



Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī, Between Islamic Studies and the Social Sciences

International Symposium
January 31 and February 1, 2023

Organized by Ilyass Amharar
Hosted at the Centre Jacques Berque
and the NIMAR Institute
Rabat, Morocco



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Between Islamic Studies and the Social Sciences

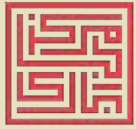
ARGUMENTATION

Born around 838-9/1435-6 and passing away in 895/1490 in Tlemcen, Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī is arguably the most famous Ash'arite theologian of the Maghreb. As highlighted by European-language studies beginning into the early 19th century (Wolf 1818), the creeds (*'aqā'id*, sing. *'aqīda*) of al-Sanūsī played a major role in the teaching of Ash'arite doctrine for many centuries and in many languages. The translation of his treatises into vernacular languages such as Tachelhit (van den Boogert 1997), Fulfulde (van Dalen 2016), Bambara (Tamari 2019), as well as Malayo (Bruckmayr 2016) testifies to the great popularity of these texts from West Africa to Southeast Asia. Studies have also shown their diffusion in the Iberian Peninsula (Cassasas 2016) and Southern Africa (Davids 1985).

Certainly, then, al-Sanūsī was an important Ash'arite pedagogue. But while it is true that al-Sanūsī contributed through his small treatises to making Ash'arite doctrine accessible to a large number of people, he should not be reduced to a mere "popularizer"; his Long Creed and auto-commentary merit study as a major work of Ash'arite theology (El-Rouayheb 2015). At the same time, the role of reformer or revivalist (*mujaddid*) that primary sources sometimes assign to him should also be scrutinized. Recent work on some of his hitherto unknown predecessors (Amharar 2020), on the theological output of the neighboring Ḥafṣid territories (Thiele 2020), and on a rival theologian in Tlemcen (Olson 2020) has shown that the Maghreb seems to have experienced uninterrupted theological activity, which contradicts the received idea that the teaching of Ash'arism just before al-Sanūsī was very weak or even at a standstill and destabilizes his portrayal as a reviver of this school of thought.

With funding from the Bureau des Cultes (French Ministry of the Interior) and hosted by IREMAM, the project "Pour une histoire de l'aš'arisme au Maghreb" is honored to host a symposium featuring the most studies on al-Sanūsī. Taking inspiration from the work of Sabrina Mervin, the aim will be to carry out this project from a perspective of dialogue between Islamic Studies and the social sciences, in order to take a cross-cutting approach to the life, work, and legacy of al-Sanūsī. Thus, while prospective presenters may certainly choose to focus on the ideas and arguments of the theologian, others may wish to deal with the anthropological aspects of the transmission and translation of his treatises in the African or Asian context. Finally, the recent trend of teaching al-Sanūsī's creeds in Euro-American mosques and online institutes may attract the attention of sociologists, perhaps as part of the turn toward "madhhabic" traditionalism (Pierret 2011).

This symposium, the proceedings of which will be published, will approach al-Sanūsī and his thought through the prisms of Islamic studies and the social sciences along three main axes:



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1. The theological thought of al-Sanūsī

- To what degree do al-Sanūsī's theological writings represent a turning point in Maghrebi Aš'arism?
- Assessing al-Sanūsī's thought in relation to earlier regional trends
- How should al-Sanūsī fit into broader narratives of Ash'arī history and Islamic intellectual history? How does his inclusion in those narratives stand to change them?
- Al-Sanūsī's relationship to falsafa and *falsafī kalām* (as represented by Ibn Sīnā, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and others)
- Al-Sanūsī and logic (*al-manṭiq*)
- New editions of his texts

2. The reception of al-Sanūsī's writings in the Maghreb and beyond: commentaries, translations, and teachings

- Maghrebi and non-Maghrebi commentaries on al-Sanūsī's works
- The influence of al-Sanūsī's work on later Ash'arite thought (10th/16th century to present)
- The role of al-Sanūsī's creeds in the teaching of Ash'arism: in Africa (e.g. Mali, Guinea, Sudanic Africa but also Zanzibar), in Asia (Southeast Asia such as Malaysia or Indonesia or Central Asia such as Tajikistan), in Eurasia (Tatarstan, Chechnya, Dagestan), as well as in Europe (former Ottoman territories, Iberian Peninsula etc).
- The teaching of the creeds in major Muslim institutions of higher learning (al-Azhar, al-Qarawiyyīn, al-Zaytūna)
- The translations of the creeds into vernacular languages (Bambara, Malayo, Maninka, Amazigh, Turkish, Tatar...): the history of this process, its relationship to the Arabic texts, the use of vernacular languages to express intellectual discourse
- The materiality of al-Sanūsī's creeds: circulation of manuscripts, study of princely copies, spiritual function (*baraka*), popular uses, etc.
- The teaching of the creeds as a vehicle for a "Middle Way Islam" in Muslim societies today, or as a symbol of a return to a "Madhhabic Islam" for Muslim communities living in the West
- The modalities of these teachings (at the mosque in Europe or the U.S., the emergence of online institutes, training abroad, etc.)

3. Al-Sanūsī and his time (9th/15th century)

- How did the social, political, and intellectual climate of Tlemcen impact al-Sanūsī's thought?
- What was al-Sanūsī's status, and the status of his writings, in his own moment, compared to later?
- What relation, if any, did he have to scholars, texts, and ideas from the *Mashriq*?

Location and organization of the symposium :

The symposium will be held over two days: the first at the Centre Jacques Berque and the second at the NIMAR Institute, both located in Rabat.

Each presentation will last twenty minutes, plus ten minutes of discussion with the audience. The languages used will be Arabic, French, and English. The participants' flight and accommodation expenses will be covered.

Timeline for participation :

- Deadline for submission of summaries: **September 20, 2022**
- Date of announcement of the selected proposals: **November 20, 2022**
- Date of receipt of the final version of the articles: **June 20, 2023**

The summary (1 page maximum, which should include the applicant's and institution) should be sent to the following address: alsanucijb@gmail.com

Organizer :

Ilyass Amharar (Iremam-CJB)

Scientific Committee :

El Mehdī Ben Muḥammad al-Sa'īdī (Université Ibn Zuhr – Agadir), Khaled El-Rouayheb (Harvard University), Caitlyn Olson (Oxford University), Dorrit Van Dalen (Université de Leyde), Khālīd Zahrī (Université 'Abd al-Malik al-Sa'īdī – Tétouan), Ahmad Arif Zul-Kifl (International Islamic University Malaysia), Ilyass Amharar (IREMAM-CJB).