

PEARLS FROM THE FLOOD

Select Insight of of Shaykh al-Islam Ibrāhīm Niasse

Compiled and Translated by Zachary Wright

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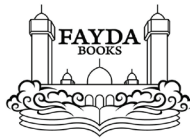
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ZACHARY WRIGHT



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Recognition is due to the exemplary efforts of my elders in the American Muslim community who have exerted so much

effort long before me to make the writings of Shaykh Ibrāhīm available in English. I cannot hope to honor all of them by name, but certainly Shaykh Abdul-Hakim Halim, Dr. Dawud Jeffries, and Imam Sayyid Abdussalam have been inspirations for their work in this field.

All good in this book is from God, all mistakes are my own.

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هذا تقرير للكتاب المبارك الميمون
" جواهر الفيضة "

الحمد لله حمد الذات للذات وللذات والصلاة والسلام على مظهره في جميع التجليات سيدنا محمد مدد
الكائنات وخاتم الرسالات وعلى آله وأصحابه ينابيع العلوم والخيرات والبركات ورضي الله عن خاتم
الولاية المحمدية الخصوص بالخمسة والكتيبة وعن خليفته ووارث سره على الإطلاق دون نزاع
أوشقاق سيدنا أبي إسحاق الشيخ إبراهيم أنياس بن الحاج عبد الله رضى الله عنه

وبعد،

فان الله تبارك وتعالى ساقى بمشيئته لكى أكون من ضمن الذين وقفوا على هذا
الكتاب الجليل جواهر الفيضة وهو كتاب له من الفضل ماله وله من الخير والمنفعة ماله فقد فرحت به
وسررت به غاية ونهاية لما حوى من العلوم التى تنفع أهل الفيضة خاصة وكل من أراد الله نفعه من
العباد فجزى الله كاتبه ومؤلفه خيرا وواصل أمداد الشيخ فيه سرا وجهرا فهو أخ خير وفاضل وعالم
الا وهو الاستاذ الجليل والعالم النبيل السيد زكرياء رايت كثر الله خيرته وزاد في حسه ومعناه وبلغه في
الدارين متمناه فله من عندنا الرضى التام والمحبة الكاملة ولكن أنسى أبدا ما قام وما يقوم به دائما
وأسال الله متوسلا بحضرتي النبوة والولاية أن ينصره ويؤيده ويرضى عنه وعن جميع خدماته وأعماله
الظاهرة والباطنة وءاخر دعوانا أن الحمد لله رب العالمين وسلام.

وكتب الشيخ التجاني علي سيس
نزيل أكرانا

6 من جمادى الآخرة 1436 هـ

شيخ تاج الدين علي سيس



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الإيميل :

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**Commendation for the blessed and auspicious
book**

Pearls from the Flood

By Shaykh al-Tijānī Cissé

[Abridged translation]

All praise to Allāh, praise of the Essence, belonging to the Essence. Blessing and peace on His manifestation among the entirety of manifestations, our master Muḥammad, the support of the created entities, the seal of messengers; and upon his family and companions following after in knowledge, virtue, and blessing. May Allāh be pleased with the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood, uniquely distinguished to be the seal, and to be hidden. And (may He be pleased) with his successor, the unlimited inheritor of his secret, without dispute or dissension, our master Abī Ishāq al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse b. al-Ḥājj ‘Abd-Allāh.

Allāh the Most High and Exalted has directed me by His will to be among the guarantors for whoever should come upon this distinguished book, *Pearls of the Flood*. This book contains grace, goodness, and benefit. It has brought me happiness and satisfaction from the beginning to the end for what it contains of knowledge for the people of the Divine Flood

especially, and for whomever Allāh desires benefit among His servants. So may Allāh reward its writer and compiler with goodness, and may the support of the Shaykh continue to be with him, secretly and openly, for he is a brother endowed with grace, virtue, and knowledge: the distinguished professor and noble scholar, *al-Sayyid* Zakariya Wright [...]

And our final prayer is to praise Allāh, Lord of all the worlds. Peace.

Shaykh al-Tijānī b. ‘Alī Cissé
Imam of the Grand Mosque
Medina-Baye Kaolack, Senegal

Accra, Ghana
March 26, 2015

Translator's Introduction



This book gathers some of the key discourses of the renowned Senegalese “Shaykh al-Islām” Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abd-Allāh Niasse (d. 1975). Shaykh Ibrāhīm was undoubtedly one of the twentieth century’s most renowned Muslim intellectuals. Indeed, he engaged with a variety of questions pertaining to contemporary Muslim identities: changes in Islamic learning, spiritual training, anti-colonial liberation, or the politics of community building, for example. *Pearls from the Flood* translates a wide range of primary source material that speaks to the Shaykh’s spectrum of intellectual and social roles. These sources should be read in the context of Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s historical positioning within relevant Muslim and African discourses. This introduction thus provides a short overview of the Shaykh’s intellectual biography relating to Sufism, Islamic learning more generally, African decolonization, and post-colonial visions of Islamic solidarity.

As a leading scholar of the Tijāniyya Sufi order in modern times, Shaykh Ibrāhīm was the spiritual guide to millions of Sufi aspirants throughout Africa and beyond. His followers

knew him as the paradigmatic inheritor (*khalīfa*) of the “Seal of Saints” Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815, Fez), and thus the axial saint (*qutb*) of his age. Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s community distinguished itself historically by an unprecedented transmission of the experiential knowledge (*maʿrifa*) of God. This was based on the Shaykh’s claim to possess the “flood” (*fayḍa*), an overflowing divine grace (*fadl*) reconnecting the Muslim community to God in an age of corruption.

*I said: “There is no god but Allāh,
and Muḥammad has been sent by Allāh.”
Then from me overflowed His secret, and whoever seeks me with
purpose
Attains the knowledge of Allāh, the Eternal Sustainer
The elders the same as the youth
Since the Beloved, the Sanctuary has come close
The men the same as the women
The poor the same as the sultans.*

Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s words, here from the poem “The Bursting Flood” included in this collection, thus communicate a sense of urgency: humanity, and Muslims especially, must strive for the cognizance or gnosis (*maʿrifa*) of God. Such knowledge is the essential purpose of human existence.

If the Shaykh’s endowment with *fayḍa* offered his students direct access to *maʿrifa*, he also demonstrated recognizable mastery of other doctrines and practices long held dear to the Sufi tradition. His writings and speeches are thus filled with references to the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God, purification of the self (*tazkiyat al-nafs*), love of the Prophet, friendship (*walāya*) with God, and comportment on the spiritual path (*adab al-*

sulūk). The actual practice of Sufism is of course inseparable from apprenticeship to a guiding master (*shaykh al-murshid*). According to noted Islamicist William Chittick, “All Sufis agree that entering the path without a shaykh is impossible. If someone thinks he has done so, in fact he has gone astray.”¹ Shaykh Ibrāhīm explained the disciple’s special relationship to the spiritual guide by citing the words of Abū Madyan:

*The shaykh is someone whom your subjective being (dhāt) has acknowledged with preference, and whom your innermost being (sirr) has acknowledged with reverence. The shaykh refines you with his exemplary character, trains (addaba) you by bowing his head in silence, and illuminates your inner being with his radiance. The shaykh is he who gathers you in his presence and preserves you in his absence.*²

Accented here is the gentle beauty of “love for the sake of God” within the shaykh-disciple relationship, so often lost in academic discussion of the practice. Indeed, the sacred bond between the shaykh and the disciple cannot be reduced to words. But the ineffability of such core doctrines and practices of course did not stop Sufi intellectuals from producing a rich corpus of writing. While the current collection does not present a comprehensive overview of the Shaykh’s Sufi thought, it demonstrates his familiar access to Sufism’s deep knowledge tradition.

Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s writing and speeches readily display mastery of the Islamic knowledge disciplines (‘ulūm al-dīn) more broadly. Particularly discernable is his knowledge of Arabic grammar (*naḥw*), literature (*adab*), theology (‘aqīda), juris-

1 William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 270.

2 Abū Madyan (d. 1198, Tlemcen) cited in Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās ‘an faydat al-khatm Abī l-‘Abbās* (Cairo: al-sharika al-dawliyya, 2001), 136.

prudence (*fiqh*), Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), and Qur'ān exegesis (*tafsīr*). The Shaykh learned these sciences at an early age, mostly in the distinguished learning circle (*majlis al-ʿilm*) of his father, al-Ḥājj ʿAbd-Allāh b. Muḥammad Niasse (d. 1922). Al-Ḥājj ʿAbd-Allāh had attracted students from all over Senegal and Mauritania. On the way to Mecca to accomplish the pilgrimage, his erudition so impressed the scholars of Egypt's Azhar University that they conferred on him an honorary diploma.³ Aside from his father's authorization to teach, Shaykh Ibrāhīm's collection of scholarly licences (*ijāzāt*) in the religious sciences include unlimited authorizations from some of the most renowned traditional scholars in the Muslim world: ʿAbd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī of Morocco, ʿAbd-Allāh b. al-Ṭayyib al-Azharī of Egypt, Ṣāliḥ b. al-Fuḍayl al-Tūnisī of Medina Arabia, Aḥmad Sukayrij of Morocco, and Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Tijānī of Egypt.⁴ Several learned students of Shaykh Ibrāhīm, chief among them the Shaykh's successor (*khalīfa*) Sayyid ʿAlī b. al-Ḥasan Cissé, thus obtained from him a comprehensive authorization through multiple illustrious chains of transmission (*asānīd*; sing: *sanad*). Indeed, at least by the early 1960s, Shaykh Ibrāhīm had become known, in Arab world press reports and elsewhere, as the "Shaykh al-Islām" or simply the "Leader" (*zaʿīm*), of Muslims in West Africa.

Lead by such an African "Shaykh al-Islām" at the moment of decolonization, Shaykh Ibrāhīm's community has maintained a certain anti-colonial and pan-African and pan-Islamic stance. Internal discourses remember a three-decade campaign, beginning in the 1930s, of spiritual Jihād against colonial occupation employing the weaponry of self-reliance

3 Ibrahim Niang, "Āthār al-ṭaṣawwuf fī ḥayāt al-Ḥājj ʿAbd-Allāh In-ṭyās" (Conference paper: *Semaine al-Hajj Abdoulaye Niasse*, Dakar, 1986). Copy in author's possession.

4 For more discussion of Niasse's *Majmūʿ al-ijāzāt*, see Zachary Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: the Sufi Community of Ibrāhīm Niasse* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 194-197.

and prayer.⁵ The community's distance from colonial power and its rapid spread after the Second World War unnerved British and French colonial authorities. The Shaykh's surveillance file in the colonial archives is probably the largest of any African scholar. In 1955, one colonial official warned that with Niasse's growing following "there is a risk of seeing the impending creation of a State for the black race with a Muslim political and social structure."⁶

Indeed, Shaykh Ibrāhīm's millions of followers mostly spread between Mauritania, Nigeria, and Sudan, constituted arguably the most successful Afro-Islamic revivalist movement of modern times. Such an international network occasioned significant reflection on the nature of post-colonial solidarities beyond the narrowly defined nation-state. Shaykh Ibrāhīm became friends with pan-Africanist anti-colonial intellectuals like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Ahmad Sekou Touré of Guinea. He campaigned in travels, speeches, and writings for the ideals of pan-African solidarity, encouraging all Africans to "liberate themselves and raise the pan-African banner, so that they may practice their beliefs and traditions freely."⁷ He told a large gathering in Nigeria: "I believe it is incumbent on all the African nations to one day unify, in order to facilitate cooperation between themselves: a cooperation that will be quite fruitful."⁸

5 See Wright, *Living Knowledge*, 255-258.

6 Sous-Directeur Bougeau, 4 June 1955; cited in Rüdiger Seesemann, "Nach der Flut: Ibrahim Niasse Sufik Und Gesellschaft in Westafrika" (PhD Dissertation, University of Bayreuth, 2004), 868.

7 Ibrāhīm Niasse to Ahmad Bello, March 1961; cited in Jonathan Reynolds, *The Time of Politics (Zaminin Siyasa): Islam and the Politics of Legitimacy in Northern Nigeria 1950-1966* (Bethesda, MD: International Scholars Publications, 1999), 194.

8 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* (Nigeria: Aḥmad Abū l-Faṭḥ, unknown date), II:132-133.

Significantly, the Shaykh did not see confessional differences as an impediment to mutual cooperation for common goals. In 1961, he told an international gathering in Ghana, whose audience included Kwame Nkrumah, Josip Tito of Yugoslavia, and Leonid Brezhnev of the Soviet Union:

I see the world as one great village that the people of different religions share. And in this village, whatever their confessional differences, the inhabitants can unite under the tree to discuss during the day, to reflect on what might undermine or bring favor to their hopes. However, as soon as each person is in the enclosure of his hut, nobody can prohibit him from exercising his religion. I am sure every parent will have an idea as to how to best guide their own children.⁹

Shaykh Ibrāhīm of course encouraged the involvement of righteous Muslims in politics, but he shied from supporting any specifically Muslim political agenda. Within Senegal, he cultivated a distant cooperation with the country's founding president, a Christian, Leopold Senghor. The Shaykh seemed to define politics simply as "providing benefit to people." Muslim politicians, like any other politicians, must be challenged to help people: that is what defined their worth, not their religious affiliation.

The creation is the family of God, and the most beloved to Him are those who provide for His family ... "God helps the servant as long as the servant is helping his brother." With these attributes, we become the best of communities brought forth for mankind.¹⁰

9 Niasse's words according to Barham Diop, interview, Dakar, August 2006, and September 2011. The same speech is cited in Mouhamadou Mahdy Niasse, *Baye Niass: Le Défenseur de l'Islam* (Montreal: Alioune Thiam, 1997), 50. The last sentence, however, was provided only in Diop's September 2011 interview.

10 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il*, II: 9.

Such an emphasis on justice essentially defined the Shaykh's political engagement. He was thus fond of reciting the Islamic adage: "A believer can live for a long time with those of no faith, but he will not last long with the unjust."¹¹

Beyond the ideals of pan-African cooperation during decolonization, Shaykh Ibrāhīm's community articulated its own vision of global Islamic solidarity. Unlike other modern Islamic movements, this vision explicitly denounced what may sometimes appear as the thinly veiled ethno-centrism of reformist calls (such as Arab socialism, the Muslim Brotherhood, or Salafism) emerging from the Arab world.

The truth is that, for the last three centuries, you have not seen anyone who has raised up the religion in history—either by knowledge, guidance, or struggle (jihād)—except that he was a non-Arab. This proves the statement of the one who said: "Islam will remain with the Arabs, but it will be strengthened by the non-Arabs." The non-Arabs, they are those who strengthen Islam. There are seven hundred million Muslims today, and the Arabs pride themselves that they make up one hundred million ... Whether among Arabs or non-Arabs, Islam entails holding fast to this religion and not turning to nationalisms (qawmiyyāt), racialisms ('uṣuriyyāt), and pagan ignorance (jāhiliyya). The most honored of you in the presence of God is the most pious.¹²

In a Muslim world increasingly racialized by the experience of colonialism, Muslims needed to rethink their common association of the Arab race with Islamic orthodoxy. The community

11 Ibrāhīm Niasse, "Eternal Islam," see selection later in this volume. The Shaykh echoed a similar sentiment in a 1971 speech in Kaduna, Nigeria. See Niasse, *Sa'ādat al-anām bi aqwāl shaykh al-islām* (Cairo: al-sharika al-dawliyya, 2006), 33.

12 Ibrāhīm Niasse, "Khuṭbat ḥadīqat al-anwār" (in Kano, Nigeria, 1960s), in *Sa'ādat al-anām*, 118–119. The final quotation is from the Qur'ān.

thus created ideological space for a global revivalist network whose heart remained in black Africa.

Shaykh Ibrāhīm also avoided the common reformist manipulation of the Islamic traditional sciences that tends to direct virulent attacks against the variety of opinions in the legal schools (*madhāhib*) or the methods of spiritual purification in the Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*). According to such reformist discourses, the defeat of the Muslim world can be blamed on superstitious accretions (allegedly Sufism) and the practice of following scholars instead of sacred texts. Shaykh Ibrāhīm openly castigated such associations, and suggested that the problem was actually the turning away from the exemplars of the Islamic cultural order.

When the enemies of Islam wanted to forcibly tear apart Islam, they began by driving people away from the friends of God (awliyā'). When they finished with that, they alienated people from the ritual prayer. Then they alienated them from the religion completely. Thus, we hear many in this time who disavow the Tijāniyya Sufi order.¹³

Shaykh Ibrāhīm's vision of global Islamic solidarity thus depended on the Muslim community's recognition of Islamic exemplars, or "friends of God," whose very being-in-the-world inspired meaning and purpose to contemporary Muslim identities.

But the question of community solidarities may exaggerate certain contextualized responses to immediate concerns. Most of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's public statements downplayed sectarian divides and asserted the sacred unity of the Muslim world. In practice, he met with various Saudi kings and scholars, was photographed with Mawlana Mawdudi of the Pakistani Jamaat-e Islami, and wrote Egyptian president Gamal Abdel

13 Niasse, "Khuṭbat ḥadiqat al-anwār," in *Sa'ādat al-anām*, 117.

Nasser to stop the execution of Muslim Brotherhood intellectual Sayyid Qutb.¹⁴

Perhaps the only feature that has consistently united Shaykh Ibrāhīm's vast and diverse network of followers as a distinctive community has been an uncompromising desire for the direct knowledge (*ma' rifa*) of God. The understanding of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's popularity cannot overstate the appeal of *ma' rifa*. Here is the Shaykh's explanation of the divine "attraction" (*jadhb*) through which aspirants obtain *ma' rifa*, here taken from his primary work on Sufism, the *Kāshif al-ilbās*:

Know that when a servant comes near to God through supererogatory good works, God enraptures (yajdhabu) him, loving him with a forceful attraction (jadhban). In this (rapture), the servant is not aware of himself, or anything else; neither what came before nor what will come after, neither of any part of himself, nor the whole of himself. He becomes absent from his personal witnessing (shuhūd), and is consumed in the intensity of his Master's summoning, glorious and exalted is He. In this state, he witnesses the divine presence (ḥaḍra), as before the world and after the hereafter, as before the before and after the after. This presence has no beginning and no end, no above and no below, no right and no left, no explanation (kayf) and no definition, no name and no attribute, no going forward and no going back, no connection and no separation, no going in and no going out, no sensation and no realization (idrāk), no incarnation (ḥulūl) and no fusion (ittiḥād). The lover becomes extinct in his Beloved. And he becomes extinct to his own extinction (fanā'). Nothing remains except the divine selfhood (al-Huwiyya).¹⁵

14 Wright, *Living Knowledge*, 277-280.

15 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Kāshif al-ilbās*, 147-148.

As previously mentioned, this experiential knowledge of God was the essential purpose for which humanity was created. The Shaykh wrote in his first poem, *Rūḥ al-adab*: “Whoever does not obtain knowledge of the Merciful [God], his life has been in ruin for all time spent.”¹⁶

Pearls from the Flood provides primary source material for the ongoing study of Sufism in the contemporary world, and especially for the understanding of Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s “Community of the Flood” (*jamā‘at al-fayḍa*). From the perspective of traditional learning, the availability of such source material does not obviate the need for living teachers. From an academic perspective, source translations do not take the place of scholarly analysis. In my own research on the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse, I have made a case for understanding Muslim religious identities on their own terms. Reliable translations therefore become imperative. This work hopes to illuminate Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s broad scholarly corpus, adding to the earlier translation of his primary work on Sufism, the *Kāshif al-ilbās* (Fons Vitae, 2010) and the translation of his Qur’ān exegesis, *Fī riḡāḍ al-tafsīr* (Fayda Books, 2014). As illustrative excerpts from Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s voluminous speeches, letters, poetry, and supplications, this book offers little more than a surface sampling. Nonetheless, I attempted to identify some of the key tracts, letters, and verses that Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s followers reference to the present day.

An earlier rendition of this book was attempted with *Pearls from the Divine Flood: Selected Discourses of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse* (African American Islamic Institute, 2006). Roughly half of that book (in revised form) makes its way into this book. Significantly, this includes a reprint of Shaykh Ḥasan Cissé’s formative overview of his grandfather Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s

16 Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Rūḥ al-adab*, in Ḥasan Cissé, *Spirit of Good Morals by Shaykh al-Islam Ibrahim Niasse, Translation and Commentary* (Detroit: African American Islamic Institute, 2001), 70.

life and legacy first written in 1984 (see appendix). Stylistically, the reader will be aware that I have sometimes used alternate translations for the same word, especially where the Arabic word has proven notoriously difficult to approximate with one English equivalent. For example, *maʿrifa* becomes “gnosis”, “cognizance”, or just “knowledge” depending on the context. *Taqwā* appears alternatively as “fear”, “awe”, or “piety.” In most cases, I have inserted the transliterated Arabic word in parenthesis for more precise reading. This translation adopts the normative transliteration format used by most academic publishers in English. I have sometimes omitted the customary magnifications of God and salutations on the Prophet Muḥammad found in Islamic religious texts, but mostly these formalities are translated in the text where they could be integrated into the sentence structure.

The intention in publishing this book is to make available some of the key sources that have informed my own research on the community of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse. I originally thought to include this material as an appendix to the more academic publication, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam* (Brill, 2015). However, *Pearls from the Flood* is an attempt to honor the rights of a public, non-Arabic speaking audience desiring more direct access to these sources. I hope that English readers can find benefit from Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s words in this book.