

Living Knowledge in West African Islam

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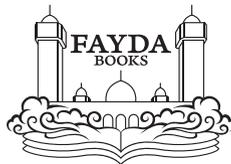
Living Knowledge in West African Islam

The Sufi Community of Ibrāhīm Niasse

By

Zachary Valentine Wright

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Preface

This book concerns the ways in which a prominent West African Muslim community drew on a long legacy of Islamic knowledge transmission to further deepen a contemporary Islamic subjectivity. “This Sufi path,” a Senegalese teacher, Tijānī b. ‘Alī Cissé, told a group of followers who had come to see him in Morocco, “is about becoming a better Muslim.” Indeed, Muslim scholars had long called on a variety of knowledge specializations (*‘ulūm*), including Islamic mysticism and self-purification (“Sufism”), to root Islam in the beings of students.

The intellectual history attempted here depends on case studies of the vast network of students of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1975, Senegal), a network sometimes referred to as the “Community of the Flood” (*Jamā‘at al-fayḍa*) that today spans West Africa and reaches far beyond. Ibrāhīm Niasse was undoubtedly an exceptional personality, but his scholarship adapted long-standing African (and wider Islamic) knowledge traditions surrounding Sufism, Qur’ān learning and Islamic law, among other classical disciplines. Here I make the broader point, that West African religious authority, specifically of Sufi “marabouts,” is illegible without an understanding of the history of Islamic learning in West Africa.

The richness of the Islamic intellectual tradition is such that it appears to the untrained as a vast, unfathomable ocean. One solution has simply been to suggest that this ocean, into the depths of which African scholars have for centuries plunged, is of little or no consequence for understanding the history or anthropology of Muslim African societies. This solution is actually surprisingly understandable, given that the alternative is nothing less than the unsettling prospect of an academic admitting that he really knows very little.

My own solution to this quandary has been to acquire the tools with which to sketch the shape of this ocean. The training and experience so graciously made available to me by my West African hosts and teachers certainly does not give me license to speak as a trained Islamic scholar. Swimming along the shoreline has only given me a fuller appreciation of the ocean’s depth. Nonetheless, the reader should be aware that as a Muslim academic, I take an unusual position in relation to my research subjects. The shallow forays I have made into classical Islamic learning as practiced in West Africa have not only provided me with a wealth of research material concerning African Muslim societies, but also enriched the understanding of my faith. Yet in this work, I make every attempt to respect the rules of analytical distance that characterize academic writing as a worthwhile medium. My intention has been to produce

the most reliable account possible based on my research experience, but to allow readers space to read this account in dialogue with other, alternative narratives. I do not claim objectivity in the absolute sense, nor do I believe any historian can do so. I hope the result is an honest account, where my close positionality does not warp the narrative but rather enriches it.

The study of diverse human cultures, in history as in the present, necessitates a mutual recognition of humanity across vast expanses of time, space, and understandings. Yet this exchange must also recognize the humanity of the “research subject” as he himself understands it, not as defined by a supposedly objective onlooker. I hope that this book conveys the human narrative of an important Muslim community, not only in terms recognized by an external reader, but in terms that resonate with this community’s own perception.

Zachary Wright

Doha, Qatar

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Note on Orthography

Transliteration of Arabic words complies with the system utilized by Brill's *Arabic Literature of Africa* series, as well as the that used by Cambridge's *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. This system is reproduced for reference purposes below.

Well-known African family names are preserved as earlier represented in literature for the sake of continuity. Thus Niasse and Cissé appear as they would on government passports and in earlier academic literature, rather than the Wolof spelling Ñaas and Seesay or the Arabic transliteration Anyās and Sisi. I have opted for the Arabic transliteration of first names in most cases (thus Tijānī rather than Tidiane, Ḥasan rather than Assane, Aḥmad rather than Amadou), unless the name has been thoroughly “Africanized” (Samba, Andal, Ma).

All dates mentioned in the text have been converted to “Common Era” (C.E.) designations, even when sources only indicate the “Hijri” (A.H.) date.

Translations from Arabic, French, and Wolof into English are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

Arabic Transliteration Chart

<i>Arabic letter</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Phonetic equivalent</i>
ا	a	<u>ta</u> lk
ب	b	<u>bo</u> y
ت	t	<u>ta</u> ble
ث	th	<u>ba</u> th
ج	j	jo <u>y</u>
ح	ḥ	–
خ	kh	–
د	d	<u>da</u> y
ذ	dh	<u>th</u> en
ر	r	ru <u>n</u>
ز	z	ze <u>br</u> a
س	s	<u>su</u> n
ش	sh	<u>sh</u> ine
ص	ṣ	–
ض	ḍ	–

(Cont.)

<i>Arabic letter</i>	<i>Transliteration</i>	<i>Phonetic equivalent</i>
ط	ṭ	–
ظ	ẓ	–
ع	ʿ	–
غ	gh	–
ف	f	feast
ق	q	–
ك	k	key
ل	l	love
م	m	mother
ن	n	none
ه	h	health
و	w/ū	weather/food
ي	y/ī	yes/street
ء	ʾ	(glottal stop)
ت	-/t	(silent)/hat
ا	a	bag
ب	i	big
ب	u	bug

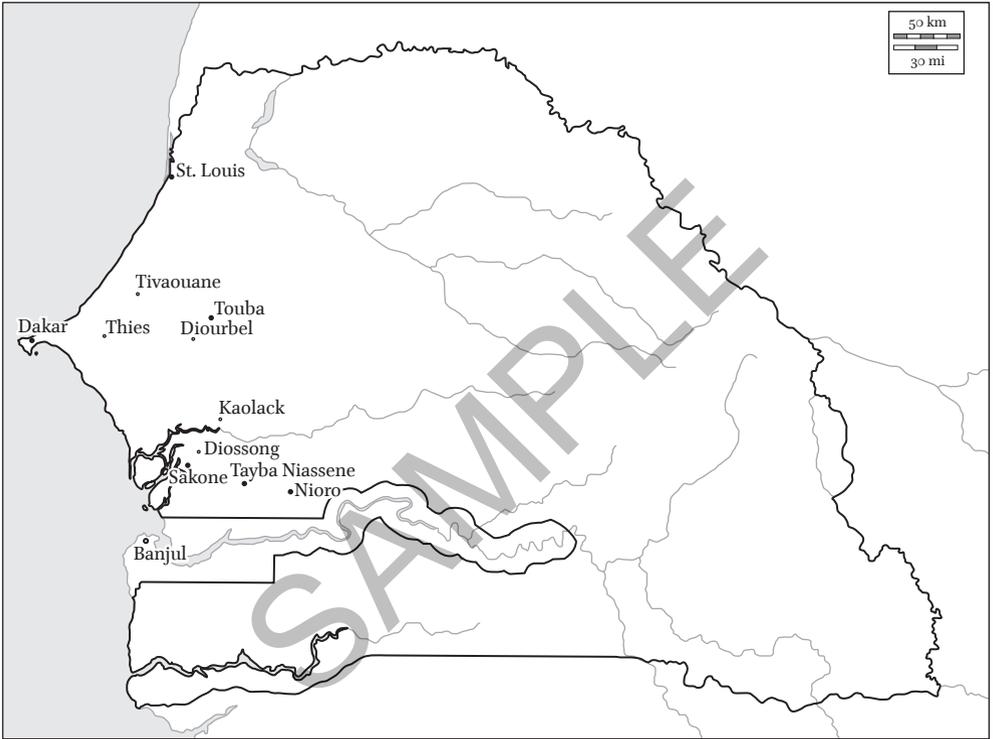


FIGURE 1 *Senegambia in the 19th and early 20th centuries*

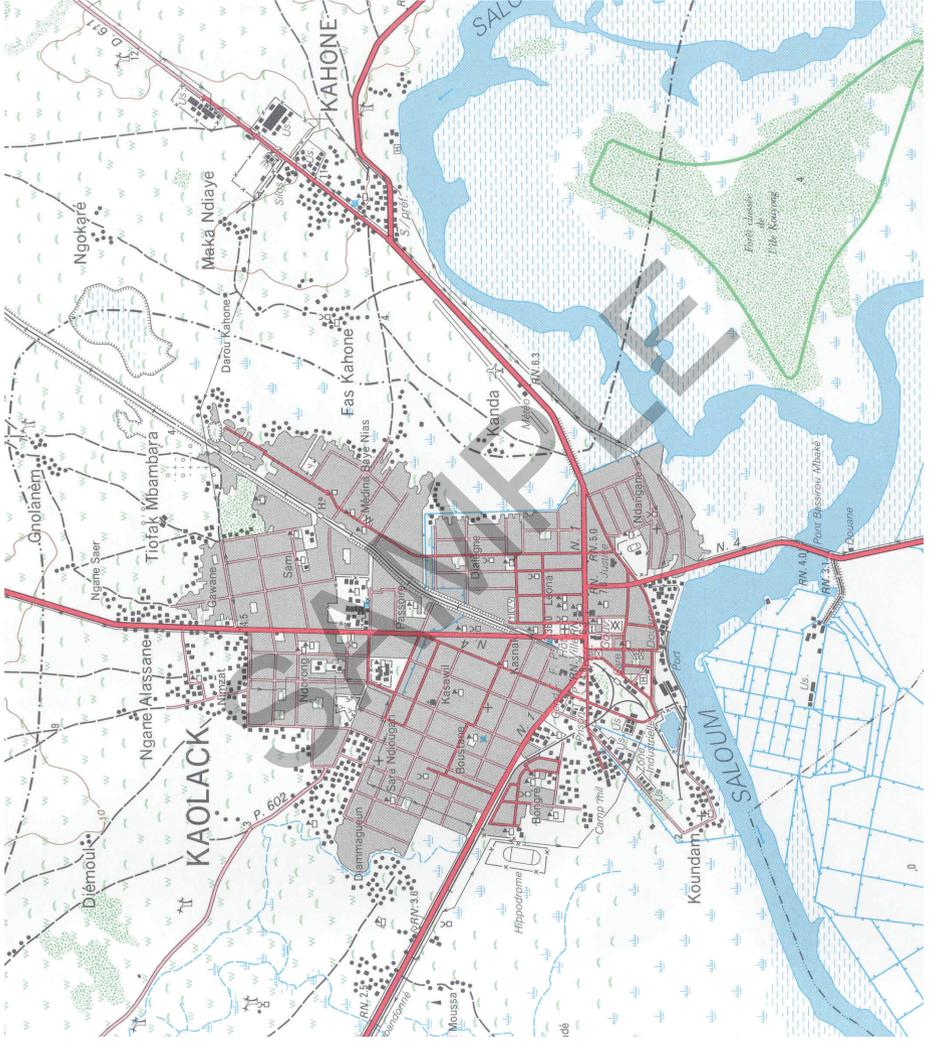


FIGURE 2 Medina-Baye and the City of Kaolack

Glossary

All words are Arabic transliterations unless otherwise indicated.

<i>adab</i>	manners, disposition, <i>habitus</i>
<i>‘ālim</i> (‘ <i>ulamā</i> ’)	scholar(s)
<i>‘aql</i>	mind, intellect
<i>bāṭin</i>	esoteric, hidden
<i>bur</i> (Wolof)	king
<i>ceddo</i> (Wolof)	warrior caste
<i>daara</i> (Wolof)	Qur’ān school
<i>daariya</i> (Wolof)	collective of disciples of a particular marabout
<i>dhāt</i>	bodily presence, essence
<i>dhawq</i>	tasting, spiritual experience
<i>dhikr</i>	liturgical remembrance (of God)
<i>du‘ā</i>	supplication, asking (God)
<i>fanā</i>	annihilation, extinction of the self (in God)
<i>faqih</i> (<i>fuqūhā</i> ’)	jurist(s)
<i>fath</i>	illumination, opening
<i>fayḍa</i>	flood, effulgence, overflowing abundance, grace
<i>fiqh</i>	jurisprudence
<i>gamou</i> (Wolof)	celebration of the Prophet’s birthday
<i>géér</i> (Wolof)	nobility
<i>ghawth</i>	succor, savior
<i>ḥadīth</i>	narration, traditional report (from the Prophet)
<i>ḥaḍra</i> (<i>ḥaḍarāt</i>)	spiritual presence(s)
<i>ḥāl</i>	spiritual state, experience
<i>ḥifẓ</i>	guarding, memorization (of the Qur’ān)
<i>himma</i>	zeal, aspiration, magnetic spiritual power
<i>ḥulūl</i>	incarnation
<i>idhn</i>	permission to teach or to perform a prayer or secret
<i>iḥsān</i>	righteousness, spiritual excellence
<i>ijāza</i>	license to teach from a previous scholar
<i>ijtihād</i>	scholarly reasoning arriving at a new legal opinion
<i>‘ilm</i> (‘ <i>ulūm</i> ’)	knowledge, book learning (disciplines, sciences)
<i>‘ilm al-ḥurūf</i>	the science of letters
<i>istighrāq</i>	drowning, immersion (in God)
<i>jaam</i> (Wolof)	slave
<i>jadhḥ</i>	attraction, rapture

<i>jambur</i> (Wolof)	freeborn (peasant)
<i>karāma</i>	saintly miracle
<i>kashf</i>	unveiling, disclosure
<i>khalifa</i>	inheritor, successor, deputy
<i>khalwa</i>	retreat, spiritual isolation
<i>khatm</i>	seal (of prophecy, sainthood)
<i>kuttāb</i>	Qur'ān school
<i>lycée</i> (French)	high school (secular)
<i>madhhab</i> (<i>madhāhib</i>)	school of thought (jurisprudence)
<i>madrasa</i>	school (formalized)
<i>mahdī</i>	rightly-guided one who will bring a reign of peace near the end of time
<i>majlis</i>	learning circle
<i>maqām</i>	spiritual station, rank
<i>marabout</i> (French)	Muslim scholar, Sufi shaykh
<i>ma'rifa</i>	cognizance, gnosis, experiential knowledge of God
<i>mawlid</i>	celebration of the Prophet's birthday
<i>muqaddam</i>	Sufi instructor, propagator
<i>murīd</i>	Sufi aspirant, disciple
<i>nafs</i>	soul, self, ego, carnal soul, lower self
<i>ñeeño</i> (Wolof)	casted people
<i>qabd</i>	crossing the hands on the chest while standing in the ritual prayer
<i>qalb</i>	heart
<i>quṭb</i>	axial saint, pole of the universe
<i>rūḥ</i>	spirit, soul
<i>ru'ya</i>	seeing, visionary experience
<i>sadl</i>	hanging the arms at the side of the body while stand- ing in prayer
<i>ṣalāt</i>	ritual prayer
<i>sanad</i>	chain of (exoteric) knowledge transmission
<i>seriñ</i> (Wolof)	Qur'ān teacher, Islamic scholar, Sufi shaykh
<i>sharī'a</i>	sacred law
<i>shaykh</i>	Muslim elder, scholar, and/or Sufi trainer
<i>silsila</i>	chain of (Sufi) knowledge transmission
<i>sirr</i> (<i>asrār</i>)	secret(s)
<i>sunna</i>	behavioral model of the Prophet and the early Muslim community
<i>taalibé</i>	(Wolof) student, disciple

<i>tafsīr</i>	Qurʾānic exegesis
<i>tajallī</i>	manifestation (of God)
<i>tarbiya</i>	education, spiritual training
<i>ṭarīqa</i> (<i>ṭurūq</i>)	path, Sufi order
<i>taṣawwuf</i>	science of the soul's purification, Sufism
<i>tëgg</i> (Wolof)	blacksmith caste
<i>walī</i> (<i>awliyāʾ</i>)	friends of God, saints
<i>wird</i>	litany, arrangement of <i>dhikr</i> particular to a Sufi order
<i>xam-xam</i> (Wolof)	knowledge
<i>zāhir</i>	exoteric, apparent, manifest
<i>zakāt</i>	alms tax
<i>zāwiya</i>	place of gathering for a Sufi order

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Publishers Preface

We are happy to make available, the 2nd Edition of this monumental book. It is in our opinion, an amazing source and reference for anyone looking to understand the Prophetic model of the Shaykh (who embodies living knowledge) and the sincere disciple. Fortunately for us, Professor Wright's research has helped uncover one of Islam's greatest hidden realities, that is to say, the West African Islamic culture, educational system and spiritual leadership bares the greatest resemblance of the Prophet Muhammad's Madani Islamic culture, system of education and spiritual education. In many respects, it is indeed a carbon copy.

This Edition was slightly edited to include an important point of clarification and a correction. We hope this important work reaches the masses and stimulates other researchers to investigate the amazing hidden jewel of the West African Islamic culture that endures up to now.

Ibrahim b. Ahmed Dimson
Publisher, Fayda Books

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Introduction

“Where is Ḥasan?” Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse, venerable, moving in crowds, asked his son-in-law and closest disciple, ‘Alī Cissé, about the latter’s son and his own grandson. “I have not seen him all day long.”

‘Alī Cissé responded, “He has begun his spiritual training (*tarbiya*), as you instructed. He is remembering God alone in the mosque.”

“Tell him to come out of the mosque and sit with me. He will know God sitting in my presence.”

When I first began research for this book, Ḥasan Cissé (d. 2008), the grandson of Ibrāhīm Niasse and Imam of the Grand Mosque in Medina-Baye Kaolack, Senegal, related the story of how he came to “know” God, or obtain *ma’rifa* (cognizance, gnosis).¹ The point was simple: true knowledge was contained in people, and transmitted in their company.

Living Knowledge is the story of how a community of West African Muslims, that surrounding the Senegalese Sufi Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse (1900–75), strove to actualize their religious identity, and the historical context in which this happened. Learning Islam was meant as a transformative process, one that changed an ordinary human being into a luminous physical presence. Such an individual acquired the perfection of character necessary to manifest and transmit the religion, to become an isthmus between the material world and the divine realm, the ruby held up to the sunrise. The true meaning of following the example (*sunna*) of the Prophet Muḥammad was to become, like him, “a human being, but not like other human beings, just as a ruby is a stone, but not like other stones.”²

Realizing this extraordinary human potential required, from the long-held perspective of West African Islamic scholarship, the cultivation of individual disposition, a way of being in the world, through the close companionship of students and teachers. Sufism, or “Islamic mysticism,” which became prevalent in West Africa from the nineteenth century on, made use of and deepened such enduring practices of Islamic knowledge transmission. But Sufism did not itself initiate the “maraboutism,” or master-disciple clientalism, for which West African Islam has often been thought synonymous. This book examines one of West Africa’s most prominent Muslim communities as the elaboration

1 Ḥasan Cissé, interview, Medina-Baye Kaolack, Senegal, 2 February 1999.

2 These well-known lines of Arabic poetry of anonymous origin, sometimes ascribed to Muḥammad al-Buṣayrī (d. 1294, Alexandria) or to Abū Mawāhib al-Shadhili (d. 1477, Tunis), are written outside the tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad in Medina.

of a tradition of Islamic scholarly specialization spanning nearly one thousand years of West African history.

Beginning with a young man's 1929 declaration, on a small farm near the banks of Senegal's Saloum River, that he contained an overflowing "flood" (*fayda*) of divine knowledge, the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse has manifested one of the most successful Islamic revivals in the contemporary Muslim world. The shaykh's vibrant intellectual legacy and millions of affiliates to this legacy,³ concentrated in West Africa but increasingly found throughout Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and among Muslim minorities in the West, justify the community's emerging profile in academic literature.⁴ This was a global community unified by the promise of "knowing" God and by the attachment to Ibrāhīm Niasse as the culmination of a long (West African) Islamic scholarly tradition. The challenge for the researcher, then, is to account for the historical novelty of the community's intellectual and social trajectory, while recognizing its formation in centuries of Islamic learning in a West African context.

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- 3 The exact number of affiliates is impossible to verify due to the lack of central organization. Internal estimates circulated in Medina-Baye, Senegal, put the number upwards of 100 million. A recent report by Jordan's Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center gives the same number (probably drawing on internal estimates from various Tijānī websites), and the community's spiritual leader, Tijānī Cissé, as the nineteenth "most influential" Muslim leader in the world. See Abdallah Schleifer (ed.), *The Muslim 500: The 500 Most Influential Muslims* (Amman, Jordan: Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center, 2013), 70–71.
- 4 For full-length works on the movement, see Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrāhīm Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), and several PhD dissertations: Joseph Hill, "Divine Knowledge and Islamic Authority: Religious Specialization among Disciples of Baay Nas" (Yale University, 2007), and Zachary Wright, "Embodied Knowledge in West African Islam: Continuity and Change in the Gnostic Community of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse" (Northwestern University, 2010). Other important articles or chapters on the community include Andrea Brigaglia, "The Fayda Tijāniyya of Ibrāhīm Nyasse: Genesis and Implications of a Sufi Doctrine," *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* 14–15 (2001): 41–56; Ousmane Kane, "Shaikh al-Islam al-Hajj Ibrāhīm Niasse," in *Le Temps Des Marabouts: Itinéraires et Stratégies Islamiques en Afrique Occidentale Française V. 1880–1960*, ed. David Robinson and Jean-Louis Triaud (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 299–316; Ousmane Kane, "La Confrerie 'Tijāniyya Ibrāhimiyya' de Kano et ses liens avec la zawiya mere de Kaolack," *Islam et Societes au Sud du Sahara* 3 (May 1989): 27–40; Christopher Gray, "The Rise of the Niassene Tijāniyya, 1875 to the Present," *Islam et Societes au Sud du Sahara* 2 (May 1988); Mervyn Hiskett, "'The Community of Grace' and its Opponents, the 'Rejecters': A Debate about Theology and Mysticism in Muslim West Africa with Special Reference to its Hausa Expression," *African Language Studies* 17 (1980): 99–140; and John N. Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 73–145.

Ibrāhīm Niasse's *Jamā'at al-fayḍa*, or "community of the divine flood," established its own "holy town" called Medina-Baye a few kilometers outside Kaolack, Senegal, in 1930. It overcame externally perceived ethnic and caste marginality in Senegal, gradually reconciled internal dissensions in the clerical family of al-Ḥājj 'Abdallāh Niasse (d. 1922), and increasingly made itself known to the French and British colonial regimes following World War II. By independence it had emerged as one of three major clerical (or "marabout") communities in Senegal second only to the followers of Mālik Sy (d. 1922) based in Tivaouane and Aḥmad (Amadou) Bamba (d. 1927) in Touba. Ibrāhīm Niasse's community was founded on the teaching of classical Islamic knowledge disciplines (*ʿulūm*) together with a formalized training system (*tarbiya*) for the transmission of the experiential knowledge of God (*maʿrifat Allāh*) on an unprecedented scale. Claiming to be the supreme saint of the age (*quṭb*), Ibrāhīm Niasse developed the doctrine of a special overflowing grace, or flood (*fayḍa*), that permits the teaching of divine cognizance to all Muslims on the path to God.

Ibrāhīm Niasse can also be distinguished from other Senegalese marabouts by his pronounced international following. Beginning with the submission of prominent Mauritanian scholars as early as the 1930s, his external profile soared after World War II with the public recognition of many prominent Nigerian and Ghanaian scholars and political figures, chief among them the Emir of Kano. In the 1950s, this increasing number of followers throughout West Africa attracted the attention of emerging African political leaders, and led to surveillance by colonial authorities. By the time of independence, Ibrāhīm Niasse was a figure of considerable international significance in West Africa and even the Middle East. He met the renowned African and Muslim leaders of his time, and held leadership positions in many newly-formed organizations promoting African and Muslim solidarity. Egyptian and Saudi Arabian press reports from the 1960s referred to him simply as "the leader (*zaʿīm*) of the Muslims in West Africa."

Despite his rising international profile, knowledge continued to define the central dynamism of the community. Ibrāhīm Niasse and his followers produced a remarkably rich Arabic literature in all fields of Islamic scholarship: jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Arabic grammar (*naḥw*), Qurʾān exegesis (*tafsīr*), poetry (*qaṣīda*), and Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). More importantly, they continued to transmit such knowledge through highly personalized teacher-student relationships whereby initiates came to actualize or personify a particular Muslim subjectivity. Based on Ibrāhīm Niasse's undoubted scholarly qualifications and the perceived force of his very presence to transmit knowledge, followers came to affectionately refer to him as "Shaykh al-Islam." To them, he was the very personification of their religion.

For the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse, the method of teaching Islamic knowledge, including Sufism, reactivated and adapted an enduring habitus—learned subjectivity, acquired disposition, or way of “inhabiting” the world—that had characterized West African Muslim identity for centuries. True knowledge, whether of jurisprudence, of God’s revealed word, or of God Himself, was actualized through the physical presence of a living master. The community thus attempted to preserve the transmission of knowledge through the teacher’s inscription of disposition into the student’s very being. This was similar to an “epistemology of embodied knowledge,”⁵ except that approaches to knowledge were usually assumed in practice, only rarely articulated as “epistemology,” and except that the teacher’s implantation of sacred knowledge in human hearts transformed physical beings entirely, transcending the specific corporeality normally associated with embodiment. At the core of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s claim for the unprecedented communication of divine cognizance was the inculcation of a method of inhabiting the world, a method that resonated with the enduringly valued dispositions cultivated by earlier West African Muslim communities. The community of Ibrāhīm Niasse thus attempted to position itself not simply as a Sufi revivalist movement, but as the means to actualizing Muslim identity in the contemporary world.

Theoretical Considerations

This work draws on several key theoretical considerations: the idea of macrohistory from (African) history and habitus from sociology. I also refer to embodiment from anthropology and relational subjectivity from religious studies. For the non-academic reader, I would emphasize that these concepts are not an artificial framing by which academics sometimes isolate a lay readership from discussions of their own identities. These ideas, even if the language used to describe them may initially appear obtuse, emerge from the sources themselves. The development and triumph of Islamic identity is often the central story for how African Muslims perceive their place in history (macrohistory). Islamic identity was rooted in people, and the religion was put into practice through a person’s being in the world (habitus). Belief was manifested, not through abstract theorizing, but through a person’s physical presence (embodiment). Religious identity was not constructed in a vacuum, but formed through personal relationships (relational subjectivity). The following

5 Rudolph Ware III, *The Walking Qur’an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 49–50.

section explores the theoretical significance of these observations, and demonstrates their emergence from the Islamic intellectual tradition held dear to African Muslims and the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse in particular.

Macrohistory

Historical change can result in both ruptures and reappropriated continuities. Despite the fact that people, ideas, societies, and environments change, certain narratives that order history from a particular cultural standpoint are remarkably tenacious. African historians have demonstrated the importance of paying attention to such “macrohistories,” allowing for the understanding of African historical narratives not simply as local responses to metanarratives anchored in the West. “The definition of domination is for one group to appropriate the narrative of another, and to assign that narrative a subsidiary role in the dominant group’s narrative.”⁶ Recognizing the necessity of African macrohistories, Steve Feierman writes of enduring discourses of “healing the land” as a way to understand aspects of Tanzanian political engagements, rather than only narrating the political discourses of Western-educated elites.⁷ David Lan shows how the stories of spirit mediums, long predating independence, animated the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, which was not based on an exclusively Marxist anti-colonial ideology.⁸

According to Feierman, “If historians do not construct an alternative macrohistory they are left with only a Europe-centered one.”⁹ This alternative macrohistory “capture[s] the cultural categories as both continuous and in transformation, and the actors as both creating new languages and speaking inherited words, all at the same time.”¹⁰ For Ibrāhīm Niasse’s community, the struggle to preserve and deepen a preexisting habitus of knowledge realization defined both its relationship to the Islamic scholarly tradition and the sense of unprecedented urgency that compelled its expansion. The imposition of

6 Sherman Jackson, guest lecture at Northwestern University in Qatar, “Islam, America, and the Media,” 5 June 2014.

7 Steve Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 3.

8 David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

9 Feierman, “Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories,” in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 207.

10 Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, 13.

colonial modernity or the integration of West African economies into global capital flows, for example, thus appear as subsidiary stories in this book. The community's enduring preoccupation has not been on these historical forces, but with how best to continuously actualize Islamic identity in West Africa and beyond.

Habitus

The actualization of religious identity through relationships with people can best be understood as habitus: the acquisition of disposition to effect a way of being in the world. West African Muslim societies transmitted Islamic knowledge not so much as ideology, or even differentiated epistemology, but as habitus, or the “way in which individuals become themselves.”¹¹ Muslim intellectuals have long recognized that exemplars of a cultural order (such as Islam) seek to inscribe a set of acquired dispositions in succeeding generations. Teachers of the Islamic disciplines (*ʿulūm al-dīn*) thus emphasized the formation of character (*adab*) precedent to discursive knowledge. The goal of Islamic learning was to “root” (*rasakh*) disposition into the very bodily presence of students, thereby producing individuals who personified the religion, and who were then able to reproduce Islamic dispositions and learning in new historical contexts.

Mention of habitus cannot escape reference to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (d. 2002). Bourdieu's elaboration of habitus has become a common, perhaps even passé, framing device in many academic studies of Islamic subjectivity. Many have challenged the application of Bourdieu's theory to Islamic studies: the assumption that subconscious habits of Islamic practice trump articulated doctrine is in fact an idea that replicates earlier orientalist presumptions of the West's religious intellectualism versus the East's more corporal engagement with religion. But a deeper understanding of Islamic learning practices or “habits” that change over time, and of the intricacies of Bourdieu's own understanding of habitus, permit a reengagement with the concept. Indeed, for both Muslim scholars and Bourdieu, acquired disposition was not exclusive of articulated doctrine, and it permitted historical change and continuity through the conscious inscribing of the cultural order in successive generations who performed that order anew. Moreover, the application of habitus to religious identity need not be constrained by Bourdieu's limited

11 This definition of habitus was provided by Jen Webb, Tony Schirato, and Geoff Danaher, *Understanding Bourdieu* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), xi.

concept of religion: his discussion of habitus in artistic disciplines is actually well suited to the emphasis on *adab* (disposition) in the study of Islamic knowledge disciplines.

Bourdieu described habitus as a certain “practical mastery” or “feel for the game” specific to an autonomous “field.”

This practical mastery gives its possessors a ‘nose’ and a ‘feeling,’ *without any need for cynical calculation*, for ‘what needs to be done,’ and where to do it, how and with whom, in view of all that has been done and is being done, all those who are doing it, and where.¹²

Such a “system of dispositions,”¹³ which both structures and is structured by the “cultural order” (episteme),¹⁴ is accompanied by *doxa*: a “set of core values and discourses which a field articulates.”¹⁵ Although cultivated primarily through bodily dispositions and practices (“hexis”), the *doxa* accompanying habitus is not altogether beyond epistemological reflection:

There is nothing more certain, for those taking part in it, than the cultural order. Cultivated people are in culture as in the air they breathe, and it takes a major crisis (and the criticism that accompanies it) for them to feel obliged to transform the *doxa* into *orthodoxy* or into *dogma*, and to justify the sacred and the consecrated ways of cultivating it. It follows that it is not easy to find a systematic expression of the cultural *doxa*, but it nevertheless always crops up here and there.¹⁶

Habitus is thus inscribed into the body, and potentially articulated at instances of conflict as a specific vision of cultural orthodoxy. The notion of habitus

12 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 95. Italics in the original.

13 Bourdieu, “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction,” in *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education*, ed. Richard Brown (London: Tavistock, 1973), 72.

14 Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 170, “The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure . . .” For Bourdieu’s reference to the episteme, or “cultural order,” see Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 33.

15 Webb, Schirato, and Danaher, *Understanding Bourdieu*, xi.

16 Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 185–186. Italics in the original.

suggests that subjectivity includes the presence of both an acquired, but otherwise internalized, disposition, and an identifiable, if latent, epistemology.

Those who have used *habitus* to describe Muslim religious subjectivities have rarely admitted Bourdieu's own limiting vision of religion. Religion for Bourdieu appears as a temporal struggle of worldly interests given a certain "immanence" and "most indubitable transcendence."¹⁷ Religious institutions and their leaders, who alone have real agency, contend with each other to "modify, in a deep and lasting fashion, the practice and world-view of lay people."¹⁸ Salvaging Bourdieu's *habitus* for the study of religion requires, according to one suggestion, the conceptualization of religion as "spiritual capital" that is not necessarily controlled by elites and their institutions. According to Bradford Verter, "spiritual dispositions may be regarded as a form of cultural capital. Personal piety may be viewed as a matter of taste—in other words, as a product of social relations . . ."¹⁹ This reformulation has the advantage of restoring agency to "lay" individuals. But Bourdieu, despite his rather instrumentalist description of religion, rejected the notion that cultural fields more broadly could be understood exclusively through "the economic mode of thought": competition for capital, monopoly, supply, and demand.²⁰

Bourdieu's discussion of *art* reveals the true value of *habitus* for understanding religious identity. Not only is Bourdieu's writing on the theory of fields rife with religious references (orthodoxy, dogma, spiritual unity, etc.),²¹ but he specifically invites readers to replace words like "writer, artist" with producers in other cultural fields, such as philosophers.²² West African Muslim clerical communities are best understood in "Bourdieuian" terms as communities of artists struggling to inculcate the *habitus* or aesthetic disciplines of a particular artistic field. Indeed, Arabic texts from the region often refer to Islamic knowledge specialization (normally *ʿulūm*) as "artistic disciplines" (*fanūn*).²³

17 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 317.

18 Bourdieu, "Legitimization and Structured Interests in Weber's Sociology of Religion," in *Max Weber: Rationality and Modernity*, ed. Scott Lash and Sam Whimster (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987); as cited in Bradford Verter, "Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu," *Sociological Theory* 21, no. 2 (June 2003), 153. See page 156 of the same article for the discussion of Bourdieu's restriction of agency to religious institutions.

19 Verter, "Spiritual Capital," 152.

20 Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 183–184.

21 Verter, "Spiritual Capital," 150–151.

22 Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 214–215.

23 Ibrāhīm Niase, *The Removal of Confusion Concerning the Flood of the Saintly Seal Aḥmad al-Tijānī*, trans. Zachary Wright, Muhtar Holland, and Abdullahi El-Okene (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), 17.

The inhabitants of an artistic field acquire dispositions allowing them to “experience” or actualize the field’s particular symbolic universe, in turn permitting the inhabitant to take up a “position” within that field. For Bourdieu, the artist (here poet) is capable of “a sort of mysticism of sensation enlarged by the game of language: an autonomous reality, with no referent other than itself, the poem is a creation independent of creation, and nevertheless united with it by profound ties that no positivist science perceives.”²⁴ The student’s experience of artistic content may also produce a bodily experience that transcends fixed corporeality:

The divinatory search for equivalences among data collected by the senses allows them to recover the “expansion of infinite things” by conferring on them, by the power of the imagination and by the grace of language, the value of symbols capable of melting into the spiritual unity of a common essence.²⁵

In the student’s experience of art, or Islamic knowledge, symbolic universe and experience become one. Habitus thus reflects a cultivated disposition that is determined by the field, but also acts upon it, effectively recreating anew the symbolic universe with each new “experience” of the artwork.

The experience of the work of art as immediately endowed with meaning and value is an effect of the harmony between the two aspects of the same historical institution, the cultivated habitus and the artistic field, which mutually ground each other. Given that the work of art does not exist as such, meaning as an object symbolically endowed with meaning and value, unless it is apprehended by spectators possessing the aesthetic disposition and competence which it tacitly requires, one could say that it is the eye of the aesthete which constitutes the work of art—but only if one immediately remembers that it can only do so to the extent that it is itself the product of a long collective history, that is, of the progressive invention of the “connoisseur,” and of a long individual history, that is, of prolonged exposure to the work of art.²⁶

Inhabitants thus take up positions in an artistic field in relation to their degree of actualization of the relevant aesthetic dispositions. The content, or “autonomous reality” of Islamic knowledge as an artistic field thus must be understood

24 Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 107. The specific reference here is to Baudelaire.

25 Bourdieu, *Rules of Art*, 107.

26 Ibid., 289.

in its own terms. The intellectual history of West African Islam developed in dialogue with political, social and economic changes. But Islamic learning constituted an internally adapted artistic field, which external historical forces did not completely determine.

Islamic knowledge experts gain authority through the realization and reproduction, in both expression and comportment in the world, of their appropriate field. Following Bourdieu's advice on the interchangeability of "artist" and related words, the citation "the eye of the aesthete constitutes the work of art" could be understood for our purposes, "the bodily presence of the Muslim constitutes the work of the Islamic religion." Such a conception allows for deeper reflection on Muslim identity and religious authority beyond the self-interested struggles of religious leaders or the competition for "spiritual capital."

The idea of habitus in an artistic field is well suited, then, to understanding religious disposition in history. Individuals have agency, but they act in and reproduce a symbolic universe, an "independent social universe" which must be understood in its own terms. Broader historical contexts certainly remain important, but they are not completely determinative of the field in which the artist operates. Through habitus, the researcher can strike a balance between the methodologies of "internal reading" and "external explication," the latter too closely relating cultural productions "directly to the economic and social conditions of the moment."²⁷ The "cultural order" is thus reproduced through the acquisition of dispositions, and is thereby not a Foucauldian episteme, an "autonomous, transcendent sphere, capable of developing in accordance with its own laws."²⁸ The very act of reproduction, entailing the taking up of "position" by virtue of degree of cultivation, engenders historical change: "The fact remains that every new position, in asserting itself as such, determines a displacement of the whole structure and that, by the logic of action and reaction, it leads to all sorts of changes in the position-takings of the occupants of other positions."²⁹ For Ibrāhīm Niassé's community, the reactivation of long-standing practices of knowledge transmission meant both the reproduction of an enduring habitus, and the remaking of Muslim identity in a new historical context.

Recent literature in the field of Islamic studies and African history has sometimes incorporated reference to habitus to explain a wide variety of cultivated religious dispositions. Brian Peterson's study of Islamic conversion in a

²⁷ Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 163.

²⁸ This is Bourdieu's characterization of Foucault's concept of the episteme. *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

small Malian town draws on habitus as a “system of durable, transposable, and embodied dispositions and practices which integrate past experiences and function as the generative basis of practices and representations.”³⁰ Peterson suggests that pre-Islamic religious practices of *bamanaya* remained the underlying habitus which framed or “localized” Islamic conversion: “Even as people began praying and embracing Muslim forms of religious life, the generative cultural grammar, as it were, remained rooted in *bamanaya*.”³¹ One may wonder, however, how those who testify to Islam and perform the five daily prayers suddenly become less Muslim simply because of their African heritage, especially when many of their Arab counterparts may not even pray. Sometimes the researcher’s limited understanding of Islamic orthodoxy, particularly in an African context, means that he may fail to read practices as “Islamic” simply because he does not recognize them. But regardless of the positioning of particular practices on the spectrum of Islamic orthodoxy, Peterson demonstrates that habitus can be a useful way to understand the enduring cultivation of particular religious dispositions in African Muslim communities.

Saba Mahmood’s ethnography of a women’s pietist movement in contemporary Cairo finds that the practice of the Islamic ritual prayer was actually constitutive of Muslim subjectivity. Mahmood employs habitus to look at bodily practices as a “developable means for realizing the pious self,”³² thereby rescuing Bourdieu’s theory from an earlier dismissal in the study of Islamic ritual. In a study of Islamic practice in Egypt, Gregory Starret remarks that Bourdieu “fails to appreciate that we should also extend to others the ‘dignity’ of abstraction and conscious agency” normally thought specific to European elites.³³ But Mahmood moves beyond Starret’s narrow focus on “bodily hexis” to conceive of an “older genealogy of habitus”: “Thus habits in this tradition of moral cultivation imply a quality that is acquired through human industry, assiduous practice, and discipline such that it becomes a permanent feature of a person’s character.”³⁴ Mahmood nonetheless finds the use of Bourdieu limited by his “lack of attention to the pedagogical process by which a habitus is learned.”³⁵

30 Brian Peterson, *Islamization from Below: The Making of Muslim Communities in Rural French Sudan, 1880–1960* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 12.

31 Ibid., 13.

32 Saba Mahmood, “Rehearsed Spontaneity and Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of ‘Ṣalāt,’” *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 4 (Nov. 2001), 828.

33 Gregory Starret, “The Hexis of Interpretation: Islam and the Body in the Egyptian Popular School,” *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 4 (1995), 964.

34 Mahmood, “Rehearsed Spontaneity,” 838.

35 Ibid.

A study of *madrasa* educational changes in India uses habitus to highlight such pedagogical techniques in the inscription of Muslim subjectivity. Arshad Alam recognizes that Bourdieu's explanation of apparently egalitarian education (as implemented by the modernized *madrasa* system) could actually reproduce social stratification by allowing individuals to cultivate dispositions formulated to a hierarchy of "positions" within a "field."³⁶ The result of the habitus ingrained in students by new pedagogical techniques has been an emerging tension between the largely Sufi-orientated, classically-trained elder generation of the Indian Barelwi movement, and a new generation of *madrasa*-trained, hierarchically ranked, bureaucratically-minded intellectuals in the movement.³⁷ This was despite their common ideological commitment to the Barelwi legacy.

The framework of habitus I employ here builds on the idea of enduringly meaningful dispositions (Peterson), the conscious reactivation of bodily learning practices to inscribe subjectivity (Mahmood), and the emphasis on pedagogical choices for understanding scholarly expertise (Alam). So what does habitus mean for African Muslims? A recent collection of translated texts on Islamic education makes a case for the use of this concept in classical Islamic texts. Here is a suggestive passage from Ibn Khaldūn:

Habit (*malaka*) is different from understanding and knowing by memory . . . Habit belongs solely and exclusively to the scholar or the person well versed in scientific disciplines (*fanūn*) . . . All habits are corporeal, whether they are of the body, or, like arithmetic, of the brain and resulting from man's ability to think and so on. All corporal things are sensibilia. Thus, they require instruction. Therefore, a tradition of famous teachers (*al-sanad fi al-ta'lim*) with regard to instruction in any science or craft, is acknowledged (to be necessary) by the people of every region and generation.³⁸

The perfection of the human soul (*nafs*) required training, the acquisition of habitus: "the soul grows under the influence of the perceptions it receives and the habits accruing to it."³⁹ Indeed, the well-known Islamicist Ira Lapidus

36 Arshad Alam, *Inside a Madrasa: Knowledge, Power and Islamic Identity in India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 23; Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 162.

37 Alam, *Inside a Madrasa*, 89–91.

38 Bradley Cook and Fathi Malkawi (eds.), *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2011), 216.

39 *Ibid.*, 221.

believed the correct translation of Ibn Khaldūn's *malaka* (which Rosenthal translates as "habit") should be explicitly rendered as "habitus."⁴⁰ Rüdiger Arnzen's translation of a text from the tenth-century Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' specifically invokes habitus in connection to the acquisition of knowledge: "Knowledge is a habitus (*qunya*, lit: acquisition, property, possession) of the soul."⁴¹ Religious knowledge meant the actualization of habitus acquired through the study of Islamic knowledge disciplines.

In the context of West African Islamic scholarship, learning meant to inscribe or "root" (*rasakh*) a manner of inhabiting the world and a predisposed submission to God into the very being of the Muslim. *These are the verses of the Qur'ān: none know their meaning except God and those deeply rooted (rāsikhūn) in knowledge...* (Qur'ān 3:7). The introduction to Ibn Abī Zayd's *Risāla* on Māliki jurisprudence, a book ubiquitous throughout West Africa, thus reminds knowledge practitioners: "The concern... [of teachers] is to inculcate (*iṣāl*) goodness in the hearts of believing children, so that it becomes firmly rooted (*yarsakh*) therein."⁴² Knowledge must thus come to dwell in the being of the student.

For Ibrāhīm Niasse, "those firmly rooted in knowledge" are those in whom knowledge had come to reside, who had become established (*thābitūn*) in knowledge.⁴³ "Those firmly rooted in knowledge are those who derive benefit [from their knowledge], and whoever studies knowledge but does not find understanding and light guiding him to the Real, he is like a donkey carrying books."⁴⁴ The primary Qur'ānic reference here, according to the shaykh, is to the first Jewish convert to Islam, 'Abdallāh b. Salām, whose rooting in knowledge allowed him to immediately recognize Muḥammad as the Prophet of God, the personification of truth. "He said [concerning the Prophet], 'That is not the face of a liar.' And he said, 'When I saw him, by God, I found that I knew him (*'arāftuh*) more profoundly than I knew my own son.'⁴⁵ Being infused with knowledge thus leads to the recognition of truth (*ma'rifa*), significantly,

40 Ira Lapidus as cited in Saba Mahmood, "Rehearsed Spontaneity," 839.

41 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, "The Seventh Epistle of the Propaedeutical Part on the Scientific Arts and What they Aim at," in Cook and Malkawi (eds.), *Classical Foundations*, 23.

42 'Abdallāh b. Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī, *Matn al-risāla* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2001), 4.

43 The reference here is to the Qur'ān 4:162. See Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr li-l-Qur'ān al-karīm* (Tunis: al-Yamāma, 2010), 2:89.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 2:90.

here, in the physical presence of the Prophet. According to the words of the Prophet, “Who has seen me has seen the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*).”⁴⁶

This ability to permeate one’s being with knowledge, to personify the Qur’ān and the *sunna*, was what defined the teacher, or spiritual guide. As Ḥasan Cissé, the grandson and spiritual inheritor of Ibrāhīm Niasse explained:

The Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, said, “I am leaving with you two things, as long as you follow them you shall never be led astray. They are the Qur’an and the Sunnah.” What the Shaykh does is guide the disciples using these two things according to an understanding that transcends that of an ordinary Muslim. Allah says in the Qur’an, “And those deep in knowledge (*rāsikhūn fi al-‘ilm*) say, ‘We have faith in it, everything is from our Lord.’”⁴⁷

This indwelling of knowledge was clearly not limited to rational speculation or reading. Significantly, the student could learn from simply being in the presence of such a teacher. After encouraging the disciple to be with the shaykh at all times, Ibrāhīm Niasse wrote, “And you could gain from him by infection (*‘adwa*). This has been confirmed by those of spiritual distinction, so be warned.”⁴⁸

The set of dispositions accompanying Islamic learning was obviously inseparable from the concepts associated with habitus—character formation, etiquette, disposition, bodily hexis, and moral refinement—all of which are included in the Islamic concept of *adab*. Indeed, the best one-word translation for *adab* is arguably habitus. The ingrained bodily dispositions of *adab* were perhaps most clearly thrust into the spotlight of epistemological reflection by the contemporary Malaysian intellectual Syed Muhammad al-Naqib al-Attas. A traditionally trained Islamic scholar and Sufi proponent, al-Attas offers a starkly different vision of the “Islamization of knowledge” paradigm, one that contrasts with that of many reformists who simply attempt to provide an Islamic veneer to modern institutions of power and pedagogical control.

46 *Ḥadīth* cited in Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 131.

47 Ḥasan Cissé, *The Spirit of Good Morals Shaykh al-Islam Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse* (Detroit, MI: African American Islamic Institute, 2001), 65–66. The Qur’ānic reference is to Qur’an 3:7.

48 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Rūḥ al-adab*, verse 76, cited in Cissé, *Spirit of Good Morals*, 67.

The fundamental element inherent in the concept of education in Islam is the inculcation of *adab* (*ta'dib*)... Education is what the Prophet, peace be upon him, meant by *adab* when he said, "My Lord educated (*addaba*) me and made my education (*ta'dib*) most excellent."⁴⁹

Adab was not to be obtained through a process of educational "leveling" controlled by the state, for "knowledge is inherent in man as an individual, and not in society and state and *Ummah*."⁵⁰ The lack of *adab* or "discipline" meant "the loss of knowledge" and the society's inability to appreciate the authority of traditional scholars:⁵¹ "*Adab* is the recognition and acknowledgment of such lights in man; and acknowledgment entails an attitude expressing true reverence, love, respect, humility—it entails knowing one's proper place in relation to him who sheds such light."⁵² As *adab*, habitus becomes formative to West African Islamic teaching practices, whether in reference to Qur'an memorization or Sufism. "O seeker, acquire good conduct (*adab*)," Ibrāhīm Niasse urged disciples: "Be of good manners (*ta'addab*) openly and secretly."⁵³ Ḥasan Cissé explained this latter stanza by suggesting that the desired aim here was to "implant in the *murīd* or disciple" the knowledge or consciousness of God.⁵⁴ The idea of religious knowledge as an acquired disposition (habitus) to be inscribed in the being of the student, who effects a particular comportment and positioning in the world, was thus fundamental to learning practices in West African Islam.

Embodiment and Subjectivity

For the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse, knowledge was meant to permeate the scholar's bodily presence so that his very being communicated an Islamic religious subjectivity. Such a notion clearly invokes notions of religious

49 Syed Muhammad al-Naquib al-Attas, *Aims and Objectives of Islamic Education* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1996), 1.

50 *Ibid.*, 4, 6.

51 *Ibid.*, 12.

52 *Ibid.*, 7.

53 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Rūḥ al-adab*, verses 51, 10, cited in Cissé, *Spirit of Good Morals*, pages 53, 19. I have slightly altered the translation of the Arabic of the verse 51.

54 Cissé, *Spirit of Good Morals*, 20.

“embodiment,”⁵⁵ but the employment of habitus hopes to avoid the specific corporality associated with embodiment, and the ideological irreconcilability of an “epistemology of embodied knowledge” in distinction to textual or “disembodied” approaches to learning. The inscription of *adab* in the being of students clearly references a physical presence, but it does not specify the type of corporality involved. Clearly Rudolph Ware’s study of Qur’ān learning in Senegal demonstrates the utility of a more specific notion of embodiment in some contexts: the student’s body was the tablet (*lawḥ*) on which the Word of God was inscribed.⁵⁶ The one who has learned the Qur’ān becomes the Qur’ān. But what happens when the knowledge obtained, as in Sufism, is of God’s essential being? Indeed, Muslim theologians, and Sufis themselves, would likely perceive the notion of individualized, “embodied” lumps of divinely invested flesh as dangerously close to incarnation.

A few studies have attempted to relate embodiment to Sufism. Scott Kugle’s study on various body parts invoked in Sufi discourses focuses on the biological bodies of Sufi saints, thereby revealing some interesting comparisons to the sanctification of body parts found in Catholicism.⁵⁷ But this discussion, focusing as it does on antinomian or truncated Sufi legacies, is perhaps largely marginal to “mainstream” Sufism,⁵⁸ which rarely sanctified saints’ bones and other biological relics to the extent of the Catholic tradition. Shahzad Bashir’s analysis of the significance of physical contact (handshaking for example) in medieval Persian Sufism attempts to apply embodiment to Sufism more

55 For examples of the use of embodiment in Islamic Studies and the anthropology of Muslim societies, see Marion Katz, *Body of Text: The Emergence of the Sunnī Law of Ritual Purity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); Mahmood, “Rehearsed Spontaneity”; Gregory Simon, “The Soul Freed of Cares? Islamic Prayer, Subjectivity, and the Contradictions of Moral Selfhood in Minangkabau, Indonesia,” *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 2 (May 2009): 258–275.

56 Ware, *Walking Qur’an*, 49–50.

57 Scott Kugle, *Sufis and Saints’ Bodies: Mysticism, Corporality, and Sacred Power in Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). For another study on “embodied charisma” in Sufism, see Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu (eds.), *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults* (London: Routledge, 1998), 3–30.

58 Rüdiger Seesemann, “Review: Sufism and Saints’ Bodies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 76 (2008), 514–521; Dina Le Gall, “Recent Thinking on Sufis and Saints in the Lives of Muslim Societies, Past and Present,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010), 683.

broadly.⁵⁹ But here, the strict emphasis on bodily *contact* (rather than the communicative bodily *presence* invoked by the Sufi chain of transmission) serves to confine knowledge to such physical contacts, effectively marginalizing women and other students denied bodily access to saints. This fails to explain the socially accepted spiritual experiences and authority claimed by women and those meetings saints in dreams or otherwise outside of their physical bodies. In any case, the readily apparent corporality in the studies of Ware, Kugle, and Bashir justifies their uses of embodiment even if the terminology is not of direct use for this study. My earlier attempt to use embodiment simply as exemplification (the more general dictionary meaning of “embody”) hardly seems justified, upon later reflection, given the current academic fascination with the more specifically corporal definition of the word.⁶⁰

Bodies are culturally constructed. As Bashir observes, “human bodies—our own as well as of others—always become present to us through social mediation.”⁶¹ Studies of African “traditional” religions have opened new perspectives on embodiment. Based on fieldwork in Namibia where human “bodiliness” might include the bodies of ancestors or even animal herds, van Wolputte retains the notion of an “embodied epistemology, as knowledge-in-action that is the basis of social practice and world-making.”⁶² These studies are explicit in stating that the objective universality of the body should not be taken for granted, and that the cultural order may even emphasize a “transcendent self or even the absence of self, a nonself.”⁶³ The continued emphasis on a materially bounded corporality despite such transcendence may sustain the continued use of embodiment in such studies. But van Wolputte’s suggestion of a “bodily presence,” which transcends the corporal form but remains linked to it, may be the more enduringly useful term for research on Muslim (especially Sufi) subjectivities. The bodily presence is thus not bound by explicit physicality, nor does it exist in opposition to the body.

Embodiment as defined in academic literature, however usefully employed in previous studies of Muslim societies, cannot be literally translated into Islamic terminology without severely misleading connotations. “To embody” would be closest to the verb *tajassada* or *tajassama*, “to become corporal, to

59 Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

60 Wright, “Embodied Knowledge,” 17.

61 Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 15.

62 Steven van Wolputte, “Hang on to Your Self: Of Bodies, Embodiment, and Selves,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), 258.

63 *Ibid.*, 251, 262.

become embodied, to become incarnate.”⁶⁴ Muslims generally consider the idea of incarnation or humanization of the divine, also translated as *ḥulūl* or *taʿannus*, as a blasphemy specific to Christianity. For Ibrāhīm Niasse, the idea of incarnation was a terrible transgression of sacred law (*sharīʿa*), a result of failing to acquire Islamic disposition through companionship with the teacher or shaykh.⁶⁵ Rather than embodiment, this study generally employs internally legible words such as “actualization, realization” (*taḥaqaqqa*) or “exemplification” (*tamaththala*).

The locus of actualization is understood as “bodily presence” (*dhāt*, Wolof *jëmm*) rather than as the material body (*jasad*, Wolof *yaram*). Shahzad Bashir’s use of Merleau-Ponty to speak of the “habitual body” as distinct from the “present [material] body” may provide additional theoretical background to this notion, as the habitual body is invested with expectations and possessed of a certain “aura” surrounding the physical body.⁶⁶ Bashir’s observation that “Sufi authors never describe the body solely as a material entity,”⁶⁷ is thus not exactly true: when they write about the physical body (*jasad*) they are describing physical bodies; when they are writing about the personal bodily presence (*dhāt* or *ḥaḍra*), the reference is to a different type of body. In the latter case, corporality is entirely subsumed by a human reality explicitly beyond the confines of ordinary physical bodies. The endowment of divine knowledge to this bodily presence thus results in what Bashir calls the second “acquired body”: “the purpose of the second body is to make the imaginal world available to humans.”⁶⁸ In other words, the ability of the actualized bodily presence to experience (and communicate) spiritual realities was not outside of the “body,” but this body was not the ordinary body of flesh and blood. The ruby bears an affinity to the rock, but its value is entirely different.

Classical Islamic formulations of human identity (*dhāt al-insān*) utilized by Ibrāhīm Niasse’s community speak of the human being as consisting of various components or “presences” (*ḥaḍarāt*): interior or secret (*sirr*), spirit (*rūḥ*), intellect (*ʿaql*), heart (*qalb*), and body (*jasad*) or sometimes embodied self (*naḥs al-badan*).⁶⁹ Significantly, Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815), the founder of the

64 Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1980), 125, 126.

65 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasāʾil wa yalīyya ziyādat al-jawāhir al-ḥawī baʿḍ ʿulūm wasīlat al-wasāʾil* (Nigeria: Aḥmad Abī l-Faṭḥ, n.d.), 1:10–12; also Seesemann, *Divine Flood*, 102.

66 Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 15.

67 Ibid., 20.

68 Ibid., 39.

69 See, for example, Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Riyāḍ al-tafsīr*, 3:345.

Tijāniyya Sufi order to which Ibrāhīm Niasse's community remains affiliated, defined the "reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the human being" as the realization (*idrāk*) born of God's "breathing" of the spirit (*rūḥ*) into the corporal form (*jasad*): "God created realization when He joined the spirit with the body, then He called it a human being, and addressed it."⁷⁰ Ibrāhīm Niasse elaborated on realization as "actualization" (*taḥqīq*) or "cognizance" (*ma'rifa*) taking place in the heart, which is essentially the same concept, since the intellect (the place of realization as *idrāk*) was located within the heart in traditional formulations.⁷¹ According to Ibrāhīm Niasse:

The body without the spirit is dead. The body with the spirit, but no intellect, is insane. If there is intellect but no cognizance, that intellect is completely lost, there is no benefit in it. If there is cognizance, the goal is obtained. Cognizance is the spirit of the intellect, and intellect is the spirit of the spirit, and the spirit is the spirit of the body.⁷²

Not only was the actualization of knowledge constitutive of human identity, such realization transformed the body itself, defying normal corporal constraints. The *idrāk* possessed by the Prophet Muḥammad's bodily presence (*dhāt*), for example, meant that his "noble body" (*jasaduhu al-sharīf*) personally returned the greetings sent to him by pious Muslims after his death.⁷³ As Fritz Meier has observed, mainstream Muslim religiosity at least by the time of al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505, Egypt) admitted that the Prophet (and by extension other realized personalities) could be seen "in the flesh" after his death, in many places at the same time.⁷⁴

This indeed represents a form of "bodiliness," but it is not "embodiment" as known in academic literature. The idea of identity or *dhāt* as "bodily presence" is thus meant to suggest that the presence of fully actualized human beings is both linked to their corporal forms but transcends (or subsumes) them in both space and time; a transcendence or subsumption that others can sometimes perceive. The idea of *dhāt*, coming from the root *dhū* ("possessor,

70 Muḥammad b. al-Mishrī, *al-Jāmi' li-durar al-'ulūm al-fā'ida min biḥār al-quṭb al-maktūm* (printed manuscript, Rabat: Muḥammad Rāḍī Kanūn, 2002), 1:101.

71 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Kitāb sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*, cited in John Renard (trans.), *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 308.

72 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Riyād al-tafsīr*, 3:345.

73 al-Mishrī, *Jāmi'*, 1:101.

74 Fritz Meier, *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 505–547.

holder or master of, endowed or provided with”), connotes the idea of identity as feminine receptivity.⁷⁵ Although provided with a natural disposition toward submission to God (*fitra*),⁷⁶ human beings (including spirit, intellect, heart, body) are ultimately the knowledge they come to possess or actualize in the lives they live.

The problem with the scholarly fixation on embodiment in religious studies, Constance Furey suggests, is the “conflation of subjectivity and embodiment.” Subjects emerge as distinct, embodied units enacting an impersonal relationship with society at large. The religious subject is rather a “relational subject”: formed not only by “practice, performance, authorizing discourse, and subjectifying power,” but also by person-to-person “sustained affiliations and intense encounters.”⁷⁷ Religion, after all, is about alternating relationships of difference and commonality, rejection and intimacy.⁷⁸ According to Furey, “Studies focused on personal relationships can expose the complexity of how body, society, and subjectivity interact through an intimate, relational process of internalization, transformation, affirmation, and rejection.”⁷⁹ The notion of relational subjectivity is thus essential to understanding how a student’s companionship with a teacher could serve to inscribe a certain habitus in the being.

Since the notion of bodily presence as *dhāt* avoids the strictly individualized corporality of embodiment, relational religious subjectivity is naturally implicit. The best Arabic translation for subjectivity is thus *dhātiya*, that which has become intrinsic to an entity. This unique, divine receptivity of humans is what gives them a special connection to God, as according to the twelfth-century theologian al-Shahrastāni, “attributes of essential identity (*dhātiya*) cannot be fixed except by the One who acts (*al-Fā’il*), indeed these attributes belong to Him without [need for] a reason.”⁸⁰ The human being or “form” can be perceived as the receptacle of divine manifestation (*tajallī*), which, according to Sufis, is the meaning of the intriguing words of the Prophet Muḥammad,

75 For the implications of the word’s feminine gender, see Edward Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1980), 1:985.

76 Qur’ān 30:30.

77 Constance Furey, “Body, Society, and Subjectivity in Religious Studies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2012), 9, 13.

78 Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2–4; also Furey, “Body, Society, and Subjectivity,” 23–24.

79 Furey, “Body, Society, and Subjectivity,” 25.

80 Muḥammad al-Shahrastāni, *Nihāyat al-iqdām fi ‘ilm al-kalām* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 60.

“God created Adam upon His own form (*‘ala šuratihi*).”⁸¹ The human form can thus become the “proof” (*ḥujja*) of God as the manifestation of divine attributes. Such an idea is perhaps the best way to root the notion of “relational subjectivity” in an Islamic framework: “It is clear that a human loves another human because he or she is a locus of divine beauty, although not all lovers know this.”⁸² The mystical implications here should serve to emphasize rather than distract from the underlying Islamic notion that human beings were loci of knowledge. God manifests His attributes mostly completely in the human being, and guides people to Him through such receptacles of divine manifestation. The transmission of knowledge thus depends on relationships between people.

West African Muslims, as represented in the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse, cultivated Muslim subjectivity as an enduring habitus rooted in the human presence through teacher-student relationships. As Michael Chamberlain observes of knowledge practices in thirteenth-century Damascus:

The lecture, the transmission of hadith and of books, and of everyday interactions among students and their teachers were . . . a set of ritual and initiatory practices. The bond with the shaykh initiated the young person into the *adab* of the learned shaykh, a set of acquired dispositions that scripted virtually every aspect of daily life. The student-teacher relationship was thus also a master-disciple relationship.⁸³

This citation neatly summarizes the theoretical issues at stake here: acquired dispositions (*habitus*), the teacher’s bodily presence as the actualization of knowledge, and person-to-person interaction for the transmission of knowledge (relational subjectivity). This book is about a West African Muslim community’s struggle to reenact an understanding of knowledge practices very similar to that described in medieval Damascus. Transmitted over hundreds of years and across thousands of miles, this then is the macrohistory of an Islamic habitus that compels the historian’s attention. As the definition of “disciple” increasingly became applied to multitudes unable to complete the

81 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 16.

82 Cyrus Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love, and the Human Form in the Writings of Ibn ‘Arabi and Iraqi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 66.

83 Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 150. I thank Rudolph Ware for making me aware of this source.

arduous path of Islamic learning, this is not only the story of isolated lineages of Muslim scholars. West African scholars and students who transmitted an Islamic disposition by their bodily presences became the means by which Islam was actualized in society at large.

Literature Review

In this book I hope to open new understandings of Muslim identity in West Africa. Several previous studies of Muslim societies in Africa have advanced important narratives upon which my own work builds. Earlier historians of Africa have demonstrated the depth of West African Islamic history, whether by illustrating the durability of political institutions and strategies of political engagement,⁸⁴ by examining the enduring forms of social organization and belonging,⁸⁵ or by identifying the adaptability and pervasiveness of Muslim scholarly communities and networks.⁸⁶

Studies of African Muslim scholarship, or the Islamic clerical tradition, have similarly established a number of signposts within which this work unfolds. West Africa boasts a rich textual legacy in Arabic and African languages written in Arabic script,⁸⁷ a recognizable core curriculum,⁸⁸ and persistent pedagogical

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- 84 See for example, Nehemia Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (New York: Africana Publication Co., 1980); Ivor Wilks, *Wa and the Wala: Islam and Polity in Northwestern Ghana* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Michael Gomez, *Pragmatism in the Age of the Jihad: The Precolonial State of Bundu* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992); David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880–1920* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).
- 85 Tal Tamari, *Les castes au Soudan occidental: etude anthropologique et historique* (Paris: Université de Paris x, 1987); Lucie Colvin, “The Shaykh’s Men: Religion and Power in Senegambian Islam,” in *Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and Humphrey Fisher (Boulder, CO: L. Rienner Publishers, 1987).
- 86 For West Africa: Elias Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu, 1400–1900: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Lamin Sanneh, *The Jakhanke Muslim Clerics: A Religious and Historical Study of Islam in Senegambia* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989); Stefan Reichmuth, “Islamic Education in Sub-Saharan Africa,” in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).
- 87 The best bibliographical overview of African Islamic literature remains John Hunwick and R. S. O’Fahey (eds), *The Arabic Literature of Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).
- 88 Bruce Hall and Charles Stewart, “The Historic ‘Core Curriculum’ and the Book Market in Islamic West Africa,” in *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Arabic Literacy, Manuscript*

techniques of personalized instruction.⁸⁹ Scholars or marabouts maintain prominent political, economic, and social roles in African societies.⁹⁰ Muslim scholars have responded ideologically to colonialism,⁹¹ and to developments in the post-colony.⁹² Traditional attachment to Sufism has been challenged,⁹³ but remains a vibrant intellectual, political, and social force.⁹⁴ Ordinary Africans have appropriated Muslim identity and knowledge practices to stake claims of belonging or to otherwise effect change in their environment.⁹⁵ Sometimes these appropriations have produced hybrid or fractured subjects, where scripted ideals are only partially adapted (or even dispensed with entirely) depending on the local context of ordinary people.⁹⁶ But it is likewise often the case that popular appropriation of knowledge practices introduced by scholars may in fact reproduce these practices across local contexts.⁹⁷

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- Culture, and Intellectual History in Islamic Africa*, ed. Graziano Krätli and Ghislaine Lydon (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
- 89 Louis Brenner, *Reflexions sur le Savoir Islamique en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Talance, France: Centre d'étude d'Afrique noire, 1985); Ware, *Walking Qur'an*, 54–57.
- 90 Donal Cruise O'Brien, *Saints and Politicians: Essays in the Organisation of a Senegalese Peasant Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Christian Coulon, *Le Marabout et le Prince: Islam et Pouvoir au Sénégal* (Paris: A. Pedone, 1981).
- 91 Muhammad Sani Umar, *Islam and Colonialism: Intellectual Responses of Muslims of Northern Nigeria to British Colonial Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
- 92 Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
- 93 Lansiné Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974); see also the various articles in *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists*, ed. David Westerlund and Eva Rosander (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997); and Frederick de Jong and Bernd Radtke (eds.), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
- 94 Cheikh Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853–1913* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007); Seesemann, *Divine Flood*.
- 95 Martin Klein, "Social and Economic Factors in the Muslim Revolution in Senegambia," *Journal of African History* 13, no. 3 (1972): 419–441; Jonathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856–1888* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995).
- 96 Benjamin Soares, *Islam and the Prayer Economy: History and Authority in a Malian Town* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Peterson, *Islamization from Below*; Robert Launay, *Beyond the Stream: Islam and Society in a West African Town* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992).
- 97 Seesemann, *Divine Flood*.

Most accounts of African Muslim identity inevitably return to the readily observable West African Islamic social institution of teacher-student relationships, either in explanation thereof or as the foil against which findings are presented. The “master-disciple” (*shaykh-murīd*) relationship, most pronounced in Sufi orders, is sometimes glossed as “maraboutism” and appears in earlier literature as nearly synonymous with West African Islam. Colonial-era writers were fascinated with marabouts as the purveyors of false consciousness: the repositories of superstitions inherent to the African consciousness.⁹⁸ A later generation explained the influence of marabouts largely through instrumentalist causes: political influence, economic organization, social mediation, or even as vessels of worldly “blessing” (*baraka*).⁹⁹ But even as recent studies argue against the fascination with “big-man” accounts of religious identity, marabout communities remain ever present in the background. They appear in accounts of reformist trends as the purveyors of rural, syncretistic superstition, or in local microhistories as the ambiguous norm against which local variations are supposed to refreshingly depart.

The recent reappraisals of widespread and increasingly globalized Sufi communities rendered by Cheikh Babou for the Mourides, Seesemann for the Fayḍa-Tijāniyya, and Hanretta for the followers of Yacoub Sylla, demonstrate that such explanations have underestimated the ongoing appeal and dynamism of Sufi orders. There are, however, a few lingering ambiguities in scholarship on West African Sufism. First, the shaykh-disciple relationship is largely taken for granted, and the internal understanding of both shaykhs and disciples remains unexamined. Second, the relationship of Sufi knowledge to Muslim identity and the Islamic scholarly tradition more broadly is sometimes obscured by the exclusive emphasis on Sufism. Moreover, the actual content of knowledge transmission (Sufi or otherwise) has only now begun to receive serious consideration based on primary texts in dialogue with ongoing oral transmission. Lastly, the mechanisms of continued adaptation and even expansion of West African clerical traditions in the postcolonial context is passed over,

98 The formative representative of this trend was Paul Marty, *Études sur l'Islam au Sénégal* (Paris: Leroux, 1917). For more on the colonial-era formulators of “Islam Noir” as pertaining to Senegal, see Mamadou Karfa and Hélène Grandhomme, “De la vision coloniale de l'Islam Noir à l'Islam sénégalais: Identités perçues, identités vécues,” in *Society, State, and Identity in African History*, ed. Bahru Zewde (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Forum for Social Studies, 2008), 105–122.

99 Leonardo Villalón, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal: Disciple and Citizens in Fatick* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Donal Cruise O'Brien, *Symbolic Confrontations: Muslims Imagining the State in Africa* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 49–50; Soares, *Islam and the Prayer Economy*.

with the exception of simplistic observations that such groups remain popular. Sufi communities such as that of Ibrāhīm Niasse have become increasingly influential in West Africa (and beyond) because they have adapted enduring practices of Muslim identity formation even as they provided these identities with new meanings in the colonial and postcolonial contexts.

At the heart of the challenge to and reassertion of “traditional” practices of knowledge transmission in modern times is an apparent divergence between enduring pedagogical understandings and reformist trends. Perhaps the most widely used explanation of this rupture has been Eickelman and Piscatori’s concept of the “objectification of Muslim consciousness.”

The objectification of Islam means that religious beliefs and practices are increasingly *seen* as systems (*minhaj*) to be distinguished from non-religious ones . . . For [Sayyid] Qutb, as for other activists, it is not sufficient simply to “be” Muslim and to follow Muslim practices. One must reflect upon Islam and articulate it. When activists declare that they are engaged in the “Islamization” of their society, the sense of thinking of religious beliefs as an objective system becomes explicit.¹⁰⁰

The idea of conscious reflection on religious behavior was not entirely unprecedented, but it took on new meaning in the context of cultural resistance to colonialism and the formation of the nation-state.

There is of course a difficulty in assigning overly distinct ideological fault lines: the notion of Sufi versus Salafi is obviously reductionist. But the concept of cultural hybridity or a polymorphous “contemporary Islam,”¹⁰¹ as a way to avoid the binaries of “tradition” and “reform,” fails to explain the intense theological debate and even violence resulting from divergent trends. Louis Brenner, in his landmark study of Muslim schooling in Mali, famously concluded that this showdown constituted nothing short of an “epistemic rupture,” since the “esoteric episteme” of the traditional learning circle (*majlis*) was hopelessly marginalized by modernity’s privileging of the “rationalist episteme” best exemplified by reformist products of the modern Islamized school (*madrassa*).¹⁰² Seesemann and Ware more convincingly argue that the

100 Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 42.

101 Benjamin Soares and Filippo Osella, “Islam, Politics, Anthropology,” in *Islam, Politics, Anthropology*, ed. Osella and Soares (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 12.

102 Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 7–12.

difference, which admits of some slippage between poles, is explained by an epistemological contestation. Like Brenner, Seesemann and Ware recognized that traditionalists and reformists are not only contesting specific issues of theology or jurisprudence (celebration of the Prophet's birthday for example). Unlike Brenner's concept of a mutually exclusive and irreconcilable episteme, however, they separately argued that divergent approaches to knowledge defined an epistemological divide. Seesemann suggests a divergence between a *sanad* (chain of transmission) and *dalil* (evidence-based) paradigm: the one emphasizing the reliability of the transmission for determining the value of knowledge, the other more interested in the rationally-evaluated content of the knowledge.¹⁰³ Ware defines the epistemological divide as that between the embodied word and a disembodied textuality: the first perspective seeks knowledge primarily from people, the other primarily from texts: "Embodied transmission of Islamic knowledge is being eclipsed by disembodied consumption."¹⁰⁴

The habitus of knowledge realization that was rearticulated and expanded by the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse may consciously challenge what are considered shallow or surface understandings of Islam, but this habitus rarely finds itself challenged by surface (text-based) understandings. In other words, those steeped in traditional learning do not perceive themselves as facing an epistemological divide, much less an epistemic rupture. The way of inhabiting the world cultivated in the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse is meant to comprise literal, text-based, rational or discursive knowledge; even if the full meaning of "living" the religion cannot be reduced to words. In an interview with the French academic J. P. Froelich, Ibrāhīm Niasse admitted, "the reformists have sparked many quarrels," but deemphasized any epistemological divide:

As for those who follow the teachings of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb, they are following the letter of the Qur'ān. Certainly, this is good. But we think that it is also necessary to know the meaning, as was done by Imam Mālik, Abū Ḥanīfa, Shāfi'ī, and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal.¹⁰⁵

103 Seesemann, "On the Cultural History of Islamic Knowledge and Its Contemporary Relevance," Religious Studies Faculty Colloquium, Northwestern University, 17 February 2010. William Graham similarly postulated the existence of the "*isnād* paradigm," but did not specifically juxtapose it with an "evidence paradigm." See Graham, "Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1993), 507.

104 Ware, *Walking Qur'an*, 71.

105 J. Froelich, "Visite à el-Hadji Ibrāhīma Niasse," *L'Afrique et l'Asie* 84–85 (1968): 37–41. The latter reference here was to the four imams of Sunni jurisprudence.

From the perspective of Ibrāhīm Niasse's followers, then, the conflict is not so much between different worldviews, but between those who have been endowed with the meaning of Muslim identity and those who have not; between those who have *adab*, or have put the religion into practice, and those who do not have *adab*, those for whom religion is simply ideology. The opportunities for knowledge cultivation offered by Ibrāhīm Niasse's community continue to attract practitioners mostly because some Muslims continue to find in these opportunities a way to *live* their religion in a new time.

This book adds to existing research on the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse by focusing on intellectual and cultural history with reference to changing social and political contexts. Again to quote Feierman, "The difficult task in actual historical analysis is to . . . capture the cultural categories as both continuous and in transformation, and the actors as both creating new languages and speaking inherited words, all at the same time."¹⁰⁶ The only two other full-length monographs on the community, that of Rüdiger Seesemann (2011) and of Joseph Hill (2007), are largely concerned with situating Ibrāhīm Niasse's thought and practice in larger currents of Sufi thought (Seesemann), and tracing the ethnic and social contours of a Senegalese knowledge community (Hill). These are certainly essential questions, without which the present work would not be possible. In this work, my emphasis is on situating the community's development within long-term historical trajectories in West African Muslim societies and showing how actors both drew on an enduring habitus of actualized religious subjectivity and endowed this Muslim identity with new meaning in the twentieth century. Practically speaking, this work examines important lines of inquiry not fully examined in previous research, such as the content of Islamic knowledge transmission across the Islamic sciences within the community, the discourse on shaykh-disciple relations, and the engagement of the community with the discourses surrounding decolonization. *Living Knowledge in West African Islam* is an account of Muslim identity in historical motion.

The research I present here is based on both textual and oral sources. Primary Arabic and Wolof (and to a lesser extent, French) sources related to the community provide a wealth of information. This book, even when combined with previous sourcework conducted by Seesemann and Hill, does not exhaust their analysis. Particularly important to the question of divine cognizance and shaykh-disciple relations are Ibrāhīm Niasse's foundational justification for his movement, the *Kāshif al-ilbās*,¹⁰⁷ and the three-volume collection of the

¹⁰⁶ Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals*, 13.

¹⁰⁷ Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās 'an fayḍat al-khatm Abī l-Abbās*, ed. Tijānī Cissé (Cairo: al-Sharika al-Dawliyya, 2001). I collaborated on a translation of this work during my 2008–09 fieldwork, see *Removal of Confusion*.

shaykh's letters to disciples, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il*.¹⁰⁸ I also had recourse to Ibrāhīm Niasse's primary work on Islamic jurisprudence, the *Raf' al-malām*,¹⁰⁹ and a number of his collected works of poetry, such as the *Diwāwīn al-sitt*¹¹⁰ and the *Jāmi' al-jawāmi'*.¹¹¹ The colonial archives do not play a large role in this work, but some useful material is included in chapter 6 from research in the Archives Nationales in Dakar. I used other material from the colonial archives that is already available in the appendix of Seesemann's 2004 thesis, "Nach der Flut."¹¹² I am also grateful to Ousmane Kane, who provided a wealth of surveillance notes on Ibrāhīm Niasse that he had collected from the French archives in Aix-en-Provence and the British archives in London.

Other primary sources include two important archives of letters. The first was found in the house of Ibrāhīm Niasse after his death; it consists of a wide range of material (letters, speeches, conference proceedings, administrative records) most from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Of interest was incoming and outgoing official correspondence (the latter of which the archive thankfully included a copy) with government officials, religious leaders, or international Islamic organizations; in addition, the archive includes letters from disciples all over the world. A copy of this archive was graciously provided by a family relation of Ibrāhīm Niasse who wished to remain anonymous. A second archive exists in the hands of the descendants of 'Alī Cissé and consists of very personal letters exchanged between Ibrāhīm Niasse and his closest disciple. Members of the Cissé family kindly allowed me to copy a representative portion (around twenty) of these letters that provide rare insight into a paradigmatic expression of shaykh-disciple relations. Also included in the Cissé family archives are two notebooks (*kunnāsh*), each of roughly 130 pages, containing the notes, scholarly authorizations, letters, and prayers of 'Alī Cissé.¹¹³ I am

108 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il*. I translated sections of this work in Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Pearls from the Divine Flood: Selected Discourses from Shaykh al-Islam Ibrāhīm Niasse*, trans. Zachary Wright and Yahya Weldon (Atlanta: African American Islamic Institute, 2006).

109 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Raf' al-malām 'amman rafā'a wa qabaḍa iqtidā'an bi-sayyid al-anām* (Cairo: al-Mashhad al-Ḥusayni, n.d.).

110 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Dawāwīn al-sitt* (Dakar: Muḥammad Ma'mun Niasse, 1988).

111 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jāmi' al-jawāmi' al-dawāwīn* (Dakar: Muḥammad Ma'mun Niasse, 1988).

112 Seesemann, "Nach Der 'flut': Ibrāhīm Niasse (1900–1975), Sufik Und Gesellschaft in Westafrika," (PhD diss., Bayreuth University, 2004).

113 The first was arranged by 'Alī Cissé himself, and titled *al-Kunnāsh al-maktūm al-makhzūn*, and contains papers dated roughly from 1930 to 1939. The second was put together by Tijānī Cissé; here I have given it the name *al-Asrār al-mujarraba* for the sake of convenience,

grateful to Tijānī Cissé for allowing me to read these documents in Medina-Baye, Senegal.

Oral sources consist of a range of formal and informal interviews with shaykhs and disciples. My primary access to the community was through the Cissé family, who have inherited the imamate in the persons of Saydī ‘Alī Cissé (1975–1982), and his two sons Shaykh Ḥasan b. ‘Alī Cissé (1982–2008) and Shaykh Tijānī b. ‘Alī Cissé (2008–).¹¹⁴ Disciple sources came mostly, though not exclusively, from followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse through the Cissé family; these disciples live and work in a number of countries including Senegal, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United States. Aside from interviews conducted in Medina-Baye, I visited communities of disciples in the village of Diossong (the village where ‘Alī Cissé was born and the center of the Cissé lineage in the Saloum), various suburbs of Dakar (particularly Parcelle) and in Futa Toro (this during an earlier research trip in the summer of 2006). Outside Senegal, I conducted research among disciples in Mauritania (1997, 2006), Gambia (1998, 2009), Ghana (2003), Ivory Coast (2003), Nigeria (2006, 2014), South Africa (2003), France (2002), the United Arab Emirates (2011), and Britain (2012). Some of these trips were in the company of Ḥasan Cissé or Tijānī Cissé. I also spent time with disciples, mostly of West African origin, during periods of overseas residence in Egypt (2000–02), Morocco (2002–03), and Qatar (2010–13). In the United States, I made frequent visits to groups of disciples in New York and Chicago, and occasional visits to disciples in Washington, DC, Atlanta, and Detroit.

A last significant oral source for this work has been my participation in the learning circles of Islamic knowledge transmission in Medina-Baye, as well as in various celebrations (for the birthday of the Prophet, for example) where knowledge is shared. From 1997 onward, over roughly twenty separate visits, I spent nearly three years in Medina-Baye. In learning circles there I studied specific subjects, including the Qur’ān with Ḥasan Cissé and Serin Biteye (1998–99), sayings (*ḥadīth*) of the Prophet with Ḥasan Cissé (2000), the famous book of Sufi aphorisms *Kitāb al-Ḥikam* under Ḥasan Cissé (2003), parts of the Tijāniyya’s sourcebook *Jawāhir al-ma‘ānī* with Ḥasan Cissé (2002–03), and Ibrāhīm Niasse’s *Kāshif al-ilbās* with Tijānī Cissé (2008–09). I also studied classical texts of Mālikī jurisprudence with disciples outside Medina-Baye. What the following account lacks in external ethnographic impressions,

since Tijānī Cissé related that his father only included in this collection prayers of proven efficacy (*mujarrab*). This latter collection contains documents dated c. 1935–1965.

114 The first two were by designation in Ibrāhīm Niasse’s will, the last was by community consensus; a process I witnessed in August 2008.

compromised by prolonged exposure to the sources through particular people, is hopefully redeemed by analytical depth.

Narrative Structure of the Book

This work alternates between the intellectual, social, and political history of West African Islamic scholars. Chapter 1, “Clerical Communities in West African History,” traces the emergence of distinctive learning practices, emphasizing the necessity of knowledge being rooted and contained in people, through a closer look at four Islamic disciplinary specializations: Qurʾān learning, jurisprudence, “esoteric sciences” (healing and protection techniques), and Sufism. It also considers the West African social space in which Islamic scholarly communities negotiated their identities. West African Muslim identity had become, by the early twentieth century, uniquely personified in Islamic scholars and the communities that surrounded them.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the emergence of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s “community of the flood” from the perspective of Islamic knowledge specialization and the honored social status increasingly invested in Muslim identity. Chapter 2 considers the background of the Niasse family, and the gradual emergence of a new type of scholarly authority in the person of Ibrāhīm Niasse. Chapter 3 demonstrates the reception of this authority by the Cissé family, particularly in the person of ‘Alī Cissé, Ibrāhīm Niasse’s closest disciple and successor. One of the oldest Islamic scholarly lineages in West Africa, the Cissé family provide unique insight into the continuities and changes in clerical communities over time.

The community’s distinctive focus on the direct knowledge of God provided new access to the heights of Islamic learning, even as it deepened existing practices of person-to-person knowledge transmission. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the meaning of attaining divine cognizance (*maʿrifa*) based in the primary sources of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s community. Chapter 5 shows how the teaching of *maʿrifa* relied on previous conceptions of knowledge realization, while effectively deepening relations between teachers and students through a public discourse on master-disciple relations.

Chapters 6 and 7 turn to the maintenance and adaptations of traditional learning practices from roughly the 1950s to the present. Chapter 6 addresses the adaptation of pedagogical techniques that continued to focus on acquired disposition even as they incorporated new teaching practices in the context of modernization. Chapter 7 discusses how the content of traditional knowledge

transmission, here focusing again on Qur'an learning, jurisprudence, esotericism, and Sufism, was reprioritized to transmit divine cognizance in the new social space of the post-colony.

Chapter 8 is a discussion of Muslim identity and decolonization in Africa. Ibrāhīm Niasse's community envisioned that the exemplars of Islam it strove to produce, starting with Ibrāhīm Niasse himself, could foster solidarities in and across ethnic, national, and even religious boundaries. In the context of alternative visions of political and religious community solidarity that emerged after decolonization, the community's political vision of itself became distinct from other visions of African liberation and Islamic unification.

Much of this work is based on a reframing of my earlier PhD dissertation, "Embodied Knowledge in West African Islam: Continuity and Change in the Gnostic Community of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse." Parts of the current book have appeared in previous publications. Some of chapter 1 appeared in "The History of Islamic Identity in West Africa" (*Orient Journal*, Winter 2012) and in "Sufism in West Africa" (*Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, 2012). A version of chapter 6 appeared in "Traditional Islam and Pedagogical Change in West Africa: The Majlis and the Madrasa in Senegal" (*Journal for Islamic Studies*, Fall 2012). Elements of chapter 8 appeared in "Islam and Decolonization in Africa: The Political Engagement of a West African Muslim Community" (*International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Fall 2013).

Overall, this book is an internal narrative of the attempted adaptation and revival of Islamic learning in an African context. My conclusions thus reflect on continuities and ruptures in Islamic identity in the contemporary world, with reference to discussions of religious change in the broader Muslim world. Islamic learning was traditionally carried in the bodily presence of masters, sometimes called the proofs of Islam. Modern Muslim societies have often marginalized enduring learning practices that emphasized the personalized nurturing of character. Muslim identity has thus been reconstructed from the selective appropriation of texts, often with the best interests of the state (or other political actors) in mind, the same state that incidentally controls the new educational institutions. West African Muslim societies, which other Muslims and western academics have unfortunately long considered inconsequential to the larger story of Islamic identity, have sometimes succeeded in reviving the Islamic habitus of an earlier time. The community of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse represents one such narrative. In companionship to Ibrāhīm Niasse, disciples thus hoped to reenact the personalized transmission of the Prophet to his companions, making of themselves exemplary Muslims: the proofs of Islam in a new age.