

ON THE PATH OF THE PROPHET
Shaykh Ahmad Tijani (1737-1815)
and the Tariqa Muhammadiyya

Zachary Valentine Wright

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On the Path of the Prophet

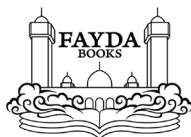
*Shaykh Ahmad Tijani (173 7-1815) and the
Tariqa Muhammadiyya*

by

ZACHARY VALENTINE WRIGHT

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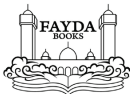
Publishers Preface



The revising, reprinting, and redistribution of this book has been of paramount importance to me personally. I recall reading the university thesis of Professor Zachary Wright many years ago, and immediately knew that it would one day evolve into this current book. When it was initially published in 2005, I read the entire book in one weekend. It was as if it quenched a perpetual thirst after many years. This book removes the shroud covering one of Islam's most influential leaders and provides insight into the movement he initiated at the behest of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him).

This work is a must read for anyone interested in understanding the importance of Allah's "Divine Balance." It is that balance which placed Islam's greatest proponents of theological rigidity (Wahhabism) and Islam's greatest proponents of spiritual unity (Tariqa Muhammadiyya), on opposite scales, in the world, at the same time in history.

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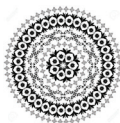


First and foremost, I would like to thank Shaykh Hassan Cisse for his assistance and inspiration in this work. Other Tijani scholars who have been of great help include Shaykh Muhsin Shalaby of the Tijani center (zawiya) in Heliopolis, Cairo, and Professor Abdelaziz Benabdellah in Rabat, Morocco. The actual publication of this work would not have been possible without the support of Dr. Dawud Jeffries and the African-American Islamic Institute based in Atlanta. *On the Path of the Prophet* was originally written as an M.A. thesis for the American University in Cairo. As such I am indebted to several professors there: my primary advisor, Dr. Mark Abd al-Azim Sedgwick, as well as Dr. Mohamed Serag and Dr. Nelly Hanna in the Arabic Studies Department. Thanks as well to Sawson Mardini in the Graduate Student Office. Others in Egypt include Azhar students Adam al-Islam and Zakir Khan for their help in translation. In Morocco I must also thank the Fulbright scholarship program, and particularly the program officers in Rabat, Dawud Casewit and Saadia Maskia. Professor Benabdellah's assistant in Rabat, Selma Bennani, was also of great help. In Fes, my gratitude is due to the descendents of Shaykh Ahmad Tijani in the Tijani zawiya there. Qarawin

University students Idris Watts and Mukhtar Sy also provided valuable help in translation and the procuring of texts. Besides Shaykh Hassan Cisse in Senegal, my thanks to Ibrahim Kafani Cisse for his advice and for helping to facilitate my stays there. Lastly, I must thank my mother, Um Salama Keller, for her support.

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Introduction by Shaykh Hassan Cisse



This work is an important step both in elucidating the life and thought of one of Islam's seminal religious personalities, and in exposing the essential link between Sufism and the Islamic tradition. This work concerning Shaykh Ahmad Tijani (may Allah be pleased with him) is one of the only in the English language to which I have been able to lend my support. I hope it will help to dispel some of the myths surrounding the person of Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and to establish definitively the orthodoxy of the type of Sufism, which he practiced.

The concept of the *Tariqa Muhammadiyya* or “Muhammadan Way” is important because it expresses the absorption of Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and the path that bears his name, the Tijaniyya, in the example of the Prophet Muhammad (may Allah bless him and grant him peace). Indeed, Shaykh Tijani himself said, “If you hear something attributed to me, weigh it on the scale of the Shari’a (sacred law), if it balances, take it, if not, leave it.” Outside the circle of Qur’an and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet), there is no such thing as the *Tariqa Tijaniyya*. In this way, Tijanis do not distinguish themselves from the larger Islamic community, for all Muslims are only trying

to follow the teachings of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad.

I, Shakyh Hassan Cisse, endorse this work as an accurate portrayal of Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and some of the important concepts of the Tijaniyya. The author, Zakariya Wright, visited us many times over the past years preparing this work. I worked with him helping him to interpret primary texts of the Tijaniyya, such as the *Jawahir al-Ma'ani*. I believe he has understood the importance of reading such texts from the perspective of one knowledgeable of the tradition of scholarship from which they emerge.

Shaykh Hassan Cisse

Imam of the Grand Mosque in Kaolack, Senegal.

Note on transliteration



All Arabic words have been italicized, except those common in English usage, such as shaykh (Islamic scholar or spiritual guide), Shari'a (Islamic sacred law) or Jihad (struggle, holy war). Words ending in ^o are left to end in sound of the preceding vowel, unless followed by another word, thus *khalifa* vs *khalifat al-akbar*. Short vowels are transliterated as follows: *fatha*, **a**; *kasra*, **i**; *damma*, **u**.

<i>a</i>	ا	<i>d</i>	ض
<i>b</i>	ب	<i>t</i>	ط
<i>t</i>	ت	<i>zh</i>	ظ
<i>th</i>	ث	<i>'</i>	ع
<i>j</i>	ج	<i>gh</i>	غ
<i>h</i>	ح	<i>f</i>	ف
<i>kh</i>	خ	<i>q</i>	ق
<i>d</i>	د	<i>k</i>	ك
<i>dh</i>	ذ	<i>l</i>	ل
<i>r</i>	ر	<i>m</i>	م
<i>z</i>	ز	<i>n</i>	ن
<i>s</i>	س	<i>w</i>	و
<i>sh</i>	ش	<i>y</i>	ي
<i>s'</i>	ص		

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PREFACE



Little has been written about Islamic scholarship, and even less about Islamic mysticism, in the late eighteenth century of the Common Era. It was a period whose central actors were seemingly about to be obscured by the advent of modernity in Islamic societies. European colonialists and Muslim reformers generally had no taste for the delicately nuanced Islamic legal tradition, and certainly not for the intangible science of Sufism.

But in their own time, scholars such as Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and their followings were respected, cosmopolitan and popular movements; more-so than, say, the Wahhabi movement emerging at the same time in the east of Saudi Arabia. In scholarly and popular circles in the late eighteenth century, there is evidence that the sober mysticism associated with the *Tariqa Muhammadiyya* phenomenon was the talk of the town. *Tariqa Muhammadiyya* ideology, as it evolved in the late eighteenth century, was an attempt to orient Sufism more directly to the person of the Prophet Muhammad as the ultimate Sufi shaykh. With simultaneous emphasis on such concepts as the Prophetic Sunnah (code of behavior), the Muhammad Reality (*Haqiqa Muhammadiyya*) and visionary experience, the phenomenon was

an interesting combination of external Islamic orthopraxy and some of the more complicated elements of Islamic esotericism.

Well traveled and well educated propagators made the *Tariqa Muhammadiyya* movements some of the primary agents of Islamic revival in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From the Khalwatiyya in Egypt, the Salihyya in East Africa, the Sammaniyya in Sudan, the Sanusiyya in Central and North Africa, the Tijaniyya in the Maghreb and West Africa and similarly-minded movements in India and other parts of the Islamic world, scholars identifying with the ideology of the *Tariqa Muhammadiyya* helped to reinvigorate Islamic societies and institutions, to spread Islam among Christian and animist populations and even to lead resistance struggles against colonial occupation.

It is indeed surprising that the massively popular *Tariqa Muhammadiyya* movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were so marginalized by modernist rhetoric that many present-day Muslims can hardly recall the names of such scholars as Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi, Mustafa al-Bakri, Muhammad al-Hifhi, Ahmad Tijani, Ahmad ibn Idris or Muhammad al-Sanusi. In Egypt, the modernist reformer Muhammad Ali undermined the Azhari establishment and the *ulama* (class of Islamic scholars), which, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was often led by Khalwati shaykhs. In Libya, Muammar Qaddafi attempted to downplay and even erase the memory of the Sanusiyya order's resistance to Italian occupation. In Algeria, leftist revolutionaries and a new class of Salafi-influenced Islamists joined forces to malign the Sufi orders, particularly the Tijaniyya whose founder hailed from the Southern Algerian town of Ain Madi. Such attacks were not simply the result of a newly emerging power structure in competition for spheres of influence. They involved a struggle for the very identity of Islam itself. Simply put, modernist reformers were in need of a version of Islam that could be easily manipulated for political aims.

For the historian, the *Tariqa Muhammadiyya* movements represent some of the last examples of attempted Islamic revivification that might be said to be wholly indigenous to the Islamic tradition. With Europe's colonization of the Muslim world beginning in the nineteenth century, European-style modernity would become an inescapable reference point coloring all subsequent attempts at Islamic reform. Scholars such as Shaykh Ahmad Tijani thus provide us with an important window into the nature of the Islamic tradition before the coming of modernity, that would irrevocably imprint all forms of discourse in Islamic societies.

It is no accident that the personalities of figures such as Shaykh Ahmad Tijani have remained enigmatic. The polemics of the modernist discourse aside, Shaykh Ahmad Tijani was probably a somewhat mysterious person to his own contemporaries. He himself was not political, although his influence may be discerned on a wide range of political leaders. His life's work primarily centered on the standard Sufi shaykh ideal (that of helping people come to the knowledge of God), but neither did he require of himself or his followers to remain withdrawn from the world. He taught about the necessity of the heart's freedom from worldly preoccupation, but was himself rumored to possess great wealth. He claimed to have been graced with exalted spiritual stations, but was humble and frequently asked God for forgiveness. His presence inspired extraordinary love among his companions, but it never ceased to strike them with awe as well.

This book thus hopes to illuminate the double veils of a misunderstood time period and a saint who himself possessed a somewhat mysterious aura. This work does not pretend to be the definitive word on either subject, only a step in the process of reconstructing modern knowledge of the late eighteenth century in the Muslim world, and the Sufi shaykhs who dominated the stage.

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Introduction: Sufism within Traditional Islam



There remains a continued reluctance in some circles to admit the integral relationship between Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and the Islamic tradition. This reluctance exists despite the consensus of most contemporary academic research, not to mention the perspective of Sufis, or Muslim mystics themselves. While critics can always point to the executions of a few mystics such as al-Hallaj and Suhrawardi or the aberrant tendencies of some strands of popular Sufism such as those detailed in Jabarti's *History of Egypt*, elite or scholarly Sufism has more often than not found itself in the position of defining Islamic "orthodoxy" in the premodern period.

There is a long list of Sufi-scholars who have had a historically integral role in interpreting the Islamic message, including the likes of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Abu Zakariyya Yahya al-Nawawi (d. 1278) and Abd al-Rahman al-Suyuti (d. 1505), to name a few. Certainly there is much truth to the common assertion that it was the Sufi sages, whether in Malaysia, India, Anatolia, Upper Egypt or West Africa, who were responsible for spreading the religion of Islam. As long as the large-

ly imagined barrier between Sufism and Islamic orthodoxy persists, Islamic history, from its supposed decline (Bernard Lewis), to its renaissance, to its spread, to the very personality of the Prophet Muhammad himself, are all in danger of being misunderstood if Islam is to be divorced from what might be defined as the essentially spiritual, mystical or “Sufi” nature of its message.

Even before modern ideas of Islam and Sufism’s irreconcilability could be articulated, there emerged in the Muslim world a movement, the *Tariqa Muhammadiyya*, whose appearance indicates a decisive rejection of the idea of Sufisms alleged departure from Islamic orthodoxy. No wonder then, given the reluctance in the modern period to admit the close relationship between Sufism and Islam, that it has only been recently that this movement, despite its temporal proximity and popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has been granted any serious attention in the academic study of Sufism or premodern Islam.