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## The Islamic Eighteenth Century: A View From The Edge

### Abstract

This chapter acknowledges the pioneering work of Reinhard Schulze in suggesting that the eighteenth century in the Islamic world may have witnessed significant-enough epistemological and social change to justify regarding it as a turning point. It argues that extant studies on Early Modernity in Islamdom should be supplemented by a broader look at dynamics on the ‘periphery’ of the established urban centres of Islamic learning and culture. In Sub-Saharan Africa, an unprecedented explosion of writing activity can be dated to the last quarter of the eighteenth century. This explosion was largely due to the activities of movements of ‘inner mission’ that aimed at spreading Islamic knowledge and responsible Islamic practice beyond the traditional confines of the urban-based scholar-jurists. The carriers of these movements were to a large part standing in the tradition of the Sufi orders. Their audience consisted mainly of people at the boundaries of the traditional urban sphere. Both pietist preaching and puritan politics contributed to breaking the hegemony of scholastic scholars over defining “Islam” and diluting the concomitant divide between the elite (*al-khāṣṣa*) and the commoners (*al-‘amma*). This development may be seen as an important factor in the rise of the individual in the Islamic world.

**Keywords:** Islam, 18th century, pietism, Sufism, Africa, Sudan, Nigeria, periphery, literature, individual

### The eighteenth century: a turning-point?

Cultural dynamics in the Islamic world on the eve of the encroachment of European colonialism have been the subject of a significant body of research since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The impetus of this research was the desire to break the old paradigm claiming that Muslim intellectual life had gone into stagnation and decline after handing over the heritage of Greek antiquity to a rising Europe

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Hourani was an early precursor in calling for this investigation, in his “The Changing Face of the Fertile Crescent in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Studia Islamica* 8 (1957): 89–122, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595249>.

and that modernity in the Islamic world was essentially an import from the West in the wake of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798.

This old paradigm has been disavowed by most scholars familiar with the period as both factually inaccurate and as an ideological construct serving to legitimize a colonial 'civilizing mission' and the hegemony of a Western 'democratic,' 'liberal,' and 'enlightened' 'free world' in the current age. It is probably due to the latter function that the old paradigm is still influential—and has even been revitalized—in public discourse and public policies.<sup>2</sup>

Reinhard Schulze has been an important voice in trying to revise this perspective. He joined others—notably Peter Gran—in suggesting that a major transformation happened in eighteenth-century Islamic history that had parallels to similar transformations in European/Western history. In Schulze's view, this transformation was later obscured and displaced by the colonial takeover, but it set the ground for Muslims' engagement with modernity in its dominant European guise.<sup>3</sup>

Schulze's hypothesis caused a stir since he presented it under the heading of an autochthonous "Islamic enlightenment," a notion threatening the sacred heart of Western modernity. Much ink was subsequently spilled to demonstrate that this idea was based on "projections and insufficient philology."<sup>4</sup> Later scholarship has mostly shied away from further attempts at establishing a clear

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<sup>2</sup> See the recent critical essay by Ulrich Rudolph, "Vorsicht vor dem Mythos," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 7, 2016; for a detailed treatment of the function of orientalism, see Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*, The Contemporary Middle East 3, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511606786>). See also Stephan Guth, "A Losing Battle? 'Islamwissenschaft' in the Times of Neoliberalism, IS, PEGIDA... and Trump," in this *Festschrift*.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1979); Reinhard Schulze, "Das islamische achtzehnte Jahrhundert: Versuch einer historiographischen Kritik," *Die Welt des Islams* 30, no. 1/4 (1990): 140–59, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006090x000666>; idem, "Was ist die islamische Aufklärung?," *Die Welt des Islams* 36, no. 3 (1996): 276–325, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570060962597391>; idem, "The Birth of Tradition and Modernity in 18th and 19th Century Islamic Culture—The Case of Printing," in *The Introduction of the Printing Press in the Middle East*, ed. Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, special issue of *Culture & History* 16 (1997): 29–72.

<sup>4</sup> Bernd Radtke, "Erleuchtung und Aufklärung: islamische Mystik und europäischer Rationalismus," *Die Welt des Islams* 34, no. 1 (1994): 56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1570857>. Already the title of this article betrays its bias in constructing "European rationalism" as a historical particularity. This is not the place to document the subsequent controversy; for my own view, see Albrecht Hofheinz, "Illumination and Enlightenment Revisited, or: Pietism and the Roots of Islamic Modernity," lecture, University of Bergen, 1996, accessed September 4, 2017, [http://folk.uio.no/albrech/Hofheinz\\_IllumEnlightenment.pdf](http://folk.uio.no/albrech/Hofheinz_IllumEnlightenment.pdf). Most recently, Khaled El-Rouayheb has rejected "overhasty attempts at capturing the age by a few 'isms' imported from Western European historiography" since in order to do so, "the meanings of such terms have to be stretched to such an extent that they arguably become devoid of historical content and become free-floating 'ideas' not associated with any particular region or period." Quoted from *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107337657>), 8. To strip these terms of their particularity as exclusively Western was, however, precisely the point of the revisionist exercise!

periodization,<sup>5</sup> but has produced detailed and valuable insights into the “early modern” history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, often with a focus on the Ottoman lands.<sup>6</sup> Documenting intellectual life among both élite and non-élite circles has done much to enrich our understanding of the world of Islamdom before the colonial encounter.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, important lacunae remain. Most of the extant studies on 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual history deal with urban areas, even as they are bringing non-élite actors to the fore. And they pay particular attention to unearthing ‘secular’ concerns—that is, empirical interest in worldly, everyday matters—as evidence of ‘early modernity,’ even as they acknowledge the potential importance of studying the contributions of religious traditions to intellectual life. Nelly Hanna, a key figure in shedding light on urban ‘middle class’ literacy, is the first to concede: “innumerable Sufi works were written in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, most of them of a popular nature, rather than of a philosophical or intellectual one. [...] These works [...] are yet to be explored in their social context, in terms of content, language and readership.”<sup>8</sup>

Just how important it remains to investigate intellectual developments on a broad scale becomes clear when reading Dror Ze’evi who refocuses on the colonial encounter as the crucible of modernity. The profoundly unsettling effect of colonialism has not been denied by any serious scholar, and it is certainly important to realise that this also shaped the coloniser. There are good

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<sup>5</sup> With the notable exception of Dror Ze’evi, “Back to Napoleon? Thoughts on the Beginning of the Modern Era in the Middle East,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 19 (2007): 73–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951896042000256652>.

<sup>6</sup> The German term “Frühe Neuzeit” avoids the contagion of associating this period with “modernity”; it has, unfortunately, no current equivalent in English.

<sup>7</sup> Stefan Reichmuth, ed., “Arabic Literature and Islamic Scholarship in the 17th/18th Century: Topics and Biographies,” special issue of *Die Welt des Islams* 42, no. 3 (2002): 281–415, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700600260434994>; Nelly Hanna, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo’s Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003); James Grehan, ed., “Popular Culture in the ‘Early Modern’ Middle East,” special issue of *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 3 (Fall 2003): 17–73; Dana Sajdi, ed., *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee: Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Tauris, 2007); Samer Akkach, *‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi: Islam and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007); Stefan Reichmuth and Florian Schwarz, eds., *Zwischen Alltag und Schriftkultur: Horizonte des Individuellen in der arabischen Literatur des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Beirut and Würzburg: Ergon, 2008); Stefan Reichmuth, *The World of Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1732–91): Life, Networks and Writings* ([Cambridge:] Gibb Memorial Trust, 2009); Christoph Herzog, “Aufklärung und Osmanisches Reich: Annäherung an ein historiographisches Problem,” in *Die Aufklärung und ihre Weltwirkung*, ed. Wolfgang Hardtwig, special issue of *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 23 (2010): 291–321; Bekir Harun Küçük, “Early Enlightenment in Istanbul” (PhD diss., University of California San Diego, 2012); Ahmet Bilaloglu, “The Ottomans in the Early Enlightenment: The Case of Public Libraries in the Reign of Mahmud I” (MA diss., Central European University, 2013); El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History*.

<sup>8</sup> Nelly Hanna, “Literacy and the ‘Great Divide’ in the Islamic World, 1300–1800,” *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 2 (July 2007): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022807002240>.

arguments for conceptualising modernity as a product of the colonial encounter.<sup>9</sup> Ze'evi's account, however, leaves little room for precolonial epistemological change; in his Middle East, "institutional change [...] preceded changes in worldviews," and precolonial transformations appear as mere "nooks and crannies" compared to the "quantum leap" resulting from the colonial encounter.<sup>10</sup> In the following pages I want to challenge this view and partly answer Hanna's call by highlighting what may be regarded as a quantum leap in the role precolonial Sufi preachers played in effecting important epistemological change. In what constituted an unprecedented literary and social expansion, they helped to erode scholastic reasoning and the hegemony of scholastic authorities and promoted a greater role for the individual believer in the understanding and practice of Islam. As a case in point, I hark back to my detailed study of a Sufi shaykh from the Sudan, Muhammad Majdhub, who lived 1795/6–1831 but in whose work the impact of the 1821 colonial conquest is imperceptible.<sup>11</sup> I analysed how he interacted with his followers, what he tried to impart to them, and how they reacted. Here, I shall not repeat the particulars of this case; instead, I focus on some of the lessons learned from it, and set these lessons in the context of what we have come to know about the development of Islamic writings in Africa, on the periphery of the established centres of Islamic learning. My aim is both to emphasize the importance of paying attention to the 'periphery' in evaluating epistemological and social change in the Islamic world and to acknowledge the pioneering role Reinhard Schulze has played in pointing out—though not closely elaborating—the role of pietist movements not only in Christian but also in Islamic contexts.<sup>12</sup>

The basic proposition that I shall explicate in the following pages is that (a) the Sufi tradition, in particular in the form of a piety centred on the Prophet Muhammad, provided a unique combination of emotional experience and intellectual teachings that facilitated the increasing internalisation of norms taught by Islamic authorities; and that (b) pietist reform movements since the eighteenth century were essential agents in spreading this understanding of what Islam means

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<sup>9</sup> See, i.a., Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), to which Ze'evi refers directly.

<sup>10</sup> Ze'evi, "Back to Napoleon?," 76, 86, 91.

<sup>11</sup> Albrecht Hofheinz, "Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the Early Nineteenth-Century Sudan" (dr. philos. diss., University of Bergen, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> First in Schulze, "Was ist."

on an unprecedented scale, leading to a growing number of individual believers gaining a measure of autonomy from the old authorities.

I use 'pietism' as a generic term to designate religious movements that place greater weight on 'piety' than on scholarly learning and that consequently open up direct access to (the sources of) Truth to all individuals (not only the scholars), provided they have a pious heart.<sup>13</sup> The term is derived from the Pietistic movement that emerged within Protestantism since the 1670s but may usefully be applied in a generic way. A fundamental demand of pietists is the conscious individual (re-)con-version, a turn, in intent and practice, from the sinful to the godly, leading the individual to lead a new life in accordance with the moral principles of the faith and to join a new community of brethren in the faith, a community that is seen as a nucleus for permeating society at large. There are significant parallels between Protestant Pietism and pietist movements in the Islamic world. In the definition, I have already indicated the centrality of piety / *taqwā* as opposed to mere 'bookish' scholarship; the emphasis on individual 'conversion' / *tawba* and personal religious experience; and the opening up in practice, not only in theory, of direct access to the sources of knowledge (the Scriptures) to everyone. Both Christian and Muslim pietist movements aimed at reforming the religious life of individuals since the extant religious establishment was seen as being unable or unwilling to do so. Both had mystical roots, but deemphasised speculative mysticism for the ethical dimension (piety as the motivator for moral conduct in everyday life, and moral conduct as evidence of piety). Both put a particular effort into addressing lay audiences via 'inner mission' using new media such as pamphlets and song, and both had an unprecedented mass impact.<sup>14</sup> All these aspects point to the contribution of pietist movements to the psychological and social expansion of the internal boundaries of the Faith. It is these two dimensions that I shall now look at in turn.

### **The psychological expansion of Islam's internal boundaries**

From about the end of the eighteenth century (I shall come back to this chronology), we can observe a development that I have termed the 'expansion of Islam's internal boundaries.' Unlike an

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<sup>13</sup> I use the term 'individual' here as meaning 'der Einzelne,' referring to individual people as opposed to groups, and not in the sense of a human being possessing a sense of 'individuality' and a certain reflective distance from dominant ideational systems (i.e., in a different sense than Ralf Elger, "Individualität und Kulturkritik in arabisch-muslimischen Ego-Dokumenten, 15.-18. Jahrhundert," *Periplus* 13 (2003): 30-50).

<sup>14</sup> For sources and more detail on these parallels, see Hofheinz, "Illumination and Enlightenment," 14-18.

*external* expansion through which new believers are won who have not previously been Muslims, an *internal* expansion is an expansion of the realm of influence of Islamic norms *within* the community of believers. This internal expansion has two dimensions, a psychological one and a social one. The psychological one is that it is no longer sufficient for Muslims simply to profess to be Muslims and to follow the commands of their religious leaders; a true believer is now thought to have the obligation to *understand* what he—and later she—believes, and to be *responsible* for complying with this understanding *in practice*. Mindless repetition of formulas and blind following of authorities is to be replaced by personal understanding and personal responsibility.<sup>15</sup> This is the *psychological* dimension; it comes about chiefly through a process of *internalising* fundamental norms.

Internalisation means the introjection of external norms and ideas into the mind of a person so that these norms and ideas become constitutive parts of the person's mental make-up. As every good psychologist and every parent knows, such an internalisation can only be successful through an emotional bond, through the medium of love. Simply to proclaim norms may make people comply with them as long as they fear punishment if they don't. But to align someone's 'own free will,' so to speak, with certain norms of behaviour and certain ideas of what is right and wrong requires greater subtlety; rules and laws alone are not enough. Emotional security is the precondition for a successful internalisation of the rules laid down by an authority. Freud's model of the development of the super-ego is illustrative even though it may be oversimplifying in detail. This model shows striking similarities to what is reported about the interaction between Shaykh Majdhub and his followers. Instead of legal sanctions, the shaykh used psychological means to press his point. He worked to establish a paternalistic relationship with his followers, inducing in them the image of a father who knows everything about them, loves them and cares about them and does not want to cause them distress. In this way, he moulded the community of his followers as a moral community in the faith. Formally, the community was constituted as a *ṭarīqa*, a "path" or "method" in the Sufi tradition. This is no coincidence, as Sufism offers a wealth of psychological knowledge that has been used throughout history by people from very diverse backgrounds who wanted not merely to lead people but to guide them.

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<sup>15</sup> This may be compared to Schulze's work highlighting a move from a cult-centred to a faith-and-morality-centred conceptualisation of religion, which he termed "protestantisation"; see i.a. his "Islam und andere Religionen in der Aufklärung," *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts* 7 (2008): 317–40; and *Der Koran und die Genealogie des Islam*, Basel: Schwabe, 2015.

What was the content of this guidance? It was not so much spiritual or mystical training in the narrower sense—the attempt to initiate his followers into advanced spiritual secrets—but morality in everyday life that Shaykh Majdhub was most prominently concerned with. In other words, he emphasized the *ethical* over the mystical dimension of Sufism. Muslim authors have distinguished these two dimensions of Sufism—*al-taṣawwuf alladhī li-l-takhalluq* as opposed to *al-taṣawwuf alladhī li-l-tahaqquq*—at least since the fourteenth century.<sup>16</sup> But it seems that it was in particular since the eighteenth century that writers started deliberately to emphasize the importance of the ethical over the mystical dimension. This is clearly apparent in Majdhub's re-writing of an earlier, seventeenth-century manual on the Sufi path,<sup>17</sup> and also in a work by the West African reformer Usumaani bii Fooduyee (1754–1817) who identified 'ethical' Sufism with *iḥsān* ("virtuous praxis") and demanded that every Muslim should cultivate it for individual edification.<sup>18</sup> 'Mystical' Sufism, on the other hand, was only for a few select gnostics; Bii Fooduyee did not go on to say very much about it, while dwelling at length on the ethical aspects. This is very similar to other Sufi-inspired reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including that of Shaykh Majdhub, and to Majdhub's concentration, in his preaching and his work with his followers, on morality in everyday life.

The paradigmatic example of this was sexual morality—no coincidence given that the relations between the sexes are constitutive for the social order and have been a major point of concern for moralists throughout history. Without going into detail here, I want to highlight the fact that the specific *norms* Majdhub propagated were all *derived from the literary scholastic tradition as developed in the urban centres of Islamic learning*. Majdhub's mission was primarily aimed at aligning people's actual behaviour with religious morality as laid down in the books of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). There was, however, an important difference between the Sufi shaykh's attention to these norms and that of the jurists. The jurists had long recognised a distinction between the legally enforceable and the morally good. They had held that sometimes the latter had to be relegated to the individual's consciousness, and limited the realm of legal judgment (*ḥukm*)

<sup>16</sup> For sources, see Hofheinz, "Internalising Islam," 18–19.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed comparison of Majdhub's *Risalat al-Suluk* to Qasim al-Khani's *al-Sayr wa-l-suluk ila malik al-muluk*, see Hofheinz, "Internalising Islam," 338–59.

<sup>18</sup> 'Uthman b. Foduye, *al-Tafriqa bayna 'Im al-Tasawwuf alladhī li-l-Takhalluq wa-'Im al-Tasawwuf alladhī li-l-Tahaqquq*, see Muhammad S. Umar, "Sufism and its Opponents in Nigeria: The Doctrinal and Intellectual Aspects," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. Frederick De Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 358–9.

to externally verifiable (*ẓāhir*) acts. Our Sufi disregarded this distinction and in doing so, affirmed the primacy of morality over legal judgement.<sup>19</sup> Where the jurists for centuries had maintained what Johansen called the idea of a "scholastic balance" between law and morality, Majdhub blamed them for failing to move society to actually comply with the norms that their books laid down.<sup>20</sup> It was therefore precisely the moral aspect, which lay outside the scope of judicial verdict, that constituted the focus of his attention. For him, it was not so much the act as the *intent* that counted, and therefore, the moral standard he demanded of his followers was more comprehensive and stricter than the legal prescriptions. Thus, Majdhub did not differentiate between coitus, petting, or merely passing by the window of a former girlfriend—it was all the same to him.

This emphasis on moral intent, on the internal aspect of behaviour, ties in with the psychological means that he used to educate his followers. Like the jurists, Majdhub aimed to establish conformity with Islamic normative rules; he did so, however, not by punishing observed transgressions, but by trying to prevent people from committing such transgressions in the first place through changing their self-conscious perception of their acts. His followers were gradually brought to introject the father-figure of their shaykh so that he, as the representative of the normative authority, became ever-present *within* them. This happened in stages, as is normal in any process of internalisation. A gamut of stories is preserved illustrating various stages of this process—how a man who had taken the oath of allegiance travelled outside of town, where the shaykh was living, since he believed that the shaykh would then not find out about the fornication he had set his mind on; how a man peed his pants when he *thought* that the shaykh had found out that he had pressed the hand of his former girlfriend; how one of Majdhub's students reported that "after having pledged allegiance to the Shaykh, I left town to go on travel. On my trip, I met a pretty woman whom I talked into making an appointment for the night. She came, but when I was just about to lay her on her back, suddenly the Shaykh appeared clearly before my eyes, between her and me, which frightened me a lot, so I let off her." These are some examples illustrating how by

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<sup>19</sup> This distinction could obviously be used as an argument by groups rivalling the religious establishment and the social classes it represented in concrete social and political contexts; cf. Hofheinz, "Internalising Islam," 236, 266, 296, 517.

<sup>20</sup> Baber Johansen, "Die sündige, gesunde Amme: Moral und gesetzliche Bestimmung (*hukm*) im islamischen Recht," *Die Welt des Islams* 28, no. 1/4 (1988): 280, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006088x00203>. Majdhub provides a good example of what Johansen describes as characteristic of the eighteenth-century reform movements: an attempt to abolish the conceptual separation between religious morality and the law, out of the conviction that this scholastic distinction was responsible for the perceived 'un-Islamic' practices rampant in everyday life.



introjecting the image of the shaykh, the normative authority and the rules set by it were absorbed into the super-ego of his followers.

### **The social expansion of Islam's internal boundaries**

Of course, Muslims have been internalising norms throughout history, as all people do in all societies. What norms, however, were internalised by whom, and to what extent? It is here that we need to consider the second, *social* dimension of the internal expansion of Islam. Majdhub was one of many religious leaders who may be called *inner missionaries*, people who saw it as their task to work with the less educated members of society in order to 'improve' their understanding and their practice of religion. Beginning in the eighteenth century, we can observe a marked increase and a growing influence of such movements of inner mission in the Islamic world. They were led largely by men who went out and preached specifically to Muslims living at the periphery of urban centres, people who were largely unlettered and who were trying hard to improve their social standing. To these people, the inner missionaries preached certain Islamic norms, often a simplified and—as I have indicated—a heavily moralistic version of Islamic norms. As a consequence, *more people* came to internalise *more Islamic* norms than before, specifically Islamic norms that had a clear 'scriptural' basis in the Qur'ān or the Prophetic Tradition, and that had been elaborated in the centres of scholastic learning over the centuries. Through the activities of inner missionaries, these norms became more prominent within the overall make-up of their followers' super-ego. And by the same token, a growing number of people was coming under the influence of the message that *every individual* was responsible for understanding these norms, for understanding the fundamentals of the faith and for putting them into practice.

This social expansion of Islam's internal boundaries correlates with a literary phenomenon. The inner missionaries made heavy use of certain media to spread their message. Majdhub himself was the most prolific author the Sudan had known up to his time, and his literary output provides a paradigmatic example of a more general trend: an unprecedented explosion of writing—or more precisely, authoring—that is noticeable since the second half of the eighteenth century, in particular in areas peripheral to the classical centres of Muslim learning.

For Muslim Africa, we can quantitatively document this explosion of writing since we have, in the volumes of *Arabic Literature of Africa*, a particularly comprehensive catalogue of what African

Muslims have written. The first two volumes in this series deal with the Eastern and the Central Sudanic belt, two core areas in the history of Islamic Africa.<sup>21</sup> Both volumes are the fruit of thirty years of intensive archival and field research by a network of scholars, and the authors can claim that within reasonable limits, the literary output of the respective areas has been thoroughly mapped, including not only authors and works that are still preserved but also those of which we only know through other references. It is this meticulousness that makes *Arabic Literature of Africa* so particularly useful for quantitative analysis.

A rough survey of the literary production by Eastern and Central Sudanic African writers shows that after early and isolated beginnings in and around the thirteenth century, a steadier growth of literary culture sets in in the sixteenth century. Literary output increased gradually until around 1800, when we begin to see an unprecedented exponential growth. By 1900, the number of writers had increased more than fivefold in both areas compared to 1800; the number of titles had increased in the Nilotic Sudan by a factor of 7.6 and in Central Sudanic Africa by 20.8.<sup>22</sup>

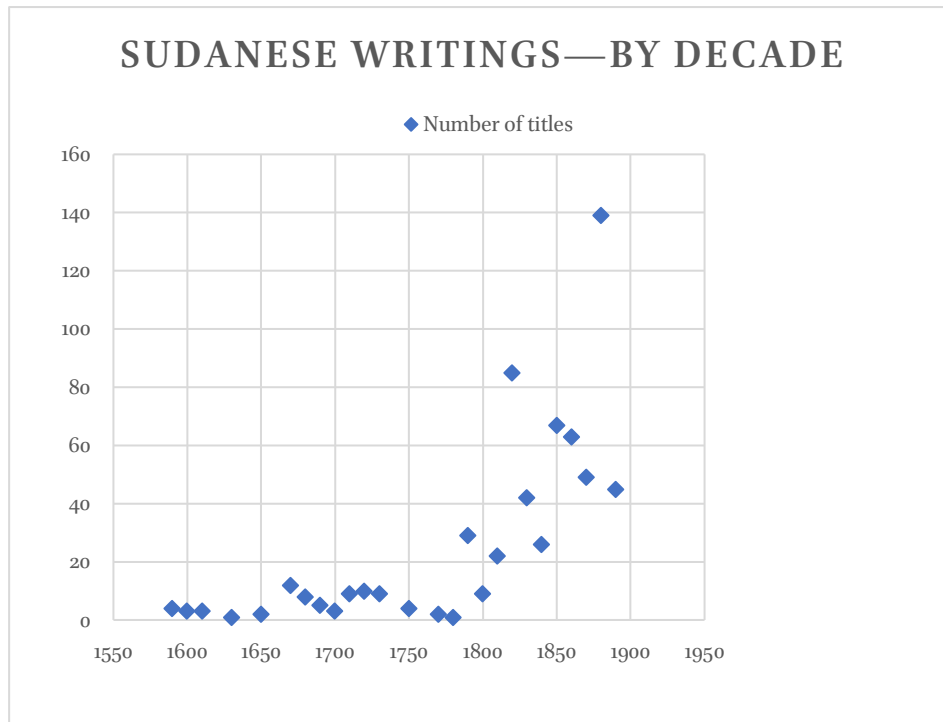
<i>until</i>	<i>Eastern Sudanic Africa</i>		<i>Central Sudanic Africa</i>	
	authors	titles	authors	titles
1200	0	0	1	8
1300	0	0	0	0
1400	0	0	0	0
1500	0	0	0	0
1600	3	4	7	43
1700	16	32	9	35
1800	26	83	16	51
1900	141	632	88	1062

The division by centuries may allow for a general comparison across a large geographical area. To obtain a more exact picture, however, we need to sharpen our focus and track the development of

<sup>21</sup> John O. Hunwick et al., eds., *Arabic Literature of Africa*, Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung: Der Nahe und Mittlere Osten, 13: vol. 1, *The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, comp. Rex S. O'Fahey (Leiden: Brill, 1994); vol. 2, *The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa*, ed. Hunwick and O'Fahey, comp. Hunwick, (Leiden: Brill, 1995). The quantitative study undertaken here is limited to these two volumes in the production of which I have been most closely involved myself; it should be supplemented by a study in particular of vol. 4, *The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, comp. John O. Hunwick (Leiden: Brill, 2003), and vol. 5, *The Writings of Mauritania and the Western Sahara*, comp. Charles C. Stewart (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> The numbers I operate with must of course not be taken in an absolute sense, but as indicating relative proportions.

literary output by smaller time units. I have been able to do this for the Nilotic Sudan, the area I am most familiar with; the following graph charts the number of titles produced by Sudanese authors, broken down by decades:



This chart suggests that the 'literary explosion' in the Sudan set in towards the end of the eighteenth century, not after 1800, and certainly *before* the colonial takeover. In Central Sudanic Africa, it has proven more challenging for me to plot literary output by decades, but based on what I have come to know while working on *Arabic Literature of Africa* as an editorial consultant with the late John O. Hunwick, the development there appears roughly comparable to that in the Nilotic Sudan, so that in both areas, it is reasonable to locate a threshold around the years 1780/90.

This threshold has much to do with the agents responsible for this explosion of writing. In Central Sudanic Africa, it was the reformist (and eventually militant) movement of Uṣūmaani bii Fooduyee and his successors. In the Nilotic Sudan, it was the new or renewed Sufi orders that were established there since the late eighteenth century. In other words, the literary revolution was the result of very active socio-religious reform movements that sought to change society through preaching and sometimes through militant action—the very same movements that I have referred to above as movements of inner mission.

The content of these writings was not necessarily all that new in itself; what was new, however, was the extent to which the message was effectively spread. Briefly, and a bit schematically, we may say that

- Before the late eighteenth century, *before the 'take-off,'* literary production was chiefly addressed to a *scholarly audience*, serving to reproduce an elite of religious specialists.
- Beginning with the late eighteenth century, much of the literary production was inspired by efforts to *simplify access to normative religious knowledge* and to drive home to every Muslim *what every Muslim needs to know and practice*. Much of the quantitative leap is due to hymns and songs in easy Arabic or even newly written vernacular languages, and to short tracts or pamphlets summarizing the essentials of religious knowledge and morality without bothering the reader with scholarly apparatuses.

None of the Central African or Sudanese reform movements responsible for the explosion of writing presented their teachings as a break with past ideas on orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Rather, they sought out new and more effective means to implement these teachings. To this end, they broadened their audience beyond the traditional elite circles of scholars and rulers (*al-khāṣṣa*). It was the common people (*al-ʿāmma*) who were now increasingly addressed directly. All Muslims, not merely the scholars and rulers, were now believed to have the duty—and thus the right—to obtain a basic understanding of the fundamentals of religious life. Whatever theoretical positions scholars of previous centuries may have taken on this point, the reformers who emerged since the end of the eighteenth century put much more practical effort into really addressing ordinary people and in formulating the basic message in such a way that it could be understood by ordinary people.

Thus, through these writing and preaching activities, an increasing number of people were exposed to scriptural norms and came to internalise them and the moral principles they conveyed, principles that had originally been developed in the urban centres of Islamic learning. This development had both a quantitative and a qualitative impact. On the one hand, it extended the mass impact of scriptural norms, and on the other, it enhanced the role of the individual in controlling 'Islamic' behaviour, first and foremost in one's own personal life.

In the process, Islamic discourse changed. Reference to Prophetic Traditions (*ḥadīth*) largely displaced reliance on scholastic literature, and even recourse to the Qur'ān gained greater practical

weight in the construction of knowledge than it had had in the preceding centuries. When Majdhub's grandfather was educated around 1700, *tafsīr* (Qur'ānic exegesis) and *ḥadīth* played no noticeable role in his curriculum. A century later, when Majdhub composed his treatises, Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* loomed so large in his thinking that there was almost no room left for any other argument. And there was another element added to these scriptural sources: contact with the Prophet in a vision or dream. The Prophet embodied the scriptural norms and brought 'live' access to the sources of religious knowledge within reach of every individual. In practice, this served chiefly to convey emotional certainty when seeking guidance, to confirm one's reading, one's interpretation of the sources. Such ways of 'direct' recourse to the 'primary' sources of knowledge helped erode scholastic methods of reasoning that relied on and always referred to a long tradition of scholarship and learning and that could only be practiced by those who had undergone specialized training in this tradition. With the new approach, this tradition was bypassed, and the right to interpret the normative sources was founded on individual piety more than on mere learning. In most cases, the learned tradition was not dismissed outright, but a growing emphasis on the individual's understanding (of what Islam means) and on the individual's responsibility (for how to put it into practice) jeopardized the interpretative authority of scholastic hierarchies.

Spreading the scriptural word of the Qur'ān and the Prophetic Tradition among the common people was a long-term process that helped blur the divide between the scholarly elite and the common people. This process was a dialectical one. On the one hand, it helped extend the validity of norm systems and institutions that were originally urban-based, and thus advanced the control of the city over the countryside. By the same token, however, it opened up in principle to each and every one of the 'commoners' the right and the duty to acquire an understanding of the fundamentals of religious knowledge as based in the scriptural sources, to apply this knowledge in practice, and to assume individual responsibility for its practical application. Access to and appropriation of these normative foundations eventually allowed the 'commoners' to challenge the position of the old elite on the basis of the very scriptures the interpretation of which had formerly been a prerogative of the '*ulamā*'.

The scholars in the established centres of learning such as the Azhar in Egypt were clearly sensitive to the dangers this approach posed to their position. They therefore launched virulent attacks against those "on the far edges of the land of Islam" who allegedly claimed that "the one who treads

the path [*ṭarīqa*], even if he is an uncivilized bedouin (*wa-law a'rābiyyan jilfan*), is a *mujtahid* (that is, someone entitled to draw his own conclusions from the fundamental sources of knowledge)."<sup>23</sup>

This was a crude distortion of the avowed teachings of our inner missionaries—but changes in basic patterns are often more evident from a distance. The Azhar scholars were acutely aware of the beginnings of a development that was increasingly to gain ground in the Islamic world over the next two centuries. The house that Sunni Islamic scholars had constructed and carefully maintained for half a millennium, where a 'scholastic balance' obtained between the legal and the moral, and where *taqlīd* (requiring ordinary Muslims to follow one of the recognized authorities of the scholarly tradition) was the dominant epistemic principle, came under threat from a variety of forces that were not only heterogeneous in origin but could also have differing agendas.<sup>24</sup> Taking a bird's eye view, however, it is possible to argue that one important strand in this development was the psychological and social expansion of Islam's internal boundaries that took on a new dynamic in the pre-colonial eighteenth century. This contributed to a paradigm shift in the understanding and practice of what it means to be Muslim. Since then, the production of texts, their distribution, and their consumption has steadily grown. More and more, it was seen as the right and duty of every serious believer to understand the text—first and foremost, the Scriptures—for him/herself and to act accordingly. As Muslim cultural brokers reworked their religious heritage to re-present it to ever more people, ever greater weight was given to, and assumed by, the individual as the responsible recipient of the message and the responsible actor in the world. "Today," a

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<sup>23</sup> Hasan al-ʿAttar (1766–1835), *Risala fi l-Ijtihad* (c. 1817/8?), MS Cairo (Dar al-Kutub), mf. 17834, ff. 46–7 & 80; edited by Knut Vikør, *Sources for Sanūsī Studies* (Bergen: Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1996), 104, 125; translated by Knut Vikør, *Sufi and Scholar on the Desert Edge: Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Sanūsī and his Brotherhood* (London: Hurst, 1995), 244. Al-ʿAttar's invective appears to have been directed against Muhammad ʿUthman al-Mirghani (c. 1793–1852), then a young but highly self-assured student of Ahmad b. Idris (1749/50–1837), one of the most central figures in the Sufi reform movements of the 18th–19th centuries. Al-Mirghani spent the years 1815–21 in the Sudan preaching the new way, in the process doing much to upset the local religious establishment. It was through al-Mirghani that Majdhub learned of Ahmad b. Idris whose student he became in Mecca the following year.

<sup>24</sup> There were many individual differences between those who conceptualised and formulated ideas that threatened the dominant epistemology, and these differences may be emphasized to such an extent that one no longer recognizes commonalities (cf. Ahmad Dallal, "The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750–1850," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (1993): 341–359, <https://doi.org/10.2307/605385>). In the space of this article, I cannot even begin to do justice to the vast literature on important themes such as the role of *ḥadīth* and *ḥadīth* studies in eroding the hegemony of scholarly compendia (*mukhtaṣar*), the renewed dynamics in the *taqlīd–ijtihād* continuum/dichotomy, and the revived emphasis on the individual's obligation to ascertain the scriptural references for an authority's positions (sometimes termed *ittibāʿ*, sometimes *ijtihād*). For more on Majdhub's approach, see Albrecht Hofheinz, "Transcending the Madhhab—in Practice: The Case of the Sudanese Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb (1795/6–1831)," *Islamic Law and Society* 10, no. 2 (2003): 229–248, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851903322144961>. I borrow the expression "*taqlīd–ijtihād* continuum" from Ahmed Fekry Ibrahim, "Rethinking the *Taqlīd–Ijtihād* Dichotomy: A Conceptual-Historical Approach," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136, no. 2 (2016): 285–303, <https://doi.org/10.7817/jameroriesoci.136.2.285>.

conservative Muslim complained in the 1990s,<sup>25</sup> "it is common to see young Arabs filling their homes with every hadith collection they can lay their hands upon, and poring over them in the apparent belief that they are less likely to misinterpret this vast and complex literature than [...] the great Imams." "With every Muslim now a proud Mujtahid, and with *taqlid* dismissed as a sin rather than a humble and necessary virtue," the premises for the construction of religious knowledge have been radically altered.

### Individuals *en masse*

This increasingly significant role of the *individual*—of every individual—is to me one of the most striking aspects that emerges from the study of the Islamic 'periphery' around 1800. It is the individual as *object* of the message and as *subject* of a direct, emotional or rational *experience of and access to Truth*—an access that is, in principle, *immediate*, i.e., no longer mediated by the scholastic guardians of the faith. This development is of course not to be confused with individualism. But it heralds a process of emancipation of the individual from 'traditional' established authority, an attempt effectively to spread a generalized concept of true knowledge and normative practice throughout society and into every individual's heart.<sup>26</sup>

What we can see in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is that pietist reform movements of inner mission, rooted in old mystical traditions but clearly distinguishable from these roots both as intellectual and as social phenomena, helped to lay crucial foundations for the success of a 'revolutionary' development that in the end surpassed and often disowned its Sufi heritage and that

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<sup>25</sup> Abdal Hakim Murad, "The Problem of Anti-Madhabism," *Islamica: The Journal of the Islamic Society of the London School of Economics* 2, no. 2 (March 1995): 37, 39. Al-'Attar's words are echoed in the Syrian scholar Muhammad Sa'id al-Buti's denunciation of those who eventually became known as 'Salafis' when he accused them of saying: "As long as we indicate that Islam only consists of its acts of worship and its familiar five pillars and that any Arab (*a'rābī*) can memorize these within minutes and then go and apply them, then that is Islam" (*al-La-Madhhabiyya: Akhtar Bid'a Tuhaddid al-Shari'a al-Islamiyya* [Damascus: Dar al-Farabi, 2005; first published 1970], 35; a refutation of Muhammad Sultan al-Ma'sumi al-Khujandi al-Makki [1880-1960], *Hal al-Muslim Mulzam bi-ttiba' Madhhab Mu'ayyan min al-Madhahib al-Arba'a?* (c. 1939; photomechanical reprint [Kuwait:] Jam'iyyat Ihya' al-Turath al-Islami, n.d. [after 1982]).

<sup>26</sup> My formulation "generalized concept of true knowledge and normative practice" runs somewhat parallel to Schulze's considerations on changes in the conceptualisation of 'religion' and of 'Islam,' along with the 'protestantisation' of Islam, that he has put forward over the years, perhaps for the first time in his "Was ist," 296: "es könnte sein, daß im Laufe der Forschungen der Schluß plausibel wird, daß [...] in der islamischen Welt eine [...] überregionale Normierung des Konzepts 'Islam' eingeleitet wurde, die im 19. Jahrhundert zu [einer] Verdinglichung [*reification*] des Islam geführt hat."

- (a) used primary reliance on the Scriptures (Qur'ān and Prophetic Tradition) to push aside other normative texts that had come to constitute a canonized body of reference over the preceding centuries;
- (b) opened up access to the primary Scriptures, in principle, to every individual believer, thus challenging the interpretative hegemony of the scholar-jurists;
- (c) used new media to simplify access to the message and spread it as widely as possible throughout society;
- (d) promoted the importance of the Prophet as a role model to be imitated by every individual believer, thus nurturing the internalisation of Islamic normative principles and increasing the importance of the individual as a key instance of behaviour control.

The study of the 'literary explosion' and its carriers in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that at least in some respects, and in some regions, a watershed moment in Islamic history may actually be identified in the latter part of the eighteenth century, before the onslaught of European colonialism. The pietist missionaries should then be regarded as one of several confluents contributing to the current make-up of the Islamic world, and one perhaps particularly important in and for social and geographic 'peripheries.' This chronology needs not coincide with, and may be wholly independent of, developments in Cairo, Damascus, or İstanbul and the ego-documents and other literary engagements by urban non-elites, secular or Sufi literati, introspective individuals and the like that have been studied there over the past decades.<sup>27</sup> Its importance for the growing weight of the individual, on a mass scale, should, however, not be underestimated.

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<sup>27</sup> See, notably, the contributions to the collections by Stefan Reichmuth and Florian Schwarz, eds. *Zwischen Alltag und Schriftkultur*; Ralph Elger and Yavuz Köse, eds., *Many Ways of Speaking about the Self: Middle Eastern Ego-Documents in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish (14th-20th Century)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010); and François-Joseph Ruggiu, ed., *The Uses of First Person Writings: Africa, America, Asia, Europe / Les usages des écrits du for privé: Afrique, Amérique, Asie, Europe*, *Comparatism and Society* 25 (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0352-6309-1/3>).



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