

WHAT THE KNOWERS OF ALLĀH HAVE SAID  
ABOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF ALLĀH

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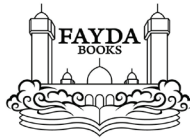
*What the Knowers of Allāh Have Said  
About the Knowledge of Allāh*

Imam Cheikh Tidiane Ali Cissé

*Celebration of the Prophet's Birthday,  
Abidjan, Ivory Coast, 2011*

*Translated by*

ZAKARIYA WRIGHT ؔ  
MUHAMMAD HASSIEM ABDULLAHI



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## *Introduction to the Translation*



Cheikh Tidiane Cissé (or Shaykh Tijānī b. ʿAlī Sīsī) holds the Imamate of the Grand Mosque in Medina-Baye Kaolack, Senegal. As Imam of the spiritual heart for the followers of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse, Cheikh Tidiane Cissé is the teacher and guide of millions of Muslims around the world. He succeeds to the position after a lifetime of personal instruction and companionship with some of the twentieth century's most eminent Tijānī scholars: Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1975), Shaykh Sayyid ʿAlī Cissé (d. 1982), and Shaykh Ḥasan b. ʿAlī Cissé (d. 2008). Upon succeeding to the Imamate in 2008, Cheikh Tidiane also assumed leadership of the humanitarian NGO founded by Shaykh Ḥasan Cissé, the African American Islamic Institute. Cheikh Tidiane Cissé has attained wide renown as an Islamic scholar, a Sufi guide, and a committed humanitarian activist.

Cheikh Tidiane Cissé (b. 1955) is the second son of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's most beloved student, Shaykh ʿAlī Cissé, and his first daughter, Fāṭima Zahra Niasse. After memorizing Qurʾān in Medina-Baye, Shaykh Tijani himself became a Qurʾān teacher in Medina Baye while continuing his Islamic studies. In his late teens, he devoted himself full-time to personalized instruction (*majālis al-ʿilm*), first under his father, Shaykh ʿAlī (1971-1972); and then under

his grandfather, Shaykh Ibrāhīm (1973). He was the last to be personally instructed by Shaykh Ibrāhīm in the classical texts, focusing mostly on Arabic literature and poetry. He would later receive the highest of licenses from his father, Shaykh ‘Alī Cissé, who told him: “Whatever Shaykh Ibrāhīm gave me, I am giving you.”

Cheikh Tidiane’s collection of scholarly licenses (*majmū‘ ijāzāt*) thus includes comprehensive authorizations in the Islamic sciences of Qur’ān recitation (*tajwīd*) and exegesis (*tafsīr*), Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and its principles (*uṣūl*), theology (*‘aqīda*), and literature (*adab*). The chains of transmission in this collection pass through Shaykh Ibrāhīm to some of the most prominent Islamic scholars around the world in the twentieth century. These scholars, by whom Shaykh Ibrāhīm was invested personally, include: ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī (Morocco), Muḥammad al-Ḥafiz al-Tijānī (Egypt), Aḥmad Sukayrij (Morocco), Šāliḥ b. al-Fudayl (Tunisia, Saudi Arabia), ‘Abd-Allāh b. al-Ṭayyib al-Azharī (Egypt), Muḥammad al-Amin al-‘Alawī (Mauritania), and his own father, ‘Abd-Allāh b. Muḥammad Niasse (Senegal). The authorizations in Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) transmitted to Cheikh Tidiane through Shaykh Ibrāhīm are similarly comprehensive. It has been related that the renowned Indonesian Ḥadīth scholar of Mecca, Yāsīn al-Fādānī (d. 1990), granted comprehensive authorization (*ijāzā*) to Cheikh Tidiane, along with Shaykh Ḥasan Cissé, in Mecca by order of the Prophet Muḥammad in a visionary encounter.

Upon completion of his early education in Senegal, he traveled to Egypt where he lived with Shaykh Ḥasan Cissé during his elder brother’s last year of study in Cairo. Like his brother, Shaykh Tijani excelled in his formal studies in Egypt; the result, he said, of the rigor of the informal instruction given him in Senegal. He graduated first in his class in the



Azhar preparatory school, receiving his diploma in Arabic language in 1974. He received his Baccalaureate in 1977 in Arabic Language, graduating fourth in his class. By 1981, he had distinguished himself at the University of Azhar with a degree in the faculty of Uṣūl al-Dīn (Theology), specializing in Ḥadīth (Prophetic Traditions).

After finishing his studies in Egypt, he traveled extensively throughout Africa, the Middle East and America, attending conferences, participating in religious debates, and calling people to Islam. He edited and published several important works, including Shaykh Ibrāhīm's *Kāshif al-ilbās* and an edited collection of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's writings, which he named *Sa'adat al-anām*. He also aided the publication of a comprehensive collection of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's supplications, *Kanz al-Maṣūn*. Most recently, he has edited and published the most important work of the Tijāniyya, the *Jawāhir al-ma'ānī*, based on the original manuscript of 'Alī Harāzim al-Barāda currently in Cheikh Tidiane's possession.

Such invaluable work has not gone unnoticed. One Azhar scholar reportedly told him that his work identifying ḥadīth citations in the 2001 publication of *Kāshif al-ilbās* would have been enough to earn him a doctoral degree at Azhar University. In the introduction to Cheikh Tidiane's reprinting of the *Kāshif*, Shaykh Ḥasan Cissé wrote: "I thank my dear brother, the master, the Shaykh, Tijānī 'Alī Cissé, who spent of his efforts for the success of this pious work and much appreciated endeavor."

The high scholarship and humanitarian mission of Cheikh Tidiane Cissé have garnered recognition around the world. The Senegalese government appointed him as Senegal's General Commissioner for the Hajj in 2001. In 2006, he was again recognized by Senegalese President Aboulaye Wade and appointed a Senegalese "Special Missions Ambassador." He has also received Senegal's distinguished award, the

Ordre de Merite (1993). On a recent trip to Atlanta, Georgia (January, 2011), he received the city's prestigious Phoenix Award. A 2014/2015 report issued by Jordan's Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre and Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding ranks Cheikh Tidiane thirteenth among the world's 500 most influential Muslim personalities.

The work presented here was originally written for delivery at a Mawlid celebration in Abidjan, Ivory Coast in 2011. It concerns *ma<sup>ʿ</sup>rifat-Allāh*, the experiential knowledge of God, sometimes translated as gnosis or cognizance. *Ma<sup>ʿ</sup>rifa* is often considered the essence of the Sufi path, for it meant to actualize the last stage of the Islamic religion: after *al-islām* (submission) and *al-īmān* (faith) comes *al-iḥsān* (excellence), “to worship God as if you are seeing Him, and if you are not seeing Him, know that He is seeing you.”

ZAKARIYA WRIGHT

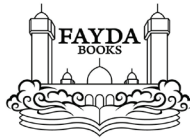
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## بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

*In the Name of Allāh the Compassionate the Merciful*

All praise belongs to Allāh, who engendered fraternity between the souls before the appearance of bodies. We have learned from the words of Allāh’s Prophet that the souls (*arwāh*) are like soldiers standing in rank. Those who knew each other before feel affinity in this realm and those who do not have differences. Allāh the Most High said, “And when your Lord took the children of Adam, from their loins, their descendants, and made them testify [saying to them], ‘Am I not your Lord?’ And they said, ‘Yes indeed (*balā*)!’”<sup>1</sup> So they responded with the letter *bā*, out of which was what was, out of which is what is until the Day of Gathering.

May the prayer and peace of Allāh be upon the secret of the Divine Essence (*dhāt*), the light of the Divine Essence, our master Muḥammad, the light of existence (*wujūd*), the spiritual support (*madad*) of existence. There is no existence except his existence, no light except his light, no spiritual support except his support. And by this prayer, we come to the knowledge of him. The Lord of Might said, “I was an unknown treasure. Then I desired to be known, so I created the creation and made myself known to them. So by Me (*fa-bī*) they know Me.” And the letters of the word, “by Me” (*fa-bī*) are equivalent to ninety-two, and these are

1 Qur’an, 7:172.

also the numerological equivalent of the letters in the name “Muḥammad.”<sup>2</sup> That is to say: it was by Muḥammad that the Exalted and Blessed Lord made Himself known. And may this prayer be on his pure family, his chosen companions, and those who have succeeded them in ṣpiritual excellence (*iḥsān*) till the Day of Judgment.

Distinguished leaders, ministers, princes, and directors; happy companions; distinguished imams, shaykhs, and instructors; his excellency, the noble, eminent master, the scholarly Sharīf ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, who has taken responsibility for this blessed gathering, together with his noble brothers; to all you brothers and sisters gathered here from all corners of the earth in order to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet: may Allāh’s peace, mercy, and blessing be upon you all.

Allāh has facilitated my coming to this blessed place to meet with this large gathering of beloveds, among the citizens of the Ivory Coast and neighboring countries. Our purpose is to discuss what is between us concerning “the knowledge of Allāh” (*ma‘rifa bi-Llāh*). The Sufi path, it is said, consists of both (individual) remembrance (*dhikr*) and collective reminding (*madhākara*). We hope that Allāh the Most High benefits us by what we hear, and allows us to hear what benefits us, in our final destination back to Him. He responds to those who long for Him. So by Him do I ṣpeak, and my words are only by Him, from Him and to Him.

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2 In Arabic,  $fā' = 80$ ,  $bā' = 2$ ,  $yā' = 10$ ;  $mīm = 40$ ,  $hā' = 8$ ,  $dāl = 4$ . Thus  $80 + 2 + 10 = 92$ ; and  $40 + 8 + 40 + 4 = 92$ . For a reference chart concerning this system of numerology, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1975), xix-xx.

## The Reality of the Knowledge of Allāh



Imam Abū al-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Hūzān al-Qushayrī,<sup>3</sup> may Allāh be pleased with him, described the knowledge of Allāh as follows:

Cognizance (*maʿrifa*) is knowledge (ʿilm), for every knowing (ʿilm) is an awareness (*maʿrifa*), and every awareness is a knowing. Every knowledgeable person of God (ʿālim bi-Llāh) is thus a gnostic, and every gnostic (ʿārif) is a scholar (ʿālim). In the terminology of the Sufis, gnosis is attributed to the one who knows the Real, Glorious is He, by His Names and His Attributes, whom God has then confirmed in his affairs. Then God purifies him from his lowly traits and awakens him. Long he waits at the door in God’s attendance, his heart persisting in worldly withdrawal, until Allāh the Most High grants him the beauty of acceptance in His presence. Allāh then confirms him in all of his words, and cuts off from him the stray thoughts of his self (*nafs*). Nothing occurs to his heart that would invite him to other than Allāh. So he becomes a stranger to the creation, absolved from the negligence of his self, and purified from fixations and petty observations. He persists in the secret of his

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<sup>3</sup> ʿAbd al-Karīm Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072) was an early Sufi master from Khurasan.

intimate discourse with Allāh the Exalted. He ascertains the reality of every moment as having its return to Allāh. The Real, Glorious is He, informs him (of each moment) beforehand, and permeates him with an awareness of through an awareness the secrets of Allāh's dispositions and capacities. It is at this point that he is named "gnostic" (*ʿārif*), and his spiritual state is called "gnosis" (*maʿrifā*). The gist of the matter is that a person obtains gnosis by his Lord to the extent of his alienation from his self.<sup>4</sup>

The Prophet David (Dāwūd), upon him be peace, once asked, "O Lord! How do I arrive to You?" The Lord, exalted is His majesty, said, "Leave your self, and come."

The hidden pole, our master Aḥmad al-Tijānī, may Allāh be pleased with him, was asked about the reality of knowing Allāh the Most High. He responded saying:

True gnosis is when Allāh takes a servant in such an embrace that he does not know origin (*aṣl*), differentiation (*fāṣl*), or means (*sabab*). He does not discern a specified wherewithal, and nothing remains of his sensory feeling, individual witnessing, personal erasure, movement, or volition. What has befallen him by divine manifestation (*tajalla*) has no beginning and no end; it is not bound by delimitation or ending.

In the *Jawāhir al-maʿānī*, he also said, "The people of gnosis are absent in Allāh from everything that perishes. They see by the majesty and beauty of Allāh, and they know by His attributes and names.

The pole of gnostics, the bringer of the Tijānī flood (*ṣāhib al-fayḍa al-Tijāniyya*), our master Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse, said:

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4 Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Risālat al-Qushayriyya*; For an English translation of this epistle in full, see Qushayrī's "Treatise on Sufism" in John Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 286-293. The translation above is our own.



Gnosis is the rooting and establishment of the spirit (*rūh*) in the presence of witnessing, with complete annihilation and persistence by Allāh. The gnostic for the Sufi people is the one who sees in otherness the essence, or who witnesses the Real in otherness. For me, the gnostic is he who becomes annihilated in Allāh's Essential Being (*dhāt*) once, then becomes annihilated in Allāh's Attribute (*ṣifa*) twice or three times, and then becomes annihilated in the Name once. So he attests to the creation by the three realities (*ḥaqā'iq*), and he attests to the names by the Name. This is a spiritual station without which there is only the gummy sap of thorny shrubs and the crumbling of hearts. It cannot be obtained by the giving of money or (having lots of) children. Who has mastered this station is possessed of perfect wakefulness. He is perfectly content with Allāh, with His wisdom, with His rulings, and with the entirety of His decrees. And Allāh is pleased with him, and he becomes deserving of His words, "So enter among my righteous servants, and enter My Paradise" (Qur'ān, 89:29-30).

He also said, may Allāh be pleased with him, that gnosis means, "the unveiling (*kashf*) of Allāh's names and attributes, and the result of this is the observance of Allāh and the sincerity of action for His sake." And he said, "The reality of gnosis is the witnessing of the perfection of Allāh's Essential Being (*dhāt*): 'And there is nothing the like comparable to Him' (42:11)." And he also said, "The one acquainted with Allāh does not derive pleasure from anything else in the creation, and the one acquainted with the lower world (*dunyā*) has no pleasure in his life. Who has opened for the him the eye of sight is astonished into silence, and does not occupy himself with words."

The Greatest Shaykh Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī said: "Know that gnosis is of two types: general gnosis, and special gnosis. As for the first, this is the gnosis obtained by seeking evidence, and it is called 'certain knowledge' (*'ilm al-yaqīn*).

As for the second, it has two types: the 'eye of certainty' (*'ayn al-yaqīn*) and knowledge of the 'absolute truth' (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*). This first is gnosis obtained by means of witnessing, and it is the station of the elite saints. The second is gnosis the spirit obtains by the One witnessed. This is when the senses of the heart become tranquil of the self's turbidities, freed from the chains of carnality, and purified from base human characteristics. At this point the knowledge of Allāh the Exalted becomes manifest to the spirit."

(Abū Bakr) al-Shibli said, "The gnostic does not look to other than Him. He does not speak words by other than Him. He does not see any guardian for himself other than Allāh the Exalted."

Some of the Sufi people have said, "Gnosis is when the Real causes you to die to your self, and brings you to life by Him." And it is said, "The gnostic becomes intimate with the remembrance of Allāh, and flees from the creation. He presents his needs to Allāh, and Allāh makes him independent of His creation. He humbles himself before the Most High, and then Allāh exalts him among His creation."

Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Sāmīrī said: "Gnosis is the Real's sunrise upon the secret, innermost being through the arrival of lights." And it has been said, "The gnostic is more that what is said, the scholar is less than what is said."

Junayd said, "The gnostic is he to whom Allāh has enunciated His secret, and he has kept quiet."<sup>5</sup>

Ya'qūb al-Sūsī was asked, "Does the gnostic feel grief on account of anything other than Allāh the Mighty and Majestic?" He said, "Does he see anything besides Him on whose account to be grieved?" Then he was asked, "By what eye does he look at things?" He said, "With the eye of annihilation and perishing."

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5 An alternative translation of this statement could be, "The Real speaks from the innermost being (*sirr*) of the gnostic, while he remains silent."

It has been said, “The gnostic is the one whose eye cries, but whose heart laughs.”

Junayd said, “The gnostic is not knowledgeable until he is like the earth, enclosing both righteousness and corruption, or like the cloud shading everything, or like the rain quenching the thirst of those it loves and those it does not love.”

Abū Yazīd (al-Biṣṭāmī) said, “They have obtained gnosis by forsaking what belongs to them, and stopping with what belongs to Him.”

Ibn ‘Aṭā’-Allāh said, “Gnosis is based on three pillars: fear (*hayba*), modesty (*hayya*), and intimacy with Allāh (*uns*).”

It was said to Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī, “How did you come to know your Lord?” He said, “I came to know my Lord by my Lord, and if not for my Lord, I would not have known my Lord.”

It has been said, “The scholar is a good example, but the gnostic is the one to be followed.”

One of the shaykhs was asked, “How did you come to know Allāh the Exalted?” He said, “By a light shining forth from the tongue, taken from the differentiated one contracted (with Allāh’s secret), and the expression passing from the tongue of one destroyed, lost; pointing towards the finding of a (divine) manifestation, preferring the secret over everything else. This is how it came to be.” And there are many other expressions of this sort. As the poet has said:

*I uttered without utterance; He is the utterance  
For You is the pronouncing of the utterance, or to  
explain out of the utterance  
You appeared where before You had been hidden  
A flash of lightning burst upon me, and I burst forth  
with speech.*

It has been said of the gnostic's description: "Nothing makes him impure, and everything is purified by him."

Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī said, "The signs of the gnostic are three: the light of his gnosis does not obscure the light of his pious restraint (*waraʿ*); he does not believe that inner, esoteric knowledge (*ʿilm al-bāṭin*) abolishes the need to follow outward legal injunctions; and the many gifts and blessings given to him by Allāh does not incite him to expose the veils that cover Allāh's hidden sanctity."

Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (al-Baghdādī) said, "Gnosis comes from an eye that weeps abundantly, and from expending the utmost effort."

Junayd was asked about the saying of Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī describing the gnostic, "He was here but now he has gone." Junayd replied, "One spiritual state does not hold the gnostic back from another spiritual state, and one spiritual station does not veil him from changing stations. Thus he is with the people of every place just as they are, he experiences whatever they experience, and he speaks their language so that they might benefit by his speech."

Muhammad b. al-Faḍl said, "Gnosis is the life of the heart with Allāh."

Ibn al-Sammāk was asked, "When does the servant know that he has attained the reality of gnosis?" He answered, "When the servant comes to witness the Real with the eye of esteem and respect, and when he passes away from everything other than Him."

Yaḥya b. Muʿādh, may Allāh have mercy on him, said, "Gnosis is the proximity of the heart to the Ever Near (*al-Qarīb*), the spirit's vigilant awareness of the Beloved (*al-Habīb*), and the isolation of oneself from everything else with the Sovereign responsive to prayers (*al-Mālik al-mujīb*)."

It has been narrated that Allāh the Exalted once revealed to the Prophet Dāwūd, peace be upon him, "O

Dāwūd! Come to know Me and come to know yourself!” So Dāwūd meditated on these words and said, “My God! I have come to know You through Your transcendental uniqueness (*fardaniyya*), might (*qudra*) and everlasting permanence (*baqā'*); and I have come to know myself through my incapacity (*'ajz*) and annihilation (*fanā'*).”

The knowledge of Allāh, glorious and exalted is He, is, according to these meanings, the utmost goal and aspiration of the ascetics and the highest degree that the God-conscious hope to attain. Thus, the Sufi people have been thrust on to the path of obtaining this most precious and invaluable acquisition. They have spent their lives in its pursuit, leaving their homelands on its account, undergoing extreme difficulties and passing through severe ordeals until they achieved victory in its attainment. Some of them have turned back empty handed from failing to fulfill its prerequisites or patiently endure its weighty affair, without realizing anything of its reality. It is enough for you as an example to recall the story of Prophet Moses (Mūsa) and his companion, Khidr, peace be upon them both. Mūsa was among the arch-Prophets. But he could not bear patiently with the testing and examination of Khidr. So he had to return without obtaining anything of this Divine Knowledge (*'ilm al-ladunī*), although he went on the journey with the express intention of acquiring such knowledge.

This is why this knowledge has been referred to as “the rarest treasure” and the one in possession of it has been referred to as “the philosophers stone” or “the red sulphur” (*al-kibrīt al-aḥmar*). However, since the appearance of the Sainly Seal (Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī), the distance to its arrival has been folded up and made short. The knowledge has been spread among the people of his spiritual path and circulated among his followers. And with the appearance of the bringer of the Tijani flood—our master Shaykh Ibrāhīm

b. al-Ḥājj ʿAbd-Allāh Niasse—there has been an effusion of Divine knowledge and gnosis. Everyone has drunk from its contents, until the knowledge of Allāh has spread to nearly every land. All who have a connection with this honorable saintly pole (*qutb*) has been blessed with their share, and none have been given a greater portion than them in this day-and-age. Such people are scholars, leaders, imams and princes. They are stars and lamps of guidance in every land.

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