CHAPTER 2

A New Senegambian Clerical Community

The emergence of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s community adds perspective to the foundation and development of Senegambian clerical communities from the late nineteenth century. Ibrāhīm Niasse’s emergence can be contextualized in the legacy of a new generation of Senegambian saints represented by his father’s generation. His father, ʿAbdallāh Niasse, was the scholarly peer of Mālik Sy and Aḥmad Bamba, and likewise the representative of a renowned scholarly lineage dating at least to the eighteenth century. ʿAbdallāh Niasse, a few years older than Sy and Bamba, was widely traveled, had scholarly connections throughout North and West Africa, and had his own impressive scholarly credentials.1 Together with Sy and Bamba, ʿAbdallāh Niasse represented a new generation of Sufi scholars, who exemplified a degree of knowledge realization previously unpublicized in West Africa. Such scholars capitalized on the new social space that the nineteenth-century jihads had opened for Islam, and they founded learning communities that gave students from all backgrounds unprecedented access to Islamic knowledge.

The claims to knowledge personification advanced by the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse were articulated in the context of this earlier founding of new learning communities. Ibrāhīm Niasse’s popularity, both internationally and domestically, can be explained, primarily, by the ability of followers to find in his person access to knowledge they had hitherto found inaccessible. But essentially, this was a discourse that had been shaped by earlier scholars such as Sy, Bamba, and Ibrāhīm Niasse’s father. For his disciples, Ibrāhīm Niasse was the ultimate personification of Islamic knowledge. Like his father and other marabouts of the preceding generation, Ibrāhīm Niasse was considered a deep repository of the Islamic disciplines that had defined West African scholarly specialization for centuries. The increasingly pronounced Sufi identity of the new marabout communities strengthened earlier learning practices by emphasizing the saintliness of true teachers. The new marabouts attracted followers because they represented a widened capacity for the formation of Muslim subjectivity, at a time when there was new social space for the assertion of Muslim identity. But Ibrāhīm Niasse also offered followers something new: the direct experiential knowledge (maʿrifah) of God. After considering

1 See Seesemann, Divine Flood, 32–34; Mbaye Thiam, Cheikh el Islam el Hadji Ibrahima Niasse: Imam de la Faydatou al Tidiania (Dakar, 2013), 15.
the legacy of ʿAbdallāh Niasse, this chapter examines the reason these claims resonated with what came before. The meaning of “knowing God” and its relationship to the enduring habitus of knowledge realization is the subject of a separate discussion in chapter 4.

**The Niassène: Social and Intellectual Background**

The ancestry of Ibrāhīm Niasse provides significant insight into the social changes experienced by clerical lineages since the seventeenth century. Academic scholarship has only recently included the Niasse family (Niassène) among Senegambia’s more important clerical lineages. Many writers have unthinkingly reproduced French colonial allegations or external critics of Ibrāhīm Niasse that categorize the Niasse family as belonging to the caste of blacksmiths (tëgg). This association is undermined by detailed internal oral histories that stretch back hundreds of years and speak of a close-knit clerical lineage, and by the fact that no such categorization is mentioned in external sources before the mid-1930s (well after Ibrāhīm Niasse’s movement had been politicized).

Primary evidence of the older clerical identification of the Niasse comes from the Senegambian scholar and historian Mbacké Bousso, himself a disciple of Aḥmad Bamba. He wrote Ibrāhīm Niasse in response to the latter’s query concerning a prominent ancestor of the Niasse, Muḥammad Samba Thiam.

Concerning the love [between us for the sake] of God that you mentioned in your letter, know my son that this love is something you have

---

2 This includes nearly every writer on the Senegambia who mentioned the Niasse family, except Ka, Hill, and Seesemann. For a list of such writers, see Seesemann, *Divine Flood*, 223–230. There are in fact others in Senegambia bearing the name Niasse who are of blacksmith origin (Ḥasan Cissé, interview, Medina-Baye, Senegal, August 2007) but of no relation to Ibrāhīm Niasse’s ancestors. It is not uncommon for Senegambian lineages to bear the same name but have distinct social backgrounds. In any case, the Torodbe or Fulani clerisy, from which the Niasse probably emerged, may have “evolved out of a mass of rootless peoples who perceived in Islam a source of cultural identity.” See John Ralph Willis, “The Torodbe Clerisy: A Social View,” *Journal of African History* 19, no. 2 (1978), 196. In other words, Fulani identity may not have precluded an earlier slave or casted status. This notion ran counter to many prominent Fulani scholars themselves. ʿUmar al-Fūtī for example, claimed the Fulani were descended from the Prophet Muḥammad’s own tribe, the Quraysh (Willis, “Torodbe Clerisy,” 198).

3 For more on this subject, see Seesemann, *Divine Flood*, 156–157.