BOOK REVIEW

Sorcery or Science? Contesting Knowledge and Practice in West African Sufi Texts

By Ariela Marcus-Sells (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2022), xviii + 214 pp. Price HB $119.95. EAN 978–021092294.

In late eighteenth-century West Africa, cycles of increasing violence and slave raiding sparked a desire for new modes of political organization. In the Sahel and savannah lands, there was a wave of military campaigns to establish Muslim-ruled states. In the western Sahara Desert, however, the Sufi Muslim theologians Sīdī al-Mukhtār (d. 1811) and his son and successor Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī (d. 1826)—founders of the Kunta scholarly network—adopted a different model. Drawing on material and social capital acquired through trans-Saharan trade and pedagogical networks, they consolidated their position as socioreligious leaders, playing a pivotal role in the political developments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

In *Sorcery or Science?* Ariela Marcus-Sells tells the story of Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī through the prism of their writings on 'the sciences of the unseen' (*'ulūm al-ghayb*). Through close analysis of these texts, Marcus-Sells looks at how the Kunta scholars defined and limited access to legitimate knowledge and practice, thus responding to—and shaping—the social authority under which they lived.

Many of these writings exist as unedited manuscripts in libraries across West and North Africa, France and America. Taking her cue from approaches within literary theory and anthropology, Marcus-Sells locates these texts within an intertextual context composed of other primary works that vary in genre and intended audience in order to trace their underlying epistemological structure. In addition to closely engaging with the works' textual content and intertextual context, Marcus-Sells considers the social and political frameworks of their production—in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century West Africa—and their reception—by both herself as a scholar and ourselves as readers in the twenty-first century. She underlines the importance of examining how our own presumptions and categories might shape our reception of Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī's discourses on knowledge and practice. In particular, Marcus-Sells interrogates the application of terms such as 'esoteric' and 'occult', which, she suggests, not only obscure distinctions made by Kunta scholars among the various sciences, but also artificially separate them from other knowledge and practices that engage with the unseen world.

Marcus-Sells further examines wider European discussions around magic, underlining how they shaped, and were shaped by, the colonialist discourses. Drawing on recent scholarship by Edward Bever and Randall Styers on magic discourses, Marcus-Sells describes the process by which the definition and

categorization of a branch of knowledge, such as magic, as 'illegitimate' in fact opens it up as a powerful platform for reinterpretation. Such scholarship on magic discourses has typically been centred on modern Europe. Here, however, Marcus-Sells demonstrates how similar discourses have been employed to demarcate legitimate knowledge and practice in other times and spaces. Despite this, her project is by no means universalist; Marcus-Sells grounds this reframing of discourses on magic in the concrete social and political context of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century West Africa.

In the first chapter 'The visible world', Marcus-Sells describes the social and political contexts of the development of the Kunta scholars. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in West Africa, warrior lineages and military rulers were able to offer less and less protection to their subjects from slave raiding—or even actively traded their own subjects into slavery—which weakened their authority in the region. Kunta leaders drew on a different rhetoric; they rejected military rule as the foundation of legitimacy in favour of rhetorical 'voluntary submission' to a Sufi shaykh. Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī used wealth gained from trans-Saharan trading in camels, salt, and tobacco, in addition to investment in wells and educational networks, to establish alliances and thus consolidate their authority and ability to offer security. Their rise and influence contributed to the ongoing development of Sufi identity and leadership in the region, leaving a significant mark on the human and physical geography of the West African desert.

The Kunta scholars argued for their authority as Sufi Muslim leaders through the consolidation of their ability to perceive and access the 'realm of the unseen'. This realm, as presented in Kunta texts, is composed of various cosmological realms, an afterlife, unseen entities, and invisible components of the human body. According to Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī, all Muslim believers can experience the realm of the unseen, but only certain elite individuals can travel through its layers to the divine presence at its heart. In the chapter 'The realm of the unseen', Marcus-Sells reconstructs the architecture of the realm of the unseen, before studying the way certain individuals acquire particular knowledge of this realm and the ability to perfect their body and heart through development of this knowledge and further devotional practice.

The Kuntas' understanding of the realm of the unseen provides the epistemological framework through which they develop the sciences of the unseen. These sciences make up a body of knowledge and practices that include the crafting of amulets, communicating with jinn, and reciting litanies for protection or healing. In the chapter 'The sciences of the unseen', Marcus-Sells explores how Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī defended the sciences of the unseen, which some Muslim scholars rejected as sorcery (*siḥr*), and argued for their place within legitimate devotional practice. The engagement of Kunta scholars with the sciences of the unseen emerged out of the long history of the popularity of these practices among West African Muslims. However, the Kunta represented a growing regional trend in associating these sciences with a Sufi cosmological framework and socioreligious hierarchy. Kunta scholars demarcated these sciences from knowledge or practices that they considered as 'sorcery'. This classification often

followed changing developments in the formation of racial identities in eighteenth and nineteenth-century West Africa; knowledge and practices considered as originating from 'the land of the blacks' were often delegitimized.

In order to examine the Kuntas' claim that the sciences of the unseen offer a form of devotional practice, Marcus-Sells analyses written devotional aids, a popular genre of Islamic textual production that has been little examined in scholarship. Bridging oral and written literature, devotional texts emerge as the link connecting the bodies of Muslims to the structure of the cosmos, thus enabling believers to alter their material conditions. In 'Bridging the worlds in prayer', Marcus-Sells not only examines how Kunta scholars used devotional aids to encode their teachings for oral transmission, but were also responding to the rising popularity of such texts. In this way, Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī can be considered as both products and producers of an intellectual and social landscape.

Through her analysis, Marcus-Sells seeks to illustrate the reciprocal relationship between the Kunta scholars' intellectual realm—their ideas, cosmologies, and metaphysical structures—and their material and social world—their geography and socioeconomic history. Each chapter demonstrates a different mechanism through which Kunta scholars navigated this relationship in order to demarcate legitimate knowledge and establish their authority as a socioreligious elite.

From its extensive engagement with a vast, and understudied, corpus of primary sources and the contexts of their production to its thoughtful reflections on the scholar's position and approach, *Sorcery or Science?* represents an exciting model for future scholarship across disciplines. It offers a lens through which we can consider the reciprocal relationship between knowledge and authority/power outside of discourses centred on European sources. The perceived opposition between 'sorcery' and 'science'—so often associated with European narratives of the emergence, and legitimization, of modern science—is thrown into question at numerous points throughout the book. The work offers nuanced discussions of discourses around 'magic' and its role in the formation of social and intellectual authority, both more broadly and in relation to the Kunta scholars specifically. Such discussions point to the urgent need to examine the definitions and functions of 'science' and 'magic' in the production and organization of knowledge outside of European modernity and its associated colonialist discourses. Indeed, this book poses two key questions to scholars of history today—how do discussions of 'sorcery' and 'science' outside of European sources offer different perspectives on legitimate knowledge production and practice? How do such perspectives in turn extend our understanding of the purpose and limits of 'science'?

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