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Ariela Marcus Sells, *Sorcery or Science? Contested Knowledge and Practice in West African Sufi Texts*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2022. xiii + 214 p. ISBN: 9780271092294.

Ariela Marcus-Sells's *Sorcery or Science?* marks a critical intervention in the history of Islamic/ate magic by centring the West African context. She presents a coherent link between magic and the socio-political aspirations of the nineteenth-century Sahara Desert Sufi scenes, focusing on the influential yet understudied works of Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811) and his son Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī (d. 1826) whose descendants are known as Kunta and rose to prominence in the Azawād. Their works emerged from a confluence of religio-political movements that responded to the violence of enslavement raids and instability of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries such as the military campaigns that established "Almamates" in Bundu, Futa Jallon, and Futa Toro (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), and the movement across Hausa states that led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate by the Sufi leader ʿUthmān Ibn Fūdī who claimed Sīdī al-Mukhtār as teacher. In response to the colonial weaponisation of the term "magic" to discredit the traditions of colonised people, and to the Enlightenment's reduction of it as irrational superstitions, Marcus-Sells recognises the polysemous nature of the term magic and instead of asking "what is magic?," she is concerned with "whose magic is it?," exemplifying this with Sīdī Muḥammad's definition of "sorcery" as a manipulation of the "normal" order of the world, in contrast to the miracles of the prophets and the charismata of God's friends (15).

In the first chapter, Marcus-Sells sets up the context for the thought of Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad, looking at the economic, political, and spiritual capital of the Kunta. To do so, she highlights the need for rethinking the Sahara from transitional sparse locale to a 'vibrant place of densely overlapping networks that link microregions of highly specialised production in complex and flexible but enduring patterns of interdependence' (29). In the context of state formation trends in the Sahel and savanna lands by Muslim intellectuals (40), she elaborates on the Kunta family's control of salt-production and the Ijjilmine in the eighteenth century, their involvement in tobacco trade (30–31), and their participation in Tuareg politics (38). Furthermore, it is shown that through institutional connections, Kunta leaders sought education, transmitted knowledge, and refashioned the notion of Islamic authority: they rejected military enforcement of authority and cultivated a political capital on the basis 'voluntary association of followers' of a Sufi master (40–41). Sīdī al-Mukhtār's Shaykh was the scholar Sīdī ʿAlī al-Najīb, from whom the former received and mobilised spiritual exercises, prayers, and

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litanies ascribed to the twelfth-century Sufi master ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī. The spiritual capital of the Kunta reflects the importance of the network of religious and spiritual institutions, with an intense interaction with the Moroccan Sufi scenes (47–48).

From the earthly realm to the "Realm of the Unseen" (*ʿālam al-ghayb*), the second chapter traces the major features of the Kunta scholars' views on this world to which angels, jinn, and devils belong, within a Aristotelian and Neoplatonic cosmological framework. Integrated into this framework is the alphanumerical system of Islamic Lettrism (*ʿilm al-ḥurūf*), according to which letters and divine names constitute 'the building blocks of the universe' (63). Elaborately described by Sīdī al-Mukhtār in *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayḍiyya*, Sufi spiritual elite, known as the Friends of God, seek proximity with Him through spiritual exercises that tame the *nafs* ("the self"), and prepare the heart of the Sufi for receiving revelations about the realm of the unseen to ascend toward the Divine realm (73). Crucially, in Kunta politics, spiritual hierarchy legitimises the socio-political one (64, 71).

Paying attention to the works of Sīdī Muḥammad, the third chapter looks at the intellectual and theological negotiations surrounding the extraordinary acts of saints and sorcerers. The central point is that Sīdī Muḥammad's categorisation of these acts depends on 'opening up space between the prohibited category of sorcery and the charismata' (102) where we find some allowed practices which 'the righteous' (103) may perform. This opening up is done by giving a natural framework to these practices, restricting efficaciousness to the power of God's divine names and attributes, and confining agency to God (105, 111). Sīdī Muḥammad insists that the practices of the righteous ones involve knowledge of natural causes and the dictates of one's "station" (*maqām*) in the Sufi path (103–105). The practice of adjuration whereby the operator is able to control the jinn via angelic forces is considered 'a subset of the science of letters and names' (106), approximating it to Solomon's rule over the jinn. This reflects the presence in West Africa of texts such as *al-Durr al-Manẓūm wa khulāṣat al-sirr al-maktūm* by the Fulani scholar Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Kashnāwī's. This text is a didactic commentary on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *al-Sirr maktūm*, which is arguably the most influential text on astral, planetary, angelic, and jinnic adjurations emerging in the twelfth century (113). Also demonstrating the transmission of magical texts within the networks that connect West Africa to northern and eastern regions is the presence of the lettrist-occultist works attributed to Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. c. 1225). Sīdī Muḥammad copies parts of the fifteenth-century *Shams al-Āfāq* by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Bisṭāmī (d. 1454), who played an important role in the promulgation of al-Būnian practices. Nevertheless, in addition to rejecting astrology

and divination (*kihāna*), Sīdī Muḥammad explicitly denounces al-Būnī's magic for its planetary and spiritual propitiations (123). The classificatory exclusions made by Kunta scholars, and Sīdī Muḥammad specifically, were not only justified theologically, but also racially. Marcus-Sells shows that the Kunta's classification of sciences and sorcery is related to the precolonial development of racialized categories in the region, whereby illegitimate sorcery is associated with 'a kind of people who predominate in the land of the Blacks', as Sīdī Muḥammad maintains, alluding to practices deemed "evil" such as draining blood (117).

In the final chapter, Marcus-Sells looks at the place of supplicatory prayers in the lettrist cosmology of Sīdī Muḥammad and Sīdī al-Mukhtār. She shows that prayers in their various genres—*aḥzāb*, *awrād*, *dhikr*, *taṣliya* etc.—are central to Islamic West African devotional practices (128). One of the most interesting aspects of *Ḥizb Sīdī al-Mukhtār* is the way he "sanctifies" (my use) the microcosmic human by prayers that seek to embed divine names and attributes in the supplicant's body parts and the faculties of the soul (intellect, spirit, soul) (134–135). The body as a divine site becomes authorised, according to Sīdī Muḥammad's *al-Fawā'id al-nūrāniyya*, to perform extraordinary acts, such as sending down rain and "folding space" (teleportation), by the knowledge of God's Greatest Name (O AHM SQL ḤL 'YṢ) and the other divine names (142). The chapter also highlights the strategies of establishing the "orthodoxy" of such practices. Once embedded in the context of formal prayer, as we see in *al-Fawā'id al-nūrāniyya*, the extraordinary acts requested are legitimised (147). Finally, Marcus-Sell places these works in the context of devotional practices in the Sahara and Sahel, showing that piety manifested in the acts of reading and recitation. Sīdī Muḥammad and Sīdī al-Mukhtār's texts engage with these local devotional practices 'with reference to established Sufi intellectual traditions, and this with attention to larger regional and global networks of Muslim scholars' (149–150).

The third and fourth chapters are very rich, but the book's overall argument would have benefitted from showing how the texts themselves reflect the political aspirations of the Kunta, connecting these chapters to the sociopolitical and economic contextualisation of the first two chapters. We see a hint of this in Sīdī al-Mukhtār's *Nafḥat al-Ṭībb*'s, where supplicatory prayers refer to the Prophet Muḥammad by his genealogy, extending it to the community of believers, representing Muḥammad as 'the master of Qahtan and 'Adnan' (legendary tribal ancestors), and ultimately of the ummah and the realm of the jinn (139). Notwithstanding, *Sorcery or Science?* emerges as a pivotal contribution to the study of magic, especially the science of letters and divine names, with its attention to the categories and boundary-work of Sīdī

al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad, marking a place for the West African context in the more Arabo- and Perso-centric studies of Islamic/ate occult sciences.

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