

"History of the Western Sanhaja," first and last pages of Sidiyya Baba's text which occupies pages 160-217 of H.T. Norris, *Saharan Myth and Saga* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1972).

A much smaller excerpt, found in the narrative essay of this gallery, is from page 211. Note that one of the many Frenchmen who spent time with Baba at Butilimit, a certain Captain Gerard, is mentioned in the narrative and gave strong encouragement to Baba to write this work.

Excerpt from pp. 160-163 and 211-213.

MANUSCRIPT B

A HISTORY OF
THE WESTERN ṢANHĀJA

By

Shaykh Sidyā Bāba (d. A.D. 1924)
of the Awlād Abyayrī

Folio 1

IN the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds. There is no way to assess His grace just as there is no way to comprehend His nature or to know His wisdom or His grandeur. His perfect knowledge encompassed the first and the last. They pastured among His abiding favours and His all-embracing clemency. [He is] the king of truth who every day lives, and who does not die. Among all those creatures upon the [earth], He has created man and has taught him clear speech and given to him two eyes and a tongue and two lips. He has guided him in the Najrayn [Mecca and Medina] and has subordinated the night and the day, the sun and the moon, and they pursue their course. He has made the earth to be as a bed for man and the heavens as an edifice. He has sent down water from the sky and by it He has made fruits to grow to be a sustenance for him, and for him He has created all there is in the earth. He has honoured him and has carried him on the land and the sea and has exalted him. He has given him all he has asked, for him to adore Him, to proclaim his belief in His unity, to thank Him, to praise Him, and to exalt Him. He has sent His Prophet Muḥammad to all men as a bearer of good tidings and as a warner and summoner to God, by His permission, and as a shining lamp. He has sent down the glorious Qur'ān which, were mankind and *jinn* to agree to produce another like it, they could not do so even if the one were to aid the other. The blessing and peace of God be upon him and upon his brother prophets and messengers and those who followed them, with bounty and favour, in the beginning and the end.

To proceed. It is not hidden from the man of understanding and percipience and from the distinguished scholar and man of letters what the books of history contain of learned matters. Their likes are scarcely to be found in books in other sciences, and [also] wise sayings and writings of a literary kind. Such are not acquired save from them, likewise conversation moving from one topic to another, and reports of matters whereby the rulings of the *Shari'a* are disclosed for keen-sighted '*ulamā*' and just views for most distinguished intelligentsia. [There are besides] noble deeds. He who hears them spoken of makes them an exalted object before his eyes, and follows them to his best ability.

Tales which those of note pass round during discourses on moonlit nights and amid the breezes of the late hours of the night and the fragrant odours of the flowers—the inclusion of them in sermons, and their consideration from every aspect in the viewing of accounts of those former ages, is something peculiar and special to those who ponder and reflect. As Qishr b. Sā'ida¹ said [in metre *al-Kāmil*], observing that faculty:

We have visions of those who first set forth in ages past,
When I beheld death's water-holes which have no issue
And I saw my people, the youngest and the oldest going towards
them.

He who has gone returns not to me, nor is there one among them
who remains.

I was thus sure that I could not escape that end which had
befallen other men than me.

I was surprised at the scholars and lettered men of this Saharan, Maghribi² Moorish land, in view of their virtue and nobility, how it had come about that they had paid no attention to its history in some book which would take account of [it] from the beginning of time until the present day. This, despite the abundance of great events which have taken place in it, and which merited some attention being paid to their recording, as did the [lives of] the multitude

¹ Qishr b. Sā'ida in the translated text is an unknown poet. According to Mukhtār wuld Hāmidun the name should be Bishr b. Abī Khāzim.

² Maghribī in this context must be understood as referring to North-West Africa without any precise signification. During his discourse the author refers vaguely to negro African states as Maghribī, as opposed to Mashriqī, which denotes regions near to Egypt and the Middle East. He further qualifies the land as *biḍāni*, 'Moorish', in the sense of *Maure* used by French writers to describe the inhabitants of the western Sahara, Arabs or Berbers.

of the greatest men from every class who were in it, and whose lives should not be left forgotten, together with their illustriousness. Had I discovered a dependable book about that, I would have put in writing the conspicuous therein.

After my writing this, to be precise the folios of this epistle, our brother and active scholar Muḥammad Fāl b. Bāba al-‘Alawī¹ sent me the *Kitāb al-Wasīṭ*² written by the distinguished man of letters Aḥmad b. al-Amīn al-‘Alawī resident in Cairo, may God Almighty have mercy upon him.³ Then it was that after the French occupation of [this country] at the end of the second decade and the beginning of the third decade of the fourteenth century [twentieth century A.D.],⁴ some of the greatest men asked me to write about this, because of their interest in knowledge and in education and the benefits to be derived from the circumstances surrounding long by-gone events, and those others which came after. I excused myself, as has been mentioned, for fear lest the threat of punishment befall me, on account of the tradition of the Prophet: ‘It is sufficient for a man to lie, by recounting all that he has heard a Muslim proclaim.’⁵

Then it was that in the thirtieth year of the aforesaid century, the noble and lettered commander,

Folio 2

Captain Gerard, spoke with me about that, and I said to him the same thing as I had said to those before him. He was content with

¹ Muḥammad Fāl b. Bāba b. Aḥmad Bayba was a Ṣūfī scholar and author from the Īdaw ‘Alī of the Trārza. He was one of the shaykhs of the Tījāniya ṭariqa, and he died three days before the end of Rajab 1349/27 Nov. 1930.

² *al-Wasīṭ*. See the remarks of ‘Abd al-Wadūd b. Aḥmad Mawlūd in the text of his MS. regarding this work.

³ Aḥmad b. al-Amīn al-‘Alawī, the author of the above work, was an Īdaw ‘Alī from al-Medhdherdhra, and he lived approximately between A.D. 1863 and 1913; see the article by Ahmad Baba Miské, ‘al-Wasīṭ (1911), tableau de la Mauritanie à la fin du XIX siècle’, *Bull. I.F.A.N.*, t. xxx, sér. B, no. 1 (1968), pp. 121-31.

⁴ Treaties between the French and the rulers of the Trārza, the Brākna, and the Īdaw ‘Īsh were signed between 1835 and 1885. The twentieth century saw the creation of Port Etienne, 1904, the assassination of Coppolani, 1905, the arrival of General Gouraud in Āṭār, and the submission of Āṭār and Wādān in 1908. The protectorate of the Moorish districts was created in May 1903; by the decree of 18 Oct. 1904 it was placed under the control of a Commissioner of the Gouvernement général de l’A.O.F. The decree of 4 Dec. 1920 transformed Mauritania into a colony.

⁵ This *ḥadīth* is a variant of the *ḥadīth* cited by the author of Manuscript A. See p. 134.

what was easy for me to summarize and was satisfied with what was at hand. I say—and God Almighty is the one relied upon in every hope—the French state entered this country at the date mentioned, and the military power and leadership there for centuries belonged to two groups of people. One of them was the Īdaw ‘Īsh and the other the Maghāfira.¹ As for the domain of the Mashdūf in the Ḥawḍ, it only existed in the thirteenth century [nineteenth century A.D.], and as for the domain of the Ahl Sid Maḥmūd of the Īdaw al-Ḥājj in Argayba,² that was in the aforesaid century also; although in reality it was but a branch of the realm of the Īdaw ‘Īsh. As for the additional military power of the people of the north-west, the Rgaybāt³ and Awlād Bu Sbā’⁴ and others besides them in this land during the years the French entered it, this is also an accidental matter and not one of rulers. One of its causes was that the famous 1874 rifles, or the like, fell into their hands before other Moorish people of this country [possessed them]; this combined with the preoccupation of the Arabs⁵ of the land, their disregard through their preoccupation with the French, and in the deterioration of relations between them in other respects.

As for the Īdaw ‘Īsh they are [descended] from the Lamtūna.⁶ The scholar Sid ‘Abdullāh b. al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm al-‘Alawī al-Tījīkī⁷

¹ Maghāfira denotes those members of the Banū Ḥassān who claim descent from Maghfar b. Ūday b. Ḥassān. The name more particularly denotes the Trārza, the Brākna, the Khwāwāt, the Awlād Da’ūd, the Awlād Yaḥya b. ‘Uḥmān, the Awlād Mubārak, the Awlād Da’ūd Mḥammad, the Awlād Khalīfa, the Rmaytāt, and the Awlād al-Nāṣir.

² Argayba is a southern region of Mauritania in the vicinity of the A’šāba. The successful engagement of ‘Abdullāh b. Sīdī Maḥmūd al-Ḥājjī against the Kunta is referred to in *al-Wasīf*, p. 451.

³ The Rgaybāt and their history are described in detail by Commandant A. Cauncille, ‘Les nomades reguibat’, *Travaux de l’Institut de recherches sahariennes*, Algiers, t. 6 (1950), pp. 83–100. They are not to be confused with the geographical region referred to on p. 185, n. 5.

⁴ The Awlād Bu Sbā’, like the Rgaybāt, claim to be *shurafā’*. They were formerly Zwāya, but are now considered Ḥassān; see *al-Wasīf*, p. 509.

⁵ The author appears to refer to all the warrior tribes by this term, in particular the Banū Ḥassān.

⁶ See p. 213, n. A.

⁷ Sīdī ‘Abdullāh b. al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm (d. c. 1233 A.H./A.D. 1818) is reckoned by the Moors to be among the most important of their scholars of the late eighteenth century. He spent a lifetime in study and research in the religious sciences and particularly in jurisprudence and *ḥadīth*, and he achieved fame by his poetry and in his mastery of rhetoric. He studied *fiqh* under the master al-Mukhtār b. Būna al-Jakanī, and then later left the Sahara to perform the pilgrimage, and to study at Fez and in Egypt where he was honoured by academics and potentates alike (see *al-Wasīf*, pp. 37–40).

and the Awlād Abyayr ended with the departure of some of the Awlād Bu Sbā' to the north-east.

The reason for the wars which took place between the Zwāya, in ancient and in modern times, was the lawlessness and anarchy of the country and the lack of interest of fighting men and others in [the country] in following the Glorious Qur'ān in which [God] says, 'Where two parties of believers fight each other, then make peace between them, both equitably, and act with justice. Verily, God loves those who are just.'¹ God Almighty, who is the All-Knowing and All-Wise, brought the French state, and they spared the bloodshed of these poor people and restrained aggressive hands from their possessions. What favour is greater than that, and what advantage is there above that which lends to others benefits such as the wells which they have dug and soundly constructed, and the markets which they have established, and the skilled doctors and the numerous medicines [supplied] without charge? Since the death of the respected doctor and active scholar and man of letters, Awfā [b. Abī Bakr],² may God Almighty have mercy upon him, there has been no skilled doctor among the Moors. The benefits of French medicines and doctors have been tried and proved, such as the removal of smallpox from the land. There used to be hardly a year free of it, and it was usual for death to occur because of it, or blindness, or loss of an eye, or deformity. [It has led] to the treatment of many grave illnesses. Were the Zwāya and Arabs and others besides them of the people of this land to remember the situation they were once in, the killing, the looting, the feuds, the forms of injustice, and to recall it, and to put the blessings which have come to them because of the French before their very eyes, they would be full of joy that they came, and know that nothing equals good health,

Folio 21

and that the common good bestows dignity.

Likewise the Zwāya, had conciliation been their companion, there would not have been such wars between them, since they would not have engaged in a tug of war for sovereignty, nor would they have sought to gain advantage. They have the Qur'ānic verse,

¹ The Qur'ān, *sūrat al-ḥujurāt*, v. 9.

² Awfā was born in 1217 A.H./A.D. 1802, and he died in 1300 A.H./A.D. 1883.

'He who slays a believer intentionally . . .', and they recite it.¹ The two *Ṣhaykhs*² have declared on the authority of Abū Bakr that he said, 'I have heard the Messenger of God, the blessing and peace of God be upon him, say, "When two Muslims confront one another with their swords, then both the slayer and the slain will be in hell-fire." He said, "I said", or "it was said, O Messenger of God, this [man] is the slayer, so what harm has the slain man committed?"' The Prophet said, "He wished to kill his companions."'

But what God wishes will be, and what He does not want will not be, and there is no might nor power save in God. Muslim³ declared in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* on the authority of Sa'd that the Messenger of God, the blessing and peace of God be upon him, one day came from *al-'Alīya*,⁴ and when he passed the mosque of the Banū Mu'āwiya he entered within and performed two *rak'as* there. We prayed with him, and he prayed to God for a long time, then he went to us, and he said, 'I have asked God for three things. He has given me two and has denied me one. I asked God that he would not destroy my community by barrenness and drought, and he has granted my request, and I asked him that he would not destroy my community by drowning, and he has granted my request, and I asked him that he would not cause affliction brought upon themselves, but he has denied me this.'

Among the expressions noised abroad, both in the past and in the present, is the saying of the Banū Ḥassān '*at-ṭalba a'jam*', 'the *Zwāya* are Berbers', as a current maxim. Now if by it they mean their lineage in order to stultify in some matters, then perhaps it indicates that the origin of the *Zwāya* is the *Ṣanhāja*, who are in fact related to the Berbers or deemed to be so.⁵ However, it is as if the intention is that the *Zwāya* do not possess the intelligence of the Arabs because their origin is non-Arab [i.e. Berber]. It is said that the famous scholar al-Mukhtār b. Būna al-Jakanī,⁶ the author of famous works in theology, grammar, rhetoric, and logic, said to one of them when he heard him make this remark, 'As for your powers of intelligence, they have spoilt your lives in both this

¹ See the Qur'an, *sūrat al-nisā'*, v. 93.

² al-Bukhārī (d. A.D. 870) and Muslim (d. A.D. 875), the greatest collectors of traditions of the Prophet. See the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī, chapter on faith (*imān*), Bāb 22; *tawājaha* should read *iltaqā*.

³ See the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim, chapter on feuds (*fitan*), Bāb 20.

⁴ Upper Mecca or plateau area.

⁵ See p. 216, n. G.

⁶ See *al-Wasīf*, pp. 277-83.

world and the next, but as for our powers of intelligence, they have redeemed our lives in both this world and the next.

If those things which we have verified or heard from these reports be seriously studied, and their details pursued further, then discussion would be greatly prolonged. God knows best.' End of quotation.

'As for the second group, the people in power and who bear arms in this country, and who are the Maghāfira . . .'. End of quotation.

Here ends what our father Shaykh Sīdyā b. Shaykh Sīd Muḥammad b. Shaykh Sīdyā, may God be pleased with them, Amen, has gathered together of the accounts of this Moorish country. I have asked al-Sīd Muḥammad Fāl b. Bāba b. Aḥmad Bayba al-'Alawī¹ to complete this book by what has reached him regarding reports of the Trārza and others besides them among the tribes of the Maghāfira, together with what is connected with such, concerning the deaths of Zwāya scholars in this country. He collected this compilation for me. It begins with discussion of the Trārza. May God Almighty reward him with favour. Amen. Muḥammad b. Shaykh Sīdyā wrote on the 16 Rabi' II, in the year 1344 A.H./ Tuesday 3 November A.D. 1925.

NOTES

A. This claim is made by the Īdaw 'Īsh, either directly or indirectly by virtue of their Himyarite descent. The Īdaw 'Īsh, whose name some Moorish scholars fancifully regard as a corruption of Banū Wārith, one of the medieval Sanhāja 'drum-groups', undoubtedly claim to be Sanhāja, and the term Anbāt is often used by them to prove it. This title was also used by the Nyarzig of whom only a few fractions remain. It occurs in the famous *rasm* of Saddūm wuld Njartu, and it denotes the chiefs of the Īdaw 'Īsh (see my *Shinqīṭī Folk Literature and Song*, Oxford, 1968, p. 80). Elsewhere the term is pejorative, since certain tributaries are called Anbāt Znāga. Some identify the name with that of the Yanātibūn, who were probably a servant group or a corps of guards attached to the king of Tageddā (see Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, 1325-54, trans. H. A. R. Gibb, *The Broadway Travellers*, 1939, pp. 337 and 383). Such an identification is highly disputable, since it is likely that a black tributary (*waṣīf*) is referred to (see *Textes et documents relatifs à l'histoire de l'Afrique*,

¹ See p. 162, n. 1.