CHAPTER 7

Cognizance and the Revival of the Islamic Sciences

Traditional Islamic learning, despite the emphasis on memorization and mimesis, was not meant to produce the type of “slavish imitation” modern reformers associated with “following” (taqlīd) scholars. For Bourdieu, habitus was the process by which individuals, some more than others, were prepared to acquire cultural knowledge: “the inheritance of cultural wealth which has been accumulated and bequeathed by previous generations only really belongs (although it is theoretically offered to everyone) to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves.”1 Ware’s account of Qurʾān schooling in Senegal demonstrates that the emphasis on inscribing the word of God in human beings was an effort to create “walking Qurʾāns”—individuals who could respond to new circumstances, while continuously enacting the relevance of the revelation.2 Habitus was thus a “durablel installed generative principle of regulated improvisations…[producing] practices.”3 The properly prepared student, formed in the correct habitus that traditional learning meant to impart, continuously revived inherited knowledge by his very being in the world.

The adaptable but insistently relevant nature of traditional Islamic learning in Medina-Baye meant that, even as teachers and students maintained the emphasis on character formation, the content of knowledge transmission changed slightly over time. As mentioned in chapter 1, the habitus of knowledge realization had been previously imparted through the transmission of a variety of Islamic disciplines; key among them were Qurʾān learning, Mālikī jurisprudence, the esoteric sciences, and Sufism. The intellectual dynamism of the Islamic scholarly tradition, in dialogue with external historical changes, thus produced scholarly communities that laid claim to the heritage of West African Islam but also made significant adaptations to contemporary circumstances. In addition to adjustments in pedagogical techniques detailed above, the exact content of these knowledge fields has not remained entirely static over time. The community of Ibrāhīm Niasse continued to transmit the earlier legacy of Islamic scholarship, but the unprecedented emphasis on Sufi

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1 Bourdieu, “Cultural Reproduction,” 73.
2 Ware, “Knowledge, Faith, Power,” 303.
cognizance (maʿrifa) and a variety of new social realities brought about slight adjustments to the content of these knowledge traditions.

**Qurʾān Learning and Knowing God**

The teaching of maʿrifa in Medina-Baye drew on enduring practices of knowledge transmission in the Qurʾān schools. The continued presence of Qurʾān learning in the new Sufi communities of the twentieth century was not simply a transplant of earlier institutions, however. Sufi masters used the Qurʾān schools to teach basic religious disposition through the example of Qurʾān teachers, but they also revived and altered certain aspects of an old practice. The community has continued to produce a significant number of students who have memorized the Qurʾān, while it has also adapted to contemporary social concerns. Thus we see a continued durability of the habitus of knowledge personification from the earliest ages of instruction. After memorization, the lifelong process of acquiring the “sciences” of the Qurʾān (ʿulûm al-qurʾān) became increasingly infused with divine cognizance. The notion of personalized maʿrifā was thus readily apparent in Ibrāhīm Niasse’s highly influential and public performances of Qurʾān exegesis (tafsīr), discussed in the latter part of this section.

Ibrāhīm Niasse reportedly prayed that the miracle of his community be knowledge of the Qurʾān, since the greatest miracle of the Prophet was the Qurʾān.⁴ The shaykh himself recited the entire Qurʾān twice every week: once reading and once from memory.⁵ He personally supervised the Qurʾān memorization of select disciples, most famously ʿUmar Fati Diallo, a blind man who later became famous for his poetry recitations.⁶ The exact number of Qurʾān schools (daara, kutāb) in Medina-Baye is difficult to count. Toward the end of his life, Ḥasan Cissé was supporting fifty-seven full-time schools in the town.⁷ The number of schools may be closer to 100, representing one school for every 100 people of the town’s stable population.⁸ But many of these schools have

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⁴ Māḥī Cissé, interview, Medina-Baye, Senegal, 26 October 2008.
⁷ This according to a list provided to me by Ḥasan Cissé’s former secretary, Auwalu Diso, on 15 March 2009.
⁸ Of course the Qurʾān schools are frequented by many children besides local residents. Ḥasan Cissé’s own Qurʾān school has children from all over West Africa, South Africa, and America.