

Noble Lineage (*Sharīfianism*) in the Central Maghreb: Between Symbolic Legitimacy and Social Functions (7th–9th Centuries AH / 13th–15th Centuries AD)

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Abstract:

This study addresses the issue of Noble Lineage (*al-Nasab al-Sharīf*) in the Central Maghreb, examining it not from the perspective of verification or refutation, nor merely as a biological affiliation, but as a constitutive element of the social fabric and a vital historic force. This role was dictated by the prestigious standing held by the Prophet's Household (*Ahl al-Bayt*) within wider society and among political authorities alike. Consequently, political rulers viewed noble lineage through a symbolically significant lens that transcended intra-tribal blood ties. It served to regulate relations between the jurists (*fuqahā'*) and Sufis while preserving equilibrium between the state and society.

As a result, affiliation with the *Sharīfian* domain became highly coveted, prompting numerous individuals to forge claims to noble descent in order to secure the privileges and social status accorded to the *Sharīfs* by both society and the political elite. This phenomenon ultimately gave rise to the question of maternal *Sharīfian* descent, wherein a segment of the population claimed noble lineage through their mothers. This sparked divergent positions among jurists and Sufis, who issued *fatwās* (legal opinions) either affirming or denying the validity of maternal lineage.

Keywords: Noble lineage (*al-Nasab al-Sharīf*); Society; Political authority; Jurists; Sufis.

Introduction

The question of noble lineage (*al-Nasab al-Sharīf*) occupies a distinctive place in the social history of the medieval Central Maghreb. It is far more than a matter of genealogical origin; it represents an active component within the social structure that generated legitimacy and regulated relations between the ruling power and religious elites. Transcending its purely biological dimension, noble descent evolved into an influential symbolic value within society.

Owing to the elevated status attained by *Sharīfian* lineage, references to it are abundant in jurisprudence, *nawāzil* (legal consultations), and hagiographical Sufi literature. This was particularly evident from the beginning of the seventh century AH, a period when the veneration of the *Sharīfs* intersected with profound political and social transformations across the Maghreb. The subject became a matter of intense debate, eliciting varied responses from jurists, Sufis, and the political establishment. This discourse expanded beyond theoretical arguments to encompass practical issues, including the organization of the *Sharīfs* into distinct corporate bodies endowed with privileges, official duties, and tax exemptions, as well as the verification of claims made by impostors.

Although historical studies frequently mention noble lineage, the majority focus on tracing genealogies or cataloguing privileges, often overlooking the social and symbolic dimensions that governed the formation and evolution of this phenomenon in medieval Maghrebi society. Furthermore, this dynamic engendered the contentious issue of maternal descent (*al-sharaf min jihat al-umm*), which sparked extensive jurisprudential debate. This secondary issue has similarly received insufficient scholarly attention as an independent subject of inquiry capable of illuminating its underlying social motives and mentalities.

This article examines noble lineage in the Central Maghreb within its historical and social contexts. Rather than attempting to prove or disprove specific lineages, it seeks to elucidate the social functions and roles assigned to *Sharīfianism* within society. Additionally, it analyzes the attitudes of jurists and Sufis toward the issue, highlighting their points of convergence and divergence while remaining attentive to the political and social environments that shaped their views.

Methodologically, this study draws upon a variety of textual sources, including works of *fatwās*, legal precedent (*nawāzil*), biographical dictionaries (*tarājim*), and hagiographies (*manāqib*). These sources provide crucial insights into how religious discourse interacted with social reality. The temporal scope focuses on the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries AH, a period during which the *Sharīfs* played an increasingly visible role, accompanied by vigorous debate concerning their socio-political standing. Ultimately, this research aims to deepen our understanding of a pivotal aspect of Central Maghrebi history by highlighting how noble lineage transcended genealogical boundaries to acquire broader social and religious significance.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study is situated within a socio-historical framework that views religious and symbolic phenomena as the product of complex interactions between social structures, collective mentalities, and political conditions. Rather than attempting to validate or invalidate claims of descent, our objective is to analyze noble lineage as a historical phenomenon endowed with social functions and symbolic meanings that evolved alongside changing temporal contexts and historical actors.

This approach bypasses traditional political narratives to focus instead on the structural foundations of social consciousness. Chief among these was *Sharīfian* lineage and its role in regulating relations among jurists, Sufis, and political authorities, ultimately reshaping the social structure of the Central Maghreb.

Accordingly, our analysis relies on a corpus of jurisprudence, legal consultations (*nawāzil*), and Sufi texts as empirical evidence of a dynamic social response to specific historical conditions. It tracks the transformation of noble lineage from a narrow genealogical construct into a potent symbolic signifier that generated widespread debate and divergent attitudes among jurists and Sufis in response to broader societal shifts. Through historical analysis and social induction, this study offers a holistic interpretation of the symbolic power of noble lineage in the Central Maghreb.

1. The Linguistic Meaning of *Sharaf*

Linguistically, *sharaf* denotes high status derived from one's ancestry (*al-ḥasab bi-l-ābāʾ*). It is said: *sharufa*, *yashrufu*, *sharafan*, meaning one has become noble (*sharīf*; plural: *ashrāf* and *shurafāʾ*). *Sharaf* is the verbal noun describing a person of noble standing, whereas *mashrūf* denotes someone surpassed in nobility. To bestow honor upon someone is expressed as *sharrafahu*, while

shāraftu al-rajul implies competing in prestige to determine who is more noble. The phrase *mashārif al-arḍ* refers to its elevated grounds. In the *ḥadīth* of Ibn ‘Abbās, it is stated: "We were commanded to build cities with battlements (*shuraf*) and mosques without them¹," where *shuraf* refers to the elevated battlements of a structure².

2. The Technical and Conceptual Meaning of *Sharaf*

In the medieval Maghreb, noble lineage emerged as a central issue that engaged both jurists and Sufis, each offering distinct perspectives. The cultural, political, and social environment of the period favored the exaltation of the Prophet's Household, according them a privileged status among rulers and subjects alike. As a result, tribal solidarity (*‘aṣabiyyah*) partially receded in favor of *Sharīfian* descent, which derived its legitimacy from a sacred source that transcended localized blood ties. Consequently, the social influence of the *Sharīfs* expanded across diverse strata of society.

In the Central Maghreb, the *Sharīfs* held considerable prestige. Maghrebi jurists issued rulings emphasizing "the obligation to respect the *Ashrāf* and fulfill the rights of the Prophet's noble progeny and all who belong to his exalted house. Anyone who dared to violate their sanctity deserved punishment commensurate with the severity of their offense."³

Capitalizing on these conditions, the Zayyanid sultans (Banu ‘Abd al-Wād) claimed *Sharīfian* ⁴ descent despite their well-documented Berber origins, likely to legitimize their rule and neutralize political rivals. Cultivating and honoring the *Sharīfs* was a policy priority, manifested in the patronage and proximity granted to them. Members of this group enjoyed significant material privileges ⁵, including monthly stipends, tax exemptions, and appointments to high offices. In his political treatise *Wāsiṭat al-Sulūk*, Sultan Abū Ḥammū II advised his son: "Let the *Sharīfs* be the highest among people in your esteem, owing to their noble heritage and exalted lineage."⁶ Rulers adorned their courts with *Sharīfs* and retained them as advisors.

However, the standing of the *Sharīfs* in Central Maghrebi society should not be understood solely as the result of formal legal veneration or political expediency. It was deeply rooted in the collective consciousness as a sacred affiliation extending back to the dawn of Islam. Consequently, interactions with a *Sharīf* differed fundamentally from those with an ordinary individual, lending their presence in official ceremonies and daily life a semi-ritualistic character.

3. The Phenomenon of False Claims to *Sharīfian* Lineage in the Middle Ages

Given the high status accorded to the *Sharīfs*, numerous individuals falsely claimed noble descent to secure social privileges and prestige. Conversely, this environment created hardship for legitimate *Sharīfs* who were wrongfully accused of fabrication. The emergence of false claims can be understood as an attempt to integrate into an elite social group and alter one's position within the social hierarchy.

To prevent non-*Sharīfs* from infiltrating these ranks, rulers established mechanisms to verify lineage ⁷, eventually organizing the *Sharīfs* under an official syndicate headed by a *naqīb al-ashrāf* (Marshal of the Nobility) ⁸. The political authorities' active role in verifying claims meant that recognition or rejection of lineage often served as a bargaining tool, utilized strategically to reward loyalty or punish opposition.

In this context, *Sharīfian* lineage functioned as a form of symbolic capital, as conceptualized in historical sociology. Rather than operating merely as a genealogical relation, it conferred social

prestige and redistributed legitimacy across both political and religious spheres. Disputes over noble lineage were inherently bound to broader power dynamics, reflecting latent conflicts over status, authority, and representation. By intervening to regulate these claims, the state transformed noble lineage from a private family matter into a public, institutional issue.

4. Claims to Maternal *Sharīfian* Lineage and the Juridical Response

The prestige attached to the *Sharīfs* gave rise to the controversial issue of maternal descent (*al-sharaf min jihat al-umm*), wherein individuals claimed noble status through their mothers rather than their fathers. This subject generated intense debate among jurists, and *nawāzil* collections record numerous cases regarding its validity.

For instance, al-Wansharīsī recorded a query addressed to the scholars of Tlemcen regarding whether *sharaf* could be transmitted maternally, and if confirmed, whether an individual could be addressed by that title. Jurists expressed conflicting opinions on the matter. Among eighth-century AH scholars who validated maternal descent were Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Sharīf al-Tilimsānī ⁹ (d. 771 AH / 1370 AD), Sa‘īd al-‘Uqbānī (d. 811 AH / 1409 AD), and a group of Tlemcen jurists. In the ninth century AH, proponents included Abū Yahyā ibn al-Sayyid Abī ‘Abd Allāh al-Sharīf, Muḥammad ibn Marzūq al-Ḥafīd (d. 842 AH / 1439 AD), Qāsim ibn Sa‘īd al-‘Uqbānī (d. 854 AH / 1450 AD), and Aḥmad ibn Zāghū (d. 845 AH / 1442 AD). They argued that paternal *Sharīfian* lineage ultimately relied on maternal transmission in foundational historical instances ¹⁰.

Ibn Marzūq al-Ḥafīd authored a treatise titled *Ismā‘ al-Ṣumm fī Ithbāt al-Sharaf min Qibal al-Umm* ("Deafening the Deaf in Affirming Lineage Through the Mother"), relying on Qur’anic texts and *ḥadīths*.¹¹ He argued that the biological certainty of maternal affiliation is stronger than that of paternal affiliation, and that only those adhering strictly to literalist interpretations opposed this view ¹². Another treatise bearing the same title was written by Muḥammad al-Murrākushī al-Qusanṭīnī, known as al-Akmah¹³ (d. 807 AH / 1405 AD), which urged the public not to diminish the rights of the *Sharīfs*.

Conversely, a number of Central Maghrebi jurists rejected maternal transmission to curb the proliferation of false claims. Abū ‘Alī Ḥasan ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Bijā’ī (d. 754 AH / 1353 AD), a prominent Maliki jurist of Béjaïa, authored a treatise ¹⁴ invalidating maternal claims to *sharaf*, a position endorsed by his teacher, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Mashaddālī (d. 731 AH / 1331 AD) ¹⁵. Similarly, Ibn Qunfudh al-Qusanṭīnī (d. 810 AH / 1407 AD) wrote *Tuḥfat al-Wārid fī Ikhtisāṣ al-Sharaf min al-Wālid* ¹⁶ ("The Present for the Visitor on the Exclusivity of Noble Descent Through the Father").

Some jurists went so far as to challenge long-established lineages. It is recorded that the elder al-Maqqarī refused to stand for the *Mizwār* (head) of the *Sharīfs* upon his entry into the Marinid sultan's assembly. When asked by the *Mizwār* why he did not rise out of respect for his ancestral noble lineage as the sultan and court had done ¹⁷, al-Maqqarī replied that lineage dating back over seven hundred years ¹⁸ could not be definitively verified, whereas the honor derived from religious knowledge (*sharaf al-ilm*) was concrete and demonstrably evident. Over time, the passage of centuries came to be viewed not merely as a temporal gap, but as a factor that diminished the certainty of genealogical claims and increased the likelihood of fabrication, explaining why certain jurists rejected ancient claims of descent.

This legal debate reflects the tension between authoritative scriptural texts and the pressures of social reality, which compelled jurists to broaden their interpretative methods to accommodate new conditions. The disagreement among jurists was fundamentally an interpretative debate over how scriptural sources should be applied in light of social change.

Furthermore, the debate over maternal lineage highlights an enduring conflict between the patriarchal framework dominant in Islamic jurisprudence and society, and the reality imposed by the symbolic importance of the Prophet's Household. Recognizing maternal transmission represented a significant exception to established norms, demonstrating the capacity of religious symbols to reshape social conventions while according women a unique role as conduits of prophetic lineage.

The divergent legal opinions also reflect the differing social environments of the jurists themselves. Those operating in major urban centers—where interactions between the general public and self-proclaimed *Sharīfs* were frequent—faced practical challenges that necessitated strict scrutiny. Conversely, scholars in less complex rural settings encountered different social dynamics. Thus, legal rulings (*fatwās*) cannot be isolated from the social contexts that produced them, nor from the efforts of jurists to distinguish genuine *Sharīfs* from impostors.

Sufis also formulated distinct perspectives on *sharaf*, according the *Sharīfs* high esteem. When Ibrāhīm al-Tāzī¹⁹ constructed his lodge (*zāwiyah*), he allocated an elevated room in its madrasa specifically for two students of *Sharīfian* origin, fully equipping it for hospitality. This room was inherited by successive generations of *Sharīf* students and became known as the *Bayt al-Shurafā'* (House of the *Sharīfs*). Al-Tāzī held the Prophet's descendants in high regard, remarking to his companions: "Venerating the Household of the Prophet (pbuh) is part of venerating him, for his sanctity in death is equal to his sanctity in life."²⁰

However, not all individuals of *Sharīfian* descent upheld the moral conduct expected of their station. Ibn Ṣa'd al-Tilimsānī relates an incident involving a *Sharīf* who arrived in Oran for trade. The attendant at Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Tāzī's lodge attempted to accommodate him in the room designated for the *Sharīfs*. The visitor took offense, exclaiming: "Should someone of my standing reside in a madrasa mixed with the general public?" The attendant responded: "This is the finest room in the lodge; it is where Sayyidī Ibrāhīm himself used to stay."²¹ The *Sharīf* responded with abusive language and insulted the lodge. Nevertheless, the Shaykh reacted with gentleness, leaving the man without expressing anger.

5. The Sufi Conceptualization of *Sharaf*

Incidents of misconduct led Sufi scholars to redefine *sharaf* within an alternative symbolic framework. Lineage was no longer viewed as an end in itself, but rather as an insufficient condition that required spiritual realization and ethical conduct. For Sufis, *sharaf* shifted from a purely genealogical attribute to a spiritual one (*nasab ma'nawī*) grounded in self-striving (*mujāhadah*) and moral virtue. This approach allowed Sufis to venerate the Prophet's Household while criticizing reliance on lineage alone. Hagiographical narratives suggest that in the Sufi imagination, true nobility was tied to righteous behavior rather than unearned descent; moral transgression was viewed as forfeiting one's nobility, regardless of biological descent. This conceptual shift linked symbolic prestige to ethical standards, preventing lineage from becoming an instrument of social domination.

Although many Sufi figures in the Central Maghreb belonged to the *Sharīfian* class, the prevailing view held that noble lineage carried no intrinsic value unless accompanied by worldly renunciation and spiritual discipline. Through spiritual exertion, individuals progressed through mystical stations toward the rank of *Qutbāniyyah* (spiritual axis), wherein the saint inherited the inner and outer states of the Prophet.²²

Among the Sufis whose *Sharīfian* lineage was traced maternally was Shaykh Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad al-Bijā’ī, whom Ibn Maryam mentioned in *Al-Bustān* during his biography of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Warneedī: "The ascetic scholar and worshipper Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad al-Bijā’ī, a *Sharīf* through his mother, addressed a letter to him..."²³ This demonstrates that such individuals were recognized as *Sharīfs* and accepted the title.

Similarly, figures such as Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Sanūsī ²⁴ (d. 895 AH / 1490 AD) and Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Hawwārī ²⁵ (d. 843 AH / 1440 AD)—whose Berber origins precluded direct paternal descent from the Prophet—were attributed *Ḥasanī* lineage through their mothers²⁶. Collected evidence indicates that *Sharīfian* lineage in the Central Maghreb was a dynamic concept continuously redefined across changing historical contexts, intersecting with legal, political, symbolic, and spiritual dimensions.

Conclusion

Noble lineage in the Central Maghreb was a central issue at the intersection of religion, politics, and society. It contributed to reshaping the social hierarchy and generating modes of legitimacy that were negotiated by jurists, utilized by rulers, and reinterpreted by Sufis. Examining this phenomenon provides an essential gateway to understanding the symbolic and social structures of the medieval Maghreb.

During the seventh to ninth centuries AH (13th–15th centuries AD), *Sharīfian* descent functioned not merely as a biological attribute or a royal privilege, but as symbolic capital contested among religious elites and utilized by political authorities to legitimize their rule.

The findings of this study may be summarized as follows:

1. **Political and Social Flexibility:** Noble lineage served as a adaptable construct utilized by ruling dynasties to consolidate power and negotiate political allegiances. Socially, it provided a recognized mechanism for upward mobility.
2. **Impact of Social Reality on Jurisprudence:** The debate surrounding maternal transmission demonstrates how social conditions influenced legal scholarship. Divergent legal opinions reflected the necessity of addressing social groups asserting noble descent, leading some jurists to accommodate these claims while others rejected them to prevent fabrication.
3. **The Sufi Reinterpretation of Lineage:** Sufi scholars broadened the concept of *sharaf*, asserting that biological descent must be accompanied by moral rectitude and piety. Within Sufi thought, lineage divorced from ethical conduct possessed no spiritual validity.

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13. Naṣr al-Dīn Ben Daoud, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
14. ‘Ādil Nuwayḥīd, *Mu‘jam A‘lām al-Jazā‘ir*, 2nd edn (Beirut: Mu‘assasat Nuwayḥīd al-Thaqāfiyyah li-l-Ta‘līf wa-l-Tarjamah wa-l-Nashr, 1980), p. 34.
15. Al-Wansharīsī, *op. cit.*, XII, p. 207.
16. Al-Ṭāhir Bounabi, *Al-Taṣawwuf fī al-Jazā‘ir Khilāl al-Qarnayn 6 wa-7 al-Hijriyyayn / 12 wa-13 al-Milādiyyayni* (‘Ayn M'lila: Dār al-Hudā li-l-Ṭibā‘ah wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 2004), p. 378.
17. Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Maqqarī al-Tilmisānī, *Nafḥ al-Ṭib min Ghuṣn al-Andalus al-Raṭīb*, ed. by Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1988), V, p. 281.
18. Al-Maqqarī, *ibid.*, V, p. 281.
19. Ibrāhīm al-Tāzī: Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Tāzī, who settled in the city of Oran. He was amongst the ascetic saints of God (*awliyā’*) and one of His sincere, devoted servants; he died in 866 AH. See: Ibn Ṣa‘d, *Rawḍat al-Nasrīn fī al-Ta‘rīf bi-l-Ashyākh al-Arba‘ah al-Muta‘akkkhirīn*, ed. by Yaḥyā Bū ‘Azīz (Algiers: ‘Ālam al-Ma‘rifah li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 2009), p. 183.
20. Ibn Ṣa‘d al-Tilmisānī, 'Al-Najm al-Thāqib fī-mā li-Awliyā’ Allāh min Mafākhir al-Manāqib (Part One): Critical Edition and Study', ed. and study by Belhadj Mohamed (unpublished Master's thesis, supervised by Benmaamer Mohamed, Department of Islamic Civilisation, University of Oran, 2007–2008), p. 117.
21. Ibn Ṣa‘d al-Tilmisānī, *Rawḍat al-Nasrīn*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
22. Al-Ṭāhir Bounabi, 'Al-Ḥarakah al-Ṣūfiyyah fī al-Maghrib al-Awsaṭ Khilāl al-Qarnayn al-Thāmin wa-l-Tāsi‘ al-Hijriyyayn / 14 wa-15 al-Milādiyyayni' (unpublished Doctorate of Sciences dissertation in Medieval Islamic History, supervised by Abdelaziz Filali, Department of History, University of Algiers), p. 380.
23. Ibn Maryam al-Tilmisānī, *Al-Bustān fī Dhikr al-Awliyā’ wa-l-‘Ulamā’ bi-Tilmisān*, ed. by Muḥammad Bencheneb (Algiers: Imprimerie Thaālibiyya, 1908), p. 14.
24. Al-Sanūsī: Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf ibn ‘Umar ibn Shu‘ayb al-Sanūsī al-Ḥasanī (on his mother's side). He was the foremost scholar and ascetic of Tlemcen in his time. He was raised in Tlemcen and died there in 895 AH; he is the author of the renowned creeds (*‘aqā‘id*) on monotheism (*tawḥīd*). See: ‘Ādil Nuwayḥīd, *op. cit.*, p. 180.
25. Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Hawwārī: Abū ‘Abd Allāh, a jurist (*faqīh*), Sufi, ascetic, and renunciant of wide renown throughout the regions of the Maghreb. Born in Maghraoua, he moved to Béjaïa where he studied under al-Waghlīsī and Ibn Idrīs. He resided in proximity to Mecca (*jāwara*) before returning to Oran, where he died in 843 AH. See: Nuwayḥīd, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

26. Alfred Bel, *Al-Firqah al-Islāmiyyah fī al-Shimāl al-Ifriqī* [*Les Sectes musulmanes du Nord de l'Afrique*], trans. by 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, 3rd edn (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1987), p. 423.
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