Book Reviews

Zachary Valentine Wright

Living Knowledge in West African Islam. The Sufi Community of Ibrahim Niasse, (Islam in Africa; 18), Leiden, E.J. Brill, 2015, XVIII+333 p., 1 fig., 2 maps, ISBN 978-90-04-28807-2, 120€, hardback.

The Tijaniyya is no doubt one of the largest influential Sufi communities in the modern world. Its following runs in the tens of millions in Africa. Tijaniyya *zawaya* (lodges) and communities are found in large numbers in the entire African continent from among the Arabs/Berbers of Aïn Madhi and Fez in North Africa to the Indians and Malays of Cape Town in South Africa, from the Wolof in Senegambia to the Fellata of the Republic of Sudan, and also among the Hausa and Yoruba in Nigeria where millions of Muslims have been touched by its teachings.

The first monograph on the Tijaniyya in a Western language has been written by Jamil Abun-Nasr (*The Tijaniyya, A Sufi Order in the Modern World*) in 1965. Since then to the end of the twentieth century, very few academic studies have been devoted to this Sufi order. Yet since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a number of studies have been conducted shedding new light on diverse aspects of this Sufi community. Zachary Wright is no doubt one of the most prominent authors among these newer publications. In addition to translating key Tijani texts, he has authored *On the Path of the Prophet. Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and the Tariqa Muhammadiyya* (Atlanta, African-American Islamic Institute, 2005), a major contribution to the study of the growth and doctrines of the Tijaniyya. In *Living Knowledge in West African Islam*, Wright deals with the Sufi community established by Ibrahim Niasse (1900–75), one of the most influential and prolific Sufi authors and guides of the twentieth century.

Wright's historical ethnography of Niasse's community is interwoven with an analysis of the development of Islamic scholarship and formation of clerical communities in West Africa in the past several centuries. Islamic scholarship in West Africa, according to Wright, focused on four main specializations: the

study of the Quran, Maliki jurisprudence, esoteric sciences, and Sufism. Islamic studies certainly begin with the study of the Quran. But the author argues that elementary Quranic studies are far from being only about memorization. They entail a process of individual transformation of the pupil based on the living example of the Quranic teacher. Next to the study of the Quran is the study of Maliki jurisprudence. Since the rise of the Almoravid movement in the eleventh century, West Africa has adopted Malikism, and the teaching of Maliki texts, like the *Mukhtasar* of Khalil and the *Risāla* of Ibn Abid Zayd al-Qayrawani. These texts are central to the Islamic studies curriculum in West Africa. Esoteric sciences or *ʿilm al-asrār* is yet another topic that has been long been taught in West Africa. With the spread of Sufi orders beginning in the early nineteenth century, the study of their doctrine finally became an important part of the curriculum.

All four subjects are taught among the disciples of Ibrahim Niasse, just like in other clerical communities. But what sets the community of Ibrahim Niasse apart is not so much discursive knowledge, but the emphasis on experiential knowledge of the Divine (*maʿrifa*). Even if their emphasis on *maʿrifa* is somewhat unprecedented in West African Islamic history, the *habitus* by which this divine knowledge is transmitted is familiar to West African Muslims. Indeed, the seminal elements of the practice—initiatory personal transmission and the knowledge of sacred texts inscribed in the being of the practitioner—were already present earlier on in the development of Islam in West Africa (p. 32).

Two novel features set this work apart from most studies of the community of Ibrahim Niasse. First, Wright worked with a wide range of sources. In addition to oral interviews and participant observation, he used French colonial archives, Tijani doctrinal texts (many of which he translated into English in separate publications), and hundreds of letters of personal correspondence between Ibrahim Niasse and his disciples. Last but not least, through close association with descendants of Ali Cisse, the deputy of Ibrahim Niasse, and particularly the late imam Hassan Cisse of the great Mosque of Kaolack, Cheikh Tidiane Cisse, the current imam and Mouhamad Mahi Cisse and Cheikh Diery Cisse, the author gained unique insights into the development of the community. His discussion of the shaykh/disciple relation is richly illustrated by extensive documentation of the long companionship between Ibrahim Niasse and his deputy Ali Cisse.

Second, Wright's close reading of those sources is a particular strength. As an excellent arabist, he offers a fascinating and deep analysis of the doctrines and views of Ibrahim Niasse by looking at his collections of poems, theological treatises, and letters to disciples. Especially Niasse's poetry is a useful source for the study of this Tijani community as acknowledged by many, however,

nobody before Wright has undertaken such a deep and systematic reading of Niasse's poetry.

Like Rudolph Ware (*The Walking Qur'an* 2014) and others, Wright shows that West African Muslim societies long considered by Western scholars and other Muslims as inconsistent have succeeded in reviving the Islamic habitus of an earlier time (p. 31). Indeed, in companionship with Ibrahim Niasse, disciples strove to reenact the personalized transmission of the Prophet and his companions, making themselves exemplary Muslims. Despite the unprecedented growth of schools based on Western pedagogy in colonial and postcolonial Africa, this mode of personalized transmission is alive and well in Madina Baye and among disciples of Ibrahim Niasse throughout Africa.

A major lesson that Wright's work teaches students of modern Islam is that so-called Salafi or Islamist movements do not exhaust the expression of Islamic revivalism. Sufi revivalism, as embodied in the ever-expanding community Ibrahim Niasse, is no doubt as well an articulation of global Islam.

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