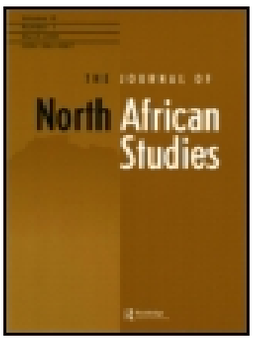

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Models of sacredness: the veneration of *walī's* in the tradition of Mauritanian society

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ABSTRACT

One of the aspects of Islamic life in which theology and religious practices reveal significant inconsistencies concerns the visiting of cemeteries and the spread of the cult of saints; these practices are quite prevalent and often interrelated. The main schools of thought regarding the status of saints have a clear position, while the ongoing debate regarding the practices and procedures of cemetery visits has not reconciled the conflicting views; all this creates considerable confusion in the Islamic community, with repercussions not only in religious behaviour and practices, but also in social relations and sometimes even in politics. This article depicts the evolution of the procedures and rites regarding Mauritanian society's practice of saints and a review, albeit brief, of the sanctification rituals for the dead, which will help provide insight into the ethnic specificities of Mauritanian society.

KEYWORDS Mauritania; veneration of male and female *walī* (saints); ritual visits of cemeteries; Sharī'a

> There are people from the servants of Allah who are neither prophets nor martyrs; the prophets and martyrs will envy them on the Day of Resurrection for their rank from Allah, the Most High (…). Muḥammad, the prophet of Islam (Sunan Abī Dāwud, Book: 24, *Ḥadīth*: 112)

Introduction

The practice of visiting cemeteries and the notion of saints are highly contentious topics among Islamic scholars and theologians. Regarding visits to burial sites, most scholars agree that Islamic doctrine initially forbade this practice because the Prophet said 'I forbade you (in the past) from visiting graves but visit them now. Whoever wants to visit a graveyard, let them do so, because it reminds us of the Hereafter' (Bin al-Ḥajjāj 2006, 434).[1] Originally, the ban distanced Islam from practices rooted in pre-Islamic paganism,

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jāhiliyya (Muḥyi al-Dīn al-Nawawī n.d., Part V: 285), which involved the sanctification of symbols. Interestingly, the words that seem to prohibit cemetery visits encounter contradictory phrases in the same *ḥadīth* that grants visits. The whole debate between theologians and religious scholars regarding cemetery visits stem from the varying interpretations of this *ḥadīth*. In the authentic digests (the Ṣaḥīḥayn) of al-Bukhārī and Muslim Bin al-Ḥajjāj, this *ḥadīth* is the most cited about visiting the deceased in general. In a subsequent *ḥadīth*, Abū Hurayra 'narrated that the Messenger of Allah cursed the women who frequently visit the graves' (Abī Šayba 2007, 504). Modern scholars often refer to this *ḥadīth* that concurs with the views of Ibn Taymiyya. The intention is clearly to exclude women from visiting cemeteries due to their perceived weakness and sensitivity.

This interpretation differs from common practices and customs in several Arab-Islamic countries, including Mauritania, where there is no distinction between men and women regarding cemetery visits. For these people, it is a human act of religious significance that any believer can observe. This practice reinforces the faith of male and female believers alike. Female participation remains one of the most highly debated issues among scholars (Lagdaf 2017b, 225).

According to the Hanafite Abū Ja'far Aḥmad al-Ṭaḥāwī (853–933), adding prayers to a *ṣadaqa* (donation) aids the dead (al-Ṭaḥāwī 1974, 42). The *Sunna* people and the *Jamā'a* (*Ahl al-sunna wa al-Jamā'a*) people agree on this point, even if they limit the *ṣadaqa* only to prayers by children for their parents (Muḥyi al-Dīn al-Nawawī 1992, 26). This, of course, has little impact on the diffuse practice of faithful praying for the souls of deceased people with whom they bear no relation.

Visiting the graves of deceased saints, or the so-called *Awliyyā' Allāh al-ṣāliḥīn* (*walī*), is an even more complex issue, given that these visits often involve a different ritual from those reserved for the common dead.

The worship of saints does not correspond precisely to the Islamic religion. Islamic scholars cite various passages of the Quran (Qur'ān) (sura 10: 106–107; 17: 56 34:22; 35: 13–14) and of the Prophet to reject this kind of worship. Abū Hurayra's narration refers to the Prophet when he said that 'When a man dies, his deeds come to an end, except for three: continuous charity, knowledge by which people derive benefit, pious sons/daughters who pray for him' (Bin al-Ḥajjāj 2006, 770). They condemn any kind of *jāhiliyya* veneration, which distances the faithful from the sole Creator; the only one capable of giving life and taking it away. The Quran states (39: 3):

> Unquestionably, Allah is the pure religion. Moreover, those who take protectors besides Him [say], 'We only worship them that they may bring us nearer to Allah in position.' Indeed, Allah will judge between them concerning that over which they differ. Indeed, Allah does not guide he who is a liar and [confirmed] disbeliever.

The Quran refers to the *Awliyyā 'Allāh al-ṣāliḥīn* as those who believe in God and are in awe of God in all of their deeds (Quran 10: 62–64) as the *Awliyyā' Allāh Al-Ṣāliḥīn*. In popular tradition, however, these are people who have witnessed a *karāmāt* (miracles), which is an extraordinary event akin to a miracle during their life or after their death. The Egyptian Al-Ṭaḥāwī, an Islamic scholar between the ninth and the tenth centuries, wrote of the *Awliyyā' Allāh al-ṣāliḥīn*. In a passage from his book '*al-'Qīda*', he does not deny customary belief, but proposes a hierarchy in which

> none of the *Awliyyā'* prevails over any of the prophets (peace be with them); and let's say: only one prophet is better than all the *Awliyyā'*. We believe in all their [*awliyyā'*] *karamāt* (s. *karāma*) and in their credited narratives. (al-Ṭaḥāwī 1974, 44–45)

The respected *walī* are often points of reference in conflicts and disagreements, and their sanctification is a highly contentious matter, with various religious streams in countries with Islamic majorities opposing the practice.

This hostility towards the cult of saints and other customs and traditions increased after the postcolonial religious reform that occurred in the Muslim world at the end of the 1920s. It was an arduous process hampered by the presence of different religious, ethnic and tribal groups, as in the case of Mauritanian society, where the force of habit still interacts with religious precepts. If, in this context, we take the view that cults are often generated in societies with significant social inequalities, even in worship, thus turning to saints might represent compensation for the frustration of social marginalisation, which goes deeper than the Sufi origin of certain cults. This notion consolidates the roles of the *Awliyyā' Allāh Al-Ṣāliḥīn* over time, and their tombs become the destination for pilgrims seeking forgiveness for bad deeds or in need of a miracle. The issues relating to female *walī* reside somewhere between traditional and contemporary contexts. They are not as popular as male saints but do nonetheless possess the same *karamāt* powers at the service of society, a role that is particularly evident in the *biẓān* ethnic group.

In order to have a better understanding of the practices, it is essential to consider the main characteristics of Mauritanian society. Mauritania is an Arab-African country, with Sunni Muslims of the Mālikī rite constituting the majority of the population.[2] The *biẓān* are Arab-Berbers who speak the *ḥassanyya* Arabic dialect; *laḥrāṭīn* are the descendants of former slaves and, according to some scholars, are very similar to the *biẓān*. The Peul/Wolof, the so-called Fulani in Arabic, originated in west Africa and spread throughout most African and Soninke nations.[3] Therefore, to study Mauritanian society, one needs to take into account its Arab and African affiliations, based on ethnicity rather than geographical connections. For these reasons, the author has chosen to compare local ethnic groups without widening the comparison to other Arab or African countries.

The results of the research presented here derive from a comparison of the religious literature and customs that were identified during a series of interviews the author arranged over many research trips to Mauritania (Adrar, Dakhlet Nouadhibou, Tiris Zemmour, Nouakchott) from August 2014 to September 2018. The many dozens of men and women the author interviewed during the field-research trips belong to different social and professional groups and age categories.

The study of the saints is part of a wider research project regarding cemeteries and the dead in Mauritania. The attraction of oral histories and less explored themes, associated with the most intimate aspects of the society, drived the selection of case studies. This has been the driving reason behind the selection of the case studies.

In a multi-ethnic context, like Mauritanian society with its Islamic majority, it is important to analyse variations in customs and traditions among ethnic groups, as well as the interactions between social customs and religious precepts. To achieve this, the author developed the research strategy in three phases.

The first was a planning phase, during which questionnaires were developed and local authorities approached in order to establish contact with selected communities and their religious scholars, notables, imams and other experts.

In the second phase, the author used the questionnaires to interview those who had agreed to participate in them. Some information regarding the miracles of saints was obtained during customary cemetery visits, normally performed on Fridays.

In the final phase, the preliminary data were analysed in order to plan further interviews with new or previously interviewed subjects that might help clarify some aspects or provide additional information useful to the objectives of the research.

To confirm the results, information obtained from respondents of the same community, as well as from members of different ethnic groups, was compared and validated.

The visit to cemeteries: between obligation and interdiction

In 1920, Étienne Richet wrote 'the intellectual and moral existence of the Moorish people has taken refuge entirely in their religious life' (Richet 1920, 118). In reality, Mauritanian society, like other Arab-Muslim societies, features reciprocal interactions between religion and customs. This interchange is apparent in the worship of saints and in rituals, such as visiting cemeteries.

The impact of religion on the life of Mauritanian people has increased with the growth in sedentary lifestyles that had characterised part of society in the final decades of the twentieth century. This has been accompanied by the

mushrooming of religious groups that blame the degradation of the country's social circumstances on the distancing from what they consider the true values and canons of Islam. However, various rites and customs persist despite the continuous process of renewal within the society. The revision of habits and behaviours is propagated through teachings to men and women and in the mosques and *zāwiya* of urban neighbourhoods. The idea is to apply the notion of '*ldhā nasharnā al-sunan mātat al-bid'a* (if we spread the dictates of the *sunna*, the novelties [heresy in religious terms] will disappear)'.

In Mauritania, when visiting a cemetery, it is important to dedicate a moment of prayer for the souls of the dead. The prevalent belief is that the deceased need to receive prayers more than the living, who, unlike the dead, still have time to redeem themselves. People also believe that human souls rejoice at hearing prayers dedicated to them, as it helps settle their debts with the Creator (Fortier 2005, 2010). Visitors commemorate the Day of Judgment in the knowledge that their fate is inevitably in the tomb, but it is not the final destination, as many believe.[4]

For many scholars, the relationship between the individual and the cemetery is both a warning for the living and a gesture of respect for the dead. For the *Sunna* people, visiting the graves of disbelievers is not forbidden as long as it is meant to serve as a lesson; one cannot, however, visit the tomb of an infidel for religious or spiritual purposes (Aḥmad al-Sharbāṣī 2008, 431–434). Imam Muḥammad Lamīn explains the educational aspect of visiting a grave in that it reminds us that a person was alive and well like all of us but is no more. It teaches us that in life we must work for the afterlife, quoting the Takāthur: 102 [5] *sura*, which adds that this should be the final message of the visit to the cemetery.[6]

According to the Islamic faith, visiting the cemetery is *Sunna* and you can do it at any time, on any day. Despite the refusal of the *bīẓān* imam to comment on the habits and customs of the different ethnic groups of African [Black] origin in Mauritania, the consensus is that there is not a lot of difference among the ethnic groups in Mauritanian society concerning cemetery visits, except that some of them like the Fulani, emphasise sanctification of their sheiks.[7] People generally visit cemeteries on Fridays and sometimes on Mondays.[8] While night visits are generally not advisable, according to the tale of Khoudjeidu Iagana, the Soninke prefer to visit the graveyards after *al-'aṣar* prayer (late afternoon); this distinguishes them from other ethnic groups who prefer to avoid this hour so close to the darkness of night.[9]

The first prohibition that the Prophet expressed on women's visit to the cemeteries influenced certainly contemporary debates on women's visit to cemeteries; the alleged fragility and sensitivity of women motivated this debate, although eventually women also gained access to cemeteries.[10] In Mauritania, women can visit cemeteries like men, within certain limitations;

however, it is not recommended for children, as they might be frightened.[11] The custom of the *biẓān* in the region of Hodh, for example, does not forbid women from visiting cemeteries, even if this prohibition exists in some parts. When it is allowed, visitors must remain silent. The visit must be to a specific tomb; one cannot venture around the cemetery, and women especially should leave quickly after the visit. A widow can visit the grave of her dead husband once the period of mourning has ended.[12]

> Some rules have been introduced which are contained in some *ḥadīth*, such as those that put conditions on the visit of the woman to the cemetery depending on the distance from her home; for example, if the cemetery is near the city, the woman can go alone. However, if this requires a trip, a *maḥram* (p. *maḥārīm*: a close kin) must accompany her (*sura* 4: 22–23 lists these rules). The second rule is for her to cover herself; the woman should be fully covered and devoid of all ostentation and fragrant essence, in respect of the dead, but, most of all, according to the Imam, to avoid tempting men in such a peculiar place. (Lagdaf 2017a, 296)

The visit generally begins with the arrival at the cemetery, reciting *al-salamu ʻalykum yā ahla al-dīār* (peace be upon you, inhabitants of the city), followed by the reading of some *sura* of the Quran like *al-Fātiḥa* and *al-Ikhlās*. The choice of the *sura* varies according to customs, membership in a fraternity, or the teachings of an imam. When arriving at the tomb, visitors often sit next to the tomb and introduce themselves to the deceased. If it is a relative, they proceed to update them with general news and then pray for their soul. The visit ends with a request for help with a problem.

The ritual of speaking to the dead, which is widespread in several countries with a Muslim majority, is, according to many Mauritanian scholars, innovation (*bidʻa*) and has generated disputes among Muslim scholars on the interpretation of the compatibility of this practice with the *Sunna*.

In Mauritania, two types of visits to cemeteries exist. The first, is a traditional visit which is part of the general religious practice; it is brief but occurs frequently. Moreover, the visit usually takes place at a cemetery next to a village. The second type of visit is more complex, takes longer and requires careful planning. While the main reason for the first type of visit is emotional, the goal in the second type is a journey of hope, perhaps to seek healing, or a miracle, or some other reason.

Visits to a *wali*[13] continue after their death for reasons of devotion, gratitude, favours, and so on. The visit lasts for three days, during which the visitors offer sacrifices for the soul of the saint; there is a great deal of criticism regarding this practice in Mauritania. Sunni clerics try to discourage this practice among believers because they consider travelling to graves a novelty (*bidʻa*) that contradicts the *Sharīʻa*: Quran: 3, 31 and the Prophet's *ḥadīth*. The *ḥadīth* states 'The best of the speech is embodied in the Book of Allah, and the best of the guidance is the guidance given by Muhammad. And the

most evil affairs are their innovations; and every innovation is error' (Bin al-Ḥajjāj 2006, 375).[14] But if faith does not fulfil people's needs, they will tend to embrace other practices that do satisfy their needs, even if these are *bid'a*.

Visitors travel with enthusiasm, often transporting very ill people for whom they seek healing, which in many cases ends in delusion. It is customary to bring the patient close to the tomb of the *walī* and leave them there to wait for the healing miracle to happen. Desperation often drives the family to repeat the ritual more than once to one or more saints. During the stay, it is customary to sacrifice animals near the tomb of the *walī* and say, 'This is your lunch (or dinner)', hoping for a miracle in return.

Imām Muḥammad al-Mahdī reveals that in some cases people bring sacrificial offerings believing they are offering a *ṣadaqa* (charitable donation) despite the fact that cemeteries are uninhabited desert territories so there can only be sacrifices on the altars of the dead, i.e. inedible carrion (*sura*: al-Mā'īda, 3 [15]).[16] In citing this *sura*, the imam attempts to point out that the practice of making sacrifices at altars to invoke saints is similar to the prohibition observed by the Islamic world against eating pig meat, carrion or their blood. Other imams and the Mauritanian people try to distance themselves from such custom, linked closely to the Maliki rite, associating the practice with regions where Sufism is spreading and where the followers sanctify their sheikhs (imam Muḥammad Lamīn, Interview, 2016, 2017).

At any rate, the belief in the sanctification of a *walī* is so strong for some people that they consider the tomb of a saint the perfect place to be heard and, therefore, perform their daily prayers beside their tomb.[17] In this context, one of this author's Fulani interlocutors, Mintou Boyba Mamadou, spoke passionately about a personal experience. Boyba Mamadou made a trip to Dakar to visit the graves of seven famous *awliyyā'* (s. *walī*), invoking healing for a disease and asking for the realisation of many of his own desires and those of his loved ones. Boyba Mamadou is convinced that he was healed because of his visit to these prodigious saints. He recounted the surprising story of one of the *awliyyā'*, Amadou Kidiota (buried at Kuodi-Boghé), who gained recognition due to his death occurring during a heavy downpour that ended a long drought in the region. According to the story, Amadou Kidiota asked that they bury him without ablution but, on the day of his death, it started raining heavily as he was being transported to the cemetery, thus receiving an ablution of sorts. Amadou Kidiota is therefore considered a *walī* and there is a box for donations (*al-ṣadaqāt*), often in cash, and a jar full of water next to his tomb. The ritual is to put money in the donation box, and then wash with water from the jar while invoking favours. In Boyba Mamadou's view, it is now customary to visit the grave of this *walī* on the birthday of the Prophet (*al-Mawlid al-nabawī*), a practice that is not limited to communities of African origin, but also observed by the Arabic-speaking population of Mauritania.[18] Some *tījānīyya* also habitually bring gifts to the families before making

the trip to visit the tomb of a saint. Evidence of this is apparent in the well-known tomb of Sheikh Muḥammad Abū Bakar in Kaédi, whom the Fulani, especially, consider a saint (Ould Barou, Interview, 2016).

Once the visit has ended, a final customary act before leaving the tomb is to take a little of the burial soil (*trāb al-ziyāra*) and pass it over one's body for the *baraka* (blessing) and as a body lotion. Sealed tombs are opened a few times a year to take out some earth, which is distributed to the faithful. Imam Ould Fatan attributes this custom to the Sufi sheikh Ibrāhīm al-Kūlkhī,[19] who, during a visit to the tomb of Sheikh Muḥammad al-Ḥāfaẓ, wanted to take a handful of earth from the tomb to take with him, but forgot to do so. Later, he sent someone to collect it on his behalf, and when the envoy returned, the sheikh said, 'this is a medicine'. The soil that had been in contact with the body of the sheikh had a *baraka* and was therefore considered a cure for all ills. Afterwards, his followers adopted this practice, which is widespread in Mauritania and in neighbouring Western Sahara (Ould Fatan, Interview, 2014).

The ritual begins by taking three handfuls of sand (during a visit to a cemetery, the author noticed a woman who replaced the sand taken from elsewhere; the only explanation for this act was that she had seen others do it). The subject then rubs the sand on his or her body, starting from the sole of the right foot and moving it around the rest of the body. They also bring some of the soil (*trāb al-ziyāra*) to relatives who cannot attend, so that those relatives can also perform the same ritual. This gesture is not just limited to the graves of saints, but also to the dead in general. Relatives practice also the ritual after the burial of a deceased. They take a small amount of grave soil and put it in water to drink or use as a body lotion. The belief is that this gesture might ease the sorrow of loss and provide contact with the deceased (Ould Barou, Interview, 2018).

The Fulani of *tījāniyya* affiliation conclude their visits and invocations with the phrase 'in your name before God Almighty that realizes our desires in this world and in the hereafter'. Some visitors also read verses from the Quran before leaving the tomb, first beside the head of the deceased, then around the middle and then at the feet. According to popular belief, this ritual protects the grave against evil spirits until the next visit.

Some visitors also conclude their visit by placing a pebble on the wall of the cemetery or of a private tomb. They believe that they will remain alive as long as the stone sits on the wall, as imam Muḥammad al-Mahdī observes with some criticism.

The *walī* figure

According to the Mauritanian scholars whom the author interviewed, the *al-walī*, or saint, is a hidden servant of God. People therefore identify *walī* from

signs like uniqueness and virtue found among certain Muslims. Society in general, especially in Chenguiti (Adrar region), regard favourably those reputed to be saints (and sometimes feared). Even theologians, who are often critical on the unconventional behaviour of certain saints and their eccentricity with respect to religious dictates, admire some of them. Perhaps this is because *awliyyā'* are simply different. Imam Muḥammad Lamīn explains that some of them operate within the bounds of *sharī'a* and religious principles, while others let themselves resort to *bid'a* and ignore conventional Islam, (imam Muḥammad Lamīn, 2016). The title of *walī* is therefore attributable to living persons as well as dead, and people go to their homes to receive the *baraka*. The people fear the *awliyyā'* in life and after their death; and pilgrims visit their graves seeking miracles and positive changes to their lives.

When Nomadic Bedouins visit a location with *awliyyā'* tombs, they customarily offer a sacrifice near the tomb as *ṣadaqa*. Some of the meat is offered to the locals so that everyone can share the spiritual benefit. Offering sacrifice or *ṣadaqa* to a *walī/awliyyā'* is an important social act, which women can also perform in their own name and in the name of their family. In other cases, people prepare food and distribute it to the poor people in the area, and to other visitors to the cemetery. The distribution of food is accompanied with the words: '*Yā Awalyyā' Allah al-ṣāliḥīn rānī hādyalak/hādyalik hādhā alma'arūf* ya'tinī (Oh saints, I give you this and in return I wish to receive [whatever the desire is])', (Muḥammad Maḥmoud, Interview, 2018).

In Mauritania, the funeral and burial procedure for *walī* is similar to the procedure for ordinary people. The Sufis, on the other hand, privilege the *al-laḥd* burial for their sheikhs which involves the construction of a dome or room over the grave. They also leave a box next to the grave for offerings and gifts to the saint; usually the box is handled by one of the descendants of the *walī* or someone in their service. In some cases, they bury the *walī* at home or in a mosque, and for the most important *walī*, communities build mosques on the site of the graves.

The significance of the figure of the *walī* in Mauritanian society is prone to what might generally be classified as superstition. The notion of a *tazūba* (divine vengeance) is widespread and is often an element in relations between people and the so-called *ṭūlba* (local *murābiṭūn*). The *tazūba* (Mauritanian *ḥassaniyya* dialect word) is the infliction of misfortune because of an evil act or rude behaviour towards a *walī*, a descendant of a *walī*, or a family of *Murābiṭūn*. Only forgiveness through *baraka* can save the perpetrator.

The majority of believers in the miraculous qualities of a person usually stem from members of the same ethnic group. Later, the story becomes legend and contributes to extending the entourage of supporters to other groups, villages and small neighbouring towns. The nature of the nomadic Bedouin life facilitates this aspect, as Bedouins recount these stories wherever they roam.

When someone gains *walī* status in his lifetime, he remains so even after death. Others become *awliyyā'* after death because of some extraordinary event associated with a visit to their graves. The relationship with the *walī* can manifest itself in dreams, where a person receives a visit from a *walī* encouraging them to perform a specific task. The person who dreamed must fulfil the request to avoid a curse; they should also visit the grave of the deceased and offer a meal to visitors and gifts to relatives of the *walī*. Boyba Mamadou said that, while he was in Morocco on a business trip, he dreamed of the Sufi Sheikh al-Tījānī. This spiritual encounter was positive for Mintou Boyba Mamadou as he managed to sell all his merchandise and to become a successful merchant. Since that time, he has been a devoted visitor of his tomb.

In a not too distant past, the graves of free men and those of the slaves were different. This was due to popular legend involving dreams about dead people complaining about having someone unworthy buried beside them, perhaps a servant or a stranger. Professor Ibrahim Tounkara (a Soninke) notes that there is a distinction between cemeteries for slaves (*komo m'bourou n'galè*) and those of free people (*horo m'bourou n'galè*) in Ghuidimagha. When a foreigner or an unknown person whose origin, status and religious belief cannot be guaranteed by anyone dies, he/she is buried in the cemetery of slaves. The local imams (Muḥammad al-Mahdī, Muḥammad Lamīn) shirked the existence of this custom, perhaps because this social aspect is detrimental to a society still under indictment for slavery and because it clearly violates the egalitarian Islamic values regarding funerary rites.

Nowadays, experts of *sharī'a* argue that the cemetery is *waqf* (a religious endowment) for all, regardless of social class or ethnic origin. Furthermore, the authorities should not allow the construction of buildings inside the cemetery as these buildings infringe on the egalitarian concept that applies to all the dead. For imam Muḥammad al-Mahdī, the low walls around tombs, decorations and larger lots in an undeniably important space, like a cemetery, are unacceptable in a Muslim society; he considers it arrogance and insolence towards the poor, even in the tomb.[20] Despite the attempts of some governments to settle the issue of cemeteries and matters regarding the dead in general, there is no law that regulates the granting of spaces in cemeteries. There are still many cemeteries with large and well preserved mausoleums for *walī*, personalities and notables, as well as the tombs of families. Imam Ould Barou affirms that the graves of families are important as they allow relatives who have lived together to remain united in the afterlife.

Despite the belief that the link between the living and the dead continues after death through visits to graves and blessings to souls, there are sporadic forms of desecration of graves that some factions of Mauritanian ethnic groups practice. In the past, these violations of tombs occurred for revenge

among tribal factions as well as to use body parts for potions or in witchcraft. In other cases, people violated graves to bury magic items on the advice of a shaman. Some of those in higher religious echelons doubt or deny this practice, but others like imam Blāl readily confirm its existence.[21]

The destruction of the mausoleums of saints, which has occurred more recently in some other Muslim countries, such as Libya, Tunisia, and Mali, where the cult of the saints is more widespread, is threatening Mauritania. Undoubtedly, the growth of extremist *Salafist* groups[22] constitutes a real risk for the practice of venerating the dead in Mauritania. These Salafist groups have for now only chastised and criticised Mauritanian customs such as building on graves, which they believe contradicts the principles of *sharī'a*.[23] These condemnations of popular customs, especially regarding the graves of notables and saints, and the rituals for visiting the graves of saints are also widespread among scholars and imams who do not consider themselves Salafist. Several of them denounce the proliferation of non-observance of the religious doctrine in cemeteries; those Salafists subscribe to the demolition of mausoleums and domes built on the tombs of saints and notables. For current reformists, those visiting *walī* graves should never ask for favours or miracles.

Al- waliyyāt al-ṣāliḥāt (The female *walī*)

The acknowledgement of *walī* status for women in Mauritanian society and several other ArabMuslim countries is not as widespread as it is for men. However, the fear of the curse of a *walī*, be they man or woman, *Allāh Aifknā min ada'wa wa ahlhā*,[24] according to the popular edict used in the *ḥasaniyya* language in Mauritania, supports the social recognition of pious women, *Waliyyāt Allāh al-ṣāliḥāt*. This aspect, however, seems limited to the *Biẓān* group. For the Fulani, Mrs. Kumbabaron of the Hodh region concedes that *walī* women in their ethnic group are uncommon.[25] Other members of the community, including Muḥammad Kāmal Ould Abū Bakr Barou of the *zāwiya tījāniyya* of Nouadhibou, confirmed this observation, saying that it was unlikely, if not impossible, for women to be the subject of something as important as sanctification (Ould Abū Bakr Barou, Interview, 2018). The Soninké ethnic group also confirms the peculiarity of the notion of *walī* women in their community. Since none of those interviewed provided a satisfactory explanation, we can only assume that the lack of *walī* women in the Fulani and Soninké communities might be attributable to the regard that these groups reserve for women in general.

Walī women in the *biẓān* community retain their status after death, like men. The status of piety, above others, and being closer to God extends to women, who are also called on to help solicit divine intervention (Ould al-Bara 2010). Supplication to the *walī* is not limited to cemetery visits, but whenever the

devotee of the *walī/yya* may be in need. The invocation may involve certain favours or pleas for healing. They may ask for a blessing or a curse against a person, depending on how the subject has behaved towards the invoker. The most common prayer in this circumstance is '*Ya sīdī al-walī yassar lī fī* (Oh my sir, [the name of the *walī/yya* and the supplication])'.

From the stories of those whom the author interviewed, it seems that the status of *walī* women is more fragile, and many of them even hide the fact of having received *karamāt* for fear that publicising the revelation may cause the loss of this particular gift. The possibility of losing such an important gift is more probable among women than among men. Muḥammad Maḥmūd speaks of the existence of such women in his Hodh region. They are only acknowledged as *walī* by a small family circle and the miracles cannot be revealed to others. The reasons, he says, do not relate to a specific popular tradition, but have to do with the desire of some families to retain their privacy and protect their relatives.[26] Muḥammad Maḥmūd explains that those aware of the nature of the *walī* women and those who know the location of their tombs may visit them. Unlike males, female sanctity is confined to private spaces. The tombs of male *walī* are often located in ways that enable the believers to access them from all over the country, while those of women are often not accessible to strangers and devoid of anything remarkable to avoid drawing the attention of illintentioned people who practice magic or witchcraft in cemeteries (Muḥammad Maḥmūd, Interview, 2018).

Some *walī* women are renowned outside family circles and some interviewees speak of miracles and veneration of *biẓān* women. Amīna Yūsaf, a woman who died about ninety years ago in the province of Inchiri (region of Akjoujt), earned the respect of her people and of all those who knew of her *karamāts*.[27] To this day, her tomb remains a destination for believers from all over Mauritania seeking good fortune or hoping to make a wish come true, bearing gifts for their living descendants in return.[28]

Another famous *walī* woman is Fatimatù Mint Akah from the city of Kiffa who lived for a hundred years; her grave is located in the east of Kiffa. From al-Nanna's account, Fatimatù Mint Akah was able to disappear and reappear in distant locations and could determine the location and needs of people far away from her. According to the grandson, Mint Akah was born in around 1860 to a family of scholars of the Quran and *sharī'a* and was thus able to study the sacred texts as a child. No one in the family was a saint, so her case was unique. She was married and had children.[29]

Mauritanian men willingly speak of the miracles of acknowledged *walī* women in their country. Mr. al-Khāl immediately spoke of Mint Fatan, who lives in the town of Butilimit (Trarza region). Mint Fatan can allegedly communicate with the dead, which makes her popular with those who seek to contact dead relatives and loved ones, or those who were not fortunate enough to have known them in life.[30]

There is no difference in the *biẓān* society regarding the status of *walī* women or men, even if the majority of those they acknowledged are male. People fear and respect both, also because of the prevalent fear of *ṭazuba* for failure to believe in a *baraka* (blessing) of a *walī/iyya*. One must not confuse, however, the figure of the *walī* in the broader *biẓān* society with the so-called *Makhāliq Allāh* (beings of God), who have a physical or mental defect. The benevolent fear them and give them *sadaqa* because of their *ṭazuba*, although this may be more an instrument of social welfare and protection than any other consideration.

There are tombs of *walī* men and women in the cemeteries around Kiffa. The ritual to a saint begins with expressing the intention (*al-niyya*) and the choice of the gift to bring to the specific female *walī* in exchange for the fulfillment of the wishes of the requester. The gifts are usually left on the *walī's* grave or sent to immediate relatives. Maryam from the city of Kiffa tells of Zaynab Mint Ahmām, a blind woman in this area known for her songs of praise, the so-called *madḥ alrasūl*, for the Prophet of Islam. The woman healed miraculously. The belief is that the Prophet appeared to a man in a dream and left him some *Kajal* (*kohl*), a black dye for the eyes. Zaynab mint Ahmām used the *kajal* and she recovered her sight totally. About Zaynab mint Ahmām we only know the approximate date of her death; people believe that she died an old woman at the beginning of the twentieth century in Kiffa, where she was born. Her childhood was characterised by profound loneliness that she mitigated with her great love of songs of praise for the Prophet. She had no children, so her brother's son inherited *al-marwad*, the container of the *kajal*. It was Zaynab's wish that the *kajal* should not be sold but kept and used to help those in need. Later, when the family decided to sell her cure, *al-marwad* (the container of the *kajal*) was lost, only to be found again when Zaynab visited its caretaker in a dream. The nephew's failure to keep his promise not to sell the contents of the *al-marwad* later provoked its permanent disappearance.[31]

The stories regarding (*Al- waliyyāt al-ṣāliḥāt*) *walī* women continue. Tallāfa mint Sīdāt, a *walī* of the Kiffa region, is said to have received a visit from the Prophet in a dream. She ran her hands over her face in a *baraka* gesture and regained her vision after a long life of blindness. Tallāfa, with this *karāma*, became *walī*. All those who believe in the miracles of the *karamāt* continue to visit her tomb (Maryam, Interview, 2018).

The vision of the Prophet of Islam in a dream is particularly important because, in Islamic theology, to dream of the prophet Muḥammad is to have actually met him. In fact, this is confirmed in a *ḥadith* and attributed to the Prophet, who says 'Whoever has seen me in a dream, then no doubt, he has seen me, for Satan cannot imitate my shape'. (Buḫārī 2002, 1733; Bin al-Ḥajjāj 2006, 1077)

Tallāfa died in 2009 in Kiffa, where she was born, at around eighty-five years of age; she had no children despite having been married. She tended to keep

to herself and avoided contact with her peers. She devoted herself solely to reading the Quran.

Given what we have discussed regarding visits to the sepulchres of male and female saints, and the customary rituals performed for them, it is important to bear in mind that today the practice of visiting cemeteries is more frequent in village societies. In urban centres, however, increasingly prevalent religious pedagogy tends to discourage customary practices such as the cult of saints. New doctrine adopted by the imams of mosques in urban centres seeks to marginalise practices considered contrary to religious dictates or perhaps not explicitly authorised. Seminars and conferences proffer corrective religious teachings to different members of the community, promoting lifestyles deemed more coherent with *Sharī'a*.

The imams therefore encourage the practice of *al-Raqyya* in place of the cult of saints. *AlRaqyya* involves experts or imams reading specific verses of the Quran that relate to the requesting person's predicament. The chosen verses of the Quran tend to focus on health, luck or some other specific aspect. This already widespread practice is becoming popular in Mauritania, particularly in urban centres and represents a parallel practice to the long-standing cult of saints that the imams seek to defeat.

Notes

1. In another narration, the Prophet tells of his visit to the tomb of his mother: 'I sought permission from my Lord to beg forgiveness for her but it was not granted to me, and I sought permission to visit her grave and it was granted to me, so visit the graves, for that makes you mindful of death' (Bin al-Ḥajjāj 2006, 434; Abī Šayba 2007, 500).
2. For more information see: Pazzanita (2006).
3. 'The Soninke State of Ghana (different from ex-Gold Coast Ghana, seventh to eleventh centuries AD), part of whose territory, as well as the ruins of its historic capital, are within the present limits of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania'. (Bertrand Fessard de Foucault. 2017).
4. In the Arab world, it is common to hear a Muslim person say '[they] have gone to their final abode'; some consider blasphemy, *kufr,* because the tomb is not the last resting place for the human being. Interview in August 2014 with 'Abd al-Raḥīm Ould Fatan, imam of the mosque of R's al-Imān (Nouadhibou), originally from the *wīlāya* of Trarza. Ould Fatan is a member of the sufī *bīẓān* community.
5. 'Competition in [worldly] increase diverts you. Until you visit the graveyards. No! You are going to know. Then no! You are going to know. No! If you only knew with knowledge of certainty (…) You will surely see the Hellfire. Then you will surely see it with the eye of certainty. Then you will surely be asked that Day about pleasure. Then you will surely be asked that Day about pleasure'.
6. Interview with imam Muḥammad Lamīn 'Abdī Sālam, August 2014, 2016, 2017. Muḥammad Lamīn, a Mauritanian religious scholar, is native of the *wīlāya* of Néma; he has several publications in *fiqh* and serves as imam of *Jāma' al'atīq*, the first mosque built in Nouadhibou.

7. Author's interview with Muḥammad Kāml Abū Bakr Barou (Ould Barou), the Sheikh of the *tijāniyya* Brotherhood (Fulani) in the city of Nouadhibou. During the first day of the visit to his house, he had received the news of the death of his grandmother in Mali; the author suspended the meetings with him for a few days. When the meeting resumed, the author observed that the visits of condolence and the giving of generous gifts continued, thus confirming the attachment of the followers to their sheikh (Interview, August 2014). The father of Muḥammad Kāml Abū Bakr Barou is the founder of the *tijāniyya* brotherhood (Fulani group) in Nouadhibou. He is imam of *zāwiya* and a Quran teacher in *tijāniyya maḥḍara* (Quran School).
8. Regarding Friday, the Prophet of Islam said: 'Among the best of your days is Friday. On that day pray to Allah to exalt my mention frequently, for your such supplications are presented to me'. (Muḥyi al-Dīn al-Nawawī 1992, 425; www. Sunnah.com. Accessed September 25, 2018). Muslim also consider Monday as a favourable day because the Prophet was born on a Monday.
9. Khoudjeidu Iagana is a housewife, I was assisted by an interpreter from the Soninke group in this interview as she did not speak Arabic or French (Interview, August 2014, Nouadhibou).
10. Abu Hurayrah narrated, 'Indeed the Messenger of Allah cursed the women who visit the graves', Jāmi' at-Tirmidhī, 1056, Book 10, *Ḥadīth* 92, www.sunnah.com, accessed April 25, 2018.
11. For more information about the visit to cemeteries in Mauritania see: Lagdaf (2017a).
12. Interview with Muḥammad Maḥmūd (May 2018). Muḥammad Maḥmoud is an elderly man of the *biẓān* community, from the Hodh region; the author met him for the first time during his visit to the Nouadhibou city.
13. The awliyā' (s. *walī)* are considered 'under the protection of God' for the Sufis as mentioned in the *sura* 10, 62: 'Unquestionably, [for] the allies of Allah there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve' (Martin Smith and Ernst 2011, 58-60). In Mauritanian culture this definition is so deeply rooted that the *walī* is seen to be so pious that those who believe in his *walāya* (miracle) can have access to God.
14. Some Islamic scholars use this weak narration in cases of *bid'a*: the Prophet said 'Allah refuses to accept the good deeds of one who follows innovation until he gives up that innovation' (Sunan Ibn Māja 2015, 15; www.sunnah.com, accessed April 25, 2018).
15. 'You are forbidden to eat carrion; blood; pig's meat; any animal over which any name other than God's has been invoked; any animal strangled, or victim of a violent blow or a fall, or gored or savaged by a beast of prey, unless you still slaughter it [in the correct manner]; or anything sacrificed on idolatrous altars. (…)', (Khan 1975, 108).
16. Interview with Imām Muḥammad al-Mahdī Muḥammad al-Shaykh, (August 2014, August 2016). Muḥammad al-Mahdī is the imam of the al-Taqwaý mosque in Nouadhibou where he is a member of the Regional Office of the League of 'Ulama'. He is also a researcher in the Principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*Uṣūl al-fiqh*).
17. On the importance of the cult of the saints in the culture of the countries of the Maghreb, see, Martin Smith and Ernst 2011; Dermenghem 1982; Chodkiewicz 2012. For an example of funeral rites and saints in another African country, see: Becker 2009.

18. Interview with Mintou Boyba Mamadou, September 2015. An interpreter assisted the author in this interview. Mintou Boyba Mamadou is a trader and she is politically very influential in her community.
19. Sheikh Ibrāhīm Nayās al-Kūlkhī (Kaolach, Senegal, 1900 – London, UK, 1975), is one of the greatest sheikhs of *Ṭariqa tījaniyya* in Africa of the twentieth century. He had several students, including Muḥammad al-Naḥwī (Gueye 1983, 30–32).
20. On the status of humility that wraps the dead who is going to the afterlife, where only good deeds serve, 'the deceased, from a president to a scientist, lose all these titles', imam Muḥammad al-Mahdī says. The story the Sufi imam al-Junayd tells is a case in point: one of his disciples saw him in his dream and 'asked him what Allah has preserved; alJunayd said: titles have fallen and symbols have disappeared and only a few prostrations (*rak'āt*) that we did at night are useful for us'. The imam cites this narrative as a demonstration of the futility of titles and awards that a dead man got in his life, (imam Muḥammad al-Mahdī 2015).
21. Interview with imam Blāl Ould Muḥammad Lamīn, August 2014 and August 2015. Blāl belongs to the *laḥrāṭin* group and serves as imam of the al-Ṣamad mosque in Nouadhibou. He is originally from the Hodh El Gharbi region and is an expert on the subject of the dead and funeral practices.
22. For more information about Salafism Discourse see: Roel (2009); Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem (2011).
23. Aisha recounted that the Prophet said: 'May Allah curse people who take the graves of their prophets as Masjids'. Reference: Sunan an-Nasa'i 2046. In-book reference: Book 21, *Ḥadīth* 23; www.sunnah.com, accessed April 25, 2018.
24. The meaning of *Allāh aifknā min ada'wa wa ahlhā* resides in the different terms used in this formula. In the first part, it means: 'May God save us'; in the second one, it is intended to prevent the curse (*ada'wa*) by a *walī* or another person who has been treated unfairly (*ahlhā*).
25. Interview with Kumbabaron, May 2018. An interpreter assisted the author with this interview. Kumbabaron is a member of the Woolf community.
26. For more information on the family structure in the Hodh region, see: Boulay (2005).
27. Among the miracles AmīnaYūsaf allegedly performed through the gift of seeing the thoughts of others, one example that is often cited is when she revealed to a person that they had been robbed and indicated where the robbers hid the stolen goods.
28. Interview with Muḥammad, May 2018. Muḥammad is an administrative assistant at the Nouadhibou municipality, originally from the Kiffa region.
29. Interview with Al-Nanna, May 2018. Al-Nanna is an elderly lady, originally from the Kiffa region. She practice the trade in a shop close her house. She is point of reference for many locals.
30. Interview with al-Khāl, May 2018. Al-Khāl is an elderly man, originally from Buti-limit (Trarza region); he is a trader in Nouadhibou.
31. Interview with Maryam, May 2018. Maryam is a young woman from a village near Kiffa. She is interested in the questions of miracles and saints.

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