MANUSCRIPTS

Back to Saharan Myths:[1] Preliminary Notes on ‘Uqba al-Mustajab

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Introduction

“Conversion is not only entering a new religion with its creed, dogmas and rituals. As the Latin etymology indicates, to convert is to get totally turned around. That means a new self-reappraisal following the adoption of a new cosmology. One visible aspect of conversion has been a radical change in the discourse of identity.”[2] This observation by the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane B. Diagne concerning the reconfiguration of identities following the conversion to a new religion, well suits the case of West African communities who, in the course of the centuries, converted to Islam. One of the most common “cultural and ideological tools”[3] to construct Muslim identities is the fabrication of genealogies, linking the communities that have accepted the new religion to relevant episodes and figures of the sacred history of Islam.[4]

A number of foundational myths widespread among Muslim communities of West Africa rely on the character of ‘Uqba al-Mustajab. As part of a wider study on the presence of this mythical character among different Islamized groups of West Africa,[5] this paper focuses on ‘Uqba al-Mustajab in the traditions of the Arabized Kunta tribe of the western Sahara and the Tuareg Kel Es-Suq of the central Sahelo-Saharan belt. Its aims are to analyse the differences that characterise the role of ‘Uqba al-Mustajab in the tradition circulating among these two groups, and to investigate how these differences create two variants of the myth serving different purposes.

1. A mythical ancestor for *Bidan* ‘Clerical Groups’: ‘Uqba al-Mustajab

The mythical character of ‘Uqba, known in West African traditions as *al-mustajab* (“the one whose prayers have been answered by the Almighty”),[6] primarily developed from ‘Uqba b. Nafi‘ al-Fihri (d. 683 C.E.), the Muslim conqueror of north Africa.[7] No external sources report that ‘Uqba b. Nafi‘ al-Fihri ever went beyond the oasis of Kawar, halfway between Fezzan (in today’s Lybian Sahara) and Kanem (north of lake Chad), as recorded by the Arab historian Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam (d. 871 C.E.).[8] Nevertheless, Saharan and Sahelian traditions unanimously refer to some alleged expeditions of ‘Uqba al-Mustajab deep into the western Sahara and south of the desert.

Harry T. Norris devotes a section of his seminal book *The Tuaregs – Their Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel* to the presence of ʻUqba al-Mustajab in the traditions of the *bidan*[9] populations of West Africa. In his study, the author emphasises that ʻUqba b. Nafiʻ al-Fihri is not the only historical figure to which the mythical character of ʻUqba al-Mustajab can be traced back. On the contrary, Norris observes that ʻUqba al-Mustajab has, indeed, a more complex origin: "He is a composite character uniting two great Muslim commanders".[10] The first is ʻUqba b. Nafiʻ al-Fihri, while the other is the companion of the Prophet and governor of Egypt in 665-7 C.E., ʻUqba b. ʻAmir al-Juhani.[11] Conflating the two ʻUqbas a mythical character emerges that is a "prince (*amir*) who combines in his person the military valour of the holy warrior (*mujahid*) and the spiritual power and sanctity of a religious leader (*murabit*)".[12] In this way – continues Norris – across the local traditions of the Sahelo-Saharan belt, from Mauritania to Niger, emerges the prototype ancestor of the so-called 'clerical groups' of West Africa.[13] According to most scholars, the emergence of clerical groups (called *zwaya* among the Arabized western Saharan tribes and *ineslemen* among the Tuaregs) in the region goes back to "a number of battles or migrations dated to the period 1650-1700".[14] This period of intense conflict led to the entrenchment of the hegemony of warrior tribes, while at the same time new groups emerged who redefined their status as clerical groups to distinguish themselves from their warrior counterparts. It is to these groups that, according to Bruce Hall, we owe the development of fictional genealogies linking them to "'saintly' ancestor[s]", such as ʻUqba al-Mustajab.[15]

> The mythical character of ʻUqba, known in West African traditions as al-mustajab ("the one whose prayers have been answered by the Almighty"), primarily developed from ʻUqba b. Nafiʻ al-Fihri (d. 683 C.E.), the Muslim conqueror of north Africa.

It is not surprising, then, that ʻUqba al-Mustajab figures as a mythical character in the traditions of two of the most important clerical groups of the region: the Arabized Kunta (*zwaya*) and the Tuareg Kel Es-Suq (*ineslemen*). In the following section, I analyse the myth of ʻUqba al-Mustajab as it is differently embodied in the traditions of these two groups. My analysis confirms the suggestion of Hall, according to which the traditions serve the purpose of those groups who claim ancestry to ʻUqba to represent themselves as the "vanguard of Islam".[16] However, my analysis of the myths also shed light on the existence of several differences characterising the two traditions, and argues that they serve different purposes according to the context to which they refer .

2. Two versions of the tradition of ʻUqba al-Mustajab

2.1 *Kunta version*

The version of the tradition of ʻUqba al-Mustajab circulating among the Kunta develops the theme of the Saharan and sub-Saharan Muslim conquests, but it does not differ substantially from the historical account of ʻUqba b. Nafiʻ al-Fihri. A well-known text written by Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtar al-Kunti b. Ahmad b. Abi Bakr al-Kunti al-Wafi (d. 1825-6), the *Risala al-Ghallawiyya*, records the standard version of the tradition on the origins of the Kunta.[17] This work is a lengthy text in which the section devoted to ʻUqba al-Mustajab occupies only the very first part. While, to the best of my knowledge, no other tradition develops the story further, a number of other Kunta sources accept ʻUqba al-Mustajab as ancestor, giving more or less the same account of the story. Among these, for example, is the important work of Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtar al-Kunti, the *Tara'if wa-l-tala'id*,[18] and the anonymous *Ta'rikh Kunta* collected by the French explorer George de Gironcourt (1868-1970) in Aguelhock (Mali), now in the holdings of the *Institut de France*.[19]

The outline of the tradition circulating among the Kunta is as follows: ʻUqba al-Mustajab b. Nafiʻ conquers north Africa, reaches the old empire of Ghana and arrives at the 'border of the inhabited world'. He returns to Qayrawan (in modern Tunisia) bringing with him the conquered berber chief Kusayla in chains. In the north African city ʻUqba is treacherously killed by Kusayla, who, having feigned conversion to Islam, joined the Arab conqueror in the Friday prayer and murders him before being killed by the Arabs himself. According to this tradition, ʻUqba is buried in Qayrawan,[20] and one of his sons, al-ʻAqib, stayed in Walata (today's eastern Mauritania), where his presumed tomb existed until 1914 when it collapsed.[21] However, the tradition does not identity this al-ʻAqib as the direct ancestor of the Kunta in the Sahara and the Sahel. In fact, it will

be only many generations after 'Uqba that another of his descendants, mentioned by the tradition as Duman, led his kin from north Africa to the oasis of Tuwat (southern Algeria), thus establishing the Kunta in the western Saharan desert.[22]

2.2 *Kel Es-Suq version*

The version of the tradition of 'Uqba al-Mustajab that circulates among the Kel Es-Suq is significantly different. According to it, 'Uqba al-Mustajab is 'Uqba b. 'Amir and all the most relevant episodes occur in the southern Sahara, between the cities of Walata and al-Suq/Tadmakka.[23] Contrary to the Kunta version, which is extensively narrated only in the *Risala Ghallawiyya*, many written documents report the Kel Es-Suq version. Among these are: a manuscript delivered in the early 20th century to the French lieutenant Maurice Cortier by the Kel Es-Suq scholar Mohammed Ouginatt;[24] a short, anonymous text entitled *Qissat ahl al-Suq*,[25] collected by de Gironcourt from the same Mohammed Ouginatt at the Mare de Fombalgo in Mali – this being, to the best of my knowledge, the only text entirely devoted to the tradition of 'Uqba al-Mustajab; a short chronicle written by a Kunta scholar called Sidi al-Mukhtar, the *Ta'rikh al-Suq wa-l-Sudan*, received by de Gironcourt in Aguelhock and now housed at the *Institut de France*;[26] another manuscript received by Jacques Hureiki from the Kel Es-Suq scholar Mohammed Ag Mohammed al-Amine, known as Moha, in Gary near Diré (Mali);[27] the anonymous *Ta'rikh al-suq wa-ulama'iha* in the Mamma Haidara Memorial Library in Timbuktu;[28] and a section from a 1950s Timbuktu chronicle called *Kitab al-tarjuman fi ta'rikh al-Sahra' wa-l-Sudan wa-balad Tinbuktu wa-Shinqit wa-Arwan* by Muhammad b. Mahmud b. al-Shaykh b. Abi Bakr b. Ahmad al-Hasani al-Suqi al-Arwani al-Tinbukti (d. 1973).[29]

A summary of the Kel Es-Suq tradition is as follows: In 61 A.H./680 C.E., during the caliphate of Mu'awiya b. Abi Sufyan (d. 680 C.E.),[30] an army of companions of the Prophet, among whom is 'Uqba b. 'Amir, was sent to the Maghreb by the caliph. They advanced across north Africa until they reached the Sus al-Aqsa (today's central Morocco) and from there moved southwards to al-Suq/Tadmakka. The city, then at its apogee, was conquered by the Muslim army which converted its people, built mosques and established muezzins. The king of al-Suq/Tadmakka was Kusayla who, fearing to be killed, also converted to Islam. 'Uqba then moved to Walata, leaving in al-Suq/Tadmakka a number of *sahaba* (companions of the Prophet), both *ansar* ('helpers', i.e. those companions who joined Muhammad in Medina) and *muhajirun* ('emigrants', i.e. those companions who migrated with the Prophet from Mecca) who are – this is the claim of the tradition – the ancestors of the 'people of al-Suq', that is the Kel Es-Suq. However, fearing treachery by Kusayla, 'Uqba took the Berber leader with him to Walata, where, while 'Uqba was performing the noon-prayer on the day of *'Id al-Adha*, Kusayla killed the Arab conqueror before being in his turn killed by the Arabs.[31]

> It is not surprising, then, that 'Uqba al-Mustajab figures as a mythical character in the traditions of two of the most important clerical groups of the region: the Arabized Kunta (zwaya) and the Tuareg Kel Es-Suq (ineslemen).

3. Temporal framework for the emergence of the tradition

The first element that emerges from the analysis of the traditions of 'Uqba al-Mustajab relates to the period its Kunta version started to circulate. To date the emergence of the tradition I rely on a fragment of a work attributed to the 16th century scholar Ahmad al-Bakkay (d. 1514-5)[32] and analysed by Thomas Whitcomb.[33] The fragment does not mention 'Uqba al-Mustajab as the mythical ancestor of the Kunta, nor add any other Arab forefather, ascribing to them a Berber ancestry.[34] The absence of 'Uqba al-Mustajab in this fragment marks a *termine post-quem* to place the emergence of an Arab ancestry for the Kunta and, as a consequence, the appearance of the mythical character of 'Uqba al-Mustajab. This means that the myth emerged among the Kunta sometime between the 16th century, and the early 19th century, the date of the *Risala al-ghallawiya*.

Unfortunately, very little can be said with regard to the time of the emergence of the 'Uqba al-Mustajab tradition among the Kel Es-Suq. According to Hureiki, this tradition was transmitted by the Kunta to the Kel Es-Suq in a later period (early 20th century).[35] The evidence he uses to support his hypothesis, however, is not entirely convincing. I have argued that it is likely that it developed among the Kel Es-Suq between the 17th to 19th centuries, as part of a larger reconfiguration of their status of *ineslemen*.[36]

The issue of whether the tradition of 'Uqba al-Mustajab was transmitted from the Kunta to the Kel Es-Suq (or vice versa), or it emerged independently in the two groups as a borrowing from written sources circulating in the region,[37] cannot be analyzed at this stage of my research. However, the temporal framework detected for the emergence of 'Uqba al-Mustajab among both the Kunta and the Kel Es-Suq confirms Hall's intuition that it was around the 17th century that such legitimatory traditions developed among the newly emerged Saharan clerical groups.[38]

4. One mythical ancestor, two different myths

Contrary to several studies which refer to the tradition regarding 'Uqba al-Mustajab as a shared foundational myth for many West African groups, and specifically for the Kunta and the Kel Es-Suq,[39] I argue that according to the context, the function of the mythical ancestor also changes. While accepting Norris' suggestion that 'Uqba al-Mustajab is the conflation of two historical characters, my argument is that the different personalities of the two 'Uqbas in the two versions of the myth are of utmost significance, the personality of 'Uqba b. Nafi' for the Kunta, and that of 'Uqba b. 'Amir for the Kel Es-Suq.

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Among the Kunta 'Uqba al-Mustajab, which is always recorded as Ibn Nafi', is the ancestor who is responsible for the transmission of an Arab bloodline. The tradition is thus primarily related to racial issues, whereas the reference to Islam, though existing, is only implicit. As Hall points out, the Kunta "writers in the southern Sahara would do their outmost to ensure that the religious authority was entangled with lineage."[40] The Kunta version is carefully kept as close as possible to historical events. In linking their ancestry to the first Muslim conqueror of Africa, "[t]he Kunta were able to situate themselves as the first to bring Islam to West Africa".[41]

For the Kel Es-Suq, 'Uqba al-Mustajab, the son of 'Amir, is not the Arab ancestor. When Tuareg groups claim Arab blood, they do it by invoking other ancestors, such as the *shurafa* (descending from the Prophet) or the Kel Ansar (descending form the *ansar*, the helpers of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina).[42] In the Kel Es-Suq version of the tradition of 'Uqba al-Mustajab the ancestor of the people of Tadmakka/al-Suq is not the protagonist of the myth, but the *sahaba*, those companions of the Prophet who allegedly remained in the city after 'Uqba al-Mustajab had left! 'Uqba al-Mustajab is for the Kel Es-Suq a 'saintly' figure more than a military conqueror or the ancestor of the tribe. He is the Islamizer of the city, and great emphasis is posited on him building mosques and establishing muezzins. He is completely transfigured into a 'saint' who initiated Islam among the Kel Es-Suq before his murder. The event of the murder, assumes in the Kel Es-Suq version a more dramatic tone. Although both versions have 'Uqba al-Mustajab treacherously killed by Kusayla (a murder that personifies, probably not by chance, that of the caliph 'Uthman b. 'Affan),[43] for the Kel Es-Suq he was killed not during the Friday prayer, but during the most holy day of the *'Id al-adha*.

However, the significance of the martyrdom of 'Uqba al-Mustajab suggests that another historical 'Uqba might have been the referent in this tradition, one omitted in Norris' analysis. In a work written in *c.* 1830, the 19th century Sokoto leader Muhammad Bello suggests another referent for 'Uqba al-Mustajab: one of the Companions of the Prophet martyred in the battle of Aqraba' in 632, 'Uqba b. 'Amir al-Khazraji of the *ansar*.[44] This figure, with his story of martyrdom, is possibly a more significant and immediate referent for the construction of the mythical character of 'Uqba al-Mustajab among the Kel Es-Suq.

Conclusion

Drawing on the existing literature, complemented with a new reading of primary sources, this paper finds that the mythical character of 'Uqba al-Mustajab present in the traditions of the Kunta and the Kel Es-Suq is the result of the combination of three different, historical figures, all known to early Muslim historiography: 'Uqba b. Nafi' al-Fihri, 'Uqba b. 'Amir al-Jihani and 'Uqba b. 'Amir al-Khazraji. However, my argument is that, instead of a single myth shared by different groups who have conflated three historical characters into one narration, we have the presence of a mythical character whose personality and function changes according to the

context. In one version of the tradition, ʻUqba al-Mustajab is mainly the conqueror of North Africa who passed his Arab descent on to the Kunta, while in the other one ʻUqba al-Mustajab represents the Islamizer-ancestor of the Kel Es-Suq. Thus, ʻUqba al-Mustajab for the Kunta is mainly a mythical character shaped on ʻUqba b. Nafiʼ al-Fihri, while ʻUqba al-Mustajab for the Kel Es-Suq refers mainly to the two companions of the Prophet ʻUqba b. ʻAmir al-Juhani and ʻUqba b. Nafiʼ al-Fihri. The function of the mythical character changes according to the context, or, to put it in other words, a different context 'requires' a different ʻUqba al-Mustajab. In this way, the paper argues that the myth of ʻUqba al-Mustajab adjusts to different historical, social, cultural and political contexts shaping itself according to the contingencies. This conclusion suggests a new reading of the agency of Muslim communities of scholars in West Africa, a phenomenon whose full appreciation goes far beyond the scope of the paper. Far from being in the presence of a case of naive misinterpretation of the sources by an unlearned chronicler, the conflation of different historical figures with the same name in the myth of Uqba al-Mustajab is the product of a manipulation of the sources for specific purposes.[45] This manipulation requires a fundamental knowledge of the historiographical literature and, even more importantly, a conscious agency on the part of the storytellers, thus confirming the intellectual 'vibrancy' of West African Muslim historians that has recently been highlighted by the inspiring studies of scholars like Scott S. Reese and Paulo de Moraes Farias.[46]

Far from being in the presence of a case of naive misinterpretation of the sources by an unlearned chronicler, the conflation of different historical figures with the same name in the myth of Uqba al-Mustajab is the product of a manipulation of the sources for specific purposes

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Notes

1 This title explicitly recalls the classic study by Harry T. Norris *Saharan Myths and Saga* (Norris 1972).
2 Diagne 2004: 21.
3 Hall 2005: 344.
4 See for example Conrad 1985.
5 The paper omits the study of the Fulani traditions, although many manuscripts report traditions relating the Fulani's origins to ‘Uqba *al-Mustajab*.
6 Norris 1975: 17.
7 Levtzion 1978: 637.
8 Levtzion & Hopkins 1981: 12-13.
9 The southern-Saharan population is commonly divided between *bidan* (‘white’), referring to groups of Arab and/or Berber pedigree, and those who do not have such descent, defined as the *sudan* (‘black’).
10 Norris 1975: 17.
11 The confusion may have originated with the medieval Arab geographer and historian Yaqut (d. 1224), who records the name ‘Uqba b. Amir in place of ‘Uqba b. Nafi‘ (Levtzion & Hopkins 1981: 469).
12 Norris 1975: 19 (due to ARIA's editorial requirements, I removed the diacritical marks in the quotation).
13 Norris 1975: 27.
14 Stewart 1977: 76.
15 Hall 2005: 356. Norris noticed that these genealogies appear in the same period, but does not attempt to explain the phenomenon (Norris 1975: 23).
16 Hall 2005: 359.
17 On the *Risala al-ghallawiyya*, see Hunwick et al. 2003: 111, n° 49. The text is translated in Hamet 1911.
18 Ms. *Institut de France*, *Fonds De Gironcourt* 2407 (121); on this work see Hunwick et al. 2003: 113, n° 63. On the *Fonds de Gironcourt*, see Nobili 2008-2009.
19 Ms. *Institut de France*, *Fonds De Gironcourt* 2406 (90).
20 Actually, ‘Uqba b. Nafi‘ al-Fihri was defeated and killed in battle, on his way back to Qayrawan from the extreme Maghreb, by Kusayla (d. 686) near Biskra (Algeria), where his tomb still exists in the village of Sidi Oqba.
21 Batran 1979: 116 quotes the German explorer Heinrich Barth (d. 1865).
22 According to historical reconstructions, this migration happened between the second half of the 14th century and first half of the 15th (Batran 1979: 116).
23 An inscription analysed by Paulo de Moraes Farias strengthens the old hypothesis that the city of Tadmakkat described by the Arab geographers is the site of al-Suq (Moraes Farias 2003: 87-88, inscription 104).
24 Cortier 1908: 394-396.
25 Ms. *Institut de France*, *Fonds de Gironcourt*, 2410 (133), translated in Norris 1975: 22-23.
26 Ms. *Institut de France*, *Fonds de Gironcourt*, 2406 (119).
27 Hureiki 2003: 393-396 (French translation) and 719-722 (Arabic Text).
28 Ms. Mamma Haidara Memorial Library, 3450. I thank the Tombo*uct*ou Project for allowing me to use this manuscript.
29 Ahmad Baba Institute for Higher Islamic Studies and Researches, 769; on this work see Hunwick et al. 2003: 59, n° 7. I thank Dr. Shahid Mathee for this reference.
30 According to the tradition collected by Cortier, ‘Uqba b. ‘Amir was sent by the caliph ‘Uthman b. ‘Affan (d. 656) (Cortier 1908: 395).
31 According to ms. *Institut de France*, *Fonds De Gironcourt*, 2406 (119), the murder of ‘Uqba happens in Qayrawan, following the Kunta variation of the saga.
32 Not to be confused with the 19th century Ahmad al-Bakkay b. Muhammad b. al-Mukhtar al-Kunti al-Wafi (d. 1865). Actually, the fragment is from the work of a certain Ahmad b. al-hajj ‘Abd Allah (*fl. c.* late 17th, early 18th century), who quotes the genealogy of Ahmad al-Bakkay the elder taken from one of the latter's work (Whitcomb 1975: 108-109).
33 Whitcomb 1975.
34 Whitcomb 1975: 113.
35 Hureiki 2003: 399.
36 Nobili 2011: 126-129.
37 Hall stresses the importance of written sources in the construction of myths concerning race and ancestry in the Sahelo-Saharan region (Hall 2005: 355).
38 Hall 2005: 346.
39 Both local and foreign scholars underestimated the differences between the different versions of the myth of *‘Uqba al-Mustajab*. See, for example, the *Nasihat al-umma fi isti‘mal al-rukhsa* by Sidi Mawlay Muhammad al-Hadi (cit. in Norris 1975: 22) or Levtzion 1978: 637. On the contrary, Norris stresses the existence of “[i]mportant differences between the Kunta version of the ‘Oqba [i.e. ‘Uqba] story and that of the Kel Es-Suq” (Norris 1975: 25).
40 Hall 2005: 355.
41 Hall 2005: 359.
42 Grémont 2010: 92.
43 Norris 1975: 25.
44 Bello, cit. in Delafosse 1912: 263.
45 Hureiki records that, when he insisted to his Tuareg informant that their ancestor might be ‘Uqba b. Nafi‘ al-Fihri, the informant stressed that the ‘Uqba al-Mustajab mentioned in the Tuareg traditions is not ‘Uqba b. Nafi‘, but ‘Uqba b. ‘Amir (Hureiki 2003: 399).
46 Reese 2004 and Moraes Farias 2004.