


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Enslaved Muslim Sufi Saints in the Nineteenth-Century Sahara: The Life of Bilal Ould Mahmoud

Khaled Esseissah\* 

Georgetown University

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [ke230@georgetown.edu](mailto:ke230@georgetown.edu)

## Abstract

This article centers on the life of Bilal Ould Mahmoud, an enslaved man who became a spiritual authority in the nineteenth-century Sahara. It examines how Bilal's piety allowed him to rise to prominence in a hierarchical context that subjugated him to an inferior position. Yet what makes him so fascinating to study is his ability to achieve the highest station as a Sufi saint without being attached to a Sufi order. Using Bilal's case, this article makes two important contributions to the historiographies of Sufism and slavery. First, it brings fresh perspectives to the studies of Sufism outside of *ṭariqa* (Sufi orders). Second, it contributes to the studies of Saharan slavery by exploring enslaved Muslims' experiences beyond the practice of illicit magic, and also as part of how they exercised their saintly authority as empowered agents. In the process, it analyzes the interplay among Islam, race, and slavery in the nineteenth-century Sahara.

**Keywords:** Mauritania; northwestern Africa; Sahara; Islam; slavery; race

Bilal Ould Mahmoud (hereinafter Bilal) was an enslaved man who gained his freedom and attained the status of *awliyā'* (sing. *wālī*, meaning a saint) in the nineteenth-century Sahara.<sup>1</sup> Through his performance of *karamāt* (saintly miracles) Bilal transformed himself into one of the most venerated saintly figures in Muslim West Africa.<sup>2</sup> Like most enslaved people in the Sahara during this period, who were denied a formal Muslim education due to their status, Bilal was illiterate. Nonetheless he pursued a religious vocation, entertaining audiences with beautiful recitations of the Qur'an and performances of *el-medh* (a Sufi-inspired devotional practice). According to oral traditions, Bilal died between the 1880s and 1890s (the exact date is unknown).<sup>3</sup> However, his religious status remains elevated: members of the *bīḏān* and *ḥarāṭīn* communities visit his shrine at Lemsiha, a

<sup>1</sup>Arabic and Ḥassāniyya terms are transliterated according to the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*' guidelines. Because Ḥassāniyya is an oral language, complications in spelling often arise. For example, words are not often consistent across texts (e.g., Beni may also be spelled Banu). I have also opted not to use diacritics for personal names and places. Additionally, the expressions 'Ould' and 'Ibn' refer to 'the son of' and are used interchangeably in the Arabophone communities in Mauritania. Although the expression 'Ould' is more popular, some individuals still prefer to use 'Ibn'. When identifying scholars from this region in this essay, I use both 'Ould' and 'Ibn'. I do so because I wanted to respect individuals' choices, both living and deceased.

<sup>2</sup>Here, I use the term *wālī* to refer to someone who becomes a close 'friend' of the Almighty Allah due to his or her high level of *iḥsān* (excellence in faith) and *taqwā* (piety). I use the concept of *karamāt* to denote the special divine protection and miraculous powers that the Almighty God bestows on the *awliyā'* based on their closeness to Him. In this sense, they perform *karamāt* by God's permission. The concept of *karamāt* has been studied as a central theme in Sufi traditions and needs no further discussion here. See J. S. Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1998), 26–8; J. Brown, 'Faithful dissenters: Sunni skepticism about the miracles of saints', *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 1:2 (2012), 123–8; and S. A. Nabi, 'The concept of the Sufi saintly miracle: a literary approach' (unpublished MA thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2020), 59–68.

<sup>3</sup>B. B. Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli min sii-ratii Bilal al-wali* (Nouakchott, Mauritania, 2017), 19.

small encampment in the Inchiri region of northern Mauritania, in search of *baraka* (divine blessings) and protection from a Sufi saint.<sup>4</sup>

Bilal is recognized as a saint in part through reports that he performed *karamāt*. In West Africa, as in other parts of the Muslim world, Sufi religious leaders are known by their *karamāt*, but Bilal's miracles are distinctive. The most common version of these miracles is the one involving a baby camel owned by Bilal's master. Several informants gave me a version of this widely-recounted miracle. According to this version, Bilal's master noticed that one camel never gave milk and accused Bilal of drinking the milk while shepherding animals. Responding to the master's threats to punish him, Bilal denied the accusations and told his master, 'If you don't believe me ask the camel.' Bilal's response further angered the master, who shouted 'Are you now making fun of me?' He continued to abuse Bilal until the baby camel uttered the words, 'It is I who drank from my mother's milk.' Startled and fearing the prospect of *tazūbb* (spiritual retribution), the master relented and decided to manumit Bilal.<sup>5</sup>

This miracle, and its widespread circulation in Mauritania, led to the popular reference to Bilal as 'the enslaved man who made the camel talk'. It specifically references Bilal's transition from slavery to freedom and eventually his *zūhūr* (a term used by Mauritians to refer to the emergence of a Sufi saint) as an influential Sufi master. Here was an enslaved man who was able to carve out a niche for himself as a holy man in a playing field where *bizān* elite domination was persistent.<sup>6</sup>

Yet what makes him so fascinating to study is his ability to achieve the highest *maqām* (station) as a Sufi saint without being affiliated with a Sufi order (*ṭarīqa*, pl. *туруq*). In analyzing Bilal's spirituality, I borrow the concept of 'Sufism without [the] Sufi order' from Heon Choul Kim. He defines Sufism as the spiritual life, not as organized Sufi movements have defined it, but as it 'was representatively practiced by the Prophet and his Companions'.<sup>7</sup> Viewed from this angle, Bilal's example provides an important window into the types of agency exercised specifically by enslaved Muslims in the emergence of non-*ṭarīqa* Sufism. Although several scholars have stressed early Sufism's individual nature in Africa, much of the existing literature has focused on the establishment and development of formal Sufi movements in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in West Africa.<sup>8</sup> During this period, Sufi orders became inextricably linked with powerful scholar-saints whose influence was based more on a communal Sufi identity and the search for mystical

<sup>4</sup>Mauritanian society is made up of two main social groups: the Arabophone and non-Arabophone groups. The non-Arabophone groups include Halpulaar'en, Soninke, and Wolof speakers. The Arabophone communities, also called the Moors and *bizān* (those who define themselves as 'white'), refer to all native Hassaniyya speakers and are divided into various ranked hereditary strata. The *bizān* include Banū Ḥassān political elites claiming descent from the Beni Hilal warriors of Arabia, who reportedly migrated to the southwestern Sahara in the early fifteenth century. These Banū Ḥassān confederations came to terms with *zawāyā* groups, Amazigh (or 'Berber') confederations that had long inhabited the southwestern Sahara. Banū Ḥassān groups sought to monopolize political power and represented themselves as 'warrior' groups, in contrast to *zawāyā* groups, who claimed status as Muslim scholars and acknowledged Banū Ḥassān political dominance. Other social groups were incorporated into southwestern Saharan society below the *bizān* social hierarchy and others who provided services for elites. These groups include the *lahmā* or *znāga* (tributary groups), *mu'ālīmīn* (craftspeople), *iggāwen* (singers and musicians, often referred to as 'griots'), and 'abid (enslaved peoples, m. sing. 'abd, f. sing. *khadem*). The *bizān* include the *ḥarāṭīn* communities (sing. f. *Ḥarṭāniyya*, sing. m. *Ḥarṭānī*): often defined as freed persons, but the *ḥarāṭīn* also encompasses other Saharan inhabitants and Black African populations whose ancestors came to speak Hassaniyya Arabic as their native language and adopted aspects of the *bizān* culture, but never experienced slavery.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Oubeid Ould Imijine, Nouakchott, 9 Aug. 2017.

<sup>6</sup>Other celebrated nineteenth century *ḥarāṭīn* Sufi saints include Mohamed Ehel Imwah and Muhammad Khairat, respectively from the Tagant and Trarza regions in contemporary Mauritania. For further details on Muhammad Khairat's story, see M. Brhane, 'Narratives of the past, politics of the present: identity, subordination and the Harāṭīnes of Mauritania' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 1997), 127–31.

<sup>7</sup>H. C. Kim, 'The nature and role of Sufism in contemporary Islam: a case study of the life, thought and teachings of Fethullah Gülen' (unpublished PhD thesis, Temple University, 2008), 174.

<sup>8</sup>L. Brenner, 'The esoteric sciences in Islam', in B. M. Du Toit and I. H. Abdalla (eds.), *African Healing Strategies* (Buffalo, NY, 1985), 25; P. F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuareg History* (Oxford, 2003), 364–73; R. T. Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied*

knowledge. As Zachary V. Wright has noted, ‘by the nineteenth century, charismatic figures emerged from the ranks of these same scholars, and began to publicly associate themselves with international Sufi orders, primarily the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya’.<sup>9</sup> However, Bilal’s story reveals that Sufism during this era was more than just organized Sufi orders associated with clerical families.<sup>10</sup> I argue that Bilal’s *taqwā* (piety) allowed him to assert himself as a Sufi saint — a privilege long reserved for noble groups — in a hierarchical context that subjugated him to an inferior position as a formerly enslaved person. The important point here is that Bilal achieved the highest profile not by attaching himself to a Sufi *ṭarīqa* or being part of a scholarly lineage, but through his piety. Much of Bilal’s power originates from his ability to assert his healing powers and expertise in ‘*al-‘ulūm ‘al-bāṭiniyya*’ (esoteric Islamic sciences).

Through a close reading of various oral and written sources, this article makes two important contributions to the historiographies of Sufism and slavery. First, it contributes to the existing Sufi scholarship in Islamic West Africa by bringing fresh perspectives to the existing body of work on Sufism outside *ṭarīqa*. Scholars like Robert Launay, Benjamin F. Soares, and Gilles Holder have explored non-*ṭarīqa* Sufism in contemporary West African contexts. Robert Launay examines the changing Sufi practices and tenets in West Africa.<sup>11</sup> He notes that Sufi orders have three main attributes that can apply to followers in West Africa. The first major characteristic of a Sufi order is that it is extremely hierarchical, meaning that one cannot join an order without the guidance of a shaykh, which creates deeply personal relationships between the shaykh and his initiates. Second, Sufi orders are defined by rivalries between each other, as membership tends to be more exclusive. Finally, Sufi orders involve *dhikr* or ‘remembrances’, ritual recitation of prayers particular to each order.<sup>12</sup> However, these characteristics, Launay argues, are not always obvious, and Sufi orders that lack them are not any less Sufi. To support his argument, Launay focused on the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya orders among the Dyula of Koko, Côte d’Ivoire, finding that rivalry was not as potent as he thought (people chose an order based on what litanies they found ‘attractive’), hierarchical structure was not very rigid or personal, and corporate identity was missing. More recently, Soares has analyzed the influence of ‘new Sufis’ whose religious authority strays from the typical ‘other Sufis in Mali and their historical predecessors from the colonial and pre-colonial past’.<sup>13</sup> These leaders work in an environment where ‘most Malian Muslims today have no formal affiliation whatsoever to a Sufi order.’<sup>14</sup> In Soares’s view, the expansion of new media platforms in the neoliberal age has contributed to the reconfiguration of Muslim authority. In a similar vein, Holder analyzes the example of Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara, a figure who shares many qualities with the previous Sufi leaders that Soares has studied. According to Holder, Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara, the leader of the Sufi Ansar Dine movement, is not affiliated with any particular Sufi order, but instead has created an organization with great political and financial autonomy.<sup>15</sup> While these works are important, they only examine the phenomenon of Sufism outside *ṭarīqa* in the contemporary context. Yet, oral testimonies and Arabic texts reference the existence of non-Sufi-based *ṭarīqa* as a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Using Bilal’s case, I aim to

---

*Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014), 179; Z. V. Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community of Ibrahim Niassé* (Boston, 2015), 51.

<sup>9</sup>Wright, *Living Knowledge*, 56.

<sup>10</sup>As Benjamin F. Soares reminds us in his studies of Sufi leaders in contemporary Mali, ‘Sufism and its influence cannot, and should not, be reduced to its presumed institutional forms such as the handful of Sufi orders whose history we already know something about.’ See B. Soares, ‘Saint and Sufi in contemporary Mali’, in M. V. Bruinessen and J. D. Howell (eds.), *Sufism and the ‘Modern’ Islam* (London, 2007), 77.

<sup>11</sup>R. Launay, *Beyond the Stream: Islam and Society in a West African Town* (Berkeley, 1992), 180–9.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.* 180–1.

<sup>13</sup>Soares, ‘Saint and Sufi’, 76.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* 79.

<sup>15</sup>G. Holder, ‘Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara et l’Association Islamique Ançar Dine: un réformisme Malien populaire en quête d’autonomie’, *Cahiers d’Études africaines*, 206–7:2 (2012), 389–425.

show that this tradition existed well before the contemporary era, specifically during the nineteenth century, when Sufi orders dominated the Western African Islamic spiritual landscape.

Second, this article contributes to the studies of Saharan slavery by uncovering the intellectual practices of enslaved Saharan saints, who are not often discussed by historians. It will thus enhance our understanding of the relationship between enslaved people and the ‘unseen’. Such an analysis forces us to think of the experiences Saharan Muslims had beyond the practice of illicit magic, as part of a more complicated way of understanding how they exercised their saintly authority. Here, I draw particularly on the framework for studying agency set by Saba Mahmood in her seminal *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* to reveal Bilal’s ability to attain influence in a culture that largely continued to hold him in contempt. Mahmood highlights the different forms of agency that individuals can exert depending on their circumstances. In her analysis of women’s piety movements in Egypt, Mahmood illuminates Muslim women’s ability to shape Egyptian Muslim society, not by resisting patriarchal oppression in mosque spaces, but by inhabiting male-dominated religious circles in order to attain a higher level of *taqwā*.<sup>16</sup> Reflecting on this alternative framework is very important, as it reveals the varied and complex ways in which marginalized groups can assert themselves not by subverting norms to make progressive change, but by choosing to purposefully inhabit those norms. Bilal’s efforts exemplified this kind of agency, as he did not seek to undermine the large social hierarchies of the nineteenth-century Sahara, but instead strove to excel in piety and assert himself as part of society.<sup>17</sup>

Through his own religious initiatives, Bilal was able to impose his saintly authority in nineteenth-century Sahara. By saintly authority, I refer to the spiritual power associated with religious figures who claim to harness supernatural forces through *karāmāt* and their capacity not only to benefit local communities — such as by producing rain during drought periods, healing the sick, and offering protection — but also to release spiritual retribution against others. Crucial to a saint’s authority is the ability to work simultaneously in multiple domains. As noted by Vincent Cornell in his study of Sufism and sainthood in Morocco, saints are recognized as such because they possess both *walāya* (closeness to God) and *wilāya*, authority granted by God because of that closeness.<sup>18</sup> It is these two dimensions that give the saint his special status as a holy figure who exercises authority in the religious, social, and political domains. Inherent to saintly authority is also the concept of *karāmāt*. Indeed, the performance of *karamāt* is of critical importance to a saint’s authority, as it is not only a means to access privileges, but also confers respect from others and serves as a source of legitimacy. Here, I consider saintly authority to highlight how Bilal engaged in Sufi practices to claim religious authority equal to major Sufi masters.<sup>19</sup> This historical analysis is significant because it reveals how enslaved Muslim saints redefined Sufi practices and imagined themselves as part of the *umma* (the global Muslim community).

Africanist scholars have often neglected to study enslaved Muslim saints, even though their roles are active, just sometimes hidden. Until recently, scholarly works have centered overwhelmingly on male figures from clerical lineages, and these figures are subsequently linked with Sufism and Sufi *shuyūkh* (sing. *shaykh*, a master) in West Africa.<sup>20</sup> With some notable exceptions, references to

<sup>16</sup>S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, 2011), 15.

<sup>17</sup>This trend of using Islam as a means to gain a certain level of influence is one that other marginalized Africans have utilized in other historical contexts. See B. S. Hall, ‘How slaves used Islam: the letters of enslaved Muslim commercial agents in the nineteenth-century Niger Bend and central Sahara’, *The Journal of African History*, 52:3 (2011); Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, *Precher dans le desert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie* (Paris, 2013); and K. Wiley, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-Slavery Mauritania* (Bloomington, IN, 2018).

<sup>18</sup>V. J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, TX, 2010), xvii–xxi.

<sup>19</sup>For more discussion of the complex and multilayered forms of authority in precolonial West Africa, see M. Nobili, ‘Reinterpreting the role of Muslims in the West African Middle Ages’, *The Journal of African History*, 61:3 (2021), 1–14.

<sup>20</sup>See C. C. Stewart and E. K. Stewart, *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania: A Case Study from the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1973); D. Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1985). Notable exceptions include the following scholarly works: S. Hanretta, ‘Gender and agency in the history of a

enslaved Saharan Muslims' supernatural powers are largely limited to accusations of bloodsucking and practices of extractions.<sup>21</sup> We know from Arabic texts and colonial documents that *bizān* communities have long associated enslaved Muslims with sorcery and the practice of black magic rather than the performance of *karamāt*, revealing a tendency to show them as lax Muslims or to even estrange them from Islam.<sup>22</sup> However, Bilal's story obliges us to look at Saharan enslaved Muslims' supernatural powers beyond the bloodsucking and sorcery accusations. A number of scholars have led the way in my analysis of the complex associations perceived to exist between esoteric powers, enslaved status, and phenotype in the Saharan contexts. Ann E. McDougall explores the intertwined histories of slavery and witchcraft in colonial Mauritania. In one of her important works, she outlines numerous documented cases of slavery and witchcraft to reveal the changing practices of sorcery in colonial Mauritania. More recently, Benjamin Acloque and Erin Pettigrew have expanded on McDougall's work, illuminating the ways in which French colonial authorities saw the belief in bloodsucking and witchcraft as troublesome because it was a sensitive issue to deal with and could sow discord among governed groups.<sup>23</sup>

The present article expands on these scholars' insights to contextualize Bilal's life story and his emergence as a prominent saint and performer of *karamāt* in a Saharan context still dominated by *bizān* efforts to exert cultural, social, and religious dominance over subordinate groups. My objective here is to make explicit Bilal's role as a Sufi shaykh and analyze the social, intellectual, and spiritual milieu in which he operated. Drawing on a variety of written and oral sources, I highlight his transition from commoner (*'awāmm*) to member of the elite (*khawāṣṣ*) with the purpose of underscoring his efforts to shape Sufi practices. To that end, this article will be divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the historical context in which Bilal was born and grew up. It tracks his personal journey in which he rose from slavery to work as a trusted camel herder and loyal servant for his master. The second part takes accounts of Bilal's various travels and examines his interaction with prominent Saharan Sufi masters by showing how many of them held him in high regard while others were skeptical of his saintly authority and even disdained him. The third part discusses Bilal's Sufism without *ṭarīqa*. It examines the ways in which he lived an Islamic spiritual life based on complete detachment from worldly desires and constant devotion, coupled with an absolute reliance on the Almighty Allah.<sup>24</sup>

### Bilal's early life as a camel shepherd

Bilal was born enslaved in approximately 1816 and raised in a rural area that became the town of Boutilimit, in the Gebla region of present-day southwestern Mauritania.<sup>25</sup> He takes his name from

---

West African Sufi community: the followers of Yacouba Sylla', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50:2 (2008), 478–508; B. Frede, 'Following in the steps of 'Ā'isha: Ḥassāniyya-speaking Tijāni women as spiritual guides (Muqaddamāt) and teaching Islamic scholars (Limrābūṭāt) in Mauritania', *Islamic Africa*, 5:2 (2014), 225–73; and J. Hill, *Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal* (Toronto, 2018).

<sup>21</sup>See Brhane, 'Narratives of the past', 127–31; and R. C. Jankowsky, *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia* (Chicago, 2010), 79–88.

<sup>22</sup>A. Ibn al-Amin ash-Shinqiti, *Al-wasit fi tarajim Shinqiti wa kalam hla tilk al-bilad* (Cairo, 1911), 541.

<sup>23</sup>See A. E. McDougall, 'Slavery, sorcery and colonial "reality" in Mauritania, c. 1910–1960', in C. Youé and T. Stapleton (eds.), *Agency and Action in Colonial Africa: Essays for John E. Flint* (New York, 2001), 69–82; B. Acloque, 'Accusations of remote vampirism: the colonial administration in Mauritania investigates the execution of three slaves: 1928–1929', in A. Bellagamba, S. Greene, and M. Klein (eds.), *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 2013), 282–304; E. Pettigrew, 'The heart of the matter: interpreting bloodsucking accusations in Mauritania', *The Journal of African History*, 57:3 (2016), 417–35; and E. Pettigrew, 'Politics and affiliations of enchantment among the Ahel Guennar of southern Mauritania', in S. Boulay and F. Freire (eds.), *Culture et politique dans l'Ouest saharien: Arts, activisme et État dans un espace de conflits* (Paris, 2017), 293–356.

<sup>24</sup>Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli*, 46.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.* 18.

Bilal b. Rabah, one of the most celebrated historical figures in Muslim history. Bilal b. Rabah was an enslaved man, originally from Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), who became one of the first Africans to embrace Islam and rose to become the first muezzin (caller to Muslim prayers) in the newly established Muslim community in Medina. Many African-descended peoples around the globe continue to find inspiration in Bilal b. Rabah's story to affirm their aspirations to mobility.<sup>26</sup> His name remains among the most common family names among Muslims globally, yet many members of the *bīzān* communities still refuse to name their children after Bilal, even though he is considered one of the most trusted Companions of Prophet Muhammad. Only altered versions of his name, like Bellal and Bellali, are used by some *bīzān* communities.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the refusal of the *bīzān* to name their children after Bilal b. Rabah feeds into racial stereotypes toward dark-skinned peoples, regardless of their piety or status, a point to which I shall return.

Information on Bilal's parents is very scarce. Oral sources tell us that Mahmoud Ould Modi, Bilal's father, came to what is now Boutlimit in the early eighteenth century to study under a prominent local scholar named Muhammad Ould Abu al-Khadili. He took up residence there, started a family, and never left.<sup>28</sup> Bilal's father married an enslaved woman named Vaitoum, and together they had four children. During my fieldwork, I heard different stories about Bilal's ancestry. The most widely known version, which is supported by written and oral accounts, holds that Bilal's father was born and raised as an enslaved person. Another version, recounted to me by Sidi Ahmed Ould Mouloud (one of Bilal's great-grandsons), holds that Bilal's father was a man of high rank and belonged to Ahl Modi, an illustrious Muslim family that traces their lineage to the Prophet Muhammad. The significance of tracing Bilal's lineage to the Prophet Muhammad is twofold. The first concerns the need to challenge the legality of Bilal's enslavement because it allows for his descendants to distance themselves from the stigma associated with his enslaved past. Second, claiming that Bilal is a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad is an attempt to establish a social identity as a noble *bīzān*. This kind of emphasis on genealogy points to the fluidity of social ranks in Mauritanian society and the ways in which several local elite groups have created, altered, and shifted genealogies over the past three hundred years.<sup>29</sup> However, the manipulation of genealogies is not confined to elite groups. Many descendants of families, who achieved special status by acquiring Islamic knowledge or becoming wealthy through trade, have also altered their genealogies to claim a *bīzān* identity. One very well-known example is Muhammad Khairat (d. 1913, hereinafter Khairat), an enslaved man who became an icon of Muslim dignity in the Sahara during the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> As Meskerem Brhane points out, some of Khairat's great-grandchildren identify themselves as *shurfa* and see themselves as *bīzān* nobility. In particular, Brhane discusses how at least one of Khairat's descendants has stories about him to establish his sainthood, 'not only through the miraculous act he performs, but first in the nobility of his genealogical line', even though the evidence is simply not there.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to Bilal's father, oral traditions give us a different portrait of Vaitoum, Bilal's mother.<sup>32</sup> She is vividly remembered in some accounts as having exceptional accomplishments.

<sup>26</sup>See E. E. Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014).

<sup>27</sup>M. Ould Khattar, personal communication, 10 Jan. 2021. See also E. Brahim, 'Moritanya'da görsel kültür: etnografik bir çalışma' (unpublished PhD thesis, Istanbul University, 2020), 112–13.

<sup>28</sup>Interview with Sidi Ahmed Ould Mouloud, 20 Aug. 2020.

<sup>29</sup>See T. Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation* (Portsmouth, NH, 2002).

<sup>30</sup>Brhane, 'Narratives of the past', 127–31.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.* 130. It is noteworthy that several prominent African groups have claimed Bilal b. Rabah as their ancestor or associate themselves with his story. In Mali, the Keita family claims him as an ancestor, and so does the *gnāwa* community in Morocco. See D. C. Conrad, 'Islam in the oral traditions of Mali: Bilali and Surakata', *The Journal of African History*, 26:1 (1985), 33–49; and C. El Hamel, 'Constructing a diasporic identity: tracing the origins of the Gnawa spiritual group in Morocco', *The Journal of African History*, 49:2 (2008), 241–60.

<sup>32</sup>Written sources do not say much about her life story, perhaps because she was an enslaved Black woman who did not deserve much attention.

According to Ould Ghaddour, Vaitoum was attached to Ould Khajil, a *zawāyā* family in the prestigious Oulad Ebiri *qabila*.<sup>33</sup> She performed a variety of jobs such as cooking, cleaning, looking after her master's children, and sometimes fetching water and firewood. Moreover, she practiced traditional medicine and was known for her ability to heal sick people. One such instance happened when her master, who was experiencing excruciating urinary pain, called upon her to help him.<sup>34</sup> In full gratitude for the care that he received, her master granted her greater liberty in the household. While Vaitoum's actions did not result in her manumission, it certainly allowed her to gain a certain level of influence in her enslaver's household. This is very significant, as it shows enslaved Muslim women's ability to utilize their positions and skills within particular contexts to carve out spaces for themselves that were sometimes denied to enslaved men.

Little information is available on Bilal's early childhood. What we know is that he was a very loyal and devoted servant. He grew up in his master's household, performing a wide variety of tasks for his enslaver. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Bilal's birthplace went from having a peripheral role in the social and political conflicts animating the Gebra region to becoming an important learning center, as well as an early foothold for what would become the French colony of Mauritania (1902–60). In 1828, Boutilimit was established by a prominent Sufi scholar-saint by the name of Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabir, 'Sidiyya the Great' (1789–1868, hereinafter Shaykh Sidiyya). Shaykh Sidiyya's extraordinary career as a religious figure, statesman, and *qabila* leader spanned nearly four decades, for much of which he played a decisive role in shaping regional politics in the Sahara. The Ahl Sidiyya, or Sidiyya's family, became the backbone of Boutilimit's social, religious, and political elite. Bilal lived through this period of tremendous social and political transformations.<sup>35</sup> During this period, Boutilimit's economy was largely based on agriculture and livestock, which was heavily dependent on slavery.

In his early youth, Bilal began to look after his enslaver's camels. Early in the morning, Bilal would gather camels, take them to the grazing ground and water, and return them late in the afternoon.<sup>36</sup> Upon returning home, Bilal would feed baby camels, milk their mothers, and bring milk to his master's wife.<sup>37</sup> Most enslaved peoples participated in the Saharan economy as well as labored in it. They were integral to key industries such as the production of gum, salt, copper, and dates, as well as to transportation. Enslaved laborers also herded animals like goats, sheep, and cows. However, enslaved men with roles related to camel care were very uncommon.<sup>38</sup> These roles were historically held by young men from the *lahmā* or *znāga* (tributary groups). The *znāga*, light-skinned free laborers who were incorporated into Saharan society below the *bīzān* social hierarchy, provided a variety of services and paid tribute to elites in exchange for physical and spiritual protection. While the *znāga* performed a variety of tasks for the Saharan elites, their main responsibility was to maintain, feed, milk, breed, and herd camels, and sometimes even to recover camels lost in the desert. Most of the *znāga* young men became known for their excellent reputation as camel experts, as they grew up around camels and witnessed their grandfathers and great-grandfathers herding camels.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup>This is one of the largest *qabila* in Mauritania. The term *qabila* is often loosely translated as tribe in English (or *la tribu* in French). In Mauritania, the term is not pejorative and the French word '*la tribu*' is often used to refer to *qabila*. This use does not partake of Westerners' negative connotations for the word. In this article, however, I use the term *qabila* rather than the ambiguous word 'tribe' or '*la tribu*', which does not capture the complexity needed to understand the historical experiences of different ethnic groups in Saharan societies.

<sup>34</sup>Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli*, 13–19.

<sup>35</sup>For more information on the life of Shaykh Sidiyya, see Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*.

<sup>36</sup>Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli*, 4–26.

<sup>37</sup>Interview with Oubeid Ould Imjine.

<sup>38</sup>U. P. Ruf, *Ending Slavery: Hierarchy, Dependency and Gender in Central Mauritania* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1999), 153–7.

<sup>39</sup>F. Freire, 'Saharan migrant camel herders: Znāga social status and the global age', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 52:3 (2014), 425–46.

Camel husbandry is an extremely difficult job that requires many years of training and apprenticeship to develop the necessary knowledge. It also requires a great amount of decision making and experience due to the extreme danger associated with camel care. Camels are extremely mobile animals that tend to roam around in the wilderness. Therefore, camel herders had to know not only how 'to maintain and increase a camel herd', but also how 'to read tracks and get back the lost animals'.<sup>40</sup> Because camel herding was a full-time job, and because enslaved men were much more likely to work outside the home in agriculture and other more physically demanding jobs, they were rarely sent to look after camels.

Only those enslaved laborers, like Bilal, who showed the greatest degrees of autonomy, physical strength, and loyalty to their masters were assigned tasks related to camel herding. For instance, wealthy enslavers from the Rgaybât confederations in the Tiris Zemmour region in northern Mauritania assigned camel herding tasks to only their entrusted enslaved men. Thus, becoming a camel herder 'represented the peak of a slave man's career, putting him ahead of those slaves only allowed to leave the camp within the distance of a day's walk. . . . Once performing such a responsible task, otherwise performed by a dependent, but free herder, e.g. a [znāga] or ruined hassān, a slave became difficult to replace'.<sup>41</sup> This is because camel herders spent a significant amount of their time away from their enslavers caring for their camels, and thus had to earn their enslavers' trust much more than enslaved people in roles in which they were constantly being surveilled. Additionally, enslaved people with this role were typically much more intelligent and physically fit than the average enslaved person, because they needed to not only master camels' physical features, habitus, and behaviors, but also walk long distances to locate appropriate grazing grounds and water sources across the Sahara Desert.

It is important to note that enslaved men's roles were not limited to camel breeding or herding. In some cases, they served as skilled commercial agents in trans-Saharan trade. Wealthy commercial elites relied on enslaved men to work on their small and large camel caravans. Thus, enslaved people were the primary force for wealth production. They acted as trade agents, taking large and small caravans across the Sahara Desert as part of a business that from ancient times connected the Sahara to centers of civilizations in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>42</sup> In this case, the enslaved businessmen knew much more than their enslavers about trade and camel caravaning because of their relative experience. As Bruce S. Hall has argued, Saharan Muslim merchants and traders often employed enslaved men as their trade agents, as well as relied on their commercial expertise to organize and manage their international business trades.<sup>43</sup> This situation was not at all unique to the central and western Sahara. In the context of nineteenth-century East Africa, Jonathan Glassman and Stephen J. Rockel have highlighted the crucial role freed and enslaved persons played, since they served as skilled caravan porters in the long-distance Indian Ocean trade.<sup>44</sup>

Although we have no evidence that Bilal worked as a trader for his enslaver, his elevation to the camel shepherd position speaks to his force of character and capacity to exercise high levels of initiative. While securing his enslaver's trust by no means made Bilal immune from verbal and physical abuse, it did allow him to make clear choices elsewhere. Being a camel shepherd in the desert perfectly suited Bilal, as this role allowed him to gain a substantial amount of autonomy in movement. It served as a spiritual retreat for him and gave him more space and time to meditate and contemplate on God's creation. This was especially true regarding the role of camel herders. Camels are

<sup>40</sup>Ruf, *Ending Slavery*, 153.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.* 154; and S. Caratini, *Les Rgaybât (1610–1934), tome II, territoire et société* (Paris, 1989), 120.

<sup>42</sup>For more detailed treatment of this topic, see G. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>43</sup>Hall, 'How slaves used Islam', 289.

<sup>44</sup>See J. Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, NH, 1995); and S. J. Rockel, *Carriers of Culture: Labor on the Road in Nineteenth-Century East Africa* (Portsmouth, NH, 2006).



considered special animals for Muslims. The Qur'an speaks of their miraculous creation and mentions them before the creation of the heavens, earth, and mountains. Even though he was still constrained by his status as an enslaved man, he was able to use his relationships with his enslavers and personal communications to negotiate in his own interest and eventually gain more independence on favorable terms. All of this suggests that Bilal demonstrated a remarkable ability to assert his dignity and make a name for himself, as the next section discusses.

### Bilal and his connection to the Saharan scholarly elite

As we have seen, Bilal is recognized as a saint in part through reports that he performed *karamāt* as well as through his relationship with Saharan Sufi saints. Oral sources tell us that after obtaining his freedom, Bilal traveled extensively across the Sahara.<sup>45</sup> Specific details regarding the exact age he acquired his freedom are lacking, but we know that Bilal, as already noted, was born around the year 1816, acquired his freedom, and became widely recognized as a holy man during the life of Shaykh Sidiyya, who died in 1868, when Bilal was only 42 years old. Oral testimonies attest that Shaykh Sidiyya and Bilal knew each other personally. As Deddoud Ould Abdallahi, a historian at Nouakchott University, told me, Shaykh Sidiyya recognized Bilal's exceptional gifts. Ould Abdallahi mentioned to me that on one occasion:

Shaykh Sidiyya invited Bilal to his home and sat him on his *'eliwish* [animal-skin rug for prayer], on the floor. Over the course of their conversation, Shaykh Sidiyya asked Bilal to tell him about the strangest thing he had ever seen in his life. Bilal responded that he would not go beyond what just happened, the fact that the Shaykh Sidiyya, has seated him [Bilal, the enslaved man] on his prayer rug.<sup>46</sup>

This conversation means that not only did Bilal live the majority of his life as a free person, but he was also a respected holy man to whom some of the most well-known religious and social leaders of his time were drawn.

From the moment he became a free person, Bilal went to the desert and lived with different nomadic communities. In one case, he traveled to the famous Saharan spiritual leader Shaykh Muhammad al-Mami al-Bukhari al-Bariki (d. 1865–6, hereinafter Shaykh al-Mami) and spent a significant amount of time with him in his *zāwiya* (lodge) in the Tiris Zemmour region.<sup>47</sup> Bilal's choice to go and live with Shaykh al-Mami came as no surprise. In effect, Shaykh al-Mami was one of the earliest religious figures to recognize Bilal's sanctity, and he considered him the *qutb* (saintly pole) of the age. Shaykh al-Mami also wrote a number of poems in Ḥassāniyya praising Bilal's devotional ability. In one of his poems, he expressed his adoration for Bilal and even invoked him to intercede on his behalf:

---

*Yā mūlan barkt Bilal w-sr li baynu wyk*

*'Ghfir ll 'lm wljhal*  
*W-'ghraf ll-hjmāt 'mn-smāk*

O Our Lord, I seek intercession through Bilal and the secret between You (the Almighty) and him.

To forgive those who know and those who do not know.  
To open the sky and let it rain abundantly.<sup>48</sup>

---

The poem is indicative of the close relationship that had developed between Shaykh al-Mami and Bilal. They became so attached to each other that they would later be buried in the same cemetery.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Interview with Sidi Ahmed Ould Mouloud.

<sup>46</sup>Interview with Deddoud Ould Abdallahi, Nouakchott, 11 Aug. 2017.

<sup>47</sup>Interview with Sidi Ahmed Ould Mouloud.

<sup>48</sup>Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli*, 48.

<sup>49</sup>Interview with Deddoud Ould Abdallahi.

What is more essential for our discussion here is the fact that Shaykh al-Mami acknowledged Bilal as an intercessor before God on behalf of believers. This is especially important because both *'abid* and *ḥarāṭīn* were not considered spiritual healers or mediators. Historically, spiritual mediation has been associated with Sufi lineages and families of knowledge. In a region that lacked a strong political establishment, scholar-saints claimed religious, socioeconomic, and moral power. They were entrusted with healing and performing miracles to counter illicit magic such as bloodsucking, and wrote that it was anti-Islam, originating in India.<sup>50</sup> Asserting spiritual authority has been a very central part of how noble groups have defined themselves vis-à-vis non-noble categories. Those who are understood to be spiritual healers are learned scholars who have a strong command of the Qur'an and its *tafsir* (exegesis) and are from *bīzān* communities.

On the other hand, enslaved communities are associated with *sh̄r* (sorcery) and *sell* (bloodsucking or extraction) practices, which are not rooted in Islamic teaching. However, the *bīzān* communities have long demonized formerly enslaved Muslims by linking them with Black talismans.<sup>51</sup> For a very long time, this stereotypical way of thinking about the *ḥarāṭīn* communities has been prevalent in Mauritania. Arabic and colonial sources are filled with anecdotes and passages discussing accusations of *sell* among the *ḥarāṭīn* communities in the nineteenth-century Sahara.<sup>52</sup> As reported by Ahmad Ibn al-Amin ash-Shinqiti (d. 1913), many enslaved Bamana women in the town of Tidjikia, in Tagant region, were often accused of bewitching their masters' children.<sup>53</sup>

However, Shaykh al-Mami's poem challenges the conventional narrative of enslaved Saharan Muslims as bloodsuckers. It reveals to us that Bilal was truly someone who possessed religious expertise in esoteric sciences. In a similar vein, the baby camel miracle — noted above — compelled Bilal's master, a member of a prominent *bīzān* family, to fear divine punishment because he had treated Bilal unkindly. It thus had great symbolic significance by revealing some *bīzān* acceptance of Bilal's ability to unleash *tazubba*, a privilege that is usually restricted to *bīzān* Sufi masters. Bilal transcended these restrictions, and his life is celebrated as an assertion of *ḥarāṭīn* respectability before an enslaver.

After Shaykh al-Mami affirmed Bilal's highest *maqām*, or station as a Sufi saint, other scholar-saints followed suit. We know from local legal texts written in Arabic that several famous scholars held Bilal in high esteem. Muhammad Abdullah Ibn al-Bukhari (d. 1901, hereinafter Ibn al-Bukhari) offered the following accounts about his interaction with Bilal:

I was in the company of some people at a place called the *baṭ-ḥa*, around the grave of my mother and others. There was also the grave of a man who was a slave and God had bestowed on him so many blessings and miracles, which could be denied only by those who were blind or jealous. He loved me very much. I believed in his miracles, and I used to visit him very frequently. But there is something inside me that prevented me from making him [Bilal] an imam, because of his apparent ignorance and lack of fluency in his tongue. So, I said to myself that if his tongue was not clear, then his heart was loud and he who prayed behind the deceased forgives him of what he had done.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Pettigrew, 'Heart of the matter', 421.

<sup>51</sup>Acloque, 'Accusations of remote vampirism', 282–304.

<sup>52</sup>See McDougall, 'Slavery, sorcery and colonial "reality"'; Acloque, 'Accusations of remote vampirism'; and Pettigrew, 'Heart of the matter'.

<sup>53</sup>Ibn al-Amin ash-Shinqiti, *Al-wasit*, 541. Even during the colonial period, accusations of bloodsucking and bewitching were very common. As noted by several scholars, colonial writings are replete with court cases and events involving enslaved men and women who were accused of magical practices, and sometimes they were brutally punished and even killed by their masters because of those accusations. See McDougall, 'Slavery, sorcery and colonial "reality"', 283–4; Acloque, 'Accusations of remote vampirism', 282–304; and Pettigrew, 'Heart of the matter', 417–18.

<sup>54</sup>M. A. Ibn al-Bukhari, *Ḥayat al-mranyt al-tarykhiyat*. The author has a copy of this unpublished manuscript.

What is striking in this statement is Ibn al-Bukhari's reluctance to entrust a formerly enslaved man to lead prayers, despite his sainthood. This is because the enslaved were considered legal minors and were not accorded the privilege of leading prayers.<sup>55</sup> However, the author tells us, in his own words, that he finally accepted Bilal's spiritual leadership.

Elsewhere, Ibn al-Bukhari reveals other important details that further attest to Bilal's spiritual capacities. Specifically, he discusses his request for Bilal to perform *salāt 'al-Istisqā'* (a special prayer performed by Muslims to ask Allah for rain) to help local communities during famine and drought periods, which were frequent in the southwestern Sahara. He wrote:

I went with him and we realized it was *zhr* prayer, the noon prayer, and we gathered and prayed behind him, and then when we were about to part our ways, I said to him, Bilal, people need '*al-ghayth* [abundant rain], and he prayed until water started pouring heavily from the sky and now after ten years and there was still water, and thank God for such things.<sup>56</sup>

It is clear from this statement that Bilal, who had limited religious education, was able to gain the same recognition and social prestige as other important Sufi leaders due to his miracles. Other Arabic texts have also confirmed that many prominent nineteenth-century Sufi masters sought Bilal's blessing and protection. Those who knew him asserted that he had a beautiful character and embodied sacred knowledge. The author of *al-wasit* reported that Mouled Ould Agshmett, one of the most celebrated Saharan scholars, told him the following story about his encounter with Bilal:

One day, I lost my herds and went looking for them, and I bumped into the pious man, Bilal '*al-wālī*, a former slave, who displayed signs of sainthood and was freed by his master. . . . I asked him to pray for me to recover my lost herds. He did so. . . and shortly after leaving him, I was able to recover my lost herds.<sup>57</sup>

All this demonstrates that Bilal's admirers included some of the prominent Sufi masters in Mauritanian history. While Bilal achieved a degree of public recognition, he also experienced extreme color prejudice practiced by the *bīzān* societies of that time toward dark-skinned peoples. One story relates that Muhammad Ould Ahmed Jorah (d. 1924/5, hereinafter Ould Ahmed Jorah), one of the most well-known Mauritanian poets, was initially inclined to acknowledge Bilal's sanctity. On one occasion, Ould Ahmed Jorah, whose poetry was replete with disparaging remarks against enslaved peoples, visited Bilal and found him with a group of people.<sup>58</sup> He reportedly walked up to Bilal and asked him this sarcastic question:

'So Bilal, tell me what kinds of miracles did Allah give you?' Bilal laughed and responded: 'Is it not the clearest evidence of my miracles that Ould Ahmed Jorah, being who you are, came to visit me?'<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup>According to a *fatwā* issued by the prominent Mauritanian *qāḍī*. Muḥammadun b. Muḥammad Val b. Muḥammadun al-Abhami (d. 1966) in the early twentieth century regarding the Islamic stand on slavery, enslaved men in *bīzān* societies were generally not allowed to assume important leadership roles in mosques. See Y. Ould al-Barra, *Al-Majmu at al-kubra al-shamila li-fatawa wa-nawazil wa-aḥkam ahl gharb wa-janub gharb al-Ṣaḥra*, Volume XII (Nouakchott, Mauritania, 2009), 6208–11.

<sup>56</sup>Ibn al-Bukhari, *Ḥayat*.

<sup>57</sup>Ibn al-Amin ash-Shinqiti, *Al-wasit*, 357–8.

<sup>58</sup>For more details on Ould Ahmed Jorah's poetry, see M. S. Ould Muhamadu, *Al-riqq fi Muritanya wa abaduhu al-shar iyya wa al-siyyasiyya* (Nouakchott, Mauritania, 2012), 76–82.

<sup>59</sup>Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli*, 53.

The audience laughed, and a friendship was struck between the two men that would continue until their death and burial in the same burial site.<sup>60</sup>

However, Ould Ahmed Jorah's skepticism highlights the disdain that some members of the *bīzān* community had for Bilal. Indeed, he continued to experience social discrimination due largely to the combination of his Blackness and non-noble origin. Note the common Ḥassāniyya adage that *'al'abd ytm ela 'abd wlw 'yl'at zmaḥatū mn-al-dh-hab* (an enslaved person will always retain an enslaved status even if he or she is crowned with gold). This adage conveys the meaning that an enslaved person would continue to be poorly treated, no matter what their qualities, because they continued to be marked by race and non-noble ancestry. It underscores enslaved peoples' racial categorization as religiously inferior to the *bīzān*. Although Saharan slavery was significantly different from the Atlantic model in terms of racial ideologies, race certainly factored into slavery in the Sahara and 'remains central in understanding ḥarātīn identity'.<sup>61</sup> This is especially true regarding *bīzān* societies' ideals of nobility that had created a social order in which Black African Muslims felt inferior, despite their religious credentials.

In Bilal's example, we also see another instance where African Muslims experience lower status as a minority group. Pettigrew explores this in her research about the Ahel Guennar, Wolof-speaking scholars of the Qur'an with an identity overlapping the Wolof and *bīzān*. While some members of the *bīzān* communities recognized the Ahel Guennar as having religious expertise in the esoteric Islamic sciences, other regarded them with suspicion.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Bilal and Ahel Guennar shared a similar experience. They straddled Muslim and Black identities smoothly, but elites perceived those identities to conflict. This, of course, is highly reminiscent of arguments by other authors regarding Black saints' experiences in other contexts. Erin Kathleen Rowe, for instance, highlights some of the deep color prejudice that Black Catholic holy men experienced in medieval Europe. She contends that many white clergy, intellectuals, and authors 'revealed their own ambivalence about how low-status people of color, with their inherent social and religious inferiority, could be God's chosen vessel'.<sup>63</sup>

### The saint Bilal: A Sufi shaykh without a *tariqa*

In the previous section I demonstrated that Bilal was one of the most eminent Sufi leaders during this period in the Sahara. It appears that even Bilal himself had realized his spiritual ascension within his own life. As he tells us in his own words:

---

<i>Al-ḥamdu lillāhi al-ladhī wahaba lī klimatū tūqāl lī Bilal ūl 'al-wāli.</i>	All praise is for Allah who blessed me with the honorific title Bilal the Saint.
<i>Wilayātūn kāmilātūn lātanjli qadimatūn mktūbatūn vi 'alazlī</i>	A perfect and unchangeable saintly status written in eternity [by Allah's command]. <sup>64</sup>

---

In an era when Sufi orders were being solidified in West Africa, Bilal emerged as an influential Sufi saint without a *tariqa*. He was noted for his deep knowledge of sacred matters and performance of miracles that, according to Louis Brenner, represent the most respectable forms of the Islamic esoteric sciences.<sup>65</sup> Historically, they have included numerology, the sciences of letters, geomancy,

<sup>60</sup>Interview with Deddoud Ould Abdallahi.

<sup>61</sup>McDougall, 'Who are the Haratin? Asking the right questions...', in Ann E. McDougall and M. L. Nouhi (eds.), *Devenir visible dans le sillage de l'esclavage: La question Haratin en Mauritanie et au Maroc* (Paris, 2020), 15. See also B. S. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600–1960* (Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>62</sup>Pettigrew, 'Politics and affiliations', 293–7.

<sup>63</sup>E. K. Rowe, *Black Saints in Early Modern Global Catholicism* (Cambridge, 2019), 176.

<sup>64</sup>Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli*, 45–6.

<sup>65</sup>Brenner, 'Esoteric sciences', 23.

talismanic squares and amulets, and the effacement of Arabic writing into water to drink or bathe in.<sup>66</sup> Esoteric sciences have been taught and transmitted through the traditional master-disciple method typical in Sufi tradition. Pedagogy has emphasized learning from a master instructor, rather than solely from a sacred text. Personal contact with the teacher is seen as essential for a holistic, individualized education. Sufi instructors were and are highly respected, in particular for their knowledge of the occult sciences.

In the Saharan context, as Pettigrew writes, ‘members of *bīdān* scholarly confederations garnered a mastery of these sciences through their learning of the Qur’ān.’<sup>67</sup> In stark contrast, Bilal — at least insofar as we know from available sources — did not sit in a particular *ḥalaka* (study circle) to learn about esoteric sciences. He did not receive any ‘*awrād*’ (sing. *wird*, litany) from any particular Sufi shaykh. Simply put, Bilal’s entrance into Sufism was never initiated by any master. As one informant mentioned to me, ‘Bilal neither read nor wrote. He lived like any other enslaved person, until one day he became known as a saint. But he was one of the *awliyā’ al-bāṭin* (saints of the inward) not one of the *awliyā’ al-zāhir* (saints of the outward).’<sup>68</sup>

It is evident from this quote that Bilal was not someone who studied and learned from books. But nevertheless, his expertise in esoteric sciences came from his spirituality, lived experience, and particularly, more ‘*al-munājāt*’ or intimate conversations with the Almighty Allah. In other words, Bilal received his *tarbiya* (spiritual training) from the Almighty God. It is believed that he may have had intimate moments with God. Perhaps God was his teacher and provider of spiritual education. For instance, the following poem indicates the ways in which it was believed that God opened up lights and horizons for him:

---

<i>Min baḥr ‘arvānīn bivaḍlī ‘al ‘alī qad ḡahrav ‘alqutbū Bilal ‘al-wālī</i>	By virtue of the Most High, Bilal, the Pole, scooped from the sea of gratitude
<i>Wqrab ‘allhū lhu mskan vī ‘al-khayrī mn sulūkihī ‘al ‘mthelī</i>	The Almighty Allah made his path closer to him in goodness for his ideal behavior
<i>Bh ‘ertaqā vī drājātī ‘el-‘ala ḡta ‘enṡa ‘ela maqām ‘alī</i>	By his noble manners, he rose in the higher ranks until he reached the highest station
<i>Wḡdṡh ‘ethūqātū ‘an sh’nhī mn ‘aliman ‘w al-wālīn kml</i>	Trustworthy narrators talked about his knowledge and perfect sanctity
<i>Qd yṡwla ‘allhū ‘abd lhū yūnzilhū vī ‘almnzlī ‘al-awlī</i>	The Almighty Allah may choose a person and raise them high for their repute
<i>Yṡyh mā ysh’ mn vadylh Subḡānhū w ‘alkrymū ‘al-wālī</i>	This is the favor of Allah; He grants it to whoever He wills: And Allah is generous and the Lord of infinite bounty. <sup>69</sup>

---

This poem perfectly captures the source of Bilal’s *ma‘rifa* (knowledge) of God. In Islam, there are two main types of knowledge. The first level is ‘*ilm*’ or factual knowledge. The ‘*ilm*’ is related to the study of the Qur’an, *hadīth*, *fiqh*, and other topics of Islamic sciences. The ‘*ilm*’ is transmitted from

<sup>66</sup>Wright, *Living Knowledge*, 45.

<sup>67</sup>Pettigrew, ‘Heart of the matter’, 420. See also A. W. Ould Cheikh, ‘Nomadisme, islam et pouvoir politique dans la société maure précoloniale (XIème siècle–XIXème siècle): essai sur quelques aspects du tribalisme’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Université de Paris V, 1985), 904–24; and E. Hamel, ‘The transmission of Islamic knowledge in Moorish society from the rise of the Almoravids to the 19th century’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 29:1 (1999), 79.

<sup>68</sup>Interview with Oubeid Ould Imijine.

<sup>69</sup>This poem was composed by Muḡammadun Ould Baba Ould Mahmud Muhammad al-Daymani, a famed nineteenth-century writer and litterateur, when he visited Bilal’s tomb in Lemsīha in search for his blessings and protection. Interview with Sidi Ahmed Ould Mouloud. See also Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli*, 46.

master to disciple through oral or written means.<sup>70</sup> The second type of knowledge, *ma'rifa*, is experiential or intuitive knowledge, which concerns *tarbiya*. It involves the transmission of Sufi teachings, such as esoteric sciences and *awrād*, via a deepened master-disciple relationship.

While Bilal emerged during the Sufi order's dominance in northwest Africa, he did not adhere to any Sufi orders. Instead, Bilal embraced Sufism as a means for spiritual refinement or purification of personal character. This was done through *al-munājāt* and seeking divine guidance as well as other practices associated with Sufism. Bilal, Ould Ghaddour relates, devoted his life to prayers, fasting and other devotional activities.<sup>71</sup> Any close readings of Bilal's poetry will reveal the depth of his Sufi propensity. For example, in one of his poems, he gives us rare glimpses into his thoughts and ideas on the importance of *dhikr* (Sufi devotional prayers of remembrance of and praise to God):

---

'Al-qabr vih zmetū vi 'dakhli  
Jla 'ehā ḥilālā [Lā 'ilāha 'illā Llāh]vi 'elil

The grave is full of darkness  
Its light is the remembrance of Allah, so let us keep  
remembering Him.<sup>72</sup>

---

Here, Bilal reminds all believers of the importance of constantly repeating the sacred phrase *ḥilālā* (*Lā 'ilāha 'illā Llāh*, there is no God but Allah), in order to avoid the grave's torment and darkness. In many parts of the Muslim world, *dhikr* circles are very much part of the core of Sufism's mystical theology.<sup>73</sup> People often hold those circles, especially on Friday nights, to pray and recite passages from the Qur'an and poetry in order to honor the Prophet Muhammad's legacy.

In another poem, we see Bilal's complete submission to God coupled with a strong sense of trust:

---

'Ent āldhy bk 'ḍālu 'da' ybr'vi 'alḥyni bilā dw'

O You [the Almighty Allah] are the one who has the power to  
bring immediate healing to incurable diseases.

Bk 'atšmtu mn šnādyd 'alqdr  
Wālkfr wālfqr wqłti 'almṭr

I seek refuge in [Allah] from the evil of the divine decree,  
disbelief, poverty, and lack of rain.<sup>74</sup>

---

It is my contention that Bilal practiced Sufism as a spiritual expression and a means to get closer to the Most High. According to oral and written histories, Bilal loved being away from the pressures of everyday life.<sup>75</sup> In so doing, he followed in the footsteps of prophets and saints, replicating their traditions of practicing *khalwa* (spiritual retreats) as well as their engagement in intense prayers, constant fasting, and recitation of the Qur'an.

In particular, Bilal's Sufism shares important parallels with the two eminent eighth-century Sufi figures: Imam Abu Said Hasan ibn Abil Hasan Yasar al-Basri, better known as Hasan al-Basri (642–728, hereinafter Imam Hasan al-Basri) and al-Sayeda Rabia al-Adawiyah (717–801, hereinafter al-Sayeda Rabia). Although they existed in completely different historical eras, they were all noted for their piety, modesty, *zuhd* (ascetic lifestyle), and performance of *dhikr*. Both Imam

---

<sup>70</sup>For works that explore the rich tradition of knowledge production and transmission in Africa, see L. Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington, IN, 2001); Ware, *Walking Qur'an*; and O. Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge, 2016).

<sup>71</sup>Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli*, 4–26.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.* 46.

<sup>73</sup>See K. S. Vikør, 'Sufi brotherhoods in Africa', in N. Levtzion and R. Pouwels (eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens, OH, 2000), 441–76; R. Seesemann, 'Sufism in West Africa', *Religion Compass*, 4:10 (2010), 606–14; and J-L. Triaud, 'Giving a name to Islam south of the Sahara: an adventure in taxonomy', *The Journal of African History*, 55:1 (2014), 12.

<sup>74</sup>Ould Ghaddour, *A-srd al-jli*, 46.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.* 27.

Hasan al-Basri and al-Sayeda Rabia, who are regarded in the historical literature as the founders of *taṣawwuf* or Sufism, were *mawālī* (sing. *mawlā*, manumitted enslaved person) and experienced hardship at a young age. However, through their personal piety and exemplary character, they rose to become two of the most influential saintly figures in Islamic history. Though Imam Hasan al-Basri and al-Sayeda Rabia were known for their constant devotion to worship, they never belonged to a Sufi movement.<sup>76</sup> Like Imam Hasan al-Basri and al-Sayeda Rabia, Bilal demonstrated very early in his life a complete renunciation of worldly matters, which is an integral part of Sufi tradition. Like both Imam Hasan al-Basri and al-Sayeda Rabia, Bilal was also a respected Sufi figure. Though he never created a *ṭarīqa* of his own, to numerous Saharan scholars who received his spiritual counseling and vied for his attention and favor — and for whom Bilal was a paragon — he played a significant role in the religious, social, and political life of the nineteenth-century Sahara. Furthermore, Bilal's spirituality is analogous to those of other major contemporary Sufi figures. One notable example is the prominent Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941). This reference to Gülen illustrates that Sufism without a *ṭarīqa* is vibrantly alive in the global Muslim community today. In Kim's view, Gülen defines Sufism as the spiritual essence of Islam as reflected in the actions and deeds of Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, and not in the ways represented by Sufi orders. Bilal and Gülen practiced a nonpartisan Sufism that was firmly situated within the Sufi theological traditions. One major difference, though, is that Gülen holds a uniquely powerful political position in modern Turkish society.<sup>77</sup> While Bilal did not have a political role, he had a tremendous influence on the Saharan elite who were drawn to him and saw him as an inspiration for their spiritual experience.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have uncovered the historical roots underlying the emergence of the saint Bilal who attained elevated religious status on the path to inclusion in the pantheon of the greatest Sufi holy men of the nineteenth-century Sahara. Despite his social status as a formerly enslaved person, Bilal achieved a considerable degree of public recognition during his lifetime and is revered today by both members of the *biṣān* and *ḥarāṭīn* communities in contemporary Mauritania. I have argued that an analysis of Bilal's life story offers sobering insights for understanding the complex relationship between Islam, slavery, social hierarchies, and mobility in Saharan contexts.

Specifically, this article has used Bilal's biography to make two significant contributions to existing historiographical studies of Sufism and slavery. First, it has revealed how enslaved Muslims actively participated in shaping Sufi traditions to claim religious equality and respectability. It has demonstrated how sainthood allowed Bilal to achieve upward social mobility that otherwise would be hard to attain in a highly stratified Saharan society. This is significant because so much of the literature on enslaved Saharan Muslims' supernatural powers is largely limited to accusations of bloodsucking and practices of extractions. While not ignoring such issues, this article has explored Bilal's case to highlight the importance of recognizing these enslaved Muslims as saints who understood themselves as part of a larger society and asserted themselves within it.

Second, this article has argued for a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of Sufi practices in nineteenth-century West Africa. In particular, it has highlighted the existence of Sufism outside *ṭuruq* and disconnected from established scholarly lineages in the region. In an era when Sufi orders were being solidified in West Africa, Bilal emerged as an influential Sufi saint without a

<sup>76</sup>For in-depth discussion of Imam Hasan al-Basri and al-Sayeda Rabia's Sufi thoughts and ideas, see M. M. Khan, *The Muslim 100: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of the Most Influential Muslims in History* (Leicester, UK, 2009), 252–5; S. Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History: Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110H/728CE) and the Formation of His Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship* (Leiden, 2006); and R. E. Cornell, *Rabi'a from Narrative to Myth: The Many Faces of Islam's Most Famous Woman Saint, Rabi'a Al-'Adawiyya* (London, 2019).

<sup>77</sup>See Kim, 'Sufism in contemporary Islam'.

*ṭarīqa*. In many ways, his trajectory resembles in no small way some of the prominent historical and contemporary Sufi saints in Islamic history. His righteousness and performance of miracles, along with his connections to powerful figures, fueled his upward social and religious mobility. Though the numbers may outweigh the exceptionality of Bilal's case, life histories like his immensely enrich our understanding of sainthood, Sufism, and Muslim authority in the nineteenth-century Sahara.

**Acknowledgements.** In the Name of Allah, the Merciful and Most Compassionate, who gave me the faith, patience, and perseverance to finish writing this article. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my parents, wife, and children for their love, support, and encouragement every step of the way. I want also to thank Gregory Mann, Moses Ochonu, and all the reviewers of *The Journal of African History* for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this article. Special thanks also go to John Hanson, Michelle Moyd, Marissa Moorman, Christina Snyder, Beth Buggenhagen, Pedro Machado, Mohamed Ould Khattar, Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, Deddoud Ould Abdallahi, An Tuan Nguyen, Musa Dauda Hassan, Maxime Mianzokouna, Ann. E. McDougall, Katherine Wiley, Jonathan Brown, Scott D. Taylor, Lahra Smith, and Ken Opalo for their priceless advice, critical comments, and countless corrections of my work. This research was financially supported by the Carnegie Saharan Crossroads Fellowship, the Richard A. Horovitz Fund for Professional Development, and the Council of American Overseas Research Centers/National Endowment for the Humanities Senior Research Fellowship. Of course, this work would not be accomplished without the generous funding from several departments, programs and academic units at Indiana University-Bloomington including the History Department, African Studies Program, Islamic Studies Program, and the College of Arts and Sciences.