

The Divine Flood

**Ibrāhīm Niasse and the Roots of a
Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival**

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Acknowledgments

The fruit of many years of study, travel, and interaction with members of the religious movement portrayed here, the present book provides the first monograph-length study of the Senegalese Sufi leader Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1395/1975) and his *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*, or “Community of the Divine Flood,” which emerged within the Tijāniyya Sufi order in West Africa from the late 1920s onwards. My first close acquaintance with a representative of this Sufi movement goes back to the year 1994. During a visit to Darfur, I met Shaykh Ibrāhīm Sīdī (d. 1420/1999), who, though not closely related to the inner circle of the “Community of the Divine Flood,” was a strong advocate of Niasse’s method of spiritual training. Our first encounter marked the beginning of a deep friendship, and I can say without any reservation that I have never met a more affectionate, more generous, and more captivating person than Shaykh Ibrāhīm. I owe him more than I can ever hope to be able to express in words. Certainly the present study would not have been produced without the tremendous insights into the doctrines and practices of the Tijāniyya that I gained from my encounters with Shaykh Ibrāhīm, especially during the time he hosted me in El Fasher from December 1994 to September 1995. He and his family, as well as his brother Shaykh al-Ghālī and all his followers with their families, most notably °Abd al-Raḥmān Wādī, have treated me as one of theirs, supported me in all my pursuits, and showered me with their affection in myriad ways that have endeared them to me and make me stand in their debt forever.

Crucial support also came from several leading figures within the “Community of the Divine Flood” in Medina Baye near Kaolack, the headquarters of the movement in Senegal. Among the sons of Ibrāhīm Niasse I need to mention first and foremost al-Ḥājj °Abdallāh, the first successor of his father (d. 1422/2001), who approved of my presence in the community and

granted me access to several important written sources. Likewise, Shaykh Tijānī, Muḥammad al-Māḥī, Muḥammad al-Amīn, and Mukhtār Niase graciously sacrificed their time to respond to my queries, sometimes in long conversations. I shall always remember my encounters with the late Shaykh al-Ḥasan Cissé (d. 1429/2008), Imam in the mosque of Medina Baye and the most widely known representative of the “Community of the Divine Flood” for the last two decades of his life. Uniquely acute and perceptive, Shaykh al-Ḥasan always seemed to be aware of my needs, doubts, and questions. His willingness to interact with me—a white European outsider—greatly enhanced my standing in the community. None of this would have been possible, however, without Moustapha Diouf, my host in Medina Baye and a model of modesty, generosity, and erudition. He and his family gave me much more than a hospitable home during my sojourns in Medina Baye.

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al-Ḥājj al-Mishrī in Ma[°]tā Mawlānā (Mauritania), whose energetic and forceful character is enormously contagious. Last but not least, I benefited enormously from my conversations and correspondences with Shaykh Fakhruddin Owaysi (Capetown, South Africa). My deepest gratitude goes to all these individuals, as well as to those whom I cannot mention by name.

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The present study is an abridged and substantially revised version of a thesis, titled “Nach der Flut: Ibrāhīm Niasse, Sufik und Gesellschaft in Westafrika,” that I submitted in 2004 to Bayreuth University (Germany) for the Habilitation degree. As the leading German institution for African Studies in Germany, Bayreuth University offered excellent resources and was the home to several outstanding scholars who facilitated my work in various ways. Gerd Spittler, then holding the chair of anthropology, shaped my career more than he probably knows. The support of Jamil Abun-Nasr and his successor Rainer Oßwald as chair of Islamic Studies was crucial in securing funding for my research. Colleagues who were in Bayreuth at the time and discussed my work with me included (in alphabetical order) Kurt Beck, Franz Kogelmann, Roman Loimeier (now Universität Göttingen), and Norbert Oberauer (now Universität Münster). My intellectual exchange with Benjamin Soares (African Studies Centre, Leiden) has been a

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Note on Transliteration

Transliteration of Arabic names and terms follows the system of *Arabic Literature of Africa* (ALA), which is adapted from the system used in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Many personal names of West African Muslims include Arabic and non-Arabic elements. I have not made an attempt to transliterate non-Arabic names based on the way they appear in Arabic sources. Rather, the guiding principle here is orthographic self-representation as in Roman script. Thus, I write Niasse rather than Anyās or Inyās, Sy rather than Sī, Tall rather than Tāl, etc. Terms from African languages are rendered without attention to phonetic or other transliteration.

As for dates, I have opted for a mixed approach. Dates taken from Arabic sources usually refer to the Islamic lunar calendar (*hijrī*) and are rendered accordingly, followed by the equivalent in the Common Era calendar separated by a slash. Both the Islamic and the Common Era years are also given to indicate the years of birth and/or death of Muslim individuals. Dates that appear only in Common Era format in the primary sources or the secondary literature have not been converted into Islamic years. In these cases, only the Common Era date is given. For the sake of simplification, in phrases such as “during the ninth century” reference is always made to the Common Era calendar. Only in the rare cases that specific mention of a *hijrī* century is necessary, such dates will be given as “during the third/ninth century.”

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Arabic and French sources are my own. The Arabic primary sources used in this study often contain lengthy eulogies and honorific titles. For the sake of legibility these have generally been omitted. I have also tried to dispense with abbreviations as much as possible. One frequently used abbreviation is “b.” for Arabic *ibn*, “son of,” which occurs in many names. The female equivalent is “bt.” for Arabic *bint*, “daughter of.”

Prologue: “A Flood Shall Come Upon My Companions”

تأتي فيضة على أصحابي حتى يدخل الناس في طريقنا أفواجا

A flood shall come upon my companions, so that the people will enter our path in throngs.

Aḥmad b. Maḥammad al-Tijānī

This prediction stands at the beginning of the story that forms the subject of the present book. It is attributed to Aḥmad b. Maḥammad [*sic*] al-Tijānī (b. 1150/1737, d. 1230/1815), who hailed from present day Algeria and was the founder of the Sufi order named after him, the Tijāniyya. His disciple Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī (d. 1259/1843-1844), who transmitted this statement in *al-Ifāda al-aḥmadiyya*, a collection of al-Tijānī’s aphorisms, carries on with the quotation: “This flood will come at a time when people are subjected to extreme ordeals and hardships.”¹

The term rendered here as “flood” stands for the Arabic word *fayḍa*, which is a technical term in Sufism. The full spectrum of its meaning can hardly be summarized in a few words. *Fayḍa* can signify “flood,” “deluge,” “overflowing,” “overabundance,” “flow of grace,” or “emanation,” to list only some of the possible translations.

What did Aḥmad al-Tijānī have in mind when he made his statement? The Cairo edition of *al-Ifāda al-aḥmadiyya* contains the following interpretation by al-Sufyānī: “With this flood he meant that a great number of his companions would experience illumination. He did not consider it unlikely to occur during his time.”²

¹ Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī, *al-Ifāda al-aḥmadiyya*, 83.

² *Ibid.*

After this prediction, which has most likely been uttered sometime between 1224/1809 and 1230/1815,³ more than a century elapsed before the flood was unleashed. In Kosi, a tiny village near Kaolack in the then–French colony of Senegal, a young Muslim scholar called Ibrāhīm Niasse laid claim to the title “bringer of the flood” (*ṣāhib al-fayḍa*). He made this assertion in approximately the third quarter of the year 1929, and in Muḥarram 1350/May–June 1931 he completed his book *Kāshif al-ilbās ʿan fayḍat al-khatm Abī l-ʿAbbās* (“Removing the Confusion Surrounding the Flood of the Seal Abū l-ʿAbbās i.e., Aḥmad al-Tijānī”), which gives a comprehensive justification of his claim to the epithet *ṣāhib al-fayḍa*. In April 1931 Niasse founded a settlement called Medina a few miles northeast of Kaolack, though he continued to spend much of his time in Kosi. The number of people who recognized him as the bringer of the flood did not yet exceed a few hundred.

Twenty years later French colonial officials estimated the number of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s followers in the province of Sine-Saloum alone to be about 100,000,⁴ and the flood had already crossed the borders of the then–colony Afrique Occidentale Française. The *fayḍa* had swept the neighboring British colony of Gambia and the southern parts of Mauritania, where it was embraced by several members of the influential Idaw ʿAlī tribe, known for its high standard of Islamic scholarship and its historical role in spreading the Tijāniyya south of the Sahara. During the 1950s, the *fayḍa* spread rapidly in Ghana (then known as Gold Coast) and even as far away as Nigeria. By the time Niasse passed away in London in 1975, the flood had reached millions of Muslims in more than fifteen African countries south of the Sahara.

³ This assumption is based on the fact that no trace of the statement can be found in the two other major works written by disciples of al-Tijānī, *Jawāhir al-maʿānī* by ʿAlī Ḥarāzīm (completed 1214/1800) and *al-Jāmiʿ li-mā iftaraqa* by Muḥammad al-Mishrī (completed before 1224/1809).

⁴ CAOM Aff Pol 2158/3, J. Beyriès, Rapport de Mission sur la situation de l’Islam en A.O.F., 3 Avril-31 Juillet 1952, 58.

“*Naḥnu nās al-tarbiya*—We are people of spiritual training,” Shaykh Ibrāhīm b. Sīdī Muḥammad (d. 1420/1999) explained to me in one of our first meetings, in March 1994 in El Fasher, the capital of the now-embattled province of northern Darfur in the Republic of Sudan. My conversation partner was the grandson of a Tijānī shaykh (Sufi master) from Djenné, a town in present-day Mali, who had migrated to Darfur at the beginning of the twentieth century. In keeping with family tradition, Ibrāhīm Sīdī had chosen the vocation of a shaykh in the Tijānīyya order. His *zāwiya* (Sufi center) in El Fasher, established toward the end of the 1970s, flourished under his direction.

Although Ibrāhīm Sīdī was very proud of this family tradition, his leadership of the family *zāwiya* was marked by a significant innovation. In contrast to his predecessors and many other Sudanese proponents of the Tijānīyya, he was a supporter of Niasse and expressed this in the statement “*naḥnu nās al-tarbiya*.” *Tarbiya*, “spiritual training,” was the label used to popularize Niasse’s teachings in Darfur; the term came to be known, alongside *fayḍa*, as referring to the specific Tijānīyya tradition established by Niasse.

During my sojourn in Darfur I soon learned that *tarbiya* and *fayḍa* were at the heart of heated disagreement among members of the Tijānīyya. One faction considered Niasse to be the highest ranking saint of his time and saw him as a great renewer of the order; others, however, were of the opinion that *tarbiya* and *fayḍa* had no place in the “true,” original teachings of Aḥmad al-Tijānī.

How did this flood gain such an importance within only fifty years of its emergence? How did Niasse manage to wield such an enduring influence on the Tijānīyya? What were the modes of and the reasons behind the *fayḍa*’s amazing spread? In Medina, which has grown into a

large neighborhood on the outskirts of Kaolack where Niasse's descendants reside and visitors from all over Africa come and go, answers to these questions are not hard to come by: the success of the flood was a divine affair. After all, was it not Aḥmad al-Tijānī himself who had predicted its coming? Was not the fact that Niasse's teachings had reached the Red Sea the best proof for the legitimacy of his claim to the *fayḍa*? Anyone who fails to find these arguments convincing will most likely be told that the *fayḍa* has recently begun to attract a following in parts of Asia, Europe, the United States, and even a few countries in South America, and has thus become a truly cosmopolitan movement.

Introduction: Studying Sufism in Context

A movement like Sufism, aspiring to a life of dedication and involving itself in social works on a broad front, should not necessarily be judged by the literature it produces. Precisely because its pretensions lay in other areas, a large part of its “true” history escapes us.

Fritz Meier, “Mystic Path,” 127.

On his way home from the market, a man carrying a bag full of meat passed by the mosque of Medina. As it was the time of the congregational prayer, he stopped and entered the mosque. Fearing that someone might steal the meat if he left it at the entrance, he took the bag inside and placed it next to his feet. Baye was leading the prayer, and after it was over, the man went home to prepare his meal. But to his great amazement, the meat remained raw; in fact, it did not change its consistency at all, as if it was not on the fire. Disturbed by this experience, he went to inform Baye about the incident. Baye listened patiently and responded: “Everything that is behind me in congregational prayer is immune against fire.”

Baye means “father” in Wolof and is the affectionate epithet of Ibrāhīm Niasse (b. 1318/1900, d. 1395/1975), the main protagonist of this study. Medina is the name of the settlement Niasse founded in 1349/1931 a few miles outside of Kaolack, a provincial capital in Senegal; today it is one of the biggest neighborhoods in Kaolack and home to the headquarters of a transnational branch of the Tijānī path (*ṭarīqa*, often rendered as Sufi order), best known under the name *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* (“Community of the Divine Flood”). It is no exaggeration to say that Niasse has left an enormous legacy. He was a leader for millions of African Muslims from between the Atlantic Ocean and the Red Sea, a charismatic spiritual guide, a distinguished scholar of Islam, an outstanding Sufi saint and accomplished shaykh of the Tijāniyya, a successful mediator between his followers and government authorities, a high-ranking official in many international

Islamic organizations, and a prolific writer and gifted poet, to mention only some of his most important roles.

The above anecdote, which I heard on several occasions from followers of Baye in Medina, highlights Niasse's role as a saint and miracle worker. On the surface it suggests that he guarantees his followers immunity from hellfire—a claim that would sound outrageous to most non-Sufi Muslims, and possibly even to some Sufis. Nevertheless, the story does indeed capture a conviction that is widespread among followers of Niasse. We might thus be tempted to interpret it as an expression of some type of vulgarized, popular Sufism, as understood by ordinary people who have no sense of the exalted world of “real” Sufi spirituality.

Judging from his vast literary oeuvre, there is no doubt that Niasse was intimately acquainted with this spirituality as it unfolds in the magisterial texts of the great historical Sufi masters. His writings are replete with references to the classical authors as well as the seminal works of North African Sufis of the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, not to mention the Tijānī corpus of literature that grew rapidly after Aḥmad al-Tijānī established his path in 1196/1782.¹ In fact, Niasse himself can be counted among the most influential and versatile Sufi authors of the twentieth century.

If we assume that Niasse's credentials as Sufi scholar are above reproach, how can we explain that his followers circulate stories that perpetuate rather unorthodox promises of eternal bliss? Of course, we cannot determine whether Niasse did indeed utter the statement attributed to him, nor can we know whether the account describes an actual historical occurrence. As a matter

¹ In that year, al-Tijānī had a visionary encounter with the Prophet Muḥammad in the oasis of Abū Samghūn in the Algerian desert, during which he received the order to start his *ṭarīqa*. See °Alī Ḥarazīm, *Jawāhir al-ma°ānī* I, 51.

of fact, we are probably dealing with a *Wanderlegende* (traveling legend).² But we should not dismiss it as primitive folk tale that supports the notion of ordinary followers whose popular beliefs separate them from the more sophisticated Sufi leaders. Like many other miracle stories involving Baye, the anecdote subtly connects his supernatural capacities with a religious message. We should therefore take it seriously and use it as the point of departure to explore how the purportedly unorthodox Sufism of the masses is connected to and intertwined with the complex Sufi doctrines as expounded by the erudite few.

As it is told in Kaolack, the *Wanderlegende* of the uncooked meat has an additional dimension. It points to a profound spiritual experience that looms beyond the surface of popular Islam. The fire's failure to outwardly transform the consistency of the meat signals a dramatic inner transformation, a transformation that is not propelled by simply praying behind Baye, but by becoming his disciple and by taking him as role model. The two dimensions of the anecdote can perhaps best be expressed by drawing on the distinction, frequently employed among Sufis, between the manifest (or apparent; *zāhir*) and the hidden (or esoteric; *bāṭin*). Outwardly, the non-transformation of the meat signifies immunity against hellfire; inwardly, the story invokes the radical effects mystical experience can have on those who embark on the Sufi path. Becoming immutable is itself an extraordinary mutation, and it is this apparent paradox that requires us to dig deeper into the anecdote and, by extension, the history of Sufism in West Africa.

² The story is also related in a nineteenth-century pilgrimage diary from Mauritania; see Norris, *Pilgrimage of Ahmad*, 11. Here it is a *sharīf* (descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad) in Morocco who led a communal prayer where a man attended carrying a chunk of meat. When the *sharīf* was later informed that the meat had failed to cook, he said: "I hoped that, by my words, all who prayed behind me would not be consumed in hell-fire." A similar account circulated in Timbuktu: a servant was unable to cook a fish that had been touched by a *sharīf* and was thus immune against fire. I heard this version from John Hunwick, who cited an unidentified manuscript from Timbuktu. The motive of the *sharīf* who is impervious to fire, heat, or boiling water figures frequently in folk tales.

Perceptions and Interpreters of Sufism

The present book does in part what earlier studies did, in that it examines Sufi doctrines and the related spiritual experiences. Yet, unlike previous works on Sufi teachings, it focuses on the twentieth century and relates the dynamics of Sufism, both as a religious and as a social phenomenon, to the continuous interaction between the leaders, their followers, and other audiences, such as internal and external opponents, and occasionally also colonial officials and even authors of academic studies.

The first epigraph of this chapter highlights some of the theoretical and methodological challenges of such an endeavor. The author of these lines is Fritz Meier, one of the foremost academic authorities on Sufism.³ After having devoted three decades of his life to the study of the literary production of Sufis, Meier arrived at the conclusion that Sufi writings give us only limited access to Sufism's historical "reality." At first glance this confession by a full-blooded philologist may appear surprising, as it seems to diminish the value of his own meticulous work. However, coming from a scholar who stands out as a towering figure in his field—though still largely unacknowledged in anglophone academia—this statement conveys two important messages. First, it signals the modesty of the author, and second, it points to the immense complexity of Sufism both as a philosophical and as a social phenomenon, and to the difficulty to apprehend its multiple expressions.

Acknowledging the limits of one's own academic approach is a significant achievement. Meier was a philologist whose primary interest lay in the literary and intellectual history of

³ I should mention that the second phrase in the epigraph is my translation of the German version of the same article (Meier, "Weg," 127). It does not appear in the English version ("Mystic Path").

Sufism. He worked from his study rather than in the field, and questions pertaining to the social context rarely entered into the focus of his inquiry. Being unfamiliar with living Sufis, he avoided judgments about actual Sufi practices or comments on the alleged decline of Sufism in the face of modernity.

This abstention distinguishes Meier from some of his notable colleagues, who, while praising the brilliant intellectual and spiritual accomplishments of individual early Sufi leaders, routinely lamented the inexorable decline of Sufism. A selection of such statements features acclaimed Sufism specialists like Georges Anawati and Louis Gardet (“At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Sufi brotherhoods merely represented a degraded and decadent form of Sufism”), Arthur Arberry (“Sufism has run its course”), and Annemarie Schimmel, who expressed her deep concern about the relentless encroachment of “the darker side of the Sufi world.”⁴ The scenario these authors offer ties in with the superficial reading of the story about the man whose meat failed to cook: Sufism, formerly the preserve of a small group of highly sophisticated and erudite Muslims, has over time degenerated into mere superstition, characterized by saint veneration or even “saint worship,” and kept alive only by the ignorant masses and “false” Sufis who have no connection to the sublime spiritual sources of pristine Sufism.⁵

⁴ Anawati and Gardet, *Mystique musulmane*, 68; Arberry, *Sufism*, 134; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 19.

⁵ See further Seesemann, “Verfall.” In his work on Sufism in Morocco in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Vincent Cornell makes a similar point when he takes issue with the terms “philosophical” and “popular” Sufism. He dismisses the latter as a label for any religious expression that seems to contradict the “orthodox mystic norm.” As he argues, it is inconsistent to praise the founder of the Jazūliyya Sufi order for his great intellectual achievements as a Sufi while identifying his ordinary followers with popular Sufism or maraboutism (Cornell, *Realm of the Saint*, 196–198).

More recent research has invalidated the premature claims about Sufism's demise.⁶ However, several problematic assumptions underlying the decay scenario persist and continue to influence perceptions of Sufism, both within and outside academic circles. The notion of Sufism's Golden Age, usually located somewhere between the ninth and the thirteenth century, reinforces the idea that every articulation of Sufism after the Golden Age, when it had reached its lofty peak, was inevitably bound to go downhill. Coupled with the problematic distinction between true and false Sufis, this view draws a picture of continuous downward development ultimately leading to the extinction of true Sufism, while false Sufis seek and find a growing audience in the plebeian milieu of some obscure popular Islam.⁷

The perspective taken in Orientalist scholarship is but one genealogy of the widespread identification of contemporary Sufism with popular Islam. An additional and even stronger genealogical bond connects the conflation of Sufism and popular Islam with another academic discipline: anthropology, particularly as represented by the work of Ernest Gellner, Clifford Geertz, and Michael Gilsenan.⁸ Typically (though certainly not always) shunning away from texts, anthropologists of the old-fashioned type sought to understand culture and society from a non-elitist angle. The practices of ordinary people rather than the doctrines of the intellectuals have long been at the center of conventional anthropological inquiry into religion. In one of his articles, Gilsenan, whose writings about Sufism in Egypt have exerted a lasting influence on the anthropology of Islam, recounts his conversation with an Egyptian Muslim scholar about his

⁶ See in particular Hoffman, *Sufism in Egypt*. As Michel Chodkiewicz states, "the shaykhs are not dead, the Sufi orders are not depopulated, the saints do not seem in a hurry to take a vacation" ("Soufisme au XXI^e siècle," 533). See also Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, 152.

⁷ In the words of Bryan Turner, "many Orientalists treat the progress of Sufism as one of perpetual decline towards popular religion" ("Virtuosi Religion," 51).

⁸ See Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* and *Muslim Society*; Geertz, *Islam Observed*; and Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi* and *Recognising Islam*.

research. The scholar was apparently uncomfortable with Gilsenan's decision to work among the followers of the Ḥāmidiyya-Shādhiliyya Sufi order and tried to convince him to go to the library and read the texts, rather than studying the "religion of street."⁹

This anecdote not only sheds light on Gilsenan's (and other anthropologists') deliberate choice to study "living religion" without taking into account the textual basis,¹⁰ it also adds a further dimension to the equation of Sufism with "popular" Islam. It is striking to see the extent to which the assessments of Sufism put forward by Orientalists, anthropologists, and some reform-oriented Muslims, often referred to as Salafiyya, overlap. While these groups differ in their argumentation, methods, and motivations, they tend to concur in the identification of Sufism in its popular expression as superstitious, debased, backward, and incompatible with modern life—although anthropologists of the romantic mode may occasionally give a positive valuation to these features.

Perhaps the most conspicuous convergence occurs between Gellner's model of Islam's development in the context of modernization, on the one hand, and Salafi rhetoric, on the other. The catchword *bid'ā* ("innovation"), used by reformists to describe religious beliefs and practices deemed contrary to the teachings of Islam, is equivalent in meaning to Gellner's pejorative notion of "folk religiosity." The reformists' criticism of Sufi teachings as detrimental to progress matches Gellner's depiction of Sufi attitudes in the face of political and economic change as "absorption in a religious condition which is also a forgetting," since "Sufism is the opium for the people."¹¹ Subscribing to a teleological Weberian perspective, Gellner sees the

⁹ Gilsenan, "Trajectories," 187.

¹⁰ In Gellner's words, Orientalists are at home with texts, whereas anthropologists are at home in villages (*Muslim Society*, 99).

¹¹ Gellner, *Muslim Society*, 48 and 54.

decline of “saint-sectarian forms of religion”¹² as inevitable. The Sufis are “on the way out,”¹³ and the future is reserved for a puritanical, egalitarian, scripture-based version of Islam, the only version that can survive in a modern environment characterized by urbanization and industrialization.

Forty years and two theoretical shifts (postmodernism, globalization) later, it does not take too much of an effort to show that Gellner’s heavy reliance on modernization theory led him to faulty conclusions. The notion of Sufism’s inability to adjust to modernity, a standard view expressed in academic studies up to the 1980s and even beyond, does not hold up in light of more recent empirical evidence. Newer studies of Sufism in the twentieth century demonstrate how Sufism not only survived, but also managed to respond to some of the challenges of modernity by adopting new organizational structures and renewing its spiritual appeal.¹⁴ I will come back to some of the new perspectives on Sufism in a later section of this introduction.

The accidental alliance of Orientalism, anthropology, and Islamic reformism has had a tremendous and lasting impact on the perception of Sufism within academic circles as well as in the wider nonacademic public. The more differentiated approach of post-Orientalist scholarship notwithstanding, it is still common to ascribe essentialist attributes to Sufism that make it appear different from “real” Islam, as the preserve of a few hermitic sages, as popular or folk religion, and as incompatible with modernity. In the post-9/11 era we can see policy makers pondering

¹² Gellner, “Foreword,” vii.

¹³ Gellner, *Muslim Society*, 133.

¹⁴ See in particular the contributions to van Bruinessen and Howell, *Sufism and the ‘Modern’* and the monographs by Hoffman, *Sufism in Egypt*; Chih, *Soufisme au quotidien*; Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood*; Rozenahl, *Islamic Sufism Unbound*; Sedgwick, *Saints and Sons*.

whether Sufism, as the “peaceful side of Islam,” could possibly be mobilized to counter the danger of Islamic radicalism.¹⁵

Thus, the perspective taken by its interpreter shapes to a large extent the answer to the question of what Sufism actually is. While this is true of any subject of intellectual inquiry, the perception of Sufism has been particularly afflicted with the preoccupations of scholars who have studied it. The same applies to Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, to which we now turn.

Islam and Africa

The risk of drawing a distorted picture of Islam, Sufism, and Muslims increases considerably in the African context. The main mechanisms at work here are implicit or explicit assumptions about race, and reproduction of the ways colonial administrators understood their African Muslim subjects. The pervasive misconception of the Middle East as the center and sub-Saharan Africa (and large parts of Asia) as the periphery of the Islamic world also plays a part here.

According to the colonial perspective, what separated Muslims south of the Sahara from the sources of Islam was not only the long geographical distance from the purported center of Islamic civilization, but also their racial characteristics. “The further one gets from the Sahara, the poorer it is,”¹⁶ was a frequently expressed opinion about Islam among European colonial authors. In the works of French and British “scholar-administrators” such as Paul Marty and Harold Ingrams, and of later academics, occasionally with a missionary background, such as Vincent Monteil and John Spencer Trimingham, there is an obvious conflation of the categories

¹⁵ See, for instance, McCormack, *An African Vortex*; cf. Seesemann, “African Islam or Islam in Africa,” and Ernst’s warning against turning Sufism into a “tool for neo-colonialism” (“Sufism, Islam, and Globalization,” 25).

¹⁶ PRO CO 544/746, note by W. H. Ingrams, December 2, 1952.

religion and race.¹⁷ “African Islam,” or *Islam noir* in French parlance, has since become the common denominator in both academic and nonacademic discourse about Islam in Africa, conveying the image of an essentially syncretistic and superstitious, and in any case adulterated, version, of Islam, as opposed to an “orthodox” (whatever one may understand by orthodoxy), authentic, pure Middle Eastern version.

A cursory look at colonial policies and ideologies, which certainly changed over time and were not without contradictions, allows us to recognize some of the reasons why Europeans would develop such a perspective on Muslims in their African colonies. Especially from a French point of view, denigrating the culture of “the other” was a precondition to justify the *mission civilisatrice*, which in turn was key—at least initially—in the legitimization of the colonizing enterprise of *La Grande Nation*. A number of colonial authors did concede that Islam helped “the negro” to rise to a superior cultural level, but this level could only be an initial step toward “real” culture, as represented by European, or rather French, civilization.

In the later colonial period, the cultural-turned-hegemonic notion of African Islam was reinforced by new political considerations. Confronted with what they perceived as the threat of an encroaching “Arab Islam” in the 1950s, the colonial authorities in West Africa reached out to the representatives of “African Islam” as possible allies. The latter were seen as more tolerant, less militant, and in any case more malleable and tamable than their “Arab” counterparts. In this manner, French and British colonial authorities constructed their own Islam, to the degree that they even referred to it as “Islam africain français” and “the proper marriage of British and

¹⁷ Most notable in Trimingham’s distinction between “Arab Islam,” “Hamitic Islam,” and “Negro Islam.” See Trimingham, “Phases of Islamic Expansion,” and his later, more elaborate monograph *Influence of Islam*. For a critical analysis of Marty, see Harrison, *France and Islam*, 93–105, and the scathing review by Ware, *Knowledge, Faith, and Power*. The relevant original works are Marty, *Sénégal*, and Monteil, *Islam noir*.

Islamic culture,” respectively.¹⁸ The roots of the still ubiquitous binary opposition between peaceful, syncretistic, “traditional” African Muslims on the one hand, and violent, puritan, “modern” Arab Muslims, usually referred to as Wahhabīs in colonial documents, on the other, can be traced back (at least in great part) to the imagination and projection of a few colonial administrators working in the discursive context of competing European imperialisms.¹⁹

The present image of “African Islam,” particularly when constructed as the counterimage of “Arab” or “orthodox” Islam, continues to bear the imprint of colonial assumptions of racial and cultural hierarchies (including the alleged racial superiority of Arabs and “Moors” over “black” Africans). Moreover, it continues to reflect political interests, be they colonial or neocolonial in nature, as evidenced by the latest drive in Western security circles toward reviving “African” (read Sufi) Islam as a bulwark against the radical Islamic “danger.”²⁰ Given the problematic origins of the concept of African Islam, it is difficult to grasp how such flawed and biased views of Islam in Africa could linger for so long and even leave their traces in some of the most recent scholarship.²¹

¹⁸ See the references in Seesemann, “Dialog der Taubstummen.” See also Triaud, “French Colonial Rule” and “Crépuscule des Affaires musulmanes” (on French West Africa), and Umar, “Tijāniyya and British Colonial Authorities” (on British views of Islam in colonial Nigeria). For an example from the Portuguese colonies, see Alpers, “Islam in the Service of Colonialism.”

¹⁹ The most influential of these were Paul Marty, Louis Mangin, and Jean Beyriès on the French side, and Peter Scott and Harold Ingrams on the British side (see further Seesemann, “Dialog der Taubstummen”; note the differences between French and British views of Islam). In the case of the French, their colonial experience in North Africa also had a significant influence on their understanding of Islam in racial categories (see Harrison, *France and Islam*).

²⁰ Otayek and Soares, “Introduction.”

²¹ See in particular the introduction to Westerlund and Rosander, *African Islam*; Quinn and Quinn, *Pride, Faith, and Fear*; Miles, “Islamism in West Africa.” One may also wonder why the subtitle of a recent collective volume on the Tijāniyya (“Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l’Afrique”) appears to be adapted from Monteil’s *Islam noir*; see Triaud and Robinson, *Tijaniyya*. For further examples and a critique see Seesemann, “African Islam or Islam in Africa,” and Soares, “Study of Islam.”

A striking example of the persistence of colonial notions in academic writings is the continuous uncritical application of the term *marabout* to Muslim religious leaders. Originally coined by French colonial officials in late-nineteenth-century Algeria as a corruption of Arabic *murābiṭ*,²² the term has had an astounding career. Early usage in West Africa seems to have been restricted to members of Muslim lineages who specialized in religious activities.²³ At the beginning of the twentieth century, when French authorities attempted to tighten their control over their Muslim citizens in West Africa, marabout became a label for village imams, Qurʾān teachers, amulet makers, and local as well as regional saints.²⁴ Subsequently marabout could signify anyone from a charlatan to the head of a Sufi community, and it came to describe the paradigmatic prototype of “African Islam,” which henceforth became synonymous with Sufi or “maraboutic” Islam.²⁵ By the 1950s, representatives of Islamic reform movements inspired by the Salafiyya and even “secularists” appropriated the term for polemical purposes, using it to mean “quack” or to refer to Muslim leaders whom they saw as false saints and, above all, as collaborators with the colonial regime.²⁶

Maraboutism is the rhetorical device in which preconceived notions of “African Islam” and debased Sufism converge. It trivializes the religious experience of African Muslims, it denies their capacity to rise to the spiritual heights of the “real” Sufis of the Golden Age, and it

²² On the original meaning of the term, see Meier, “Almoravids and Marabouts.”

²³ Soares, *Prayer Economy*, 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁵ According to an (in)famous statement by Paul Marty, the “Islamized Blacks [*noirs islamisés*] of Senegal classify themselves without exception under the religious banner of the marabouts and only understand Islam under the form of affiliation to a Sufi order” (Marty, *Sénégal* I, 8). It is startling that in 1981 Christian Coulon still believed Marty’s understanding of Islam to be valid for “knowing Senegalese Islam [*saisir l’Islam sénégalais*] in its social and political reality” (Coulon, *Marabout et prince*, 10).

²⁶ See for instance Merad, *Réformisme*, 58–76 (on Algeria) and Loimeier, “Cheikh Touré” (on Senegal).

presents them as ignorant and credulous masses prone to superstition and exploitation at the hands of fraudulent, self-interested leaders—in short, it is an utter misrepresentation of what Islam and Sufism mean to many West African Muslims.²⁷ Yet, the terms *marabout* and *maraboutism* (also *maraboutage* in French) have been employed to characterize West African Muslim societies and expressions of Sufism in an uninterrupted chain well into the recent past: from Paul Marty in the 1910s to Fernand Quesnot and Alphonse Gouilly (alias Jacques Mouradian) in the 1950s, from Jean-Claude Froelich and Vincent Monteil in the 1960s to Christian Coulon and Jean Copans in the 1980s, culminating in the publication of the edited volume *Le temps des marabouts* in 1997.²⁸ Even African scholars have subsequently taken up the terminology.²⁹ Examples of anglophone authors who have adopted the same parlance, sometimes critically but often uncritically, in their writings about West Africa include Lucy Behrman, Donal Cruise O'Brien, and Martin Klein in the 1960s and 1970s (in addition to Ernest Gellner in his studies of Northern Africa); Christopher Gray in the 1980s; and Leonardo Villalon in the 1990s.³⁰ This list is by no means complete.

It is certainly no coincidence that most of this literature is based on research conducted in Senegal, and it is telling that the majority of the authors focus on the political role of the

²⁷ See Soares, *Prayer Economy*, for a similar assessment of maraboutism.

²⁸ See Marty, *Sénégal*; Quesnot, “Cadres maraboutiques”; Gouilly, *Islam dans l’A.O.F.*; Froelich, *Musulmans*; Monteil, *Islam noir* and “Marabouts”; Coulon, *Marabout et prince*; Copans, *Marabouts de l’arachide*; Robinson and Triaud, *Temps des marabouts*. But note Triaud’s remark about the “pejorative connotation” of the term, which nevertheless did not deter him from employing it (*ibid.*, 11 and 13).

²⁹ For instance Samb, “Islam et histoire”; Fall, “Question islamique”; Magassouba, *Islam au Sénégal*; Mbaye, *Malick Sy*; Kane, “Islam confrérique”; and Mbacke, *Soufisme et confréries*, to mention but a few. These authors’ adoption of vocabulary from the French colonial lexicon exemplifies the lasting feedback effect of colonial views among African Muslims.

³⁰ Behrman, *Brotherhoods and Politics*; O’Brien, *Mourides and Saints and Politicians*; Klein, *Islam and Imperialism*; Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas*; Gray, “Rise of the Niassene”; Villalon, *Islamic Society*.

marabouts (here the leaders of the Sufi orders), occasionally to a degree that makes them appear as quintessential politicians. Many simply take for granted the fact that these leaders wield political influence, as if such influence were an intrinsic feature of maraboutism. While it would be naïve to deny that the leaders of such well-established religious institutions assume political roles in one way or the other, the question of why and how they are able to transform their religious authority into political power requires careful study, which seems to be the exception rather than the rule. It can hardly be satisfactory to point to vague notions of charisma and saintly authority, or to the alleged blind and unconditional submission of followers that supposedly elevates the leaders to the position of power brokers.³¹

Even in current literature—particularly in the more general titles or those that mention Islam only in passing—many statements about Islam and Sufism in Africa not only echo colonial discourses about “African Islam,” but also reproduce clichés about Sufism. In the collective volume *Islam Outside the Arab World* (1999) we learn, in the chapter on Senegal, that “Sufi piety is largely charismatic and emotional. Religious doctrines lack systematization and are seldom codified.”³² Such essentialist and factually wrong statements continue to reinforce the image of African Muslims as anti-intellectual and inherently different from their purportedly orthodox fellow Muslims in the Arab world.

To end this section on a more positive note, the fuller picture of academic scholarship on Islam and Africa is not as dreadful as what I have painted so far. Historians such as Nehemia Levtzion, David Robinson, Jean-Louis Triaud, Charles Stewart, and John Hunwick have opened

³¹ For instance Behrman, *Brotherhoods and Politics*, 13–18.

³² Rosander and Westerlund, “Senegal,” 81.

up new perspectives on Islam in West Africa, as has Lamin Sanneh's study of the Jakhanke.³³ Since the 1980s, an increasing number of significant studies have avoided many of the mistakes identified above. In particular, mention must be made of Louis Brenner's works on Sufism and Islamic education in West Africa; Launay's monograph on Muslims in northern Côte d'Ivoire; Loimeier's studies of Islam, Sufi orders, and political change in Nigeria and Senegal; Villalon's nuanced studies of Islam and the public sphere in Senegal; and Cheikh Babou's and my own work on Ahmadu Bamba and the emergence of the Murīdiyya Sufi order.³⁴ Some of the most recent publications, such as Ousmane Kane's monograph on Muslim modernity, Muhammad Sani Umar's study of Islam and colonialism in Nigeria, Soares' writings on Mali, Hanretta's work on Yacouba Sylla, and the as-yet unpublished study of Qur'ānic schooling in Senegal by Rudolph Ware represent the move to open up fresh avenues to the understanding of both Islam and Africa.³⁵

This new line of scholarship, which shows promising signs of expansion, is characterized by accounts that disentangle the multiple layers of discourse among and about African Muslims. Like the more recent approach taken in African history or gender studies, the new scholarship distinguishes between different perspectives and perceptions, analyzes them, and demonstrates that they are the result of interpretations that frequently interact with and influence each other.

³³ See Sanneh, *Jakhanke*; for the historians, see, in particular, Levtzion, *Islam in West Africa*; Robinson, *Holy War and Paths of Accommodation*; Triaud, *Légende noire*; and Hunwick, *Sharia in Songhay*. See also the latter's "Sufism and the Study of Islam," a trenchant criticism of certain historiographical approaches to Sufism in West Africa. The *History of Islam in Africa*, edited by Levtzion and Pouwels, represents a summary of the achievements of historical research over the last three decades of the twentieth century.

³⁴ Brenner, *West African Sufi and Controlling Knowledge*; Launay, *Beyond the Stream*; Villalon, *Islamic Society*; Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Säkularer Staat*; Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*; Seesemann, *Ahmadu Bamba*.

³⁵ Kane, *Muslim Modernity*; Umar, *Islam and Colonialism*; Soares, *Prayer Economy* and "Public Piety"; Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change*; Ware, *Knowledge, Faith, and Power*.

The interpreters include colonial administrators, politicians, Sufi leaders and their internal rivals, ordinary Muslims, reform-oriented Muslim scholars (south and north of the Sahara), and last but not least academics from different disciplines and a variety of personal backgrounds, ranging from Christian missionaries to Muslim authors with reformist inclinations. Rather than searching for a single meaning that captures the imaginary essence of Islam in Africa, writers in the new trend seek to understand how different concepts, beliefs, and practices mean different things to different people. Above all, they listen to and provide an outlet for the voices of African Muslims themselves, who have been the objects of racial prejudice, Orientalist projections, and anthropological and historical paternalism far too long.

This book endorses the new approach and widens its scope to include African expressions of Sufism. The task, however, is not limited to proving the existence of Sufism as an intellectual tradition, the only form the Orientalist paradigm would recognize as real Sufism, usually measured in terms of literary production. John Hunwick's and Sean O'Fahey's pioneering, multivolume reference work *Arabic Literature of Africa* provides more than ample evidence for the intellectual achievements of Sufis and other Muslims south of the Sahara. Likewise, our knowledge of Sufi contributions to the political history of West Africa, particularly in the jihad period, is fairly advanced, and we are also relatively well informed about several Sufi personalities, their writings, and their *ṭarīqa* branches.³⁶

One of the greatest present challenges lies in showing how African Muslims cultivated Sufism and engaged with its intellectual heritage, how they actively shaped Sufi doctrines and

³⁶ In alphabetical order: Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*; Batran, *Qadiriyya Brotherhood*; Boubrik, *Saints et société*; Brenner, *West African Sufi*; Dumont, *Pensée religieuse d'Amadou Bamba*; Hanson and Robinson, *After the Jihad*; Hiskett, *Sword of the Truth*; Last, *Sokoto Caliphate*; Martin, *Muslim Brotherhoods*; Radtke, "Von Iran" and "Rimāḥ"; Robinson, *Holy War*; Soares, *Prayer Economy*; Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*.

practices and applied them in their religious and social lives. It is time to study Sufism in its context, to write an account that brings religious leaders into dialogue with ordinary Muslims (in a way that moves beyond the common cliché of patron-client relationships) and analyzes the multiple layers of discourse and interpretation. In this sense, academic scholarship has yet to begin to systematically explore the potential of the new approach and apply it to the study of Sufism in Africa.

The following section returns to the general question of how to study Sufism and outlines the theoretical perspective taken in the present book.

Sufism in Context

Among the latest academic works that have set the parameters for the future study of Sufism, Carl Ernst's and Bruce Lawrence's *Sufi Martyrs of Love* is one of the most significant. In light of the treatment of Sufism in Africa in the literature discussed above, their programmatic statement appears to be even more pertinent: "Our thesis is that a Sufi order . . . is more than a parasitical legitimization of power or a nostalgic reverence for bygone saints; it is instead a complex of spiritual practice, historical memory, and ethical models, which continues to evolve from its medieval Islamic origins in response to the political, ideological, and technological transformations of the contemporary world."³⁷

On the basis of a wide variety of primary sources, Ernst and Lawrence are able to offer unique insights into the history of Chishti Sufism, from its origins in the thirteenth century to its latest expressions in the twenty-first. They begin their analysis with the conscious choice to focus on a group they describe as the "great ones, in Sufi idiom, the saints, the pirs, the masters

³⁷ Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs*, 1. See also their criticism of the Golden Age paradigm, with particular reference to Trimingham (ibid., 11–12)

and captains of spiritual destiny who drew countless others to God through their exemplary lives and pure passion.”³⁸ While much of the material presented in the study also sheds light on the perceptions of “those who link themselves to the great ones,” however, the roles “ordinary” followers might have played in the development of the Chishtiyya remain rather vague. The picture that unfolds in this masterly work is one of a living Sufi tradition (as opposed to a tradition in inevitable decline, as suggested in the Orientalist script), a spiritual experience embedded in and reenacted by historical memory, and a cyclical revival of Sufi teachings culminating in its latest transformation to “cyber Sufism.”

The value of Ernst’s and Lawrence’s book notwithstanding, the perspective they take leaves another part of the picture blank: the involvement of followers in the Sufi orders, which can reasonably be considered no less crucial than the contributions of the “great ones” to the cyclical renewal of Sufi beliefs and practices. We are apparently back to the division of labor between philologists sitting in the library and anthropologists living in the village or studying the “religion of the street.” How can we develop a perspective that considers both the “great ones” and “those linked to them”?

Consideration of this question requires us to engage with the heuristic value of two-tiered models of religion that distinguish between high and low variants of religious expression. In the following, I will base my discussion on Robert Redfield’s distinction between the “great” tradition and the “little” tradition, as it was this terminology that exerted the greatest influence over the study of Islam, especially by anthropologists.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 2.

³⁹ Ahmet Karamustafa refers to other two-tiered models of religion in his study of Derwish groups in the Ottoman period. While he concedes that such models may serve a heuristic purpose in some contexts, their application to his case “only confounds the researcher” (Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends*, 9).

Since the 1980s, almost no contribution to the expanding literature on the anthropology of Islam has failed to refer unfavorably to Redfield's model.⁴⁰ One might be led to believe that Redfield-bashing has become an indispensable ingredient of politically correct anthropological writing.⁴¹ Ironically, however, in many accounts that begin by debunking Redfield, the notion of high versus low culture creeps in through the back door. For lack of better terms to describe their findings, authors occasionally resort to formulations like "what Redfield called the great tradition."⁴² Without denying the problems with Redfield's model and the shortcomings of the way he viewed "peasant society," I argue that the questions he raised with his distinction between different traditions are still relevant, even though we need to exercise great caution when referring to these concepts.

Let us briefly recall the wording of Redfield's statement: "In every civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many."⁴³ This depiction of different levels of reflection certainly comes across as derogatory, and describing "the many" as unreflective is clearly not accurate. Yet, a careful reading of Redfield's complete essay does not substantiate the view that he employed the term *little* to actually belittle this tradition. After all, this was the tradition he sought to understand in his academic work.⁴⁴ For Redfield, the phrase that has become so contentious was merely the starting point for the agenda he tried to develop.

⁴⁰ See Antoun, *Muslim Preacher*, 13–15; Bowen, *Muslims Through Discourse*, 7; Eickelman, *Middle East*, 202; Heine, "Islamic Studies," 8–10; Soares, *Prayer Economy*, 6–8; Taylor, *Vicinity of the Righteous*, 3; Villalon, *Islamic Society*, 27–38.

⁴¹ Cf. Varisco, *Islam Obscured*, 4–5.

⁴² See *ibid.*, 153. Abu-Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful*, also apparently borrows from Redfield's model, her criticism of the terminology notwithstanding.

⁴³ Redfield, *Peasant Society*, 70.

⁴⁴ This is also acknowledged by Varisco (*Islam Obscured*, 163–164).

This agenda did not consist in conceptualizing “civilization” (or “Islam” in our case) as two distinctive, unconnected blocks (high versus low, orthodox versus popular). Instead, Redfield called on his colleagues to examine the interconnections and communication between the great and little traditions and explicitly warned against treating them as closed, separate entities. Specifically, he distinguished two patterns that he saw as characteristic of this interaction: parochialization and universalization, the latter describing the incorporation of elements from the little tradition into the great tradition, and the former referring to “the ways in which the high tradition is communicated to the common people and how it becomes part of the little tradition.”⁴⁵ In light of this clarification, calling Redfield an essentialist or blaming him for a whole generation of anthropological endorsement of a simplified dichotomous view of high versus low Islam is a misrepresentation of his principal concern.

Another frequent objection to Redfield claims that he saw the great tradition not only as superior, but also as dominant. Spittler maintains that in Redfield’s model “everything comes from the center (great tradition), and the periphery (little tradition) then adapts to it.”⁴⁶ Yet again, if we look at what Redfield actually says, it is unambiguous that he does not view the relationship as a one-way flow of ideas: “The two traditions can be thought of as two currents, distinguishable, but ever flowing into and out of each other.”⁴⁷ Similar to Spittler, Antoun feels that Redfield’s model privileges the great tradition; according to his reading, Redfield implicitly assumes that in the long run the great tradition will win out.⁴⁸ While authors like Gellner, who used to quote Redfield in support of his own model of “Muslim society,” would certainly

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 81. Redfield borrows the terminology from McKim Marriott’s work on India; see Marriott, “Little Communities.”

⁴⁶ Spittler, “Ibn Khaldun,” 276.

⁴⁷ Redfield, *Peasant Society*, 72.

⁴⁸ Antoun, *Muslim Preacher*, 14–15.

subscribe to this idea, I do not see any clear indication that Redfield himself conceived of the relationship between the two traditions in terms of an evolutionary process.

To be unmistakably clear, I have not taken up the cudgel on Redfield's behalf in order to revive "peasant studies" or to make the case for outdated binary oppositions. Identifying Sufism with the little tradition and juxtaposing it with a fictitious orthodox Islam is plainly wrong, whether it is being done with or without reference to Redfield.⁴⁹ However, I do take issue with Redfield's interpreters among the anthropologists of Islam, who first used the model to reify the dichotomy of orthodox versus popular Islam, occasionally with a distinct evolutionist flavor, and subsequently went on to deconstruct the dichotomies, often ignoring what Redfield actually had to say.

I would assert that Redfield's distinction still raises relevant theoretical questions, though certainly not in the sense that it should guide us in the search for great and little traditions in the empirical reality. Distinguishing two such traditions can be seriously misleading when done with the purpose of defining intrinsic differences between them.⁵⁰ Yet the model has the potential to serve as an effective tool when the aim of academic inquiry is to understand the interconnections and intersections between different modes of cultural or religious expression, especially in instances where these expressions are typically treated as separate entities and identified with essentialist attributes. Translated into these terms, it turns out that Redfield's agenda has rarely been implemented. As Soares points out in his discussion of the anthropology of Islam, most anthropologists of the post-Orientalist period have turned away from the villages and have

⁴⁹ Cf. Radtke's diatribe against the identification of Sufism with "popular" Islam (Radtke, "Projection and Suppression"; more recently also in *Neue kritische Gänge*, 251–291). However, Radtke's insistence that the future task of the study of Sufism lies only in the proper philological analysis of texts can hardly help to explain the variety of Sufi religious expressions.

⁵⁰ See Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 9–10.

instead begun to study Islamic courts, schools, mosques, and public debates, areas previously assumed to be the preserve of Orientalists, while very few “have embraced the challenge of studying areas that cut across the false dichotomy of orthodox and un-orthodox Islam.”⁵¹

Applied to the study of the Sufi orders, the task would thus consist of examining the interaction between “the great ones” and “those linked to them”—or, in other words, of analyzing the interfaces between “intellectual” or “philosophical” Sufism on the one hand and so-called popular Sufism on the other. While the latter terms are no less problematic than the notion of great and little traditions, they are reflective of terminology employed by Sufis themselves to describe spiritual hierarchies within and outside the Sufi orders. In Sufi idiom, those who have reached an advanced stage in their travel on the mystical path (*ṭarīqa*) are known as *al-khāṣṣa*, literally “the special ones,” whereas the beginners, or those who have not yet embarked on their spiritual journey, are called *al-ʿāmma*, “the commoners.”⁵² While *al-ʿāmma* can simply have a descriptive function to draw the line between advanced Sufis and beginners, it can also take on an explicitly pejorative connotation. In such cases, the term assumes the meaning of “ignorant folks” and may include both non-Sufis and individuals who would identify themselves as Sufis but fail to live up to the standard of Sufism defined by “the special ones.” In

⁵¹ Soares, *Prayer Economy*, 7. The exceptions referred to include Bowen, *Muslims through Discourse*; Launay, *Beyond the Stream*; and Werbner, *Pilgrims of Love*. Soares (in *Prayer Economy*) also emphasizes that Islamic discourses and practices previously conceived of as either orthodox or unorthodox are “not separable analytically,” and therefore criticizes previous anthropological uses of Redfield’s model.

⁵² The use of these terms is of course not limited to Sufi circles; they also appear in a general sense, especially in Arab historiography, to distinguish the “noble people” or “elites” from the “plebeians” or the “common folk.”

other words, *al-‘amma* may serve as the rhetorical device to distinguish “real” Sufis from “false” or “pseudo” Sufis, and in this function it appears frequently in Sufi literature.⁵³

The latter consideration underscores the ambiguity of categories such as the “special ones” and the “commoners,” “intellectual” and “popular” Islam, and the “great” and the “little” tradition. Whether used by a Sufi denouncing his opponents, a colonial official writing about “African” Islam, an Orientalist raving about the beauty of Sufi poetry, or an anthropologist announcing the demise of ecstatic religion, the terminology implies a value judgment. While some would contend that this is precisely what disqualifies the terms for analytical use, I would argue that this ambiguity is exactly what requires us to engage with these notions, rather than merely dismissing them. Referring to Redfield’s terminology in this sense goes far beyond the reification of “civilization” as being divided into only two, bifurcate branches. Little and great tradition, popular and intellectual Sufism, *‘amma* and *khāṣṣa* thus become relative terms rather than absolute categories. In the empirical reality, most if not all phenomena defy clear identification with either one or the other category; yet when seen through the eyes of interpreters, they become susceptible to a judgment about superiority and inferiority and thus reemerge as being split into empirically relevant categories.

The deeper we delve into the matter, the more ambiguities arise. Let us take on a few statements nobody would seriously deny. Sufi orders are complex hierarchical organizations. Educational and social status can vary significantly between members, and access to resources and knowledge is anything but equal. Like any doctrine, whether religious or not, Sufi doctrine does make statements about what constitutes the norm and what is regarded as deviation. As with

⁵³ Even scholars critical of Sufism like Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) distinguished between “real” Sufis who deserve support and “false” ones who go beyond the limits (Meier, “The Cleanest,” 313).

any doctrine, there are some who are more conversant with its tenets than others and therefore function as guardians of the norm; Max Weber has expressed this difference in terms of “virtuosi religiosity” and “mass religiosity.”⁵⁴

If we accept the presumption of a knowledge divide, we can proceed to study the dynamics of a Sufi order by examining the transmission of knowledge from the more knowledgeable (the “virtuosi” or “the great ones”) to the less knowledgeable (Weber’s “masses”). The former assume the role of teachers and brokers of knowledge who communicate the “great,” here understood as the “literary,” Sufi tradition to their students.

However, there is a further aspect that complicates the picture. Some would argue, and probably rightly so, that the conceptualization of Sufism as a doctrine is misleading because the subject matter of Sufism has more to do with an experience than with an intellectual endeavor. Hence, we are confronted with distinct modalities of knowledge⁵⁵ in Sufi contexts, entailing the notion that reason is incapable of fathoming the depths of Sufism’s spiritual dimensions. The role of a Sufi “virtuoso” is thus not limited to teaching his students in the sense of conveying discursive knowledge accessible by means of reasoning, but includes—or, in many instances, focuses on—guiding the disciples in their search for experiential knowledge. Even a disciple who is illiterate or not familiar with Sufi doctrine as expounded in the seminal writings can potentially become *‘arīf bi-llāh*, a person endowed with *ma‘rifa*, mystical knowledge of God.⁵⁶ On the other hand, someone can study countless Sufi manuals and reach the highest level of

⁵⁴ See the introduction to his “Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen” (Weber, *Religionssoziologie* I, 237–275).

⁵⁵ Cf. Brenner’s differentiation between the “esoteric” and the “rationalistic” episteme (Brenner, “Two Paradigms”; see also his later elaboration in *Controlling Knowledge*, especially 6–8 and 302–307).

⁵⁶ For more on *ma‘rifa* and the translation of the term into English see the section “*Tarbiya* – An Overview” in Chapter 2.

erudition but still fail to attain the desired experiential knowledge. In other words, not every *‘arīf bi-llāh* becomes a “virtuoso,” and not everybody who tries to pose as a “great one” is *‘arīf bi-llāh*.

The fact that even the criterion of knowledge fails to establish an unambiguous difference demonstrates the limits to, if not the futility of, the endeavor of drawing clear boundaries between a popular Sufism of the masses and an intellectual version of the great ones. If we extend our search for a clear-cut classification to include the criterion of social status, it becomes even more evident that the reality can cut across categories and hierarchies. Some of the undeniably great ones in the history of Sufism came from humble backgrounds, Ibrāhīm Niasse being widely regarded as one of them (although this is subject to debate; see Chapter 4), and their ascension to a high spiritual rank was rarely accompanied by a comparable rise in social status more generally—at least during their lifetime. Thus, depending on the criterion applied, presumably little or great ones can end up on the opposite side of the spectrum. Neither category is an indispensable prerequisite for the other, although there are certainly many cases where social status, scholarly expertise, and experiential knowledge coincide.

Under these premises, Sufism becomes an arena in which complex social and spiritual relationships play out on a variety of interconnected levels, each of which may become subject to value judgments oscillating between notions of great and little. The attempt to conceive of the sphere of the virtuosi as distinct from the world of the masses would amount to separating the two sides of the same coin.

If anything, intellectual and popular expressions of Sufism are connected with each other in an osmotic relationship. This is not a new discovery, but it is surprising how few studies examine phenomena that bridge the purported intellectual-popular divide. Jonathan Katz’s work

on Muḥammad al-Zawāwī, someone we could perhaps best describe as a failed saint of fifteenth-century North Africa, takes such a perspective and emphasizes that some of the “wildest claims” that we would typically identify with the “unschooled masses” actually originate in the writings of the great Sufi authorities.⁵⁷ A little earlier than Katz, Boaz Shoshan arrived at similar conclusions in his study of popular culture in fourteenth-century Cairo. According to Shoshan, elite culture and popular culture both draw on “common cultural material”; the main differences lie in the kinds of use and the strategies of appropriation.⁵⁸

Approaching the study of a Sufi order from this angle can open up novel perspectives. Previously fixed categories become much more fluid, and new questions replace evanescent certainties. The great ones can leave the ivory tower to which they were confined in the Orientalist paradigm. They can also transcend their rather mechanical roles as power brokers, patrons, or carriers and distributors of blessings (*baraka*) that have been assigned to them in much of the anthropological and historical literature. One key element in this approach is to put the focus on the modes of transmission of knowledge, both discursive (*‘ilm*) and experiential (*ma‘rifa*, translated as cognizance in this study).⁵⁹ However, although the virtuosi take center stage in this approach as the mediators of knowledge, the masses are not merely the recipients of

⁵⁷ According to Katz, “literate elites and ordinary people shared a common view of reality” (see *Dreams*, 16–17).

⁵⁸ Shoshan, *Medieval Cairo*, 7.

⁵⁹ I have opted to render this technical term of Sufism as cognizance because it is the English word that comes closest to the notion of cognition based on experience. Other languages have a better terminology to distinguish between *‘ilm* and *ma‘rifa*, e.g. French *savoir* and *connaissance*; German *Wissen* and *Erkenntnis*. One problem with the translation of *ma‘rifa* as cognizance is that the latter implies the existence of an object, whereas the former describes a state where the differentiation between subject and object is dissolved (though someone who has attained *ma‘rifa* is called *‘arif bi-llāh*, “knower of God” or “cognizant,” a grammatical construction that posits God as an object of experiential knowledge). A possible alternative would be gnosis, but this term evokes philosophical and Christian mystical connotations that *ma‘rifa* does not have. See the introduction to Renard, *Knowledge of God*, for a discussion of the problem.

whatever the leaders wish to convey to them. They are conscious actors who have preferences and make choices, and any virtuoso who fails to take this into account risks to lose his appeal to his audience. We thus have to conceive of the transmission of knowledge not in terms of a simple transfer or as a one-way flow of ideas, but as an interactive communicative process.

One particular challenge to the virtuosi lies in the fact that, in the words of Redfield, “teachings have been and continue to be understood in ways not intended by the teachers.”⁶⁰ Because the masses may engage with knowledge on their own terms, the “virtuosi” as the guardians of the norm are constantly faced with the threat of deviations. This applies especially to the case of experiential knowledge, which, if not properly controlled, can easily yield unexpected and undesirable results. References to this dilemma abound in Sufi literature. Hence, the task of a virtuoso is an intricate one indeed. He has to direct his disciples on the path toward mystical knowledge of God, and at the same time he needs to ensure that they do not transgress the limits. Figuratively speaking, he has to give them a push and apply the brakes almost simultaneously. This gives us a hint of how difficult it is to put Sufi norms and ideals into practice. Any approach guided by normative presuppositions, or by assumptions about how Sufism should be, cannot but fail to account for the inconsistencies, fluctuations, and occasional conflicts that occur within every Sufi order to a greater or lesser degree.

Furthermore, we need to be aware that those who link themselves to the great ones do so in a variety of ways. While the master-disciple relationship is arguably at the core of the Sufi order, there are additional layers and levels that defy simple identification with either the virtuosi or the masses. As Hoffman put it in her study of Sufism in modern Egypt, “the *shaykh* has intense involvement with a small circle with whom he has spiritual connection and whom he

⁶⁰ Redfield, *Peasant Society*, 72.

initiates into the divine secrets, with the *shaykh*'s influence radiating in concentric circles of ever decreasing intensity of attachment."⁶¹ A Sufi order thus constitutes an elaborate web of social and spiritual relationships, and people frequent the shaykhs for many different reasons. Although it is problematic to make guesses about numbers, evidence from various regions and historical periods suggests that a large majority of those who maintain links with a Sufi order are not formally initiated. A substantial group of followers can be categorized as *muḥibbūn* (lit., "the lovers"), who have not made a commitment to the shaykh but nonetheless have become part of the social fabric of the Sufi order. In his work on Morocco, Cornell describes them as "untutored enthusiasts."⁶² In early Ottoman Egypt, Sufi leaders lamented that their visitors came to seek advice on profane matters rather than spiritual guidance.⁶³ From present-day South Asia Buehler reports that "the primary activities of Sufis are assisting believers in their worldly affairs, counseling them in mental/physical health problems, and writing amulets to protect them."⁶⁴

While this underscores once more the need to differentiate and to avoid binary oppositions and essentialist assumptions, it also raises the question of how we can untangle such complex webs of interaction, involving not only the agents (the great ones and their followers of various categories) themselves, but also their internal opponents, their critics among other Muslims, representatives of political and other nonreligious institutions, and last but not least their academic interpreters.

Considering the extent to which outside observers, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, have confused the picture of Sufism with their value judgments (with particularly devastating consequences in the case of sub-Saharan Africa; see above), the most promising point of

⁶¹ Hoffman, *Sufism in Egypt*, 364.

⁶² Cornell, *Realm of the Saint*, 197.

⁶³ Winter, *Ottoman Egypt*, 131–132.

⁶⁴ Buehler, *Sufi Heirs*, 10.

departure seems to me to privilege the perspectives of Sufis themselves. How do the practitioners of Sufism, the masters and disciples, perceive and represent their own beliefs and practices? How do they relate to Sufism as found in texts? In what terms do they speak about experiential knowledge? How do the leaders perform their role as knowledge brokers? How do the followers, whether initiated or not, see their leaders, and how do they characterize their relationship with them? How do they see themselves in relation to opponents and outsiders? How do they react to the ways others see them? These are some of the questions we need to ask in order to study Sufism in context.

Admittedly, even if we found full answers to these questions, the “true” history of Sufism referred to by Fritz Meier would still remain evasive. But searching for answers and trying to understand, as Robert Orsi puts it, “the religious worlds people make”⁶⁵ will enable us to highlight aspects of this elusive history that have been ignored in previous scripts. This approach will ultimately also help us to integrate apparently unorthodox ideas, as expressed in the anecdote quoted at the beginning of this introduction, with the intellectual tradition of Sufism.

The Setting

Parts of West Africa—especially Senegal, Mauritania, and Northern Nigeria—are the geographical setting of the religious worlds explored in this book. However, the roots of the “Community of the Divine Flood,” the Sufi movement Ibrāhīm Niasse established within the Tijāniyya, go back to the Maghreb and ultimately to other parts of the Islamic world. Although no statistical data exists (estimates from within the movement, running as high as 100 million

⁶⁵ This is the first part of the subtitle of *Between Heaven and Earth*, one of Orsi’s studies of Catholicism in the United States. The subtitle continues, “and the scholars who study them,” a theme that is also pertinent to the study of Sufism and Islam in Africa.

followers, appear exaggerated), it is probably not an overstatement that nowadays, i.e. at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the movement is among the largest associations of Muslims with a global presence. The intellectual influences that converge in Niasse's thought reflect almost all periods of Islamic history and connect him to a wide variety of places, including the Maghreb, Andalusia, Egypt, Syria, the Ḥijāz, Yemen, Mesopotamia, Iran, and even Transoxania.

Niasse shares these features with Aḥmad al-Tijānī, the founder of the Tijāniyya, whose background, career, and teachings have been studied in a series of academic works, albeit of varying quality.⁶⁶ It does not seem especially surprising that a Sufi leader of late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century Morocco can have such a cosmopolitan background and a culturally diverse following; after all, the Maghreb is considered part of the Islamic heartlands, which have produced several Sufi movements that have later gone global. However, the emergence of a Sufi leader from presumably peripheral West Africa with such a wide range of intellectual roots and such a large following spread out over the five continents clearly falls outside of the familiar pattern. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the literature has so far almost consistently overlooked the spiritual dimensions and global impact of Niasse's movement.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ The work by Jamil Abun-Nasr, published in 1965, has long held the distinction of being the standard monograph on the topic (see Abun-Nasr, *Tijaniyya*). The recent studies by Wright (*Path of the Prophet*) and El Adnani (*Tijâniyya*) have advanced our knowledge much further, as has the collection edited by Triaud and Robinson (*Tijâniyya*). Other notable, if shorter works include Berque, *Intérieur* (see 240-282), Martin, "Notes sur l'origine," and de Lucia, "Figura carismatica."

⁶⁷ Major exceptions are several unpublished theses, such as (in alphabetical order) Hill, "Divine Knowledge"; Gueye, "Niasse le mystique"; Kane, "Tijâniyya réformée"; and Wright, "Embodied Knowledge." A shorter published study that captures some of the spiritual aspects very well is Brigaglia, "Fayḍa Tijaniyya." A French thesis covers the movement's network on the African continent (Biarnès, "Dimension internationale"). Ousmane Kane has addressed the transcontinental dimension in some of his publications (see Kane, "Muslim missionaries" and "Economie spirituelle transnationale"), as has Harrak, "Confréries d'origine africaine aux USA."

Authors of previous studies tend to treat the “Community of the Divine Flood” as a specifically West African phenomenon, although they acknowledge the remarkable appeal the movement had across colonial and later national borders.⁶⁸ Without downplaying the importance of the West African context, developing a meaningful explanation of Niasse’s extraordinary career and the movement’s success requires us to engage more closely with the broader Sufi tradition. Niasse’s interpretation and practical application of Sufi doctrine are no less crucial to a proper understanding of the subject matter than the specific juncture in West African political and religious history at which his movement emerged; a juncture that also gave birth to various other, if ultimately less successful or less widespread Sufi movements, such as the Ḥamawiyya and the Murīdiyya.

Historically, Niasse’s rise took place against the backdrop of the late colonial period. He thus entered the West African religious scene a generation after the three great Muslim saints of the wider region of Senegambia, whose impact on the religious institutions, ideas, and practices in the area can be felt until today: Ibrāhīm’s father °Abdallāh b. Muḥammad Niasse (b. 1264/1848, d. 1340/1922), Mālīk b. °Uthmān Sy (b. 1270/1853-1854, d. 1340/1922), and Aḥmadu Bamba (b. 1270/1853-1854, d. 1346/1927).⁶⁹ In the political and economic upheaval of the late nineteenth century, the three emerged as saintly poles capable of offering spiritual

⁶⁸ See in particular Gray, “Rise of the Niassene” and Hiskett, “Community of Grace.” The first detailed, though not always reliable, treatment of Niasse and his movement in the Nigerian context can be found in Paden’s study of religion and politics in Kano (Paden, *Kano*). Kane, “Shaikh al-Islam,” highlights Niasse’s relationship with the French and British colonial administrations. Piga’s studies mainly draw on previous secondary literature, although she also gives some interesting insights into a *zāwiya* in Dakar affiliated with Niasse (see Piga, *Ordini sufi*, 193-209; id., “Aperçu sur les confréries”; id., *Voies du soufisme*, chapter 10).

⁶⁹ °Abdallāh Niasse is the least studied of the three. On him see Gray, “Rise of the Niassene”; Kane, “Niasse Abdoulaye”; Seesemann, “Nach der Flut,” 97-114; Wright, “Embodied Knowledge,” 90-95. On Bamba see Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad* and Seesemann, *Aḥmadu Bamba*. On Sy see in particular Mbaye, *Malick Sy*; other studies include Bousbina, “Al-Hajj Malik Sy” and Robinson, “Malik Sy.”

orientation and economic stability to uprooted rural populations. The three also marked a transition to new types of religious leaders, who detached themselves from the political class, whether “traditional” African rulers, leaders of jihad movements, or colonial administrators. The Sufi orders, previously largely the preserve of clerical lineages, developed into veritable mass movements that transcended often rather rigid social boundaries and hierarchies of Senegambian society.

While Muslim religious leaders of ‘Abdallāh Niasse’s generation laid the foundation for the continuing importance of the Sufi orders in the wider Senegambia and were instrumental in developing “paths of accommodation”⁷⁰ to colonial rule, leaders of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s generation faced different challenges. The integration of West Africa into colonial economies helped to undermine established social structures and gave rise to new opportunities. Significantly, colonial modernity, although clearly a potential threat to the religious identity of Muslims in West Africa, provided the context for a series of Sufi revivals and other notable religious movements—some local, some regional, and some transcending colonial borders—in West Africa.⁷¹ New technologies facilitated communication and travel and allowed religious ideas as well as political ideologies to circulate on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, there was widespread expectation among West African Muslims of the appearance of a great religious leader—couched in terms such as *mujaddid* (“renewer”), Mahdī (“the rightly-guided one,” whose advent announces the imminent end of this world), or, in the case of the Tijāniyya, the

⁷⁰ Thus the title of David Robinson’s important study of the subject.

⁷¹ These movements include the Ḥamawiyya (Soares, *Prayer Economy*) as well as the Yacoubistes (Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change*), Nasiru Kabara’s Qādiriyya network in Nigeria (Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*), the Aḥmadiyya (Fisher, *Ahmadiyya*), and arguably also the Murīdiyya. A compelling example of a Christian revival movement that emerged around the same time is provided in Peel, *Aladura*. For a discussion of the notion of colonial modernity see Seesemann and Soares, “As Good Muslims as Frenchmen.”

“bringer of the divine flood.” Perhaps nobody seized this moment more successfully than Ibrāhīm Niasse, who showed his contemporaries a way to reconcile their religious identity as Muslims and Sufis with the transformations and disruptions connected with colonial modernity.

Scope and Structure of the Book

The present book is the first monograph-length academic study devoted to Niasse and his “Community of the Divine Flood.” Needless to say, it is far from offering a comprehensive treatment of the vast subject. The study focuses on the origins of the movement and its formative period. It analyzes the religious and social dynamics that propelled the spread of Niasse’s community and explores its intellectual outlook, combining Sufism and other Islamic sciences. The study also looks at some of the ways the movement spans different settings, groups, and regions. Last but not least, the book elucidates the ways in which the community tackled the challenges of colonial modernity and attempted to reconcile Sufism with modernity.

Some of the study’s obvious biases include its focus on male protagonists,⁷² as well as bias minimal consideration of post-colonial developments within the movement. My thematic choices are aimed at exposing the roots of the twentieth-century Sufi revival initiated by Ibrāhīm Niasse, and thus providing a foundation for future studies of aspects and themes neglected herein. The strengths of my approach are to bring text into dialogue with context, and to draw a nuanced portrait of Sufism as a living religious tradition in the twentieth century.

In five chapters that draw on a wide range of primary sources, the book analyzes Niasse’s career as a Sufi leader and the expansion of his movement until 1951, the year that marks—as I

⁷² Joseph Hill is planning to explore female participation in the “Community of the Divine Flood” in a book currently in progress, under the working title “Hiddenness and Feminine Authority: Sufi Women in Senegal.” I gratefully acknowledge his willingness to share a draft with me.

will argue—the final stage in Niasse’s ascension to supreme sainthood. Expressed in the imagery used within the “Community of the Divine Flood” itself, this year signals the bursting of the dam and the spread of the flood throughout West Africa. In many ways, the events that followed the ultimate unleashing of the flood reproduced the pattern of the early years of the movement in Senegal. New communities, typically with close links to Niasse or his leading deputies, started to proliferate from the Atlantic Ocean to the Nile, and wherever they emerged, their growth was accompanied by internal and external tensions similar to those of the formative period in Senegal. One objective is to uncover the causes and circumstances that first gave birth to a local Sufi community and later transformed it into a transnational movement.

Chapter 1 introduces Ibrāhīm Niasse on the basis of oral and written hagiographical material that offers insights into both scholarly and popular perceptions and representations of Niasse’s career. The focus is here on the first three decades of his life, using accounts of his childhood and training to highlight the milieu and family background in which he grew up. The chapter then turns to the “emergence of the flood,” the pivotal moment that triggered Niasse’s movement. A detailed exposition of the notions of *fayḍ* (“emanation,” “effusion”) and *fayḍa* is followed by an analysis of the relevant sections of Niasse’s magnum opus *Kāshif al-ilbās*. He mainly wrote this book to justify his claim to the position of “the bringer of the flood,” who would lead a massive expansion of the Tijāniyya by opening up new ways to deeper and more intense mystical experiences. The chapter also highlights the reception of the *fayḍa* motive as reflected in popular hagiographical literature and poetry.

Chapter 2 focuses on another concept that is crucial to the understanding of Niasse’s Sufi practices as well as his success: *tarbiya*, or spiritual training. Departing from a philological examination of Sufi and Tijānī writings pertaining to *tarbiya*, the chapter expounds the historical

development of methods used by Sufi shaykhs to guide their disciples on the mystical journey and ultimately to direct experiences of the Divine. The analysis demonstrates how the Tijānī method builds on previous models and modifies them by putting an even stronger emphasis on the recitation of the *taṣliya*, i.e. formulas invoking blessings on the Prophet Muḥammad. It is this legacy that Niasse drew upon when he devised his own method of spiritual training, which acted effectively as a shortcut to mystical knowledge. Using short treatises and transcripts of sermons, the chapter also sheds light on Niasse's *tarbiya* method and its practical application. Finally, the chapter considers the consequences of the greater public exposure of mystical doctrines and practices and unravels the complex dynamic that fuelled the large-scale and rapid expansion of the movement from the 1930s onwards.

Chapter 3 returns to the Senegalese context and offers a micro-history of the early community. Several of Niasse's published letters give unique insights into the debates and tensions that shaped the formative years of the movement. In the initial phase, much of his energy went into attempts to reign in the excesses of a few overzealous followers, whose flouting of the rules of the Sufi path gave rise to much criticism from outsiders. The movement was faced with increasing hostility, which led to the next critical stage in its history: Niasse left his home and founded a new settlement outside the town of Kaolack, called Medina. As the community continued to grow, it attracted attention and opposition from other Tijānī leaders. Rather than containing the movement's spread, the antagonistic responses further contributed to its coherence. This mechanism, which I argue is crucial to the explanation of Niasse's success, is examined in a detailed analysis of polemical texts attacking or defending Niasse's teachings and practices. At the heart of the controversy was the question whether it is possible to see God, and the involved parties drew extensively on old theological arguments to support their respective stance. The

chapter concludes by demonstrating how mystical experiences, articulated in terms of visions of God, and the debates surrounding them constitute one of the key factors in the spread of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*.

Chapter 4 broadens the focus from the movement's religious aspects to consider the social and economic context in which the "Community of the Divine Flood" emerged and grew. It engages with competing discourses about Ibrāhīm Niasse, which either promote him as the supreme saint of his time or denigrate him as a descendent of a family of blacksmiths, that is, of low status who were upstarts. Drawing on writings by Niasse and some of his followers, the chapter reconstructs the history and background of Niasse's claim to supreme sainthood and shows how this claim is intimately connected with the development of the early community. For the followers, the image of the unblemished saint prevailed over widely circulated allegations about Niasse's purportedly low social status. Next, the focus shifts to an analysis of the gradual acceptance of the *fayḍa* by young scholars among the Idaw °Alī in southwestern Mauritania. The recognition of the saintly status of Niasse, the purported descendent of a blacksmith, by the progeny of the most famous propagators of the Tijānī path in the wider region was a major milestone in the history of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. Finally, the chapter shows how the *fayḍa*'s spread beyond the confines of Saloum in Senegal was accompanied by the redrawing of social and gender boundaries.

Chapter 5 traces the stages in Ibrāhīm Niasse's emergence as a Muslim saint, to the point where he came to be regarded by many West Africans as the highest ranking saint of his time and the supreme leader of the Tijāniyya. It submits the conventional hagiographical and academic narratives to analytical scrutiny by juxtaposing them with the versions given in various primary sources. These include first and foremost Niasse's own accounts of his numerous

travels. The chapter returns to the analytical tools developed in the introduction and employed through the book by highlighting differences in perceptions and interpretations among leaders and followers, which—as I argue—constitute a decisive element of the movement’s dynamics. Ultimately, Niasse’s success seems to have depended more on the dynamics within the community than on the endorsement of several influential individuals discussed in the chapter, most notably ʿAbdallāh Bayero, Emir of Kano until 1953, and Aḥmad Skīraj (d. 1363/1944). It was after Niasse’s first public appearance in Kano in 1951 than his reputation as the supreme saint of the era began to spread rapidly throughout West Africa. This visit was the momentous event that signaled the unleashing of the divine flood on a large scale, as predicted by Aḥmad al-Tijānī in the early nineteenth century.

The Epilogue first sketches some of the developments that occurred after the ultimate unleashing of the flood, giving a condensed overview of the state of the *fayḍa* today. While acknowledging the complexity of motivations and reasons behind the extraordinary expansion of the “Community of the Divine Flood,” I argue that the combination of the notion of being an accomplished Sufi and Muslim with an open attitude towards modernity can be identified as a common denominator of the *fayḍa*’s success in a wide variety of settings. The epilogue also addresses Niasse’s legacy in more general terms, including his stature as a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, his political stances, as well as his engagement in international Islamic organizations. It also underscores the ways Niasse connected his role as a Sufi leader with his engagement for the promotion of Islam more broadly. Finally, I offer a summary of the central argument of the book, highlighting the ways in which the patterns of conflict are intertwined with the movement’s expansion and showing how Niasse’s Sufi revival questions received wisdom about Sufism and Islam in Africa.

Although drawing on extensive sojourns in the field, the present book does not claim to do more than scratch the surface of the vast ethnographic potential the “Community of the Divine Flood” presents to researchers.⁷³ One limitation of this study is its focus on mystical religiosity at the expense of other facets of lived Islam. Ibrāhīm Niasse and his followers did posit experiential mystical knowledge as the apex of being Muslim, but this position did not amount to neglecting other disciplines that form part of the Islamic sciences. Rather, they were actively engaged in studying and teaching Arabic language and grammar, Qur³ān and *ḥadīth*, the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, Islamic jurisprudence, to mention only the major disciplines. However, they did so through the lens of the deeper insight gained from direct mystical experience of the Divine, or, to borrow from Zachary Wright’s compelling argument, within the framework of an “enduring epistemology of embodied knowledge transmission.”⁷⁴

I would like to make one final disclaimer here especially for readers interested in the more recent history of Niasse’s movement, particularly its remarkable expansion beyond the confines of the African continent. My decision to limit my analysis to the evolution of the “Community of the Divine Flood” until the early 1950s, though in part a response to the constraints imposed by contemporary academic publishing, is first and foremost guided by the consideration that a full understanding of the later developments presupposes acquaintance with the roots and the workings of Niasse’s Sufi revival. It is my hope that the present book will lead to further scholarly explorations of this extremely rich and fertile field of study.

⁷³ Joseph Hill’s recent PhD thesis offers an insightful ethnography of the movement in Senegal (Hill, “Divine Knowledge”).

⁷⁴ Wright, “Embodied Knowledge,” 10. Wright does much better justice to Niasse’s role as a scholar of Islam (rather than only a Sufi virtuoso) and leader of Muslims (rather than of the Tijāniyya) than I am able to do within the limits of this study.

1 Beginnings: Ibrāhīm Niāsse and the Advent of the Flood

وتأتي قريبا فيضة الختم هيئوا بتفريغ أغيار فتحظي بموضع

The flood of the Seal [Aḥmad al-Tijānī] is coming soon, so prepare for it by vacating [your hearts] of all others, so that it can take their place!

Ibrāhīm Niāsse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 57.

Imagine ... a fathomless well—not an ordinary well, mind you, but a well which has no bottom. Imagine, next, a tireless worker who continually draws water from that well. Then imagine a leather bucket that never wants repair. Fourthly, imagine a basin next to that well which eventually becomes full. Finally, imagine a [*sic*] water so precious it cannot be thrown away and yet cannot be put back into a well already over-flowing. The question arises, “What should be done with the water after the basin is full?” The answer comes. Many basins will be constructed around the well to receive the precious water. In this parable the well represents Allah, whose being is continuous without end. The water is Divine Gnosis and experience. The leather bucket is the Prophet. ... The worker in the parable is Shaykh al-Tijani. The basin is an extraordinary spiritual adept who has received so much in the way of Divine Gnosis that he must communicate this Gnosis to others or it will overflow. He is the owner of the fayda or flood, Shaykh Ibrahim Niāsse.

Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop, as quoted in Cissé, *Revivalist*, 7-8.

Hagiographies of Muslim saints often attempt to prove the saintly status of their subjects with evidence from their early childhood or before their birth, and sometimes even well before conception. The life of the saint is made to appear as a straightforward ascension to the ranks of sainthood, although the saintly hero frequently faces fierce opposition and sinister plots by his enemies. Proving superiority over his opponents is part of the saint’s success story. The approach taken in the hagiographic genre is always teleological. We can hardly expect a discussion of ruptures in the saintly career; these would blemish the flawless picture these sources are out to present.

Drawing mainly on a variety of hagiographical sources, this chapter introduces Ibrāhīm Niasse, the main protagonist of this study, together with the emergence of the *fayḍa* or flood, the iconic event in the history of the movement. Although such sources offer few clues to the kind of explanations academic scholars are looking for, they can nevertheless give highly valuable insights.¹ Among other things, they contain the official, scholarly justification that demonstrates how the saint matches the criteria of sainthood. Often they also give access to the perspective of the ordinary followers and reveal some of the reasons why they would regard this particular person as a saint. The latter applies especially to oral hagiography, whereas written sources tend to display a learned discourse rather than a popular one.

The authoritative scholarly hagiography of Ibrāhīm Niasse was written as early as 1934 by °Alī b. al-Ḥasan Cissé, by all accounts the person closest to Niasse and his later successor.² Shortly thereafter Cissé’s text appeared as the foreword to the first print edition of *Kāshif al-ilbās*, Niasse’s major work on Sufism.³ Hagiographies of Niasse that reflect the followers’ perspective more than the scholarly discourse abound. In the villages of western Saloum, where the movement originated in the late 1920s, the followers continue to preserve oral accounts of the founding years. Among the “official” oral historians of the movement was Ibou Diouf, who composed countless verses in Wolof that praise Baye, recount the major events in his early life, and defend him against the attacks of his opponents. While only few people in Senegal still

¹ On hagiography in Sufi contexts and the ways it can be put to academic use see now Renard, *Friends of God*.

² °Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*. He completed this text on 18. Dhū l-Ḥijja 1352/April 4, 1934. — Cissé’s family background and relationship with Niasse is discussed at length in Wright, “Embodied Knowledge,” 117-136.

³ The first edition was published by al-Maṭba‘a al-°Arabiyya in Casablanca in 1353/1934-1935 (see Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 318-319; Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā’il* I, 69). There have been several reprints and reeditions, and the work is now available in an annotated English translation (Wright et al., *Removal of Confusion*).

remember Diouf, who died some time in the 1940s, and even fewer still memorize his verses, the oeuvre of a famous Hausa poet still enjoys enormous popularity in Northern Nigeria: Balarabe Jega's *Goran fayla* ("The Jug of the *fayḍa*") continues to be recited in meetings of Niasse's followers up to the present day. After Niasse's death his followers have begun to collect oral traditions and materials that document his life and work. Some of these collections have appeared in print in the form of small booklets.⁴

The hagiographical genres described here differ in terms of the audiences they address and the aspects they stress. However, their common focal point is the appearance (*zuhūr*) of the *fayḍa* that marks the first highlight of Niasse's saintly career. Interestingly, almost no source other than the hagiographies mentions this event.⁵ Similarly, Ibrāhīm Niasse does not appear in any outside source before the early 1930s, when his name was first listed in French colonial reports about Muslim personalities in the Kaolack area. One such report describes him as the master with the greatest following in the region and adds:

He is a black from Sine-Saloum, literate in Arabic, who always seeks to expand his literary knowledge. He enjoys a high consideration as a teacher and jurisconsult. [He is] one of the most active propagandists for the return to the soil. He leads a life of ease, far from material difficulties, at times at his farm in Kosi, at times in Medina near Kaolack, where he possesses a mosque made of European building materials.⁶

By the time this report was written, Niasse's movement had already taken firm roots in Saloum. The official Hijri year of its inception is 1348, equivalent to June 1929 to May 1930, which is considered to be the year of the advent of the *fayḍa*, rendered in this study as "flood."

⁴ See for instance the writings by Ḥamal b. Muḥammad al-Awwal al-Zakzakī (*Uṣūl al-fayḍa*, *ʿAjāʾib al-shaykh*) or the documentation of Niasse's international career in Thiam, *25 Sana*.

⁵ See Chapter 3 for a discussion of one such source, Aḥmad Dem's *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʾ*.

⁶ This is my translation of the quote from the *Rapport annuel du Cercle de Sine-Saloum* for the year 1933, as in Garonne, "Saint ambigu," 15-16. See also CAOM 14 MI 2648 = ANS 2 G 32/101, *Rapport politique pour l'année 1932*, Cercle de Sine-Saloum, 25.

Although the precise time of the actual emergence of this flood is unknown, it most likely coincided with the end of the rainy season, i.e. around September 1929. As was his habit during that period, Niasse spent the entire rainy season—the time of cultivating the fields—together with his disciples in Kosi, a small hamlet located roughly ten miles to the south-southwest of Kaolack. Though still not more than village size eighty years later, Kosi continues to be invoked by Niasse’s followers as the venue where it all began.

By laying claim to the *fayḍa*, Niasse referred to an aphorism uttered by Aḥmad al-Tijānī a few years before his death in 1815, in which he predicted the appearance of a flood among his companions that would inaugurate a time of tremendous expansion of the Tijāniyya. Niasse’s announcement to be the bringer (*ṣāḥib*) of this flood thus amounted to claiming supreme leadership of the Tijāniyya, at a time when he had not yet reached the age of thirty. However, the hagiographies trace Niasse’s mission as the bringer of the flood back to his childhood, and they imply that the *fayḍa* was from the very outset meant to appear at Niasse’s hands.

Birth, Childhood, and Adolescence

Although most authors of primary sources and previous studies declare 1902 as the year when Ibrāhīm Niasse was born, the correct date is two years earlier, on Rajab 15, 1318, equivalent to November 8, 1900. The confusion apparently stems from an error in °Alī Cissé’s biography, who gave Rajab 15, 1320, equivalent to October 17, 1902, as the date of Niasse’s birth.⁷ French colonial sources that mention Niasse usually only give an estimate of his age, not the actual birthday or birth year.⁸ Nonetheless, 1318 has the status of the official birth year, and Niasse

⁷ °Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*, 4.

⁸ Only one report mentions a year, in that case 1899. See CAOM Aff Pol 2258/2, Haut Commissariat de la République en A.O.F., Direction des Affaires Politiques, à M. Le Ministre de

himself has written a short note, dated 1353/1934-1935, confirming that this year was correct and 1320 was wrong.⁹

All sources are unanimous, however, that he was born in the village of Taiba, about twenty-five miles south of Kaolack. This is a further indication that 1902 cannot be the correct year of Niasse's birth, because the village was destroyed in late 1900 or early 1901, just after his father °Abdallāh Niasse (b. 1264/1848, d. 1340/1922) had moved his family to the neighboring British colony of Gambia.¹⁰ Thus, the first turning point in Ibrāhīm's life came when he was only a few months old. °Abdallāh's decision to go into exile was presumably the result of heightening tensions with Mandiane Ba, the local ruler of the Rip region recognized by the French colonial administration. Ba's father and predecessor, Mamour N'Dary, had been the archrival of Sa°id Maty, son of the jihad leader Maba Diakhou (d. 1284/1867), of whom the young °Abdallāh Niasse, as well as his father Muḥammad, had been a loyal supporter. Apparently the relations between Ba and Niasse were strained from the outset. According to Marty, who wrote less than two decades after the event but nonetheless seems to have confused the chronology, the cause for the friction was Niasse's refusal to pay the harsh taxes the ruler tried to impose on his millet harvest.¹¹ Other accounts state more generally that Mandiane Ba feared Niasse's influence over the population in the area and therefore tried to intimidate him.¹² Whatever the precise reason,

la France d'Outre-Mer, 7 Décembre 1956. Annexe: Fiche technique sur Ibrahima Niasse de Kaolack.

⁹ A copy is in my possession. Ibn Iktūsh, *Min akhbār al-shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 26, quotes the document in full.

¹⁰ For a detailed account of °Abdallāh Niasse and the founding of Taiba see Hill, "Divine Knowledge," 97-107.

¹¹ See Marty, *Sénégal I*, 136. According to Marty, the events took place in 1894.

¹² A French report of 1898 (quoted in Klein, *Islam and Imperialism*, 224) described Niasse as the "leader of all the Marabouts of Rip and of Saloum, ... superior to all of them." See also *ibid.*, 223-225, for Klein's version of the events.

°Abdallāh Niasse finally left Taiba together with his family and disciples, and shortly thereafter Mandiane Ba had the abandoned village looted and burnt down.¹³

Almost nothing is reported in the sources about the family's stay in Gambia. As far as Ibrāhīm Niasse is concerned, °Alī Cissé tells us about his childhood training in the Islamic sciences. The account conforms to common hagiographical standards: Ibrāhīm grew up with his pious father who taught him the Qur'ān until he mastered its recitation by heart, in the version transmitted by Warsh.¹⁴ Thereafter he studied the Islamic sciences, showing such extraordinary talent that he had soon acquired profound knowledge of all relevant disciplines. Throughout his studies—and it is here that the account deviates from the common pattern—his only teacher was his father.¹⁵ The emphasis on this hagiographic motive pervades followers' accounts of Baye, as they affectionately call him. The implication is, of course, that he must have received his vast knowledge from other, divine sources. In the words of Cissé, Niasse received °*ulūm ladunniya*, knowledge that came directly from God by way of divine inspiration (*ilhām rabbānī*).¹⁶

¹³ For other, sometimes contradictory, accounts of the attack on Taiba and the reasons for Niasse's exile see Mbodj, "El Hadj Abdoulaye Niasse," 10; Mbaye, *Malick Sy* I, 449; Gray, "Rise of the Niassene," 36-37; Kane, "Niasse Abdoulaye," 46-47. In a later publication Kane gave yet another version, claiming that "the French" destroyed Taiba to prevent an anti-colonial uprising and made °Abdallāh Niasse flee to Gambia. See Kane, "Shaikh al-Islam," 302.

¹⁴ This is still the common version in the Maghreb and West Africa. Warsh (d. 197/812-813) developed it on the basis of the transmission by Nāfi°. See further *EI* 2, entry "i rā'a."

¹⁵ °Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*, 4. – Contrary to occasional claims in the literature (see Quesnot, "Cadres maraboutiques," 144; Froelich, *Musulmans*, 236; Monteil, *Islam noir*, 165), Niasse never studied in Mauritania, nor did he study the Qur'ān with a Mauritanian scholar called "Mohamed Tolba," likely to be identified Muḥammad al-Ṭulba b. Aḥmaddu. See the following sections and Chapter 4 for details on Niasse's Mauritanian connections.

¹⁶ °Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*, 4. – The term °*ilm ladunnī* occurs in the Qur'ānic story of Moses and al-Khiḍr (Sura 18:65).

While one popular narrative has it that “Baye studied only two books, al-Awwal and al-Thānī” (Arabic for “the first and the second”),¹⁷ thus emphasizing the divine provenance and miraculous character of his knowledge, other sources occasionally make mention of works young Ibrāhīm read with his father. Most of them were part of what we can call the typical West African Islamic curriculum at the time, including classics in theology and Mālikī law such as al-Qayrawānī’s *Risala*, Ibn ʿĀshir’s *Murshid al-muʿīn*, Khalīl’s *Mukhtaṣar*, al-Juwaynī’s *Waraqāt fi uṣūl al-fiqh*, Mālik’s *Muwaṭṭāʾ*; standard titles in Arabic grammar and literature like the *Ajurrumiyya* and Ḥarārī’s *Maqāmāt*; and a few works on Sufism, including Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh’s *Ḥikam*, ʿAlī Ḥarāzīm’s *Jawāhir al-maʿānī*, the authoritative work on the life and teachings of Aḥmad al-Tijānī, and *Munyat al-murīd*, a popular versification of the tenets of the Tijāniyya by Ibn Bāba al-Shinqīṭī.¹⁸ It is also reported in some of these sources that ʿAbdallāh Niasse introduced Ibrāhīm into the discipline of *tafsīr*, Qurʾān interpretation, which usually forms the last subject taught at the very end of a long training.

Among the few things we know about the family’s stay in Gambia is that the father continued to cultivate his connections with leading personalities of the Tijāniyya in Mauritania and Morocco. He had forged his first relationships during a stopover in Morocco on his way to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1890.¹⁹ During his time in Gambia he regularly received

¹⁷ These are apparently references to the two parts of the *Mukhtaṣar* by Khalīl b. Ishāq, one of the most commonly taught texts in Islamic law. The phrase comes from an interview with “Vieux” Diop, Kaolack, December 10, 1996.

¹⁸ See the list in a half-completed thesis on Niasse: Ba, *Cheikh Ibrahima Niasse*, 19-20; cf. Gueye, *Niasse le mystique*, 32-34. In other religious centers of Senegal the works taught were almost identical (see Loimeier, *Säkularer Staat*, 102-104).

¹⁹ Marty mentions the friendship between ʿAbdallāh Niasse and Muḥammad wuld Shaykh, a Tijānī from Trarza. However, he describes the relation in a rather condescending manner, implying that the “white” Moor only agreed to enter into contact with the “black” Senegalese after the latter helped him, being stranded without money in the Ḥijāz, pay for the return ticket. See Marty, “Groupements Tidianiä,” 331 and *Sénégal I*, 137.

visitors, some of whom illustrious enough to deserve mention in French colonial records.²⁰

According to most accounts, °Abdallāh Niasse traveled from Gambia to Fez and further to Marseille, accompanied by his eldest son Muḥammad (b. 1299/1881). From there, Muḥammad went to the Ḥijāz to perform the *ḥajj*, while °Abdallāh returned to Morocco where he waited for his son. However, contrary to the claim of most studies, it seems unlikely that they undertook this journey during the early years of the exile.²¹ Primary sources suggest that the trip in question took place in 1910-1911, and rather than returning to Gambia, °Abdallāh Niasse went to Senegal where he obtained permission to end his exile and take residence in Kaolack.²²

The favorable response of the colonial administration to Niasse's request is usually attributed to the intervention of his friend al-Ḥājj Mālik Sy, the most prominent religious leader in Senegal of the early twentieth century together with Niasse and Aḥmadu Bamba, the founder of the Murīdiyya. Niasse's first destination coming from Morocco was Tivaouane, the headquarters of the emerging Sy branch of the Tijāniyya, where he spent several weeks as Mālik

²⁰ A distinguished Moroccan visitor to Gambia was Aḥmad b. al-Sā'ih from Sefrou (Marty, *Sénégal I*, 137; Diouf, "Abdoulaye Niass," 9), who was perhaps from the family of Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā'ih, the celebrated author of *Bughyat al-mustafid*.

²¹ Marty—and many later authors who rely on him—has the trip take place in 1903-1904 (*Sénégal I*, 136-137), but later French colonial reports speak of 1900-1901 (see for instance CAOM Aff Pol 2260/1, Notice documentaire sur l'islam en A.O.F., Août 1940). Amar Samb dates the journey to 1901 (*Adab*, 6). Kane denies that Muḥammad Niasse undertook any pilgrimage before 1920 (Kane, "Muhammad Niasse," 222). If this were really the case, it would mean that Marty, whose work appeared in 1917, fabricated the whole story.

²² There is a considerable degree of confusion in the secondary literature about the exact course of the events. Many authors assume that Niasse took residence in Senegal before traveling to Morocco (Diouf, "Abdoulaye Niass," 9; Gray, "Rise of the Niassene," 37-38; Kane, "Niasse Abdoulaye," 47; Mbodj, "El Hadj Abdoulaye Niass," 10). The account offered here is based on scattered indications in primary sources, which seem more reliable and also make more sense than the secondary literature. The source that dates Muḥammad's pilgrimage to 1328/December 1910 is the foreword by Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-°Alawī to Muḥammad Niasse's anthology *Khātimat al-durar*. °Abdallāh's stay in Morocco in 1329/1911 is mentioned in Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, 8. The accounts by Klein (*Islam and Imperialism*, 224-225) and Gueye ("Niasse le mystique," 22-24) give the accurate sequence of events, though not always the correct dates.

Sy's guest. According to Klein, the latter advised Niasse to write to the governor of Senegal and ask for permission to settle in Kaolack.²³ As Senegalese sources agree, it was thanks to Mālik Sy's mediation that Niasse was finally allowed to stay in his home country.²⁴ Within a short period of time, his *zāwiya* in Kaolack flourished, and the reputation of his school extended well beyond the region of Saloum. Together with Sy, °Abdallāh Niasse was the leading figure within the Tijāniyya of Senegal.

Some later voices from Kaolack would even assert that Niasse's position in the Tijāniyya was superior to Sy's, as Niasse was the first Senegalese to receive a so-called unlimited license (*ijāza muṭlaqa*), the highest available rank authorizing the holder to initiate aspirants, appoint deputies without limitation of the number, and give others permission to recite all litanies (*awrād*, sing. *wird*), mandatory as well as optional. According to one version that is popular in Kaolack, °Abdallāh Niasse, after having obtained his license, tried to convince the Moroccan leaders of the Tijāniyya to issue one for Mālik Sy as well. They finally agreed, though they initially argued that they would usually not bestow such an honor through correspondence. Thus, when Niasse arrived in Tivaouane he was able to confer the license to Sy, on behalf of the Moroccan issuer. This version, however, is rejected in Tivaouane. From their perspective, it was Sy who acted as Niasse's mentor, as evidenced in Sy's successful mediation effort.²⁵

Although there is much talk about Niasse's unlimited license, and there is no reason to doubt that he did indeed accede to this rank, it is not quite clear who issued it. During his stay in

²³ In the letter (partly quoted in Klein, *Islam and Imperialism*, 224) Niasse explained that he only sought to live a peaceful life as cultivator of his fields and teacher of his students, and promised to abstain from politics.

²⁴ See Mbaye, *Malick Sy* I, 450; Gueye, "Niasse le mystique," 23-24.

²⁵ Up to the present day, this matter arouses controversial discussions in Senegal. The debate between followers of Sy and supporters of Niasse has even left traces on the Internet. In an apparent attempt to counter Tivaouane claims, Kane insists that Niasse never was a disciple of Sy, contrary to widespread opinion ("Shaikh al-Islam," 302).

Morocco in 1910-1911, he met with a large number of leading personalities of the Tijāniyya, including Muḥammad al-Bashīr b. Muḥammad al-Ḥabīb b. Aḥmad al-Tijānī, the oldest living descendant of the order's founder at the time, who purportedly gave him the original manuscript of *Jawāhir al-ma'ānī*.²⁶ Other potential issuers of the license include Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī, grandson of a companion of Aḥmad al-Tijānī with the same name and longtime head of the *zāwiya* in Fez; a deputy called al-Muḥibb b. al-°Arabī; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-°Abd Lāwī, the son of one of the most eminent disciples of °Alī al-Tamāsīnī, al-Tijānī's first successor; and last not least, Aḥmad b. al-°Ayyāshi Skīraj (b. 1295/1878; d. 1363/1944), a student of Aḥmad al-°Abd Lāwī who was to become the leading scholar of the Tijāniyya in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁷ The grandsons of °Abdallāh Niassé put much emphasis on the latter connection, although Skīraj, born in 1295/1878, was only in his early thirties and had not risen to his later prominence at the time of his meeting with the Senegalese. Whatever the case, Niassé received licenses from most if not all the personalities mentioned above, and at least one of these was unlimited.²⁸ The recognition from the Tijāniyya's headquarters was a boost to his reputation when he established himself as the foremost scholar of Islam and the Tijāniyya in Saloum and the adjacent regions.

²⁶ See Ibrāhīm Niassé, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabayīn*, 8. It seems that the manuscript is preserved in Kaolack up to the present day, though there are competing claims about its precise location.

²⁷ The unlimited license is discussed and attributed to various sources by the following authors: Ba, "Cheikh Ibrahima Niassé," 20-22; Diouf, "Abdoulaye Niassé," 9; Gray, "Rise of the Niassé," 37; Gueye, *Niassé le mystique*, 23; Kane, "Niassé Abdoulaye," 47; Kane, *Fihris*, z; Kane, "Shaikh al-Islam," 303; Mbodj, "El Hadj Abdoulaye Niassé," 10; Paden, *Kano*, 95 and 89 note 43. — For more on Skīraj see Chapter 5; references include Abun-Nasr, *Tijaniyya*, 182-184 and the biographical sketches in Abū Bakr °Atīq, *al-Fayḍ al-hāmi*, 17-24 and Ibrāhīm b. Ṣāliḥ, *Aḥmad Skīraj*. My rendering of the name conforms to Moroccan usage. In the secondary literature the name frequently appears as Sukayrij.

²⁸ According to Ibrāhīm Niassé, his father had eleven authorizations, among them several that were unlimited. However, he does not specify them. See *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 106.

The father's standing as a Muslim scholar and his position within the Tijāniyya had a decisive influence on young Ibrāhīm. Hagiographical narratives of his youth in Kaolack attest that he, though still a boy at the time, already showed signs of extraordinary promise. °Alī Cissé's account suggests that °Abdallāh Niasse had always expected great things from him. He even traces this expectation back to the time when Ibrāhīm's mother, °Ā'isha (known as Astou) Diankhe, had barely conceived. According to Cissé, she had a dream in which she saw the moon fall apart and slowly disappear into her womb. When she told her husband about the dream, he urged her to keep it as a secret. Cissé also relates another occasion where °Abdallāh predicted that °Ā'isha would be the mother of his real heir, because she was the most God-fearing among his wives.²⁹

Miracle stories circulating in oral hagiography emphasize that Ibrāhīm was different from his age-mates. One such narrative recounts Ibrāhīm's time as a student in the Qur'ānic school:

Among the daily chores of the boys was the collection of firewood. While each of the other boys used to carry a huge bundle when they came from the collection tours, Ibrāhīm always returned with empty hands. When the others complained to °Abdallāh Niasse, Ibrāhīm responded, "Why don't you count the bundles first before you raise your accusations?" And indeed, the number of bundles equaled the number of boys. Nobody had seen him collecting firewood, but his bundle was there.³⁰

The Léona neighborhood of Kaolack, where °Abdallāh Niasse had established his home and his *zāwiya*, soon became a busy hub of distinguished Tijānī visitors, mostly representatives of the Idaw °Alī, a tribal confederation based in Trarza and other regions of Mauritania, whose members claim descent from °Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and are widely regarded as descendants of the Prophet. In fact, the Mauritanian author of a biographical note on Niasse stresses that "there is

²⁹ °Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*, 12. Ibrāhīm was named after his maternal grandfather, Ibrāhīm Diankhe. On the mother see Bello, "Sheikh Ibrahim," 136-137; Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 78; Quadri, "Ibrahim Niass," 109.

³⁰ Interview with "Vieux" Diop, Kaolack, December 10, 1996.

nobody among the °Alawiyyūn [i.e., the scholars of the Idaw °Alī], whether from the desert or from Shinqīt, but he knows his genealogy and chains of initiation. He knows them better than their own sons, who sometimes get the details wrong.”³¹ The environment during Ibrāhīm’s adolescence in Kaolack was thus saturated with a Tijānī way of life. Performance of Tijānī rituals, along with the five daily prayers, structured the day, and lessons in Tijānī doctrine, taught by his father, dominated his curriculum. Ibrāhīm is also said to have taken a great interest in the guests, and he drew particularly close to one of them, °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj, who is at the center of the most important hagiographical narrative of his youth.

°Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj (b. 1277/1860-1861, d. 1347/1928-1929) was one of the °Alawiyyūn who maintained close relationships with representatives of the Tijāniyya in Senegal.³² His acquaintance with °Abdallāh Niasse probably went back to the days when the family was still in Gambia, and he is credited with discovering a special gift in young Ibrāhīm. Not all accounts are specific about the nature of this gift, but most versions have it that he recognized him as the future bringer of the *fayḍa*. One account goes as follows:

Here are the facts. As it was the use, *sharīf* [the title reserved for descendants of the Prophet] Wuld al-Ḥājj had come to ask al-Ḥājj °Abdallāh Niasse for the gift. Once he had been served he was about to start praying for the family members who had all gathered. But then, to the surprise of those present, he suddenly turned to young Ibrāhīm asking him to pray for him, the *sharīf*. As he later confided to the father, he had “seen” in the child the sign of predestination, something that indicated that the adolescent had a calling to an extraordinary destiny, and that there was a blessed star shining in him, which distinguishes the great men of God. Then the boy prayed for the *sharīf* who subsequently came to visit him often and never ceased to watch his ascension from a distance.³³

³¹ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār Fāl, *Muqaddima*, 18.

³² The dates of his birth and death are given in Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 80.

³³ Translated from the French original in Diouf, “Ibrahima Niass,” 4. – More than fifty years later Niasse recalled in a speech how he had prayed for °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj, giving him the guarantee that he would die as a Tijānī. See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Majlis Zāriyā*, 21.

Muḥammad al-Māḥī, one of the senior sons of Ibrāhīm Niasse, and director of the highly regarded *Institut Islamique El Hadj Abdoulaye Niasse* in the Sam neighborhood of Kaolack, gave the following version:

°Abdallāh Niasse had always wished and hoped that one of his sons would become the bringer of the *fayḍa*. . . . Ibrāhīm was still young when °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj predicted that he would bring the flood, because he had perceived the scent of God in the boy. . . . Wuld al-Ḥājj had traveled from Mauritania to Senegal in search of the scent of God. He failed to find it in Touba and Tivaouane, and when he arrived in Kaolack, he told °Abdallāh Niasse to call all his sons. He looked at Ibrāhīm and said, “He is the one!” °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj stayed for some time and was always close to the Ibrāhīm. They shared the same bed, and he asked the boy questions about the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*. Although Ibrāhīm was still a child, he always knew the answer.³⁴

A similar version is recounted by the Nigerian poet Ibrāhīm b. Hārūn alias Balarabe Jega in his celebrated poem “The Jug of the *fayḍa*.” He also has °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj leaving his country, though not in search of a scent, but attracted by a light that he had seen from Mauritania. After he failed to find the source of the light in Dakar, he continued his search until he reached Kaolack, where he saw the young Ibrāhīm in the house of °Abdallāh Niasse. He asked his host whether this was his son, and when he answered in the affirmative, he said: “He is the one I am looking for! I have seen his light from my home country! This is the reason why I came.” The visitor then revealed to °Abdallāh Niasse that Ibrāhīm would be the recipient of the flood.³⁵

While it is quite plausible that °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj did indeed visit Kaolack on several occasions, it is hard to tell to what extent the narratives refer to actual historical events, or whether they are hagiographical fiction. Whatever the case, °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj figures in the story of Ibrāhīm Niasse as the one who discovered in him the disposition to becoming the bringer

³⁴ Interview with Muḥammad al-Māḥī b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, Medina Baye, November 24, 1996.

³⁵ Balarabe Jega, *Goran fayla*, 6.

of the *fayḍa*.³⁶ The hagiographers would probably see it as an endorsement of their version that Marty noted in 1915 °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj’s reputation of being able to predict the future.³⁷ In 1931, almost two years after laying claim to the *fayḍa*, Niasse would give his own account of his relationship with the Mauritanian shaykh and assign him a crucial role in the justification of his claim.

Early Career

Ibrāhīm was in his early twenties when °Abdallāh Niasse, his great role model, teacher, and initiator passed away on Dhū l-Qa’da 13, 1340/July 9, 1922, only two weeks after Mālik Sy had died in Tivaouane. Already before his father’s death Ibrāhīm had started to introduce his own circle of disciples into the study of the Qur’ān and the basics of other Islamic sciences. He was not the only one among °Abdallāh’s approximately twenty sons who embarked on a scholarly career. Muḥammad, the oldest son of the family, was already an established scholar in his own right and succeeded °Abdallāh Niasse as the head of the *zāwiya* in Léona, thereby earning the epithet Khalīfa. Other brothers with an advanced training in Islamic sciences included °Umar alias Shaykh Khalīl (d. 1387/1967), Muḥammad Zaynab (b. 1310/1892, d. 1366/1947), Abū Bakr (b. 1315/1897, d. 1358/1939), and Abū Bakr II (al-Muthannā), known as Serigne Mbaye (b. ca. 1323/1905-1906, d. 1393/1973).³⁸

³⁶ Joseph Hill relates yet another version in which °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj not only features as the discoverer of Ibrāhīm Niasse as *ṣāhib al-fayḍa*, but also as the transmitter of the secret of the *fayḍa* that is traced back to Aḥmad al-Tijānī. As Hill points out, his version of the account bears a strong resemblance to David’s selection as narrated in 1 Samuel 16, 1-13. See “Divine Knowledge,” 132-135.

³⁷ See Marty, “Ida Ou Ali,” 247.

³⁸ See the biographical portraits in *Afrique Musulmane* 13, March 1983. The nickname Shaykh Khalīl is a reference to °Umar Niasse’s expertise in Islamic law.

During the rainy season from July to September, the activities shifted from Léona to the countryside. °Abdallāh Niasse had been one of the pioneers of peanut cultivation as cash crop in the area, and the family owned land in the vicinity of several villages to the south of Kaolack, particularly those inhabited by Njolofoon families,³⁹ who formed the core of his followers. After his death, the sons divided the land and continued to engage in agricultural activities. Ibrāhīm Niasse chose Kosi as his rural basis and had his followers work in the fields during the rainy season. However, he gradually spent more time in Kosi than he did in town, surrounded by a growing number of disciples who divided their time between the fields and the school.

Hagiographical accounts not only stress Niasse’s early maturity and talent as a teacher, but also his first ventures into the composition of poetry. In 1342/1923-1924, he wrote a didactic poem detailing the proper performance of religious duties and the rules for the aspirant’s conduct vis-à-vis the master. This text, known by the title *Rūḥ al-adab*, continues to be considered as an authoritative exposition of the topic.⁴⁰ Even before this work, which is regarded as his first, Niasse had started to compose poetry. His earliest verses relayed in the sources are elegies for his father, whose loss had a deep impact on Ibrāhīm, still at the threshold of adulthood.⁴¹ While the earlier samples focus on the endless tears he shed over the father’s demise, a later poem in praise of the deceased contains a verse where the author appears to look forward to the future:

Before they buried you in the ground I never used to know
that there are the Pleiades positioned beyond the sun.⁴²

³⁹ See the section “Consolidation in Senegal” in Chapter 4 for more on these families.

⁴⁰ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Rūḥ al-adab*. The English translation of the text, *Spirit of Good Morals*, nowadays circulates widely among Anglophone followers in the United States, South Africa, and elsewhere.

⁴¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jalā’ al-ṣudūr*, 146-148. See also the verses quoted in Gueye, “Niasse le mystique,” 6.

⁴² Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jalā’ al-ṣudūr*, 149.

With these verses he seems to imply that now that the sun has set, the lights of other stars can begin to shine, including himself. And indeed, over the following few years Niasse gradually built his reputation as a scholar and author. In 1925, he completed his first anthology in the discipline of *al-madh al-nabawī*, panegyrics in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad, under the title *Nūr al-baṣar*.⁴³ In the following year he also introduced himself as expert in *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence, when he tackled the question of whether peanut crops were to be taxed according to the rules of *zakāt*, or charity levy.⁴⁴

Parallel to his ascension as an author and scholar, Ibrāhīm Niasse also gradually earned his own credentials as a shaykh of the Tijāniyya. His original initiation came from his father during his youth. Although he spent much of his time devouring any writing on the Tijāniyya he could get hold of in his father's library, he had yet to wait for his promotion to the rank of a deputy.⁴⁵ According to Ibrāhīm's own account, the father carefully planned his appointment as a deputy, choosing a Mauritanian scholar as intermediary.

He was the noble *sharīf* and distinguished scholar Sīdī Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Shinqīṭī al-Tishīṭī, the son of the scholar Muḥammad al-Saghīr b. Aḥmad al-Saghīr. My father made him a deputy with the authorization to transmit everything he had. He told him that he had done so in order to have him, Muḥammad Maḥmūd, later transmit the unlimited license to me, because I was qualified for this rank. Thereupon some people blessed with disclosure [of authentic knowledge from God, *kashf*] said to him [°Abdallāh Niasse]: “He

⁴³ This anthology later became the first part of his famous anthology *al-Dawāwīn al-sitt*.

⁴⁴ Niasse first addressed this question around the year 1925 in the form of poetry, apparently in response to a question by one of his followers (see *Ya sāl^{am} hal Mālik^{um} qad zakkā*). A few years later he revisited the same problem and wrote a long treatise under the title *Irshād al-sārīn*. In both texts he argues that *zakāt* does not apply to groundnuts. As *zakāt* is one of the “Five Pillars of Islam,” this question was of vital importance in the agrarian milieu of Senegal. Ibrāhīm's father °Abdallāh is also known for his rejection of *zakāt* for groundnuts, whereas Mālik Sy used to support it. See further Mbaye, *Malick Sy* I, 593, who offers an edition of Sy's long chapter in *Kifāyat al-rāghibīn* on the topic together with a French translation (*Malick Sy* II, 383-419). Cf. Gueye, “Niasse le mystique,” 62-65 and 77-82.

⁴⁵ As Ibrāhīm Niasse remarked later, “there was virtually no piece of paper written [about the Tijānī path] but my father went to get it and I read it” (*Jawāhir al-rasā'il* I, 102).

[Ibrāhīm] does not need an appointment as deputy from a human being, because the Exalted Creator has already made him a deputy.” At that time I was still young. After my father had passed away, the *sharīf* came and appointed me as a deputy with an unlimited license, just as my father had instructed him to do.⁴⁶

The statement about God having granted him the rank of a deputy is indicative of Niasse’s self-confidence, even at a time when he had not yet laid official claim to a high spiritual position. Before he continues to list the licenses from other leading Tijānī personalities, he refers to dream visions of his father and of Aḥmad al-Tijānī that once more confirm his extraordinary status. In one of the dreams his father told him, “Everything I left behind is yours. Take it from the others!”⁴⁷ Aḥmad al-Tijānī, Niasse claims, appeared to him repeatedly and gave him the permission (*idhn*), i.e. made him a deputy authorized to initiate aspirants and appoint deputies himself. His narrative suggests that it was God who conferred to him this lofty position. Aḥmad al-Tijānī had confirmed it, and °Abdallāh Niasse was to assist in this divine plan by passing everything on to his son.

His astounding self-confidence notwithstanding, Niasse would continue his collection of licenses for many years to come. Referring to visions of the founder was one thing, but deriving legitimacy from actual written authorizations was another. In the late 1920s, he concentrated his effort on receiving authorizations from the Mauritanian authorities of the Tijāniyya. However, as he did not have the opportunity to travel at the time, he had to wait for visitors to come to Kaolack. The next license came from no other than °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj, the old mentor of Ibrāhīm Niasse, who was—apart from the father—the only person who played the role of a

⁴⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 106 (with the text of the license that includes the permission to recite the “greatest name of God”). See the entry on Muḥammad Maḥmūd’s father in *MLG I*, 475-476.

⁴⁷ Niasse adds, “and he said more things that cannot be put in writing.” See *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 106.

shaykh in his life.⁴⁸ It was presumably issued in 1345, equivalent to 1926-1927, and the *silsila*, or chain of initiation, connects him with some of the most celebrated shaykhs of the Ḥāfiẓiyya, as the dominant Mauritanian branch of the Tijāniyya was known: °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj received his initiation from Aḥmad (alias Abba, d. 1323/1905-1906), who was appointed by his father Muḥamdi Baddi b. Sīdinā (d. 1264/1847-1848), who in turn had his license from his father-in-law Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ b. al-Mukhtār al-°Alawī (d. 1248/1831-1832), who was initiated by Aḥmad al-Tijānī in Fez in the year 1800.⁴⁹

<Figure 1.1>

Figure 1.1 shows a selection of other early chains of transmission (*asānīd*, sing. *sanad*; lit., support) Niasse held. Among those going back to his father, the ones highlighted here are °Abdallāh’s first initiation that connected him with al-Ḥājj °Umar b. Sa°id Tall (d. 1280/1864), the famous jihad leader, and a later connection to Moroccan authorities. The figure illustrates the key role of the appointment by °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj. This was not only the first independent chain of initiation Niasse received, but also the first such document coming from a representative of the Ḥāfiẓiyya. For about a decade, the Ḥāfiẓī chain would remain his preferred connection with Aḥmad al-Tijānī.⁵⁰

However, only a few months after this important step, Niasse was able to diversify his *asānīd* further. The issuer was once more a representative of the Ḥāfiẓiyya, Muḥammad al-Kabīr

⁴⁸ See Niasse’s praise of °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 107, and *Ziyādat al-jawāhir*, 107.

⁴⁹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 107. – The early spread of the Tijāniyya in Mauritania and the Western Sudan was essentially the work of Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ (from whom the branch derived its name) and his successors. Virtually all nineteenth-century West African Tijānī leaders received their original appointments from Ḥāfiẓī scholars. See further Dedoud Ould Abdellah, “Passage au Sud” and Seesemann, “The Shurafā° and the ‘Blacksmith’,” 73-74.

⁵⁰ In a letter from 1934, Niasse referred to the Ḥāfiẓī chain as “the highest and the most treasured.” See *Jawāhir al-rasā°il* I, 101; cf. Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 82-83.

b. Aḥmad b. Maḥamm b. al-°Abbās al-°Alawī.⁵¹ Like °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj he held a license connecting him to the Baddi lineage through Aḥmad b. Muḥamdi Baddi. Yet, in addition he had three other chains going back to Moroccan disciples of al-Tijānī, Mūsā b. al-Ma°zūz, who is listed in Figure 1.1, Muḥammad b. Abī Naṣr and al-Ḥājj °Abd al-Wahhāb b. al-Aḥmar.⁵²

The fourth license represented in the figure came from Muḥammad Sa°id b. Aḥmaddu (alias Manna), a grandson of Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ al-°Alawī and caliph of the Ḥāfiẓī lineage at the time. It is the last license mentioned in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, and the fact that it was issued in 1350/1930-1931—more than a year after the advent of the *fayḍa*—suggests that Niasse still felt the necessity to broaden the basis of his legitimacy by collecting authorizations from other recognized leaders. In the early 1930s, he continued to strengthen his bonds with the Ḥāfiẓiyya, as evidenced in a number of further licenses issued by its prominent representatives.⁵³ The most important license, however, which Niasse used to call his “golden *silsila*” (chain of initiation), was issued in 1937 and connected him with Aḥmad al-Tijānī via Aḥmad Skīraj, Aḥmad al-°Abd Lāwī, and °Alī al-Tamāsīnī (d. 1260/1844). After receiving this unlimited authorization from Skīraj, Niasse apparently stopped initiating aspirants on the authority of his earlier Ḥāfiẓī licenses and switched to the North African chain, which was not only shorter than most of the others, but also very prestigious because it ran through °Alī al-Tamāsīnī, Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s appointed successor.

Niasse’s collection of licenses continued well into the 1960s, a time when his reputation as a caliph of the Tijāniyya was so well established that it was hardly in need of further attestation. The search for legitimacy is thus not the only reason why deputies would attempt to

⁵¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 108. See Muḥammad al-Kabīr’s entry in *MLG* I, 432.

⁵² The two latter count among the four companions who purportedly received all the secrets from Aḥmad al-Tijānī. See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, 25-26.

⁵³ For details see Chapter 4 and the charts in “The Shurafā’ and the ‘Blacksmith’.”

diversify their chains of initiation. Other reasons may include special blessings (*baraka*) associated with a particular chain, or simply the wish to strengthen a relationship of mutual respect and affection through exchange of licenses. Thus, Niasse received a license from Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī, the long-time deputy in the *zāwiya* at Fez, and he established *sanad* connections with several descendants of Aḥmad al-Tijānī and °Alī al-Tamāsīnī, and apparently also with Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ b. °Abd al-Laṭīf (d. 1398/1978) from Cairo, one of the most influential Tijānī leaders of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ In the course of his life Niasse purportedly collected a total of fifty chains of initiation.⁵⁵

At the time of the emergence of the *fayḍa*, however, Ibrāhīm Niasse’s legitimacy as a deputy rested on no more than three licenses, hardly enough to claim supreme leadership of the Tijāniyya. In *Kāshif al-ilbās* he further supported his claims with assertions about visionary encounters with Aḥmad al-Tijānī. Thus, he concludes his section about his licenses saying, “My bond with the path is now genuine. Our connection goes back to Aḥmad al-Tijānī without any intermediary, because he is—praise be to God—permanently present with me.”⁵⁶ A few paragraphs later Niasse stresses once more his closeness and identification with al-Tijānī,

⁵⁴ The exchange of licenses was not a one-way affair: Several of Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s descendants asked Niasse for his golden *silsila* (Muḥammad al-Qurashī Niasse, *Risāla*, 15).

⁵⁵ This number appears in Kane, “Shaikh al-Islam,” 305. Other sources speak of more than fifty chains (Ba, *Cheikh Ibrahim Niasse*, 22-23; Gueye, *Niasse le mystique*, 101-104). Maigari mentions the number seventeen (Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 81-84). Ibn Iktūsh, *Min akhbār al-shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 69-74, lists thirteen complete chains. Apart from the chains in the Tijāniyya, Niasse had hundreds of authorizations in the Islamic sciences that connected him to some of the leading Muslim scholars throughout the Islamic world (Wright, “Embodied Knowledge”, 248-250).

⁵⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 109. – A few years later, a disciple asked Niasse in a letter whether this statement was meant metaphorically, or whether he did indeed have a direct license from al-Tijānī. Niasse responded: “I hereby authorize you in the path on the authority of Aḥmad al-Tijānī” (see Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Ziyādat al-jawāhir*, 26).

claiming that, “Those who read this book thoroughly and judge it objectively will certainly find that it was written by shaykh al-Tijānī himself.”⁵⁷

Ibrāhīm Niasse wrote these lines a few weeks after moving from the Léona neighborhood to his newly founded settlement called Medina on the outskirts of Kaolack. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, this move was partly prompted by the deteriorating relationship with his brother Muḥammad Khalīfa. It is important, however, to point out that this relationship used to be harmonious and even cordial in the years following the death of °Abdallāh Niasse. Reports in the literature about Ibrāhīm having contested his brother’s authority as the father’s successor are not accurate.⁵⁸ Rather, the conflict only erupted in the Hijri year 1349 (May 1930 to May 1931). In the preceding years, the two brothers cooperated in the *zāwiya*, coordinated the activities in the school and in the fields, and exchanged their writings and poetry. Thus, in 1925 Ibrāhīm wrote a blurb (*taqrīz*) that appeared in the Cairo edition of Muḥammad’s panegyric anthology *Mir’āt al-ṣafā’*.⁵⁹ As late as Ramaḍān 1348/February 1930, several months after the appearance of the *fayḍa*, Ibrāhīm composed a commentary to another work by his brother, *al-Murhafāt al-quṭṭa*^c, which responds to the famous anti-Tijānī polemic by the Mauritanian author Muḥammad al-Khiḍr b. Māyābā (d. 1354/1935-1936).⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 110. This claim echoes one of the famous statements about *Jawāhir al-ma’ānī*, reportedly made by the Prophet Muḥammad in a visionary encounter with al-Tijānī: “This is my book, and I have composed it” (see Aḥmad Skīraj, *Kashf al-ḥijāb*, 71-73).

⁵⁸ See the section “Discord in Léona” in Chapter 3.

⁵⁹ See Samb, *Contribution du Sénégal*, 214-216.

⁶⁰ The title of Ibrāhīm’s commentary is *al-Budūr al-suṭṭa*^c, published for the first time in 2007. Ibn Māyābā and his work *Mushtahā al-khārif al-jānī* have been among the most frequent targets of Tijānī polemics (see Abun-Nasr, *Tijaniyya*, 172-175; *MLG II*, 603-604; Ould Cheikh, “Perles,” 134-145; and Triaud, “Voie infaillible”). Muḥammad Niasse also wrote his own commentary on *al-Murhafāt al-quṭṭa*^c, published in Cairo around 1929 (and again in Dakar in 1996) under the title *al-Juyūsh al-ṭulla*^c. For a detailed discussion of these texts see Kane, “Muhammad Niasse.”

On the other hand, there are indications that Ibrāhīm Niasse began to step out of the shadow of his senior brother well before the emergence of the *fayḍa*. In Kosi, his rural estate, he lived surrounded by students who received a fully-fledged training in the Islamic sciences, including *tafsīr* lectures during Ramaḍān—a task usually reserved for senior teachers.⁶¹ Oral accounts collected by Hill connect the earliest signs of disagreement between the two brothers with the occasion of one such Ramaḍān *tafsīr*.⁶² Although Niasse had received training in Qurʾān interpretation from his father, he had never delivered a complete set of *tafsīr* lectures. He went to see Muḥammad Khalīfa in order to get his permission and to borrow a copy of the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) and his student Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), a classical work of Qurʾān interpretation that continues to serve as a primary *tafsīr* reference in West Africa. According to Hill’s informants, Muḥammad Khalīfa turned down the request and told the younger brother if he wished to perform the *tafsīr*, he should do so on the basis of what he already knew. Ibrāhīm Niasse returned to Kosi and delivered a stunning *tafsīr* without recourse to any book, thus establishing himself as an accomplished religious authority who had not only all scholarly credentials, but also knowledge of things nobody else knew—not even his elder brother or his late father. The episode is among the events that herald Niasse’s emergence as a scholar and mystic with distinct qualities.

Fayḍa – A Short History of the Terminology

The term *fayḍa* is derived from an Arabic root that signifies “to flow, overflow, gush, inundate, be present in abundance, pour forth, shower.” Sufi literature from the post-classical period is

⁶¹ Gueye, “Niasse le mystique,” 33.

⁶² See Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 141-142. Hill has this *tafsīr* take place in 1929, but it is difficult to establish a precise chronology for these early events. See also the account in Wright, “Embodied Knowledge,” 106-107 (based on an interview with al-Ḥasan Cissé).

replete with the largely synonymous noun derivatives *fayḍ*, *fuyūd* and *fuyūdāt*. The former is the *nomen actionis* (*maṣḍar* in Arabic), while the two latter are related plural forms.⁶³ The derivative *fayḍa*, which is pivotal in Ibrāhīm Niasse’s concept, does to the best of my knowledge not occur outside the literature inspired by Niasse, apart from a few works by earlier Tijānī authors that refer to Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s aphorism about the coming of the *fayḍa*. Grammatically speaking, *fayḍa* represents the *nomen vicis* (Arabic, *ism al-marra*) that refers to a single occurrence.

There is no equivalent in any occidental language that would do justice to the various connotations of the term *fayḍ*. Basically it describes a movement characteristic for water and light, which leaves a choice of “flow,” “flux,” or “emanation.” In addition, however, the term conveys two other notions that need to be expressed in different words, namely the notion of abundance and opulence on the one hand, and that of divine grace, manifested in the emanation or outpouring, on the other. Hence *fayḍ* can also refer to the unlimited grace the creator bestows on man. The expression “stream of grace” comes close to this idea, and it is in this sense that Hiskett speaks of Niasse’s *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* as the “Community of Grace.”⁶⁴ However, al-Ḥasan Cissé (1365/1945-1429/2008), perhaps the most charismatic representative of this community in recent decades, renders the term *fayḍa* as flood, which is also the preferred rendering in the present study.⁶⁵

Leaving aside for the time being the specific case of the *nomen vicis*, *fayḍ* has two major connotations that need to be addressed here: firstly, its meaning in conceptions of creation and the cosmos, and secondly, the function it fulfills during the journey on the mystical path. With

⁶³ The causative form *ifāḍa*, with its respective verb *afāḍa*, is also found in the authoritative literature. The Qurʾān uses this form to describe the return of the pilgrims from the plain of ʿArafa after the culmination of the *ḥajj* rituals.

⁶⁴ See Hiskett, “Community of Grace.”

⁶⁵ See Cissé, *Revivalist*, 7.

regard to the concept of creation, the term emanation comes closest to the connotation of the Arabic term. The second aspect seems to be captured quite well in the expression “outpouring” (*Ausgießung*) as used by Fritz Meier.⁶⁶

Fayḍ in the sense of emanation is interlinked with at least eight centuries of Sufi thought. In his exploration of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s (d. 638/1240) cosmology, Chittick differentiates three models of creation.⁶⁷ According to the first model, the creation takes place *ex nihilo* and as a single act. The second model suggests a gradual process of creation, which occurs in the form of emanations (*fuyūḍ*). In the third model, creation proceeds in discrete manifestations of the divine or theophanies, termed *tajalliyyāt*.

According to common Sufi models, the light of the Prophet Muḥammad (*al-nūr al-Muḥammadi*) was God’s first act of creation and thus the primary emanation. The entire following process of creation is comparable to a hydraulic sequence of further emanations, which not only brought the material universe into being, but also permeate the spiritual cosmos. As these emanations principally materialize as light, Western academics as well as Muslim reformist circles have advanced the view that these ideas go back to neo-Platonist influences.⁶⁸

In the teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabī the terms theophany (*tajallī*) and emanation (*fayḍ*) seem to merge into each other. God manifests Himself in each emanation, and hence the flow of *fayḍ* can be understood as the self-disclosure of God.⁶⁹ Even if the emanations relevant for the actual work of creation lie in the remotest past, God can still manifest Himself in the form of *fuyūḍ*. These pour forth in a defined hierarchical order through the spiritual cosmos, and the Prophet

⁶⁶ Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen*, passim.

⁶⁷ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*.

⁶⁸ See the discussion in Ryan, “Tijani Sufism.” For a Muslim reformist position on the question of Neo-Platonism with regard to the Tijāniyya see Maigari, *Tuḥfa*.

⁶⁹ See Meier, *Kubrā*, 111; Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, Part 1.

Muḥammad, the most perfect embodiment of the divine names and attributes, acts as the supreme channel. As the first recipient of the flows of divine grace he becomes the fountainhead of the entire process of subsequent outpourings.

For Ibn al-[°]Arabī, however, the relevance of theophanies is not limited to the act of creation. Divine self-disclosure is among the highest privileges God may grant to the mystic, and it plays a key role during the final stages on the mystical path.⁷⁰ At the climax of the mystical experience God reveals Himself to the seeker. Apart from the concept of theophany there are other metaphorical expressions in Sufi terminology to describe this moment, one of the most important being *fath*, translated as “illumination” in this study. The literal meaning of the term is “opening,” conveying the idea that God “opens up” the aspirant so that he can receive mystical knowledge. *Fuyūd* can thus be defined as outpourings that originate from God or the Prophet, flow to the traveler on the path, and help to propel the experience of cognizance (*ma[°]rifa*).⁷¹

The differentiation of the meaning of *fayḍ* into components pertaining to creation and others pertaining to man (and, by extension, the mystical path) also occurs in [°]Abd al-Mun[°]im al-Ḥifnī’s dictionary of Sufi technical terms.⁷² He defines *fayḍ* as non-material emanations, triggered by theophanies. These manifestations of the divine can have varying effects, depending on where they are directed. They either cause the emanations to flow towards existence (*wujūd*), and thus transform the *fuyūd* into the actual oeuvre of creation. Or they manifest themselves with

⁷⁰ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 318.

⁷¹ Meier illustrates this role of *fayḍ* with examples from the Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya. In particular he quotes Kurdī al-Irbilī (d. 1332/1914), a Sufi from what is today northern Iraq, as saying: “The educator [i.e., the master dispensing spiritual training] is like a rain gutter: The divine outpouring comes down on you from the ocean (of God)” (Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen*, 49; for more references to *fayḍ* in the Naqshbandiyya see *ibid.*, 46-47, 90, 137, and 143; see also Paul, *Doctrine and Organization*, 36). In the Chishti-Sabiri order as depicted by Rozenahl the term was apparently not directly connected to the idea of attaining mystical knowledge (Rozenahl, *Islamic Sufism Unbound*, 33-34 and 203).

⁷² The following is a paraphrase of al-Ḥifnī, *Muṣṭalahāt*, entry “fayḍ.”

regard to the form (*ṣūra*) of creation, also called the attributes of the creatures. The first effect corresponds to the function of the emanations in the process of creation, as explained above. These *fuyūḍ* are a purely divine affair and beyond human perception. In the second effect, however, human beings can—under certain conditions—take part directly.⁷³

The models of emanations and divine manifestations presented so far appear in the Tijāniyya literature in the same, or at least a similar, form. The fundamental statement is that God created the cosmos and man by “pouring out the emanation of existence.”⁷⁴ As in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s cosmology, Aḥmad al-Tijānī too holds that the spiritual cosmos consists of five realms, which are commonly called *ḥaḍra* (pl. *ḥaḍarāt*, “presence”), or sometimes *ʿālam* (“world”). The highest realm is named *ḥaḍrat al-hāhūt*; it is totally inaccessible to human comprehension. The sphere of the divine essence (*dhāt*) is called *ḥaḍrat al-lāhūt*, which likewise is an exclusive prerogative of God, but unlike in the case of *hāhūt* there is a flow of *fuyūḍ* that connects it with the other realms. The following *ḥaḍrat al-jabarūt* is the realm of the divine secrets, as well as the divine names and attributes. The next sphere, *ḥaḍrat al-malakūt* contains the seven heavens, which is finally followed by *ʿālam al-nāsūt*, the world of man.⁷⁵

One peculiar feature of Tijānī doctrine with regard to *fayḍ* is the claim that Aḥmad al-Tijānī occupies a special position in this cosmos. As Seal of the Saints (*khatm al-awliyāʿ*) and pole of the poles (*quṭb al-aqtāb*),⁷⁶ he acts as the channel of the spiritual emanations originating from God and coming from the Prophet. Thanks to his mediation his followers can ascend

⁷³ On the connection between *fayḍ* and *wujūd* see also Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 52 and 244. The distinction between emanation as a divine affair (*al-fayḍ al-aqdas*) and emanations within human reach (*al-fayḍ al-muqaddas*) is also discussed by Brigaglia, “Fayḍa Tijaniyya,” 44.

⁷⁴ Muṣṭafā b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh al-ʿAlawī, *Ifādat al-Tijānī*, 23.

⁷⁵ ʿAlī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-maʿānī* II, 39-40; discussed in Radtke, “18th Century,” 352; cf. Chodkiewicz, *Océan*, 27. See further *EI* 2, entries “ʿĀlam,” “Lāhūt,” and “Nāsūt.”

⁷⁶ Some of these titles and the corresponding claims will be discussed again in the section “The Supreme Saint” in Chapter 4. See also Abun-Nasr, *Tijaniyya*, 27-34; Nicolas, *Dynamique*, 185.

directly to the Prophet and the Creator. While al-Tijānī drew on earlier authors—most notably Ibn al-ʿArabī and al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. around 297/910)⁷⁷—when he developed his concept of the seal of sainthood, he added a new dimension by declaring himself the sole distributor of *fayḍ*. All outpourings that flow toward other beings come from him, and he in turn receives them exclusively from the Prophet Muḥammad and the other prophets. Hence the complete title of *Jawāhir al-maʿānī*, “The Jewels of Meaning and the Fulfillment of the Desire Concerning the Outpouring of My Master Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Tijānī,” already contains an agenda: The book intends to explain what *fayḍ* is all about, and how one can obtain the bliss of these exclusive streams of grace.

The notion of the exclusive *fayḍ* is one of the central threads running through *Jawāhir al-maʿānī*.⁷⁸ The Prophet is not the only source of the unique outpourings al-Tijānī receives. Other emanations flow to the order’s founder directly from God. In contrast to the other saints, whose outpourings originate from the ninety-nine names of God, those directed toward Aḥmad al-Tijānī derive from the so-called Greatest Name (*al-ism al-aʿẓam*).⁷⁹ In Tijānī sources he often appears under the epithet “Father of the *fayḍ*,” a title that underscores his elevated position as the highest recipient of the outpourings, as well as his role as their supreme distributor after the Prophet

⁷⁷ On Ibn al-ʿArabī’s influence see Abun-Nasr, *Tijaniyya*, 29 and Chodkiewicz, *Océan*, 27; on al-Tirmidhī’s original formulation of the concept see Radtke and O’Kane, *Sainthood*. The year of his death given here is based on Radtke, *al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī*, 1-38.

⁷⁸ This is also emphasized by Radtke, who describes *fayḍ* as a “fundamental idea in the Tijāniyya” (Radtke, “Ibrīziana,” 127). He further observes that the notion of *fayḍ* fails to appear in the *Ibrīz*. The latter work, one of the seminal writings of later North African Sufism now available in an English translation (O’Kane and Radtke, *Pure Gold*), was an important reference for the Tijāniyya in general and for Niassé’s conception of *tarbiya*, or spiritual training, in particular. See the details in the following chapter.

⁷⁹ ʿAlī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-maʿānī* I, 72; more references to *fayḍ* *ibid.*, 57-76. See also Radtke, “Ehrenrettung,” 6.

Muḥammad. Ultimately, all beings that participate in these outpourings depend on the mediation of Aḥmad al-Tijānī.⁸⁰

In his magnum opus *Rimāḥ ḥizb al-Raḥīm*, one of the most important pieces of Tijānī literature, al-Ḥājj °Umar Tall has designed a diagram consisting of seven circles (*dā'irāt*) meant to illustrate the flow of emanations.⁸¹ In a slightly simplified version, this model can be adapted into the following figure:

<Figure 1.2>

The fountainhead of the outpourings is the Prophet Muḥammad, more precisely the archetypal Muḥammad as represented in the doctrine of the “Muḥammadan Reality” (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*). This circle has two doors that form a passage for the emanations. One door leads to the prophets, the other one to Aḥmad al-Tijānī, who thus enjoys a direct link to Muḥammad independent of the other prophets. This connection is of crucial importance, because it enables al-Tijānī to receive a unique outpouring from the Prophet.⁸² But the outpourings coming from the other prophets also coalesce into the Seal of the Saints. Al-Ḥājj °Umar describes this central position in the flow of the *fayḍ* with the expression *barzakh al-barāzikh*, “the intermediary of the intermediaries.”⁸³ From there the outpourings emanate like cascades to the followers of the seal of the saints, to all the other saints, and through them eventually to the followers of the other saints. In the *Rimāḥ*, al-Ḥājj °Umar illustrates the pivotal position of the

⁸⁰ °Alī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-ma'ānī* II, 100.

⁸¹ The following is a summary of °Umar al-Fūtī, *Rimāḥ* II, 16-23; the diagram appears on page 21.

⁸² See also Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī, *al-Ifāda al-Aḥmadiyya*, 135. The unique relationship between al-Tijānī and the Prophet Muḥammad is discussed in Radtke, “Ehrenrettung,” 9 and Radtke et al., *Exoteric*, 117.

⁸³ °Umar al-Fūtī, *Rimāḥ* II, 16; cf. Hunwick, “Sufism and the Study of Islam,” 327.

Seal of the Saints in the saintly hierarchy by taking recourse to a graphic metaphor: Everything the other saints drink comes from the ocean of Aḥmad al-Tijānī.⁸⁴

The model outlined here describes a spiritual cosmos that forms a bridge between the two major notions of *fayḍ*: the transcendent work of creation emerging out of divine emanations on the one hand, and the manifestations of the divine perceptible to man on the other. The embodiment of this bridge or “isthmus”—another possible rendering of the term *barzakh*—is Aḥmad al-Tijānī.

Tijānī doctrine converges once more with the teachings of Ibn al-°Arabī, who connects the experience of illumination to an interplay between the outpourings and divine self-display (*tajallī*). A good illustration of this correlation is the so-called great illumination (*al-faṭḥ al-kabīr*) Aḥmad al-Tijānī experienced in the year 1200/1785-1786 in the desert hamlet of Abū Samghūn. According to *Jawāhir al-ma°ānī*, al-Tijānī met with the Prophet in a visionary encounter (while awake; *ru°ya fī l-yaqza*), and under the personal supervision of the latter received a formidable outpouring that resulted in the highest conceivable illumination. Ever since, °Alī Ḥarāzīm concludes his account, al-Tijānī has been the recipient of an uninterrupted flow of lights, divine secrets, and theophanies that continued to pour down on him.⁸⁵

As a result of this great illumination Aḥmad al-Tijānī has become the repository of the *fayḍ*. Anyone who establishes a personal connection to him by reciting his litanies and complying with the conditions of his path gains access to this receptacle and can thus partake in the flow of *fayḍ*. Accordingly, *Jawāhir al-ma°ānī* describes the mystical journey as a succession of outpourings, sometimes also expressed in the metaphor of light, that allow the wayfarer to

⁸⁴ °Umar al-Fūtī, *Rimāḥ* II, 16 and 136.

⁸⁵ °Alī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-ma°ānī* I, 52.

advance on the path.⁸⁶ Since the flow is always generated by the remembrance of God (*dhikr*; i.e., the repetition of Divine Names, most often the name Allāh), the progress is determined by the intensity and frequency with which the aspirant recites the respective formulas.

In each of the stages the emanations originate from a different source.⁸⁷ At the beginning, the aspirants find themselves in the *ḥaḍrat al-nāsūt*, the lowest sphere of the spiritual cosmos, and receive the outpouring in the form of divine lights from the world of *malakūt*, the second lowest sphere. Subsequently, the transformation of the lower self (*naḥs*) goes hand in hand with the ascension to the higher realms. When the aspirants reach the station where the outpouring emanates from the realm of *jabarūt*, they can already smell the scent of the realm of *lāhūt*, the sphere of the divine essence. Finally the wayfarers reach the point where *al-fayḍ al-akbar*, the supreme outpouring, completely inundates them. The source of this outpouring is *ḥaḍrat al-lāhūt*. At this point, the experience culminates in the supreme illumination (*al-faṭḥ al-akbar*), an unveiling that allows the mystic to behold the spiritual cosmos in its entirety and coincides with the completion of the purification of the lower self, having evolved into the state of the perfect soul (*al-naḥs al-kāmila*). All negative traits of the aspirant have now been replaced by praiseworthy qualities, and the 165.000 veils that previously separated him or her from God have been removed. However, it is not the aspirant him- or herself who brings this purification process to a conclusion. The final stage requires divine intervention and is described as an assault that occurs in the form of a sudden divine manifestation.

A final passage from *Jawāhir al-maʿānī* reveals yet another aspect of how illumination is connected to the outpourings. ʿAlī Ḥarāzīm relates how Aḥmad al-Tijānī responded to the

⁸⁶ ʿAlī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-maʿānī* II, 56-58. Another source speaks of light that is showered onto the heart of the wayfarer (Muḥammad al-ʿArabī b. al-Sāʿih, *Bughyat al-mustafīd*, 27).

⁸⁷ This paragraph is based on ʿAlī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-maʿānī* II, 56-58 and 66-67; cf. *ibid.*, 39 for slightly different definitions of the spheres and the related emanations.

question of a disciple regarding the difference between various terms used for the description of mystical experiences, explaining that, “illumination indicates the removal of the veil. What appears after the removal is called *fayḍ*, because it overflows after having been confined. Hence *fayḍ* embraces all forms of higher knowledge, all mysteries, all truths, and all gnosis (*maʿārif*).”⁸⁸

To sum up this brief history of the terminology, *fayḍ* has two major meanings in the Tijāniyya. On the one hand it refers to the emanations that keep the wheel of the universe in motion; on the other it stands for the driving force or, metaphorically speaking, the fuel required for traveling on the mystical path. Those who join the Tijāniyya and perform the required rituals, particularly the remembrance of God and the recitation of the litanies, will taste the delight of the outpourings that flow toward them from various realms of the spiritual cosmos. These outpourings effect the purification of the lower self and ultimately lead the aspirant to illumination, which occurs as an overwhelming theophany. Experiencing *fayḍ* in this way allows the aspirants to gain insight into the absolute reality of God and his opus of creation.

Niasse as the Bringer of the fayḍa

As mentioned above, the form *fayḍa* is a *nomen vicis* that describes a single occurrence. We are concerned with *one* outpouring, even though it may be as huge as a torrent or a deluge, coming out of the pool of *fayḍ*. Thus, in addition to the notions discussed so far, *fayḍa* refers to a specific flood that can be located in space and time. As will become evident, the term also takes on additional meanings in the parlance of Ibrāhīm Niasse and his followers, meanings that play a crucial role in their self-perception. In the following, *fayḍa* will be referred to as flood, and *fayḍ*

⁸⁸ c Ali Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-maʿānī* II, 119-120; discussed in Brigaglia, “Fayḍa Tijaniyya,” 46.

as emanations (when the term relates to the spiritual cosmos) or outpourings (when it concerns the mystical path).

The idea of the *fayḍa* goes back to an aphorism of Aḥmad al-Tijānī transmitted by Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī (d. 1259/1843-1844) in his work *al-Ifāda al-Aḥmadiyya*, a collection of al-Tijānī's sayings. In the 1971 edition of the *Ifāda* the phrase appears as follows:

A *fayḍa* shall come upon my companions, so that the people will enter our path in throngs. This *fayḍa* will come at a time when people are subjected to extreme ordeals and hardships.⁸⁹

Al-Sufyānī then adds the following commentary: “With *fayḍa* he meant that a great number of his companions would experience illumination. He did not consider it unlikely to occur during his time.”⁹⁰ We can thus distinguish four indicators that characterize the arrival of the flood: firstly, many people will become initiated into the Tijāniyya; secondly, people face an enormous predicament; thirdly, experiences of the mystical illumination will multiply; and fourthly, Aḥmad al-Tijānī apparently expected its emergence in the near future. The first two indicators go back to al-Tijānī himself, whereas the last two are based on al-Sufyānī's inference.

Earlier studies that address *fayḍa* almost never mention this key passage.⁹¹ Hiskett, who renders the term as “grace,” “overflow” and “infusion of grace,” was the first to acknowledge the role *fayḍa* played in making mystical experiences accessible to larger groups of people.

⁸⁹ Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī, *al-Ifāda al-Aḥmadiyya*, 83; see also Aḥmad Skīraj, *Kashf al-hijāb*, 178. The phrase contains a graphic allusion to Sura 110, which commentators relate to the conquest of Mecca as well as to the end of times.

⁹⁰ Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī, *al-Ifāda al-Aḥmadiyya*, 83. Cf. the translation and discussion in Brigaglia, “Fayḍa Tijaniyya,” 49.

⁹¹ Most statements about *fayḍa* in the literature are vague and contradictory. Paden explains it as “the overflowing of God's love and wisdom to man,” thus failing to account for the mystical connotation of the term (Paden, *Kano*, 130). For Schulze *fayḍa* is the “passive reception of divine love” and (together with *tarbiya*) the “fundamental dogma” of the Tijāniyya of Kaolack (Schulze, *Internationalismus*, 388). Kane puts forward an altogether different aspect and describes *fayḍa* as “massive adherence” to the Tijāniyya (Kane, “Tijāniyya reformée,” 28).

Moreover, it goes to Hiskett's credit that he noticed the huge popular response to the *fayḍa* motive. He was mistaken, however, in his statement that neither Niasse nor his disciples have attempted to give a precise definition of the term.⁹² In fact, previous studies appear so superficial because most authors have failed to consult the relevant sources, particularly *Kāshif al-ilbās*, Niasse's most important work on Sufism along with *al-Sirr al-akbar*. Although Hiskett does quote selectively from the work, only Andrea Brigaglia and Muḥammad al-Tahir Maigari, the Nigerian deputy-turned-enemy who authored a scandal-provoking diatribe against Niasse, have given the *Kāshif* its due consideration. Maigari's exposition is of great thoroughness, but it is, like his entire book, tainted by his declared objective to refute Niasse.⁹³

Brigaglia's analysis, on the other hand, is very much to the point and captures the various meanings of *fayḍa* very well. The term, he writes, contains a spiritual element, which manifests itself in the experience of gnosis; it has a spatial aspect that refers to the expansion of the Tijāniyya, both numerically and geographically; it has implications for Sufi teachings because *fayḍa* leads to the dissemination and deepening of esoteric knowledge; and it has social ramifications because esoteric knowledge becomes accessible to larger groups of people. Last but not least, it has an eschatological connotation, since the advent of the *fayḍa* is believed to precede the coming of the Mahdī, whose appearance will trigger the events that culminate in the Final Judgment. As Brigaglia rightly emphasizes, "These meanings do not exclude one another, nor are they thought to be properly 'completing' each other, as if they were single parts of a

⁹² See Hiskett, "Community of Grace," 102 and 122-123. I concur with Brigaglia's assessment of Hiskett's exposition as a useful starting point for further research, but not as authoritative findings, as which they are often appraised in the secondary literature ("Fayḍa Tijaniyya," 42).

⁹³ Maigari's work contains a long chapter on *Kāshif al-ilbās*, where he summarizes the contents of the book and gives a detailed commentary (*Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 347-384; cf. the polemical response in Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh °Abdallāh, *Radd bi-l-ḥadīth*, 240-286). In another chapter he discusses the passages relevant to the *fayḍa* (Maigari, *Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 296-301).

composite whole. Rather, the one is used to allude to the other, and mirror it: through the interplay of symbols and images, the one includes and confirms the other, or reflects it.”⁹⁴

The particular relevance of *Kāshif al-ilbās* lies in the fact that Niasse wrote it to justify his claim to be the bringer (*ṣāhib*) of the *fayḍa*.⁹⁵ In other words, the aim of the book was to establish the legitimacy of his movement, the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* or “Community of the Divine Flood.” This is already expressed in the programmatic title, “Removing the Confusion Surrounding the Flood of the Seal Abū l-ʿAbbās [i.e., Aḥmad al-Tijānī].”⁹⁶ But *Kāshif al-ilbās* contains more than the official account of Niasse’s ascension to the position of the *ṣāhib al-fayḍa*. The work also derives its significance from the fact that it constitutes a manual of Sufism as it was understood and taught in West Africa in the early twentieth century. It can thus be read as Niasse’s ambitious testimony of his own spiritual development, ascending to the acme of mystical experience, at a time when he was merely thirty years old: He wrote the *Kāshif* in Muharram 1350, equivalent to May-June 1931, just a few months before the second anniversary of the emergence of the *fayḍa*.

The preface of the work already sets the stage for the confrontation between his community and the opponents. The “people of the *fayḍa*,” Niasse writes, have encountered so much ignorance, foolishness, and envy that it was now time to confront the continuous denial (*inkār*). By introducing the notion of *inkār* as the reason that prompted him to compile his work, Niasse constructs a parallel between his *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* and the situation of the Tijāniyya at

⁹⁴ Brigaglia, “Fayḍa Tijaniyya,” 56.

⁹⁵ Brigaglia understood this crucial point (“Fayḍa Tijaniyya,” 41 note 3), but it escaped Hiskett’s attention (see “Community of Grace,” 109, 118, and 122).

⁹⁶ It has nothing to do with “Removal of the Clothing,” as Paden suggests (*Kano*, 439), obviously misreading *ilbās* for *albās*. Brigaglia’s translation as “Unveiler of the *fayḍa*” is also not precise (“Fayḍa Tijaniyya,” 51 note 34). Niasse uses the form *ilbās* instead of the more common *iltibās*, “confusion” or “ambiguity,” perhaps in order to retain the rhythm in the title.

the time of its founder. Already Aḥmad al-Tijānī and his first deputies were confronted with the enmity of deniers (*munkirūn*) who disputed the veracity of their teachings. As the “people of the *fayḍa*” were the true heirs of Aḥmad al-Tijānī, denial of their claims was therefore tantamount to rejecting the founder of the Tijāniyya.⁹⁷

The section about *fayḍa* in *Kāshif al-ilbās* covers the first part of the second chapter. Niasse puts forward his argument in three steps. First he sets out to prove that Aḥmad al-Tijānī had indeed predicted a *fayḍa*. Secondly, he tries to establish that the position of bringer of this flood was still vacant. Finally, he endeavors to demonstrate that he is this bringer.

Not surprisingly, the section starts with the above quoted prediction from *al-Ifāda al-Aḥmadiyya*, “a flood shall come over my companions.” There is, however, a significant deviation from the wording of al-Sufyānī’s statement, or at least from the form that has appeared in print. Niasse writes: “The author of the *Ifāda* said: He [Aḥmad al-Tijānī] meant with *fayḍa* that illumination would occur abundantly among his companions. But he considered it unlikely to happen during his time.”⁹⁸

The published version of the *Ifāda*, however, is unequivocal that al-Tijānī expected it to happen in his lifetime. In his polemic against Niasse, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari takes this apparent contradiction as a reason to accuse him of deliberately manipulating the actual source text, motivated by the attempt to justify his claim to the *fayḍa* long after its predicted arrival.⁹⁹ Although Maigari’s observation of the discrepancy between the two versions is accurate, his accusation is not entirely plausible. At the time when Niasse composed the *Kāshif*, the *Ifāda* only

⁹⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 25.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹⁹ See Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 304-310. In the Arabic original, the difference is only about the inclusion or exclusion of the word *lā*, “not.” For Maigari, Niasse’s alleged manipulation undermines his credibility in general. See the terse response by Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh °Abdallāh, *Radd bi-l-ḥadīth*, 312-316.

circulated in the form of manuscripts.¹⁰⁰ It is thus quite possible that the divergence has to do with manuscript variations. More importantly, Niasse is not alone in claiming that the *fayḍa* would emerge at a later stage. His interpretation is shared by numerous Tijānī authorities, including al-Ḥājj °Umar Tall and Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°ih, who are quoted with statements to the same effect in *Kāshif al-ilbās*. There is yet another source, although not cited by Niasse, that also speaks of the appearance of the *fayḍa* toward the end of times. In his famous poem *al-Yaqūta al-farīda*, written in 1342/1923-4, the Moroccan Tijānī scholar Maḥammad al-Nazīfī (d. 1366/1947) described the future of the Tijāniyya as follows:

It will last and remain for a long time to come,

and at the end of times it will bring a *fayḍa*.¹⁰¹

Like al-Nazīfī's poetic statement, Niasse's argument in *Kāshif al-ilbās* is built on the supposition that Aḥmad al-Tijānī foretold a rapid expansion of the Tijāniyya that will occur towards the end of time and coincide with the abundance of mystical illumination. Niasse begins his exposition by listing previous Tijānī caliphs who commented on the *fayḍa*, sometimes claiming it for themselves. The first such declaration is related by Aḥmad b. Maḥamm (d. after 1281/1864-1865), an °Alawī scholar from Trarza who once asked al-Ḥājj °Umar whether the *fayḍa* had already emerged or was yet to come. He is said to have replied in these words: "As for the *fayḍa*, I ask from God before you that I, the destitute slave, and al-Imām al-Fāṭimī [i.e., the

¹⁰⁰ Kane's catalog lists two manuscripts of the *Ifāda* in Kaolack (*Fihris*, 330 and 355-356), but I was not able to consult them.

¹⁰¹ al-Nazīfī, *al-Yaqūta al-farīda*, 7; see also his magnum opus *al-Durra al-kharīda* I, 135-136, where he discusses *fayḍa* in connection with Sura 110. Interestingly, Maigari quotes these verses himself, but fails to see that they contradict his accusation that Niasse manipulated al-Sufyānī's statement (*al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 306).

Mahdī] are meant with it.”¹⁰² Niasse then introduces Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°ih̄ (d. 1309/1892), the author of one of the most famous Tijāniyya manuals, and cites him with the following comment about al-Ḥājj °Umar’s proclamation:

The great companions of the shaykh [Aḥmad al-Tijānī] whom I have met did not agree whether the *fayḍa* had already emerged or not. Some, who tended to think that it had already occurred, used to say: “It is what has come to pass in the region of Shinqit [i.e., Mauritania] under the leadership of Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ.” Others said: “No, it has not yet arrived, since the shaykh has declared that the people would be entering our path in throngs, without mentioning a particular country or region.” But all of them were unanimous that he considered it unlikely to happen in his lifetime. I conclude from the shaykh’s statements that it has not yet emerged; it will appear with the Mahdī, when all Sufi orders will merge into a single path, and God knows best.¹⁰³

Immediately after these citations Niasse already deems it appropriate to stake his own claim to the *fayḍa* by declaring:

People have entered the path (*ṭarīqa*) in throngs. Perhaps the Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*) have been abrogated, because there is no [other] order left that is able to impart spiritual training. In this time, people experience hardships and difficulties that many of the elders whom I know have never seen. And what has been happening in this time among the companions of the shaykh [al-Tijānī] in terms of the abundance of illumination, cognizance, absorption (*istighrāq*) in God and turning away from all other than Him, has to my knowledge never happened in our path from its early times to this day. This is the grace of God, which He gives to whom he wishes.¹⁰⁴

Niasse legitimizes his claim by announcing that the conditions for the emergence of the *fayḍa* had been fulfilled: the Tijanyya was experiencing an enormous growth; it was a time of great upheavals; more members of the order than ever before were attaining mystical realization. Regarding the time of the flood’s appearance, Niasse adopts Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°ih̄’s position that it coincides with the appearance of the Mahdī, indicated with his inference that only

¹⁰² Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 53. On Aḥmad b. Mahamm, the father of Muḥammad al-Kabir who issued the above-mentioned license for Niasse, see *MLG* I, 312; on his exchange with al-Ḥājj °Umar see Dedoud Ould Abdellah, “Passage au Sud,” 94.

¹⁰³ Translated from Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 53.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

one path, the Tijāniyya, remains capable of practicing spiritual training (*tarbiya*; see the detailed discussion in the following chapter). Here he echoes the common belief among Sufis that all paths or orders will merge into one at the end of times; according to Tijānī doctrine, this will be the Tijāniyya, which will be the path of the Mahdī.¹⁰⁵

Although Niasse is categorical from the outset that he met all the criteria, his subsequent argumentation goes one step back and seeks to underscore once again that the position of the bringer did in fact exist and was yet to be filled. Perhaps he wrote this section in anticipation of the objection that Aḥmad al-Tijānī had only spoken about a *fayḍa*, but not about an individual who would bring it. He therefore refers to two contemporaries of his father from Trarza, who, as recognized caliphs of the Tijāniyya, had laid claim to the *fayḍa*. According to Niasse, their claims were widely considered invalid, which meant that the position was still vacant.

The first candidate Niasse considers a failure is Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ b. al-Khayr al-°Alawī, a scholar from Trarza with a high reputation for his extraordinary knowledge of the Qurʾān.¹⁰⁶ Niasse cites four verses by Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ where he expresses his hope to be the anticipated bringer of the flood, who was to come towards the end of time.¹⁰⁷ The second failed candidate is °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj, the same person who, according to popular hagiography, discovered Niasse as the future bringer of the *fayḍa*, and who gave him his first Ḥāfiẓī chain in 1345/1926-1927. According to the *Kāshif*, °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj used to receive disclosures (*kūshifa lahu*) about the *fayḍa*. He initially thought that he himself would be its bringer, but later

¹⁰⁵ See °Umar al-Fūtī, *Rimāḥ* II, 146; Meier, *Mohammedverehrung* II, 350. – The common Sufi belief that all paths will merge into one was the reason why Muḥammad Aḥmad, the Sudanese Mahdi (d. 1302/1885), abolished all Sufi orders as part his eschatological agenda (see O’Fahey, “Sufism in Suspense”).

¹⁰⁶ On him Marty, “Ida Ou Ali,” 246; see also Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 80.

¹⁰⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 53-54, translated in Brigaglia, “Fayḍa Tijāniyya,” 53. According to Muḥammad al-Māhī b. Ibrāhīm Niasse (interview, Medina Baye, November 24, 1996), Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ b. al-Khayr later renounced his claim and supported Niasse.

began to search for a sign of it among his disciples. Finally, when he became aware of his imminent death and the flood had still evaded him and his disciples, he began to appoint a large number of deputies and traveled extensively, since he wanted at least to act as the liaison to the person endowed with the *fayḍa*.¹⁰⁸

At this point Niassé rather abruptly changes the subject and continues his exposition with a series of quotations from the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth*, which at first sight do not seem to be directly relevant to the topic.¹⁰⁹ However, he then points out that the quotes—like every verse of the Qurʾān—have manifest (*ẓāhir*) and hidden (*bāṭin*) meanings. The true, inward meaning only reveals itself to those who stand in God’s special grace. Unless God “opens” (*fataḥa*) them for the hidden truth, the believers cannot gain a deeper understanding and therefore remain unaware that the cited verses and traditions were in fact speaking about the *fayḍa*. It is only after this subtle invocation of divine and Prophetic sanction that Niassé takes the last, decisive step in arguing why his claim to the flood was legitimate. The key statement comes from no other than ʿAbdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj, who had been searching for the *fayḍa* among his disciples for years:

ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥājj al-ʿAlawī said to me: “The *fayḍa* is truly coming through your hand and certainly not through others who claim it. And you will experience an onslaught of envy no one has ever experienced before.” He also said: “You are the greatest in the Tijāniyya in your time“, and he said other things modesty prevents my pen from recording.¹¹⁰

ʿAbdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj must have made this statement well before Niassé began to publicize his claim to the *fayḍa*. The official year of the advent of the flood is 1348 (June 1929 to May 1930), and Niassé’s Mauritanian mentor had died in 1347/1928-1929. In other words, his utterance has the character of a prophecy, and as such it has been documented in various versions

¹⁰⁸ Ibrāhīm Niassé, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 54.

¹⁰⁹ The quoted verses include 2:106, 5:45, 89:6, 62:3, 110:1, and 16:8; cf. Hiskett, “Community of Grace,” 122-123. The *ḥadīth* citations are discussed in Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 300.

¹¹⁰ Ibrāhīm Niassé, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 56.

in the popular hagiography. Although °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj’s word certainly carried weight, his statement was a prediction, not an actual confirmation of the emergence of flood. Niasse therefore turns to other dignitaries within the Tijāniyya to substantiate his claim to the lofty position. In *Kāshif al-ilbās*, he provides the names of three members of eminent families, who, according to him, explicitly stated that the *fayḍa* had appeared and that he was its bringer. The first is Muḥammad b. Aḥmad (alias Abba),¹¹¹ a grandson of Muḥamdi Baddi b. Sīdinā, the companion and successor of Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiḥ, and brother of the caliph of the Baddi lineage at the time, i.e. the most important Tijānī family in Mauritania besides the descendants of Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiḥ (see Figure 1.3).

<Figure 1.3>

Ibrāhīm Niasse introduces his next guarantor, Muḥammad °Abd al-Raḥman b. al-Ḥājj al-°Alawī, as “the outstanding venerable scholar” and “the possessor of the holiest secret.” He is most probably a son of °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj.¹¹² Finally, a descendant of Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiḥ concludes the circle of witnesses. His name is given as Muḥammad b. Aḥmaddu b. Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiḥ, most likely to be identified with Muḥammad al-Ṭulba b. Aḥmaddu (alias Manna). While these three witnesses certainly hail from celebrated families of Tijānī scholars, none of them held actual leadership positions. Judging from *Kāshif al-ilbās*, the two most important exponents of the Tijāniyya among the Idaw °Alī at that time gave rather hesitant responses when confronted with the alleged advent of the *fayḍa*. Niasse states that Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Aḥmad (alias Abba, d. 1382/1963), the caliph of the Baddi lineage, and Muḥammad Sa°id b.

¹¹¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 57.

¹¹² Elsewhere Niasse mentions Muḥammad °Abd al-Raḥmān as the one who wrote the unlimited license on behalf of his father (*Kāshif al-ilbās*, 107). He died in 1388/1968; see his entry in *MLG II*, 741. However, °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj also had a brother called °Abd al-Raḥmān, who is probably the one who features in entry no. 3387 in *MLG II*, 1045.

Aḥmaddu (alias Manna, d. 1352/1933-1934), the caliph of the Ḥāfiẓī lineage, praised God and pronounced supplicatory prayers when they heard about the emergence of the flood.¹¹³

The reaction of the two caliphs may not have been enthusiastic, but Niasse nevertheless continues this section of the *Kāshif* with ringing endorsements by poets from Trarza. One of them is Muḥammad °Abdallāh b. al-Muṣṭafā al-°Alawī (d. 1363/1944),¹¹⁴ whose verses describe Niasse as *ṣāhib waqtihi* (“master of his time,” a Sufi title given to the supreme saint of an era) and bringer of the *fayḍa*. Less explicit is the following poem by °Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Sālik b. Bāba (d. 1398/1977-1978),¹¹⁵ but he too portrays Niasse as the “possessor of the secret,” “lifter of the veils,” “master of training the accomplished ones,” and as a shaykh who holds the key to cognizance. Niasse concludes:

These are the shaykhs of Islam, the great men in our path (. . .). They all have indisputably confirmed that the flood has arrived through the hands of this sinful servant, the author of this blessed compilation.¹¹⁶

Taking a closer look at the supporters of Niasse’s claim to the flood, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that they do not precisely represent “the great men” of the Tijānī path. Even more striking is the absence of Senegalese voices among them. All testimonies come from Trarza, from personalities who belong to the third generation of the Tijāniyya among the Idaw °Alī, and—with the exception of °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj, who was already dead when the *fayḍa*

¹¹³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 57. As mentioned above, Muḥammad Sa°id issued a license for Niasse shortly before the composition of the *Kāshif*.

¹¹⁴ See his entry in *MLG II*, 1041. The verses suggest that they were composed on the occasion of the opening of the mosque in Medina in Dhū l-Qa°da 1350/April 1931.

¹¹⁵ See *MLG II*, 800. Both °Abd al-Raḥmān’s father al-Sālik (d. 1333/1914-5; *MLG I*, 506) and his paternal uncle, Muḥammad Fāl (d. 1349/1930; *MLG II*, 589-90), were celebrated Tijānī scholars. According to Paul Marty they were among the best medical specialists of Trarza and possessed large libraries with books from Europe (see “Ida Ou Ali,” 244-255). Their lineage is known as the Ahl Abbāh in Mauritania, whose members continue to be influential in the Ḥāfiẓiyya.

¹¹⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 60.

finally appeared—all can be counted among the younger cadre of the local Tijāniyya, but not its top ranks. In other words, even if Niasse legitimizes his position with explicit reference to the Idaw °Alī, it cannot be ignored that his claim to the *fayḍa* rested on a rather thin foundation—at least in early 1350/May 1931, the time when he wrote *Kāshif al-ilbās*. As firmly as Niasse may have been convinced of his mission, he must have been aware that his ambitions would yet have to become reality. Laying claim to the flood was the beginning; what needed to follow was the increase in the number of followers, as foretold by Aḥmad al-Tijānī, accompanied by prodigious illumination experiences.

The last section of the chapter on *fayḍa*, which covers approximately one third of the total exposition of the theme in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, shows that Niasse had already received strong negative responses to his message. Over several pages he dwells on examples of earlier Sufis who were confronted with opposition and even accusations of unbelief (*kufr*). The enmity of the deniers (*munkirūn*) appears almost as a necessary condition for a Sufi to be on the side of the truth. Just as the Prophet had his adversaries, Niasse argues, the saints (*awliyāʾ*) too have always had enemies, from the time of the Prophet's companions up to the present day. Niasse makes it abundantly clear whom he had in mind with his stern warning of *inkār*, or rejection of the truth:

Those among whom the *fayḍa* has manifested itself and who occupy themselves constantly with God, the Prophet and shaykh al-Tijānī—they are the ones whom the shaykh has led to complete absorption, so that everything they do is through him and for him. They are the ones who perform the remembrance of God in his *zāwiyas* day and night, and incessantly recite benedictions of their most noble role model and exalted intercessor [the Prophet Muḥammad]. They are the ones who follow his Sunna and his moral excellence, his footsteps and rules of conduct. And now they have been accused of not being [true] members of the Tijāniyya—by those ignoramuses who have never stood up for the cause of their Imam [Aḥmad al-Tijānī], and who have no connection with the Tijāniyya apart from taking the litanies!¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

By defining the deniers as those who claim to be affiliated with the Tijāniyya but fail to recognize him as the bringer of the *fayḍa*, Ibrāhīm Niasse demarcated the front line that separated his followers from his opponents for decades to come. The debates evolve around some peculiarities of Niasse's interpretation. Examined carefully, his self-declaration as the bringer of the *fayḍa* in *Kāshif al-ilbās* suggests that the increase in instances of illumination not only amounted to a quantitative rise in numbers, but also implied a qualitative dimension. Mystical experiences not only occurred in a higher frequency, but also with greater intensity—an intensity never felt before, which Niasse expresses with the terms illumination, cognizance, and absorption. The unprecedented magnitude of mystical experience is due to the special outpouring or flood—the *fayḍa* Ibrāhīm Niasse had received from Aḥmad al-Tijānī. The only way to gain access to this outpouring is through spiritual training. The person who dispenses this training on behalf of Aḥmad al-Tijānī is none other than Niasse, because he is closest to the order's founder in his time. Thus, as the following figure illustrates, Niasse becomes the floodgate that channels the outpouring.

<Figure 1.4>

In this concept, *fayḍa* and *tarbiya* build a system of mutual support and dependence. One cannot subsist without the other. The tremendous outpouring is reserved to those who undergo spiritual training, and the training can only be so intensive and efficient because it is accompanied by the outpouring funneled through Niasse. The assumption that only one Sufi path remains capable of imparting effective spiritual training, cautiously expressed in the *Kāshif*, underscores this exclusive claim. From here it is only a short step to the assertion that true mystical realization is henceforth only possible through affiliation with the bringer of the flood. If that were the case, illumination would be turned into an exclusive privilege of the members of

the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. The position of Aḥmad al-Tijānī as the origin of the outpourings, or the “father of the stream of grace” (*abū l-fayḍ*), remains intact, but Ibrāhīm Niasse becomes the intermediary who conducts this stream.¹¹⁸ He establishes himself in a key position below the reservoir of *fayḍ*, embodied in Aḥmad al-Tijānī, and interpolates himself as a new liaison in the flow of outpourings.

The model in Figure 1.4 depicts the nodal position Niasse claimed in the spiritual cosmos and the Tijānī hierarchy. But it also illustrates the crucial question following from the above, here indicated by the dotted line between Aḥmad al-Tijānī and the members of the Tijāniyya: After the advent of the *fayḍa*, is there still a direct outpouring from the order’s founder to the members, or is it henceforth only transmitted through the flood’s bringer or conductor?¹¹⁹ Niasse does not take a clear stance in the *Kāshif*. Perhaps he was not certain himself, at least during the early days, whether other outpourings would continue to flow besides his *fayḍa*. His correspondence from the formative period contains abundant clues that this very question was the subject of many discussions among his followers and became the bone of contention for his opponents within the Tijāniyya.

Was Niasse the *only* floodgate for Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s outpourings? Was illumination *only* attainable through his method of spiritual training? Niasse’s opponents, who rejected such claims, based their arguments on two points that relate to major tenets of the Tijāniyya. First, the founder of the order had unequivocally declared that he was the only shaykh and spiritual trainer

¹¹⁸ In the words of Aḥmad Anwār (*Iltiqāt al-lu³lu²*, 1), a Moroccan deputy of the *fayḍa* in Kano, Niasse was the bringer of the flood, but al-Tijānī was its father.

¹¹⁹ Related questions have been debated in the Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya, whose founder Mawlānā Khālīd al-Baghdādī (d. 1243/1827) claimed a similar spiritual monopoly. Meier described Mawlānā Khālīd as the “springboard” to mystical knowledge, and the other shaykhs as stairs leading to the board (*Zwei Abhandlungen*, 182). On the Khālidiyya *ibid.*, 171-180 and Hourani, *Emergence*, 75-89.

(*murabbī*) in his mystical path. Secondly, he had received an assurance from the Prophet that everyone who recited his litany on a regular basis would experience illumination during his or her lifetime.¹²⁰ This means that the preconditions for illumination were fulfilled if someone held fast to the litanies and was connected to Aḥmad al-Tijānī through a valid chain of initiation. The monopoly of the stream of grace is hence with none other than al-Tijānī, and from him the outpourings flow to his caliphs and deputies (and, one might add for the sake of completeness, to all other creatures). Therefore the opponents of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* vehemently denied that the outpourings would henceforth only reach people with an initiation linking them to the bringer of *fayḍa*. To them, such beliefs were in clear contradiction to the teachings of Aḥmad al-Tijānī.¹²¹

Ibrāhīm Niasse remains silent on these issues in the *Kāshif*. However, his position can be reconstructed from other sources. On Rabī' al-Thānī 16, 1353/July 28, 1934 he raised the topic in a letter to Muḥammad al-Ṭulba b. Aḥmaddu (alias Manna) and Muḥammad b. Aḥmad (alias Abba) b. Muḥamdi Baddi, two of Niasse's early supporters from Trarza who had already featured in *Kāshif al-ilbās* as witnesses for his claim to the *fayḍa*:

The person dispensing spiritual training in the path of the shaykh [Aḥmad al-Tijānī] is not the caliph °Alī Ḥarāzīm, nor any other [of the caliphs]. The shaykh made this amply clear when gave the following response when confronted with the rivalries between the disciples of °Alī Ḥarāzīm and those of Muḥammad al-Mishrī: “Who knows me, knows me alone.” This means that the path belongs to him, and no one else. He is the shaykh, and nobody else.¹²²

A few months later, in Rajab 1353/October-November 1934, Niasse commented once more on the matter in *al-Sirr al-akbar*, his second major work on Sufism:

¹²⁰ See, for instance, Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā'ih, *Bughyat al-mustafīd*, 26-27; cf. Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 72-73.

¹²¹ A good summary of the arguments is offered in Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 276-282.

¹²² Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* I, 101; see also *ibid.*, 24, 39, and 143. — °Alī Ḥarāzīm and Muḥammad al-Mishrī were two students of Aḥmad al-Tijānī who both held appointments as caliphs.

The one who implants the litanies (*al-mulaqqin*) does so as a representative of the shaykh [Aḥmad al-Tijānī]. (. . .) The aspirant is not the disciple of the implanter, but of the shaykh, and therefore he is free in his choice of the deputy. He has to give the implanter the respect and obedience that is due to the shaykh until he finds [direct access to] the shaykh. (. . .) The goal of the disciple is the shaykh, nothing else.¹²³

In both citations Niasse reiterates well-known teachings of the Tijāniyya: The only criterion for the validity of an initiation is that it establishes a connection with Aḥmad al-Tijānī. If this criterion is fulfilled, the aspirant partakes in all the guarantees the order's founder received from the Prophet. If Niasse ever intended to present himself as the exclusive floodgate of the outpourings or as the sole shaykh who could grant access to mystical knowledge, his writings from the 1350s/1930s contain no such evidence. Rather, there are plenty of references that downplay such claims to a monopoly and instead emphasize compliance with Tijānī doctrine.

Following up on the above-quoted statement in *al-Sirr al-akbar*, Niasse explains that the success of the aspirant is contingent on the closeness of the implanter to the shaykh, i.e. Aḥmad al-Tijānī. The decisive criterion is the degree of effacement (*intimās*) of the implanter's identity in that of the shaykh, particularly at the time when he implants the litanies but also prior to and after the act of initiation.¹²⁴ This statement implies that not all implanters are equally efficient. However committed a disciple may be to the litanies, if the implanter does not have the requisite close relationship to Aḥmad al-Tijānī, his progress on the path will be delayed. The closer the implanter to Shaykh al-Tijānī, the earlier will his aspirants become the object of divine attraction (*jadhb*),¹²⁵ and the more splendid and perfect will their illumination be.

These considerations give us a sense of how Niasse might have perceived of his own role. In the *Kāshif* he had stated that Aḥmad al-Tijānī was constantly present with him; as mentioned

¹²³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Sirr al-akbar* (ed. Maigari), 419-420.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 420.

¹²⁵ See the following chapter for a detailed discussion of *jadhb*.

above, he even declared the founder of the order to be the actual author of his book. In other words, Niasse was the first and foremost representative of the Tijānī path in his time, and no one was closer to Aḥmad al-Tijānī than himself. This does not mean that cognizance was now only attainable through him as the bringer of the *fayḍa*. But association with him was a guarantee that the travelers on the path could reach the goal in the fastest possible manner and have the most intense experiences. Simply put, Niasse's disciples now formed the elite among the cognizants. Expressed in the imagery of water, the other outpourings continued, but they were a mere trickle compared to the torrent of Niasse's *fayḍa*.

Niasse's conception combines the *fayḍa* that was predicted by Aḥmad al-Tijānī—the flood of people who were to enter the Tijāniyya and experience illumination—with the idea of the divine emanations or streams of grace that permeate the universe. As the bringer of the *fayḍa*, he acts as the liaison with this divine stream and passes it on to his disciples in gushes of mystical outpouring. In his *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* the various meanings of *fayḍ* and *fayḍa* coalesce into a complex formation of symbols, ideas, and experiences. This unique formation gave its members the sense of belonging to a chosen elite, and it transformed the divine flood into a dynamic doctrine that became the driving force behind the expansion of the Tijāniyya under Niasse's leadership.

Reception and Resonance

So far, *fayḍ* and *fayḍa* have primarily been discussed in their relation to Sufi thought and the Tijānī literary tradition. Ibrāhīm Niasse's adoption of the terminology and the respective concepts can only be understood against the background of this intellectual history. However, right from the outset of his movement, the followers of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*—whether learned

or illiterate—engaged with the kaleidoscope of meanings in their own terms. If someone were to write the ethnography of *fayḍa*, she or he would come across hundreds of oral accounts that adapt the motives introduced above in myriad ways and refract them in new and unforeseen manners. Some of these accounts began to circulate right from the outset, and we can assume that they played a greater part in the spread of Niasse’s ideas than the few handwritten copies of his writings.

Although Niasse’s main rationale behind writing *Kāshif al-ilbās* was to stake his claim to the *fayḍa*, he gives no hints how we should imagine the actual event of its manifestation. The Arabic word commonly used for the event is *zuhūr*, appearance, but how precisely the flood appeared is left open in the *Kāshif* and all other texts produced by and for the learned elite. Niasse is said not to have spoken about it in detail.¹²⁶ He thus gives relatively free reign to the imagination of oral historians, hagiographers, and poets. Many of their testimonies give insights into the reception of the *fayḍa* and cast the events in a different light than the rather dry treatment of the matter in scholarly texts. In the following, I will take a cursory look at oral accounts and selected hagiographical sources, some of them in the form of poetry, that give a vivid impression of the ways the *fayḍa* was received among different generations of followers.

One of the pieces that throw light on the popular reception of the *fayḍa* is a small booklet by Ḥamal b. Muḥammad al-Awwal, a contemporary Nigerian follower of Ibrāhīm Niasse, titled *Uṣūl al-fayḍa*, “The Origins of the Flood.”¹²⁷ Although he wrote his work in Arabic, he uses a simple and plain language, obviously targeting ordinary followers more than a scholarly audience. As with most such testimonies, a major focus of his exposition is Kosi, the village that features as the cradle of the *fayḍa*. He describes his visits to Kosi almost like pilgrimages:

¹²⁶ Interview with Muḥammad al-Māḥī b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, Medina Baye, November 24, 1996.

¹²⁷ Sidī Ḥamal, as he is also known, is based in Lagos and has authored several such booklets.

We visited Kosi several times. Our guide was a well-known man called Ādam Kosi. We arrived at the house of the shaykh [Ibrāhīm Niasse], where we met a man, called Ustādh Ibrāhīm, who was the guard, appointed by the shaykh. There was another hut next to the house. The guard told us to perform a supererogatory prayer with two genuflections (*rakʿatān*) in front of the hut, so that we could partake in the blessings (*baraka*), since it was the hut of the shaykh’s mother. When we were done Ustādh Ibrāhīm said: “Shaykh Ibrāhīm has guaranteed that the supplication (*duʿāʿ*) of anyone who offers two genuflections here is accepted, praise be to God!” (. . .) This was later confirmed by the caliph al-Ḥājj ° Abdallāh [b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, d. 1422/2001].¹²⁸

According to Sīdī Ḥamal’s account, the guard then related to him that Niasse had once predicted to the people of Kosi that one day they would receive throngs of visitors whose language they would not understand. Ustādh Ibrāhīm had hardly finished his sentence when some of the Nigerian guests started talking in a foreign language, which made everyone present agree that they had just witnessed a miracle (*karāma*) delivered by Ibrāhīm Niasse. Cheerfully they continued their tour of Kosi:

We reached a place known as the “Garden of the Cognizants” (*bustān al-ʿarīfīn*). When we stood in the center of the garden, Ādam Kosi said: “This is the place of the *fayḍa*.”¹²⁹

In his following report, Sīdī Ḥamal’s guide Ādam Kosi distinguishes two stages in the appearance of the *fayḍa*: The first step was a public declaration Niasse made in Kaolack, followed by the second step, the actual manifestation of the *fayḍa* in Kosi. Ādam Kosi’s version largely conforms to the account that I heard from Muḥammad al-Māḥī, one of Niasse’s senior sons, in the course of a conversation in his house in Medina Baye.

The *fayḍa* manifested itself in Kosi, but it had appeared earlier in the house of ° Abdallāh Niasse. He had established the practice of celebrating the twelfth day of the month Rabīʿ al-Awwal [i.e., the Prophet Muḥammad’s birthday, or *mawlid*] as a great festivity. People used to gather and listen the whole night to poetry on the life of the Prophet. In the morning they would listen to poems praising Aḥmad al-Tijānī. One day, when the odes in praise of Shaykh al-Tijānī were over, people

¹²⁸ Ḥamal b. Muḥammad al-Awwal, *Uṣūl al-fayḍa*, 20. Eulogies have been omitted.

¹²⁹ Ḥamal b. Muḥammad al-Awwal, *Uṣūl al-fayḍa*, 21.

gathered in the house of °Abdallāh Niassé, who had already died several years ago. They were talking about Shaykh al-Tijānī and the Tijāniyya, when all of a sudden Shaykh Ibrāhīm got up and said: “Those who want anything from Shaykh al-Tijānī, let them know that it is me!” Everyone was staggered. “Come to me, I am Shaykh al-Tijānī.” The people were stunned and began to disperse. Then one of his brothers uttered: “If you are Moses, then I am your Aaron.” That was [Muḥammad] al-Hādī. He was the first brother to join Shaykh Ibrāhīm. This happened approximately 1926 or 1927. Thereupon Shaykh Ibrāhīm went to Kosi.¹³⁰

Sīdī Ḥamal continues his narrative by describing Niassé’s subsequent departure from Kaolack as an emigration, thus likening it to the Prophet’s *hijra* from Mecca to Medina:

When Shaykh Ibrāhīm saw how the people turned away from him, he emigrated from Kaolack to Kosi and remained in his house in the “Garden of the Cognizants.” . . . Our guide explained: “This was the house where the *fayḍa* manifested itself.” We were sitting exactly at the spot where the house had been at that time. The house that occupies the place today had not been built at that time. Those who believed the Shaykh [i.e., Niassé] were exactly seven in number, not more. . . . They were the first who underwent the spiritual training at the hands of the Shaykh and attained the goal.¹³¹

In Sīdī Ḥamal’s account of the appearance of the *fayḍa* the first seven followers are intrinsically linked to the event itself. The first four names are arranged in a way that replicates the names of the rightly-guided caliphs, a common trope in popular hagiography: Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye, Ibrāhīm’s younger brother; °Umar Touré from Ndoffane, who joined Ibrāhīm Niassé at the very beginning of his teaching career, well before the *fayḍa*; °Uthmān Ndiaye from Sine, together with Touré an addressee of many early letters of Niassé, which were later published in *Jawāhir al-rasā’il* and *Ziyādat al-jawāhir*; and °Alī Cissé, the son of a deputy from Saloum appointed by °Abdallāh Niassé who would emerge as his closest confidant and later

¹³⁰ Interview with Muḥammad al-Māḥī b. Ibrāhīm Niassé, Medina Baye, November 24, 1996. Cf. the accounts given by Ibn Iktūsh (*Min akhbār al-shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 31) and Hill (“Divine Knowledge,” 143), who both say that Niassé made this declaration during the *mawlid* festivities in August 1929.

¹³¹ Ḥamal b. Muḥammad al-Awwal, *Uṣūl al-fayḍa*, 22.

successor.¹³² The other three disciples mentioned by Sīdī Ḥamal are Ibra (for Ibrāhīm) Fall from Kosi, who features prominently in a number of miracle stories; °Umar Lo, whose name is absent from all but one written sources in my possession;¹³³ and al-Ḥājj Amīn Tuti, who accompanied Niasse together with Ma°abdu Niang on his first pilgrimage to Mecca in 1355/1936-7.

Other accounts add more names to the list, such as Ibrāhīm’s brother al-Hādī or °Alī Cissé’s brother Muḥammad, and arrange them in a different order.¹³⁴ The version of “Vieux” Diop emphasizes the role of Ibra Fall during the formative period of the community. He gave the following response when I asked him how precisely the *fayḍa* manifested itself:

There were several manifestations, but it cannot be exactly defined. Baye composed many of the poems that deal with the appearance of the *fayḍa* at night. He often spent the nights with Ibra Fall und °Uthmān Ndiaye. . . . Ibra Fall told me that one day Baye called him and °Uthmān and said: “You are very close to me. I want to send you to a *sharīf* that you stay there and get nearer to God.” Ibra and °Uthmān replied: “Anything we cannot find with you, we can do without!” Baye called them crazy and sent them away. He locked himself in his hut for three days. Only then he emerged, had the two called, and gave them *tarbiya*. [Question: “Did Baye start *tarbiya* in Kosi?”] Yes, in Kosi.¹³⁵

As in Sīdī Ḥamal’s account, the advent of the *fayḍa* is put in direct connection with *tarbiya*. The start of spiritual training coincides with the unleashing of the flood. Whether there were seven disciples, as reported by Sīdī Ḥamal, or only two, as “Vieux” Diop relates—the point was reached when the dams burst open, and the outpourings of mystical knowledge took their course. Descriptions of the prelude to the actual appearance of the *fayḍa* suggest that Niasse was at times almost reluctant to bear this burden, as reflected in the attempt to send Ibra Fall and

¹³² °Alī Cissé is one of the major protagonists in Wright’s study (see in particular “Embodied Knowledge,” 128-136). See also the section “Consolidation in Senegal” in Chapter 4 below.

¹³³ See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā’il* I, 52.

¹³⁴ Cf. Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 143-145. Apparently Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye has written a short history of the first disciples, but I was unable to obtain a copy.

¹³⁵ Interview, Kaolack, December 10, 1996. I failed to ask for details about the poems Niasse composed about the *fayḍa*. Perhaps “Vieux” Diop refers to Niasse’s early panegyric poetry that later became part of his anthologies.

°Uthmān Ndiaye away. People in his environment realized that he had changed, but they were unable to read the signs that heralded the impending event. For instance, Niasse is reported to have spent many nights alone in the Garden of the Cognizants. At daybreak he often complained to his companions about severe headache: it was as if his head wanted to explode—a metaphor for the imminent eruption of the flood. Baye Zeynabou Fall, a son of Ibra Fall (d. 1415/1994), described the arrival of the *fayḍa* as follows:

One day Baye wanted to visit his disciples in Kosi while they were working in the fields. When he reached a field called Thialang, he suddenly felt very weak and lay down under a tree. He had Ibra Fall called, who determined that Baye had a fever, and tied a piece of cloth around his head, which was aching in particular. It was the *fayḍa* that manifested itself in his head, but Baye did not tell anyone. Only a year later, when he Ibra Fall came again to the same field, he said: “Here I received something from God one year ago.” It took yet another year before he declared himself. The first ones who then received their illumination through the *fayḍa* were [Abū Bakr] Serigne Mbaye and Ibra Fall.¹³⁶

An account attributed to °Umar Faty Diallo Niasse, a nephew of °Abdallāh Niasse who became—although blind—a celebrated Qurʾān teacher and acquired great fame for his extraordinary recitations of Niasse’s poetry, describes how people began to doubt about Ibrāhīm Niasse’s mental health in the period preceding the emergence of the *fayḍa*:

It was in a night from Thursday to Friday, a bright moonlit night. Baye was lying in a hammock and recited poetry. The people asked themselves: “Has he gone crazy?” His brothers did not understand what he was saying, and made fun of him. That was the first time when °Umar Faty Diallo saw Baye like this.¹³⁷

Other reports suggest that Niasse knew very well what was to come. But until the time predestined for the eruption of the flood, he was supposed to keep his mission secret. He only revealed his mystical powers to the handful of confidants who stood firmly behind him. This

¹³⁶ Interview, Kosi, December 24, 1996.

¹³⁷ This is “Vieux” Diop’s summary of a conversation he had with °Umar Faty Diallo a few years before the latter’s death in 1416/1996 (interview, Kaolack, December 10, 1996).

point is emphasized in a story of “Vieux” Diop about Ma°abdu Niang, yet another early follower who is sometimes mentioned as the first disciple of Niasse:

Baye had told Ma°abdu Niang of his position already seven years before he declared himself publicly. At that time Ma°abdu Niang was still a disciple of Baye’s father, but Baye gave him *tarbiya* already then. At that time people did not know yet who Baye really was. That was the beginning of Baye’s mission. One day, early in the morning, Ma°abdu Niang set out from his village to see Baye. He wanted to convey to him that there would be a lot of quarrel about *tarbiya* some time in the future, and that he considered it better if *tarbiya* remained an affair between him and Baye, or between a few *talibés* and Baye. Otherwise it would cause too much trouble. Baye replied: “I have sworn to God that I will not stop with it. A day will come when people from the east and the west will flock to me in throngs.” This happened in Kosi.¹³⁸

Time and again Kosi features as the venue where events relevant to the *fayḍa* converge.

In the parlance of Niasse’s followers, the name of the small village with its Garden of the Cognizants has become synonymous with mystical knowledge. Kosi embodies the flow of the *fayḍa*, closeness to Aḥmad al-Tijānī, and intimacy with God. Ma°abdu Niang, who later became the first person Niasse appointed to the rank of a caliph according to “Vieux” Diop, figures as a symbol for this in another anecdote.

One day, Ma°abdu Niang wanted to bring water for Baye. He set out from Taiba Niangène to Kosi with a huge calabash. His companions wanted to help him carry it, but he wouldn’t let them. Having reached Kosi, he put the calabash in front of Baye. Baye said: “Everyone who drinks from this water will drink the *fayḍa* and cognizance.” This means, whoever drinks the water gets closer to God.¹³⁹

In the narratives from the early days, the *fayḍa* is almost treated as a physical object, albeit its precise nature is not always clear. In the last account it takes on the material form of water, which stands as a metaphor for the experience of the Divine. This contrasts with the larger Sufi tradition, which associates *fayḍ* with the imagery of light, particularly when understood as

¹³⁸ Ibid. Most accounts collected by Ibn Iktūsh describe Ma°abdu Niang as the first disciple who received illumination through the *fayḍa* (see Ibn Iktūsh, *Min akhbār al-shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 31).

¹³⁹ Interview with “Vieux” Diop, Kaolack, December 10, 1996.

emanations. Although light metaphors also figure in statements about the *fayḍa*, water came to be the preferred allegory in Niasse's Senegalese environment. As the materialization of mystical knowledge, *fayḍa* becomes accessible to sensual perception: it has a taste and a scent, one can drink and smell it—two notions that we will encounter again in the coming chapters.

In the parable quoted in full at the beginning of the present chapter, as narrated by Niasse's former confidant Ibrāhīm b. Maḥmūd (known as Barham) Diop, the dominant image is the overflowing water, which surges incessantly from the well and fills the basin, representing the bringer of the *fayḍa* who in turn passes it on to his followers.¹⁴⁰ In the course of our conversation Diop expanded this parable further: Next to the large basin one should imagine countless small vessels—the disciples who serve as receptacles for the water overflowing from the basin.

Whereas Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop's account puts the accent on Niasse's function as the recipient, other variations of the same parable assign him a more active role.¹⁴¹ One version describes a well surrounded by crowds of thirsty people. However, they are unable to reach the water until someone arrives with a bucket and a rope. This person begins to tirelessly draw the never subsiding water and fills the vessels of the incessantly arriving crowds. The latter variant draws a subtle parallel between physical and spiritual life: Just as humans depend on water for their physical survival (a fact that certainly resonated with people who knew the harsh realities of life in the Sudanic zone), they need the *fayḍa* for their spiritual wellbeing. Whoever wants to attain knowledge of God is in need of the precious water, and Niasse, the bringer of the *fayḍa*, is the one who hands it out for the people to drink.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Cissé, *Revivalist*, 7-8. As Diop pointed out to me, this parable goes back to Niasse himself, who already used to narrate it when he was young (interview, Dakar, January 9, 1997).

¹⁴¹ See Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 80 and Gueye, "Niasse le mystique," 145.

These metaphors translate the complex mystical teachings about *fayḍ* and *fayḍa* into a language accessible to ordinary followers, who are not conversant with elaborate Sufi doctrines. A particularly creative field where such metaphors are coined and reworked is vernacular poetry. The motive of the flood inspired many poets, and it is difficult to overestimate the role their verses—whether in Arabic, Hausa or Wolof—played in the dissemination of ideas pertaining to the *fayḍa*. Composed for the purpose of public recitation, such poetry was well suited to aid in the oral transmission of Niassa’s teachings. One of the best examples is Balarabe Jega’s “Jug of the *fayḍa*.” What follows is a rather prosaic rendering of his poetic depiction of the *fayḍa*.

Let us reiterate our gratitude for the abundance of grace, contained in
the *fayḍa* of Shaykh al-Tijānī, which has engulfed the entire world:
The *fayḍa*, whose rain has moistened the dry and thirsty soil, and made it blossom;
that has caused the grain to grow and the trees to bear fruit.
The *fayḍa*, whose saw has cut down the forests and jungles;
whose hammer has smashed the rocks and crushed the thorns.
The *fayḍa*, whose ocean has emerged from inside the earth and inundated the world,
so that sweet water is flowing everywhere and we can dispense with containers,
jugs, and wells.
Now the water is available to everybody who wishes to drink without obstruction
but its dowry must be paid: faith and following the guidance.
The *fayḍa*, whose lights have illuminated all the tracks and roads,
so that nobody will stumble or run into barriers;
whose shadow has defeated the midday heat, so that everyone
enjoys its protection, even those who are not aware of it.
The *fayḍa* that has barred the caves of scorpions and snakes,
so that no pernicious evil can crawl out to the surface.
Come out, my friend, be cheerful!
The *fayḍa*’s thunder has put the beasts to flight.
May God give us more knowledge of the secret of the *fayḍa*’s manifestation!

How much do we yearn to be among the first!¹⁴²

Verses such as these were instrumental in popularizing Niasse's flood and helped to pave the way for the emergence of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* as a mass movement.

¹⁴² Balarabe Jega, *Goran fayla*, 2.

2 Spiritual Training: The Way to Mystical Knowledge

العارف عندي من فنى في الذات مرة وفي الصفة مرتين أو ثلاثا وفي الاسم مرة

For me, the cognizant is someone who has been annihilated once in the essence, two or three times in the attribute, and once in the name.

Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Maqāmāt*, 8.

Among those shaykhs or deputies are some who tell the disciple: “I am capable of showing you God, the Most Exalted and Most High.” This prompts the disciple to reply: “Oh yes, please make me see Him!” Then the master asks him: “What will you give me for that?”, and they agree on a price. Thereupon the shaykh takes the disciple to a darkened room in his house and orders him to recite certain litanies for two or three days, while abstaining from food and drink, and leaves him alone in the room; this is what they call seclusion. Every three or four hours the master comes and asks the disciple: “Have you seen anything?”, which the latter answers in the negative. This continues until the second or third night. Then the shaykh or deputy approaches the window of the room from outside and dazzles the disciple with a strong torch light, for which he had bought new batteries. The hungry disciple is overwhelmed and deems the light to be the divine essence. Instantly the shaykh enters the room and congratulates him. With this the seclusion comes to an end, and beaming with bliss, the gullible disciple returns to his home.

Abū Bakr, *al-Thaqāfa al-ʿarabiyya*, 216-217.

Apart from *fayḍa*, the label under which the teachings of Ibrāhīm Niasse came to be known within and outside Tijāniyya circles was spiritual training, or *tarbiya* in Arabic (and African languages such as Hausa and Wolof where it is a loanword). Just like *fayḍa*, *tarbiya* was far from being a newly coined term in Sufi contexts, even though many of Niasse’s contemporaries in West Africa were not familiar with some of the notions and practices related to these terms. With regard to *tarbiya*, it is not an exaggeration to say that Niasse reinvigorated the previous practice of spiritual training in ways unseen and unheard of in West Africa, and even within the Tijāniyya, before his emergence as a Sufi leader.

Tarbiya and *fayḍa* are the most important markers of religious group identity among the followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse, and they are at the root of the disagreement between his followers and his opponents within the Tijāniyya. We would perhaps run the risk of overemphasizing the importance of religious doctrine if we stated that the dividing lines were between those who subscribed to certain mystical teachings, and those who rejected them. Other, non-doctrinal factors certainly played a role as well, particularly at the level of the followers who were less familiar with doctrinal matters. However, understanding the doctrinal dimension of the movement is a crucial step towards a proper understanding of the movement as a whole. In his writings and sermons Niasse used to assign utmost importance to *tarbiya*. To him, spiritual training was the best method to become an accomplished believer, and the statement cited at the beginning of this chapter underscores the high expectations Niasse's disciples had to meet. *Tarbiya* was a tedious journey, not a recreational walk.

While spiritual training is the key to superior knowledge of God for some, it is nothing else than charlatanism for others. The second quote at the beginning of this chapter is representative of the latter position, which portrays *tarbiya* as a dubious religious practice based on deception, and sometimes bearing dangerous consequences for the disciple. The author, °Alī Abu Bakr, is an arabophone Northern Nigerian intellectual and claims to describe the practices of Tijānī leaders affiliated with Ibrāhīm Niasse. Interestingly, British colonial officials in Northern Nigeria expressed a similar skepticism of Niasse's religious practices. The following quotation from a colonial report originally written in August 1956 is worth to be cited in full:

All accounts describe the shutting of the candidates, either singly or collectively, in a hut . . . for a period of days without food or water. And all agree that when, by his own admission or by a manifest change in his physical condition, the candidate has seen God, he then becomes a member of the sect. It is on the means by which this vision is brought on that accounts differ. In one case it is said that the candidates are given drinks of alcohol at intervals until they are overpowered

by it: they are then brought out, revived, and on recovery are prompted to declare that they saw God. Another account says that they chant for hours on end until they collapse through hunger and fatigue; and then they are declared to have collapsed in the religious ecstasy of having seen God. A third version is that hypnosis is induced by moving backwards and forwards before the eyes of the candidate the photograph of Ibrahim Kaolack until the visit of God is revealed. The last version says that if all else fails the candidate is beaten up by his mentor, in order to hasten on these same moments of religious wonder.¹

The author does not even remotely consider the possibility that *tarbiya* might have been accompanied by a genuine religious experience.² Confronted with the emergence of Ibrāhīm Niasse as a major Muslim leader in Northern Nigeria in the mid-1950s, it seems to have been a relief for the British authorities that his purported religious practices allowed them to identify *tarbiya* as a scam. A charlatan was much easier to deal with and appeared less dangerous than a “real” religious leader who might incite the Muslims to fanaticism and thus threaten the British *pax colonica*. From the perspective of reform-minded Muslims like °Alī Abu Bakr, the bogus shaykhs and their fraudulent methods were the major reason why the Muslims failed to address the political, social, and educational challenges of the time.

Whether seen as a means to extract remittances from the credulous (as in the case of British colonial officials) or as the opiate of the people (as in the case of Muslims with Salafi inclinations), *tarbiya* as practiced within the community established by Ibrāhīm Niasse never failed to evoke spirited reactions. Some of the strongest opposition came from within the Tijāniyya. Many Tijānī leaders believed that Niasse’s way to impart *tarbiya* contravened the

¹ PRO DO 177/14, Report on Islamic developments in Northern Nigeria, 31-32.

² Only nine months earlier, however, when the British first noticed the popularity of *tarbiya* among Muslim youths in Northern Nigeria, they sought the advice of Norman Anderson, a recognized authority on Islam at the School of Oriental and African Studies. In particular, they asked whether he knew of Islamic texts that discourage “revelation-seeking by young men without religious training.” Anderson pointed out that *tarbiya* was common among Sufis and explained that, “in Sufi circles ... such practices would be extolled – I feel pretty sure – without restriction as to age or maturity” (PRO CO 554/1321, Professor J.N.D. Anderson, SOAS, to T.B. Williamson, Secretary of State, 23 December 1955).

rules laid down by Aḥmad al-Tijānī, the order's founder. To them, spiritual training was the prerogative of a few elite members of the Tijāniyya. Accordingly they took offence with Niasse's practice of initiating large numbers of ordinary followers into *tarbiya*. Severe criticism was also directed against allegedly outrageous claims made by some disciples who had completed their spiritual training. In the view of the critics, the training dispensed by Niasse and his deputies had serious side effects that could in some instances lead to mental disorder.

From the outset of his nascent movement, which was marked by an almost euphoric mood among the followers, fuelled by intense mystical experiences, Ibrāhīm Niasse had to come to terms with two challenges. On the one hand, there was an urgent need to ensure that his deputies imparted the proper training to the disciples, which also included full compliance with the rule of secrecy. On the other hand, Niasse had to establish the legitimacy of his interpretation of Tijānī doctrines and practices against the learned critics within the Tijāniyya. This constellation has a direct bearing on the character of the available written sources, which can roughly be classified in two groups: scholarly treatises addressing the learned elite of the Tijāniyya, and more ephemeral texts, such as letters, transcripts of sermons, or small pamphlets addressing the deputies and, by extension, the disciples.

The analysis has thus to consider two types of written sources that differ from each other in terms of character, style, and expected audience. None of the two gives details about how exactly *tarbiya* is supposed to be done, or what it implies for the practitioner. The scholarly writings focus on the doctrinal question whether *tarbiya* is legitimate and do not address practical questions at all. The texts addressing the followers contain bits and pieces of information about the stages and the objective of *tarbiya*, but they do not answer the question how *tarbiya* actually works. The fragments and scattered pieces found in these texts resemble a

jigsaw puzzle that the researcher has to put together in an arduous process in order to get a fuller picture.

The task would definitely be easier if there were oral sources to draw upon. However, these cannot be tapped because of the strict secrecy that surrounds *tarbiya*. Neither the master nor the aspirant is supposed to divulge the details of the process to outsiders.³ *Tarbiya* is transmitted through personal initiation, and there is no manual that can replace the spiritual master (or alleviate the researcher's dilemma). It is thus impossible to get a clearer sense of *tarbiya* unless one decides to get initiated and make the experience oneself. The interpretation in this chapter is therefore offered with the caveat that the secret character of *tarbiya* imposes limits to an outsider's understanding of the topic.

Authors of previous studies have occasionally pointed to the crucial role *tarbiya* plays among Tijānīs affiliated with Ibrāhīm Niassé.⁴ The most comprehensive attempt to offer a description was made by Mervyn Hiskett in 1980, based on an interview with a former practitioner of *tarbiya* from Ghana who later joined an anti-Sufi Muslim reform movement. The informant explains *tarbiya* as a model consisting of five *ḥaḍarāt* ("presences"; sing. *ḥaḍra*). In the first *ḥaḍra* the novice learns that there is only one God, and that He has created everything, and hence forms a unity with creation. In the second *ḥaḍra* he learns that Muḥammad was the

³ Adriana Piga gives a description of meetings in a *zāwiya* in Dakar affiliated to Ibrāhīm Niassé. Whenever the shaykh intended to address secret topics, he would ask whether there are "clouds in the sky." Only when the participants denied, thus indicating that no outsiders were present, the shaykh would continue to talk. See Piga, *Ordini sufi*, 199.

⁴ See Paden, *Kano*, 65, 130-132; most of his statements about *tarbiya* are misleading. See also Schulze, *Internationalismus*, 388. Froelich (*Musulmans*, 236) claims that Niassé's branch is known as *tarbiya* because it puts a great emphasis on learning and constructing schools; Clarke and Linden (*Modern Nigeria*, 45-46) liken *tarbiya* to "rebirth"; Villalon (*Islamic Society*, 135) quotes an informant—presumably a deputy of Niassé—from Fatick who describes *tarbiya* as "an apprenticeship, which can last for years, undertaken in the expectation of receiving some mystical secrets from the marabout."

first creation of God, and therefore the entire creation emerged from him. In the third *ḥaḍra* he learns that Aḥmad al-Tijānī emerged from the Prophet, and therefore the entire creation also came through al-Tijānī. In the fourth *ḥaḍra* the aspirant learns that Ibrāhīm Niasse emerged from al-Tijānī, and in the last *ḥaḍra* he finally learns that Niasse is presently the manifestation of *kaun dukka*, the Hausa term for “the whole of being.”⁵ Hiskett believed this depiction to be reliable, since other informants who still identified with the Tijāniyya had not objected to this model when he presented it to them. The procedure of interviewing a former member of the Tijāniyya, who has joined a religious movement ideologically opposed to Sufism, and then presenting the response as the correct model of *tarbiya* is certainly problematic from a methodological point of view, even if the attempt is made to verify the statement through other sources. Informants I asked about Hiskett’s model did not object either—they simply declined to comment. While it is not impossible that the model conforms to local understanding of *tarbiya*, my research does not corroborate its validity for the Tijāniyya as a whole.

Hiskett was correct, however, in emphasizing the facilitation of access to mystical experience through *tarbiya*. This aspect has also been highlighted Ousmane Kane, who went so far as to characterize *tarbiya* as the “democratization of the sacred.”⁶ In an earlier, unpublished study, Kane stressed another important feature of Niasse’s *tarbiya* practice as compared to the

⁵ See Hiskett, “Community of Grace,” 120. Many later authors treat this description as authoritative (see Hutson, “Women’s Authority in Kano,” 51; Umar, “Sufism and its Opponents,” 367-368; Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*, 35). – The five *ḥaḍarāt* are obviously modeled on the five realms of the cosmos discussed in conjunction with the terminology surrounding *fayḍa* in the previous chapter.

⁶ Kane, “Shaikh al-Islam,” 316; see also id., *Muslim Modernity*, 174-175. The use of the term democratization seems debatable given the strict hierarchy within the Tijāniyya.

previous usage in the Tijāniyya: The former apparently leads to more profound spiritual experiences, giving the followers of Niasse a sense of spiritual superiority over other Tijānīs.⁷

The present chapter analyzes how spiritual training is understood and practiced within the community established by Ibrāhīm Niasse. It begins by introducing *tarbiya* as a Sufi method to attain mystical knowledge and goes on to situate it within the larger background of the history of Sufism. Special emphasis will be put on the North and West African contexts: What was the meaning and role of spiritual training in the past, and in what ways does Ibrāhīm Niasse depart from his predecessors? The latter question will be addressed on the basis of an analysis of the relevant sections in Niasse’s magnum opus *Kāshif al-ilbās*. The critique by Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari will help to answer the question of why *tarbiya* became such a bone of contention in many regions where Niasse’s community spread. The chapter will then draw on a different type of sources—documents addressing the followers—to give an outline of the journey on the mystical path according to Niasse’s *tarbiya* model. Finally, the chapter will show why *tarbiya* as practiced by Niasse and his deputies was probably the most important factor in the expansion of the movement. But let us first have a cursory look at the history of spiritual training as a Sufi method.

Tarbiya – An Overview

A very common way for Sufis to conceptualize *tarbiya* is to speak about the purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). The *nafs*, here translated as soul, but often rendered as self or ego, is conceived as the seat of the lower desires, and by extension of everything that leads human

⁷ Kane, “Tijāniyya reformée,” 29-31. Tahir’s unpublished thesis also contains useful observations about *tarbiya* (see “Saints and Capitalists”; in particular 125-126; 505-506; 510-512).

beings away from God. The objective of spiritual training is thus to cleanse the evil-commanding soul (*al-naḥs al-ammāra bi-l-sūʿ*; see Qurʾān 12:53) of all negative influences, up to the point where it becomes the perfect soul (*al-naḥs al-kāmila*). The latter stage ideally culminates in the temporary annihilation (*fanāʿ*) of the ego, which prepares the aspirant for mystical union with the divine. This moment is described as *wuṣūl* (arrival), *waṣl* (union), or *fath* (illumination, lit. “opening”), and is equivalent to attaining cognizance or experiential knowledge of God, *maʿrifa* in Arabic.⁸ We can tentatively define *tarbiya* as spiritual training, dispensed by a qualified shaykh or spiritual master, based on a set of rules, meant to guide the aspirant during the journey (*sulūk*, lit. “wayfaring”) on the Sufi path, with the aim of purifying one’s self and achieving mystical union with and experiential knowledge of God.

Someone who ventures into the academic study of Sufism will find occasional references to *tarbiya* in the great Sufi manuals and texts, and perhaps even a few specialized titles by less known Sufi authors, but he or she will soon realize that surprisingly little of substance has been written about *tarbiya* in the academic literature.⁹ Dictionaries of modern standard Arabic render the term as “education.” The root *r-b-w*, from which the verbal noun *tarbiya* (*sic*, not *tarbiyya*) is derived, originally means “to make grow” and has the connotation of “to rear, to breed, to raise.”¹⁰ As a Sufi technical term, *tarbiya* has much more in common with these original

⁸ I prefer the term cognizance over gnosis because of the latter’s esoteric connotation (see note 59 in the Introduction). “Experiential knowledge” is Renard’s rendering of *maʿrifa* in his translation of selected sources on knowledge from the classical period of Sufism (see Renard, *Knowledge of God*, 19).

⁹ One of the most useful discussions of *tarbiya* can be found in Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 116-127. It is significant that the only reference to *tarbiya* in the article on *taṣawwuf* in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* occurs in connection with Ibrāhīm Niasse. John Hunwick, the author of this section, translates the term as “spiritual tutelage,” adding that it is an important element in Niasse’s teaching. See *EI* 2, entry “Taṣawwuf.”

¹⁰ There is a parallel between the original sense of the root *r-b-w* and the English verb “to train,” which originally meant “cause (a plant) to grow in a desired shape.”

meanings than with the notion of “educating.” It describes the spiritual “breeding” or “rearing” of the aspirant (*murīd*) at the hands of his shaykh.¹¹ The imagery used to describe this relationship sometimes likens it to the rearing of young animals by their parents, thus underscoring the utter dependency of the former on the fostering and nurturing care as well as the disciplining force of the latter.

One of the reasons why we find so little information about *tarbiya* in Sufi literature (and, by extension, in the academic literature about Sufism) seems to lie in the fact that the philosophy and practices of spiritual training are not subject to discursive instruction. The locus of spiritual training is the master-disciple relationship, not the public or semi-public arena of Sufi writings or sermons. The aim of *tarbiya* is to perfect one’s belief (*īmān*) in and worship (*‘ibāda*) of God by attaining mystical knowledge (*ma‘rifa*), a type of knowledge that is different from rational, discursive knowledge and rarely if ever put into writing. As a spiritual process, *tarbiya* is accompanied by experiences that defy verbalization. An accomplished master is able to recognize these experiences when they occur, and he can always tell where exactly the disciple is in the journey through various stages of the mystical path. Experiential knowledge is not acquired through conventional teaching and learning processes, but through initiation that occurs as a part of a confidential master-disciple relationship. The master guides the disciple to make the experience, but he does not put it in words. Hence the difficulty for the non-initiate to reconstruct, let alone understand, this experience.

One of the few academic specialists who wrote about *tarbiya* was Fritz Meier. In his study on Khurāsān and the end of classical Sufism, Meier described the gradual transition from the “instructing master” (*shaykh al-ta‘līm*) to the “master of training” (*shaykh al-tarbiya*), the

¹¹ Cf. Radtke’s German rendering as *Seelendressur* (“soul dressage”) in “Erleuchtung,” 53.

former being a mere teacher and dispenser of Sufi wisdom, and the latter being the spiritual guide who leads the aspirant to mystical knowledge.¹² Meier locates the beginnings of this process in the late ninth century and claims that it was completed in the eleventh century. Based on a close reading of primary sources from this period, Meier observes a growing emphasis on submission to one master (as opposed to many), and the introduction of physically demanding exercises under direct supervision of the master as an integral part of the spiritual practices. The master-disciple relationship gradually became more personal and intimate, based on a well-defined code of conduct (*adab*), whereas previously the disciples tended to maintain less personal and less formalized relationships to more teachers.

Recently Meier's differentiation between the shaykh as instructor and as trainer has come under criticism. According to Laury Silvers, Meier's sources do not prove that the earlier Sufi masters failed to perform their roles as *shaykh al-tarbiya*, or "master of spiritual direction," as she translates the term.¹³ Her reading of early sources suggests that the Sufi leaders saw themselves as the heirs of the Prophet Muḥammad, who acted as both teacher and guide, to the extent that the two roles became indistinguishable. Therefore, Silvers argues, Meier was wrong in claiming that the masters only came to assume their "directing" roles at a later stage. However, Silvers fails to acknowledge that Meier does not deny the existence of mystical guidance before the period in question. He only points to the fact that the masters did not appear as spiritual trainers in the way they used to do later.¹⁴ In other words, wayfaring was much more of an individual and less teacher-centered enterprise in classical Sufism than it came to be in the

¹² Meier, "Khurāsān." He defines *tarbiya* as "an initiation into Sufism in general" (ibid., 202).

¹³ Silvers-Alario, "Teaching Relationship," 70.

¹⁴ Meier, "Khurāsān," 197.

postclassical period.¹⁵ The basic methods—asceticism, eating little food, avoiding idle talk, cutting down on sleep—were similar, but the systematization, culminating in the emergence of the Sufi orders from the twelfth century onwards, was new. Earlier Sufi masters might have given direction, but *tarbiya*, in the sense of a systematic training the disciple receives from one shaykh according to a defined set of rules with the objective of purifying the self and attaining mystical knowledge of God, only made its appearance later.

Among the Sufi authors who elaborated on the distinction between the instructing and the training master was Ibn ʿAbbād al-Rundī, a prominent Muslim scholar from Andalusia of the fourteenth century.¹⁶ He introduced a third rank of masters, the *shaykh al-tarqiya* (master of elevation), thus accommodating the model to the tripartite pattern that is so typical of Sufism. Both Meier and Silvers see Ibn ʿAbbād as the first author to reflect on the transition from instruction (*taʿlīm*) to *tarbiya*. For Silvers, Meier simply takes Ibn ʿAbbād’s classification for granted, rather than questioning it. She does not see any such transition as postulated by Ibn ʿAbbād, and she believes Meier to be mistaken in his attempt to locate the transition in a specific historical context. Yet, as far as Ibn ʿAbbād is concerned, Meier’s major point seems to be that systematic spiritual training is a later development that can be distinguished from earlier modes of instruction, without trying to situate the transition precisely in space and time.

We need to keep in mind that the ninth century, i.e. the period where Meier sees the beginnings of *tarbiya* in the sense defined above, is also the time of the systematization, standardization, and institutionalization of other Islamic sciences, most notably Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). In his seminal study *Knowledge Triumphant*, Franz

¹⁵ See Meier, “Mystic Path,” on the stages in the development of Sufism.

¹⁶ On him Renard, *Ibn ʿAbbad*. Ibrāhīm Niasse quotes Ibn ʿAbbād in his discussion of *tarbiya*, though not in relation to the distinction between different ranks of masters (*Kāshif al-ilbās*, 18).

Rosenthal calls attention to an important aspect of Muslim perceptions of knowledge at the time that can help to shed light on the transition from instruction to spiritual training. His discussion suggests that there was no sharp differentiation between *‘ilm* and *ma‘rifa*, at least not until the tenth century. Many, though not all, early Muslim scholars tended to conflate knowledge (variously called *‘ilm* and *ma‘rifa*) and faith (*īmān*, *taṣdīq*).¹⁷ Although neither Rosenthal nor Renard¹⁸ explicitly draw this conclusion, the evidence they present supports the view that it was only after the gradual emergence of an established classification of Islamic sciences (*‘ulūm*)—a process that took until the tenth century—that *‘ilm* began to refer specifically to discursive knowledge (German, *Wissen*; French, *savoir*). *Ma‘rifa*, on the other hand, took on the meaning of experiential knowledge or cognizance (German, *Erkenntnis*; French, *connaissance*). In other words, it seems entirely plausible that the first generations of Muslims did not see the need to draw a sharp line between different modes of knowledge. Knowledge of God was in the same category as knowing and following the Qurʾān and the Sunna. However, by the eleventh century, the time when *tarbiya* developed into a systematic method of guiding disciples to mystical union with the divine, knowing God had become a distinctive branch of knowledge with its own terminology, epistemology, and pedagogy.

We know little about the subsequent development of the ideas and practices associated with *tarbiya*. Although the great Sufi manuals outline the stages of the path and expound the purification of the self, they neither contain descriptions of *tarbiya*, nor do they say how it is conducted. Secondary literature fills this gap only partially. We have studies of practices that fall under the rubric of *tarbiya*, such as seclusion or the Naqshbandī technique known as *rābiṭa*, or

¹⁷ Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 102-105 and 113-115. He discusses one instance of a distinction between *‘ilm* and *ma‘rifa* from the fifteenth century, where the former refers to God’s knowledge (God is *‘ālim*, not *‘ārīf*), and the latter to human knowledge of God (ibid., 117-118).

¹⁸ See his introduction to *Knowledge of God*.

bondage of the heart to the master.¹⁹ In most descriptions of the mystical journey *tarbiya* only appears in parentheses, when authors use terms like “spiritual formation,” “education,” or “initiation.”²⁰

Later writings from the Maghreb offer some clues as to how Sufis conceive of the long-term development of *tarbiya*. One of the most important reference works, *Qawā'id al-taṣawwuf* (“Principles of Sufism”) by Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 899/1493), indicates that spiritual training became the subject of heated debates in the fifteenth century. In particular, one phrase in the *Qawā'id* suggests that another significant shift occurred with regard to *tarbiya* during Zarrūq's lifetime, i.e. roughly four hundred years after the institutionalization of the *shaykh al-tarbiya*. As in the case of the earlier transition, this new shift was probably neither comprehensive nor sudden, and it is difficult to locate it precisely in space. The phrase reads:

Shaykh Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Ḥaḍramī [d. 895/1490] said: “Conventional spiritual training has come to an end. What remains is only to turn towards spiritual energy (*himma*) and the mystical state (*ḥāl*). So follow the book [i.e., the Qurʾān] and the Sunna without adding or omitting anything.”²¹

Zarrūq's endorsement of al-Ḥaḍramī's position had reverberations well into the twentieth century, when it became the first topic Ibrāhīm Niāsse tackled in *Kāshif al-ilbās*. With the wide

¹⁹ On *rābiṭa* see Abu Manneh, “*Khalwa* and *rābiṭa*”; Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen* (my rendering of the term is based on his “*Herzensbindung an den Meister*”); Paul, *Doctrine and Organization*. On seclusion see further *EI* 2, entry “*Khalwa*”; on the African context Triaud, “*Khalwa*.”

²⁰ See the indices in Popovic and Veinstein, *Voies d'Allah* and de Jong and Radtke, *Mysticism Contested*. Schimmel does not discuss *tarbiya* at all in her *Mystical Dimensions*. Chittick only mentions the term once in his works on Ibn al-ʿArabī, rendering it as “training” (*Sufi Path*, 271).

²¹ Zarrūq, *Qawā'id*, 165; cf. the translations by Kugle (*Rebel*, 124) and O'Kane and Radtke (*Pure Gold*, 614; their translation is based on the quote given in the *Ibrīz*, because, as Radtke explains in note 2, he failed to find the original quote in the *Qawā'id*). See also the short remarks in Meier, *Mohammedverehrung* II, 291. — Aḥmad b. al-ʿUqba al-Ḥaḍramī was born in Yemen and emerged as a prominent shaykh of the Qādiriyya in fifteenth-century Egypt (Kugle, *Rebel*, 118-128; see further Trimmingham, *Sufi Orders*, 87; Khushaim, *Zarruq*, 21-25). Zarrūq counts him among his teachers, although he is himself closer to the Shādhilī tradition (Khushaim, *Zarruq*, 142).

circulation of the *Qawā'id* in North Africa, first in the form of manuscripts and later in print, and the reputation of the author as a leading authority, it was difficult for subsequent generations to ignore the verdict about the end of *tarbiya*. As one of the most influential theorists of “juridical sainthood,” aimed at the rapprochement between the mystical path and the demands of Islamic law, Zarrūq left a lasting legacy in the North African Sufi tradition as a whole.²²

But what exactly did Zarrūq and al-Ḥaḍramī mean? The Arabic term rendered above as conventional spiritual training is *al-tarbiya bi-l-iṣṭilāh*, which is apparently used to refer to practices that were widespread but controversial. In particular, conventional training seems to have included physically demanding exercises, such as prolonged fasting or seclusion, and in some instances probably also more extreme practices such as self-flagellation, walking on burning charcoal or fire, piercing oneself with nails or knives, etc. The only legitimate form of spiritual training, according to the above quote, is the one based on spiritual energy (*himma*) and the mystical state (*ḥāl*), in accordance with the Qurʾān and the Sunna. Zarrūq does not elaborate on the meaning of these terms, nor does his master al-Ḥaḍramī, who has not left any written traces.²³ The terms appear in the statement as if everybody knew what they referred to—at least among Zarrūq’s Sufi contemporaries.

²² See Kugle, *Rebel*.

²³ The *Qawā'id* contain numerous aphorisms ascribed to al-Ḥaḍramī, and Kugle occasionally quotes from a text by Zarrūq about al-Ḥaḍramī’s saintly qualities (*manāqib*). According to Kugle, al-Ḥaḍramī uttered the famous statement about the end of *tarbiya* in response to Zarrūq’s question how he could find a true saint and guide (*Rebel*, 124). However, I tend to disagree with Kugle’s assertion that, for al-Ḥaḍramī, “this whole edifice of Islamic sainthood ... was no longer valid” (ibid.). It is clear that al-Ḥaḍramī strongly condemned what he saw as excesses, and that he wanted the more sober mystical methods to prevail. But I doubt that this amounted to a complete rejection of the institution of the shaykh and, by extension, the idea of sainthood. Also, it seems to me that Kugle misinterprets al-Ḥaḍramī’s statement about following the Qurʾān and the Sunna. Rather than asking his followers “to simply study the scriptural sources that remained as the legacy of the Prophet Muḥammad” (ibid.), al-Ḥaḍramī probably wanted them to embody the Prophet’s example, as Kugle himself explains a few paragraphs earlier with reference to

The later reception of al-Ḥaḍramī's aphorism can provide some tentative answers. About three hundred years after Zarrūq, the Moroccan mystic Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. °Ajība (d. 1224/1809)²⁴ addressed the topic in his commentary of the *Ḥikam*, the famous collection of Ibn °Atā° Allāh al-Iskandarī's (d. 709/1309) aphorisms. According to Ibn °Ajība, al-Ḥaḍramī did not mean that *tarbiya* had ceased for good. He made that statement because in his time there were many self-proclaimed masters, who falsely claimed to possess the skills to impart *tarbiya*. Hence al-Ḥaḍramī felt the need to caution against them. People who were familiar with the ideas of al-Ḥaḍramī and Zarrūq knew very well that they did not seek to terminate spiritual training. And even if they did, they were not immune against error, and everyone, except the Prophet, could be proven wrong. Even after al-Ḥaḍramī there had been masters who practiced *tarbiya* correctly, with mystical states, words of guidance, and spiritual energy, and they still existed.²⁵

The question of *tarbiya* is also discussed in the *Ibrīz* by Aḥmad b. al-Mubārak al-Lamaṭī (d. 1156/1743), roughly two generations before Ibn °Ajība.²⁶ This work, a hagiography of al-Lamaṭī's master °Abd al-°Azīz al-Dabbāgh ("the Tanner," d. 1131/1719) and manual of his teachings, has been one of the most influential texts in the later Sufi tradition of the Maghreb, with a wide reception in a variety of Sufi orders, including the Tijāniyya. The section on spiritual training is worth to be paraphrased in full.

Zarrūq (ibid., 123). The wider implications of following the Prophet in this sense become apparent in a section of the *Ibrīz*, to be discussed below.

²⁴ See his biography in Michon, *Ibn °Ajība*, 31-86.

²⁵ Ibn °Ajība, *Īqāz al-himam*, 346; see also Michon, *Ibn °Ajība*, 111. — Fritz Meier describes Ibn °Ajība as an advocate of the disciple's unconditional surrender to the master dispensing the training ("Khurāsān," 218). In other texts, such as the *Futūḥāt*, 126-127, Ibn °Ajība is even more outspoken in his support of *tarbiya*. Kugle quotes him with a scathing critique of Zarrūq, accusing the latter of being a literalist, who "never plunged deeply into the ocean of its [i.e., the *Ḥikam*'s] secret meanings," and of having spent to little time with his master (Kugle, *Rebel*, 200-202).

²⁶ An authoritative English translation of the work has recently become available: O'Kane and Radtke, *Pure Gold*. See also Radtke, "Ibrīziana," for a summary of its themes.

According to the *Ibrīz*, the goal of *tarbiya* is the purification of the self (*dhāt*).²⁷ This purification continues as long as it takes the self to get ready to bear the secret. To achieve this, the self has to be kept away from all falsehood and harmful influences. All its negative traits need to be eliminated. Initially God Himself used to effect this purification without intermediary. This had been the case in the first three centuries (after the *hijra*)—the best ones ever. As the believers of the early generations had been eager to please God on their own accord, *tarbiya* was not required. The master could lead the disciples to illumination (*fath*) by merely whispering into their ear, because at that time the believers were still following the right guidance.

However, the quote of al-Dabbāgh continues, this changed in subsequent centuries. The people started to develop ignoble intentions; they became obsessed with worldly concerns and followed their passions. Their minds were occupied with futile and wicked pursuits. When people in such a condition came to a shaykh, he subjected them to the training by using formulas of remembrance (*adhkār*, sing. *dhikr*; i.e., the recitation of divine names), or by sending them into seclusion (*khalwa*), or by ordering them to reduce their food intake. In seclusion they were far removed from bad company, when they recited litanies they were prevented from loose and superfluous talk, when they ate little, their passions were subdued, until their concentration was focused again on God and the Prophet, and they finally became ready to bear the secret. This was the intention of the masters when they sent their disciples into seclusion and imparted spiritual training to them.

²⁷ The following is based on al-Lamaṭī, *Ibrīz*, 356-357; cf. O’Kane and Radtke, *Pure Gold*, 614-616. Ibrāhīm Niāsse, who quotes the same section, has *nafs* instead of *dhāt* (*Kāshif al-ilbās*, 21). Brenner (*West African Sufi*, 113) cites the statement as well but erroneously attributes it to °Umar al-Fūṭī. The section in *Rimāḥ* I, 131-132, is in fact a quotation from the *Ibrīz*. O’Kane and Radtke translate *dhāt* as “body” (*Pure Gold*, 614).

But this situation did also not prevail. According to the *Ibrīz* falsehood soon mixed up with truth, darkness mingled with light. The “people of falsehood” started to send others into seclusion with ulterior motives. They gave them divine names to recite, not for the sake of the truth, but to seek personal profit. At the time of Zarrūq and others the malpractice had reached such proportions that the true masters discouraged people to engage in *tarbiya*. They should stay on the safe side and adhere exclusively to the Qurʾān and the Sunna. This was meant as a counsel in order to avert harm from the believers. It could by no means have been their intention to abolish true *tarbiya*; the light of the Prophet was to subsist until the Last Day.

While the *Ibrīz* can hardly be read as a factual account of the history of *tarbiya*, it gives us valuable insights into how leading Sufis saw the development of spiritual training. One of the most remarkable statements is that *tarbiya* was not necessary during the first few centuries of Islam. In view of this claim, both Meier’s proposition about the transition from the “master of instruction” to the “master of training” and Rosenthal’s observation about the lacking distinction between knowledge and cognizance appear in a different light. Although there are good reasons to be suspicious of “Golden Age” claims,²⁸ the first shift, from a situation without formal spiritual training to one with a fixed set of *tarbiya* practices, seems entirely plausible.

As for the second shift, the author of the *Ibrīz* (just like Ibn ʿAjība) attributes it to the emergence of false masters who did not provide correct training. Zarrūq’s statement about the end of conventional *tarbiya* should, according to the *Ibrīz*, not be read as a general disapproval. His aim was to stop the excesses, not the genuine training.²⁹

²⁸ See Seesemann, “Verfall.”

²⁹ At the present state, we can only speculate about possible connections between al-Ḥaḍramī’s end of *tarbiya* and the rapid spread among Sufis of the practice to recite various versions of the *taṣliya*, prayer formulas invoking blessings on the Prophet Muḥammad (see Meier, *Mohammedverehrung* II, 309). Muḥammad al-Jazūlī (d. 869/1465), the author of *Dalāʾil al-*

What, then, is the proper version of *tarbiya*? Are the “conventional” methods, like seclusion and other strenuous physical exercises, now ruled out? Or are they still legitimate, as long as the training occurs under the supervision of a genuine master? What about the training by means of spiritual energy and the mystical state, which al-Ḥaḍramī recommended as the only safe method that remains valid? Both al-Lamaṭī and Ibn ʿAjība keep conspicuously silent about these questions, and the answers will in the end depend on the specific outlook of the respective Sufi order. Each Sufi tradition has a different take on what can be termed the gate of *tarbiya*. Should it be kept open or not? If the former, how far can it be opened? Should access be restricted by leaving just a small gap, or can the door remain wide open?

The leading authority within the Tijāniyya to deal with this problem was Muḥammad al-ʿArabī b. al-Sāʾiḥ (d. 1309/1892), the author of *Bughyat al-mustafid*, the most widely read synopsis of the Tijāniyya. Although not as authoritative as *Jawāhir al-maʿānī*, the *Bughya* has a high reputation in Tijānī circles. Thus, Muḥammad al-ʿArabī’s statements on *tarbiya* can be taken to reflect the official position within the Tijāniyya, even though they go beyond the few passages on *tarbiya* in the *Jawāhir*.

Like his predecessors among the North African Sufi authors, Muḥammad al-ʿArabī cannot but take up al-Ḥaḍramī’s verdict about *tarbiya*. In *al-Jawāb al-shāfi*, a less widely

khayrāt, one of the most famous collections of such prayers, was only one generation older than Zarrūq and al-Ḥaḍramī. Muḥammad Akansūs, a celebrated nineteenth-century Tijānī author, quotes Zarrūq with a statement—attributed once more to al-Ḥaḍramī—that seems to extol the *taṣliya* as the best method of spiritual training: “I saw the doors to God as they were about to close, and the only ones that remain open are those of saying blessings on the Prophet Muḥammad” (Muḥammad Akansūs, *al-Jawāb al-muskit*, 47-48). Cf. Kugle, *Rebel*, 149 on Zarrūq’s use of the *taṣliya*.

circulated text than the *Bughya*,³⁰ he explains that the training al-Ḥaḍramī and Zarrūq sought to terminate was the conventional version, which referred to methods that had been introduced after the first three centuries of the *hijra*. The end of *tarbiya* did not apply to methods like guidance in accordance with the Qurʾān and the Sunna, the inculcation of formulas of remembrance, or other methods suitable to safeguard the lower self against detrimental influences. These methods were based on the assistance (*madad*) and the spiritual energy of the master. The master was able to dispense this training because of a special permission that he received either through inspiration from God or from the Prophet in a waking state or while asleep. All of this, Muḥammad al-ʿArabī concludes, was to be found in the *Ibrīz*.

This statement suggests that Muḥammad al-ʿArabī did indeed interpret al-Ḥaḍramī and Zarrūq in the sense that the conventional training methods (seclusion, physical exercises) were now prohibited. The proper training required an express permission and was to take recourse to other methods. The *Bughya* is more explicit about what this means in practice.³¹ There Muḥammad al-ʿArabī explains that, in the Tijāniyya, spiritual training could proceed without seclusion, isolation of the disciple from his environment, or other physically demanding exercises, because the system of *tarbiya* followed the example of the first generation of the pious forebears. He calls this the “original method,” which was tantamount to gratitude towards and contentment with the Merciful Lord,³² and marked by the training of the heart (*al-riyāda al-qalbiyya*). Everything introduced after the first three centuries, i.e. exertion, toil, and corporal exercises (*al-riyāda al-badaniyya*), was not part of this method, but was imposed by the

³⁰ I have not seen an original copy of *al-Jawāb al-shāfi*, which is not published. Skīraj renders the full text in *Kashf al-ḥijāb*, 301-309. The following paraphrase is based on Skīraj, *Kashf al-ḥijāb*, 308. Ibrāhīm Niase quotes the same paragraph in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 21.

³¹ What follows is a paraphrase of Muḥammad al-ʿArabī b. al-Sāʿih, *Bughyat al-mustafīd*, 27.

³² On the principle of gratitude (*shukr*) in the Tijāniyya, see Wright, *Path of the Prophet*, 147-155.

conditions of the times. The former system amounted to a journey of the hearts, and the latter to a journey of the bodies. In order to reach the goal of cognizance, it was more important to turn attention to the heart than to the body.

The model for this original form of *tarbiya* is no other than Aḥmad al-Tijānī, the order's founder, who is said to have received his training directly from the Prophet Muḥammad. *Jawāhir al-ma'ānī* contains the description of one of the encounters between Aḥmad al-Tijānī and the Prophet in a waking state, where the Prophet told al-Tijānī that he should now begin imparting spiritual training to the creation (*khalq*).³³ As Muḥammad al-°Arabī explains, the Prophet established Aḥmad al-Tijānī as the sole intermediary (*wāsiṭa*) between the believers and God. There were no spiritual masters besides him, and God had granted him a preferred status by enabling him to reach the spiritual station (*maqām*) appropriate to him without recourse to seclusion, isolation, or strenuous exercises. This guarantee extended to his disciples, who could likewise attain mystical realization without undergoing seclusion or other hardships.³⁴

Muḥammad al-°Arabī and other Tijānī authors took the absence of seclusion in the practices of their Sufi path as a sign of superiority over other orders. °Ubayda b. Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr b. Anbūja (d. 1284/1867), a Tijānī shaykh from Tishīt (Mauritania) and author of a rare *tarbiya* manual that will be discussed below, expressed this supposed advantage in a famous verse that describes Aḥmad al-Tijānī's approach to spiritual training in relation to others:

Without seclusion he gave spiritual training, while the others trained by seclusion:

how different are the sources from which the two Yazīds drink!³⁵

³³ °Alī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-ma'ānī* I, 51 (discussed in Meier, *Mohammedverehrung* II, 353).

³⁴ Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. Sā'ih, *Bughyat al-mustafīd*, 26.

³⁵ Ibn Anbūja, *Mizāb al-raḥma*, 29. Sufis sometimes use the reference to the "two Yazīds" to allude to Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 261/874) and to the Umayyad caliph Yazīd. The former is

Thus, from the perspective of the Tijāniyya, al-Ḥaḍramī's and Zarrūq's verdict about the end of conventional training was quite convenient, as it dovetails with their version of spiritual training that dispenses with seclusion and physical hardship. The argumentation of the *Ibrīz* or Ibn °Ajība, on the other hand, seems mainly inspired by the attempt to defend the continuing use of conventional methods, which Muḥammad al-°Arabī depicted as the journey of the bodies. But if the Tijāniyya embraced the journey of the hearts, what does it look like?

Spiritual Energy and the Mystical State

As outlined above, the Tijāniyya understands conventional training as methods based on physical deprivation. Whoever took this way, undertook the journey of the bodies. Following al-Ḥaḍramī and Zarrūq, the Tijāniyya turns to *tarbiya bi-l-himma wa-l-ḥāl*, training by means of spiritual energy and the mystical state, as the only legitimate method. Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°iḥ describes it as the journey of the hearts, but he neither tells us how this journey proceeds, nor does he explain what *himma* and *hal* entail. A quick look at the range of meanings covered by these terms can help us to get a better sense of what this type of training is about.

So far, *himma* has been rendered as “spiritual energy,” following Chodkiewicz's usage in his study of Ibn al-°Arabī.³⁶ A more literal translation is “zeal.” Some of the already mentioned Sufi manuals reveal that the term conveys a variety of notions. Thus, Schimmel explains *himma* as used by Ibn °Aṭā° Allāh in his *Ḥikam* as “intent, wish, will power, creative force of the heart, power of concentration that can affect others and, according to general belief, draw events from

cast as a model of piety and mystical knowledge, whereas the latter is held in contempt for the slaughter of the Prophet's grandson al-Ḥusayn (see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 50).

³⁶ Chodkiewicz, *Océan*, 132. Kugle translates the term as “lofty aspiration” (*Rebel*, 124), while O'Kane and Radtke render it as “effective will” (*Pure Gold*, 614).

the world of imagination into this world.”³⁷ The keyword “imagination” recalls the title of one of Corbin’s works, and *himma* does indeed play a role as the creative energy of the heart in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s power of imagination.³⁸ If we follow Corbin, the heart fulfills a central function for the progress on the mystical path—a statement that shows parallels to the definition of Muḥammad al-Majdhūb (d. 1246/1831), a Sudanese mystic of Shādhilī background, who stated that spiritual zeal was the means of conveyance on the path.³⁹ *Himma* is thus the force that causes the traveler to advance in his or her mystical journey. This sense corresponds to Ibn ‘Ajība’s usage, who defines *himma* as the force that helps to achieve the objectives.⁴⁰

Meier addresses an additional aspect that comes perhaps closest to the meaning of *himma* in our context. He explains the term as the master’s faculty of efficacy (*Wirkungsvermögen*), understood as spiritual potency that can produce results in others.⁴¹ Meier gives rather profane examples for this efficacy, referring to a Naqshbandī shaykh who went to watch wrestling matches and caused one or the other wrestler to win.⁴² However, the master can also produce extraordinary effects in his disciples. Meier mentions the Shādhiliyya, whose masters took pride in imparting training to their novices solely by their own power of influence. Hence it is not only the disciple’s own zeal or urge that takes him further on his journey (although the aspirant’s yearning is an important precondition for successful training, too), but it is first and foremost up

³⁷ Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, *Bedrāngnisse*, 119.

³⁸ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 222.

³⁹ Hofheinz, *Internalising Islam*, 349; he renders *himma* as “zeal.” On *himma* as a means of conveyance see also Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 279, 376; id., *Self-Disclosure*, 317.

⁴⁰ Ibn ‘Ajība, *Īqāz al-himam*, 69.

⁴¹ Meier, “Vorrang,” 45. The same meaning occurs in Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 48 and 406 note 8. See also Meier’s discussion of *himma* in the thought of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (Meier, *Kubrā*, 227-240).

⁴² On this and the following see Meier, “Vorrang,” 45 and 47.

to the master to guide the disciple through his spiritual energy. Training with the help of *himma* thus means that the master utilizes his efficacy for the advancement of the aspirant.

Sporadic indications in the sources show that Ibrāhīm Niasse primarily understood *himma* in the sense of the master's efficacy. In a letter to his favorite Mauritanian disciple, Manna Abba alias Shaykhānī, written in the month of Rabī^c al-Thānī 1354/July 1935, he states that spiritual training in the Tijāniyya was based on Aḥmad al-Tijānī's *himma*, which constituted the source for all the deputies. Their affiliation to the Tijāniyya allowed them to draw their own portion of *himma* from this source, and to utilize it to train their own disciples.⁴³ Niasse's followers were convinced that, thanks to his status as the bringer of the flood, he had privileged access to Aḥmad al-Tijānī's *himma* and employed the same with special efficiency for the spiritual advancement of his disciples.⁴⁴

What about the role of *ḥāl*, the second term al-Ḥaḍramī and Zarrūq used to describe proper *tarbiya*? As a technical term in the Sufi lexicon, *ḥāl* denotes the state or condition God confers on the wayfarers without any doing of their own. Even though they have to pass the individual stations (*maqāmāt*) on their own, they cannot reach the destination of the journey through personal effort alone, but will always depend on God to advance to a higher state. While every aspirant has his or her peculiar spiritual energy and his or her peculiar divinely bestowed mystical state, it is the master's spiritual energy or efficacy and the master's state that determines the progress on the path. The more advanced the master's *ḥāl* and the stronger his *himma*, the

⁴³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* I, 24.

⁴⁴ Muḥammad Kaura Namoda, a Nigerian deputy, has composed a panegyric poem that uses the phrase "by the efficacy of Ibrāhīm" as a supplication (see *Ibānat al-muqaṣṣir*, 15 and *passim*).

greater the benefit for the aspirant.⁴⁵ Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop, who was already quoted in the last chapter, explained the partaking of the disciple in the master's state in the following manner:

If someone attains a state, a person who is present cannot but be affected. It is as if someone puts on perfume: someone else present will smell the scent. The aspirant who keeps the company of the master is necessarily affected by the states of the master, and will benefit from them. This is the kind of training practiced by believers living in a community that conforms to the Sunna. The master leads them, corrects them, and guides them on the straight path. However, not only the states and efficacy of the master play a role here. It is also the spiritual energy of the aspirant. There are some who stay with a master for a long time and still progress very little, whereas others reach the goal very fast.⁴⁶

This statement recalls the transformative experience described in the anecdote about the meat that failed to cook, quoted at the beginning of the introduction to the present study, where Niase's presence as a leader of prayer had a profound effect on everything that was behind him. We can therefore also read this incident as an illustration of how an accomplished master has the potential to transform his disciples—not through taking direct measures, such as sending the disciple into seclusion, but in very subtle ways that presuppose not more on the part of the aspirants than constant company and compliance with the rules, provided they have unconditional faith (*taṣḍīq*) in and cultivate their love (*maḥabba*) for Aḥmad al-Tijānī.

While the exigencies of this journey of the hearts appear to be less taxing than those of the journey of the bodies, the latter usually seems to produce faster and easier results. As mentioned above, many Tijānī authorities took the rule of “no seclusion” as a marker of their

⁴⁵ The possibility to participate in the efficacy and mystical state of the master does not depend on the temporal or spatial nearness of the master: Even if the latter is far away or already dead can the aspirant share in the master's *himma* and *ḥāl* (see, for instance, al-Lamaṭī, *Ibrīz*, 361). Muḥammad al-ʿArabī's answer to this question, quoted in Skīraj, *Kashf al-ḥijāb*, 303-304, is also affirmative. — Sufis who rely on the guidance of a deceased or distant master are called Uwaysī, named after Uways al-Qaranī, a contemporary of the Prophet who allegedly received spiritual training from him without ever meeting him (see further Hussaini, “Uways al-Qaranī”). A group of such Sufis is the subject of Baldick, *Imaginary Muslims*.

⁴⁶ Interview, Dakar, January 9, 1997.

order's superiority over others. But they also concede that mystical realization, the ultimate goal of the journey, often takes a long time to occur.⁴⁷ Moreover, as will be outlined in more detail below, only few masters were considered to have the required qualification to guide their disciples successfully on the path. In other words, the adoption of *tarbiya* by means of spiritual energy and the mystical state meant in practice that fewer aspirants embarked on the journey of the hearts, and it took them longer to attain cognizance.

It is here that Ibrāhīm Niasse's practice of spiritual training brought profound changes. As we shall see, his method of *tarbiya*, while based on the principle of *himma* and *ḥāl*, not only provided easier access to the mystical path, but also allowed the aspirants to complete their journey much faster than before. In addition, in his capacity as the bringer of the *fayḍa*, Niasse saw himself as the master with the greatest *himma* within the Tijāniyya of his time. Accordingly, he was also the most efficient spiritual trainer (*murabbī*), who could guarantee his disciples faster and more intense spiritual experiences than others. Such far-reaching changes, however, required scholarly legitimization. The following section analyzes Niasse's strategy to justify his cautious opening of the door of *tarbiya*.

Justifying tarbiya

As outlined in Chapter 1, Ibrāhīm Niasse's major rationale behind the composition of *Kāshif al-illās* was to present himself as the bringer of the *fayḍa*. However, an equally prominent theme in the book is spiritual training; in fact, Niasse tackles the question of the legitimacy of *tarbiya* right at the beginning. In the first paragraph of the introduction, he cites al-Ḥaḍramī's statement

⁴⁷ Although Aḥmad al-Tijānī promised that every member of the Tijāniyya would experience illumination at some point during his or her lifetime, most authorities agree that it usually occurs on the deathbed. See the section "The Special Litanies" below for details.

about the end of conventional training, and devotes the following pages to a detailed discussion of North African Sufi authorities and their stance in the *tarbiya* question.

Why would Niasse deem it necessary to revisit such an old debate? Would he not have been able to justify his position without rehearsing well-known arguments? One possible answer is that he intended to define his place in the larger intellectual tradition of Sufism. His scholarly style and the structure of his argument was not only designed to convince his peers within the Tijāniyya. He also sought to establish his credentials as a learned shaykh and to make an original contribution to a wider debate among Sufis. Another potential explanation is that he considered it necessary to demarcate his stance against some of his predecessors or contemporaries who held divergent views of *tarbiya*. Likely candidates are al-Ḥājj Mālik Sy, a compeer of °Abdallāh Niasse, and conceivably also Aḥmadu Bamba, the founder of the Murīdiyya in Senegal.⁴⁸

From the outset, Niasse does not leave the slightest doubt that he considers *tarbiya* to be a legitimate practice. In *Kāshif al-ilbās*, Zarrūq’s quote of his master al-Ḥaḍramī is followed by a resolute disclaimer:

Only someone who is devoid of the taste of mystical experience and has neither knowledge nor truthfulness concludes from this that *tarbiya* has come to an end in the ninth century [of the Hijra; the fifteenth century C.E.]. This is not what Zarrūq or his shaykh [al-Ḥaḍramī] wanted to say.⁴⁹

The major witnesses Niasse quotes in his case for *tarbiya* are none other than Ibn °Ajība, al-Lamaṭī, and Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°iḥ, who all agree that neither Zarrūq nor al-

⁴⁸ Cheikh Babou has emphasized the importance of *tarbiya* in the Murīdiyya. However, his description of the process remains rather vague (Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad*, 62-66 and 79-85; see also his “Educating the Murid”). In his analysis, *tarbiya* takes a rather general sense of “education” and does not appear to have a deeper mystical significance in Aḥmadu Bamba’s concept. Babou also tends to present *tarbiya* as a unique feature of the Murīdiyya. However, this claim can only stand if *tarbiya* did indeed lack a mystical connotation in Murīd contexts. A close comparison with Ibrāhīm Niasse is pending a thorough study of *tarbiya* in Bamba’s thought and practice.

⁴⁹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 17.

Ḥaḍramī intended to put an end to spiritual training in general. For Niasse, the strongest evidence for the continuing legitimacy of spiritual training lies in the fact that Aḥmad al-Tijānī, “the standard-bearer for *tarbiya*,” ascended to the highest position in the eternal hierarchy of saints more than three hundred years after al-Ḥaḍramī. As he says in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, there can be no doubt that Aḥmad al-Tijānī was an accomplished trainer (*murabbī*) who dispensed the training with the required divine sanction.⁵⁰

But what criteria does *tarbiya* need to fulfill in order to be permissible? Is it really only the training based on spiritual energy and participation in the shaykh’s mystical state? Or can some of the physical exercises still be allowed, on the condition that they are done under the supervision of a qualified master? Does seclusion still play a role in Niasse’s *tarbiya* practice, as the accounts from Nigeria quoted at the beginning of this chapter assert? What requirements do the disciples have to meet before they can be initiated into *tarbiya*? Should access be restricted to mature or elderly people, or can the training be imparted to the young? Is it permissible to dispense *tarbiya* in a way that discloses the identity of the master to the public? In other words, should the emphasis be put on the limits, restrictions, and dangers, or does the potential spiritual benefit for the disciples justify the relaxation of the exclusive approach to *tarbiya*?

Throughout the introduction of *Kāshif al-ilbās*, Niasse tries to maintain the delicate balance between leaving too much and too little room to spiritual training. Apparently, he cannot simply ignore the calls of his prominent predecessors to keep access to mystical knowledge restricted. On the other hand, he is obviously not content with the tiny gap that previous

⁵⁰ Ibid. It is noteworthy that Niasse also acknowledges the Qādiriyya shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1226/1811) as a great training master. See further *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 112-113; see also al-Kuntī’s strong statement in favor of *tarbiya*, quoted in Ibn Anbūja, *al-Jaysh al-kafīl*, 184-185 and translated in Meier, *Mohammedverehrung* II, 417-418. On al-Kuntī’s view of the mystical path see Brenner, “Concepts of *Tarīqa*.”

authorities have left in the door of *tarbiya*, and he seeks to widen it. A look at al-Hajj Mālik Sy's position will help us to get a better sense of what was at stake.

In *Ifhām al-munkir al-jānī* (“Silencing the Sinful Denier”), his major work on Sufism, Mālik Sy elaborates on the very topic that Ibrāhīm Niassa raises at the beginning of *Kāshif al-ilbās*.⁵¹ He repeatedly mentions al-Ḥaḍramī, Zarrūq, and conventional spiritual training, expressing his utter rejection of certain—never concretely identified—practices that fall into this category.⁵² Sy also reiterates the common Tijānī tenet that condoned only those methods that follow the ideal of the first three Muslim generations, aimed at cleansing the lower self of negative traits. The times when a master could train his disciples in the conventional manner to travel on the mystical path were definitely over, as were the times when someone could openly claim the position of a shaykh (*taẓāhur bi-l-mashyakha*). Whoever contravened these rules, Sy warns emphatically with reference to a purported statement by Aḥmad al-Tijānī, was putting a knife at his own throat. In these decadent times, Sy concludes, the only permissible option was to travel on the path in its true meaning, under the guidance of a perfect master and on the basis of the spiritual energy of someone who was a cognizant and had attained the goal.⁵³

Mālik Sy is unequivocal that he wants to set strict limits to the practice of *tarbiya*. For him, only a small circle of people had the required qualification, and regarding the permissible

⁵¹ I have used Ravane Mbaye's edition of the text that forms, together with a French translation, the third volume of his seminal work on Mālik Sy.

⁵² Mālik Sy, *Ifhām al-munkir al-jānī*, 124-125, 134-135, 144-147 and 402-405. According to Bousbina, who has analyzed the text, Sy's statements about *tarbiya* referred to “innovations” that had led to a diversion from the correct methods of spiritual training (“Siècle,” 291). See also Mbaye, *Malick Sy I*, 568-573.

⁵³ Mālik Sy, *Ifhām al-munkir al-jānī*, 404; the author apparently draws on the above-quoted position from the *Bughya*. Mbaye characterizes Sy as a Sufi who practices *tarbiya bi-l-himma* and explains (perhaps with Ibrāhīm Niassa in mind?) that, “if being a Sufi means to transgress the limits of the orthodox practice of Islam or to emit theopathic locutions under the regime of *ḥāl* (. . .), then al-Ḥajj Mālik Sy was not a Sufi” (*Malick Sy I*, 575; my translation).

methods, he favors rigorous, although not clearly outlined, limitations. He reads al-Ḥaḍramī's verdict as a categorical rejection of conventional training. If we compare this stance with Niasse's interpretation as outlined in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, it becomes evident that Niasse tackles the issue differently in a few small, but significant details. Sy rejects conventional training right from the outset, whereas Niasse is at pains to qualify the statement about the end of *tarbiya*. Only towards the end of his treatment of *tarbiya* does Niasse distance himself from conventional training. Otherwise, his entire chapter aims at showing that spiritual training is not only legitimate, but also essential. There is no discussion of dangers, let alone mention of daggers, in Niasse's exposition.

Neither Sy nor Niasse develop their arguments independently from the previous authorities within the Tijāniyya. It is therefore relevant to see how earlier sources have dealt with this problem. The following paraphrase summarizes a paragraph from the “Unequivocal Response” (*al-Jawāb al-shāfi*) by Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā'ih:

Those who carry the burden of *tarbiya* in the Tijāniyya are many. They have been there during the lifetime of Aḥmad al-Tijānī as well as after his death, during all times and in every region. But they do not publicly expose themselves, and only those destined by God can meet a master who provides the training. They work in concealment because the masters chosen for the mission of *tarbiya* do not divulge their secrets. Their true spiritual status is unknown, and they do not outwardly display any behavior that may suggest that God favors them.⁵⁴

At first Muḥammad al-°Arabī claims that the masters of spiritual training are many, but then goes on to characterize *tarbiya* as an exclusive affair to which only a few disciples have access. Like Mālik Sy, Muḥammad al-°Arabī stresses that a shaykh who dispenses spiritual training is not supposed to expose himself outwardly. It thus seems that the qualified masters

⁵⁴ See the full citation in Skīraj, *Kashf al-ḥijāb*, 307-308; also quoted in Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 18-19. Cf. the similar statement in Skīraj, *Tanbih al-ikhwan*, 167. — Muḥammad al-°Arabī uses the term Malāmatiyya, “people of blame,” to describe the latter category. The term will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

belong to a rather rare species that is difficult to find. Given the fact that Ibrāhīm Niasse quotes this paragraph in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, we can assume that he shared Muḥammad al-°Arabī's view on this matter, too. Hence there seems to be a consensus that *tarbiya* is an invisible affair, and that the public exposure (*taẓāhur*) of the rank of a master is not permissible in the Tijāniyya.

However, this consensus is not as obvious as it may seem. In fact, the question of whether Niasse's practice was in conformity with the stipulation of working clandestinely later became the subject of fierce controversies within the Tijāniyya. Although there is no written source that covers these controversies, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari, the former Nigerian deputy who defected from the Tijāniyya, provides us with an insight into the arguments used in the debate. In fact, nobody has dealt with the topic of *tarbiya* in the Tijāniyya more elaborately than Maigari.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, he does not use his vast command of the sources to provide an in-depth analysis of *tarbiya*, but instead tries to expose it as heresy. Doing this he constantly wavers between two tendencies: On the one hand, he describes *tarbiya* as a typical Sufi practice and, hardly a surprise given his reformist stance, classifies it as an objectionable innovation (*bid°a*). On the other hand, he wants to prove that Niasse introduced *tarbiya* newly into the Tijāniyya and thereby deviated from the tradition of the order. In the words of the author of a later rejoinder, Maigari first depicts *tarbiya* as a crime, and then absolves all Sufis except Niasse of the same.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ See Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 266-295. Not only did he trace *tarbiya* through the writings of Niasse, but he also included other sources into his analysis, writings by members of the Tijāniyya as well as other Muslim authors.

⁵⁶ ° Abdallāh b. Muḥammad al-Mishrī, *Indhār wa-ifāda*, 42. — Another strategy of Maigari is to accuse Niasse of plagiarism, because he relied heavily on the *tarbiya* model of Ibn Anbūja, allegedly without identifying his source (see *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 294; more on Ibn Anbūja below). However, Maigari's exposition is contradictory. Elsewhere, his attack focuses on the claim that Niasse made up his *tarbiya* model by himself (ibid., 294-295). He also asserts that his model was just as little rooted in the Tijāniyya as Ibn Anbūja's (ibid., 278), ignoring the fact that Tijānī authorities explicitly condoned Ibn Anbūja's position (Skīraj, *Kashf al-ḥijāb*, 94).

Maigari's strategy mainly consists of trying to substantiate that Niasse had actually endorsed conventional training and thus contradicted the position of the foremost authorities within the Tijāniyya. He not only refers to Muḥammad al-ʿArabī b. al-Sāʾiḥ, but also introduces the position of Aḥmad Skīraj (d. 1363/1944 in Marrakesh), perhaps the leading Tijānī scholar in the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, Maigari draws on *Tanbīh al-ikhwān*, a treatise by Aḥmad Skīraj published in Tunis in 1339/1921, ten years before Ibrāhīm Niasse wrote *Kāshif al-ilbās*. In one of the sections that deal with the question of proper *tarbiya* Skīraj explains that most masters consider the conventional methods as “lost” (*mafqūd*) and would abstain from using them for a large number of disciples. He continues:

The journey on the path remains accessible only for very few, and only the fewest of the few can provide the necessary guidance. If anyone openly lays claim to the position of a master and alleges that he can take a large number of disciples by the hand and give them training, it will make people think bad of him and can result in the perdition of many believers.⁵⁷

Elsewhere *Tanbīh al-ikhwān* repeats the standard Tijānī position that *tarbiya* was not altogether ruled out, but functioned only in the sense of training the hearts and on the basis of spiritual energy and the mystical state.⁵⁸ This is reminiscent of Mālik Sy's position, as is the warning against the serious consequences *tarbiya* might have if practiced incorrectly.

In the same text Skīraj also elaborates on another limitation, emphasizing that Tijānīs do not practice *tarbiya* openly. For this reason one could not find anyone in the Tijāniyya who claimed to be a shaykh, i.e. a master of spiritual training. Even if the disciples regarded their spiritual trainers as shaykhs, the latter were nevertheless only deputies. In this capacity they

⁵⁷ Skīraj, *Tanbīh al-ikhwān*, 106-107. See Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 276-277; cf. Skīraj, *Kashf al-ḥijāb*, 299-300.

⁵⁸ See for instance Skīraj, *Tanbīh al-ikhwān*, 129.

acted as mere representatives of Ahmad al-Tijānī. No deputy is allowed to claim another title, however exalted his spiritual station may be.⁵⁹

For Maigari it is obvious that the positions of Niasse and Skīraj were far apart. Niasse did not abide by the rule that aside from Aḥmad al-Tijānī nobody was entitled to be called shaykh, let alone use other titles and ranks the Senegalese laid claim to.⁶⁰ Whereas Skīraj established that *tarbiya* was only practiced by an extremely small number of masters, Niasse made a public spectacle of *tarbiya*, as if it were the very feature that distinguished the Tijāniyya from other Sufi orders. Furthermore, Skīraj had cautioned against imparting spiritual training to a large number of disciples, while Niasse had opened it up to all and sundry. Maigari finally ends up portraying Niasse as an exponent of conventional training. Had he been of a different opinion, he could not have practiced *tarbiya* in the first place. Hence he had revolted against the recognized authorities of the Tijāniyya. Instead of following the principles established by Aḥmad al-Tijānī, Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°iḥ, and Aḥmad Skīraj, Niasse considered himself an independent *shaykh*, entitled to impart spiritual training on his own.

The followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse would certainly object to this perspective. For them, Niasse had revived and restored *tarbiya* as practiced by Ahmad al-Tijānī. It was therefore inconceivable that he violated any of the established rules. Opponents of Niasse within the Tijāniyya, on the other hand, often raised objections similar to Maigari's. Occasionally, they would go as far as to depict Niasse as the founder of an independent Sufi order, because the

⁵⁹ See Skīraj, *Tanbīh al-ikhwān*, 106-107 and the summary of Skīraj's argument in Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 276.

⁶⁰ On this and the following, see Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 278-279 and 281-283. — The question of whether a deputy of Aḥmad al-Tijānī may lay claim to other titles is the subject of a fierce debate between Maigari and Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh °Abdallāh, the author of a reply to Maigari's work. According to the latter, Niasse had violated the rules by posing as the succor and the pole. Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh °Abdallāh sees no violation at all (*Radd bi-l-ḥadīth*, 92-95). See also °Abdallāh b. Muḥammad al-Mishrī, *Indhār wa-īfāda*, 64-66.

training he dispensed was allegedly not in line with the teachings of Aḥmad al-Tijānī.⁶¹

However, judging from *Kāshif al-ilbās* and the written instructions to his followers, Niasse's views do not seem to be fundamentally different from the established Tijānī tenets as expounded in particular by Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°iḥ. If anything, it is the practice, but not the theory of *tarbiya* that contravenes rules about the public exposure of the master and of *tarbiya* in general, about seclusion, or about the numbers of masters and disciples involved in *tarbiya*. These questions will be revisited later in this and in the following chapter.

However, it is apparent that Niasse arrives at a different assessment than Mālik Sy and Aḥmad Skīraj, whose positions can also be identified as echoes of Muḥammad al-°Arabī. Particularly the passages where Niasse quotes the *Ibrīz* and Ibn °Ajība reveal that he does not content himself with Muḥammad al-°Arabī's treatment of the topic. He rather goes back to the sources himself, sources which present *tarbiya* largely in a favorable light. Other than Sy and Skīraj, Niasse is not preoccupied with condemning conventional training or alleged innovations.

Ibrāhīm Niasse had two principal reasons for writing *Kāshif al-ilbās*: Firstly to establish his credentials as the bringer of the *fayḍa*, and secondly to justify his practice of *tarbiya*. If we consider the introduction of the *Kāshif* in the context of this twin aspiration, it becomes obvious why he emphasizes different aspects than Mālik Sy or Aḥmad Skīraj. One of the crucial features of the *fayḍa* is the flood of mystical knowledge, and true *tarbiya* is the key to it. Niasse needs *tarbiya* in order to justify the advent of the *fayḍa*. Whereas Sy's and Skīraj's interpretations of Muḥammad al-°Arabī underscore the necessity to handle *tarbiya* restrictively and discretely, Niasse passes over the limits and focuses on *tarbiya* as the means to attain mystical knowledge,

⁶¹ See, for instance, the response by one of Niasse's sons to other Tijānīs who spoke of Niasse's movement as an independent Sufi order, called Tarbiya (Muḥammad al-Qurashi b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Risāla*; the questioned is further discussed in Seesemann, "History of the Tijaniyya in Darfur").

the ultimate goal of the Tijāniyya. He seeks to re-open the door of *tarbiya*, of which his predecessors had only left a small gap, and this is what he is trying to justify in *Kāshif al-ilbās*.

The Three Stations of Religion

“What is *tarbiya*?” This question was on the top of my agenda as I went to my first encounter with al-Hasan Cissé, a grandson of Ibrāhīm Niasse and imam of the mosque in Medina Baye from 1982 until his death in 2008, in his home in September 1994. Dozens of visitors filled the small room when I finally had the chance to ask the question, and Cissé took the opportunity to respond in the form of a short sermon. “*Tarbiya* means that the disciple traverses the three stations of religion. These are submission (*islām*), faith (*īmān*), and perfection (*iḥsān*). Each station is divided into three stages (*manāzil*).” The imam then enumerated the nine stages: repentance, righteousness, awareness of God, truthfulness, sincerity, serenity, contemplation, witnessing, and cognizance. Under the close supervision of their shaykh the aspirants would reach one stage after the other until they finally arrived at cognizance. In the course of this process, they would purify their lower self. This, the imam concluded, was the system applied by Ibrāhīm Niasse.⁶²

Cissé’s response was a concise summary of *tarbiya* as presented in *Maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth* (“The Three Stations of Religion”), one of Niasse’s short treatises written in 1350/1931-1932 to instruct his deputies in the principles of spiritual training.⁶³ However, it was not Niasse who designed this system, but °Ubayda b. Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr b. Anbūja, the above-mentioned Mauritanian Tijānī author of the mid-nineteenth century, who in turn drew on an earlier

⁶² Interview with al-Ḥasan Cissé, Medina Baye, September 22, 1994.

⁶³ The addressee was his deputy °Umar Touré, who had asked Niasse to explain the stages of the path. Touré was one of Niasse’s first followers; see further Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 144.

Andalusian model.⁶⁴ Although Niasse mentioned Ibn Anbūja in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, he made no Abū reference at all to this *tarbiya* model—another indication that the *Kāshif* dealt with the legitimacy of *tarbiya* at the expense of practical instructions. Ibn Anbūja’s *Mizāb al-raḥma*, on the other hand, does not make even a single attempt to justify *tarbiya*, but gives a comprehensive treatment of the purification of the self and goes on to expound three different methods of spiritual training, which the author introduces as training by means of formulas of remembrance (*adhkār*), training by means of the five ritual prayers, and training with the help of the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*, the Tijāniyya’s common formula to invoke blessings on the Prophet Muḥammad. *Mizāb al-raḥma* is perhaps the text that comes closest to what we can call a *tarbiya* manual.

The underlying idea of the system Niasse reproduces in “The Three Stations of Religion” is the division of the mystical path into stages that correlate with the terms *islām*, *īmān* und *iḥsān*, as defined in the famous “*ḥadīth* of Gabriel.”⁶⁵ In this *ḥadīth* the Prophet Muḥammad describes *islām* as submission to the will of God as expressed in the compliance with the five pillars of Islam. *Īmān* relates to the internalization of the fundamental articles of faith (*‘aqā’id*), i.e. belief in God, the angels, his messengers, the heavenly books, and the divine decree and predestination. *Iḥsān*, literally “doing the beautiful,” is the complete immersion in worship and the perfection of one’s faith, as described in the maxim, “worship God as if you see Him, and

⁶⁴ The title of Ibn Anbūja’s work is *Mizāb al-raḥma* (summarized and analyzed in Bousbina, “Siècle,” 212-273). In his critical treatment of Niasse’s *tarbiya* concept Maigari pretends to expose Ibn Anbūja as a plagiarizer. This is in line with his attempt to prove that *tarbiya* is alien to the Tijāniyya. However, Ibn Anbūja states himself (*Mizāb al-raḥma*, 59 and 120) that he draws on a book titled *Bughyat al-sālik* by a certain al-Sāḥilī, who can be identified as Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Anṣārī al-Sāḥilī (d. 754/1353; cf. *GAL* Suppl. I, 809 and Suppl. II, 378). The work has recently become available in a careful edition in two volumes with introductory chapters about the book and the author (al-Sāḥilī, *Bughyat al-sālik*, ed. °Abd al-Raḥīm al-°Alamī).

⁶⁵ See Wensinck, *Concordance* I, 467.

even if you do not see Him, He sees you.” Sufis commonly interpret *ihsān* as a direct reference to Sufism. Figure 2.1 illustrates the respective model.

<Figure 2.1>

There is nothing unusual or unique about this division of the mystical path into stages. Such models are typical for the Islamic mystical tradition, and they overlap considerably with general injunctions of Islamic ethic, to the extent that the mystical content at times remains rather vague. That we are here concerned with a model that describes the path to mystical knowledge, rather than to ethical accomplishment, only becomes evident when we read the explanations Niasse offers for the respective stages. His source is, once more, Ibn Anbūja’s *Mizāb al-raḥma*, more specifically the chapter on *tarbiya* by means of formulas of remembrance. The major difference between Ibn Anbūja and Niasse is that the latter keeps silent about the recitation formulas used in the training, whereas the former gives detailed information as to what the aspirant is supposed to recite.⁶⁶ Niasse contents himself with the description of the three stations and the corresponding nine stages.

According to “The Three Stations of Religion,” submission, the first station, means to pronounce the declaration of God’s oneness: The traveler on the path *says*, *lā ilāha illā Allāh*, “there is no deity but God.” Arriving at the station of faith, the traveler reaches certainty beyond any doubt: He or she *knows* that there is no deity other than God. Those who attain the station of

⁶⁶ The formulas mentioned in *Mizāb al-raḥma* are invocations for forgiveness (*istighfār*), benedictions on the Prophet (*ṣalāt ‘alā l-nabī*), and the *haylala* (“There is no deity but God”). These are all taken from the set of recitations that are obligatory for every member of the Tijāniyya. Interestingly, the method al-Sāhili described in *Bughyat al-sālik*, on which Ibn Anbūja modeled his own *tarbiya* system, still draws heavily on seclusion—an element that is completely absent from *Mizāb al-raḥma*. This finding supports Meier’s hypothesis about the shift in Sufi practices from physical exercises to the recitation of litanies (see Meier, *Mohammedverehrung II*, 313-317). — Another, though minor difference between Niasse and Ibn Anbūja is that stages four (*ṣidq*) and five (*ikhḷās*) appear in the reverse order in *Mizāb al-raḥma*. The order in the *Mizāb* is an exact reproduction of the pattern in al-Sāhili’s *Bughyat al-sālik*.

perfection are constantly engaged in putting God's oneness into practice: They *realize* the maxim "there is no deity but God," to the extent that it permeates their entire existence.⁶⁷

Niasse then tackles the three stages of the first station, repentance, righteousness, and awareness of God, defining the first as "leaving the state of being ungrateful for God's favor." Repentance also implies to fulfill the legal obligations of a Muslim, and to shun all actions and objects that are unlawful. Righteousness means to follow the straight (or righteous) path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) referred to in the Qur'ān (Sura 1:6; 6:39 and 126, and others), and to abstain from associating anything with God. Awareness of God takes the first stage further and entails full compliance with the divine commandments and total avoidance of everything that is forbidden.⁶⁸

Then follows the transition to the station of faith. During the subsequent stage of truthfulness the aspirant performs only virtuous deeds (*amal al-birr*). The single criterion that guides the possessor of truthfulness (*ṣādiq*) in all his undertakings is the belief in God and the Last Day. Sincerity, the next stage, introduces a new quality to the compliance with the divine commandments and prohibitions, which already was the focus of the stage of awareness of God. The sincere aspirant complies with these rules purely for the sake of God (*li-wajh Allāh*), and not for profane or selfish motives, like the fear of divine punishment or the longing for paradise.

So far I have summarized five of the nine stages. Niasse accords them a peculiar treatment as compared to the remaining four, because he divides each of them further into three subcategories, depending on the status of the aspirant. Thus, he differentiates between repentance (and righteousness, awareness, truthfulness, sincerity) of the ordinary disciples or commoners

⁶⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Maqāmāt*, 2. The following summary of the stages is based on the same source.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 4. This is an allusion to the Qur'ānic injunction of commanding good and prohibiting evil (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahī 'an al-munkar*; see among many others Sura 3:104, 110, and 114; 9:67, 71, and 112).

(*al-ʿamma*), of the elect (*al-khāṣṣa*; lit., “the special ones”), and of the elite among the elect (*khāṣṣat al-khāṣṣa*). This only changes after the sixth stage, serenity, which marks the transition from the rank of the commoners to the rank of the elect. Niasse explains that with serenity, the heart of the seeker dwells in God and reaches a state where it is content with God. The heart no longer cares about what may cause benefit or harm, but commits itself totally into the hands of God.

After serenity the traveler enters into the station of perfection, beginning with the stage of contemplation, where he or she can permanently sense the divine presence. However, a thin veil still obscures God from full perception; the aspirant only perceives Him through tasting (*dhawq*). Niasse therefore speaks of “contemplation prior to witnessing,” as witnessing is reserved for the following stage. Niasse defines it as the “vision of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) by the Real.” When this vision occurs, it cannot be imagination; it is beyond the possibility of doubt. The seeker loses sensation of anything but the Real by the Real through the Real; not even a hair is left from his or her existence. This is a state where nothing remains as a separate object, neither remembrance (*dhikr*) nor the one who remembers (*dhākir*, i.e. the aspirant) nor the object of remembrance (*madhkūr*, i.e. God). Witnessing is the stage nearest to illumination: the aspirant has now reached the door of cognizance.

Niasse only reserves few remarks to the definition of the final stage of his model: By attaining cognizance the spirit (*rūḥ*) stands firmly established in the presence of witnessing. Such an attainment, however, cannot come through one’s own faculty or effort. It rather resembles the experience of being suddenly overwhelmed by God, resulting in complete annihilation of one’s

own identity (*fanāʿ*), which is finally, after returning to self-awareness, followed by permanent sustenance in God (*baqāʿ*).⁶⁹

This definition of the stations and stages of religion raises once more the question of how its ethical and mystic components relate to each other. Especially from the explanation of the first five stages it is not apparent why this system would be specifically mystical, as compared to ethical. The impression that we are here concerned with ethical Sufism is also confirmed if we put the stations and stages in relation to the successive purification of the lower self (*nafs*), which the *Ibrīz* describes as the actual purpose of the journey on the spiritual path. Although Niasse does not refer to the process of purifying the lower self explicitly in *Maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth*, the gradual transformation of the *nafs*, which occurs parallel to the progression from one stage to the next, constitutes an integral component of his *tarbiya* model.⁷⁰ The following figure illustrates this correlation:

<Figure 2.2>

This fivefold model of the *nafs* was already used by Aḥmad al-Tijānī himself.⁷¹ While the three stations submission, faith, and perfection are derived from the *ḥadīth*, the phases of the development of the soul are drawn from the Qurʾān. The “evil-commanding self” is mentioned in Sura 12:53; the “self-reproaching soul” occurs in 75:2; the “tranquil soul” appears in 89:27, and the following verse describes the condition of the self as “satisfied and causing satisfaction.” Other Sufi traditions, such as the Khalwatiyya, add two more phases to their model, the “inspired soul” (*al-nafs al-mulhama*; derived from a statement in Sura 91:8 that God inspired the self with

⁶⁹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Maqāmat*, 8.

⁷⁰ In other writings Niasse connects the stages of the mystical journey directly to the successive purification of the soul. See *al-Sirr al-akbar* (ed. Maigari), 418-419.

⁷¹ See ʿAlī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-maʿānī* II, 66-67.

discernment of what was beneficial and what was harmful) as the third step, and the “perfect soul” (*al-nafs kāmila*) as the final step.⁷²

Trimingham has argued that, from the nineteenth century onwards, the various models of purification of the soul have come to describe an ascetic-ethical journey rather than a mystical one. Therefore he is of the opinion that the “reformed” orders, such as the Tijāniyya and those that emerged from the Idrīsī tradition, diverged from the mystical orientation of their predecessors.⁷³ Yet, neither the case of the Tijāniyya in general nor the example of Ibrāhīm Niāsse in particular can confirm this hypothesis. Rather, there is overwhelming evidence that transformation of the self and mystical attainment are closely intertwined.

References to the subject matter in *Jawāhir al-ma^cānī* are unambiguous that the purification of the soul is more than a personal ethical endeavor. In one instance, the *Jawāhir* point out that the aspirant cannot fully realize the ethical virtues without the experience of divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*), which occurs immediately after illumination.⁷⁴ Thus, the designation “perfect soul” does not refer to ethical excellence alone, but to someone who has been “opened up” by God for the mystical knowledge of the higher divine realities. Ibn Anbūja, who provided the model for Niāsse’s systematization of the mystical path, also confirms the mystical character of the journey, especially in the final three stages (contemplation, witnessing, cognizance), which he says are designed to discover some of the secrets of the “Muḥammadan Reality” (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*).⁷⁵

⁷² See *EI* 2, entry “Khalwatiyya.” For other models see Hofheinz, *Internalising Islam*, 354; Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, 152-153 and 155-157; Radtke, “18th century,” 348-349.

⁷³ Trimingham, *Sufi Orders*, 106-107 and 155.

⁷⁴ ^c Alī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-ma^cānī* II, 58.

⁷⁵ See Ibn Anbūja, *Mizāb al-raḥma*, 111 and 155.

Treading the path (*sulūk*) and purifying one's self form together only one component of the spiritual training as conceived by Ibn Anbūja and Ibrāhīm Niasse. The second component, without which the journey and the purification process would remain incomplete, is the mystical experience, culminating in illumination and subsequent cognizance. However, both components go hand in hand: The mystical experience would also be lacking without the internalization and realization of the ethical virtues.⁷⁶

A final argument for the combination of ethical and mystical elements in Niasse's concept is provided by the further deliberations in "Three Stations of Religion." It has already been mentioned that Niasse divides some of the nine stages into three classes, the commoners, the elect, and the elite of the elect. Let us take repentance, the first stage, as an example. Niasse applies the general definition to the ordinary disciples or commoners. For them, repentance means to fulfill their religious obligations and observe the prohibitions. To be counted among the elect, one had to go a step further: They not only fulfill their obligations, but also observe what is recommended as praiseworthy; they not only observe the prohibitions, but also abstain from what is considered blameworthy.⁷⁷ The elite of the elect finally are the ones who accomplish the reality of repentance by mortifying their lower self. Once this has been achieved, according to Niasse, even repentance itself is being repented of, up to the point where nothing is left to repent, according to the maxim: "The reality of repentance is the absence of repentance."⁷⁸

As Figure 2.3 illustrates, Niasse applies this threefold division of the stages only up to serenity, i.e. the sixth stage. On having traversed the station of faith, the ethical virtues have been

⁷⁶ The same idea is expressed in Niasse's famous aphorism, to be discussed in Chapter 3: "Two [types of people] do not belong to me, or to the path in any way: Someone who is enraptured and does not tread the path, and someone who treads the path and does not get enraptured."

⁷⁷ This is a reference to the five categories used in Islamic law to classify human actions: obligatory, recommended, neutral, reprehensible, forbidden (see the entry "Aḥkām" in *EI* 2).

⁷⁸ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Maqāmāt*, 2-3.

absorbed and become the traveler's attributes. He or she thus enters the rank of the elect. During the subsequent part of the journey there is an analogous differentiation between the meaning of the stages for the elect and the elite of the elect. For instance, with regard to contemplation the model distinguishes "contemplation prior to witnessing" (applying to the elect) from "contemplation after witnessing" (applying to the elite of the elect). The stations of religion thus resemble a spiral through which the traveler moves upward.

<Figure 2.3>

The three categories of the commoners, the elect, and the elite of the elect can further be correlated with the terms instruction (*ta'lim*), training (*tarbiya*), and elevation (*tarqiya*). The first five stages fall in the range of general instruction. From the sixth stage onwards the actual process of spiritual training begins, and only someone who has traversed the stations and stages of the commoners and has become a cognizant can realize true repentance, righteousness, awareness of God, truthfulness, and sincerity. The highest realm is that of elevation, and only someone who has left behind the stations and stages of the elect enters it. Here the master elevates the traveler to the loftiest stages, and the higher realities of the individual stages are revealed to him. This development culminates at the stage of righteousness. For the elite of the elect it means *al-baqā' ba'd al-fanā'*, permanence after annihilation.⁷⁹ Whoever is granted the state of permanent intimacy with and sustenance from God after having been annihilated has reached the ultimate goal of the mystical path.

Other documents from the early period of Niassé's community provide further details about this model of *sulūk*, or journey on the path. In 1349/1930-1931, about one year before he wrote the letter to 'Umar Touré that eventually came to be published as "The Three Stations of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 10.

Religion,” Ibrāhīm Niasse replied to the queries of a certain Muḥammad al-Amīn, who can probably be identified as Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Abū Bakr, also known as al-Ḥājj Amīn Tuti.⁸⁰ The letter also addresses the stations of religion and recounts the nine stages. But unlike in “The Three Stations of Religion,” Niasse puts the term *sulūk* here in relation to *jadhb* (rapture, attraction), a common expression in the Sufi lexicon that refers to the phenomenon that the aspirant is drawn towards God in a profound mystical experience. This attraction can occur quite suddenly; this is another reason why it is absolutely imperative that a qualified master keeps a close eye on the aspirant.⁸¹ If the disciples were exposed to this attraction on their own, they would be in danger of not returning from this condition, or even of falling prey to Satan and being led astray.

In his instructions to Muḥammad al-Amīn, Niasse points out that the character of the journey differs, depending on the stages the aspirant traverses before and after he makes the experience of the attraction: “Prior to attraction the wayfaring is a veil; thereafter it is perfection.”⁸² Hence the aspirant is still deprived of the glance at the higher divine truth until he becomes “enraptured” (*majdhūb*). In Figure 2.3 rapture would ideally coincide with cognizance. However, there is no rule that says when it has to occur; it can affect the adept much earlier.

In any case, true wayfaring only starts after having experienced rapture. The further journey is called “wayfaring within rapture” (*al-sulūk fī l-jadhb*), characterized by the return to repentance after the attainment of cognizance. With this, the cycle begins anew: The traveler now passes through the stages as one of the elect, until he or she traverses the threshold of the

⁸⁰ The letter has been published in Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 81-82.

⁸¹ See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 73, on the sudden occurrence of *jadhb*. In another chapter, Niasse discusses the necessity of having a qualified master who supervises the training (*ibid.*, 88-97).

⁸² Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil*, I, 81.

realm of elevation. The journey concludes with the arrival at the stage of righteousness as one of the elite of the elect, having been graced with permanence after annihilation. Niasse makes yet another statement in this letter that suggests extending the model depicted in the above figure by one ultimate stage. Whoever ascends once more to the stage of God-awareness at the end of the journey has accomplished “the reality of wayfaring in the inward and the outward.”⁸³

Annihilation

We are now familiar with Niasse’s conceptualization of the mystical path and its division into stations and stages. However, the characterization of the ultimate goal of the journey still appears vague. According to Niasse’s definition, the stage of cognizance (*ma^crifa*) is marked by the aspirant’s experience of complete annihilation, followed by permanent intimacy with the divine. This statement is in line with standard Sufi doctrine.⁸⁴ However, less common is that Niasse also distinguishes between various stages of annihilation, similar to his definitions of preceding terms and models. “The Three Stations of Religion” only contain a few hints to this differentiation, the most important being the aphorism quoted in the beginning of this chapter: “For me, the cognizant is someone who has been annihilated once in the essence, two or three times in the attribute, and once in the name.”

Niasse thus suggests that the highest form of cognizance results from a sequence of steps, with annihilation occurring at least four or five times. But what is actually meant by annihilation in the essence, in the attribute, and in the name? Given the fact that Sufis do not verbalize these experiences, it is impossible for an outsider to arrive at a consistent and straightforward

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 141-145.

interpretation. The following considerations are intended to throw some more light on the issue, without claiming to resolve the enigma.

The differentiation between God's names, attributes and essence is quite common, both in Islamic theology and in Sufism. According to the theosophist al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, God's primary name (*ism*) is Allāh, and all other names are secondary.⁸⁵ While names serve to denominate a thing, attributes are meant to make it perceptible. Names are for the tongue; attributes for the eye. The attributes are a means for man to recognize God, because each of His attributes describes an aspect of God or His creation. God has endowed His attributes with designations that can be read with the eye of the heart. These designations are derived from His abstract qualities of being Eternal, Omnipotent, Creator, Living, All-knowing, All-seeing, All-hearing, and Speaking.⁸⁶ The essence, last but not least, is the core being of God, which can neither be designated by a name nor be expressed through attributes.

Niasse's aphorism thus refers to well-known Sufi concepts. But does his notion of several steps of annihilation resemble the ideas of any of his predecessors? Ibn Anbūja, who provided the model for Niasse's systematization of *tarbiya*, uses the term annihilation frequently. In his explanation of the last three stages (contemplation, witnessing, cognizance) he speaks of *fanā'* *al-fanā'*, "the annihilation of annihilation," and he also points out that the meaning of God's names, attributes, and essence reveals itself to the aspirant on reaching the stage of cognizance.⁸⁷ But a systematic division into four or five steps can nowhere be found in Ibn Anbūja's work. However, if we turn to Ibn 'Ajība's commentary of Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's *Ḥikam*, we find close parallels to Niasse's concept.

⁸⁵ See Radtke and O'Kane, *Concept of Sainthood*, 224-226, for al-Tirmidhī's position on the topic.

⁸⁶ See further the entries "Allāh" and "Ṣifa" in *EI* 2.

⁸⁷ Ibn Anbūja, *Mizāb al-raḥma*, 113 and 155-156.

Ibn ʿAjība also distinguishes between the three types of annihilation mentioned by Niasse. He arranges them in a graded model and appends as a final grade the annihilation of annihilation.⁸⁸ He further elucidates that the traveler, once he attains one level, hears the “calls” (*ḥawātif*) of the next. In this manner he first realizes annihilation in the name, then in the attribute, and finally in the essence. Tasting the sweetness of the subsequent levels, he ultimately reaches *fanāʾ al-fanāʾ*, where even his annihilation would be obliterated. This, Ibn ʿAjība concludes, is the moment when the secret of unification (*tawḥīd*) of the name, the attributes, and the fundamental nature of God is revealed.

Although this does not yet fully clarify Niasse’s aphorism, the *fanāʾ* experiences have hereby been put in a sequence.⁸⁹ But why two or three annihilations in the attribute, and why does Niasse speak of “the attribute” in the singular, instead of the plural? Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop, Niasse’s companion for decades and certainly one of the most knowledgeable persons with regard to such questions, politely declined my request for an interpretation of the phases of *fanāʾ*, remarking that from a linguistic point of view the aphorism was clear, but its true significance was among the things that could only be understood through personal experience.

The scholarly writings left by Niasse and his disciples fail to provide answers to these questions. However, we can resort once more to sources that document the transmission of Sufi

⁸⁸ See Ibn ʿAjība, *Īqāz al-himam*, 52. On his use of essence and attribute see also Michon, *Ibn ʿAjība*, 252-253. — For a thirteenth-century perspective on *fanāʾ ʿan al-fanāʾ* from Qayrawān see Abrahamov, *Divine Love*, 126-127.

⁸⁹ This order is also confirmed by Ilyās al-Wālī, a Nigerian deputy of Niasse who attempted to systematize the mystical teachings laid down in Niasse’s work *al-Sirr al-akbar* (on him *ALA* II, 355; Paden, *Kano*, 121; Mohammed, “Hausa Scholar-Trader,” 150; Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 206-207). In his treatise *Afḍal al-wasāʾil fī l-tawassul bi-sayyid al-awākhir wa-l-awāʾil* he writes: “The name is the interior (*bāṭin*) of a thing (*shayʾ*), and the thing is the exterior part (*ẓāhir*) of the name, in the same way as the attribute (*ṣifa*) is the interior of the name, and the name is the exterior of the attribute. The essence (*dhāt*) is the innermost core of the attribute, and the attribute is the exterior of the essence” (Ilyās al-Wālī, *Afḍal al-wasāʾil*, j 11).

teachings to the followers. One of them is *al-Khuṭba al-Murītāniyya*, the transcript of a sermon Niasse delivered in Shawwāl 1387/January 1968 in Nouakchott. This text contains quite a few hints that help to get a clearer picture of the stages of annihilation. The following quotation gives a synopsis of the mystical path, indicating that the wayfarer advances on his journey with the help of recitations. Niasse explained:

When an aspirant who desires arrival (*wuṣūl*) comes to an accomplished master, the first thing the master does is to instruct him to observe remembrance (*dhikr*) as long as it takes to establish a connection to the divine presence (*ḥaḍrat Allāh*). This happens through annihilation. As long as the bondman is not annihilated in the divine essence, his faith is not perfect. . . . If he persists in the remembrance of God, he will experience annihilation.⁹⁰

Thereafter Niasse lists the three forms of annihilation, but this time with a conspicuous deviation: The first variant mentioned here is not annihilation in the name, but *fanāʾ fi l-afʿāl*, annihilation in the acts. The explanation Niasse offers for annihilation in the acts is an excellent example of the rhetorical devices he used when addressing his followers. He referred his audience in Nouakchott to the example of Arabic grammar lessons, a situation most if not all listeners were familiar with. Whenever he taught the lesson about the verbs (*afʿāl*), he would point out that, according to the grammarians, the real actor (*fāʿil*) behind every action was God. Thus, the annihilation in the acts was related to God, and this stage was reached when the aspirant had internalized the certainty that there was no actor other than God. Even the common believers (*ʿamma*) could realize this first form of annihilation.

In the exposition of annihilation in the attribute Niasse appeals once more to the religious education of his audience. Everyone knew the meaning of the divine attributes, as they were being taught in the first lessons of *tawhīd* (doctrine of God's oneness; theology): God being Omnipotent, All-Knowing, Living, Hearing, Seeing, and Speaking. The second phase of

⁹⁰ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Khuṭba al-Murītāniyya*, 11; also in *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 59.

annihilation was consequently realized when the aspirant reached the certainty that there was no power, knowledge, life, hearing, seeing, and speaking apart from God. Ascending yet higher, the aspirant could be granted annihilation in the essence, characterized by the complete disappearance of everything except God alone.⁹¹

In the next step, Niasse links the three phases of annihilation with the principle of unification. The formula “There is no deity but God” (*lā ilāha illā Allāh*) consisted, according to Niasse, of a shell (*qishr*), a core (*lubb*) and the core of the core (*lubb al-lubb*). The shell relates to the first dimension of annihilation, and the statement is equivalent to: “There is no God but Him.” The testimony of someone who reaches the core becomes, “There is no God but You,” signifying promotion to the rank of the elect. The third dimension is reserved for the elite of the elect, and whoever ascends to this stage can be heard saying, “There is no God but Me.” This is not to be misunderstood as the annihilated self laying claim to divinity (*ulūhiyya*). Rather, the self becomes the medium (*lisān*; lit., “tongue”) by which the Real proclaims Itself. The actual speaker is God, not the aspirant who reaches the core of the core. The latter does not even hear the voice, as God is both the speaker and the hearer; only a possibly present third person would hear it. Whoever makes this experience has truly learnt that there was nothing in existence but God. This stage is called the special unification (*al-tawḥīd al-khāṣṣ*).⁹²

Niasse describes the state of the aspirant who arrives at the core of the core with the term *yaqīn* (“certainty”). The peculiar quality of this certainty lies in the fact that it is not an ephemeral experience the aspirant makes in the moment of annihilation in the divine essence, but that it becomes a permanent distinction of the successful aspirant. The realization of the absolute

⁹¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Khuṭba al-Murītāniyya*, 12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 12-13. On the shell, the core, and the core of the core see also *ibid.*, 30. The idea of special unification will also play a role in the following chapter.

oneness of the name, the attributes and the essence, gained in the state of annihilation, intoxication (*sukr*), or during enrapture, settles in the normal consciousness. In Niasse's words, this absolute certainty results in the establishment of a true bond (*irtibāṭ*) with God. The aspirant who reaches this stage can see the things in their true reality. He or she treats every creature according to the rank God had given it, and he or she fulfills all religious duties and all pious acts by observing the rules of perfect conduct (*adab*) towards God, the creation, and him- or herself.⁹³

This exposition conveys a clearer sense of the phases of annihilation, but it still fails to explain why Niasse demands of his disciples to be annihilated in the attribute two or three times. Being aware of the highly speculative character of the enterprise, I will propose a tentative interpretation of this phrase, drawing on scattered remarks by Ibrāhīm Niasse in written sources.

In his Mauritanian sermon Niasse spoke of the annihilation in the attribute in connection with the divine attributes as they are known in theology. Yet, it is unlikely that these were meant in Niasse's aphorism.⁹⁴ Taking as a premise al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's definition that man can experience God through the attributes, the Prophet can also be considered one such attribute. Given the central position Muḥammad occupies in Sufi cosmology and in the Tijāniyya's in particular, it seems justified to relate one of the three annihilations in the attribute to the Prophet.

In the hierarchy of the mystical cosmos of the Tijāniyya, the archetypical Muḥammad, as portrayed in the concept of the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*), is directly succeeded by the Seal of the Saints (*khatm al-awliyāʾ*), i.e., Aḥmad al-Tijānī. In his capacity as the intermediary of the intermediaries (*barzakh al-barāzikh*) it is the latter's function to channel the outpourings (*fuyūd*) that emerge from the Muḥammadan Reality. Moreover, Aḥmad al-Tijānī

⁹³ Ibid., 15.

⁹⁴ Had Niasse meant the theological attributes, it would make little sense to divide the respective annihilation into two or three separate experiences. Either a collective annihilation could have been expected, or a separate one for each of the theological attributes.

is the only “true” shaykh in the Tijāniyya, because he is the one who, with the authorization of the Prophet, imparts spiritual training to all disciples, even if their actual training is done under the supervision of deputies. Hence it is quite plausible to associate another “annihilation in the attribute” with Aḥmad al-Tijānī.

The interpretation given so far seems to be corroborated by the rules for the recitation of the litanies and formulas of remembrance, which stipulate that the disciple should visualize the human form (*ṣūra*) of the Prophet Muḥammad and Aḥmad al-Tijānī. In *Kāshif al-ilbās*, Niasse notes that those who practice the recitations in this way on a regular basis will eventually meet with the spirit (*rūḥ*) of the Prophet and Aḥmad al-Tijānī and thus fulfill the conditions for additional and deeper mystical experiences.⁹⁵

Now Niasse says that the annihilation in the attribute has to take place two *or* three times. We may thus assume that two experiences, probably annihilation in the Prophet and in Aḥmad al-Tijānī, have to be regarded as obligatory. The third time, on the other hand, would be optional; it does not form part of the necessary conditions to become a cognizant and may therefore be omitted. A likely possibility is to relate this optional annihilation in the attribute to the shaykh, i.e. the master under whose supervision the aspirant travels the path. One of Niasse’s statements in his sermon in Nouakchott supports this view. Following the observation that the special unification could only be achieved through annihilation he pointed out:

Therefore, the first objective the cognizants want to achieve for an aspirant is that the latter finds annihilation in God [the first step: *fanā’ fī Allāh*]. Then the aspirant progresses further until he establishes a connection with the master, because he is an attribute of God [the first annihilation of the second step]. In these two kinds of annihilation the purpose is that the aspirant meets with the

⁹⁵ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 73.

Prophet and Aḥmad al-Tijānī [the second and third annihilation of the second step]. Otherwise he falls back to the previous station [i.e. the first step].⁹⁶

This elucidation not only confirms that the master becomes the object of one of the annihilations in the attribute. In addition, it hints at the sequence in which the three steps are arranged. The first annihilation pertains to the respective master who dispenses the spiritual training; this step is optional. The second annihilation is related to Aḥmad al-Tijānī, and the third targets the Prophet. The annihilation in the master is optional because he does not impart *tarbiya* on his own account, but only as a deputy of Aḥmad al-Tijānī. Therefore the actual goal of the annihilation is not the acting master, but the founder of the order himself; the annihilation in the latter is the prelude to annihilation in the Prophet. Hence some aspirants may pass over their own master and get annihilated in Aḥmad al-Tijānī right away, whereas others take the interim step of annihilation in their master.

I need to emphasize once more that this interpretation, however plausible it may appear, is based on my own conjecture. It is entirely conceivable that for some, the object of the third annihilation in the attribute was not their respective master, but Ibrāhīm Niasse himself, since he, in his capacity as the bringer of the flood, channeled the emanations coming from Aḥmad al-Tijānī further to the disciples.

Mystical experiences differ, and any attempt to capture them in words has to remain deficient. Even if Niasse systematized the journey on the mystical path, it does not mean that each and every experience had to conform to the model. The model projects an ideal meant to provide orientation during the journey; it names milestones and landmarks, but cannot be read as an exact outline or blueprint of the path. Niasse reminded his followers that the cognizants were always talking about the same goal, but the experiences they tasted in the course of their

⁹⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Khuṭba al-Murītāniyya*, 14; the additions are mine.

wayfaring were manifold.⁹⁷ The originality of his system does not consist in its individual components; these can be traced back to teachings and practices of Sufism and the Tijāniyya. Niasse's achievement lies in the fact that he devised his system in a practical manner that allowed ordinary Muslims to gain access to religious experiences previously out of their reach. The following section shows how precisely Niasse managed to open the gate of spiritual training to larger groups of people.

The Special Litanies

The above discussion suggests that Ibrāhīm Niasse assigns greater importance to spiritual training and values easier access to mystical experience higher than other authorities within the Tijāniyya. Another passage from his Mauritanian sermon illustrates his peculiar take on *tarbiya* further. Faith, Niasse explained to his audience, can only be brought to perfection through annihilation in the divine essence. Alluding to Qur'ān 83:15-16 he continued: "As long as there is a veil [between the believer and God], the possibility remains that punishment will close in on the bondman in the hereafter."⁹⁸ The implication is that *tarbiya* reduces the probability of such punishment, because it removes the veils that separate the believer from God.

However, although Niasse seems to place a stronger emphasis on mystical experience than many of his contemporaries and predecessors within the Tijāniyya, it would go too far to construe a fundamental difference between his approach and the older Tijāniyya. The oldest and most authoritative of all sources, *Jawāhir al-ma'ānī*, is full of descriptions of spiritual states and mystical experiences. The actual difference lies elsewhere. Niasse assumes a new position vis-à-

⁹⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* I, 81.

⁹⁸ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Khuṭba al-Murītāniyya*, 11. The verses hinted at say: "Verily, they will be veiled from their Lord on that day. Further, they will enter the fire of hell."

vis other representatives of the order by regarding spiritual training as an essential, though not mandatory, component of faith itself. In this designation *tarbiya* is more than an optional supplement reserved for a small elite—it becomes the means by which potentially every believer can attain illumination and thus perfect his or her faith. The systematization of the steps and stages served this very purpose. Niasse’s practical guidelines facilitated the access to mystical experience, and—as we will see—launched a shortcut to illumination.

At the core of the method devised by Ibrāhīm Niasse were a few recitation formulas, which, by all accounts, accelerated the training process dramatically. *Tarbiya* begins with the implantation (*talqīn*) of these recitation formulas, which are known as the special litanies (*al-awrād al-khāṣṣa*) or litanies of spiritual training (*awrād al-tarbiya*). Observations I made during my visits to Tijānī communities and statements I heard in conversations with leaders and followers indicate that this implantation involves a formal initiation process. Before starting the process, the master—who needs to be authorized by Ibrāhīm Niasse or one of his deputies—has to determine that the aspirant is physically and mentally capable to undergo the training. Then the master gives the candidate the litanies together with instructions for the proper recitation, i.e. what to recite, when to do it, and how many times he or she has to repeat the respective formula. No litany is supposed to be recited without permission from the master, and no information is supposed to be leaked to outsiders. During the process the master ensures the correct course of the training by closely observing the candidate’s progress, which ends when it becomes apparent that the aspirant is not aware of anything other than God.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Occasionally I heard people talk about an examination (*imtiḥān*) the candidates have to undergo when they believe to have experienced illumination. In a private meeting the master would put a number of questions to them in order to verify that they had indeed reached the desired stage. Joseph Hill gives a similar account and even describes one such dialogue—though not private—between master and disciple. See Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 244.

Due to the initiatory and secret character of *tarbiya*, information concerning the special litanies is rarely put into writing. However, Ibrāhīm Niasse does give occasional hints in some of his letters. One of these was addressed to a certain *sharīf* Muḥammad al-Bashīr, composed at the end of the month of Dhū l-Qa° da 1359/end of December 1940. The context suggests that the *sharīf* had previously asked in writing how he could satisfy his desire for mystical realization. In response, Niasse gave him the following advice, which once more illustrates the importance of spiritual energy (*himma*) for the purpose of spiritual training:

I have renewed your permission to recite the litanies according to the known conditions, and I have channeled the spiritual energy of Aḥmad al-Tijānī to you. Given the love and conviction you already have, this will be sufficient for you, because *tarbiya* is all about truthfulness and love. The first step towards illumination is to be faithful. It has been said: In our path, faith can only be perfected through illumination. . . .

Know that the intention behind the masters of spiritual training is to reach the Prophet, the highest of all intermediaries, through their mediation. ° Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj al-° Alawī once told me: “The purpose of the recitations in the Tijāniyya is to get a fragrance of the Muḥammadan Reality.” Therefore, my brother, I advise you to recite the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* frequently during the night as well as during the day. . . . Observe the [correct] number. Know that with every secret the actual secret lies in the number. It is 500 times before going to sleep, as well as in the time before dawn, and likewise after the Morning Prayer. Whoever does this continuously cannot but attain cognizance of God, the Most High.¹⁰⁰

Thus, the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*, a short Arabic prayer formula containing blessings on the Prophet and consisting of less than thirty words, takes center stage in the *tarbiya* process.¹⁰¹ The same prayer formula also forms an integral part of the obligatory litanies (*al-awrād al-lāzima*) of the Tijāniyya: Any initiated person is supposed to recite it 250 times a day, individually and in congregation. According to *Jawāhir al-ma°ānī*, one recitation of the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* “is equivalent

¹⁰⁰ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā°il* I, 112-113.

¹⁰¹ The formula can be rendered into English as follows: “Oh God, send blessings upon our master Muḥammad, who opens what has been closed, who seals what has gone before, who makes the truth victorious by the truth, who guides us on the straight path, and [send blessings] upon his family, [blessings] that accord with his status and his exalted position.” For other translations, see for instance Wright and Weldon, *Pearls*, 136 and Ryan, “Tijani Sufism,” 210.

to 6,000 recitations of every formula that praises God (*tasbīh*) since the creation, of every formula of remembrance of God (*dhikr*), of every supplicatory prayer (*duʿāʾ*) big or small, and of the Qurʾān.”¹⁰² This statement is attributed to a communication Aḥmad al-Tijānī received from the Prophet during a visionary encounter in a waking state (*ruʿya fī l-yaqza*). It is certainly not a coincidence that Niasse chose the number of 500 recitations of the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* for the purpose of spiritual training: This number is equivalent to the numerical value of the divine name *al-Fattāh*, “the Opener”—i.e., the one who grants *fath* or illumination.

In his advice to Muḥammad al-Bashīr, Niasse describes the master as the mediator who enables the aspirant to get a fragrance of the archetypal Muḥammad. We thus have a model example of what Meier calls *Mohammedmystik*, a type of mysticism that focuses on the Prophet and elevates the recitation of the *taṣliya*—i.e. formulas invoking blessings on Muḥammad—to the rank of the most important method to attain mystical insight.¹⁰³ Yet, as other documents show, the function of the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* is not limited to giving the aspirant access to the Prophet Muḥammad. The latter is not an end in itself, but the means to obtain knowledge of God—a fact emphasized in Meier’s studies of *Mohammedmystik*, but long ignored in the literature about so-called “Neo-Sufism.”¹⁰⁴ The following extract from another of Niasse’s letters illustrates this and

¹⁰² ʿAlī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-maʿānī* I, 136. – This and other Tijānī beliefs pertaining to the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* occupy considerable space in the primary sources. See, for instance, Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 140-142. A concise summary is Ibrāhīm Sīdī, *al-Minhaj al-qawīm*; a comprehensive reference work in four volumes is al-Nazīfī, *al-Durra al-kharīda*. Fritz Meier’s analysis of formulas invoking blessings on the Prophet also contains two sections on the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* (Meier, *Mohammedverehrung* II, 318-325). On the controversies surrounding this prayer formula see Abun Nasr, *Tijaniyya*, 173-181 and Kane, “Muhammad Niasse,” 226-227. For an in-depth analysis see Seesemann, “*Takfīr* Debate.”

¹⁰³ Meier (*Mohammedverehrung* II) traces the rise of *taṣliya* recitations as the preferred mystical method back to the fifteenth century and shows how they gradually superseded other methods, particularly the ascetic exercises of the Sufis, which he refers to as *vita purgativa*.

¹⁰⁴ See the discussion in O’Fahey and Radtke, “Neo-Sufism.”

confirms once more that the recitation of the formidable *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* at three different times of the day lies at the heart of Niasse’s training method:

Take the Prophet as your highest intercessor by frequently invoking blessings on him. This is the way of the one who wants to attain cognizance of the Most High. Recite especially the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*, because it is the greatest treasure. . . . Recite it [several hundred] times after every Evening Prayer before going to sleep, as well as before the break of dawn, and after completing the morning recitation of the [obligatory] litanies. Do this with the intention of obeying God’s command and to express adoration, glorification and love, not for any other purpose. Whoever does this continuously, provided he has the special permission from an authorized person—will be granted illumination, through God’s power and might. What I have noted here is what I possess in terms of secrets. It is sufficient for me and for you.¹⁰⁵

What else is part of the *awrād al-tarbiya*, apart from the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*? As mentioned above, written sources usually keep silent about this matter, and details about the litanies and their proper use are only supposed to be passed on from master to disciple, or from one master to another. One of the reasons for the rule of secrecy is, of course, that publicizing the litanies would amount to an invitation to recite them without the supervision of a qualified master. Nonetheless, there are a few written sources that disclose specifics of the process, and I occasionally heard bits and pieces from deputies.¹⁰⁶ In addition to the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*, which falls into the category of *taṣliya*, the special litanies consist of a supplicatory prayer (*du‘ā’*) and a formula of remembrance (*dhikr*). The latter is a variation of the *haylala* (the formula *lā ilāha illā Allāh*) derived from the Qur’ān: “There is no deity but God, the first, the last, the manifest, the hidden” (*al-awwal al-ākhir al-ẓāhir al-bāṭin*; Sura 57:3). The supplication is known as the

¹⁰⁵ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā’il* I, 72-73. For other references to several hundred recitations of the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* at three times of the day see *ibid.*, 82 and Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Ziyādat al-jawāhir*, 13. — Although the precise number of required recitations appears in the source, I have decided not to include them here, following the request of several Tijānī shaykhs.

¹⁰⁶ One of the most detailed expositions is Ibrāhīm Sīdī, *al-Nuṣūṣ al-wāḍiḥa*. The thesis by Yasir Quadri contains vivid descriptions of *tarbiya* practices and recitations. See Quadri, “Tijāniyyah in Nigeria,” 323-326.

Mu^ʿawwaliyya, which appears in Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s prayer book.¹⁰⁷ The title is taken from the opening phrase of the prayer, *Allāhumma ʿalayka mu^ʿawwalī*, “Oh God, on You is my reliance.” The recitations of both the supplication and the formula of remembrance are tied to the times of the ritual prayer. The *Mu^ʿawwaliyya* is supposed to be recited more than ten times after each prayer; the *dhikr* formula has to be repeated more than one thousand times after the prayers, with one additional time during the night, adding to a total of close to ten thousand.¹⁰⁸

Going back to the stations and stages of the mystical path as summarized in Figure 2.3, we can correlate the function of special litanies with the stages leading up to the first experience of cognizance. Those aspirants who wish to continue their journey to the higher stages in the realm of elevation will do so by means of other litanies. Illumination they achieve through the three formulas *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*, Sura 57:3, and *Mu^ʿawwaliyya*—the peculiar method Niasse devised to take his adepts closer to God.

However, a closer look at the authoritative texts of the Tijāniyya reveals that this method is not as peculiar as it may seem. All formulas are taken from the well-known repertoire of Tijānī litanies, some obligatory (*awrād lāzima*), others optional (*ikhtiyāriyya*). Niasse’s innovation only relates to the combination of the three formulas and the rules regarding the precise numbers and times that govern the recitation. For instance, the Egyptian Tijānī scholar Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ b. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf (d. 1398/1978) recommended three or seven recitations of the *Mu^ʿawwaliyya* after each ritual prayer, as this exercise would make the heart adhere exclusively to God.¹⁰⁹

The *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* has already been mentioned as an integral part of the obligatory daily *wird*. Tijānī manuals universally recommend this prayer for additional recitations. Its efficacy for

¹⁰⁷ See Aḥmad al-Tijānī, *Aḥzāb wa-awrād* (ed. Tunis), 101-102.

¹⁰⁸ Once more, I prefer not to include the precise number of recitations.

¹⁰⁹ Ibrāhīm Sīdī, *al-Nuṣūṣ al-wāḍiḥa*, 24.

mystical pursuits was already emphasized by Aḥmad al-Tijānī himself. *Jawāhir al-ma^cānī*, for instance, describes the *dhikr* together with the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*, if recited at the proper time, as the “key to the gates of goodness.”¹¹⁰ In *Mizāb al-Raḥma*, the model that inspired Niasse’s version of *tarbiya*, Ibn Anbūja dedicates a whole chapter to the “training by means of the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*.”¹¹¹ His exposition deals mainly with the many benefits of this formula and does not contain guidelines as to when and how often it should be recited. Nonetheless, Ibn Anbūja maintains that, according to Aḥmad al-Tijānī, its regular recitation inevitably leads to illumination and rapture (*jadhb*), provided it is done in accordance with the conditions. Therefore the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* was by itself sufficient to traverse the stations and stages.¹¹² Last but not least, Muḥammad al-^cArabī b. al-Sā^oiḥ also indicates that the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* formed the basis of *tarbiya* in the Tijāniyya.¹¹³ Even with regard to the three recommended times and the number of recitations there is evidence that Niasse replicates methods used by earlier Tijānī authorities.¹¹⁴ In other words, the litanies of *tarbiya* were apparently part and parcel of the recitations already used by Aḥmad al-Tijānī and his companions.

If Niasse simply rearranged well-known litanies, what was the novelty of his practice?

How was it different, and why did it turn out to be so controversial? The answer to these

¹¹⁰ ^cAlī Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-ma^cānī* II, 155.

¹¹¹ Ibn Anbūja, *Mizāb al-raḥma*, 143-148.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 146-147. This is another element that backs Meier’s theory about the *taṣliya*’s capacity to oust not only the *vita purgativa*, but also the remembrance of God (*Mohammedverehrung* II, 316-317).

¹¹³ Muḥammad al-^cArabī b. al-Sā^oiḥ, *Bughyat al-mustafīd*, 377.

¹¹⁴ According to Ibrāhīm b. Sīdī Muḥammad (*al-Nuṣūṣ al-wāḍiḥa*, 23), mention of 500 recitations at three times occurs in *Taṣfiyat al-sulūk* by Muḥammad Fāl b. Bāba (d. 1349/1930; on him Marty “Ida ou Ali,” 244 and *MLG* II, 589-590). The work is not listed in *MLG* (though it might be identical with item no. 15 in the list of Muḥammad Fāl’s writings) and has never been published. It is a poetic treatment of the inner (*bāṭin*) aspects of Tijānī doctrine that complements *Munyat al-murīd* by Muḥammad Fāl’s much elder brother Aḥmad al-Tijānī b. Bāba (*MLG* I, 268-270), an exposition of the outward (*ẓāhir*) teachings of the Tijāniyya that is the subject of Muḥammad al-^cArabī b. al-Sā^oiḥ’s famous commentary *Bughyat al-mustafīd*.

questions is partly related to Niasse's emphasis on optional recitations. While it is true that an authorized deputy can permit his disciples to recite optional litanies from Aḥmad al-Tijānī's prayer book, the rules and conditions of the Tijāniyya clearly stipulate that the obligatory *wird* remains the basis of the Tijānī path. According to an assurance Aḥmad al-Tijānī is said to have received from the Prophet during one of their daylight encounters, it is sufficient for the aspirant to attain illumination.¹¹⁵ Ibrāhīm Niasse himself has succinctly acknowledged this fact by referring to the *wird* in *al-Sirr al-akbar*, his second important work on Sufism apart from *Kāshif al-ilbās*, as the "greatest secret": it is the ultimate tool to realize cognizance.¹¹⁶ Yet, he does not content himself with the obligatory litanies and takes recourse to optional recitations, although they constitute neither a precondition for illumination, nor a requirement for membership in the Tijāniyya. The goal of his method is to remove all veils between the aspirants and God, and the litanies of *tarbiya* are designed to accelerate the process. If we give credence to the accounts that circulate among followers of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* throughout West Africa and beyond, Niasse's mix of litanies helped countless aspirants to arrive at the goal of the mystical path, and in most cases they were able to do so within a very short period of time.¹¹⁷

Reference has already been made to the well-known tenet of the Tijāniyya that anyone who recites the obligatory *wird* on a regular basis will experience illumination during his or her lifetime. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, none of the classical manuals specifies how long it takes the aspirants to make this experience. Ibn Anbūja, who conceived the original model that correlates the stages of the path with specific recitations, also fails to express himself on the

¹¹⁵ See the concise summary in Abu Bakr °Atīq, *Mufīdat al-khillān*, 12-14.

¹¹⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Sirr al-akbar* (ed. Maigari), 418. – The "greatest secret" referred to in the title of this work is thus nothing other than the *wird* (cf. Umar, "Sufism and Its Opponents," 367 and "Fatwa and Counter-fatwa," 19).

¹¹⁷ For an impressive example of such accounts see Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh °Abdallāh, *Radd bi-l-ḥadīth*, 214-215.

duration of the training process. One of the few authors who addressed this question is Abū Bakr °Atīq (died 1394/1974), a distinguished scholar and supporter of Niasse from Kano. He writes:

Whoever takes (*akhadha*) the obligatory litanies and observes the related conditions will certainly realize arrival and reach illumination. . . . However, in our path the arrival occurs mostly at the time of death. Sporadically it has happened earlier with some people.¹¹⁸

Thus, ordinary members of the Tijāniyya, who stick to the obligatory recitations, have to be prepared to wait their entire lifetime until they are granted illumination. If we compare this statement with the following passage from *al-Sirr al-akbar*, a drastic disparity emerges. In an exposition of the stations and stages of the path, Niasse first underscores the importance of strict compliance with the rules and then explains:

How fast success is achieved depends on the degree of truthfulness (*ṣidq*). Whoever is truthful can, in some cases, traverse the thresholds in an instant, or in an hour, or in one to two days, or within a few days. Others take a month, or a year, or two or several years. There are also people who take seventy years. It all depends on truthfulness. . . . If this condition is fulfilled, one is safeguarded against stumbling blocks and travels through the stations within the shortest period of time.¹¹⁹

Even though Niasse is also known to have made more cautious statements regarding the duration of *tarbiya*, it is quite clear that his practice amounted to nothing less than a shortcut to illumination and knowledge of God. The special litanies allowed spiritual training to take place much faster than before—an aspect that is of central importance in the perception of Niasse’s followers, who consider his method as a way that leads instantaneously to cognizance. Of course, it needs to be emphasized that successful and correct training requires more than simply reciting the litanies. Only when combined with truthfulness, love, and the shaykhs’s as well as the aspirant’s spiritual energy can the litanies create a shortcut to the rocky and winding mystic path.

¹¹⁸ Abū Bakr °Atīq, *Mufīdat al-khillān*, 12.

¹¹⁹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Sirr al-akbar* (ed. Maigari), 418.

Once all conditions are fulfilled, Niasse’s method supposedly works like an elevator: It saves the aspirants the arduous ascent and instead lifts them up to illumination with unprecedented speed.

“The Cup Makes Its Round”

Spiritual training proceeds faster, it leads to more intense mystical experiences, it is the means to perfect one’s faith, and—this is probably the most momentous difference compared to previous ways of imparting spiritual training in the Tijāniyya—it is potentially accessible to everybody.

Several previous studies have already pointed out that Niasse’s method apparently opened the mystical path to ordinary Muslims.¹²⁰ However, it is misleading to describe this process as popularization or democratization. Neither did Niasse intend to create a trivialized form of mystical experience for many people, as Hiskett’s use of the term “popularization” implies, nor was the new method an attempt to topple the hierarchy that characterizes the Tijāniyya as well as other Sufi orders. Niasse did indeed remove restrictions that barred ordinary followers from reaching the higher stages of the path. In his concept, the experience of cognizance was in principle open to everyone who wanted to perfect his or her faith by removing the veils that separated him or her from God. Yet, this lifting of the veils was not a mere mechanical incident, but—as is evident from the previous sections—a complex process tied to comprehensive conditions.

Niasse understood it as his mission to help the greatest possible number of Muslims to achieve perfection of their faith through spiritual training. However, it would be wrong to portray the facilitation of the access to *tarbiya* as the result of a conscious decision or strategy. Viewed from an inside perspective, whatever Niasse did was not out of his personal motivation, but in

¹²⁰ Hiskett, “Community of Grace,” 120-121; Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*, 35-36; Kane, *Tijāniyya reformée*, 30; Kane, “Shaikh al-Islam,” 316.

compliance with the divine will. The creation of a shortcut to mystical realization was a precondition for making it accessible to everyone, and in the perception of Niasse and his followers, the efficiency and celerity of the new method was nothing less than a divine affair.

In the written instructions to his followers, Niasse never failed to demand utmost compliance with the conditions and rules of spiritual training, most notably secrecy. But the high expectations he had in the qualities of his deputies and in the discipline of his followers notwithstanding, the implementation of his method did at times lead to unintended results. Niasse and his deputies used *tarbiya* to train significantly more aspirants than their predecessors and contemporaries within the Tijāniyya, thus causing a sharp increase in the number of both initiates and initiators. In this situation it was almost inevitable that the practical consequences were not always in line with the theoretical foundation of spiritual training. Yet, being so simple and still so successful, Niasse's version of *tarbiya* effectively developed into a tool to recruit new followers. Word of mouth, fueled by those who had undergone the training, helped to spread the news about the speed and efficaciousness of the novel method. Attaining mystical realization and becoming a cognizant was now within everybody's reach—this belief functioned as a powerful incentive for potential new members to join the movement.

The transformation of *tarbiya* from a virtually invisible affair into a matter of public interest had far-reaching ramifications. Wherever the new practice spread, it gave rise to conflicts. One bone of contention, which developed into the major theme of the scholarly dispute over *tarbiya*, was the question as to whether this form of training was in line with the original teachings of Aḥmad al-Tijānī. But the shift in the dispensation of spiritual training had implications that went well beyond debates between scholars about proper Sufi practice. The followers, too, became engaged in public controversies with other members of the Tijāniyya or

with other Muslims who were critical of Niasse's movement. In many instances, heated exchanges evolved around what can be described as side effects of *tarbiya*. These were frequently related to the difficulty to control the mystical experiences. Although Niasse never ceased to warn his deputies that some aspirants might overshoot their spiritual destination, he could do little to prevent the occurrence of such undesired instances. Ensuring that the aspirants followed the rules during and after the training was one of the constant challenges Niasse and his deputies had to face. A similar problem arose with regard to the qualification of the masters who dispensed the training: In practice, it was rather difficult to guarantee that the deputies fulfilled their task in accordance with the strict regulations. There was thus considerable room for deviations from the correct practice of *tarbiya*.

If we recall the more restrictive approach to spiritual training as advocated by Mālik Sy and Aḥmad Skīraj, we can now get a clearer sense of why they pronounced such dire warnings against the exposure of *tarbiya*. The public appearance of masters offering to impart training, first in Saloum, then in Trarza, later in Northern Nigeria, and finally in many other parts of West Africa and the Sudan, did indeed raise the question of how the new practice can be reconciled with the old Tijānī principle that a master dispensing such training has to do so secretly.

The variance of scholarly positions in this debate evolves around the keywords *taẓāhur*, which denotes the public exposure of the rank of a master as well as the public display of *tarbiya*, and *Malāmatiyya*, literally “the people of blame” or “self-abasement.” In the Tijāniyya, the term does not refer to those who purposely attract blame or abase themselves, but describes those who avoid blame through discreetness.¹²¹ Hence, being a *Malāmatī*, understood as

¹²¹ *Malāmatiyya* thus has a different connotation in our context than it does in Central or South Asia, where it denotes Sufis who commit acts that either appear to or do indeed contradict the sharia. Displaying blameful behavior resembles an act of camouflage, as the *Malāmatiyya* would

someone who conceals a rank or mystical state, signifies the opposite of practicing *taẓāhur*, publicly displaying ranks or secrets.

Leading authorities within the Tijāniyya confirm this interpretation and exalt Malāmātī conduct as the ideal. Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°iḥ, while affirming the permissibility of *tarbiya*, emphasizes that it was “prohibited to come into the open with claims to impart spiritual training, as the pseudo-masters used to do in these and earlier times.”¹²² Aḥmad Skīraj, too, stresses that, although *tarbiya* was a legitimate practice, the “true” trainers shunned all ostentation in dispensing it and never provided training for a large numbers of disciples. For the few who qualified as training masters, it was imperative to follow the Malāmātī example and keep their secrets hidden.¹²³ Similarly, Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°iḥ portrays the Malāmātiyya as those who do not show any behavior suggesting that God favors them.

If we believe accounts of Niasse’s *tarbiya* practice, there is indeed a contrast to these positions.¹²⁴ His deputies trained a large number of aspirants, who sometimes broke the rule of secrecy and publicly made exalted claims about their spiritual states. Accordingly, his opponents accused him and his deputies of imparting *tarbiya* in an ostentatious manner, thus violating the

inwardly reach the highest stages of mystical attainment. In the case of the Tijāniyya, the term means to behave like any other member of the society so as not to attract curiosity. Ibn al-°Arabī defines the Malāmātiyya as “those who do not show outwardly what they have inwardly” (°Abd al-Wahhāb, *Iṣṭilāḥāt Ibn °Arabī*, 57) and calls them “the most perfect of the gnostics” (Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 372-373). See also Schimmel, *Dimensions*, 86-87 (with references to the positions of al-Sulamī and al-Hujwīrī); Winter, *Ottoman Egypt*, 112-116; cf. Abun-Nasr, *Tijaniyya*, 48. – The Naqshbandī tradition expresses a related idea in the concept of *khalwat dar anjumān*, “seclusion within society” (see Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen*, 35), which can be defined as being “outwardly with the creatures and inwardly with God” (Paul, *Doctrine and Organization*, 30-31).

¹²² Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°iḥ, *Bughyat al-mustafīd*, 231.

¹²³ Skīraj, *Tanbīh al-ikhwān*, 107; cf. Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 276.

¹²⁴ See below and the following chapter for such accounts. A good illustration from Nigeria is provided by Yasir Quadri (“Tijāniyyah in Nigeria,” 322), who explains that previously, a training master “used to conceal himself from being known by the people, but shaykh Ibrāhīm who wanted many people to be trained spiritually easily advised his followers to train as many murids as they could so that the murids could become ‘al-murid al-sadiq’ [truthful aspirants].”

Malāmatiyya ideal outlined above. But what evidence do we have that this accusation was true? If we take Niasse's own statements as an indication, he is at least cleared of the suspicion of not having warned his disciples and deputies sufficiently against divulging secrets. In a circular to his followers dating from the formative period of his community, we find the following passage:

We are Malāmatiyya. Our affair is to conceal the stations, and not to concern ourselves with miracles (*karāmāt*). Everyone who practices a profession is doing his work; everyone who has a business is engaged in his job. We do not make assertions, and we do not lay claim to exceptional merits or special privileges. . . . Our signs are in our hearts, whereas the signs of others are on the horizons.¹²⁵

Niasse's definition conforms to the classic connotation of the term Malāmatiyya as understood in the Tijāniyya. But reference to the restrictions on the public exposure of a master dispensing training is conspicuously absent from this quotation. In other words, Niasse does not seem to perceive Malāmatiyya as the opposite of *tazāhur*, public display. The contours of the reinterpretation of the Malāmatiyya ideal become clearer in the following remark by Niasse's confidant Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop, who was already quoted in previous sections:

Malāmatiyya designates a group among the Muslims that always exists and that does not bear any outward sign by which its members could be identified as the righteous. In spirit, they are constantly connected with God, irrespective of where they live, what they work, or what they do. Their hearts are always with God. One can be a minister, a governor, a teacher, a student or a porter; it is not a condition to devote oneself exclusively to a religious office or to the journey on the path or the striving for illumination. The only condition is to take the litanies from an authorized deputy and to recite them on a regular basis. This means that everybody can be a practicing member of the Tijāniyya and that everybody, irrespective of status, residence, or profession can attain cognizance. One only needs to remain faithful to the litanies and the remembrance of God.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* I, 19. This statement is followed by a discussion of Qur'ān 41:53, which describes God's signs as being in the horizons (*āfāq*) and in the souls (*anfās*). Niasse refers to miracles and claims about saintly status as "the menstruation of men," thus repeating a common trope of Sufi discourse.

¹²⁶ Interview, Dakar, January 9, 1997.

According to this designation, the Malāmatiyya are not an elite of virtuosi living in retreat, nor are they a few masters dispensing spiritual training in secrecy. Rather, the term here refers to quite ordinary members of the order who go about their everyday affairs.¹²⁷ Everyone can be a Malāmatī, and those who practice their recitations in the prescribed manner and under the supervision of a master have the guarantee that they will attain cognizance. There is a subtle shift in emphasis, away from the need to conceal one's capacity to impart the training towards access for everyone. Provided that a master has the required divine sanction, he or she can acquire a public reputation as a spiritual trainer and still be a Malāmatī. Many masters who match this profile practice a profession and live an ordinary life, rather than posing as religious specialists. The Malāmatiyya ideal is thus redefined in a way that accommodates the concept of “*tarbiya* for everyone.” The few virtuosi living anonymously and imparting spiritual training have turned into many ordinary people who live conventional lives and are yet able to perfect their faith.

But how can this redefinition of the meaning of Malāmatiyya be reconciled with the prohibition of *taẓāhur bi-l-mashyakha*, the public exposure of the rank of a master, and the related maxims that spiritual training must be imparted without ostentation? Since *tarbiya* as practiced by Niasse and his deputies virtually became a public affair, this point was perhaps most in need of scholarly justification. To counter the objection that their practice contravened the verdicts of Muḥammad al-°Arabī b. al-Sā°iḥ and Aḥmad Skīraj, the followers of Niasse developed various lines of reasoning. One argument holds that Niasse could not be implicated with the ostentatious practice of *tarbiya* condemned by Muḥammad al-°Arabī und Skīraj, because a thorough reading of these two Tijānī authorities showed that their criticism had not

¹²⁷ On this point see also Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, 22.

targeted the “true” training. Rather, their objections were directed against the imposters who pretended to have the rank of spiritual trainers without being qualified and without the required permission. Since Niasse undoubtedly did not fall into this category, he could therefore not have violated the ban on *taẓāhur*.¹²⁸

Another line of argument that I encountered frequently in conversations with deputies and disciples of Niasse emphasizes a different aspect. The accusation that Niasse had violated the prohibition of publicly posing as a master of training was, as they assured me frequently, simply invalid, because he had done nothing without the respective authority. It was God, not Niasse, who brought the *fayḍa*. Niasse only emerged as a master imparting spiritual training after having received the required permission. Such reasoning may not have convinced the critics within the Tijāniyya, but the logic on which it is based reveals the self-perception and self-confidence of the members of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*. According to Ibrāhīm b. Sīdī Muḥammad, the leading *tarbiya* protagonist in Sudan during the 1980s and 1990s, it was the key part of Niasse’s mission to make spiritual training generally known and accessible:

Tarbiya is not new, and it was not the succor (*ghawth*) Ibrāhīm Niasse who invented it. He rather followed the method of his pious predecessors. The only additions he made were done with express permission, received [during a visionary encounter with Aḥmad al-Tijānī] in the state of being awake: that he extended his call to everyone, and that he let the cup make its round among all those who desired it, and that he bestowed the secret on everyone who underwent the training.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ This argument is put forward by ʿAbdallāh b. Muḥammad al-Mishrī, *Indhār wa-ifāda*, 66-68. The terms used by Muḥammad al-ʿArabī and Skīraj, such as *mutashayyikh* (“the one who behaves like a master,” *Bughyat al-mustafīd*, 231) and *mutaṣaddir li-l-shuyūkh* (“the one who acts as if he had the rank of a master,” *Kashf al-ḥijāb*, 299-300) do indeed suggest that reference is made to people whose claims of being spiritual trainers are not justified.

¹²⁹ Ibrāhīm Sīdī, *al-Nuṣūṣ al-wādiḥa*, 19. Niasse uses this metaphor in one of his poems, describing himself as the person who passes around the drink (Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Dawāwīn al-sitt*, 62) – For details on the title *ghawth* and Niasse’s claim to supreme sainthood see Chapter 4.

This quotation underscores that Niasse drew the legitimization for his *tarbiya* practice of from the tradition of the Tijāniyya and from a specific permission. The metaphor of the goblet elucidates in a graphic manner the changes brought about by Niasse's practice. It is the vessel that contains mystical realization, is often referred to in Tijānī literature (as well as in Sufi parlance in general) as drink (*mashrab*).¹³⁰ Since Aḥmad al-Tijānī enjoys special privileges as the Seal of the Saints, and his teachings have been derived from direct communication with the Prophet, it is a drink of a very peculiar nature, reserved exclusively for the members of the Tijāniyya. Linked to this is the notion that the drink is subject to tasting, and therefore it is taste (*dhawq*), not reason (*ʿaql*), that is required to attain realization.¹³¹ Moreover, the image of the cup making the round also implies that the aspirants are not required to do much more than to drink in order to partake in the mystical experience. According to the above statement, the drinking vessel is now in the hands of Niasse. He is the dispenser of the drink in his era, acting as the substitute for Aḥmad al-Tijānī. But other than earlier trainers, Niasse also has the authority to pass the goblet around. It is his mission to distribute the abundantly flowing drink to all those who are thirsting, and everyone can drink from it, because the only required effort is to take the glass. Here the metaphorical depiction of the *tarbiya* process connects with the imagery of water and drinking, which—as we have seen—also plays a pivotal role in relation to *fayḍa*. When we compare the ease with which aspirants can now receive *tarbiya* and attain cognizance, as

¹³⁰ A good example is Ibn Anbūja, *Mizāb al-rahma*, 116. – Followers of Shaykh Ḥamallāh (d. 1362/1943; more on him in Chapter 4) also used the image of the goblet to express their yearning for mystical knowledge (Soares and Hunwick, “Falkeiana IV,” 109). In his “Meccan Openings” (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*) Ibn al-ʿArabī explains: “The cup is identical with the locus of manifestation, the wine is identical with the Manifest within it, and the drinking is that which is actualized from the Self-discloser in His locus of self-disclosure” (Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 109).

¹³¹ See for instance Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 80. Smelling is another frequent metaphor to describe mystical experience, which potentially involves all senses.

expressed in this allegory, with the old rule that even a truthful aspirant can find a master of training only after a long search,¹³² the difference could hardly be more striking.

From the perspective of Niasse and his followers, the new training method could by no means be considered a departure from the authentic Tijānī tradition. Rather, the advent of the *fayḍa* ushered in a new phase. They understood Niasse's ascension to the position of the bringer of the flood as a manifestation of divine grace. If he, on the authority of this position, passed the glass around, it did not mean that he made a public spectacle of *tarbiya*, but that he executed the mission God had chosen for him. God directs the outpourings through Aḥmad al-Tijānī to Niasse, and these outpourings grant the aspirants the opportunity to experience illumination by way of spiritual training, and thereby perfect their faith. From this perspective, the offer to impart *tarbiya* to everybody is not a violation of the prohibition of public display, but is in line with the very essence of *fayḍa* and with Niasse's mission as its bringer. As a result, *tarbiya* experiences a renaissance.

¹³² See the exposition of this rule in Abū Bakr °Atīq, *Mufīdat al-khillān*, 9-10.

3 Seeing God: The Nascent Community

إثنان ليسا مني ولا من الطريق في شيء ، مجذوب لم يسلك وسالك لم يجذب

Two [types of people] do not belong to me or to the path in any way: Someone who is enraptured and does not tread the path, and someone who treads the path and does not get enraptured.

Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* I, 10.

From about 1930 onward, Ibrāhīm Niasse's claim to the position of the bringer of the flood and his practice of spiritual training became the causes of fierce controversy. In 1931 Niasse drew his conclusions from the enmity of his opponents within the Tijāniyya, whom he called deniers (*munkirūn*), and moved to Medina, a newly founded settlement a few miles outside of Kaolack. However, conflicts did not occur only with the deniers. The situation within the young community was at times anything but harmonious, to the extent that Niasse was repeatedly compelled to take action against excesses and lack of discipline among some of his followers.

Niasse had hardly reached the age of thirty when the mainstay of the teachings that he was to stand for until the end of his life came to be firmly established. With regard to religious practice, these teachings comprised the regular and correct observation of all obligatory acts of worship (ritual prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage where the circumstances allow it); the offering of supererogatory acts of worship, like additional prayers and fasts (*nawāfil*); daily recitation of the Qur'ān;¹ the recitation of the obligatory litanies (*awrād lāzima*) of the Tijāniyya every morning and evening; and the daily group recitation of the *wazīfa* (lit., "assignment").

¹ According to one of his hagiographers, Niasse had the habit of completing three full Qur'ān recitations every week (Ḥamal b. Muḥammad al-Awwal, *Uṣūl al-fayḍa*, 27).

In addition to the mandatory Friday afternoon group recitation (*dhikr al-jum'ca*) Niasse encouraged his followers to recite the *haylala*, i.e., the formula *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (“There is no deity but God”), as much as possible in congregation, which meant the so-called loud or public remembrance of God (*dhikr jahr^{am}*). For the ritual prayer, too, he strongly emphasized its performance in congregation. In contrast to the practice of the overwhelming majority of West African Muslims at the time, Niasse did not keep his arms freely suspended (*sadl*) as prescribed in the Mālikī school of jurisprudence, but held them crossed in front of his chest (*qabḍ*) when he performed his ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*). His followers emulated the practice, so that folding the arms in prayer became a visible marker of adherence to Niasse’s movement.²

The month of Rabī^c al-Awwal, with its celebrations of the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad (*mawlid*), held a special position in the annual cycle. The devotees gathered regularly for several days in Kosi to relive together the biography of the Prophet (*sīra*) and to present and listen to panegyric poetry. Moreover, Sufism was of essential importance in Niasse’s outlook. He demanded that his disciples and followers perfect their faith by wayfaring the path, and presented himself as the shaykh who could lead the aspirants to illumination and open for them the door to mystical knowledge of God (*ma^crifa*). For Niasse, the Tijāniyya was the best

² It is not clear when Niasse began to pray with *qabḍ*. A version that is popular among his followers claims that “he has been praying with *qabḍ* since he started praying” (interview with Muḥammad al-Tihāmī b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, Ndjaména, October 29, 1997). Referring to Ousmane Kane as his informant, Loimeier writes that Niasse introduced the practice around 1930 (Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*, 35). Wright, who quotes from an interview with al-Ḥasan Cissé, says Niasse adopted the practice in 1944 following a waking encounter with the Prophet Muḥammad (Wright, “Embodied Knowledge,” 264). While the proper position of the arms in ritual prayer never seems to have become a major bone of contention in Senegal, the question later gained great significance elsewhere, especially in Northern Nigeria, where the dispute even turned violent in the 1950s. This prompted Niasse to compose *Raf^c al-malām*, his major work in the field of jurisprudence, which is partly in defense of this practice and partly an outline of his position on the legal schools (*madhāhib*) on *ijtihād* (independent juridical reasoning; see the Epilogue for more on this work). The debate continued well into the 1970s. For details, see Seesemann and Soares, “As Good Muslims and Frenchmen,” 106-107 (with further references).

and most effective Sufi order, and he considered himself the one who, in his own time, had the closest connection to Aḥmad al-Tijānī, the “Seal of the Saints.” This was, according to the belief of his followers, confirmed by his divine appointment as the bringer of the flood, which allowed him to act as the distributor of the outpourings coming from Aḥmad al-Tijānī and thereby to help his disciples through spiritual training to realize illumination. For the “people of the *fayḍa*,” it was this intensive experience that distinguished them from other Muslims and other members of the Tijāniyya.

Apart from the correct execution of all the obligatory acts of Islamic worship, the journey on the mystical path requires compliance with certain rules. Niasse expected his aspirants to follow a very specific code of conduct, and many of his ideas were new in the Senegalese context at the time, even for Muslims who belonged to the Tijāniyya. This was the situation when Niasse began to present himself as the exponent of Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s original teachings, which he saw as being equivalent to true Islam. The early history of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* is thus the history of the implementation of his claims—both within his own community, where the mood seems to have been almost euphoric, and against opposition within the ranks of the Tijāniyya. In the course of this process severe conflicts and rifts occurred, eventually leading to the foundation of Medina.

Internal Tensions

On the basis of Niasse’s correspondence published in *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* and the supplementary volume *Ziyādat al-jawāhir*, the early development of his *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* can be reconstructed relatively precisely. The fact that Niasse always wrote in Arabic suggests that his deputies and immediate disciples had a fairly good command of the language. In the years from 1348 to 1350

(June 1929 to May 1932) almost all the letters were addressed to people in and around Kaolack. With a few exceptions the letters were sent from Kosi, and Niasse often dictated them to °Alī Cissé, who then signed them with the name of his shaykh. Considering the locations mentioned in these documents, it appears that the “people of the *fayḍa*” were initially spread over not more than a dozen villages in Saloum. Moreover, there are indications that Niasse recruited his disciples mainly from the old following of his father.³

The members of the young community were carried by the conviction that they belonged to a group of chosen people. In conjunction with the prospect of extraordinary spiritual experiences, the group dynamics generated considerable magnetism. Many of Niasse’s letters give testimony to the fact that he constantly appointed new deputies and initiated aspirants into *tarbiya*. However, in the same measure by which the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* grew, the urgency of disciplinary problems increased. Niasse and his deputies had to contain the euphoria of their followers, but at the same time they were eager to attract new aspirants and guide them to mystical experience. Hence their task turned into a balancing act: on the one hand, they had to underscore the benefits of membership in the *Jamāʿa*, but on the other hand, members who tended to go beyond the set goals had to be restrained.

The first letter published in *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* illustrates that this was a problem right from the outset. In 1348/1929–1930 Niasse wrote from Kosi to a certain Muḥammad Muṣṭafā b. Thierno Thiam, whom he had shortly before appointed as a deputy and who, as the context reveals, had started to dispense spiritual training:

³ Interview with Muḥammad al-Māḥī b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, Medina, November 24, 1996. Prominent examples include al-Ḥasan Ndiaye (see *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 13, and *Ziyādat al-Jawāhir*, 47) and Maḥmūd Diop (the father of Ibrāhīm Diop, known as Barham, who became Niasse’s secretary and confidant). See the following chapter for more information on the early followers.

You must have two shaykhs: Your shaykh for the outward (*ẓāhir*) are the Qurʾān and the Sunna, and your shaykh for the inward (*bāṭin*) is our shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī. He is always with you. The intermediaries [i.e., the deputies] are only intermediaries. . . . Hide your secret! Bury the secret of divine lordship (*rubūbiyya*) that He has bestowed on you until such time when He exposes you! Who poses as shaykh [i.e., emerges as a spiritual trainer] before receiving the permission loses his portion in this world and the next. . . . But if God makes you emerge then His Favors are irreproachable. The love for outward exposure before the [divine] confirmation cuts off the outward manifestation, because such behavior indicates indulgence in the desires of the lower self. If God keeps you hidden then His veiling you is best for you, and if He makes your station with Him known then His exposing you is best for you. You should not wish for anything other than what God wishes for you. Who aspires to outward manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) is the slave of outward manifestation, and who aspires to concealment is the slave of concealment, but he who seeks only what God wants, he is truly God's servant. The cognizant is he who relinquishes his own aspirations for the sake of God's will.⁴

This document clarifies important aspects of Niasse's perception. At the beginning he refers briefly to the role of the Qurʾān and the Sunna as the ultimate guidelines. He then elaborates on the question of *ẓuhūr* or *taẓāhur*, publicly claiming a particular position, and emphasizes that whoever wants to impart spiritual training is required to have express divine sanction. The addressee of this letter apparently lacks this permission, and therefore Niasse reprimands him. At the same time, his elaborations make it clear that he believed himself to have received divine sanction with the emergence (*ẓuhūr*) of the *ḥayda*. And in this he acts only as an executive aide of the divine will, which is the way befits of servant of God.

Yet even when divine permission has been granted, the person is not at liberty to disclose his mystical experiences. Niasse instructs the addressee unequivocally to guard the secrets. The term *ẓuhūr* thus not only describes the public self-exposure of a shaykh authorized to dispense training, but also refers to indiscretion. Although Niasse repeatedly ordered his followers to maintain secrecy about mystical experiences, the loquaciousness of some of them kept rousing

⁴ *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* I, 5.

his displeasure into the year 1349/1930–1931; this is documented in a circular “to all the beloved ones (*aḥbāb*), wherever they may dwell.”

I enjoin everyone who has smelled the scent of the special unification (*al-tawḥīd al-khāṣṣ*) to maintain silence about it, and to stay away from the assemblies of ordinary people, who do not gather to obey God. This applies particularly to talking about unification and the secrets while they are present. Know that the disclosure of the secrets of divinity in the presence of those who are veiled counts more gravely in the eyes of God than committing an unlawful act. . . . Your shaykh al-Tijānī used to recite these verses in this connection: “With me the secret is in a house with a lock, the keys of which are lost, and the door is locked.” . . . And he used to say: “The bosoms of the men of nobility are the graves of the secrets.”⁵

The urgent admonition to secrecy resurfaces in many letters published in the first part of *Jawāhir al-rasā'il*, but the letters also show that Niasse was more satisfied with some of his followers, and less with others. For instance, the “people of Taiba and Kosi” appear as exemplary,⁶ and the “people of Taiba Mbiteyène” are praised as people who had “smelt the scent of divine reality (*ḥaqīqa*).”⁷ In contrast, the villages Thiamène and Medina Fas do not receive favorable mention. Although Niasse generally emphasized in his letters the importance of correct observation of the specific Tijānī practices, like the recitation of the *wazīfa*, the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ*, and the remembrance of God, in some cases he felt the need to rebuke his followers in the strongest terms and instruct them in the basic obligations of a Muslim.

A good example is the letter to the “people of Thiamène” (1349/1930–1931). Niasse expresses his utter disapproval, stressing that it is inconceivable that someone would refer to God and Aḥmad al-Tijānī without knowing how to perform the ritual prayer and the ablutions properly.⁸ He took particular exception to the practice of disciples who, instead of performing

⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

their ablutions in the prescribed way with water, apparently used sand or dried mud (*tayammum*) to ritually clean themselves, which is permitted only in cases where water is unavailable. Niasse not only felt compelled to clarify matters concerning strict and uncompromising adherence to the sharia, but he also saw the need to instruct his followers with respect to the performance of the *wazīfa*. He wrote in his letter: “Who, after the receipt of this letter, absents himself even once from the congregational recitation of the *wazīfa*, I disown him. He does not belong to us, and we do not belong to him. Only those are on our path who do what we do with our companions.”⁹ Followers had to adhere meticulously to these principles and owed gratitude to God for being among the first of the “people of the *fayḍa*.”

Almost all of Niasse’s correspondence follows the same pattern. Addressing his immediate followers, mostly those whom he had previously appointed as deputies, he instructs them to assert their authority with regard to their disciples and to discipline them if necessary. In this manner he addresses even close confidants and established scholars, such as his eight-years-old brother, Muḥammad Zaynab, giving them directives for how to proceed.

The following extract from a letter to Muḥammad Zaynab, written in 1350/1931–1932, describes through metaphor how crucial the observation of certain rules and the continuous exercise of self-control are for the journey on the mystical path.

Know that the *fayḍa* of the shaykh [Aḥmad al-Tijānī] is like the clouds. Their purpose is not only that they should shower rain; they are also expected to bring forth fruit. Just consider how the gardens can bring forth fruit if a man does not weed his garden after the rainfall. The same is the case with the metaphorical gardens.¹⁰

Like the field that yields a crop only if it is properly cultivated, the aspirant—even though he holds a privileged position as a member of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*—can achieve his goal only if

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 21-22.

he works on himself, self-denial (*zuhd*) and piety (*wara'*) being the basic virtues in this process. Only by scrupulously observing the commandments and prohibitions can the aspirant get closer to the ultimate stage where he offers to God what His due is and truly and totally submits to His will. Without observing these rules, the disciple is like a neglected field where everything grows all over the place.

One of the reasons it was so difficult to contain this wild growth becomes clear in another letter written in 1349/1930–1931, in which Niasse addresses two of his deputies, as well as “all who claim to be associated with us.” From the context it appears that this was a reply to a letter in which the deputies had given a report about the mystical experiences of their disciples.

I am writing to you to inform you of the following. Two [types of people] do not belong to me, or to the path in any way: Someone who is enraptured and does not tread the path, and someone who treads the path and does not get enraptured (*majdhub lam yasluk wa-sālik lam yujdhab*), as long as they remain stagnant in their state (*ḥāl*) or stop in their course. You know about my affair: Who wants to be with me and partake in my state, let him walk in my way in everything that he says and does, by observing the commands and prohibitions, inwardly as well as outwardly, by thirsting and yearning to achieve the pleasure of God and His Prophet. Who however associates with us and then diverts even once from the pure and exalted sharia, . . . I testify before God and before you that I herewith dissociate myself from him. O God, I am innocent before Thee, of all that those people might perpetrate. . . . I am well nigh to revoking the authorization (*idhn*) of any deputy in whose presence unlawful acts are being committed and who does not comply with his duties. By God, the only thing that restrains me . . . is the fact that they have been connected with us for so long.¹¹

Up to the present day, followers of Niasse cite these statements as evidence of their shaykh's strict adherence to the sharia. In addition, the quoted passage contains another key statement that further illustrates the dilemma of uncontrolled growth. The fact Niasse had to distance himself in such grave and unmistakable terms from disciples who flouted the sharia, as

¹¹ Ibid., 10. The deputies addressed in the letter are Aḥmad Thiam and Malik Sow. Both continued to be members of the inner circle of the *fayḍa*, in spite of the serious rebuke expressed in this drastic letter.

well as from deputies who acquiesced therein, is an indication that there must have transpired considerable offenses. What these were comes to light in a closer look at the terms *jadhb* (rapture, attraction) and *sulūk* (wayfaring, inner journey on the mystical path), which come from the same Arabic roots as the participial derivatives *majdhūb* and *sālik* that occur in the above quotation.

These terms designate two central aspects of the way to mystical knowledge.¹² While *jadhb* is associated with the concept of enrapture, where the aspirant plays a passive role and is attracted toward God, *sulūk* has the character of an inward journey that requires the active progression of the disciple. The journey on the path can take place in either fashion, but in any case both the inner journey and enrapture constitute integral parts of it. Some aspirants travel on the path for a long time before they become attracted; others become attracted at an earlier stage and may attain cognizance long before other wayfarers. Although the early occurrence of rapture is sometimes considered superior to long wayfaring, the *majdhūb* is not absolved of the obligation of wayfaring. The difference lies in the way the aspirant obtains mystical knowledge. The *sālik* is attracted only at the end of the way, and thus covers a shorter distance in his rapture. Those who are *majdhūb*, on the other hand, skip over a long distance: at times they may suddenly fall into a state (*ḥāl*) in which they have an overpowering experience of divine reality and the absoluteness of God, and it is all the more important that they return to the path and walk all the way again after such an experience.

In *Kāshif al-ilbās* Niassa differentiates two types of mystical realization that run analogous to the described forms of rapture and wayfaring. In the first instance, illumination

¹² The two terms are widely discussed in the Sufi literature. One of the most comprehensive treatments can be found in ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī's (d. 632/1234 in Baghdad) *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif*; see Gramlich, *Gaben und Erkenntnisse*, 93–94. For the Naqshbandī tradition see Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen*, 82–83.

overcomes the disciple all of a sudden, like a raid or an assault (*hujūm*). The second variety is comparable to a slow, gradual removal of the veils that separate the heart of the disciple from mystical realization.¹³ The latter is the equivalent to the case of the wayfarer who is enraptured toward the end, while the former, raid-like experience refers to enrapture before the wayfaring.¹⁴ In the letter quoted above, Niasse gives an outline of how he expects the mystical journey of his disciples to proceed. Both ways are open to them, but for both cases Niasse sets a condition: the *majdhūb* must not stagnate in his or her state; enrapture has to be followed by wayfaring. As for the *sālik*, he or she must not stop in his wayfaring before being enraptured. Otherwise the mystical experience of both—the attracted ones who do not tread the path, and the wayfarers who are not attracted—remains incomplete.

Niasse does not give details about the violations of the sharia that had occurred. He only dissociates himself from the imperfect aspirants. A later passage in the same letter targets once more, as the context suggests, the wayfarers who get stuck on the way.

Where does my disciple stand in comparison with you? If things are as you describe them, then he is as rare as red sulfur among you. . . . Here [i.e., with Niasse] are young men who have forgotten the taste of passion and desire. Some of them even forget their wives and do not call on them unless they get permission, or are forced to do so. These are my disciples; the others are not.¹⁵

While this quotation highlights the high demands Niasse made on his disciples, whose journey on the path required total submission to the training master, it also contains a hint that those to blame for the violations of sharia were not the wayfarers who were not enraptured, but rather the enraptured ones who did not tread the path. Apparently the excesses of the latter group posed the greatest challenge the young community had to deal with.

¹³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 73. Cf. Skīraj, *Kashf al-ḥijāb*, 307, and Muḥammad al-Qurashī Niasse, *Risāla*, 7.

¹⁴ Also treated in Ibn °Ajība, *Īqāz al-himam*, 52, 76, and 357–358.

¹⁵ *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 10.

If the bits of information and indications contained in the various letters in *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* and *Ziyādat al-jawāhir* are brought into context, the following picture emerges: After the advent of the *fayḍa*, many aspirants had overwhelmingly intense experiences of sudden illumination, or at least made claims to that effect. But instead of returning from the attained spiritual state after their rapture and concentrating on wayfaring under the supervision of their master, some of them persisted in their state or started to speak about it with outsiders. This problem did not occur only in Senegal, but reappeared in the course of the later expansion into Mauritania, Nigeria, and many other countries.

Years after founding the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*, Niasse addressed the problem in a letter to his followers in the Mauritanian town of Tidjikdja. Once again he pointed out that divulging the “mysteries of divinity” in the presence of the “veiled ones” was a greater offense than to commit unlawful deeds. He further elaborated:

Therefore I never speak with a disciple about his state in the presence of others. Even in front of someone who already has caught a scent, I do not mention any station (*maqām*), except that he has reached it, because someone who has smelt the scent of the Exclusive Oneness (*aḥadiyya*) cannot hear of any other station without laying a claim to it and imagining he had already realized it. Woe to you if you uncover the secrets to others! Your obligation is to conceal the secrets and to confirm the sharia of the chosen Prophet in the outward.¹⁶

It appears that Niasse was not successful in preventing all his disciples from talking about their mystical states. At least this is what two other letters from the earlier period suggest. In both cases the addressee is Niasse, and his deputies are reporting their difficulties with their protégés. Initially Niasse was informed by Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye, Ibra Fall, and °Uthmān Ndiaye, three of his close confidants, that some aspirants were publicly boasting that they had reached the goal. They had even gone to the extent of talking publicly about their states and stations. In his brief

¹⁶ Ibid., 42–43. This letter was probably written in the late 1930s.

reply, appended to the letter, Niasse ordered the deputies to send anyone to him who claimed “arrival” (at the final destination of the path; *wuṣūl*) if they were not certain about the veracity of the claim. If they were able to establish that the claim was true, they should instruct the person not to talk.¹⁷

Apparently the deputies were not able to tackle the problem because in a subsequent letter °Uthmān Ndiaye and Ibra Fall reported that “great ruin” had befallen the disciples. Not only did they mingle with non-initiates, but everyone who claimed to have arrived now also wanted to act as an “implanter” (*mulaqqin*) of the litanies, to the extent that they had started to pass on the litanies independently. Niasse responded:

Let no one make a claim of having arrived before coming to me, and do not attest to anyone to have achieved arrival if he has not come to me. You do not know anything! Bring me everyone who talks about a reality of the realities.¹⁸

This allows us to identify the enraptured ones who are not treading the path as the most likely source of the problem. Besides their failure to guard the secrets and their arbitrary dissemination of the litanies, they also attracted attention through other violations of the code of conduct.

Although Niasse does not mention those aberrations concretely, it is obvious that some disciples asserted that their arrival absolved them of the obligation to observe the mandatory religious performances (*takālīf*; the ritual prayer etc.). In one of his letters Niasse underscores the need for persistent, unabated efforts in the purification of the lower self. Otherwise the aspirants would reach the point when the lower self suggested to them that they had reached a stage in which they were no longer under any obligation (*mukallaf*). In this respect Niasse quotes an anecdote about the famous mystic Junayd (d. 298/910 in Baghdad):

¹⁷ *Ziyādat al-jawāhir*, 47–48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

Junayd was asked about the people who claimed they were no longer required to perform any obligatory actions, as those were only the means to attain arrival, and now they had arrived. Junayd replied: “They are right, they have arrived—in hell, that is! Someone who steals and fornicates is better off than someone who believes that.”¹⁹

Behind Niasse’s allusion the contours of the dilemma emerge. After experiencing their illumination, some of the followers ceased to perform the ritual prayer and other prescribed acts of worship. The negligence of religious duties thus did not simply stem from ignorance, like in the aforementioned case in which sand was considered a valid substitute for water in the ritual purification. Some of the attracted ones disregarded the injunctions of the sharia deliberately and thereby provided the opponents of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* with additional and welcome arguments. The only possible solution was for the deputies to enforce a stronger control over the mystical experiences of their disciples and to compel them to complete their travel on the path.

The difficulties notwithstanding, the ideas connected with *fayḍa* exerted enough attraction to counterbalance the centrifugal forces. Moreover, the young community found its identity in its dissociation from the others who did not join the *fayḍa*. The increasing frequency and intensity of the disputes with their antagonists by no means weakened the community; rather, they boosted inward cohesion. The identity-generating mechanism and the self-perception of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* at the time are manifest in another early letter by Niasse, which he sent to al-Ḥasan Ndiaye, a former disciple of his late father, as a warning against joining the camp of the opponents:

God has decided in His pristine decree that the *fayḍa* of the Tijāniyya will flow through the hands of its master, may God be pleased with him [i.e., Aḥmad al-Tijānī]. He is the dispenser of the flood, directing it wherever he wants, in accordance with the decree of the Powerful, the Compeller. Through God’s omnipotence and strength the flood will reach all horizons. No one can contain it, no one can stop it, and nothing can restrain it. It cannot but spread over the earth

¹⁹ *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 23.

because it belongs to the Tijāniyya. Now God has struck some of the shaykhs and some of the leading deputies in such a manner that they scheme and plot and invent lies. Thereby they want to extinguish the Light of God—but He will not allow anything but that His Light keeps shining. You have been close to me since I grew up. Therefore I am writing to you to warn you against joining those who want to extinguish the Light of God. I am doing so out of sympathy, not as an effort to second the *fayḍa*. It will appear anyway by God’s omnipotence and strength. Whoever wants to suppress the flood will only achieve that it emerges all the stronger. If someone wants to incite the people to turn away from the *fayḍa* and its bringer, they will only turn their backs on that person, but not on the *fayḍa*.²⁰

Since Niasse considered the *fayḍa* a divine affair, he was unshakably convinced that his mission would be successful. The hostile deniers could do what they wanted to do; they would not be able to stop the flood released by God. Niasse’s disciples shared the same certitude and developed a distinct feeling of superiority toward other members of the Tijāniyya. What distinguished them from the deniers were their tremendous experiences of illumination and their attainment of the highest grades of mystical knowledge.

Niasse must have realized these problems—disregard for the rule of secrecy, claims regarding absolution from religious obligations, and unauthorized passing on of the litanies—were precisely what strengthened the position of the deniers. Therefore, in his letter about rapture and wayfaring, he urgently cautioned against making false claims and thereby aiding the cause of the deniers. According to Niasse, those who abetted denial had joined the ranks of the opponents, and therefore belonged to those on whom God had declared war.²¹

Hence there is a causal connection between the internal dynamics of the *Jamā‘at al-fayḍa* and increasing opposition by the deniers. The latter’s tenacious rejection of Niasse’s claims only reinforced the followers’ conviction that the deniers did not know the “true” Tijāniyya and that they contravened the will of God by opposing the *fayḍa*. At the same time, by going to extremes

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

and abandoning the mandatory framework of the sharia, some of the aspirants and self-declared disciples supplied the deniers with effective arguments.²² Under these circumstances, the escalation of the dispute seems to have been almost inevitable.

Discord in Léona

Although Niasse spent most of his time in Kosi during that period, the Léona neighborhood in Kaolack remained his official residence. The brothers who had joined the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*²³ also lived there, at least periodically. On the other hand, Muḥammad Khalīfa, the eldest son and successor of °Abdallāh Niasse as the head of the *zāwiya* in Léona, did not recognize his younger brother's claim to the *fayḍa*. The followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse presumably formed only a small group in Léona, but they had a strong public presence that manifested itself in clamorous *dhikr* processions. Especially during his sporadic visits, which Niasse always undertook amidst a group of disciples, the loud, public *dhikr* attracted great attention.

The majority of the Tijānīs in Léona remained loyal to Muḥammad Khalīfa, and they looked upon the activities of the “people of the *fayḍa*” with growing contempt. The rift between the two groups became more and more irreconcilable. The supporters of Muḥammad considered him the legitimate heir of the father, °Abdallāh, and thus the legitimate leader of the Tijāniyya in the region. For the members of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*, on the other hand, Ibrāhīm Niasse held the

²² This interpretation of the genesis of the conflict is confirmed by Gueye, who blames the strife on the large number of “ignorant people” who received spiritual training (see Gueye, “Niasse le mystique,” 107).

²³ These were Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye, Muḥammad Zaynab, Muḥammad al-Hadi, Muḥammad Mahmud, Muḥammad al-Shafi', °Uthmān, and al-Ḥājj Mu°ādh (interviews with Muḥammad al-Māḥī b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, Medina, November 24, 1996, and °Umar Gueye, Medina, November 17, 1996). See also the list of names in Maḥmūd °Umar Wane, *Tabshīr al-sārī*, 10.

highest position in the Tijāniyya order as a whole due to his capacity as the bringer of the flood, whereas Muḥammad was simply the shaykh of the *zāwiya* in Léona.²⁴

Toward the end of 1349/beginning of 1931, tensions between the rival groups ran high, and the emotions eventually erupted in physical violence. As a consequence, Niassé turned his back on Léona, and in the month of Dhū l-Qa^cda/April 1931 he founded his own *zāwiya* outside the city boundaries.²⁵ The new settlement was located approximately two miles northeast of Léona and was given the name Medina; later on it came to be known as Medina Baye.

The events that led to the establishment of an independent *zāwiya* can be reconstructed fairly precisely—though not in every detail—on the basis of the available sources. The emerging picture differs significantly from the versions found in the secondary literature. The authors of previous accounts commonly interpreted the founding of Medina as the result of a succession dispute between Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad Niassé. According to one version, the conflict erupted right after the death of ^cAbdallāh Niassé. Although Muḥammad was, as the eldest son, the proper candidate for the office of the caliph, Ibrāhīm allegedly refused to recognize the elder's right.²⁶ Therefore he eventually left the house of the deceased father in Léona and established his own *zāwiya*. The dates given for this event vary between 1924 and 1932.²⁷

Almost all of these authors have in common that they base their interpretation on the assumption that the death of ^cAbdallāh Niassé triggered a rivalry between the sons for the leadership of the family or control of the *zāwiya*. Yet this view is confirmed neither by the

²⁴ See Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh ^cAbdallāh, *Radd bi-l-ḥadīth*, 77.

²⁵ This is the official date of the establishment of the new *zāwiya*. See ^cAlī Cissé, *Tarjama*, 10.

²⁶ Some authors attribute Ibrāhīm's refusal to his personality, which they say was more dynamic and charismatic than Muḥammad's (Behrman, *Brotherhoods and Politics*, 70; Gray, "Rise of the Niassene," 39). Paden (*Kano*, 97) asserts that Ibrāhīm considered himself the "true" successor.

²⁷ 1924: Nicolas, *Dynamique*, 128; between 1928 and 1930: Behrman, *Muslim Brotherhoods*, 70; 1930: Paden, *Kano*, 97; 1932: Hiskett, "Community of Grace," 106, without any reference to the conflict between the brothers. Cf. Gray, "Rise of the Niassene," 39–40.

descendants of Ibrāhīm nor by the sons of Muḥammad, and there is reason to believe that there was a good understanding between the brothers that continued up to 1930.²⁸ Had there been a dispute about the succession following the death of °Abdallāh Niase in 1922, Ibrāhīm would very likely have established an independent *zāwiya* already at that time. Yet, he only took this step in April 1931, almost nine years after the father's demise.²⁹ Moreover, none of my informants in Medina Baye questioned Muḥammad's legitimacy as the caliph, who was—as many pointed out to me in conversation—almost twenty years older than Ibrāhīm, and hence it was in full accordance with local custom that he, and not one of his younger brothers, would take over the responsibilities of the father.

Likewise, there are no indications whatsoever that there was already a rivalry between Ibrāhīm Niase and the Sy family, the leaders of the largest Senegalese Tijānī branch in Tivaouane. The accounts that portray Ibrāhīm as a rebel who refused to submit to the authority of the Sy family are mere conjecture.³⁰ The scene of the dissent was the Léona neighborhood in Kaolack, and the issue was not competition for leadership of the family or the *zāwiya*, but Ibrāhīm's claim to be the bringer of the *fayḍa*. The conflict had not yet transcended the local context to reach the wider religious landscape of Senegal, where various branches of the Tijāniyya vied for power and influence.

²⁸ As mentioned in Chapter 1, Ibrāhīm wrote a detailed commentary on *al-Murhafāt al-quṭṭa*^c, one of Muḥammad's works in verse form defending Tijāniyya doctrines against the critics (see Ibrāhīm Niase, *al-Budūr al-suṭṭa*^c). During the 1920s Ibrāhīm also wrote several blurbs (*taqārīz*) commending other books published by his elder brother (see Samb, *Contribution du Sénégal*, 214–216). Informants in Medina emphasized that Ibrāhīm used to treat his elder brother with the appropriate respect (interviews with Mukhtār b. Ibrāhīm Niase, Medina, November 26, 1996, and °Umar Gueye, Medina, November 17, 1996).

²⁹ Abun-Nasr (*Tijaniyya*, 146) is the only author who gives the correct date and quotes a source (°Alī Cissé's *Tarjama*) in his account of the establishment of Medina.

³⁰ This is the version of Abun-Nasr (*Tijaniyya*, 146), supported by Cuoq, *Musulmans*, 136.

We can be relatively certain that the “official” version of the story as it is nowadays told in Léona and Medina Baye tries to disguise the conflicts rather than to expose them. Just as no one in Medina Baye wishes to talk about the differences between Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad Niasse (at least not in the presence of outsiders), the people of Léona too downplay the disagreements between the brothers, emphasizing that they were united in the goal of working for Islam and the Tijāniyya. In response to questions about the violent incidents, the outsider is being told that the violence cannot be blamed on the brothers themselves but was the responsibility of some ignorant followers.³¹ The search for detailed information about what really happened at the time is all the more difficult because Ibrāhīm Niasse apparently instructed his followers to keep silent about it. According to “Vieux” Diop, a committed follower of Baye and a renowned local specialist in Wolof oral traditions about the *fayḍa*, Niasse repeatedly stressed that whoever considered himself his disciple (Wolof, *talibé*; from Arabic *ṭālib*, “student”) should forget about the matter. Those who talked about it were interested only in sowing discord and opening old sores.³²

It is credible that the escalation of the conflict at the beginning of 1931 should be ascribed to transgressions on the part of followers, especially if we recall Ibrāhīm Niasse’s stern reaction to the misconduct of some of his disciples. But on the other hand, it is likely that after 1930 the brothers also contributed their part by contending with each other for a leadership position within the Tijāniyya. Ibrāhīm may have accepted Muḥammad as the caliph of the House of Niasse, but as far as the spiritual rank of the leading shaykh of the Tijāniyya was concerned, statements in his *Kāshif al-ilbās*, written in June 1931, leave no doubt that Ibrāhīm considered

³¹ Interview with Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad Khalīfa Niasse, Kaolack, September 22, 1994.

³² Interview with “Vieux” Diop, Kaolack, December 11, 1996.

himself the true heir of the father.³³ Furthermore, according to Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari, the brothers repeatedly fell out over the distribution of books from the property left by °Abdallāh Niase.³⁴ In January 1934 Ibrāhīm Niase admitted in a letter to Aḥmad b. al-‘Ayyashi Skiraj, the leading Tijānī authority in Morocco at the time, that a “misunderstanding” had occurred between him and Muḥammad, who is referred to as caliph: “I do not say that someone who asserts these things is a liar, but I do say that he is inconsiderate.”³⁵

It nevertheless appears that the rising tensions during the first months of 1931 cannot be directly attributed to the disagreement between the brothers. This can be concluded from the fact that the conflict over leadership claims did not emerge immediately after the advent of the *fayḍa* in Kosi but about eighteen months later. The likely bones of contention were the exaggerations and misdemeanors of some disciples. The presence of hundreds of disciples who were almost incessantly engaged in vociferous recitations, who would hardly talk about anything but the *fayḍa*, and who occasionally boasted about their mystical experiences was bound to irritate Muḥammad Khalīfa and exasperate his followers. Initially Muḥammad may have put up with his younger brother for presenting himself as the bringer of the *fayḍa*, but at some point the patience of his followers must have been exhausted.

The situation was apparently aggravated at the close of Ramaḍān in 1349—that is, toward the end of February 1931. According to the account of “Vieux” Diop, it was Niase’s habit to spend the fasting month in Kosi, and then to come with his *talibés* to Léona to perform the

³³ Ibrāhīm Niase, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 107; see also Chapter 1.

³⁴ Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 235. Ousmane Kane mentions that the most important works from °Abdallāh’s library went to Muḥammad Khalīfa (Kane, *Fihris*, h).

³⁵ *Jawāhir al-rasā’il* I, 122. He added that this chapter was now closed once and for all. See also Gueye’s remarks on the relationship between the brothers (“Niase le mystique,” 27–30).

prayer of the festival marking the end of the fast, held on the first day after Ramaḍān. “Vieux”

Diop describes the events of that year as follows:

The people of Kaolack alarmed the governor [*sic*; he was apparently referring to the *Commandant de Cercle*] prior to the Korité festival [Wolof for *‘īd al-ḥiṭr*]. They said the arrival of Baye with his *talibés* could cause problems, and he should do everything to prevent them from entering the town. Thereupon the administration dispatched some police officers down to the river, who were to foil the entry of too many people into the town. The people of Kaolack were afraid of Baye. . . . When the situation became critical, Baye sent word to the governor that he only wanted to come to town with his followers to celebrate Korité and that there was no other reason. Afterward they would all together return to their villages. No one wanted to sow discord; no one was interested in a quarrel. Hence he requested the governor’s permission to attend the festivities. The permission was granted under the condition that they did not enter the town before six o’clock on the eve of the festival.³⁶

Even though the anticipated clashes did apparently not occur, and Niasse did indeed return with his *talibés* to Kosi after the festival prayer had ended, this account conveys how easily the atmosphere could become heated among the adherents of the rival factions.

Although “Vieux” Diop emphasizes that Ibrāhīm Niasse always exhorted his disciples to stay calm and to be considerate,³⁷ Niasse himself indirectly admits in a letter from this period that things could quickly get out of control. The letter is addressed to a deputy called Muḥammad Sa‘īd Ane, who had presumably become the subject of intense gossip, to the extent that he was apprehensive that he might have fallen from Niasse’s favor. The letter takes on the “intrigues of

³⁶ Interview with “Vieux” Diop, Kaolack, December 11, 1996.

³⁷ Hill also cites informants who praised Niasse’s “wise response” to the escalating situation (“Divine Knowledge,” 146). His account differs slightly from “Vieux” Diop’s: According to him, the events took place a year earlier, at the end of Ramaḍān 1930, and fighting did indeed break out after the festival prayer. He gives one version where the fighting was immediately followed by the exodus toward the site that was to become Medina Baye; another version—which conforms to the one given here and also matches with the information that the emigration took place in the *hijrī* year 1349—has the move take place a few weeks later (see *ibid.*, 146-148). Perhaps “Vieux” deliberately kept silent about the violence after the Korité prayer.

the envious and the lies of the meddlers” and then goes on to describe the mechanism of the gossip:

When they hear that God has given a special position to one of His bondsmen, they are quick with their tongues and plots. . . . They make false claims and then attribute them to honorable men, like you or people like you. At first they are cordial with you and act outwardly as if they loved you, but their true purpose is that you should help them fight their enemy and afflict harm on him. . . . Once you have become involved with one of them—and you do not even need to have said anything—then they go out and proclaim: “Ane has told me such and such.” If you are not careful, then it will soon be said: “Ane has said such and such about so-and-so.” Finally someone who is close to me hears it, and he writes to me what people quote you as saying—while it is pure fabrication! I have often heard them talk like this, but I am well aware about their affair, and about yours.³⁸

Niasse attributes the incidents to the conspiratorial machinations of his opponents. But the same mechanism that reproduced and spread rumors could just as well take root among his own followers—if not among the serious aspirants, then at least among those who did not take their wayfaring all that seriously. Considering the tense atmosphere that must have prevailed after the month of Ramaḍān 1349/end of February 1931, one can imagine how the tensions eventually erupted into open conflict a few weeks later, culminating in the gathering of a huge crowd in front of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s residence in Léona to demand his departure. He had become *persona non grata* in his own hometown.

Hijra to Medina

The only written source that documents the founding of Medina is ‘Alī Cissé’s biography of Niasse, and there too the event is mentioned only in passing. Cissé explains that Ibrāhīm Niasse initially stayed in his father’s house, but the place soon became “too narrow” due to the crush of followers and visitors. For this reason, Cissé continues, he began to set up a new domicile

³⁸ *Jawāhir al-rasā’il* II, 120–121 (written in Kosi in 1349/1930–1931).

outside the city limits of Kaolack on Monday, 16 Dhū l-Qa^cda/April 6, 1931. The place was given the name “the new Medina of the unique pole (*qutb*; the highest rank in the saintly hierarchy),” and also came to be known as the “lodge of the people of remembrance” (*zāwiyat ahl al-dhikr*).³⁹

Other authors of hagiographic orientation usually mention spatial constraints as the reason for this step. According to Ba, the number of Niasse’s pupils increased so drastically during the years 1929 and 1930 that he had to employ two additional teachers, and due to lack of space, he began construction on a new *zāwiyā*.⁴⁰ This is in accordance with the official account, which conceals the darker aspects of the events of those days. Apart from the official version, there is also the unrecorded and, according to the view of the “people of the *fayḍa*,” the true story, which depicts the exodus from Léona and the founding of Medina as the unjust expulsion of Ibrāhīm Niasse and his followers by the hostile deniers. “Vieux” Diop’s account can be seen as representative of the perspective of the *talibés*:

Initially Baye and his followers went through very difficult times. Whenever anyone spoke in favor of Baye, the others immediately isolated him. . . . The first ones who followed Baye were all abandoned—by their families, their friends, their neighbors. They were treated as if they were abnormal.⁴¹

The “people of the *fayḍa*” thus perceived themselves as a marginalized and victimized minority. Other sporadic hints in the sources point in the same direction, such as the letter from Niasse to al-Hasan Ndiaye quoted above. Niasse was utterly convinced that he was engaged in a divine affair, and he considered his adversaries the enemies of God. This is further underscored by the use of the term deniers for those who rejected the *fayḍa*. Several Qur³ānic references to

³⁹ c Ali Cissé, *Tarjama*, 10; cf. Samb, *Adab*, 22.

⁴⁰ Ba, “Cheikh Ibrahima Niasse,” 24; cf. Gueye, “Niasse le Mystique,” 134. According to Quadri (“Ibrahim Niasse,” 110), the new *zāwiyā* accommodated up to 10,000 people.

⁴¹ Interview with “Vieux” Diop, Kaolack, December 11, 1996.

inkār (and its verbal and participial derivatives) appear in the context of admonitions to the believers not to reject the truth revealed by God to the Prophet.⁴² According to their self-perception, Ibrāhīm Niasse and his followers were experiencing the same fate as other saints, and the saints in turn shared the plight of the Prophet Muḥammad and all previous prophets who suffered persecution and whose contemporaries denied their mission—but in the end the truth always prevailed.⁴³ The fact that the “people of the *fayḍa*” had to face plotting and scheming adversaries was thus not an exception, but constituted the rule. As in the case of their predecessors among the prophets and saints, the machinations of their enemies were evidence for the veracity of their own mission.

An undated letter, presumably written shortly after the founding of Medina, conveys this quite distinctly. In this letter Niasse attempts to boost the morale of his followers in the village Medina Fas, who apparently had to endure intense hostilities.

Know that I have, despite my young age, my little knowledge, and my weak standing in the religion, already faced all the discredit that can be pronounced in God’s name. They have accused me of infidelity (*kufr*), of heresy, and of declaring the unlawful permissible. . . . I have been accused of destroying the path of the shaykh [Aḥmad al-Tijānī] by adding to it what does not belong to it. They have charged me with attributing untruths to God, with practicing magic, and with insanity. I have been subjected to things my pen refuses to record. But I persevered in patience for the sake of God. . . . I have realized that they can cause neither harm nor benefit. Only what God wills comes to pass, and what He wills is invariably the best. He has granted me His Victory, and He has protected me from the wickedness of my enemies.⁴⁴

Niasse even goes on to predict that the *fayḍa* will one day turn out to be entirely triumphant, expressing his certainty in the following terms: “I know of a time which will come in

⁴² Qurʾān 21:50, 23:69. Cf. Hiskett, “Community of Grace,” 130.

⁴³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 62.

⁴⁴ *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 32. One of his early poems, probably composed before the *hijra* to Medina, contains very similar statements. See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Fa-l-ʿawnu bi-llāhi*.

the future, as if it were the past for me.”⁴⁵ From his perspective, the deniers might have succeeded in forcing him out of his father’s house and even out of his hometown, but this was only the prelude to a story that would ultimately end with God granting the party of the truth a resounding victory.

The precise event that triggered the founding of Medina also remains vague in Niasse’s written statements. He made only one explicit pronouncement, to be found in two verses of a panegyric poem, which was possibly composed in 1350/1931–1932. Every “true” *talibé* in Medina Baye can recite these verses, and they stand as a symbol for their shaykh’s expulsion from Léona:

They publicly tore my skin,
drove me out from my place,
without any transgression on my part—apart from
being filled with rapturous love for Ṭāhā [i.e., the Prophet Muḥammad].⁴⁶

It is not a mere coincidence that the verses are part of a poem in which Niasse praises the Prophet. The genre of panegyrics on the Prophet was for him the means par excellence to express his love for Muḥammad and to come close to the beloved. In all he wrote no fewer than fifteen anthologies and uncounted individual poems that fall into this genre. By using a great variety of poetic motives and forms, he conveys over and again the same message: that he does not rely on anyone other than God and the Prophet; that whatever he does, he does in the awareness of being in the Prophet’s presence;⁴⁷ that he is under the Prophet’s special protection;⁴⁸ that he does not

⁴⁵ *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 32.

⁴⁶ Quoted from Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Majmūʿa al-kāmila*, 18. See also Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 236.

⁴⁷ See the poem in Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Majmūʿa al-kāmila*, 25–26.

⁴⁸ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Ḥirz al-munīʿ*.

love anything but the Prophet, and that he is annihilated in the Prophet. In some of the later anthologies Niasse also describes encounters he had with Muḥammad while in a waking state.⁴⁹

By including verses about his own situation in the poem quoted above, Niasse accentuates his high degree of identification with the person of Muḥammad. He interprets his own situation as being analogous to that of the Prophet, and he searches for the solution to his problems in the conduct of his great role model. The parallels with Muḥammad's emigration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Yathrib, the later Medina in present-day Saudi Arabia, are obvious. Although Niasse never, to the best of my knowledge, explicitly mentioned it in writing, there is no doubt that the exodus from Léona to Medina was his *hijra*.⁵⁰

The move to Medina constitutes a landmark in Niasse's career not only as a reenactment of the *hijra*.⁵¹ He had now become the head of an independent *zāwiya* and had thereby set the stage for the later expansion of the Tijāniyya under his direction. But apart from the logistical importance of the departure from Léona, its symbolic significance was also enormous. The Hausa poet Balarabe Jega readily takes up the motive of the *hijra* in his panegyric piece *Goran fayla*, one of the most celebrated poems in praise of Ibrāhīm Niasse. Drawing a direct analogy between Medina Baye and the Prophet's Medina in Arabia, the poet describes both places as the destination of a *hijra*, and points out that the people of Medina in Senegal bear resemblance in

⁴⁹ For instance Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Dawāwīn al-sitt*, 215; see also the citations in Samb, *Contribution du Sénégal*, 227–235.

⁵⁰ One author who draws this parallel very explicitly is Ibn Iktūsh, *Min akhbār al-shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 38. See also Kane, "Tijāniyya réformée," 28; Gueye, "Niasse le mystique," 34.

⁵¹ With his *hijra* Niasse followed in the footsteps not only of the Prophet, but also of other famous West African Sufi leaders, such as °Uthmān dan Fodio, al-Ḥājj °Umar Tall, and Aḥmadu Bamba, who tried to model their biographies according to the Prophetic pattern. For details see Seesemann, *Aḥmadu Bamba*, 224–227.

their words and deeds to the companions (*ṣaḥāba*) of the Prophet.⁵² °Alī Cissé describes the new *zāwiya* as the sanctuary of the true religion, built on the five ritual prayers, the *wazīfa*, and continuous remembrance of God, which could be heard day and night.⁵³ Reportedly, there were also Mauritanian visitors present when the *zāwiya* was established. A member of the Idaw °Alī, though not mentioned by name, is quoted as having addressed the following verse to Niasse: “If there were a fourth besides the three sacred mosques [the Ka°ba, the Prophet’s mosque in Medina, and al-Aqṣā in Jerusalem], it would be you whom the world would congratulate [on having established it].”⁵⁴

The *hijra* to Medina was the decisive step in the development of a community of chosen people, who did not have the lightest doubt that they were on the side of the truth. To them, Niasse was in no way a rebel against the authority of his elder brother; rather, he was the innocent victim of intrigues, which his envious opponents did not cease to contrive.

However, the retreat from Léona to the new *zāwiya* did not put an end to the conflicts between the “people of the *fayḍa*” and the deniers. The physical separation of their respective followers led to a decrease in tensions between Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad Niasse, but since Ibrāhīm had now entered the religious stage of Senegal, new divisions opened up. The scene of the conflict was to relocate shortly. Besides, the problem of the lacking discipline with some of the followers apparently persisted.

⁵² Balarabe Jega, *Goran fayla*, 10. See also the description of the “people of Kaolack” (i.e., Medina Baye) in Muḥammad al-Amīn, *al-Khabar al-maṣūn*, 7.

⁵³ °Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*, 10. He also emphasizes that the construction of the buildings proceeded “faster than ever before in comparable constructions,” implying that this is due to the close connection of the construction workers with God.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Ba, “Cheikh Ibrahima Niasse,” 24. However, Ba’s connection of the verses with the founding of Medina might be erroneous. On the occasion of the commissioning of the new mosque of Medina in 1938, a Mauritanian scholar composed a poem that also plays with the motive of four mosques. See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Wajh al-taḥqīq*, 36.

It was from Medina that Ibrāhīm Niasse wrote his most drastic decree against disciples who violated the rules. The addressees were Ma^cabdu b. Aḥmad Bakar Niang and ^cUmar Touré, two of Niasse's earliest companions who were among the most experienced deputies of the *fayḍa*. Like in earlier circulars, Niasse asked the recipients to inform the "brothers" (*ikhwān*) about the contents. The following is an excerpt:

Sufism consists of cognizance, fulfillment of the religious obligations, and self-denial (*zuhd*). Whoever misses out on even a single one of these three [pillars] only makes empty claims and is doomed, without any hope for salvation. People talk of Sufism while they become the slaves of this world and its lusts. Would that I had never known those people and they did not know me, unless God still guides them to repentance! . . . Pass my instructions on to the people. For those who listen to you, there is still the opportunity of repentance. But those who do not listen to you do not belong to me. . . . Do not come back unless you can tell me that all those who want to belong to us desire to serve God alone. Keep your secrets to yourselves, . . . to be safe from your enemies, the enemies of the religion and of the path. . . .

If you see someone claiming for himself annihilation in any of the divine presences (*ḥaḍra min al-ḥaḍarāt*) without . . . constantly being by his master's side, send him to me, so that I may suspend him. Otherwise [i.e. if he never underwent proper spiritual training] he is one of the liars, who add to the religion what does not belong to it. This he did not get from us. Who does not totally dissociate himself from those people after having received these instructions, I ask God's permission to make a supplication (*du^cā³*) that God may make him perish instantly. And on the Day of Reckoning I will be his adversary before the Lord of the Judgment.⁵⁵

At the end of this quotation Niasse indicated that, due to his high rank in the hierarchy of saints, he had a special role not only in this world but also in the hereafter. The lines can be read as heralding his emergence as the *ghawth* ("succor of the age," the supreme saint of his time), which was to take place gradually in the following years. The letter also reveals that the members of the *Jamā^cat al-fayḍa* were kept in trepidation by severe controversies and deep fault lines, even after the founding of Medina. Nowadays the precise reasons for the continuing dissent in those days are surrounded by silence. It appears as if Niasse's followers are finally

⁵⁵ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Ziyādat al-jawāhir*, 49.

complying with his command to keep their secrets to themselves. Yet, despite all efforts to conceal the traces of the events, there are several sources that help to unravel the enigma: The great bone of contention during this period was the question whether one could see God.

New Attacks

Shortly after his *hijra*, at the beginning of June 1931, Ibrāhīm Niasse completed his work on *Kāshif al-ilbās*, the book that was to become the doctrinal cornerstone of his movement. The enormous significance of this work lies not only in the sections where he justifies his claim to the *fayḍa* and his practice of *tarbiya*, analyzed in the preceding chapters. The book also expounds the wide range Sufi ideas that circulated in West Africa at the time, certainly through the subjective lens of Niasse, but interspersed with frequent references to other Sufi authorities from West Africa, the Maghreb, Andalusia, Egypt, Yemen, Mesopotamia, Turkey, Iran, Khurasan, and India, covering a period of more than thousand years. Moreover, because of the way Niasse arranged the chapters and themes, the *Kāshif* can be read as a mirror that reflects the early history of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. The appendix (*dhayl*) to the *Kāshif*, published together with the original text in the print editions that appeared from 1951 onward, was completed in May 1932, roughly a year later. It is a collection of short essays on Sufi themes that allow us to identify the issues that occupied the nascent community during the first year after the *hijra* to Medina.

The third section of the third chapter gives the first hint that there was an argument at the time about the vision of God (*ru'yat Allāh*).⁵⁶ Niasse refers to statements by previous Sufi

⁵⁶ Of course, this was not the first time Muslims posed the question of God's visibility. In the formative period of Islamic speculative theology (*kalām*) in the ninth and tenth centuries, the question was hotly debated between the representatives of the different schools, most notably the Ḥanbalīs, the Mu'tazila, and the Ash'arīs. While the rationalist Mu'tazila denied the possibility of the vision both in this world and in the hereafter, the other two schools affirmed the *visio*

authors concerning the “vision of the essence of the Creator” (*ruʿyat dhāt al-Bārī*) and proposes to prove the possibility of this vision, though he touches only briefly upon the old theological debate about *ruʿya*. His line of argument consists mainly of a sequence of quotations detailing the positions of early theologians and Sufis. In a departure from the common Ashʿarī opinion, Niasse asserts that seeing God in this life is not the exclusive prerogative of the Prophet Muḥammad. The latter’s encounter with God during the Night Journey is to be considered a *muʿjiza*, a miracle performed by a prophet to establish the prophet’s credentials. What a prophet can accomplish in a *muʿjiza* can also occur (or, to be more precise, be made to occur by God) in the form of a *karāma*, a miracle performed by saints (or “friends of God”; *awliyāʾ*). Therefore, Niasse argues, it is in principle possible to see God in this world.

Already at the beginning of this section there is a passage describing the cognizants as being able to experience the vision of God in the sense of “the heart witnessing Him in everything” (*shuhūd al-qalb bihi fī kull shayʾ*). A later passage is more explicit:

The vision about the possibility or impossibility of which the scholars argue so vehemently is not identical with the vision that the “people of annihilation” (*ahl al-fanāʾ*) claim for themselves with regard to the essence of the Real. Their vision takes place neither by means of gaze (*baṣar*) nor by the heart, but through the eye of the Real. This eye sees where there is no vision and no seer.⁵⁷

Niasse underscores his conviction that a saint could see God in this manner by referring once again to the gift of *karāma*. If a saint gave testimony that he had seen God, it was

beatifica on the Day of Judgment and in the hereafter. Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935–936), the founder of the theological school that later came to dominate Sunni Islam, even argued that the vision in this world could not be ruled out entirely, although it was granted only to the Prophet Muḥammad during his Night Journey (*miʿrāj*). The crucial Qurʾānic verses referred to in the debate are Sura 6:103 (“No vision can grasp Him”); Sura 75:22–23, about the vision on the Day of Judgment; Sura 7:143, which deals with Moses’ request to be granted the vision of God (cf. Exodus 33:18–23); and Sura 53, on the Night Journey. As Tufts, the author of the most detailed study of the problem, points out (“Controversy over Ruʿya,” 247), the divergent views of the schools finally became “petrified dogmas.”

⁵⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 102.

incumbent upon the ordinary believers to trust him. If they did not, they were to be counted among the deniers, who were the most deeply steeped in ignorance even if they considered themselves the most learned scholars. The deniers even readily raised the accusation of unbelief (*takfīr*) against other Muslims, not heeding the dire consequences such an accusation could have if it was unjustified: according to a Prophetic tradition, infidelity (*kufr*) reverts to the one who wrongfully accuses another Muslim of it.⁵⁸

These statements suggest that Niasse's stance in the *ru'ya* question had earned him the accusation of infidelity already before the founding of Medina (April 1931). However, the accusation constituted only the prelude to a debate that was to ravage the religious landscape in Senegal and beyond for decades. The reconstruction of the events that followed amounts to detective work, as the protagonists have long been dead and their descendants and disciples are extremely reluctant to talk about the topic and most seem to be unfamiliar with the details of the controversy. Most written traces of the debate have disappeared, while others have apparently been kept under lock and key. For instance, although Niasse seems to have dealt with the vision of God in a treatise written in early 1932, none of his descendants and close companions seems to possess a copy.⁵⁹ In the course of my research I was able to get hold of three sources that throw light on the events of the year 1350/1931–1932. As these sources were considered lost, and in some cases not even known to exist, among the leadership of the Tijāniyya in Medina, the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁹ Niasse refers to the book in the appendix to the *Kāshif* and gives the title *Tabṣirat al-anām fī jawāz ru'yat al-Bārī fī l-yaqza wa-l-manām* (Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 177). The title is also listed in °Alī Cissé's biography of Niasse, written in 1934 (°Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*, 6). Because Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari was unable to find a copy, he speculated that Niasse might have planned to write the book but later changed his mind and abandoned the idea, because the topic was "too difficult" (Maigari, *Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 320). This suggestion is strongly rejected by the Mauritanian author of a rejoinder to Maigari (see Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh °Abdallāh, *Radd bi-l-ḥadīth*, 317–318).

news about my discovery triggered a large number of requests from people desiring to take a look at my copies.⁶⁰ What follows is an interpretative summary of the debate based on these three and a few other, more easily available sources.

When the first manuscript copies of the *Kāshif* began to circulate in Senegal, it was only a matter of weeks before other representatives of the Tijāniyya voiced their disagreement.

Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Dem (b. 1311/1893, d. 1393/1973), a Tijānī shaykh from the town of Sokone, approximately thirty miles southwest of Kaolack,⁶¹ emerged as the spokesperson for those who opposed Ibrāhīm Niase, still a young newcomer at that time. Dem was a descendant of a family of religious scholars from Fouta Toro, a region with a long-standing reputation for Islamic learning. He held various chains of initiation into the Tijāniyya, linking him with al-Ḥājj °Umar Tall. In addition, Malik Sy had appointed him as a deputy, and °Abdallāh Niase had also endowed him with a license. In the 1920s, while on pilgrimage in Mecca, he received another appointment to the deputy rank, this time from al-Ḥājj °Umar's nephew Alfā Hāshim (d. 1350/1932), one of the leading figures in the order at the time, who acted as the liaison of the Tijāniyya in the Ḥijāz.⁶² Especially the latter connection helped Dem to enhance his credentials

⁶⁰ Some of my acquaintances in Kaolack recently told me that several of these sources have appeared in print in the meantime, perhaps as a ripple effect of my discovery. I was unable to see these published versions.

⁶¹ On Dem, see Samb, *Adab*, 355–372 and id., *Contribution du Sénégal*, 250–257 (focusing on Dem's literary activity); Monteil, *Islam noir*, 167–169; *ALA IV*, 324–327.

⁶² See Alfā Hāshim's entry in *EI 3* for details about his illustrious career. The information about Dem's licenses comes from an interview with his son Muḥammad (Sokone, January 2, 1997). This version differs from the one given by Villalon, which portrays °Abdallāh Niase as a disciple of Aḥmad Dem's father (*Islamic Society*, 142; cf. Loimeier, *Säkularer Staat*, 391). While I am inclined to think that Muḥammad Dem's version is more reliable, Villalon's account highlights a common pattern of the relationship between competing scholarly lineages. Different answers to the question of who initiated whom trigger competing claims to superiority, as is also evident in the conflicting accounts of the relationship between Mālik Sy and °Abdallāh Niase.

as the head of an independent Tijānī center in Senegal, even though he maintained close relations with the Sy family in Tivaouane and with Muḥammad Niasse in Kaolack.

Sometime in the second half of 1931 Dem produced a lengthy polemical treatise under the title *Tanbīh al-aghbiyā*⁶³ (“Admonition to the Fools”).⁶³ While most of the 134 manuscript pages expound the theological positions in the *ruʿya* debate and the views of Sufi authors, there are a few revealing references to the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* and the teachings of Ibrāhīm Niasse, even though the latter is never mentioned by name. Dem’s introduction suggests that he received his copy of *Kāshif al-ilbās* from Niasse himself. Following is his version of the events that prompted him to write his book:

In our country a group has emerged from among our brothers in the Tijāniyya who have wreaked great confusion among the ordinary believers (*al-ʿāmma*) regarding their religion. They have spread expressions none of the true scholars who follow the Sunna has ever used from the times of the Prophet’s companions until the present day. This includes the prattle about the vision of God. Forthwith there were statements circulating within this group such as “so-and-so has seen God,” “so-and-so can now show you your Lord,” “so-and-so has attained,” “so-and-so will attain,” or “so-and-so has had illumination.” They even say, “such-and-such woman has now surpassed so-and-so—a great saint and knower of God—in his position.” Finally one could hear them saying, so-and-so and so-and-so do not pray and fast anymore, because they had reached the state of annihilation. . . .

In the beginning I told everyone who reported such things about those people that these had to be lies. I searched for explanations and answers to find for them an honorable way out of this affair, because I held a good opinion of them, as Muslims are required to do. I interpreted their statements about the vision in the sense of the vision of the heart, as it is possible upon attaining cognizance. But then, when they made more and more of those false claims and flooded the whole

⁶³ Translated into English, the full title is “Admonition to the Fools Regarding the Impossibility of the Visual Perception of God the Exalted in this World for Others than the ‘Seal of the Prophets’ According to the Sacred Law”. Apart from the manuscript in Dem’s *zāwiya* in Sokone (which I was eventually allowed to use after a friend’s persuasive intervention), there seems to be only one other manuscript copy, held in the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire in Dakar (Fonds Amar Samb, *Soufisme*, 12; see Mbaye and Mbaye, “Supplement”).

religion with their silly tales, I refrained from protecting them any longer. There were too many people telling such things.⁶⁴

At this point Aḥmad Dem had, according to his own account, already decided to leave the matter in the hands of God. But then the “leader of this group” (i.e., Ibrāhīm Niasse) sent him a treatise (i.e., *Kāshif al-ilbās*), and while reading it, Dem apparently came across the section about *ruʿya* summarized above, because he continues as follows:

I had to realize that he sanctioned the very things that those people were spreading and making subject matter of their inflated prattle. He claims things for himself [in his book] that I do not even want to contest.⁶⁵

Although Niasse’s argumentation was actually more differentiated than Dem’s statement suggests, the latter felt that a border had been crossed. He considered it his duty to defend the religion and to enlighten the “fools” about the truth regarding the vision of God. The first chapter of *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʿ* summarizes the theological arguments and eventually adopts the Ashʿarī stance: by reason (*ʿaql*), vision in this life could not be absolutely ruled out, but the revealed tenets of Islam (*sharʿ*) declare the vision a prerogative of believers in the hereafter. The second chapter explains that only the Prophet Muḥammad had been granted a vision of God in this life and that whoever claims to have seen God after the Prophet has to be considered an infidel.⁶⁶ The third chapter contains a list of saints who had seen God in their dreams, a form of *ruʿya* Dem considers plausible.

Two other lengthy chapters are dedicated to Sufi themes. Among other topics, they address the difference between *mushāhada* (introspection, witnessing) and *ruʿya*, as well as the terms *maʿrifa* (cognizance), *fanāʿ* (annihilation), and *kashf* (unveiling, disclosure). According to

⁶⁴ Aḥmad Dem, *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʿ*, 1–2. Cf. the same quotation, with a slightly different wording, in Samb, *Adab*, 368.

⁶⁵ Aḥmad Dem, *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʿ*, 2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 12–26.

Dem, the only acceptable form of *ruʿya* is the “vision of the heart,” which is a metaphorical and not a physical way of seeing.⁶⁷ Anything beyond this amounts to the doctrine of *ittiḥād* (“union”) and *ḥulūl* (“indwelling,” “incarnation”), which is equivalent to heresy (*ilhād*).⁶⁸ Dem obviously stands on the side of those who feared that certain mystical experiences would lead to antinomianism. He repeats time and again that even the saints and those endowed with mystical knowledge of God are not immune to sin and had to adhere strictly to the injunctions of the sharia, just like all other believers.⁶⁹ The sixth chapter is primarily a reproduction of Prophetic traditions, warning against kindling the “fire of *fitna*,”—that is, sowing dissension among Muslims and splitting their community. Neither Niasse nor his *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*, the targets of Dem’s polemic, are mentioned by name.⁷⁰

The concluding chapter of *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʿ*, which covers almost a quarter of the entire book, addresses two other topics discussed in *Kāshif al-ilbās*: the abrogation of the Sufi orders (*naskh al-ṭuruq*) and the identity of the person endowed with the *fayḍa* predicted by Aḥmad al-Tijānī. Dem takes issue with a statement Niasse made in the context of the justification of his claim to the *fayḍa*, where he asserted that all other Sufi orders might have

⁶⁷ Ibid., 41–42.

⁶⁸ See in particular *ibid.*, 61–66. Dem also seems to equate the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (“unity of existence”) with heresy (*ibid.*, 61, 64). The debate about “unification” and “indwelling” is an old one and has been analyzed in Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, especially 118–125.

⁶⁹ For instance Aḥmad Dem, *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʿ*, 3 and 105–106.

⁷⁰ Amar Samb, the only author (apart from Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 237) who has discussed *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʿ*, merely speculated that Dem’s polemic could have targeted Niasse and his movement (see *Adab*, 36; the section on *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʿ* is missing in the French version of Samb’s work). Samb concluded his summary of Dem’s book with a warning of the “great danger” that may arise from claims about the vision of God: “Such statements can become a frightening weapon in the hands of an impostor, if he manages to persuade the ordinary people that he saw God with his own eyes” (*ibid.*, 369).

come to an end, as there was only one left that was capable of providing spiritual training.⁷¹ The one remaining *ṭarīqa* that Niasse had in mind was obviously the Tijāniyya under his leadership, and his statement has to be seen against the background of the previous Tijānī authorities' agreement that the *fayḍa* would coincide with the appearance of the Mahdī (i.e., the end of times), when "all Sufi orders merge into one."⁷²

Although Niasse avoided describing the abrogation of the Sufi orders as a definite fact, using the expressions "perhaps" (*laʿalla*) and "God knows best" (*wa-Allāhu aʿlam*) to put his claim in more cautious terms, Dem ignores these subtleties and, after a long excursus about the continuous chain of saints and Sufi orders that will continue until the end of the world, launches a frontal attack:

No one has ever uttered such a thing, with the exception of this agitator (*muddaʿī*) and sower of discord (*fattān*), who disregards the fact that the inhabited world is full of millions of Muslims and believers who do not belong to our *ṭarīqa*, but only know the innumerable other *ṭuruq* that are established in their countries, because the ways of the "people of God" are many.⁷³

For Dem, there is no reason to doubt the efficacy of other Sufi orders. The superiority of the Tijāniyya notwithstanding, aspirants could choose the litanies of any other order to conclude their spiritual training successfully.⁷⁴ The problem did not lie in the pluralism of the *ṭuruq*, but in the emergence of extreme groups (*ghulāt*) whose leaders cleverly used Sufism as a cover to beguile ordinary believers and create dissension among Muslims: "Their tongues are sweeter than honey, but their hearts are more bitter than colocynth."⁷⁵

⁷¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 53; see Chapter 1.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Aḥmad Dem, *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʾ*, 127.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 128. One of the authorities quoted is Ibn ʿAjība, who already figured prominently in Chapter 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 129.

On the last five pages, Dem takes on Niasse's claim to be the bringer of the *fayḍa*. His understanding of the term *fayḍa* differs significantly from the interpretation given in *Kāshif al-illās*. According to Dem, *fayḍa* stands for the continuous expansion of the Tijāniyya from the days of Aḥmad al-Tijānī until the end of times. Hence, the founder's statement did not imply that the *fayḍa* would emerge in only one region or that there would be only one bringer.⁷⁶ The extreme hardships mentioned in the prophecy about the *fayḍa* referred to the general situation when the world comes to an end. Only then would the prophecy be fulfilled conclusively; then the continuous expansion of the Tijāniyya would finally culminate in throngs of people entering the path. However, this would not happen unless the conditions for the end of time, as laid down in the Prophetic traditions, were met. One of these conditions stated that people would begin to eat each other, and upon this signal the Mahdī would appear.⁷⁷

Dem leaves no doubt that, in his view, Niasse's arguments were completely baseless. Apparently, some supporters of Niasse identified the worldwide economic crisis caused by the collapse of stock markets in October 1929 with the hardships mentioned in Aḥmad al-Tijānī's prophecy. But in Dem's opinion, the soaring prices did not indicate any extraordinary affliction. Those affected by the rise in the peanut price were Europeans, not peasants or local merchants. In any event, the difficulties people experienced during this crisis were in no way comparable to the suffering that would be required to fulfill the conditions for the appearance of the ultimate *fayḍa*. If it had been otherwise, the people would have begun to devour each other. He then continues:

What are the woes this boaster and sower of discord [i.e., Niasse] quotes as evidence for the advent of the *fayḍa*, compared with the agonies, hunger, and upheaval our ancestors have gone through in their time? They ate the skins and

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 130.

cadavers of their animals after they had perished, they ate dried-up plants, but they never started to eat each other.⁷⁸

Toward the end of the document, Dem advances an additional argument to refute Niasse's claim to the *fayḍa*, suggesting that the only legitimate bringer of the *fayḍa* so far could have been al-Ḥājj °Umar Tall. Nobody else, Dem argues, had worked more successfully for the Tijāniyya than the leader of the jihad and the founder of an Islamic state; nobody had initiated more people into the order; nobody had led more aspirants to mystical knowledge of God.⁷⁹

Hence Dem concludes:

In the case that our Shaykh °Umar is, in spite of his exalted affair and the multitude of his followers, not entitled to the *fayḍa*, then it is at any rate inconceivable that people of the like of this agitator [i.e. Niasse] have a claim to it, who make false allegations and spread rumors about having reached the position of the pole. . . . In our *ṭarīqa* there are others who lead much larger communities and have many more followers than him, and none of them has claimed the rank of a caliph, let alone the *fayḍa*.⁸⁰

At any rate, it is better to have a few sincere followers with correct beliefs than many ignorant adherents. Nothing is worse, Dem charges, than a large number of fools led by a man who wanders around without direction, not knowing that there will be saints and Sufi orders and methods of spiritual training in this world until the Day of Judgment.⁸¹

The Rejoinders

Not surprisingly, this unflattering description of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* and its leader was met with outrage when the first copy of *Tanbīh al-aghbiyā'* arrived in Medina sometime toward the end of 1931. So far the members of the *Jamā'a* seemed to have held the conviction that the denial was

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 131. Dem emphasizes that the chains going back to al-Ḥājj °Umar prevailed even in the Hijāz.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 133–134.

limited to the faction around Muḥammad Niasse in Léona, who had rejected the *fayḍa* out of envy for the success of his younger brother. Dem's book, however, not only meant that a distinguished representative of the Tijāniyya had joined ranks with the deniers, it also constituted an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of Niasse's claims by substantive arguments. On top of this, Dem had dared to deny what all adherents of the *fayḍa* believed to be an undisputable fact, namely that it was possible to see God during the mystical experience.

Almost instantly °Uthmān Ndiaye and °Alī Cissé, both close disciples of Niasse, began preparing responses to the accusations against their shaykh. The result was two short polemical rejoinders that reflect the combative mood within the *Jamā'a*: Ndiaye chose for his work the title *Ṣawārim al-ḥaqq wa-l-intiṣār fi qat' a'naq al-muta'aṣṣibīn 'alā shaykhinā min dhawī al-inkār* ("The Swords of Truth and Victory that Cut the Necks of Those who Conspire Against our Shaykh from Among the Deniers"), while Cissé's tract is titled *al-Mikhzam li-abāṭil Aḥmad Dem* ("The Lance that Pierces Aḥmad Dem's Falsehoods"). Like *Tanbīh al-aghbiyā'*, the two pamphlets had not been published, and they later disappeared from the scene. Everybody I spoke to in Medina Baye shielded himself with ignorance, and it was only by coincidence that I came across copies in a tiny village in Saloum.⁸² The primary relevance of the texts does not lie in the point they make about the vision of God; the arguments employed are relatively predictable. Rather, the documents are significant because they give original insights into the dynamics that propelled the early development of the *Jamā'a*.

Both texts are striking for their uncompromising, even aggressive tone. Although Aḥmad Dem's rebuke of the *Jamā'a* was certainly not conciliatory, he did at least avoid attacking his

⁸² The owner only allowed me to use the copies on the condition of anonymity. However, at least Cissé's text must have been known in limited circles, as it gives the name of the copyist, a descendant of the author, who copied the text in 1979. See the details in the bibliography.

adversary on a personal level, painstakingly concealing his identity in the entire book of 134 pages. This accords with the etiquette of polemical writing, at least within the Tijānī tradition.⁸³ Neither Ndiaye nor Cissé made a comparable effort. Cissé explains that he never used to care about the insults and lies of the deniers, but was forced to respond after reading the book by Dem, “the most ignorant of all ignoramuses, the most foolish of all fools, the Abū Jahl of the Tijāniyya.”⁸⁴ In a mockery of the long lists of titles of honor that are common in hagiographic works, Ndiaye introduces Dem as “the imam of the ignoramuses and deniers, the pole of the liars and slanderers, the standard-bearer of the envious and stubborn ones.”⁸⁵ Both authors were outraged that Dem had the audacity to accuse a saint (i.e., Niasse) of lying—a blunder that could only be committed by someone who had not drunk from the cup and not tasted the flavor of mystical experience. The only way out from this dangerous assault on a saint was for Dem to retract his allegations and sincerely repent of his action. Otherwise, there was no hope for him to avert a dreadful end.⁸⁶

Ṣawārim al-ḥaqq and *al-Mikhzam* devote only a few pages to the question of God’s visibility, the bone of contention that had triggered the whole controversy. Both authors present it as a matter of course that the complete annihilation of the self leads to a direct experience of the divine, which can be described with terms like *ruʿya* (vision), *shuhūd* (witnessing), or *tajallī* (theophany).⁸⁷ Rejecting the possibility of seeing God thus amounts to denying the obvious, and can only be done by those who lack mystical insight. We can assume with considerable certainty that this view was prevalent among the members of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*.

⁸³ For a detailed analysis of intra-Tijānī polemics see Seesemann, “*Takfīr* Debate.”

⁸⁴ °Alī Cissé, *al-Mikhzam*, 2. Abū Jahl was the archenemy of the Prophet Muḥammad.

⁸⁵ °Uthmān Ndiaye, *Ṣawārim al-ḥaqq*, 2.

⁸⁶ See °Alī Cissé, *al-Mikhzam*, 4–7 and 21; °Uthmān Ndiaye, *Ṣawārim al-ḥaqq*, 13 and 16–18.

⁸⁷ °Alī Cissé, *al-Mikhzam*, 7–9; °Uthmān Ndiaye, *Ṣawārim al-ḥaqq*, 4–6.

The texts reveal another crucial element of the self-perception within the *Jamā'ca* during this formative period: the notion that the followers of Niasse represented the real Tijāniyya, whereas those not affiliated with the *fayḍa* were cut off from the spiritual guarantees and privileges granted to the devotees of Aḥmad al-Tijānī. Therefore, Aḥmad Dem's opinion about the continuing efficacy of other Sufi orders became easy prey for Cissé and Ndiaye. Dem had argued that any litany and any Sufi order would enable the disciple to attain mystical knowledge. According to both Cissé and Ndiaye, this statement was evidence that Dem had distorted the teachings of Aḥmad al-Tijānī. The conditions (*shurūṭ*) of the Tijānī path state that a disciple may not mix the litanies of the Tijāniyya with those of another Sufi order and that he may never abandon them until he dies. Even though Dem had not openly contradicted these rules, his failure to refer to them was sufficient reason for Cissé to accuse him of having joined the ranks of the great deniers, such as Ibn Māyābā (d. 1354/1935–1936) and Aḥmad al-Bakkā'ī.⁸⁸ The former was the author of a widely discussed polemic against the Tijāniyya and one of its most prominent adversaries in the early twentieth century, while the latter was a leader of the Qādiriyya in the mid-nineteenth century and one of the major antagonists of al-Ḥājj 'Umar Tall.⁸⁹

Ndiaye's argument is even more radical than Cissé's. In his opinion, Dem had not only attributed false statements to Aḥmad al-Tijānī, but had also denied the supremacy of the Tijāniyya over other orders. Quoting from *Kāshif al-ilbās*, Ndiaye claims that it was indisputable that the other *ṭuruq* were abrogated and could no longer impart effective spiritual training.⁹⁰ Whereas Niasse had been relatively cautious when he wrote about the abrogation of the *ṭuruq*,

⁸⁸ 'Alī Cissé, *al-Mikhzam*, 19–20.

⁸⁹ On Ibn Māyābā see *MLG* II, 603–604; Abun-Nasr, *Tijaniyya*, 172–175; Ould Cheikh, “Perles,” 134–145; Triaud, “Voie infaillible.” On al-Bakkā'ī and his famous controversies with Tall and his supporters see Bousbina, “Siècle,” 187–201; Willis, *Passion*.

⁹⁰ 'Uthmān Ndiaye, *Ṣawārim al-ḥaqq*, 14.

Ndiaye presents it as an actual fact. The latter builds his argument on the premise that all saints were drinking from the ocean of al-Tijānī, and hence all other Sufi orders were dependent on the mediation of the Seal of the Saints.⁹¹ With the emergence of the *fayḍa*, the other orders had ceased to be connected to this ocean. Access was now limited to those who submit to the authority of the bringer of the *fayḍa*. This exclusivist stance seems to have prevailed among many rank-and-file members of the *Jamāʿa*.

Ndiaye's advice to Aḥmad Dem is representative of the sense of superiority within the young community, which included the conviction that every critic of the beliefs and practices of the *fayḍa* could legitimately be reviled:

Oh ignoramus who stumbles around blindly! My advice to you is not to write any more and not to send any more letters. You'd rather withdraw because you are utterly incapable. . . . Your book gives testimony that you never went through the school of grammar. . . . Beware of writing again, since what you have written has exposed your shortcomings before all the sons of your nation.⁹²

Cissé's rejoinder points to an additional aspect of the general mood of the founding years of the *Jamāʿa*: being the target of wrongful criticism did not constitute a setback for their mission, but rather confirmed that they were on the side of the truth. Aḥmad al-Tijānī had faced many enemies, so it was only befitting that Niasse would have his adversaries, deniers, and enviers too.⁹³

What was Niasse's position in the controversy? As mentioned above, his treatise on *ruʿya*, which might have been written as a rejoinder to Dem, is apparently lost. But three letters published in *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* and *Ziyādat al-jawāhir* discuss the episode, and they suggest that Niasse did not find it worthwhile to respond directly to Dem's attack. The earliest letter referring

⁹¹ See ʿUmar al-Fūṭī, *Rimāḥ* II, 16.

⁹² ʿUthmān Ndiaye, *Ṣawārim al-ḥaqq*, 14.

⁹³ ʿAlī Cissé, *al-Mikhzam*, 19.

to the matter reveals that *Tanbīh al-aghbiyā*⁹⁴ barged in while preparations were under way to establish a new *zāwiya* in Sokone, the very place where Dem had his headquarters. Niasse mentions the book only in passing:

Perhaps news has already reached you about the ignorant and outcast (*al-tarīd*) Aḥmad Dem and about his pamphlet, in which he maligns us. . . . It is worthless, as he neither is versed in the compilation of books nor knows Arabic. Therefore his statements revert back to himself.⁹⁴

Just before the beginning of the month of Ramaḍān 1350/early January 1932, Niasse wrote to “the brothers in Sokone” to give them instructions for the construction of the *zāwiya*. Later in the letter he dismisses Dem’s assertion that the vision of God is impossible, emphasizing instead that nothing is impossible for God because in the Qur’ān it is stated that “when He decrees a matter, He says to it ‘Be,’ and it is” (Sura 2:117). Niasse uses another Qur’ānic reference to demonstrate that he saw himself in the tradition of great predecessors: “So We have made for every prophet an enemy” (Sura 6:112). He concludes with the following advice to his disciples in Sokone:

Do not pay any attention to the blather of the ignoramuses and fools, who are strangers in the path of the Shaykh [Aḥmad al-Tijānī] and slaves of their passions. Pay no attention to what they deny or to what they pretend to prove. Whoever follows his reason is on guard against them. They are the enemies of God and His Prophet; they want to extinguish the Light of God with their chatter. . . . As for those who are led to denying Shaykh al-Tijānī by their conceit, just see what punishment will befall them, especially an ignoramus like Aḥmad Dem. . . . He has brought upon himself his own misfortune by denying Shaykh al-Tijānī and his path—while he does not know anything! If he fails to repent, he has forfeited his fate in this world and the hereafter.⁹⁵

As in other instances of conflict, Niasse discouraged his disciples from seeking a confrontation with Dem’s followers. Instead, they should leave the matter to God, who knows

⁹⁴ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Ziyādat al-jawāhir*, 16–17.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

best how to deal with the deniers. In the case of Sokone, it seems that they heeded the advice of their shaykh.

The construction of the *zāwiya* apparently made good progress; Niasse expected its conclusion after the festival of sacrifice (*‘īd al-aḍḥā*) 1350/mid-April 1932. Shortly afterward he sent a personal letter to the author of *Tanbīh al-aghbiyā’*, addressing him as “the brother and scholar Aḥmad Dem” and striking a more conciliatory chord, though without changing his position:

I have seen your book and did not benefit from reading it, as it contains contradictions in the premises and in the meanings. . . . I have seen how statements from other books were copied and how a group was vilified of which I do not know whom you mean. If I, the sinful slave, was the one referred to, I praise God for His graciously granted protection. God will bring the libelers to account. In case the book refers to the followers of Shaykh al-Tijānī who are in my company, praise be to God for lowering my gaze so that I have not seen what you ascribe to them. . . .

I do not know a response to your book. If you asked for my comment on what caused you problems, I would be obliged to give an answer. To state that something contravenes the Qur’ān and the Sunna is not slander. I turn to God and ask by the intercession of the Prophet . . . that He may confirm the truth of what is true and the falsehood of what is untrue.

I have also received what the caliph Muḥammad wrote with regard to your concerns and your book. To God is the destiny of the way.⁹⁶

While Niasse did not exclude the possibility that the excesses criticized by Dem had indeed occurred, he refused to relate them to himself or his followers. The last remark reveals an interesting detail of the affair, as it suggests that Niasse’s elder brother had taken sides with the shaykh from Sokone.⁹⁷ It seems that the established leaders of the Tijāniyya joined ranks in the attempt to contain the expansion of the *Jamā‘at al-fayḍa*. Although there is no conclusive evidence for this in the early period, it is likely that they also received support from Abū Bakr Sy

⁹⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā’il* II, 123.

⁹⁷ According to Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari, Muḥammad Niasse wrote a blurb (*taqrīz*) in praise of *Tanbīh al-aghbiyā’* (Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 237).

in Tivaouane. The latter had close ties with the family of Abdou Kane, the head of another *zāwiya* of the Tijāniyya and Imam of the oldest Friday mosque in Kaolack.⁹⁸ The growing opposition notwithstanding, the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* continued to maintain its position during the *ruʿya* controversy and gradually consolidated its role within the religious scene of Senegal.

While the sources provide few clues to the subsequent developments in the relationship between the competing groups within the Tijāniyya, the constellation that resulted from the *ruʿya* dispute does not appear to have significantly changed until the late 1940s, when the rivalry between Medina Baye and Tivaouane took center stage. In 1960, almost thirty years after the acrimonious exchange between Dem and Niasse’s disciples, Niasse accepted an invitation to Sokone to participate in the launching of Dem’s Qurʾān commentary, the first volumes of which had just come from the press.⁹⁹ The two shaykhs seem to have used this occasion to bury the hatchet, and this reconciliation may have prompted both sides to erase the written traces of the controversy¹⁰⁰—which would explain why the affair is nowadays shrouded by secrecy.

Visions and Ecstatic Utterances

By the mid-1930s, the vision of God had ceased to raise tempers within the competing factions of the Tijāniyya in Saloum. However, we should not conclude that the members of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* ceased to have visions. There is ample evidence that visionary experiences continued to

⁹⁸ Abdou (diminutive of ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd) Kane served as the longtime “cadi supérieur” in Sine-Saloum and was married to a daughter of Mālik Sy, whose son and successor Abū Bakr later married a daughter of Abdou Kane. The latter died in August 1932 and was succeeded by ʿUthmān Kane, who became the main representative of the Sy family in the region (not to be confused with ʿUmar Kane, Niasse’s deputy in Dakar). See Marty, *Sénégal* I, 198; Klein, *Islam and Imperialism*, 225; Marone, “Tidjanisme au Sénégal,” 141; Mbow, “Querelles,” 20; CAOM 14 MI 2648 = ANS 2 G 32/101, Rapport politique pour l’année 1931, Cercle de Sine Saloum, 26.

⁹⁹ See Samb, *Contribution du Sénégal*, 250, and the entry in *ALA* IV, 325.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 237.

play a pivotal role in the development of the *Jamā'at*, even though that the deputies apparently succeeded in achieving better control of the mystical experiences of their disciples.

How did the question of seeing God assume such overwhelming significance for the identity and history of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*? And why did Niasse introduce the theological notion of *ru'ya* in his writings about mystical experiences? What exactly did he mean when he described these experiences in terms of seeing God? I will try to answer these questions with reference to two other texts by Niasse, written between Muharram 1931/May 1932 and Rajab 1353/October–November 1934. Both texts address the vision and related matters, with the purpose of providing guidance to Niasse's deputies who were engaged in the spiritual training of their aspirants. The first was the appendix (*dhayl*) to *Kāshif al-ilbās*, and the second was a mystical treatise known under the title *al-Sirr al-akbar* ("The Greatest Secret"). As the title suggests, the latter text deals with esoteric teachings that were not supposed to leave the circle of authorized readers, usually deputies with permission to dispense spiritual training.¹⁰¹

As mentioned above, Niasse wrote the appendix about one year after *Kāshif al-ilbās* to clarify some of the issues that had come under criticism from the deniers. Two short sections are dedicated to the vision of God. One significant difference from his earlier statements in the *Kāshif* attracts attention: Whereas he had previously dealt with the saints and their visions of God, he now spoke about the visions of the disciples. Niasse begins the first of the two *ru'ya* sections in the appendix as follows:

If the annihilated aspirant (*al-murīd al-fānī*) reaches a state of intoxication (*sukr*) and absence (*ghayba*) and then says, "I have seen God" or "I saw nothing but

¹⁰¹ In 1981, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari published *al-Sirr al-akbar* in a critical edition as part of his polemic against Niasse, evidently without permission from Niasse's heirs in Medina Baye (see *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 410–459).

God” or uses similar expressions, someone who has not attained cognizance must not deny it.¹⁰²

Niasse emphasizes that such statements have been part of the speech of Sufis since the time of the companions of the Prophet. He then goes on to cite other Sufi authorities who have confirmed the possibility of the vision. Among others, he refers to Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-°Arabī’s *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, which describes a station (*maqām*) where the mystic is in permanent visual contact with God:

This is the station of one who says: “I have seen nothing but God.” When he is then asked: “Who is it that sees?” he replies: “He [i.e., God],” and when he is asked: “Who is it that speaks?” he replies: “He [i.e., God],” and when he is asked: “Who is it that asks?” he replies: “He [i.e., God].” And if he is finally asked, “How can this be?” he replies: “These are correlations that appear in Him, from Him, and for Him. There is nothing anywhere apart from Him. He is the eye of anywhere.” This is the doctrine of Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī.¹⁰³

With the mention of al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 261/874), the discussion moves in another direction, as the mention connects the vision with the *shatḥiyyāt* (sing., *shatḥ*), the famous theopathic utterances or “words of ecstasy” of the Sufis.¹⁰⁴ Niasse continues with a quote of Aḥmad al-Tijānī, who, according to *Jawāhir al-mā°ānī*, once gave the following explanation of al-Biṣṭāmī’s adaptation of the common praise formula “Glory be to God” (*subḥān Allāh*) into “Glory be to Me” (*subḥānī*):

If someone enters [into the holy presence; *al-ḥaḍra al-quḍsiyya*], he loses awareness of all existence. Only pure divinity (*ulūhiyya*) remains; even his very self vanishes from his perception. In this state the servant does not articulate himself any more. There is neither reason nor imagination, neither motion nor

¹⁰² Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 170.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 171. A careful reading of *Kāshif al-ilbās* does not support Michel Chodkiewicz’s claim that Niasse had only indirect access to the works of Ibn al-°Arabī (Chodkiewicz, *Océan*, 28; “Quelques remarques,” 213–214). Niasse even includes the page numbers in most of his citations from Ibn al-°Arabī. Brigaglia also expresses doubts about Chodkiewicz’s statement (“Fayḍa Tijaniyya,” 45 note 16).

¹⁰⁴ The latter is the rendering Carl Ernst uses in the title of his seminal study of the *shatḥiyyāt*. See Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*.

standstill nor form, neither How nor Where, neither boundary nor signpost. If the servant utters anything in this stage, he says: “There is no deity but me; glory be to me, how exalted is my affair,” because he is now the interpreter (*mutarjim*) of God.¹⁰⁵

Niasse stresses repeatedly that understanding these higher realities requires having a taste (*dhawq*) of the experience. Although the statements appear to contravene the Sacred Law, the person who utters them is excused (*ma^cdhūr*) “because reason, which would enable him to differentiate his perceptions . . . , is absent, extinguished, obliterated; it has vanished.”¹⁰⁶ Niasse uses the following quote from Aḥmad al-Tijānī to illustrate how the disciple becomes God’s interpreter:

When reason is lost and leaves [the aspirant] and the divine secret pours out onto him, he speaks what He speaks. The speech that falls upon him was created within him by the Real as His substitute. He speaks with the tongue of the Real, not with his own tongue, articulating the essence of the Real, not his own essence.¹⁰⁷

As Niasse himself points out, none of this was new. Citing numerous predecessors, he maintains that such a vision could not be considered an unlawful innovation (*bid^ca*). If there was anything that deserved to be called an innovation, it was the persistent calumny of the Sufis on the part of the deniers.¹⁰⁸ While the *shatḥiyyāt* have been more controversial in history than Niasse seems to admit, it is certainly true that they are part of the well-known lore of Sufism.¹⁰⁹ This, however, raises once more the question of why Niasse would insist on describing this experience in terms of *ru^oya*, to the extent of justifying it with a theological argument about the

¹⁰⁵ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 175. An even more prominent instance of *shatḥ* is al-Ḥallāj’s statement *anā al-Ḥaqq* (“I am the Real”), which is also quoted in the *Kāshif*. See the detailed discussion of al-Ḥallāj’s utterances in Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, 63–72 and 102–110.

¹⁰⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 176.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* On other occasions, Niasse took the Qur^oānic story of Moses’ encounter with a speaking tree (Sura 28:30; cf. Exodus 3:1–14) as an example to illustrate how a human being can become the medium of God’s speech. See, for instance, Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Tawsi^cat al-^cilm wa-l-^cirfān*, 6–7; cf. *id.*, *al-Khuṭba al-Murītāniyya*, 18; *id.*, *Majmū^cat thalāth majālis sunniyya*, 43–44.

¹⁰⁸ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 177.

¹⁰⁹ Even Ahmed Dem refers to them. See, for instance, *Tanbīh al-aghbiyā^o*, 66–67.

visibility of God.¹¹⁰ Why would he not dispense with the controversial *ruʿya* and instead stick to his model of the three steps of unification, which he employed on many other occasions, and in which the *shatḥiyyāt* occur when the disciple realizes *al-tawḥīd al-khāṣṣ*, “the special unification”?¹¹¹

The difficulty of establishing a precise definition of *ruʿya* stems from the fact that Sufi literature makes subtle and not always consistent distinctions between different modes of visual perception that correspond to different stages of the ultimate mystical experience.¹¹² Neither type of vision implies a physical act of seeing; it is always a vision of God with the Eye of God, usually localized in the heart (*qalb*). In his writings Niasse employs *ruʿya* in a rather general sense to refer to experiences while in the state of annihilation. But in the actual parlance of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* the term came to describe a particular moment of mystical attainment: *ruʿya* relates to the first perception of the divine. The term functions as a metaphor for what the disciples “see” in the instant when they experience their first *fath*, or illumination. This instant is typically accompanied by ecstatic utterances, such as “I am our Lord” (*anā mawlānā*) or others mentioned in the above quotations.¹¹³ Thereupon the aspirants can make the transition to the highest stage, known as subsistence (*baqāʿ*), where the experience of the Oneness of God becomes a permanent companion, with the perpetual potential of visions.

¹¹⁰ A striking example is Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 180.

¹¹¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Khuṭba al-Murītāniyya*, 13; cf. Chapter 2. A discussion of the three degrees of *tawḥīd* is also included in the *ruʿya* section of the appendix to *Kāshif al-ilbās*, here based on the famous Sufi Qurʾān commentary *Rūḥ al-bayān* by Ismāʿīl al-Ḥaqqī of Bursa in Turkey (d. 1136/1724; see *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 173).

¹¹² See Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 227–228.

¹¹³ On several occasions, particularly in Medina Baye, I saw disciples who uttered such phrases, and other people present said that they were “seeing God.” Cf. Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 252–253; see also his description of two young disciples, one male and one female, who are apparently experiencing illumination (*ibid.*, 244).

The sources analyzed here all indicate that the vision of God became the symbol of the nascent *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. The members interpreted the presence of a multitude of people with visionary experiences as the fulfillment of Aḥmad al-Tijānī's prediction that the advent of the *fayḍa* would coincide with abundant occurrences of illumination. With the rising frequency of such experiences came the need to justify these visions theologically; hence the references to the Islamic schools of theology and their respective interpretations of the Qur'ānic verses pertaining to *ru'yā*, and hence Aḥmad Dem's theological objection to the vision of God in this world.

However, the sources also point to other important implications of the proliferation of visions. Compared to the earlier history of Sufism, where such liminal experiences were the prerogative of only a few great Sufi masters and saints, Niasse's method of spiritual training potentially allowed every aspirant to gain access to the world of mystical visions. There can be little doubt that the expectation of such visions was one of the major factors that attracted new followers to the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. This, however, brings us back to the problem that troubled the *Jamā'a* even before the *hijra* to Medina, when some of the enraptured disciples failed to complete their journey on the path and began to talk publicly about secrets. In light of the early correspondence between Niasse and his deputies, it is likely that the accusations raised by Aḥmad Dem in his "Admonition to the Fools" were not entirely unfounded, although Niasse took great pains to disassociate himself from those who did not follow his instructions and can thus not be held directly responsible for the transgressions.

A section in *al-Sirr al-akbar* underscores the dilemma and demonstrates the urgency of controlling the spiritual experiences of the followers. In one of his compact and intense descriptions of mystical states and stations, Niasse refers to the ultimate stage of mystical experience, which was already the subject of Ibn al-ʿArabī's statement quoted above:

Whoever has arrived at this station is by the standards of the sacred law (*sharʿ*) an infidel, but by the standards of divine reality (*ḥaqīqa*) he is a believer because he has testified to the Truth.¹¹⁴

With the following warning Niasse emphasizes the danger this station entails:

Who alights on this station is in absolute need of a shaykh who must be a perfect cognizant, having realized arrival and being in a position to bring him [the aspirant] back from the ocean of his blindness and from his obliteration.¹¹⁵

Thus, ecstatic utterances are admissible only when the aspirant is in the liminal state of annihilation, and it is only through the guidance of the shaykh that the aspirant can safely return to his normal consciousness. However, as the early letters of Niasse reveal, some of his deputies went through severe struggles with untutored enthusiasts who first became enraptured and subsequently escaped the control of their spiritual masters. It is therefore not entirely implausible that the statements Dem alleges to have heard, such as “I have seen God wearing so-and-so” and “I have seen God under that tree,”¹¹⁶ were uttered by some of these enthusiasts. While there is, again, precedence for such statements in the history of Sufism,¹¹⁷ it is hardly a surprise that scholars like Dem would not classify them as permissible *shatḥiyyāt* made in the state of annihilation.¹¹⁸

The visions of God and the accompanying ecstatic utterances had double-edged consequences. The public circulation of accounts of visionary experiences has undeniably caused serious challenges throughout the history of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*—but at the same time it has

¹¹⁴ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Sirr al-akbar* (ed. Maigari), 426. Cf. Ernst’s discussion of “spiritual infidelity” in the case of al-Ḥallāj (*Words of Ecstasy*, 71).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 427.

¹¹⁶ Aḥmad Dem, *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʿ*, 64.

¹¹⁷ For instance, the Persian Sufi Abū l-Ḥusayn Nūrī (d. 295/907) once said *labbayk* (“Here am I”; the phrase pilgrims use during the hajj to announce their presence to God) to a barking dog, thus identifying the dog with God. See Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, 100; see also *ibid.*, 121, where Ernst interprets such statements as “responses to the perception of the divine presence as revealed in nature.”

¹¹⁸ See Aḥmad Dem, *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʿ*, 67.

greatly contributed to the movement's extraordinary success. Even though Niasse and his deputies made every effort to ensure that all followers fully complied with the strict rules of spiritual training, it took only a few enthusiasts who started to publicize their alleged or real visions to set the cycle of accusations in motion. Certainly, Niasse and other leading figures with the *Jamā'a* were able to respond to the charges of infidelity with scholarly arguments, stressing the metaphorical character of the vision and justifying it theologically. But these arguments did little to preclude occasional violations of the sharia or public talk about secrets and manifestations of God by those who remained on the margins of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*.

Had this been the only effect of the popularization of mystical knowledge after the emergence of the *fayḍa*, Niasse would probably have refrained from imparting spiritual training to so many aspirants. But the transgression of the limits and the ensuing accusations of unbelief constitute only the dark side of the proliferation of visions. On the other side, it was precisely the prospect of mystical realization, as publicized in the accounts of people who had "seen" God, that prompted many future disciples to join the movement. Niasse was the one who provided them with the terminology, and we can assume that he was well aware of both the attractions and the risks of his mystical practice. His most important task consisted of finding a balance between attracting followers and controlling their experiences. The internal sources leave no doubt that he was up to the task, but apparently not all of the deputies were. Yet if some of the latter were less successful in walking the tightrope between captivating the followers and curbing their enthusiasm and talkativeness, the resulting attacks of the deniers helped to reinforce the cohesion of the community. This very mechanism later drove the large-scale expansion of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*.

4 Crossing Borders: Expansion in Senegal and Beyond

If the neighboring cows don't come to drink, those from afar will.
Statement ascribed to °Abdallāh Niasse, addressing his son Ibrāhīm.

The nature of the Tijānī flood implies that its bringer has to be more than a local figure. Claiming this position means to pursue an ambitious agenda and requires its holder to move beyond the confines of a specific region or country. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, the disputes that rocked the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* in the first years after its emergence actually helped the community to grow and cohere. The antagonistic response from many Senegalese fellow Tijānīs gave a further impetus to the *Jamā'a*'s move beyond its regional confines. From the very beginning, the community drew followers from neighboring countries, as well as from diverse ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. Ibrāhīm Niasse systematically built relationships with Tijānī personalities outside of Senegal, particularly from Mauritania, which helped him to grow his reputation. Broadening the social basis and widening the geographic horizon were thus the first step towards transforming a regional movement into a larger, transnational movement (though the term transnational should not be taken too literally, as the African nation states were yet to emerge at the time when the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* was founded).

As spectacular as the success story of Ibrāhīm Niasse may appear in retrospective, the spread of his flood proceeded in consecutive waves rather than in a single gush. Adapting the language used within the movement itself, we could say that the *fayḍa* took off with a splash in Senegal, but it soon met with the resistance of the established religious leaders and their following, who acted as effective barriers to the initial surge. Up to the present day, the

expansion of the *fayḍa* in Senegal followed a capillary pattern¹ and never reached a huge scale, unlike other countries where substantial sections of society joined the *Jamāʿa*. Beginning in 1930, a succession of waves poured into Gambia and Mauritania. Subsequently the flood seemed to enter into a period of relative stagnation, only to resurge again from 1945 until 1370/1951, the year that marks the bursting of the dam from the perspective of many followers, as evidenced by the ensuing massive and rapid spread of the *fayḍa* throughout West Africa.

The early development of the “Community of the Divine Flood” is closely interlinked with the history of Niasse’s recognition as the supreme saint of his time, *ghawth al-zamān* (literally, “the succor of the age”). There is written evidence that people around Niasse started to promote him as the supreme saint in the early 1930s, and Niasse’s writings from this period indicate that he began to see himself in this role, too. Nonetheless, his ascension to this position was not as smooth and linear as many authors, hagiographers as well as academics, suggest. Written well after the fact, their works tend to project Niasse’s rise to highest rank in the hierarchy of saints back to the time of his emergence as the bringer of the *fayḍa*.² However, the initial claims to the position of the succor were pronounced in a rather cautious manner, and even later, when more explicit claims began to circulate, the prospects for Niasse’s wide recognition as such were less than dim.

This chapter follows the early itinerary of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* with a focus on the first decade. It seeks to sketch out the various stages in the saintly career of Ibrāhīm Niasse on the basis of a variety of written primary sources, including letters, treatises on Sufi doctrine, and

¹ I borrow this term from Joseph Hill, who has used it to describe the scattered presence of local communities affiliated to Niasse throughout Senegal (see Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 114).

² The erroneous notion that Niasse publicly declared himself *ghawth al-zamān* in 1930 goes back to Mervyn Hiskett (“Community of Grace,” 102) and has been repeated unquestioningly ever since. See for instance Gray, “Rise of the Niassene,” 40; Biarnès, “Dimension internationale,” 26; Umar, “Fatwa and Counter-Fatwa,” 18.

colonial reports. Once more, I analyze how Sufi teachings—in this case, regarding the hierarchy of saints—are translated into actual social practice, highlighting how the actors adapt these ideas in ways that conform to their own understanding. After giving a sketch of the *fayḍa*'s consolidation in Saloum, I will summarize the characteristics of the supreme saint as presented in Sufi texts. The promotion of Ibrāhīm Niasse as the head of the hierarchy of living saints set off an intriguing chain reaction. While Niasse's followers advocated his saintly status, several of his opponents brought his purported humble background into the debate and sought to undermine his spiritual authority by advancing the notion that he was the descendant of a blacksmith, and thus not qualified for a religious leadership position.

The relationship between religious authority, class, and race (i.e., “black” Africans versus “white” Mauritians, called *bīḍān*) is further pursued in the subsequent section that deals with the spread of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* in Mauritania, particularly among the Idaw °Alī of Trarza. As the case of Mauritania underscores, affiliation with the *Jamā'a* was attractive for various and rather different groups, including male religious scholars and a significant number of women. In fact, the expansion of the *Jamā'a* went hand in hand with substantial shifts of social and gender boundaries, which will be analyzed in the last section of this chapter.

Consolidation in Senegal

The nucleus of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* was predominantly, but not exclusively, drawn from families that had religious and sometimes also parental ties with Ibrāhīm's father °Abdallāh Niasse. Most of these families lived in the region of Saloum, but also in the town of Kaolack, where they had built a sizable community. Like his father, Ibrāhīm Niasse had a large following among the so-called Njolofoen, i.e., Wolof-speaking descendents of mid-nineteenth-century

migrants from the neighboring region of Jolof who had left their homes partly to join the *jihād* movement of Maba Diakhou (d. 1284/1867) and partly in response to a prolonged period of drought.³ In Saloum, the Njolofoon—among them Ibrāhīm’s grandfather Muḥammad—formed a largely endogamous group of closely allied families and cultivated an identity as religious specialists who combined religious learning with farming.⁴ As will be discussed in more detail below, many Senegalese consider the Njolofoon in general and the Niasse family in particular to belong to the hereditary caste of blacksmiths (Wolof, *tegg*)—a classification that implies impurity and a low social standing. Although members of castes could be wealthy and influential, their social background carried a stigma that had a great impact on their relations with members of other groups.

Yet, it is important to note that even the small community of the *Jamā‘a*’s formative period was heterogeneous in its ethnic composition. Quite a few prominent figures, most notably ‘Alī Cissé and ‘Umar Touré, came from families identified as Saloum-Saloum, a designation that suggests a long attachment to the region, but does not necessarily imply origin from Saloum itself.⁵ Others, such as Ma‘abdu Niang or ‘Uthmān Ndiaye, had forefathers from Jolof who migrated to Saloum independently from the Njolofoon and kept a distinct group identity in their new environment. Together with Touré and others, Niang and Ndiaye figure among the disciples

³ For a solid overview of the historical background see Klein, *Islam and Imperialism*, 96-93.

⁴ An excellent account of the Njolofoon can be found in Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” Chapter 2. In fact, Hill has to be credited with “discovering” the Njolofoon as a group with a distinct ethnic and cultural identity. As he notes, not all migrants from Jolof identify themselves as Njolofoon.

⁵ The Cissé were originally Mande. For a detailed account of the family’s history as a clerical lineage see Wright “Embodied Knowledge,” 117-128. Wright also offers an in-depth analysis of ‘Alī Cissé’s relationship with Ibrāhīm Niasse, which has roots in the attachment of Cissé’s father and uncles to ‘Abdallāh Niasse (*ibid.*, 128-136).

who were with Ibrāhīm Niasse even before the emergence of the *fayḍa*.⁶ All these early followers were appointed as deputies and subsequently attracted non-Njolefeen to the *Jamāʿa*. Of course, several of the Njolefeen deputies had non-Njolefeen disciples as well, the most famous example being the celebrated blind Qurʾān teacher and chanter ʿUmar Faty Diallo Niasse, who was instrumental in spreading the *fayḍa* among Serer-speaking fishermen in Sine.⁷

The rural environment of Kosi, the cradle of the *fayḍa*, gave the nascent community a distinct character, both before and after the *hijra* to Medina. Oral accounts of the formative period emphasize the unique fusion of religious learning, mystical experience, and work in the fields, which characterized everyday life in Kosi particularly during the rainy season. Actively encouraged by Ibrāhīm Niasse, the community exalted the merits of *khidma*, an Arabic term adapted into Wolof that literally means service, but refers in this context to work the aspirant does for the shaykh.⁸ Responding to Niasse’s emphasis on the role *khidma* plays for progress on the mystical path, his followers attached spiritual value to the performance of *khidmat al-bustān*, working in the fields of the shaykh, be it in Kosi or elsewhere in the environs of Kaolack.⁹ In the

⁶ Hill discusses the ethnic composition of the following of both ʿAbdallāh and Ibrāhīm Niasse during the 1920s. See “Divine Knowledge,” 110 and 143-144.

⁷ Ibrāhīm’s mother ʿĀʾisha Diankhé grew up in the household of ʿUmar Faty Diallo’s father, a nephew of ʿAbdallāh Niasse (Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 132; more on him *ibid.*, 262-268).

⁸ The importance attributed to work seems to suggest that Ibrāhīm Niasse borrowed from the Senegalese Murīdiyya, which is well known for its allegedly unique work ethic. However, as I have shown elsewhere, Murīd attitudes towards work are not as peculiar as most authors claim (Seesemann, “Islam, Arbeit und Arbeitsethik”). The sense of Murīd uniqueness was reinforced by colonial observers, who assumed that Ibrāhīm Niasse simply copied the “lucrative methods of Aḥmadu Bamba” (CAOM Aff Pol 2158/3, J. Beyriès, Rapport de Mission sur la situation de l’Islam en A.O.F., 3 avril-31 juillet 1952, 58; see also Quesnot, “Influence du Mouridisme,” 122-123). Apparently this notion goes back as far as to Paul Marty, who described Ibrāhīm’s father ʿAbdallāh as “chef spirituelle d’un petit Mouridisme” (Marty, “Ida Ou Ali,” 258).

⁹ Followers of Niasse in Saloum used to cultivate a field that they referred to as *toolu Baye*, “the field of Baye” (see Marone, “Tidjanisme au Sénégal,” 184). Statements by Niasse extolling the virtue of *khidma* can be found in letters published in *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* (I, 23; II, 150-152) and *Ziyādat al-jawāhir* (11-12 and 18). See further Seesemann, “Nach der Flut,” 346-349.

collective memory of the *Jamā^ca*, the name of the tiny village thus came to stand for the attainment of mystical knowledge through the combination of spiritual training with *khidma*. Many years later, deputies of Niasse in Mauritania, Ghana, Nigeria, Sudan and elsewhere would call their farms Kosi and thus evoke the spirit of the founding years of the *Jamā^ca*.¹⁰

Niase's choice of Kosi as his rural retreat also had to do with economic necessity, as the saline soils of Kaolack did not permit the cultivation of millet or groundnuts, the two most important crops in this geographic area at the time. For the same reason he and his followers later expanded other villages south of Kaolack, most notably Taiba Niassene, the village of his birth, which was the first in the region to introduce mechanized agriculture in the late 1940s. However, from early on the *Jamā^cat al-fayḍa* diversified its economic basis and developed an urban, commercial profile that complemented its rural, agricultural cornerstone. The formative period of the *Jamā^ca* coincided with an unprecedented boom in the region of Kaolack, which turned the town into the largest economic and administrative center in Senegal after Dakar—a status it was able to maintain throughout the colonial period, but eventually lost to Thiès, which in turn had to cede the rank of the second-largest Senegalese city to Touba in the late 1990s. In the 1920s, Kaolack experienced a dramatic population increase. According to Mohamed Mbodj, who relies on colonial sources, only 1,454 people lived in Kaolack in 1914. This number climbed to 5,652 by 1925. In the following six years the population increased almost threefold, so that the town had 14,140 inhabitants in 1931.¹¹

¹⁰ For an analysis of *khidma* and work ethics in the Tijāniyya more generally see Seesemann, "Islam, Arbeit, und Arbeitsethik."

¹¹ Mbodj, "Sine-Saloum," 277. If Mbodj is to be given credence, the population tripled again in the span of the next three years and totaled 44,200 in 1934. However, he fails to provide a reference for this last number, which seems exaggerated. Nonetheless, even the first three, documented numbers show a clear trend.

Although the population growth was also connected to a surge in rural-urban migration prompted by two years of insufficient rainfall and food shortage in the late 1920s—the time of crisis Ibrāhīm Niasse alluded to in his claim to be the bringer of the *fayḍa*—, it was mainly due to the combination of three factors: a new boost in the peanut market, the increase in mercantile naval traffic in the port of Kaolack, and the establishment of several trading companies in the town. In many parts of Senegal, the 1930s brought a fresh drive in the exploration of *terres neuves*, new territories for the cultivation of groundnuts for cash-crop purposes. Kaolack had the advantage of being accessible by road, train, and boat and thus developed into a busy commercial hub linking the peanut basin with Dakar and the overseas market.

Probably from the beginning in the 1920s, Ibrāhīm Niasse had his share in the economic boom.¹² He intensified his engagement in the profitable peanut production, which led to a further accentuation of the agricultural element within the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*. In addition, he began to explore his possibilities in the emerging urban commercial environs. Several members of the extended family of his deputy and confidant Maʿabdu Niang became successful entrepreneurs and entered into trade relationships with Niasse—relations that were to last for decades and later came to include the transport business.¹³ By 1940, Niasse had launched an entrepreneurial career himself and was well connected with many influential personalities and institutions in the flourishing business community of Kaolack. Not only did he own extensive agricultural territories to the south and southwest of Kaolack (more than 500 acres according to his former

¹² A number of documents in the colonial archives refer to Niasse’s business transactions. In one instance—the minutes of a court case involving a trader who claimed that Niasse owed him money—the documentation allows insights into Niasses commercial activities during the 1930s and even in the late 1920s. See CADN, Fonds Dakar, Carton 923, Tribunal Civil du 2^{ème} degré de Kaolack, Jugement No 5. Affaire: Momar Gueye et Ibrahima Niasse, 27 juillet 1940.

¹³ See Amin, *Monde des affaires*, 123. According to Biarnès (“Dimension internationale,” 27) Niasse was a pioneer among the “marabouts commerçants.”

accountant Mor Abdou Ndiaye), he also acquired houses and land property in Diourbel, Mbour and Dakar.¹⁴ In this manner, the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* developed an urban, commercial dimension that complemented its rural, agricultural profile from a relatively early stage of its history.

As important as agriculture and commerce became as the economic basis of the *Jamāʿa*, they always remained secondary to the religious activities, especially teaching of various Islamic sciences. ʿAlī Cissé, who later married Niasse’s eldest daughter Fāṭima, was in charge of teaching Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in Medina. Aḥmad Thiam, who was considered the most accomplished expert of Arabic grammar and rhetoric in Medina, was entrusted with advanced language instruction. He was slightly senior to Niasse and continued to head the school until his death in 1982. Over the years the circle of renowned teachers was joined by al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad Dem (d. 1409/1989), a Futanke from the region of Podor in Fouta Toro, the bastion of Islamic scholarship in the wider Senegambia area.¹⁵ He became a pillar of the community and expanded his teaching activity to include medicine, the curing of mental patients being his field of expertise.

From 1936 onwards Niasse assigned the Qurʾān instruction to Aḥmad al-Rabbānī, a scholar from Trarza who had joined the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*. All of Niasse’s children memorized the Qurʾān there. Ibrāhīm Niasse himself gave the *tafsīr* lectures during the fasting month of Ramaḍān.¹⁶ Those who attended the lessons on a regular basis were allowed to wear the so-called *meetel*, a white headgear resembling a small turban. Many followers from the neighboring

¹⁴ Interview with Mor Abdou Ndiaye, Kaolack, December 5, 1996.

¹⁵ Another member of a prominent Futanke scholarly family who joined the *Jamāʿa* was ʿAbdallāh b. Aḥmad Sakho, a son of the famous *qāḍī* of Boghe (on the latter see Sall, “Cerno Amadou Mukhtar Sakho”). A list of Futanke members of the *Jamāʿa* is included in a small hagiographical text dealing with al-Ḥasan Dem. See Maḥmūd ʿUmar Wane, *Tabshīr al-sārī*, 13.

¹⁶ In 1946 Aḥmad’s sons Muḥammad Maḥmūd and ʿAbdallāh took over the Qurʾān school and led, as their father had done before them, the *tarāwīḥ* prayers during Ramaḍān in the mosque of Medina.

villages attached particular value to this headgear. In addition to signifying association with Niasse and the *Jamā'at al-fayda*, wearing the *meetel* gave them a sense of being superior to those who had not attended the *tafsīr* sessions in Medina.¹⁷ Several of the deputies also established schools in the closer and farther environs of Kaolack. Ma'abdu Niang taught in Taiba Niangène, °Umar Touré (d. 1416/1995) ran a *madrasa* in the town of Ndoffane and later established another one in the Gambian town of Serekunda. Ibrāhīm's younger brother Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye initially acted as deputy in Lamarame and later founded a *zāwiya* in Keur Madiabel, which also included a renowned school.

The Supreme Saint

Although Medina became the official headquarter of the *Jamā'a* after its foundation in April 1931, Kosi remained Niasse's preferred residence until the mid-1930s. There he was able to dedicate more time to writing, which remained his major preoccupation between 1348 and 1355 (1929 to 1936), the most productive time of his life in terms of literary output. During this period, he not only wrote *Kāshif al-ilbās* and *al-Sirr al-akbar*, but also many other major works in prose and verse. Several of these texts shed light on the stages of his emergence as the *ghawth*, or highest-ranking saint of his time. In Senegal (and later also elsewhere), the recognition of Niasse as the supreme saint became the litmus test for the acceptance or rejection of his claim to supreme leadership of the Tijāniyya. It is therefore worthwhile to take a closer look at definitions of the position of the *ghawth* and its treatment by Niasse and his followers during the formative period of the *Jamā'at al-fayda*.

¹⁷ Marone, "Tidjanisme au Sénégal," 184; see also Samb, *Adab*, 22-23.

As a technical term of Sufism, the title *ghawth al-zamān* or “succor of the age” refers to the head of the hierarchy of living saints at a particular period. Alternative designations are *quṭb al-zamān* (“the pole of the age”), *kāmil al-°asr* (“the perfect one of the era”) or *ṣāhib al-waqt* (“the master of the time”). The occupant of this position is the supreme mediator between the creation and God. As long as he lives, he represents the door through which creation has access to divine grace. The holder of the position is determined by divine choice. The supreme saint cannot proclaim himself, nor can there be a formal appointment by others. However, there are signs that become manifest in his person that allow others to recognize him as such. Although it is possible that there is more than one pole at a particular time, there can be only one “pole of the age.” He is the head of all other saints, who receive knowledge only through his mediation.¹⁸

The statements about the hierarchy of saints ascribed to Aḥmad al-Tijānī in *Jawāhir al-ma°ānī* largely conform to the teachings of Sufism in general, as expounded by authorities such as al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. after 318/930), Muḥyī al-Dīn b. al-°Arabī (d. 638/1240), and °Abd al-Karīm al-Jilī (d. 832/1428). According to al-Tijānī’s conception the succor of the age is the earthly representative of the “cosmic pole” or “pole of poles” (*quṭb al-aqtāb*), who also appears as *al-insān al-kāmil* (“the perfect man”). It is through him that God preserves the order of existence and dispenses His mercy to all creatures. The cosmic pole embodies the life of everything in existence, and if he were absent for a single moment, the entire creation would perish instantly.¹⁹ In his capacity as the “seal of the saints” (*khatm al-awliyā°*), Aḥmad al-Tijānī is at the same time the legitimate holder of the title *quṭb al-aqtāb*. In this capacity, he is for all times the “greatest vicegerent” (*al-khalīfa al-a°zam*); he acts as the spirit (*rūḥ*) of all existence

¹⁸ See *EI* 2, entry “Quṭb.”

¹⁹ °Ali Ḥarāzīm, *Jawāhir al-ma°ānī* I, 227.

and maintains the order among the creatures.²⁰ The succor or pole of the age functions as an extended arm of the cosmic pole; he is the “vicegerent of the greatest vicegerent” (*khalīfat al-khalīfa al-ʿazam*). If Aḥmad al-Tijānī occupies the ranks of the cosmic pole and the greatest vicegerent, the internal logic of Tijānī doctrine demands that the office of the temporary pole or succor of the age falls to the lot of one of his caliphs.

Ibrāhīm Niasse has expressed himself on the topic several times in the period following the inception of his movement. In the month of Rabīʿ I 1349/July 1930, he discussed the hierarchy of saints in a letter written in response to questions from an unidentified follower. The letter begins with a sketch of a complex saintly cosmology and goes on to explain that in each age, the cosmic pole has an earthly complement, the “unique pole” (*al-quṭb al-fard*), who acts as the head of all other poles. Most poles, however, were not aware of their position, unless they received knowledge of their saintly status in a dream or in a waking state, or in communications from their shaykh or the Prophet Muḥammad. Niasse refers to the example of Muḥammad al-ʿArabī b. al-Sāʿid, who was once asked whether he was a *quṭb* and responded: “I heard people say so.”²¹

After the *hijra* to Medina, Niasse wrote another letter from Kosi in reply to a question regarding the “Muḥammadan Reality” (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadiyya*). In every age, he pointed out, there is someone who acts as the caliph or vicegerent (*khalīfa*) of the “Muḥammadan Reality” among men. He further asserted:

Nothing happens in the realm of earthly existence without his mediation. He has representatives, deputies and other forms of manifestation. Everything that is granted comes through their mediation, their person or their blessings (*baraka*). (...) A servant (*ʿabd*) whose heart is without a trace of a relationship to him [the

²⁰ Ibid., II, 150

²¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 83-85.

caliph of the “Muḥammadan Reality”] or of love for him or one of his manifestations will not receive anything from him in that epoch.²²

The attributes of the caliph of the “Muḥammadan Reality” not only match those of the succor of the age, they also bring to mind the characteristics of the bringer of the *fayḍa*, who acts as the supreme mediator of mystical realization during his time (see the illustration in Figure 1.4). In other words, although this statement does not yet amount to claiming the position of the highest-ranking saint, it suggests that the step from being the bringer of the *fayḍa* to occupying this position is not very big.

A more explicit indication can be found in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, which was completed in Muḥarram 1350/May-June 1931. In a section that deals with the position of the succor, Niasse quotes a paragraph from Ibn al-°Arabī, introduced as the “Greatest Master” (*al-shaykh al-akbar*) and the “red sulfur,” about the cosmos of the saints. In this model the cosmos consists of several circles (*dāʿira*), arranged in a hierarchical order and separated from each other by veils. Each circle is connected to the next through a flow of assistance (*madad*). All saints on earth receive their assistance from the succor, who in turn receives his from the spirituality (*rūḥāniyya*) of one of the four prophets Idrīs (Enoch), Elias, Jesus, or al-Khiḍr (“the Green One”). Beyond this circle is the “greatest veil,” which covers the circle of the Prophet Muḥammad. While the four prophets receive their assistance from Muḥammad, the latter’s circle is linked to the “absolute presence” (*ḥaḍrat al-iṭlāq*), which has neither beginning nor end. Those, Ibn al-°Arabī concludes, who behold with the “eye of the heart” how the ocean of emanations is constituted and how it flows through several intermediary levels to the entire creation, their hearts will be filled with awe.²³

²² Ibid., 92.

²³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 87.

Niasse is quick to point out that Ibn al-^cArabī's model needs to be corrected in one respect. Despite his extensive knowledge and profound cognizance, Niasse holds, the "Greatest Master" was not aware of the "hidden presence" (*al-ḥaḍra al-katmiyya*) and therefore erroneously assumed that the succor receives his assistance from one of the four prophets Enoch, Elias, Jesus, or al-Khiḍr. In reality, however, the supreme saint draws his support directly from the "ocean of the greatest assistance" of the hidden pole (*al-quṭb al-maktūm*) and Muḥammadan seal, who is none other than Aḥmad al-Tijānī.²⁴

Let us pause for a moment and consider the implications of this argument. If the succor's assistance does indeed come from al-Tijānī, we can assume that, in the view of Niasse, the succor has by necessity to be a member of the Tijāniyya. If this is the case, who would be more entitled to this position than Niasse, who had already declared on several occasions that he considered himself the highest-ranking caliph of Aḥmad al-Tijānī at the time? Of course, this passage in *Kāshif al-ilbās* is not intended as a self-proclamation of the supreme saint. But it gives us valuable hints to Niasse's self-perception, which seems to have evolved more and more around the conviction that he was indeed the earthly pole during his time.

About two and a half years later, Niasse produced rather unambiguous evidence that he saw himself as the *ghawth*. The key statements can be found in his treatise *al-Sirr al-akbar*, written in Rajab 1353/October-November 1934.²⁵ Niasse begins the relevant passage by emphasizing the fundamental importance of God-awareness (*taqwā*) for those who intend to embark on the path to God. Once this condition is fulfilled, there are three basic means (*wasā'il*) that help the aspirant to reach God. The first is to follow the Prophet in word and deed, the second is constant remembrance of God (*dhikr*), and the third is to seek affiliation with a person endowed with

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The following is based on Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Sirr al-akbar* (ed. Maigari), 413-414.

mystical knowledge of God (*‘arīf bi-Allāh*). This cognizant, Niasse points out, should be none other than “the perfect shaykh in our path,” i.e. the Tijāniyya. Everyone is required to escape from the lower self (*al-firār min al-nafs*) and its passions, and the refuge is with God. Then the crucial sentence follows: “Refuge with God is attained by seeking refuge with the perfect one of the age (*al-firār ilā kāmīl al-‘asr*).”

In other words, in his capacity as the leading caliph of the Tijāniyya Niasse is predestined to be the “vicegerent of the greatest vicegerent.” As the dispenser of the *fayḍa* he is closer to Aḥmad al-Tijānī, the Prophet, and ultimately to God than any other living saint. As the perfect shaykh in the Tijāniyya, he is the “perfect one of the age.” Even though Niasse falls short of making an explicit statement to that effect, his self-portrayal as the succor is now complete. The rules, however, required that the actual proclamation had to come from other sources.

We can consider ‘Alī Cissé’s biographical note (*tarjama*), completed in April 1934, as a public announcement of Niasse’s ascension to supreme sainthood. The *tarjama* reflects the official doctrine of the *Jamā‘at al-fayḍa* regarding the saintly status of Niasse, and it is one of the first documents where the title “unique pole” appears in connection with his name.²⁶ Oral accounts describing the early period corroborate the written evidence. Supposedly the first person to call Niasse *ghawth* was Ma‘abdu Niang’s son Aḥmad.²⁷ Countless miracle stories, which continue to circulate widely in Saloum and beyond, evolve around Niasse’s capacities as

²⁶ ‘Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*, 3. Occasional references to Niasse as the supreme saint also occur in earlier documents, such as the polemical writings targeting Aḥmad Dem (see ‘Alī Cissé, *al-Mikhzam*, 2; ‘Uthmān Ndiaye, *Ṣawārim al-ḥaqq*, 1 and 9). In a poem recited at the inauguration of the *zāwiya* in Medina in April 1931, Niasse is described as *ṣāhib waqtihī* (quoted in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 58). The author is Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. al-Muṣṭafā al-‘Alawī (d. 1363/1944; see his entry in *MLG II*, 1041). Another example of a Mauritanian poet calling Niasse *quṭb* is Mawnāk al-Tandaghī (d. 1359/1940; *MLG II*, 613), quoted in ‘Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*, 5. For a similar poetic proclamation of Shaykh Ḥamallāh as supreme saint see Soares and Hunwick, “Falkeiana IV.”

²⁷ Interview with ‘Abd al-Malik b. Aḥmad Niang, Ndjaména, October 29, 1997.

the supreme saint and reflect the conviction among his followers that he had the power to bring blessings or to evoke disaster. As the “perfect one of the age,” he could assure their good fortune in this world and bliss in the Hereafter.

In the early years of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*—especially during the confrontation with the *munkirūn* or “deniers” in Kaolack, Sokone, and elsewhere—Niasse’s perceived rise to supreme sainthood reassured his disciples of their superiority over other members of the Tijāniyya. Niasse reinforced this idea by claiming that he had received a confirmation from God that no created being could do him or his followers any harm.²⁸ Submitting to the authority of the succor thus amounted to a guarantee of protection in this world, on top of the promise of mystical attainment and success in the world to come. In this combination, Niasse’s saintly capacities constituted a major factor in the growth of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* during the 1930s, in Saloum as well as in the region of Trarza in neighboring Mauritania. In the late 1940s, the mobilizing potential of the idea of the supreme saint was to manifest itself in an even more dramatic manner, when the influx of followers from all over West Africa occurred under the motto “taking refuge with the perfect one of the era,” *al-firār ilā kāmil al-ʿasr*—the very slogan Niasse had coined in late 1934.

Spiritual Authority and Social Inequalities

As many observers have noted, it is conspicuous that the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* had its most spectacular moments outside of Senegal. Indeed, the widespread recognition of Niasse in Mauritania, Nigeria, Ghana, and elsewhere cannot hide the fact that he only found a limited constituency in his home country. In the early 1950s, French colonial sources used to describe Niasse’s branch of the Tijāniyya as the dominant Sufi group in the region of Kaolack—largely

²⁸ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 128.

corresponding to Sine-Saloum—and estimated the number of his followers to be 100,000.²⁹ A study conducted by Fernand Quesnot in 1958 on behalf of the Centre des Hautes Etudes d’Administration Musulmane in Paris describes the influence of Niasse as being limited to the region of Kaolack, which had 237,000 Tijānīs at the time, most of whom followers of Niasse.³⁰ This is certainly not an insignificant number, but only a fraction of the Muslim population of Senegal, said to be roughly 1.8 million (out of a total of 2.3 million inhabitants), of which 1,029,577 (approximately 60%) are identified as members of the Tijāniyya.³¹ Thus, only a minority among Senegalese Tijānīs recognized Niasse as the bringer of the *fayḍa*, and equally few seemed convinced that it was a religious necessity to submit to him as the supreme saint. Was it not for the submission of several members of prominent Mauritanian Tijānī families—rather unexpected for outside observers, and to be discussed in more detail in the next section—from the mid-1930s onwards, Niasse’s ascension to supreme sainthood might have ended before it really began.

Most previous studies therefore ask why the “Niassène,” as Ibrāhīm Niasse’s branch of the Tijāniyya is often but inappropriately referred to in the literature, failed to become a “successful” Senegalese brotherhood like the Murīdiyya or the Tijānī branch led by the Sy family. Even after the *fayḍa* was thriving in other parts of West Africa, it was apparently unable to traverse the frontier at home. Answers have ranged from the claim that the other Sufi communities were already firmly established as “national” brotherhoods when the *Jamā‘at al-*

²⁹ The first colonial official to mention this number was Jean Beyriès. See CAOM Aff Pol 2158/3, J. Beyriès, Rapport de Mission sur la situation de l’Islam en A.O.F., 3 avril-31 juillet 1952, 58.

³⁰ Quesnot, “Cadres maraboutiques,” 145.

³¹ See Quesnot, “Panorama,” 1. According to the survey, the Murīdiyya had 423,723 members, and the Qādiriyya 302,957. See also the chart with a breakdown by region in Chailley et al., *Notes et études*, 125.

fayḍa appeared on the scene, to speculations that Niasse's modest political influence in Senegal also limited his ability to build a larger religious constituency.³² Yet, the major reason is widely seen in the alleged low social status of the Niasse family, attributed to their provenance from the caste of metalworkers.

If we define the success of a Sufi order in terms of political influence, economic strength, and the number of followers, the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* does indeed lag behind other Sufi communities in Senegal. However, these criteria conform to a politicized understanding of Sufi orders that has its roots in the colonial period and completely ignores the spiritual dimension of Sufi religiosity. As Joseph Hill has emphasized, the real question is not why the *fayḍa* failed to emerge as a major player in the Senegalese religious arena, but rather "how this movement has succeeded in steadily permeating Senegal and beyond, opening multiple and highly localized conjunctures and challenging long-solidified alliances, despite its late arrival, its much smaller initial geographical base, and its low political and economic profile."³³

It is much more promising to analyze the interplay between social identities, especially regarding class, caste, and gender, and spiritual authority than to look for reasons that explain the subordinate public role of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* in the Senegalese arena. As I have argued in a study of the first Mauritanian disciples of Ibrāhīm Niasse, the latter's alleged low ancestry never became a dominant factor in attracting or repelling followers. Those who wanted to join did so regardless of his purported caste status; those who did not were already predisposed against

³² Coulon, *Marabout et prince*, 183; Gray, "Rise of the Niassene," 35; Garonne, "Saint ambigu," 62; Biarnès, "Dimension internationale," 37-38. Niasse's success outside of Senegal is often explained in the inverse manner: In Nigeria or Mauritania, he was able to exploit the rivalry between other Sufi orders and promoted his movement as an alternative. See for instance Loimeier, "Playing with affiliations," 353; Schmitz, "Islam en Afrique de l'Ouest," 128.

³³ Hill, "Divine Knowledge," 113-114.

joining the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* anyway.³⁴ Thus, the interesting issue is not whether Niasse was of blacksmith origin or not. Rather, his case invites reflections about the nature of religious identity and authority, and about the ways they can transcend ethnic distinctions, class boundaries, and political affiliations.

Historically, the division in classes and endogamous occupational groups was a common feature of society in Senegal and several neighboring countries.³⁵ The major distinction relates to slaves and freeborn people, but the freeborn are further differentiated into nobles, peasants, and members of occupational groups. It is the latter category, referred to as *ñeeño* in Wolof, that was assigned caste status and had the lowest regard in the social hierarchy, even though their services were in high demand. The category includes artisans (weavers, leatherworkers, woodworkers, and blacksmiths) as well as praise singers (known as *griots*; *gewel* in Wolof), who historically all married within their own group. Among the ethnic groups that practiced segregation along these or similar lines were the Wolof, the Halpulaaren, the Futanke (also known as Toucouleur), and the various Mande groups. Religious specialists historically formed a separate group, though not endogamous, that enjoyed a high reputation, famous examples being the Torodbe and the Jakhanke.³⁶ Ascension to the rank of religious specialists was a rare achievement for people of caste status, who were historically not known to adhere to clerical standards of piety.³⁷

³⁴ Seesemann, “The Shurafāʿ and the ‘Blacksmith’,” 95-96. Hill also doubts that Niasse’s purported caste status has a “deciding influence (whether positive or negative) in people’s decision to follow Bay Ñas” (“Divine Knowledge,” 54).

³⁵ For a general overview and analysis see Tamari, “Caste Systems.”

³⁶ On the latter, see Sanneh, *Jakhanke*.

³⁷ The varying degrees of compliance with Islamic norms among different groups in West are discussed in Launay and Soares, “Islamic Sphere.”

Few are the studies that fail to identify Ibrāhīm Niasse as the descendant of a blacksmith.³⁸ As a member of one of the groups with caste status, he allegedly had very limited appeal to the vast majority of the population. Most Senegalese were not from a caste background and would not only avoid intermarriage with such “detestable” families, but also shun affiliation with a religious leader of such status. Although this view is usually only supported by anecdotal evidence and has never been corroborated by a systematic study of the ethnic or social composition of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*, it has until recently gone largely unchallenged in the academic literature.

The prevailing way of reasoning is exemplified in Roy Dilley’s study of Islamic and caste knowledge in Senegal. Like others, he takes Niasse’s ancestry from a family of blacksmiths for granted; like others, he sees it as “an important factor in restricting the spread of the movement within Senegal among freeborn sectors of the population.”³⁹ Dilley not only fails to supply sociological evidence for his claim, his statement also disguises the fact that the *ñeeño* are freeborn, too, even if the other freeborn groups hold them in contempt. He then refers to the reverse conclusion offered in the literature, namely that the story of Niasse—the descendant of a metalworker who rises to saintly status—demonstrates the social mobility potentially fostered by Sufi orders.⁴⁰ According to this logic, the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* was especially popular among

³⁸ Beginning with Jean-Claude Froelich in 1962, almost all studies that mention Niasse also refer to his alleged low ancestry. See for instance Froelich, *Musulmans*, 237; Monteil, *Islam noir*, 165; Klein, *Islam and Imperialism*, 223; Gellar, *Senegal*, 113; Clarke, *West Africa*, 207; Magassouba, *Islam au Sénégal*, 47; Gray, “Rise of the Niassene,” 35; most recently also Glover, *Sufism and Jihad*, 78. Lucy Behrman and Mervyn Hiskett are among the few authors who do not discuss the matter.

³⁹ Dilley, *Islamic and Caste Knowledge*, 209. Villalon makes an almost identical statement (*Islamic Society*, 68). See the concise response to this hypothesis in Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 53-55.

⁴⁰ Christan Coulon already made a similar point with regard to Ibrāhīm’s father ʿAbdallāh Niasse (*Marabout et prince*, 91).

Senegalese of low social standing because it enabled them to occupy religious leadership positions previously out of their reach. Even in those regions of West Africa where this type of caste ideology did not apply, Niasse's non-aristocratic background is cited as a factor that made his movement attractive to the masses.⁴¹

Other than previous authors, Dilley offers at least one ethnographic example of a local community whose members present the common caste background as a motivation to seek affiliation with Ibrāhīm Niasse. He therefore hails the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* as promoting a "liberating and open form of Sufism," although he also observes that the "artisan past" is otherwise a taboo subject among Senegalese followers of Niasse.⁴² However, Hill's study strongly suggests that the instances of *ñeeño* who consciously chose to join the *Jamā'a* because its leader presumably shared their caste status constitute the exception rather than the rule.⁴³ The obvious problem with the "caste hypothesis" is its inability to explain the mixed composition of the movement's membership in Senegal. The "Community of the Divine Flood" has never been an exclusive Njolofoen affair and continues to draw followers from all caste backgrounds, social classes, and ethnic groups of Senegal. The "taint of caste"⁴⁴ that allegedly surrounds the leadership has not prevented the *Jamā'a* from experiencing a veritable vogue among urban youth since the 1990s. Thus, it is rather futile to speculate whether Niasse's caste identity was a major determinant of his purported failure to build a large following in Senegal. A useful exploration of the topic has to start with the recognition that caste is not a fixed or closed category, and has to

⁴¹ See Gray, "Rise of the Niassene," 35; Magassouba, *Islam au Sénégal*, 47; Piga, *Ordini sufi*, 193; Paden, *Kano*, 95.

⁴² Dilley, *Islamic and Caste Knowledge*, 208. He quotes the author of an unpublished thesis who states that evoking the caste origin "is altogether prohibited by the Nyas family."

⁴³ Hill, "Divine Knowledge," 55.

⁴⁴ Villalon, *Islamic Society*, 68.

acknowledge that the caste status of the Niasse family is actually contested—as is, by the way, the status of several other scholarly lineages in Senegal and the neighboring countries.⁴⁵

A visitor who talks to Senegalese in Dakar or St. Louis about the Niasse family will routinely be told that they are blacksmiths. However, raising the same questions in Kaolack or the towns and villages in Saloum with a strong presence of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* will yield rather different responses. Followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse usually vehemently deny the caste origin of his family and frequently counter it with a claim to Arab ancestry.⁴⁶ Several written sources contain a genealogy that connects Niasse over six (occasionally seven) generations with an Arab immigrant called al-Riḍā.⁴⁷ Hailing from North Africa, al-Riḍā came to Jolof and married Jayla Niasse, described as a princess or daughter of a noble family. The progeny of this marriage came to be known by the family name of the wife, because Arabs did not have the habit of using family names. A common version holds that al-Riḍā was a descendant of ʿUqba b. Nāfiʿ, remembered in Islamic historiography as the conqueror of North Africa, whose military expeditions brought him as far as Fezzan in southern Libya in the year 46/666.⁴⁸ Another

⁴⁵ See Seesemann and Soares, “As Good Muslims as Frenchmen,” 101. Dilley (*Islam and Caste Knowledge*, Chapter 4) deals at length with the debates surrounding the alleged caste background of al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tall, his progeny, and some of his followers. There are abundant examples of families who switched between castes and social classes in West African history; a few are discussed in Soares, *Prayer Economy*, 26-27.

⁴⁶ In the 1980s, Ousmane Kane took the same approach in his unpublished MA thesis (Kane, “Tijāniyya reformée,” 24 and 36). See most recently Wright, “Embodied Knowledge,” 86-90.

⁴⁷ The oldest written trace I found of this genealogy is a biography of Ibrāhīm’s father composed by a Mauritanian author in the early 1920s (Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār Fāl, *Muqaddima*, 19-23), who describes all of these ancestors as scholars or saints. See also the account in Ka, *Ecole de Pir*, 252-255.

⁴⁸ The ʿUqba b. Nāfiʿ-*genealogy* seems to have been popularized by Abū Bakr ʿAtīq and Muḥammad al-Thānī Kafanga, two well-known Nigerian deputies. See their introduction to Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Dawāwīn al-sitt*, 3; cf. Gueye, “Niasse le mystique,” 20 and Samb, *Contribution du Sénégal*, 227, who also refers to this genealogy, but deplors the tendency among the followers of Senegalese religious leaders to make up Arab pedigrees. According to

version, predominantly transmitted in oral accounts, even claims that al-Riḍā was a *sharīf*, or descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad.⁴⁹

However, even though the members of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* generally reject the blacksmith narrative, prevalent among non-followers, “the Njolofeen have in many ways come to resemble the caste categories they disavow.”⁵⁰ As Hill has demonstrated in his exemplary ethnographic account, the maintenance of an endogamous marriage pattern and the cultivation of a reputation as religious specialists has turned the Njolofeen into a distinct group that implicitly recognizes the caste regime, in spite of their refusal to be classified as *ñeeño*. Indeed, they tend to avoid close contact with people of caste background, as reflected in the population of their villages, which rarely feature the occupational groups that form the *ñeeño* category. Contrary to the hypothesis of Dilley and others, many of the latter seem to accept Njolofeen claims to a non-caste origin. Hill reports that those followers of Niasse who disclosed to him their identities as *ñeeño* regularly pointed out that the Njolofeen, the Niasse family included, were not marriageable to them⁵¹—in other words, they acknowledge the existence of a caste barrier that prohibits intermarriage, but not discipleship.

It is instructive to see how various groups have tried to exploit Ibrāhīm Niasse’s purported origin for their purposes. While his followers extol his Arab pedigree in order to

Hill (“Divine Knowledge,” 97), this is the version Senegalese praise singers present as the official genealogy.

⁴⁹ See Paden, *Kano*, 96; Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 97-98. Hill is right to correct my previous assumption, based mainly on conversations with leaders, that Senegalese followers of Niasse were unfamiliar with the claim to a *sharīfian* pedigree (Seesemann, “The Shurafā’ and the ‘Blacksmith’,” 91 note 85). However, he does not seem to realize that the two genealogies (*sharīfian* and °Uqba b. Nāfi°) are at odds with each other, because °Uqba b. Nāfi° was not a descendant of the Prophet. The name of °Uqba b. Nāfi° appears in quite a few genealogies of Muslim clerical families West Africa.

⁵⁰ Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 74.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 55. Non-members of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* who are not of *ñeeño* status apply the reverse logic: They treat the Njolofeen as not marriageable because they regard them as metalworkers.

augment his saintly reputation, his opponents disparage him as a blacksmith, who does not qualify for a position of religious leadership. Interestingly, French colonial administrators joined the voices that denigrated Niasse on account of his alleged caste background. Beginning in 1952, colonial reports are replete with references to his “detestable ancestry.”⁵² The available documentation does not allow us to determine whether the French acted as the prompters or the parrots. Perhaps the most revealing example is provided by the adaptations of the so-called Rapport Beyriès of 1952, a detailed assessment of Islam in French West Africa written by a former governor of Mauritania that was quoted extensively in later French documents. Referring to Niasse, Beyriès wrote, “We willingly apply to him the Moorish proverb ‘There is nothing good about a blacksmith, even he is educated’.”⁵³ In subsequent reports this statement appears in a distorted version. Whereas Beyriès figures as the one who applied the saying to Niasse in the original document, all later versions present “the Moors”—i.e., the Mauritanian opponents of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*—as the ones who used the proverb with reference to Niasse.

⁵² Even before 1952 colonial documents referred to Niasse as a blacksmith, most notably a detailed report written by the commander of the region of Sine-Saloum in 1935 (CADN, Fonds Dakar, Carton 923, E. Louvau, Commandant de Cercle du Sine-Saloum, à Monsieur le Gouverneur du Sénégal au sujet des Marabouts Ibrahima Nyass – Mohammed Niasse, 26 septembre 1935; the commander observes that the Niasse family encountered opposition because “the rules of Qurʾānic law do not allow a blacksmith to accede to the post of imam” [*sic*]). — I only became aware of this report after the publication of an earlier piece, where I suggested that the French first “discovered” Niasse’s humble ancestry in 1952 and subsequently used the information in their attempt to contain the spread of his movement (Seesemann, “The Shurafāʾ and the ‘Blacksmith’,” 90; cf. Garonne, “Saint ambigu,” 17 and Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 76). Nevertheless, ʿAbdallāh Niasse was apparently never described as a blacksmith in early French sources, not even by Paul Marty, who meticulously reported such details in his writings about *Islam noir*. This suggests that the blacksmith motive was not widely publicized in the 1910s.

⁵³ CAOM Aff Pol 2158/3, J. Beyriès, Rapport de Mission sur la situation de l’Islam en A.O.F., 3 avril-31 juillet 1952, 58.

Whether the French were indeed the ones who launched the blacksmith propaganda, as followers of Niasse often claim,⁵⁴ or whether they only joined the chorus of Niasse's rivals on the Senegalese religious scene—in either case, both sides were apparently united in the hope that the depiction of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* as a movement of ignoble people would undermine its spread and curb the rising influence of Ibrāhīm Niasse. According to French colonial sources, however, this influence continued to increase, and it manifested itself in a rather dramatic manner in the course of a major affair that captures the interplay between spiritual authority and social inequality in a compelling way.

In 1955, Niasse was about to conclude a marriage with Maryam Ndiaye, a woman from a noble lineage known as Gelwaar. A Serer-speaking matrilineal group of Mande origin, the Gelwaar had established a non-Muslim dynasty that ruled for centuries over northwestern Saloum; it was only after the arrival of the Njolofoen and the subsequent jihad of Maba Diakhou that the Gelwaar lost control of the region and eventually converted to Islam.⁵⁵ Niasse's wedding plans were met with outrage among Gelwaar chiefs, who saw the marriage between one of their daughters and the purported descendent of a metalworker as utterly inappropriate and unacceptable. The news eventually reached colonial officials in the *Bureau des Affaires Musulmanes*, who documented the “turmoil” Niasse had caused in the royal circles of Sine-Saloum.⁵⁶

Ibrāhīm Niasse was apparently unmoved by the passionate reactions and went ahead with his marriage project. Shortly before the wedding ceremony was supposed to take place, some

⁵⁴ Kane, “Tijāniyya reformée,” 23; Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 76.

⁵⁵ For details see Klein, *Islam and Imperialism*, who also emphasizes that the hand of a Gelwaar princess was only “sought by the wellborn” (ibid., 158).

⁵⁶ CAOM Aff Pol 2259/1, Gouvernement Général de l'A.O.F., Direction des Affaires Politiques, Bureau des Affaires Musulmanes, *Revue des questions musulmanes en A.O.F.*, Avril 1955, 7.

Gelwaar chiefs made a last desperate attempt to prevent what they perceived as a most disgraceful union.⁵⁷ According to an oral account related in Ousmane Silla's study of the Wolof caste system, they conspired to sabotage the wedding by abducting the bride. However, the plan was foiled when the group that had gone to carry out the operation was involved in a severe road accident. In the words of Silla, the car crash was widely interpreted as "the punishment from God and the Prophet inflicted on those nobles who had tried to thwart the ambitions of their earthly representative."⁵⁸ It is likely that many people also saw the accident as a demonstration of Niassé's supernatural capacities. In any case, it serves as a lesson of how spiritual authority can actually prevail over an alleged humble ancestry.

This was not the only marriage Niassé concluded with women of noble status. Less than a year before the confrontation with the Gelwaar, his union with Murayam bt. Muḥammad al-Ṭulba from the Idaw °Alī of Trarza provoked similar responses among members of this group, which is widely considered to be of *sharīfian* origin.⁵⁹ However, the widespread rejection of such marriage relationships did not prevent fathers of noble status from offering their daughters to a purported descendent of a blacksmith. Considering the fact that Ibrāhīm Niassé was not the first in his family to conclude such marriages,⁶⁰ his real or imagined caste background cannot fully explain the commotion caused by his matrimonial activities. Rather, these controversies have to

⁵⁷ One of Hill's informants even cited death threats against Niassé coming out of Gelwaar circles (Hill, "Divine Knowledge," 74).

⁵⁸ Silla, "Persistence des castes," 745-746. – Khalīfa Niassé, the offspring of the union between Ibrāhīm Niassé and Maryam Ndiaye, was recently elected mayor of Kaolack.

⁵⁹ For more on the *sharīfian* genealogy of the Idaw °Alī see Seesemann, "The Shurafā° and the 'Blacksmith'," 89 (with further references).

⁶⁰ His elder brother Muḥammad Khalīfa had previously married a woman from the Idaw °Alī, too. She later gave birth to Muḥammad Khalīfa's two prominent sons Aḥmad Khalīfa (the "Ayatollah of Kaolack") and Muḥammad al-Amīn, known as Sidi Lamine, an eminent public intellectual and owner of the influential Wal Fadjri media consortium in Dakar. Contrary to occasional claims in the literature, such as Gray, "Rise of the Niassene," 52-53, the two are not sons of Ibrāhīm Niassé.

be viewed in the context of the competitive atmosphere in the religious and political arena in Senegal at the time. Seen from this perspective, the disputes over nuptial matters illustrate how religious identity gradually transcended class status and racial categories, such as caste versus non-caste or “black” versus *bīḍān*. While religious leaders were often the first to break long-established rules of endogamy,⁶¹ intermarriages between different castes and ethnic groups gradually also became an accepted practice among the followers, who nowadays emphasize that the caste system with its pre-Islamic matrimonial rules contradicts the egalitarian spirit of Islam.⁶²

Throughout the history of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*, its members strengthened their religious ties across different countries and cultures with intermarriages, both at the leadership level and the level of the followers. Ibrāhīm Niase had spouses from Mauritania, Nigeria, and elsewhere, and he married his daughters to deputies and followers in various West African countries. Many of his leading Senegalese deputies did the same, to the extent that the *Jamāʿa*’s matrimonial connections complemented and reinforced the expanding transnational religious network. The importance of this marriage “policy” for the spread and the internationalization of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* can hardly be overemphasized.⁶³

If neither caste nor ethnic identity can provide satisfactory explanations for the relatively modest success of the *fayḍa* in Senegal, then what was the reason? Confronted with the question

⁶¹ On religious leaders as pioneers of exogamy see Diop, *Société Wolof*, 65-66.

⁶² It is striking, however, that most Njolofoen—who formed the nucleus of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*—continue to marry within their own group, whereas other members of the *Jamāʿa* ignore the old rules with increasing frequency. See the detailed discussion in Hill (“Divine Knowledge,” 68-81), who argues that the Njolofoen have “disengaged” from the caste system, but at the same time maintain a distinct identity, although this identity seems to be at odds with Islamic ideas about human equality.

⁶³ On Niase’s family ties with Kano see Hutson, “We are Many,” 123-128; on other marriage connections see the chart in Seesemann, “Nach der Flut,” 522.

members of the *Jamā^ca* often respond by quoting an aphorism in French: “Nul n’est prophète dans son pays,” nobody is a prophet in his home country.⁶⁴ As Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Ibrāhīm Niasse pointed out to me, his father shared this fate with other significant personalities, such as Aḥmad al-Tijānī, who only had few followers in Algeria and Morocco, or even the Prophet Muḥammad, who was forced to leave Mecca after his preaching met with continuous opposition from his kinsmen. Most Senegalese, he continued, believed they had already found what they were looking for: “You can compare it to a farmer who is successfully planting cotton. Why should he switch to cultivating rice?”⁶⁵ While the aphorism about the ignored prophet invokes a hagiographic theme, the latter statement may indeed contain some truth. By the time the *Jamā^cat al-fayḍa* appeared on the Senegalese scene, the established Sufi communities had already staked out their territories and constituencies; the time was over when throngs of people turned to spiritual leaders who could guide them through the turmoil of the colonial period.

Senegalese followers of Niasse also draw on another narrative to reconcile the relative failure of the *fayḍa* at home with their hagiographic perspective. Allegedly Ibrāhīm’s father ʿAbdallāh Niasse once said to his son, “If the neighboring cows don’t come to drink, those from afar will.”⁶⁶ The spread of the *fayḍa* in Trarza, and subsequently throughout West Africa, appears to them as the proof that ʿAbdallāh’s prediction did indeed come true.

⁶⁴ Incidentally, this phrase already occurs in colonial documents of the 1950s, beginning with one of the most detailed reports about Niasse that circulated widely in French administrative circles. See CAOM Aff Pol 2259/3, Direction des Affaires Politiques, Note sur Ibrahim Niasse, 1953-1954, 2. The distinguished Senegalese scholar Amar Samb also applies this aphorism to Ibrāhīm Niasse (Samb, *Adab*, 23).

⁶⁵ Interview with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, Medina Baye, December 9, 1996.

⁶⁶ Cissé, *Revivalist*, 6.

Passage to Mauritania

Before discussing the *fayḍa*'s entry into Mauritania, it is helpful to have a brief look at some of the relevant actors, even if they have already been mentioned in passing in previous chapters. The key role in this process was played by members of the Idaw °Alī, who not only enjoyed a special prestige as scholars and shaykhs of the Tijāniyya, but were (and still are) widely regarded as descendants of the Prophet. The precursor of the Tijāniyya in the Western Sahara was Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ b. al-Mukhtār al-°Alawī (b. ca. 1172/1758-1759; d. 1247/1831-1832) from Shinqīt. His initiation into the order goes back to Aḥmad al-Tijānī himself, and it was due to his efforts that the Tijāniyya found wide acceptance among the Idaw °Alī, to the extent that Paul Marty dubbed it the “national religion” of this group.⁶⁷ The region of Trarza in southwestern Mauritania has always been the stronghold of the Idaw °Alī, but they also lived in Brakna, Adrar, and Tagant. Those who traced their affiliation with the Tijāniyya back to Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ came to be known as Ḥāfiẓiyya; this term is nowadays used to distinguish them from the other two major branches in Mauritania, the Ḥamawiyya (named after Shaykh Ḥamallāh; also called “Eleven Beads Tijāniyya” because they recite the prayer formula known as *Jawharat al-kamāl* eleven times instead of twelve, as is the common practice of others) and the Ibrāhīmiyya (named after Ibrāhīm Niasse), which both emerged in the early twentieth century.

When Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ passed away, his succession was shared by his eldest son Aḥmaddu, known as Manna (d. 1325/1907-1908), and his closest confidant and brother-in-law Muḥamdi Baddi b. Sīdinā, known as Ḥassān al-Ṭarīq (b. 1202/1787-1788, d. 1264/1847-1248).⁶⁸ At the latter's death, his son Aḥmad, known as Abba (d. 1323/1905-1906), succeeded him as the

⁶⁷ Marty, “Ida Ou Ali,” 240 and 253.

⁶⁸ The epithet Ḥassān al-Ṭarīq is an allusion to Ḥassān b. Thābit, a companion of the Prophet known for his beautiful praise poetry. Muḥamdi Baddi was also a celebrated poet, whose verses continue to be memorized and recited among the Idaw °Alī.

head of the Baddi lineage. The third prominent personality of the first Ḥāfiẓī generation was Mawlūd Fāl (b. ca. 1186/1772-1773, d. 1268/1852), who was also related to Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ by marriage and belonged to the clan of the Īdayqūb.⁶⁹

In the early 1930s, when Ibrāhīm Niasse began his collection of *ijāzāt* (the licenses that allowed him to appoint deputies who in turn are authorized to initiate new members into the Tijāniyya), the leadership of the Ḥāfiẓiyya was in the hands of the third generation (see Figure 1.1). The family of Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ was led by Aḥmaddu’s son Muḥammad Sa°id (d. 1352/1933-1934), later succeeded by his younger brother Muḥammad al-Ṭulba (d. 1376/1957). The head of the Baddi lineage was Aḥmad’s son Muḥammad al-Amīn (d. 1383/1963-1964). As outlined in Chapter 1, Niasse tried to bolster his claim to the *fayḍa* by quoting several members of leading Ḥāfiẓī families with statements in his support (see Figure 1.3). However, relations between the Niasse family and prominent Tijānī families among the Idaw °Alī predate the *fayḍa*. Already Ibrāhīm’s father °Abdallāh maintained close contacts with representatives of the Ḥāfiẓiyya. Some of them were frequent guests at the *zāwiya* of °Abdallāh Niasse. As described in detail in Chapter 1, one of them, °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj, figures as the discoverer of Ibrāhīm as the future bringer of the flood.

Shortly after the emergence of the *fayḍa* the relationship between Ibrāhīm Niasse and Mauritanian Tijānīs intensified. Guests from Mauritania were already present at the inauguration of the first mosque in Medina Baye in 1931, as evidenced by their praise poetry quoted in *Kāshif*

⁶⁹ Mawlūd Fāl is credited with spreading the Tijāniyya beyond the borders of the Idaw °Alī’s heartland. Among others, he initiated °Abd al-Karīm Naqīl, the future shaykh of °Umar al-Fūtī, and Muḥammad Wad Dūlib, the head of the first Tijānī *zāwiya* in the Sudan. See further Seesemann, “The Shurafā’ and the ‘Blacksmith’,” 75 and id., “History of the Tijāniyya in Darfur,” 395.

al-ilbās.⁷⁰ Throughout the 1930s, the influx of visitors from Mauritania seems to have continuously increased, and more and more of them recognized Niasse as the bringer of the flood. Not all of these early Mauritanian followers had a strong scholarly background, though some of them were from distinguished families of *sharīfian* origin, such as Muḥammaddu wuld Anaḥwī (b. 1325/1907-1908, d. 1424/2003), who is considered the first Mauritanian follower of Niasse and remembered as working tirelessly on the fields of Kosi, contrary to what one would expect from a person of *sharīfian* status. One version of the story of Wuld Anaḥwī, recounted to me by a senior son of Ibrāhīm Niasse, goes as follows:

When the Mauritians heard that there was a man in Senegal claiming to be the bringer of the *fayḍa*, they were of course skeptical, because under normal circumstances they would never submit to the authority of a black person. They could not imagine that a black man should have received the *fayḍa*. A black scholar or legal expert (*mujtahid*), that was still conceivable. But a black man as the carrier of such a divine secret, this was just unthinkable. Therefore one of the Mauritians came to Kaolack to dissuade Shaykh Ibrāhīm from insisting on his claim. This was Muḥammaddu wuld Anaḥwī. He came to Senegal to get to the bottom of the matter. Otherwise the Mauritians only came to the black people to collect their gifts (*hadāyā*). Wuld Anaḥwī knew the description of the bringer of the *fayḍa*, but he did not know Shaykh Ibrāhīm yet. When he met with him he was immediately convinced, and he wrote back to Mauritania that the *fayḍa* had indeed appeared in Kosi.⁷¹

The development reached a new dimension when the sons of some of the most distinguished shaykhs among the Idaw °Alī submitted to Niasse’s authority. It was at this point that the *Jamā’at al-fayḍa* ceased to be a regional movement confined to the area of Saloum.

⁷⁰ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 57-60. Several verses by Mauritanian authors in praise of Niasse can also be found in °Alī Cissé, *Tarjama*.

⁷¹ Interview with Muḥammad al-Māḥī b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, Medina Baye, November 24, 1996. For more on Muḥammaddu wuld Anaḥwī’s submission see Seesemann, “The Shurafā’ and the ‘Blacksmith’,” 80-81. However, a more recent hagiographical work by a Mauritanian author necessitates minor corrections to my previous account. This applies to the spelling of the name (Muḥammaddu Anaḥwī rather than Muḥammad al-Naḥwī). The verse Wuld Anaḥwī used to convince his contemporaries to undertake the journey to Senegal should be translated as, “I respond to the call when the [herdsman’s] voice is raised * oh goat, this is the tree, this is the water.” See Aḥmaddu b. al-Shaykhān, *Wamaḍāt munīra*, 109.

Prior to this, the representatives of the other Senegalese Tijānī families might have regarded Niasse as a dissident and the *Jamāʿa* as an ephemeral phenomenon. Yet, the progressive submission of the progeny of prominent scholarly lineages from Trarza, beginning in the early 1930s and continuing throughout the 1940s, initiated a new dawn for the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*. French colonial officials, who documented several instances where young Idaw ʿAlī defected from the Ḥāfiẓiyya to Ibrāhīm Niasse, observed this development with disbelief. How could a “white,” noble Moor possibly become the disciple of someone who was not only a black African, but also the descendant of a blacksmith?⁷²

A series of reports show how puzzled the French were by what they perceived as an unnatural inversion of the racial and spiritual hierarchy. They ultimately settled on the explanation that the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* was almost exclusively an affair for women and former slaves (*ḥarāṭīn*); young *shurafāʾ* who supported the *Jamāʿa* were assumed to be rebels against their fathers’ authority.⁷³ It is quite typical for the colonial view that it fails to acknowledge the possibility that people joined the movement out of a sincere religious motivation, be it in Senegal, Mauritania, or elsewhere. Yet, as I have demonstrated in a separate study of this episode, the decision of several Idaw ʿAlī to join the *Jamāʿa* is perhaps the best illustration for the prevalence of spiritual authority over racial identity. Senegalese followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse even describe it as the “miracle” of the *fayḍa*, because a *kori*, as black Africans are sometimes referred to pejoratively in Mauritanian parlance, succeeded in receiving wide recognition as a religious leader among “white” Mauritians.

⁷² See for instance CAOM Aff Pol 2259/4, Mauritanie, Vie religieuse, 3ème trimestre 1954, 2. — See further Seesemann, “The Shurafāʾ and the ‘Blacksmith’,” and the insightful discussion in Diana Stone’s unpublished paper (Stone, “Inversion”).

⁷³ The most influential of these reports, the Rapport Beyriès, will be discussed below. For an in-depth analysis of colonial sources dealing with the movement in Mauritania see Seesemann, “Nach der Flut,” 371 and 495-507.

In an earlier article I have argued that the submission of leading members of the fourth Ḥāfiẓiyya generation to Niasse's authority constituted a turning point not only in the development of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*, but also in the history of the Tijāniyya in Mauritania, where the Ḥāfiẓiyya was gradually supplanted by the Ibrāhīmiyya.⁷⁴ I argued that the third generation was instrumental in the sense that they issued the licenses that allowed Niasse to establish himself as an authorized leader of the Tijāniyya. They acted as his initiators, while the fourth generation became his disciples. I would now, after a visit to Trarza in December 2008, concede that the Ḥāfiẓiyya did not become as marginalized as I may have suggested. Although certainly less visible than Niasse's Mauritanian deputies, the representatives of the Ḥāfiẓiyya continued to cultivate their distinctive heritage within the Tijāniyya and retained considerable influence in southwestern Mauritania, where they still enjoy an excellent reputation as religious scholars and Tijānī shaykhs. The members of the fourth Ḥāfiẓiyya generation did not defect to the camp of Ibrāhīm Niasse as a group, but rather submitted to him as individuals; the shift of their allegiance did not occur suddenly, but over a period that lasted at least one decade.⁷⁵

However, this qualification does not diminish the significance of this development. After joining the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*, the progeny of the prominent Ḥāfiẓiyya families quickly became new figureheads in the movement. Three personalities in particular came to play dominant roles in the future expansion of the *Jamā'a*. Chronologically the first was Manna Abba b. Muḥammad al-Ṭulba b. Aḥmaddu b. Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ (b. 1325/1907, d. 1406/1986); his father was one of the witnesses Niasse quoted in support of his claim to the *fayḍa* and became caliph in the Ḥāfiẓī lineage after the death of his brother Muḥammad Sa'īd in the mid-1930s. Manna Abba

⁷⁴ Seesemann, "The Shurafā' and the 'Blacksmith'," 96.

⁷⁵ The doctoral dissertation by Britta Frede, currently in progress at the Free University Berlin, will shed more light on the history of *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* in Mauritania. See Frede, "Shaikhani," for a summary of some of her preliminary findings.

was followed by Muḥammad al-Hādī b. Sayyid b. Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Mawlūd Fāl (d. 1402/1982), who descended from one of the most famous propagators of the Tijāniyya during the first Ḥāfiẓiyya generation. Last not least, Muḥammad al-Mishrī, the son of Niase's discoverer and mentor °Abdallāh wuld al-Ḥājj, also joined the *ḥayda*, probably in the early 1940s.

Oral tradition in Medina Baye has it that Manna Abba decided to go to Kaolack after Muḥammaddu wuld Anaḥwī, who had sent letters to Trarza in order to spread the news about the emergence of the *ḥayda*, had roused his curiosity. On his arrival in Kaolack, he introduced himself to Ibrāhīm Niase as Manna Abba, who reportedly responded: “So you are my two shaykhs (*anta shaykhānī*),”⁷⁶ thus alluding to the fact that he held licenses that connected him with Aḥmaddu (known as Manna) b. Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ and Aḥmad (known as Abba) b. Muḥamdi Baddi, the two towering figures of the second Ḥāfiẓiyya generation. The distinguished Mauritanian visitor, who subsequently came to be known as Shaykhānī, then decided to become Niase's disciple. The following depiction of their encounter in the oral accounts highlights the motivation behind his (and other Mauritians') submission to Niase's spiritual authority:

When Shaykhānī came to Shaykh Ibrāhīm for the first time, he wanted to renew his affiliation to the *ṭarīqa*. So Shaykh Ibrāhīm told him: “I have nothing you did not already get from your forefathers,” referring to Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ. “There is nothing I could give you in addition.” Shaykhānī replied: “I know you have received something special from God, something that has not been given to my forefathers. And this is what I am looking for.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Cf. the slightly different version in Aḥmaddu b. al-Shaykhān, *Wamaḍāt munīra*, 111.

⁷⁷ Interview with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Ibrāhīm Niase, Medina Baye, December 9, 1996. Cf. Aḥmaddu b. al-Shaykhān, *Wamaḍāt munīra*, 112.

Niasse then agreed to give him the litanies of spiritual training, and within a short period of time, Shaykhānī had his experience of illumination and remained a faithful supporter of Niasse ever since; he even became Niasse's favorite Mauritanian disciple.⁷⁸

The narrative of the submission of al-Hādī Mawlūd Fāl, as he is called in *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*, repeats a feature that already occurred in the story of Muḥammaddu wuld Anaḥwī. Purportedly, the leaders of the Ḥāfiẓiyya, taken aback by Manna Abba's defection, agreed to send al-Hādī as an emissary to Kaolack in order to get a clearer picture of the developments there. The accounts emphasize that Muḥammad al-Hādī arrived in Senegal full of prejudice, but when he saw Ibrāhīm Niasse face to face, he was so impressed that he could not but submit to him instantaneously. Maigari cites a letter al-Hādī sent to his family after his arrival in Kaolack. This document illustrates how overwhelming the encounter with Niasse must have been for the young traveler. For almost an entire page, one superlative follows the other:

When I arrived in Kaolack, I found an expert physician, well acquainted with all external and internal diseases. This is the shaykh of all stations, the tongue of his time, the light of his age, the locus of divine surveillance of His creation, the door that is open for all those who want to enter the sanctuary of the divine presence, our intercessor with God, the unique pole, installed by God, the great cognizant Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥājj ° Abdallāh al-Tijānī.⁷⁹

Later Maigari cites another passage from the same letter where al-Hādī describes how Niasse influenced his personal development:

God granted me His grace in the way that Shaykh Ibrāhīm made me see the disease of my lower self after I had been veiled from it for so long. For a few days my lower self battled and blinded me, as it had always done. It whispered to me that I was not sick and not in need of a physician. It was sufficient for me to be a

⁷⁸ According to Aḥmaddu b. al-Shaykhān (*Wamaḍāt munīra*, 108), the visit took place in Ramaḍān 1350/January 1932, which is a couple of years earlier than I stated previously (Seesemann, "The Shurafā° and the 'Blacksmith'," 81-82).

⁷⁹ See the extract of the letter in Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 212.

descendent of Sayyid Mawlūd Fāl and Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ, the two great leaders and first dispensers of the *ṭarīqa* in these regions.⁸⁰

Thus, al-Hādī realized that his lower self had been misleading him and that it was wrong to content himself with being a descendant of great masters of the Tijānī path. By identifying affiliation with the bringer of the *fayḍa* as the cure, he expands the motive of mystical experience highlighted by Shaykhānī. In both cases, the submission to Niasse and the *fayḍa* signals a break with the traditions of the ancestors, and both personalities came to play key roles in the subsequent development of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* in Mauritania and beyond.

In the 1940s al-Hādī b. Mawlūd Fāl ascended into the inner leadership circle of the *Jamāʿa*. Niasse gave him his daughter Baraka in marriage, and after World War Two he made him the liaison with the rapidly expanding *fayḍa* communities in Nigeria, Niger and Gold Coast. In this way, al-Hādī followed in the footsteps of his famous great-grandfather, who had been instrumental in spreading the Tijāniyya throughout Sudanic Africa in the mid-nineteenth century.

The last prominent Mauritanian disciple of Niasse to be mentioned here is Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥājj al-ʿAlawī (b. 1336/1917-1918; d. 1395/1975). At the beginning of his career as deputy, Muḥammad al-Mishrī—another sobriquet that goes back to Niasse—was, like Manna Abba alias Shaykhānī, more active in the neighboring region of Adrar than in his native Trarza. The likely reason for this choice was the strong opposition of the Ḥāfiẓī establishment in Trarza, which only began to cease in the late 1940s. However, by that time the *fayḍa* had established a firm presence in many areas north of the Senegal River, aided by its successful adaptation to profound economic changes. In the 1950s Niasse’s deputies became the pioneers in the move towards a sedentary lifestyle, establishing settlements that were among the first to get a modern

⁸⁰ Quoted from *ibid.*, 212.

infrastructure and acquired a high reputation as centers of Islamic learning and religious communal life.⁸¹

Redrawing Gender Boundaries

The *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* not only attracted men like Muḥammadu wuld Anaḥwī, Shaykhānī, or al-Hādī Mawlūd Fāl, who believed that their affiliation with Niasse would allow them to ascend to a higher spiritual level. In addition to crossing the physical border of Senegal, the movement also challenged established class and gender boundaries in its new Mauritanian environment. The following quote from the Rapport Beyriès, though not referring to the earliest period of the *fayḍa*'s history in the area, conveys this challenge very succinctly:

If we believe their detractors, Menabba [i.e, Shaykhānī] and especially Mohammed ould el Mechri push Sufi exaltation to its utmost limits, going so far as to identify themselves with God and to abandon the standard practices of Islam, prayer included. They recruit their disciples predominantly among women and men of humble background: servants, freed slaves, and dependents. But one also sees young people from reputed religious families, who are beguiled by them and leave the *ṭarīqa* of their parents. The “El Gazra” [“the marginals”; a pejorative Ḥasaniyya term used to refer to *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* the in Mauritania] indulge in multiple kinds of eccentricities without any concern for conventions or sense of shame. Thus, women leave their husbands to follow the propagators of the new path, and it happens that they strip off all their clothes right in the middle of the camp and in broad daylight. It also occurs that male disciples behave like insane people, eating excrements, uttering obscene phrases, and committing acts of violence against their fellow believers without any apparent reason.⁸²

Although many elements in this report appear vastly exaggerated and can be identified as an echo of Niasse's rivals, it is more than French fiction. At least the statement about the presence of women and members of the lower classes in the *Jamāʿa* is corroborated by internal

⁸¹ For details see Stone, “Inversion” and Seesemann, “The Shurafāʿ and the ‘Blacksmith’.” Some of these centers are nowadays frequented by European converts.

⁸² CAOM Aff Pol 2158/3, J. Beyriès, Rapport de Mission sur la situation de l’Islam en A.O.F., 3 avril-31 juillet 1952, 20.

accounts. What were the attractions the movement held for these groups, who seem to be rather unlikely candidates for spiritual illumination? The scattered available evidence suggests that this development can at least partially be explained by the social upheaval that shook West African societies at the time. As Soares has pointed out in his study of the Ḥamawiyya, colonial rule created new spaces that allowed people to move “on a much larger scale and with increasing rapidity”⁸³—not only in the spatial sense, but also in the sense of seeking new social and religious affiliations that undermined the old social and economic order. The widespread standardization of Islamic religious practice, transcending ethnic, class, and caste boundaries, occurred precisely during this particular period, the first decades of the twentieth century.⁸⁴

Some features of the reports about the Ibrāhīmiyya in Mauritania are reminiscent of an earlier, contentious movement, although no French document known to me invokes this parallel. In late 1929, i.e., around the same time when the *fayḍa* appeared in Kosi, the town of Kaédi on the north bank of the Senegal River was the setting of a brief religious revival that puzzled French officials and made the foundation of local society tremble.⁸⁵ The leader of this movement was Yacouba Sylla (d. 1409/1988), a disciple of Shaykh Ḥamallāh who was still in his early twenties at that time. Hailing from a village near Nioro du Sahel, the headquarters of the Ḥamawiyya in present-day northwestern Mali, Yacouba arrived in Kaédi in August 1929 and preached a message of religious revival to the inhabitants of the town. Much of his preaching was concerned with the perceived immoral lifestyle of the towns’ population and directly affected the status of women. For instance, he urged women to wear more decent clothing and condemned the common practice of giving huge amounts of money or kind as bridewealth on the

⁸³ Soares, *Prayer Economy*, 77.

⁸⁴ See Launay and Soares, “Islamic Sphere.”

⁸⁵ The following is based on Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change*, Chapter 2.

occasion of weddings. Yacouba quickly gained support among the Soninke in the Gattaga neighborhood of the town, many of whom had already supported the “Eleven Beads”-faction before his arrival. Even more contentious than his call for social reforms was his practice of convening mixed congregations for the performance of the *dhikr*, or remembrance of God, a ritual Tijānīs observe every Friday before sunset.

For a variety of reasons the “Yacoubistes,” as they are referred to in the colonial sources, soon became embroiled in acrimonious debates that eventually led to violent confrontations. The controversy reached its height on February 15, 1930, when colonial police forces—sent to end the fighting between rival groups of Muslims in Gattaga—fired on Yacouba’s supporters and left nineteen people dead and dozens of others wounded.⁸⁶ By that time Yacouba himself had already been convicted to eight years of exile in southern Côte d’Ivoire on previous charges of disturbing the colonial order. The Yacoubistes later reemerged as a successful agricultural community in Gagnoa (Côte d’Ivoire) and extended their economic activities into trade and the transport business. During the early 1930s, however, when almost all men were kept in detention in various places in French West Africa, the movement was to a large extent kept alive by the women who remained in Kaédi.⁸⁷

Other than the emergence of the “Yacoubistes,” which drew the attention of French officials from the very beginning, the initial expansion of Niasse’s movement in both Saloum and Trarza occurred beyond the purview of the colonial state. Had the spread of the *Jamā‘at al-fayḍa* been accompanied by violent clashes, Niasse might have found himself in exile like Yacouba Sylla or Shaykh Ḥamallāh. Also, there are no indications that Niasse preached a “revolutionary” message similar to Yacouba’s. But there are clear indications that his movement

⁸⁶ See *ibid.*, 81-82.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter 6.

subverted established gender boundaries, particularly in Mauritania, where at least in some instances women joined the men in *dhikr* congregations.

The sporadic participation of women in Tijānī rituals in Mauritania gave rise to fierce debates that have lingered for many years and still have the potential to flare up at the slightest provocation. According to Diana Stone, many scholars of the Ḥāfiẓiyya were already outraged by the fact that Ibrāhīm Niase and his deputies gave women the *wird*, i.e., the obligatory litanies of the Tijāniyya that establish membership in the order. Allowing them to join *dhikr* congregations was even worse, Stone reports, and amounted to “a potentially divisive and rebellious act.”⁸⁸ However, the fact that Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ, the founding figure of the Tijāniyya in Mauritania, had chosen Muḥamdi Baddi’s sister Fāṭima bt. Sīdinā, known as Ḥuṭūtu, as one of the ten deputies he was allowed to appoint according to his *ijāza* from Aḥmad al-Tijānī⁸⁹ suggests that Ḥāfiẓī objections against the presence of women in the Ibrāhīmiyya did not evolve around mere female membership, but rather female participation in public rituals.

Niase himself felt compelled to address the question on the occasion of his first visit to Trarza in April 1952. In a few lines of his poetic travelogue *al-Riḥla al-Kannāriyya* (*sic*; the latter word is the Arabic rendering of Gennar, the Wolof word for Mauritania) he argued against the joint attendance of men and women at religious events, even if spatially separated.⁹⁰ The point of departure for Niase’s argument is a verse of the Qur’ān that exhorts the Prophet’s wives to stay in their houses (Sura 33:33). According to Niase, women who remain in the house are not to blame, and even more likely to avoid blameful behavior than women who go out. Niase

⁸⁸ Stone, “Inversion,” 7.

⁸⁹ Ḥuṭūtu’s appointment (though not her name) is mentioned in Ibrāhīm Niase, *Jawāhir al-rasā’il* I, 159, where he responds to a question concerning the promotion of women to the rank of a deputy.

⁹⁰ Ibrāhīm Niase, *al-Riḥla al-Kannāriyya*, 109. – Other sections of this poem refer to Ḥuṭūtu and several other women of the Idaw °Alī by name.

cites the example of Sawda, the woman Muḥammad married after the passing of his first wife Khadīja, and describes her as disclosing wisdom, even though she never participated in any military campaign nor performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. At the same time, Niasse makes it clear that the rules regarding female segregation do not exclude women from the journey in the mystical path. He explains that, in the Tijāniyya, the travel on the path is a journey of the heart, not of the bodies.⁹¹ Thus, mystical attainment can be achieved without physical presence in congregational rituals. What we do for God, Niasse concludes, unites us with God; what we do not do for God separates us from Him.

Niasse's opposition to mixed congregations as expressed in the above statement raises the question whether the allegations about women of the intermingling with men during *dhikr* meetings are indeed accurate. The recurring debates surrounding this matter suggest that reality occasionally fell short of the ideal promoted by Niasse. It seems that the rules regarding the segregation of sexes were enacted in different ways in the local communities, depending on the deputies who headed them. In any case, the mixed congregations of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*—where they occurred—were of a different kind than those of the “Yacoubistes,” who, according to Hanretta, extended the usual *dhikr* session on Fridays to include speeches, other recitations, and apparently also elements of music and dance, with men and women intermingling.⁹² According to my observations in Senegal, Mauritania, Nigeria, and Sudan, almost all local communities of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* practice a strict segregation of sexes during religious observances. I never witnessed a communal religious ritual or event where men and women shared the same physical space. Exceptions to this rule are spontaneous *dhikr* congregations that occur outside of the formal group recitations prescribed in the Tijāniyya. Such gatherings

⁹¹ Ibid. – See the section “*Tarbiya*—A Short Introduction” in Chapter 2.

⁹² Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change*, 76 and 175-176.

became a typical practice (though usually only for male members) of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* wherever it spread: Followers come together and recite the formula *la ilāha illā Allāh* aloud and in public; as discussed in the last chapter, this had been one of the reasons behind the confrontation between the followers of Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad Khalīfa Niasse before the *hijra* to Medina. Elsewhere, too, the practice (known as *dhikr jahr^{am}*) frequently attracted hostile reactions from other Muslims, and in some cases even lead to the detention of followers on charges of disorderly conduct.⁹³ Yet, it seems that, other than in most communities in West Africa, in Mauritania such spontaneous gatherings were occasionally attended by both men and women.

It would be misleading to reduce the presence of women in the religious life of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* to the effects of the social and economic transformations at the time. Women not only took advantage of new opportunities generated by the gradual erosion of family structures and gender roles, they also participated in the movement as active seekers of spiritual advancement. The frequent remarks about mystical excesses with female involvement in colonial reports can be read as references to instances of *jadhb* (“rapture”; described in Chapter 3), experiences where the disciple may temporarily flout the rules and utter words of ecstasy. For the representatives of the Ḥāfiẓiyya such manifestations of mystical extravagance were already reprehensible when displayed by men, but they were outright abominable when they involved women. While Ḥāfiẓī practice does not bar women from membership, and even leadership, in the Tijāniyya, their mystical pursuits were not supposed to become public. It was therefore not the participation of females in Tijānī ritual as such, but rather the greater public exposure of their spiritual experiences that distinguished the Ḥāfiẓiyya from communities affiliated with the *fayḍa*.

⁹³ One such incident in Northern Nigeria is described in Seesemann, “Nach der Flut,” 610-619. See also Seesemann, “History of the Tijāniyya in Darfur,” 419 for a similar conflict in El Fasher.

The case of Senegal underscores further that female participation in the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* was more than the reflection of a more general societal change. Although the accounts about Niase's first disciples only give the names of men, there can be little doubt that women, beginning with Ibrāhīm's mother ʿĀʾisha, played important roles in the nascent community. Already during the formative period, women, often from the younger generation, are said to have flocked to Kosi in order to receive spiritual training. In *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʾ*, his polemical attack against the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*, Aḥmad Dem quoted alleged statements members of the *Jamāʿa* made about women's spiritual advances, including the claim that certain women have surpassed the rank of some of the greatest saints.⁹⁴ Although Dem's allegations were probably exaggerated, they confirm once more that women, just like men, did receive spiritual training. This is also underscored in another poem by Ibrāhīm Niase, where he emphasizes the possibility of women becoming *rijāl* (lit., men), a term that refers to accomplished mystics in Sufi parlance.⁹⁵ Not only did women attain the rank of "perfection," according to the same poem, it even seems that many of them were instrumental in bringing male members of their families into the movement: Their profound mystical experiences, which appear as a common feature in conversations among followers up to the present day, raised the curiosity of others.⁹⁶

Similarly, colonial reports from Mauritania suggest that much of the credit for the impetus of the *fayḍa* in Trarza goes to women, who are described in one document as performing

⁹⁴ See Aḥmad Dem, *Tanbīh al-aghbiyāʾ*, 1-2.

⁹⁵ Ibrāhīm Niase, *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil* I, 130. He composed these verses in 1372/1952 in response to a letter from his Mauritanian disciple Shaykhānī. Towards the end of the short poem he states that women should only perform silent *dhikr*, whereas men could do both silent and loud *dhikr*. See the section "The Conakry Trip" in Chapter 4 for another poetic statement by Niase that emphasizes women's access to mystical knowledge.

⁹⁶ Interview with Ibrāhīm b. Maḥmūd Diop, January 9, 1997. Hill narrates the story of a woman who left her family in order to go to Kosi and receive *tarbiya* ("Divine Knowledge," 155-156).

a veritable “exodus” to the residences of Niassa’s deputies.⁹⁷ Of course, not all husbands or, in the case of unmarried women, male members of their families, willingly followed their womenfolk to join the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*. Rather, its popularity among women caused a stir in many families, apparently in Saloum as well as in Trarza, when some women neglected their domestic duties or even temporarily left their homes in order to be with their master and fellow disciples. As the Rapport Beyriès shows, male complaints about such unruly behavior also reached colonial officials. Together with the alleged spiritual excesses, the motive of the wives leaving their husbands entered the pool of citations from which later French administrators drew when complying with their cumbersome duty to write new reports.

The scandalous air of colonial reports about the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* shows many parallels to the earlier assessment of the Ḥamawiyya by French officials. In both instances, the authors emphasized the lower class background of the followers,⁹⁸ the purported religious deviations, and the extravagant mystical practices; in both cases, the depiction as “heterodox” and potentially dangerous seems to go back to internal opponents in the Tijāniyya.⁹⁹ The French officials had no doubt that the “orthodox” version of the Tijāniyya was the one represented by representatives with Ḥāfīzī and °Umarian affiliations. Consequently, they were the ones who were regularly consulted in matters regarding the Muslim population, first and foremost °Umar

⁹⁷ CAOM Aff Pol 2259/1, Cahier “1954,” Extraits des rapports trimestriels, Mauritanie, 4ème trimestre 1954, Vie religieuse, 2.

⁹⁸ The Ḥamawiyya did indeed count many (but certainly not only) people of servile or caste status among its followers. See Soares, *Prayer Economy*, 78-81, where he also discusses scholars and members of prominent families who joined the Ḥamawiyya.

⁹⁹ A close reading of these reports thus supports Hanretta’s call to read the French documents about Islam as “the legacy of a propaganda war between competing religious leaders” (Hanretta, *Islam and Social Change*, 152).

al-Fūṭī's grandson Saʿīd al-Nūr [Seydou Nourou] Tall, dubbed "le grand marabout de l'A.O.F." by French colonial officials.¹⁰⁰

Other than in most Sufi orders in Africa and elsewhere, women also have more than a symbolic presence at the leadership level of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*. From the outset of his movement, Niasse appointed women from Saloum as deputies who subsequently initiated others into the Tijāniyya and *tarbiya*.¹⁰¹ Although such appointments are not without precedent in the Tijāniyya, it became a relatively common, though not exactly frequent practice wherever the *Jamāʿa* spread. Leadership positions continued to be dominated by men, but they are not an exclusive male preserve. It would be tendentious to claim that the stronger female presence among deputies constitutes of reversal of the patriarchal structure of many Sufi orders, but it is equally one-sided to assert that all Sufi orders marginalize women and exclude them from positions of power and influence, as the author of a recent study of women's participation in Senegalese orders does.¹⁰² Certainly, women face certain restrictions when exercising functions of religious leadership, restrictions that do not apply to men in same measure. For instance, they rarely appear as speakers at important public religious events, nor are they likely candidates to act as negotiators of the community in dealings with state authorities.

Nonetheless, the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* has contributed to a redrawing of gender boundaries. One of the most notable achievements of Ibrāhīm Niasse pertains to the education of girls. All of his daughters, by all accounts more than thirty in number, are said to have memorized the entire

¹⁰⁰ See Seesemann and Soares, "As Good Muslims as Frenchmen."

¹⁰¹ Hill, "Divine Knowledge," 157.

¹⁰² See Bop, "Roles and the Position of Women." Bop seems to be unaware of the role women play at the leadership level in the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*, even though she refers to two daughters of Ibrāhīm Niasse and emphasizes their scholarly credentials (*ibid.*, 1111). Her position is perhaps not entirely surprising, given her firm conviction that only secular mechanisms can free women from their marginalization in the Sufi orders and Muslim societies more generally.

Qurʾān, along with their brothers. Niasse never ceased to encourage his deputies and followers to give their daughters and wives access to religious education, not only with the objective to turn them into pious mothers and teachers, but also to allow them to participate in the advancement of the community. Several of Niasse’s own daughters emerged as the role model for other women, particularly Maryam Niasse, who is recognized as an accomplished religious scholar and directs one the largest girls’ school in Dakar.

In the 1950s, when Niasse established matrimonial relations with his disciples by marrying off his daughters, many of the latter were instrumental in initiating women into the Tijāniyya. A case in point is the city of Kano, the only place so far where female members and scholars of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* has been studied in some depth.¹⁰³ During his extensive trips in West Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, Niasse often traveled in the company of one or sometimes even more of his daughters, which is another indication that he was eager to reach out to female audiences.¹⁰⁴ In Senegal, it is nowadays not too difficult to find female deputies who dispense religious instruction and initiate disciples into spiritual training.¹⁰⁵

To be sure, the redrawing of gender boundaries has not entirely eliminated common constraints on female participation in Sufi orders, nor did the integration of lower-class people

¹⁰³ I am referring to Alaine Hutson’s unpublished thesis on women in the Tijāniyya in Kano (Hutson, “We are Many”). Many of her findings—summarized in a published article (Hutson, “Women’s Authority”)—are fascinating, though only further studies can determine the extent to which the case of Kano can be extrapolated to other regional contexts. One such study, focusing on Senegal, is currently (2010) undertaken by Joseph Hill. Britta Frede’s dissertation (mentioned in note 75 above) promises new insights into female participation in Tijānī communities in Mauritania.

¹⁰⁴ For instance, Charles Stewart reports that a daughter of Niasse initiated many women in the course of a visit to Ghana in 1952 (Stewart, “Tijaniyyah in Ghana,” 53).

¹⁰⁵ See the portrait of one such deputy in Hill, “Divine Knowledge,” 272-279.

transform the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* into an emancipatory movement.¹⁰⁶ But by attracting women and followers from diverse sectors of society, the *Jamā'a* broadened its membership base and thus created conditions that were instrumental in its future expansion; by transcending gender, age, class, and caste boundaries, the movement laid the foundation for its later development into a cosmopolitan *ṭarīqa* with a mass following.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Soares's discussion of the emancipatory potential of the Ḥamawiyya (*Prayer Economy*, 78).

5 “The Supreme Saint of His Time”: A Prophecy Fulfilled

ومن يحبني ومن يراني في جنة الخلد بلا بهتان

Those who love me and those who see me will dwell in the Garden of Eternity—
this is not a fabrication.

Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nafaḥāt al-Malik al-Ghanī*, 11.

The previous two chapters have outlined several conditions that prepared the stage for Ibrāhīm Niasse’s emergence as the leader of a transnational Sufi movement. Firstly, in the early 1930s the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* developed into a tight-knit community, whose members were tied together by a common enemy (the “deniers”) and shared the same profound religious experience, symbolized by the mystical vision of God. Secondly, membership in the community transcended social boundaries pertaining to race, gender, class, and ethnic and caste identities, thus laying the foundation for the transformation of the *Jamāʿa* into a transnational movement with a mass following. Thirdly, the submission of a growing number of Mauritians to Niasse’s authority paved the way for his recognition as an eminent scholar and shaykh of the Tijāniyya in other countries and by other leading personalities in this Sufi order.

In this chapter, I extend the focus to other parts of West Africa and trace Niasse’s ascension to supreme sainthood, as well his wide, though by no means universal, recognition as the highest-ranking leader of the Tijāniyya of the era. In doing this, I will draw on a new set of sources, Niasse’s own accounts of several of his travels, most of which have been written in verse. These travelogues, which contain many evocative autobiographical passages, will be juxtaposed with information drawn from other contemporary sources, including writings and poetry by his deputies and hagiographical accounts that are popular among the followers.

All these sources shed new light on Niasse's career as a saint and reveal a picture that is rather different from the one drawn in previous studies. According to Hiskett, whose account was reproduced by many subsequent authors, Niasse declared himself *ghawth al-zamān* (literally, "succor of the age") at the age of thirty.¹ However, as outlined in the previous chapter, there was no such self-declaration, and Niasse's rise to the position of the *ghawth* was anything but a straightforward and rapid process. The swelling chorus of his admirers notwithstanding, the ultimate breakthrough did not occur until years after the end of World War Two. At that point, Muslims from all over West Africa, and later even from areas east of Lake Chad, began to flock to Kaolack in order to "take refuge with the perfect one of the age" (*al-firār ilā kāmīl al-ʿaṣr*), to quote the phrase many of those who undertook the trip used to describe their travel. The story of Niasse's ascension to the summit of sainthood culminates in his triumphal appearance in Kano in September 1951, more than twenty years after the founding of the "Community of the Divine Flood."

Hagiography written after the fact—that is, after the ultimate unleashing of the flood epitomized in Niasse's 1951 visit to Kano—can be expected to project the evidence for Niasse's mission as the supreme saint of his time back to the earliest stages of his career; as we have seen, hagiographers even seek to support their claims with miraculous events surrounding his birth and childhood. However, what hagiographical retrospective makes appear as a smooth and linear development was actually a complex and slow process when seen through the lens of contemporary sources. Methodologically speaking, we need to separate the early documentation from later hagiographical embellishments that tend to obscure how bumpy the road to supreme sainthood actually was, and how protracted the path to the large-scale spread of the *fayḍa* turned

¹ See note 2 in Chapter 4.

out to be. Of course, this does not mean that hagiography should be dismissed; rather, it means that the message hagiography conveys needs to be submitted to interpretative scrutiny.

Examining the sources of the 1930s and 1940s for hints regarding Niasse's position in the Tijāniyya and the hierarchy of saints allows us to untangle the intricate itinerary the *fayḍa* took until its ultimate breakthrough. Throughout the chapter, I therefore read hagiographical depictions and autobiographical sources critically in the light of other written evidence. This approach elucidates once more the interplay—outlined in some detail in the introduction of the present study—between the scholarly formulation of religious doctrine on the one hand and its popular reception on the other. The resulting dynamic relationship between leaders and followers provides an important element to the explanation of the *fayḍa*'s popularity and the mechanism of its spread.

However, even after clearing the picture of hagiographic twists, one feature still stands out: What we see unfolding is the story of a prophecy, made by Ibrāhīm Niasse himself in the early days of his movement, when he predicted that the *fayḍa* could not be stopped and would one day reach all horizons. His followers gradually adapted these predictions in the form of firm convictions, and they interpreted Niasse's visit to Kano in 1951 as the fulfillment of his earlier pledge. Nowhere does this feature come out more clearly than in Niasse's travelogues, which can be considered as autobiographical sources that document important symbolic and factual aspects of his ascension to supreme sainthood. As most of these travelogues are composed in verse, the literary device of poetry assumed center stage in publicizing his claims. At the final stage of Niasse's breakthrough, his own poetry was complemented by poetic responses to his claims composed by several of his followers, particularly in Nigeria. The proliferation of verses describing the characteristics of the supreme saint and the *fayḍa* produced and reproduced

Niasse's spiritual presence. As a medium that lends itself to oral recitation, poetry functioned as an effective means to reach larger audiences at a time when other modern media were yet to become widely available in West Africa. Niasse, and later also his deputies, used this medium to depict the spread of the *fayḍa* and his emergence as the widely recognized supreme saint of his time in terms of a prophecy fulfilled.

Consequential Encounters

In late 1355/1936 Ibrāhīm Niasse left his home country for the first time in order to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, together with two travel companions. The entire trip took about three months, most of which he spent on board of ships that took him from Dakar to Casablanca, subsequently from Tanger to Jeddah, and later back home via the same stations. The only source that gives details of this trip is his own travelogue, *al-Riḥla al-Hijāziyya al-ūlā*, which he completed on his return to Kaolack in Muḥarram 1356/March 1937.² Other than the later travelogues that he composed in verse, *al-Riḥla al-Hijāziyya* is written in rather unpretentious prose. Much of the text reads like a pilgrim's diary, detailing the stations of the *ḥajj* and listing the supplications and prayers Niasse pronounced at the different stages of the journey. The text also contains descriptions of various encounters in Morocco, particularly in Casablanca, Settat, Fez, and Tanger, where Niasse made brief stopovers on the way to the Ḥijāz and during his return trip to Senegal. Nothing in *al-Riḥla al-Hijāziyya* suggests that Niasse undertook the trip in his capacity as the highest-ranking saint of his time or as the supreme leader of the Tijāniyya. If anything, the text documents the story of a saint in the making, showing how he gradually bolstered his claim to leadership of the Tijāniyya.

² Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Riḥla al-Hijāziyya*.

Among the few hints that indicate Niasse search for recognition as a saint is an encounter with a person identified as “a young *sharīf* from Fez” on a street corner in Mecca on 20 Dhū l-Ḥijja 1356/ March 4, 1937. Followers of Niasse later came to regard this encounter as “the peculiarity of his first pilgrimage.”³ According to the version narrated by Niasse himself, the *sharīf* told him of a saint (*walī*) who had a vision of al-Khiḍr and the four rightly-guided caliphs, in which he was informed that this year the *ghawth* would be among the pilgrims. The unidentified *walī* told the *sharīf* that the sins of all pilgrims would be forgiven due to the presence of the *ghawth*. He further advised him to look for the *ghawth* at a particular street corner in Mecca. Niasse then asked the *sharīf*, “And whom did you meet?” – “You,” the *sharīf* responded.⁴

Niasse narrates this episode without any further comment. Likewise, he leaves his various encounters with several prominent leaders of the Tijāniyya in Morocco and in the holy cities, though mentioned in *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, largely uncommented. Niasse’s failure to draw his own conclusion from these events seems to have opened the door to speculations among his followers as well as among academic authors about the significance of his first pilgrimage. Thus, in the academic literature the year 1937 is generally considered as the decisive turning point in the career of Ibrāhīm Niasse. The two events described as critical were his encounter with ʿAbdallāh Bayero, the Emir of Kano, in the Ḥijāz, and his alleged appointment as the “universal leader” of the Tijāniyya by Aḥmad Skīraj, the foremost Tijānī scholar at the time, in Morocco.

³ See the comment by Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Ibrāhīm Niasse in the table of contents (Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, 78).

⁴ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, 49.

While there can be no doubt that these two encounters were indeed consequential, almost all accounts circulating in the literature misrepresent the actual facts.⁵ An analysis of the primary sources, first and foremost *al-Riḥla al-Hijāziyya* itself, exposes countless errors in the literature and shows that the year 1937 was not a turning point, but another stage in the long development that eventually led to the widespread, though by no means unanimous, recognition of Niasse as the leading shaykh of the Tijāniyya and supreme saint of his era.

Several elements of the accounts given in the secondary literature also occur in hagiographical narratives. But instead of identifying hagiography as such, the authors invariably reproduce it rather uncritically as if they were reporting historical facts. As a matter of fact, both the hagiographical versions of the events and those given in the literature differ in significant details from the version that can be reconstructed from the sources. According to his own account, Niasse met ʿAbdallāh Bayero and his “minister” (*wazīr*), Wālī Sulaymān (d. 1358/1939),⁶ in the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina before the start of pilgrimage. Niasse adds that he fulfilled the Emir’s and the minister’s requests to renew their affiliations to the Tijāniyya and appoint them as deputies.⁷ In the literature, however, the encounter is usually moved to Mecca, and the Emir is said to have recognized Niasse as the *ghawth al-zamān*.⁸ According to some authors, Niasse accepted an invitation from the Emir and visited Kano immediately after the

⁵ See Paden, *Kano*, 97-99; Hiskett, “Community of Grace,” 103–104; Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 109–110 and 116; Quadri, “Ibrahim Niass,” 110–113; Gray, “Rise of the Niassene,” 41–43; Kane, “Shaikh al-Islam,” 305-306; Piga, *Voies du soufisme*, 264-273.

⁶ Sulaymān b. Ismāʿīl was an influential figure at the Emir’s court (see Paden, *Kano*, 83–84 and 107). The title *wālī* refers to the head of the legal system. His important role in the education and initiation of women into the Tijāniyya is discussed in Hutson, “Women’s Authority in Kano.”

⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Riḥla al-Hijāziyya*, 38.

⁸ The likely source for this inaccurate information is Hiskett, “Community of Grace,” 103. Paden does not mention the place in his earlier study; see his account in *Kano*, 98-99.

pilgrimage.⁹ Occasionally, the alleged Kano trip of 1937—which never took place—is presented as a French plot to use Niassa in an attempt to extend their influence in British colonial territories.¹⁰ Some of these narratives are embellished with reports about the Emir going through a deep psychological crisis, which miraculously ended as soon as he met with the Senegalese shaykh.¹¹

Two major claims arise from this representation of the ties between Niassa and ʿAbdallāh Bayero: Firstly, the Emir submitted to Niassa as the supreme saint of his time, and secondly, this submission paved the way for the later spread of the *fayḍa* in Nigeria. As for the first claim, there is good reason to doubt its accuracy. Given the meticulousness with which Niassa recorded every single indication that he might occupy an extraordinary position in the saintly hierarchy, his failure to mention Bayero’s alleged recognition of such a position strongly suggests that there was no such recognition at that time. In his description of their pilgrimage Niassa recounts his visit to the Kaʿba in the company of “my aspirant, the Emir of Kano” and also describes him as his acolyte (*khādim*).¹² But he never indicates that Bayero saw him as anything other than his shaykh and, by implication, a leading figure within the Tijāniyya.

The second claim builds on the first by assuming that the Emir’s submission to the supreme saint triggered similar reactions from his subjects. ʿAbdallāh Bayero was certainly an influential political figure in Northern Nigeria, and he also commanded great authority in the city of Kano, one of the largest urban centers in the British colony. His affiliation with the Tijāniyya

⁹ This time the source of the misunderstanding is Paden, *Kano*, 98-99. Other authors who erroneously have Niassa go to Kano in 1937 or 1938 include Anwar, “Ulama in Kano,” 34; Gray, “Rise of the Niassene,” 43-46; Kane, “Kano et Kaolack,” 29; Mohammed, “Hausa Scholar-Trader,” 38; Quadri, “Ibrahim Niass,” 113.

¹⁰ See the section “First Visit to Kano” below.

¹¹ Tahir, “Saints and Capitalists,” 361; Kane, “Shaikh al-Islam,” 305-306; Paden, *Kano*, 73; Piga, “Aperçu sur les confréries,” 164-165.

¹² See Ibrāhīm Niassa, *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, 42 and 46.

went back to his youth, and his father and predecessor, Emir °Abbās (d. 1347/1926), was the first ruler of Kano to become an active supporter of the Tijāniyya. However, even though the backing of the Tijāniyya from the ruling house was significant and gave this Sufi order a certain advantage over others, it would be simplistic to assume that the later large-scale expansion of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* depended on °Abdallāh Bayero. In a sermon Niasse gave during one of his last visits to Kano in 1391/1971-1972, he addressed this very question, showing that he was well aware of the role many people ascribed to Bayero. He stated, “They say the Tijāniyya was successful because °Abdallāh Bayero was a Tijānī. But °Abdallāh Bayero has gone, and the Tijāniyya has remained.”¹³

Nevertheless, colonial sources of the 1950s as well as Niasse’s adversaries depict the expansion of his movement in Northern Nigeria as the result of his alliance with the ruling class of Kano. According to Maigari, Niasse would have never had such a success in Nigeria without °Abdallāh Bayero.¹⁴ Similar views have been expressed by French colonial officials, who became aware of the developments in Nigeria towards the end of 1951. In a series of reports they sought to explain the unexpected vogue of the Tijāniyya in British territories. They quickly found out that Niasse’s acquaintance with the Emir of Kano went back to what they call a “chance encounter” during the pilgrimage of 1937. For the French, there was little doubt that Niasse’s popularity had to be attributed to the fact that the Emir was his disciple.¹⁵

¹³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Tawsi'at al-'ilm wa-l-'irfān*, 22.

¹⁴ Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 153.

¹⁵ See for instance CAOM Aff Pol 2258/2, Territoire du Sénégal, Annexe du rapport trimestriel, 1er trimestre 1952, Note de renseignements au sujet d'Ibrahima Niasse, and CAOM Aff Pol 2258/2, Haut Commissariat de la République en A.O.F., Direction Générale de l'Intérieur, Service des Affaires Politiques. Rapport de Mission effectuée en Nigéria en mars 1952 par M. l'Administrateur Mangin, Chef du Bureau des Affaires Musulmanes. Dakar, 16 juin 1952.

Several reasons make this version unlikely. Firstly, it appears that neither Bayero nor his advisor, Wālī Sulaymān, spread the news of their acquaintance with the Senegalese shaykh beyond their immediate environment at the Emir’s court. On his first visit to Kano in June 1945, Niasse made no public appearance and apparently only met with the Emir’s immediate entourage.¹⁶ It took until the late 1940s—more than ten years after the historic first meeting—that the well-known deputies of the Tiāniyya in the city became acquainted with Niasse’s teachings, and they did not learn about Niasse through the Emir’s connection, but through emissaries from Kaolack or Nigerian travelers who made early trips to Senegal. Linked to this is the second reason why the expansion of the *fayḍa* did not depend on the Emir: ʿAbdallāh Bayero was an ardent follower, but he kept his affiliation very much to himself. He never became an active proselytizer on behalf of Niasse, neither before nor after their relationship had become official toward the end of the 1940s.

Thirdly, although Kano was certainly an important city whose Emir carried much weight in the Nigerian context, the “Northern Region,” as the British officials called it, had other urban centers and other seats of traditional rulers that matched or even outweighed the influence of Kano, such as Sokoto, Kaduna, and Zaria. Nonetheless, Niasse gained a large following throughout Northern Nigeria, from Adamawa and Bornu in the East to Sokoto and even Zamfara in the West, not to mention the Niger-Benue area or Yorubaland to the south. If the success of the *fayḍa* in Kano had indeed to be attributed to Bayero’s standing, the question arises how it spread into areas where Niasse had little or no constituencies. A French colonial report of 1952, written by Louis Mangin, the head of the *Bureau des Affaires Musulmanes* in Dakar at the time,

¹⁶ Details of this visit are discussed in the section “First Visit to Kano” below.

answers this question by pointing to Hausa intermediaries who promoted the Tijāniyya in other parts of Nigeria and even in neighboring Gold Coast (present-day Ghana):

The extraordinary honors bestowed on him by the powerful Emir—comparable to those he renders to the Sultan of Sokoto—have contributed to a large extent to spreading his reputation of holiness and religious knowledge. . . . The Hausa of Kano, recruited and indoctrinated through the new hierarchy, have become the promoters of his reputation, and nowadays people talk about “Ibrahim the Kaolacki” in Lagos and Ibadan, in Accra and Kumasi, not only among the Hausa but among all Muslim communities of different ethnic origin.¹⁷

Mangin explains the spread of the *fayḍa* in terms of a Hausa affair, ignoring the fact that even in the Hausa-dominated city of Kano, the Tijāniyya was far from being the exclusive preserve of the Hausa, with leading deputies coming from Fulani and Kanuri backgrounds.¹⁸

Although Mangin also emphasizes Niasse’s popularity among various ethnic groups in the British colonies, he seems to interpret it as the result of other peoples’ subordination under Hausa dominance, who in turn imitate the Emir’s submission to the authority of Niasse. The report offers no evidence to corroborate such a view. Where such evidence exists, it suggests that non-Hausa who became followers of Niasse only rarely did so because of Hausa intermediaries.¹⁹ In most cases, they established their own connections with Niasse or his emissaries, thus being on a par with their Hausa counterparts, rather than subordinate to them. Last not least, being Hausa was not always equivalent to being part of the economic or political elite. In a place like Sokoto, where the *fayḍa* also expanded rapidly in the 1950s, the Hausa repeatedly complained about their alleged marginalization by the Fulani aristocracy. On several occasions, this sense of

¹⁷ CAOM Aff Pol 2258/2, Territoire du Sénégal, Annexe du rapport trimestriel, 1er trimestre 1952, Note de renseignements au sujet d’Ibrahima Niasse, 4.

¹⁸ See Paden, *Kano*, 194. In general, however, Paden has the tendency to overemphasize the role of ethnic differences in Kano’s religious politics. See for instance the figures in *Kano*, 114-116.

¹⁹ See Cohen, *Custom and Politics*, 183-187; Ryan, “Tijani Sufism.”

marginalization led to serious tensions, which erupted in a series of violent confrontations in 1949 and 1956.²⁰

As a matter of fact, the pattern of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* as a protest movement is far more frequent than the pattern of the alliance with the ruling class. In Saloum, the nascent community had to assert itself as a minority against the established Tijānī branches. In Mauritania, it was the fourth generation of the Ḥāfiẓiyya that rebelled against their influential predecessors. In Ségou, the sons of well-known Tijānī families turned against their fathers and submitted to the authority of Ibrāhīm Niasse.²¹ As in many other regions where the movement spread, its principal promoters in Kano were relatively young scholars. Apparently the *fayḍa* held special attractions for the younger generation, as it opened up new career avenues outside of the closed ranks of the religious establishment.²² Alliances between the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* and the ruling classes were the exception rather than the rule, and the constellation that came closest to such a pattern was not the Kano Emirate under °Abdallāh Bayero, but under his son and successor Muḥammad al-Sanūsī, who reigned from 1953 to 1963. The latter did indeed use his instruments of power to promote the cause of the Tijāniyya in the Emirate. But even here, the fortunes later turned, due to political turmoil in Northern Nigeria that culminated in al-Sanūsī's deposition. Thus, from 1963 onwards and well into the 1970s the "people of the *fayḍa*" in Kano formed a protest movement against the political establishment. The legacy of these years can be felt up to the present day.

All this is not meant to deny that the 1937 encounter was to play an important role for the future development of the *fayḍa*. The point to be made here is that °Abdallāh Bayero's part in this development has been exaggerated. His submission to Niasse's authority as a caliph of the

²⁰ See the detailed analysis in Seesemann, "Nach der Flut," 600-627.

²¹ See Manley, "Sosso and Haidara."

²² A case in point is the young generation of the so-called Salgawa scholars in Kano, discussed extensively in Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*.

Tijāniyya was the dawn of the *fayḍa* in Nigeria. But the Emir never actively promoted the *fayḍa*, nor did he promote Niasse as the supreme saint of the era. Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop presented the following as Niasse's own account of what transpired in the Hijaz:

After the Emir had seen Shaykh Ibrāhīm several times in the mosque of the Prophet, he came one day and addressed him saying, "You are the one I am looking for!" Shaykh Ibrāhīm replied, "What do you mean?" The Emir replied, "I prayed to God and asked him to grant me three requests." Shaykh Ibrāhīm asked, "Which ones?" The Emir responded, "That I become the Emir of Kano, and indeed I did; that I will be the first Emir to perform the hajj, and indeed I am here; that I meet with a caliph of Aḥmad al-Tijānī who can renew my affiliation and whom I can follow. When I saw you over the last days, I knew that it was you." Thereupon Shaykh Ibrāhīm went with him to the tomb of the Prophet and renewed his affiliation as requested. . . . During the subsequent pilgrimage the Emir acted as Shaykh Ibrāhīm's servant (*khādim*). He helped him perform his ablutions, cooked tea for him, and provided other services. When they parted the Emir invited Shaykh Ibrāhīm to visit him in Kano.²³

As will be outlined below, this visit did not take place until after the end of World War Two, and it took six more years until Ibrāhīm Niasse made his legendary appearance in Kano in September 1951 as the supreme saint of his time.

The myths surrounding Niasse's 1937 encounter with Aḥmad Skīraj have created even more confusion than those concerning the Emir of Kano. Hagiography has it that Niasse met Skīraj in Fez during his Moroccan stopover on the way to Mecca and was officially appointed as the supreme leader of the Tijāniyya. Similar claims also pervade the secondary literature. Most authors quote either Hiskett or Paden, who both got the story wrong. In the words of Hiskett, Skīraj, "the khalifa of the Tijaniyya at the time," told Niasse in Fez "that he should now assume leadership of the order, at any rate in West Africa."²⁴ Neither was Skīraj the caliph at the time, nor did the two ever meet in Fez. Paden recounts Niasse's meeting with °Abd al-Salām al-Sa°idī, a deputy of the Tijāniyya in Tanger, where the Senegalese group boarded the ship to Jeddah.

²³ Interview with Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop, Dakar, January 9, 1997.

²⁴ Hiskett, "Community of Grace," 103.

According to Paden, who quotes from the travelogue *al-Rihla al-Hijāziyya*, °Abd al-Salām addressed Niasse saying, “you are the successor (*khalif* [sic]) of Shaykh Tijānī, and you are the intermediary between people and the Prophet, and the Shaykh.”²⁵ Paden takes this as an official appointment to the office of the caliph of Aḥmad al-Tijānī. Yet, the original text unmistakably states that °Abd al-Salām first expressed his gratitude to God that He had send to them “a caliph among the caliphs of Aḥmad al-Tijānī.” Thereupon Niasse told his host, “May God make you the intermediary (*barzakh*) with Shaykh al-Tijānī and the Prophet.”²⁶ Many subsequent authors, including those who know Arabic and could have double-checked Paden’s generally mediocre translations, have taken Paden’s account as reliable. Sometimes they even concoct their own versions of the alleged appointment by moving the encounter from Tangerang—where Paden locates it correctly—to Fez, which has a higher symbolic value prestige as the site of the main *zāwiya* and Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s tomb.²⁷

Contrary to what hagiographical sources and many authors of previous studies claim, Niasse was never officially appointed as the universal leader or sole caliph of the Tijāniyya, neither by °Abd al-Salām, nor by Aḥmad Skīraj, nor by the descendants of Aḥmad al-Tijānī, nor by anyone else. As a matter of fact, such an office does not even exist, the popularity of this hagiographical motive notwithstanding. Niasse himself never made such a claim, nor did any of his confidants or close deputies. Even if Niasse was eventually widely recognized as the greatest living caliph of the Tijāniyya—and there is reason to believe that he considered himself as such

²⁵ Paden, *Kano*, 98, quoting from *al-Rihla al-Hijāziyya*.

²⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Rihla al-Hijāziyya*, 29.

²⁷ Brenner, *West African Sufi*, 51; Quadri, “Ibrahim Niass,” 111–112; Kane, “Shaikh al-Islam,” 305. Christopher Gray also has Skīraj recognize Niasse as the *ghawth* (“Rise of the Niassene,” 42). – Perhaps Paden’s greatest blunder is the translation of the book title *Kāshif al-ilbās* as “The Removal of the Clothing” (*Kano*, 439).

due to his capacity as the “bringer of the *fayḍa*”—he still occupied a spiritual rank only. There are no administrative powers or leadership functions that go with such a position.

Part of the problem can be attributed to the conflation between the rank of the caliph and the rank of the supreme saint. While several people can be caliph at the same time, there can only be one succor of the era. As Niase's followers gradually came to regard him as the supreme saint, they applied the notion of a single succor to the caliphate: If Niase was the supreme saint, he necessarily had to be the supreme leader of the Tijāniyya. Submitting to the authority of the holder of this formidable double position was not a matter of individual discretion, but a collective necessity. Thus, many followers of Ibrāhīm Niase came to conflate the two ranks and translated them into a claim to exclusive leadership of the whole order.

A short treatise by Abū Bakr °Atīq (d. 1394/1974), one of the pillars of the *fayḍa* in Kano, can serve to illustrate the productive tension between popular hagiographical imagination and learned discourse about offices and mystical ranks in the Tijāniyya. This text, written in 1968, is titled “The Sincere and Cordial Response to the Document of al-Ḥājj Aḥmad °Abd al-Karīm.” As Abū Bakr °Atīq explains, he wrote his treatise to address objections raised by Aḥmad °Abd al-Karīm, a fellow Tijānī from Kano who was critical of Niase. Aḥmad °Abd al-Karīm had apparently pointed out that the only person in the Tijāniyya worthy of being addressed as caliph was Sīdī Ṭayyib b. °Allāl b. Aḥmad °Ammār, the oldest living descendant of Aḥmad al-Tijānī at the time.²⁸ For Abū Bakr °Atīq, such a statement could only come from someone who was not familiar with the different meanings of the term caliphate (*khilāfa*). Sīdī Ṭayyib was called caliph in his capacity as the head of the family of Aḥmad al-Tijānī and of the Tijāniyya. Otherwise the rank of the caliph was a spiritual position, and many members of the

²⁸ Abū Bakr °Atīq, *al-Jawāb al-khāliṣ al-ṣamīm*, 8.

Tijāniyya had reached it, beginning with °Alī Ḥarāzim, whose ascension to this rank was confirmed by the founder himself. This implies, Abū Bakr °Atīq continues, that there can be more than one caliph at the same time. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that the caliphate is a *maqām*, a spiritual station. Reaching this station requires divine election. Others can only acknowledge that someone has attained the rank. Consequently there can be no such thing as a formal appointment. One either is a caliph, chosen by God, or is not.²⁹

This conclusion corresponds to the statement °Abd al-Salām made in Tangerang in 1937, who did not appoint Niasse to any position, but simply acknowledged him as one among several caliphs of the Tijāniyya. However, Abū Bakr °Atīq’s lesson apparently failed to curb the zeal of Niasse’s hagiographers. Yasir Quadri, whose studies of Niasse display a distinct hagiographical flavor, contributed to the confusion by mistranslating one of Abū Bakr °Atīq’s arguments in defense of Niasse’s claim to the rank of a caliph. Abū Bakr °Atīq refers to the visit of Sīdī Ṭayyib b. °Allāl to Kano in 1961, during which the distinguished guest mentioned Niasse in a public supplicatory prayer, saying “He is the caliph of our grandfather today. He is our father, we don’t have another father apart from him.”³⁰ Quadri translates, “[he is] our khalife, our grandfather today, he is our father.”³¹ In his version the supplication becomes an official declaration of Niasse as the universal leader of the Tijāniyya, allegedly made by Sīdī Ṭayyib in Fez in 1937. While Sīdī Ṭayyib’s statement certainly extols Niasse as a Tijānī leader, neither he nor any other descendant of Aḥmad al-Tijānī made a pronouncement of the type described by Quadri and others.³²

²⁹ See *ibid.*, 8–10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

³¹ Quadri, “Ibrahim Niass,” 112.

³² Other authors disseminating this misleading information include Gray, “Rise of the Niassene,” 42, who quotes Quadri several times in his widely read but unreliable study. — For most of the

However, academic authors are not the only ones who read their own ideas into Abū Bakr °Atīq’s text. Muḥammad al-°Āshir b. Shu°ayb, one of Abū Bakr °Atīq’s students, added the following footnote to the published version of the small treatise:

The people of Fez acknowledged [the rank of Niasse] and handed the direction [of the Tijāniyya] over to him. They took an oath of allegiance to him in his hometown Kaolack, and gave him everything the heir is supposed to receive from the bequeather [Aḥmad al-Tijānī]: his walking stick, a pair of shoes, and the notebook with the secrets.³³

Muḥammad al-°Āshir fails to specify who exactly made this acknowledgment. He deems the precise identity of “the people of Fez” as less important than Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s relics, which form another powerful hagiographical topos. Popular hagiography adapts the motive of the relics from statements made by Niasse and other leading representatives of the *fayḍa*. I heard the following version from Niasse’s son Muḥammad al-Amīn, who emerged in the 1990s as one of the most visible representatives of the movement:

When he came to the descendants of Shaykh al-Tijānī, they honored him with everything they had. They gave him Shaykh al-Tijānī’s walking stick, his prayer beads, and the original manuscript of *Jawāhir al-ma°ānī*. This is true. The things are with al-Ḥājj °Abdallāh [the eldest living son of Ibrāhīm Niasse at the time].³⁴

time, Niasse maintained good relations with the descendants of Aḥmad al-Tijānī. Sīdī Ibn °Umar b. Muḥammad al-Kabīr b. Muḥammad al-Bashīr (d. 1389/1968), who made a celebrated and still widely remembered tour of West Africa and the Sudan between 1949 and 1951, coordinated some of his travel with Niasse and met many of his deputies, especially in Nigeria (Seesemann and Soares, “As Good Muslims as Frenchmen”). In the late 1950s, Sīdī Muḥammad al-Ḥabīb b. Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad al-Bashīr (d. ca. 1391/1971-1972), a cousin of Sīdī Ibn °Umar, took residence in Pikine near Dakar and married Umm al-Khayr, a daughter of Ibrāhīm Niasse. The breakup of this marriage in February 1960 created some tension a few years later, but only cast a temporary shadow on Niasse’s relationship with al-Tijānī’s family (see Seesemann, “Nach der Flut,” 456-459). In neighboring Trarza, however, the divorce affair had serious repercussions that even involved violent clashes between supporters of competing Tijānī branches among the Idaw °Alī. In the collective memory of the Idaw °Alī this period is remembered as *sanawāt al-khawd*, “the years of strife.”

³³ Abū Bakr °Atīq, *al-Jawāb al-khāliṣ al-ṣamīm*, 4.

³⁴ Interview with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Ibrāhīm Niasse, Medina Baye, December 9, 1996.

The “people of Fez” mentioned in Muḥammad al-°Āshir’s account are now specified as “the descendants of Aḥmad al-Tijānī.” However, Niasse’s first contact with such a descendant dates to the year 1947, when Sīdī Ṭayyib b. °Allāl made his first visit to Senegal. There was no official conferral of leadership insignia to Ibrāhīm Niasse, neither in 1937 nor in 1947 nor later; neither in Kaolack nor in Fez nor elsewhere. Moreover, a look at Niasse’s writings reveals that the narrative has undergone several modifications as it was refashioned into a hagiographical discourse. The manuscript of the *Jawāhir* was a present from Sīdī Muḥammad al-Bashīr, the grandfather of Sīdī Ibn °Umar and Sīdī Muḥammad al-Ḥabīb, to Ibrāhīm’s father °Abdallāh Niasse during the latter’s stay in Morocco in 1329/1911.³⁵ In *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, Niasse relates that he received the walking stick from Aḥmad b. al-Sā°iḥ in Sefrou.³⁶ The only prayer beads Niasse mentions are al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī’s, who handed them over to him as a gift during his stopover in Fez.³⁷ The shoes and the documents in al-Tijānī’s handwriting, listed among the relics in Muḥammad al-°Āshir’s footnote, occur in Niasse’s account of his first stay in Casablanca. However, he only says that he saw the items, not that he received them as presents.³⁸

The narratives about the relics all seem to confirm Niasse’s appointment as universal leader of the Tijāniyya. Who else, if not the possessor of all these insignia, could be the true caliph of Aḥmad al-Tijānī? Aḥmad Skīraj’s alleged appointment of Niasse to the imaginary office of the supreme caliph serves the same hagiographical purpose. All these claims were

³⁵ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, 8.

³⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, 52. — As noted in Chapter 1, note 20, Aḥmad b. al-Sā°iḥ was an acquaintance of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s father.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 25. Incidentally, the hagiographical accounts omit reference to Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s perfume bottle and his hairs, which Niasse lists among the things he received from al-Ṭayyib al-Sufyānī.

³⁸ See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, 22.

popular among Niasse’s followers because they seemed to prove that he occupied a unique position—regardless of the fact that this position did actually not exist.

Yet, by no means all Tijānīs accepted this reasoning. Those who contested Niasse’s authority in Senegal were the same people who had earlier refused to acknowledge the advent of the *fayḍa*, led the Sy family in Tivaouane. In Trarza and other parts of Mauritania, many members of the Tijāniyya remained loyal to their original spiritual lineages, which connected most of them to Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ or to Shaykh Ḥamallāh. The followers of the *fayḍa*, however, saw the relics and the alleged endorsement from Aḥmad Skīraj as evidence of Niasse’s position, which confirmed his superiority over the obstinate deniers.

But what did Skīraj actually say to Ibrāhīm Niasse? It is true that he made several pronouncements in favor of Niasse that could have hardly been stronger—but these date to the final stage of his relationship with the Senegalese shaykh. Hiskett quotes one such document both in the Arabic original and in English translation, presumably an extract from an annotated list of Niasse’s licenses compiled by Niasse himself. My own translation of the Arabic is as follows:

He orally conferred to me an unlimited license (*ijāza muṭlaqa*) and stated that he had given me everything he possessed in the path of our shaykh [Aḥmad al-Tijānī], and that I was the caliph and the heir of his secrets. He even said, “You are the caliph of Aḥmad al-Tijānī and the caliph of your father and the caliph of all caliphs of the shaykh.”³⁹

Hiskett quotes this phrase in support of the appointment thesis. However, while the license does indeed go back to their 1937 encounter, Niasse does not specify that Skīraj made the latter statement on the same occasion. His failure to mention any such phrase in *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya* strongly suggests that it dates to a later time. Moreover, Skīraj never expressed his

³⁹ Hiskett, “Community of Grace,” 103.

endorsement of Niasse in terms of an appointment. When he finally made his widely quoted statements in praise of Niasse, he made them in the sense described by Abū Bakr °Atīq—that is, he did not appoint Niasse to any position, but he acknowledged his spiritual rank.

Written sources in my possession show that the relationship between Skīraj and Niasse extended over approximately twelve years, from the early 1930s to 1944, the year the Moroccan scholar died. Their only physical encounter took place in the town of Settat in March 1937, immediately before Niasse embarked on his boat trip to return from Casablanca to Dakar.⁴⁰ Niasse devotes less than a page of his travelogue to this meeting. He says that he stayed over night at Skīraj’s home, and that they spent the evening discussing questions of Arabic grammar.⁴¹ In the appendix he gives the text of two licenses he received from Skīraj in the field of *ḥadīth*; in both documents, Niasse is addressed as caliph. He also quotes a few verses he exchanged with his host, where the two flatter each other and express their mutual respect.⁴² There is no mention of his “golden *silsila*,” the chain of transmission of the Tijānī license, which he received during this encounter and of which he was so proud.

Correspondences dating back to the time before their meeting suggest that the relationship between the two was not without ups and downs. Writing to Skīraj on 6 Shawwāl 1352/January 22, 1934, Ibrāhīm Niasse gratefully acknowledges receipt of Skīraj’s letter and apologizes for his long silence, which he says was due the fact that he never got a response to his last letter. Instead, he had only received Skīraj’s news through third parties. He had even started

⁴⁰ According to Maigari, Niasse was so eager to meet with Skīraj that he did not mind that the latter made him wait for a long time (*al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 116). This account, however, can hardly be accurate, because Niasse arrived in Settat coming from Fez via Casablanca, and was received by Skīraj on the same day (Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, 53). Maigari’s statements about the relationship between Niasse and Skīraj are somewhat contradictory. See *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 114–117 and 283.

⁴¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziyya*, 53.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 58–62.

to blame himself for not being a worthy correspondent.⁴³ Between the lines the letter suggests that the third party was no other than Niasse's brother Muḥammad Khalifa, who apparently was on good terms with the Moroccan scholar.⁴⁴ Niasse even briefly refers to the conflict with his brother, admitting that there had been some "misunderstanding," which in the meantime had been resolved.

The early documentation thus indicates that Skīraj initially leaned more toward the elder brother than to Ibrāhīm. However, by the beginning of the 1940s the situation had changed. The correspondence from this period reveals how the two gradually drew closer and closer. Hiskett refers to four other letters by Skīraj he saw in Kaolack, but only states that each of the letters addresses Niasse as caliph.⁴⁵ In my possession are copies of a personal note by Niasse and two letters from Skīraj. The note is undated, but was probably written around 1361/1941 or 1362/1942. Niasse says that he was in the process of making plans for a trip to Morocco when he received a letter from Skīraj. This letter included verses that described him as the only legitimate heir of Aḥmad al-Tijānī's secret. Nobody could match his achievements. Skīraj ascribed the verses to an inspiration he received in a visionary encounter with the order's founder. At the end of his note, Niasse relates that Skīraj told him that he should postpone his trip.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* II, 122.

⁴⁴ See Kane, "Muhammad Niasse," 224–225. Muḥammad Khalifa probably met with Skīraj during his second trip to Morocco in 1342/1923–1924. In 1934 he hosted the Moroccan scholar in his home in Kaolack (see the reference to Skīraj's visit to Kaolack in CADN, Fonds Dakar, Carton 923, E. Louvau, Commandant de Cercle du Sine-Saloum, á Monsieur le Gouverneur du Sénégal au sujet des Marabouts Ibrahim Nyass – Mohammed Niasse, 26 septembre 1935). Ibrāhīm Niasse gives no indication in his writings that he met with Skīraj on the occasion of this visit.

⁴⁵ Hiskett, "Community of Grace," 104. He gives the dates as 28 Rabī' I 1356/June 8, 1937, 1361/1942 and 1362/1943.

⁴⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Mudhakkira*.

The verses alluded to in this note continue to circulate widely within the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. They are commonly presented as the proof that Niasse's greatest contemporaries in the Tijāniyya acknowledged his supreme position in the order. In the three key verses Skīraj says:

You have inherited the caliphate from Shaykh al-Tijānī,
and I am herewith putting it for you in the form of a text.

On the basis of what you have achieved, I bear witness to your obvious victory,
with which the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) has favored the people of the path.

I see my shaykh, al-Tijānī, the seal:

You are the one who has become the gem in the ring!⁴⁷

The last verse contains a subtle play on words, as the poet first uses the word *khātim* in the sense of “seal” (of sainthood), and then in the sense of “ring,” implying that Niasse is the one who makes Aḥmad al-Tijānī's mission shine. These verses quickly reached a large audience and are much more widely known than the more prosaic statements in Skīraj's letters. In his last extant letter to Niasse, dated November 1943, he wrote:

Praise be to God, because through you the gates to success have been opened.
Everybody whom you summon heeds your call. Rush to prosperity! Through you
the way to serenity has become smooth for the aspirants in the Tijāniyya. . . .
There is no distance between you and the pure ones, the heirs of the secrets of our
shaykh. . . . The signs God showed to me make me among those who can give
this testimony.⁴⁸

The latter phrase underscores the spiritual character of Niasse's position, as opposed to a rank attained through a formal appointment. Skīraj refers to divine signs that have helped him to

⁴⁷ This translation is based on the version of Aḥmad al-Tijānī °Uthmān in the appendix to Abū Bakr °Atīq, *al-Jawāb al-khāliṣ al-ṣamīm*; see also Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh °Abdallāh, *Radd bi-l-ḥadīth*, 94. The word translated as victory in the second verse is *fath*, “illumination,” which also serves as the technical term for mystical realization.

⁴⁸ Skīraj, *Risāla ilā Ibrāhīm Niasse*, end of Dhū l-Qa'da 1362/end of November 1943.

recognize where Niasse stood in the Tijāniyya. He concluded his letter with a statement that accounts for the intensity of their relationship:

Although I fail to realize your presence in a waking state, at least I succeed in having you present when I sleep, and while asleep I see you as if I were awake. You speak with my tongue . . . You are from me, and I am from you, as I already told you several times.⁴⁹

This letter signals the culmination of Skīraj's ties with Niasse. What had started as a correspondence marked by a distance turned into a friendship at their 1937 encounter. The continuing rapprochement ended with a spiritual companionship, where the two communicated with each other in dreams and visions. From the perspective of popular hagiography, the precise details about Skīraj's recognition of Niasse's rank are not relevant. As Hiskett pointed out correctly, even if there is no conclusive evidence about Niasse's appointment, what matters is the fact that a growing number of Tijānīs in West Africa did indeed believe him to be the supreme leader of the Tijāniyya.⁵⁰

For analytical purposes, however, it is essential to distinguish popular hagiography from scholarly discourse, and to understand the relationship between the two. The case of Abū Bakr °Atīq's treatise on the caliphate and its reception is very instructive here. The learned exposition of spiritual ranks is one thing; its adaptation to the follower's imagination is another. Statements made by the deputies and scholars—such as the account by Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Ibrāhīm Niasse about the transfer of Aḥmad al-Tijānī's relics—supply the followers with the material they use to create their own, modified version of the events, often infused with new meanings. Few if any leaders are unaware of this mechanism. But they do little to intervene, as it is this very mechanism that fuels the dynamism of the movement.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Hiskett, "Community of Grace," 104.

Another good illustration of this mechanism was the commissioning of the new mosque of Medina in February 1938. Niasse had begun to pursue the mosque project immediately on his return from the Ḥijāz in March 1937. He clearly envisioned the new mosque as a further step towards enhancing his visibility and asserting his independence as a religious leader in the Senegalese context. Already in 1932, shortly after the founding of Medina, he had written a short treatise in which he claimed the right to perform the Friday Prayer in his mosque⁵¹—a proposition that was likely to provoke controversy, as it was a consensus among religious scholars of the Mālikī School of Law that all Muslims of one town should convene in one mosque to perform the Friday Prayer. Six years later, Niasse proceeded with his plans and did indeed declare his mosque a Friday mosque, a step he justified in another text eventually published under the title *Wajh al-tahqīq fī kaww jāmiʿ Madīna huwa l-ʿatīq*. In his view, which was also advocated by religious scholars in many other growing urban areas under Maliki influence, there was no objection to holding the Friday Prayer in more than one mosque in a specific town provided that the existing mosque was difficult to reach or failed to provide enough space for the congregation.⁵² In the particular case of Kaolack, Niasse argued, there was even sufficient reason to abandon the existing Friday Mosque, as it had been constructed with the support of “foreigners” (*ajānib*; most likely a reference to French officials), who continued to meddle in its affairs. Therefore the mosque of Medina was the one that could rightfully claim the title *al-jāmiʿ al-ʿatīq*, i.e., the original Friday Mosque.⁵³

⁵¹ The title of this treatise, which I was unable to see, is *Masarrat al-majāmiʿ fī masāʾil al-jāmiʿ* (discussed in Ba, “Cheikh Ibrahima Niasse,” 29 and 68-70).

⁵² Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Wajh al-tahqīq*, 25-26. The general debate surrounding multiple Friday mosques is summarized in *EI* 2, entry “Masdjid.”

⁵³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Wajh al-tahqīq*, 27.

However, the designation of the new building as Friday Mosque was not the only reason why the new mosque attracted attention. According to Maigari, there was an Arabic inscription on one of the walls suggesting that whoever prayed in the mosque would be guaranteed entry into paradise.⁵⁴ This inscription was written in the form of a chronogram, where the sum of the numerical value of each letter added up to the number 1350, according to Maigari the year of the Hijri calendar in which the mosque was opened. Maigari's version of the chronogram reads:

Maqām Ibrāhīm man dakhlahu kāna āmin^{an} bi-hudāhu.

This is Ibrāhīm's place of worship. Who enters it will be safe through his guidance.

In this translation, which conforms to Maigari's understanding, the suffix following the word *hudā*, "guidance," refers to Ibrāhīm, thus assigning him the role of the guide to safety and clearly implying that the safety here refers to the Hereafter. Maigari therefore presents the inscription as another evidence of Niasse's exaggerated sense of his own position, which did nonetheless not deter countless Nigerians from traveling to Kaolack in order to pray in this mosque and benefit from the Niasse's purported guarantee.⁵⁵

Although Maigari's account is colored by his strong bias and therefore not always trustworthy, it is quite possible that some of Niasse's followers did indeed understand the phrase in the way Maigari insinuates. Promises of eternal bliss are quite likely to become part of popular hagiography, no less than Niasse's purported appointment as the supreme leader of the Tijāniyya or the alleged transfer of Aḥmad al-Tijānī's relics from Fez to Kaolack. A closer look at the chronogram and its origin, however, indicates that the intention was a different one.

<Figure 5.1>

⁵⁴ Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 125.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

As Figure 5.1 shows, the chronogram even featured on the photographs of the mosque kept in a file titled “Mosquée Kaolack” in the colonial archives.⁵⁶ Maigari apparently failed to recognize that the first part is a quotation from the section of Sura 3 that deals with Abraham, whom the Qurʾān describes as the founder of the Kaʿba. Verse 97 reads: *Maqām Ibrāhīm wa-man dakhalahu kāna āmin^{an}*; “This is Abraham’s place of worship. Who enters it is in safety.” Not only does the Qurʾānic wording reveal that Maigari forgot the letter *waw* (equivalent to the number six, which makes the total numeric value of the phrase 1356—the correct Hijri year of the opening of the new mosque—instead of 1350), the context also suggests that the promise of safety is not made by virtue of Abraham, but by virtue of the holiness of the place where he worshipped, which is none other than the Kaʿba.⁵⁷ The suffix following *hudā* thus relates to the Kaʿba, not to the Prophet Abraham, and certainly not to Ibrāhīm Niasse. Transferring the context from the Kaʿba in Mecca to the new mosque of the *Jamaʿāt al-fayḍa* in Medina Baye, the chronogram assumes the character of a supplication. The proper translation is therefore:

This is Ibrāhīm’s place of worship. May those who enter it be safe by virtue of the guidance it provides.

If we finally take into consideration whose idea it was to represent the date of the commissioning of the mosque in a chronogram, we have strong reasons to read the phrase as a supplicatory prayer rather than a promise of eternal bliss. As Niasse tells us in a small treatise

⁵⁶ See CAOM 14 MI 2837 = ANS 19 G 6. The same file contains several correspondences that show the support, both logistical and in the form of tax exemptions, Niasse received from the French administration for his construction project (see also Behrman, *Brotherhoods and Politics*, 53). Niasse even extended an invitation to the Governor General de Coppet to attend the inauguration ceremony. In view of this cooperation, Niasse’s argument as to why the mosque of Medina deserved the title Friday Mosque more than the previous mosque loses some of its validity.

⁵⁷ The preceding verse (3:96) says that the Kaʿba had been built as “guidance for all the worlds.” The term *hudā* used in the chronogram most probably derives from this verse. See also 29:67, where the entire town of Mecca is described as *ḥarām amīn*, “a safe sacred area.”

written to document the history of the mosque and to justify its use for the Friday Prayer, the chronogram came from no other than Aḥmad Skīraj.⁵⁸ Given the history of his relationship with Niasse, it is rather unlikely that he intended to describe him as the *ghawth* and his mosque as the gate to paradise.

Yet, popular reception once more provides an example of how followers adapt statements made by their leaders according to their own logic. Even if we discount Maigari's claim that certain Nigerians were attracted to Kaolack just because of the mosque inscription, the verses of a panegyrist of the Idaw °Alī, cited in Niasse's treatise that mentions the opening of the mosque, take up the motive of the guidance and the related promise of safety and unmistakably connects it with the person of Ibrāhīm Niasse. The author, Muḥammad °Abdallāh b. al-Muṣṭafā al-°Alawī, already featured a few years earlier in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, where Niasse quoted him in support of his claim to the *fayḍa*.⁵⁹ At the official inauguration of the mosque in February 1938 Muḥammad °Abdallāh declared:

He is none other than the possessor of the flood,

I have decisive evidence for this;

he is a spiritual trainer through whom the aspirant gets what he desires.

What remains is only that all countries heed his call.

His guidance (*hudāhu*) has encompassed all creation:

no other shaykh is left, no one else who can be beneficial [to humanity].⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Wajh al-tahqīq*, 36. See also Ibn Iktūsh, *Min akhbār al-shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 39, who adds that Skīraj received the chronogram by way of a divine call (*hātif rabbānī*; i.e. the voice of an invisible caller announcing a future event).

⁵⁹ See the section "Niasse as Bringer of the Flood" in Chapter 1.

⁶⁰ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Wajh al-tahqīq*, 38. — In the last verse I read *nāfi°u* instead of *yāfi°u*.

Pronouncements made in praise poetry always display a strong tendency to hyperbole. This, however, is a trait panegyrics share with popular hagiography. In a way, this genre of poetry is at the intersection of scholarly discourse and popular ideas, as discussed in the introduction with reference to Redfield's "great" and "little" tradition. Yet, as we have seen, even scholars themselves make statements that fuel the popular hagiographical imagination. It is this particular aspect of the interaction and communication between leaders and followers that lies at the heart of the dynamism of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. Although the ambiguities and occasional contradictions produced by this interaction sporadically led to confusion or conflict, they clearly assisted in the rise of Ibrāhīm Niasse and the expansion his movement.

First Visit to Kano

The visit to the Ḥijāz and the two stopovers in Morocco in 1937 must have made Ibrāhīm Niasse aware of how important traveling was in developing and spreading his saintly reputation. Further expansion of his movement was contingent on mobility. Yet, the outbreak of World War Two created serious obstacles for free movement between the French and British colonies, let alone between continents. Colonial reports from French and British archives show that, during the Vichy years (1940-1942), British and French officials suspected each other of using Niasse's services to undermine the political stability of their respective colonies.⁶¹ The air of suspicion and the flurry of conspiracy theories did not make colonial officials particularly eager to issue travel permits to religious figures, unless they had a long track record of loyalty to colonial rule. Niasse made several attempts in 1943 and 1944 to secure permission from the French authorities

⁶¹ In both instances, the accusations are rather unlikely. For details see Seesemann, "Dialog der Taubstummen."

for a trip to Morocco.⁶² However, these attempts did not receive the approval from Protectorate officials in Rabat.⁶³

For almost a decade, Niasse was thus unable to expand his relationship with the two most important acquaintances made during his 1937 journey, Aḥmad Skīraj and °Abdallāh Bayero, the Emir of Kano. However, almost immediately after the German capitulation on May 8, 1945, he undertook a trip to Kano with stopovers in Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), apparently with the permission of both the French and the British administrations. The authors of previous studies agree that Niasse's first visit to Northern Nigeria was a milestone in his career as a saint. But there is considerable confusion about the precise timeline of events. As mentioned above, Paden is the source of the erroneous but widely reported information that Niasse traveled to Kano in 1937, directly after his first pilgrimage to Mecca.⁶⁴ None of the primary sources available to me, neither oral nor written, confirms this version, which is perhaps influenced by conspiracy theories current in British colonial circles at the time.⁶⁵

Maigari, who analyzed the only written first-hand account of this trip, also fails to establish the correct date and seems to follow Paden's wrong lead by assuming that Niasse made

⁶² See the correspondence between Niasse and Aḥmad Skīraj, analyzed and quoted in Seesemann, "Nach der Flut," 391.

⁶³ Oumar Kane quotes a letter from Niasse to the General Governor in Dakar requesting a travel permit. It seems that the Résident Général in Rabat did not respond favorably to the General Governor's request to approve of the trip. See Kane, "Relations entre Sénégal et Fès," 16.

⁶⁴ See Paden, *Kano*, 73 and 98-99. Paden also claims that Niasse made another unpublicized visit to the Emir of Kano in 1944; see *ibid.*, 106. Authors who reproduce Paden's inaccurate account, sometimes, with slight variations, include Gray ("Rise of the Niassene," 43-46), Kane ("Kano et Kaolack," 29), Loimeier (*Islamic Reform*, 39-40), and Quadri ("Ibrahim Niasse," 112-113).

⁶⁵ A good summary of the conspiracy theories can be found in Tahir, "Saints and Capitalists," 361-363, although the author apparently takes them at face value. See also Anwar, "Ulama in Kano," 288-289; Feinstein, *Aminu Kano*, 205, and Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*, 40.

two unpublicized visits to Kano prior to his public appearance in 1951.⁶⁶ The account in question, a short travelogue composed in the *rajaz* meter, stems from the pen of a personality few people would associate with Ibrāhīm Niase: Mukhtār wuld Ḥāmidun (b. 1315/1897-1898, d. 1414/1993-1994), one of the finest scholars of twentieth-century Mauritania.⁶⁷ Wuld Ḥāmidun's authorship of this piece is all the more surprising as he is not known as a Tijānī and does not figure in any account about Mauritanian followers of Niase.⁶⁸ The text is titled *Tadhkirat man kānū fī l-siyāḥa fī l-tā'ira ilā Kanū* and consists of seven manuscript pages with altogether 113 verses, written by °Umar Falke in Kano in the month of Dhū l-Qa' da 1366/October 1947 and attributed to “the most knowledgeable writer Mukhtār b. Ḥāmid,” undoubtedly to be identified as Mukhtār wuld Ḥāmidun. Nowhere do the verses refer to the actual year of the trip. The text does, however, contain a hint that allows us to date the events with great precision: Wuld Ḥāmidun, whose poetic account was apparently based on what he heard from Niase after his return, states that the trip began on the fifteenth day of the month of Jumādā II and ended exactly one month later, on 15 Rajab.⁶⁹ Although Wuld Ḥāmidun fails to mention the year, he does specify only two lines later that the departure fell on a Monday. The year in question must therefore be 1364/1945, as this is the only year in the mid-1940s where the

⁶⁶ Paden has the visits take place in 1937 and 1944; Maigari speaks of July 1945 and 1946 (see *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 121-123 and 125-126).

⁶⁷ See his entry in *MLG II*, 822-823. His magnum opus is *Ḥayāt Murīṭānīyā*, a historiographical work on Mauritania.

⁶⁸ Wuld Ḥāmidun spent a substantial time of his life in Dakar and Kaolack. Ḥasan Cissé confirmed to me that he did indeed maintain a close friendship with Niase (Interview, Medina Baye, December 10, 2007).

⁶⁹ See Mukhtār wuld Ḥāmidun, *Tadhkirat man kānū*, 50 (verse 8); the number 15 is derived from the numeric value of the letters *yā'* and *hā'*.

15th day of Jumādā II coincided with a Monday. This allows us to date the trip from May 28 to June 27, 1945.⁷⁰

No other surviving account of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s first visit to Kano was written with less distance to the events than Wuld Ḥāmidun’s. This does not necessarily mean that it has to be more accurate than others. But the fact that the author is not a disciple of Niasse gives the text considerable credibility. The first few verses describe how Niasse went by car from Kaolack to Bathurst, where he spent several days as the guest of Kabīr Faye, a leading Gambian deputy of the *Jamā’at al-fayḍa*. From Bathurst Niasse continued his journey by plane to Lagos, with stopovers in Freetown, Takoradi, and Accra. At all stations Niasse led congregational prayers and initiated many visitors into the Tijāniyya. The text suggests that the arrival in Kano fell on a Saturday, which can be identified as either the 9th or the 16th of June 1945. According to Wuld Ḥāmidun, when the Emir of Kano received news of Niasse’s arrival at the airport, he immediately sent Muḥammad al-Sanūsī, his son and later successor, to pick the visitor up and accommodate him in one of the palaces. After a few days in seclusion, with no visitors apart from °Abdallāh Bayero and Muḥammad al-Sanūsī, Niasse was finally invited to give a lecture to a selected audience; Wuld Ḥāmidun speaks of an assembly (*majlis*), held in his residence.

This lecture given to a few notables and scholars of Kano seems to have been a key moment of the trip. According to Wuld Ḥāmidun, when the meeting was over, the entire city began to “shake and tremble,” presumably because of the intense spiritual aura Niasse’s

⁷⁰ Maigari (*al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 121-122) believes that the trip described in *Tadhkirat man kanū* was Niasse’s second visit to Kano and assumes that it occurred in 1946. His description of what he presents as Niasse’s first trip is based on the oral account of an informant in Kano, Mallam Bello, who says Niasse arrived on a Saturday at the end of the month of Rajab 1364 (July 1945). Muḥammad al-Thānī Kafanga, an influential deputy of Niasse from Kano, also confirms that the visit took place in 1364/1945 (Kafanga, *Tārīkh majī’ al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 41; other than the title suggests, this work contains little information on Niasse’s visit, but focuses on al- Kafanga’s later journey to Kaolack).

performance had produced.⁷¹ Visitors flocked to his residence, asking to be initiated into the Tijāniyya or to receive a renewal of their initiation (*tajdīd*); unfortunately, Wuld Ḥāmidun only identifies a few of them, sons of °Abdallāh Bayero and a son of Wālī Sulaymān, the Emir’s deceased confidant and companion on the trip to the Ḥijāz in 1937.⁷² The days and nights with Ibrāhīm Niase were “like in paradise”; his presence made the Emir’s rule just and benign, as in the days of Hārūn al-Rashīd; the atmosphere in the schools of Kano was as if Mālīk b. Anas was present. Before Niase’s departure, the Emir received the “secret,” possibly an allusion to spiritual training. More visitors came to ask for a *tajdīd* or to be appointed to the rank of a deputy, and the poets of Kano arrived to sing the praises of their distinguished guest. Wuld Ḥāmidun’s text ends here, but it is followed by seventeen verses from the pen of Niase himself, in which he describes the return trip to Kaolack, using the same route as before.

Mukhtār wuld Ḥāmidun’s verses suggest that Niase’s first visit to Nigeria had a public component, in contrast to most oral accounts I heard, which emphasize the secret character of the trip. Let us consider the version of Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop, whose account assigns a remarkable role to Niase’s book *Kāshif al-ilbās*:

⁷¹ Maigari’s description of these events, though presumably based on the same source, is misleading. He postulates that the lecture was met with extraordinary enthusiasm and led to Niase’s recognition as the supreme saint in the metropolis of Northern Nigeria. He goes so far as to claim that Niase had “conquered” the entire country by the time he left. See Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 122-123. Apparently Maigari was not aware that Mukhtār wuld Ḥāmidun’s poetic account refers to Niase’s first, unpublicized visit, which was the prelude to the later breakthrough.

⁷² Mukhtār wuld Ḥāmidun, *Tadhkirat man kanū*, 54. Neither this source nor other accounts give details about the early appointments. Likewise, the praise poetry Mukhtār wuld Ḥāmidun mentions does not seem to have survived—at least not in writing. Muḥammad al-Thānī Kafanga’s verses suggest that they were composed after the visit. In *Tārīkh majī’ al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 45, he gives the names of three Tijānī leaders from Kano who met with Niase during his stay in Kano: Abū Bakr °Atīq, °Uthmān al-Qalansuwī (known as Mai Hula; see *ALA II*, 300-301), and Aḥmad Anwār al-Ṣāliḥ (on him *ALA II*, 272-274).

Shaykh Ibrāhīm could only travel after the war was over. He arrived in Kano all alone; this was the only trip in his life that he undertook without a companion. When he reached the palace, he inquired about the Emir. The guard asked him, “What do you desire from the Emir?” Shaykh Ibrāhīm responded, “He is my disciple.” The guards burst into laughter. “The Emir is nobody’s disciple!” Just then a visitor, who had accompanied the Emir on his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1937, passed by. He heard the conversation and informed the Emir, who came running out of the palace without his bodyguards. He hosted Shaykh Ibrāhīm in the palace, and nobody else met him.⁷³ On his departure, Shaykh Ibrāhīm left behind a few copies of *Kāshif al-ilbās*. Later the book found its way into the hands of a few religious scholars, who assumed that the author had lived in Senegal a long time ago—until °Alī Cissé and Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye made a stopover in Kano on their way to the Ḥijāz. The scholars of Kano were stunned by their visitors: “Where are you from?” – “Senegal.” Then the scholars asked whether they had heard about a saint called Ibrāhīm Niasse, who had lived in Senegal a long time ago. “He is alive, he is still in Senegal. This is his brother.” When the scholars heard this they did not want their guests to leave. The next visitor who came was Muḥammad al-Hādī b. Mawlūd Fāl, and the message (*daʿwa*) of Shaykh Ibrāhīm began to spread. The Nigerians started to visit Senegal, and they do it up to the present day.⁷⁴

The two versions reveal variations between different hagiographic agendas. Whereas Wuld Ḥāmidun’s account appears as a rather sober chronicle of events, Diop highlights the miraculous character of the trip, by having Ibrāhīm Niasse begin his Nigerian itinerary with a lone arrival at the Emir’s palace, an itinerary that—though not mentioned by Diop, but clearly implied in his account—eventually culminates with his recognition as the supreme saint of his era by millions of Muslims in Nigeria. It is as if Niasse’s physical presence suffices to spread a mystical charisma that ultimately makes him emerge as the supreme saint. His visit can be kept secret, but his position cannot be concealed. Diop’s description of the subsequent circulation of *Kāshif al-ilbās* as a book by an author long dead—as improbable as it may seem—conveys a similar

⁷³ Here Diop’s version differs from Wuld Ḥāmidun’s, whose account suggests that a flow of visitors set in after Niasse held his *majlis*.

⁷⁴ Interview with Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop, Dakar, January 9, 1997.

message: Through merely leaving behind his book, Niasse sows the seeds of his later success.⁷⁵

Wuld Ḥāmidun’s account, on the other hand, underscores the direct impact the encounter with Niasse had on local religious leaders, who were immediately convinced that the Senegalese was indeed a distinguished scholar and great saint.

In any case, none of the extant accounts of Niasse’s first visit to Kano can be read as describing the breakthrough of his movement in Nigeria. The trip certainly marks the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*. But it did take some more time for the seeds to grow and for the message to spread. In the years after World War Two, Niasse continued to work on his self-promotion as the leading saint of his time. As we shall see, he refined his message through recourse to the medium of poetry, thus casting it into a form that lent itself to large-scale diffusion.

The Conakry Trip

Perhaps the most remarkable source documenting Ibrāhīm Niasse’s ascension to supreme sainthood is the travelogue describing his journey to Guinea, Bamako, and Sierra Leone toward the end of 1947. This work, a poetic travel account composed in the *rajaz* meter, is commonly known as “The Conakry Trip” (*al-Rihla al-Kunākiriyya*), but the actual title is *Nafaḥāt al-Malik al-Ghanī*, “Breaths of the Self-Sufficient King.” Not the encounters and events during journey make this text so significant, but the overwhelming mystical experiences Niasse has on different

⁷⁵ Muḥammad al-Thānī Kafanga’s account corroborates this view. As he points out, he felt strongly attracted to Niasse upon reading °Alī Cissé’s *Tarjama* and sections of *Kāshif al-ilbās*. See Kafanga, *Tārīkh majī’ al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 44; cf. *ibid.*, 51.

stations of the trip.⁷⁶ In the following, I propose to read “The Conakry Trip” as an autobiographical documentation of Niasse’s ascension to the position of the *ghawth*.

As mentioned above in the section “Consequential Encounters,” Niasse’s report of the journey to Fez and the Ḥijāz in 1937 has the character of a pious pilgrim’s journal, with rather modest claims scattered throughout the work. “The Conakry Trip,” composed more than ten years later, represents a very different type of travelogue. Right from the outset the verses leave no doubt that the author is none other than the greatest saint of his age. How can this remarkable shift be explained? At first sight the situation of the *Jamā’at al-fayḍa* in 1947 was not entirely different from 1937. Niasse’s first trip to Kano secured the allegiance of a few influential people in the surroundings of the Emir’s court. Probably Muḥammad al-Hādī b. Mawlūd Fāl had already appointed a few deputies on behalf of Niasse during a visit to Nigeria in the second quarter of 1947.⁷⁷ But there are no indications that Niasse was already considered as the bringer of the *fayḍa*, let alone the *ghawth*, outside of the circle of his Senegalese and Mauritanian followers. Colonial sources mention that Sīdī Ṭayyib b. ‘Allāl from ‘Ayn Mādī, the formal head of the Tijāniyya at the time, spent several days in Medina during his visit to Senegal in July 1947.⁷⁸ Although their relationship seems to have been cordial, nothing suggests that Sīdī Ṭayyib regarded Niasse as anything other than a leading deputy, at least at that time. Nonetheless, these

⁷⁶ The significance of the *Nafahāt* has already been highlighted by Andrea Brigaglia; see his “Fayḍa Tijāniyya,” where the interpretation focuses on the representation of the notion of *fayḍa* in the text. Without going into detail, Ibrahim Tahir also emphasizes the importance of the work and claims that Niasse’s followers in Nigeria hold the text in almost the same reverence as ‘Alī Ḥarāzīm’s *Jawāhir al-ma‘ānī* (Tahir, “Saints and Capitalists,” 422 note 2).

⁷⁷ Details of the 1947 trip can be distilled from praise poetry by Nigerian authors (particularly ‘Umar Falke, *Bishārat al-akhillā’*) and letters by al-Hādī b. Mawlūd Fāl (especially the *Risāla ilā l-ikhwān*, written on 24 Muḥarram 1367/December 8, 1947). For details see Seesemann, “Nach der Flut,” 432 and 447, where I also show that Paden’s chronology of the first exchanges of visits between Kano and Kaolack is not accurate.

⁷⁸ CAOM Aff Pol 2259/1, Affaires Politiques Musulmanes, Rapport des 2ème et 3ème trimestres 1948, 4.

and other contacts Niasse forged in the course of the 1940s allowed him to expand his network and diversify his legitimacy as a Tijānī leader. As discussed above, the endorsement from Aḥmad Skīraj in the early 1940s was of crucial importance here. Other acknowledgments, such as the *ijāza* issued in 1364/1945 by °Alī b. Muḥammad al-°Īd, the head of the important *zāwiya* in Tamāsīn (Algeria),⁷⁹ also helped to increase Niasse’s self-confidence. It appears that he reached a point where he found it appropriate to articulate his claims loud and clearly beyond the circle of his followers. This is precisely what we see unfold in his account of the journey to Guinea, Mali and Sierra Leone from mid-November 1947 to mid-January 1948.

One peculiarity of the “The Conakry Trip” is Niasse’s recurrence to various divine names. Two of these names, the King and the Self-Sufficient, already feature in the title of the work; others appear at the different stations of the journey, where Niasse often employs them in supplication formulas. As the context of Islam in Guinea is almost completely absent from the text, my accounts dispenses with details about the setting. The following summary focuses on the most important physical and spiritual stations covered in this work, placing Niasse’s claims to extraordinary faculties within the wider Sufi tradition.

On the last night of Dhū l-Ḥijja 1366, i.e., the evening of November 12, 1947, Niasse departs from Kaolack. In Dakar he boards an airplane for Conakry, where he already succeeds in recruiting new followers. From there Niasse sets out for the mountains of Fouta Djallon, visiting all the major towns on or near the railway line connecting the capital Conakry with Kankan in the eastern part of the country. From Kouroussa, a town on the banks of the river Niger, he

⁷⁹ See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Risāla ilā l-Ḥājj °Alī b. Muḥammad al-°Īd*.

reaches Kankan, a renowned center of Islamic learning during the colonial era.⁸⁰ This is the place where Niasse's ascent to the highest echelons of sainthood comes to pass:

I ask Him by His sublime essence

and by the sparkling attributes of His essence

that He may fulfill my longing and conduct to me His help;

that He may put the world through me on the path of the right guidance;

that He may revive through me knowledge (*al-ʿilm*) and the Sunna, which had been

extinguished through ignorance, and that He may lift up my religious community!

Then the Subtle One led me on towards Kankan,

and my Lord bestowed on me the station of *kun kun* [i.e., the power of *takwīn*; see below].⁸¹

From Kankan Niasse proceeds to Siguiri and, after a journey of about 120 miles, he arrives in Bamako, the capital of Soudan Français (present-day Mali). There he spends the day of ʿAshūrāʾ (10 Muḥarram 1367/November 24, 1947). Although he already thinks of returning home to Kaolack, God guides him to go back to Guinea. He arrives in the town of Bissikrima, situated at one of the headwaters of the Niger, and from there Niasse relates the following:

There I called upon Him with the Greatest Name

approaching [Him], seeking guidance, until heat

spread out in the center of my breast from my invocations.

And how could it not, as it was filled with lights,

⁸⁰ Kankan was the home of Chérif Fanta Madi, known as the “*sharīf* of Kankan,” a distinguished Muslim scholar and shaykh of the Qādiriyya (on him Kaba, *Islam et société à Kankan*). Niasse mentions him among the people he met during his trip (Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nafaḥāt al-Malik al-Ghanī*, 16).

⁸¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nafaḥāt al-Malik al-Ghanī*, 2.

and with realities and gnosis (*ma^cārif*),
 and the secret of the secret of the secret and cognizance.
 I carried the secret of the Seal of Sainthood,
 I have united tasting and comprehension.
 The tongue of my mystical state sung hymns to me,
 telling of the gifts of the Creator.
 The basin filled up and my abdomen said:
 “Go easy, go slowly, you have already filled my belly!”
 He gave me distinction through knowledge and power of disposition (*taṣrīf*).
 If I say, “Be,” it comes about without delay!⁸²

By using the Greatest Name of God in his supplication, Niase indicates that his spiritual journey is about to reach a climax. He experiences a profound mystical state accompanied by a bodily transformation, expressed in terms of heat spreading in his breast, and then in terms of being physically filled with the Divine. This metaphor invokes the flow and subsequent overflow of the divine outpourings, which take center stage in the imagery of the *fayḍa* as understood by Ibrāhīm Niase. The section finally culminates in the claim to the gift of disposition (*taṣrīf* or *taṣarruf*), here cast in the form of the special capacity to perform *takwīn*, or bring things into being, which already appeared at the end of the previous section, where Niase’s arrival in Kankan coincided with his reaching of the “station of *kun kun*.”

The power of disposition is among the prerogatives of the supreme saint. Laying claim to *taṣarruf* thus amounts to a self-declaration as *ghawth*. In his analysis of Naqshbandī literature,

⁸² Ibid., 4-5. — The term *ma^cārif* used in the third verse refers to the knowledge of the reality of the divine names, attributes, and essence, achieved through annihilation.

Meier differentiates three forms of disposition.⁸³ The first is the “assumed authority” (*angemaßte Befugnis*) of the master to freely dispense wellbeing and woes among his disciples, without taking recourse to any supernatural abilities. The second form is the ability of potentially every person to change things in his or her imagination, whereby his or her fantasy only influences the internal images, not the outward realities. The third kind of *taṣarruf* transcends the mere power of thought and includes the capability to actually make things happen by merely employing the faculty of volition. This faculty may take effect internally in another person, but it may also manifest itself outwardly.⁸⁴ For instance, through exercising this type of disposition a master can exert influence over the ego (*nafs*) of the disciples and bring them closer towards rapture (*jadhb*), or he can reach out to them and lead them along the path (*sulūk*), in a way that transcends the authority mentioned in the first definition of *taṣarruf*. “The master does not command anything nor does he take any direct action, but he acts through a mysterious power inherent in him, which often causes a secondary action to take place.”⁸⁵ In Meier’s classification *takwīn* is included in the third category of *taṣarruf*, defined as the “power to create something,” which, according to Meier, was considered by the Persian mystic Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618/1221) as a *conditio sine qua non* for a saint. This power is the privilege of those who have reached the highest stage of disposition: they wield an increased power of imagination that can instantly realize the object they envision.⁸⁶

It is the power of *takwīn* as the highest stage of the divinely granted faculty of disposition that Niasse means with his statement that he had reached the “station of *kun kun*”: He claims that the things he imagines come into existence at once. The later verses recounting the mystical state

⁸³ See Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen*, 246-248.

⁸⁴ Meier gives numerous examples for such outward manifestations; see *ibid.*, 271-286.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 248; cf. Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 80.

he experienced in Bissikrima culminate once again in the claim to *takwīn*, this time cast in the words, “If I say ‘be,’ it is,” which allude to a famous Qurʾānic phrase where God simply pronounces the command “Be!” (*kun*) in order to bring something into existence.⁸⁷

Given the bold assertions expressed in these verses, the charge that the author presumes to possess divine powers almost suggests itself. Indeed, these utterances have invited severe criticism from Niasse’s opponents, both within and outside of the Tijāniyya, who accused him of contravening one of the basic monotheistic tenets of Islam, namely that the power to create was an exclusive prerogative of God. Not surprisingly, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari, one of the staunchest critics, refers repeatedly to verses from the “The Conakry Trip” to place Niasse in the vicinity of unbelief (*kufr*).⁸⁸ From a Sufi perspective, however, the power of disposition was not an infringement on God’s oneness and uniqueness (*tawḥīd*), but rather a faculty inherent in the qualities of a saint (*walī*). According to this view, God can choose one of His servants as an instrument and endow him with special, supernatural abilities. A saint who has been granted the gift of *takwīn* thus only acts as the executor of God’s will.

In “The Conakry Trip,” Niasse argues along the same line, emphasizing that he considers himself as a servant who assists in executing the Divine Command. The following verses relate to his stay in Bissikrima, where he had entered into his extraordinary spiritual state after invoking God by the Greatest Name:

But I surely have taken Him [i.e., God] as a trustee,

in compliance with the rules of conduct, and thus He chose me as His intimate.

I said, “There is no deity but God,

⁸⁷ See for instance Sura 2:117, 3:47, 16:40, 19:35, 40:68, and others.

⁸⁸ Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 118-119, 124, 186, 198, 226, 280, 497-498. Elsewhere Maigari describes the alleged reaction of the president of the Muslim World League to some of Niasse verses (*ibid.*, 264).

and Muḥammad is the one God has sent.”

Then His secret flew over from me, so that no one

calls on me without coming to know God, the Self-Subsisting.

This applies to the old as well as the young:

the Beloved [the Prophet] has drawn near and so has the sanctuary.

This applies to men and equally to women,

this applies to vagrants as well as rulers.

Had I wished, the divine outpourings would have covered all land expanses,

and everybody would have grasped their all-embracing secrets.⁸⁹

With the pronouncement of the *shahāda*, or testimony of faith, in the second verse Niasse affirms that whatever he does is inscribed in the fundamental recognition of God’s oneness. If we apply once more Meier’s categories of “people with disposition” to the case of Niasse, the last verse suggests ranking him among those who “exercise their power only at the explicit command from above, although they would be capable of exercising it without such a command.”⁹⁰

Although Niasse would have been in a position to bring about any effect at any time, including directing the outpourings of his flood to all humankind. But he strictly abides by God’s will and only acts in fulfillment of the orders he receives. It is his divine mission to act as the dispenser of the outpourings, and he channels them according to God’s wish. The triple recourse to the rhetorical figure of merism (old and young, men and women, people of low and noble rank) underscores that the invitation to join the *Jamā‘at al-fayḍa* and attain mystical knowledge applies to everyone. In the person of the supreme saint, the Prophet has drawn near to the

⁸⁹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nafahāt al-Malik al-Ghanī*, 5; cf. Brigaglia, “Fayḍa Tijaniyya,” 55.

⁹⁰ Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen*, 286.

potential recipients of the outpourings. The only step they need to take is to accept that invitation.

Niasse then further elaborates on the consequences emerging from his endowment with the power of disposition, emphasizing that he not only considers himself an instrument of God, but also an aide of the Prophet. He has been assigned the function of the basin, mentioned in one of the foregoing verses, that collects and further dispenses the outpourings flowing to Aḥmad al-Tijānī. By claiming to unite these three qualities in his person, he puts himself at the head of all living creatures, and by virtue of this position he assumes the role of the ultimate dispenser of divine grace, epitomized in his mission as the bringer of the flood.

And you will witness wondrous things once more

from the outpourings of the holder of the Seal, the leader of the noble [i.e.,
Aḥmad al-Tijānī].

All of this is the flood of al-Tijānī,

the help of the Chosen of all humankind, of the House of °Adnān [i.e., the
Prophet].

All of this is benevolence from the Benefactor [i.e., God],

whose praise I sing in secret and in public.⁹¹

When Niasse eventually gets back to Conakry, he receives an enthusiastic welcome. Throngs of people flock to his residence, and Niasse interprets his popularity as evidence of what he, as the supreme saint and dispenser of the outpourings, can make happen. The following section describes his visits to Kuyéya, Forécariah, and Farmoréya southeast of Conakry. He is on his way to Sierra Leone and suddenly finds himself overcome with nostalgia about Kaolack. No

⁹¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nafaḥāt al-Malik al-Ghanī*, 5.

one, he now complains, appreciated men of learning; even he, the chosen one of God and caliph of the Tijāniyya was hardly given any attention—other than in Kaolack, the home of his beloved companions, who had grasped and realized the secret. In several verses Niasse expresses regret that they were not with him, so that he could relate to them his experiences and inform them that he had now reached the highest possible position, thanks to the assistance of the Prophet.⁹²

The town of Kambia near the border with Guinea is the only stopover mentioned during his stay in Sierra Leone. Although he views the British colony as a “land of depravity and ignorance,” he finds an audience for his sermons, as well as Muslims who wish to be initiated into the Tijāniyya; he even promotes some of them to the deputy rank. Some recognize him as the intermediary of God’s grace, and he has a vision in which the Prophet himself comes to Sierra Leone. Once more God grants his supplications; once more other peoples’ wishes are fulfilled by means of his power of disposition. But the closer the month of Rabī^c al-Awwal draws, and with it the festivities of the Prophet’s birthday, the stronger he longs for his hometown, Medina.⁹³

On the return trip to Conakry Niasse spends the night in Forécariah, and just as he is getting ready to leave early in the morning, his disciple Ibou Diagne arrives from Kaolack and delivers a letter from his closest confidants (presumably Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye and °Alī Cissé). Niasse immediately writes a reply in which he summarizes the events and experiences of his tour in a few verses, which are quoted in “The Conakry Trip.” Here the ascent to the highest position of the saintly hierarchy finds yet another culmination:

Surely those who have served me will attain
what they desire, happiness, and wealth.

⁹² Ibid., 8.

⁹³ Ibid., 9.

Those who live will witness it with their own eyes, and those
 who die will be victorious, for all time to come.

Death will not harm those who have attained such happiness:

For those who have been rightly guided, it is but repose.

Those who love me and those who see me

will dwell in the Garden of Eternity (*jannat al-khuld*)—this is not a fabrication!

As I am truly the successor of [Aḥmad] al-Tijānī

a boon from Aḥmad [i.e., the Prophet] from the house of ʿAdnān.⁹⁴

Especially the fourth of these verses has achieved great fame. Its postulate later became a preferred target for attacks by Niassé's opponents who considered his claims as heretical and incompatible with Islam.⁹⁵ After all, there is consensus in Islamic theology that only God decides man's fate in the afterlife. Nonetheless, the prospect of benefiting from the promise of paradise by merely "seeing" the supreme saint has inspired the imagination of Niassé's followers for decades.⁹⁶ Followers and opponents both tended to take the utterance literally, thus stripping it of its conditions and taking it out of the context of Sufi teachings in which it belongs. Hence the adaptation of the phrase "Those who love me and those who see me will dwell in the Garden of Eternity" provides an excellent illustration for the productive tension between complex doctrinal tenets and their popular reception: A learned specialist of the Sufi tradition makes a statement in

⁹⁴ Ibid., 10-11.

⁹⁵ Once more, the leader of the critics is Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari. See the references in note 88 above.

⁹⁶ Apparently Niassé made similar utterances on a variety of occasions. According to a French colonial report of 1953—which, in the light of the statements made in "The Conakry Trip," appears entirely credible—Niassé declared to a crowd in Ségou that those who had seen him "would be saved tomorrow, and God would reserve a place for them in paradise." See CAOM Aff Pol 2258/2, Commissariat de Police de Ségou, 19 Mai 1953: Renseignements s/s passage marabout Niass Ibrahima.

a specific context and possibly even with a clear intention. The statement, however, is subject to interpretation—not only by the targeted audience, but also by outsiders, who may consciously or unconsciously understand it in ways that were not intended. Thus, the meaning of the statement can potentially be transferred into a different context and thereby changed and possibly distorted.

As a matter of fact, the assurance of entering paradise presupposes “real seeing” (*al-ruʿya al-ḥaqīqiyya*), which is part of Sufi teachings regarding the capabilities of the highest saint. As in other instances, Niasse does not divert from the conventional framework of Sufi doctrine in general and Tijānī teachings in particular. Already Aḥmad al-Tijānī had assured his followers success in this world and bliss in the next; the most conspicuous of his statements is “Whoever sees me on a Monday or a Friday will enter Paradise without reckoning and without punishment.”⁹⁷ Niasse reconfirms this guarantee, but he pronounces it on his own behalf and thereby declares himself the guarantor, by virtue of being Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s caliph.

In his attempt to prove the legitimacy of his claim, Niasse emphasizes that it was ultimately the Prophet who invested him with the caliphate, which here not only denotes a rank in the Tijāniyya, but also the position of the “vicegerent of the greatest vicegerent” (*khalīfat al-khalīfa al-aʿẓam*) and thus the highest-ranking saint of his time. However, he does not address the question how such an assurance of eternal bliss is possible at all. Abū Bakr ʿAtīq, who was already quoted in connection with the controversy about Niasse’s position of the caliph, has addressed this problem in a small treatise. Referring to the verse in question he writes:

He [Niasse] said this because he is among the perfect cognizants who have reached the goal, and among the dispensers of spiritual training who guide others to the goal and to perfection. Therefore it is inevitable that everyone who loves

⁹⁷ See Meier, *Mohammedverehrung* II, 354; Abun-Nasr, *Tijaniyya*, 22 and 43-45. El Adnani (“Naissance de la Tijāniyya,” 30) discusses earlier saintly models al-Tijānī might have imitated. A complete list of guarantees given by al-Tijānī is included in Muḥammad ʿAlwān, *al-Nafāḥa al-quḍsiyya*, 113-115.

him, sees him, and takes from him will belong to the cognizants who attain the goal. Now for the Sufis, cognizance is the preliminary paradise. This is what the Shaykh [Niasse] hints at with his statement about the Garden of Eternity. This is the paradise of gnosis (*al-ma^cārif*), which the Sufis prefer over the paradise of sensual delights (*al-zakhārif*).⁹⁸

In order to support this view, Abū Bakr °Atīq draws on a verse in Surat al-Raḥmān—famous for the extensive use of the grammatical dual form—that talks about two paradises.⁹⁹ According to Abū Bakr °Atīq, this verse refers to the metaphorical paradise (*jannat al-ma^cānī*; lit., “paradise of meaning”), which exists in addition to the commonly known paradise. Other than the latter, which is the preserve of the afterlife, the metaphorical paradise can be accessed both in this life and the next. Abū Bakr °Atīq explains that it was this paradise that Niasse had meant in his statement about “those who love me and those who see me”:

The Shaykh thus wants to say: “Those among my sincere disciples who love me and those among the wayfarers who regard me with respect, they enter the Garden of Eternity, that is, the paradise of meaning, the paradise of cognizance.”¹⁰⁰

Hence the visual perception of the saint through a simple glance or gaze is not sufficient to gain access to paradise in the Hereafter. Niasse himself indicates this in his verses, since he attaches a number of conditions to his assertion, such as following the guidance, i.e., the Qur^oān and the Sunna, and also the necessity to serve and love him in his capacity as the highest-ranking saint. As discussed in Chapter 2, love of and service for the shaykh are two basic elements that figure prominently in Niasse’s conception of spiritual training. They not only facilitate and accelerate travel on the mystical path, but also serve as indicators of the required submission to the authority of Niasse, derived from his capacity as the leading caliph of the Tijāniyya and the

⁹⁸ Abū Bakr °Atīq, *Taḥṣīl al-amānī*, 1-2; cf. the translation and commentary by Anwar, “Ulama in Kano,” 238-239.

⁹⁹ “For those who fear the position of their Lord there will be two gardens” (Sura 55:46). The “Garden of Eternity,” which occurs in Niasse’s verse, is also mentioned in the Qur^oān (Sura 25:15).

¹⁰⁰ Abū Bakr °Atīq, *Taḥṣīl al-amānī*, 2.

supreme saint of his time. In other words, Niasse contends that all those who follow him as the holder of this dual distinction will attain cognizance, and by virtue of their cognizance they will enter the Garden of Eternity, i.e., the metaphorical paradise in this life, which in turn is a prelude to their assured entry into paradise in the Hereafter.

However, apart from the “real seeing,” which is the preserve of successful travelers on the mystical path, the seeing of the saint has yet another connotation, and it is this second implication that was taken up in the popular reception of Niasse’s statement. Abū Bakr °Atīq tackles this issue in his treatise by referring to Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s utterances guaranteeing certain groups of people entry into paradise.¹⁰¹ This guarantee, Abū Bakr °Atīq explains, included everyone who had seen Aḥmad al-Tijānī. Mondays and Fridays were favored, because on those days al-Tijānī used to be in the company of the Prophet, and he was escorted by seven angels who would record the names of all those who had seen him. This was the gift of *ru’ya li-dukhūl al-jinān*, i.e., entry into paradise as a result of seeing a saint endowed with this faculty, which had been granted to earlier saints, too. After al-Tijānī’s ascension to the rank of the Seal of Sainthood (*khatm al-walāya*), this capacity was inherited among his caliphs. Since Niasse was one of them, Abū Bakr °Atīq concludes, it was quite conceivable that he was in the possession of the gift of *ru’ya* during his time.

Although not mentioned by Abū Bakr °Atīq, this type of *ru’ya* echoes not only the widely popularized statement made by Aḥmad al-Tijānī, but also a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet Muḥammad. As al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī relates in his (not universally recognized) *Mustadrak*, the Prophet said, “Blessed is the one who saw me, and the one who saw the one who saw me, and

¹⁰¹ The following is a paraphrase of Abū Bakr °Atīq, *Taḥṣīl al-amānī*, 4-5.

the one who saw the one who saw the one who saw me.”¹⁰² The Arabic phrase here translated as “blessed is the one who saw me” is *tūbā li-man raʿānī*, and al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī notes that *tūbā* is a term used in the sense of paradise, derived from the name of a tree in the Eternal Garden.¹⁰³ Thus, Aḥmad al-Tijānī and Ibrāhīm Niasse, as well as other saints who lay claim to the gift of *ruʿya li-dukhūl al-jinān*, act as the heirs of the Prophet when they make such utterances.

Do we thus have to conclude that all those who saw Ibrāhīm Niasse—or another inheritor of this capacity—will definitely enter paradise? Abū Bakr ʿAtīq answers this question by taking a cautious approach. In principle, he says, there can be no doubt that God in His omnipotence is able to favor a saint with special divine grace. The *ruʿya* belongs in the category of miracles of saints (*karāmāt*), and only ignorant people dispute this possibility. If a saint says, “whoever sees me will enter the Garden,” he expresses his hope (*rajāʿ*) that God will make it happen. Hence there is no guarantee, but only the anticipation that the saint might indeed be a beneficiary of this special gift. If a saint has reason to believe that he had been awarded this particular *karāma*, it is quite appropriate that he should articulate it; otherwise the Muslims would be deprived of this privilege. According to Abū Bakr ʿAtīq, there is thus no reason to deny the possibility that Niasse had been granted this faculty.¹⁰⁴ He further explains:

The saints are the gateways through which God’s grace becomes manifest. They have the appropriate rank with the Merciful Magnanimous Lord. So what should

¹⁰² al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, *Mustadrak*, 16:315. A similar version can be found in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s *Musnad* (3:71; 5:248; 5:264) and other collections.

¹⁰³ This is also the etymology of Touba, the “capital” of the Murīdiyya in Senegal.

¹⁰⁴ See Abū Bakr ʿAtīq, *Tahṣīl al-amānī*, 6-7. — In a letter dated 2 Shaʿbān 1373/April 6, 1954, Niasse attested that Aḥmad Abū l-Faṭḥ (d. 1414/2003), one of his most prominent Nigerian disciples, had inherited the “secret of seeing” (*sirr al-ruʿya*). He even gives a *sanad*, or chain of transmission, for this secret, explaining that he received it from Aḥmad Skīraj, who got it from his master Aḥmad al-ʿAbd Lāwī, who had received it from Muḥammad b. Abī Naṣr, who in turn inherited it from Aḥmad al-Tijānī. See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Ziyādat al-jawāhir*, 59.

prevent God from endowing some of them with the capacity of intercession (*shafāʿa*) during their time or even beyond?¹⁰⁵

Thus, by virtue of his supreme position in the hierarchy of saints, Niasse has the permission to perform *shafāʿa*, i.e., to intercede for others on the Day of Reckoning. With the verse “Those who love me and those who see me will dwell in the Garden of Eternity” he declares that his intercession also encompasses those who physically see him. This, however, is not an absolute guarantee, as it remains the prerogative of God to actually bestow this favor. Divine grace is a probability; there is no certainty that God will indeed effect it.¹⁰⁶

As in every Sufi movement, the followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse display different degrees of attachment and belonging. The *murīdūn*, i.e., the sincere aspirants on the path who fully submit to their master’s authority, are more inclined to understand the verse in question in the sense of “real seeing.” Since Niasse is the most accomplished cognizant of his time, he can help his aspirants to attain mystical knowledge, which is equivalent to temporary happiness in the preliminary paradise of meaning. If they comport themselves correctly, entry into paradise in the Hereafter is the certain consequence of their achievement in this world.

The mass of the followers, however, can be placed in the category of *muḥibbūn*, the enthusiasts (lit., “lovers”), who usually lack the formal training of the aspirants. For them, it does not make a big difference whether Niasse uttered his statement in the sense of an intercession or as a definite guarantee. As the supplications of the *ghawth* are, according to a widespread conviction among the *muḥibbūn*, granted in any case, they are assured of paradise either way. Such attitudes have the potential to become problematic when enthusiasts draw the conclusion

¹⁰⁵ Abū Bakr ʿAtīq, *Taḥṣīl al-amānī*, 6. See also the justification given in Kafanga, *Tārīkh majrʿ al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 49-50 and 72.

¹⁰⁶ This assessment accords with the view of Ibrāhīm Maḥmūd Diop, who emphasized that the verse in question has to be understood as a *duʿāʾ* or supplication (interview, Dakar, January 9, 1997).

that the observance of religious obligations is no longer required, since they have already secured entry into paradise by virtue of Niasse's promise. It would be naïve to assume that Niasse laid claim to the gift of *ru'ya* without being aware of such negative side effects, and it would be equally naïve to think that he made his utterances without trying to attract new followers. On the one hand, he sought to recruit new members for his movement; on the other hand, he had to restrain the enthusiasts, whose excesses always provided his opponents with welcome opportunities to renew their attacks on Niasse and the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. Mobilizing and at the same time maintaining control of his following amounted to walking a tightrope. But Niasse did it with remarkable success and was thus able to lay the foundation for the transformation of his *Jamā'a* into a mass movement.

But let us briefly return to Guinea. Of his subsequent stay in Conakry Niasse only relates an encounter with a shaykh of the Qādiriyya by the name of Doungou, who asks to be initiated into the Tijāniyya. Shortly thereafter Niasse has a visionary meeting with Aḥmad al-Tijānī, who instructs him to appoint the former member of the Qādiriyya as a deputy. As if further evidence were required to confirm Niasse's position, another (unidentified) shaykh turns up and declares that he was told by Aḥmad al-Tijānī in a vision that someone who searched for the secret could not afford to stay away from Niasse.¹⁰⁷

Then Demba Diop, Niasse's driver and brother-in-law arrives from Kaolack with the car. Niasse gives a farewell address in a mosque, during which several people in the audience are overcome by mystical states and burst into tears. The return trip to Senegal is by road. Niasse once more passes through Kindia, Mamou, and Dalaba. From there the way leads north. Pita and Labé are the last stations in Guinea; from there the travelers cover the 220 miles' distance to

¹⁰⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nafahāt al-Malik al-Ghanī*, 12.

Tambacounda without any further stops. Now Ibrāhīm Niasse is separated from home only by a few hours by car, and in Tambacounda he is already amidst the familiar circle of disciples and acquaintances. He still does not wish to tarry beyond the overnight stay, but the Prophet speaks to him and prevents him from continuing his journey right away, commanding him to stay on and deliver another address. This he complies with after the Friday Prayer.¹⁰⁸

During the remaining time of the journey his thoughts are already with the celebrations of the Prophet's birthday. In Koungheul Niasse stays once more overnight. He recounts the enthusiastic welcome he is accorded by his followers and further meetings with disciples in and around Kaffrine. On the last three pages Niasse names the people whom he has encountered on his tour, first of all his hosts, then those who served him, and finally the ones whom he appointed as deputies.¹⁰⁹

On 30 Šafar 1367/January 11, 1948 Niasse is safely back home. When he set out on the journey he had considered himself the bringer of the flood, the dispenser of Aḥmad al-Tijānī's outpourings, and the highest-ranking caliph of the Tijānīya. Two months later he returned as *kāmil al-ʿaṣr*, the "perfect one of the age," undoubtedly confirmed by God and the Prophet in his mission, endowed with the power of disposition and the gift of *ruʿya* that enabled people to enter paradise as a result of seeing him. With this, his ascent to the peak of the saintly hierarchy is complete: God has made him the *ghawth al-zamān* and thus created the conditions for his recognition as such. From this time onwards, i.e., the year 1367/1948, an incessant stream of visitors set in who came to him in his capacity as the *ghawth*. Even if some of Niasse's devotees in Saloum and certain panegyrists had described him as such already fifteen years earlier; even if he long had the presentiment that he was the supreme saint; and even if the respective indications

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 15-17.

had been accumulating during his sojourn in the Ḥijāz in 1937: it was only in the course of his journey to Guinea that Ibrāhīm Niasse reached the zenith.

Reception of “The Conakry Trip”

The significance of “The Conakry Trip” not only lies in the fact that it represents a subjective account of Niasse’s mystical career or that it contains his most explicit claim the position of the supreme saint of his time. In addition, the verses derive their particular relevance from the way they were received in Tijānī circles throughout West Africa, and most importantly in Nigeria. Numerous poetic testimonies from the pens of Nigerian representatives of the Tijāniyya show that “The Conakry Trip”—combined with the impact of *Kāshif al-ilbās*—gave a decisive impetus for the recognition of the Senegalese as the *ghawth*, although only very few Muslims in Nigeria had met him personally. Verses from the “The Conakry Trip” and another poetic work, yet to be introduced, apparently produced such enthrallment and exerted such convincing power that the news of the emergence of the supreme saint in the Senegalese town of Kaolack, together with the notion that it was the incumbent on everyone to submit to his authority, spread within a short period of time in Kano, Zaria, and several other towns in Nigeria.

My following argument about the role these poetic works played for the widespread acceptance of Niasse’s claim to supreme sainthood is not meant to reduce complex social and religious processes to pieces of literature. Nonetheless, as I will show, poetry functioned as a powerful medium in publicizing these claims. Just like the verses that popularized the polyvalent idea of *fayḍa* (discussed at the end of Chapter 2), poems invoking the powers of the highest-ranking saint appealed to the religious imagination of large audiences. It is from this perspective that the analysis of documents in verse helps to shed light on the rapid development of the

Jamā'at al-fayḍa into a religious mass movement in West Africa. The literary testimonies presented here cannot replace the precise historical reconstruction of this development (a task that is beyond the scope of this study and complicated by contradictory accounts in the few available sources), but they can complement the scattered information that exists about individuals who traveled between Senegal and Nigeria in the late 1940s.

The year 1946 keeps recurring in the secondary literature as the time when West African Tijānīs began to visit Kaolack.¹¹⁰ However, the travelers who shuttled between Kaolack and Northern Nigeria at that stage were few in number. Among the first Nigerians who embarked on the journey to Kaolack to study and to undergo spiritual training were Aḥmad al-Tijānī b. °Uthmān and Muḥammad al-Thānī Kafanga. According to the latter's account of his stay in Kaolack, which lasted from late 1945 until early 1947, they undertook the journey upon reading Niassé's *Kāshif al-ilbās*.¹¹¹ Although there can be little doubt that Kafanga and other visitors spread the news of the *fayḍa* after they returned to Kano, these early contacts still only had limited impact. Personal initiation and word of mouth were both important factors in promoting the *fayḍa*, but it was the combination of these factors with the medium of poetry that attracted large groups of people who submitted to the authority of the *ghawth*, rather than few individuals who sought initiation into *tarbiya*.

Beginning in 1948, when copies of the *Nafahāt* had started to circulate in many parts of West Africa, Kaolack gradually became the destination of an incessant flow of visitors, who came to "take refuge with the perfect saint of the age" (*al-firār ilā kāmīl al-°aṣr*). The written

¹¹⁰ See Paden, *Kano*, 106-108 and, largely drawing on Paden, Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*, 42, and Quadri, "Ibrahim Niass," 114.

¹¹¹ See Kafanga, *Tārīkh majī' al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 44; the *hijri* years of his stay are given as 1364 to 1366. Cf. the accounts by Maigari (*al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 131-132) and Bello ("Sheikh Ibrahim," 280-288) of the first delegation that traveled from Kano.

traces from this period, predominantly in verse, suggest that “The Conakry Trip” was instrumental in setting this movement in motion, at a time when Niasse was not yet personally known in most parts of West Africa. In other words, it was not his physical appearance, but the reception of his poetry combined with the activities of travelers between Kaolack and Kano that prepared the ground for the later rapid expansion of the *fayḍa*.

It was Niasse’s Mauritanian disciple Muḥammad al-Hādī b. Mawlūd Fāl who acted as the liaison between Kaolack and Nigeria. In April and May 1947, on a return trip from the Ḥijāz, he undertook a first extended tour of Nigeria and made the acquaintance of several representatives of the Tijāniyya.¹¹² A year later, in June 1948, i.e., a few months after the composition of “The Conakry Trip,” Muḥammad al-Hādī traveled once more to Nigeria on orders of his shaykh.¹¹³ From that time onwards, poetic testimonies abound in which Nigerian followers take up motives from Niasse’s verses. The earliest evidence is a poem by Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad, written in praise of Niasse and Muḥammad al-Hādī. The author states that there were clear signs that the “standard bearer of the shaykh [i.e., Aḥmad al-Tijānī]” and the supreme saint of the era had appeared in Kaolack. Just like one had to follow the verdict of those who had seen the crescent of the new moon (*hilāl*) in determining the end of the fasting month of Ramaḍān, it was necessary to submit to the authority of this saint once his identity had been revealed.¹¹⁴ Referring to Niasse’s claim to the power of disposition publicized in “The Conakry Trip,” Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad launches an appeal to all members of the Tijāniyya to betake themselves to Kaolack:

So travel to those lands in the quest of the one

¹¹² The sources that document this trip include *Bishārat al-akhillā’ al-ajyāl* and *Shākirat al-ni‘am*, both written by ‘Umar Falke.

¹¹³ The date of this visit is given in Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad, *al-Tanbīh bi-l-sa‘d al-ṭāli‘*, 4.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-3. On the author see *ALA II*, 266-267.

who matches [the description of the *ghawth*] with regard to the power of disposition and miracles.¹¹⁵

This is but one indication of the ripple effect the notion of disposition, as formulated in Niasse's verses, had in Tijāniyya circles. But even greater popularity was scored by the other major claim made in the "The Conakry Trip," namely that seeing (*ru'ya*) the supreme saint could guarantee eternal bliss. In this context another poem from Niasse's pen gained great importance: a *Yā'iyya*, i.e., a poem rhyming on the letter *yā'*, of fifteen verses that starts with the line *Wuṣūlu jamī' l-māsikīn^a bi-habliyya*, "The Arrival of All Those Who Hold Tight to My Rope" (henceforth referred to as "The Arrival"). Counting among Niasse's most widely quoted poetic works, it seems to have been composed some time before "The Conakry Trip." Later it was integrated into the anthology *Awthaq al-urā*, which forms the fourth part of the poetry collection published under the title *al-Dawāwīn al-Sitt*. Here Niasse presents a variation of the verse "Those who love me and those who see me," perhaps the most famous of "The Conakry Trip," adding another element to the motive of attaining bliss through seeing the supreme saint:

Surely my writings are a source of happiness to man,

and those who see me or my handwriting will not suffer a day of misery.¹¹⁶

Abū Bakr °Atīq and Muḥammad al-Thānī Kafanga, the commentators of the *Dawāwīn*, explain that seeing an action or its result was equivalent to seeing the agent (*ru'yat al-fi'l ka-ru'yat al-fā'il*).¹¹⁷ In other words, having seen Niasse's handwriting is like having seen him in person. As the following samples from panegyric poetry by Nigerian authors illustrate, this statement had an enormous echo in Tijānī circles.

¹¹⁵ Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad, *al-Tanbīh bi-l-sā'd al-ṭālī'*, 3.

¹¹⁶ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Dawāwīn al-Sitt*, 143-144.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, note 2; see also Abū Bakr °Atīq, *Taḥṣīl al-amānī*, 7.

Without doubt the most prominent example is a poem known under the title *al-Mīmiyya al-Ibrāhīmiyya*, written by Yahūdhā b. Sa°d al- Zakzakī from Zaria (d. ca. 1384/1964). It was most likely composed after the second sojourn of Muḥammad al-Hādī b. Mawlūd Fāl in Zaria in June 1948.¹¹⁸ The Mauritanian visitor brought a number of Niasse’s writings with him, among others *Kāshif al-ilbās*, “The Conakry Trip,” the poem “The Arrival,” and apparently also some documents in the handwriting of Ibrāhīm Niasse; in any case, several of Yahūdhā’s statements in *al-Mīmiyya al-Ibrāhīmīya* show that he had knowledge of these texts.¹¹⁹

In the 85 verses of his *Mīmiyya*, Yahūdhā b. Sa°d pays homage to Ibrāhīm Niasse, in a way that indicates how intensely Nigerian representatives of the Tijāniyya identified with him even before they made his personal acquaintance. Yahūdhā largely relies on information from the sources mentioned above; the section of the poem that deals with Niasse’s biography draws on the *Tarjama* by °Alī Cissé. His core message is that Niasse holds the key to mystical realization. More than any other leader of the Tijāniyya he is capable of showing the way to happiness in this world and the Hereafter. Everyone in quest of mystical attainment and eternal bliss was thus bound for the journey to Kaolack. Many lines of the *Mīmiyya* express Yahūdhā’s yearning for a meeting with Niasse, to the extent that the poem can be viewed as the spiritual preparation for his journey to Senegal, which he undertook some time in the late 1940s.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ The manuscript I consulted carries the date 17 Dhū l-Ḥijja 1367/October 20, 1948. The earlier date given in *ALA II*, 371—probably drawing on Paden, *Kano*, 442, who refers to the same manuscript—cannot be correct, as Yahūdhā’s text contains several references to “The Conakry Trip.” The same reason makes Bello’s account of the origin of the *Mīmiyya* seem unlikely (“Sheikh Ibrahim,” 285-286).

¹¹⁹ “The Arrival” seems to have circulated in Nigeria since the visit of Niasse’s brother Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye and °Alī Cissé to Kano, which probably took place in late 1945. Kafanga (*Tārīkh majī’ al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 48-49) describes how he first heard the verses from Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye, and how these verses increased his longing for an encounter with Ibrāhīm Niasse.

¹²⁰ Immediately before this visit, Yahūdhā composed a pentastich (*takhmīs*) of his own *Mīmiyya* in order to present it to Niasse on their first encounter. See Bello, “Sheikh Ibrahim,” 288.

However, Yahūdḥā also tells of other ways to derive benefit from the exceptional capabilities of the supreme saint, taking up the statements about *ruʿya* in “The Conakry Trip” and the above-quoted verse from “The Arrival”:

We saw his handwriting and so we have our share [in his blessings]:

Seeing him effects remission of sins.

And this is not astounding—how many a saint (*awliyāʿ*) is there,

whose visual perception leads to rescue from punishment [in the Hereafter].¹²¹

With his *Mīmīya*, Yahūdḥā b. Saʿd gave, as it were, the starting signal for the mass movement of taking refuge with the supreme saint.¹²² More and more members of the Tijāniyya from Nigeria, but also from Niger, Gold Coast and other neighboring colonies set out on the journey to Kaolack to pay their respect to the *ghawth*. These travels marked the climax of a development that began with Ibrāhīm Niasse’s trip to Guinea—cast in a literary monument in the *Nafaḥāt*—and gathered momentum with the reception of Niasse’s verses especially through Yahūdḥā.

The impact of “The Conakry Trip” on Nigerian Tijāniyya circles also becomes apparent from documents dating back to Niasse’s first public appearance in Kano in September 1951. For instance, a poem composed by one of Niasse’s Nigerian disciples to welcome him on that occasion contains the following verse:

Whoever loves him or sees him in his reality,

or just his handwriting, will indeed gain God’s satisfaction.¹²³

<Figure 5.2>

¹²¹ Yahūdḥā b. Saʿd, *al-Mīmīyya al-Ibrāhīmiyya*, 4.

¹²² This is also emphasized by Maigari (*al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 125), who discusses the significance of the *ziyāra* (visit) to Kaolack for Nigerian Tijānīs in considerable detail (*ibid.*, 224-229).

¹²³ Muḥammad al-Thānī b. Ādam, *Nafaḥāt al-Bāqī*, 5.

Another example for the reception of “The Conakry Trip” is a photograph, reproduced in Figure 5.2, that circulated widely among Niasse’s followers in Nigeria, showing him with the Emir of Kano and the later Prime Minister of the Northern Region, Aḥmadu Bello, on his arrival at the airport of Kano in the early 1950s, and indexing this event as one of the wondrous things Niasse had predicted in one of his verse verses.¹²⁴ Throughout the 1950s and even thereafter, motives from “The Conakry Trip” kept resurfacing in panegyric poetry. For instance, a *tawassul* (“intercession”) poem composed in 1374/1954-1955, states among other things:

And I ask you, whose supplications are always granted,
to bestow on us entry into paradise through the gaze at your countenance.¹²⁵

In all panegyric documents that came out of Nigeria from 1948 onwards, Niasse appears consistently as the supreme saint, the perfect spiritual trainer, the guarantor of mystical realization and eternal bliss. These characterizations almost always appear in combination with an appeal to undertake the journey to Kaolack, and the accounts of those who made the trip depict their stay with Niasse in the most vibrant colors.¹²⁶

“The Conakry Trip” therefore marks a further milestone in Niasse’s career in a twofold manner. Firstly, it stands for the definite confirmation of his instatement as the supreme saint, and secondly, the reception of this poetic travelogue is a mirror of the history of Niasse’s acceptance as the rightful occupant of this position. Especially Yahūdhā’s reworking of verses from “The Conakry Trip” can be read to augur the imminent fulfillment of Niasse’s prediction,

¹²⁴ The Arabic version of the verse contains an orthographic error, adding the letter *lām* after *marrat^{an}*.

¹²⁵ Muḥammad Kaura Namoda, *Ibānat al-muqaṣṣir*, 15. – A later poem, published in 1381/1961-1962, that takes up the *takwīn* motive is al-Nufāwī, *Nūr al-fayḍa al-aḥmadiyya*.

¹²⁶ The two most prominent examples are Aḥmad al-Tijānī °Uthmān, *al-Nafahāt al-ilāhiyya*, and °Umar Falke, *al-Rihla al-ghawthiyya*, which both refer to sojourns in Kaolack in early 1368/1949.

uttered almost twenty years earlier, that the *fayḍa* could not be stopped and would soon spread to all horizons. Indeed, poems like the *Mīmiyya* seem to have been instrumental in paving the way for the *fayḍa*.

Returning to Kano and the Ḥijāz

The movement of “taking refuge with the perfect one of the era,” triggered by the proliferation of several of Niassé’s writings and verses in Nigeria and supported by the visits of emissaries such as Muḥammad al-Ḥādī b. Mawlūd Fāl, Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye, °Alī Cissé, and others, prepared the ground for Ibrāhīm Niassé’s emergence as the supreme saint of his time. It was Kano rather than his home country Senegal that became the stage for his most spectacular public appearance, made during a stopover in the city on the way back from the Ḥijāz in September 1951. Although his sojourn in Kano, like his earlier visit in 1945, lasted only a few days, it marked the ultimate breakthrough in the process of his recognition as the *ghawth al-zamān* and leading caliph of the Tijāniyya of his time. To use the water metaphor so common in the *Jamā°at al-fayḍa*, Niassé’s first public visit to Northern Nigeria signaled the bursting of the dams. From now on, the flood spread rapidly and on a large scale, expanding in countries hitherto out of its reach, such as Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Sudan. People did indeed enter the path in throngs all over West Africa, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Nile, and they had intense mystical experiences, just like Aḥmad al-Tijānī had predicted in his famous aphorism about the advent of the flood. Kano served as the hub of this expansion, to the extent that it came to be known as the “capital of the *fayḍa*.”

In the memory of Niassé’s followers, the year 1370/1951 therefore marks the fulfillment of prophecies made by their revered shaykh in the early 1930s, and ultimately by Aḥmad al-

Tijānī in the early nineteenth century. Some Nigerian disciples went so far as to identify Niasse with a certain Sharaf al-Dīn, who would be the harbinger of the Mahdī and whose advent was predicted by °Uthmān dan Fodio.¹²⁷ Others went to the extent of comparing the importance of Niasse’s visit to the significance the Farewell Pilgrimage had for the companions of the Prophet Muḥammad,¹²⁸ implying that both events sealed the success of a movement that originally seemed unlikely to get even close to succeeding.

The actual destination of the journey in September 1951 was not Kano, but the holy cities in the Ḥijāz. °Abdallāh Bayero, the Emir of Kano, had invited Niasse to accompany him on his pilgrimage, and so he came from Senegal to Northern Nigeria in order to continue his journey together with the Emir. This trip is the subject of yet another poetic travelogue by Niasse, later published under the title *Nayl al-mafāz bi-l-°awd ilā l-Ḥijāz*, composed in the *rajaz* meter and strongly reminiscent in its style and flow of “The Conakry Trip.” Other than his account of his first trip to the Holy Cities fourteen years earlier, which only contained vague allusions to his saintly status, the verses of *Nayl al-mafāz* leave no doubt that he undertook his second pilgrimage in his capacity as the supreme saint of his time. He now believed his mission to be accomplished.

This is not the only reason why this text is so significant. A closer examination shows that Niasse seeks to substantiate his claim to supreme sainthood with detailed descriptions of

¹²⁷ See Cissé, *Revivalist*, 8, who reproduces dan Fodio’s prediction in a Hausa poem in the appendix. The document is discussed in Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 209-211; he argues that the identification of Niasse as Sharaf al-Dīn is based on a deliberate misinterpretation. The attempt of Niasse’s followers to use dan Fodio’s verses in order to promote Niasse as the harbinger of the Mahdī was partly an expression of the rivalry between the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya at the time. For more on the debate surrounding these verses and the latent Mahdist potential of the *Jamā°at al-fayḍa* see Seesemann, “Nach der Flut,” 478-487.

¹²⁸ Mahmūd b. Muḥammad b. °Umar (known as Mudi) Salga, as quoted in Kane, “Tijāniyya réformée,” 36.

mystical experiences, which put him firmly in the tradition of Ibn ʿArabī. In addition, the text—like the earlier “Conakry Trip”—repeatedly refers to people Niasse encountered during his trip and thus reveals the wide extent of the religious network he had built within a very short period of time. In other words, his ascension to the highest rank in the saintly hierarchy coincides with mystical states of the highest order, and goes hand in hand with the recognition by vast sections of the Tijāniyya from West Africa and Sudan.

Niasse indicates already in the first lines of *Nayl al-mafāz* that it was no other than the *ghawth* who embarked on this trip: He says that he was on his way to visit the “House of the Creator” [i.e., the Kaʿba in Mecca] as “the representative of creation.” He took the same route as in 1945, via Bathurst (present-day Banjul), Freetown, Takoradi, Accra, and Lagos to Kano.

At each station, he describes the enthusiastic welcome by his followers. In Bathurst, they turn the airport into a *zāwiya* and hail him with the performance of loud *dhikr*. Niasse delivers a sermon in which he promises good fortune and success to those present, some of whom he mentions by name. In Accra, “where the wind of Aḥmad al-Tijānī already blows strongly,”¹²⁹ he makes an extended stopover. His host Aḥmad al-Fūṭī thanks God incessantly for being graced with hosting the august guest. The following morning delegations of visitors pour into his residence. Niasse thinks with longing of Kumasi and his deputies there, in particular Baban Makaranta, originally a disciple of Yahūdhā b. Saʿd al-Zakzakī and one of the first to “take refuge with the perfect one of the age” in 1947. After his arrival in Lagos, Niasse has some spare time, which he uses to make a short visit to Agege. There too he is received with all honors.

¹²⁹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nayl al-mafāz*, 2.

Finally he boards a plane to Kano. While flying over Zaria, his thoughts are with Yahūdihā, whom he calls “the great one of Zaria.”¹³⁰

When the plane finally approaches Kano, Niasse invokes special blessings on the city and its inhabitants, praying that they may remain forever within the flow of the *fayḍa*. He describes the feelings that overwhelm him at the arrival in the face of the multitude of people gathered at the airport:

After I landed something came to pass,
 which, by God, has not been in my imagination,
 although I used to have the certainty that God
 arranges all matters in the way He wishes to see them.
 I began talking to myself: “Who is this shaykh after all,
 in front of whom all great scholars bow in deference?
 Who is Ibrāhīm? What is Ibrāhīm
 that they are annihilated and enflamed in his love?”
 By God, had I not already been obliterated
 in Shaykh Aḥmad [al-Tijānī], I would have died from shame!¹³¹

Niasse is welcomed by Muḥammad al-Sanūsī (also known by his title Chiroma), the son of the Emir ° Abdallāh Bayero, and supposed to be taken to the latter’s palace. However, his convoy manages only with great difficulty to leave the congested airport. To ensure his safety, “Christian” (white) soldiers have to escort him from the inside of the airplane to shield him against the euphoric masses.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹³¹ Ibid., 4. See the comments on these verses in Cissé, *Revivalist*, 8-9.

The following day Niasse is unable to leave the palace due to the huge crowds of people waiting for him outside. The Emir has already left for the *ḥajj*, accompanied by Abū Bakr °Atīq and other representatives of the Tijāniyya of Kano.¹³² Only a few people are allowed to see Niasse. Apart from the Emir's entourage he receives visitors from Bornu, Jos and Kaura Namoda, as well as the young guard of the Tijāniyya in Kano, Muḥammad al-Thānī Kafanga, Aḥmad al-Tijānī b. °Uthmān, al-Ḥājj °Abd al-Karīm, and Muḥammad al-Thānī b. Muḥammad al-Awwal.¹³³ He also mentions several sons of al-Ḥasan Dan Tata, an affluent merchant from Kano and early follower of the *fayḍa* in Nigeria, thus hinting to the support he received from influential businessmen in the city. Muḥammad al-Hādī b. Mawlūd Fāl, his Mauritanian confidant, is also present. In several verses Niasse expresses his esteem for the “people of Kano” and attests that “they have drunk from the largest vessels of the *fayḍa* and united the sharia with the *ṭarīqa* [path] and the *ḥaqīqa* [divine reality].”¹³⁴

In the meantime the Chiroma has prepared the documents for the onward journey via Rome and Cairo to the Ḥijāz. Once more, a security escort comprised of British soldiers receives him at the airport to ensure that he can safely board the plane. During the flight from Cairo to Jeddah Niasse enters into the state of *iḥrām*, the consecration required from every pilgrim. In Jeddah he meets his oldest son °Abdallāh, who serves him during the following days until they arrive in Mecca. Together with Muḥammad al-Hādī he eventually starts to perform the *ḥajj* rites. After completing the run (*sa°y*) between the two hillocks Ṣafā und Marwā a slight rain sets in,

¹³² John Paden, the only author so far to pay attention to *Nayl al-mafāz*, grossly misinterprets the half verse *lakinna °Abdallāhⁱ ka-l-°Atīqⁱ * qad sabaqānī ilā °atīqⁱ* (“But °Abdallāh and [Abū Bakr] °Atīq had preceded me in the journey to the Ka°ba”) and writes: “Thanks to Abdullahi who died” (Paden, *Kano*, 110). The significance of the work as a document that describes the pilgrimage of Niasse as the *ghawth* has apparently escaped him.

¹³³ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nayl al-mafāz*, 5-6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

and Niasse interprets it as an indication of his high spiritual station. One of his first encounters in Mecca is with a descendant of °Alī al-Tamāsīnī (“the *ghawth*, the origin of my highest chain of initiation”) and a few Egyptian members of the Tijāniyya. Finally °Abdallāh Bayero arrives from Medina, where he had spent the days prior to the *ḥajj*. Niasse expresses his amazement at the degree of the Emir’s love and affection. In the company of his beloved ones he sets out to Minā. Now the journey nears its first spiritual climax, as he receives divine communications (*bishārāt*), assuring him that he is endowed with extraordinary divine favors and knowledge.

Pearls of pure meaning gushed forth from me,
without any effort or exhaustion on my part.

Whoever tastes them will surely travel on the path of eternity,
and attain the highest forms cognizance, thanks to my assistance (*madadī*).¹³⁵

As the culmination of the *ḥajj* rituals draws near, Niasse’s mystical experiences become even more intense. In the plain of °Arafa, the next station of the pilgrimage, he makes supplications for himself, his family, his followers, and finally for the whole world and the entire era, until God manifests Himself:

He said: “Pour now forth from °Arafa, and the sins shall be forgiven
for all of you, and your blemishes shall be covered!”¹³⁶

The remission of sins here appears as the immediate effect of Niasse’s prayers. This divine assurance extends to all pilgrims because the *ghawth* is on pilgrimage. He acts as the mediator between the believers and God the Judge and is thereby instituted in his divine mission. In addition, Niasse receives a further guarantee from God that pertains especially to his followers:

¹³⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹³⁶ Ibid.; this verse takes up Qurʾān 2:198.

Then there was a breath from the Great One
and the Highest, the All-Powerful swept away all evil.

My beloved ones have attained victory for all times,
as a preference and promise from the Compassionate.¹³⁷

Still in °Arafa, Niasse experiences a theophany where he finds himself in a doomsday scenario, similar to the one described in Sura 69. While he reasserts once more his ability to save people from adverse judgment by interceding on their behalf, another vision sets in, introduced by the disintegration of the mountains, a metaphor for Judgment Day:

All creation is in need of the One Who Is All, and also of my capacity
to have my supplications granted when the world will be destroyed and ground to
dust.

Then the mountains disintegrated into dust, and I whispered:

“I have come, and yet I did not come.”

He spoke to me tenderly: “Take what you see!”

I said: “Oh Ka°ba of my heart, naught do I see.

By God, I do not see and no more am I seen, and not
a thing there is that I desire.” Then I added, saying:

“I have lost myself, I have lost all.”

Now it burst out from within me: “There is no power [except with God]!”

The fact that I am the servant of the Chosen One [i.e., the Prophet], from the
House of °Adnān,

does not require any further evidence.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nayl al-mafāz*, 9. As in “The Conakry Trip,” Niasse uses terms that highlight different aspects of God’s nature as expressed in the various divine names.

What had only been an imagination while standing on the plain of °Arafa—a part of the *hajj* ritual that is often likened to the assembly before God on Judgment Day—suddenly turned into a concrete vision: Niasse stands in front of God on the Last Day and is supposed to intercede for all people in his capacity as the supreme saint. This however, he is unable to do—at least in the vision, in which he is entirely overwhelmed by the experience of annihilation. The vision ends with the affirmation of God’s omnipotence, signifying Niasse’s return to temporal reality and the confirmation of his mission as the servant of the Prophet.

The subsequent sections of *Nayl al-mafāz* summarize stations of the pilgrimage and encounters with old and new acquaintances, mostly fellow Tijānīs but also Prince Fayṣal, the influential brother and later successor of the Saudi monarch, who hosts a dinner for him. Niasse spends the days of the Festival of Sacrifice in Minā in the company of the Emir of Kano and °Abd al-Raḥmān alias Uba Ringim, a wealthy merchant from Kano. When he goes back to the Ka°ba to perform the rites of the lesser pilgrimage (*°umra*), it is unbearably hot; Niasse states that there had not been such a blistering heat for eighty years. He explains this as a manifestation of God’s sternness (*jalāl*) and makes a supplication where he asks the Lord to show His benevolence (*jamāl*).¹³⁹ These words apparently bring the cooling the pilgrims longed for, as he continues saying:

Was it not for the one who was there [i.e., the *ghawth*],
they would all have perished and torn to a thousand pieces!¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nayl al-mafāz*, 11. *Jalāl* and *jamāl* describe complementary qualities of God, who can be harsh as well as lenient. See further Meier, *Kubrā*, 79-82.

¹⁴⁰ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nayl al-mafāz*, 11. Especially here, but also in other passages of *Nayl al-mafāz* and “The Conakry Trip,” Niasse’s verses are reminiscent of the poetry of Quirinus Kuhlmann, a German mystic of the baroque period. Kuhlmann saw himself in the role of the “refrigerator” (in the original Latin sense of the word), i.e., the one who cools the heat of hellfire,

On his arrival in Mecca, Niasse reunites with his son °Abdallāh. He concludes the *‘umra* rituals and makes more supplications. After that he receives visits from members of the Tijāniyya, among them two Sudanese, who both get appointments as deputies: a descendant of Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Shinqīṭī called Muḥammad and Aḥmad [al-Bashīr b.] al-Ṭayyib Hāshim.¹⁴¹ The former acknowledges Niasse’s status and declares that the only way to reach Aḥmad al-Tijānī was through Niasse. Other visitors express their conviction that they had recognized in him Aḥmad al-Tijānī himself.

Meanwhile Ibrāhīm Niasse is overcome with intense yearning for the Prophet. Escorted by four traveling companions he flies from Jeddah to Medina, and at Muḥammad’s tomb the journey reaches its second spiritual climax:

When I came to him, I felt as if

I had never been there before. Oh, was it not

that I, when He [i.e., God] manifested himself, became like a child.

I entered into a state (*ḥāl*) unlike the states I used to know.

The fire of my yearning blazed

so hot that it almost consumed me.

I had taken a vow that, once I arrived

which he believed to be about to devour humankind. He called his poetic anthologies “Kühlpsalmen,” “cooling psalms,” thus assigning them a function similar to the effect Niasse ascribed to his supplication in Mecca. Quite ironically, Kuhlmann’s life ended prematurely at the stake in Moscow in 1685. I am grateful to Stefan Reichmuth (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) for drawing my attention to Kuhlmann’s poetry. Although there is most certainly no relation between the two poetic traditions, the parallels can be stunning and point to the potential of comparative studies across religious traditions. In the words of Reichmuth (personal communication), both Niasse and Kuhlmann used their poetry to “continuously file their celestial figure.”

¹⁴¹ Both come from distinguished Sudanese Tijānī families (Seesemann, “History of the Tijaniyya in Darfur”; on Aḥmad al-Bashīr b. al-Ṭayyib Hāshim see *ALA* I, 293). Niasse also mentions several Nigerians among those appointed as deputies in Mecca (Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nayl al-mafāz*, 12).

at the House of the Beloved [i.e., the Prophet's Mosque], I would fast or perform
a ritual prayer,

but when I reached there, I was unable to do either,

because all my strength had departed from me.¹⁴²

Niasse interpolates his resolve to make up for the missed fasts upon his return before
describing yet another visionary experience that overcomes him at Muḥammad's grave:

My mount disintegrated to dust when he [i.e., the Prophet] spoke softly to me,
and I became Moses, as he had purified me.

I fell silent, I could not speak nor move,

then I turned entirely into Aḥmad al-Bashīr [i.e., the Prophet Muḥammad].

I thought to myself: "Will I ever return to the world,

or will this obliterate me?" But I would not care if someone blamed me.

I did not recover from the vehemence of this encounter

until the following morning: I had seen the bride unveiled!¹⁴³

The language of these verses is compact, filled with symbolism and allusions. Niasse depicts one of the highest forms of mystical experience, interspersed with reflections made in retrospect. The imagery of the mountain disintegrating into dust echoes an idea of the Malāmatiyya, the most accomplished cognizants, which holds that internal experiences on the level of *tarqiya*, or elevation, occur either in the heart, in the secret, or in the spirit (*rūḥ*). As Sulamī (d. 412/1021), one of the foremost classical theoreticians of the Malāmatiyya, has pointed out, each of these experiences can manifest itself in different ways.¹⁴⁴ When an internal

¹⁴² Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nayl al-mafāz*, 13.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴⁴ Déladriere, "Malāmatiyya," 9.

experience in the heart manifests itself in the soul or lower self, it makes the latter disintegrate into dust.¹⁴⁵ This is the process Niasse describes at the beginning of the above-quoted section, and he attributes the purification and obliteration of his lower self to none other than Muḥammad himself.

The mountain metaphor also alludes to Moses' theophany at Mount Sinai, as recounted in Sura 7:143.¹⁴⁶ This motive is taken up in the second part of the verse, where Niasse states that he "became Moses." He thus realizes what the Sufi tradition calls the "Mosaic form."¹⁴⁷ This type of mystical identification with a prophet does not amount to the claim that a saint can attain a rank that equals the rank of a prophet, but it signals arrival at the highest possible station a saint can reach, according to the maxim, "the highest stages of the friends of God are simply the beginning stages of the prophets."¹⁴⁸ Reenacting Moses' experience, Niasse feels as if he is paralyzed, immersed in a theophany that leads him to an extrasensory perception of the divine magnitude and omnipotence.

The realization of the Mosaic form is, according to Niasse's account, immediately followed by the most magnificent form of the beatific vision of God a Sufi can have. He casts this with the phrase "I turned entirely into Aḥmad al-Bashīr," which has a twofold allegorical connotation. Firstly, it implies the realization of unification with the Prophet, the hidden (*bāṭin*) goal of the *ṭarīqa muḥammadiyya*, the "Muḥammadan path." The founder of the Sanūsiyya has

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 10 (quoted from Sulamī's *Risāla*). On the basis of Sura 25:23 Sulamī connects this experience with the Day of Judgment.

¹⁴⁶ In response to Moses request that God may show Himself to him, God tells Moses to gaze at the mountain and makes the vision contingent on the mountain remaining in its place. However, the mountain is then destroyed, and Moses fell unconscious. The same verse was at the center of the theological debates regarding God's visibility, discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁴⁷ For a brief discussion of the "mosaische Gestalt," see Meier, *Zwei Abhandlungen*, 97.

¹⁴⁸ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 52.

described this process as the absorption (*istighrāq*) in the essential being (*dhāt*) of the Prophet.¹⁴⁹ Secondly, Niasse asserts that he “sees” God—not in the sense of having an immediate vision of the Divine (which was already denied to Moses, as the pulverized mountain evidences), but through the medium of the “Muḥammadan form” (*ṣūra muḥammadiyya*). The Prophet serves as a mirror in which the mystic beholds God, and in this manner God depicts Himself in Niasse. For Ibn al-^cArabī, whose model Niasse seems to follow here, this type of *visio beatifica* is “the most perfect vision within which and through which the Real is seen.”¹⁵⁰ Niasse underscores his exceptional vision with the metaphor of having seen the bride unveiled, evoking the consecutive lifting of the veils that separate the seeker from God during the journey on the mystical path until nothing stands in the way of the mystical vision of God.

Nayl al-mafāz then returns to the worldly reality. Niasse describes how, during the return flight from Medina to Jeddah, he still feels the physical effect of his visionary experience. He feels so debilitated and exhausted that he says to himself: “If I die I will go to paradise, and if I live on, I will take my people to paradise.” On his arrival in Jeddah he the traces of the vision have disappeared. Baban Makaranta, a deputy from Ghana, receives him at the airport and later gives him a revitalizing massage to ensure that his shaykh recovers from the exhaustion.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Sanūsī’s depiction of this absorption has often been referred to as the “official” definition of *ṭarīqa muḥammadiyya*. For various translations of the quote see Radtke, “Ibriziana,” 125-126 (cf. his later amendment in “Projection and Suppression,” 74, note 9); Vikør, *Sanusi Studies*, 80-81 (cf. the original Arabic version in *ibid.*, 227); Schimmel, *Muhammad*, 203-204; Padwick, *Devotions*, 150-151. Apparently the statement goes back to Abū l-Baqā^o Ḥasan al-^cUjaimī (d. 1113/1702 in Mekka; see Peters, “Revival,” 7). One of the most insightful discussions of mystical practices centering on Muḥammad is Hoffman, “Annihilation.” — The most elaborate statement on the *ṭarīqa muḥammadiyya* in the Tijānī tradition can be found in Muḥammad al-^cArabī b. al-Sā^oiḥ, *Bughyat al-mustafīd*, 79-83. According to Muḥammad al-^cArabī, the continuous recitation of the *taṣliya*, i.e., formulas invoking blessings on the Prophet, brings the seeker closer to Muḥammad, until he eventually sees him.

¹⁵⁰ Chittick, *Self-Disclosure*, 302.

¹⁵¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Nayl al-mafāz*, 14.

The journey home to Senegal turns into a triumphal procession. While Niasse's plane passes over Khartoum, El Geneina, and Bornu, he remembers his followers in these places. Especially close to his heart, however, are his beloved ones in Kano, where he makes another short stopover. From all sides Ibrāhīm Niasse is courted. The Emir of Katsina has arrived with a big entourage to see him. Niasse again appoints deputies; those mentioned by name include Muḥammad Gibrima, a Tijānī shaykh from Nguru (d. 1390/1970), and °Abd al-Malik, who later went to London as a high-ranking diplomat and gave his daughter Bilqīs to Ibrāhīm Niasse in marriage.

At the farewell °Abdallāh Bayero and the crown prince Muḥammad al-Sanūsī are present at the airport, and so are the white soldiers who again keep the masses at bay. On leaving the city Niasse expresses his certainty that his followers there are blessed in this world and the next, where they will dwell in the garden of °Illiyīn in the immediate vicinity of God.¹⁵² Lagos and Accra are the last stopovers on this journey. The reception is triumphant; in Lagos, once more the army has to be deployed to guarantee Niasse's safety. In Accra, visitors come in throngs to be initiated into the Tijāniyya, and others accept Islam. Delegations arrive even from Kumasi. Aḥmad Bāba al-Wā°iz, who was to become one of the most prominent representatives of the *Jamā°at al-fayḍa* in Ghana,¹⁵³ wants to convince him to travel to Kumasi, but Niasse declines, promising he would come on another occasion. Eventually he lands in Dakar, where his beloved ones are already expecting him impatiently at the airport. *Nayl al-mafāz* concludes with a supplication that God may accept his pilgrimage.

Compared to "The Conakry Trip," which depicts Niasse's ascension to supreme sainthood, this travel account demonstrates what powers and capabilities he possesses in his

¹⁵² Ibid., 15.

¹⁵³ On him Kramer, "Two Tijānī Scholars."

capacity as *ghawth*. He is the ultimate intercessor for the creation and the axis of the universe, and this role is further underscored by his exceptional mystical states and experiences. In addition, the verses of *Nayl al-mafāz* reveal the vast extent of Niasse's contacts. Similar to, and even more than in the "The Conakry Trip," we see an unfolding network of important relationships not only with old and new disciples, but also with businessmen and other influential people whose support would later turn out to be very beneficial to Niasse and his movement.

Thus, Niasse's appearance in Kano in September 1951 marks the decisive turning point in the history of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. It is from this time that local and regional leaders of the Tijāniyya submitted to his authority all over West Africa; it is from this time that people previously not affiliated with the Tijāniyya joined the order on a mass scale; it is from this time that he becomes the most widely discussed Muslim religious leader in French colonial reports.¹⁵⁴ Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Niasse only appeared as a minor figure, "a marabout of the second tier," in French colonial archives.¹⁵⁵ This assessment was largely based on the role he played in the Senegalese setting, characterized by the numerical dominance of the Tijānī branch led by the Sy family and the economic influence and strong cohesion of the Murīdiyya. A French report on the development of Islam in the British colonies in West Africa, authored by Louis Mangin in June 1952, the director of the *Bureau des Affaires Musulmanes* based in Dakar, illustrates the dramatic changes that had occurred in the religious landscape of West Africa

¹⁵⁴ For reasons that can in part be traced back to differences between French and British approaches to Muslim policy, Niasse is less prominent in British colonial documents. This only changes in 1955, when the British became apprised of his great influence in Northern Nigeria and saw his movement as a potential threat to the fragile balance between the religious and political forces in the region. See further Seesemann, "Dialog der Taubstummen."

¹⁵⁵ CAOM Aff Pol 2259/3, Direction des Affaires Politiques, Note sur Ibrahima Niasse, 1953-1954.

within just a few months after Niasse's pilgrimage and visit to Kano. He states that the Hausa in Northern Nigeria were instrumental in spreading his reputation and continues:

Nowadays people talk about "Ibrahima the Kaolacki" in Lagos and Ibadan as well as in Accra and Kumasi, not only among the Hausa, but in all Muslim communities of different ethnic origin, which make up the greater part of the urban population in these areas. For all these people, he is the most pious, the most knowledgeable, and the most saintly man they have heard of. They consider getting close to him as extremely useful for every individual's spiritual wellbeing. This is why, during his short stopover in Kano during his return trip from Mecca in 1951, a large number of people come from Bornu, Sokoto, and Zinder, from a radius of 300 kilometers [almost 200 miles], to see him and listen to him. This is also why the Muslim population of Gold Coast has asked unanimously and with greatest insistence that they receive him soon as a visitor.¹⁵⁶

Of course, Niasse's emergence was not as sudden as it appeared to Mangin. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, his rise as the most influential Sufi leader in West Africa at the time was the result of a longer development that went through various stages. Nonetheless, within just two decades, the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* had undergone a transformation from a small rural community to a transnational religious movement. In 1951, Niasse had accomplished his mission, and the prophecy was fulfilled.

¹⁵⁶ CAOM Aff Pol 2258/2, Rapport de Mission effectuée en Nigéria en mars 1952 par M. l'Administrateur Mangin, Chef du Bureau des Affaires Musulmanes. Dakar, 16 juin 1952, 4.

Epilogue: After the Flood

You do not want to see a generous version of spiritual training that conforms to the simplicity of our religion and the path of gratitude. Rather, you want see Sufi communities who, at the end of the twentieth century, eat from the leaves of trees. You want to see communities who turn away from the legitimate demands of their selves, their people, and the wider society, so that they become a museum for tourists, or a laboratory for researchers, or the object of ridicule for ordinary people like you. The Prophet wants us to work for both this world and the Hereafter, and to treat each and everything according to its due, while we stand at the door of God.

°Abdallāh b. Muḥammad al-Mishrī, *Indhār wa-Ifāda*, 46-47.

The rise of Ibrāhīm Niasse culminated in his triumphal visit to Kano in 1951, and this is where this book concludes. However, that year marks anything but the end of the story. Rather, the ultimate unleashing of the flood, epitomized in the apogee of 1951, was the beginning of an unabated surge that would eventually rise above the confines of the African continent and nowadays encompasses the entire globe. It is from here that many other stories begin, yet only partially told, but hopefully to be further documented and analyzed in future studies.

There is the long story of the *fayḍa* in Nigeria, which soon became and still remains the country where the movement has its greatest numerical strength.¹ There is the story of Ghana, the destination of many of Niasse's later travels, where he led large sections of the Muslim population into the Tijāniyya and also became instrumental in the conversion of tens of

¹ The major published works on the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* in Nigeria are Paden, *Kano*, and Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*. Article-length studies include Mohammed, "Influence of the Niass Tijaniyya," Quadri, "Influence of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse," id., "Qâdiriyyah and Tijâniyyah Relations," Umar, "Sufism and its Opponents," and id., "Tijâniyya and British Colonial Authorities." Several unpublished theses contain rich material on the topic, too; see in particular Anwar, "Ulama in Kano," Bello, "Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse," Hutson, "We are Many," Kane, "Tijâniyya reformée," Quadri, "Tijâniyya in Nigeria," Tahir, "Saints and Capitalists."

thousands to Islam.² There is the story of Niger, where his movement integrated the previously scattered Tijānī congregations into a cohesive and fast-growing network.³ There is the story of Mali, where the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* met with strong resistance from the leaders of other branches of Tijāniyya.⁴ There is the story of Chad, where his followers became subject to severe persecution under the government of François Tombalbaye, and the story of Darfur, where the *fayḍa* prevailed after fierce controversies within the ranks of the Tijāniyya.⁵ Before Niasse's death in a hospital in London in 1975, the *fayḍa* also reached other sub-Saharan countries like Guinea, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Togo, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic.⁶ Under the dynamic leadership of his grandson al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī Cissé (d. 1429/2008), who succeeded his father ʿAlī in 1982 as the Imam of the mosque of Medina, the flood even swept across continental borders, partly in the form of West African diaspora communities in Western Europe and North America, partly through attracting followers among American Muslims and recent converts, establishing the Tijāniyya as one of the most vibrant Sufi movements in the United States.⁷ Among the latest territorial gains of the *fayḍa* are Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Africa,⁸ and Trinidad; especially in the two latter countries,

² On Niasse's influence and followers in Ghana see Hiskett, "Community of Grace," Kramer, "Two Tijānī Scholars," Martin, "Tidjanis et adversaries," Ryan, "Tijani Sufism," Stewart, "Tijaniyya in Ghana," and Seesemann, "Nach der Flut," 507-524.

³ The few works that address the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* in Niger include Glew, "Islamic Culture in Zinder," Seesemann, "Nach der Flut," 529-539, and Zakari, "Mallam Abba Tchillum."

⁴ See Manley, "Sosso and Haidara."

⁵ This chapter of the *fayḍa*'s history is analyzed in Seesemann, "Tijāniyya in Darfur."

⁶ In all these regions, the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* has not yet been studied, with the exception of Togo, which is briefly (although inadequately; cf. Martin, "Tidjanis et adversaries," 290) addressed in Delval, *Musulmans au Togo*, 205 and 240-247.

⁷ See Kane, "Economie spirituelle transnationale" and Harrak, "Confréries d'origine africaine aux USA."

⁸ A recent study of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* in South Africa is Molins Lliteras, "Path to Integration."

it was once more the indefatigable al-Ḥasan Cissé who inspired the creation of new communities. No serious disciple would doubt that the outpourings of Niasse's *fayḍa* continue.

Most followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse are well aware of their global presence and are proud of being part of a cosmopolitan movement. Whether they are Senegalese, Mauritanian, Nigerian, Ghanaian, or Sudanese; whether they are Wolof, Fulani, Hausa, Yoruba, Kanuri, Zerma, Ashanti, Dagomba, Fur, Zaghawa, Arab, or African American, they share similar spiritual experiences, the same reverence for Niasse, and to some extent also a common history. Yet, these commonalities notwithstanding, the attempt to write a comprehensive history of the *fayḍa* seems too audacious. In each locality the history of *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* follows its own dynamic and has its peculiar political, economic, and historical background. Yet, the impossibility of coming up with a single explanation that accounts for the success of the *Jamā'a* in so many and so diverse settings does not preclude the possibility of identifying a few common patterns. As the present study demonstrates, there are several constants that give the movement its distinctive character, even if local variables may have shaped regional *fayḍa* communities in distinctive ways.

Two of these constants are succinctly summarized in the statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The quote comes from °Abdallāh b. Muḥammad al-Mishrī (b. 1374/1954), known as al-Ḥājj al-Mishrī, a leading figure within the Tijāniyya in Mauritania whose father belonged to the inner circle of Niasse's deputies. It is addressed to Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari, the author of the major polemical work attacking Niasse and his teachings. Taking issue with the latter's portrayal of "real" Sufism as ascetic and detached from this world, al-Ḥājj al-Mishrī delivers a succinct description of a version of Sufism that is compatible with the exigencies of modern life. This description largely conforms to Niasse's understanding of the Malāmatiyya, who constitute the highest ranks of the cognizants while leading ordinary lives that

do not allow them to be distinguished from other people. Like al-Ḥājj al-Mishrī, Ibrāhīm Niasse used to exhort his followers to keep a proper balance between this world and the Hereafter, encouraging them to become engaged with the wider society, to seek professional success, and to work for the promotion of Islam in every way possible. This blending of the Malāmattiyya ideal with an attitude that embraces and appropriates aspects of modernity is a distinctive feature of most if not all *fayḍa* communities wherever they emerged, and it accounts for much of the *fayḍa*'s extraordinary success, starting in the late colonial period, continuing in the subsequent postcolonial era, and persisting in the present age of globalization.

Niasse's Legacy

As important as the findings about Niasse's Sufi revival are, it would be misleading to reduce his impact to his role as an eminent Sufi leader. As a matter of fact, Ibrāhīm Niasse has many faces, and his legacy is vaster than this study was able to present. He not only inspired the serious aspirants on the mystical path, but also responded to the spiritual needs of other Muslims. His literary oeuvre⁹ not only addressed Sufi themes, but also includes significant contributions to various Islamic sciences, such as Arabic grammar, Islamic jurisprudence (including legal opinions), or the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad. His countless compositions in verse cover a wide spectrum of poetic genres and continue to be recited in *fayḍa* gatherings. His supplications and prayers are nowadays accessible in popular collections and circulate widely among his followers.¹⁰ Every year in the month of Ramaḍān Niasse used to give an oral *tafsīr*, or interpretation of the Qur'ān, mostly in Wolof. Recordings of his *tafsīr* performances are now becoming available in digital format and thus in easier reach for future researchers proficient in

⁹ For a summary discussion of his writings see Seesemann, "Three Ibrāhīms."

¹⁰ One such collection is Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Kanz al-maṣūn*.

Wolof. Last but not least, his published speeches and letters, partly analyzed in the preceding chapters, have been translated into several African and European languages and enjoy a large readership.

As much as Niasse was a Sufi, he was also a distinguished scholar of Islam (*‘ālim*). His role as the spiritual guide to mystical knowledge is complemented by and inseparable from his role as a scholar, which culminated in his assumption of the honorific title *shaykh al-islām*, purportedly bestowed on him during one of his first visits to Egypt in the early 1960s.¹¹ From the perspective of his followers, this title is testimony to the wide acclaim he received as a scholar and epitomizes the many functions he performed in international Islamic organizations over the last fifteen years of his life, beginning with his inclusion in the prestigious constitutive council (*al-majlis al-ta’āsī*) of the Mecca-based Muslim World League in May 1962.¹² The exoteric face of Ibrāhīm Niasse and his later career in Islamic internationalism were no less instrumental in the transformation of the *Jamā‘at al-fayḍa* into a cosmopolitan, transnational movement than his role as an eminent Sufi leader, which has been the focus of the present study.

However, it would be tendentious to portray Niasse as a “Sufi-turned-*‘ālim*,” as his detractor Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Maigari has attempted to do, going so far as to speculate that Niasse abandoned the Tijāniyya towards the end of his life.¹³ As a matter of fact, Niasse already began to play the two complementary roles as a Sufi and a scholar when he was in his early twenties, and he performed both functions throughout his adult life. In one of his most famous quotes, which he seems to have uttered on several occasions in the latter part of his career, he

¹¹ According to a version that is popular among his followers, Niasse was formally appointed to the rank of Shaykh al-Islam. However, such appointments are not common, and documents in my possession show that Niasse used the title as early as in the late 1950s, a few years before his first visit to Cairo.

¹² Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus*, 193.

¹³ Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 162-164.

stressed that he only felt as member of the Tijāniyya when he sat in the circle of the *wazīfa*, the daily group recitation that is mandatory for members of this Sufi order.¹⁴ Rather than dissociating himself from the Tijāniyya, as Maigari insinuates, Niasse emphasizes his identity as a member of the Muslim *umma* over his particularistic identity as a Tijānī. Although this statement seems to contrast with his many declarations made at the beginning of his career, where he described the Tijāniyya as the supreme path to perfect one's faith, it indicates at best a shift in emphasis, and certainly not a renunciation of his Sufi affiliation.

Probably more than anything else, the work that established Niasse's international prominence as a scholar was *Raf^c al-malām*, originally written in the 1940s and first published in the early 1950s. Although primarily a treatise in defense of *qabḍ* (i.e., folding the arms in front of the chest during ritual prayer), the significance of this text lies in the position Niasse takes in a wider debate among scholars of Islamic law about the status of the *madhāhib*, or Sunni Schools of Law, and the application of *ijtihād*, i.e. independent juridical reasoning based on direct recourse to the Qur^{ān} and the Sunna. Following the argument Muḥammad b. °Alī al-Sanūsī (d. 1276/1859) had developed in his *Īqāz al-wasnān* a century earlier, Niasse rejects the blind imitation (*taqlīd*) of previous authorities and supports an approach, already taken by al-Sanūsī's teacher Aḥmad b. Idrīs (d. 1253/1837), that seeks the answer to legal questions by immediately drawing on the sayings and the practice of the Prophet.¹⁵ In the case of ritual prayer, this meant, according to Niasse, that the worshipper was supposed to raise his or her hands at certain junctures during prayer (*raf^c al-yadayn*), to keep the arms folded in front of the chest (*qabḍ*)

¹⁴ Interview with al-Ḥasan Cissé, Medina Baye, December 2, 1996. Cf. Maigari, *al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm*, 162.

¹⁵ See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Raf^c al-malām*, 7-37. On al-Sanūsī's *Īqāz al-wasnān* see Vikør, *Sufi and Scholar*, 221-228 and id., *Sanusi Studies*, 57-68. Wright offers a detailed discussion of *Raf^c al-malām* and Niasse's legal methodology ("Embodied Knowledge," 262-266).

rather than hanging at the sides (*sadl*) when in a standing position, to begin the recitation of the Fātiḥa with the *basmala* (i.e., the formula “In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”), to repeat the word *amīn* aloud when the Imam finishes the recitation of the Fātiḥa, and finally to pronounce the formula “May peace and the mercy of God be upon you” twice at the end of the ritual prayer. In all these details Niasse’s position deviates from standard Mālikī practice, predominant in West Africa, and in all instances Niasse quotes directly from the *ḥadīth* in order to legitimize his departure from Mālik’s school.¹⁶ With *Rafʿ al-malām*, the Senegalese shaykh established himself as an expert of Islamic jurisprudence, capable of drawing directly on the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth* and qualified to make authoritative legal judgments.

Virtually all followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse adopted *qabḍ* in their ritual prayer. In several, though by no means all, areas where the *fayḍa* spread, the practice gave rise to prolonged inner-Muslim controversies. It seems that these controversies were not the immediate result of Niasse’s stance in jurisprudential matters pertaining to prayer, but rather triggered by the fact that *qabḍ* became a visible marker of membership in the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*. Whereas the other details of prayer practice never became part of the controversy, the question of the proper position of the arms took center stage in the debate, culminating in violent confrontations between followers and opponents of Niasse in Northern Nigeria during the 1950s. In other words, it was *qabḍ* as a symbol that gave rise to a series of acrimonious exchanges between West African Muslims, both at the level of the followers and at the scholarly level, as reflected in countless texts that attack or

¹⁶ It should be noted that Niasse was by no means the first Muslim scholar in West Africa who adopted *qabḍ* and thus deviated from Mālikī practice. His predecessors in this respect include al-Sanūsī (Vikør, *Sufi and Scholar*, 224), the early nineteenth-century Sudanese Sufi and scholar Muḥammad Majdhūb (Hofheinz, *Internalising Islam*, 528-529), and Niasse’s contemporary ʿAbdallāh wuld Shaykh Sidiyya (CAOM Aff Pol 2259/1, Gouverneur Général de l’A.O.F., Direction des Affaires Politiques, Bureau des Affaires Musulmanes, Revue des questions musulmanes en A.O.F., Avril 1955). For references to earlier Mauritanian debates about the positions of the arms in ritual prayer see the thematic index in *MLG III*, entry *qabḍ*.

defend the practice.¹⁷ Of course, these debates had wider social and political implications, especially in those regions where *qabd* emerged as the most important public marker of group identity within the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*.¹⁸ As far as the career of Ibrāhīm Niasse is concerned, the *qabd* dispute helped to build his image of a battle-hardened defender of the practice of the Prophet and thus emerge as an internationally renowned scholar of Islam.

After the 1951 trip to Kano and the Ḥijāz, Niasse became an incessant traveler. During the 1950s, most trips led him to other West African countries, in addition to his visits to Mecca, which he now undertook almost annually during the *hajj* season. However, from 1959 onwards, he added new destinations to his itinerary. His travels took him to Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq in the Middle East; Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China in Asia, as well as France in Europe. On a visit to Egypt 1961, he was received by Gamal Abdel Nasser and established a personal relationship with him.¹⁹ During the same visit, he was invited to lead the Friday Prayer in the prestigious al-Azhar Mosque, a rare, or, as his West African followers continue to emphasize, unique honor for a black African. A few years later Niasse was asked to join the Academy of Islamic Studies (*Majma' al-buḥūth al-islāmiyya*) based in Cairo and participated in several international conferences convened by this organization.²⁰ This was the time of intense competition between Egypt and Saudi Arabia for influence in the Islamic world, and the move to invite Niasse, as well as other Muslim personalities who were already part of the Muslim World League, can partly be interpreted as an Egyptian attempt to draw internationally renowned scholars to their side. However, Niasse also assumed official functions in other international

¹⁷ See the details in Seesemann, "Nach der Flut," 633-637.

¹⁸ For a discussion of these implications see Loimeier, *Islamic Reform*, 79-83, and Seesemann and Soares, "As Good Muslims as Frenchmen," 106-107.

¹⁹ The contact between Niasse and Nasser was facilitated by the former Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, an acquaintance of Niasse since 1952. See Kane, "Shaikh al-Islam," 309.

²⁰ For details see Seesemann, "Nach der Flut," 722-725.

Islamic forums. He was a member of the General Islamic Conference for Jerusalem, a short-lived initiative by Muslim scholars to support the cause of the Palestinians before the Six-Day-War of 1967. In 1964, he served as the vice president of the Islamic World Congress held in Karachi, the highest international office Niasse held during his career. Other organizations he joined include the Association of Islamic Universities based in Rabat and the High Islamic Council in Algiers.²¹

One prominent theme of the international Islamic conventions held during that period was *da'wa*, or the call to Islam. Niasse addressed this topic in several lectures given at such occasions and soon acquired the reputation of a gifted proselytizer among his Arab colleagues. He established relationships with al-Azhar University in Cairo and the Qarawiyyīn Mosque-College in Fez, which resulted in Senegalese student delegations going to study in Morocco and Egypt, and eventually also in Azhar-educated Egyptian teachers coming to Kaolack to train students there. Although these activities had no direct bearing on Niasse's role as a Sufi shaykh, the wide recognition he gained in the Arab and Islamic world further increased the high regard in which he was held by his West African followers. From their perspective, his career as Shaykh al-Islām—a title they often use when referring to him—was a further proof of his supreme rank in the hierarchy of living saints, and his international standing added to their self-perception as members of a religious movement that transcended the African continent.²²

From the 1950s onwards, Niasse's rise as a Muslim leader of international stature also had repercussions in the political arena, initially primarily within Senegal and later also in the wider context of African nationalism. In a series of Senegalese elections, Niasse supported

²¹ Ibid., 711.

²² This perspective comes out clearly in a recent collection of newspaper reports, mostly from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and other scattered sources compiled by a Senegalese follower in order to document Niasse's international career and his reception in the Arab world. See Thiam, 25 *Sana*.

Lamine Gueye and his *Section Française Internationale Ouvrière* against Léopold Senghor's *Bloque Démocratique Sénégalais*, which nonetheless became the dominant force in Senegalese politics.²³ In 1957, he became the co-founder, together with Cheikh Tidjane Sy, of the *Parti de la Solidarité Sénégalaise*, a short-lived and ultimately failed attempt to unite Muslims under the banner of a political party.²⁴ Several African independence leaders and later heads of state counted among his personal acquaintances, most notably Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Guinea's Sékou Touré. In one of his famous polemical treatises, *Ifrīqiyya li-l-Ifrīqiyyīn* ("Africa to the Africans," 1960), Niasse ran a fierce attack on the then-archbishop of Dakar (and later founder of the Society of St. Pius X), Marcel Lefebvre, who had published a diatribe against Islam in a Catholic weekly. Although it is quite a stretch of imagination to describe Niasse as an African nationalist on account of this short text,²⁵ "Africa to the Africans" can be read as testimony of his ambitions to establish himself as the voice of African Muslims more generally. Contrary to the claim of previous authors who interpreted Niasse's political activities as the reflection of his rivalries with other Muslim leaders or as attempts to increase his political or economic capital,²⁶ his excursions into politics can best be understood as attempts to ensure a stronger presence of Islam in public matters, be it in the realm of family law, education, or the representation of Muslim interests in the government.

Related to Niasse's constant endeavor to insert Islam into the public arena is a further aspect that also helps to explain the success of his Sufi revival. His role as a West African Muslim religious leader went beyond the function usually assigned to the so-called marabouts in

²³ For details see Loimeier, *Säkularer Staat*, 130-143.

²⁴ See Coulon, "Gaullisme musulman"; Seesemann, "Nach der Flut," 675-688.

²⁵ This is the view expressed in Hiskett, "Community of Grace," 108-109. A very elaborate argument regarding Niasse's panfricanism is offered in Wright, "Embodied Knowledge," Chapter 4.

²⁶ See in particular Behrman, *Brotherhoods and Politics*, and Coulon, *Marabout et prince*.

studies perpetuating the *Islam noir*-paradigm. He was more than a patron mediating between government agencies and the interests of his clients, even though this was a task that he also fulfilled effectively. However, it was intimately connected to his objective to carve out greater space for Islam. In order to do so, he embraced certain aspects of colonial modernity and tried to turn them into assets for his followers and his movement as a whole.

One of the earliest examples is his establishment of the first agricultural cooperative in Senegal in 1947, soon followed by the introduction of mechanized farming.²⁷ Around the same time he adopted new organizational patterns that were established alongside the *ṭarīqa* model with its spiritual hierarchy. The *Jamʿiyyat Anṣār al-Dīn*, “Association of the Helpers of the Religion,” created in Senegal in the late 1940s, served as an umbrella organization for regional and local groups that were meant to further the cause of Muslims in general, although most members were recruited from the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa*. Towards the end of the 1950s, Niassé undertook a major effort to make the hitherto dormant *Anṣār al-Dīn* more functional, ordering his followers to set up local sections in villages and urban neighborhoods, to be led by fully-fledged steering committees consisting of a president, several vice presidents, a general secretary and a treasurer.²⁸ In the 1960s, similar structures were put in place in other West African countries, this time under the name Islamic African Union, which recruited its members particularly in Ghana and Nigeria.²⁹

The organizational changes were complemented by Niassé’s constant promotion of the use of modern technologies to support the association’s agenda. In the 1950s his Nigerian followers were among the first to go into the printing business, still not widespread in West

²⁷ Interview with Mor Abdou Ndiaye, Niassé’s former secretary and accountant, Kaolack, December 2, 1997. See also Behrman, *Muslim Brotherhoods*, 200-201.

²⁸ Kane, “Tijāniyya reformée,” 42.

²⁹ See Hiskett, “Community of Grace,” 114, where he also reproduces a membership card.

Africa at the time. They produced large quantities of Niasse's writings and even his photos that reached a wide circulation in the growing network of affiliated *zāwiyas*. At a time when some of the more conservative Muslim scholars rejected the idea to broadcast the recitation of the Qurʾān over the radio, Niasse wrote a legal opinion expressing his strong support, arguing that it was mandatory for Muslims to embrace every innovation (*bidʿa*) that promotes piety or serves the common good or helps to spread the message of Islam. For him, there was no doubt that technological advances such as printing, broadcasting stations, or loudspeakers fell into this category. Likewise, he regarded modern means of transportation, such as ships, cars, or airplanes, and communication, such as the telephone and tape recorders, as blessings for Muslims, as they helped them to practice their religion and work for its spread more efficiently than before.³⁰ Niasse was also one of the first West African scholars to write a book explaining the rules that apply to pilgrims who travel to Mecca by plane.³¹

Like other Muslim religious leaders of his time, including, for instance, Shaykh Ḥamallāh or several members of the Sy, Tall, and Mbacké families in Senegal and Mali, Niasse led his followers on the path to mystical knowledge of God and to the perfection of their faith. In addition—and this is a feature that, at least initially, set him apart from most of his peers—he also provided answers to the question of how Muslims could reconcile their religious identity with the profound transformations of the late colonial and early postcolonial period. It would go too far to describe this approach as “modern Sufism,” but Niasse's understanding of being a Sufi included

³⁰ See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *al-Ḥujja al-bāliḡha* and id., *Majmūʿ thalāth ajwiba*. The latter text also contains the legal opinion of the Emir of Zaria who was opposed to broadcasting the Qurʾān. The debate is analyzed in Umar, “Fatwa and Counter-Fatwa.” Shortly thereafter Niasse wrote *al-Ḥujja al-bāliḡha*, a longer exposition on the same topic that makes a strong case for openness towards technological innovations. See also the document published in Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Saʿādat al-anām*, 183-185, written in response to the first landing of men on the moon.

³¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Manāsik al-ḥajj*.

a strong emphasis on active engagement with the wider society, rather than withdrawal from it. This is epitomized in Niasse's *Risāla ilā Niyāmī* ("Letter to Niamey"), written in the early 1970s in response to the allegation that he had abandoned the Tijāniyya. He begins by strongly dismissing the rumors and then describes the Tijānī path as consisting of asking God for forgiveness (*istighfār*), saying blessings on the Prophet Muḥammad (*al-ṣalāt 'alā l-nabī*), and pronouncing the formula "There is not deity but God." Thereafter, he tackles the claim, raised by the author of a letter to which his *Risāla* constitutes a response, that Muslims are in the process of turning away from the Tijāniyya because it failed to provide solutions for the challenges of the time. He writes:

May God enlighten the African Muslim, so that he realizes that the problem does not lie in the fact that millions of Muslims are committed to the *ṭarīqa* as I have defined it. These millions ... are among the best sons of Africa. We see their positive presence in the mosques and places of worship, in the farms and in the schools, in the universities and in the market, in political parties and parliaments, in the government and in courtrooms, in the factories and other sectors.³²

Niasse concludes his letter with an appeal to all Muslims to work together for the development of their countries and the African continent as a whole. For him, Sufism had to respond to the challenges of the time, and the spiritually accomplished Sufis he sought to train were supposed to become the vanguard of this mission. In his appraisal of Niasse's achievements, the late al-Ḥasan Cissé takes up the notion of the Sufi as *ibn al-waqt*, "the son of the moment," which early Muslim mystics used to emphasize the necessity of submitting and adapting to God's decree whatever it may entail, and characterizes him as follows:

Shaykh Ibrahim was the best example of a Sufi according to the description 'The Sufi is the son of his hour (ibn waqtihi).' He will respond to the needs of the time. At every moment he is dealing with the requirements of that moment. The Muslim who is greatest in understanding is he who submits to the rule of his hour. That is, he gives everything the position it requires in action and speech. He is a

³² Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Risāla ilā Niyāmī*, 5-6.

person moving with time in a circle. He does not attempt to stop time, not to become stagnant in it, nor to regress in it. His effort is aimed at continually moving forward.³³

Niasse's peculiar combination of facilitating access to mystical knowledge with a conscious way of tackling the exigencies of colonial and post-colonial modernity is perhaps the most important factor driving his Sufi revival.

Patterns of Expansion and Conflict

I began this book with the vignette about the man whose meat failed to cook after attending the congregational prayer led by Ibrāhīm Niasse. If we interpret the anecdote literally, it appears to emphasize the promise of immunity from hellfire for those who follow Niasse and thus seems to confirm received wisdom about "African Islam" and "maraboutism." However, it can also be read as a powerful metaphor that offers the clue for the understanding of the Sufi revival launched by Niasse. Precisely because the meat retained its material substance while on the fire, it was radically transformed in the process. As such, it stands for the transformation of Niasse's disciples who undergo spiritual training: Although they do not (or rather: should not, in accordance with the *Malāmatiyya* ideal) show any outward signs of their inner state, inwardly they have been deeply transformed by the mystical experience.

At the heart of Niasse's Sufi revival lies his method of spiritual training, which he devised by drawing on precedents in the *Tijāniyya*, as well as on earlier Sufi traditions. Above all, it was the easier access to experiential knowledge of God to more people, facilitated by this method, that triggered the large-scale expansion of the *Tijāniyya* in West Africa and beyond. However, the proliferation of mystical experiences had several side effects. Firstly, it increased

³³ Cissé, *Revivalist*, 11.

the chance that Sufi secrets became public. Secondly, it raised the problem of containing the occasional outbreaks of mystical ecstasy among some followers, as highlighted in several sections of the present study. Thirdly, the greater public exposure of certain Sufi beliefs and practices invited bogus shaykhs to capitalize on the boom of the emerging religious market. These side effects reinforced each other and created the specific dynamic that propelled the movement's emergence and spread.

In theory, the application of the principle of the *Malāmatiyya*, as understood by Niasse, amounts to an act of camouflage that hides the traces of the disciple's profound inner transformation from public view. As illustrated in several chapters of this book, reality occasionally fell short of the lofty ideals. The tensions between doctrinal demands and practical application, between scholarly interpretation and popular adaptation, situated in the context of an expanding public sphere in late colonial West Africa, can supply us with the key to the spectacular development of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*. To its members, the history of their movement may appear as a seamless success story and the fulfillment of a prophecy. But it is also a history of ruptures and conflicts, many of which were caused by the very fact that Sufi secrets were divulged to a wider public. On the one hand, this helped Niasse to make many Muslims embrace his teachings and seek training in *tarbiya*. On the other hand, there were many others, Sufis as well as non-Sufis, who remained utterly opposed to the *Jamā'a*.

Tarbiya gave millions of Muslims access to new spiritual dimensions hitherto beyond their reach. Mystical secrets that were previously well guarded by few virtuosi now left the circles of the scholarly elite within the Tijāniyya and were eventually leaked to outsiders. In the course of this process, certain aspects of Sufi teachings, particularly the more sensitive and subtle ones such as the vision of God, were potentially subject to distortion and would provoke

criticism from other Muslims. By dispensing spiritual training on an unprecedented scale, Niasse and his deputies triggered a chain reaction: the larger the number of people who attained mystical knowledge, the higher the likelihood of rule violations and the appearance of impostors; the more frequent the rule violations and the more flagrant the excesses, the more forceful the criticism from outsiders; the stronger the opposition to the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* and the more acrimonious the debates, the firmer sense of group identity among its members.

As highlighted in Chapter Three, this mechanism characterized the *Jamā'a* from its very beginnings, when some of the enraptured disciples failed to complete their journey on the path and went out of bounds. As much as the deputies tried to stay in control, they could not prevent the spread of Sufi secrets among outsiders. To many people, the prospect of partaking in these secrets made membership in the *Jamā'a* appealing; to many others, the claims connected with these secrets were simply outrageous or even blasphemous. The public debates triggered by the new mystical practices took place against the backdrop of colonial modernity, when new means of communication connected people in areas that previously had little contact with each other. Spiritual education was drawn into the growing spiritual marketplace of the late colonial economies.³⁴ As a result, new actors appeared on the scene and turned *tarbiya* into a religious commodity, although they lacked the necessary qualification as training masters. Yet, rather than containing the spread of the *fayḍa*, the ensuing polarization turned out to be highly productive, as it strengthened the internal cohesion of the movement and even attracted new followers. The constant disputes did not weaken the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*; rather, they helped the community to find its identity in the dissociation from the “deniers” (*munkirūn*). Thus, the large-scale

³⁴ For a compelling analysis of a similar spiritual marketplace in West Africa see Soares, *Prayer Economy*.

expansion of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* can be attributed not only to Niasse's *tarbiya* method itself, but also to its largely unintended side effects.

A Nigerian episode of 1964 illustrates the effects of *tarbiya*'s greater public exposure very well. In that year, Abū Bakr Gumi, the Chief Qāḍī of Northern Nigeria who later became the leader of the reformist, anti-Sufi Yan Izala movement, wrote a letter to Niasse demanding an explanation for utterances purportedly made by some of his followers, thus indicating that *tarbiya* had indeed become a matter of public debate. The gist of the letter, together with Niasse's response, is worth to be quoted at length:

I would like to ask you to enlighten me about the following jurisprudential matters pertaining to Sufism. Among us (i.e., in Northern Nigeria) are people who are affiliated with you and call themselves your aspirants. They maintain that they train their disciples by means of seclusion (*khalawāt*). During seclusion the disciple dedicates himself to the worship of God until he reaches the desired goal, which consists of complete obliteration in a mystical state (*ḥāl*), so that he responds to every question his master asks, "It is God." If he is asked about himself, he says that he is God; if he is asked about a chair or anything else, his answer is the same. What verdict has to be applied to him? How is this procedure to be evaluated according to the Sacred Law? (...) Please give me your legal opinion and support your response with evidence from the Qur'ān and the authentic Prophetic traditions.³⁵

Gumi's inquiry reveals parallels with the situation that occurred in Saloum more than thirty years earlier, when Aḥmad Dem took issue with the alleged proliferation of visions of God among Niasse's followers.³⁶ Once again, some of the latter had apparently violated the rule of

³⁵ Translated from the version published in Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Ijābat al-fatwā*, 1.

³⁶ There are several other instances where claims about the vision of God gave rise to fierce controversy, sometimes even erupting in violent clashes. These conflicts largely followed the pattern of the first *ru'ya* debate of 1931–1932 in Saloum and occurred in the Sokoto region during the 1950s and in Northern Ghana and Togo between 1960 and 1970 (see Hiskett, "Community of Grace," 132–133; Ryan, "Tijani Sufism," 221; Delval, *Musulmans au Togo*, 242–247). In all cases, trouble began when claims about the vision of God became public. Opponents of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* instantly accused Niasse's followers of idolatry (*shirk*) and infidelity (*kufḥ*). In response, some of the deputies wrote scholarly treatises defending their

secrecy and thus invited criticism from outsiders. In his polite reply, written in the Saudi-Arabian town of Medina, Niasse made no attempt to deny Gumi's allegations or to clarify the role of seclusion in his version of *tarbiya*.³⁷ He gave the following explanation:

You have asked me about statements made by some of those who claim to be engaged in wayfaring and have realized arrival, illumination, or annihilation. All these expressions are common among Sufis and have the same meaning. In the initial stage their love of the Real and their immersion in the Divine Presence may make them utter things that go in that direction. This can reach a stage where they neither hear nor see what happens in the world. Then they address everything as God. Yet, they never mean that what they see or perceive is indeed God, the Exalted and Almighty. It is the same that happened to the Prophet Abraham. He saw a star and said, "This is my Lord." Then he saw the moon and said, "This is my Lord." Then he saw the sun and said, "This is my Lord." The Exalted said: "He was not among the polytheists." [See Sura 2:135, 16:123, and others; cf. Sura 6:79]. Had Abraham indeed meant that the star was God, he would have been a polytheist. But you will notice that the mention of Abraham in the Qur^ʿān always occurs with the negation of polytheism. Those who are acquainted with these states know that they do not last long. In any case, we will expose everyone who contradicts the Qur^ʿān as an unbeliever, because we are the guardians of the sharia. If he later repents and recants, we will accept him back in our ranks. In any case, there will always be truthful ones and liars.³⁸

Niasse here draws on the example of Abraham to justify the mystical experiences of his disciples. Interestingly, he omits the reference to the story Moses hearing God's voice from a

theological and mystical position. Often the exchange would only end when both sides succumbed to attrition.

³⁷ It is not clear why Gumi described *tarbiya* as a practice that entails seclusion (*khalwa*). Several other non-Tijānī sources from Niger and Nigeria suggest this, too, such as ʿAlī Abū Bakr in the epigraph of Chapter Two. Mervyn Hiskett claimed that *tarbiya* replaced *khalwa* in Niasse's approach ("Community of Grace," 120). As discussed in the section "*Tarbiya* – An Overview" in Chapter Two, it was a general principle of the Tijāniyya, and not only of Niasse, that spiritual training can dispense with seclusion. However, this does not mean that seclusion has no place in the Tijāniyya at all. Jean-Louis Triaud went so far as to argue in his analysis of a chapter in al-Ḥājj ʿUmar's *Rimāḥ* that *khalwa* "opened the door to a possible career of sainthood" (Triaud, "Khalwa," 58). Yet, there are no indications that seclusion was part of spiritual training as practiced by Ibrāhīm Niasse, even though he left written statements about the rules that a person has to follow when going into seclusion. This suggests that Niasse saw *khalwa* as a legitimate practice that was, however, not required to attain mystical knowledge and therefore probably limited to very few advanced travelers on the path.

³⁸ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Ijābat al-fatwā*, 2-3.

tree, which he often used to explain how a disciple can become the medium of Divine speech when making ecstatic utterances (*shatḥiyyāt*).³⁹ His treatment of the subject in *Kāshif al-ilbās*, discussed in Chapter Three, is also of a different character. Comparing his response to Gumi or his definition of the Tijāniyya in his letter to Niamey as consisting of various recitation formulas to other documents, most notably his letters and published speeches,⁴⁰ reveals how Niasse drew on different registers depending on the audience. When addressing the outsiders, he kept a relatively low profile and presented the teachings of the Tijāniyya in rather general terms. To the insiders, however, he conveyed his message in markedly different ways; ways that can partially explain why some of his followers came to make exaggerated claims about their alleged superiority over other Muslims. A formidable example is the sermon he gave in Zaria in 1971 during one of his last trips to Nigeria. In one segment of the sermon he made a statement that, in retrospective, can be interpreted as an indication of his imminent passing:

Know that the world will perish soon. As soon as its time is up, we will all gather in front of God. When we assemble on this day, the closest to God among His servants will be the Prophet. His companions will be those next to the Prophet, and after them the companions of Aḥmad al-Tijānī, because the Prophet counts them among his own companions. On the last day I will not permit any saint, apart from Aḥmad al-Tijānī, to stand between the Prophet and me. And I will not permit any member of the Tijāniyya to stand closer to the Prophet's companions than my own companions. It is as if I already see this time. Know that it will come soon. When it comes you will realize whether what I tell you is a lie.⁴¹

The importance of this statement not only lies in Niasse's claim that he and his followers will be occupy a privileged place in the Hereafter, but also his insistence on closeness to the

³⁹ See Chapter Three, note 106.

⁴⁰ Most of these speeches were given during major religious events in Medina Baye (notably the *mawlid*, the annual celebration of the Prophet's birthday), or on the occasion of visits to his disciples all over West Africa. One such speech, given in Nouakchott in 1968, has been discussed in Chapter Two to show how he communicated some of the basics of *tarbiya* to ordinary followers. Shaykh Tijānī Cissé has recently edited a collection of speeches and other, hitherto unpublished pieces by Niasse (see Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Sa'ādāt al-anām*).

⁴¹ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Majlis Zāriyā*, 15-16.

Prophet. For him, his path meant nothing other than following the Prophet. It is certainly no coincidence that panegyrics of the Prophet stand out in the large body of poetry composed by Niasse. His verses express over and over again how his thoughts and his longing evolved around Muḥammad, and he repeatedly alludes to visionary encounters with his beloved role model. This type of mystical or inner relationship with the Prophet complemented his constant endeavor of outwardly following his Sunna, as epitomized in his adoption of the *qabḍ* position in ritual prayer. For Niasse, this way of following the *ṭarīqa muḥammadiyya*, the path of Muḥammad, combined with his method of spiritual education, allowed his disciples to realize their full potential as believers (*muʾminīn*) and would eventually entitle them to dwell in the immediate vicinity of the Prophet in the Hereafter.

With the rise of so-called Islamic reform movements in large parts of late colonial West Africa such ideas have increasingly come under attack from other Muslims who denied the value of this spiritual experience and favored a different conception of what it means to be a believer. The mounting pressure from the critics can partly explain why Niasse chose to convey his message differently, depending on which public he addressed. However, the apparent dominance of “reformists,” represented by Muslim scholars such as Abū Bakr Gumi in Nigeria or Cheikh Touré in Senegal and more recently by an array of new Islamic movements and intellectuals, in public discourses about Islam in many countries in post-independence West Africa should not lead us to premature assumptions about the demise of Sufism. Nor should we take the derogatory depiction of Sufism in West Africa as “popular” or “African” Islam, prevalent among “reformists” as well as in writings following the French *Islam noir* tradition, at face value.

The present study has focused on Ibrāhīm Niasse and his followers as people who had genuine religious experiences, and who saw the events unfolding during and after the emergence

of the divine flood through the lens of their religious worldview. It has demonstrated that the beliefs and practices of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* cannot be reduced to some crude popular Islam or a diluted, “Africanized” version of Sufism. One of the major factors that attracted people to the *Jamā'a* was the prospect of gaining access to mystical knowledge, not as an aim in itself, but as a means of perfecting one’s belief (*īmān*). Against standard accounts that explain the success of Sufi orders in terms of “saint veneration,” this study has advanced a perspective that values the ideas and experiences of the practitioners and elucidates their religious world. Such a perspective shifts the focus away from vague notions of saintly charisma and the followers’ alleged quest for *baraka* or blessings, which have been prevalent in many previous attempts to explain the strong presence of Sufi orders in many West African Muslim societies, as well as the success of Ibrāhīm Niasse. The disciple’s profound inner transformation, captured so well in the vignette of the uncooked meat, highlights a central feature of Niasse’s Sufi revival that underscores the need to change the script of “African Islam.” The interaction between leaders and followers takes center stage in this alternative script, and the longing for knowledge, mystical as well as exoteric, embodied as well as discursive, replaces the obscure motive of *baraka*. The force that drove the emergence and spread of the *Jamā'at al-fayḍa* was not some obscure popular mysticism or “traditional” Islam, but the dynamic interplay between leaders, followers, and opponents, situated in the context of the rapid changes associated with colonial and postcolonial modernity. Niasse’s *Jamā'a* is more than a simple product of this new environment or of the emergence of a larger public sphere. Rather, it played a major role in shaping religious modernity in West Africa by making Sufi beliefs and practices compatible with the exigencies of modernity and inaugurating a Sufi revival, with reverberations well beyond West Africa and the African continent.

Far from being a debased version of Sufism or a typical expression of “African Islam,” the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* has been and continues to be a valid and genuine way for Muslims to live according to their religion. This conclusion is not as obvious as it seems. The dominant tendency in the literature is still to assign the Sufi orders the part of popular Islam, while the “reformists,” whether identified with the Salafiyya, the Wahhābiyya, or Islamism, appear as the guardians of orthodoxy and sometimes even as the vanguard of some Islamic enlightenment. The history of Niassa’s divine flood and his movement underscores the need to question common categories and essentialist ascriptions. This holds true with regard to long prevalent ideas about Sufism’s fate in face of modernity, and even more with regard to the label “reform.” Although John Paden’s characterization of the *Jamāʿat al-fayḍa* as “reformed Tijāniyya” misleadingly suggests that Niassa departed from the Tijānī tradition, there is no doubt that his followers saw him as a great reformer of Islam. Studying Sufism in context therefore also means to scrutinize hegemonic discourses. Who claims authority to define Sufism, Islam, and reform? How do competing claims play out in practice? These are some of the broader questions Niassa’s Sufi revival invites us to ask, rather than drawing premature conclusions about the decay of Sufism.

Glossary

<i>awliyāʾ</i>	plural of <i>walī</i> (q.v.)
<i>awrād</i>	plural of <i>wird</i> (q.v.)
<i>baqāʾ</i>	subsistence; the state that ideally follows <i>fanāʾ</i> (q.v.)
<i>barzakh</i>	intermediary, isthmus; everything that unites and separates two things
<i>bāṭin</i>	hidden; the inward, “esoteric” dimension of Islam
<i>bidʿa</i>	unlawful innovation; the opposite of Sunna (example of the Prophet)
<i>dhāt</i>	essence, bodily presence
<i>dhikr</i>	lit., remembrance; recitation of Divine names, often in form of the <i>haylala</i> (i.e., the formula <i>lā ilāha illā Allāh</i> ; “There is no deity but God”)
<i>duʿāʾ</i>	supplicatory prayer
<i>fath</i>	lit., opening; illumination
<i>fanāʾ</i>	annihilation; loss of the self in the moment of mystical experience of the Divine
<i>fayḍa</i>	emanation, effusion, outpouring; the Divine Flood predicted by Aḥmad al-Tijānī
<i>ghawth</i>	succor; title referring to the highest-ranking saint in a particular era
<i>ḥaḍra</i>	spiritual presence; term applied to the spheres of the spiritual cosmos
<i>ḥāl</i>	lit., state; the spiritual state accorded to the mystic by God, occasionally accompanied by ecstatic utterances (see <i>shaḥḥ</i>)
<i>ḥaqīqa</i>	truth, divine reality
<i>hijra</i>	emigration; the Prophet Muḥammad’s forced relocation from Mecca to Medina, later emulated by other Muslims
<i>himma</i>	spiritual energy

<i>ijāza</i>	license to teach or transmit knowledge; in the Tijāniyya: permission to pass on the <i>wird</i> (q.v.) or to appoint deputies (see <i>muqaddam</i>)
<i>ijtihād</i>	independent juridical reasoning; the formulation of legal opinions on the basis of direct recourse to the Qur ^ʿ ān and the Sunna
<i>jadhb</i>	rapture; God’s attraction of the aspirant to divine reality
<i>karāma</i>	miracle performed by a saint
<i>kashf</i>	unveiling, disclosure (of special knowledge from God)
<i>khalīfa</i>	lit., vicegerent, successor; caliph (the highest rank in the Tijānī hierarchy)
<i>khalwa</i>	seclusion
<i>khatm</i>	seal, here referring to the supreme position in the hierarchy of saints
<i>maqām</i>	station on the mystical path, spiritual rank
<i>majdhūb</i>	enraptured (see <i>jadhb</i>)
<i>ma^ʿrifa</i>	cognizance, mystical knowledge of God
<i>murabbī</i>	Sufi master who dispenses spiritual training (<i>tarbiya</i>)
<i>murīd</i>	disciple, aspirant to mystical knowledge
<i>munkir</i>	lit., denier; term applied to those who rejected Niasse’s claims and practices
<i>muqaddam</i>	deputy; a rank in the Tijānī hierarchy that allows the holder to initiate disciples
<i>nafs</i>	ego, lower self
<i>qabḍ</i>	the folding of the arms in front of the chest while standing in ritual prayer
<i>quṭb</i>	pole, axis; one of the highest ranks in the hierarchy of saints
<i>ru^ʿya</i>	vision
<i>sanad</i>	lit., support; the chain of transmitters in a teaching <i>ijāza</i> (q.v.), or initiators into a Sufi order

<i>sharīf</i>	descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad
<i>shaḥḥ</i>	ecstatic utterance, made by a Sufi in the state of <i>fanā'</i> (q.v.)
<i>shaykh</i>	master (in the context of Sufism)
<i>silsila</i>	chain of initiation
<i>sulūk</i>	wayfaring; the travel on the mystical path
<i>talibé</i> (Wolof)	disciple, student; from Arabic <i>ṭālib</i>
<i>tafsīr</i>	Qur ^ʿ ān interpretation
<i>tajallī</i>	divine manifestation, theophany
<i>tarbiya</i>	spiritual training
<i>ṭarīqa</i>	lit., path, method; Sufi order
<i>walī</i>	saint, friend of God
<i>wazīfa</i>	lit., assignment; the daily group recitation prescribed in the Tijāniyya
<i>walāya</i>	closeness to God, sainthood
<i>wird</i>	lit., watering place; term applied to the prayer formulas recited by members of a Sufi order
<i>zāhir</i>	manifest; the outward, “exoteric” dimension of Islam
<i>zāwiya</i>	lit., corner; lodge, Sufi center

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