

THE REALM OF THE UNSEEN

In Sīdi Muḥammad's hagiographic account of his father, marvelous events are always occurring in the vicinity of Kunta family members. In one story, Sīdi al-Mukhtār's brother Abū Bakr had reached the midpoint of a long journey when, in the sweltering heat, the last water flask falls from a camel, breaks, and spills its contents. Sīdi Abū Bakr runs forward and grabs the flask, which instantly reverts to its unbroken, unspilled condition. In another story, while traveling with Sīdi 'Alī and his other students, a young Sīdi al-Mukhtār scares the pack camel, causing it to spill all their remaining water. In the face of this crisis, Sīdi 'Alī says that, improbably, only good will come from Sīdi al-Mukhtār's mistake, and then suddenly they see the lights of a campsite where none was expected. In yet another narrative, enemy bandits attack Sīdi al-Mukhtār and his traveling companion, only to unexpectedly surrender and acknowledge the authority of the shaykh as a friend of God.¹ The hagiography portrays these endings as marvelous and improbable reversals, in which apparently dire situations are resolved in unexpected salvation because of the presence of a Kunta family member. Specifically, these are moments when proximity to God becomes visible, when the divine authority with which these individuals are invested manifests itself in the material world of the senses. In the *Ṭarā'if wa'l-talā'id* and other treatises, Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad explain that the humbling of oppressors partakes in a special category of improbable events that occur around the friends of God. Other examples include making fruit bloom out of season, causing water to appear from the desert or dead rock, traveling great distances instantaneously, and speaking to the dead.² The Kunta scholars, like Sufi writers before them, refer to these marvelous events as *karāmāt*, a term I translate as "charismata" to indicate both a divine gift and a compelling presence. The charismata are gifts bestowed by God to single out and highlight the extraordinary status of his friends. For Sīdi al-Mukhtār and

Sīdī Muḥammad, the *charismata* represent one type of relationship between the world as perceivable to the human senses, and another, invisible world that extends around and interpenetrates it: the *‘ālam al-ghayb*, or realm of the unseen. Ultimately, it is their access to and position within this unseen realm that give the friends of God their legitimate socioreligious authority in the human realm and differentiate them from the bandits and tyrants of the hagiography. This chapter thus reconstructs the architecture of this invisible world in order to illustrate how the Kunta argued for their authority as Sufi Muslim leaders.

In the Kunta texts, discussions of the unseen draw on a *mélange* of vocabulary from the Qur’ān, *ḥadīth*, and sacred history mixed with cosmological and philosophical terminology stemming from both the Greco-Arabic tradition and medieval Sufi philosophy. The term *al-ghayb* (the unseen) entered the Qur’ān from pre-Islamic Arabia. In her work on the context of the Qur’ānic revelation, Jacqueline Chabbi describes the *ghayb* as “the world of the invisible, which has to do with the future or the hidden present. . . . The *ghayb* used to designate an absence to the eye that masked a presence simultaneously overwhelming and terrifying.”³ In the Qur’ān, where the word occurs forty-nine times, some verses stress that the *ghayb* is known exclusively by God, while others indicate that God occasionally gifts knowledge of the unseen to his believers.⁴ The *ghayb* of the Qur’ān is populated by invisible entities, including angels, devils (*shayāṭīn*), and jinn. The jinn are often understood as beings made of fire, and the Qur’ān indicates that some of them will hear and heed the revelation of God, while others will become devils and ultimately be cast into the fire.⁵ In the works of later commentators and philosophers, the *ghayb* came to mean both the invisible world and its inhabitants, as well as everything invisible to human knowledge and reason. For these scholars, as for the Kunta, the counterpart to the realm of the unseen is the perceptible world, *‘ālam al-shahāda*.⁶ In Kunta texts, the angels, devils, and jinn of the Qur’ān are placed within a greater cosmological imaginary inspired by Greek philosophy. In their cosmological discussions they use a technical vocabulary that can be traced back to Aristotle, while positioning those terms within a Neoplatonic framework in which all existence emanates from God.⁷ The cosmology of the Kunta texts is also based on the principles of what scholars refer to as *lettrism* and Muslim writers in Arabic call the science of letters (*‘ilm al-hurūf*), the idea that the letters of the Arabic alphabet, and their numerical equivalents, constitute the building blocks of the universe.⁸

That said, the *‘ālam al-ghayb* is rarely the direct topic of sustained discussion in the Kunta texts, but rather forms an intellectual backdrop that occurs across different discussions and categories of texts. Attention to this metaphysical

framework reveals that the Kunta scholars organized different human bodies into a sociospiritual hierarchy according to their differential access to the realm of the unseen. According to these scholars, all believing Muslims acquire some knowledge of the invisible through the mediating role of the human heart. Devotional Muslim practices purify the heart and prepare individuals for travel within the unseen, but they also provide a dangerous opening for attacks by devils and other unseen entities. Ultimately, only those with perfect bodies, as demonstrated by extraordinary acts of devotion, will successively navigate these threats and achieve mastery over the unseen. It is this claim—to master the invisible world—that serves as the basis for the Kunta scholars' understanding of their authority as Sufi friends of God. The first section of this chapter lays out the architecture of the realm of the unseen as it appears in the Kunta's writings, with a particular focus on the role of the heart as the bridge between the visible and invisible worlds. The next section discusses how certain valorized individuals acquire particular knowledge of God and the unseen, and thus become the site for the manifestation of all created existence. Because this process occurs within and through the heart of believing Muslims, the final section discusses the relationship between knowledge of the unseen and the perfection of the heart and the physical body through devotional practice.

The Invisible World

In the Kunta texts, the visible world and the realm of the unseen are imagined as conjoined opposites—two sides of one coin. On one register, the visible world (*'ālam al-shahāda*) and the unseen (*al-ghayb*) correspond to the opposition between this world (*al-dunyā*) and the next (*al-ākhirā*). In the Kunta imaginary, the next world refers both to a set of places—the garden and the fire—and to a time, the eschatological period when God destroys the world and then resurrects and judges its inhabitants.⁹ In one passage from the *Jidhwat al-anwār*, Sīdi al-Mukhtār quotes a description of the end-times attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, one of the companions of the Prophet. The scene begins by describing the tightly packed crowd of resurrected people assembled for judgment, and then depicts an invisible voice that summons groups of people to escape from the crowd and pass directly into the garden. These groups include “those who praised God at all times,” “those whose minds drew them from their beds, calling to their lord in fear and longing, and giving away in alms what we gave them as sustenance,” “those who were not distracted from the remembrance of God by trade or commerce, and undertook prayer and gave alms, fearing the day that hearts and fates would reverse,” and finally “those who obeyed [God]

and preserved [His] compact, not because of the unseen (*la li'l-ghayb*).” Earlier in the same text, Sīdi al-Mukhtār refers to this last group of believers as those whose “minds stop seeking the garden and no longer fear, through avoidance of the fire, being denied it; rather, they worship Him for the sake of His glory and His might and His greatness.” Thus, in this particular scene, Sīdi al-Mukhtār uses the term *al-ghayb* to refer specifically to heaven and hell. Those who obeyed and worshipped God, not out of fear of hell or desire to reach heaven but for the sake of God alone, will escape from the packed crowd. This group “will stand up and their faces will be full moons, made up of the best parts of light, to which a red ruby will adhere and by which they will fly to the head of the martyrs and continue, by means of it, into the presence of God. . . . So they will pass onto the dazzling road of lightning and then the gates of the garden will open up for them and they will glorify in it as they will.”¹⁰

Although the Kunta scholars often locate the garden and the fire in the specific temporal frame of the end-times, these locations also inform their understanding of the invisible world as a separate cosmological realm. In this register, the visible world and the realm of the unseen are distinguished spatially, as higher and lower planes of existence. Thus both Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad refer to the unseen as *al-malakūt*, the higher, invisible, or immaterial plane, and to the lower, material world as *al-mulk*. For example, in one passage from the *Jidhwat al-anwār*, Sīdi al-Mukhtār describes the process of traveling between these planes to reach God as a dissolution of boundaries: “His sleeping enters into his waking and his waking into his sleeping, and his life into his afterlife and his afterlife into his life, and his secret into his publicness (*‘ilāniyya*) and his publicness into his secret, and his *mulk* into his *malakūt* and his *malakūt* into his *mulk*.”¹¹ Other passages from Kunta texts also mention a third realm, *al-jabarūt*. The terms that the Kunta use for these three realms have a long history within Sufi cosmological discussions, with different systems proposing different orders for the various realms, and some systems adding the realms of *al-nāsūt* and *al-lāhūt* to these three.¹² The Kunta’s presentation of the three cosmological realms of *al-malakūt*, *al-mulk*, and *al-jabarūt* most closely resembles that of the late eleventh-century Sufi philosopher al-Ghazālī. According to al-Ghazālī’s schema, *al-jabarūt* acts as the intermediary realm that sits between and binds together the heavenly *malakūt* and the physical *mulk*. In this configuration, *al-jabarūt* acts as the most important realm, allowing the other two to fulfill their function by giving each access to the other. In this fashion, *al-jabarūt* lies, spatially, between the other two, while representing the completion of the universe by uniting and permitting congress between the unseen and material realms.¹³ The Kunta scholars do not focus on elaborating the relationship between these realms to the same degree

as al-Ghazālī, but in his *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayḍiyya*, Sīdī al-Mukhtār describes the ascent through the realms to God in these terms: “He [God] opens upon them three secrets from the secrets of the unseen [aspects] of the Real [*ghayūb al-ḥaqq*]. So with the first secret they see *al-mulk*, and with the second *al-malakūt*, and with the third *al-jabarūt*—which is the talisman of the two preceding secrets, because it turns you away from them and is the veil for them; indeed, their affair is only completed by means of it.”¹⁴ At first, this passage appears to place *al-jabarūt* as the highest realm, as it is the last of the three secrets revealed as the believer ascends toward God. However, the final line indicates that *al-jabarūt* in fact mediates between the other two, completing them by separating each from the other. If the realm of the unseen and the visible world represent two sides of one coin, then *al-jabarūt* is the substance of that coin, binding the two together.

On yet another register, the realm of the unseen includes the invisible inhabitants of the various cosmological realms—primarily angels, devils, and jinn. Various Kunta texts portray the friends of God interacting with unnamed angels. In one passage from the *Jidhwat al-anwār*, Sīdī al-Mukhtār describes how, when a pious believer dies, God raises his spirit to a “high place,” which he refers to with the Qur’ānic term *‘Illyīn* (83:18–19). Then “God creates angels faster than the blink of an eye” to protect him on the journey. “Then He loves him, so when He loves him He orders Jibrīl to cry out among the people of the heavens [*ahl al-samawāt*]¹⁵ and the martyrs that God loves so-and-so—so love him!”¹⁶ In addition to the unnamed ranks of angels and other inhabitants of the heavens, Sīdī al-Mukhtār also refers here to Jibrīl, whom the Kunta identify with “the faithful spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-amīn*) of the Qur’ān, and who appears often in their texts in the role of a messenger between God and both the prophets and the people of the heavens.¹⁷ In addition to Jibrīl, the Kunta texts reference other specific angels, including Mikā’īl, Isrāfīl, and ‘Azrā’īl; the archangels (*al-karūbiyyūn*); “those who are brought near” (*al-muqarrabūn*),¹⁸ those who carry and circle God’s throne (*al-ḥāffīn*, Qur’ān 39:75), “the spiritual entities” (*al-rūḥāniyyūn*), the angel of death (*malak al-mawt*) (Qur’ān 32:11), the two angels who question the believer in the grave, and the punishing angels (*al-zabāniyya al-adhāb*).¹⁹ Indeed, angels fill the Kunta texts, and although they belong primarily to the realm of the unseen, they often descend into and interact with the visible world. Thus stories recounted in Sīdī Muḥammad’s hagiography of his father indicate that angels can and do interact directly with the bodies of believing Muslims. One story from the *Tarā’if wa’l-talā’id*, for example, claims that an angel punished Sīdī al-Mukhtār for looking at an unrelated woman by slapping his left eye, blinding it for a time.²⁰

The direct counterparts to the angels of the Kunta texts are the devils (*shayāṭīn*). The word *shayāṭīn* is associated with the Qur'ānic story of Iblīs, who refused God's order to bow before Adam and as a result was cast from heaven and forced to wander the earth as *al-Shayṭān*, the Satan, or the Devil. Theologians debated whether Iblīs was an angel, and whether angels were capable of disobeying God. The Kunta specifically identify angels as protected from sin (*ma'ṣūm*) and suggest that Iblīs was instead a member of a third race known as the jinn.²¹ While the Kunta do not explain the relationship between devils and the Devil, various passages suggest that "devils" refer to humans and jinn who fall under the sway of *Shayṭān*.²² In *Khalwa*, for example, Sīdī al-Mukhtār describes how jinn appear to Muslims who undertake a spiritual retreat and attempt to distract them from their devotions to God. These jinn try several different methods of misleading a secluded believer. First, they "show him their faces" in an attempt to frighten him, but if he succeeds in adhering to his devotions and ignoring his assailants, then they

bring forth evil whisperings [*al-waswās*]. But if they find his heart inhabited by remembrance of God, then the lights of that remembrance burn them and they flee out of self-preservation. . . . Then they lose hope for the one whose heart is inhabited [with remembrance], so they change their approach to him and glorify him as one of the righteous and they tell him their names and bring him news about unseen things [*al-mughayyibāt*] . . . and they say to him: "Go to so-and-so and tell him that he is one of the people of the garden because of such-and-such deed," which only he knew about. And so he is deceived by that news . . . and people come to him, thinking that he is a friend, but he is a *shayṭān*, ensnared. The *shayāṭīn* have seduced him.²³

By the end of this passage, the narrator is referring to both the jinn *and* the secluded believer as *shayāṭīn*: the jinn for tricking a Muslim into abandoning his quest for God, and the human for falling into their trap. However, the jinn/*shayāṭīn* in this passage do not lie to their target. They truly do bring him knowledge of the unseen, including true information about the actions of others. The deception here consists of enticing the believer away from God by means of this secret knowledge.

While it is useful to think of the realm of the unseen in the separate registers of time, space, and inhabitants, these registers collapse when the Kunta texts address the human body. In the anthropological imagination of these texts, the human body, and specifically the heart, partakes of both the visible and

invisible worlds and serves as the gate allowing passage between the two. Indeed, in the Kunta texts the heart plays a role within the human body similar to that which the realm of *al-jabarūt* plays on a cosmic scale. Just as the middle realm lies between and permits congress across the lower and higher planes, so too does the heart connect a corporeal body to the unseen realm. And just as the visible world acts as a barrier to the realm of the unseen, so does the inclination of a believer to the *dunyā*, the world of the body, prevent the heart from accessing the world of the spirit. In this role, the heart represents *al-jabarūt*, the cosmological realm that both separates and permits congress between *al-malakūt* and *al-mulk*. Thus in the *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayḍiyya*—the same work that describes *al-jabarūt* as the talisman that completes the other two realms—Sīdi al-Mukhtār describes the human body as a “talisman” that each believer must break to “win the treasure of his heart.”²⁴ In the Kunta imaginary, the human heart acts as the organ of perception of the unseen, just as the five senses provide information about the visible world. In the *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās*, Sīdi al-Mukhtār writes, “There is for the hearts of the prophets and the friends an acquaintance with [*maṭāla‘a ‘alā*] the unseen realm, just as for the senses there is an acquaintance with the visible world.”²⁵ Communication with the invisible world is thus easier during sleep, when the five senses are stilled. Indeed, the text identifies “abundance of being occupied in the world of sensory perception and inclining toward it” as the primary veil between a believer and both the realm of the unseen and the divine presence at its heart.²⁶

In addition to the heart, which lies in both the visible and invisible worlds, these texts assign every human body two fully invisible components: a self (*nafs*) and a spirit (*rūḥ*). The Kunta scholars explicitly identify the *nafs* of the believer with both the aforementioned “inclination” for the world of the senses and the “whisperings” of the devils. The *nafs* of the Kunta texts is an exclusively negative force. The seat of carnal passions and trivial desires, the self distracts a believer from God and leads her into evil and corruption. Thus an individual’s moral character is determined by the extent to which she resists and controls the desires of her *nafs*. According to Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad, the self requires constant surveillance and training. Once a believer joins the ranks of the friends, however, God takes control of his *nafs*. Thus, in the *Jidhwat al-anwār*, Sīdi al-Mukhtār quotes another scholar as saying, “The true friend is whomever God brings close to Him, and repels from him his devil [*shayṭānihi*], and takes possession of his self and does not allow it power over him.”²⁷ In contrast, the spirit (*rūḥ*) is neither good nor evil; rather, people use their spirits as tools for good or evil purposes. The spirit inhabits and animates the body, but, unlike the *nafs*, it can leave and travel forth from it.²⁸ Indeed, one of the primary properties of the human spirit is its ability to detach itself from the

human body. Moreover, the Kunta are very clear that a person's spirit has the ability to interact with and alter both other human bodies and material objects in the perceptible world. For example, Sīdī Muḥammad tells a story about a group of people who can remove the seeds from a pomegranate without opening it and another about a group who use their spirits to repel an enemy army from a fortress.²⁹ As the mirror of the macrocosm, the human body draws together the cosmological, temporal, and interpersonal aspects of the unseen. Just as the larger cosmos contains a material realm, a spiritual realm, and one that mediates between them, so too does the human body contain an aspect that inclines to the material (the *nafs*), a component that partakes of the spiritual (the *rūḥ*), and a heart that mediates between the two. The body partakes in temporal life and death but will be miraculously resurrected on the Day of Judgment. And, as we will see below, it is through the actions of the body in ritual devotion that a believer encounters and interacts with angels, devils, and jinn.

Finally, at the heart of the realm of the unseen lies the most important of invisible entities—God. Following Neoplatonic Sufi traditions, the Kunta scholars understand all of creation as emanating from God, the wellspring of all existence. In his *Kitāb al-minna*, Sīdī al-Mukhtār explains his understanding of God by drawing on the Ashʿarī theological categories of the essence (*dhāt*), attributes (*ṣifāt*), and acts (*aʿfāl*) of God.³⁰ In this text, the Kunta scholar explains that God alone does not depend on the process of creation, that he is the only being “for whom existence [*al-wujūd*] is necessary [*yujiba lahu*].” That is, God is the only entity whose existence itself is absolute, independent, and uncreated. Moreover, what is true for God's essence (*dhāt*) is true for both his attributes (*ṣifāt*) and his acts (*aʿfāl*). Just as he exists before the creation of existence, he also has knowledge (and life, speech, sight, etc.) and *knows* (lives, speaks, sees, etc.) even before the creation of things to know, words to speak, and sights to see. Finally, it is from God's real, essential existence, attributes, and acts that created beings gain their own existence, attributes, and acts. Sīdī al-Mukhtār refers to these derivative human components as “metaphorical” (*majāzī*): “Know that God Most High made for us a metaphorical existence, within which His real existence acts. . . . And he made for us a metaphorical power that we might infer from it His true power acting within our metaphorical power. And He made for us a figurative will that we might infer from it His true will. . . . And He made for us a figurative knowledge, that we might infer by it our true, eternal knowledge, for all is from Him and toward Him. And He made for us a figurative life that we might infer by it His true life.” Thus people both exist and can be described as “powerful,” “willing,” “knowing,” and “alive” only because they have been granted extensions of God's own

properties and because he himself works within them. The passage continues in this vein for the properties of hearing, sight, and speech (“and He made for us a metaphorical hearing”), with the addition that human perceptions depend on physical properties, such as sensory organs and directionality. In contrast, God’s perceptions have no need of these corporeal limitations; they function only through his essence.³¹ According to Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad, God creates the universe from himself—his own essence, attributes, and acts—and then works within these ontological echoes. As a result, God’s own life exists within every created metaphorical life.

In a passage from the *Fawā'id nūrāniyya*, Sīdi Muḥammad describes the process by which God creates the various realms of the cosmos from his own essence, attributes, and acts by means of his “most beautiful names” (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*).

Know that God Most High created *al-malakūt* of the lights and established its parlors [*maqā'id*] by means of His noble names . . . just as He created the realm of *al-mulk* and the realm of *al-jabarūt* and established their parlors by means of His noble names. Then He created the angels of *al-malakūt* from the lights of the throne [*al-'arsh*] because the throne was created from the names of the essence [*al-dhāt*] by means of the secret of secrets. Then He created the angels of *al-jabarūt* from the light of the footstool [*al-kursī*] because it stands upon the names of the characteristics. . . . Then He created the angels of the realm of *al-mulk* from the light of the tablet [*al-lawḥ*] because it is based on the names of the actions.³²

The divine throne, footstool, pen, and preserved tablet are all terms drawn from the Qur'ān that have been ascribed symbolic importance by various Muslim and Sufi interpreters.³³ In the Kunta's interpretation, these terms find their roles in a cosmogonic process in which the various realms of the world are created directly from different aspects of God. Thus, for the Kunta writers, the nature of God is not merely a point of contention in a theological argument; rather, God's essence, attributes, and actions form the metaphysical substance from which he created the universe and its components.

The Return to God

While sense perceptions allow all humans access to the manifest material world, the unseen aspects of creation become apparent only to the hearts of believing Muslims. Sīdi al-Mukhtār explains that believing Muslims “become

acquainted” with the unseen “in [one of] two ways: the first is God Most High informing them [of the unseen] and the other is God creating faith in their hearts and creating in them an inborn disposition for it and beautifying it in their hearts and making them to love it.”³⁴ Thus believers know about the unseen in the first place because of references in the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* to various aspects of the invisible world, such as the afterlife, angels, jinn, and devils. However, beyond information about the unseen communicated directly by God through prophetic revelation, believers also become acquainted with the unseen because of the faith in their hearts. That is, by acknowledging God, they also acknowledge the unseen foundation of their own existence, and thus they acquire knowledge of the invisible realm by existing in it, just as created beings gain knowledge of the manifest realm by living in it. Sīdī al-Mukhtār emphasizes that only those who hear, but disbelieve, God’s revelation to Muḥammad have no acquaintance at all with the realm of the unseen. The senses of these unbelievers might provide them information about the material world, but by rejecting God they reject the source of all existence and are cut off from all things concealed.

However, while the Kunta allow that all believing Muslims experience the unseen realm to some extent, Sīdī al-Mukhtār emphasizes that this experience varies “in accordance with the rank [*manzila*] of the informed heart.”³⁵ For the Kunta scholars, all believing Muslims occupy a hierarchy arranged according to the purity of their hearts and thus their proximity to God. Indeed, Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad present the process of training at the hands of a Sufi shaykh as a purification of the heart and ascent toward the divine: as each believer’s proximity to God increases, so too does his knowledge of the unseen realm. And although many believers will achieve some stage along this path, only a select few will reach the ultimate goal. These valorized few go beyond acknowledging God and the unseen as the foundation and framework for their existence and directly experience all of creation as an extension of God. The Kunta texts depict this process as a sequence of destruction and re-creation. First, the believer experiences the destruction of the created world, which disappears into the unity of the divine; then the process is reversed, as the heart and body of the new friend of God become the site for the re-creation of the universe.

As discussed in the preceding section, the Kunta scholars locate the ascent toward God within the human heart, the organ through which Muslims come to know God and in which God manifests himself to them.³⁶ But the inclination of a believer’s self to the *dunyā*, the world of the body, prevents the heart from accessing the world of the spirit. Thus, in order to control the inclination of the self toward the manifest world, a believer must submit to the training of

a Sufi shaykh, himself a friend of God. This shaykh engages the seeker, his disciple (*murīd*), in a series of exercises (*riyāḍāt*) designed to tame and control the *nafs*, clearing the way to knowledge of God. These texts associate controlling the self with Sufi training to such an extent that Sīdī Muḥammad compares the devotion of Sufis to legal scholars' devotion to the law, or the *ḥadīth* folk to the sayings of the Prophet: "So the judges undertook renewal of the provisions of judging and the *amīrs* the renewals of ruling, and the exegetes the fulfilling of the judgments of the Qur'ān and its etiquette and the *ḥadīth*-folk the preservation of the *ḥadīth* and their accuracy, and the legal scholars the reporting of the *ḥalāl* and the *ḥarām* and its preservation, and the Sufis [*al-ṣūfiyya*], the science of struggling with the self, and training it, and curing its illnesses and pruning its hidden thickets."³⁷ Only when the self is trained, cured, and pruned by following a Sufi shaykh will God manifest his love for his servant by "lifting the veil from his heart until he sees Him with it."³⁸

When Sīdī al-Mukhtār and Sīdī Muḥammad describe the believer's ascent through various stations toward God, they speak of increasing love (*maḥabba*) between God and his servant, who receives lights (*anwār*) in a series of manifestations (*tajalliyāt*) and disclosures (*mukāshifāt*). Like Sufi writers before them, the Kunta understand these disclosures as moving a believer through a progression of states (*aḥwāl*) and stages (*maqāmāt*), most of which come in contrasting pairs, such as awe and intimacy, hope and fear, enrichment and poverty, and expansion and contraction.³⁹ Moreover, in one passage, which recurs almost verbatim in both the *Jidhwat al-anwār* and the *Sharḥ al-qaṣida al-fayḍiyya*, Sīdī al-Mukhtār relates the rankings of these various stations to the actions, attributes, and essence of God.

All those who arrive at the purity of certainty by the way of tasting [*dhawq*] and ecstasy [*wijdān*] have achieved a degree from the degrees of arriving. . . . Included among them are those who define God in the path of acts [*af'āl*]⁴⁰—which is a degree in the manifestation [*al-tajallī*]. So they are annihilated, by means of that, from their actions and the actions of others by undertaking the actions of God. So in this state he leaves planning and choice.

And among them are those who stand in the station of awe and intimacy by means of acquaintance with the glory and perfection that their hearts disclose to them. And this is manifested through the path of the attributes [*ṣifāt*], which is a degree in arriving.

And among them are those who rise to a station of annihilation in which the light of certainty and witnessing encloses their hearts, washed away by their witnessing from their existing. And this is a blow from the

manifestation of the essence [*dhāt*] to the elite who are brought near. And this is a degree in arriving, and above this degree is the truth of certainty and there they are in effacement and it is the flowing of the light of witnessing in the entirety of the servant until his spirit and his heart and his self and his form [*qālibuhu*] obtain it.⁴⁰

The idea of the extinction (*fanāʾ*) of the conscious self of the believer in the totality of the divine goes back to the earliest Islamic mystical writings.⁴¹ This passage describes a series of annihilations correlated to different ranks of believers as they “arrive at” different degrees of knowing God. Some will come to know God through his actions and find their own actions effaced, others will connect to his attributes, and still others will witness the divine essence, which will annihilate even their sense of existing (*wujūd*).

However, the passage also hints at yet a higher station, beyond annihilation in the essence of God. Sīdī al-Mukhtār refers to this last degree as a light that flows into the believer until it suffuses every aspect of her being: her spirit, her heart, her self, and her physical form. Elsewhere, the Kunta refer to this last station as abiding (*baqāʾ*), which both complements and fulfills the purpose of extinction. Indeed, these two stations—annihilation and abiding—are the most frequently discussed within the Kunta’s works and represent their understanding of the goal of the Sufi path. Sīdī Muḥammad even defines friendship with God by saying, “In the understanding of the Sufis, it [friendship] is annihilation in God and abiding with him. Annihilation is sinking into witnessing him with the heart [*al-mushāhidihi al-qalbiyya*] until he is unaware of anything but Him; rather, he is annihilated from himself and from the rest of his kind. And [the state of] being unaware of anything but Him is the end of traveling to Him. Then he abides with Him because he is the site of manifestation [*maẓhar*] of God’s actions and wishes, without choice in the wellspring [*ʾayn*] of His choice.”⁴² Thus, for Sīdī Muḥammad, friendship with God can be summarized by the twin processes of annihilation and abiding—which he once again situates within the heart of the believer. Moreover, according to this passage, a believer who reaches the station of abiding with God becomes “the site of the manifestation of God’s actions and wishes.” This statement is crucial because, as described above, God’s actions, along with his attributes and essence, are the very substance out of which he created the universe. Thus, at the highest stage of the Sufi path, the heart of the believer becomes the location of God’s creation, and the macrocosm of the universe is revealed to inhabit the body of the believer.

In one of the most elaborate descriptions of this process, the *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayḍiyya* traces the ascent of a believer to the highest stage of the path, where

he becomes the site of, and source for, all of created existence. Over the course of six manuscript pages, Sīdī al-Mukhtār describes the entrance of the believer into the presence of God, resulting in the annihilation of the individual and created existence, followed by the subsequent abiding of the believer and the internal re-creation of the universe. The path begins with the training of the self: “The first rank by which he reaches the presence is the training of the self with exercises until it results in knowing it and at that point the lights shine upon it.” At this stage the self does not pass away but rather becomes completely comprehended, illuminated, and indeed visible to the believer in a series of visions. Moreover, once the believer understands his own self, he comes to see clearly the selves of others as well: “he sees the self of the believer, pure whiteness, and he sees the self of the corrupted, clouded muddiness, and he sees the self of the unbeliever and the hypocrite, intensely dark black.” From this understanding of human selves, the seeker then progresses to the stages of the heart and then the spirit: “And the second stage is the heart. So he becomes occupied with its training and knowing it. . . . Then he rises to the third stage, which is the spirit [*rūḥ*]. So when he knows it [the spirit] and his knowing of it is complete, then the winds of certainty blow upon him and the sides of the expanse swell and water flows, running, the rays of perception separated by flashes of lightning . . . and he comprehends nothing of what has come to him from the three stages, and there he is bewildered as God wills.”⁴³ This stage of bewilderment in the love of God marks the end of the process of training and coming to know the various components of the believer. The believer’s intellect is bewildered and “comprehends nothing,” and nevertheless he fully knows his own self, heart, and spirit.

At this point, the seeker moves beyond the limits of human characteristics and begins to acquire knowledge of the cosmos and then of God himself: “Then God supports him by the light of the original Intellect [*al-‘aql al-aṣlī*] in the lights of certainty and he sees a being [*mawjūd*] with no border or limit in addition to this servant. Then all of the existing entities [*kā’ināt*] dwindle away but this being remains.” The seeker then hears the voice of a concealed speaker, who “says to him that this being is the Intellect [*‘aql*] by means of which God takes and gives and it is the outpourer [*al-sāqī*] and the created before any creation.”⁴⁴ In another work, Sīdī al-Mukhtār mentions this moment as a particularly dangerous point along the Sufi path, when a believer risks conflating this vast being with God himself.⁴⁵ Only a true friend of God will receive the guidance necessary—here represented as a voice from an invisible speaker—to correctly identify this being as “the Intellect.” While Sīdī al-Mukhtār refers to this being as “the original Intellect” here, later in the same text he uses the specific term “the Active Intellect” (*al-‘aql al-fa‘aliyya*).⁴⁶ The idea of “the Active

Intellect” entered Sufi cosmology from Greek philosophy and is often considered one of the agents mediating between the celestial and material, or human, realms.⁴⁷ Sīdi al-Mukhtār’s description of “the Intellect” also serves to highlight the parallels between the microcosm of the human and the macrocosm of the universe. Thus, just as a person has a specific intellect, so too is there a cosmic, original “Intellect.” And just as a person has an individual spirit, so too is there a universal, macrocosmic Spirit: “[God] supports him with the light of the lordly Spirit. . . . Then God Most High enlivens him with the light of his attributes and they bring him by degrees into this life, so by means of them he knows this lordly being. . . . Then God supports him with the light of the secret of the Spirit. And when he is sitting at the gate to the field of the secret then he loses consciousness, for all of his attributes are destroyed until he becomes as if he were nothing.”⁴⁸ As the seeker becomes illuminated by the divine Spirit, he ascends into the sphere of God’s attributes, and then, illuminated by the secret of the Spirit, he achieves annihilation and all of his own attributes disappear. This moment marks the point where the believer has returned to the nonexistence that preceded creation. The passage begins with the revelation of all the created forms as the believer came to know the components of his own being. The multiplicity of these created beings then disappeared, replaced by the singularity of “the Active Intellect,” as the seeker rose to the level of the cosmos. Finally, as the seeker is brought into the divine presence, both “the Active Intellect” and all of his own attributes are annihilated—leaving nothing at all. Thus, as the believer moves upward toward God, he also moves backward through time in a process of de-creation.

From this point of nonexistence, extinction, and annihilation, Sīdi al-Mukhtār reverses the process, describing the re-creation of the world through the believer. First, the annihilation of the seeker becomes abiding as God illuminates him with the divine essence: “Then, at that moment, God supports him with the light of His essence and so He brings him to life at that moment with an abiding life that has no limit. Then, at that moment, he looks at all the known things with the light of this life. Thus he becomes the source of the beings [*aṣl al-mawjūdāt*], a light shining in everything, nothing but it is known.”⁴⁹ According to this passage, the re-created life of the abiding believer serves as the singularity from which all other creations come into being. Later in the same text, Sīdi al-Mukhtār elaborates on this process, describing how the various components of both the cosmos and the seeker gradually reappear. Rather than a direct, linear unfolding, the internal elements of the seeker (such as his heart, spirit, and self) and external features of the cosmos (such as God’s throne, pen, and tablet) are created by and within one another, interpenetrating and entangling to the point where the order of events and sequence of causation become indecipherable:

Then this servant is brought to life . . . thus he becomes the first thing to appear, with nothing appearing before him. Then [all] things become existent by means of his qualities and appear through his light by his decree [*qadarihi*]. So the first thing that appears is his secret [*sirruhu*]; then by means of it his pen [*qalamuhu*] appears, then his command [*amruhu*] appears by means of his secret in his secret and it appears by means of his command in his command. Then by means of it his throne [*‘arsh*] appears in the light of his footstool [*kursī*] by means of the light of his throne. Then his heart appears by means of his spirit in his spirit and it appears by means of his heart in veils [*hujub*] by means of the light of his footstool in the light of his footstool. Then his self [*nafs*] appears by means of his heart in his heart and it appears by means of his self in his evilness and his goodness by means of the light of his veils.⁵⁰

All of these entangled elements, both cosmic and human, partake of the invisible realm, and as Sīdī al-Mukhtār describes their re-creation, he also positions them definitively within the physical body of the believer: “Then [his heart] appears in his body by means of his self and by means of his body [*jismhi*] [all] the bodies of the manifest realm [*al-‘ālam al-kashīf*], from earth or heaven, appear, and all together, every thing is manifest by the light of *al-mulk* in the light of *al-mulk*.”⁵¹ Thus, as creation of the unseen cosmos proceeds both from and within the unseen parts of the believer, so finally does the manifest realm, *al-mulk*, appear by means of his physical body. Creation thus proceeds from the invisible to the visible realm through the body of a Muslim who arrives at the highest point of the Sufi path.

The unseen realm that emerges from the Kunta texts consists of both the higher, spiritual realms—the sites of manifestation of God’s attributes and essence—and the interior, invisible components of the believer, such as her self, spirit, and heart. The Sufi path illustrates the fundamental interdependence of these two aspects of the unseen as the invisible cosmic realms are revealed within the seeker. Finally, the last stage of the Sufi path demonstrates the relationship between the invisible and manifest realms, *al-malakūt* and *al-mulk*, the *‘ālam al-ghayb* and *‘ālam al-shahāda*, as the believer’s body becomes the source for the creation of all bodies. However, these descriptions of the Sufi path within the Kunta texts also highlight the vast gulf between the general “acquaintance with the unseen,” available to all believers, and the intimate knowledge of the *‘ālam al-ghayb* bestowed only upon the friends of God. For while the masses of believing Muslims might learn that all existence originates in God, those who reach the end of the Sufi path will directly experience this

unity, as the created world extends outward, through the macrocosm/microcosm of their perfect hearts, and from there to all material bodies.

Perfect Bodies

Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad al-Kuntī ascribe a great deal of cosmic importance to the physical heart and body of the believing Muslim. When a seeker reaches the highest point of the Sufi path, the entire unseen realm is manifested within, and the entire physical realm through, her body. Thus, the Kunta texts dedicate a significant amount of attention to how Muslims use their bodies, and in particular to their engagement in various devotional practices, from reading or listening to the Qurʾān, to fasting, to ritual prayer. The Kunta writers clearly understand Muslim devotional practice as intimately concerned with the *ʿālam al-ghayb*, and they insist that access to the unseen realm and advancement along the path to God come only through correct use of a believer's own body. Moreover, while engaging in both required and supplemental devotional practices provides benefits to all Muslims, Sīdi al-Mukhtār and Sīdi Muḥammad understand the level of physical exertion necessary to reach the pinnacle of the path as beyond the capacities of most people. Not everyone will attain annihilation and abiding in God's essence or become the source of all created beings. That role they reserve for the perfect hearts and bodies of the prophets and their successors, the friends of God.

As demonstrated above, the Kunta understanding of the unseen includes the Sufi path and the ascension of believers through various degrees of knowing God. According to the Kunta shaykhs, the various ranks of believing Muslims along this path correspond to perceivable changes to their bodies. Thus, in his *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayḍiyya*, Sīdi al-Mukhtār writes:

And the people who love God are of two types: the first type love Him for the sake of the good that He brings them and His kindness to them, and this is the love of the masses . . . and the second type loves Him for the sake of His greatness and His majesty and His might and His power, and whether they are tried or spared does not alter the love of Him in their hearts . . . and this is the love of the elite . . . and the people of this degree in love are also of two types. So the first type, their bodies shrivel up from the heat of their love and their color changes from its blaze and its burning. The second type, their bodies fatten up when rejoicing in witnessing Him intermingles with [their bodies].⁵²

The passage goes on to explain that the shriveling of the body and the unhealthy hue of the skin correspond to the state of fear of God, while the fattening of the body corresponds to the state of hope and rejoicing in being brought near.⁵³ Thus as believers move from a station of fear and distance to one of hope and proximity, their bodies undergo perceptible changes. Moreover, just as the physical condition of the believer corresponds to different stages along the Sufi path, so too can the realization of God in the heart of a believer have direct and noticeable effects on her external body. Sīdī al-Mukhtār relates a story about a famous early Sufi, Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī: “Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, was, on a Friday, facing the pulpit when the speaker was making his address, and he read, *They measured not God with His true measure* [Qur’ān 6:91], and when it [the verse] fell upon the ear of Abū Yazīd, blood flowed from his eyes until it hit the pulpit, and that was because he was immersed in the sea of might and majesty. So when that majestic address passed by his ears, the winds of might stirred in his heart until the blood flowed from his eyes.”⁵⁴ In this story, a Qur’ānic verse that refers to the greatness of God causes two of the divine attributes—might and majesty—to awaken in Bisṭāmī’s heart, a process that becomes visible as blood runs from his eyes. These references to processes that begin in the heart of a believer and then affect her physical condition follow from the interpenetrating of the manifest and unseen realms. If God and all the cosmos are contained in the heart of a believer, then changes to that cosmos will affect the believer’s heart, and thus her body.

Moreover, the Kunta texts demonstrate that this process works in reverse as well; just as events in the unseen realm can affect human bodies, so can the actions of those bodies travel through the heart into the unseen realm. Thus when Muslims engage in correct devotional practice (ritual prayer, fasting, and remembrance of God), those actions elicit a direct response from the *‘ālam al-ghayb*. “God Most High said to Him good words go up and righteous deeds rise [Qur’ān 35:10]. This means that good words appear from the good heart and go to God themselves, having no goal save Him. And righteous deeds are raised by the angels to *Illyīn*. . . . And if his spirit is seized, it is raised to that high place. Then God creates angels faster than the blink of an eye from that *takbīr*, they repulse from him the restrained jinn, and in their hands are whips of light.”⁵⁵ Once again, the heart serves as the connection between the actions of the believer—in this case the pronouncement of the *takbīr* (God is great) and the higher realm. Moreover, if that believer’s spirit also returns to God, those words become the substance from which God creates angels to defend the spirit from attacks by the jinn. This process of creating angels from words evokes God’s creation of the three realms of existence from his own names, discussed

earlier. Indeed, the Kunta often imagine words and speech as traveling through and interacting with the unseen realm. In the *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayḍiyya*, for example, Sidi al-Mukhtār explains that the phrase “‘in the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful’ is a veil between those who take refuge in it and the punishing angels [*zabāniyya al-‘adhāb*], because the punishing angels have nineteen leaders and [the phrase] has nineteen letters—each letter subdues one of the angels.”⁵⁶ This passage depicts the letters that form this phrase as traveling outward to interpose themselves between a believer and the leaders of these angels.

The physical body of the believer contains a direct connection to the realm of the unseen through his heart, but this does not mean that the Kunta valorize the manifest realm or encourage aspirants on the Sufi path to engage in it. On the contrary, as noted earlier, it is occupation with the physical world that prevents a believer’s heart from accessing the realm of the unseen. Thus, in the *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās*, Sidi al-Mukhtār states that “unseen things appear to the sleeper that do not appear to the one who is awake because of the stilling of the realm of his senses. Because it is abundance of being occupied in the world of sensory perception and inclining toward it, and especially those parts of it that are legally prohibited, that creates in the heart doubts and delusions and thoughts that veil him from being informed of the unseen.”⁵⁷ Passages like this one often depict the believer as torn between love of the material realm, perceptible to the senses, and love of God and the unseen realm, perceptible to the heart. Indeed, in the Kunta texts, the physical human body performs a dual function. On the one hand, the implication of the body in the material world acts as a barrier between the believer and the *‘ālam al-ghayb*; on the other hand, however, it is only through the engagement of the body in ritual action that a seeker can purify his heart and attain any knowledge of God. In this fashion the body serves in the same dual role as a gate—it both prevents and permits access to the heart. And it is because of this gatelike function that Sidi al-Mukhtār refers to the body as a “talisman”: “and whoever does not break the talisman of his body will not win the treasure of his heart.”⁵⁸

In the Kunta texts, breaking the talisman of the body requires the performance of various “exercises” under the guidance of a Sufi shaykh, with the ultimate goal of pulling the self away from its obsession with the material world. These exercises involve corporeal “devotions” (*‘ibādāt*), including both obligatory practices, such as ritual prayer and fasting during Ramaḍān, and supererogatory practices such as ritual seclusion (*khalwa*) and additional prayers or fasts. Thus, in one section of the *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayḍiyya*, Sidi al-Mukhtār discusses the practice of fasting for forty days:

And the shaykh Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Sāṭī,⁵⁹ may God have mercy on him, said, “I saw [several] men, none of which broke their fast except at the head of forty days,” so it was said to him, “where did the burning of their abdomens go?” And he said: “the light of witnessing and the flowing nectar of love extinguish it. Then the rays of the light of his heart are reflected and the self is pulled out from the manifest realm [*‘alam al-kashīf*] to the subtle realm [*‘alam al-laṭīf*], like iron is pulled by magnetic stones, and thus it becomes tranquil.”⁶⁰

In this story, the act of fasting out of devotion to God eliminates the physical sensation of hunger and pulls the self entirely out of the manifest realm, causing it to grow calm. Sīdī al-Mukhtār and his son insist that these devotional exercises are an absolutely necessary part of the approach to God, with Sīdī Muḥammad writing that anyone who “directs his face toward the Real without looking at his practice [*sunna*] in his devotions [*‘ibādihī*]

—then there is doubtless error in his deeds, straying in his states, and calamity in his statements, thus he is either destroyed or he destroys.”⁶¹ Similarly, Sīdī al-Mukhtār devotes the majority of the *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās* to listing various ways in which Muslims can become “deceived” by Satan—many of which involve failing to perform or understand the importance of one or another type of devotional action.

Finally, after listing all the categories of deceived believers, Sīdī al-Mukhtār attributes the root cause of all forms of deception to “the lack of presence with God in prayer, because it repeats many times during the day. And if they are present with God during all of them—or most of them—then Satan does not lodge firmly within their hearts and whisper to them.”⁶² This statement indicates the centrality of formal, ritual, prayer (*ṣalāt*)⁶³ to the Kunta leaders’ understanding of the Sufi path, and evokes their description of remembrance of God as filling the heart and thus protecting it from attacks by the jinn and *shayāṭīn*. To emphasize the importance of *ṣalāt* to his understanding of Muslim devotional practice and the path to God, Sīdī al-Mukhtār writes:

The messenger of God, may the prayers and peace of God be upon him, said: The servant is in no state closer to his lord than in prayer [*ṣalāt*], because it is the location of those arranged in ranks [*al-maṣāḥifāt*] and the pulpit of intimate conversations and the core of the disclosures, and the spring of the blessings, and the gathering place of the greetings, and the ladder by which one climbs into the presence of the lord of the heavens and the earth. It is the ointment for every wound that distresses, and a panacea for every known poison.⁶⁴

As we have seen, though, as beneficial as ritual prayer may be, it can also be dangerous, offering an opportunity for Satan to whisper to the heart of the believer multiple times a day. A believer in prayer can stave off these whisperings and realize the potential of his prayer to raise him “into the presence of his lord” only “if he stands to pray with a heavenly heart” and maintains “presence with God” through the entirety of each (or at least most) of his prayers.⁶⁵

In the *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās*, Sīdī al-Mukhtār explains exactly what he means by “being present with God” during prayer, and he makes it clear that not all believers will succeed in “breaking the talisman of the body.” Correctly performing prayer requires a believer to “conceive in his mind the might and majesty [of God], and that he is preparing to enter into the presence of a king” at each stage of the prayer—during the ritual ablutions that proceed it, in pronouncing the *takbīr*, in raising and lowering his hands, in praising God, in reciting the selected verse from the Qur’ān, and so forth. Moreover, at various stages of the prayer, the believer may receive inspirations regarding his relationship to God, and each one of these inspirations requires a proper response. For example, when he reads the selected verse, “should he be present at that moment, then his lord Most High will address him about what it contains concerning commands and prohibitions or promises or compacts or glad tidings or warnings . . . and He will inform him of his lot from them. So let him thank God if it is glad tidings and let him ask for forgiveness and for improvement and for guidance if it is a warning . . . and if he does not do so then his lot will be failure and lack of joy.”⁶⁶ These detailed instructions continue for each possible inspiration from God to the believer in prayer and extend into the bowing, prostrating, and supplicating section of the prayer, with the narrator noting at each stage that failing to maintain the proper mental state or to provide the correct response to an inspiration will result in failure and “sorrow.” The accumulated effect of all these instructions is to suggest that maintaining presence with God throughout the entirety of even one prayer, and thus fending off the whisperings of Satan, is an almost impossible task, which only a very select few will accomplish. The difficulty of correctly performing the prayer recalls Sīdī al-Mukhtār’s story, in the *Sharḥ al-qaṣīda al-fayḍiyya*, of al-Sāṭī fasting for forty days and thus succeeding at calming his *nafs*. The Kunta clearly do not expect all believers to successfully go without food for forty days or to “maintain presence with God” at each stage of every ritual prayer; they reserve these feats of devotional practice—and their association with the pinnacle of the Sufi path—for a very select few. In the words of Sīdī Muḥammad, “not all those who go wayfaring arrive at the presence of the king of the universe, for that

is a presence none take refuge in save the well raised, and a station none acquire save those brought close, well-trained.”⁶⁷

Within the Kunta texts, the role of the paradigmatic perfect body is filled by the Prophet Muḥammad. At various points, the Kunta point out differences between Muḥammad’s body and the bodies of most Muslims, indicating, for example, his particular relationship to food and fasting: “The messenger of God—prayers and peace be upon him—said: ‘I am not like any one of you, for I remain with my lord who gives me food and drink, and this food is not like corporal food [*al-ṭa’ām al-jismānī*]; rather, it is spiritual food [*al-ṭa’ām al-rūḥānī*], which does not ruin a fast because it is a breaking [of the norm], and the judgments of the law don’t apply to breakings.’ But he only said that to them so that the strong might imitate him and the weak ones might walk in a higher path.”⁶⁸ This passage once again emphasizes the antithetical nature of the corporeal and the spiritual and indicates the degree to which Muḥammad’s body partook of the spiritual world, since it could be nurtured even by noncorporeal food. Indeed, in the *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās*, Sīdi al-Mukhtār claims that while the scholars receive news of the unseen through “reports,” and the friends “in a sleep that is like waking and in a waking that is like sleep,” the prophets gaze directly at the unseen with their eyes, a process that caused Muḥammad physical pain because of the opposing nature of the physical and spiritual realms.⁶⁹ And because the heart and body of a believer who ascends into God’s presence serve as the connection between God’s light and all created bodies, Muḥammad, the archetypal believer, is also the archetypal source for knowledge of God. In one metaphor, Sīdi al-Mukhtār compares knowledge of God to a vast flood, filling first the heart of Muḥammad and then the hearts of those closest to him, and so forth, out to the masses of believers:

And one of the knowers said: knowledge has the rank of the sea, out of which a river extends, then from the river extends a stream, then from the stream extends a creek, then from the creek extends a rivulet. And were the sea to flow into the river, or the river into the stream, it would flood it and ruin it. . . . And the Creator indicated that with His statement: *He sends down out of heaven water, and the rivers flow each in its measure* [Qur’ān 13:17], and the meaning of the water is: what God sent down on his messenger—may the prayers and peace of God be upon him—is a sea, and the hearts of his companions are rivers, and the hearts of the followers [of the companions] are streams, and the hearts of the legalists are creeks, and the hearts of the masses are rivulets.⁷⁰

Sidi al-Mukhtār's point in this passage is that most human hearts could not contain the totality of knowledge of God; rather, believing Muslims each acquire a particular share of knowledge of the divine through their connection to the Prophet, and according to the particular capacity of each individual heart.

However, this passage also states that knowledge of God grows increasingly attenuated the further one gets from the Prophet, and the first three ranks mentioned—the Prophet, his companions, and the generation that followed them—had long since passed away by the time of Sidi al-Mukhtār. This analogy would suggest that knowledge of God ceased to flood into the hearts of the believers after the death of Muḥammad and the end of the period of prophecy. Does this leave the world with only the “water” contained in the remaining creeks and rivulets? For the Kunta, the answer to this question was a decided “no.” Sidi al-Mukhtār states unequivocally that “the friends are the heirs of the prophets and the inheritor has what the bequeather had.”⁷¹ This allows both him and his son to claim that, like the prophets, the friends of God are “invulnerable” (*ma'sūm*), that they too have the potential to receive a direct vision of God, and that the *ḥadīth qudsī* “Neither my earth nor my heaven encompasses me, but the heart of my believing servant encompasses me” refers specifically to God's friends.⁷² As a result, when Sidi al-Mukhtār and Sidi Muḥammad describe the paired states of annihilation and abiding by which the heart and body become the source of all creation, they are referring specifically to the heart and body of God's friends: “His friends . . . with their light the created beings are illuminated and with their knowledge the religions were penned, and with their blessings the blessings descended and the hidden treasures appeared, and with their sanctity and illustriousness before God the sorrows were lifted.”⁷³ Moreover, just as the hearts of the friends allow light from God to reach downward, so too can the process be reversed. Thus Sidi al-Mukhtār explains the importance of loving the friends of God: “For their hearts are like mirrors, and whoever loves them, their names appear in those polished hearts. And God, may He be exalted and glorified, looks into the hearts of His friends every day with a merciful gaze, and whoever loves them, their names are etched in their hearts and thus they obtain their share of the mercy by which their master looks at them.”⁷⁴ Like the talisman, the metaphor of the mirror works in two directions. While most believers will never ascend into the divine presence, they can broadcast an “image” of themselves onto the divine gaze by becoming inscribed in the hearts of the friends. In return, the gaze of God, reflected back through the same heart, will confer upon these lower-ranking believers a portion of God's love for his friends.⁷⁵

Indeed, for the Kunta scholars, the continued presence of the friends of God amounts to the continuation of revelation, even after the passing of the last prophet. Thus Sidi Muḥammad begins his introduction to the *Ṭarāʾif waʾl-talāʾid*, a work devoted to one particular friend, with this statement: “Know, oh sincere brother . . . that there is never a period without a friend of the friends of God Most High, through which he preserves the countries and the servants. . . . Their number is never deficient and their support never decreases. And if one of them was to be deficient, then the light of prophethood would be deficient.”⁷⁶ The guarantee of the constant presence of the friends ensures that the light of God’s revelation to humankind will continue to flood out into the hearts of the believers. To the constancy of the friends and their number, the Kunta also add a specific hierarchy, adding to the sense that the friends form part of the cosmic scaffolding underlying the universe. Thus, in his *Jidhwat al-anwār*, Sidi Muḥammad ascribes the following statement to al-Khidr:

Know that when He took the messenger of God—peace and prayers be upon him—the earth wept, so she said to Him, “O my master, I will remain without a prophet walking upon me until the day of resurrection!” So God revealed to her, “I shall place upon your back from among this *umma* those whose hearts are according to the hearts of the prophets—upon them be peace—I shall not make you empty of them until the day of resurrection.” She said, “how many are they?” He said, “three hundred—and they are the friends; and seventy—and they are the nobles; and forty—and they are the pegs; and ten—and they are the chiefs; and seven—and they are the chosen; and three—and they are the poles; and one—and he is the succor [*al-ghawth*]. So if the *ghawth* dies, then one of the three moves and becomes the *ghawth*, and one of the seven moves to the three, and from the ten to the seven, and from the forty to the ten, and from the seventy to the forty, and from the three hundred to the seventy, and from the rest of the created beings to the three hundred, and thus until *the day the trumpet is blown* [Qurʾān 6:73].”⁷⁷

The Kunta scholars are not the first to refer to a constant hierarchy of variously ranked friends grouped according to numbers. Various versions of this hierarchy appear in Sufi intellectual traditions.⁷⁸ Within the rhetorical world of the Kunta texts, this tradition allows Sidi Muḥammad to acknowledge the existence of a vast number of friends of God while maintaining that, at all times, one will sit at the top of the pyramid—a position he ascribes to his father.⁷⁹ Together, these passages claim that the light of God will continue to pass into the created realm through the hearts of the friends of God—who serve as

replacements for the hearts of the prophets. Moreover, they imply that as believers connect to higher and higher ranks of God's friends, they will move progressively closer to the source of the light—to God himself. Finally, in one passage, Sīdi al-Mukhtār explicitly states the reverse corollary of this claim—that rejecting the friends amounts to abandoning the search for God, writing: “Among [the things necessary for the believer to know] is having a good opinion of the friends of God, that he might draw near to their presence and be ennobled by their goals, for whoever has a poor opinion of them is expelled from their presence and whoever is expelled from their presence is expelled from the presence of God and the prophet.”⁸⁰ The stakes of this claim could not be higher. The flow between God and the manifest realm goes both ways, and in both directions it passes through the hearts of the *awliyā'*—and in particular the highest of the friends, the *ghawth*. Flowing outward, the hearts of the friends allow the light of God to pass from the unseen to the manifest realm, assuring the continued re-creation of all existent beings. And in the other direction, these same hearts provide the *only remaining path* back toward God. Therefore, rejecting God's friends amounts to rejecting God.

Although only the hearts of the prophets and the friends of God can attain the purity and clarity necessary to become the source of all existence, the Kunta do not go so far as to say that *all* knowledge of the unseen realm must pass through these specific individuals. Such a claim would effectively render prayer (or fasting, reading the Qur'ān, etc.) futile for anybody outside the hierarchy of friends. As discussed earlier, Sīdi al-Mukhtār explains that all believers have some experience of the *'ālam al-ghayb* according to the rank of their heart. This statement accords with the Kunta's presentation of the unseen realm as concealed aspects of the created universe, and the created universe as an extension of God. Thus anyone who acknowledges God as the foundation of existence and engages in devotional practices to control the *nafs* and clear the heart will acquire some knowledge of the realm of the unseen. However, according to Sīdi al-Mukhtār, this basic level of knowledge does not include “the category of knowledge of the unseen by which God singles [someone] out.”⁸¹ The Kunta texts identify this second category of knowledge as the particular access to the unseen granted to a select few individuals. These elite few ascend the Sufi path, experience the various components of God, and ultimately achieve annihilation in the unity of God before being re-created as the source of created existence. Finally, at the end of the *Kitāb zawāl al-ilbās*, Sīdi al-Mukhtār explicitly links this ascent to devotional practice. As believers control their selves and purify their hearts through devotions, they gain increasing knowledge of the unseen, with the pinnacle of the path reserved for those perfected hearts and bodies of the friends of God. These perfect bodies thus

assume cosmological and soteriological significance. With the end of the period of prophecy, the hearts of the friends allow divine light and the process of creation to continue flowing into the manifest realm, while offering the rest of believing Muslims a path back toward God. For the Kunta scholars, the unseen realm provides the structure that gives the friends of God both significance and purpose. As Sīdi Muḥammad puts it, “whoever believes in a thing that he has not reached has believed in the unseen, and that is the key of happiness and the place of ascension of friendship.”⁸²