Nouakchott, 5 May 2019).
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Interview with al-Sālik b. 'Abdallāh b. Sayyid al-Qawm b. al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār b. Laghzaf b. al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār (Nouakchott, 19 April 2019). See also Patris (1948: 7–8).
- 48 These events are at the origin of the persistent enmity between the Ahl Ābba and the *ghuzf*.

- 49 Interview with al-Sālik b. ‘Abdallāh b. Sayyid al-Qawm b. al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār b. Laghzaf b. al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār (Nouakchott, 19 April 2019).
- 50 Interview with Muḥammad b. al-Tār (Nouakchott, 22 April 2019).
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 The author of *Inārat al-afkār bi-tārīkh Awjaft wa Aṭār*, in his biography of Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd, affirms that he died in 1924. His tomb is situated at Wādī Āgirj, in the vicinity of Bumdeid.
- 53 Interview with al-Dadda b. Muftāḥ al-Dīn in (10 February 2018).
- 54 Sibta is situated 70 km southeast of the town Timbedra and has been inhabited by the Mashzūf.
- 55 This genealogy is affirmed in two documents written by al-Ḥasan b. Mawlāy A‘lī al-Nī‘māwī and Sīdī b. al-Ṭālib ‘Ammār al-Filālī, the latter dated to 1253 H/1837 CE. Paul Marty (1921: 77) cites a slightly different genealogy: Āffa b. Sīdī (surname ‘Farba’) b. ‘Umar b. Būkar b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Labb b. Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh b. Dlaym.
- 56 Interview with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. ‘Ālī b. Āffa (Bassiknou, 19 February 2019).
- 57 Interview with Sidāt b. Shaykhna (Nouakchott, 20 April 2018).
- 58 The descendant of this man currently lives in Nema. He is a *faqīh* and the *imām* of the town’s ‘old mosque’.
- 59 Interview with Muḥammad al-Shaykh b. Muḥammad b. Daydda (Legweirga, 11 February 2019).
- 60 *A‘lām al-Shanāqīta fi al-Hijāz wa al-Machrik* (‘Les grandes figures mauritaniennes au Hijāz’), p. 152. Beirut: Dar al-Kitab 2015. Abu ‘Alī Beheyda b. Cheikh Yerbana al-Kalkami al-Idrissi.
- 61 Interview with Muḥammad al-Shaykh b. Muḥammad b. Daydda (Legweirga, 11 February 2019).
- 62 Interview with Izīd Bih b. al-Rābī, imam of Nema’s ‘old mosque’ (Nema, 10 February 2019).

## References

- al-Burtulī, b. Bannān Muḥammad (1981), *Faṭḥ al-shakūr* fi ma‘rifat a‘yān ‘ulamā’ al-Takrūr. Annotated by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Katānī and Muḥammad Hajjī. Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islāmī.
- al-Jakanī al-Shinqīṭī, Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Aḥmad Zaydān (1993), *Sharḥ Khalīl b. Ishāq al-Mālikī (raḥamahu Allāh ta‘ālā) al-musammā Naṣīḥa*, vol. 1. Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risāla.
- Beyriès, J. (1935), ‘Questions Mauritaniennes: 1. Note sur l’Enseignement et les Moeurs Scolaires Indigènes en Mauritanie; 2. Note sur les Ghoudf de Mauritanie’, *Revue des études islamiques*, 9: 39–73.
- Boubrik, R. (2000), ‘Itinéraires initiatique du fondateur de la tariqa Fādiliyya (Mauritanie)’, *Journal of the History of Sufism* (Special Issue: the Qādiriyya Order), 1: 259–74.
- Du Puigaudeau, O. (1961), ‘Mauritanie, république des sables’, *Esprit*, 292 (2): 230–48.
- Gutelius, D. P. V. (2002), ‘The Path is Easy and the Benefits Large: The Nāṣiriyya, Social Networks and Economic Change in Morocco, 1640–1830’, *The Journal of African History*, 43 (1): 27–49.

- Hamès, C. (2013), 'La Shâdhiliyya ou l'origine des confréries islamiques en Mauritanie', *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, 3: 73–87.
- Hammoudi, A. (1980), 'Sainteté, pouvoir et société: Tamgrout aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles', *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 35 (3–4): 615–41. <http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/ark:/61561/hj998ez6x3w.num=200.form=simple.start=2891>.
- Ibn 'abd al-Jalīl, Muḥammad al-Amīn (2014), '*Inārat al-afkār bi-tārīkh Awjaft wa Aṭār*', 2nd edn, Nouakchott: 2md.
- Ibn Aḥmad al-Muṣṭafā al-Mahjūbī al-Walāti, al-Ṭālib Būbakar (2002), *Minaḥ al-rabb al-ghafūr fī dhikr mā aḥmalahu fath al-shakūr*. Edited by Elhadi Mebruk, Tripoli. Undated manuscript (c. 1860). Private library of the Ahl al-Ṭālib Būbakar, Walata, Hawd al-Chargui, 80 pages.
- Ibn Mawlāy Ḥasan, Mawlāy 'Abdallāh b. al-Shaykh Mawlāy 'Abd al-Mālik (n.d.), *Waraqa fī nasab al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf*. Undated manuscript (c. 1920). Private library of Hamaddi Ould Hajati (al-Mabrūk, Mali), 7 pages.
- Ibn Faḍīlī, Al-Sālik (c. 1910), *Muqaddimat kitāb farq al-'ayn*. Undated manuscript. Private Library of Sīdāt b. Shaykhna, Nouakchott, approx. 250 pages.
- Ibn Māmīn, al-Shaykh Muḥammad Fāḍil (n.d.), *al-Ḍiyyā' al-mustabīn*. Undated manuscript (c. 1860). Manuscript Center for Heritage and Culture 'Ennour Sati', Nouakchott, 450 pages.
- Ibn Māmīn, Sa'd Būh b. al-Shaykh Muḥammad Fāḍil (n.d.), *Kashf hijāb al-astār 'an wajh rumūz sullam al-izhār*. Undated manuscript (c. 1904–1917). Manuscript Center for Heritage and Culture 'Ennour Sati', Nouakchott, approx. 300 pages.
- Ibn Maynummu, Būna 'Ālī (n.d.), *Sharḥ manzūmāt 'Ālī b. Āffa ḥayāt al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Aghzaf*. Undated manuscript (c. 1961). Private library of Shaykh ad-Dadda b. Mufāh al-Dīn (Adele-Bagru, Hodh al-Chargui), 31 pages.
- Katz, J. (1992), 'Visionary Experience, Autobiography, and Sainthood in North African Islam', *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies*, 1: 85–118.
- Knysh, A. (2018), *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Laforge, P. (1928), 'Une secte hérésiarque en Mauritanie: Les Ghoudf', *Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, 11: 654–65.
- Marty, P. (1921), *Études sur l'islam et les tribus du Soudan. Tome III: Les tribus Maures du Sahel et du Hodh*. Paris: Ernest Leroux.
- Ould El-Bara, Y. (1998), 'Fiqh, société et pouvoir: étude des soucis et préoccupations socio-politiques des théologiens-légistes maures (fuqahā) à partir de leurs consultations juridiques (fatwas), du xvii<sup>e</sup> au xxe siècle', Thèse de Doctorat en Anthropologie sociale – PhD thesis in Social Anthropology, Paris.
- Ould Mohamed Baba, E. and F. Freire (2020), 'Looters vs. Traitors: The *Muqawama* ("Resistance") Narrative, and its Detractors, in Contemporary Mauritania', *African Studies Review*, 63 (2): 258–80.
- Patris, A. (1948), *Contribution à l'étude des ghoudfs*. Mémoire de stage d'administration coloniale, 82 pages.
- Rebstock, U. (2001), *Maurische Literaturgeschichte*, 3 vols. Würzburg: Ergon.
- Stewart, Charles C. and S. A. Ould Ahmed Salim (2016), *The Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 5: The Writings of Mauritania and the Western Sahara*. Leiden: Brill. 2 vols.
- Voll, J. O. (1992), 'Conservative and Traditional Brotherhoods', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 524 (1): 66–78.

- Wright, Z. V. (2020), *Realizing Islam: The Tijaniyya in North Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Muslim World*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Wuld Al-barrā', Y. (2009), *al-Majmū 'a al-kubrā: al-shāmila li-fatāwā wa nawāzil wa aḥkām ahl gharb wa janūb gharb al-Ṣaḥrā'*, 12 vols. Nouakchott: al-Sharīf Mawlay al-Ḥasan b. al-Mukhtār b. al-Ḥasan.
- Wuld Bayya, al-Mahfūz (n.d.), *Risāla fī al-Radd 'an al-Shādhiliyya (Epistle in defense of the shādhiliyya)*. Undated manuscript (c. 1955).
- Wuld Hāmidun, al-Mukhtār (1970), *Ḥayāt Mūrītānyā*, volume *Īdaybūsāt*. Manuscript available at Institut Mauritanien de Recherches Scientifiques, Nouakchott, 130 pages.

