

THE REMOVAL OF CONFUSION

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THE REMOVAL OF CONFUSION  
Concerning the Flood  
of the Saintly Seal Aḥmad al-Tijānī

*A Translation of*

*Kāshif al-Ilbās ʿan Fayḍa  
al-Khatm Abī al-ʿAbbās*

*by*

Shaykh al-Islam  
Al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbd-Allāh Niasse

Biography of Author by Sayyid ʿAlī Cisse

Introduction by Shaykh Ḥasan b. ʿAlī Cisse

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Proceeds from the sale of this book are donated to the ongoing construction of the Grand Mosque in Medina-Baye Kaolack, Senegal, first established by Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niassé in 1937.

May Allah accept our efforts

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## Background to the Text

The *Kāshif al-ilbās* is the magnum opus of twentieth-century West Africa's greatest Muslim leader, Shaykh al-Islam Ibrāhīm ʿAbd-Allāh Niasse (1900–1975). No Sufi master can be reduced to a single text, and the mass following of Shaykh Ibrāhīm, described as the largest single Muslim movement in modern West Africa,<sup>1</sup> most certainly found its primary inspiration in the brilliant career and spiritual zeal of the Shaykh rather than written words. This analysis of what is, arguably, the most significant Arabic text of twentieth-century West Africa cannot escape the essential paradox of Sufi writing, namely, the difficulty of putting the ineffable experience of God into words. The *Kāshif* repeatedly insists that the communication of experiential spiritual knowledge (*maʿrifa*)—the key concept on which Shaykh Ibrāhīm's movement was predicated and the subject that occupies the largest portion of the *Kāshif*—is beyond words. The Shaykh writes of spiritual experience or “taste” (*dhawq*): “It cannot be acquired through talking or written texts, but can only be received directly from the people of spiritual experience (*ahl al-adhwāq*).”

While some recent academic research has rightly devalued the role of texts in the transmission of Sufi knowledge,<sup>2</sup> none can deny the continued relevance of studying the writings of prominent Sufis. Sadly, serious textual consideration of West African Sufism has been stifled by lingering colonial prejudice of a supposedly unlearned, localized *Islam Noir* (“Negro Islam”). Time and again, received knowledge concerning African Muslims' lack of scholarly qualifications has substituted for actual study of their teachings

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- 1 Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (London: Longman, 1984), p. 287.
  - 2 Proceedings from the workshop, “Sufi Texts, Sufi Contexts,” Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA), Northwestern University (28–29 May 2007), particularly the presentations of Carl Ernst, Valerie Hoffman, and Rüdiger Seesemann.

and writings. West African Arabic writings deserve a closer look. This translation is a significant step forward in understanding Islamic religiosity on the African continent.

Understanding the contents of the *Kāshif al-ilbās* requires some background of the life and mission of its author.<sup>3</sup> Shaykh Ibrāhīm was a Muslim scholar and sage of the Tijāniyya Sufi order.<sup>4</sup> The Tijāniyya has spread to all corners of the Muslim world since Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815, Fes) established the confraternity in North Africa in the late eighteenth century. Many eminent scholars have emerged from among the Tijāniyya in the last two centuries, but none has been as successful in propagating the Order as Shaykh Ibrāhīm. It is currently estimated that those owing their initiation into the Tijāniyya to Shaykh Ibrāhīm number around one hundred million and make up more than half of all the Tijānis in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Shaykh Ibrāhīm explained his historical mission in spreading Islam and the Tijāniyya throughout West Africa and beyond as being endowed with *al-Fayḍa al-Tijāniyya*, the “Tijānī Flood” predicted by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī that would occasion people entering the Tijānī spiritual path group upon group. If *fayḍa* was the doctrine, the distinguishing practice of Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s movement was *tarbiya*, or spiritual training. Through *tarbiya*, aspirants transcended the confines of their ego-selves and “tasted” the directly-experienced knowledge, or gnosis (*māʿrifa*), of God. Certainly this practice was not new within Sufism or the Tijāniyya itself, but Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s ability to help millions attain the highly valued spiritual illumination (*fath*) was surely unprecedented. Of course, there is much more to the story of Shaykh Ibrāhīm—his ground-breaking legal rulings, his creation of a grass-roots pan-African and pan-Islamic movement, his world travels and close relations with some of the most renowned revolutionary leaders

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- 3 For more information on the life and thought of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse, see Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrāhīm Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-century Sufi Revival* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Joseph Hill, “Divine Knowledge and Islamic Authority: Religious Specialization among Disciples of Baay Ņas” (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 2007); Andre Brigaglia, “The *Fayda* Tijaniyya of Ibrāhīm Nyass: Genesis and Implications of a Sufi Doctrine,” in *Islam et Sociétés au sud du Sahara* 14–15 (2001); Ousmane Kane, “Shaykh al-Islam al-Hajj Ibrāhīm Niasse,” in Robinson and Triaud (eds.), *Le Temps des Marabouts, Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française v. 1880–1960* (Paris: Karthala, 2000); Mervyn Hiskett, “The Community of Grace and its Opponents, the Rejecters,” in *African Language Studies* 17 (1980).
- 4 For more on the Tijāniyya, see Zachary Wright, *On the Path of the Prophet: Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and the Tariqa Muhammadiyya* (Atlanta: AAIL, 2005); Triaud and Robinson (eds.), *La Tijaniyya, Une Confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l’Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 2000); Abdelaziz Benabdallah, *La Tijania: une Voie Spirituelle et Sociale* (Marrakesh: Al Quobba Zarqua, 1998); and Jamil Abun-Nasr, *The Tijaniyya, A Sufi Order in the Modern World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).
- 5 Statistics presented by Shaykh Ḥasan Cisse at the International Tijani Forum in Fes, Morocco, 28 June 2007.

(Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Touré and Gamal Abdel Nasser for example) of his time—but this concept of a flood of gnosis, spiritual illumination for all who desired it, was the key to understanding the Shaykh's life and mission.

The *Kāshif al-ibās*, written early in the Shaykh's career in 1931–1932, is primarily a justification for the transmission of the experiential knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God on a widespread scale. The self's complete immersion and annihilation in the divine Essence, which Sufism has long maintained is essential for true knowledge of God, is a concept that has been fraught with tension throughout Islamic history, both among the detractors of Sufism and among Sufis themselves. The aspirant who becomes “enraptured” in God may behave as one absent from his senses or he may make extraordinary spiritual claims. The *Kāshif* thus presents the means of attaining gnosis (*ma'rifa*) and the results of such knowledge for its possessor; in the process differentiating false pretensions from sincere expression, delusion from real experience, heresy from Islamic orthodoxy.

Divine gnosis and the possibility of its mass transmission through the Tijānī *ḥayda* was certainly one of the issues current in early twentieth-century West Africa, and is *the* key issue of the *Kāshif*. But it was not the only matter of dispute to which Shaykh Ibrāhīm was responding in his work. Around the time the *Kāshif* was written, there seems to have been a lively debate in Senegal over whether it was possible to “see” God. This debate erupted in a series of polemical exchanges immediately after the *Kāshif*'s writing between the followers of Shaykh Ibrāhīm and Aḥmad Dem (d. 1973), a Fulani scholar living in Sokone, Senegal.<sup>6</sup> Other issues with an immediate historical context include the emphasis on public recitation of Sufi litanies. This was, no doubt, a response to the century-old dispute between scholars of the Tijānī and Qādirī Sufi orders in northern Nigeria and elsewhere, over whether Sufis should recite their liturgies silently or out loud in public. Other questions emerged with the triumph of Sufi leaders over traditional forms of authority in West African society in the early twentieth century. For example, what was the spiritual identity and social role of women in the new religious order of the Sufi shaykhs? To these questions, Shaykh Ibrāhīm devoted separate sections of the *Kāshif*. Other subjects addressed in the work confront some of the most contentious issues still facing Muslims today: the orthodoxy of Sufism and its practices, the untenability of continued racial and cultural prejudices, the nature of religious authority and the ethics of disagreement between Muslims.

6 Aḥmad Dem's polemical work against the possibility of “seeing” God was entitled *Tanbīh al-aghbiyā*. It produced immediate refutations from ʿUthmān Ndiaye, whose work was entitled *Sawārim al-ḥaqq*, and from ʿAlī Cisse, whose work was entitled *Mikhzam li abāṭil Aḥmad Dem*. For the specifics of this debate, see chapter three (“Seeing God”) of Seesemann's *The Divine Flood*. I am indebted to Seesemann for providing me an advance copy of this and other chapters.

Conventions of writing change with the times, and Sufi literature is no exception. For one familiar with the genre of Islamic scholarly prose since the eighteenth-century, it is not surprising to find that roughly half of the *Kāshif* consists of citations from prior works. The source analyses conducted on important Sufi works in the region immediately prior to the *Kāshif*—on Ibn al-Mubārak al-Lamaṭī's *Ibrīz* (written 1719, Morocco) and ʿUmar al-Fūṭī Tal's *Rimāḥ* (written 1844, Senegal) by Bernd Radtke,<sup>7</sup> and on Mālik Sy's *Iḥām al-munkir al-jānī* (written 1921, Senegal) by Ravane Mbaye<sup>8</sup>—permit a useful comparison to Shaykh Ibrāhīm's citation from previous sources. According to Radtke, the *Ibrīz* contains 270 citations from 139 different books, with most sources used not more than once or twice. The *Rimāḥ* contains about 640 citations from 123 sources, with most citations (two-thirds) coming from nine authors (with eighteen to ninety-eight citations from each). Mbaye did not keep track of the number of citations in the *Iḥām*, but he estimates more than 200 sources,<sup>9</sup> while six works are cited more frequently (between four and thirty citations from each). In the *Kāshif*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm uses 271 citations from 112 different works. There are eighteen works which Shaykh Ibrāhīm cites more frequently: between four and seventeen times each.

A closer look at the main sources used in each of the three seminal Tijānī works—the *Rimāḥ*, the *Iḥām*, and the *Kāshif*—reveal a diverse group of sources for Tijānī writers in West Africa. Of the main sources listed by Radtke for al-Ḥājj ʿUmar, Mbaye for al-Ḥājj Mālik and ourselves for Shaykh Ibrāhīm, the only work cited more than four times by all three writers is the primary text of the Tijāniyya: ʿAlī Harāzīm al-Barāda's *Jawāhir al-maʿānī*. Shaykh Ibrāhīm shares al-Ḥājj ʿUmar's frequent recourse to the works of ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī (d. 1565, Egypt), Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 1493, Libya), Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh (d. 1309, Alexandria), and Ibn al-Mubārak al-Lamaṭī's *Ibrīz*. Shaykh Ibrāhīm also shares al-Ḥājj Mālik's predilection for the nineteenth-century Moroccan Tijānī scholar Ibn al-Sāʿih's *Bughya al-mustafīd* and the eighteenth-century Turkish Sufi exegete Ismāʿīl al-Ḥaqqī's *Rūḥ al-bayān*. To this list of distinguished Sufi writers, Shaykh

7 Bernd Radtke, "Ibriziana: Themes and Sources of a Seminal Sufi Work," *Sudanic Africa* 7 (1996); and Radtke, "Studies on the Sources of the *Kitab Rimah Hizb al-Rahim* of al-Hajj ʿUmar 6 (1995).

8 Ravane Mbaye, *Le Grand Savant El Hadji Malick Sy, Pensée et Action, tome troisième: Iḥām al-Munkir al-Jani, Réduction au silence du dénégateur* (Beirut: Dar Albouraq, 2003).

9 This number may be inflated, as an examination of Mbaye's "Index of works cited" for the *Iḥām* reveals that Mbaye neglects to distinguish between works cited by Sy directly and works referenced by authors whom Sy cites. For example, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse may cite from Shaʿrānī, who in turn cites from a work of Ibn al-ʿArabī. In such a case, our list of the sources in the *Kāshif* would not include the work of Ibn al-ʿArabī, only the work of Shaʿrānī.

Ibrāhīm adds frequent use (four or more citations each) of the writings of the Malian Qādirī Shaykh Mukhtār Kuntī (d. 1811), Ibn al-ʿArabī al-Ḥātimī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111, Baghdad), the Moroccan Shādhilī scholar Ibn ʿAjība (d. 1809), the Moroccan Tijānī Shaykh Aḥmad Sukayrij (d. 1949), the Persian Sufi al-Qusharyī (d. 1072), the Indian scholar Aḥmad al-Ṣāwī (d. 1825), the Mauritanian Shādhilī master Muḥammad al-Yadālī (d. 1753), and the writings of al-Ḥājj ʿUmar himself.

Radtke’s observation on the diversity of subject matters these works draw from is certainly confirmed by examining an overview of the sources used in *Kāshif*. Like Lamaṭī and al-Ḥājj ʿUmar, Shaykh Ibrāhīm cites works of exegesis (*tafsīr*),<sup>10</sup> prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*),<sup>11</sup> jurisprudence (*fiqh*),<sup>12</sup> theology (*ʿaqīda*),<sup>13</sup> grammar (*naḥw*),<sup>14</sup> religious principles (*uṣūl*)<sup>15</sup> and history/ biography (*sīra*),<sup>16</sup> as well as works of Sufism. The geographical diversity of sources also deserves notice: authors from India, Persia, Turkey, the Arab Middle East, and Morocco are cited alongside authors from West Africa. The diversity of subjects and geography demonstrate definitively

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- 10 Most notably the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (along with the commentary of Aḥmad al-Ṣāwī on the margins), the *Jawāhir al-ḥisān* of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Thaʿālibī (d. 1471), *Rūḥ al-bayān* of Ismāʿīl al-Ḥaqqī, the *Tafsīr al-kabīr* of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), the *Baḥr al-ʿulūm* of Abū Layth al-Samarqandī, and the *Taʿwīlāt al-najmiyya* of ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla al-Simnānī (thirteenth century, Persia).
- 11 Aside from the six *Sunan* of Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, Tirmidhī, Ibn Majā, and Nasāʾī; these include the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, the *Muwattʿa* of Imam Mālik, the *Shifā* of Qāḍī ʿIyād, *Kitāb al-adhkār* of Nawawī, the *Sunan al-kubrā* of Bayhaqī, *al-Maqāṣid al-ḥasana* of Sakhāwī (d. 1497, Egypt), the *Fath al-Bārī* of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1448, Egypt), *al-Fatawa al-ḥadīthiyya* of Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī al-Makkī (d. 1556, Mecca) and other classical works of prophetic traditions.
- 12 These are, predictably, mostly of the Mālikī school (*madhhab*), such as the *Risāla* of Qayrawānī (d. 996, Fes), the *Mukhtaṣar* of Khalīl, or the *Bidaya al-mujtahid* of Ibn Rushd. But there are a few notable exceptions, such as the Shāfiʿī scholar ʿAbd al-Mālik al-Juwaynī (known as Imam al-Ḥaramayn, d. 1085, Hijaz) and Imam Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī al-Shāfiʿī (d. 1392).
- 13 Such works include important works of the Ashʿarī school, such as the *Sharḥ al-mawāqif* of ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Jurjānī (d. 1413), the *Idāʾa al-dujanna* of al-Maqqārī (d. 1632, Tlemcen/Damascus), and *al-Durr al-thamīn wa al-mawrid al-maʿīn* of al-Mayyāra (d. 1662, Fes).
- 14 Among the works cited in this category are *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīt* by Abū al-Ṭahir b. Ibrāhīm Majd al-Dīn al-Fayruz Abadi (d. 1414, Shiraz/Mecca) and its commentary *Tāj al-ʿarūs min jawāhir al-qāmūs* by Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1790, India/Egypt).
- 15 An example would be the *al-Asrār al-ʿaqliyya* by the Egyptian Shāfiʿī scholar Taqiyy al-Dīn al-Maqtaraḥ (d. 1215).
- 16 Such works would include the comprehensive history of the early Muslim community by Ṭabarānī, or the historical compilation of legal opinions in the Maghrib, the *Miʿyār* of al-Wānsharīsī

that West African Muslim writers participated in global Muslim currents of scholarly exchange.

The *Kāshif* thus deftly weaves together the writings of the past Sufi masters. This format was, of course, not lost on Shaykh Ibrāhīm himself, who describes his own work as one that “collects the cream of the books authored on this discipline (of Sufism).” It was a style well received by his contemporaries. In the section of commendation of the *Kāshif*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm includes the praise poetry of a number of scholars from Mauritania associated with the heritage of Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Shinqīṭī (d. 1830), who first introduced the Tijāniyya south of the Sahara. The Shaykh writes:

I have presented my work entitled *Kāshif al-ilbās* to a community among the people of my age, the people of explanation (*ḥall*), joining (*ʿaqd*) and scholarly criticism in the sciences of the sacred law and the divine Reality. They are the masters of creation and leaders of the distinguished folk of the sufi path. All of them, praise be to Allah, praised me for this work and wrote a commendation. So I wanted to include here their commendations and testimonies in order that the fair-minded person would know that this book contains nothing other than a collection (*jamʿ*), so the words in it are the words of the scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*), and the doctrine on which it is built is the doctrine of the bosom-friends.

This ability to gather the knowledge of earlier scholars was thus considered an important testimony to a shaykh’s scholarly credentials. Certainly the work played a role in the submission of many within the Idaw ʿAlī scholarly tribe to Shaykh Ibrāhīm beginning in the 1930s. It is likewise related that when Shaykh Ibrāhīm first visited Nigeria in 1945, he took with him four copies of the *Kāshif*, which he left with the *ʿulamāʾ* in the city of Kano, one of the most renowned centers of Muslim scholarship in all of Africa. After reading the book, the Kano scholars testified that such a work, which gathers so much knowledge together in one place, was an occurrence they thought relegated to the scholars of Islam’s golden ages.<sup>17</sup>

This is not to say that the *Kāshif* contains nothing original. In his analysis of the sources for al-Ḥājj ʿUmar’s *Rimāḥ*, Radtke rightly draws

17 Interview with Shaykh Tijānī ʿAlī Cisse, Medina-Baye, Kaolack, Senegal, June 2009. Rüdiger Seesemann reports a similar version of events from Barham Diop, the traveling companion of Shaykh Ibrāhīm: “On his departure from Kano, Shaykh Ibrāhīm left behind a few copies of *Kāshif al-ilbās*. Later the book found its way into the hands of a few religious scholars, who assumed that the author had lived in Senegal a long time ago—until ʿAlī Cisse and Abū Bakr Serigne Mbaye (Niasse) made a stopover in Kano on their way to the Hijaz. The scholars of Kano were stunned by their visitors: ‘Where are you from?’—‘Senegal.’ Then the scholars asked whether they had heard about a saint called Ibrāhīm Niasse, who had lived in Senegal a long time ago. ‘He is alive, he is still in Senegal. This is his brother.’”

the reader's attention beyond the author's incorporation of so many other sources, to focus instead on *how* the author uses his sources. The *Kāshif* of course also contains a good deal of the author's own prose and poetry. But the methodology the Shaykh uses in citing from other works deserves a closer look. Generally speaking, Shaykh Ibrāhīm presents a series of citations on a given subject, usually interspersed with his own comments. He concludes by including what Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815), the founder of the Tijāniyya Sufi order, has himself said concerning the subject in question. The significance of this straightforward approach should not go unnoticed. In fact, Shaykh Ibrāhīm says in the text: "Whoever examines it (the *Kāshif*) closely and judges it fairly will know for certain that this compilation was authored by Shaykh al-Tijānī with his own hand." The guiding spiritual presence of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī aside, Shaykh Ibrāhīm's methodology in selecting and ordering citations seems to be a conscious effort to demonstrate the dialectic between the Tijāniyya and earlier Sufi traditions, thereby giving fresh perspective to Shaykh al-Tijānī's own words. Moreover, Shaykh Ibrāhīm hoped that such fresh perspective would benefit and unite his Tijānī readership, praying in the book's conclusion that Allah would "make it a source of discernment for the Spiritual Path and its people, stringing them together (like pearls) in the company of the Noble Seal (al-Tijānī)."

The claim that Shaykh al-Tijānī is the real author of the *Kāshif* of course has broader implications than just putting the Shaykh's words in dialogue with other Sufi traditions. In fact, the *Kāshif*, like many other Sufi texts, has its own reputation for saintly blessing (*baraka*), simply as a physical object. Shaykh Ibrāhīm writes: "May Allah put tremendous blessing (*baraka*) in it, to the extent that it may bless any place it is found." Today, many followers of Shaykh Ibrāhīm carry the book with them when they travel just to have the blessing of it in their possession wherever they go.<sup>18</sup>

Standards of Muslim sainthood and saintly blessing—where personal agency is often obscured with reference to God, the Prophet Muḥammad, or a previous saint—should not prevent the reader from grasping the unprecedented or original quality of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's *Kāshif al-ilbās*. The *Kāshif* argues in a nutshell that acquiring the experiential knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*) is the essential purpose of human existence, and that a "flood" has come within the ranks of the Tijāniyya to spread the Sufi path of the Seal of Saints, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī; thereby reconnecting Muslims to the Divine in a time of ignorance and distance from God. Even if the *Kāshif* is filled largely with a collection of the "cream" of past Sufi writings, Shaykh Ibrāhīm's essential argument is extraordinarily bold and unprecedented. His frequent warnings in the text not to reject the pronouncements of God's saints are an indication that he was aware of this. The result of this

18 Interview with Shaykh Tijānī 'Alī Cisse, Medina-Baye, Kaolack, Senegal, June 2009.

masterful blend of the Sufi tradition, in which the concept of a flood of gnosis is fully justified, was no less than the foundation for one of the greatest Sufi movements in modern times. The significance of the *Kāshif* in the development of modern West African Muslim religious identity, and the religiosity of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's followers elsewhere around the world, cannot be underestimated.

Whatever the blessing or lofty purpose of a Sufi text, the reader of the *Kāshif* should not forget the suspicion with which Sufis have generally treated writing. "Secrets are in the hearts of the distinguished folk (*rijāl*), not in the bellies of books," Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse was fond of saying.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, very particular circumstances inspire a Sufi master such as Shaykh Ibrāhīm to write in the first place, and most Sufi shaykhs left no writings at all. The purpose of Sufi texts is to respond to particular issues at hand, not to serve as the means of actually transmitting the knowledge of God or the means of purifying the ego-self (*nafs*). These essential aims of Sufism are meant to be transmitted from spiritual master to disciple in the absence of texts. The *Kāshif* was written to make space for the emergence of the Tijānī Flood, not to actually initiate aspirants into the knowledge of God brought by this Flood. Sufi texts remain important sources for study not because they contain the actual practices of people, but because they help establish a conceptual space within which practice unfolds. Careful consideration of works such as *Kāshif al-ilbās* is a prerequisite to the serious discussion of Islam in West Africa.

Zachary Wright

Medina-Baye, Kaolack, Senegal  
June 2009 (Rajab 1430)

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19 Interview with Shaykh Ḥasan Cisse, Lagos, Nigeria, February 2006.