


RESEARCH ARTICLE		Khārijite Doctrines and the Formation of Early Islamic Thought in Western Sudan
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Issue Link	https://imcra-az.org/archive/383-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-9-vol-8-2025.html	
Keywords	Berber; Khārijite; Islam; Sudan; Ibadism	
Abstract	<p>The Great Berber Revolt (2nd century AH) marked the emergence of the first political entities adopting Khārijite doctrines. Its repercussions extended into Western Sudan, where Berber tribal confederations had already established firm foundations and absorbed Khārijite ideas, preceding the dominance of the Sunnī Mālikī school of law. The Mālikī tradition only gained prominence with the rise of the Almoravid Sanhaja state, which itself originated in this region historically referred to as Western Sudan.</p>	
Citation	<p>Akrimah A. (2025). Khārijite Doctrines and the Formation of Early Islamic Thought in Western Sudan. <i>Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems</i>, 8(9), 959–966. https://doi.org/10.56352/sci/8.9.80</p>	
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Received: 12.02.2025	Accepted: 01.07.2025	Published: 08.08.2025 (available online)

1. Introduction

Extensive scholarship has addressed the expansion of Khārijite doctrines in the Islamic West, particularly among the Berbers. However, their penetration into Western Sudan has received comparatively little attention. Evidence suggests that Khārijite Islam, especially Ibadism, may have been the earliest form of Islam to reach this region. This is significant, as Western Sudan constituted a major stronghold of the Sanhaja confederation, one of the most prominent Berber tribal groupings.

2. Western Sudan: Concept and Spatial Boundaries

The term *Sudan* evolved through several stages before acquiring its present geographical meaning.

Early Arabic sources employed *Sudan* primarily as an ethnonym for people of black skin, regardless of geographic context. For example, al-Jāhiz extended the term to groups in Sind and India, emphasizing phenotype rather than territory. Al-Ya‘qūbī combined colour and geography, applying *Sudan* to western populations, while reserving *Habasha* for eastern groups. Similarly, al-Ṭabarī often used *Sudan* interchangeably with *Habasha*, while al-Mas‘ūdī differentiated between the *Sudan* of India and the Zanj, yet also employed the term in a geographical sense when delineating regions.

The transition towards a spatial meaning became clearer with Ibn Ḥawqal’s *Ṣūrat al-Ard*, which mapped the extent of *Sudan* across the second climate—from Ghana in the west to Ḥabasha and the Zanj in the east. His observations during travels through Sijilmāsa and Awdaghust offered critical details on Berber tribes and the desert frontiers separating North Africa from Sudan.

Al-Bakrī refined this conception, explicitly defining Sudan as the territory beyond the desert south of Sijilmāsa, with a two-month caravan distance to Awdaghust. He dedicated an entire chapter to this spatial understanding. Al-Idrīsī likewise employed a territorial approach, though without fixed boundaries, while al-ʿUmarī extended Sudan from the Atlantic Ocean to Egypt. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's eyewitness accounts further consolidated the western conceptualization.

Ibn Khaldūn combined spatial and phenotypic criteria, extending Sudan from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean. Later authors, such as al-Wazzān, attempted to narrow its scope by excluding Ḥabasha. European travellers adopted similar classifications, sometimes equating Sudan with Ethiopia on the basis of skin colour. These developments facilitated the subdivision of the region into Eastern, Central, and Western Sudan, stretching from the Red Sea to the Atlantic and aligning broadly with the Sahelian belt.

Thus, the term *Sudan* progressed from an ethnonym based on phenotype to a geographical designation with growing precision, particularly in reference to the western sector. By the early modern period, *Western Sudan* was understood as the zone extending from Lake Chad to the Atlantic Ocean, between 11° and 17° N latitude, covering approximately seven million square kilometres.

Today, this region encompasses the modern states of West Africa together with parts of Algeria and Chad. In narrower usages, the term refers specifically to the basins of the Niger and Senegal rivers. Western Sudan, therefore, constitutes not only a vast geographical expanse but also a cultural and civilizational domain intersecting with multiple historical designations.

2. Western Sudan as a Civilizational Domain

Western Sudan constituted a vast geographical space encompassing multiple states and civilizations, while intersecting with other historical designations. A notable example is the term *Takrūr*, employed particularly by Easterners—especially Egyptians—to describe the same region, albeit with variant details that need not be elaborated here.

The breadth of Western Sudan included numerous urban centres of commercial, political, and intellectual significance. Cities such as Jenne, Walāta, and Gao flourished, while Timbuktu emerged as the leading spiritual and intellectual hub of the region for diverse historical reasons. Other centres, however, declined and eventually disappeared, as in the case of Walāta.

3. The Khārījites

The Khārījites were the first sect to emerge within Islam in a distinct, organised, and politically potent form. Their appearance followed the raising of Qur'āns by the Syrians during the Battle of Ṣiffīn. Both Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, in his *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, and al-Baghdādī, in his *al-Farq bayn al-Firaq*, trace their emergence to this pivotal incident.

This study focuses specifically on the Ibāḍiyya and the Sufriyya, due to their influential role in disseminating Khārījite doctrines in Western Sudan, whether through missionary activity or by means of state authority.

3.1. The Ibāḍiyya

Most Islamic sources, regardless of orientation, concur that the name *Ibāḍiyya* derives from 'Abd Allāh ibn Ibāḍ al-Tamīmī, regarded as the school's eponymous figure. Alternative attributions—such as that of al-Malṭī, who initially ascribed the name to Ibāḍ ibn 'Amr—were subsequently corrected, including by al-Malṭī himself.

Ibāḍī sources confirm this designation, with al-Azkawī noting that “they were called the Ibāḍiyya after the leader of the Muslims, 'Abd Allāh ibn Ibāḍ.” A linguistic distinction is observed in the pronunciation of the name: Easterners vocalise the initial hamza with fath, whereas Westerners employ kasr.

While Sunnī and Shīʿī accounts generally attribute the school's foundation to ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ibād, Ibādī tradition accords primacy to Jābir ibn Zayd, who is viewed as the true founder. In this version, Ibn Ibād is presented as his successor, assuming leadership in the missionary and political domains, supported by his strong tribal background in Baṣra. The prominence of Jābir ibn Zayd, of Azdī lineage, reflects the enduring political and religious centrality of the Azd tribe—particularly evident in the survival of Ibādism within the contemporary ʿUmānī state.

Sources agree that the first major dispute between Ibn Ibād and other Khārījite factions occurred in 64 AH, concerning the legitimacy of rebellion against the ruler and the permissibility of fighting his followers among the general populace. Their poetic and theological expression, alongside the qaʿada (those abstaining from rebellion), was notably represented by ʿImrān ibn Ḥittān.

3.2. Doctrinal Foundations of the Ibādīyya

The doctrinal system of the Ibādīyya is structured around key theological and ethical principles:

1. **Tawḥīd (Divine Unity):** God is one in essence and attributes, without partner or composition. Tawḥīd represents the very essence of religion, inseparable from both words and deeds. Ibn Jamīʿ emphasised: “If someone asks, ‘What is the foundation of religion?’ then say: Tawḥīd.”
2. **Attributes of God:** The essence of God is identical to His attributes. Power and causality are intrinsic to His essence, and separating attributes from essence would imply multiplicity of eternals—contradicting divine unity.
3. **Faith:** Faith is defined as word, deed, intention, and adherence to the Sunnah. For Ibādī theology, *īmān* and *islām* are synonymous, admitting no gradation. The four foundations of Islam are knowledge, action, intention, and piety.
4. **Denial of Vision:** The Ibādīyya categorically deny the possibility of seeing God in the Hereafter. Rational arguments, rather than transmitted reports, form the basis of this stance, since vision would imply spatiality and localisation.
5. **Qadar (Divine Decree):** Human beings possess free will, and God's foreknowledge does not annul human choice. Belief in *qadar*, both good and evil, is affirmed.
6. **Justice:** Divine justice requires the fulfilment of both promise and threat. Accordingly, grave sinners who die unrepentant are condemned to eternal punishment, and intercession is rejected.
7. **Createdness of the Qurʾān:** The Qurʾān is held to be created in both wording and meaning. As all that exists must be either Creator or created, and as the Qurʾān is originated and perceptible, it must be created.
8. **Reason and Revelation:** Revelation takes precedence over reason in all matters, including tawḥīd. Obligation (*taklīf*), understood as entailing reward or punishment, can only be established through divine revelation. Al-Sālimī stated: “For us there is no obligation prior to revelation in any of the fundamentals or the branches, without distinction between tawḥīd and other matters.”

3.3. Later Developments of the Ibādīyya

The doctrinal foundations of the Ibādīyya, as outlined above, represent their essential theological framework. Although subsequent elaborations were produced, many intersect with doctrines of other sects. Notably, the contemporary Ibādī scholar ʿAlī ibn Yahyā ibn Maʿmar highlighted areas of convergence with Sunnī orthodoxy, particularly the Ashʿarīs and Māturīdīs.

The Ibādīyya share significant theological ground with the Muʿtazila, especially regarding divine attributes, the denial of vision, the createdness of the Qurʾān, and the interpretation of God's *istiḥā*. Nevertheless, they remain firmly situated within the broader Khārījite orientation, as reflected in prosopographical works and their doctrinal positions on *al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar* (commanding right and forbidding wrong), the judgment of grave sinners, and the Qurashī requirement for the imamate. For this reason, Ṣābir Ṭuʿayma, despite his sympathies, refused to classify them as an independent *ijtihādī* branch within *Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jamāʿa*.

Later Ibādī scholars sought to soften their association with the Khārījite framework of names and rulings, which had been shaped by the political and sectarian context of their emergence. Nevertheless, the Ibādīyya have consistently represented a moderate tendency within Khārījism. They did not declare their opponents polytheists nor regard their blood as licit. Ibn Ḥazm, accordingly, considered them the closest of all Khārījite sects to *Ahl al-Sunna*.

4. The Sufriyya

The study of the Sufriyya is hampered by the absence of internal sources, compelling reliance on adversarial accounts. These sources agree that the sect emerged in the aftermath of the crisis of 64 AH, which fragmented the original Khārījite body into distinct groups, including both the Ibādīyya and the Sufriyya.

Heresiographers attribute the founding of the sect to Ziyād ibn al-Aṣfar, although al-Ṭabarī refers to him as ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Ṣaffār. The name *Sufriyya* is evidently derived from this etymology; alternative explanations—such as the pallor of ascetic devotion—are not credible.

4.1. Doctrinal Features of the Sufriyya

The Sufriyya were closely aligned with the Ibādīyya in both origins and orientation, particularly in their association with the *qa‘ada* (those abstaining from revolt). Al-Ash‘arī regarded them as a foundational Khārījite branch. Their distinguishing feature lay in their relative moderation, evident in the following principles:

1. **Stance toward the Qa‘ada:** The Sufriyya refrained from excommunicating the *qa‘ada*, provided they shared their doctrinal outlook. Qu‘ūd was systematised to such a degree that it shaped their position toward rulers and became the dominant approach among their adherents.
2. **Taqiyya (Dissimulation):** They permitted dissimulation in speech but not in deed. To avoid persecution, they extended *taqiyya* to unprecedented lengths, even permitting Ibādī women to marry non-Ibādī men in lands of concealment (though not where open practice was possible).
3. **Designation of the Sinner:** They advocated descriptive classification of sinners—such as thief, adulterer, or slanderer—based on offences incurring ḥudūd penalties. Abandoning prayer or fleeing battle, however, was deemed unbelief.
4. **Polytheism and Unbelief:** They distinguished between idolatrous polytheism (*shirk al-awthān*) and satanic polytheism (*shirk al-shayṭān*). Similarly, unbelief (*kufī*) was divided into denial of God’s lordship and denial of His blessings.

More broadly, the Sufriyya displayed pragmatism in social dealings, prohibiting the killing of women and children among their opponents. This moderation contributed to their relative endurance.

In sum, the Sufriyya occupied an intermediate position between the Ibādīyya and other Khārījite sects. Their moderation prolonged their survival: while most Khārījite groups had disappeared by the early second century AH, the Ibādīyya and Sufriyya persisted. The latter endured until the fall of their state in Sijilmāsa to the Fāṭimids in the late third century AH, whereas the Ibādīyya survive to the present day—dominant in ‘Umān, formerly established in Zanzibar, and maintaining communities in Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria (notably Ghardaïa), with continuing connections to northern Mali. Migration to peripheral regions such as the Islamic West and ‘Umān was crucial to their survival, enabling them to evade direct confrontation with central powers.

5. The Khārījites in the Islamic West

Several factors facilitated the penetration of Khārījite doctrines in the Islamic West. Chief among these was the injustice inflicted upon the Berbers, as reported in early Islamic sources. Al-Ṭabarī describes them as initially among the most loyal and obedient peoples, until the reign of Hishām ibn ‘Abd al-Malik, when their grievances—voiced in a formal petition—were dismissed by the Umayyad caliph.

The Berbers' receptivity to Khārijism was also linked to their social and cultural traits. Their desert-based, nomadic lifestyle fostered resistance to submission, especially among the Butr and Barānis confederations. Ibn Khaldūn interpreted this tendency as the "Berber disease," citing their repeated apostasies—up to twelve times. While this observation highlights Berber particularity, it neglects the broader Arab context, where tribal pride likewise fuelled conflict, most notably in the Yamānī–ʿAdnānī rivalry, which extended from Khurāsān to al-Andalus.

These conditions created fertile ground for doctrines advocating rebellion against unjust rulers. By the late first century AH, Khārijite preachers—both Ibādī and Sufī—found ready audiences across the Maghrib, and by the early second century their influence had grown markedly. Battles erupted between Berbers and Arabs, with Berbers frequently aligning themselves with Khārijite ideology.

As al-Nāṣirī observed, the governors' oppressive conduct toward the Berbers "broke the veil of awe surrounding the caliph" and provoked their revolt. Maḥmūd Ismāʿīl concurs, identifying such grievances as the strongest catalyst of the Khārijite movement.

Ultimately, this combination of social injustice and ideological appeal enabled the establishment of the first Khārijite states in the Maghrib: the Sufī Banū Midrār polity (140–297 AH) and the Ibādī Rustamid state (160–296 AH).

IV. Khārijite Doctrines in Western Sudan

The strength and visibility of the Khārijites in the Islamic West, from the early second century AH until their decline in the early fourth century AH, is readily observable prior to the diffusion of other doctrinal schools. Ibn Ḥawqal explicitly remarks: *"The people of this mountain did not enter into the covenant of Islam under any authority, nor did any inhabit it other than the Khārijites since the earliest days of Islam."* By "the people of the mountain," he was referring to the Nafūsa region in present-day Libya.

Western Sudan, as part of the broader Islamic West, was similarly influenced by this Khārijite expansion. However, extant sources rarely focus on the region directly and tend to mention it only incidentally. Al-Masʿūdī, for example, notes that "in this district of the Maghrib there are many of the Sufī Khārijites," and further acknowledges the presence of both Ibādī and Sufī groups settled there. Likewise, al-Yaʿqūbī describes the inhabitants of Zuwīla, on the border with Sudan, as *"all Muslims of the Ibādī sect."*

A particularly significant testimony is found in al-Zuhrī, who states: *"These people embraced Islam when the people of Warglān did, during the reign of Hishām ibn ʿAbd al-Malik, but they followed a doctrine by which they departed from the law."* His remark refers to the veiled Berbers of the Sahara, affiliated with the dominions of the Kingdom of Ghana. This evidence underscores the early penetration of Khārijite doctrines in Western Sudan.

Although the sources remain limited, it is possible to reconstruct an outline of Khārijite influence in the region through dispersed references, particularly with regard to Ibādism:

1. **ʿĪsā ibn Yazīd.** Chosen as the leader of the first Sufī state—an autonomous Khārijite polity with its capital in Sijilmāsa—ʿĪsā ibn Yazīd is consistently described in the sources as being of Sudanese origin. His selection to lead the state suggests the demographic weight of the Sudanese population in Sijilmāsa, which served as a vital commercial and cultural link between the Maghrib and the Sudan. Al-Bakrī even records that the founder of the ruling family of Banū Midrār al-Sufriyyūn was a *ḥaddād* ("blacksmith"), implying non-Berber, possibly Sudanese, ancestry. Nevertheless, Khārijite presence cannot be reduced to a solely Sudanese component, as the dominant population of Sijilmāsa consisted of Ṣanhāja and Masūfa Berbers, both widely dispersed across the Sahara and into the Niger bend.
2. **Muḥammad ibn ʿArafa.** A distinguished Rustamid official, Ibn ʿArafa was appointed ambassador to the lands of the Sudan. His close reception by the king of Sudan illustrates the depth of Ibādī-Sudanese

relations, which clearly extended beyond commerce. Entrusting such a mission to Ibn ‘Arafa, son-in-law of the Rustamid ruler and at one time a central figure in the state, underscores the political and diplomatic significance of these ties. These exchanges facilitated not only caravan trade but also a form of demographic and intellectual integration across the Sahara.

3. **Mukhlad ibn Kaydād (Abū Yazīd al-Khārījī).** Known as *Ṣāhib al-Himār* (“the man of the donkey”), this Zanāta leader spearheaded a major uprising against the Fāṭimids between 331 and 335 AH. Sources agree on his Khārījite background, though they differ as to whether he was affiliated with the Nakāriyya (a splinter group from the Ibāḍiyya) or with the Azāriqa. Notably, he was born in Gao or Juju—key urban centers of Western Sudan—and some reports suggest his mother was a Sudanese slave woman. His origins point to the presence of an established Khārījite community in the region by the late third century AH, predating the widespread adoption of Islam in much of Western Sudan.
4. **The King of Mali.** Ibāḍī sources recount that in 575 AH, a shaykh journeyed to Mali and, after invoking rain during a drought, succeeded in converting the king and subsequently his subjects. Al-Bakrī offers a parallel account concerning the “king of Mallal,” whom he calls al-Muslimānī after his conversion. While al-Bakrī’s earlier death (487 AH) raises chronological issues, the Sudanese historian Aḥmad Ilyās Ḥusayn has argued that both accounts may refer to separate but similar events, given the frequency of Ibāḍī missionary activity in the region. However, the discrepancies suggest the possibility of genealogical or sectarian motivations behind al-Darjīmī’s narrative, which requires careful scrutiny.
5. **Ibn Baṭṭūṭa.** During his travels in the early 14th century, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa recorded the presence of Ibāḍī groups in a town near Timbuktu, attesting to the endurance of Ibāḍism long after the Mālikī school had become dominant. Ibāḍī sources themselves confirm that Mālikism eventually supplanted their influence, though the Ibāḍiyya had initially held prominence. Some modern Ibāḍī scholars even interpret architectural features of mosques in Western Sudan—such as absence of a minbar, rectangular miḥrābs, and pyramidal minarets—as enduring traces of earlier Ibāḍī presence.

Conclusion

The spread of Khārījite sects into Western Sudan cannot be separated from the early Berber embrace of Khārījism in North Africa. Much of what was later designated as “Western Sudan” represented, in effect, an extension of Berber confederations—particularly the Ṣanhāja and Zanāta—whose interactions with neighboring Black African populations shaped the religious and cultural landscape of the region. While the precedence of Khārījite influence in Western Sudan remains a hypothesis rather than a demonstrable certainty, the convergence of historical testimony, missionary activity, and material culture strongly suggests its formative role prior to the rise of Mālikism.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, University of Algiers, for providing access to academic resources essential for this study. Special thanks are also extended to colleagues who offered constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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