

MagRenew: Spiritual Renewal and Artistic Expressions in Nineteenth-century Morocco. Islamological, Literary, and Aesthetic Approaches

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Introduction: Religion, society and art in the Maghrib (19th century)

a. The Maghrib in the 19th Century: A Historical Field of Study

A vast scholarly literature has highlighted the deep and multifaceted relation between the Maghrib and the notion of holiness, whose articulation has historically informed social phenomena and religious dynamics in the region. The issues of sacred spaces and holy men acting as vehicles of sanctity intersected the different social classes, and thaumaturgical authority became an important question for the negotiation and determination of the self or the group. First approached – among others – through the observations of Alfred Bel, then developed by Jacques Berque from a viewpoint steeped in the social sciences,¹ the study of holiness in Morocco continues to engage Francophone scholarship, as demonstrated by the work of Houari Touati² and, more recently, Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino.³ It is in this tradition of research on Moroccan culture and society that this project aims to position itself, by tackling new corpora of texts and artifacts and proposing new interpretive frameworks, with a special focus on the 19th century.

b. Research Team and Previous Work

The project is directed by Francesco Chiabotti (MCR HDR, INALCO, member of the CERMOM). Umberto Bongianino (The Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East, University of Oxford) and Eloïse Brac de la Perrière (PU Sorbonne University, Conseillère scientifique at the INHA) are associated with the second and third phases of the project (see §3). Several previous collective enterprises contributed to the genesis and development of the MagRenew project: first and foremost, the ANR-DFG project “PROPHET”, directed by Rachida Chic (CNRS–CETOBAC) and Stefan Reichmuth (Ruhr University Bochum), which highlighted the importance of 19th–century Morocco as a field of Islamological research.⁴ Francesco Chiabotti was part of the PROPHET core group. The ANR project “ILM – Islamic Learning in Morocco (18th–21st Centuries)”, directed by Sabrina Mervin, did not address the issue of the artistic productions related to hagiographic discourses.⁵ Also worthy of mention is the CNRS delegation project led by Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (Sorbonne University), who, in association with Antoine Perrier (CNRS), investigated the question of genealogy in Morocco over a long period of time.⁶ Francesco Chiabotti is currently studying the work of the calligrapher and Sufi master Qandūsī (d. 1861) as part of his CNRS delegation (IREMAM, 2022–23), while also coordinating a research group that plans to edit the literary output of this significant intellectual of 19th-century Fez.⁷ An initial conference was organised in Aix-en-Provence in June 2023 (“Le monde de al-Qandūsī (m. 1861): le calligraphe et son environnement”), which brought together Islamicists, art historians, and codicologists.⁸

¹ J. Berque, *Ulemas, fondateurs, insurgés du Maghreb*, 1982

² L. Touati, *Entre Dieu et les hommes. Lettrés, saints et sorciers au Maghreb (17e siècle)*, 1994

³ R. Vimercati-Sanseverino, *Fès et sainteté, de la fondation à l’avènement du Protectorat (808-1912): Hagiographie, tradition spirituelle et héritage prophétique dans la ville de Mawlāy Idrīs*, 2014

⁴ <https://prophet.hypotheses.org>

⁵ <https://anrilm.cnrs.fr>

⁶ <https://www.ideo-cairo.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/«-Quête-des-ansâb-quête-des-ashrâf-».pdf>

⁷ <https://www.iremam.cnrs.fr/sites/default/files/2023-03/Projet-le%20monde-%20de-al-Qandūsī-délégation-cnrs.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.iremam.cnrs.fr/fr/journee-detudes-et-exposition-le-monde-de-al-qandusi-m-1861-le-calligraphe-et-son-environnement>

1. Islamology through the Prism of Religious Materiality and Visual Culture: Problems and Approaches

a. Self-Representation: a Renewed Hagiographic Study

The starting point of our research is the scholarly critique to the writing of the self in Arabic literature. This approach, which questions literary outputs as ego-documents, was developed by two German authors, Reichmuth and Elger (see Mayeur-Jaouen 2013) among others, and initially focuses on literary sources. Mayeur-Jaouen subsequently led a project on the cultural and religious history of the concept of *adab*, first concentrating on Sufi *adab*,⁹ then on the question of its redefinition in the modern and contemporary era,¹⁰ and most recently on the origins of this ethical and literary ideal.¹¹ She has shown that the study of *adab* makes it possible to reconsider the religious and cultural history of the Muslim worlds in the light of this founding concept, which was developed and recast many times over the centuries. The Maghrib has been largely neglected in the study of these questions, despite the profusion of recently edited sources and the accessibility of important archives and libraries — even private family archives — with the potential to provide a wide range of new data. The present project aims to apply these advances in the field of *adab* studies to the history of Moroccan Sufism in the 19th century, a period that is among the least known and studied. By combining Islamological methodologies and a literary approach to texts drawn from various corpora, the project focuses on the specific question of *self-representation*. More precisely, the following key questions will be addressed: how and why did hagiographic writing (in its wide variety of genres such as *manāqib*, *ṭabaqāt*, *tarājim*, *fahāris*) came to show an increased dose of self-assertion during the 19th century? What strategies were used at this time and in this region of the Islamic world to reconcile — sometimes paradoxically — the mystical ideal of self-effacement with the emergence of new writing modes in which individuals seem to represent themselves with greater confidence? To what extent does the reappropriation of literary canons applied to religious themes play a role in this process of self-redefinition?

b. The study of Islam through its materialities

A second approach, which involves an expansion of the textual corpus to include calligraphic and iconographic sources, concerns the study of the *aesthetic conceptions* through which the textual is made visual, and in documents of private use, *a testimony of the self*. This project aims to study, as part of a collective enterprise, the material manifestations of the discourses on holiness in Moroccan religiosity. These “*Islamological materialities*” can proceed from very different corpora (illuminated manuscripts, letters, annotations, certificates of prophetic descent, monumental paintings, songbooks/*kunnāsh*, embroidered textiles, and epigraphic artifacts), but they share similar contexts of production and reception, and are rooted in a milieu of profound aesthetic renewal, as exemplified by the *Dhakhīrat al-Muḥtāj* (see Zahri 2021) or the work of Qandūsī.

2. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Our initial hypothesis is that, when they were written down, spiritual experiences acquired a literary dimension that cannot be separated from the beliefs expressed by the authors. This link is known for early Sufism, but it remains largely unstudied for more recent periods. For example, the birthplace of Qandūsī, the oasis of Kenadsa in southwestern Algeria, was also a land of *adab*: the recent publication of a *Dīwān al-Qandūsiyīn (Poetic Collection of the Masters of Kenadsa)* shows that these Sufis enjoyed an authority that was not only spiritual, but also cultural. Touati’s own research, already mentioned above, demonstrates it clearly. These apparently isolated centers were important places of literary production. That seems to be particularly true of the *ṭarīqa nāṣiriyya ziyāniyya* in Tamgrout (Reichmuth studied the poetic writing of a *qaṣīda* from the same Nāṣirī background).¹² The father of the patron of the great Qur’ān calligraphed by Qandūsī, Idrīs al-‘Amrawī, was also a poet, and his unpublished epistolary exchanges, which have a profound literary dimension, played a role in the specific genre of epistolary writing as a strategy of self-representation. **In this context, we hypothesise that the evolution of hagiographic writing observable in 19th-century Morocco was galvanised by the adoption of aesthetic frameworks and renewed literary codes.**

⁹ Voir Chiabotti et alii (2016).

¹⁰ Mayeur-Jaouen (2019).

¹¹ Mayeur-Jaouen (2023, à paraître).

¹² Reichmuth (2017).

The second hypothesis derives from the latter statement. These **renewed aesthetic frameworks** triggered the production of visual supports (wall paintings, calligraphy in several styles, embroidered fabrics, epigraphic compositions) that will be studied as specific sources for the representation of the self or the various social groups (familial or fraternal memory). For example, in addition to the panels of Qandūsī, we will seek, in collaboration with art historians specialising in the Maghrib such as U. Bongianino and Hiba Abid (New York Public Library), to investigate the aesthetic and doctrinal universe of **Moroccan calligraphic panels**. Mounia Chekhab-Abudaya (Museum of Islamic Art, Doha) has recently published and edited one of these complex artifacts, kept in the Harvard Art Museums.¹³ These panels, which recall the Ottoman *hilyas*, have not yet been sufficiently studied. The patrons could personalise them by requesting the insertion of texts that expressed their personal and familial memory (initiatory *silsilas*, genealogies, specific prayers, etc.). The objective, in this case, is to understand the significance of these documents for the history of holiness in the Maghreb in the 19th century. Also worth mentioning is the forthcoming article by Péter T. Nagy and U. Bongianino on “*barakat Muḥammad*” icons in square Kufic: the “presence” of the prophet should not only be sought in literary sources, but also in his visual evocations.¹⁴ Other visual sources will be considered, including the widespread iconographic and calligraphic genre of the **sandals of the Prophet** (*niʿāl*), following the preliminary observations of Christiane Gruber (2014) and Lorenz Korn (2020), and the embroidered inscriptions that adorn the tomb covers of Moroccan saints (Bongianino, forthcoming).

Based on these two hypotheses, the project sets out a set of three main objectives:

- Identifying, editing, and studying a varied corpus of new hagiographic and autobiographical sources, hitherto neglected outside Morocco.
- Answering the questions set out above, trying to unpick and understand the dynamic links between hagiography, writing of the self, and artistic expression in Morocco.
- Reviving the study of the religious and cultural history of the broader Maghrib in the 19th century through innovative, multi-disciplinary methodologies.

3. Project Timeline and Main Research Axes

1st year: 2024–2025

Axis: Hagiography, writing of the self, and Sufism in 19th–century Morocco

Principal Researchers: Francesco Chiabotti, Rachida Chih, and Jaafar Ben el Haj Sulami

During the first year, the project aims to bring together specialists in the history of Sufism in Morocco, in order to establish an inventory of research and its recent advances. The number of editions of Arabic sources relating to the history of Sufism in this period has increased sharply. We are also interested in the publishing contexts of these texts. Particular attention will be given to private archives, which remain a largely untapped source, particularly for **epistolary exchanges**. The preliminary research carried out by the project leader has allowed him to establish contacts with families that own important unpublished sources. Rachida Chih will focus more specifically on the history of the *ṭarīqa darqāwiyya*. The team will work in collaboration with Jaafar Ben el Haj Sulami, professor at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Tetouan, who notably supervised a thesis on biographical writing in Arabic literature (see Muḥammad al-Wardī’s recently published work, *Bidāyāt al-sīra al-dhātīyya ʿinda al-ʿarab*). Qandūsī’s work, sprinkled with autobiographical data, will also be examined in the light of the texts currently being edited.

2nd year: 2025–2026

Axis: Islamological materialities

Principal Researchers: Francesco Chiabotti and Umberto Bongianino

The second year of the project will be devoted to *Islamological materialities*, a corpus of artifacts and visual phenomena that materialised religious concepts in connection with hagiographic discourses.

A first workshop will focus on **Moroccan calligraphic panels**. A second workshop will concentrate on the analysis of **epigraphic textiles** that adorn the tombs of Moroccan saints. Umberto Bongianino has conducted innovative research on the poetry embroidered on the precious tomb covers associated with the *sharīf* of Wazzān, Mawlāy

¹³ Chekhab-Abudaya (2023).

¹⁴ Nagy & Bongianino (2023).

Idrīs I, and Mawlāy Idrīs II.¹⁵ This workshop will extend this approach to other epigraphic media and address the interplay between embroidered hagiographic discourse, its intended audiences, and the sacred spaces that enclosed it.

3rd year: 2026–2027

Axis: A Calligraphic Revival: Actors, Circulations, Uses

Principal Researchers: Francesco Chiabotti, Umberto Bongianino, and Eloïse Brac de la Perrière

The project's third year will focus on the calligraphic renewal that invested 19th-century Morocco. A first workshop will explore two fundamental themes: 1) **the production of calligraphic Qur'āns driven by the Alaouite dynasty.** Thanks to the collections of the Royal Library of Rabat, we will be able to chart the changes that took place during the 19th century in the artistic production of calligraphic Qur'āns. We will return to the case of Qandūsī and we will compare his *Muṣḥaf* with other contemporary codices in the royal collection. 2) **The *Dhakhīrat al-muḥtāj*: a textual family and its ramifications.** The preliminary work of Khalid Zahri (codicologist, former curator at the Royal Library of Rabat) has shed light on the intellectual world of Shaykh Sharqāwī, an 18th-century Sufi calligrapher and author of *Dhakhīrat al-muḥtāj*, a major work of devotion and an important source of self-representation. We will build on this line of research by examining private copies of this work, currently owned by various Moroccan families.

¹⁵ Bongianino, forthcoming.