INTRODUCTION

This is a book about two Sufi Muslim scholars who lived, taught, and wrote in the West African Sahara Desert at the turn of the nineteenth century. These scholars, Sīdi al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811) and his son, Sīdi Muḥammad al-Kuntī (d. 1826), composed numerous works across multiple genres that discuss contested and controversial practices related to a vast unseen realm (ʿālam al-ghayb) that surrounds, and interpenetrates, the visible world. Sīdi Muḥammad in particular acknowledged that other Muslim scholars might consider these practices to be acts of sorcery (siḥr), but he rejected this categorization and argued that they should instead be considered "the sciences of the unseen" (ʿulūm al-ghayb). The descendants of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad, known collectively as the Kunta, are still associated with these practices today, which Muslims in West Africa—like Muslims in many other parts of the world—continue to perform, even as their legitimacy remains contested. This book demonstrates why the Kunta family became associated with these practices by situating the sciences of the unseen within the thought of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad as well as within the social and historical context that gave those sciences shape and meaning.

To give one example, a text by Sīdi Muḥammad, called the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya wa farāʾid sirriyya raḥmāniyya* (The Illuminated Benefits and Secret Pearls of the Compassionate), offers to reveal God's secret, greatest name. According to the text, the universe itself is crafted out of the various names of God, each of which controls a specific function in the world. The greatest name controls all of the lesser names, and anyone who manages to "connect to" this name can accordingly manipulate all aspects of the world. Ultimately, the narrator reveals the greatest name of God to be a string of unvoweled consonants: AHM SQK ḤLʿ YṢ and then provides a table and a supplicatory prayer associated with that name. Specific instructions tell the reader how to inscribe the table on a

tablet and recite the prayer to gain control over "any thing that includes the property of existing"—in other words, complete mastery over the universe. This one text makes claims about the structure of the world, powerful knowledge about that world, and correlating practices that would allow a user to master his surroundings. The text also places individuals who study or search for knowledge of the letters and names along a moral spectrum, discrediting those who would use these practices solely in fulfillment of their individual desires. Indirectly, the text asserts that those who have fully mastered these practices have done so on the basis of a moral and spiritual superiority that serves as the foundation for those individuals' social authority. The text thus elaborates a complex cosmology, presents practices that draw on that cosmological structure, and links those practices to hierarchies of social authority and power.

Texts like the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* are difficult for scholars to read, because they relate to a sphere of human activity—ritual practice—that is difficult to reconstruct from textual sources alone. Unlike an ethnographer, I cannot ask eighteenth-century Saharan Muslims how (or whether) they put Sīdi Muḥammad's instructions into practice. And although Muslims in West Africa continue to both use and produce similar texts today, the Kunta scholars and their followers are separated from our current context by two hundred years and the epistemic ruptures of colonization and postcolonial nationalization. Oral histories have proved useful in examining the recent past and have extended our understanding of regional contexts as far back as the end of the nineteenth century. But oral histories cannot reliably reconstruct the lives and contexts of people who—like Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad—have passed from living memory into legend, and attempting such reconstructions on the basis of oral sources risks projecting present debates and contestations into the past. As a result of this theoretical position, this project does not attempt to describe what the Kunta or their followers did with these texts, or what rituals they may or may not have performed. Instead, I first demonstrate how the Kunta scholars attempted to leverage discussions of the sciences of the unseen specifically, and devotional practice in general, to shape the religious landscape of the Sahara Desert, and to claim social authority within that space. Second, I argue that attention to the content and circulation of these works reveals changing attitudes toward devotional practice in the Sahara Desert, as Muslims increasingly came to understand practice as connected to changing forms of textuality.

Texts like the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* are also difficult for historians to read because they implicate categories of knowledge and practice whose meanings have been contested at almost every period in history. Sīdi al-Mukhtār's and

Sīdi Muḥammad's defense of their practices against charges of sorcery recalls contemporaneous efforts in western Europe to distinguish science from both religion and magic. Those European discussions were shaped by colonialist analyses that pejoratized African practices as superstitious and resulted in the excision of the study of these texts and practices from the field of religious studies for generations. Today, scholarship on historical African and Islamic societies takes place within an academy that has inherited these colonial-era categories, and is practiced by scholars living in societies where terms like "magic" have taken on additional meanings ranging from whimsical entertainment to the diabolic. As a result, scholarly literature on discussions of sorcery in Islamicate contexts occasionally conflates the epistemological understandings of historical Muslim writers with either colonial or current understandings of magic practices. In order to understand how the Kunta scholars understood the sciences of the unseen, and how their discussions responded to and shaped both synchronic and diachronic discourses about knowledge and practice, we must first examine our own presumptions and categories.

Therefore, although texts like the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* are difficult, it is crucial that we read them. This book performs just such a reading. It tells the story of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad al-Kuntī, the first two leaders of the Kunta network, through the prism of their writings on the sciences of the unseen. Through close and sustained analysis of these texts, I demonstrate (1) that the Kunta scholars rooted their description and defense of the sciences of the unseen in an epistemology informed by Sufi cosmology and metaphysics, and (2) that the relationship between knowledge and practice that they posit was inextricably related to the structures of social authority under which they lived. This reading thus leads to the reconstruction of the matrix of epistemology, practice, and authority of a particular Muslim society. At the same time, even as this book offers a window into a West African Muslim society at the turn of the nineteenth century, it also puts that particular history into dialogue with scholarship on the development of discourses about legitimate and illegitimate knowledge and practice that reached from ancient Greece to modern Europe. And while some of this scholarship has acknowledged the role of Islamic traditions in the development of these discourses, other scholars have asserted the uniqueness of the western European framing of magic as illegitimate knowledge and superstition. Ultimately, this book aims to demonstrate that the Kunta participated in an epistemic process that cannot be limited to western European history but rather characterizes all societies in which an elite attempts to define and limit access to legitimate and true knowledge and practice.

The Kunta Scholars and the Sahara Desert

Situating the history of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad involves tracing two lines of historical inquiry—the history of the Kunta family and that of the desert in which they lived. Of these two, the latter has received much more attention. Within the Sahara, desert peoples built and maintained elaborate systems of wells that allowed them to cultivate date palms. These oasis towns served as nodes in regional networks of interconnectivity and provided transhumanant pastoralists and merchants with places to store and defend their stocks. While many of the regional networks that connected these nodes responded to the economics of scarcity that governed desert life, the development of these networks and life in the oases also represented great individual and collective investment in both the physical and the human landscape.[1] The Kunta scholars rose to prominence in a particular region of the Sahara known as the Azawād, which was linked by regional networks to the Ahaggar Mountains and the Aïr Massif to the east, the Mauritanian Hodh and Adrār to the west, and the oases of Tuwāt and the Tidikelt to the north. At the social, economic, and political levels, these desert communities were connected to the desert edge (Sahel) and savanna lands to the south and the political entities that governed them.[2]

Recent scholarship on the Sahara and the greater region indicates that Sīdi al-Mukhtār built his economic and pedagogical network during a period of great social change marked by cultural and political realignments both within the desert and between desert and desert-edge communities. These changes resulted in the increasing dominance of nomadic desert pastoralists over settled agriculturalists in the Sahel and savanna lands to the south. Meanwhile, desert communities developed new racial and religious idioms to express this realignment in power. Previously Berber-speaking populations adopted the Arabic dialect of Ḥassāniyya and produced new family histories that tied them to an Arab lineage and to the family of the Prophet Muḥammad.[3] Increasingly, groups who identified as Arab came to refer to themselves as "white" (biḍān) and to distinguish between different lineages of white "nobles." These lineages were often divided into "warrior" groups that claimed political and military authority and "clerical" lineages that (in theory) renounced military force and dedicated themselves to learning and providing religious services. Both warrior and clerical groups came to describe the settled people whom they dominated as "black" (sūdān) and, in a context of increasing violence and slave raiding, whiteness became associated with Muslimness and free status and blackness with permanent enslaveability.[4]

As slave raiding and violence increased during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "warrior" lineages and military rulers—both Muslim and non-Muslim—could no longer guarantee protection to their tributary populations and increasingly came to prey upon and sell their own people into slavery. This cycle of violence and insecurity led in turn to new forms of political organization, as Muslim scholars began to claim political power and establish new states.[5] Beginning in the Senegambia, a wave of military campaigns led by Muslim intellectuals established "Almamates" in Bundu in the 1690s, in the Futa Jallon in the 1720s and 1730s, and in the Futa Toro in the 1770s and 1780s.[6] Linked to these movements by religio-political ideology, student-teacher networks, and a common ethnic identity, another set of campaigns then began in Hausaland, in the Inner Niger Delta at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1804, a Sufi Muslim teacher named ʿUthmān ibn Fūdī rallied a movement that ultimately deposed all of the Hausa states and established a Muslim-ruled empire often referred to as the Sokoto Caliphate.[7] The establishment of Sokoto was soon followed by the campaign of Aḥmad Lobbo, a pastoral Muslim scholar from the Niger River Valley who established the state of Macina, centered on the new city of Hamdullahi. Finally, in 1852, al-Hājj ʿUmar Tāl began a sweeping campaign that originated in the Futa Jallon, defeated both the Bambara kingdom of Segou and the state of Macina, and reached north to threaten Timbuktu.[8]

Sīdi al-Mukhtār rose to prominence in the Azawād roughly contemporaneously with the movement to establish the Almamate along the Senegal River, but decades before ʿUthmān ibn Fūdī rallied his followers in Hausaland. Indeed, the Kunta family of scholars appears to have provided some of the intellectual foundations for the second "wave" of *jihāds*, even as they entered into competition with many of the new Muslim states. ʿUthmān ibn Fūdī claimed Sīdi al-Mukhtār as a teacher, and Ibn Fūdī's successor, Muḥammad Bello, received Sīdi Muḥammad's son Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī as a visitor. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Kunta leaders managed a tense series of negotiations between Sokoto and Macina. And when ʿUmar Tāl defeated Macina and marched toward Timbuktu, he was opposed and ultimately defeated by Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī al-Kuntī.[9] However, while the Kunta leaders engaged, in diplomacy or in war, with the leaders of Islamic states in the region, they carefully distanced themselves from the political ideologies of these rulers. Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad drew on a long-standing current of Islamic political ethics that distinguishes the morally suspect rulership of princes (*ʿumarāʾ*) from the legitimate authority of scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*). In Islamicate contexts throughout the premodern period, Muslim scholars used a

genre known as "mirrors for princes" to offer advice to rulers, attempting to guide political policy while simultaneously asserting their greater moral and ethical standing.[10] Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad very much understood themselves as ʿulamāʾ and attempted to use their social and religious authority to direct various neighboring ʿumarāʾ, including the leaders of the Barābīsh and the Iwellemmedan Tuareg. Notably, Sīdi Muḥammad wrote letters to both Muḥammad Bello and Aḥmad Lobbo in the form of a "mirror for princes,"[11] thus suggesting that both leaders had ceded their status as scholars by claiming political rulership.

In contrast to direct political rule, Sīdi al-Mukhtār used the voluntarist model of submission to a Sufi shaykh to attract and retain followers. Louis Brenner argues that this model represented a new form of political formation in the region, one that explicitly rejected military force as the foundation of political legitimacy; instead, the Kunta shaykhs asked followers to willingly submit to the authority of a pious Sufi leader.[12] The Kunta leaders based their claims to the voluntary devotion of their followers on both their Islamic learning and an assertion of their particular proximity to God, as manifested through the spontaneous occurrence of marvelous events. In the context of the late eighteenth century, as the moral legitimacy of military leaders decreased in inverse correlation to the rise of military violence, the growth of the Kunta movement represented a new political and social experiment. Of course, the "voluntary submission" of individuals and groups to the authority of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and his successors was a rhetorical fiction—the Kunta often resorted to military force to assert or maintain their authority. Nevertheless, this fiction offered the possibility of a political formation whose legitimacy was based on something other than rule by force. Moreover, scholars agree that the success of the Kunta model established the Sufi lineages as a mode of political organization in the region.[13]

Indeed, the appeal of the Kunta model led directly to the development of at least one other Sufi community in the desert. Shaykh Sīdiyya al-Kabīr, a student first of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and then of Sīdi Muḥammad, established his own Sufi community in the Mauritanian Gebla in the early nineteenth century, following the model of his Kunta teachers.[14] During the same time period, another Sufi community developed in the Mauritanian Hodh around the shaykh Muḥammad Fādil, whose hagiography imitates the content and structure of Sīdi Muḥammad's hagiography of his father.[15] Descendants of these figures influenced the development of the region throughout the nineteenth century and perpetuated the memory and legacy of the Kunta model. Sons of Muḥammad Fādil and a grandson of Shaykh Sīdiyya rallied followers either in opposition to, or in collaboration with, French colonial rule in the late

nineteenth century.[16] And while the names of Kunta leaders, their descendants, and their students appear most frequently in historical studies of the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, Saharan communities in Algeria, Mali, and Mauritania continue to consider Kunta descendants to be the bearers of both religious authority and particular knowledge of the sciences of the unseen.[17]

However, although the significance of the Kunta network to the development of the political and intellectual history of the region has been established, there is comparatively little original research devoted to the lives and work of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Baṭrān's book *The Qadiryya Brotherhood in West Africa and the Western Sahara: The Life and Times of Shaykh al-Mukhtar al-Kunti (1729–1811)*, an abridged version of his 1971 doctoral dissertation, remains the only published monograph on either of these two scholars. Baṭrān's impressive research draws on dozens of manuscript works by Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad, relying primarily on two family chronicles composed by Sīdi Muḥammad to reconstruct the life of Sīdi al-Mukhtār. The first, *Al-Ṭarāʾif wa'l-talāʾid min karāmāt al-shaykhayn al-wālida wa'l-wālid* (Original and Inherited Knowledge Regarding the Miracles of the Two Shaykhs, My Mother and My Father), is Sīdi Muḥammad's hagiography of his father (a final chapter, theoretically devoted to his mother, is not extant). The second, *Al-Risāla al-ghallāwiyya* (The Letter to the Aghlāl), is a long letter that denounces the aggression of the Aghlāl against a branch of the Kunta family in the Mauritanian Hodh, while rejecting the claims to religious authority made by the Aghlāl leader ʿAbd Allāh wuld Sīdi Mahmūd. Baṭrān also draws on the earlier work of the colonial scholar and administrator Paul Marty, whose voluminous publications on West African peoples emerged as part of the colonial government's attempt to classify and categorize the Africans under their rule. Marty's book on the history of the Kunta follows the narrative trajectory of Sīdi Muḥammad's *Risāla al-ghallāwiyya* almost point by point.[18]

Because Baṭrān draws primarily from the work of Marty and the Kunta chronicles, and because Marty relies on those same chronicles, the internal Kunta narrative presented by Sīdi Muḥammad in the *Ṭarāʾif wa'l-talāʾid* and the *Risāla al-ghallāwiyya* has become deeply ingrained in subsequent scholarship concerning the Kunta family. This literature acknowledges the hagiographic quality of Sīdi Muḥammad's depictions of his family's earliest history, which he traces back to the legendary Arab conqueror of North and West Africa, ʿUqba ibn Nāfiʿ, and from him to the Prophet Muḥammad's tribe of Quraysh.[19] Both Baṭrān and Marty argue that the family lineage emerges from "legend" into "history" with the late fifteenth-century figure Sīdi Muḥammad

al-Kuntī al-Kabīr and his son, Sīdi Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī.[20] These scholars then trace the split of the Kunta patrilineage into two branches, with a "western branch" moving into the Hodh and Adrār, in contemporary Mauritania, and an "eastern branch" moving first into the northern Saharan regions surrounding the city of Tuwāt, now in Algeria, and from there into the Azawād, in contemporary Mali. The story continues with the rise of Sīdi al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr among the Azāwad Kunta in the late eighteenth century. Again, drawing on the internal Kunta chronicles, Baṭrān recounts how a young Sīdi al-Mukhtār studied with various teachers across the Sahara before meeting his Sufi shaykh, Sīdi ʿAlī ibn al-Najīb (d. 1757), who initiated him into the Qādiriyya Sufi order. At some point, Sīdi al-Mukhtār claimed for himself the title of head of the Qādiriyya order. In this role, Sīdi al-Mukhtār consolidated the diffuse branches of the Kunta family, established his family's control over important material resources, particularly livestock and salt, and accumulated wealth through the management of crucial Saharan trade routes. Baṭrān also records Sīdi al-Mukhtār's establishment of a school at al-Hilla, where he trained followers and managed the organizational structure of the Qādiriyya order.[21]

This book approaches the pre-eighteenth-century history of the Kunta family with hermeneutic suspicion while acknowledging that some documentary evidence does support the broad outlines of the received Kunta history from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century (see chapter 1). And while ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Baṭrān's work on Sīdi al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī brought this important family into the work of modern historians, his reliance on Paul Marty's publications and Sīdi Muḥammad's hagiographies has reinscribed a narrative meant to assert a long history of Kunta authority over other West African Muslims. This study accepts that Sīdi al-Mukhtār was a historical figure who lived and taught in the Azawād, and the textual evidence is sufficient to support the broad outlines of his life. However, the importance of the Kunta family to both regional politics and the development of Sufi intellectual and social traditions owes much to the role played by Sīdi Muḥammad in cultivating and promulgating the legacy of his father. This book thus presents a revised version of the history of the Kunta scholars set within recent scholarship on the social and economic history of the eighteenth-century Sahara.

Sufism

Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad argued for their social authority within the Azawād on the basis of their status as Sufi friends of God (awliyāʾ), and they presented their mastery over the sciences of the unseen as a critical element of

that status. As a result, most of their discussions of the sciences of the unseen occur in texts that fall under the discursive rubric of Sufism. This general category was coined by Islamic studies scholars to refer to the diverse array of social, cultural, and intellectual traditions related to people who called themselves "Sufis," a category of identity that emerged in, and then spread out from, Baghdad as early as the ninth century.[22] As a neologism, the category of Sufism represents neither a term internal to historical Muslim societies nor a unified and coherent domain. The Kunta, for example, refer to people and ideas as "Sufi" (*ṣūfī*), or to Sufis as a collective group (*al-ṣūfiyya*), but never to "Sufism" as a unifying system. Rather, they participate in a large array of literary genres associated with Sufi Muslim writers, including cosmological, metaphysical, and hagiographical works, and they refer to practices and modes of piety developed and debated by Sufi lineages, including the recitation of the names of God (*dhikr*) and spiritual retreat (*khalwa*). Some of these works fall into a genre known in Arabic as *taṣawwuf*, which translates literally as "how to make oneself into a Sufi." This term refers to an internal discussion by Sufis of how best to perfect their ethical development and devotional practice, and as such represents only one component of the broader sociocultural and intellectual world of Sufism.[23]

As the movement developed in ʿAbbāsid Baghdad in the ninth and tenth centuries, early Sufis gathered around particularly revered teachers who focused on developing an ethic of asceticism coupled with a totalizing focus on loving and being loved by God. Early Sufis understood these valorized figures as particularly close to God, so close that they earned his particular friendship (*wilāya*) and became known as the friends of God (*walī*, pl. *awliyāʾ*).[24] These figures are still sometimes referred to in scholarly literature as Sufi "saints," based on a comparison to Catholic sainthood. As the tradition developed in the ʿAbbāsid period, Sufi writers described the friends of God as responsible for guiding their students along a path (*ṭarīq[a]* or *sabīl*) to God articulated in terms of a series of internal or psychological states. The goal of the Sufi path was often described as extinction (*fanāʾ*), in which the individual consciousness of the believer is annihilated in a direct experience of the divine, followed by a period of abiding (*baqāʾ*), when the now-inspired worshipper returned as a leader and teacher for his community. By the twelfth century, important Sufi figures had appeared across the breadth of the ʿAbbāsid empire, from Iran to the Iberian Peninsula.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed important developments within the growing cultural current of Sufism. The focus on divine love and love of the divine combined with poetic traditions to produce Sufi love poetry in both vernacular and transregional languages. Meanwhile, Sufi scholars engaged

with and absorbed Neoplatonic Islamic philosophy, resulting in the widely influential philosophical syntheses of Abū Hamīd Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111)[25] and Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240).[26] In the works of these two scholars and contemporaneous figures, the friends of God adopt roles of critical cosmological importance as figures who allow for the existential flow of being from God to his creation. Meanwhile, increasingly complex and widespread Sufi teaching circles developed into full-scale social institutions with hierarchical leadership structures, distinctive rituals, and physical structures that served as lodges, schools, and gathering places for members. These institutionalized Sufi networks, or "orders" (ṭarīqa, pl. ṭurūq), traced their founding to an eponymous or authenticating friend of God and focused on the transmission of spiritual authority in an unbroken chain (silsila) from each pupil back through the founder of the lineage and ultimately to the Prophet Muḥammad and God.[27] Although all of these developments involved people identified as Sufis, not all Sufis participated simultaneously in all these discursive, social, or institutional registers. Thus throughout Islamic history there have been Sufi teachers and poets who did not belong to institutionalized Sufi networks, members of those networks who had no interest in Neoplatonic philosophy or cosmology, and philosophers who rejected the erotic or drunken imagery of love poetry.

Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad participated in almost all of these discursive realms of Sufism. They presented themselves and their ancestors as friends of God with particular proximity to the divine, gathered students in teaching circles, and traced their spiritual chain back through a valorized Sufi predecessor—ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166)[28]—to the Prophet Muḥammad. They composed poetry and produced extensive treatises detailing their particular Neoplatonic Sufi philosophy and cosmology. However, my research indicates that they did not understand their pedagogical circle as an institutionalized Sufi order. By positioning the Kunta scholars outside the structures of institutionalized Sufi orders, I differ from A. A. Baṭrān, who described Sīdi al-Mukhtār as the founder of the Qādiriyya Sufi order in West Africa, and from more recent scholars who have described either Sīdi al-Mukhtār or Sīdi Muḥammad as the head, or "pole," of the Qādiriyya order in the region.[29] As I discuss at greater length in chapter 1, the Qādiriyya appears to have coalesced as a regional institution in reaction to the proliferation of Tijānī Sufis following the jihād of al-Hājj ʿUmar Tal. Prior to this historical moment, Sufis in the region understood themselves as members of a community following a particular shaykh and as individual links in a chain (silsila) extending back to the Prophet Muḥammad.[30] Sufi leaders often understood themselves as spiritually linked to important earlier members of their lineage. For example, Sīdi

al-Mukhtār positioned himself as the living heir of ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, and Sīdi Muḥammad described his father's teachings as a "path" (*ṭarīqa*), but neither of these discourses provides evidence for an institutional, corporate identity as members of a "Qādiriyya Sufi order."

Miracles and Magic

Two other debates of importance to this study developed alongside, and interpenetrated, the growth of Sufi identities and traditions. The early ʿAbbāsid empire brought together people from Arabia, Persia, and Byzantium and witnessed the elaboration of new scholarly disciplines, including Islamic law and theology. As Muslim scholars worked to classify the textual and ritual traditions of this diverse population, theologians found themselves confronted with two sets of practices that infringed on the ontological space of prophetic miracles (*muʿjizāt*). First, members of early Sufi communities claimed that the friends of God were themselves surrounded by miraculous occurrences (*karāma*, pl. *karāmāt*). Important Sufi synthesizers from the tenth through twelfth centuries defined these *karāmāt* as gifts from God that indicated the elevated spiritual status of one of his friends.[31] Because the Kunta scholars use this same definition for the *karāmāt* in their own works, I have chosen to translate this term as "the charismata," to retain the sense of both a divine gift and a compelling presence that inspires devotion. Second, as Muslim scholars discussed the astrological, alchemical, divinatory, thaumaturgic, and medicinal practices of peoples stretching from the Indus Valley to Iberia, they began to classify some of these practices under either the Arabic term *siḥr* or the Persian term *nirānj*— "sorcery," or perhaps "magic."[32] Theologians who discussed these practices did so under the new category of *khawāriq al-ʿādāt*, "breakings of the norm," or events that appeared to reverse the usual sequence of events.[33] When Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad argue for the legitimacy of the "sciences of the unseen," they do so by referencing these earlier debates about breakings of the norm by positioning the sciences in relation to both sorcery, on the one hand, and the charismata, on the other.

The Islamic studies scholarship on textual-ritual traditions related to sorcery and the sciences of the unseen is still haunted by the unanswered question "is it magic?" The difficulty in answering this question stems partly from the semantic ambiguity of the word "magic" itself and partly from a long history of Western elites' using this term to discredit the traditions of colonized people, the poor and working classes, and women. On the one hand, in Western contexts today, practitioners claim to perform magic and identify themselves as

magic practitioners; others profess the existence of magic but consider it a form of evil or at least amoral behavior, while yet others think of magic as a fantastical form of entertainment.[34] On the other hand, during the formative period of the field of religious studies, scholars associated "magic" with "superstition." When these scholars, and other Western elites, applied the term "magic" to colonized peoples, they defined it as either an irrational, corrupt version of a rational religiosity or a sort of flawed science. Many of these scholars specifically cited African traditions and practices as examples of "primitive" or "superstitious" thinking.[35] These elites simultaneously used the terms "magic" and "superstition" to discredit the practices of both the working classes and women within their own borders, in this case defining "magic" as surviving traces of primitive societal and cognitive stages of development that needed to be purged from a "rational" society.[36]

An early push against defining magic as the result of deficient or irrational thinking came from the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, whose work portrayed magic and divination as logical within the epistemic world of his Azande interlocutors in east-central Africa. Evans-Pritchard did not, however, question whether the terms "magic" and "witchcraft" were appropriate translations of Azande terminology.[37] Within Islamic studies, the hiving off of "magic" from "religion" resulted in the long neglect of these traditions within the field.[38] Finally, scholars of Islam in Africa long considered "magic" to represent surviving elements of local African traditions, or, more recently, to reflect an unquestioning mimesis of textual-ritual traditions originating in North Africa or the Middle East. The colonial baggage that weighs down this term has led several scholars to argue for dropping the word altogether. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, for example, has likened "magic" to "a kind of wastebasket" filled with forms of knowledge and practices that do not fit easily into Enlightenment definitions of "religion" and "science."[39] Meanwhile, Randall Styers has accused scholars of magic of "culling diverse forms of behavior, modes of knowledge, social practices, and habits from an indiscriminate range of cultural systems and historical epochs and transmogrifying them into a unified phenomenon."[40]

Styers's argument accurately criticizes scholarship that unreflectively applies the label of "magic" to textual or ritual traditions without interrogating the relationship between their sources and the history of that particular term. However, work by scholars across various subfields has demonstrated that the word "magic" has its own history and that is it possible to isolate and identify the growth and spread of specific magic discourses through time, across geographical regions, and into and between different religious communities. Kimberly B. Stratton has demonstrated compellingly that the discourse

of magic and witchcraft emerged within ancient Greek texts in the fourth century BC as a result of changing citizenship laws and wars with the Persians. Within these texts, depictions of magic users and witches served to highlight anxieties about sexually deviant women and threatening foreigners.[41] Bernd-Christian Otto has labeled this kind of magic discourse a "discourse of exclusion," which pejoratively marginalizes people associated with threatening practices. As a discourse of exclusion, accusations of magic practice position the accused beyond the bounds of a particular community and its construction of orthodoxy, morality, and/or rationality.[42] However, Otto has also pointed out that people have identified themselves as "magicians" and referred to their own practices as "magic" from almost the earliest uses of the term. Recently, Otto has argued compellingly that there might be a continuous, if constantly changing and heterogenous, textual-ritual tradition of "Western learned magic" from antiquity to the present.[43] Magic in this sense operates as a "discourse of inclusion," in which individuals and groups identify themselves as magic practitioners. Because the polysemous term "magic" resists definition, this book asserts that the operating question should be rephrased as "whose magic is it?" and that research into these textual-ritual traditions must begin by locating specific actors and thinkers within the larger history of this term.

Indeed, recent publications by scholars in Islamic studies have clarified the outline of the growth and spread of inclusive discourses of Islamicate magic in the early medieval period. This scholarship demonstrates that the Arabic term *siḥr* served the same discursive functions in the premodern Arabophone world that the term "magic" did in Greek and Latinate contexts. The first written texts of self-identified *siḥr*/magic practitioners were produced during the ninth and tenth centuries, even as theologians and Sufis were debating the existence and legitimacy of the charismata. These works included the letters of the enigmatic Brothers of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ) and the *Ghāyat al-hakīm* (The Goal of the Sage), attributed to Maslama ibn Qāsim al-Qurṭubī (d. 964).[44] Arabic-language works on astral magic synthesized Neoplatonic understandings of the relationship between individual souls and the "World Soul," Aristotelian ideas of causation, and a neo-Pythagorean mathematization of the cosmos.

By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Muslim scholars writing in Arabic were much less likely to describe their own works as *siḥr*, as discussions of that term shifted to a discourse of exclusion. However, this period also saw the elaboration of a "science of names and letters" by Sufi writers, who posited a lettrist cosmology by which the names of God, and the letters that made up those names, corresponded to both numbers and specific properties and components of the universe. Renowned Sufi philosophers such as Ibn al-ʿArabī discussed the sciences of names and letters and occasionally mentioned their

thaumaturgic applications, particularly in the construction of talismans.[45] The articulation of both the theoretical and applied aspects of this science reached a decisive formulation in the works of Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. ca. 1232). The historical al-Būnī was a Sufi philosopher and teacher who developed esoteric reading circles in Cairo. His works focused on elaborating a Neoplatonic Sufi cosmology in which the names of God and letters serve as agents of creation and on the practical application of those names and letters to attain both divine mysteries and this-worldly benefits. Al-Būnī's reputation became associated almost entirely with the practical application of the sciences and resulted in the proliferation of textual forgeries and imitations attributed to him after his death. The most important of these, the *Shams al-maʿārif al-kubrā* (*The Suns of Knowledge: The Longer Version*), was produced in the seventeenth century and achieved widespread appeal across North Africa and the Middle East.[46] The *Shams al-maʿārif al-kubrā* and other pseudo-Būnian works eventually acquired a reputation as works of *siḥr*, and it was through the circulation of texts such as these that magic discourses became deeply associated with the realm of Sufism.

Scholars have also traced the transmission of Islamicate magic discourses into western Europe. Liana Saif in particular has demonstrated how the translation of Arabic texts on astral magic into Latin in the eleventh and twelfth centuries stimulated the growth of Western "occult philosophy" in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[47] The occult philosophy of Renaissance magicians such as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico, and John Dee "present[ed] this 'natural magic' as part of one single, supreme tradition of *religious* wisdom derived from sages such as Zoroaster or Hermes Trismegistus."[48] This "occult philosophy" of the Renaissance then became the "wastebasket" of rejected magic and superstition of the Enlightenment. However, even as new categories of "science" and "religion" gained coherence in modern Europe, a countermovement that rejected the "philosophical rationalism and mechanical philosophy" of the Enlightenment resulted in the emergence of a new set of "esoteric" or "occult sciences."[49] This period saw a broad range of groups combine "a drive to recover a hidden God" with attempts to establish a scientific study of the spirit realm.[50] Unlike the occult sciences of the Renaissance, these movements drew on Enlightenment-era conceptions of a rational, scientific process, even as they attempted to reposition the spiritual within the scientific. From these western European developments, scholars such as Peter Pels have concluded that "magic *belongs* to the modern," because "modern discourses position[ed] magic as their antithesis, reinventing it in the process."[51] Bever and Styers have since described this process as a "double gesture," in which attempts to banish and delegitimize magic discourse only reinforce and reinscribe magic as an alternative "potent resource."[52] European and North American discussions of

magic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries clearly involved reconceptualizing magic discourses inherited from the past and repositioning them relative to forces such as industrialization, education, consumerism, and new media, among others. However, Bever and Styers's "double gesture" essentially describes a process by which elites attempt to claim authority over a sphere of legitimate knowledge while invalidating and marginalizing the textual-ritual traditions of various marginalized others. That basic process also describes the twin magic discourses of exclusion and inclusion described by Otto—the process of defining and categorizing a "rejected" body of knowledge and practice ironically opens up that sphere for powerful reinterpretation and reappropriation.

This book engages this recent scholarship by positioning the Kunta's distinction between the sciences of the unseen and sorcery at the intersection of magic discourses and the particular history of the eighteenth-century Sahara. The resulting picture is simultaneously Saharan and Islamic and yet connected to a longer transregional, multireligious tradition that began in ancient Greece and connects people across the world today. Specifically, this book argues that Sīdi al-Mukhtār's and Sīdi Muḥammad's defense of their sciences of the unseen responded to both Arabo-Islamic traditions of self-professed sorcery and social expectations that Sufi leaders should offer powerful practices that yield tangible results. The Kunta scholars responded to this textual-ritual landscape by offering a set of powerful practices—their sciences of the unseen—while rejecting their categorization as sorcery. In doing so, they participated in a magic discourse of exclusion, rejecting sorcery qua magic as illegitimate practice. Moreover, the Kunta's discussion of sorcery and the sciences of the unseen very much participates in the double gesture of disavowal and inscription. Sīdi Muḥammad in particular classified knowledge and practice in an attempt to delegitimize and disavow the knowledge and practices of racialized others living to the south. However, in the process, he simultaneously reinscribed and reinforced the theoretical and cosmological basis of knowledge that draws on the structure of the realm of the unseen and wove himself and the legacy of his family into the history of Islamic magic discourses. The salience of this argument depends, first, on its framing within a specific set of historical discourses about science and sorcery and, second, on its careful attention to the semantic meanings of terms within the Kunta's texts. For example, Sīdi Muḥammad explicitly defines sorcery as a manipulation of the normal order of the world, in contrast to the miracles of the prophets and the charismata of God's friends. Thus any understanding of *siḥr* as related to the "supernatural" or to "ideas and actions that alter the natural course of events"[53] reflects an inaccurate conflation of modern and historical epistemological categories.

Attention to the emic meanings of terms as they emerged from the Kunta's works also led me to avoid the labels of "the occult," "the occult sciences," and "the esoteric sciences" as translations for the Kunta's sciences of the unseen. Islamic studies scholars have applied the rubric "the occult sciences" on the basis of the apparent semantic overlap with the Arabic ʿulūm al-gharība (the strange sciences) or ʿulūm al-kāfī (the sciences of the hidden).[54] Neither of these terms appears in the works of Sīdi al-Mukhtār or Sīdi Muḥammad. The Arabic phrase used by the Kunta scholars—ʿulūm al-ghayb—does not suggest that the sciences themselves are hidden or obscured; rather, they are the sciences *of that which is hidden*. Moreover, while the terms "esoteric" and "occult" might accurately highlight a distinct sphere of knowledge and practice within some contexts, they do not provide useful heuristic distinctions when discussing precolonial West African history. Louis Brenner has argued compellingly that precolonial West African society was characterized by "an esoteric *episteme*" in which *all* Islamic knowledge required some degree of initiation. While the sciences discussed by the Kunta were imbued with a rhetoric of secrecy, they may not have been, in fact, less accessible to Saharan Muslims than training in the procedures of Islamic jurisprudence. Moreover, this esoteric and initiatory approach to Islamic knowledge developed out of a context in which all crafts were governed by a caste system composed of professional guilds, who guarded and handed down knowledge of leatherworking, weaving, blacksmithing, and epic storytelling (among other crafts).[55] In a context where the knowledge of how to tan a hide into leather was as closely guarded a secret as the practice of making amulets, the term "esoteric" offers little explanatory force. Ultimately, the terminological choices used by a particular author represent the goals and methodology of her study. This book is rooted in a methodology that begins by identifying the internal, emic terminology used by the Kunta so that those categories can then be usefully connected to recent scholarship on the history of magic discourses. With this goal in mind, I have decided to avoid the terms "esoteric" and "occult." These terms not only obscure the finer distinctions that the Kunta scholars made among the various sciences but also artificially separate them from other sets of knowledge and practice that bridge the visible and invisible worlds, particularly the use of ritual practices such as supplicatory prayer.

Texts and Textuality

The analysis in this book is based on a selection of Arabic texts attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad al-Kuntī that are themselves part of a

vast Saharan manuscript legacy that has defied attempts to quantify.[56] Through examinations of the catalogues of more than a dozen manuscript libraries across West and North Africa, I identified several hundred separate titles of works attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār and another several hundred attributed to Sīdi Muḥammad al-Kuntī. These works cover almost the entire range of the classic Islamic disciplines, including commentaries on the Qurʾān and ḥadīth traditions, stories of the prophets, works on Arabic grammar, Islamic jurisprudence, and theology, and a sizeable and diverse body of works related to Sufism, including hagiographies, works defending the friends of God, descriptions of the Sufi path, treatments of the relationship between teachers and their students, and many others. Moreover, this book examines a set of devotional aids, a genre of Islamic textual production rarely examined in formal scholarship. Manuscript catalogues attribute dozens of these texts to Sīdi al-Mukhtār, and they include supplicatory prayers and poems in praise of the Prophet. Some of these texts stand on their own and are only one or two folios long, while others are collected in longer compendia.

These works represent a small segment of a precolonial West African manuscript tradition that remains understudied, even as new scholarship begins to pay attention to the written legacy of this region. Attention to the written form and features of these texts does not discount their oral aspects or the context of textual transmission in the region, in which written works were often memorized by students and "read" back to an instructor.[57] Indeed, the textual devotional aids in particular contain elements—including formulaic and rhythmic qualities, repetition, and the use of rhyming prose—that indicate that they were composed in a fashion intended to aid memorization and point to a context of oral performance and transmission. Memorization and oral performance can be used to transmit ideas and texts to a wide array of audiences, including those who might not be fully literate in written Arabic or have access to manuscript texts. These components of orality, inscribed into these written works, demonstrate what Ruth Finnegan has described as the "multi-modal" interconnectedness of written and oral forms of literature.[58] This study draws on a theory of textuality developed by Karin Barber that includes both oral and written production.[59] However, while in some cases practices of oral transmission have left traces in the manuscript record, much of the context and content surrounding the oral transmission and interpretation of these texts prior to the late nineteenth century has been lost. Accordingly, this study addresses the oral performative features of these texts when possible, but also depends on a methodology of reading written texts—including devotional aids—in historical contexts by carefully addressing their location relative to a body of intertexts.

Specifically, my approach to the vast Kunta manuscript corpus is based on a methodology developed by literary theorists and anthropologists who attempt to "read related texts together, to read across genres, and to read for discursive systems." Recently, Brinkley Messick has used the work of Bakhtin and other literary theorists to criticize "the tendency . . . to view texts in isolation, as individual 'monuments.'" Instead, Messick advances "a 'dialogic' conception [in which] individual writings could be understood as responding to and as anticipating responses from other texts."[60] This methodology begins by locating texts within an intertextual context composed of other works connected across the boundaries of genre. Specifically, this study focuses on discussions of the realm of the unseen and the bodies of knowledge and practice associated with that realm across different genres and registers of texts aimed at different audiences. Such a reading presumes that claims to authoritative knowledge and effective action are based on deeper epistemological frameworks, and that these in turn are rarely contained or concisely laid out in one work or even one genre.

A small number of works by Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad have been published, including the aforementioned *Risāla al-ghallāwiyya* and *Ṭarāʾif wa'l-talāʾid*. With the exception of these two texts and one collection of supplicatory prayers, all the other works by Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad referenced in this study exist only in manuscript form. The research in this book references manuscripts held by the Bibliothèque des manuscrits de Djenne in Mali; the Cheik Zani Baye Library, also in Mali;[61] the Bibliothèque nationale du royaume du Maroc in Rabat; the Royal Library, or al-Maktaba al-Ḥasaniyya, in Rabat; the library of the Great Mosque in Meknes; and the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, which holds the contents of the former library of Segou,[62] while the archives of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign provided reproductions of their microfilm copy of the Boutilimit Collection, from Mauritania.[63] I accessed and obtained reproductions of these texts during nine months of research in Mali, Morocco, and France in 2012.

At the most elite register, this project draws on two long treatises by Sīdi al-Mukhtār aimed at other highly educated elite Muslim scholars: the *Kitāb al-minna fī ʿitiqād ahl al-sunna* (The Book of Grace Concerning the Belief of the People of the Sunna),[64] a long theological treatise dedicated to the concept of declaring the unity of God (*tawḥīd*) that demonstrates Sīdi al-Mukhtār's understanding of the relationship of God to his creation; and the *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayḍiyya* (The Explanation of the Overflowing Poem),[65] a line-by-line commentary on one of Sīdi al-Mukhtār's own poems.[66] The commentary does not explain the literal meanings of the words or lines, but rather uses them as

evocative headings for lengthy discussions of the Sufi path to God, the degrees of love for God, and the heart of the believer. In their absence of local referents, the complexity and richness of their classical Arabic prose, their adherence to genre conventions, and their length, these long treatises can be considered "cosmopolitan texts." Sheldon Pollock defined a cosmopolitan text as one that "thinks of itself as unbounded, unobstructed, unallocated," and Brinkley Messick has recently expanded on this definition by focusing on the transportability of these texts, which, "by means of their distinctive discursive horizons . . . thought beyond any local frame."[67]

In contrast to these "generalizing" texts, the Kunta scholars also produced works related to the unseen directed at a more localized, although still elite, audience. These include the *Risāla al-ghallāwiyya* and the *Ṭarāʾif waʾl-talāʾid* by Sīdi Muḥammad, both of which assert and defend the authority of the Kunta family lineage within a Saharan context. No complete copies of the *Ṭarāʾif waʾl-talāʾid* have been found—the longest extant witnesses stop midway through chapter 5—suggesting that the work may never have been completed and thus may have been composed toward the end of Sīdi Muḥammad's life. While the *Ṭarāʾif waʾl-talāʾid* contains bio-hagiographical content throughout, certain chapters more closely resemble other genres of Islamic literature and could be read as self-contained treatises on specific topics. For example, the long introduction could stand alone as a treatise on the defense of God's friends, while chapter 3 discusses the various types of human knowledge, with a specific focus on the sciences of the unseen. Both of these works explicitly name, and respond to, other regional leaders and scholars. Sīdi al-Mukhtār's *Jidhwat al-anwār fī dhabb ʿan munāṣib awlīyāʾ allāh al-khiyār* (The Torch of Lights in Defending the Offices of the Friends of God, the Best of [Men]) directs itself at a similarly local audience.[68] The work itself is a long defense of the friends of God, and in the preface Sīdi al-Mukhtār claims that he composed this text in response to another regional scholar, Mukhtār ibn al-Būnā al-Jakānī, who supposedly pronounced anybody convinced by the words of the *awliyāʾ* to be an unbeliever.[69]

This book draws on two other works in this category, Sīdi al-Mukhtār's *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās wa ṭard wasāwas al-khannās* (The Book of Dispelling Confusion and Banishing the Whispering of the Slinking One),[70] and Sīdi Muḥammad's *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya wa farāʾid sirriyya raḥmāniyya* (Illuminated Benefits and Secret Pearls of the Compassionate).[71] The *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās* begins with the idea that God sent down the last two suras of the Qurʾān, Sūra al-Falaq and Sūra al-Nās, specifically as refuges against sorcery (*siḥr*) and evil whisperings. It then argues that both the prophets and the friends of God are protected (*maʿṣūm*) from these whisperings, before enumerating all the

different ways that Satan can deceive and lead Muslims astray. Finally, the work concludes by describing those who perfect their devotions to God and discussing the importance of formal ritual prayer (ṣalāt). Meanwhile, as described above, the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* details specific instructions for using the greatest name of God to make the cosmos submit to the will of the suppliant. Additionally, this work includes a lengthy introduction explaining the relationship between the names of God and cosmology, defending the practice of using the greatest name of God, providing a sacred history for the sciences of letters and names, explaining the theory behind those sciences, and illustrating specific uses for each letter of the greatest name, such as defeating one's enemies or healing the sick. Although the *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās* and the *Fawāʾid nūrāniyya* do not inscribe the names of Saharan figures, their shorter length and narrow focus position them within a more localized set of concerns than more expansive treatises such as the *Kitāb al-minna*.

Finally, this book examines a selection of devotional aids attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār. Several of the freestanding supplicatory prayers consulted here are named *ḥizb*, including *Ḥizb sīdī al-mukhtār al-kuntī* (The Prayer of Sīdi al-Mukhtār),[72] *Ḥizb al-nūr* (The Prayer of Light),[73] and *Ḥizb al-isrāʾ* (The Prayer of the Night Journey).[74] One of the most copied devotional texts attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār was the *Nafḥat al-ṭīb fī'l-salāt ʿalā'l-nabī al-ḥabīb* (Sweet Breath Concerning Prayer for the Beloved Prophet), a collection of prayers to the Prophet.[75] Unlike the other genres of texts used in this study, these devotional aids contain no explanatory material. On their own, detached from a narrative, ideological superstructure, they resist interpretation. Who used these texts, and under what conditions? Were they read and recited aloud or silently, on their own or in combination with other practices? Unlike anthropologists, historians cannot ask people what meanings texts held for them, or what uses they put them to, and this study is based on the theoretical position that it is not possible to draw observations from the present back into the past. Rather, evidence about the past needs to be independently confirmed in order to demonstrate continuities and ruptures with the present. Instead of attempting to use the practices of contemporary communities to make inferences about the meanings of Kunta devotional materials, I propose an alternative method for examining devotional texts in historical contexts. Specifically, this book connects these texts to other works by the same authors, and to other examples of the genres by other authors to reveal how elite Muslim scholars both attempted to shape and were shaped by the devotional landscape of the Sahara.

When reading these texts, I draw on the conceptual ground laid out by Talal Asad, who focused on the relationship between the religious meanings produced

in any given present and the historical conditions of their production. In an essay originally published in 1986, Asad famously defined Islam "as a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it) and the production of appropriate knowledges."[76] Asad understood this discursive tradition as the process, at every historical moment, in which individuals and groups interpreted, selected, and rejected practices from the reservoirs of the past, and he sought in particular to call attention to the institutional power structures that informed these choices. This book follows in Asad's path by examining the institutional forces at work in the Kunta's production of the sciences of secrets as a form of social knowledge, and it understands those sciences both as part of the discursive tradition of Islam and as part of the production of orthodoxy in the Sahara. For when Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad, as Saharan elites, sought "to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones," they established the "relationship of power to truth" that constitutes orthodoxy.[77]

Approach and Position

It has become standard practice in works of anthropology to outline how the position of an author affects a particular study; however, reflections of this kind in historical scholarship are still rare. Anthropologists who include these reflections do so in response to the contributions of scholars working within the discipline of postcolonial studies, who have dismantled the idea of a value-neutral or "objective" observational position and pointed out that decisions made by scholars about what methods to use, what questions to pose, and what to publish are enmeshed in ethical considerations. The choices made throughout this book, particularly concerning the methodology I used to interrogate the textual base for this study and the decision to publish the litanies, prayers, magic squares, and names of God referenced in these texts, reflect the unique combination of my academic training, personal interests, and social position. Other scholars might make, and have made, different choices when dealing with similar materials. But another insight from postcolonial studies has been to highlight the value of including within the academy works that represent views formed by different social locations.

In order to research this book, and for various academic and professional engagements over the past fifteen years, I traveled to Mali and Morocco (in 2010 and 2012) and Senegal (in 2016). While the bulk of my research time in West Africa was spent in manuscript libraries, my travels included extended

stays with host families and friends, discussions with students engaged in religious training, archivists, librarians, Qurʾān teachers, and people I met on public transport, in cafés, and in airport lounges as well as scholars in local universities. In all three countries, and also during extended Arabic language training in Jordan and Syria, I met members of transnational Sufi orders and their students. When I was able to visit Timbuktu in 2010, I spoke to several contemporary practitioners of "the sciences of the unseen," who today both identify themselves, and are identified by others, using the French term "marabout," which has now come into English as well.[78] I spoke with friends in Bamako and Timbuktu about their own visits to marabouts. After my first visit of several weeks to Timbuktu, my research plan for 2012 was to return to the city for an extended period of six months. The beginning of the conflict in northern Mali in 2011 made this plan untenable, and although I was able to spend several weeks in Djenne, conditions of warfare and violence have made it impossible for me to return to northern Mali or to consider entering the desert. In 2016, during a faculty development seminar in Senegal sponsored by the Council on International Educational Exchange, I had the pleasure of meeting with a contemporary descendant and student of the Kunta scholars in the town of Ndiassane. But I did not deliberately seek out the current representatives of this community in Senegal or southern Morocco as part of my research, and my analysis in this book does not draw on discussions with contemporary West African Muslims or my observations of current practices.

I had multiple reasons for this decision. First, my academic training cautions me strongly against reading the interpretations of contemporary communities back into the distant past. Perceptions of Muslim orthodoxy and heterodoxy, both in West Africa and around the world, have changed greatly over the past two hundred years and have been influenced by global trends, including increasing travel, migration, and study abroad, the rise of the Salafi movement, and the growing prominence of transnational Sufi networks. Indeed, contemporary Kunta students are understood today as members of an organized Sufi order, which represents a shift from late eighteenth-century understandings of Sufism in West Africa (see chapter 1). Second, contemporary shaykhs in the Kunta lineage—those who have been authorized to transmit Kunta texts, have their own private manuscript collections, and who teach and train students—represent a very specific set of authoritative social positions. Reading historical documents according to the interpretations of contemporary Kunta leaders thus risks inscribing the current positions of a particular group with social and institutional authority back into the past. Interviews with the contemporary readers and transmitters of these texts would be invaluable for determining the reception history of the works composed by Sīdi

al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad, for tracing the development of the sciences of the unseen and Sufi identities over the past century, and for examining the ongoing impact of this community in West Africa. I certainly hope that future research will pursue these lines of inquiry.

My methodological decision not to interview contemporary followers of Sīdi al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī stemmed primarily from my theoretical position on the usefulness of such sources in answering the questions posed in this study. But I also found throughout my travels that networks of Muslim and Sufi religious learning were largely unavailable to me as a non-Muslim woman. This applied mostly to contact with local scholars who held authority within the historical textual tradition. In contrast, discussions with Malian marabouts and their clients were often effortless. Many people were eager to connect me with their marabout or one they knew, and the marabouts with whom I spoke often surprised me in their openness. They willingly discussed their training and the training of their students, and the types of practices they used. My discussions with Malian friends and marabouts impressed on me the degree to which the practices discussed in this study are contested in West Africa today. The marabouts whom I met invested these disciplines with highly varying degrees of secrecy, and while some of these practitioners were connected to Sufi orders, others were not. Moreover, there is evidence that the perceived heterodoxy or orthodoxy of these practices has changed greatly since the late eighteenth century. Members of transnational Sufi orders must maintain their reputations and the respectability of their organizations on a global stage, where criticisms and rejections of magic squares and amulets often predominate, even as these practices continue to attract widespread popularity in local contexts from Indonesia to India to Senegal.

It is not my place to intervene in these debates or to uphold the perspective of one group of West African Muslims over another. Accordingly, I have been willing to publish anything that Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad felt comfortable committing to writing, including the magic squares, litanies, and names of God that are found in their works. This decision reflects the goals, the intellectual stakes, and the primary audience of this study. This book aims to add a history of a West African Muslim community to discussions within the fields of Islamic studies and religious studies, where scholarship in precolonial African contexts remains rare. I also hope that illuminating the trajectory of magic discourses in this Islamic African context will destabilize some of the assumptions concerning the uniqueness of the western European experience of contesting the boundaries of legitimate knowledge and practice. Sharing the details of the Kunta's understanding of sorcery and the sciences of the unseen allows for collaborative work toward these goals while opening

new possibilities for understanding the location of West African Muslims within local, regional, and transregional debates over acceptable practice. However, while these have been my choices, I recognize and respect the work of scholars whose theoretical and methodological choices differ from my own, and I acknowledge the benefit gained from the multiple positions and perspectives highlighted by our collective research.

Outline of the Book

This book demonstrates that Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad al-Kuntī understood human life as governed by the interactions between the visible and invisible worlds. Chapter 1 thus begins with the visible world by situating the Kunta scholars within the sociohistorical context of the Sahara Desert at the turn of the nineteenth century. The first section of this chapter connects primary sources by the Kunta scholars to the rich scholarship regarding the social, cultural, and economic history of the region to demonstrate how the Kunta's new model of authority, based on Sufi friendship with God, responded to the changing sociopolitical context of the region. The chapter then presents a revisionist account of the role and influence of Sufism on the organization and intellectual foundations of the Kunta family and updated biographies of Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad.

The Kunta scholars understood the visible world of the senses as only one component of created existence. In the hagiographies, the other, unseen parts of the world are always breaking through into the human realm in the form of marvelous events that occur in the vicinity of the friends of God. In various stories, a needed water flask breaks, only to suddenly reappear intact. A friendly campsite appears where none was expected. Bandits and tyrants unexpectedly surrender to the authority of a Sufi shaykh. In all of these stories, an apparently dire situation resolves into unexpected salvation because of the presence of a Kunta family member. And while these unexpected reversals affect the social realm, the Kunta texts locate their source beyond the social, human world, in a vast invisible realm that surrounds and permeates perceptible reality—the subject of chapter 2. The realm of the unseen presented in the Kunta texts is composed of an afterlife, various cosmological realms, unseen entities, and invisible components of the human body. According to Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad, all believing Muslims experience the realm of the unseen to some degree, but certain elite individuals succeed in traveling through the various layers of this realm back to the divine presence at its source. In the Kunta texts, the physical body assumes a central role in this process, for only a

heart and body perfected through devotional practice will reach this ultimate goal. Moreover, when the elect friends of God reach the end of this path and are annihilated in knowledge of the divine, their perfected bodies are then re-created as the source of all existence. As a result, the friends of God assume a position of ultimate cosmological importance in the Kunta texts, simultaneously allowing creation to proceed from the unseen into the manifest realms and offering a pathway for believing Muslims to return to God.

The Kunta's understanding of the "realm of the unseen" provides the epistemological framework for a group of practices that they refer to as the "sciences of the unseen" (ʿulūm al-ghayb) or the "sciences of secrets" (ʿulūm al-asrār). Chapter 3 examines these "sciences," which include the crafting of amulets, communicating with the jinn, and reciting various types of litanies for healing and protection. As this chapter demonstrates, the Kunta scholars acknowledged that other (unnamed) Muslim scholars might reject these practices as acts of sorcery (siḥr); however, they explicitly reject this label and argue strenuously for the categorization of these acts as legitimate devotional practices. Moreover, their texts provide explicit instructions for how to perform these actions to accomplish specific goals. This chapter situates the debate over the classification of knowledge and practice as sorcery or science within a longer history of the development of magic discourses in the region. Specifically, I demonstrate that the Kunta participated actively in a magic "discourse of exclusion," as they rejected sorcery as illegitimate practice. Nevertheless, the Kunta texts also demonstrate an awareness of works that embrace the category of siḥr as a positive designation. Their categorization of the sciences of the unseen thus reflects the presence of a magic "discourse of inclusion" in the region. In reaction to this discourse of inclusion, Sīdi Muḥammad argues that his "sciences" are *just as effective* as acts of sorcery, but also categorically distinct in their legitimacy and legality.

When the Kunta scholars argue for the legitimacy of the sciences of the unseen, they do so by associating them with devotional practices, particularly supplicatory prayer (duʿāʾ). In chapter 4, I take this association seriously and engage with the Kunta's understanding of supplicatory prayer as another method of connecting the realm of the unseen to the material and human world. Moreover, this chapter investigates the relationship between the elite intellectual frameworks developed by the Kunta scholars and the larger social body of their followers by examining the short nonnarrative devotional aids attributed to Sīdi al-Mukhtār. First, the chapter situates these works against other works by the same authors to show how the Kunta used these texts to encode their complex teachings for oral transmission. Next, I compare these works to other devotional aids that were becoming increasingly popular during

this period. This reading shows how the Kunta adapted their works in response to the increasing popularity of textual devotional aids. Ultimately, this chapter argues that both of these readings are equally correct and equally necessary—practice shapes ideology even as ideology shapes practice. Whether read in one direction or another, these texts reveal that both the Kunta specifically and Saharan Muslims generally understood Arabic texts as a fundamental component of efficacious religious practice. For eighteenth-century Saharan Muslims, prayer was based in, and driven by, textuality.

This final point returns us to the social landscape addressed in chapter 1. But whereas the first chapter dealt with the social world of the Sahara as it emerges from both historical scholarship and Kunta hagiographies, the end of chapter 4 reveals the connection between that idealized representation of Saharan society and the larger Kunta project of consolidating their authority as Sufi friends of God. The chapters of this book thus reveal different ways that the Kunta leaders argued for the authority of God's friends: as teachers of students and transmitters of devotional prayers, as the cosmological underpinnings of the invisible and manifest realms, and as the source of the only legitimate practices with tangible and predictable outcomes. Finally, in returning to the material remnants of historical Muslim practices, I argue that the Kunta directed these arguments for their authority as friends of God toward a greater landscape of devotional religious practice. Ultimately, the discursive works produced by Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad acquire their meaning only in reference to a larger discussion about practice in the region, but this larger discussion becomes legible only when situated against the larger conceptual context embedded in the textual production of these scholars.