Sorcery or Science?

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Published by Penn State University Press

Marcus-Sells, Ariela.
Sorcery or Science? Contesting Knowledge and Practice in West African Sufi Texts.
Penn State University Press, 2022.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/99973.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/99973
In the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya*, Sīdi Muḥammad argues for the efficacy and legitimacy of the sciences of letters and names, including the use of the greatest name of God, by positioning them as a form of supplicatory prayer (*duʿāʾ*). He defends the practice of calling on God for help by referring to the Qurʾānic verse “Your Lord said, ‘Call on me [adʿūnī] and I will answer you, but those who think themselves above my devotion [ʿibādatī] shall enter Jehenna utterly abject’” (40:60). This verse allows Sīdi Muḥammad to make two arguments. First, prayer works—God responds to the supplications of his creations—and second, supplicatory prayer constitutes an act of devotional worship (ʿibāda) that acknowledges the relationship of servanthood (ʿubūdiyya) between the servant (ʿabd) and God.1 Within the Arabic Islamic tradition, supplications, or personal requests to God, are referred to as *duʿāʾ* (pl. *duʿāt* or *adʿiyya*). While supplicatory prayer is distinguished in theory from formal, obligatory prayer (ṣalāt), recent scholarship has called attention to the ambiguity of the boundaries separating supplicatory from formal prayer and other devotional practices.2 On the one hand, personal supplication is included as one of the prescribed components of ṣalāt. On the other, the plural form of the word—ṣalawāt—is often used to refer to supplicatory prayer. Supplicatory prayer can be performed at any time, and while Muslims may choose their own words or formulas, specific prayers became associated with certain authoritative figures and were known to be particularly effective. Set litanies associated with specific Sufi teachers, and meant to be recited at specific times or for specific occasions, were sometimes known as ʿızb (pl. ʿızāb). The ʿızāb are themselves a form of supplication, a type of *duʿāʾ*. In the Kunta texts, as in other Arabic-speaking Sufi contexts, the *adʿiyya* and ʿızāb are associated with each other and also with the genres of *wird* (pl. *awrād*) and *dhikr* (pl. *adhkār*). The *awrād* refer to different arrangements of standard formulas whose exact order, pattern, number of
repetitions, and timing of recitation are associated with particular teachers. Dhikr can refer to remembrance in general or to the Sufi ritual of individually or collectively reciting names of God and devotional formulas. Additionally, the term, particularly in the plural form, can also refer to the specific formulas used during the ritual, and those formulas were, again, often associated with specific Sufi teachers. This chapter takes seriously the Kunta claim that the sciences of letters and names specifically, and the sciences of the unseen more broadly, constitute a form of supplication. Specifically, I interrogate the meaning of supplicatory prayer within Sīdi al-Mukhtār’s and Sīdi Muḥammad’s works by analyzing written devotional aids, a popular genre of Islamic textual production that has received very little treatment in academic scholarship.

The Kunta not only discussed supplicatory prayer as an aspect of devotional practice; they also produced and circulated their own prayers. These short texts, both single prayers and collections of prayers, are attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār, including one collection of prayers for the Prophet, a subgenre of supplicatory prayers that beseech God to pray upon Muḥammad. Judging from the manuscript record, this last work, the Nafḥat al-ḥib fiʾl-salāt ʿalāʾl-nabi al-ḥabib (Sweet Breath Concerning Prayer for the Beloved Prophet), was more popular than any of the Kunta’s narrative treatises. Muslims in West Africa and elsewhere in the world continue to use devotional texts like these in a variety of contexts and a variety of ways. Supplicatory prayers, including aḥzāb and prayers for the Prophet, are recited both individually and in collective rituals. Prayers are sometimes folded and bound into amulets or “erased” when a worshipper soaks them in water and then drinks or washes with that water. Anthropologists working in a variety of contexts have documented how contemporary Muslims discuss and debate the meaning of these texts. In contrast, the research supporting this book is historical and is based on the theoretical position that drawing evidence from the present into the past anachronistically inscribes contemporary debates and struggles for authority onto historical contexts. Studies that make use of such methodologies also risk obscuring the historical contours and development of a tradition. In this case, the possibility of change and development over time becomes hidden beneath an imposed sense of continuity and timelessness.

How, then, can scholars determine how these works acquired meaning within their historical context? This chapter proposes a methodology of reading that situates the Kunta’s devotional texts within two contemporaneous intertextual contexts in order to reveal the social logic that shaped and animated these works. The first two sections examine supplicatory prayer texts attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār against the background of the Kunta scholars’ longer discursive works. Set against the context of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi
Muḥammad’s discussions of cosmology, metaphysics, and sacred history, these prayer texts appear as a series of encoded references intended for didactic expansion. After demonstrating this reading in the first section, the second situates these devotional aids against the larger theory of efficacious devotional practice that emerges from the Kunta texts. Within this ideology of practice, devotional texts emerge as the link connecting the bodies of believing Muslims to the structure of the cosmos, allowing them to alter the material conditions surrounding them. While the first two sections situate the supplicatory prayers within the larger Kunta corpus, the third turns to other supplicatory texts circulating in the region at the time. Read against a backdrop of proliferating textual devotional aids, the Kunta’s contributions to this genre suggest an attempt to regulate the religious practice of Muslims in the region—to bring these practices under the authority of the Kunta scholars. In contrast to the first two sections of this chapter, which portray the Kunta scholars’ supplicatory prayers as a manifestation of an ideology of practice, the third section understands this ideology of practice as a secondary effect, produced in order to explain and justify the Kunta’s participation in local Muslim religious practices. Both of these readings are equally correct and equally necessary—practice shapes ideology even as ideology shapes practice. Moreover, whether read in one direction or the other, these texts reveal that both the Kunta specifically and Saharan Muslims generally understood Arabic devotional texts as a fundamental component of efficacious religious practice. For eighteenth-century Saharan Muslims, prayer was based in, and driven by, textuality.

By textuality, I refer not solely to the production of written works but rather to the production of “instances of discourse” that, “by being rendered detachable from their immediate context of emission, are made available for repetition or recreation in other contexts.”

Texts are products of human discourse that can travel from their original sites of production and become available for recontextualization and reinterpretation elsewhere. Karin Barber formulated this definition with the explicit intention of including oral texts equally within a theory of textuality. Her work and the many publications of Ruth Finnegan have drawn attention not only to oral literature but also to the complex interrelationship between oral and written genres. “Written and oral forms can overlap and intermingle,” Finnegan writes, with writing serving “as performance score, dictated transcription, crib sheet, memory cue, hearing aid, prompt book, calligraphic representation, ceremonial memento, notes for a speech, printed version of a memorized poem, medium for scholarly exegesis, tool for helping audiences understand a performance as it develops, script for recreating or remembering a past performance—and multiple possible combinations and sequences of all of these and more.” The development and spread
of rhyming and rhythmic prose (sajʿ) offers one window into the relationship between written and oral forms in the early development of Arabic literature. Sajʿ developed out of the pre-Islamic oral tradition, was legitimized through its use in the Qurʾān—itself a written text embedded in oral performative contexts—and then developed during the literary efflorescence of the ʿAbbāsid period, when it “invaded all domains of literature,” from the secretarial to the philosophical. And despite this reinscription of what had been an oral mnemonic device into a new literate written context, the foundational unit of the sajʿ developed during this period was a set of syllables, “the length of which remain[ed] within the limit beyond which the breath is exceeded,” indicating that even these written compositions were “intended to be recited before an audience, aloud.”

While much of the oral performative context surrounding the Kunta’s devotional texts has been lost, these works contain evidence that they are examples of precisely the oral/written hybridity described by Finnegan. The prayer texts discussed here all include elements long recognized as constitutive of oral genres, including rhyming and rhythmic prose (sajʿ) and the repetition of formulaic phrases, all of which aid in memorization. Moreover, Sīdi Muḥammad provides explicit instructions for reciting devotional texts, and particularly the aḥzāb, as part of a ritual performance in the Fawāʾid nūrāniyya, while the Ťarāʾif waʾl-talāʾid describes the recitation of awrād, aḥzāb, adʿiyya, and adhkār as part of the pious devotions of his mother, Lalla ʿĀʾisha (see below). Thus, although these texts were written down and circulated in manuscript form, they were also intended for oral memorization, transmission, and recitation. Writing and orality serve different purposes and allow for the transmission of texts to different, if often overlapping, populations. Thus written texts demonstrate superior geographic mobility—they can travel farther and faster from their points of origin, while oral texts extend a text deeper into a society’s social fabric, reaching populations that would not have access to a written work. One of the central arguments of this chapter is that the production of these texts in a dual written/oral form allowed Sīdi al-Mukhtar and Sīdi Muḥammad to fix the form of these works and attach them to their names and authority, while also encoding and transmitting their ideas to a wider audience than they could reach by manuscript alone.

Arabic manuscripts and the paper needed to produce them were valuable commodities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were a central part of inter- and intraregional trade networks. Manuscript books were widely sought and collected, and individuals often amassed impressive personal libraries. However, both books and paper remained limited luxury goods, and the teaching of students revolved around reading groups that shared a text or
worked from pieces copied onto wooden boards. Knowledge of the Arabic alphabet and basic literacy during this period may have been unusually high relative to other regions. However, we can presume the presence of both illiterate individuals and a spectrum of literacy ranging from knowledge of the alphabet to fluent reading of classical Arabic manuscripts. Producing short devotional texts intended for memorization would have allowed the Kunta scholars to spread complex metaphysical and cosmological ideas to Muslims who did not have access to, or could not read, written manuscripts. These references to literate or less literate audiences should in no way be confused with "literariness," however. Scholars of orality have stressed the importance of including oral texts in any definition of "literature," and Arab and African literatures have flourished in both low-literacy and highly literate contexts. The devotional works of Sidi al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī are masterly examples of an Arabic African literature that was simultaneously written and oral.

Supplication

The manuscript libraries of West and North Africa include dozens of supplicatory prayers and devotional texts attributed to Sidi al-Mukhtār. In addition to the *Nafḥat al-ṭīb*, these include various poems (*qaṣīdāt*); single texts called either *duʿāʾ* or *ḥizb*; and compilations labeled "*dhikrs* and supplications" (*adhkār wa duʿāt*) or "supplications and prayers" (*al-adʿiyya waʾl-ṣalawāt*), and so on. Of the texts titled *ḥizb*, the manuscript catalogues include the names of half a dozen separate works, including *Ḥizb ṣādī al-ʿismāʾ* (The Prayer of the Night Journey), *Ḥizb al-nūr* (The Prayer of Light), and *Ḥizb al-ikhlās* (The Prayer of Sincerity), among others. What follows is a close reading of, first, the eponymous *Ḥizb ṣīdī al-mukhtār al-kuntī*, which is representative in its forms and themes of the Kunta's other prayer texts, and, second, of the *Nafḥat al-ṭīb*, the most popular of the Kunta's devotional works. While these two texts do not encompass the entire range of this devotional literature, they do represent a good cross section of the major genres of prayer texts produced and circulated by this community.

*The Ḥizb ṣīdī al-mukhtār al-kuntī*

As a single prayer, the *Ḥizb ṣīdī al-mukhtār* is the shorter of the two works by far—short enough to quote and treat here in its entirety. The text begins with short, rhythmic lines and grows gradually more prosaic. The supplication also begins on a personal note, asking God to add divine or cosmological qualities
to the narrator, switches to the plural, addressing the relationship between God and a group of believers, and, finally, asks God to grant those believers victory over, and protection from, their enemies. Within this framework, two repeated devices maintain a sense of continuity and motion. The chiastic structure borrowed from Qur’ān 3:27, “you make the night to enter into the day and you make the day to enter into the night,” patterns many of the reversals throughout the text, while lists of dependent clauses following the same grammatical pattern (and ending with the same syllable or vowel) keep the reader moving toward the resolution of the sentence. However, while these general structures provide a loose sense of repeating or evolving patterns, the prayer is not tightly organized, and it contains brief thematic and structural excurses that reflect on the nature of God or sacred history.

O God, strike me with the veil of light,
And veil from me the canopy of fire,

And make the greatest name a garment of mine,
And the largest secret hair of mine,

And the talismanic altar [al-haykal al-muṭalsam] a veil of mine,
And the deeply dark clouds a wall of mine,
And the perfected radiance light of mine,

And the subduing jabarūt,
And the overcoming nāsūt,
And the gathering forms, a dwelling of mine.
To you belong the amulets [kaḥāl] that compel,
And the beauty that dazzles,
And the might that manifests.

Draw me close by bringing me near, near to you as the length of your bow [qāb qawsīk]¹⁴
And distant to you as the lasting of your intimacy.

O God, fill our needs with you
And bring us away from ourselves until we see nothing but you.

O God, hurl your truth against our falsehood¹⁵ and overwhelm it—for thus it perishes, thrown from us into the seas of your knowledge—
And snatch us from the sea of ignorance and darkness,
And inhabit our secrets with your proximity,
And our hearts with your love,
And our spirits with your concern,
And our intellects with your kindness,
And our chests with your [unintelligible] and your faith,
And our sight with submission to you and watering with the water of your certainty.

For what you have prohibited is not given,
Nor what you have given prohibited.
There is no increase for what you have decreed.
And one who has wealth from you does not benefit from chance.
You are the one who goes before and the one who goes behind.
You are the first and the last,
The apparent and the hidden [Qur’ān 57:3].

The greatness of your essence is surrounded by what is above the throne,
And your jabarūt by what is beneath the footstool.

You rise above the “how,”
And transcend the “how much.”
You are destroyed with “where,”
And you cannot be encompassed by the eye.

O God, make me among those whom you chose before creating,
You singled them out with your mercy after upon them gazing,
And you made the striking of the droplets of your light the cause that led them by the reins to strengthening.
Without strengthening, neither Iblīs nor Balʿām16 could do anything.
They were free from the singling out of mercy and a preexistent lot and so their deeds turned upon them, corrupted.
The abundance of their sciences only increased them in defects.
And gift us, O God, with the manifestation of guidance,
And repel from us the causes of perishing,
And make us victorious over our enemies—
For victory is by your hand. You said—and your speech is truth—“if God helps you to victory then none can overcome you” [Qur’ān 3:160]. And we have enemies who see us while we cannot see them. So when we learn that there is no meeting with them we ask you to help us overcome them because you see them while they cannot see you. Then you cover
us with victory out of preference for us—for you said to the chief of tricksters: “Over my servants you have no power” [Qur’an 15:42].

O God, just as you honored us with victory without our deserving it, so honor us with the realization of devotion. Say: “Surely favor is in the hand of God, he gives it to whom he wills” [Qur’an 3:73]. May you be exalted. You make weakness mighty when it is from you and to you and you make might weakness when it is to other than you. Say: “O God, king of the kingdom [al-mulk], you give the kingdom to whom you will and you seize the kingdom from whom you will and you magnify whom you will and you abase whom you will. In your hand is the good, and you are powerful over all things. You make the night to enter into the day and you make the day to enter into the night. You bring forth the living from the dead and you bring forth the dead from the living and you give provision to whomever you will without reckoning” [Qur’an 3:26–27].

O God, plunder, with the intensity of your position, those who would plunder us and overcome, with the might of your power, those who would overcome us and destroy the high pillar of those who would abase us, and rend with your force those who would seek to rout us and do not entrust us to our selves in either our smallness or our greatness.

O Most Merciful of the Merciful! O Possessor of Majesty and Nobility. Amen.17

The opening of the Hizb evokes a mélange of allusions to Sufi cosmological and metaphysical principles. The beginning lines of this section first posit and then invert Sufi tropes of veiling and light as the narrator asks for a brutal, direct encounter with the divine light standing between the supplicant and God, while requesting a continued veiling from light in its negative aspect—the fires of hell. From this metaphysical position between divine light and hellfire, the prayer moves on to request that God add divine or cosmological aspects to the body of the supplicant. Some of these, such as the greatest name and secret, and the realms of existence, al-jabarūt and al-nāsūt (or al-mulk), directly recall elements from other texts by Sīdi al-Mukhtar and Sīdi Muḥammad (see chapter 2), while others, such as “the talismanic altar” and the “deeply dark clouds,” are more opaque. The next section again asks for the addition of divine qualities to the bodies of what is now a group of supplicants. However, while the previous list added to the body from the outside (clothing, hair, veil, and wall),
this section moves into the interior bodies of the believers, asking God to instill his characteristics within them: “our secrets with your proximity / And our hearts with your love / And our spirits with your concern / And our intellects with your kindness / And our chests with your . . . faith.” Within these two sections, the Ḥizb thus presents exterior and interior aspects of the idealized human body: composed without of clothes, hair, veil, shelter, and illumination, and within of sight, chest, intellect, spirit, heart, and secret. By asking God to inhabit these aspects of the human body with his own characteristics, the narrator engages a familiar Sufi trope that reveals the microcosm of the believing human body as the site of divine manifestation.

In a later section, the Ḥizb connects these Sufi metaphysical themes to sacred history. Returning briefly to a single narrator, the text asks God to include the speaker among those chosen for a predetermined but unspecified fate: “O God, make me among those whom you chose before creating / You singled them out with your mercy after upon them gazing.” Other texts by Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad suggest that this fate could refer either to the guarantee of entry into paradise or to reaching the goal of the annihilation of the self in knowledge of the divine (fanāʾ). In works composed by both the Kunta scholars and earlier Sufi authors, this direct experience of God represents a return to the day, before creation, when God called forth the future spirits of humankind and asked them to witness him directly.18 The Ḥizb alludes to this cycle of primordial predestination and ultimate return with the line “you made the striking of the droplets of your light the cause that led them by the reins to strengthening.” If Sīdi al-Mukhtār only evokes this sacred history in the Ḥizb, however, he references it explicitly in the Nafḥat al-ṭīb: “You placed him [Muḥammad] in the world of the progeny before the sons of Adam when you manifested yourself to them. Then you said: Am I not your lord? (7:172) and he was the first to respond with the utterance—but yes!”19 In this passage, Sīdi al-Mukhtār directly quotes the Qurʾānic verse that forms the basis for this sacred history of predestination and adds the interpretation that on that primordial day, Muḥammad stood before Adam’s gathered progeny and was the first among them to testify to God’s lordship.

Immediately following the lines in the Ḥizb that request this predetermined blessing from God, Sīdi al-Mukhār cites the names of two figures who reappear in Kunta sacred histories: Iblīs and Balʿām. Iblīs, or Satan, the angel who disobeyed God’s command to bow down before Adam and was cast out of heaven as a result, appears as a complex figure in Sufi poetics. Classical Sufi authors, beginning with al-Hallāj, cast him in the tragic role of the ultimate monotheist and lover of God, who refused his beloved’s command to worship another and found himself forever bereaved as a result.20 However, despite the familiarity of
this portrayal to scholars of Sufism, the Kunta do not make use of this typology of Iblis, who appears only as a negative character in their writings. In the Ṭarāʾif wa’l-talāʾid, Sidi Muḥammad presents the story of Iblīs as an angel who spent thousands of years in continuous worship of God but grew arrogant as a result. This arrogance led to his refusal of God’s order to bow before Adam, a single act of disobedience that erased countless years of devotion and serves as a cautionary tale for the dangers of complacency and the consequences of even one lapse. Elsewhere in the same text, Sīdi Muḥammad claims that his father spent four years battling Iblīs/Satan, establishing his resistance to corruption and his character as a friend of God through this period of resistance and defiance. Iblīs also appears in an important role in a short, untitled text attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār and labeled Khalwa in manuscript catalogues, which discusses the visions that might appear to followers of the Sufi path. In this context, Iblīs/Satan appears as a purveyor of false visions who manifests himself to a paradigmatic friend of God, ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, and claims to be God himself. In this account, al-Jīlānī proves his status as a friend of God and a Sufi shaykh by correctly identifying and rejecting Satan.

The same text that presents Satan as an impersonator who brings false visions of God also includes one of the longest descriptions of Balʿām by the Kunta scholars, who occasionally mention his name in connection with corrupt practitioners of the sciences of the unseen. In Khalwa, the Kunta provide a rare discursive elaboration of this character, writing, “It is narrated that Jesus, peace be upon him, said: ‘O God! Why did you bereave Balʿām of [your] friendship . . . ?’ So Allāh said to him that he had not [been humble], and for that reason he was recompensed with bereavement. And had he said one day: ‘O God! All praise is to you for what you have conferred upon me, which I have not deserved, neither for my essence nor as an imperative of my attributes,’ then I would not have expelled him from my presence, nor distanced him. However, he undervalued my favor, so my punishment descended on him.”

This passage presents a dialogue between God and Jesus, in which the latter asks the reason for Balʿām’s punishment. This text suggests that Balʿām, like Iblis, was punished for his arrogance. However, at no point does Khalwa mention exactly what crime Balʿām’s arrogance led him to commit and suggests only that a show of proper humility might have averted his fate. Both al-Thaʿlabī and al-Ṭabarī, two early chroniclers of Muslim histories, briefly mention a figure named Balʿām ibn Bāʿurā, a Canaanite who was persuaded by the giants to use the greatest name of God to curse the Israelites. But when he launched his curse, he ended up cursing the giants instead, and God caused his tongue to fall from his mouth. While we cannot be sure that this story corresponds to accounts circulating among the Kunta community, the reference to Balʿām as
a corrupt user of the greatest name of God certainly evokes concerns that the Kunta raise about the misappropriation of the sciences of the unseen. In this context, the references in the Ḥizb suggest that both Iblīs and Balʿām possessed the sciences, but that their attempts to employ that knowledge only turned against them. Moreover, the Ḥizb adds an additional layer of interpretation, linking this failure not to the crime of arrogance in these figures’ lifetimes but rather to a withdrawal of God’s mercy in the pre- eternity before creation.

Each reference in the Ḥizb sīdī al-mukhtār contains the potential for this type of discursive elaboration, evoking an array of intertexts both within and outside the Kunta corpus. The line “Make the greatest name a garment of mine” could easily lead to a long conversation about the greatest name of God, which, in written form, might look similar to the Fawāʾid nūrāniyya, discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, even an apparently simple request, such as “inhabit . . . our hearts with your love,” could provide the occasion for a long discourse about the nature and components of the human heart, not to mention the nature and role of God’s love for his believers. And if the Ḥizb contains this potential for discursive elaboration in every line, the Nafḥat al-ṭīb encodes an even denser array of topics, from sacred history and geography to personal ethics, anthropology, cosmology, and metaphysics.

The Nafḥat al-ṭīb

Although both the Ḥizb sīdī al-mukhtār and the Nafḥat al-ṭīb belong to the overall category of supererogatory devotional prayers, the two works display some distinct genre conventions. Unlike the category of single short prayers known alternately as ḥizb, dhikr, wirk, or dūʿāʾ, the Nafḥat al-ṭīb partakes in a genre of literature known as taṣliyya, or “prayers for the Prophet.” These supplications ask God to pray upon Muḥammad and involve the repetition of some version of the taṣliyya, the phrase “prayer and peace be upon the prophet, Muḥammad, and his family and his companions” (ṣalā wa salām ʿalā al-nabī Muḥammad wa ālihi wa šaḥbihi). This form of benediction stems from Qurʾān 33:43, which describes God as “He who prays upon you, and His angels,” and uses the word for formal liturgical prayer (ṣalā). The Nafḥat al-ṭīb and other collections of prayers for the Prophet add this phrase to the invocation “O God!” (Allāhuma), effectively asking God to pray upon the Prophet. In his commentary on the Nafḥat al-ṭīb, Sīdi Muḥammad affirms that God does indeed pray. He relates a report that the tribes of Israel asked Moses, “does our Lord pray?,” prompting God to respond to Moses, “Say to them, ‘Indeed I pray and my prayer is a mercy and my mercy encompasses everything.’” Sīdi Muḥammad states that God’s prayer is a mercy, while the prayers of the angels are a
supplication (\textit{duʿāʾ}), asking God to have mercy on his believers. God’s prayer is a way of singling out and showing favor to a believer, “a divulgence of his remembrance [\textit{dhikr}] of the beauty in his servants,” and a method of praising them. When specifically addressing the \textit{taṣliyya}, Sīdi Muḥammad emphasizes that all members of the community of believers (\textit{umma}) share in God’s prayer upon his Prophet. Thus, while some scholars translate \textit{ṣalā} and \textit{yuṣallī} in this context as “blessing” and “to bless,” I have decided to use the more literal translation, while taking into account the rich layers of meaning that the Kunta scholars read into this word. This choice reflects an overall methodology of focusing on and clarifying the specific emic terminology used in the Kunta texts (see chapter 3) and highlights the many and overlapping meanings of the different terms used for devotional practice within this context.

As a collection of prayers, rather than a single prayer, the \textit{Nafḥat al-ṭib} possesses more formal structure than the \textit{Ḥizb}. The text is divided into four “quarters,” and many (though not all) of the manuscript witnesses are preceded by a short preface or pre-text that describes a dream encounter between Sīdi al-Mukhtar and Muḥammad, in which the latter demands that the Kunta scholar produce a work of dedicated prayers for the Prophet and then approves the final version of that work. Generally, the first quarter treats the topic of the supplicant’s prayer itself, enjoining God repeatedly to call down the greatest possible prayer upon the Prophet; the second quarter refers most consistently to Muḥammad’s position in human history and the physical and human geography of the earth; and the final two quarters address the Prophet in terms of his cosmological and metaphysical significance. However, within this general structure, no organized narrative takes shape. Each supplication contains its own host of references and allusions, which may borrow from any of these themes and others. Indeed, the \textit{Nafḥat} contains so many themes and references that one witness to Sīdi Muḥammad’s commentary on the text ends after addressing a little more than half of the text and still amounts to almost four hundred manuscript pages. Since even one quarter of the \textit{Nafḥat al-ṭib} contains too many references to address fully in one chapter, the following analysis addresses a selection of excerpts that illustrate the text’s treatment of one theme—Muḥammad’s role in human history. For this purpose, selections are grouped thematically and thus are out of order; however, any sense of narrativization gained from this arrangement is illusory. The progressive rhyming supplications in the \textit{Nafḥat al-ṭib} never add up to a narrative discourse; rather, they pile allusion on top of allusion, making possible a potentially infinite number of discursive expansions.

The second quarter of the \textit{Nafḥat al-ṭib} opens with a series of supplications, referring to Muḥammad not by name but by genealogy.
O God, pray upon and bring peace to the son of Ibrāhīm who most resembles Ibrāhīm, honored with adornments and intimacies.

O God, pray upon and bring peace to the one sent from the line of Ismā’īl, ennobled by revelation and sending down.

O God, pray upon and bring peace to the one prophesied from an established seed, whose honoring and remembering and extolling is established in all eras.

O God, pray upon and bring peace to the one chosen from Dā‘ūd Īdūn, the one who was brought the seven oft-repeated [verses] and the criterion [Qur’ān 15:87].

O God, pray upon and bring peace to the elected from a destined lineage [‘unṣur], the one specified by the sūra: “Say, He is God, the One” [Qur’ān 112:1].

O God, pray upon and bring peace to the best of the Nizār, the one who leads to calling upon the truth of the emigrant and the helpers. (9)

The references in these supplications trace Muḥammad’s genealogy in a line of descent from Ibrāhīm, through his son Ismā’īl, and then into the mythologized origins of the Arabs, represented here by ‘Adnān, the legendary ancestor of the northern Arab tribes, and his grandson Nizār. More than a simple pedigree, the Nafḥat al-ṭib grants the descent of this line through history a teleological force, guided by fate through the “established seed” of Ibrāhīm and Ismā’īl and the “destined lineage” of the Arabs toward the prophesied birth of Muḥammad.35

Even as the Nafḥat al-ṭib collapses humanity before Muḥammad into a single descending lineage, it slowly expands the pool included in Muhammad’s community of believers (umma), mentioning, at various points, all the peoples reached by his mission. The passage above concludes with a reference to the emigrants (al-muhājirīn) who accompanied Muḥammad on his flight from Mecca, and the helpers (al-anṣār) who welcomed him to Medina. Elsewhere, the text refers to Muḥammad as “the master of Qaḥṭān and ‘Adnān, by whose call all the types of people and jinn were led” (12). This supplication begins by portraying Muḥammad’s prophetic mission as including all Arabs—metonymically represented here by Qaḥṭān and ‘Adnān, the legendary ancestors of both the northern and southern Arab tribes—and ultimately of not only all people but all jinn as well. At other points, supplications portray the Slavs and the Turks as responding to his call (da’wā) (13), and people with red and black skin as joining his community of believers (umma) (13). Finally, these references spill out from the human into the nonhuman realm. Above, we saw Muḥammad’s mission as reaching both all humans and all jinn, and other
lines portray angels, all animals, and inanimate objects as recognizing his prophethood. One set of supplications reads, “O God, pray upon our master Muḥammad, upon him be peace, whom all of the animals addressed with [their] types of speech. . . . O God, pray upon our master Muḥammad, upon him be peace, whom all inanimate objects saluted with greetings. O God, pray upon our master Muḥammad, upon him be peace, for whom the noble angels spread their wings” (14). In contrast to the verses that portray Muḥammad as the end goal of the human history that preceded him, these passages depict the human and nonhuman populations of the world joining his community in ever-expanding and more encompassing categories: emigrants and helpers, Arabs and non-Arabs, and, finally, the nonhuman categories of jinn, angels, animals, and inanimate objects.

Just as some supplications in the Nafḥat al-tib look backward to human history before Muḥammad, or to the community of believers after his death, other passages look forward into the future and depict the eschaton. However, while Muḥammad is depicted as the teleological goal of history and as the undisputed center of living Muslims communities, he plays a critical, but not solitary, role at the end of time. In passages referring to the Day of Judgment, Muḥammad appears primarily as the intercessor between God and the believers: “O God, pray for and bring peace to . . . the intercessor on the Day of Judgment, when anxiety will intensify and fear and faintheartedness increase, and the throats constrict and people are choked by sweat” (10–11). This passage refers to the gathered throngs of humanity on the Day of Judgment, conjures up affectively their fear of punishment and retribution, and presents Muḥammad as interceding on their behalf before God. But while Muḥammad appears as the central figure during the encounter between humans and their lord, the end of the world itself evokes the presence of another persona, the mahdī: “O God, pray upon and bring peace to our master Muḥammad the effacer, through whom God effaces disbelief and the worship of idols. The effacing of disbelief in his community will continue until his son, the mahdī, and ʿIsā emerge, may peace be upon them, and his family, and his companions” (26). This prayer identifies the mahdī as Muḥammad’s “son,” or descendent, and his appearance along with ʿIsā signals an end to Muḥammad’s mission and the call to monotheism. In another important passage, the Nafḥat al-tib lists the people from Muḥammad’s family who served as “seals,” bringing closure to key historical periods. “O God, pray upon him whose house you made the sealing house—thus with him you sealed the message, and with his uncle, ʿAbbās, the hijra; and with his circumcision and his education the vice-regency; and with his two sons—the lords of the youth of the people of the garden, al-Ḥassan and al-Ḥusayn, the pure, the noble—[you sealed] the grandsons; and with his son, the
mahdi, you sealed the nation of Islam and the authority (wilāya) of men—and upon his family and his companions, and bring peace [to them]” (31). Here, the appearance of the mahdi, again identified as a descendent of Muḥammad, signals the end of the growth of the Muslim community, just as Muḥammad signaled the end of the period of prophecy. Bookmarked between these two figures appear Muḥammad’s only surviving grandsons, al-Ḥassan and al-Ḥusayn, and ‘Abbās, who joined Muḥammad’s followers as they returned from Medina to Mecca, signaling an end to the exile of the early community. Unlike Muḥammad, the mahdi, and even ‘Abbās, it is not clear from the passage what historical era al-Ḥassan and al-Ḥusayn served to seal. However, their inclusion here alongside Muḥammad’s uncle calls attention to the importance of Muḥammad’s relatives—a key point for the Kunta, who also claimed descent from the Prophet’s tribe of Quraysh.

These selections do not exhaust the references in the Nafḥat al-tib to Muḥammad’s life and personal history—other passages treat his night journey, the purification of his heart as a child, and his death. Nor does the text limit its understanding of Muḥammad’s roles to the human or the historical, and many supplications deal with his cosmological and cosmogonical significance as well as his status as an exemplar of ethical human behavior. Looking beyond the particular personage of Muḥammad, many supplications in the Nafḥat al-tib evoke the characteristics or names of God, and at least one passage enumerates the many components of the world:

O God, pray upon him the number of revolutions of the spheres. Pray upon him the number of praises of the kings. Pray upon him the number of lights and of darknesses. Pray upon him the reach of perception and pray upon him the number of souls and of progeny. Pray upon him the number of mountaintops and pray upon him the number of the dead and the sleeping. Pray upon him the number of drops in the swelling seas. Pray upon him the number of exquisite flowers and pray upon him the number of lofty waterfalls. Pray upon him the number of sand grains and stones and pray upon him the numbers that can be neither reckoned nor fathomed. Pray upon him the number of raindrops from the clouds. Pray upon him the number of the seen and the unseen. (4–5)

Taken together, the supplications of this relatively short work, written in easily memorized rhyming prose, allude to all the major elements of the Kunta’s understanding of the world: its creation and inhabitants, human history and communities, the nature of God and the Prophet, the relationship between God and his believers, and the end of the world. The text discusses none of the
references fully, but through its list of allusions it provides a platform for infinite intellectual elaboration, a condensed encoding of an entire worldview.

With their webs of references and allusions to sacred history, Sufi cosmology, metaphysics, and ethics, texts like the *Hizb sīdī al-mukhtar* and the *Nafḥat al-tīb* could easily have served as mnemonic, didactic texts, memorized by students and then expanded upon in lessons by teachers. However, such an analysis says little about how these texts functioned as prayers, that is, about their use in, or relation to, devotional practice. And although we might not know how these prayers were used by Saharan Muslims of the period, one text does suggest how the Kunta scholars understood the application of these texts and how they prescribed their use in Sufi devotional practice.

**A Theory of Practice**

In the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya*, as we saw in chapter 3, Sīdi Muḥammad discusses at length the use of the letters of the Arabic alphabet and the greatest name of God to exert control over the world and its inhabitants. In this text, he links the names of God, and the letters that make up those names, to the structure of the cosmos, explaining that each name and letter performs a specific function within the created world, and that whoever connects to and activates that name or letter controls that function—sending down rain, quieting the seas, or healing the sick, for example. Moreover, the greatest name, *ahm sqk hlʿ yṣ*, includes the properties of all the other names of God. By extension, anyone who can establish a connection to that greatest name gains control over the entire structure of the cosmos. Finally, the text argues that use of the greatest name constitutes a form of supplicatory prayer, and thus a type of devotion to God (*ʿibāda*). On its own, this discussion of the theory underlying the sciences of the names and letters provides a useful window into the Kunta’s understanding of the relationships among cosmology, metaphysics, and devotional worship. But the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* moves beyond this theoretical discussion to provide practical instructions on how to use the greatest name in combination with supplicatory prayers to achieve any desired goal. By providing both supplicatory prayers that invoke the greatest name of God and instructions on how to deploy those prayers in ritual, the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* depicts the texts of these prayers as part of a larger performance, that is, as a devotional practice.

In one example, Sīdi Muḥammad provides a four-by-four table associated with the greatest name of God and the following instructions:
Put it [the table] on a lead tablet and fumigate it with aloewood and purify your heart with sincerity and your body with the water purification. Then bring it to your special place of retreat [khalwa]. First, you become part of the category of the elite, and your eyes darken. Next, you are present of mind. Then you are stricken by the greatness of the remembered, believing that this name is from His hidden absence, and is part of God’s grace for the lords of emanation. Then, if He flashes before you a flash of light and pervades your secret with the coolness of happiness and joy, then say with the tongue of brokenness, humility, and poverty:

God witnessed that there is no God but He until the All-Wise
[i.e., Qur’ān 59:22–24].

At your service, O God! May you be happy!
All goodness flows from you to you by your hand, and I desire what comes from you.
O, He who is named by the names!
Though I am in blindness, I ask you by your name of the names and your most protected secret.

O AHM SQK ḤL’YS!
I call to you with the alif of the composing of the cosmos,
And with the hāʾ of divinity in the presence of witnessing and the essences,
And with the mīm of sovereignty and the elongating of might and power,
And with the sin of the encompassing and protecting secret,
And with the qāf of subsistence with the sustaining of the cosmos,
And with the kāf of the complete sufficing of wants,
And with the ḥāʾ of wisdom with justice and iḥsān,
And with the lām of the friendship of the people of certainty and faith,
And with the ‘ayn of concern for the lords of sincerity and knowing [‘īrfān],
And with the yāʾ of auspiciousness and ease and easing of the people of need through iḥsān,
And with the ṣād of everlastingness through the preserving of the universes from the injuring of order and from greed,
And with the secret of He-ness, concealed by the cloak of greatness and mightiness.
O Strongest of pillars!
O Constant in Ḣansān!
O Needless of agents!
O He who is in every place yet contained by no place!
O Possessor of might and al-jabarūt!
O He whose hand holds al-mulk and al-malakūt!

Compel objects to me and strengthen me from the registers of the spirits until neither human nor jinn nor angel from the agents nor benefit nor power nor seeker nor devil nor time nor place—nor any thing that includes the property of existing is beyond the encompassing of my freedom of action, or emerges from the grip of my imposing.38

This supplication, with its accompanying instructions, constitutes the primary invocation provided by the Fawā’id nūrāniyya. Many of the elements familiar from the Ḥizb and the Nafhat al-ṭib recur in this prayer, including the references to the realms of al-mulk, al-malakūt, and al-jabarūt. However, the brief instructions at the beginning of the passage situate these references within a larger ritual setting that includes a purified body; a physical object—a lead tablet inscribed with a table; a physical location—a place of withdrawal or spiritual retreat (khalwa); and a progression of mental states that lead up to the pronouncement of the prayer itself. These mental states serve as conditions for the performance of the described ritual, ensuring that only those gifted with the exact series of spiritual signs can effectively follow the instructions and achieve the stated goal of the prayer, which is nothing less than complete control over the cosmos.

This goal, while striking in its scope, correlates with the Kunta’s depiction of the world as created from, and controlled by, the names of God and their constituent letters. The prayer above invokes the greatest name of God both in full and letter by letter, linking each letter in the name to specific divine characteristics. Moreover, these divine characteristics correspond to the more commonly referenced names of God that begin with the same letter. Thus the letter kāf, linked to the characteristic of sufficing, evokes the name al-Kāfi, “the Sufficient,” while the letter ḥā’, linked to the characteristic of wisdom, evokes the name al-Ḥakīm, “the Wise,” and so forth. In this fashion, the prayer calls on God through both his greatest name and all the names invoked by each letter composing it. Since the names of God control the physical and spiritual worlds, invoking them in the proper ritual setting and proper spiritual state allows a believer to exert complete control over those worlds and their inhabitants.
Although this prayer in the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* provides instructions for total control over the cosmos, the text goes on to provide alternative prayers with instructions for responding to more specific needs. In one example, the text provides the following variation:

O God, I ask you with the *alif* of your cleverness—O *Allāh*!
And with the *hāʾ* of your guidance—O *Hādi*!\(^{39}\)
And with the *mīm* of your sovereignty—O *Mālik*!
And with the *sīn* of your peace—O *Salām*!
And with the *qāf* of your compelling—O *Qahhār*!
And with the *kāf* of your sufficiency—O *Kāfī*!
And with the *ḥāʾ* of your forbearance—O *Ḥalīm*!
And with the *lām* of your subtlety—O *Laṭīf*!
And with the ḳāf of your knowledge—O Ṭalīf!
And with the yāʾ of your auspiciousness—O *Yāmin*!
And with the sād of your everlastingness—O *Ṣamad*!

O *Allāh*! O *Aḥad*! O *Kāfī*!
You are the god of those in the heavens and on the earth.
You are their Guide and you are their Judge.
O *Muʿmin*! O *Muhaymin*!
Answer O *Hulmayāʾīl*!

O God! O *Salām*!
Preserve me from the calamities of this world and the next!
O *Fahār*!
Subdue for me my enemies and make me a subduer and not one subdued!
And make sufficient for me the worst of what you have spread out!
O *Karīm*! O *Kafī*!
Answer O *Musqayāʾīl*!

O God! O *Ḥalīm*! O Ṭalīf!
O Most Kind, be kind to me and teach me the obscurities.
Restrain me and put compassion for me into the hearts of your servants
and give me tenderness toward them.
Answer O *Qatqayāʾīl*!

O God! O Creator [*Mukawwan*] of created beings! O Easer of hardships!
O Former of forms! O Creator [*Khāliq*] of the earth and Raiser of the heavens!
O Descender of rain! O Grower of plants!
Make my enemies die.
O Intensely Valorous!
Answer O Ṭaghayāʾ il!

By the truth of these names,
O Allāh! O Hādī! O Muʾmin! O Salām!
O Qāhir! O Kāfī! O Ḥalīm! O Latīf!
O ’Alīm! O Yamīn al-Yaman! O Ṣamad!

All praise belongs to God, Lord of the worlds.40

This supplicatory prayer does not directly refer to God as ṣqkhlʿys but instead lists each of the eleven letters composing that name in turn, connecting them both to one of God’s attributes and to one of his more commonly known names. The conclusion of the prayer then invokes each of those eleven names in order, spelling out the greatest name through its component letter-names. Between the first and last sections of this prayer, the text invokes God through his roles in creating and sustaining the earth and through four unexplained epitaphs: Ḥulmayāʾ il, Musqayāʾ il, Qatqayāʾ il, and Ṭaghayāʾ il. Modeled on a naming pattern often used for angel names in Arabic (Mīkāʾ il, ’Azāʾ il), these four names do not appear elsewhere in the Fawā ʾid nūrāniyya, but they do bear striking similarities to the names for the spirits of the planets listed in pseudo-Būnian works.41

In contrast to the first prayer, which requested control over every existing thing, this supplication makes more specific requests of God. These more limited requests—for divine protection and secret knowledge for the supplicant, goodwill between him and others, and death to the supplicant’s enemies—punctuate the invocations of God by his roles and through the four unexplained names. However, while these embedded requests point to possible reasons for deploying this prayer in practice, the instructions that follow this passage suggest other goals as well:

And whoever wants to request something from God Most High, let him pray [yuṣallī] two rakʿ as [repeating] the statement, He is Allāh, One (112:1) three times after the fātiḥa, while remembering the name  during each prostration. Then, when he finishes the two rakʿ as, let him pray [yadʿū] with the supplicatory prayer. Then let him ask God his request and the answer will come to him quickly from God Most High.
And whoever wants to walk upon the sea, let him do the same and he will obtain his desire with the blessing of the noble name. . . .

And whoever wants to fold up a distant space, let him pray two rakʿ as and then recite the name ١١١١ and pray the supplicatory prayer and God Most High will fold up space for him and he will reach [his destination] unharmed.

And whoever wants to reconcile people of the greatest hatred and disorder and dispute, let him pray two rakʿ as and recite the name ١١١١ and pray the supplicatory prayer. Then let him say, “I have bound your tongues and your hands from dispute and evil deeds, and I have reversed your hearts and changed your natures by this name and the call of God, the lord of the worlds.”

And whoever writes ١١١١ along with the supplicatory prayer and erases it [with water] and washes with it, iron will not work on his body. And in this fashion, sorcery [siḥr] will not work on him who drinks it, nor the evil eye, and he will be protected from all hatred. ⁴²

This list of possible applications (which continues for another page), explains how to use this supplicatory prayer in combination with formal prayer (ṣalāt) to make a generic request of God and then to obtain more specific results, including walking on water, traveling instantaneously between two distant places, reconciling two conflicting groups, and protecting a body from iron weapons, sorcery, the evil eye, and other manifestations of hatred. The text provides these instructions in their entirety, except that the specific names of God needed to complete each ritual have been replaced with sets of two, three, or four vertical lines. By leaving this information in code, Sīdi Muḥammad reserves the final deployment of these instructions to himself and his students, and prevents the transmission of this knowledge by manuscript alone. Indeed, elsewhere in the same text, Sīdi Muḥammad displays an awareness of the fact that physical manuscripts, once created, become available for unsupervised use and interpretation. He thus offers up the negative example of a sect of people who “imitate what the people of secrets recorded in their written records” in order to gain secrets and hidden powers. Their obsession with obtaining secrets actually weakens the results of their practice and occludes their perceptive faculties. ⁴³ The coded information embedded in these supplicatory prayers thus serves as a method of limiting the final operation to individuals within the Kunta’s pedagogical network. ⁴⁴

While lacking the names needed to implement these rituals, the instructions that accompany these prayers depict the supplicatory invocations in
connection with the specific sequences of bodily postures indicated by formal prayer and with other physical objects (lead tablets, incense, etc.) and a physical space. Moreover, the *Fawā’id nūrāniyya* establishes an explicit link between the content of these prayers and their function. Rather than mnemonic or didactic tools written in rhyming shorthand, these prayers invoke the metaphysical structure of the cosmos in order to alter the material conditions surrounding the supplicant. According to these passages, when a believing human body correctly performs her relationship to the world around her—and particularly her relationship to the creator and controller of that world—she gains the ability to physically alter it: folding up space, walking on water, repelling iron, and dispelling hatred. The instructions for these prayers demonstrate that when the text states that any believer who “connects to” the greatest name of God assumes control over the functions exercised by all the names, it means this in a physical, corporeal sense. When a believer correctly enacts, physically and verbally, the greatest name of God, she embodies that name and thus assumes control over its function within the cosmos. By providing supplicatory prayers in combination with instructions and a discursive theory of practice, the *Fawā’id nūrāniyya* provides a connection between three elements: metaphysics, supplicatory prayers, and the bodies of believing Muslims. By establishing this connection, the text depicts these prayers as performances, as part of a reenactment of the relationship among God, the cosmos, and a believer. Moreover, by withholding a last key piece from many of the instructions, these texts also reinscribe a particular social performance—a reenactment of the relationship between secret knowledge, a teacher, and his students.

The contextualization provided by this theory of devotional practice allows for the identification of corresponding structures in Sidi al-Mukhtār’s other devotional prayers. For example, in addition to cosmological and metaphysical principles, both the *Ḥizb sīdī al-mukhtār* and the *Nafḥat al-ṭīb* include references to practices discussed at length in the Kunta’s more prosaic works. The *Ḥizb* refers to both the production of amulets and to the greatest name of God. The *Nafḥat al-ṭīb* even includes a long section calling on God through an apophatically unnamed name:

O God!
I call on you by the name in which you lodged the symbols of the realities, And with which you opened up the treasuries of the refinements, And with which you manifested the manifest in the world of your mulk, And made flow the seas of your secret upon al-mulk and al-malakūt, And lit with the flood of its lights the gardens of al-jabarūt. (22)
In contrast to the rest of the *Nafḥat al-ṭib*, this section does not mention or invoke the Prophet but calls on God directly through his unnamed greatest name in a fashion that evokes the structure and content of both the *Ḥizb sīdī al-mukhtār* and the supplicatory prayers of the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya*. Moreover, many sections of the *Nafḥat al-ṭib* ascribe to Muḥammad exactly the sorts of extraordinary feats that the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* claims to provide: walking on water, speaking to animals and inanimate objects, and folding up space. In this sense, Muḥammad serves as the paradigmatic believing body, an exemplar and a model for the practice of other Muslims. These parallels among the prayers in the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya*, the *Ḥizb sīdī al-mukhtār*, and the *Nafḥat al-ṭib* suggest that the Kunta scholars understood all of these supplicatory texts as fulfilling a similar role in relation to Muslim devotional practice—in other words, all three texts are artifacts of a Kunta theory of prayer.

**Technologies of Devotion**

Situating devotional texts such as the *Ḥizb sīdī al-mukhtār* and the *Nafḥat al-ṭīb* within the Kunta corpus of texts illuminates the role that these short devotional works play within a larger Kunta theory of prayer and devotional practice. However, by granting discursive texts the authority to explain the role of devotional works, this analysis has necessarily privileged the intellectual context of these texts over their social context, and thus also the scholars who composed these works over the practitioners who might have performed them. Indeed, the reading given in the previous section was, necessarily, a reading down—it gave priority to longer philosophical and metaphysical discourses and then saw those concepts re-encoded in the format of supplicatory prayers. To put this in social terms, the previous discussion understood supplicatory prayers as a vehicle used by scholars to convey and enact their ideologies. I am not suggesting that this reading was incorrect, but rather that it tells only half of the story.

This section investigates the other half of this story by prioritizing the social context of devotional practice in the Sahara and Sahel at the turn of the nineteenth century. This reading begins by examining other popular works concerned with devotional Sufi practice circulating in the region at the time—and then works upward, arguing that the Kunta produced their own works in response to this devotional context. Reading upward privileges the social context of Muslim religious devotion and sees the Kunta’s production of supplicatory prayers as a response to, and attempt to shape, that context. Finally, this section argues that, conceptually, the Kunta’s longer narrative treatises served
to justify this engagement with local devotional practice with reference to established Sufi intellectual traditions, and thus with attention to larger regional and global networks of Muslim scholars.

The Dalāʾil al-khayrāt of al-Jazūlī

The internal Kunta accounts provide a few hints concerning the devotional life of the members of their community, including one passage in Sīdi Muḥammad’s hagiography of his parents that describes his mother’s engagement with Muslim devotional rituals.

And the shaykha . . . was ascetic, devoted, pious, religious, generous, and beloved. You would hardly ever see one of her breaths empty from remembrance of, or reflection on, or recitation of, the book of God, the Mighty and Exalted, or from reciting her awrād from the ṣūbūb and the adʿiyya or the adhkār handed down from the righteous ancestors, or from supererogatory prayers, or from reading the Dalāʾil al-khayrāt waʾl-shawāriq al-anwār—with the appearance of a breaking of the norm that could hardly have happened to anyone other than her.47

This passage roots the pious and praiseworthy qualities of Sīdi Muhammad’s mother, Lalla ʿĀʾiša, in a near-continuous outpouring of devotional words, drawn from recitation of the Qurʾān, ḍhikrs, and various supplicatory prayers. The continuity of these devotions, which flow out along with her breath itself, constitutes a breaking of the norm and thus a sign of friendship with God. However, while the ʿIrāq waʾl-talāʾid abounds with claims of extraordinary piety, this passage uniquely depicts a hagiographic persona in a particular devotional context. Sīdi Muḥammad informs his readers not only that Lalla ʿĀʾiša was extraordinarily pious but, more important, that she manifested that piety through specific acts of reading and recitation. For the most part, the non-Qurʾānic texts referred to in this passage are nameless—dhikrs and supplicatory prayers attributed to anonymous Muslim forebears—but Sīdi Muḥammad does mention one text specifically by name: the Dalāʾil al-khayrāt waʿl-shawāriq al-anwār fī dhikr al-ṣalāt ʿalāʾl-nabi al-mukhtār (Guide to Goodness and Rays of Lights in Remembering Prayer for the Chosen Prophet).48

This compendium of prayers for the Prophet, attributed to the fifteenth-century Moroccan Sufi Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad al-Jazūlī (d. 1465),49 achieved widespread influence across the Muslim world, from West Africa, to India, to Indonesia.50 Because the Dalāʾil al-khayrāt played a pivotal role in establishing the genre characteristics for prayers for the Prophet across the
Muslim world, it unsurprisingly shares many stylistic features with Sidi al-Mukhtar’s *Nafḥat al-ṭib*. Most manuscript witnesses of the *Dalā’il al-khayrāt* include markers for the four quarters and three thirds of the text. Modern printed copies also divide the text into eight sections, each labeled for a day of the week, beginning and ending on a Monday. In addition to these divisions of the main text, the work is often prefaced by several short paratexts that vary from witness to witness but usually include an introductory prayer, a list of the Prophet’s names, and a description of the Prophet’s tomb in Medina. Like the *Nafḥat al-ṭib*, the main text consists of a list of requests that God pray upon the Prophet Muḥammad, each beginning with the phrase “O God” and including some version of the *tasliyya*. While most compendia of prayers for the Prophet composed after the *Dalā’il al-khayrāt* share these genre conventions, al-Jazūlī’s compendium is one of the few known with certainty to have circulated in pre-colonial West Africa. The known presence of this work in the region, the fact that Sidi Muḥammad refers to it by name in the *Ṭarāʾif wa’l-talā’id*, and the stylistic parallels between the two texts suggest that the *Dalā’il al-khayrāt* served as the model for Sidi al-Mukhtar’s *Nafḥat al-ṭib*.

Indeed, in addition to sharing formal genre conventions, the content and even the wording of the two works bear striking similarities. Both texts repeatedly enjoin God to pray for the Prophet with prayers of hyperbolically infinite glory and length, and, just like the *Nafḥat al-ṭib*, the *Dalā’il al-khayrāt* often uses these descriptions as an opportunity to enumerate all the facets and components of the world:

O God, pray upon our master Muḥammad . . . to the number of your creations, to the extent of your pleasure, in the decoration of your throne, and in the ink of your words, and as often as your creations have remembered you in the past and as often as they will remember you throughout the rest of time, and pray upon him in every year, in every month, in every week, in every day, in every hour, in every sniff, in every breath, in every blink and in every glance, for ever and ever, for the duration of this world and the duration of the next world, and for longer than this, with a beginning which never ends and an end which never finishes!52

Moreover, the enumeration of the components of the world often overflows into references to the various inhabitants—human, demonic, angelic, and jinn—of the cosmos, and to the end of the world and the Day of Judgment. Other passages refer to Muḥammad’s role as intercessor on that day, to episodes from his biography, and to his place among the prophets and his role in
sorcery or science?

sacred history. Finally, the Dalāʾil al-khayrāt includes references to the unseen realm and to the greatest secret name of God:

O God, I ask you—by the truth that carries your seat from your might and your power and your majesty and your glory and your authority, and by the truth of your secret and hidden name by which you named yourself and which you took exclusively for yourself from yourself in knowledge of the unseen [ʿilm al-ghayb]—that you pray upon our master Muḥammad, your servant and your messenger.

And I ask you, by your name in which, were one to call upon you, you would answer, and by which, were one to ask you something, you would grant it.

And I ask you by your name which, when you lay it upon the night, darkness falls; and which, when you lay it upon the day, light arises; and which, when you lay it upon the heavens, they are raised up; and which, when you lay it upon the earth, it becomes solid; and which, when you lay it upon the mountains, they form peaks; and which, when you lay it upon difficulties, they become trivial; and which, when you lay it upon the water of the sky, it pours down; and which, when you lay it upon the clouds, they rain.

In its depiction of a secret, all-powerful name—a name that both ensures God’s response and directly controls the functioning of the material world—this passage strongly evokes the Kunta’s theory of the greatest name of God as described in the Fawā’id nūrāniyya. Al-Jazūlī was certainly not the first, or the only, Sufi author to discuss the idea of God’s greatest name and its relationship to the realm of the unseen (al-ghayb). However, the resemblance in both content and structure to the Naḥḥat al-ṭīb and the fact that Sīdi Muḥammad both knew and named the Dalāʾil al-khayrāt strongly indicate that this work may have served as one of the key texts shaping the Kunta’s theory of God’s greatest name.

However, despite the influence of this work in the greater region and in the Kunta’s own writings, Sīdi al-Muktār’s Naḥḥat al-ṭīb exhibits significant departures from the Dalāʾil al-khayrāt. First of all, despite the high level of mimesis, Sīdi al-Mukhtār never reproduces verbatim any of the prayers included in al-Jazūlī’s work. Moreover, the absence of such direct borrowing contravenes the conventions of this genre. Compendia of prayers for the Prophet often, even usually, include prayers attributed to famous Sufi forebears such as al-Shādhili and Ibn Mashīsh, or to the Prophet himself. The Dalāʾil al-khayrāt itself includes numerous repetitions of a prayer known as “the Ibrāhīmic prayer” (al-ṣalāt al-ibrāhimiyya):
O God, pray upon our master Muḥammad and the family of our master Muḥammad just as you prayed upon our master Ibrāhīm and the family of our master Ibrāhīm, for you are the Praised, the Good.

O God, bless our master Muḥammad and the family of our master Muḥammad just as you blessed our master Ibrāhīm and the family of our master Ibrāhīm, for you are the Praised, the Good.

O God, have mercy upon our master Muḥammad and the family of our master Muḥammad just as you had mercy upon our master Ibrāhīm and the family of our master Ibrāhīm, for you are the Praised, the Good.

O God, be kind to our master Muḥammad and the family of our master Muḥammad just as you were kind to our master Ibr āhīm and the family of our master Ibr āhīm, for you are the Praised, the Good. 57

Ḥadīth traditions hold that the Prophet Muḥammad certified this prayer himself, and consequently it is a common element in compendia of prayers for the Prophet throughout the Muslim world. 58 In addition to this nearly ubiquitous prayer, al-Jazūlī reproduces prayers with more specific regional circulation or Sufi affiliations, including the “Ṣalāt al-ṣughrā” (the minor prayer), attributed to ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī. "O God, pray upon our lord Muḥammad, whose light precedes creation and whose appearance is a mercy to the worlds, to the number of your creatures who have gone before and who remain and [to the number of] those among them who are fortunate and those who are not; a prayer which exceeds enumeration and that encompasses all limits; a prayer without limitation, end, or conclusion; an eternal prayer through your eternal nature; and protect his family and companions for all time.” 59 Because this prayer was attributed to ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, inclusion of this prayer in the Dalāʾil al-khayrāt suggests that al-Jazūlī identified with al-Jīlānī’s social and spiritual legacy. 60 However, although Sīdi al-Mukhtār identifies al-Jīlānī as the founder of his Sufi lineage, the Nafḥat al-ṭīb does not include this or other well-known prayers from this lineage. This omission suggests that while Sīdi al-Mukhtār drew on the familiarity of the form of the Dalāʾil al-khayrāt among Saharan Muslims, he chose to set the content of the Nafḥat al-ṭīb definitively apart from previous compendia of prayers for the Prophet.

Additionally, despite the great thematic overlap between the two works, the Nafḥat al-ṭīb displays a radically heavier emphasis on the cosmological and metaphysical role of Muḥammad and his lights. For example, the fourth quarter of the text begins:

O God, pray upon our master Muḥammad—from droplets of his light the prophets were created and from him they received, during the first
determination of fates, the vestments of his beauty and his likeness—and for his family and his companions, and bring him peace.

O God, pray upon our master Muḥammad—whose light prostrated and bent in prayer in all of the holy presences, and thus the angels sing his praises and he is pastured in the gardens of intimacy—and for his family and his companions, and bring him peace.

O God, pray upon our master Muḥammad—the reason for existence and the cause of its appearance after nonexistence, and whose lights shone out from the sea of his light in preexistence—and for his family and his companions, and bring him peace. (24)

This passage depicts Muḥammad’s light as the cause and source of creation, and as the wellspring from which all the other prophets received their light. These ideas have a long history within the Sufi intellectual tradition. The depiction of Muḥammad’s light as he prays in prostration before God can be traced back to al-Tustari’s tenth-century commentary on the Qurʾān.61 The idea that God created Muḥammad before, and as the source of, the rest of creation developed gradually within the early Sufi tradition and was consolidated in the concept of the ḥaqīqa muḥammadīyya by Ibn al-ʿArabī in the thirteenth century.62 The presence of these ideas in Sīdi al-Mukhtar’s compendium of prayers for the Prophet, along with copious references to the three realms of al-mulk, al-malakūt, and al-jabarūt, reflects the importance of cosmology to the Kunta’s understanding of Muslim prayer and devotional practice.

In contrast, al-Jazūlī borrows many themes and terms from the Sufi intellectual tradition, but very rarely those that deal with Muḥammad’s cosmological and cosmogonical roles. Instead, al-Jazūlī’s compendium depicts Muḥammad as the pinnacle of the Sufi path. Many prayers ask God to grant him what he deserves for having reached the most advanced “rank” and “station,” and to bring him to “a place of proximity.” Other passages draw on traditions that reflect on the love between God and his believers by referring to the mutual love between Muḥammad and God, and by beseeching God to let the reciters drink “from his drinking bowl” and to “avail us of his love.”63 One prayer describes Muhammad as “the sea of your lights, the mine of your secrets, the tongue of your proof, and the bridegroom of your kingdom.”64 These references grant Muhammad a preeminent role in God’s regard, place him at the pinnacle of the Sufi path, and draw attention to his importance in guiding humanity out of ignorance and toward the light of God. However, they do not grant him or his light a cosmological or cosmogonical function. Indeed, the reference in the “Ṣalāt al-ṣuḥrā” to “Muḥammad, whose light precedes creation,” represents a rare mention of preexistence, while cosmological realms such as al-mulk,
al-malakūt, and al-jabarūt are never mentioned at all. This doesn’t mean that
al-Jazūlī did not believe that Muḥammad had a cosmological or cosmogonical
function, much less that he rejected that concept: various prayers that include
references to God’s throne, footstool, and tablet, and to various named angels,
and to Muḥammad’s light may have served as touchstones for cosmological
elaboration, either orally or in other writings. However, the contrast with the
Nafḥat al-ṭib is striking and suggests that al-Jazūlī did not triangulate cosmol-
yogy, veneration of Muḥammad, and supplicatory prayer in the same fashion as
Sīdi al-Mukḥtār. These departures serve as a reminder that we should not
equate mimesis with copying, or reduce the complex play of intertextual tradi-
tions to the simple transmission of knowledge.

Other Saharan Sources

Although Sīdi Muḥammad’s description of his mother’s devotional recitations
mentions only the the Dalā’il al-khayrāt, we can draw inferences from other
sources about the devotional literature available to Saharan Muslims in the late
eighteenth century. Zachary Wright’s recent examination of Aḥmad al-Tījānī’s
“travel notebook,” the Kunnāsh al-riḥla, has demonstrated how eighteenth-
century Muslims circulated powerful supplicatory prayers through networks
that connected South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.65 And both the
catalogues of regional manuscript libraries and commentaries composed by
other regional Muslim leaders indicate that West African Muslims also partici-
pated in the circulation of devotional works, both prior to the rise of the Kunta
and then, increasingly, from the eighteenth century onward. The contents of
these collections point to three works that occupied a prominent place among
regional collections during the period of Sīdi al-Mukḥtār’s ascendency: al-
Shādhilī’s Ḥizb al-baḥr, al-ʿAzāzī’s Al-Ishrīnīyāt, and al-Būṣirī’s Al-Burda.66
These titles certainly do not exhaust the body of devotional literature available
to Saharan Muslim communities at the time, but they all have clear resonances
with the Kunta’s own works and provide a template for understanding what
kinds of aḥzāb, adʿiyya, and adḥkār Lalla ʿĀ’isha and other members of the
early Kunta community might have recited.

Of these three sources, al-Shādhilī’s Ḥizb al-baḥr (Litany of the Sea) most
resembles the aḥzāb attributed to Sīdi al-Mukḥtār. While al-Shādhilī’s various
devotional works became popular throughout West and North Africa, the Ḥizb
al-baḥr stands out for the number of copies made of it and the commentaries
it inspired. Indeed, several regional contemporaries of Sīdi Muḥammad—
Muḥammad Bello in Sokoto and Aḥmad Lobbo and his son Aḥmad Aḥmad in
Macina—composed commentaries on the Ḥizb al-baḥr.67 Finally, while the
Kunta do not specifically refer to the *Ḥizb al-bahr*, they do make numerous references to al-Shādhili, and both the *aḥzāb* attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār and the supplicatory prayers in the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* display striking similarities to al-Shādhili’s litany, particular regarding the use of the names of God and the letters of the Arabic alphabet.

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.
May the prayers and peace of God be upon our master Muḥammad and his family.

O God,
O Exalted One,
O Gentle One,
O All-Knowing One,
You are my lord, and your knowledge is sufficient for me.
What an excellent lord is my lord!
What a wonderful sufficiency is my sufficiency!

Even so, make us firm, aid us, and subject to us this sea, as you did subject the sea to Moses, and the fire to Ibrāhīm, and the mountains and iron to David, and the wind, the devils, and the jinn to Solomon.

Put in subjugation to us every sea of yours in earth and in heaven, in this domain and in the celestial, the sea of this world and the sea of the next. Render subservient to us every thing,

*O Thou, whose hand holds sovereignty over every thing* [Qurʾān 23:88].

*Kaf hāʾ yāʾ ʾayn šād* [Qurʾān 19:1]
*Kaf hāʾ yāʾ ʾayn šād
Kaf hāʾ yāʾ ʾayn šād
Help us, for you are the best of helpers.
Open to us the hand of mercy, for you are the best of openers.
Pardon us, for you are the best of pardoners.
Be compassionate toward us, for you are the best of those who show compassion.
Sustain us, for you are the best of sustainers.
Guide us and rescue us from the unjust people.

Send us a gentle breeze, as you know how to do, and let it blow on us from the storehouses of your mercy. Let it bear us along as if by miraculous
intervention, with security and well-being, in religion, worldly affairs, and the hereafter.

You are powerful over all things.

God, facilitate for us our affairs, with ease of mind and body, with security and well-being in religious and worldly matters. Be a companion for us on our journey, and a substitute for our households.

Blot out the countenances of our enemies, and transform them where they stand, disabling them from leaving or coming to us. If we willed, we would blot out their eyes. Yet they would race forward to the path. But how would they see? If we willed, we should transform them where they stand. Thus they would be unable to leave or return [Qurʾān 36:66-67].

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

May their faces be deformed!
May their faces be deformed!
May their faces be deformed!
Let their faces be submissive before the Living, the Self-Subsistent, for he who is laden with wrong has already met frustration.

Tāʾ sin hāʾ mīm ʿayn sin qaf [Qurʾān 27:1, 42:1-2].

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Hāʾ mīm [Qurʾān 41:1], hāʾ mīm, hāʾ mīm, hāʾ mīm, hāʾ mīm, hāʾ mīm!
The affair has been decreed. The triumph has come. Over us they shall not triumph.

Hāʾ mīm!
The sending down of the scripture from God,
The Mighty, the All-Knowing,
Forgiver of sin,
Receiver of penitence,
Severe in punishing,
Forbearing,
No god is there except Him.
To Him is the returning [Qurʾān 40:1-3].

In the name of God is our door.
May he bless our walls.
Yāʾ sin [Qurʾān 36:1] is our ceiling.
Kāf hāʾ yāʾ ʿayn ẓād [Qurʾān 19:1] is our sufficiency.
Hāʾ mīm ʿayn sin qāf [Qurʾān 42:1] is our shelter.
So God is sufficient for you against them, for He hears all, knows us.
[Repeat three times]
In the name of God, by whose name nothing in the earth or sky can do harm, for He is the All-Hearer, All-Knower.

[Repeat three times]

There is no force and no power save with God, the Most High, the Almighty.

Like the supplicatory prayers of the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya*, this litany invokes the mysterious letters that begin certain suras of the Qurʾān. Moreover, in his *Durrat al-asrār*, Ibn al-Šabbāgh relates the following statement from al-Šādhili: “By God, I only uttered it because it came from the Prophet of God, from whose instruction I learned it. ‘Guard it,’ he said to me, ‘for it contains the greatest name of God.’” Although the *Ḥizb al-baḥr* itself never refers explicitly to the greatest name of God, this statement suggests that al-Šādhili’s followers believed that the text contained the greatest name of God—perhaps as some arrangement of the various letters invoked by the text. The invocation of these letters closely parallels Sīdi Muḥammad’s use of the mysterious letters as stand-ins for God’s lesser names when invoked individually, and for God’s greatest name when invoked together in the proper sequence. Al-Šādhili’s *Ḥizb al-baḥr* even asks God to make everything in existence subservient to the supplicant, again, in a fashion highly reminiscent of the litanies of the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya*. Although the Kunta scholars chose different letters for their litanies and their version of the greatest name, they clearly selected and combined specific elements from the earlier *ahzāb* tradition when fashioning their own supplicatory prayers.

In addition to the *Dalāʾil al-khayrāt* and the *Ḥizb al-baḥr*, evidence suggests that other devotional texts were circulating in the Sahara and Sahel at the turn of the nineteenth century. One such work was the *Ishrīnīyāt* of al-Fāzāzī (d. 1230), a poem in praise of the Prophet that is mentioned in the seventeenth-century chronicle *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* and in al-Bartili’s eighteenth-century biographical dictionary, the *Fatḥ al-shakūr*. This poem inspired a tradition of written commentary by scholars such as al-Kashnāwī (d. 1667) and al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tāl and is listed as one of the major works that ʿUthmān ibn Fūdī and his brother studied as part of their Islamic education. Another work in the same genre, *Al-Kawākib al-durriyya fī madḥ khayr al-bariyya*, more commonly known as *Al-Burda*, by al-Būṣīrī (d. 1295/96), appears in almost all major manuscript collections from the region and contributed greatly to the Islamic poetic tradition of Hausaland and the Sokoto Caliphate. There is also evidence that Saharan Muslims had just begun to compose their own devotional works in
the early eighteenth century. The Saharan scholar al-Yadālī, who died in 1753, just before Sīdi al-Mukhtār’s rise, composed a poem in praise of the Prophet that had a lasting impact on the development of praise poetry in the region.72

This evidence indicates that devotional texts of various genres were proliferating in the region in the late eighteenth century and that Saharan Muslims were increasingly interested in using these texts as devotional aids. Within this context, the prayers attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār indicate an attempt to engage with, and contribute to, existing practice by producing new texts in genres already familiar to and popular with local Muslims. The Kunta, moreover, argued that personal supplication to God was closely linked to other devotional practices, such as spiritual retreat, formal prayer, the crafting of amulets, and the use of magic squares, which they described under the rubric of “the sciences of the unseen.” They did not simply provide new devotional aids; they sought to teach devotional practice. Against this backdrop, the cosmological and metaphysical theories attached to the Fawā’id nūrāniyya, and explained in greater length in treatises like the Ṭarāʾīf wa’l-talāʾīd and the Kitāb al-minna, appear less like theoretical precursors and more like ex post facto productions. If the primary goal of the Kunta scholars was to teach efficacious religious practice to local Muslims, then these treatises can be understood as an attempt to attach existing practice to a larger Sufi intellectual tradition.

As discussed above, the Fawā’id nūrāniyya displays an awareness that Muslims might use texts on religious practice on their own, without the guidance of the Kunta shaykhs. Were Saharan Muslims actively engaged in individual text-based practices during this period? It is impossible to answer this question from works composed by the Kunta scholars alone. However, those texts do suggest that the Kunta were concerned about this possibility and that they responded to that concern by attempting to shape the devotional religious landscape of the Sahara on two levels. First, Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥam-mad produced and circulated written devotional aids. These texts evoked works of devotional literature that were already popular in the region, but without directly citing or referencing the supplicatory prayers of earlier figures. Instead, these new compositions were fixed in written form and attached solely to the name and authority of Sīdi al-Mukhtār. As written works in manuscript form, they could travel by caravan across the region and into the teaching circles of other shaykhs, but as easily memorized oral texts they could also reach a broader cross section of West African society than the manuscripts alone. Next, didactic works like the Fawā’id nūrāniyya suggested that when used in the appropriate ritual context—and under the supervision of Sufi shaykhs—these prayers could alter the material conditions surrounding the supplicant.
Finally, these hybrid teaching texts also began the work, continued in longer treatises, of connecting these practices to a larger Sufi theoretical framework, and thus justifying them from an intellectual perspective. At the same time, however, the relationship between these layers of texts can be flipped. Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad were indisputably highly educated Muslim scholars and fully engaged and conversant with cosmological and metaphysical discussions. The theories of efficacious religious practice that emerge from their longer works demonstrate not only their fluency but also their investment in these concepts. Their short, supplicatory prayers fit neatly into the framework of their theories, encoding their religious worldview and pointing to the deep relationship between their understanding of God and the cosmos, on the one hand, and of practice, on the other. Devotional practice, for the Kunta scholars, was the performance of cosmology, metaphysics, and sacred history—a reenactment of the relationship among supplicating believers, the world around them, and God.

These two readings are not contradictory. Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad were products and producers of an intellectual heritage and a social landscape. They applied the textual traditions they studied to their local context, and they sought to shape their context in accord with their scholarship. Ultimately, the ability of these scholars to connect these two kinds of texts demonstrates the degree to which practice, for eighteenth-century Saharan Muslims, was based on and driven by Arabic texts, which were transmitted in both written and oral form. The ideally pious Muslim is represented in the Kunta texts by the image of Lalla ‘Ā’isha, reciting the Qurʾān, the Dalāʾil al-khayrāt, and other supplicatory prayers—that is, reading texts. In the Ṭarāʾif waʾl-talāʾid, the image of Lalla ‘Ā’isha’s devotions is paradigmatic, but it is also concerning. Behind her stands the specter of other Muslims performing similar devotions, but without a marital or family connection to Sīdi al-Mukhtār. The Kunta’s devotional aids and didactic works on religious practice address these spectral believers and attempt to bring their practice in line with the Kunta’s doctrines and into the sphere of their teaching—to make them, in other words, members of their community.
The association of the Kunta scholars with the sciences of the unseen continues to the present day. A popular Saharan saying holds that “wisdom [ḥikma] belongs to the Kunta or the Fūtiyya,” and scholars acknowledge that “wisdom” refers here both to learning and to secret and powerful disciplines. Moreover, the joint invocation of the Kunta and the people of the Futa Toro (al-fūtiyya) simultaneously refers to the ongoing associations of these groups with Islamic learning and to the historic battle between the forces of al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tāl (of the Futa Toro) and Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī al-Kuntī, which was portrayed in later oral accounts as a clash between two powerful adepts of the sciences of secrets.1 In her research on intraregional networks in the contemporary Sahara, Judith Scheele notes that the Malian Kunta are known for “the writing of amulets . . . the curing of mental illnesses and disquiet,” and for serving as “fortune-tellers, healers, and soothsayers.”2 At gatherings of Saharan Muslim scholars, Kunta family members from Mali are liable to show up with manuscripts attesting to the sciences of the unseen, much to the embarrassment of their Algerian neighbors, who dismiss them as “mere sorcerers.”3 This discomfort with the physical reminder of the history of these sciences, along with the ongoing engagement of the Malian Kunta with these traditions, attests to the continuing debates among West African Muslims about the legitimacy of these practices. In her research on l’hjāb, “a secret Islamic wisdom of healing and protecting” in Mauritania, Erin Pettigrew confirms that debates over the legality of these practices continued through the colonial and postcolonial periods, and that Mauritanians continue to refer to the Kunta as a source of knowledge for these disciplines.4

This historical and ongoing association of the Kunta family with powerful practices capable of altering the material world originated with the investment of Sīdi al-Mukhtar and Sīdi Muḥammad al-Kuntī in presenting themselves as

CONCLUSION
masters of the sciences of the unseen. This book has sought to locate those sciences within the writings of these two Saharan scholars and within the social and historical context that gave them shape and was shaped by them in return. These two men depicted a world composed of two interlocking realms, the visible world of the senses and the invisible world of the unseen. And, while not identical, the dichotomy of this presentation mirrors the scholarly division between social and economic history, on the one hand, and the history of ideas, on the other—the divide between the accounts of human material and social circumstances and the reconstruction of past worldviews. Indeed, this book has followed just such a pattern in presenting both the visible and invisible worlds of the Kunta scholars—the social and material world in which they lived and the intellectual realm in which they articulated sacred history, described cosmological and metaphysical structures, and classified knowledge. And just as the Kunta imagined constant connection and mutual interaction between the visible and invisible worlds, so too has this book sought to illustrate the reciprocal interactions between their ideas and arguments and the society in which they lived.

For Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad, that visible world of material and social circumstances was the West African Sahara Desert, and they occupied a particularly privileged position within that world. In the absence of centralizing state structures, Saharans of the eighteenth century developed a series of social charters that provided historical rationales for a society organized around occupational divisions. Within this social organization, the Kunta presented themselves as members of the zwāya, religious specialists who devoted themselves to learning while ceding political control to the warrior ḥassān. In the occupational hierarchy of the Sahara, this position also indicated wealth, as embodied by the ownership of herds—often placed with tributary clients for caretaking—and slaves. According to the Kunta’s own accounts, Sīdi al-Mukhtār acquired much of his wealth through involvement with regional trade. Recent scholarship on the Sahara has stressed the mutually reinforcing bonds between social institutions and the material environment, pointing, for example, to the ways in which people used the trade routes to spread pedagogical networks, and how the presence of a renowned teacher provided the founding story for many wells and their surrounding settlements. Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad helped reinforce these links between the Saharan environment and Muslim social institutions, particularly through their participation in desert institutions of learning. However, although these scholars acquired wealth and successfully asserted their status as zwāya religious specialists, Sīdi al-Mukhtār may have begun as a tributary client of the Kunta family, presenting a revised genealogy after his rise in socioeconomic fortune. Such
ex post facto transformations were part and parcel of the Saharan world, where social positions—and their accompanying genealogies and ethnic identities—shifted along with a family's economic fortunes.

The hagiographic accounts and chains of transmission provided by Sidi Muḥammad indicate that his father studied with teachers among the Kel al-Sūq, particularly the Sufi shaykh Sīdi ʿAlī al-Najib. The hagiographies also suggest that Sīdi al-Mukhtār competed with Sīdi ʿAlī’s children—particularly his daughter and son-in-law—for the right to inherit Sīdi ʿAlī’s authority. Sīdi al-Mukhtār was ultimately acknowledged as a Sufi friend of God, partly owing to the efforts of his son and hagiographer Sīdi Muḥammad, and the reputation and authority of the Kunta family expanded outward from the Azawād—particularly to the south and to the west. By the early nineteenth century, Muslim scholars from the Senegal River Valley, the Mauritanian Hodh, and the Inner Niger Delta claimed the Kunta scholars as their teachers or sent their children to them to study. This pedagogical network resulted in the establishment of Shaykh Sidiyya’s community in the Hodh, while Sīdi Muhammad’s hagiography of his father served as the template for the hagiography of Aḥmad al-Fādil. By the time ʿUmar Tāl began his campaign in the Niger Delta, the Kunta family exercised de facto control over Timbuktu and the desert to the north. It was thus one of Sīdi al-Mukhtār’s grandsons, Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī, who opposed the ʿUmarian armies and ended the northern expansion of the jihād.

However, Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī’s identification of Sīdi al-Mukhtār as the leader of an organized Qādiriyya Sufi order does not reflect the writings of his father and grandfather, who imagined themselves much differently. Prior to the rise of the Kunta, West African Sufis of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries made up relatively small communities of isolated ascetics who engaged in devotional practices handed down from a paradigmatic friend of God like ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī or Abū Ḥasan al-Shādhili. Evidence from those periods indicates that participation in these communities was not exclusive—students could and did travel from one to the other—and nothing suggests the presence of the specific organizational hierarchies that would predominate in later centuries. Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad’s writings demonstrate that the Kunta community developed within this model of Sufism. These shaykhs identified their community as “Qādirī,” according to their practice of reciting litanies (awrād) traced back to al-Jīlānī, even as they abundantly referenced earlier Shādhili authorities. Sīdi al-Mukhtār’s spiritual lineage (silsila) also carefully ties him to historical Muslim authorities in the region, including Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī al-Kuntī al-Kabīr, al-Maghili, al-Suyūṭī, and Aḥmad al-Raqqā. Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad broke from this earlier model of Sufism not through organizational hierarchy or exclusive corporate identity
but by renouncing ascetic withdrawal from the social and political realms. They used their acquired wealth to place tributary families under their “protection” and then leveraged their economic resources and the military force of their allies to insert themselves into the political realm—supporting contenders for leadership among the Barābīsh and the Kel Tadamakkat, negotiating with the Iwellemmedan Tuareg, resisting the economic claims of the Moroccan sultanate to the north, and occasionally warring directly with surrounding “warrior” groups. Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad could enforce their authority by leveraging the military force of their tributary clients; however, they employed the rhetoric that the support of these “students” stemmed from voluntary submission to their authority as Sufi shaykhs.

The texts composed by Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad also indicate that they located their authority as Sufi friends of God in their privileged access to, and mastery over, the realm of the unseen. The hagiographies composed by Sīdi Muḥammad present the friends of God as the site at which the divine realm, with all of its force and power, erupts into the material and human world. These spectacular breakings of the norm indicate the special position that the friends of God occupy between the world as perceivable to the senses and the realm of the unseen. Indeed, it is this alternate realm that provides the framework for all of the Kunta’s arguments about the authority of the friends of God in the social realm. Across the Kunta’s many texts, the unseen realm appears as the scaffolding that undergirds material existence. But while all believing Muslims partake in this realm to some degree, the friends of God rise within it to a position of ultimate cosmic importance. Arriving at the end of the Sufi path, these individuals participate in the simultaneous destruction of both their selves and the created universe, only to be re-created as the source of creation and the gateway between the manifest and unseen realms. Finally, because it is the physical hearts and bodies of all believers in general, and of these elite believers in particular, that serve as the connection between these two realms, the purification of the heart and body through devotional practice assumes a position of central importance in the Kunta texts.

For Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad, it was privileged access to the realm of the unseen that granted them mastery over powerful practices. They referred to these practices, and the bodies of knowledge on which they were based, as “the sciences of the unseen.” These sciences lie at the heart of the legacy of the Kunta family in West Africa. The Kunta scholars, and Sīdi Muḥammad in particular, acknowledged the apparent proximity between these sciences and prohibited acts of sorcery and went to great lengths to present the sciences of the unseen as legitimate engagements for Muslims. To accomplish this goal, Sīdi Muḥammad categorized the various fields of potential knowledge/practice into
the uneasy categories of the charismata, the sciences of the unseen, and sorcery, and employed a bricolage of rationales to distinguish between these various classifications. Rather than a neat epistemic map, these classificatory efforts reflect a series of tensions, including his attempts to balance the ability of humans to exert a meaningful influence over their surroundings with the tenets of Ashʿarī theology, and his desire to maintain a divide between Muslim and non-Muslim practices while presenting himself and his family as the masters of powerful disciplines.

There is evidence that several of the first-order disciplines that make up the Kunta’s sciences of the unseen were widespread and established in West Africa in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. This evidence points to the widespread use of the sciences of letters and names, magic squares, and talismans by networks of Muslim clerics throughout the region. Muḥammad al-Kābarī, a fifteenth-century scholar from Timbuktu, produced a work on using supplicatory prayers and names of God to effect tangible results in the material world. And the sciences of sand writing (geomancy), astrology, letters, and magic squares were established among the Fulânì in Hausaland by the eighteenth century. There is much less evidence, however, for the development of second-order classifications that sought to use Islamic justifications for grouping disciplines into prohibited and permitted categories. One exception occurs in the work of al-Maghīlī, whose “Replies” to Askia Muḥammad at the turn of the sixteenth century associate writings “that bring good fortune . . . [or] ward off ill fortune” with the actions of “sorcerers,” while proclaiming that anyone who claims knowledge of the unseen is an unbeliever. However, al-Maghīlī’s categorical rejection of any knowledge or practice associated with the unseen does not appear to have been taken up by any later writer. The Kunta scholars are thus the first in the region to compose written works organizing the sciences into second-order classifications of prohibited and permitted disciplines and integrating them into Sufi cosmological and metaphysical frameworks. The Kunta appear to have initiated a trend of increasing systemization of these disciplines as well as an increasing association between the sciences of the unseen and Sufi shaykhs. Indeed, following the rise of the Kunta, Sufi scholars and leaders in the region increasingly worked to restrict the sciences of the unseen to the purview of the Sufi friends of God.

Finally, this examination of the Kunta’s sciences of the unseen illustrates a new approach to the study of contested Islamic bodies of knowledge/practice. Earlier works on these types of practices traditionally begin by taking terms such as “magic” or “the occult,” which are laden with negative meanings in the contemporary West, and applying them anachronistically to non-Western cultures and other historical contexts. More recently, Islamic studies scholars
attempting to avoid this error often resort to abandoning second-order categories in their entirety and dealing exclusively with first-order disciplines (alchemy, astronomy, etc.). The former method has received much criticism for its roots in colonial-era approaches and for its inaccurate portrayal of the emic terminology used by Muslims. However, while the latter approach has yielded more accurate results, it has also resulted in a fragmentation of knowledge about these disciplines. And neither approach has engaged with the rich scholarship on the development of traditions of self-professed magic in the ancient Mediterranean and medieval Europe. In contrast, this study reveals that the Kunta scholars engaged in historical discourses about magic that began in ancient Greece and influenced Islamic thought and culture as well as medieval and early modern Europe.

Specifically, the Kunta’s classification of the sciences of the unseen participated in what Kimberly Stratton has called a “discourse of alterity” and Bernd-Christian Otto has labeled a “magic discourse of exclusion.” Sīdi Muḥammad in particular associated the condemned practice of “sorcery” with racialized others in “the land of the blacks,” and he included practices prevalent among Muslims living in Hausaland in the prohibited sciences of the unseen. His approach stands in marked contrast to “the discourse of inclusion” demonstrated by the eighteenth-century Fulānī scholar Muḥammad al-Kashnāwī, for whom no type of knowledge was considered intrinsically illicit. Al-Kashnāwī composed, among other works on the sciences of secrets, a didactic commentary on Fakr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Al-Sīr al-maktūm. This commentary directly engages with both sihr and nīranj as legitimate sources of beneficial knowledge and practice. As such, al-Kashnāwī’s work demonstrates a magic discourse of inclusion. The dialectical codevelopment of magic discourses of inclusion and exclusion also tie the Kunta to the “double gesture” of disavowal and reinscription by which the process of rejecting categories of knowledge/practice in fact reinscribes those practices as both generative and meaningful. And while this “double gesture” has previously been described as a unique feature of European modernity, this study indicates that this discursive move applies to all contexts in which people in authority attempt to reject and delegitimize the knowledge and practices of those they describe as other.

Finally, Islamic studies scholarship has traditionally considered the disciplines that the Kunta describe as the sciences of the unseen as categorically distinct from other aspects of Muslim devotional practice, such as seclusion (khalwa), the recitation of the names of God (dhikr), and prayer. However, the works of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad consistently associate the sciences with these types of ritual action, and particularly with the use of various forms of supplicatory prayer. This study thus situates the sciences of the unseen
within the devotional landscape of West Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The evidence suggests that West African Muslims were recopying and composing textual devotional aids in greater and greater numbers during this period, and that the Kunta participated in this trend by composing their own Arabic texts for use as supplicatory prayers. Sīdi al-Mukhtār’s and Sīdi Muḥammad’s production of these texts stemmed from their overall understanding of devotional practice as a performance of the relationships among God, the cosmos, and the believer, while allowing them to condense and transmit their understanding of cosmology, metaphysics, and sacred history to a wider audience through oral transmission. However, comparison to other devotional aids circulating in the region at the time, such as the *Dalāʾ il al-khayrāt* of al-Jazūlī and the *Ḥīẕb al-bahr* of al-Shādhilī indicate that Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad also intentionally produced prayers that would have been familiar to a Saharan audience but were attached to their own name and authority. In this fashion, the Kunta scholars sought to shape the larger landscape of Saharan devotional practice and to legitimize that practice in reference to Islamic intellectual traditions.

Returning to the social context of the Kunta scholars’ intellectual output brings this study full circle by linking their intellectual production back to the material conditions of Saharan devotional practice—in this case through the production of manuscript texts. Just as scholars such as Judith Scheele and James McDougall have documented how human populations and social formations shaped the physical environment of the Sahara, this study demonstrates the bi-directional influence of the social and material circumstances of Muslim practices and the ideational, intellectual production of elites. Educated Muslim scholars like Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad invested their economic and intellectual resources in attempts to shape Saharan society and practice through the material production and circulation of written Arabic texts, even as their own ideologies and philosophies were shaped by both the preexisting social landscape of the Sahara and the circulation of material goods. Ultimately, this study of the works of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad once again demonstrates the inextricable relationship between the material and the ideational, the world of ideas and the visible realm of material history and culture.