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Erin Pettigrew, *Invoking the Invisible in the Sahara: Islam, Spiritual Mediation, and Social Change*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023, 252 p.

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"Between the universe that can be apprehended by pure intellectual perception […] and the universe perceptible to the senses, there is an intermediate world […] as real and objective, as consistent and subsistent as the intelligible and sensible worlds; it is an intermediate universe 'where the spiritual takes body and the body becomes spiritual'"[1]. When the philosopher and Islamicist Henry Corbin wrote these lines in the mid-1950s, he was struggling to capture in a single French word an entire sphere of existence fundamental to Sufi metaphysics. Rejecting terms like "imaginary" for its association with fiction, he coined a neologism – the "imaginal" – to refer to that which was real but irreducible to either sense perception or abstract reasoning. The Sufi tradition that Corbin spent decades studying offered more elaborate terminology for this zone of contact between the corporeal and the spiritual. One of its key terms was *barzakh*.

Appearing three times in the Qur'an (twice to denote an isthmus and once to indicate a barrier between the physical world and the hereafter), *barzakh* proved enormously generative for Sufis like Ibn Arabi, who understood it to be not only a barrier, but a link between distinct levels of existence[2]. In her new book *Invoking the Invisible in the Sahara: Islam, Spiritual Mediation and Social Change*, Erin Pettigrew seeks to understand this "intermediate universe" of visions and spirits empirically. What Corbin encountered in the writings of Ibn Arabi, Pettigrew finds in the social world of the "Saharan West" (largely, though not exclusively, modern-day Mauritania). For her, the *barzakh* is not only an object of study, but a source of methodological inspiration. "The only way to include spirits, divine forces, and inexplicable miracles in academic analysis is for the researcher herself to inhabit the *barzakh*," she writes, "a barrier or partition that, in Sufi tradition, becomes a space of spiritual insight where the metaphysical and worldly realms meet" (20). Pettigrew approaches this domain through the figures who know it best: the practitioners of *l'ḥjab*, or "Islamic esoteric sciences," who have long managed and interpreted the significance of this interstitial realm on behalf of others.

[1] Henry Corbin (1998), *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 4. "[E]ntre l'univers appréhensible par la pure perception intellectuelle […] et l'univers perceptible par les sens, il existe un monde intermédiaire […] aussi réel et objectif, consistant et subsistant, que l'univers intelligible et l'univers sensible, univers intermédiaire 'où le spirituel prend corps et où le corps devient spirituel.'" Henry Corbin, *L'Imagination Créatrice dans le Soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi* (Paris: Flammarion, 1958), 6.

[2] William C. Chittick (1989), *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 117-118.

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For centuries, these experts – known as *ḥajjab* in the Ḥassāniyya variety of Arabic spoken in the southwestern Sahara – have been routinely called upon to ensure a community's health and welfare and offer protection against *sell*, or "bloodsucking." Pettigrew demonstrates both the antiquity of these practices and the ways they have changed in response to various pressures: the political fortunes of particular lineages and groups, the shifting hierarchies rooted in race and slavery, and the modernizing and "reformist" impulses of statesmen and Salafi activists. The result is a study that grapples with the fundamental ambivalence of its subject. *L'ḥjab* can heal, but it can also harm. Although its techniques are claimed by some to be drawn from the Qur'an (and thus distinct from unlawful "sorcery"), it is still considered an illegitimate innovation by others. *Ḥajjab* are therefore not without their critics. Nevertheless, they can still lay claim to possessing formidable bodies of Islamic knowledge, while those accused of *sell* tend to be of lower social status, often women, and often racialized "black"[3] with enslaved forbears. By interweaving the intellectual history of Islamic esoteric knowledge with the vastly unequal social terrain on which it has been deployed, Pettigrew is able to show how both *l'ḥjab* and *sell* are structured by hierarchies that they help structure in turn.

This book's opening chapter begins with fundamentals, reaching back to the IXth century Abbasid court in order to affirm the centrality of the esoteric sciences to the early Islamic tradition as a whole. Tracking the spread of lettrism, geomancy, and other assorted techniques to North and West Africa, it definitively lays to rest the notion that the esoteric sciences somehow represented an "Africanization" of Islam. The production of amulets and talismanic squares, the prescription of orally recited prayers and poems, the imbibing of Qur'an water – all were known therapies and none were unique to West Africa. On the contrary, they were part of one of the core disciplines of Islamic knowledge. Equally foundational, however, was indigenous criticism of such practices. Twentieth-century "reformists" were far from the first to consider them beyond the pale of Islam, as revealed by a late XVth century correspondence between West African critics and the Egyptian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, as well as Muhammad Al-Maghīlī's well-known responses to Askiya Muhammad Ture of Songhay.

Having established this context, the book's second chapter focuses on the role of *l'ḥjab* in the rise of the Kunta confederation, a network of Arab scholars and caravanners who managed Saharan trade between western Mauritania, northern Mali and central Algeria. Their writings form much of the source material for this chapter, and Pettigrew identifies the early XIXth century as the period in which *l'ḥjab* coalesced as a Kunta specialty. Yet the practice of Islamic esoteric science was hardly unique to the Kunta, a point Pettigrew illustrates through a discussion of contemporaneous Fulbe-speaking Muslim scholars. For both groups, such techniques proved vital not only to individual clients, but to the political fortunes of whole collectivities, as demonstrated by their use by prominent leaders such as Usman dan Fodio, Ahmad Lobbo and Umar Taal.

Part II follows *l'ḥjab* into the colonial and postcolonial periods, first by discussing how the esoteric sciences were mobilized to resist French colonial incursions (chapter 3), and then by tracing debates over *l'ḥjab* in the era of "modernization" and "Islamic reform" (chapter 4). Colonial administrators, modernizing statesmen and advocates of "Islamic reform" all opposed *l'ḥjab*. In the face of such antagonism, engagement with the invisible became less visible itself. By the 1960s, amulets were no longer proudly displayed, but hidden under clothing. This crucial yet elusive shift receives less attention than more recent televised debates about *l'ḥjab*, as the traces of mid-century debates prove scarce compared to the denser archival footprint of the early twenty-first century. At the same time, the easy transition of *l'ḥjab* onto social media demonstrates the tradition's durability and capacity for adaptation.

The book's final two chapters address questions of race and gender head on. Chapter 5 shows how bloodsucking accusations have been utilized to keep socially disenfranchised groups in their place. Historically, the enslaved and their descendants (*ḥrāṭīn*) were often on the receiving end of such accusations, with women especially vulnerable to charges of practicing *sell*. Through oral histories, Pettigrew shows how this segment of the population has not only denied individual accusations, but rejected the entire existence of *sell* as such, portraying it exclusively as a mechanism of social control. Chapter 6 further complicates the relation between race and Islamic esoteric

[3] In this context, the assignment of "black" or "white" is fundamentally connected to a social process; on the history of race in Mauritania, see the special issue of *L'Ouest Saharien* edited by E. Ann McDougall, « Devenir visibles dans le sillage de l'esclavage : la question Ḥarāṭīn en Mauritanie et au Maroc », 2020/1, vol.10-11.

knowledge by focusing on the *Ahl Guennar*, "black" Wolof-speaking practitioners of *l'ḥjab* who trace their genealogy to the Prophet via the Moroccan saint Sharīf Bubazūl. The history of this unique community stands as a counterpoint to arguments that "white" Mauritanians possess superior esoteric knowledge and religious authority.

Readers of *Invoking the Invisible in the Sahara* will come away with a profound sense of the historic depth and continued relevance of *l'ḥjab* in contemporary Mauritania. This vital Saharan practice has found its historian.

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