

Introduction: Mobilizing with Manuscripts

When the eleventh-century Ibadī Muslim scholar Abu al-Rabi‘ Sulaymān b. Yakhḷaf al-Mazāṭi was asked by his student whether he should consult a book of legal opinions attributed to older generations of scholars, he responded: “Of course! How have we associated with so many of those pious scholars who came before us if not through books?”¹

Both the question and its answer reveal the growing power of manuscript books in Northern Africa by the beginning of the Middle Period (eleventh–sixteenth centuries) to bring together scholars of different times and places, incorporating them into the same community. For a religious minority like Ibadī Muslims in the late medieval Maghrib, books complemented the webs of personal relationships connecting students and teachers. Ibadīs, a Muslim minority community following neither the Sunni nor the Shi‘ī traditions of Islam, lived throughout the earlier medieval centuries (the eighth–tenth centuries) in towns and villages across the southern Maghrib stretching from Sijilmasa in what is today southern Morocco to the mountains of the Jebel Nafusa in what is today northwestern Libya. In the early medieval period their communities had flourished, especially through their participation in Saharan trade. But by the eleventh century Ibadīs had begun their steady numerical decline in the region. Their numbers dwindled as Arabic-speaking Sunni communities spread into regions where Berber-speaking Ibadīs had previously made up the majority. Ibadī scholars responded to this existential threat through literal and literary mobilization.

Itinerant students and scholars traveled widely and met together in small study circles, drawing personal and intellectual connections among different centers of learning in Northern Africa. A longstanding tradition of Saharan trade facilitated travel, and its routes provided the

¹ Abū al-Rabi‘ Sulaymān al-Wisyanī, *Kitāb siyar al-Wisyanī*, ed. ‘Umar b. Luqmān Bū‘aṣbāna (Muscat: Wizārat al-Turāth wa-’l-Thaqāfa, 2009), 692.

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links among different Ibadī towns and villages. Out of these interactions among students and scholars, a formalized system of education and an accompanying large body of texts emerged over the next few centuries. One specific genre, collective biographical texts or “prosopographies” (Ar. *siyar*), both recorded this process and represented the second method of mobilization among Ibadī scholars of the Middle Period. Each prosopographical text comprised anecdotes and biographies of exemplary Ibadīs from the collectively imagined beginnings of the community in the early centuries of Islam nearly up to its compiler’s lifetime. The prosopographies determined which stories survived as well as which scholars belonged to the Ibadī community and its history. Unconstrained by the lifetime or memory of an individual, these books drew connections among scholars of multiple generations and constructed the Ibadī tradition in the Maghrib by marking its boundaries.

As Abu al-Rabi‘ al-Mazati suggested in the response to his student’s question, the perceived value of books extended beyond their capacity to create a narrative of the community’s history. The prosopographies also connected the scholars of the present to those of the past. In doing so, these books at once cloaked them in the mantle of the authority of their predecessors and drew the boundaries of the Ibadī community through the inclusion or exclusion of certain individuals or groups. The prosopographical tradition expanded and adapted to the circumstances of the community, with each iteration reflecting the historical experience of the Ibadī community in the Maghrib during the period of its compilation. Each century from the eleventh to the sixteenth witnessed the compilation of a new work of Ibadī prosopography, and each new work of *siyar* absorbed many of the stories of its predecessors—adopting and adapting them to suit the compiler’s purposes. Through books, as Abu al-Rabi‘ said, each new generation of Ibadī scholars associated with those that came before it.

A WRITTEN NETWORK

This book tells the story of the compilation, adaptation, and circulation of this late medieval Ibadī prosopographical corpus. I argue that the history of this corpus exemplifies the long-term process of the construction and maintenance of an Ibadī tradition in Northern Africa. The books

themselves serve as the main actors in this story, although the scholars whose lives they chronicled and who created and used them play important supporting roles.

Constructing and maintaining the Ibadi tradition in the Maghrib and its boundaries occurred on two distinct but closely interrelated levels. On the narrative level, the Ibadi prosopographies connected several generations of individuals across time and space. When they appeared as friends, colleagues, or fellow travelers in stories, Ibadi scholars became linked to one another. Likewise, even in those cases where hundreds of years separated two or more individuals, their inclusion in the same prosopographical text brought them into a single historical and religious community. I have called this narrative web of connections and associations among Ibadi scholars, constructed and maintained by the prosopographies, a “written network.”

The second component relates to the manuscripts themselves and the constellation of links among people, places, and books. I argue here for the importance of examining the physical, material history of these and other Ibadi manuscripts in Northern Africa. Ideas and memory did not move throughout the Sahara and the Mediterranean littoral solely inside the heads of people. As object-actors, manuscript copies of the Ibadi prosopographies proved as important as individuals in the transmission of the tradition in the long run. Manuscripts allowed for the continuation of the tradition through the Middle Period and well beyond. Moreover, the late medieval and early modern transmission of the *siyar* in manuscript form explains the survival of these texts up to the present day.

Manuscript books and people traversed the same paths, moving in tandem along the circuits that connected the geographic hubs of Ibadi intellectual and commercial activity in Northern Africa. While the Ibadi written network appears in the synchronic iterations of the *siyar*, behind it lie dense circuits of the continuous movement of people and books. As a complement to the written network, I follow the manuscript copies of the Ibadi *siyar* as they move along often elliptical trajectories. Since both Ibadi scholars and their books often returned to their point of departure, whether in their original form or as a new copy or other textual vestige, I refer to these journeys and their trajectories as “orbital” (discussed further below). The orbits of the Ibadi prosopographies provide the dynamic complement to the written network they helped create and maintain.

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MADHHABIZATION: HISTORICAL CONTEXT(S) FOR THE
 PROSOPOGRAPHICAL CORPUS

The written network of the Ibadī prosopographies and its orbit emerged out of two interrelated contexts. First were the historical circumstances specific to the Ibadī community in the Maghrib, while the second was the broader historical context of the Middle Period in which Ibadīs lived.

As for the first, the *siyar* were not of course the only books Ibadīs were writing or circulating from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries, nor were they the first. Texts produced by identifiably Ibadī Muslim authors represent some of the earliest works of literature by autochthonous Northern Africans. For example, the *Kitāb bad' al-islam wa-sharā' al-din* by Ibn Sallam al-Ibadī (ninth century) may well be the earliest work of historiography by a Muslim author from the Maghrib. Ibadī epistles on theology, and especially *responsa* literature between the Ibadī Imams of the Maghrib and their communities, also long predate the prosopographical tradition. Many texts from the ninth and tenth centuries survive in much later manuscript copies, and the Ibadī prosopographical tradition without doubt built off older textual traditions in the Maghrib. But by the eleventh century, circumstances had changed for the Ibadī communities in the region (see Chapters 1 and 2). In numerical decline and pushed to the edges of the Maghrib, this new context contributed to the formation of a genre of literature, distinct in form and purpose from that which preceded it.

The Ibadī prosopographical corpus developed alongside larger efforts toward community construction from the eleventh century forward. John Wilkinson has called this process Ibadī “madhhabization,” from the Arabic term *madhhab*, used to refer to different schools of thought and law in Islam. He and other historians of both eastern and western Ibadī communities have pointed to similar moves toward the formalization of Ibadī theology, hadith, law, and political theory in this same period.²

² John Wilkinson, *Ibādism: Origins and Early Development in Oman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 413–37. The same period has been highlighted as important for the formation of Ibadī theological, intellectual, historical, and legal traditions in both the Maghrib and the Mashriq. See, e.g. Pierre Cuperly, *Introduction à l'étude de l'ibādisme et de sa théologie* (Algiers: Office des publications universitaires, 1984); Elizabeth Savage, *A Gateway to Hell, a Gateway to Paradise: The North African Response to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997); Ersilia Francesca, “Early Ibādī Jurisprudence: Sources and Case Law,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 30 (2005): 231–63; Adam Gaiser, *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers: The Origins and Elaboration of the Ibādī Imamate Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Perhaps the clearest instance of this process took place in the realm of hadith. While the “science of hadith” tradition had formed by the ninth century or so in the east, before the twelfth century Ibadī scholars did not follow in that tradition.³ The preoccupation of Sunni scholars with the chains of transmission (sing. *isnad*) of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that helped lead to some of the most impressive prosopographical literature of the Middle Period in western and central Asia was almost entirely absent from Ibadī circles. Ibadī hadith compendia did exist long before the twelfth century, including most famously *al-Jami‘ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, attributed to the Ibadī Imam in Basra al-Rabī‘ b. Ḥabīb al-Farahīdī (d. 791).⁴ But Ibadī scholars approached these compendia with the assumption that their very transmission in the community assured their authenticity, and so chains of transmission only appear on occasion. As Adam Gaiser has noted, this suggests that Ibadī scholars followed a much older approach to hadith, but also that their tradition “increasingly diverged from Sunni and later Shi‘i norms.”⁵ This situation persisted all the way until the twelfth century, when Northern African Ibadī scholar Abū Ya‘qub Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm al-Warjalānī (d. 1174/5) composed his *Tartīb al-musnad*, which brought the Ibadī tradition of hadith in line with Sunni standards, including attention to chains of transmission.⁶

Like hadith, the Ibadī prosopographical tradition belonged to this much broader process of madhhabization. Compared to the number of other texts from different genres compiled in the Middle Period, the prosopographies represent only a small part of the larger written corpus. Out of all proportion to its size, however, this corpus has maintained its importance because these works chronicled the lives and relationships among Ibadī scholars, marking the boundaries of the community itself. As such, I argue that the *siyar* represent the most explicit, sustained effort at the larger process of the construction of the Ibadī tradition in Northern Africa.

³ First discussed in John Wilkinson, “Ibadī Hadith: An Essay on Normalization,” *Der Islam* 62 (1985): 231–59.

⁴ On al-Rabī‘ b. Ḥabīb and the prominence of his hadith collection in the written tradition, see Martin H. Custers, *al-Ibādīyya: A Bibliography*, 2nd edition (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2016), vol. I, 427–40.

⁵ Adam Gaiser, “Ḥadīth, Ibādīsm,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam, THREE* (hereafter *EI3*), available at http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/hadith-ibadism-COM_30165.

⁶ Printed as Abū Ya‘qub Yūsuf b. Ibrāhīm al-Warjalānī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḥīḥ musnad al-Imām al-Rabī‘ b. Ḥabīb b. ‘Umar al-Azdī al-Baṣrī*, ed. Maḥmūd ‘Ayrān (Damascus: al-Maṭba‘a al-‘Umūmiyya, 1968). See discussion in Custers, *al-Ibādīyya* (2016), vol. II, 493 and 497–499.

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The second context out of which the written network emerged was the larger world in which Ibadīs lived during the Middle Period. Highlighting this context helps demonstrate some of the ways in which this book connects to other studies in Islamic history, in terms of both historical context and methodology. In terms of historical context, the Ibadī *siyar* were not the only works of prosopography produced by Muslims in Middle Period, but their use of the term *siyar* itself, as Chase Robinson has pointed out, distinguishes Ibadīs early on from other Muslim communities.⁷ The term became associated primarily with either the archetypal biography of the Prophet Muhammad (*al-sira al-nabawiyya*) or biographies of individuals.⁸ Ibadīs, by contrast, employed the term in slightly different ways. In the east, Ibadīs continued for centuries to use the term *sira* for religious epistles, while those in Northern Africa used the term for prosopographies.⁹

For other Islamic traditions, however, different genres served similar functions to the Maghribī Ibadī *siyar*, including so-called biographical dictionaries (works of *tabaqat* and *muʿjam*), which appeared quite early in the ninth century. While universal, chronologically driven histories (*taʾrikh*), a tradition exemplified by al-Tabarī's (d. tenth century) *Taʾrikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk*, were absent from the Ibadī tradition in the Maghrib, the *siyar* played a similar role in preserving the community's past.¹⁰

The Ibadīs were thus not unique in developing literature that fulfilled the function of community building in the Middle Period. Not only were they drawing inspiration from existing Sunni traditions of *tabaqat* and *taʾrikh*, they were writing at precisely the same time as their Sunni contemporaries were witnessing major transformations in the historiographical tradition, including “an explosion of contemporary history.”¹¹ These centuries saw the composition of some of the most exhaustive and remarkable local or community-based prosopographies and histories in the larger Islamic tradition. Chase Robinson has argued that it was a move away from traditionist-minded (i.e. hadith transmitter) approaches

⁷ Robinson was more specifically discussing the eastern (Omani) use of the term to mean “religious epistles.” See Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 64.

⁸ On which see Wīm Raven, “Biography of the Prophet,” in *EI3*.

⁹ On Omani *siyar*, see Abdulrahman Al Salimi, “Themes of the Ibadī/Omani *Siyar*,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 54, no. 2 (2009): 475–514; Abdulrahman Al Salimi, “Identifying the Ibadī/Omani *Siyar*,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 55, no. 1 (2010): 115–62.

¹⁰ For a full overview of the different categories of historiography and the larger tradition into which they fit, see Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, chapter 4, 55–79.

¹¹ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 101.

to historiography that led to this major shift.¹² Fascinatingly, Ibadī scholars were moving in the opposite direction in this same period. As noted above, the process of madhhabization meant that Ibadī scholars of hadīth adopted Sunni norms at the same moment that Sunni “secretaries and bureaucrats” broke with older approaches to history writing.¹³ In either case, however, a growing sense of locality and community helped push the development of historiography, including prosopography, forward. Although equally propelled by their increasing marginalization and numerical decline, Ibadīs also belonged to this much larger transformation to Islamic historiography in the Middle Period.

Beyond connecting Ibadīs to other Muslim communities and their traditions of historiography, alongside my argument about the formation of the Ibadī tradition in Northern Africa sits a methodological intervention that I believe could be of use to historians of other traditions. In the story of the Ibadīs I see potential parallels regarding the construction and maintenance of different Muslim communities and their written traditions. Previous studies have examined similar genres of literature like those discussed above and how they functioned in much the same way to help build a sense of community.¹⁴ Yet too little attention has been given to the ways in which various communities in the history of Islam have often relied on the interplay between the movement of people and texts for both their crystallization and long-term vitality. The two complementary

¹² See full discussion in Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 83–102.

¹³ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 100–01.

¹⁴ This is especially true of work on *ṭabaqāt* literature. The classic study of the *ṭabaqāt* genre is Ibrahim Hafsi, “Recherches sur le genre *Ṭabaqāt* dans la littérature arabe [1],” *Arabica* 23 (1976): 227–65; Ibrahim Hafsi, “Recherches sur le genre *Ṭabaqāt* dans la littérature arabe [2],” *Arabica* 24 (1977): 1–41; Ibrahim Hafsi, “Recherches sur le genre *Ṭabaqāt* dans la littérature arabe [3],” *Arabica* 24 (1977): 150–86. For a more recent take on the genre and a literature review see “An overview of the *Ṭabaqāt* genre” in Kevin Jacques, *Authority, Conflict, and the Transmission of Diversity in Medieval Islamic Law* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006), 10–16. Cf. Kevin Jacques, “Arabic Islamic Prosopography: The *Ṭabaqāt* Genre,” in *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook* (Oxford: Occasional Publications, 2007), 387–414. The best-known studies on Islamic biographical literature include Richard W. Bulliet, *The Patricians of Nishapur: A Study in Medieval Islamic Social History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Carl Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Michael Cooperon, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). The genre and recent studies are surveyed in Michael Cooperon, “Biographical Literature,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam, vol IV: Islamic Cultures and Societies to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Robert Irwin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 458–73.

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and interdependent networks—one written, one human—work together to draw the limits of religious community. Moreover, these networks bore the responsibility of making that community into a tradition, in its literal sense of “passing” or “delivering” it from one generation to the next. This is precisely what I mean in emphasizing both the construction and the maintenance of the tradition over time. As such, the argument I make here about Ibadīs seems to me equally applicable to the medieval textual corpora of jurists or traditionists in Baghdad or Damascus, Sufi communities in South Asia, or poets in al-Andalus. The relationships among community, texts, and identity in different subsets of Islamic societies also conforms to the idea of “textual communities” developed by Brian Stock for late medieval Christianity in Europe. Moreover, it deserves note that it was in precisely this same period (eleventh–twelfth centuries) that Stock described this transformation.¹⁵ The key underlying idea is that the Middle Period witnessed a change in which the very creation of texts ended up altering the way the community was understood.

Indeed, in presenting this idea of the construction of the Ibadī prosopographical tradition to other historians of Muslim communities I have at times been told that the argument is almost intuitive, if not obvious. Of course, these kinds of texts do the work of drawing the boundaries of the community. I find this response encouraging. The growing consensus seems to be that prosopographies and biographical texts do the work of tradition building and community construction. But neither the texts nor the people who use them, I argue, could have built or maintained a tradition without the other. Perhaps most importantly, demonstrating how texts worked alongside the people who used them proves not nearly as easy as taking this relationship for granted. I offer here an example of how books and people draw the boundaries of community and I hope that this model proves useful for thinking about similar processes in the history of other Muslim communities.

THE PROMINENCE OF THE *SIYAR* CORPUS

My discussion of this process of tradition building centers on five prominent Ibadī prosopographies in Northern Africa, with each representing about one century of the history of the community in the region (see

¹⁵ “Textual Communities,” in Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), esp. pp. 88–91.

Chapter Outlines below). Beyond their chronological arrangement, I have chosen these specific books for several reasons. The first stems from their prominence in the Maghribi Ibadī tradition itself. Long before the contemporary importance of the *siyar* described in the prologue, these five books occupied a distinguished place in the pre-modern Ibadī tradition, evidenced especially by their circulation in manuscript form (discussed in Chapter 8). Other pre-modern *siyar* existed, but the circulation of manuscript copies of similar works, such as Muqrīn b. Muhammad al-Baghturi's (d. early thirteenth century) book known as the *Siyar al-Baghturi* or *Siyar maskhayikh Nafusa*, paled in comparison to the five works I examine here. Moreover, modern works of *siyar* such as Sa'īd b. 'Alī b. Ta'arīt's (d. 1936) *Risāla fī ta'rikh Jarba* or Abu al-Yaqzan Ibrahim's (d. 1973) *Mulḥaq al-siyar* explicitly situate themselves as continuations of these prosopographical works of the Middle Period.¹⁶

A second reason for choosing these five books comes from their prominence in modern historiography on the Ibadīs. Some of these works were among the first to be printed in lithograph form by Ibadī print houses in late nineteenth-century Cairo.¹⁷ This made them far more accessible to European scholars than their manuscript equivalents, housed in private libraries throughout Northern Africa. When manuscript copies of the Ibadī *siyar* did become available to European orientalists, it was in the context of colonialism. French and to a lesser extent Italian colonial-era officials, travelers, and historians privileged the *siyar* from an early date, due in part to the utility of knowledge about the Ibadī past for serving colonial interests in the Mzab valley, the island of Jerba, and the Jebel Nafusa.¹⁸ Perhaps the most prominent author on Maghribi Ibadī communities in the twentieth century, the Polish historian Tadeusz Lewicki

¹⁶ The *Siyar al-Baghtūrī* (also *al-Bughṭūrī*) exists in very few manuscript copies (perhaps only two). See Muqrīn b. Muḥammad al-Baghtūrī, *Siyar mashāyikh nafūsa*, ed. Tawfīq 'Iyād al-Shuqrūnī ([online edition]: Tawalt, 2009), www.tawalt.com/wp-content/books/tawalt_books/siyar_nafousa/siyar_nafousa.pdf. The *Risāla fī ta'rikh Jarba* by Sa'īd b. 'Alī b. Ta'arīt exists in manuscript form in the private library belonging to the family of Shaykh Sālim b. Ya'qūb (d. 1991). I was provided with a photocopy of the manuscript from one of Bin Ya'qūb's notebooks by 'Alī Boujdidī. On the *Mulḥaq al-siyar* by Abū al-Yaqzān Ibrāhīm b. 'Isā, see Custers, *al-Ibādīyya* (2016), vol. II, 31.

¹⁷ On Ibadī printing in Cairo, see Martin H. Custers, *Ibādī Publishing Activities in the East and in the West, c. 1880–1960s: An Attempt to an Inventory, with References to Related Recent Publications* (Maastricht: n.p., 2006).

¹⁸ On the colonial context of these works, see Paul M. Love, "The Colonial Pasts of Medieval Texts in Northern Africa: Useful Knowledge, Publication History, and Political Violence in Colonial and Post-Independence Algeria," *Journal of African History* 58, no. 3 (2017): 445–63.

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(d. 1992) published dozens of articles based on manuscript and lithograph copies of the prosopographies at his home institution (first in Lviv and later in Kraków). These books had been acquired through a combination of travel in northern Africa by his teacher, Zygmunt Smogorzewski (d. 1931), and the purchase of manuscripts from the personal library of the French colonial interpreter Adolphe Motylinski (d. 1907).¹⁹ Another well-known scholar who worked on the *siyar*, the Italian orientalist Roberto Rubinacci, based his research on Ibadi lithographs and manuscripts acquired following the Italian invasion of Tripolitania in 1912–13.²⁰

In the wake of Maghribi independence from colonial control in the 1950s and 1960s, Ibadi historians engaged with colonial-era work on their community's history. In some cases this involved rectifying what Ibadi scholars viewed as the errors of colonial historiography. Continuing interest in and attention to the five prosopographies examined here later led to several new print editions of each of them, edited and published in both Northern Africa and Oman in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This combined pre-modern, colonial-era, and post-independence interest and research on the five works of prosopography discussed here has contributed to their unparalleled importance in modern historiography on the Ibadis.²¹

PROSOPOGRAPHICAL NETWORKS: A NEW METHODOLOGICAL
 APPROACH

Although these five books have long served historians as the main sources for Ibadi history in the Maghrib, in this book I approach them from a very different perspective. The traditional method of using these texts has assumed that they represent interrelated yet separate and distinct collections of biographies and anecdotes about the Ibadi community. By

¹⁹ Krzysztof Kościelniak, "The Contribution of Prof. Tadeusz Lewicki (1906–1992) to Islamic and West African Studies," *Analecta Cracoviensia: Studia Philosophico-Theologica Edita a Professoribus Cracoviae* 44 (2012): 241–55.

²⁰ See Roberto Rubinacci, "Il 'Kitāb al-Jawāhir' di al-Barrādī," *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli* 4 (1952): 95–110; Roberto Rubinacci, "La professione di fede di al-Gannawuni," *Annali di Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 14 (1964): 552–92; Roberto Rubinacci, "Bibliografia degli scritti di Roberto Rubinacci," in *Studi arabo-islamici in onore di Roberto Rubinacci nel suo settantesimo compleanno*, XIII–IX (Naples: Universitario Orientale, 1985).

²¹ For an example of the ways in which post-independence historians engaged with colonial-era historiography on the Ibadis, see Love, "The Colonial Pasts of Medieval Texts," 458–61.