

Sufism, Islamic Philosophy, and Education in West Africa

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Summary and Keywords

West Africa has been home to and contributed to the development of several important Islamic intellectual traditions, including logic (*manṭiq*), theology (*kalām*), Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), legal philosophy (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), and even philosophy (*falsafa*)—all of which influenced the distinctive forms of pedagogy that emerged in West Africa, in which ritual practice, physical presence, and the cultivation of virtue and *adab* (manners, a particular habitus) played an important role. The 20th and 21st centuries CE (14th and 15th centuries AH) witnessed the emergence of radically different forms of pedagogy and epistemology in Muslim West Africa, because of both increasing exposure to texts and ideas from other Muslim societies and the colonial encounter with Western philosophy and institutional education in the context of nation-states, which profoundly altered the intellectual landscape of the region. The contemporary situation in West Africa is quite plural and dynamic, in which traditions of Sufism, Salafism, Shi'ism, Western philosophies and pedagogies, Pentecostalism, and traditional African religions coexist, compete, interact, and influence each other across a wide variety of domains of life. Nevertheless, Sufism remains an important and prominent feature of many dimensions of life in Muslim West Africa, including Islamic education.

Keywords: Islam, Sufism, epistemology, pedagogy, West Africa, Sahara, philosophy, theology, colonization, Salafism

Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 1493 CE) begins his work *Qawā'id al-taṣawwuf* (*Principles of Sufism*), which is widely popular in West Africa, by asserting that

the specification of a thing is either by definition, which is the most general, or illustration, which is the most clear, or through explanation, which is the most complete in elucidating it and the quickest for understanding it. Sufism has been defined, illustrated, and explained in nearly two thousand ways, and all of them come back to sincerity in turning towards God. These [different descriptions] are different aspects of the same thing.¹

As Zarrūq notes, definitions are important, and so it behooves us to similarly begin by defining Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), Islamic Philosophy (*falsafa*), theology (*kalām*) before giving

illustrations and examples to explain the role they played, and continue to play, in education in West Africa.

Sufism in West Africa

Sufism names the most popular and important tradition of Islamic spirituality, esoterism, and mysticism in West Africa, which is typically structured around orders (*ṭuruq*; singular, *ṭarīqa*) governed by master-disciple relationships and chains of initiation (*silsila*; plural, *salāsila*) going back to the founder of the order and from him to the Prophet Muhammad. However, before the 13th century (6th century AH), Sufism was organized around more informal master-disciple and familial relationships of transmission and initiation, such as the Jakhanke tradition of Islamic scholarship and spirituality that traces its lineage back to al-hājj Sālim Suwārī (d. 13th or 15th century). This tradition generally rejected military jihad and active proselytization and became popular among the Djula traders of the region. In West Africa, the Sufi orders became widely popular only in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In general, the history of Sufism in West Africa can roughly be divided into three phases: scholarly lineage affiliation (prior to the 18th century), the emergence of Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*) as prominent social and spiritual/intellectual institutions (late 18th century through the 19th century), and the popularization of these Sufi orders with emergence of the Sufi shaykh as a center of social organization (19th and 20th centuries). However, this schema is heuristic and varies somewhat geographically, with older forms of Sufi practice, transmission, and social organization persisting in many areas through the early 21st century. These shifts in organization responded to and catalyzed broader socio-political and economic changes in the region; for example, the Sufism of scholarly lineages seems to have coincided with or followed the development of “caste systems” in West Africa, although the emergence of Sufi orders in the region appears both to coincide with and to have contributed to the marked socio-political and economic upheavals of the late 18th and 19th centuries, culminating in the emergence of new colonial societies in which Sufi orders and leaders played an increasingly prominent role.²

In the pre-*ṭarīqa* era, historical documents such as the 17th-century Timbuktu chronicle *Tarīkh al-Sūdān* by ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sa’dī (d. 1656?) and Muhammad Bello’s (d. 1837) *Infāq al-Maysūr* are replete with references to Sufi masters and practices, terminology, and classic treatises, poetry, and prayers, such as the works of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111, Tus, Iran), Ibn ‘Atā Allah (d. 1309, Cairo), ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī (d. 1168, Baghdad), al-Busīrī (d. 1294, Alexandria), and al-Jazūlī (d. 1465, Marrakesh). Such manuscript collections were in wide circulation from an early period. The presence of these Sufi texts, prayer manuals, and descriptions of Sufi “friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*) and their miracles (*karamāt*) in learning centers such as Timbuktu, Pir Saniokhor (in present-day Senegal), Borno, and Katsina throughout West Africa in the 17th century indicate the near ubiquity of Sufi practices on both a popular and elite level, before the widespread advent of Sufi orders in the region. Nevertheless, in contrast to the widespread practice of Sufi devotional rituals

and prayers, formal Sufi initiations seem to have been limited to a scholarly elite during this period. However, even before the widespread advent of Sufi orders as prominent social institutions in the region, the initiatic lineages (*salāsīl*) and practices of several Sufi orders made their way into West Africa.

The Qādiriyya, Early West African Sufi Scholars, and Transnational Networks

The legendary Saharan scholar al-Maghīlī (d. 1505) traveled throughout West Africa and is believed to have spread the Qādirī Sufi order (which takes its name from its founder, ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī) throughout the region, including to the Kunta family of scholars (although textual evidence for this is scanty). The Kunta lineage and network of Saharan and Sahelian scholars affiliated with the Qādirī Sufi order trace their lineage back to an Ahmad al-Bakkā’ī ibn Muhammad al-Kuntī (d. 1515?), a legendary Sufi saint (and supposed student of al-Maghīlī) who settled in Walata, in present-day southeast Mauritania. His descendant, Sīdī Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811) spread the Qādirī order throughout the Sahara and Sahel through his network of students, disciples, and trading partners, which stretched from the Atlantic to central Sudan. This lineage was but one of the most prominent of several Sufi lineages in the region, in which the practice of Sufism was closely bound to family or tribal affiliation. The political, economic, and social instrumentalization of religious authority consolidated under Sīdī Mukhtār al-Kuntī was characteristic of the shift from these lineage-bound forms of Sufi practice to the emergence of the Sufi order as a significant socio-political institution of its own. Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabīr (d. 1868), a student of Sīdī Mukhtār al-Kuntī and his son Muhammad al-Kuntī, founded the library and city of Boutilimit and extended the Kunta Qādiriyya and model of spiritual/scholarly political-economic authority and influence to southwestern Mauritania and the Senegal River valley. His grandson, Shaykh Sidiyya Baba (d. 1924), was an important scholar, shaykh of the Qādiriyya order, and political leader in colonial Mauritania and Senegambia.

The storied city of Timbuktu was home to a number of celebrated Sufi saints, including many from the Kunta family. One of the earliest recorded Sufi saints of the city, Yahyā al-Tadallisī (d. 1461), allegedly a teacher of al-Maghīlī, reportedly spoke with the Prophet every night in his dreams and is credited with several legendary miracles; his mosque/mausoleum remains a prominent landmark in the town. In 2012, the doors to this structure were destroyed by the Ansar al-Dine jihadis occupying Timbuktu. Through their pilgrimages to Mecca, the Sufi scholars of Timbuktu, Djenné, Borno, Kano, Katsina, Agadez, Pir Saniokhor, and Walata were also connected to and had intellectual and spiritual exchanges with leading Sufi scholars of Cairo and Damascus throughout the centuries, such as the Shādhilī Sufi scholar Jalāl al-dīn Suyūṭī (d. 1505), one of the authors of the most widely used Qur’anic commentary in West Africa (*Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*); Muhammad al-Bakrī (d. 1585, Cairo), the source of the most popular prayer on the Prophet in West Africa, the *Salāt al-Fātih*; the famous Qādiri-Naqshibandī, shaykh and defender of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism; ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731, Damascus) and his student, the reviver of the Khalwatī order, Mustafā al-Bakrī (d. 1749). In fact, al-Nābulusī wrote a commentary on a

didactic poem on theology by the Timbuktu scholar and student of Ahmad Bābā (d. 1627), Muhammad ibn Ahmad Bagayogo.³

Numerous West African scholars are mentioned in the Sufi hagiographies and histories of the scholars of Damascus, Fez, and Cairo, such as Muhammad al-Kashnawī (d. 1741, Cairo) of Katsina, an expert in logic and the esoteric sciences who taught at al-Azhar (his work on the esoteric sciences is still in print in the early 21st century), and the mysterious Shaykh ‘Abd Allah al-Barnāwī (from Borno), known as “the saint of Kalumfardo” (a Sufi settlement in Borno) who trained the famous saint of Fez, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbāgh (d. 1719), and whom the traveling Yemeni scholar Ahmad al-Yamanī (d. 1712, Fez) first met in Borno, taking al-Barnawī as his master and describing him as the “the master of his time” (*sāhib waqtihi*).⁴ Al-Yamanī also encountered al-Barnawī’s teacher, the Tuareg Sufi of Agadez, Ahmad ibn Uways al-Lamtūnī (d. 1680?), who was the disciple of the enigmatic Sīdī Mahmūd al-Baghdādī (d. 1640). Al-Baghdādī came to the Air desert from Baghdad and there spread his own Sufi order, the Mahmūdiyya (itself a branch of the Ottoman Khalwatī and Suhrawadī orders). Al-Yamanī studied ibn Uways’s treatise summarizing the teaching and methods of the Mahmūdiyya, *al-Qudwat al-mu‘taqid*, in Agadez with the author before taking it with him to Fez.⁵ Another famous Sufi saint of Borno, Muhammad al-Wālī ibn Sulaymān al-Fulānī (d. 1688?), made the pilgrimage to Mecca twice and was known for his work on theology *al-Manhaj al-farīd fī ma‘rifat ‘ilm al-tawhīd*, which was based on Fulfulde oral commentaries on al-Sanūsī’s primer. Al-Fulānī was also known for his specialty in esoteric sciences, as was his student, the aforementioned Muhammad al-Kashnawī.

Jibrīl ibn ‘Umar (d. 1785?) of Agadez returned from his pilgrimage with initiations in the Qādirī and Khalwatī Sufi orders from Egyptian masters, which he transmitted to his student, ‘Uthman ibn Fūdī (d. 1817), the leader of the Fulani jihad of 1804–1809 and founder of the Sokoto Caliphate. The family and students of Usman dan Fodio (as he is locally known) spread Islamic learning and Qādirī Sufism throughout the caliphate, and his writings and intellectual legacy and those of his brother ‘Abd Allāh ibn Fūdī (d. 1828) remain an important feature of the intellectual and spiritual culture the region. Dan Fodio’s daughter, Nana Asma’u (d. 1864), an accomplished author, scholar, and Sufi, created a network of female teachers called *jajis*, whom she authorized to travel around the Sokoto Caliphate teaching Qur’an, Sunna, basic Islamic law and theology, ethics, Sufism, and history (often through Hausa poems written by Asma’u) to women in their homes. This network was called the *Yan Taru* (those who congregate) and continues to inspire Islamic women’s educational movements in the region and the diaspora in the early 21st century.⁶ The Sokoto jihad marks an important transition from the ethnic-lineage or clan-based organization and transmission of Sufism to a broader *tariqa* structure (although the heads of such Sufi orders tended to come from these same scholarly families). As with Sīdī Mukhtār al-Kuntī, this transition coincided with an increase in the spiritual-political authority of the figure of the Sufi shaykh. Zachary Wright explains, “What differentiates earlier local jihad movements in West Africa (those of Mālik Sy [d. 1699], ‘Abd al-Qādir Kane [d. 1809], Sulāyman Bal, in the 17th and 18th centuries) from the broader regional campaigns of ‘Uthmān b. Fūdī (d. 1817) and ‘Umar al-Fūtī Tāl (d. 1864), may be partially

explained by the increased spiritual authority of the shaykh. This allowed the Sufi orders to appeal to groups beyond their own lineages and ethnic backgrounds, and to consolidate the Sufi affiliations of particular groups.”⁷

Shaykh Nāsiru Kabara (d. 1996) of Kano is responsible for much of the popularization and spread of the Qādirī order beyond the scholarly elite in 20th-century Nigeria. He traveled to Baghdad (the burial site of the founder of the Qādirī order), Libya, Sudan, and Timbuktu, making contact with other major Qādirī *shuyūkh* and collecting authorizations from them, importing and adapting popular rituals from these other branches of the Qādirī order to Nigeria, and elaborating his approach to Sufism in his prolific writings, in which he positions himself as a reviver of the Qādirī legacy of Usman dan Fodio.⁸

The Shādhiliyya and Sanūsīyya

In addition to his Qādirī and Khalwatī initiations, dan Fodio also records that he had an initiation into the North African Shādhilī order. The teachings of the Shādhilī order were spread through the wide circulation of treatises by its masters such as Ahmad Zarrūq and Ibn ‘Atā Allāh al-Iskandarī, collections of prayers attributed to the founder of the order, Abū’l-Hasan al-Shādhilī (d. 1258), and the Mauritanian scholar and Sufi Shaykh Muhammad al-Yadālī (d. 1753), who was a member of the order and whose Qur’anic commentary and treatises on Sufism, among other writings, were studied widely throughout the region. In addition to spreading into West Africa through Mauritania, because of the widespread popularity of the Shādhiliyya in Egypt and North Africa, especially among scholars in Cairo, Alexandria, Fez, and Marrakesh, many West African scholars stopping in these cities on their way to or from the pilgrimage would pick up Shādhilī initiations that they would transmit upon their return to West Africa. However, this order remained largely restricted to transmission through private, scholarly, and lineage relationships and did not achieve the prominence and popularization of the Qādirī, Tijānī, or even the Sanūsī orders in the region.

Founded in 1837 by Sīdī Muhammad ibn ‘Alī al-Sanūsī, a student of the influential Moroccan Sufi master and scholar Ahmad ibn Idrīs (d. 1837), the Sanūsī order was and, to a certain extent, still is widespread in the central Sahara (contemporary Libya, Niger, and Chad), where it fought Mussolini’s Italian colonization of Libya (the famous Omar Mukhtar, “the Lion of the Desert” (d. 1931), was a Sanūsī shaykh) and King Idrīs (d. 1983), the first leader of the newly independent Libya, was the grandson of al-Sanūsī and head of the Sanūsī order, in addition to ruling Libya until he was deposed in a coup by Muammar Gaddafi in 1969.

The Tijāniyya

The most popular Sufi order in contemporary West Africa is the Tijāniyya, founded by Ahmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815, Fez) who claimed to be initiated directly by the Prophet Muhammad in a waking vision and granted the station of “seal of Muhammadan sanctity,” the supreme Sufi saint of all time. The Tijānī order spread rapidly throughout West Africa

through the efforts of his students Muhammad al-Hāfiz (d. 1830), who converted the scholarly 'Idāw 'Alī tribe of Mauritania to the order, and especially al-hājj 'Umar Tal (d. 1864), founder of the short-lived Tukulor empire, whose magnum opus, *Kitāb rimāh hizb al-Rahīm 'alā nuhūr hizb al-Rajīm* (*The lances of the party of the compassionate against the necks of the party of the accursed*), is a compendium of Sufi writings on doctrine and practice, synthesizing and drawing extensively on the works of the Egyptian Shādhilī scholar 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī (d. 1556); Sidi 'Alī Ḥarāzim's (d. 1856) record of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijānī's teachings, the *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*; the Persian Sufi Ruzbihan Baqlī's (d. 1209) Qur'an commentary, *'Arā'is al-Bayān*; and the Fez scholar Ahmad ibn Mubārak al-Lamatī's *al-Ibrīz*, a record of the teachings of his master al-Dabbāgh (who was trained by 'Abd Allāh Barnāwī); among others.⁹ Al-hājj Mālik Sy (d. 1922) spread the order and Islamic learning throughout Senegambia during the colonial period; however, it was the Senegalese Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1975) who is most responsible for the current popularization of the Tijānī order in West Africa. The son of a prominent Senegambian Tijānī shaykh, Ibrāhīm Niasse claimed to be the successor of Ahmad al-Tijānī, and the possessor of the *fayda*, a flood of spiritual knowledge and grace, prophesied in Tijani sources to come at the end of time and lead many people to the Sufi order and to direct knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God. Niasse spread his branch of the order throughout West Africa and the Middle East during his lifetime, and his disciples and descendants have since spread the order to Europe; North America; Central, South, and East Africa; India; Indonesia; and Malaysia; the order has claimed tens of millions of disciples worldwide. The Northern Nigerian Tijānī Shaykhs Dahiru Bauchi (b. 1929) and, especially, Ibrāhīm Sālih (b. 1939), both affiliated with Niasse's branch of the order, have traveled widely throughout Northern Nigeria, North Africa, and the Middle East establishing scholarly and spiritual connections with Tijānī scholars in the region and around the world.

The Murīdiyya

Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba (d. 1927) another Senegalese shaykh, rose to prominence in the era of French colonial rule, not only through his charisma, but also through his network of school-village-farm complexes, or *daaras*, which used Bamba's poetry to teach Islamic law, theology, Sufism, ethics, and more. These *daaras* that attracted many student-residents as the old social order and Wolof royal courts collapsed or were radically altered by French colonial conquest; the *daaras* also popularized the practice and teaching of Sufism among both scholars and laypeople.¹⁰ Bamba's popularity led to him being exiled twice by the colonial regime, which only increased his profile and legendary status among his followers. Bamba founded a new Sufi order, the Murīdiyya, which in the early 21st century boasted around four million followers in Senegal and the diaspora, and the city of Touba, which has become Senegal's second-largest city. Bamba's exile is celebrated in an annual pilgrimage to this city, which attracts as many as three million pilgrims.¹¹

In summary, although Sufi orders have been present in West Africa since at least the 16th century, the older, lineage-based structure was the main channel for Sufism in the region up until the late 18th to 20th centuries, when the Qādiriyya and Tijāniyya *tariqas* gained mass followings among both laypeople and scholars, becoming important social institu-

tions in their own right.¹² West African Sufism has always been connected to and influential in international networks of Islamic scholarship and spirituality in places such as Marrakesh, Fez, Tlemcen, Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, Mecca and Medina, Yemen, Baghdad, and even Iran and India. Most of the orders and figures mentioned above were involved with a number of Sufi reform movements around the world from the 16th century onward (or perhaps earlier) that called themselves *Tarīqa Muhammadiyya*. In their various forms, these Sufi movements emphasized direct contact with the spiritual reality of the Prophet, intense individual spiritual cultivation and education focusing on the Qur'an and hadith, as well as strict observance of the *sharī'a* and *sunna*.¹³

Largely because of the efforts of these movements and Sufi orders, according to a 2014 Pew Charitable Trust study, Sufism is more popular in West Africa than in any other surveyed region of the Muslim world, with 92 percent of Senegalese Muslims, 55 percent of Chadian Muslims, and 37 percent of Nigerian and Ghanaian Muslims claiming affiliation to a Sufi order.¹⁴ However, given the fact that many of the most influential Muslim scholars, educators, and political leaders of the precolonial and colonial eras—such as Ahmad Bābā, Muhammad al-Yadālī, Mukhtar al-Kuntī (d. 1811), 'Uthmān ibn Fūdī, al-hājj 'Umar Tal, al-hājj Mālik Sy, Ahmadu Bamba, Ibrāhīm Niasse, and Nāsiru Kabara—were virtually all Sufis, the tradition of Sufism has had a profound influence upon the conceptualization and study of other Islamic disciplines in the region.¹⁵ In his *Kāshif al-Ilbās (Unveiling of confusion)* the Tijānī Senegalese Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse synthesizes many previous discussions of the “science of Sufism” (*ilm al-tasawwuf*) to explain its importance and pre-eminence among the other Islamic sciences:

As for its legal status (*hukm*), al-Ghazālī said: “It is a duty incumbent on every individual Muslim (*fard 'ayn*), since no one is free from fault or sickness, except the Prophets.” Al-Shādhilī said: “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.” . . . There is no science that cannot be dispensed with occasionally except the science of Sufism: one cannot do without it for a single moment.

As for its attribution or relationship (*nisba*) to the other sciences, it is comprehensive of them all as well as their prerequisite, since there is no knowledge and no good deed without genuine dedication to Allah. . . . Outwardly, the religious sciences may exist superficially without Sufism, but they become defective and disreputable. That is why al-Suyūtī said, “In relation to the sciences, Sufism is like the science of rhetoric (*balāgha*) in relation to grammar (*nahu*): it perfects and beautifies them.” According to Shaykh Zarrūq, “the relationship of Sufism to the religion is the relationship of the spirit to the body, because it represents spiritual excellence (*ihsān*).”¹⁶

Given this widespread perspective, in which Sufism was viewed as a necessity, the foundation, essence, and perfection of all the other branches of Islamic knowledge, both Sufi

practice and epistemology had a profound effect upon the broader epistemology and pedagogy of Islamic West Africa.

West African Sufi Epistemology

Drawing upon the Qur'an and hadith, a long tradition of lived practice, oral traditions, and the writings of figures such as al-Ghazālī, the Shādhilī Sufis Ibn 'Atā Allāh al-Iskandarī, Ahmad Zarrūq, and Muhammad al-Yadālī, as well as Tijānī sources such as the *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī* (*Pearls of meanings*) of Sidi 'Alī Ḥarāzīm that details the teachings and sayings of the order's founder, Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijānī, al-hajj 'Umar Tal's *al-Rimāh*, and the works of local Qādirī Sufis such as Sidi Mukhtar al-Kuntī and 'Uthman ibn Fūdī, and others, Sufi epistemology in West Africa (as elsewhere) revolves around the discussion and acquisition of *ma'rifa*, a direct, existential, experiential knowledge of the Divine Reality and the self that is indubitable and transformative. Among other colorful similes, this form of knowledge is likened to taste (*dhawq*) in its immediacy and certainty, and it is contrasted to ordinary conceptual knowledge ('*ilm* or *dirāya*) in al-Ghazālī's classic examples: "How great a difference there is between knowing and causes of health and satiety and your being healthy and sated, and how great a difference there is between your knowing the definition of drunkenness . . . and your being drunk!"¹⁷

This special form of knowledge is not "produced," constructed, or achieved through study, but is rather unveiled, inspired, transmitted, or granted by God through the intermediary of the Prophet and Sufi masters (*shuyūkh*), usually in conjunction with a rigorous regimen of spiritual-ethical-psychological exercises, which typically consists of the strict observance of the *sharī'a* (Islamic law); *sunna* (Prophetic example); the purification of character traits (*akhlāq*) and psychological states (*ahwāl*); keeping company with and obeying a realized master, who typically would prescribe the invocation (*dhikr*) of various litanies (*awrād*)—especially names of God, the *Shahāda* ("There is no god but God"), and prayers upon the Prophet (*salāt 'ala'l-nabī*)—and recitation and contemplation of the Qur'an. As Ibrāhīm Niasse writes about *ma'rifa*:

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.¹⁸

Ma'rifa is often described as the reality of certainty (*haqq al-yaqīn*) in the following Qur'anically inspired schema that describes three levels of certainty: the "lore of certainty" ('*ilm al-yaqīn*), which is likened to hearing about a fire; the "eye of certainty" ('*ayn al-yaqīn*), which is likened to seeing a fire; and "the reality of certainty" (*haqq al-yaqīn*), which is likened to being consumed in the flames of the fire. In this last state, the knower, known, and knowledge are all one as the being and consciousness of the knower is radically transformed. As a popular West African Sufi prayer manual puts it, "Our knowledge

of death is the knowledge of certainty (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*), our seeing someone die is the eye of certainty (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*), and death [itself] is the reality of certainty (*haqq al-yaqīn*), because we have realized (*natahaqqaqu*) it.”¹⁹

The relationship between ritual practice and the acquisition of *ma‘rifa* or spiritual realization is often summarized in reference to the following *hadīth qudsī*:

The Messenger of God said, “And the most beloved things with which My servant draws near to Me, is what I have enjoined upon him; and My servant does not cease drawing near to me through supererogatory acts of worship until I love him. Then when I love him, I become his hearing with which he hears, and his sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he grips, and his leg with which he walks.”²⁰

This *hadīth* outlines one of the most popular triads of Sufism: *sharī‘a*, *tarīqa*, and *haqīqa*, or “the law,” “the way,” and “the reality.” The acts “that have been enjoined” constitute the *sharī‘a*. The supererogatory acts of worship constitute the *tarīqa*, the Sufi path to God; and the state of divine union described at the end of the *hadīth*, the goal of the Sufi path, is the *haqīqa*, the Divine Reality that overtakes the illusion of separation of the knower, known, and knowledge. This state of union is typically known as *fanā fī Llāh* (“annihilation in God”), in which Sufi adepts lose awareness of themselves and everything else except the Divine Reality.

However, this is typically not the end of the path; there remains the “annihilation of annihilation” (*fanā’ al-fanā’*) also known as “subsistence” (*baqā’*), in which the adept “returns” to his or her senses, but with a new perspective, seeing everything in, through, and by God. A Sufi who has attained this station are thus known as an *‘Ārif biLlāh* (“knower by God”) since it is ultimately God who knows through him or her.²¹ In a related schema, disciples at the beginning of the Sufi path are described as being in a state of “separation” (*farq*) in which they “see things and not God,” then they reach the state of “union” (*jam’*) or *fanā’*, in which they “see God and not things,” and finally, they attain the state of the “the union of separation and union” (*jam’ al-farq wa’l-jam’*) or *baqā’*, in which they “see things in God and God in things.” This final state of epistemological and ethical perfection is identified with the Prophet, and as such, conformity to the Prophet’s example is both a means to the achievement of this goal and a manifestation of this state. The ritual invocation (*dhikr*) of prayers upon the prophet and names of God are understood to facilitate the achievement of this ideal existential/epistemological state because of the close connection or even identity between the invocation (*dhikr*) and the one invoked (*madhkūr*). As the Mauritanian Shādhilī Shaykh al-Yadālī explains,

It has been said that the quickest way to enter the Divine Presence is through the remembrance/invocation (*dhikr*) of God because the Name cannot be separated from the Named. Since the invoker (*dhākir*) ceaselessly invokes the name of God, the veils are torn to shreds bit by bit, until the heart comes to witness God directly.²²

As mentioned in “TIJĀNIYYA,” this direct knowledge of God is characterized as both the foundation, spirit, and goal of all the sciences. Contemporary West African Tijānī disciples frequently cite the following saying (often cited as a *ḥadīth qudsī*): “Search for knowledge (*maʿrifa*) of Me before you worship/serve Me. How will he who does not know Me worship/serve me?”²³ to illustrate the primacy of *maʿrifa*. One contemporary West African shaykh and scholar similarly describes *maʿrifa* as

the most important of the religious obligations and the most sublime honor, as it is the foundation of faith and the goal of Islam. The Knowledge of God is the utmost goal in the perfection of the human condition, the highest rank of spiritual realization, and the most cherished ideal. . . . Mankind’s Knowledge (*maʿrifa*) of God is above all other types of knowledge.²⁴

Thus, Sufi epistemology is based upon the primacy of *maʿrifa*, an existential, direct, and certain form of knowledge of God and self, which serves as the foundation, essence, and goal of all other forms of knowledge. Whereas these other forms of knowledge may be acquired through study and memorization, *maʿrifa* is bestowed upon the Sufi adept by God through the intermediaries of the Prophet and Sufi masters, typically after a period of companionship with, service to, and imitation of the latter—including the performance of spiritual exercises and cultivation of a particular, ideal ethical-epistemological orientation. This process of the preparation for the bestowal of *maʿrifa*, of bringing the disciple to spiritual maturity, is often known as *tarbiya* or “rearing of the soul”—the same word also being used for the rearing of small children or animals in other contexts. When considering Islamic education in West Africa, it is important to remember that many, if not most, students and teachers are or were involved in Sufi practices and networks to one degree or another, and as such, the Sufi epistemology and pedagogy sketched above influences both the study and teaching of other disciplines. To give one particularly blatant example, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse wrote, “I teach students in grammar lessons: the grammarians say ‘In reality the subject of the verb (*al-fāʿil*) is God.’ Metaphorically, the one who gives existence to the action, and technically, the one on whom the action relies completely, all of these are God.”²⁵

Kalām

The discipline of theology or *kalām* (often known in local works as *ʿilm al-tawhīd*, “the science of divine unity,” *usūl al-dīn*, “roots of the religion,” or *ʿaqīda*, “creed”) was also heavily influenced by Sufism and formed part of the trivium of the “Sciences of Religion” (*ʿulūm al-dīn*): *tawhīd-fiqh-tasawwuf* (“belief-law-Sufism”), which along with Qurʾan schools formed the backbone of Islamic education in the region. This trivium takes its structure from the famous ḥadīth of Gabriel in which the Prophet defined *Imān* (“belief/faith”) as believing in “God, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, and His Messengers, the Last Day, and Divine Providence;” *Islām* (“submission”) as testifying to the Oneness of God and the Messengerhood of the Prophet Muhammad, praying the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*), giving the prescribed alms (*ṣakāt*), fasting during the month of Ramadān,

and performing the pilgrimage (*hājj*) to Mecca if one is able; and *Ihsān* (excellence) as “worshipping God as if you see Him, for if you do not see him, He sees you.” Numerous works identify *Ihsān* with Sufism, *Islām* with jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and *Imān* with theology (*kalām*), often described as a rational exposition and defense of these articles of belief. Indeed, this hadith provides the organizing principle for numerous works popular in the region.²⁶

Young students and new converts in the region typically first studied basic primers of the Ash‘arī creed, typically derived from the celebrated Sufi Muhammad ibn Yūsuf al-Sanūsī’s (d. 1486) influential *‘Aqīdat ahl al-tawhīd al-Sughrā* (*The lesser creed of the people of divine unity*), also known as *Umm al-Barāhīn* (*The mother of proofs*).²⁷ Some of these works such as the Fulfulde *kabbe* were originally composed in local languages, whereas others were and are taught in Arabic with oral commentaries in West African languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Bamana, and Wolof.²⁸ These works typically revolve around the Avicennan modal distinction between the necessary, contingent/possible, and impossible applied to the six articles of belief mentioned in the hadith above: God, His Messengers, His Angels, His Books, Death and Resurrection, and Divine Providence, or simply to the two subjects of the testimony of faith (*shahāda*): God and His Messengers. For example, al-Sanūsī’s *Lesser Creed* begins:

Know that rational judgement (*hukm*) consists of three parts: the necessary, the impossible, and the possible. The necessary is that which cannot be conceived by the intellect as not existing. The impossible is that which cannot be conceived by the intellect as existing. The possible are those things whose existence or non-existence is acceptable to the intellect. And it is incumbent upon every legally responsible person (*mukallaf*) to know what is necessary, impossible, or possible, with respect to our Master, glorious and mighty [God]. Likewise, it is incumbent to know the same with respect to the Messengers, blessings and peace be upon them.²⁹

The work goes on to lay out twenty necessary attributes of God and twenty corresponding impossible attributes, as well as the countless possible attributes and actions of God. Then it offers proofs for the necessity, impossibility, and possibility of these attributes before moving on to do the same for three necessary, three impossible, and several possible attributes of the Messengers of God. Al-Sanūsī and some of his commentators seem to have held the rather extreme view that unless one could verify through rational proof these basic articles of faith, one’s belief was nothing more than unacceptable blind imitation (*taqlīd*), and thus one was not a true believer. ‘Uthman ibn Fūdī argued against this tendency, asserting that verification through rational proof was necessary only for an elite and that “for the common people, belief in these foundations stands in the place of knowledge for the spiritually elite.”³⁰

Many scholars, including ‘Uthmān ibn Fūdī, followed al-Suyūtī dividing the science of theology (*tawhīd/kalām*) into two parts: (a) the foundations of religion (*usūl al-dīn*)—the basic articles of belief that, legally, form a part of every individual Muslim’s individual oblig-

ations (*furūd al-‘ayn*)—and (b) the discipline of theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*)—the technical, scholastic discipline that involves the rational investigation into different doctrines and arguments, distinguishing the true from the false, proving the former and refuting the latter.³¹ Legally, this discipline is considered a collective obligation (*fard al-kifāya*)—in a given region or community, at least one person is obliged to master this subject, and this person’s mastery absolves others of the necessity of undertaking it.

Generally, proofs and arguments in West African *kalām* texts were (and are) based on the synthesis of Aristotelian syllogistic logic as developed and modified by the Islamic tradition (*mantiq*) and the hermeneutics of the Qur’an and hadīth, which characterizes the post-Ghazālī Ash‘arī tradition that is dominant in the region, as well as appeals to the authority of the opinions of respected Ash‘arī scholars.

Falsafa/Hikma

As can be seen in al-Sanūsī’s adoption of Ibn Sīnā’s (d. 1037) distinction of the necessary, impossible, and contingent modes of existence, the discipline of *kalām* was influenced not only by Sufism, but also by the discipline of Islamic Philosophy (*falsafa*). It should be noted that the English term “philosophy” is not coextensive with the Arabic *falsafa*, but rather the disciplines of *usūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), *kalām* (theology), *tasawwuf* (Sufism), *mantiq* (logic), *tafsīr* (Qur’anic hermeneutics), as well as certain aspects of the Islamic linguistic, mathematical, and natural sciences also all contain discussions that would be considered “philosophical” in the contemporary English usage. *Falsafa* designates a particular discipline and tradition that developed from the adoption and synthesis of Greco-Roman Peripatetic, Neoplatonic, Pythagorean, Stoic, and Hermetic (as well as certain pre-Islamic Persian and Indian) traditions (largely based on the translations of philosophical texts from Greek and Syriac into Arabic) into the broader Islamic tradition. Al-Kindī (d. 873), the first great Muslim peripatetic philosopher, defined *falsafa* as “the knowledge of the reality of things within man’s possibility, because the philosopher’s end in his theoretical knowledge is to gain truth and in his practical knowledge to behave in accordance with truth.”³² The proponents of this tradition often referred to it by the Qur’anic term *hikma* (wisdom), as in the following definition of Ibn Sīnā, perhaps the tradition’s greatest and most influential author: “*Hikma* is the perfecting of the human soul through the conceptualization of things and the judgment of theoretical and practical truths to the measure of human capability.”³³ As these definitions indicate, *falsafa* included both a theoretical and a practical dimension, combining philosophical contemplation, rational demonstration, and ethical cultivation to achieve the goal of human perfection and felicity (*sa‘āda*).

This is so because, as Ibn Sīnā argues, mankind’s defining trait is the ‘*aql*’ or “intellect,” and as such, our *raison d’être* and perfection lies in the perfection of this faculty, which is itself the last link in a chain of Divine Intellects going back to God, the One Necessary Being.³⁴ The potential of the intellect (‘*aql*’) to achieve the blissful state of divine contemplation and knowledge that is the goal of human existence is actualized through the acquisi-

tion of knowledge, and, since the intellect is an immaterial substance, through ascetic exercises, discipline, and a balancing of the passions and bodily humors, which can cloud and weaken the functioning of the intellect. This perspective was not limited to the proponents of *falsafa*, but was also taken up by thinkers such as Ibn Khaldūn, who writes in his *Muqaddima*, “In his first condition, before he has attained discernment, man is simply matter, in as much as he is ignorant of all knowledge. He reaches the perfection of his form through knowledge, which he acquires through his own organs. Thus, his human essence reaches perfection.”³⁵ Moreover, a treatise by Usman dan Fodio’s younger brother, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Fūdī, titled *Tahdhīb al-Insān min Khisāl al-Insān (Refinement of man against the traits of Satan)* creatively reworks and summarizes many ideas from Ibn Miskawayh’s (d. 1030) similarly titled treatise on philosophical ethics, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq wa’l-tathīr al-a’rāq (The refinement of morals and the cleansing of character)*.³⁶

Following the earlier Islamic philosopher al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā describes four levels of the intellect’s potential development through proper training: (a) the material intellect (*‘aql hayūlānī*), which is shared by all mankind and is simply the potential to acquire knowledge from the senses and reason; (b) the dispositional intellect (*‘aql bi’l-malaka*), which is the level of the intellect attained when one has mastered the basic rules of knowledge and correct thinking and become habituated to putting them into practice; (c) the actual intellect (*‘aql bi’l-fi’l*), in which the intellect can arrive at knowledge by itself and generate its own intellectual activity; and finally, if one continues to train the intellect, one can reach the highest stage (excluding the level of the prophets, who, because of their perfection of their nature, have even greater intellectual possibilities), (d) the acquired intellect (*al-‘aql al-mustafād*), in which the intellect perfectly mirrors the higher intelligible world, conjoining with the Universal or Active Intellect (*al-‘aql al-fa’āl*), the source and home of all intelligibles and through whom all human knowledge is received by Divine outpouring (*al-fayd al-ilāhī*).

For Ibn Sīnā, the Prophets have a nature characterized by a perfect clarity of consciousness, a perfect imagination, and the power of making “external matter obey [them] even as the bodies of other men obey their commands,” which leads to a state of consciousness called the “sacred intellect” (*al-‘aql al-qudsī*), which receives all knowledge, directly and without human instruction, from the Active Intellect.³⁷ The Prophet’s perfect imagination also gives perfect sensible and verbal form to these intelligible realities, which he can communicate to others in the form of stories, parables, metaphors, and rituals to guide the development of their intellects. Herein lies the import of the rituals of religious practice from the perspective of *falsafa*: they promote and support the development of the intellect in imitation of the Prophetic model of perfect intellection.

After the 13th century, the ideas, arguments, and terminology of works of theology (*kalām*), Sufism (*tasawwuf*), and *falsafa* had influenced each other so much that some scholars such as Ibn Khaldūn noted that it had become difficult to classify many works as belonging to one discipline or the other.³⁸ In the West African context, this dynamic is most clearly seen in the more advanced works of *kalām* and their commentaries, the philosophical Sufi works of Ahmad al-Tijānī, al-hājj ‘Umar Tal, the Kunta, the Sokoto

scholars, and others, as well as the theoretical works on the occult sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-gharība*), many of which draw on Islamic receptions of neopythagorean, hermetic, and Neoplatonic philosophical traditions such as those found in the “Epistles of the Brethren of Purity” (*Rasāʾil ikhwān al-safāʾ*) and Ibn Sīnā’s oeuvre.³⁹ Although the discipline of *falsafa/hikma* continued to thrive as a separate discipline in the Eastern Muslim lands (in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires) until the 18th century or even 19th century (and in Shiʿite Iran and Iraq, through the early 21st century), *falsafa* seems to have ceased to exist as an independent discipline in the Western Islamic lands, continuing instead within the disciplines of *kalām*, Sufism, and certain esoteric sciences.⁴⁰ The *falsafa* tradition’s modifications of Aristotelian logic, especially by Ibn Sīnā, found a welcome home among theologians (*mutakallimūn*), jurists, and Sufis who adopted it as an auxiliary science to their own disciplines, so that logic (*mantiq*) became an important discipline of its own and, along with the linguistic sciences, became an important prerequisite for, or preparatory discussion in, the disciplines of *kalām* and *fiqh*.

Many prominent Ashʿarī theologians whose works were studied in West Africa such as al-Ghazālī, al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390), al-Maghīlī, al-Sanūsī, al-Akhdarī (d. 1585), and the Moroccan al-Yūsī (d. 1691) were also accomplished logicians who wrote works on the subject and were deeply versed in the arguments and works of *falsafa*, as well as being Sufis (or at least sympathetic to Sufism, in the case of al-Taftāzānī). Moreover, the works of Islamic philosophers on education and the classification of the sciences, especially al-Fārābī’s, were read, quoted, and influential throughout the Islamic world, and al-Fārābī’s dictum that “education combines knowledge and virtuous behavior; it is happiness and goodness at the same time” was characteristic of Islamic conceptions of education even in regions where *falsafa* was not widely taught.⁴¹

Traditional Islamic Education in West Africa: The Mālikī-Ashʿarī-Sufi Complex

Until the 20th century, Islamic scholarship and education in West Africa was characterized by what Rüdiger Seesemann has termed the “Mālikī-Ashʿarī-Sufi complex,” in which the traditions of Mālikī *fiqh*, Ashʿarī *kalām*, and various forms of Sufism (typically Qādirī or Tijānī) governed and set the terms of the discussion and practice of the three respective dimensions discussed in the hadith of Gabriel: *Islām (fiqh)*, *Imān (kalām)*, and *Ihsān* (Sufism).⁴² However, before students embarked on the study of the texts of these disciplines, they would begin their formal education at Qurʾan school, where they would first memorize the last short few suras of the Qurʾan orally, and then learn the Arabic alphabet in order to read, recite, and memorize the rest of the Qurʾan in both its written and oral forms (although in some places the Qurʾan is memorized in its entirety orally before it is memorized again with its written form). However, as Rudolph Ware has compellingly argued, Qurʾanic education involved far more than mere memorization and Arabic literacy; rather, through its various disciplines and the embodied presence of the ethical exemplar of the Qurʾan teacher, it sought to transform its students into vessels worthy and capable

of containing the Sacred Word of God—to make them “walking Qur’ans,” as the Prophet’s wife ‘Ā’isha once called him.⁴³

Although fees at these traditional Qur’an schools were typically not set, students offered themselves and their service (*khidma*) to the Qur’an teacher—in rural areas by working in fields, tending crops or cattle, and in urban areas by trading, doing housework, and begging—to provide food and financial support for the Qur’an school, which otherwise was supported by gifts to the teacher, the teacher’s own property or wealth, and the work of the teacher and students in the “prayer economy.”⁴⁴ These Qur’an schools were intended to build character and inculcate particular intellectual, ethical, and spiritual dispositions in their students, even as the students committed to memory a long text (whose recitation in its entirety could take between fifteen to forty hours)—or portions thereof—that they would ideally spend the rest of their lives contemplating and striving to understand. Generally, there is no set pace for this process; a student’s progress would depend on his or her natural aptitude, available time, and interest, although students who make little or no progress often face the ridicule or chiding of their teachers and fellow students.

A few treatises have been written on proper pedagogy for Qur’an school instructors, most prominently that of the North African Mālikī scholar Ibn Sahnūn (d. 854) of Kairouan (present-day Tunisia). His *Kitāb Adab al-mu’allimīn* (*Rules of conduct for teachers*), which may be the first such educational treatise, consists of ten chapters, the first four of which describe the process and explain the importance of Qur’anic education and consist almost entirely of Prophetic traditions and commentaries on them, whereas the next six chapters are presented as a set of questions and answers on various aspects of teaching such as final examinations, teacher wages, extra-Qur’anic curricula, and teaching boys and girls together.⁴⁵ Ibn Sahnūn’s work deals extensively with questions of discipline and physical punishment, advocating light punishment that does not harm the students and/or make them hate their studies. His work also encourages the teacher to challenge the students intellectually by devising competitive games for them and emphasizes that modesty, patience, and a love of children are necessary qualifications to be a Qur’an school teacher, as teachers must not only teach students the precise pronunciation, reading, and orthography of the Qur’an but must also teach their charges the basic rituals of worship (ablution and prayer) as well as good *adab* (manners or habitus). Ibn Sahnūn also encourages Qur’an school teachers to instruct their students in Arabic language and grammar, arithmetic, writing, Arabic poetry and proverbs, history of the early Arabs, the early Muslim community and their battles, and sermons (should students have interest in them).⁴⁶ As several scholars have noted, the general scheme described in Ibn Sahnūn’s work appears to have been practiced in Qur’anic schools in West Africa for over a thousand years, including the early 21st century.⁴⁷

As students advance in this process of memorization, they could also begin the next phase of their education: the elementary study of the Islamic sciences. This study usually took the form of the memorization and/or study of a text (typically in verse form) on a particular subject in a group of other students with a teacher, who would read, translate, and comment on the text in question. Such a group would be called a *dawla* or *majlis*, and its

pace would typically be set by the teacher who would continue until he (or she, although typically he) was satisfied that some of his students had mastered the subject of the text and could read it on their own. Such mastery was often recognized by the granting of an *ijāza*, a diploma or license, given by the teacher to the student, authorizing him or her to teach the text to others. This *ijāza* might have been a written document or an oral testimony in front of witnesses, often accompanied by a kind of celebratory ceremony, such as putting a turban on the student.

Students typically begin by studying basic texts of theology (*tawhīd/kalām*), such as a versification or adaptation of al-Sanūsī's *'aqīda al-Sughra*, or of *fiqh* (Islamic law)—usually limited to the basic law governing the performance of basic rituals of worship such as ablution, prayer, and fasting—such as al-Akhḍarī's *Mukhtasar* and al-'Ashmāwī's (fl. 16th century) *al-Muqaddima*, or sometimes primers that combined both (such as Ibn 'Ashir's poem *al-Murshid al-Mu'īn*).⁴⁸ These basic texts were typically dense poems or concise prose texts that were often memorized and studied with an oral commentary by a teacher in a local language—which itself could be based on a written, Arabic commentary on the original poem or text. In many regions in West Africa, it was traditional to begin with *tawhīd*, emphasizing the standard Ash'arī position of primacy of knowledge: the logic is that theoretically, a student should know who God is and why he or she could have confidence in the Prophet and the Qur'an before worshipping him in the ways attributed to the Prophet and the Qur'an—but in other areas, *fiqh* was the primary, and sometimes the only, subject studied.⁴⁹

Students would also typically study basic works of Arabic grammar (*nahu*), such as the popular 14th-century poem *al-Ajrummiya*, and morphology (*sarf*), such as the *Lāmiyyat al-Af'āl* of the Andalusian Ibn Mālik (d. 1273), with oral and/or written commentaries. These works and others would give students the linguistic skills needed for more advanced studies of Arabic language and literature (*lughā*), itself a key to more advanced studies of all other disciplines. For the intellectual (*'aqlī*) sciences (such as *'ilm al-kalām*), logic also played a similar preparatory role, with the *'aqīda* section of Ibn 'Ashir's *Murshid al-Mu'īn* serving as the typical introduction to the subject. Al-Akhḍarī's *al-Sullam al-Murawnaq fī 'Ilm al-Mantiq* (*The ornamented ladder in the science of logic*)—a versification of al-Abhari's (d. 1265) *Kitāb al-Isaghūjī fī Mantiq* (a commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*)—was a common intermediate text, and al-Sanūsī's *al-Mukhtasar* with the author's own commentary and/or al-Yūsī's supracommentary served as a more advanced text. Young students also typically learned basic mathematics, and more advanced mathematical techniques and texts were often taught as an auxiliary to *fiqh* studies of inheritance and trade.

More-advanced students would study advanced texts of Mālikī *fiqh*—such as the *Risāla* of al-Qayrawānī (d. 996) and the celebrated *Mukhtasar* of Khalīl ibn Ishāq al-Jundī (d. 1374)—and of *usūl al-fiqh*, such as al-Suyūtī's *Kawkab al-sāti'*—a versification of al-Subkī's (d. 1370) *Jam' al-jawāmi'*—or al-Juwaynī's (d. 1085) *al-Waraqāt*. These more advanced texts were often—but not always—memorized and studied more than once with more than one teacher, until the students were satisfied with their own understanding of the many difficult topics and issues in these texts. Advanced students would also study more advanced

works of *kalām*, Arabic grammar and rhetoric, *hadīth* collections and the sciences of critical *hadīth* transmission, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad (*sīra*), devotional poetry in praise of the Prophet (*madh*), as well as Arabic prosody, classical poetry, literature, and works of Sufism. Particularly gifted students would also begin to teach those texts and subjects that they had mastered, often composing their own commentaries or new didactic works.

These studies were largely self-directed—that is, students chose the texts and teachers with whom they wanted to study, often traveling to study with a particularly renowned teacher or to gain mastery of a text or subject not taught in their vicinity. Students had to obtain the teacher’s permission to join a *majlis* or class session, especially those on more advanced texts. Elementary class sessions were typically held in or near the Qur’an school for children, often in the compound of the teacher’s home, and/or in mosques and Sufi centers (*zawāya*) for adults. A teacher’s home compound could serve at once as schoolyard, Sufi center, and mosque. Students would typically study one or a few texts at a time, sometimes studying the same text multiple times with different teachers. Although it seems to be relatively rare to restudy an elementary text once completed (except for teaching purposes), more advanced texts of language, theology, or law such as the *Mukhtasar* of Khalīl, works of devotional poetry, Sufism, and especially works on the virtues (*shamā’il*), biography (*sīra*), and traditions (*hadīth*) of the Prophet, and the Qur’an seem to have been studied and restudied continuously.

Typically, the final subject studied by students in this system was *tafsīr*, or Qur’anic interpretation, which would in a sense bring their trajectory full circle, as the students would apply all of their knowledge of the various Islamic sciences they had mastered to the Qur’an itself, which is understood to be the source and synthesis of all forms of Islamic knowledge. Usually, only the most advanced scholars would produce works of *tafsīr* or perform public *tafsīr* sessions, often held during the month of Ramadān—the month in which the Qur’an was first revealed.⁵⁰ Mention must also be made of the occult sciences or science of “secrets” (*‘ilm al-asrār*)—such as the science of letters (*‘ilm al-hurūf*) of magic squares (*‘ilm al-awfāq*).⁵¹ These sciences were also studied through texts with a teacher, who would often encourage students to verify the efficacy of these secrets empirically for themselves, but because of the potentially dangerous and/or distracting nature of this knowledge for making talismans, charms, and the like, some of these texts are encoded, such that the correct formula or means of operation of a given talisman or “secret” (*sirr*) can only be discerned with a key from the oral commentary tradition (such as the substitution of the letter *b* for every letter *f* or the reversal of numerals in the numbers of a given formula). Other texts or manuals in these sciences are carefully guarded and only shared with a teacher’s closest disciples and family members, whereas others are transmitted exclusively orally. Although many of these “secrets” (*asrār*) are believed to work independent of such transmission, the efficacy for some of these “secrets” is believed to lie in their authorization (*idhn*) from a qualified possessor. Similarly, the transmission and practice of Sufi prayers, litanies, practices (some of which overlap significantly with these occult sciences), typically takes place in-person (or in dreams or waking

visions) independent of textual study, and the efficacy of these practices is understood to be dependent upon their transmission from an authorized representative of the tradition.

The *Sanad* Paradigm

These subjects and texts were taught and studied in the context of what Seesemann has called the “*sanad* paradigm,” after the chains of transmission (*asanīd*; singular, *isnād* or *sanad*), through which knowledge and texts were transmitted in traditional Islamic learning circles (*majālis*) around the world. Students would typically study a text with someone who had studied it with and was granted an *ijāza* by someone else who had studied with and been granted an *ijāza* by someone else, going back to the author of the text in question. In this *sanad* paradigm, as William A. Graham writes, “truth does not reside in documents, however authentic, ancient, or well preserved, but in authentic human beings and their personal connections with one another.”⁵² Students would rarely pick up a book and study it on their own, even with a written commentary. In the words of the Andalusian Mālikī scholar al-Shātībī (d. 1388), “Knowledge was in the chests of men, then it was transferred to books, with its keys in the hands of men.”⁵³ Or as Amadou Hampâté Bâ (d. 1991), a Malian Tijani scholar, wrote, “Writing is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is the photographing of knowledge, but it is not knowledge itself. Knowledge is a light that is within man. It is the heritage of all the ancestors knew and have transmitted to us as seed, just as the mature baobab is contained in its seed.”⁵⁴ In this epistemological paradigm, knowledge is not merely a set of disembodied “facts” or “information,” but is rather identified with a mode of being; there is no knowledge without a knower, and to know more is to “be” more.⁵⁵ Acquiring this information or “knowledge” without the concomitant practice and ethical disposition was viewed as being incomplete and even dangerous. As Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba wrote in his didactic poems, paraphrasing *hadīth* to emphasize the necessity of the union of knowledge, practice, and virtue,

Everyone who acts without knowledge is like a speck of dust in the wind
And he who acquires knowledge without practicing it is a loaded donkey.⁵⁶

...

Is it useful for the hungry to hold a sickle without ever farming in the fields?
Is it useful for the thirsty to have a rope without ever using it to draw water?

...

If your progress in knowledge does not lead to spiritual growth and detachment from worldly things

You are regressing and harming yourself because you are distancing yourself from God Most High. Consider the saying of the Messenger of God

The peace and blessings of God be on him, his family, and his noble companions:
“Certainly going hunting without a weapon is the action of ignorant fools.”

...

So you should never go hunting without carrying weapons, well-sharpened,
nor take up these weapons without going hunting

It is necessary to both take up weapons and go hunting, and do your best to attain your goal

Which is what? To be saved from the danger of these fatal illusions.

...

Know that learning accompanied by action constitutes an illusion when it is attached to vices.⁵⁷

This orientation is not a uniquely West African phenomenon; as Mālik ibn Anas (d. 795) the Medina-based founder of the Mālikī school of jurisprudence (now dominant in West Africa), reportedly said, “Knowledge should only be acquired from one who has memorized [the text], who has himself kept company with the scholars, who has put his knowledge into practice, and who possesses piety.”⁵⁸ The emphasis on memorization, which has persisted in traditional West African learning circles (*majālis*), even after paper and cheap printed and digital editions of texts have become widely available, can be explained by this orientation toward the internalization and embodiment of knowledge; as Ware argues, “Memorization of texts allowed for a personal possession of the Word in the body, without requiring recourse to a written source external to the self. The people were the books.”⁵⁹ Or in the celebrated dictum of Amadou Hampâté Bâ, “When an old man dies, it’s a library burning down.”⁶⁰

Thus Seesemann concludes, “Becoming attached to the master’s *sanad* is not limited to discursive means of knowledge transmission but also implies the acquisition of the required habitus (*adab*), learned through *mulāzama*—that is, spending extensive periods of time in the company of the master.”⁶¹ In this way, the mastery of a text of logic or *fiqh* would often involve the memorization of the text (or, more typically, a versified form of it), attending numerous lectures in which the teacher would read and comment upon the text, explain its meanings and answer questions, numerous study and review sessions with peers, and extensive periods of keeping company with, ritual practice alongside, and service of the teacher, who would embody the example of putting the knowledge of the text into practice. Thus, in their intellectual autobiographies, West African scholars such as Ahmad Bābā of Timbuktu and ‘Abd Allāh ibn Fūdī list not only the texts they studied but with whom they studied them. Although this *sanad* paradigm was dominant throughout the premodern Muslim world, Ibn Khaldūn notes that Islamic education in North and West Africa was characterized by its greater emphasis on memorization than in the central and eastern lands of the Muslim world.⁶² These pedagogical practices emerge from an epistemology with deep roots in the Islamic tradition and that is perhaps elaborated most explicitly in the disciplines of *falsafa/hikma* (philosophy) and *tasawwuf* (Sufism).

The Traditional Epistemology

The Qur’an explicitly connects knowledge with reverence toward God: “*revere God, and God will teach you, God knows everything*” (2:282); “*only the knowledgeable among His servants fear God*” (35:28); “*what of one who is devoutly obedient during the watches of the night, prostrating and standing [in prayer], wary of the Hereafter and hoping for the Mercy of his Lord? Say: ‘Are those who know and those who do not know equal?’ Only the possessors of intellect reflect*” (39:9). The Qur’an also describes human knowledge as being granted or taught by God, who “*taught man that which he knew not*” (19:5). Part of

the famous “throne Verse” reads, “*they do not encompass anything of His knowledge save what He wills*” (2:255), and verse 269 of the same sura reads, “*He [God] grants wisdom to whomsoever He will. And whoever is granted wisdom has been granted much good. Yet none remember save the possessors of intellect.*”⁶³ A famous poem (oft quoted in West African sources) of Imām al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820, Cairo), founder of the Shāfi‘ī school of law, connects all of these dimensions:

I complained to Wakī‘ [al-Shāfi‘ī’s teacher] of the weakness of my memory
And he advised me to leave aside disobedience
He told me that knowledge is a light
And God does not give light to the disobedient.⁶⁴

That is, knowledge is only granted by God to those who are prepared or qualified for it, and this preparation or qualification is identified as existential conformity to the knowledge itself—obeying the *sharī‘a* and following the example of the Prophet. To paraphrase a Sufi adage, “Only when the ring-setting has been properly shaped can it hold the gemstone.” In the context of Sufism, this knowledge or wisdom is identified with the human being’s original nature (*fitra*) and the character of the Prophet, so the Qur’anic emphasis on “remembrance” functions as a kind of Platonic *anamnesis*, as William Chittick explains:

The Quran speaks of God as “the Praiseworthy” (*al-Hamīd*), the implication being that no one else is truly deserving of praise. If the Quran calls the Prophet both “Muhammad” [the Praised One] and “Ahmad” [the Most Praiseworthy], this is because his character conforms to God’s “character,” which is to say that his “character was the Quran,” God’s Speech and Self-Expression. . . .

Imitating the Prophet can lead to the soul’s primordial nature (*fitrah*), created in God’s image or form (*sūrah*) [a reference to a hadith]. Hence Sufis commonly spoke of the goal as “coming to be characterized by the character traits of God” (*takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*), and they understood that the Prophet’s “exalted character” [*khuluqun ‘azīm* (68:4)] derived precisely from his being characterized by the entire range of Divine Names and Attributes, his full realization of the reality of the Real. . . . The fact that Sufis have focused their attention on spiritual transformation helps explain their dedication to what one scholar has called the “Quranization of memory.” This meant not only that they, like other Muslims, put great stock in the memorization and recitation of Quran and invocation of Divine Names contained in the Quran, but also that they voiced their teachings in Quranic terminology and kept in mind that the purpose of all their efforts was to assimilate the Divine Word. Always the goal was for the soul to be transmuted into Divine Light, the living reality of God’s Self-Expression.⁶⁵

This assimilation to the “beautiful model” of the Prophet is accomplished through obeying, keeping company and studying with the Sufi masters, who have themselves already

been transformed and transmuted into “Walking Qur’ans,” like so many magnetized links in a chain.

Similarly, from the perspective of *falsafa*, the teacher who has a achieved actual intellect serves as a kind of embodiment of the Active or Universal Intellect (which is most clearly reflected in the “sacred intellect” of the Prophet), and close and prolonged contact studying with and imitating such a teacher leads the student’s intellect from potentiality to actuality, just as prolonged contact with a hot coal coaxes flame from wood.

In this paradigm, the content of Islamic knowledge is meant to shape and transform its container, assimilating it to itself, even as the container gives the content its own “color.” Without this transmutation, the container cannot hold the content. As the Algerian Sufi Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawī (d. 1934), a prominent product of this *sanad* paradigm, put it poetically, “Unless man melts like snow in the hands of God, truth will melt in his hands.”⁶⁶ This is true not only of Islamic intellectual traditions but of other premodern spiritual traditions, as Michel Foucault succinctly notes:

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.⁶⁷

The 20th Century: Colonial and Salafi Interventions

This modern approach to knowledge seems to have first entered West Africa with the arrival of Western European (typically missionary) education in the region’s coastal enclaves in the 19th century. One of the first such institutions, Fourah Bay College, was established in 1826 in Freetown, Sierra Leone, for “the purpose of training the children of freed African slaves as schoolmasters, catechists, and clergymen.”⁶⁸ After the colonial conquest and “scramble for Africa” of the early 20th century, British and French colonial administrators were faced with the problem of how to maintain control and govern the vast region of West Africa, whose climate, inhospitable terrain, tropical diseases, and vast distances posed significant difficulties. For example, in British Nigeria, there were 1,315 European officials governing a population of twenty million inhabitants, whereas in French West Africa, there were 3,660 French officials for a population of fifteen million.⁶⁹ The solution was to recruit and train African subjects to work in the colonial administration, and to quell immediately and harshly any potentially serious threats to European imperial hegemony. Thus, both the British and French sought to isolate their sub-Saharan Muslim subjects from those in North Africa in order to curtail trans-Saharan and/or pan-Islamic movements of solidarity that were the colonial administrations’ worst nightmare.

As a result, certain trans-Saharan Sufi orders and networks such as the Sanūsī order in the Central Sahara and certain branches of the Qādirī and Tijānī orders as well as various Messianic Mahdist movements were explicitly monitored and targeted. However, the colonial officials not only used the stick but also offered the carrot of considerable autonomy, religious freedom, and even support to those Muslim leaders and communities who did not explicitly challenge European colonial rule.

Nevertheless, it was education that combined the disciplining force of the stick with the carrot's promise of new knowledge, career advancement, and prosperity that was to be the colonial administrations' most enduring legacy and best means of forming modern, colonial subjects.

Colonial Schools

The colonial and missionary schools introduced a whole new administrative, pedagogical, and disciplinary apparatus to the educational landscape of West Africa, initiating students into modern Western European languages, literatures, worldviews, and epistemologies. Whereas traditional Islamic education in the region was based on the *sanad* paradigm outlined above, structured by individual relationships between teachers and students, who would be granted licenses to teach individual texts of a relatively limited, flexible, curriculum that was memorized, recited, read, and reread, the modern schools were governed by a standardized bureaucratic administration, structured around multisubject "grades" (of students of the same age), general diplomas, and salaried teachers, who taught a much more diverse curriculum of many more texts that were approached in a very different way. Although many colonial schools, especially the missionary schools, had classes on "religion," the curriculum was dominated by "secular" subjects such as language, math, science, history, and geography, and religious devotion and piety were understood to be separate from learning and educational attainment. In contrast, the classical Islamic curriculum was dominated by the religious sciences, and even disciplines such as the natural sciences, language, and mathematics were taught through a "religious" paradigm in which this knowledge was seen as a sacred inquiry into the "signs of God" (*ayāt Allāh*) and aids to understand the cosmic and scriptural "speech of God."⁷⁰ Moreover, religious devotion and piety was integral to education, understood as being necessary for true understanding.

As Ousmane Kane explains, the responses of West African Muslims to this introduction of Western education can roughly be grouped into three categories: the first response was to have children educated primarily in Western schools in European languages while arranging for them to have some parallel instruction in the traditional Islamic system—such as attending a few hours of Qur'an school over the weekends; the second response was the creation of hybrid schools (called Islamiyya schools in Northern Nigeria, Franco-Arabe schools in Senegal, and *médersas* in Mali and Senegal) that adopted Western administrative structures and pedagogies to teach students a modern curriculum alongside classes on Islamic subjects—using Arabic or Arabic and the colonial language as the lan-

guages of instruction; and the third response was the avoidance or rejection of the colonial school in favor of the traditional model of Arabic- and African-language education, and was typically the case in remote areas and enclaves of Islamic scholars (such as the rural areas of Mauritania or towns like Touba).⁷¹

The hybrid schools of the second response were initially founded by colonial officials to train Muslim religious leaders who could serve in the colonial administration and, in the words of a governor of the French Soudan, “attract to French culture the young persons of a milieu which is closed to the influence of France using the lure of their own traditional culture, and . . . domesticate these young people, and even the entire population, and familiarize them with the institution of French education.”⁷² Despite these original objectives, this hybrid model was later copied by private “Muslim activists who used these schools to promote their own agendas, and challenge colonial authority.”⁷³ For example, one of the most influential of these hybrid schools, the Northern Province Law School (later renamed as the School for Arabic Studies) was founded in 1934 by Abdullahi Bayero, the emir of Kano, to teach students a modern curriculum in English and Arabic. This school trained a number of important Muslim politicians, administrators, and elites in colonial northern Nigeria, including Abubakar Gumi (d. 1992), the former grand qadi (judge) of post-independence northern Nigeria, and the founder of the region’s largest Salafi reform movement, *Yan Izala*.

Salafi and Reform Movements

The other main challenge to the paradigm of traditional Islamic education in West Africa came from reform movements beginning in the mid-20th century, which primarily had their roots in the Arabian peninsula and Egypt. The Wahhābī reform movement emerged under the leadership of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), who led aggressive campaigns against the traditional Muslim scholarly and spiritual practices of his time, arguing that the former were crippled by *taqlīd* (blind following of authority) and the latter compromised by *bid‘a* (heretical innovation) leading to the great sin of *shirk* (setting up partners alongside God). Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s solution was a “return” to the “pure” practice of the first generations of Muslims (the *salāf*) through a “back to the scripture” paradigm, which advocated basing legal and theological opinions on a direct examination of the “plain meaning” of Qur’an and hadith, not by reference to the centuries-old traditions of interpretation, which were, he argued, compromised by the accretion of errors and heretical beliefs.⁷⁴ Other movements in Yemen and India, which collectively became known as *Salafī*, made similar claims, arguing against the elitism of the Sufi and scholarly establishments, and that the masses could interpret the Qur’an and Sunna for themselves without the intermediaries of scholars or Sufi shaykhs, as was the case in the early generations of the Muslim community (the *salaf*).⁷⁵ Seesemann has characterized this as a *dalīl* (scriptural evidence)-based paradigm in contrast to the *sanad*-based paradigm outlined in “SANAD PARADIGM,” whereas Louis Brenner has characterized this as a “rationalist” episteme in contrast to the “esoteric” episteme of the older *sanad* paradigm.

The modernist reform movement led by the Egyptian Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and his student Rashīd Ridā (d. 1935), who was heavily influenced by the Salafi movement, also charged the traditional Islamic educational paradigm with *taqlīd*, blaming its supposedly moribund intellectual culture for the Muslim world “falling behind” the West, and advocating for a program of modernization, Westernization, and “rationalization” that would return Muslims to political, intellectual, and technological prominence and independence. Central to this project was the scholarly practice of *ijtihād*, the formulation of new legal rulings derived from reasoning based on the direct sources of Qur’an and Sunna, bypassing the old interpretive traditions, in order to directly interpret and apply these sources to contemporary realities.

These trends converged in the various Salafi movements of the 20th and 21st century, who despite their many differences, have tended to adopt a similar epistemological paradigm in which the *zāhir* (outward or apparent) meaning of the Qur’an and Sunna—understood as being accessible to anyone with the necessary linguistic skills—has sole authority in matters of Islamic doctrine and practice and in which traditional notions of suprarational knowledge are rejected (and thus Sufism and the esoteric sciences based upon this knowledge are also rejected). An important concomitant of this position is the rejection of the initiatic hierarchies of Sufism and the *sanad* paradigm more generally, leading to the egalitarian conception that all knowledge is potentially accessible to anyone. For this reason, Salafi reformers who sought to transform their societies were quick to adopt the technologies of mass media and colonial mass education, whose implicit epistemological orientation was very similar.⁷⁶ As Brenner concludes his study on Islamic schooling in 20th-century Mali:

Whatever its personal appeal for individual Muslims, Salafi doctrine was also conveniently compatible with the newly emerging social and political environment: it advocated a complete break with local historical forms of Muslim expression and at the same time provided a new religious platform from which to challenge the dominant political order on its own ground. . . .

The French (and their Soudanese allies) tried to discredit Salafi doctrine and Wahhabism as alien institutions but failed to recognize their own role in preparing the ground for this “rationalizing” form of Muslim expression. Engagement in the national political arena of the colonial state required participation in its institutions, its bureaucracies and of course its schools, all of which functioned within and produced a discursive environment informed by a rationalist *episteme*. The French supposed that the Muslims operating within this environment would become secularists; but Salafi doctrine (and *médersas*) offered a Muslim alternative for initiation into the rationalist *episteme*.⁷⁷

That is, the structures of colonial state bureaucracy, schooling, and society were more compatible with the Salafi, *dalīl*-based epistemological paradigm than the older, *sanad* paradigm were. Furthermore, the declining confidence in state-sponsored education across West Africa in the late 20th century (partly because of educational budget cuts

mandated by “structural adjustment” programs) led to the increased prominence of private religious education throughout the region, including Arabic-language Islamic schools.

Although Salafi reform movements—like earlier Sufi reform movements in West Africa—were not simple external impositions or importations of foreign ideas and practices, the billions of Saudi petrodollars and numerous satellite TV channels and video and audio recordings from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Pakistan, Egypt, and India promoting Salafi norms have had a tremendous influence on Muslim life and thought in West Africa.⁷⁸ Moreover, since the Saudi conquest of Mecca and Medina, West African Muslim pilgrims (whose numbers have dramatically increased in the early 21st century) encountered Salafi scholars in these holy cities, increasing the aura of authority of Salafism as “official” Islam. Furthermore, increasing numbers of West African Muslims have been granted scholarships to study at the universities and other institutes of higher learning in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, often returning to the region to train other students and advance Salafi reform projects.⁷⁹

Contemporary Islamic Education in West Africa

However, in response to these challenges and to the necessity of Western education for career success in postcolonial societies, several Sufi orders and traditional scholars have also begun adopting modern standardized, mass educational techniques and methods, opening their own state-accredited hybrid schools and even universities.⁸⁰ Thus Roman Loimeier’s assessment of Islamic education in 20th-century Zanzibar can also be applied to much of West Africa: “Learning has become a standardized, open, depersonalized process of sequential learning in which learning has lost its sacred and initiatic character.”⁸¹

However, the traditional learning circles, although no longer enjoying the educational hegemony they once did, are still prominent and popular throughout the region, and many of the region’s Sufi leaders and scholars were educated and still teach others in this paradigm. Many Sufi orders have combined modern classroom-style education with traditional learning circles in their centers throughout the region (such as Medina Baye, Touba, and Tivaouane, in Senegal, Kano, Maiduguri, and Ilorin, in Nigeria; and Djenné and Segou, in Mali).⁸² The *mahadaras* or traditional “learning villages” of Mauritania in the early 21st century have become popular among young would-be scholars in the region (and even in Europe and the United States) seeking an experience of “authentic” or traditional Islamic learning.⁸³ For example, the *mahadara* of al-Nabbāghiyya, founded in the 1960s by the Tijānī Shaykh Muḥammad Fāl ibn Babah al-‘Alāwī (b. 1936), who is known as “Shaykh Bah,” has attracted hundreds of students who come not only from neighboring Mauritania, Senegal, and Mali but also from Nigeria, Morocco, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, and even as far away as Malaysia and India to study Mālikī *fiqh* and *usūl al-fiqh*, Arabic language and literature, *ḥadīth*, *sīra*, Ash‘arī *kalām*, works of Sufism, and Qur‘an and *tafsīr*. Despite being overshadowed by modern Western-style educa-

tional institutions, many of the scholars teaching at these traditional learning circles are so widely respected that even some Salafi scholars send their students to study at these *mahadara* and other traditional learning circles.

Moreover, the traditional *sanad* paradigm has been dominant in the early 21st century in the contemporary practice of Sufism (*'ilm al-tasawwuf*), which is still based on initiation by and obedience to a shaykh who is understood to mold and shape the character of his or her disciples to enable them to receive the direct knowledge of *ma'rifa*. So although West African Sufi orders have made many adaptations in their use of mass media (including social media and platforms such as YouTube) and their adoption of modern, Western educational paradigms and techniques, including organizing academic conferences with international scholars and prepared papers, the initiatic transmission of knowledge and *baraka* through the *sanad* remains the backbone of these Sufi orders, which remain remarkably popular and influential in the region.⁸⁴

The current educational landscape of West Africa is a diverse one in which government schools, Christian schools of Pentecostal, Catholic, and mainline Protestant denominations, various American, French, and international schools, hybrid Muslim schools (Franco-Arabe schools, Islamiyya schools, etc.) run by Salafis, Sufis, and others, as well as traditional learning circles (*majālis*), training and apprenticeship in Islamic esoteric sciences, and the priesthoods of the various traditional African religions of the region continue to shape the societies of West Africa. Moreover, it is not uncommon for West African Muslims to have experience with, or even training in, many of these different kinds of institutions: a young, Muslim Nigerian woman could attend a private Islamiyya primary school and a government secondary school while attending a Qur'an school and traditional learning circles (*majālis*) to study basic works of Arabic, as well as *fiqh* and *usūl al-dīn* on the weekends and the Ramadan *tafsīr* sessions of a local Salafi Imām. She could later enroll at a private Christian university, majoring in a “secular” subject such as agriculture or marketing, while taking initiation into a Sufi order, such as the Tijāniyya, at whose gatherings she may attend classes teaching Sufi texts and poetry and would likely read and share videos and texts of lectures and sermons by Muslim scholars of various orientations from around the world with her family and friends on Facebook and WhatsApp. She or her parents or other relatives may also patronize specialists of the esoteric sciences—Islamic, indigenous, and/or African Independent Christian—to help her succeed in school, stay out of trouble, and find a good job and spouse after graduation. Despite the many and rapid changes and challenges of the 19th and 20th centuries, Sufism and Sufi epistemology remain prominent influences in West African conceptions of knowledge and will likely continue to be so for decades to come.

Discussion of the Literature

Although the history of Sufism in West Africa features in many of the Arabic historical works of authors such as Ibn Battūta, Ibn Khaldūn, 'Abd al-Rahmān Sa'dī, and Muhammad Bello during the precolonial and colonial periods, the seminal Europhone scholarship on

the subject appears in the writings of explorers such as Heinrich Barth and of colonial officers and orientalist scholars such as Paul Marty, Vincent Monteil, Mervyn Hiskett (who first drew attention to the “core-curriculum” of the Sokoto scholars), and J. Spencer Trimingham’s study, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* and *Islam in West Africa*. George Makdisi’s pioneering study, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, drew attention to and analyzed the epistemologies and pedagogical practices of medieval Muslim societies in a comparative perspective, and Franz Rosenthal’s seminal work, *Knowledge Triumphant*, synthesized many discussions of Islamic epistemology and pedagogy in the classical Islamic texts, as does William Graham’s influential article, “Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation.” More recently, Sebastian Günther’s work has highlighted the educational thought of medieval Muslim scholars such as Ibn Sahnūn, al-Jāhiz, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Ghazālī, and Jonathan Berkey’s *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo* vividly describes the curricula, pedagogy, and epistemologies of medieval Islamic centers of learning. Bruce Hall and Charles Stewart’s article “The Historic ‘Core Curriculum’ and the Book Market in Islamic West Africa” synthesizes a study of several manuscript collections to helpfully reconstruct the traditional “core curriculum” of the region, whereas volumes 2, 4, and 5 of Sean O’Fahey and John Hunwick’s colossal, multivolume *Arabic Literature of Africa* series provide a more detailed description of the writings and authors of the region.⁸⁵

Turning to specific studies of Islamic education in West Africa, Ivor Wilks’s 1968 article on Islamic education in Ghana, “The Transmission of Islamic Learning in the Western Sudan,” was one of the first of many studies in this burgeoning field. Lamin Sanneh’s 1979 book, *The Jakhanké: The History of an Islamic Clerical People of Senegambia*, although primarily a historical ethnography, dealt extensively with Islamic education in the region, as did Renaud Santerre’s 1973 book on Islamic education in Cameroon, *Pédagogie musulmane d’Afrique noire*.⁸⁶ John Weir Chamberlin’s 1975 unpublished dissertation on Islamic education and scholars in Kano remains an important resource for scholars in the early 21st century, as do A. A. Batran’s works on the Kunta.⁸⁷ Brenner’s 1985 *Réflexions sur le savoir islamique en Afrique d’Ouest* was a seminal study in this nascent field, as was Stefan Reichmuth’s 1989 article, “New Trends in Islamic Education in Nigeria,” one of the first to draw attention to the rapid changes to Islamic education in the region.⁸⁸

Brenner and Bintou Sanankoua’s 1991 edited volume, *L’enseignement islamique au Mali* marked the beginning of the emergence of the study of Islamic education in West Africa as its own topic and field, and the 1990s witnessed the publication of several excellent edited volumes, monographs, and articles on the subject, such as Seydou Cissé’s book on Islamic education in Mali.⁸⁹ Corrine Fortier’s works on education in Mauritania built on earlier scholarship to provide a deeper examination of the epistemologies at work in the various pedagogical practices of these learning institutions. During this time, Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack began publishing several pioneering articles and books on Nana Asma’u and women’s Islamic education in the region. A number of informative PhD and master’s theses were also completed during this decade that continue to be important sources of reference for scholars, such as Hamidu Boboyi’s 1992 PhD dissertation, “The ‘Ulama of Borno,” Chouki El Hamel’s dissertation and 1999 article, “The Transmission of

Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society,” was a landmark study, as was Stefan Reichmuth’s 1997 work on Islamic learning in Ilorin, and the latter’s “Islamic Education and Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa” in Levtzion and Pouwels’s *The History of Islam in Africa* is a good summary of the early literature on the topic.⁹⁰

The field continued to grow in the next decade, as the various entries in Scott Reese’s 2004 edited volume, *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, provided excellent studies of Islamic education in particular local contexts, and Tal Tamari’s numerous works have provided an insightful analysis of Qur’anic and Islamic higher education in Mali.⁹¹ Muhammad Sani Umar published several important works on Islamic education in Northern Nigeria, and Cheikh Anta Babou’s *Fighting the Greater Jihad* provided a compelling history of the historical development of the Mouride *daara* schools. Ousseina Alidou and Adeline Masquelier’s studies of Muslim women in Niger, Benjamin Soares’s *Islam and the Prayer Economy*, and Robert Launay’s *Beyond the Stream* developed a more anthropological approach to Islamic education in the region, complementing the earlier, more historical analyses of the topic. Roman Loimeier and Ousmane Kane published important monographs on Salafi reform movements in Northern Nigeria, as did Ousman Kobo on the development of Salafi reform movements in Ghana and Burkina Faso, building on Lansine Kaba’s earlier work on the history of Salafism in West Africa. Triaud and Robinson’s edited volume, Rüdiger Seesemann’s *Divine Flood*, and Andrea Brigaglia’s work on Northern Nigeria provided important histories of the Tijāniyya in the region.⁹² Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s 2008 edited volume, *The Meanings of Timbuktu* provides an accessible introduction to some aspects of Islamic intellectual history and learning in the region.⁹³

The Epistemology Debate

However, Brenner was one of the first scholars to focus on the epistemological paradigms of Islamic pedagogy in West Africa and the important roles that Sufism, Salafism, the colonial state, and modern European epistemologies played in shaping Islamic education and Muslim publics in the region. His seminal 2001 study of educational change in mid-20th century Mali, *Controlling Knowledge*, set the terms for a central debate in the field, arguing that precolonial Islamic knowledge practices operated in and were structured by an “esoteric” episteme in which knowledge is “hierarchical and initiatic,” acquired from personal transmission from a limited number of qualified teachers and transformative devotional practice leading to mystical experiences such as dreams and visions. Brenner contrasts this with the “rationalist” episteme of various Salafi reformist movements (and European schools) in which all knowledge is theoretically equally available to all, devotional practices are understood as being separate from the learning process, and study and discursive reasoning, not personal transmission, divine intervention, or visionary experiences, are the primary means of acquiring knowledge. The status of the Qur’an and *sharī‘a* as the ultimate guide to human fulfilment is retained, but emphasis is placed on the plain or evident meaning of the text and law, and the possibility of divine inspirations into deeper interpretations of the both are denied.⁹⁴

Rudolph Ware's 2014 pioneering study of Qur'anic education and embodiment in Senegambia, *The Walking Qur'an*, took up this epistemological distinction between the traditional and reformist paradigms, arguing that, "Contemporary Salafis, Wahhabis, and Islamists often espouse a confrontational and oppositional stance *vis-à-vis* the West, but Western rationalisms and positivisms are inscribed at every level of their approaches to knowledge."⁹⁵

However, Ware modified Brenner's argument, characterizing the primary distinction as being between "embodied" or "personalized" knowledge and "disembodied" or "depersonalized" knowledge, writing that, in the latter case, "knowledge unbound from its embodied human bearers thus became quantifiable, alienable, and observable."⁹⁶ In a later edited volume, *Islamic Education in West Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, Robert Launay and Ware further distinguish the traditionalist and reformist paradigms by arguing that, "the former are convinced of the opacity of signs, the latter of their transparency."⁹⁷

Zachary Wright took up this debate in his 2015 monograph on Islamic learning practices of an influential Tijani Sufi network, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community of Ibrāhīm Niasse*, in which he concludes that "the idea of religious knowledge as an acquired disposition (*habitus*) to be inscribed in the being of the student, who enacts a particular comportment and positioning in the world, was thus fundamental to learning practices in West African Islam."⁹⁸ Furthermore, Wright critiques Ware's argument, pointing out the embodied and ethical practices involved in reformist movements, arguing that "the fault lines may not simply be between 'embodied' and 'dis-embodied.' The key issue, rather, is *how* knowledge is inscribed as *disposition* [*adab*] in the being of the Muslim, and for what purpose," provocatively concluding that "Salafis mean to produce servants of the Islamic state. Traditionalists mean to produce good servants of God."⁹⁹

Ousmane Kane's 2016 landmark monograph, *Beyond Timbuktu*, summarizes many of these discussions, providing an expansive yet incisive overview of the history, curricula, contexts, and practices of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Islamic education in West Africa. While restating Brenner's argument, Kane underscored the fact that "the relationship between these different forms of traditional Islamic, Western, and hybrid education is indeed very complex, and the limited shift notwithstanding, the majority of Muslims navigate easily between the esoteric and the rational episteme."¹⁰⁰ Kane cites the examples of Sufi orders, which "while preserving the fundamentals of Sufi epistemology rooted in the esoteric episteme . . . have proven to have a remarkable ability to appropriate modern technology and pedagogy. . . . They built new schools based on modern pedagogy, while still operating zawiyas that provided esoteric knowledge."¹⁰¹ Chapter 1 of *Beyond Timbuktu* also provides a comprehensive history and summary of the scholarship on Islamic learning in West Africa.

In a pair of outstanding articles (published in 2017 and 2018, respectively), "*Ilm and Adab Revisited: Knowledge Transmission and Character Formation in Islamic Africa*" and

“Epistemology or Ideology?: Toward a Relational Perspective on Islamic Knowledge in Africa” Rüdiger Seesemann synthesizes these discussions and debates about epistemology and pedagogy in Muslim West Africa with broader discussions about Islamic epistemologies around the world and across various disciplines and time periods, to argue for the integral nature of the transformative cultivation of *adab* to the acquisition of knowledge in what he calls the “*sanad* paradigm,” connecting it to Foucault’s analysis of the importance of the classical Greek concept of *paideia* (education, rearing, formation—like the Arabic *tarbiya*) in pre-Renaissance cultures as a precondition for acquiring knowledge. Seesemann writes,

The fundamental proposition of *adab* as understood here is well expressed in Foucault’s affirmation that “an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject.” . . . According to this perspective, it is through *adab* that the individual is transformed into a vessel worthy of ‘ilm; it is *adab* that prepares the Sufi for higher spiritual insights, frequently glossed as *ma‘rifa*. . . . In the new institutions of Islamic education established by protagonists of such reformist currents, learning revolved much more around discursive practices than the inculcation of *adab*.¹⁰²

He argues for a relational understanding between the *sanad* paradigm, the reformist model, which he characterizes *dalil* paradigm, and an emerging *maqāsid* paradigm exemplified by various “Islamization of knowledge” programs of Islamist reformers whose “objective is not to modernize Islam but to Islamize modernity, based on new epistemological tools that allow for a high degree of pragmatism and openness toward the incorporation of ‘non-Islamic’ ideas.”¹⁰³ Seesemann further argues that “claims about epistemology tell us more about ideological positions than they reveal about actual knowledge practices,” illustrating the exceptions and disconnects between rhetoric and practice in all three paradigms.¹⁰⁴ Although Alex Thurston’s work *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics* provides an insightful examination of the Salafi canon, its history, and instruction in Nigeria, more research is needed on the actual pedagogical practices of Salafi learning practices and schools in the region, the new Sufi-sponsored “modern” schools, as well as the majority of Islamic educational institutions not specifically affiliated with either Sufi or Salafi groups.¹⁰⁵

One such study is Hannah Hoechner’s 2018 exemplary monograph, *Qur’anic Schools in Northern Nigeria: Everyday Experience of Youth, Faith, and Poverty*.¹⁰⁶ Hoechner’s study draws on education studies, poverty, and youth studies to provide a detailed and rich anthropological and sociological account of the lives, experiences, and socio-economic contexts of *almajirai* (Qur’an school students) in northern Nigeria. One of the great strengths of nearly all of these studies, and the field in general, is their rich interdisciplinarity, using the methods and theories of history, anthropology, and several other disciplines to combine textual study with in-person fieldwork involving interviews and observation, which inevitably complicates and adds nuance to the more abstract textual and rhetorical

positions such as the idealized “traditional”-“modern” and “Sufi”-“Salafi” dichotomies described above.

Nevertheless, the emerging consensus of the literature on Sufism and Islamic education in West Africa seems to be that the traditional educational paradigm (which extends beyond those scholars and students with Sufi affiliations) in which the cultivation of *adab* through embodied interaction with teachers shaped by chains of transmission is integral to the learning process has been, because of a number of factors, overshadowed by a different educational paradigm based more on discursive study in Western-style classrooms, in which ethical transformation is seen more as an application of acquired information than a prerequisite for the bestowal of knowledge. In the former paradigm, knowledge is understood to have both a *zāhir* (outward form) and a *bātin* (inward reality), the former corresponding to its discursive explication or embodied practice, and the latter, to the psycho-spiritual or existential condition (*hāl*) or station (*maqām*) of the soul (*nafs*) or heart/mind (*qalb*), and so learning practices in this paradigm take both of these dimensions into account, emphasizing both outer and inner spiritual exercises, devotional practices, and the cultivation of *adab* in addition to study and memorization as necessary pedagogical practices to attain deeper levels of understanding and spiritual realization. The more recent paradigm, although still stressing the importance of ethics, *adab*, and “proper intention,” seems to reduce much of the conceptualization of Islamic knowledge to its outer dimensions of correct practice and discursive exposition, neglecting or rejecting the deeper levels of the hierarchies of meaning, understanding, and being emphasized in the older paradigm. However, as the authors mentioned in this section demonstrate, on-the-ground realities are much more mixed and complicated than these academic abstractions suggest. As Ware writes, educational choices and structures are “driven much more by a series of quotidian choices made by parents, teachers, clerics, and even children . . . than by any grand articulated ideological visions that either hypothetical Sufis or stereotypical Salafis might pronounce.”¹⁰⁷

Primary Sources

The various Islamic manuscript collections of West Africa provide a rich trove of primary sources on Islamic Education in the region, not only in terms of indicating who was studying what with whom; the marginal notes, commentaries, and glosses on these manuscripts are also a valuable source of information about the way in which the content of the manuscripts was taught, learned, and understood. The catalogs of some private collections, such as ‘Umar Falke’s—now housed at Northwestern University, or al-hājj ‘Umar Tal’s library, now housed in Paris at the Bibliothèque National de France are easily accessible online. The first chapter of Ousmane Kane’s *Beyond Timbuktu* provides a helpful history of the development and activities of the major centers of manuscript collection and study in West Africa.

Given that Islamic education in West Africa is a living tradition, the best primary source is still direct observation of the many and varied institutions of Islamic education in the region, some of which have written records, syllabi, course catalogs, and websites. More-

over, many of the men and women who were trained or are teaching in these institutions also have rich oral histories and/or unpublished documents and notes that can illuminate the history of Islamic education in the region.

Other interesting primary sources include autobiographies, memoirs, and autobiographical novels from the region, such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, Amadou Hampâté Bâ's *Amkoullel*, and Ahmadu Bello's *My Life*, which describe the settings and experience of various educational institutions in vivid detail.¹⁰⁸ National, colonial, and missionary archives also contain valuable information on educational institutions, practices, and programs, and provide important political, historical and socio-economic context.

As for primary sources about pedagogy in translation, Bradley Cook's *Classical Foundations of Islamic Thought* and Sebastian Günther's articles contain numerous translations of the writings of figures such as Ibn Khaldūn, Ibn Sahnūn, and al-Ghazālī, which provide insight into the classical conceptualization of pedagogy in the region.¹⁰⁹ The 2018 collection *Jihad of the Pen: The Sufi Literature of West Africa* consists of translations of the works of 'Uthman ibn Fūdī, al-hājj 'Umar Tal Ahmadu Bamba, and Ibrāhīm Niasse, many of which are pedagogical in nature.¹¹⁰ Muhammad Shareef's Sankore Institute of Islamic-African Studies also has an impressive and open online archive of translations of manuscripts by 'Uthmān ibn Fūdī and scholars of the Sokoto Caliphate, many of which are also pedagogical in nature.¹¹¹ One of Ibrahim Niasse's main works has been fully translated into English as *The Removal of Confusion* and is an excellent example of a 20th-century primary Sufi text that addresses issues of pedagogy and education. Ravane Mbaye has also published French translations of many important Tijānī works, such as the *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*, and various West African presses have published bi- and sometimes trilingual editions of works of major Islamic scholars of the region, such as Ahmadu Bamba, Ibrahim Niasse, al-hājj Mālik Sy, Nasiru Kabara, and Abubakr Gumi.¹¹²

Links to Digital Materials

The West African Arabic Manuscripts Database

Maintained by Charles Stewart and Bruce Hall, this is a bilingual, searchable database that compiles several collections of West African manuscripts from throughout the region. The WAAMD is currently hosted by the Library of the University of California, Berkeley, and is updated regularly.

Sankore Institute of Islamic-African Studies Digital Archive

Maintained by Muhammad Shareef, an independent scholar, this collection contains manuscripts and edited critical editions of texts by the early scholars of the Sokoto Caliphate along with English (and some French and Spanish) translations.

West African Arabic Manuscripts: Electronic Resources and West African Arabic Manuscripts: Physical Archives

Sufism, Islamic Philosophy, and Education in West Africa

These guides, hosted by the University of Illinois, were created to aid in the finding of manuscripts from West Africa that are written in Arabic or in Arabic script.

Duniya Juyi Juyi

A film by *almajirai* (Qur'an school students in northern Nigeria) about their own lives and experiences, with English subtitles. This source is highly recommended.

Maliki Fiqh YouTube channel

A YouTube channel on Maliki fiqh, including several videos of classes of Maliki fiqh texts widely taught in West Africa and a documentary on the *maḥḍara* of al-Nabbāghiyā

Al-Azhar Touba YouTube Channel

An official YouTube channel of the Mouridiyya order of Senegal

Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba University Official Website

Tijani Tariqah

Mady Baye Niass

Kossy TV

Popular Tijani Facebook pages with links to video and audio recordings of *tafsīr* sessions and other classes by Tijani scholars.

Arab-Islamic Education In Sub-Saharan Africa: Going Beyond Clichés To Build The Future

“The Modernization Process of Qu’ranic Schools Daaras in Senegal”

A Web Edu TV a short documentary on Qur’anic schools in Senegal.

Further Reading

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Notes:

(1.) Ahmad Zarrūq, *Qawā'id al-Tasawwuf* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005), 21.

(2.) Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," *Journal of African History* 32, no. 2 (1991): 221–250.

(3.) Stefan Reichmuth, "Islamic Education and Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. N. Levtzion and R. L. Pouwels (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 428.

(4.) Dahlia El-Tayeb M. Gubara, "Al-Azhar and the Orders of Knowledge" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014); and Zachary Wright, "The African Roots of a Global Eighteenth-Century Islamic Scholarly Renewal," in *New Directions in the Study of Islam in Africa*, ed. Ousmane Kane (London: James Currey, forthcoming).

(5.) Wright, "African Roots."

(6.) Beverley Mack and Jean Boyd, *Educating Muslim Women: The West African Legacy of Nana Asma'u 1793–1864* (Leicester, UK: Kube, 2013); and Jean Boyd, "Distance Learning from Purdah in Nineteenth-Century Northern Nigeria: The Work of Asma'u Fodiyo," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 14, no. 1 (2001): 7–22.

(7.) Zachary Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community of Ibrāhīm Niasse* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 58.

(8.) Roman Loimeier, "Translocal Networks of Saints and the Negotiation of Religious Disputes in Local Contexts," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 135 (2006): 17–32.

(9.) Bernd Radtke, "Studies on the Sources of the Kitab Rimah Hizb al-Rahim of al-Hajj ‘Umar." *Sudanic Africa* 6 (1995): 73–113.

(10.) Cheikh Anta Babou, "Educating the Murid: Theory and Practices of Education in Amadu Bamba's Thought," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 3 (2003): 310–327.

(11.) Christine Thu Nhi Dang, "Pilgrimage through Poetry: Sung Journeys within the Murid Spiritual Diaspora," *Islamic Africa* 4, no. 1 (2013): 69–71. By comparison, the hajj typically has between two and three million participants.

(12.) Zachary Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community of Ibrāhīm Niasse* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 51–54; and H. T. Norris, *Sufi Mystics of the Niger Desert: Sīdī Maḥmūd and the Hermits of Aīr* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1990).

(13.) Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 219; and Wright, "African Roots."

(14.) Pew Research Center, "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity."

(15.) This is not to mention the importance of Ghazalian Sufism for the Almohad movement, and the Sufi movements within the Almoravids, credited with spreading Islam and the Māliki madhhab throughout much of the Western Sahara and Sahel. As Chouki El-Hamel writes, "Education and Sufi activities in Moorish society were in the same institution, and the shaykh functioned as teacher as well as Sufi master" (Chouki El-Hamel, "The Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in Moorish Society from the Rise of the Almoravids to the 19th Century," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29, no. 1 [1999]: 79).

(16.) Ibrahim Niasse, *The Removal of Confusion Concerning the Flood of the Saintly Seal Ahmad al-Tijani*, trans. Zachary Wright (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), 29–30.

(17.) W. Montgomery Watt, *Imam al-Ghazali's Deliverance from Error and the Beginning of Guidance* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2005), 52.

(18.) Niasse, *Removal of Confusion*, 31

(19.) Ahmad al-Tijānī, *Aḥzāb wa al-Awrād* (Kano, Nigeria: Dār al-Ifriqiyah. n.d.), 15.

(20.) Saḥīḥ Bukhari VIII, bk. 76, no. 509.

(21.) Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijānī writes, "It effaces the servant such that no awareness of anything, even of the lack of his awareness, of his effacement, remains. He is not able to distinguish the root from its branches, nor vice-versa. Rather, he only knows from the perspective of the Real, by the Real, in the Real, from the Real. And this is real Knowledge [*al-ma'rifa al-haqiqiyya*]. Then an outpouring of the lights of His Holiness is poured out upon him, giving him perfect discernment and discrimination amongst the levels [of existence] and their particularities. . . . This discernment is called complete subsistence [*al-baqā' al-tāmm*] and perfect sobriety [*al-sahū*]. The primary origin [of Real Knowledge] is called complete annihilation [*al-fanā' al-tāmm*] and perfect effacement [*al-mahū*]. This subsistence is only established with the annihilation of the first annihilation as its origin and foundation" (Sīdī 'Alī Ḥarāzim Barrāda, *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī wa Bulūgh al-Amānī fī Fayḍ*

Sidi Abī ‘Abbās al-Tijānī, trans. Ravane Mbaye [Dakar, Senegal: Dar Albouraq, 2011], 979–980).

(22.) Tidiane Ali Cissé, *What the Knowers of Allah Have Said about the Knowledge of Allah*, trans. Zachary Wright and Muhammad Hassiem Abdullahi (Atlanta: Fayda Books, 2014), 18.

(23.) I have been unable to find a source for this supposed *hadīth qudsī*. The closest I have been able to discover is the 22nd *hadīth qudsī* recorded in Ibn ‘Arabi’s collection, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*: “He who hopes for other than Me does not know Me. He who does not know Me does not worship Me. He who does not worship Me has incurred My Displeasure. He who fears other than Me, My Vengeance befalls him” (Ibn ‘Arabi, *Divine Sayings: 101 Hadith Qudsi; The Mishkāt al-Anwār of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Stephen Hirtenstein and Martin Notcutt [Oxford, UK: Anqa, 2004], 22).

(24.) Cissé, *What the Knowers*, 20.

(25.) Ibrāhīm Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā’il wa-yaliyya ziyādat al-jawāhir al-ḥawī ba’d ‘ulūm wasīlat al-wasā’il*, ed. Ahmad Abū’l-Fath (Borno, Nigeria: Ahmad Abī’l-Fath, n.d.), 59. This idea is also mentioned in the Moroccan Sufi, Ibn ‘Ajībah’s (d. 1809) commentary on the widely used grammar text *al-Ajrūmiyyah*.

(26.) Such as Ibn ‘Ashir’s (d. 1631) elementary poem *al-Murshid al-Mu’in*; ‘abd al-Rahmān al-akhdarī’s (d. 1575) fiqh primer *al-Mukhtasar*; ‘Uthman dan fodio’s *Umdat al-‘ulamā’*, *Uṣūl al-dīn*, *Kifāyat al-Muhtadīn*, and others; and Ahamdu Bamba’s *Masālik al-Jinān*, *Taza-wwud aṣ- Ṣighār*, and others.

(27.) Al-Sanusī also wrote an intermediate-level text *‘Aqīdat al-Wuṣṭā* (*The intermediate creed*) and an advanced *‘Aqīdat al-Kubrā* (“The greater creed”). Each of these texts was designed for a different audience and level of learning.

(28.) Indeed, Muhammad al-Wālī al-Fulānī (d. 1688) wrote an influential Arabic translation and commentary of the *kabbe*, titled *al-Manhaj al-farīd fī ma’rifat ‘ilm al-tawhīd*, illustrating the flow of scholarship back and forth between Arabic and local African languages.

(29.) Imām Al-Sanūsī, *Umm al-Barāhīn* (Beirut: Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, 2009), 27.

(30.) Usman dan Fodio, “Usul al-deen” [The science of the foundation of the deen] (Maiurno, Sudan: Sankore Institute of Islamic African Studies International, 2003), 9.

(31.) Usman dan Fodio, “Fath’l-Basaa’ir” (Maiurno, Sudan: Sankore Institute of Islamic African Studies International, 2011), 31.

(32.) Qtd. in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 35–36.

(33.) Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy*.

(34.) In this Neoplatonic schema, this chain of intellects and, indeed, all creation are created by the act of intellection of these intellects, terminating in the world of matter and change. Mankind's intellect reverses this cosmogonic process in a sense: "The Tenth Intellect also serves as the illuminator of the mind of man. Man abstracts the forms which he finds combined with matter in his mind and is able to elevate it again to the level of a universal through the illumination received from the Tenth Intellect. Universals therefore exist in the 'angelic mind'; then they descend to the world of matter to become material form and are particularized only to be raised once more in the mind of man through the illumination of the angel to the level of the universal again. The Tenth Intellect is therefore not only the instrument of creation but also of illumination and, as we shall see later, of revelation to the prophets and in a more limited sense to the saints and gnostics" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi* [New York: Caravan Books, 1997], 30.)

(35.) Qtd. in Bradley J. Cook and Fathī Hassan Malkāwī, *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought: A Compendium of Parallel English-Arabic Texts* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), 215.

(36.) Abdullahi dan Fodio, "The Training of Humanity" [Tahdheeb'l-Insaan] (Maiurno, Sudan: Sankore Institute of Islamic African Studies International, 2003). Its combination of al-Fārābī's political theory, Ibn Miskawayh's virtue ethics and pedagogy, also makes it remarkably similar to Nasīr al-dīn al-Tūsī's *Akhlāq al-Nāsirī*.

(37.) Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, 42.

(38.) Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosentahl (Princeton, NJ: Bollingen, 1989), 390. Interestingly, this is also true of Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah*, whose discussion of the sciences begins with a summary of the Avicennan schema outlined in "Kalām."

(39.) For example, Ibn Sīnā's levels of intellect are taken up by Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī in his *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*, and many Sufi descriptions of the *haqīqa al-Muhammadiyya* bear striking resemblance to Avicennan descriptions of the Active and First Intellects; and The proponents of these occult sciences also often referred to them as "*hikma*."

(40.) However, some Maghrebi Sufi scholars such as Abū Sālim 'Abd Allāh al-'Ayyāshī (d. 1679) studied philosophical texts such as Abharī's (d. 1265) philosophical primer *Hidayāt al-ḥikma* and Suhrawardī's (d. 1191) *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* in Medina with the Kurdish scholar and Shattarī Sufi, Ibrāhīm al-Kurānī (d. 1690) (see Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015], 51); and 'abd al-Qādir ibn Mustafā, the grandson of 'Uthman ibn Fūdī appears to have studied and written works of *falsafa*. In any event, the arguments, methods, schemas, and even excerpts of texts of Islamic philosophers (*falāsifa*) such as Ibn Sīnā or Ibn Miskawayh continued to be studied through their influence and quotation in works of *kalām*, Sufism, ethics, and logic.

- (41.) Qtd. in Sebastian Günther, "The Principles of Instruction Are the Grounds of Our Knowledge: Al-Fārābī's Philosophical and al-Ghazālī's Spiritual Approaches to Learning," in *Trajectories of Education in the Arab World*, ed. Osama Abi-Mershed (New York: Routledge, 2009), 18.
- (42.) I use the adjective "traditional" here to refer not to a time period in the past, nor to suggest a kind of teleology of progress from the "traditional" to the "modern," nor to imply a kind of moribund stasis of the traditional, nor to suggest a relationship to "traditional African religions," but rather to denote the important element of personal transmission and continuity across generations that the word's etymology suggests. In this essay, the "traditional" is opposed to the "modern" in terms of epistemological orientation.
- (43.) Rudolph Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
- (44.) See Tal Tamari, "Styles of Islamic Education: Perspectives from Mali, Guinea, and the Gambia," in *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, ed. Robert Launay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 29–60.
- (45.) Prominent Mālikī scholars such as Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī and al-Qābisī (d. 1012) also wrote similar treatises, which appear to be based in part on Ibn Sahnūn's seminal work.
- (46.) Sebastian Günther, "Advice for Teachers: The 9th-Century Muslim Scholars Ibn Sahnūn and al-Jāhiz on Pedagogy and Didactics," in *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, ed. Sebastian Günther (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2005): 89–128.
- (47.) See Corrine Fortier, "Orality and the Transmission of Qur'anic Knowledge in Mauritania," in *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, ed. Robert Launay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 61–78; Tamari "Styles of Islamic Education," 29–60.; and Ware, *Walking Qur'an*. However, one important difference is that while Ibn Sahnūn's text forbade non-Muslims from attending Qur'an schools, the Jakhanke scholarly tradition admitted all children to their Qur'an schools.
- (48.) Didactic works by local scholars such as 'Uthman ibn Fūdī and Ahmadu Bamba are also widely studied.
- (49.) See Tamari, "Styles of Islamic Education."
- (50.) Andrea Brigaglia, "Learning, Gnosis and Exegesis: Public Tafsīr and Sufi Revival in the City of Kano (Northern Nigeria), 1950–1970," *Die Welt des Islams* 29, nos. 3–4 (2009): 334–366
- (51.) Many of these sciences have pre-Islamic origins, although others, such as the science of using Divine Names and verses of the Qur'an for *tasrīf* (occult manipulation of affairs) are of Islamic origin. Contrary to popular belief, these sciences are not the result of

the imposition of indigenous “African” culture upon Islam in the region but are widely attested to in the works of Islamic scholars from all over the world (such as al-Ghazālī, Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī, and Ibn Sīnā), from the classical period to the present day.

(52.) William A. Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1993): 505.

(53.) Ibrāhīm ibn Mūsā al-Shātībī, *The Reconciliation of the Fundamentals of Islamic Law*, vol. 1, trans. Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2011), 45.

(54.) Amadou Hampâté Bâ, *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul: Mémoires* (Arles, France: Actes Sud, 1991), 197.

(55.) In the Book of Knowledge of his magnum opus, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Al-Ghazālī quotes the Qur’an (58:11) to make this point: “God will raise in rank those who have believed and those who have been given knowledge.”

(56.) Ahmadu Bamba, “Maghāliq al-Nīrān wa Mafātiḥ al-Jinān,” in *Dīwān fī ‘ulūm al-dīniyya lil-Shaykh Aḥmad Bāmbā al-Mbakkay, khādim al-rasūl* vol. 2, ed. and trans. Sam Mbaye (Dakar, Senegal: n.p., 1988), 234.

(57.) Ahmadu Bamba, *Masālik al-Jinān: Les itinéraires du paradis; Traité de Soufisme*, trans. Sam Mbaye (Dakar, Senegal: n.p., n.d.), 77–78, 20.

(58.) Qtd. in Wright, *Living Knowledge*, 35.

(59.) Ware, *Walking Qur’an*, 7.

(60.) Amadou Hampâté Bâ, *The Fortunes of Wangrin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), ix.

(61.) Rüdiger Seesemann, “Epistemology or Ideology?: Toward a Relational Perspective on Islamic Knowledge in Africa” *Journal of Africana Religions* 6, no. 2 (2018): 239.

(62.) This paradigm was not without contestation, however, as Ibn Khaldūn quotes favorably the opinion of the Andalusian-Moroccan Maliki scholar Abū Bakr ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1148) that education should begin with the Arabic language and poetry, then mathematics, and then the memorization and study of the Qur’an, followed by other sciences. Moreover, in his book of advice for teachers, al-Jāhiz argues that although memorization has a “more honorable rank” than does deductive reasoning (*istinbāt*), relying on memorization harms students’ capacity for deductive reasoning, and that relying on deductive reasoning alone can harm the development of a students’ memories, but by employing both methods together, “perfection comes to be and virtue appears” (Günther, “Advice for Teachers,” 121).

(63.) All Qur’anic citations are from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds. and trans., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

(64.) Qtd. in Niasse, *Jawāhir al-Rasā'il*, 56.

(65.) William Chittick, "Sufism and the Qur'an," in *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 1739–1740.

(66.) Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), i.

(67.) Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–82*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 19.

(68.) Qtd. in Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 122.

(69.) Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, 121. Moreover, many missionaries and colonial officials seem to have sincerely believed in the "civilizing mission" of the colonial project, bringing African "heathens" into the "light" of Christianity, modern European culture, and civilization.

(70.) See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

(71.) Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, 126.

(72.) Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, 129.

(73.) Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, 128.

(74.) J. A. C. Brown, "Is Islam Easy to Understand or Not?: Salafis, the Democratization of Interpretation and the Need for the Ulema." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 26, no. 2 (2014): 117–144.

(75.) Brown, "Is Islam Easy." However, in this article, Brown also cautions that this position is often more rhetorical than real as most Salafi scholars uphold a hierarchy of knowledge, and many advise against autodidacticism, stressing the importance of studying a text with a teacher for absorbing the "piety and etiquette" (*adab*) of the scholar (Brown, "Is Islam Easy," 141).

(76.) See Alexander Thurston, "The Salafi Ideal of Electronic Media as an Intellectual Meritocracy in Kano, Nigeria," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 4 (2015): 1058–1083.

(77.) Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 302, 306. Brenner also cautions that "it is important not to exaggerate the extent of this epistemic shift, which is both limited and uneven. It is probable that the vast majority of Malians, includ-

ing many products of French schooling, still operate under the influence of the esoteric *episteme* in many aspects of their lives” (Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge*, 307).

(78.) For example, Chanfi Ahmed has demonstrated the important role of African scholars who fled colonial conquest and settled in Saudi Arabia in the early 20th century. See Chanfi Ahmed, *West African ‘ulamā’ and Salafism in Mecca and Medina: Jawab al-Ifriqi: The Response of the African* (Boston: Brill, 2015); and Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, ch. 8.

(79.) See Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, ch. 8; and Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

(80.) See Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, ch. 7; Zachary V. Wright, “Traditional Islam and Pedagogical Change: The Majlis and the Madrasa in Medina-Baye, Senegal,” *Journal for Islamic Studies* 32 (2012): 92; and Stefan Reichmuth, *Islamische Bildung und soziale Integration in Ilorin (Nigeria) seit ca. 1800* (Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 1998). An important byproduct of the development of these mass education movements has been increased women’s participation in Islamic education. For example, see Muhammad Sani Umar, “Mass Islamic Education and Emergence of Female ‘ulama in Northern Nigeria: Background, Trends, and Consequences,” in *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, ed. Scott Reese, vol. 2 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 99–120.

(81.) Roman Loimeier, *Between Social Skills and Marketable Skills: The Politics of Islamic Education in 20th Century Zanzibar* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 162.

(82.) See Wright, “Traditional Islam.”

(83.) This is in large part because of the example and profile of Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, the founder of Zaytuna College, who studied in Mauritania for a time with the famed scholar Muhammad Ould Fahfu, known as Murābit al-hājj (d. 2018).

(84.) See Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, chs. 7, 8, and Epilogue.

(85.) Bruce S. Hall and Charles C. Stewart, “The Historic ‘Core Curriculum’ and the Book Market in Islamic West Africa,” in *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*, ed. Graziano Krätli and Ghislaine Lydon (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010): 109–174.

(86.) Ivor Wilks, “The Transmission of Islamic Learning in the Western Sudan,” in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Jack Goody (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 162–197; and Lamin Sanneh, *The Jakhanke: The History of an Islamic Clerical People of Senegambia* (London: International African Institute, 1979); and Renaud Santerre, *Pédagogie musulmane d’Afrique Noire* (Montreal, Canada: Presse de l’Université de Montréal, 1973).

(87.) John Weir Chamberlin. “The Development of Islamic Education in Kano City, Nigeria, with Emphasis on Legal Education in the 19th and 20th Centuries” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1975); and A. A. Batran, “The Kunta, Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti and the Of-

fice of Shaykh al-Tariqa al-Qadiriyya," In *Studies in West African Islamic History*, ed. J. R. Willis (London: F. Cass, 1979) 1:113–147.

(88.) Louis Brenner, *Réflexions sur le savoir islamique en Afrique d'Ouest* (Talence, France: Centre d'Étude d'Afrique Noire, University of Bordeaux, 1985).

(89.) Louis Brenner and Bintou Sanankoua, eds., *L'enseignement islamique au Mali* (Bamako, Mali: Jamana, 1991) ; and Seydou Cissé, *L'enseignement islamique en Afrique noire* (Paris: L'harmattan, 1992).

(90.) Hamidu Bobboyi, "The 'Ulama of Borno: A Study of the Relations between Scholars and State under the Sayfawa, 1470–1808" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1992; and Chouki El Hamel, "Transmission o, 62–87; and Stefan Reichmuth, "A Regional Centre of Islamic Learning in Nigeria: Ilorin and Its Influence on Yoruba Islam," in *Madrassa: La transmission du savior dans le monde musulman*, ed. Nicole Grandin-Blanc and Marc Gaborieau (Paris: Éditions Arguments, 1997), 229–245; and Stefan Reichmuth, "Islamic Education and Scholarship in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. N. Levtzion and R. L. Pouwels (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000).

(91.) Reese, *Transmission of Learning*; and Tal Tamari, "Islamic Higher Education in West Africa: Some Examples from Mali," *Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam* 4 (2002): 91–128.

(92.) Brigaglia, "Learning, Gnosis and Exegesis," 334–366.

(93.) S. Jeppie and S. B. Diagne, *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008).

(94.) Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge*.

(95.) Ware, *Walking Qur'an*, 15–16.

(96.) Ware, *Walking Qur'an*, 205.

(97.) Robert Launay and Rudolph T. Ware, "How (Not) to Read the Qur'an?: Logics of Islamic Education in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire," in *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*, ed. Robert Launay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 261. Similarly, Noah Salomon describes Sufi pedagogy as "practices based on the absence of knowledge for the average believer," adding that "pious goals can better be attained by recognizing one's depravity and lack of knowledge, and for this reason by entering into a relationship of strict discipline to one who knows" (Noah Salomon, "Evidence, Secrets, Truth: Debating Islamic Knowledge in Contemporary Sudan," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 3 [2013]: 820–851; see 824).

(98.) Wright, *Living Knowledge*, 15.

(99.) Zachary Wright, "Salafi Theology and Islamic Orthodoxy in West Africa," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 35, no. 3 (2015): 655. Robert Lau-

may, Adeline Masquelier, and Hannah Hoechner have also articulated similar critiques of Ware's argument; and Wright, "Salafi Theology."

(100.) Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, 204.

(101.) Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu*, 205.

(102.) Rüdiger Seesemann, "'Ilm and Adab Revisited: Knowledge Transmission and Character Formation in Islamic Africa,'" in *The Piety of Learning: Islamic Studies in Honor of Stefan Reichmuth*, ed. Michael Kemper and Ralf Elger (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 35.

(103.) Seesemann, "Toward a Relational Perspective," 253.

(104.) Seesemann, "Toward a Relational Perspective," 254.

(105.) Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

(106.) Hannah Hoechner, *Qur'anic Schools in Northern Nigeria: Everyday Experience of Youth, Faith, and Poverty* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

(107.) Ware, *Walking Qur'an*, 207.

(108.) Bâ, *Amkoullel*; and Ahmadu Bello, *My Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

(109.) Cook and Malkāwī, *Classical Foundations*.

(110.) Rudolph Ware, Zachary Wright, and Amir Syed, *Jihad of the Pen: The Sufi Literature of West Africa* (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2018).

(111.) Sankore Institute of Islamic-African Studies Digital Archive.

(112.) Barrāda, *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*

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