CHAPTER 1

Clerical Communities in West African History

In West Africa, contemporary Muslim scholarly communities that continue to emphasize personally transmitted knowledge draw on a long history of clerical organization. Studies of Islamic learning in the region have thus recognized a rich legacy of textual production, instruction in a basic “core curriculum,” and changing political and social strategies of engagement in the broader context of West African societies. The historian of contemporary African Muslim societies cannot ignore these historical developments and continuities. This chapter explores the semi-autonomous field of Islamic learning as it developed over time, and puts this development in dialogue with the social positioning of West African scholarly communities in history. The prevailing habitus that grounded Muslim subjectivity in the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse thus emerged in conversation with both regional Islamic intellectual history and West African social history. The following narrative hopes to set the background, then, for the constitution of a new maraboutic community.

Enduring Learning Practices

Disciples were attracted to the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse, and to other Sufi communities in twentieth-century West Africa, because they found in the bodily presence of the shaykh access to knowledge that had previously been unavailable to them. Even if the emphasis on the cognizance (maʿrifa) of God among the followers of Ibrāhīm Niasse was somewhat unprecedented in West African Islamic history, the habitus by which this specifically Sufi knowledge was transmitted was familiar to West African Muslims. The seminal elements of the practice—initiatory personal transmission and the knowledge of sacred texts inscribed in the being of the practitioner—were present earlier in the development of Islam in West Africa.

In order to have an audience, new religious expression must have resonated with existing “society and culture…[and] this resonance was mobile rather than stationary.”¹ Famous West African libraries in Timbuktu, Boutilimit, Touba, or in Medina-Baye for that matter, signify more an “objectified cultural

capital representing...physical wealth in knowledge,”² than actual learning. A scholar's common adage, as recorded by Ghislaine Lydon from Mauritania, speaks to the enduring ideal of inscribing knowledge in people rather than books: “My knowledge is mine, wherever I go I carry it with me; in my heart and not in a trunk. If I am at home, knowledge is with me; if I am at the market, knowledge is in the market.”³

Earlier practices that emphasized the importance of knowledge transmission in the actualized presence of masters are best observed in four separate disciplinary specializations of Islamic learning, each formative to West African Muslim identity. This section explores the intellectual traditions of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) of the Mālikī doctrine (madhhab), Qurʾān learning, Islamic esoteric sciences (ʿilm al-asrār or ʿilm al-ḥurūf), and the Sufi orders, all as they were understood in a West African historical context. These sciences comprised much of the historical “core curriculum”;⁴ we will make additional references to other subjects such as Qurʾān exegesis (tafsīr), theology (ʿaqīda), literature (adab), and prophetic narrations (ḥadīth). The findings that emerge are not meant to suggest an uncontested uniformity of understanding, although historians are never innocent of “selective[ly] marshal[ling]...evidence from the past” to explain what appears significant in the present.⁵ What follows is an attempt to understand the core principles of West African Islamic learning, principles that shaped the teachings of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s community.

Islamic Jurisprudence of the Mālikī School

The Mālikī school (madhhab) is one of four schools of Sunnī Muslim jurisprudence that have persisted since jurisprudence (fiqh) emerged as a distinct science of Islamic knowledge in the eighth century. Islamic jurisprudence, or the scholarly understanding of the Islamic sacred law (sharīʿa), entails both legal methodology and the specific rulings that permit the believer to put the religion into practice. The lengthiest section of any fiqh compendium is always that relating to ritual purification and prayer (tahāra and ṣalāt), thus

---
³ Ibid., 50.
⁴ Hall and Stewart, “The Historic ‘Core Curriculum.’” For a description of this curriculum, see 118–142.
⁵ Bashir, Sufi Bodies, 18.