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Chapter 7

The historical interpretation of myth in the context of popular Islam

Wim van Binsbergen

1 Introduction¹

The interpretation of myths, and the relative weight that should be attributed to mythical materials in historical reconstructions based, partly or wholly, on oral evidence, has been a bone of contention ever since Jan Vansina presented a comprehensive statement on methodology in this field (Vansina, 1965). In the domain of Central African history, which has been Vansina's main interest, this debate has been carried on by such scholars as Luc de Heusch (1972), Joseph Miller (1976), Roy Willis (1976) and Thomas Reeve (1977). Scholarly opinion has oscillated between the rather literalist early views of Vansina and the dismissively structuralist approach of de Heusch (which would read myths uniquely as timeless statements of dominant symbolic themes in a culture). As the body of available data expanded, and experience in the handling of such data accumulated, we have seen the emergence of more relativist approaches, best exemplified by Willis's work, which try to specify the conditions under which what aspects of what sorts of myth become amenable to what types of historical interpretation.²

Central Africa can be regarded in several aspects as the cradle of modern oral history and in my recent work on religious change in that region (1979 and 1981), I have had occasion to touch upon these problems. In the present article, however, I shall draw upon materials from North Africa collected during fieldwork in the Khrumiriya³ highlands of North-Western Tunisia in 1968 and 1970.⁴ The myth I shall focus upon is that of Sidi⁵ Mhammad, a local saint venerated in the area where the foothills of the cool,

forest-covered Khrumiriya mountains (which reach their summit near the town of 'Ain Draham, a colonial creation) give way to the lush, wide-open plain of the Wad le-Kebir. This plain receives its name from a major river which stretches over fifteen kilometres, from its confluence with the Wad Ghenaka, northward to the age-old harbour-town of Tabarka. After presenting the myth⁶ and briefly indicating the relatively ahistorical elements it has to offer to a cultural and structural analysis, within the simplifications enforced by an essay of limited length I shall build up a framework which opens out the historical content of this myth for analysis. This framework is informed, first, by an analysis of the social and religious organization of contemporary rural society in this region (such as it was at the end of the 1960s) and, second, by the historical evidence derived from other oral sources in the locality.

My argument will thus add a footnote to the religious anthropology and history of the Maghreb. But my main purpose is more general. I aim to show how the historical interpretation of myths should not be attempted in isolation, but against the background of much more comprehensive information about the past and present of a society and of a region. While in this way we may manage to decode a myth's historical message, it also becomes clear that the decoding procedure may be long, devious and uncertain. Finally, I shall demonstrate that, at least in the case of this one myth, the historical message may be carried over into a later period where the myth no longer can be claimed to sum up, in a detectable form, events that were of primary significance in the shaping of the political and social structures of that later period. The myth of Sidi Mhammad will turn out to be nothing like *the* key to the local past. Exciting as the process of interpreting the myth of Sidi Mhammad may prove to be, the conclusion will come as an anticlimax. The historical events encoded within the myth will turn out to be rather trivial and commonplace occurrences in nineteenth-century Khrumiri society.

This suggests that the great importance attached to the analysis of myth within the field of oral history may be somewhat exaggerated. Yet in many cases, particularly for the more distant past, and in the context of religious studies, a myth is all the evidence we have got. In such circumstances it would be a pity if we were forced to wholly fall back on the ahistorical structuralist alternative: and it is advisable for us to steer a middle course with

the understanding that it would be dangerous to try to build historical reconstructions on mythical grounds alone.

2 The myth of Sidi Mhammad

The myth of Sidi Mhammad was known, in more or less elaborate form, to almost every adult inhabitant of my research area and adjacent localities. I managed to record as many as twenty variants of the myth. All agreed as to the basic narrative and only differed in the degree of detail that each informant spontaneously offered. On all occasions I recorded the myth as volunteered, without probing for more details. The variants could be aggregated so as to form one hypothetical and complete version. I am aware of the fact that this version is an analytical construct; yet the high rate of agreement and convergence between the variants seems to warrant such treatment. Table 7.1 summarizes which informants (numbered i-xx) presented which elements of the aggregate version. It is the public, consensual content of the myth that shall occupy us in the course of my argument, and not the specific minutiae of verbal activity as exemplified in the individual informants' presentations of the myth. I have not, therefore, attempted to relate systematically the differences (in length, precision, inclusion of certain elements and omission of others) to differences in sex, age, place of residence, descent group membership, etc., of the various informants. A more impressionistic inspection of these background variables, however, has convinced me that they had no significant effect on the distribution of variants. Variants of the myth that were recounted with third parties present did not differ significantly from those offered to me in private, and never gave rise to disagreement and critical discussion. This in itself suffices to place this myth, along with the other pious legends circulating in the region, in a class apart from other oral-historical statements in Khrumiriya. For (as we shall see, particularly in relation to evidence on genealogies, residential history, and histories of clans and lineage segments) oral-historical statements in contemporary Khrumiri society tend to be contentious, idiosyncratic, non-consensual and manipulative rather than collectively accumulated, shared historical images; and in this

sense reflect the individual speaker's transitory position in a shifting network of interests and relationships.

The aggregate version, then, of the myth of Sidi Mhammad runs as follows (the elements, numbered 1-28, correspond to those in Table 7.1):

Sidi Mhammad (1) was a herdsman (2) employed by Sidi Slima (3) of Ulad ben Sayyid in the Khdayriya area (4). Sidi Mhammad took the cattle to graze in the immediate surroundings of what today are the hamlets of Sidi Mhammad, Mayziya, Tra'aya-sud and Tra'aya-bidh (5); various names of localities are specifically mentioned in this connection (6). There (implied or expressly: on the Hill-top⁷ where later his main shrine would be located) he would sit down in order to sleep or to meditate (7). For that purpose he would take off some, or all, of his clothes (sometimes specified: his white burnous); towards the evening he would put these on again (8). The cattle he allowed to roam freely (9) in those parts (various names of localities are again specified in this connection) (10). Partridges came and alighted on his body (11), in order to pick away the lice (12). At dusk Sidi Mhammad would call the cattle to return to him (various ways are specified: he clapped his hands; he waved a flap of his burnous; or he made a to-and-fro movement with his walking-stick, which had a particularly large head) (13). The birds left him (14). He returned home (with all the cattle unhurt) (15). Sidi Slima became aware of this unusual way of herding (various ways are specified in which this information reached Sidi Slima: he is said to have followed his herdsman in the morning to watch secretly if the latter was doing a good job; or Sidi Slima's wife, or a passer-by, is said to have informed Sidi Slima of the strange ways of his herdsman) (16). (From his own reflection on this matter, or at the suggestion from others) Sidi Slima now understood that Sidi Mhammad was a saint (17), and notably: one greater than Sidi Slima himself (18). There were other signs to the same effect (e.g. Sidi Slima's wife noticed that Sidi Mhammad performed the Moslem's obligatory prayers before he went to sleep) (19). Therefore, when Sidi Mhammad returned home once again, he was treated with all signs of respect (his feet were washed, he was offered a choice meal - either by Sidi Slima or by the latter's wife but on his instigation)

Table 7.1 Sequences of elements in the myth of Sidi Mhammad, as found in twenty variants

Informants	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
XX	+																											
XIX	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
XVIII	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
XVII	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
XVI	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
XV	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
XIV	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
XIII	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
XII	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
XI	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
X	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
IX	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
VIII	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
VII	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
VI	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
V	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
IV	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
III	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
II	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
I	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Note: the version as presented by, e.g., informant iii contained the elements 1, 7 and 11, in that order; further explanation in the text.

(20). Sidi Slima decided that the relationship of dependence between Sidi Mhammad and himself should be brought to an end (21). Sidi Mhammad settled on the Hill-top (22), which had been given to him (either by Sidi Slima or by some unspecified owner who may, or may not, have been Sidi Slima) (23) after Sidi Slima had urged him to name any gift that he might fancy (24). Good relationships, as between neighbours, continued to exist between Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima (25). Now everyone came to consider Sidi Mhammad as a saint (26). After his death he was buried on the Hill-top (27). And this was the origin of his present main shrine, called Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir (the Elder) (28).

3 The myth of Sidi Mhammad in the light of cultural and structuralist interpretations

It is perfectly possible to ignore any specific historical content in the myth of Sidi Mhammad; or to explain such content away as an accidental touch of *couléur locale* (allowing, moreover, for considerable free variation between the various narrators), of no consequence to the myth as a statement of cultural and symbolic structure. At least two lines of analysis are open then for such an ahistorical interpretation.

From the viewpoint of cultural analysis, the myth can be read as a particular combination of a number of hagiographic themes⁸ which run through the Islamic cultures of North Africa and the Middle East, and which together serve to express the essence of sainthood as distinct from ordinary human existence. In these cultures the saint represents a distinct social category. He or she is characterized by an exceptionally close and harmonious relationship with God and with Nature; this enables the saint to circumvent the usual limitations of human toil and human social control, and instead to rely directly on divine grace (*baraka*). The saint reveals himself in various ways, ways which are often found in combination: through the ostentatious display of formal Islamic observance (in a cultural environment of popular Islam where very few people do perform the obligatory prayers, are sufficiently literate to have access to the Book, etc.); through wonder-working (*karamat*) and through the possession of material objects (such as

stone cannon balls (*turra*), or the white burnous) reserved for saints; and through a particular state of mind (*niya*) characterized by piety, humility and non-violence. Constituting a social category incomparable to that of non-saintly people, saints do not compete with ordinary human beings; on the other hand, the gradations of sainthood result in a saintly hierarchy, which defines some saints as being subservient to others, but which precludes relations of dependence between saints whose *baraka* is at the same level of excellence.

Considered in this light, the 'rags-to-riches' story of Sidi Mhammad is a restatement, cast in a local context, of what constitutes sainthood. Sidi Mhammad first appears as the essence of humility: a dependent herdsman. His *niya* is further brought out by the fact that he keeps his saintly status a secret, and that he indulges in meditation or sleep unhindered by such social conventions as clothing and the behaviour expected from herds-men. For herdsmen are supposed to remain alert in guarding the cattle entrusted to them against such accidents as may befall them on the steep and rocky forested slopes of Khrumiriya. The saintly herdsman's harmony with God and Nature is brought out by the fact that, even without the conventional attention, the cattle wander unhurt and return at the herdsman's first call, while partridges (like all birds, conventional messengers from Heaven) settle on his shoulders. The attempt on the part of a few informants to explain the partridges' presence rationally by referring to the poor herdsman's lice suggests that the divine symbolism of the bird has become lost on them. Anyway, as one would expect, Sidi Mhammad's sainthood could not remain a secret for long, and once detected, the relationship of dependence is supplanted by one of equality, via ceremonial actions and gifts through which Sidi Slima makes up for his original oversight. Incidentally, some variants also highlight the typical role of women in popular Islam as being more involved in, and familiar with, the supernatural aspects of life than men. In these variants it is Sidi Slima's wife who detects Sidi Mhammad's sainthood – thereby typifying the role of the wife as the mediatrix between her rural household and others, including the supernatural: it is the wife who processes food, cooks for visitors, visits saintly shrines and takes offerings there.

The second ahistorical line of approach to the myth would be

that of symbolic anthropology or semiotics.⁹ Despite much variation between individual authors and between schools, a consensus has developed over the past twenty years or so according to which a first step in the analysis of myth would be the application of fixed basic oppositions which, it has been argued, may be shown to underlie symbolic structures in a wide variety of cultures. Some of these oppositions are:

human	—	non-human
nature	—	culture
male	—	female
high	—	low (or, in general, vertical differentiation)
left	—	right (or, in general, horizontal differentiation)

Often, these oppositions turn out to be clad in oppositions between natural species (e.g. birds versus cattle) or types of natural environment (e.g. plain versus mountain). Through various logical operations (transformations) these oppositions are then shown to be connected to each other, and to form a deep structure revealing general features of human society and of the human mind.

Such a structuralist analysis of the myth of Sidi Mhammad would, I suppose, abstract even from the cultural model of the Islamic saint, and would instead stress the pairs of oppositions which are obvious in the story. In a somewhat diluted variant of the semiotic approach, the deep structure can then be related to fundamental formal aspects of the culture and the social structure in which it is found. Viewed in this light the myth contains much to please a structuralist's heart. In particular, the myth can be seen as a concentrated statement of vertical and horizontal oppositions, of which the 'rags-to-riches' theme (the movement from social *subordination* and vertical differentiation to horizontal *equality*) is only one aspect. Sidi Slima lives in the *plain*, whereas Sidi Mhammad takes the cattle into the *mountains*, and finally settles there as an independent pastoralist. While the cattle roam about in space (essentially *horizontally* – despite the mountain slopes), birds *descend* and *ascend*, and Sidi Mhammad remains *fixed in one place* as some sort of nodal point where the tensions between all these symbolic axes are resolved. While the saint transgresses the rules of *human Culture* through nakedness and socially unexpected behaviour as a herdsman (through which, in his *niya*, he reverts to

a purer state of Nature under its human aspect), *non-human Nature* yet becomes domesticized under the effect of *Divine Grace*: wild birds fondly interact with the saint, and the cattle return unhurt. The rhythm of day and night should not be overlooked, either: from the point of view of his employer the saint is a herdsman during the day, only secretly to indulge in his sainthood through prayers at night; however, from the point of view of Nature, of God, and of the saint himself, it is during his day-time meditations and intercourse with the partridges that his sainthood is most clearly revealed. As a sort of transformational, vectorial solution to these and other binary oppositions (I only indicate the more obvious ones), the logic of the story almost inevitably leads on to a permanent geographical displacement of Sidi Mhammad from the plains, where he now settles independently; dwells, to the mountains, where he now settles independently; from concealed sainthood expressed in interactions with non-human Nature, to an overt sainthood manifested in culturally patterned interaction with human beings (elements 26–8); and from a subordinate to an equal social position. That it should be a woman who, in some of the variants, forces this solution at crucial points is only logical, considering the symbolic ambiguities of women in Islamic rural cultures, along such axes as the opposition between Nature and Culture, subordination versus equality, and human society versus the supernatural.

It would not be difficult to relate this tentative and somewhat amateur structuralist reading of the myth of Sidi Mhammad to significant aspects of the social organization of the region. The Khrumiri mountain-dwellers are linked to the plain through economic ties (Tabarka has been a regional market for millennia), marital relations and pilgrimage (the Wad le-Kebir plain contains some major saints' shrines). In terms of supra-local relations, such as that between the plain (which for centuries has been economically and politically integrated in the international and intercontinental structures of the Mediterranean world) and the remote, somewhat inaccessible mountains (which, for example, in the nineteenth century defied beylical control and taxation), the myth of Sidi Mhammad could even be read as another restatement of the irony of the maghrebine local saint: as a stranger carrying elements of formal Islam into remote parts, he is soon encapsulated there so as to form, with his tomb, legend and

baraka, a corner-stone of popular Islam, and a focal point for local, particularist social and ritual organization (cf. van Binsbergen, 1980). The horizontal/vertical deep structure of the myth reflects a symbolic accommodation of status differences, a dominant theme in the society of Khrumiriya and other parts of North Africa. In these societies we find on the one hand specific relations of interpersonal dependence (such as analysed by Favret, 1968), of which the institution of the stranger herdsman is but one example. On the other hand, the social process in these societies hinges on notions of honour and shame¹⁰ which imply a potential equality between adults of the same sex. The myth of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima can be read as a statement both of this contradiction and of its possible solution. It is perhaps significant that the act of quietly sitting on the Hill-top, at the intersection as it were of all these oppositions, conveys a suggestion of firm, legitimate individual ownership of land (*mulk*); and in this respect the herdsman's unusual behaviour (in which he denies being someone else's herdsman) anticipates the outcome of the story. Again, another major theme in Khrumiri society is, inevitably, the division of labour between the sexes in a context of reproduction and production; and a representation of this theme, the symbolic opposition between male and female, comes up in at least some of the variants.

In Khrumiriya saints only survive symbolically, as a cultural category explaining local shrines as places where saints living in the past have been buried. Unlike other parts of the Maghreb, contemporary Khrumiriya no longer has saints: the most recent actual encounter with a living saint as recorded in my oral-historical data took place in the 1910s. This might be all the more reason to consider the myth of Sidi Mhammad as a timeless symbolic statement for social-organizational or experiential referents, of whatever kind. The possibilities of relating the myth, and its deep structure, to the contemporary social organization in the region, without attributing any specific historical content to the myth, are many. Yet in the remainder of this paper I shall explore the limited sense in which the myth does convey a historical message.

4 Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima as contemporary shrines

The inhabitants of the region have good reason to be familiar with the myth of Sidi Mhammad. His shrine is still there. For anyone travelling from Tabarka to 'Ain Draham, the modest, square, white structure, with its domed roof (*qubba*) and horned ornaments on the four corners, can be seen across the Wad le-Kebir for about ten kilometres of the journey. In fact, the saint, and his shrine, have given their name to the entire valley south of the Wad Ghenaka, consequently called *hanshir* (patrimony of) Sidi Mhammad. In this valley, comprising the hamlets of Tra'aya-sud, Tra'aya-bidh, Sidi Mhammad, Mayziya, Raml al-'Atrus and Fidh al-Missay, three more shrines of the same saint can be found: another *qubba* right in the centre of the hamlet Sidi Mhammad; a hut-like structure (*kurbi*, consisting of a roof of arboreal material (branches, leaves, cork) on a foundation of large rocks laid out in the form of a rectangle) next to this *qubba*, and another *kurbi* between the hamlets of Sidi Mhammad and Mayziya. The *qubba* in the centre of the hamlet of the same name is called Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda (the Son) to distinguish it from the shrine on the Hill-top, designated le-Kebir (Elder). The collective celebrations during the massive festival (*zerda*), which is held twice a year in honour of Sidi Mhammad, take place almost entirely around the *qubba* of Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda. Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir's main function is that the valley's major cemetery is situated around this shrine. Hundreds of pilgrims (particularly women who, born within the valley, have married outside and who are under an obligation to visit the shrine) make the pilgrimage to Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda on the occasion of the *zerda* and throughout the year; however, on the same day, these pilgrims will also visit the adjacent *kurbi* as well as Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir (cf. van Binsbergen, in press). These three shrines are attended by a shrine keeper (*ukil*), who looks after the key to both *qubbas*, collects pilgrims' gifts, and performs a short ritual at all three shrines on Thursdays and Fridays. No such regular service exists for the *kurbi* half-way towards Mayziya, whose roof, however, is repaired twice a year by the inhabitants of that hamlet. The

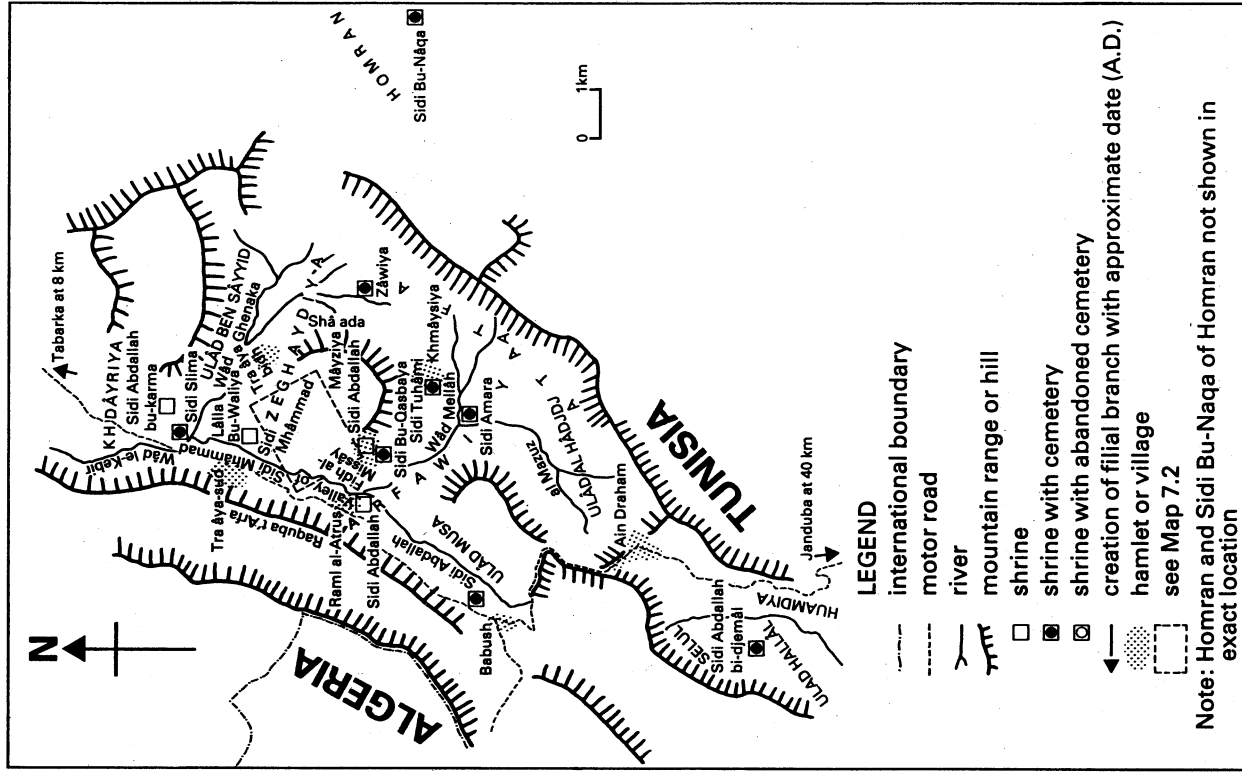
cemetery of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir serves the hamlets of Sidi Mhammad and both Tra'ayas. Mayziya buries its dead at a separate cemetery, Sidi Rhuma. The hamlets of Fidh al-Missay and Raml al-'Atrus bury their dead near Sidi Bu-Qasbaya in Fidh al-Missay. This again is not the only local shrine of that name: in the western part of the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad, near a large farmhouse that during the colonial era (1881-1956) accommodated the only-European presence in the valley, three more shrines bearing the name of Sidi Bu-Qasbaya can be found. The inhabitants of Fidh al-Missay and Raml al-'Atrus do participate in the festival at Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda; but they also have, on a much more modest scale, their own festival for Sidi Abdallah, represented by two *kurbis*, one in each hamlet.

Sidi Mhammad is clearly considered the major saint throughout the valley. In addition to the festivals, pilgrimages and burials near his shrine, all households regularly dedicate meals to him, to be consumed in his honour. The few people who can afford it irregularly sacrifice sheep, goats or a head of cattle for him. In everyday conversation, in the houses as well as the men's assembly grounds (which deliberately have been located so that the two *qubbas* can be seen from there), the name of Sidi Mhammad is frequently invoked to render force and credibility to a statement. And while a large number of saints and demons may be invoked in the course of the ecstatic dances in which over 20 per cent of the male population of the region specialize, the dancers (*fekirs*) in the valley of Sidi Mhammad tend to concentrate, in their song (*triq*), on that particular saint.

My ancestor Mhammad,
 You who sleep under the fig-tree,
 Mhammad with the partridges,
 You who sleep under the hawthorn,
 Mhammad, assist me.

Nor is it only during the ecstatic dances that Sidi Mhammad is fondly called *djaddi*, 'my ancestor', 'my grandfather'. This is also what the women keep exclaiming in near-ecstasy, when they visit the shrines together, touch and kiss the walls and sacred objects inside, and dance near the tomb. This is how people in the valley choose to refer to their major saint. But so too are the scores of

Map 7.1 Selected shrines in Khrumiriya



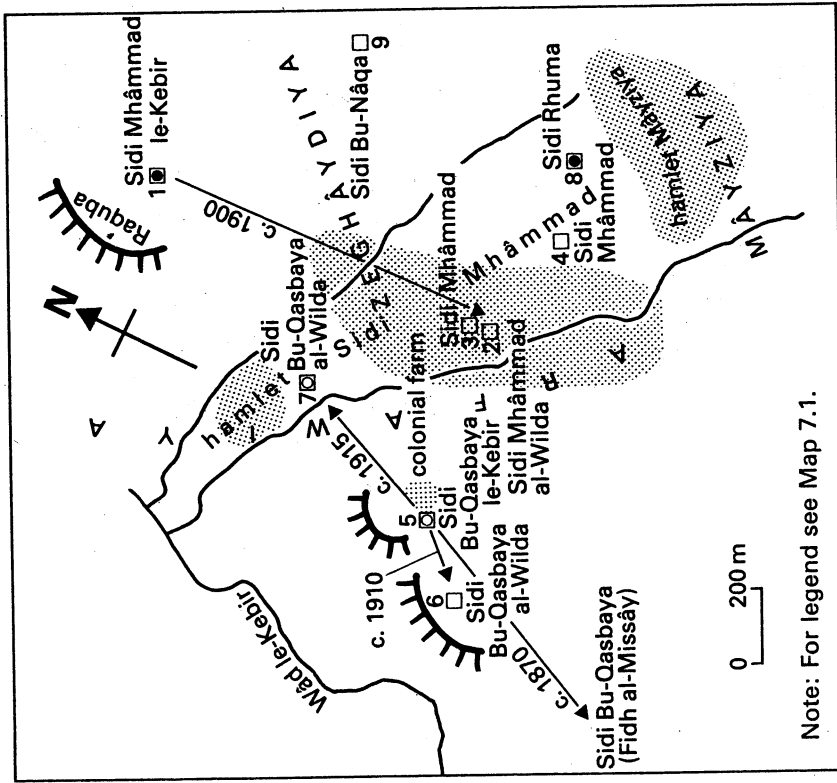
Mhammad has. Instead, the wider area (a chiefdom)¹¹ is called Khdayriya, and the place immediately around Sida Slima is known as Ulad ben Sayyid; the latter is a clan name which is traditionally associated with the Drid tribe. Segments of the tribe can also be found scattered in other parts of Tunisia, including elsewhere in Khrumiriya, as we shall see below (cf. Souyris-Rolland, 1949: p. 135; Bel, 1938: pp. 378ff.; Miedema, 1967: p. 19; Cuisenier, 1962; Hartong, 1968; and van Binsbergen, 1970: pp. 93f.).

The shrine of Sidi Slima is of a somewhat unusual shape, but is rather reminiscent of the rectangular structures of large rocks that form the foundation for *kurbi* shrines. It consists of a shallow pit surrounded by a rectangular wall (about 7 x 7 m) built from large rocks each about 40 cm in all dimensions. An ancient olive-tree stands at the edge of the pit. Behind the tree, at the other side of the pit, a less heavily constructed inner wall about 80 cm high, connects two opposite sides of the outer wall. There is a suggestion that it is a Roman ruin.¹² The bottom of the pit is covered with hundreds of clay candle-sticks (*mosba*), clay saucers on which incense can be burned (*assa*), and paper wrappings containing incense – the usual pious gifts that also abound in all the other shrines in the region. The edges of the pit are fringed with myrtle shrubs, a vegetation typically found in Khrumiri cemeteries. For like Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir, the shrine of Sidi Slima is surrounded by a vast cemetery.

No other shrines bearing the name of Sidi Slima seem to exist locally, and certainly no festival is held for this saint. Instead, the people of Ulad ben Sayyid have two festivals annually for Sidi Abdallah bu-Karma ('with the fig-tree'), whose shrine is located less than a kilometre from Sidi Slima.

5 Aspects of the contemporary social and ritual organization of the region

The *hanshir* Sidi Mhammad is one of four valleys which the French colonial government in the 1880s united to form one chiefdom, 'Atatfa. The other valleys are al-Mellah, al-Mazuz and Shaada. The population of these valleys belongs to a number of different clans and lineage segments. The nature of these social groupings is much too complex for justice to be done to the subject within the



Map 7.2. Selected shrines in the hamlets of Sidi Mhammad and Mayziya (enlargement of box in Map 7.1)

lesser saints, whose shrines (seldom more than a few large rocks piled on top of each other: *mzara*) abound in the valley, referred to as *djadudna*: 'our ancestors'. And when asked why people visit these local shrines, the answer 'Djadudna!!' is generally considered to constitute sufficient explanation.

Sidi Slima is still a shrine near the confluence of the Wad le-Kebir and the Wad Ghenaka, where the myth of Sidi Mhammad locates the homestead of Sidi Slima. Sidi Slima has not managed to impose his name on an entire valley in the same way as Sidi

scope of this article. I must limit myself to the following summary (see van Binsbergen, 1970 and 1971a for fuller accounts).

Every Khrumiri places himself or herself in a genealogy based on patrilineal descent. These genealogies usually have a depth of four or five generations, and the participants regard them as repositories of the literal historical truth. In the Khrumiri view, contemporary rural society is still governed by a structure of segmentary patrilineages, which is supposed to regulate rights to land, male residence, the nature and intensity of interpersonal ties, and the relations between people and saints. Residential units which are clearly visible in the landscape (from the level of the individual household, via such higher-level clusters as compounds, neighbourhoods, and hamlets, up to the valley and chiefdom level) are supposed to correspond with lineage segments at various levels as defined by the generations in the lineage genealogy. In the participants' folk theory, therefore, all inhabitants of a valley, and all the residential units at various levels, could be fitted into one large genealogy. Since patrilineal descent uniquely and ideally defines membership of local residential groups and rights to local land, people who at a given moment in time happen to live at a particular spot are under strong ideological pressure to justify their presence there in terms of patrilineal descent from the local apical ancestor. At the ideological level the migration of individuals and groups, and the acquisition of rights to land by means other than filial inheritance, are not recognized. Yet, of course, the various patrilineal descent lines that are locally represented (I do not call them lineages to avoid confusion with the participants' ideologically distorted view of social groupings) do not, on the level of some analytical, objective historical truth, converge towards one and the same historical ancestor. Most local descent lines have only immigrated into the valley which they are occupying now in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and most have acquired land rights not through filial inheritance but by other much less prestigious means: by matrilineal inheritance, gift, patronage, purchase, violent conquest, collusion with the colonial authorities, and theft. While there is no reason to assume that genealogical manipulation is a recent feature in Khrumiriya, the insistence on ideologically acceptable rights to local land appears to reflect, partly, the dramatic increase in population pressure on the land since the beginning of the colonial period.

This increase is due to a number of related factors: a five-fold numerical increase of the population in less than a century (the valley now supports 60 inhabitants per square kilometre); the alienation of land for the purpose of state exploitation of cork forests and for the benefit of a few colonist farmers; the politically inspired state alienation of pious-endowment land (*habus*) attached to shrines and religious brotherhoods; and the concentration of land in the hands of the chiefly family, which I shall discuss in more detail in section 7.

At any rate, the existing ideological pressure forces people constantly to revise their genealogies so as to bring these into line with the actual residential situation in the valley, and with the existing social relationships between the inhabitants. It may be attractive for a recent immigrant to trace descent to an undisputed local ancestor: but he will only be allowed to do so if his presence is appreciated by those already firmly established in the valley. Alternatively, negative social and political relationships are inevitably expressed in terms of recent immigration: anyone will try to dispute his enemy's right to local residence, and to participation in the local community. There are other reasons why genealogies are not complete or true reflections of historical reality. When genealogies serve such a clear purpose defined by the pattern of relationships that prevails here and now, there is no point in burdening one's genealogies with whole series of collateral relatives who have left the valley long ago and who no longer take part in local affairs. As a result, genealogies mainly hark back to those past occupants of a valley who have living descendants there – unless an informant is strategically placed, e.g. as the youngest of an otherwise extinct generation who has personal recollections of the emigrants. Finally, genealogies are constantly revised so as to reflect the relative numerical, political and economic strength of contemporary kin groups who are presented as the descendants of particular ancestors in the genealogy. So, as the relative importance of various clusters of agnates waxes and wanes on the contemporary scene, the genealogical relationship said to have existed between their ancestors is revised accordingly. Segments descending from two brothers (or less closely related segments that once were equals and allies and for that reason were considered to be 'as brothers') may assume a genealogical relationship of father and son, or even grandfather and grandson,

if their subsequent fortunes at the local scene take a substantially different course.

Since genealogies are so manifestly the outcome of shifting contemporary relations and are only subject to discussion and alteration at abnormal moments, during open conflict or when an anthropologist comes along with intrusive questions, the manipulation of genealogies by individuals produces genealogical fictions which seldom dovetail neatly. No two informants, not even full brothers, produce exactly the same genealogy of their own line of descent, or of that of their neighbours. And no genealogy taken down in the field can be said to be historically correct in all its detail.

In order to serve such ideological purposes the revision of genealogies has to be covert and, in fact, largely subconscious. The situation recorded for the West African Tiv (Bohannan, 1952), of lineage segments publicly revising their genealogies so as to bring them into line with their altered social relationships, is unthinkable in Khrumiriya. The revision process works at incredible speed. It is common for a line of descent that has immigrated into a hamlet as recently as thirty or forty years ago to find itself firmly attached to the locally dominant genealogy, provided interpersonal relationships within the hamlet are harmonious.

Yet there will always be cases of immigrants whose arrival has been too recent to be included in genealogies in this fashion; or there will be ties too distant to be encompassed within a single master genealogy of the sort which the participants themselves consider historically correct. The main device by which Khrumiri genealogies overcome this difficulty is by attaching one or more mythical ancestors to the head of each allegedly historical lineage chart. These ancestors are said to have lived in some unspecified past and, as founders of clans, allow people to claim common descent without having to invent specific and connecting descent lines. The clan name becomes a sort of surname which people adopt (and sometimes alter) without having to overhaul all the more recent elements in their genealogical knowledge. Clan names, and therefore mythical ancestors or clan founders, turn out to be attached to particular areas, for the most part irrespective of the specific genealogical position of the people to which each clan name is attached.

Thus summarized and greatly simplified, the social organization

of contemporary Khrumiriya can be said to rest upon three interconnected principles:

(a) *A structure of shallow segmentary patrilineages*, which are continuously redefined in the process of migration and fission. In so far as it serves as an organizing principle in the Khrumiri understanding of their own society, this ideology provides us with an explanation for the genealogical manipulations and the distorted perceptions of local residential history which are so widespread in this area. Therefore, this organizational principle also allows for the detailed reconstruction of actual historical events (i.e. actual residential movements of people in the past), provided we have a sufficient quantity of distorted material at our disposal to inspect and assess the many possible permutations. Genealogies are the most readily available, and the least specialized form of oral historical evidence in this region. On the basis of some 200 genealogies collected in the late 1960s among inhabitants of the valley and adjacent valleys, supplemented by statements regarding the places of residence of all the individuals concerned and by more comprehensive traditions concerning migratory movements and the attendant social and political repercussions and disputes,¹³ I was in fact able to reconstruct, more or less to my own satisfaction, the residential and migratory history of the people in the valley of Sidi Mhammad since c. 1800.

(b) *A structure of residential units*, units which are clearly identifiable on the ground and which, beginning with individual households, combine in a segmentary, pyramidal fashion to form compounds, neighbourhoods, hamlets, valleys and chiefdoms. The everyday social process that determines the economic, social and political structures in contemporary Khrumiri life mainly takes place within these residential units. At all levels (except that of the individual households) they are heterogeneous as far as unilineal descent is concerned. For although these residential units are named after lineage segments and are considered to be founded by ancestors belonging to a comprehensive fictive patrilineage encompassing an entire valley, in fact most compounds, and all neighbourhoods and hamlets, comprise more than one patrilineal descent line. The social relationships that inform the continuous manipulation of genealogical ties so as to bring them into line with the participants' patrilineal ideology are mainly acted out within these residential units. Moreover, the contemporary local ritual

structures can be adequately described and explained in terms of these residential structures. From the most inconspicuous *mzara* concealed somewhere behind a cactus hedge to the *qubbās* that are the focus of massive festivals, the patterns of collective and individual pilgrimages, offerings and sacrifices, dedication of meals, and burials within any valley are *entirely* determined by the fact that each shrine is attached to a residential unit at one level or another (cf. van Binsbergen, in press). Thus Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir serves as a characteristic attribute of the residential unit encompassing the total valley of Sidi Mhammad. The *kurbi* half-way towards Mayziya, however, may share the name of Sidi Mhammad, but it is only a characteristic attribute of one hamlet, that of Mayziya, and does not feature in the ritual activities of the inhabitants of other hamlets in the valley. The same applies to Sidi Abdallah at Fidh al-Missay. Likewise, at the residential levels below the hamlet level there are a considerable number of *mzaras* whose names I have not mentioned here but which serve as the characteristic attributes of these lower-level units, and thus as foci for (typically lesser) dedications and offerings, and small-scale collective pilgrimages exclusive to the members of one compound or neighbourhood. In the collective pilgrimages which entire hamlets direct to a major shrine such as Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir, the impact of these lower-level units becomes eminently visible, when from the various households women (under the supervision of one elderly woman from their midst who is referred to as the *kebira*) team up to form a group of pilgrims representing their compound; then various compound groups join into one neighbourhood group as they proceed; until the various neighbourhood groups under their respective *kebiras* team up into one massive procession on their way to the shrine. On their return home the same process can be observed in the reverse order. It is in the contemporary ritual structures that the social organization of Khrumiri society becomes most manifest. *Shrines are the symbols of residential units which pose as kin groups and desperately revise their genealogies in order to conceal the fact that they are not kin.* This is in fact the underlying meaning of the participants' characterization of the saints as *djūdna*. But in order to perform this function it seems imperative that the local saints should never themselves figure in the genealogies. They are primarily attached to residential units. If, through the inclusion of local saints in their genealogies,

patrilineages were allowed to lay exclusive claims by birth-right to these saints, the integrative symbolic function which the saints now provide for the residential units as a whole would be jeopardized.¹⁴

(c) *A structure of localized clans* which loosely categorizes the population and which is so flexible that it facilitates the transformation of lineage segments into residential units, and permits the latter to pose as lineage segments.

With these summary insights into the contemporary social organization of the region set against the background provided by a painstaking reconstruction of the settlement history of the valley of Sidi Mhammad since c. 1800, we may now return to the myth of Sidi Mhammad and see if it can be shown to contain some specific historical information in addition to the cultural and symbolic messages explored in section 3. We know that shrines and saints serve as symbolic foci for the collective identities and activities of contemporary residential units. They are more than likely to have done so in the past. If, in the past, the valley of Sidi Mhammad turns out to have been the scene of continuous migration, and if the existing residential units have therefore been subject to continuous alterations in their composition, the shrines and saints that characterized and symbolized those units are likely to have been distributed and redistributed as a reflection of these social processes of fission and fusion. The myth of Sidi Mhammad speaks of the geographical displacement of a saint, and of his attaining independence *vis-à-vis* another saint. Would it be too far-fetched to read into this myth the record of an actual migration of a social group that has taken the saint Sidi Mhammad as its focus, its characteristic attribute, and its symbol? And would it be possible, on the basis of the information available on the area, to pinpoint this social group? To answer these questions, we shall now look at other myths which present relations between saints and explore the historical background of these myths.

6 Saintly myths and the history of shrines in Khrumiriya

Though the myth of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima may be the best-known myth in the region, it is by no means the only myth featuring saints.

One common type of myth seeks to explain the presence, within

one valley or two adjacent valleys, of the shrines of several saints not having the same name. Although dead and invisible, the saints are more or less considered to be dwelling in the area, and when all ordinary human beings inhabiting the same valley should ideally fit into one genealogy, participants are inclined to apply the same model to saints. So the presence of lesser shrines within a valley is often explained in terms of the saints associated with these shrines being junior relatives of the valley's main saint (the one with the most elaborate festival). The myth usually takes the extremely simple form:

Sidi X was the younger brother/sister/son/etc. of Sidi Y.

It is important to stress that this myth forms a kind of productive model, in which any minor saint can be substituted *ad libitum*; in other words it is a model which informants are prepared to invoke as a standard explanation even if they cannot give any more specific, colourful details concerning the relationship between the saints involved.

There is another folk explanation of the relationship between saints which is even more significant because it introduces a non-kin connection which suggests that strangers or immigrants have been incorporated: it runs thus:

Sidi X was the friend/servant/herdsman of Sidi Y.

The myth of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima clearly forms an elaborate version of this type of myth. But also of Sidi Tuhami, of the hamlet of Khmaysiya in the valley of al-Mellah, it is said that he was the servant of Sidi 'Amara, that valley's main saint. Likewise, Lalla Bu-Waliya, a female saint associated with a *mzara* in Tra 'aya-sud, is said to be the servant of Sidi Mhammad.

Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima ultimately became friends and neighbours. Two saints who, according to a local myth, have always been friends were Sidi 'Abdallah and Sidi Bu-Naqa.

So inseparable were they that after their death their servant Hallal put the former on a male camel and the latter on a female camel (*naqa*), to travel to a place where he could bury them. Wherever the animals stopped Hallal would start to dig graves, but the animals would always get up and continue their journey before the graves were ready. People living in those parts would

turn the unfinished graves into shrines, either for Sidi 'Abdallah or for Sidi Bu-Naqa. Finally the camel stopped among the Huamdiya clan in the Selul chiefdom south of 'Ain Draham. Here Sidi 'Abdallah was buried. The female camel stopped in the chiefdom of Homran, where Bu-Naqa was buried.

This myth explains to the participants' satisfaction the occurrence of a number of shrines having the same name throughout Khrumiriya. We have already encountered Sidi 'Abdallah in Ulad ben Sayyid, Fidh al-Missay and Raml al-'Atrus. To this is now added one in Selul, while a fifth exists in Ulad Musa, in the valley of Babush. All these places are connected by ancient footpaths, along which pilgrims, traders and local people going to the regional markets must have travelled for many centuries. In addition to the major Sidi Bu-Naqa shrine in Homran there is a minor *mzara* of that name east of Tra 'aya-bidh, and others are likely to exist a few kilometres further to the east. Incidentally, Hallal was never raised to sainthood, but instead became the mythical ancestor of the Ulad Hallal at Huamdiya, another example of the implicit rule that saints do not appear in genealogies.

There is also a less ornate topographical myth to explain shrines having the same name. This myth lacks specific references such as those to the servant Hallal and to the animals, and constitutes rather a productive model similar to the one discussed above. It takes the following form:

Sidi Z travelled through the countryside. Wherever he sat down or slept, people created a shrine for him. Therefore today we find shrines for him at A, B, C, D, etc.

That this is in fact a productive model which people apply to any actual case of a number of shrines having the same name, irrespective of more specific mythical or historical knowledge, is clear from the fact that I have heard this myth applied not only to the multiple shrines of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Bu-Qasbaya, but also to those of Sidi 'Abdallah!

Finally, there is a local explanation for a number of shrines having the same name, which on the one hand forms a productive model and may be applied, just like the preceding explanation, to all cases with which an informant is confronted, but which on the

other hand turns out to have very solid foundations in living memory. When people emigrate from one area and settle in the next, they cannot take with them the shrine that is the main characteristic attribute of the residential unit they are leaving behind. In many cases they will join an existing residential unit where they will be received as dependents, clients, herdsmen, etc. In those cases they will not be in a position to erect their own shrines, and instead will try to ingratiate themselves with their hosts, and with the latter's saints, by directing ritual activities to the shrines in their new place of residence. When, however, they move to a relatively unoccupied area, or when they emigrate to an area not as dependents but as purchasers of land or even as violent invaders, then they will insist on erecting there a branch of the shrine of their area of origin – as a sign of their identity, as a focus for the new residential unit they are in the process of establishing, and particularly as a symbol of their recently won independence vis-à-vis the residential unit they have left behind. From the original shrine they take a few relics: the bones of the saint if these in fact can be found there, or else a *mosba* or *tassa*. Around these, the new shrine structure is erected. The new shrine receives the same name as the original shrine; when both are in the same valley, the latter is distinguished by the addition 'al-Wilda', the son.

There is ample oral-historical evidence that several of the shrines having the same name in the valley of Sidi Mhammad have been created in this fashion during the course of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. In those cases informants could mention the names of the historical people who actually created these branches, and could indicate some of the surrounding circumstances. This might seem paradoxical in the light of my previous statement that in Khrumiri society migration (the precondition for the creation of filial branches of shrines) was not cognitively recognized. However, in the course of oral-historical fieldwork one builds up, with some informants at least, a level of trust that allows one to penetrate beyond their formal normative image of their own society. Particularly if one's informants are unusually intelligent and belong to generations otherwise extinct, and if the researcher can feed into his interviews bits of information that indicate that he has already advanced some way towards a more objective truth, and if, finally, one can play off such tensions and rivalries between residential units and lineage

segments as exist in this highly competitive society, then, glimpses of the objective truth concerning events in the last century may yet be revealed. Much depends also on finding the proper operational translations for a research question. For instance, informants would not have a clear picture of the succession of cemeteries in the valley of Sidi Mhammad. But they would know where, ever since c. 1900, specific people have been buried; and thus the history of cemeteries (and the attendant shrines) could be gleaned from shifts in lists of individual burials.

It became fairly well established that of the three shrines named Sidi Bu-Qasbaya in the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad, two have been created in the early twentieth century, after a European colonist built his farmhouse on the original shrine and cemetery of that saint. The Sidi Bu-Qasbaya shrine in Fidh al-Missay already had been created in c. 1870 as a filial branch of that same shrine. Likewise, Sidi 'Abdallah in Raml al-'Atrus was created around 1850 upon relics taken from the shrine of that name in Fidh al-Missay. Similar processes were recorded for some of the minor shrines in and around the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad. The most significant case, however, for the interpretation of the myth of Sidi Mhammad was the creation of Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda on the basis of relics taken from Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir. This event took place around 1900, when two of my informants were small boys and witnessed this activity. Both of these shrines were then *kurbis*; their transformation into *qubbas* was only effected in the late 1910s by a European contractor under contract to a local chief.

This solid piece of evidence suddenly transports the shrine of Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda, and its associated saint, from the obscurities of antiquity into the more sharply delineated world of recent events. It strengthens our hope of penetrating the history of the original shrine of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir, and of understanding its relationship with the figure of Sidi Slima.¹⁵

7 The history of Sidi Mhammad

Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda was erected on a flat stretch of land between the cemeteries of Sidi Rhuma and Sidi Bu-Qasbaya following the migration of the shrine-keepers and their associates to the area one kilometre south of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir. This

Sidi Mhammad today is a hamlet dominated by the Zeghaydi clan. The Zeghaydiya ultimately trace their descent to the mythical ancestor Zaghdud, who is claimed to hail from the holy city of Kairwan, in Eastern Tunisia. One of the major constituent lines of descent within this clan has supplied all the chiefs of 'Atatfa since the office was created in the 1880s (with only a short interruption immediately after Tunisia became independent). Moreover, the confederation of clans which gave its name to the 'Atatfa chiefdom was created in the 1870s by another member of that same line of descent. Today the most wealthy people in the valley of Sidi Mhammad, and indeed in the chiefdom as a whole, belong to this chiefly family. Most of the land in the valley of Sidi Mhammad belongs to people of the Zeghaydi clan, and particularly to the chiefly family. However, the expansion of the Zeghaydiya is relatively recent; it depended largely on their association with the French colonial power, and on their ability to convert this association into lasting economic power and influence through land ownership, education, and office in independent Tunisia (where members of this chiefly family are holding posts in local government, unemployment relief work, etc.).

The Zeghaydiya present a totally different picture from the other main clan in the chiefdom, the 'Arfawiya. This clan, an offshoot of the Drid tribe, traces its origin to the mythical ancestor 'Arfa. From times past, they have been associated with the religious brotherhood of the Shabbiya, and with tax collection. Contrary to the Zeghaydiya, the 'Arfawiya have a specific clan myth which centres upon the head of a partridge that is said (by the cook who had eaten it) to have been burned in the cooking-fire. The 'Arfawiya settled in the valleys of Sidi Mhammad and al-Mellah around 1800. In 1870 they created in the latter valley a lodge (*zawiya*) for the Qadiriya brotherhood which later was moved to the valley of Shaada. Members of the 'Arfawi clan still control this lodge, the only one of its kind in the region of 'Ain Draham. Moreover, the 'Arfawiya are considered to be strongly represented among the lodge membership, and to be more expert than other groups in the ecstatic dancing that is the brotherhood's main ritual in Khrumiriya. Throughout the chiefdom, the 'Arfawiya command considerable religious prestige (further enhanced by their claims to a purer Arab descent than most Khrumiris, by their predilection for horses, etc.); but their economic and political

migration followed a dramatic and violent conflict that took place at the festival of Sidi Mhammad. For, before the migration of the shrine-keepers, the original shrine of this saint was not a place of death, but the site of one of the most famous *zardas* (saint's festivals) in Khrumiriya. On such occasions not only did the inhabitants of the local residential unit, and the out-married women who were under obligation to return annually to their shrine, gather at the ritual centre, but they were also joined by pilgrims from the surrounding valleys; and even when interaction between the Khrumiri groups was characterized by violence and feud, such pilgrims were assured of safe-conduct by virtue of the sanctions attached to the supernatural powers of the saint himself. At the same time the *zardas* were (and they still remain) the principal occasions when the local population revealed their strength, their alliances and the splendour of their saint and shrine. The ensuing sense of competition has been known to raise tempers, not only in the past but also in recent years.

During the *zerda* of Sidi Mhammad, c. 1900, a male pilgrim from Ulad ben Sayyid insulted the local men by making sexual allusions concerning their wives and daughters. As a result, he was put to death. This bloodshed triggered further violence and disrupted social relations in the hamlet of Tra'aya, near the shrine, to such an extent that the hamlet split in two parts, 'Bidh' (White) and 'Sud' (Black), and a part of the original population migrated to what is now the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad. This event by no means forms the explanation of the myth of Sidi Mhammad; but it indicates the existence of long-standing tensions between the groups living around the shrines of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima, and the role which the shrines and their festivals have played in enhancing these tensions and bringing them to a critical point.

But who were the people who were in control of the shrine of Sidi Mhammad around 1900, and who, by the creation of Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda, established the conditions under which the present hamlet of Sidi Mhammad could emerge, thrive, and become the site of a major *zerda*, whereas Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir declined and became a mere cemetery?

It is an indication of the great changes that have taken place in the valley of Sidi Mhammad, and in the chiefdom of 'Atatfa as a whole, that the contemporary situation does not even suggest, at least on the surface, what I now take to be the correct answer.

power is, these days, hardly comparable to that of the Zeghaydiya.

The Zeghaydiya and the 'Arfawiya are by no means the only clans in the chiefdom of 'Atatfa. Yet these two clans, whose interactions have constituted the main political and religious developments in the chiefdom for the past hundred years, have been so prominent that they have imposed a moiety-like structure upon all the valleys in the chiefdom except the southern part of al-Mellah. Most people would claim identity as either 'Arfawi or Zeghaydi – even those who belong to older descent lines that traditionally link up with mythical ancestors other than 'Arfa or Zaghdud. Their own mythical ancestors (such as Bu-Maza, Bu-Tara, Rshab, Bu-Dabus) are then treated as descendants of either of the founders of the two dominant clans; for instance, the Tra'ay and Mayzi clans in the valley of Sidi Mhammad today largely pretend to be members of the Zeghaydi clan.

At present one finds members of both the Zeghaydi and 'Arfawi clans residing in the valley of Sidi Mhammad, but the saint Sidi Mhammad is strongly associated in the popular mind with the Zeghaydi clan. Within this valley the 'Arfawiya are now exclusively associated with the western part of the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad, and with Fidh al-Missay and Raml al-'Atrus; and here they are associated not with the saint Sidi Mhammad but with Sidi Bu-Qasbaya and Sidi 'Abdallah. Even, since at present the 'Arfawi clan is most prominent in the valley of al-Mellah, whose major shrine is Sidi 'Amara, it is suggested that the main saintly patronage of the 'Arfawiya who reside in the valley of Sidi Mhammad should lie with Sidi Amara rather than with the saint Sidi Mhammad.¹⁶ The people of the Zeghaydi clan, on the other hand, live closest to the four shrines of Sidi Mhammad; and the wealthy, powerful Zeghaydiya in the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad, including members of the chiefly family, have a major say in the organization of the *zerda*. For the past forty years, the keepers of the shrine have been Zeghaydiya, close relatives or clients of the chiefs. The present-day *fekirs* specializing in the ecstatic dance for Sidi Mhammad largely have the same relationship *vis-à-vis* the chiefly family.

Yet the ecstatic dance, and the Qadiri brotherhood within which it is loosely incorporated, is primarily an 'Arfawi affair. What is more, Sidi Mhammad was originally an 'Arfawi shrine!

In fact, the present Zeghaydi control over the shrines and the

cult of Sidi Mhammad dates back only to the 1920s. In half a century the Zeghaydiya, and especially the chiefly family, went through a dramatic expansion in the valley of Sidi Mhammad, both numerically and in terms of wealth, political power and ritual control. Their latterday kinship-based control over the shrine-keepers and the local *fekirs* has been the outcome of a concerted effort on the part of the Zeghaydi chiefs to break the ritual power of the 'Arfawiya, and to legitimate their own political and economic power by whatever symbolic support the ritual sphere had to offer. It was through the influence of a Zeghaydi chief that the original festival function of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir was transferred to Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda. That chief would personally supervise the collective *zerda* rituals around al-Wilda, which at that time still included the preparation and consumption of a huge meal for hundreds of pilgrims. Again, it was he who converted the site of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir into a cemetery; he even had himself buried directly in front of the entrance to the shrine of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir. By these means he drastically altered the ritual organization of the valley. Before that time the 'Arfawiya would be buried at the 'Arfawi cemetery of Sidi Bu-Qasbaya, while the Zeghaydiya would be allowed to bury their dead at the Mayzi cemetery of Sidi Rhuma. The creation of the cemetery of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir ended Zeghaydi dependence on the Mayzi cemetery; it also sealed the defeat of the 'Arfawiya by the Zeghaydiya (for burial at Sidi Bu-Qasbaya would be discontinued and henceforth all the 'Arfawiya within the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad would bury their dead at the Zeghaydi cemetery). However, the Zeghaydi chief could only do this after wrenching cultic control from the hands of the original 'Arfawi shrine-keepers, whose line of descent had created the original shrine of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir, who had administered the *kurbi* on the Hill-top until the bloodshed desecrated the *zerda* there, who had (as a cultic expression of the emigration from Tra'aya of both the 'Arfawi and Zeghaydi households) then created the shrine of Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda, and who had continued to administer that shrine and the original one for another twenty years or so until the Zeghaydiya took over. The change-over is clearly marked in the succession list of shrine-keepers of Sidi Mhammad: after a number of close agnates of a 'Arfawi line of descent which succeeded each other according to a perfect patrilineal adelphic pattern from the

1870s onwards, in the 1920s suddenly non-'Arfawi keepers crop up, all of whom have close relations with the chiefly family. This indicates that the 'Arfawi keepers lost control over the cult and were economically and numerically brought to virtual annihilation within the valley, as the Zeghaydi chiefly family utilized their collusion with the colonial authorities to acquire rights over pious-endowment land that belonged to the shrine of Sidi Mhammad. The creation and expansion of the colonist's farm in the western part of the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad, and the decline, therefore, of the shrine of Sidi Bu-Qasbaya, furthered the downfall of the 'Arfawiya in the valley – a process that reached its culmination in the 1950s when the chiefly family obtained ownership of this farm as well.

The dominant Zeghaydi group, therefore, have a strong interest in denying the original 'Arfawi connection with the shrine of Sidi Mhammad. They laid a dense smoke-screen of historical distortion around what I now take to be the objective historical facts. And significantly, all informants, and, for a long time, I myself, found it difficult to step out of the illusion that the present-day associations between local groups and shrines (shrines that gave the impression of having been there for ever) should be projected wholesale into the distant past.

8 Conclusion: The history of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima

We are now finally ready to glean the historical message from the myth of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima. At this point let me remind the reader of the anti-climax which I have already anticipated in my introduction.

As my painstaking reconstructions of the residential history of the valley of Sidi Mhammad during this century and the last bear out, a number of distinct groups from the 'Arfawi clan settled along the Wad le-Kebir around 1800 in what today are the hamlets of Fidh al-Missay, the western part of Sidi Mhammad, Raml al-'Atrus, and both Tra'ayas. They hailed from the area around Sidi 'Abdallah in Selul, and along with their awareness of belonging to the Drid tribe they brought with them the 'Arfawi myth of origin featuring the burned partridge. So closely associated is the 'Arfawi clan with the valley of Sidi Mhammad that the mountain slope

west of the Wad le-Kebir facing the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad is still called Raquba t' 'Arfa, after their clan founder. Many informants make specific reference to this place name in their version of the myth of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima (elements 6 and 10).

One of these immigrant 'Arfawi lines of descent was that of the original pre-Zeghaydi shrine-keepers of Sidi Mhammad. In contrast with their fellow-clansmen, they were pacifists. On various occasions during the turbulent nineteenth century, they would intervene in the battles which the militant and expanding 'Arfawiya fought with earlier inhabitants of the region; carrying the flags of their shrine, the shrine-keepers would come to the battlefield and exhort the parties to end hostilities. Among all the lines of descent in the region, these shrine-keepers come closest to the type of pacifist saintly lineages which Ernest Gellner (1969)¹⁷ describes for the High Atlas, some 1,500 kilometres to the west.

The prominence of the partridge in the myth of Sidi Mhammad and in the ecstatic song associated with him; the fact that, unlike the other clans in the area, the self-perceptions of the 'Arfawi immigrants supported their identification with the Ulad ben Sayyid on the basis of common affiliation with the Drid tribe; and the occurrence of shrines for Sidi 'Abdallah both among these 'Arfawi groups in the valley of Sidi Mhammad, and among the Ulad ben Sayyid – all these items of evidence lead to the conclusion that the myth of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima symbolically embalms the historical interactions that occurred between the 'Arfawiya of Tra'aya and their close neighbours, the Ulad ben Sayyid of Khdayriya, during the first half of the nineteenth century. Their common association with the Drid tribe enabled the immigrant 'Arfawiya to find hospitality and patronage among the Ulad ben Sayyid living around the shrine of Sidi Slima. It is most likely that the early 'Arfawi immigrants in the Tra'aya area received not only land to the south of the Wad Ghenaka to settle on, but also the right to bury their dead in the cemetery of Sidi Slima. However, as the immigrant group expanded, they asserted their own distinct identity *vis-à-vis* their hosts, and created their own shrine. Partly because of its strategic location in the ecology of the region and partly because of the backing which the guardian lineage received from their non-pacifist clansmen, within a few decades this shrine became one of the

major shrines of Khrumiriya, worthy of a myth that is known throughout the region. This transformation of the 'Arfawi/Ulad ben Sayyid relations from one of dependence to one of equality took place in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the shrine of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir must have been built by about 1850, that is, by the time the eldest remembered 'Arfawi guardian of that shrine was born. The bones which, half a century later, my informants saw dug up and transferred to another site to create the shrine of Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda, must have been those of a man, very likely called Mhammad, who lived and died in Tra'aya in the first half of the last century.¹⁸ True to type, he does not occur in the genealogies of the guardians' line of descent. Nor would he ever have sat on the Hill-top as a herdsman of Sidi Slima, who by that time must have long since rested at the cemetery that bears his name. It is likely that the partridges that alighted on Sidi Mhammad's shoulders flew out of the 'Arfawi clan myth rather than from Heaven. And the 'Arfawi connection itself has been all but concealed in the course of half a century of Zeghaydi expansion. It is my contention that the devious 'mountain paths' of my historical reconstruction have brought the myth of Sidi Mhammad and Sidi Slima into the 'plain' of history, in the sense in which 'history' is commonly understood by scholars today.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to the following persons and institutions: D. Jongmans, Hasnawi ben Tahar, H. van Rijn, J. Boissevain, A. Hartong, J. van der Klei, M. Creighton, A. Huitzing, C. Beeker, P. van Dijk, E. Gellner, K. Brown, M. Schoffeleers, the people of 'Atatfa, the University of Amsterdam, the African Studies Centre (Leiden), the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires (Tunis), the Free University (Amsterdam) and those mentioned in note 13, for various important contributions to my research and to the present argument. Moreover, I am grateful to Michael Roberts for editorial suggestions, and to A. van Wijngaarden, Ursula Cornish and Anne Moniten, who typed successive drafts of this paper. An earlier version appeared in *Social Analysis* (Adelaide, South Australia), 4, September 1980; pp. 51-73.
- 2 For a recent application of this debate to religious history, see Schoffeleers' contribution to the present volume.
- 3 The rendering of place names poses a particular problem in scholarly writing dealing with the former French Maghreb. Distorted and unsystematic transliterations of the Arabic names appear on maps and

- in the literature. For instance, the French called the highlands of North-Western Tunisia 'La Kroumirie'. The name derives from a local saint, Sidi Bu-Khmirra. I could not bring myself to retain the colonial place name, and instead invented the fake arabization of 'Khrumiriya'. Another problem relating to place names in this article is that, for profound structural reasons which will become clear in the course of my argument, the same name may apply to a locality (valley, hamlet), a residential unit, a kin group, a saint and a shrine. The awkward repetitions in the text resulting from this could not be avoided. The other Arabic words used in this article are all rendered in the singular, with plurals loosely indicated by -s. The simple transliteration system that has been adopted after Gibb and Kramers (1974) inevitably obscures many orthographic and phonetic distinctions.
- 4 Cf. van Binsbergen (1970; 1971a). A combined English version of these studies is currently being prepared (van Binsbergen, forthcoming). In this work one important omission of the present paper will be put right: the fact that the oral evidence of which I make use is not explicitly identified with names of informants, etc. I am grateful to the Free University, Amsterdam, for enabling me to revisit the area briefly in 1979.
 - 5 *Sidi* ('Lord', 'Saint') is the conventional epithet for saints' names in the Islamic world.
 - 6 The distinction between myth and hagiographic legend is ignored in this study.
 - 7 In Arabic: *Raquba* - a place commanding a wide view, hence a protruding hill-top overlooking a valley, the abrupt end of a mountain ridge, and the open-air, windswept men's assembly grounds which are found in every Khrumiri neighbourhood.
 - 8 From the vast literature, I mention: Brunel (1926), Demeerseman (1964), Dermenghem (1954), Eickelman (1976), Geertz (1968), Gellner (1969), Marçais and Guiga (1925), Montet (1909), Westermarck (1926).
 - 9 Cf. Lévi-Strauss (1958; 1964; 1966; 1973) and Leach (1967; 1976). For reflections on this approach, and an overview of the recent literature, see de Mahieu's contribution to the present volume.
 - 10 Cf. Bourdieu, 1965; Davis, 1977: pp. 89-101; Jongmans, 1968; Blok, 1979; and references cited in these works.
 - 11 Although the petty administrator created by the colonial government was called by the title of honour *shaykh*, which is also the term used for religious leaders and for saints, I shall designate this secular office by the terms used elsewhere in Africa: chief, chieftaincy and chieftdom.
 - 12 A suggestion corroborated by the ordnance map for the area: Institut Géographique National, Carte topographique 1:50,000 (*La Calle*, Paris, n.d. probably early 1960s).
 - 13 Part of this material was collected by P. Ernsting, P. Geschiere, C. Holzappel, G. von Liebenstein, P. Tamsma (deceased), and myself, in the course of a collective project under supervision of K. W. van der

Veen in March/April 1968. I am grateful to these colleagues for their permission to use this material. Earlier accounts of genealogical and oral-historical research in the chiefdom of 'Atatfa include that by Hartong (1968), while I also gleaned some information from Beeker's (1967) preparatory study for a housing project (which never materialized) in the hamlet of Sidi Mhammad.

- 14 On the other hand, when a clan founder who figures in a genealogy has some association with sainthood (e.g. in the clan of Ulad al-Hadjdj) – 'Descendants of the Pilgrim' – in the valley of al-Mazuz), he has no shrine locally and is never the subject of a cult.
- 15 The details which informants could supply with regard to the history of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir and Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda contrast sharply with the absolute lack of specific historical information concerning the two remaining *kurbis* of the same saint: the one adjacent to Sidi Mhammad al-Wilda, and the one half-way to the hamlet of Mayziya. Mechanical application of either of the two productive models for shrines having the same name led some informants to suggest that Sidi Mhammad might have rested at the sites of these *kurbis* in the course of his wanderings through the region. But in general the informants were remarkably taciturn on the subject. Elsewhere, I offer a reconstruction of the history of these two *kurbis*, suggesting that they were originally named after a totally different saint who was associated with a clan that had prevailed in the area before the immigration of the shrine-keepers and their associates from Tra'aya (van Binsbergen, 1971a: pp. 281ff).
- 16 Yet the fact that Sidi 'Amara is not called Sidi 'Abdallah, and my reconstruction of the valley's residential history, suggest that Sidi 'Amara was not originally an 'Arfawi shrine, but one created by pre-'Arfawi members of the Mayzi clan, to whom the 'Arfawiya had come as client immigrants.
- 17 Cf. van Binsbergen (1971b).
- 18 Why has not the shrine of Sidi Mhammad le-Kebir been called Sidi 'Abdallah like the other shrines established by the 'Arfawiya? The figure in the ecstatic song of Sidi Mhammad cannot be found on the Hill-top today, and although there are traditions of it having been destroyed by lightning at the beginning of this century, it is most likely a vestige of Sidi 'Abdallah bu-Karma, in Ulad ben Sayyid. The shrine of Sidi Mhammad might originally have been dedicated to Sidi 'Abdallah, only to be renamed after Sidi Mhammad once the Tra'aya 'Arfawiya had produced from within their midst a saintly man of the name of Mhammad.

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Chapter 8

The consequences of literacy in African religion: The Kongo case

John M. Janzen

Introduction

Although sub-Saharan Africa has been involved with European languages and literacy for over a century, and has seen numerous 'national literatures' arise in these languages (Gérard, 1972), and although Christian literature has been introduced in many African languages in connection with biblical translations (Hastings, 1979), relatively little scholarship has been conducted on the consequences of literacy, *per se*, in African religion.¹ This essay proposes such a project for the Kongo tradition of coastal Zaire, Angola and Congo, and puts forward methodologies for the analysis of the articulation of oral and written language use in Kongo religion. The essay will examine genre uses in the oral and written phases of Kongo religion, and will then study at closer range two examples of early Kongo writing on religion. The first is part of an account by African teachers of North Kongo's major historic healing cult, Lemba, written in the 1900-20 era on commission by missionary-linguist Karl Laman as part of a vast corpus of writing about a way of life that was rapidly disappearing (Janzen, 1972). The second is a much briefer text, written in 1921 by the personal secretaries of the Kongo prophet Kimbangu, describing the remarkable beginning of one of the major independent churches of Black Africa (Nfinngani and Nzungu in Raymaekers, 1971). These two very different texts have, as we shall see later, similar structures for the portrayal of religious phenomena.

The implications of literacy for religion are, of course, part of the overall set of transformations that literacy unleashes upon an entire culture, as is apparent in the great civilizations of Meso-