Rüdiger Seesemann

_The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival._


Rüdiger Seesemann’s book, *The Divine Flood*, is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on the history of Muslim societies in West Africa. This recent scholarship, pioneered by a new generation of historians and social scientists, has greatly transformed our understanding of Islam in Africa. By harnessing innovative methodological and interpretive approaches and by taking seriously internal written and oral sources, it has moved the debate beyond dominant orientalist and instrumentalist interpretations that marginalized African Muslims and downplayed the role of religious beliefs, to relocate West African Muslims within the global Muslim community (*umma*) while acknowledging their distinct identity.

*The Divine Flood* is a study of the Sufi movement founded by the Senegalese Shaykh Ibrahima Niasse (1900–75), arguably one of the most influential Sufi masters in twentieth-century West Africa, but whose history has been overshadowed in the literature by the towering figures of Ahmadou Bamba and Elhaj Malick Sy, respectively leaders of the Muridiyya and Tijaniyya Malikiyya *tariqa*. The book follows two recent dissertations on the same topic and focuses on similar notions of spiritual education, experiential knowledge, religious authority, and modernity. But its originality resides in its temporal frame covering the origin and formative years of the movement and its exploration of an impressive array of internal written sources, including Niasse’s own writings. This is a refreshing departure from established scholarship on Muslim communities in sub-Saharan Africa, which until recently paid little attention to indigenous literature and ignored historical dynamics independent from colonial connections. In contrast to his predecessors, Seesemann is particularly interested in the role of ideas and especially the theological foundations of Niasse’s core religious thought and claims. He explores the history, transformation, and transformative power of complex Sufi notions and concepts such as *fayda* and *tarbiyya*, discussing how these notions are appropriated, reinterpreted, and acted upon by disciples of different educational and socio-cultural

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1 Joseph Hill, “Divine Knowledge and Islamic Authority: Religious Specialization among Disciples of Baay Nas” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2007); and, Zachary Valentine Wright, “Embodied knowledge in West African Islam: Continuity and change in the gnostic community of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse [Senegal]” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2010).
backgrounds. And his goal is to do this by putting Niasse and his disciples' writings in context. Seesemann argues that the intellectual dynamics which unfolded as an interactive communicative process involving religious leaders and ordinary disciples explains the originality and success of Niasse's movement. The attraction of Niasse, unlike other Sufi masters in Senegal, was not his ability to impart *baraka* or solve existential problems, but rather his role as a disseminator of experiential mystical knowledge that shortened disciples' paths to illumination.

The book is comprised of an introduction, five chapters and an epilogue. It also includes a map, seven charts that illustrate the text throughout, and two pictures. In the first chapter, Seesemann utilizes oral and written hagiographical narratives to reconstruct the first thirty years of Niasse's life, focusing mostly on the work of Ali Cisse, his closest disciple. Contrasting popular oral discourses with learned written perspectives, the chapter chronicles Niasse's life and spiritual growth as his claim to superior spiritual authority pitted supporters and deniers within his family and the larger Tijani community of Senegal and beyond. The bone of contention between Niasse and his critics revolved around his claim as “bringer of the *fayda*” or divine flood that Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani, the founder of the Tijaniyya *tariqa*, had predicted. The chapter offers an erudite perusal of the meaning of *fayda* and the polemics unleashed by Niasse's claim. It also documents the tensions and conflicts generated by the popular reception and understanding of the *fayda* and its power.

The second chapter concerns *tarbiyya*, the most important concept of Niasse's teachings and practice after *fayda*. *Tarbiyya* is a ubiquitous word of the Sufi lexicon that refers to spiritual training, but in Seesemann's view, this concept conveys a unique significance in the Niasse tradition. Its significance builds on Sufi and Tijani interpretations but departs significantly from these as *tarbiyya* was turned into a means for fast-track access to mystical realization for all disciples without discrimination. He credits *tarbiyya* for being the most important factor in the expansion of Niasse's influence. But as central as it is to an understanding of Niasse's calling, the study of *tarbiyya* seems to present an unforeseen and important challenge to the author. He explains that *tarbiyya* does not lend itself to critical inquiry because it is shrouded in secrecy and neither master nor disciples are willing to discuss its working. Moreover, because *tarbiyya* pertains to the domain of experiential knowledge, its access is exclusively limited to initiates. Hence, one is then left inferring causality from something whose influence is impossible to measure, because it is unknowable in the first place. However, while *tarbiyya* might be inaccessible to the outsider, its expected impact on the disciple's body and mind might well