

In the Gardens with Ibrahim: An Evaluation of *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr* by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, a Contemporary, Traditional *Tafsīr*

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The Senegalese Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (1900–1975), known to his disciples as Baye Niasse, was the founder of the most popular branch of the Ṭarīqa Tijāniyya (called the Ṭarīqa Tijāniyya-Ibrāhīmiyya, or more commonly, the Fayḍa), which is one of the largest Muslim movements in the world.¹ In this paper, I propose to give a brief overview of his recently published *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr li'l-Qurʿān al-karīm*,² a contemporary work of *tafsīr* transcribed from Shaykh Ibrahim's annual Ramaḍān *tafsīr* sessions. The *tafsīr* is unique for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that it is a transcription of an oral *tafsīr* performance. This raises interesting questions about the relationship of oral performance to textuality and intertextuality, not to mention the relationship between spiritual practice and Qur'anic hermeneutics, and challenges certain received notions about Islam in West Africa and the place of West Africa in the Islamic world. While *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr* has previously been discussed in an excellent article by Andrea Brigaglia,³ this paper builds on, and complements, Brigaglia's work by conducting a close reading of Shaykh Ibrahim's *tafsīr* of Q. 6:75–79, the story of Abraham and the setting star, moon, and sun, and comparing it with its 'source material' and other Ṣūfī *tafsīrs* of the same passage. I will also argue that this work should be considered a contemporary, traditional *tafsīr* because of the specific reflexive approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics it exemplifies.

Background on *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr*

Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr belongs to the popular West African (and broader Muslim) tradition of Ramaḍān *tafsīr* sessions, which are often broadcast on the radio and

local television. These sessions are usually performed between the *‘aṣr* and *maghrib* prayers over the course of two months, either during Ramaḍān and the following month of Shawwāl, or over the course of two (or more) consecutive Ramaḍāns. As has been remarked elsewhere,⁴ in West Africa (and the Islamic world at large), the performance of *tafsīr* is reserved for the most senior and advanced Islamic scholars since it is understood to require a mastery of a number of disciplines including the various linguistic sciences, the Qur’anic sciences (such as knowledge of the different readings of the Qur’an (*qirā’āt*), and the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*)), and the principles of jurisprudence and how they relate to various Qur’anic injunctions, as well as *kalām* (‘theology’), and, for the Ṣūfīs, *ma’rifā*, the experiential/existential knowledge that is the fruit of spiritual wayfaring: direct knowledge of God and of the various states the soul goes through on the path to Him.

In *tafsīr*, the Islamic intellectual tradition comes full circle, as scholars bring many of the various disciplines that emerged from the Islamic revelation to bear on the interpretation of their origin and root: the Qur’an. It is also significant that these *tafsīr* performances take place during Ramaḍān, the month in which the Qur’an was revealed and in which the angel Gabriel would recite the entirety of the revelation to the Prophet. The ‘emptying’ of fasting is widely understood as a preparation for the complementary ‘filling’ of the revelation.⁵

The 56 sessions from which *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr* is derived took place in 1964 (1383 AH), in Medina Baye, Kaolack, Senegal, the centre of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s branch of the Tijāniyya, between the *zuhr* and *‘aṣr*, or sometimes *maghrib*, prayers over the course of Ramaḍān and the preceding month of Shawwāl. Shaykh Ibrahim was very keen to have his *tafsīr* sessions recorded, and his son, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Makkī, told me that he would sometimes delay giving these lessons until tapes could be brought from Dakar on which to record them. Baye Niasse initially began delivering his public *tafsīr* sessions, when he was in his late twenties, in his mother tongue of Wolof but, by the 1960’s, he began to give these sessions in Arabic due to the large number of Arabic-speaking disciples from Mauritania and other countries, such as Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Chad, and Sudan, who had traveled to Medina Baye for spiritual instruction. While recordings of the 56 sessions that comprise this Ramaḍān *tafsīr* are widely circulated throughout West Africa and diasporic communities, as are several other oral Ramaḍān *tafsīrs*, the recordings that comprise *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr* are unique in that a Mauritanian disciple of Niasse, Muhammad Ould Muhammad Abd Allah (b. 1942), carefully transcribed and annotated the entire *tafsīr*, a tremendous labour of love requiring almost 36 years of work. The copious annotations cite many, but not all, of the sources for the Qur’anic verses, *ḥadīths*, stories, quotations, and allusions to other works of exegesis and works of Ṣūfī doctrine, poetry, and other literature, referenced within it. From these annotations, we can see that Niasse’s

tafsīr draws primarily from the famous *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* with the marginal notes of Ahmad al-Ṣāwī (d. 1825), the Egyptian Mālikī scholar and a Ṣūfī of the Khalwatiyya order.⁶

The *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (by Maḥallī (d. 1459) and his student al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505)) forms the basis of most West African *tafsīrs*, both written works and oral performances, and Shaykh Ibrahim is said to have delivered these particular *tafsīr* sessions with a copy of the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* with al-Ṣāwī's marginal notes in his hand.⁷ In reading the text of *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr*, one can almost hear when Shaykh Ibrahim puts down the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* and began to expound on his own. The text also contains several references to al-Qurṭubī's (d. 1273) encyclopaedic *tafsīr*, and the *tafsīr* of the Ottoman shaykh and qāḍī, Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī al-Bursawī (d. 1725), *Rūḥ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. The late Ustadh Barham Diop, a prominent student of Shaykh Ibrahim Niase, told me that Shaykh Ibrahim insisted that the top shelves of his library be stocked with books of *tafsīr*, and that he had a special fondness for the *Rūḥ al-bayān*. The notes also show occasional references to the Mauritanian Shadhīlī scholar, Muḥammad al-Yadālī's (d. 1753) *tafsīr, al-Dhahab al-ibrīz fī tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-ʿazīz*, which has been influential in Mauritania and Senegal. (For example, it is also frequently cited in Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba's works.)

On the whole, *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr* adheres relatively closely to al-Ṣāwī's commentary on the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, sometimes citing other common exegeses related by al-Qurṭubī or others, but what differentiates it from other works of *tafsīr* is that it uses these citations as a *maṭla*⁸, a launchpad for practical spiritual instruction, metaphysical exposition, and, above all, the description of the exalted Muhammadan reality (*ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*) and its special relationship to God and to Muslims. Discussions of *asbāb al-nuzūl, fiqh, kalām, sīra, ḥadīth, qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, as well as Ṣūfī stories and cosmology are all integrated and interwoven into an original supracommentary on the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn/al-Ṣāwī* with a strong accent on spiritual wayfaring (*sulūk*) and *ma'rifā*.

The commentary on the verse from *Sūrat al-Faṭḥ, the hand of God is above their hands* (Q. 48:10), is characteristic. After a discussion of the occasion of the revelation of this verse (the pact of ʿAqaba) and the special status of the Prophet, Shaykh Ibrahim notes that the only time it is permissible to pray towards a person is during the funerary prayer (*ṣalāt al-mayyit*), when the corpse is placed at the front of the congregation, and this is why we can *ṣallā ʿalā* ('pray upon or towards') the Prophet, because he is completely annihilated in the Divine Essence—his soul is absent like that of a deceased person. In further evidence of this, he cites a *ḥadīth* stating that on the Day of Resurrection each of the prophets will cry out, 'Oh my soul!', but the Prophet Muḥammad will cry out, 'O my community!'; for Shaykh Ibrahim this

is another sign of the perfection of the annihilation of the Prophet's soul in the Divine—it is so far gone in God that he will not call out for it.⁸ Other common themes include the varying degrees of *tawhīd* (for the masses, the elite, and the elite of the elite), the *ḥaḍarāt* ('divine presences') of Ṣūfī cosmology, esoteric interpretations of the stories of the prophets, and symbolic interpretations of Qur'anic images, such as lightning, clouds, waves, and others.

As is characteristic of Tijānī literature (and Ṣūfī literature of the past few centuries in general), *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr* shows the clear influence of the school of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) in its technical terminology; however, there is nothing quite as shocking as Ibn ʿArabī's (in-)famous inversions of the stories of Noah and his community and that of Moses and Pharaoh, the School of Khurasan's *kufr ḥaqīqī*, or the portrayal of Iblīs as an ideal lover of God. For example, the idea of the 'gods created in belief' and that 'God is He who is worshipped in all forms of worship' does not appear in Niasse's *tafsīr* as it does in al-Kāshānī's, or the Qur'anic commentaries of Shaykh Ibrahim's near-contemporary, the Algerian Shādhilī Shaykh Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī (1869–1934). Also, unlike some other Ṣūfī *tafsīrs*, this work does not divide itself into various levels of interpretation, except in very specific cases (i.e. the meaning of a term, such as *taqwā*, for the masses, the elite, and the elite of the elite).

Although these *tafsīr* sessions were given in the presence of disciples, the fact that they were recorded and given in Arabic indicates that Shaykh Ibrahim may have had a broader audience in mind. In his introduction to the English translation of the first volume of the *tafsīr*, Ustadh Barham Diop (1932–2014) argues that Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse strove to be especially 'objective' and unbiased in these sessions so that 'if one were to listen to the tapes without knowing the speaker, one would not discover his name, his father's name, *madhhab*, whether he has a *ṭarīqa*, or what his ethnicity is.'⁹ This is in stark contrast to Shaykh Ibrahim's other works in which these individual traits feature prominently—strongly suggesting that he had a wider audience in mind.

When put in the context of his other, written, works (which are characterised by their frequent quotations of Qur'an), *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr* demonstrates the centrality of the Qur'an to Shaykh Ibrahim's thought (many of the same ideas and interpretations of Qur'anic passages appear in his collection of letters, *Jawāhir al-rasāʿil*) and also the polyvalence of the Qur'an for Shaykh Ibrahim: the same aya is given different interpretations in different sections of the *tafsīr*, and many interpretations given in his letters and treatises are not found in this transcription. This is unsurprising since Shaykh Ibrahim is reported to have completed a recitation of the entire Qur'an twice a week.¹⁰ Shaykh Ibrahim's close relationship with the Qur'an is understood as being hermeneutically significant, as we will see below.

'Traditional' versus 'Modern' Qur'anic Hermeneutics

In his introduction to the English translation of the *tafsīr*, Barham Diop quotes the Arab proverb, 'All game is found in the belly of the wild ass', to back up his assertion that everything one might want to know is found in the Qur'an, and all one could hope to learn from the Qur'an is found in Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's *tafsīr*, because of the profound and intimate way in which the Qur'an and the Prophet shaped the latter's life.¹¹ This point is a crucial one, and one that separates traditional Qur'anic hermeneutics from modern attempts, whether they come from Cairo or Cambridge, from the fourth or fifteenth century AH. Traditional Qur'anic hermeneutics is an interactive process in which the divine word transforms and even enlightens its reader; the text is not an inanimate semantic field which can be interpreted or manipulated at will. As Foucault succinctly notes:¹²

If we define spirituality as being the form of practices which postulate that, such as he is, the subject is not capable of the truth, but that, such as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject, then we can say that the modern age of the relations between the subject and truth begins when it is postulated that, such as he is, the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject.

That is, in the 'spiritual'—or what I call the 'traditional'—episteme, the Qur'an, as the expression of the Truth (*al-haqq*) *par excellence* in the Islamic tradition, can transfigure and 'save' the human subject; however, the ordinary human subject cannot hope to understand the Qur'an without the aid of its transformative power. According to Foucault, in this context, one of the hallmarks of the modern episteme would be that the raw human subject is expected to be able to interpret the Qur'an (given that he or she has all the relevant information), but that the subject would remain fundamentally unchanged by this process. In other words, in the modern episteme, it is the interpreter that works on the Qur'an in order to produce or discover its meaning; whereas in the traditional episteme it is the Qur'an that works on its interpreter to make him or her capable of understanding its meanings.

This is a subtle, but important distinction that has been relatively unexplored in the field of Qur'anic studies. In his essay in the recently published Harper Collins *Study Quran*, Walid Saleh presents a related, but distinct, schema:¹³

In the classical period, the *tafsīr* tradition displayed far more unity than in the modern period. Many modern exegetes have abandoned the dictates and methodologies of the classical tradition, interpreting the Quran according to ideological stances that reduce the subtleties of the revelation to the predilections of human beings in the present

world ... Four major trends can be noted in modern Islamic *tafsīr*: the modernizing, the Salafī, the classical, and the fundamentalist. The modernizing and the fundamentalist trends share the same hermeneutical outlook; both have escaped the dictates of the tradition and see fit interpret the Quran according to an ideological stance. One has modernity as its guiding principle, the other a militant outlook. Both also seem to have had only a limited appeal to the general Muslim public. The Salafī trend, which is increasingly the norm in Sunni lands, attempts to leapfrog over a thousand years of Islamic scholarship in order to return to an imagined golden age of the first Islamic centuries. In the field of *tafsīr* it does this by denigrating many of the most important classical *tafsīr* works ... Meanwhile, the richness and complexity of classical mainstream *tafsīr* has been pushed to the side, and the classical trend is kept alive among intellectuals only through the selective publication of medieval classics.

I would argue that the unity amongst *tafsīr* of the classical period that Saleh mentions is due in part to this shared ‘traditional’ orientation to Qur’anic hermeneutics, whereas the contemporary period (the last century or two) has witnessed the rise of ‘modern’ hermeneutics, which has produced these ideological *tafsīrs*. Furthermore, I would assert that the hermeneutic similarities between Saleh’s ‘modernizing’, ‘fundamentalist’, and even some members of the ‘Salafī’ categories of *tafsīr*¹⁴ are due to their shared ‘modern’ (in my usage) hermeneutic. It is perhaps this distinction that best explains the erasure of subtlety that Saleh notes in modern *tafsīrs*, as well as the discomfort most modern *tafsīrs* seem to have with polyvocality and ambiguity, and their ideological nature when compared to early, medieval, and contemporary traditional *tafsīrs*. The idea that the Qur’an consists of a set of definite meanings that are clear to whomever has the relevant linguistic and contextual information stands in sharp contrast to the conception of the Qur’an as a living reality that can unveil itself to and transform its interpreters.

This conception of the transformative power of the Qur’an extends beyond *tafsīr* literature, as *ḥadīth*, *sīra*, historical, and Ṣūfī literature are filled with stories of the recitation of the Qur’an prompting radical conversion, repentance, weeping, and severe physical reactions—including sudden death.¹⁵ The early *mufasssīr* al-Tha‘labī even authored a short book entitled ‘Those Slain by the Noble Qur’an, Who Heard the Qur’an and Thereupon Died’ (*Kitāb mubārak yudhffī qatlā al-Qur’ān al-‘aẓīm alladhīna samī‘ū al-Qur’ān wa-mātū bi-samā‘ihī taḥmat Allāh ‘alayhim wa-‘alā jamī‘ al-muslimīn*), in which he recounted stories of those who were thrown into such extreme states of ecstasy or holy fear that their souls took flight.¹⁶ This trope is but the existential or even physical concomitant of the epistemologically transformative

power of the Qur'an assumed by traditional *tafsīrs*, whether classical or contemporary, such as Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's.

Niasse's Interpretation of Q. 6:75–79: Sources and Original Contributions

To get a better sense of the hermeneutic method and content of Shaykh Ibrahim's *tafsīr*, and how it compares to its source material, we now turn to the example from *Sūrat al-An'ām* (Q. 6), verses 75–79, which reads:¹⁷

Thus did We show unto Abraham the dominion (malakūt) of the Heavens and the Earth, that he might be of those possessing certainty. When the night grew dark upon him, he beheld a star and said: 'This is my Lord'. Then, when it had set, he said: 'I love not things which set.' And when he saw the moon rising, he said: 'This is my Lord.' Then when it set, he said: 'Unless my Lord lead me, I must needs become one of the folk who have gone astray.' And when he saw the sun rising, he said: 'This is my Lord. This is the greatest.' Then when it set, he said; 'O my people, verily I am innocent of all that ye place beside God. Verily I have turned my face purely towards Him who created the Heavens and the Earth.'

Now, these verses are regarded as somewhat problematic because Abraham, the so-called father of monotheism, seems to be falling in and out of the astrolatry of his fellow Babylonians.

The *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, which forms the skeleton of Niasse's *tafsīr*, addresses this issue by arguing that Abraham declared, '*This is my Lord*', in order to mock or teach his people the folly of their ways (an opinion also cited in the *tafsīr* of al-Qurtubī and in a commentary attributed to Ibn 'Abbās). The *tafsīr* of the *Jalālayn* reads:¹⁸

When night descended, [when] it darkened, upon him he saw a star—said to have been Venus—and said, to his people, who were astrologers: 'This is my Lord', as you [are wont to] claim. But when it set, when it disappeared, he said, 'I love not those that set', to take them as lords, because it is not possible for a [true] Lord to be transformed or to change place, as such [attributes] pertain to accidents—but this had no effect on them. And when he saw the moon rising, appearing, he said, to them: 'This is my Lord.' But when it set he said, 'Unless my Lord guides me', [unless] He establishes me within [true] guidance, 'I shall surely become one of the folk who are astray'—an intimation to his people that they are astray, but still this had no effect on them. And when he saw the sun rising, he said, 'This is my Lord; this is greater!' than the star and the moon. (The masculine

[demonstrative pronoun] *hādhā*, ‘this’, is used [for the feminine *shams*, ‘sun’] because the predicate [*rabbī*, ‘my Lord’] is masculine.) *But when it set*, and the argument against them had become stronger and they still had not repented, *he said*, ‘*O my people, surely I am innocent of what you associate*’, with God, in the way of idols and accidental bodies, which require an originator.

In his commentary on the Jalālayn’s *tafsīr*, al-Ṣāwī contextualises this account with a story that presents the prophet Abraham as a precocious young child who pesters his parents with questions about who his Lord is until his father slaps him out of exasperation. Niasse cites this story at the beginning of his commentary, along with al-Ṣāwī’s definition of the *malakūt* and its relationship to the *mulk*, as we will see shortly.

Turning to Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī al-Bursawī’s commentary on this passage, which appears to be a summary of al-Kāshānī’s (d. 730–736/1329–1335) commentary, we read:¹⁹

The malakūt of heavens and earth is an allusion to the manifestation of God’s power in bringing the living from the dead ... Know that for every thing in the world that is manifest physically expresses physically what it has along the three dimensions [soul, heart, spirit = star, moon, sun] ... The allusion here is to the method of spiritual wayfaring to God and it is verification by the signs which He made, and they [the signs] are a ladder for them [the spiritual wayfarers].

Al-Kāshānī’s commentary identifies the star with the soul, the moon with the heart, and the sun with the spirit, interpreting this passage as the prophet Abraham’s spiritual ascent and development:²⁰

When night descended upon him, that is, when the night of the world of corporeal nature grew dark over him during his childhood and early youth, he saw, the star of the dominion of the human frame, which is the soul referred to as ‘spiritual spirit’ he found that his effusion, his life, and his lordship was issuing from this [soul], since God, exalted be He, was showing him at that moment through His name the Life-giver (*muḥyī*), and so he [Abraham] said [the following] by the tongue of his state: ‘This is my Lord’. But when it set, by his crossing over the station of the soul and [by] the rising of the light of the heart and its radiating over him with its vestiges of maturity, rational comprehension and knowledge of the contingency of the soul and the necessity of its being imprinted upon the body, he said, ‘*I love not those that set*’, those who are eclipsed in the setting place of the body,

who are veiled by it, hiding behind the darkness of contingent existence and the need for the other.

And when he saw the moon of the heart standing prominent upon his arrival at the station of the heart and his having risen above the horizon of the soul by prevailing over it; and [when] he saw his effusion, through the unveilings of realities, and his knowledge and lordship as issuing from it [the moon of the heart], for God, exalted be He, was at that instance showing him through His name[s] the Knower and the Wise: he said, *'This is my Lord'*. But when it set, by becoming veiled from him and its crossing over from his stage and his sensing that its light was drawn from the sun of the spirit and that it would set in the darkness of the soul and its attributes and be veiled thereby, having thus no light, he turned away from his station to wayfare along the path of the self-disclosure of the spirit, saying: *'Unless my Lord guides me, to the light of His Face, I shall surely become one of the folk who are astray'*, those who veil themselves from Him behind esoteric aspects, such as the Christians who stop at the luminous veils.

And when he saw the sun, the spirit, shining prominent, by its self-disclosure to him and the manifestation of its light, he found that his effusion, his presential vision, and his lordship as issuing from it [the spirit], for God, exalted be He, was now showing him through His name[s] the Witness, the Sublime, and the Tremendous; he said, *'This is my Lord; this is greater!'*, because of its tremendousness and the intensity of its luminosity. But when it set, as a result of the dominance of the lights of the self-disclosure of the Truth and the rising of the august glories of the Abiding Face and the unveiling of the veil of the Essence upon his arrival at the station of unity, he saw that to look upon the spirit and his own existence was an act of idolatrous association, and so, he said, *'O my people, surely I am innocent of what you associate, with Him'*, that is, whatever that thing be, since there is no existence other than His.

'Verily I have turned my face', that is, 'I have surrendered my essence and my existence, to Him Who, brought into existence the heavens of the spirits and the earth of the soul, inclining [myself] away from all that is other than Him, even from my own existence, by annihilation in Him, and I am not of those that associate others [with God]', that is, 'I have nothing to do with idolatrous association whatsoever, be it the existence of remnants [in me] or their manifestation or otherwise'.

None of these above passages seem to inform Niasse's interpretation, which reads as follows (Qur'anic citations are in italics, al-Şāwī's commentary is in plain text, the Jalālayn's underlined, and Niasse's original content **in bold**):²¹

And so we showed Abraham the *malakūt* of the heavens and the earth that he might be among the certain ... He [Abraham asked], 'Oh my father, who is my *rabb*?' He said, 'Your *rabb* is your mother.'

'And who is my mother's *rabb*?'

'I am.'

'And who is your *rabb*?'

'Nimrod.'

'And who is Nimrod's *rabb*?'

Then he slapped him and left. So [Abraham] began to wonder and long to know his *rabb*. So when night fell over him, they took him out of the cave and this was his first experience of the sky, he saw a star, Venus, and he said to his people—and they were star-worshippers—he said, 'This is my Lord', and when it set, he said, 'I love not those which set', that is, he does not like to take them as lords because the Lord cannot change. So when he saw the moon in rising in splendor, that is, rising, he said, 'This is my Lord', but when it set he said, 'Unless my Lord guides me, I will surely be among a people gone astray.' So when he saw the sun rising, and it was on the morrow, he saw the sun for the first time, he said, 'This is my Lord, this is greater/the greatest', that is, greater than the star and the moon, but when it set, that is, 'set', he said, 'O my people, I am free of that which you associate' with God of idols and created heavenly bodies. 'As for me, I have turned my face purely towards He who created the Heavens and the Earth, and I am not one of those who associate [others with God].'

And likewise, as we showed him the erring of his father, we showed Abraham the *malakūt* of the heavens and the earth that he might be among the certain. Now, **Abraham was the pole (*quṭb*) of *tawḥīd*. God does not mention him without acquitting him of association (*shirk*), but how is this so? This is because he said, 'This is my Lord.'** Had he meant that the star was actually his Lord, this would be association. But rather, he did not mean the star, as he was, at that moment, drowned in oneness (*tawḥīd*), he did not see anything other than God, Most High. When he saw the star, he said, 'This is my Lord'; I say that had he intended the star, he would have said 'that' (*dhālika*) because he was far from it, and for the sun he would have said 'that' (*tilka*) because it is feminine, but instead, each time he said, 'This is my lord.' Since his Lord is closer to him

than these things, he meant the Real Lord (*rabb ḥaḥīqī*). So for this reason God mentions him [Abraham], saying, *He was not one of those who associate. He was annihilated in tawḥīd and the annihilation of the prophets does not last for a long time, as it is for the Muhammadans*²². If God wants his servant to benefit by what is other than Him, He annihilates him and makes him subsist in that he returns to his senses, so he benefits from Him/other than Him. Abraham said, *'This is my Lord'*, when he saw the star, *'This is my Lord'*, when he saw the moon, and *'This is my Lord'*, when he saw the sun. Having sobered up, he said, *'O my people, I am free of that which you associate [with God]. As for me, I have turned my face to He who created the heavens and the earth as a ḥanīf, and I am not one of those who associate [others with God].'* And so we showed Abraham the *malakūt* of the heavens and the earth that he might be among the certain ... It mentions that God showed Abraham the *malakūt* of the heavens and the earth, the *malakūt* is what is hidden and the *mulk* is what is apparent, the unseen (*ghayb*) and the witnessed (*shahāda*), this world (*dunyā*) and the hereafter (*al-ākhirā*), the sense (*al-ḥiss*) and the meaning (*al-ma'nanā*), the outward (*al-zāhir*) and the inward (*al-bāṭin*), the creation (*khalq*) and the spirit (*al-ʿamr*), the kingdom (*mulk*) and the dominion (*malakūt*), all of these names are synonymous: the *mulk* with what is apparent, and the *malakūt* with what is hidden. So God showed Abraham the *malakūt* of the heavens and the earth, and he showed Muḥammad among our signs (*min āyātīnā*), *Glory be to He who took his servant by night from the Inviolable Mosque to the furthest mosque, whose precincts We have blessed in order to show him some among our signs* (Q. 17:1). This '*min*' indicates 'someness' in the case of Muḥammad (pbuh), whereas Abraham's '*malakūt of the heavens and the earth*' does not have this '*min*' of 'someness'. But this does not necessarily mean that Abraham has a more exalted station than Muḥammad, rather Abraham was shown the *malakūt* of the heavens and the earth, while Muḥammad was shown some of the signs, but the signs of what? Not the signs of the heavens, nor the signs of earth, but among Our signs, the signs of God. This presence has no end, and so the servant can only become familiar with some [signs], while others will always remain [to be known].

This latter section on the infinite journey of knowledge of the Muḥammadan (here symbolised by the *isrāʾ/miʿrāj*) and those who follow him is a common one in the Akbarī tradition, and Ibn ʿArabī often cites the Qur'anic prayer *My Lord increase me*

in knowledge to make the same point and define the most complete category of saints, the Muḥammadans, as those who never stop at any station, but continuously increase in knowledge with each new manifestation of the Divine.²³

While Niasse's linguistic argument appears to be original, his appeal to the states of *fanā'* and *baqā'* finds a strong parallel in the commentary of the Shādhilī Ṣūfī shaykh Aḥmad al-ʿAlāwī (d. 1925) on the same Qur'anic passage:²⁴

He did not say *This is my Lord* by way of making comparisons, but he spake thus in utter affirmation of God's Transcendence, when there was revealed to him the Truth of all Truths that is indicated in the noble verse: *Whereso'er ye turn, there is the face of God*. He informed his people of this Truth that they might show piety unto God in respect of each thing. All this was on account of what was revealed unto him of *the dominion of the Heavens and the earth*, so that he found the Truth of the Creator existent in every created thing. Then he wished to impart to others the knowledge to which he had attained, but he saw that their hearts were turned away from the pure doctrine of Oneness for which God had singled him out, so he said, *'O my people, verily I am innocent of all that ye place beside God.'*

The words, *I love not things that set*, he explains in another passage:

Albeit the Truth appears unto his slaves in some forms, yet is He Jealous on behalf of His other forms of manifestation wherein they are unmindful of Him, for the limited form unto which they attach themselves is very often of the most fleeting transitoriness ... Abraham was not willing to abide with God in some fleeting forms without recognizing Him in all, and therefore he said: *'I love not things which set'*, that is, I like not to know God in one thing apart from another lest with the disappearance of that thing I should forget Him. Nay, *'I have turned my face, and whereso'er I turn my face, there is the Beauty of God.'*

Now Abraham incurred a certain preference for one of his sons, and God tried him for it with an order to sacrifice him and Abraham showed his obedience, thus proving his sincerity ...

The same idea is beautifully expressed in the *qaṣīda* of Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235) that begins with *tih dalālan fa-anta ahlu li-dhāka* (rhyming in *kāf*):²⁵

You have a nearness to me in your distance from me / and a
compassion I found in your cruelty

...

In other than thee, You showed Yourself to my eyes / which,
 delighting in Thee, saw nothing but Thee
 Even so, did the Friend (*khalīl*) turn his gaze, before me / when he
 beheld the spheres [solar, lunar, planetary].

This builds upon the idea, common in Ṣūfism, that God is present in each of the manifestations which veil Him. This dialectic of presence and absence is a celebrated one amongst Ṣūfī authors such as Ibn ʿArabī who writes, ‘So glory be to Him who veils Himself in His manifestation and becomes manifest in His veil! No eye witnesses anything other than He, and no veils are lifted from Him.’²⁶ Likewise Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh (d. 709/1309) wrote in his aphorisms:²⁷

(164) Only His extreme nearness to you is what veils God from you.

(15) That which shows you the existence of His Omnipotence is that He veiled you from Himself by what has no existence alongside of Him.

(218) How can God be veiled by anything, for He is apparent and has actual being in that wherewith He is veiled?

This idea stretches back to the mysterious early Ṣūfī al-Niffārī (d. 354/965), who wrote in his *Mawāqif*:²⁸

Thy nearness is not thy farness, and thy farness is not thy nearness: I am the Near and the Far, with a nearness which is farness, and a farness which is nearness.

The commentary on this statement of Niffārī’s by Ibn ʿArabī’s student ʿAfif al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291) reads:²⁹

The meaning of this noble revelation is wondrous; and I explain it as that the nearness of the Real to His servant is His witnessing his annihilation (*fanāʾ*) in finding his Lord (*sayyidihi*), and then, when it is established, in subsisting through the subsistence (*baqāʾ*) of his Lord. And there is no doubt that this nearness is a form of farness because it is the annihilation of the witnessing of his [the servant’s] own essence and all of his attributes—and what distance could be more intense than that, although it is nearness. So if you ask, then how can annihilation be nearness, if it appears at the outset to be a form of intense farness as we have heard? The answer would be that the servant, in his annihilation form his own essence and from his attributes subsists with an everlasting subsistence, but by his Lord, Most High; and this leads to nearness, and what leads to nearness is nearness. Subsistence is not mentioned without mentioning annihilation, and this matter is agreed

upon among the tribe of the people of God, and their mention of *baqāʿ* after *fanāʿ* is well-known amongst them.

In a similar vein, and perhaps more succinctly, another early Ṣūfī author, al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), comments:³⁰

Insofar as the servant is ‘near’, it is not ‘nearness’ until he becomes absent to [his] nearness on account of [His] nearness. When he no longer sees [his] nearness on account of [His] nearness, that then is nearness. That is, [when he no longer] sees his nearness to God (Great and Glorious) on account of God’s nearness to him.

Given this background, while Niasse’s linguistic argument appears to be original, his commentary seems a natural extension of this constellation of ideas relating nearness and farness to the endless self-manifestations of God which simultaneously reveal and veil Him, and the states of *fanāʿ* and *baqāʿ*, in which the aspirant participates in these perpetual self-manifestations or signs of God through annihilation and subsistence, following in the footsteps of the Prophets Abraham and Muḥammad. This dizzying interplay of nearness and farness, *fanāʿ* and *baqāʿ*, that characterises spiritual wayfaring, is nicely summarised in a verse of poetry by Muhammad Ould Shaykh Abd Allah, the compiler of *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr*, about Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse:³¹

Fanaytu bi-ḥubbihi wa-baqaytu ḥattā / fanaytu ʿan al-fanāʿ wa-ʿan al-baqāʿ

I was annihilated in love for him and I subsisted until / I was annihilated from that annihilation and from subsistence as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Fī riyāḍ al-tafsīr* marks an original and important contribution to the discipline of *tafsīr* and contemporary Ṣūfī literature for a number of reasons. First, Niasse’s *tafsīr* demonstrates the importance of the classical tradition for contemporary *tafsīr* despite the fact that ‘most scholars of modern Islam pay little heed to ... classical works and assume that to study modern *tafsīr* one only needs to study contemporary works.’³² The analysis above demonstrates just how much can be lost by taking this limited approach.

Secondly, as a supracommentary or gloss, Niasse’s *tafsīr* demonstrates the continuing relevance and importance of this particular genre of *tafsīr*. As Walid Saleh has noted:³³

Publishing of new glosses has all but stopped, a regrettable development, but unless we have access to this subgenre of *tafsīr*, which became the dominant form of writing exegetical works after

the seventh century AH, we shall remain severely hampered in our efforts to write any meaningful history of the genre. If we add to this the fact that almost no scholarly interest has ever been shown in glosses by modern academics, we have a predicament in the field that will be hard to get rid of: the glosses are not being published (out of sight) and scholars are not interested in studying them (out of mind).

Furthermore, as noted above, this *tafsīr* is a transcription of an oral performance, which is now being used in similar oral performances in different settings around the world. While Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse held the *tafsīr* of the Jalālayn/al-Ṣāwī in his hand, his disciples now hold his *tafsīr* in their hands while performing their own *tafsīrs*, underscoring the continuing relevance and importance of this genre of *tafsīr* in both its written and oral forms.

Thirdly, Niasse's *tafsīr* demonstrates the remarkable vitality of the Islamic scholarly and spiritual traditions in West Africa, in contrast to claims of decadence and intellectual decline espoused by scholars such as J.S. Trimingham.³⁴ What is perhaps most remarkable is that this *tafsīr* represents a single performance among the many other similarly original oral *tafsīrs* that Shaykh Ibrahim gave in both Wolof and Arabic over the course of his life, many of which have been recorded. The published work is now being used throughout West Africa and around the world by Tijānī scholars in their own *tafsīr* sessions and *khuṭbas*. An English translation of the first volume of the Arabic *tafsīr* was recently published by Fayda Books in Atlanta, and this will no doubt find its way into many more English-language *tafsīr* sessions and Friday sermons.

The rapid acceptance and use of this *tafsīr* by scholars in Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, England, Indonesia, the United States, Sudan, and, of course, Senegal (just to name a few places where I have heard of this *tafsīr* being used) challenges Arab- and Persian/Turkish-centric notions of Islam, both culturally and geographically. Far from being at the periphery, for many, Western Africa is a major centre of Islamic learning and spirituality that not only passively receives but actively contributes to, and shapes, Islamic intellectual disciplines and spirituality. Unfortunately, the academic study of Islam seems to be lagging a bit behind in this regard, as the works of black African Islamic scholars (and even contemporary academic works on Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa) continue to be exoticised and ghettoised as documents of primarily ethnographic, but not intellectual, significance. This *tafsīr* in particular, and the *oeuvre* of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse in general, demonstrate just what a mistake this is, and just how much is lost by focusing only on the intellectual activities of the early and medieval scholars of the Arab, Persian, and Turkish heartlands, fecund though they may be.

Finally, but perhaps most significantly, this work illustrates what I call a traditional approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics,³⁵ which Rūmī (d. 672/1273) poetically describes by likening the Qur'an to a bride:³⁶

The Koran is like a bride. Although you pull the veil away from her face, she does not show herself to you. When you investigate the Koran, but receive no joy or mystical unveiling, it is because your pulling at the veil has caused you to be rejected. The Koran has deceived you and shown itself as ugly. It says, 'I am not that beautiful bride.' It is able to show itself in any form it desires. But if you stop pulling at its veil and seek its good pleasure; if you water its field, serve it from afar and strive in that which pleases it, then it will show you its face without any need for you to draw aside its veil.

In following what he understood to be the Qur'an's exhortations to spiritual practice (involving recitation of the Qur'an), Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse underwent the transformative experiences of *fanā'* and *baqā'*. Then on the basis of these Qur'anically-induced transformative experiences, Niasse was able to 'recognise' them in the Qur'anic account of Abraham and the planets, providing the basis of his unique interpretation. While this article has attempted to illustrate the textual connections between Niasse's work and classical works of *tafsīr* and Ṣūfism, I hope that it has also shown how these textual connections allude to less obvious, but no less important connections of, and between, spiritual practice, experience, and interpretation. *Fī riḡāḡ al-tafsīr li'l-Qur'ān al-karīm* presents many of the beauties of this 'bride', and its publication is a significant event in the history of Ṣūfism and *tafsīr* in the twenty-first century. I hope that this short study will be but one of the first of many on this remarkable work.

NOTES

1 While internal estimates place the number of disciples in the Fayḡa at 100 million, this figure is difficult to verify. For a history of Sahykh Ibrahim Niasse and the Fayḡa, see Seesemann, *The Divine Flood*, and Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam*.

2 Shaykh Ibrāhīm Inyās [Niasse] al-Kawlakhī, *Fī Riḡāḡ al-tafsīr li'l-Qur'ān al-karīm, katabahu wa-kharraja aḡādīthahu Muḡammad b. al-Shaykh 'Abd Allāh al-Tijānī bi-musā'ada al-waladayn al-ustādhayn Aḡmad b. al-Shaykh 'Abd Allāh wa'l-Shaykh Bāy b. Aḡmad* (6 vols. Tūnis: Majma' al-Yamāma li'l-ḡibā'a wa'l-Nashr, 2010). Suras 1–4:23 are also available in English translation as *In the Meadows of Tafsīr for the Noble Qur'ān: Volume 1, Sūrat al-Fāṡihā–al-Nisā'* v. 23, tr. Moctar Boubakar (Atlanta: Fayda Books, 2014).

3 Brigaglia, 'Two Exegetical Works'.

4 Brigaglia, 'Two Exegetical Works'.

5 For example, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr's 'Why do Muslims Fast' in his *Islamic Life and Thought*, pp. 214–215.

6 al-Ṣāwī, *Hāshiya 'alā Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*.

7 Niasse, *In the Meadows of Tafṣīr*, vol. 1, p. 35. Thus, Niasse's *tafṣīr* can be considered a kind of gloss of al-Ṣāwī's gloss of the *Tafṣīr al-Jalālayn*. As Walid Saleh points out, although this is one of the most popular forms of *tafṣīr*, these glosses have received scant scholarly attention. In his essay in the *Study Quran*, Saleh laments: 'It is rather unfortunate that not a single study in Western scholarship has ever been devoted to any of these glosses' (Saleh, 'Quranic Commentaries', p. 1,656).

8 Niasse, *Fī riyād al-tafṣīr*, vol. 5, pp. 346–347.

9 Niasse, *In the Meadows of Tafṣīr*, p. 36.

10 Niasse, *In the Meadows of Tafṣīr*, p. 38. Shaykh Ibrahim's daughter, Shaykha Maryam Niasse, told me that Shaykh Ibrahim recited a seventh of the Qur'an during the day, and then recited the same portion of the Qur'an that night, completing two recitations of the Qur'an every week—one during the day, and one during the night.

11 Niasse, *In the Meadows of Tafṣīr*, p. 38.

12 Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 19.

13 Saleh, 'Quranic Commentaries', pp. 1,645, 1,657.

14 The Salafī tradition tends to reduce the *tafṣīr* tradition to the works of Ibn Kathīr and the Jalālayn, and represents something of a liminal case in this traditional-modern hermeneutic dichotomy. Like the classical *tafṣīr* tradition, the Salafī tradition holds that the Prophet and the Companions had unique access to the meanings of the Qur'an due to the profound way in which it had shaped them; however, unlike the classical tradition, it limits this traditional, transformative hermeneutic to the first generations of Muslims, and so those who come after them must practice something more akin to a modern hermeneutic in which such transformation is an interpretive afterthought. As a result, the contemporary Salafī *tafṣīr* tradition tends to privilege interpretations apparent to modern readers, reject spiritual and hermeneutic hierarchies, and emphasise reports from early generations over individual or 'original' insights or unveilings.

15 For example, the well-known *ḥadīth* in which verses from *Sūrat Hūd* (Q. 11) are said to have turned the Prophet's hair grey (see Kermani, *God is Beautiful*, p. 294).

16 Kermani, *God is Beautiful*, pp. 293–311.

17 Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*.

18 al-Suyūṭī and al-Maḥallī, *Tafṣīr al-Jalālayn*, pp. 143–144.

19 al-Bursawī, *Rūḥ al-bayān*, vol. 3, pp. 55–56.

20 al-Kāshānī, *Tafṣīr al-Kāshānī*, pp. 235–236.

21 Niasse, *Fī riyād al-tafṣīr*, vol. 2, pp. 222–224.

22 'Muhammadan' is a technical term used by the school of Ibn ʿArabī to designate the highest category of saints who occupy the 'station of no station' and whose hearts are perpetually transforming in response to the perpetual self-disclosures of the Real. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 340.

23 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p. 340.

24 Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, pp. 141–142, quoting Aḥmad al-ʿAlāwī, *al-Mināḥ al-Qudūssiya*. Similarly, Ibn ʿAjība's commentary on these verses states, 'When the world of the *malakūt* was unveiled to Abraham, he saw God in everything, as it has been related: "I did not see a thing without seeing God in it." As for when he said, "I love not that which sets", it was a precaution against stopping at the sensible without witnessing the meaning. For the ocean of meaning is always connected and in it there is no change or movement. Only that which is seen without the meanings changes, so the sun of meanings dawns over eternity, and it has no setting or change or motion.' (Ibn ʿAjība, *Baḥr al-madīd fī tafṣīr al-Qurʿān al-majīd*, vol. 2, p. 136).

- 25 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān*, p. 94.
- 26 Chittick, *The Self Disclosure of God*, p. 129, quoting Ibn ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt* III 546.24.
- 27 Ibn ʿAtaʿllāh, *Book of Wisdom*, pp. 88, 49, 102.
- 28 Arberry, *The Mawāqif and Mukhāṭabāt*, p. 28.
- 29 al-Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Mawāqif al-Niffarī*, p. 73.
- 30 Rustom, 'Approaches to Proximity and Distance', p. 11, quoting al-Sarrāj, *al-Lumaʿ*.
- 31 Niasse, *In the Meadows of Tafsīr*, p. 30.
- 32 Saleh, 'Quranic Commentaries', p. 1,657.
- 33 Saleh, 'Quranic Commentaries', pp. 1,648–1,649.
- 34 See Trimmingham, *A History of Islam* and *The Sufi Orders*.
- 35 Following Foucault's aforementioned distinction between 'spiritual' and 'modern' hermeneutics: 'If we define spirituality as being the form of practices which postulate that, such as he is, the subject is not capable of the truth, but that, such as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject, then we can say that the modern age of the relations between the subject and truth begins when it is postulated that, such as he is, the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject' (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 19).
- 36 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 273.

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