***Ijāzas* in the Saharan West: Shaykh Sīdiyyā and the Qādiriyya Brotherhood**

**An Introduction to Three *Ijāzas* Granted to Shaykh Sīdiyyā**

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*Ijāza* literally means “authorization,” “permission,” or “license,” and normally refers to a document that certifies the competence of the possessor to transmit a certain type of knowledge.[[1]](#footnote-1) The origin of the *ijāza* system is found in the practice of early Muslim scholars seeking to collect reports on the deeds or sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad (*ḥadīth*) and to obtain from eyewitnesses the permission to transmit them to others. This kind of knowledge transmission and verification, which is premised on the idea that face-to-face, individualized learning is paramount in maintaining the integrity of knowledge, was then applied to other fields.[[2]](#footnote-2) An *ijāza* normally comprises the *silsila*, or the “chain” of transmitters that connect the last recipient to the foundational figure at the apex of the transmitted knowledge, be it the Prophet in the case of *ḥadīths*, or, for instance, the author of a book in cases where an *ijāza* is a license to teach a given text or a specific practice.

*Ijāza*s[[3]](#footnote-3) also play an important role in the case of Muslim Sufi brotherhoods (*ṭarīqa*), those spiritual paths that developed around the teaching of prominent mystics.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this context, an *ijāza* is the act by which the religious leader or *shaykh*—whether the founder, the *khalīfa* (the founder’s successor), or the *muqaddam* (an individual tasked with initiating novices)—authorizes a disciple who has climbed the brotherhood’s ranks to teach and transmit the precepts, prayers, rites, and spiritual secrets to other disciples and to give him or her, in turn, the possibility of granting *ijāza* himself or herself.

In the Sufi context there are different types and “levels” of *ijāza*s. The most basic (*‘āmma*) authorizes its holder to initiate disciples only into the fundamentals of the *ṭarīqa*: the set of *wirds* and *ḥizbs*—spiritual formulas and specific prayers—that must be recited a certain number of times per day or per week, individually and/or collectively, and are intended for the masses (*‘awam*). The absolute (*muṭlaqa*), or full (*tāmma*), gives the recipient the right to initiate, study, and transmit esoteric knowledge as well as the secrets and mysteries (*asrār*) of the *ṭarīqa* and is intended for the elite(*khawāṣ*). Although there is no fixed “template” for an *ijāza*, it generally includes the following elements: the name of the person granting the *ijāza*, the name of the beneficiary, the type of *ijāza*, sometimes the reasons for choosing the beneficiary, and the details of what can or cannot be done in terms of transmission and teaching. Though typically written, an *ijāza* can be transmitted orally too.

The three documents presented here[[5]](#footnote-5) are examples of *ijāzas* of the Qādiriyya, one of the most important Sufi brotherhoods in the Muslim world. The Qādiriyya is among the oldest Sufi brotherhoods in Islamic history and traces its origins to a Sufi scholar of twelfth-century Baghdad, ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (d. 1166). After having spread in North Africa at an early stage, the Qādiriyya found its way into western Africa.[[6]](#footnote-6) Traditions that date the spread of the Qādiriyya to the sixteenth century are likely spurious.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, by the late eighteenth century the brotherhood started spreading in the region thanks to the peripatetic teaching of the foremost scholar of the Arabophone Kunta clan of the Saharan West, al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr (d. 1811).[[8]](#footnote-8) Al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr reformulated the brotherhood and became responsible for the unprecedented spread of the Qādiriyya in western Africa.

These *ijāzas* belonged to an influential Muslim scholar of the Saharan West, Shaykh Sīdiyyā (d. 1868).[[9]](#footnote-9) He was among the disciples of al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr, a member of the Awlād Abyayrī tribe from the northern shore of the middle course of the Senegal River in what is today’s Mauritania. Born in 1775, he completed his study of the Qurʾan at the early age of thirteen with his mother, Maryama Barka. He then left his tribe to study with a famous teacher of the Idaw ʿAlī named Ḥurma b. ʿAbd al-Jalīl al-ʿAlawī. He spent seventeen years with this teacher, becoming an accomplished scholar and authoring his first work, a commentary on the didactic poem on grammar by Ibn Durayd (d. 933) called *al-Maqṣūra*. He then moved to study jurisprudence among the Djedjeba and specifically under Ḥabīb Allāh b. al-Qāḍī (d. c. 1815). At this stage of his career, at around thirty-five years of age, Shaykh Sīdiyyā finally moved to the Azawād, north of the Niger Bend, to study under al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr. Unfortunately, the Kunta scholar was close to death when Shaykh Sīdiyyā arrived; as a result he spent only five months with al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr before becoming mainly the student of his successor, Muḥammad al-Kuntī (d. 1826).[[10]](#footnote-10) With him, he furthered his studies in jurisprudence, which led him to become a prominent jurist and influential political figure once returned to the Gebla region after the death of Muḥammad al-Kuntī.

In the Kunta camp, Shaykh Sīdiyyā also studied Sufism and became initiated into the Qādiriyya, as the three *ijāzas* presented here demonstrate. The first[[11]](#footnote-11) was written by the son of Muḥammad al-Kuntī, al-Mukhtār al-Ṣaghīr (d. 1846), who would become the leader of the Kunta Qādiriyya in the region after his father’s demise,[[12]](#footnote-12) and the other two[[13]](#footnote-13) by a rather obscure son of al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr, ‘Umar. The three *ijāzas* granted to Shaykh Sīdiyyā are absolute, general and full, the same as those received by al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī, according to their authors. As such, they grant him the right to initiate aspirants into the entirety of the *wird*, *ḥizb*, and other prayers, as well as the secrets and mysteries of the *ṭarīqa*.

1. On this system, see William A. Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3, (1993): 495-522. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam,” 507. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The plural of *ijāza* is *ijāzāt*, though here for ease of reference we use the anglicized plural, “*ijāzas*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an introduction to Sufism and Sufi brotherhoods see, David Cook, “Mysticism in Sufi Islam,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, published online 4 May 2015), <https://oxfordre.com/religion/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-51>. For a history of these Sufi brotherhoods in West Africa, see Mauro Nobili, “Muslim Brotherhoods in West African History,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (published online 29 October 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.171>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. MS 95/4/1057, MS 95/4/1058, MS 95/4/1059, Charles C. Stewart Papers, University of Illinois Archives (henceforth “Stewart Papers”). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. G. Jenkins, “The Evolution of Religious Brotherhoods in North and Northwest Africa 1523–1900,” in *Studies in West African Islamic History*, ed. John R. Willis (London: F. Cass, 1979); and Louis Brenner, “Concepts of Ṭarīqa in West Africa: The Case of the Qādiriyya,” in *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, ed. Donal B. Cruise O’Brien and Christian Coulon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 33–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jenkins, “The Evolution of Religious Brotherhoods,” 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Aziz A. Batran, “Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī and the Recrudescence of Islam in the Western Sahara and the Middle Niger, c. 1750–1811” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1971), 341. On al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr, see John O. Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, vol. 4, *The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 68-94. The full version of his name, as found in *ALA* vol. 4, is al-Mukhtār b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Kuntī al-Wāfi, Abū Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a study on Shaykh Sīdiyyā, see Charles C. Stewar. *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania: A Case Study from the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) and Charles C. Stewart with Sidi Ahmed Wuld Ahmed Salim, *Arabic Literature of Africa,* vol. 5, pt. 1, *The Writings of Mauritania and the Western Sahara* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 133–45. The full version of his name, as found in ALA vol. 5, is Shaykh Sīdiyyā b. al-Mukhtār b. al-Hayba al Abyayrī al-Intashāʾī. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a study of Muḥammad al-Kuntī, see Abdallah Ould Daddah, “Šayh Sîdi Muhammed Wuld Sîd Al-Muḫtar al-Kunti (1183H/1769-70-2 Šawwâl 1241/12 Mars 1826). Contribution à l’histoire politique et religieuse de Bilâd Šinqîṭ et des régions voisines, notamment d’après les sources arabes inédites” (PhD diss., Université de Paris–Sorbonne, 1977); and Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, vol. 4, 94-115. The full version of his name as it appears in the *Arabic Literature of Africa* is Sīdī Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Kunti al-Wāfī. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ijāza from al-Mukhtār b. Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Kunti al-Wāfi to Sīdiyyā b. al-Mukhtār b. al-Hayba al-Abyarī al-Intashāʾī* (title of work assigned by the *Maktaba* project), MS 95/4/1059, Stewart Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On al-Mukhtār al-Ṣaghīr, see Boubacar Sissoko, “Le cheikh al-Muḫtār aṣ-Ṣaġīr al-Kuntī (1790–1847): médiation entre l’état peul du Macina et les Touaregs de Tombouctou de 1826 à 1847” (PhD diss., Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2019); and Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, vol. 4, 115-18. The full version of his name as it appears in ALA vol. 4 is al-Mukhtār al-Ṣaghīr b. Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Kuntī. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ijāzas from [ʿUmar] b. al-Shaykh al-Mukhtār b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Wāfī al-Kuntī to Sīdiyyā b. al-Mukhtār b. al-Hayba al-Intashāʾī* (title of works assigned by the *Maktaba* project), MS 95/4/1057 and MS 94/4/1058, Stewart Papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)