



Veiled Men of the Desert. Perceptions of the Ṣanhāġa Face-Muffler in the Medieval Islamic West¹

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I trace shifts in the perception of the face-muffler employed by the men of the North African tribal group of the Ṣanhāġa in medieval sources from al-Andalus and the Maghreb. The men of the Ṣanhāġa traditionally wear a face-muffler or “veil” that covers the lower half of their face, as it continues to be the custom among the Tuareg community, for instance (Keenan, 1977; Rassmussen, 2010), whereas the women go about unveiled. In an Islamicate context, such as the medieval Maghreb, the “masculine veil” of the Ṣanhāġa stands in a particular position. First noted by Arab geographers as some sort of anthropological curiosity, it was later employed by a rival tribal group, the Maṣmūda, in order to delegitimize the political rule of the Ṣanhāġa during the Almoravid period, accusing them of effeminacy.

KEYWORDS: Face-muffler, veil, Ṣanhāġa, Almoravids, Almohads.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I trace shifts in the perception of the face-muffler employed by the men of the North African tribal group of the Ṣanhāġa² in medieval sources from al-Andalus and the Maghreb. The men of the Ṣanhāġa traditionally wear a face-muffler or “veil” that covers the lower half of their face, as it continues to be the custom among the Tuareg community, for instance (Keenan, 1977; Rassmussen, 2010), whereas the women go

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² I have chosen to avoid the terms “Berber” and “Amazigh” that would most usually be employed to characterize the Ṣanhāġa, as well as other groups mentioned below in this article. “Berber” is in origin a derogatory, onomatopoeic term that refers to peoples who do not speak a properly civilized tongue, like the analogous term “Barbarian” in the Graeco-Roman world. When Arabs took over the North of Africa, they employed the umbrella category of “Berber” to refer to the different groups of indigenous population they encountered there, thus conferring unity to what arguably were just a diversity of peoples, speakers of different languages and with different cultures. The communities identified as “Berber” do not refer to themselves using this term. Nowadays, some prefer to use the term “Amazigh” or “Imazighen” instead of “Berber,” but this term merely translated the unifying concept behind the word “Berber,” leaving it uncontested. For a recent critical appraisal of the question of “the invention of Berbers,” see Rouighi 2019.



about unveiled. In an Islamicate context, such as the medieval Maghreb, the “masculine veil” of the Ṣanhāḡa stands in a particular position. First noted by Arab geographers as some sort of anthropological curiosity, it was later employed by a rival tribal group, the Maṣmūda, on order to delegitimize the political rule of the Ṣanhāḡa during the Almoravid period, accusing them of effeminacy.

In his study of the Algerian revolution, Frantz Fanon aptly refers to the “historic dynamism of the veil” (Fanon, 1965: 63) that takes on different meanings in function of different contexts. It is precisely this historically dynamic perspective that I would like to take in this paper. In the last few months, as the new Covid-19 pandemic spread throughout the world, we have all become painfully aware of, rephrasing Fanon’s expression, the “historic dynamism of face-covering practices” as masks have quickly been introduced in Western environments up until recently very reluctant to most forms of face-covering. As we are well-aware, this has not come without fierce resistance on the part of some segments of the population: the sudden implantation of face-covering has been the catalyst for violent ideological battles. Looking back at the history of the medieval Islamic West, we find another moment of cultural shift in which cultural battles over face-covering practices took the spotlight: the political heyday of the Almoravid Empire, when the face-muffler of the Almoravid Ṣanhāḡas became part of the social landscape from the Senegal river to Andalusia, and its rivals, the Maṣmūda adherents to the Almohad movement, employed the face-muffler as part of a political campaign against them.

VEILING PRACTICES IN THE ISLAMIC WEST

When studying Arabo-Islamic societies and cultures, all too often the “veil” is considered as a single and univocal signifier overwhelmingly associated with the subordination of women.³ However, things are much more complex than that. There isn’t just one Islamic veil, as very different kinds of garments are utilized in different ways for veiling practices in Muslim societies, all of which are included under the too general English translation of “veil.”⁴ It should also be indicated that veiling practices in Muslim societies are not exclusive to the female gender, as there exist masculine veiling practices as well (El Guindi, 1999: 117-128). In Islamic contexts, the most prevailing function of veiling is the separation of male and female spaces, and most commonly the

³ It is virtually impossible to refer to all studies on veiling practices in Islam. I would refer for a general overview to El Guindi 1999; Ahmed 1992; for a nuanced view on female empowerment and veil usages, see Mahmood 2005.

⁴ In what follows, I will provide between brackets the Arabic term employed to refer to the piece of clothing that covers the head and face in each case. I refrain from offering a definition of the different terms at the beginning because in the absence of a detailed description in the texts themselves, it seems to me very difficult to ascertain the exact meaning of each term (for instance, when an eleventh century Andalusī poetess talks about a *burqu’*, we cannot know with certitude that she is referring to a garment similar to what we know as *burqu’* in twenty first century Afghanistan). I have preferred to let each text speak in its own terms, rather than trying to offer a classification at the outset that would precondition our understanding of the premodern sources.



burden of carrying the veil that enacts the separation falls on the female part, but this is not always necessarily the case (for the description of a situational veiling of men in the context of an academic institution for female students in Egypt in the 1970s, see El Guindi, 1999: 118-119). Veiling may also fulfil other functions. In the pre-Islamic period, a number of men, warriors in some cases, poets in others, are said to have been veiled (El Guindi, 1999: 120-121). The *ḥadīth* refers several times to the Prophet veiling in the presence of ‘Ā’īša’s father Abū Bakr (Al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* 934 and 5360, as cited in El Guindi, 1999: 119). And Abbasid and Fatimid caliphal ceremonial resorted to veiling or appearing from behind a curtain managed by the chamberlain (literally, “the one in charge of the veil,” *hāḡib*) in order to inspire fear and veneration on the part of the common people (Sourdel, 1960; Canard, 1951). These are just some examples of the different kinds of face-covering practiced among men.

Regarding al-Andalus and the medieval Maghreb, we have to take into account that although studies about veiling practices in contemporary Muslim societies are relatively easy to find in disciplines such as sociology or ethnographic studies, history finds itself at a great disadvantage here, as we do not know much about the prevalence and the uses of veiling in the premodern period. The evidence we have is often anecdotal and comes to us in a roundabout way from references in literary or artistic sources.

In what concerns veiling among Andalusī women, it seems that social class, rather than religious identity, determined the use of the veil in al-Andalus. According to Manuela Marín, “ultimately the need for a woman’s face to be covered was determined by her social position, independently of her religion or personal status” (Marín, 2000: 196). Particularly women belonging to the aristocracy and to the families of the religious authorities (*‘ulamā’*) were veiled in al-Andalus (Marín, 2000: 189). Slaves and lower-class free women seem to have circulated uncovered throughout the Andalusian streets, as a well-known anecdote relating to a lady disguised as an unveiled female slave roaming the streets of Cordova in Ibn Ḥazm’s *Necklace of the Dove* shows (Ibn Ḥazm, 1953: 52). As for the visual arts, we have very few iconographic representations of Muslim Iberian women, and most of the ones we have, such as those in the Alfonsine *Book of Chess*, and that of a possibly female flute player in a painted stucco panel in the palace of Dar al-Suḡra in Murcia (Navarro Palazón & Jiménez Castillo, 1995: 21), correspond to interior settings, in which Muslim women were not required to go about veiled (Marín, 2000: 186-191; Marín, 1993: 41-43). There is one notable exception of a visual representation of a veiled woman in an exterior setting, and it is the depiction of a partially veiled woman in the thirteenth-century Andalusī or Maghrebi manuscript containing the story of *Bayād wa Riyād* preserved in the Vatican Library (ms. Vat. Ar. Ris. 386, fol. 17r; Robinson, 2007: 45).⁵ Interestingly, the use of the veil in this image is clearly situational: the woman is lifting it over her face with her hand, while she speaks

⁵ I would like to thank Margaret Graves for pointing this image out to me and kindly discussing it with me.



to a man, to whom she is handing a letter, but the veil is clearly not in a permanent position over any part of her face.

As for veiling practices among men, we find several references in historical chronicles to Umayyad rulers in al-Andalus engaging in practices of occultation behind a veil or curtain, in a similar manner to the abovementioned Abbasid and Fatimid caliphs (Barceló, 1991; Safran, 2000: 74-75). On some occasions, veiling is employed as a stratagem to conceal the identity of the emir or caliph; this is the case of the emir Muḥammad (852-886), who had been banned from the royal palace and rivalled with his brother ‘Abd Allāh over the succession to the throne. When his father was ill and shortly before he passed away, Muḥammad gained access to the palace disguised as a woman, passing as his own daughter, who used to visit her grandfather during his final sickness. The guards of the royal palace, loyal to ‘Abd Allāh, assumed that the veiled female figure that crossed the gates was the young princess, and let him go through (Marín, 2000: 188). The Caliph Hišām II (r. 976-1009 c.e.) is reported to have veiled whenever he left the palace at the suggestion of his powerful chamberlain Al-Manṣūr. It is reported that whenever Hišām II left the royal palace, he did it surrounded by his female-slaves (*jawārī*), and disguised as if he were one of them, with a hooded garment (*burnus*) (Marín, 2000: 188-189). In addition, a general practice of occultation was also employed by the Umayyad in al-Andalus to instil fear and respect among the people. Thus ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II (r. 822-852 c.e.) “is reported to have introduced some new regulations respecting royalty, one of which was that he always veiled himself whenever he appeared in public” (Al-Maqqarī, 1843: 125).

“VEILED” MEN OF THE DESERT: THE FACE-MUFFLER (*LITĀM*) OF THE ṢANHĀĠA

The most commonly cited example of the use of a sort of veil covering part of the face among Muslim men is that of certain tribal groups from North Africa, such as the Tuareg, among which the use of the face-muffler (which they call “*tagelmust*” or “*šāš*”) is well documented up until the present (Keenan, 1977; Rasmussen, 2010). The *tagelmust* of the Tuaregs is a four-meter-long piece of cotton cloth that is wrapped around the head, one of its folds being brought across the face to form a face-muffler (Keenan, 1977: 108). The Muslim Arabs encountered different North-African peoples during the fast expansion of Islam in the seventh and early eighth centuries c.e. As Islam expanded throughout the Maghreb, some of the local populations converted to Islam and joined in the new expansionist venture. It is very difficult to gauge the level of Islamization of the local North-African peoples in these first centuries of Islam, but it is fairly safe to assume that it could not have been very high, particularly in the mountainous and desert hinterlands, far from the Mediterranean coastline.

One of these groups were the Ṣanhāġa, who lived in the desert areas between the south of Morocco and the valleys of the Senegal and Niger rivers. The Ṣanhāġa were Muslim, at least nominally, since the seventh century c.e., and they controlled important trade routes between across the Sahara Desert through which gold circulated



northbound, and salt and manufactured goods, such as textiles, circulated southbound. This tribal group is described as follows by the Arab geographer Ibn Ḥawqal, who travelled throughout the Maghreb and al-Andalus in the years 947-51 c.e., in his work *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*:

Between Awdaghust and Sijilmāsa there is more than one tribe of isolated Berbers who have never seen a settlement and know nothing other than the remote desert. Among them are the Shartā, the Samsaṭa and the Banū Masūfa. The latter are a great tribe who live deep inland around inadequate water-points and do not know wheat or barley or flour (...). Their food consists of milk and occasionally of meat, yet they are sturdier and stronger than anyone else. They have a king who rules them and administers their affairs. The Ṣanhāga and other people of these regions respect him, because they control that route. They are steadfast and brave, good camel riders, lightfooted in running and tough (...) Nobody has ever seen the face of any of them [the Banū Masūfa], nor of the Ṣanhāga, except for the eyes, for they don the veil (*liṭām*) when they are children and they are brought up with it. They consider that the mouth is something shameful, like the privy parts, because of what issues forth from it, since in their opinion what emanates from the mouth smells worse than what emanates from the privy parts (Ibn Ḥawqal, 1938, vol. 1: 101; English translation cited from Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000: 49).

The Andalusi geographer al-Bakrī (ca. 1040-1094 c.e.) described them in a similar manner in his *Kitāb al-masālik wa-ʿl-mamālik*:

All the tribes of the desert preserve the custom of wearing a veil (*niqāb*) which screens their foreheads, above the other veil (*liṭām*) which covers the lower part of the face, so that only their eyes are visible. They do not remove these veils under any circumstances. A man does not distinguish his relative or friend unless he is wearing the veil. Thus if one of them is killed in a battle and his veil is removed, nobody can recognize him until the covering is put back, for it has become for them more necessary than their skins. To those who wear apparel different from theirs they give a nickname which in their tongue means “fly-mouths” (al-Bakrī, 1857: 170; English translation cited from Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000: 75-76).

From these descriptions by Ibn Ḥawqal and al-Bakrī, we can see that the Arabic term that was considered most fitting to describe the face-covering practices of the Ṣanhāga was “*liṭām*,” and indeed this became one of their main identifiers in the eyes of the Arabs (they were called often in Arabic sources “*ahl al-liṭām*” and “*mulattimūn*”). In the Middle Eastern setting, the term “*liṭām*” refers to “a piece of material with which the Bedouins concealed the lower part of the face, the mouth and sometimes also part of the nose” (Björkman, 2012). From the description by al-Bakrī, which is more detailed, it would seem that the Ṣanhāgas wear actually two pieces of garment: a face-muffler (which he calls *liṭām*), and a head cover over it (which he refers to as *niqāb*). Al-Bakrī’s description might be correct, but we can also entertain the possibility that he misread as



two different pieces of garment that were known to him (the *liṭām* and *niqāb* of the Arabs) what really was a single long strip of cloth, arranged so as to fulfil a double function, in the manner of the Tuareg *tagelmust*.

North-African soldiers had been part (in good probability, they were a numerical majority) of the contingent of Muslim troops that crossed into the Iberian Peninsula starting in the eighth century c.e. A steady flow of North-African population entered Iberia during the centuries of Islamic rule, many of them as mercenaries and slaves. We can suppose that Ṣanhāḡa elements were most probably present in the human landscape of the Iberian Peninsula since the beginning of the Muslim rule, and during the Umayyad emirate and caliphate. After the collapse of the Cordoban caliphate, one of the most important taifa kingdoms, that of Granada, was ruled by the Zīrīd dynasty, affiliated to the Ṣanhāḡa tribal group, between 1013 and 1090 c.e.

Some branches of the Ṣanhāḡa, particularly the Lamtūna, gave impetus to the Almoravid movement, a religious-political movement that emerged in North Africa ca. 1050, and created an Empire stretching from the Senegal river in Africa to the Ebro river in the Iberian Peninsula between the mid eleventh and the mid-twelfth centuries c.e. During the period of Almoravid rule in al-Andalus, between 1086 and ca. 1145 c.e., objections to the use of the face-muffler by men seem to be understandably moderate (after all, the face-muffler was the traditional garb of the ruling elite, so it was probably dangerous to object to it vigorously). Some of the objections to the face-muffler that we encounter in this period seem to relate to the maintenance of social order —the lack of adequacy between the face-muffler and the Andalusian urban setting, in which criminal elements could employ the face-muffler to perform misdeeds in conditions of anonymity, — and to mosque etiquette: in al-Andalus it was not considered appropriate to pray in the mosque with a covered face.

We find an example of the first type of objections, related to the maintenance of social order, in the treatise on *ḥisba* (supervision of economic and commercial affairs) by Ibn ‘Abdūn, composed at the very end of the eleventh or the beginning of the twelfth century. Seville, the city where the author served as public officer, fell to Almoravid control in 1091. Ibn ‘Abdūn writes:

The use of the veil that covers the lower part of the face (*liṭām*) must be exclusively reserved for the Ṣanhāḡa, the Lamtūna and the Lamṭa [tribal subgroups associated with the Ṣanhāḡa], because the mercenaries (*ḥasam*) and the black Berber soldiers (*‘abīd*), as well as others who have no good reason to do it, use the *liṭām* so that people would see them and fear them, and thanks to the *liṭām* they do many inappropriate things. It is convenient to discuss this matter with the government, so that the *liṭām* be the distinctive sign of the Almoravids, who must be regarded with honor and respect, and to whom we owe allegiance. Because these Berber soldiers and mercenaries, in their insolence, if they veil their face and modify their external aspect, they may be misread as important men and they may receive a consideration and respect of which they are unworthy (...). If, however, the Berber soldiers of the



Almoravids must be veiled, so that they can differentiate themselves, they should do it with a *ḥimār*, or with an *al-mi'zar*, or something similar (Ibn 'Abdūn, 1955: 28).

Regarding proper mosque etiquette and the use of the Almoravid face-muffler, we know that the local Andalusians had qualms about the practice of Almoravid men to attend religious services at the mosque with their face covered. A legal query to this effect was sent to the religious scholar Abū l-Walīd ibn Rušd al-Jadd (1058-1126 c.e.), grandfather of the famous philosophy known as Averroes. This query requests Ibn Rušd's opinion on whether the use of the face-muffler is acceptable according to Islamic law. His response is that the members of tribes among which it is customary to wear the face-muffler since times immemorial were entitled to wear it also in the mosque, but nobody else should do it. As he puts it:

Face covering is for the Murābiṭīn the garb they have selected for themselves, upon which they were brought into being, and which they have transmitted [through the generations]. [Thus, their] ancestors and offspring got accustomed to it. Therefore, there is no repugnance (*karāhiyya*) towards [this practice]. On the contrary, it is desirable (*yustaḥabb*) for them to abide by and preserve [this custom]. (...) [That being said,] it is desirable for whoever [wore the veil] to remove it while praying. But if he prayed while wearing it, his prayer is nonetheless fulfilled and [what he did] is not counted as a sin. There is no constraint. And through God [comes] reconciliation! (Ibn Rušd, 1987, II: 963-966).⁶

There were also humoristic references to the face-muffler, such as the one we find in the polemic work of Al-Šaqundī, *Risāla fī faḍl al-Andalus*. In it, he cites the satiric verses of the poet al-Yakkī mocking the Almoravids and their claims to descend from the ancient Ḥimyarīs of Yemen:⁷

They are people who hold the utmost honour among the [Banū] Ḥimyar;
but if they trace back their genealogy to the [Banū] Lamtuna, they are the same.
They gathered in them treasures of all excellence;
which is why they blushed, and they veiled their face (*fa-talattamū*) (al-Munaḡḡid, 1968: 45).

In another poem by the same poet al-Yakkī, we read:

The Almoravid is stingy with his gifts and is only generous towards his family. His face accords with the ugliness of his deeds, which is why he veils it (al-Munaḡḡid, 1968: 45).

⁶ Translation into English by Ghassan Osmat, to whom I am most grateful for sharing it with me.

⁷ Several genealogical legends ascribe Middle Eastern origins to the North-Africans; according to one of them, their origins would be in the south of Arabia, in the ancient kingdom of Ḥimyar (Shatzmiller, 1983 : 147).



The same sarcastic motif that explains the veil (in this case, employing a different term in Arabic, *burqu'*) as a cover for ugliness is found in the eleventh or twelfth century female poet *Nazhūn bint al-Qilā'ī* of Granada, also in the Almoravid period:

Who will defend me from this unpleasant lover,
Who does not understand hints and wishes?
He wants to join someone who would not even
Deign to give him a slap in the face.
With a head in need of a cover,
And a face in need of a veil (*burqu'*) (Sobh, 1994: 96-97).

The face-muffler is also very present in the poetry of *Ibn Quzmān* (d. 1160 c.e.), a master of the *zajal* poetry whose life spans throughout the period of Almoravid rule in Iberia. For instance, in a strongly homoerotic description of a *Ṣanhāḡa* youth, *Dāwūd ibn Yattummar*, *Ibn Quzmān* says:

By Him who granted you the Emir's favor,
Don't wear a veil (*tulattam*) until you grow up,
For I am, indeed, jealous of your turban,
Whenever your mouth is under that veil (*liṭām*).
Your veil (*liṭām*) is nothing but an enemy,
(God curse the lucky bastard!):
I may be forgiven for envying it,
Since it gorges on ks and is and double esses [kisses] (Monroe, 2016, I: 424-427).

The *Ṣanhāḡa* face-muffler is very much present in texts from the Almoravid period in al-Andalus, and not without criticism, as we have seen, but it does not seem to be associated with connotations of effeminacy. But precisely this association would become one of the rallying cries of the religious-political movement of the Almohads, who vied for power with the Almoravids starting in the decade of 1120 c.e.

ALMOHAD CONDEMNATION OF THE FACE-MUFFLER

Led by *Ibn Tūmart*, a self-styled *mahdī*, a movement of religious and political renewal that emerged in the north of Africa in the decades of 1120 and 1130 c.e. *Ibn Tūmart* belonged to the *Harga* tribe, a branch of the *Maṣmūda*, from the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. They managed to overthrow the Almoravid Empire, and that took over control of al-Andalus by the mid twelfth century. The Almohads rose with a message of religious renewal that was not very different from the original inspiration of the Almoravids. Indeed, it seems that at his return from the East, *Ibn Tūmart* tried to enlist the Almoravid establishment into his movement. Upon his failure to do so, he started to distinguish himself from the Almoravid message, creating some ideological anchors for this distinction, and emphasizing his own messianic role as *mahdī*, which seems to have more subdued before his definitive rift with the Almoravids. Probably the most



significant “rallying cry” of the Almohads against the Almoravids was the accusation of anthropomorphism (which has been dealt with in detail by Serrano, 2005). But, as already indicated by Barbour a few decades ago, another accusation that resonated quite a lot was the association of the face-muffler with effeminacy and subversion of the proper gender roles (Barbour, 1966: 118-120). Both accusations, anthropomorphism and reversal of gender roles, are related to the messianic claims of Ibn Tūmart: they exemplify the chaotic situation of the world which precludes the arrival of the *mahdī*. In the words of Ibn Tūmart himself in his treatise *A‘azz ma yuṭlab*:

The Messenger of God, may the blessings and peace of God be upon him, commanded an opposition to [and a separation from] the people of falsehood in what they wore, the deeds they performed and in all of their affairs. He did this in many of his statements. He said, ‘Oppose the Jews, oppose the polytheists, the Zoroastrians, and also the corporealists (*al-mujassimūn*) who are among the infidels. They wear women’s attire in that they cover their faces with a veil (*al-liṭām wa-l-niqāb*), and their womenfolk resemble their menfolk in uncovering themselves, their faces unveiled, not wearing any head covering whatsoever (*al-riqāb*). Resemblance to the male gender is prohibited (*ḥarām*), according to what Ibn ‘Abbās narrated on the authority of the Prophet, may the blessings and peace of God be upon him. He said: ‘The Messenger of God, may the blessings and peace of God be upon him, cursed the *mutaṣābihūn*: women who dress like men and men who dress like women. The curse is applicable to all. All of that is forbidden and is unlawful’. God, Mighty and Glorious is He, said, ‘Do not rely on those who do evil, or the Fire may touch you, and then you will have no one to protect you from God, nor will you be helped’ (Q. 11:113) (Ibn Tūmart, 1903: 263-264; English translation cited from Norris, 2011: 161).

It seems in this text that the custom of the Ṣanhāḡa men to wear face-mufflers, a univocally masculine feature within the Ṣanhāḡa culture, which was probably well-known to their neighbouring Maṣmūda, was deliberately misinterpreted by the Almohads as a practice that reversed gender norms, and that allowed them to accuse them and mock them on that account.

GENEALOGICAL EXPLANATION OF THE FACE-MUFFLER THAT UPHOLDS THE ASSOCIATION OF FACE-COVERING PRACTICES WITH FEMININITY

There is an abundance of genealogical explanations that try to explain the origins of the diverse North African peoples that were categorised by the Arabs as “Berbers” (see Roughi, 2019). These explanations locate their origins in the East; as Shatzmiller has noted, they can be generally divided in three main groups: those that purport a filiation from Cham, the son of Noah; those that argue for Philistine origins; and those that relate them to Ḥimyar, in Yemen (Shatzmiller, 1983). Two historians of Eastern origin, Ibn al-Aṭīr (1160-1233 c.e.) and Ibn Ḥallikān (1211-1282 c.e.), present the theory of the Ḥimyari descent of the Almoravids, providing explanations for their particular custom of wearing a face-muffler.



Ibn al-Aṭīr, born in Mosul (Iraq), provides in his historical work *Al-Kāmil fī-l-tārīḥ* an account of the origins of the Almoravids. Talking about the moment in which Yūsuf ibn Tāshfīn became the leader of the Almoravids, acquiring the title of *amīr al-muslimīn* in 1069-70 c.e., he writes about the Lamtūna, i.e., the branch of the Ṣanhāḡa to which belonged the Almoravid elite:

A group of the tribe of the Lamtūna and others went out and thereupon tightened their *liṭāms*. Before they ruled they had worn their *liṭāms* in the desert [only] against the heat and cold, as the Arabs do, and were mostly of swarthy complexion. But when they became rulers of the land, they tightened their *liṭāms*. It is said that the reason for their adoption of the *liṭām* is that a party of Lamtūna went out to raid one of their enemies, but the enemy came up behind them to their tents, there being there none but the old men, children, and women. When the old men realized that it was the enemy they ordered the women to wear men's clothes and fix *liṭāms* on tightly so that they should not be recognized and to gird on weapons. This they did, and the old men and children advanced before them while the women circled round the tents. When the enemy came close they saw a great body and thought that they were men, so they said: 'These are with their women, and will fight to the death in defence of them. We would do well to drive off the livestock and depart, and if they follow us we will fight them away from their women.' While they were gathering the livestock from the pastures the men of the tribe came up and the enemy found themselves between them and the women, and many of the enemy were killed, the more so on account of the women. From that time they have made the wearing of the *liṭām* an invariable custom, so that one cannot know and old man from a youth. They do not remove it by night or day. (Ibn al-Aṭīr, 1863, IX: 418; English translation cited from Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000: 161-162).

The sources from which Ibn al- Aṭīr derived his knowledge of Almoravid history are not known to us, but his account differs from that of Maghrebi sources (and is considered a bit suspect on account of these divergences, as Levtzion and Hopkins note (Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000: 157). According to this passage, the Lamtūna used the face-muffler rather casually, as the Arabs do, in order to protect themselves from the natural elements. But when they became “rulers of the land” (i.e., with the rise of the Almoravid empire), their usage changed in nature; “they tightened their *liṭāms*.” This change was motivated by a military event, in which the Lamtūna women used the face-muffler to pass as men and scare off the enemy surrounding their encampment. The military stratagem paid off and ended with a spectacular success of the Lamtūna. In commemoration of this victory, the Lamtūna men (not the women) adopted the habitude of wearing the face-muffler as an “invariable custom.” This text introduces an element of “gender anxiety” in the usage of the face-muffler, while still maintaining the Lamtūna face-covering practices as a clearly gendered masculine (when the women want to disguise themselves as men, they don the face-veil).

In another text by yet an Eastern scholar, Ibn Ḥallikān, the element of “gender anxiety” is taken one step further, reversing the initial gender identification of the face-



muffler, which becomes in his text a practice originally gendered as feminine. Ibn Ḥallikān, born in Irbil (Iraq) was a legal scholar who developed his career under the Mamluks in Syria and Egypt, and author of a biographical dictionary titled *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān*, composed between 1254-1274. In this work, he uses as a source an anonymous history of the Maghreb composed in Mosul in 1184, for which he gives the title *Kitāb al-muḡrib 'an sīrat mulūk al-Maḡrib*. Citing from this source, he says:

In this biography [of Yūsuf b. Tāshfīn] there is mention of the *mulattamūn* so it needs a word. What I have found is that the origin of these people is in Ḥimyar b. Saba'. They are a people of horses, camels and sheep, dwelling in the southern deserts and moving from one watering-place to another like the Arabs. Their tents are of hair and fur [...]. They are a people who wear the *liṭām* and do not uncover their faces, so they call them *mulattamūn*, 'people wearing the *liṭām*.' This is a custom of theirs which they hand down from generation to generation. The reason for it, according to what is said, is that Ḥimyar used to wear the *liṭām* on account of the severity of heat and cold. This is what their élite used to do, but then it became general and the common people began to do it. It is also said that the cause of it was that certain of their enemies used to seek to take them unawares when they were absent from their tents and attack the clan by night, taking property and women, so one of their shaykhs advised them that they should send their women away to one side dressed as men, while they should sit in the tents wearing the *liṭām* dressed as women. When the enemy came, thinking them to be women, they would come out against them. So they did this and fell upon them with swords and killed them. Then they kept to the *liṭām* as a blessing for the victory over the enemy which they had achieved (Ibn Ḥallikān, 1968, VII: 129; English translation cited from Levtzion & Hopkins, 2000: 165).

As in the previous passage, the face-muffler is used in a military stratagem, but here, it is originally considered to be a female garment: the Lamtūna men send the women away dressed as men, and they "sit in the tents wearing the *liṭām* dressed as women." The assumption here, as opposed to the previous text, is that the face-muffler is a female attire.

A pious, Islamic reinterpretation of this genealogical explanation is provided in *Ḥulal al-Mawṣiyya fil-Aḥbar al-marrakuṣiyya*, a work composed in 1381 c.e. that has been described as a "cut-and-paste" of different sources, some of them historically reliable, some of them "invented by the author, and ridiculous legends whose origins appear to be oriental" (Huici Miranda, 2012: n.p). The content of the work summarizes the history of the Almoravids, the Almohads, and the Merinids up until 1381 c.e. At the beginning of this work, we find again a genealogy of the Ṣanhāḡa that attempts to provide a reasonable explanation for their seemingly unbecoming practice of using a face veil "in the manner of women:"

The Ṣanhāḡa stem from Ḥimyar. They came to the Yemen, then they journeyed to the Sahara and to their homeland in the Maghreb. The reason for that is that



one of the kings of the Tubba's was not like those kings who had preceded him among his people. He was exceptional. None attained his excellence and the might of his realm. After he had subdued the Arabs and the non-Arabs, he effaced the memory of all the nations which were before him. One of the rabbis had told him of the events of the day and of the revealed books of Allāh to His Messenger, likewise that Allāh would send a Messenger who would be the Seal of the Prophets and that He would send it to all nations. He believed the words of that rabbi about the Messenger and his revelation. He testified in regard to him, 'I testify that Aḥmad is the Messenger of Allāh.' He composed some verses, which said, 'I bear witness to Aḥmad that he is the Messenger of Allāh the creator, if my life span were to be extended to his own I would be a *vizir* of his and a cousin.' The poem is a long one. Then he marched to the Yemen and he called on the people of his kingdom to believe. But only a party of Ḥimyar responded to him. When the infidels overcame the men of faith, all who believed and followed him were among the slain and the banished, sought-after and pursued. It was then that they veiled their faces as did their women-folk at that time. They fled for their lives and they scattered to the four winds in all lands. The cause of the appearance of the muffled ones was on account of this. They were the first to wear the face muffler. Then they went from land to land and from place to place until they arrived in the remotest west in the land of the Berbers. There they occupied the land and they peopled it. The *liṭām* muffler became the attire whereby Allāh had honoured them and by means of which he had saved them from their enemies. They held it in esteem and they clung to it. It became their adornment, nay rather that of their successors, and they do not forsake it, to this very day. Their language only became Berber due to the proximity of the Berbers, living with them and marrying among them" (*Hulal al-Mawṣiyya*, 1936: 7-9; English translation cited from Norris 1982, 107-108).

According to this explanation, which certainly is not to be taken at face value as a historical source, but which is fascinating from the point of view of the construction of an imagined genealogy of the Ṣanhāḡa, the custom of men to veil their faces goes back to a period of war in which "the infidels overcame the men of faith," and the latter were forced to flee disguised as women in order to survive. The face-muffler is reinvented as a symbol of the attachment to Allāh in the midst of infidelity. The association of the practice of face-covering with femininity is not contested at all; it is, on the contrary, further consolidated in this passage.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has traced different perceptions of the face-muffler of the Ṣanhāḡa, from a perspective that we have characterized as the "historic dynamism of face-veiling practices." First noted by the Arab geographers as a sort of anthropological curiosity, the face-muffler came to political prominence during the heyday of the Almoravid Empire. During that period, it was mentioned in texts that presented objections to its use on account of social order and of proper mosque etiquette. It was also mentioned because of its aesthetic properties in sarcastic poems, as a fitting cover for ugliness; and in erotic poems, as an obstacle to erotic enjoyment. Up until this point, I have not found



associations of the Ṣanhāğa face-muffler with the feminine gender: it is well established that this is a practice that is gendered male. With the deposition of the Almoravids by the Almohads, a new religious-political movement originating in the decade of 1120 c.e. in the Maghreb, a new and highly strategical understanding of the face-muffler is put forward. According to Almohad ideology, deeply suffused with eschatology, the use of the face-muffler by men demonstrates the reversal of the proper gender roles that is one of the signs that announce the imminent arrival of the *mahdī*. In later, Eastern sources, the face-muffler is creatively reinterpreted as an originally feminine attire that was strategically employed by Ṣanhāğa men in military conditions, and then kept on as a commemoration of their victories, or, alternatively, of their attachment to God in the midst of infidelity. Despite the existence in Middle Eastern, Arabic culture of masculine veiling practices, some of them going back to the pre-Islamic era, the masculine face-muffler of the Ṣanhāğa has been reinterpreted time and again, often in attempts to align it with the female gender. It constitutes a good example of the “historic dynamism of face-veiling practices,” which are not essentially associated with one gender, or one culture, but rather shift and are perceived differently according to the varying historical contexts in which they take place.

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