

Conclusion

Sufism in West Africa is best understood as the culmination of a long Islamic scholarly tradition of inscribing knowledge in people. The teaching of Sufism, and more explicitly the transmission of the experiential knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*), drew on existing understandings of the transformative inculcation of habitus. This formation of character or set of dispositions (*adab*) was acquired in the physical presence of masters, whose bodily presence knowledge had infused.

The process of reproducing Muslim identity through the person-to-person cultivation of knowledge ensured certain continuities and permitted obvious adaptations over time. Islamic learning practices emphasized different specializations and were subject to varying pedagogical techniques in diverse historical contexts. But the inscription of Islam, like the formation of master artists in Bourdieu's conception, nonetheless must be understood as a semi-independent symbolic field. Religious identity was affected by social, political, and economic historical forces, but not necessary determined by them.

In the narrative of Ibrāhīm Niasse's community presented here I have engaged the internal understanding of Islamic knowledge transmission in dialogue with the history of West African scholarly communities. The cultivation of divine cognizance (*ma'rifa*) permitted broader social acquisition of an enduringly valued Muslim character. "Traditional" Muslim identity responded to twentieth-century developments through the continued formation of dispositions, resulting in what were perceived as coherent articulations of an adapted cultural inheritance. Such learning also deepened relations between teachers and students by articulating the transformative potential of knowledge in new ways. In the process, the actual content of transmitted knowledge witnessed slight adjustments even while formulations of Muslim identity remained true (in the minds of practitioners) to inherited ideals.

The movement of an Islamic religious habitus in history constitutes the sort of macrohistory essential for reorientating African history away from Eurocentric metanarratives of the emergence of nation-states, for example, or of the globalized cultural hybridity that is increasingly captive to the forces of (western capitalist) consumption. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty:

To attempt to provincialize this 'Europe' is to see the modern as inevitably contested, to write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by

the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of ‘tradition’ that ‘modernity’ creates.¹

Historians must thus pay closer attention to these “other narratives of human connections.” Sufi Muslim communities in contemporary West Africa have generated their own macrohistory to explain their long historical emergence and significant, if sometimes contested, social influence. Attention to this internal narrative helps the historian to circumscribe (or “provincialize”) constitutive categories of the (European) modernist project and their assumed foils: state and civil society versus feudalism or tribalism, freedom versus slavery or clientalism, and secularism versus theocracy.

In more practical terms, Ibrāhīm Niassé’s “community of the flood” is a prime example of a transnational network that is vital to understanding contemporary Africa. According to Frederick Cooper, networks, connections, and “units of affinity and mobilization” between Africans are a better way to think beyond the narrow boundaries of the nation-state than “globalization.”² Ferguson and Gupta add that such transnational networks may “reconfigure states’ abilities to spatialize their authority” and allow members of such movements to “stake their claims to superior generality and universality.”³ Religious movements in particular are significant vehicles for such interconnectivity, because they expand the binary opposition between state and civil society⁴ and invite followers to a “politics of transcendence.”⁵ In giving voice to the community’s internal narrative of transcendence, this study gives serious attention to an African macrohistory. African Muslim scholarly communities, who survived colonial rule and succeeded in re-inscribing (and perhaps expanding) Islamic identity in the post-colony, were writing their own narrative. This, then, has been the story of a clerical community that strove to cultivate, to deepen, and to expand Muslim identity in twentieth-century West Africa.

The formation and formulation of Muslim identity considered here is in some ways distinctive from “reformist” or “Islamist” Islamic ideologies found elsewhere in the Muslim world. It is tempting to assume that competing

1 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 46.

2 Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 108.

3 James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, “Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality,” *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 4 (2002), 996.

4 Erica Bornstein, *The Spirit of Development: Protestant NGOs, Morality, and Economics in Zimbabwe* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 98.

5 *Ibid.*, 97.

articulations have diverging trajectories of religious continuity and rupture. But as John Voll argues, Muslim revivalist movements, whether attempting to adapt, conserve, or strip away Islamic tradition, all manifest significant elements of both continuity and change worthy of consideration.⁶ In the perceived doctrinal dispute between Sufis and Salafists for example, both uphold the supremacy of the Qurʾān and the example of the Prophet, and both revere certain scholarly chains of authorities. In such an Islamic religious context, assigning continuity or rupture to one group over another is essentially assigning them religious authenticity or blameworthy innovation. Unlike an earlier generation of orientalist scholars who tended to associate anti-Sufi reformists with religious orthodoxy, academics today should recognize the inappropriateness of entering a debate on Islamic authenticity. But the other extreme—the claim that there is no one Islam, only innumerable “islams”—also represents an external misreading of certain recognizable orthodoxies. Indeed, there has been wide consensus on basic understandings of Islam across broad expanses of space and time. The solution is rather to recognize a spectrum of modalities,⁷ divergent ways of knowing (epistemologies), or even alternative ways of being (ontologies) within the religion. My work suggests that the spectrum within Islamic orthodoxy is best understood through reference to divergent (but not entirely mutually unrecognizable) dispositions or subjectivities.

Ibrāhīm Niase's community, like other Muslim groups, considered itself the purest expression of orthodox Islamic doctrine and practice. The community admitted that there were diverging interpretations within Sunnī orthodoxy, and it did not claim exclusive access to salvation. Differences were rather explained as varying levels of the religion's penetration into the being of the individual. For Ibrāhīm Niase, those who rejected Sufism simply had not allowed the reality of Islam as an acquired disposition to sink into their hearts. As the renowned Sufi scholar al-Ghazālī insisted, “Nobility of character is a disposition (*hayʾa*) deeply rooted in the soul. When it manifests itself, praiseworthy actions are accomplished with ease and without any need of effort . . . the inner disposition of an individual leads him to act with beauty.”⁸ The one who penetrated to the essence of the religion retained knowledge of its shell, but the one who lingered at the shell predictably rejected what he had not yet experienced. For these people of the shell, Islam did not go beyond their

6 Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 21–23.

7 Here I am borrowing a word used by Rüdiger Seesemann, explained during a panel discussion, “Transformation of Islamic Knowledge in Africa,” German African Studies Conference, University of Bayreuth, 14 June 2014.

8 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyāʾ ulūm al-dīn*, cited in Chourief, *Spiritual Teachings of the Prophet*, 3.

tongues, and they began to reconstruct Islam based on self-interested ideological systems. The result was an ugly, twisted version of the religion. For others, Islam took possession of their hearts, and they manifested the religion's beauty through their very physical presence in the world.

To borrow the formulation of noted Islamic scholar William Chittick, Ibrāhīm Niasse's community perceived itself carrying out the "actualization" or "verification" (*taḥqīq*) of a religious reality, rather than simply "following" (*taqlīd*) an ideological agenda.⁹ This was not exactly a divergence, then, between "traditional Islam" and "reformist Islam," it was the difference between putting Islam into lived practice versus simply formulating doctrines of an Islamic authenticity. For the people of *taḥqīq*, it did not matter so much what line of scholars Muslims came to revere, although a good opinion of them all was representative of good character. What mattered was the continued formation of people, in the company of other people, whose physical being reproduced the exemplary presence of the Prophet Muḥammad as the personification of Islamic knowledge. The human bodily presence, actualized with knowledge, represented an ideal of human perfection in intimate relationship to the divine; an ideal that reformists systematically rejected as an idolatrous glorification of other than God. Generalizing about changes in perspective in the contemporary Muslim world, Chittick observes:

The Islamic conception of human perfection has been banished from the stage, to be replaced by various types of outwardly orientated human endeavor borrowed from contemporary ideologies. The traditional Muslim quietly set out on a personal quest, while the modern zealot shouts slogans from the pulpits with the aim of reforming everyone but himself.¹⁰

In the narrative this book presents, the "flood" of divine knowledge could not be kept quiet, nor has it been banished from the stage. But for the community of Ibrāhīm Niasse, there is no doubt that the transformative actualization of religious learning was predicated on a notion of human perfection abandoned in many other parts of the Muslim world.

9 William Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2007), 45–47. I thank Patrick Laude for alerting me to the significance of Chittick's work here.

10 William Chittick, "The Islamic Conception of Human Perfection," in *Jung and the Monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Joel Ryce-Menuhin (New York: Routledge, 1994), 164.

Anti-Sufi reformists, however, were not exactly people without an “Islamic character,” since people cannot be without some sort of acquired dispositions (*habitus*). Both types of *habitus* were articulated as Islamic, but reformists began to operate in an altered field of reference or “cultural order.” As Louis Brenner observes, “So-called ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ or Islamism can be understood as an effort to combine Muslim doctrine with contemporary technologies of power, most of which have their origins in European culture.”¹¹ Older ideas of human perfection were thus not so much idolatrous to Islam, as humans were after all meant to be God’s representatives on earth: such ideas of the transformative potential of Islamic learning fundamentally destabilized modern technologies of social and political control. An older Islamic *habitus* appeared antagonistic to the new modern state.

“Traditional” West African clerical communities measured the success of Islam through the formation of people in whom the religion became actualized, and the communities that naturally developed around such people. “Modern” reformers suggest that Islam’s success was found in modern political power. Islamists’ fascination with the “Islamic state” was not unprecedented in its interjection of Islam in politics. Indeed Islam, particularly through justice as an ethical standard, had always guided Muslims’ involvement in politics, Sufi communities notwithstanding. For Islamists, the modern state became the key evaluative reference, representing a new conception of religious authority and subjectivity. Islam’s involvement in politics was not new; it was the harnessing of Islam to the modern state, which was structurally and ideologically unwilling to admit alternative nodes of authority, religious or otherwise, that was new.

From the perspective of Ibrāhīm Niasse’s community, then, the contemporary doctrinal divide in Sunnī Islam was best explained not by an epistemological stand-off or an epistemic rupture: it was a divergence of *habitus*. Reformists attempted to produce good servants of the idealized Islamic state. The community of Ibrāhīm Niasse, like many other West African clerical communities, remained committed to producing good servants of God.

11 Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge*, 307.