

THE *KĀSHIF AL-ILBĀS* OF SHAYKH IBRĀHĪM NIASSE: ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

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The *Kāshif al-Ilbās* was the magnum opus of one of twentieth-century West Africa's most influential Muslim leaders, Shaykh al-Islam Ibrāhīm 'Abd-Allāh Niassa (1900–1975). No Sufi master can be reduced to a single text, and the mass following of Shaykh Ibrāhīm, described as possibly the largest single Muslim movement in modern West Africa,¹ most certainly found its primary inspiration in the personal example and spiritual zeal of the Shaykh rather than in written words. The analysis of this highly significant West African Arabic text cannot escape the essential paradox of Sufi writing: putting the ineffable experience of God into words. The *Kāshif* repeatedly insisted that the communication of “experiential spiritual knowledge” (*ma'rifa*)—the key concept on which Shaykh Ibrāhīm's movement was predicated and the subject which occupies the largest portion of the

¹ Portions of this article are included in the introduction to the forthcoming publication: Zachary Wright, Muhtar Holland, and Abdullahi El-Okene, trans., *The Removal of Confusion Concerning the Flood of the Sainly Seal, Ahmad al-Tijānī: A Translation of Kāshif al-Ilbās 'an fayḍa al-khatm Abī al-'Abbās by Shaykh al-Islam al-Hājj Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd-Allāh Niassa* (Louisville, Ky.: Fons Vitae, 2010). See Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (London: Longman, 1984), 287. See also Ousmane Kane, John Hunwick, and Rüdiger Seesemann, “Senegambia I: The Niassene Tradition,” in *The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, vol. 4 of *Arabic Literature of Africa*, ed. John Hunwick and R. S. O'Fahey, 272–307, 276 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), where the Shaykh is described: “Without a doubt, one of the greatest figures of Islam and the Tijāniyya in twentieth century Africa.”

Kāshif—was beyond words. The Shaykh wrote of spiritual experience or “taste” (*dhawq*):

Know that this science we mention is not mere wagging of the tongue. Its contents are spiritual experiences (*adhwāq*) and ecstasy (*wijdān*). It cannot be acquired through talking or written texts, but can only be received directly from the people of experience (*ahl al-adhwāq*). It can only be gained through serving (*khidma*) the people of spiritual distinction (*rijāl*), and companionship with the perfected ones. By Allah, no one has ever succeeded (on this path) except by companionship with one who has succeeded, and the achievement is from Allah.²

Even if recent academic research has rightly devalued the role of texts in the transmission of Sufi knowledge,³ none can deny the continued relevance of studying the writings of prominent Sufis. Moreover, serious textual consideration of West African Sufism has been stifled by lingering colonial prejudice of a supposedly distinct, synchronistic Islam Noir (Negro Islam) and by thinly veiled disdain for black African scholars.⁴ Time

² Shaikh al-Islam Ibrāhīm ‘Abd-Allāh Niassé, *Kāshif al-Ilbās ‘an fayḍa al-khatm Abī al-‘Abbās* (Cairo: Shaykh Tijānī Cisse, 2001), p. 45.

³ Proceedings from “Sufi Texts, Sufi Contexts,” a workshop held at the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA), Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., May 28–29, 2007, particularly the presentations of Carl Ernst (“Sufi Literature and Its Reception in History”), Valerie Hoffman (“Concluding Remarks”), and Rüdiger Seesemann (“Three Ibrahims”).

⁴ An expert on French colonial knowledge of Islam, for example, said Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s books “apparently lack originality” (J. C. Froelich, *Les Musulmans d’Afrique Noire* [Paris: Éditions de l’Orante, 1962], 236). A later Islamologist, Michel Chodkiewicz, concludes that Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niassé had no direct contact with the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), one of Islam’s greatest thinkers. This can only mean it was Chodkiewicz who never had direct contact with Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s writings: the *Kāshif* is in fact replete with precise chapter references to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s greatest works. See Michel Chodkiewicz, *Ocean Without Shore: Ibn ‘Arabī, the Book and the Law* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 10–11. A version of Chodkiewicz’s introduction to *Ocean Without Shore* also appears separately as Michel Chodkiewicz, “The Diffusion of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Doctrine,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society* 9 (1991), <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/diffusion.html> (accessed December 13, 2009). Chodkiewicz writes in this latter piece: “A dissident of the Tijāniyya, Ibrāhīm Nyass could assuredly find many elements of akbarian origin in the masters of this *tarīqa*. But I am led to believe that his eschatological beliefs owe a lot to the *Yawāqūt* [of Sha‘rānī], and very little (or more likely nothing) to an assiduous familiarity with the works of Ibn ‘Arabī.” It seems to have escaped Chodkiewicz that

and again, the received knowledge concerning African Muslims' lack of scholarly qualifications substitutes for actual study of their teachings and writings. West African Arabic writings deserve a closer look.

Shaykh Ibrahim's *Kāshif al-Ilbās* provides an illuminating window into the world of a twentieth-century West African Muslim scholar. The book is certainly informed by its historical context, but it tackles some of the most widespread debates in the Muslim world. The author was clearly immersed in a rich Muslim scholarly tradition spanning several centuries and continents. The sources cited demonstrate a profound familiarity with a range of specialties within the Islamic sciences. Moreover, the wholesale commitment to the necessity of "gnosis" (*ma'rifa*) for every sincere Muslim seems unprecedented—dare we say original—even if the author is careful to substantiate his claims with citations from previous works. Analysis of the *Kāshif* thus provides important evidence that West African Muslim scholarship in the early twentieth century was cosmopolitan, diverse and both innovative and deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition.

Understanding the contents of the *Kāshif al-Ilbās* requires some background of the life and mission of its author.⁵ Shaykh Ibrāhīm was a Muslim scholar and sage of the Tijāniyya Sufi order. The Tijāniyya has spread to all corners of the Muslim world since Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815, Fez) established the confraternity in North Africa in the late eighteenth century. Many eminent scholars have emerged among the Tijāniyya in the last two centuries, but few have been as successful in propagating the order as Shaykh Ibrāhīm. No external statistics for the number of those

the *Kāshif* contains frequent precise references to the works of Ibn al-ʿArabī but only one reference to Sha'rānī's *Yawāqūt*. Indeed, Chodkiewicz's characterization of Niasse, whom he mistakenly labels as a "dissident" and elsewhere as "another black African Sufi," seems prejudiced from the start.

⁵ For more information on the life and thought of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, see Rüdiger Seesemann, *Sufism in Context: Ibrahim Niasse and the Emergence of a 20th-Century West African Sufi Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Joseph Hill, "Divine Knowledge and Islamic Authority: Religious Specialization Among Disciples of Baay Ōas" (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 2007); Andre Brigaglia, "The *Fayda* Tijaniyya of Ibrahim Nyass: Genesis and Implications of a Sufi Doctrine," in *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2001), 41–56, 14–15; Ousmane Kane, "Shaykh al-Islam al-Hājj Ibrahim Niasse," in *Le temps des Marabouts: Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale française v. 1880–1960*, ed. David Robinson and Jean-Louis Triaud, 299–316 (Paris: Karthala, 2000); Mervyn Hiskett, "The Community of Grace and Its Opponents, the Rejecters," in *African Language Studies* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1980), 99–140, 17n.

tracing their Tijānī affiliation through Shaykh Ibrāhīm are available, but internal estimates claim one hundred million followers, or more than half of all Tijānīs in the world.⁶

Shaykh Ibrāhīm explained his historical mission in spreading Islam and the Tijāniyya throughout West Africa and beyond as being endowed with Al-Fayḍat al-Tijāniyya, the “Tijānī Flood” predicted by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī that would occasion people entering the Tijānī spiritual path group upon group. If *fayḍa* was the doctrine, the distinguishing practice of Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s movement was *tarbiya*, or “spiritual training.” Through *tarbiya*, aspirants transcended the confines of their ego-selves and “tasted” the directly experienced knowledge, or “gnosis” (*maʿrifa*), of God. Certainly this practice was nothing new within Sufism or the Tijāniyya itself, but Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s ability to help millions attain the highly valued “spiritual illumination” (*fath*) was surely unprecedented. Of course, there is much more to the story of Shaykh Ibrāhīm—his adaptive legal rulings, his creation of a grassroots pan-African and pan-Islamic movement, his world travels and close relations with some of his day’s most renowned revolutionary leaders (Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Touré, and Gamal Abdel Nasser, for example)—but this concept of a flood of gnosis, spiritual illumination for all who desired it, was the key to understanding the Shaykh’s life and mission.

The *Kāshif al-Ilbās*, written early on in the Shaykh’s career in 1931–32, was primarily a justification for the transmission of the “experiential knowledge” (*maʿrifa*) of God on a widespread scale. The self’s complete immersion and annihilation in the Divine Essence, which Sufism has long maintained is essential for true knowledge of God, is a concept that has been fraught with tension throughout Islamic history, both among the detractors of Sufism and among Sufis themselves. The aspirant who becomes “enraptured” in God may behave as one absent from his senses or he may make extraordinary spiritual claims. The *Kāshif* thus presented the means of attaining “gnosis” (*maʿrifa*) and the results of such knowledge for its possessor. In so doing, the work differentiated false pretensions from

⁶ Statistics presented by Shaykh Hassan Cisse at the International Tijānī Forum in Fez, Morocco, June 28, 2007. Shaykh Hassan justified this figure by reference to his own extensive personal travel throughout Africa, discussion with local *muqaddams*, and statistics claimed for specific countries on various African media outlets. For this latter, Shaykh Hassan referenced a recent radio broadcast in Nigeria positing the number of Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s followers in Nigeria at forty million. Independent verification of such figures would require a separate study on its own.

sincere expression, delusion from real experience, and heretical claims from Islamic orthodoxy.

Shaykh Ibrāhīm's method in this regard was to urge the disciple's combination of "rapture" (*jadhb*) and "traveling the path" (*sulūk*). A few lines of the Shaykh's own poetry from the *Kāshif* illustrate this key point:

O enraptured one! If you do not travel the difficulties of the path
Alas for you, you are incomplete; so continue seeking

O seeker! If you do not become enraptured
You remain veiled, so move and bestir yourself!

The perfected one is he who combines
The two states of rapture and seeking, it is he who progresses with speed

May Allah include us among such perfected ones
Who have become truly enraptured, but continued traveling the path.⁷

As the key issue of the *Kāshif*, the issue of Divine gnosis, and the possibility of its mass transmission through the Tijānī *Fayḍa*, was certainly one of the currents in early twentieth-century West Africa. But it was not the only issue of dispute to which Shaykh Ibrāhīm was responding in his work. Around the time the *Kāshif* was written, there seems to have been a lively debate in Senegal over whether it was possible to "see" God. For followers of Shaykh Ibrāhīm, seeing God seems intimately connected to attaining *ma'rifa* in the process of *tarbiya*.⁸ It is not a topic of 'aqīda, or "theology." The fact that it became an issue of theological dispute over what constitutes proper belief or conceptualization of God's identity is itself evidence that gnosis was becoming widespread in the region at this time.

In any case, the debate would erupt in a series of polemical exchanges immediately after the *Kāshif*'s writing, between the followers of Shaykh Ibrāhīm and Aḥmad Dem (d. 1973), a Fulani scholar living in Sokone, Senegal.⁹ Shaykh Ibrāhīm's position on this issue, to which he devoted an

⁷ *Kāshif*, 118.

⁸ I observed Shaykh Hassan Cisse ask a student beginning *tarbiya*: "Go find Allah, and come back and tell me what you see." Shaikh Hassan Cisse, in discussion with the author, Medina-Baye Kaolack, Senegal, December 2008.

⁹ Aḥmad Dem's polemical work against the possibility of "seeing" God was entitled *Tanbīh al-Aghbiyā'*. It produced immediate refutations from 'Uthmān Ndiaye, whose work was entitled *Sawārim al-Ḥaqq*, and from 'Alī Cisse, whose work was entitled *Mikhzam li Abāṭil*

entire chapter in the *Kāshif*, was more nuanced than the ensuing polemical exchange would indicate:

The substance of the issue is that the vision of Allah with the eyes, today in this world, is conceivable, even if it has not been legally demonstrated. As for the vision by means of spiritual insight (*baṣīra*), experience (*dhawq*), and unveiling (*kashf*), its occurrence is an indisputable fact. The expressions of the Sufi people differ concerning the vision of Allah. Some express it as not seeing any existence (*wujūd*) aside from the Real. Others say it means self-annihilation (*fanā'*), or others express it as the arrival in the Divine Presence (*wuṣūl*). Some say it means union with the Divine (*jam'*).¹⁰

His argument in this regard was consistent with his method elsewhere: the Shaykh took the time to address the question from a variety of perspectives. The chapter begins with a presentation of what scholars of jurisprudence and theology have said about the vision of God before providing testimony from the Sufi tradition as to real meaning of seeing God. He thus conceded certain difficulties if Sufi expressions should be limited to one perspective, such as a narrow legalistic framework, but reasserted the essential meaning of the concept. The result is a skillful defense of the Sufi experience of witnessing the Real, essentially making it palatable to a larger audience.

There are other important questions also addressed in the *Kāshif*, some of more limited historical scope, and others that still are of relevance to Muslims today. The emphasis on public recitation of Sufi litanies, for example, no doubt responds to the century-old dispute between scholars of the Tijānī and Qādirī Sufi orders in Northern Nigeria and elsewhere over whether Sufis should recite their liturgies silently or out loud in public. Other questions emerged with the triumph of Sufi leaders over traditional forms of authority in West African society in the early twentieth century. For example, what was the spiritual identity and social role of women in the new religious order of the Sufi shaykhs? To these questions, Shaykh Ibrāhīm devoted separate sections of the *Kāshif*. The book has immediate

Aḥmad Dem. For specifics of this debate and reference to these rare manuscripts, see Seesemann's forthcoming book "Divine Flood," chap. 3, "Seeing God." I am indebted to Seesemann for providing me with an advance copy of this and other chapters.

¹⁰ *Kāshif*, 266.

relevance to some of the more contentious issues that continue to confront Muslims of our own age: the orthodoxy of Sufism and its practices, the untenability of continued racial and cultural prejudices, the nature of religious authority, and the ethics of disagreement between Muslims.

Conventions of writing change with the times, and Sufi literature is no exception. That roughly half of the *Kāshif* consists of citations from prior works should not surprise one familiar with the development of the genre of Islamic scholarly prose since the eighteenth century. The source analyses conducted on important Sufi works in the region immediately prior to the *Kāshif*—on Ibn Mubārak al-Lamaṭī’s *Ibrīz* (written in 1719 in Morocco) and ‘Umar al-Fūtī Tal’s *Rimāḥ* (written in 1844 in Senegal) by Bernd Radtke,¹¹ and on Malik Sy’s *Iḥām al-Munkir al-Jānī* (written in 1921 in Senegal) by Ravane Mbaye¹²—permit a useful comparison to Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s citations from previous sources. According to Radtke, the *Ibrīz* contains 270 citations from 139 different books, with most sources used not more than once or twice. The *Rimāḥ* contains about 640 citations from 123 sources, with most citations (two-thirds) coming from nine authors (with eighteen to ninety-eight citations from each). Mbaye did not keep track of the number of citations in the *Iḥām*, but he estimates more than two hundred sources,¹³ while six works are cited more frequently (between four and thirty citations from each). In the *Kāshif*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm used 271 citations from 112 different works. There are eighteen works which Shaykh Ibrāhīm cited more frequently: from between four and seventeen times each.

A closer look at the main sources used in each of the three seminal Tijānī works—the *Rimāḥ*, the *Iḥām*, and the *Kāshif*—reveal a diverse source base for Tijānī writers in West Africa. Of the main sources listed by Radtke for al-Ḥājj ‘Umar, Mbaye for al-Ḥājj Mālik, and ourselves for

¹¹ Bernd Radtke, “*Ibrīziana*: Themes and Sources of a Seminal Sufi Work,” *Sudanic Africa* 7 (1996); and Bernd Radtke, “Studies on the Sources of the *Kitāb Rimāḥ Ḥizb al-Raḥīm* of al-Ḥājj ‘Umar,” *Sudanic Africa* 6 (1995).

¹² Ravane Mbaye, *Le grand savant El Hadji Mālick Sy: Pensée et Action*, vol. 3, *Iḥām al-Munkir al-Jani: Réduction au silence du dénégateur* (Beirut: Dar Albouraq, 2003).

¹³ This number may be inflated, as an examination of Mbaye’s “Index of Works Cited” for the *Iḥām* reveals that Mbaye neglects to distinguish between works cited by Sy directly and works referenced by authors whom Sy cites. For example, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse may cite from al-Sha’rānī, who in turn cites from a work of Ibn al-‘Arabī. In such a case, our list of the sources in the *Kāshif* would not include the work of Ibn al-‘Arabī, only the work of al-Sha’rānī.

Shaykh Ibrāhīm, the only work cited more than four times by all three writers was the primary text of the Tijāniyya: ‘Alī Ḥarāzīm al-Barāda’s *Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī*. Shaykh Ibrāhīm shared al-Ḥājj ‘Umar’s frequent recourse to the works of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (d. 1565, Egypt), Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 1493, Libya), and Ibn ‘Aṭā-Allāh (d. 1309, Alexandria), and to Ibn Mubārak al-Lamaṭī’s *Ibrīz*. Shaykh Ibrāhīm also shared al-Ḥājj Mālik’s predilection for the nineteenth-century Moroccan Tijānī scholar Ibn al-Sā’ih’s *Bughyat al-Mustafīd* and the eighteenth-century Turkish Sufi exegete Ismā‘īl al-Haqqī’s *Rūḥ al-Bayān*. To this list of distinguished Sufi writers, Shaykh Ibrāhīm added frequent use (four or more citations each) of the writings of the Malian Qādirī Shaykh Mukhtār Kuntī (d. 1811), Ibn al-‘Arabī al-Ḥātimī, Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī (d. 1111, Baghdad), the Moroccan Shādhilī scholar Ibn ‘Ajība (d. 1809), the Moroccan Tijānī Shaykh Aḥmad Sukayrij (d. 1949), the Persian Sufi al-Qusharyī (d. 1072), the Indian scholar Aḥmad al-Ṣāwī (d. 1825), the Mauritanian Shādhilī master Muhammad al-Yadālī (d. 1753), and the writings of al-Ḥājj ‘Umar himself.

Space limitations preclude a comprehensive list of the sources as included in the analyses of Radtke for the *Ibrīz* and the *Rimāḥ*.¹⁴ But an overview of the sources for the *Kāshif* sustains Radtke’s observation for these other works concerning the diversity of subject matters drawn from. Like al-Lamaṭī and al-Ḥājj ‘Umar, Shaykh Ibrāhīm cited works of exegesis (*tafsīr*),¹⁵ Prophetic traditions (Hadith),¹⁶ jurisprudence (*fiqh*),¹⁷

¹⁴ I have included a list of the works cited three times or more in the appendix of the forthcoming translation of the *Kāshif*. See Wright, Holland, and El-Okene, *Removal of Confusion*.

¹⁵ Most notably the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (along with the marginal commentary of Aḥmad al-Ṣāwī), the *Jawāhir al-Ḥisān* of ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Tha‘ālibī (d. 1471), the *Rūḥ al-Bayān* of Ismā‘īl al-Haqqī, the *Tafsīr al-Kabīr* of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), the *Baḥr al-‘Ulūm* of Abū Layth al-Samarqandī, and the *Ta’wīlāt al-Najmiyya* of ‘Alā’ al-Dawla al-Simnānī (d. 1336, Persia).

¹⁶ Aside from the six *Sunan* of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, Ibn Māja, and al-Nasā’ī, these include the following: the *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, the *Muwatta’a* of Imam Mālik, the *Shifā* of Qādī ‘Iyāḍ, the *Kitāb al-Adhkār* of al-Nawawī, the *Sunan al-Kubrā* of al-Bayhaqī, the *Al-Maqāṣid al-Hasana* of al-Sakhāwī (d. 1497, Egypt), the *Fath al-Bārī* of Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1448, Egypt), the *al-Fatāwā al-Ḥadīthiyya* of Ibn Hajar al-Haythamī al-Makkī (d. 1565, Mecca), and other classical works of Prophetic traditions.

¹⁷ These are predictably mostly of the Mālikī school (*madhhab*), such as the *Risāla* of al-Qayrawānī (d. 996, Fez), the *Mukhtaṣar* of Khalīl, or the *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid* of Ibn Rushd. But there are a few notable exceptions, such as the Shāfī‘ī scholar ‘Abd al-Mālik

theology (*‘aqīda*),¹⁸ grammar (*naḥw*),¹⁹ religious principles (*uṣūl*),²⁰ and history/biography,²¹ as well as works of Sufism. The geographical diversity of sources also deserves notice: authors from India, Persia, Turkey, the Arab Middle East and Morocco are cited alongside authors from West Africa.

The diversity of subjects and geography demonstrate definitively that West African Muslim writers participated in global Muslim currents of scholarly exchange. The *Kāshif* was certainly no exception in this regard. Indeed, Shaykh Ibrāhīm would have had to rely almost exclusively on the library of his father, al-Ḥājj ‘Abd-Allāh Niasse (d. 1922), to write the *Kāshif*. Although the Shaykh, who attained scholarly fame at a young age, would have undoubtedly begun his own collection of books by the early 1930s, he did not travel outside of Senegal until 1937, many years after writing the *Kāshif*. A comparison of the sources for the *Kāshif* with those used by al-Ḥājj Mālik Sy for the *Ifḥām al-Munkir al-Jānī* reveals the same basic corpus of rich and varied Arabic literature for West African scholars of the early twentieth century.

Outside of the predictable recourse to past Tijānī writers, a few authors deserve special note for their frequent citation by Shaykh Ibrāhīm: ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (d. 1565, Egypt), Muḥammad al-Yadālī (d. 1753, Mauritania), and Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811, Mali). After classic Tijānī works such as the *Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm quoted from various writings of al-Sha‘rānī more than any other author. He described al-Sha‘rānī in his author’s appendix to the *Kāshif* as “the saintly pole and scholarly gnostic, he who combines the Sacred Law with the

Abū al-Ma‘ālī al-Juwaynī (known as Imām al-Ḥaramayn, d. 1085, Hijaz) and Imām Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 1392).

¹⁸ Such works include important works of the ‘Asharī school—for example, the *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif* of ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Jurjānī (d. 1413), the *Idā‘at al-Dujannat* of al-Maqqarī (d. 1632, Tlemcen/Damascus), and the *al-Durr al-Thamīn wa al-Mawrid al-Ma‘īn* of al-Mayyāra (d. 1662, Fez).

¹⁹ Among the works cited in this category are the *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīt* by Abū al-Ṭāhir b. Ibrāhīm Majd al-Dīn al-Fayrūz Ābādī (d. 1414, Shiraz/Mecca) and its commentary *Tāj al-‘Arūs min Jawāhir al-Qāmūs* by al-Zabīdī (d. 1790, India/Egypt).

²⁰ An example would be the *Al-Asrār al-‘Aqliyya* by the Egyptian Shāfi‘ī scholar Taqiyy al-Dīn al-Muqṭarāḥ (d. 1215).

²¹ Such works would include the comprehensive history of the early Muslim community by al-Ṭabarānī or the historical compilation of legal opinions in the Maghrib, the *Mi‘yār* of al-Wānsharīṣī.

Divine Reality.”²² The *Kāshif* contains seven citations from al-Sha‘rānī’s *Laṭā’if al-Minan wa al-Akhlāq*, two citations from his *Kitāb al-Jawāhir wa al-Durar*, two citations from the *Baḥr al-Mawrūd fī al-Mawāthiq wa al-‘Uhūd*, two citations from the *Mizān al-Kubrā*, one citation from *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, one citation from the *Al-Yawāqūt wa al-Jawāhir*, and three citations from al-Sha‘rānī where the work is not mentioned. This gives a total of eighteen citations from al-Sha‘rānī.

The significance of al-Sha‘rānī for Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s popularization of Tijānī Sufism in West Africa should not be overlooked. Al-Sha‘rānī has been variously described as the one who spread and interpreted the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī for a larger Muslim audience²³ or as the half-eloquent, half-vulgar Sufi realist whose writings played an unmistakable role in popularizing complex Sufi doctrines.²⁴ There is no doubt that al-Sha‘rānī’s eloquent popularization of Sufism paralleled Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s own historical mission to open the teaching of *ma‘rifa* to a larger audience. Consider this striking statement from al-Sha‘rānī cited in the *Kāshif* concerning the essential accessibility of complex Sufi doctrines: “A special characteristic of the Sufi spiritual path is that if a genuine seeker enters this path, he becomes familiar with the technical terminology in every detail, from the first step he takes on this path. It is almost as if he himself is the creator of this terminology.”²⁵ Elsewhere al-Sha‘rānī was quoted as speaking to the commonsense application of Sufi practice attainable by every practicing Muslim:

Know that the science of Sufism is knowledge kindled in the hearts of the saints, until the practical application of the Qur’ān and the Sunnah completely illuminated their hearts. For anyone who puts the religion into practice like this has such sciences kindled in him, along with moral virtues, secrets and Divine realities which tongues are incapable of enunciating.²⁶

This justification of Sufism resonated with Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s attempt to inspire ordinary Muslims with Sufi understandings, particularly with

²² *Kāshif*, 244.

²³ Chodkiewicz, “Diffusion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Doctrine.”

²⁴ Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Sharānī* (New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1982), p. 233.

²⁵ Citation from al-Sha‘rānī (unidentified source), as quoted in *Kāshif*, 249.

²⁶ *Kāshif*, 105.

ma'rifa, the “direct knowledge of God.” When discussing the “legal status” (*ḥukm*) of Sufism in the first chapter of the *Kāshif*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm cited the adage of al-Shādhilī: “If someone does not become immersed in this science of ours, he will die as one who persists in the major sins, without being aware of his condition.”²⁷ In a revealing poem written years before the drafting of the *Kāshif*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm said explicitly: “Whoever does not obtain knowledge of the Merciful, his life has been in ruin for all time spent.”²⁸ The work Shaʿrānī did in popularizing and rationalizing Sufi doctrines (from the perspective of Muslim Sunni orthodoxy) was clearly indispensable for the sense of urgency with which Shaykh Ibrāhīm wished to inspire his fellow Muslims to obtain the experiential knowledge of the Real through the science of Sufism.

Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s use of two great West African Sufis of the eighteenth century, al-Yadālī (of the Shādhilī order) and al-Kuntī (of the Qādirī order), is also of interest. He was of course not the first to have recognized the scholarly aptitude of these writers, but the extent of his reliance on them seems unprecedented. The *Kāshif* contains five substantial citations from al-Yadālī, mostly from his writings on Sufism such as the *Sharḥ Khatimat al-Taṣawwuf*. This is a bit more than the number of times this author is cited by al-Ḥājj Mālik in the *Ifham*, one of the few other books of the genre where al-Yadālī’s name appears. The writings of Kuntī, mostly his *Al-Kawkab al-Waqqād fī faḍl dhikr al-mashāʾikh wa ḥaqāʾiq*, is cited in the *Kāshif* thirteen times. This far surpasses the four times he is cited by al-Ḥājj ʿUmar in the *Rimāḥ*.²⁹ Brita Frede, a research fellow at the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin studying the Mauritanian disciple of Shaykh Ibrāhīm, “Shaykhānī” Menna Abba, has made an interesting observation that Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s use of al-Yadālī and Kuntī would have been particularly effective in the scholarly milieu of the Idaw ʿAlī in Mauritania, the Tijānī stronghold where Shaykh Ibrāhīm was gaining an influence at the time of the *Kāshif*’s writing.³⁰

This specific historical context aside, the citations from al-Yadālī and

²⁷ *Kāshif*, 42.

²⁸ Shaykh al-Islam Ibrāhīm ʿAbd-Allāh Niasse, “Rūḥ al-adab” [Spirit of good morals]. See Shaykh Hassan Cisse (translation and commentary), *The Spirit of Good Morals by Shaykh of Islam Ibrahim Niasse* (Detroit: African American Islamic Institute, 2001), p. 70.

²⁹ Radtke, “Sources of the *Kitāb Rimāḥ*,” 100–101.

³⁰ Welcome observation made by Frede at my presentation of the *Kāshif*, “Reflections on the *Kāshif al-ilbās* of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse,” for the Tijānī literature conference, “The Tijānī literature of Africa,” sponsored by ISITA, Fez, Morocco, June 2009.

Kuntī play an important role in advancing Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s argument in the *Kāshif*. The force of the citations from al-Yadālī included in the *Kāshif*, which speak openly of key Sufi concepts like annihilation and absorption in God a century before Sufi orders became widespread in West Africa, might suggest that al-Yadālī’s role in the popularization of Sufism in West Africa may have been underestimated. In any case, the inclusion of an earlier well-respected Mauritanian scholar speaking openly of “gnosis” (*ma’rifa*) through “annihilation” (*fanā’*) was significant for Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s public emphasis of the necessity of *ma’rifa*. Kuntī’s role in the development of Sufism in West Africa has been well substantiated,³¹ so it is not surprising to find his name among the sources for the *Kāshif*. It is nonetheless of note to find the specific use Shaykh Ibrāhīm found for this scholar so closely linked to the emergence of Sufi orders in West Africa. The *Kāshif* generally presents Kuntī as an earlier example of a consummate spiritual trainer, guiding aspirants to the knowledge of God through the process of *tarbiya*. As earlier mentioned, *tarbiya*, or “spiritual training,” was the key practice through which the “flood” of gnosis was to reach Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s followers. It is no accident then that Shaykh Ibrāhīm cited Kuntī at length on the subject of master-disciple relations within Sufism, asserting the guide’s authority to train followers and the respect which the aspirants are supposed to accord their teacher. Significantly, it was the presence of the guide, rather than the guide’s words, which was emphasized here: “The shaykh is he who polishes you with his virtuous character traits, trains you by bowing his head in silence, and enlightens your inner being with his radiance.”³² The idea of a teacher who would enlighten his student through his inner radiance was certainly a key concept in the transmission of *ma’rifa*: especially since *ma’rifa* is incapable of being fully enunciated.

The *Kāshif* thus presents an adept weaving together of the writings of past Sufi masters. This format was of course not lost on Shaykh Ibrāhīm himself, who described his own work as one that “collects the cream of the books authored on this discipline (of Sufism).” It was a style well received by his contemporaries. In the section of commendation of the *Kāshif*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm included the praise poetry of a number of scholars

³¹ See Aziz Batran, *The Qadiriyya Brotherhood in West Africa and the Western Sahara: The Life and Times of Shaykh al-Mukhtar al-Kunti, 1729–1811* (Rabat: Université Mohammed V, 2001).

³² Mukhtār al-Kuntī, as cited in *Kāshif*, 144.

from Mauritania associated with the heritage of Muhammad al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Shinqīṭī (d. 1830), who first introduced the Tijāniyya south of the Sahara. The Shaykh wrote:

I have presented my work entitled *Kāshif al-Ilbās* to a community among the people of my age, the influential notables (*ahl al-ḥall wa al-‘aqd*),³³ people of scholarly criticism in the sciences of the Sacred Law and the Divine Reality. They are the masters of creation and leaders of the distinguished folk of the Sufi Path. All of them, praise be to Allah, praised me for this work and wrote a commendation. So I wanted to include here their commendations and testimonies in order that the fair-minded person would know that this book contains nothing other than a collection (*jam‘*), so the words in it are the words of the scholars (*‘ulamā’*), and the doctrine on which it is built is the doctrine of the bosom-friends.³⁴

This ability to gather the knowledge of the prior scholars was thus considered an important testimony to a shaykh’s scholarly credentials. Certainly the work played a role in the submission of many within the Idaw ‘Alī scholarly tribe to Shaykh Ibrāhīm beginning in the 1930s. This may also have been the case in Nigeria. According to Shaykh Tijānī ‘Alī Cisse, when Shaykh Ibrāhīm first visited Nigeria in 1945, he took with him four copies of the *Kāshif*, which he left with the *‘ulamā’* in the city of Kano, one of the most renowned centers of Muslim scholarship in Africa. After reading the book, the Kano scholars testified that such a work gathering so much knowledge together in one place was an occurrence they thought relegated to the scholars of Islam’s golden ages.³⁵

³³ The *ahl al-ḥall wa al-‘aqd* is an idiomatic expression in Arabic, translated literally as “the people who bind and unbind.” The expression connotes a sense of authority. I am indebted to Muhammad Sani Umar and Rüdiger Seesemann for their suggestions here.

³⁴ *Kāshif*, 289.

³⁵ Shaikh Tijānī ‘Alī Cisse, in discussion with the author, Medina-Kaolack, Senegal, June 2009. Rüdiger Seesemann reports a similar version of events from Barham Diop, the traveling companion of Shaykh Ibrāhīm: “On his departure from Kano, Shaykh Ibrāhīm left behind a few copies of *Kāshif al-Ilbās*. Later the book found its way into the hands of a few religious scholars, who assumed that the author had lived in Senegal a long time ago—until ‘Alī Cissé and Abu Bakr Serigne Mbaye (Niasse) made a stopover in Kano on their way to the Hijaz. The scholars of Kano were stunned by their visitors: ‘Where are you from?’—‘Senegal.’ Then the scholars asked whether they had heard about a saint called Ibrāhīm Niasse, who had lived in Senegal a long time ago. ‘He is alive, he is still in Senegal. This is his brother.’”

This is not to say that the *Kāshif* contains nothing original. In his analysis of the sources for al-Ḥājj ‘Umar’s *Rimāh*, Radtke rightly draws the reader’s attention away from the fact that the author incorporates so many other sources, focusing instead on *how* the author uses his sources. The *Kāshif* of course also does contain a good deal of the author’s own prose and poetry. But the methodology the Shaykh used in citing from other works deserves a closer look. Generally speaking, Shaykh Ibrāhīm presented a series of citations on a given subject that were usually interspersed with his own comments. He usually concluded by including what Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815), the founder of the Tijāniyya Sufi order, had himself said concerning the subject in question. The significance of this straightforward approach should not go unnoticed. In fact, Shaykh Ibrāhīm says in the text: “Whoever examines it (the *Kāshif*) closely and judges it fairly will know for certain that this compilation was authored by Shaykh al-Tijānī with his own hand.” The guiding spiritual presence of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī aside, Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s methodology in selecting and ordering citations seems to have been consciously aimed at demonstrating the dialectic between the Tijāniyya and prior Sufi traditions, thereby giving fresh perspective to Shaykh al-Tijānī’s own words. Moreover, Shaykh Ibrāhīm hoped that such fresh perspective would benefit and unite his Tijānī readership, praying in the book’s conclusion that Allah would “make it a source of discernment for the Spiritual Path and its people, stringing them together (like pearls) in the company of the Noble Seal (al-Tijānī).”

The claim that Shaykh al-Tijānī was the real author of the *Kāshif* of course has broader implications than just putting the Shaykh Tijānī’s words in dialogue with other Sufi traditions. In fact, the *Kāshif*, like many other Sufi texts, has developed its own reputation for saintly blessing (*baraka*) simply as a physical object. Shaykh Ibrāhīm writes: “May Allah put tremendous blessing (*baraka*) in it, to the extent that it may bless any place it is found.” Today, many followers of Shaykh Ibrāhīm carry the book with them when they travel just to have the blessing of it in their possession wherever they go.³⁶

Standards of Muslim sainthood and saintly blessing—where personal agency is often obscured with reference to God, the Prophet Muḥammad, or a previous saint—should not prevent the reader from grasping the

³⁶ Shaikh Tijānī ‘Alī Cisse, in discussion with the author, Médina-Kaolack, Senegal, June 2009.

unprecedented or original quality of Shaykh Ibrahim's *Kāshif al-Ilbās*. The *Kāshif* argues in a nutshell that acquiring the experiential knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*) is the essential purpose of human existence, and that a "flood" has come within the ranks of the Tijāniyya to spread the Sufi path of Seal of Saints, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī, thereby reconnecting people to the Divine in a time of ignorance and distance from God. Even if the *Kāshif* is filled largely with a collection of the "cream" of past Sufi writings, Shaykh Ibrāhīm's essential argument was extraordinarily bold and unprecedented. That he was aware of this is substantiated by his frequent warnings in the text not to reject the pronouncements of God's saints. The result of this weaving together of the Sufi tradition to justify the concept of a flood of gnosis was no less than the foundation for one of the most successful Sufi revivals in modern times. The significance of the *Kāshif* in the development of modern West African Muslim religious identity cannot be underestimated.

Whatever the blessing or lofty purpose of a Sufi text, the reader of the *Kāshif* should not forget the suspicion with which Sufis have generally treated writing. "Secrets are in the hearts of the distinguished folk (*rijāl*), not in the bellies of books," Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse was fond of saying.³⁷ Indeed, very particular circumstances inspire a Sufi master such as Shaykh Ibrāhīm to write in the first place, and most Sufi shaykhs left no writing at all. The purpose of Sufi texts is to respond to particular issues at hand, not to serve as the means of actually transmitting the knowledge of God or the means of purifying the ego-self (*nafs*). These essential aims of Sufism are meant to be transmitted from spiritual master to disciple in the absence of texts. The *Kāshif* was written to make space for the emergence of the Tijānī flood, not to actually initiate aspirants into the knowledge of God brought by this flood. Sufi texts remain important sources for study not because they contain the actual practices of people, but because they help establish a conceptual space within which practice unfolds.

³⁷ Shaikh Hassan Cisse, in discussion with the author, Lagos, Nigeria, February 2006.