CHAPTER 5

Method and Message

At this point we can take up the question to be answered in the next three chapters, namely, how al-Wālī fashioned himself as a scholar and made his work significant for his environment. As a first step, this chapter will present an analysis of the most important pillar of his reputation, *The peerless method for understanding the science of theology* (*Al-manhaj al-farīd fi maʿrifat ʿilm al-tawḥīd*). This text has been highly regarded in more quarters than any of the other texts that bear his name, both in his own time and later. Thirty-two copies of it are still extant. Most of them are kept in libraries in Nigeria, while some are in Niger, Ghana, and Mali. A number of copies that were collected in Segou are now in Paris.[1] The fact that *The peerless method* (and al-Wālī's own versified abridgement, *Sweet water source of the inmost attributes of the Lord*) has been passed on and preserved so often demonstrates that it has answered the needs of audiences that have discussed, appraised, and cited it.

The origin of the text—of which al-Wālī was not the sole author—is complex, and this makes it a rich source of information. In the first place, it is a text situated in the heart of Ashʿarī theology, or more specifically *tawḥīd*, the science of God's oneness.

Secondly, *The peerless method* is a commentary on a canonical text, the *ʿaqīda al-ṣughra* or 'small creed', (hereafter 'the *Ṣughra*'), by the North African theologian al-Sanūsī. Composing a commentary is a specific way of transfering and passing on selected knowledge from one environment to another. Generally speaking, commentating concerns knowledge with authority, which is deemed important as a point of reference in the social or intellectual life of the commentator. It is about the explanation and interpretation of canonical texts (or music or painting) in terms of the specific culture of a different time, place, ethnic background or class; about linking canon to cultural identity. As such, commentaries say as much about the culture of the interpreters as about the interpreted text. In an exceptional essay on the genre of commentary writing, Aron Hughes argues that, while negotiating between two worlds, interpretations of canonical religious texts present an authoritative view of the basic values of the community for which they are written. They are intended to be normative for a new community which they provide with their own code

1 *ALA* II, 35, 36.

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and legitimacy. In the relationship between canonical text and commentary, the former facilitates the latter. 'Commentary may think *with* the text it interprets; it is almost never *about* it.'[2] The aim, then, of this chapter is to uncover what *The peerless method* really *is* about, and how it links canon to the cultural and political environment of central Sudanic Africa in the seventeenth century. It will allow us, in chapter 7, to discuss al-Wālī's relationship as an author with this message of *The peerless method*.

Thirdly, this commentary stems from a Fulfulde oral tradition of teaching Islam, which was based on al-Sanūsī's *Ṣughra* and had existed since the sixteenth century, and which al-Wālī claims to have only translated. In the nineteenth century this tradition was known as the *kabbe*, a name which, for the sake of convenience, will also be used here, although it is uncertain either whether the term was used in the seventeenth century, or to what extent today's *kabbe* versions correspond to the earliest forms.

The composers of predecessors of *The peerless method* are anonymous, but the reader must be warned that I will often speak in the plural of the *authors* of *The peerless method*, because of the contribution of others to earlier versions.

The method in this chapter is twofold. First it will analyse the relationship between *The peerless method* and the traditions on which it is based. It will then explore the meaning and intention of the resulting text. A close comparison of *The peerless method* with the *Ṣughra* on the one hand and with what we know of the *kabbe* tradition on the other, will reveal the choices that were made and the ideas that were either adopted or left out. The adaptations will uncover motivations that were relevant to the cultural, social and historical environment of seventeenth-century central Sudanic Africa.

For the present study I have used copies of four manuscripts. I closely studied manuscript Hunwick 178 (kept at NU) and another that is kept in the library at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, catalogue number 48.[3] I later compared these with two manuscripts from the Segou collection in Paris, numbers 5650 and 5541. Mistakes that were made in copying both Hunwick 178 and the Ibadan manuscript suggest a direct relationship between these two. In both versions the number of mistakes (not always the same ones) increases towards the end. Both copyists seem to have been less and less captivated by the text as it became more repetitive. Although Hunwick 178 has more mistakes than Ibadan 48, my references are to the former, because this copy is more

2 A. Hughes, 'Presenting the Past: the Genre of Commentary in Theoretical Perspective', in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 15 (2003), 164–165.

3 My copy bears two numbers: 82 and 48.

easily available and its handwriting is generally clear. The manuscript is not an original but a photocopy. References are to numbers I gave the photocopied pages, starting with 1 where the text starts with the *basmallah*, and ending with 57.

1 Al-Sanūsī's *Ṣughra*

In al-Wālī's lifetime al-Sanūsī's *Al-ʿaqīda al-ṣughra* had been a canonical text in North and West Africa for quite a while: very soon after it was written, the West African Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ḥawḍī (d. 1505) produced a versification, copies of which are now in libraries in Boutilimit, Segou and Timbuktu.[4] A few decades later one of the most respected scholars of Timbuktu, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr b. Baghayogho al-Wangarī (1523–1594), made another versification,[5] and dozens of copies of the *Ṣughra* itself were found in almost all of the West African collections. In the nineteenth century commentaries and versifications were also made in other languages such as Hausa, and numerous commentaries were written in the Mashriq.[6]

Abū ʿAbdallah Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī was born in 1428 near Tlemcen, a town in the mountains of today's Algeria, which had been one of the main cultural centres of the Maghrib for many centuries. He died there in 1486. He wrote about law, algebra and medicine, but was most famous, perhaps even during his own life-time and certainly soon afterwards, for his 'creeds', the *ʿaqīda al-kubra* (or *ʿaqīdat ahl al-tawḥīd wal-tasdīd al-mukhrija min ẓulamāt al-jahl wa-raqbat al-taqlīd*), the *ʿaqīda al-wusta* (also called *Al-jumal* or *al-murshida*), and the *ʿaqīda ahl al-tawḥīd al-ṣughra*, which is also called *Al-ṣughra* or *Al-Sanūsiyya* or *Umm al-barāhīn*. They are all similar in content, treating the same theme of the Ashʿari doctrine on the attributes of God and the prophets. The *Ṣughra*, as it is referred to in *The peerless method*, is elementary, while the longer texts, including a separate 'introduction' and commentary by al-Sanūsī (*al-muqaddima*), discuss more topics more extensively and polemically, criticising Christian, Muʿtazilite, and other points of view. All these texts

4 *Wāsiṭat al-sulūk*. Hall & Stewart 2011, 170; GAL S II, 355.

5 For the author see *ALA* IV, 33. Ms Arabe 5484 (Paris) was consulted.

6 Hall & Stewart 2011, p. 137; See also A. Berbrugger, "Abd Allah Teurdjman, renégat de Tunis en 1388.' In *Revue Africaine*5 (1861), 262; Hiskett (1975, 68, 69) writes about a poem in Hausa that shows much similarity with the *Ṣughra*. I found two short poems (in Arabic) that resemble the *Ṣughra* or *The peerless method* in Chad, copies of which are kept in the library of Leiden University. For comments from the Mashriq see *GAL* II, 250.

have played an essential role in teaching theology in North and West Africa (as well as in Egypt and Asia) up to the twentieth century, but the *Ṣughra* was and is by far the most popular and the most highly respected.[7] In *The peerless method* it is presented as a text that al-Sanūsī found on the 'preserved tablet' (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*) that is believed to contain all books of the revelation.[8]

Al-Sanūsī's theological work was that of a scholastic, a master of *kalām*. It deals with God's ontology from an axiomatic point of view, from where His attributes are deduced. From there the logical implications for the relationship between God and man are deduced. Al-Sanūsī's thought is permeated with the terms and concepts of Aristotelian logic, usually designated by the Arabic term *manṭiq*. His 'proofs' are indeed *barāhīn* (sing. *burhān*): they follow from a methodical argument within the logical framework. The word is to be distinguished from another type of 'proof' (*adilla*, sing. *dalīl*), which is the unmistakable sign of something else, the way smoke is the sign of a fire.[9] The *Ṣughra's* nickname *Umm al-barāhīn* was deserved.

By contrast with the abstract character of this work, as a person al-Sanūsī was remembered as an ascetic, as a pious and humble man, and as a good teacher with special sympathy for the poor and those who lacked formal education, but also as someone who shied away from social interactions, especially whenever the authorities were involved.[10] His lifestyle helped to win him the reputation of a 'walī', a 'friend of God'. Al-Sanūsī was often held to know things that could not be known by reason, to see truths the eye cannot perceive, and to be

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7 E.I.; Hall and Stewart, in Krätli & Lydon 2011, 137. Today in northern Nigeria the text is best know as *Umm al-barāhīn*, and it is taught in secondary schools. In Indonesia it is still in print as *Al-ʿaqīda al-sanūsiyya*, in a popular series of booklets called *kutub kuning* or yellow books. I thank Dr. N.J. Kaptein for showing me some copies printed in the 21st century.

8 Hunwick 178, 9.

9 See J. van Ess, 'The logical structure of Islamic theology' in I.R. Netton (ed.) *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, II. London: Routledge, 2007, 35–38.

10 In 1519 Sīdī Aḥmad al-Abbadī sent information about al-Sanūsī to a colleague in Fez. The text was found and translated by C. Brosselard: 'Les Inscriptions Arabes de Tlemcen.' In *Revue Africaine* 3, 16, (1859), 241–248. And 'Les Inscriptions Arabes de Tlemcen. Retour à Sidi Senouci. Inscriptions de ses deux Mosquées.' In *Revue Africaine* 5, 28 (1861), 241–260. Other biographical information comes from a biography by his pupil Muḥammad al-Mallālī, a resume of which was spread in west Africa by Aḥman Bābā al-Tinbuktī (*Al-laʾālī al-Sundusiyya fi-l-faḍāʾil al-Sanūsiyya*. Bibliothèque Générale et Archives, Rabat, D984. Now Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc) and from Ibn Maryam (d. 1602) who devoted a long paragraph to al-Sanūsī in *Al-bustān fidhikr al-awliyāʾ wa-l-ʿulamāʾ bi-tilimsān*. Algiers, 1908.

blessed with the ability to perform miracles.[11] Moreover, he was said to be descended from al-Ḥassan, the son of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and grandson of the prophet Muḥammad. *The peerless method* presents him as one of four men in history who possessed three exceptional blessings, being *sharīf*, *walī* and *ʿālim* (descending from the Prophet, 'holy' and learned).[12] After his death, people would appeal for his intervention in heaven, for instance to ask God for rain.[13]

Even a short while after his death, al-Sanūsī's writings were already held in high regard. It was said that there once was a man who upon his death appeared before God with al-Sanusi's *Ṣughra* in his hand. Because of that book God saved him from hell, or so a friend of this man was told when the dead man appeared to him in a dream.[14] The flip side of the coin was that, according to the author's biographer, a man who admitted to the angels Nakir and Munkar that he had never read any of al-Sanūsī's creeds was immediately beaten by them with iron rods.[15]

Al-ʿaqīda al-ṣughra is an excerpt from a work on *tawḥīd*. It presents the quite abstract main issues of this field of learning without much explanation. The lack of clarification, however, is perhaps compensated for by al-Sanūsī's concluding remark that this entire theology is contained in the *shahāda*, the testimony that there is no other god than God and that Muḥammad is His prophet. Each of the two parts of the *shahāda*, he wrote, embodies knowledge of the attributes of God and the prophets, which can and should be internalised by repeating the words often, 'until they mingle with one's flesh and blood'. One wonders whether the phrase is one of the reasons for the *Ṣughra*'s great popularity in many parts of Africa and Asia, because it may have been read as a 'free' offer of all this philosophical knowledge to each Muslim: even if a believer could not reproduce the logical arguments, this paragraph seems to

11 Ibn Maryam 1908, 244, 245. Ibn Maryam says that there are many anecdotes about al-Sanūsī's miracles and relates two of them. The first is the miracle of the meat that would not cook, which is also told in *The peerless method* and was mentioned in the previous chapter. The second is about a woman who had lost the key to her house. She desperately tried to enter the house, but did not succeed until she laid her hand on the lock, crying 'by the glory of my lord Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī!' Then, when she pulled, 'the house gave way'. The image of unlocking doors and knowledge again emphasises al-Sanūsī's educational gift.

12 Hunwick 178, p. 13. The other three are Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāʾīnī and Abū al-Ḥassan al-Shādhilī.

13 Brosselard 1861, p. 247.

14 Brosselard 1861, p. 247.

15 Berbrugger 1861, 264.

suggest, as long as he remembers the *shahāda* he or she nevertheless is always a vessel and a custodian of such knowledge, and thus a respectable member of the community of Muslims.

Another reason for the *Ṣughra*'s popularity was undoubtedly its brevity, an obvious advantage for its circulation, whether oral or written. Throughout the Islamic world short texts were more often commented on than longer ones.[16] The entire text of the *Ṣughra* takes up no more than eight or ten pages in modern print, but it is worth giving an even shorter paraphrase of it, and I do this below. The excerpt is actually based on three editions: J.D. Luciani's edition, with a translation and a selection from comments by al-Sanūsī himself and by al-Dasūqī (d. 1815) and al-Bajurī (d. 1861);[17] an edition of al-Sanūsī's own *Sharḥ Umm al-barāhīn*;[18] and an edition with a translation and primarily grammatical and philological notes by M. Wolff.[19] Other sources that help to understand the text are Luciani's introduction and notes to al-Sanūsī's *Muqaddima* and to al-Laqānī's *Jawharā*.[20]

After the *basmallah*, al-Sanūsī immediately comes to the point:

> Know that judgement concerns three categories: the necessary, the impossible and the possible. The necessary is that of which non-existence cannot be thought; the impossible is that of which existence is incompatible with reason; the possible is that of which existence as well as non-existence can be thought of. Every adult is held by Law to know what is necessary, impossible and possible concerning God and the prophets.
>
> God has twenty attributes that are necessary to Him, starting with the following six: existence; existence without beginning; eternity (existence without end); being unlike temporal things; existence by itself without the need for anything to define that existence (without *mukhaṣṣis*); oneness—that is, not being composed of elements and having no equal. The first of these attributes is essential (*nafsīya*), while the other five are negative (they define what He is not).

16 Wisnowsky 2004, 159.

17 J.-D. Luciani (translation and annotation), *Petit traité de théologie musulmane par Abou Abdallah Mohammed ben Mohammed ben Youssef Senoussi*. Algers: Imprimerie Orientale Pierre Fontana, 1896.

18 Al-Sanūsī, *Sharḥ umm al-barāhīn*. Cairo: Maṭbaʿāt al-istiqāma, 1932.

19 M. Wolff, *El-Senusi's Begriffsentwicklung des Mohammedanischen Glaubensbekenntnisses*. Leipzig: FCW Vogel, 1948.

20 J.-D. Luciani, *Les prolégomènes théologiques de Senoussi. Texte Arabe et traduction Francaise par J.D. Luciani*. Alger: Imprimerie Orientale Pierre Fontana, 1908.

God has seven necessary attributes that are 'substantive' or 'real' (*maʿānī*):[21] power and will (which have as object everything that is possiblet), knowledge (which has as its object everything that is necessary, possible and impossible), life (which has no object), hearing and vision (which have all that exists as their object) and speech (without word or voice and having the same object as knowing). God has seven necessary attributes that are ideal (*maʿanawiẏa*), related to the first seven: he is powerful, willing, knowing, living, 'hearing', 'seeing' and 'speaking'.

God has twenty impossible attributes, the opposites of the first twenty: non-being; having been created; being finite; being like temporal things and taking up space, being limited in space and time or having interests; depending on something else to define Him; not being one; having no power to create, and an attribute such that it is impossible that anything exists that was created without his willing or knowing it. It is impossible that he should act as a natural force, causing things involuntarily (*biʾl-taʿlīl*) or with the force of a law of nature (*biʾl-ṭabāʿ*). It is impossible for God to be unknowing or defective in any way concerning anything that can be known. It is impossible for Him to die, or be deaf or blind or without speech.[22]

It is possible for God to do or not to do anything possible.

The proof of God's existence without beginning is the creation of the world. If the world had come into existence by itself, from a situation where being and non-being were equal, there would have been a moment where being had gained precedence over non-being, without the interference of an external cause. The proof of the necessity of His eternity (without end) is that if He could be non-existent in future, then His existence without beginning would have to be denied too, because His being would then be only possible, not necessary. The proof of God's being dif-

21 Delphin and Luciani translate the term صفات المعانى with 'idées réelles'. The term *maʿāna* played a role in the philosophical discussion about 'meaning' as 'a form or essence insofar as it is apprehended by any cognitive faculty [senses or intellect] and serves as an object for that faculty.' Modern philosophers speak of 'intentionality'. This notion of 'intentionality' built on Aristotle's understanding of cognition. See D. Black, 'Psychology: soul and intellect' in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*. P. Adamson and R.C. Taylor (eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 311 ff.

22 Thirteen impossible attributes are listed. The last seven are the opposite of the seven necessary real attributes. If the opposites of the seven ideal attributes had been added, the text would have been more repetitive, but the total number of impossible attributes would add up to twenty.

ferent from temporal things is that if He were similar to them, He would have to exist in time, which is unthinkable. The proof that He exists by himself, is that if He depended on something to make him appear, He would be an attribute, and an attribute cannot have other attributes. And if He needed a creator, He would have had a beginning. The proof of His oneness is that if He were not one, nothing would exist, because He would be powerless. The proof that God necessarily has power, will, knowledge and life is that, if He lacked one of them, none of the created things would exist. The proof that He necessarily has hearing, vision and speech is in the Book, in the Sunna, and in the unanimity of the first Muslims (*ṣahaba*). Also, if He did not have them, He would have imperfections, whereas it is impossible for God to have imperfections.

The proof that it is possible for God to do or not to do what is possible is that, if one could imagine that realising or abandoning something possible were necessary or that it is impossible for God, the possible would become necessary or impossible.

God's prophets have the following necessary attributes: truthfulness (*ṣidq*), faithfulness (*imāna*), and being transmitters of what they have been commissioned to transmit. The contrary is impossible: they cannot lie or betray their mission by doing something forbidden or disapproved of by religious law, or hide anything they have been commissioned to transmit. What is possible for the prophets is any event that can afflict people, such as illness and other accidents, as long as they do not harm their dignity.

The proof that the prophets are necessarily truthful is that, if they were not, God would have lied when he confirmed by miracles (*muʿjiza*) the truthfulness of His messengers. The proof that they are necessarily faithful is that, if they did something forbidden or disapproved of, those things would be acts of obedience, for God has ordered us to imitate the prophets, and He does not order what is forbidden or disapproved of. The proof that human events can befall them is that it has been observed to be so. This may happen either to assure them of greater rewards in the hereafter, or to establish an example for others, or to inspire people to accept their fate or to show that worldly things are contemptible in God's eyes and that He does not mean that this world should be the place where prophets and saints receive their reward.

All this is included in the words 'There is no god but God, and Muḥammad is His prophet', because they mean: there is no creature that is in need of nothing outside of him, or is needed for everything outside him, except God. 'There is no god but God' encompasses the necessary, the

> impossible and the possible, which every adult must know. 'Muḥammad is His prophet' encompasses belief in the other prophets and angels and books of revelation and the Day of Resurrection, because Muḥammad has brought belief in all these. Although they have only a few letters, the two expressions of the *shahāda* encompass all the knowledge that a Muslim adult must have. The adult who is of sound mind (*al-ʿāqil*) must repeat the *shahāda* often, so that its meaning mingles with his flesh and blood. Then, God willing, he will behold many secrets and wonders.

The second, and main, part of *The peerless method* comments on the *Ṣughra* by explaining and illustrating each statement in the original, as I will discuss below. In a few instances, the explanations are drawn directly from al-Sanūsī's own commentary (*Sharḥ*) and introduction (*Muqaddima*), which were apparently known to the author(s) of *The peerless method* or of its precursor.[23]

For instance, the *Ṣughra* distinguishes between the cognitive categories of the necessary and the impossible, of 'that which the mind cannot think of as absent' and 'that which the mind cannot conceive to exist', but it does not elucidate this. In *The peerless method* (*PM*), however, the point was considered important enough to be worth expanding on. The necessary is divided into two, it states, and paraphrasing al-Sanūsī's *Muqaddima*, it explains

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23 Passages that are quoted from al-Sanūsī's *Muqaddima* occur in Hunwick 178 notably on p. 14 ('judgement is the assertion or the negation of a thing') and on pp. 15 and 16, when the categories of judgement based on experiment and rational judgement are discussed: *The peerless method* comments:

> There are four categories of experimental/custom-related judgement (*ʿādiya*)
> – that which relates the existence of something to the existence of something else
> – that which relates the non-existence of something to the non-existence of something else
> – that which relates the existence of one thing to the non-existence of another
> – that which relates the non-existence of one thing to the existence of another
>
> The link of existence with existence is like the link between the presence of food and the presence of satiety; the link between absence and absence is like the link between the lack of food and the lack of satiety; the link between existence and absence, is like the link between the presence of hunger and the absence of food; the link between absence and existence is like the link between the absence of hunger and the presence of food.

Cf. J.D. Luciani 1908. 38, 39.

> that which is self-evidently necessary (*ḍarūrī*) and that which is necessary after rational consideration (*naẓarī*). What is self-evidently necessary is, for instance, the impenetrability of a body. What is necessary after consideration is, for instance, the prior existence of God. You do not perceive this necessity until you consider what would follow from the negation. The impossible is what the mind cannot conceive of as existing. [*PM* adds:] The impossible is divided into two: [*PM* quotes from *Muqaddima*:] that which is self-evident and that which is impossible after rational consideration. It is self-evidently impossible, for instance, for a body to be free from movement and immobility at the same time. What is impossible upon rational consideration is, for instance, the existence of an idol next to our Lord, the majestic and powerful. [*PM* adds again:] You do not perceive the necessity until you consider what would follow from the negation.[24]

This passage is all the more significant in that it gives a first glimpse of *The peerless method's* views on knowledge. In his longer text, which is addressed to other scholars of theology, al-Sanūsī had given a place to this typically *kalām* distinction between self-evident knowledge and insights that can be reached only after a thought process, but apparently he did not consider it essential in the context of the shorter, more popular creed.[25] For the author(s) of *The peerless method*, by contrast, the distinction was important for the message they wished to transmit. The examples of *naẓarī* knowledge that are given make one realise that the topic of the *Ṣughra* and *The peerless method* falls entirely within this category of things that are essential to the religion and need to be turned over and over in the mind.

Given the awareness on the part of the author(s) of the commentary of al-Sanūsī's other theological work, it is interesting that some of the themes and explanations that al-Sanūsī discussed there at length were not incorporated into *The peerless method*, such as the relationship between legal judgement and divine law, and the concepts of 'appropriation' (*kasb*) and unbelief (*kufr*). Al-Sanūsī's views on these last two are closely related, and they are particularly relevant for this study: as I will argue below, *The peerless method* rejects them on purpose. Let us look more closely, then, at al-Sanūsī's understanding of *kasb* and unbelief.

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24 Hunwick 178, 15, 16. Cf. Luciani 1908, 48–51.

25 See Van Ess 2007, 42,43.

Regarding *kasb* al-Sanūsī expressed the prevailing Ashʿarī view. He rejected both the determinist view of the Jabriyya, that all human acts are like trembling, over which man has no influence at all, and the opposite view, of the Muʿtazila and the Qadarīya, which held that a human being has his own independent will in all acts in which he feels no constraint—voluntary movements for instance—and can produce certain effects himself through a force he has received from God. This would imply, said al-Sanūsī, that God produced only what we cannot produce ourselves, such as colours or trembling. The correct Sunni doctrine was, he argued, that all acts come from God, whereby 'voluntary' acts coincide with a human being's incidental force, which does not produce these acts nor has any effect in and of itself. The human being is free in the sense that he generally does not feel compelled either to act or not to act. He has 'a share' in his acts, consisting of the relationship between his incidental force and the act produced in him. Through that relationship he appropriates (*yaksabu*) the effect of the acts within himself, but not their effects outside of him. The effects outside of him are concomitant with God's will, the effects within himself are the basis of his responsibility for the law.[26]

A belief that human beings are free to produce certain acts and their effects themselves, so that there exists causality outside of God, amounts to associating something else with God, and is therefore a form of polytheism (*shirk*).[27] Al-Sanūsī lists six forms of *shirk*:[28]

1. Believing that there exist two independant Gods (as do the Magians)
2. Believing that God is composed of more than one deity, as Christians do
3. Adoring others than God with the aim of coming closer to Him, as the pagans of the first *jahaliyya* period did (*shirk al-taqrīb*)
4. Adoring others than God, in imitation of others, as the pagans of the last *jahiliyya* period did (*shirk al-taqlīd*)
5. Believing that causes that we experience have effects of their own, as philosophers do
6. Doing anything for reasons other than God

He continues with a list of seven sources from which innovation (*bidʿa*) and unbelief can develop:[29]

26 Luciani 1908, 58–72.

27 Luciani 1908, 237.

28 Luciani 1908, 96–108.

29 Luciani 1908, 112.

1. The belief in an 'essential necessity' that makes God act through a logical causality or a natural force, and not by divine will
2. The belief, held by the Muʿtazila, that God's acts depend logically on interests or motivations (*al-aghāḍ*) to realise what is good and prevent what is bad
3. Imitation by clinging (to one's *madhhab*; *taʿassab*) without searching for the truth
4. Experimental induction, i.e. the belief, based on experience, in inevitable relations between certain things
5. Complex ignorance, that is, not knowing the truth and ignoring the fact that one does not know it
6. Attaching supreme importance to what the Qurʾan and the hadith *seem* to mean, without a distinction between what is possible and what is impossible
7. Not knowing the rules of reasoning that allow one to know what is necessary, possible, and impossible, as well as not knowing the Arabic language, including lexicology (*ʿilm al-lugha*), inflection (*iʿrāb*) or rhetoric (*bayān*).

It is especially important that a good part of al-Sanūsī's views on possible sources of unbelief revolves around the relationship between God's omnipotence and free will or causality. The Fulani commentary, by contrast, does not (except in one instance[30]) refer to this matter because, as we will see, the view of unbelief expressed there is linked not to an understanding of causality, but to social issues.

In his dialectic al-Sanūsī mostly uses the Muʿtazila as the party to whose views he opposes his own. Apart from their 'false doctrine' regarding causality and man's free will in certain cases, as well as God's obligation according to logic to consider the well-being of people, al-Sanūsī also discusses, in his *Muqaddima* and his *Ṣharḥ*, the Muʿtazilites' erroneous belief that it is impossible that God would punish someone who has not transgressed any of His laws; the idea (based on a grammatically erroneous interpretation of a phrase in the Qurʾan) that there are things that God has not created; the notion that God has no substantive attributes, and a few other Muʿtazila errors.

30 See Hunwick 178, 49, where an explanation is offered of the words in the *Ṣughra* 'This must be the case if you presume that one of the existing things has an effect through its own nature. If you presume that [something] has a self-working [causal] effect through a force that God has made in it, as many of the 'ignorant' claim …' Here al-Sanūsī's sentence is broken off, in order to give three different categories of 'ignorant philosophers' and their ideas of cause outside God. The passage is abruptly ended by the remark that this (cause outside of God) 'is also impossible'.

It is also noteworthy that *The peerless method* refers to the Muʿtazilites only once, where the first of God's necessary ideal attributes, His being powerful, is explained: 'It is related to the first of the substantive attributes, power. This is different from the point of view of the Muʿtazila, who say that it is [directly] related to [God's] essence. But if it were linked to the essence, as they claim, the essence would be substantive, and his uniqueness would be denied.'[31] Otherwise al-Wālī leaves the Muʿtazilites in peace.

2 The *Kabbe* Tradition

In the first lines of *The peerless method*, Al-Wālī wrote that he translated commentaries in Fulfulde which several learned Fulani before him had made on al-Sanūsī's *ʿaqīda al-ṣughra*. These commentaries existed most probably only as oral texts,[32] but if they were anything like *The peerless method*, they must have been the beginning of a long tradition of religious teaching. In its form *The peerless method* strongly resembles texts from a Fulani tradition of teaching *tawḥīd* that is still alive in a region stretching from today's Senegal to Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Niger. At least since the nineteenth century, this teaching has been called the *kabbe* in Fulfulde, a word derived from a root meaning 'to tie', just like *ʿaqīda* in Arabic.[33] The translation of the Arabic word into Fulfulde covers the cultural transference of al-Sanūsī's text to the context of the Fulani's 'missionary' work. In the *kabbe*, the idea of the purpose of the *Ṣughra* was transmitted, and concepts were explained in a way that was appealing to a new audience, and were organised and presented in ways compatible with the discursive culture of the Fulani.

The roots of the *kabbe* must lie early in the sixteenth century, when al-Sanūsī's *Ṣughra* was already circulating, as manuscripts show, in its original form and in versified versions, in the most western part of West Africa from where Fulani brought it eastward. What the content of the *kabbe* was in al-Wālī's time can only be guessed at, because its oral transmission has always been an important characteristic, and up until the twentieth century it was indeed the only way in which the text was preserved.[34] And even of the recent

31 Hunwick 178, 23.

32 As far as we know Fulfulde prose was hardly ever written down before the 19th century. Brenner and Last 1985, 434.

33 Brenner 1984, 79.

34 As far as I know they are still only transmitted orally in some Quranic schools in various West African countries where there is a strong Fulani influence.

expressions of the *kabbe* not much has been committed to paper. But there are some sources that describe the tradition. To begin with, a short description by Paul Marty from 1921 tells us that in some of the most western regions of Africa the *kabbe* is a form of teaching *tawḥīd*, based on al-Sanūsī's *Umm al-barāhīn* and preceded by an introduction which includes information about the Qur'an as the first of four holy books, before the Pentateuch, the Psalms and the Gospel.[35] These three elements—*Umm al-barāhīn* as the core of the text, its didactic character (for instance introducing new topics with the phrase 'what is the meaning of …?' and the use of metaphor and repetition), and an added introduction about more general aspects of the Muslim faith—are also found in other *kabbe* versions, as well as in *The peerless method*. A few other versions have been discussed in detail by Brenner, both in his book about the Malian Sufi shaykh Tierno Bokar (d. 1940), the author of the 'catechism' called *Mā al-dīn* ('What is religion?'), and in an article about one of the latter's pupils, the Malian historian and famous author Amadou Hampâté Bâ (d. 1991), who collected several versions of the *kabbe* and also made a new version of it himself in Fulfulde.[36] Brenner also found references to the *kabbe* in the archives of two French colonial officers from Senegal and Niger.[37] And, together with a Fulani colleague, he wrote down a version of the *kabbe* that had been recorded on tape in the 1960's by Boubou Hama in southern Niger. They translated part of the Fulfulde text into English.[38]

The traces and descriptions of *kabbe* versions from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries confirm much continuity, especially in their educational aspects. As oral texts they were aimed at an illiterate audience: non-Muslims who were candidates for conversion, as well as members of the broader Muslim community who wished to expand their understanding of their religion. In stories about its origin the *kabbe* is often presented as a recent discovery by a specialist in religion who wishes to make difficult information available to people without (much) formal education. More than once the stories also

35 P. Marty, *L'Islam en Guinée*. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1921, 351–355.

36 Brenner 1984. L. Brenner, 'A Living Library: Amadou Hampâté Bâ and the Oral Transmission of Islamic Religious Knowledge.' In *Islamic Africa* 1, 2 (2010), 45–93.

37 The first report is entitled 'Islam dans la Résidence de Dori', 31 July 1899. Archives Nationales du Sénégal, AOF Série G, 15-G-186. Professor Brenner has generously given me a copy of his own handwritten copy of part of this report. The second report is quoted at some length in his *West African Sufi*, 83.

38 Brenner did this work together with Almamy Malik Yattara. Unfortunately the translation could not be finished and was never published, but I am much indebted to Professor Brenner for kindly allowing me to photocopy his drafts.

mention the instruction to and by women, who were often excluded from formal education.

The *kabbe's* teaching methodology is well adapted to the purpose of including as many ordinary believers as possible. Like religious poetry in Fulfulde, the *kabbe* was clearly marked by techniques to facilitate memorisation, like repetition and the use of pairs of phrases.[39] Most remarkable is the version developed by Tierno Bokar, who supported the teaching of his *Mā al-dīn* to illiterate people by means of a pattern of lines and dots, each of which represented an item in the catechism. The *kabbe* versions also share a devotion to the clarification of abstract theological concepts through metaphor and analogies with elements of daily life.

Another characteristic of the recent versions is the association with Sufism, and there is a strong mystical element especially in the teachings of Tierno Bokar and Amadou Hampâté Bâ. The older, oral Nigerian version says that the *kabbe* concerns one branch of the study of *tawḥīd*, of which 'there are two branches, [that of the study of] the manifest and the hidden' The manifest has to do with the knowledge of jurisprudence and other Islamic sciences and of what is permitted and forbidden. 'What is hidden concerns purification … it is Sufi knowledge and it is called the knowledge of truth.'[40] That may not prove that Sufism was as important in the *kabbe* tradition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as it later became. It may be that it has gained importance in these texts since the nineteenth century, when the influence of Sufism in the region as a whole increased.[41] On the other hand, since many elements

39 Cf. Seydou 1966 op. cit. in Haafkens, J., *Chants Musulmans en Peul. Textes de l'héritage religieux de la communauté musulmane de Maroua, Cameroun*. E.J. Brill, Leiden 1983, 27.

40 The passage in Brenner's notebook is: 'The religion which the Prophet brought us is divided in two parts, the fundamentals and the commands. Fundamental religion consists of faith, and the knowledge [of/and] upright behaviour. It is the knowledge of *tawḥīd*. It is called the *kabbe*. It is called the knowledge of essence, it is called the knowledge of attributes. One who [understands] the attributes will come near to what he seeks. There are two branches [to this study]: the manifested and the hidden. The manifested is Islam and the knowledge of doing what is right in Islam. It is the knowledge of *fiqh*, and is called the knowledge of the branches, or knowledge of the permitted and knowledge of the prohibited. And it is called the knowledge of practice.'

41 Even so, the versions recorded in the twentieth century have given rise to different interpretations of this aspect. Marty and Brenner, for instance, have contrasting views of the meaning of *'ilm al-ḥurūf* in the *kabbe*. Marty writes that, using knowledge that is transmitted through the *kabbe* (for instance that the shahada is contained in the name Allah, and that the letters of this name correspond to the number 66, which is therefore

of the *kabbe* tradition are quite constant, there is no reason to doubt that it accommodated from the outset—in its text or context—an intuitive approach to religious knowledge. For specialists of Sufism this was not an alternative to intellectual knowledge of religion, but the extent to which ordinary believers may have considered it as such is open to debate.

The status of the *kabbe* has not always been the same at different times and in different places. Marty, for instance, described it in Futa Djallon in the early twentieth century as part not of popular Islam but of formal Islamic education, taught only in the most advanced classes attended by no more than a minority of students. In other regions, mastering the text came to function as a rite of passage that must have been widespread among Fulani: Marty and French-colonial reports, as well as Boubou Hama, say that in certain communities, from Senegal to Niger, a Fulani man could marry or slaughter an animal after he had finished his study of the *kabbe*. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at least, it was this study that made him a full Muslim and an adult member of his community.[42] It is plausible that, as Brenner suggests, such practices had already developed into a sectarian cult by the end of the eighteenth century and that the advocates of the *kabbe*, the *kabbenkoobe*, were the *mutakallimūn* against whom ʿUthmān dan Fodio raised serious objections because they excluded faithful believers for no valid reasons and spread confusion and dissension among Muslims.[43] Though he was admired by Dan Fodio's son, al-Wālī seems to have had a hand in turning an inclusive educational tradition into a tool of partition.

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sacred), many cultured Fulani are devoted to combining words, letters and numbers, but that there is nothing mystical about such activities; that basically they hardly differ from the 'intellectual recreation' favoured by European scholars in the Middle Ages or offered on the last pages of our own journals and magazines. (Marty 1921, 352) Disagreeing with Marty, Brenner explains that the manipulation of numbers and letters is more than recreation, that it reflects an elaborate religious understanding of creation and of the relationship between the visible and the invisible world. (Brenner 1984, 91) While both interpretations seem right for different groups of people, their different understandings must also be seen against the background of their work. Marty was partly responding to French colonial officers and travellers who saw students of the *kabbe* as members of a secretive sect and the *kabbe* itself as an obscure sort of 'Kabbala', an image he wished to correct. One of Brenner's intentions is to correct an image of African Sufism as being devoid of the spiritual dimension.

42 Brenner 1985, 83–86.

43 Brenner 1987, 47.

3 Between Oral and Scholarly Text

> And then: some Fulāta have commented on the *Ṣughra* by shaykh al-Sanūsī in their own language. I have wished to put that in Arabic in order to study the lessons from it. I have named this *The peerless method to knowledge of the science of theology*.

This is how al-Wālī starts his work, which, at first sight, indeed seems to be nothing but an Arabic translation of a model example of the *kabbe* tradition. Like the modern examples, *The peerless method* is divided into two parts, a preface about issues than the *Ṣughra*, and the actual commentary on al-Sanūsī's text on God's attributes. The preface takes up slightly more than a quarter of the entire text. The second part comments on—al-Wālī uses the verb *sharaḥa*—or rather explains *Al-ʿaqīda al-ṣughra* in the peculiar way in which commentaries were often composed: al-Sanūsī's entire creed is wrapped up in it. It is followed word by word, and the comments are added in a way that sometimes even disturbs the syntax and the logic of the original sentences.[44]

Below I will first discuss textual characteristics that seem to be part of the oral *kabbe* tradition: the introduction, the organisation of the text in order to facilitate memorisation, and the transference of abstract concepts to the life-world of an audience that had no education in theology. As a written text, *The peerless method* still shows clear traces of this oral tradition, and it was intended to be not only read but also to be heard, as is vividly evoked at the end of the preface: 'Know! That is, be aware of your foolishness, wake up from your sleep, rouse your brain and understand what I say, so that the beginning of the speech does not escape you, for he who lets the beginning slip and [then] listens to the middle or another part, will not understand a thing.'[45]

In the past decades, increasing attention has been given to the ways in which oral and written practices have complemented each other in the transmission of knowledge in different fields of literature and scholarship in Islamic culture. Within that field of interest, Samir Ali has focussed on the influence of orally transmitted traditions on written texts.[46] His work—like that of Jan Vansina

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44 This suggests that the first written version was noted as two texts: al- Sanūsī's as the main text, with the commentary added between the lines.

45 Hunwick 178, 14.

46 G. Schoeler, 2006; K. Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands. A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012; S. Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages. Poetry, Public Performance and the Presentation of the Past*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2010.

and Walter Ong before him in the wider field of intellectual history and literary studies—shows that two main principles underlie oral traditions in cultures which are primarily oral, that is among people who had no writing at all: performance and memory, whereby performance is related to the adaptability of traditions, and memory to continuity. In orality narratives must be organised in a way that makes it easy to remember them and pass them on—for instance, through repetition and the use of parallel terms and phrases, antithetical phrases, epithets and formulas; and they must be composed in a way that allows the narrator to hold the attention of his audience, for instance by assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of ordinary people; through narration as opposed to more abstract ideas in written texts; through the use of an agonistic tone, celebrating physical behaviour, featuring both violence and praise, in a highly polarised world of 'good and evil, vice and virtue, villains and heroes'.[47] All of these figures of style will be recognised in the formal analysis of *The peerless method* below.

Later, in the section 'Tradition with a twist', we will turn our attention to a specific element in the content of the text: the point where *The peerless method* diverges from both the *Ṣughra* and the *kabbe*.

An Introduction for New Muslims

The preface to *The peerless method* shares many similarities with other expressions of the *kabbe* tradition. It reads like an introduction, not so much to the topic of God's ontology, but to the culture and society of Islam at large. It is not directly related to the text of the *Ṣughra*, but it is in a way true to the character of al-Sanūsī's creed in that it presents Islam to a wide audience. Thus *The peerless method* opens with remarks about the conventions of Islamic text, such as starting by invoking the name of God. It asserts God's power over Muslims and non-Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs (as is done in the Nigerian *kabbe* version in Brenner's notebook). Then it places Islam in the context of other religions of the Book and tells us that the basmallah contains all the knowledge God has revealed to the various prophets in a way that is almost identical to what Marty described whenhe wrote about the *kabbe* versions he knew.[48] There follows a

47 J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*. London: James Currey, 1985; J.W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982, chapter 3. Quotation: Ong 1982, 44.

48 Hunwick 178, 1,2: (About the reason why the orthography of the *bā* in the opening word of religious texts, *bismallāh*, is usually long) Some say that it is long to substitute the *alif* that is suppressed, and some say it is long because it contains all the knowledge (*jamīʿ al-ʿulūm*) that God has sent down. It constitutes a hundred and four books. He sent ten down

brief distinction between believers and unbelievers: all have God's compassion and mercy in this world, but believers can also count on these in the hereafter, a notion which is thereby casually introduced. This again resembles a paragraph in the Nigerian version. The same is true of the discussion of the meaning of 'companionship' of the prophet Muḥammad, with special reference to the conversion and companionship of the Negus of Ethiopia. Whatever the direction of influence between different versions has been, it shows that *The peerless method* is part of the wide *kabbe* tradition.

There are a few topics in the introduction to *The peerless method* for which I have not found parallels in the other *kabbe* versions, but these may well have existed. This is true, for example, of a paragraph on blessing (*niʿma*) and notably the blessing of the *shahāda*, which can protect against murder, abduction, theft and even hell.[49] Other examples are details about the Prophet Muḥammad's status among people, and the concept of *sharīf*. Much later in the text—not in the preface, but also somewhat separate from the abstract discussion of God's attributes—there are explanations of the essence of angels and *jinns* (they are made of ethereal substance, finer than wind; less ethereal than wind is water, and after that comes earth and the substance of human beings), as well as a presentation of the archangels and their various realms of authority.[50] And throughout the text other concepts and social roles belonging to a Muslim culture are introduced, such as *ahl al-bayt*, *saḥaba*, *shurafā'*, different types of shaykhs, the *faqīh* and other leaders, and the Sufi or 'saint who knows God', *al-walī al-ʿārif bi-Allāh*. The importance of praise, prayer and worship is emphasised. Altogether, the text touches on everything one needs to know to act as a good Muslim. *The peerless method*—especially the introduction—is a shop-window full of samples of law, hadiths, Sufism, terminology, mythology, classical poetry, folklore and so on.

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to the prophet Adam and fifty to the prophet Seth (peace be with him), ten to the prophet Idrīss (peace be with him), ten to the prophet Ibrāhīm (peace be with him), the Psalms to the prophet Dāwūd (peace be with him), the Torah to the prophet Mūsā, the Gospel to the prophet 'Īsā (peace be with him), the Furqān to the prophet Muḥammad, God bless him and grant him peace and honour and nobility. A hundred books are contained in three books and three books are contained in the Furqān, and all of the Furqān is contained in sūrat al-baqara and sūrat al-baqara is contained in the fātiḥa, the fātiha is contained in the basmallah and the basmallah in its opening and its meaning (*maʿnāhā*) 'in Me was what was, and in Me will be what will be'. Therefore it is called the connecting *bā'*: it connects all knowledge. Cf. Marty 1921, 352.

49 In Ashʿarī theology man is not predestined to go to heaven or hell. It is one of the differences al-Wālī mentions between Ashʿarism and Matūridiyya.

50 Hunwick 178, 51, 52.

The preface ends with sixteen tales about miracles that al-Sanūsī is said to have performed or witnessed, thus bearing witness to the special blessing he received from God, and therefore to the value of his *Ṣughra*. These were evidently part of the original text that al-Wālī had translated, because he noted twice (indicating the addition with the phrase 'here ends what I added') that he had come across a similar story elsewhere, where it was told about someone else. Such narratives do not seem to be part of the more recent versions of the *kabbe*, but they are rooted in the Sufi lore about 'holy men' in the Maghrib. Some of the miracles have other people as beneficiaries: through mediation by al-Sanūsī they find gold (symbolic, of course, for God's truth), or peace, either in the hereafter or in this world. According to other anecdotes, hidden knowledge was unveiled to the shaykh and God favoured him in other ways, for instance by lifting him up into the sky one day, when pupils asked whether holy men could fly.

Two of these anecdotes deal specifically with causality. Apart from the story about the meat that would not cook (see chapter 3), there is one about a *jinn* who came in the form of a snake to where al-Sanūsī was sitting with some pupils, and wrote the words: 'Nothing in all of creation has any effect.'[51] In other words: the only cause of anything there is, is the uncreated God. To West African Muslims, these two little stories were signs of the powers God invested in the 'saint'. We may also recognise them as adaptations of an abstract scholarly theme for an audience without philosophical training. As we saw, the subject of causality played an important role in al-Sanūsī's theology and in his discussions with other theological schools. One of the anecdotes that transfers his stance on causality into a narrative, and turns the metaphor he used—of the prophet untouched by fire—into a meal that remains raw over the fire, originates from the region where he lived, as do many of these stories. It can be assumed that the same is true of the story of the snake. Apparently, when the *kabbe* originated, the stories were considered to be part of a fixed corpus of tales about al-Sanūsī, designed to demonstrate his closeness to God (*wilāya*) and to explain a theme that was important in his theology, the theme of causality. However, in the course of time, causality faded into the background in the *kabbe*, and for al-Wālī the theme was not a priority, as will be argued later in this chapter. Having said that, the presence of these anecdotes in al-Wālī's version is an example of how elements that had lost their original meaning and function nevertheless survived for quite some time and even after the text had travelled quite some distance, because the text as a

51 Hunwick 178, 10: فكتب الا تاثير لشيء من الكائنات.

whole had a special significance of its own. The same may be true of other elements in the text that we will encounter below.

Organisation of the Text

After the preface to *The peerless method*, the *Ṣughra* is followed sentence by sentence. Despite this tight framework, the commentary manages to introduce some independent ideas and push others into the background by not giving them much, or any, attention. Many of the choices that were made are related to the organisation of the text and determined by the oral context, not only of the *kabbe* tradition but also of *The peerless method* itself. As mentioned in chapter 3, in central Sudanic Africa the transmission of the culture of Islam has in the first place been oral. Even written, scholarly texts were produced to be recited from memory or read aloud to students and to be memorised by them.

Memorisation was important, not only because many people were illiterate or had limited access to written sources, but also because memorisation and reciting from memory were highly respected, not only in Islam. In the Middle Ages and the pre-modern period, even when writing was in principle available, memorisation was regarded not as a passive method of learning but, on the contrary, as an art that was also essential for the creation of new knowledge. Ideas about this art and its methods influenced the organisation of long texts.

These ideas were based on the understanding of the working of the brain by Aristotle and some of his commentators in the Muslim as well as the Christian world, such as Ibn Sīna, Ibn Rushd, Galen, and Thomas Aquinas. In their view, the brain receives impressions from the senses. These are brought together by the image-forming ability into an 'image' that has a likeness to the observed things, and into an instinctive 'feeling' that colours the images. Thinking then makes these images available to the mind, so that it can use them to form thoughts and ideas. Since thoughts are made of mental images, which are stored and recalled in memory 'locations', memory is the basis of the inventive powers of the mind. Memory storage was to be undertaken in such a way that images were readily and immediately accessible. This meant they had to be organised. The basic principles for that arrangement were division and composition. A sophisticated technique was to divide text into verses and paragraphs that could be linked to particular markers and that could also serve as markers for more text such as glosses. The markers were arranged in numbered sequences or linked to the alphabet or to a picture of a house with rooms, a hand with fingers that had joints, an angel with wings that had feathers, and so on.[52]

52 M. Carruthers, 'Mechanisms for the Transmission of Culture: The Role of 'Place' in the

In *The peerless method*, division and composition were applied with enthusiasm. For example, where the actual commentary on the *Ṣughra* starts, and includes a quotation to the effect that rational judgement comprises three categories, it adds that 'altogether there are twelve fundamental principles: five of Sharīʿa, four of experience,[53] three of reason'.[54] The five principles of the Sharīʿa are given in an oppositional pair: '*Wājib* (obligatory) and its 'next in line' *mandūb* (recommended), and *haram* (forbidden) and its 'next-in-line' *makrūh* (disapproved of), and in the middle *mubāh*' (allowed or neutral).[55]

The peerless method then arranges into seven chapters all that a Muslim adult should know: that God's essence does not lack anything; that it is different from other beings; and that He is described by attributes of which none is lacking; what His substantive, negative and ideal attributes are (three separate chapters), and what the consequences of the 20 attributes are.[56] And when al-Sanūsī adds—not in the *Ṣughra*, but in his *Muqaddima*—that the necessary refers to either what is evidently necessary or what appears to be necessary upon reflection, *The peerless method*, typically, spells out that the necessary refers to *two things*: what is evidently necessary and what appears to be necessary upon reflection.[57] Sometimes it is as if the author (or authors) gets carried away by the habit of dividing and numbering, to the point that the didactic benefits seem doubtful. The impossibility of God's lack of oneness is thus subdivided into six sorts; the impossibility of a lack of will on His part into four sorts.[58] These divisions surpass al-Sanūsī's discussion of God's impossible attributes, and are also more detailed than the corresponding paragraphs in the Nigerian oral version of the *kabbe*.

Arts of Memory.' In *Translatio or the Transmission of Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. L.H. Hollengreen ed. Turnhout: Brepols, 2008. 1–27.

53 *Ḥukm al-ʿādiya* refers to judgement based on observation or experience notably when causality is explored. The four principles in this category concern that which relates the existence of something to the existence or the non-existence of something else, and that which relates the non-existence of something to the existence or non-existence of something else. For instance relating the absence of hunger to the presence of food, etc. J.-D. Luciani translates *ʿādiya* with *expérimental*.

54 The judgement of what is necessary, impossible and possible.

55 Hunwick 178, 15.

56 The choice of the number seven is of course not unique to the *kabbe* tradition. The North African scholar and poet Aḥmad al-Maqqārī al-Tilimsānī (d. 1632), whom al-Wālī quotes a few times, had written that 'the student's efforts with the pursuit [of these matters] are not finished until he knows of seven issues he needs to know'. Hunwick 178, 33.

57 Hunwick 178, 16. Cf. Luciani 1908, 48, 49.

58 Hunwick 178, 30–31.

The most conspicuous way in *The peerless method* of 'explaining' or reorganising statements from the *Ṣughra* is to follow and note down every logical step in the argumentations behind them, even when only small variations occur. This technique is also applied in the *kabbe* version from Niger, but not as exhaustively as in *The peerless method*. The examples below also illustrate the way in which the explanations are inserted into the text of the *Ṣughra*. The phrases in italics are from al-Sanūsī's base text.

> *Impossible with regard to the truth of God are twenty attributes. They are the opposites of the first twenty necessary attributes: non-existence*—non-existence is the first of the twenty attributes that are impossible regarding the truth of God the Exalted, and it is the opposite of the first of the twenty necessary attributes, which is existence. The necessity of existence negates non-existence of His being and attributes. *Being created*—being created is the second of the twenty attributes that are impossible regarding the truth of God the Exalted. It is the opposite of the second of the twenty necessary attributes …[59]

And so on until the twentieth attribute. The fourth impossible attribute, *resemblance to temporal things* (*al-mumāthala li l-ḥawādith*), touches on an issue that was central to the Ashʿari doctrine—namely, the reconciliation between God's incomparability to anything created and Quranic expressions about God's hands, vision, throne, and so on, that do leave room for some sort of resemblance (*tashbīh*) between God and created beings. Al-Sanūsī gives some explanation for this attribute (see in italics below), and *The peerless method* also puts in an extra effort:

> A question was asked, 'What is resemblance to temporal things?' and the shaykh [al-Sanūsī] answered *that He would be like a body*. It was asked, 'What is a body?' and the shaykh answered, [It would mean] *that His exalted essence would take up a measure of the empty space*. Being a body, however, is the first kind of the ten resemblances that are impossible regarding the reality of God, because of the necessity of His being different from temporal things. The necessity of His being different from temporal things negates that,

59 Hunwick 178, 26. Compare, for example, with al-Laqānī, who says nothing more about the impossible attributes than: *Les contraires de ces attributs sont impossibles à l'égard de Dieu. Il est impossible par exemple, qu'il occupe un coté d'un objet, c'est à dire qu'il soit dessus, dessous, devant, derrière, à droite ou à gauche*. Luciani 1908, 14.

> *or that He would be incidental, needing a body* Being incidental and needing a body, however, are the second kind of the ten impossible resemblances regarding the reality of God,
>
> *or He would be in the realm of bodies*, and would be above a throne or below it, or to the right or the left of it. But being in the realm of bodies is the third kind of the ten impossible resemblances regarding the reality of God. The necessity of His being different from temporal things negates that,
>
> *or He would have spatiality* and the throne would be above that [spatiality] or under it or to the right or the left of it. But spatiality to Him is the fourth sort of the ten resemblances that are impossible regarding the reality of God, because of the necessity of His being different from temporal things, and the necessity of being different from temporal things negates that,
>
> *or that He would be confined by place*. It is said that He is in paradise or on a throne or a chair, or in the heavens or on earth, but confinement to a place is the fifth sort of the ten impossible resemblances regarding the reality of God …[60]

Some of the methods of organising information have been especially associated with Sufism. For instance, *The peerless method* introduces a new classification of the twenty attributes, dividing them between God's divinity (*ulūhīya*) and His lordship (*rubūbīya*). There are eleven attributes of divinity and nine of lordship. Why this partition into nine and eleven is appealing is not explained. But, while nine and eleven play no significant role in Sufism in other cultures,[61] both numbers are significant in the *kabbe* of the twentieth century. There, nine represents matter and materiality—the realm of God's lordship or governance,[62] while eleven, as Amadou Hampâté Ba explained, represents the spiritual world. It is the mystical light of God's essence and the key to the name of Allāh, since eleven is the added numerical value of the letters that make up 'huwa'. To know the secret of the number eleven 'is to know how to make God smile'.[63]

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60 Hunwick 178, 27–28. Cf. Cambon, J. et J.-D. Luciani. *Petit Traité de Theologie Musulmane, par Abou Abdallah Mohammed Ben Mohammed Ben Youssef Senoussi*. Alger: Imprimerie Orientale Pierre Fontana, 1896. 7 and the page numbered 4 in Arabic. The question whether God's throne should be understood as metaphor or fact continues to be an issue of popular discussion in Chad in the 20th century, see Seesemann 2003 and Brigaglia 2005.

61 A. Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: a Phenomenological Approach to Islam*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

62 Brenner 1984, 96.

63 Brenner 2010, 67, 71. *Hā'* = five, *wāw* = six.

The authors of *The peerless method* were obviously familiar with *ʿilm al-ḥurūf*, the science of letters (also called *sīmīya*), which is related to *ʿilm al-awfāq*, the science of 'correspondences' between the laws that govern the manifest universe and those that govern the hidden reality. These branches of learning could be used for divination, a contested practice, but they were solidly based on the generally accepted understanding that the manifest and the hidden worlds are interconnected. The rules that govern the one are assumed to be similar to those that govern the other. Therefore, the study of rules in the manifest world of humans and animals, minerals, stars, numbers and letters can bring one closer to the hidden truths regarding God. God himself cannot be known, but His laws and His attributes can. Although *ʿilm al-ḥurūf* and *ʿilm al-awfāq* are sometimes described as magic, the techniques were studied in the framework of the regular Islamic sciences.[64]

The peerless method explains, for instance, that God has sent 313 or 314 or 315 messengers, numbers that corresponded to the numerical value of the name Muḥammad.[65] The preface also presents a number of terms of which each radical is linked to an idea that explains it. The word *al-shaykh*, for example, receives the following treatment: Alif stands for being close (*alifa*) as in the words of the prophet 'those who will be near me on the Day of Resurrection are those of good deeds'. *Lām* is softness (*līn*) of the heart in obedience to God, *shīn* is thankfulness (*shukr*) for His blessings, *yā* is commending what is good and prohibiting what is bad (*yaʾmar bi l-maʿrūf wa yanhī ʿan al-munkar*) and *khā* is fear (*khawf*) of sinning against divine law. The words Allāh, Muḥammad and *al-faqīh* are explained in a similar way. The interpretation of the orthography of the letter *bā* as the first word of a text (see note 330 above) is another example.

Playing with the first letters of words fits into an old tradition, probably going back to pre-Islamic Indian cultures, that was especially popular among mystics and poets who wished to convey the deeper meaning of concepts to

64 See P. Marty 1921,85. L. Brenner 1985a, 'Three Fulbe scholars in Bornu.' In *The Maghrib Review*, Vol. x, 4–6 (1985): 107–113; 107. S. Dorpmüller, *Religiöse Magie im Buch der probaten Mittel. Analyse, kritische Edition und Übersetzung des Kitāb al-Muǧarrabāt von Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf as-Sanūsī (gest. um 895/1490)*. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2005, 25.

65 The name has three *mīms*. Each word *mīm*, consisting of the letters *mīm*, *ya, mīm*, has a numerical value of 90. The numerical value of one *mīm* is 40, the value of the *yāʾ* is 10. Therefore three *mīms* make 270. The three letters of the name of the letter *dāl* add up to 35: *Dāl* is 4, *lām* is 30, *alif* is 1. The value of the *ḥāʾ* is 8. 270 plus 35 plus 8 makes 313. If the letter *ḥāʾ* is counted as ḥ plus *alif*, 8 plus 1, the outcome is 314 and if the *hamza* is also counted, it makes 315. Hunwick 178, 39. The letters are discussed in this sequence, as in ancient Arabic dictionaries: the first, then the last, then the middle radical.

their readers. The meaning accorded in *The peerless method* to the letters that make up 'Allāh', for instance, is the same as that proposed by the school of the great Sufi Ibn 'Arabī.[66] But the method was used more widely than that. It was also applied at a didactic level, where it was elaborated, for example, into the 'golden alphabet', a genre of poetry designed to make it easier to learn the alphabet.[67] It is suggested here that, in *The peerless method* too, the practical purpose of this playing with words and numbers was at least as important as the mystical one, and that it served here as a mnemonic aid rather than a method of esoteric science.[68] That is the function of the method in this text, which places its primary emphasis on reason, as we will see below.

Metaphor and Closeness to the Human Lifeworld

What is especially interesting here is the way in which some concepts from the scholarly culture within Islam were transfered to the lifeworld of ordinary people through the use of metaphors and analogies with local practices. It is at this level that cultural transference is most explicitly at work, and again I suggest that *The peerless method* inherited this from its Fulfulde model. For example, one impossible attribute of God is (al-Sanūsī's sentences in italics, PM in roman type)

> *that His exalted essence would be clad by incidental things*, like hunger and repletion, or illness and health, or skinniness and fatness, or sadness and happiness. Attributing incidental things to His exalted essence [involves] the seventh sort of the ten impossible resemblances regarding the reality of God. *Or that smallness* like a speck of dust … *or that greatness* like an elephant *could be attached to His exalted essence*.[69]

66 A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975. 422; L. Schaya, *La doctrine soufique de l'Unité*. Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1962. 47, 83.

67 See Schimmel 1975, 421–423.

68 Maribel Fierro makes a similar point in an article about the Andalusian Sufi Ibn Masarra (d. 931). He was a philosopher who, she argues, was interested in showing the practical concordance between the Qur'an and philosophy. '[His] *kitāb al-ḥurūf*, in which he deals with the letters found at the beginning of some Koranic verses, does not aim at magical interpretation or predicting the future, but intends to show that the Koran is nothing less than an explanation of creation.' M. Fierro, 'Opposition to Sufism in al-Andalus.' In *Islamic Mysticism Contested*. F. de Jong ed. Leiden: Brill, 1999. 179.

69 Hunwick 178, 26–29.

Aspects of the human and the bovine body, which the cattle-herding Fulani know so well, are used to clarify the very abstract notion that God's oneness is incomparable to anything earthly.

> The oneness of His being negates three 'defects': the composition (*tarkīb*) of His being, manifoldness (*taʿaddud*), and the total of components and parts (*kamīya ittiṣāl wa infiṣāl*). Composition of being concerns six things: skin, blood, flesh, sweat, bone and marrow. Manifoldness of being concerns the number of members, from head to toe. 'Total of components' concerns the parts of substance. Every created body exists by the composition of substance in relation to its essence. The oneness of being means that God's being is not composed of two or more substances. A total of parts would imply that there is a[nother] being like God's being, but the oneness of His being negates that. The oneness of His attributes also negates three deficiencies: composition, manifoldness, and the total of His attributes.

Composition, where attributes are concerned, regards, for instance, fat, skinny, long, short, beautiful and ugly. Manifoldness, where attributes are concerned, regards, for instance, white and the like. A single cow can be white-footed, or be white from breast to belly, or have a white tail, or a white back. The oneness of His being negates all that.[70]

Other abstract concepts are translated into terms of social life in central Sudanic Africa. This happens, for example, when the Prophet Muḥammad's status among people is considered. In more mainstream theology, his status is also discussed, but there the discussion revolves around the issue of *ʿiṣma*, the eminence or infallibility of prophets—that is, the quality that God gives to certain souls so that at times they can rise to a spiritual level where they can hear divine speech. A question often discussed in that context is whether Muḥammad had been without sin all his life, or only after he took up his mission; and if he *had* sinned before that, to what extent? But this is not how his authority is discussed in *The peerless method*. Here, the question of the extent to which the Prophet is like other people is answered with the information that he was different in the sense that he could marry whomever he wished without paying a bride-price, and that he did not even pay a bride-price if he wished to give a woman in marriage to someone else.[71] The notion is not

70 Hunwick 178, 19.

71 Hunwick 178, 5.

without a basis in the Qur'an, which says, 'We have made lawful unto thee [the prophet Muḥammad] thy wives unto whom thou hast paid their dowries … and a believing woman if she give herself unto the Prophet and the Prophet desire to ask her in marriage—a privilege for thee only, not for the (rest of the) believers'. (Q. 33:50) There is also a hadith about the Prophet's taking the 'slave girl' Safiyya after a battle in order to marry her. When asked what he had paid her as dowry, he answered that her manumission served as her dowry.[72] Finally, there is the hadith related by ʿĀisha that the prophet did not die before God allowed him to marry whatever woman he wished.[73] The sources are irrefutable, but the choice of this privilege to describe Muḥammad's standing among men is nevertheless remarkable. Particularly the assertion in *The peerless method* that he could forfeit paying a dowry for a woman whom he wanted to give in marriage to someone else seems to have been made with a view to local circumstances and is in contrast with what the Qur'an says.

The elucidations regarding the *shahāda* are partucilarly informative. As we saw, al-Sanūsī had believed the testimony of faith to comprise all there is to know about God and the prophets in a symbolic way (each part represents part of the doctrine of the attributes) and perhaps also in a mystical way (frequently repeating the *shahāda* could lead one to behold 'boundless secrets and wonders'). More or less in line with this thought, the commentary in *The peerless method* gives examples of the blessing the *shahāda* can bestow on the person uttering it, notably when used in *dhikr*—that is, 'remembrance' or repeated utterance as practiced in Sufism but also by non-Sufi Muslims: one man who had performed *dhikr* with the *shahāda* had a son who was born with the parts of the *shahāda* written on his left and right shoulder. Another who had done the same proved to be blessed when he was killed, for when his blood was shed it formed the words of the *shahāda*.[74] (On the other hand, *The peerless method* warns that someone who repeats the words just because he believes they can guarantee him a place in paradise and rescue him from calamity in this world and the next is an unbeliever.[75])

However, the preface also presents a remarkably practical view. First it states, in line with the conventional Ashʿarī view, that, as long as it is pronounced by someone who firmly believes in God *and* complies with the Sunna *and* acts as a Muslim should, the *shahāda* is the key to paradise. But the authors of *The peerless method* realise that, for their audience, more than paradise is at

72 Al-Bukhārī Vol. 1, book 8, no. 367.

73 Al-Nasāʾī, kitāb 26 Nikāh. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, Kitāb 41, 180, 201.

74 Hunwick 178, 55.

75 Hunwick 178, 55.

stake, and that the idea of paradise (and hell) is a part of the Muslim religion has little effect on believers in the Sudanic culture. Their audience of relatively new believers wishes to know what is in it, here on earth, for the person who pronounces the double creed. The answer to that question is that he who pronounces the *shahāda*, even if his faith is defective, will not be murdered or enslaved (or abducted: *lā yustaraqu*[76]), and that others will not consume what is his. Murder, enslavement and theft were the real-life terrors in a society suffering from unrest. To be enslaved was a threat to everyone, but specifically to those who were considered non-Muslims. The passage shows clearly that the message of *The peerless method* was addressed to people who felt that threat at least as deeply as the threat of suffering in hell.

Sufism and Reason

It is not easy to gauge the attitude of *The peerless method* towards hidden knowledge. The word *maʿrifa*, which appears in the title is often translated by modern scholars as gnosis, and might be interpreted as an indication of a Sufi approach. However, in Arabic theology and philosophy the word was just as often synonymous with *ʿilm*.[77] In *The peerless method* both approaches to knowledge—the mystical and the rational—are represented. The text pays its respects, in the introduction, to the Sufi al-Shādhilī; there is the list of miracles associated with al-Sanūsī characteristic of the Sufi tradition in the Maghrib. In the last pages the stages on the path towards surrender to God are mentioned, and there is a reference to the existence of a sort of reality that is beyond ordinary perception, notably in the context of an elucidation of the character of the prophet Muḥammad. The Prophet has a perfection of beauty that is hidden from ordinary people. It is so bright that they cannot see it, but God has created a stronger perception in us thanks to which some do behold it.[78]

Bobboyi is of the opinion that *The peerless method* 'strives to attain a synthesis between *Tawḥīd* and *Taṣawwuf*'.[79] But the question is: could it not be the other way around? Could it be that al-Wālī, with the political climate of Bornu in mind, tried to undo an existing synthesis between *tawḥīd* and *taṣawwuf* in the original oral *kabbe* (which further developed in its modern oral expressions) with the aim of privileging the rational study of God's oneness? In *The*

76 Hunwick 178, 5. If *yustaraqu* is the tenth form of the verb *raqqa*, the meaning here is 'he will not be enslaved'. If it is the eighth form of *saraqa*, the meaning is 'he will not be stolen, abducted'.

77 Rosenthal 2007, 211.

78 Hunwick 178, 51.

79 Bobboyi 1992, 100.

peerless method the logical demonstrations of God's oneness are all spelled out in detail, and quotations from al-Sanūsī's *Muqaddima* are introduced in order to emphasise, I suggest, that an understanding of the truth about God's eternity or uniqueness can *only* be had by rational consideration, while—in line with the *Ṣughra*—references to the Sufi way of understanding are much more cursory. When, at the end of *The peerless method*, the question is asked, 'how it is that all knowledge just presented is contained in the words of the *shahāda*?', the answer is a sort of excerpt of what went before but does not speak, for instance, of a relationship between words and divine truth. Neither is there an explanation of the doctrine of the unity of creation (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), which makes it possible to gain knowledge about divine truths by observing phenomena in the physical world. And in his versified 'abridgement' of *The peerless method*, *Sweet watersource of the inmost attributes of the Lord*, al-Wālī does not mention any elements that are specifically related to Sufism.

Ultimately the best way to make the point is not to highlight what is missing. Before we move on to more positive indications of the separation of, rather than a synthesis between, two modes of religious exercise, however, one thing must be underlined. *The peerless method* does not deny that there is knowledge of an esoteric quality that can be acquired only through spiritual understanding. The existence of two types of truth—the one to be attained by spiritual, the other by intellectual effort—was commonly accepted. And usually, although *not* in the case of al-Wālī's contemporary in Kalumbardo, shaykh ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbd al-Jalīl, knowledge of *tawḥīd* that was acquired by means of the rational intellect was seen as a prerequisite to acquiring spiritual understanding. In the view of religious specialists Sufism was a mode of religious life reserved for the few, the highly educated who also had the strength of character to fulfill its demands. For all we know, al-Wālī's own religious practice may well have included forms of Sufi devotion. In this part of Africa Sufism was beginning to be organised into brotherhoods and special communities in the seventeenth century, but was not yet as separate, culturally and socially, from other forms of Islam as it was later to become. Again, *The peerless method* does not contest the Sufi road to understanding—rather, it attributes to it only minor significance for the ordinary Muslim. However, even if al-Wālī would have liked to suppress some references to Sufism in this text, the Fulfulde version he translated was too well known as it was, which was exactly why it served his purposes, as I will argue in chapter 7. A canonical text cannot be altered too much without losing its authority. Meanwhile, the primary indication of al-Wālī's ambivalence towards Sufism in *The peerless method* is the much greater emphasis in the rest of the text on rational cognitive learning. That is the subject of the next part of this chapter.

4 Tradition with a Twist

There is one important issue on which *The peerless method* diverges significantly from the content of the *Ṣughra* and introduces its own views. This is where ignorance and imitation (*taqlīd*) are concerned, and the person who is 'guilty' of it, the *muqallid*. The theme does not occur in the modern *kabbe* versions, so we can concentrate on a comparison of the issue as it is discussed in *The peerless method* and by al-Sanūsī.

As we have seen, the latter had said that every legally competent Muslim adult (the *mukallaf*) is held by divine law to know what is necessary, impossible and possible with regard to God. The *Ṣughra* presented this knowledge as essential to one's faith or religion. It could be obtained by reading the *Ṣughra* and by reciting the *shahada*, which contained it all. *The peerless method* starts to unfold its own view of knowledge at the end of the preface:

> knowledge (*'ilm*) is essential to the doctrine of faith. It relates to the truth, by means of proof (*dalīl*). Because, if people do not know, it does not matter whether this is from simple ignorance or complex ignorance, or whether they are doubting or mistrusting, or mislead or blindly accepting [imitating].

Farther on in the text, *The peerless method* comments on al-Sanūsī's statement that it is possible for God to do whatever He wishes ('As for that which is possible to the Exalted, it is doing or refraining from everything possible') by remarking that God can judge in whatever way He wishes. Therefore a Muslim adult must know a number of things, and 'it is no excuse [to say]: "I have worked hard, but I am not capable." That, rather, is a sign of disqualification.'[80] Apparently this remark about the duty to study was so important that it was squeezed into the commentary in a place where at first sight it does not seem to belong. For what do the earthly dweller's intellectual efforts have to do with God's capacity to judge? The remark makes sense only if the intention is to say that God will judge believers first and foremost for the intellectual knowledge they have acquired.

What else did al-Wālī say about the relationship between belief and knowledge or ignorance? According to the convention he distinguished between simple and complex ignorance. Simple ignorance (*al-jahal al-basīṭ*) was that of the person who, when asked about God's being, says, 'I do not know', which

80 Hunwick 178, 32.

means that he is willing to learn. For al-Sanūsī, there was nothing wrong with that.[81] Complex ignorance (*al-jahal al-murakkab*) was the ignorance of people who do not recognise that they do not know the truth, and was a source from which unbelief could develop. *The peerless method*, however, expresses quite a different view. Here, ignorance in any form, simple or complex, is categorically condemned as unbelief. Four types of *unbeliever* are identified, two of whom are ignorant, while for the other two their ignorance or understanding is unstable: first, there are those whose ignorance is 'flat like the grass': they neither have nor ask for knowledge; second, there are people whose ignorance is complex—that is, who are ignorant but do not know it; third, there is the doubter ('he who is equal to both sides shifting all the time and equally between truthfulness and lying. [Each time], whenever one side prevails, the other is mistrusted'); and fourth, there is the imitator. The short description of each category concludes with the words, 'there is agreement that he is an unbeliever'. There is no further discussion of the first three categories. Rather, all attention goes to the imitator.

> The imitator is he who pledges the twenty attributes without [their] proof (*dalīl*), and it is said that the imitator is he who accepts the words of the ulema without proof and [then] falls back to blind acceptance.

And again: 'There is agreement that he is an unbeliever.'[82]

Was there in fact such a consensus? We should here stop and consider the question in some detail before evaluating the assertions of *The peerless method*. First of all, al-Sanūsī himself had never suggested that the verdict regarding *taqlīd* was a matter that had been decided. It is true that he was convinced of the need to keep pondering the ontology of God, but his view on imitation seems to be more nuanced than is sometimes assumed.[83] His *ʿaqīda al-ṣughra* starts by stating that every believer has the duty to use reason to understand the proofs of God's reality that are provided by the science of theology. In his own commentary (*Sharḥ umm al-barāhīn*) on the *Ṣughra*, al-Sanūsī says that, when he wrote that every *mukallaf* must know what is necessary, impossible and possible with regard to God, he specifically said 'know' (*innahu yaʿrifu*)

81 Luciani 1908, 112–125.

82 Hunwick 178, 14.

83 K. el-Rouayheb, for example, in his inspiring article mentioned above ('Opening the gate of verification'), regards al-Sanūsī as someone who was unambiguous and outspoken in his condemnation of *taqlīd*. El-Rouayheb 2006, 269.

and not 'settle for' (*innahu yajzamu*). What one needed for faith, he said, was knowledge based on proof.

> '*Taqlīd* is not sufficient. It is a resolution that corresponds with the principles of belief, but without the proof for it. [The word 'know'] refers to the duty of knowing and the fact that *taqlīd* is not sufficient. That is the opinion of numerous experts such as shaykh Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī and the qāḍī Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, Imām al-Ḥaramayn (al-Juwaynī), and Ibn al-Qiṣār also relates this on account of Mālik. But there are various interpretations regarding the obligation of knowing. Some say that the imitator is a believer, although he is disobedient, because he leaves aside the knowledge which is produced by true understanding. Others say he is a believer and is not disobedient, except when he is capable of understanding the right meaning [and yet leaves it aside]. Others say: the imitator is fundamentally not a believer, but yet others criticise that.'[84]

He then mentioned famous scholars—al-Qushayrī, Qāḍī b. al-Wālid b. Rushd, Ibn al ʿArabī, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and his followers—who believed that knowledge of God could also come from faith or inspiration and that one could be a good Muslim without independent intellectual reflection, by 'blindly accepting' the knowledge of religious experts. In his *Muqaddima*, al-Sanūsī simply termed these scholars competent (*muḥaqqiqūn*) and left it at that.[85] In the *Sharḥ* he added more critically, 'but this is in most cases (*fī aghlabin*) not true'[86]—that is, in most cases it is not true that firm belief can be reached or maintained without sustained reflection on God's being.

This matter may also be seen, incidentally, in the context of al-Sanūsī's ongoing discussion with Aḥmad Ibn al-Zakrī, his fellow townsman to whom I referred above and who defended the view that one could have faith without a perfect understanding of the theological arguments behind religious tenets. Indeed Ibn Zakrī argued (along with al-Ghazālī) that the faith of 'simple' souls and old women was the most sincere and solid of all, and that honest worship was enough for those who lack the education or understanding possessed

84 *Sharḥ*, 1932, 14, 15.

85 Luciani 1908, 121. For al-Ghazālī's point of view, see R.J. McCarthy, 'Al-Ghazali, The clear criterion for distinguishing between Islam and Godlessness.' In *Deliverance from Error. Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography, al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. Translated and annotated by R.J. McCarthy. Louisville: Fons Vitae, Louisville, 1980, 146.

86 *Sharḥ* 1932, 16.

by the learned.[87] The discussion between the two men and their followers may have accentuated their differences and put more emphasis on al-Sanūsī's insistence on reason and intellect. In any case, al-Sanūsī wrote that the risk one runs in trying to do without reflection is that one will lapse from faith into doubt and unbelief. He regarded *taqlīd* as a weakness that could eventually lead to unbelief, but not as a form of unbelief in its own right.

In fact, in keeping with Ashʿarism, al-Sanūsī was rather careful when it came to defining what unbelief is at all.[88] He mentioned only two unambiguous forms of *kufr*: consciously adoring other divinities than God, and denying that Christians and Jews are heathens. A substantial part of his *Muqaddima* is devoted to explaining that only he who adores an entity other than God is an unbeliever, and that it is very difficult to define any other categories of unbelievers. Even the greatest theologians—and he gives the examples of Qaḍī ʿIyāḍ, Malik and al-Bāqillānī—could not say anything definite about it. The exclusion of anyone who professes Islam, he argued, must be avoided at all costs, for 'it is better to forgive a thousand unbelievers than to spill one drop of blood of a believer'.[89] He enumerated a number of excuses for those who follow a certain opinion without being aware that it implicitly leads to denial of the truth. Among his examples are the view that voluntary acts spring from an independent force in man, and the ideas that God resembles a body and that He has ideal but not substantive attributes.[90] All those who hold such erroneous opinions on topics that are central to al-Sanūsī's theology are nevertheless excused, he says, if they do not realise that the logical consequences would affect the concept of God's oneness. To summarise, it is true that al-Sanūsī stressed the necessity of studying *tawḥīd* and the rules of reasoning, but he does not judge too harshly those who acted on the wrong information out of ignorance.

That al-Sanūsī's view of *taqlīd* was nuanced, or at least complex, is also confirmed by the distinction he makes in his *Muqaddima* between vicious and praiseworthy imitation (*al-taqlīd al-radī* and *al-taqlīd al-ḥasan*). He understands the former as the adoration of objects other than God, in mimicry of parents and ancestors, as the pagans of the ancient period did.[91] Yes, such imita-

87 Brosselard 1861, 255.

88 Knysh 1993. Only for the Kharijites was *takfīr* central to their ideology, but they also chose the only position towards society compatible with that position, namely outside it. See Van Ess 1991–1997, IV, 671, 674.

89 Luciani 1908, 102, 103.

90 Luciani 1908, 98–106.

91 Luciani 1908, 88,89.

tors were unbelievers. But the imitators—perhaps 'followers' would be a better translation here—of Muʿtazilites and Murjiʾis, whose theology he disputed vigorously, were not unbelievers, let alone 'imitators' of his own doctrine, people who subscribed to it without understanding it completely.[92] On the contrary, al-Sanūsī approved of praiseworthy imitation, 'such as the imitation by believers of the Sunni scholars in the field of applied law'. This imitation 'is considered by most authors to be sufficient, if a person is firmly convinced of the Truth, or if he lacks the capacity to understand the evidence.'[93]

In spite of all this, if al-Wālī derived his categorical rejection of *taqlīd* from al-Sanūsī, he was not alone. Some of al-Sanūsī's commentators, for instance a certain Yaḥya al-Shawī (d. 1685) and ʿĪsā al-Saktanī (d. 1652), both theologians in the Maghrib, shared a disparagement of imitation, which they based on the opinion of the master from Tlemcen.[94] In the same period, a group of ulema in the west Saharan town of Sijilmasa apparently indulged in 'inquisitory practices' based on the view that those who could not produce the answers to philosophical questions regarding *tawḥīd* were unbelievers. It seems, then, that the idea of the 'imitator' as an outsider circulated in West Africa on a wide scale.

But we know this because a contemporary of these inquisitory ulema, al-Ḥasan b. Masʿūd al-Yūsī (d. 1691), criticised them sharply, explaining that one who did not know all the desired details could certainly be a true believer.[95] Aḥmad b. ʿĪsā al-Anṣārī (d. 1826 in Sudan) was hesitant: he wrote a commentary on the *Ṣughra* in which he remarked, in connection with the duty to know what is necessary, possible and impossible with respect to God, that one must avoid calling others doubters, and that there are different opinions about the imitator; that al-Bāqillānī for instance says that the faith of an imitator is true.[96] Another commentator, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dasūqī (d. 1815), was more explicit. Commenting on al-Sanūsī's own commentary, he wrote: 'The claim that the imitator is not a believer is regarded as dubious, because it would imply *takfīr* on the part of most ordinary believers, and they are the majority of the umma.'[97] Of course these commentators are from other regions, and from a later period than al-Sanūsī or al-Wālī. But their opinions serve to demonstrate that among Ashʿarī theologians, *taqlīd* was never an issue that had simply been

92 Luciani 1908, 120, 121.

93 Luciani 1908, 120, 121.

94 El-Rouayheb 2006.

95 Al-Yūsī, al-Ḥasan b. Masʿūd (no title) Arabe 1273, BN. See also El-Rouayheb 2006; *GAL* II 455, S I 675 and Al-Hajj 1974/77, 7.

96 A. b. ʿĪsā al-Anṣārī, *Sharḥ umm al-barāhīn ʿalā al-Sanūsiyya*. Al-Qāhira: n.d. 1962, 9.

97 M. b. A. al-Dasūqī, *Ḥāshiyaʿalā sharḥ Umm al-barāhīn*. Al-Qāhira: n.d. 1912, 67.

decided. Against that background, the insistence in *The peerless method* that there was agreement about it is striking, and draws our attention to the central importance of the theme of 'blind acceptance' versus learning and knowing in this text.

The position of *The peerless method* is clear: Muslims had to gather intellectual knowledge about their religion, and to use their intellect (*ʿaql*) to understand it. For the Sufi it was a prerequisite for embarking on the path towards intuitive knowledge, but for all ordinary Muslims it was a prerequisite for being accepted in the community of believers at all. That is the central concern of the text, and the point is emphasised by a stylistic turn. Where al-Sanūsī wrote 'know that rational judgement consists of three categories', *The peerless method* repeats (words from the *Ṣughra* in italics): *'Know*, you who are eager to enter the group of friends of God, that al-ʿaqīda al-ṣughra teaches you what you must know of tafsīr, hadith and fiqh. *Rational judgement consists of three categories*.' The word 'know' has been cut loose from al-Sanūsī's sentence and appropriated by the commentary, emphasising the essential importance it has for its authors. *Iʿlam* (know) is, of course, a very common word in texts about religious doctrine. It has been used for centuries almost as a conjunction, to posit a thesis and begin a sentence. The literal meaning in those cases fades to the point that in translations the word often disappears altogether. Here, however, the imperative is anything but casual. Isolated in terms of both syntax and quotation, it takes on a solemn character and recalls the sacred word of the archangel Jibrīl to the Prophet Muḥammad: *iqraʾ*, recite! At the same time it is linked to the idea of people entering, as if it were transferred from the abstract categories of judgement of the *Ṣughra* to a place where it stands as a heavy gate, guarded by ulema who will ask for the password.

As the text of *The peerless method* progresses, the figure of the imitator is ever more present. There is increasing emphasis on the exhortation to learn, 'so that you are not an imitator'. Starting about halfway through the text of the commentary, sentences from the *Ṣughra* (in italics in the example below) about God's necessary ideal and real attributes are time and again expanded by the added formula,[98] 'if you are asked about proof—according to reason/according to revelation—of [x], then say [y], so that you are not an imitator.' For instance:

98 W. Ong describes the formula as a 'more or less exactly repeated set of phrases or expressions [...] in verse or prose, which [...] have a function in oral culture more crucial and pervasive than any they may have in a writing or print or electronic culture.' Ong 1982, 26.

> If you are asked about the proof of the existence of God the Exalted, according to reason, then say, so that you are not an imitator: *as for the proof of God's existence according to reason, that is the creation of the world*.[99]

At times the proof from reason that the believer is supposed to be able to reproduce is quite complex, like this example about the creation of the world (which is part of the proof that there is a Creator):

> And if you are asked about proof for the world's creation, then say: *the proof of the creation of the world*, that is of this earthly world, *is its being inseparable from properties that are accidental in time, like movement and rest and such things*, for instance uniting and dividing; and that which is inseparable from properties that exist in time, is itself temporal.
>
> If you are asked about the creation of the accidental, then say: '*the proof of the creation of the accidental is the observation of its transformation from non-being to being and from being to non-being*.' If the accidental properties were eternal, then they could not be non-existent. But their non-existence has been observed in numerous bodies, just like their opposite, existence.
>
> So the observation of the transformation of occasional things is proof of their creation, and the link to temporal occasional things is proof of their creation, and their creation is proof of their existence in time, and their existence in time is what is pursued. Praise God who guides us when we desire this proof of existence according to reason.[100]

The reasoning reflects the standard *kalām* argumentation for the existence of the Creator.[101] It was well known among scholars in the historic heartlands of Islam, who had studied works on such topics as *uṣūl al-dīn* by al-Bāqillānī (*kitāb al-tamhīd*) or al-Ashʿarī (*kitāb al-lumāʿ*). But, judging from Hall and Stewart's 'core curriculum', not many West African scholars can have been familiar with such works, and even if they had been the reasoning seems hardly fit for testing the basic religious knowledge of the ordinary believer. For al-Wālī, however, basic knowledge was really not enough. Whoever wrote this paragraph—an earlier Fulani scholar or al-Wālī himself—was interested in science at a high

99 Hunwick 178, 33.

100 Hunwick 178, 33.

101 See H.A. Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 134–143.

level. As usual in Ashʿarī *kalām*, the proof from reason is followed by proof from revelation (in this case Q 14;10: 'Can there be doubt concerning Allāh, the creator of the heavens and the earth?'). Then follows a most suitable verse from 'the poet', that is Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Maqqārī, who wrote: 'Our proof for the existence of the world is, when you are learned, that the world was created.'[102]

The point is that in *The peerless method* al-Sanūsī's connection between the *shahāda* and knowledge is, if not entirely replaced, nonetheless overshadowed by a connection between imitation and unbelief, because the intention of *The peerless method* was to draw a line between 'imitators' and believers. It maintained that the person who, when asked, could not reproduce the required proof, would be considered an imitator, and therefore an unbeliever—and that was that. Where did this intransigent view come from? I suggest three influences: first, a local concern with obedience, notably to the ulema; second, the Sudanese tradition of reform described by Hiskett; and third, a contemporary reform movement in the Middle East.

Obedience to Ulema

As we saw in the previous chapter, things were changing for ulema in this period: the spread of Islam to rural areas, the rise of popular Islam, and an increasing number of specialists in the religion, not all of whom had the same scholarly education, fostered the idea that ulema could be 'bad'. At the same time some influential Sufis claimed that the intellectual learning of ulema was not indispensable for gaining knowledge of the truth. Moreover, the good relationship between ulema and the ruling class, which had lasted more than five centuries, now appeared to be less strong. Now, the rejection of the imitator dove-tailed with, and may, indeed, have originated in, the collective concern with classical book learning of ulema who were losing some of their status among Muslim communities. At the same time, this rejection answered the needs of rural communities, which were struggling to define their new Muslim identity. Both factors—the latter will be further explored in the next chapter—belong to the social history of central Sudanic Africa.

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102 Hunwick 178, 33: دليلنا على وجود العالم ان كنت عالما حدوث العالم Abū l-ʿAbbās A.b.M. al-Maqqārī al-Tilimsānī al-Mālikī al-Ashʿarī b. al-Tatāʾūnī Shihāb al-Dīn (*GAL* II 296, S II 407) was born at the end of the 16th century in Tlemcen. He taught history and hadith in Fez, then went on to teach in Mecca, Damascus and Cairo. His *Manẓūmat iḍāʾat al-dujjuna fī iʿtiqād ahl al-sunna*, from which this line is taken, is a profession of faith in fivehundred verses. It is part of Hall & Stewart's 'core curriculum'.

In accordance with Ashʿarism al-Sanūsī had written in his *Muqaddima* that any truthful doctrine must be in agreement with both reason and tradition, but he had left it to his readers to find examples from revelation to support his tenets. In many cases *The peerless method* does supplement proof from reason (*dalīl al-ʿaql*) with citations from tradition (*dalīl al-naql*)—that is, the sunna or the Qurʾan. For the student of theology, proof from reason and proof from tradition functioned in the same way at a cognitive level. Only the source or method of proof was different. As we have seen, *dalīl* is proof in the sense of an unmistakable sign. 'Proof from reason' did not mean that the student was supposed to 'invent' his own logical proof, but that he must remember and be able to reproduce the proof that had been established before by authoritative scholars, just as he had to learn which Quranic verses or hadiths proved certain theses. Both types of information depended on the specialised knowledge of scholars.

Against this background the imitator in *The peerless method* is not someone who follows pagans or the wrong ulema, but someone who does not pay due attention to the ulema and what they stand for. He is someone who repeats single phrases from the Muslim tradition and who merely *poses* as a believer—someone who has picked up scattered details about Islam but who cannot reproduce enough propositions and proofs regarding the attributes of God and the Prophet, including quite complex philosophic lines of reasoning from the Muʿtazila repertoire.

In contrast, the believer was the person who had memorised—in Arabic, not in his mother tongue—parts of the text on the subject of *tawḥīd*. In actual practice this was the person who was regularly spending time with an ʿ*ālim*, sitting at his feet to hear the text and memorise it. Indeed, popular texts from a tradition that expounded 'the benefits of learning' tell students that 'he who is not present at the place of a scholar for 40 days in a row is [one of the people who side] with Pharaoh.'[103] The believer, then, was the person who visited the ulema, paid his respects to them, and submitted to their authority. In the preface of *The peerless method* it says, intricately but tellingly:

> Verily, God created four kingdoms. One in the east, one in the west, one in the south and one in the north. They never stop exclaiming, each morning and evening. Those who are in the east [exclaim]: If only we had not been created! And those in the west: If only we knew, when we were created, why we were created! Those in the south [exclaim]: Alas,

103 See e.g. Falke 11 and Falke 269.11

> if we knew why we were created, we would act according to what we knew. And those in the north: Alas! If only we had *not* acted according to what we knew, we would have resigned from what the ulema prohibit us![104]

What this means is that the knowledge that ordinary human beings have is always insufficient. Only the ulema have the knowledge that can bring salvation. Relevant salvation in this cultural context was in this life, here and now. It was to be a member of the Muslim community and not an outcast. And it was the knowledge of the ulema that made the difference.

Bad Muslims

The distinction between good and bad Muslims, and therefore the discussion about the grounds for anathematising (*takfīr*), had long been a central theme for reformers in all parts of the Muslim world, including West Africa. Here, Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ (d. 1149) had written, in his famous *Kitāb al-shifāʾ*, that unbelief was in the first place ignorance of God. He differentiated between three kinds of unbelievers: born unbelievers (such as Jews and Christians), apostates, and those who were to be adjudged unbelievers on account of their actions and beliefs. Committing a sin, even a capital one such as murder, adultery or treating the prophets with levity, made one a sinner, but not necessarily an unbeliever. But denying revelation and divine law by doing things that only an unbeliever would do, or saying things only an unbeliever would say, like declaring the drinking of wine or other sins lawful, did make one an unbeliever.[105]

As we know from his letters to Askia Muḥammad and Muḥammad Rumfa, al-Maghīlī adopted this view. He also discussed other grounds for *takfīr* that were related to diverging intellectual positions. Maintaining, for instance, that God is knowing but has no knowledge, as did the Muʿtazila, while being aware of the logical implication that God is thus denied one of His necessary attributes, made one an unbeliever in the eyes of some, said al-Maghīlī, although he

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104 Hunwick 178, 8 has 'north' again where other manuscripts have 'south'. Hunwick 178 and Ibadan 82/48 mix up the verbs *ʿamala* and *ʿalima* in the sentences about the people in the south and the north. Apparently the passage did not appeal much to the copyists. But mss Arabe 5541 and 5650 (Paris) solve that problem and are the sources of the translation given here.

105 See Hunwick 1985. 118–120. Ibadis too accepted the idea that sinners are not unbelievers. Ibadism was important in the region for at least the early history of Islam. See Chapter 2.

acknowledged that there was no agreement on the matter.[106] He also warned against the mixing of the Muslim faith with practices related to traditional beliefs.

The next discussion in the region of the theme that is both well documented and preserved is between ʿUthmān dan Fodio and his teacher, Shaykh Jibrīl b.ʿUmar. It took place more than a century after the period in which al-Wālī was active, but it responds to developments that had been building up in the eighteenth and possibly the seventeenth century. It can therefore add to our 'oblique' view of the second half of the seventeenth century, and it will allow us to compare al-Wālī's ideas with those of one of his readers. Shaykh Jibrīl maintained that people who were disobedient because of having committed a grave sin were unbelievers, and that even those who refused to listen to what 'an intelligent person says' while they themselves were 'of little knowledge' and befuddled by 'fanciful opinions on their Islam' were unbelievers.[107] What intelligent people would say, according to Jibrīl, was that someone who commits sins such as having more than four wives, not veiling his womenfolk, partaking in or allowing the mingling of men and women, taking women in tribal warfare and depriving orphans of their rights, necessarily becomes an unbeliever.[108] Arguably, this view was in keeping with the idea that doing things that only unbelievers would do made one an unbeliever. Hiskett commented: 'the teaching of Sheikh Jibrīl b.ʿUmar set off a controversy in the Sudanese towns, centred round the relation of "disobedience" (here synonymous with non-Islamic local custom) to unbelief.'[109]

Dan Fodio was much troubled by the extremely judgemental attitude of his venerated shaykh and of many others around him, and referred to al-Maghīlī and al-Suyūṭī to justify his view that a sinner was not an unbeliever. In the course of his career he wrote a few dozen sermons, epistles and treatises warning against anathematising. He specifically rejected the practice, which had become quite popular by then, of questioning people on their knowledge of religion and accusing them of unbelief if this knowledge was insufficient.[110]

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106 Hunwick 1985.

107 The text of a poem on the subject by Shaykh Jibrīl is rendered in Bivar and Hiskett 1962, 141–143.

108 Hiskett, 1962, 588–589.

109 Hiskett 1962, 591.

110 Last and al-Hajj 1965; Brenner 1984, 84–85; Brenner and Last 1985a, 436. In this light Bello and Dan Fodio's admiration of al-Wālī is the more remarkable. One ground for it was al-Wālī's work on grammar.

Nevertheless, obedience was an issue for Dan Fodio too. In his *Nur al-albāb* he wrote that there are Muslims, unbelievers and groups about whose status there is no agreement. He divided unbelievers into the same three categories as al-Maghīlī and qāḍī ʿIyād had done. Believers were also found in three groups: they were the ulema, the students (*ṭalaba*), and those who listen to the ulema and follow their example—almost a social category. One of the groups about which there was no agreement was made up of the ignorant who had entered Islam but did not understand on what it is based, and yet did *not* pursue *taqlīd*; 'they pronounce the *shahāda* without sound belief, but do not study or question the ulema or attend their gatherings because of their lack of interest: in the eyes of God they are unbelievers, but insofar as they do nothing in word or deed that reflects unbelief, their fellowmen must accept them as Muslims.'[111] As a great social leader, Dan Fodio was more moderate than his teacher regarding sin and much more moderate than al-Wālī regarding *taqlīd*. But even for Dan Fodio the decisive matter, the question that made one an unbeliever or not 'in the eyes of God', was whether one studied and attended the ulema's lessons. By this time, the ulema's grip on the Muslim community was a major issue.

Hiskett, Hunwick and Brenner have convincingly demonstrated the continuity of reformist themes, terminology and quotations from qāḍī ʿIyād to al-Maghīlī and then to ʿUthmān dan Fodio. How this tradition developed in between these landmarks, which are each three centuries apart, is still largely unknown, but *The peerless method* adds another link to the chain of its transmission. It demonstrates that the promotion of anathematising was not so much initiated, as Hiskett remarked, but rather elaborated on by Shaykh Jibrīl, because before him, in al-Wālī's time, it was already a vital question. ʿUthmān dan Fodio rejected the austere stance in the matter of unbelief of his shaykh Jibrīl, of al-Wālī, and of the sectarian '*mutakallimūn*' who used the knowledge recorded in *The peerless method* to test people's devotion. But he shared al-Wālī's idea that faith and loyalty to the ulema were as good as synonymous.

Fundamentally, *The peerless method* is preoccupied with determining what sorts of people did or did not belong to the community of believers. The commentary, in spite of the many lines that were added to the *Ṣughra*'s ruminations about God's attributes, is in the end not so much about abstract principles of faith or theology, but about the practical matter of sifting the wheat from the chaff in daily life. Within this tradition the theme of *taqlīd* served as the litmus test that demonstrated whether a self-professed Muslim was wheat or chaff.

111 Brenner 1987, 52–53.

Influence from the Middle East

It has been suggested that, from the late eighteenth century onwards, the movement of reform in central Sudanic Africa was influenced by Wahhabism.[112] It is a fact that Wahhabism also explicitly rejected imitation of medieval scholarly opinions and propagated the doctrine that disobedience in religious matters involves unbelief. Nevertheless, *The peerless method* shows that, in Sudanic Africa, a rigorous position regarding the imitator had developed well before Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (1703–1792) was born. On the other hand, African theologians such as al-Wālī were evidently influenced by discussions in the Middle East, notably in the holy cities, where pilgrims from the far corners of the Muslim world met 'to imbibe the doctrines and ways of recentered Sunnism.'[113] In al-Wālī's day, a lively debate was taking place there about *taqlīd*, of which he must have been well aware. According to the modern researchers who recently wrote about it, it was especially about *taqlīd* in relation to *ijtihād*, and not particularly in relation to *taṣdīq*, which would have been the main concern of al-Wālī. But it was the tendency to reject *taqlīd* that interested al-Wālī. On one of his journeys to Mecca, he was reported to have visited Muḥammad b. ʿAlā al-Dīn al-Bābilī (1592–1666). This remarkable man, a Shāfiʿī, published only one book, because modesty held him back from writing anything that would not add significantly to what others had already done before him. But he had a great reputation as a jurist and a teacher of hadiths, and many of his students would go on to earn fame in their own right. One of these was Muḥammad Ḥayyā, who was to become one of the teachers of ʿAbd al-Wahhāb. Al-Bābilī studied not so much the chains of transmission of hadiths, as had been the vogue for centuries, but rather the texts themselves and their meaning as sources of law. This formed the core of his reformist ideas. John Voll identified al-Bābilī as one of the focal points of a network of revivalist ulema in Cairo, Madīna and Mecca, who all shared in this effort to return to the Sunna and the Qur'an as the direct sources of sharīʿa by way of individual unrestricted *ijtihād* instead of *taqlīd*.[114]

Students and scholars who participated in this network were from various geographical regions, including Persia, North Africa and India, and also from different legal schools. Some of them were Ḥanafī, still more were Mālikī, but most were Shāfiʿī. Strict adherence to one of the schools or its legal doctrine

112 Hiskett rejected this view in 1962, 593 ff., and later wrote that 'the Western sudan was not immune to intellectual and spiritual currents from the Islamic world beyond the Sudan. Powerful among these currents was the rise of Wahhabism'. See *The Course of Islam in Africa*, 1994, 109.

113 Bulliet 1994, 177.

114 Voll 1975, 32–39. See also Levtzion 2007, XII.

was not as important to them as it had been in earlier periods. Moreover, many of these revivalists subscribed to a Sufi *ṭarīqa*, and often to more than one. They were not opposed to Sufism as such. But as Voll pointed out, there was certainly a tension within their circles between their appreciation of the popular ways of the *ṭuruq* and the ulema's struggle to uphold the more formal tenets of religion.

This tension is further analysed in the previously mentioned article on reform in pre-modern Islam by B.M. Nafi. He shows how sentiments in these circles turned against what were seen as excesses of popular Sufism, but also against the Sufi understanding of two separate fields of knowledge, one concerning inner truth, the other the rules of outer truth, to which the Sharīʿa belongs. These scholars objected in particular to the idea that knowledge of inner truth could be gained without a good measure of knowledge of the outer truth or strict compliance to the Sharīʿa. Others among them accused Sufism of asserting too close an association between the divine and the contingent in their doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. On the other hand, the reformers felt that many philosophical systems, including the Ashʿarī interpretation of God's attributes, had gone too far over the centuries in their abstraction. In any case, the position of the Qur'an and the Sunna as the fundamental sources of religion and law had to be reasserted.

Al-Wālī was clearly interested in this reconsideration of the Qur'an and the Sunna. Many examples from both sources were added in *The peerless method* as proof of God's attributes, and many were also included in *Valid arguments*. It is possible that al-Wālī also heeded the concerns discussed in the court-yards of al-Bābilī about extravagant Sufi customs and the excessive importance that some Sufis accorded, in the eyes of the reformers, to the intuitive path to the knowledge of inner truth. Listening to and participating in these discussions, al-Wālī can hardly have missed the link with what he had heard or seen himself of Sufis such as Shaykh ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbd al-Jalīl in Kalumbardo, the shaykh who was so proud of the knowledge he obtained without studying or reading, and was moreover suspected of preaching disobedience to Bornu's ruling class. The opinions of al-Wālī's Cairene and Middle Eastern peers must have strengthened his own conviction that the value for religion of cognitive learning—that is, of the type of (*ẓāhir*) knowledge in which the 'book-learned' ulema were specialists—had to be emphasised. And that is exactly what he did in his version of *The peerless method*.

5 Conclusion

The peerless method builds on two traditions of canonical text: al-Sanūsī's written *Al-ʿaqīda al-ṣughra*, and the oral commentaries on it that Fulani 'missionaries' transmitted to new Muslims in a large part of West Africa, and which were called the *kabbe*. Comparison between *The peerless method* and these other traditions offers an opportunity to investigate why the former was composed in the first place. Two questions arise: Why did al-Wālī write his version, and what was its message? I will explore the first question in chapter 7. The second was the subject of this chapter.

The second part of *The peerless method* follows the *Ṣughra* sentence by sentence, so that there seems to be little room for independent ideas. Nevertheless, I have argued in this chapter that the Fulani commentators, ending with al-Wālī, did more than just explain a canonical work in their own language. The first *kabbe* commentaries had translated the *Ṣughra* in a double sense: linguistically and culturally, from Arabic to Fulfulde and from the North African environment, where Islam had been the religion of the majority for a much longer time and was taught in numerous madrasas, to the religion's frontier in Sudanic Africa. They added ideas stemming from their experience as educators about the organisation of a text in order to facilitate memorisation; from previous discussions they raised certain issues and left others out, and they inserted new notions. In short, they adapted al-Sanūsī's text for their own audience.

However, the purpose or the general drift of the first Fulfulde commentaries was comparable to that of the *Ṣughra*. Al-Sanūsī's 'small creed' was a scholastic work with an educative aim. It was meant to impart to believers more knowledge of the philosophical foundations of the doctrine of the attributes of God, the central doctrine of Ashʿarism. Written in an environment where *fusḥā'* Arabic was widely understood, the *Ṣughra* was intended to imbue Muslims with the sense of duty needed to understand the basic principles of their religion and to make better Muslims out of the majority of believers. The final lines of al-Sanūsī's text take into account the fact that intellect was not the only route to the knowledge of religious truth, and declare that it could be complemented by methods of mysticism, in particular by internalising the knowledge represented by the words of the shahāda. Essentially, al-Sanūsī's aim was the commitment to Islam of as many believers as possible. It was an inclusive goal, with an aspect of emancipation.

The same can be said of the oral *kabbe* tradition. It reformulated the *Ṣughra* and expanded it, explaining it to Muslims in West Africa and adding general information about the culture and the religion of Islam so that new converts would know what Muslims do. It did so in Fulfulde, the language of the

'missionaries' and their first audience. *Kabbe* versions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to address a very broad readership. They, too, present their content as one of two complementary ways to obtain religious knowledge—notably, knowledge about the manifest laws and principles, and knowledge about hidden truths which could be obtained by following the path of the mystic.

In *The peerless method*, however, the first characteristic that the *kabbe* and the *Ṣughra* share—inclusiveness—is replaced by its opposite. A further characteristic of the *kabbe*—its almost modest presentation of knowledge of the manifest as one of two 'branches' of *tawḥīd*—seems to be pushed into the background in *The peerless method*. The emphasis is entirely on the admonition that it is indispensable in order to pursue religious knowledge of the manifest by means of reason.

The text contains various references to Sufism. However, one of the supposed indications of Sufism, the literary method of explaining concepts by attaching meaning to each letter of the word that represents them, may well have served the practical purpose of a mnemonic aid. As I have argued, the method does not necessarily signal an interest in *ʿilm al-ḥurūf*, the mystical means of discovering hidden truths through the study of values that letters share with other realms of creation. Other references to Sufism are weighed down by the strong emphasis throughout the text on reason, on *naẓarī* knowledge obtained through intellectual reflection, and on the transmission of hadiths and knowledge of the Qur'an—all sorts of knowledge that only cognitive learning can impart.

The peerless method does not address believers who aspire to reach the exalted level of friends-of-God, nor even individuals who seek salvation in the hereafter. It addresses individuals who need to know the basics of Islam so as not to be considered 'imitators', unbelievers, or outcasts. Apart from knowledge of God, these basics include knowledge of Islamic social life in which one must know one's own place, and that of the shaykh, the faqīh and the imam—and most of all, perhaps, that of the *ʿālim*. In other words, the objective of the authors of *The peerless method* was the transformation not of the soul (as with Sufism), but of society.

In the society thus envisaged there is no place for imitators because they are unbelievers, without exception and without doubt. This notion of the imitator as an unbeliever is the most idiosyncratic element that *The peerless method* adds to the *Ṣughra*. The idea does seem to be related to the practice that the Maghribī scholar al-Yūsī recorded in the same period, of testing people's knowledge of *tawḥīd*. But it had not, up until then, been integrated in a serious scholarly work. In a way, *The peerless method*'s pronounced stance against *taqlīd* fits into a trend of insistence on *taṣdīq* and *ijtihād* in certain circles in the

Middle East. But in *The peerless method* it does not solely lead to the "empirical" study of the sources of the revelation. Rather, while still emphasising *kalām*, all the "anti-*taqlīd*" inspiration is put to this specific use of defining the *muqallid* in a way that no other Sunni theologian had followed. That the imitator is an unbeliever is far from a cursory idea. The author or authors rather hammered away at it with a repeated formula. The 'imitator' who does not accept the importance of study and reason is the motor that turns the inclusive character of the *Ṣughra* and the *kabbe* into exclusiveness, into a method of defining who does and who does *not* belong to the community of Muslims.

The aim of this chapter has been to find out what *The peerless method* is *really* about. Commentaries, Hughes wrote, use canonical sources to express the basic values of a new community. A basic value of the new Muslim communities in the central Sudanic countryside of the second half of the seventeenth century was firmness of belief, as opposed to doubt or ambiguity about religious and therefore social loyalties. Another text by al-Wālī begins with greetings to the Prophet, his companions and 'those who consolidate faith and are steadfast in certainty'.[115] Firm belief and commitment were at the core of a new Muslim identity, which was expressed by a communal lifestyle with new daily routines of prayer and formal learning. *The peerless method* reflects and reinforces this identity, because it is about marking the cultural boundary between dedicated Muslims and 'doubters', between people who sit down with an *ʿālim* to learn and others who do not and who are therefore suspected of loyalty to their traditional religion. The role of the *ʿālim* was crucial: at a time when Islam expanded to the countryside and the position of the ulema was changing, their specialised knowledge was presented as indispensable for the ordinary believer who does not want to be mistaken for an unbeliever.

The analysis of *The peerless method* has also shown that the author of its final version, al-Wālī, negotiated between different levels of Muslim culture. To begin with, his basic material—consisting of the 'mainstream' *Ṣughra* and the regional tradition of the *kabbe*—had a hybrid character. I have argued that al-Wālī himself was inspired on the one hand by ideas he had discussed with peers in Cairo or Mecca, in the circle of the Shāfiʿī scholar of hadith al-Bābilī. On the other hand, his *Peerless method* responded to social dynamics at the local level—that is, to the need of both ulema and ordinary believers to rethink their role as Muslims in a time when Islam was spreading to new populations. This last issue will be further explored in the next chapter.

115 *Tadrīb al-ṭullāb ʿalā ṣināʿat al-iʿrāb*. Kaduna (National Archive) 47/2. Folio 1.