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B. G. Martin

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## MUSLIM BROTHERHOODS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AFRICA

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**For Philip and Jenny**

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## Preface

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This book about sufi brotherhoods derives from my interest in African Islam, which I have taught or been concerned with for some time. It occurred to me that several short studies of sufi groups and their chiefs in East, North, and West Africa – based on the groups’ common historical background, tied together by their attachment to “political” mysticism, and amplified by discussions on allied subjects – might be useful. It seemed appropriate to contrast these groups, so that their contribution to African Islam might be reevaluated or, in some cases, discussed for the first time. Hence this book employs an informal comparative method – largely historical, but with an occasional contribution from other disciplines, such as politics, literary studies, anthropology, or Islamic theology. I believe that it is essential for historians of Africa to adopt such interdisciplinary techniques in order to give suitable explanations for the problems they encounter. (See the programmatic statement of the editors of this series in the front papers of this book.)

When I started writing this study, I thought I would find that the leaders of the brotherhoods I wanted to investigate used their organizations in much the same way – that, for example, in the case of jihad or military operations in which they engaged, the brotherhoods would invariably furnish the structural underpinning that the leaders needed. This was not the case; certain leaders exploited the brotherhood structure more than others. For example, their ideas of “holy war” (jihad) were quite different. I also found that dedication to mysticism in no way hindered many of them from being practical leaders of causes, quite as much as being mystics or intellectuals, and that most of them had expressed their ideas in writing. Also, most of them were very much in the contemporary intellectual mainstream; they rejected blind imitation of what earlier thinkers had done. They very often showed their great intellectual independence over such matters as *hijra* (“removal,” “withdrawal”), particularly in the face of a colonial takeover by some alien power, and expressly opted for a form of juridical freedom (*ijtihad*) when it was appropriate.

Another theme that runs through these pages, and now appears much larger than I had originally thought possible, is that of Islamic

millennialism and mahdism. Here is a subject that deserves for itself a complete study – applied to the African continent – but that can only be touched on peripherally here. I hope that some other writer may take this subject up and exploit it. Much can be inferred about African mahdi figures from the writings of Norman Cohn, Peter Worsley, and A. F. C. Wallace. One day a full account of African mahdis, of whom there are so many, will be written.

Another interrelated theme that appears and reappears in this book is that of Pan-Islam – of Ottoman Turkish interest in the Muslim Africa of the late nineteenth century. This was particularly true in Arabic-speaking areas of the continent, or where Islam was gaining ground. Thus many of the leaders of brotherhoods treated here looked hopefully to Istanbul for moral and political support. Sometimes they obtained it, sometimes not, although it is now clearer that the farther they were from Istanbul, the higher their hopes were raised. Once again, this is a theme that demands an exhaustive study, which this book cannot claim to make.

To deal more effectively with the interconnected issues and problems treated here, I have deliberately avoided European sources wherever I could do so. I was determined to use them only in a confirmatory manner to support what I found in Arabic (or occasionally in Turkish) materials. Among such sources, I have used the writings of chiefs of brotherhoods whenever I could find them, in order to read about their ideas, theories, and convictions in their own words. This has not always been easy, for much of this material is still uncollected or otherwise inaccessible. All the same, this study attempts, in a limited way, to explain and synthesize a series of problems in hope that it may some day contribute to a fuller understanding of the development of Islam in Africa.

In translating Arabic (and a few Turkish) words and names, I have simplified the standard practice by omitting subscripts and long marks, but I have retained *k* for a front *k* (*kaf*), *q* for a back *k* (*qaf*). An apostrophe stands for both *'ayn* and *hamza*.

Among many other people who have helped me with this book, I would like to thank Norman Bennett, who gave me the idea for it, and John Paden, J. R. Willis, Mervyn Hiskett, Idris el-Hareir, David Robinson, Mallam 'Abd al-Qadir Datti, Harry Norris, Shaykh 'Umar 'Abdallah, and Hans Panofsky, who have furnished me with material. I should also like to thank Ivor Wilks, Robert Ferrell, Tom Whitcomb, John Paden, Phyllis Martin, and J. R. Willis for their helpful criticism. Additionally, I would like to thank Karen Ford, Mrs. John Sbordone, and Debra Chase for their typing, and Joyce Hendrixson for her useful suggestions and kindly assistance. My thanks are also due to my



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editor, Jack Goody, and the staff of the Cambridge University Press.  
Finally, I claim the errors in this book as my own.

B. G. Martin

Bloomington, Indiana

August 1976

## Abbreviations

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- BCEHSAOF**  
*Bulletin du Comité des Hautes Études de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*
- BIFAN**  
*Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamentale de l'Afrique Noire*
- BNP**  
 Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
- BSOAS**  
*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
- CADRB**  
*Research Bulletin, Centre of Arabic Documentation*
- EI<sup>1</sup> EI<sup>2</sup>**  
*Encyclopedia of Islam*, first or second editions
- IJAHS**  
*International Journal of African Historical Studies*
- JAH**  
*Journal of African History*
- JAOS**  
*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
- JHSN**  
*Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*
- JRAS**  
*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
- JRGS**  
*Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*
- MW**  
*Muslim World*
- RA**  
*Revue Africaine*
- REI**  
*Revue des Études Islamiques*
- RHM**  
*Revue d'Histoire Maghrébine*
- RMM**  
*Revue du Monde Musulman*
- TNR**  
*Tanzania Notes and Records*