

Introduction

A Saharan Ontology of the Invisible

The desert has been the home of saints and prophets ... because it is the *barzakh* between freedom and existence, between death and life.
 —Ibrahim al-Koni¹

In the 1950s in the French colonial West African Saharan territory of what is now Mauritania, the Sufi saint (or *walī*) E'li Shieykhould Momma (1929–2013) set up his tent at a water source called Amdayr with his young family.² No one else dared to stop at *dakhlāt al-af'ā* (“the serpents’ entry”) because of the snakes who lent their name to the location, but, apparently, this reputation did not give E'li Shieykh pause as he put up the tent for his wife and infant daughter. A later hagiographical text records that while E'li Shieykh prayed at dawn outside the family encampment, an old woman appeared and hurried into the tent, leaning over the sleeping wife and girl. She quickly put the thumb, pinkie, and index fingers of her right hand together and placed them on the temple of E'li Shieykh's daughter. The “wretch” then lifted her claw-like hand to her mouth and made a sucking sound before turning to the saint's wife to repeat the same eerie process.³ E'li Shieykh stood up to intercede but, being in the middle of prayer, could only silently signal the old woman to stop. Taking her cue from the snakes, she slithered away in the early morning light. When the saint, prayers completed, finally pursued the woman who attacked his family using the extractive and nefarious art of *sell*, she fell to the ground and asked for forgiveness, which he granted.

¹ Ibrahim al-Koni, “Ibrahim al-Koni: In the Desert We Visit Death,” *Vimeo*, Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2014, Online, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://vimeo.com/92607891>.

² One of the saint's later disciples composed the hagiographical text. See Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥamayn min Āl Bārikallāh fīhi Fāḍilī, *al-Wuṣūl wa-l-tarsīkh bimanāqib al-shaykh e'li al-shaykh, aw, ḥādī al-rijāl ilā ḥadrat dhī al-jalāl* (Nouakchott: Imprimerie, n.d.). The Mauritanian juriconsult and Sufi *shaykh* Ḥamden ould Tāh gave 1927 as his birthdate. Ḥamden ould Tāh, interview, Nouakchott, April 20, 2012.

³ Āl Bārikallāh fīhi Fāḍilī, *al-Wuṣūl wa-l-tarsīkh*, 192.

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E'li Shieykh would eventually become a powerful central figure in the Mauritanian prayer economy.⁴ But it was vivid and often haunting descriptions of *sell* (“bloodsucking” in the local Arabic dialect of Ḥassāniyya) like the one above that initially led me to study the ways Sufi saints and spiritual mediators, or *shuyūkh* (sing. *shaykh*), in the Sahara have managed invisible forces, spirit agents, and divine blessings and miracles to ensure the well-being of their communities and to render justice when wronged.⁵ Like E'li Shieykh, these Muslim spiritual mediators domesticated the intangible spirits who inhabited desolate stretches of desert and preyed on the vulnerable, occasionally adopting the form of snakes or other (in)animate objects for this purpose. The mediators’ expertise in what Mauritians today call *l’ḥjāb*, or what I translate as the “Islamic esoteric sciences,” granted these Muslim spiritual mediators the authority to access the invisible spiritual world in order to act upon the visible material world.

Invoking the Invisible considers how these often-unseen forces and entities have shaped social structure, religious norms, and political power in West Africa over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Situating this ethnographic history in what became *la Mauritanie* under French colonial rule and, later the postcolonial nation of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, the book traces the changing roles of Muslim spiritual mediators and their Islamic esoteric sciences, with a focus on the colonial and postcolonial eras. These sciences and their experts have been part of a framework of therapeutic and protective practice attending to physical insecurity, social anxiety, and personal desires. Unwed women sought out the expertise of these Muslim spiritual mediators to ensure a timely marriage. Once married, they asked these same specialists for numerical squares filled with references to and verses from the Qur’ān that would guarantee fertility and their husbands’ loyalty. Warriors and emirs rewarded these specialists in secret knowledge with herds of animals and promises of exemption from taxes usually paid for protection from raids. Families with a suddenly ill child summoned these

⁴ For more on the concept of prayer economy, see Benjamin Soares, who defines it as “an economy of religious practice in which people give gifts to certain religious leaders on a large scale in exchange for prayers and blessings.” Benjamin F. Soares, *Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2005), 153.

⁵ Archives nationales du Sénégal (ANS) 9G86/107 “Affaire de sorcellerie” and Archives nationales de la République Islamique de Mauritanie (ANRIM) E1/75. Benjamin Acloque, “Accusations of Remote Vampirism: The Colonial Administration in Mauritania Investigates the Execution of Three Slaves: 1928–1929,” in *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade*, eds. Alice Bellagamba, Sandra Greene, and Martin Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 282–304.

spiritual mediators to diagnose and heal illnesses caused by malevolent spirits or jealous neighbors understood to harm through the evil eye (*'ayn*) or bloodsucking. These powerful sciences constituted a system of knowledge in response to the needs of its consumers, most often ensuring the health and welfare of local populations. Spiritual mediators also, albeit less frequently, invoked these divine forces and entities in retribution for social wrongs. *L'ḥjāb* could then be used both productively and destructively as circumstances required.

In the region I broadly call the Saharan West (as opposed to the disputed territory of the Western Sahara) and at least since the mid-nineteenth century, the term *l'ḥjāb* has been used to identify the knowledge required to make amulets containing slips of paper with inscriptions, to work for and with spirits, and to serve clients as a spiritual mediator. As a system of knowledge with restricted access and fundamentally abstruse methods, *l'ḥjāb* is intrinsically difficult to pin down and define. The term can be something of a blank slate on which people list meanings and techniques they admire or fear. While the bodies of knowledge constituting *l'ḥjāb* have shifted over time – as is true for any science – what has remained constant is *l'ḥjāb* as a locus of concern for Muslim clerics, practitioners, and clients, and for political and military agents. And, yet, despite – or perhaps as a result of – centuries of contest over its permissibility and efficacy, *l'ḥjāb* endures as an effective means of confronting and understanding the shifting conditions of everyday life in the Saharan West.

In studying the social and cultural history of *l'ḥjāb*, the book favors an ethnographic approach to its written and oral sources. A historical genealogy of texts on this topic runs throughout as chapters follow the ways that Saharan scholars referenced and cross-referenced texts and debates in their own attacks on or defenses of the esoteric sciences. Not only do these texts provide evidence of an awareness of and participation in polemics just as salient elsewhere in the Muslim world but they also indicate shifts in the kinds of anxieties and challenges facing inhabitants in the region. More recent materials make use of these principles and reveal the existence of certain practices specific to the region, such as *sell*, which provide insight onto social tensions, environmental crises, and conceptions of racial and gendered differences. Finally, the ethnographic history upon which this book relies provides an account of the changing visible and invisible worlds with which Muslims of the Saharan West interacted. The lived realities of these practices may or may not have textual iterations but they reflect shifts in understanding about well-being, religious practice, political structures, social hierarchy, and racial identity. Invoking invisible forces constituted a means for Saharan men

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and women to exert control over and, ideally, to transform political, cultural, and social relations. By accepting as part of the narrative the forces often denied a place in academic history writing – the “unbelieved,” the “unseen,” the “unknown,” the “supernatural” – and dismissed as irrational, exoticizing, or unverifiable, we can better understand how the people of the Saharan West understood their past, their immediate challenges, and their future possibilities.⁶

Defining the Invisible

For the purposes of this book, I use the expression the “Islamic esoteric sciences” to refer to a range of systematic knowledge and techniques elaborated on and restricted to initiated Muslims to get closer to God and to invoke the capacity of the divine to enact change in the material world by activating the spiritual realm. Terms in Arabic used to identify these sciences – *asrār* (secrets), *‘ulūm al-bāṭin* (esoteric sciences), *al-‘ulūm al-khafiyya* (hidden sciences), *al-‘ulūm al-gharība* (wonderous sciences) or *sirr al-hurūf/al-ḥarf* (secrets of letters) – point to the restricted nature of access to this knowledge. While some scholars have used the term “occult sciences” to describe these various forms of secret knowledge, I have found that the English word, “occult” carries negative connotations from a European historical context and thus avoid using it.⁷ While I am sensitive to calls to interrogate the labeling of anything as “Islamic” because of the diversity of meanings and debates about what this category actually means and includes, I am following historian Louis Brenner’s lead when he interchangeably applies the terms “Muslim” or “Islamic” to these esoteric sciences as learned, accessed, and practiced by Muslims as part of their spiritual study and service to a community of co-religionists.⁸ I use the “Islamic esoteric sciences” to refer to a field of knowledge that was considered not only a normative but a central part of the

⁶ See a three-part series of articles co-written and edited by Luke Clossey, Kyle Jackson, Brandon Marriot, Andrew Redden, Karin Vélez, David M. Gordon, Arlen Wiesenhal, Taymiya R. Zaman, and Simon Ditchfield, “The Unbelieved and Historians,” *History Compass* 14, no. 1 and 2; 15, no. 1 and no. 12 (December 2016, January 2017 and December 2017), doi: 10.1111/hic3.12360; 10.1111/hic3.12370; 10.1111/hic3.12430.

⁷ See Liana Saif and Francesca Leoni, “Introduction,” in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, eds. Liana Saif, Francesca Leoni, Matthew Melvin-Koushki, and Farouk Yahya (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1–40, 2.

⁸ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 6 and 545; Louis Brenner, “The Esoteric Sciences in Islam,” in *African Healing Strategies*, eds. Brian Du Toit and Ismail Abdalla (Owerri, Nigeria: Trado-Medic Books, 1985), 20–28; Brenner, “Sufism in Africa,” in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: A Herder and Herder Book, 2011), 324–49.

intellectual history of elite Islamic, philosophical, and scientific thinking shared across time and space within the larger Muslim world until at least the nineteenth century when modernist and reformist condemnation made public engagement with these sciences undesirable.⁹

The discipline of the Islamic esoteric sciences relied on the Qur’ān as the foundational knowledge for attaining both metaphysical and material goals. The Qur’ān itself contained the elements necessary for a practitioner or client to become closer to the divine and to access the spiritual realm, for when its verses were recited, written, or ingested, its protective and healing properties were accessible to the body. As Michael Muhammad Knight has emphasized, “[t]he words *mean* things, but they also *do*,” making the words of God written in the Qur’ān “a technology of protection.”¹⁰ Written (*jedāwil*) and voiced (*ruqā*) supplications most frequently relied on sections of the Qur’ān traditionally associated with healing and protection: the *āyat al-kursī*, the *sūrat al-fātiḥa*, and especially the last two chapters, known as *al-mu’awwidhatān*, or “the two protective [ones].”¹¹ These two final chapters of the Qur’ān signal assumptions within Islam about the evil forces that threaten Muslims and how believers should cope with these threats. *Siḥr* (which I translate as “sorcery”), as a manifestation of evil originating in Satan’s desires to weaken and turn people away from God, is rejected as purposefully harmful. In these concluding verses, sorcery is associated with knots, breath, whis-pers, women, and non-Muslims.¹² As the Qur’ān’s message and words provide both healing and mercy for those who believe, invoking Qur’ānic

⁹ Liana Saif, “What Is Islamic Esotericism?” *Correspondence* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–59 and the special issue of *Arabica* 64 (2017); Matthew Melvin-Koushki, “Introduction: De-orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism,” *Arabica* 64, no. 3–4 (2017): 287–95; Jean-Charles Coulon, *La Magie en terre d’islam au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Éditions du CTHS Histoire, 2017); Noah Gardiner, “Esotericist Reading Communities and the Early Circulation of the Sufi Occultist Aḥmad al-Būnī’s Works,” *Arabica* 64, no. 3–4 (2017): 405–41; Nala Aloudat and Hanna Boughanim, eds., *Trésors de l’Islam en Afrique de Tombouctou à Zanzibar* (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 2017); and Dahlia El-Tayeb M. Gubara, “Al-Azhar and the Orders of Knowledge” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014).

¹⁰ Michael Muhammad Knight, *Magic in Islam* (New York: Tarcher Perigee, 2016), 57–59.

¹¹ Qur’ān, 2:255, 1, 113 and 114. See Shawkat M. Toorawa, “Seeking Refuge from Evil: The Power and Portent of the Closing Chapters of the Qur’an,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 4, no. 2 (October 2002): 54–60. Ibn Khaldūn cited an example from the *sūrat al-falaq* (Qur’ān 113), which lists “those who blow on knots” as evidence of sorcery. Ibn Khaldun, trans. William MacGuckin Baron de Slane, *Histoire des Berbères et des dynasties musulmanes de l’Afrique de l’Afrique septentrionale* v. 1 (Algiers: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1852), 393.

¹² Qur’ān, 113 and 114 and Toufic Fahd, “Siḥr,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs, accessed April 4, 2021, doi: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7023.

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verses through the esoteric sciences provides an efficacious means of dealing with threats of evil and misfortune.¹³

In contemporary Mauritania, the Ḥassāniyya term *l'ḥjāb* specifically refers to leather pouches made by local artisans to hold the written demand (*maṭlūb*) and numerological and Qur'ānic formula (*jedwal*) solicited by a client (*tālib*), which become amulets (*tamā'im*) when paired together.¹⁴ As technologies of the invisible, the written talismans inside the leather pouch rely on a sophisticated science of geomancy and lettrism where the right combination of numerological patterns, Qur'ānic verses, and astrological alignments in time serve as a manifestation of the divine powers of God and his agents – angels (*malā'ika*) and other spiritual beings (*rūḥāniyyāt, jnūn, 'afārīt*).¹⁵ The pouch protects and conceals the inscription, ensuring the secrecy of the formula and the potency of its powers. The amulet thus serves as a medium to activate divine forces through its written letters and symbols, mediating between the visible, temporal world of humans and the invisible and otherwise immaterial world of spirits and divine forces.¹⁶ Saharan men and women wore these amulets openly hanging from their necks or tied around their arms and waists as a kind of public manifestation of divine blessings (*baraka*) and a defense system that protected the wearer from any number of dangers. After the desired goal was attained, or when the amulet's strings wore through, the client would be expected to throw away or bury the amulet without having pried it open – doing so, they were told, would threaten the efficacy of the spell and could endanger its user.¹⁷

¹³ “We send down the Qur'ān as healing and mercy to those who believe.” Translated by Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān* 17:82, 180.

¹⁴ See Geert Mommersteeg, “‘He has smitten her to the heart with love’: The Fabrication of an Islamic Love-Amulet in West Africa,” *Anthropos* 83 (1988), 501–10; Geert Mommersteeg, “Allah’s Words as Amulet,” *Etnofoor* 3, no. 1 (1990): 63–76.

¹⁵ See Jean-Charles Coulon, “Histoire du *Shams al-ma'arif*,” in *Talismans: le soleil des connaissances*, trans. Pierre Lorry and Jean-Charles Coulon (Paris: Orientis, 2013), 6–7, 6. For more on lettrism, see Noah Gardiner, “Stars and Saints: The Esotericist Astrology of the Sufi Occultist Aḥmad al-Būnī,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* (Spring 2017): 39–65, 40; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, “Of Islamic Grammatology: Ibn Turka’s Lettrist Metaphysics of Light,” *Al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 24 (2016): 42–113 and Liana Saif, “From *Gāyat al-ḥakīm* to *Šams al-ma'arif wa laṭā'if al-'awāriif*: Ways of Knowing and Paths of Power in Medieval Islam,” *Arabica* 64 (2017): 297–345.

¹⁶ Venetia Porter, Liana Saif, and Emilie Savage-Smith, “Medieval Islamic Amulets, Talismans, and Magic,” in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, eds. Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoglu (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 521–57.

¹⁷ Alain Epelboin, Constant Hamès, Johana Larco Laurent and Jean Louis Durand, eds. *Un art secret: les écritures talismaniques de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*, Exposition du 14 février au 28 juillet 2013 au Musée de l'Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris: IMA, 2013).

The term *l'ḥjāb* itself comes from the Arabic root *h-j-b*, which connotes veiling, hiding, or concealing.¹⁸ The word can also intimate protecting or intervening, the primary reasons that clients seek out *l'ḥjāb*. In contemporary Mauritania, *l'ḥjāb* functions as an umbrella term for all the above as well as a range of techniques applied to communicate with and manage unseen spiritual agents. Arabic terms for the techniques of spiritual mediation encompass a wide range of practices including numerology, geomancy, and lettrism, or *'ilm al-ḥurūf w-l-asmā'*.¹⁹ But there also exists a distinct range of very local practices that are referenced only in Ḥassāniyya: these include the use of a string to diagnose exposure to the effects of the evil eye (*naẓra*); divination relying on sand, cowry shells, or camel excrement (*ligzāna*); and the summoning of spirits to find lost things (*invīl*). The term *l'ḥjāb* also covers therapeutic techniques such as wiping one's face with a Sufi saint's saliva or ingesting water in which ink used to write the Qur'ān has been washed or soaked.²⁰ *L'ḥjāb*, as the term is used today, takes place in private spaces where clients explain their needs and problems in face-to-face meetings with experts skilled in these sciences, known in the singular as *ḥajjāb* (sometimes used interchangeably with the terms *shaykh* and *walī*), to heal family members, fulfil personal desires, and protect others from harm. Experts in *l'ḥjāb* have safeguarded these sciences from competitors and the uninitiated, only sharing with those deemed deserving and capable of handling such potent wisdom responsibly.

L'ḥjāb is distinct from what is today known in Mauritania as “traditional medicine” (*al-ṭibb al-taqīdī*), which relies primarily on the use of

¹⁸ The word has the same root as the word for a woman's veil or head covering, *al-ḥijāb*. In Wolof, the term most often used is *xamxam*, meaning “knowledge” or “sciences” according to Jean Léopold Diouf, *Dictionnaire wolof-français et français-wolof* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 379. In Pulaar, *mbillejo*, and in Soninké, *móodi*, were most often identified as terms used to refer to a specialist in the esoteric sciences. See Ousmane Moussa Diagona, *Dictionnaire soninké-français (Mauritanie)* (Paris: Karthala, 2013), 142. While neighboring Arabic-speaking countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya) might use the term *l'ḥjāb* for an amulet, outside Mauritania the word is not typically used to encompass a broader set of Islamic esoteric practices.

¹⁹ Matthew Melvin-Koushki, “Persianate Geomancy from Tūsī to the Millennium: A Preliminary Survey,” in *The Occult Sciences in premodern Islamic Cultures*, ed. Nader El-Bizri (Würzburg, Germany: Ergon Verlag, 2018), 151–199; Denis Gril, “La science des lettres” in *Ibn 'Arabi, Les Illuminations de la Mecque*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Albin Michel and Sindbad, 1988), 165–282; Melvin-Koushki, “In Defence of Geomancy: Šaraf al-Dīn Yazdī Rebutts Ibn Khaldūn's Critique of the Occult Sciences,” *Arabica* 64 (2017): 346–403.

²⁰ For similar practices in Sudan, see 'Abdellahi Osman El-Tom, “Drinking the Koran: The Meaning of Koranic Verses in Berti Erasure,” *Africa: Journal of the International Africa Institute* 55, no. 4, Popular Islam (1985): 414–31 and in Senegal, see Rudolph T. Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

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plants and mineral-based substances to treat problems related to physical health. The methods and materials used for traditional medical treatment are not shrouded in secrecy, nor is access to such knowledge limited by gender, religion, or long years of study under a Sufi guide.²¹ This kind of expertise is further differentiated from *l'ḥjāb* in its reliance on earthly and tangible materials as remedies for physical illness. A woman would not seek out the help of a traditional medical expert when suffering in her marriage or anxious about raids on her camp; she would go to a *ḥajjāb*. That said, healers of all kinds might combine a knowledge of both traditional medicine and *l'ḥjāb* to treat their clients' diverse health-related problems.²² Various methods of healing and protection based on herbal remedies, dietary changes, Qur'ānic recitation, spirit intervention, Greek humoral medicine, scorpion sting extraction, bone-setting, and *ad hoc* surgery have often coexisted as clients sought help from a variety of experts, some of whom might be experts in multiple, yet separate, categories of systematized knowledge and method.

A written contract from the early twentieth century shows us where and how *l'ḥjāb* would be sought out as a solution. The contract between a client and an expert in the esoteric sciences was written in the Saharan oasis town of Shinqīṭ, known for its long tradition of Islamic learning and its involvement in the trans-Saharan trade.

Praise be to Allāh alone, may Allāh bless Muḥammad and his soul. I bear witness that al-Nājīm bin Aḥmad Būd al-Sā'dī promised 100 male camels to my lord 'Alī bin al-Mukhtār bin al-A'mash on the condition that he rid his nephew Ambārak bin 'Abd All of spirits and this is witnessed by Muḥammad al-Mahdī bin al-Ḥājī al-Bashīr bin 'Abd and all the above was witnessed by Muḥammad al-Bashīr bin Aḥmad Maḥmūd bin al-Seyyed bin Ḥāmen. Amen.²³

²¹ See Michel Thourzery and Abdellahi Ould Muhammad Vall, *Plantes Médicinales de Mauritanie: Remèdes traditionnels et guérisseurs du Sahara au fleuve Sénégal* (Toulouse: L'association Plantes et Nomades, 2011). For recommendations of care from Awfa Ould Abū Bakr, see the translation of his poem in Paul Dubié, "'El 'Omda'. Poème sur la médecine maure," trans. Muhammad Ould Ebnou Aden, *Bulletin de L'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (BIFAN)* 5, no. 5 (1943): 38–66. See also Bertrand Graz, Vincent Barras, Anne-Marie Mouin, and Corinne Fortier, eds. *Maqari, le Recueil des vertus de la médecine ancienne. La médecine gréco-arabe en Mauritanie contemporaine* (Paris: Éditions BHMS, 2017) and Sidī Aḥmad b. Amin al-Shinqīṭī, *al-wasīṭ fī tarājīm shinqīṭ wa kalām 'alā tilk al-bilād* (The Best of the Biographies of the Literati of Shinqīṭ) (Cairo: Al-Jumalia, 1911), 507–09 and 537–39.

²² Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 101; John M. Janzen, *The Quest for Therapy: Medical Pluralism in Lower Zaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

²³ Document posted on Facebook April 6, 2014, by Med Lemin Bellamech, "al-ḥamdulillāh," attributed to the Ahl Bil'amesh Library, Shinqīṭ, accessed June 29, 2021, www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=649367418463973&set=a.124268254307228.

Here, Muslim scholar ‘Alī b. al-Mukhtār b. al-A‘mash is promised a hefty payment in camels if he successfully casts out the mischievous spirits that have taken hold of another man’s body. This agreement was witnessed by two other prominent Shinqīṭ scholars, Muḥammad al-Bashīr b. Aḥmad Maḥmūd (d. 1916–7) and Muḥammad al-Mahdī b. al-Ḥājj al-Bashīr.²⁴ The transaction’s payment of camels for therapeutic work illustrates the *l’ḥjāb* economy at work – camels formed the basis of many families’ capital – and clients’ trust that such a heavy investment would ensure the restoration of health to the spirit-possessed. We can also see local Muslim scholars condoning the knowledge required to diagnose and cast out spirits, entities described in the Qur’ān as created out of smokeless flame, living in a parallel universe to that of humans, and as potential Muslim converts and practitioners.²⁵ Within Islamic epistemology, these spirits – known broadly as *jinn* – live in the in-between, moving between the human and spirit worlds. Some narratives recount that *jinn* descend from Iblīs, an ambiguous entity described alternately as fallen angel or devil who defied God by refusing to bow in deference before the first human, Adam. As punishment for his disobedience and subsequent attempts to trick Adam and Eve, Iblīs and his progeny were proscribed to live where humans refuse to tread – abandoned buildings, abattoirs, trash heaps, and cemeteries – and in their own spiritual world that mirrors that of humans.²⁶ Specific *jinn* could be beckoned from the spiritual world by experts that I call “Muslim spiritual mediators” who knew their names and how to mobilize them through their knowledge of the esoteric sciences.²⁷

Saharans have historically inhabited a harsh physical environment where malevolent and benign spirits dwelled alongside humans. Known to haunt deserted or dirty places, these spirits (*jinn*) are also known as *ahl al-lighla*, or “people of the empty dunes,” and they have sometimes appeared to humans who walked alone at night through cemeteries, across moonlit sand, or in spaces reserved for the slaughter of animals. Invoked to help find lost things – or, alternatively to wreak vengeance – these ethereal entities could collaborate with or work against

²⁴ ‘Alī b. al-Mukhtār b. al-A‘mash’s famous ‘Alawī ancestor, Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār b. al-A‘mash, appears in Chapter 1. Muḥammad al-Bashīr b. Aḥmad Maḥmūd was from the Aghlāl, a tribal confederation known for their Islamic learning.

²⁵ See Qur’ān 1:2; 2:47; 15:18; and 72:1.

²⁶ Arent Van Wensinck and Louis Gardet, “Iblīs,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs, eds. Online, 2012, doi: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3021.

²⁷ Joseph Chelhod, “Ifrit,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs, Online, 2012, doi: 10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3502.

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their human counterparts.²⁸ Their existence, immaterial as it was, has had real effects on people's decisions about how to deal with misfortune, hopes, and dreams. Experts use their familiarity with the realm of other-worldly entities to act as intermediaries between clients, spirits, and God, the ultimate administrator of this invisible world.²⁹

The term *l'ḥjāb* itself reflects the epistemological and ontological nature of the sciences. Not only are the techniques themselves used to communicate with divine forces hidden within amulets or obscured by complicated mathematical and astrological calculations, but those who master these sciences have historically situated their work within that of *taṣawwuf*, or Sufi knowledge. As an approach to Islam that focuses on moving through various stages of disciplined and ethical behaviors to reach personal and direct knowledge of God and his truths, Sufism encourages the cultivation of knowledge of the *'ulūm al-bāṭin*. These hidden, unseen realities of the world are understood to be the foundation of the outward, manifest expressions of the Divine.³⁰ Thus, a strong grasp of the Islamic esoteric sciences that depend on familiarity and mastery of these otherwise invisible realities allows the Sufi expert to position themselves as a mediator between the temporal and spiritual realms that constitute what Scott Reese has called the "Islamic multiverse."³¹ *Jinn* and other spiritual agents that, under normal circumstances, remain invisible to ordinary Muslims, are drawn out from their parallel world and made to effect change in the human universe through Sufi knowledge that makes the previously unseen tangible and apparent. One of the highest stages of spiritual connection with God comes when the Sufi can "lift the veil of the senses" (*al-mukāshafa*) that prevents true union of the self with God.³² When the people of contemporary Mauritania refer to Muslim spiritual mediators of the Saharan West as *ḥajjāba*, they evoke the mediators' liminal positionality between the material and the spiritual forces shaping their co-religionists' lives – it

²⁸ Muḥammad Muḥammadū Ahzānā, *M'aqūl al-lāma 'qūl fī al-wa'y al-jam'ī al-'arabī: ṣurat al-mughayyab fī al-mukhayyala al-sha'biyya al-morītāniyya "namūdḥajan"* (The rationality of the irrational in the Arab collective consciousness: An image of the occult in the Mauritanian popular imagination), n.p., 2002.

²⁹ I rely here on Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh's dexterity in translating local concepts into the French language. Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme, Islam et pouvoir politique dans la société maure précoloniale (XIème siècle–XIXème siècle): Essai sur quelques aspects du tribalisme" (PhD diss., Paris V, René Descartes, 1985), 917–23.

³⁰ Reynold A. Nicholson, *Sufism: The Mysticism of Islam* (Los Angeles: Indo-European Publishing, 2009), 27.

³¹ Scott Reese, *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839–1937* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 10.

³² See Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism – Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 129–34.