

**STUDIES ON IBADISM
AND OMAN. VOL 3**

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ON IBADISM

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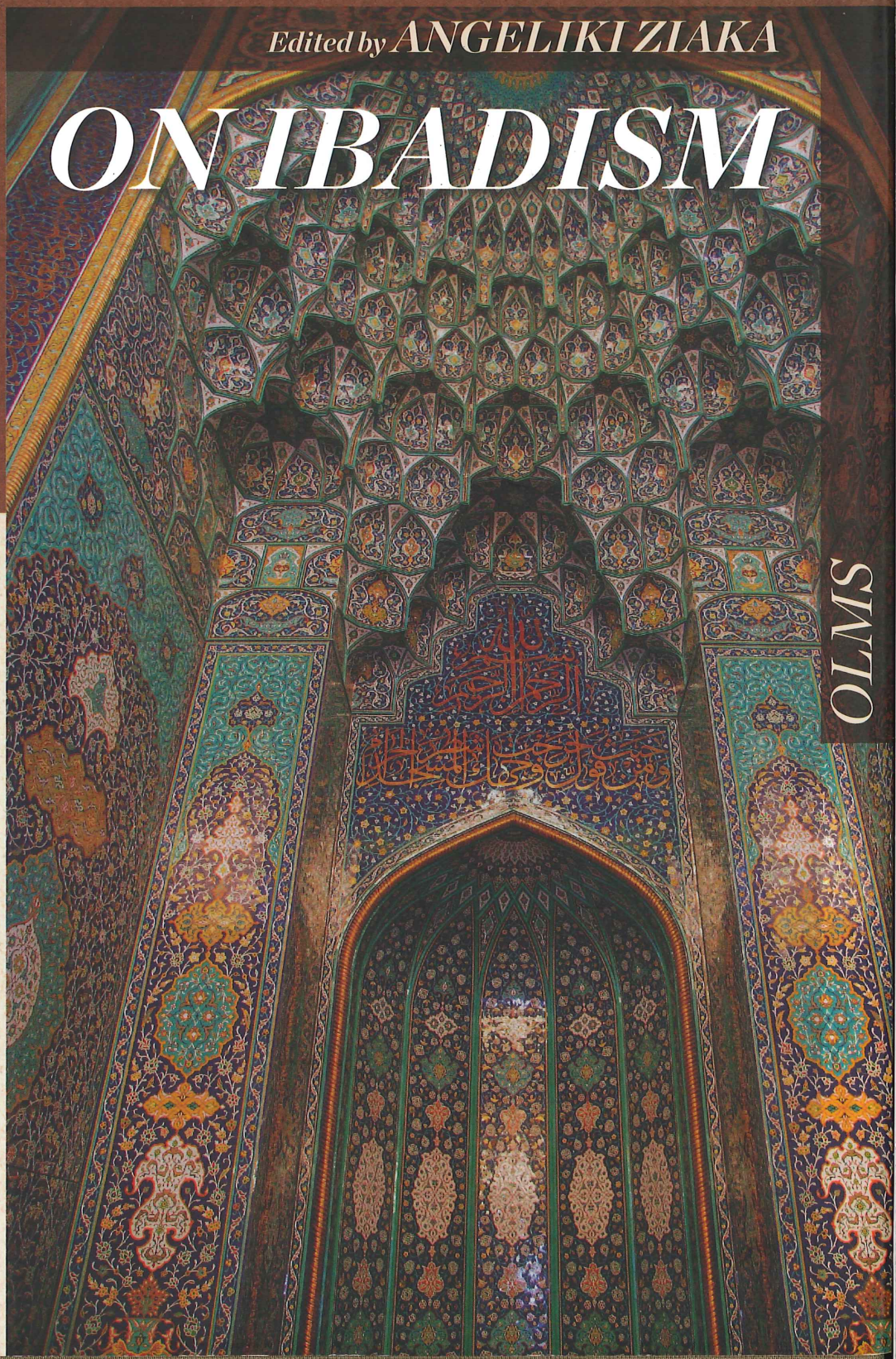


Table of Content

Preface	5
Foreword by H.E. Sheikh Abdullah b. Muhammad Al Salmi, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs of the Sultanate of Oman.	9
Introduction	11
On Ibadi History, Theology and Jurisprudence	
Abdulrahman Al Salimi: <i>Ibadi Studies and Orientalism</i>	23
Josef van Ess: <i>Introduction. The Beginning of Ibadi Studies</i>	35
John C. Wilkinson: <i>Ibadism. Some Reconsiderations of its Origins and Early Development</i>	43
Wilferd Madelung: <i>‘Abd Allāh Ibn Yazīd al-Fazārī on the Abode of Islam.</i>	53
Adam Gaiser: <i>Tracing the Ascetic Life and Very Special Death of Abū Bilāl. Martyrdom and Early Ibadi Identity</i>	59
Ahmed Al Ismaili: <i>The Characteristics of God in the Ibādi, Mu‘tazilite and Ash‘arite Schools</i>	73
Ersilia Francesca: <i>Constructing an Identity. The Development of Ibādi Law</i>	109
On Ibadi Religion and Society	
Valerie J. Hoffman: <i>Historical Memories and Imagined Communities. Modern Ibadi Writings on Khārijism.</i>	137
Dale F. Eickelman: <i>The Modern Face of Ibadism in Oman</i>	151
Marc Valeri: <i>Ibadism and Omani Nation-Building since 1970</i>	165
Mandana E. Limbert: <i>On Learning Ibadism and Being Ibadi. Study- Groups, Reason and History</i>	177
Fotini Tsiibiridou: <i>State Culture and Ibadi Tradition in the Sultanate of Oman.</i>	189
Nikolaos Efstratiou: <i>Practicing Ethnoarchaeology in the Sultanate of Oman.</i>	211
The Authors	225

INTRODUCTION

THE BEGINNING OF IBADI STUDIES¹

Josef van Ess*

Ibadi studies have always been a game of the “happy few”. You can count the experts in this field on your fingers. Such exclusiveness has become rare. But in the earlier days, two or more generations ago, it was still normal. European scholars interested in the Ibadi communities, their habits and their belief, used to belong to the colonial powers: France, England, Italy, even Germany as long as it had laid its hand on Zanzibar and had not yet exchanged this piece of the colonial cake for the island of Helgoland. The French sent their soldiers and officials to Algeria and down to its desert outpost, the Mزاب, after 1830; think of Adolphe de C. Motylinski² or Emile Masqueray.³ The Italians were, for a relatively short time, the masters in Libya and the Jabal Nafusa, and I still remember having met the last representatives of their tradition, people like Laura Veccia-Vaglieri⁴ or Roberto Rubinacci. The British signed a political agreement with Oman in 1798, in favor of the East India Company, and monopolized the scholarly contacts up to the last generation; think of Robert Serjeant or his younger colleague Martin Hinds who kept copies of a few Ibadi manuscripts in his room in Trinity Hall, Cambridge, unknown and unavailable to anybody else. There was one exception to this rule, Tadeusz Lewicki, a Polish orientalist who in his youth had crossed the desert from Algiers to Ghardaya (600 kms) on a camel, an experience which he had not found altogether pleasant but used to talk about with enthusiasm in his old age when he lived in retirement in Cracow;⁵ he kept there a few manuscripts which he had rescued from the Smogorzewski collection in Lwów/Lemberg, a town which had belonged to Poland until 1939 (or 1945) and then became part of the Ukraine.

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And now the Greeks! In-between a few Germans: Wilferd Madelung, Fritz Zimmermann (in cooperation with a Danish scholar, Patricia Crone),⁶ Werner Schwarz,⁷ Ulrich Rebstock,⁸ and myself.

I should have mentioned in the first place, of course, those who know the Ibadi heritage best: the Ibadis themselves. We have a continuous tradition of Ibadi scholarship through the centuries until today, largely ignored by the mainstream of Arab or Muslim scholarship and scarcely tapped by Orientalist research. Motylinski was the first to make use of it; in 1885 he published a bibliography of Ibadi literature which he had found in the *K. al-Jawahir al-muntaqat* written by Abu l-Fadl al-Barradi, a Maghribi author of the fourteenth century.⁹ Barradi was a historian, but his intellectual horizon, his "Geschichtsbild", the cultural memory as we would say nowadays, was not restricted to the Maghrib; he knew that the roots of his community lay in Iraq, in the town of Basra to be precise. This was a fact to be remembered; the Ibadis had lived there for a few generations, early in Islamic history, during the second half of the second century AH (late 8th century AD). They had not stayed, but they cherished their past as did the Andalusian Muslims after they had been expelled from Spain and lived in Morocco or Tunisia. However, they were no longer able to check what they transmitted. For us this means that in their books they possibly retained old material which in the area where it originated, i.e., in Iraq, had long been suppressed or replaced.¹⁰

This assumption is merely a working hypothesis. But it possesses a certain probability, for the emigration from Basra was not simply due to the mobility of wandering tribes. It rather had an ideological reason: the Ibadis were Kharijites. It is true that they themselves refused to accept this epithet, stressing the fact that they did not breed sedition or insurrection; they were quietists (*qa'ada*). On the other hand, however, they rejected the caliphate. They did not make their opposition public, but the Abbasid government did not trust them, and there was all sort of supervision which made life in Iraq unpleasant for them.¹¹ They were cautious people because, unlike the majority of the other Kharijites, they were not bedouins but merchants who had something to lose. They were mainly interested in freedom of trade, but this was, in a way, bound to freedom of opinion because they had decided to govern themselves, by way of a Council or Senate which they called *jama'at al-muslimin*, the "Assembly of the Muslims". They did not intend to compete with the caliphal bureaucracy in Baghdad; they rather thought in terms of a federal structure. But the expression *jama'at al-muslimin* implied that they reserved being "Muslims" to themselves. This did not sound well in the ears of their neighbors. It would have been appropriate for an Italian republic of the Renaissance, but under the conditions of autocratic Abbasid rule the idea could not prosper.

Even today this phase of Ibadi history still possesses a hidden actuality. The man who excelled in reviving it was a Libyan scholar, 'Amr Khalifa al-Nami who,

in his PhD thesis which he finished at Cambridge under Serjeant in 1971, uncovered a considerable number of extremely old texts which he knew existed in Ibadi libraries in Libya as well as in Tunisia, on the island of Jerba.¹² For a long time his book was not easily accessible; it was never printed, and it was even difficult to make photocopies of it. But we have an Arabic translation now which came out in Beirut¹³, and some research has been done on the texts which he brought to light. A few of them go back to the Umayyad period when the intellectual climate was not yet so repressive; the best example are the *Rasa'il* of Jabir b. Zayd al-Azdi. Their authenticity has to be proved in each case, of course; some of them have obviously been reworked by a later hand, names were wrongly identified, etc. But the profit we get from them for historical research concerning early Islam is enormous.

However, the Basrian community did not only emigrate to the Maghrib, not even primarily so; primarily they went to Oman from where they had come when, after the conquest of Mesopotamia and Iran, the Arabs of the Peninsula had left their native areas. The emigration to the Maghrib is a complicated story; we would have to talk about Khariji mission among the Berbers, about the rule of the Rustamids in Tahart,¹⁴ etc. Omani history is, in a way, much more straightforward. But Oman was also the latest spot to be put on the map of Orientalist scholarship. When Martin Hinds showed me the photocopies of the Ibadi material that he owned, he was the only person who had managed to visit the sultanate in recent days, and the private libraries in the countryside of Oman were only the object of vague rumours. The situation has changed by now; the Omanis are among the most hospitable and liberal people in the Arab world. At present we are in a position to compare the material preserved in Oman with what we know from Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria. For even though the material preserved in these different areas relates to the same religious community, it is obviously not completely identical. The Musnad of Rabi' b. Habib, one of the oldest Hadith collections we know of, testifies to Basrian Hadith tradition; the author went back to Oman, and he circulated his material there, but his book also found its way to the Maghrib. It was first printed as a lithograph in Cairo, due to this Maghribi tradition.¹⁵ In contrast to this, another text of the same generation, juridical and apparently based on the fatwas of a Basrian scholar by the name of Qatada b. Di'ama, a pupil of Hasan al-Basri, seems to have never made it to Oman. It was used only among the Berbers, though in a version which had been considerably reworked in the meantime.¹⁶ The Omanis on the other hand developed a strong juridical culture of their own.

Omani culture was a culture of seafarers who sailed down the African coast to Zanzibar, Mombasa, and Kilwa, disseminating Ibadi Islam to East Africa. The political structure was the imamate, but an imamate on a tribal basis, not with a divinely guided leader as in Shiism; John Wilkinson has done pioneering work on that,¹⁷ followed by Arab scholars like 'Isam al-Rauwas.¹⁸ The evolution of the

system and the debates about it, have been documented in Omani historiography in a specific literary genre, the *Siyar*. We know this expression from Yemen where we have a considerable number of *siyar* connected with the Zaydi imams, and we feel reminded, of course, of the *Sirat Rasul Allah* written by Ibn Ishaq. But in Oman these texts are not so much concerned with biographical material, but rather deal with religious and political questions. Besides that they also show us to what extent Omani scholars maintained relations with their Maghribi—or, in the early period, Iranian—kinsmen or brethren in their faith. Patricia Crone's and Fritz Zimmermann's study on the *Sirat Salim b. Dhakwan* demonstrates how rich a harvest can be gained from such a text.¹⁹ Abd al-Rahman al-Salmi has collected 140 examples of this genre in his PhD thesis²⁰ which, unfortunately, is not yet printed.²¹ Omani history is still a largely unploughed ground, but we have at least periodicals like the "Journal of Omani Studies" (since 1975) and, of course, the "Arabian Studies", where articles on this subject are published. Incidentally, the connections on the Peninsula itself, with Hadramaut and the Yemen, were less tight than those with the East; Iran was much closer, and the Gulf was a link rather than a border. It was also from Iran that the invasions came, under the Seljuks for instance.

European imperialism put an end to Ibadi unity. True, this unity had always been precarious, but now the split was deepened even linguistically; the Arabs started speaking different colonial languages. Masqat became a stronghold of British trade whereas the Ibadi communities of the Maghrib fell into the hands of the Italians and the French. Henceforward the people of the Jabal Nafusa were isolated, and the Ibadi communities in the oases of the Mzab and of Ouargla, which had dominated the trade with Africa, lost their economic independence. They had not been seafarers like the Omanis but had financed the caravans which crossed the Sahara. During a trip to West Africa, Joseph Schacht discovered in 1950, that the type of minaret used in the mosques among the Fulbe, the Haussa and the Kanuri owed its existence to Ibadi influence.²² However, the same merchants who, as messengers of their variety of Islam, penetrated West Africa also sent their sons to Algiers for cooperation with their commercial partners who exported their merchandise. This is where the French began to make their acquaintance. It was in the Mediterranean area that the Ibadis first conceived the idea of founding a publishing house of their own, in Cairo, i.e., the famous Baruniyya press where their great scholars of this period, Muhammad b. Yusuf Atfayyish from the Mzab and Nur al-din 'Abdallah b. Hamid al-Salimi from Oman, entered into contact with a common Muslim audience. Curiously, they both died in the same year, 1914, the year when the Europeans started the first of two disastrous wars which put an end to their dominant role in world politics.²³

Notes

- 1 This is an introduction and not a paper. Quotations are selective; many items have been omitted. An Ibadī bibliography is still a desideratum.
- 2 Cf. his *Bibliographie du Mzab*. Motylinski 1885, 3: 15 ff.
- 3 Cf. for instance his translation of the *Chronique d'Abou Zakaria*. Masqueray 1878.
- 4 Veccia-Vaglieri 1952, 4: 1 ff.
- 5 A bibliography until 1969 is found in: *Folia Orientalia* 11/1969/7 ff. His study *Les historiens ibadhites en Afrique du Nord* was translated into Arabic by Mahir and Rima Jarrar (Beirut 2000).
- 6 See below.
- 7 He published, together with shaykh Salim b. Ya'qub, the *Kitab Ibn Sallam*. Schwarz & Ya'qub 1986. Cf. also his PhD thesis Schwarz 1983.
- 8 Rebstock 1983 (= PhD thesis Tübingen 1983).
- 9 See above n. 2.
- 10 In later compilations like Tabari's *Ta'rikh* (= *K. Akbbar al-rusul wal-muluk*).
- 11 When, in 145 H., al-Nafs al-zakiyya started his anti-Abbasid insurrection in the Hijaz, the caliph al-Mansur was eager to get the names of the Ibadī chiefs in Basra in order to prevent them from supporting Ibrahim b. 'Abdallah, al-Nafs al-Zakiyya's brother, who agitated in the town (Shammakhi 1886, 108, apu. ff., quoted in: van Ess 1992, II: 198).
- 12 Al-Nami 1971.
- 13 Al-Nami 2000.
- 14 Cf. EI² VIII 638 ff. s. v. Rustamids (Muh. Talbi).
- 15 EI² III 651a s. v. Ibadīyya (T. Lewicki); VII 663a s. v. Musannaf and VIII 836° s. v. Sahih (G. H. A. Juynboll); van Ess 1992, II: 198 ff.
- 16 The so-called Aqwal Qatada; cf. van Ess, 1992, II: 143 ff. and Francesca 2005: 231 ff.
- 17 Wilkinson 1987.
- 18 Al-Rawas 2000.
- 19 Crone and Zimmermann 2001 (with a good bibliography).
- 20 Al-Salmi (al-Salimi) 2001.
- 21 A first glimpse is, however, given by an article in the most recent volume of the *Journal of Semitic Studies*: Al-Salmi (al-Salimi) 2009, 44: 475–514.
- 22 Schacht 1954, II: 11 ff.
- 23 It is worthwhile to have a look at the role played by Algerian Ibadism in the Islamic reform movements of the early 20th century. The scholars from the Mzab joined the Salafis because of their common resentment against the Sufi orders. Open antagonism against the colonial power did not flare up until later when, after 1912, the French imposed military service on the Ibadis as they had tried to do with regard to the other Muslims since 1908, against certain concessions (which were not appreciated by the settlers). Cf. the interesting article by Shinar 1961: 97–120, and, from the viewpoint of an insider, Dabbuz, 1385/1965, 1: 2–3.

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