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12 Exploring the Manuscripts of Tuwāt: History and Community Memory in the Algerian Sahara

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Abstract

In this essay, I reflect on the documentary research I conducted in the oases of Tuwāt in southern Algeria between 2009 and 2012. Since the Middle Ages, the region has played a crucial role as a centre of Muslim scholarship. Most works by local ‘*ulamā*’ remain unedited manuscripts preserved in private collections. Exploring these collections depends on the researcher’s ability to situate himself or herself within interpersonal networks structured around genealogy, kinship, and religious identity. The chapter discusses the impact of such a configuration on conducting historical research. I argue that the rise of neo-traditionalism and the new visibility of scriptural religious knowledge (*ilm*) in contemporary North and West African societies facilitate engaging in a dialogue with locals on their cultural heritage. At the same time, it bears the risk of neglecting the study of historical change and social cleavages that an all-embracing discourse of continuity with the past tends to overshadow.

One late afternoon in April 2009, I was waiting with my dusty travel bag on a deserted square in Adrar, a city in the middle of the Algerian Sahara, to start my first fieldwork on Muslim scholarly culture in the oases of Tuwāt.¹ I had just begun a Ph.D. project on premodern Saharan *fiqh* literature, and the region was the first place where I hoped to access local collections of Arabic manuscripts. A few weeks earlier, in Paris, I had told a fellow Ph.D. student from the Mzāb—another Algerian oasis region whose inhabitants are mostly Tamazight speakers and practitioners of *ibādī* Islam—about my plans. He suggested connecting me with one of his

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colleagues, an assistant lecturer at the local university, for whom I was waiting now. I still remember how my Ph.D. colleague contacted his friend in a call shop in Paris’ vibrating Goutte d’Or district and how the two of us later had lunch in a Turkish restaurant while he was pointing to the various shops in the street run by immigrants from the Mzāb. We had met for the first time at a graduate seminar in Constantine in eastern Algeria and quickly realized that we shared similar research interests. He was studying the history of customary law in the *Mzābī* community. At the same time, I set off to work on Saharan *fatāwā* collections.²

The colleague in Adrar with whom my friend had connected me was also a native of the Mzāb region, but he came from an Arabic-speaking background. His family belonged to the Sha‘ānba, a confederation of former nomadic groups who, historically, controlled the northern parts of the central Sahara. After a two-hour drive in a shared cab from Timimoun airport, where the plane from Algiers had landed, I finally arrived and became increasingly nervous since my contact initially failed to arrive. He later explained that he had been teaching a course. Still, at that very moment, I was starting to seriously worry about what I would do if he did not come. I was alone in a strange and silent city, imagining the Sahara as a lost place, certainly without any accommodation structures. My fieldwork preparation had merely consisted of exchanging a few text messages and my supervisor’s recommendation to reach out, once arrived, to a certain Monsieur Smaili whose help, he thought, could be beneficial for my project. When, to my great relief, my host came to pick me up, he drove me to a nearby hotel where he had already booked me a room at his own expense. In the evening, he invited me to have dinner at a friend’s place, who was also a *sha‘ānbi* “expatriate” from Ghardaïa, the capital of the Mzāb region.

The next day, I went with him to the local university to attend a conference on the history of Tuwāt. The program was typical for the scientific events celebrating the *turāth*—the Nation’s cultural heritage—that have become frequent in North African countries during the last decades. Panels featured national academics, among them many “sons of the region” (*abnā’ al-manṭiqa*) and various religious scholars from local centres of Islamic learning. Presentations and discussions dealt almost exclusively with the region’s scholarly traditions. Speakers presented these traditions as a local particularity within the Algerian nation-state framework. They narrated the biographies of native scholars, listed their writings, and praised their mastery of Islamic sciences, starting with jurisprudence (*fiqh*). For more contemporary figures, the presenters did not fail to mention the scholar’s engagement in the Nation’s struggle for independence from France. During the conference, I had the impression that the oases of Tuwāt had become a symbol for an “authentic” national Islam, rooted in centuries-old scholarly traditions and seeking to distinguish itself from political Salafism and religious practices and beliefs that contemporary Sunni mainstream thought condemns as “blameworthy innovation” (*bid‘a*). Local religious life was supposed to represent the idea of an “Arab and Islamic Maghrib” (*al-Maghrib al-‘arabi al-islāmī*) that has become a central and controversial theme in official discourses on cultural identity in contemporary North Africa.

Upon our arrival at the university, I ran immediately into Monsieur Smaili, or rather Moulay, as most people call him, since he belongs to the Awlād Sīdī Hammū bi-l-Ḥājj, a confederation of *shurafā’* families whose branches spread from Southern Morocco to Mauritania, Mali, and Niger between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. A former college teacher of Arabic converted into a businessman and local politician, Moulay is deeply committed to preserving the memory of his native region and his family. When we met, he was even preparing a degree in manuscript edition at a university in Cairo. My encounter with him was decisive for my research in Tuwāt. Moulay agreed to act as a guide and intermediary, greatly facilitating my

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investigations. He introduced me to the owners of the various manuscript collections in the region. He arranged interviews with local notables and scholars. He was even willing to drive with me hundreds of kilometres to visit a private library (*khizāna*, pl. *khazā'in*)³ in the Tidikelt area and to make the same trip again after I realized that I had forgotten to take pictures of one of the manuscripts that interested me. Most importantly, he did me the honour of welcoming me into the intimacy of his home and sharing his family life with me. During my three stays in Tuwāt between 2009 and 2012,⁴ I could always rely on his friendship and hospitality, without which I would have been unable to carry out my project. My debt to him is vast.

Why this long introspective account that would probably have been more suitable in the acknowledgments section of my Ph.D. thesis? The reason is that it nicely illustrates what this essay wants to address, namely the question of what it means to work as a historian in societies that have developed ways to commemorate the past that are different from those with which our socialization has made us familiar.⁵ In the oases of Tuwāt, research methods bore little resemblance to those usually associated with a Ph.D. project in history or philology. No public libraries or archives existed where access conditions are standardized, in the sense that anyone could readily receive permission to consult documents there. Although public authorities inaugurated a spacious National Centre for Manuscripts in Adrar in January 2007, it hosted only a dozen manuscripts when I went there in 2009.⁶ Likewise, the digitization project conducted by Élise Voguet and her research team from the French *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* had not yet started.⁷ The interplay of two types of social institutions fashioned the ways of remembering the past and preserving its traces: those organizing the transmission of Muslim scholarly knowledge according to “traditional” or “modern” norms—the *zāwiya*, the *madrasa*, the university—and those structuring interpersonal relationships, primarily genealogy and kinship.

Figure 12.1

The Sahara in the early nineteenth century

Map taken from Warscheid, *Droit musulman*, 273

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The manuscripts I wished to consult were part of private collections that belonged to members of the region’s notable families or the various centres of Muslim learning scattered across the oasis villages (*qṣar*, pl. *qṣūr*). Simultaneously, my inquiries took place in a context profoundly marked by the rise of the neo-traditionalism I have already mentioned.⁸ In the public sphere, the omnipresent references to scriptural Islam and religious knowledge (*ilm*) acted as powerful discursive tools in defining the modalities of integration into or exclusion from local communities. Similarly, most people I talked to perceived the oases’ past through the notion of Islamic exemplarity embodied by the generations of saints and scholars the region had produced. In what follows, I want to make a few remarks on the implications of such a configuration for conducting historical research. My aim with this is not to provide a fully developed analysis of the notion of *turāth* in contemporary Algeria, but rather to offer a personal

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account of the conversations and readings I engaged in while conducting fieldwork in the oases of Tuwāt.

1 A History of Scholarship, Manuscripts, and Genealogy

Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the oases of Tuwāt developed into one of the leading centres of Muslim scholarship in the central Sahara. A close-knit network of *zāwiyas* led by local scholarly families progressively emerged and attracted students from the region and neighbouring areas. Conversely, *Tuwātī* scholars travelled widely across the Islamic West and the Middle East “seeking knowledge” (*li-ṭalab al-‘ilm*) and acquiring manuscripts.⁹ One principal outcome of the flourishing intellectual and religious activities was the spread of Islamic legal institutions inside the oases. As *qāḍīs* and *muftīs*, local scholars diffused *fiqh*-shaped forms of normative regulation, closely interacting with the councils of communal notables (*jamā‘a*, pl. *āt*) that existed in every *qṣar*.¹⁰ In the second half of the eighteenth century, the growing importance of Islamic adjudication led to the creation of a jurisprudential council (*shūra*) in which the region’s leading juriconsults discussed local cases.

Figure 12.2

A folio from the *Ghunya*, collection *khizānat al-Balbālī*, Kousam

photo by the author

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The centrality of the study and practice of Islamic law is also apparent in the writings of *Tuwātī* scholars. As elsewhere in the Sahara, the spread of Muslim scholarly culture fostered the development of significant literary traditions, particularly from the seventeenth century onwards. The output of local authors thereby deeply reflects their sustained endeavour to promote Islamic norms as the bedrock of social relations. Most importantly, between 1750 and 1850, jurists from Tuwāt produced several lengthy *fatāwā* and “case” collections (*nawāzil*).¹¹ The largest of these collections is the *Ghunya al-muqtaṣid al-sā‘il fi-mā waqa‘a fi Tuwāt min al-qadāyā wa l-masā‘il* (“the indispensable tool for those who inquire on the disputes and legal questions that have arisen in Tuwāt”). It was compiled during the first half of the nineteenth century by two scholars from the al-Balbālī family who gathered hundreds of *fatāwā* from local jurists, to which they added numerous transcriptions of letters, notarial deeds, and other legal documents. The question of the preservation and study of these jurisprudential texts extends far beyond academic research concerns. Today, the *Ghunya* and the other *nawāzil* collections are considered the most emblematical contribution of the region to Algeria’s *turāth*. In a way, they represent the centuries-long accumulation of scriptural knowledge on which Tuwāt’s scholars base their claim to religious authority within the Nation.¹²

However, the historical process that led to Tuwāt’s integration into Algeria’s national space was complex. Until the French occupation in 1900, the Sultans of Morocco considered the oases

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a Saharan outpost of their realm. The Saadian sultan Aḥmad al-Manṣūr (r. 1578–1603) ordered his army to occupy the oases in 1584 before conquering the West African Songhay Empire a few years later.¹³ After the fall of the Saadians towards the middle of the seventeenth century, Tuwāt remained closely connected to the succeeding ‘Alawī dynasty, at least until the early nineteenth century. Most *qādīs* in the oases held formal appointments from the ‘Alawī sultan, and historical sources such as the *nawāzil* collections attest to regular military campaigns to raise taxes (*ḥarka*). They also mention the local presence of governors and other official representatives.¹⁴ Furthermore, kinship ties, commercial activities, or the frequentation of centres of religious learning like the *Nāṣirī zāwiya* in Tamgrout connected many locals to southern Morocco.

On the other hand, the political history of Tuwāt is also one of considerable and continuous autonomy. Notwithstanding the oases’ integration into the ‘Alawī sultanate, internal affairs remained mainly in the hands of local communities who often challenged the sultan’s executive bodies (*makhzan*). In this regard, they can be compared to the so-called “dissident” territories (*bilād al-sā’iba*) of the Atlas Mountains or the deserts of present-day Mauritania, where the recognition of the *imām*, the legitimate Islamic ruler, was a rather symbolic act.¹⁵ Inside the villages of Tuwāt, a system of autonomous self-governance prevailed in which local lineage groups competed for political and social hegemony. The constant pressure of surrounding Bedouins like the Sha‘ānba on oasis communities further complicated such competition.¹⁶

Living in the villages of the oases was concomitant with being associated with a specific social status group depending on genealogical and cultural prestige, or to be more precise, those with the power to operate such classifications sought to distinguish themselves from those lacking it. A detailed discussion of this question is beyond the scope of the present study. Suffice it to say that we can observe two principal ways through which pre-1900 *Tuwātī* elites articulated their claims to power. Some put forward their alleged genealogical connection to the Prophet of Islam, the *shurafā’* families; others insisted on learning and piety as a collective heritage and source of social prestige, the *mrābṭīn*. At the same time, *mrābṭīn* and *shurafā’* families jointly managed local affairs inside the various oasis villages. Their leading figures controlled the management of collective resources. They supervised the work of the *qādī* courts and coordinated the complex relations with the ‘Alawī sultanate and the various Bedouin groups.

In North African oasis societies, the push of certain lineage groups towards leadership within their communities while claiming a specific social status finds its counterpart in the existence of those who had to resign themselves to a permanent subaltern position for similar reasons. In their case, an inherent lack of “nobility” was supposed to justify the power exerted over them. Unsurprisingly, these mechanisms of subordination were intrinsically bound to the question of trans-Saharan slavery and its enduring consequences. Tuwāt was a hub of the trans-Saharan slave trade for centuries. Until today, its population mirrors the painful history of the enslavement and deportation of West Africans.¹⁷ The widespread practice of slavery gave rise to the status category of “slaves” (*abīd*), to which also manumitted persons and their descendants belonged. Most enslaved persons were to perform domestic services inside *mrābṭīn* and *shurafā’* households. For women, this often meant being exposed to sexual exploitation.¹⁸ Agricultural labour was left mainly to a different category of people with subaltern status and probable West African origins who, at least legally speaking, were free, the *ḥarāthīn*.¹⁹ Members of *ḥarāthīn* lineage groups worked in their vast majority for *mrābṭīn* and *shurafā’* families who owned most of the oases’ agricultural resources and properties.

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Of course, the dynamics of social hierarchies in Tuwāt were less schematic than this summary may suggest. Nevertheless, it helps to understand why genealogical memory and knowledge still play a crucial role in contemporary representations of collective identities.²⁰ The distinction between four status groups (*shurafā*, *mrābṭīn*, *ḥarthānī*, and *‘abīd*) within oasis communities continues to impact heavily upon social relations in Tuwāt. Having been “adopted” by a member of a well-known *shurafā*’ family, I came to realize that a significant part of my investigations took place among his extended kin, other *shurafā*’ families, or *mrābṭīn* groups with whom his branch of the Awlād Ḥammū bi-l-Ḥājj had over time developed ties of friendship. Additionally, it seemed inconceivable for most of my interlocutors that people belonging to *ḥarthānī* and *‘abīd* families may also have something to say about the history of Muslim scholarship in Tuwāt.

At first glance, the colonial conquest and Tuwāt’s integration into French Algeria in 1900 did not seem to have had much impact on how Islamic learning and legal institutions operated within local society. Exploring the archives of *qāḍī* courts in the Tidikelt region during the 1950s and 1960s, Judith Scheele describes a situation comparable to the one we can reconstruct from the evidence provided by the older *nawāzil* records.²¹ Within the institutional framework of *qāḍī* courts and *jamā’a* councils, the leading figures of *mrābṭīn* and *shurafā*’ families coordinated judicial procedures and managed communal affairs, most notably regarding the preservation of water resources. The practice of issuing fatwas (*iftā*) also remained widespread, and local scholars regularly met to discuss the various cases submitted to the *qāḍīs* in the oases. The only significant innovation brought by the French administration was the introduction of the Ottoman-inspired courthouse (*maḥkama*) system.²² Before, lawsuits most often took place in local mosques or *zāwiyas*. Furthermore, some of the scholarly families that had been prominent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries maintained their influence and continued to provide oasis communities with *muftīs* and *qāḍīs*. The al-Bakrī family even succeeded in re-establishing its control of the office of the principal judge (*qāḍī al-jamā’a*) that had passed from them to the al-Balbālī in the early nineteenth century.²³

The writings of *Tuwātī* scholars in the twentieth century suggest an even more substantial continuity. Authors remained faithful to the literary models inherited from the past, composing chronicles, biographical dictionaries, hagiographies, or fatwa collections. In this respect, the oases of Tuwāt forcefully illustrate the persistence of forms and practices of literary expression in the Sahara and Sahel that emulate the traditions and stylistic conventions of premodern Muslim scholarship. Take, for example, the collection of fatwas by ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Balbālī, who served as a *qāḍī* and *muftī* in the 1930s et 1940s.²⁴ The fatwas in the volume do not significantly differ from those I studied in my Ph.D. dissertation. Relying on standard reference works of the post-1500 *Malikī* school, such as Khalīl’s *Mukhtaṣar* or al-Wansharīsī’s *Mi’yār*, as well as the various local *nawāzil* collections, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Balbālī is concerned with the same jurisprudential problems his predecessors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries discussed: transactions on landed property, domestic relations, the transmission of shares in the water irrigation system, and the caravan trade.

Figure 12.3

The *qṣar* of Tamentit

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photo by the author

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Moreover, the volume contains almost no explicit reference to the new political order emerging under French rule. The only occurrence I was able to locate is a fatwa on whether modern paper money is subject to legal almsgiving (*zakāt*).²⁵ The reader gets the impression that Islamic law operates within a timeless setting in which the Muslim community remains protected from all external influences. The absence of any juridical or theological engagement with the consequences of the French conquest in 1900 may be peculiar to al-Balbālī’s collection. A deeper investigation of scholarly writing in Tuwāt during the colonial period would be necessary to assess the strategies developed by local ‘*ulamā*’ to deal with the new order imposed by the colonial authorities. French colonial rule elsewhere in the Sahara led to extensive and controversial debates among Muslim scholars.²⁶ The *muftī*’s silence thus appears somewhat mysterious and may result from posthumous editorial choices. More importantly, it reflects a much larger discursive framework celebrating continuity in religious and cultural matters that I encountered almost immediately when I started my fieldwork.

2 The Discourse of Continuity

The emphasis I place on the prominent role of an ongoing tradition of Muslim scholarship in shaping the history of Tuwāt reflects how local culture presents itself to the foreign visitor upon their arrival. The notion of continuity invests almost any public discourse on history and culture, putting at its centre scriptural religious knowledge (‘*ilm*’) as the connecting link between the old and the modern. In a recent book devoted to the region’s most prominent scholars, a member of the al-Bakrī family succinctly expresses the all-pervading idea of the region’s abiding and unchanging Islamic identity: “The people of Tuwāt have embraced Islam with all their heart and dedicated themselves to memorizing the book of God. Hence, the study of religious sciences (‘*ilm*’) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) flourished. The number of *zāwīyas* and scholars multiplied, and through them, wealth and divine blessings spread.”²⁷

Figure 12.4

A picture of Muḥammad bi-l-Kabīr in the *khizānat al-Balbālī*, Kousam (photo by the author).

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The author’s assertion mirrors the enduring relevance of religious studies within local society. Tuwāt still hosts many institutions for Islamic higher learning, some directed by descendants of scholarly families already mentioned in the eighteenth-century *nawāzil* collections. Walking in the streets of Adrar, I regularly encountered young turbaned students from these religious schools. Called *ṭulba*, they often participate in public and private events as Qur’an reciters or prayer leaders. On official occasions, their teachers sit as distinguished guests between local

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politicians and other dignitaries eager to be seen in the proximity of men of religion.²⁸ When the most famous and respected scholar in twentieth-century Tuwāt, Muḥammad bi-l-Kabīr (1911–2000), passed away, the former Algerian president Abdel Aziz Bouteflika attended the funeral in person. The memory of bi-l-Kabīr also shapes public space. A newly built quarter in Adrar bears his name, as does the local airport and the university’s institute of social sciences and theology.

The staging of religious scholarship as the purported essence of Tuwāt’s cultural “identity” provided a starting point for my investigations. Since the manuscripts I was searching for were part of the private collections belonging to *mrābīn* and *shurafā’* families, it was indispensable for me to find a way to connect with them. Only Moulay’s unfailing and generous support made such a connection possible in the first place. At the same time, he could present himself to others as an indispensable interlocutor for western researchers and a promoter of Tuwāt’s cultural heritage. Even a precarious Ph.D. student from France may become an eminent *ustādh* in a society where professional categories largely determine the perception of a person’s social standing. However, engaging with the owners of the private libraries further required finding a common language to communicate, both linguistically and culturally. How to formulate questions and requests in a way that makes sense for those whose manuscripts you want to read? I quickly realized that my interest in Islamic law and “traditional” Muslim education significantly contributed to creating a space for dialogue and discussion. It is likely that my partial Middle Eastern ancestry was of some help as well. Additionally, being a male researcher in a highly gendered society undoubtedly facilitated access to social spaces strongly associated with masculinity. On the other hand, it precluded any access to female-associated areas of social life.

A key element in negotiating such mutual understanding was to oppose the legacy of religious learning that local scholars have transmitted over centuries to contemporary Salafist or *wahābī* readings of Islam. My interlocutors stressed, for example, the maintenance of peace inside the oases during the *Décennie Noire*, the bloody conflict between the Algerian government and Islamist groups in the 1990s. Some invoked a tradition according to which the blessing (*baraka*) of Tuwāt’s scholars and saints has always protected its inhabitants against the world’s evils. Similarly, Algerians from the north of the country who had settled in the *Wilāya* of Adrar presented life in the oases as shaped by the locals’ profound and quietist faith that contrasted with the raw urban realities of Algiers and other big cities. Calm and peacefulness were terms that often came up in our discussions, as did the comparison with the first Muslim community in Medina. It was only during my last trip to Tuwāt in 2018 that I heard dissenting voices—probably because my ability to understand vernacular Arabic had much improved—from locals and “Northerners” (*nordistes*) alike. Some openly criticized the persistence of social hierarchies they perceived as archaic and exploitative. Others expressed the frustration of living in a neglected and marginalized region of Algeria despite the enormous revenues generated by the local oil and gas production.

To what extent the discourse of continuity reflects a general rise of neo-traditionalist ideas and movements in the Maghrib and West Africa is beyond the scope of our discussion here. Yet the enthusiasm for the “spiritual” and “scholarly” legacy of the *zāwiyas* appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon. Since the 2000s, there has been a significant increase in Arabic publications on Muslim scholarship in Tuwāt, mostly historical studies or text editions. The authors of these works are almost exclusively local academics, religious scholars, or members of distinguished *Tuwātī* families.²⁹ Likewise, local and national media regularly broadcast

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programs or publish articles on Tuwāt’s scholars and manuscripts. This new dynamism in academic publishing and public visibility sharply contrasts with research up until the 1990s. The French historian Gilbert Grandguillaume offered a cursory reading of the *Ghunya* in a series of articles in the 1970s, but other than that, there was very little research on the topic.³⁰ The Algerian sociologists Nadir Marouf and Rachid Bellil, both authors of precious ethnographic studies on the oases, make almost no mention of scholarly traditions or the local manuscript collections. In this regard, the more recent anthropological work of Judith Scheele on the pivotal role of Tuwāt in trans-Saharan mobility illustrates a remarkable shift in scholarly attention, as she integrates Arabic manuscript sources in her analysis of ethnographic materials.³¹ One has the impression that the “oral culture” paradigm in research on rural areas such as Tuwāt that dominated in the 1980s and 1990s has increasingly given way to a new focus on Islamic literacy and its social roles.

The various local authors writing on history and culture in Tuwāt adopt a strikingly uniform and selective approach. Most studies display a similar structure, built around a content that is often repetitive. Each author begins by giving a general overview of the oases’ history and culture, which he—I did not encounter any female author—perceives in the light of an ideal Muslim society, carefully eliminating those elements that do not fit in such a narrative. Most notably, the history of Tuwāt’s prosperous and ancient Jewish community only appears in the context of its disintegration in the late fifteenth/early sixteenth century at the instigation of a preacher and jurist from the city of Tlemcen in western Algeria, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī (d. 1503?).³² In the standard narrative found in most publications, al-Maghīlī becomes a champion of faith and the founding figure of Muslim scholarship in the oases. Quite interestingly, and in sharp contrast to the impact al-Maghīlī’s work had on the intellectual history of Islam in West Africa, I came across very few references to his writings in the sources I explored in my dissertation, where he is remembered chiefly as a local saint.

In other words, local authors usually describe local customs and ways of living, limiting themselves to those they consider to be in harmony with Islam. Unsurprisingly, Tuwāt’s institutions of religious learning receive most of their attention. However, the authors also emphasize the sophisticated nature of the irrigation system inside the oases based on complex networks of underground channels, called *foggāra*, as a manifestation of the genius of *Tuwātī* people who have succeeded in domesticating a hostile natural environment.³³ By contrast, the sensitive topic of Tuwāt’s prominent role in the trans-Saharan slave trade or the different forms of servile relations on which almost all economic and agricultural activities relied do not appear. Likewise, studies barely engage with the coexistence of the region’s Arabic- and Tamazight-speaking communities. The main section either presents the life and work of a scholar, provides an overview of the different places of religious learning in Tuwāt, or contains the edition of a manuscript, to which photos of local scholars from the twentieth century, such as the omnipresent Muḥammad bi-l-Kabīr, are added in the appendices. The works of contemporary local ‘*ulamā*’ furthermore imitate the style of classical biographical dictionaries (*tarājim*, *ṭabaqāt*). Here, we again observe that authors carefully avoid any potentially controversial topic. For example, at best, authors only briefly mention Tuwāt’s historical ties to southern Morocco. Similarly, the aspects that seem incompatible with the mainstream Sunni vision of what a Muslim scholar should look like are left out of the picture. We thus learn much about the erudition of Tuwāt’s *muftīs* and *qādīs* but very little about their activities as Sufī mystics and even less about their expertise in the occult sciences.

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The various works published in the last decades became a crucial tool for my research. On the one hand, they allowed me to formulate questions that my interlocutors considered meaningful. For example, I could inquire about the genealogical ties and concepts that still shape most social relations in the oases.³⁴ On the other hand, reading these studies provided me with the names of local scholars and the titles of manuscripts that rendered my research comprehensible. I realized that the most promising approach to connecting with the owner or the guardian of a private library was to ask him about specific books and authors. By contrast, framing my questions in a general or undetermined manner, for example by inquiring whether the collection hosted a particular type of text, like a fatwa collection or a chronicle, proved not very useful. Such a question ignored the very principle of how locals perceived manuscripts as historical objects. In my interlocutors’ eyes, the manuscript’s intrinsic individuality preceded any categorization by genre or disciplinary specialization. Each text contributed, through its title and author, to the constitution of a family memory that placed scholarly practice and writing in a genealogical context. I would even argue that this was why it became conceivable for my hosts to show a stranger the writings and books of their ancestors.

3 The Changes of the Twentieth Century

So far, I have mainly tried to show that contemporary narratives on Tuwāt’s literary heritage tend to reflect the historical hegemony of *shurafā’* and *mrābṭīn* families. In the final section, I shall argue that the discursive framework stressing continuity in cultural traditions is paradoxically also an expression of a new historical consciousness that resulted from the region’s integration into Algeria’s national space and the popularization of Islamic reformist ideas.

Notwithstanding appearances, *Tuwātī* society has undergone profound changes since the French conquest in 1900. First, the remodelling of borders in the early twentieth century radically redefined the region’s position within its Saharan and North African environment.³⁵ The progressive dissolution of the multiple networks connecting Tuwāt to southern Morocco entailed increasing exchanges with northern Algeria and the eastern Saharan regions, most notably the Mzāb. A shift in migratory movements further illustrates this process: Whereas the *nawāzil* records from the eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries suggest that people from Tuwāt in the past mainly emigrated to Morocco and West Africa, working opportunities in northern Algeria now attracted many of them. Simultaneously, the oases saw the steady arrival of *Mzābīs*, *Sha’ānbīs*, and “northerners” (among them many from the Kabylia region), who mostly settled in Adrar, the new administrative capital. As to local scholars, their “traveling for knowledge” declined drastically. Unlike their ancestors who had studied in the cities and *zāwiyas* of Morocco, or even in Egypt, few local ‘*ulamā*’ in the twentieth century sought knowledge in foreign places and, if they did, their travels most often remained within the borders of Algeria.³⁶

The life of Muḥammad bi-l-Kabīr seems exemplary in this respect. Born in 1911, he first studied with the leader of the al-Bakrī *zāwiya* in Tamentit, Aḥmad Dīdī (d. 1951). The young Muḥammad bi-l-Kabīr then wished to go to Fez and continue his education at the prestigious Karaouine mosque. According to local traditions, however, his father opposed this plan. He sent him instead to Tlemcen. Bi-l-Kabīr became a close disciple of the shaykh of a Sufi brotherhood from his native region, Abū Falja b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Karzāzī, who was at the same time residing in the city. Later, bi-l-Kabīr returned to Tuwāt. In 1949, after a short stay in

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Timimoun, he founded a *madrasa* in Adrar that attracted hundreds of students from Algeria and West African countries until he died in 2000.

The twentieth century’s ruptures and changes, in fact, considerably affected the world of Tuwāt’s ‘*ulamā*’. Despite the contemporary emphasis on “traditional” erudition and the persistence of cultural practices that revolve around the memory of saints and scholars, the oases of Tuwāt did not remain untouched by the spread of Muslim reformist movements that began in the late nineteenth century.³⁷ The *nawāzil* collection of ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Balbālī contains several fatwas seeking to prove the licit character of devotional practices that in the 1930s became targets of the early *ṣalafiyya*: joint *dhikr* sessions during funerals, “pious visits” (*ziyāra*) made to the tombs of local saints, and group recitation of the Qur’an.³⁸ It is worth quoting here one of the arguments put forward by the *muftī* to justify the practice of *dhikr*: “One proof for its lawfulness is the fact that for centuries (*min qadīm al-zamān*), *qāḍīs* and jurists have not blamed such practice (*‘amal*) or tried to change it.”³⁹ While the *muftī* mobilizes the well-known *mālikī* notion of “continuous practice” (*‘amal*), the apologetic purpose differs from the way the concept appears in the older *nawāzil* collections, where it principally refers to local jurisprudential conventions or habits. Writing within the tradition of Malikism, al-Balbālī addresses new theological or moral issues.⁴⁰ In doing so, his fatwa raises the question of the impact of the *Iṣlāḥ* movement led by the scholar and publicist Ibn Bādīs (d. 1940) and the *Association des oulémas musulmans algériens* that he founded in Constantine in 1931.⁴¹ Augustin Jomier has recently shown how profoundly the spread of *Iṣlāḥ* ideas changed religious culture and society in the neighbouring Mzāb during the interwar period.⁴² It would be worthwhile to investigate how things developed in Tuwāt.

Even more significant in this context is the institutional transformation that local teaching and learning centers underwent. The model of the *zāwiya* funded by *ḥibus/waqf* endowments progressively gave way to the “religious school” (*madrasa*) model whose emergence in twentieth-century North and West Africa reflected a general desire for renewal in Islamic education.⁴³ Its adoption furthermore entailed reorganizing the funding schemes that had hitherto sustained religious learning, as, from a legal point of view, the *madrasa* became private property (*milk*). I have mentioned earlier that, upon his return to Tuwāt, Muḥammad bi-l-Kabīr opted for the *madrasa* model in the 1940s. Several of his local students did the same and opened *madrasas* in various villages. More research is needed to determine to which degree such changes resulted from the new legal and administrative framework imposed by French colonization and, later, by the Algerian state. Nevertheless, they indicate a profound remodelling of religious and social space during the twentieth century.

The creation of a *madrasa* in southern Tuwāt by an immigrant from Morocco, Mawlāy Aḥmad al-Ṭāhirī (d. 1978), further illustrates this point. Al-Ṭāhirī was born in the region of Marrakech in 1907 among the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā*, a confederation of lineage groups reputed for their trans-Saharan trade activities.⁴⁴ According to local traditions, he spent many years as a teacher in Shinqīt in present-day Mauritania before moving to Tuwāt in 1937. Al-Ṭāhirī settled in the *qṣar* of Sali. Helped by a local fraction of the *shurafā* family, Sīdī Hammū bi-l-Ḥājj, he founded a *madrasa* that was to become an important regional centre of scholarship.⁴⁵ In a sense, al-Ṭāhirī’s arrival is part of a long list of Muslim saints and scholars who, during their wanderings across the Sahara, ended up in Tuwāt and, with the support of local communities, set up centres of Islamic learning. However, his choice of the “modern” institution of the *madrasa* demarks him from his predecessors. Moreover, although he had received initiation into the *Qādiriyya* tradition and one of its local biographers describes him as a man of religion “uniting in himself

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the exoteric and esoteric sciences” (*al-jāmi‘ li-‘ulūm al-zāhir wa-l-bāṭin*),⁴⁶ al-Ṭāhirī seems to have been discrete about his Sufi affiliation and essentially concentrated on the teaching of theological and legal sciences.

Al-Ṭāhirī’s discretion about his affiliation with the *Qādiriyya* echoes observations I made during my fieldwork. Sufism was not a subject on which my interlocutors were eloquent without explicitly condemning it. A certain ambiguity characterized their attitude. On the one hand, they often adopted a critical stance towards Sufi rituals and Muslim hagiography; on the other, many actively participated in the various *ziyārā* festivals organized in honour of local saints. I first interpreted their attitude as a distinctive feature of Saharan Islam, which integrates Sufism into the Muslim scholar’s way of life and is wary of ecstatic religious practices.⁴⁷ However, reading my eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources, I realized that my interlocutors’ ancestors did not necessarily share such a taste for devotional sobriety. Here, for example, is what an early nineteenth-century dictionary has to say about one of the most prominent jurists of the al-Bakrī family, the qadi Muḥammad al-Bakrī (d. 1721): One day, the saint Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān passed through Tamentit with his disciples (*fuqarā’ihi*) performing *dhikr*. Al-Bakrī left his home to contemplate the ceremony. As soon as he had arrived at the scene, he entered a state of ecstatic excitement (*ḥāl*) so powerful that the saint ordered his followers to stop lest the qadi “lose control of his mind” (*allā yajdhūb*).⁴⁸ Such narratives sharply contrast with the restraint that characterized the devotional meetings I was able to attend.⁴⁹

Figure 12.5

Prayer gathering led by Shaykh Ḥassān al-Anṣārī al-Inzigmīrī, one of the leading scholars in contemporary Tuwāt, in his madrasa in the *qṣar* of Inzegmir, May 1, 2010

photo by the author

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The developments within contemporary Tuwāt’s religious and scholarly culture require further research. I noted them along the way while investigating the local manuscript collections. Nonetheless, I contend that the traditionalism on which locals pride themselves today is, to a significant extent, a product of the social and political changes of the twentieth century. These changes include the region’s incorporation into the emerging Algerian Nation, the rise of Muslim reformism and its impact on religious practices, and the reconfiguration of trans-Saharan trade and migration networks. Since the 1970s, this reconfiguration has entered a new phase as a consequence of the droughts and political crises in the Sahel zone.⁵⁰

In this context, I shall at least briefly evoke the evolution of relations between subaltern groups and their former masters, as it constitutes a sensitive topic in all contemporary Saharan societies.⁵¹ Indeed, the renewed interest in Tuwāt’s *turāth* does not seem to extend to the history of the *ḥarthānī* and *‘abīd* groups. To the best of my knowledge, none of the many studies published in recent years deals with the cultural heritage of enslaved persons from West Africa

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and their descendants. On the contrary, during my fieldwork, I repeatedly heard derogatory comments presenting the *ḥarthānī* and *‘abīd* population as indispensable but uneducated service providers.⁵² Although they deserved charity and care, they were deemed unworthy to appear in the official historical record. Such a conception seems at odds with the increasing social mobility among these groups after Algeria’s independence in 1962, while *shurafā’* and *mrābṭīn* elites became economically weakened.⁵³ However, it may precisely constitute a reaction of Tuwāt’s former leading figures against the progressive dissolution of the “old” order.

4 Conclusion

The exploration of Arabic manuscript collections in the contemporary Sahara depends substantially on the researcher’s ability to situate himself or herself within interpersonal networks structured by genealogy, kinship, and religious identity. From this perspective, the discussion of my research in Tuwāt in this chapter intends to delineate a historian’s approach to the concept of “social codicology.” While my main interest as a scholar of pre-1900 Islam still lies in the content of the manuscripts, I believe that the historical and philological analysis of such content can only benefit from considering the anthropological dimension of searching for sources “in the field.”⁵⁴

The various digitization projects of the last decades and the development of public collections provide precious alternatives in the context of political instability and insecurity, which make fieldwork almost impossible in many parts of the Sahara.⁵⁵ However, in the oases of Tuwāt, as in many other places across North and West Africa, such initiatives are slowly progressing, and, in my view, no digital copy of a manuscript can replace the experience of engaging with the geographical and social contexts that fashioned its making and preservation.⁵⁶ Furthermore, in Algeria and elsewhere, access to manuscripts preserved in public collections remains no less subject to one’s ability to manoeuvre through the complexities of interpersonal relations that still largely determine to which extent researchers may consult them.

For “outsiders” like myself, the new visibility of neo-traditionalist Muslim scholarly culture in contemporary North and West African countries was of great help. I would even argue that the mobilization of Islamic manuscripts and Muslim scholarship as a central theme in discourses on identity and religious belonging has played a vital role in the renewal of studies on Saharan Islam since the early 2000s.⁵⁷ Accessing materials has become easier as the researcher’s interest often contributes to such discourses. In this respect, my observations reflect broader dynamics of cultural politics in the Middle East and the Muslim world. Internationally operating institutions such as the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation have become powerful actors in shaping the relationship between historical memories and religious identities.⁵⁸ In the case of the Maghrib and the Sahara, I shall stress that, until the 1990s, social anthropologists and historians investigating social and cultural life within rural communities frequently faced the categorical refusal of their interlocutors to show them any historical document.⁵⁹

At the same time, the image of Muslim scholarly culture in the Sahara reflecting religious authenticity, erudition, and continuity produces blind spots and taboos in remembering the past. Paradoxically, the “rediscovery” of scholarly traditions seems less to result from an interest in the historical processes that produced them than from the quest for culturalist arguments in contemporary struggles. On the one hand, such a situation has constraining effects on accessing

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socially and politically sensitive documents, such as legal deeds or chronicles revealing genealogical ties. On the other hand, locals and non-locals alike tend to perceive the results of historical research essentially in the light of present issues. How should one then best engage with what in my opinion, defines the historian’s main task, namely to study changes and ruptures? It would, of course, be presumptuous to discuss such a question in concluding a chapter. Nevertheless, Leopold von Ranke’s famous call to write history “as it essentially was” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*),⁶⁰ notwithstanding its undoubtedly utopian and somewhat old-fashioned character, could at least serve us as helpful advice.

1

By the term Tuwāt, I refer in what follows to the three oasis districts of Gourara, Touat, and Tidikelt that, before the French conquest in 1900, were considered as a single geographical entity. On the region and its history, see Rachid Bellil, *Les oasis du Gourara, Sahara algérien*, 3 vols. (Paris: Louvain, Éd. Peeters, 1999–2000); Nadir Marouf, *Lecture de l’espace oasien* (Paris: Sindbad, 1980); Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2

By now, we have both finished: Bi-l-Hājj Nāṣir, *al-Naẓm wa-l-qawwānīn al-‘urfiyya bi-Wādī Mzāb fī l-fītrat al-ḥadītha* (Ph.D. diss., University of Constantine, 2014), Ismail Warscheid, *Droit musulman et société au Sahara: la justice islamique dans les oasis du Grand Touat (Algérie) aux XVIIe–XIXe siècles* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

3

On private libraries in Tuwāt, see Saïd Bouterfa, *Les manuscrits du Touat: le Sud algérien* (Algiers: Éd. Barzakh, 2005); Bashār Mukhtār and Hassānī Qwīdar, *Fihris makḥṭūṭāt wilāyat Aḍrār* (Algiers: CNRPAH, 1999). For a thoughtful and fresh study of manuscript libraries in the contemporary Muslim world, see Olly Akkerman, *A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books: Arabic Manuscripts among the Alawi Bohras of South Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

4

Each time I visited the region, I spent one month there.

5

Michel de Certeau, *L’écriture de l’histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 139–140.

6

Cf. Judith Scheele, “Coming to Terms with Tradition: Manuscript Conservation in Contemporary Algeria,” in *Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy, and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa*, ed. Graziano Krätli, Ghislaine Lydon (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 307–314.

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7

The digitized copies are available for consultation at the Institut de Recherche et d’Histoire des Textes in Paris-Aubervilliers.

8

On neo-traditionalism in the Maghrib, see for example Jason Idriss Sparkes, “Morocco as a Hub of Globalised Traditional Islam,” *Religions*, 13, no. 5 (2022): 392.

9

On the link between higher studies and the constitution of libraries in the Saharan context, see Ghislaine Lydon, “Inkwells of the Sahara: Reflections on the Production of Islamic Knowledge in Bilad Shinqit,” in *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, ed. Scott S. Reese (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 39–71.

10

Warscheid, *Droit musulman*.

11

Warscheid, *Droit musulman*, 58–83. On the *nawāzil* genre in the Saharan context, see Ismail Warscheid, “*Nawāzil* de l’Ouest saharien (XVII^e—XX^e siècles): une tradition jurisprudentielle africaine,” in *L’encyclopédie des historiographies: Afrique, Amériques, Asies*, vol. 1 *Sources et genres historiques (Tome 1 et Tome 2)*, eds. Nathalie Kouamé, Éric P. Meyer, and Anne Viguier (Paris: Presses de l’Inalco, 2020), 1272–1281.

12

Cf. Judith Scheele, “Recycling *Baraka*: Knowledge, Politics, and Religion in Contemporary Algeria,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49, no. 2 (2007): 304–328. We see similar developments in Mauritania. In 2012, the Mauritanian government created a *High Council for Fatwa and Petitions* (*al-majlis al-a’lā li-l-fatwā wa-l-mazālim*) in Nouakchott. The council promotes Malikism as Mauritania’s national “school of law,” most notably through the edition of local *nawāzil* collections. In 2017, for example, the council published the edition of the *nawāzil* by the eighteenth-century scholar ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Anbūya from Walata. See ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Ṭālib Muḥammad al-Maḥjūbī al-Walātī al-mullaqab Anbūya, *Majmū‘ al-nawāzil al-ma’rūf bi-majmū‘ Anbūya*, (Nouakchott: al-Majlis al-a’lā li-l-fatwā wa l-mazālim, 2017).

13

Louis Mouglin, “Les premiers sultans sa’dides et le Sahara,” *Revue de l’Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 19 (1975): 169–187.

14

Ismail Warscheid, “Exploring the Manuscripts of Tuwāt: History and Community Memory in the Algerian Sahara” in *Social Codicology: The Multiple Lives of Texts in Muslim Societies*, ed. Olly Akkerman (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 373-401.

Ismail Warscheid, “Les jours du Makhzen: levée d’impôt et relations communautaires dans les oasis du Touat (Sud algérien), 1700–1850,” *Revue d’Histoire du XIXe Siècle*, 59 (2019): 31–48.

[15](#)

See Houari Touati, “Le prince et la bête: enquête sur une métaphore pastorale,” *Studia Islamica*, 83 (1996): 101–119; Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, “Théologie du désordre: Islam, ordre et désordre au Sahara,” *L’année du Maghreb*, 7 (2011): 61–77.

[16](#)

Cf. Alfred Georges Paul Martin, *Les oasis sahariennes (Gourara—Touat—Tidikelt)* (Alger: Édition de l’imprimerie algérienne, 1908); Alfred Georges Paul Martin, *Quatre siècles d’histoire marocaine: au Sahara de 1504 à 1902, au Maroc de 1894 à 1912* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1923). On A.G.P. Martin’s two books, see Ismail Warscheid, “Comment écrire un passé qui ne soit ni colonial ni classique? Le cas du Tuwāt algérien,” in *Après l’Orientalisme: l’Orient créé par l’Orient*, eds. François Pouillon and Jean-Claude Vatin (Paris: Karthala, 2011), 213–226.

[17](#)

John Wright, *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (London, Routledge, 2007).

[18](#)

Cf. Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Rainer Oßwald, *Sklavenhandel und Sklavenleben zwischen Senegal und Atlas* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2016).

[19](#)

My transliteration follows the way the term appears in the local manuscripts, namely حراثين حراطين. nommoc erom eht fo daetsni

[20](#)

Judith Scheele, “Embarrassing Cousins: Genealogical Conundrums in the Central Sahara,” in *Past is Present: The Religious and Political Uses of Genealogies in Muslim Societies*, eds. Sarah Bowen Savant and Helena De Felipe (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 89–101.

[21](#)

Judith Scheele, “Councils Without Customs, Qadis Without States: Property and Community in the Algerian Touat,” *Islamic Law and Society*, 17, no. 3 (2010), 350–374.

[22](#)

Ismail Warscheid, “Exploring the Manuscripts of Tuwāt: History and Community Memory in the Algerian Sahara” in *Social Codicology: The Multiple Lives of Texts in Muslim Societies*, ed. Olly Akkerman (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 373-401.

Allan Christelow, *Muslim Law Courts and the French Colonial State in Algeria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[23](#)

See the biographies in ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Bakrī, *al-Nubdha fī tā’rīkh Tuwāt wa l-a’lāmihā: min al-qarn al-tāsi’ al-ḥijrī ilā l-qarn al-rābi’ ‘ashra* (Oran: Dār al-Maghrib li-l-nashr wa l-tawzī’, 2007) and Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Sīdī ‘Umar, *Qatf al-zaharāt min akhbār ‘ulamā’ Tuwāt* (Tīmī: Madrasa Sīdī al-Bukhārī, 2002).

[24](#)

Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Sīdī ‘Umar, *al-Jawāhir al-li’ālī min fatāwā al-shaykh Sīdī ‘Abd-Karīm al-Balbālī* ([s.l.], [n.d.]), 2003.

[25](#)

‘Abd al-‘Azīz Sīdī ‘Umar, *al-Jawāhir al-li’ālī*, 84–91.

[26](#)

See for example Augustin Jomier, “Islam, pureté et modernité: les ‘innovations blâmables’ en débat au Maghreb, 1920–1950,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 73, no. 2 (2018), 385–410, Yahya Wuld al-Bara, “Les théologiens mauritaniens face au colonialisme français: étude de fatwa-s de jurisprudence musulmane,” in *Le temps des marabouts: itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique Occidentale Française v. 1880–1960*, eds. Jean-Louis Triaud and David Robinson (Paris: Karthala, 1997).

[27](#)

‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Bakrī, *al-Nubdha fī tā’rīkh Tuwāt*, 20.

[28](#)

See also on this point Mohammed Hachemaoui, *Clientélisme et patronage dans l’Algérie contemporaine* (Paris: Karthala, Aix-en-Provence: IREMAM, 2013).

[29](#)

I counted about fifty titles during my stays that have been published since the 2000s. Among the most often quoted are al-Bakrī, *al-Nubdha fī tā’rīkh Tuwāt wa l-a’lāmihā*, al-Bakrī, *Silsilat ‘ulamā’ Tuwāt*, 2 vols. (Oran: Dār al-Maghrib li-l-nashr wa l-tawzī’, 2008); Muḥammad Bāy Bi-l-‘Ālim, *Qabīla Fulān fī l-mādī wa l-ḥādīr wa mā lahā min al-‘ulūm wa l-ma’rifā wa l-ma’āthir* ([s. l.], [s. é.], 2004), idem, *al-Riḥlat al-‘āliya ilā mīntaqa Tuwāt* (Algiers: Dār Hūmah, 2005); Maḥmūd Faraj Faraj, *Iqlīm Tuwāt khilāl al-qarnayn al-thāmin ‘ashara wa l-tāsi’ ‘ashara al-mīlādiyayn* (Algiers: Office de publications universitaires, 2007); Aḥmad Abā-l-Ṣāfī Ja‘frī, *al-Rijāl fī l-dhākira: Muḥammad b. Ubba al-Muzammirī ḥayātuhu wa athāruhu* (Oran, Dār al-gharb li-l-nashr wa l-tawzī’, 2007); al-Hājj Aḥmad al-Ṣadīq, *al-Tā’rīkh al-thaqāfī*

Ismail Warscheid, “Exploring the Manuscripts of Tuwāt: History and Community Memory in the Algerian Sahara” in *Social Codicology: The Multiple Lives of Texts in Muslim Societies*, ed. Olly Akkerman (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 373-401.

li-iqlīm Tuwāt: min al-qarn 11h ilā l-qarn 14h/17 m ilā 20 m (Adrar: Direction culturelle de la wilaya d’Adrar, 2003); Bin ‘Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad Sālim, *Absaṭ al-‘ibārāt wa aṭyab al-nafaḥāt bi-dhikr ba‘d ‘ulamā’ wa ṣāliḥī maṭīqa Tuwāt* ([s.l.], Shams al-Zībān li-l-nashr wa l-tawzī‘, 2011).

[30](#)

Gilbert Grandguillaume, “Régime économique et structure du pouvoir: le système des foggaras du Touat,” *Revue de l’Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée*, 13–14 (1973), 437–457; Gilbert Grandguillaume, “Universalisme musulman et pratique locale au Touat,” in *Actes du XXIXe Congrès international des orientalistes: études arabes et islamiques I—histoire et civilisation* ed. Claude Cahen, (Paris: L’Asiathèque, 1975): 89–93; Gilbert Grandguillaume, “Le droit de l’eau dans les foggara du Touat au XVIIIe siècle,” *Revue des études islamiques*, 43, no. 2 (1977): 287–332; Gilbert Grandguillaume, “De la coutume à la loi: droit de l’eau et statut des communautés locales dans le Touat précolonial,” *Peuples méditerranéens*, 2 (1978), 119–133.

[31](#)

See Scheele, *Saints and Smugglers*, especially 25–59 and 164–198.

[32](#)

See for example al-Siddīq, *al-Tārīkh al-thaqāfi li-iqlīm Tuwāt*, 53. On al-Maghīlī, see among others John O. Hunwick, “Al-Mahīlī and the Jews of Tuwāt: the demise of a community,” *Studia Islamica*, 61 (1985): 155–183; John O. Hunwick, *Shar‘ia in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghīlī to the Questions of Askia al-Hajj Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[33](#)

Grandguillaume, “Régime économique et structure du pouvoir,”; Judith Scheele, “L’énigme de la faggāra: commerce, crédit et agriculture dans le Touat algérien,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 67, no. 2 (2012): 471–493.

[34](#)

Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints*, 125–163.

[35](#)

Cf. Ross Dunn, *Resistance in the Desert: Moroccan Responses to French Imperialism, 1881–1912* (London: Croom Helm, and New York: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977).

[36](#)

See the biographies of twentieth-century *Tuwātī* scholars gathered in Bin ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Absaṭ al-‘ibārāt wa-aṭyab al-nafaḥāt*.

Ismail Warscheid, “Exploring the Manuscripts of Tuwāt: History and Community Memory in the Algerian Sahara” in *Social Codicology: The Multiple Lives of Texts in Muslim Societies*, ed. Olly Akkerman (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 373-401.

[37](#)

Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reformism in Twentieth Century Africa* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

[38](#)

‘Abd al-‘Azīz Sīdī ‘Umar, *al-Jawāhir al-li’ālī*, 61–77.

[39](#)

‘Abd al-‘Azīz Sīdī ‘Umar, *al-Jawāhir al-li’ālī*, 66.

[40](#)

On *fatwā*-issuing in nineteenth–early twentieth century *Malikism*, see Etty Terem, *Old Texts, New Practices: Islamic Reform in Modern Morocco* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

[41](#)

On Ibn Bādīs and the Association des oulémas musulmans algériens, see Charlotte Courreye, *L’Algérie des oulémas: une histoire de l’Algérie contemporaine (1931–1991)* (Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2020); James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Ali Merad, *Le réformisme musulman en Algérie de 1925 à 1940: essai d’histoire religieuse et sociale* (Paris, La Haye: Mouton et Cie, 1967).

[42](#)

Augustin Jomier, *Islam, réforme et Colonisation: une histoire de l’ibadisme en Algérie (1882–1962)* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2020). See also, for the case of the Aurès region in Eastern Algeria, Fanny Colonna, *Les versets de l’invincibilité: permanence et changements religieux dans l’Algérie contemporaine* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1995).

[43](#)

Cf. Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).

[44](#)

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

Ismail Warscheid, “Exploring the Manuscripts of Tuwāt: History and Community Memory in the Algerian Sahara” in *Social Codicology: The Multiple Lives of Texts in Muslim Societies*, ed. Olly Akkerman (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 373-401.

[45](#)

Bin ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Absaṭ al-‘ibārāt wa aṭyab al-nafaḥāt*, 77–157.

[46](#)

Bin ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Absaṭ al-‘ibārāt wa aṭyab al-nafaḥāt*, 78.

[47](#)

Cf. Charles Stewart, *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania: A Case Study from the 19th Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

[48](#)

Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm b. ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Bakrī, *al-Kawākib al-barriyya fī l-manāqib al-bakrīyya*, mss. collection *khizāna Aḥmad Dīdī*, Tamantit, Wilaya of Adrar, 53.

[49](#)

On this point, see Fanny Colonna’s remarks about a similar phenomenon in the Aures. Colonna, *Les versets de l’invincibilité*, 165–223.

[50](#)

Cf. Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara*.

[51](#)

See, among others, Remco Ensel, *Saint and Servants in Southern Morocco* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Hall, *A History of Race*, Ann E. McDougall (ed.), *Devenir visibles dans le sillage de l’esclavage: la question haratin en Mauritanie et au Maroc*, special issue in *L’Ouest saharien* 10/11 (2020); Urs Peter Ruf, *Ending Slavery: Hierarchy, Dependency, and Gender in Central Mauritania* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 1999); Villasante-de Beauvais, Marielle (ed.), *Groupes serviles au Sahara: approche comparative à partir du cas des arabophones de Mauritanie* (Paris, Éd. du CNRS, 2000).

[52](#)

I discuss this question in more detail in a forthcoming paper.

[53](#)

Scheele, *Smugglers and Saints*, 146–153.

[54](#)

Ismail Warscheid, “Exploring the Manuscripts of Tuwāt: History and Community Memory in the Algerian Sahara” in *Social Codicology: The Multiple Lives of Texts in Muslim Societies*, ed. Olly Akkerman (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 373-401.

Olly Akkerman’s recent book on the South Asian Bohra community and their manuscripts forcefully illustrates the potential of research on contemporary manuscript libraries in the Muslim world. Cf. Akkerman, *A Neo-Fatimid Treasury of Books*.

55

On these various initiatives, see Bernard Salvaing, “À propos d’un projet en cours d’édition de manuscrits arabes de Tombouctou et d’ailleurs,” *Afriques* [Online], Sources, online December 25, 2015, accessed November 14, 2023. URL: <http://afriques.revues.org/1804>, Graziano Krätli, “West African Arabic Manuscript Heritage at a Crossroads: Dust to Digital or Digital Dust,” *Annuario de Filologia: Antiqua et Mediaevalia*, 5 (2015), 41–66.

56

For example, visiting a Bedouin camp or a village where humans and animals closely cohabitate may be extremely helpful in understanding what is at stake when Muslim jurists discuss questions of ritual purity (*tahāra*).

57

Ismail Warscheid, “The Islamic Literature of the Western Sahara: Sources and Approaches,” *History Compass*, 16/5 (2018), 1–10.

58

I thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

59

See, among others, Geneviève Bédoucha, *L’eau, l’amie du puissant: une communauté oasienne du Sud tunisien* (Paris: Archives contemporaines, 1987); Bellil, *Les oasis du Gourara*; Colonna, *Les versets de l’invincibilité*; Marouf, *Lecture de l’espace oasien*.

60

Cf. John Toews, “Historicism from Ranke to Nietzsche,” in *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, eds. Warren Breckman and Peter E. Gordon (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019): 301–329.

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