WHAT'S IN A NAME?
THE ALMORAVIDS OF THE ELEVENTH CENTURY
IN THE WESTERN SAHARA*

BY

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I. Introduction

The Almoravids were a militant Muslim reform movement, which emerged among the Ṣanhāja Berbers, particularly the Lamtūna sub-group, of the southwestern Sahara in the mid-eleventh century. They went on to conquer northwestern Africa and Muslim Spain, before being overthrown themselves by the succeeding dynasty, the Almohads, in the mid-twelfth century. Because of this intense northern involvement, a large amount of evidence about the Almoravids has survived, including a good deal about the movement's origins in the southwestern desert, adjacent to the bilād al-sūdān, the land of the blacks. This historical material has in turn given rise to extensive modern discussion and debate, especially during the past thirty years.

The present essay seeks to carry further that debate, with specific reference to the movement's name—Almoravids in western sources, al-murābiṭūn, the people of the ribāl, in Arabic. I have tried to fulfil three purposes in particular:

Firstly, to include (in English) some of the major relevant passages from the original sources, at some length, supported of course by many lesser references, so that the essay may be read more-or-less as a self-contained whole. This seems sensible, most of all for readers in Africa, who may not have easy (or indeed any, in some cases) access to the major reference volumes, such as the Corpus of Levitzion and Hopkins,1 from which are taken (as far as possible) all English translations from the Arabic in this paper.

* I should like to thank very warmly colleagues and friends who have given time and attention to reading and commenting upon earlier drafts of this paper, in particular Charles Beckingham, Michael Brett, Avner Cohen, Paulo Farias, Fritz Meier, Harry Norris, Constanze Schmaling. Responsibility for surviving excesses and eccentricities remains, of course, my own.
Secondly, to advance, against the primarily military explanations of the name Almoravid which are now current, the claims of another specific hypothesis, the *ribāṭ* as network. This interpretation has been (and perhaps still is) in some measure shared by other scholars. I do not expect that the network suggestion, some of which—see Section VII—is still very speculative, will win instant support, but I do hope that, by such argument, our understanding may be deepened, whether in acceptance or counter-argument.

And thirdly, to consider some of the wider implications, for Islamic and African historiography, of the uncertainty which, as we shall see, pervades much of the data.

*Ribāṭ*, or *rābiṭa*, is defined in the *Corpus* index as

a kind of fortified monastery in territory where Islam is struggling to establish itself. Its inmates, *murābiṭān*, are devoted to a life of asceticism and military discipline in the service of Islam.²

The Almoravid *ribāṭ* in particular has long been well established in the secondary literature. One of the foremost pioneer historians of western Africa, Maurice Delafosse, set the stage in 1912.³ The first two leaders of the new movement, Yaḥyā bin Ibrāhīm and ʿAbdullāh bin Yā Sīn, decided to withdraw together

...to an island or a peninsula between the sea and the Senegal, near the mouth of this river; one could, from the north bank of the Senegal, get to this island by a ford at low water, while it was necessary to use canoes at high water.

The two men, with seven loyal Juddāla (another Ṣanhāja subgroup) followers, built a hermitage on a hillock on the island, and shut themselves away there, vowing to adore God until their lives’ end.

At the end of three months, masses of people—principally Lamtūna—drawn especially by curiosity, came to the hermitage and begged to be taught; thus ʿAbdullāh [Ibn Yā Sīn] soon had a thousand disciples who no longer left the hermitage (*ribāṭ*) and whom, because of this, he called *al-murābiṭīn* (those of the *ribāṭ*, the hermits), a word which we have transformed into Almoravids...

For half a century, this was the accepted story. In 1962—just about the time that serious doubts concerning the whole island episode were beginning to surface—another commanding observer of this area and period, J.S. Trimingham, partly influenced by Delafosse, partly using the same sources as Delafosse, told how Ibn Yā Sīn and his earliest colleagues (Trimingham and Delafosse differ somewhat in their list of these)

constructed a *ribāṭ* or fortified fraternity centre⁴ somewhere on the Atlantic coast of Mauritanian.⁵ The *ribāṭ* soon won a great reputation as a recruiting
centre for a jihād and new followers, all Lamtūna, poured in. The subsequent history of the Murābītūn, as his followers came to be called, is an illustration of what militant Islam can accomplish...  

In fact, both Delafosse and Trimingham relied on a small number of fourteenth-century authorities for these details about eleventh-century events. Let us now turn to these sources themselves.

II. The island ribāṭ: (a) the fourteenth-century sources

The earliest surviving source for the story of the island retreat—and, as we shall see, the only source associating this explicitly with a ribāṭ—is the work of Ibn Abī Zarç of Fez, early in the fourteenth century. What sources Ibn Abī Zarç may himself have used, for the details of the island ribāṭ, is unknown. None are specified in this portion of his text—nor, as we shall see, can such details be found in surviving earlier sources, except maybe for a brief physical description of an island without any Almoravid link at all (in al-Bakrī, see below, p. 295).

Because of the central importance of Ibn Abī Zarç for our exploration here, we may quote his account of the island ribāṭ in full. When the Şanhāja saw that Ibn Yā Sin

was intent on making them abandon their wicked ways they shook him off, turned away from him, and shunned him, for they found his actions burdensome. Besides this he found that most of them did not pray or know aught of Islam except the declaration of faith (shahāda), and were entirely overcome by ignorance. When 'Abd Allāh b. Yāsin saw their opposition and the way in which they followed their fancies he wished to leave them and go to the land of the Südān who had adopted Islam (for Islam had made its appearance there). But Yahyā b. Ibrāhīm al-Gudālī would not let him,9 saying: ‘I shall not let you go away for I brought you here only that your learning might profit my person, my religion, and those of my people, for whom I am responsible, who are on the wrong path; but, Master, may I make you a suggestion if you wish to obtain the benefits of the hereafter?’ He replied: ‘What is it?’ He said: ‘Here in our country there is an island in the sea (bahr). When the water is low we reach it on foot, and when it is high we reach it by boat. On this island there is what is undoubtedly permissible in the way of wild trees, land and sea creatures to be hunted, various kinds of birds, beasts, and fishes. Let us settle there and live there off these permissible things10 and worship God until we die!’

‘Abd Allāh b. Yāsin said: ‘That is better. Let us go and settle there in the name of God.’ They did so, with seven men of Gudālī. He built a rābiḍah11 there and there stayed with his companions worshipping God for three months. People heard about them from each other that they sought Paradise and deliverance from Hellfire, and so the number of those who came to visit them and those who had repented increased. ‘Abd Allāh b. Yāsin began to teach them the Koran, to win them over to what is good, to plant in them
a desire for the divine reward, and to warn them against His painful punishment until love for him was firm in their hearts and before many days were past about a thousand disciples from among the nobility of Ṣanhāja had gathered round him. He called them murābiṭūn 'Almoravids', because of their settling in his rābiţa.\textsuperscript{12}

He began to teach them the Book and the Sunna, the ritual ablutions, the prayer, the almsgiving, and like obligations which God had imposed on them. When they had become versed in these matters and had become numerous he preached to them, admonished them, made them long for Paradise and fear Hell, ordered them to fear God, to command good and forbid evil, and told them of God’s reward and great recompense for these actions. Then he called upon them to make Holy War on the tribes of Ṣanhāja who opposed them, saying: ‘O Almoravids, you are a numerous body, the chiefs of your tribes and the heads of your clans. God has reformed you and led you to his straight path and put you under an obligation to be thankful for His grace and to command good and forbid evil and to fight the Holy War for his sake.’ They replied: ‘O blessed Shaykh, make what commands you will, you will find us obedient. Were you to order us to kill our parents we should do so.’\textsuperscript{13} ‘Go with God’s blessing,’ said he. ‘Warn your people. Make them fearful of God’s punishment. Tell them of His proofs (hujjaj). If they repent, return to the truth, and abandon their ways, let them be. But if they refuse, continue in their error, and persist in their wrongheadedness, then we shall ask for God’s help against them and wage holy war on them till God shall judge between us, for He is the Best of Judges.’\textsuperscript{14}

Seven days’ admonition having failed, jiḥād was unleashed, first against the Juddālā, amongst whom many of the unrepentant were slain. ‘The rest accepted Islam anew.’\textsuperscript{15}

This is a persuasive account, long and detailed, and dramatically told: no doubt part of its influence is due to these features. It was also—and this is no doubt important too—made accessible to modern scholars at an early date, 1860, in A. Beaumier’s French translation of the Rawd al-qirāṣ.\textsuperscript{16} There are, however, two other accounts of the same events, which need to be set alongside Ibn Abī Zarīc. Both are even later than he, but both are by serious historians.

The first is by Lisān al-Dīn bin al-Khaṭīb, who was born near Granada in Spain in 713/1313, worked at court in Granada and in Fez, and who died in Granada in 776/1375.\textsuperscript{17} Ibn al-Khaṭīb has this to say of the island retreat:

[‘ Abdullāh b. Yaṣīn] journeyed from [the Ṣanhāja] accompanied by Yahyā b. Ibrāhīm to one of the islands of the western sea, impelled by the divine command to devote himself solely to God and to wander on pilgrimage (siyāḥa), led by the spirit. Both men were accompanied by seven men of the Gudālā. Thereby [‘ Abdullāh b. Yaṣīn] renounced friendly association with mankind. God gave him sweet solace through [his companions]. They sur-
rounded him with their devotion. A few days passed, and—lo, about 1,000 men assembled with him! These he called Murābiṭūn, to undertake the jiḥād against their opponents. He commanded them to publish abroad grace, pardons and admonitions among their tribes for seven days. Then, when [ʿAbdullāh b. Yāsīn] despaired of their favourable response, he began to raid, commencing with the Gudāla...  

The third island account, after Ibn Abī Zar,c and Ibn al-Khaṭīb, is by Ibn Khaldūn, doyen of Arab historians, who died in 808/1406. Ibn Khaldūn tells of the work of the two reformers, Ibn Yā Sīn and Yaḥyā bin Ibrāhīm, amongst the Śanhāja.

Then Yaḥyā b. Ibrāhīm died, dissension broke out between them, and they rejected ʿAbd Allāh b. Yāsīn, made difficulties for him, and ceased to learn from him because of the stern discipline which they had to undertake.

So he turned away from them and embarked on a life of asceticism in company with Yaḥyā b. ʿUmar b. Tālāgāṭīn and his brother Abū Bakr, two of the chiefs of Lamṭūna. They withdrew from human society to an area of hillocks surrounded on all sides by the Nil, whose waters were low in summer but abundant in winter so that these hillocks became islands cut off. They entered the thickets of this island, withdrawing to worship God. Those who had the smallest grain of good in their hearts heard about them and made their way to them and joined them in their beliefs and devotions. When their number had swollen to 1,000 men of Lamṭūna their shaykh ʿAbd Allāh b. Yāsīn said: 'A thousand men are not to be vanquished on account of their fewness. We have been appointed to maintain the truth and summon others to it and induce everyone to embrace it, so let us go forth for that purpose!' So they sallied forth and fought those among the tribes of Lamṭūna, Gazūla, and Masūfa who resisted them until they returned to the Truth (ḥaqq) and settled firmly on the Right Way (ṣarīqa). ʿAbd Allāh authorized them to take the legal alms (ṣadāqa) from the property of Muslims and called them Murābiṭūn (Almoravids).  

III. The island ribāṭ: (b) assessment of the fourteenth-century evidence

There are manifest and sometimes substantial discrepancies amongst the three accounts just presented, particularly between Ibn Abī Zar,c and Ibn Khaldūn; Ibn al-Khaṭīb is the lightweight of the three, and clearly follows Ibn Abī Zar,c, though with touches of (further?) romanticisation creeping in. We may notice here a few examples of disagreement.

In Ibn Abī Zar,c’s account, the crucial intervention leading to the island is by the Juddālī pilgrim, Yaḥyā bin Ibrāhīm. Ibn al-Khaṭīb mentions Yaḥyā, but in a much less prominent way. Ibn Khaldūn says that Yaḥyā was dead before Ibn Yā Sīn thought of withdrawing anywhere.
Again, for Ibn Abî Zarç and for Ibn al-Khaṭīb both, the island enterprise is, at least initially, an explicitly Juddāla affair, whereas for Ibn Khaldūn it is Lamṭūna.

Further, there is disagreement about the location of the island. Ibn al-Khaṭīb, speaking of the western sea, seems unambiguously to site it on the Atlantic coast. Ibn Abî Zarç speaks of an island in the baḥr, which may mean either sea or river; but his reference also to high and low water, presumably meaning daily tidal variations, implies the Atlantic coastline. Ibn Khaldūn obviously means a river island. It seems quite likely that Ibn Abî Zarç took the physical description of his island direct from al-Bakrī, who writes:

Near Āwlīl in the sea is an island called Ayūnā [Ayūnī, Iyūnī etc]. At high tide it is an island which cannot be reached from the land but at low tide it may be reached on foot.20

On the other hand, it seems highly unlikely indeed that al-Bakrī, in describing this island, should altogether have omitted to comment on its crucial, ribāṭ-site role in the early evolution of the Almoravid movement, if it had in fact had such a role.

Finally, and in some ways most curiously of all, neither Ibn al-Khaṭīb nor Ibn Khaldūn mentions any ribāṭ or rābiṭa. Had such a mention occurred in the last of the three sources, or in the last two of them, we should have been left with the rather open-ended question, whence came such new information, information of such importance? As it is, we have instead to explain why Ibn al-Khaṭīb and Ibn Khaldūn, apparently deliberately, chose to omit this detail.21 Noth, who omits the Ibn al-Khaṭīb passage from his discussion, dismisses this line of argument. He suggests, not I think entirely plausibly, that the omission might have been an oversight on Ibn Khaldūn’s part, or that Ibn Khaldūn thought that the explanation of the name ‘Almoravid’ was unimportant.22 But it is not merely an explanation of a name which is missing: there is no mention of the term ribāṭ or rābiṭa whatever.

The clash of evidence, quite an elaborate clash as we have seen—and other instances might also be cited, such as dates—amongst Ibn Abî Zarç, Ibn al-Khaṭīb and Ibn Khaldūn does not definitively prove anything, either way. There are discrepancies amongst the Gospels. But it certainly should alert us to the need for caution in handling such evidence.

Turning now from the discordance amongst the three fourteenth-
century sources, concerning events in the mid-eleventh century, we may for a moment concentrate our attention upon some of Ibn Abī Zarī’s other data, since his is the fullest and most important account for our purposes. Commenting on Ibn Abī Zarī’s reliance upon al-Bakrī for much information concerning the early development of the Almoravids, the Corpus editors remark, with diplomatic understatement and periphrasis: ‘our author appears to have been an enterprising one, who used (perhaps even manipulated) al-Bakrī’s text in order to present what he considered a more meaningful history’.23 Fritz Meier, whose 80-page article, ‘Almoraviden und Marabute’, is by far the most detailed and extensive study of the subject, approaches Ibn Abī Zarī with similar courteous caution: ‘admittedly a clever writer, who reels off events like clockwork, and loves broad, simple lines’.24

As a single, but I hope sufficient, example of such meaningful manipulation, or pursuit of the broad brush stroke, we may look briefly at Ibn Abī Zarī’s presentation of Yaḥyā bin ʿUmar, who succeeded the pilgrim Yaḥyā bin Ibrāhīm as the so-to-speak secular head of the Almoravids, beside and beneath Ibn Yā Sin.

Al-Bakrī in the eleventh century, and Ibn Abī Zarī in the fourteenth, share an anecdote about Yaḥyā bin ʿUmar, flogged (without prior explanation) by Ibn Yā Sin for having needlessly exposed himself to danger in battle, a forbidden indulgence since the commander’s life is the life of his army.25 It is possible, therefore, that Ibn Abī Zarī had a copy of al-Bakrī on his desk as he wrote.

Al-Bakrī continued, describing how Ibn Yā Sin was later called north by a crisis in Sijīlmasa, and how, before leaving, he ordered Yaḥyā bin ʿUmar to stay at home, holed up in the mountains, holding the fort as it were against the Juddāla branch of the Ṣāhāja, the Juddāla having by now broken with the Almoravid movement. Yaḥyā bin ʿUmar was supported by Labī bin Wārjābī, the chief of Takrūr, a Negro state on the Senegal which had begun to accept Islam.26 The Juddāla attacked. The two armies met at a place called TBFRLY, in 488/1056-7. Yaḥyā bin ʿUmar was killed, and many of his warriors. ‘From that time the Almoravids made no more attempts against the Banū Gudāla.’27 This is an extremely interesting episode, in which black and white Muslims fight side-by-side against white apostates (so, at least in Almoravid eyes, the Juddāla were), and the Almoravid commander-in-chief is slain by fellow-Ṣāhāja.
Interesting it may indeed have been, but meaningful enough it evidently was not, as far as Ibn Abī Zarī was concerned. Here is the full biography of the unfortunate Yahyā bin ʿUmar, as given by our enterprising, clockwork historian. Ibn Yaḥ Sin

assembled the leaders of the tribes of Ṣāḥīḥa and placed Yahyā b. ʿUmar al-Lamṭūnī at the head of them and made him commander over them. When ʿAbd Allāh b. Yāsīn appointed Yahyā b. ʿUmar al-Lamṭūnī the Almoravid (who was a man of firm religion, virtue, sinlessness, asceticism, and uprightness) he commanded him to wage holy war. The emir Yahyā gained control of all the Desert and made raids on the land of the Sūdān, conquering much of it... The emir Abū Zakariyyā Yahyā b. ʿUmar died on one of his jiḥāds to the land of the Sudan.

Were it not for the identity of names, the innocent reader might be forgiven for thinking that two quite different individuals were being described: on the one hand the beleaguered Almoravid commander, sheltering in the mountains with his black allies, and finally slain by his own renegade Ṣāḥīḥa, and on the other the commander-in-chief of all the Ṣāḥīḥa, waging jiḥād, controlling the whole desert, raiding the land of the Sūdān and conquering much of that, before at last he fell on one of his jiḥād expeditions thither. It would be a rash undergraduate indeed who would attempt such enterprising meaningfulness in essay or exam: and were I to practise the same, as a professional historian, I would deserve to lose my job. This is apartheid history, with the precarious boundaries of race and religion considerably tidied up.

A final point to be made about the fourteenth-century, island-friendly sources—and here we return to the triumvirate together—concerns something which they all have in common: this is, that all are very late. It is all too easy, looking back over time at a relatively sparse scatter of events and sources, to lose sight of just how much time actually elapsed between one and another. According to al-Bakrī, the Almoravid movement began after 440/1048. The island retreat, if it ever occurred, must have been about the same time or a little earlier. Ibn Abī Zarī died about 715/1315, his editor and reviser, Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalim, died in 726/1326. A quarter of a millennium separates the alleged island event, and the first surviving account of it. Such a gap would take us back well before the American Revolution. Ibn al-Khaṭīb was later again, born in 713/1313, and still in swaddling clothes when Ibn Abī Zarī died. It was the following century before Ibn Khaldūn died, in 808/1406—he was writing well over 300 years after the emergence
of the Almoravids. And, in all the time between that emergence, and the first description by Ibn Abī Zarc of the island ribāt, nobody, amongst many interested and informed authorities, so much as mentioned the island episode.

Albrecht Noth, one of the first scholars critically to examine the evidence for the existence of an island ribāt, and its connection with the name Almoravid, and who rejects both hypotheses, does not attach significant weight to the silence of earlier sources. Ibn Abī Zarc might, Noth argues, have had access to some other tradition, unknown to the rest of our surviving authorities:32 he might have been following this, rather than some popular legend, rather even than just manipulating and making up. The possibility is there, to be sure, but it is I think unlikely, for two specific reasons.

Firstly, another historian, Ibn ʿIdhārī, a contemporary of Ibn Abī Zarc and having access to the apparently now lost work of a twelfth-century historian of the Almoravids, Ibn al-Ṣayrafi, follows not Ibn Abī Zarc but al-Bakrī, both about Yahyā bin ʿUmar’s death at Juddāla hands, and about the withdrawal (to which we shall come in a moment) of Ibn Yā Sin, not to any island, but to his old school to the north.33 And secondly, both Ibn Abī Zarc and Ibn Khaldūn locate their respective islands in the sequence of Almoravid development quite precisely, and both locate it at the same time. Ibn Yā Sin has arrived, has begun proclaiming his message, and the local Ṣanhāja, dismayed at the implications thereof, turn away from him. And, after his own withdrawal, Ibn Yā Sin fights his way back to power. In al-Bakrī, who of course does not mention any island episode, this sequence is pretty well paralleled. An extended period of peaceful relations between the missioner and local people is followed by violent reaction against him. Virtually driven out, Ibn Yā Sin travelled secretly, not to an island, but back to Wajjāj, his old teacher, who had first sent him to the Sahara as companion to Yahyā bin Ibrāhīm, the returning pilgrim. Fortified by the Islamic counterpart of bulls of excommunication from Wajjāj, against the disobedient Ṣanhāja, and ordered by Wajjāj to return to the Sahara, which he did, Ibn Yā Sin killed those who had rebelled against him, massacring many ‘whom he regarded as having deserved death because of their crimes or immorality’.34

Given al-Bakrī’s detailed knowledge of exactly the period in which the island ribāt is supposedly located, his silence on this par-
ticular matter does demand some explanation. The dog did not bark, and that, as Sherlock Holmes observed, was the whole point. Al-Bakrī’s silence alone, concerning the island ribāṭ, would be a significant witness: in fact, although he may have been the best informed, he was only one of many observers and recorders, one of a phalanx of dogs which did not bark.

Another Almoravid specialist, Paulo Farias, attempts to rescue something. He divides the island ribāṭ into two questions: was there ever a ribāṭ, in the sense of a building, in Almoravid south-western Sahara? and did the pioneer Almoravids ever withdraw to an island? In a highly detailed and extensive argument, incorporating archaeological and oral evidence from two research expeditions, mounted by the Institut fondamental d’Afrique noire, to the island of Tīdṛa on the Mauritanian coast in 1965 and 1966, Farias develops a tentative answer ‘no’ to the first question, and a tentative ‘yes’ to the second. Summarising the negative answer (p. 828), Farias says that no vestige of any building was found on Tīdṛa—seeming, at first sight, ‘to confirm the idea, developed in the present paper, that no Almoravid ribāṭ (in the sense of a building) ever existed’. He does not, however, exclude the possibility of a temporary shelter of some sort. Summarising the positive answer (p. 861, my brackets), he suggests:

The report of the retreat of Ibn Yāśīn and his followers to an island in the sea, recorded in the Rawd [of Ibn Abī Zar]c, seems not improbable, in the light of the comparison of the Rawd’s evidence to the results of the field work done by the IFAN expeditions. Such a retreat might have re-enacted to some extent early Islām’s pattern of the Hijra.

In my own view, the whole island ribāṭ hypothesis, sub-divided or not, is fatally undermined by its over-dependence on Ibn Abī Zarc. The lateness of this source, centuries after the event; the lack of earlier corroborative evidence elsewhere, even in accounts where we might justifiably have felt sure that the episode would be mentioned; the discrepancies between Ibn Abī Zarc and still later authorities; and the grotesque extravagances, in other respects, of which this author stands convicted—all these together are too strong to be counterbalanced by the largely circumstantial evidence which Farias has so painstakingly and scrupulously collected.

It is time, I believe, for the Almoravid Atlantis, island and ribāṭ, to sink finally beneath the waves, awaiting—who knows?—resurrection should some hitherto lost Almoravid source be rediscovered.
Where Ibn Abī Zarʿ got the idea of an island *ribāṭ* is a question to which we will return later (see below, 310). Before that, we need to consider the other surviving usages of the terms *ribāṭ* and *al-murābiṭūn*, Almoravids, the people of the *ribāṭ*, within the context of the western Saharan movement, from its first beginnings until the end of the fourteenth century.

**IV. Ribāṭ and murābiṭūn as terms in other early Arabic descriptions of the Almoravid movement:** (a) al-Bakrī

Abū ʿUbayd ʿAbd Allāh bin ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Bakrī, ‘undoubtedly one of the most important sources for the history of the Western Sudan’, was an Andalusian Muslim geographer, who died in 487/1094, and who had finished his *Kitāb al-masālik waʾl-mamālik*, ‘The Book of routes and realms’, in 460/1068.

He was a contemporary of the birth of the Almoravid movement, and evidently had good sources of information about the western Sahara and Sudan. He is certainly *a*, and perhaps *the*, crucial witness in the argument of the present essay.

We have already quoted his account of Ibn Yā Sīn’s earliest experiences amongst the desert Ṣanhāja, and we have seen how al-Bakrī makes no mention of an island retreat, much less of any *ribāṭ* upon such an island.

However, al-Bakrī does use the terms *ribāṭ*, *rābiṭa*, and *murābiṭ*, and we need to consider these references, two of them in some detail. Al-Bakrī was perfectly well aware of the physical, locational meaning of *ribāṭ*. He writes of a number of *ribāṭī* in Tripoli, the most frequented and best known of these being a mosque.

Indeed, there was even a material *rābiṭa*, always filled with people, built at the tomb of Ibn Yā Sīn. The fact that al-Bakrī was thus at home with the idea of *ribāṭ* as a building makes the distinctiveness of his two evidently non-building passages, to which we shall come in a moment, all the more noteworthy.

Al-Bakrī also uses the name Almoravids, without any special comment, very early in the expansionist military campaigns of the new movement. It is interesting to see how quickly this appellation had come into use.

Finally, let me quote the two key passages, in which al-Bakrī intimately associates the term *ribāṭ* with the Almoravid movement. These are at or near the heart of the matter in all discussion of the origins of the Almoravid name and movement.
First, al-Bakrī concludes a survey of pre-Almoravid Ṣanhāja Berber history in this way:

These are the tribes who after the year 440/1048 rose to proclaim the Truth (daʿwat al-haqq), to repel injustice, and to abolish all non-canonical taxes (magharīm). They were Sunnis, strict adherents of the school of Mālik b. Anas (may God grant him favour). The one who began this activity among them and called the people to Holy War and made them proclaim the truth was ‘Abd Allāh b. Yāsīn. This happened in the following way...41

I have italicised the vital phrase. The Arabic reads: wa-daʿā ʾl-nās ilā ʾl-ribāṭ wa-daʿwati ʾl-haqq. A more literal translation would be: and he called the people to the ribāṭ and to the daʿwah of the truth. Daʿwah may be safely translated as ‘proclamation’;42 whether ribāṭ is really ‘Holy War’ will be considered in Section VI below.

The second passage occurs in a list of unusual judgments by Ibn Yā Sīn:

When a man joins the cause (daʿwa) and repents for his past misdeeds they say to him: ‘You have committed in your youth many sins, so it is necessary that you be subjected to the punishment stipulated by the law, and so purified from your transgressions.’ The stipulated punishment for an adulterer is 100 lashes, for a slanderer 80 lashes; for a drunkard likewise, and sometimes even the number of lashes is augmented. It is in the same way that they treat those whom they have vanquished and compelled to join their Holy War. Yet if they know that he has killed someone they kill him, regardless of whether he came to them voluntarily, repenting, or was compelled to do so while openly recalcitrant.43

Again I have italicised the critical words. The Arabic reads: dakhala fī daʿwatihim, and, adkhalūhu fī ribāṭihim, ‘he entered their daʿwa’, ‘they made him enter their ribāṭ’. The distinction in the passage seems to be more between volunteers and pressed men (even if both are in fact treated with the same severity), than between daʿwa and ribāṭ. This passage, too, will be taken up again in Section VI.

V. Ribāṭ and murābiṭūn as terms in other early Arabic descriptions of the Almoravid movement: (b) after al-Bakrī

Al-Zuhrī, writing about the middle of the twelfth century, uses (like al-Bakrī) the name Almoravids, but (again like al-Bakrī) without any special comment.44 Al-Qāḍī ʿIyād, another twelfth-century figure, uses the name Almoravid without explanation; but he does add the interesting detail that the school of Wajjāj, Ibn Yā Sīn’s teacher, was called dār al-murābiṭūn.45 The anonymous Kitāb al-ʾistibṣār, still in the twelfth century, is another to use the name
Almoravid without comment. Abū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf b. Yaḥyā al-Tādīlī, known as Ibn al-Zayyāt, in the thirteenth century, provides a second reference to Wajjāj’s school as dār al-murābiṭīn. He does not refer to the Almoravids as such.

Ibn al-Athīr, who died in 630/1233, is the first to describe how the Almoravids were given their name: after Ibn Yā Sin had rallied his early supporters, he ‘urged them to Holy War for God’s sake and called them Almoravids’. A good deal of bloodshed followed, partly through trickery and execution, but there seems to have been some delay before fullscale jihād was let slip.

Ibn Khalīkān, later in the thirteenth century, claims that Yūsuf bin Tāshfīn first bestowed the name Almoravid upon his companions. No reason is specified for the name, and the report is incorrect, since we know from earlier sources, al-Bakrī among them, that the name was in use well before the rise of Yūsuf to power over the northern wing of the movement. Al-Dimashqī, who died in 727/1327, and who lived all his life in Syria, mentions the Almoravids, but offers no comment on the name.

Ibn Qurṭūsī, writing early in the fourteenth century, describes the baptism of the movement in this way. Adherents had raided fellow Berbers who refused the call to convert. The raiders took captives, and divided these among themselves, their amīr Yaḥyā bin ʿUmar taking ‘the Fifth’.

This was the first Fifth divided by the Lamtūniyyūn in their desert. At that time they had lost more than half the number of their army but their leader ʿAbd Allāh b. Yāsin encouraged them until they overcame their enemies and ʿAbd Allāh called them the ‘Murābiṭīn’ and called their amīr Yaḥyā b. ʿUmar ‘Amīr al-Ḥaqq’.

This is the closest that any source thus far in our survey has come to linking the name of the movement explicitly with military action, though Ibn al-Athīr certainly tended in that direction. We may notice also the implication, in the division of booty according to the law, of some central organisation and control of finance.

Ibn Abī Zarf, also early in the fourteenth century, we have already met at close quarters. TheRawd al-qirṭās uses the name Almoravid frequently, adding two details of special interest to us. It refers to Wajjāj ‘teaching and summoning men to what is good, in a ṛibāṭa’. And, as we have seen in the long island account, it was there, and apparently some time before they were sent out to
preach, let alone fight, that Ibn Yā Sīn gave his colleagues the title Almoravids.54

_Al-hulal al-mawshiyya_, another anonymous work (possibly by Ibn Sammāk), completed in 783/1381, evidently follows Ibn ʿIdhārī. Here again the Lamtūna, under Yaḥyā bin ʿUmar, raid Berbers who have refused to convert:

They defeated them and took them prisoner and divided up their property. They abstracted the fifth of their prisoners and it is said that he was the first to take the fifth of the share of the Lamtūna in their desert. Many of them lost their lives in this struggle, whereupon the shaykh Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. Yāsīn gave to them the name of _murābiṭ_ because of the extreme endurance which he saw in them and their valour against the infidels.55

And finally Ibn Khaldūn, whom we have already quoted (see p. 294 above), concludes his island account with the retreating sallying forth and conquering those Berbers who resided them.

ʿAbd Allāh [Ibn Yā Sīn] authorized them to take the legal alms (ṣadqa) from the property of Muslims and called them _Murābiṭūn_ (Almoravids). He gave the command in war to the emir Yaḥyā b. ʿUmar.56

Here the element of organised finance has been somewhat altered and promoted, while the link between the name and actual fighting has become less clear.

What light does this body of evidence throw on the question of the origins of the name Almoravid? We have already discussed, and dismissed, the island _ribāṭ_ hypothesis. Two other theories have been put forward, and have received varying degrees of support amongst scholars. One, currently the front runner, is the _ribāṭ_ as _jihād_. The other is the _ribāṭ_ as organisation, or according to modern terminology as ‘network’, in a religious and educational sense.

**VI. The _ribāṭ_ as _jihād_**

Here, _ribāṭ_ becomes an activity, rather than a place. And that activity was warfare, against the infidels. Farias was one of the first to elaborate this argument. He linked it with

an original _Qur'ānic_ meaning....connected with _Jihād_ either through the idea of tying horses to assemble and prepare them for Holy War or through the idea of arranging the warriors in ranks for combat.

He marshalled evidence to suggest

strongly that the reenactment by Ibn Yāsīn of the military tactics of early Islam is the clue to understanding why he gave the name _Al-Murābiṭūn_ to his followers.
In the context of the Almoravide movement, it seems that the words ribāṭ and murābiṭūn did not refer to any fortified building or "monastery", but rather meant "the movement of those who wage Holy War", or "the movement of those who practise the correct way of waging Holy War".57

I am not entirely persuaded by this ingenious, and very scholarly, argument. Al-Bakrī does indeed give some striking details about Almoravide tactics:58 but if these very tactics had been so ultra-respectable in their Quranic models, and so currently charged as to provide the new movement with its name, I would have expected al-Bakrī to comment on this, particularly since he himself uses this name.59

The Quranic link is not essential for this hypothesis. Noth, for example, argues cogently for warfare as a possible interpretation of ribāṭ. Indeed, he introduces a further refinement: jihād is large-scale warfare, ribāṭ small-scale.60

Meier makes the essential link with the two key passages from al-Bakrī. In these, he argues, it is quite clear that we have a pair of opposites, the proclamation on one side, ribāṭ on the other. 'The proclamation of the truth can only be the language of the tongue, and the ribāṭ only threat [drohung] and the language of weapons. The murābiṭūn thus get the name from the use of weapons.'61

We have already seen (p. 301 above) how wholeheartedly the Corpus editors embrace this point of view. In both al-Bakrī passages ribāṭ is translated Holy War. The first passage has a footnote, and the painstaking reader who consults it at the back of the volume will be alerted, albeit somewhat obliquely, to the concealed ribāṭ:

Both ribāṭ and da'wa have a politico-religious connotation. On ribāṭ as the equivalent of jihād 'holy war', see Farias (1967). Da'wa (lit. 'call, appeal, summoning') became closely associated with the missionary and propagandist effort of politico-religious movements (e.g. the Abbāsid da'wa or the Fātimid da'wa).62

As for the second al-Bakrī citation, there is nothing in the Corpus to betray that ribāṭ lies behind this second 'Holy War' also.

Does al-Bakrī really carry such a warlike construction? I do not think so. In the first passage, it is just possible. But it seems a forced reading. The passage is a general introductory statement, before al-Bakrī has even begun to tell the Almoravide story. He sets out several general principles, a sort of Almoravide party-political platform: proclamation of the truth, repelling injustice, tax reforms, strict application of Mālikī law—and, ribāṭ. It is impossible, now,
to say what *ribāṭ* really meant here: however, the package as a whole seems to me rather non-military.

In the second passage, I think the *jihād* reading is impossible. I have already suggested (see above, p. 00) that the underlying distinction is between the man who volunteers, who ‘enters’—*dakhala*—and him whom the Almoravid have vanquished and ‘make enter’—*adkhala*. The pairing of the two verbs is inescapable. The distinction is then spelt out a second time: on the one hand the man who comes ‘voluntarily, repenting’, and on the other the man who ‘was compelled...while openly recalcitrant’. Now, al-Bakrī speaks, for the volunteer, of the *daʿwa*, and for the pressed man, of the *ribāṭ*. If these two, *daʿwa* and *ribāṭ*, are really the key contrast, then the logical conclusion seems to be that, if you volunteer, you get a cushy office job in the Ministry of Propaganda, whereas if you wait too long and have to be compelled, then you go straight into the ranks of the army. This, obviously, makes no sense at all. De Slane was evidently aware of the problem, in his translation of al-Bakrī. In the first passage, his main text leaves the Arabic term, ‘au *ribat*’, but a footnote explains that this means ‘à la guerre sainte’, to the holy war.63 In the second passage, rightly sensing that al-Bakrī must here be using both *daʿwa* and *ribāṭ* with some common meaning, de Slane translates both as ‘secte’.64 This may not be the best translation, but the search for a *common* element, a shared implication, is surely correct.

Al-Bakrī’s alleged support for the *ribāṭ* as *jihād* hypothesis seems thus rather to crumble away. If the hypothesis is to be satisfactorily defended, we need to look elsewhere for additional evidence. Turning back to Section V, after al-Bakrī, the next four authors to touch upon ‘our’ terminology do not suggest any military link-up: on the contrary, two of the four mention the word *murābiṭūn* in connection with Wajjāj’s school, where Ibn Yā Sīn had been a student before becoming a missionary. Ibn al-Athīr is the first to make such a connection, between name and military activity.65 He is already a somewhat late authority (he died in 630/1233): he was also far away, born and living most of his life in Mosul, also visiting Baghdad and Aleppo. He cites none of his sources. ‘His account of the origins of the Almoravids,’ state the *Corpus* editors, ‘...often contradicts evidence from other sources (mostly from the Maghrib, and therefore apparently more reliable).’66

Ibn ‘Idhārī (see above, pp. 298, 302), writing in the early four-
teenth century and a contemporary of Ibn Abī Zarā', relies heavily
on al-Bakrī, and on other sources otherwise inaccessible to us. As
we have seen, he speaks of Ibn Yā Sīn encouraging his men in bat-
tle, and calling them murābiṭūn: the link between weapons and the
name is not quite explicit, but seems implicit. Al-Ḥulal (see above,
p. 303), completed in 783/1381, following Ibn ʿIdhārī closely, does
make the link explicit: Ibn Yā Sīn ʿgave to them the name of murābiṭ
because of the extreme endurance which he saw in them and their
valour against the infidels’. Did the author of al-Ḥulal have access
to other sources for this elaboration? or is it merely embroidery
upon Ibn ʿIdhārī’s simpler statement, embroidery in terms which
might have seemed appropriate more than three-and-a-quarter
centuries after the event? When Ibn Khaldūn mentions the nam-
ing, the fighting connection has almost disappeared.

The case against the ribāṭ as jihād hypothesis is, perhaps, not
strong enough to rule out that hypothesis altogether. But the case
is, I believe, quite sufficient to prevent any positive endorsement
of the hypothesis. The most that advocates of the hypothesis can hope
for is a ‘not proven’ verdict, neither for, nor against. I am not, of
course, arguing that ribāṭ could never mean jihād; there is ample
evidence that it could and often did. I am arguing that the evidence
that the name Almoravid, in the eleventh-century, Saharan con-
text, derived from the practice of jihād is, at best, uncertain.

One final detail under this heading. The last three witnesses, Ibn
ʿIdhārī, al-Ḥulal, Ibn Khaldūn, all mention organised, legal finan-
cial arrangements in these ‘naming’ passages. Is it possible that the
name has something to do with the emergence of administrative
structures of some kind? One further related point: two of the
three—not Ibn Khaldūn—mention finance in terms of booty and
its proper division. Booty could not, legally, be taken from
Muslims: is another implication here that the Almoravids are
accusing their opponents not merely of disobedience, or wrong-
doing, but of outright kufr, unbelief? 67 Or, is it possible that this is
a hard-line interpretation of past events, which is being read back
into them, in order to firm up denominational definitions and party
demarcation lines? Al-Bakrī speaks, not only of Ibn Yā Sīn taking
booty, i.e. from non-Muslims, but also of his confiscating one-third
of the property of conquered adversaries, leaving two-thirds, now
purified by this exaction, with its original owners, 68 i.e. regarding
them as fellow-Muslims, albeit Muslims who might earlier have
acquired their property in an improper way, and/or who might have neglected to pay due taxes on their property.69

VI. The ribāṭ as network

I have in mind here ribāṭ understood as a kind of religious and educational network. This is my own preferred hypothesis, though admittedly the evidence has to be pieced together with some care. We have already noticed two early, good, twelfth-century sources, evidently to a considerable extent independent of each other, al-Qāḍī ‘Iyād and al-Tādīlī, who refer to Wajjāj’s school as dār al-murābiṭīn, the house of the murābiṭīn (see pp. 301-2 above, and nn. 45 and 47). Even Ibn Abī Zarī speaks of Wajjāj teaching in a ribāṭa (or, ‘in his ribāṭ’), and summoning men to what is good (see p. 302 above, and n. 53). As this is a North African detail, rather than a western Saharan one, Ibn Abī Zarī may even be right.70 It is not difficult to imagine this name being carried over to the Almoravid movement, when that was launched by the most distinguished ‘old boy’ of the dār al-murābiṭīn. The Corpus editors suggest that the school may have been the origin of the name of the movement (see below, n. 45). Cuoq makes the same suggestion.71 This seems to me very likely. The name itself, and the links binding this particular part of the network together, would have been reinforced by Ibn Yā Sīn’s return to Wajjāj, having been for the moment expelled by the recalcitrant Ṣanhāja (see above, p. 298).72

The original partner of Ibn Yā Sīn, Yaḥyā bin Ibrāhīm of the Juddāla, had first become involved in all this when he went on pilgrimage. Returning, he stopped at Qayrawan, and was profoundly influenced by a teacher there, Abū ʿImrān from Fez. The Mālikī clerics of Qayrawan had a long tradition of the vigorous defence of the faith, not only against non-Muslims, but against those whom they regarded as deviant Muslims. Yaḥyā bin Ibrāhīm was here plugging into a very powerful and committed network indeed. He begged for a missioner whom he might take back to the Sahara with him, to help straighten out religious affairs there. (It is interesting to note that he does not say that his people at home were unbelievers, only that they were defective believers. It is also interesting, and a tribute to the zeal which Yaḥyā bin Ibrāhīm encountered in Qayrawan, that it was only there, and on his way home from Mecca, that he realised that there might be some short-
coming in the Islam of the southwestern Sahara.) Abu ʿImrān could find noone in Qayrawan willing to go with Yahyā. This in itself may be a reminder of just how peripheral the southern Sahara seemed to the Muslim world even of North Africa: it is also a hint that there were limits to what the network might demand even of its most committed adherents. So Abū ʿImrān sent Yahyā bin Ibrāhīm instead to Wajjāj, who had himself studied with Abu ʿImrān, and Wajjāj in turn supplied Yahyā with Ibn Yā Sin as the response to his request for help.73

As a tiny morsel of corroborative evidence for the ‘network’ theme, we may recall how de Slane, translating al-Bakrī, used ‘secte’ for both daʿwa and ribāṭ (see above, p. 305), and we may also cite de Slane’s ribāṭ footnote (see below, n. 37):

The Almoravids... had taken this name because they formed a religious order and because the initiates were affiliated to their ribāṭ. Thus, with them, the expression to attach oneself to the ribāṭ, or rabata, signified becoming a member of the ‘corps’ of the Almoravids.74

The network sense of ribāṭ, with disciples bound to their masters, may also help make sense of the fact that later leaders of the movement are said to have bestowed the title murābiṭūn on their followers. We have seen one possible instance of this, in Ibn Khallikān who wrote that Yusuf bin Tāshfīn was the first to call his companions Almoravids (see p. 302 above, and n. 49). That he was the first is certainly not true; we know that the name was current well before Yusuf’s time. But this passage, and similar namings attributed to other, still later, leaders, may possibly indicate some kind of pledge, or renewed pledge, of loyalty. Ribāṭ might thus come almost to mean the link between ruler and subject, master and man, teacher and disciple.75

VIII. Some historiographical considerations

I should like to make four suggestions here. Firstly, that the pattern of events described in this paper is, if stripped to the bare essentials, a prototypical model of innumerable such interventions in the history of black Africa, up to and including today. There is a foreign expert, foreign at least to the receiving group, foreign by origin, maybe, or by training and experience, or whatever. He comes in, whether by invitation or intrusion. Lacking the sensitivity and sagacity necessary to heed the particularities of the local
situation, often indisposed in principle to pay attention to such finer points, he stirs up resentment and resistance, or simply creates disturbance. To handle the new situation thus created, the intruder, often over-reacting, appeals to some higher outside authority, if he can—if he cannot, the evolving story is likely to be broken off here. Such an appeal leads to new pressure on the receiving group, which finds that it has no option any longer to reject, but must accept and adjust. But finally, whether for all the receiving group or perhaps only for some favourably placed individuals within it, there remains the hi-jack option: to take over the new elements, and to use them for old, or at least locally determined, purposes.

This, in a nutshell, is the early Almoravid story. Ibn Yā Sin, radically altered by intensive training away from the southwestern Sahara, is introduced, or reintroduced, there. His severe mercy plunges Saharan society into uproar, and he is driven out. Fortified with renewed authority from Wajjáj, Ibn Yā Sin returns, breathing forth threatenings and slaughter, and imposes himself by force. And, within a brief period, the new religious ideal has been re-shaped as a weapon which the Ṣanhāja may use against their age-old enemies the Zanāta, and which, within the Ṣanhāja family, the Lamtūna may use against their fellow-Ṣanhāja rivals. There were indeed setbacks, as at the battle of TBFRLY, where the backsliding Juddāla defeated the Lamtūna, but it would not be long before the whole movement might be called, not only the Almoravids, or the mulaththamūn (or veiled ones), but also the Lamtūniyyūn, even though other groups continued to participate.

How often might such a sequence be paralleled in the history of precolonial Africa? In the colonial period, how often did the enterprising District Officer, or some colonial specialist or other, seek to play the role of Ibn Yā Sin? In the early independence period, how often did the trappings of nation-state, democracy, and the like, fall victim to the hi-jack option? And today, perhaps we may see Ibn Yā Sin once again, in the new and strange guise of the development expert, the dispenser of aid, the man from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

Secondly, the influence of prototypes from Islamic history needs careful assessment. Such models may well be consciously adopted by Muslims of later ages. Examples are legion: for instance, Usuman dan Fodio launched the military stage of his reform movement in 1804 by copying explicitly, in northern Nigeria, the hijrah
or withdrawal of the Prophet from Mecca to Madina. No doubt the early Almoravids were guided, in innumerable ways, by such prototypes. There is also, however, the likelihood that later scholars may read such prototypes back into intermediate periods. This, I think, was what Ibn Abī Zarṣ did (with Ibn al-Khaṭīb closely, and Ibn Khaldūn loosely, taking their cue from him). Confronted with a name, Almoravid, of which he did not (as I believe) know the real explanation in this specific case, Ibn Abī Zarṣ created a physical ribāṭ, for which there were of course many historical antecedents. Since such antecedents and prototypes are drawn from a common store, it may sometimes be difficult to distinguish between actual actions copied from that store and put into practice, and assumed actions read back into the record by later analysts.

_Hijrah_, just mentioned, is a particularly interesting example, for our present purposes, of such a prototype. The possibility of finding an eleventh-century _hijrah_ within the Almoravid context exercises considerable fascination for modern scholars—we have already mentioned an allusion of this kind by Farias (see p. 299 above). The island ribāṭ would fit this model well. It is striking, however, that so far as I know none of the early sources, not even in the great age of the imagination in the fourteenth century, actually mentions _hijrah_. A possible explanation may be the following. The Prophet’s _hijrah_ was from Mecca, his home, the centre of his attention. After he had withdrawn thence, he bent every effort to securing a triumphant return. If the argument of the previous section is valid, that Wajjāj’s school was the home-base of Ibn Yā Sin who was sent out on a mission to a remote frontier district, then his expulsion from that district, an expulsion which in fact brought him home again, was not _hijrah_. It was, momentarily, a failed mission, a failed expedition. To travel from the Sahara, to Wajjāj’s _dār al-murābiṭin_, was not to sacrifice home, to leave behind property and loved ones, or any other such elements of prototypical _hijrah_. That the concept continues to surface in modern literature about the Almoravids is, I think, a result of the continuing influence of Ibn Abī Zarṣ, who, though he did not go so far as to mention _hijrah_ himself, nevertheless did set up a scenario within which the term might conceivably be applied, even though the contrast between the presumably uninhabited island, and Madina where the Prophet already had adherents expecting him, suggests that the alleged island retreat partook more of the nature of _khalwa_ (see below, nn. 12 and 75) than of _hijrah_.

Thirdly, and very briefly, I think that there is a tendency to overestimate the extent of military action within the story of Islamic development in black Africa. Some modern apologetic, which plays down the use of the sword altogether, and which turns those wars which indubitably did happen into defensive wars, goes too far, and is quite unconvincing. There was a lot of bloodshed, and the Almoravids were no doubt first and foremost warriors. Perhaps more 'foremost' than 'first': if my argument in Section VII is correct, it is worth noticing that the initial Almoravid impulse in the Sahara was, however hardline, primarily a preaching affair, not a war. War followed, all too soon, partly because local people began turning the new movement to their own old purposes, partly (I suspect) because Ibn Yā Sin and Wajjāj, as academic theorists, were not skilful enough administrators and diplomats to keep the lid on events in the Sahara. On the contrary, when the pot boiled over, when events began to go out of control, Wajjāj and Ibn Yā Sin over-reacted, and fullscale war became inevitable. But this was not the first step, nor, I believe, was the name Almoravid first written in the Saharan sand by the sword.

Fourthly, and finally, the evidence illustrates how remote black Africa, bilād al-sūdān, actually was. Al-Bakrī seems to have had unusually good information in this respect: but for the most part, it is a story either of the neglect of the interaction of black and white along the Sahel, the southern shore of the desert, or, as we saw in Abī Zarqā’s account of Yaḥyā bin ʿUmar, of fantastical embroidery (see pp. 296-7, above). The clearest example of this sort of thing, about this time, is the story of the alleged conquest of Ghana by the Almoravids in 1076, a story which I believe to be almost entirely a fabrication to suit North African (and later, European also) tastes. Ghana does not come within the scope of this article; I mention it only as a reminder of the caution needed in handling Arabic materials for the early history of black Africa. We do not need to go as far as the late H.F.C. (Abdullahi) Smith, who concluded a catalogue of generally quite legitimate complaints about the unreliability of Arab geographers as a source for the study of sub-Saharan Africa with these words:

Finally it is important to realise that these writings show substantial racial prejudice against the Negroes on the part of the authors, prejudice which destroys their value as source material for African history.

That prejudice destroys the value of source materials seems a rather
doubtful historical proposition. But, remembering, Ibn Abī Zarī and Yaḥyā bin ʿUmar, we do need to be careful.

NOTES

1. Corpus of early Arabic sources for West African history, N. Levitzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, eds., Cambridge University Press (with financial assistance from UNESCO), 1981. This splendid volume, an absolutely indispensable tool, too expensive to reach many libraries within Africa, is now alas out of print, the final few copies having been, astonishingly, remaindered.

2. This entry, on p. 478, is not altogether satisfactory. As we shall see, there are a number of variant meanings for ribāṭ, some even used by the Corpus editors themselves. And the personalisation of a religion—here, Islam struggling to establish itself—always causes me some anxiety.


4. Here Trimingham adds a discursive footnote on the meaning of ribāṭ.

5. Here Trimingham adds a footnote describing some of the discrepancies amongst the surviving original sources, but still without radically questioning what they report.


7. Ibn Abī Zarī died about 715/1315. The surviving text of his book is probably a somewhat later and somewhat shortened version, done by Ibn ʿAbd al-Hašim, who died in 726/1326. The brief popular title of the book is the Rawd al-Qirtās, ‘The garden of paper’. See Corpus, 234, for these and other details. Norris, in a personal communication of 29 April 1992, suggests ‘The watery glade of papyrus’ as a translation more elegant and also admissible. Or, Qirtās may be a proper name, referring to gardens in Fez (Farias, ‘Almoravids’, 864; see below, n. 35).

8. The Corpus editors (234) say that Ibn Abī Zarī did undoubtedly have independent sources.

9. F. Meier, ‘Almoraviden und Marabute’, Die Welt des Islams, 1981, 21, 120, speculates that Ibn Yā Sin may have intended to recoup his forces in the land of the Südān, and at a later time to return, perhaps with an army of black warriors; admitting that these thoughts are not explicit in our surviving sources, Meier nevertheless adds that Yahyā bin Ibrāhīm ‘must have’ feared something of the sort, because he made a counter-suggestion.

10. Al-Bakrī commented on Ibn Yā Sin’s dietary scruples. Even when Ibn Yā Sin dwelt amongst his own early followers, he ‘refrained from eating their meat and drinking their milk because he considered that their property was impure; he lived only from hunting in the desert’ (Corpus, 71). The symbolism of food, and who eats what with whom, can be of enormous potency in the religious context, witness the troubled history of the Christian Eucharist.

11. The Corpus editors (409 n. 15) state that this is the same as a ribāṭ. A. Noth confirms this, at least for the Maghrib and Spain (‘Das Ribāṭ der Almoraviden’, in W. Hoenerbach, ed., Der Orient in der Forschung: Festschrift für Otto Spies zum 5. April 1966, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1967, 500 n. 5); Noth cites the article by G. Marçais, ‘Ribāṭ’, in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, iii. 1244b, where, however, Marçais does differentiate.
12. The words following the final comma, ‘because of their settling in his ṭābi‘a, li-luzūmīhi ṭābi‘atathu, are omitted, without comment, in the Corpus (240, line 16). This must have been simply an oversight on the editors’ part. The original Arabic they cite includes the words, as does every other text or translation which I have been able to consult—including the Geschichte der Mauritanischen Könige, a translation by Franz von Dombay, 1794-5. (The place of publication, Agram in Croatia, suggests that some kind of historical wheel seems to have come full circle here.)

The word luzūm may perhaps have some special religious resonance of its own. In 1493, a scholar named Muhammad al-Lamtunī, probably in the Air region of the southern central Sahara, spoke of lūzūm al-khālwa, ‘staying in solitude’, as an activity of some local clerics. J. Hunwick, ‘Notes on a late fifteenth-century document concerning “al-Takrūr”’, in C. Allen and R.W. Johnson, eds., African Perspectives, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 10-1, 19; the precise reference in the published Arabic which Hunwick cites is p. 382, line 3 from the bottom. For further mention of khalwa, see n. 75 below.

13. The whole episode is highly liminal, and thus in many respects profoundly moving, motivating and liberating. A central aspect of liminal experience is total obedience, here illustrated by the willingness of Ibn Yā Sin’s followers to do whatever he commands, however repugnant: such blind surrender of all individual responsibility is one of the most threatening aspects of liminality. For further discussion of liminality, particularly in the Islamic context, and additional references, see my ‘Liminality, hijra and the city’, in N. Levitzion and H.J. Fisher, eds., Rural and urban Islam in West Africa, Lynne Rienner, Boulder and London, 1987, 147-71.

14. Quran 7.87.

15. Corpus, 239-41. The late Père Joseph M. Cuqoq (235) renders the last point thus: le restant embrassé l’Islam pour la première fois, ‘the rest embraced Islam for the first time’. Cuqoq seems thus to suggest an assault upon non-Muslims, with those being killed who refused to convert, while converts were spared. In fact, the Arabic, wa-aslama al-baqīn islāman jadīdan, ‘and the rest submitted (aslama) with a new submission (islām)’, seems clearly better rendered by the Corpus than by Cuqoq. The most likely implication here is that the local people were shifting from one form of Islam to another, more correct at least in Almoravid eyes—from untutored Islam to a more sophisticated understanding and observance of the faith, and/or from Ibadī to Sunni Islam of the Mālikī school. And, indeed, much of the major Islamic military activity in western Africa has been directed more towards repentence and reformation amongst professing Muslims, than towards the first conversion of non-Muslims.—Cuqoq’s Recueil des sources arabes concernant l’Afrique occidentale du VIIIe au XVIIe siècle (Bilād al-sūdān), Paris, 1975, remains a monumental achievement. In some measure superseded by the English Corpus, which was published six years later, the Recueil still offers a great deal, facilitating interesting comparisons with the Corpus, and sometimes including items or authors—al-Maghili at the end of the fifteenth century is the outstanding instance—omitted by the Corpus or falling outside its scope.

16. The Corpus editors (234) describe this translation as now outdated.


18. This passage is taken, brackets included, from Norris, Saharan myth, 97; he takes it (118, note D) from Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb, Tārīkh al-maghrib al-‘arabī fi-l-‘asr al-wasit, vol. iii of Kitāb a‘māl al-‘alām, eds. Ahmad Mukhtar al-‘Ibādī and Muḥammad Ibraḥīm al-Kattānī, Casablanca, 1964, 227-8. Neither the Corpus, nor Cuqoq’s Recueil, includes this passage.
20. Corpus, 77.
21. The Corpus editors (234) remark: ‘this text of Ibn Abî Zarî used extensively by Ibn Khaldûn’.
23. Corpus, 234.
24. p. 123: zugegebenemassen ein gewandter schriftsteller, der die vorgänge am schnürchen erzählt und die grossen, einfachen linien liebt.
25. Corpus, 72 and 242. Interestingly, the Egyptian scholar al-Šuyûṭî, a man of moderate opinions, answering questions from the western Sahara about 1493, ruled that a commander is allowed deliberately to seek martyrdom in battle, even if this might jeopardise Muslim fortunes, provided only that he must first have prepared his army properly for battle. Hunwick, ‘Notes’ (see n. 12 above), 23, 27.
26. For al-Bakri’s account of the conversion of Takrûr, see Corpus, 77.
27. Corpus, 72-3.
28. Here I omit the flogging incident.
30. Though, to his credit, Ibn Abî Zarî did mention Ibn Yâ Sin’s own early inclination to leave the Ṣanḥâja and to ‘go to the land of the Sûdân who had adopted Islam (for Islam had made its appearance there)’; Corpus, 239, see also above, p. 292 and n. 9.
31. Corpus, 70.
33. Corpus, 218 (here Ibn ʿIdhârî adds that some say Ibn Yâ Sin only wrote to his teacher Wajjāj at this point, not going himself in person), 222; see also 465.
34. Corpus, 71-2. To be sure, there is at the very beginning of this account of Ibn Yâ Sin’s first arrival, a fleeting moment which might just conceivably conceal an island episode:

Yahyâ [bin Ibrâhîm] took ʿAbd Allâh b. Yâsîn with him to his home, where 70 persons assembled to learn and obey. The Gudâla then raided the Banû Lamûna.... (Corpus, 71)

But the extremely cursory nature of this notice, together with the fact that the episode seems to have taken place at Yahyâ’s home, make any island interpretation, or interpolation, seem very dubious.
37. Mâc Guckin de Slane, tr., Description de l’Afrique septentrionale par Abou-Obeïd-el-Bekri, 1911-1913, reprinted Paris, 1965, 20-1 (French), 7 lines 9-10 (Arabic). There is a long footnote here, in the French, by de Slane, discussing the meaning, both devotional and military, of ribâṭ as a physical establishment. See also 170 and 171 (French), 84 lines 6 and 17-8 (Arabic); 306 (French), 161 lines 4-3 from the bottom (Arabic). For other locational ribâṭ’s, see Ibn Zûlûk in Cuoq, Recueil, 79.
38. De Slane, Description, 318 (French, reading ‘ribâṭ’), 168 lines 5-4 from the bottom (Arabic). The Corpus (74) translates this as ‘hostel’, and there is nothing to indicate what Arabic term lies behind the English. Cuoq, Recueil, 92, gives ‘un ribâṭ (râbiṭa)’.
39. Corpus, 72-5.
40. Noth, ‘Das Ribât’, 499, points out that although ‘Almoravids’ is only one of the names used for the movement in the Arabic sources, and perhaps not even the most common, nevertheless it commands special attention as the name, apparently, which adherents of the new movement used of themselves.
41. Corpus, 70; see de Slane, Description, 311 (French), 164 lines 4-3 from the bottom (Arabic), for the vital phrase.

42. In the sense of what is proclaimed—cause, teaching, doctrine—as well as its actual proclamation. Meier, ‘Almoravidien’, 131 n. 241, mentions possible uncertainty even with da`wa. See also above p. 304-5.

43. De Slane, Description, 319 (French), 169 lines 12-3 and 16-7 (Arabic), for the vital phrases; the English is that of the Corpus, 74-5. The French translation of Cuqoq preserves the Arabic in both cases—‘les appella au ribât et à l’action pour la Verité’ (Recueil, 86), called them to the ribât and to action for the Truth, and, ‘les vaincus ou les ralliés à leur ribât’ (93), the conquered or those brought together to their ribât.

44. Corpus, 95, 98.

45. Corpus, 101-2. The editors (p. 389, n. 2) suggest that this may have been the origin of the name murābiṭūn as applied to the whole movement; we shall return to this interesting idea in Section VII; it is not, however, spelt out by ʿIyād himself.

46. Corpus, 150.

47. Corpus, 155.

48. Corpus, 157, 160-1, where the Corpus ‘Holy War’ is jihād.

49. Corpus, 165, 398 (the first n. 7).

50. Corpus, 204, 209.

51. Corpus, 216, 220-1. For Ibn ʿIdhārī, see above, pp. 298, 302, 305-6.


54. Corpus, 240. See p. 293 above, and n. 12, for discussion of a phrase apparently omitted by the Corpus editors.

55. Corpus, 312, 419 n. 11.

56. Corpus, 329.

57. These quotations come from ‘The Almoravids’, 816-7; the whole of Section II, entitled ‘The significance of the Almoravid methods of waging war’, of this article is relevant, 808-20.

58. Corpus, 72.


61. ‘Almoravidien’, 133-4, Meier’s italics.

62. Corpus, 385 n. 20.

63. Description, 311 and n. 1 (French), 164 line 3 from the bottom (Arabic).

64. Description, 319 (French), 169 lines 12-3 and 16-7 (Arabic).


68. Corpus, 72, 74. For booty in al-Bakrī, see 71, 74.

69. Michael Brett, in a very interesting article, has suggested that the Almoravids accused their opponents of both ʿadāwa, hostility to the Law on the part of those who had never accepted it, and ʿadā’, (from the same root, meaning sin), hostility to the Law manifested by those who break its commandments even while professing the faith, and that the Almoravids took both these condemnations

70. Even so, Ibn Abī Zarīc may be here imposing his own preference for a physical building on the possibly more associational implications of dār al-murābīthin.

71. *Receuil*, 89 & n.

72. If Ibn Yā Sīn’s temporary withdrawal to the dār al-murābīthin of Wajjāj did help consolidate the use of Almoravid as the movement’s name, then the fourteenth-century sources in Section II, all of whom do associate withdrawal with naming, were right in making this connection, though wrongly locating it.


74. *Description*, 21 n.1; I am not sure how far the word ‘corps’ in the French here carries a military connotation.

75. Let me mention what may be a distant but interesting echo of the very speculative line of argument which I have been following here. Al-Ḥaḍrī ‘Umar al-Fūtī, the nineteenth-century militant reformer in the Senegambian region, writing about the practice of khalwa, a kind of spiritual retreat or withdrawal, specifies as an essential rule that the disciple (or murīd) must maintain the link which unites his heart (qalb) with his master (shaykh). The word for link here is ribāṭ. The nineteenth century is, of course, a long way from early Almoravid days: but ‘Umar was no innovator, and he boasts that his own work is taken, with few exceptions, from two Middle Eastern mystics of the fifteenth century. I do not know how far before that such a tradition may be traced. For fuller reference details, see D.B. Cruise O’Brien and C. Coulon, eds., *Charisma and brotherhood in African Islam*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, 55-6 (in the chapter ‘Khalwa and the career of sainthood’ by Jean-Louis Triaud).

More directly relevant may be the rule of an early 16th-century sūfī jārīqa, or mystical brotherhood, the Mahmūdiyya, which includes penalty regulations for firmly established members, and adds: ‘Whosoever is not an established member amongst them, him they banish from their ribāṭ.’ Being the only ribāṭ mention in the lengthy rule, it is impossible to interpret precisely, but seems more likely to refer to an organisation than to a building. The brotherhood was located in the Air region of the south central Sahara; some of its leading members were of Lamtūn origin. H.T. Norris, *Sūfī mystics of the Niger desert: Sīdī Mahmūd and the hermits of Air*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990, 87 and 111 n. 45.

76. See, for example, *Corpus*, 98, 209, 220-1, 224, &c.

77. The island location may go back to local archetypes even more ancient than Islam itself. See the marvellous and tantalising probing of such themes in Norris, *Saharan myth*, 13, 21-2, and elsewhere in the book.


Almoravid history: another reading of "The conquest that never was", forthcoming in *History in Africa*; as I write, this paper has not yet been published, nor have I yet had time to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it.