Sufism and Ifa: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions

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Sufism and Ifa: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions

Abstract

This dissertation examines and compares the epistemologies of two of the most popular West African intellectual traditions: Tijani Sufism and Ifa. Employing theories native to the traditions themselves and contemporary oral and textual sources, I examine how these traditions answer the questions: What is knowledge? How is it acquired? and How is it verified? Or more simply: “What do you know?,” “How did you come to know it?,” and “How do you know that you know?” After analyzing each tradition separately, and on its own terms, I compare them to each other and to certain contemporary, Western theories.

Despite having relatively limited historical contact, the epistemologies of both traditions appear to be based on forms of self-knowledge in which the knowing subject and known object are one. As a result, ritual practices that transform the knowing subject are key to cultivating these modes of knowledge. Therefore, I argue that like the philosophical traditions of Greek antiquity, the intellectual or philosophical dimensions of Tijani Sufism and Ifa must be understood and should be studied as a part of a larger project of ritual self-transformation designed to cultivate an ideal mode of being, or way of life, which is also an ideal mode of knowing. I further assert that both traditions offer distinct and compelling perspectives on, and approaches to, metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, psychology, and ritual practice, which I suggest and begin to develop through comparison.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to thank my parents, Dr. Babatunde and Anna Ogunnaike for their love, support, example, and for teaching me to love to learn. Neither this work nor any other achievement would be possible without them.

Next I would like to thank my wife, Mrs. Naseemah Mohamed Ogunnaike, for her understanding, unflagging support, humour, care, and for her efforts in helping me edit this work, and most of all, for making me feel like the most beloved and blessed man in the world, even whilst writing a dissertation.

Next I would like to thank my brothers, Ayodeji and Olumakinde Ogunnaike, who have supported this project from its inception in every conceivable way. Even though they are both younger than me, I look up to them in many ways, and words cannot express the gratitude I feel for their generosity, ideas, encouragement, edits, selfless help, and inspiring conversations.

I am also deeply grateful to my advisor Prof. Jacob Olupona for his tireless support of me and my work, and for giving me the freedom to explore my ideas with confidence.

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Prof. Ousmane Kane and the entire Kane family, Sidi Ben Omar Kane, Sidi Mohamed Kane, Shaykhah Maryam Niassé, and especially Zeynabou Kane, for their incredible hospitality, generosity, kindness, friendship, insights on and interest in this project. The knowledge and experiences they shared with me, not to mention the doors they opened, are what have made this project possible.

I would also like to thank Prof. Agboola, Fajimi Faniyi and especially the Araba of Modakeke, Ifarunwale Ogundiran, for sharing their wisdom, time, knowledge, and for their patience and instruction. I would also like to extend my appreciation to my friend Wale Bukola for his selfless support and friendship during my stays in Nigeria, and I must also thank Prof. Šola Ajibade and Prof. David Ogungbile for their insights and help during my research there. I am also grateful to my Uncle Şeu, Aunty Bimbo, and the rest of my family in Nigeria for going out of their way to take care of and host their “Fulani Man” on his travels.

I am also grateful to Professors Khaled el-Rouayheb, Barry Hallen, and David Carrasco for his consistent help, support, and scholarly example. I am also profoundly appreciative of the care, attention, and encouragement of Prof. James Morris, whose classes and seminars on Ibn ‘Arabi and the Islamic humanities have deeply enriched my life and thinking.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Shaykh Māhī Niassé, Pape Makkī, Pape Mahdi, Shaykh Māhī Cissé, Shaykh Tijānī ‘Alī Cissé, and especially the late Ustahd Barham Diop and Sidi Inaya Niang, for generously sharing their precious time, knowledge, and profound insights with me.

For their encouragement, guidance, support, and inspiration, I am also sincerely grateful to Zachary Wright, Rudolph Ware, and Rüdiger Seesemann.

Many heartfelt thanks go out as well to my friends, Abubakar Sadiq Abdulkadir, Shaykh Moustapha Niang, Mehdī Boutayeb, Yousef Casewit, Alison Cohen, Shankar Nair, Nariman Aavani, and Nicholas Boylston, who have all supported me and my work over the years.

I would also like to offer my gratitude to the Awan and Moneeb families for their hospitality and support during this project.

And last, but certainly not least, I must thank Gholamreza Aavani and especially Seyyed Hossein Nasr for introducing me to the living presence of philosophy and showing me what it means to truly love wisdom.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

*Are those who know equal with those who know not? But only men of understanding will remember.*

Qur'an 39:9

*So ask the people of remembrance (dhikr) if you do not know*

Qur’an 16:43

*Odo to ba gbagbe orison o ma gbe ni*

The spring that forgets its origin will run dry

-Yoruba proverb

While browsing through a bookstore during my freshman year of college, I saw the title of a book that got me so excited that I almost shouted. The book was entitled *African Philosophy*, an anthology edited by Emmanuel Eze. I bought the book on the spot and ran into a few trees and lampposts on my way home because I couldn’t take my eyes off the book. But the more I read, the more my excitement cooled into disappointment. Aside from one or two articles, the book’s title seemed to me to be false advertisement. I felt as if I had bought an album labeled “The Royal Drummers of Burundi,” but when I played the music, it was Taylor Swift—enjoyable in its own right, but not what I was looking for.

A little bit of context will help explain why I felt this way. At the time, I had been reading, spellbound, a translation of al-Ghazzālī’s *Deliverance from Error* while borrowing the books and handouts from my roommate’s Indian Philosophy course, most of which were translations of mind-blowing primary texts by Buddhist philosophers such as Nagarjuna (d. 250 CE) and Dignaga (d. 540) and the Vedantin philosophers Adi Shankara (9th-C CE) and Sri Harṣa (d. 1180 CE). In middle school and high school, (besides the books on Greek and Norse mythology that my brothers and I wore the spines off), my favorite book was another anthology, *Classics of Philosophy* edited by Louis Pojman, which contained the equally astonishing (at least to me at the time) excerpts of the writings of some of the most influential
figures in Western Philosophy from the Pre-Socratics to Wittgenstein, along with short introductions designed to contextualize the readings and make them more accessible. So when I saw Eze’s anthology, I was excited to have my mind blown again, but this time, by the thinkers and traditions of Africa! I was expecting to be introduced to radically new ways of seeing the world (as Indian Philosophy had done), to have my assumptions exposed and challenged (as both Indian and Western Philosophy did), and to find the concepts, words, and origins for and of some of the ideas I already had half-formed in my head.

Instead, I found a group of academic articles, almost exclusively by Western-trained scholars, about what should count as African Philosophy, and about the philosophy of race, gender, slavery, and colonialism, etc. Almost all of the articles in the book seemed to be talking about talking about the things I wanted to read about,¹ and virtually all of them seemed written from a perspective with which I had become familiar through years of schooling, but in which I never fully felt at home. With the exception of an article by the 17th C Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob, I felt more at home in the works of Ghazzālī, Nagarjuna, Plotinus, St. Augustine and even Kierkegaard, Hume, Berkeley, Spinoza, and Wittgenstein, than I did in the articles of the African Philosophy anthology. I remember asking myself, “If this was African Philosophy, and I’m African, should I just suck it up and learn to love it, like I do with my Great-Aunt’s moin-moin (bean cakes)?” “Is there no African equivalent to Greek, European, Indian, and Islamic Philosophy?” “Does it matter if there is or is not? Should it matter?”

¹The only articles that piqued my interest and sincere appreciation at the time were Chinua Achebe’s articles on Igbo cosmology and art, Wole Soyinka’s article “The Fourth Stage,” Kwame Gyeyke’s article on the Akan conception of the “self,” and my favorite reading of the book, the 17th C Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob’s reflections on “God, Faith, and the Nature of Knowledge.”
A little over a decade later, I now have a bit of perspective on this important experience of disappointment. Part of the problem, I think, was that I was looking for the wrong thing. I was looking for an *African version* of the works of philosophy with which I already had some familiarity—that is I was looking for a written treatise with clearly-stated premises, standard logical arguments, refutations of other known positions, and relatively clear conclusions that defined the author’s position on a certain topic. I already knew what I was looking for and was just hoping to find a new flavor or style that perhaps had some resonances with my ancestry and upbringing. What I have since concluded is that while the works of many African intellectuals fit this description (such as those of the neo-Platonic, North and North-East African Christian, and the even more voluminous Islamic traditions of the continent), part of what makes the indigenous philosophies or intellectual traditions of the continent so interesting and worthy of study are the ways in which they *do not* fit this description. Practitioners of African traditions such as Ifa pursue knowledge and truth and engage in critical debates with one another, but they do so in very different ways, ways that I may not have recognized as philosophy back in the bookstore in 2003 during my freshman year of college.

Because of this, not only was I not looking for the right thing, I was also not looking in the right place. I began to realize this while reading Amadou Hampaté Bâ, the seminal Malian belle-lettrist, activist, and scholar of traditional West African culture, literature, religion, and thought. A Tijani Sufi himself, Bâ quotes his master Tierno Bokar’s observation, “Writing is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is the photographing of knowledge, but it is not knowledge itself. Knowledge is a light which 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.”² Or more succinctly, as Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (one of the focal points of this study) was fond of saying, “Secrets are in the chests (ṣudūr) of the spiritual heroes (rijāl), not in the bellies of books.”³ Thus I came to realize that in order to find what I was looking for back in the bookstore, I would have change my ideas about what philosophy looks like and where I could find it.

The present work is the result of this effort to learn about, learn from, learn with, and present, two “ways of knowing” popular in West Africa: Tijani Sufism and Ifa. The term “ways of knowing” has two meanings: 1) the process or manner in which something is known, and 2) a program, a path, a way of life characterized by knowledge. In this work, I present an account of the “ways of knowing” (first meaning) that are used in Tijani Sufism and Ifa, which are themselves, “ways of knowing” (second meaning).

Ifa and the West African branches of Tijani Sufism are perhaps the most widespread and influential of African religious traditions, claiming thousands and perhaps millions of adherents throughout the continent as well as in Europe, North America, East Asia, the Middle East (Sufism), and Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean (Ifa). Texts and spiritual leaders of West African origin have wide influence and authority in these traditions, both of which have their geographic centers in the region: Ile-Ife, Nigeria for Ifa, and Medina Baye, Senegal for the most widespread branch of Tijani order, the Fayḍah, founded by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. While issues of “African” authenticity are largely outside the scope of this project, both traditions had a significant presence in pre-colonial West Africa. Moreover, the practices and opinions of communities in Senegal and Nigeria are regarded as authoritative


and normative by many adherents around the globe, and people come from around the world
to study with babalawo (priests of Ifa) in Ile-Ife and Shaykhs (Sufi masters) in Medina Baye.
There is a modest, but growing secondary literature on these traditions in European languages,
which attests to the intellectual sophistication and wide appeal of both traditions. Thus Tijani
Sufism and Ifa represent two different African worldviews and ways of knowing, similar in
transnational appeal and profound influence. In this work, after providing a brief introduction
to each tradition (Chapters 2 and 4), I discuss how each tradition defines knowledge, how
these forms of knowledge are acquired, and how they are verified (Chapters 3 and 5). Finally,
I conclude with a comparison of these two traditions to each other and to contemporary
academic perspectives.

Theory and Methodology

In light of the difficulties alluded to above, prominent scholars from a wide range of
disciplines, including Latin American Studies, South Asian Studies, Sociology,
Anthropology, The Study of Religion, Islamic Studies, History, and African Studies have
proposed the development of a “theory from the south” or “indigenous theory.” For example,
the scholar of Yoruba art, Babatunde Lawal writes,

Unfortunately, some scholars have become so obsessed with theories which attempt to relate
the “particular” to the “universal” that their conclusions often reflect the Eurocentric bias of
the theories per se rather than the traditions of the culture they purport to analyze. Moreover,
the search for paradigms often results in intellectual fantasies that mystify rather than clarify
the subject being studied. A number of scholars… have called for a new critical approach that
will allow African traditions to be studied on their own terms, instead of being viewed through
Eurocentric lenses… [While] it would be unreasonable to suggest that only insiders can write
intelligibly about a given culture, what is urgently needed, as Henry Gates has pointed out, is a
method that enables a given culture to speak for itself about its nature and various functions,
rather than to read it, or analyse it, in terms of... theories borrowed whole from other traditions,
appropriated from without.4

4 Lawal, Babatunde The Gèlèdé spectacle : Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture. (Seattle:
University of Washington Press, 1996), xvi. Similarly, another scholar (I can’t remember who) said, “Far too
often, theory becomes a celebration of ourselves, a tool of subjugation and domestication.”
This dynamic is particularly troublesome when the theories and the theorized differ in power, place, and culture, but is especially so when they differ radically in their worldviews and philosophies that define “power, place, and culture.” It’s hard enough for an American university student to understand an English-language article about colonial history written by a West African academic, but it can be an even more complicated task to get the same student to understand an Arabic poem by a West African Sufi, because the worldviews expressed therein are even more different. However, from another perspective (perhaps that of the Sufi poet), the poem could be easier to understand than the article, because it addresses universal matters of the heart, at least more so than the academic work. These dynamics illustrate the inescapable effects of perspective and theory and highlight just how important this call for new methods that allow cultures and traditions to “speak for themselves” is.

However, I think such methods are not necessarily “new,” as the seminal works of Ananda Coomaraswamy on Asian Art and Philosophy, Toshihiko Izutsu on East Asian and Islamic Philosophy, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William Chittick on Islamic Philosophy and Sufism, to name but a few, demonstrate. What all of these figures have in common is a strong grasp of Western philosophy and a remarkably profound understanding not only of the languages of the traditions they study, but also of the metaphysics and epistemologies of these traditions, with which they have a great affinity, and even identity. Moreover, their works are largely presented from the perspective, and in the terms of, the traditions studied, and so one frequently finds Arabic, Persian, Chinese, and Sanskrit terms, not “sprinkled in for flavoring,” but as the fundamental categories of thought and analysis. Additionally, they all emphasize the relevance of the works and figures they study, not merely for an academic understanding of the intellectual, artistic, or political history of a particular sector of humanity, but for the
merits of their arguments and their relevance to the art of being human, a position very much in-line with the traditions themselves. Thus, at times, these works can seem to stretch the contemporary conventions of academic language and genre, although never abandoning scholarly rigor.

The present work is inspired by Toshihiko Izutsu’s groundbreaking tome, *Sufism and Taoism*,\(^5\) which demonstrates the power of taking two non-Western thinkers and their arguments seriously on their own terms (much as academics would with figures like Spinoza or Descartes) and the profound insights that can emerge from comparison. William Chittick’s books on the Sufi masters and thinkers Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi (d. 1273)\(^6\) have also been particularly useful in demonstrating how to let texts and traditions “speak for themselves.” These books mostly consist of original translations from the primary texts of these two figures, but through careful arrangement, discussion, and contextualizations of these texts, what emerges is much more than a straightforward translation, it is a masterful exposition of the *oeuvre* of a thinker, almost entirely in his own words, and seemingly from his own perspective.

* Ibn ‘Arabi as a Theorist

Another one of Chittick’s works, *Imaginal Worlds*, invites us to consider Ibn ‘Arabi, known as the Shaykh al-Akbar, “the greatest master,” as a theorist of religion. Chittick writes,

> The bewildering diversity of religion’s historical actuality is accentuated by the great variety of methodological approaches that are employed by specialists to study religion. Each of these approaches makes important contributions to our understanding of religion’s nature, but most are firmly rooted in the experience of modernity undergone by the West…. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s

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perspective on religion differs profoundly from that of contemporary Western methodologies in its assumptions about the role and function of human beings in the cosmos. Of course, most scholars of religion do not voice their assumptions on such matters, but it is precisely the unspoken assumptions that provide the greatest commonality among them. These assumptions are perhaps easier to express in negative than positive terms. For example, modern scholarship in contrast to traditional Islamic scholarship does not presuppose an ultimate reality that unifies all of existence, a clear purpose to human life, a moral dimension to both human activity and the natural world, the divine origin of religion, or the truth of scripture.  

For the purposes of the present study, Ibn ‘Arabi is quite suitable as a theorist since he is by far the most influential theorist of the Sufi tradition itself, and his works are commonly cited in the Tijani tradition. But, in general, the Shaykh al-Akbar’s work is uniquely suited to this task not only because of its subtlety, depth, and dizzying breadth, but also because of its unique understanding of different perspectives on or theories of the Real (al-Ḥaqq, one of the 99 Names of God in Islam). For Ibn ‘Arabi, the Islamic declaration of unity (tawḥīd), “there is no god but God,” (lā ilāha illā Llāh) therefore also means: “there is no reality but The Reality.” This “Ultimate Reality,” by virtue of its nature is also all-Powerful (“there is no power but God”), all-Living (“there is no life but God), and all-Knowing (there is no knower but God), etc. By virtue of being all-Knowing, this Ultimate Reality must know itself both in and of itself, and as another, or if you like, both perfectly and imperfectly. Thus creation came into being as means for this Reality to know itself both in itself and as another. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi often describes the cosmos as a “mirror of non-Being” or a “dream” of the Real, in which it can contemplate Itself as not-Itself. While everything in a dream is distinct, but also nothing other than the dreamer, the characters through which the dreamer experiences the

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7 William Chittick, Imaginal Worlds: Ibn Al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 6. On the same page he adds, “Even scholars who speak as Christian theologians tend to bow to the assumptions of modern thought. If they refuse to do so, they often assume the superiority or ultimacy of the Christian religion and devalue other religions appropriately, and of course they are likely to be ignored by the academy. Those Christian theologians who attempt to avoid exclusiveness often end up doing away with features that most Christians consider essential to their faith…. [In relation to what modern scholarship does not assume] one might reply that Christian fundamentalists, for example, do presuppose some or most of these things, and that they do not play an honored role in academic circles. I would add that they are also not known for the subtlety of their interpretative techniques or their positive evaluation of religious plurality.”
dream are somehow different. Because the dreamer (the Real) “sees through their eyes” they are more directly connected to him, therefore to everything else in the dream. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s account, these “dreamers in the dream” are human beings, and their diverse and unique perspectives on and beliefs about reality, are described as so many “self-portraits” of the Real (Ibn ‘Arabi calls them “gods created in belief”). Because they are just representations, they are not and cannot be confused with the Real itself, but because there is no other reality save the Real, they are also identical with the Real, like images in so many mirrors.

Ibn ‘Arabi describes all of these different approaches (religious or not) to reality as “knots” in the fabric of reality, because they represent so many limitations of the Real. To mix metaphors, as “dreamers in the dream,” human beings are only truly themselves, and therefore truly happy, when they “wake up inside the dream” or “untie all of their knots,” and fulfill their function of knowing the Real. Ibn ‘Arabi calls this “knot-free” state, the “station of no station” or the “perspective of no perspective”—the perspective the Real has on Itself. Because the Real wants to be known, or because God is Merciful, concerned with human felicity, He helps guide people towards felicity, towards knowledge of the Real, that is, He helps them untie their knots (or from another perspective, He unties the knots in Himself). This is usually accomplished through the forms of religions, which as particular limited self-portraits of the Real, are knots in themselves. However, they have the distinction of being knots that undo other knots, including themselves. These “not-knots” and the process of untwisting they involve require the use of both reason and imagination. The function of reason is analytic, to distinguish between the Real and its manifestations, the dreamer and the dream. The function of imagination is synthetic, to connect the manifestations to the Real, to see the dreamer in the dream. Because the purpose of religion is to connect human beings back to the
Real, religious forms often emphasize imagination through poetic language and ritual symbolism. However, when taken too far, imagination leads to confusing and conflating the dream and the dreamer; while if reason is taken too far, it destroys the imaginal coherence of the religion, and makes the dreamer (the Real) seem out of reach, if not out of the picture altogether. Thus, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, people must learn to “see with two eyes,” reason and imagination, in order to untie their knots.

But what does all of this have to do with theories and methodologies of religion?

Chittick explains,

Any methodology can be nothing but a knot in terms of which reality is construed. In the name of objectivity or other norms, certain assumptions are made about experienced reality. Modern methodologies are often considered to have achieved a superior view of things because of their critical approach, but the belief that one's approach is "critical" already represents a particularly intractable knot. As the Shaykh would point out, the gods of critical belief have no privileged place in the pantheon. God is also the Critic, no doubt, but God as the Guide has a far greater claim to human loyalty... But the Real demands the predominance of undifferentiation over differentiation, gentleness over severity, and mercy over wrath. One ignores this fact at one's peril. In this sort of context, the Shaykh likes to quote the hadith qudsī [divine saying] in which the Real says, "I am with My servant's opinion of Me, so let him have a good opinion of Me."*8

He then sketches an outline of an Akbarī (Ibn ‘Arabi-based) approach to the study of religion,

Ibn al-'Arabi's approach provides a predisposition toward the study of religion that is also a knot, no doubt. Nevertheless, by recognizing the existence of knots and appreciating their value, and by acknowledging the position (perhaps never attainable) of untying all knots, this approach may provide certain insights unavailable to other points of view. By taking up the Shaykh's standpoint, one is predisposed to deal with religious diversity as follows: Religion appears among human beings because the Real as Guide desires to bring about human wholeness and felicity. But manifestations of the Guide can never embrace the total truth the Real as such, which lies beyond expression and form. Hence each religion has its own specific mode of expression that is necessarily different from other modes of expression.... The specific imaginal forms that guidance assumes in a given religion will be determined by the cultural and linguistic receptacles as much as by the specific self-disclosure of the Guide—the prophet, avatara, buddha, sage—who initiates the religion. In the last analysis, these two sides of reality are inseparable: The cultural and linguistic receptacles, like the revelations, are self-disclosures of the Real. "The water assumes the color of its cup," but the cup is nothing but frozen water.*9

Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi’s unique appreciation of the diverse and differing perspectives (self-portraits

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*8 Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 174.

*9 Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 174-5.
of the Real) on reality, his understanding and use of both of rational and imaginal modes of
discourse and thought, and his sensitive appreciation of socio-historical context without
becoming reductionist all make him a compelling theorist. Moreover, as a result of the
“theory” outlined above, Ibn ‘Arabi takes each of these “knots” or perspectives seriously “on
their own terms,” since each is a Divine self-portrait that reveals aspects of the Real not
contained in any other. Thus he writes,

Beware of becoming delimited by a specific knotting and disbelieving in everything else, lest
great good escape you. . . . Be in yourself a matter for the forms of all beliefs, for God is wider
and more tremendous than that He should be constricted by one knotting rather than another.10

And elsewhere advises,

He who counsels his own soul should investigate, during his life in this world, all doctrines
concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity
of his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is
correct for him who holds it, then he should support it in the case of him who believes in it.11

For this reason, in his writings, Ibn ‘Arabi constantly shifts between different perspectives,
always evaluating the topic at hand from multiple points of view, in a manner that
contemporary theorists would call “perspectivist” or “polyvocal.”12 Ibn ‘Arabi’s peculiarly
flexible style of arguing from and for multiple different positions (while still remaining
mysteriously coherent) is such that even if you do not agree with him or all of his arguments,
his undeniable acumen forces you to see the issue at hand from new perspectives, and always
illuminates the issues at stake in these various discussions. Ibn ‘Arabi gave answers (many,
many different answers) to many questions similar to those we would ask of a contemporary
theorist of religion: “What is the relationship between practice and doctrine?” “What is the

10 qtd. in Chittick Imaginal Worlds, 176.
11 Ibid.
12 See Eduardo Batalha Viveiros De Castro and Peter Skafish (trans). Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-
structural Anthropology. (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014) for a somewhat similar effort based on the
“perspectivism” of indigenous Amazonian peoples.
purpose of prayer?” “What is knowledge?” “What is truth?” “Who has the authority to answer these questions, and why?” As Chittick notes,

His great popularity over the centuries has to do with the fact that "He has an answer for everything." Of course, the Shaykh addressed these answers to questions that had been posed by Muslim intellectuals, but the underlying issues are by no means unique to Islamic civilization. Once his overall worldview is grasped, it is easy to understand that his answers are utterly coherent with a certain view of reality, and that this view—whether or not we agree with it—leaves nothing out of account.13

Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi is ideally suited to serve as a model and a theorist for approaching religious traditions, particularly those that appear to have much in common with his plural metaphysics. Here it is important to note that my understanding of Ibn ‘Arabi has been profoundly influenced, not only by the works of William Chittick, but also those of Michel Chodkiewicz, Claude Addas, Denis Gril, Toshihiko Izutsu, Caner Dagli, and James Morris. Professor Morris’ multi-year reading seminar on Ibn ‘Arabi’s most influential work, the Ringstones of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam) has also had a tremendous influence on my understanding of the Shaykh al-Akbar, as have private sessions and discussions with Dr. Gholamreza Aavani (currently of Peking University) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

Nevertheless, while I use Ibn ‘Arabi a great deal in presenting Tijani Sufism, when presenting Ifa, a non-Islamic tradition of at least equally staggering profundity, breadth, subtlety, and insight, I try to use the terms, categories, and theories of the tradition itself. From time to time, in explaining Ifa, I also contrast and compare Ifa to other traditions in order to clear-up confusions and false analogies that I anticipate may arise in the mind of the reader. As Abrahamic traditions, Christianity and Islam share a great deal of intellectual history, terms, and conceptual categories, and thus the categories of Sufism typically require less of an explanation for Western-educated readers (whatever their religious affiliation) than

13 Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 6.
do those of Ifa.

**Comparative Methodology**

As cited above, my approach to philosophy owes a great deal to the insights of Pierre Hadot, and to Emmanuel Eze’s critiques of Enlightenment racial theories. However, my overall philosophical orientation has been most profoundly influenced by the contemporary Islamic philosophers Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Gholamreza Aavani, with whom I have had the privilege of studying several works of Sufism (‘Irfān) and Islamic Philosophy (Ḥikmah). These sessions have often involved comparisons with both traditional and modern Western Philosophy. My coursework and discussions with Khaled el-Rouayheb on issues in Western and Islamic philosophy have also been illuminating and formative.

In this work, I also draw on Barry Hallen’s work in comparing Yoruba and Western epistemologies. One of Hallen’s most important insights is that when moving back and forth between different traditions, discourses, or languages, one has to be careful to understand the role that each term plays in its own context before constructing equivalencies and translations. His masterful analysis of the categories of “witchcraft” in English vs. “Ajẹ” in Yoruba and of “knowledge and belief” in ordinary language and Anglophone philosophical discourse and “imọ and ịgbagbọ” in the discourse of Yoruba ritual specialists (oniṣegun) inspired my own methods in comparing forms of “knowledge” in Ifa and Tijani Sufism.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s kaleidoscopic method of shifting perspectives also deeply influenced the way I conduct and present these comparisons: examining Tijani Sufism from the perspective of Ifa, examining Ifa from the perspective of Tijani Sufism, and then examining certain topics from various positions within each of these traditions.

**Presentation**
As mentioned above, the formal structure of this dissertation was inspired by Izutsu’s Sufism and Taoism, while the method of presentation owes a great deal to William Chittick and to Ibn ʿArabi. However, to my surprise, in the course of writing, I found that I had unintentionally internalized some of the stylistic features of the writing of Shaykh Ibrahim Niassse (especially of his *Removal of Confusion*) and the discursive style of the Araba of Modakeke. I apologize for these poor imitations, and beg your indulgence, gentle reader, for the many long quotations and elaborate analogies.

*Brief Literature Reviews*

*Ifa*

The academic works of Bolaji Idowu, Wande Abimbola, William Bascom, Pierre Verger, Jacob Olupona, Wole Soyinka, Susanne Wenger, Ulli Beier, J.D.Y. Peel, Karin Barber, John Pemberton, Babatunde Lawal, Margaret and Henry Drewal, J. Lorand Matory, Andrew Apter, Noel Amherd, and especially Rowland Abiodun and Barry Hallen were also deeply influential in developing my appreciation and understanding of Ifa and my approach to the study of Yoruba artistic, religious, and intellectual traditions. While the works of all of these authors explore the rich theoretical resources of Ifa’s orature, ritual, and art, none of them focus specifically on Ifa as an intellectual tradition, although they employ it as such in their works. My coursework and conversations with Jacob Olupona were also deeply influential not only in my understanding of Ifa, but of my approach to “indigenous theory” and the study and representation of African worldviews and traditions. Moreover, my conversations with Professors Šola Ajibade, David Ogunbile, and Wale Bukola of Obafemi Awolowo University were also important and enlightening. My conversations with the practitioners of Ifa, especially the Araba of Modakeke, Prof. Agboola of Obafemi Awolowo University, and Fajimi Faniyi, have probably had the most influence on my theoretical
understanding of and orientations towards Ifa. I would be remiss if I did not also mention the influence of my brother Ayodeji Ogunnaike, a rising scholar of Ifa and Yoruba traditions, from whom I have learned a great deal, and who has forgotten more about Ifa than I will ever know.

Since the works of the authors mentioned above have mostly been summarized in a comprehensive article by Jacob Olupona, I will give a brief overview of some of the relevant literature on Ifa that has come out since the publication of that work.\(^\text{14}\)

Kola Abimbola’s brief, but comprehensive *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*,\(^\text{15}\) like Idowu’s *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*\(^\text{16}\) (to which it responds unnecessarily harshly in my opinion), provides an insightful account of traditional Yoruba beliefs, well-supported by interviews and citations from the orature of Ifa. Abimbola’s work is more personal and less scholarly than Idowu’s classic, which has both advantages and disadvantages, and as the author is a contemporary babalawo (priest of Ifa), the work has a particularly Ifa-centric perspective. While this book represents a good introduction to the contemporary and traditional worldview of a babalawo trained both in Ifa and Western academic institutions, it does not significantly engage with philosophical literature (which again has its advantages and disadvantages), and is not primarily concerned with Ifa as an intellectual tradition, although it does highlight many of its intellectual aspects.

On the other hand, Şegun Gbadegesin’s *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba*...

\(^{14}\) For a comprehensive review of the literature of these authors see Jacob Olupona. “The Study of Yoruba Religion Tradition In Historical Perspective.” *Numen* 40(3) Sep., 1993: 240-273.


Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities\textsuperscript{17} engages extensively with the academic literature on African philosophy and Yoruba ritual and religion, and moreover contains many detailed and fascinating presentations of facets of traditional Yoruba thought and life. However, the analyses of these concepts are often uncritically done within the categories, and from perspectives of, various Western philosophies.

Velma Love’s Divining the Self: A Study in Yoruba Myth and Human Consciousness\textsuperscript{18} is a concise, sensitive ethnography of Ifa divination practice amongst African-American communities in South Carolina (Oyo\-tunji Village) and New York. Her insightful interviews and observations of ritual performance mark significant contributions to the little-studied practice of Ifa amongst African-American communities. Her discussion of “destiny” (ori) is quite insightful, and her work seeks to expand the understanding of “scripture” in the case of Ifa.

Noel Amherd’s carefully-researched Reciting Ifa: Difference, Heterogeneity, and Identity\textsuperscript{19} argues forcefully and convincingly that the “verses” of the orature of Ifa should be understood as performances, not as fixed texts, and draws several important conclusions from this shift in perspective. While Amherd is remarkably sensitive to the worldviews of the babalawo with whom he works, and some of the ways in which these worldviews differ from contemporary, Western worldviews, his jargon-heavy poststructuralist analyses of these differences obscures as often as it clarifies. While this work represents an important effort to


acknowledge the distinct features of Ifa performance and theorize about and from these unique positions, the theoretical categories of these analyses are virtually all drawn from poststructuralist theories.

Perhaps the work whose goals seem most similar to my own is Omotade Adegbindin’s *Ifa in Yoruba Thought System*, which sets out to “prove that Ifa, an oral text of the Yoruba, is philosophical”  

(although that is *not* the goal of this project). Like the present work, Adegbindin also evaluates the history of Western philosophy and its Eurocentric biases, and furthermore, his book contains an insightful discussion of “Ifa and the Consequences of Literacy.” Moreover, the work contains many verses of Ifa not found elsewhere in the literature. In general, however, the work suffers from a superficial engagement with the ideas and thinkers it cites, and often lapses into long discussions about which category of which Western theory Ifa qualifies as (pragmatist, foundationalist, etc.) instead of positively defining and asserting the categories of the tradition itself. Finally, Adegbindin’s work can be characterized as a set of often insightful ruminations on various topics of “philosophical” interest in light of verses of Ifa, while the present work is concerned with the ways in which knowledge is described, acquired, and verified in Ifa, and insofar as it is interested in describing Ifa as “philosophical,” it is as “a way of life,” and not as an indigenous example of various positions found in Western philosophical discourse.

*Tijani Sufism*

The works of historians David Robinson, Jean-Louis Triaud, John Hunwick, Roman Loimeier, and Mervyn Hiskett as well as the more interdisciplinary/Islamic studies works of Amadou Hampaté Bâ, Louis Brenner, Ousmane Kane, Andrea Brigaglia, Joseph Hill and

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especially those of Rüdiger Seesemann and Zachary Wright have been influential in shaping my understanding of Tijani Sufism, especially the branch of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, the subject of the present study. Although not directly related to Tijani Sufism, the works of Cheikh Anta Babou and Rudolph Ware have provided inspiring and insightful examples of new approaches to the study of Sufism in West Africa, and new ways to think about epistemology in the tradition. Furthermore, my conversations and correspondence with Rudolph Ware, Zachary Wright, Rüdiger Seesemann, and especially Ousmane Kane have been extremely important to my understanding of Tijani Sufism. Most influential, however, have been my conversations with Tijani Sufis in Dakar and Medina Baye, Senegal: Z.K., S.D., M.D., K.S. (interviewees who wished their identities to remain private), Abu Ibrahim, Thierno Mahmoud Oumar Athie, Shaykh Boubacar N’Diaye, Sidi Inaya Niang, Sidi Ben Omar Kane, Sidi Mohamed Kane, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Mahdi Niasse, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Makki Niasse, Ustadh Barham Diop, Shaykh Māḥī Niasse, Shaykh Māḥī Cissé, Baba Lamine Niasse, Shaykh Tijānī ‘Alī Cissé, Shaykhah Maryam Niasse, and Khalifah Shaykh Ahmad Tijāni Niasse, and the dozens of other disciples and masters who shared their time, knowledge, and experiences with me have profoundly shaped my approach to the tradition.

As above, I will briefly discuss some of the existing works on Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s branch of the Tijāniyyah in order to better define my project. Rüdiger Seesemann’s outstanding The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-century Sufi Revival is an intellectual history of the origins and early years of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s community. Drawing on extensive written sources in Arabic, the colonial archive, and interviews, it meticulously situates the practices, doctrines, and debates surrounding the

emergence of this important Sufi movement within the context of the historical Sufi tradition, as well as local and international political and religious contexts. Unlike the study of “indigenous” African religious traditions like Ifa, in general, the study of the Islamic intellectual traditions of the continent tends to pay careful attention to the traditions’ own categories of thought, as Seesemann’s careful work demonstrates. My own work differs from Seesemann’s in that it focuses on the contemporary community in Dakar and Medina Baye, and that it is interested less in intellectual history and more in providing an account of the epistemology of the contemporary tradition. The present work is less concerned with the context and history of the ideas and practices of Shaykh Ibrahim’s community than it is with providing a compelling exposition of them and how they “work.”

Joseph Hill’s dissertation “Divine Knowledge and Islamic Authority: Religious Specialization among Disciples of Baay Nas”\textsuperscript{22} is a sensitive anthropological study of the social relations and identity-construction of communities of disciples in Dakar, Kaolack and the surrounding Sine-Saloum region, and Mauritania. While the work contains several illuminating interviews and discussions of epistemological issues related to this branch of the Tijani order, this is not the main concern of the study. Zachary Wright’s dissertation, recently published as \textit{Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community of Ibrahim Niasse},\textsuperscript{23} probably comes the closest to the goals and methods of the present work. Wright uses the resources of the Islamic tradition in general, and that of Tijani Sufism in particular, to expand and deepen the academic concepts of “history,” “habitus,” “embodiment,” and

\textsuperscript{22} Joseph Hill, “Divine Knowledge and Islamic Authority: Religious Specialization among Disciples of Baay Nas” (Yale University, 2007). Dissertation.

“identity” in his study of the history and pedagogical methods of this particular tradition of Islamic scholarship. Wright achieves this through his extensive and intimate personal knowledge of the tradition, interviews, published Arabic works, as well as previously unexamined letters and notes. While Wright’s book covers some of the same ground as the present work, especially in his chapter entitled, “Knowing God,” the book can be characterized as more of an historical account of the traditions of learning and pedagogical practices of the community, in his words, “an account of Muslim identity in historical motion.” The present work seeks to be more of an intellectual exposition of the doctrines and practices of the community, placing more of an accent on the intellectual and philosophical (instead of the historical) rationales for and significance of the doctrines and practices of the tradition.

Finally, I should mention Valerie Hoffman’s remarkable *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* as another important model for the present work. In this book, the author first provides a deep textual examination of classical theories of Sufi doctrine and practice and then examines these concepts in the context of various Sufi and Coptic communities in Egypt in the late 1980’s, situating the contemporary Sufism in its political, religious, social, historical and doctrinal context. Hoffman’s accessible style and combination of classical texts and contemporary interviews, is something I seek to emulate in the present work. However, the structure of Hoffman’s work seemed to present an image of classical Sufi theory that is then translated into contemporary practice, and did not include many examples of contemporary Sufi texts or theoretical engagement with the classical tradition. In the present

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work, I have tried to illustrate contemporary Sufis’ active engagement with the classical Sufi tradition.

The Present Work

The primary purpose of the present work to provide philosophical accounts of the “ways of knowing” of the branch of Tijani Sufi order founded by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, and that of Ifa. That is, taking Hadot’s definition of philosophy as a “way of life,” I propose to critically examine how each tradition defines, acquires, and verifies “knowledge” through various ritual and discursive means—or in Hadot’s terms, through “spiritual exercises” and “philosophical discourse,” which can itself be a spiritual exercise. These accounts, for the most part, will be developed in the categories of the traditions themselves, and will attempt to represent the intellectual dimensions of these “ways of knowing” as a rigorously as possible.25

Basically, I ask the representatives of each tradition: “What do you know?”, “How did you come to know it?”, and “How do you know that you know it?,” and critically investigate and “think with”26 their responses as well as those provided by the texts, orature, and practices of each tradition.

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25 While many of the doctrines or aspects of the worldviews of Ifa and Tijānī Sufism presented here have been discussed in the works mentioned above, they have usually been done so with an emphasis on their historical or anthropological significance, and not their intellectual or philosophical relevance. That is, from the secondary literature one can get a general sense of what Tijānī Sufis and babalawo claim to know and do, but it is difficult to get a sense of the intellectual rigour, rhetorical force, and internal logic and coherence of the traditions from these accounts because they seldom focus on these philosophical dimensions. For example, many works on Tijānī Sufism describe the concept of the Ḍuṭb, an axial saint or friend of God, but I am not aware of any that demonstrate (or seek to), the logical necessity of a Ḍuṭb given certain fundamental premises of the tradition. While Ifa and Tijānī Sufism have all been admirably represented in the secondary literature, what I am attempting to do in this work is to “think with” these traditions the way Izutsu has done with Ibn ‘Arabi and Chuang Tzu, Bernard Faure has done with Chan/Zen traditions, or the way a book presenting the philosophy of Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, or Spinoza would.

26 See Faure, Bernard, and Janet Lloyd. Double Exposure: Cutting across Buddhist and Western Discourses. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004) for an exposition and many examples of “thinking with” Buddhist traditions.
That is, I attempt to not only ask how each tradition defines different forms of knowledge in the ways that it does, but also why, intellectually, it does so. I endeavor to not only outline the means of acquiring knowledge, but ask how and why these means yield this knowledge, and I try to explain not only how these forms of knowledge are verified in each of these traditions, but also investigate the theories of verification in each tradition. Taking care to respect the plurality of voices and opinions, I construct a representation of the epistemology of *ma'rifah* (gnosis) among contemporary disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim (Chapter 3) and of the epistemology of *imo ijinle* (deep knowledge) of contemporary babalawo (priests of Ifa) (Chapter 5). While my goal is not to write an apology for or defense of either Ifa or Tijani Sufism, if I have done my job well, and effectively communicated the ways in which these traditions “make sense” of and “make a case” for themselves, it may appear as such. This is because, following Ibn ‘Arabi’s lead, I make an effort to “learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his or her doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed in the specific mode in which it is correct for he or she who holds it, then I attempt to support it in the case of he or she who believes in it.”

The secondary purpose of this work is to, on the basis of these characterizations, construct a comparison of Ifa and Tijani Sufism. Although currently neighbors in Nigeria, Benin and in some places in the African Diaspora, Ifa and Tijani Sufism developed in radically different spiritual, intellectual, and cultural contexts. However, the epistemologies of both traditions appear to share certain structural traits that make comparison not only possible, but potentially fruitful. Namely, the epistemologies of both traditions seem to be based on a kind of self-knowledge, in which the knowing subject is identical with the known object. As such, these modes of self-knowledge are cultivated through various ritual practices, especially
the watershed rites of initiation, that are believed to transform the knowing subject, leading to a kind of identification with the founder of the tradition, who is conceived of as the perfect embodiment of knowledge. It should be noted that this structure is in no way unique to these two traditions, but it can be found in other religious traditions and forms of mysticism and philosophy around the world. Thus, I attempt to construct what Toshihiko Izutsu has called a “transhistorical” or “meta-historical” dialogue between Ifa and Tijani Sufism, to complement and perhaps enrich the limited, but ongoing historical dialogues between the two traditions.

That being said, I attempt to guard against facile and superficial comparisons through both the structure and method of this comparison. Following Izutsu, I divide the work into three parts: the first is an exploration of the epistemology of maˈrifah (direct knowledge) in Tijani Sufism; the second is an exploration of knowledge (specifically imọ ijinle, “deep knowledge”) in Ifa; and only in the third section do I attempt a comparison of the two traditions. Furthermore, this third part is further subdivided into four parts: In the first part, I present the opinions of practitioners of Ifa on Tijani Sufism, and then conduct a comparison of the two traditions from the perspective of Ifa. In the second part, I present the opinions of representatives of the Tijani tradition on Ifa, and then conduct a comparison from the perspective of Tijani Sufism. In the third part, I attempt to compare, and use the two traditions and Ibn ‘Arabi to “think through,” certain topics that emerge from the descriptions of the traditions given in first and second parts of the dissertation. Finally, in the fourth part, I take some of the points where Ifa and Tijani Sufism appear to converge and suggest ways in which their perspectives can expand conceptions of these points amongst contemporary academics.

**Metaphysics and Epistemology**

I decided to focus my research on epistemology or “ways of knowing” in these
traditions because it links their metaphysical doctrines and the rituals and practices designed
to realize or actualize them in the souls and bodies of their adepts. Without an understanding
of the epistemology of these traditions, one can study the doctrines of Sufism and remain
baffled by its rituals (what does the oneness of being have to do with sitting in a dark room
and repeating a name?), or conversely learn all about the rituals of Ifa and remain mystified
by its mythology (What do incantations and sacrifices have to do with the relationship
between the Supreme God and other deities?). Moreover, as the site where doctrine meets
practice, epistemology can provide important insights into both and their relationship to one
another.

From a certain point of view, the metaphysics or ontology of a given philosophical
system is the result of the application of a particular epistemology: it is a knowledge arrived at
through certain means. However, this epistemology itself is dependent on a particular
metaphysics or ontology, because this particular ontology will, in turn, determine a
psychology or anthropology: the nature of the knowing subject. In order to know something, I
have to put some practice of knowing into action. For example, I may come to the conclusion
that electrons exist through the application of a certain epistemological process. However, this
epistemological process is itself determined by a priori assumptions about the nature of
reality and knowledge (i.e. dreams in which the “spirits of electrons” tell me about themselves
do not count as valid knowledge). I have chosen to focus on the epistemological pole of this
philosophical loop, because it allows me to bracket some of the more difficult metaphysical
disparities between these African traditions and contemporary Western worldviews, and
explain how they arise.
Methods

This research is based on textual and oral sources, as well as my own observations during extended periods of research in Ile-Ifẹ and Modakekẹ Nigeria (June-August 2011 and September-December 2013); and in Dakar and Medina Baye, Senegal (January-February 2012 and January-May 2014). The oral sources from Senegal come primarily from formal interviews with Tijani Shaykhs conducted in Arabic and French, as well as formal interviews with disciples conducted primarily in French, but also in Arabic and English. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are direct and from recordings and transcriptions of these interviews. A few group discussions and interviews in which I participated (through the kind translation of friends) took place in Wolof, but the lack of Wolof oral sources is a major gap in the source material. My primary access to the community was through the incredible generosity of the Kane family, the sons and grandchildren of Shaykhah Maryam Niasse, the daughter of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. Through their mediation I was able to interview Shaykhs from several different branches of the family and spiritual lineage of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, and interact with a wide variety of disciples. Disciple interviews in Dakar primarily came from the time I spent in the zawiyahs of Baba Lamine, Shaykh Mamour Insa, Shaykh Babacar N’Diaye, the home of Shaykhah Maryam Niasse and “Keur Baye” in Dakar. As for textual sources, I made frequent reference to the Tijani sourcebooks Jawāhir al-Maʿānī27 and the collection Aḥzāb wa Awrād,28 as well as the prose works of Shaykh Ibrahim, particularly his collection of letters, Jawāhir al-rasāʾīl29, his Qu’ranic commentary, Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr30, his

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29 Jawāhir al-rasāʾīl wa-yaliyya ziyādat al-jawāhir al-ḥāwī baʿd ʿulūm wasilat al-wasāʾīl, edited by Aḥmad
Kāshīf al-Ilbās (translated as Removal of Confusion),\textsuperscript{31} and Maigari’s edition of his al-Sīr al-Akbar\textsuperscript{32}. Shaykh Ibrahim’s collections of poetry Dawāwīn al-Sīt, Jāmī’ al-jawāmī’ al-dawāwīn, and Sayr al-qalb were also frequently consulted, but seldom cited in the present work (the translations and analyses of these poems will hopefully form part of another work), which is another potential shortcoming. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Arabic sources are my own. I was a participant-observer in many communal prayers, and gatherings both formal and informal in Medina Baye and Dakar, but as a non-initiate, there were strict limits to my participation in these rites and discussions. As a matter of methodological integrity, I shared the drafts of my chapters on Tijani Sufism with the Anglophone disciples and shaykhs I interviewed, and have tried to incorporate their suggestions into the present work.

In Nigeria, oral sources came primarily from interviews and conversations with the babalawo, especially the Araba of Modakẹẹ, Professor Agboola, and Awo Fajimi Faniyi which were primarily conducted in Yoruba with some English, as well as informal conversations with apprentices (ọmọ awo). I made video recordings of performances of a number of Ifa verses with the Araba of Modakẹẹ, and Ayọdeji Ogunnaike’s digital database

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\textsuperscript{32} al-Sīr al-Akbar wa l-Kibrīt al-Aḥmar (ed. Maigari) in Maigari, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Aniyās [sic] al-Sinighāli hayatuhu wa arā uhu wa ta‘limuhu. (Beirut: Dar al-‘Arabiyyah, 1981), 410-59. Maigari, a former follower and opponent of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and the Tijānīyyah, edited and published Sīr al-akbar without the permission of Shaykh Ibrahim’s successors, as a part of a larger work whose aim was to expose and discredit Shaykh Ibrahim’s teachings.
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of Odu Ifa, which were also important oral sources. I was an observer, but not a participant, in the Araba’s daily practice of divination as well as several rites of worship and festivals. Textual collections of verses of Ifa such as William Bascom’s *Ifa Divination*, Epega and Neimark’s *The Sacred Ifa Oracle*, and Wande Abimbọla’s books were also important textual sources. I also shared several of my ideas and my chapters with the babalawo whom I interviewed, and have tried to incorporate their feedback.

**Conclusion**

However, the point of all of this research and theory and critical engagement with philosophy is to produce a work that would be able to speak to that seventeen-year old back in the bookstore. Hopefully, the present project can add to the growing literature that provides introductions to the intellectual dimensions and philosophical discourse of non-Western worldviews and traditions. Such literature is important not only because it introduces alternative perspectives on reality, knowledge, ethics, etc., into Western discourses, but because these perspectives can be compelling and transformative in their own right. At the very least, they can make us aware of unexamined assumptions and prejudices, and perhaps they can even help us “untie our knots,” as Ibn ʿArabi suggests. But this can only happen if we allow ourselves to take these traditions seriously, not only as anthropological curiosities or as historical data, but as serious, “philosophical” accounts of knowledge and knowing—if we take them “on their own terms.” Such serious consideration does not require that we embrace these traditions or blindly accept all of their claims, but rather, that we acknowledge the possibility that our difficulties in understanding them may have more to do with our history and training than with the particularities of the traditions themselves. This is much more

33 Accessible at [http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/odu-ifa](http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/odu-ifa)
easily said than done, but I hope the following chapters facilitate this kind of serious consideration and reflection. This is indeed a serious endeavor; for to take the epistemologies of Tijani Sufism and Ifa seriously on their own terms means to be open to possibilities that may seem foreign, strange or uncomfortable, such the possibility of a knowledge that is a discovery or remembrance of one’s true self, at once one’s Divine origin and destiny.34

34 As Amadou Hampaté Bâ writes, “to discover a new world, one must be able to forget one’s own; otherwise one merely carries that along with one and does not ‘keep one’s ears open.’ The Africa of the old initiates warns the young researcher, through the mouth of Tierno Bokar, the sage of Bandiagara: ‘If you wish to know who I am, If you wish me to teach you what I know, cease for a while to be what you are, and forget what you know.’” (“The Living Tradition” in Ki-Zerbo, J. (ed.) General History of Africa vol. 1: Methodology and African Prehistory, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 202-3.
Chapter 2: What is Tijani Sufism?

The light of Truth… is a darkness more brilliant than all other lights combined
-Shaykh Tierno Bokar

Over the past two centuries, Tijani Sufism has become one of the most influential and popular religious movements in West Africa. But before exploring the history of Tijani Sufism, we must first explain what it is. The term “Tijani Sufism” has two components, “Tijani” and “Sufism,” the former qualifying the latter. Sufism is an English term that roughly translates the Arabic term, taṣawwuf. Taṣawwuf, a term of uncertain origin,\(^{35}\) has been given thousands of definitions by its proponents\(^{36}\) including, “a reality without a form,“\(^{37}\) “the science of the Real,” “the science of hearts,” “acting upon knowledge,” “good manners,” “character,” “excellence,” “taste,” “sincerity,” “love,” “certainty,” and “seeing things as they really are.” For the purposes of this chapter, we will take taṣawwuf to be the name of the most popular and influential tradition of Islamic esoterism, mysticism, and spirituality.\(^{38}\) Here again we are confronted with a dichotomy: “Islamic” and “esoterism, mysticism, and

\(^{35}\) Some have hypothesized that it is derived from Suf, meaning wool, referring to the woolen garments that early ascetics often wore. Others connect it to the word Ṣafā’, which means purity. Still others think it refers to Ṣuffah (bench) and the Ahl al-Ṣuffah, the famous members of the early Islamic community who lived on this bench outside the Prophet’s mosque in Medina. Still others think the name comes from Ṣaff, meaning line or rank, the implication being that Sufis are the foremost in religion, like the first few rows in a mosque. The polymath al-Birūnī famously proffered the hypothesis that the term was derived form the Greek “Sophia,” however this is unlikely because the Greek “sigma” usually becomes the Arabic letter “ṣīn,” not the letter, “Ṣād,” but interestingly, Sophia, the capital of Bulgaria, is written with a “Ṣād.”


\(^{38}\) Ismaʿlism and Twelve Imām Shiʿism are also contain important esoteric Islamic traditions which are distinct from Sufism, not to mention traditions of esoteric Islamic Philosophy whose connection to Sufism is not necessarily explicit or clear (e.g. Ikhwan al-Safā’ and the later Ishrāqīyyūn).
spirituality.” Sufism is Islamic because it is derived from and based on the Islamic revelation, namely the Qur’an and the Sunnah (the example of the Prophet Muḥammad). Sufism is “esoteric” in that in that it emphasizes the inward (bāṭin) aspects of the Qur’an and Sunnah; it is “mystical” in that it emphasizes an existential knowledge of the Divine or direct perception that transcends discursive description; it is spiritual in that its focus is the Divine, and that it privileges the meaning or spirit (ma‘nā) over the outward form (sūrah).

What is Sufism?

The Sufi tradition begins with the Prophet Muḥammad, his close companions, and those whom they taught and instructed on the inner meaning of the Qur’an, ḥadīth (sayings of the Prophet), and Islamic rituals. Sufism during this time was famously described as “a reality without a name,” since such distinctions in Islamic practice and piety had yet to formally arise. This previously unnamed reality took the name taṣawwuf during the period in which the other early disciplines of Islamic knowledge such as the discipline of the transmission of

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39 Most Sufis would say that it is the heart of essence of Islam cf. Zarrūq, “Sufism is to religion what the spirit is to the body” qtd. in Niasse, Pearls, 47.

40 The term “mysticism” is derived from the Greek mysterion, meaning “a secret rite or doctrine,” which is in turn derived from mystes, meaning “an initiate,” which in turn is derived from muen, meaning “to close or shut [the mouth or eyes].”, Unfortunately, this term has been clouded by connotations of subjective, emotive irrationality since the standard-bearers of the Enlightenment defined their “rationality” against “mysticism.” Furthermore, William James’ influential Varieties of Religious Experience largely served to reduce mysticism to a particular category of personal, psychological experience, and Bertrand Russell’s Logic and Mysticism categorized it as a special kind of irrationality. These particular prejudices notwithstanding, if figures in the Western tradition such as Plotinus, St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart are “mystics” then Sufis are also mystics., Here I take the term “mystical” to denote a spiritual tradition that emphasizes union or direct connection with the Divine or the Transcendent, and to connote the importance of initiation and secrecy—either of things not to be said or things which cannot be said—in these traditions.


ḥadīth (‘ilm al-ḥadīth), the science of jurisprudence (‘ilm al-fiqh), the science of Qur’anic commentary (‘ilm al-tafsīr) also began to emerge.43 These Islamic sciences or disciplines (including Sufism, ‘ilm al-ṭaṣawwuf) were (and are) defined, classified, and delimited according to their subject matter (mawdū‘).44 For example, the subject matter of medicine (‘ilm al-ṭibb) is the human body in terms of health and disease, the subject matter of mathematics is number in terms of quantity, etc. The subject matter of Sufism, however, is nothing less than the Divine Essence, or Reality as such, and as such, the subject matter of Sufism has no limit. Sometimes Sufism was called the science of hearts (‘ilm al-qulūb) and its subject matter was defined as the states of the heart and the soul, but later Sufis equated these two definitions, citing the well-known Prophetic maxims, “the heart of the believer is the throne of the All-Merciful,” “Heaven and Earth do not contain me, but the heart of my believing servant contains me,” and “he who knows himself, knows his Lord.”45

This demonstrates why, although Sufism represents the most inner aspect of Islam, it is also the most universal, dealing with questions of universal concern and interest. Very few people care what Islamic jurisprudence has to say about how Muslims should pray at the North Pole, whereas virtually everyone cares about the question of what’s real and what’s not. The Sufi tradition addresses questions such as, “What is truth/reality? Where did we come

43 Namely the 2nd C Hijri–8th C. See Ibid.

44 Traditionally each Islamic science was classified according to its definition (ḥadd), a subject matter (mawdū‘), founder (wādi‘), name (ism), derivation (istimdād), legal status (ḥukm), topics (masā‘īl), its relationship to other sciences (nisbāh), distinguishing trait/virtue ( фаḍīlah), and fruit/benefit (thamarah).

45 See Niasse, Pearls, 43. Similarly, Sufism has also been described as the “science of intention (niyyah),” since, according to a ḥadīth, “Actions are [judged] by their intentions.” Thus even performing all the actions required by Islamic Law could be judged as sinful, if one’s intention is not correct., The famous Sufi Shaykh al-Shāhidī (d. 1253) is said to have remarked, “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” (Ibrahim Niasse, The Removal of Confusion: Concerning the Flood of the Saintly Seal Ahmad Al-Tijānī : A Translation of the Kāshīf Al-Ilbās ‘an Fayda Al-khāt Al-‘Abbās trans. Zachary Wright (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010)). Thus the aim of Sufism can also be described as that of purifying or correcting intention.
from? How did we get here? Who are we? Where are we going? And how do we get there?” in a specific way. Its perspective is based on the Qur’an and Sunnah, and secondarily on the experiences and insights previous Sufis acquired during their quest to mold their souls to the “beautiful model”\(^{46}\) of the Prophet (whose wife ‘Aisha equated his character with the Qur’an\(^{47}\) and called him “the Qur’an walking on earth.”\(^{48}\))

However this vast treasury of scripture, wisdom, meditations, and ideas is only the beginning. The tradition of Sufism seeks answers that come, not from authority or tradition, but rather from direct realization and personal experience. As one of Sufism’s most famous and influential figures, al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111) writes, “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!”\(^{49}\)

The Sufi is not satisfied with mere mental assent to the doctrines contained in the Qur’an, ḥadīth, and traditions of Sufi masters, he or she seeks their confirmation in direct experiential knowledge (\(ma’rifah\)). Sufism is interested in realities, not concepts. As Ghazzālī himself experienced, arguments from authority, historical authenticity, and even reason and sensory-data are all subject to doubt,\(^{50}\) but what Sufism seeks is certainty, the realization of the truths proclaimed by these sources. It is one thing to accept or agree with the verse of the

\(^{46}\) From the oft-quoted verse of the Qur’an (33:21), “Verily, you have in God’s Messenger a beautiful model for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day and remembers God much.”


\(^{48}\) In Arabic, *Kāna al-Qur’an yamshī ‘alā’l-ard*


\(^{50}\) See *Ibid*, 23-4 and 52-3.
Qur’an, *From God we come and to God we return* (2:156), it is quite another thing to confirm the same through personal experience (before death), as many Sufis claim to have done.\(^{51}\) Accepting the historical validity of and believing in the ḥadīth that “Prayer is the heavenly ascent of the believer” (*al-ṣalāt mi rāǰ al-mu’min*), is a far cry from experiencing it as such. Thus, Sufism can be described as an empirical, verifiable tradition, but one whose findings cannot be fully contained in language, because they are existential rather than discursive.\(^{52}\)

Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), the great Andalusian mystic whose influence is only rivaled by that of Ghazzālī, explained that if someone asks for proof of the special knowledge claimed by Sufism, “demand that they in turn prove the sweetness of honey. He will answer that this a question of knowledge derived through taste. Reply that it is the same for Sufism.”\(^ {53}\) In the same vein, the great poet and Sufi master Rumi (d. 1273) said, “It’s like when a child asks about sex, and you reply, ‘like candy, so sweet.’”\(^ {54}\)

But unlike a particular culinary tradition or the *Kama Sutra*, the content of the mystical experience upon which Sufism is based (often symbolically called *dhawq*, “taste” or *kashf*, “unveiling”) is not merely sensory or emotional, but rather metaphysical and intellectual. It is important to distinguish this direct knowledge (*ma’rifah*) from the visions and other mystical experiences that sometimes accompany its “unveiling.” These visions, dreams, and the like are considered but another form of sensory experience (albeit a


\(^{52}\) This is why descriptions of Sufi doctrine (and Islamic and religious doctrines in general) tend towards the allusive and mythopoetic; allusion and symbol are necessary when experience is not shared.


potentially lofty one), which, on its own, does not constitute the certain knowledge that is the
goal of the Sufi path.

The Whirling Dervishes don’t spin around to make themselves dizzy, and the mystical
states (aḥwāl) that sometimes overtake Sufis are not pursued for their own sake. The Sufi
wants to see things as they are, not things that aren’t really there.\(^{55}\) The knowledge and
certainty that Sufis seek is not opposed to reason; rather, it is said to be above it. Those Sufis
who also took part in discursive, rational philosophy claim that the supra-rational mode of
knowing which characterizes Sufism (kashf, dhawq, etc.) establishes the foundational axioms
upon which reason can build its philosophical edifices.\(^{56}\) This relationship between the
discursive nature of rational philosophy and the supra-rational nature of Sufism is perhaps
best described in the legendary meeting between the great philosopher, Ibn Sīnā, and the Sufi
master Abū Sa‘īd Abū’l Khayr. When asked what he thought of Ibn Sīnā, the Sufi master said,
“He knows what I see.” When asked about Abū Sa‘īd, the philosopher replied, “He sees what
I know.”\(^{57}\)

Thus the vast corpus of Sufi theoretical and intellectual works (which covers abstract
topics such as the nature of being and its relationship to knowledge, the relationship of time to
eternity, the problem of qualia, etc.) is not approached as rational speculation, nor poetic
flight of fancy, but rather a record of verified and verifiable metaphysical truths and realties.
The following statement from the introduction to ‘Abd al-Karīm Jīlī’s (d. 1424) magnum opus

\(^{55}\) In imitation of the oft-cited Prophetic supplication Allāhuma Aranā al-ashyā’ kamā hiya, “O God, show us things as they really are.”


of Sufi metaphysics, cosmology, and anthropology, *The Universal Man* (*Insān al-Kāmil*), is typical, “I will mention of all that only that which happened to me on my own journey to God; moreover I recount nothing in this book, neither of myself nor of another, without having tested it at the time when I traveled in God by the path of intuition and direct vision.”

**Sufi Doctrines**

But what exactly is this “direct vision” and how can it possibly meet the Sufi criterion of certainty that everything else seems to fall short of? A look at the tradition’s conception of certainty (*yaqīn*) should help answer these questions. Works of Sufism commonly distinguish between three degrees of certainty: “the knowledge/lore of certainty” (*'ilm al-yaqīn*), “the eye of certainty” (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*), and “the truth of certainty” (*ḥaqq al-Yaqīn*). The Lore of Certainty is likened to hearing about a fire, the Eye of Certainty is compared to glimpsing the fire, while the truth of certainty is being consumed in its flames. In this last degree, the knowledge of the object, the being of the knower and that of the object are all identified. When the object of knowledge is God, this degree of certainty of spiritual attainment is known as annihilation in God (*fanā' fī Llāh*), a term derived from the verse of the Qur’an (55:26), *All upon it is passing away* (*fān*). This mysterious state of annihilation is celebrated and described in numerous Sufi treatises and poems, one of the most famous of which comes from the pen of al-Ḥallāj:

I saw my Lord with the eye of my heart

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58 Titus Burckhardt, *Universal Man: Extracts*, (Roxburgh, Scotland: Beshara, 1995), 42. Jīlī was one of the most prominent authors of Ibn ‘Arabi’s school.


60 Ibid.
I asked him, “Who art Thou?”
And He said, “Thou.”

And another of which comes from the pen of Ibn ‘Arabi:

When my Beloved appears,
with what eye do I see Him?
With His eye not with mine;
for no one sees Him except Himself.

But this state of annihilation is not the end of the Sufi path, there remains the “annihilation of the annihilation” or fanā’ al-fanā’, which the Sufis call subsistence (baqā’), a term derived from very next verse of the Qur’an (55:27), “and there subsists/abides (yabqā’) the face of your Lord, the Possessor of Majesty and Magnanimity.” If fanā’ is seeing nothing but God,61 then baqā’ is seeing everything in God, doing everything in God, and knowing everything through God (or rather, God knows through one). For this reason, Sufi masters are often given the title al-‘ārif bi Llāh, “The Knower by God” instead of “The Knower of God.”

These are the spiritual heights from which Sufi masters have articulated their visions of reality, their doctrines, all of which are said to be summarized, or symbolized, in the two testimonies of faith (shahāda), “There is no god but God” (Lā ilāha illā Llāh) and “Muḥammad is the Messenger of God” (Muḥammadun Rasūl Llāh).

The First Shahādah

As Titus Burckhardt writes, “In conformity with the Qur’an, the central idea of Sufism is Divine Unity.”62 The first shahādah, Lā ilāha illā Llāh, is the formulation par excellence of this doctrine of Divine Unity, tawhīd. Although Sufis often quote the maxim, al-tawḥīd wāḥid, meaning, “The doctrine of Divine Unity is unique/singular,” this doctrine has taken

61 Sufis often quote the verse of the Qur’an “Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God” (2:115) to justify the orthodoxy of this state.

62 Burckhardt, The Universal Man, xii.
many forms and descriptions over the centuries. As with certainty, Sufi texts and masters often describe three degrees of tawḥīd, again with phrases drawn from the Qur’an. The first stage corresponds to the verse, Lā ilāha illā Huwa, “There is no god but He” (2:255), in which God is described by the distant third person pronoun. At this level, God is out there somewhere, and we believe there’s only one of Him, but that’s about as deep as it goes. This is called the shell of tawḥīd. However, as the Sufi novice progresses, he or she reaches the stage of Lā ilāha illā Anta, “There is no God but You” (21: 87). At this level of tawḥīd, the Sufi stands before God as he does in the ritual prayer, where he or she says to Him, “You alone do we worship, on You alone we rely” (1:1). But in this stage, the Sufi addresses God like this all the time, not only in prayer. He relies only on God, and when he speaks, he speaks only to God, and when he listens, he hears only God. This is the kernel of tawḥīd. Then, if he continues, he or she arrives at annihilation in God and there is only Lā ilāha illā Anā, “there is no God but I”(21:27). The 20th-century Tijani Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (d. 1975) explains,

It would be strange for a person to hear his brother saying, ‘there is no God but I.’ He might think that this person is claiming divinity for himself, but it is only the speech of the Real (al-Ḥaqq) on his brother’s tongue. And he likewise hears the speech coming from him, while he is not the speaker. God spoke like this to Moses on the tongue of a [burning] bush [in the Qur’an], innā anā Lāh, “Verily I am God” (20:14). And if He can say, “Verily I am God” through a bush, then he can certainly say it through a person.63

This recalls the fatally famous saying of Ḥallāj, Anā al-Ḥaqq, “I am the Truth,” and Maḥmūd Shabistarī’s poetic commentary upon it,

If saying “I am the Truth” was permissible for the bush
Why is it not in the mouth of a good man [Ḥallāj]?
Every man whose heart is pure from doubt
Knows for sure that there is no Being but One
Only “the Truth” can say “I am.”64


Similarly, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī is recorded as saying, “the reality of tawhīd [saying “there is no god but God”] cannot be grasped, because so long as you are speaking, you exist and God exists, so there are two, and so where is the unity (tawḥīd)? There’s no tawḥīd except that which is [said] by God, through God, and to God. The servant has no entrance to this, and no exit from it.”

Perhaps the most celebrated (and misunderstood/controversial) formulation of this doctrine comes from the school of Ibn ‘Arabi, and became known in Arabic as wahdat al-wujūd, the “Oneness of Being” or “Unity of Existence.” While Ibn ‘Arabi gives many metaphors or symbols to describe this doctrine, one of the easiest to understand is the Qur’anic symbolism of Light. Just as pure light brings about perception, but cannot be perceived, so God’s Being (Pure Being) brings about existence, but can’t be found in existence. Similarly, things can only be seen if they are not light, and then come into contact with light. Light by itself can’t be seen, and nothing can be seen in the dark. If we take Light as a metaphor for Being, and visibility for existence, then this means that everything that exists is a coming together of Being and non-being. When we look at a thing, what we see is light, but it is not pure light. If we turned off the light, we wouldn’t see anything, and if we were to turn on very powerful lights, all we would see is light, and if they got bright enough, we wouldn’t see anything at all. So from one perspective, we can say that all we see is light

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65 Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, Jawāhir al-Rasā’il vol. 1, 60.


67 cf. Rumi’s poem, “We and our beings are really non-existence; thou art Absolute Being manifesting as the perishable. We all are lions, but lions on a banner: because of the wind they are rushing onward from moment to moment. Their onward rush is visible, and the wind is unseen: …our whole existence is from thy bringing into being.” (Mathnawī Book I, v. 599-607)
(everything that exists is Pure Being, i.e., God), and from another point of view we can say that what we see is not light (the world is not God). So, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, everything that exists is both Being and non-being, both God and not-God.

Now, light has different gradations or intensities while still remaining the same reality. Similarly, being has different levels, while still remaining a single reality. These different levels of being were often called presences or ḥaḍrāt by Ibn ‘Arabi and his students, who divided them up into five and sometimes, six levels: 1) Hahūt, the level of the Divine Essence (Being, Light so bright you can’t see it); (2) Lahūt, the Level of the Divine Names and Qualities (Existence, what we’d perceive as light so bright you can’t see anything else) ; 3) Jabarūt, the level of the Divine Acts, archangels and paradise (brilliant light) ; 4) Malakūt, the subtle or imaginal level between the physical and the spiritual worlds (dimmer light) ; 5) Nasūt or mulk, the everyday, physical world (light so dim you can hardly see anything).  

Human beings are said to also exist on all of these levels, we have a physical body, emotions, and a soul/spirit with many levels, going all the way up to the highest, and so sometimes man is added as a sixth presence, encompassing all the others in a slightly different version of this schema.

A different school of waḥdat al-wujūd is associated in the West (North Africa) with the Ibn Sab‘īn and his better-known (and liked) disciple, the poet Abū’l-Hasan al-Shushtarī, who wrote the following famous poem:

After extinction, I came out  
Eternal now am, though not as I

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68 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth*, 50. In a typically symbolic fashion, some Sufis identify a similar schema of levels of existence with each of the words of the shahādah: “Lā”=The Sensible world; “ilāha”=The Imaginal/Psychic world, “illā”=The Angelic/Spiritual world, “Allah”=the Divine

69 These different levels of the soul feature in the training of Tijānī disciples, and will be discussed in the next chapter.
And who am I, O I, but I?

Similarly, in the East, it is associated with the trope of Hama Ust (“All is He”) in Sufi writings and poetry from Persia and the Indian Subcontinent. This “extreme” form of tawḥīd asserts that everything is God, whereas Ibn ‘Arabi and his followers asserted that everything is simultaneously “God and not-God.” The former school was (somewhat understandably) often confused with that of Ibn ‘Arabi, as in the case of the famous Treatise of Oneness by Awḥad al-Dīn Balyānī, which was often mistakenly attributed to Ibn ‘Arabi. This treatise, which takes the doctrine of tawḥīd to the very limits of language and logic, begins:

Praise belongs to God, before whose Oneness there is no before, unless the before is He and after whose Singularity there is no after, unless the after is He!

He was, and there was not with Him any before, nor after, nor above, nor below, nor closeness, nor distance, nor how, nor where, nor when, nor time, nor moment, nor period, nor duration, nor manifested existence, nor place. “And He is now as He was”. He is the One without oneness, the Singular without singularity. He is not composed of name and named: for His Name is He and His named is He and there is no name or named other than Him. He is the First without firstness and the Last without lastness. He is the Apparent without appearance and the Hidden without hiddenness. I mean that He is the very being of the letters of the Name ‘the First’ and the Name ‘the Last’, of the Name ‘the Hidden’ and the Name ‘the Apparent’. There is no First nor Last, Apparent nor Hidden except Him, without the letters (which form these names) becoming Him or His becoming these letters.

Understand this so as not to fall into the error of those who believe in incarnation: because He is not in anything and no thing is in Him whether entering in or coming out. It is in this way that you should know Him and not through (theoretical) knowledge, reason, understanding or conjecture, nor with the eye nor the external senses, nor even with interior sight or perception. No one sees Him, except Himself; no one reaches Him, except Himself; and no one knows Him except Himself. He knows Himself through Himself and He sees Himself by means of Himself. No one but He sees Him. His very Oneness is His veil since nothing veils Him other than He; His own Being veils Him. His Oneness is concealed by His Oneness without any condition.

Because of this, the Prophet (may God bless him and give him peace) said, “He who knows himself, knows his Lord”. He also said, “I knew my Lord through my Lord”. What the Prophet meant by this, is that you are not you but you are He and there is no you; and it is not that He enters into you or comes out of you, or that you enter into Him or come out of Him. He did not mean that you have being and you are qualified by this or that attribute. What he meant was that you never were and that you never will be, whether through yourself, or through Him, or in Him or with Him. You have neither ceased to be nor are you existent. You are Him and He is you, without any of these imperfections. If you know your existence in this way, then you know God; and if not, then not!

…

When this secret is revealed to you, you will know that you are not other than God but that you yourself are the object of your quest. You do not need to cease to be – you have not ceased and never will cease to be, without time and without moments, as we have already mentioned. You will see His attributes as your attributes, your exterior as His exterior, your interior as His
interior, your first as His first and your last as His Last, without any doubt or uncertainty. You will see your attributes to be His attributes and your essence to be His essence, without your having to become Him and without His having to become you in the least degree.\textsuperscript{70}

And yet, as lofty as this all sounds, this is only half of the story.

**The Second Shahādah**

For Ibn ‘Arabi and his students, Balyānī is right, there is no real existence but God, and this is confirmed by the experience of *fanā*’ (annihilation in God), and yet we also experience the world as being separate from God. Ibn ‘Arabi explains that this is because man is an isthmus (*barzakh*) between the world and God. As Chittick explains,

> Man is an “isthmus” (*barzakh*), i.e., something that stands between two other things, yet possesses the attributes of both. Hence man is “all-comprehensive” (*jāmi’*), for there is nothing on either side—God and the world—that escapes him. Of course here we must distinguish between the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), who truly actualizes and lives this reality, and ordinary men, who have not realized their potentialities. Only the Perfect Man may truly be considered as the All-Comprehensive Isthmus (*barzakh*), who embraces within himself the realities of both God and the world.\textsuperscript{71}

Louis Massignon called this doctrine of the Perfect or Universal Man, “the privileged myth of Islam.” This is what *Muḥammad*“* Rasūl*‘ Llāh (“Muḥammad is the Messenger of God”) means for Sufis; it is not just the mere fact that a particular man happened to receive a message from God, but rather, it is a statement about the nature of the connection between God and man, a spiritual anthropology. The Universal Man connects all the levels of being discussed above, from God on down to the physical world, and contains them all within himself. On the basis of the verses of the Qur’an, “*God taught Adam all the Names*” (2:31) and “*We have recounted all things in an evident prototype*” (36:12),

Ibn ‘Arabi calls the world in this particular context the Big Man (*al-insān al-kabīr*), i.e. Macrocosm. The most salient feature of the Big Man is that every single existent in it represents one particular aspect (Name) of God, and one only, so that the whole thing lacks a clear delineation


\textsuperscript{71} William C. Chittick, “The Five Divine Presences: From Qunawi to Qaysari,” in *The Muslim World* vol. 72(2) April 1982, 110
and a definite articulation, being as it is a loose conglomerate of discrete points. It is, so to speak, a clouded mirror.

In contrast to this…Man is a well-polished spotless mirror reflecting any object as it really is. Rather, Man is the polishing itself of this mirror, which is called the universe. Those discrete things and properties that have been diffused and scattered all over the immense universe become united and unified into a sharp focus in Man. The structure of the whole universe with all its complicated details is reflected in him in a clear and distinctly articulated miniature. This is the meaning of being a microcosm.  

Employing the same metaphor of the mirror, a Mauritanian Tijānī Shaykh explained to me that because man encompasses all levels of reality, he combines the spiritual and the material, just as a mirror has a transparent/reflective side and an opaque side. In fact, it is because of this opaque side that a mirror can reflect. Whereas angels only occupy a single level of reality, and are thus like transparent glass, man encompasses all levels of reality, from the physical to the Divine Essence, and can thus serve as a mirror in which God can contemplate Himself.

Elsewhere Ibn ‘Arabi cites the ḥadīth, “God created Adam in His image,” to make the same point and explain that man’s theomorphism is the secret behind the Qur’ān’s anthropomorphic language—the Qur’ān isn’t just describing God in human terms, because these “human terms” are actually reflections or depictions of Divine Qualities and Attributes. Thus the Universal Man is the mirror in which God contemplates his Names and Qualities, and through which the world was created. Everything is in the Universal Man, and he is in everything.

Another way of explaining this reality is through the common metaphor of the world as a dream. If the world is a dream and God is the dreamer, then the Universal Man is the

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74 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 16-8.
dreamer within the dream. Everything in the dream is or represents an aspect of the dreamer, but the persona of the dreamer within the dream represents him in a comprehensive manner, and therefore this persona also reflects or contains everything in the dream. Moreover, it is through this persona that the dreamer experiences the dream, if the dreamer within the dream were to disappear or die, the whole dream would collapse and disappear. Ibn ‘Arabi clarifies this relationship in other terms, “In relation to the Real [one of the Names of God], man is like the pupil in relation to the eye, through which vision occurs; one calls this the faculty of sight. For this reason he is called Man [the word for “man” in Arabic, *insān*, also means pupil], and through him the Real looks upon His creation and shows mercy upon them.” This is the function of the Universal Man, he connects God (metacosm) and the world (macrocosm), and mirrors both within his own being (microcosm).

This “Theoanthropocosmic” perspective, which bears many similarities to the neo-Platonic/Christian doctrine of the *Logos* and the doctrine of “Buddha nature” is identified in Islam with the *ḥaqīqah Muḥammadiyyah*, or Muḥammadan reality, sometimes referred to as the *nūr Muḥammadī* or Muḥammadan light. The Sufis say that this is the reality to which the Prophet referred in the *ḥadīth*, “I was a prophet while Adam was betwixt water and clay.” Ibn ‘Arabi takes the following *ḥadīth*, “the first thing that God created was the intellect (*al-‘aql*),” “the first thing that God created was the spirit (*rūḥ*), and “the first thing that God

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75 cf. S. Niasse, *The Removal of Confusion*, 155, “‘the Prophet said, the Hour will not arrive as long as there is a perfect human (*Insān al-Kāmil*) upon the earth.’ He is the delegated spiritual pillar., If you want, you could call him the one for whose sake the universe is kept intact. If (this position) were taken away, the sky would be shattered, the sun would be divested of life, the stars would fall, the pages would be scattered, the earth would split asunder, and the Resurrection would be at hand.” See also Oludamini Ogunnaike. “Inception and Ibn ‘Arabi.” *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 10.


created was my Light,” to equate the Intellect with this reality; he also cites the verse of the Qur’an, *He created you from one soul* (4:1, 7:189, 39:6) to demonstrate that the whole cosmos was created through this Muḥammadan Reality, the primary and principle figure of creation.

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**Fayḍ**

One of the main metaphors Ibn ‘Arabi employs to describe this process of creation mediated by the Muḥammadan reality or other “Divine Presences,” it that of *fayḍ*, which means effusion, outpouring, overflowing, or emanation. This was the term (in its plural form, *fuyūḍ*) used by the Islamic philosophers to translate the neo-Platonic concept of the emanations (*aporrhoiai*) through which the intellects, heavenly spheres and the world come into existence. Within Ibn ‘Arabi’s (and later Sufi) cosmology, the *fuyūḍ* refer both to the outpourings that give existence and form to the things of the world, and also to the graces that give human beings, especially the prophets and the saints, knowledge of God.79 The significance of the *fuyūḍ* having both ontological and epistemological dimensions will be explored further in the next chapter, but for now it is sufficient to note that in this schema, the Muḥammadan reality is the distributor of both existence and knowledge to all creation.

This Muḥammadan reality also has an inward dimension connected to spiritual realization. The Qur’an states, *The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own souls* (33:6), and *God comes between a man and his heart*, (8:24) and furthermore that, *We [God] are closer to him than his jugular vein*. (50:16). The Prophet is considered not only an intermediary between God and man externally, but internally as well. If God is considered in


79 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 169, 85
terms of His name “The Inward” (*al-hātin*) or as being contained in the “heart of his believing servant,” as the ḥadīth says, then the Prophet’s mediation can be understood as also existing between the believer and his innermost self with which he or she tries to connect through spiritual practice. Titus Burckhardt writes, “He [the Prophet] appears as an aspect which withdraws gradually as one approaches him, until his disappearance in Divine Unity. It is in this sense that one says that nobody will meet God before meeting the Prophet.”

As the Universal Man and the Muḥammadan Reality, the Prophet is considered the best of mankind, both as the most perfect of all, and as the perfection within each.

*Walāyah*

The second Shahādah also has profound implications on the related Sufi doctrine of sainthood called *wilāyah* or *walāyah*, literally, “friendship with God.” Islamic thinkers throughout the ages have drawn different distinctions between messengers (*rusul*) and prophets (*anbiyā’*), one of the more common views being that all messengers are prophets, but not all prophets are messengers. Messengers are those prophets who, like Moses and Jesus, bring a revealed scripture, and sometimes a new sacred law (*risālah* and *sharī‘ah*). Similarly, all prophets are saints (*awliyā’*), but not all saints are prophets. Prophets are those saints to whom God has sent to guide a sector of humanity and given a revelation which may or may not be in the form of a scripture (if it is a scripture, then the prophet would also be a messenger). Sufis, however, are primarily interested in the sainthood of the prophets because the particularities of messengerhood and prophecy come to an end with the world, while sainthood exists in this world and the next. The prophets are more revered for their exalted

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80 Burckhardt, *Universal Man*, x., Also compare with the sayings of the Prophet, “He who knows himself knows his Lord,” and “He who has seen me has seen the Truth.”

81 Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints*, 50.
spiritual or inward status as the highest of saints, than for their specifically outward, prophetic functions.  

While the cycle of prophecy came to an end with Muḥammad, that of sainthood remained open. This initiatic power of sainthood know as wilāyah or walāyah itself formed a whole branch of Sufi doctrine, to which Ḥākim al-Tirmidhī and Ibn ʿArabi made significant contributions. These authors described an elaborate hierarchy of saints headed by the qutb or pole under whom a whole pyramid of saints occupy different levels of sanctity and perform different functions. The saints holding positions in this vast hierarchy were called the “men of the unseen” (rijāl al-ghayb), and this concept, and its terms and titles, played and continues to play an important role in Sufi discourse.

Another feature of this elaborate hagiology was the identification of different modes of sainthood with different prophets. The most perfect kind of sainthood was called Muḥammadan sainthood, which was said to contain and be the source of all other types of sainthood, just as Muḥammad was said to contain and be the source of the attributes of all the other prophets. Just like prophecy, each type of sainthood had a “seal,” a final, most perfect representative who is the source of that particular type of sainthood. The seal of Muḥammadan sainthood (khatm al-walāyah al-Muḥammadiyyah) often shortened to the “seal of the saints” (khatm al-awliyāʾ) therefore was described as the source of all sainthood.

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82 Although these of course are also regarded as important, given that they serve as the “door” to the inner sainthood of the prophet.

83 See the Introduction of V. Cornell’s Realm of the Saint (Vincent J. Cornell, Introduction to Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism (Austin: U of Texas, 1998) for a detailed discussion of the distinction between the two terms.

84 See Chodkiewicz The Seal of the Saints, 89-115.

85 There is a subtle difference here between Ibn ʿArabi’s conception of the Seal of the Saints and that of the Tijānī’s. For Ibn ʿArabi, the Seal of the saints appears to be the source of sainthood even for the prophets.
This doctrine was a source of great controversy, and several prominent Sufis, including Ibn ‘Arabi and Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī claimed to be the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood.86

This power of walāyah is understood to originate with God (one of whose names is al-Walī, “The Friend/Protector”) and to be transmitted by the Prophet to certain of his companions who, in turn, transmitted it to their disciples, and so on and so forth from master to disciple to the present day.87 In this aspect, walāyah can be understood as the power that makes that makes spiritual progress possible, that which can turn an ordinary person into a “friend of God.”

**Methods**

For most Sufis in history, however, the process of becoming a “friend of God” was much more difficult than merely taking the hand of a Sufi master. Sufism has developed several techniques and practices designed to help the novice realize the doctrines outlined above, to embody the reality of the Universal Man (according to his or her capacity), to befriend God. These methods vary widely across history and geography, but there are some normative universals that can be discussed. The foundation of all “mainstream” Sufism is the *sharīʿah*. Echoing generations of Sufi masters, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī is recoded as saying, "If you hear someone quoting me, place the statement on the scale of the noble sharīʿah; if it balances, take it, if it doesn't, leave it."88 But the sharīʿah is only the beginning. As its name

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87 In this respect, walāyah is closely connected to the concept of *fayḍ*, Divine Outpouring or Effulgence

88 qtd. in Niasse, *Pearls*, 105
suggests (it literally means path or way) it is only the threshold to much more. This is outlined in one of the most famous and oft-cited ḥadīth qudsī (a ḥadīth in which the Prophet reports the speech of God):

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…"

This ḥadīth outlines one of the most popular triads of Sufism: Sharī’ah, Ṭarīqah, and Ḥaqīqah, or “The Law,” “The Way,” and “The Reality.” The acts “that have been enjoined” constitute the sharī’ah. The supererogatory acts of worship constitute the Ṭarīqah, the Sufi path to God; and the state of Divine union described at the end of the ḥadīth, the goal of the Sufi path, is the Ḥaqīqah, the Divine Reality that overtakes the illusion of separation.

The supererogatory acts of worship constitute the practical backbone of the Sufi way, the Ṭarīqah. Different Sufi traditions have developed different ways of carrying out these acts of worship, but they almost all revolve around faqr, dhikr, and fikr. Faqr literally means poverty, but in the context of Sufism, it means something more like emptiness or passivity towards the Divine. Sufism tends to place a high premium on good conduct/manners (adab) and service to others (khidma), as a means of cultivating virtue (akhlāq) and subduing one’s carnal soul or ego (nafs). However, in Sufi ethics, all of the virtues belong to God. Virtues are not something that one adds to one’s character like a skill, they are innate qualities of the fitrah (primordial human norm), which are revealed as one becomes empty or “poor” before God. The process of acquiring virtues is then the process of becoming transparent before God,

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89 Sahih Bukhari VIII, Book 76, Number 509
or in a common image, of polishing the mirror of one’s heart, so that the fullness of God’s Qualities and Attributes, the source of all virtues, can be reflected therein.

But how is this polishing accomplished? According to a ḥadith, “for every thing there is a polish, and the polish for the hearts is dhikr.” Dhikr at once means mention, invocation, and remembrance, and is the central practice of Sufism. More than one Sufi author has argued that the point of all religion, of all the rites of all religion, is the remembrance of God (dhikruLlāh). Dhikr can take many forms, including the recitation of the Qur’an or various prayers and litanies, but it most commonly takes the form of the repeated invocation of a name of God or revealed formula such as a prayer on the prophet, or the shahādah (Lā ilāha illā Llāh—“There is no God but God”).

Virtually all Sufism is based on dhikr, but as this kind of invocation requires a great deal of concentration, different Sufi traditions have developed forms of meditation or fikr, to help the mind transition from its everyday dispersion to the single-pointed focus of dhikr, and to remain focused on the invocation. Fikr, meditation or reflection, is a support for dhikr, invocation. While the practice of dhikr differs little from one Sufi tradition to the next, the variety of forms of fikr seems infinite. Dance, music, parts of the body, geometric patterns, rhythm, poetry, colours, calligraphy, and the human face are all commonly used in different methods of fikr. The Qur’an encourages Muslims to meditate (tafakkur) on various aspects of

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91 Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse says, “We have been commanded to pray because it constitutes the remembrance of Allah (20:14)…The remembrance of Allah constitutes the highest stage in religion.” (Niasse, Pearls, 118. See also M. Lings, A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), “The law was not enjoined upon us, neither were the rites of worship ordained but for the sake of establishing the remembrance of God,” 96.

92 This distinction between dhikr and fikr is more analytic and heuristic than substantive—as they are combined in practice and seldom discussed separately, the term dhikr being used to name dances, songs, visualizations, and other “meditative” practices.
the natural world, and these symbolic natural phenomena or signs *ayāt* (such as the ocean, the sun, the wind, the moon, the desert, a tree, etc.) are also used by various Sufi traditions in their meditative practice.

The point of all of these practices is to remember God and become beloved. The *ḥadīth qudsī* cited above distinguishes between two phases: in the first, the servant travels the path through his or her own efforts in performing obligatory and supererogatory acts of worship. In the second, when he or she becomes beloved, it is God who “walks” the path with the servant’s legs. These two stages on the spiritual path, one of individual effort, and the second of divine attraction are called *sulūk* (wayfaring) and *jadhb* (rapture, attraction). While the path to realization can be characterized by one stage or another to a greater degree (those who proceed primarily by attraction are known as *majdhūb*, and those by wayfaring, *sālik*) the ideal espoused by most Sufi orders is some combination of the two.⁹³

**Sufi Orders**

Around the 6th Islamic century, the structure of this kind of spiritual training changed dramatically with the emergence of new social institutions and traditions around Sufi masters. These traditions came to be known as *Ṭarīqahs* (Arabic pl. *ṭuruq*) or Sufi orders. Before this time, the teaching and training of Sufism largely took place in the context of individual master-disciple relationships or in small circles, like the famous school of Baghdad, which formed around Junayd (d. 910). But this informal structure gradually gave way to the more formal structure of the *Ṭarīqah*, from the 12th/13th Christian century onwards, as increasing numbers of disciples and changing social and spiritual conditions demanded a greater degree

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The new Sufi orders served as organizations and structures designed to facilitate spiritual teaching, training, and a particular way of life. Typically a ṭarīqah would form around a great Sufi saint, whose disciples would organize and formalize his method of spiritual instruction and practice.

Sufi orders are typically run by a shaykh, or spiritual guide, who initiates and trains disciples according to a particular method. The shaykh will have had completed this process of spiritual training him or herself, at the hands of another spiritual master, and so on back to the Prophet Muḥammad. This chain of transmission or spiritual lineage is called a silsilah, and is seen as a sign of the orthodoxy and efficacy of the order. Disciples, often called murīds ("seekers"), fuqarā’ (singular: faqīr, “a poor person”), or the Persian equivalent, “dervishes,” can join the ṭarīqah and attach themselves to its silsilah through the process of initiation.

Initiatic rites and practices vary greatly from order to order, sometimes initiation takes the form of the bestowal of a cloak (khirqah) from master to disciple, sometimes it takes the form of a pledge (bayā‘), in which the disciple grasps the shaykh’s hand, and sometimes it is just the mere repetition of a phrase. Sometimes shaykhs go out looking for disciples to initiate, and sometimes disciples have to undergo trials and tests of their sincerity and humility before initiation. Whatever the case may be, initiation connects the disciple to the initiatic chain of the silsilah, and authorizes him or her to perform the rites of the Sufi order. These specific

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94 It is also interesting to note that Sufi doctrine also became more formalized and fully elaborated in writing shortly after this period, and undoubtedly, the two trends are connected. However, this was not seen as a form of “progress” or development by those who participated in it. During this time, ʻAlī Hujwīrī, the author of the early Sufi treatise, Kashf al-Mahjūb, lamented that Sufism went from being “a name without a reality to being a reality without a name.” Seyyed Hossein Nasr resolves these seemingly opposite trends by asserting that, “the need for exposition of the truth increases with our ignorance not our knowledge.” (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardī, Ibn ʻArabī (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

95 The precedent for this being the pact of ‘Aqabah in which a delegation of people from Medina pledged their allegiance to the Prophet and about which the Qur’ān says, “God’s hand was over their hands.” (48:10)
rites, usually called awrād (singular, wird) are typically daily litanies consisting of Qur’anic passages and formulae to be recited a certain number of times, both morning and evening. A typical example would be 100 recitations of astaghfiruLlāh, “I beg forgiveness of God,” followed by 100 Ṣalāt ‘an Nabī (prayers on the Prophet), and 100 recitations of the shahādah, La ilāha illā Llāh, “There is no god but God.” The wird may also be accompanied by invocations (dhikr, pl. adhkār) of various names of God or other formulae. Shaykhs sometimes prescribe khalwahs, or spiritual retreats, in which the disciples remain isolated, devoting themselves only to a particular dhikr (invocation) or set of invocations for a set period of time (1 week, 40 days, 1 year) or until they have achieved the desired spiritual result.

The shaykh of an order will often have several muqaddams or representatives who can initiate disciples on his or her behalf and train them in the practices of the order. Some orders also appoint khalīfahs, vicegerents or successors, who act as shaykhs in their own right, appointing muqaddams and initiating their own disciples, all the while remaining attached to the shaykh of the order. Sufi orders often also have or group sessions of dhikr, called ḥādrahs or majālīs (singular, majlīs), which sometimes involve drumming, singing, poetry, and dance. The most famous, and one of the most elaborate, Sufi rituals of this kind is the sema (Arabic: samā’) of Rumi’s Mawlāwi (Mevlevi) order, from which comes their nickname, the “Whirling Dervishes.” These activities usually take place in a Sufi center or mosque called a zāwiyyah (called a tekye, khanaqah, or dargah, in the Turkish and Persianate world-including India). A major order, like the Qādiriyyah, founded by the famous Shaykh ‘abd al-Qādir Jīlānī (d. 1166) will typically have a main or mother zāwiyyah and other zāwiyyahs in different cities around the world.

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96 If music is involved, it is often called a samā’.
The Sufi orders are often likened to branches of a tree, and within the context of a particular order, an especially great master may inaugurate a new branch. For example, the predominantly North African Shādhilī order has spawned many branches including the Shādhilī-Darqawī, founded by Shaykh Muḥammad al-Darqawī (d. 1823), which itself spawned a new branch, the Shādhilī-Darqawī-‘Alawī, founded by Aḥmad al-‘Alawī (d. 1934). Sometimes shaykhs who have been initiated into multiple orders can merge these different Sufi lineages into one order such as the Qādirī-Rifāʿī order or the Khalwatī-Jerrahī order. Some Sufi orders, like the Chistiyyah of the Indian subcontinent (famous for its qawwali music and influence on classical Hindustani music), the Mūridiyah of Senegal, or the ba ‘Alawī of Yemen and the Indian Ocean rim, are localized to a particular cultural or geographical zone, while others, like the Qādiriyyah, have spread all over the world. Some Ṭarīqahs emphasize ecstatic experience, while others emphasize sobriety. Some emphasize charity and service to society, while others emphasize contemplation and retreat from society, and these emphases can change over time or vary from zāwiyah to zāwiyah within the same order. In addition to the orders mentioned above, the Naqshibandī, the Khalwatī, NiʿmatuLlahī, and Bektashī Sufi orders should also be mentioned as contemporary, popular Sufi orders. While Sufism is sometimes practiced outside of the structure of Sufi orders, they have been and remain the main vehicles for the tradition of tasawwuf for the past millennium.

**The Tijāniyyah**

One of the more recent Sufi orders to emerge is the Ṭarīqah Tijāniyyah. Its name is derived from that of its founder, Aḥmad al-Tijānī, who was born in 1737 in Aīn Madi, an oasis in the southwestern desert of Algeria, and died in 1815 in the city of Fes, where his beautiful mausoleum is an important site of pilgrimage. Shaykh Tijānī traced his lineage to
the legendary Mawlay Idrīs, whom many consider the founder of North African Sufism and Islam, and through him, to the Prophet of Islam. As a young man,  Ahmad Tijānī traveled to Fes to study religious sciences, where several of his teachers initiated him into different orders of Sufism including branches of the Qādirī and Shādhilī orders. According to the hagiographical literature, one of his teachers predicted that the young Tijānī would attain the lofty spiritual rank of Shaykh Abu’l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (who was widely recognized in the Magreb as the “pole” or  quṭb of his age), but that this spiritual opening (fatḥ) would only come to him in the desert.97

Shaykh Tijānī then returned to the Algerian desert, teaching religious sciences while devoting himself to his spiritual exercises. On his way to perform the Ḥājj in 1773, Tijānī was initiated into the Khalwatī order in Algiers. In Mecca and Medina, Shaykh Tijānī is said to have met with and learned from several great Sufi masters,98 and on his way back to the Maghreb, he was made a muqaddam of the Khalwatī order by Maḥmūd al-Kurdī (d. 1780) in Egypt.

Shaykh Tijānī’s affiliation with the Khalwatī order ended, however, in extraordinary circumstances. According to the hagiographical sources, in 1784, in the oasis of Abū Samghūn, Tijānī had a waking vision of the Prophet, who told him to leave everything he had taken from other spiritual teachers and masters, since he (the Prophet) was now his spiritual

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97 See Zachary Valentine Wright, On the Path of the Prophet: Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī (1737-1815) and the Tariqa Muḥammadīyya, (Atlanta: African-American Islamic Institute), 2005.

98 Including a mysterious shaykh from India, Ahmad ibn Abdullah al-Hindi, who declared Tijānī the inheritor of his “knowledge, secrets, gifts, and lights.” and Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Sammān (d. 1775), a famous shaykh of the Khalwatī order who founded what would become the popular Sammāniya order of Sudan, see Ibid.
guide. The Prophet gave him the basis of a new \textit{wird} or litany, establishing a new spiritual way, which was to become known as the Ṭarīqah Tijāniyyah.\footnote{The complete name of which is the \textit{Ṭarīqah Aḥmadiyyah Muḥammadīyyah, Ibrahimiyyah, ḤanIFIyyah Tijāniyyah}.}

In 1798, Shaykh Tijānī settled in Fes, where he enjoyed the favor of the Alaouite sultan, Mawlay Sulaymān,\footnote{Some Tijānī sources claim that Mawlay Sulaymān was a disciple of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, but this claim has not been verified by other records.} and established his zawiya in the center of the city. Before he died, Shaykh Tijānī’s most famous muqaddams, Sīdī ‘Alī Tamāsīnī (d. 1844), Sīdī ‘Alī Harāzīm al-Barāda (d. 1856), Muḥammad al-Ḥāfīz (d. 1830), and Muḥammad Ghālī (d. 1829), spread and established the Tijāni order across North Africa and the Sahara, into Mauritania, and in the Ḥijāz. Sīdī ‘Alī Harāzīm’s \textit{Jawāhir al Maʿāni}\footnote{\textit{Kitāb Jawāhir al-maʿāni wa-bulūgh al-amānī fi fayd Sīdī Abī’l al-ʿAbbās al-Tijānī} (Pearls of Indications and Attainment of Aspirations in the Outpouring of Sīdī Abū’l ʿAbbās Tijānī) (Dakar, Senegal: Dar alBouraq, 2011).} gives an account of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī’s life, visions and mystical experiences, teachings, and aphorisms, and has become the main and most influential written source of Tijāni doctrine.

Recent scholarship has linked the Tijāni Order with the rather nebulous concept of “Neo-Sufism,” and while I believe there is little “neo” about neo-Sufism, it should be noted that the order was founded in and shows the influence of the context of 18th Century Sufi reform movements that became popular and influential in North Africa, the Ḥijāz, and the Indian Subcontinent.\footnote{See O’Fahey and Radtke “Neo-Sufism Reconsidered” \textit{Der Islam} 70: 1(1993): 52-87. and Nehemia Levtzion, \textit{Eighteenth-century Renewal and Reform in Islam} (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 117–132.} This movement included Sufi masters such as Aḥmad Ibn Idris (d. 1837) and his disciples, Muḥammad al-Sanusī (d. 1859), founder of the Sanusīyyah order,\footnote{Which became widespread in the central Sahara, namely in Libya, Chad, and Niger.}
and Muḥammad al-Mirghānī (d. 1852), founder of the Khatmiyyah order,\(^{104}\) as well as Muṣṭafā Kamāl al-dīn al-Bakrī (d. 1749) (the spiritual master of Shaykh Sammān (d. 1775),\(^{105}\) and the spiritual grandfather of Shaykh Kurdī (who initiated Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī), and Shah Walī Allāh (d. 1762) of Delhi in India. All of these figures and the traditions associated with them emphasized strict observance of the sharī‘ah and often advocated for social reform through spiritual renewal amongst scholars and at the grass-roots level. These various movements also continued a trend in Sufism that seems to have begun in the 15\(^{th}\) century,\(^{106}\) in which the role of the Prophet and prayers upon him (taṣliyah) in individual spiritual attainment was explicitly emphasized to a greater degree than before, and which saw a shift away from the extraordinary asceticism and seclusion which characterized much of early Sufī practice, and instead emphasized “being with God in the midst of people.” Many of these trends can be seen in the written works and records of the Shādhili Shaykhs Aḥmad Zarrūq\(^{107}\) (d. 1493), whom Tijani authors frequently quote, and his contemporary, Muḥammad al-Jazūlī (d. 1465),\(^{108}\) author of the popular Dalā’il Khayrāt. Many of the orders associated with the 18\(^{th}\)-century reform movements that embodied these trends took the name Ṭariqah Muḥammadiyyah, including the Tijāniyyah.

**Tijani Doctrine**

\(^{104}\) Also known as the Mirghaniyyah, this order spread and is still active in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.

\(^{105}\) Founder of the Sammāniyyah order, which is popular in Sudan.


\(^{108}\) See V. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint*.
While the Tijāniyyah share many of the same doctrines and practices of other Sufi orders, especially the Shādhilī and Khalwatī, there are a few features that distinguish it from other ṭuruq. The most unique feature of the Tijāniyyah is that its silsilah, the chain of initiatic transmission, goes directly from Aḥmad Tijānī to the Prophet Muḥammad. Virtually all other Sufi orders, such as the Shādhiliyyah, Qādiriyah, etc. have chains of transmission that go back to the founder of the order, and then from the founder back through various Sufi masters usually converging on ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and then going back to the Prophet.

For Tijanis, this direct link to the Prophet was and is regarded as the source of the superiority of the order. Virtually all Sufi orders have traditions making some kind of claim for the superiority of the order and/or its founder, but the Tijāniyyah claims its founder as the seal of the saints (khatm al-awliyā’), the hidden source of sainthood (al-khatm al-maktūm) for all the other saints of all Sufi orders of all times, just as the Prophet Muḥammad is understood to be the source of prophecy for all other prophets. Extending the analogy further, Tijanis sometimes describe the order as playing “in Islam, the same role that Islam plays among the other religions,” that is, completing, perfecting and synthesizing them. Many Tijanis also predict that all Sufi orders will eventually become incorporated into the Tijāniyyah. For similar reasons, and on the basis of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī’s explicit instructions, Tijanis are forbidden from taking other initiations, and upon entering the order, must abandon the litanies they may have been given by previous non-Tijani masters. They are also forbidden to visit the shuyukh of other Sufi orders for spiritual instruction or barakah.

109 For example, Shādhilīs claim that all aqtāb (poles or axial saints) will be Shādhilī, the Naqshibandīs claim that their silsilah which goes through Abu Bakr grants them easier and superior spiritual realization, and Qādirīs claim that the founder of their order, Shaykh ʿabd al-Qādir Jīlānī is superior to all other saints, citing his saying, “My feet are upon on the necks of all the other saints.”

a practice that is common amongst disciples of other orders. Needless to say, these doctrines of Tijani supremacy have been the source of some controversy amongst members of other Sufi orders, but only seem to have contributed to, and not detracted from, the order’s growth.

But perhaps the most characteristic feature of Tijani doctrine is its emphasis on the related concepts of Fayḍ and the ḥaqīqah Muḥammadīyyah. On the latter, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse writes, “In a hadīth qudsī, Allah says, ‘If not for you (O Muḥammad), I would not have brought forth creation. I created you for Myself and I made the rest of creation for you.’ The Prophet said, ‘All Muslims are from my light, and my light is from the light of Allah.’ All of creation—believers and non-believers, the heavens and the earth—came from his light and his light came from Allah.” For Tijanis (and all Sufis), the Prophet is not a merely an historical figure, but rather a living reality through whom God continuously creates the world, and through whom He pours out His light, mercy, being, knowledge, and blessings on all of creation. This is the meaning of fayḍ, Divine effusion or overflowing, and one of the secrets behind the importance of the ṣalāt al-fātih and other prayers on the prophet (several prayers

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111 The logic being that they can and should visit the Prophet through their spiritual exercises, rather than visiting other saints. In the words of one disciple, “Drink form the source at the top of the mountain, not from the pools at the bottom.”


113 Ibid.

114 Once I had the privilege of having afternoon tea with a couple of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī’s descendants and other Tijānī disciples in Morocco. The Shaykh’s great grand-nephew poured some Coke into a glass for us while he was talking and didn’t notice that the glass had started to overflow. Once he saw the coke spilling, he exclaimed, “The Fayḍa!” and emptied the rest of the bottle into the glass, which spilled out all over the table.

115 Niasse, Pearls, 82

on the prophet from other orders use similar imagery and language of *fayḍ*\(^\text{117}\), they call forth the Divine *fayḍ*, which is simultaneously being, knowledge, and light.\(^\text{118}\) Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse writes, “Know that the intention behind the masters of spiritual training is to reach the Prophet, the highest of all intermediaries, through their mediation. ‘Abd Allāh ould al-Ḥājj al-‘Alawī once told me, ‘The purpose of the recitations in the Tijāniyyah is to get a whiff of the Muhammadan reality.’”

The basic structure of the concept of *Fayḍ* as it operates in the Tijāniyyah-Ibrāhīmiyyah is perhaps most clearly explained in the following extended metaphor:

There is a parable the Professor Ibrahim Mahmud Diop heard from Shaykh Ibrahim which helps to explain the concept of *fayḍa*. We are to picture five things. First imagine a fathomless well – not an ordinary well, but a well that has no bottom. Next imagine a leather bucket that never needs repair. Next, imagine a tireless worker who continually draws water from that well. Fourthly, imagine a basin next to that well which eventually becomes full. Finally, imagine water so precious it cannot be thrown away and yet cannot be put back into the well already overflowing. The question arises, what should be done with the water after the basin is full? The answer: many basins will be constructed around the well to receive the precious water. In the parable, the well represents Allah, glorified and exalted is He, whose being is continuous without end. The water is Divine gnosis (*ma’rifa*) and experience (*dhawq*). The leather bucket is the Prophet. A saying among Sufis indicates, ‘Without an intermediary, one never reaches a goal,’ and the Prophet is the greatest intermediary between the creation and Allah. The worker in the parable is Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijānī. The basin is an extraordinary spiritual adept who has received so much in the way of Divine gnosis that he must communicate this Gnosis to others or it will overflow. He is the owner of the *fayḍa* or Flood – Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse.\(^\text{120}\)

This schema can be pictured in two ways. First there is the macrocosmic model in which God sends down blessings and spiritual realization on the Prophet who passes it along to Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, who passes it along to Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, who passes it on to


\(^{118}\)Recall that *ma’rifah* is literally existential knowledge. In the Jawāhir al-Ma’ānī, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī is recorded as saying, “*Fayḍ* embraces all forms of knowledge (*‘ulūm*), all mysteries (*āsrār*), all realities (*haqā’iq*), all realizations (*ma’ārif*), and all lights (*anwār*).” (1047)

\(^{119}\)Niasse, Jawāhir al-Rasā’il I, 113.

\(^{120}\)Niasse, *Pearls*, 17.
his disciples. Remembering that Shaykh Tijānī is also the Seal of Sainthood, he also receives this outpouring of Divine knowledge and blessings from the other prophets, and is the source for all the other saints.\textsuperscript{121}

The second schema is microcosmic and depicts the different levels of inner spiritual realization. From this perspective, the \textit{fayd} is experienced as a fountain welling up from the deepest depths of the aspirant’s soul, which are identified with God, the Prophet, and the Shaykh.

\textsuperscript{121} This diagram is modified from that found in Seesemann, \textit{The Divine Flood}, 56 and from those found in the \textit{Rimāh} (from which Seesemann’s diagram is also derived)
Macrocosmically\textsuperscript{122},

![Diagram of Macrocosmic Fayd](image1)

Microcosmically,

![Diagram of Microcosmic Fayd](image2)

\textsuperscript{122} Many Tijānī disciples interviewed during the course of my research would modify this diagram to make Shaykh Ibrahim the intermediary between Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī and everyone else.
**Tijani Method**

The methods of the Tijāniyyah, again, do not differ significantly from those of other ṭuruq. They include the observance of the sharī‘ah, including the observance of the five prayers (in congregation when possible), an obligatory *wird*\(^{123}\) to be recited morning and evening, an additional litany called the *ważīfah*\(^ {124}\) which can be recited either once or twice daily, a weekly gathering for dhikr on Friday afternoons known as the *ḥadrah* or *hailalah*.\(^ {125}\) The *wird* and *ważīfah* must be made up if missed, and strict adherence is a condition of being a disciple. Tijani disciples are also encouraged to recite the Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ or, with permission, the shahādah and the Divine name “Allāh,” outside of these formal sessions. There are numerous optional litanies and invocations for particular spiritual purposes (largely consisting of prayers commonly recited by other Sufi ṭuruq), many of which can be found in printed collections, but these require the authorization, supervision, and initiation (*talqīn*) of a spiritual guide. The most important of these are the litanies used in the *tarbiyah*\(^ {126}\) (awrād al-*tarbiyah*) of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s branch of the order.

\(^{123}\) Consisting of the standard 100 AstaghfiruLlāh, 100 Ṣalāt ‘an nabī, and 100 Lā ilāha illā Llāh, separated by and concluded with standard Qur’anic passages.

\(^{124}\) Consisting of one recitation of the Fātiḥah, 30 recitations of *Istighfār*: "*AstaghfiruLlāh Al-‘Azīm aladhī lā ilāha illa Huwa al-Ḥayyu al-Qayyūm*" (I ask forgiveness from God, The Supreme, whom no God exists but He, The Living, The Self-Subsistent), 50 recitations of the Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ, 100 recitations of the shahādah, "*La ilāha illā Allah*", followed by one recitation of "Muhammadun RasūluLlāh ‘alayhi SalāmuLlāh", then 12 (or 11) recitations of the Jawhār al-Kamāl; separated by and concluded with standard Qur’anic passages.

\(^{125}\) Held between the afternoon and sunset prayers, in which the shahādah is recited at least 1,000 times; begun and concluded with standard Qur’anic passages.

\(^{126}\) *Tarbiyah* is a word that means spiritual training or rearing, and is the process by which the shaykh brings the initiate to spiritual realization and maturity. This term took on special significance in Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s branch of the Tijāniyyah as will be discussed in the next chapter.
The Tijani method in general is, however distinguished by its general lack of *khalwah* (the practice of putting disciples into prolonged spiritual retreat)\(^{127}\) its emphasis on the *Ṣalāt al-Fāṭih* and *Jawharat al-Kamāl*, and the particular practices surrounding the latter’s recitation,\(^{128}\) and by its emphasis on *shukr* or gratitude towards God, rather than *zuhd* or asceticism.\(^{129}\) In his *Rimāḥ*, Shaykh ‘Umar Tall explains that real *zuhd* is not defined by not possessing things, but in not being possessed by things, and that the Sufi path is concerned with “the journey of the hearts, not the journey of the bodies,” meaning that ascetic practice is not an end in and of itself.\(^{130}\)

In this sense, *shukr* means something more than ordinary gratitude, but represents the purest and most disinterested approach to worship. The Prophet was once asked why he continued to pray fervently even though God had forgiven all his past and future sins, to which he answered, “Should I not be a grateful servant?”\(^{131}\) Similarly, Shaykh Ibrahim

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\(^{127}\) Although the way tarbiyah is practiced in some places might be described as a kind of *khalwah*.

\(^{128}\) When reciting this prayer, said to have been revealed to Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī by the prophet, Tijānī mūrīds must be in a state of ritual ablution, sit in a clean place, and observe certain other conditions because after seven recitations of the prayer, the Prophet, the first four caliphs, and Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī are believed to become present with the reciter.

\(^{129}\) This distinction between the “way of gratitude” and the “way of asceticism” was characterized in the influential work *al-Ibrīz* by the 18th C Shādhilī scholar of Fes, Aḥmad al-Lamaṭī, about his Shaykh, ‘abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbāgh. The way of gratitude (*shukr*) was described as being the way of Shaykh al-Shādhilī and the way of asceticism (*zuhd*) was described as being the way of al-Ghazzālī. The *Ibrīz* says, “And from the start emigration (*hijra*) on the path of thankfulness was to God and to His Apostle, not to illumination and the acquisition of unveilings. Emigration on the path of self-mortification, however, was aimed at illumination and the acquisition of spiritual ranks. Journeying on the first path is a journey of hearts, while on the second path it's a journey of bodies. And illumination on the first path is a sudden onslaught that the bondsman hadn't been desiring. While the bondsman was in the station of seeking repentance and forgiveness of sins, behold clear illumination came over him! Both paths are correct but the path of thankfulness is more correct and more sincere.” O’Kane, J. and Radtke, B. *Pure Gold from the Words of Sayyidi ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbagh* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 623.


\(^{131}\) Related in Ṣāḥīḥ Bukharī, cited in *Gardens of the Righteous: Riyāḍh As-Salihīn of Imam Nawawi*, (London: Curzon ;, 1975). Ch 11 no. 98. In the same vein, the famous early female Sufi saint, Rabī‘ah al ‘Adawiyyah, is said to have walked around with a bucket of water and a torch in order to “set fire to heaven and put out those of hell, so people worship God for His own sake alone.”
Niasse counseled his disciples not to worship God in expectation of receiving spiritual enlightenment, as this is just another form of horse-trading that props up the nafs (ego/carnal soul), but rather to worship God for His own sake, and ask God for God.\textsuperscript{132}

Likewise, the earliest Tijani literature identifies the founder and the followers of this Ṭarīqah as being among the Malāmiyyah or “People of Blame.”\textsuperscript{133} This term originally named an early movement of Islamic piety and Sufism whose adherents would actively court the blame and disapproval of religious authorities and the public as a means of combatting spiritual hypocrisy and pride.\textsuperscript{134} However, Ibn ‘Arabi (and later Sufi authors, including the Tijanis) use this term to refer to the highest category of mystics who “know and are not known,” those saints who are outwardly ordinary and inwardly extraordinary, who do not make a show of miracles or their high spiritual station, but remain hidden in plain sight.\textsuperscript{135} Thus Tijanis tend to have ordinary professions and “blend in” to their societies rather than standing apart or aloof from them.

Finally, the particular Tijani method which is the subject of this study is distinguished by the special mode of tarbiyah introduced by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, which his disciples claim has produced a remarkable quality and quantity of realized Sufis in West Africa and around the world.

\textsuperscript{132} Niasse, \textit{Pearls}, 91-8, 125-6

\textsuperscript{133} See Seesemann, \textit{The Divine Flood}, 106-108.


\textsuperscript{135} See Chittick, \textit{Sufi Path of Knowledge}, 372-375. In a passage reminiscent of Taoist descriptions of sanctity, Chittick writes of the Malāmī, “In him, nothing stands out, since he flows with all created things in perfect harmony and equilibrium., He is like a tree or a bird in his ordinariness, following the divine will wherever it takes him, with no friction, no protest, complete serenity, no waves,” (Ibid, 372).
**A Brief History of the Tijāniyyah in West Africa**

Shaykh Tijānī was born and raised in the Sahara bordering West Africa. The desert is often compared to an ocean dotted with islands of oases and traversed by ships of caravans, and like an oceanic zone, the desert paradoxically increases cultural, economic, and intellectual exchange along its borders. This was very much true of the Sahara, where goods, books, ideas, and spiritual movements like the Ṭarīqah Tijāniyyah spread from “coast” to “coast.” While today, the Tijāniyyah has spread to South Africa, Indonesia, Europe, and North America, the core of its membership is still found in Western Africa, particularly in the Saharan and Sub-Saharan countries between Mauritania/Senegal, Nigeria, and Sudan.

During Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī’s life, one of his closest disciples and khalīfahs, Muḥammad al-Ḥāfīz (d. 1830) spread the order in Mauritania, converting the scholarly Idaw ‘Alī tribe to the order. The Ḥāfiziyah branch of the Ṭarīqah was known for its scholarship and respect for other ṭuruq. The influential Tijani manual of spiritual training, *Mizāb al-Raḥmah al-Rabbaniyyah fī al-Tarbiyah bi’l-Ṭarīqah al-Tijāniyyah*, was written by ibn Anbūjah, a disciple of Muḥammad al-Ḥāfīz. Muḥammad al-Ḥāfīz’s close disciple, Mawluḍ Fal, spread the order amongst other tribes in Mauritania and along the Senegal river valley, making further inroads south of the Sahara, even as far as Nigeria. Mawluḍ Fal’s older brother, Aḥmad Ibn Baba authored the *Munyāt al-Murīd* (Goals of the Seeker) which became famous through the influential commentary *Bughyāt al-mustafīd* by the Moroccan Tijānī Shaykh Muḥammad al-‘Arabī ibn Sā’īh (d. 1892), who founded the prominent Tijānī zawiya of Rabat. This commentary has become one of the main sources of Tijānī doctrine and illustrates

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the flow of knowledge and writing both north and south in Western Africa. Members of the scholarly Idaw ‘Alī tribe played an important role in spreading the Tijāniyyah throughout the region, but it was the appearance of the singular personality of al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tall that firmly established the ṭarīqah south of the Sahara.

Al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tall (d. 1864) was originally initiated by a disciple of Mawlūd Fal in Futa Tooro (Northern Senegal), but it was Muḥammad al-Ghālī (d. 1829), another close disciple and khalīfah of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, who appointed Tall as a muqaddam and khalīfah of the order after meeting him in Mecca. Ghālī charged him with spreading the ṭarīqah in West Africa, and this he did, by the pen and the sword. On his return from Mecca, al-Ḥājj ‘Umar spent time in the court of the Sokoto caliphate, befriending Muḥammad Bello, the son of ‘Uthman dan Fodio, and further spreading the order there. Through a series of controversial jihads (he fought both the French and other Muslim polities), Shaykh Tall established the extensive, but short-lived, Toucouleur Empire, and spread the Tijani order in what is today Mali, Guinea, and eastern Senegal. Al-Ḥājj ‘Umar is also the author of the Rimāḥ ḥizb al-Raḥīm ‘alā Nuhūr ḥizb al-Raǰīm, “The Lances of the Party of the Compassionate Against the Necks of the Party of the Accursed,” a veritable compendium of Tijani doctrine, history, rules for disciples, aphorisms, and quotations from other Sufī works on a variety of topics. The Rimāḥ is often printed in the margins of the Jawāhir al-Maʿāni, from which it quotes extensively.¹³⁸ Tall’s nephew Alfa Hāshim (d. 1931) left the Sokoto Caliphate after its defeat at the hands of the British in 1902/3 and fled to the Ḥijāz, eventually settling in Medina, where he became one of the most prominent Tijani scholars in the region. Many West Africans sought and took initiation from him during pilgrimages to Mecca and

Medina, spreading his lineage back in West Africa upon their return. Al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tall’s grandson, Seydou Nourou Tall (d. 1980), whom the French nicknamed “le grand marabout,” and who was also the son-in-law and contested successor of al-Ḥājj Malik Sy (see below), was an important leader of his grandfather’s branch of the order in Senegambia and Mali.

The Ḥamawwiyah branch of the order, founded by Shaykh Ḥamāḥallāh (d. 1943) in Nioro, Mali, emphasized mystical experience over formal learning, and despite persecution from the French colonial authorities and conflicts with other branches of the order, found success amongst merchants and non-scholars in Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Côte D’Ivoire, where Shaykh Yacouba Sylla established a sizeable following for this branch of the order.139 Tierno Bokar (d. 1939) (himself a descendant of al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tall) and his disciple, the celebrated Africanist and belle-lettrist Amadou Hampâté Bâ (d. 1991), were both members of this branch of the Tijāniyyah.140

Mention must also be made of al-Ḥājj Mālik Sy (d. 1922), whose initiations linked him to both the Ḥāfiziyah and al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tall’s branches of the order. El-Ḥājj Mālik spread the Tijāniyyah and Islamic learning throughout Senegal and Gambia at the turn of the century. A consummate teacher and savvy navigator of the tricky French colonial system, Mālik Sy established many schools throughout Senegal and authored a substantial body of doctrinal and didactic works in both prose and poetry deserving of further scholarly attention.

139 The Hamawiyyah also had its fair share of scholarly adherents, but they did not constitute the majority of the order. See Sean Hanretta. Gender and Agency in the History of a West African Sufi Community: The Followers of Yacouba Sylla. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

He established his zawiya in Tivaouane, which has become one of the main centers of the order in Senegal.\(^{141}\)

Although al-Ḥājj Malik’s close friend, ‘Abdallāh Niasse (d. 1922), is better known as the father of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, he was an important scholar and shaykh in his own right. Like Mālik Sy, he corresponded frequently with the Tijani zawiyas of Mauritania, Aīn Madi and Fes, and was granted an *ijāzah muṭlaqah* (unlimited authorization) by Shaykh Aḥmad Sukayrij (d. 1944), the great Moroccan scholar, judge, and defender of the Tijāniyyah, on a visit to the latter in Fes. In addition to his initiatory lineages (*asānīd*) connecting him to al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tall and the Ḥāfīziyyah, Shaykh ‘Abdallāh also received an important chain of initiation connecting him to Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī through the latter’s successor, ‘Alī Tamāsīnī.

However, it is through Niasse’s son, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, that the Tijāniyyah order became the most widespread and influential Sufi order in West Africa, and most likely one of the largest Muslim organizations in the world. Shaykh Ibrahim instituted a special form of spiritual training, known as *tarbiyah*, which is claimed to have led a great number of disciples, from all walks of life, to high spiritual stations more quickly than was common amongst other branches of the ṭarqāh, or even other ṭuruq (Sufi orders). As a result, hundreds of thousands of people were initiated into the Tijāniyyah by Shaykh Niasse and his *mugaddams*, establishing important zawiyas in Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Sudan. This was widely interpreted as the fulfillment of a prophecy prevalent in Tijani sources of the coming

of a *fayḍah*, or outpouring of mystical knowledge and spiritual realization.\(^{142}\) Ibrahim Niasse authored two major works on Sufism, defending and explaining his methods, entitled the *Kāshif al-Ilbas*, “The Removal of the Veils,” and the *al-Sirr al-Akbar*, “The Greatest Secret,” in addition to several shorter works and *diwāns* of poetry. One of his popular oral *tafsīr* sessions has been transcribed and published as *Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr lil-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (“In the Gardens of Tafsir of the Noble Qur’an”), as has a collection of his short treatises, letters, and sermons (as *Jawāhir al-Rasā’il, “Pearls of Letters*’). Shaykh Ibrahim traveled widely throughout the West Africa, the Middle East, Europe and even Asia, and his branch of the order, the Tijāniyyah-Ibrāhīmiyyah, commonly known amongst its members simply as the *Fayḍah*, is currently the most popular branch of the Tijāniyyah, with zāwiyyahs throughout the continent, the Middle East, Indonesia, and in North America and Europe.

In addition to continuing his legacy of tarbiya, some of Shaykh Ibrahim’s most recent successors, Shaykh Hassan Cissé (d. 2008) and his brother, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī ‘Alī Cissé have been responsible for the spread of the Tijāniyyah in the United States, Europe, and South Africa, and have overseen the publication and translation of many of Shaykh Ibrahim’s works into English. Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī ‘Alī Cissé was recently named #19 of the 500 most influential Muslims by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center of Jordan, which described him as “the Spiritual leader of around 100 million Tijani Muslims.”\(^ {143}\) While the Tijāniyyah began (like so many other Sufi orders and movements) in the Magreb, the remarkable legacy of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse has transformed it into a global Sufi order, centered in West Africa.

\(^{142}\) See Seesemann’s *The Divine Flood* for an in-depth scholarly description of the early history of this phenomenon.

\(^{143}\) See “Sheikh Ahmad Tijānī bin Ali Cisse” *themuslim500.com*, [http://themuslim500.com/profile/sheikh-Ahmad-Tijani-ali-cisse](http://themuslim500.com/profile/sheikh-Ahmad-Tijani-ali-cisse). While the figure given for the number of disciples is very much a matter of debate, the influence which the multiple successors of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse wield in West Africa and the diaspora is immense.
The Present Study

The present work is a study of the epistemology and associated spiritual exercises, or ways of knowing, amongst contemporary members the Tijāniyyah-Ibrāhīmiyyah in Dakar and Kaolack. Life in many neighborhoods in Senegal is accompanied by the soundtrack of the rites of Tijani and Mouride Sufis, broadcast over loudspeakers from mosques or chanted in the street. The pictures of Tijani shaykhs adorn taxis and shop stalls, and on Fridays, prayer beads become a nearly universal accessory. If you were to examine any young person’s cell phone, you’d find pictures of hip-hop artists, football and wrestling stars, and Sufi shaykhs. The Sufi orders of Senegal have adapted themselves well to the increasingly globalized and online world of contemporary Senegal, and seem to be in no danger of going anywhere. But as fascinating as these sociological dynamics are, I am primarily interested in the intellectual or philosophical dimensions of the tradition.

Sometimes, when participating or listening to on conversations about different Sufi masters or topics, I felt as if I were in a Socratic dialogue. Like the Pythagoreans, many Senegalese Sufis refuse to discuss the “mysteries” (asrār) of doctrine or method whenever an outsider is present. For example, Ibrāhīmī Tijanis sometimes ask, “Are there any clouds in the sky?” before speaking about the order’s secrets, such as the process of tarbiyah.144 While many of the spiritual exercises of tarbiyah are secret, and I have done my best to protect their integrity, I have tried to approach them as part of a larger philosophical praxis, taking Hadot’s redefinition of philosophy. That is, I tried to

144 Cf. Plato, Theatetus, trans. Benjamin Jowett, [http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/theatu.html] “Soc: ‘Take a look round, then, and see that none of the uninitiated are listening. Now by the uninitiated I mean: the people who believe in nothing but what they can grasp in their hands, and who will not allow that action or generation or anything invisible can have real existence.’ Theaet: ‘Yes, indeed, Socrates, they are very hard and impenetrable mortals.’
approach and interpret contemporary Sufi practice, discourse, and discourse about practice, not as anthropological or historical data, but as a philosophical program of theory and praxis that can be analyzed and evaluated (to a certain extent) intellectually. In this chapter, I have attempted to provide a brief introduction the various terms and concepts of Sufism in general and the Tijāniyyah in particular, in order to contextualize and define the terms of the main arguments of this study. In the next chapter, I will attempt to describe the unique knowledge contemporary Tijanis claim to possess, how they acquired it, and how and why they describe this knowledge as being Ḥaqq al-Yaqīn or ‘Ayn al Yaqīn, the very reality or essence of certainty.
Chapter 3: Ways of Knowing in Tijani Sufism

What is ma’rifah? That’s hard to say because you live it.
-M.D.

Conceiving of the reality of knowledge is extremely difficult.
-Ibn ‘Arabī

What is knowledge? Like “being” or “consciousness,” “knowledge” is one of the most everyday, and yet mysterious aspects of human life. What can we know? How is it that we know? How well can we know? How well can we know ourselves? How can we know that we know? These questions have inspired some of the greatest minds of civilizations around the world, from the earliest recorded history right down to the present day. In contemporary Africa, and in the Islamic world, some of the most dynamic and fascinating approaches to these questions can be found in the branch of the Tijani Sufi order founded by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. The community of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, known in Arabic as al-Ṭarīqah al-Tijāniyyah al-Ibrāhīmiyyah, in French as Niassènes, in Wolof as the Taalibe Baay, and amongst themselves as the Fayḍah, are a self-defined community of knowledge. Membership in the community is largely defined by having gone through the process of tarbiyah, a process of spiritual transformation that is supposed to lead to the acquisition of ma’rifah, direct knowledge of God and of self.

This chapter is intended to be an exposition of the epistemology of Ibrahim Niasse’s branch of the Tijāniyyah as articulated by the masters, disciples, and authoritative texts of the tradition. In it, I will present various definitions and explanations of ma’rifah and its relationship to other kinds of knowledge, the means by which this special knowledge is acquired, and the ways in which it is verified. I will begin with two long quotations from
disciples that illustrate the main themes and arguments that will be explored throughout the rest of the chapter.

S.D. is a new father and philosophy teacher who moonlights as an English teacher for Senegalese students, and as a Wolof and French teacher for expats in Dakar. I met S.D. at his wife’s family home in the neighborhood of Ouakam on the day after his son’s batême (naming ceremony). S.D. took me to meet his Shaykh, Babacar N'Diaye, who greeted us warmly and after hearing a little bit about my research, assured me that I was in good hands with S.D., whom he described as an ‘Ārif biLLāh (knower through God) and a leader of his disciples. While S.D. and I waited for my official interview with Shaykh N’Diaye, he told me how he first came to the Ṭarīqah.

I was out late one night with my friends. We were coming back from a club—in those days, I used to party and smoke cigarettes—and it was very late, and I heard the sound of a gammu [of Shaykh Ibrahim’s branch of the Tijāniyyah]. I liked the sound of the zikrs, there were different from what I had heard before…. Since that day, I started being interested in the Ṭarīqah, in tarbiyah, but I didn’t go immediately, I think I waited two or three years later to decide and I don’t know what exactly made me join. But, I know that since that day, I was clearly interested in that. Then one day, my elder brother, he is a taalibe [disciple] also, a taalibe of Shaykh Babacar N’Diaye, I asked him to bring me to the Shaykh to introduce me to him. And that is what he did. Two years or three years later, I became the president of the association, I was the president of the association for four years before I left it for another brother because I am getting busier and busier, because I teach classes and I have a lot of papers to correct and grade…

I think I took the wīrd, and a week later I asked for tarbiyah, because I always heard Niassènes [Followers of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse] say that we have to know God first when we want to practice His religion. And that idea made me curious. How can we know God, Who is God? If we can know God, where is God? Can I communicate with him? So that made me curious, so I wanted to know, to discover if we can really know God. Also, they give a sentence from the Qur’an which says that God asks us to know him first before practicing. I don’t know exactly the passage, but I think it is in the Qur’an.145 People have many interpretations of this sentence; for some people, it means that we have to know that He is the greatest, that he is the one that gives you life, food, etc. and that He is the One who has created the world, everything; but I myself, I consider that this answer is not very strong. So that made me curious to go further and understand if we can actually know God. And while I was doing my initiation, during the night while I was alone near the beach, I looked at the beach and then I said, probably something will come from the sea…[laughs] and tell me that He is God—but I said no, it’s not possible, because God is not limited. Whatever it is, no matter how awesome it is, it

145 Actually a Ḥadīth Qudsi, frequently cited in Ibrahim Niaisse’s writings, “Seek to know me before you worship me, for without knowing Me, how can you worship Me?”
is still limited, so it can’t be God. So days later, I still didn’t know who God was. And one moment I said, “hmmm, these Niassenes, they make people silly, to lose their sense”… but my shaykh, he gave me three or four words: Awwalu [The First], Akhiru [The Last], Zāhiru [The Outward], Bātin [The Inward]. That means that God is the First and the Last, and God is the Visible and the Invisible. So for example, if I put my hand here, I can see this, but I can’t see what is behind [it]. So I say that probably all things that we are seeing, all things that I can see, there is a visible and invisible side, the visible side is God and the side that I can’t see is also God, and likewise with the First and the Last. So I asked myself, who was here to know that God was here first, or here last, I didn’t understand that part. What I understood was that all things that we can see, if really God is unlimited, if God is everywhere, all things that we see can be God or are God, but I was not very sure. Because what disturbed me about that idea was, when I was going to the toilet… is God in the toilet? In our religion, we have the habit of not pronouncing even the name of God when we are inside the toilet. I am seeing the dirty things inside, can I consider that is God?

So I was thinking that I was making a mistake. Then I was confused again. But, one day, while my marabout was giving a lesson for all the taalibes, he came back to those four words: Awwalu, Akhiru, Zāhiru, Bātin… and there is a proverb in Wolof that says, “all things that are not good are nothing.” So, I asked myself, who can show nothing? Who can identify nothing? He made us ponder about that idea. Can we identify nothing? Can we put our finger on or point towards nothing? So what if all things which are not God are nothing? So, that means everything is God….

When I was in terminal class of lycée, our philosophy teacher asked a question, if God can do everything, if He is All-Powerful, can He create a stone which would be bigger than God? So now we’d have to recognize that there is something bigger than God. If God can’t do it, we’d have to limit God’s power. When I studied Ibrahim Niassé’s philosophy, I understood that he (the teacher) was ignorant, because there is no difference between the stone and God. That is why I appreciate [the initiation], once you do the initiation, you are able to explain, or to understand, many things even if you have never dealt with them before. In every situation you understand or you know how to proceed. I am a little bit different from the other Taalibes (disciples), in the beginning I was like them, I was always using my kurus [prayer beads] and always praying, but when I heard that even working is a kind of prayer, I understood that. Prayer is not just doing the five prayers each day, we also have to make efforts to earn money….

My shaykh explained that in initiation we go through four levels, or Hadrāt: Hadrat al-Qudsī—there is nothing, there is only one mystery here, Hadrāt Ḥaḍrath ʿAḥmadiyyah, Hadrāt Muḥammadīyyah, and Hadrāt khutbu or Naṣūt…. After the initiation, once you know who God is, you are in what we call the Hadrat al-Qudsī, that Ḥaḍrāt, there is only One God, nothing except God, everything is God…. I don’t believe that we can get all knowledge from the muqaddams, the muqaddams only give us the principles. The main things that you need to discover yourself. My own initiation, it took two months and a half. I still went to work, but every day after praying, I would go around the streets with my prayer beads, and I went to the beach in the night to do my prayers, but since I’ve finished, since I’ve gone through the four Ḥaḍrāt, in my life I always practice it….

I remember when I just finished my initiation, I called myself God and everything God. My brother-in-law told me “you are stupid.” He asked me, “Can we see this furniture and call it God? That’s God for you, but maybe I don’t see it that way.” Or “If you are God, you can make rain right now.” That’s what they used to say. Also I heard from a shaykh, he was telling me the origin of things, he said that everything—God Himself said that everything—will return to the way it was. One day I asked him if Satan had misbehaved, and he needs to be punished, but how will God punish him? Also we said than he was an angel, and the angels were created from Fire, so if God wants to punish Satan, how would he proceed? Would he put him into Fire? That is not punishment! And he smiled and said “that is why everything will go
back to as it was at the beginning.” People, human beings, everyone is from their parents, until Adam and Eve, Eve is from Adam, Adam comes from the Earth, the Earth comes from the foam (of the ocean), and the foam comes from water and the heaven of the Prophet, and the heaven of the Prophet comes from the Prophet and the Prophet comes from God. So, everything, the sofa, the wood, the trunk, the tree has an origin, and everything will return to its origin, back to its primary material, back to the Prophet, back to God. So when we see that the sofa is God, that is justified because all of its materials are derived from God. It is not possible that God should create anything apart from nothing, because nothing is that which does not exist. Like Antoine LaVoisier said, “nothing is created, nothing is lost, all is transformed.” Everything is only transformation…if God created something from other than nothing then that thing would exist alongside Him, it would be a self-contradiction since God is the First and the Only. God cannot co-exist with anything, so “creation” is the profane term, but it is really “transformation” is the more correct term…

Just after my initiation I remember my shaykh asked me if it was good to drink beer as a Muslim. I said, “beer and water are the same thing,” because I was in the state of Ḥadrah Qudsī, everything was identical. But right now, because, according to the shaykh, it is dangerous to let someone always live in Ḥadrah Qudsī, because he may create some problems with other people. He would misbehave and say that “this is God.” That is why after the initiation, immediately, you have to put him in the second step, the third step, so that he leaves the Ḥadrah Qudsī and goes back to the Ḥadrah al-Nasūt, to know that here you are God, but there you are not God.…

I said that this is like philosophy. In philosophy for example, we put some rules, some main elements which are the foundation, axioms.… After the initiation, there are some elements, keys, they give you. Because what the shaykh has given you, it is a liberation, but not an absolute liberation. For example, they tell you that in everything you should see the four hadrahs, in everything you should see God, the Prophet, the Shaykh [Tijānī], and Shaykh Ibrahim…. I re-asked the question my teacher asked, “can God make a rock too heavy for him to lift, and if so, does God then have limited power? When he asked this question, this professor was ignorant, because there is no difference between the stone and God. It’s the same thing, isn’t it?

It’s like philosophy from Greek antiquity, they had what they called the public place, the agora where the intellectuals met to discuss diverse questions. The same thing is reproduced during the ḡammu at Kaolack, when we are together and we ask each other questions. Each person has his own question which he thinks about and asks, often prompting a debate. I forget when, but I remember one debate we had all night, until the dawn. Each person has his perspective and opinion, that is to say, there is no dogmatism, equally one can even swim against the current of the shaykh…. We respect and revere the guides, but, for example, when planning an event, I seek the advice the shaykh, but as the president, the final decision returns to me. If he tells me something that I don’t agree with, I tell him, ‘No, I don’t see it like this because of such and such.’ This reminds me of a story about the Prophet: before a battle he had a strategy, but some of the Sahabah [Companions] asked, ‘does this come from God or from you?’ The Prophet said, ‘From me.’ So they said, ‘Alright, well we think that this strategy is not good for these reasons.’ And the Prophet followed their advice…The shaykh may have more knowledge, more wisdom than us, especially regarding what is in religious books, so we follow what he says in these matters, but in the domain of social life, we are all initiated. Once you have been initiated you can see differently, you can see farther than another, so when it comes to ma’rifah, there is no absolute authority, no absolute truth. Each person can see from and present his own perspective and try to pose questions and arguments that follow from that position. It is like this that we develop our understanding and experiences.\footnote{S.D., Interview with the author, February 16, 2014. Dakar, Senegal. French and English.}
About a week later, I met with Abu Ibrahim, a French convert to Islam who has been a member of the Tijani Ṭarīqah for five years. After meeting him at the zāwiyah of Baba Lamine, one of Shaykh Ibrahim’s sons and a prominent shaykh in Dakar, Abu Ibrahim invited me over to his apartment to discuss his time in the Ṭarīqah and maʿrifah. When I asked him about what he has learned in the Ṭarīqah, he told me,

I’ve learned the inside knowledge, knowledge of oneself, knowledge of God, of life, of reality. It’s changed the way I see things, the way I react to events, the way I plan things, just the way I live, I’m less affected by outside events, because you don’t see life the same way you saw it before…. What happens, happens; it’s like that. You accept destiny. All Muslims say they believe in destiny, but when something bad happens, it’s like they don’t believe in destiny anymore. If something bad happens, they say, “ah, it shouldn’t be like this.” I tell you this and I feel this, but of course sometimes I get sad, I get angry, it’s not like you totally just [*moves hands in a flat line*], but you get closer to that…. It’s that inside knowledge, it’s different reading and living it. It’s something you feel and you’re sure about it. It’s difficult to express it, it’s something you live. It’s like, you ask me, “how does an apple taste?”, I can talk for hours and you’ll still not gonna know how it tastes until you go and taste it yourself, and that knowledge is the same, so it’s difficult to talk about it. I couldn’t prove it, but I know myself, and that’s enough…

[Question: How would you define maʿrifah, what are its conditions?]

To me, maʿrifah is knowledge of God, knowledge of reality, knowledge of inward things, like esoterism, that’s what it is for me, that’s how I see it…. I think that in order to have maʿrifah, the person should be correct. He should be pious, a very good Muslim, inwardly, outwardly. It should be like a reward, that’s what I think it should be. But obviously, it’s not the case, you know? And even Shaykh Ibrahim, he said it’s open to everyone. And it’s like it’s not even a reward, I’ve read that it’s rather like a way to improve yourself, to do tarbiyah. Sometimes, I see people, it’s like they’re not even good Muslims, and they do tarbiyah. Like you don’t even pray correctly, you don’t make effort, and we give you tarbiyah, we give you the secrets of the universe, the best thing you can get. To me, it should be like a reward. Like previous Sufis, it was only the elite who had this knowledge and these awrâds, but now it’s given to everyone. Sometimes, I don’t like that, but it seems Shaykh Ibrahim was not against that, that’s what I’ve read, I don’t know if it’s true or not. ‘Cause it’s getting so democratic, you know… If you want to have Iḥsān, but you don’t have good Islām, it’s not worth doing it. That’s what I think, but obviously, maybe Shaykh Ibrahim or other shuyukh they see it differently. It's the most precious thing and they're just giving it away like that, but I guess that's the way God wants it. If I were a muqaddam, for example, if I see a girl who doesn’t wear hijab, I’d never give her [tarbiyah]. But you see people in the Ṭarīqah, even disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim, you don’t see Islam in them, but they've done tarbiyah, you know. The problem is that after that, it can be dangerous. That’s what I think… Sometimes it can help the person better, but sometimes the things you discover may also not make you want to make more effort, because with what you discover you may tend to say, “Oh! So it’s like this? Why would I want to make more effort then?” But the rules of the Tijāniyyah are very strict, you have to pray in groups, you have to do this, this, this…If you respected this, you wouldn’t give tarbiyah or the Tijani Ṭarīqah to anyone.
But, on the other hand, I’ve witnessed an excellent example of the opposite. I once heard of someone who wanted / was about to take ṭarīqah and do ṭarbiyah. I thought it wasn’t appropriate to give it to that person because of the behavior he had at the time. He did take the ṭarīqah and do ṭarbiyah though, and he very quickly changed his way of life and his habits, did a good ṭarbiyah and became a very good disciple!

[Question: So what is the goal then, what is the point?]

…The goal is to be a good person, be a good Muslim, that means to be a good person, be a good man, to improve myself in my behaviour, my character, my thoughts—in the thoughts, that’s even harder. You can stop sinning, for example, physically or outwardly, but in your mind, it’s harder to control, but it’s part of the process, you know. You’ve got to control your heart and your mind.

When I asked Abu Ibrahim if people outside of his Ṭarīqah could also have access to this maʿrifah, he told me:

Sometimes when we listen to atheists, or non-Muslims in general, we hear things that we got to know, and sometimes we think it’s really close. The non-believer is really close to the believer, to some extent, you know? Sometimes, when an atheist speaks, you think he is a gnostic, an ‘Arif, you know? That’s very strange. For example, some people say “there’s no God, there’s nothing, it’s just a game,” and it’s true, but it depends how you see it, but to some extent it’s true, and at least it’s his truth. Because he’s sure of that too, you know, he believes it, that’s the way he sees the world. Sometimes, maybe I think they could be gnostics. Some Muslims say, “no, God’s religion is Islam, all the rest is false.” But also Truth is everywhere, even in the false there is Truth. Allah is al-Haqq (The Real/The Truth) so everything is truth, you know? When we say “He exists”/ “He doesn’t exist,” the border between these two is so slight, so thin, so difficult to express. Because you say, lā ilāha—there is no God, we start with this—except Allah. It’s not so simple eh? Of course yeah, Islam is the religion of God, but as I said, an atheist, he can speak like a gnostic. That’s very difficult to judge…

[Question: Like philosophers for example? Do they sound like gnostics? Could they be gnostics?]

… To me, philosophy is just speaking, it’s like turning around. You talk, you talk, but you’re not getting anywhere, like a mouse on a wheel. Sometimes though, philosophy is deep, philosophers can say deep things, but it’s like they don’t react to what they’re saying, and they keep on speaking and speaking. Whereas Sufism is part of a practice, it’s something practical. We could also say that it’s also a philosophy, a spirituality, but it’s also acts. Awrāds [litanies] you do, prayers you do, fasts you do, and you have a concrete result of your thoughts, of your philosophy, you know? It’s not just you speak, it has to change you. Whereas, I’m not sure philosophers become better people with what they say—do they become better people with what they say, with what they discover? That’s how I see it…

[Question: What about different ṭuruq and religions?]

Although I think most ṭuruq are very good, I think Tijanis are the best. It’s like Islam, all religions are good, but Islam is the one, all Tijani shaykhs are good, but Shaykh Ibrahim is the best. And after that some will say, and this particular muqaddam [of Shaykh Ibrahim] or shaykh is better than all the others, but I wouldn’t say this. But at least, Tijāniyyah and Shaykh Ibrahim is the best way for man. Islam is the best way for man, inside Islam, Tijāniyyah is the best way, inside Tijāniyyah, Shaykh Ibrahim’s movement is the best. That’s what I think, yes!.

[Question: What about different religions? Are they abrogated or can they still benefit people?]
I think there are some good things in other religions, even for myself, now, if I read some texts, I can benefit from them. But if I see someone, for example, he doesn’t believe and he wants to take a religion, I would tell him, take Islam. But when I see for example, Christians or Buddhists who are really into it, you can see they feel well, they have their truth. If you speak to a Christian, they will say they know it’s the truth for them, it’s their truth. So how do you tell them about the Prophet Muhammad and all that, they’re like, “we don’t need it, we have everything.” So it’s not to be rejected, because even for us, all those prophets are Muslim, so it’s like former Islam, you know? It’s the forerunners of Islam—Christianity, Buddhism, if you believe Buddha was Muslim. Everything is Islam you know? Adam was Muslim, so all the prophets are Muslim. So all other religions are pre-Islam, so everything is good, no? It’s what people did and said about it that’s not correct. But even Islam, you know, what people do and say… Sometimes I can understand someone who says Islam is not good, if you judge Muslims, but the religion itself is good.

When asked about some the technical terms of Sufism, Abu Ibrahim had this to say:

It’s pretty strange, because I want to know more of God, you know, I’m still thirsty. But all of these things, the ḥadrāt, the ṣīfāt [Attributes], I’m not interested. But does it means I know less than the ones who know this? Because these things, we can explain to you these things, but what I know, it can’t be explained. But all the rest, you can read it, you can explain it, you can understand it, but the big knowledge, it’s personal, you know? Sometimes you hear people, they speak about all these things, but are you sure they got the most important thing? Sometimes they speak well, it’s like they know many things, but maybe they just repeat what they heard, and maybe they didn’t feel what you feel…When do you start baqā’ (subsistence after annihilation)? Because fanā’ (annihilation) yeah [I get it], but should you always die more, or you only die once? That’s very technical, and the problem is that the true shaykhs who can explain this to you and guide you well on this path, are very few. The true ones are very few.

But also explaining it, what’s the point of explaining it, you’re supposed to discover it for yourself. I’ve been in some dahiras [Sufi circles/associations], it’s like they give lessons. I’m not for that. It’s things you have to discover. Like the fath or the knowledge that everything is God, if you tell it to the person before he does [tarbiyah] he will think he lived it, but he just understood a bit more maybe, or yeah maybe he feels he understands, but it’s better not to speak about that, and if you start, try not to know or understand too much before you start. Because if you have all the answers, how will you know if you validated them yourself? That’s a big problem. Also, knowing the five ḥadrāt, what’s the point? What will it give me more? Will it make me sin less or become a better person? Or do this or that? Maybe it’s good to know, because it’s “just” knowledge-like historical knowledge for example, you know, it’s good, it’s knowledge, but I’m not very interested in that.

In some way it’s all interrelated [different kinds of knowledge] But also you can know some Islamic sciences and not be good at others. But ma’rifah, which is one of them, is also very specific, eh? And I would say, if you have this, you have everything. So sometimes, even, I don’t feel like learning; it’s not that I’m not interested, it’s rather that I already have the most important knowledge. The point of all these other things is to get you to the Knowledge [ma’rifah], you know? The rest is “small” or “smaller” knowledge—it’s important, yes for sure, but if you have the Knowledge, the Truth, then all the rest seems small. Still the best shuyukh know everything, and even after their fath al-akbar147, they’ve got books everywhere, and they read all the time. So for sure, it’s better for someone who’s got ma’rifah to also know the rest.

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147 “the greatest opening/enlightenment,” a term designating supreme realization.
I think *ma‘rifah* is the “opposite” of rational knowledge, or sensory knowledge. I think, it’s not rational, it’s even difficult to speak about, it’s not like, “this is white,” or “this is black.” It’s so difficult to put words on it. And I told you, even if I speak for hours, you will still not know the thing. You can’t really learn it. It’s something you experience, it’s different … It’s like scholars, they read, they learn … It’s like you read a guidebook about Paris, you learn the history of Paris, you see the pictures of Paris, but it’s better to go there for two days, now you know Paris! But if you’re just, you’re outside Paris, you read about Paris for years, but you don’t know Paris, the guy who’s never read anything, but he’s been to Paris, he knows Paris better than you do. It’s the same with God. Like some young guys here, they maybe don’t know much of “conventional” knowledge, but they know God and that makes them “better” than Imams and shuyukhs who’ve studied for years but never experienced this knowledge. You see?

The best Sufis, they are also the most crazy, You don’t know what they think deep inside of them. You see them, they’re nice, they smile, they’re like normal people but they’re not! You don’t know what they think, live and experience deep inside!!!!… There are some things I think, I wouldn’t even dare to share them with anyone, I am sure some things I think, if I said it in an assembly, they would say, “he’s talking bulls**t”, because it goes almost the opposite of what I am hearing publicly. Well, even though it’s opposite, they might well both be true, maybe both are correct.

When I asked him how the process of *tarbiyah* works to bring about *ma‘rifah*, Abu Ibrahim leaned back, shook his head and said,

I don’t know [how the *adhkār* work]. I do it, I know it works, but how? That’s too mystical, that’s too crazy for me. But also everything, why we do four rak‘ats for *Zuhur*, why three for *Maghrib*, why 33 suḥḥān’Allāh’s, everything!—why we have 5 fingers, two eyes, one nose, there has to be a reason, there has to be, but I don’t know. And how *adhkār* changes you, your mind, if you’re supposed to do 100 but if you do 103, then it’s not going to work, it’s crazy no? But it’s like this… Behind all this, everything is well-ordered, so perfectly, that if you do one more or one less, it’s not going to work, that’s crazy uh? But so is all of creation.

I think this *tarbiyah* of Shaykh Ibrahim, if you follow it, I think it’s sure you’re gonna access [God and/or *ma‘rifah*]. I don’t know anyone who did it, who didn’t say he accessed. Well, I do know some, but they admit themselves that they didn’t access because they don’t follow the things correctly (being regular, making *adhkār* on time…) But also some people, they say they accessed, but you don’t know what kind of access they are talking about. So some they say, “yeah I did *tarbiyah* in one day,” but also some they say *tarbiyah* is never finished, so there’s “*tarbiyah*” and “*tarbiyah*”. But I haven’t heard anyone say, I’ve been doing *tarbiyah* now for 15 years and I didn’t access—everyone, everyone who did *tarbiyah* [correctly] accessed, from what I know. But I don’t know what access, but at least, everybody pretends they’ve accessed [*laughs*]. It’s already a good thing, I think [*laughs*]…. Anyway, It’s all God’s wish, it’s so great and so precious, it’s the ultimate knowledge he’s giving us—there’s nothing greater than that.  

While one could devote an entire chapter just to the analysis of these two accounts, for now, it suffices to note that while representing two distinctly different descriptions of

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ma’rifah, both accounts insist that it is the most important form of knowledge, emphasize its ineffable, existential, and transformative nature, and connect it to self-knowledge while contrasting it to modern philosophy and/or formal learning. These features were present to one degree or another in virtually every interview I conducted. But for now, I will postpone discussion of these fascinating accounts in order to provide a background discussion of ma’rifah from various classical Sufi sources, before turning to the works of Shaykh Ibrahim and the words of his disciples.

I will begin with a summary of ma’rifah, as it is described within the broader Sufi tradition and contemporary scholarship on Sufism, before presenting descriptions from within the Tijani tradition of Shaykh Ibrahim and his disciples. This will be followed by a discussion of how ma’rifah is acquired and verified, with reference to Shaykh Ibrahim’s writings and interviews with contemporary disciples. Finally, I will conclude with a critical appraisal of these epistemological accounts, and highlight important similarities and differences with contemporary theories of epistemology, focusing on how and why the category of ma’rifah does not fit within contemporary academic frameworks of knowledge.

What is Ma‘rifah?

Ma’rifah in Early and Classical Sufism

Deriving from the Arabic root ‘-r-f, “ma’rifah” began to be distinguished from its close synonym ‘ilm in the 3rd C AH/ 9th CE as Sufism and other Islamic sciences began to separate into distinct disciplines with their own specific, technical vocabulary. Before this differentiation, ‘ilm was the predominant term used to refer to knowledge of all types, whereas ma’rifah and its derivations featured less commonly in the Qur’an and hadith
literature, and usually had the connotation of “recognition” or “acquaintance” (somewhat similar to the distinction between the French connaissance and savoir). In the newly-differentiated discipline of Sufism however, *ma'rifah* came to have a distinct and technical definition, referring to the direct, unmediated, experiential knowledge of God (in both senses of the phrase— God’s knowledge and knowing God—at once). For example, Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765 CE) regarded as one of the early authorities of Sufism, Islamic jurisprudence, and several other Islamic sciences (as well being regarded as the Sixth Imām of Shi‘ism) famously wrote, “Surely he alone knows [*'arafa*] God who knows Him by means of God (biLLāh). Therefore, whoso knows Him not by means of Him knows Him not.” Similarly, the seminal Sufi Dhūl-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 859), widely credited with developing the emphasis on *ma'rifah* which came to characterize later Sufism, famously defined this form of knowledge in the following formulation: “I knew my Lord by my Lord; without my Lord I would not have known my Lord.”

Abū’l Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Hujwīrī’s (d. 1077) famous and highly influential treatise, “The Uncovering of the Veiled,” (*Kashf al-Mahjūb*)152, which summarizes many of the theories and debates of early Sufism, contains this eloquent description of *ma'rifah*:

Gnosis [*ma'rifah*] is the life of the heart through God, and the turning away of one's inmost thoughts from all that is not God. The worth of everyone is in proportion to gnosis, and he who is without gnosis is worth nothing…. According to the view of orthodox Moslems, soundness of reason and regard to evidences are a means (*sabab*) to gnosis, but not the cause (*'illat*) thereof: the sole cause is God's will and favour, for without His favour (*'inayat*) reason is

149 For example, see Qur’an 2:186, 12:58, and 5:83, which reads: *You will see their eyes overflow with tears as they listen to what is revealed to the Messenger, for they recognize ('arifū) the Truth.*


151 Qushayri, Epistle, 323

blind. Reason does not even know itself: how, then, can it know another? Heretics of all sorts use the demonstrative method, but the majority of them do not know God. In reality Man's only guide and enlightener is God. Reason and the proofs adduced by reason are unable to direct anyone into the right way. When the Commander of the Faithful, 'Ali, was asked concerning gnosis, he said: "I know God by God, and I know that which is not God by the light of God.")

Hujwīrī goes on to contrast maʿrifah to rational demonstration, the favored tool of the philosophers (falāsifah) and theologians (mutakallimūn):

No created being is capable of leading anyone to God. Those who rely on demonstration are not more reasonable than was Abu Talib, and no guide is greater than was Muḥammad; yet, since Abu Talib was preordained to misery, the guidance of Muḥammad did not avail him. The first step of demonstration is a turning away from God, because demonstration involves the consideration of some other thing, whereas gnosis (maʿrifah) is a turning away from all that is not God. Ordinary objects of search are found by means of demonstration, but knowledge of God is extraordinary. Accordingly, the miracle is not that reason should be led by the act to affirm the existence of the Agent, but that a saint should be led by the light of the Truth to deny his own existence. The knowledge gained is in the one case a matter of logic, in the other it becomes an inward experience. Let those who deem reason to be the cause of gnosis, consider what reason affirms in their minds concerning the substance of gnosis, for gnosis involves the negation of whatever is affirmed by reason, i.e. whatever notion of God can be formed by reason, God is in reality something different. How, then, is there any room for reason to arrive at gnosis by means of demonstration? To infer the existence of God from intellectual proofs is assimilation (tashbih), and to deny it on the same grounds is nullification (taʿtil). Reason cannot pass beyond these two principles, which in regard to gnosis are agnosticism, since neither of the parties professing them is Unitarian (muwahhid). Therefore, when reason is gone as far as possible, and the souls of His lovers must needs search for Him, they rest helplessly without their faculties, and while they so rest, they grow restless and stretch their hands in supplication and seek a relief for their souls; and when they have exhausted every manner of search in their power, the power of God becomes theirs, i.e. they find the way from Him to Him, and are eased of the anguish of absence and set foot in the garden of intimacy and win to rest. God causes Man to know Him through Himself with a knowledge that is not linked to any faculty, a knowledge in which the existence of Man is

153 The cousin of the Prophet, who defended his nephew against his enemies, yet did not convert to Islam despite Muḥammad’s frequent attempts to persuade him of his prophecy.

154 i.e. The Cosmological Arguments of Peripatetic philosophy and theology.

155 A reference to the state of annihilation, fanā’ discussed in the previous chapter.

156 This important notion was greatly elaborated in the work of Ibn ‘Arabi, and will be addressed later in the present Chapter. The important idea is that the Divine Reality transcends any human conception.

157 The argument here is that in using rational proofs to affirm God’s existence, one necessarily places God under the restriction of the limited rules of this reasoning, making His existence posterior to these rules, when in fact it is prior to them. In doing so, one makes God a thing amongst other things, falling into the error of tashbih, denying God’s transcendence. Similarly, denying God’s existence on the basis of these proofs is regarded as equally fallacious. In the words of the early Baghdadi Sufi Abu Bakr Wāṣitī (d. 932), “If someone says, ‘I recognized God through the evidence,’ ask him how he recognized the evidence.” (Chittick, *Kashf Al-asrar: The Unveiling of the Mysteries* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2015), 295.
merely metaphorical. Hence to the gnostic, egoism is utter perfidy; his remembrance of God is without forgetfulness, and his gnosis is not empty words but actual feeling….You must not let blind conformity enter into your knowledge of God, and you must know Him through His attributes of perfection.

In a move that was to be repeated by countless Sufis (especially by Ibn ‘Arabi and his school) throughout the ages, Hujwīrī takes his definition of *ma’rifah*, “the turning away of one's inmost thoughts from all that is not God,” to its extreme limit, arguing that awareness of *ma’rifah*, or anything else other than God, is not part of true *ma’rifah*.

Shiblī158 says: "Real gnosis is the inability to attain gnosis," i.e. inability to know a thing, to the real nature of which a man has no clue except the impossibility of attaining it. Therefore, in attaining it, he will rightly take no credit to himself, because inability (‘ajz) is search, and so long as he depends on his own faculties and attributes, he cannot properly be described by that term; and when these faculties and attributes depart, then his state is not inability, but annihilation….

…the affirmation of knowledge of other than God is not gnosis; and so long as there is room in the heart for aught except God, or the possibility of expressing aught except God, true gnosis has not been attained. The gnostic is not a gnostic until he turns aside from all that is not God. Abu Hafs Haddád159 says: "Since I have known God, neither truth nor falsehood has entered my heart."160

From these early Sufi texts up through contemporary usage by Sufi authors such as Shaykh Ibrahim, *ma’rifah* is usually contrasted to *‘ilm*, which is commonly used to refer to “ordinary” conceptual knowledge. However, due to the fact that *ma’rifah* is not used in the Qur’an and ḥadīth to refer to God’s knowledge (whereas *‘ilm* is161), *ma’rifah* is sometimes considered as a special category of *‘ilm*, while this latter term is also used to refer to

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158 Abu Bakr al-Shiblī was an important early Sufi and poet of Junayd’s circle in Baghdad whom Ibn ‘Arabi held him in the highest esteem.

159 An early Persian Sufi of Nishapur, Abū Ḥafs ‘amr ibn Salmā Ḥaddād (d. ~879) described by other early Sufi writers (Sulamī and Qushayrī) as an ascetic and a *Malāmī* (see previous chapter) of the first order.


161 The Qur’an refers to God as al-‘Alīm, The Knowing, deriving form the same root as *‘ilm*. Moreover, in a famous hadīth the Prophet says, al-‘ilm mūn*, “Knowledge is Light,” which was taken by Sufi authors to imply a scope for *‘ilm* beyond mere conceptual knowledge.

162 And in other specialized contexts, *‘ilm* is considered to be superior to *ma’rifah*, the former referring to God’s perfect knowledge, the latter referring to man’s “recognition” of the Divine, which is regarded inferior because it
various esoteric sciences associated with *maʿrifah* (such as the “science of letters,” *ʿilm al-hurūf*). In the works of some Sufi writers, such as Ibn ʿArabi, the two terms are used almost interchangeably, the context determining the type of knowledge meant by either term. Despite these nuances of vocabulary, Sufi authors unanimously emphasized the distinction between conceptual knowledge that could be acquired through formal learning, and existential knowledge that could only be acquired through spiritual practice and/or “unveiling.”

The earliest Sufi texts often based their expositions of this second kind of knowledge on two oft-quoted ḥadīth and an early commentary on a verse of the Qurʾan, all three of which employ the root, ‘-r-f from which the word “*maʿrifah*” is derived. Later Sufi authors, including Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, have followed suit, making these three traditions a kind of canonical foundation for Sufi discussions of *maʿrifah.* The Qurʾanic verse in question reads, *I created man and jinn only to worship Me* (51:56), and the oft-cited commentary of Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 687) glosses “to worship Me” (*liyaʿbudūni*) as “to know Me” (*liyaʿrifūni*). Many Sufi authors, including Shaykh Ibrahim, take this as proof of *maʿrifah*, knowing God in a direct, experiential manner, being man’s *raison d’être*.

The two ḥadīth cited alongside this commentary have become such as staple of Islamic mystical literature that one would be hard-pressed to find a Sufi text that does not reference implies a coming to know after ignorance. Ibn ʿArabi characteristically took the position that these distinctions were merely verbal and that whether a Sufi author referred to *ʿilm* as being superior to *maʿrifah* or *maʿrifah* as being superior to *ʿilm*, he referred to the same distinction between Divine and merely human knowledge. See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 148-9.

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one or both of these traditions. In the first ḥadīth, God says (through the mouth of the Prophet), “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known [u’raf], so I created the creatures that they might know me.” This ḥadīth is often cited to identify ma’rifah as the reason for creation, and to explain the intimate relationship between this kind of knowledge and love, which is the cause of former. In this respect, this ḥadīth often cited alongside the tradition, “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, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks.” The state described in second half of this ḥadīth, in which the God “becomes” the various faculties of the servant, is often identified with ma’rifah, wherein God becomes the servant’s noetic faculty, his knowledge, and that which is known.

The other foundational ḥadīth cited in discussions of ma’rifah reads, “He who knows [’arafa] himself, knows his Lord,” connecting ma’rifah with self-knowledge. Perhaps more than any other author, Ibn ʿArabi discusses this ḥadīth from a variety of perspectives. He writes,

> The root of the existence of knowledge of God is knowledge of self. So knowledge of God has the property of knowledge of self, which is the root. In the view of those who know the self, the self is an ocean without shore, so knowledge of it has no end. Such is the property of knowledge of the self. Hence knowledge of God, which is a branch of this root, joins with it in a property, so there is no end to knowledge of God. That is why in every state, the knower

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165 The two oft-cited ḥadīth, while not found in the canonical collections, have been cited so often by Sufis that they have has become part of the popular canon of narrations attributed to the Prophet. Ibn ʿArabi claimed to have asked the Prophet about this narration in a dream, and that Prophet told him that its meaning is sound even though he never said it. Thus Ibn ʿArabi considered it a saying whose authenticity is proven by unveiling (kashf), but not by historical transmission (naql). See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 391 n14 and 250-1.

166 Indeed the first chapter of Ibn ʿArabi’s influential *Ringstones of Wisdom* can be considered a commentary on this tradition.

167 Shaykhah Maryam Niasse, daughter of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse told me, “love is a station that precedes ma’rifah and is also the fruit of the union of ma’rifah to which it leads.”
says, “My Lord increase me in knowledge!” (20:144). Then God increases him in knowledge of himself that he may increase in knowledge of his Lord. This is given by divine unveiling.\textsuperscript{168}

Elsewhere, he further explains the nature of this self-knowledge:

Whoso knows himself by this knowledge knows his Lord, for indeed He created him in His image; indeed he is identical with His selfhood and Reality. For this reason, none of the men of knowledge have discovered this knowledge of the self except the godly, namely the Messengers and the Sufis. As for the companions of reasoning and the masters of thinking—namely the ancients [Greek philosophers] and the theologians in their theological discussions concerning the self and its quiddity—none have discovered its reality, and mental reasoning will never grant it. Whosoever seeks knowledge of it by way of mental reasoning does so in vain.\textsuperscript{169}

In the 177\textsuperscript{th} Chapter of his \textit{magnum opus}, the \textit{Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah} (Meccan Openings), the Andalusian sage expands upon this description of \textit{ma’rifah} and its relationship to other forms of knowledge. Before delving into the arguments for the necessity of \textit{ma’rifah}, Ibn ‘Arabi begins this chapter with a dense poem that connects \textit{ma’rifah} to self-knowledge and the spiritual realization described in the \textit{ḥadīth} in which God “becomes” the faculties of the aspirant, underscoring the importance of spiritual practice (particularly following the example of the Prophet) in acquiring this form of knowledge.

\begin{quote}
\textit{Ma’rifah} is unique in its place and seeks nothing but The One, so \textit{ma’rifah} according to the Folk [the Sufis], is a pathway (\textit{maḥajjah}), for it is only acquired through practice, mindfulness (\textit{taqwah}), and spiritual wayfaring (\textit{sulūk}), because it is [acquired] through verified unveiling (\textit{kashf muḥaqqqaq}) which is never subject to doubt, unlike [conceptual] knowledge (\textit{‘ilm}) which is acquired through speculative thought. So know that the only one who Knows (\textit{‘arafa}) correctly is he who knows things through himself. For everyone who knows a thing through
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{168} Chittick, \textit{Sufi Path of Knowledge}, 346.

\textsuperscript{169} Ringstones of Wisdom, 134-5.
something added [to himself] is a follower (muqallid) of that which is added [to himself] and what it gives him. ¹⁷⁰

Ibn ‘Arabi continues this exploration of self-knowledge, explaining why all other forms of knowledge (even sensory and rational knowledge) are really just fallible forms of “following authority” or “blind imitation” (taqlīd), a powerful rhetorical move, as this this often negatively-charged term was the rationalist philosophers’ and theologians’ insult of choice for their opponents. ¹⁷¹

Nothing in existence knows things in itself other than the One. The knowledge of things and not-things possessed by everything other than the One is a following of authority (taqlīd). Since it has been established that other-than-God cannot have knowledge of a thing without following authority, let us follow God’s authority, especially in knowledge of Him.

Why do we say that nothing can be known by other-than-God except through authority? Because man knows nothing except through one of the faculties given to him by God: the senses and reason. Hence man has to follow the authority of his sensory perception in that which it gives, and sensory perception may be mistaken, or it may correspond to the situation as it is in itself. Or, man has to follow the authority of the rational faculty in that which it gives him, either in that which is a logical necessity (darūrah) or speculation. But reason follows the authority of thought (fikr), some of which is correct, and some of which is corrupt, so its knowledge of things is “hit-or-miss” (bi’l-ittifāq). Hence there is nothing but following authority. ¹⁷²

Since there is no escape from following authority, and both reason and the senses can err, what authority can be reliably followed? Moreover, how can one know that this authority is reliable, given that even one’s rational speculation can be suspect? Ibn ‘Arabi’s subtle answer sheds light on the relationship between the spiritual practice and the acquisition of the certain knowledge of ma’rifah.

¹⁷⁰ Ibn al-‘Arabī. Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah vol. 2 (Cairo: Bulaq, 1911), 297
¹⁷¹ Ibn ‘Arabi sets up this move in the preceding chapter by arguing that, in contrast to being the instrument of “free-thinking,” reason is actually the ultimate “follower of authority.” He writes, “Reason is troublesome because it is governed by speculation, along with all the other faculties within man, since there is nothing greater than reason in following authority. Reason imagines it has God-given proofs, but it only has proofs given by speculation. Speculation’s proofs let it take reason wherever it wants, while reason is like a blind man…. How is it proper for an intelligent man to follow the authority of the faculty of rational speculation, when he divides reflective consideration into the correct and the corrupt? Necessarily, he has need of a criterion with which [he can] distinguish the correct from the corrupt, but he cannot possibly distinguish between correct and corrupt rational speculation through rational speculation itself. So he necessarily needs God in that.” (II 290. 14) Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 166-7.
Since this is the situation, the intelligent man who wants to know God should follow His
duty in the reports He has given about Himself in His scriptures and upon the tongues of
His messengers. So if a person wants to truly know things as they really are, he can’t do so
simply by what he is given by his [natural] faculties [of sense and reason], instead he
needs to expand [himself] through many acts of willing obedience (ṭa‘āt) until the Real
becomes his hearing, and seeing, and all of his faculties [referring to the previously cited ḥadīth qudsī], then he will truly know all things through God (biLlāh) and know God
through God. In any case, there is no escape from following authority. But once you know
God through God and all things through God, then you will not be visited in that by ignorance,
obfuscations, doubts, or uncertainties….  

The rational thinkers from among the people of speculation imagine that they know
what speculation, sensory perception, and reason have given them, but they are following the
authority of these things. Every faculty is prone to a certain kind of mistake. Though they may
know this fact, they seek to throw themselves into error, for they distinguish between that
within which sensory perception, reason, and thought may be mistaken and that within which it
is not mistaken. But how can they know? Perhaps that which they have declared to be a
mistake is correct. Nothing can eliminate this incurable disease, unless all a person’s
knowledge is known through God, not through other than Him. God knows through His own
Essence, not through anything added to it. Hence you will also come to know through that
to which He knows, since you follow the authority of He who knows, who is not
ignorant, and who follows the authority of no one. Anyone who follows the authority of other
than God follows the authority of he who is visited by mistakes and is correct only by chance.

Someone may object, “How do you know this? Perhaps you may be mistaken in
these classifications without being aware of it. For in this, you follow the authority of that
which can be mistaken: reason and thought.”

We reply, You are correct. However since we see nothing but following
authority, we have preferred to follow the authority of he who is called “Messenger” and
that which is called “The Speech of God.” We followed their authority in knowledge until
the Real was our hearing and our sight, so we came to know things through God and
gained knowledge of these classifications through God. The fact that we were right to
follow this authority was fortunate, since, as we have said, whenever reason or any of the
faculties accords with something as it is in itself, this is by chance. We do not hold that it
is mistaken in every situation. We only say that we do not know how to distinguish its
being wrong from its being right. But when the Real is all a person’s faculties and he
knows things through God, then he knows the difference between the faculties’ being
right and their being mistaken. This is what we maintain, and no one can deny it, for he
will find it in himself.

Since this is so, busy yourself with following what God ordered you to do, including
the acts of willingly obeying Him, watching over your heart (muraqqabah al-qalb), not the nafs
(ego/carnal soul), regarding the haya’ (bashfulness/reverence173) that occurs in your heart from
God, observing His limits [i.e. those limits God has decreed for you], staying alone with Him
and preferring His side to yourself, until the Real becomes all of your faculties, and you have
clear insight (baṣīrah) with regards to your situation…for the Messenger of God said that there
is no way to truly know God except by truly knowing the self when he said, “whoever knows
himself, knows his Lord”174

In this insightful passage, Ibn ‘Arabi establishes the fallibility of the sensory and
rational faculties, and posits that these limitations can only be overcome when God Himself

173 Ḥadīth, “shame is part of iman” and “every religion (dīn) has a distinguishing characteristic and the
characteristic of my community is modesty (haya’)” Al-Muwatta, Volume 47, Ḥadīth 9.
replaces these faculties, as promised in the ḥadīth. However, before this transformation, he
admits that, strictly speaking, one only has only the fallible authority of the senses and reason
by which to judge the promises and propositions of scripture, but he preferred to follow them,
and claims to have verified their truth. Thus he advises his readers to follow his example and
focus on their spiritual practice and their hearts, observing the natural responses of their hearts
to the presence of the Divine. Implicit in this passage is the notion that one is not truly
oneself, or not truly aware of oneself without spiritual practice and formation. Based on the
ḥadīth, Ibn ‘Arabi asserts that the self-knowledge which results from this discipline is
identical to the knowledge of God.

This same passage continues by relating this ḥadīth to the Qur’anic verse, *We will show them our signs on the horizons and in themselves until it is clear to them that It/He is the Real* (41:53), explaining that God has directed us to acquire knowledge of Himself by
reflecting upon that which is within us and that which is without. After further explaining why
self-knowledge is not subject to the same doubts as those forms of knowing acquired through
reflection on the external world, Ibn ‘Arabi concludes:

> But everything is in ourselves, so if we examine and reflect upon what is in ourselves we will
realize from our knowledge of the self what is acquired by the person who reflects upon the
horizons. So the Prophet, since he knew that the self encompasses all the realities of the world,
focused you on that self-knowing out of his *solicitude for you*¹⁷⁵…. So this (path of self-
knowing) is the path of salvation (*najāḥ*),….and it is the path which has been traveled by the
elite among the true servants of God….¹⁷⁶

As a whole, this passage contains several important points that outline the
epistemological foundations of *maʿrifah*. First and foremost, in this perspective, sure
knowledge of the self, or things, or of God, is not possible for an ordinary, everyday human

¹⁷⁵ From Qur’an (9:128) *A Messenger has come unto you from amongst yourselves [or from your souls], grievous is your distress to him, full of concern for you, for the believers, most kind and merciful.*

being merely as he or she is. The sensory and rational faculties can be right and they can be wrong, but without some other means of discrimination, it is impossible to determine when they are right and when they are wrong, and so these faculties alone cannot guarantee us knowledge. Thus there is no escape from following fallible authority, at least initially.

However, following the authority of that which people claim to come from “the Word of God” (the Qur’an and other scriptures) and “His Messengers” (the Sunnah and Divine Laws) can lead to a transformation whereby one becomes identified with the Real, allowing one to know It through self-knowledge. This in turn allows one to verify the authority of the Qur’an and Sunnah, discern correct rational speculation and sensory perception from that which errs, and dispense with external authority, since one now knows things through oneself, which is identical to the Real’s self, in a certain respect. Thus, the initial poem,

*Whoever climbs the degrees of ma’rifah  
Sees he who is in himself from his Attribute  
Because that [attribute] points to the One  
Because of the difference between ‘ilm and ma’rifah  
It (the self/soul) has being (wujūd) in the being of he who  
Was sent by the Real and what He required of him  
For he is the leader (Imām) of the Moment (al-waqt) in his state  
And the bystander (Wāqif) longs to Know him  
His rulings proceed from wisdom  
In the exalted level of his vantage point*

Can now be understood as indicating that the spiritual adept comes to know the Real through the Real’s faculties (“his Attribute”-the pronoun is intentionally ambiguous since these attributes or faculties are now shared by the Real and the adept), and sees the Real as being “in himself.” Thus through the Real’s faculties (“his Attribute”) the adept realizes the true oneness of the Real, a unity that includes his own being. This is accomplished by following the Prophet (“he who was sent by the Real”) who is the archetypal example of this nexus of the Divine and the human. By following the Prophet’s example, the adept can know the Real through this same self-knowledge of existential identification because the Prophet’s,
and now his, own faculties and attributes are the same as those of the Real. In fact, it is only by following the Prophet that the adept can become who he or she really is—the Real. In the line “It (the self/soul) has being (\textit{wujūd}) in the being of he who / Was sent by the Real,” the word \textit{wujūd} can also mean “finding” and “consciousness,” and so it also means that the self finds itself in finding the Prophet/the Prophet’s finding of the Real, or that the self’s consciousness has its root in the consciousness of the Prophet/the Prophet’s consciousness, which is identified with that of the Real.

Later, in the same passage, Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “When Junayd was asked about gnosis \textit{[ma’rifah]} and the gnostic \textit{[al- ‘Ārif]}, he replied, ‘The water takes on the color of its cup.’ In other words, the gnostic assumes the character traits of God, to the point where it seems as if he is He. He is not He, yet he is He” (II 316.9).177 Because the Prophet is perpetually in this state of annihilation in God, because his attributes have been subsumed in the Divine Attributes, he can serve as this existential mold and model for others. This model is necessary due to the fact that ordinary knowledge cannot be sure without the foundation of the certainty of existential self-knowledge (“the difference between \textit{‘ilm} and \textit{ma’rifah}”). This existential knowledge requires an initial following of authority, and thus the novice who has yet to embark upon this path (“the bystander” of the poem), longs to know the model by becoming him, by discovering the Prophet’s being within himself, and in doing so, discovering the Real. The rulings which come from the Prophet (\textit{sunnah} and \textit{sharī’ah}) cannot be understood unless they are put into practice,178 that is, unless one ascends to his level by following him through

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177 Chittick, \textit{Sufi Path of Knowledge}, 149. Elsewhere Ibn ‘Arabi cites the following verses of Sāhib ibn ‘Abbād to make the same point: “The glass was so clear, and so was the wine / they became so similar, that it became unclear / Whether there was wine and no cup / Or a cup and no wine.”

178 Elsewhere Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “The root of every knowledge derives from knowledge of the divine things, since ‘everything other than God derives from God.’ (I 170.8) Everything in engendered existence must be supported by divine realities and comprised within knowledge of the divine things, from which all knowledges
the ascending degrees of *ma’rifah*, of existential identification or oneness with the One, the Real.

**Limitations of Ma’rifah**

Junayd’s saying, “The water takes on the color of its cup,” is also cited to describe the individual limits of *ma’rifah*. In spite of what poetic descriptions of annihilation may suggest, the Knower (‘ārif) doesn’t simply pop out of existence like a bubble or a drop falling into the ocean. The process of obtaining *ma’rifah* is perhaps better described as the whole ocean becoming contained in one drop, or as a drop of water, or a pearl or ruby becoming perfectly clear and being placed in a spot where the whole world seems reflected within it. In this regard, Sufis including Ibn ‘Arabi and Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse,179 often quote the following verse of Abū Nuwās (d. 814), “It is not difficult for God / To gather the whole world in one [man].” Similarly, in his commentary on the previously cited Qur’anic verse “We will show them our signs in the horizons and in themselves…” (41:53), Shaykh Ibrahim writes, “There are some who say man is a small world (microcosm), but in reality, he is the large world (macrocosm) since all the worlds are contained in him.”180 But despite containing all the worlds *in potentia*, in actuality, individual man is still limited, especially when compared to God. Sidi Mohamed Kane, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s grandson, explained that “the Qur’an refers to God as ‘Alīm because it [His knowledge] is unrestricted, and not ‘Ārif, because

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180 Niasse, *Fī Rīyāḍ al-tafsīr* vol. 5, 250-1. Cf. Ibn ‘Aṭa‘illāh’s *Hikam* # 246, “The cosmos is large in respect to your body, but it is not large in respect to your soul.”
ma’rifah comes from the human side, and is therefore limited. It is true that it is absolute, but it is also limited.” Commenting further he said,

Shaykh Ibrahim said, ‘God does not manifest himself to the same person in the same way.’ God is infinite, the way he will manifest himself to you is different from the way he will manifest Himself to me or to Shaykh Ibrahim, because God is Infinite. He will manifest Himself to you in a form that corresponds to you…. The way in which God manifests himself is different, just as people are different. It’s also like drunkenness, the Sufis also talk about drunkenness, and people get drunk differently: one person cries, another laughs, another does something else…People do not become drunk in the same fashion, it somewhat depends on the quantity, on what, on how much they can handle. It’s the same with ma’rifah.181

In a similar vein, Ibn ‘Arabi comments on Junayd’s saying, comparing knowledge of God (ma’rifah) to water, and the knower (‘ārif) to its container.

Junayd was asked about knowledge (ma’rifah) and the knower (‘Ārif). He replied. “The water takes on the color of its cup.” In other words, the container displays its effects in what it contains. Junayd said this to let you know that you will never judge your object of knowledge except by yourself, since you will never know anything but yourself. Whatever may be the color of the cup, water becomes manifest in that color. The person without knowledge judges that the water is like that, since sight gives that to him. Water discloses itself in the forms of all the cups in respect to their colors, but it does not become delimited in its essence. You only see it that way. In the same manner, the shapes of the containers in which water appears display their effects in it, but in all of them it is still water. If the container is square, the water becomes manifest as square…. He who sees the water only in the cup judges it by the property of the cup. But he who sees it simple and noncompound knows that the shapes and colors in which it becomes manifest are the effect of the containers. Water remains in its own definition and reality, whether in the cup or outside it. Hence it never loses the name “water.”

God’s knowledge of Himself, like water, is formless and without color, but it necessarily takes on the appearance and form of the knower, while remaining completely itself. Ibn ‘Arabi elaborates further,

Having been asked about knowledge (ma’rifah) and the knower (‘Ārif), Junayd said, “The water takes on the color of its cup.”…Since there are as many cups as drinkers at the Pool which will be found in the abode of the Hereafter [every person who has ever lived], and since the water in the cup takes the form of the cup in both shape and color, we know for certain that knowledge of God takes on the measure of your view, your preparedness, and what you are in yourself. No two people will ever come together in a single knowledge of God, since a single constitution is never found in two different people, nor can there be such a thing. When there are two, there must be that through which the distinction is made, since the entity of each is immutably established. Were this not so, they could not be two. Hence no one ever knows anything of the Real except his own self.

181 Sidi Mohamed Kane, interview with author, April 26, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French.
The knowledge of Himself which God bestows to each person is a formless Divine self-disclosure or manifestation (tajalli) that takes on the person’s form (and is thus a form of self-knowledge). But in this perspective, we must remember that each person, indeed, everything, is itself a Divine Self-Disclosure or manifestation. So it is as if water first forms several cups of ice, and then pours itself out into these containers, taking on their forms. Ibn ‘Arabi calls the forms of these ice cups, “preparedness” and refers to them as “immutable entities”—what we are in God’s knowledge of Himself. Thus God’s self-knowledge of us, which is the root of our existence, is what determines our particular limitations, which in turn colors and shapes our knowledge of God. This can be summed up in the following way, revealing another meaning of the previously-cited hadīth, “He who knows himself, knows his Lord,” since “his Lord,” that which he worships, is nothing other than his own beliefs, which are the product of his own limited knowledge of God. Thus:

\[
\text{God’s knowledge of us in Himself} = \text{Our delimited form (self/nafs)} = \text{Our knowledge of God} = \text{The God we worship (Lord/rabb)}
\]

Just as each of us has a unique self (nafs), we each have a unique lord (rabb), a limited conception of Unlimited or Ultimate Reality. For Ibn ‘Arabi, true knowledge (ma’rifah) is not discovering or coming up with all-embracing conception of Reality, since this is impossible. Nor is true knowledge to be confused with the limitations it assumes in “filling our cups.”

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183 cf. Meister Eckhart “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which he sees me.” The Knower’s recognition of his nothingness in God is what allows him to transcend these limitations because this recognition makes his limited conception of God open out onto the unlimited reality, like a window-frame open out onto the world.

184 Ibn ‘Arabi also writes, “Man’s knowledge of himself precedes his knowledge of his Lord. Indeed his knowledge of his Lord results from his knowledge of himself. That is why he said, upon him be peace, ‘Whoso knoweth himself, knoweth his Lord.’ If you wish, you can say that the knowledge spoken of in this saying is
Instead, true knowledge (ma‘rifah) consists of recognizing these limitations and transcending them (in a sense, by recognizing our own nothingness, since we normally identify ourselves with these limitations) by recognizing God in all of the various forms in which he reveals Himself—i.e. recognizing the water in every container. This point is so important that Ibn ‘Arabi concludes his most influential work, The Ringstones of Wisdom, with this passage,

This is as we have said concerning the believer: he only praised the God who is in his belief and to whom he has tied himself.185 His [the god’s] action all goes back to himself [the believer], so he praises only himself. For without doubt, he who praises the product, praises the maker, for its beauty or lack of beauty goes back to its maker. The God of the believer is made by him who observes Him, so this God is his artifact. Hence his praise of what he has made is his praise of himself. That is why he considers the belief of others blameworthy. But if he were fair, he would not do so. But, of course, the possessor of this specific object of worship is ignorant of that, since he objects to others in what they believe concerning God. If he knew what Junayd said—that the water takes on the color of the cup—he would let every believer have his own belief and he would recognize God in the form of every object of belief. But the believer has “an opinion,”186 not knowledge. That is why God said, “I am with My servant’s opinion of Me,”187 that is, “I do not become manifest to him except in the form of his belief.” If he likes, he declares Him nondelimited, and if he likes, he delimits [Him]. The God of beliefs assumes limitations. He is the God who is “embraced” by the heart of His servant.188 But nothing embraces the Nondelimited God, since He is identical with the things and identical with Himself. It cannot be said that a thing embraced itself, nor that it does not embrace it. So understand! God speaks the Truth and He guides on the way (33:4)

Earlier in the same work, Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

Beware lest you bind yourself with a specific belief and reject others, for much good will escape you. Indeed, the knowledge of reality as it is will escape you. Be then, within yourself, a pure substance (hyle), for the forms of all belief, for God is too vast and too great to be confined to one belief to the exclusion of another, for indeed He says, Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God (2:115).189

impossible, or that one cannot attain to it, for it allows of this. Or if you wish, you can acknowledge this knowledge. The first means that you know that you cannot know yourself, and hence cannot know your Lord. The second means that you can know yourself and hence can know your Lord.” (Dagli, Ringstones of Wisdom, 278).

185 cf. Meister Eckhardt’s saying: “I pray to God to be free of God.”

186 Zan, reference to the Qur’anic verse And the most of them follow only surmise [Zan], and surmise avails naught against truth. (10:36).

187 Şahîh Bukhari, 97:35.

188 A reference to the hadîth, “My Heavens and My Earth do not contain me, but the heart of my believing servant contains me” and “The Heart of the Believer is the Throne of the All-Merciful”

189 Ringstones of Wisdom, 115-6.
The only way to get beyond mere “opinion” or the “god of belief” is to recognize both its limitations and its identity with our limited forms and God’s formless Essence. To extend Junayd’s metaphor, this means recognizing that our cups (we ourselves) are nothing but water (the inscrutable Divine Reality), in a sense making them translucent or “melting” them, and becoming like the water, like a pure substance (hyle), capable of accepting any form. This is the work of the heart, and not reason, as Ibn ‘Arabi explains,

And since beliefs are various, and preparednesses are different, whenever God manifests Himself, anyone who has limited Him to the form of a particular description denies Him in other than that form. Whereas whoever has disengaged Him from the limitation of one form other than another – like the Perfect Men and the gnostics ['urafā’] – does not deny Him in any form of theophany (tajjalī). Rather, he glorifies Him as he should and performs the worship worthy of His station, for the theophanies of God possess no end at which the perfect gnostic and the understanding knower of God might stop.

“Wear the turban, or the dress, or the robe! By thy father, it will only increase my love!”

Do you not see that God “Every moment is in a state” (Quran LV, 29)? In the same way, the heart is constantly undergoing transformation in accordance with His transformations in the states of its consciousness. Therefore He said, “Surely in that”, i.e. in the Quran, “there is a reminder to him who has a heart” (L, 37) which undergoes transformation according to different forms and attributes. He did not say, “who possesses a reason”, because the reason becomes limited according to particular beliefs, so the Divine Reality – Who is infinite – becomes restricted in that which it perceives, in contrast to the heart, for since it is a locus for diverse theophanies from the levels of Divinity and Lordship and since it undergoes transformation according to the forms of these theophanies, it remembers its forgotten existence before it appeared in this physical and elemental level, and it finds here what it had lost, as the Prophet said, "Wisdom is the believer's stray camel." So understand!

So here ma‘rifah is identified as the recognition of God in every form of belief, in every aspect of creation, starting with one’s self. The knowledge that one contains in one’s self at any given moment cannot encompass the Real, since the Real is itself identical with

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190 Rumi similarly writes, “Know that the outward form passes away, (but) the world of reality remains forever. / How long will you play at loving the shape of the jug? Leave the shape of the jug: go, seek water. / You have seen its (outward) form, you are unaware of the reality; pick out from the shell a pearl, if you are wise.” And “When the many-coloured glasses are no more, then the colourless Light makes thee amazed., Make it thy habit to behold the Light without the glass, in order that when the glass is shattered there may not be, blindness (in thee).” (Mathnawi of Jelaluddin Rumi, Book II v.1020–22 and v. 990-1, trans. R.A. Nicholson, (London, 1972)).

both the knowledge and its container. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s epistemology, reason and its mental constructions are fixed and limited, and so cannot adequately comprehend reality and its perpetual and infinite transformations. The best reason can do is to endlessly chase after an impossible grand theory of everything. But the heart, on the other hand, can overcome its individual limitations through its limitless receptivity to the perpetual transformations of the Real itself.

A cup can only show the true color of water if it itself is colorless like water; that is, if it is capable of taking on every single color. Similarly, by accepting every form in which the Real discloses itself, the heart becomes like the Real itself—allowing it to realize that it and everything else is nothing other than the Real itself. Thus being and knowing coincide and the true Knower knows the Real not by his limited self, but by the Real, which is his true self. As Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “Whosoever sees the Real from Him, in Him, by His Eye is a Knower (‘Ārif). Whosoever sees the Real from Him, in Him, by his own eye [i.e. those mystics still bound to a particular belief] is not a Knower. Whosoever does not see the Real from Him nor

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192 One is reminded of the concept appearing in short stories by Jorge Luis Borges and Lewis Caroll that explore the futility of creating a map that is the same size as the country, or empire, or the world that it is meant to represent. One of Caroll’s characters notes, “we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.”

193 Rumi make a similar distinction in his Mathanwi in the story about the Greek and Chinese painters. In summary, a king once held a contest between Greek and Chinese artisans to see who could create the most beautiful room. The Chinese artists asked the king for hundreds of shades of paint and supplies, but the Greeks only asked for polish. When the Chinese artists were finished, the king inspected the room and was astounded by its beauty, but when the screen separating it form the Greeks’ room was removed, he was even more amazed. The reflection of the Chinese works of art on the polished Greek walls was even more beautiful than the Chinese room itself. Rumi concludes this story with the following verses, “The Greeks, O father, are the Sufis: (they are) without (independent of) study and books and erudition/ But they have burnished their breasts (and made them) pure from greed and cupidty and avarice and hatreds. / That purity of the mirror is, beyond doubt, the heart which receives images innumerable. / That Moses (the perfect saint) holds in his bosom the formless infinite form of the Unseen (reflected) from the mirror of his heart. / Although that form is not contained in Heaven, nor in the empyrean nor in the sphere of the stars, nor (in the earth which rests) on the Fish, / Because (all) those are bounded and numbered — (yet is it contained in the heart): know that the mirror of the heart hath no bound. / Here the understanding becomes silent or (else) it leads into error, because the heart is with Him (God), or indeed the heart is He.” (Book 1 v 3484-9).
in Him, and waits to see Him with his own eye [i.e. those limited to rational speculation] is veiled and ignorant." Ibn ‘Arabi’s most famous poem illustrates and summarizes these points, equating *ma’rifah* and love:

> My heart became capable of accepting any form
> A meadow for gazelles, a cloister for monks
> A temple for the idols, the Ka’bah for the circling pilgrim
> The tablets of the Torah, the scrolls of the Qur’an
> My religion is the religion of Love
> Wherever its caravan turns
> Love is my religion
> And my faith

This, in summary, is one of the most influential Classical Sufi epistemologies of *ma’rifah*. The careful reader will doubtless have noticed resonances between these descriptions of *ma’rifah*, and those given in the accounts at the opening of this chapter. While neither of the two disciples had ever read Ibn ‘Arabi or other classical works of Sufism, through the texts and oral traditions of the Tijani order, especially those of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, this extensive classical tradition both formed and informed the oral and written discourses about *ma’rifah* in which these two disciples are embedded, not to mention the tradition of spiritual exercises through which they acquired *ma’rifah*. But before delving into the texts of the Tijāniyyah and the oral accounts of contemporary Tijanis, a note about *ma’rifah* in contemporary scholarship, particularly those works that deal with Ibrahim Niasse’s branch of the Tijāniyyah, is in order.

**Ma’rifah in Contemporary Scholarship on the Tijāniyyah**

As can be seen in the translation quoted above, *ma’rifah* has often been rendered into English as “gnosis.” This translation is a felicitous one, drawing on the Indo-European root K/G-n-o from which words such as “knowledge,” “ignorance,” the German *kennen*, and even

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194 *Ringstones of Wisdom*, 115.
the Sankrit *jnana* are derived. Moreover, “gnosis” is the term used in Greek Orthodox Christianity to designate a form of knowledge that appears to have much in common with *ma‘rifah*. The main drawback, aside from unfortunate connotations of the Gnosticism of early antiquity (which bear little resemblance to Sufi conceptions of *ma‘rifah*), is that there is no verbal form of the word in English to correspond to the commonly-used Arabic verb ‘*arafa*. While “gnosis” may be used to translate *ma‘rifah* in the technical usage of Sufism, it cannot be applied to the more everyday uses of *ma‘rifah*, (which are quite similar to the French *connaissance*). This is another shortcoming of the term “gnosis,” it makes *ma‘rifah* seem like something so exotic and mystical that its important similarities to more commonplace forms of knowledge are obscured.

In his masterful study of the history of Ibrahim Niasse and his early community of disciples, Seesemann translates *ma‘rifah* as “cognizance,” which has the benefit of including the connotations of “awareness through experience,” which the original Arabic term carries. However, this translation also suffers from the lack of a verbal and an agent form (“cognize” and “a cognizant”) and sounds too “cognitive,” in contrast to the existential nature of *ma‘rifah*. Another potential drawback of this translation, which Seesemann points out, is that cognizance implies a separation of subject and object, which technical Sufi use of *ma‘rifah* does not. In his soon-to-be published book, *Living Knowledge*, Zachary Wright follows Seesemann in rendering *ma‘rifah* cognizance but writes, “*ma‘rifah* thus means an experiential

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awareness of God achieved in the absence of deductive speculation, through the erasure of the individual ego in God.”

In his dissertation, an in-depth anthropological study of communities of disciples of Ibrahim Niasse, Joseph Hill uses “divine knowledge” to translate the Arabic/Wolof “ma’rifah / ma’rifat,” which was the French term (Connaissance Divine) which I most regularly heard used in place of ma’rifah during the course of my research.

In the present work, I have chosen to translate ma’rifah as “Knowledge,” ʿĀrif as “Knower,” etc., capitalized to highlight the distinction between this special form of knowledge and its more commonplace varieties. On the other hand, in other places, I have tried rendering ma’rifah as “recognition,” where it better reflects not only the Qur’anic sense of the term, but also its experiential dimensions and parallels with more commonplace experiences. For example, like ma’rifah, the act of recognizing is a kind of perspective shift in which the same sense data are understood in a new way; similarly “recognition” implies a prior knowledge that is remembered or recalled, as is the case for ma’rifah in the Sufi tradition and its close relationship to dhikr (invocation, remembrance, recollection). In addition, the experience of looking in a mirror and suddenly recognizing one’s own face is one that disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse sometimes cited as an analogy for the experience of acquiring ma’rifah. In any event, the meanings of ma’rifah will become clearer as we explore their descriptions in Tijani texts and the accounts of disciples.

Ma’rifah in Tijani Texts and Contemporary Accounts

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197 I am grateful to Professors Chittick and Morris for suggesting this translation and its advantages.
In reading Tijani texts (indeed most Sufi texts after the 12th C), one is confronted by a dizzying array of terms related to spiritual experience and knowledge that all seem synonymous or somewhat related to *ma‘rifah*. Often these terms seem to be used in lists of synonyms for rhetorical effect, but careful attention to their usages reveal nuances in their meanings, which often vary from author to author, and tradition to tradition. Within the Tijānī tradition, the *Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī* contains one of the clearest expositions of the relationship between these terms:

I asked him [Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī] about the difference between knowledges /sciences (‘ulūm), secrets (asrār), lights (anwār), openings (futūḥ), outpourings (fuyūḍ), realities (haqā‘iq), subtleties (la‘ātīf), Divine self-disclosures (tajālīyāt), knowledges (ma‘ārif), presences (ḥadrāt), stations (maqāmāt), stages (ma‘āzīl), inspirations (wāridāt), and states (aḥwāl). He responded with the following statement:

Know that the opening (al-fath) designates all of these things. The reality of the opening is what emerges from the unseen when the veils disappear from that which they hide. It encompasses all of the realities mentioned above, all that was veiled from him is opened for him in it [the opening], and this is the Fath, the opening. It also designates the lifting of the veils. The realities and meanings mentioned above that come after this are called fayd, outpouring, because it pours out after being blocked. Moreover, the outpouring encompasses the sciences and secrets and realities and knowledges and lights. The secret (sirr) comes from the outpouring (fayd) and is that which God places directly in the heart of the servant in the way of understandings, among which are what God acquaints him with of His will in the disposal of things: why they are they way they are, substantially or accidentally, what He wants from them, and from which presence (ḥadrāh) they come.

Among the secrets are the outpourings of wisdom and their subtleties, and among these secrets is that which relieves the servant completely and takes him out of the circle of his senses while he is drowned in the ocean of the Divine Presence to the point where he has no awareness of himself or anything other than himself. Here he hears and witnesses what intelligences/reasons (‘uqūl) do not have the capacity to understand—of his beginning and also the perception of his end. So by this secret which absorbs him, he perceives his beginning and end through witnessing and hearing and perception and tasting. And this is among the most exalted of secrets which is poured out upon the servant which can neither be conceived nor imagined let alone expressed or come within the compass of allusion due to the splendor of its power and majesty and what they contain of benefits and perfections. These secrets have no limit. They can only be known by he who tastes them, and this suffices [as an explanation] for this point.

Knowledge (ma‘rifah) is the lifting of the veils of the unseen realities of the Names and Attributes. Knowledge is inseparable and yet distinct from the opening (fath). For the reality of the opening is the lifting of the veils which come between the servant and the emergence of the realities of the Names and Attributes, accompanied by the disappearance of the forms of created things from the knowledge, senses, perception, understanding, and attachment of the servant until nothing remains for him—neither the existence others or otherness—except for the being of the Real by the Real, for the Real, in the Real, from the Real. Once this is realized, direct Knowledge (ma‘rifah) emerges by necessity and the ocean of Universal Certainty (al-
yāqīn al-Kullī) is poured out upon the servant. But this is dependent upon annihilation (fanāʾ) and subsistence (baqāʾ). And as for what precedes this of the witnessing of the hidden things and their appearance to the servant, this is called unveiling (kashf) and not called an opening (fath) or Knowledge (maʿrifah).

As for inspiration (wārid), it is an expression for the appearance of what comes to the servant from God, from the presence of the Real to the servant in the form of Divine Power or Divine Beauty. It combines all the knowledges/sciences (ʿulūm), Knowledges, (maʿārif), mysteries, states, certainty, and lights.

And as for state (ḥāl), it is an expression for the affair which comes from the presence of the Real in the form of Divine Power or Beauty transforming the servant into a form that corresponds to it. For example, it can be that a man who is capable of taking a hundred blows on the skin without crying our or turning pale, can cry out when hit by a single blow. In the first case, he was in a state of witnessing the Real, enshrouded in the perfection of love for the Essence of the Real and the perfection of its magnificence and glories which flow in its totality through that state, so it [this state] removes his sensation of pain when he is overcome by the sweetness of witnessing. So he doesn’t feel the weight of the blows, and they don’t hurt him. But as soon as the tablecloth of this state is folded up and he is no longer veiled from witnessing being hit with one blow, he cries out as a result of losing that state.

As for the Lights, their realities are well known. They are brightness. As for the delicate points and subtleties, they are an expression for what is hidden/occult amongst the realities of knowledges/sciences (ʿulūm), and Knowledges/gnoses (maʿārif), and mysteries.

As for the presences and stages and witnessings and haltings, they have been alluded to earlier in this work. All success relies on God! Here ends the dictation that the Shaykh (R.A.) gave us. 198

In this passage, Knowledge depends upon “the lifting of the veils”, a common Sufi image referring to the purification of the soul (tazkiyah al-nafs) through spiritual exercises, and the resulting existential transformations of consciousness (annihilation (fanāʾ) and subsistence (baqāʾ)). This Knowledge is also connected to certainty, and compared to “taste” in its immediacy and ineffability. Moreover, as above, maʿrifah is described as being closely related, or even identical to a Divine outpouring (fayd), and, due the intense single-pointed focus associated with it, can induce unusual psycho-physical states (ahwāl). Shaykh Ibrahim further clarifies the fine distinction between the opening or enlightenment (fath) and Knowledge writing, “Every Knower (ʿĀrif) is open [has achieved the fath/spiritual enlightenment], but the opposite is not true.” Thus, the opening can be likened to the complete

polishing of a mirror and Knowledge to what subsequently appears therein. One disciple described the opening (fitḥ) as “the removing of the veil between the human being and Allah, between the person and knowledge of Allah [ma’rifah], the veils that cover your heart, seeing, hearing that separate them from Allah…Allah has many, many secrets and it is the duty of the human being to unveil them. Fitḥ is the process of unveiling secrets…it’s a process of getting into the real nature of things.”

Furthermore, in the passage above, “the secret” of this Knowledge is equated with self-knowledge, and is described as being beyond the capacity of reason. Similarly, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse is said to have treasured Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī’s poetic description of his own attainment of ma’rifah

I was pushed forward all at once from the Divine Presence.  
My beginning became my end, my end my beginning.  
My whole became my every part, and my every part became my whole.  
I became Him, and He, me; but as His becoming, and not as mine.  
At that moment, if I were asked a million questions,  
I would have given only one answer  
And so I became like the “lamp”

Ibrahim Niasse himself defines a Knower by God (‘Ārif biLlāh) as “one who turns towards God in all of his states…and there is nothing for him except God” and “the Knower (‘Ārif) among the Sufis is he who sees the other as the essential, that is, he witnesses


200 This is strongly reminiscent of another saying attributed to Abu Yazīd al-Bistāmī, “I am not I, I am I, because I am I, He is I, I am He, and He is He.” See A. J Arberry, Revelation and Reason in Islam (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), 98.

201 Shaykh Tijānī ‘Alī Cissé. Interview with the author. January 14, 2013. Medina Baye, Senegal. Arabic. The “lamp” is a reference to the Qur’anic description of the Prophet as an illuminating lamp (33:36) as well as the celebrated “Verse of Light” (ayah al-nūr (24:35)) which reads, God is the Light of the heavens and the earth, the likeness of His Light is like a niche wherein is a lamp—the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as it were a shining planet—kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor West, whose oil would almost shine forth, though no fire touched it. Light upon light. God guides unto His light whom He will. And God strikes likenesses for mankind and God is of all things, Knowing.

202 Niasse, Jawāhīr al-Rasā’īl II, 58.
the Real in the other.” This recalls and refers to Ibn ‘Arabi’s description of the Knower as one who can see and recognize the Real not only in his own form, but in its other forms as well. That is, he can recognize the water in cups other than his own. In the same work, Shaykh Ibrahim defines *ma’rifah* as “the spirit being deeply rooted and firmly established in the presence of direct witnessing (*mushāhadah*) with complete annihilation (*fanā’*) and subsistence (*baqā’*) through God.”

Similarly, Shaykh Tijānī ‘Alī Cissé, one of Shaykh Ibrahim’s successors and one of the most prominent and popular leaders of his disciples, described the Knower (*’Ārif*) to me in an interview,

> The spiritual wayfarer (*sālik*) is he who arrives by invocations (*adhkār*) to the presence of God Most High. When he recognizes (*’arafa*) himself, he recognizes his Lord. When he recognizes himself as non-existent, as nothing, he recognizes his Lord as Being (*wujūd*), when he recognizes his meagerness, he recognizes his Lord’s Majesty. And it is like this, you find that there is no god but God (*lā ilāha illā Llāh*), there is no god but you (*lā ilāha illā Anta*), there is no god but I” (*lā ilāha illā Anā*).  

In my interviews with disciples in Dakar and Kaolack (conducted between January 2012 and May 2014), the most common response to the question, “What is *ma’rifah*?” was a shaking of the head, an exhalation of breath, and a raising of the hands in exasperation. Virtually all members of this community, from revered shaykhs who were direct disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim to young novices who had just completed their *tarbiyah*, responded by insisting that *ma’rifah* was beyond anything that could be expressed in words. When they did attempt to define *ma’rifah* verbally, their responses tended to share certain common features. The disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim frequently described *ma’rifah* as “knowledge of God,”

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204 Ibid.

“knowledge of self,” “knowledge of Reality,” “knowledge that you are nothing and God is everything,” “knowing who you really are,” “knowing that everything is God,” “knowing with God’s knowledge,” and “seeing God, seeing God in everything and everything in God.” Some even described it in apophatic terms as “a kind of ignorance or bewilderment,” “unlike any other kind of knowledge”. The ineffable quality of *ma’rifah* was often linked to its experiential dimension in statements such as, “It’s something you have to experience, you can’t describe it, it’s very deep inside, very personal”; “It’s something very personal, it’s hard to describe, you have to experience it”; “I know it, I feel it, but I can’t tell you how, it’s like I smell something, you either smell it too or you don’t”; “It’s like taste, it’s something you have to experience”; “It’s like if you ask me, ‘how does an apple taste?’, I can talk for hours and you’ll still not gonna know how it tastes until you go and taste it yourself, and that knowledge is the same, so it’s difficult to talk about it.” Disciples also frequently commented on the existential dimension of *ma’rifah*, noting that, “it’s something you live,” “you have to live it, to be it.” They also commented on its transformative nature with phrases such as “it is like waking up,” “it changes the way you view yourself, the world,” “it changes you, you’re like a new person,” “when you get *ma’rifah*, you can’t be the same as before, it changes the way you see things, the way you react to things, the way you behave, even the way you think, it’s not like before,” “after you know God, you see the good things and the bad things clearly, so it’s easier to avoid the bad things and to do the good”; “When you do tarbiyah, you know God and the Prophet and the Shaykh, and you love them, and you want to be like them so you won’t do things that they don’t like”; “after tarbiyah I’m not so hard on myself because I know I’m weak, I’m only human, and of course we all still make mistakes, but we know God has forgiven us, and we are grateful, so we try to do good.” Disciples also frequently
described *ma’rifah* as being “the most important form of knowledge you can get,” “the goal of life,” “the reason for creation,” “the most important thing,” and “the most precious thing in the world.” They also referred to it as being “certain” or “certainty” itself.

However, at the same time, often in the same interview, disciples also described *ma’rifah* as being qualified. Sidi Inaya Niang, the son of one of Shaykh Ibrahim’s earliest and closest disciples, told me that,

Certainty is achieved when the adept (*al-sālik*) attains the Divine Presence (*ḥadrah al-gudṣi*), the sacrosanct spiritual station, by the Muḥammadan Reality (*haqiqah muḥammadiyyah*). But after this certainty, the Knower (*al-‘Ārif*) is in a state of uncertainty, and vice-versa. It is the spiritual station of doubt or perplexity, the station of bewilderment (*maqām al-ḥayrah*), or the negation, “there is no God” (*la ilāḥa*) which precedes the affirmation “but God” (*illā Llāḥ*). *Ma’rifah* also has its own dialectic.  

Echoing many other disciples, Sidi Inaya described *ma’rifah* as being “dynamic,” “living knowledge” that “has no end, just as God has no end.” Echoing Junayd’s statement about the colour of water, Sidi Inaya told me that “the *‘Ārif* [Knower] is the container, the Knowledge (*ma’rifah*) is the content, and the purpose of this Knowledge is the use of the content and its transmission to other containers.” While many disciples described *ma’rifah* as the realization of the identity of the knower, known, and knowledge with God, Sidi Mohamed Kane gave a more nuanced account (as quoted above):

Shaykh Ibrahim said, ‘God does not manifest himself to the same person in the same way.’ God is infinite, the way he will manifest himself to you is different from the way he will manifest Himself to me or to Shaykh Ibrahim, because God is Infinite. He will manifest Himself to you in a form that corresponds to you…. The way in which God manifests himself is different, just as people are different. It’s also like drunkenness, the Sufis also talk about drunkenness, and people get drunk differently: one person cries, another laughs, another does something else…People do not become drunk in the same fashion, it somewhat depends on the quantity, on what, on how much they can handle. It’s the same with *ma’rifah*.  

Similarly, commenting on the hadīth, “he who knows himself knows his Lord,” Sidi Inaya Niang explained, “if you want to know your Lord, you must go through knowledge of

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207 Sidi Mohamed Kane, interview with author, April 26, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French.
yourself or the realization of self. That is, the Names and Divine Attributes must first manifest
themselves in you. The search for the Truth requires the discovery of the truth in yourself.”

K.S., a Senegalese disciple in his mid-twenties who is currently pursuing an
undergraduate degree in Economics in Paris, also described ma’rifah as a kind of self-
knowledge that contains all other knowledge, using the role the brain plays in decision
making as a metaphor for the individual self and what lies beyond it:

What is ma’rifah? Ma’rifah biLlāhi (Knowledge by God) is gnosis. Ma’rifah is the most
important knowledge a person can get. Because it is the box that contains the whole repository
of knowledge, knowledge we know and what we don’t know. Imagine your brain, if you do
something like, for instance, I am raising my hand — it is a command I gave to my brain, and
in my brain after that there is a stimulus or something like that and my hand is raised. That
thing that tells your brain, it is something inside you, it is something you don’t control, and in
this state, the brain has a sort of ma’rifah [re: existential self-knowledge], but you have to
know what your brain is exactly and exactly what your brain contains, or might contain, or
could control, what is exactly the extent of your brain, what exactly it is. Do you command
your brain, or does your brain command you? When you raise your hand, there is a basis for
the decision to raise my hand, where does it come from exactly?

Ma’rifah is the content (contenu). Ma’rifah is something everybody can reach, but there are
many conditions. The gnosis, what is important is not the gnosis itself, but the consequences of
having the gnosis, of seeing the gnosis, of understanding the gnosis, what does it imply. This is
what is important. And ma’rifah could be said to be like a key that opens all areas in your brain
and displays exactly what each thing is.

Of course ma’rifah is very, very certain knowledge. If you see ma’rifah, it is like a door that
opens onto something. As I said, the consequences of having ma’rifah are the most important
thing of the ma’rifah itself. We all come from the main source, and truly what is inside you is
inside other people, and there is a process of waking up. First you have to know you are asleep,
recognize that state, and after, you must strongly have the will to wake up yourself, and start
the process of waking up. Next you recognize that you are sleeping and that you have to wake
up and put yourself in the path of deepening knowledge, of awakening what is inside…. All
life is a process of getting knowledge, whatever happens, you always learn something, life is a
process of getting knowledge… The first ayah that God had Gabriel reveal to the Prophet was
Iqra’! (Read/Recite!). Iqra’ is the process of getting knowledge, “recite in the name of your
Lord.” Life is a process of getting knowledge, ma’rifah and other kinds. What is important is
to have a strong will for knowledge and to get yourself to that path. 209

Many of the members of Shaykh Ibrahim’s community whom I interviewed had
received extensive formal education in Arabic-language traditions of Islamic scholarship, both
in Senegal / Mauritania and the Middle East, and/or had been educated in the French-language

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educational systems of Senegal and France. For example, Sidi Mohamed Kane received a traditional West African Qur’anic and Islamic education in his youth at the hands of his mother (Shaykh Ibrahim’s daughter, Seyyyidah Maryam Niasse), but went on to study in French-language schools in Senegal, where he developed an interest in Marxist philosophy, which he pursued during his university studies in Paris. However, after undergoing *tarbiyah*, he lost interest in Marxism as his philosophical interests became more aligned with his spiritual practice and the works of his grandfather. Many other disciples had pursued higher degrees in Islamic studies or Arabic Literature in Egypt at the Universities of al-Azhar and ‘Ayn Shams, while many more had graduated from, were currently enrolled in, or hoping to attend the French-language Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, where they studied a variety of subjects from economics, to physics, to literature and philosophy.

These disciples often contrasted *ma’rifah* to the forms of knowledge which they acquired in these formal settings, saying that *ma’rifah* is “beyond reason,” “beyond what you can find in books,” “not something you can learn in any class,” “the realization of the things we used to talk about in philosophy class” “like philosophy, but the philosophers don’t realize what they are saying.”; Sidi Inaya even paraphrased Rabelais by describing *ma’rifah* as “the conscience of all forms of knowledge/science, for ‘knowledge without conscience is but the ruin of the soul.’”210 In the same interview he further contrasted *ma’rifah* to other forms of knowledge, “*Ma’rifah* is innate (infuse) knowledge, while the other forms of knowledge are diffuse. *Ma’rifah* is esoteric knowledge, while other forms of knowledge are exoteric.

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210 “La conscience de toutes les sciences: science sans conscience n’est que ruine de l’âme.”
Ma’rifah is mystical knowledge, while the other forms of knowledge are rational. Ma’rifah is metaphysics (la Métaphysique), while the others are logical (les sciences logiques).”

Relationship of Ma’rifah to Other Forms of Knowledge

The late, illustrious Shaykh Barham Diop (d. 2014), who served as Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s personal secretary for several decades until the latter’s death in 1975, told me a story about Shaykh Ibrahim which eloquently captures the relationship between ma’rifah and other forms of knowledge.

The people of his [Shaykh Ibrahim’s] time in West Africa, the learned (‘ulamā’) and the legal scholars (fuqahā’), they were frozen in their thinking and rulings out of fear of making a mistake or deviating. But Shaykh Ibrahim’s thought was dynamic and living, since he took it from God and the Prophet. For example, the issue of praying with one’s hands folded over the chest (qabḍ) [as opposed to the standard Malikī practice of praying with your hands at your sides]. When Shaykh Ibrahim started doing this, from the response, you would think he was calling people to infidelity (kufr). People said all kinds of things. But Shaykh Ibrahim didn’t say that you couldn’t pray with your hands at your sides, he merely said that he and his followers could pray with their hands folded. He had this directly from the Prophet, in a vision, but he then gave proofs by going through the texts of Malikī jurisprudence (fiqh) and showing its validity on this basis as well. He did this out of adab [good manners], so that others would be able to understand and not attack him and his disciples, and the adab [good manners] of the Knowers is to give everyone and everything its due.212

Shaykh Barham’s description of Ibrahim Niasse’s thought alludes to a famous saying of the early Sufi Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī (d. 874) which Ibn ‘Arabi quotes in the following passage,

Abū Yazīd addressed the exoteric scholars with his words, “You take your knowledge from the dead, but we take our knowledge from the Alive [one of the 99 Names of God] who does not die.” The likes of ourselves say, “My heart told me of my Lord.” You say, “so-and-so told me.” Where is he? “Dead.” “And he had it from so-and-so.” Where is he? “Dead.” When someone said to Shaykh Abu Madyan (d. 1198), “It is related from so and so , from so and so,” he used to say, We don’t want to eat dried meat. Come on, bring me ‘fresh flesh’!” Thereby he would lift up the aspirations of is companions. He meant: These are the words of so and so. What do you yourself say? What God-given knowledge has God singles out for you? Speak from your Lord and forget about “so and so related form so and so. They ate fresh meat and God has not died. He is “nearer” to you “than the jugular vein.” (50:16)213


213 Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 249.
Similarly, Shaykh Ibrahim’s grandson, Sidi Mohamed Kane, told me that his
grandfather had said, “Knowledge (connaissance) that is dead comes from the dead, but
knowledge that is living comes from The Living (al-Ḥayy).” “This latter knowledge,” Sidi
Mohamed continued, “is ma’rifah. Book knowledge you get from a book written by someone
who is dead about someone else who is dead, but living knowledge comes from God.”

Shaykh Ibrahim’s emphasis on this latter form of knowledge led him to take the inspirations
he received seriously. In the previous quote, Shaykh Barham refers to the controversy stirred
up when Shaykh Ibrahim made a minor change in the way in which he said his daily prayers
(with his hands folded over his chest, instead of hanging down at his sides) on the basis of a
visionary experience of the Prophet. He later published a short treatise defending this change
in practice on the basis of the tradition of Islamic jurisprudence (specifically, Mālikī fiqh),
citing prior opinions from within the tradition and adducing arguments from the ḥadīth and
the Qur’an, but without referencing his vision. This work and the change in practice it
defended were very controversial, but what is of interest here is that although the inspiration
for the change came from a form of unveiling, a visionary encounter with the Prophet, Shaykh
Ibrahim did not cite his personal experience as definitive proof, but instead followed the
conventions of the genre of fiqh in providing rational and transmitted proofs for his position.
This example illustrates both the continuity that can exist between ma’rifah and the rational
(‘aqlī) and transmitted (naqīlī) sciences, and the priority that ma’rifah was given over the

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214 Sidi Mohamed Kane, interview with author April 24, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French.
215 See Wright, Living Knowledge, 223-31 for a detailed discussion of this work (Raf’ al-malām ‘an man rafa’
wa qabād iqti’dā bi-sayyid al-anām (Raising the blame from the one who raises and clasps [his hands in the
prayer] emulating the master of humanity)) its reception, and context.
latter.\footnote{Similarly, Sidi Inaya Niang told me that Shaykh Ibrahim often quoted the adage attributed to Imām Mālik, founder of the Mālikī school of jurisprudence (fiqh), “Whoever engages in Sufism (taṣawwūf) and does not learn fiqh is a heretic; whoever learns fiqh but does not engage in Sufism is depraved, and whosoever joins the two of them is correct.”} Shaykh Barham described Shaykh Ibrahim’s actions as being motivated by adab, a word that is notoriously difficult to render into English, but simultaneously carries the connotations of the state of being “well-mannered,” “cultured,” “considerate,” “of good character.” Adab, in this context can perhaps best be described, paraphrasing Shaykh Barham, as the acquired disposition of giving everything and everyone its due. In this case, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse adduced proofs to clarify and defend his position to others, since they were not privy to his own visionary encounter, but these proofs were for the sake of others, not for himself. In this instance, Shaykh Ibrahim’s visionary experience, which was a result of his ma‘rifah, guided his work in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh).

However, Shaykh Ibrahim insisted that not every “mystical experience” or dream or vision was to be regarded as Knowledge; he drew a sharp distinction between dhawq (tasting, experience) and dhawq sālim (sound tasting, experience). Anyone could have a vision or a dream for any number of reasons, but the only guarantee of the veracity of this experience and its interpretation was to have already obtained complete ma‘rifah by passing through annihilation to subsistence and coming to recognize and judge things by the Real itself. Before achieving this, one would have to submit such extraordinary experiences to the scrutiny of one who had done so.\footnote{Sidi Inaya Niang, interview with author, March 4 2014, Dakar, Senegal. English.} Moreover, just as the spiritual seeker doesn’t just pop out of existence after attaining ma‘rifah, but rather continues to walk and talk and eat, he also continues to think and engage in rational discussions, albeit from a different standpoint, with a
different perspective. In a famous speech, which he gave in Nouakchott, Mauritania in the
1944, Shaykh Ibrahim described the state of the Knower (‘ārif)

He knows there is nothing but God and he perceives things as they are, and he puts every
created thing in its place, in which God placed it. And he knows that he is nothing. He exalts
things, while not considering them existent; and he fears things, without considering them
existent, and he loves things without considering them existent. And he acquires all good
actions, he prays, and he fasts, and he makes hajj, and he tells the truth and he spends his
money. And all of that is out of good manners (adab) to God, while he knows that there is
nothing there.218

In this same speech, he gives an example of how ma‘rifah can even influence the way
one studies disciplines such as grammar, “I teach students in grammar lessons: the
grammarians say ‘In reality the subject of the verb (al-fā’il) is God.219 Metaphorically, the
one who gives existence to the action, and technically, the one on whom the action relies
completely, all of these are God.’220

In his earliest-known work, a poem entitled Rūḥ al-Adab, “The Spirit of Good
Manners,” (see the Appendix to this chapter) Shaykh Ibrahim lists the forms of knowledge
that a disciple must acquire:

47. Obtain the knowledge of four things, O spiritual traveler, the first of which is the Knowledge (‘irfān) of the Lord, the Master
48. The second is to know that on which the acts of worship depend, that you may realize/verify [them]
49. Third is the Knowledge (‘irfān) of the states of the soul: its deceptions, tricks, and schemes
50. The soul has its fault, the heart has its fault, and the spirit has its fault, of this, there is no doubt
And Adab (good manners), [knowledge of] adab is the fourth, o traveller, it is the door for every traveller

What is interesting here is that Knowledge of God (‘irfān/ma‘rifah) is listed first—it is
not the end of the path, but rather its beginning. The other forms of knowledge are listed as
being secondary and tertiary to the Knowledge of God, in line with the ḥadīth qudsī oft-cited

218 Niasse, Jawāhir al-rasā’il II, 61.
219 This idea is also mentioned in Ibn ‘Arabi’s letter to Fakhr ad-Din al-Rāzī and Ibn ‘Ajībah’s commentary on the widely-used grammar text, al-Ajrumiyyah.
220 Niasse, Jawāhir al-rasā’il II, 59.
by Shaykh Ibrahim and his disciples, “Search for knowledge of me before you worship Me. How will he who does not know Me worship me?” However, Knowledge of God is only obtained through the correct performance of rites such as prayer and invocation, so there must be some initial knowledge of these acts of worship, although their efficacy and meaning is “verified” through the acquisition of ma’rifah. Similarly, the acquisition of the Knowledge of God depends upon some initial form self-control and adab, however these forms of knowledge find their completion and fulfillment in and through ma’rifah. Thus, as for Sufis before him such as Ibn ‘Arabi and Ghazzālī, ma’rifah for Shaykh Ibrahim was both the foundation and the crown of other forms of knowledge, revealing and verifying their inner meaning and significance. These other forms of knowledge—be they rational, like logic, or transmitted, like ḥadīth or the correct way to perform the prayers—may lead to ma’rifah, but ma’rifah leads to their perfection. For example, Shaykh Ibrahim comments on the inner significance of the rites of ḥājj from this perspective:

While circuiting around the Ka’ba, did you think of your spirit (rūḥ) going around the heart of your self? If not then you haven’t made Ḥajj, and you must go back. While going between [the hillocks of] Ṣafā and Marwā, did you think of your self going back and forth between God’s Majestic (jalāl) and Beautiful (jamāl) Attributes? If not then you have not made Ḥajj, and [thus you must] go again. Did you think of searching for “water” of Zamzam [as] looking for the drink of Knowledge of Allāh going in between Ṣafā and Marwā? While shaving your hair, did you think of your sins and the being of your self falling off of you? If you didn’t, then you haven’t made Ḥajj and you need to go again.”221

Thus, within this epistemology, ma’rifah is not separated from other forms of knowledge, and it can only be opposed to them apparently, since in reality, it is their root and their perfection. Thus, on the basis of his ma’rifah, S.D. could resolve the version of the classic omnipotence paradox with which his philosophy teacher had presented him, “Can God make a rock too heavy for Him to lift?” not by resorting to notions of logical impossibility as

221 Also see Niasse, Fī Rīyāḍ al-tafsīr vol. 1, 171.
other thinkers have done, but by dissolving the question on the basis of his own experience of annihilation, in which there could be no stone that is not God. Other disciples told me that after having done tarbiyah and acquiring ma’rifah, they would ace all of their philosophy exams without even reading or studying because it gave them a deeper insight and new perspective on the metaphysical questions posed in their classes and exams.222

Ibn ‘Arabi further clarifies the distinctions between different types of knowledge:

The sciences are of three levels. [The first] is the science of reason, which is every knowledge which is actualized for you by the fact that it is self-evident or after considering proof, on condition that the purport of the proof is discovered…

The second science is the science of states (ahwāl), which cannot be reached except through tasting. No man of reason can define the states, nor can any proof be adduced for knowing them, naturally enough. Take for example the sweetness of honey, the bitterness of aloes, the pleasure of sexual intercourse, love, ecstasy, yearning, and similar knowledges. It is impossible for anyone to know any of these sciences without being qualified by them and tasting them…

The third knowledge is the sciences of the mysteries (asrār). It is the knowledge which is “beyond the stage of reason.” It is the knowledge through the blowing (naft) of the Holy Spirit (ruh al-quddūs) into the heart (rū’), and it is specific to the prophet or the friends of God. It is of two sorts:

The first sort can be perceived by reason, just like the first of the kinds above. However, the person who knows it does not acquire it through consideration: rather the level of this knowledge grants it.

The second sort is divided into two kinds. The first is connected to the second kind above [knowledge of states], but its state is more noble. The second kind is the science of reports (akhbār), and concerning them, one can say that they are true or false, unless the truthfulness of the report-giver and his inerrancy in what he says have been established for the one who receives the report. Such is the report given by the prophets from God, like their reporting about the Garden [heaven] and what is within it. Hence the words of the Prophet that there is a Garden is a science of reports. But his words that at the resurrection there is a pool sweeter than honey is a science of states, a science of tasting. And his words, “God is, and nothing is with Him,” is one of the sciences of reason, perceived by consideration.

The knower of this last kind—the science of mysteries (asrār)—knows and exhausts all sciences. The possessors of the other sciences are not like that. So there is no knowledge more noble than this all-encompassing knowledge, which comprises all objects of knowledge.223


223 Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 169-70.
In this schema, ordinary knowledge is divided up into that which can be acquired by reason (i.e. the sum of the interior angles of a triangle is 180°) and that which can be acquired by the senses (i.e. honey is sweet, sex feels good). The “knowledge of mysteries,” which is identified with *ma‘rifah* and described as being beyond reason, is itself divided into that which could be acquired by reason (i.e. “God is, and there is nothing with Him), but is acquired through unveiling, and that which in no way could be acquired by reason alone (i.e. what heaven is like). This latter category of knowledge is subdivided into that which is like sensory knowledge (i.e. the Prophet’s tasting of a heavenly pool sweeter than honey) and that which is like factual knowledge (i.e. the fact that there is a heaven). This “knowledge of mysteries” is described as “all-encompassing” and “comprising all objects of knowledge” since it concerns the Divine principles of all created things, as well as the Real itself. It is important to note that this particularly exalted “knowledge of mysteries” is not opposed to sensory or rational knowledge, but is rather described as “encompassing” or “going beyond them,” so that these more common forms of knowledge can and should conform to *ma‘rifah*.

Ibn ‘Arabi further explains,

> The way of gaining knowledge is divided between reflection (*fikr*) and bestowal (*wahb*), which is the divine effusion (*fayḍ*). The latter is the way of our companions… Hence it is said that the science of the prophets and the friends of God are “beyond the stage of reason” (*warā‘ tawr al-‘aqil*). Reason has no entrance into them through reflection, though it can accept them, especially in the case of him whose reason is “sound” (*sālim*), that is, he who is not overcome by any obfuscation deriving from imagination and reflection, an obfuscation which would corrupt his consideration (I 261.9)…

Two ways lead to knowledge of God. There is no third way. The person who declares God’s Unity in some other way follows authority in his declaration. The first way is the way of unveiling (*kashf*) It is an incontrovertible knowledge which is actualized through unveiling and which man finds in himself. He receives no obfuscations along with it and is not able to repel it. He knows no proof for it by which it is supported except what he finds in himself. One of the Sufis differs on this point, for he says, “He is given the proof and what is proven by the proof in his unveiling, since, when something cannot be known except through proof, its proof must also be unveiled.” This was the view of our companion Abū ʿAbdallāh [Muḥammad] Ibn al-Kattānī in Fez. I heard that from him. He reported about his own state and he spoke the truth. However, he was mistaken in holding that the situation must be like that, for others find the knowledge in themselves through tasting without having its proof unveiled. This kind of
knowledge may also be actualized through a divine self-disclosure given to its possessors, who are the messengers, the prophets, and some of the friends.

The second way is the way of reflection and reasoning (istidlāl) through rational demonstration (burhān ‘aqlī). This way is lower than the first way, since he who bases his considerations upon proof can be visited by obfuscations which detract from his proof, and only with difficulty can he remove them.224

In this passage, while ma‘rifah is still described as being “beyond the stage of reason,” Ibn ‘Arabi portrays a kind of continuity between reason and unveiling, with “sound” reason being capable of accepting, if not deriving, the truths and knowledge of ma‘rifah. Moreover, he even states these unveilings may also include their rational proofs, as was the case for his contemporary, al-Kattānī. The knowledge acquired through unveiling could thus potentially be acquired through rational demonstration, but this is a more difficult and arduous route, and even this “lower route” still depends upon then “soundness” of the rational faculties, which can by no means be assumed. In spite of these points of contact and continuities between reason and unveiling, Ibn ‘Arabi insists upon the primacy of ma‘rifah,

Sound knowledge is not given by reflection, nor by what the rational thinkers establish by means of their reflective powers. Sound knowledge is only that which God throws into the heart of the knower. It is a divine light for which God singles out any of His servants whom He will…he who has no unveiling has no knowledge.225

When I interviewed K.S., a Senegalese disciple in his mid-twenties who is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in Economics in Paris, about the limitations of reason and its relationship to ma‘rifah, he offered a similar, but slightly different perspective,

What is your definition of reason? For me, reason itself is not limited, but it is the person who limits reason. If we have only one approach to understand, if we try to define a scheme in which we speak, it is a process in which we are limiting reason ourselves. But reflection (tawakkur) is a combination of many elements, and reason is one of them, they move forward together. Never can one element move forward in a stage and leave the others behind, or even if one element is leading, there is feedback, so the other elements know what is going on. So reason is not limited, but we have to discover all the elements and merge them in order to know exactly how to use perfectly our reason. For example, scientific thinking or scientific experimentation with observation, experimentation, trying to discover interactions,

224 Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 169.
225 Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 170.
collaboration and comparison of theories, is something very valid for all kinds of thinking that we have. But sometimes what is problematic is the observation, there are many things you can’t observe, but you shouldn’t reject them or say that it doesn’t exist, simply because you can’t observe them. As for our reasoning, if it has a false basis, we will always be in a circle of flaws. For example, if I say $1+1 = 2$ or $1+1+1=3$, it is simply a way of thinking which we have learned, which is very strong in us, and of course we have the certainty that it is true, and it would be very difficult to get out of that way of thinking, of that schema. But we have to have a plurality of ways of thinking, and understand exactly how to enlarge our reasoning.

Because reason is not limited, but it is something the human limits, himself. For example, take this pencil, it is one, one pencil, and if I break it, this way [*snaps pencil*]—OK, I have broken it—and for you, I have two parts. And if I join them, and for you, one plus one is two, and if I say to you, one plus one is one, this way [*holds the pieces of the pencil apart*] you will say it is not possible. For me, one plus one is one [*puts the pieces of the pencil together*], even though I broke it, and you can see the two parts are one, everything can be united. Mathematics, truly, mathematics is a process of uniting everything to one. Then a person will understand that everything, all mathematics leads to just one, one, one...Why Allah gave us mathematics is just to understand that all the elements we see are just one, so we have to resolve not $1+1=2$, but $1+1=1$, like this [*puts the pieces of the pencil back together*]. And so we just have to consider very different ways of thinking and not just adopt a schema and generalize it to everyone, every person, every situation. But for me, reason is not limited, but we limit it, and we don’t understand, and we can’t make it function correctly because we don’t know how to use, how to combine all the elements to do reflection...

**Fath** is the process of being conscious that you have no limits, and you can only keep discovering, and discovering, and finding out, and destroying walls and discovering the true interaction between things. You just keep moving forward and moving forward and moving forward, and that limit that you think you have in your reason is destroyed and you move forward by a combination of many elements in which you have reason, and all the elements that you have to combine in order to move forward...Reason is a part and you have to combine reason and the other elements in order to form one element capable of knowing things, so if you consider only one element, for instance, only reason, you will fail. But you have to join reason and all elements in order to form one thing that will give you the strength to know, and those other elements include **jayyadh**, being hard-working, acting only for the sake of Allah, etc. …There is a way of thinking that says that reason and the heart are very different, and this is something distorted, because reason is exactly the heart and the heart is reason. And we will never be able to understand the different things without understanding that reason and heart are one entity, and to understand this we must be able to think from inside us and from outside, because to reach the Truth we need both, we need reason and we need the heart, it is very important to join them, to unite them in a single entity and unite the many other elements in a single entity in order to think, to see things properly.

[Question: So when you can synthesize these different elements into one, then you can know the truth? When you become one, then you can know the One, the Truth?]

K.S.: Yes, Yes. Because if the truth is just a point, you can come from here, from here, from here [*pointing from all different directions*], or you can come from just one direction. Ok, so, there are very different approaches, but the one coming just from one direction and getting to the point has many flaws, but the one coming from this direction, that direction, that direction and reaching the point is more complete. He is more complete, so we have to be plural in our way of thinking and after, try to unite all our different forms of knowledge and realize that there is only a single entity, and realize that the solid, the liquid, the gas is just one entity.226

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In this account, reason is described as a part of a larger whole, a whole with a seemingly unlimited capacity for knowledge. Reason can be fallible or “unsound” when it is limited to a particular perspective or way of looking at things, but these limits can be overcome, and reasoning can be expanded through spiritual practice. This process of transformation unites the various cognitive and noetic elements of the knower into one, transcending all their individual limitations, allowing the knower to see everything as one. This is a clear allusion to the process described in the ḥadīth in which God becomes “his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks.” In this ḥadīth and K.S.’s account, the faculties are all united into one, and allow the knower to reason correctly, see things properly, to know The One. From this perspective, there is only one real object of knowledge, and so all forms of knowledge, and all possible ways of knowing, must also be united. K.S.’s concluding description of having plural approaches to, and ways of thinking about, the truth, recalls, in a different mode, Ibn ‘Arabi’s insistence that the Truth cannot be encompassed by a single form of belief or doctrine. Overall, K.S.’s account stresses the continuity and unity of reason and unveiling, and insists upon the necessity of both in order to “see things properly” to have a more complete knowledge of the truth.

In a similar vein, Sidi Inaya Niang directed my attention to a passage of Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī in which Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī describes the different levels of the intellect (‘aql) and

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227 He writes, “Beware of becoming delimited by a specific notting and disbelieving in everything else, lest great good escape you. . . . Be in yourself a matter for the forms of all beliefs, for God is wider and more tremendous than that He should be constricted by one knotting rather than another.” and “He who counsels his own soul should investigate, during his life in this world, all doctrines concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is correct for him who holds it, then he should support it in the case of him who believes in it.” qtd. in Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 175.
their relationship to one another. In many Sufi texts, the term ‘aql can often be glossed as “reason,” with limitative and pejorative connotations, but in this passage, Shaykh Tijānī describes ‘aql as a kind of continuum with various degrees and levels running the epistemological gamut from the most sublime and complete form of ma’rifah to the most mundane forms of knowledge and cunning:

…the intellect here (‘aql) is the Divine Intellect (al-‘aql al-rabbānī) hidden in the presence of the unseen (ḥadrat al-ghayb) which was an attribute of the spirit at first, before it was combined with the body, being for the spirit what vision is for the eye. Just as by vision, the realities of apparent things are revealed in the eye, likewise by the Divine Intellect, the inward realities of hidden things are Known. By it [the Divine Intellect] the truth is Known as true, and the false as false in reality and by certain unveiling, without confusing things, and without becoming overwhelmed by the difficulties of trials. This is maintaining the just balance between the two pans [of the scale]: the true and the false. By it [the Divine Intellect] is Known the means of weighing things and placing everything in the pan of truth or the pan of falsehood. By it is Known the way of distinguishing between things and their equivalents.

This Divine Intellect takes knowledge from God without an intermediary, without requiring the teaching of a teacher or the reports of a reporter, rather all that it desires of knowledge it takes directly from the Real….The degrees of the intellect are three:

The first is the Divine Intellect which is pure, divine light which is poured out in the inward reality of the spirit. It is the guide and it leads to the goal. None attain to this intellect save the perfect Knower by God (al-‘ārif biLlāh al-kāmil).

The second level of the intellect is the Universal Intellect (al-‘aql al-kullī), which is covered by thin veils of darkness. It discovers the realities of existing things, the apparent and the hidden. The difference between it and the first intellect is that the first intellect reveals things outwardly and inwardly and discerns the secrets of the Holy Presence (ḥadrāt al-Qudsī) while sitting upon the footstool of magnificent power, and while governing all things as it wills—everything obeys it and nothing disobeys it. As for the second intellect, which is the Universal Intellect, it is veiled from the Divine Presence (ḥadrāt al-Illāhiyyah) by many veils, so it does not glimpse anything of the secrets of the Holy Presence, but it does discover the realities of existing things, the apparent and the hidden, but only by the Divine Light cast into it. It governs things as it wills, sometimes carrying out its wishes, sometimes with difficulty. It Knows the source of things and their origins from the apparent aspect of the cosmos, not from the hidden aspect of the Holy Presence. The Knowledge (ma’rifah), which is taken from the inward aspect of The Holy Presence, of the realities of the universe, outwardly and inwardly, and the knowledge which is taken from the apparent existents of the unseen and visible worlds—the distance between them is great.

The Universal Intellect, in this level, weighs things on the just scale. It Knows things and their outcomes and their ends to which they are returned. This is one of the greatest and most elevated matters. Even if the situation does not allow one to attain this level of the Divine Intellect, he or she can still greatly benefit from sciences and Knowledge [acquired by the lower level of the intellect], even if they only concern the external forms of the world.

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228 The passage in question is a part of a commentary on a famous poem attributed to Junayd.
This intellect is divided between the believer and the unbeliever. This second intellect can be given to some unbelievers through their persistence in opposing the passions of their souls and their consideration of the Divine Presence. Although this does not avail them against their lack of faith, they can attain some of the special qualities of the Universal Intellect in this world by discovering some aspects of the unseen. So they can have command of certain specialities and mysteries, and thus they can have a great deal to say on many different topics. But this lures them to their destruction in the afterlife. May God preserve us from this by His grace and generosity.

The third level of the intellect is the lowest, the most trivial, and it is the practical intellect (al-‘aql al-ma‘āshiyy) by which one organizes worldly affairs and its external aspects, out of one’s own passions, penchants, and love of rest, and tenacity in pursuing one’s whims and avoiding anything that opposes one’s affairs. This intellect is divided between men and beasts. The Intellect that takes precedence is the greater Divine Intellect, which is beyond the scope of the Universal Intellect.229

This passage draws on the ḥadīth, “Knowledge is a light that God casts into the heart of whomever He wills,”230 and the long tradition of Islamic epistemology equating knowledge with light, as well as the Islamic philosophical tradition’s adaptation of the Aristotelian/neo-Platonic concept of various levels or kinds of intellect. In this perspective,231 the intellect is likened to varying degrees of light, which allow for various modes of perception and understanding. The most common, and lowest, form of intellect allows one to discern the helpful from the harmful, and obeys one’s whims and desires. The next level of the intellect can only be achieved by those who master their passions and desires and direct their attention towards aspects of reality beyond one’s own worldly affairs. This intellect can govern over the soul of its possessor, but it can also be opposed. It can also “govern over” external things by understanding their origins and predicting their outcomes; but again, this knowledge and control is only partial, and proceeds from the appearances of things to their inner realities,

229 Jawāhir al-Ma‘āni, 893-7.

230 And implicitly upon the ḥadīths “The first thing that God created was the Intellect” and “The first thing that God created was my light,” and the Light Verse (Ayat al-Nūr) of the Qur’an, which begins, God is the light of the heavens and the earth... (24:35).

231 This perspective was prominent in Sufi discourse as early as Ghazzālī (d. 1111), and increased in prominence as the tradition deepened its engagement with, and incorporation of, Islamic philosophical discourse.
whereas the highest level of the intellect knows both the apparent and hidden aspects of things from their divine origins. One imagines that many Islamic philosophers and contemporary academics would be categorized as having this second kind of intellect. The highest level of intellect, the Divine Intellect, is described as being a kind of “eye of the spirit,” and as being a faculty that derives knowledge directly from the Real, with neither intermediary nor doubt. It is the exclusive purview of the most perfect of Knowers who have passed through both fanā’ (annihilation) and baqā’ (subsistence), so that they know things both in and through God. It is the instrument of ma’rifah. Due to its immediate and certain nature, its spiritual requirements, and its identification with the Divine, it “governs over” both the soul of its possessor and external things in that its perceptions cannot be refuted and that it knows the apparent and hidden realities of things, both as they exist in the world, and as they exist in divinis.

But by far the most common schema for relating ma’rifah to other forms of knowledge had to do, not with the varying degrees of the intellect, but with those of certainty, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The popular Tijānī prayer book, Ḩāṣib wa Awrād (“Litanies and Prayers”) describes these levels in the following way: “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 (ḥaqq al-yaqīn), because we have realized (nataḥaqqaqu) it.”232 The connection between knowledge and death here is significant, since the annihilation (fanā’) which leads to ma’rifah and certainty is often likened to death, and the Prophetic injunction to “die before you die” is often interpreted as referring to fanā’. The first level of certainty is identified with discursive knowledge, the

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232 Ḩāṣib wa-Awrād, 15.
second, with perception, and the third, with an existential transformation. At this highest
degree of certainty, knowledge and being are united and inseparable.

Similarly, Shaykh Māḥī Niasse, one of Shaykh Ibrahim’s more prominent sons and
spiritual successors, told me that the knowledge of certainty (‘ilm al-yaqīn) is like my
knowing that Medina Baye exists, but without knowing where it is; the eye of certainty (‘ayn
al-yaqīn) is like seeing the city, and the reality of certainty (ḥaqq al-yaqīn) is like entering the
city and gaining a complete understanding of its residents and history.233 This formulation
was repeated, with minor variations, by virtually every shaykh I asked about certainty. As
quoted above, the French disciple Abu Ibrahim used a similar metaphor of discursive
description vs. personal experience to characterize the difference between ma’rifah and other
forms of knowledge:

...It’s like scholars, they read, they learn...It’s like you read a guidebook about Paris, you
learn the history of Paris, you see the pictures of Paris, but it’s better to go there for two days,
now you know Paris! But if you’re just, you’re outside Paris, you read about Paris for years,
but you don’t know Paris, the guy who’s never read anything, but he’s been to Paris, he knows
Paris better than you do. It’s the same with God. Like some young guys here, they maybe don’t
know much of “conventional” knowledge, but they know God and that makes them “better”
than Imams and shuyukhs who’ve studied for years but never experienced this knowledge.
You see?

Before concluding, a note is in order about the “knowledge of mysteries” (‘ilm al-
āsrār) that is associated with ma’rifah. In this worldview, God reveals or manifests Himself
in three main domains or “books”: the book of the cosmos, the book of the soul, and the book
of scripture. These three books are intimately related to each another, and Knowledge of God
necessarily grants profound knowledge of these three “books” and the relationships that exist

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interview, Shaykh Māḥī also contrasted philosophy (falsafah) with Sufism, describing the former as being
concerned with doubt, and the latter with certainty, “the philosophers seek doubt in everything even to the extent
of asking, “is white black?” The Sufis seek certainty, they seek the Truth/the Real, as it is, they don’t try to go
into doubt. But as for philosophy, you always think in your mind trying to create these doubts.”
amongst them. For example, K.S. described the relationship between spiritual realization and one’s understanding of the Qur’an in the following terms:

When we read Quran and if you have \textit{Fatḥ}, you could understand exactly without any doubt in the interpretation, what Allah wants to say. For instance, in the Quran there is a moment when Moses wanted to see Allah [7:143]…For instance, someone without \textit{Fatḥ} who reads that passage of the Quran won’t be able to understand what Allah means or he will have flaws in his interpretation of it. But if someone has \textit{Fatḥ}, he would be able to know exactly what happened and what Allah means…It is very important to have \textit{Fatḥ} because without that you won’t be able to understand the interaction between what you see in the world, between many things, you won’t be able to link them to each other and to Allah. And \textit{Fatḥ} is a process of understanding the Qur’an.

These insights, which can only be obtained through spiritual realization, are often referred to as “secrets” or “mysteries” (\textit{asrār}), and as the name suggests, are jealously guarded by those who possess them. The most popular category of these occult sciences is called \textit{‘ilm al-hurūf}, or “the science of letters,” which concerns the numeric, cosmological, and metaphysical symbolism of the letters of the Arabic alphabet, and the magical effects of reciting or writing certain combinations of them.

Shaykh Aḥmad Zarrūq’s (d. 1493) (whom Shaykh Ibrahim quotes copiously) statement on this branch of knowledge is characteristic of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s perspective on this form of knowledge, its dangers and merits, and the means by which it is acquired:

Many dervishes of this time have become obsessed with gaining knowledge of secrets, experiential mysteries and the subtle profundities of the Sufis, without taking care to live up to the requirements of proper worship and good etiquette with God. Thus they have strayed away from the true goal and disconnected themselves from the path to God’s love. The result of this is that they are hindered while displaying the guise of righteousness. Some of them are delighted when they understand something that the Sufis say, and mistake this for actual experience of it, even going so far as to claim that they have realised this spiritual state, when in fact they have been barred from it. The sincere man ought to busy himself with perfecting his character, attachment and realization, and ignore all distractions. Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh says in the \textit{Ḥikam}, “To be curious about the flaws hidden within you is better than being curious about the mysteries hidden outside you.” The Sufis have said, “If the disciple speaks about a station he has not yet reached, he will be barred from reaching it, since he will have become one of those people who merely know about it. After that, he will not be safe from being misguided by it or getting lost in one of its symbols—that is what happens when one tries to take these things from the words of other people.”
One of the prime examples of this is obsession with mysterious sciences such as the sciences of letters and names, and the like. Knowledge of these sciences is attained by a divine gift and opening, and its experts only speak about it at all by way of aiding those who have been given such an opening and benefitting those who have already been shown the reality of them.…

Likewise, Shaykh Muḥyī al-Dīn [ibn ʿArabī] said, “The science of letters is a noble science learned by divine bestowal alone; actively seeking it is blameworthy for one’s religion and worldly life.

In sum, the sciences of divine gift are all praiseworthy in themselves, but blameworthy to seek…. Avoid everything but invocation, and you will be saved from evil. By God, we have found all of the secrets in invocation; we have not found them in the esoteric study of Arabic words, nor of non-Arabic words.”

Shaykh Tijānī is quoted as having said that, “revealing divine secrets among the veiled folk is worse, in the presence of God, than committing forbidden acts (harām).” As mentioned in the above quotation, the reasons for this prohibition are many, ranging from the fact that some secrets are considered to be dangerous, while others could constitute a substantial distraction (such as those secrets believed to bring wealth, or power, or visions and other unusual experiences) for those whose hearts have not yet been cleansed of baser desires, to the inevitable misunderstanding, confusion, and discord that would result from revealing such secrets to those who do not have the capacity to understand them. Many of the “discoveries” or “realizations” that disciples whom I interviewed came to during their spiritual journeys fall into this latter category, and so some disciples were reluctant to share them with me. Others told me about some of these “secrets” they had discovered, but asked me to not share some of them with others, and not to tell anyone what they had told me. I have done my best to respect their wishes. In this regard, Shaykh Ibrahim quoted the


235 Niasse, Jawāhir al-Rasā’īl I, 19.
following poem, employing the standard Sufi trope of the beloved Layla standing for the Divine,

As for the one seeking information of Layla’s secret
I have sent him away in ignorance of her, with no certain knowledge
They say, “inform us, for you are her custodian!”
But if I were to inform them, I would not have been the custodian.

But some secrets or aspects of ma’rifah are not only forbidden, but actually impossible to reveal to anyone else. In this regard, Shaykh Tijānī ‘Ali Cissé quoted the following poem for me to explain the futility of describing ma’rifah:

Without tasting it, you won’t understand it, and tasting it renders explanation irrelevant
Whoever tastes the flavor of the drink of the people [The Sufis] knows it
And whoever becomes aware of it tomorrow [on the Day of Resurrection] will give his soul for it.

Similarly, in his Three Station of Religion, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse equates “the reality of ma’rifah” with the Qur’anic verse There is nothing like unto Him (42:11), drawing on the long tradition of Sufi commentaries upon this verse which connect it to the ineffability of ma’rifah. For example, Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

The science of tastings is the science of qualities. Tastings cannot be told about except by those who experience them when they come together on a designated technical term. However, when they have not come together on a term, the tasters cannot communicate their tastings. This concerns knowledge of those things other than God which can be perceived only through tasting, such as sensory objects and taking pleasure in them and the pleasure which is found through knowledge acquired by reflective consideration. It is possible to establish technical terminology in all of this in an approximate manner.

As for the tasting which occurs during the witnessing of the Real, in that there can be no technical terminology. That is the tasting of the mysteries/secrets (al-asrār) and lies outside considerative [rational] and sensory tasting. The reason for this is as follows:

The things—I mean everything other than God— have likes and similarities. Hence it is possible to establish technical terminology concerning them in order to make oneself understood to everyone who tastes their flavor, whatever kind of perception it may be, but as for the Author [God]—“There is nothing like unto Him” (42:11). Hence it is impossible for a technical term to tie him down since that which one individual witnesses of Him is not the same as what another witnesses in any respect. This is the manner in which He is known by the gnostics. Hence no gnostic is able to convey to another gnostic what he witnesses of his Lord, for each of the two gnostics witnesses Him who has no likeness, and conveying knowledge can

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236 Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 88.

only take place through likeness. If they shared a form in common,…, they would establish a technical term as they willed. If one of them accepted that, then everyone could accept that.

The gnostics among the folk of Allah know that “God never discloses Himself in a single form to two individuals, nor in a single form twice.” Hence for them the situation does not become tied down, since each individual has a self-disclosure specific to himself, and man sees Him through himself….Hence he cannot designate a technical term concerning this through which any positive knowledge would accrue to those who discuss it.

So the gnostics know, but what they know cannot be communicated. It is not in the power of the possessors of this most delightful station, higher than which there is no station among the possible things, to coin a word which would denote what they know.238

This perhaps explains the “democratizing” nature of ma’rifah many disciples mentioned, since each person’s knowledge of God is unique and distinct from everyone else’s, each knower, in fact, each person, has a unique perspective on God that is not shared by anyone else. This fact also explains why so much of the technical terminology of Sufism concerns the process of acquiring this ineffable form of knowledge, and the light it sheds on other domains of knowledge such as scriptural hermeneutics, psychology, cosmology, philosophy, etc.239

Having explored some of these connections, the next section of this chapter will focus on the processes through which ma’rifah is acquired in the community of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. In summary, since ma’rifah is “beyond the scope of discursive reason,” it resists standard definition. However, in the various accounts of it presented in this section, ma’rifah

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238 Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 353.

239 Elsewhere Ibn ‘Arabi writes, illuminating another perspective, “One of the most marvelous things in this path—it is not found in any other—is the following: Every group which has a science—logicians, grammarians, geometers, mathematicians, astronomers, theologians, philosophers—has technical terms not known to him who comes from outside unless a master or someone familiar with it acquaints him with it. The only exception is this path [of Sufism]. The sincere seeker—and by this they know his sincerity—enters among them and has no news of their technical terms. Then God opens up the eye of his understanding and he takes form his Lord at the beginning of his tasting, even though he had no news of the terminology they were using… Then this sincere seeker understands everything they are talking about, as if he himself had established the technical terms. He shares with them in the conversation and does not find it strange to himself. On the contrary, he finds it all a self-evident knowledge which he is unable to repel. He does not know how he gained it. But the one who comes from outside, in all other groups, never finds this unless someone as acquainted him with the terms.” Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 250.
was described as foundational, as certain or as certainty, as existential, as being linked to spiritual practice and the resulting radical transformations of \( \text{fanā}' \) and \( \text{baqā}' \). It was described as being self-knowledge, and as simultaneously as being knowledge of God and God’s knowledge. \( \text{Ma‘rifah} \) could be said to be the way God knows Himself through a given individual, which is also the way this individual knows God. This knowledge is described as being dynamic, ever-changing, and unique to each Knower (‘\( \text{Ārif} \)), such that the \( \text{ma‘rifah} \) of each knower is coloured by the individual particularities of each Knower, as water is by its vessel. This knowledge is closely associated with and accompanied by the unveiling (\( \text{kashf} \)) of mysteries/secrets (\( \text{asrār} \)), that is, the experience (“tasting”), direct witnessing (\( \text{mushāhadah} \)), or realization of certain truths or realities which lie beyond the scope of the sensory and rational faculties. However, \( \text{ma‘rifah} \) is not opposed to these faculties, but rather is understood as the result of the integration and perfection of these various noetic faculties through the transformations of \( \text{fanā}' \) and \( \text{baqā}' \). Thus \( \text{ma‘rifah} \) is intimately related to other forms of knowledge; being, in a sense, their foundation and base.\(^{240}\) So while \( \text{ma‘rifah} \) is not necessary to become proficient in these other domains of knowledge, within the community of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, and Sufism in general, it does determine the perspective from which one approaches these forms of knowledge, and serves as their implicit epistemic foundation and their perfection.

For example, in his commentary on the Qur’an, Shaykh Ibrahim explains the relationship between reflection (\( \text{tafakkur} \)), which is often associated with the rational faculty, and the knowledge of God which is the fruit of spiritual realization,

\(^{240}\) Shaykh Tijānī ‘Ali Cisse quotes the following hadīth on the authority of the Prophet’s wife, ‘\( \text{Ā’isha} \), “‘The support of the house is its foundation. The support of the religion is the knowledge (\( \text{ma‘rifah} \)) of Allah the Most High, certainty and the restrained mind.’” Imam Cheikh Tijānī ‘Ali Cisse. \textit{What the Knowers of Allah have said about the Knowledge of Allah.} (Atlanta: Fayda Books, 2014), 61.
It has been narrated in a ḥadīth, “the reflection of an hour is better than the worship of a year.” Reflection (tafakkur) is better than worship because worship is an action of the physical limbs while reflection is an action of the heart, and because worship is from the servant and reflection is from God. There are some people who worship God through reflection…The reflection of the common people is that they reflect upon the creation of God so that by it they may draw conclusions about the Creator. The reflection of the elite is upon the Essence of God, whereas reflection upon the Essence of God is forbidden (ḥarām) for the common people because they do not have the ability to conceive of the Essence of God which has no where or how or foot or head or hands. If a common man were to reflect upon that, he would simply conceive of our Lord like a watermelon and would thereby fall into that which is not to be praised. But as for the elite, they reflect upon the Essence of God, and so for that reason it has been related “the reflection of an hour is better than the worship of a year.”

Reflection is described as an intellectual activity whose instrument is the heart. It is a form of worship that can lead to maʿrifah, but maʿrifah also leads to the perfection of reflection (tafakkur). Shaykh Ibrahim extends this paradigm further, defining different modes of intellectual activity in light of spiritual practice and realization:

Meditation (fikr) is among the actions of the servant, it is the journey of his heart (sayr qalbihi), either [meditating] about his Lord or about his messenger or about his saint—that is, about God or His signs (ayāt) if we take the signs of God to be His prophets and saints—and as for [meditation] about his soul and its wretchedness, that returns to God and His signs also. And we have an answer for the question that came to us: Are thought (khāṭir), reflection (fikrah), and insight (ʿibrah) synonyms or not? They are from one point of view, and are not from another. Thought (khāṭir) is what descends on the heart either with the acts of meditation (fikr) or not. The real thought (al-khāṭir al-ḥaqīqī) is the thought united with God when the slave ceases to exist and his being is annihilated so that nothing remains except the thought which roams, freed from its restrictions, wherever it wants.

All people draw near, subject to their state
But we are unfettered by its limitations, as it is [for us] a mirage

Reflection (fikrah) is among the actions of the slave, the journey of his heart either in his Lord or in himself, and both are sources of great benefit, because if you reflect upon God and upon the beauty of His Attributes and Actions, you will necessarily long for Him and draw near to him by the means of those actions of the limbs which bring you near to Him. And if you reflect upon your soul and its wretchedness, you will necessarily flee from it, and the flight from it is the flight to God by the means of those actions of the limbs which draw you near to Him. This is reflection. Insight (ʿibrah) is the benefit obtained by reflection, and it is that when something occurs to your vision (baṣar), large or small, of potential significance, you discover its meaning. And likewise, a thought is something that occurs to your mind (bād), large or small. By this you know that thought (khāṭir) is what is from God to you, reflection (fikrah) is

242 cf. Ibn ʿAṭaʾillah’s Ḥikam #262 “Reflection is the journey of the heart through the plains of alterities.” (al-fikrah sayr al-qalb fī mayādīn al-aghyār).
what goes from you to God, and insight ('ibrah) is the effect of both of them and their result (natfjah). And God's it is to show the way (16:9).243

In this passage, “real thinking” only occurs in the absolute freedom of annihilation, “reflection” is described as a “journey of the heart,” and both God and the thinker are active participants in these processes. “Insight” ('ibrah), the result of these two activities, is the correct interpretation and discernment of whatever comes to one’s mind. In this perspective, intellectual activity finds its perfection in spiritual realization. Ma’rifah determines the approach to intellectual activity in general and the various branches of knowledge, for which it is foundational.

In his Removal of Confusion, Shaykh Ibrahim writes, “There is no science that cannot be dispensed with occasionally except for the science of Sufism: one cannot do without it for a single moment. As for its relationship to the other sciences, it is comprehensive of all of them, as well as [being] their prerequisite, since there is no knowledge and no good deed without genuine dedication to Allah…From the standpoint of the external, the religious sciences may exist superficially without Sufism, but they become defective and disreputable [without it].”244 In the same work, Shaykh Ibrahim cites the Jawāhir al-Ma‘āni’s quotation of a letter which Ibn ‘Arabi wrote to his contemporary Fakhr al-Dīn Rāżī, the great theologian and polymath (who became something of a stock figure in later Sufi literature, representing the scholar who could not give up his book learning for Divine Knowledge).245 This version

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244 Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 21.

of the letter, as received by the Tijani tradition, provides a nice summary of *ma‘rifah* and its relationship to other forms of knowledge,

Know my brother, may Allah assist us and you with His enabling grace, that a man does not attain perfection in the station of knowledge until he receives his knowledge directly from Allah the Exalted without intermediary, such as the transmitted report of a shaykh. If one’s knowledge comes only from transmitted reports, one becomes obsessed with the study of temporal phenomena (*muhadithāt*). This is well known by the people of Allah. If someone devotes his life to the study of temporal phenomena and their detailed classification, this becomes his allotment with his Lord. Such a person becomes completely engrossed in temporal phenomena and fails to recognize their reality.

O my brother, if you traveled (the path) with the help of a shaykh from among the people of Allah, you would be led to the presence of witnessing the Real. You would learn from Him knowledge of affairs through genuine inspiration, without difficulty, fatigue, or sleeplessness, just as Khidr learned it. There is no true knowledge except that which comes from unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*shuhūd*), rather than speculation, thinking, supposition, and conjecture. The perfect Shaykh Abū Yazīd al-Bītāmī used to say to the scholars of his era: “You have taken your knowledge form the scholars of written texts like a dead man from a dead man. But we have received our knowledge from the Ever-Living who never dies.”

O my brother, it is incumbent on you to refrain from seeking any of the sciences except those by which your essential nature will be perfected, and which will travel with you wherever you go. This is only the knowledge of Allah (*al-‘ilm biLlāh*) the Exalted, by way of bestowal or witnessing. As for your knowledge of medicine, for example, you only need it for the world of sickness and disease. If you moved to a world in which there is no sickness and no disease, whom would you treat with that knowledge?

So you have to come to know, my brother, that it is unnecessary for the intelligent person to acquire anything of the sciences except that which will travel with him between worlds. Otherwise (leave the sciences that) will part with you at the time of your move to the world of the hereafter. Only two forms of knowledge travel with a man to the hereafter. The first is the knowledge of Allah. The second is the knowledge of the regions (*mawātīn*) of the hereafter, so he will not fail to recognize the manifestations that occur to him there. This is so he will not say to the Real when he manifests Himself to Him, “We take refuge with Allah from You!” Therefore, my brother, you must discover these two forms of knowledge in this abode so you may reap the benefits of them in the next abode. You should refrain from carrying around anything from the sciences of this abode, except that for which there is a pressing need in your journey to Allah the Almighty and Glorious. And this is according to the consensus of the people of Allah the Exalted.

The two desired forms of knowledge can be discovered only by means of spiritual retreat (*khalwa*), spiritual discipline (*riyāda*) and effort (*mujāhada*), and rapture (*jadhb*) in the

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246 It is worth noting that the manuscript copies of this letter differ somewhat from what is found this quotation, highlighting the fact that these classical Sufi texts and ideas are mediated by their transmission from master to disciple and by their quotations in other works. Thus the Tijānī reception of Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy differs from that of other Sufi orders or philosophical schools.

247 “That which I said to you about the ‘transmutation in forms’ [refers to] what Muslim [d. 261/875] has mentioned in his Ṣaḥīḥ namely that the Creator will disclose Himself [to His servants on the day of Resurrection] but will be denied, and refuge will be sought from Him. So He will transmute Himself for them into a form in which they will recognize Him. Then they will acknowledge Him after having denied Him.”
divine. I had intended to describe for you the retreat and its prerequisites, and what will appear to you during it—one thing and the next in its proper sequence—but shortage of time has prevented me from that.

The habitual practice of one with no interest in the secrets of the sacred law is disputation. So they have refuted everything of which they are ignorant. They have become addicted to fanaticism and the love of appearance and leadership. They use religion to eat of the world, instead of yielding to the people of Allah and submitting to them.248

A different translation based on manuscript copies of the same letter further illuminates these points,

A person with lofty aspirations should not waste his life with contingent things (muhdathāt) and their exposition, lest his share from his Lord escape him. He should also free himself from the authority of his reflection (jīr), for reflection can only know from its own point of reference; but the truth that is sought after is not that...

God (great and glorious) is too exalted to be known by the intellect’s [powers of] reflection and rational consideration (nazār). An intelligent person should empty his heart of reflection when he wants to know God by way of witnessing (mushāhada)...

Know that when the people of reflection attain the furthermost goal, their reflection takes them to the state of being deaf imitators. But the matter is too exalted for it to halt at reflection! So long as there is reflection, it will be impossible for one to repose and be at rest. The intellect has a limit at which it halts with respect to its reflective powers, for it has the quality of receiving [only] what God bestows upon it. Therefore, an intelligent person should expose himself to the divine breaths of generosity and not remain enslaved by the shackles of his rational consideration and learning (kash), for he is liable to doubt because of these.

It has been reported to me from one of your brothers—whom I trust, and who is amongst those sincerely disposed towards you—that he saw you weeping one day, and so he and those present asked you why you were weeping. You replied, “A position to which I have adhered for the past thirty years has become clear to me thanks to a proof which has just dawned upon me. [It turns out that] the [truth of the] matter is contrary to my previous position. So I cried and said to myself, ‘perhaps that which has occurred to me is also like the first position!’” This, then, is what you said.

It is impossible for the one who knows through the scope of the intellect and reflection to be at rest or tranquil, especially when it comes to knowing God; and it is impossible for him to know His quiddity (māhiyya) by way of rational consideration. So, my brother, what ails you that you remain in this predicament and do not enter upon the path (ṭarīq) of self-discipline (riyāda), inner-struggle (mujāhada), and spiritual retreat (khalwa)—which have been instituted by the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace)—so that you can attain what was attained by the one (Khādir) about whom God said, [a servant] from among Our servants whom We had granted a mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Our Presence [Q. 18:65]...249


This knowledge from the Divine Presence (‘ilm ladunnī) is nothing other than ma’rifah, the “perfection of knowledge,” which can only be attained through spiritual practice.

In summary, this section demonstrates some of the many and varied ways in which Shaykh Ibrahim and his disciples have creatively drawn on a long tradition of Sufi thought in their attempts to describe the ineffable and fundamental knowledge of ma’rifah. As one recent study of the community of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse concluded,

What is unusual about the Taalibe Baay [disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse] movement is that it has popularized the search for mystical knowledge and mystical union with God and has created an environment in which these philosophical ideas become reworked and embedded in practical situations by perhaps millions of non-specialists. Baay Nias’s [Ibrahim Niasse’s] followers hold that his particularity is not simply in attaining for himself knowledge no one else had, but in making this unique knowledge available to anyone who sought it. His technique of mystical education and the "secret" (mboot) of which he held the key promised to allow any seeker to attain a mystical knowledge of God in a relatively short period of time without becoming a specialist.250

The next section will address this process of “mystical education,” known as tarbiyah.

How is Ma’rifah Acquired?

In a Skype interview, K.S. provided me with his own account of tarbiyah as a “drop merging with the ocean,” using this image to flesh out the concepts of fanā’, baqā’, and ma’rifah.

What is tarbiyah? Tarbiyah is something that consolidates your faith, your faith in Allah, and once you have taken tarbiyah, there is no doubt possible in your faith, it is something that completes your faith. But you have to understand that tarbiyah does not belong to a person, not Baye Niasse or Shaykh Ḥmad Tijānī, it is something that belongs to God… There are normal questions a person asks himself: Who am I? Why am I in the world? Why are there so many people? Why are there different people, White, Black, Japanese? Existential questions. It is very natural for a person to try to understand the environment in which he or she is. The most important question in philosophy is “Who am I?”, so people want to understand the world and themselves. And mostly they want to know God, who is God? Where does He come from? Why does God exist?” Or simply, “is there a God?” or, “is the world a creation of someone, or is it just something that happened by chance?” And tarbiyah gives

answers to all these questions. Let’s go to the Qur’an, Allah says that “I created the human being in my image” [actually a hadith qudsi]. And this implies something, in order to understand the world, in order to know God—it is something like a prism, when you have light that refracts—to know who you are or to know God, you first have to know first who you are, and after that you will know the environment around you and step by step you will reach God, or what we call God, but when you reach the highest step you will not be able to see differences between all the steps you went through, and what Allah said in the Qur’an is very important, I created human beings in my image. Before that we know that Allah created first the Prophet Muḥammad, his light, and from the light of the prophet Muḥammad, he created all the things we know: me, you whatever. This is the chain of creation.

I am going to talk about ma’rifah, ma’rifah will give you all the things you need to understand who you are, who is God, what is the environment, whatever you see in the world, whatever you can imagine. The process of knowing God from the beginning to the end is like you take a drop of water and you put it in the ocean. If you take a drop of water like this and it goes into the ocean, you won’t be able to see that it is a drop of water, and you won’t be able to differentiate between the ocean and the drop. But there is a process of merging between the drop of water and the ocean, it is something which can be very short or very long, the merging is not something immediate, it is a process, and tarbiyah is the process of the drop of water becoming completely fused in the ocean. The ocean is God, an ocean of light, or an ocean of water. Let’s say that Allah is an ocean of water and the only condition to know Allah is to be, yourself, of water, so that you can fuse with the ocean, but there is a process between the moment the drop of water falls and the complete fusion between the drop of water and the ocean. Then the drop of water will be the ocean and the ocean will be the drop of water. There won’t be any difference. Let’s suppose that we have five oceans: the Atlantic, Pacific, etc. and there are many places, many elements within these oceans, and you are the drop of water, and you just have reached the ocean. At the beginning you are just at the surface, but after the complete fusion between the drop and all oceans, you will be yourself the oceans, the Pacific, Atlantic, Artic, and you will be yourself, the elements, and you will have a complete knowledge of whatever is in the ocean because you are the ocean—this is the process.

Fanā’ [annihilation] is a state when you are not able to make any differences between yourself and all elements and anything else. Fanā’ is a state when you think that you are the sky, all the planets, and the elements. There is a traditional way of thinking that people have where you think that Allah is everywhere, but it is not exactly true, everywhere is in Allah, but Allah is not in everywhere, and fanā’ is a state when you realize that Allah is not everywhere, but everywhere is in Allah, and you are trying to understand that, and that is why you are confused, because you are in a state that you are searching, you are trying to understand, you are searching. And it is a state where you don’t have the notion of time, because time is something Allah gave us to guide us, it is very useful to know this 10 pm, 5 am, but Allah doesn’t need that. Allah doesn’t need time. Fanā’ is a state where you are escaping time and, in that state, you understand that what is important is the present. Because past and future are illusions, the real time is the present. If you think about yesterday you are bringing it into the present, if you think about the future you are bringing it into the present, you are thinking about it all in the present. And if you think deeply, you understand that all is present. If you are able, if you can think about tomorrow, that’s because you are in the present, and if you can think about yesterday it is because you are in the present and you are bringing all those notions in the present. So fanā’ is a process of understanding what time is and what space is. And it is a very rich moment, a very rich state.

Let’s go back to what I was talking about, the ocean. Now the drop of water is starting to merge with the ocean, with all oceans, and the drop itself is something very tiny very miniscule, and imagine the drop while in itself. In the process, the drop discovers many landscapes, scenes, terrains and the drop is in the process of discovering all the different
mountains, valleys, etc. And *fanā‘* is comparable to that process. But if you want to understand *fanā‘*, you can somehow say it is in the process in which people are understanding what is space and time and many other elements, but mainly space and time, and it is a state of confusion, bewilderment, because it is a process of understanding.

There is a moment when the process of merging is complete, in that moment, something happens and the person has reached something very important, something very deep, very grand. But no matter how deep, how grand, how important it is, the person can support it, can bear it, because in that state, the person reaches the highest of his capabilities, and we should not underestimate the capabilities of a person, the real capabilities of a person in the scale of creatures. Allah says that in all creatures, humans are the most variable. Do you feel that you are more powerful, more deep, more wide than an angel, than Jibrīl (Gabriel), for example? There is a very simple reason that will convince you that you are far more important than Jibrīl, far more elevated than Jibrīl, you have many knowledges inside of you that Jibrīl and the other angels want to have and they don’t have it. When God said that humans are the most variable in the creation that means that you were better than angels, better than anything, better than the ocean, the moon, the jinn, and even though you have many knowledges inside of you, many powerful things that are in you that you don’t know exactly, but you know what could be the power of an angel, or the power of Satan, or the power of a jinn, but you don’t know the power that is inside of you. But in order to know what is inside of you, in order to know your complete capabilities, you have to reach the complete fusion in the process between the ocean and the drop of water, but before reaching the complete fusion, you will understand many things, and will discover many secrets that are inside of you.

Have you ever noticed how God in the Qur’an uses “We” and “Us”? Once you reach the complete fusion, you become part of the “we” of the Qur’an. That is *baqā‘* [subsistence]. It is a state of complete fusion.

In response to my query “how to you get *ma‘rifah***?”, M.D., a disciple in his early twenties who runs a hip-hop clothing store in a chic quarter of Dakar, told me, “Have you read *Rūḥ al-Adab* (‘The Spirit of Good Manners’)? That’s it, that’s how you do it.” M.D. also described his experience of *tarbiyah* using creative and colorful metaphors, like decoding satellite channels to describe the process of acquiring *ma‘rifah* through the experience of *fanā‘* and *baqā‘*.

My friend brought me to Shaykh Mamour Insa (a popular Tijani shaykh) to ask him to pray for my *bac* [end of high school exam]. The Shaykh said, ‘I won’t pray for your *bac*, but I will pray for you to become part of the Divine Government.’—Do you know what that is? Alright, well I didn’t, and said to myself, what the heck is this? Then I went back to my house to sleep and I saw the shaykh in my dream as clear as I see you now. I was surprised, so I went back to the shaykh and asked him who he was and what he was doing in my dream. I told him I wanted to take initiation from him, but he told me to finish studying for my *bac* and to come back and see him during Ramadan. I did—this was when I was 18—and I took *tarbiyah* from him and I knew God. Since then, many of my friends have come to Shaykh Mamour Insa, to the Ṭarīqah.

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252 See Appendix for a full translation.
Even one friend I had, he was a serious Mouride, he was always talking about Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba, this, that, saying that there’s no one better than Serigne Touba [Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba], but even he came to take the tarbiyah of Shaykh Ibrahim Niass…

It’s a lot like philosophy, the philosophers say “I think therefore I am,” but do they know what this means? Philosophers say things, but they don’t have certainty. You’ve studied philosophy right? They say, “Philosophy is a preparation for death,” no? In school, I think we learned that Plato said this. That’s it no? That’s tarbiyah, a preparation for death, dying before you die…

Tarbiyah is like jumper cables, you get connected and you come to life. But ma’rifah, what is it? That’s hard to say because you live it. It’s like what the philosophers say, but they don’t realize what they’re saying, ma’rifah is realizing it, not just saying things or arguing back and forth. You live it. It’s like prayer, you live prayer, it’s not just the five times a day. Shaykh Ibrahim said that the ṣalāt al-fātiḥah is not limited to the rosary, you eat, drink, live ṣalāt al-fātiḥah. That’s why we must always work hard for God, because everything we do must be for Him by Him, in Him always…When you do tarbiyah you come to know who you are, who God is, who the Prophet is, who Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī is, who Shaykh Ibrahim is, and you see them in everything…

The true knowledge is ma’rifah. Much has been written about ma’rifah, but it’s something that one lives. It’s like a reader; he can read a book out loud very well without understanding what it means at all. There are some things that are lived experiences. Tarbiyah is not something you read in a book, it’s something you do, you live, it’s an experience of life. I don’t know how I can explain it…you can’t explain it, it’s something that you live. You live it…Have you read Rīḥ al-Adab (a short didactic poem which is Shaykh Ibrahim’s earliest known work—see Appendix)? Well that’s it, it’s all there, that’s how you live it….

When I was young, I studied the Qur’an, I practiced the religion, but the Ṭarīqah allowed me to cling to the religion, to practice the religion better. It’s true that the sharī‘ah is there, it forbids certain things, but I did them. But when I took the wīrd, it strengthened my faith because they told me, ‘don’t take the wīrd, because if you take the wīrd and you do these things, such and such will happen.’ With the sharī‘ah it’s like this, you shouldn’t do things because it’s a sin, if you do this, God will punish you, don’t do that—but it’s more immediate with the wīrd…when you start saying it you don’t want to do those things anymore…

It’s true the Qur’an is there, but you always have need of someone to guide you, you need a wasīlah, because without that, you think that you know but you don’t really know. It’s like if you have a plate of rice, what is the wasīlah? It’s the spoon. Because if the food is hot—let’s say the food is Islam, the Qur’an—if you put your hand inside, you will burn it, but if you take the spoon, because the spoon can never burn, if you take the spoon, you will not burn yourself because the spoon cannot burn. That’s the wasīlah, that’s what we are in need of. Anything you consider, there’s someone who directs it. A country, there is a president. A car, there is someone who drives it, and the rest are passengers. In the bureaus and ministries there is a director, someone who directs it. The one who directs it, he is the wasīlah…

A person is a person, you can’t be holy just like that. There is a Wolof proverb that says “soap does not clean everything by itself.” There must be, as I said, someone to guide you, to help you—man by himself cannot do anything…

In summary, [what you learn in tarbiyah] is the Truth, the Reality, ḥaqīqah. You can’t find that in any book. It’s something that you live. It’s like the philosophers say, you need to learn to read between the lines, that which is between the lines is the ḥaqīqah, and that you can’t find in books. You can take a book and read it ten times, but if you don’t read between the lines…It’s not that what is written isn’t true, it’s true, but appearances can be deceiving. For example, before tarbiyah, if you speak about God, you’ll think about something that is far away, on high like that—Who listens to us, sees us, etc. But when you have done tarbiyah, you
see Him, you sense Him! You know that He is everywhere, in every place, in everything. The Infinite is the infinite—you can’t measure it!

God said, “Know me before you worship me, if you don’t know me, then how could you worship me?” If you don’t know God, then how can you worship Him, pray to Him? If you read the Qur’an closely, you’ll see that knowledge (connaissance) is an obligation, I have only created jinn and men to worship me (51:56), but that means “to know me.” Knowledge is the precondition of worship or service. It [this knowledge] is certainty; you see it! There is no mistake.

They say that the Zāhir (Outward/Apparent) is different from Bāṭin (Inward/Hidden), but one cannot go without the other. You, when you die, your body goes into the earth, but the soul rises, but you can’t say my soul is here, or there. Do you understand? You can’t separate the Zāhir (Outward/Apparent) and the Bāṭin (Inward/Hidden). It’s like two sides of the same coin, you can’t have one without the other. People now think that what they see is everything, but there is always a hidden side, for everything. It’s like the Prophet Muhammad, it’s Muhammad—OK, we’ve given him that name, but he has a hidden side, the haqīqah muhammadîyyah (Muhammadan reality). There’s Muhammad and there’s Muḥammad. As they say, “the light of the Prophet will not leave the earth until the end of the world,” so he has disappeared, but he has not yet disappeared. But how?—that is the question. There is Muḥammad, and there is Muhammad. There is Muhammad, the son of ‘Abd Allah and Amina [parents of the Prophet], alright, but there is another Muḥammad, because God has said that everything He created, He created from the light of Muḥammad, so everything is Maḥammad, everything. You, you are Muḥammad. Mīm-hā-mīm-dal [M.D. pointed to my head, arms, chest, and legs, because these Arabic letters, when written vertically, form the shape of a human being: head, arms, torso, legs]. That’s it. You see?...

It [tarbiyah] fortifies your faith. For example, I was born as a Muslim, I was given the name Mohammed, I prayed because my father prayed, I fasted because he fasted, but I didn’t know why I did these things because I was brought up in it. If you’re born Muslim, everyone prays, so you pray. But afterwards, you start asking questions, “When I prayed, was that prayer accepted or not?” It can get to a point that when you pray, you pray, you pray, and it’s just like doing gymnastics [just physical motions]. But when you do this [tarbiyah] you gain the knowledge of why you pray, you are ignorant of nothing; you know everything. When you know God, you know yourself, because it is God who owns everything, who is in everything, and who is everywhere. If you know God you know everything. It’s the law of all-or-nothing. If you don’t know it, you don’t know anything. If you know God, you know everything. If you don’t know God, you don’t know anything. There’s no in-between, you either know or you don’t. It’s like that: all or nothing— it’s God.

…Without tarbiyah you can’t decipher these things, it’s like the Canal decoder [French television cable/satellite decoder] that you have at your house. If you’re haven’t “subscribed” to Shaykh Ibrahim, you can’t watch. You have the decoder at your house, but if you haven’t paid and you turn on the television, what do you see? The channels are encrypted, you see black and white [static]. Life is like that. Life is the white and black [static]. But when you take the ṣalāt al-fāith, that is the key which makes everything clear. That’s subscription. Because you’ve subscribed to God, to Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, to Baye, it’s a subscription. Canal Plus, that’s the Tijani Faydah. You see? So now, you see clearly, you turn on the TV—zap! You have Canal Plus, TF1 [Popular French-language channels], it’s clear, you can see what it is. You see? It’s easy to explain. You have the Zāhir (Outward/Apparent) and the Bāṭin (Inward/Hidden), but in order to peel back the husk, you have to go through Shaykh Ibrahim. They say all roads lead to Rome, we could also say that all roads lead to God, but the elevator is Shaykh Ibrahim. For a building, you have the stairs, and you have the elevator, Shaykh Ibrahim is the elevator, the fastest and most direct way to knowledge of God.

[Question: What are the conditions or qualifications for going through tarbiyah?]
To do tarbiyah, you have to first be Muslim, then take the Tijani wîrd, then after that you have to take the *tarbiyah* in order to know God’s knowledge, and when you know God, you gain *ma’rifah* without that you cannot gain *ma’rifah*. It’s step by step. You have to go through the steps. I can’t just go direct—there are steps. Be Muslim, be Tijani, take the Tijani wîrd, and take tarbiyah. Tarbiyah is the key that opens all doors. As I said to you, when you know God, you know everything. It’s the door. Once it’s open, you’re there. It’s like snapping your fingers, once you have that, you’re finished, you have everything. But really, it’s only the base, after that, there are many things, many things...

[Question: So what is the point of tarbiyah? Of knowing all of these things? Is it to go to Heaven? To just know more?]

We want more than Paradise, and we know that there is more than Paradise, we know that there is more than Paradise. Because Paradise is a level, it has levels. It’s like if you get 18/20 on an exam, there’s still 19. In life, you should always try to surpass your limits, in order to discover who you really are. As soon as you stop trying to surpass your limits, as soon as you rest, you won’t be able to know yourself. You should do unusual things, things that break your normal habits. When you do tarbiyah, you cut yourself off from the world. You switch off your phone, all those good things, and sit in your corner—you are cut off. You implore God, you only seek God. Look at the Prophet Muḥammad; he did the same thing. At a certain time, he cut himself off from the world, he went up into the mountains where there was no one else. Because God, He is selfish. He is jealous. You can’t associate him along with other things, no, He is too jealous, all or nothing. When you die, you leave all your things here. You go into the grave alone, you can’t even go with your clothes—that is to say, God is very jealous. And so you can’t do certain things…You must cut off the world in order to succeed. Even the tarbiyah can take some time if you want to keep doing this and that and other things, it takes calm and stillness, and cutting yourself off from the world.

[Question: How long does tarbiyah take?]

It depends on the person; my own tarbiyah took around two weeks, but I know someone who took two days, I know someone who came on AirFrance to Dakar for 20 hours to take the Tijani wîrd and tarbiyah, but he believed, he believed! God will join you with what you believe in. He came, and in 2 hours—yes, 2 hours—he was done and he went back on the same plane on the same flight, the same day, because he believed in it. What you believe is what will happen. When you believe in something, do it, focus, it will happen….

_Fanâ’_ (annihilation) and _baqā’_ (subsistence) are paired like _Zâhir_ and _Bâṭîn_, you can’t have one without the other. You can’t have _fanâ’_ and stay out there, afterwards you have to come back and put your feet on the ground. Because afterwards you are a person, like others, you eat, you drink, you live like others. You are like them, but you are not like them. You live, but you don’t live. You are dead, but you are not dead. You are alive—ok, because you eat, you drink, etc., but you are not alive because ‘he who does not die, does not see God.’ It’s because you are dead that you see God. This death of which I am speaking, is not the death that puts you in the ground, but it’s the death of having cut off the world, being dead to the world…

In the above accounts, both disciples present tarbiyah as a way of acquiring the answers to common fundamental questions about life and religion. The process of tarbiyah is described as radically transforming basic notions of self, God, time, space, etc.

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The disciples reference, implicitly and explicitly, several texts and ideas of the Tijani and broader Sufi traditions, especially concerning the importance and significance of following the Prophet in acquiring knowledge of God. Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī makes similar points in a passage of Jawāhir al-Maʿānī, giving a broad outline of the nature of, and knowledge needed to, undertake the kind of spiritual training the above accounts so colorfully describe:

He also said: the knowledge of spiritual training (al-ʿilm al-riyāḍī) requires several things, the first of which is Knowledge (maʿrifah) of the balancing of temperament, then Knowledge of the intended goal, then Knowledge of the means of pursuing it, then Knowledge of the veils which can separate one from it, then Knowledge of the means of removing them so as to arrive at the intend goal, then knowledge of the roots of the veils which affect him, then the effort needed to overcome these roots, then the Knowledge of that by which the veils are removed, either generally or specifically, then all that remains is for him (the servant) to unsheathe the sword of determination and mount the steed of effort, in following what is known of these matters and acting in strict compliance with them.

As for knowledge of the balancing of temperament it consists of knowing how to maintain balance in eating and drinking, equally avoiding excess and lack, being mindful of the moment and the place with respect to the heat, cold, humidity, and dryness. And likewise for age, and all that strengthens one, preventing illness.

As for the intended goal, it is lifting of the veils from the Divine Spirit (al-rūḥ al-rabbānī), returning it to the state of purity in which it was before it was combined with the body. For it is by this that one attains all the knowledges/sciences (ʿulūm), Knowledges (maʿārif), and states (aḥwāl) and virtues, stations, openings, divine bestowals (mawāhib), and true nearness, and by it, one attains the happiness of this world and the next, and whosoever has lost this, has not obtained the happiness of the next world.

As for the Knowledge of the means of pursuing [this goal] it consists of following the Messenger (pbuh) in his speech, in his deeds, in his states, and in his character, by upholding the rights of God Most High, secretly and openly, solely for the sake of God, not adulterating it with any worldly or after-worldly ambitions, so that it may all be for the glory and majesty of God, placing all on the cloth of contentment, submission, in delegation to and reliance upon Him, Most High, in everything, referring all to Him.

As for the Knowledge of the veils which obstruct the goals, it is [knowing how] the spirit sinks in the sea of possessions and passions and self-aggrandizement, striving for that which promotes them and repelling whatever harms them.

As for the Knowledge of the means of lifting these veils, it is striving to cut off relying on possessions and passions, giving up self-aggrandizement, and ceasing to strive for what pleases it and repelling what harms it through asceticism, but gently and with subtlety.

As for the Knowledge of the roots of these veils—they are excessive eating and drinking and attachment to things (creation), and excessive speech and sleep, and remaining neglectful of the invocation/remembrance (dhikr) of God.
As for the efforts needed to overcome these roots, they are hunger and thirst, in gentle moderation, in persistence in cutting off attachments to things, and remaining silent, only speaking when necessary, and keeping night vigils, in gentle moderation, and perpetual remembrance/invocation of God with the heart and tongue, and ceasing thinking about sensory things.

As for the Knowledge of that by which the veils are removed generally or specifically, it is perpetual remembrance/invocation (dhikr) of God with the heart and tongue, with any remembrance/invocation (dhikr). Now, of the invocations which remove veils, some are general: they are those that remove any veil from the spirit, in any situation. Some are specific: they are those that only remove a veil or one type of veil. As for the general [invocations] they are: “there is no god but God” (lā ilāha illā Allāh), prayers (salāt) on the Prophet, “glory be to God” (subhān Allāh), “Praise be to God” (AlhamduliLlāh), God is Greater (Allāhu akbar), “In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,” (BismiLlāh al-Rahmān al-Rahīm), “Allāh, Allāh, Allāh,” or “God, there is no god but He, the Living, the Self-Subsistent” (Allāhu lā ilāha illā huwa al-Ḥayy al-Qayyūm).

As for the specific invocations, they are all of the Beautiful Divine Names of which each one removes one type of veil without affecting the others. God is the one who grants success.

As for his statement, “all that remains is to unsheathe the sword of determination…etc.” it is not discussed because of its obviousness. Here ends the dictation which was done by our beloved Sīdī Muḥammad ibn al-Mishrī, may God perpetuate his elevation and ascension.

After quoting this passage in his Removal of Confusion, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niass writes, “These words of his are worthy of being inscribed in golden ink.” Here, Shaykh Tijānī presents the pursuit of Knowledge (maʿrifah) as a process of “purification,” and equates the acquisition of this Knowledge with felicity. This epistemological quest is also a pursuit of ethical perfection, requiring the elimination of negative character traits and habits of thought.

It is noteworthy that the “acquisition” of this Knowledge is described in negative terms, as the “removal of veils.” The Knowledge is considered innate, but accessing it requires maintaining physical and psychological balance, removing negative traits and mental habits (including seeking other-worldly rewards), and the practice of certain spiritual exercises. This general outline of spiritual training involves a physical as well as psychological/spiritual regimen of discipline, which is generally defined as following the Prophet in “his speech, deeds, states,
and character.” This assimilation of the Prophetic example is in turn made possible through the practice of invocation/ remembrance (dhikr) of specific formulae.

Shaykh Māḥi Niasse, described his father’s (Shaykh Ibrahim’s) particular program of spiritual training in similar terms:

The goal of religion, all of it, is to connect man to God. From the prophet all the way down to the great Sufi scholars, they have explained that its goal is to connect man to his Lord, so that He is with him. So from this, scholars followed these methods to leads servants to God, form this come the Sufi orders, and the Ṭarīqah Tijāniyyah is among these orders. Within the Ṭarīqah Tijāniyyah the Ṭijānī ḥayḍah appeared, to which Shaykh Ibrahim called. In short, this tarbiyah came to emphasize the kernel of Islam, and it is the return of the servant to God, Most High, voluntarily, and not by force. If you love God…[then follow me and God will love you] (3:31)—That’s love. “I was a hidden treasure and loved to be known…” So since God’s creation came through the door of love into existence, the return to God must also be through the way of love. And that is the basis of tarbiyah, and that is the basis also, of all the things which the Shaykhs have taken to direct the servants to God, Most High. Shaykh Ibrahim came to purify the servants from their passions/lusts (shahwāt), and from the worship of themselves (their egos), and from the worship of all that is other than God, and direct them to worship of God alone. Because, as God said in the Qur’an, We did not create man and jinn except to worship (51:56). So this worship is the most certain of things in the world [i.e. people cannot help but worship something], but this worship is not accomplished by force, as I told you, but is only by love, voluntarily. The servant chooses, of his own volition, to turn towards God, until God is with him as it should be.

—Then follow me and God will love you (3:31). So the love of God is the foundation. So Shaykh Ibrahim came, calling people to the return of the primary foundation of the Sufi orders. Once in history, some of the Sufi scholars said, among them al-Zarrūq of Libya, who said that conventional spiritual training (tarbiyah istilāhah)—as you know—was finished, and many Sufis agreed with this opinion.255 But Shaykh Ibrahim said, “no, this is not correct.” Naturally, the scholars disagreed with one another, and he said, “Tarbiyah will remain on earth as long God’s creation does; as long as there is God’s creation, there must be means of drawing them near to God, and tarbiyah is among these means of drawing near.”…

Some said that Shaykh Ibrahim was the first to speak of tarbiyah in the Tijāniyyah, but if you go to the Mizāh al-Raḥmah al-Rabbañiyah, you will see that the Shaykh [ibn Anbūjah] said a lot about tarbiyah—but it does not contain the full benefit—about the special Tijani methods of tarbiyah and directing people to God. So Shaykh Ibrahim said, “this [tarbiyah] exists, truly.” Because the servant of God, in every place, is in need of God. And God is also compassionate towards His servants in every time and in every place. So at every moment, and in every time, there must be someone who can facilitate their return to God by taking them by the hand in tarbiyah, bringing them closer to God. And this is what Shaykh Ibrahim did…This tarbiyah is establish on the methods, the invocations (adhkār) that are all known in the Ṭarīqah [Tijāniyyah], and on the invocations (adhkār) that are known in all of the Sufi orders. It is based on the remembrance/ invocation of God (dhikrAllāh), it is based on presence (hūdūr), it is based on intellectual work in reflecting/meditating upon the signs/verses (ayāt) of God, as God has said in the Qur’an, always calling people to turn to God and to reflect on His descriptions/depictions [of Himself] in His signs/verses. And Shaykh Ibrahim also confirmed this saying that as long as people, Muslims or believers, remain on earth, God

255See Niasse, The Removal of Confusion, and Seesemann, The Divine Flood, 75-87 for an overview of this controversy and the different ways in which tarbiyah was understood.
has obliged Himself to ensure that there is someone who can help them and direct them to Him.

In short, God said to his creation, in the Qur’an and in the hadith qudsi, Remember me, and I will remember you (2: 152) and He also said in a hadith qudsi, “I”—meaning God—“I am seated with he who remembers me.” So God has conditioned what He gives [to his servant] by remembrance (dhikr) of Him. So remembrance/invocation (dhikr), in it is a mystery (sirr) of God, by which he has mercy on His servant by turning him towards Him. So if you understand an invocation from among the invocations given by those who have the authorization to do so, you will find that this mystery takes you into the depths of your self, and you will find that you become freed from your carnal soul (nafs) [exchanging it for] God, without fabrication, and without anyone coming between you and your Lord, until you reach God and he welcomes you, as He said, Remember me, and I will remember you, “I am seated with he who remembers me,” “If you remember me in your self, I will remember you in My Self, if you remember me amongst a multitude, I will remember you amongst a multitude.” So this remembrance/invocation (dhikr) connects the servant to God, as God has shown in the Qur’an and the hadith of the Messenger of God, and that is the secret of God which is with his servants in every time.256

But what is the actual process of tarbiyah? Virtually all disciples request tarbiyah after having taken the witr from a shaykh or shaykhah (or one of their representatives, known as muqaddams). If the shaykh or shaykhah believes the disciple to be qualified and ready, he or she will give the disciple a certain set of invocations and prayers to recite a set number of times, at certain times of the day, alongside the standard practices of the five daily prayers, the witr, and the wazifah. Among these prayers and invocations are the prayer known as the Mu’awwaliyah, the invocation of a variation of the shahādah, “there is no god but God, The First, the Last, the Outward the Inward” (lā ilāha illā Llāh, al-Awwal, al-Akhir, al-Zahir, al-Bāṭin), and the celebrated prayer on the Prophet, the salāt al-fātiḥ, “O God blessings be upon our Lord Muḥammad, the opener of what has been closed, and the seal of what has come before, the help of the Truth by the Truth, and the guide along Your straight path, and upon his family in accordance with the reality of his rank and his tremendous degree.” These latter formulae are to be recited a specific number of times at particular times during the day and night. This particular assemblage of prayers and invocations is collectively known as the litanies of tarbiyah (awrād al-tarbiyah) and the process of transmitting them is known as

talqîn (implantation/initiation). The precise number of times these formulae are to be recited is a closely-guarded secret, and disciples are instructed to keep these details private, to avoid others attempting the process of tarbiyah without supervision or qualification. One shaykh told me, “The best thing that can happen to someone who attempts these litanies without authorization is that he or she escapes unharmed.”

The shaykhs and shaykhas who dispense tarbiyah often advise their disciples to avoid watching TV or movies, and to avoid unnecessary conversation, although they are advised to continue to go to work, and school and care for their families, especially their parents and children. Due to the rigorous nature of this practice, and the unusual psychological states that often accompany it, however, disciples are often advised, and often choose, to begin this process when they are less busy. In Dakar, disciples often recite these invocations at the beach, in the mornings and evenings due to its isolation, beauty, and the symbolism of the ocean.

The shaykhs and shaykhas monitor the disciple’s state during this process, until the disciple experiences a state known as rapture (jadhb) and eventually experiences annihilation (fanâ’). This process can take as little as a few hours, or a few years, depending on the sincerity of the disciple. As Shaykh Ibrahim explains in his work, Sirr al-Akbar, “The disciple can traverse these stations by the power of his sincerity (ṣidq), and the sincere can traverse them in the blink of an eye, or an hour, or a day or two, or a few days. And some traverse them in a month or in a year or two and some in seven years, it all depends upon sincerity.”


258 Niasse, Sirr al-Akbar, 388.
Shaykhs sometimes test disciples who seem to have experienced *fanāʾ* (annihilation) by asking them questions, such as “Who are you? Where are you? What do you see?” or “If I offered you beer or water, which would you drink?” Disciples in a state of annihilation typically give answers such as “I am God, I am in God, there is only God.” Or to the beer or water question: “it doesn’t matter, both are God.”

One prominent shaykhah told me that when she thinks a disciple is not fully in the state of annihilation, or is faking the state, she takes a lighter or a match and holds it close to the disciple. The disciples in the state of annihilation perceive the fire, themselves, and everything as God, and so do not flinch, while those not yet in the state respond normally (flinching from the flame), and are told to continue with their tarbiyah.

When the shaykh or shaykhah is satisfied that the disciple has attained *fanāʾ*, he or she helps “bring back” the disciple, explaining and helping the disciple to interpret these unusual experiences, and attempting to help the disciple re-integrate them into a new mode of life. If the shaykh or shaykhah succeeds in bringing the disciple through the state annihilation (*fanāʾ*) into subsistence (*baqāʾ*), this stage of tarbiyah is completed and the disciple is believed to have obtained *maʿrifah*, true knowledge of God.

While the disciples and shaykhs I interviewed made it very clear that each person’s experience of tarbiyah is unique, they all drew on a number of concepts from Sufi literature in order to describe different aspects of this process of spiritual transformation including Rapture/Wayfaring (*jadhb/sulūk*), Stations (*maqāmāt*), Levels of the Soul (*marāṭib al-nafs*),

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259 Such ecstatic utterances are known as *shathiyāt* and are a well-documented feature of Sufism throughout the ages. See Carl Ernst. *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism.* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 1985.

Divine Presences (ḥaḍrāt), and different kinds of annihilation (fanā’). I will include summaries and excerpts of the most prominent and influential of these descriptions of what happens during tarbiyah below before analyzing accounts of how these transformations occur.

**Rapture (Jadhb) and Wayfaring (Sulūk)**

In an interview, Imam Tijānī ‘Ali Cissé explained rapture and wayfaring in the following way:

As I told you, “My servant doesn’t cease...the hand with which he grasps, the hearing with which he hears, the eye with which he sees, the foot with which he walks. How does this happen? By way of these invocations (adhkār), which we invoke with permission. Because there are two paths: the path of rapture (jadhb), and the path of wayfaring (sulūk). God draws to Himself whosoever He wills and guides to Himself those who turn to Him (42:13). The first [part of the verse] is rapture (jadhb), the second [part of the verse] is wayfaring (sulūk). The wayfarer is the one who practices these invocations (adhkār) which we have mentioned until he arrives at God, Most High. And the enraptured, he is the one who is attracted without dhikr or anything, God takes him by his attraction and he arrives at God Most High without struggle or great effort, rather by the divine grace of God. That’s rapture. The wayfarer is he who arrives by adhkār to the presence of God Most High. When he recognizes himself, he recognizes his Lord. When he recognizes himself as non-existent, as nothing, he recognizes his Lord as Existence, when he recognizes his meagerness, he recognizes his Lord’s Majesty. And thus you find lā ilāha illā Llāh, lā ilāha illā anṭa, lā ilāha illā Anā’.

In his *Sirr al-Akbar*, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse explained that taking the Tijani wīrd is the beginning of tarbiyah, the beginning of spiritual wayfaring. Thus, the disciple proceeds through this process of spiritual wayfaring—praying the prayers, reciting the general litanies or the Tijani order and the special litanies of tarbiyah—through his or her own effort until it leads to a state of rapture (jadhb), in which where God draws the aspirant to Himself by His own power, not the disciple’s effort.

One disciple compared this transition between wayfaring and rapture to lighting something in fire or over coals: at first, the object has to be held in the fire or over the coals, which have to be fanned, but once it catches fire, the object burns on its own, without any effort. Shaykh Ibrahim was fond of quoting the following verse of the Qur’an to describe this

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transformation and its relation to spiritual poverty (faqr): O mankind, you are the poor (fuqarāʾ) in relation to God, and God, He is the Rich, the Praiseworthy, If He willed, He could remove you and bring about a new creation, And that is not difficult for God. (35:16-17). This “removal” and bringing about of “new creation” is understood to refer to the transformative process of jadhb. In Sirr al-Akbar, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse elaborates on this state of rapture:

Rapture (Jadhb) is arrival and annihilation (fanāʾ) and the opening (fatḥ), and all of these names refer back to one named referent, and the reality of this is as he says: God does not veil anything from the seeker, because He alone exists and nothing other than He exists to veil Him… Rather, nothing veils Him from the seeker except his imagining that there is something in existence other than Him. And so, whenever God wants to choose a servant from amongst his servants, to make him among those brought near to Him, He raises those imaginary veils from him, and so he doesn’t see anything but God. He doesn’t see himself, nor other than himself; [he sees] nothing of the created things, he doesn’t see anything except for the oneness of God in everything, and this is what is referred to as the Unlimited Being of the Real (al-wujūd al-muṭlaq al-Ḥaqq), where there is no name, no attribute, no action, and no trace, and he becomes veiled from them [created things] by God just as before he was veiled from God by them.”

In the same work, Shaykh Ibrahim explains that there are three kinds of disciples who reach this state of rapture: the blind, the weak of insight, and the strong of insight. The blind, or the veiled, do not witness God as al-Ẓāhir, the Outward/Apparent; they are unable to recognize Him in His veils. The weak of insight remain drowned in the rapture of annihilation (fanāʾ) and are unable to go beyond it. Thus, they are unable to combine this rapture and are known as majdhūb-enraptured. He states that this second category makes up the majority of disciples who reach this station.

Finally, the strong of insight are able to see both God and creation (al-Ḥaqq and al-khalq) at once, together. They perceive the world as having only metaphorical existence, like a shadow or a reflection, but they perceive these veils as self-manifestations of God, and so

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263 Niasse, Sirr al-Akbar, 391.
they are able to recognize God in his manifestations as well as in His Essence. He describes this as the beginning of *baqā’* (subsistence), “which is the first of the stations the wayfarer encounters in the plain of *ma’rifah*.”

In the same work, Shaykh Ibrahim further develops this dialectic of rapture and wayfaring by explaining that disciples can continue by practicing wayfaring in their rapture (*sulūk fī jadhb*) by “sobering-up” and coming back to the world, but without losing sight of God. Then they can continue with rapture in their wayfaring (*jadhb fī sulūk*), in which the disciple continues to perform spiritual exercises, but inwardly in a state of rapture. In this state of being “inwardly drunk, outwardly sober,” the disciple perfectly combines rapture and wayfaring. Shaykh Ibrahim writes,

> Know that the people of the Ṭarīqah are of four categories: the unenraptured wayfarer: his wayfaring dominates over his rapture, and he is apparent and outward; and the non-wayfaring enraptured: his rapture dominates over his wayfaring, and he is cut off; and the enraptured wayfarer (*sālik majdhūb*), his wayfaring takes him to the station of rapture, and he has arrived at being among the Knowers if he finds one to take him by the hand; and the Wayfaring enraptured (*majdhūb sālik*), he combines his rapture with his wayfaring, and these are the majority of the companions of the seal al-Tijānī, and they are the great ones. And there remains a fifth class—they have no place in the Ṭarīqah—and they are those who have no wayfaring and no rapture—we seek refuge in God from this. So they, although they took the Ṭarīqah, they took it not as Tijanis. Perhaps God will have mercy on them by giving them love for our master, the shaykh, may God be pleased with him.

As for the wayfaring in rapture it is the essence of the wayfaring previously mentioned, meaning for the Knower by God when he stops with God at the stopping places to which we have alluded, he does not perish, but he sobers up or returns to the world of metaphor and witnessing the traces and the world of exemplars and he sees two speeches: the Speech of the Divine Will and the Speech of Wisdom, God’s saying alludes to these two, *You don’t will unless God, the Lord of the worlds so wills* (81:29). So he travels a path that combines establishing that which is appropriate and that which errs... He stands in his outward aspect, in the religious laws of Islam, and it is the appropriate speech of wisdom in the physical world. But all the while, inwardly he has no movement and no stillness, and no action,

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265 See Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Ringstones of Wisdom* (p. 87-95) for a more detailed discussion of this distinction and relationship between the Divine Creative Command (*al-‘amr al-takwīnī*—here called the Divine Will), which makes things as they are, and the Divine Prescriptive Command (*al-‘amr al-tadwīnī*, here called the Divine Wisdom) which divides deeds into good and bad, and their consequences into felicitous and infelicitous. In this passage, Shaykh Ibrahim describes how The Knower is inwardly aware that everything happens according to the Divine Will, even those actions that go against the Divine Wisdom, and yet he upholds and closely conforms to this Divine Wisdom, even though he knows it is “out of his control” from a certain point of view.
and this is appropriate to the speech of the Divine Will in terms of faith and certainty and Knowledge. So he conforms himself to the commands of God for God, from God, by God, and no movement or stillness remains for him except by the command of God, for God, and by God….

Shaykh Ibrahim concludes that, “before being enraptured, wayfaring (sulūk) is a veil, and after, it is a perfection.” He summarizes this relationship in the following verses,

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

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

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

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

The Mauritanian Sermon

In addition to these notions of rapture and wayfaring, the disciples and shaykhs I interviewed often referred to an influential sermon given by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse in Mauritania to describe this process of tarbiyah and the relationship between spiritual practice and knowledge (see Appendix B for a partial translation of this work). This rich sermon contains several significant epistemological principles that characterize the thought of Shaykh Ibrahim and his community. First, and perhaps foremost, is the relationship between knowledge and spiritual practice/ethics. Obeying God’s commands is presented as being an important condition for the acquisition of knowledge, which is described as a “light from God.” This spiritual practice involves closely following the example of the Prophet in word and deed, spending time with those who are like the Prophet, and following their example, by

266 Niasse, Jawāhir al-Rasā’il I, 81.

267 Ibid.

268 Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 95.
performing dhikr. This practice eventually leads to states and levels of “annihilation,” in which the disciple’s awareness of the Divine is radically transformed, until the disciple is aware of nothing but God, not even himself. This process culminates in the “annihilation of annihilation” wherein the disciple returns to the world, but views it in a new light, as simultaneously existent and non-existent. Annihilation in the Prophet and Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī, which disciples described as “realizing that everything is the Prophet, comes from the Prophet, even yourself” and “seeing the Prophet/ the Shaykh everywhere in everything,” is described as being necessary for achieving this state of spiritual maturity (of this more will be said later), and it is only in this state of return that truly sincere worship is possible. The existential transformations of these various kinds of annihilation are identified with ma’rifah, real knowledge and certainty of the way things are. It is important to note that in this process, the ethical and the epistemological converge. Knowledge is necessary to perfect the ethical, and ethical excellence is required to access the heights of knowledge. The forms of spiritual/ethical practice, which lead to annihilation and subsistence, are perfected in this ideal mode of knowing, being, and acting in the world, in God. Thus, “the end is in the beginning.”

*Stations of Religion (Maqāmāt)*

This Mauritanian sermon substantiates its claims with several passages from the Qur’ān and ḥadīth, including one of the most-quoted and foundational traditions, the ḥadīth of Gabriel. This ḥadīth is often cited to describe or define three levels of the Islamic tradition: Islam (Submission), Imān (Faith), and Iḥsān (Excellence).269 The tradition reads,

> On the authority of ‘Umar (may God be pleased with him):

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269 This tradition is the source of the so-called “five pillars of Islam,” and Sufis usually identify Iḥsān, which literally means, “doing the good/beautiful,” as Sufism.
While we were one day sitting with the Messenger of God (peace be upon him), there appeared before us a man dressed in extremely white clothes and with very black hair. No traces of journeying were visible on him, and none of us knew him. He sat down close by the Prophet (peace be upon him), rested his knee against his thighs, and said, "O Muḥammad! Inform me about Submission (Islām)."

The Messenger of God (peace be upon him) said, "Islām is that you should testify that there is no god but God, and that Muḥammad is His Messenger, that you pray the daily prayers, pay the poor-tithe, fast during Ramadan, and perform Ḥājj to the House, if you are able to do so."

The man said, "You have spoken truly." We were astonished at his questioning him (the Messenger) and telling him that he was right, but he went on to say, "Inform me about Faith (Imān)."

He (the Messenger of Allah) answered, "It is that you believe in God and His Angels and His Books and His Messengers and in the Last Day, and in fate (qadar), both the good and the bad." He said, "You have spoken truly."

Then he (the man) said, "Inform me about Excellence (Iḥsān)." He (the Messenger of God) answered, "It is that you should worship God as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He sees you."

Thereupon the man went off. I waited a while, and then he (the Messenger of God) said, "O Umar, do you know who that questioner was?" I replied, "God and His Messenger know best." He said, "That was Gabriel. He came to teach you your religion."

This tradition forms the foundation for the text most frequently-cited by the disciples and shaykhs I interviewed to describe the process of the path to spiritual maturity—a treatise by Shaykh Ibrahim entitled, “The Three Stations of Religion.” Drawing on a long tradition of similar works, Shaykh Ibrahim describes Islām, Imān, and Iḥsān as three consecutive stations (maqāmāt) of the spiritual path. He further divides each station (maqām) into three

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270 Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Book 1 (Kitāb al-Imān), Ḥadīth 1, http://sunnah.com/muslim/1/1

271 As Seesemann points out in Divine Flood, Niasse’s treatise is a synthesis of an earlier Tijānī work ibn Anbūjah’s Mizāb al-Rahma, which is in turn largely based on a 14th century work by the Andalusian scholar Muḥammad al-Anṣārī al-Sāhilī (d. 1353). A similar schema can be found in Ibn ’Ajbah’s Book of Ascension to the Essential Truths of Sufism (and in his commentary Ḥaqīqat al-himam) on the Wisdoms of ibn Ṭātā Allāh. This genre of Sufi literature, describing the different stages or stations of the spiritual path seems to have its origin in the Persian treatise, The Hundred Plains (Ṣad Maydan) of Khwājah ’abd Allāh Anṣārī. Seesemann takes Niasse’s work as being constitutive of the method or process of tarbiyah, writing, “Drawing on earlier models within and outside the Tijānī tradition (most notably the Andalusian fourteenth-century mystic Abu ‘Abdallah Muḥammad al-Sahili), Niasse devised a method of spiritual training (tarbiya).” However, I believe that this work represents, not a program or method of spiritual training, but rather one description amongst many of the process of this transformation. While Niasse’s description in “The Three Stations of Religion” is indirectly derived from the description given Sāhilī’s work, these descriptions should not be confused for the process itself, which can, and is, divided up into several different conceptual schemas, as this chapter demonstrates.
stages, yielding the nine stages: Islām: repentance, integrity, mindfulness; Imān: sincerity, pure devotion, serenity; Iḥsān: observing, direct witnessing, and Knowledge. Each of these nine stages is divided according to its meaning and nature for the masses (al-‘awām), the elite (al-khāṣah), and the elite of the elite. The stages from serenity onwards are only for the elite. However these divisions between common and elite are not static, in fact, the text implies and oral commentaries confirm, that this schema involves a kind of spiraling motion in which the disciple can go through the stages of the masses, then the stages of the elite, and then the stages of the elite of the elite. It is important to note, however, that these distinctions are largely descriptive and heuristic, and that disciples often do not experience tarbiyah as a gradual step-by-step process. Tarbiyah is more like the blooming of a flower than the construction of an Ikea chair. See Appendix C for the full translation of “The Three Stations of Religion.”

As in the Mauritanian sermon, the “Three Stations of Religion” describes a process of transformation which is at once existential, ethical, and epistemological. Similarly, in both works, this process is somewhat non-linear, with the “end being in the beginning.” The density of Qur’anic allusions both in this treatise and the sermon also illustrate the centrality of the scripture to the thought of Shaykh Ibrahim, who was said to finish a recitation of entire Qur’an twice every week, and the unique hermeneutics of the Sufi tradition to which he belonged.

Purification of the Self/Soul (tazkiyah al-nafs)

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272 Zeynabou Kane, personal communication on behalf of Shaykhah Maryam Niasse, September 23, 2014.
The text of the Qur’an also forms the basis for a parallel descriptive schema known as the “Purification of the Soul” (tazkiyah al-nafs) which appears in Shaykh Ibrahim’s works, and to which his disciples frequently referred. In an interview, Shaykh Māḥī Niasse provided me with an overview of this process of purification, which I will paraphrase here.

Many people are governed by “the soul which commands evil” (nafs al-‘ammāra bi’l-sū’, mentioned in Surah 12:53). This “inner jerk” is selfish, greedy, wicked, and pushes people towards satiating their appetites for power, wealth, position, and pleasure without any consideration of right or wrong, of other people, or of consequences. However, through spiritual discipline and the grace of God, one can escape from its clutches and arrive at the “blaming soul” (nafs al-lawwāma, mentioned in 75:2). This is the soul that reproaches itself when it does something wrong, and pushes a person towards repentance. After a person repents, and repents, and repents, he or she can reach the level of the soul known as “the inspired soul” (nafs al-mulhamah, mentioned in 91:8). At this level, God inspires the soul with clear discernment between good and evil, and as a result, one’s lusts and negative impulses become more manageable, and the partially purified soul begins to be characterized by praiseworthy attributes.

From this stage, one can progress to the “serene soul” (nafs al-muṭma’innah, mentioned in 89:27). This level of the soul is characterized by serenity and tranquility because those who have attained it see everything that happens as coming from God. For this reason, they don’t get enraged or upset, or try to return evil for evil, because they perceive everything as occurring by God’s will. After this comes the “satisfied soul” (nafs al-rādiyah, mentioned in 89:27), the soul, that is satisfied and pleased with all of God’s decrees. Those who have reached this stage, see everything as coming from God as good, and are content with whatever
God does with them. This stage is followed by the “satisfying soul” (nafs al-mardiyah, mentioned in 89:27) that is pleasing to God just as it is pleased with God. This process of purification culminates in the “perfect soul” (nafs al-kamilah), which is like a perfectly polished mirror, reflecting all of the qualities and attributes of God. This is the goal of the spiritual path, and of human existence; one who attains this level of purity of soul is called “The Perfect Man” (al-insān al-kāmil), and he or she is the goal of creation, the best of spiritual masters, and the most knowledgeable of God.  

As above, this process of ethical perfection and spiritual purification is inseparable from the perfection of knowledge, although the latter is emphasized to a greater degree in the Mauritanian sermon and “The Three Station of Religion.”

**Presences (Ḥaḍrāt)**

At the end of “The Three Stations of Religion,” Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse introduces the important Sufi concept of “presences” (Ḥaḍrāt), which appears throughout his works and in the oral traditions of his disciples. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the school of Ibn ‘Arabi developed the technical vocabulary of these “presences” to describe the hierarchy of corresponding levels of consciousness or being (wujūd) of the human self and the cosmos. While the number and nature of these presences vary from schema to schema, in Shaykh Ibrahim’s works they are typically five: Nasūt-the physical realm of objects and bodies; Malakūt-the subtle or imaginal realm, the world of exemplars (‘alam al-mithāl), of dreams and visions; Jabarūt-the world of spirit, beyond form; Lāhūt-the domain of Divinity, the

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273 Māḥī Niasse Medina Baye, interview with author, January 14, 2013, Senegal, Arabic. Similar accounts can be found in Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s Sirr al-akbar, 388.

manifestation of the Perfect Qualities of God; Hāhūt-the inscrutable Divine Essence.\textsuperscript{275} In his Sirr al-Akbar, Shaykh Ibrahim compares each of these cosmological/existential levels to levels of consciousness, of the self. Nasūt corresponds to the body or the soul (\textit{nafs}), to the Malakūt corresponds the heart (\textit{qalb}), to the Jabarūt corresponds the intellect (\textit{‘aql})\textsuperscript{276}, to the Lāhūt corresponds the spirit (\textit{rūḥ}), and to the Hāhūt corresponds the innermost secret (\textit{sirr}).\textsuperscript{277} However, this schema was mainly cited by shaykhs and disciples in a metaphysical or cosmological sense, in terms of explaining how they made sense of the world after tarbiyah, and not as a description of the experience of tarbiyah itself.

In describing the process of tarbiyah itself disciples made use of a different schema of presences (\textit{ḥadrāt}). As quoted at the beginning of the chapter, S.D. described the experience of four presences, “Ḥadrah al-Qudsī—there is nothing, there is only one mystery here, Ḥadrah Aḥmadiyah, Ḥadrah Muḥammadiyyah, and Ḥadrah khutbu or Nasūt…. After the initiation, once you know who God is, you are in what we call the Ḥadrat al-Qudsī, that Ḥadrah, there is only One God, nothing except God, everything is God…”. He further explained that in the Ḥadrah Aḥmadiyyah you “can become a Christian, a Jew, and animist,” because, in the words of another disciple, “this presence contains the essence of all religions, without any distinction.”

Shaykh Ibrahim alludes to this state in Sirr al-akbar, writing that the one who has attained rapture (\textit{jadhb}) and the opening (\textit{al-ḥiss}), “Is a disbeliever (\textit{kāfīr}) in the divine law

\textsuperscript{275} Niasse, \textit{Sirr al-Akbar}, 429. This same passage also describes a parallel schema of seven levels of “divine descents” (\textit{tanazzulāt}), 1) Absolute Simplicity (\textit{al-sādhi}) 2) Divine Unicity (\textit{al-aḥadiyah}) 3) Divine Oneness (\textit{al-wāḥdah}) 4) Divine Unity (\textit{al-wāḥidiyah}) 5) the level of the spirits (\textit{al-arwāḥ}) 6) the imaginal realm (\textit{‘alām al-mithāl}) 7) the level of the sensory (\textit{al-ḥiss}).

\textsuperscript{276} Shaykh Ibrahim makes it clear that this is the divine intellect (\textit{al-‘aql al-rabbānī}) described earlier in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{277} Niasse, \textit{Sirr al-Akbar}, 434.
(sharī’ah) because of the erasure of the Divine Names and Attributes [i.e. he is in a state where there is only God, without Name or Attribute, without any external world to which the laws can apply]. And he denies [literally, “slays”] the prophets, while he is in reality, a believer because he affirms them in reality.

He goes onto explain that this state is very dangerous, because the creed or belief (‘aqīdah) of the disciple is also effaced, and he can become a Jew or a Christian, or a Magian. The disciple must be assisted by a perfected, Knowing, shaykh who has already arrived, who can help bring the disciple safely back into the realms of differentiation without losing himself or his religion.

This experience had such an impact on S.D. that he keeps a picture of the Virgin Mary and Christ on his phone, and in his words, “when people ask me if I am a Christian, I say, ‘Yes.’ But then when I go to the mosque and they ask me why, I say, ‘Because I am a Muslim.’”

Disciples described the Ḥadrah Muḥammadīyyah, as realizing that “everything comes from Muḥammad, from his light, and so everything is Muḥammad,” and “there’s Muḥammad the son of ‘abd Allāh and Amina, but there’s also the Muḥammad who ‘was a prophet while Adam was between water and clay,’ so there’s Muḥammad and there’s Muḥammad. That’s the ḥaqīqah Muḥammadīyyah (Muḥammadan reality).” Shaykh Māḥī Niasse described this reality to me in the following way,

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278 Sirr al-Akbar, 426

279 Ibid.

280 I should emphasize here that S.D. does not attend masses or church services, and by all appearances, behaves like any other pious, urban Muslim man in Dakar—he prays five times a day, fasts during Ramadan, neither drinks nor smokes, etc.

The Muḥammadan reality—in the great universities, you will learn that Plato was the first to speak of the First Intellect (al-*aqāl al-āwwal), isn’t that so? And this First Intellect, in his mysticism (tasāwuf al-fathih), was everything that is. And in Philosophy, they call it the First Intellect. And in Christianity, they call it the Holy Spirit (al-Rūḥ al-Qudūs), and so on. And the Muslims, they call it the Muḥammadan Reality, because it is very close, in terms of understanding, to [what the Philosophers mean by] the First Intellect, and [what the Christians mean by] Jesus the Son of God. The Muḥammadan Reality is closer to the [First] Intellect and very close to what they mean by it, in any age. The Muḥammadan Reality is the vault (makman) of the secret/mystery (sirr) of life, all of it. Every living thing is contained inside the Muḥammadan Reality, until God wishes to manifest this reality, and so there is the first self-manifestation, the second self-manifestation, the third self-manifestation—returning to Plato, we have the First Intellect, the Second intellect, the Third, and so on, until we reach this degree—and likewise you have the manifestation (tajallī) in Unicity (Ahādiyyah), the self-manifestation in Unity (Wahādiyyah), and so on. So the Muḥammadan Reality amongst us, the Tijanis and the Sufis, is the vault of the Divine secrets/mysteries. From this reality came all that was, and from it will come all that is to be. And thus it is the foremost of all Divine matters which man seeks, because the door to [them all] is the Muḥammadan Reality. The door of the Muḥammadan Reality gives man access to all of these detailed spiritual points.

The scholars and Sufis have said a great deal in describing this reality, all of these descriptions return to the fact that this reality is characterized by the Divine secrets/mysteries (asrār)—it is the Divine Source/Essence of Mercy (‘ayn al-raḥmah al-rabbāni), the Divine Source/Essence of Mercy. And another shaykh has said that something like this in describing this Muḥammadan Reality, that it is the secret in Tijānī Sufism. 282 And in the tarbiyah of Shaykh Ibrahim also, there is annihilation [in this reality], which if a person reaches it, perhaps he will find an opening (fatḥ) from God and more than that. The Muḥammadan Reality is the secret/mystery of the cosmos (Kawn). As the Christians say, “the Messiah is the son of God,” as Plato has said, “The First Intellect” and so on. Each tries to explain this being in the way which suits him, some explain it with reason, others explain it with the traditions [scripture and received religious texts/sayings], some explain it with what they have taken from the prophets, and all of them find felicity through what they have.283

This description of the Muḥammadan reality would probably be considered as encompassing both Ahmadiyyah and Muḥammadadiyyah in the schema S.D. presented, but it illustrates the many and varied ways in which this reality is described. In the same vein, Shaykh Ibrahim quotes the following celebrated verse to explain the various names of this “reality of realities” (ḥaqīqah al-ḥaqā’iq):

Our expressions are varied, while their meaning is one

282 Probably a reference to the following passage from one of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s letters, “Know that the purpose of the shaykhs of tarbiyah is to connect to the Prophet, who is the greatest means of access to God. Sidi Abdullah wuld al-Hājj al-’Alawi, once said to me, ‘The purpose of the Tijānī litanies is to get a whiff of the Muḥammadan Reality (ḥaqīqah Muḥammadadiyyah).’” (Jawāhir al-Rasā’il I, 113)

and all, to that perfection allude. 

After the Muḥammadan presence, the disciple completes this phase of the spiritual journey by returning to the Ḥadrāh al-Nasūt, an “ordinary” state of consciousness, wherein he or she is aware of the sensible world around him or her, while also remaining aware of these other “presences” or levels of reality. What they see or hear on an everyday basis may be the same as before, but now they perceive it as a vast system of symbols, which are now legible, or “decoded”—to use a phrase commonly employed by the disciples themselves. This can be likened to looking at a page of a book without knowing how to read—one would only see black shapes on a white background. But after learning how to read, one could recognize letters, words, understand sentences, and even get the general meaning of the passage, all while still looking at the same black shapes on the white page. All of these different levels of meaning can be perceived together, or focused on separately. As M.D. put it, undergoing tarbiyah is like “learning to read between the lines” of existence.

Having returned to “ordinary” reality, disciples are instructed to uphold the sharī’ah, not to divulge their “extraordinary” experiences and insights to outsiders, and generally to respect the rights and nature of these different Ḥadrāt, levels of reality/consciousness (wujūd). For example, while it is not considered appropriate to go around saying “I am God” or “I am the Prophet” in everyday life, these statements are valid on their respective levels—those presences where there is no distinction between the self of the disciple and that of the Prophet, or the Divine Essence. The proper integration of these different levels of being/consciousness is a defining feature of ma’rifah, and in this tradition, is exemplified by the Prophet, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, and Shaykh Ibrahim—all three of whom maintained the outward practice of

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284 Niasse, Sirr al-Akbar, 439
the sharī‘ah, and selectively shared different aspects or levels of their inward states, thoughts, and experiences. Thus true Knower is one who follows this example of recognizing or “seeing” all the presences simultaneously, without confusion, in everything.285

As S.D. related, after tarbiyah, “they tell you that in everything you should see the four ḥadrahs, in everything you should see God, the Prophet, the Shaykh [Tijānī], and Shaykh Ibrahim.” But where do Shaykh Tijānī and Shaykh Ibrahim figure in all of this? The answer lies in the fact that these presences, in whatever schema they are presented, constitute a system of correspondences, such that each one is a different mode of manifestation of the Divine Essence. As such, anything that exists in one presence is both a manifestation of an aspect of the aspectless Essence, and has its own shadows or reflections in lower presences, like a light surrounded by several lampshades. Any smudge on the light bulb will appear as a dark spot on each of these shades, and ultimately, on the wall. In Sirr al-akbar, Shaykh Ibrahim explains,

Firstly, the Pure Essence, which is the essence of effacement and simplicity without relation, manifests itself to itself without relation, and this is al-Aḥdiyyah (Unicity). In al-Aḥdiyyah (Unicity) the Divine Essence only manifests itself to itself—Say: He is God, the Only (Ahad) (112:1). Then it [the Essence] manifests itself in al-Ahmadiyyah by a name of the Essence, a

285 This mode of “seeing” can have practical consequences as Sidi Ben Omar Kane, Shaykh Ibrahim’s grandson and director of a prominent Franco-Arabe school founded by his mother, Shaykhah Maryam Niass, explained, “Shaykh Ibrahim once told me the story of ‘Aisha (r.a.) who when she gave a gift to a beggar, perfumed it and wrapped it up nicely. When the Prophet asked her why she had done this, she said, ‘because I knew that it is the hand of God that will receive it.’ The Prophet smiled when she said this and told her that she had understood things well.” Sidi Ben Omar then went on to link this story to the rise of Islamic sectarian groups, explaining that outwardly, physically, we are all separate and different, and unity is only conceptual or imagined. However, inwardly our hearts and spirits mingle together and are actually united in the Prophetic reality, and in God. The reason there is so much divisiveness and sectarianism today, he argued, is that people are less aware of this inward dimension in which there is real unity, and are only aware of the outward dimension in which unity is less apparent. The ways in which we are different, he explained, are less real than the ways in which we are the same, and this synthetic way of seeing, of understanding the world, is what Shaykh Ibrahim taught, because it is also the message of the Qur’an, of the Prophet. (interview, Sidi Ben Omar Kane 2/16/14, Dakar, French and Arabic). Cf. Rumi, “Know that between the Faithful is an ancient union./The Faithful are numerous, but the Faith is one: their bodies are numerous, but their soul is one./Besides the understanding which is in the ox and the ass, the human being has another intelligence and soul; / Again, in the saint, the owner of Divine breath, there is a soul and intelligence other than human./ The souls of wolves and dogs are separate, every one, but the souls of the Lions of God are in union.” (Mathanwi Book IV v. 407-10; 414).
secret of the Essence, and an attribute of the Essence, which is Ahmad [considered the esoteric, or heavenly name of the Prophet]. In al-Ahmadiyah also, nothing is manifest in it except for Ahmad. Then it [the Essence] manifests in al-Muḥammadiyah the forms of the Prophets and Messengers and the secret of existing things. Then it manifests in al-Ahmadiyah the poles (aqṭāb) and Knowers, then it manifests itself in the vicegerent (khaliḥah), the servant of the Essence for men and jinn.  

Shaykh Ibrahim declared himself to be this khalīfah, the archetypal representative and deputy of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī, who is described as the archetypal representative and deputy of the Prophet. Later in the same passage, Shaykh Ibrahim compares the undifferentiated unity of al-Aḥdihīyah to that of al-Ahmadiyah, and the differentiated unity of the Divine Names and Attributes in al-Wahīdiyah to that of the Prophets and Messengers in al-Muḥammadiyah where they are all united in the Muḥammadan Reality (ḥaqiqah Muḥāmadiyyah). In the description above, there appear to be two presences named Aḥmadiyah, one above Muḥammadiyah, and one below. Niasse clarifies this point a few pages later, this time describing only the “lower” presence in a slightly different schema:

When the Essence manifests itself, It manifests itself by its perfection, and so the witness, through his witnessing of the manifestation in Muḥammadiyah, sees Muḥammad as the Essence, because there is nothing other than it, and the difference is in the thinking of the witness, in the transformation of the reality, and not in its becoming many, but rather in the characterization of the Essence and the derivation of Muḥammad from It. As God has said Say, if you love God, then follow me, and God will love you (3:31), and Those who swear allegiance to you have sworn allegiance to God. God’s hand is above their hands (48:10), and Whosoever obeys the Messenger has obeyed God (4:80), … and Verily you are of a magnificent nature (68:4), and You did not throw when you threw, but God threw (8:17)….  

What the one who witnesses [this] finds is that God is not other than Muhammad, while Muḥammad is not God, but not other than Him. An example of this in the world of metaphor is what appears to someone in a mirror, except that here there is no mirror….  

If Muḥammad manifests himself in al-Ahmadiyah, he manifests himself with his perfection. So the witness, through his witnessing of the manifestation in al-Ahmadiyah, sees Aḥmad and says that he is the same as Muḥammad, for there is nothing after God other than Muḥammad, only the thinking (khāṭir) of the witness is changed, the thing seen does neither changes nor multiplies. So he is he, and he is he, there is no difference between the two save in its description and derivation since it [Aḥmad] is that which God brought forth as second of  

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Niasse, Sirr al-Akbar, 427. On the relationship between Aḥad and Aḥmad, see Shabistari’s Gulshan i-rāz, “And of them [the prophets] our lord Muḥammad is the chief, / At once the first and the last in this matter. / The One (Aḥad) was made manifest in the [letter] mīm of Aḥmad. In this circuit the first emanation became the last. / A single mīm divides Aḥad from Aḥmad; The world is immersed in that one mīm. / In him is completed the end of this road, … His entering state is the union of union. / His heart ravishing beauty the light of light., He went before and all souls follow after/ Grasping the skirts of his garment.”
two. Its [this reality’s] possessor is the greatest of the Sincere (Ṣiddīq) [Qur’anic term for the
greatest of believers, and also the title of the Prophet’s close companion, and successor, Abū
Bakr] and the “door to the city of knowledge” [a title for the Prophet’s close companion,
nephew, and successor, ‘Alī]. And this presence is the presence of sealhood (al-khatmiyah) and
concealment (al-katmiyah) and it is the presence of our lord and master Abū‘l ‘Abbās
Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Tijānī in the realm of the senses. So he is the barzakh of the Poles
and the support of all existing things and their spirit and their secret in so far as nothing
emerges from the Muḥammadan reality without him receiving it, from the pre-temporal (al-
Azal) to post-temporal (al-Abād).

So the Divine Essence manifests itself as an image in a mirror, and this reflection is
the Muḥammadan reality, then this Muḥammadan reality manifests itself, as another image in
another mirror, and this reflection is the spiritual reality of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī (as well as
that of Abu Bakr al-Ṣiddīq and ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib). Then this reality manifests itself in the
mirror of the world producing its myriad people and things.

If we take the metaphor of the world as a dream within a dream, the Real, the Divine
Essence, would be the dreamer, and the presences (ḥadrāt) would be the various levels of
dreams. The Muḥammadan reality is like the dreamer in the dream; it is the self-manifestation
of the Essence in this level of reality, and as the dreamer’s “dream-self” it both is, and is not,
the dreamer. Since everything that appears in the dream is a manifestation of some aspect of
the dreamer, while Muḥammadan reality is a manifestation of the dreamer itself (it is that
through which the dreamer experiences the dream) this Muḥammadan reality contains within
itself all of the realities of the dream that it occupies.

In this metaphor, the world of everyday experience world would be the dream which
the Muḥammadan reality dreams, and the presence of the dreamer (Muḥammadan reality) in

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287 Two titles of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, who amongst Tijanis is known as the “concealed seal of Muḥammadan
sanctity” (khatm al-walāyah al-Muḥammadiyah al-maktūm) see Chapter 2.

288 Niasse, Sirr al-Akbar, 432. This description and the larger discussion of the Muḥammadan and Aḥmadī
realities bears strong similarities to that of the relationship between “first entification” (al-ta‘ayyun al-awwāl)
and “the second entification” (al-ta‘ayyun al-thani) in the later Akbarī tradition. See Richard Todd, The Sufi
this dream (sensory world) would be found in the Prophets and Messengers before the Prophet Muḥammad, and after him, in the supreme saints and Knowers. The idea here is that this “dreamer within the dream” was most fully actualized in the person of the Prophet Muḥammad, and after him, in the person of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī, but that the presence of the “dreamer within the dream” is always necessary for there to be a dream, a world, at all (without a dreamer in the dream, there is no dream!). Furthermore, the aspect of the Muḥammadan Reality that appears in the dream world of senses and history as the poles (‘aqtāb) and Knowers is most fully realized in the person of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, and it is this aspect of the Muḥammadan reality that is described as the Aḥmadī presence, the intermediary between all of the saints, and even (in some accounts) all of existence, and the fullness of Muḥammadan reality. From this perspective, the process of tarbiyah can be likened to successive stages of “waking up,” passing from the dream within the dream, to the dream, to the Dreamer; and then from the Dreamer to the dreamer-within-the-dream (in its various aspects as the Prophet, Shaykh Tijānī, and Shaykh Ibrahim), returning to the dream within the dream, but now as one who knows that he is dreaming.

289 An alternative schema would be an intermediate dream level between the Muḥammadan Reality and the world, which the text implies, but which would result in the historical Prophet Muḥammad being a less complete or central manifestation of that Aḥmadī reality. Thus the Prophet’s consciousness and knowledge of higher levels of reality would have to pass through this Aḥmadī reality, whose true owner, or central manifestation, would be the Seal of Muḥammadan Sanctity. Ibn ‘Arabī describes such a schema, claiming the title of Seal of Muḥammadan Sanctity for himself and explaining that the relationship between the seal and the Prophet is like that of the keeper of the treasury and the King whose treasury it is. However Shaykh Ibrahim, following the Tijānī tradition, rejects this model in favor of that outlined in Figure 1 of the previous chapter. See his Saʿādat al-Anām, 226-30.

290 Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse explains that the relationship between saintly pole (quṭb) and the rest of existence is like that of the spirit to the body, “He is for them like the spirit for the physical body. If his spiritual reality (rūḥāniyah) departed form them, the whole of existence would pass into extinction. He is the spirit of existence and the entirety of its properties… None of the elements of existence can exist unless the spiritual reality of the saintly pole exists within them. If the saintly pole’s spiritual reality was removed form them, the whole of existence would cease, becoming a featureless corpse.” (Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 263).
It is important to remember that all of these complex schemas and metaphors have been and are employed to describe the experiences and states of consciousness disciples undergo during and after the process of tarbiyah. Far from being mere abstractions or flights of fancy, they draw on a long, creative tradition of spiritual practice, associated states and modes of being/consciousness, and descriptions of these states and modes of being/consciousness.

Having covered these presences, we are now in a position to understand Shaykh Ibrahim’s statement at the end of “The Three Stations of Religion,”

For if you enter the Divine pre-Eternal Presence (Ḥadrāt Azaliyah), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī]; and if you arrive at the Muḥammadan Presence (Ḥadrāt Muḥammadiyyah), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī]; and if you arrive at the Aḥmadī Presence (Ḥadrāt Aḥmadiyyah), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī].

Because the Muḥammadan presence is a perfect reflection of the Divine Essence, and the Aḥmadī presence is a perfect reflection of the Muḥammadan presence, anything that appears in one presence is found in the others.

**Annihilations**

The process of entering these presences is often described as “annihilation” َfanā’. The French disciple, Abu Ibrahim, described his experience of annihilation during tarbiyah in the following way:

You feel the unicity of everything...To me, everything is one, even the Qur’an says, “don’t say three, say one.” The worshipper, the worship, the one worshipped, it’s all one. َFanā’ is to realize you don’t exist yourself, the person, the entity you think you are, doesn’t have a real existence. You realize the nonexistence of everything, yourself first and then the rest. َBagā’, to me, is to live correctly after having experienced َfanā’, it’s like being newborn, you live like before, but with the new knowledge.

When I asked him about the different types of annihilation, he replied,

I don’t understand all that, I’ve probably experienced several of them, but I can’t differentiate them. I mean I can guess, but I know the most important one, I’ve got that. َFanā’ in God, in the Essence. That I’m ok with. But the others, َfanā’ in the Prophet, or Shaykh Tijānī, or
Shaykh Ibrahim, I couldn’t make the difference— I might have them all or I’ve been through all of them or some of them, but I couldn’t tell which is which. That all seems too theoretical for me…. Some people say Shaykh Tijānī saw the Prophet with him all the time. Whether that means he saw the man, the person, or he saw himself as the Prophet—that I can understand, that we’ve experienced—or both, I don’t know. Maybe that’s fanā’ in the Prophet, I don’t know…. To some extent, this knowledge, you have it, but to some extent, you don’t have it. It’s like you forget. It’s not like you’re in fanā’ all the time. For example, sometimes if someone insults you and you’re not like, “it’s God who’s insulting me,” you get angry and you want to react. I think it’s like this for most people, even shuyukh I see them get angry sometimes. Are they in fanā’ or not? But also this thing it comes back. What I want, myself is to have it as often as possible, it’s nice to have it once but the objective is to have it so that it becomes a [permanent] state that’s what I’d like… I want to have fanā’ for good. I have it, but I want more of it.

This account highlights the individual nature of the experience of tarbiyah, and the distinction between the “theory” and “lived experience” of tarbiyah. These distinctions should be kept in mind as we go through further schematic discussions of this process of transformation.

In his Mauritanian Sermon, Shaykh Ibrahim draws on a long tradition of Sufi discourse describing three progressive kinds or stages of annihilation: Annihilation in the Acts (fanā’ fī al-af’āl), Annihilation in the Attributes (fanā’ fī al-Ṣifāt), and Annihilation in the Essence (fanā’ fī al-Dhāt). Annihilation in the acts is to realizing, experiencing, all actions as coming from a single actor. Annihilation in the attributes is realizing, experiencing the seven Divine Attributes of Islamic theology (Power, Will, Knowledge, Life, Hearing, Sight, Speech) as belonging only to God. In Shaykh Ibrahim’s words, knowing that there is “no power but God’s, no will but God’s, no life but God’s, no knowledge but God’s, no hearing but God’s, no sight but God’s, and no speech but God’s. Whoever recognizes this also finds annihilation in the Attributes.” As for annihilation in the Essence, it is the awareness of nothing but God. In describing it, Shaykh Ibrahim says, “everything flees from him [the disciple] until nothing remains but God.”

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After describing these three levels of annihilation in the Mauritanian Sermon, Shaykh Ibrahim discussed two other modes of annihilation in the Attributes: annihilation in the Prophet and annihilation in the Shaykh. Here the Prophet and Shaykh al-Tijānī are considered as a Divine Attributes given their status as unique manifestations of the Divine Essence as discussed above. These annihilations are considered necessary for the acquisition and perfection of maʿrifah, as Shaykh Ibrahim writes,

For this reason, the Knowers, their first concern for a seeker is that he finds annihilation in God, then after that he ascends until he arrives at the Shaykh, because he is an attribute of God. The goal of these two annihilations is that the servant will return to this station [annihilation in the attributes], for if he has not met the Messenger of God and the Shaykh, then he will not know what comes after. So if he continues in this way, he will return to witnessing the existents, [but] he will see the existence as non-existent and existent at the same time.

In fact, these annihilations define the Knower in one of Shaykh Ibrahim’s most-quoted sayings from “The Three Stations of Religion”: “For me, the Knower (al-ʿĀrif) is he who is annihilated in the Essence once, and in the Attribute twice or three times, and annihilated in the Name once. He confirms the existence of these three realities, and he confirms the Names by the Name.”

When I asked Sidi ‘Inaya what this saying meant, he interpreted it as referring to going through the two or three circuits of the stations described in “The Three Stations of Religion.” In the Divine Flood, Seesemann also connects this statement to the Mauritanian Sermon, interpreting the “two or three annihilations in the Attribute” as referring to annihilation in the Prophet, Shaykh Tijānī, and Shaykh Ibrahim. My own discussions with disciples seemed to confirm this interpretation. For example, S.D. has already been quoted as explaining that after tarbiyah, “they tell you that in everything you should see the four

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292 Disciples and Shaykhs often cited the Qur’anic verse, we only sent you as a mercy to the worlds (21:107)—“mercy” being one of God’s primary attributes in the Qur’an—to substantiate this claim.
hadrahs, in everything you should see God, the Prophet, the Shaykh [Tijānī], and Shaykh Ibrahim.”

But why are these annihilations necessary to be a Knower? Is not annihilation in the Divine Essence enough? And what is annihilation the Name? What does it mean to confirm the Names by the Name? Seesemann quotes a work by a Nigerian disciple of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse which explains the relationship between name, attribute, and essence, “the name is the interior of a thing (shay’), and the thing is the exterior part (zāhir) of the name, in the same way as the attribute (ṣifah) is the interior of the name, and the name is the exterior of the attribute. The essence (dhār) is the innermost core of the attribute, and the attribute is the exterior of the essence.”

So what is this name in which the disciple becomes annihilated? The name “Allāh” is generally considered to be the comprehensive Name of God, which includes all other Divine Names. It names the Divine Essence in its totality, which each of the other Names (with the possible exception of al-Rahmān) designates only a particular aspect of the Divine Reality.

For this reason, some consider the name “Allāh” to be the Greatest Name of God, the 100th of the traditional 99 names, which, “if God is called by it, He will answer.” In Sirr al-Akbar, Shaykh Ibrahim connects this Greatest Name to the Muḥammadan Reality,

The expression of the People of Tastings (Ahl al-adhwāq) differ. Some of them say that His

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293 Seesemann, Divine Flood, 296 n 89 from Ilyās al-Wālī’s Afdal al-wasā’il fi al tawassul bi sayyid al-awākhir wa al-awā’il. cf. Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Lāhī’s 250th Ḥikam “The existence of His actions points to the existence of His Names. The existence of His Names points to the establishment of His Attributes, The establishment of His Attributes points to the existence of His Essence, since an attribute cannot subsist by itself.”

294 Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “Abūl-Qāsim al-Qaṣī alluded to this in his Removal of the Sandals, saying, ‘Every Divine Name can be named by all of the Divine Names, and can be described by them.’ This is so because every Name indicates the Essence as well as a meaning that is proper to it and requires it. By virtue of its indicating the Essence it possesses all the Names, and by virtue of it indicating a meaning by which it is unique it is to be distinguished from what is not itself, such as Lord, Creator, Giver of Forms, and so forth. The Name is the Named by virtue of the Essence, and the Name is not the Named in virtue of the meaning specific to it, by which it is set apart. (Ringstones of Wisdom, 57-8).
Names, all of them are the Greatest, and the response depends on the degree of the power of sincerity [of the supplicant]...and others amongst them say that the name “Allāh” is the Greatest, others say that it is Al-Ḥayy al-Quayyūm (The Living, The Self-Subsistent), others say that is is “Ḥūwa,” others say that it is Dhū‘l-Jalāl wa‘l-Ikrām (Possessor of Glory and Generosity), while others say that it is rabb rabb (Lord, Lord), while others say that it is Yā Sin and bā mīm [Arabic letters], while others say that it is al-ḥānān al-manān (The Kind, the Beneficent) etc. The expressions differ and their meaning is one:

Our expressions are varied, while your meaning is one
And all of them to that perfection allude

Some of them connect [the Greatest Name] to some of the separated letters (ḥurūf al-muqāta‘ah) at the beginning of the surahs of the Qur’an…and the truth in that is, if God wills, that the Greatest Name is the name before every relation, and with it, and after it in terms of description. So it is established that is has that reality and meaning and form and utterance because of the perfection of its validity/sincerity (ṣidq) in The Essence and Attributes and the Names and the Acts…and its reality is the universal reality, in which all realities are immersed because it is the First and the Last and the Outward/Apparent (al-Ẓāhir) and the Inward/Hidden (al-Bātin), and its meaning is the reality of our lord Muḥammad the Opener, the Seal, that is, the Muḥammadan Reality which veils the prophets and the messengers and angels from perceiving the core of the Essence, insofar as they are not it. The ḥadīth, “I have a moment with God which is shared neither by any angel brought nigh nor by any prophet sent” … refers to this, for it [the Muḥammadan reality] is the essence of the Name, while the Names are its parts. It [the Divine Essence] manifested itself in the Muḥammadan reality and our lord Muḥammad became the total meaning of the essence of the Name, while the prophets are its parts. And It manifested Itself in perfection and the greatest of the Righteous (Ṣiddiqīn) [Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī] became the form of the totality of the Essence of the Name, while the saints are its parts.

In this passage, Shaykh Ibrahim draws on a long tradition within Maghrebi Sufism connecting the Greatest Name of God with the Muḥammadan Reality and its various manifestations in the form of the perfected saints. Since man is made in God’s image, the Muḥammadan Reality /Perfect Man (insān al-kāmil) is the perfect and greatest “name” of God in that he manifests or reflects all of the attributes, qualities, and actions of the Divine Essence in a comprehensive manner, while everything else only does so partially. In a treatise on supplications on the Prophet, the Shādhillī/Qādirī Shaykh and calligrapher al-Qandūsī (d. 1861) explains,

When we contemplated hard and long on this majestic verse [And to God belong the Beautiful Names, so invoke Him by them (7:180)] we found that it is not restricted to the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of Allah recorded [in the ḥadith collections]. Rather the bounty is spread to the hundredth name, which is the name of His Beloved: Muḥammad! That is because the name

295 Niasse, Sirr al-Akbar, 439-40
of Allah’s beloved is never separated from His Name, Exalted is He! There is no Divine Name, be it one or two or three, or ten or ninety-nine, from Allah’s Names, save that the name of His Beloved is linked with It… Consequently, a person who knows the name of Muhammad in its essence (dhāt) and not just its attributes (ṣifāt) knows Allah’s Supreme Name, for the name of the Beloved is the essence of Allah’s Beautiful Names that are well-pleasing to Him; and whosoever calls upon Allah through the name of His Beloved will have his supplication answered… Consequently, a person who knows the name of a friend (wali) of Allah in its essence and not just its attributes knows Allah’s Supreme Name too, and knows the best supplication with which he can invoke.  

Similarly, the famous pole of Moroccan Sufism, ‘Abd al-Salām ibn Mashīsh (d. 1227), master of Abu’l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (founder of the Shādihilī Order), is supposed to have once told his illustrious disciple, “O Abū’l-Ḥasan, you want to ask about the Greatest Name of God. It is of no use to ask about the Greatest Name of God. It is important that you should be the Greatest Name of Allah.”  

Shaykh Ibrahim’s disciple, Shaykh Ḥasan Cissé commented upon this saying, writing:

A man once asked Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī about the greatest name. He said, “It does not have a specific definition, for it is the emptiness of your heart for the sake of His oneness. If you were like this, then you could obtain the East and the West with any name you use” . . . The affair is not to know the name, the affair to become the essence (ʿayn) of the name. Perhaps this is the meaning of the noble narration [of God’s words], “Surrender yourself to Me, O My servant, then say, Be! And it will be” . . . Shaykh Abū Ḥasan (al-Shādihilī) said, “In some of God’s books sent down to His prophets, God said, ‘Whoever obeys Me in everything, I cause everything to obey him.’

So returning to Shaykh Ibrahim’s definition of a Knower, “For me, the Knower (al-‘Ārif) is he who is annihilated in the Essence once, and in the Attribute twice or three times, and annihilated in the Name once,” annihilation in the Name refers to the realization that the human state, in its perfection (the Muḥammadan Reality) is the Greatest Name of God, through the annihilation in or actualization of this state. In this state, one realizes the unity of all of the various Divine Names in that single reality which they all name. This is what is

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296 Shaykh Muḥammad B. Al-Qasim Al-Qandusi. The Drink of the People of Purity. (Singapore: Muḥammadan Press, 2014), 21-23
297 See Hoffman, Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt, 23.
meant by “confirming the Names by the Name,” one becomes characterized by all of the Divine Names, and realizes their unity in oneself, the Greatest Name. This realization is necessarily an annihilation in which one’s own self-consciousness or awareness is not separate from the realization or awareness of the unity of the reality of the Greatest Name.

Similarly, disciples described annihilation in the Prophet, Shaykh Tijānī, and Shaykh Ibrahim (the “two or three annihilations in the Attributes”) as “realizing that everything—including yourself—that everything is the Prophet, Shaykh Tijānī, and Shaykh Ibrahim, you see them in everything—even in yourself.”

Annihilation in the Essence refers to a similar annihilation in which the inscrutable Divine Essence becomes the sole object and subject of consciousness.

Shaykh Ibrahim describes a visionary experience of his that further clarifies the “three realities” mentioned in the description of maʿrifah in “The Three Stations of Religion”, and relationship between annihilation in the Name and annihilation in the Prophet and Shaykh Tijānī as Divine Attributes,

I witnessed the Greatest Name (al-ism al-ʿĀzm) in its essence, separate from all relations, having neither end nor beginning. From this perspective, I say that the essence of The Greatest Name is the [Divine] Essence, because of the unity of the Name and the Named. I remained [in this state] for a while, and I sought out the Beautiful Names and Divine Attributes, but I saw neither Name or Attribute because of the integration of the Names and Attributes into The Greatness [of the Name].

Then something from among things of the Real occurred, which cannot be described, and then with respect to the Name, the Names appeared as separate parts—it was something like—and with God are the greatest likenesses—the appearance of the stars in the sky: the stars were the Names which appeared to me in the sky of the Essence of the Name, and each part of those parts had neither beginning nor end. So in respect to the Essence, which is the Greatness, I saw each Name as a part. And in respect to each Name amongst the Names, it meant that It [the name] was It [the Named], without any separation. So I came to know that he who says that the Name is not a name for other than the Essence has spoken truly, and he who says that [all of] the Names are great has also spoken truly. And in this place of witnessing (mashhad) nothing appeared to me except our lord Muḥammad.

Then another thing occurred, and I saw the Pole (al-quṭb) in his multiplicity and

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proximity and beauty. Then something occurred, which I cannot describe, and then I found the Muḥammadan Reality as I had found the Greatest Name. And I stayed [in this state] and sought out the Prophets and Messengers from Adam to Jesus, upon them be blessings and peace, and I saw the essence of neither prophet nor messenger because of the integration of the messengers into the Messengerhood of our lord Muḥammad. Then something occurred, and in respect to Muḥammad, the other messengers appeared as separate parts just as before [with respect to the Names]. And so I was made to encounter the prophets, one after another, and I didn’t see a single one amongst them, except that I was told, this is our Prophet, and I only looked at our lord Muḥammad. In this place of witnessing, the Real did not manifest itself to me except as our lord Muḥammad. Then something occurred and I saw the hidden pole, and the seal of sanctity, and I found him in the place of our lord Muḥammad. So I stayed [in this state], and I sought out the saints (awliyā’) and I did not find a single saint apart from our lord Aḥmad [al-Tijānī], because of their integration into his [Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī’s] sainthood. Then something occurred and the saints and poles were seen as separate parts in him, exactly as in the first example [of the Names and the Prophets like stars in the sky]. So I came to know that our lord Muḥammad had sealed Messengerhood by his being the vicegerent (khalīfah) of the Name, while the [other] prophets were [with respect to him] like the Names [in relation to the Greatest Name]. And [I knew that] our lord Aḥmad had sealed sanctity by his being the vicegerent (khalīfah) of our lord Muḥammad, and the other saints were [with respect to him] like the prophets [in relation to Muḥammad]. This is the meaning of the seal of Muḥammadan Sanctity. Some of them [the saints] existed before [Shaykh Tijānī] and some existed after [him], because this [Sealhood] is not a question of temporal occurrence. For the Seal of the Prophets [Muḥammad] was a Prophet aware of his own prophethood while Adam was still between water and clay; and likewise the seal of sanctity was a saint while Adam was between water and clay.300

Disciples’ accounts of the process of tarbiyah (what they felt comfortable sharing with me) bore great similarities to the above description, except that many disciples also described a similar encounter with the spiritual reality of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse as the (khalīfah) of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī.301 So the Greatest Name, and the spiritual realities of the Prophet Muḥammad, and Shaykh Tijānī all reflect or represent the Divine Essence in a particularly total or complete way in their various domains. However, it is still not yet clear why these annihilations in the Prophet, Shaykh Tijānī, and the Name are necessary in order for one to qualify as a Knower (ʿĀrif). Why isn’t annihilation in the Divine Essence sufficient?

Epistemic Significance of Annihilation in the Prophet


301 Shaykh Ibrahim gives a similar account in which he explicitly describes himself taking on the role of khalīfah through his annihilation in the Prophet and Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, see Cissé, What the Knowers of Allah have said about the Knowledge of Allah, 94-5.
The answer can be found in a story Ibn ‘Arabi relates about the early Sufi Abū Yazīd Bistāmī, which Shaykh Ibrahim quotes in his Removal of Confusion.

Abū Yazīd was among those reported as saying things like this [I am God (27:9), and Verily, I am God, there is no god but Me (20:14), and There is no god but I, so worship Me (27:14)] in a state of full sobriety and establishment; knowing that the Real is the One manifesting in the servant’s actions within the substance of potentialities. So in some of his states, he spoke as He, and in some states, he did not mention that he was speaking as He.

Some of the gnostics said in regards to the disciple (of Abū Yazīd) who considered Allah sufficient for him in his claim (to have witnessed Him), thereby disregarding seeing Abū Yazīd, that seeing Abū Yazīd one time is better than seeing Allāh a thousand times. (After the disciple was informed of this) Abū Yazīd passed in front of him, and he was told “that is Abū Yazīd.” When his eyes fell on the Shaykh, the disciple died. When Abū Yazīd was informed of his death, he said, “He saw what he could not bear, for Allah manifested Himself to him in me. He could not bear it, just as Moses could not bear it (when Allah manifested Himself to him on the mountain). Allah’ manifestation in me was greater than the divine manifestation the disciple used to witness in himself.”

Ibn ‘Arabi concludes, “Since the matter is thus, we know that our vision of the Real in the Muḥammadan form by the Muḥammadan vision is the most perfect vision [of God] that there is. So we do not cease to encourage people to [seek] this.” It must be remembered that in Ibn ‘Arabi’s cosmology (and that of the vast majority of Sufis), everything that exists is a self-manifestation (tajallī) of God, and that the most perfect and comprehensive of these manifestations is the Prophet Muḥammad. So any vision or knowledge of God that manifested to a Sufi adept is necessarily less complete or perfect than the knowledge manifested to and through the reality of the Prophet, just as in the hours before dawn, the full moon is brighter than the faint glow of sunrise on the horizon. Elsewhere in the Futūḥāt, Ibn ‘Arabi explains this point in greater detail, employing the metaphor of mirrors,

You should know that God did not create the creatures with a single constitution. On the contrary, He made them disparate in constitution. This is obvious and self-evident to anyone who looks, because of the disparity among people in rational consideration and faith. God has told you that man is his brother’s mirror [a reference to a ḥadīth]. Hence man sees in his brother something of himself that he would not see without him. For man is veiled by his own caprice. But when he sees that attribute in the other, while it is his own attribute, he sees his

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own defect in the other. The he comes to know its ugliness if the attribute is ugly, or its beauty, if it should be beautiful.

Know that mirrors are diverse in shape and that they modify the object seen by the observer according to their own shapes, whether they be tall, wide, curved, bent, round, small, large, numerous, and so on—whatever may be given by the shape of the mirror. It is known that the messengers are the most balanced of all people in their constitution, since they receive messages from their Lord. Each of them receives the message to the measure of the composition God has given him in his constitution. There is no prophet who was not sent specifically to a designated people, since he possessed a specific and curtailed constitution. But God sent Muḥammad with an all-inclusive message for all people without exception. He was able to receive such a message because he possessed an all-inclusive constitution which comprises the constitution of every prophet and messenger, since he has the most balanced and most perfect of constitutions.

Once you come to know this, and once you desire to see the Real in the most perfect manner in which He can become manifest in this human plane, then you need to know that this does not belong to you. You do not have a constitution like that possessed by Muhammad. Whenever the Real discloses Himself to you within the mirror of your heart, your mirror will make him manifest to you in the measure of its constitution and in the form of its shape. You know how far you stand below Muḥammad’s degree in knowledge of his Lord through his plane. So cling to faith and follow him! Place him before you as the mirror within which you gaze upon your own form and the form of others. When you do this, you will come to know that God must disclose himself to Muḥammad within his mirror. I have already told you that a mirror displays an effect in that which is seen form the point of view of the observer who sees. So the manifestation of the Real within the mirror of Muḥammad is the most perfect, most balanced, and most beautiful manifestation, because of the mirror’s actuality. When you perceive Him in the mirror of Muḥammad, you will have perceived from Him a perfection which you could not perceive in respect of considering your own mirror.

Thus, given the imperfection of our mirrors in comparison to the Prophet’s, Ibn ‘Arabi concludes that for us, the Real’s manifestation in the Prophet will be more “perfect and balanced” than its manifestation in our own mirrors. It is as if we are in an alley whose tall buildings block the direct sight of the sun. We can perceive the sunlight in the sky, but if we were to look at a mirror that does have a direct line of sight to the sun, we would be dazzled by its brilliance. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Arabi describes the “mirror of Muḥammad” as not only providing more perfect knowledge of the Real, but also of ourselves and other creatures, due to its perfect composition, it gives us a more complete picture of ourselves and other things than we could obtain without it. However, one could just as well ask if the same distorting effect our mirrors have on the image of the Real could also apply to the Prophet? Can our

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304 Chittick, *Sufi Path, of Knowledge*, 351-2
mirrors ever contain what is beyond their capacity to contain? If our own vision or knowledge of the Real is incomplete or weak when compared to our knowledge or vision of the Real through the mirror of the Prophet, what of our knowledge or vision of this Prophetic mirror?

Isn’t this just shifting the goalposts? The later Sufi tradition, including the Tijānī tradition, introduces the intermediaries of the Shaykhs [i.e. by one’s Shaykh, one knows Shaykh Tijānī, by Shaykh Tijānī one knows the Prophet, by the Prophet, one knows God in His Essence and manifestations]. But this can still be regarded as just another shifting of the goalposts, for if the mirror is still bent or imperfect, how can it not distort all that appears within?

As Shaykh Ibrahim’s disciples often remarked, “Abu Lahab was the Prophet’s uncle and saw him all the time, but did he ever really see him?”

The answer to this question can be found in Ibn ‘Arabi’s previously-discussed concept of “gods created in belief” to which the metaphor of imperfect mirrors alludes, and in the Shaykh al-Akbar’s concept of “following Muḥammad,” in which the spiritual practice of following the prophet’s example “polishes” and perfects mirrors so that they begin to approximate that of the Prophet. As discussed above, Ibn ‘Arabi argues that our particular constitutions, the limitations which make us individuals, “colour” and “shape” our belief and

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305 This ultimately goes back to the question raised in the discussion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s definition of ma’rifah at the beginning of this chapter: before you know, how can you know the way that will lead you to know? Practically, the answer usually comes in the form of some kind of deep intuition or recognition of the truth or liberating potential of a doctrine, text, or person, living or dead. Within Shaykh Ibrahim’s branch of Tijānī Sufism, this most commonly takes the form of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and/or one of their living representatives who will serve as the foundation and touchstone of the disciple’s confidence in the ṭarīqah and its methods, until he or she comes to verify them for him or herself, or does not. Ultimately, however, even this initial intuition, and every other stage in the process, is dependent upon God, who is understood to be an active participant in this process, seeking the seeker even more than the seeker seeks Him, as the following Ḥadīth Qudsi illustrate, “I desire them more than they desire Me,” and, “I am as my servant thinks of me and I am with him as he remembers me. If he remembers Me in himself, then I remember him in Myself. If he mentions me in a gathering, then I mention him in a better gathering. If he draws near to me by the span of his hand, I draw near him by the length of an arm. If he draws near me by the length of an arm, I draw near him by the length of a fathom. If he comes to me walking, I come to him running.” (Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhari 6970 cf. William A. Graham, Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam a Reconsideration of the Sources, with Special Reference to the Divine Saying or Ḥadīth Qudsi (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 129, 175-6).
knowledge of God, just as the form of a mirror shapes the images that appear within it, or a cup colours the water poured into it. Because of this, most people simply end up worshipping a “god created in belief,” a constructed idea of God, bound by one’s own particular limitations.

Ibn ‘Arabi bases many of his discussions of this topic on the verse of the Qur’an which states *They did not measure God in accordance with the reality of His measure (ḥaqqaqā qadrihi) ... on the Day of Resurrection*\(^{306}\) (39:67) and the related “ḥadīth of transformations”\(^{307}\) in which God appears to people on the Day of Resurrection in a form in which they do not recognize Him, declaring, “I am your Lord.” The people reject Him in this form and say, “No! We take refuge in God from you!” Then God appears to them in a familiar form, again declaring, “I am your Lord.” This time, people recognize and accept Him in this familiar form, saying “You are our Lord.” Ibn ‘Arabi argues that these accounts do not only refer to the Day of Resurrection, but that they describe what is happening right now in regards to all of the self-manifestations (*tajâlliyāt*) in which God presents Himself to us. Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

Generally speaking, each person necessarily sticks to a particular belief concerning his Lord. He always goes back to His Lord through his particular belief and seeks God therein. Such a man positively recognizes God only when He manifests himself to him in the form recognized by his belief. But when He manifests himself in other beliefs, he flatly refuses to accept Him and runs away from Him. In so doing, he simply behaves in an improper way towards God, while imagining that he is practicing good manners (adab) towards Him. Thus a person who clings to belief believes in a god according to what he has made in his own soul/mind (*nafs*). The god of beliefs comes about through the subjective act of making/positing (*ja’l*) on the part of the believers. They see naught but their own souls and what they have made therein.

So contemplate the fact that the hierarchy of mankind in their knowledge of God is their very hierarchy in terms of their vision on the Day of Resurrection. So beware of being bound by a particular belief and rejecting all others as unbelief! If you do that, much good will escape you. Nay, you will fail to obtain the true knowledge of reality. Try to make yourself a (kind of) Prime Matter (*hyle*) for all forms of belief, for God is too vast and too great to be confined to one belief to the exclusion of another. For He says, *Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of*

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\(^{306}\) This phrase appears at the end of the *Ṣalāt al-Fātih*, the primary prayer of Tijānī tarbiyah, where it is probably an allusion to this verse, and possibly an allusion to this notion of a rank (*qadr*) beyond all limitations.

\(^{307}\) Ṣaḥīḥ of Muslim, Book of *Imān*, 81, and Bukhari’s books of *Tawḥīd* 23, 24, and *Riqāq* 52. For additional references, see W. Graham, *Divine Word*, p 134-135 (for the *ḥadīth qudsi* section only).
God (2:115). God does not specify (in this verse) a particular place in which the Face of God is to be found, He only said, there is the Face of God. The “face” of a thing means its real essence. With this verse, God admonished the hearts of the Knowers so that they might not be distracted by nonessential matters in this lower world from being constantly aware of this kind of thing. For no one knows at which moment he will be taken [die]. If one is taken during a moment of forgetfulness, his position will certainly not be equal to another who dies in a state of clear awareness.

Thus, for Ibn ‘Arabi, the degree of one’s knowledge of God is directly related to the degree to which one can recognize the Real in all of its various forms. That is, the degree to which one can transcend or go beyond one’s own subjective conception of reality, one’s “god created in belief.” This can only be achieved through following one who has already transcended these limitations, and worshipping his absolutely unconditioned object of worship. For Ibn ‘Arabi, the Prophet Muhammad is the example par excellence of one who has an infinitely receptive heart which recognizes God in all of His manifestations, and so one hoping for “knowledge of things as they are” must follow his example. Otherwise, one merely worships a creation of one’s own imagination. Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

When a person rationally considers God, he creates what he believes in himself through consideration. Hence he worships only a god which he has created through his consideration…. That is why God has commanded us to worship the God brought by the Messenger and spoken of in the Book. For, if you worship this God, you will be worshipping that which you have not created. On the contrary, you will be worshipping your Creator, and you will have fully given worship its due (ḥaqq). For knowledge of God only derives from following. It cannot possibly be derived from proofs.

Ibn ‘Arabi divides knowers up into a tripartite hierarchy: those who follow reason alone, those who accept and follow the Prophets and Messengers have said concerning the Real, and those who realize or verify what the Messengers have said for themselves. Those who follow reason are unable to accept that which goes beyond the domain of reason and so reject the self-manifestations of God and verses of scripture that appear to contradict ordinary

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308 Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam ‘Afīfī, 135-6 qtd. in Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism, 254; also see Ringstones of Wisdom, 115-6 for an alternate translation.

309 Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 350.
logic or reason. The second category, whom Ibn ‘Arabi calls “the People of Faith,” employ their imaginal faculties (khayāl) to accept those things which appear to contradict reason (such as imagining God in front of them when they pray). By employing imagination where reason falls short, this second group can follow the Messengers in word and deed, state and trait, and come to recognize God in more of His manifestations. If they are persist in this practice, they can become a part of the third group, whom Ibn ‘Arabi various names as the “People of Allah,” “the Muḥammadans,” “the verifiers,” and “the perfect gnostics,” they recognize the Real in all of its manifestations, including themselves. More precisely, the Real recognizes Itself in Itself in and through them. He writes,

In the eye of a real Knower, the Real (in whatever form it may appear) remains always the recognized one, which is never denied. The people who recognized the same Real under all phenomenal forms in the present world will do exactly the same in the hereafter. This is why God (speaking of a man of this kind) says he who has a heart (qalb) (50:37). For such a man knows the constant changing of the Real in various forms; he knows this judging by the fact that his heart is constantly changing from one form to another. Thus such a man comes to know his own self through (the knowledge of the constant transformation of) himself. (And from this he obtains the real knowledge of the Real, for) his own self is nothing other than the Self-hood (Huwiyyah) of the Real, (and his knowledge thus obtained is easily extended to everything because) everything in the world of being, whether present or future, is nothing other than the Self-hood of the Real; indeed everything is identical with this Selfhood.

The real knower, the Muḥammadan, is he who has escaped his own limitations through his heart’s ability to take on any and every form. As in the example of the cup and water discussed earlier, the only way for the cup (the heart) to display the true color of water is for it to become transparent—that is, to transcend its colouring and become capable of taking on any colour. This transformation is achieved by transcending one’s own “gods created in belief” by following the Messenger of God to the point that one becomes identified

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310 Ibn ‘Arabi here plays with the meaning of root of the word “heart” (qalb) q-l-b, which means to change, transform, or turn over.

311 Qtd. in Izutsu, *Sufism and Taosim*, 260-1.
with his state of perfect receptivity, achieving annihilation in him. It is only after having achieved this state of perfect receptivity to all of the Divine Self-disclosures that one can know and recognize God in His Essence as well as in all of His various manifestations. Thus, annihilation in the Messenger is necessary for the perfection of Knowledge and recognition of God in this life and the next.

In her article “Annihilation in the Messenger of God: The Development of a Sufi Practice,” Valerie Hoffman presents annihilation in the Prophet and annihilation in the shaykh as means of attaining annihilation in God; however, in “the Mauritanian Sermon” Shaykh Ibrahim describes these annihilations as occurring after annihilation in God, as a means of establishing subsistence (baqāʾ) after annihilation (fanāʾ) in God. It is significant that Shaykh Ibrahim’s schema of annihilations follows the arc of creation of Tijani mythology: first God separates the Muḥammadan light from His Light, and the light or spiritual reality of Shaykh Tijānī is a hidden aspect of this Muḥammadan Light, and the spiritual reality of Shaykh Ibrahim is a hidden aspect of the spiritual reality of Shaykh Tijānī. From this Muḥammadan/Aḥmadi/Ibrāhāmī reality, all of the various things of the world are created.

312 See Hoffman, “Annihilation in the Messenger of God.”, 360-4 In truth, some of the examples Hoffman adduces (such as that of al-Dabbāgh) actually seem to correspond with Shaykh Ibrahim’s perspective, in that annihilation in the Shaykh and Prophet are a means of attaining permanent subsistence (baqāʾ) after annihilation in God (fanāʾ). In a section of his Futūḥāt al-Ilāhīyyah devoted to prayers on the Prophet, Ibn ‘Ajibah seems to share this perspective, describing the highest category of those who invoke blessings on the Prophet, “Then there are those who invoke blessings upon his [the Prophet’s] primordial light, which is the light of all lights; these are the people of spiritual firmness and mastery, they of direct witnessing and vision. The Prophet never leaves them for a moment, which is why Shaykh Abu’l ‘Abbās [al-Mursī], God be pleased with him, said: ‘Were the Messenger of God to leave me for the blink of an eye, I would no longer consider myself a Muslim.’ In saying this, he was alluding to his own firmness and mastery in the Presence, and his having come back to the station of subsistence (al-baqa’) wherein one witnesses the Intermediary (the Prophet). Such people’s thoughts roam through the World of Dominion (al-Malakūt), and their spirits are connected to the World of Domination (al-Jabarūt), and in them is synthesised all that is lacking in others, as the Prophet said: ‘All prey is in the belly of the wild donkey’; for the wild donkey is the fattest of all hunted animals, so that whoever catches one is as fortunate as he would be to catch them all. And the poet said: It is not beyond God in the least / To combine all worlds in one man.” The two perspectives are not mutually exclusive by any means and in some places Shaykh Ibrahim seems to describe annihilation in the prophet as a means to annihilation in God. Here I wish to draw attention to this other role of annihilation in the prophet as perfecting subsistence, and not just annihilation in God.
Now in this perspective, when something is created from something else, that means that the two things are identical from a certain point of view. From the perspective of eternity, this transformation appears as just the elaboration or extension of a single reality in time and space. From this atemporal perspective, the seed contains and is identical with the tree, which contains and is identical with the fruit, which contains and is identical with the seed. Because everything is created from God, everything is God. Because everything is created from the light of the Prophet/Shaykh Tijānī/Shaykh Ibrahim, everything is this light. Shaykh Ibrahim and other Sufi authors have employed a number of metaphors to illustrate these relationships such as ink and the letters formed by it (the entire Qur’an is said to be contained in the dot of ink of the  bā’,” of the basmalah which begins the Qur’an), breath and spoken words, and light and images, as in Shaykh Ibrahim’s metaphor of the cinema in the Mauritanian Sermon. In this perspective, the fact that the many comes from the One means that the many are still but one. In this vein, Sufi authors often cite the prophetic saying, “God was and there was nothing with Him,” and the commentary of ‘Alī (or Junayd), “it is now even as it was.”313 In this regard, Shaykh Ibrahim quotes the following verse of poetry,

I was asked, “Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?”
I said, “is there anything else but this in existence?”314

The Muḥammadan Reality, as the Logos, the nexus or barzakh between the One and the many, God and the world, the Real and its manifestations, is the key to understanding this relationship: the presence of the many in the One and the One in the many.

Thus the annihilations in the Shaykh(s) and the Prophet, following annihilation in the Divine Essence, permit disciples to further transcend their individual limitations and begin the

313 Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 87-8 and Şâhîţ Bukhârî Volume 9, Book 93, Number 514
314 Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 65
stage of subsistence (baqā‘), of complete ma’rifah, in which they can recognize God in themselves, in His Essence, and in all of His manifestations. Shaykh Ibrahim describes the one who has attained this complete degree of knowledge in the previously-cited “Mauritanian Sermon”:

He knows there is nothing but God and he perceives things as they are, and he puts every created thing in its place, in which God placed it. And he knows that he is nothing. He exalts things, while not considering them existent; and he fears things, without considering them existent, and he loves things without considering them existent. And he acquires all good actions, he prays, and he fasts, and he makes ḥajj, and he tells the truth and he spends his money. And all of that is out of good manners (adab) to God, while he knows that there is nothing there. And if the servant arrives at this, he is connected to God by a real connection—he doesn’t do anything except for God.

Or in the words of M.D.,

Because afterwards you are a person, like others, you eat, you drink, you live like others. You are like them, but you are not like them. You live, but you don’t live. You are dead, but you are not dead. You are alive—okay, because you eat, you drink, etc., but you are not alive because ‘he who does not die, does not see God.’ It’s because you are dead that you see God. This death of which I am speaking, is not the death that puts you in the ground, but it’s the death of having cut off the world, being dead to the world…

Having covered these various descriptions of the process of tarbiyah, we now turn to the question of how this process actually works. That is, how is it that this particular program of spiritual exercises results in the transformations described above?

**How Does Tarbiyah Work?**

When asked how the process of tarbiyah works, most disciples and shaykhs responded with some variation of “I know it works, but I have no idea how it works. It’s like when I go to the ATM: I put in my card, I punch in my code and the cash comes out, but how all that works, the electronics and such, I don’t know. I know tarbiyah works, I’ve done it myself, I’ve given it to others, but how it works, I don’t know.” Sidi ‘Inaya Niang compared the effect of reciting the litanies to a description of music he once heard the late Peter Tosh give,

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315 Sidi Mohamed Kane, interview with author April 24, 2014, Dakar, Senegal. French.
“When you listen to good music it gives you a good vibration. Good vibration gives you a good feeling, a good feeling gives you a good way of thinking; good thinking makes you change your life, see the world in a new way.” Disciples and shaykhs often described tarbiyah as a process of focusing the attention and awareness of the disciple on God (and the Prophet, Shaykh Tijānī, and Shaykh Ibrahim) to the exclusion of all else, and then integrating this singular awareness of unity with the awareness of multiplicity.

One disciple in her early thirties, the daughter of a prominent shaykhah, described her experience in these terms,

I wasn’t really interested in tarbiyah and these things, and even though I saw all the people who came to my mother for tarbiyah. I was more interested in having fun with my friends and going to clubs. My mother never stopped me, she just said, ‘If you’re ever interested in what I have, you can come take it.’ So after some of my friends took tarbiyah from my mother, and I saw how they were different, I was curious, so I asked my mother for tarbiyah. Then I was saying the ṣalāt al-fātīḥ all the time, and when I went back to the club, I could still hear the ṣalāt al-fātīḥ, very clearly. I just didn’t feel right in the club anymore, it just didn’t fit, so I stopped going...it used to be only the greatest people who separated themselves from everything who could get a fath, but what Shaykh Ibrahim brought, you can be a mother working in the house, a student, a worker, and say ṣalāt al-fātīḥ all the time and you can get the opening that people used to have to work so hard for, and only a few of them got it.

For this disciple, the constant presence of the prayer in her mind/heart, and the related focus on God and the Prophet, is what led to the transformation of certain dispositions. S.D., the philosophy teacher quoted earlier, was even more explicit: “They have you say lā ilāha illā Allāh and Ṣalāt al-Fātīḥ so many times that you start saying them in your sleep. You don’t watch movies or TV, you don’t talk to people [any more than necessary] so you are just thinking God, God, God all the time, until eventually that is all you think or see.”

Relatedly, several shaykhs described tarbiyah as helping disciples love God and the Prophet,

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316 Sidi Inaya Niang, interview with author, April 26, Dakar, Senegal. English.
because “when you love someone, you think about him all the time, and would do anything for him. So love is the key to all of this. Everything Shaykh Ibrahim had, he obtained through his love of the Prophet."⁹³¹⁹ This theme of love as the catalyst for existential transformation is a prominent one in the writings of Shaykh Ibrahim, and Sufi literature in general. As Shaykh Mâḥî Niasse explained, “‘I was a hidden treasure and loved to be known [therefore I created creation that I might know them].’ So since God’s creation came through the door of love into existence, the return to God must also be through the way of love…The foundation [of tarbiyah] is love.”⁹³²⁰

But how does the performance of certain prayers and invocations lead to this focus and love? And why these prayers and not others? Many of Shaykh Ibrahim’s writings contain a kind of ritual theory that addresses such questions. For example, in his commentary on the Qur’anic verse *Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God* (2:155), Shaykh Ibrahim writes

> there is the face of God means His direction, His Essence. The Essence of God has neither direction nor place, but it is wheresoever the servant turns in seeking the qiblah (direction of prayer—towards the Ka‘bah in Mecca). It is this complete ma‘rifah of the servant which dictates that he pray in any direction he wishes, but the fact that we pray in one direction is out of good manners (adab), conforming to the command of God, and to train the soul so that it becomes accustomed to singularity of orientation. So whenever the servant wants to worship or pray or invoke (dhikr), he turns towards a single direction, this is best because the servant’s adopting a singular orientation outwardly affects his inner reality (bāṭin), until God grants him a singular orientation inwardly. The real qiblah is the exalted Essence, what is required of the servant is that he turn his heart to this real qiblah perpetually and eternally. Persistence in turning towards the [physical] qiblah may discipline the inward reality of the servant until he attains the turning towards the real qiblah. If not for this, it would be difficult for the Knower (‘ārif) to pray towards the known direction for [to him] all directions are the same.”⁹³²¹

Thus, the outward (zāhir) discipline of facing a single direction facilitates the inward (bāṭin) discipline of single-pointed concentration or focus. In fact, as this passage suggests,

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⁹³¹⁹ Ustadh Barham Diop, interview with author, April 4, Dakar, Senegal. Arabic.


⁹³²¹ Niasse, *Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr* vol. 1, 134-5. This commentary is remarkably similar to Ibn ‘Arabi’s commentary on this verse in his *Ringstones of Wisdom* (see 115-6).
the point of the outward discipline of turning towards the qiblah is its effect on the inward disposition of turning towards “the real qiblah” of the Divine Essence. This symbolic principle of correspondence underlies most of Sufi theories of ritual practice, as Shaykh Ibrahim’s work and the works from which he quotes (especially those of Ibn ‘Arabi) demonstrate. For Ibn ‘Arabi, this correspondence is mediated by the faculty of imagination (khayāl). Unlike the English meaning of “imagination,” khayāl, for Ibn ‘Arabi, denotes a kind of perception with its own corresponding ontological reality. As the barzakh or bridge between the formless world of spirit/meaning and the sensory world, imagination (khayāl) allows supraformal realities to take on sensible forms; it is what allows us to “see” or ‘hear” or “taste” ideas and spiritual realities, as we do in dreams (and, strictly speaking, in everyday life). Ibn ‘Arabi argues that this is continuity between the spiritual and the sensible, which imagination (khayāl) makes possible, is why Muslims are commanded to “imagine God in the qiblah” when they pray and to “worship God as if you see Him.” This “as if” (the particle ك (ka) in Arabic) is the key to imagination—to imagine a reality described by scripture and prophetic reports, and in doing so, to eventually realize and verify that reality.

In the case of imagining God in the qiblah, Ibn ‘Arabi and his commentators explain that those who follow reason alone reject imagination and are incapable of carrying out this particular command. Better are those “people of faith” or those who “bear witness”: those who, through imagination, accept the scriptural and prophetic descriptions that seem to defy reason. They imagine God in the qiblah, and pray with the resulting humble awareness of body and soul (khushū’)—in fact, Ibn ‘Arabi argues that any prayer offered without this imaginalized presence of the Divine and corresponding attitude of humble devotion is not valid. This is the lowest degree of “bearing witness.” Better still are those who rise from this
level and witness God in the qiblah through their spiritual insight, or “inner eye” (baṣīrah).

Then comes the level in which God is witnessed in the qiblah with both the inner eye of insight and outer eye of the senses. And in the ultimate stage, the subject and object of this witnessing become one, and God witnesses Himself in Himself.322

Returning to Shaykh Ibrahim’s commentary, paradoxically, turning in one direction leads the adept to see God in any direction, “wheresoever he turns.” However, even after this realization, the adept persists in facing the physical qiblah out of adab (good manners) and in conformity with God’s command, maintaining the symbolic correspondence between a particular spatial orientation (towards the qiblah) and spiritual or inner orientation (towards the Divine Essence).

A similar symbolic logic is found in Shaykh Ibrahim’s commentary on the verse, those who remember God standing and sitting and lying on their sides and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth…(3:191)

God described the rememberers/invokers (al-dhākirīn) as people who pray and invoke/remember God much. In the beginning, the remembrance of God is with the tongue, and then with the heart (qalb), and then with the spirit (rūh). By the remembrance/invocation (dhikr) of the tongue, the annihilation (fanā’) in the Acts is found. By the remembrance/invocation of the heart, annihilation in the Attributes is found. By the remembrance/invocation of the spirit, total annihilation is found. He is annihilated, then annihilated, then annihilated, so that his annihilations are the source of subsistence (baqā’). Remembrance/invocation has a shell, and a kernel, and a kernel of the kernel. The shell is for the generality, the kernel is for the elite, and the kernel of the kernel is for the elite of the elite, and the kernel of the kernel is the oil.323 In any case, abundance of remembrance/invocation (dhikr) is necessary.324

322 See Izutsu, Sufism and Taoism, 260 and Futūḥat Chp. 63 for a more complete discussion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s imagination and its role in “ritual theory.”

323 An allusion to the “Verse of Light” which reads, God is the Light of the heavens and the earth, the likeness of His Light is like a niche wherein is a lamp—the lamp is in a glass, the glass is as it were a shining planet—kindled from a blessed tree, an olive neither of the East nor West, whose oil would almost shine forth, though no fire touched it. Light upon light. God guides unto His light whom He will. And God strikes likenesses for mankind and God is of all things, Knowing. (24:35).

324 Niasse, Fī Riyūḍ al-Tafsīr vol. 1, 352.
Here, Shaykh Ibrahim defines a progressive hierarchy of *dhikr*, moving from the outward (the tongue) to the inward (the spirit). *Dhikr* with the tongue is supposed to lead to the *dhikr* of the heart, which in turn leads to the *dhikr* of the spirit. These different modes of *dhikr* also lead to different kinds of realization or annihilation. The *dhikr* of the tongue is physical, occurring in space and time, and is limited—people have to eat, sleep, talk to one another, etc. The *dhikr* of the heart, or the internal invocation, takes place on a different, higher level of being, and is thus less limited by these constraints, although it can be limited by turning of attention to other than God. The *dhikr* of the spirit takes place at an even higher level of being, and as such can be perpetual—in fact, it can barely be said to take place in time and space. One can perform the different modes of *dhikr* independently, i.e., one can invoke with the tongue, but absentmindedly, and thus not with the heart. Or one can invoke silently and inwardly with the heart, but not with the tongue. But the ideal *dhikr* is one that takes place on all levels, although from a certain perspective, the higher forms of *dhikr* can be said to encompass the lower. Shaykh Ibrahim writes,

The Knower by God (‘Ārif biLlāh) in this station is charged with filling his inner reality (*bāṭin*) with God perpetually though invoking/remembering with the tongue, the heart, the spirit, and the secret (*sirr*). The invocation/remembrance (*dhikr*) of the heart is reflection (*fikrah*), and invocation/remembrance (*dhikr*) of the spirit is insight (*'ibrāh*), and the invocation/remembrance (*dhikr*) of the secret is contemplation (*naẓrah*).

This is the station of Have you seen how your Lord has extended the shadow (24:45) ... and to this station alludes the hadith, “the best *dhikr* is the hidden (al-khafi)” The best *dhikr* of the tongue is the *Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ*-it should be practiced always with neither limitation nor [fixed] number nor limit nor set place or time.  

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325 A similar hierarchy is also found in the works of Ibn ‘Aṭā Llāh. For example, see his Key to Salvation, 53-55 (Ah H. and Mary Ann Koury Danner. The Key to Salvation & the Lamp of Souls = Miftāḥ Al-falāḥ Wa Miṣbāḥ Al-arwāḥ (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996), 53-55).

326 cf. Ibn ‘Arabi’s discussion of this verse comparing the word to a shadow and the Real to the object that casts the shadow (see Ringstones of Wisdom, 99-101). The allusion here seems to be comparing the “lengthening shadow” to *dhikr* extending through the various levels of man, the best, being the “most hidden” or the place where the shadow and object meet. OR, alternatively, the shadow itself could represent the “hidden” invocation.

327 Niasse, Sirr al-Akbar, 446-7.
The Science of Letters and Language

This ontological hierarchy—from the spiritual/supra-formal (rūḥānī/rabbānī) to the imaginal/formal (khayālī/mithālī) to the sensible (ḥissī)—features prominently in the “science of letters,” to which shaykhs and disciples frequently invoked to explain the efficacy of particular prayers and litanies. In this science, each sound/letter of the Arabic alphabet is associated with a number, meaning, element, aspect of life/nature, part of the body, spiritual reality or realities, and Divine Quality or qualities.328 This Hermetic science, variations of which are also found in several other religious traditions, relies on a logic of symbolism in which relationships between entities in one particular domain, such as written letters, are symbols/manifestations of relationships between entities of another domain, such as numbers or Divine Names. Connections in one domain can be mapped onto other domains.

This “science” has a certain logic to it, but its proponents claim that it can only be partially understood rationally and requires spiritual unveiling and realization to master and understand. In a sense, one could say that this occult science appears to the uninitiated much as music theory would appear to a deaf person. He or she would have to take the hearing person’s word that a minor scale sounds sad, and a major scale happy, and which intervals are harmonious and which are dissonant. On this basis, a deaf person could have some idea how a piece of music would sound on the basis of a musical score, but it is only through the power of hearing that one can truly appreciate the effects of a piece of music. Similarly, one can learn about this “science of letters,” but it is only by gaining new perception through spiritual unveiling that one can truly and immediately appreciate these subtle powers of language.329

328 See Chittick. The Self-Disclosure of God, xviii-xxx

329 “For Ibn 'Arabī as well as a number of other Sufis, the science of letters is properly speaking the science of the [saints] ʿāwliyāʾ, and it is one of the surest signs of the authenticity of their spiritual realization.” Addas, C.
Ibn ‘Arabi provides several different metaphors and metaphysical frameworks to explain these relationships between the world of language and various other worlds, the most prominent and influential of which is the “doctrine of the breaths,” which draws on the Qur’anic image of God breathing His Spirit into man, and the image of the “breaths of the all-Merciful” (nafas al-Rahmān) from the ḥadīth literature.

Speech is simply an articulation of breath, and in this perspective, the Divine “breath” is pure being, so everything that exists is Divine speech, a cosmic array of words. Since man is “made in God’s image,” he has the peculiar status of being a “talking word.” To borrow an image from The Lord of the Rings movies, it is as if Gandalf, amidst his many smoke rings, blew a smoke figure of himself blowing smoke rings. Therefore, man’s speech, which constitutes human language, echoes the Divine speech, which constitutes the cosmos (including man and his language). Man’s articulation of breath is but a reflection, in a very limited domain, of the process which brings the entire cosmos into delimited existence from undifferentiated Being. Chittick summarizes this perspective,

When the All-Merciful speaks, He articulates His Words in His Breath, just as we articulate our words in our breath when we speak. Thus, the Breath of the All-Merciful is the underlying substance of the universe. It is the page upon which God writes out the grand Book of the Cosmos. The nature of the Divine Speech that appears in the Breath is suggested already in the derivation of the word kalām (Arabic for speech). It comes from ‘kalimah’ [from the root: “k-l-m”], a word that means to cut, to wound. As Ibn ‘Arabi explains, this means that speech leaves effects and traces in the undifferentiated and unarticulated Breath. Each of these traces is then called a Word, kalimah; that is, a wound, or an articulation in undifferentiated existence. The Breath itself remains forever untouched and unwounded by the words it pronounces, just as our breath is unaffected by the words that we speak.330

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Since God brought the world into being through His speech, man can also return to Him through His speech. Thus the efficacy of certain prayers or invocations, like the shahādah and the Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ is attributed to or explained through these correspondences between their letters/sounds, meanings, and the spiritual realities/forces which they are believed to vehicle. The number of times a formula is recited also forms a part of this symbolic correspondence. One shaykh explained that the symbolism of the Tijani daily office (al-wazifah) through this science of numbers, pointing out that the number of recitations of this office spell out “The Prophet” (al-nabī), which is also (nearly) numerically equivalent to the Prophet’s name, Muḥammad (M, Ḥ, M, D).

In his Removal of Confusion, Shaykh Ibrahim quotes Shaykh Aḥmad Zarrūq’s explanation of this operational symbolism:

The special distinction of each remembrance (dhikr) and Divine Name derives from its meaning, and its power (tasrīf) is according to what is needed. The secret of the remembrance is in the number of repetitions. Its fulfillment depends on the spiritual aspiration (himma) of the one practicing it (sāhibīhi). This explains why the knowledgeable person does not benefit (from a dhikr) unless the meaning is clear, and why the ignorant person does not benefit unless the meaning is hidden and unknown to him. In this way, their (divergent) understandings persist. As for how many times a particular formula of remembrance is repeated, this is taken

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332 The wazifah consists of 1 recitation of the Fatiḥah, 30 recitations of AstaghfiruLlāh, 50 recitations of the Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ, 100 recitations of the Shahādah, and 12 recitations of Jawhara al-Kamāl. In Arabic numerology, 1 = Alif, 30 = Lām, 50 = Nūn, 2 = bā’, 10 = Yā’. So 1+30+50+12 = al-nabī = 93; removing the one recitation of the fatiḥah gives 92. The four letters of the Prophet’s name, “Muḥammad” have the following numerical values: Mīm=40, Ḥā’=8, Mīm=40, Dal=4. 50+8+40+4 = 92. The 100 recitations of the Shahādah are excluded/numerically incorporated for esoteric reasons. Similarly, many disciples and shaykhs were fond of pointing out the numerical equivalence of the Prophet’s name with a phrase form a variant of the ḥadīth qudsī, “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creatures, and by Me (fa bī) they know Me.” In Arabic numerology, the three letters that make up the phrase “by Me” (fa bī) have the following numerical values: fā’=80, bā’=2, and yā’=10. 80+2+10= 92, which is the numerical equivalent of the name “Muḥammad.” The implication here is that the Prophet is the means through which God is known, and through which He knows himself. This numerical symbolism underscores the close identity between God and the Prophet, and the latter’s central role in epistemology. (Shaykh Babacar N’Diaye, interview with author, February 16, 2014. Dakar, Senegal. Arabic).
from the legal sources, or derived by spiritual discovery. Success is dependent upon Allah’s established custom (sunnat Allāh).\textsuperscript{333}

So the efficacy of the invocations is related to the zeal (himmah) which with it is recited, the number of times it is recited, and its meaning.

\textit{Meaning}

Disciples and shuyukh often referred to the inner meanings of the invocations of the Tijani litanies, especially the \textit{Ṣalāt al-IFIED} (the primary invocation of tarbiyah), in explaining how tarbiyah works. Several disciples told me that the inner meaning of the formula of seeking forgiveness (\textit{istighfār}) is to seek “forgiveness” for one’s own separative existence from God and asking God to “erase” this sin of the illusion of separate existence.\textsuperscript{334} The \textit{Shahādah}, \textit{lā ilāha illā Allāh}, “there is no god but God,” as discussed above, was interpreted as meaning, “there is nothing but God.” Reciting it is believed to erase all illusory existence until one attains \textit{fanā’} and realizes the true meaning of the \textit{Shahādah}.

The Tijani tradition has produced a vast body of literature on inner meanings of the \textit{Ṣalāt al-IFIED} and the merits of its recitation, and it is widely described as “the best form of worship other than the invocation of the Greatest Name of God.”\textsuperscript{335} The late Ustadh Barham Diop told me, “The \textit{Ṣalāt al-IFIED} is such a great mystery, I am still discovering its wonders, and I can’t even understand how great it is.”\textsuperscript{336} Abu Ibrahim explained his understanding of the prayer to me in the following terms:

\textsuperscript{333} Niasse, \textit{Removal of Confusion}, 29.

\textsuperscript{334} This is a common theme which appears in early Sufi literature, perhaps beginning with the aphorism attributed to Rabi’ah al-’Adawiyah who told a self-righteous would-be disciple, “your very existence is a sin with which no other sin can be compared.” See also Niasse, \textit{Removal of Confusion}, 185.

\textsuperscript{335} \textit{Ibid}, 193.

If you know God and the Prophet are the same thing, then you know that when Allah prays on the Prophet, it is God manifesting himself, that's it basically. That's how I understand it now. Also one of those guys who ask a lot of questions about ma'rifah, asked, “Allah said we’ve got to pray on the Prophet, but when we say Ṣalāt al-Fāṭih, we say, ‘O Allah pray on the prophet…’ so how do you pray on the Prophet yourself?”

It’s what’s creating the world, it’s through Ṣalāt al-Fāṭih that everything exists, from the unseen, the unknown, the unrevealed. Ṣalāt al-Fāṭih is what’s between existence and non-existence, when you say it, you’re part of the process of expanding the universe. Did you hear this? Is this in the books? [Response: Yes, Shaykh Ibrahim wrote something like this, Shaykh Tijānī has written something similar to this in Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī]. Because I thought it’s not something to say. You see, that’s something I discovered myself, I’m even surprised that it’s in the books.337

The prayer on the prophet (Ṣalāt al-nabī), of which the Ṣalāt al-Fāṭih is the example par excellence for the Tijani traditions, is understood as God’s outpouring (fayḍ) of being, consciousness, light, life, etc. to the Muḥammadan reality, and the subsequent outpouring from Muḥammadan reality to all of existence. Thus, to recite the Ṣalāt al-Fāṭih is to participate in this process, to call forth an outpouring from God, through the Prophet, to oneself, and to draw nearer to uniting with the Muḥammadan Reality, which contains everything. In his article on the Prayer of Ibn Mashīsh, one of the most popular prayers on the Prophet in North Africa, Titus Burckhardt explains,

According to the Sufis, the blessing or effusion of graces (ṣalāt) that God heaps upon the Prophet is nothing other than the irradiation (tajallī) of the Divine Essence, which eternally pours into the cosmos, of which Muḥammad is the synthesis. To ask for the blessing of God on the Prophet is thus to conform with the divine act and intentionally to participate in it; also, tradition provides the assurance that whoever blesses the Prophet attracts upon himself the blessing of the entire universe.338

Furthermore, in his Futūḥāt al-Ilāhiyah (Divine Openings), from which Shaykh Ibrahim and other Tijani authors quote extensively, the Shādhīli Shaykh Ibn ‘Ajībah expands on this perspective:

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In the invocation of blessings (ṣalāḥ) upon the Messenger of God, people are divided into three groups:

First there are those who send blessings upon his human form; these are the people of rational arguments and proofs. They envisage him in their hearts as they invoke blessings upon him, and as they invoke more and more (with presence of mind), the noble image becomes firmer and firmer in their hearts. Thus they see him often in their dreams; and perhaps his noble spirit might take the form of his blessed body so that they see him in a waking state.

Then there are those who invoke blessings upon his illuminating spirit; these are the people of witnessing who travel the spiritual path. They invoke blessings upon his light which flows down from the Realm of Domination (al-Jabarūt), and they witness him most of the time, as long as they have presence of mind and vision.

Then there are those who invoke blessings upon his primordial light, which is the light of all lights; these are the people of spiritual firmness and mastery, they of direct witnessing and vision. The Prophet never leaves them for a moment, which is why Shaykh Abūl ‘Abbās [al-Mursī (d. 1287)], may God be pleased with him, said: “Were the Messenger of God to leave me for the blink of an eye, I would no longer consider myself a Muslim.” In saying this he was alluding to his own firmness and mastery in the Presence, and his having come back to the station of subsistence (al-baqā‘) wherein one witnesses the Intermediary [the Prophet]. Such people’s thoughts roam through the World of Domination (al-Malakūt), and their spirits are connected to the World of Domination (al-Jabarūt), and in them is synthesised all that is lacking in others, as the Prophet said: “All prey is in the belly of the wild donkey.” For the wild donkey is the fattest of all hunted animals, so that whoever catches one is as fortunate as he would be to catch them all. And the poet said:

It is not beyond God in the least
To combine all worlds in one man.339

Here, and in Abu Ibrahim’s account, the blessing or prayer on the prophet (Ṣalāḥ) is equated with the Divine manifestation (tajallī) or outpouring (fāyḍ) of the Divine light, which is simultaneously existence and knowledge. Thus the words of the Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ, “O God blessings be upon (ṣallī ‘alā) our lord, Muḥammad, the opener of what has been closed, and the seal of what has come before, the helper of the Truth, by the Truth, and the guide along your straight path, and upon his family, in accordance with the truth of his rank and his tremendous degree,” take on a deeper significance when applied to the Muḥammadan Reality, and not just the historical person of the prophet. For example, one disciple told me that in this prayer, the phrase, “our Lord Muḥammad” (sayyidīnā Muḥammad) refers to the fact (to which the verse The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own souls (33:6) is also believed to

allude) that the Prophet is our real self, our inner reality for which our everyday identities are but a shell or husk.\textsuperscript{340} In the same vein, “the opener of what has been locked” can be interpreted to refer to the ḥadīth in which God says, “I was a hidden treasure…”, the Prophet is the key which opens the hidden treasure of the Divine Reality and made it manifest. “The seal of what came before” refers not only to the Prophet Muḥammad being the “seal of prophecy,” but also to the fact since it is the reality through which all things come into existence, it is also therefore that to which all things return on their way back to God. Thus, the Muḥammadan reality both “opens” and “seals” all of existence. This arc of creation and return to God is described in the Qur’anic language of the “straight path,”\textsuperscript{341} upon which the Prophet is the guide since he both brings forth and returns multiplicity to the Divine Unity. This Muḥammadan reality is described as the “helper of the Truth by the Truth (al-Ḥaqq),” because though it God brings everything into existence, and through it, everything is returned to God, but this does not imply duality, since this is all accomplished in and by God, the Truth. The commentaries also gloss the first “Truth” as God, the unlimited Divine Reality, and the second “Truth” as he Prophet’s message, Islam, the delimited religion or way of truth, which helps bring creation back to the first Truth. In the prayer, the Prophet’s “family” is commonly taken to refer to his spiritual progeny or successors, the saints. “The reality of his rank and his tremendous degree” (ḥaqq qadrihi wa miqdarihi al-‘azīm) echoes the previously discussed verse of the Qur’an, \textit{They did not measure God in accordance with the reality of His measure (ḥaqqa qadrihi)...on the Day of Resurrection} (39:67) and the associated “ḥadīth


\textsuperscript{341} See Ibn ṬArabī, \textit{Ringstones of Wisdom}, Chapter on Hūd, 105-117.
of transformations,” a possible allusion to the Prophet occupying “the degree beyond degrees” or the “station of no station,” in which everything is synthesized.342

Through reciting the Ṣalāt al-Fātih, the disciple is supposed to realize or discover its inner meanings in him or herself, just as Abu Ibrahim claimed to have done. This is equally true of the “Pearl of Perfection” (Jawharat al-Kamāl), the longer prayer on the Prophet, which Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī is said to have been taught directly by the Prophet Muḥammad in a waking encounter. This prayer contains an even more elaborate description of the Muḥammadan Reality, and is described as being so intimately connected with this reality that reciting it seven times before sleep is believed to ensure a dream of the Prophet, and reciting it twelve times daily is believed to evoke the spiritual presence of the Prophet and lead to waking visions of him. In his Removal of Confusion, Shaykh Ibrahim quotes the prominent Moroccan Tijānī scholar, Shaykh Aḥmad Sukayrij’s (d. 1944), statement: “Know that this noble invocation [the Jawharat al-Kamāl] is equal in content to all the wells of gnosis and secrets.”343

The literal text of the prayer reads:

O God, blessings and peace be upon the source/essence/spring (‘ayn) of Divine Mercy, The realized ruby that encompasses the center of understandings and meanings, The light of the existentiated existents, The Adamic possessor of the Divine Truth The brightest flash of lightning that fills the rain clouds of blessing That fill all the intervening seas and receptacles Your radiant light with which you have filled Your creation,

342 This phrase also appears in 6:91, And they measure not God in accordance with the reality of His measure when they say: God has not sent down anything to a human being [in terms of revelation]. Thus, in the prayer, the reality of his/His measure possibly alludes to this “measure” including both God’s transcendence and immanence, especially his immanent manifestation in the form of the “Perfect Man.”

343 Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 215. The Jawharat al-Kamāl belongs to a genre of prayers (ṣalawāt) on the spiritual reality of the Prophet popular in North African Sufism. The aforementioned prayer of Ibn Mashīsh is perhaps the oldest and best known of this type of prayer containing an elaborate and poetic description of the Prophet’s metaphysical and cosmological dimensions. The celebrated Dalā’il al-Khayrāt of the Shāhīlī Shaykh al-Jazullī also contains several such prayers. These prayers were often said to be received from the Prophet in some form of visionary experience, as was the Jawharat al-Kamāl.
Encompassing all possible places
O God, blessings and peace be upon the source/essence/spring (‘ayn) of the Truth from which are manifested the thrones of realities
The source/essence/spring (‘ayn) of the most correct/precious (al-aqwām) Knowledges
Your complete and most straight path
O God, blessings and peace be upon the dawning of the Truth by the Truth
The greatest treasure, Your outpouring from Yourself to Yourself
The encompassing of the talismanic light
May God bless him and his family, a blessing/prayer (Ṣalah) through which You make him Known to us

This highly poetic prayer primarily employs the symbolism of light and that of water, and the commentarial tradition makes much of the fact that the word ‘ayn can, at once, mean “source,” “essence,” and “spring” to describe the Muḥammadan reality as a spring or well which waters all of creation, as the channel through which Divine Mercy and existence flow to everything that exists.

This highly poetic prayer can be understood as a summary of Ibn ‘Arabi’s theory of the Muḥammadan reality, with a strong emphasis on its epistemic dimension. In one of the masterpieces of Sufi literature (and Arabic literature in general), the first chapter of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Ringstones of Wisdom describes the origin and nature of the Muḥammadan reality. In short, Ibn ‘Arabi explains that the Real willed to know itself through another, and not just in itself, for “the vision a thing has of itself in itself is not like the vision a thing has of itself in another thing, which will be like a mirror for it.” Thus God created the universe as a mirror for himself, and the Muḥammadan Reality is the polish of this mirror and His reflection in it. It is the synthesis of all of the Divine Qualities in a single reality that comprises all other realities, and from which they are derived. More precisely, Ibn ‘Arabi likens this reality to the pupil of the eye (insān means both “pupil” and “man” in Arabic) since the pupil is that through which vision occurs, and so when looking at a reflection of your own face, the pupil is the point which contains everything else in the mirror. It is the source of vision, and thus, the reflection.

Drawing on the imagery of the ḥadīth literature, Ibn ‘Arabi explains this process through the previously discussed metaphor of the breaths of the All-Merciful (nafs al-Raḥmān). In the beginning, the Divine Reality is referred to as al-‘Amā — “the cloud” or “the blindness,” names for the inscrutable, undifferentiated Divine Essence (although Ibn ‘Arabi interprets this image slightly differently in different places). Then (keeping in mind that this succession is logical and ontological, not temporal), through what is termed “the invisible self-disclosure” (al-tajjālī al-ghayb) the Divine Essence considers itself, differentiating itself within itself to create the Divine Ideas or immutable entities, the Divine seeds or roots of everything that will come to be. This is known as “the first self-disclosure of God to Himself” (al-tajjālī al-awwal min Allāh ilayhi) or “the first entification” (al-ta’āyyun al-awwal) or “the most holy outpouring” (al-fayḍ al-aqdas) and is identified with the Muḥammadan reality. Then, through the “visible self-disclosure” (al-tajjālī al-ghayb), also known as “the holy outpouring” (al-fayḍ al-muqaddas) these Divine Ideas are brought into existence as the many things of creation. These outpourings are identified with the “breaths of the all-Merciful,” as breaths or flows of Divine Mercy, which Ibn ‘Arabi equates with being (wjūd).

The implied visual image is that of a cloud which in one “breath” produces an indefinite number of holes in itself, and in the second “breath,” breathes “the breath of mercy” out through these holes, bringing the multiplicity of creation into existence. The holes, while non-existent in themselves, and not other than the cloud, determine the “shape” and trajectory of everything that comes into being. From another point of view, these immutable entities are described as receptacles that are “filled” with existence in accordance with their varying capacities.
The description of this reality as a “realized ruby” alludes to the famous verse of poetry, “Muḥammadan is a man, but not like mortal men / For he is a ruby, and people are like stones,” attributed to the Shādhilī poet al-Buṣirī (d. 1294). This ruby is “realized” or “realizing” (mutaḥaqiqah) because it is both perfect in its spiritual realization and is the means through which spiritual realization is achieved. The image of the ruby suggests facets corresponding to the Divine Qualities and Attributes, and a transparency and purity through which the otherwise invisible can be seen—just as certain lenses permit one to look directly at the sun or at a solar eclipse, the “realized ruby” allows the aspirant to “see” the Divine Essence.  

Echoing Qur’anic language, in the Islamic intellectual tradition, knowledge (‘ilm) is often defined as “the encompassing of the known by the knower” (iḥāṭah al-ma‘lûm bi’l-‘ālim), and so the commentators describe the Muḥammadan reality, the “realized ruby,” as both the point in which all knowledge is synthesized, and the circle which surrounds it—its own self-awareness.

The next line of the prayer introduces the symbol of light, and the commentaries explain that the light of the Prophet was taken from the light of the Divine Essence, and the light (which is here identical to existence) of existing things is taken from the Prophet. Using Shaykh Ibrahim’s cinematic analogy, the Muḥammadan reality is like the projector which contains all of the images within itself, and whose light manifests them into visibility. Light is associated with knowledge, and the analogy between visibility and intelligibility is oft-used in

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Shaykh Ibrahim comments on this part of the prayer in another prayer of his, writing, “allow this scintillating ruby to take possession of my heart, so that by it I come to realize (ataḥaqqaqu) the Greatest Name and Its secret. Illuminate my heart until it emits light, so that by this ruby I see the unseen worlds of the universe, until neither the unseen external worlds nor the subtleties of the hidden worlds are hidden from me. By this ruby let me see the perfection of Your essence (dhhāt). (Niasse, Ibrāhīm. Kanz al-maṣūn, 63 qtd. in Wright, Living Knowledge, 157).
Sufism, Islamic Philosophy, and other Islamic intellectual traditions. Light is commonly defined as that which is visible in itself, i.e. self-aware, and that which makes other things apparent/intelligible. The luminous imagery of this prayer is at once cosmological and epistemological, describing the noetic and ontological dimensions of the Muḥammadan reality.

The “flashing lightning in the clouds” is a stock image of Arabic poetry, which evokes the contrast of light and dark and the promise of rain, which is associated with Divine Mercy. In Sufi poetry, lightning is also commonly used as a symbol of the self-disclosure (tajallī) of the Divine Essence (al-dhāt) due to its blinding brilliance, power, and instantaneity. The image of the cloud recalls the “ḥadīth of the cloud” in which the prophet responded to the question “Where was our Lord before He created the heavens and the earth” by saying “He was in the Cloud (al-‘Amā) neither above nor below which was any air (hawā).” In commenting on this ḥadīth, Ibn ‘Arabi explains that the cosmos in its entirety takes shape within this Cloud, which he identifies with the breath of the All-Merciful (nafas al-Raḥmān), and calls “the supreme barzakh,” another name of the Muḥammadan reality. Thus the evocative image of the “lightning in the rain clouds” describes the Muḥammadan reality as

346 For example, see Ghazzālī’s influential treatise, The Niche of Lights (Mishkāt al-Anwār).

347 This image also appears in Ḥallāj’s Ẓawāṣīn, “Above him [the Prophet] a cloud flashed bolts of lightning, and below him a bolt of lightning flashed, shone, caused rain, and fructified. All knowledge is but a drop from his ocean, and all wisdom is but a handful from his stream, and all times are but an hour from his life.” (Aisha Bewley, The Tawasin of Mansur Al-Hallaj (Berkeley: Diwan, 1974), 2).

348 Related in Ḥanbal and Tirmidhī, see Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 125.

349 Chittick, Self-Disclosure, 70, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 125. The allusion here is to the two outpourings (fayḍān) through which the world is existentiated. In the first, “The Most Holy Outpouring,” (al-fayḍ al-aqdas) the absolutely undifferentiated Divine Essence differentiates itself into the immutable entities (‘ayān thābitah) without existentiation, and in the second, “The Holy Outpouring” (al-fayḍ al-muqaddas), the breath of the All-Merciful grants these immutable entities their existence. The “lightning” can refer to the first effusion, and the “rain” to the second.
the light of creation within the realm of the unseen, within which all of creation is waiting to 
be manifest through Divine Mercy, like the rain in dark clouds. The commentators interpret 
the “intervening seas and receptacles” as the hearts of the Knowers, which are filled with 
maʿrīfah according to their different capacities, or more generally, as the immutable entities 
(‘ayān al-thābitah) of everything—their realities in God’s Knowledge before they come into 
existence.

The commentators gloss the “thrones of realities” as the spiritual realities of 
phenomenal things. The “throne” (ʿarsh) is a Qur’anic term, which the Sufi tradition has 
generally taken to refer to the reality that encompasses the entire manifest universe, 
connecting it to higher Divine Realities (such as the Muḥammadan Reality). In this 
cosmology, the visible world is something akin to a chain of islands—the landscape “above 
the surface” of the water is just a projection of a much larger, hidden landscape, “beneath the 
surface.” In this perspective, the “thrones of the realities” would be the “hidden” roots of the 
islands, which connect them to the ocean floor.

The “greatest treasure” refers to the ḥadīth of the “hidden treasure,” and the 
“outpouring from Yourself to Yourself” alludes to the description of the Muḥammadan reality 
as the “most holy outpouring” (fayḍ al-aqdas) and “invisible self-disclosure” (tajallī al-ghayb) 
the reflection of the Real in mirror in which It contemplates Itself in Itself. The commentators 
gloss “talismanic light” as “hidden light,” but given that the Arabic word for talisman (tīlīm) 

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350 This image could also possibly allude to the verse And you see the mountains, which you deem to be solid, 
passing away as the passing away of the clouds (22:78) which Shaykh Ibrahim frequently quotes as an allusion to 
another aspect of the doctrine the breaths of the All-Merciful (nafas al-Rahmān), through which the entire 
world is created and returned to God at each instant, like kind of instantaneous Divine inhalation and exhalation. 
Jawāhir al-Rasāʾīl II, 126.
also means “protective seal,” Ibn ʿArabi’s description of the Perfect Man/Muḥammadan Reality is also relevant here:

He is to the world what the ringstone is to the ring, which is the place of the signet and the mark with which the king sets a seal upon his treasures…. For through him, the Real protects his creation, as the seal protects those treasures. No one would dare open them so long as the king’s seal was still upon them, unless by his leave. It is thus that he is entrusted with protecting the world.351

The “greatest treasure” alludes to the previously-discussed ḥadīth qudsī, “I was a hidden treasure and loved to be known…”, identifying this treasure of God’s unmanifest knowledge of Himself with the Muḥammadan reality. The closing invocation of the prayer, “a blessing/prayer (Ṣalah) through which You make him known to us,” underscores the identification of the prayer on the prophet (Ṣalāt al-nabī) with the outpouring of knowledge (fayḍ). Since the Ṣalāt al-nabī is understood to be identical to the Divine outpouring (fayḍ) of light, existence, and knowledge, the very act of reciting these prayers is regarded as receiving and participating in this outpouring of knowledge. In fact, these prayers could even be said to be or contain this Knowledge, which is, in turn identified with the Muḥammadan reality.352

Thus the very meanings of these prayers are supposed to facilitate the realization of the realities they describe and embody in language, not only through the daily contemplation of their meanings and symbolism, but also through the mysterious power of their language. That is, the prayers are believed to be efficacious even if the reciter does not understand their meanings. When I asked shaykhs and disciples if the Ṣalāt al-Fāṭih would have the same effect if recited in French or English, most of them replied, “I don’t think so” or “of course not.” Some explained that this was because it was impossible to exactly translate the prayer

351 Ringstones of Wisdom, 6; see also Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 184-6.

352 See Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 177-222, Jawāhir al-maʿānī, 1408-1431, and Ḥzāb wa Awrād p. 1-21 for commentaries on these and other Tijānī prayers.
from one language to another, and most said something like “God had put *barakah* (blessing/sacred presence) into some words, and so when you say them, they have an effect.”

K.S. elaborated on this perspective, dividing languages into three categories: sacred languages, those languages in which God has spoken; liturgical languages, those accepted by God for ritual use, but in which He did not speak; and profane languages, all those which are neither sacred nor liturgical.353

Language is something very grand, very complex, but very important. I was talking about the process of getting knowledge, but to get a form of knowledge whatever it could be, you must understand language so that the person teaching you can express himself, and so that you yourself will be able to understand other forms of knowledge of language are not spoken forms, you see something, you try to understand its direction and you build your own theory of things….

But Allah has sent many prophets, many messengers to the world, and all languages in civilization can be categorized into three parts: there are sacred languages-why do I call them sacred? When Allah sent a book in that language, that is a sacred language. For instance, Arabic, Syriac, and Hebrew. Allah sent to us books and many forms of spiritual knowledge in those languages, Arabic, Syriac, and Hebrew, but those books-some are inspired, Allah inspires people so that they could write that book, but only God's speech can be called revelation. And there are liturgical languages, liturgical languages are not sacred, but they were accepted, recognized by messengers of Allah, and after that, there are profane languages. What you have to know is that these languages,… they are just a starting point, but deeply inside, Arabic, Spanish, etc. are not important because gradually you will reach a point that words are simply useless, you won’t need words to express or understand or to get knowledge.354 Right now, you need languages, Spanish, English, you need Italian, but you will reach a point that words and languages you are using right now won’t be able to reach.355

In response to my question, “would the *Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ* work in French?”, Shaykh Māhi Cissé referred to this “point beyond language” and the different levels of *dhikr* discussed in the previous section.

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353 A similar distinction can be found in the work of Frithjof Schuon (See his *Understanding Islam*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1963). When I asked K.S. if he had ever read Schuon or come across this distinction in his reading, he seemed surprised and said that this was something that he had devised himself.

354 cf. Rumi “Although the commentary of the tongue makes (all) clear, yet, tongueless love is clearer., Whilst the pen was making haste in writing, it split upon itself, as soon as it came to Love.” (I 113-4) “Therefore the tongue of mutual understanding is different indeed: to be one in heart is better than to be one in tongue., Without speech and without sign or scroll, hundreds of thousands of interpreters arise from the heart.” (I. 1207-8).

That could also work, but [saying it in Arabic] is for the barakah of following the Prophet Muhammad. Because many people when they come to Islam, they say “there is no god but Allah,” because they don’t know how to say lā ilāha illā Allah. But to say lā ilāha illā Allah, Allah put some barakah in some things, so that barakah will go with those things all the time. But even if you say lā ilāha illā Allah to the point where you don’t say anything, but you just have it in your heart, that will work. So what you have in your heart working, that is not French, it is not Arabic, but what they call “numerical letters,” “mental letters” “imaginal letters,” (al-hurūf al-raqmiyah, al-fikriyah, al-khayāliyah)—all these things are working. So you can make the Surah Al-Fātihah without even mentioning anything. Because dhikr, as Shaykh Ibrahim mentioned in his “Conversation with his Secret,” his secret asked him, “O Ibrahim, are you a friend of God (wali Allāh)?” He said, ‘Yes, and my proof for that is that I am close to Him (wālaytuhu) through the remembrance (dhikr) in my secret, in my spirit, inwardly and outwardly (qalbān wa qalībān).’...” Mentioning it with your tongue (qalībān), is only the beginning, but [the goal is] to get to the dhikr of qalb (heart), to get to rūḥ (spirit) to get to sirr (secret)—even to get to sirr you can go to get to khafī (the hidden secret).

**Permission/Transmission**

However, the prayers and invocations of tarbiyah do not simply work on their own, nor are they the only way in which Shaykh Ibrahim led people to ma’rifah. Ustadh Barham Diop told me a story about a time when he and Shaykh Ibrahim traveled to Ibadan, a city in southwestern Nigeria where Shaykh Ibrahim has a large number of disciples. A certain local judge (qāḍī) had heard that the disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim were prone to ecstatic utterances and came to scold Shaykh Ibrahim and denounce him for promoting heresy. When the judge arrived, and began arguing with him, “Shaykh Ibrahim asked him question after question, like Socrates, until that judge had a fals and began making the same ecstatic utterances he had come to criticize Shaykh Ibrahim about!”

Moreover, the shuyukh I interviewed emphasized the fact that the litanies of tarbiyah cannot be practiced without being formally transmitted from a realized shaykh, quoting the following saying of Shaykh Ibrahim, “The secret is in the permission. The best thing that can happen to someone who attempts these litanies without authorization is that he or she escapes

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356 This short treatise is translated in full in the following section.


Shaykh Ibrahim also wrote, “it is well known among the people of the spiritual path that the remembrance which benefits its practitioner is the one received from perfected shaykhs.” Thus, on their own, the litanies and practices of tarbiyah do not lead to the radical transformations of consciousness described above. In fact, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī is said to have answered a disciple’s question, “‘Is the benefit of the Tijānī litanies from the words themselves, or because of you?’ He said, ‘It is because of me.’”

Similarly, when I asked Barham Diop how Shaykh Ibrahim devised or discovered these litanies (awrād) of tarbiyah, he told me, “The litanies were known, they can be found in the books. It was because Shaykh Ibrahim was the possessor of the fayḍah that his tarbiyah was so effective.” Thus the litanies of tarbiyah can be understood as a means of conveying the flow of spiritual realization from master to disciple. In his Removal of Confusion, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse quotes the following passage,

Success will either come upon him suddenly, or it will take him by surprise. Allah the Exalted will favor him by removing the veil from his heart and he will become united with the spirit of the Shaykh or that of the Prophet…. Like this, his spiritual training (tarbiyah) comes by the outpouring (istifāda) from one of them [Shaykh Tijānī or the Prophet] or both of them together. That is the grace of God, which he gives to whom He wills; and God is the owner of infinite grace (57:21). This is the meaning of what is found in the Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī in regards to visualizing the presence of the Shaykh or the Prophet while performing the litanies. . . .

The prominent Shaykhah, Seyyidah Diarra Ndiaye likened this outpouring to an electric current. “When a disciple comes to me for tarbiyah, I feel something like electricity. With some disciples it is stronger, and other times it is less, just as the electric current can

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359 cf. Wright, Living Knowledge, 232.

360 Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 23.

361 Umar al-Fūtī, Rimāḥ, 419. qtd. in Wright, Living knowledge, 245.


363 Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 91 quoting Sidī al-‘Arabī al-Sā’īḥ’s Jawāb al-Shāfī.”
sometimes surge and sometimes be weaker, depending on the zeal (*himmah*) and the capacity of the disciple.”

This almost-sensory/physical, non-discursive transmission of knowledge from one person to another finds its precedent in accounts of the Prophet’s *mi’rāj* or heavenly ascent, where he was said to have received the totality of all possible human knowledge directly from God. Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

> The Prophet said, “When God struck His palm between my shoulders, I came to know the knowledge of the ancients and the later folk” through that placing of the palm. So through that striking God gave him the knowledge he mentioned. By this knowledge he means knowledge of God. Knowledge of other than God is a waste of time (*tāḍyī’ al-waqt*), since God created the cosmos only for knowledge of Him. More specifically, this is the case with what is called “mankind and jinn,” since He stated clearly that He created them to worship Him.\(^{365}\)

Shaykh Babacar Ndiaye commented on this account, explaining that that the Prophet then transmitted some of this knowledge to all of his followers, and some of it, he only transmitted to his closest companions through initiation (*talqīn*), which is the origin and source of Sufi initiations today.

In *Sirr al-Akbar*, Shaykh Ibrahim describes this process of initiation (*talqīn*) and the central role that Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī plays therein:

> When the Tijānī disciple reaches this, he puts himself in submission in the hands of his shaykh *murabbī* (his spiritual master) who is the representative of Shaykh Tijānī in the sensory world. For Shaykh Tijānī is his [the disciple’s] spiritual trainer in reality, and he is with him always, whenever he [the disciple] remembers him [Shaykh Tijānī] in his heart... so the initiator cannot initiate anyone unless he has already been effaced (*inṭimās*) in Shaykh Tijānī, that is, annihilated in him, from the point of view that he sees himself as being the same as Shaykh Tijānī. So in light of this effacement, Shaykh Tijānī is the one who initiates the disciple himself without an intermediary between them...the power [of the initiator] comes from the degree to which he is annihilated in Shaykh Tijānī at the moment of initiation and before it, and after it. For the goal of the disciple is none other than Shaykh Tijānī.\(^{366}\)

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Shaykh Ibrahim then goes on to explain that since Shaykh Tijānī is the real initiator, those who do the initiation are only his representatives in the sensory world, and so if these initiators leave the Ṭarīqah or lose their state of annihilation, it doesn’t affect the disciple’s relationship with Shaykh Tijānī and the flow of initiatic power from him since “he is the one behind the veils of sanad (chains of transmission).”\(^{367}\)

However, since the power of the initiation is understood to be connected to the degree of annihilation of the initiator in Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī (and the Prophet and God), not all shaykhs and not all initiations are considered equal. Shaykh Māḥī Cissé likened this to studying the same subject with two different professors—those who study with the better professor will learn more.

The wīrd is the same, but the shaykhs are not the same, so the more barakah your shaykh has, the more barakah you’re going to get—if you follow him! Because some people, they follow, maybe a small shaykh, and get more than the other people who follow a big shaykh, because maybe, these people, they follow, while those people, they don’t follow. But the faith of a disciple depends on the faith of his shaykh and his degree of annihilation in the presence of the Messenger and of God.\(^{368}\) That is why Shaykh Ibrahim said, “before you chose any shaykh for tarbiyah, be sure that he is a murabbī (one who can dispense tarbiyah) and that there isn’t anyone better qualified to give tarbiyah than him.\(^{369}\)

This theme of annihilation features prominently in accounts of the beginning of the Fayḍah, the special outpouring which disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim claim as the secret behind the power of his tarbiyah. In many accounts, the Fayḍah first became manifest in the Kaolack during a mawlid celebration at the house of Shaykh Ibrahim’s father, ‘Abdallāh Niasse. During the proceedings, Shaykh Ibrahim suddenly stood up and said, “Those who want anything from Shaykh Tijānī, know that it is me! Come to me, I am Shaykh Tijānī” or “this is

\(^{367}\) *Ibid*, 390. He also explains that a disciple must show reverence and respect to one’s shaykh because it is the same as showing reverence to Shaykh Tijānī.

\(^{368}\) Although, some disciples told me that they saw other disciples following shaykhs whose degree of realization was lesser than theirs, “like the moon following a star,” or “an ocean following a river.”

the hand of God, this is the hand of the Prophet, this is the hand of Shaykh Tijānī.”  

The taking of the hand as a pact (ba’yah) is a common form of initiation in Sufi orders, which takes its precedent from the pact of ‘Aqabah, in which a delegation from Medina swore their allegiance to the Prophet by taking his hand. The Qur’an famously refers to this event in the verse, *Those who swear allegiance to you [Muḥammad], swear allegiance to God. The hand of God is above their hands* (48:10). Commenting on this verse, Shaykh Ibrahim explains, that the Prophet’s hand is God’s hand because of the former’s total annihilation in the latter. So the outpouring of initiatic power (walayah) and Knowledge (ma’rifah), which constitutes the process of tarbiyah, is made possible by the annihilation of the initiator in Shaykh Ibrahim, his annihilation in Shaykh Tijānī, his annihilation in the Prophet, and his annihilation in God. These figures, as well as the disciple, all play an active role in the process of spiritual realization.

Thus, tarbiyah is understood in a manner quite different from that of modern discourses about meditation or mindfulness or other “self-help” approaches to spiritual “realization.” Tarbiyah (like other processes of spiritual realization in Sufism in general) is premised upon a set of social and spiritual relationships, of which, from a certain perspective, the performance of meditative practices are but a manifestation. When I asked K.S. how he joined the Ṭarīqah, he told me his story, but then added,

> Officially you are not considered Tijānī until you have taken the wīrd, it is a precondition. But a person can consider him or herself as Tijānī if he or she feels deeply inside that he shares

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371 Niasse, *Fī Ṭiyād al-Tafsīr* vol. 5 346-7. He also describes this annihilation as being the secret of the Ṣalāt al-nabī (the prayer on the prophet) explaining that it is not permitted to perform the ritual prayer towards or upon someone, with the exception of the funeral prayer, in which case, the person is not there. Because of the totality of the Prophet’s annihilation in God, it is permissible to pray towards or upon him, just as it is permissible to perform the prayer towards or upon a dead person in the funeral prayer.
something with Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī, if he recognizes her or himself in the writings of Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī, the ideas of Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī. So, there are two ways to join the Ṭarīqah. The official one if that you take the wīrd, from a Tijāni scholar who has the authorization to give you the wīrd, and the second way is more spiritual, and it is something you deeply feel inside...The wīrd is just a concrete way to join the Ṭarīqah, but the prerequisite is to be sincere, to feel directly connected to Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī. The wīrd is something material, it is just a second stage. But first, you have to have a strong belief in the Ṭarīqah, in Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī, in the ideology, in the framework in general of the Tijāniyyah, and after taking the wīrd is something obvious, it is just a result of this.  

From this perspective, the performance of litanies and spiritual exercises that lead to maʿrifah can be understood as manifestations of these spiritual relationships or connections, and/or as a means of establishing these relationships in time and space. This may be difficult for some modern, Western-educated readers to understand, but this may say more about the limitations of contemporary academic paradigms than it does about the coherence of these Sufi ideas. As Shahzad Bahsir notes in an excellent article on the practice of dhikr in 14th-century Central Asia,

…the practice of dhikr cannot be disassociated from the social context in which it takes place. In my view, the inextricability of the personal and the social in the practice of dhikr is ties to the fact that in Sufi theory, the ultimate purpose of following the Sufi path is to cultivate a particular form of human religious subjectivity that conjoins many different aspects of human existence…. the comparison between dhikr and meditation is instructive for highlighting the fact that our commonsensical modern understanding of meditation is also premised on a particular conception of the human person that is far from a human universal valid across cultures and time periods. The idea that individual practice is localizable to a single person rests on the notion of individual sovereignty and is connected to a particular conception of rights and responsibilities that has acquired an aura of universality and inevitability only since the worldwide spread of modern western ideas. The modern concept of meditation is premised on this base understanding, which is why it resembles, but cannot be interchangeable with, the place of dhikr within a different system such as Sufi thought and practice…. Examining meditation in the light of presumptions coming from dhikr highlights meditation’s connections to modern forms of human subjectivity that are ingrained in the way we think and act, but are not always easily visible.  

In the contemporary practice of tarbiyah, God, the Prophet, Shaykh Tijānī, Shaykh Ibrahim, and his disciples are all active participants in this process of cultivating “a particular form of subjectivity” and its associated mode of knowledge (maʿrifah).

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Following the Prophet

This ideal “human religious subjectivity” is identified with the Prophet to such an extent that disciples and shaykhs alike usually described the process of acquiring ma’rifah simply as “following the Prophet.” As the Prophet is reported to have said, “Were it not for the excess of your talking and the turmoil in your hearts, you would see what I see and hear what I hear.”374 The mode of being identified with the Prophet as the Perfect Man (the Muḥammadan reality) is a particular possibility amongst many possibilities, but for the Sufis, it is like the point that contains the whole circle. It is somewhat akin to “the Aleph” from Borges’ short story of the same name: the point in space which contains all other points, and from which everything in the universe can be seen from every angle, simultaneously, and without confusion or distortion.375 Thus, following the Prophet “in words, deeds, and states” is the best way to cultivate this most comprehensive and complete mode of being/knowing.

While some Western-educated readers may find it confusing as to what fasting during a certain month, praying in a particular way, avoiding certain types of foods, wearing certain kinds of clothes, etc. have to do with acquiring knowledge, the fact that the Prophet has done so makes it epistemically relevant. From this perspective, the many disparate things of the visible or physical world are so many phenomena or appearances of the spiritual realities, which are in turn manifestations of the Divine Essence throughout the various levels of

374 qtd. in Morris, J. The Reflective Heart, 42. Also see Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 238 for a similar statement.

375 Borges has the characters of the story describe the Aleph and the experience of seeing it as, “the only place on earth where all places are — seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending…. I saw the circulation of my own dark blood; I saw the coupling of love and the modification of death; I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth; I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon — the unimaginable universe.” (http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/borgesaleph.pdf)
reality. Thus actions in the physical or sensory level of reality can affect, or more precisely, are connected with actions or transformations on higher levels of reality. As Shaykh Ibrahim writes, “the movement of the apparent things (ẓawāhir) is only realized by the movement of the secret things (sarāʿir).” Thus, one’s outward actions both come from, and affect, the heart, spirit, and intellect. These different levels of being each have their own characteristics and qualities, like different layers of the atmosphere. In the physical world of everyday time and space, one thing cannot be another, and things are bound in forms. This is less so in the imaginal world where opposites can combine and forms are more fluid. The higher spiritual or intelligible worlds are those of pure meanings without forms, and about the inscrutable Divine Essence, nothing can be said. Ibn ʿArabi often likens these presences or levels of reality to a horn or cone, in which the physical or sensible level is the most narrow, and the higher levels are wider and more expansive. I mention this here because many in modern or modernized societies seem to feel a strong impulse or desire to escape the constraints of formal, outward religious practice in the name of transcending it (“to be spiritual but not religious”). This idea is completely alien to the Tijani Sufi milieu (and mainstream Sufism in general), in which the formal is transcended through formal spiritual practice. In this perspective, one can’t follow more than one way of life/prescribed law (sharīʿah), because this physical level of reality does not permit the union of opposites; however, one can transcend these apparent contradictions on the ontologically higher level of the heart, which can potentially accept all forms of belief.

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376 See For Ibn ʿArabi’s influential and fascinating theory of causality across different levels of reality, see Izutstu, Sufism and Taoism, 256-9.

377 Niasse, Sirr al-Akbar, 390.
On the physical and mental levels, forms are inescapable. If you do one thing at a
certain time that means you can’t do another thing at the same time; if you think about one
thing, that means that you can’t think about another thing at the same time. However, the
higher levels of reality, which do not partake in these limitations, can be accessed and
integrated into these lower levels, through the doors of certain forms. As the Perfect Man, the
model *par excellence* of the integration of the various levels of reality, the Prophet is
considered to embody and represent the best of these forms that lead to levels of existence
beyond form, and so can be said to contain all forms. If existence is envisioned as a multi-
story building with a beautiful penthouse and rooftop terrace, then the Prophet is the staircase
connecting all of its levels; if it is a mountain, then he is the stream that flows from the snowy
summit to the grassy plains; if an underground cave, as in Plato’s Allegory, he is the tunnel
that leads to the world above, and back again. This is why the practice of following the
Prophet’s example, often in minute detail, is given such importance, even (especially)
amongst advanced Sufi masters. Restricting oneself to the particular form of the Prophet at
one level is understood to paradoxically free one from all formal restrictions on other levels,
just as the practice turning in a single direction to pray is supposed to lead to the vision of
God “wheresoever one turns.” The purpose of following the *sharī‘ah* of the Prophet
Muḥammad outwardly is the realization of the inward states of the Muḥammadan, the Perfect
Man, whose heart is receptive to all forms, and whose reality is identical with their very
essence. From this perspective, the *sharī‘ah* is the manifestation of this ideal mode of being in
the plane of outward actions. As the Sufi saying attributed to the Prophet says, “The *sharī‘ah*
is my speech, the *fariqah* is my acts and the *ḥaqiqah* is my state.”

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In the Jawāhir al-Maʿānī the following account of “following the prophet” is attributed to Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī:

Following the prophet is a sign of love of the servant for his Lord, and the servant’s recompense for the beauty of following the Messenger is God’s love for him. This love emerges from the servant’s awareness of God’s blessings upon him, both outward and inward. The power of that love is in accordance to the degree of this awareness. Among the greatest awareness that the servant can have of the blessings of God upon him is the blessing of him being connected to Him through love and Knowledge and following His beloved. The foundation of this is a light which God casts into the heart of His servant. When that light illumines the heart, it reveals its essence to it [the heart], so he [the servant] sees in himself what is appropriate to it of perfections and beauties, by which his zeal and determination are strengthened, and the darkness of his soul and nature are dissipated, for light and darkness cannot come together without one of them driving out the other. This happens to the spirit when it is between awe and intimacy with the beloved. And in accordance with this following, love and being loved are bestowed together. The affair is not complete without both of them.

For what is important is not [just] for you to love God, but rather, for God to love you, and you will not beloved unless you follow His beloved outwardly and inwardly, confirming his reports (khabar), obeying his commands, answering his call, preferring him, leaving aside the rulings of anyone other than him for his own rulings, leaving aside the love of and obedience to anyone else in creation in order to love and obey him alone. If you are not like this, then you do not have anything. So consider His saying, then follow me, God will love you (3:31). Following this Prophet is the nobility of the life of the hearts, and the light of the insights, and the healing of the breasts (hearts), the joy of the spirits, the intimacy of the isolated, and the guide of the bewildered. …Among the signs of love for him [the Prophet], is love of his sunnah and the reading of his ḥadiths. So if anyone in whose heart the sweetness of faith has entered hears a word from among the words of God or the speech of His Messenger, his spirit, soul, and heart absorb it. And when his heart and secret are illumined, waves of realization (taḥqīq) wash over him and proofs are manifest to him while he drinks in the affection and love he has for his beloved. Nothing could be more refreshing.379

Commenting on the same verse of the Qur’an (3:31) Shaykh Ibrahim similarly connects the practice of following the Prophet with love and spiritual transformation,

Say, if you love God, then follow me, and God will love you. (3:31)
This is an indication that whoever loves God will follow the Messenger of God. God has linked obeying him with obeying His messenger. Whosoever obeys the Messenger has obeyed God. He made the sign of love of God obeying the Messenger of God. It is clear that whoever loves someone loves all of his beloveds and everything associated with him. Whoever is in love with his beloved even loves those who dress like him. When his love for Layla grew strong, Majnūn saw a dog in the desert and clothed him with a robe. When asked about it, he responded, “Truly, My eyes saw him once in Layla’s neighborhood.” Thus, whoever loves God, God’s beloved is the Messenger of God, if you love God, then follow me, and God will love you, so whoever loves God, then let him follow the Messenger. The one who claims to love God and yet leaves aside the way of the Messenger, he is a false claimant.

Had your Love been sincere, you would have obeyed it
For the lover is obedient towards whom he loves

The following of the Prophet through all of one’s words and actions is the most elevated means (wasīlah) that the servant can take to arrive at the presence of God… Whoever follows the prophet finds the love of God, and when God loves his servant, He is him. “My servant does not cease to draw near to me through supererogatory works until I love him, and when I love him, I am him.”  

Because the Prophet is understood as being totally annihilated in God, as having the most complete knowledge of God possible, following his example inwardly and outwardly is believed to lead to the same state. Practically, following the Prophet means following those who are annihilated in him, his representatives in one’s own time and place. In this case, the Shaykhs of the Tijani order. These states of annihilation, in which there is no distinction between subject and object, are only possible given the noetic/existential identity of the knower and the known, the annihilated and the “annihilated-in.” Thus this perspective implies that subjectivity and consciousness are not separate, self-contained individual realities, but rather more like a tributaries of a river flowing into an ocean—distinct on one level, connected or identical on another.

Thus “following the Prophet” is a journey that is at once intellectual and existential, ethical and mystical. The fruit of this work is ma’rīfah—certain, direct, existential knowledge of God, of self, and the intermediate realities of the Prophet and Shaykhs. This process is described as a “voyage of the heart” (sayr al-qalb) through the world of meaning, the heart being the instrument of this special and most important form of knowledge. As Ibn ʿArabi writes, “Know—God confirm you—that knowledge is for the heart to acquire (tahṣīl) something (amr) as that thing is in itself, whether the thing is existent or nonexistent. Knowledge is the attribute gained by the heart through this acquisition. The knower is the

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381 Niasse, Sirr al–akbar, 390.
heart, and the object of knowledge is that acquired thing. Conceiving of the reality of knowledge is extremely difficult." In the same vein, Shaykh Ibrahim quotes the following verses of poetry, describing this “eye of the heart”

My Beloved graciously manifested Himself
What a great honor he has shown me
Making himself known to me, until I became certain
That I am seeing him overtly, without fantasy
And in every state, I see Him continuously
On the mountain of my heart, where He speaks to me
In this embrace, there is no union
And no separation, He is exalted above either of these
How is it possible for the likes of me to contain the likes of Him?
How can the tiny star be compared to the full moon?
But I happened to see him in the purity of my secret
There I saw Perfection, too glorious to be divided
Just as the full moon shows its face
In the still pond, although it shines high in the heavens

**How is Ma‘rifah Verified?**

Now that we have discussed *ma’rifah*, and the ways in which it is acquired, we turn to the question of verification. How do you know if someone else has *ma’rifah*? How can you tell if you yourself have acquired this knowledge? Given the close association of *ma’rifah* with certainty and the unique experiences of *fanā’* and *baqā’* the latter question may appear trivial, but as we will see, is one in which Shaykh Ibrahim (and the Sufi tradition in general) addresses in a non-trivial manner.

**Verification of Others’ Knowledge**

Given the deeply inward and personal nature of *ma’rifah* (Knowledge), it is difficult to imagine how, under “normal” everyday circumstances, another person’s Knowledge could be verified with confidence. As several disciples pointed out,

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382 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 149.

It’s difficult to say who has *ma’rifah* and who doesn’t. Some people speak well, and so they seem to have *ma’rifah*, but you never know, they could just be repeating what they learned in books, what they heard from other people...Because someone, you can hear him speak, and he speaks very well, as if he knows many things, but maybe hasn’t actually experienced them...But you go off of what you hear from him and what you see from him—does he pray, is he pious, does he have a good character—but it’s difficult to judge. He can talk well and have nothing, or he can say nothing and have a great thing. You can guess, but you can’t tell. As for the shaykhs, they can tell, but I don’t quite know how.384

However, the shaykhs who administer tarbiyah examine their disciples to determine when they have finished the process and attained *ma’rifah*, and may even give certain disciples the permission to initiate others. Shaykh Māḥī Cissé compared this to taking a disciple into the ocean and teaching him how to swim. Once the shaykh is satisfied that the disciple can swim, he gives him permission to go swim in the oceans of *ma’rifah* on his own.385

As mentioned above, disciples told me that their Shaykhs sometimes test disciples who seem to have experienced annihilation by asking them questions, such as “Who are you? Where are you? What do you see?” Disciples in a state of annihilation typically give answers such as “I am God, I am in God, there is only God.” One shaykhah told me that when she thinks a disciple is not fully in the state of annihilation, or is faking it, she takes a lighter or a match and holds it close to the disciple. The disciples in the state of annihilation perceive the fire, themselves, and everything as God, and so do not flinch, while those not yet in the state respond normally and flinch, and are told to continue with their tarbiyah.

When I asked Shaykh Māḥī Cissé if and how he can tell if someone else has *ma’rifah*, he responded,

> If I talk with him, I know. Like the people who take tarbiyah from me, sometimes they come, you talk to them and they don’t know, they just hear some words and want to get it [approval that they’ve completed tarbiyah]. So you tell them, “go back, go make your *dhikr* until you


have *yaqīn* (certainty).” In the Truth, there is force. Words of truth have a taste, a flavor, a scent. Just as this perfume has a scent, the Truth also has a scent... If you know it, then you know it. It’s like music, if you know or you’ve studied music, or been exposed to music, when you hear music, you’ll know if that music is correct or not. Some things you know, and you can describe how you know them, and other things you know, but you cannot describe how you know them. Some things we do not have the right to describe, because they are secret, and a secret revealed is not a secret.\(^{386}\)

K.S. also compared the recognition of a fellow ‘Ārif to smelling a scent or fragrance,

It is like a fragrance, you can see if someone is very advanced in the process. If a person of that kind is about to meet another person of that kind, for example, you are in CODESRIA [an academic center in Dakar], and that person is in Tambacounda [a city in eastern Senegal] or Mermoz [a neighborhood of Dakar just north of CODESRIA], you can see his light, coming, going in that way or going in that way. And sometimes it is like a fragrance. But sometimes, you can have the strong feeling that the one you are seeing is you, and you are him or her. And you were talking about *fanā’*, and I said that it is a process of knowing space and time, it is also a process of unification, and in *fanā’*, there isn’t any male and female, man and woman, there isn’t a single thing. How do recognize someone with *ma’rifah*? If you see the person you know that he is you and you are him, you won’t be able to make or to imagine two different entities, you will just see him as a part of you. May be he is higher or lower, so that you go to him in order to get high, or he comes to you in order to get high, and it is something complementary. But of course you will be able to know him. But it is easier for the person who is near the completion of merging, it is easier for that person to feel, to recognize someone who has just reached the ocean.\(^{387}\)

Thus, it seems to take an ‘Ārif to know an ‘Ārif, and that *ma’rifah* recognizes *ma’rifah*.

However, as K.S. mentions, it is easier for the greater to recognize the lesser than the other way around. A large portion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s oeuvre is devoted to his discussion of different kinds of saints and possessors of various degrees of *ma’rifah*, and the signs by which they can be recognized. Just as one of the highest levels of *ma’rifah* is the ability to recognize the Real in all of its manifestations, the ability to recognize and correctly judge the sanctity and *ma’rifah* of others is among the characteristics of the most advanced of Sufi masters. From


Ibn ‘Arabi’s descriptions, this appears to be due in large part to these masters’ prior experience of the states and stations which they then recognize in others.\textsuperscript{388}

**Verification of One’s Own Knowledge**

But how do you know that you know? How do you know if you yourself have *ma’rifah*? Many disciples answered this question by insisting, “If you know, then you know that you know. And if you don’t, then you don’t.” But is it possible to have *ma’rifah* and not know it? Some disciples appealed to the atemporal perspective which *ma’rifah* opens up in order to answer this question in the affirmative. One disciple, who wished to remain anonymous told me, “Some people have great *ma’rifah* inside of them, but they don’t know it yet. They haven’t realized who they are yet, but some people can see it in them now. When they realize it, then they will know who they are, what they have inside of them.” Abu Ibrahim held that, “*Ma’rifah* is always certain, but the question is whether or not what you are thinking is really *ma’rifah* or just an idea or Satan messing with you.”

In one of his more unique compositions, Shaykh Ibrahim discusses these issues in the form of a conversation with his secret (*sirr*) or “inner self.”

**Dialogue and Discussion**

What Occurred Between Me and My secret (*sirr*) from my Lord

He said: “O Ibrahim, have you arrived at God (*Wāṣil ilā Allāh*)?

I said: Yes. My proof for that is my Knowledge by Him through the reality of certainty (*ḥaqiq al-yaqīn*). And God is too great for anything to be attached to Him or separated from Him.

Then He said: Are you a friend of God (*waṭī Allāh*)?

I said: Yes, and my proof for that is that I am close to Him (*wālaytuhu*) through the remembrance (*dhikr*) in secret, in spirit, inwardly and outwardly (*qalbā’ wa qālibā’*) and He is close to me (*wālānī*) through the facilitation of my affairs, being attached to me both outwardly and inwardly.

Then He said: “Are you a Knower by God (‘Ārif biLillāh)?

I said: Yes, and my proof for that is my witnessing (shuhūdī) of the Essence (al-‘ayn) and without entification (muta‘ayyun) by my Lord in each entification (bilā ta’ayyun) and my submission to His decree and my satisfaction with all of His judgments, and that my master and support and example who trained me in the Sufi way, al-Ḥājj ‘abd Allāh [Niasse] said to me, “You are a Knower (‘Ārif),” and that the master of the latter (ḥājj ‘abd Allāh), Aḥmad Baddi, likewise testified to him [that he was a Knower], and likewise the notable khalīfah, the Ḥassān of the Ṭarīqah, Muḥammad ibn Sayyidayn, his father, likewise testified to him [Aḥmad Baddi], and likewise Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ḥafīz [al-Shinqīfī] testified to him [ibn Sayyidayn], and likewise did the Seal, al-Tijānī bear witness to him [Muḥammad al-Ḥafīz], and likewise did the Master of Existence [the Prophet] bear witness to him [Shaykh Tijānī] of that and his sealhood (Khatmiyyah) and concealment (Katmiyyah) and that is confirmed by God because he [the Prophet] did not speak out of caprice (35:3).

Then he said: are you among the Poles (‘aqṭāb)?
I said: I do not know, but I heard the enraptured ones say as much to themselves. Maybe they saw in the fleeting state (ḥāl) of a second and witnessed what is to come.

Then he said: Do you see the Messenger of God while awake and asleep like some of the spiritual heroes (rijāl) [of the Sufi Path]?

I said: I hope for that from God. But I love him and I know him with such a knowledge that were I to perceive him while alive and accompany him, it would not increase me in those two [my knowledge and love of him]. All praise be to God.

Then he said: Do you want to meet him?
I said: For me, I do not want it. For if I want, I want to not want; for whatever the Willer (al-Murīd) wills, that is what I want.390

Then he said: Do you know the Secret Greatest Name?
I said: The Names, all of them are great to me.

Then he said: I testify that you are among the great men among the Knowers to whom the travelers are drawn and whom the leaders salute. So, blessed (literally, paradise (Ṭūbā))391 is for he who keeps your company and thinks well of you, and woe to he who opposes you because of criticism. And he departed and wished me well. Praise be to God.

I appreciated our dialogue and I set some of it down here for the beloveds.


389 See Niasse, Removal of Confusion 66 n 15. He was known as the Ḥassān of the Ṭarīqah because of his remarkable poetic gifts, which he used to defend and promote the Tijāniyyah, just as the Prophet’s poet Ḥassān ibn Thābit, used his poetry to defend and promote the early Muslim community.

390 This is a paraphrase of a famous saying attribute to Abū Yazīd “I want not to want except what He wants.”

391 A reference to a famous saying of the Prophet. see Seesemann, Divine Flood, 199.

Among other interesting points, in this work, Shaykh Ibrahim offers himself three proofs of his *ma’rifah*: his recognition of the undelimited Divine Essence, the Real, in the delimited forms of the world; his compliance with God’s religious commands and his contentment with the Divine rulings of fate; and finally, the testimony of the Knowers in his initiatic chain, going back to the Prophet and God. Thus the verification of one’s own *ma’rifah* can have an important social or intersubjective dimension.

Disciples often mentioned the discussions they had with one another and with their shaykhs as an important means of “comparing notes” or coming to understand and find the words to describe certain experiences and intuitions. The *gammus*, other organized gatherings (such as classes with *shuyūkh*, *dahirah* or student group meetings), informal gatherings on Fridays after the *waṣifah*, or dinner parties with friends and family often provide the occasion for lengthy, usually nocturnal, discussions about *ma’rifah*, related ideas and insights, and the different states and stages of the spiritual journey. Disciples often described how satisfying it was to hear another disciple or shaykh confirm, through their own similar experiences or through quotations from the works of Shaykh Ibrahim, something they had “deeply felt” or “discovered” on their own. Sidi Inaya Niang told me that Shaykh Ibrahim used to encourage his disciples to get together to discuss these matters as a means of perfecting their spiritual state and knowledge. For example, Sidi Inaya told me how his father had entered a station he called the *maqām al-Mahdiyah*, where he seemed to have a presentiment of everything that happened around him, and everything seemed to be obedient to his own will. “Because of this, he wondered, ‘Could I be the Mahdi?’” He went to talk to Shaykh Ibrahim about it, who didn’t answer his question directly, but instead told him to talk to three of his friends who were also disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim. When they all sat down together, they realized they
were all in the same station, and they laughed about it. They were better able to understand this station and what comes after it.”


Sidi Inaya also drew on the scientific method to describe the verification of *ma ’rifah*, positing that the experiences and knowledge or insight associated with *ma ’rifah* can be confirmed by repetition under the same conditions for oneself, and by observing its reoccurrence under the same conditions in others.

Disciples with more extensive formal Islamic education often cited the Qur’an and ḥadīth as the sources to which they turned to verify their own knowledge, both in terms of the confirmation these texts provided for their experiences and ideas, but also through the new levels of meaning of these texts which *ma ’rifah* revealed to them. The deeper experience and understanding of the ritual prayer and Tijānī litanies, as well as the poetry and prose works of Shaykh Ibrahim also served to confirm the attainment of *ma ’rifah* for many of these Arabophone disciples, and some non-Arabophones as well.

At one point in his own Qur’anic commentary, Shaykh Ibrahim seems to take the position mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, that “Real *ma ’rifah* is the inability to attain or perceive *ma ’rifah*.” Commenting on the verse of the *amānah* or “trust,” *We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and feared it, and man bore it. Verily he is tyrannical, ignorant* (33:72), Shaykh Ibrahim interprets this “trust” to refer to man’s vicegerency (*khilāfah*) of God in creation, explaining that only man could bear this burden, since only he combines the spiritual and the physical. He provides two interpretations for the second part of the verse, one obvious, negative interpretation, and one more subtle positive interpretation:

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For were it not for his tyranny, he would not have disobeyed, and were it not for his ignorance, he would not have forgotten. He was “tyrannical” in that he left the collar of mortal humanity (bashariyah) for in order to be characterized by the attributes of Lordship. And he was “ignorant,” meaning aware of God (‘Ārifā biLlāh) to the point that he was ignorant of all other than He, and [this is] the ignorance of the core of the Essence. Ignorance of God, as Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī says, is of two kinds: ignorance of the rank of Divinity, which makes its possessor worthy of perpetuity in the Fire; and the ignorance of the core of the Essence, in terms of what It is in Itself, which necessitates the perpetuity of its possessor in the Garden. For whoever is ignorant of the rank of Divinity is an infidel, while whoever is ignorant of the core of the Essence after he has arrived there, he finds that “his inability to perceive it is his perception of it.” His ignorance of the reality of the core of his essence/His Essence is his knowledge of It. And so this is the vicegerent (khalīfah), tyrannical and ignorant. That is, [“tyrannical”], having left the collar of mortal humanity, being characterized by the attributes of Lordship, and ignorant of the core of the Essence because it has no end, and he only reaches it after having lost himself. “O Lord, how can one reach you? Leave yourself and come.” If you leave yourself before coming, then how can you know It? There is no one there to know it. This is the ignorance which is the utmost limit of ignorance, and it is a station of praise from this perspective.

The editor notes that in this passage Shaykh Ibrahim paraphrases a statement of Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī in which he described this second ignorance as “the purity of faith and the perfection of ma’rifah.” As with tawbah in the “Three Stages of Religion,” from this perspective, the inability to verify one’s own ma’rifah is associated with its perfection, since “none knows God but God.”

Thus, for the community of Shaykh Ibrahim, ma’rifah is verified in and of itself, since it itself is the reality of certainty; it is verified through the confirmation of other confirmed Knowers, and the distinct intellectual content of ma’rifah can be confirmed through recourse to the Qur’an and Ḥadīth and other Ṭarīqah authorities, personal “empirical” testing, and consultation with other Knowers. However, from another perspective, ma’rifah is impossible

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394 In the Qur’anic account of the Garden of Eden, Adam’s sin is sometimes described as forgetfulness (20:115).
395 A famous Sufi aphorism, often attributed to Abu Bakr. See Franz Rosenthal, Knowledge Triumphant the Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam (Boston: Brill, 2007) and Imam Cheikh Tijānī ’Ali Cisse. What the Knowers of Allah have said about the Knowledge of Allah. (Atlanta: Fayda Books, 2014), 49.
396 Another famous saying of Abū Yazid al-Bistāmī.
397 Niasse, Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafṣīr vol. 5, 87.
398 Ibid.
for a person attain, let alone verify, because it presupposes the annihilation or “leaving behind” of one’s self.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have seen how Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and his disciples have creatively drawn on the rich epistemological tradition of Sufism to both realize and describe *ma’rifah*. In short, *ma’rifah* refers to the direct, existential knowledge of the Real/the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), achieved through annihilation (fanā’) and subsistence (baqā’) in Him. This knowledge can be described as self-knowledge, but the self that knows and is known is radically transformed by the process of acquisition. Or, from another perspective, the self that knows and is known is the unchanged and unchanging Divine Self.

Tarbiyah is the primary means by which disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse acquire *ma’rifah*. During this process, the spiritual flux (*fayd*) from God, the Prophet, the Shaykhs, the performance of spiritual exercises, and the sincerity of the disciple (all of which are identical from a certain perspective) lead to radical transformations of consciousness. These transformations, which are described in a wide variety of schemas and metaphors, result in a unitive knowledge of God in His Essence, and in His various manifestations, which constitute the phenomenal world. This unique mode of knowledge is *ma’rifah*, and, in principle, is its own justification. However, practically speaking, the attainment of *ma’rifah* is verified through a number of processes, most prominently, through examination by an advanced spiritual master. While *ma’rifah* stands above the level of belief or speculative thought, determining whether particular ideas or beliefs are the fruit of *ma’rifah*, ordinary human speculation, or deception/illusion is a concern of some disciples who have completed tarbiyah. This discernment is achieved through further progress in the “journey of the heart,”
consultation with other Knowers, and the examination of the Quran, ḥadīth, and other authoritative texts.

As the meeting place of knower and known, subject and object, human and Divine, ma’rifah takes on seemingly contradictory descriptions. It is different for everyone and yet, fundamentally the same. It is beyond all limitations, and yet limited by the knower. It is knowledge of self, of God, of the Prophet and the saints, of everything, of nothing. These various descriptions, which at times seem mutually contradictory or confusing, are not meant to be mere conceptual or poetic abstractions, but are supposed to name an experiential reality.

Knowledge or knowing presupposes a properly functioning instrument of knowledge, be it heart or intellect. In this perspective, the knower needs to be perfected in order for his knowledge to be perfect. Thus correct knowledge coincides, and is even identical with, a certain mode of being. This unique mode of being is identified with the Prophet. One’s point of view depends on where one stands, and like the mythical “Aleph,” the Prophet’s point of view is understood to be that which synthesizes and comprises all possible points of view. Tarbiyah works to cultivate this ideal mode of being in the disciple. The perfection of knowledge is knowledge of God (since there is nothing other than Him to know), and the perfection of knowledge of God is to know Him in the inscrutable Unity of His Essence and in the multiplicity of His manifestations, at once. Because these manifestations have no end, and their origin, the Divine Essence, is also boundless, ma’rifah also has no end. Thus ma’rifah is dynamic, evolving as the knower does, because it is identical with the constantly transforming being of knower.

The various detailed descriptions, extended metaphors and schemas that describe the process of acquiring ma’rifah and the states and stations that follow its acquisition are meant
as allusions (isharāt) to these experiential realities, with which they must neither be confused nor conflated.\(^\text{399}\) However, these elaborate metaphysical systems and theories emerge from “the tongue of the state” (lisān al-ḥāl), or the vantage point of the possessors of ma’rifah and their reflections upon their experiences and perceptions. These theoretical expositions reveal a worldview, a metaphysics, an anthropology, ontology and epistemology that differs radically from that assumed by most contemporary philosophers and scholars in the academy. In Tijani Sufism, the ratiocination and discursive speculation that is characteristic of contemporary academic philosophical thought really only begins once one’s consciousness has been radically transformed through spiritual practice. Before that, such speculations can really only serve as a kind of map or a postcard of the view from the summits of ma’rifah, calling aspirants to its heights and indicating the way.

These fundamental differences cannot be forgotten when comparing, implicitly or explicitly, Sufi epistemology with its Western, academic counterparts; moreover, these differences mean that it would be a grave mistake to try to subsume Tijani epistemology into categories which are themselves premised upon and inseparable from a radically different anthropology, metaphysics and epistemology. For example, if we tried to fit the epistemology of ma’rifah described in this chapter into the “justified true belief” paradigm, one would have to change “true belief” to “Imān” and “justified” to mutahaddiq (verified/realized) yielding a definition of ma’rifah as perfected or realized Imān—a description which Shaykh Ibrahim himself gives, but which differs markedly from the ordinary connotation of “justified true

\(^{399}\) The conflation of these descriptions of experienced realities with the experiences themselves is all too common in the secondary literatures, especially in attempts to historicize these noetic experiences. For example, even Seesemann in his otherwise excellent Divine Flood describes Ibn Anbiyah’s Mizāb al-Raḥma as “the model that inspired Niasse’s version of tarbiyah.” I would argue that Mizāb al-Raḥma inspired Ibrahim Niasse’s descriptions of tarbiyah in “The Three Stations of Religion,” not the tarbiyah itself.
belief.” Technically, *ma’rifah* is more akin to “knowledge by acquaintance” (hence its association with *dhawq*, “tasting”) than it is to propositional knowledge (which the “justified true belief” paradigm describes). However *ma’rifah* cuts across this distinction, since it includes knowledge that would be considered propositional as well.

Sufi epistemology could be said to be foundationalist, with *ma’rifah* being the basic foundational belief upon which all other beliefs rely, but strictly speaking, *ma’rifah* is not a propositional belief. It could be described as a correspondence theory of knowledge in that it implies that the perfectly polished mirror of the heart reflects its object of knowledge, but in the case of God or the self (the primary “object” of *ma’rifah*), the relationship is one of identity, not correspondence.

Likewise, this Sufi epistemology could be described as being coherentist (albeit in a radical re-interpretation of this position), in that it represents a coherence with the larger context of the Real, through the knower’s annihilation in the Real, and through the heart becoming “capable of accepting any form,”—of the noetic “container” becoming transparent, in complete coherence with God and His Manifestations. Or more technically, *ma’rifah* could be coherentist in that it represents “a belief that receives its justification from other beliefs in its epistemic neighborhood (or their justification)” since *ma’rifah* is defined by its acceptance of all beliefs—its transcendence of belief through its immanence in all of them.

This Sufi epistemology also bears some similarities with Williamson’s “Knowledge First” position⁴⁰⁰ which argues that knowledge is a fundamental psychological/epistemological state, and attempts to analyse it by breaking it down into components is mistaken. In its essence, *ma’rifah* is absolutely simple, refusing to admit any distinction of

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knower and known, subject and object. This is the perspective from which the perfection of ma’rifah is described as ignorance, or the inability to attain ma’rifah. However, despite these similarities, ma’rifah is distinct from the “factive mental state” which defines knowledge in this position.

Thus ma’rifah could be described as all of these theories (and many more), and none of them, because the Sufi epistemology from which it emerges is radically different from the epistemologies from which these other theories developed. Moreover, ma’rifah is not a theory, but designates an experiential/existential reality at the core of Sufi thought and practice.\textsuperscript{401} Virtually all contemporary academic analyses of knowledge presuppose that it is a particular mental state among other mental states, and that the knowing subject is somehow distinct from the object of knowledge. In addition to having a different conception of what constitutes a “mental state,” the epistemology described in this chapter posits that ma’rifah is quite unlike other “mental states.” It is existential as well as mental, and is the result of the opening (fatḥ) of the mental plane onto higher orders of reality, which have no equivalent in contemporary academic theories of epistemology. Furthermore, the distinction between knowing subject and the known object is collapsed in ma’rifah. Ma’rifah is not a proposition amongst other propositions, or a kind of belief amongst other beliefs, but rather the transcendence of belief through realization of and annihilation in the Truth, and the immanence in every belief through the manifestation of the Truth in each of them. However, as this chapter demonstrates, simply because it does not fit into contemporary categories or accord with the assumptions that produce them, ma’rifah cannot be dismissed as mere “irrational mysticism” or “superstition.”

\textsuperscript{401} Ma’rifah is in fact where experience meets existence.
But perhaps most importantly, *maʿrifah* is not merely conceptual, and so cannot merely be thought about or theorized. It must be lived and experienced, and ultimately judged only through personal “tasting,” by “being” it. As Frithjof Schuon so aptly puts it,

> There is intelligence and there is intelligence; there is knowledge and there is knowledge; there is on the one hand a fallible mind that registers and elaborates, and on the other hand a heart-intellect that perceives and projects its infallible vision onto thought. Here lies the entire difference between a logical certitude that can replace another logical certitude, and a quasi-ontological certitude that nothing can replace because it is what we are, or because we are what it is.  

Thus discursive descriptions and debates about *maʿrifah* can only go so far—they halt on the shores where *maʿrifah* begins. As such, we will conclude this discussion of *maʿrifah* with a poem (describing *maʿrifah* through the symbolism of wine), which Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse quotes in his *Removal of Confusion*:

> Say to him who condemns the people of ecstasy  
> If you have not tasted the drink of passion, leave us alone  
> For when we have become joyful and light-headed,  
> Intoxicated by the wine of ardent yearning—you will put us to shame  
> So do not blame the drunkard in his state of drunkenness  
> For burdensome ceremonies are lifted from us in our intoxication  
> How could we insist on patience from a woman filled with desire?  
> How can one bear patience when he witnessing the real meaning?  
> O driver of the ardent lovers, come to the aid of the conspicuous one  
> Sing for us in the Name of the Beloved, and cheer our spirits  
> Preserve our secret in our drunkenness from those who envy us  
> And if you see something unworthy, forgive us  
> Their stories move us, but if not for their passion  
> Burning inside, such words would not affect us  
> Young man, have you not seen the caged bird?  
> When native lands are mentioned, it longs for its home  
> So it consoles itself, giving song to the contents of its heart  
> The abdomen shakes only with feeling and meaning  
> O young man! So too the spirits of the lovers:  
> They are moved by ardent yearning for the realm of radiance

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402 Frithjof Schuon, *To Have a Center* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, 1990), 67.
Chapter 4: What is Ifa?

Ọsa Otura says, “What is Truth?” I say “What is Truth?”
Orunmila says, “Truth is the Lord of Heaven guiding the earth.” Orunmila says, “Truth is the Unseen One guiding the Earth. The wisdom of Olodumare, he is using.”

Ọsa Otura says, “What is Truth?” I say “What is Truth?”
Orunmila says, “Truth is the character (ìwà) of Olodumare. Truth is the word that cannot fall. Ifa is Truth. Truth is the word that cannot spoil. Might surpassing all. Blessing everlasting was the one who cast Ifa for Earth. They said they should come and speak the truth.”

“‘Speak the truth, tell the facts; Speak the truth, tell the facts; Those who speak the truth are those whom the gods will help.”

-Odu Ṣasa-Otura

Of the thousands of different religious traditions of African origin, those of the Yorùbá-speaking peoples of Southwestern Nigeria, Benin, Togo and the Atlantic diaspora have emerged as the most influential, and the most studied. The sophistication, beauty, and power of these traditions have impressed colonial explorers, missionaries, scholars, and generations of adherents and admirers on both sides of the Atlantic, ensuring their survival and growth in the face of wars, enslavement, and the increasingly competing claims of other religious traditions and ways of life. Of all the various sacred traditions of the Yoruba, Ifa has come to be recognized as one of, if not the, most important and authoritative. So what is Ifa?

Like many terms in Yorùbá religious discourse (indeed in the Yoruba language itself), the term “Ifa” has many meanings, and this polyvalence is of deep metaphysical significance. First and foremost, the word “Ifa” refers to the divinatory wisdom tradition associated with Orunmila, the òrìṣà, or deity/prophet believed to have founded it. Secondly, “Ifa” refers to this deity, who is revered by his followers as Ibikéji Olodumare, “second only to Olodumare,”

the transcendent, Supreme Divinity also known as Ṣeṣedá, the Creator, and Òlorun, the Lord of Heaven. Thirdly, and perhaps most formally, “Ifa” is used to refer to the religious tradition established by Òrunmila. One who practices Ifa is known as a Babalawo (literally, father of secrets⁴⁰⁵), and is required to spend years of training and study to master this multifaceted tradition. One of these facets, also known as Ifa, is the vast oral corpus which babalawo (the term is both plural and singular) spend their lives memorizing, reciting, and contemplating.⁴⁰⁶

This living oral tradition is organized into 256 Odù, or sections, each of which is associated with a particular divinatory sign, and is said to have as many as 256 ẹsẹ or verses,⁴⁰⁷ which can themselves be quite long. This vast body of orature is regarded as the most authoritative source of traditional Yoruba mythistory, ritual, moral prescriptions, and is a treasury of proverbs, songs, stories, wisdom, and philosophical meditations. Many popular Yoruba songs, proverbs, stories, and sayings come from this tradition of orature, and there is scarcely a deity, cultural practice, town,⁴⁰⁸ or even plant or animal found in Yorubaland whose myth of origin is not found in the ẹsẹ of Ifa.

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⁴⁰⁵ Both men and women worship and practice Ifá and have done so traditionally. Female priests of Ifá are called Iyanifa (wife/mother of Ifá). The children and spouses of babalawo and inyaifa often have extensive knowledge of the oral corpus and rituals of Ifá, even if they have not been initiated as priests, and do not perform divination. Today, there are some (but not many) Iyanifa who practice divination, but they cannot perform all of the initiatory rituals that men do.

⁴⁰⁶ Some babaláwo, however, consider this to be the principal and original meaning of Ifá. I frequently heard variations of the phrase, Ifá ọrọ ènu Olódumare, ti a fi da ayé, “Ifá is the word of the mouth of Olódumare, by which he created the world,” and a story from the Odù Eji Ogbe in which Òrunmila makes a distinction between himself and Ifá, cited as proof of the fact that Ifá is first and foremost the Divine message and Òrunmila is the bearer of this message.

⁴⁰⁷ This number, however, is largely symbolic and refers to the potentially infinite number of verses in each Odù. Many of the babaláwo I interviewed compared Ifá to an ocean, saying that no one can know the beginning or end of its verses or wisdom. In his Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá, Abimbola estimates that each Odù contains 600 ẹsẹ.

⁴⁰⁸ Each Yoruba town is said to have been founded by a particular Odù through the performance of divination; for example, the relatively recent (19th-C) city of Ibadan was said to be founded by the Odù Òrẹ-Ọjá and then again by Òṣẹ-Méjì. Professor Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. English and Yoruba.
But this vast orature is not the only facet of the tradition of Ifa, which also involves the knowledge and performance of various rites, rituals, and sacrifices, and a veritable pharmacopoeia of herbal medicine. These other facets are often described, mentioned in, or closely associated with particular ṣe, and are sometimes also referred by the term “Ifa.” In the most popular usage, however, “Ifa” refers to the system of divination associated with this religious tradition and its vast orature and bodies of knowledge. However before turning to Ifa divination, a word is in order about the traditional Yoruba cosmology in which this tradition functions.

**Yoruba Religion(s) and Cosmology**

Ifa is but one, albeit a particularly important, tradition of Yoruba spirituality. The traditions of sacred kingship, the cults of the Orians such as Obatala, Ogun, Osun, Sango, Eshu etc., the numerous secret societies such as the Ogboni fraternity, as well as ancestral masquerade societies (Egungun), and the numerous cults of local deities all provide unique perspectives on this world. Each tradition is like a planet in the religious solar system of Yoruba. The view from each of these traditions is different, but deeply interconnected. What is central for one is peripheral for another; what is terra firma for a priest of Obatala is but a single star in the firmament for a priest of Osun or a babalawo (priest of Ifa).

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409 Some accounts (see below) attribute the introduction of Ifa to the Yoruba-speaking people to a Nupe man named Šetilu. Ifa was exported to the Kingdom of Dahomey during the reign of Agaja (1718-1740) in the where its practice (known as Fa) persists amongst the Fon-speaking people of Benin to this day (see Edna Bay, *Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey*, (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 94), and Ifa is presently practiced by hundreds of thousands of people around the world today of every imaginable ethnic background. What makes Ifa, “Yoruba” (itself a complicated category) is that Yoruba is the sacred, ritual language of the tradition.
At the center of this spiritual universe is Olodumare, the ineffable, transcendent deity, who is also mysteriously immanent in aṣe, the divine force that animates the cosmos.\footnote{See Rowland Abiodun, “Understanding Yoruba art and aesthetics: The concept of ase.” \textit{African Arts}, 27 no.3 (1994) 68-103. Some (such as Abimbola Kola, in his book \textit{Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account}, (Iroko Academic Publishers, 2005)) argue that Olodumare’s role in Yoruba mythology and religion is the result of Islamic and Christian influence, and while possible, this is unlikely, due to the nearly ubiquitous references to Olodumare as the Supreme Creator deity in the verses of Ifá and other mythological traditions around Yorubaland. If Olodumare were an Islamic insertion or modification, one would expect areas under greater Islamic influence to differ significantly in their conception of the Supreme Deity than other regions, but this does not seem to be the case. Furthermore, a High God presiding over a pantheon of lesser deities is a common feature of traditional religions in West Africa (see Awolalu and Dopamu (eds.) \textit{West African Traditional Religion}. (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979)). Finally, even if Olodumare’s role is the result of Islamic or Christian influence, this fact would be of little concern to the present study, which seeks to explicate contemporary beliefs and practice, not those of the past.} Olodumare is described as the Ultimate Source (Orise), the Owner of Life/Spirit (Elemi), the Creator (Eleda) of everything in heaven and earth. Idowu writes,

Yoruba theology emphasises the unique status of Olodumare. He is supreme over all on earth and in heaven, acknowledged by all the divinities as the Head to whom all authority belongs and all allegiance is due…. His status of supremacy is absolute. Things happen when He approves, things do not come to pass if He disapproves. In worship, the Yoruba holds Him ultimately First and Last; in man's daily life, He has the ultimate pre-eminence.\footnote{Bolajid Idowu. \textit{Olodumare}. (London: Longmans1962), 56.} However, unlike the Supreme Deity in Abrahamic religions,\footnote{With the possible exception of Christianity, depending on the particular formulation of Christology.} Olodumare is not the main focus of ritual worship or sacrifice.\footnote{Abimbola writes, “The Yoruba believe that Olodumare cannot be influenced by sacrifice. Hence the saying which recurs in several Ifá poems, ‘Ta ni le f’Olodumare l’ebo’ (Who dares offers sacrifice to Olodumare)” (Abimbola, \textit{Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá} (1975), 28). Although Idowu demonstrates that Olodumare is the object of devotion, reverence, worship, and prayer, He is primarily approached through the intermediacy of the Oríṣa, not directly. To borrow terms from the Hindu world, Olodumare is less \textit{ishvara}, the personal god, and more Brahman, the supremely transcendent Deity.} This role is played by the Oriṣa, who are described as creations of Olodumare and have distinct personalities, histories, functions, rituals, natural phenomena, and even days of the week associated with their worship. For example, the oriṣa Ọṣun has been described as the goddess of sweet waters, love, fertility, brass, and honey (the latter two are frequently used in her worship). Her worship is closely connected with the river
that shares her name\textsuperscript{414} and is centered in the town of Oṣogbo, home to many of her sacred groves through which the river flows, and Ado-Ekiti, where the source of the river is found. One myth tells us how, when offended by the other deities, Ọṣun withdrew from the earth, causing the rains to cease and leaving pregnant women unable to deliver their children,\textsuperscript{415} demonstrating two of her many functions.

It is significant that the Yoruba apply the verb \textit{sin}, meaning to serve or worship,\textsuperscript{416} to Olodumare, but not the verb \textit{bo}, meaning to offer sacrifice or venerate through ritual offering. Both verbs are applied to the Oriṣa. The Oriṣa have specialized priesthoods and cults of worshippers/followers, whereas Olodumare has no specialized priesthood and his cult is either universal or nonexistent.\textsuperscript{417}

The major Oriṣa, or those whose worship has become widespread throughout various Yoruba cities and the diaspora include Ọbatala, the old, wise, and gentle arch-deity of white cloth who fashions the bodies of people; Eṣu, the mischievous and powerful trickster deity of the crossroads who delivers sacrifices to their recipients, and serves as a divine policeman and messenger; Ogun, the powerful, hot-tempered, solitary deity of iron, war, and justice; Ọṣun, the charming and strong-willed goddess of wealth, beauty, magic, and the river that bears her name; Ọrunmila, the wise and patient god of Ifa divination and messenger of Olodumare;

\textsuperscript{414} The river is actually an embodiment of Ọṣun, several myths describe how she transformed herself into the river.

\textsuperscript{415} This myth is found in Odù Ọṣẹ-tura of the Ifa corpus.

\textsuperscript{416} This verb is very similar in connotation to the Arabic verb ʼ\textit{abada}.

\textsuperscript{417} In this sense Olodumare has much in common with the High God described in Eliade’s work (see Mircea Eliade, \textit{Patterns in Comparative religion}, (Nebraska: U of Nebraska Press, 1996); \textit{The myth of the eternal return: Cosmos and history}. Vol. 46. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). However, as Idowu demonstrates, Olodumare is not a \textit{Deus otiosus or Deus abscondis}, His presence is too closely felt and he is appealed to and invoked too frequently in prayers and myths to be a truly remote God. See Idowu, \textit{Oludumare}, Chapter 11.
Osanyin, the mysterious god of plants, medicine, and magic; Olokun, the deity of riches and the lagoon and/or deep sea, Sango, the fiery, proud god of thunder, lightning, and retributive justice, and Yemoja, the gentle, maternal goddess of the Ogun river in Nigeria and the ocean and its fish in the New World.\(^{418}\)

Ulli Beier summarizes the perspective of Susanne Wenger, the late, renowned Austrian-born artist, longtime priestess of Obatala, and architect of the sacred grove of Oṣun in Osogbo, on the relationship between Olodumare and the Oriṣa,

Olodumare who contains all the complexities of the world within him. He is the egg from which the world breaks out. As a creator, Olodumare is called Eleda (eda = creature). With a gesture of creation Olodumare splits himself up and becomes a multiple being through his innumerable creatures. Olodumare in his pure form cannot be perceived by the senses or understood by intelligence—that is why he receives almost no direct worship and no sacrifice. But as Eleda we can begin to understand him…

In Susanne Wenger’s vision, the orisha are part representations of Olodumare. Each orisha is the universe looked at from another angle. Olodumare is the sum total of all the complexities, he is the universe concentrated into one intelligence. Susanne Wenger says that one could conceive God as the force from which everything emerges—or else one could see him as the coexistence of all the complexities.”\(^{419}\)

Wenger also writes,

“Oṣun can be described as the goddess of the waters of life. As she is an Oriṣa she is supernaturally intense, a metaphysical concentration of a distinct force (sacred force) which also is contained not only in man and in all that lives, in all that exists physically, but also in Olodumare, God himself.”\(^{420}\)

Thus Obatala can be understood both as the god of creativity and as the creativity of Olodumare; Oṣun as the goddess of bewitching beauty, and as Olodumare’s bewitching beauty; Ọrunmila as the god of wisdom, and the embodiment of the wisdom of God; Eṣu as

\(^{418}\) The cults of these later two Oriṣa, although still prominent in Nigeria, seem to be even more central in diaspora, especially in Cuba.

\(^{419}\) Ulli Beier, The return of the gods: the sacred art of Susanne Wenger (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 33.

the god of transformation and communication, and as the embodiment of the unpredictable transformative and communicative power (aṣé) of God.

The Oriṣa, however, are not just understood as rarified Divine Powers, but are also believed to have come down to the world and lived as human beings. Moreover, the ranks of Oriṣa are not closed, but can be joined by exceptional human beings. In his seminal essay on Ifa, Fela Sowande writes,

For the definition of Oriṣa we turn once more to...Chief Ajanaku, Araba Eko, who defined Oriṣa as “Awọn eniti Ori ṣa da yato si awọn ègbè re iyoku,” namely, “he whom Ori has created in a manner different to that in which his contemporaries have been created.” Such a person has an added something which makes him stand out among his fellows....we have the following Eji-Ogbe [1st Odu of the Ifa corpus] stanza: “Ọrunmila said: Human beings become Oriṣas! I responded: human beings become Oriṣas. He said, Oduduwa, that you hear so much of, he was a human being; because he did good while on earth as a man, he was remembered after his death and worshipped. Ọrunmila said: Human beings become Oriṣas! I responded: human beings become Oriṣas. He said, Oriṣanla, for example, was a human being: but he was wiser than his fellows, and did good while on earth; therefore he was remembered and worshipped after his death. Therefore human beings become Oriṣas; only the wise ones are worshipped. Human beings become Oriṣas.421

The Oriṣa in Comparative Perspective

The characters of these oriṣa and their relationship to one another, and to people on earth is chronicled in the many myths, songs, dances, and rituals of their traditions. The Oriṣa, indeed Yoruba religion and civilization as a whole, have been productively compared to that of the Ancient Greeks, and with good reason. Both have diverse mythological and ritual traditions, which vary significantly from one region to the next, reflecting the diversity of the many culturally distinct city-states that made up each civilization. Both traditions were/are home to initiatic mystery cults, priesthoods, and shrines/temples associated with different gods, and in both traditions people commonly worshipped multiple deities while usually having a particularly strong affiliation with a particular god or goddess. Both pantheons place

some deities in Heaven (Orun / Olympus) and others under the earth (Ilé or Orun Odo / chthon\textsuperscript{422}). Both sets of mythology are replete with tales of the gods misbehaving, interacting with mortals, and mortal and semi-divine heroes becoming deified after death. Both pantheons have inspired remarkable works of theatre, sculpture, music, dance, poetry, song, festivals, food, and crafts, both ritual and non-ritual.\textsuperscript{423}

Despite their many and profound similarities, Greek and Yoruba mythology have three fundamental differences which are worth discussing: The Greek pantheon contains no Supreme Deity like Olodumare; the deeds of the Yoruba pantheon have only recently begun to be set down in written form, whereas the Greek gods have been bound to paper for millennia; and finally, the Oriṣas are still actively worshipped and sacrificed to by millions of people around the world, while the Olympians, although revered in modern literature, probably haven’t smelt a burnt offering in over a thousand years.

The significance of the first difference is seen in the various quarrels between the divinities, and their seeming flaws and faults. Although Zeus is the arch-divinity of Mt. Olympus, he too makes mistakes and can be outwitted, overcome, or defied by other deities. The Zeus of Homer or Hesiod is a far cry from Olodumare, instead he is more like a Ṣango with the authority of Ọbatala, he can settle disputes between other deities by virtue of his strength or seniority, but he is decidedly one of them. As such, Olympian feuds are settled, and mistakes are punished, based on personal strength and cunning (consider the myth of Hermes’ birth and childhood). The Greek gods don’t really transgress; they more step on each

\textsuperscript{422} Yoruba mythology often seems to equate the “Heaven under the Earth” and that “Above the Sky,” placing the same deities in both. Gods and people usually are described as coming into the world from Heaven and leaving it to descend into the Earth. As in Greek mythology, the “Earth” in Yoruba mythology is metaphysically “deep”—it is a symbol of unseen spiritual realms. On the whole, however, Yoruba mythology seems more chthonic or “geocentric” than Greek mythology.

\textsuperscript{423} Norse mythology also has many similarities to that of the Yoruba.
others’ toes and offend one another. The Oriṣa, on the other hand, are firmly under the
dominion of Olodumare, whose moral reign is as certain and natural as physical law. The
justice of Olodumare is impersonal, and the punishment/ redemptive penance, a natural result
of the offense, whereas that of the Olympians tends to be described in more personal terms of
offense. Wole Soyinka notes, “Like the Yoruba deities, but to a thousandfold degree, the
Greek gods also commit serious infractions against mortal well-being…. Punishments, when
they occur among the Olympians, take place only when the offence happens to encroach on
the mortal preserves of another deity…” 424 The Yoruba gods, however, are generally held to
the same natural laws of justice that they enforce. 425 In the Yoruba moral universe,
Olodumare’s moral dominion would have cut Socrates’ dialogue with Euthyphro rather short:
the gods love the good because it is good, because it is in accordance with the nature of
Olodumare, the Supreme arbiter of right and wrong.

The process of writing necessitated a standardization and canonization of the Greek
mythology. Dynamic, different and seemingly contradictory mythologies can easily exist and
are readily found in oral traditions, which are often discretely conveyed via particular speech-
events in particular contexts. Whereas in writing, mythology becomes more fixed and less
context-dependent, making seeming contradictions more apparent, and the need for their
“resolution” more pressing. The remarkable variation in the mythology found in the works of
Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, Aeschylus, and Plato is but a small snapshot of what must have


425 This does not mean however that the Oriṣa never get away with acts of seeming wickedness- Many myths
involving Esu describe how he causes unprovoked mayhem with impunity, and Ọrunmila scams people in more
than one myth without punishment, but these actions are usually only peripheral to the main thrust of the myth.
They set up the story, but are not its moral center. In fact, the gods are usually able to avoid punishment only by
performing some sort of sacrifice, and so are held to the same moral law as the mortals for whom they are
exemplars. As far as I know, there are no sympathetic Prometheus figures in Yoruba mythology.
been an even more diverse and dynamic body of oral mythology. The diversity of Yoruba mythology, as a tradition that is still evolving and still primarily oral, is much greater than can ever possibly be represented in our scholarly writings. The canonization of mythical narratives in the strictly memorized verses of Ifa is as close as the tradition comes to an authoritative collection of myths, but even the Ifa corpus is still a living and dynamic body of orature. Moreover, most babalawo memorize, recite, and transmit mythological narratives of Ifa that seem contradictory or seem to be variants of the same story without much cognitive dissonance, in part due to the oral nature of the tradition.426

The living nature of the Yoruba mythological tradition also makes it much more dynamic and diverse than the remnants of the Greek mythological tradition that have been preserved in writing. The myths about the Oriṣa are being told and retold, revised and reinvented every day in Yoruba, Spanish, Portuguese, English, and other languages. The mythology, conceptualization, and worship of Yemoja in Brazil differs significantly from that in Nigeria, and can even differ greatly from town to town, or temple to temple, within one country. This diversity is actually proof of the life of the tradition; only dead trees produce no new branches. Moreover, for practitioners, the Oriṣa are still very much alive, acting in the world and interacting with their devotees. When we discuss Oriṣa, it is important to remember that we are describing living realities, not ancient, aestheticized abstractions. These differences between Greek and Yoruba mythology are important to keep in mind when trying to understand the role that the Oriṣa play in traditional Yoruba religion.

426 This however, does not imply that the babalawo are uncritical vis-à-vis the myths of Ifa. Some of the most lively discussions I had during my research resulted from discussions of these apparently contradictory myths. Sometimes, contradictory variants of a myth were rejected as being false, but more often, the apparent contradictions were resolved by synthesizing the seemingly opposing perspectives. The contradiction then simply became a matter of the details of exposition. In general, myth seems not to be concerned with detail, but rather with making a specific metaphysical point with moral force.
The Oriṣa have also been compared to the angels or archangels of the Abrahamic religions, and while this comparison has much to recommend it (while lofty spiritual beings themselves, angels serve and obey the Supreme Deity, performing specific functions; like the Oriṣa they even sometimes seem to question God, quarrel amongst themselves and even rebel, in the case of the Biblical Lucifer), angels are seldom worshipped directly or offered sacrifices, and are less central in these Abrahamic traditions than the Oriṣa are in their own.

The diasporic traditions, such as Santería (Cuba) and Candomblé (Brazil), have often identified the Oriṣa with Catholic saints, and here there are many ritual similarities. Catholic saints have an essentially intercessory function, which is often eclipsed in their veneration, just as happens with the Oriṣa. Many devotees have a particularly close relationship with one saint, while simultaneously venerating several others, mirroring patterns of worship amongst the abo rìṣa (those who worship the Oriṣa). The highly practical nature of the veneration of Catholic saints also shares much with that of the Oriṣa. Miracles are required for canonization, and sustain the popularity of the cult of a particular saint, which finds its parallel in the Yoruba saying, “Oriṣa ta ke ke ke, ti o gbo, ta ge, ge, ge, ti o gba, oju popo ni ngbe,” which roughly translated means, “The Oriṣa that doesn’t hear you when you cry, or doesn’t help you when you worship it, get rid of it!”

The calendar of Catholic saints includes angels (St. Michael, St. Gabriel), mythological heroes (St. George the Dragonslayer), and exceptional spiritual men and women, just like the pantheon of Oriṣa. Those saints who walked the earth become apotheosized into a spiritual principle and function, guarding particular regions and sectors of humanity, while maintaining a distinct personality and human history, much like the Oriṣa.

Although the cult of Catholic saints bears a number of ritual similarities to that of the Oriṣa, they are doctrinally quite distinct. The Oriṣa occupy a central role in worship, veneration, and salvation, more comparable to that of Christ and the Virgin in the Catholic Church. Moreover the language used to describe the Oriṣa is more mythological and less historic, more symbolic and less factual, than the hagiographies of the saints. Although both genres are more concerned with describing spiritual archetypes and moral exemplars than with prosaic fact, this feature is even more greatly accentuated amongst the myths of Oriṣa than with the sanitized tales of the saints. The Oriṣa lie, cheat, steal, get drunk, steal wives, beat people up, get jealous, and kill. The saints never seem to behave like this, at least not after their conversion, and so the myths of the Oriṣa require a different kind of hermeneutic to understand how such a seemingly rough-and-tumble crowd can uphold and impose strict moral injunctions on their followers.  

The Oriṣa can also be compared with the prophets of the Abrahamic world, particularly esoteric Islamic understanding of them as created spiritual realities having a pre-temporal existence. In many schools of Sufism, the lives of the prophets are not confined to their time on earth, as they occupy the heavens above time and exert spiritual influence in the world both before and after their deaths. Similarly, the Oriṣa are simultaneously described as spiritual realities dwelling in heaven or under the earth, and also as earth-bound people who

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428 Similar hermeneutics are used in Platonic and neo-Platonic interpretations of Greek myths, Vedantic interpretations of Hindu myths, and Kabbalistic and Sufi interpretations of the seeming slips of the prophets and cruelty of God in the Abrahamic traditions.

429 For example, the famous saying of the Prophet of Islam, “I was a Prophet while Adam was betwixt water and clay.”

430 See the ḥadīth of the mi’rāj and Ibn ʿArabi’s Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam for a full account of this prophetology. This doctrine finds a near equivalent in the Christian doctrine of the Logos. In many schools of Sufism, the prophets are understood as so many Logoi (Kalimāt), whose lives on earth are shadows or manifestations of their lofty spiritual realities, which predate, and continue on after their earthly sojourns.
experienced the vicissitudes of human existence and traveled through familiar landscapes, especially Ile-Ife. The places associated with the prophets and Oriṣa are made special due to their association and are frequently the site of shrines and pilgrimage (e.g. Jerusalem, Mt. Sinai, Medina, Mecca; Oṣogbo, Oke-Igęti, Ire, Ilé-Ife). Like the Oriṣa, the prophets have distinct histories and personalities, are associated with certain natural phenomena (e.g. Moses with water, Abraham with fire, Solomon with wind, and David with iron\textsuperscript{431}).

But perhaps most significantly, the prophets, like the Oriṣa, establish a particular way of life and mode of sanctity that is closely imitated by their devotees, often in minute detail\textsuperscript{432}. The devotees of Oriṣa ritually re-enact their particular deity’s rites of passage, and take them as moral and aesthetic exemplars in ordinary life, much as pious Muslims do vis-à-vis the Prophet of Islam.\textsuperscript{433} Very pious abọrĩṣa seldom make any major decision, or a minor one for that matter, without consulting their Oriṣa through divination or by recalling a mythological precedent for the action. In fact, in both traditions, piety and sanctity is measured by the degree to which one assimilates into the archetype of the prophet or Oriṣa. More than one babalawo (priest of Ifa/devotee of Ṭrunmila) explained that “Ṭrunmila is for us what Muḥammad is for Muslims, what Jesus is for Christians, he is the messenger of Olodumare,” and “we are all just striving to be like Ṭrunmila, no one can ever be like him, but we are all trying.”\textsuperscript{434}

\textsuperscript{431} Cf. Ibn ‘Arabi’s Ringstones of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam) and Shaykh Abu’l-Ḥasan ash-Shādhili’s Ḥizb al-Bahr.

\textsuperscript{432} The sunnah or practice the Prophet of Islam is followed by many in matters as mundane as clipping fingernails and the manner of eating dates.

\textsuperscript{433} The canonical prayer and the hajj, not to mention the plethora of supererogatory devotions such as invocation, night-vigils, and fasts, are all conducted in imitation of the Prophet and are connected with particular events in his life.

\textsuperscript{434} Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. English and Yoruba.
Furthermore, in certain schools of Sufism, each saint is said to be “on the foot” of a particular prophet, meaning that he manifests the same kind of sanctity and wisdom as that particular prophet. For example, some saints, like al-Ḥallāj, are said to be ‘Īsawī or Christ-like, and tend to be inward-focused and ascetic, and are often persecuted or martyred.

Likewise, amongst the Yoruba, every person is said to have an Oriṣa who “owns his or her head,” meaning that the he or she manifests the characteristics of that particular divinity. Unlike the Oriṣa, however, the prophets are not worshipped directly or sacrificed to, but the veneration of Christ in Christianity and the invocation of blessings and praises on the Prophet of Islam in prayers, liturgies, songs, and poems bears close resemblance to similar practices amongst the devotees of the Oriṣa.

Esoteric Islam, particularly the school associated with the great Spanish mystic Ibn ‘Arabi, shares another particularly fascinating feature with Yoruba religion, one that has caused a great deal of confusion for scholars of both traditions. The Yoruba proverb, *Bí ò s’eniyàn, imale ò si*, “If not for people, the gods would not be,” reflects an important aspect of the Yoruba worshipper’s relationship with the Oriṣa. It is widely assumed, and often explicitly stated, that the Oriṣa depend on man for their existence. In some rituals, worshippers even threaten the Oriṣa that if they do not answer their prayers, they will go worship another deity, and the god will be left without worshippers.435 However, Yoruba mythology, particularly that of Ifa, describes the deities as being temporally and ontologically prior (in myth, it amounts to the same thing) to human beings, and much more powerful than them. So how are the Oriṣa dependent on people?

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Wole Soyinka sees this as a kind of humanist strain within traditional Yoruba thought, but this seems a bit of a stretch in the ritual, mythical, and even historical context. I believe Karin Barber comes closer to the mark in her explanation of this as a West African version of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic (the clients or followers of a “Big Man” or patron derive their status from him, but he, in turn derives his status from them, because without followers/an entourage he would not be considered an important, “Big Man”) applied to relationships with the Oriṣa. However, Barber is careful to explain that this attitude is not one of skepticism, and that to the Yoruba, the Oriṣa really are existing, powerful deities, just as the popular, human “Big Men” and their power are real. She also points out that this relationship of mutual dependence or the not-so-secret “secret” that man makes the gods, does not apply to Olodumare. Citing examples from neighboring ethnic groups whose social structures mirror the structure of their worship, she argues that these social relationships serve as the model for relationships with the deities. She concludes, “The Yoruba conviction that the orisha need human attention in no way questions the existence of spiritual beings as a category…. It is rather because of the element of choice in the system, the survival in the human community of any orisha depends on human collaboration.” The Oriṣa and humanity exist in a relationship of mutual dependence, and although the concept of the Divine or the Sacred (Olodumare) remains independent, the forms in which people chose to worship and relate to the Divine are many and “made by human hands.”


437 Barber, “How Man Makes God.”

438 The traditional Yoruba perspective, however, would turn it around so that the relationships with the deities serve as the model for human relationships, or that the two are mutually dependant and reinforcing.

Similarly, in the Islamic context, Ibn ‘Arabi explains that there can be no Lord (rabb) without a vassal, or one who is lorded over (marbāb), and that there can be no divinity (Ilāh) without something for whom it is a divinity (ma’lūh), so that without the creation over which he is Lord, God could not be God. However, mirroring the Yoruba exception of Olodumare to this rule of reciprocity, Ibn ‘Arabi insists that God’s unknowable Essence remains independent of all relationships. The Spanish mystic further explains that all objects of worship are actually “gods created in belief,” writing, “No individual can escape having a belief concerning his Lord. Through it he resorts to Him and seeks Him…No believer believes in any God other than what he has made in himself, for the God of beliefs is made. The believers see nothing but themselves and what they have made within themselves.” In a poem whose sentiments and metaphors would not seem too out of place in a Yoruba context, Ibn ‘Arabi summarizes this perspective:

We are His food
since He feeds upon our existence,
just as He is the food of created things, without doubt.
He preserves us in creation
and we preserve the fact that He is a god.

However, this concept is not limited to Islamic mysticism and Traditional West African religions; it also appears in Christian mysticism. The 17th-C German Catholic poet Angelus Silesius writes, “I know God couldn't live a moment without me; if I should disappear, He would die, destitute.” The daring words of his predecessor and countryman, Meister Eckhart,

440 Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 60, 275. In fact, for Ibn ‘Arabi, creation is an expression of God’s Names and Attributes such as “The Creator.” This point suggests an interesting comparison between the Oriṣa and the multiple Names of God in Islam.

441 Ibid, 355. By recognition of their delimitation, however, the “gods in belief” can become more “transparent” and open up unto understandings and worship of God less conditioned by human limitations.

442 Ibid, 30. He introduces the poem explaining, “Since the cosmos has no subsistence except through God, and since the attribute of Divinity has no subsistence except through the cosmos, each of the two is the provision of the other; each takes nourishment from the other so that its existence may subsist.”
closely parallel the Yoruba proverb cited above, “If I were not, God would not be either. I am
the cause of God’s being God: if I were not, then God would not be God.”443

This concept of the mutual interdependence of man and gods also find a home in the
vast universe of Hinduism, whose pantheon bears some resemblance to that of the Yoruba,
not least of all in its dizzying diversity and regional variance.444 The intense personal devotion
Hindu deities receive at shrines in households, workplaces, markets and towns, as well as the
elaborate rituals of sacrifice and festivals conducted in their honor bear a strong resemblance
to practices amongst the Yoruba. The phenomenon of possession by deities, which forms an
important part of the worship and spiritual practice of many of the Oriṣa (but not that of
Ọrunmila) also finds parallels in the vast world of Hindu practice, unlike in the Abrahamic
traditions. The notion of the “avatar” a particular divine descent or incarnation, is also a
familiar one to the world of Oriṣa, each of whom has multiple stories of birth and/or ascent
into Heaven or disappearance into the Earth. This, or a similar notion, seems to be implicit in
the many variations in name, myth and ritual practice for what is considered to be a single
deity. For example, Oriṣa Funfun, Oriṣanla, and Ṓbatala all have distinct, but similar myths
and rites associated with them, but are all understood to be the same deity. Barber recounts
several examples of this phenomenon including a myth in which Ogun and his wife Ọya (a
powerful female Oriṣa) fought breaking each other into pieces (seven and nine, respectively),
each of which inspired a distinct cult of the god or goddess.445 The New World concept of

Crossroad, 2009), 424.

444 Whether or not the setting down of myth and ritual in writing has had the effect of canonizing or limiting the
growth and evolution of the Hindu pantheon, is beyond the scope of my knowledge. In fact, there probably was
no concept of a unified “Hinduism” or “Hindu” pantheon before the colonial period. In any event, the living, oral
mythological traditions of the Subcontinent certainly seem to have thrived alongside their written counterparts.

different “roads” or aspects or incarnations of a given Oriṣa is even closer to the notion of an avatar.

The close connection and even identification of Hindu deities with natural phenomena and features such as the Himalayas, the Ganges River, and natural rock formations finds close parallels in the Yoruba world. The natural or “discovered” shrines of Hinduism both look and are used in a manner very similar to the shrines of the Oriṣa. While it is difficult to make generalizations about either tradition, both seem to emphasize the worship of one particular deity, which becomes a window onto Absolute Divinity, and consequently shares many appellations with the Supreme Divinity. For example, the babalawo refer to Ọrunmila by many praise names shared with Olodumare, such as Ọbarisa, “The King of the Oriṣa,” Ọl’oj’ọ-ọni, “The Owner of Today,” and Ar’i nu r’ode, Olùmò’ ọkàn, “He who sees inside and outside, the Knower of hearts.” However, the Yoruba tradition differs from the Hindu in that the Oriṣa, by and large, remain distinct from and subordinate to Olodumare, whereas for their devotees, Shiva and Vishnu are none other than the Absolute itself. In the Yoruba setting, the relationship between the devotee, the Oriṣa, and Olodumare is summarized in the following saying, Nwon yin babalawo, babalawo yin Ifa, Ifa yin Olódùmarè, “People praise the babalawo, the babalawo praises Ifa [the Oriṣa Ọrunmila ], Ifa praises Olodumare.” Thus Beier concludes:

The relationship between the Yoruba and his orisha is essentially different from the relationship of a Christian worshipper to his God. The Christian demand for “faith” in God has no meaning in terms of Yoruba religion. A Yoruba never says “I believe” [mo gbagbo] in

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446 While by and large respecting other divinities, although they may be denigrated in the myths of the cult to show the superiority of its particular divinity. (e.g. the famous myth of Shiva’s endless phallus (lingam) bewildering Vishnu and Brahma, or Ọṣun’s shutdown of the world when the other deities tried to exclude her from their meetings)

447 Idowu, Olodumare, 52.
orisha. One can believe or disbelieve another man’s story or excuse. But in a religious context, the word cannot be used. In Yoruba, the word igbagbo (a believer) stands contemptuously for “Christian.”….

The relationship between a Yoruba and his orisha is expressed in the complex, multivalent verb li or ni that is contained in the word olorisha. Olorisha is usually translated into English with the approximation “orisha worshipper,” but strictly speaking it could mean “One who has orisha,” “One who is orisha” or “One who makes orisha.”

To have orisha expresses the simplest and most obvious relationship. Most people have simply inherited their orisha, and a failure to serve him would result in dangerous disorder, the symptoms of which could be disease or death in the family, failure in business and so on. These misfortunes are not punishments because the orisha is angry. But the neglect of the orisha has put things out of joint, and life cannot function again properly unless the right relationship is re-established.

To be orisha is an equally correct translation of the word olorisha. The worshipper offers his body as a vehicle to orisha, he allows the orisha “to mount his head,” to ride him, and he strives to become, for brief moments, the personification of the orisha. Only few and very powerful priests could really represent the orisha all the time. But every olorisha must become the orisha some time.

To make orisha is an expression that signifies the interdependency between orisha and worshipper. The orisha cannot exist for man without the olorisha through whom he can manifest himself. He must be strengthened through the ritual activities of the olorishas. In the praise names of Ogun this is very poetically expressed:

Does the woman who spins ever reject a spindle?
Does the woman who dyes ever reject a cloth?
Does the eye that sees ever reject a sight?

The function of ritual is partly to increase the orisha, to make him more orisha. The more his force is built up, the more strength he can return to the community of worshippers. The simplest and most common way of strengthening the orisha is to pronounce [ki] him. The verb ki means to greet, to call, perhaps to evoke [or invoke]. Oriki are the poetic formulae with which the orisha is being addressed, greeted, identified, strengthened…. A dialogue must take place every day through the medium of divination.448

As the oriṣa and owner of the most elaborate and trusted system of divination (Ifa) which contains oriki for nearly every member of the vast Yoruba cosmos, Òrùnmìlã, and his followers, the babalawo, are the models par excellence of this intimate, dynamic relationship between devotee, oriṣa, and the transcendent divinity of Olodumare.

“Theology” and Symbolism in Yoruba Religion

Further evidence of this telescoping model of divinity is found in the etymology of the term Oriṣa favored by Idowu in his seminal work, Olódùmarè, The Concept of God in Yorùbá Belief. He writes,

I am very inclined to the view that the name Oriṣà is a corruption of an original name Oriṣe’ (Ori-ṣe’) — “Head-Source”…an ellipsis of Ibi-ti-orí-ti-ṣe’ — “The Origin or Source of Ori [head/essence]”. Now what is this Origin, or “Head-Source”? It is the Deity Himself, the Great Ori from whom all ori derive, inasmuch as he is the Source and Giver of each of them. In Yoruba, the name Oriṣe’ (the original form), then refers to Olódùmarè. This is borne out by the fact that the name Oriṣà is applied to Him in some parts of Yorubaland…. The original Oriṣe’ is His common name in Ọw’ọ and among the Itsekiri and the Western Ijaw…. Thus the divinities would be small oriṣe, taking their name as their origin from Oriṣe’, Olódùmarè Himself.449

Thus the Oriṣa derive their name, as well as their divinity, from Olodumare.

Another mythical etymology of the name “Oriṣà” reveals another aspect of their divinity and relationship to each other and Olodumare. According to the myth,450 Olodumare sent Òrunmila and Oriṣà, the original arch-deity, into the world to keep it running smoothly.

One day, Oriṣà bought a slave at the market named Àtọw’ọdá (or Atunda, in some other versions) who served him well. Àtọw’ọdá asked his master for a piece of land to farm on his own, and Oriṣà agreed, giving him some land on a hill. Àtọw’ọdá began to till his land, digging up the large rocks that were buried there. For some reason, Àtọw’ọdá harbored the desire to murder his master, and one day, the slave saw Oriṣà walking by the bottom of the hill and seized his chance. He rolled a huge boulder down the hill at his master, who was subsequently smashed to bits and scattered to the four winds. Òrunmila came along looking for his friend, surveyed the scene of the disaster, and began traveling all around, collecting the pieces of Oriṣà, which he gathered in a calabash. He deposited some of these at the spot of the

449 Idowu. Olodumare, 60.

accident, and distributed the rest throughout the world, each piece becoming a different Oriṣa, and each place where it fell, a center of worship for that divinity. The name Oriṣa is then derived from the phrase “Ohun-ti-a-rí-ṣà,” “the thing that was found and scattered.” The deity formed at the spot of the accident was called Oriṣànlá, “the great or arch-deity.” The other scattered pieces of him, the other Oriṣa, are considered his “children.”

Another version of the myth begins with a universe peopled only by the single divinity Oriṣà and his slave, Atunda. Again, Atunda rolls a boulder on top of his master, smashing him into 401, or 601, or 1001 pieces which became the pantheon of the Oriṣa and all the other living things on earth. Idowu interprets these myths as symbolizing the necessary fragmentation that occurs when the human mind (symbolized by Atunda) tries to conceptualize, understand, or mentally encompass or master the awesome unity of the Divine. Ever the ritual dramatist, Soyinka interprets the myth as the origin of the gods’ unrest and incompleteness, which fuels their epic and tragic labours. In both interpretations, Divinity is derived form a single, unified source, and this fundamental unity of all divinity, and all life, is emphasized.

Traditional sources vary in their enumeration of the Oriṣa, some count 1,700, the numbers 400 and 200 (and their sum 600) are also common, as are 401 and 201. All of these are symbolic numbers indicating the indefinite and unlimited number of divinities. In fact, anything can become an Oriṣa. In the traditional Yoruba cosmos, the supernatural is never very far from the natural and the physical world is inextricably linked with the metaphysical,

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451 See Idowu, *Olodumare*, 67. The number 200, in Yoruba, Igba, and 400, Irinwó, both symbolize totality, the numbers 200+1 and 400+1 symbolize the transcendence of this totality.

452 Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 27, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. English and Yoruba. Olumọ rock outside Abeokuta is worshipped as an Oriṣa, as is Agẹmọ, the chameleon, and most rivers in Yorubaland are worshipped as goddesses. It is important to remember however, that it is not just the physical rock or river or animal that is worshipped, but rather the spiritual principle or force or aspect of Divinity manifested therein.
which is nearly always symbolized by elements of common experience. Wole Soyinka points out that the language of Yoruba symbolism is not one of ethereal stars and planets, but rather, “...the imagery of peat, chalk, oil, kernels, blood, heartwood and tuber, and active metaphors of human social preoccupations.”

The traditional Yoruba worldview is centered around human experience and is markedly intuitive (Wole Soyinka calls it “geocentric”). The experience of sky’s all-encompassing transcendence is a natural symbol for Olórun (another name for Olodumare), who is described as, *At’erere k’ayé El’eni à t’è ka,* “He Whose Being spreads out over the whole world, the Owner of the mat that is never rolled up.” In fact, the sky is called Ojú Ol’orun, “the face/eyes of Olórun,” and when it brightens, people often say Ol’orun nṣeju, “Olórun is winking.” Feelings, emotions, and the unseen aspects of human experience are described as being “inside,” where they are felt. After people die, they are buried in the earth, and thus the depths of the earth are also a natural symbol for the unseen realm of the dead and other invisible beings. The everyday phenomena of the vault of the sky, the “inside” of the body/self, and the earth’s depths are the three axial and convergent symbols of the metaphysical, spiritual hierarchy of the unseen in the Yoruba cosmos.

Thus traditional Yoruba worldview is highly symbolic, in the sense that nearly everything is, or can become, a symbol for a metaphysical or spiritual reality. As one

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455 Eliade’s description of symbolism seems to apply quite well to the Yoruba case, “Symbolism adds a new value to an object or to an action without however disturbing their own proper and immediate values. In applying itself to an object or an action, symbolism renders it “open.” Symbolic thought makes the immediate reality “shine,” but without diminishing it: in its own perspective the Universe is not closed, no object is isolated in its own existentialness; everything holds together in a closed system of correspondences and assimilations. Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, The Sacred and the Arts: Crossroad,* (*Herder:* 1992), 6.
babalawo explained to me, “Everything has an inú [an inner, hidden dimension], and the inú of a thing is its heavenly or spiritual self.” In this worldview, a tree is not just a physical tree, but is also a spirit or an abode of spirits, symbolizing or embodying certain spiritual realities. This symbolic relationship is enshrined and expressed in religious orature such as myths, the verses of Ifa, or the hunter’s chants known as Ijala, and in rituals, which are often connected to these myths and verses. Soyinka writes, “Ijala celebrates not only the deity but animal and plant life, seeks to capture the essence and relationships of growing things and the insights of man into the secrets of the universe.” For example, the following hunter’s poem about the Elephant connects it with hunters’ ritual sacrifices (dogs and ram) to their patron Oriṣa, Ogun

Elephant who brings death. Elephant, a spirit in the bush.
With his single hand he can pull two palm trees to the ground.
If he had two hands—
He would tear the heavens like an old rag.
The spirit who eats dog, the spirit who eats ram.
The spirit who eats a whole palm fruit with its thorns.
With his four mortar legs—he tramples down the grass.
Wherever he walks, the grass is forbidden to stand up again.
An elephant is not a load for an old man—
Not for a young man either.

Or within the Ifa corpus, the following verses from Odu Oturupon Iwori likens the passing of troubles to the clearing of turbulent water, while simultaneously prescribing the necessary ritual to bring about the end of these troubles:

Oturuponwori
Performed Ifa divination for Ololo omi ikere (a body of water)
On the day that his life was dirty and disturbed
He was told to offer 330 cowries
So that his life would be settled
He heard, and performed the sacrifice

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456 Araba of Modakeke, interview with the author, November 2, 2013. Yoruba.


458 Beier and Gbadamosi, Yoruba poetry: traditional Yoruba poems, (Ibadan: Ministry of Education, 1959), 34.
This rich symbolic web interweaves the physical and the spiritual, and connects its various elements in a particular, but dynamic pattern. This pattern is the source of the logic of ritual. For example, each Oriṣa has his or her favorite “foods” or sacrifices which are symbolically and mythologically connected to the character of that particular Oriṣa. Anyone with a passing familiarity with the music and mythology of Ọṣun, the lovely Oriṣa of sweet waters and fertility, can immediately see why honey is used to worship her. Ọṣun is like honey: sweet, golden, and strong. Or rather, honey is like, and manifests, aspects of Ọṣun. Numerous myths and songs connect Ọṣun and honey, make this intuitive connection official and explicit.

It is not unlike the connections we intuitively draw between moods, colours, friends, characters in movies, etc. The Oriṣa represent a particularly fundamental set of these archetypes, and the more one becomes familiar with their embodiments in myth, music, dance, sculpture, and devotees, the easier it becomes to recognize their manifestations in the natural world, other people, and oneself.

The Ifa corpus describes these connections with and between the Oriṣa (and the other inhabitants of the Yoruba cosmos) as interpersonal relationships, and thus babalawo and devotees of other oriṣa inhabit in a complex web of relationships within which they constantly interact with the Oriṣa in their various forms of manifestation. This web of relationships is remarkably dynamic and adaptable. For example, Ogun, the strong, trailblazing deity of iron and war is experienced in and identified with cars, trucks, and trains. As the popular King Sunny Ade song, “Ogun Party” says, “When you see a car run over a dog [the favored

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sacrifice to Ogun], don’t get upset all of a sudden, it is just Ogun’s meat.” In a 1997 interview, Soyinka similarly comments on the remarkable dynamism of this web of relationships:

...take Shango [the Oriṣa of lightning, dance, and justice] for instance. Shango becomes the demiurge of electricity, so that this new phenomenon does not become an object of terror, it does not alienate you, because Yoruba religion enables you to assimilate it. The ease with which the Yoruba moves into that world and adapts to phenomena that had not come into the purview of his religion until recently - it means that he does not see the need to protect his family or his town from the benefits of this new technological experience.  

However, it is important to note that although new myths and rituals emerge all the time, and old ones are constantly being reformulated, these symbols, myths, and rituals are not considered as creative inventions of literary or performative imagination. Rather, their significance lies in the fact that they reveal, rather than invent, the “deep” or hidden connections between the inhabitants of the densely-populated Yoruba cosmos.

Ultimately, everything in the world is a creation of Olodumare and reveals or manifests something of the Deity; in Yoruba terms, everything has its aṣé. Moreover, nearly everything one would encounter in Yorubaland (and by extension, many things that one would not) has a symbolic, and therefore mythical, and therefore ritual connection with various Oriṣa and other spiritual beings and forces. Although everything has the potential to


461 This notion of aṣé is closely related to power and beauty and is insightfully described in the following passage by Ulli Beier,“Susanne Wenger believes the aesthetic concepts of the West are ‘merely a substitute for these other things about which we no longer permit ourselves to talk. Why is a tree beautiful? One tree is beautiful because it is regular. Another is beautiful because it is irregular. When we say beautiful we simply describe our reaction to the tree that has a strong identity [or character]. The Yoruba “worships” this identity, if you want to use a Christian term here. Where we respond with superficial aesthetic remarks, the Yoruba feels a profound fusion of human intelligence with tree intelligence.’ It is no accident, perhaps, that the most sacred spots on the Oshun river, the ibu, are also the ones which the European observer regards as the most ‘beautiful’ sites” (Beier, The Return of the Gods, 89).

462 For example, as mentioned above, contemporary practitioners of traditional Yoruba religion see cars, trucks, and many forms of metallic technology as manifestations of Ogun, the pioneering Oriṣa of iron, the hunt, and justice. This ability to connect new forms to familiar archetypes is a common feature of Yoruba spirituality and accounts for its remarkable dynamism and adaptability to new circumstances.
be worshipped, to become an Oriṣa, not everything is actually worshipped at once, in the same way, otherwise there would be no pattern or structure. As a verse of Ifa from Odu Ogbe Okanran says, “not every palm nut drinks blood like ikin [the palm nuts used in Ifa divination which symbolize Orunmila and are therefore worshipped with sacrifices].”

All of this is strikingly similar to Eliade’s description of *hierophanies*, that is, places, people, objects, performances or things which manifest the “Sacred” in the “profane,” or ordinary, world. He writes, “The dialectic of hierophany implies a more or less clear choice, a singling-out. A thing becomes sacred in so far as it embodies (that is, reveals) something other than [merely] itself.”

Thus, each hierophany is described as a “paradoxical coming-together of being and non-being, absolute and relative, the eternal and the becoming.” This seems an apt characterization of the Yoruba religious world in which anything can become an Oriṣa at any time, but not everything all at once, in the same way. Unlike Eliade’s account however, the Yoruba cosmos is not divided into domains of “sacred” and “profane”; everything is sacred, everything has its aṣe, but some things have more or have a more intense aṣe. Typically these *alaṣe* (possessors of aṣe and authority) are associated with an Oriṣa, verse of Ifa, or myth because to become part of a myth or an Oriṣa is to participate in eternal mythical time, in the sacred, and it is these myths (and associated rituals) that give everyday objects like palm nuts, termite dust, honey, and chalk their profound meanings. From one perspective, it is what these “everyday objects” really are. Eliade explains that hierophanies, such as these, "acquire their reality, their identity, only to the extent of their participation in a

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463 Eliade, *Patterns*, 12-13. Although, one would be hard pressed to find an equivalent to Eliade’s concept of the “profane” in traditional Yoruba thought. Here one is confronted with varying intensities and colourings of the Sacred, not a Manichean opposition between “Sacred” and “Profane.” Everything that is, has *aṣe*, and thus everything is sacred, in its own unique way.

transcendent reality.” In the Yoruba cosmos, this participation is mediated by myth and ritual.

Because myth is what gives things their meaning, it is important to separate the word from the connotation of falsehood that it has accrued over the years in English (as in, “that’s just a myth”). In traditional Yoruba worldviews, and for Eliade, myth has the exact opposite connotation. From these perspectives, the mythical truth is the only one that matters, that gives things meaning. Comparing an actual historic event (the tragic death of a young Romanian man on the eve of his wedding) with the myth that quickly grew up around it, Eliade writes, “It was the myth that told the truth: the real story was already only a falsification. Besides, was not the myth truer by the fact that it made the real story yield a deeper and richer meaning, revealing a tragic destiny?” “The myth” is more true and of greater consequence than “the fact” because it deals with truths of a loftier nature, those truths that give meaning and structure to the world. Without these mythical truths, facts would be completely meaningless. The myths (and their associated rituals) of the Yoruba world bind its various elements together, giving them order, meaning and significance. This is why Ifa, the tradition which, more than any other, preserves and gives structure to these structuring myths is so important in the Yoruba universe. Eliade writes, “In such a perspective this is not a closed Universe, no object exists for itself in isolation; everything is held together by a compact system of correspondences and likenesses.” Ifa might very well be described as

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467 This is not just true of mythical worldviews like the Yoruba, scientific facts only have worth and meaning because of myths such as “the worth of human life,” “the quest to understand the universe,” and “development.”

this “compact system of correspondences and likeness” which holds everything together.

Since Ifa is regarded as the wisdom and expressed will of Olodumare, devotees of all other Oriṣa (and many Christians and Muslims as well) come to consult babalawo. Ifa is understood to speak for all Oriṣa, and its indefinite number of verses, to contain the myths of origin and relationships between the indefinite number of Oriṣa.

The organization of the vast pantheon described in Ifa is often depicted in the following way:

![Diagram of the Yoruba Cosmos](image)

*Figure 4.1: Diagram of the Yoruba Cosmos*

Olodumare stands above and beyond good (represented by the right side) and evil (represented by the left side), encompassing everything. The structure of this schema comes (amongst other sources) from the following popular invocation, variants of which are often heard at the start of rituals such as sacrifice or divination:

*Ibà irunmale ojúkötún*

*Ibà ibamale ojúkọsi*
Praise to the 400 divinities of the right hand (the benevolent)
Praise to the 200 divinities of the left hand (the malevolent)
Praise to the 460 divinities
Who line the very road of heaven

The major Oriṣa are usually considered as benevolent forces and ministers of 
Olodumare, who, however, can punish and harm those guilty of ritual and moral 
transgressions. Gentle, patient Ṭbatala will punish his devotees for drinking alcohol,
Ọrunmila, although patient and understanding, can punish his devotees who disregard his 
taboos by lying, committing adultery, etc., Ogun is swift to punish liars and oath-breakers, as 
is Ṣango, but of no Oriṣa is this more true than Eṣu. Eṣu is simultaneously a mischievous 
trickster and a strict enforcer of the will of Olodumare and the law of sacrifice. Whenever a 
sacrifice is offered, it is Eṣu who takes the sacrifice to the intended recipient, thus the saying, 
*Eni ọ rúbo l’Eṣu gbè,* “Eṣu supports the one who sacrifices.”

However, if a sacrifice is not 
made, or done correctly, Eṣu, will side with the Ajogun (the malevolent powers on the left 
side of the diagram) and wreak all kinds of havoc on the offending party. Eṣu also punishes 
the other Oriṣa for their refusal to sacrifice, for their hubris, and sometimes just for fun. “No 
respecer of persons,” Eṣu is a notoriously ambivalent figure and is only consistently allied 
with Ṣrunmila, the god who prescribes sacrifices (and even this god of wisdom suffers Eṣu’s 
wrath on occasion), and of course, Olodumare. For this reason, he is placed neither on the left

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469 Idowu, *Olodumare,* 67.
nor on the right, but in the middle. Eṣu is both good and evil, a reflection, on a lower plane, of Olodumare’s transcendence of both good and evil. The chaos that Eṣu is so fond of creating is a shadow of the undifferentiated “chaos” of Olodumare’s transcendence of all categories and divisions. Due to the fear he inspires and his sometimes malevolent behavior, “Eṣu” was the name used to translate “the devil” in the Yoruba Bible. However, Eṣu actually bears little resemblance to the tempting, evil Satan or the devil of the Abrahamic traditions, unless one considers the more ambiguous or even positive role he plays in some esoteric Abrahamic traditions.

Turning to the left side of the diagram, we find the Ajogun, the calamitous spirits and enemies of mankind. They are legion, and are led by eight warlords: Ikú (Death), Àrùn (Disease), Òfò (Loss), Egbà (Paralysis), Oràn (Trouble), Èpè (Curse), Ewọn (Imprisonment), and Eye (Affliction). The Ajogun are opposed and held at bay by the Oriṣa and other benevolent spiritual forces with whom man can ally himself through sacrifice and good conduct/character. The Adìẹ, often euphemistically called Ara ayé or Iyá mi (literally, “the people of the world” or “my mothers”), are sometimes added to the list of Ajogun, but I believe this is not correct. Adìẹ is often translated as “witch,” but as numerous studies, and my own conversations with babalawo have demonstrated, the English word “witch” does not

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471 Hence his appellation, Éṣù, a s’òtún ọsí la i nítìjú, “Esu, the one who belongs to the right and left sides of a matter without any shame.” Rowland Abiodun, “Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics,” African Arts 27, no. 3 (1994): 68-78, 45.


map well onto the Yoruba concept of Àj´ẹ, unless the original Old Germanic meaning\(^{474}\) of “one possessing special knowledge or uncommon skill” is intended. Despite their name and unfortunate translation, the Iyá mi or Aje are not exclusively female, and one babalawo I interviewed even told me that they are mostly male.\(^{475}\) In short, the Àj´ẹ are people of exceptional spiritual power who have the ability to curse or bless those around them, and can be propitiated by certain sacrificial rituals.

The Yoruba cosmos is also home to various tree, river, rock and nature spirits, as well as a host of other sprites, spirits, and ghosts who range from the helpful to the mischievous to the downright wicked. They are seldom the object of worship or veneration, but sometimes certain sacrificial rites are used to elicit their support, bind or block them, or avoid them altogether.

The ancestral collective known as Egungun receive sacrifice and are venerated, and are sometimes included in the pantheon of Oriṣa. The cult of Egungun is exclusively male, as is the related cult of Oro, but both men and women can, and are expected to, make offerings to this ancestral collective. Usually one’s deceased parents and/or grandparents are worshipped individually, with more distant ancestors being absorbed into the collective Egungun.\(^{476}\) However, not every dead person becomes an ancestor. Only those who reach adulthood, die a “good” death, receive a proper burial, and are known for good character.

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\(^{474}\) The word “witch” may come from the Old German witjan or wizzen (meaning “knowledge,” “intelligence,” or “skill”—from which the word “wit” is also derived) from the Proto-Indo-European wid- or vid- meaning “to see,” and metaphorically, “to know.”

\(^{475}\) Araba of Modakeke, interview with the author, November 11, 2013. Yoruba.

\(^{476}\) Cf. Eliade Cosmos and History, 47, “The transformation of the dead person into an "ancestor," corresponds to the fusion of the individual into an archetypal category. In numerous traditions (in Greece, for example) the souls of the common dead no longer possess a "memory"; that is, they lose what may be called their historical individuality. The transformation of the dead into ghosts, and so on, in a certain sense signifies their re-identification with the impersonal archetype of the ancestor.”
qualify for this veneration. As one babalawo explained to me, “Only people who have
completed the task for which Olodumare sent them into the world are worshipped after death.
We don’t sacrifice to/worship those who die in childhood or wicked people.” The *Egungun*
occupy their own realm, which is sometimes identified with the “heaven-below,” (*Ọrun-
*Odo*) and other times with the world of the unborn and the “heaven-above” (*Ọrun*) of the
Oriṣa and Olodumare. In the time of myth, these domains and the “land of the living” were
traversed by all with relative ease, and something of this porous nature remains today.

The transition from the realm of the unborn, or Heaven (*Ọrun*), into the world (*Ayé*) is
one of the main themes of Yoruba mythology. The things people and the Oriṣa do in Heaven
and on their way down to the world are of the utmost consequence. It was on his way down to
earth that Ṭbatala got drunk and fell asleep, denying him the honor of being the first king on
earth, and causing his lifetime abstinence from alcohol. It was on the way down from Heaven
that Ṭrunmila acquired the “calabash of wisdom,” and his important position in the
pantheon. But perhaps no myth illustrates the importance of heaven more than the set of
myths surrounding *orí*, the head.

The term *orí* is used to refer both to a person’s physical or “outer” head (*orí ọde*) and
his “inner head” (*orí-inú*). The latter is one of the most important elements of the Yoruba
cosmos and of the traditional Yoruba conception of personhood. The *orí-inú* is at once one’s

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478 This lower heaven is also identified with the Earth, *Ile*, in Yoruba cosmology.

479 To these three domains of human experience, the world of the unborn, the world of the dead, and that of the
living, Soyinka adds what he calls the “fourth stage”—the liminal realm between these three more stable abodes.
The fourth stage is the place of ritual, of intercourse between the different realms and the forces that inhabit

480 This myth will be recounted more fully in the next chapter, and it should be noted that it is but one of many
myths explaining the source of Ṭrunmila’s wisdom and supremacy amongst the Oriṣa.
destiny, fate, guardian angel, personal divinity, and source. It is one’s ori, more than anything else, which determines one’s outcome in life. As the myths of the Ifa corpus tell us, each person chooses an ori in Heaven. Some are good and lead to long life and prosperity, while others end in ruin. In one variant of the myth, on the way out of Heaven, each person stands at the “Tree of Forgetfulness,” Igi Igbàgbé, and declares the fate he has chosen for himself. But after passing under its branches, and descending into the world, all recollection of one’s fate is lost. In all versions of the myth, Ṣrunmila alone witnesses the choice of Ori and is thus called ẹlẹrẹ iṣẹ́, “witness of the choice [of destiny].” For this reason, Ṣrunmila can be consulted through divination to determine the content or wishes of one’s Ori. In fact, Abimbola writes,

“.it is important for every individual to consult Ifa from time to time to find out the true path of one’s destiny. By consulting Ifa, one is merely trying to find out what has been kept in store by one’s ori. Divination is therefore regarded as the communication of the wishes of one’s ori to Ifa who will then reveal this to the client through the appropriate chapter and verse of the Odù system.”

As another babalawo explained, “Everyone, even the Oriṣa, have an ori, it is only Olodumare who does not, because He is the original source of all ori.” As witness of the choice of ori, Ṣrunmila stands in a unique position to advise all of the other deities, as well as human beings. The myths of Ifa recount that he was the first creation of Olodumare, and as such, has eternal knowledge of all that was and is and is to come. He declares the will of Olodumare to man and god alike, and serves as the mouthpiece of the other Oriṣa. Since leaving the world, Ṣrunmila speaks through Ifa divination, one of, if not the, main mode of communication between mankind, the Oriṣa, and Olodumare, and between Heaven and Earth.

481 In other versions of this myth, this declaration takes place at Onibode, the boundary of heaven.

482 Abimbola, Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa, 33-4.

Babalawo often cite the proverb *Ayé l’Ojá, Orun n’Ilé*, “the world is a market, heaven is home”\(^{484}\) to explain the relationship between life in the world and that in heaven. The world, *ayé*, has a somewhat ambivalent nature, it is the stage of action, of life, of enjoyment, but it is also a place of death, decay, trouble, and torment. However, as bad as life in this world may get, it is better than life in *Orun àpádí*, “the heaven of broken pot shards,” where the wicked go after death.\(^{485}\) However, *Orun*, the realm of the ancestors, seems to be a pleasant place, although many verses of Ifa, as well as rituals and popular belief, point to the desirable possibility of return to the world from this realm, through reincarnation as a child of one’s descendants.\(^{486}\)

Heaven (*Orun*) and Earth (*Ilẹ*) are frequently depicted as two half-sphere calabashes, with that of heaven lying on top of that of the Earth, with the World (*Aỳé*)\(^{487}\) being the plane where the two halves meet. As Drewal explains,

> The Yoruba conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet inseparable realms—*ayé* (the visible, tangible world of the living) and *orun* (the invisible spiritual realms of the ancestors, gods, and spirits). Such a cosmic conception is visualized either as a spherical gourd [calabash], whose upper and lower hemispheres fit tightly together, or as a divination tray with a raised figured border enclosing a flat central surface.\(^{488}\)

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\(^{484}\) Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Enligh and Yoruba.

\(^{485}\) Peel and others conclude that this conception of the afterlife is the result of Islamic influence. (See Peel, J.D.Y., *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 187. While such speculations are beyond the scope of this work, popular Yoruba belief holds that the spirits of the wicked and those who die prematurely wander around the bush and crossroads and sometimes try to “hitch a ride” back into the world of the living by entering pregnant women and coming out with or in their new children.

\(^{486}\) Upon the birth of a new child, Ifá divination is performed to determine which of the child’s ancestors has returned to the world “through” the child. Even amongst Christians and Muslims, the names *Babatunde*, “The Father has come again,” and *Yetunde*, “The mother has come again,” are common for children born shortly after the death of a relative.

\(^{487}\) Yoruba mythology generally differentiates between the World (*Ayé*) and the Earth (*Ilẹ*), which is a divinity in her own right, as well as being a symbol for unseen realms of being.

Like the cosmos, human beings are similarly symbolized by calabashes, which are also used to house or “enthrone” the physical presences of Oriṣa (such as the sacred palm nuts of Ọrunmila) in homes and temples. As one babalawo explained, “man is a small world, everything in the world, all the powers of the world exist inside him”\(^{489}\)—so people are understood to contain or carry the presence of the Oriṣa and the inner realities of the myriad things of the world within him or herself, just as calabashes contain the physical presence of the Oriṣa. This explains the symbolic imagery of the posthumous abode of the wicked, `Ọrun àpádi, “the heaven of broken pot shards,”—the place of those fragmented and fractured souls who have fallen beneath the human state—whose containers have been broken. In several verses of Odu Ofún- Osá, the broken or cracked calabash also serves as a symbol of the world or life gone in disarray, which only Ifa can repair, restoring the cosmos, and the individual human, to order and wholeness.\(^{490}\) Between the two halves of the cosmic calabash, the drama and mystery of life and death, both human and divine, unfolds according to the will of Olodumare, under the knowing gaze of Ọrunmila. The totality of this cosmic drama is summarized and encoded in the 256 Odù of Ifa Divination.

**Ifa Divination**

The eminent Historian of Religion, Joachim Wach, described divination as, “exploration and interpretation of the will of the Godhead…done in the spirit of devotion and submission rather than coercion and manipulation.”\(^{491}\) This definition certainly applies to Ifa divination, with the qualification that the submission is not a passive process, but is nearly

\(^{489}\) Awo Faniyi, interview with the author, November 27, 2013, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Yoruba.


always an active one, requiring deep contemplation and interpretation, the performance of
specified rituals and/or changes in behavior.

IIFA divination is based on the production of 256 divinatory signatures (one for each of
the 256 Odù) through a few ritual processes. The basic structure of IIFA divination is relatively
simple, and is shared by a number of divinatory systems in West Africa and around the
world.492 The client or seeker presents his or her question or problem in a ritualized manner to
the instruments of divination, not the diviner.493 After performing an invocation, the diviner
manipulates the instruments of divination in a semi-random manner to produce a divinatory
signature or sign that corresponds to a specific body of orature. These verses are then recited
and interpreted for the seeker, often diagnosing the seeker’s issue and advising a specific
course of action (most commonly a sacrifice), with additional divination being performed for
clarification. Then the seeker confirms or rejects the diagnosis of the divination, and either
performs the prescribed ritual actions or does not.

Iifa divination is usually performed either with a 16 palm nuts, known as ikin, or with a
chain called an opele, which is made of a metal or cotton chain or thread linking eight shells
of the fruit of the opele tree. Each shell is curved, creating a convex and concave side. To
perform divination with the ikin, the babalawo takes all 16 nuts in one hand and then tries to
snatch all of them with the other hand. If two nuts remain in his hand, he makes one mark in
the sawdust-like camwood powder (iy’e-iròsùn) on his divination tray (ọpon Ifa). He then
repeats this process, and if only one nut remains in his hand this time, then he makes two
marks in the iy’eròsùn directly to the left of the first mark. If, however, no nuts or more than

492 See Bascom, Ifa Divination, 3-13 and Abimbola, 37-39.
493 This is usually accomplished by whispering the request to a small amount of currency, which is then placed
on the divining instruments. Money is a common (and effective) concrete symbol of will or desire.
two remain in his hand, no mark is made. The babalawo repeats this process as many times as
is necessary to make two columns of four sets of marks (or four rows of two sets of marks).
First he marks the top row, starting with the right, and then he continues on down, marking
each row, starting from the right, making a total of eight sets of marks (see Fig 2). These eight
sets of marks constitute the sign of the Odù. For example, the sign of the Odù Òtúrá Méji is:

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<td>I</td>
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<td>8th</td>
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Òtúrá Méji

*Figure 4.2: Order of markings*

These eight sets of marks, each with two possibilities (one or two marks), yields $2^8$ or
256 possible signs. Taken separately, each row has $2^4$ or 16 possible signs, each of which has
a name. For example, the name of each of the rows above is Òtúrá. Since this row appears
twice in the Odù above, the Odù is known as Òtúrá Méji, or “Two Òtúrás.” The sixteen
“twinned” Odùs, like Òtúrá Méji, are considered as the principal or primary Odùs, from
which the other 240 Odùs, called ãmúlù, are derived. The Odùs are all ranked in terms of
seniority from Èji Ogbè (two Ogbè’s), the most senior, occupying the 1st place, to Òfún’sè the
256th Odù. Òfún’sè is made up of Òfún on the right, and Ôsè on the left:

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Òfún’sè  Èji Ogbè
(#256)  (#1)

*Figure 4.3: Ranking of Odùs*
This ranking of Odùs plays an important role in the divination process, as we will discuss shortly.

Although the *ikin* are used in the manner above for public and special ritual occasions, babalawo usually use the *ọpẹlẹ* to divine. Grasping the chain or thread of the *ọpẹlẹ* in the middle, so that four shells hang down on either side, the babalawo will toss it forward onto his *àpò Ifá* (the bag in which he normally keeps his Ifa paraphernalia) so that the two ends of the chain point towards him, and the middle of the chain is pointing away from him. The two sides of the chain make up the two columns of the sign of the Odù. (see picture)

![Image of Opele in the position of Eji-Ogbe](image)

*Figure 4.4: Opele in the position of Eji-Ogbe*

The concave or smooth side of the *ọpẹlẹ* shell is equivalent to a single mark, and the convex or rough side of the *ọpẹlẹ* shell is equivalent to two marks. Therefore, if the *ọpẹlẹ* is tossed and all of the shells land with their concave sides up, the sign produced is that of *Èji Ogbè* (see above). The *ọpẹlẹ* is quicker and easier to use and more portable than the *ikin*, which are usually reserved for special occasions.494

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494 All of the elements used in this process of divination are also known as Ifá, and are regarded as embodiments of the deity Ọrunmila. This is the aforementioned metaphysical significance of the polyvalence of the term Ifá; Ọrunmila contains the entire tradition, with all of its facets and historical unfoldings, within himself, and conversely, is present in every aspect and every person of the tradition.
Once the figure of the Odù is produced, either by the opelẹ or ikin, the babalawo can recite one or more of the verses (ese) of that particular Odù. 495 Most senior babalawo have at least eight verses of each Odù memorized, and many have significantly more in their repertoire. The diviner will typically then recite the beginning, invocatory part of the chosen ese verbatim, and then recite the mythical narrative (itàn) of the ese in his own words. This narrative usually takes the form of a mythological figure (a god, animal, person, inanimate object, etc.) seeking out a particular mythical babalawo (often with a highly evocative name) to perform Ifa divination because of a particular need or problem (going on a journey, sickness, barrenness, etc.). The Odù to which the narrative belongs is the one that emerges, and the mythological babalawo tells the seeker to make a certain sacrifice. The figure either performs or doesn’t perform the sacrifice, resulting in his/her success or failure, respectively. The consequence of the performance or neglect of the sacrifice is often connected to the way things are in the present. 496 After the story is complete, the babalawo will recite the closing verses of the ese, which also seldom vary. 497

After this recitation, the babalawo will summarize the story and the main message of the ese for the client or seeker, giving advice to him/her in the following form, “Ifa says such-and such is happening, you must not do such-and-such, and make a sacrifice of such-and-such

495 When I asked the babaláwo how they selected the ese they recite out of the hundred or thousands in each Odù, the answers ranged from imísí, “inspiration” to “you recite whatever comes into your head,” to “you can recite as many as you remember, all of them apply.” Not one of them ever mentioned examining the client for clues, or as far as I could tell, ever tried to “cold-read” anyone who came seeking divination.

496 For example, one myth of Odù Odi-Ọkanran explains how the lizard went to a babalawo because he wanted to marry a certain beautiful woman. He partially completed the sacrifice, and so the woman agreed to marry him, but because he didn’t complete the sacrifice, the people of the town told the woman not to marry him because his home was a crack in the wall. She asked him if this was true, and when he admitted it, she left. Now the lizard runs all around, bobbing his head up and down (a characteristic behavior of this particular species of lizard) looking for his lost wife. (cf. Bascom, 330-1).

497 See Ch 3 of Amherd’s, Reciting Ifá for a detailed account of the fixed and variable aspects of recitation of ese Ifá during divination.
for so-and-so.” Then, and only then, will the seeker/client explain his problem to the babalawo, who will then help the seeker interpret the $\varepsilon\varepsilon$ of Ifa in light of his or her particular situation.\textsuperscript{498} Then, if the seeker has further questions, or if the sacrifice is not specified by the $\varepsilon\varepsilon$, they can ask Ifa further “yes” or “no” questions through the use of $i\breve{b}o$. The $i\breve{b}o$ usually consist of a piece of bone, which stands for “no,” and two cowries tied together, which represent “yes.” The babalawo will ask $\breve{O}runmila$ the question and then touch the $i\breve{b}o$ to each of the shells of the $\breve{o}\breve{p}\breve{e}\breve{l}\breve{e}$ before handing them to the seeker. The seeker cups the bone and the cowries between his palms, shakes them, and then separates them, taking one in each fist. Then the babalawo casts the $\breve{o}\breve{p}\breve{e}\breve{l}\breve{e}$ twice. If the Odù that appears first is senior to that which appears second, the seeker opens his left hand to reveal the answer. If the junior Odù appears first, the right hand is opened.\textsuperscript{499} In this way, the seeker can ask $\breve{O}runmila$ a number of direct, “yes-or-no” questions and make the answer to his or her question quite specific. The $i\breve{b}o$ can also be used after the very first cast of the $\breve{o}\breve{p}\breve{e}\breve{l}\breve{e}$, before the babalawo recites verses from that Odù, to determine whether the situation is “good” or “bad.” The babalawo will then use this information to select the verses from that Odù to recite. In this way, the message of Ifa becomes ever more specific, from Odù to $\varepsilon\varepsilon$ to the particular situation of the seeker, which could itself become an $\varepsilon\varepsilon$ one day.

\textsuperscript{498} If the babaláwo “misses the mark” and the recites a verse that seems to have nothing to do with the seeker’s secret request, sometimes the babaláwo will be blamed for not knowing enough verses of the Odù. However, sometimes this seemingly unrelated prediction is understood to be mysteriously connected to the original request, I heard several stories from babaláwo and seekers about seemingly strange predictions of Ifá which actually proved to be connected to the seeker’s original problem. More skeptical or casual visitors of babaláwo will simply ignore predictions that don’t make sense and go seek another solution to their problem, often from another babaláwo or spiritual specialist such as a Muslim Alfa or a Christian prophet or pastor.

\textsuperscript{499} There are several further intricacies to this process that are outside the scope of this chapter, however, see Bascom, \textit{Ifa Divination}, Chps. 4, 5, & 6 for a more detailed explanation of the procedure.
This process provides insight into the metaphysics and cosmology assumed by Ifa divination. The Odù themselves are considered to be deities, spiritual principles, and archetypes from which the world and all of its inhabitants are created. For example, babalawo often refer to the Oriṣa Eṣu as Òṣ’ṣetúrá, the Odù that contains the story of his creation. During a babalawo’s initiation, divination is performed to determine which Odù the initiate is “a child of.” In fact, the babalawo call their personal Odù, Odù ti bí mi, “the Odù that gave birth to me.” The babalawo in question is understood to be a particular manifestation of that particular Odù, and must endeavor to learn and follow all the principles and taboos and lessons of the many verses of that Odù, because in learning about that Odù, he or she is learning about himself.501 But this dynamic is not limited to babalawo, everything in the world is created through the Odùs, the fundamental, organizing principles of the universe and Ifa. One babalawo explained, “Ifa is the Word from the mouth of Olodumare which he used to create the world, which he uses to mend the world.”502 The Odùs are the metaphysical archetypes or principles that form the basis of the world. They are like the fundamental forces of physics or the Platonic archetypes, once you understand them, everything else in the universe is just the details of their application. Every babalawo whom I interviewed said the following in one way or another, “The whole world is in Ifa, everything that will ever happen and everything that has ever happened.” The Odùs of Ifa are the alphabet of existence.503

500 The Odù appear in many verses of Ifá as mythological characters. They are often interpreted as disciples or children of Ôrunmila, and other than Ofún Méjì (Eepe!), the powerful sixteenth and last of the principal Odù, none of the Odù are sacrificed to.

501 Awo Faniyi even equated a babaláwo’s Odù with his Ori.


503 The babaláwo often identified certain circumstances of events in their life with particular Odùs, and explained or justified their behavior by citing a myth from the Odù. Once they recognized the pattern of the Odù or one of its myths in their present situation, the babaláwo would use it to analyse the situation and make moral judgments.
The process of divination mirrors the cosmic process of creation: things go from a heavenly unity of universals to an earthly multiplicity of particulars. In Ifa divination, first the Odù governing the seeker’s situation is determined through divination, taking his or her particular circumstance and connecting it to its original archetype. Then, through divination, this heavenly archetype is brought down into the realm of the particular and the practical. Since these particulars were created through the Odù in the first place, it is through the Odù that they can be “mended,” that is, reconnected with their origin, with their true selves. It is because Olodumare created the world through his word of Ifa that the world can be mended by Ifa.

*A History of Ifa*

_B’óni tì rí, ọla ò rí b’e’ẹ_
_L’ọ mú babalowo ìfá orọrún_

As today is seen, tomorrow is not seen likewise
That is why the babalowo performs divination every five days
-Odu Ìworí Ogbè

_Ìfá L’o ni Oni_
_Ìfá l’o ni Ìlà_
_Ìfá l’o ni Òtunla_
_Ìfá l’o ni Ireni_
_Ọrunmila l’o ni ojo mérin_
_Oríṣa da si ayé_

Ifa is the owner of today
Ifa is the owner of tomorrow
Ifa is the owner of the day after tomorrow
Ifa is the owner of the day after that
Ọrunmila is he who owns the four days
The Oríṣa created on earth
-Οdu Ogunda Meji

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Time and Eternity in Yoruba Cosmology

A history implies a metaphysics of time and place, a cosmology. Different cosmologies will necessarily entail different conceptions of time and space and the events that occur therein, and therefore produce different histories. A child of the related scientific and industrial revolutions, the modern concept of history has become increasingly abstract, linear, homogenous, and quantitative, a line of identical quantized seconds running from the big bang off into the oblivion of the future. The traditional Yoruba concept of history, itàn, however, is inseparable from myth, and the cosmology described therein. Time in Yoruba cosmology has often been described as cyclical or spiral. In one of his most metaphysically insightful passages, Soyinka writes,

This seeming cosmic anachronism is in fact a very handy clue to temporal concepts in the Yoruba world-view. Traditional thought operates, not a linear conception of time but a cyclic reality...But the degree of integrated acceptance of this temporal sense in the life-rhythm, mores and social organization of Yoruba society is certainly worth emphasizing, being a reflection of that same reality which denies periodicity to the existences of the dead, the living, and the unborn...the world of the unborn, in the Yoruba world-view, is as evidently older than the world of the living as the world of the living is older than the ancestor-world. And, of course, the other way around: we can insist that the world of the ancestor is older than the world of the unborn in the same breath as we declare that the deities preceded humanity into the universe.506

505 The history of the concept of time in Western thought is a fascinating and multifaceted one as the originally mythical or cyclical time of the Ancient Babylonians, Greeks and other peoples of antiquity was transformed by the introduction of writing, the spread and dominance of Christianity, in which a particular historical event (the crucifixion and resurrection) redefined the nature of time, and finally the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution, whose rational speculation largely stripped time of its qualitative aspect, reducing it to the variable, t, an objective, independent measure of change, no longer defined by the movement of the earth. These trends ultimately lead to the Industrial Revolution and Digital Age, whose modes of labor and leisure radically altered the way most people experience time. Nevertheless, even this conception of time is not entirely without its cyclical and mythological nature: the years are all still counted from the mythological year of Christ’s birth, the twelve months have loose astrological correlations and repeat each year, the seven days of the week cycle through the names of Norse and Roman deities. The units of measurement of time are still based on the earth’s rotation and revolution, and have not yet become a completely abstract set of numbers ticking off into infinity. See Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 68-116. As far as the concept of time among Islamic philosophers is concerned, see Nasr, Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines, Chapter 13; also see the article of John Smart J. C. on “time” in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, vol. 8, 126–34.

506 Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World, 10.
Yoruba cosmology assumes multiple realms of existence which often overlap and are simultaneous, that is, they exist “on top” of one another, rather than one after the other. Those yet to be born are above us right now, and those who have already lived are below us in the earth / above us in the heaven (depending on the particular mythological perspective adopted).

In Yoruba thought, the afterlife is not so much “after” life as it is above or below it; likewise, our pre-existence is not just “before” life, but also above it. Myths of reincarnation\(^{507}\) equate the realm of the ancestors with that of the unborn, so the ordinary temporal succession we experience in everyday life is like an island surrounded by the timeless ocean of pre/post-existence. Ritual brings us to the shores of this sea of eternity. Taking another perspective, Drewal writes,

> If in Yoruba thought life on earth is merely a temporary segment in a human spirit’s journey, then all time would have to be classified as cyclical, not just ritual time. What Benjamin Ray terms “ordinary linear time” would not exist in Yoruba consciousness, since, conceptually the human spirit is always coming into the world and returning in one unending cycle. On the other hand, since nothing ever repeats itself, and since from this ontological perspective there is always change and transformation…then existence in time would be more appropriately conceived in spatial terms as a spiral—neither cyclical, nor linear. There is no time-out-of-time, properly speaking that is, if I have understood the concept…\(^{508}\)

While I agree with Drewal that in Yoruba thought, no particular thing repeats itself, and that change and transformation are a perpetual part of the world (\textit{ayé}), I believe she has misunderstood the concept of the human journey between the worlds of the Yoruba cosmos.

This is a delicate metaphysical point, but one that is essential to a complete understanding of traditional Yoruba conceptions of time. The transition from \textit{ayé} (the world) to `\textit{ọrun}` is not just

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\(^{507}\) Odu Irósùn-wọrì says, \textit{Àwọn ẹniyàn yóó sì sọ́ sì `ọrun` wọn yóó sì māa pàdà wà sòdè ayé lehin ıpàràdà títi ènìk`ò ọkan yóó fí d`d ıpò rere nàà, “People will keep going to heaven and returning to earth after death until everyone arrives at that good position.” Similarly, when someone dies, the people of heaven are said to say, “The child sent on an errand has come back.” (Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 27, 2013. Ile-Ifé, Nigeria. Enligh and Yoruba.).

\(^{508}\) Drewal, \textit{Yoruba Ritual}, 47.
an ordinary transition in time, but rather the transition from time to “outside of time.”

Closely examining Drewal’s statement provides another way of approaching this point. She writes, “the human spirit is always coming into the world… there is always change and transformation.” This “always” (lailai in Yoruba) is the boundary between the timeless and time. If something “happens” in eternity (outside of time), then it always happens in time. In Yoruba myth, the human soul comes into time as it comes into the world, and so it is always coming into the world/time. This is why people know everything that they will do in the world when they choose their ori in heaven, they are above or outside of ordinary time and can choose and perceive their lives “all at once.” If we picture time/the world as a river, then heaven could be a rain-laden cloud that extends over the entire length of the river, sending down rain and receiving evaporating water. Because the motion of rain is vertical, it doesn’t participate in the horizontal motion of time until it enters the river of the world, and can fall or evaporate up at any point along the river, just as in the Yoruba worldview, people enter and leave the world at every point in time.

But this is not the whole story. There remains what Soyinka calls the “fourth stage,” the liminal realm of myth and ritual. If time is a river, and heaven is a cloud, then myth takes

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509 Or perhaps more accurately, a qualitatively different sort of time- the nigba lailai, nigba náà, in illo tempore, the “mythical time” of Ifá and itàn. See note 540 on Ọṣango and Ja kutà for an illustrative example.

510 See 118 of John Peel “Making History: The Past in the Ijesho Present” Man, New Series, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Mar., 1984), 111-132. Odù Eji Ogbe describes how the eternal Olodumare created time (igbà) when he created the primordial day (Ọjọ). Odù Eji Ogbe also explains that Ọrunmila ’s presence at the creation of everything else is the reason for his knowledge of everything that has happened or will happen in the world.

512 Soyinka separates the worlds of the unborn and the ancestors, creating four realms: the land of the living, the unborn, the ancestors, and the fourth stage. Although the ancestors and the unborn are treated separately in ritual, for the reasons cited above, I believe Ifá combines the realm of the unborn and that of the ancestors into one realm (’órún), so I describe three realms of human experience: heaven (’órún), the world (ayé), and the transitional mythical/ritual (igbà náà).
place at the source of the river, in the heights of the hills, where the river meets the cloud. What looks like a succession of reincarnations from the perspective of ayé (the world) is simultaneous and parallel from the perspective of îtàn (myth), and utterly undifferentiated from the eternal vantage point heaven, of Olodumare.513 When combined, these three perspectives, the temporal, the mythical, and the eternal, produce something like Drewal’s “spiral” time.514 What is a point in eternity is spun to make a circle in the mythical time of heaven, which the linear time of the world stretches out into a spiral. However, it is important to remember that this spiral is only how things appear from the perspective of the world of living human experience. The point is still a point; it merely appears to be a circle or a spiral, like the patterns produced when you wave a stick pulled from the fire.515

The meaning and the etymology of the Yorùbá word for history, îtàn, can help shed some light on this concept. Îtàn is the verbal noun of tán, a verb that means “to light,” or “to spread.” The metaphorical implication of which is that myths and historical narratives are like lights that shine forth to illuminate the present, or that they are like a fire that can be brought

513 Cf. The three times (profane, eternal, mythical/ritual) implicit in Eliade’s statement, “A sacrifice, for example, not only exactly reproduces the initial sacrifice revealed by a god ab origine, at the beginning of time, it also takes place at that same primordial mythical moment; in other words, every sacrifice repeats the initial sacrifice and coincides with it. All sacrifices are performed at the same mythical instant of the beginning; through the paradox of rite, profane time and duration are suspended.” (Eliade, Cosmos and History, 35).

514 Also see Peel’s excellent 1984 article, “Making History,” whose findings closely parallel the above discussion.

515 Cf. Plato’s Timaeus in which time is describes as, “the moving image of eternity” and the “circular motion of heaven.” Also see Rumi’s Mathnawi Book I (verses 1145-8), “Life is ever arriving anew, like the stream, though in the body it has the semblance of continuity. From its swiftness it appears continuous, like the spark which thou whirlest rapidly with thy hand. If thou whirl a firebrand with dexterity, it appears to the sight as a very long (line of) fire. The swift motion produced by the action of God presents this length of duration (Time) as (a phenomenon arising) from the rapidity of Divine action.” Also see Maḥmūd Shabistari’s Rose Garden of Mystery (verses 15-18) “All these varied forms arise only from your fancy. They are but one point revolving quickly in a circle. It is but one circular line from first to last Whereon the creatures of this world are journeying.”
from one “place” (or time) to another to give light and warmth.\textsuperscript{516} The fire is the same even if the fuel is different.

These images and metaphors are meant to convey the epiphanic nature of \textit{Ètàn}, myth/history. In Ifa, and in Yoruba culture in general, moments or historical events appear as different manifestations of eternal realities or archetypes. Myths, rituals, proverbs, and divination connect these different manifestations and make them intelligible. As the Yoruba proverb says, \textit{Èni ti kò mọ ètàn, yóò mọ ètan}, “the one who doesn’t know myth/history, won’t know his relations(hips).”\textsuperscript{517}

Eliade’s characterization of the relationship between “myth” and “history” has strong resonances with this perspective. He writes, “thus though it may seem paradoxical what we may call the ‘history’ of primitive societies consists solely of the mythical events which took place in \textit{illo tempore} and have been unceasingly repeated from that day to this.”\textsuperscript{518} In his \textit{Cosmos and History}, he elaborates, “an object or an act becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation.”\textsuperscript{519} Furthermore, he comments, “To know the myths is to learn the origin of a thing…. For knowing the origin of an object, an animal, a plant, and so on is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be controlled, multiplied, or

\textsuperscript{516} I am indebted to Prof. Jacob Olupọna for this insight. Amherd makes a similar point by pointing out that the “past” tense of Yoruba most commonly used in myths can refer both to “present” and “past” action. The elision/fusion of the present and the mythical past, or their collapse into one another is one of the main functions of Yoruba myth and ritual. (Eliade similarly comments, “Yet in the humblest hierophany there is an ‘eternal new beginning’ an eternal return to an atemporal moment, a desire to abolish history, to blot out the past, to recreate the world.” Mircea Eliade. \textit{Shamanism}, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), xvii).

\textsuperscript{517} Prof. Şola Ajibade. Interview with the author. November 19, 2013, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Yoruba and English.

\textsuperscript{518} Eliade, \textit{Patterns}, 397.

\textsuperscript{519} Eliade, \textit{Cosmos and History}, 34.
reproduced at will.”

Yoruba Ìtàn, like Eliade’s myth, connects a given object or act with its origin, and with its related iterations throughout history, imbuing it with meaning, reality, and power.

Given this fact, let us consider what Ifa says about the creation of history and ritual calendar, in order to get a better understanding of these abstractions. Odu Oturupon-Otura describes the creation of the four days of the Yoruba ritual calendar. According to this myth, originally, there was only one day, which repeated over and over. Orunmila asked Olodumare to make different days, and Olodumare agreed and dedicated the four new days to four different Oriṣa. As the most senior, Oriṣanla received the first day, Orunmila took the second, Ogun had the third, and Sango took the fourth. Each deity held a big celebration on his day with his followers.

Odu Ika-Ogbe, however, tells another story. In this myth, Orunmila used to hold meetings with the other Oriṣa every 17 days (16 days in English reckoning, as the Yoruba include the present day when counting time). Since only he could reckon time, Orunmila would call all of the other deities to meet him on the appropriate day with a special charm (like a mythological cell phone). However, in that time, the days were very short, and the gods didn’t have enough time to get anything done, so Orunmila decided to go to heaven to ask Olodumare for more time. He asked Oriṣanla, Ogun, and Sango to accompany him, and each rudely rebuffed him. So Orunmila set off to meet Olodumare alone. Olodumare

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521 Sango’s apotheosis and amalgamation with Jakuta also proves the timelessness of Orun. Sango, an historical figure (the fourth king of Oyo), became a deified upon his death and identified with the primordial thunder god Jakuta, to such an extent that his name has almost completely replaced that of Jakuta in their shared mythology. Jakuta’s name is essentially only preserved in the name of his day of the week. According to his devotees, Sango, the king, did not die; in ascending to heaven, he became timeless.
responded to his request by giving him four days to take back to earth. When he returned to earth, Òrùnmila gave three of the days to the three deities who had refused him, keeping one for himself. When Eṣu, Ori, Egungun, Oṣun, and Olokun (Òrùnmila’s close friends and wives) found out that he had given away the days of the week to other Oriṣa, they were upset. But Òrùnmila calmed them down by explaining that he wanted them all to share the same day so they could celebrate together. That is why these deities are worshipped on Òrùnmila’s day.

In these myths, we again find the transition from the undifferentiated synthesis of a universal to a set of particulars, the myth connecting these particulars back to their primordial origin, which establishes the mythological precedent for ritual action. In particular, these myths establish the Yoruba four-day ritual calendar, and the congregation of Ifa priests which takes place every 4 (four-day) weeks. The myths also emphasize the role of Òrùnmila as the mediator between Olodumare and the other deities, and the origin of the ritual calendar, underlining Ifa’s role as the source of cosmic and ritual structure for the Yoruba cosmos.

The action described in these narratives of the differentiation of time and the creation of a ritual calendar is like that of a prism that separates white light out into different colours. The days of the week are not identical, but are qualitatively different, and these qualitative differences have ritual consequences. This “prismatic” structure is very common in Yoruba myth (such as in the story of Atunda and Oriṣa above), as it substantiates or organizes ritual actions in time and space, as well as connecting them with a universal origin, and therefore with each other.

As illustrated above, Eliade’s description of myth as the irruption of the eternal into the temporal is particularly apt in the case of ìtàn. Ìtàn always contains a sense of the timeless in its description of events in mythical place and time. Within Ifa (and traditional Yoruba
cosmology in general), as with many other mythological traditions, the history of a thing is not just a factual chronicle of events, but rather the story of its coming into being; the accent is placed on its coming into time rather than its becoming within time. So when babalawo describe the myths, stories, and narratives as being literally true, they mean something slightly different from what a modern European or American presumably would.

For example, when asked about the different and seemingly inconsistent myths about the creation of the world or the apotheosis of Òrunmila, many of the babalawo I interviewed had no problem explaining that all of the accounts were both different and true. The babalawo who had little to no formal Western education refused to make any distinction between literal and mythological truth, while those who had attended university seemed relatively uninterested in the historicity of the myths of Ifa compared to their moral and metaphysical content.  

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523 In his *Orientalism and Religion*, Richard King quotes the following passage from the German writer Peter Bischel, which is very informative in this regard, “A young Balinese became my primary teacher. One day I asked him if he believed that the history of Prince Rama – one of the holy books of the Hindus – is true. Without hesitation, he answered it with ‘Yes’. ‘So you believe that the Prince Rama lived somewhere and somewhen?’ ‘I do not know if he lived’, he said. ‘Then it is a story?’ ‘Yes, it is a story.’ ‘Then someone wrote this story – I mean: a human being wrote it?’ ‘Certainly some human being wrote it’, he said. ‘Then some human being could have also invented it,’ I answered and felt triumphant, when I thought I had convinced him. But he said: ‘It is quite possible that somebody invented this story. But true it is, in any case.’ ‘Then it is the case that Prince Rama did not live on this earth?’ ‘What is it that you want to know?’ he asked. ‘Do you want to know whether the story is true, or merely whether it occurred?’ ‘The Christians believe that their God Jesus Christ was also on earth,’ I said, ‘in the New Testament, it has been described by human beings. But the Christians believe that this is a description of the reality. Their God was also really on Earth.’ My Balinese friend thought this over and said: ‘I had been already so informed. I do not understand why it is important that your God was on earth, but it does strike me that the Europeans are not pious. Is that correct?’ ‘Yes, it is,’ I said.” King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 39. Or more succinctly, after recalling the myth of the Buffalo Woman and the coming of the sacred pipe, Black Elk succinctly notes, “This they tell, and whether it happened so or not I do not know; but if you think about it, you can see that it is true.” Neihardt, John G. *Black Elk Speaks.* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), 4.
**History of Ifa**

Given these facts, we must discuss two distinct histories of Ifa, first, the mythological history which Ifa ascribes to itself, and secondly, the non-mythological, external history of Ifa. While several verses of Ifa refer to the heavenly origins of the tradition, I will only discuss two here, one that describes Òrunmila’s descent into the world (Otupóṣôn Meji), and another that describes his departure (Iwori Meji).

Not long after the Oriṣa came down to earth in Ile-Ife, things started going wrong. People fell ill and couldn’t bear children, and no one knew what to do. Olodumare told the Oriṣa to come back to Heaven so he could give them something that would help them solve their problems. All the Oriṣa rejoiced and got ready to travel back to Heaven, except for Òrunmila, who wanted to do divination before they set off on the journey. The other deities mocked and abused him, saying that it was Olodumare himself who had called them, so there was no need to perform divination. So while Òrunmila went to see a diviner, they left without him. The diviner gave Òrunmila the mysterious advice that “when you lose something from your hand, don’t use your hand to find it, use your feet,” and told him to leave a meal of goat meat at the crossroads for Esu as a sacrifice. Òrunmila did as he was told and left the sacrifice at the crossroads.

On the way to heaven, Esu saw the sacrifice Òrunmila had left at the crossroads, and realizing what had happened, he quickly went down and ate it, and rejoined the other Oriṣa on their way to heaven without anyone noticing. When they reached heaven, Olodumare asked the Oriṣa where Òrunmila was. They replied, “He was taking too long, so we left him behind.” Olodumare looked at them knowingly for a while, and then handed them the “calabash of wisdom” (*ígba Ìwà*). The Oriṣa were so happy to finally have the solution to their problems, that they started going back to Earth without asking Olodumare how to use the calabash.

On their way down, they met Òrunmila at *bode*, the river separating Heaven from Earth. They began to mock him again for wasting his time doing divination on earth while they got the calabash from Olodumare. One of them even taunted Òrunmila by waving the calabash in his face. Just then, Esu knocked the calabash out of the Oriṣa’s hands into the river. The other Oriṣa all started frantically groping in the river with their hands, trying to recover the calabash. Suddenly, Òrunmila remembered the advice of the diviner, and started feeling around with his feet under water. Sure enough, he found the calabash and pulled it up out of the river. The other Oriṣa demanded that he give it back, but instead Òrunmila swallowed the calabash whole.

The Oriṣa were furious and wanted to rip him open to get the calabash back. However, Esu wouldn’t let anyone touch Òrunmila because of the sacrifice he had made for him, and so they all went back to ask Olodumare to settle the matter. When Olodumare heard their case he declared that the Oriṣa would have to treat Òrunmila better from now on since he possessed all the wisdom Olodumare had sent down into the world, and that whenever they needed anything, they would have to go to Òrunmila to find the answer to their problems. That is why everyone today goes to see babalawo, the children/disciples of Òrunmila to solve their problems.724

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This myth is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the journey of the Oriṣa (and possibly people) to and from heaven to see Olodumare illustrates the “bringing together” of heaven and earth, of the eternal and the temporal in myth, and therefore in ritual, which re-enacts the myth. The ritual re-enactment of this myth would be the performance of Ifa divination that produces this Odù, and the performance of the same sacrifice that Ṭrunmila made for Eṣu. The seeker would be advised that although people look down on him now, he is about to attain a very high position, but he must make sacrifice, and continue doing things in his own unique way, and not follow those around him. If he or she does this, then he will be greatly blessed by Olodumare, and the mockery of those around him/her will turn to respect.

This myth also illustrates one of the more peculiar features of Ifa divination: the fact that Ṭrunmila goes to see babalawo to perform divination for him. Since Ṭrunmila is supposed to be the one who speaks through Ifa divination, this seems like something of a paradox. Why would he ask himself something through divination? This paradoxical reflexivity actually a feature of many mythologies, and in the case of Ifa, it serves to establish the ritual precedent of consulting Ifa. All of the babalawo I interviewed also told me that for important matters, one should not just divine for oneself, but also consult other senior babalawo for additional divination and insight into the result of one’s own divination. The precedent for this practice is established in this and other myths where Ṭrunmila seeks out babalawo for divination. Several babalawo also explained that when we go to have divination done, it is Ṭrunmila who answers, but when Ṭrunmila goes to have divination

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525 See Kimberly Patton’s Religion of the Gods: Ritual Paradox, and Reflexivity, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), which, among many other rituals, describes and explains similar accounts of this kind of reflexivity in Ancient Greek religions, such as deities making sacrifices to themselves.

526 Although this is not the case for Ifá, in many other divinatory systems, one cannot divine for oneself.
done, it is his heavenly double (one babalawo identified him with Ọrunmila ’s ori), known as Ajagumale, who responds through the divination.

This myth also emphasizes the “physical” integration of Ọrunmila with the wisdom of Olodumare and their inseparability. Ọrunmila eats the calabash of wisdom, integrating it into his very being. This also serves as the mythical precedent for a practice in the early training of a babalawo, called “eating the Odù” or “eating Ifa,” in which the opele is put in the position of Eji-Ogbe, the first Odù, and a ritual preparation of alcohol and pepper is placed on each of the shells. The babalawo-in-training must eat this preparation of off the opele. This is repeated for each of the 16 major Odù, so the apprentice actually “eats” all 16 principal Odù. This physical, ritual internalization of the Odù is believed to assist and complement the internalization of the Odù through memorization. Most significantly, however, this myth establishes the origin of Ọrunmila’s possession of the transcendent knowledge of Olodumare, the access that Ifa divination grants to this knowledge, and the power of this knowledge to resolve problems through counsel and sacrifice.

Ode Iwori Meji gives a complementary account of the origin of Ifa divination and describes how Ọrunmila returned to heaven.

It is the apá tree that grows in the forest, lighting the wizards’ fire
It is the orúrù tree that is clothed in blood from top to bottom
It was on the earth that I pressed the marks of Ifa
Before I used the divining tray

The slender palm tree atop the hill
Which branches this way and that in sixteen heads
Performed divination for Ọrunmila
When they said that Baba would never have children in the city of Ife

When Ọrunmila was living in Ilé-Ife, people mocked him because he had no children. But Ọrunmila simply laughed and performed divination. He soon gave birth to eight children, each of whom became important kings of Yoruba city-states [most of which still exist today, the myth explains how the titles of the kings and other important positions of these cities are contractions of the original names of Ọrunmila ’s children]. One day, Ọrunmila called all of his children to join him for a festival. They all came to join him and paid their respects, but the youngest child challenged Ọrunmila ’s authority by coming to the festival with the same
symbols of authority which his father wore and refused to bow to him. Orunmila was incensed by this rejection of his authority, so he withdrew to the foot of a particular kind of palm tree and climbed up into heaven. As a result, the earth fell into chaos, women couldn’t get pregnant, those who were pregnant couldn’t deliver, the sick didn’t recover, the rain stopped falling, the rivers dried up, the crops failed, the animals started behaving strangely. Everything was falling apart. The people begged Orunmila’s children to convince him to come back, and they went to perform divination. Orunmila’s children made the prescribed sacrifice and went to the foot of the palm tree their father had climbed and began to implore him to return to earth, reciting a litany of his praise names. However, Orunmila had made up his mind not to return to earth. But pitying his children, he told them to stretch out their hands so he could give them something to ease their distress. He gave them the sixteen ikin, the palm nuts used in Ifa divination, telling them, “All the good that you want in this world, this is the one you must consult.” When they returned to Ile-Ife, things started to go well again and they attained all the good things they were seeking.

Orunmila, Fluent-in-every-language,
Ela of Isode [praise name of Orunmila]
Ifa went to the home of Olokun and never returned
He said, “The one that you see, call him Baba.”

This myth is remarkable for several reasons. Most obviously, it explains the origin of the divination with ikin, and identifies the particular kind of palm tree from which they must come. This establishes the “Ifa palm” as an axis mundi, because Orunmila climbed it to return to heaven, and because its palm nuts connect the people of earth with Orunmila in heaven.528 Furthermore, the myth establishes and explains the meaning and origin of several important titles of rulers in Yorubaland. In addition to describing the ritual paraphernalia of Ifa (and by extension, contemporary babalawo), the myth serves as a warning of the consequences of hubris against Ifa (and one’s elders in general). But most strikingly, this particular narrative’s graphic and colourful description of a world without Ifa underscores the fundamental Yoruba belief that the order and proper functioning of the world is dependent upon a continual close relationship with Heaven.529 The consequences of Orunmila’s departure recalls what Eliade

527 Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Enlish and Yoruba. cf. Abimbola, Sixteen Divination Poems, 50-72

528 Abimbola notes that these particular palm trees are not harvested by cultivators of palm oil, even to this day (Ibid, 12-3)

529 In fact, this could be regarded as the mythological equivalent of the argument first put forward by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his book Man and Nature (later developed in Religion and the Order of Man and in Lynn
calls the “Terror of History,” the descent of humanity into a desacralized, chaotic world of meaningless, endless, linear time.530

The myth also establishes a number of profound praise names of Ọrunmila, one of the most famous of which is Afedefeye, “Fluent-in-every-language,” referring to the universality of Ifa. This myth is also connected to a few other narratives in which Ọrunmila, instead of going to heaven by climbing a palm tree, enters the lagoon, the domain of his wife Olokun, to remain there forever. Like the underground, the underwater is a symbol of occultation in a heavenly realm, and babalawo do not see a contradiction in that saying that Ọrunmila is in heaven and that he is underwater with Olokun.531 Most importantly, however, the myth establishes the “vertical” history of Ifa divination, of the authority of his priests (“the one you see, call him Baba”), and its power to mend the world.

The “horizontal,” or external history of Ifa is much more difficult to reconstruct. It seems possible that the tradition of Ifa was a later addition to the Yoruba religious universe, as Ọrunmila relatively rarely appears in the myths associated with the cults of the other Oriṣa, while they all appear in the myths of Ifa. But this evidence is circumstantial at best. The most promising method of dating Ifa would probably be some kind of glottochronological study of the variants of particular verses from particular Odù, but given the special linguistic status of verses of Ifa, such an effort would be difficult and require a great deal of work. Ifa, like Yoruba religion and culture in general, is remarkably dynamic and easily integrates and

White’s famous 1967 essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” identifying the ecological crisis with the desacralization of the scientific view of nature.

530 See Eliade, History and Cosmos, Chapter 4

531 Araba of Modakẹkẹ, interview with the author, November 10, 2013. Modakẹkẹ, Nigeria. Yoruba. and Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Enligh and Yoruba. Babaláwo often say that “Christians and Muslims pray to go to heaven with Jesus and Muḥammad when they die, babaláwo pray to go to Olokun to be with Ọrunmila.”
domesticates new and foreign elements, customs, and ideas. Some verses of Ifa from the Odù Òtúrá Méji and Òtúrá Yapin mention Islam explicitly and display a great deal of familiarity with Muslim ritual practice and doctrines. Therefore we can conclude that these verses emerged no earlier than the late 17th century, when Islam began to take root in Yorubaland. Ifa is also mentioned in some of the earliest colonial and missionary accounts of the mid-19th century that deal with traditional Yoruba religion.532 So all we know for certain is that the origins of Ifa as we know it today533 are situated somewhere between the emergence of Yoruba civilization and the 19th century.

Babalawo often recount an interesting myth, illustrating Yoruba mythology’s remarkably integrative nature, which identifies the origins of Ifa divination with the mysterious figure of Setilu, the first diviner. In some versions of the myth, Setilu was a Tapa (Nupe, a tribe bordering the Yoruba to the North) man who was very unusual due to the fact that he had no bones in his body. Some versions of this myth explain that this is because he had two mothers, instead of a mother and a father. According to this myth, it was this extraordinary figure who introduced Ifa divination amongst the Yoruba.

Another version of the myth puts the boneless Setilu in Mecca during the time of the Prophet of Islam. When the Prophet was fleeing Mecca for Medina (marking the advent of the Islamic calendar) he hid in a cave with his close companion, Abu Bakr, because the people of Mecca, the Quraysh, were trying to assassinate him. The myth tells us that the Quraysh came

532 McKenzie’s Hail Orisha, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 302 provides the earliest detailed account of Ifa practice which I have been able to find, dating from 1846. Bascom cites the descriptions of Ifa appearing in Sarah Tucker’s 1853 work, Abeokuta or Sunrise within the Tropics: an Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission and the surprisingly accurate account found within Irving’s 1853 “The Yoruba Mission” from the Church Missionary Intelligencer as the earliest recorded accounts of Ifa. (Bascom. Ifa Divination, 13)

533 It is possible that Ifa could have been introduced to the Yoruba-speaking people from the outside (as several myths suggest) but its current form of practice is inseparable from the Yoruba language, and it is this form with which the present study is concerned.
to Setilu and had him do divination for them to determine Muḥammad’s whereabouts. Setilu told them that the Prophet was hiding in a particular cave, so the Quraysh went to check the cave, carrying Setilu with them. When they arrived, they found a spider had woven a web over the entrance of the cave, so they berated Setilu, telling him that he had obviously gotten it wrong. Setilu insisted that the Prophet was actually inside the cave, but the Quraysh didn’t listen and left. In fact, the Prophet and Abu Bakr were in the cave, and because the Quraysh ignored Setilu, the fleeing Prophet and his companion were able to make it to Medina, where they gathered an army and converted or expelled all the idol-worshippers in Mecca. Setilu was taken with those who fled to Africa and taught Ifa divination there. One babalawo explained to me that the Prophet Muḥammad and Ọrümila are friends and brothers, and the only reason there are problems between Muslims and babalawo today is because of what happened between Setilu and Muḥammad back in Mecca.534

Some scholars have speculated about Ifa’s relationship to other forms of divination and geomancy such as the Arab *khaṭṭ al-raml*, which is widespread in the Muslim world, and other distant, but similar forms of divination including the I-Ching and a Melanesian form of divination also based on sixteen figures.535 Bascom also compares Ifa with several other divinatory systems employed in and around Yorubaland amongst the Yoruba and neighboring Fon, Ewe, Yagba, Nupe, Igbo, Itsekeri, Ijaw, Tiv, Jukun, and Hausa peoples.536 It is likely that many of these systems of divination have a common ancestor, while some, like the *khaṭṭ al-raml* employed by the Hausa and Muslim diviners amongst the Yoruba most likely have a

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534 Araba of Modakẹọ, interview with the author, November 12, 2013. Modakẹọ, Nigeria. Yoruba. See Martin Lings’ *Muḥammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1983) for the Islamic version of the story from which the myth is derived.

535 See Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 3-12.

536 Ibid, 3-12.
different origin, although it may have influenced the way in which the Odù of Ifá are marked. Some of these other divinatory traditions are acknowledged by Ifá and often mythically connected to Orunmila himself, and the practitioners of these presumably Ifá-derived divination systems often accept these mythical accounts of the origin of their art.

**Conclusion: Ifá today and Present Focus**

While the history of Ifá divination remains shrouded in mystery, further studies and new methods of analyzing oral history may lead to some progress in this arena. However, I believe the most fascinating aspect of Ifá is not its history, but its continued resilience in a world that is increasingly modern and Christian and Muslim (on the continent) and increasingly secular (in the New World and Europe). In Nigeria, Ifá is often reviled as “devil-worship” or “pagan idolatry,” or regarded as an archaic holdover from a pre-“civilized” past, a cultural curiosity, like the ruins of an old palace. Yet despite this opposition or indifference, Ifá continues to be practiced across southwestern Nigeria, and in some ways, even thrive. Every single Yoruba town still has its council of babalawo who advise the traditional king and their communities. Moreover, the babalawo are not going out of business any time soon. At some point in nearly every single interview I conducted, I was interrupted by a seeker who had come to see the babalawo with whom I was speaking, or called him on the phone to ask him to perform divination for a particular issue. Many of these seekers were affluent, respected members of their towns, many were highly-educated, many were Muslim or

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537 As evidenced by its radically different process and logic of divination.

538 For example, Odu Ògbé-Sá describes how Orunmila taught his wife, the Oriṣa Ọsun the art of sixteen-cowrie divination, which is commonly practiced by priests of nearly all Oriṣa. Agbigba, a form of divination common amongst the Yagba and Northeastern Yoruba was said to be a slave of Orunmila, who taught him the simplified form of divination that now bears his name. The nearly ubiquitous divination by kola nut is also associated with Ifá and is used by babaláwo in certain circumstances.
Christian, and virtually all of them seemed confident in the power of Ifa to resolve their problems.

While this, in and of itself was fascinating (how does an engineer with a PhD, trained in a science based on Cartesian dualism, reconcile his scientific training and worldview with that of Ifa?), I was more fascinated by the babalawo themselves. I was impressed by their rigorous honesty, compassion, and work ethic, and their incredible breadth and depth of knowledge. I wanted to understand, philosophically, how these babalawo came to be who they are, how they know what they know, and how these ways of knowing, so radically different from anything I’ve encountered in my academic training, “work.” In answering these questions I hope to provide a compelling account of the epistemology of the tradition of Ifa, and make its worldview (and the intellectual reasons for its continued resilience) more understandable and accessible to a general audience.

It is important to recognize that Ifa is an extremely heterogeneous, diverse, and dynamic tradition. Traditions, myths, and rituals can vary widely over a small area, and within a generation or two. However, the babalawo and other practitioners of Yoruba traditions recognize a continuity between these varying manifestations, and I believe anyone who spends enough time in communities of practitioners will notice it as well. The cosmology and mythology outlined above is largely schematic and based on the principles extracted from my own various experiences, impressions, research, and study.\footnote{Largely conducted with babaláwo from ModakêKE, Ile-Ife, Oṣogbo, and Iseyin, and drawn from scholarly works in English and Yoruba.} Other scholars or practitioners will necessarily have different perspectives, having been exposed to different aspects of the traditional Yoruba universe. My goal in this chapter was not to write the exposition of the doctrines of Ifa (there are many others far more qualified to do that), but rather to present an
accessible, interesting introduction to Ifa that would be acceptable and illuminating to both scholars and babalawo.
Chapter 5: Ways of Knowing in Ifa

Truth is a sacred water from Ilé-Ifẹ, there are not many who drink from it
-Odu Ọwọnrin Dagbon

Deep knowledge (imo ijinle) is the word (orọ) from the mouth of Olodumare that He gave to Orunmila to mend the world
-Awo Faniyi

Omo ile te a gbà gbé l’óri ení, yi o jà bọ
Okè l’eye fò wún
Adì àfun àwọn ńgbàgbà,
Tí w’ọn ti ik’olè ‘orun b’ọ wà ilè ayé
W’ọn ni kini w’ọn n’lo se?
Ényin ‘orò, níbo lò nlo?
A ñlo wá im’ọ, ótít’ọ, àtì ódodo
Kádárá ńyànm’ọ,
L’ori Òke
Àti pé’el’ẹ.
A ñlo si àafín ńba réré
A ó dé il’ẹ mim’ọ
A ó si dé il’ẹ tó l’ẹwà
A ñ wà im’ọ síi l’ójojúm’ọ
Im’ọ kò lò’pin.

A small child works his way off the edge of the sleeping mat
A bird soars above it all
Divined for the elders

When they were preparing to leave heaven to come to the world
They said, “what are we going to do?”
They asked themselves, “where are we going?”
We are going in search of knowledge (imo), truth (otito), and righteousness (ododo)
In accordance with fate, destiny
over the top (ori) of the hill
and the plateau
We are going to the palace of the king of goodness
We will reach a holy land
We will reach a land that is beautiful
We are seeking knowledge everyday
Knowledge has no end

Yoruba ethics means: to become through ritual, a being who knows more and understands more, a person who lives more and is more.
-Ulli Beier

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⁵⁴⁰ Verse of Ifa cited in Drewal, Yoruba Ritual, 33-4. Translation modified by the author.

**Knowledge in Ifa**

The babalawo, the priests of Ifa, are widely regarded as being among the foremost traditional intellectuals of Yoruba society. People seek their counsel and insight on practical and personal matters, affairs of state, and all manner of ritual, mythological, theological, and philosophical questions. Babalawo undergo a rigorous training, which can last as long as 30 years, and spend most of their life researching, studying, performing and contemplating the oral corpus of Ifa and its associated sacrifices and rites. In fact, these similarities between babalawo and contemporary academics accounts in no small part for the fact that Ifa is perhaps most studied religious tradition of the Yoruba. Knowledge is of paramount importance to the babalawo, and knowledge of the secrets of Ifa is what makes one a babalawo, a “father of secrets.” The knowledge which is central to this tradition is multidimensional, involving the procedural, creative knowledge of divination and ritual, the medical knowledge of pharmacology (*ewe Ifa*), the memorization and interpretation of a vast body of orature, as well as self-knowledge (*imọrì*), all of which is intimately connected to the cultivation of good or gentle character (*iwà pẹ̀lẹ̀*). In this chapter, I will discuss the distinctions the babalawo I interviewed made between various types of knowledge, before moving on to describe the process through which these forms of knowledge are acquired, concluding with a discussion of how this knowledge is verified.

**Forms of Knowledge**

In their landmark study, Hallen and Sodipo demonstrated the critical nature of the discourse about knowledge among traditional *onishẹgun* (“medicine-men”).\(^{542}\) Amongst other things, this study underscored the distinction between *igbagbo*, second-hand or received

\(^{542}\) Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Ṣopido, *Knowledge, Belief & Witchcraft*
knowledge, and *imo*, first-hand or empirically verified knowledge. The babalawo I interviewed drew nearly identical distinctions, explaining that *igbagbo* is “something that you hear (*gbọ*) and accept (*gba*). But it is not knowledge (*imo*). When you yourself see something, then you know it, that is knowledge (*imo*).” As Hallen and Sodipo demonstrate, this distinction between *igbagbo* and *imo* does not map neatly onto the English terms “belief” and “knowledge,” as many things that we would ordinarily consider knowledge, such as the structure of atoms or the existence of giant squid, would be classified as *igbagbo*, unless we have seen and evaluated the evidence ourselves, without relying on the reports of others. As members of an oral society, traditional Yoruba intellectuals were and are more attuned to the secondhand nature of most of the information we receive. The babalawo I met were highly critical and careful about their claims to knowledge, and this does not seem to be a function of the influence of Western education or culture—by far the most critical and epistemologically cautious babalawo I interviewed, the Araba of Modakekẹ, was the one with the least exposure to formal Western education, having only attended primary school for three years in his youth.

The Babalawo also differentiated *imo* and *igbagbo* through the related concept of *otito* (truth). “If you accept something that you hear (*gbagbo*), perhaps it is true, perhaps it is not; however, if you know (*mo*) something, then it must be true.” Similarly, *imo* was described as being certain (*daju*), whereas *igbagbo* was described as being somewhat uncertain (*àìdàinilójú*).

Speaking the truth or being truthful is a *sine qua non* of being a babalawo. Strict honesty is a condition of being one who relates the words of Ifa, and babalawo often told me

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544 Ibid.
that lying is much more “dangerous” for a babalawo than for other people. Since they carry the burden of accurately communicating the speech of Orunmila, and therefore Olodumare, lack of respect for or distortion of speech (ọro) and truth (otito) fundamentally compromises this function. The babalawo whom I interviewed frequently cited the verse of Odu Ọsẹ-Otúrá, 
S'otito s'ododo, s'otití o sí tun s'ododo, éni s'otiti ni Imałe yoo gbe o, “Speak the truth, speak justly, speak the truth and also speak justly; Those who speak the truth will be helped by the gods,” and this praise name of Orunmila from Odu Ọkanran-Wọnrin, otít’ọ inú o ja ju oògùn lọ, “The truth inside is more efficacious than medicine,” to underscore the essential importance of honesty in the tradition. One babalawo even defined being a babalawo as “speaking the truth and having a good/gentle character (iwa pẹlẹ).”

The existential danger of distorting speech is related to the ontological dimension of speech and truth, to which we will turn shortly.

**Imọ and Imọ Ìjìnle**

Babalawo also described a special type of imọ, called “deep knowledge,” imọ ìjinlẹ. The Araba of Modakekẹ compared it to “ordinary knowledge,” explaining, “Imọ ìjinlẹ is knowing the origin of something, to go deep. The mechanic has imọ, but the engineer has imọ ìjinlẹ. The doctor has imọ, but the professor [of biology or medicine] has imọ ìjinlẹ.”

Thus, in this account, imọ ìjinlẹ is described as principal or foundational knowledge. Similarly, Prof. Agboola, a babalawo from Òyọ and Professor of Agriculture at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, described imọ ìjinlẹ as “fundamental knowledge, knowledge of your self/destiny (orí), of the world (ayé), of the gods (irunmọle), the knowledge of Ifa, which is

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the wisdom of Olodumare.” Prof. Agboola also described imọ ijinle as a combination of imọ (knowledge), oye (experience), and oghọn (wisdom), and as going deep into the Odu Ifa, interpreting them deeply, and applying these deep interpretations to one’s own life. Awo Faniyi, a young babalawo from the town of Iseyin and recent graduate of Obafemi Awolowo University, equated imọ ijinle with Ifa itself:

Deep knowledge (imọ ijinle) is the speech (ọrọ) from the mouth of Olodumare that He gave to Ọrunmila, when he was coming from heaven to earth, to use to mend the world. This is the basis of the knowledge for which the babalawo who can recite all 256 Odu of Ifa are called deep knowers (onimo ijinle) amongst the priests of Ifa. For example, Odu Ofun Meji says,

ọrọ seni hun
Bo-o-ba tile-ri-ko oun
Bo-o-la-til-e-ko-o-fi-sile
A difa fun Olodumare
Yoo fi ọrọ de o le isalaye

[“Speech is the one responsible for things
Even if you see that it is him
Even if we see that he has not left it”
Performed Ifa for Olodumare
Who will bring speech so that you can have an orientation/explanation]

This verse of Ifa can help us understand that since Speech (ọrọ) is what Olodumare used to create the world, Speech (ọrọ) is also what He gave to Ọrunmila to mend the world. This speech is the totality of the verses (ẹsẹ) of Ifa, which we can never finish knowing, whose depths we can never plumb; this Speech (ọrọ) from the mouth of Olodumare, which is Ifa, is imọ ijinle.548

Ọrọ, which I have rendered, here as “Speech,” has a much wider and more profound significance than the English term suggests (hence the capitalization). In everyday Yoruba, ọrọ refers to “speech,” or “topic of discussion or thought”; however, in the mythology of Ifa, Ọrọ refers to the fundamental, supra-formal, Logos-like reality of the spoken word through which God creates the cosmos and all of its inhabitants. Abiodun relates the following

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547 Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Enlish and Yoruba.


549 In fact, logos would be a good translation of ọrọ, that they are both used to refer to “primary cosmic principle” and “speech, word.”
narrative from Odu Osa-Ogunda, which explains the genesis of orọ and its relationship to wisdom (ogbon) knowledge (imo), and understanding (oye):

There were no living things
Was the priest on earth
That which was suspended but did not descend,
Was the priest in heaven
All was just empty space with no substance,
Was the priest of mid-air

It was divined for Earth and Heaven
When they both existed,
With no inhabitants
In the two empty shells
There were neither birds nor spirits
Living in them
Òdùmàrè then created himself,
Being the Primal cause,
Which is the reason we call Òdùmàrè
The only wise one on earth
He is the only cause in creation
The only wise one in heaven,
Who created humans.
When He had no companions
He applied wisdom to the situation
To avert any disaster
You, alone,
The only one in Heaven
Is the name of Òdùmàrè
The only wise one,
We give you thanks,
The only wise one
Without listening to anyone else
You judge, and are pleased

Òdùmàrè sat back and thought about how to create more things in his universe. For this purpose, he realized he needed an intermediary force, since he was too charged with energy to come into contact with any living thing and have it survive. Therefore he created Ogbon (wisdom), held it in his palm and thought where it could live. After a while, Òdùmàrè released ogbon to fly away and look for a suitable place to lodge. When ogbon could not find a suitable abode, it flew back, humming like a bee, to Òdùmàrè who took ogbon and swallowed it. Similarly imọ (knowledge) and oye (understanding), which were also created, returned for lack of suitable abodes, and were swallowed for the same reason.

Òdùmàrè then slept, but not in the human sense of the word…
After several thousand years during which Òdùmàrè was disturbed by the incessant humming of Ogbon, Imọ, and Oye, he decided to get rid of them in order to have some peace.

So he ordered Ogbon, Imọ, and Oye to descend (rô) making the sound “họọ”. Thus the three heavenly bodies, now known as Họọrô or Orô, were evacuated and set for their descent for earth. Since they were heavily charged lifeforces from heaven, their descent was accompanied by lightning and thunder. All solid matter melted and became jelly-like. For a while, Orô was suspended in mid-air like an egg and did not melt, but then it dropped to the earth and split (là).
In Ṫọrọ’s new state it is identified with Ela [of whom Orunmila is regarded as an aspect] the deity that functions in the Ifa divination complex and is regarded by the Yoruba as the embodiment of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding…. Hence Ifa confirms,

Who was the first to speak?
Ela was the first to speak
Who was the first to communicate
Ela was the first to communicate
Who is this Ela
It was the Ṣọọ which descended
That we call Ela

In this verse of Ifa, wisdom, knowledge, and understanding are described as inherent qualities of Olodumare in and of himself, which he then created as intermediaries to serve as a buffer between him and creation, to allow creation to have its own existence. Olodumare combined these three entities into a single complex known as Ṫọrọ and commanded them to descend to earth (the name of this complex is characteristically derived from the sound, “họọ,” it made as it descended (rọ)). On its descent, Ṫọrọ split open (là) and acquired the name “Ela,” the origin of meaning, speech, and communication. The Logos-like entity of Ṫọrọ / Ela is identified with Orunmila and Ifa, and often described as a kind of pure meaning beyond formal expression. Nevertheless, it is that which is expressed through the various modalities of the spoken, musical, plastic, and other art forms. Abiodun explains,

Ela utters through Owe, literally “proverbs,” but which in broad usage can metaphorically apply to the communicative properties of sculpture, aroko, dance, drama, song, chant, poetry, incantations like ofo, ogede, ayajo épé, adu, ésá and many others which make heavy and esoteric use of metaphors in ritual contexts…. Owe operates between orọ on the spiritual plane and the earth-level where Ṫọrọ can be understood, assimilated, and used by humans. Similarly, communication with the Ọrīṣa, ancestors, and invisible bodies in heaven is made possible through the channel of owe…. With the aid of Ela, Ṭọrọ is made manifest, and it is beautifully ‘clothed’ in poetry, maxims, and wise sayings, all of which are owe. For as the saying goes, kolombo ni Ṭọrọ n rin, “Ṯọrọ moves around naked,” and it is forbidden to see it in that state.551


551 Ibid, 256. There is also the proverb, Bi owe, bi owe nlfa sọrọ, “Like proverbs, like proverbs is how Ifa speaks.”
In the same vein, Abiodun quotes the adage,

\[
\begin{align*}
    & Owe \ l\ esin \ or\o \\
    & Bi \ or\o \ ba \ sonu \\
    & Owe \ la \ a \ fi \ i \ wa \ a
\end{align*}
\]

Proverbs (metaphorical/poetic speech) is the steed of or\o
If or\o is lost
Proverbs are what we will use to find it\textsuperscript{552}

So in summary, owe, the poetic, metaphorical, proverbial, symbolic mode of speech (and other forms of expression) of the Oriṣa (particularly Ẹla / Ọrunmila) is what manifests and gives us access to the enigmatic Orọ, the composite of wisdom (ogbọn), knowledge (imọ), and understanding (oye), which in turn, manifest and give us access to Olodumare. The ineffable reality of Olodumare is rendered intelligible through the creation and descent of wisdom (ogbọn), knowledge (imọ), and understanding (oye) as Orọ, which is in turn made tangible and sensible through the symbolic arts of owe. These parallel processes of “ascent” and “descent” form the animating logic of ritual practice. As Abiodun writes, “This, in fact, is what happens in the worship of Oriṣa where sculpture, mime, dance, drama, and poetry of an appropriate character combine to raise consciousness above and beyond the physical into the spiritual realm for the vivid realization of an abstract idea.”\textsuperscript{553}

Wisdom (ogbọn) and understanding (oye) also have more prosaic meanings, which the babalawo I interviewed described for me in strikingly congruent fashion. Oye was characterized as a form of understanding that is the result of wide experience and exposure: in the words of the Araba of Modakẹke, “We cannot say that a child has oye.”\textsuperscript{554} Ogbọn was often glossed as “wisdom,” or as the Araba succinctly put it, “Ogbọn is imọ plus oye,” this description of wisdom (ogbọn) as knowledge (imọ) plus understanding (oye) met with strong

\textsuperscript{552}Ibid, translated by the author.

\textsuperscript{553} Ibid, 257.

\textsuperscript{554} Araba of Modakẹke, interview with the author, November, 11, 2013. Modakẹke, Nigeria. Yoruba.
approval amongst the other babalawo I interviewed, all of whom stressed the supremacy of Òrunmila’s wisdom (ogbon), which they related to the fact that he was the first creation of Olodumare. Since Òrunmila has directly witnessed everything and has more experience than any other creation, his wisdom is supreme.

The mythological narrative about the “calabash of wisdom” (igba ìwà) from Odu Oturupon Meji (cited in the previous chapter) was also invoked to explain the supremacy of Òrunmila’s wisdom and its relationship to character (ìwà). When I asked the Araba of Modakeke about the relationship between character and wisdom, he recited part of this narrative, and explained that “Òrunmila could handle the calabash of wisdom (igba ìwà) because of his good character (ìwà).” Discerning readers may notice that the word for “character” ìwà and the word glossed as “wisdom” (ìwà) in the “calabash of wisdom” (igbá ìwà) are identical. Thus, wisdom could be said to be the content which the “calabash of character” (igbá ìwà) contains; that is, good character is a necessary condition, and the fruit, of wisdom.555

Furthermore, the etymology of the word ìwà (character) is particularly revealing. This word, ìwà (character), is undoubtedly related to the verb hùwà, which roughly means “to behave,” but, more interestingly, it takes the form of the verbal noun of the verb wà which means, “to be,” or “to exist” (For example, the verb ìfè means to like or love and ifè means love or affection). Thus ìwà could be understood to mean “being” or “existence,” revealing the close relationship between morality / ethics and ontology in traditional Yoruba thought.556


556 For example, see Soyinka’s statement on the nature of the “moral order” in Yoruba [and African] thought and society, “It must not be understood in any narrow sense of the ethical code which society develops to regulate the conduct of its members. A breakdown in the moral order implies, in the African worldview, a rupture in the body of Nature just like the physical malfunctioning of one man.” Soyinka, Myth, Literature, and the African World, 52.
The better one’s character (ìwà), the “more” one is, or conversely, to lack character, to have a bad character (ìwà burúkú), is to be “less,” to have a lesser existence.

As the source or origin of all existence, Olodumare is the foundation of the moral/existential order. Prof. Agboola explained that “Òtí’t’ò (truth/reality) is the ìwà (character/being) of Olodumare,” and so speaking the truth and behaving truthfully is to align one’s own character, or mode of being, with that of Olodumare, the Absolute Being or Lord of Existence (Olu-ìwà). To have good character (ìwà) is to be like Olodumare, to be like Olodumare is to be more real, to have a greater share of existence (ìwà). Citing a verse from Odu Eji Ogbe, the Araba of Modakéè similarly commented,

“Good/gentle character (ìwà pele) is what Olodumare likes when Olodumare comes to take `emi (“the breath of life” or vital spirit) at the time of death.

Ati wayé, a mọ̀n tura
Igbeyín pada rẹ̀ a fì dugbẹ-dugbẹ
Kọ̀ sì alábáárò bikú
Bọ̀dè a kùnì, a ku ọsè ọwọ ẹni
Ìwà pele ni El’èdumarè ìfẹ̀

Coming into the world is easy
Later, when returning, the last gasps are difficult
There is no comforter
No one to whom we can complain, what remains is the work of one’s hands
Gentle character is what Eledumare likes

When Olodumare comes to take emí, if the person’s character is not good, the emí will get stuck in the throat, he will gasp and choke, and death will be difficult.

If one’s character or mode of being is not in conformity with that of Olodumare (Absolute Being itself) then the reintegration of the individual self (´emí) with its origin will be difficult.

557 Araba of Modakéè, interview with the author, November 11, 2013. Modakéè, Nigeria. Yoruba. The Araba also connected this central ideal of ìwà pele, gentle/ good character with the popular Yoruba ideal of omoluwabi, “a well-mannered or cultured child.” The Araba glossed omoluwabi as “child of God” in English, highlighting a possible etymology of the word, omo ti Olú Ìwà bi—the child born to the Lord of existence/character; that is, the child who resembles his progenitor, God, in character.
Yoruba / Ifa Anthropology and Psychology

Emily

This Emily is a central element of the traditional Yoruba conception of personhood as articulated in the oral corpus and rituals of Ifa. Emily is often rendered into English as “self,” however, in the context of Ifa, and traditional Yoruba thought in general, Emily has a significant mythological, metaphysical dimensions which the English term “self” seldom carries. The Araba of Modakêê explained that Emily is the child of Olodumare (omo Olodumare), a bit of himself which he “blows” (fe) into the bodies of people in heaven, bringing them to life. The Oriṣa Ògún is credited with forming the bones of people, the Oriṣa Ọbatala, with forming their bodies, and Olodumare provides Emily, the animating “breath of life,” which is also the defining element of consciousness, subjectivity and selfhood. A myth from Odu Obara-Ọturuponder tells how Eṣu, Ogun, and Oriṣanla conspire and create a fake bride to scam Ọrunmila into giving them money as a bride-price; Ogun provided the structure of the body and gave it motion, Oriṣanla gave her speech, and Eṣu used his wiles to make her charming and attractive, but without Olodumare’s Emily, the fake bride started to fall apart after two days, but that was enough to scam Ọrunmila into paying her dowry. Upon death, the Emily is said to return to leave the body and return to Olodumare. However, the Araba explained that this only takes place for those who have lived, long, full, good lives. The Emily of those who died untimely deaths, or who died before developing good character is believed to linger on earth before eventually leaving to take on a new body and return to the world.

558 See Hallen, The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful, 87-90.

559 Since this all takes place in heaven, before birth, this should not be taken too “literally.” Ògún, as the principle of firmness, hardness, and strength is naturally manifest in the bones, while Ọbatala, the gentler god of creation of and creative expression is manifest in the fleshy and expressive body.

According to Ifa, before coming into the world, the newly-animated person chooses an orí, a “head” or “destiny.” As one of Hallen’s collaborators explained, “it (‘emi) chooses what it will come to do…So also it is the act of the self [‘emi] when it is with the supreme deity (Ọlọrun).” 561 This orí-inú or “inner head” is differentiated from the physical or “outer head” orí-odè which serves as a symbol and vessel for the former. The inner-head is regarded as the essence of one’s individual personality and destiny. This orí is at once a personal divinity or guardian angel, the divine aspect of a person, one’s fate or destiny, and one’s own personal archetype of a felicitous and successful life. This is illustrated in the following myth (in summary form) from Odu Ogbe-Ogunda (Ogbe-Yọnu):

It is a snare which strikes suddenly
Ifa divination was performed for Orisẹku, the son of Ogun
Ifa divination was also performed for Orileemere, the son of Ija
Ifa divination was performed for Afuwape, who was the son of Ọrunmila
On the day they were going to the house of Olodumare to choose their heads

The three of them were good friends and decided to go down to earth to settle, because perhaps it would be a better place for them than heaven. They sought the advice of elders who told them to go directly to the house of Ajala, the potter who molds heads to choose their heads and then go down to the world. Afuwape ignored the advice and went to see his father Ọrunmila who performed divination for him. Ogbe-yọnu came out and the Ifa priests in Ọrunmila’s household interpreted the Odu for him, saying that his son was going on a journey and that he should perform a sacrifice so that he would choose a good head. The sacrifice was three bags of salt, and three bags of twelve thousand cowries. When he came out of his father’s house, Afuwape could not find his friends, Orisẹku, the son of Ogun and Orileemere, the son of Ija. They had gone on ahead to find Ajala’s house. On the way they met a gatekeeper and asked him to show them the way, but he said that it was too far, so they went alone and eventually found Ajala’s house. However, they could not find the potter there, so Orileemere choose a brand-new head, not knowing that it had not been baked yet. Orisẹku chose a big head, not knowing that it was broken. They both put on their heads and hurried on down to the world. On their way down into the world they were beaten by rain, which saturated their heads, causing them to break apart. They entered the world with these small heads. In the world, they worked hard, but did not get anywhere. They consulted babalawo, who told them that the fault was in the bad heads they had chosen. The babalawo told them that they had chosen bad heads,

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561 Hallen, *The Good, the Bad, the Beautiful*, 52 The oniṣegún interviewed by Hallen also described orí-inú in the following ways, “It is the person who has chosen for himself or herself what he or she has come to do on earth...The Supreme Deity (Ol’orun) merely says that it should be so [the aṣẹ]”; “Destiny is everything that the person will do on earth. The self (‘emi) chooses all the things that the person will do, without leaving anything aside”; It [orí] is the most important thing. It is the creator with whom we come to the world (ayé).”, 52-53.
and that all the work they had been doing was just to mend the worn off parts of their bad heads. Only after this had been accomplished, would their works begin to prosper.

On the way to Ajala’s house, Afuwapẹ met the gatekeeper cooking soup. He saw the man putting ashes into his soup, and he offered him the salt to use instead. The man thanked him and told him that he would walk him to Ajala’s house. When they arrived, they heard someone shouting. The gatekeeper explained that Ajala’s creditor was the one shouting, because he was looking for Ajala. Afuwapẹ went to the creditor and paid off Ajala’s debt with one of the bags of twelve thousand cowries. The creditor left and Ajala hopped down from the ceiling where he had been hiding and thanked Afuwapẹ. Ajala took him to his storehouse of heads and began to hit various heads with his iron rod, until he found a good, strong one, which he gave to Afuwapẹ. Afuwapẹ fixed it on his head and went down to the world. He also passed through heavy rains, but they did not damage his head. When Afuwapẹ arrived on earth, he worked hard and his works bore fruit. He became wealthy, had many wives and children, and was honoured with a title. When Orisẹẹku, the son of Ogun, and Orileemere, the son of Ija, saw him they started to weep.

Each said, “I don’t know where the lucky ones chose their heads, I would have gone there to choose mine
I don’t know where Afuwapẹ chose his head
Afuwapẹ answered them saying
“You don’t know where the lucky ones chose their heads, You would have gone there to choose your own
You don’t know where Afuwapẹ chose his head
You would have gone there to choose your own
We chose our heads form the same place
But our destinies (kadara) are different

Within the Ifa corpus, misfortune in life is often attributed to having chosen a bad ori in heaven or to having “missed the road,” not followed the path of one’s destiny, and both descriptions are really just two different ways of saying the same thing, from different perspectives. From the human side, looking “up,” we have forgotten the nature of our ori, and so it would seem that either one’s bad actions spoiled one’s good destiny, or that one’s bad destiny thwarted one’s good efforts (hence the saying ẹni l’ori rere ti kò ni iwà, iwà l’o ma b’ori reje—the person with good destiny but without character, it is character that will ruin his good destiny). But from the divine side, looking “down,” all of a person’s decisions are really just repetitions of his primordial choice of ori, in fact, the person is just a manifestation of his ori, an unfolding in time of all of its potentialities, hence the verse of Ifa which says ori

562 Abimbola, *Ifa an Exposition of a Literary Corpus*, 125-32. The Yoruba word kadara is derived form the Arabic qadr, which literally means to measure out or apportion, and theologically refers to destiny, lot, fortune, or fate.
eni l’Eleda eni—“one’s ori is one’s Creator.” So from the human side, destiny is character (destiny manifests itself as character), but from the divine side, character is destiny (character seems to determine one’s destiny). Hence a song derived from Odu Ogbe-Yonu says,

*Bí Ori ba fe’ ìwà
Bí Ìwà ba fe orí
Ayé a gün règè*

If Ori marries ìwà (character) 
And ìwà marries Ori
The world will be well

And the following verse from the same Odu makes a similar point,

*Inu bibi o da nnkan,
 suuru baba ìwa
Agba t’oni suuru,
ohun gbogbo l’o ni
A difa fun orí, a bu fun ìwa.
T’ìwa nikan l’o soro
Ori kan o buru n’ile Ife
T’ìwa nikan l’o soro*

“Nothing comes from getting angry
Patience is the father of character
An elder who has patience
Has everything”
Performed Ifa divination for ori, and likewise for character (ìwà)
It is only cultivating character that is difficult
There is not one bad ori in Ilé-Ife [the primordial city, symbolizing heaven]
It is only cultivating character that is difficult

*Ori* is also worshipped as a divinity in its own right, and the Ifa corpus is replete with myths emphasizing its superiority to other divinities and its close connection to Olodumare.

For example, Abimbola cites the following verse of Ifa from Odu Oyéku Meji:

*Owo ewe o to pepe
Ti agbalagba o wo akeregbe*

\[563\] Awo Faniyi, interview with the author, November 27, 2013, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Yoruba. Ademola Kazeem Fayemi, attributes this verse to Odu Ose-Meji in his essay “Human personality and the Yoruba worldview: An ethico-sociological interpretation.” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 9 (2009): 166-176. Prof. Agboola also quoted a similar verse from the same Odu, Ogbe-Yonu, “‘Anger amounts to nothing, Patience is the Father of good gentle character (ìwà pele). The elder that has patience, has every good thing’ performed Ifa divination for Ṫúnunmila when he was seeking what we call the good life. The Awo told him, ‘Character is all that is required, character is all that is required. There is no destiny (ori) that is called unhappy in Ilé-Ifé’. Character is all that is required.’”
A child is not tall enough to stretch his hand to reach the high shelf
An adult’s hand cannot enter the mouth of a gourd
The work an adult begs a child to do
Let him not refuse to do.
We all have to work to do for each other’s good
Ifa divination was performed for Ṣrunmila
About whom his devotee
Olodumare then sent for Ṣrunmila
To explain the reason why
He did not support his devotee
When Ṣrunmila got to the presence of Olodumare
He explained that he had done all in his power for his devotee
But that the destiny chosen by the devotee made his efforts fruitless
It was then that the matter
Became quite clear to Olodumare
And he was happy
That he did not pronounce his judgment on the evidence of only one of the two parties. 564

Likewise, the Araba recited the following verse of Ogunda Meji:

Ori is the only one. Ṣrunmila says you cover a dirty person with dyed cloth, the one who makes the elephant blow its horn (a praise names for ori), Ori is the only one who can complete the journey. If you have money, it is the work of Ori. If you want a wife, it is Ori. If you want children, it is Ori. If you are searching for any blessing, it is to Ori that you must bring your supplications! O my Ori! Ori is always the first to remember me, who will quickly carry me to the Oriṣa, my helper. There is no oriṣa who supports us like Ori. My Ori, I salute you!

They say when a babalawo dies, we must bury him with his Ifa. When a devotee of Šango dies, we throw away his effects. When a devotee of Ogun dies, hunters take his effects and perform the “ipa” rituals with them. When a devotee of Oriṣanla dies, we throw his effects into the bush. However, when a person dies, nobody will take away his head. A person is buried with his/her head. Ori is the only one who can make the journey like Alasan. I greet you ori, who is always the first to remember me, who will quickly carry me to the Oriṣa, my helper.

There is no oriṣa who supports us like ori. Ori, I salute you! ⁵⁶⁵

In fact, ori is often described as our “heavenly self” or “double” (ẹnikéji t’o wà l’ọrun) that exists with Olodumare and in the depths of our being (inú). ⁵⁶⁶ The worship of ori is central to the practice of Ifa, as Abimbola explains,

..it is important for every individual to consult Ifa from time to time to find out the true path of one’s destiny. By consulting Ifa, one is merely trying to find out what has been kept in store by one’s ori. Divination is therefore regarded as the communication of the wishes of one’s ori to Ifa who will then reveal this to the client through the appropriate chapter and verse of the Odu system. ⁵⁶⁷

Thus, even Ifa serves as an intermediary between oneself and one’s own ori, the connection or nexus between one’s individual self and Olodumare. Ifa makes much of the natural symbolism of the physical head to illustrate the nature of the “inner head,” pointing out that most children come into the world head-first, and while alive, our heads are usually the closest part of our bodies to heaven, and even in death, our heads go with us into the grave, unlike other objects of worship; furthermore the body cannot function without the head, which is also traditionally used to carry heavy loads. ⁵⁶⁸ The following verses of Ifa and related praise-poem illustrate this point:

_Ire gbgbo ti ni o nii_  
_N be l’odo Ori_  
_A la ona-teere kan ayé_  
_A la ona-teere kan ọrun_

All the good things that will bless me  
I will seek from my Ori  
He who cuts a narrow path to the world  
He who cuts a narrow path to heaven.

_Ori_ cause and creator

⁵⁶⁵ African Language Program at Harvard University, last accessed, May 13, 2015, [http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/90-ogunda-meji](http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/90-ogunda-meji)


Ori the one and only, who makes bean cakes but never sells them at Ejigbomékun market

The great companion who never deserts one

Ori, the master of all

It is the Ori we should praise

The rest of the body comes to naught

When Ori is missing from the body

What remains is useless

What remains is incapable of carrying any load.

It is the Ori which bears the load

Ori, I plead with you

Do not desert me

You, the lord of all things

Susanne Wenger (d. 2009), the late Austrian-born artist and high-priestess of Òbatala

in Oṣogbo summarizes these various aspects of Ori:

Ori is that part of one’s complex identity which is an imperishable part of God… Ori is a part of God, Olodumare, in His quality as the Creator, in which capacity he is called Èlèda; but he is also our very own self. From this, our self, depends not only our fate, but our active participation in our fate. Ceremonially we address Ori as “Ori mi Èlèda mi,” “My Ori, my creator!”

However, the babalowo I interviewed emphasized the fact that no discussion of orí can be complete without a discussion of èse, a word which at once means, “leg” and “struggle” or “effort.” As the Araba of Modakêkê colourfully put it, “Have you ever seen a head (orí) rolling around by itself without any legs (èse)? It takes legs/effort (èse) to walk the path of your destiny.” Abimbola cites a verse from Odu Oturupon Meji that illustrates the inseparability and complementarity of orí and èse, destiny and effort.

Ọpẹbẹ, the Ifa priest of Legs (èse)

Performed Ifa divination for Legs

On he day was coming from heaven to earth

All heads (orí) called themselves together

But they did not invite Legs

Èṣù said: “Since you did not invite Legs,

We will see how you will bring your deliberations to success.”

Their meeting ended in a quarrel

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569 A mythical market that features in several narratives of Ifa, for example, in one verse of Eji-Ogbe, Ọrunmila’s wife, Sinimo, beat up Death’s mother in this very market. Araba of Modakêkê, interview with the author, November 20, 2013. Modakêkê, Nigeria. Yoruba.


571 Wenger, The Timeless Mind of the Sacred, 53.
They then sent for Legs
It was then that their deliberations became successful.
They said that was exactly what their Ifa priests had predicted
Opebẹ, the Ifa priest of Legs (ese)
Performed Ifa divination for Legs
On the day was coming from heaven to earth
Opebẹ has surely come,
Ifa priest of Legs
No one deliberates
Without the reckoning with Legs
Opebẹ has surely come,
Ifa priest of Legs

Prof. Agboola cited the following verses of Odu Irẹtẹ Meji, and Abimbola cites a
verse of Osa Meji to describing the necessity of struggle, even for those blessed with good
destinies:

“You imprint one leg (ese) of Irete
I too imprint one leg (ese) of Irete
When the imprint becomes two, then the true Irete-Meji is formed.”
Performed Ifa divination for “One with a good ori but lacking good legs (ese)”
He was told to offer sacrifice
He heard, he made the sacrifice
My sacred palm nuts (ikin), the protruding tooth
Ifa, please let me have a good Ori
Together with good legs (ese)

and

Ifa divination was performed for Struggle
Who was coming from heaven to earth
We are only struggling
All of us
Those who chose good destinies are not many
We are only struggling
All of us
We are only struggling

Like ori, ese illustrates an important aspect of the worldview articulated by Ifa: the
symbolic relationship that connects everything in the outer/physical (òde) world (ayé) to a
corresponding inner or heavenly (inú / orun) reality that shares the same name. While

572 Abimbola (1976), 149. In addition to illustrating the relationship between destiny and effort, this verse of Ifa
contains several other characteristic features: the “coming into being” which is the setting of many verses of Ifa,
the frustrating, but ultimately instructive role of Èṣù in preventing or facilitating communication, and the final
moral, explanatory conclusion, “No one deliberates without reckoning with Legs (effort).”


574 Abimbola, An Exposition of Ifa, 147.
conceptually distinct, the outer reality has an ontological continuity with its inner aspect, for which it serves as a manifestation or appearance. More strictly speaking, the things in heaven (orùn) all have their mirror images or manifestations in the world (ayé), just as the inner aspects or realities of a person (ìnú) have their counterparts or manifestations in the person’s outer appearance (òde).

_Inú_

This inner dimension is another important constituent element of the Yoruba conception of personhood. _Inú_, which can literally refer to the stomach or intestines, is more generally used to refer to one’s “insides,” the inner dimensions which might be called “psychological” or “spiritual” in English. _Inú_ is the stage of one’s inner life: feelings, thoughts, the promptings or impulses which manifest as conscious behavior are all described as taking place or inhering in _inú_. For example, the most common way of expressing happiness in Yoruba is, _ìnú mi dùn_, which literally means, “my insides are sweet.” _Inú_ designates the subjective, interior dimension of human existence.

_Ọkàn_

One of the most important inhabitants of the _ìnú_, the _Ọkàn_ (heart) is the seat of cognition, whereas feelings are usually described as occurring in _ìnú_. _Ọkàn_ literally means “heart,” and like other languages such as classical Arabic, Chinese, and Hebrew also denotes “the mind.” In addition to pumping blood throughout the body, the heart is also the instrument and location of thoughts (`ẹrò), intention, and attention. Closely related to this “heart/mind” is _ẹrì ọkàn_, which is often glossed as “conscience,” but which literally means

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575 _Inú_ is also used to designate “inside”, as in _ìnú ilé_, “inside the house.”

576 Suggestively, this word also means “one.”
“witness of the heart.” This faculty is the instrument of introspective moral self-evaluation. In the words of one babalawo, “when you are doing something, maybe after you have done it, it is the ẹrí ọkàn that tells you if what you have done is good or not. It can even tell you if what you are going to do is good or not.” A related, but distinct faculty is the ojú inú, the “inner eye” or “insight” by which one infers, interprets, understands, or perceives the non-apparent aspect of phenomena from their appearances. The ojú inú is used to do things as commonplace as intuiting a child’s character on the basis of a few interactions to recognizing the working of the Oriṣa or other invisible powers in one’s own life and others.

Èrò / ironú

“Thought” and “thinking” are usually used to translate èrò and ironú, which are usually described as taking place in the ọkàn (heart/mind) and/or inú. Gbadegesin speculates that èrò is derived from the verb rò meaning “to stir,” and therefore ironú (rò + inú) would literally mean “to stir up one’s insides”—the implication being that thinking or cogitation stirs up one’s insides, bringing thoughts and ideas to the surface like pieces of meat in a stew. Relatedly, ronúpìwàdà, which is commonly translated as “repentance,” refers to the process of introspection or self-reflection that leads to a change in behavior and character (iwà).

Ọpọlọ

Ọpọlọ, which is used to refer to the physical organ of the brain, is also commonly used to refer to intelligence, especially as regards creativity and production. For example, when I had a new outfit made with embroidery that I designed myself, or explained the mnemonic

577 Awo Faniyi, interview with the author, November 27, 2013, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. The heart is also associated with bravery and perseverance, so that in ordinary Yoruba speech, to say that someone “has a heart,” is not unlike the English expressions, common in sporting contexts: “he showed a lot of heart,” or “she has a lot of heart.”

578 Gbadegesin, African Philosophy, 32. This is only one of many possible etymologies. For example, the verb I know to mean “stir” is rú, not rò, which means “to relate” news or a story. These latter definitions are also found in Fakinlede’s Yoruba dictionary. Thus ironú could also mean “to relate the state of one’s inú.”
strategies I used to memorize the order of the Odu of Ifa, my babalawo interlocutors complimented me by saying, “Your brain is complete/correct!” (ọpọlọ rẹ ti pé). Awo Faniyi cited the following verse from Odu Eji Ogbe recounting the process of the self’s coming into being in the womb/heaven to explain the relationship between these different aspects of the self:

Ọj’ọ tí a bí ara ba dá omí
Ọj’ọ tí a dá omí la dá ẹjẹ
Ọj’ọ tí a d’ẹjẹ la da gbogbo ara
A difá fún ọkàn
A bí fun Ẹmí
A difá fún orí inú
A bí fun opolo
Awọn mẹrẹrun t’ọrun b’ọ wáyé

“The day that the body was created from water
The day that water was created, so was blood
The day that blood was created, so was the whole body”
Perform Ifa divination for heart (ọkàn)
And likewise for the self (Ẹmí)
[He] performed Ifa divination for the inner head (orí inú)
And likewise for the brain (ọpọlọ)
When the four of them were coming from heaven to the world

The verse goes on to describe the different functions of these four elements, which Awo Faniyi summarized as, “’Ẹmí is the king of the whole body/person (ara). Orí inú says everything that the person will do in life. Ọkàn circulates the blood and ideas throughout the body/person (ara). Opolo applies wisdom/intelligence (ogbon) to situations in order to accomplish things.” Similarly, the Araba explained, “’Ẹmí is the king, it is like the king of the whole body. ’Ẹmí comes from Olodumare and returns to Him when the person dies… Orí inú is very important; it is the fate or destiny (kadara, ayanmọ) of a person, which he or she chose in heaven before coming into the world. Everything good in life comes from one’s Orí, so it must be worshipped. We do divination and Ifa tells us what we should do, Olodumare

580 Ibid.
wants us to do, what our destiny (orí-inú) is so that we can find the blessings of life (ire ayé).” 581

Ara / Èniyàn

Ara is used to designate a person’s physical body as well as his or her totality as a person. As mentioned above, the physical body is understood not only as the vessel of the inner self (inú or ẹmí), but also as a symbolic representation, reflection, or manifestation of this inner reality. This symbolic relationship is not merely mental, but rather ontological: the physical or outer head (orí-odè) has an existential connection to the inner head (orí-inú) and the various rituals and rites of Ifa make use of these connections, which are also encoded in the language of the Odu Ifa. The babalawo I interviewed emphasized the fact that, “everything has its counterpart (enikéji) in heaven, inside a person (inú èniyàn). Head (orí), legs (ese), hands (owo), eyes (ojú)—all the parts of the body.” 582 Èniyàn is usually translated as “person,” but in Yoruba it has a distinctive, normative moral and ethical connotation, like the term “human” or “humanity” in English. Someone who exhibits bad character is said to “not be a person” (Kìíṣ ẹ ni èniyàn). Illustrating this normative dimension of the concept of personhood, Ademuleya quotes the following verse of Odu Irosun Iwori, which provides a mythical derivation of the word èniyàn, from the phrase eni a yan—“one who is chosen.”

... a wa gegebi eniyan,
a wa ni Olodumare yan
lati lo tun ile aye se,
Eni -a yan ni wa...

We as human beings,
We the ones God has chosen,
To renew the world,


582 Araba of Modakêkê, interview with the author, November 11, 2013. Modakêkê, Nigeria.
We are the chosen ones.583

Thus to be truly human is to fulfill the task for which we were chosen, renewing/repairing the world. For the babalawo, this is accomplished through their deep knowledge (imo ijinle) of Ifa, the source of wisdom (ogbon) and the fundamental principles through which the inner self (inú), the world (ayé) and heaven (orùn) were created. As Awo Faniyi explained, “Deep knowledge (imo ijinle) is the word (ọrọ) from the mouth of Olodumare that He gave to Ọrümila to mend the world (tún ayé se).” This knowledge is acquired by studying and being initiated into the priesthood of Ifa, which involves the cultivation of a good character characterized by honesty, gentleness (pele), diligence, and patience (sùùrù). The acquisition of this wisdom (ogbon) is presented as being inseparable from the cultivation of this character or mode of being (iwà), since both this wisdom and character are said to belong to Ọrümila (and ultimately to Olodumare), and, in the words of one babalawo, one must “become like Ọrümila in order to know what he knows.”584

Knowledge of God / Knowledge of Self

Knowing one’s orí (imo rí) is one of the stated goals of Ifa divination and practice. Deepening one’s knowledge (imo) of Olodumare and the oriṣa is also a part of the process of becoming a mature babalawo; however this is not so much a matter of knowing whether or not Olodumare and the oriṣa exist—to a babalawo such a question is as nonsensical as asking whether or not reality, love, wind, gravity, or consciousness exist. It is a question of acquiring deep firsthand knowledge (imo ijinle’) of what these fundamental aspects of human

583 Ademuleya, “The Concept of Ori,” 214.

experience are like. Wole Soyinka and the late scholar of Yoruba culture and literature, Ulli Beier once commented upon this distinctive feature of traditional Yoruba worldviews:

Soyinka: I believe that the truly liberated mind is never aggressive about his or her system of beliefs. Because it is founded on such total self-confidence, such acceptance of others, that there is no need to march out and propagate one’s cause. That is why Yoruba religion has never waged a religious war, like the Jihad or the Crusades.585

Beier: In fact they never make converts! It is the orisha himself who chooses his devotees....

Soyinka: The person who needs to convert others is a creature of total insecurity.
Beier: There is this beautiful Yoruba proverb: "The effort one makes of forcing another to be like oneself, makes one an unpleasant person!"

Beier: It is significant that when a Yoruba says "Igbagbo" (a believer) it means "Christian", because it is nonsensical to say "I believe in Shango" or "I believe in Ogun." One is too secure in one's worldview. I think I have mentioned to you once that remarkable reply of an old orishasha, to whom his grandchild said: "The teacher said, your Obatala doesn’t exist!" He simply answered. "Only that for which we have no name does not exist." He could not be shaken.

Soyinka: That is a brilliant way of putting it. And you have been to Brazil and Cuba. In that part of the world you find Europeans - not just Mulattoes - but people of “pure” European descent, who accept the humanism of this religion and who recognize it as their own way of truth. And they cannot conceive of any other way of looking at the world. This proven ability of this religion is well documented.

Beier: A few days before I came to Nigeria, I received a letter from a Portuguese student at the University of Munich. She came across a small community of Olorishas in Lisbon and again she found this a more realistic and intense way of looking at the world.

Soyinka: I know a number of people like that....586

Relatedly, Susanne Wenger, writes, “But the term ‘to believe’ [in God] which automatically implies the opposite, namely to not believe, does not exist for the Yoruba, to whom the idea that one may deny God’s existence is too absurd for words and the epitome of madness.”587 Similarly, when I asked babalawo if and how they knew that Olodumare or Orunmila existed or were real, the responses tended to consist of a scoff followed by some

585. However, the written record of the encounters between Yoruba-speaking Olorisaa, Muslims, and Christians in the 19th and early 20th-century is replete with examples of religiously-motivated persecution and violence on all sides (see Peel, Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba, 2003).


variation “of course!” and a counter-question invoking close personal relationships such as, “how do you know I exist?”, “how do you know you exist?” or “how do you know your father or brother exists?” The Araba of Modakẹkẹ explained, “No one can say he has seen Olodumare or Ọrunmila, but we see the work of their hands and we speak with them everyday in prayer (adura). Olodumare speaks to us through Ọrunmila, and Ọrunmila speaks through his palm nuts (ikin) and divination chain (opele).”

So asking a babalawo whether or not he believes in Olodumare or Ọrunmila is as nonsensical as asking someone if he believes in existence or the colour red. The question is rather, “what does one know of or about these realities?”, and most importantly, “what is the nature of one’s relationship with them?” The specific ways in which this knowledge is acquired and these relationships are established will be the subject of the next section of this chapter.

**How is knowledge acquired in Ifa?**

_A kọfá mọfá_

_Babalawo t’ó bá kọfá mọfá_

_A maa di Babalawo_

_Oniṣegún t’ó bá koogún-moogún_

_A màa di ágbálagbá iṣegún_

One who studies Ifa, knows Ifa
A Babalawo who studies Ifa and knows it
Will become a [senior] Babalawo
A traditional doctor, if he studies medicine and knows it
He will become a revered elder in medicine

-Odu Otura-Ogbe

*Truth is the character (iwà) of Olodumare*

_Orito (truth) is more than saying the truth, it is being true_

-Awo Agboola

Ifá ki ko nii mu ni mọ Ifá
Ona sisi nii mu ni mọ ona
Ona ti a ko rin ri

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If we teach a person to be wise, he will be wise, if we teach a person to be stupid, he will be stupid.

-Odu Irete-Ogbe

When I first began my program of research in Ife and the neighboring town of Modakẹkẹ, I conducted daily interviews with the Araba of Modakẹkẹ, who very patiently endured my seemingly endless barrage of questions about knowledge and learning in Ifa. On our third day of interviews, however, he interrupted my latest line of inquiry with a suggestion.

These things that you want to know you can see them all for yourself if you take initiation and go to the sacred grove (igbodu). But since I know you do not want to do that, I think you should learn the first sixteen Odu of Ifa. This is how we begin to teach children. Once you know these, you have the foundation, everything else is derived from these sixteen Odu.

So for the next few months, in addition to the interviews I conducted with other babalawo in the area, I spent a few hours a day, five or six days a week, memorizing the sixteen main divinatory signs of the Odu, their order, and learning two or three verses for each of these sixteen main Odu. This process introduced me to some dimensions of the process of studying Ifa that would be difficult to access through questions alone. Studying the Odu of Ifa began to change the way I perceived my surroundings; given that virtually all of the flora and fauna, cultural, economic, artistic, and social practices of Yorubaland are described in the Odu of Ifa, I daily came across things that brought the verses I had just learned to mind. After a


few weeks, I began to recognize the Odu Ifa in the phenomena and situations around me, and my perception of them became intertwined with the verses of the Odu which described them.

For example, while walking home one day, wondering whether an acquaintance of mine had overcharged me for some cloth, I saw a butterfly flapping in front of me, and immediately remembered the following verse of Odu Irẹ Meji,

“Big hill at the end of the straight way”
Performed Ifa divination for the Moth
And also for Locust
But only butterfly sacrificed
After he made the sacrifice, he said:
“Look at my belly, look at my back.” [because I am concealing nothing]
The butterfly has no scheme in mind
“Look at my belly, look at my back.”

Ifa says that the mind (inú) of this person should be open, that he should not have two minds (inú méjì) [have second thoughts] about someone. Ifa says that life should be easy for this person.

The sight of the floating butterfly, the onomatopoeic sound of the Yoruba word for butterfly, labalábà, which resembles its playful flapping, and the descriptive verse of Ifa which portrays the butterfly as an innocent and carefree all combined into a single perceptual event that allayed my suspicions and set my mind at ease. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, and it was only later that I realized that I was subtly beginning to perceive the world in a new way, even only after a few weeks, without the benefit of initiation.

*Early Training of a Babalawo*

The babalawo I interviewed all explained that their relationship with Ifa began before birth, and extended beyond death. As mentioned above, before descending to the world from heaven, each new person is said to choose his or her own unique destiny / head (orí), and each orí has a particular set of relationships with the various Odu of Ifa and with the Oriṣa. A particular Oriṣa is said to “own” the head of a devotee, who is said to have an Odu that gives birth to him or her. On the way to the world down from heaven, the person is said to pass
underneath the “tree of forgetfulness” (*igi igbagbe*) or cross the river at the boundary of heaven and forget his choice of *orí*. The physical process of birth is paralleled by the process of passing from heaven to the world (*ayé*). The *orí* of those destined to become babalawo are said to be “owned” by Ọrunmila.

According to Prof. Agboola, after birth, the infant’s feet are kept off the ground until the third day (or seventh day in some places) when a ceremony called *esẹ tayé* (“feet touching the world”) or *ikọṣẹ wayē* (“stepping into the world”), which Prof. Agboola described as “a spiritual look into the life of a newborn.”

Thus, part of this ceremony is known as *imọrí*, knowing the *orí* of the child. During this ceremony, a babalawo will perform Ifa divination for the child to determining the Odu that will guide the child’s early life. The verses of this Odu will prescribe the sacrifices that the child’s parents will perform for him, as well as the taboos (*eewo*) they will observe for the child (such as not wearing red, not eating certain foods, etc.). For example, if the Irẹtẹ Meji comes up when divination is performed, and the following verse is recited,

The dry season comes and the river quickly leaves”
Performed Ifa divination for *Atoka* (a large bird of prey)
The one who is the messenger of Eledumare
The king’s messenger does not go to the farm
The king’s messenger does not go to the river
If I am the messenger of Ifa
I will be happy
The king’s messenger does not go to the farm
The king’s messenger does not go to the river
Travellers to Ipo, travellers to Òffa

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592 In Drewal’s *Yoruba Ritual*, based on her fieldwork with a babalawo in Ijebu, this first ceremony was called as *ikọṣẹ wayē*, “stepping into the world,” and was performed between the third and seventh days after birth, while the *imọrí* was a separate ritual performed during the baby’s third month (see pg. 52-56). Such ritual variants are common from region to region, between babalawo in the same region, and many babalawo even perform these ceremonies and rituals in different ways depending on the context, time, and financial constraints of the families and individuals.

593 These are Yoruba towns, and this phrase is an Ifa idiom that roughly translates as, “people far and wide.”
Who doesn’t know that I am the messenger of Ifa?  

The babalawo will instruct the parents that the child should become a babalawo, and instead of doing customary chores and work, should be sent to study Ifa.

During this ceremony, which takes place near sunrise, the presiding babalawo will also perform divination to determine which oriṣa or oriṣas the child should worship to assist him or her in fulfilling his or her destiny. These oriṣa will then be “made” for the child, formally establishing their relationship by embodying their presence within the child. The family of the child will also then observe the taboos associated with the worship of this oriṣa or oriṣas, for example, alcohol is forbidden to children of Ọbatala, sorghum or guinea corn is likewise forbidden to children of Qṣun. During this ritual divination will also be performed to determine which, if any, of the ancestors of the mother or father have returned in this new child. If the child is destined to become a babalawo, the child’s Oluwo (Olu awo, “master of secrets”), or “godfather,” the one who will train and initiate him into Ifa, will also be determined through divination. Prof. Agboola recounted his own experience, explaining that since he was born into a family of babalawo, he was expected to become a babalawo as well.

For example, when they did my ikose-ayé, Ifa said I should be given Qṣun, so to this day I am close to Qṣun, and I have a brass opẹlẹ (Ifa divining chain—brass is sacred to Qṣun). Ifa also said who my Oluwo should be—it is usually not your father, although it can be. I used to watch my father and assist him, and at 4 years old I began memorizing verses of Ifa with my Oluwo, who lived around the corner from my father’s house in Qyọ.

Prof. Agboola went on to explain that the family and surrounding society influence the child based upon the results of this divinatory ritual, based upon the Odu and Oriṣa that are said to govern the child’s life. For example, children of Odu Otura Meji, known as the

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595 Ibid.
“Muslim Odu”, were sometimes dressed in white on Fridays and given an Islamic education, even if their parents were practitioners of an Oriṣa tradition.\footnote{See Gbadamosi, “Odu Imale: Islam in Ifa divination and the case of Predestined Muslims,” Journal of the Historical Society(8) 4, Junne 1977, 91-2 and Gbadamosi, The Growth of Islam in Yorubaland, 68-9.} Children of Ṣango are thought to be headstrong, fiery, and virtuosic, like Ṣango himself, and are treated as such. This socialization, or “passive training,” as Prof. Agboola called it, is, in the case of children destined to become babalawo, complemented by the “active training” which they receive at the hands of their Oluwo. While most children born to worshippers of Oriṣa undergo the ritual of Ṣese n taye / ikọse ayé, only those born to babalawo families and those destined to become babalawo undergo training with an Oluwo. Even amongst those destined to become babalawo, the divinatory orature of this early ritual creates a highly specialized socialization for each child.

As Bascom writes, “One becomes a diviner in much the same way that he becomes a worshipper of any other deity: by following the worship (and profession) of his father, by being told through divination that one should become a diviner, or by a combination of these reasons.”\footnote{Bascom, Ifa Divination, 8.} People also frequently become initiated when they receive the “call” of an oriṣa, which often takes the form of a personal crisis such as an illness. Through divination they discover that they are meant to be initiated. This is increasingly common in contemporary times as hereditary oriṣa worship appears to be dwindling.

\textit{Early training with Oluwo}

Even before they begin their apprenticeship, all of the children of a babalawo family, both male and female, begin their training by assisting their father and mother with chores relating to the practice of Ifa: fetching the instruments of divination, running errands,
especially to collect or assist in preparing the ingredients of sacrifices (*ẹbọ*) and herbal medicines (*ewé*). During this time, children also observe and imitate the bodily postures, intonation, greetings, and general comportment of their parents and/or *Oluwo*. Babalawo-in-training usually begin their apprenticeship with their *Oluwo* between the ages of 4 and 10, often spending all day at their Oluwo’s house and returning to their parents’ home in the evenings. The children and apprentices of *babalawo* are also disciplined to adopt certain behaviors as a result of their father’s profession. For example, one afternoon I gave some money (30 Naira) to the Araba’s young children to buy ice cream, but when the children came back and were playing with the remaining money, the Araba scolded them severely for having bought the ice cream themselves and for playing with the money out in public, he then turned to me and explained, “children of babalawo shouldn’t be seen outside playing with money or buying frivolous things. People will think that their father is just taking money from people and using it anyhow.”

*Cultivation of Character*

Furthermore, apprentices and children of babalawo are held to a higher standard than their peers. The virtues of obedience (*igbọran*), respect and deference towards elders (*ịtịriba / ibọwọ*), humility (*irele*), patience (*suuru*), honesty (*otito*), discretion (*lakaye / iṣọra*), thinking well of others (*inu rere*), bravery (*igboju*), diligence, eloquence, and intelligence that characterize the Yoruba aesthetic/ethical ideals of *ọmoluwabi* (often glossed as *ọmọ ti Olu iwa bi*, “the child born to the Lord of Existence/Character,” meaning a well-raised/cultured person) and *iwa pele* (good/gentle character) are especially expected and cultivated in the children and apprentices of babalawo. Given that they may be privy to the secrets of many

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members of their community who come to their parent or Oluwo for divination, as well as some of the “secrets” of practicing Ifa, the stakes of good character are particularly high for these children. As a verse of Odu Iwori-Ọkanran says, “Careless talk usually kills an ignorant person. There is nothing the eyes of a babalawo cannot see. There is nothing a babalawo cannot know. A babalawo cannot be garrulous.” Furthermore, as representatives and potential successors of their priestly fathers, the children and apprentices of babalawo are expected to embody these ethical ideals which are regarded as a necessary precondition and complement to receiving the knowledge of Ifa.

Abimbola cites a similar story from Odu Ogbe-Alara (Ogbe-Otura) to underscore the importance of the cultivation of iwa pẹle for babalawo:

“If we take a wooden object to bash the calabash
Let us hail Iwa (character)
If we take up a wooden object to bash the calabash
Let us hail Iwa
If we take a wooden object to strike a stone
Let us hail Iwa”
Performed Ifa divination for Ọrunmila
When Baba [Ọrunmila] was going to marry Iwa
The first time that Ọrunmila married a wife
Iwa was the one he married
And Iwa herself
Was the daughter of Suuru (patience)
When Ọrunmila proposed to marry Iwa
She said it was alright
She said that she would marry him.
But there was one thing to observe:
No one should send her away from her matrimonial home.
No one should use her carelessly as one uses rainwater
No one should punish her unnecessarily
Ọrunmila exclaimed, “God will not let me do such a thing.”
He said that he would take care of her
He said that he would treat her with love
And he would treat her with kindness
He then married Iwa
After a very long time,
He became unhappy with her…
He therefore started to worry Iwa
If she did one thing

600 Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, 204 (Ete-aim’ete niise iku p’ogbeiri. Kosi ohun oju Awo kiiri. Ko si ohun Awo kii mọ. Awo kiiṣ’aroka.)
He would complain that she did it wrongly
If she did another thing,
He would also complain
When Iwa saw that the trouble was too much for her,
Iwa said alright,
She would go to her father’s house
And her father was the first-born son of Olodumare
His name was Suuru (patience), the father of Iwa
She then gathered her calabash utensils
And left her home
She went to heaven (ọrun)
When Ọrunmila returned, he said,
Greeting to the people inside the house!
Greeting to the people inside the house!
Greeting to the people inside the house!
But Iwa did not show up
Baba [Ọrunmila] then asked around for Iwa
The other neighbors said that they had not seen her
“Where has she gone?
Did she go to the market?
Did she go somewhere?”
He asked these questions for a long time until he added two cowries to three
And went to the house of an Ifa priest
They told him that Iwa had run away
He was advised to go and find her in Alara’s household
When he got to the house of Alara he said,

“If we take up a wooden object
To bash it against the calabash
Iwa is the one we are seeking.
Let us hail Iwa.
If we take up a wooden object
To bash it against the calabash
Iwa is the one we are seeking
Let us hail Iwa.
If we take up a wooden object
To strike a stone
Iwa is the one we are seeking
Let us hail Iwa.
Alara if you see Iwa, let me know
Iwa is the one we are seeking
Iwa
Alara said that he did not see Iwa
The father then went to the house of Orangun, king of the city of Ila
Offspring of the bird with plenty of feathers
He asked whether Orangun saw Iwa
But Orangun said that he did not see her.
There was hardly any place he did not go
After a long time
He turned back
And inquired from his divination instruments
He said that he looked for Iwa in the house of Alara
He looked for her in the house of Ajero…

601 An Ifa idiom that means something like “he put two and two together.”
…But they told him that Iwa had gone to heaven (orun)
He said that he would like to go and take her from there
They said that was alright
Provided he was prepared to perform sacrifice
They asked him to offer a net,
And give honey to Eṣu
He offered honey as a sacrifice to Eṣu
When Eṣu tasted the honey
He said, “What is this which is so sweet?”
Ọrunmila then put on an Egungun costume
And went to heaven
He started to sing again
Eṣu then played the game of deceit
And went to the place where Iwa was
He said, “A certain man has arrived in heaven,
If you listen to his song,
He is saying such and such a thing…. You are the one he is looking for…”
Iwa then left (her hiding place)
And went to meet them where they were singing
Ọrunmila was inside the Egungun costume
He saw Iwa through the net of the costume
And he embraced her…
Those how change bad luck into good, then opened up the costume
“Iwa why did you behave like that?
You left me on earth and went away.”
Iwa said that was true
She said that was because of how he mistreated her
That she ran away
So that she might have peace of mind
Ọrunmila then implored her to please
Have patience with him,
And follow him [back home]
But Iwa refused
But she said that was alright
She still could do something else
She said, “You Ọrunmila,
Go back to the earth
When you get there
All the things which I have told you not to do,
Don’t try to do them
Behave very well
Behave with good character
Take care of your wife,
And take care of your children.
From today on, you will not set your eyes on Iwa any more.
But I will abide with you
But whatever you do to me
Will determine how orderly your life will be602

Among the many profound points in these passages, two stand out: the genealogy of character, i.e., its intimate relationship with patience (suuru) and Olodumare, and the utmost importance attributed to the difficult task of cultivating and maintaining the intangible quality of good character. Abimbola concludes,

The man who has *iwa pele* will not collide with any of the powers both human and supernatural and will therefore live in complete harmony with the forces that govern the universe. This is why the Yoruba regard *iwa pele* as the most important of all moral values, and the greatest attribute of man. The essence of religious worship for the Yoruba consists therefore in striving to cultivate *iwa pele* (good/gentle character). This is the meaning of the saying, *Iwa l’esi* [Worship/religion is character].

**Learning the Odu**

Like the cultivation of character, the process of memorizing the Odu of Ifa is a lifelong process that begins in childhood. Although some babalawo begin this process in adulthood, most begin in early childhood. Initially, the apprentices (*omo awo*—“child of secrets”) are taught how to properly use the divining chain (*opele*) and the sacred palm nuts (*ikin*). Then they are taught the sixteen names of the principal Odu (from which the other 240 Odu are derived) and how to make the signs for these Odu with the divining chain and in the camwood powder (*ije irosun*) on the divining tray (*opon Ifa*). This process of learning to make the marks of the Odu in the powder is known as *etite ale*.

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603 *Ibid*, 395. Similarly, both Awo Faniyi and Prof. Agboola in interviews with the author said that “A babalawo without good character is not a babalawo,” and the Araba also cited the proverbs *iwa l’ewa* “character is beauty,” and *iwa l’oba awure* “character is the king of all (good luck) charms,” to make a similar point.

604 Although some babalawo wait to teach their apprentices how handle the *ikin* (a process known as *dida owo*) during the initiation ceremony (*itefa*) since the *ikin* are regarded as a more direct emodiment of Ifa, and must be handled with even greater care than the *opele* (diving chain).
Mastering the names, signs, and order of all 256 Odu can take as little as a few days or as long as a year, depending on the intelligence, dedication, and time the apprentice has to devote to this task. The Araba told me that the availability of pen and paper has made this task easier for his apprentices, and he actively encouraged me to write down the names and signs of the Odu in my notebook to accelerate the learning process, which took a couple of days. After mastering and memorizing the names, signs, and order of all 256 Odu, the apprentice performs a ritual known as šishi-opelẹ-já (opening and grabbing the divining chain), which involves a sacrifice and among some babalawo, the ritual known as jijeun Ifa or jijeun Odu.

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**Figure 5.1: The Sixteen Primary Odu (in order of seniority)**

1) Eji Ogha
2) Oyeke Meji
3) Iworri Meji
4) Odi Meji
5) Irosun Meji
6) Ovonrin Meji
7) Obara Meji
8) Obanran Meji
9) Ogunla Meji
10) Oju Meji
11) Ibi Meji
12) Otunpan Meji
13) Otara Meji
14) Irẹ Meji
15) Oṣe Meji
16) Oṣin Meji

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605 This order has some regional variance: in Ifẹ, Ekiti, and Ileṣa, Obara Meji is 5th, Obanran Meji is 6th, Irosun Meji is 7th and Owonrin is 8th (see Figure 3); whereas babalawo in Oyo, Egba, and Ilejebu areas use the order given above.

606 There are some subtleties pertaining to the order of the 240 Odu amulu (compound Odu) that are a bit more complicated, and take some more time to memorize.
(eating Ifa or eating the Odu). In this ritual, the wife of the Oluwo, who, like all wives of babalawo is known as an apetebi (wife of a babalawo-a title in its own right with its own responsibilities and rituals) prepares a “hot” solution of alcohol, pepper, and herbs, which she places on the opẹle (divining chain) in the position of Eji Ogbe, the most senior Odu. The apprentice must then lick the solution off the eight shells of the opẹle, and do so for each of the sixteen principal Odu. Prof. Agboola recalled doing this around the age of ten years old, and barely being able to finish. “I think I had to do it over the course of two or three days, it tasted so bad, and made me sick. But they say it gives you the power of the spoken word (ọrọ sisẹ), and puts the Odu inside of you.”

This kind of physical embodiment and literal internalization of the Odu plays a prominent role in many of the rituals in Ifa, the camwood powder (iṣẹ irosun) in which the Odu is marked being the most common vehicle of this process of literal incorporation.

Next (although these stages of learning may co-occur), the apprentice memorizes the verses of the Odu. Prof. Agboola explained that the standard practice is to start from Eji Ogbe and learn one or two verses (ẹsẹ, usually one positive verse and one negative) for each Odu, in order of seniority, until the apprentice has “gone all the way around” and memorized a verse for each of the 256 Odu. Each verse (ẹsẹ) comprises a complete narrative, and range in length from a few sentences to epic narratives of hundreds of lines that may take over a half-hour to recite. This process of memorizing and mastering the oral corpus is known as Ifa riran (seeing Ifa), and is primarily done through in-person oral repetition-the Oluwo corrects mistakes in pronunciation, and then tells the apprentice to keep reciting the verse to himself until he memorizes it. While the meanings of a verse may sometimes be discussed, at this stage of

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training, the focus is on memorization and correct recitation. After the apprentice has memorized and can competently recite a verse from each of the 256 Odu, a special ceremony is held for the Oluwo, and the apprentice begins his next round, learning another set of verses for each of the 256 Odu. During this process, apprentices often move in with their Oluwo to devote themselves to the study of Ifa “full-time.” The Oluwo often assist their apprentices in this process through a special herbal/incantory preparation believed to enhance memory known as isọye (isọ + oye = speaking + understanding). There are various types of isọye, each associated with a particular Odu, such as Eji Ogbe or Qbara Iwori, whose verses encode the incantation and ingredients of the formula, which is usually ingested. 608 Similarly, the practice of memorizing the Odu is also thought to improve one’s memory. The prominent babalawo Yěmi Èlébuibon writes:

It is a belief that the acolyte or priest memorizes these verses, his capacity to memorize is increased every day. Ajagunmole (he-who-teaches-the priest-through-dreams) is the great Ifa priest in heaven. He holds the responsibility for guiding the righteous and the upright by giving them retentive memory. It is believed that those who lose their memory or are unable to recite the Odu very well might have offended Ajagunmole. 609

Prof. Agboola recalled that he began memorizing the verses of Ifa around the age of 4 and finished his “first round” around the age of 10, taking him 6 years to memorize one verse for each of the 256 Odu. He explained that he would have been able to do it faster, but that his father enrolled him in Western school at the age of 6, so he had less time to devote to his study of Ifa. The “second round” of learning a verse for each of the 256 Odu took him another two or three years, after which, as he recalled “my father [himself a babalawo] called me


inside and told me, ‘now you can call yourself a babalawo, but only inside our house. Don’t say you are a babalawo to anyone outside.”

Relatedly, the Araba of Modakẹẹkẹ told me, “If you know the 16 [principal] Odu, you will be a babalawo, the others [the other Odu] will come out of you. When you see the ọpọlẹ, Ọrunmila will come out of your mouth and speak, and what you say will be true.”

However, on another occasion, the Araba explained that to be a practicing babalawo, one must know at least eight verses for each of the Odu, and that knowing sixteen was more complete. Abimbola also gives sixteen as the number of verses of each Odu that must be memorized before the babalawo can move on to the next step of his or her training.

Awo Faniyi opined that in order to really be a babalawo, one must known at least 4 verses for each Odu, but that the process of learning new verses is a life-long pursuit.

Prof. Agboola and the Araba concurred, explaining that studying and learning verses of Ifa extends from “cradle to grave.”

Concurrent with this process of memorization, the apprentice also learns the basic interpretation of each verse, and how to perform the various sacrifices associated with each (ebo ríru). This process is known as Ọkanran ebo, and involves mastering the sacred taxonomy of Ifa, which includes a vast array of the flora and fauna native to Yorubaland (and many species which are not) as well as a vast array of cultural artefacts (farming, domestic, and ritual implements), and the incantations (ofo) that accompany each item, which may differ depending on the sacrifice or preparation. This vast body of practical knowledge is learned through observation, imitation, and then performance under observation.

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612 Abimbola, Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa, 10
The Odu themselves are not regarded as mere chapters of text or collections of words, but are understood as spiritual entities with distinct “personalities” and characteristics in their own right. For example, before the Araba taught me verses from the sixteenth Odu, Ofun Meji (also known as Ṭrangun Meji) he explained to me that he had to ask Ofun Meji if it would be alright to teach me its verses, explaining that it was a very powerful and “hot-tempered” Odu given the fact that it was once the most senior of all Odu, but is now the sixteenth. The Araba explained that in heaven, Ṭrangun Meji was the most senior of the Odu, but in a case of the “last becoming first,” the youngest Odu, Eji Ogbe, was the first to arrive on earth, followed by Oyẹku Meji and the other Odu.613 When Eji Ogbe arrived at Ile-Ife, its people made him the paramount chief. Each of the other sixteen primary Odu came down, with Ṭrangun Meji arriving last. When he arrived, he was incensed to learn that his junior sibling had been made king in his stead, and began to fight and defeat the other Odu. Eventually a truce was reached, and since they could not dethrone Eji Ogbe, it was agreed that Ofun Meji’s seniority would be recognized in other ways (for example, after saying his name, he is always hailed with the honorific “Eepa!”), and Ofun Meji is always considered senior Odu when casting the ọpẹlẹ to determine specific alternative (ibo). Ofun Meji is always propitiated before his verses are recited as a result of this primordial slight, and in recognition of his seniority.614

613 This is a common trope in Yoruba mythology and culture. When twins are born, the one who emerges from the womb last is considered the eldest.

614 Epega gives a different account of this story (63) in which Ofun Meji attains virtually equality with Eji Ogbe as a result of performing a sacrifice and paying a toll which no one of the other Odu could afford. Hence the saying, A kii dlla bori Eji Ogbe, A kii dlla bori Ofun Meji “There is no Ifa senior to Eji Ogbe, there is no Ifa senior to Ofun Meji,” which is employed in ibo —performing divination twice to answer binary questions, each alternative represented by an object held in hands of the client. If the senior Odu emerges first, the client’s left hand is selected; if the senior Odu emerges second, the client’s right hand is selected. However, if Eji Ogbe or Ofun Meji appear, they are always senior to all other Odu.
After relating this myth, the Araba then went into his back room, to where his ikin, sacred palm nuts (which are used for divination and represent the deity Ifa) are kept in a porcelain pot, and offered a propitiatory sacrifice (etutu) of alcohol, palm oil, and a rooster to Ofun Meji. He then asked Ofun Meji for permission to recite its verses to me, and to bless us and our work, performing kola nut divination to ascertain Ofun Meji’s response. The response was positive, and so “everything was open” for us to proceed studying Ofun Meji.

Similarly, Ofun-Ogunda is regarded a “dangerous” Odu, to which propitiatory sacrifice (etutu) must be made before its verses are recited. Another Odu is considered too dangerous for its name to be said aloud, and is euphemistically referred to as Odu Iru-ẹkun “leopard’s tail.” Ireṣe-ẹkun firu n’alẹ—“Ireṣe-leopard that beats the ground with its tail,” Ireṣe-dudu—“Black Ireṣe,” and Ireṣe Alaje—“Ireṣe that has wealth.” Odu Ṓṣe-Otura is considered to be the Odu that gave birth to Eṣu, and as the incantory embodiment of this divine messenger, is invoked when sacrifices are performed, even if the sacrifice is associated with another Odu. The Odu are regarded as children of Òrunmila, and as divinities in their own right. They feature as characters in many of the myths of Ifa and their distinct power (aṣe) and personalities are manifest in their verses, signatures, and associated sacrifices/preparations (ebbọ and akoṣe). Thus, learning the Odu is more like getting to know a family of people or a set of characters in a novel or TV show than it is like learning the Periodic Table of the Elements (although some chemists and small children may relate to the elements in a somewhat similar interpersonal manner).

615 Bascom, Ifa Divination, 85.

616 Verger, Ewé, 46. This is also the name of a large forest tree whose leaves and sap are used in herbal/incantory preparations associated with this Odu.
While memorizing the Odu and assisting their Oluwo, apprentices also join their Oluwo and/or their families in worshipping Ifa every 4th day (Ifa’s day in the traditional 4-day week) through sacrifice, reciting verses of Ifa, and singing orin Ifa (songs of Ifa) from the Odu of Ifa. Every 16th day the babalawo of a town or local area gather together to worship Ifa communally in a meeting known as itadoogun (meaning the 17th-the Yoruba method of counting days counts both the first and last day). Iyanifa (women initiated into Ifa), omo awo (apprentices), babalawo, their wives (Apeteibi) and children all participate in these gatherings during which they exchange news, stories, ese Ifa (verses of Ifa), seek one another’s advice, and address issues affecting their communities. On the rare occasion when I had a question which the Araba could not answer, or about which he was not sure, he would consult with other babalawo at this gathering to see what they had to say.

Initiation: Itefa and Igbodu

But perhaps the most important ritual in the training of a babalawo is the itefa, or initiation into Ifa, which takes place in a temporary space constructed for that purpose, known as the Igbodu, “the grove of mysteries,” or Igbo aiku, “the grove of immortality.” The highest level of this initiation involves witnessing the unutterable secret of Odu (which is different form the 256 Odu of Ifa), sometimes described as the mythical wife of Orunmila, who gave birth to the 256 Odu, who bear her name.617 In many places in contemporary Nigeria, women can be initiated into Ifa and become elegan Ifa (the most basic degree of initiation), but they are typically forbidden from witnessing Odu and joining the highest ranks of initiates, who are called Olodu (possessors of Odu). We will return to this point later, but here we should

617 Cf. Drewal, Yoruba Ritual, 73.
mention that the initiation of women into Ifa is still relatively rare in Nigeria (there appear to be far more babalawo than Iyanifa), and is controversial (and even more so in the diaspora). There are however, many women in Nigeria who are very knowledgeable about Ifa and are called upon to recite and interpret its verses, having studied the Odu and their rituals with their fathers, husbands, or brothers.

In any event, women play an integral role in the iteфа ceremony,\(^{618}\) which is traditionally a fourteen-day affair, involving many elaborate rituals, the details of many of which are closely guarded secrets.\(^{619}\) While it appears that traditionally, the iteфа ceremony would take place after the apprentice had memorized one or two verses of each of the 256 Odu, many children of babalawo families in Ijẹbu are initiated during childhood before completing this first round of memorization.\(^ {620}\) In other areas, children go through initiation at a young age if a verse of Ifa calling for it emerges during divination for the child. For example, this verse of Odu Irẹṣẹ Meji

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Poro bayii} \\
\text{Alaа bayii} \\
A \text{ difа fun ire, ti o tе meji} \\
Tи o la ghуurugudu \\
Ебо ni won ni ko ʃe \\
O si ɡbo ɛbo  nipе, o ru \\
Aseyinwa-Aseyinbo \\
Ire tе meji o la ghуurugudu \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\text{Ifа wipe kii eleyii o lo tе Ifа, ki awоn babalawo gbe lo si igbo-odu, ki igbesi aye re le roo l'orun}
\]

“The row (in planting) goes like this. The boundary line goes like this.”

Performed Ifa divination for cricket, who pressed two tracks

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\(^{618}\) The initiate’s wife or mother provides the pots and or calabashes for the initiate’s ikin (divinatory palm nuts), and dances with them on her head during a ritual known as iyи Ifа.

\(^{619}\) Nevertheless many details of iteфа ceremonies conducted in the 1990’s in Ijẹbu can be found in the fifth chapter of Drewal’s book Yoruba Ritual.

\(^{620}\) See Drewal, Yoruba Ritual.
That would open wide [the way]
They said he should perform a sacrifice
He understood and offered the sacrifice there
And not long after
Cricket-presses-two (Irẹ-ẹ-meji) opened wide [the way]

Ifa says that this person should be initiated (te), that the babalawo should take him to Igbodu,
so that his life will go smoothly. 621

Even if this occurs, due to the expense of the ceremony (which can run over $1,000),
may delay the child’s initiation, and even those of adults. This is the case for one the Araba’s
younger sons, whom divination revealed should enter the Igbodu as soon as possible, but
whose initiation was delayed for several years due to its expense and inconvenience.
Sometimes, when adults come for divination about a typical problem (usually lack of money
or children, or problems at work or in the family) and a verse recommending initiation into Ifa
emerges, the adult may be taken for initiation before studying the Odu. This was the case for a
Christian, Nigerian friend of mine (who is not from a babalawo family) who came to consult
Araba of Modakẹkẹ about his plans to try to move to the United States after a series of career
disappointments and frustrations. Bascom records a similar account of the Agbọnbnọn of Ijẹ,
the second-ranking of the King’s diviners (Awọni), whom Bascom described as “the most
respected diviner in Ijẹ until his death in 1947.”

He [the Agbọnbnọn] was told by his father when he was four or five years old that he should
study Ifa, but he refused. Later he was sent away from home four times as an indentured
labourer or “pawn” (iwoja). Before he left home the first time, his father told him that although
he was a Christian, he had been born to become a babalawo, and explained that he should have
been sent to a diviner to study Ifa, though this was no longer possible because it was necessary
to pawn him to someone else. According to Agbọnbnọn, this happened in 1854. When his father
redeemed him, he returned to his father and worked his farm for him. While he was in the
farm, a ghost appeared to him and commanded him to eat dust. When he did so, he swelled up
and became ill, and this happened to him each time he returned home after having been
redeemed.

About 1888, while they were at Iṣọya, about seven miles to the south, where the
people of Ijẹ had been driven through war, Agbọnbnọn’s father called him and told him, “I will

621 Araba of Modakẹkẹ, interview with the author, November 18, 2013. Modakẹkẹ, Nigeria. Note the puns
between the name of the Odu, and the “Cricket presses two.” The opening lines liken the signature of the Odu to
farming rows and the tracks of a cricket. “Opening [the way] wide” is a standard symbol for progress and
prosperity.
not return to Ife with you, because I am about to die. You were not made to be a farmer; you were meant to be a babalawo. I have seen this many times during my dreams." He gave Agbonbon a divining chain. His father was a man "who had been to heaven and returned" (ayorunbo) to earth and who had powers to foresee future events, but Agbonbon was told that before he himself was born, his father had been a babalawo. When his father died, Agbonbon "inherited" one of his wives, and he acquired another when his brother died, making seven in all with the five he had previously married. About 1894 the people returned from Iṣọya to Ife, but after they arrived, all his wives and his children suddenly died. "What can I do?" he asked himself in despair. He wrapped up his set of palm nuts and £ 2-10-0 that he had, and started out of town to die by himself in the bush. When he had walked only about three hundred yards, he met chief Jagunoṣin at the place where his house now stands. Jagunoṣin asked him where he was going and, noting his despondency, asked him if he had been fighting with his wives. Agbonbon replied, "No. All my wives and my children are dead, and I am going into the bush to die." Jagunoṣin said, "You are a coward and a lazy man. Do you know what you were made for?" Jagunoṣin took him home, and at his suggestion Agbonbon consulted a diviner. He was told that unless he became a babalawo himself, his family and his property would continue to be lost, so he became a diviner. This was about 1895, and since then he has become wealthy and respected. In 1937, he had so many wives that he said he had lost count of them, though there must have been about two hundred, of whom there were only twenty whom he really loved.622

This Job-like story is of interest here, not only for its unique historical details, but because it illustrates a common motif among the stories of many babalawo and Ọmọ awo (apprentices) whom I encountered: even a century ago, the long and intensive training and expensive initiation rituals deter many children of babalawo families from becoming babalawo themselves, and it is often only later in life, when "Ifa fights with them" that they eventually decide to undertake the discipline and study of Ifa.

In the case of both adult and child apprentices, the babalawo I interviewed all seemed to agree that the normal course of action would be to memorize the Odu before initiation.

Prof. Agboola remarked,

The knowledge should come first before initiation. You should go around once [memorize at least one verse for each of the 256 Odu]...because if you do not have the knowledge, how can you call yourself [a] babalawo? Because coming out of Ifa grove, does not empower you—it empowers you spiritually in another way—but that does not empower you to acquire Ẹji Ogbe, to know how to say yes or no. Even if I come out of Ifa grove and I throw Irete Otura, what will I say? I can’t say anything…

And the person [receiving initiation] is already old, unlike the one who was asked to do it at a young age—that is what will make you a complete babalawo. Even if you have gone around ten times [memorized ten verses for each Odu] and you don’t do Ifa initiation, you are

622 Bascom, 88-9,
not a babalawo, you are just calling yourself babalawo, but you don’t actually have it. You need to have knowledge and then you go for Ifa initiation. But some people, a lot of cruel people in Nigeria they go to US and they harvest people, whether they have knowledge or not, they initiate them, and what is that? There are some of them that cannot even recite one verse of their Odu. Not to speak of the other 255, so how can they be called a babalawo?

While the ritual details and even the length of the initiation ceremonies vary greatly, the babalawo I interviewed concurred that the ritual ideally takes fourteen days, although in recent times it is often abbreviated to three or even two days. Essentially, the initiation serves to establish the relationship (and even identity) between the initiate’s ikin, his ori, and his Odu, and to empower him with the force (aṣẹ) of Odu, the mythical wife of Ọrunmila, and mother of babalawo. In describing the initial rituals of itefá, Drewal writes, “the inner head [ori ini] of the individual was elevated to the status of a personal deity; the palm nuts are its shrine.”

The rituals that accomplish this vary significantly from initiation to initiation, due to the fact that many of these rituals are determined by divinations performed during the ceremony itself. Thus no two initiations are ever entirely alike. Nevertheless, the babalawo I interviewed sketched similar broad outlines of the initiation: an initial stage of preparation that takes place publicly or semi-privately in which the initiating babalawo, their wives and ọmọ awo (apprentices), as well as the initiate and his mother or wife participate, involving sacrificial rituals, purification by jumping over fire, and sung and chanted invocations of Ifa (iyere Ifa) preparing the initiate and his ikin, and seeking permission to enter the sacred grove

625 Awo Faniyi presented a dissenting perspective, arguing that Odu was not female but rather a male divinity or force, citing a verse of Ifa from Odu that seemed to describe Odu in these terms.
626 Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 74.
Only initiated babalawo are allowed to enter the igbodu, and this initial stage of preparation culminates in the entrance of the blindfolded initiates into the igbodu.

In the igbodu, the initiates are said to witness secret wonders, culminating in the opening of the container holding Odu, and after having washed one’s face/eyes (aju) with a special herbal infusion, witnessing Odu. The calabash or pot containing Odu is known as Igba Odu, and is identified with the “calabash of wisdom” / “calabash of existence/character” which was the source of Ôrunmila’s wisdom in the previously mentioned myth from Oturupon Meji. This calabash of Odu is itself kept in a cylindrical container known as Apere, which is mentioned in a verse of Odu Irẹtfẹ-Ofun:

“He who presses chalk, presses chalk”
Performed Ifa divination for the 401 Irumole (divinities)
When they were going to Apere
“He who presses chalk, presses chalk”
The babalawo of Ori who performed Ifa divination for Ori
When Ori was going to Apere
They were all advised to offer sacrifice
Only Ori responded by offering the sacrifice
The sacrifice of Ori was abundantly rewarded
Ori is higher then all Oriṣa
It is only Ori which reaches Apere
No other Oriṣa can help
Apart from one's Ori

Videorecordings of this stage of the initiation are easily available online, for example, this ceremony conducted by the Babalawo Efuwape Olatunji, the Ejugbona of Isara Remo (a town in Ijebu) can be accessed here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4O_fO9esiE
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYnFU2tuZwE
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UukecDnnB7E

A widely reported taboo says that if a non-initiate were to look at Odu, he would go blind, and that if a woman were to look at Odu, she would lose the ability to bear children.

Cf. Bascom, Title, 83. Another name for the Odu Oturupon Meji is Ologbon Meji, “Two posessors of wisdom,” probably in reference to this and other similarly-themed myths in the Odu.

Ifalola Sanchez, personal communication. see also http://ifalola.blogspot.com/2008_02_01_archive.html
In addition to declaring the supremacy of Orí, this verse also links Orí to the Odu contained in the *Apare*, which, like the heads of the initiates in the *igbodu*, is often decorated with white chalk. Similarly Odu Ọṣẹ-Oyẹku says:

If a babalowo who worships (*bo*) Ifa who goes to the grove of Ifa (*igbo Ifa*) if he has not worshipped (*bo*) Odu in the *Apare* nothing will come of it Ifa will not know that he has come to worship him He will not know that he has become his child He says that all his children who enter the grove of Ifa Must first also worship Odu, his wife, in the *Apare*.631

While the Araba of Modakẹkẹ was reluctant to discuss the details of the ceremonies inside the *igbodu*, especially those relating to Odu herself, he explained:

*Igbodu* is the greatest title and initiation. There is nothing after that. It is greater than the highest initiation of *Ogboni* [a secret religio-political society related to the worship of the Earth to which the Araba previously belonged]. It is greater than anything else. Anything you are seeking in life, you will find it in *igbodu*. There is nothing after that. If you go to *igbodu*, everything will open for you in life, good things will come to you…. One of my friends who was *Alhaji* [had performed the ḥājj to Mecca] before he entered *igbodu*, he told me that what they have in Mecca, in the Ka‘bah, is the same as what is in *igbodu*.632

Prof. Agboola described his own experience of Odu in the following way,

When you go in, you will feel the energy, in that part of the *igbodu*, it is already charged with Odu. They take you in blindfolded, then they remove the blindfold and you see something. It enters you. You will see something shaking your body. Science will probably say it is your feelings or something, but I felt it. And not only that time, when you are feeding Odu, after, after you have done that you can feed Odu, you can join other babalowo to feed Odu, during that time you will feel that energy.633

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631 Ibid.


633 Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. English and Yoruba. Just as the *ikin* (divination palm nuts) are linked with / imbued with the presence of Ọrunmila/Ifa and the initiate’s Ori during the rituals of initiation, other oriṣa (such as Odu) can be “made,” that is, their presence can be built up and concentrated in a tangible object, which then becomes a primary site of interaction between the Oriṣa and its devotee. This object is usually kept hidden in multiple layers of cloth and/or in calabashes and pots, which are themselves ritually prepared and imbued with certain properties. For babalowo, the *ikin* he or she receives during initiation serve as the physical presence of Ifa, and are kept in a special porcelain bowl. The *ikin* used to divine for clients (which are often separate) are kept in an elaborately carved wooden bowl called *agere Ifa.*
Awo Faniyi likened the ceremonies inside the *igbodu* to being reborn, and equated Odu with the “sacred power of one’s heavenly choice of destiny” (*aṣe ipin ọrun*) and one’s own “spiritual” or “inner head” *orí-inú*.

Odu is the *igba iwa* (calabash of wisdom/existence/character) that Olodumare gave to Ṣrunmila to mend the world. Ṣrunmila is the witness of the choice of destiny (*eleṣi-ịpịn*) while Odu is the sacred power (*aṣe*) of that choice of destiny (*ịpịn*). This choice of destiny is the thing that Olodumare has chosen for each and every creature (*eda*) coming into the world; this destiny is one’s inner head (*orí inú*). The sacred power of the choice of destiny (*aṣe ịpịn*), Odu, is the choice that one made while coming into the world, it everything that one will or should do, and everything that one will not or should not do.\(^{634}\)

Again invoking the myth of the choice of destiny (*orí / ịpịn*), which one forgets on the way into the world, Awo Faniyi elaborated, “when you see Odu, you meet everything that you left behind on the way down to earth at the tree of forgetfulness (*igi ịgbaịa*).”\(^{635}\) Thus in witnessing Odu, the initiate comes face to face with his own destiny, his innermost or divine self (*orí inú*), and the power it contains to fulfill this destiny. The initiatory process can be likened to the construction of a metaphysical mirror in which the initiate glimpses and recognizes his inner self (*orí-inu*) and becomes empowered to fulfill this destiny.

The particularities of this destiny/inner self (*orí inu*) are revealed through the verses of the Odu of Ifa that emerges when divination is performed for the new initiate in the *igbodu*. Drewal writes, “the belief is that once the divination palm nuts [*ikin*] have been ritually associated with the individual, then when cast they will reveal what his inner head prefers.”\(^{636}\) This Odu of Ifa is said to be the “Odu which gave birth” to the babalawo, and the verses which are recited from it are a kind of personal revelation which are meant to guide the

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\(^{634}\) Awo Faniyi, interview with the author, November 27, 2013, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Yoruba. Awo Faniyi then quoted a lengthy verse of Ifa from Odu Otura Iwori in which Ṣrunmila is told to use Odu as the power (*aṣe*) of all of his decisions (*ịpịn*) in life, even down to what he should eat and drink.

\(^{635}\) Ibid.

\(^{636}\) Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 79.
initiate throughout the rest of his life: establishing his taboos (eeowo), describing the initiate and his life trajectory, giving advice and counsel on how to fulfill this destiny. Initiates will spend the rest of their lives contemplating these verses, and collecting more verses from this particular Odu to better understand themselves. As Drewal writes, “Indeed, the more meaning a person reads into his personal texts, the better he knows himself.”

Prof. Agboola explained this process through the metaphor of medical surgery,

It’s like you take a patient to the operating theatre, and you open the patient. When you open the patient, then the medical doctors who are around are able to see the arrangements of organs and everything, then they put you back and then you come out. … When we are in the grove, we open you up and say that “oh, ok, this is this; this is this…” And then this thing will come up with an Odu, and when we know the Odu we can say “Ok, Ok [*nodding head*]” We are now able to precisely monitor your full step. The first one, ikose aye is just to guide the child, but this one, this is for life. And with that one, I can tell you everything about you. Someone will say “ah ah! How do you know that [about me]?” I can say, “well you said your Odu was this…” Ti Ifa ko ba joni ko nibi yìí, If Ifa did not resemble you, then it would not have come out in the initiation day. Ifa that comes out on the initiation day is the one that looks like you, it came out because it resembles you. So for example if someone says, “I am a child of [Odu] Ogbe-Atè [Prof. Agboola’s own Odu], oh ok, don’t eat cock, don’t eat amaranthus vegetable, you meet your prosperity on the road, you are not the kind of person that sits down, you must always be on the move, always check your friends, not everyone who calls himself your friend is your friend.” —so me, I always have a friend test.

How Ṫuṃnìla did it, [as related in Odu Ogbe-Atè] He hid on the roof and told his children and students to start crying as if he has already died, so a lot of people who called themselves friends came and said, “ah why did you have to die, I lent you 2000 dollars,” the other one said “I lent him my laptop,” the other one said, “You know I did this…” and Ṭuṃnìla was upstairs. It was only when they went to tell Esu—a child of Ogbe-Atè will have a particular person that is ready to die for you, you will have a lot of friends, but not all of them are true friends, but you will have one, and you must be able to identify that particular one, that is ready to die for you, for Ṫuṃnìla, that is Esu. He was shaving his head when they came to tell him [that Ṫuṃnìla was dead]. He stopped halfway through shaving, jumped up and cried out

637 Drewal quotes Awo Oṣitoła’s explanation of this process of collecting more verses from one’s own Odu, “When you are asking about your verses [that is from other diviners], you ask generally. When you ask generally, then you extract what it has to do with you—its relationship. At the same time, you don’t eliminate or abandon whatever meaning may be related to you. But you have to go in your own particular direction. What Oyeku Meji has to say to one person is different form what Oyeku Meji has to say to say to another person. For instance, Ogbe ate is the sign for Wale; Ogbe ate is also the sign for Odileye. But what Ogbe ate has to tell both of them is different. So you go to your section. But when you are asking your sign, it is not necessary to tell a diviner “this is what my verses have said.” But it will be your own confidential fact. When somebody recites for you, you just say, that’s alright. Not all they will say will be to your own way of life, but different, different people may say what they like, and then you relate it to yourself. For instance, when I am asking from other diviners about my children’s signs, I will just mention the sign. It is my own concern to collate, or relate whatever verse I like.” Ibid, 78.

638 Ibid, 77.
and went to see Ọrunmila [Eṣu is commonly depicted and described as having with a half-shaved head, just like the royal court messengers/agents of the Ọni of Ife, the paramount king of Yorubaland, and those of the Alaafin of Ọyọ, formerly the most politically and military king in Yorubaland]. And unlike the people who said “he borrowed my laptop,” “he borrowed my this,” Eṣu said, “Why did you have to leave me? You didn’t say like this... well don’t worry, let me join you.” He was about to kill himself when Ọrunmila jumped in and said “no no no! See everybody, this is my true friend. You who said that I borrowed your laptop, my laptop is actually with you! You who said I borrowed $2,000 when in actual fact, you are the one who borrowed $2,000.”

From the story, all these things, you have to do the sacrifice. So that if you have four siblings, then you have to make the sacrifice, otherwise only one of you will be well-off, if not, the three will just be serving the other one [a reference to another verse of Ogbe-Atē]. They [the verses of the Odu] tell you everything. That is me, that is my Ifa. And the wife, for the children of Ogbe-Atē, they tell you you have just one of two options, at extreme ends. If you are lucky you will marry the one who is submissive, if not you will have one who is arrogant. No in-between. Either the wife of Ogbe-Atē is respectful, or [*shakes head*]. They say, if the wife is like this [respectful], build a palace, you have to build a palace for her. If the other one, [*throws hands up in the air*]. So everything is now exposed.⁶³⁹

The Araba of Modakętę told me that his Odu was Ogbe-Yọnu (Ogbe-Ogunda), which is also known as Ogbe-Suuru, “Ogbe-Patience,” because many of its verses prescribe the patient endurance of suffering. As I was soon to be married, he recited the following verse for me from his Odu, explaining the origins of the Yoruba word for wife, “Iyawo”:

Nothing comes from getting angry  
Patience is the father of character  
An elder who has patience  
Has everything  
Performed Ifa divination for Ọrunmila  
When he was going to seek the hand of Iya (suffering)  
The daughter of the King of Iwo (a Yoruba town)  
He was told to offer sacrifice  
He accepted and offered the sacrifice  
Not long after, not far  
Meet us in the midst of all good  
The suffering (iya) which Ọrunmila faced at Iwo  
Is not worth mentioning at home  
Ọrunmila began to dance and rejoice  
That Suffering, the suffering (iya)  
That Ifa faced in Iwo became his wife (iyawo)  
That Suffering, that suffering (iya) became his wife (iyawo)

Ọrunmila was travelling to the kingdom of Iwo, and he went to see a babalawo. They told him he should perform a sacrifice and that he should marry Iya, the firstborn child of the King of Iwo. Iya was a child with very bad character. No one could stand her, and even though she was a princess all of her suitors, including Oriṣa like Ọṣango and Ogun, ran away form her rough treatment. The babalawo told him that he should not get angry, that he should not

complain. That trouble would befall him, but if he was patient and calm, then the bad things would become good.

When Ṣurunmila reached Iwo, and met with Iya, she did not greet him properly, instead she abused him and did not give him any food or water, and showed him no hospitality. Ṣurunmila remained calm and said nothing. Then when he went out to find food for himself, Iya insisted that she come along and that Ṣurunmila carry her on his back. Ṣurunmila agreed and carried her. While he was carrying her, she peed on him. Ṣurunmila remained calm and said nothing. On the way back, he carried her again, this time, she shat on him. Ṣurunmila remained calm and said nothing. When they reached her house, Ṣurunmila went to sleep. When he woke up the next day, he found that she had broken his wooden diving tray (apon Ifa) and tapper (iroke) and used them as firewood to cook her breakfast. Ṣurunmila was angry, but he remained calm and said nothing. Then she took his Ifa pouch (apo) and used it as a rag. Ṣurunmila was upset but he remained calm and said nothing.

Then Iya and Ṣurunmila went back to see her father, the King of Iwo. The King thought that Ṣurunmila had come to return Iya because of her bad character. Everyone was amazed to see that Ṣurunmila had tolerated Iya, who had now become calm. Everyone was amazed to see Iya behaving gently. The King of Iwo gave Ṣurunmila another wife and divided his kingdom into two and gave Ṣurunmila half. Ṣurunmila began to dance and rejoice, the Iya of Iwo (the Suffering of Iwo) became his wife (iyawo).

This is the meaning of the word “wife” (iyawo). Ifa says that you must be patient, that you should not get angry, that you should endure suffering, and if you are patient, you will find all kinds of good things/blessings. Did you understand/hear everything Ṣurunmila went through? No one could endure that and be patient. His wife did this, and that, and he didn’t get angry, he didn’t complain, not even once. None of us could do that, but we have to try. A child of Ogbeye-You will have to face a lot of suffering, people will always be disappointing him, but he must be patient and endure, and then he will find all good things/blessings.640

640 Araba of Modakêkê, interview with the author, November 12, 2013. Modakêkê, Nigeria. Yoruba. This attitude of embracing or “marrying” suffering embodied in this mythical narrative seemed to be characteristic of the most respected babalawo I encountered. This does not imply a passive acceptance or submission to the difficulties of life (The Araba of Modakêkê once told me how “Ifa agreed to fight for him” in a dispute with the king of Modakêkê that eventually ended in the king being driven from his palace) but rather an active process of engagement with the difficulty, born of the knowledge that difficulties bring change, and change can bring new knowledge and good things. This is related to the babalawo’s (and Ṣurunmila’s) close relationship to Esu, the mischief-making deity who tends to turn lives upside-down, as Femi Osofisan notes, “If a knowledge needs to be carried forward, something must come and disturb the present stability. It is when the present stability is disturbed that we then move forward again, else we stagnate, and die…. Revolts must come in order to have progress, which is why questioning must continue. That’s the principle that Esu represents, constant questioning, constant challenge to authority, to orthodoxy. The restless iconoclastic spirit. But the resolution of that comes out of the Ifa principle. The synthesis, the gathering of everything together, then, that’s resolved in the Ifa principle in the union of Esu and Ṣurunmila.” (Awodiya, Muyiwa, (ed.). Excursions in Drama and Literature. (Ibadan: Craft Books Limited, 1993), 81).

Relatedly, Beier comments comments on the attitude of old orisira to illness, “Europeans tend to see suffering and disease simply as evils to be avoided; undesirable forces to be fought and overcome. We see them as meaningless interference in our lives, as interruptions that upset our carefully planned days. To the Yoruba, disease is a direct intervention by the orisha, a signal that some adjustment to the person’s life is needed. Susanne Wenger points out, however, that disease is not seen as a punishment for sin. Something has gone wrong in the man’s way of life, in his mental attitude. Like a car whose wheels are out of alignment, he must be readjusted. Disease or misfortune of any kind, signifies to the Yoruba that an overhaul of his psychic motor is needed. He must welcome, not fight, disease. Every human being has something of the orisha in him. Therefore he cannot afford to be out of tune with the orisha, particularly the one who is most strongly represented within him.” (Beier, The Return of the Gods, 42-3).
True to his Odu, the Araba of Modakẹkẹ has endured a great deal, especially during the Ife-Modakẹkẹ conflict of the late 90’s, during which he lost one of his wives, his house, and much of his wealth. And yet, despite these and many other disappointments, the Araba is one of the most patient, gentle, and jovial teachers I have ever encountered.

Drewal recounts how Oyẹku Meji was the Odu divined for Awo Oṣitọla’s eldest son in the Igbodu during the itefa ceremony she witnessed in Imodi, Ijẹbu in 1986. Oṣitọla narrated an èse about the coming of Sunrise into the world whose symbolism is simply too lovely and illustrative to omit here.

He lives a full, complete life, and he was bright and prosperous and loved. He had everything in life.

Words of wisdom were spoken to Sunrise early in his life [i.e. when he was rising]. They said that he would complete his journey, that his journey would be bright; everybody would like his brightness. And he would also be powerful. But if he wanted to ensure this success, his parents must make a sacrifice on his behalf. They should sacrifice a bunch of brooms, a bundle of white cloth, and a sheep.

Sunrise gathered the items and was told, as you are rising, as your life becomes bright, there will be some enemies who will be jealous, who will try to dim your brightness. They will use the power of dangerous inner eyes (oju buruku inu) to stare at you. But, if you can satisfy the divine mediator, Eṣu, then he will assist you to prevent those dangerous eyes from dimming your brightness.

Sunrise’s parents, named Eṣuwata [devotes of Eṣu], made the sacrifice on his behalf. They prepared Sunrise for his journey right from his rise. When he arrived at his destination, everything went well. People understood his light. Everybody admired him, for they did better as a result.

But, as he moved higher in the sky, as Ifa predicted, some people attempted to dim his light by staring at him with their dangerous eyes. Immediately, Eṣu, the divine mediator who was by Sunrise’s side, inquired from wise men, “things are now topsy-turvy, what happened? What is the matter with these troublesome people?” The wise elders responded, “it is Sunrise they want to trouble.” But Sunrise had been well prepared, he had been well-established, he had performed the necessary sacrifices. Eṣu asked, “where is the evidence of the sacrifices?” The wise men showed him the bunch of brooms prepared with medicines, instructing him to put the brooms on Sunrise’s forehead so that no one can see his inner head well.

Because Eṣu blessed the brooms, when anyone stared at Sunrise they saw only the brooms, which scratched and hurt their eyes [i.e. the bright beams of sunlight, the “eyelashes” of Sunrise]. It is the broom straws scattered in the Sunrise that injure people’s eyes and prevent them from looking into it; it is the broom straws that prevent people from dimming sun’s brightness. The broom blinds the evil inner eyes of onlookers. Extraordinary eyes cannot penetrate a prepared person. If they dare disturb he child, they will be blinded.641

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641 Drewal, Yoruba Ritual, 80-1.
This beautiful verse establishes the mythological precedent for the life of the initiate, and would seem to indicate that the initiate’s parents should perform a sacrifice to Eṣù and/or prepare some sort of medicine or charm, presumably involving a broom and/or the eyelashes of the initiate to protect him against the “evil eye.” However, Drewal also recorded Awo Ọṣitolà’s interpretation of this verse, which was somewhat different:

You see the interpretation of Ifa just provides us a model to follow, not just exactly what should be done. You can perform in the “changing world manner.” You don’t have to do exactly what Ifa did historically. Our own knowledge, our own power, our own aṣẹ may not be as powerful as the one they used for the broom in the past. And again, it may be more powerful than that. And it may not be [in the manner of] that broomish preparation. We have to look at what to do. How can we do it? For instance, we are not in a world where we can give a child a broom to be carrying all the time. Then we have to do it in the changing world fashion. 642

This creativity in interpretation, doing things in “the changing world fashion,” is one of the characteristic features of the hermeneutics babalawo employ in interpreting their own verses, those of their initiates, and those of the clients who come to them for divination and counsel. Divination can also be employed to ask Ifa to clarify or amplify the taboos to be observed or sacrifices to be performed, as is done in the igbodu during initiation. A verse from Odu Ogbe-Atẹ underscores the importance of this knowledge:

“One should not wake up in the early morn
without knowing the Odu that brought one into the world”
Performed Ifa divination for Olupo Alaelu
Who reclined and was weeping because of the lack of good things
He whose life was as hard and rough as stone
They said that he should go down and perform a sacrifice
That he should go receive initiation into Ifa
He accepted, and he sacrificed
Not long, not far
Good came to him in abundance
Ifa, come, powerful one (alaṣẹ)
Palm tree [a symbol of Ifa], bring it forth soon

The initiating babalawo perform the sacrifices specified by the verse of Ifa divined for the initiate and provide him or her with an interpretation of these verses and an explanation of

642 ibid
the taboos these verses indicate the initiate should observe. After the initiation rituals are complete, the new initiates emerge from the sacred grove with shaven heads, in white cloth, symbolizing their rebirth as initiated babalawo. They can now return to the grove of Odu to participate in the initiation of other babalawo, further reflecting on the rites and rituals of the *igbodu*.

**Gender and Initiation**

> O ni gbogbo ohun ti eniyan ba nṣe
> Ti ko ba fi ti obinrin kun un
> O ni ko le ṣeṣe

He said, “In every thing that we do.
If we do not include women in it
It cannot succeed.”
- Odu Ṣẹ-Ṣẹta\(^{643}\)

As Drewal points out, the structural motif of female container, male contained is common across a wide range of art forms and rituals of Yoruba-speaking peoples. The *igbodu* represents a womb from which the (usually male) initiates emerge. The *ikin* (divination palm nuts) are kept in an *agbẹrẹ* (carved container) that usually incorporates a female form, just as women carry and dance with the *ikin* during the preliminary stages of the initiation (*itefa*).

While many other Oriṣa initiations (such as the initiations of Ọṣango and Yemoja) involve the symbolic wedding of the initiate (whether male or female) as a “bride” (*iyawo*) to the Oriṣa. In these initiations, not only is the Oriṣa “made” and kept in a calabash or container to serve as the shrine of the initiate, but the initiate him or herself serves as such a shrine (and is often decorated in a similar fashion to a shrine), as the presence of the Oriṣa is physically built up in him or her through medicines that are placed in incisions in the scalp—thus the initiate serves as a “container” for the Oriṣa. However, in the *igbodu* of Ifa, this mystical marriage or

encounter of male and female principles, takes place not only between the initiate and Ọrunmila, but also between the male initiates, and Odu, the mythical wife of Ọrunmila and “mother” of babalawo.

The role of women in Ifa has become a somewhat contentious issue amongst Ifa practitioners around the world.⁶⁴⁴ A few babalawo (who wished to remain anonymous) told me that some babalawo have accused others (especially Wande Abimbola, the former vice-chancellor of Qbafẹmi Awolowo University, pioneering scholar of Ifa, and the current Awişe Awo Agbaye (official spokesperson of Ifa, as appointed by the Qọni of Ife)) of inventing the idea of an Iyanifa, a female diviner initiated into Ifa. Other babalawo defended this as an uncommon, but traditional practice, supported by the verses of the Ifa corpus and Ifa divination itself, as Ifa is consulted through divination during the initiations of these women. However there does seem to be a consensus that women cannot witness Odu.

The Araba of Modakẹkẹ told me that he had never seen a woman perform divination, but that he didn’t know of anything forbidding it. He also remarked that he knew several women (from babalawo families) who could recite (kì) the verses of Ifa very well, and knew the Odu so well that they could interpret them for clients when divination was performed by a babalawo. He also confirmed the taboo on women seeing Odu, explaining that if a woman looked at Odu, she would lose the ability to bear children, and that if a male non-initiate were to look at Odu, he would go blind.

Women participate in the tradition of Ifa in two main ways: as an Apetẹbì, a wife of a babalawo, or as an Iyanifa (which literally means “wife of Ifa”) a female initiate and practitioner of Ifa. Women can become an apetẹbì if the divination performed shortly after

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⁶⁴⁴ For example, see the debate on this blog: http://ifalola.blogspot.com/2009/01/iyanifa-ode-remo-perspective.html
birth indicates that they should be married to a babalawo. If this is the case, then a ritual called *isodẹ*, “tying the bracelet,” is performed, in which the young woman is “married” to the *ikin* (divination palm nuts) of a babalawo. The young woman is then under the protection of this babalawo until she marries her husband (who must also be a babalawo), and then a ritual known as *itudẹ*, “cutting the bracelet,” is performed. The *apẹtẹbi* is then “wedded” to her new husband’s *ikin*. *Apẹtẹbi* have several official functions, including cleaning the area where the family worships *Ifa* (the “house of *Ifa,*” or *Ifa* shrine, *ilé Ifá*) every 5 days (4 days in the English reckoning), worshipping *Ifa* herself (there are particular *orin Ifá,* “songs of *Ifa,*” which are only for *Apẹtẹbi*), standing in for her husband in his absence and even divining for clients (using 16 cowrie shells) if she is able.

Typically, when a married man undergoes initiation into *Ifa*, his wife undergoes the rituals to become and *Apẹtẹbi*, and when a woman marries a babalawo, she is also expected to become an *Apẹtẹbi* by performing the *isodẹ* ritual. However, many of the babalawo I interviewed remarked that these rituals are no longer as common as they once were.

In contrast to an *Apẹtẹbi*, an *Iyanifa* is a woman who has studied, and been trained and initiated into *Ifa*, regardless of who her husband may be. The only difference between and *Iyanifa* and a babalawo is that the former is forbidden from entering the grove of *Odu* and witnessing/worshipping *Odu*, whereas this is the essential component of the highest degree of initiation for the latter. Since this highest degree of initiation is barred to women, some have interpreted this as meaning that the greatest *iyanifa* are still inferior to the greatest

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645 As a part of the ceremony, a specially-prepared bracelet (*idẹ*) is tied to the left wrist of the *apẹtẹbi*. Examples of this ceremony can be seen here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wLuMQTf69g
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKLfJ433V78
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnfeWPJpD8A
babalawo, whereas other babalawo argue that as a “feminine energy,” Odu complements or completes the male’s initiation, whereas it is unnecessary for the female initiate, since she already possesses “feminine energy.” For example, Prof. Agboola explained:

The Ifa initiation, what makes the difference between elegan and Olodu— for the women, they must be elegan, not because of this story, but because of the story of Odu, mystical wife of Ọrunmila. I hope you have read this. One day a woman, who was ugly, came to Ọrunmila’s house and asked for water. Then later she said, “I would like food.” Ọrunmila gave her the food. Then she said, “you know I am traveling, and I can’t continue, I need a place to sleep.” Ọrunmila gave her a place to sleep. She said, “where I come from, I don’t sleep alone, come and sleep with me.” That was when Ọrunmila’s wife said, “Ah! Look at this ugly woman, she asked for water, we gave her, she asked for food, we gave her, she asked for room, we gave her, but now, she’s now asking for our husband!” Ọrunmila said, “Well, that is what she wants. I have to.” Because Ọrunmila has done Ifa divination that has guided him. So she [Odu] said, “Yes, I’m coming here to marry you, but not a regular marriage, no sexual intercourse.” That’s Ofun Meji. “But I know that you need additional power, that’s why Olodumare sent me. So I will be your wife, but no sexual intercourse. When you want to see me, none of your wives must see me. If you want to see me, you must do this, this, and wash your eyes before you come in. But whatever you ask, I can do it for you.” But Ọrunmila’s other wives they started getting jealous, saying, “who is this woman that is inside the room?” One day, when Ọrunmila was not around, they went in and that is when they were destabilized. The interpretation is that their energy was already there, when they opened the door, the additional female energy that was there just [*claps hands together*]. The energy that is balanced, which is what we are, we have both male and female, it’s already balanced, so if you now bring additional female energy, it will throw it out of balance. So they couldn’t have children again. So that is the story that prevented women from looking into Odu. If the boys, the men, that are not up to your level, let us give them additional power so that they are equal to you. So for example, if I take you and Funmilayo [a common girl’s name] to the grove, I have to give you additional energy so that you will be equal to her.

Thus, according to Prof. Agboola, entering the ighodu makes babalawo equal and not superior to iyanifa. Aside from Awo Faniyi, all of the babalawo emphasized the feminine nature of Odu, and the son of a prominent babalawo from the Oṣogbo area even told me that Odu was the first Iya mi (name for the members of the secret society of Ajé see Chp. 4)\textsuperscript{648}, a name which literally means “My Mother.” Odu is associated with the power of giving birth,

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\textsuperscript{646} See Bascom, \textit{Ifa Dvination}, 82-115. For example, the Royal babalawo of Ilé-Ifẹ (Awọni) must all be Olodu, and Olodu are considered senior to all other babalawo. Neither I, nor any of the people I interviewed had ever heard of a female Araba (chief priest of Ifa of a town).

\textsuperscript{647} Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ifẹ, Nigeria. English and Yoruba.

\textsuperscript{648} For more on the \textit{Iya mi} and their relationship to Odu, Ifa, and other Yoruba spiritual traditions see T. Washington’s \textit{Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Ajé in Africana Literature}. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
as it is only Olodu (babalawo who have seen Odu) who can initiate or “give birth” to new babalawo. Some babalawo, such as Prof. Agboola above, seem to argue that receiving Odu is necessary for babalawo to equal their female counterparts, iyanifa. Whereas others see the acquisition of Odu as giving babalawo a degree of superiority since they now have both male and female power, pointing out that because they are not Olodu, iyanifa are unable to perform several rituals, such as initiating new babalawo (itefa) and the imóri / ikọse ayé ritual. All of the babalawo interviewed emphasized that menstrual blood was so powerful that it could “spoil” many sacrifices, rituals, and shrines, and by virtue of this, pre-menopause Iyanifa would be excluded from performing certain rituals, although menstruation (and femininity in general) was understood as being its own extremely potent spiritual force. However, it should be mentioned that Ifa is but one tradition among the many spiritual traditions of the Yoruba-speaking people, and in several other prominent and widespread spiritual/political traditions, such as those of the Oriṣa Qṣun, Yemoja, the Iya mi, the Iyalọde (chief of the market), and certain chieftaincies, women typically occupy the highest ranks, and can perform rituals which men cannot.

In any event, the taboo against women seeing Odu seems to be widely recognized and agreed upon, although I did encounter some stories about women who had breached this taboo and “looked Odu in the face.” The Araba of Modakekọ told me that an American female researcher had come to do research on Ifa and Igbodu with him in the 90’s. He told me that she insisted on seeing Odu despite his warnings that it would prevent her from having children in the future. According to the Araba, she went into the grove and looked at Odu, and even though she had married a Nigerian babalawo, did not have any children. She has since

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649 Bascom, Ifa Divination, 115.
left Nigeria and the Araba has lost touch with her. There are many similar stories circulating amongst the babalawo around Ile-Ife in which a foreign woman either pays a babalawo an exorbitant sum of money to see Odu, or ignores the advice of the babalawo and looks at Odu, and ends up becoming barren, facing problems in Nigeria, and then leaving. While I do not doubt the historical basis of most of these stories, I cite them here because they function as a kind of commentary on the verses of Ifa prohibiting women viewing Odu, a contemporary echo or manifestation of the myths that established this taboo. For example, one verse, from Odu Irefẹ Ogbe, says,

When the time had come, Odu said, “you, Orunmila.”
She said, “quickly, come know my taboos”
She said that she wanted to teach him her taboos
She said that she didn’t want his other wives
To look her in the face
She said that he should tell all his other wives
That they should not look her in the face
She said that if one of them looks her in the face, she will find a fight
She said that she does not want anyone to look her in the face
Orunmila said, “not bad”
He also called all of his wives
He warned them
Orunmila’s wives, they will not look her in the face
Odu told Orunmila that
She had come to make his burden easier

After Initiation

Whether male or female, leaving the sacred grove of Ifa (igbo Ifa) marks the beginning of the initiate’s life as a babalawo or iyanifa, and his or her lifelong journey in search of the “deep knowledge” of Ifa. As Awo Oṣiṣọla remarked to Drewal:

The sacrifice we make at the sacred bush is the beginning of one’s life. The journey does not finish there. That is not the end of everything for that man… Ifa says do such-and-such this time, just for a moment, for the time being, in order to start life properly. The first sacrifice that we can do at the sacred bush is [in order] to start life properly.


651 Drewal, Yoruba Ritual, 78.
Furthermore, the knowledge acquired through the experiences of the *igbodu* (for babalawo) and during the initiation rituals is not final and comprehensive, but is rather described more like a seed of knowledge whose branches and leaves of meaning and understanding grow and blossom through lifelong contemplation, reflection, and practice. As Awo Qṣitọla remarked, “even if you were allowed to see inside the *igbodu*, you would see only the impotent part of it. The knowledge is the potentiality, the knowledge you must sustain, the knowledge you must learn—not just the materials.”

Several verses of various Odu of Ifa emphasize this aspect of continuous reflection and contemplation after initiation, even comparing the continuous practice of Ifa to re-initiation. For example, an *esẹ* (verse) from Odu Eji Ogbe says,

\begin{verbatim}
Awa te o nifa o
K' o tunra e te
Tite la t'Eji Ogbe
T'o fi m'ori wo'gbo
Awa te o nifa o
K' o tunra e te
B'o o d'ori ope
Ma se jowo si
\end{verbatim}

It is we who have initiated you into Ifa
[Now] you must renew your initiation
This was the initiation that was performed for Eji Ogbe
Who delved into the bush (*igbo*) [literally, “who used his head to enter the bush”]
It is we who have initiated you
[Now] you must renew your initiation
If you haven’t reached the top of the palm tree
Don’t open your hands [let go]

In this *esẹ*, the mention of the palm tree recalls the various myths in which Ọrunmila left the world by climbing a palm tree into heaven (see Chapter 4). Thus “climbing the palm tree” here refers to following in the footsteps of Ọrunmila. Just as one cannot loosen one’s grip before one reaches the top of a palm tree, a babalawo or iyanifa cannot stop practicing Ifa


until he or she reaches orun (the heavenly ancestral abode) at the top of Ifa’s palm tree.

Moreover, Ifa is identified with this palm tree, so clinging to the palm tree symbolism clinging to Ifa until one “reaches the top” and has all of Ṣrunmila’s knowledge. Eji Ogbe’s “delving into the bush” is a reference to initiation, as well as the fact that Eji Ogbe was the first Odu to descend into the world. As for the “renewal of initiation,” the following èsè from Odu Ogbe-Àtẹ seems to equate it with observing one’s taboos:

“Ogbe come and be initiated so that you will be at ease
‘I accepted, I was initiated’ is the blessing of Ifa”
Performed Ifa divination for Ṣrunmila
Baba, when he was going to initiate his child into Ifa
They said that he should perform a sacrifice
He understood, He sacrificed
When I accept
[that is when] Baba will initiate me
Lack of wisdom inside
Lack of deep thought inside
This is what makes people enter the ọgbodu three times

If we have completed initiation into Ifa
What issue of Eṣu Odara remains?

If we have completed initiation into Ifa
We must not use a worn rope to climb the palm tree
We must not jump into the river without knowing how to swim
We must not risk death needlessly
We must not marry the wife of [another] babalawo
We must not take the wife of a medicine man (oniṣegun)
We must not lie with the wife of [another] babalawo
We must not plot against a friend with his wife
We must not lie to our Oluwo
Or second-guess him

Ṣrunmila initiated Akọda
He initiated Aṣọda
He initiated Araba [title of the chief babalawo of a town]
Ṣrunmila, Agbonniregun [another name for Ṣrunmila], the owner of the day
He alone we do not know who initiated [him]

Now, if I have completed my initiation
I will renew my initiation
The taboos that have been given to me
I will accept
I have been initiated

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654 Both Akọda and Aṣọda are titles in hierarchy of babalawos of a given town (especially Ile-Ife), as well as legendary disciples of Ṣrunmila. See Bascom, Ifa Divination, 91-102.
I will renew my initiation

Echoing the symbolism of climbing the palm tree in the previous verse, in this ẹṣẹ, not observing one’s taboos is likened to trying to climb a palm tree with a worn rope, to jumping into a river without knowing how to swim, and to risking death. One renews one’s initiation through observing the taboos decreed for one during initiation, and any subsequent taboos that may emerge form learning more about one’s Odu. Likewise, an ẹṣẹ from Odu Otura Irete associates this re-initiation with the virtue of moderation (iwe), which it describes in detail:

Renew yourself and your initiation
If we have been born, we must also try to be reborn
The moderate one, the moderate one
One who knows moderation will not be disgraced
I said, “Who knows moderation?”
Ọrunmila said, “One who works hard”
I said, “Who knows moderation?”
Ọrunmila said, “One who does not waste all of his money.”
I said, “Who knows moderation?”
Ọrunmila said, “One who does not steal”
I said, “Who knows moderation?”
Ọrunmila said, “One who does not owe excessive debts”
I said, “Who knows moderation?”
Ọrunmila said, “One who does not drink alcohol,
One who does not break his word to his friend
One who rises early, reflects upon himself (banu ara rè) and contemplates his actions (ṣiro niroti ise rè)
Amongst the thorns and brambles, the palm frond will be seen rising above
The cautious one (amẹso) is the moderate one (amẹwọn)

Echoing a common image in the verses of Ifa, the palm frond (moriwo ọpẹ) rising above the other flora (in this case thorns) represents the babalawo rising above the troubles of life and/or his peers who do not adhere to the ethical standards of Ifa. Perpetual reflection upon the verses of Ifa and one’s actions so as to develop understanding and good character is part and parcel of the daily life of a babalawo. For example, a verse from Odu Eji Ogbe says,

**Bi ojumọ ba mọ**
A kii ya ogbẹri bi ojo ana
Difa fun Koimo

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“If a new day dawns
We must not return to yesterday’s foolishness”
Performed Ifa divination for “I don’t know” (Koimo)
Who was pondering whether he should do the thing that he did yesterday
He thought and thought, until he fell asleep
When the next day dawned, his understanding (aye) opened
“I don’t know” came to know the thing he should do with certainty (dandan)\(^{657}\)

Through the rituals of igbodu, initiate comes face to face with his own inner reality
(orí-inu). The nature and wishes of this self are then elaborated in the poetic and symbolic
language of the verses of the Odu divined for the initiate in the grove. By learning more about
this Odu, contemplating its verses, and performing the sacrifices and avoiding the taboos
prescribed therein, the new babalawo or iyanifa both becomes “more” himself or herself and
knows him or herself better. This process of self-cultivation and discovery through the
practice of good character, divination, contemplation upon and performance of rituals and
ritual orature is thus likened to re-initiation or “re-creation,” as the following verse of Odu
Ogbe–Até indicates:

\[
\begin{align*}
N\ je\ bi\ a\ ba\ te\ mi,\ ngo\ tun\ ’ra\ mi\ te\\
Eewo\ ti\ a\ ba\ ka\ fun\ mi,\ ngo\ gbo\\
Tit\ e\ la\ te\ mi,\ ngo\ run\ ’ra\ mi\ te
\end{align*}
\]

If I am created,
I will re-create myself
I will observe all the taboos
Having been created,
I shall now re-create myself.\(^{658}\)

The study and practice of Ifa are understood to be inseparable life-long process, from
which one can never take a break. As a verse in Odu Odi-Iwori says,

\[
Bi\ a\ l’ogbon\ nini\ bu\ a\ ko\ loo
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\(^{657}\) Awo Faniyi, personal communication. March, 15 2013, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

If we have wisdom and fail to apply it  
We become ignorant  
If we have power and fail to exercise it  
We become indolent

**Traveling and Botanical Medicine (ewé Qsanyin)**

Once the period of apprenticeship with the *Oluwo*, which often takes around ten years to complete, the young babalawo or iyanifa travels widely, seeking specific knowledge from well-known babalawo through further apprenticeships. Prof. Agboola likened this stage of a babalawo’s training to a “post-doctoral fellowship” or “residency for doctors,” explaining that babalawo seek knowledge to complement their training with their *Oluwo*, and often start to specialize in one of Ifa’s many branches of practical/medicinal knowledge. For example, the Araba of Modakẹkẹ told me how he spent a few years traveling in Ilorin and the north of Yorubaland, learning about the treatment of the mentally ill (*were*). Other babalawo may specialize in the treatment of infertility, various other maladies, or forms of malevolent “magic.” The study of the pharmacology of Ifa, *ewé Qsanyin*, (“leaves of Qsanyin, the Oriṣa of plants and herbal medicine”) is often an integral part of these “advanced studies.” Babalawo keep a shrine of Qsanyin in the corner of their rooms, and a few of the verses of Odu Ọbara Meji explains how and why Qsanyin became the servant of Ọrunmila, and thus why babalawo possess his knowledge of plants and herbal medicine. One of these narratives describes how plants used to speak to people and tell them their names, natures, and various uses. However, over time, people began to abuse plants to poison one another and make bad charms/medicine (*oogun*) to harm and kill each other. Then Olodumare intervened

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659 Epega, *The Sacred Ifa Oracle* 188-9

and ordered plants to stop speaking to people. Only Ọsanyin, the Oriṣa of plants and herbal medicine, and his children (initiates) were allowed to continue to communicate with plants. As a result of the special relationship between Ọrunmila and Ọsanyin, babalawo share in this deep knowledge of plants.

Perhaps more than any other branch of knowledge in Ifa, ewé Ifá (the herbal/incantory medicine of Ifa) clearly illustrates the unique theories of language and ritual that animate the practice of the tradition. As Verger’s masterful study demonstrates, the plants and other natural ingredients, their names, the name and figure of the Odu with which they are associated, and the “activating” incantation (ọfọ) are usually inseparably linked in the preparation and administration of ewé Ifá. These incantations, which often involve puns and other wordplay, symbolically and poetically describe features of the plant and link these features to the desired result of the medicinal preparation. For example, Verger records the following formula:

The Odu Ọṣẹ-Otura requires one to bring together ewé anamu oga, stretch-to-take-chameleon (Ipomoea sp., Convolvulaceae), ewé aṣẹ, “power” (Iodes Africana, Iacacinaceae), and ile kokoro (worm). Pound them and mix with ọṣẹ dudu, black soap that must be put in a horn. Lick the soap when expressing a wish. Its incantation is:

Anamu ẹṣe ni ti oga
Aṣẹ je ki orọ temi ọ ẹsẹ
Nijo ti kokoro ba lu ile ni i ja orun

Stretch-to-take is like a chameleon
Power, allow my words to be fulfilled (ọ ẹsẹ)
When the worm falls to the ground it travels beyond [literally, “snatches heaven”]661

Note the assonance between ọ ẹsẹ (to be fulfilled), ọṣẹ, soap, and the name of the Odu, Ọṣẹ-Otura. Furthermore the appearance of the buds of ewé anamu oga (commonly known as

morning glory) resemble a chameleons’ head, and the reddish pink flowers that emerge therefrom recalls the chameleon’s tongue which stretches out quickly and takes its prey. The worm symbolizes the incantory words that move invisibly, like a worm through soil, and reach their destination. Bascom describes a similar feature of the verses of Ifa:

A special type of pun which similarly contributes to internal consistency is that designated here as word magic, in which the name of an object sacrificed resembles the words expressing the result desired by the client. Thus the figure Iwori Meji, who has sacrificed a mortar and tẹtẹ and gbegbe leaves in order to find a place to live, recites the formula "The mortar (odo) will testify that I see room in which to settle (do), the tẹtẹ leaf will testify that I see room in which to stretch out (tẹ), the gbegbe leaf will testify that I see room in which to dwell (gbe)" (35-5). Water (omi) is sacrificed so that the client can breathe (imi), ochra (ila) so that he will gain honor (ola), and salt, used to make food tasty or "sweet" (dun), so that his affairs will be sweet (dun) (1- 8). Pigeon touches her child's (ioko) head against a pot she has sacrificed while saying, "My child touches the pot (ioko) with its head; it will not die (ko ku) any more" (19-3, 33-1). In making a charm or "medicine" associated with the figure Irosun-Oṣẹ, divining powder (iyẹ-irosun) is mixed with soap (oṣẹ)(111- 2). A woman who desires to conceive is instructed to sacrifice steamed beans (elo), the allusion being to an embryo (elo) (52-4). Twenty cowries (oko) are added to larger amounts of money for characters whose case involves a farm (oko) (3-4, 86-2, 86-3) and for a character identified as Penis (oko) (4-2)...

Thus within Ifa, the relationship between signifier and signified is not arbitrary, but rather symbolic. The name of a given plant within the pharmacopeia of Ifa, its active properties, the incantation used to actualize these properties are all connected through relations of similarity, not a network of difference, as in Saussurean semiotics. The invocatory words of the verses of Ifa, the name and figure of the Odu which contains them,

662 The roots of which are famously known in hoodoo (and blues music) as “John the Conquer Root.”

663 Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 130.

664 This is true of indigenous semiotics of the Yoruba language itself. In addition to the verses of Ifa, many proverbs, poems, and ritual songs of praise employ creative etymologies to highlight or explain how the name of an object provides insight into its nature. In his book on Yoruba poetry, Ulli Beier explains the polysemic and symbolic feature of the language. “Not only are the Yoruba highly conscious of the meaning behind the names, they also like to interpret every word they use. They believe that every name is really a sentence that has been contracted through a series of elisions into a single word. Naturally, in the attempt to reconstruct the original sentence on may arrive at various meanings.” (Beier and Gbadamosi, *Yoruba Poetry*, 31) Knowing the name of a person, place, or thing gives you knowledge of its origin and destiny, and thus power in relation to it.

665 To give but another example of many, the signature Irosun (of Odu Irosun Meji, Irosun Ogbe, etc.) shares its name with the cardinal bird and the reddish camwood tree, whose bark and wood is used to produce a red dye, and is associated with medicines for blood, menstrual or otherwise (cf. Ewé, 53-4).
the plants and other objects which they name are all related or even identified with one another symbolically. That is the same principle which takes the form of a particular plant or herbal concoction in the material domain, takes a related form as an incantation in the domain of language, and another form in the visual domain of the signs of the Odu. The same symbolic logic animates the rituals of Ifa, and the dynamism and improvisation which highly-skilled babalawo display in performing these rituals is a result of the recognition of and deep familiarity with these “principles” across various domains (plant, animal, mineral, material, verbal, visual, etc.).

While I assisted the Araba of Modakẹkẹ in preparing a medicine to combat fever (iba) for a young neighbor girl, he explained, “We don’t just use the plant itself, we use the coolness in it, and the incantation provides the power (aṣe) for the medicine. It is prayer (adura), it is not just with words that you can pray, the words give the materials power and the materials give the words power so that they can be effective. All these sacrifices (ebo) that Ifa tells you to do, even these medicines (ooogun), they are prayer (adura).” Similarly, Prof. Agboola explained, “It’s not the plant, it’s the power in the plant that is used. Ododo (a kind of flower) is cool and calm, and that [coolness] is what you extract. It is the same thing in ẹṣẹ Ifa (verses of Ifa), you extract the meaning and use that.” As Verger concludes,

The conclusions of research made by Henri Lavondes, among the inhabitants of Madagascar, may also be applied to the Yoruba: “It is worthwhile trying to explain precisely how magical rituals use a collection of articles and ingredients that challenge common sense. The significance of certain magical formulae becomes clear from the moment we realize that the vocalization, the objects, and their effects are considered as a totality. The very language itself is the vehicle for the desired result. There is a vital connection between the incantation pronounced by the master of ceremonies and the objects used in it. The objects symbolically

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666 For example, see Drewal’s Yoruba Ritual for a discussion of the significant role of improvisation and play in Yoruba rituals.


represent the incantation, but the spoken word realizes the action of the ingredients. A magical composition seems to be thought of as a collection of material things, articulated by language. The spoken incantation provides the description as well as the explanation for their meaning.\textsuperscript{669}

Thus the semiotics of Ifa (like that of the early Western “doctrine of signatures”\textsuperscript{670}) is based upon a symbolic logic of resemblance or similarity. This same symbolic logic also structures the verses and rituals of Ifa, including divination and sacrifice (\textit{ebo}).

The babalawo I interviewed were all eager to distinguish between the sacrifices prescribed by Ifa (\textit{ebo Ifa}), the medicinal preparation associated with Ifa (\textit{oogun Ifa / ewe Ifa}), and the commonplace charms and magical preparations prepared by non-babalawo specialists (\textit{onisegun} and others). Prof. Agboola explained that “In the old days, babalawo only did Ifa. Ifa is just sacrifices and leaves (\textit{ewé} – botanical medicine), not charms (\textit{oogun}); but nowadays, people are more interested in charms and flashy things so many babalawo learn these other charms. But these things are not from Ifa, they are outside of it.”\textsuperscript{671}

\textsuperscript{669}Verger, \textit{Ewé}, 24.

\textsuperscript{670}Foucault provides a useful summary of the history of this Paracelsian perspective and its disappearance in the West in his \textit{The Order of Things (Les Mots et Les Choses)}. He writes, “Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them.” (Foucault, M. \textit{The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences}. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 17) and, “All this was of the greatest consequence to Western thought. Resemblance, which had for long been the fundamental category of knowledge – both the form and the content of what we know – became dissociated in an analysis based on terms of identity and difference; moreover, whether indirectly by the intermediary or measurement, or directly and, as it were, on the same footing, comparison became a function of order; and, lastly, comparison ceased to fulfill the function of revealing how the world is ordered, since it was now accomplished according to the order laid down by thought, progressing naturally from the simple to the complex. As a result, the entire \textit{episteme} of Western culture found its fundamental arrangements modified.” (Ibid. 54).

\textsuperscript{671}The Araba also described several different kinds of incantory “magic” practiced by ritual specialists, including some babalawo, all of which are distinct from \textit{ebo} (sacrifices prescribed by Ifa); \textit{ofo}-incantations which can be used to harm or help their intended target; \textit{oogun}-charms or medicine which can be used to harm or help their intended target; \textit{epé}-invocatory curses intended to harm; \textit{abilu}-a form of incantory magic that employs the signatures of the Odu pressed into the camwood powder (\textit{iye irosun}) on the divining tray (\textit{ọpọn Ifa}), intended to harm its target; and \textit{igede}-a “very bad” form of curse which the Araba described as “Ọrunmila’s wicked younger brother.”
Similarly, Bascom records the following verse of Odu Ofun-Ọkanran, “Open for all to see, open for all to see; Ifa is the one who does things we can hear about; only curses we should not know about; curses are the voice of Ifẹ” for which he provides the following interpretation, “This means that the Ifa diviners do not work with bad medicine or do other evil things which have to be concealed, while those who use curses keep their work a secret. Ifẹ is reputed as a place where curses are strong and commonly used, as the Ijebu people are known for using bad medicine (oogun). Spells or incantations (ọfọ) whose purpose is to kill someone are known as igede, ogede, or ẹgede.”

Prof. Agboola also explained that the efficacy of Ifa sacrifices (ẹbo Ifa) depends more on the person who performs it and less on the actual materials, unlike charms (oogun). “It is the non-material aspect of the sacrifice that is the one that is most important…If there is no alignment between ori-inu and ori-ode, then the sacrifice cannot be accepted.” Prof. Agboola also explained that the intention of the person performing the sacrifice was the most important element of the sacrifice, and that even if you fail to gather all the necessary materials, if you have a sincere intention, your sacrifice will be accepted. He also opined, Knowledge can substitute for sacrifice. The first and greatest sacrifice is honesty/righteousness (tọọtọọ fun ūn)… My students don’t have to go through what I went through to get knowledge, but it requires more seriousness, spiritual focus and concentration. For example there is a complicated ritual that I learned how to perform, but I learned that you can just invoke those who performed that ritual and it will have the same effect, you can still tune into that energy, that power. So instead of teaching my students that complicated ritual, I

672 Bascom, Ifa Divination, 499.

teach them to invoke my Oluwo, my father, the ancient babalawo and the Odu from which it comes.674

Bascom also recorded accounts of similar ritual simplification or innovation on the part of babalawo in the early 20th century:

The clients say that Ifa teaches the diviners to be kind and that if they know a client is poor, they may suggest a hair in place of a horse, some wool in place of a ram, or a feather in place of a chicken; or they may suggest a calabash of water, or sixteen pebbles, or something else of no value. As noted earlier, one informant said that sacrifices are generally more expensive when they are not modified, suggesting that the diviners usually propose reductions.675

While the ebo (sacrifices) and ewé (botanical preparations) of Ifa operate within a similar system of symbolic logic as the ofò (incantations) and oogun (charms) of other Yoruba-language occult traditions, intention seems to play a larger role in the former, which are regarded as the “proper” work of babalawo who are qualified to ritually modify or re-interpret these sacrifices in accordance with their own insight or inspiration.

**Independent Career**

After traveling the countryside to learn ewé Ifa and further hone their knowledge and skills, babalawo settle down to establish their own independent practice and take on their own apprentices (omo awo). Babalawo may spend fifteen to thirty years studying and practicing Ifa under the tutelage of more senior babalawo before they begin to practice on their own and take on their own apprentices. Babalawo usually make their livings through divination and as

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674 Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 26, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. English and Yoruba. “Toward the end of his Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, Gershom Scholem relates a Hasidic tale that applies in uncanny [fashion to the story above]…. Whenever the Baal Shem Tov was faced with a grave task, the story has it, he would make his way to a certain place in the forest, light a fire in a special manner, say a particular set of prayers, and—miraculously—the task would be accomplished., When his disciple the Maggid of Mezeritch faced a similar challenge, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: “We no longer know how to light the fire, but we can still say the prayers.”, He would say them, and the deed would be done., In the next generation, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov was compelled to take up the challenge and perform the task in question., He went to the forest and said: “We can no longer light the fire, nor do we know the secret prayers, but we know the place in the forest—and that is enough.” (Peter Cole. The Poetry of Kabbalah, 241).

675 Bascom, Ifa Divination, 76.
medical and ritual specialists, performing ceremonies for infants and consulting for other olorisha. The most senior and respected babalawo may become part of the official hierarchy of babalawo of the town in which they settle, the highest position of which is the Araba. These official positions carry a small government stipend, and require the title-holders to perform rituals on behalf of the king and the entire town. Being a babalawo is often a full-time occupation. As Susanne Wenger explains:

> The olorisha must intensify his life through constant preoccupation with the deity. The concentration that is needed for the dialogue with the deity can only be built up through perpetual training. That is why a real olorisha cannot have many occupations besides serving his god. All these activities of olorishas: ritual, divination, sacrifice, am magic are entirely a means. The final purpose of orisha worship is to extend the natural limits of human experience into the sphere of the metaphysical. Man becomes more than man.676

In the same vein, she is also quoted as explaining the primacy of one’s relationship with the Oriṣa, “My late friend, the priestess of Oganla, was right when she said to me: your strength comes from your love of human beings. But you must know that you love people because they are part of orisha. Do not do anything because of human beings as such. Do everything because of orisha.”677 The Araba of Modakekè expressed similar sentiments, explaining that to be a good babalawo, one must “do everything because of Ifa, do it for Ifa because everything is in Ifa, if you have Ifa, then you have everything.”

Prof. Agboola, a babalawo who also has a separate full-time job (as a university professor of agriculture), similarly described a continuum running from “spiritual” to “secular” babalawo.

The babalawo nearer the spiritual pole, they are trying hard to be like Ọrunmila, he is the most spiritual. For these kinds of people, life is very hard, They usually don’t have many material possessions or modern conveniences. They consult Ifa about everything. For example, “should I go to an event?” They ask Ifa. “Should I travel to this town?” They ask Ifa. They are very conservative and strictly adhere to the moral code of Ifa and follow the example of Ọrunmila.

677 Ibid, 59.
For example, if they had a conference in Ghana and Ifa said they couldn’t go, they wouldn’t even ask Ifa for a sacrifice to allow them to go…. Babalawo nearer to the secular pole are more liberal, not rigid. They are more lax. You can see them enjoying life with nice cars and things. You wouldn’t know that they are babalawo from their picture, from just seeing them. They modify Ifa to fit the situation, they modify what Ifa says to fit their needs.\(^{678}\)

The Araba of Modakêkê similarly opined, “We are all trying to be like Ọrunmila, but it is very hard. People today are not strong enough to do it. If someone were to be like Ọrunmila today, he would suffer greatly, he would barely have cloth to cover his body. No one today is strong enough to endure that. So we are all just trying.”\(^{679}\) The tension between the often extreme financial pressures of life in contemporary Nigeria and the demanding and time-intensive practice of Ifa was felt acutely by the babalawo with whom I interacted, and is addressed directly by a verse from Odu Ọbara-Iwori:

_Ọrọbanta-awuowobi-owù_ divined Ifa for the world on the day all the world’s people declared that money is the most important thing in the world. They would give up everything and continue to run after money. Ọrunmila said: Your thoughts about money are right, and your thoughts about money are wrong. Ifa is what we should honor. We should continue to adore both of them. Money exalts a person; money can spoil a person’s character. If anyone has too much love for money, his character will be spoiled. Good character is the essential adornment of a human being (iwarere li ọṣọ eniyan). If you have money, it does not prevent you from becoming blind, mad, lame, and sick. You can be infected by diseases. You should go and increase your wisdom, readjust your thinking. Cultivate good character, acquire wisdom, go and perform sacrifice in order that you may be at ease.\(^{680}\)

Similarly, the Araba told me that doing what Ifa says and following Ọrunmila’s example was the surest way for babalawo to be successful in life.\(^{681}\) The babalawo who I interviewed resolved this tension, between the “good life” promised by Ifa, and the difficulties

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\(^{678}\) Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria. English and Yoruba.


\(^{680}\) Epega, _The Sacred Ifa Oracle_, 203.

\(^{681}\) Araba of Modakêkê, interview with the author, November 12, 2013. Yoruba.
and hardships attempting to live up to this standard entail in four ways: 1) The intense
difficulty of practicing Ifa sincerely may last a long time, but it is eventually rewarded with
the blessings of long life, children, health/peace and wealth (ire aiku, ire omo, ire alaafia, ire
ola); 2) The contemporary time is one of turmoil and confusion where everything is upside-
down, and the life of a righteous babalawo is harder than that of careless and corrupt
babalawo, but still character is what matters most in the end; 3) Those who seem to be
enjoying life [the corrupt] may actually be suffering, and those who seem to be suffering
[those with good character], may be enjoying life, we can’t know; 4) The good character and
knowledge achieved through personal sacrifice is its own reward. As one verse of Odu Ofun
Meji says, “the babalawo have never been rich in money, although they are rich in wisdom” and
another verse of Odu Iwori-Atê says, “Anyone who does good, does it for himself,
anyone who does evil, does it for himself.”

He explained that Òrunmila is patient, but that he eventually punishes those babalawo
who ignore his taboos, and misuse or make light of Ifa (or that acting in such a way brings
down disaster upon one’s own head). He recounted the story of his own predecessor, the
former Araba of Modakêkê. This former Araba had a young Christian wife who convinced
him to become more involved in the church and neglect his worship of Ifa. Other babalawo
consulted Ifa for him about this change, and Ifa issued a strong warning that he had gone too
far and needed to return to the practice of Ifa and fulfill his duties as Araba. However, he
ignored these warnings and sadly died in a car accident shortly thereafter. His death was
widely interpreted as a result of ignoring Ifa’s warnings—not necessarily that Ifa had

682 Babalawo koše je oloro ninu owo bikoše ninu ogbon (Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, 62).
683 Eni se rere o se e fun ara re. Eni se ika o se e fun ara re (Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, 230).
punished him, but rather that Ifa had warned him that disaster waited for him if he continued along his present course. In the same vein, Epega cites the following verse of Odu Ọkanran Ọwọnrin

“Jẹkoṣeka (“let him do evil”) favors Oṣika [“the evildoer”]; Jẹkoṣebi (“let him practice cruelty”) favors Aṣẹbi [“the cruel”].”

Performed Ifa divination for those who would not listen, who say that Ọrunmila is full of warnings, but that they will do as they please. They are doing evil, they are doing wickedness; the things of the world are good for them. This was reported to Ọrunmila. He said, “However long it takes, the master of vengeance (elesan) is coming, rolling in like the waves of the ocean, he relieves people of their burdens and deals gently as he works. When he comes, they will run away.”

They said that a sacrifice should be made to prevent Jẹkoṣeka (“let him do evil”) and Jẹkoṣebi (“let him practice cruelty”) from entering into us, so that our companions and peers will not mock us in the end. The sacrifice: sixteen snails, palm oil, and eighteen thousand cowries. They heard and they sacrificed.

When asked if a babalawo with bad character could know everything that a babalawo with good character could, Prof. Agboola explained

If you become a babalawo, any kind of priest really, your character has to change. You can’t curse people, you can’t fight. You can’t curse people because your words have aṣé (effective power). It is also not befitting your status and role in society to curse and fight. People expect better of you. You must model iwa pẹle. A babalawo with bad character is not a babalawo.

When pressed, however, he clarified further, “A babalawo who lies or has bad character, we say ‘his clothes will be stained.’ (aṣọ rẹ maa pọn ni wọn) Ọrunmila used to punish people immediately, but now it can be as long as 16 years [a symbolic designation for a long time] but Ọrunmila will punish those who break his taboos.”

Being a priest also involves the merging of one’s personality into a much bigger whole. Humility, subjugation to orisha and to the discipline of ritual the essential qualities a priest has to achieve. For he knows that where a man is himself, he is foolish and where he is a part of the whole, he is wise. So for the orisha priest, modesty and a complete lack of selfishness are the prerequisites of wisdom. A prime function of the priest is to restore harmony, and it is a very difficult and responsible one. More so than any other person, the priest must watch his every step and

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686 Ibid.
action, even his thoughts—so that he can remain close to the orisha himself. A senior priest once told Susanne Wenger: “You are now an orishin. Therefore you have to be very careful what you are thinking because thought is creation.”

The Araba of Modakeke opined that a babalawo with bad character could theoretically learn (ko) anything (verses of Ifa and ritual procedures) that a babalawo with good character could, but that practically speaking, his bad character would make it unlikely that other babalawo would want to share their knowledge with him. However he emphasized that because his bad character put him out of alignment with his ori and with Ifa, he would not be as effective and his knowledge would not be as deep as a babalawo with good character. Awo Faniyi concurred, explaining that a babalawo who knows a little, but has good character can be stronger, have more powerful ashe, than a babalawo who knows a great deal, but lacks good character. However, all agreed that there were many fraudulent or “wicked” babalawo operating around the world, some of whom were quite wealthy, and some of whom had a great deal of power (agbara or ase) and knowledge (at least of a superficial kind). But as a verse in Odu Ofun Otura says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Eke pa'bi, o di} \\
\text{Odale pa'bi, ko yan} \\
\text{Oninure pa'bi, o ye peregade}
\end{align*}
\]

The liar casts the kola, and it is blocked/opaque
The oath-breaker casts the kola, and does not yield a clear choice
A good person (oninure, “One who is good inside”) casts the kola
And it is clearly befitting

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688 Awo Faniyi, interview with the author, November 27, 2013, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Yoruba. Kola nut divination (obi abata) is widely used in the worship of the orisa, including Ifa. Typically, a four-lobed kola nut is broken and cast. If three lobes are face up and one is down, or if three lobes are face down and one is up, the answer is interpreted to be “no” or “the orisa is unhappy.” If all four lobes are down, the interpretation is “inconclusive” or “you will defeat your enemies”; four lobes down is also inconclusive or “good health.” The most favorable outcome is two lobes down and two lobes up which indicates a positive response or favour with the orisa. Beier writes, “When the orisinha places the kola it is the orisha in himself who poses it. Since the kola is the direct voice of the god, the divination process becomes a kind of self-examination of the worshipper…. The more responsible a man becomes, the more difficult he must find it to satisfy his orisha…. But even the most simple question to the orisha implies a deeper one, one that is not necessarily expressed…. Those questions that were never pronounced clearly are being answered with symbols., The orishin assumes that he is always responsible,
This verse can be interpreted as underscoring the relationship between the character of a babalawo and the quality of the divination and interpretation he performs. The greater the harmony between the babalawo’s ori-inú (inner head/destiny) and ori-ode (outer head/actual life), the stronger the relationship between the babalawo and Qrunmila, the stronger the relationship between the babalawo and Qrunmila, the more fully he embodies Ifa itself, and the better his divination and other ritual performances will be.

Repetition, Contemplation, and Interpretation

Having memorized these vast bodies of knowledge associated with the practice of Ifa (the orature of the Odu, the procedures of divination and sacrifice, the rituals for festivals, newborns, and new initiates, the pharmacopeia of Ifa) and cultivated iwa pẹlẹ (gentle character) through these ritual practices, the mature babalawo or iyanifa is now in a position to contemplate the symbolism and “deep meanings” of these words and practices. Prof. Agboola explained:

When you are young, you just memorize it and repeat it back. Then you now if this verse comes out, this is the situation and you must do this and that. Then as you get older and you go over it again and again, you start thinking about the meanings, and you go deeper and deeper…. It’s like when you memorize Ifa, you go around once, then you go around again [learning one verse for each Odu, from the first to the 256th]. The same thing with the meanings (ituọ), you go around once and get one kind of meaning, then you go around again and get a deeper meaning….689

Each divination for a client, each day of worship for Ifa, each sacrifice, each preparation of medicine, each ceremony of a newborn, each new initiation provides the senior babalawo an opportunity to reflect upon and contemplate these rituals and the music and verses of Ifa that form an integral part of these ceremonies. The point is to develop a

689 Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria
particular and unique mode of being, a particular character (*iwa pəle*) characterized by patience, gentleness, and honesty. This mode of being is identified with wisdom (*ogbọn*), with deep knowledge (*imo ijinle*), and with Òrunmila. From this vantage point, the senior babalawo contemplate the tradition of Ifa, and life in general, and delve into the deep meanings of both. As the proverb says, “Like proverbs, like proverbs is how Ifa speaks” (*Bi owe, bi owe nIfa sọrọ*). As Abiodun points out in the quotes cited above, “proverb” (*owe*) has a wide semantic field, covering all forms of sacred art which “clothe” the numinous Òrọ, itself a manifestation of the even more inscrutable Olodumare.

"Owe, literally “proverbs,” but which in broad usage can metaphorically apply to the communicative properties of sculpture, *arọko*, dance, drama, song, chant, poetry, incantations like *ọfi*, *ogede*, *ayajo ẹpẹ*, *odu*, *ẹsa* and many others which make heavy and esoteric use of metaphors in ritual contexts. … *Owe* operates between *ọrọ* on the spiritual plane and the earth-level where *ọrọ* can be understood, assimilated, and used by humans. Similarly, communication with the *Oriṣa*, ancestors, and invisible bodies in heaven is made possible through the channel of *owe*…. With the aid of *Ela* [Orunmila], *ọrọ* is made manifest, and it is beautifully ‘clothed’ in poetry, maxims, and wise sayings, all of which are *owe*. For as the saying goes, *kolombo ni Ọrọ n rin*, “*Ọrọ* moves around naked,” and it is forbidden to see it in that state.

Thus the hermeneutic process is understood as a movement of return, of reintegration, from the manifest *owe* (proverb/metaphor) to the hidden *ọrọ* (meaning) through its constituent knowledge (*imo*), wisdom (*ogbọn*) and understanding (*oye*), back to Olodumare.

For example, I had the great pleasure of discussing the following verse of Odu Otura Meji with Awo Faniyi and Prof. Agboola, “When God does good we call it bad; When God does bad we call it good.” It was a fascinating discussion between a senior and junior babalawo, both of whom had attained the highest degree of initiation (*Olodu*), and both of whom have university degrees. Although the battery on my recorder died early in our discussion, I will try to recall the main points of our discourse as best I can here:

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690 Abiodun, “Verbal Art and Visual Metaphor” 256. There is also the proverb, *Bi owe, bi owe nIfa sọrọ*, “Like proverbs, like proverbs is how Ifa speaks.”
Awo Faniyi: But how can Olodumare do bad?
Prof. Agboola: Bad and good are just what we call bad and good, everything Olodumare does is good.
Me: Even in the verse itself, when it says “When God does good,” “When God does bad” we are already calling what He is doing “good” or “bad.”
Prof. Agboola: Ha! That’s interesting.
Awo Faniyi: But, excuse me sir, I think the verse means that people often don’t like what happens to them, even if it is for their good, and sometimes enjoy things that happen to them, even if they are bad for them.
Prof. Agboola: Yes, but it is also saying that Olodumare is beyond good and evil. The “good” and “evil” of his actions are just what we call them, from our perspective, our point of view.
Awo Faniyi: But, sir, you can’t just call anything “good” and call whatever you want “evil,” can you?
Me: Yeah, it’s not completely relative is it? You can’t kill someone and say that it is good. Although I guess people do that. So is the verse saying that there are two kinds of good and bad: that which people think is good and bad, and that which actually is good and bad? Or is it that Olodumare is beyond good and evil?
Prof. Agboola: Yes, I understand it like that. Everything comes from Him, what we call good and what we call bad…

Similarly, the signatures of the Odu Ifa and diving tray (opon Ifa) upon which they are marked are often the subject of “deep” interpretation and speculation. The principle of male-female (tako-tabo) and senior-junior (egbon-aburo) complementarity, which structures many of the rituals of Ifa, is also central in these interpretations. For example, when performing divination with the sixteen ikin (palm nuts), if one palm nut remains in the diviner’s hand, two marks are made on the diving tray, and if two palm nuts remain, the babalawo will make one mark on the tray. The single mark is interpreted as “male” and “senior” to the double mark, which is “female” and “junior.” Hence, Odu Eji Ogbe, which consists entirely of single marks, is considered as “male” and senior to Odu Oyẹku Meji, which is considered “female.” However, these are relationships of complementarity, no babalawo would claim that Eji-Ogbe is “better” than Oyẹku Meji, but rather they are part of an intricate network of complementary relationships: The signature of Ogbe (four marks of one) is associated with beginnings, birth, light, clarity, masculinity, the right, and seniority; that of Oyẹku (four marks of two) is associated with death, darkness, obscurity, femininity, the left, and being junior. In the
pairings of these signatures that make up each Odu, the right position is considered senior (being marked first), and that on the left, as junior (being marked second).

The divining tray is often interpreted as a symbol of the entire cosmos, and babalawo touch different parts of the tray (the top, bottom, right, left, and center) before divination when invoking the different powers of the cosmos. For example, the following invocation is typical:

\[
\begin{align*}
Iwaju \text{ opon, o gbọ} \\
Ehin \text{ opon, o gbọ} \\
Olu\text{bu l'ọtun} \\
\text{Olo\text{moran l'osi}} \\
\text{Aarin opon} \\
\text{Ode orun} \\
Ilẹ \text{ o gbọ} \\
\text{Ati\text{waye ofọ}} \\
\text{Ati\text{wo oorun}} \\
\text{Ire! Ire o!}
\end{align*}
\]

The front of the diving tray, you hear [us]
The back of the divining tray, you hear [us]
The on the right,
The knowing ones on the left
The center of the divining tray is the center courtyard of heaven⁶⁹¹
The dawning of the day
The setting of the sun
Let it be good, let it be good o!⁶⁹²

Similarly, babalawo often press a line into the camwood powder on the tray, dividing it into halves, and then another line, dividing it into quarters, before many rituals. Each of these places on the divination tray (top, bottom, right, left, center) is associated with various signatures of the Odu, cardinal directions, fundamental attributes, and types of \textit{aṣẹ} (dynamic

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⁶⁹¹ Traditional Yoruba homes were often rectangular with a central courtyard (\textit{ode}) surrounded by rooms which faced in on the courtyard. This structure resembles the shape of many divining trays, with \textit{Eṣu} standing at the doorway.

force). For example, Epega and Neimark include the following diagram in the beginning of their book *The Sacred Ifa Oracle*.\(^{693}\)

![Figure 5.2: Ṭọpọn Cosmogram](image)

However, such schematics can be highly idiosyncratic and differ from babalawo to babalawo. When I showed and explained the above diagram to the Araba of Modakęẹ, he strongly objected to it, whereas Prof. Agboola explained that while he agreed with the grouping of the Odu, he would put Ogbe at the top, Iwori on the right, Oyẹku on the bottom, and Idi/Odi on the left, or potentially have Ogbe at the top, Iwori on the right, Idi/Odi on the bottom, and Oyẹku on the left. Each signature or Odu represents a particular archetype exemplified in the verses and narratives of that Odu. Even the forms and the order of the signatures of the Odu are objects of interpretation and speculation. As the following diagram from Bascom shows, each Odu signature (Ogbe, Oyẹku, Iwori, etc.) is paired with another signature that is either its inverse, swapping single marks for double (Ogbe-Oyẹku, Iwori-

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\(^{693}\) Epega, *The Sacred Oracle*, xvi.
Odi/Edi, Irosun-Qwọnrin) or 180° rotation (Irosun-Qwọnrin, Qbara-Qkanran, Ogunda-Qsa, Ika-Oturupon, Otura-Irẹ, Ṙẹ-Ofun):

![The Sixteen Basic Figures of Ifa](image)

**Figure 5.3 The Ifẹ Numbering of the Sixteen Basic Figures**

Thus, the progression through the signatures Odu of Ifa is marked by the same logic of complementary pairing: opposites beget or follow one another. This is further illustrated in the order of the *Amulu*, the 240 Odu after the sixteen principal Odu. In one method of ordering the Odu, the first of the *Amulu* and the seventeenth Odu is Ogbe-Ọyẹku (Ogbe on the right, Ọyẹku on the left), while the next Odu is Ọyẹku-Ogbe (Ọyẹku on the left, Ogbe on the right), which is followed by Ogbe-Iwori, which is in turn followed by Iwori-Ogbe, and so on and so forth. Furthermore, each Odu has a special relationship with its complementary Odu,

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694 This is the Ifẹ ordering of the Odu (compare with Figure 1) taken from Bascom, 4. See Vérin and Rajaonarimanana. “Divination in Madagascar” Peek, (ed.) *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 63-4 for the remarkably similar figures employed in sikidy divination in Madagascar.

695 See *The Sacred Ifa Oracle*. There is also some variation in this as many (if not most) babalawo (including the Araba of Modakẹ) seem to take all of the Odu beginning with Ogbe as being senior to all those which begin with Ọyẹku, which are in turn senior to all those which begin with Iwori, and so on. See Bascom, 50. Nevertheless, this principle of complementarity amongst the Odu appears when making sacrifice, as some babalawo recite the complementary Odu when making a sacrifice prescribed by another (for example, one would recite a verse from Ọyẹku-Ogbe when performing a sacrifice prescribed by Ogbe-Ọyẹku) Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 24, 2013. Ile-Ifẹ, Nigeria. English and Yoruba.
which is recited when performing a sacrifice (from the original Odu), according to Prof. Agboola. For example, many verses from the Odu Ogbe-Irẹtẹ discuss initiation into Ifa (itefa), while several verses of its complementary Odu, Irẹtẹ-Ogbe discuss Ọrunmila’s wife, Odu (who is central to the process of initiation), and how they came to be married.

Like the figures of the I-Ching, the progression through the different signatures of the Odu is understood to represent the different stages of change, cycles of life, death, and rebirth in which opposites inevitably follow one another: what goes up comes down, what goes down, comes up; joy is followed by sorrow, which precedes joy; weakness precedes strength, which is followed by weakness; light comes before darkness, which is followed again by light, etc. This symbolism is also found in the process of Ifa initiation, which involves a kind of union or “marriage” with Odu. The following verses of Ifa allude to this dynamic of complementarity:

(Odu Iwori-Ọṣẹ)
“Tribulation does not come without its good aspects
The good and bad are always together…
sweetness usually ends the taste of a bitter leaf”

(Odu Irosun-Iwori)
“A life having the taste of sweetness without any bitterness is boring. Anyone who has not experienced destitution will never appreciate prosperity.”

(Odu Ọwọnrin-Ọkanran)
“There is a day, a day of laughter, there is another day, a day of weeping. Which day is this?”

(Odu Irosun-Iwori)
“Fire likes inside
Darkness likes outside
The roof or the back [of the house] only”


697 *The Sacred Ifa Oracle*, 234.


Performed Ifa divination for Fire
When he was going to take darkness as a wife
Fire entered, and darkness disappeared

The Araba explained that fire loves darkness and seeks it out, only to banish that which it seeks, but eventually, fire always dies down and darkness returns, just as night always follows day.

These associations and diagrams are the result of years of experience reciting, contemplating, and performing the Odu and their associated rituals. Similarly, in addition to the meanings and signatures of the verses of Ifa, the sacrifices prescribed therein are also the subject of interpretive speculation. For example, some babalawo classify the elements of prescribed sacrifices according to the three main colours of the Yoruba language: white (funfun: chalk, snails, shea butter etc.) black (dudu: indigo cloth, black animals, ashes, dark leaves, etc.), and red (pupa: blood, palm oil, camwood powder etc.). Each category has its own associations and effects. Similarly, the elements of sacrifices were also classified in accordance to whether they belonged to the animal (eran), vegetable (ewé), or mineral (okuta / ile) kingdoms. The elements of sacrifices were also classified as “hot” (gbọna), such as alcohol, peppers, etc. or “cool” (tutu), such as snails, water, and certain leaves. The dynamics of these categories of sacrifice and the relationship to the verses which contain them are illustrated by the following related pair of verses from Odu Iwori-Qsa and Odu Oturupon-Odi, respectively.

(Odu Iwori-Qsa)
Akitaraṣẹ, the diviner of heaven.
Performed Ifa divination for Olodumare and the world
When people were running to Oludumare to seek his advice on various problems
Crying, “Father, Father, I have come. Save me, please save me.”
He said, ‘What is the problem?’

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“Those to whom I gave power (agbara) did not use the power. Those to whom I gave wisdom, did not use the inner wisdom (ogbon inu) I gave them.”

He was asked to offer sacrifice in order to place a veil of darkness over the earth. The sacrifice: a black cloth, a black sheep, twenty-thousand cowries, and Ifa leaves. He heard and performed the sacrifice. It was assumed that if a child did not see his father, he would defend himself.701

(Odu Oturupon-Odi)
The world is good (dara). Heaven is magnificent. Odudua [i.e. Olodumare] advised the people of the word to come back to him for reincarnation. The children refused to go. The elderly people also refused to go. We asked why. They said, “It is not easy to go to heaven and come back.” Orunmila said, “Heaven is good and it is the home of beauty.” Odudua would never live in a despicable place. Oriṣa is always found in decent places. Anyone who is called should answer his call. No mother would call her child to suffer. The people of the world were still hesitating. They were advised to sacrifice so that the veil of darkness might be removed from their eyes. If they are working, they should always look up to heaven. The sacrifice: sixteen limestones, a piece of white cloth, twenty thousand cowries, and Ifa leaves. If the prescribed sacrifice is performed, they should abstain from blood. They refused to sacrifice.702

In the first verse, Olodumare places a veil between himself and the world because His children were not using the “inner wisdom” (ogbon inu) and “power” (agbara) He had given them. By separating Himself from His children, he forces them to rely upon their own inner resources which he has bestowed upon them. He achieves this veil of separation through a sacrifice of a black cloth, a black sheep, twenty thousand cowries and Ifa leaves. In the next verse, the “veil of darkness” (okunkun) is removed through a sacrifice of sixteen limestones, white cloth, twenty thousand cowries, and Ifa leaves. These “white” (funfun) elements have the opposite effect of their “black” (dudu) counterparts, lifting the veil of obscurity from heaven. The “black sheep,” an unusual animal (sheep are normally white) is here counterbalanced by “sixteen limestones,” an unusual mineral (stones are usually black).

These verses are also fascinating in that the second explains the common fear of death and the return to heaven as being a result of ignorance. Heaven is described as the “home of beauty,” suggesting that the beauties of the world have their home, their source and origin, in

701 Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, 213.
702 Ibid, 269-270.
heaven, the home of Olodumare and the Oriṣa. Nevertheless, because people did not perform
the sacrifice, they remained veiled, and thus fear Olodumare’s call to return home.

The first verse explains the origins of this “veil of darkness” that hides Olodumare and
heaven from people dwelling in the world. Instead of relying on the power and wisdom which
Olodumare had given them, people returned to heaven to ask Olodumare about every little
thing. Both the Araba of Modakẹkẹ and Prof. Agboola emphasized that Ifa divination is no
substitute for one’s own discernment, wisdom (ọgbọn), and hard work. The practice of Ifa
should develop these qualities in a babalawo, not make them completely reliant upon
divination to make every decision. This may seem to be somewhat in tension with the extreme
devotion respected babalawo and other oloriṣa display, often consulting their deities about
decisions as small as whether or not to travel or even what to have for dinner. This tension can
be somewhat resolved through the metaphor of intimate interpersonal relationships, which
characterizes much of Yoruba religious discourse. Consulting one’s wife or husband about
what to have for dinner or whether or not to travel is not a sign of a lack of independence, but
rather of intimate concern, consideration, and respect. So it is with devoted babalawo and
other oloriṣa. Moreover, this verse suggests that because God and heaven are obscured, we
must apply our own “inner wisdom” and strength in order to know them; this was, in fact the
reason for the imposition of the “veil of darkness.” The verse also implies that knowledge of
God and heaven is the normal state of affairs, and that something (in this case a “veil of
darkness”) has to intervene to keep us from having direct access to Olodumare and heaven.

This darkness, the ignorance that separates Olodumare’s children from him, is
mentioned in a related verse of Odu Otura Ọwọnrin, whose poetic beauty speaks for itself:

“The Omniscient One knows those who wickedly shoot others. People of the farm know
people of the town; travelers of earth and travelers of heaven, we will see each other again.
Termites do not scatter unless they reassemble again” was the one who cast Ifa for us humans

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who are mourning one who has died. Where the people of earth have come from is where they are returning to. What are tears for? What is sorrow for? What is raising oneself up and down for? What is fasting [a mourning practice amongst the Yoruba] for? He who sends one to come is he who is calling him to return home. That which pleases us on earth does not please Olodumare. The people on earth sit on earth and they do evil. Olodumare does not like it; Olodumare does not accept it. Well then, if I say go, you go, and if I say come, you come. If a child does not know his father, the earth is not right. Death is the one who takes a child to know heaven. Who is thinking of Olodumare? If there were no Esu, who would think of the poor (those who eat sacrifices)?

Everyone is thinking of themselves; they are looking for food and drink. You know darkness; a child does not know his father. Speak to me that I may speak to you; by our voices we recognize each other in the darkness. If a child does not know his father, the earth is not right. Sacrifice: four white pigeons, four ewes, and two shillings. They heard and they sacrificed so that they might remain long on earth and that they might see blessings.

Death, Burial, and Re-Birth

For babalawo, like elders of other spiritual traditions amongst Yoruba-speaking peoples, old age is typically understood as the zenith of one’s spiritual prowess, even as it marks the nadir of one’s physical strength. As Ulli Beier remarks:

In traditional Yoruba life, a man did not lose his strength as he grew older. His strength was transposed: as his physical strength weakened, his psychic power increased. The really old men became centres of power. They might sit at home on the same spot, without taking physical part even in the ceremonies. But they become the embodiment of wisdom and knowledge. It was from them that the younger more active people had to receive advice and strength. It was important for the community to be exposed to their radiation, because these people were really close to the orisha, they achieved the semi-divine state of “dynamic relaxation”: a perfected state of mind where intense concentration results in a state of complete repose. Yoruba sacred images are always represented in this state. When such a man dies it is a cause for great rejoicing, because he is becoming divine and is on his way to being ultimately reborn again.

The most senior Babalawo are regarded as having achieved a kind of union with Òrunmila. As the living representatives of Ifa, they exemplify his character, behavior, wisdom, and carry out his functions. Their words can even be regarded as the words of Ifa and can become new èṣe Ifa. This merging of babalawo and Ifa/Òrunmila in a state of “dynamic repose” is especially evident during festivals and when these senior babalawo perform

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703 Esu, as the divine enforcer, punishes those who punish the helpless. Moreover, the poor and hungry often eat the sacrifices left for Esu at the crossroads, who may not have food were it not for the sacrifices to Esu.


divination and recite verses of Ifá. While I would not call these states of trance or possession (possession is a major taboo for babalawo, unlike other oríṣa), I noticed marked changes in posture, facial expressions, and overall disposition (that seemed consistent with Wenger’s/Beier’s description of “dynamic relaxation”) when babalawo recited verses of Ifá. Perhaps one could say that the most advanced babalawo achieve this perpetual state of intense concentration/repose, which is the same state that Ṣrunmila is in. In the words of Susanne Wenger, who had a great deal of personal experience with Oriṣa possession/trance:

> The limits of human existence have been extended and man has become divine for a brief moment. Man has been reassured of his participation in creation, man has reassured himself that he is a part of god. And this is what gives man his pride: that he is able to be more than man. This is his greatness: that he has the courage to transcend the natural limits of his existence.

> Only the really great priests, when they become old achieve a permanent state of union with the god. They become like shrines, and even when their bodies have become so weak that they spend years lying on the mat of a dark room, they may still radiate power. Death does not ‘happen’ to such people. They finally pass into the other sphere when they have decided to let go of their magical hold on this world. The Yoruba ritual that leads the worshipper towards taking part in the god’s identity explains why an oríṣa’s physiognomical features are gradually being molded by some kind of archetypal image of the oríṣa. Anybody who has lived close to Yorubas would be able to identify worshippers of Obatala, Shango, or Ogun simply by looking at their eyes. The spiritual identity finally finds visible expression in a person’s physiognomy.  

> Thus a lifetime of imitation of and devotion to an Oriṣa shapes not only the inner (ìnu) but also the outer (ode) aspects of a person. The Araba confirmed this observation, noting that serious babalawo “resemble Ṣrunmila more and more as they get older, just like Ṣango priests resemble Ṣango, Ogun priests resemble Ogun, and Oṣun priests resemble her.” Likewise, Babatunde Lawal writes, “As Frank Willett aptly observes, ‘It is indeed one of the surprises of living in Yorubaland that one does frequently see people whose features remind one very forcibly of a particular sculptural style, yet the sculptures are not portraits of individuals, but

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706 Ibid, 47.
they are supposed to look as if they might be..." Taking these two perspectives together, ritual sculpts the inner and outer dimensions of babalawo and other Oriṣa devotees in the image of Oriṣa, just as sculptors carve wood in the images of the Oriṣa. The sculptures resemble the Oriṣa because they also resemble their devotees, and the sculptures resemble the devotees because they resemble their Oriṣa.

Death merely returns or transposes such people to the realm of the Oriṣa, at which point, their identification with the Oriṣa may become ritually complete: such people can be remembered and worshipped as “parts” or manifestations of particular Oriṣa, and such babalawo may become enshrined in the mysterious names of the diviners which begin most verses of Ifa, often in the Odu with which they are associated. Many of these proverbial names appear in many different verses of the same Odu. For example, the proverb/name (oriki) “Nothing comes from getting angry. Patience is the father of character. An elder who has patience has everything,” appears as the diviner in many of the verses of Odu Ogbe-Yọnu cited in this chapter, and many others that are not. As the proverb says, “It is death that turns an individual into a beautiful sculpture; a living person has blemishes” (Oju a ku la a d’ere, eniyan ko sunwọn laaye).

The verses of Ifa repeatedly describe death as an inevitable return home, and for mature babalawo, an anticipated transition (whereas premature death is feared and avoided). In this vein, Prof. Agboola quoted the following proverbs, commonly cited when hearing news of the death of an elder, “The child sent on an errand has come back, “The world is a market, heaven is home,” and “When someone dies, the people of heaven don’t cry, [just as]

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708 Ibid, 513.
we rejoice when a new child is born.” (Okuku ara orun ko sunkun; Awa l’a bimo tuntun ti a n yọ). Likewise, a verse from Odu Irosun-Ofun says

Ofun is giving out goodness
Ofun does not make any noise about it
People like Ofun are hard to find on earth
Anyone who wants to perform wonders should look up to heaven. Heaven is the home of honor.
Ifa divination was performed for human beings who were told that death would always bring them to see the wonders in heaven
They were asked to sacrifice so that darkness and sorrow might be banished from their paths
The sacrifice: four hens, four tortoises, four pieces of white cloth, and four bundles of kola nuts
They heard, but did not sacrifice

Burial (isinku)

The funerary rites of babalawo are all centered upon facilitating this transition from the world (ayé) to heaven (orun), anticipating the eventual return to the world. Not every babalawo is given a funeral. Only those who are understood to have reached maturity and achieved exemplary character and wisdom qualify for the elaborate funerary rituals, which last seven days, often at great cost to the deceased’s family. While some of the rituals are secret, and specific to Ifa, many of the funerary rites of babalawo are shared by members of other Yoruba traditions such as washing the corpse with a special solution of water, herbs, and blood (of a cock for men, a hen for women), rubbing chalk on the palms of the corpse, wrapping the body in a special cloth, washing the coffin, feasting, and playing music. These rituals are typically conducted by the eldest members of the deceased’s family and ritual group (Ifa, Ogboni, Ogun, Egungun, etc.). As Drewal explains, “This ritual is the deceased’s


710 Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, 321. This refusal to sacrifice is implicitly given as the reason why most people fear death.

711 A different set of rituals is performed for those who die in childhood, especially for those suspected of being abiku, those children “born to die” who keep coming and going between heaven and earth, inflicting a great emotional toll on their mothers and family. The foolish and wicked may be refused a funeral and be buried in the bush.
initiation by the society of elders into the group of the ancestors.”712 Awo Agboola described the funerary process for babalawo as facilitating the deceased’s “transition to the level of oriṣa”:

Anyone we feed with sacrifice to is an Oriṣa...if the priest is male we feed the left toe, if female, we feed the right toe...In the ancestral realm, in heaven (orun) we appear in a new body. But we have to do some things to help the soul, the spirit of the person to get there.... After the third day, we perform a ceremony called itufa (burying Ifa). At midnight we go and ask the deceased what we should do with his Ifa [his instruments of divination]. The only language that a babalawo will understand after death is Ifa, the Odu of Ifa. So we chant seven Odu: Odu Ofun-Ọbara, Odu Oyẹku-Ofun, etc. to guide the person to a certain point, after which he can guide himself.713

Reincarnation

The newly-deceased person who has joined the ranks of the ancestors and Oriṣa is expected to choose a new ori in heaven and return to the world, being reincarnated among their descendants. As a verse from Odu Iwori-Odi says, “Our father, if he gives birth to us in full, inevitably we shall, in time, give birth to him in turn. Our mother, if she gives birth to us in full, inevitably we shall, in time, give birth to her in turn.”714 This new incarnation is understood to choose a new ori, receive a new body from Ọbatala, and a new ẹmi from Olodumare, so in one sense, it is a bit like the mythical ship of Theseus, which retains a certain continuity of identity, even as all of its constituent parts are replaced.

Some verses of Ifa suggest a kind of teleology to this cycle of reincarnation: that the purpose of all of this coming and going between heaven and the world is to perfect one’s character and wisdom. Once this “good position has been achieved,” man has achieved his raison d’être putting an end to the now unnecessary reincarnation. For example, a verse from Odu Irosun-Iwori says:

712 Drewal, Yoruba Ritual, 41

713 Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November 26, 2013. Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

714 Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, 186
Let’s do things with joy. Those who wish to go may go. Those who wish to return may return. Definitely, human beings have been chosen to bring good fortune to the world. “Omniscience,” the diviner of Ọrunmila, performed Ifa divination for Ọrunmila who was told that human beings would come and ask him a particular question. He was advised to offer a sacrifice of fish and two hundred grains of cornmeal. Ọrunmila heeded the advice and performed the sacrifice.

One day all kinds of people, including robbers and other evildoers gathered themselves together and went to Ọrunmila to complain, they said that they were “tired of going back and forth to earth. Ọrunmila! Please allow us to take refuge in heaven.” Ọrunmila said that they could not avoid going to and coming back from the earth until they had attained the good position (ipo rere) that Odudua [in this case, another name for Olodumare] had ordained for every individual; only then could they reside in heaven. They asked, “What is the good position?” Ọrunmila asked them to admit their ignorance. They said, “We admit our ignorance and would like to be given knowledge by God (Oluwa).” Ọrunmila said, “The good position is a life/world (ayé) with full knowledge of everything, joy everywhere, without anxiety or fear of enemies, attack from snakes or other dangerous animals, without fear of death, disease, accusations, losses, wizards, witches, Eṣu, accidents from water and fire, without the fear of misery or poverty, because of your inner power, good character, and wisdom….

All evil acts have their repercussions. Individually, what is needed to attain the good position is: wisdom that can adequately govern the world as a whole; sacrifice or cultivating the habit of doing good to the poor or those who need your help; desire to increase the world’s prosperity rather than destroy it.

People will continue to go to heaven and return to the world after death until everyone attains the good position. There are a lot of good things in heaven that are still not available in the world, and will be obtained in due course. When all the children of Odudua are gathered together, those chosen (yan) to transfer the good things to the world are called eniyan, human beings.715

Thus, this verse defines the telos of humanity, or the purpose of life to be the attainment of this “good position,” which is at once individual and communal. This “good position” is characterized by “full knowledge” (amọtan), “joy” (ayọ), “wisdom” (ogbon), “inner power” (agbara inu), and ”good character” (iwa rere). Human beings in general, and babalawo in particular, have been chosen to develop these qualities and use them to “bring the good things from heaven to the world.” The Araba of Modakeke and Awo Faniyi, identified this “good position,” the perfection of the human condition with Ọrunmila, separately commenting that “Babalawo are all praying to be with Ọrunmila after death” and “the goal of

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715 Ibid, 192-4
a babalawo to do the work of Ṣrunmila, to mend the world with the word of Olodumare, which is Ifa.”

This in short, is the ultimate goal of a babalawo: to reach the “good position” of full knowledge and joy through the cultivation of wisdom, inner power, and good character, and to help others to do the same.

Summary

Thus, the process of acquiring knowledge in Ifa begins before birth with the choice of ori and can continue after death with the return to the world. This knowledge is acquired through memorization, study, ritual practice (prayer, recitation, divination, sacrifices, etc.), cultivation of good character, initiation, contemplation and interpretation of rituals and orature of Ifa. This process is inherently social, involving interaction with and the participation of other babalawo, family and community members, and the Oriṣa and other spiritual entities.

Nevertheless self-knowledge, or knowledge of one’s ori, is essential and even foundational to this process, the purpose of which is to become like Ṣrunmila, to perfect oneself and serve as a bridge between heaven and the world, bringing them together and repairing the world. As a verse from Odu Iwori-Odi says:

“There is no childbearing woman who cannot give birth to an Ifa priest. There is no childbearing woman who cannot give birth to Ṣrunmila. Our father, if he gives birth to us in full, inevitably we shall, in time, give birth to him in turn. Our mother, if she gives birth to us in full, inevitably we shall, in time, give birth to her in turn.” Performed Ifa divination for Ṣrunmila who said he would bring heaven down to the world, he would take the world back to heaven.

In order for him to accomplish his mission, he was asked to offer everything in twos, one male and one female—one ram and one ewe, one he-goat and one she-goat, one cock and one hen, and so on. Ṣrunmila heeded the advice and performed the sacrifice. Thus the earth became fruitful and multiplied greatly.

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717 Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, 186-7.
The following oriki (praise-prayer)\(^{718}\) of Ṓrunmila (from Odu Ọyẹkọ Meji), one of the many which babalawo recite daily upon waking in the morning, summarizes the role and importance of Ṓrunmila in this enterprise:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Ọrunmila! Eleri Ipin} \\
\text{Ibikeji Olodumare;} \\
\text{A-je-ju-Oogun,} \\
\text{Obiriti, A-p ’iyo- iku-da} \\
\text{Olọwa mi, A-to-i-ba-j’aye} \\
\text{Orọ a-bi-ku-j’igbo} \\
\text{Olọwa mi, Ajiki,} \\
\text{Ogege a-gb’aye-gun;} \\
\text{Odudu ti ndu ori emere} \\
\text{A-tun-ori-ti-ko sunwọn șe,} \\
\text{A-mọ-ị-ku} \\
\text{Olọwa Aiyẹrẹ} \\
\text{Agiri ile-Ilogbon} \\
\text{Olọwa mi: amọmọtan} \\
\text{A ko mọ ọ tan koșe} \\
\text{A ba mọ tan ịba șe ke}^{719}
\end{align*}\]

Ọrunmila, Witness of the choice of destiny
Second to Olodumare
More potent than medicine [charms]
The vast sphere, who averts the day of death
My Lord! Who can prevent the world’s ruin
The mystery who fought death in the bush
My Lord, whom I greet upon awakening
The balance that set the whole world aright
The one who strives to repair the heads of spirit children
Who repairs ill-made heads

\(^{718}\) This unique Yoruba genre of orature is derived form the combination of ori (source, head, destiny/self) and the verb ki (to greet, salute, or even provoke/evoke), and thus it means to salute one’s origin or inner self. Nearly everything has oriki: deities, people, towns, instruments, plants, animals, etc. Karin Barber describes oriki as “collections or strings of name-like attributive epithets, ‘praises’ which are neither narrative nor descriptive, but vocative. They are addressed to their subject or ‘owner,’ and are felt to encapsulate, and evoke in some way that subject’s essential powers and qualities.” (Barber, K. I Could Speak Until Tomorrow, 1). Susanne Wenger similarly remarks, “Myth and ritual set out to name all that is: to name it into existence…. All Yoruba ritual re-enacts, in all possible variety, the truth of the priority of the transcendent over the manifest forms of life…. In cyclic continuity, religious feasts resound with incantations, sacred-rhythmic names of the gods, attributive addresses called oriki. The conjuring rhythm of each god’s oriki is of greater importance than its verbal interpretation or history, since it repeats and moves its owners’—the gods’ and god-impersonating [/embODY-ing] priests’—identical life-vibration and its rhythm, as the Vedic mantras do. In 201 sacred feasts, we name back into co-existence with us the 201 most important Oriṣa during one sacred year. Reciting their vital vibrations and rhythm we ourselves enter into their rhythm; and ours synchroise with theirs reciprocally…. For Ayan Agalu, the drummer god, is a mighty spirit indeed. He transcribes the rhythm of the gods’ identity into human perception and names as he pleases. A god’s individual transcendent life-vibration mystically imposes unison on the devotees’ rhythmically kindred minds.” (Wenger, The Timeless Mind of the Sacred, 13-4).

\(^{719}\) Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, xi-xii.
He who knows you never dies
Lord, the unopposable king
Perfect in the house of wisdom
My Lord, whose knowledge is without end
Not knowing you fully, we [our lives] are in vain
If we could but know you in full, all would be well\textsuperscript{720}

[Translation by the author]

As the “witness of the choice of destiny” Orunmila can help “repair” ill-made heads (\textit{ori}), and help one come to know oneself, one’s \textit{ori-inú}. Thus, he who knows Orunmila, knows his or her own heavenly or eternal self, and “never dies.”\textsuperscript{721} One comes to know Orunmila by following his example as set forth in the orature and rituals of Ifa, by cultivating a character like his, through intense devotion to him, and deep contemplation of his embodiment in the Odu of Ifa. Orunmila’s wisdom is “perfect” and his knowledge is “without end,” and to know him is to participate in this perfect knowledge, which is the purpose of life and “makes all things well.”

The following verse from Odu \textit{Ọwọnrin Ọbara} emphasizes the close relationship between this most important form of knowledge and self-knowledge, and Orunmila’s role as the facilitator of the latter:

\begin{verbatim}
O mi ri mi, Maa ri i
Ọwọnrin Ọbara: A difa fun Ọwa ṣe ni:
Ohun ti a nwambẹ nitosi eni Afaimö!
Wọn niki a rubọ ki Bara Aghonniregun le fihan ni.
Orunmila, Eleri Ipin, Ibikeji Olodumare
O ni ohun ti a nwa nbẹ nitosi eni Afaimö!
Ebo: Agbegbo-adiyẹ, ẹgbaaawo ati ewe Ifa (ori awọnriwọn meji)
O gbọ o ru
Wọn ni: to! Abariwọn, Ọwa a maa ri ohun ti nwa o.

“He sees me, I don’t see him
Ọwọnrin Ọbara”
Performed Ifa divination for Ọwa
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{720} cf. The Book of The Wisdom of Solomon (15:3), “For to know thee is perfect righteousness: yea, to know thy power is the root of immortality” (KJV).

\textsuperscript{721} Similarly the Araba of Modakeke explained, “Orunmila is inside of everyone. He is what makes you study Ifa.” (Interview with the author, November, 12, 2014. Yoruba).
They said that what we are seeking is near us, but our lack of knowledge prevents us from recognizing it.
They said that we should make a sacrifice so that Bara Agbọniregun [Orunmila] can show it to us.
Orunmila, Witness of the choice of destiny, Second to Olodumare, said:
“What we are seeking is near us, but our lack of knowledge prevents us from recognizing it.”
They said that he should sacrifice a hen, twenty thousand cowries, and Ifa leaves (órì awọnriwọn meji—two guana heads)
He heard and sacrificed.
They said: Enough! From now on, Òwa will find what he is seeking.

The opening epithet, “He sees me, I don’t see him,” suggests that this verse can be interpreted as describing self-knowledge, knowledge of one’s ori / ipin. As Èlerì ipin (the witness of the choice of destiny), Orunmila alone can help us recognize that which is closest to us. The ewé ìfà (Ifa leaves) specified for this sacrifice (two guana heads (órì awọnriwọn meji) further reinforce this symbolism, for it takes a head to see another head, and the name of the plant (órì awọnriwọn) can be glossed as “heads, they see each other.” Through the practice and study of Ifa, Orunmila shows babalawo that “what they are seeking is near.” Like a mirror, unseen himself, Ifa witnesses the heads (orì) of his devotees, facilitating self-knowledge, by making them seen and known. Thus, the oracle of Ifa, like its counterpart at Delphi, directs its supplicants to “know themselves.”

How is Knowledge Verified in Ìfà?

Ọbẹ t’o mu ki gbẹ kuku ara rè
-However sharp the knife, it cannot carve its own handle

Contrary to common assumptions, knowledge in Ifa (and other indigenous intellectual traditions) is not merely memorized, but is also verified, often empirically. For something to even be considered imọ (knowledge) instead of igbagbo (accepted hearsay), it must be

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722 Epega, The Sacred Ìfà Oracle, 322

723 Yoruba proverb cited by babalawo to explain why they consult other babalawo for divination. see Bascom, Ìfà Divination, 98
experienced and verified firsthand. So how is this knowledge, some of which may seem quite unusual and far-fetched to Western-educated readers, verified in Ifa?

**How Does Divination Work?**

Going back as far as Plato, scholars have divided divination into two different categories: those characterized by technique or mechanical manipulation (casting lots, augury, etc. and those characterized by inspiration or possession (such as the Oracle at Delphi).724 Babalawo’s own explanations of Ifa blur this dichotomy describing the process of divination as Ifa or Orunmila speaking directly through them or through the instruments of divination, and quite obviously, as the mechanical or technical use of these instruments to produce a figure which is then interpreted. It must be remembered that in the process of divination, the client or seeker does not reveal the reason for his or her consultation to the diviner until the end of the consultation, when the client and diviner work together to interpret the oracular pronouncements of Ifa.

Babalawo draw on the verses and rituals of Ifa itself to provide several different, complementary accounts of how Ifa divination works. As Eze writes, “Odu, however, is not a dead document merely repeated from one generation to the next. It contains elaborate exegesis on the text, but more importantly, it contains… theories about how to do the work of interpretation.”725 These different accounts seem to be regarded as different perspectives, not a mutually contradictory or competing theories. In one account, as mentioned earlier, Ifa divination reveals the wishes or direction of the seeker’s ori, as symbolized by the seeker

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touching money or the instruments of divination to his or her head before handing them over to the babalawo for divination.

In another closely-related account, Qrunmila, as the witness of the choice of destiny (*eleri-ipin*), communicates and guides the seeker in accordance with his or her own destiny, by speaking through the instruments of divination and the babalawo. In another account, it is Qrunmila himself who hears and answers the question of the seeker, while yet another account portrays Ifa divination as a means, introduced or founded by Qrunmila, of gaining insight into the situation at hand.

In all of these accounts, however, the process of divination is the same, and is highly symbolic. Mirroring the accounts of creation in the Odu Ifa (one of which is contained above), the divination process begins by a division of undifferentiated unity into a binary opposition of possibilities. With each cast of the *ikin*, the figure of the Odu becomes more and more specific, until one of the 256 possibilities is marked on the divination tray. This figural representation of the archetypal Odu can then be further elaborated through the use of *ibo*, in which the babalawo will perform additional divination to determine if the pronouncement is good (*ire*) or bad (*ibi*), and then what type of good or bad is specified. However it is common for the babalawo, as in the examples in the previous chapter, to interpret the Odu, recite the narrative, and interpret it for the client before resorting to the lots (*ibo*) for further clarification. Finally the client explains his or her situation in light of the recited narrative, and in consultation with the babalawo (and Ifa, if subsequent divination is performed) determines the appropriate course of action.

Thus the divination procedure re-presents the coming into being of the client’s situation. The unseen and unknown intention existing in the client’s *ori-inu*, is first
manifested in a whispered word to the instruments of divination, which then manifest in a particular figure of an Odu, then in a particular verse and narrative, through which the client’s situation is interpreted and into which it is integrated through consultation and the performance of ritual (usually a sacrifice) of mythological precedent. Ifa divination reveals the unspoken archetype from which the client’s situation has emerged and with each step, becomes more specific and particular until there is a meeting and merging of the “descent” of the meaning/matter at hand (ọrọ) and the “ascent” of interpretive understanding (oye).

Since the whole world is understood to be contained in Ifa, and everything is said to be created through a combination of the Odu (which are themselves created through a combination of the binary pair: 1 II),

any given situation, just like any person, plant, animal, or town, is understood to have an Odu that gave birth to it. Ifa divination identifies this Odu, or archetypal principle, which is then elaborated through the proverbial speech (owe) of the ọsẹ of that particular Odu. This narrative is then applied to the client’s particular situation, as both client and diviner interpret the situation through the lens of this mythological/proverbial narrative, reintegrating the particular situation with its mythological/archetypal precedent and completing the cycle of creation and interpretation. This hermeneutic reverses the process described in Odu Osa Ogunda above in which knowledge (imọ), wisdom (ogbọn) and understanding (oye) combine to form ọrọ, which descends and is clothed in ọwe, the proverbial, metaphoric, symbolic register of speech and art. To quote Abiodun again, “With the aid of Ela [Orumila], Ọrọ is made manifest, and it is beautifully ‘clothed’ in poetry, maxims, and wise sayings, all of which are ọwe. For as the saying goes, kolombo ni Ọrọ n rin, ‘Ọrọ moves around naked,’ and it is forbidden to see it in

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726 This bears a striking resemblance to classical and contemporary Chinese, Korean and Japanese-language discussions of the working of the I-Ching. See Izutsu, T. On Images: Far-Eastern Ways of Thinking.
that state.” Ifa clothes oro in the Odu and their verses (ese) giving the client and the diviner access to the metaphysical root of the situation. As the previously cited verse from Odu Iwori-Odi explains, Orunmila said he would “bring heaven down to the world, he would take the world back to heaven.”

Thus Ifa divination serves as a kind of metaphysical mirror reflecting the archetypal origins of the client’s situation in the Odu, then specifying the particular mythological narrative and ritual course of action to achieve the desired result. And yet, one may still ask how this process is accomplished. How is it that seemingly random throws of a divining chain or palm nuts can give yield profound insight into any given situation? And how can the interpretive claims of babalowo be verified, if at all?

As alluded to above, these claims are only incredible or fantastical given certain metaphysical assumptions about causality, symbolic correspondences, etc.; given other assumptions (those outlined above, which undergird Ifa) these claims are more commonsensical. Nevertheless, one can still ask how babalowo account for and verify the efficacy of this particular system of divination. The babalowo I interviewed discussed several different ways in which the accuracy of the system of divination is verified and even tested, but first we will discuss the two complementary forms of explanation they offered on how Ifa divination “works,” before covering these different methods of verification. In the first, or “incantory,” explanation, the act of divination and recitation of certain verses of Ifa affects the client and puts him or her into the situation described in the verse. Prof. Agboola explained:

Esẹ Ifa are coded stories from the time of Orunmila. The spiritual power [when they are divined and recited] will transfer what happened in that time to the current situation. It’s like

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727 Abiodun, 256. There is also the previously-mentioned proverb, Bi owe, bi owe nIfa soro, “Like proverbs, like proverbs is how Ifa speaks.”

728 Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, 186-7
[the Qur'anic account] of Yunus (Jonah) and the whale. The prayer is, what happened then, let it be the same here and now…. Babalawo have power of the spoken word (ṣẹ ọfọ), what they say comes to pass. The words of Ifa are powerful…

[Question: Can the words actually put you in the same situation described?] Yes, that is what they can do.730

In the second, or “mirroring,” explanation, through the system of symbolic correspondences between the seeker’s ori, Qrunmila, the instruments of divination, and the babalawo described above, Ifa divination reveals the nature of the client’s situation. Both the Araba and Prof. Agboola frequently cited the maxim, “If Ifa did not resemble you, it would not have come out,” to summarize this perspective.

But Ifa divination is not only descriptive, it is also prescriptive. In fact, the vast majority of people who come to consult Ifa with a babalawo are just as, if not more concerned with how to resolve their problems, than they are with their root causes. The interpretive process of Ifa is then applied to prescribe the appropriate ritual intervention and/or change in behavior. Prof. Agboola explained, “It’s not the plant, it’s the power of the plant that is used, odoodo (a kind of flower) is cool and calm—that is what you extract. It’s the same thing with ese Ifa, you extract the meaning and use that…. With sacrifice you change the environment by inviting some forces and clearing out others.”731 In another interview, he similarly commented, contrasting charms (oogun) with Ifa:

Ifa goes to the root of the problem, which we may not be seeing. Charms only deal with the surface, with the symptoms, but Ifa goes to the root, that is why some people do not have the patience for Ifa today. Maybe it will tell them to change their behavior or character, or other things they don’t want to hear or understand. So they just go for charms to do what they want.732

729 The prayer recited by Jonah in this Qur’anic account (see Qur’an 21:87) is one that is commonly-recited by Muslims in times of distress and repentence.


731 Ibid.

732 Ibid.
In the same interview, Prof. Agboola responded to my question, “What if Ifa makes a prediction that doesn’t make any sense or that is wrong?” by telling me about a man he performed divination for in the United States. According to Prof. Agboola, the man came to see him about a new job he was hoping to get, but the verse of Ifa that came out was about a troublesome child. The man was confused and skeptical, but performed the sacrifice anyway. Sure enough, the man got the job, but a few months later, his son did some foolish things and was arrested. The extra money the man had from his new salary was just enough to cover the bail and lawyer’s fees to get his son out of trouble. Prof. Agboola concluded his story:

So you see Ifa dealt with the root of the problem. The man came to ask about a job, but Ifa saw that there was no issue with the job, the problem was with the child. Sometimes a woman may come seeking children, but Ifa will talk about a job or ori, or money, and eventually you will see. So sometimes when you are thinking that Ifa has given a wrong answer or when it doesn’t make sense, maybe in a few weeks, or months or years, something will happen, and you will say, “Ah! That is what Ifa was saying.” This happens often.  

So the predictions of Ifa are expected to be verified over time, but as its predictions are not always obvious, neither is this process of verification.

Sometimes, however, the process of verification is much clearer. The Araba told me how a man once came to him for divination, and the verse of Ifa that emerged indicated that he was a thief seeking help with his next robbery. So the Araba said, “you are a thief, and I don’t help thieves. Come back when you want to do something good with your life.” The man admitted that this was true and left. Sometimes the predictions of Ifa are even more specific. The Araba told me that he once interpreted a verse of Ifa for a man explaining that “he wanted to marry a light-skinned woman with a birthmark on her left thigh.” Apparently, the man excitedly confirmed this. During most of the divinations I observed during my time with the

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733 Ibid.
Araba, the clients immediately identified the interpretation the Araba gave as clearly and directly applying to their situation.

For example, several students from the nearby Obafemi Awolowo University interrupted one of our sessions asking the Araba to divine for them. The University was on strike and so they had little to do. The Araba explained to them how the divination process would work and the first one came forward and whispered his problem to a 20 Naira note, which he then placed on his head and handed to the Araba. The Araba then touched this note to each of the shells on his ọpẹle (divining chain), invoked Ọrunmila, and then cast the chain. He announced the name of the Odu, then cast lots to specify if the pronouncement was one of good (ire) or bad (ibi). The Araba then gave a summary of the pronouncement explaining, “Ifa says you want to fight two people, but you must not do this, one of them is very powerful, and the other is very good. Whatever you are trying to do to them will come back on your head. However if you make a sacrifice, and don’t fight with them anymore you can avoid this.” The students were noticeably surprised and a few of them gasped. The Araba then began reciting the verse of Ifa which he had just summarized, and then interpreted it again for the student, remarking, “Ifa says that you want to fight a person, a girl—” at this point one of the student’s friends hit him and said, “Rebecca!”734 The Araba continued, “but you must not fight her, she is a very powerful person. Ifa says you are also trying to fight another woman, a girl, but this person is very good, she has not done anything wrong to anyone, so you mustn’t fight her.” At this point the student looked back at his friends and said, “Kọrọde!” The Araba then explained the sacrifice that they must make in order to prevent bad things form happening to them in this quarrel. The students then explained that they were having some

734 Names changed to protect privacy.
sort of quarrel with other students and that they were planning to fight them later that week.

The Araba advised them not to fight, especially not to fight the two women mentioned in the
verse he had recited.

In the few cases where the pronouncements of Ifa did not seem to match the problem
which had led the clients to the Araba, neither he nor they seemed particularly bothered by
this fact. While such predictions that seem to “miss the mark,” may lead some clients to seek
the help of other specialists, many others simply trusted in that Ifa’s pronouncements would
make sense in the end, often citing their previous positive experiences with the Araba or other
babalawo as justification for this confidence in Ifa. The Araba admitted to sometimes being
puzzled by the pronouncements of Ifa, but also cited his innumerable experiences of divining
accurately (especially those instances when an unclear pronouncement became clear a few
months or years later) as justification for his confidence in the system of divination.735

Moreover, as previously mentioned if the diviner has a bad head (ori), or is
considered unskilled, he may also be blamed for a bad interpretation that seems to “miss the mark.”

**Direct Testing of Instruments of Divination**

Babalawo sometimes “test” the instruments of divination, especially the opẹle
(divining chain), which is regarded as less reliable than the ọnkan, divination palm nuts. As

Bascom records:

The diviners themselves may test their divining chains in this way to see whether or not they
are telling the truth. Before beginning to divine in the morning, they may find whether a
particular chain is "talking" through specific alternatives, asking questions whose answers they

735. The “just-so” stories contained in many of the verses of Ifa, which provide a mythological explanation of the
properties and behaviours of minerals, plants, animals, kinds of people etc. also serve as a means of
“verification” of the verses. Bascom writes, “In addition to their usual functions in myths and tales, these
aetiological elements serve another purpose in the Ifa verses: by referring to the features of plants, animals,
objects, or rituals which are common knowledge or which the client can verify for himself, they substantiate the
truth of the verse, with its prediction and sacrifice, and the system of divination as a whole.” Bascom, *Ifa
Divination*, 128
already know—for example, whether "The sun will set tonight" or "The sun will not set tonight." Or they may send someone into another room to put one of his hands on the wall, out of sight, and ask whether "It is the right hand" or "It is the left hand." If the wrong answer is selected, they conclude that the chain is "not talking" that day, and test another in a similar fashion. It is for this reason that diviners have several chains. Not all diviners test their chains, one maintaining that "anyone is willing to talk when he wakes up in the morning," and it is considered unnecessary to test the palm nuts in this way because they are reliable, whereas the divining chains are not.

The reason for maintaining that the divining chain is an inferior and less reliable instrument may derive from the fact that it is more often used for the technique of specific alternatives. If many questions are asked, conflicting answers may be given, and occasionally the answers may contradict what is said in the verse. In the instance cited earlier, where the figure Otura Irosun was cast for a client who wished to learn about taking a trip, the verse selected (183-4) warned that he would lose his way if he did not sacrifice. However, in the inquiries through specific alternatives, good rather than evil was indicated, and the kind of good specified was children. In discussing this with the diviner, he indicated that such contradictions were not infrequent, but when either good or evil is confirmed, the prediction is more certain. Nevertheless a sacrifice would still be required.

He was more puzzled by the reference to children in this context, though he showed little concern, pointing out that the correct answer had come out eventually through the verse, and citing the proverb "Like proverbs, like proverbs, is how Ifa speaks." [Bi owe, bi owe n(i)-Ifa soro.]

### Human Error and Fraud

However, when the results of Ifa divination appear to lack coherence or applicability, human error or dishonesty is usually the first suspected culprit. In his essay on Ifa divination, Ajayi cites the following verse of Ifa (without giving the Odu to which it belongs) and comments:

\begin{verbatim}
Ọpẹ-osunu,
Eniki ni o gbọfa,
Ohun a ba b’Ifa
Nifa i so.
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
Ọpe [the palm tree] (Orunmila) is not dishonest,
It is the chanter who is not versed in Ifa,
Whatever we ask Ifa
Is what Ifa reveals
\end{verbatim}

If this happens, it is the babalawo who has "misrepresented the divinity.” Anyone who has successfully passed through the rigours of Ifa training would be able to identify the problem of his clients. The babalawo should base his expertise on the training he has acquired. Those who use charms to find out the hidden problems of their clients are not true babalawo and in fact, they are not fit to be one. This class of babalawo (if any), are being dishonest, and they pay

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736 Bascom, Ifa Divination 79-80.
dearly for it. In the later part of their life, emphasised our informants, such babalawo lose their sight permanently.737

Nevertheless, the babalawo whom I interviewed complained of many fraudulent babalawo operating in Nigeria today, explaining that because contemporary people have less knowledge of Ifa and the Oriṣa than their ancestors, they are easier to take advantage of.

However, even Bascom’s work, conducted in the mid-20th century, records the presence of false or fraudulent diviners from contemporary testimony and the verses of Ifa itself:

However, that there are dishonest diviners who falsify their predictions is believed by both clients and diviners, and this belief is confirmed by the precautions that the clients take to conceal their problems (see pp. 68-69). A case in point is cited in one of the Ifa verses (247-2) in which a king's diviner, who was having an affair with the king's wife, heard that another diviner was coming; he instructed that the new diviner was to be killed as a human sacrifice because he feared that his guilt would be revealed, as indeed it was. In another verse (244-2) a false diviner pleased his clients by promising them blessings, whereas a truthful diviner correctly warned them against evil spirits. Wishing to believe the first prophecy, they bound the truthful diviner and left him in the forest until the evil spirits arrived and they saw that he had been telling the truth. Eshu intervened to save the truthful diviner, who, in turn, saved the clients.

Any diviner who controls the figure that is cast or modifies its interpretation so as to falsify the message of Ifa must deliberately depart from the principles of divination in which he has been trained for many years. To do so defeats the entire purpose of divination by giving a message other than the one Ifa intends for the client to receive, and this is considered strictly unethical. Clients avoid diviners whom they suspect of such practices, while the diviners deny that they themselves engage in them, and both agree that few individuals are actually guilty of them. The diviner's ignorance rather than his dishonesty is the usual excuse for failures….

An unscrupulous diviner must be subtle enough to avoid arousing the suspicions of his clients, as well as to avoid detection. An informant explained that if the first verse recited for him by a diviner should pertain to housebuilding (e.g. 167-1), he would be suspicious because it was common knowledge at the time that he was building a new house. Even if he had come to ask about a completely different problem, he would distrust the diviner and his advice, and would not make the prescribed sacrifice, believing that the diviner was guessing or was "twisting" Ifa to fit the situation. If the message of Ifa is twisted in this way, neither the prediction nor the sacrifice are relevant to what Ifa intended to convey. Similarly, if a woman who is childless after several years of marriage were told in the first verse that she was going to have a child (e.g. 20-3), she would suspect the diviner whether or not this was what she had come to inquire about. The Araba of Igana said that a diviner may even avoid reciting first a verse that touches on a problem which, he happens to know, concerns the client, because the client would suspect him of lying. Even an honest diviner is not above suspicion. There is an Ifa saying to the effect that "If we cast Ifa today, it must not come to pass today," because people will suspect the diviner whose prediction was accurate.

737 Ajayi, B. “Ifa Divination Process.” in Essays in Honour of Professor Wande Abimbola: Research in Yoruba Language and Literature vol. 8, (Technicians of the Sacred), 1996, 33
An apparent contradiction is involved here, for a diviner's skill is judged in part by his ability to recite the appropriate verse immediately while others touch upon it later or not at all. Earlier I concluded that "where a diviner's reputation for honesty is doubted, the fact that he answers the client's question immediately is held against him, whereas if his reputation for honesty is beyond reproach, it is taken as evidence of his skill" (Bascom, 1941: 51). This may be a partial explanation, but the nature of the problem is probably the critical factor. When it is common knowledge that the client is faced by the problem cited in the first verse, he suspects the diviner's honesty; but when the problem is known only to a few, and perhaps only to himself, he respects his skill. A clever diviner could, of course, also recite several verses before the one he improvises or takes from a different figure to suit the client's known problem. Aside from his skepticism when the first verse recited refers to his problem, the client is protected in several other ways: by his choice of the diviner he consults, by his ability to conceal his problem, by whatever familiarity he may have gained through prior consultations, by the fact that the diviner's apprentices and colleagues who know the verses are often present, and by the fact that the reputation of a successful diviner could be ruined if he were detected in reciting verses from the wrong figure.

There is no question in my own mind, on the basis of my experience, that most of the babalawo are honest, as both diviners and clients assert. They operate in perfectly good faith, employing a system in which they believe implicitly and in terms of which they themselves offer sacrifices, make decisions, and in fact order their own lives. They believe that they can best serve both their clients' and their own interests by transmitting the message of their deity, Ifa, as accurately as possible.

It is possible for clients to test a diviner's accuracy through specific alternatives, and in two of the verses (35-3, 54-4) this is done by the mythological character. In the latter, when the cow of the Sea Goddess died, she had it covered with cloths like a human corpse, and told her followers to announce her own death. When they called the diviners to learn if any sacrifice was required, they all announced, because they were not skillful in the use of specific alternatives, that the kind of evil with which they were confronted was death. The followers of the Sea Goddess asked if there were not another diviner; and when he came, he announced that the evil involved a loss. The Sea Goddess then revealed herself, rewarded him, and chose him as her diviner.738

The pragmatic and even empirical attitude demonstrated by the “Sea Goddess” (Olokun) in the above narrative is a distinct characteristic of Yoruba spirituality that has caught the attention of many scholars of religion and Yoruba culture. For example, Karin Barber recorded the following song, sung by Sango worshippers:

*Sango bo o gbe mi n o lo reeya Oṣun*
*Sango bo o gbe mi n o lo sẹgbagbọ*

*Sango, If you don’t bless me, I will make an Oṣun image*
*Sango, if you don’t bless me I’ll go and turn Christian.*739

738 Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 76-79. It is important to note that the practice of reciting verses until the client determines one that is relevant is one that I have not observed. Secondly, most babalawo I have encountered said that there are far more fraudulent babalawo in operation today than there were in Bascom’s time.

739 Barber, “How Man Makes God,” 737.
In fact, in the historical accounts cited in J.D.Y. Peel’s *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, the reason most commonly cited for converting to Christianity from the worship of the *oriṣa*, and sometimes back again, is the inability of the this particular mode of worship to provide the worshipper with what he or she is seeking, be it children, wealth, or peace of mind and understanding. This attitude is succinctly captured in the popular Yoruba saying, *Oriṣa ta kẹ kẹ kẹ, ti o gbọ, ta ge, ge, ge, ti o gba, oju popo ni ngbe*, which, roughly translated, means, "If your god doesn't listen when you praise it, or doesn't help you when you worship it, get rid of it!" This “empirical” and “skeptical” attitude is a significant cause of the dynamism of Yoruba spiritual, intellectual, and artistic traditions, and underlies the “verification” of the efficacy of these traditions in the everyday lives of their adherents.

**Verification of Sacrifices and Medicines**

While the efficacy of the sacrifices (*ẹbọ*) and pharmacopoeia (*ewe*) of Ifa is implicitly trusted (when received from authoritative sources), and is assumed to usually be more efficacious than other forms of medicine/charms (*oogun*) (hence the expression *ẹbọ s’agba*

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741 cf. Ogunnaike, A. “The Myth of Purity” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. <http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2013/myth-purity>. In the same vein Oyelaran cites the following sayings, “*Oriṣa bi oo le gbe mi ẹṣe mi bi o ti ba mi*. Oriṣa, if you cannot prosper me, leave me as you met me.” And “*Oriṣa ti a sin sin sin, ti ko gbe ni, a a pada le yin in rẹ ni*. The Oriṣa whom one serves, serves, and serves, and does not prosper one, we must turn back away from him.” (“*Eṣu and Ethics in the Yoruba World View*”, 36).

742 Similarly Bascom writes, “The ancestral guardian soul [ori], the deities, evil spirits, witches, charms, and medicines, curses, oaths, and ordeals were matters of serious belief, and religion in its various forms permeated all aspects of Yoruba life. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the Yoruba were resigned to uncontrollable destinies, or that they were content to rely on divination and other religious practices to solve all their problems. Several Yoruba proverbs clearly convey the message that ‘God helps those who help themselves,’ and some show an almost skeptical attitude toward these religious beliefs: ‘Bravery by itself is as good as magic.’ ‘A Chief is calling you and you are casting Ifa; if Ifa speaks of blessing and the chief speaks of evil, what then?’ ‘A charm for invisibility is no better than finding a big forest to hide in; a sacrifice is no better than many supporters; and a deity to lift me on to a platform is no better than having a horse to ride away on.’” Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 119.
oogun, sacrifice is senior to medicine/charms\textsuperscript{743} the babalawo I interviewed would generally not say that they know (mọ) a sacrifice or herbal preparation unless they had tried it out for themselves and verified its efficacy. Leaving aside the case of “false positives” where the cure or resolution of the problem had some other cause (or no cause at all in the case or preventative sacrifices and herbal medicines), I asked the Araba what happens when the ẹbọ or ewe appear to not have worked. He explained that he would first check to see if the people involved had correctly followed their instructions and done the sacrifice appropriately and/or that the ewe had been prepared and administered correctly. Some of the ẹbọ and ewe have specific taboos associated with them, such as not eating certain kinds of food or refraining from sexual activity or entering certain places for a period of time. The violation of these taboos is often suspected as the reason why some ẹbọ and ewe do not seem to work. Prof. Agboola quoted the following saying to explain this point, “Eniti o rubọ ti ko gba ewo bi eni florọ ẹbe s'ọ fì lori. One who offers sacrifice but does not observe the taboo is no better off than if he had thrown away the money he spent on the sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{744}

If everything appears to have been performed correctly, the Araba explained that the next step would be to try to discover, by consulting Ifa and perhaps by visiting the home of the affected person, if there are other factors or agents at play. Are there enemies (ọta) using bad medicine (oogun), curses, etc. to spoil the person’s health or efforts? Are there things in the home and family environment that are obstructing the work of the ẹbọ or ewe Ifa? Finally, the Araba explained that in some particularly difficult cases, consultation with other specialists is necessary. Babalawo are particularly ecumenical, and frequently consult with

\textsuperscript{743} See Wenger, \textit{The Timeless Mind of the Sacred}, 23.

\textsuperscript{744} Prof. Agboola, interview with the author, November, 26, 2014. Ile-Ifẹ, Nigeria. English and Yoruba.
other ritual specialists such as other babalawo and oloriṣa, Aje, oniṣẹgun (experts in traditional medicine), alfa (Muslim scholars versed in esoteric sciences), pastors and even practitioners of allopathic medicine (modern “Western” medicine). The Araba only singled out evangelical Christian pastors and modern Salafi Imams as those with whom he would not like to work, explaining that he did not think they had any useful “deep knowledge” (imọ ijinle). The Araba is sometimes hired by local government officials in Oṣun state to work in consultation with other ritual specialists to “disinfect” their offices when they suspect someone (usually the previous occupant of their position) of having left some negative charms there.

In any event, the Araba clearly distinguished between those medicines and incantations he had tried himself and seen work (those which he said he “knew,” mọ), and those few he had only received from others and had yet to verify (those he said he “accepted” gbagbo). But what if after all of this, a sacrifice or herbal preparation still did not work, would that be cause to doubt the legitimacy of the verse of Ifa which prescribed it? Of Ifa itself? Isn’t it possible that false, ineffective, or distorted verses could work their way into the oral corpus? How could you tell a “true” verse from a false one?

Since more than one verse from the Odu that emerges in divination can be employed in prescribing sacrifice and herbal preparations, and since the babalawo often determine themselves what the sacrifice or herbal preparation should be, the Araba explained that even if something didn’t seem to work, that would not lead him to doubt the efficacy of Ifa

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745 The Araba also explained that many of these Pastors and even a few Muslim leaders came to him privately for divination and other ritual help and “power” in establishing their ministries and handling their personal affairs, although these same people would often publicly denounce Ifa and traditional Yoruba religious practices.

746 Araba of Modakẹkẹ. interview with the author, November, 24, 2013, Modakẹkẹ, Nigeria. Yoruba.
divination, since another verse or sacrifice from the same Odu should be able to succeed if the other one seemed to have failed. The Araba explained that this seeming failure would then be chalked up to the error of the babalawo in determining the appropriate sacrifice, perhaps he should have asked Ifa to specify things more clearly, or perhaps he made a mistake or misremembered something. As for the issue of “false” verses, the Araba rejected this possibility, explaining that a real babalawo (babalawo gidi) would be able to tell a real verse from a false one just by hearing it, and that in any event, verses could be “cross-checked” with other babalawo.

**Consultation with other Babalawo and Authority of Ẹsẹ Ifa**

When they get together for ritual festivals or worship, babalawo frequently engage in competitions of reciting Ifa, in which each babalawo will recite a verse from a particular Odu, one after the other until they have exhausted all of the verses in their memory. One cannot recite a verse that has already been recited, and so the junior apprentices (omo awo) and babalawo usually begin such competitions, since they will typically only have a few verses of any given Odu memorized, which are often commonly known, whereas more senior babalawo will know more, and more rare verses of Ifa. Participants drop out when all of the verses they know have been recited, and the “last man standing” wins. While regional and other variants of similar verses are admitted without any problem, senior babalawo will often correct their juniors where they think they have made a mistake by incorrectly attributing a verse to a particular Odu, by misremembering the details of a verse, or conflating/combining one narrative with another. Younger babalawo whose learning is widely respected may also correct older babalawo for similar lapses. Such competitions and sessions of reciting and
chanting verses of Ifa and singing Ifa songs are important for maintaining the integrity of the oral corpus, and actively and establish and authenticate this dynamic body of orature.

This process of “authentication” is of great importance, given that the ese Ifa constitute perhaps the most authoritative body of oral tradition not only amongst babalawo, but also other orisha and Yoruba-speakers worldwide. Babalawo most commonly justify their claims about mythistory, metaphysics, epistemology, theology, correct ritual practice by referring to and interpreting ese Ifa, not unlike the way in which they conduct divinatory consultations, except in this case, they select the relevant Odus to recite. These interpretations of and insights drawn from the verses of Ifa, can be remarkably unique and even idiosyncratic, but are often cause for lively discussion and debate, as the discussion between Awo Faniyi and Prof. Agboola cited earlier in this chapter demonstrates. In such discussions, personal experience and other ese Ifa are used to support interpretations, and such consultations and discussions with other babalawo, especially respected and senior babalawo, are an important means of verifying these interpretations and insights.

Consultation with other babalawo is an important part of every stage of a babalawo’s career. The babalawo I interviewed emphasized that for important matters, one should not just divine for oneself, but also consult other senior babalawo for additional divination and insight into the result of one’s own divination. The precedent for this practice is established in the many mythological narratives of Ifa wherein Orunmila seeks out babalawo for divination.

Just as our interactions with other people teach us things about ourselves we could never learn otherwise, and just as we need a mirror in order to see our face, for babalawo, divination with other babalawo can reveal things that divination for oneself cannot. As the

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747 And I have tried to follow suit methodologically in this chapter.
proverb at the beginning of this section says, “Ọbẹ t’ọ mu ki gbẹ kuku ara re—However sharp the knife, it cannot carve its own handle.”

Thus we can see that the tradition of Ifa is critical and dynamic, and one in which verification plays an important role. While these modes of verification differ significantly from the “null-hypothesis-rejecting” paradigm that supposedly governs contemporary scientific research, they have their own internal consistency and logic, as the sections above demonstrate.

**Verification through Direct / Lived Experience**

However, by far the most commonly cited, and important form of verification was the actual experience of the practice of Ifa. Babalawo cited the things they had felt and seen during the practice of Ifa, and the profound insight that Ifa gave them into their lives and themselves as the primary basis of their confidence in their own knowledge. The experience of initiation in the igbodu, wherein one is confronted with Odu, one’s own ori, and the Odu “which gave birth to one” was especially cited as being at once the source and verification of the knowledge which babalawo had previously learned and would later acquire. As the encounter with one’s own ori-inu, one’s inner/heavenly self, everything that follows is understood as a kind of exposition of that single moment or reality, just as it is a confirmation of everything that has come before. The verses of the Odu that is determined to have “given birth to one” further clarify and construct this “destiny” and conception of the self through their words, advice, and behavioural prescriptions. Reflecting upon one’s own self, character, and life through the lens of these èsè, living out these prescriptions and taboos (eewo), and

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748 Yoruba proverb cited by babalawo to explain why they consult other babalawo for divination. see Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 98
observing what happens when one does not, were all cited as important ways in which one “verified” this self-knowledge, and by extension, the “deep knowledge” (imo ijinle) of Ifa, of the Odu, which govern the other inhabitants of the cosmos. One’s knowledge of Ifa, of one’s destiny, is verified the only way it can be, by living it.

The following narrative, from Ogbe-Atẹ, is instructive in this regard. In this ẹsẹ, a man became initiated into Ifa and performed all of the sacrifices, but his life didn’t really seem to change or get noticeably better. Frustrated by this seeming fruitlessness of all of his efforts in Ifa, he decided to give up on Ifa and go back to his old way of life. So he went to the river and threw away his ikin (divinatory palm nuts, representing Ifa itself and called “his Ifa”). But soon things got even worse for him, and he thought that maybe he had made a mistake in abandoning Ifa. He went to see a babalawo to ask for help. The babalawo performed divination for him and told him that he should sacrifice to his ikin, but the poor man told the babalawo that he had thrown away his ikin, so he was told to make the sacrifice with the ikin of the babalawo who performed divination for him. The sacrifice required a large fish, so he went to the river, caught a fish, and brought it back to the babalawo to prepare the sacrifice for him to make things easier. When the babalawo opened up the fish, he found a complete set of ikin inside. The man recognized his own ikin, and concluded that Ifa was telling him something. The babalawo agreed. They washed the ikin and the babalawo told him that he should be re-initiated. He was re-initiated and given a new Odu.749

In this narrative, a babalawo doubted Ifa to the point of giving it up because it did not seem to change his life in any noticeable way, but then decided to return to seek Ifa’s counsel

because of the changes in his life after he threw away his *ikin*. The prescribed sacrifice led the man back to his own *ikin*, and to Ifa. On a more symbolic level, the things that seemed to lead him away from Ifa or take his Ifa away from him (changes in life or lack thereof, the river, the fish) actually led him back to Ifa. In any event, his knowledge of Ifa was inseparable from his practice of it, and the verification of this knowledge (once negatively, once positively) lay in his life experiences and his interpretation thereof.

Thus, to verify the knowledge of Ifa, especially its deep knowledge (*imo ijinle*) one must practice Ifa. As the *esẹ* says, *a kọfa mọfa*, “to study/practice Ifa is to know Ifa.” To practice Ifa is to participate in a process of self-transformation and self-knowledge (*imori*), which is necessarily unique. To study Ifa is to cultivate a particular mode of being and a distinct form of self-knowledge through the mediation of the Odu. Thus there is a point at which any academic or "objective " study of Ifa and its knowledge must halt, and it is at this point that the real study and knowledge of Ifa, the study of and engagement with one’s inner self and destiny (*ori-inu*) through the mediation of Ifa, begins.

**Conclusion**

Stories are powerful things. Stories can inspire us, awaken latent possibilities within us, expand our horizons, and make us re-evaluate our priorities, our outlook on life, our lives, and our very selves. Stories keep us going, give us new ways to understand ourselves and our lives, and shape our imagination. Stories can give us the strength and guidance we need to live out and make sense of our own. When we recognize ourselves or one of the situations that make up our lives in the mirror of a story, a poem, a song or a movie, it is a unique moment of self-discovery wherein a new aspect, a new facet of our reality is revealed to us. Stories make and shape who we are, and this is perhaps more true of the initiates of Ifa than
anyone else. For babalawo and iyanifa, the indefinitely numerous and dynamic narratives of the Odu not only hold a mirror up to the whole cosmos, they also reveal and structure their individual lives and destinies.

Through a lengthy and rigorous training, babalawo memorize, learn, and become acquainted with the Odu and their associated ritual practices, and cultivate a particular mode of being (iwa) specified by and congruent with the Odu of Ifa “that gave birth” to them. This received body of knowledge (igbagbọ) is transformed, along with the apprentice (omo awo), into realized or verified knowledge (imo) by putting it into practice in ritual, and by living it through cultivating good character (iwa pẹle). The cultivation of character is essential to this process of acquiring knowledge not only because babalawo do not like to share their knowledge with ill-mannered apprentices, but because good character (iwa pẹle) is the existential or ontological concomitant of knowing the truth. To have good character (iwa) is not just to be “better” than one who lacks character, it is to be “more,” to have a greater share of “existence” or “being” (iwa). This greater capacity of being is both a condition and a result of the process of acquiring knowledge. As Beier writes, “Yoruba ethics means: to become through ritual, a being who knows more and understands more, a person who lives more and is more.” Character is so central to the epistemology of Ifa that Prof. Agboola defined truth as “Truth (otito) is the character (iwà) of Olodumare. Truth (otito) is more than saying the truth, it is being true.”

This cultivation of character is not identical for everyone, since each one of us has a unique destiny or inner-head (ori-inu). The rituals of initiation are meant to establish the

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relationship between the initiate’s ori and Ḟrunmila, and to give the initiate (and the other initiating babalawo) a glimpse into himself, into his destiny, his chosen purpose in life (ipin), to remember “everything he left behind at the tree of forgetfulness (igi igbagbe)” when coming into the world from heaven. By encountering his ori-inu in the grove of Odu, and by the elaboration of this choice of destiny (ipin) through the revelation of the Odu that “gave birth” to him/her and will structure the rest of his or her life, the initiate acquires knowledge of his or her self (imori), his/her destiny and purpose in life. Babalawo come to embody this Odu through memorizing and contemplating its verses, observing the taboos associated with these verses, and becoming defined by the character traits exemplified in the Odu. By embodying their Odu, they come to know it (and thus Ḟrunmila and Olodumare) and themselves more fully.

This is imọ ijinle, the deep knowledge that mends the self, connecting the outer or everyday self (ori-ode) with its inner or heavenly counterpart (ori-inu), and that ultimately mends the world, bringing the things in the world back together with their heavenly principles (Odu and Oriṣa), and through them, back to Olodumare. As Awo Faniyi explained:

Deep knowledge (imọ ijinle) is the Word (ọro) from the mouth of Olodumare that He gave to Ḟrunmila, when he was coming from heaven to earth, to use to mend the world. This is the basis of the knowledge for which the babalawo who can recite all 256 Odu of Ifa are called deep knowers (onimo ijinle) amongst the priests of Ifa.

As the verse from Odu Osa-Ogbe quoted at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, this ọro is composed of the wisdom (ogbon), knowledge (imọ), and understanding (oye) of Olodumare through which he created the world. To acquire deep knowledge is to reverse the cosmogonic process and return to Olodumare through the intermediary of Ela/Ṭrunmila, the owner of this deep knowledge, this Divine Word (ọro). Through imitation of and devotion to
Ọrunmila, through contemplating the Odu and rituals of Ifa, babalawo come to resemble, to know, and to participate in the endless knowledge of Ọrunmila, who is hailed as:

- Perfect in the house of wisdom
- My Lord, whose knowledge is without end
- Not knowing you fully, we [our lives] are in vain
- If we could but know you in full, all would be well.

But this deep knowledge of Ọrunmila is not other than self-knowledge, because as the Araba of Modakeke explained, “Ọrunmila is inside of everyone.” Mythologically, Ọrunmila is the father of the 256 Odu, and each babalawo is a child of a particular Odu. Thus Ọrunmila is the principle or origin of all babalawo. For a babalawo or iyanifa, to become more like Ọrunmila in knowledge, character, and actions is to become more oneself. As Eliade writes:

- For Plato, philosophy helps you remember the Ideas; more precisely to remember the situation of the soul in post-existence and pre-existence when the soul contemplated the Ideas. For the Australians, initiation reveals to you that you were already here, in these places, in the dawn of time, in illo tempore, you were such-and-such civilizing hero. This mythical personage serves as a model: the initiates must repeat what he did in the beginning. But through the initiation, you discover that this mythical personage is you yourself—as you appeared for the first time. Ultimately, you are a repetition of yourself—as you were in the beginning, exemplary.\(^{752}\)

This close relationship and even identity with Ọrunmila is the result of a lifetime of learning and devotion, as Susanne Wenger explains,

- The olorisha must intensify his life through constant preoccupation with the deity. The concentration that is needed for the dialogue with the deity can only be built up through perpetual training... All these activities of olorishas: ritual, divination, sacrifice, and magic are entirely a means. The final purpose of orisha worship is to extend the natural limits of human experience into the sphere of the metaphysical. Man becomes more than man.\(^{753}\)

This state, which Beier describes as “the semi-divine state of ‘dynamic relaxation’: a perfected state of mind where intense concentration results in a state of complete repose,”\(^{754}\) is

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\(^{754}\) Ibid, 56.
identified in Odu Irosun-Iwori as the “good position” (*ipo rere*), the goal of human existence.\(^{755}\)

The tradition of Ifa is critical and dynamic in part because of this emphasis on existential and even empirical verification of the deep knowledge (*imọ ijinle*) that is its foundation and goal. While this knowledge cannot be contained in books or tested in a laboratory, it is tested, sometimes verified, and sometimes rejected, in the lives of the millions of people who seek out Ifa’s counsel, and the lives of those who dedicate their lives to pursuing, cultivating, and disseminating the wisdom of Ọrunmila, the word (*ọrọ*) of Olodumare. As the proverb says, “*Eni t'ó bá f'eyin t'òpè ní gbó ohun Olodumare*—“Those who rest their backs against the palm tree (symbolizing Ifa) will hear the voice of Olodumare.”

Through the study and practice of Ifa, babalawo cultivate a very particular mode of being (*iwa*) defined by their Odu, by the mythological precedent of Ọrunmila. This self-transformation leads to a deep knowledge of self, of the world, and of Ọrunmila and Olodumare. In so doing, babalawo accomplish the mission of Ọrunmila as described in the Odu Iwori-Odi, to “bring heaven down to the world” and “take the world back to heaven,” to make existence whole again by bringing together the two halves of the cosmic calabash.

Chapter 6: Comparing Ifa and Tijani Sufism

Surely there is a window from heart to heart: they are not separate and far from each other. Two earthenware lamps are not joined, but their light is mingled as it moves.
-Rumi,  "Mathnawī, Book III, v 4391-2

If a Muslim were to know what an idol is He would know that religion is idol-worship And if the associator (mushrik) were to know what an idol is Where would he have gone wrong in his religion?
-Maḥmūd Shabistarī

Dagadamba fura, oseye oko ogbo male. Awo Rokonjobi A difa fun Ọrunmila nijoti ti o lo re gba gambi. A gba gambi o, a gba wa A le we lawani, a gbede borun. Ifa wa di male

Why Compare Sufism and Ifa?

The project of the Comparative Study of Religion has rightly been criticized for its checkered past, in which many, if not most, of its studies failed to balance the pole of similarity/universalism with that of difference and particularity. More recently, comparative
studies have also come under (justified) attack for its colonial and Christian triumphalist heritage of categorization, control, domination, and defeat (in which religions were classified, ranked, seen through the lens of, and unfavorably compared to Protestant Christianity or secular rationalism), and for its tendency to over-generalize and fit data into its preconceived categories. In the introduction to their anthology of essays on contemporary Comparative Religion, A Magic Still Dwells, Patton and Ray summarize this post-modern critique:

The standpoint of the comparativist was once privileged as a vantage-point of objective description, classification, and comparison of “other peoples” and their beliefs. The focus of deconstructive scrutiny ‘reveals’ it instead, at worst, as a subjective mélange of culturally-biased perception that cannot but distort or, at best, as an act of imaginative, associative “play.” … To compare is to abstract, and abstractions is construed as a political act aimed at domination and annihilation, obliterating the cultural matrix from which it “lifts” the compared object. Thus to compare religious traditions, particularly unhistorically related ones...is to attempt to control and ultimately destroy them.\footnote{Kimberley Patton, C., A Magic Still Dwells Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), 2.}

Most characteristically however, the comparative project has been criticized for its “unscientific” methodology which emphasizes similarity over difference. As J.Z. Smith writes in his seminal 1982 essay “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” “for as practiced by scholarship, \textit{comparison has been chiefly an affair of similarity}… The issue of difference has been all but forgotten.”\footnote{qtd. In Patton, A Magic Still Dwells, 3.} There are however, two sides to this coin.

The post-modern perspective is characterized by its own totalizing dogmas of difference and particular theories of semiotics (free-floating signifiers) and metaphysics (there is nothing beyond the text/discourse/power relations), which are not shared by many religious traditions, including Sufism and Ifa. Thus, as mentioned in the first chapter, subjecting these traditions to the “gaze” of postmodern theory recapitulates the same colonial logic of domestication and destruction. How many an undergraduate or graduate student has stopped
practicing or abandoned the worldviews of his or her religious tradition, regarding it as “ naïve” or “backwards” in the wake of courses in the post-modern study of religion? How many more students and professors hide their religious identities and convictions in academic settings for fear of being judged and dismissed by their colleagues? Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and the Araba of Modakèkè would strongly disagree with Derrida and Foucault on their characterizations of language, power, ethics, aesthetics, truth, etc. So why must the former pair be subjected to the theories of the latter and not the other way around? Ironically, the postmodern theorization of religious traditions, especially those of the African continent and diaspora (in many ways, the ultimate “other” of this Western tradition) can be yet another, but less self-aware and honest, attempt to control and destroy them. In the name of “giving them a voice” it silences them, in the name of freeing them from colonial hegemony, it subjects them to the hegemony of (post)colonial, (post)modern⁷⁵⁸ theory.

So what does all of this have to do with comparison? As Foucault and others have demonstrated, post-medieval Western thought has been governed more and more by the logic of difference, discursivity, and analysis. As the previous chapters demonstrate, both Ifa and Sufism are characterized by symbolic logics of resemblance, which have a much greater affinity with the Western Classical and Medieval epistemes than those of the modern and post-modern West. Describing the transition from the Classical/Medieval approach based on resemblance to the modern taxonomy based on difference, Foucault writes:

All this was of the greatest consequence to Western thought. Resemblance, which had for long been the fundamental category of knowledge – both the form and the content of what we know – became dissociated in an analysis based on terms of identity and difference; moreover, whether indirectly by the intermediary or measurement, or directly and, as it were, on the same footing, comparison became a function of order; and, lastly, comparison ceased to fulfill the function of revealing how the world is ordered… the activity of the mind… will no longer

⁷⁵⁸ I use the parentheses instead of hyphens to suggest precisely these kinds of deep and abiding continuities between “colonial” and “post-colonial” structures of knowledge and power, and likewise between the “modern” and “post-modern,” particularly when one considers the perspectives of traditions such as Ifa and Sufism.
consist in drawing things together, in setting out on a quest for everything that might reveal some sort of kinship, attraction or secretly shared nature within them [resemblance], but, on the contrary, in discriminating, that is, in establishing their identities, then the inevitability of the connections with all the successive degrees of series.759

Thus the contemporary aversion to comparative studies (which are typically governed by resemblance) has to be understood in the broader context of the rise of analysis and difference as the governing principles of modern/structuralist and post-modern/post-structuralist thought. Most contemporary arguments against comparison are based on a privileging of difference, a position that is not shared by the traditions of Sufism and Ifa.760

From the perspective of Sufism, especially that of Ibn ‘Arabi, analysis and discrimination is the domain of the rational faculty (‘aql), whereas synthesis and perceiving similarity is the domain of the imaginal faculty (khayāl) and the heart (qalb), thus the current academic climate could be characterized by a hypertrophy of ‘aql (reason) and an atrophy of khayāl (imagination) and qalb (heart/intellect).761 The ideal, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, is to “see with two eyes,” to combine the synthetic perception of similarity of the imaginal faculty (khayāl) with the discriminative and analytic power of reason (‘aql). Thus, any exercise in comparative religion must involve both comparison and contrast, and resist the tendency reduce all to incomparable difference or sheer identity.

759 Foucault, The Order of Things, 54-55.

760 In both traditions, from a certain perspective, the “level” at which things are the same, ultimately in Allah/Olodumare, is more real than the “level” at which things are different and distinct (manifestation/the world).

761 Even Foucault draws a similar conclusion regarding the necessity of imagination (admittedly a distinct concept than that of khayāl) for comparison and resemblance, “If representation did not possess the obscure power of making a past impression present once more, then no impression would ever appear as either similar to or dissimilar from a previous one. This power of recall implies at least the possibility of causing two impressions to appear as quasi-likenesses (as neighbors or contemporaries, existing in almost the same way) when one of those impressions only is present, while the other has ceased, perhaps a long time ago, to exist. Without imagination, there would be no resemblance between things.” (Ibid, 68-9).
So now we return to the titular question of this section: why compare Ifa and Sufism? First of all, not only do these traditions compare themselves to each other, but their interpretive frameworks provide means of interpreting and comparing these and other traditions. Comparison is an inescapable aspect of human cognition, and when learning about traditions such as Sufism and Ifa, we unconsciously and automatically compare and contrast them with and to each other and with the other intellectual and religious traditions with which we are familiar. Since this is happening anyway, we might as well attempt to do it consciously and carefully. Furthermore, in Nigeria and the African diaspora, these two traditions exist side-by-side and are sometimes even found within the same family. Thus for many of us who encounter both traditions in our daily lives, their relationship to one another (and to ourselves) can be a matter of personal and existential concern.

Moreover, Tijani Sufism and Ifa represent two important kinds of non-Europhone African intellectual traditions: one the one hand, the written/oral Arabophone and indigenous language traditions of Sufism and Islamic learning, and on the other, the oral (and now somewhat written) indigenous language (and somewhat European-language) traditions of indigenous religious traditions. Careful comparison can help dispel the lingering colonial myth of a syncretic *islam noir*, and help us better understand the similarities and differences between these two kinds of traditions—a prerequisite to undertaking any study of their mutual influence. Likewise, comparing Tijani Sufism and Ifa brings into sharper focus their similarities and differences, and the ways in which contemporary academic practice, discourse, and theory differ significantly from that of these two traditions. Additionally, the way the comparison is conducted in this chapter, reporting what each tradition has to say about the other, and then writing from the perspective of each tradition, provides a concrete
example of how both Sufism and Ifa can and do interpret themselves as well as other traditions. Moreover, these examples make more salient the particularities and limitations of the categories of so-called “objective” academic interpretations.

Finally, from the lens of Ibn ‘Arabi’s “theory,” studying Reality’s self-portraits side by side, comparing and contrasting them, is an important means of recognizing and transcending our own limited conceptions of Reality. To quote him again:

Generally speaking, each person necessarily sticks to a particular belief concerning his Lord. He always goes back to His Lord through his particular belief and seeks God therein. Such a man positively recognizes the Real only when He manifests himself to him in the form recognized by his belief. But when He manifests himself in other beliefs, he flatly refuses to accept Him and runs away from Him. In so doing, he simply behaves in an improper way towards God, while imagining that he is practicing good manners (adab) towards Him. Thus a person who clings to belief believes in a god according to what he has made in his own soul (nafs). The god of beliefs comes about through the subjective act of making/positing (ja‘l) on the part of the believers. They see naught but their own souls and what they have made therein.

So contemplate the fact that the hierarchy of mankind in their knowledge of God is their very hierarchy in terms of their vision on the Day of Resurrection. So beware of being bound by a particular belief and rejecting all others as unbelief! If you do that, much good will escape you. Nay, you will fail to obtain the knowledge of reality as it is. Try to make yourself a (kind of) Prime Matter (hyle) for all forms of belief, for God is too vast and too great to be confined to one belief to the exclusion of another. For He says, wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God (2:115). 762

And elsewhere:

He who counsels his own soul should investigate, during his life in this world, all doctrines concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is correct for him who holds it, then he should support it in the case of him who believes in it. 763

From this perspective, the study and comparison of different religious traditions and doctrines (all considered as “self-portraits” of Reality) is essential to the proper understanding of the Reality they intend to describe.

762 Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam ‘Afīfī p. 135-6 qtd. in Toshihiko, Sufism and Taoism, 254; also see Dagli, Ringstones of Wisdom, 115-6 and Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 175 for alternate translations.

763 Fut. II 85.11 qtd. in Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 176.
However, there are several difficulties involved in this kind of comparison, which I believe the method described above and below helps to address. The first is that of determining the corresponding category of comparison for Ifa: is it Islam, Sufism, Tijani Sufism, or Shaykh Ibrahim’s branch of the Tijāniyyah? Conversely, given that Ifa does not (so far as I am aware) have “schools,” in the same way that Sufism and other traditions do, what is the category that corresponds to Shaykh Ibrahim’s branch of the Tijāniyyah? The strategy of shifting between the perspectives of these traditions allows one to make comparisons with multiple categories. The second challenge is the different role that literacy and orality play in both traditions. Ifa is an almost entirely oral tradition, while Sufism has a long written tradition, which seems to make comparison difficult. However, the lived practice of Sufism (especially what I observed in Dakar) is more oral than most text-based academic studies would seem to suggest, and Ifa is increasingly becoming textual in its articulation of doctrines, practices and even transcription of verses on websites and in books by practitioners. Moreover, I think Western scholars and philosophers have somewhat fetishized writing and overemphasized its influence on non-academic intellectual traditions such as Sufism.

With this in mind, we will begin our comparison with a brief summary of how Ifa and babalawo have described Islam, before turning to a creative interpretation of Tijani Sufism from the perspective of Ifa. Then we will summarize the ways in which Muslims have described Ifa, before turning to a creative interpretation of Ifa from the perspective of Tijani Sufism. We will then turn to a discussion of seemingly similar elements in both traditions, again alternating between the perspectives of Ifa and Tijani Sufism. Finally, we will conclude with a comparison of these two traditions with contemporary academic epistemologies and theories, keeping in mind that when writing in English, Western Christianity, along with its
Greco-Roman and Germanic heritages and secular philosophical descendants, are always “silent interlocutors.” This concluding discussion will focus on contrasting features common to Ifa and Tijani Sufism to those of contemporary academic theories in order to prevent the reduction of the former to the latter, and to highlight the ways in which these traditions reveal some limitations of contemporary academic discourse about knowledge, ritual practice, and philosophy, and point ways out of these particular limitations.

**Tijani Sufism as Seen by Ifa**

*What Does Ifa say about Sufism/Islam?*

Islam has a fairly prominent role in the oral corpus of Ifa, a testimony to the centuries of interaction between the two traditions, especially in the northern areas of Yorubaland such as Ilọrin and Ọyọ, which are now predominantly Muslim. The general impression one gets upon surveying the references to Islam in the verses of Ifa is that Islam is regarded as another Oriṣa tradition, like that of Qṣun, Ṣango (who is said to have been Muslim himself), or Ogun. Some verses appear to be critical of Islam and mock its rituals, while others, such as the one cited at the beginning of this chapter, appear to praise it and its Prophet. This is characteristic of other Oriṣa traditions whose adherents and founding oriṣa are almost equally humiliated and lauded in the verses of Ifa. The following verse from Odu Ika-Odi mentions an *Alfa* (Muslim shaykh) alongside a babalawo and a “medicine man” *(oniṣẹgun)* as people of occult power not to be trifled with:

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| 764 Some verses mock the Muslim practice of fasting, which in traditional Yoruba society, was practiced as a rite of mourning, asking, “All Muslims, when did you hear of the death of the almighty God? You liars; Or what else makes you fast (for so long)?” (Abimbola, *Ifa Divination Poetry*, 131), Others mock Muslim clothes and prayer describing them as “those who tied their mother’s headwrap on their heads and bobbed up and down in the dirt,” (See Wande Abimbola *Ijinele Ohun Enu Ifa I* (Glasgow: Collins, 1968), 96-99), while others, probably reflecting the historical encounter with Fulani raiders and jihadists describe Muslims as “Abdollahi and his gang of thieves (Abimbola, *Ifa Divination Poetry*, 131). |
If a young man who is impudent meets an old Awo [babalawo], he will slap him. If he meets an old herbalist (iṣẹgun), he will punish him severely. If he accidentally finds an old Muslim shaykh (alufa) kneeling in prayer, he will knock him to the ground. Ifa was divined for the disobedient ones, who said that nobody could reform them. “Why? Don’t you know that a child who beats up an old Muslim shaykh (alufa) at prayer is looking for his own premature death? Maggots die quickly, very quickly.”

Moreover, in a manner very similar to other verses that explain the origins of various rituals of oloriṣa, a verse from Odu Okanran-Oturupon provides a mythological description of the origin of the sacrificial ritual of the Muslim festival of Ileya [‘Eid al-Kabīr]. In this narrative, Muslims used to make the long journey to heaven annually to sacrifice a ram to Olodumare. Over time, the trip became more and more difficult, and many of them would die along the way. A babalawo performed divination for them and told them the good news that Olodumare would accept a sacrifice made on earth, thus establishing the festival of Ileya.

But perhaps the clearest evidence of Islam being considered as an indigenous oriṣa tradition is the case of so-called “predestined Muslims.” During the ritual of ṣeṣe n taye/ikọse ayé (“stepping into the world”) some babalawo interpret the Odu Otura Meji as indicating that the child should be dressed in white on Fridays and given an Islamic education, regardless of the traditions to which their parents belonged.

Even more explicitly, a verse from Odu Otura-Yapin (Otura-Oyẹku) describes how Islam came into the world (an abridged version of this long verse follows):

“Bit by bit we hoe the farm, bit by bit, we clear the path, it was in private that Otura met Oyeku on the ṣọn” performed Ifa divination for Orunmila when he went to work as a diviner in Heaven and took an entire person as a sacrifice.

Eledumare (Olodumare) sent for Orunmila to come up to heaven to conduct an examination. This is because Eledumare created Orunmila as the first prophet (wọli) to come down to

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765 Epega, The Sacred Ifa Oracle, 266.
768 This Yoruba word, derived from the Arabic wali, meaning “friend of God” or “saint,” is used in the parlance of babalawo almost interchangeably by babalawo with the Muslim/Arabic nabi (Prophet, i.e. wali Sulayman
Eledumare is Kabiyesi, that is “the one who is not questioned”, the person who takes action that we cannot question. That is Eledumare. Ọrunmila said, “Kabiyesi!”. He said he had come because he heard Eledumare’s message. Eledumare said he should bring out his divining instruments because He [Eledumare] wanted to investigate a problem. Ah! Ọrunmila laughed, and said, “Baba, but this is You…” Eledumare cut him off and said, “This is not a joking matter. This is quite serious.” Ọrunmila understood and began to look into the matter. He said to Eledumare, “Baba, Kabiyesi, there is something you created with your own hands that is causing you sadness. Ifa says that the sacrifice You are to make now is a slave from Your own house. That is what is required for the sacrifice. Then Your power will control all that your hand has created and is saddening you.” Eledumare said, “Very well.” Ọrunmila said, “When you bring out your servant for the sacrifice, that is when Your power will control all that your hand has created and is saddening you.” Eledumare said, “A slave in my house?” Ọrunmila said, “Yes, he has a long beard. He has a long beard like this. This baba with the long beard is a slave (ẹru) in your house.”

Eledumare said, “Yes, it’s true. He brought Aafa out. He was the man with the long beard. This man with the long beard, he was Eledumare’s slave. He was Eledumare’s messenger (iranṣe).

When they reached earth, Aafa watched closely when Ọrunmila practiced Ifa. When Aafa was coming from heaven, he tucked the Qur’an underneath his arm and brought it to earth. Ọrunmila said, let us do on earth as we did in heaven. When Ọrunmila was worshipping Ifa, the man with the long beard would also come into the Ifa shrine. He would watch how Ọrunmila would wash himself, and he too would wash himself before entering the Ifa shrine. He would also copy Ọrunmila when he would touch his head to the ground in prayer. One day Ọrunmila called God’s slave, that is the man with the long beard or Aafa [the Prophet Muḥammad], and told him that he gave him permission to practice his religion just as he had been doing in heaven. That is how Ọrunmila ordered Aafa. The way Aafa was worshipping, the language he spoke when he was worshipping in heaven, that is how he then began to separate the two religions.

Ọrunmila instructed God’s slave [The Prophet Muḥammad] that he should pray just as he had been doing previously in heaven, but Aafa very much liked to imitate what Ọrunmila did when he practiced Ifa. All of the prostrations [rak’at] that Muslims do in the mosque, Aafa learned from Ọrunmila. Before anyone can enter the house of Ifa, (s)he must wash. When Aafa goes to pray in the morning, he must wash himself. Before entering Ifa’s house, one must wash his/her backside thoroughly, and everything that the babalawo did appealed to Aafa, and he has continued to do so until today.

Aafa and Ọrunmila did everything together. Aafa learned his practice of praying in the mosque from Ifa. The two loved each other very much, and they intermarried. Aafa married Ọrunmila’s children, and Islam began to expand. When it came time for the annual Ifa festival, Aafa and his wives and children would come and join the celebration. When the Ileya festival [‘Eid al-Kabūr] arrived, Ọrunmila, his wives, and his children would join Aafa in the

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769 A form of the word Alaṣa, the Yoruba term (of Songhai origin) for a Muslim religious specialist or shaykh. Here the Prophet of Islam is the original and archetypal Alaṣa.
celebration. When the Muslims would finish their fast ['Eid al-Fitr] they would all again take part in the festivities. That is how they came to live so closely to one another. They were so close to the extent that when the Ifa festival arrived and the babalawo began reciting Ifa verses, Ṣurumila praised the babalawo, and the babalawo in turn praised Ifa, all because of the babalawo who cast Ifa for Ṣurumila on the original day.

That is how Ifa brought the man with the long beard, whom we call Aafa, down to earth. This Aafa is the messenger of God in heaven. They say that they are slaves of god. There are no children of God, but rather Aafa’s followers are slaves of God. They were slaves in heaven before Ṣurumila brought them down to earth. That is how Ṣurumila brought Aafa down to earth in Odu Otura Yapin. That is also the time when the religion/worship (esin) was split (pin) into two. Islam and Ifa, traditional worship (esin ibile, esin abalaye) That is how it came to be. They did everything together, but the religion/worship (esin) was split (pin) into two.\(^770\)

While this verse is fascinating for many reasons, here we are most interested in the way it describes the Prophet [Aafa] and Islam. This verse describes and defines the mythological origins of fairly amicable and close relationship between Muslims and babalawo, as well as highlighting several similarities in ritual practice (ablutions, prostrations, and recitations in prayer) and the fact that they participate in one another’s festivals. It is also fascinating that the Prophet is described as “Aafa” or “Alfa,” the Yoruba word designating a Muslim scholar, shaykh, or religious specialist. Just as Ṣurumila is regarded as the archetypal babalawo, the Prophet Muḥammad is regarded as the archetypal Alfa. Moreover, he is described as having a “long beard” and a “book” (identified as the Qur’an), and as being a “slave” (eru) and messenger (iranṣẹ) of Olodumare. This description closely matches Islamic accounts of the Prophet as the slave (‘abd) and Messenger (rasūl) of God. Furthermore, Ṣurumila’s close relationship with Aafa [the Prophet] is described as beginning in heaven, and their earthly friendship and that of their followers is understood as a reflection of this heavenly relationship and even unity, since it is only in coming into the world that the worship/religion (esin) of Ṣurumila and the Prophet Muḥammad split into two separate

\(^{770}\) Note the wordplay between the name of the Odu (Otura-Yapin) and the end result of the narrative: the division (ipin) of Ifa and Islam. Araba of Modaḵeke, interview with the author, November 20, 2013. Modaḵeke, Nigeria. Yoruba. For a recording and full transcription and translation of this verse, see “13.2 Otura-Yapin [Oyẹku],” African Language Program at Harvard University, last accessed, May 13, 2015, ” <http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/132-otura-yapin-oy-ku>.
traditions. Thus, in this account, Ifa presents Islam as a form of worship brought into the world by and derivative of Ọrunmila/Ifa, the original prophet/messenger of Olodumare, for the purpose of mending a world full of wicked people. Ifa describes Islam as united with it in principle, and separate, but similar, in manifestation in the world—this similarity being a reflection of the original, heavenly unity of the two traditions.

What Babalawo say about Islam/Tijani Sufism

A few contemporary babalawo describe themselves as Muslim, and observe the Islamic rites of prayer, fasting, etc. to varying degrees. Ayodeji Ogunnaie’s unpublished thesis explores this phenomenon of “Muslim babalawo,” explaining that some babalawo accept the practice of Islam together with the practice of Ifa, just as they may combine the worship of Ọṣun, Ogun, Sango, or other orisha with that of Ifa. However, this work also records a kind of consensus that one can not “go deep” into both traditions simultaneously—that is, most babalawo seemed to agree that if one is to become an Imam, Alfa, or join a Sufi order (such as the Tijaniyyah) then one must leave aside serious practice of Ifa, and conversely, if one is to become a serious babalawo, then one must focus on Ifa alone. Nevertheless, opinions on this matter vary greatly from region to region, and even from babalawo to babalawo.

The Araba of Modakeke generally had high praise for Islam and Muslims: he is close friends with several local Imams and many, if not most, of his clients were Muslim. He also said that Muslims were generally more respectful of Ifa and of him than Christians. The

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771 This somewhat parallels the Qur’anic description of previous prophets (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc.) as “Muslim,” and the religious traditions they brought as “Islam.”

Araba’s wife told me how she pulled one of her children out of a Christian school because of the negative things the teachers and other students said about Ifa and traditional Yoruba religions, enrolling the child instead in a local Islamic primary school where she felt he would not be discriminated against as the child of a babalawo. As in the verse of Odu Otura-Yapin cited above, the Araba explained that he and other babalawo celebrate the ‘Eids with Muslims, and that many Muslims join the babalawo and other oloriṣa in celebrating the annual Ifa festival. When I asked him about initiation in the igbodu, he explained that his friend, who had performed ḥājj and then later been initiated in the igbodu, had said that the Ka‘ba and the Igbodu were “the same.” Generally, his opinions seemed to be very much in line with those expressed in the above narrative in which Islam is regarded as a derivative tradition of Ifa, and one that remains very close to it. In fact, many, if not most, babalawo regard Islam as a derivative offshoot of Ifa.

The Araba’s main criticism of Muslims was their refusal to acknowledge or accept Ifa’s validity, he particularly criticized those who “came to see him by night, and denounced Ifa by day.” He also criticized Muslims for not taking their tradition as seriously as babalawo take Ifa, but then added, “but today there are also many babalawo who are not serious.” The Araba was not very familiar with Tijani Sufism as such, but had seen Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s picture (which is nearly ubiquitous in Muslim shops and on minibuses in Northern and Southwestern Nigeria), and had a good opinion of him as a “great Imam,” and “a true

773 Many babalawo have an intimate knowledge of Muslim ritual and practice. Olupọna records that the Araba of Ifẹ equated the climbing of Oke Ileṣẹ, the sacred hill of Ifa, during the annual Ifa festival to the climbing of the mount of ‘Arafāt by Muslim pilgrims during the hajj (Olupọna, City of 201 Gods, 193).

774 This tendency to explain Ifa’s doctrines, rites and rituals through comparison to those of Islam and Christianity can also be understood as a comparative interpretive strategy used by babalawo to speak to an increasingly Muslim and Christian Nigerian public in terms that they can understand and may respect. However, these comparisons appear to be based on the babalawo’s perception of these traditions and their practices as profoundly similar or even identical.
Aafa” (Aafa gidi). However, the Araba was critical of some elements of the Tijani tradition. When I asked him if babalawo ever saw or spoke to Ṭrunmila in dreams, adding that Tijanis claim that reciting certain prayers regularly can lead to an encounter with the Prophet in a dream, the Araba responded:

No one can see Ṭrunmila in a dream. There is Agbalamọ, a medicine you can make to learn things in dreams, but no one has seen Ṭrunmila in a dream, no one knows what he looks like— we know [from descriptions of his in the verses of Ifa] he was short and dark, but you can’t see him in a dream. Some people receive messages from him in dreams, but they do not see him. These prayers you mentioned, have you tried them for yourself? Did they work?
Me: No, I haven’t tried them.
Araba: Eh-hen, so you see?75

In addition to illustrating the critical spirit and high standard for imọ (knowledge based on direct experience) that characterized the Araba’s discourse in general, this exchange illustrates the implicit similarity the Araba assumed to exist between Ifa and Tijani Sufism/Islam. Since babalawo don’t see Ṭrunmila in dreams, he was skeptical of the claims of Tijani Sufis to be able to see the Prophet in dreams. However, had I “verified” these prayers for myself and informed the Araba of this fact, he would probably accept (gba) what he heard (gbọ) from me, but he certainly wouldn’t consider it imọ, and I imagine he would remain somewhat skeptical. Having summarized these perspectives of Ifa and babalawo on Islam and Tijani Sufism, we will now turn to the creative exercise of interpreting Tijani Sufism from the perspective of Ifa.

*Tijani Sufism From the Perspective of Ifa*

From the perspective of Ifa, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijani and Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse could easily appear as re-births or re-incarnations of the Oriṣa Aafa, or as particularly powerful devotees of Aafa who became Oriṣa in their own right, and were somewhat amalgamated with

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Aafa. The precedent for this amalgamation can be seen in the case of the Oriṣa Ọṣango, the mythical fourth king of Ṭọya, who after death, became amalgamated with the older Oriṣa Jakuta, who shared many of his attributes, and of whom Ọṣango was possibly a devotee. From the perspective of Ifa, Ọṣango appears as a reincarnation of Jakuta. Within the Ifa corpus, it seems likely that many of the myths and stories about Ṭrunmila are actually about very powerful babalawo, who embodied or represented Ṭrunmila to such an extent that they were similarly amalgamated with him after death, or seen as a manifestation or “child” of his during life. The ritual veneration Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī and Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse receive in the form of pilgrimage, celebration of their birth and death-days (among other important days in their lives), and their continued spiritual interactions with their followers would easily qualify them as oriṣa from the perspective of Ifa.

Babalawo also frequently likened the oral corpus of Ifa to the Qurʾan, and in both Sufism and Ifa, the Qurʾan and the oral corpus of Ifa are understood, respectively, to contain all knowledge and the principles of everything that exists. Within Sufism, the different Surahs of the Qurʾan are commonly described as having their own attributes and “personalities”—Ibn ʿArabi describes visionary encounters with different Surahs in a mythical language not unlike that which Ifa uses to describe the Odu. Ritually, the verses (ayāt) of the Qurʾan and those (ẹsẹ) of Ifa are used in similar fashion: they are recited as worship, as protection, and as incantations for various effects for everything from easing childbirth to escaping enemies and

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776 Incidentally, Ọṣango is often described as being Muslim himself. See Lorand Matory, J, Sex and the Empire that is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 265.

777 Here it is useful to recall Sowande’s definition of Oriṣa, “Awon eniti Ori ọga da yato si awon elegbe re iyoku,” namely, “he whom Ori has created in a manner different to that in which his contemporaries have been created.” Such a person has an added something which makes him stand out among his fellows.” (Sowande, Ifa: Guide, Counsellor, and Friend of our Forefathers, 43).
witchcraft. Like the oral corpus of Ifa, the Qur’an is typically (in a traditional Tijani Sufi context) memorized in childhood and contemplated throughout the rest of one’s life. The process of memorization of the Qur’an, which often involves drinking or licking the ink of its verses off of a wooden tablet (lawh) and other special prayers to aid in memorization could be likened to the rituals of “eating” the Odu off of the opéle (divining chain) and the memory-enhancing medicines (isọye) given to apprentices. The strong emphasis Shaykh Ibrahim placed upon the Qur’an in his personal life and teachings (he is said to have prayed for “the miracle of his community to be knowledge of the Qur’an, since the Qur’an was the miracle of the Prophet,”778 ; he is said to have recited the entire Qur’an twice a week; he also emphasized memorization of the Qur’an amongst his own children and early disciples, and his works are studded with Qur’anic references) is certainly similar to the centrality of the oral corpus of Ifa for babalawo. From the perspective of Ifa, both the Qur’an and the Odu Ifa are primarily oratures, which happen to have symbolic, written representations that are ritually potent. The Qur’an’s physical pages or wooden board and text could thus be likened to the divining tray (opon Ifa) and camwood powder (iye irosun) into which the signatures of the Odu are pressed. Thus from the perspective of Ifa, the Qur’an, in Islam in general, and Tijani Sufism in particular, would appear to be a repetition of the oral corpus of Ifa, albeit in a different language and in a different form.

The different Sufi orders of Islam, with their different practices, emphases and taboos could appear to play the same role that the Odu “that give birth to” babalawo do in Ifa.

778 Wright, Living Knowledge, 213.
structuring their moral and ritual formation in different, but converging ways.\(^{779}\) One of, if not the central practice of the Tijāniyyah, invoking prayers on the Prophet, especially the Șalāt al-Fātiḥ, could be seen from the perspective of Ifa as reciting oriki Aafa. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Karin Barber describes oriki as “collections or strings of name-like attributive epithets, ‘praises’ which are neither narrative nor descriptive, but vocative. They are addressed to their subject or ‘owner,’ and are felt to encapsulate, and evoke in some way that subject’s essential powers and qualities.”\(^{780}\) Thus the Șalāt al-Fātiḥ and the Jawharat al-Kamāl, as well as other symbolic invocations of the Prophet’s qualities and attributes that are believed to evoke the presence and reality of the Prophet would naturally be understood as or at the very least, likened to oriki.

From the perspective of Ifa, the accounts of fanā’ in Tijani Sufism could appear as descriptions of forms of possession (igun), made possible by the initiatory rites which “make” or “put” the Oriṣa Aafa into the initiate, allowing this potential identification to be come actualized in possession/annihilation. However the idea of being directly “possessed” by God (annihilated in God) would strike babalawo as bizarre, especially since possession is taboo for and strongly looked down on by babalawo. The goal of a sober baqā’ would be much more appealing to babalawo and much more in line with the way babalawo understand and articulate the goal of their practice.

The Islamic notion of barakah (blessing, spiritual presence) would most likely be translated as aṣẹ, since both flow from the Divine (Allah/Olodumare) through the channels of

\(^{779}\) Similarly the Divine Names that are said to govern the lives of different Sufis or the Prophets from whom various Sufis inherit or are “upon the foot of” could also be seen as playing a similar role to the Odu that give birth to babalawo.

\(^{780}\) Barber, I Could Speak Until Tomorrow, 1.
sacred places, people, and rituals. From the perspective of Ifa, the asrār of Tijani Sufism would be seen as various types of oogun (medicine), akoṣe (a “prayer” of a combination of specific items), ofọ (incantation), ewe (herbal/incantory medicine), or even ẹbo (sacrifices) depending on the ingredients used and intention involved.

From the perspective of Ifa, the central doctrine of the Ḥaqīqah Muḥammadiyyah (Muḥammadan Reality) would appear as another description of Ṣrunmila and his heavenly counterpart, Ajagumale, the diviner of heaven, or Ẹla the Logos-like “word (ọrọ) of Olodumare,” “the first to speak” from which everything is created. Sowande writes, “Ẹla is, in our view, the projection into the world of men of that “single essence,” from which, in the spiritual worlds, even the Holy…derives; likewise the entire Yoruba System derives from Ẹla.” In many myths of Ifa, it is for and through Ṣrunmila/Ẹla that the cosmos is created (just as is the case of the Muḥammadan Reality), and the descriptions of the Muḥammadan Reality as the possessor of knowledge of God/all existence closely mirror those of Ṣrunmila. Moreover, just as the Prophet Muḥammad (and the other prophets) are regarded as manifestations of the Muḥammadan Reality, so to is Ṣrunmila (and the other Oriṣa) sometimes regarded as an aspect of Ẹla.

Despite these similarities, many aspects of Tijani Sufism would appear odd from the perspective of Ifa. Perhaps most obviously, as discussed above, the prohibition on participating in other religious traditions (or Sufi orders) would seem understandable, but strange to babalawo, who are often themselves initiates of other oriṣa and help initiate devotees into the traditions of other oriṣa. Relatedly, the relative uniformity of the sharī’ah and rites of the Tijānī Ṭarīqah differs markedly from the highly individual nature of the ritual

program of taboos (eewo), and sacrifices prescribed by Ifa, and such a “one-size-fits-all” approach would seem peculiar from the perspective of Ifa. The comparative lack of sacrifices in Tijani Sufism would also strike babalawo as odd, as would the fact that the Qur’an is seldom used for divination or conversation with the Prophet/Deity (although the practice known as istikhārah and the contemplative recitation of the Qur’an approach something like this). While the “deep” or “esoteric” (bāṭin) hermeneutics of the Qur’an would be familiar and welcome to babalawo, the fixed nature of the Qur’an (no new verses are added to surahs) would be seen as different and even strange. However, the continuing presence of the Prophet in dreams and waking visions of Tijanis, in a certain sense, extends the canon of ḥadīth (although these encounters are never included in canonical ḥadīth collections, and are not regarded as authoritative in the same way) in a way that babalawo would find reminiscent of the emergence of new verses of Ifa. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, at least some babalawo are skeptical of these kinds of visionary encounters.

In summary, from the perspective of Ifa, Islam in general, and Tijani Sufism in particular, appear as a tradition of the Oriṣa Aafa (or even as a peculiar form of Ifa deriving from Odu Otura Meji) characterized by the recitation/invocation of oriki, leading to a kind of possession by Aafa and even Olodumare. As the Araba remarked, “There is only one God, and that God is the same God that sent Ọrunmila and sent Musulumi [the Prophet of Islam] into the world. But many Muslims, they don’t have that understanding, and because of this modernism, people just believe that, ‘no what I’m doing should be the best.’ This is a big problem for many people today.”\(^{782}\)

While we will compare and contrast various other features of Ifa and Tijani Sufism later in this chapter, the above exercise of interpreting Tijani Sufism from the perspective of Ifa provides a new way of looking at Sufism, illustrates the interpretive strategies of Ifa, and demonstrates the tremendous influence a particular choice of interpretive tradition can have on the portrayal and understanding of another tradition.

**Ifa as Seen by Tijani Sufism**

*What do Yoruba Muslims/Tijani Sufis say about Ifa?*

Turning now to the Islamic tradition, the Qur’an does not mention Ọrunmila or Ifa explicitly, although some Yoruba Muslims identify him with the figure of Luqman, whom the Qur’an describes as a righteous man and possibly a prophet to whom God gave wisdom (*al-hikmah*) (31:12). Most of the Tijani shuyukh and disciples I interviewed were not familiar with Ifa, however, and tended to take one of three positions when it came to non-Abrahamic, African religious traditions: a) these traditions were once valid religions, but had since fallen into decay and been abrogated (i.e. rendered spiritually ineffective and not acceptable to God) by the coming of Islam; b) These traditions were not really religious, but rather a kind of “animism,” intuitions about the unseen, magic (*sihr*) and interactions with *jinn;* or c) These traditions were sheer superstition with no reality to them whatsoever. Proponents of both positions b) and c) sometimes compared these non-Abrahamic African traditions to the idol-worship of the Pre-Islamic Arabs in the so-called “Age of Ignorance” (*al-jāhiliyyah*). The opinions of the Yoruba Muslims with whom I spoke included these three positions, but also spanned a wider spectrum. Their opinions tended to cluster around the following six positions:
1) Ifa is mere superstition with nothing behind it at all. It is a clever collection of Yoruba orature with no real spiritual power.

2) Ifa is evil and dangerous magic and medicine (oogun) from which good Muslims must keep their distance, and/or Ifa is a form of Kufr (disbelief) and shirk (polytheism), a “false religion.”

3) Ifa is the corrupted remnant of a now-abrogated tradition which was brought by a Prophet (either Luqman, another Prophet mentioned in the Qur’an, or one of those prophets who is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an)

4) Ifa is a still-valid or accepted spiritual tradition brought by a Prophet sent to the Yoruba people, who is not mentioned in the Qur’an, but which cannot be practiced together with Islam.

5) Ifa is “ḥikmah,” or an occult science, which one can practice alongside of Islam.

6) Ifa is an integral part of Yoruba culture and something that one must participate in, to some level, as a Yoruba person. Ifa is a way of achieving inner peace, success, prosperity, children, and avoiding disasters and the machinations of one’s enemies. In this view, any Yoruba person, irrespective of religious affiliation, and many non-Yoruba people, can and should consult with Ifa in order to have a better life.

This last position was the one most commonly expressed by the Yoruba Muslims I encountered in the Araba’s neighborhood in Modakeke. They would often cite some variant of following proverb “I will practise the custom of my house (ọro ile mi). Christianity will not stop me, Islam will not stop me, from practising my traditional rites,” and/or emphasize that they were “Born Yoruba, but chose to practice Islam [implying a certain priority to the Yoruba identity and traditions].” A few local Alfas expressed opinions that could be categorized as position 5, whereas most other Alfas and Muslims with whom I spoke held positions ranging from positions 1-4, often some combination of these positions, and sometimes with a great deal of uncertainty. Some students with whom I spoke explained that they didn’t know what the “official” opinion on Ifa was from an Islamic perspective, but that even though Ifa and traditional religion had a bad reputation, they knew of many pastors and imams who were “crooks” and “wicked people,” and that they also had elder family members who still practiced Ifa and other oriṣa traditions who were very pious and had “good character.” One student even mentioned a ḥadīth, that “the weightiest thing on the scales on
the Day of Judgment is good character (Arabic akhlāq; Yoruba iwa)” concluding that it didn’t matter what one believed or practiced, as long as one had good character, God would be pleased. However, the more Salafi and “Ahl us-Sunna” Muslim students whom I encountered at Obafebi Awolowo University invariably advocated positions 1 and/or 2.

The perspective of Alfa Akurede of Ogbagba was typical of many Alfas:

*Lā ilāha illā Llāh* that we say is the language, everybody knows it [means] ‘the somebody that created you is God. We don’t know any other person to be divine like God, more than God.’ That is the meaning of *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*. When we call *Lā ilāha illā Llāh*, we say *Muḥammadan Rasūlu Allāh*. This Muḥammad, it is [an] intermediary between us and God, just as Ṭrunmila is the intermediary between the babalowo and God…. If you take a sentence that is true and translate it into many languages, the sound has changed, but the meaning is the same, and it is true!784

As in the accounts of Ifa, Alfa Akurede also described Islam and Islamic knowledge as being derivative of Ifa and traditional Yoruba religion, “Maybe I can’t use Ifa, but the people who have the most knowledge, all the Islamic spiritual peoples, they come from Ifa, because when the Prophet Muḥammad, our forefather in Islamic knowledge, comes from traditional religion, then all of us too come from traditional religion.”785

The Tijanis of West Africa have lived in relatively close quarters with practitioners of various indigenous traditions, and have been responsible for the conversion of many of these people to Islam. al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tall’s correspondence during his conquests of the non-Muslim polities of Tamba, Kaarta, and Segou and his accusations against the Muslim polity of Ḥamdullāh describe the practitioners of traditional Bamana religious traditions as “pagans” (*kuffār*) and “polytheists/ idolators” (*mushrikūn*). After conquering the kingdom of Segou he ordered a public burning of the “fetishes” of the chief priest and king, and held a public

783 Sunan of Abu-Dawūd Ḥadīth 4781 Narrated by Abud Darda. “The Prophet said: ‘There is nothing heavier than good character put in the Scale of a believer on the Day of Resurrection.’”


display of the “fetishes” of ruling families to prove that they were not true Muslims by virtue of their continued adherence to traditional Bamana customs.\textsuperscript{786} Thus one would be safe in assuming that al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tall and his followers would reject positions 4-6 (and probably also position 3).

However, al-Ḥājj ‘Umar’s descendant, the Tijani Shaykh Tierno Bokar seems to have advocated a more universal perspective. His disciple, Amadou Hampaté Bâ records him as having made statements such as:

The rainbow owes its beauty to the variety of its shades and colors. In the same way, we consider the voices of various believers that rise up from all parts of the earth as a symphony of praises addressing God, Who alone can be Unique. We bitterly deplore the scorn that certain religious people heap on the form of divine things, a scorn that often leads them to reject their neighbor’s hymn because it contrasts with theirs. To fight against this tendency, brother in God, whatever be the religion or the congregation to which you are affiliated, meditate at length on this verse: “The creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and of your colors are many wonders for those who reflect” (30:22). There is something here for everyone to meditate upon….

Are children of the same father, although physically different from one another, any less brothers and legitimate sons of he who fathered them? In accordance with this law-truth, we pity those who deny believers from different confessions a spiritual identity and brotherhood under one single God, the unique and immutable Creator. Although it may not please those attached to the letter, for us one thing alone counts above all others: to profess the existence of God and His unity.\textsuperscript{787}

And

There are only two categories of people in the world: those who believe in God and who are distributed among the diverse forms of religion, and those who doubt the existence of God and who are similarly distributed among the diverse forms of negation of the existence of God…. What is tragically ridiculous and not to the honor of the human spirit is that the believers in God war amongst themselves as if they did not say the same thing and attest to the same truth. As for us, we embrace the doctrine which states that all who believe in the existence of God form one family united by a single idea. The mutual opposition of believers emerges from certain human causes the origin of which is to be found in extreme racism, in the diversity of languages, and especially in the egoism which pushes us each to seek to maintain an exclusiveness.\textsuperscript{788}

\textsuperscript{786} David Robinson. “ all-Hajj Umar Rall” Failed Islamic States. http://aodl.org/islamicpluralism/failedislamicstates/essays/43-1A9-F/#jump


As well as:

You will gain enormously by knowing about the various forms of religion. Believe me, each one of these forms, however strange it may seem to you, contains that which can strengthen your own faith. Certainly, faith, like fire, must be maintained by means of an appropriate fuel in order for it to blaze up. Otherwise, it will dim and decrease in intensity and volume and turn into embers and then from embers to coals and from coals to ashes. To believe that one’s race or one’s religion is the only possessor of the truth is an error. This could not be. Indeed, in its nature, faith is like air. Like air, it is indispensable for human life and one could not find one man who does not believe truly and sincerely in something. Human nature is such that it is incapable of not believing in something, whether that is God or Satan, power or wealth, or good or bad luck. So, when a man believes in God, he is our brother. Treat him as such and do not be like those who have gone astray. Unless one has the certitude of possessing all knowledge in its entirety, it is necessary to guard oneself against opposing the truth. Certain truths only seem to be beyond our acceptance because, quite simply, our knowledge has not had access to them…

Avoid confrontations. When something in some religion or belief shocks you, instead seek to understand it. Perhaps God will come to your aid and will enlighten you about what seems strange to you….  

However, Tierno Bokar was known to actively proselytize amongst the non-Muslim Dogon people of his hometown of Bandiagara. This does not necessarily mean that he did not regard them as being “believers in God,” but it does indicate that they had something to gain by converting to Islam. Tierno Bokar’s disciple and biographer, Amadou Hampaté Bâ deeply studied the traditions of Bamana and Peul (Fulani) religious traditions in Mali and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso). In the conclusion of his seminal Aspects de la Civilization Africaine, Bâ gives his own account of the relationship between traditional religions and Islam:

The animist religions prepared Mali, like the other African countries south of the Sahara, for the idea of the Sacred and of a mysterious creative force of the universe. The revealed religions, notably Christianity and Islam, found there a fertile ground for their propagation…. The empire of Islam in Africa was established, I will not say on the ruins of animism—for it still survives despite the blows it has suffered at the hands of the [revealed] religions and by the technical and philosophical civilization brought to it by Western colonization—but on its foundations. The main principles of animism (the sacred and non-profane character of everyday life, a sense of being a part of a whole of which one is an integral part—the human community or the universe—the existence of a Supreme Being, transcendent and yet immanent in His Force in all things and all places…) found their continuation in Islam, although in a simplified and purified form.

789 Ibid, 129.

The great fear of mysterious forces lurking everywhere was one of the bases of animism. These forces were not invalidated, but rather brought back to a more accurate appraisal: they became subject to a more powerful and sublime Force, that of the One God (Allah), as defined by the 255th verse of the second surah (the celebrated Ayat al-Kursī “The Throne Verse”): God, There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-subsistent. Neither slumber nor sleep overtake Him. Whatever is in the heavens and on earth is His. Who can intercede with Him except by His Permission. He knows what lies before men, and behind them, while they only embrace of His knowledge what He wills. His Throne extends over the heavens and the earth, maintaining their existence does not burden Him. He is the Most High, the Inaccessible. The Sacred, thus defined, saw its different aspects ordered and oriented towards a pole: God the Creator became the Source and Cause of all the energies. All that which had been but a diffuse set of powers and forces became the ensemble of the “attributes” of God at work in the world. The Divine mystery ceased to be the preserve of the sometimes anonymous forces and became the prerogative of the One God, “apart from who there is no other God” immense and inaccessible in His Essence like the animist Supreme Being, but at the same time, “closer to man than his jugular vein” and all-encompassing in his gaze, “the sights of man cannot perceive him. But it is He who perceives the sights…” (Qur’an). The Supreme God, with Islam, became an object, not of a superstitious fear, but of a “reverential awe” drawn from the source of a profound love.…

Prepared by his ancestral tradition to detect all around him a living presence hidden behind the appearance of things, perhaps the Black African Muslim, while directing his body ritually to the image of the Centre which is the Ka’aba is particularly capable of realizing the mystery contained in the this Qur’anic verse:

To Him (God) belong the East and the West
And wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.791

In this account, Bà contrasts the “revealed religions” of Christianity and Islam to the pre-Islamic “animism” of the people of Mali, which nevertheless shares certain features with these Abrahamic traditions. According to Bà, African Islam was established on the “foundations” of these pre-existing traditions, which were “simplified” and “purified” by the coming of Islam, which unified and organized the diverse forces of the cosmos, replacing the fear of “mysterious forces” with the “reverential awe” and “love” of the transcendent and yet omnipresent “One God.” Nevertheless, these “animist” traditions are described as playing a role in predisposing African Muslims towards spiritual realization. This account probably represents the most positive written appraisal of indigenous African religious traditions from the perspective of a Tijani Sufi.

Turning now to Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s branch of the Tijāniyyah, which has a large following amongst the Yoruba-speaking peoples of Nigeria, while I was unable to find anything in the literature of Shaykh Ibrahim and his disciples directly dealing with Ifa during the course of my research, I did find a few brief references to traditional religions in Nigeria and West Africa. In a speech, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse explains the relationship of “Islam” to other religions:

Islam is the belief in One God. The resignation to the Will of Allah is the realization of justice among the people. The Qur’an reveals that all of the Prophets of Allah have used the same word to describe their religion: al-Islam or “submission.” Islam is surely the universal religion, encompassing all the other religions. The stains of man cannot obscure or modify its essential beauty. Islam was the belief and method of worship prescribed for Abraham, Moses and Jesus Christ. Its meaning has not changed: release yourself into the worship of Allah, and do not divide yourselves to its purpose. As for those religions the Qur’an mentions as having been altered by later followers, these religions had already become irreparably distant from the essential truth of Islam before becoming nullified by successive revelations. The last revelation, which abrogates the previous revelations, is the religion of Muḥammad.792

In this perspective, the religion brought by the Prophet Muḥammad is but the latest iteration of the “one, true religion” of “Islam.” New prophets with successive revelations are sent when the practice of people has become “irreparably distant” from the “one true religion.” These new revelations and dispensations abrogate their forerunners whose “essential truth” has become obscured. Thus, from this perspective, Ifa and other indigenous African religions could be seen as “altered” forms of “abrogated” revelations. Elsewhere, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse is describes those practitioners of indigenous African traditions as “unbelievers and idol-worshippers”:

And I - and all praise is for Allah - know of tens of millions of Muslims who took this Ṭarīqah through me; and even more who were unbelievers, idol-worshippers and Christians before coming in contact with us; and even more who attained the Opening (of the Knowledge of Allah) through witnessing and beholding (the Presence of Allah) without any proof or reasoning.793


A Nigerian pamphlet on the activities of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and his deputies in Nigeria contains similar language, describing the conversion of “pagans” and “a juju priest,” as well as the destruction of “idols” and “jujus” amongst the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria:

He (Nwagui) was converted to Islam by Shaykh Ibrahim Niass who gave his name to the new convert and requested him to propagate Islam in the Eastern region of Nigeria. Shaykh Nwagui claimed to have carried out the assignment successfully by converting many people into Islam and destroying many idols. Giving report on his activities, Nwagui said: “On October 28th 1958, the whole people of the village of Afoña, Afikpo, men and women numbering up to 2,000 embraced Islam and voluntarily handed over their individual and communal jujus, idols and shrine to me….to destroy”—This is contained in the letter which Shaykh Nwagui wrote on 14th January, 1960 to Sir Ahmadu Bello, the then Premier of the Northern Region. In 1964, Shaykh Nwagui made another significant conversion exercise which is duly [sic] recorded in a newspaper. The paper slated thus: “Hajj Sayyid Ibrahim Nwagui, a Muslim leader of Eastern Nigeria….Who is on a religious tour of some parts of Eastern Nigeria arrived at Abriba Ikomoru town with his Secretary-General, Muhammad Uchendu and thirty followers…after five hours of preaching Islam to them, the chief juju priest including one hundred and thirty-three pagans and twenty-four Christians surrendered themselves to him and embraced Islam in his hand that same day”—Nigeria Citizen, Saturday 26th Sept, 1964.794

This account implicitly likens the practitioners of indigenous Igbo religious traditions to the idol-worship of the Pre-Islamic Arabs. This comparison is a common one; for example, a course guide written by a lecturer in the Department of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Ibadan reads:

Every African tribe had its own way in faith and religion before Islam. The people of the book, most importantly, the Jews and the Christians could then be found in Egypt and Abyssinia as well as the idol-worshippers before Islam. Most of the practices and ideologies found on African land were not different to that of the Arabia [sic] before Islam. And thus, labeled by Islam as Jahiliyyah.795

But it is in a semi-hagiographical account of the Yoruba Shaykh Muḥammad Jami’u Bulala of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s branch of the Tijāniyyah that we see an explicit reference to Ifa:


Both parents were pagans. His mother especially was an Osun worshipper. This could be the reason for naming their son Osundare. Before and after the birth of a child in Yorubaland in those days, it was the practice then to consult the Oracle to know what the future held for the child. It was predicted to Shaykh’s parents that the pregnancy carried by the mother would be a male child who would acquire knowledge of the new religion (as Islam was being called then). Also that the child in question will have the ability to know what he was not even taught and many people would be blessed through him. Shaykh didn’t tread the path of his parents contrary to their belief system. Shaykh in his own case was a Muslim who lived according to the dictates of the Qur’an. He believed in the oneness of Allah. One shouldn’t be surprise that a pagan might give birth to a saint. We have seen such example in the personality of prophet Ibrahim.  

Interestingly, the pronouncements of the “Oracle” (most probably Ifa) are used here to bolster the supernatural credentials of the Shaykh, while his “pagan” parentage is excused or explained by reference to the Qur’anic account of Ibrahim, whose father is also described as taking idols for gods (6:74). This account is particularly fascinating because while it seems to denigrate the “pagan” worship of Ọṣun, it relies upon and assumes the authority of the Ifa Oracle in order to make the point that, from birth, this particular Shaykh was destined for greatness in Islamic scholarship and sanctity.

The above passages demonstrate the diversity of perspectives on Ifa and indigenous African religious traditions in general amongst Yoruba Muslims and West African Tijanis. While this is a rich topic deserving of further inquiry, for the purposes of the present study we can conclude that West African Tijanis would tend to regard Ifa as “unbelief” (kufr) “idol-worship,” “paganism,” and/or as an abrogated and altered former revelation. Some Tijanis (such as Tierno Bokar and Amadou Hampaté Bâ) would perhaps regard Ifa as being among “the diverse forms of religion” and babalawo as being among the “brotherhood of believers in

Having summarized these perspectives we now turn to the task of creatively interpreting Ifa from the perspective of the Tijani tradition.

**Ifa From the Perspective of Tijani Sufism**

As the accounts above demonstrate, the Qur’an is central to the Tijani tradition’s interpretation not only of itself, but also of other traditions. A superficial or outward (zāhir) acquaintance with Ifa (and the oriṣa traditions in general) would lend itself to interpreting the practices of the babalawo through the lens of verses describing the “intermediary deities” of the pre-Islamic Arabs, such as, *Surely pure religion is for God only. And those who choose protecting friends beside Him (say): ‘We worship them only that they may bring us near unto Allah.’ Lo! Allah will judge between them concerning that wherein they differ. Lo! Allah guideth not him who is a liar, an ingrate.* (39:3)

Or even if Ṣrunmila and other oriṣa were to be interpreted as “angels” or “prophets,” the fact that they are worshipped and sacrificed to would suggest the condemnation of the following verse, *And he commanded you not that ye should take the angels and the prophets for lords. Would he command you to disbelieve after ye had surrendered [to God]?* (3:80)

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798 Interestingly, this is remarkably similar to the role that the verses and narratives of the Odu play in Ifa.

799 Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse’s commentary on this verse reads, “*Only Purely Sincere Religion is for God, other than this is not befitting for Him. And those who take other than Him, idols, as patrons (awliyā’), and they are the disbelievers (kufār) of Mecca, they say, we only worship them that they may bring us nearer unto God. They say that they place these gods as intermediaries (wasā’i’t) between them and God. God will judge between them and between the Muslims concerning that wherein they differ about the matter of religion, and so He will enter the believers into the garden and the disbelievers into the fire.*” Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr vol. 5, p. 181. Another similar verse (7:30) is even more negative, *A party hath He led aright, while error hath just hold over (another) party, for lo! they choose the devils for protecting supporters instead of Allah and deem that they are rightly guided.*

800 The following verses describing the pre-Islamic Arabs’ worship of the goddesses Al-Lāt, ʿUzzā, and Manāt would also likely come to mind, “*And how many angels are in the heavens whose intercession availeth...*
Similarly, the divinatory aspects of the Ifa tradition would call to mind the following verses forbidding the Pre-Islamic Arab practice of “arrow divination”\(^{801}\): *Forbidden to you are carrion, blood, the flesh of swine,... as also things sacrificed to idols, and divination by the divining arrows (al-azlām): that is ungodliness.* (5:3) and *O ye who believe! Strong drink and games of chance and idols and divining arrows (al-azlām) are only an infamy of Satan's handiwork. Leave it aside in order that ye may succeed.* (5:90) The divinatory aspect of Ifa would also recall the strong Islamic prohibition against fortune-telling or soothsaying (*al-kihānah*), which the tradition poetically describes as resulting from jinn who try to sneak up to heaven to overhear events to come before being cast down by meteors and reporting what they have heard to their human interlocutors.\(^{802}\) Seen through the lens of these verses, Ifa would appear to be a reiteration of pre-Islamic idolatry and its related practices of soothsaying by means of communication with jinn.

However, given the fact that Ifa describes a unique, supreme, transcendent Deity who is also immanent and all-knowing, a “reckoning” of sorts after death, and prescribes “right actions” through the imitation of the figure of Ṣrunmila, a more charitable (and perhaps deeper) reading of Ifa could consider babalawo and iyanifa as “believers” (*mu’mīnūn*), Ṣrunmila as a prophet or sage whose “book” or message (*risālah*) of Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) is naught save after Allah giveth leave to whom He chooseth and accepteth. Lo! it is those who disbelieve in the Hereafter who name the angels with the names of females.” (53:26-7).

\(^{801}\) This practice, is however, described as being more akin to casting lots than to the kind of divination employed in Ifa. Moreover, another verse (3:44) describes how the prophet Zakariyah and the other priests of the temple *threw their pens* [in casting lots] *to know which of them should be the guardian of Mary.* Implying that this practice, although now forbidden to Muslims, may once have been allowed and even encouraged, like the drinking of wine.

\(^{802}\) *And We have guarded it from every outcast devil, Save him who stealeth the hearing, and them doth a clear flame pursue.* (15:17-18). Numerous hadith resemble the following account “They (the Jinn) would pass the information back down until it reaches the lips of a magician or soothsayer. Sometimes a meteor would overtake them before they could pass it on. If they passed it on before being struck, they would add to it a hundred lies.” (*Ṣahīh Al-Bukhari, At-Tirmidḥī*).
the Odu of Ifa. Thus, when interpreted through the lens of verses such as: *Verily We sent messengers before thee, among them those of whom We have told thee, and some of whom We have not told thee*…(40:78); *For We assuredly sent amongst every People a messenger, [with the command], ‘Serve God, and eschew Evil’* (16:36); and *there is not a nation but a warner hath passed among them. (35:24)*; *And for every nation there is a messenger. And when their messenger cometh (on the Day of Judgment) it will be judged between them fairly, and they will not be wronged.* (10:47)

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803—Orunmila could appear as a prophet/ messenger/ warner sent to Yoruba-speaking people.

Moreover, the famous “ḥadīth of the slave-woman” (*ḥadīth jāriyah*) provides a Prophetic example for considering babalawo as “believers.” In this tradition, a Companion of the Prophet asks him to examine captured a slave woman, to see if she is a believer (if she is, then she is to be freed). The Prophet asks the woman (who in some narrations is described as a “black woman”) “Where is God?” To which she replies, “In the sky.” Then the Prophet asks, “And who am I?” to which she responds, “You are the Messenger of God.” The Prophet then says, “Free her, for she is a believer.” In another version of the ḥadīth (found in Malik’s Muwattah) the Prophet asks the slave woman if she testifies that there is no God but God, that Muḥammad is His Messenger, and the resurrection after death. When she says yes, the Prophet declares her a believer and orders her to be freed.804 Babalawo, who by and large consider the Prophet to be a “divine messenger” of sorts, who also hold that God symbolically

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803 The ḥadīth literature sets the number of Prophets (*al-anbiyā’) at 124,000 and the number of Messengers (*rusul*) at 313 or 315. See Ibn Ḥanbal, Musnad, 5, 169.

exists “in” or “above” the sky, and who affirm posthumous existence of human beings, would easily pass this test.

Furthermore, taking Ọrunmila to be a prophet, Ifa’s recognition of the Prophet Muḥammad and its encouragement of children of Odu Otura Meji to follow his religion could even be read as a fulfillment of the “covenant” described in the following verse: When God made [His] covenant with the prophets, [He said]: Behold that which I have given you of the Scripture and knowledge. And afterward there will come unto you a messenger, confirming that which ye possess. Ye shall believe in him and ye shall help him. He said: Do ye agree, and will ye take up My burden [which I lay upon you] in this [matter]? They answered: We agree. He said: Then bear witness. I will be a witness with you. (3:81)

Thus, Ifa could even be interpreted in light of the following verses of the Qur’an, considering its devotees as believers who need not fear the punishment of the afterlife: Lo! Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans - whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right - surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. (2:62); We send not the messengers save as bearers of good news and warners. Whoso believeth and doeth right, there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. (6:48); Lo! those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Sabaeans, and Christians - Whosoever believeth in God and the Last Day and doeth right - there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. (5:69); For every one of you We have appointed a revealed law and a right way (shar’atminhāj) (5:48).805

805 Elsewhere, Ibn ‘Arabi emphasizes the individual nature of the “revealed law and right way” specified in this verse (each one of you) in a manner reminiscent of the highly individualized taboos and prescriptions of Ifa for each babalawo.
By this line of reasoning, the devotees of Ifa could be considered among those who “believe in God and the Last Day and do right.” From this perspective, Ọrunmila would be a prophet, not a deity or partner set up alongside God, the taboos and prescriptions of Ifa would constitute a “revealed law and right way,” and the posthumous fate of babalawo, like all other believers, would be in the hands of God: 

Lo! God pardoneth not that partners should be ascribed unto Him. He pardoneth all save that to whom He will. 

Unto God [belongeth] whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth; and whether ye make known what is in your minds or hide it, God will bring you to account for it. He will forgive whom He will and He will punish whom He will. God is Able to do all things. He will not be questioned as to that which He does, but they will be questioned.

Leaving aside these soteriological considerations, from another perspective, the oriṣa could be seen as personified Divine Names or Attributes (Ṣifāt), each representing a different Divine facet or activity. The interaction between Divine Names is sometimes described in Sufi literature in mythological language very similar to that of the myths of Ifa.

Furthermore, just as Sufi doctrine describes how different people are said to be governed by different Divine Names at different times, Ifa describes how different people and situations are governed by different oriṣa at different times.

On an even deeper/inner (bāṭin), Ọrunmila could be seen as yet another manifestation of the Muḥammadan Reality (ḥaqīqah Muḥammadiyyah) or Muḥammadan light (nūr Muḥammad) of which all the prophets (including the Prophet of Islam) are but various shades. Thus the Qur’an says, “Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and

that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered.” (2:136);
“The messenger believeth in that which hath been revealed unto him from his Lord and (so do) believers. Each one believeth in Allah and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers - We make no distinction between any of His messengers... (2:285) Say (O Muḥammad): We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was vouchsafed unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered. (3:84); But those who believe in God and His messengers and make no distinction between any of them, unto them God will give their wages; and God is ever Forgiving, Merciful. (4:152). To use Tierno Bokar’s analogy of the rainbow, from this perspective, all the prophets (and by extension all the prophetic messages and religious traditions) are the same in that they are all light, but each is unique and distinct in that it has a unique colour and, in the case of the rainbow, its own place of shining or manifestation (mażhar). Thus the seemingly contradictory verse of the Qur’an, “Of those messengers, some of whom We have caused to excel others, and of whom there are some unto whom God spake, while some of them He exalted in degree...” (2:253), can be understood as referring to the distinct degree of superiority that each “messenger” or “message” has over the other by virtue of representing a certain possibility that is not found in the others (i.e. red “has a degree” above blue because it has something that blue does not and likewise blue “excels” red in that it represents something not found in red). Here we come

807 In the Ringstones of Wisdom, Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “The degrees are many within a single identity. Indeed he has decreed that nothing shall be worshipped but Him in multiple and diverse degrees, each degree being given a divine locus of self-disclosure wherein He is worshipped.” (247-8. See 147-9 for an explicit discussion of this point).
to a very delicate point: most Tijani (and Sufi) writings identify the historical Prophet
Muḥammad with the Muḥammadan Reality to such a degree that the historical person is seen
as the “fullest” embodiment or manifestation of the Muḥammadan Reality, containing the
perfections of all others like the “white light” of a prism contains all colours. From the
perspective of Sufism, this is certainly true, but only relatively so.

The levels or ḥadrāt at which the Prophet Muḥammad is distinct and different from
the other Prophets are “lower” or “less real” than the levels or ḥadrāt in which they are all
united in the same reality. Insofar as degrees of superiority or inferiority have to do with the
historical person of a prophet, they are limited to those things having to do with that visible,
outward level of reality, bound by time and space—such as number of followers, years of life,
statements made, books written/recited, etc. Insofar as degrees of superiority or inferiority
have to do with the inner or spiritual reality of a particular prophet, they remain distinct, but
begin to converge, and insofar as statements about degrees superiority concern the innermost
reality of a particular Prophet, they all merge into one another, so on this level, the praises of
one apply to all. As Rumi writes, “The name of Aḥmad is the name of all the prophets, when
the hundred come, ninety is with us as well.”808 When you follow the rays of different colours
back into the prism, they eventually converge into a single white light. This helps explain the
apparent contradiction Prophet’s statements, “I am the best of the children of Adam, without
boast, Adam and those who come after him will be under my flag on the Day of
Resurrection”809 and “Do not say that I am better than Yunūs ibn Matta (Jonah).”810 In the

808 Mathnawī 1:1106
809 Numerous other statements in the ḥadīth, Qur’an, Sufi and Tijānī literature extol the superiority of the Prophet
as the “best of creation.”
Hadrah Ahmadiyyah, in the haqiqah Muhammadiyyah, there is no distinction between prophetic lights, there is only the all-comprehensive “white light” of the nūr Muhammadi. That is why Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and his disciples say that “during tarbiyah, a disciple becomes a Christian, a Jew, a Magus/ an animist…. At this level, one simultaneously transcends and realizes the “transcendent unity” of all forms of prophetic guidance.

From another perspective, which appears to be shared by the likes of Thierno Bokar, Ibn ‘Arabi addresses the issue of abrogation, comparing other religions to the stars and the “all-inclusive” religion of Muhammad to the sun:

“All the revealed religions [sharā’i] are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muhammad’s revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the light of the stars is actualized. This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null [bātil] by abrogation—that is the opinion of the ignorant (III 153.12) 811

On an even deeper level, in the “black light” of the Divine Essence (al-dhār), the ḥadrah al-Qudsī, all such distinctions are obliterated. All forms of belief are transcended, and even this transcendence is transcended, so that one realizes Divine Immanence in every form of belief, or rather, one sees nothing but God. More precisely, God sees nothing but Himself in Himself by Himself.

For Tijani Sufis, however, the most true perspective comes from “coming back down” and journeying “with God in creation” (ma’ al-Haqq fi ’l-khalq) through baqā’. This

810 See Niasse, Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr vol. 1, 135 and 213-20 for Ibrahim Niasse’s discussion of this issue (an English translation can be found in In the Meadows of Tafsīr for the Noble Qur’an 175 and 276-282). Shaykh Ibrahim concludes this long discussion by clearly affirming the superiority of the Prophet Muhammad over all other Prophets, saying, “Since the Qur’an has clearly affirmed that has favored certain Prophets over others and since we have witnessed these favors as well as these indisputable proofs of the fact that Muhammad is the best of the Prophets, then no one doubts the superiority of Muhammad, except one who does not believe in the Qur’an and has, as a result, completely gone out of this matter.”

811 Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 125.
necessitates combining the undifferentiated perspective of fanā’ or the ḥadrah al-Qudsī with the more differentiated perspectives of the other ḥadrāt, including the “everyday” reality of the ḥadrah al-Nasūt, where each thing, including each revealed law, is irreducibly different, distinct, and even opposing. Thus Tijanis, like other Sufis, may acknowledge and recognize the inner validity and identity of other traditions with their own, while yet outwardly denying this validity and identity. It is a question of levels of reality, of ḥadrāt. Ibn ʿArabi explains the rationale for inwardly recognizing a tradition while outwardly denying it:

As for those who know the affair as it is, they are manifest in a form that rejects the [other] forms that are worshipped [i.e. idols and other traditions of worship]. Their station in knowledge grants them that they be determined by the moment, owing to the determination over them of the Messenger in whom they believe. It is by virtue of this that they are called believers. They are worshippers of the moment, though they know that they [the idol-worshippers] did not worship those forms [idols] themselves, but only worshipped God in them by virtue of the influence of the self-disclosure which they knew to be found in them. The denier, who has no knowledge of what self-discloses, is ignorant of it, while the perfected knower—prophet, messenger, or heir—veils it.

Likewise, the Knower (ʿĀrif) inwardly recognizes that everything is God and/or the Prophet, but veils this knowledge outwardly, giving each thing its due on its own level by following the Prophet in outward actions and speech as well as in inward states and knowledge. So in this respect, Tijani Sufis could potentially inwardly recognize the validity and identity of Ifa with their own tradition, while outwardly denying it. This should not be understood as some kind of a Straussian concealment of esoteric truths for fear of political oppression, nor can it even be reduced Aristotelian concern for exposing the hoi polioi (al-ʿāmah) to that which they can not understand (“casting pearls before swine”), but should rather be understood as the epistemological imperative of following the example of the Messenger, which leads to the most perfect possible realization and recognition of the Real in all of its forms.

812 Ringstones of Wisdom, 251.
Thus from the perspective of Tijani Sufism, Ifa appears outwardly (ẓāhirān) as pagan idol-worship/unbelief (shirk or kufr) or sorcery (sihr) or as an abrogated/ altered tradition brought by a prophet sent to the Yoruba people or their ancestors. However, inwardly (bātinān), Ifa could appear as a star in the sky of prophetic lights, a distinct band of colour in the rainbow of prophetic guidance—Ọrunmila could appear as a particular manifestation of the Muḥammadan Reality, and Ifa, as one of the many forms of belief through which God knows Himself.

Through the above examples, we can see how both Ifa and Tijani Sufism are and can be used to interpret each other, demonstrating their own “comparative theories of religion.” Interestingly, both traditions can be used to interpret the other as being united or identical with it “in Heaven” (orun-Ifa) or “in the Aḥmadi presence” (al-hādrah al-Aḥmadiyyah) or “in the Divine Presence” (al-hādrah al-Qudsiyyah-Tijani Sufism), while being distinct, different, and even opposing “in the world” (aye-Ifa) or in the outward presence of apparent reality (ḥādrah al-Nasūt—Tijani Sufism). As the Araba remarked, “There is only one God, and that God is the same God that sent Ọrunmila and sent Musulumi [the Prophet of Islam] into the world. But many Muslims, they don’t have that understanding, and because of this modernism, people just believe that, ‘no what I’m doing should be the best.’ This is a big problem for many people today.” Now we will turn to the comparison of certain dimensions Ifa and Tijani Sufism. These “dimensions of comparison” are constructed by exploring the relationship between seemingly similar or related concepts from the two traditions.


**Dimensions of Comparison between Ifa and Tijani Sufism**

To study the Way is to study the Self. To study the Self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things of the universe. To be enlightened by all things of the universe is to cast off the body and mind of the self as well as those of others. Even the traces of enlightenment are wiped out, and life with traceless enlightenment goes on forever and ever.

-Dogen

**Knowledge (‘ilm-ma’rifah / imọ-igbagbo)**

The ‘ilm vs. ma’rifah, rational speculation (fikr/’aql) vs. unveiling (kashf), book knowledge (‘ilm al-awrāq) vs. knowledge by taste (‘ilm al-adhwāq) that characterizes Tijani epistemology does not exactly map onto the imọ (direct knowledge) vs. igbagbo (second-hand knowledge) distinction that characterizes the epistemology of Ifa (and traditional Yoruba thought and language in general). Within Sufism, the epistemological contrast is between a merely mental or sensory form of knowledge achieved through the senses and/or rational speculation and an existential/metaphysical form of knowledge or self-knowledge achieved through the heart (qalb)/Divine Intellect (al-‘aql al-rabbānī). In Ifa, the distinction is rather between direct/firsthand knowledge (imọ), sensory or otherwise, and second-hand knowledge of a primarily propositional or conceptual nature (igbagbo). These distinctions are similar in that they both privilege direct, intimate, personal, and non-discursive knowledge (ma’rifah and imọ) over knowledge that tends to be indirect, secondhand, and discursive (‘ilm and igbagbo). It is notable that in everyday language, both ma’rifah and imọ are used to refer to the knowledge that one has of another person, it would

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814 Similarly, while the distinction between heart (okan) and brain (opolo) in the psychology of Ifa is analogous to the distinction between the heart (qalb) and rational faculty (’aql) of Sufism, they are not equivalent, as the okan is described as the seat of emotions and ordinary thought, whereas, ins Sufism, the qalb is described as the instrument of unitive knowledge and unveiling (kashf).

815 As mentioned earlier, this distinction bears some resemblance to Russell’s distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Although both Ifa and Tijānī Sufism posit that one can know truths or The Truth/Reality (al-Ḥaqq / otito) through this kind of “knowledge by acquaintance” and not just ordinary “things” as Russell asserts.

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be a bit odd to use 'ilm and absurd to use igbagbo to refer to this kind of interpersonal knowledge. This is significant as it indicates that the object of both ma 'rifah and the deepest mode of knowledge (imọ ijinle), which is at once, the Divine (Allah/Olodumare) and the self (‘ayn / orì), is understood to be an active knowing subject and not a passive object of knowledge.

Characteristically, the language of Ifa is more polysemic and synthetic (i.e. imọ ijinle can be used to refer to the principal knowledge of medicine or geometry as well as the sacred “word that Olodumare gave to Ọrunmila to mend the world”), while that of Tijani Sufism is more analytic and technical, probably the result of the Sufi tradition’s long engagement with the even more analytic and discursively technical disciplines of Falsafah (a tradition of Islamic philosophy) and Kalām (Islamic theology). Within Ifa, there is less of a distinction between esoteric and exoteric knowledge than there is in Sufism. For example, a babalawo who has not memorized several verses of each of the 256 Odu and is well-versed in their rituals, would rarely, if ever, be called a “deep knower” (onimo ijinle), whereas I met many a Tijani disciple described as being a “Knower by God” (‘Ārif biLLāh), who had not memorized the Qur’an and had little more than a basic knowledge of Islamic rituals and jurisprudence (fiqh), not to mention the other Islamic sciences. Thus being a “Knower by God” in Tijani Sufism does not seem to require a mastery of other, more “exoteric” sciences, whereas being a “deep knower” (onimo ijinle) in Ifa is not similarly separated from the memorization of the Odu and the extensive procedural knowledge of their associated rituals. Nevertheless, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Shaykh Ibrahim and his close disciples (including many contemporary shuyukh as well as Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, Ibn ‘Arabi and Maghrebī Sufism in general) was/is their unification or combination of dhawq (esoteric knowledge, “tasting”) and
dirāyah (exoteric, rational or transmitted knowledge). The vast majority of shuyukh whom I interviewed had memorized the Qur’an and were masters of many other Islamic sciences.

In any case, the epistemologies of both traditions privilege and are founded upon these direct modes of (self)-knowing, which both traditions aim to cultivate through a highly structured program of ritual practice, a way of life and being. In fact these forms of knowledge (ma’rifah and imọ ijinle) must also be described as distinct modes of being whose perfections are identified with the Prophet Muḥammad and Qrunmila, respectively.

Acquisition of Knowledge and Ritual Practice

Thus, in both traditions, the process of acquiring or cultivating these ideal modes of knowing/being involves the transformation of the self through ritual practice. Since these modes of knowing are at once self-knowledge and modes of being, the self’s mode of being must be changed or actualized through transformative ritual practices. These practices are invariably linked to and/or done in imitation of the founder of the tradition, who is identified with this most perfect mode of being/knowing. In self-knowledge, the knowing subject is the same as the object known, so to change or increase what you know, you must change or increase your self. In Tijani Sufism, the most intense and deepest levels or aspects of the self are identified with God, the Prophet, and Shaykh Aḥmad Tijani / Shaykh Ibrahim, while in Ifa, the most intense and deepest levels of the self are identified with Olodumare (“the ori of all ori”), one’s ori, Qrunmila, and one’s Odu. If you want to know me, walk a mile in my shoes, if you want to know the Qrunmila or the Prophet Muḥammad, walk a life in their footprints—in doing so, you become who you truly are and thus know yourself as you truly are and know things as they truly are.
Initiation (tarbiyah / igbodu)

Initiation (tarbiyah in Tijani Sufism and itefa in Ifa) is of central importance to this process of transformation or realization in both traditions. However, just because both terms are translated as “initiation” does not mean that they should be assumed to be identical. As the descriptions in Chapters 3 and 5 demonstrate, tarbiyah and itefa / igbodu are clearly two very different rituals. Nevertheless they share certain deep similarities despite their obvious differences. The exact rites and realizations of both are closely guarded secrets, with strict taboos governing what initiates can and cannot disclose about their experiences to non-initiates. As mentioned above, this is closely related to the inner/invisible-outer/visible distinction and complementarity that is important to both Ifa (inux / ode) and Sufism (bātin / zāhir). Within both traditions, the knowledge of the inner is ineffable to a certain degree, and thus can only be expressed outwardly through symbol and allusion, which is liable to be misunderstood by those who have not had the same experiences. This implies a special symbolic theory of language and communication that will be taken up in the next section of this chapter. Furthermore, the rites of initiation are also kept secret to prevent the uninitiated from trying to initiate themselves, an impossible and dangerous proposition in both traditions.

Interestingly, babalawo liken going to the igbodu to performing the Ḥājj, a comparison that is suggested not only by the similarity of the clothes of the Ifa initiates to those of the Meccan pilgrims (white cloth tied over one shoulder), but also by the symbolism of the Ka‘aba as the heart within Sufism. According to Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, the real hājj is the journey to the heart, to the dwelling place of God in the innermost depths of one’s being, while for babalawo, the igbodu is the place where one encounters one’s true self (ori-inu) and the Odu that gave birth to one. Likewise, in tarbiyah, the initiate comes to know his or her
inner reality and identity with God, the realities of Prophet, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī (and
Shaykh Ibrahim). Thus, both initiatory rites are likened to a “re-birth” and radically alter the
way initiates perceive and interact with themselves and the world around them. In both Tijani
Sufism and Ifa, initiation is described as opening the soul, the self, up to the higher levels of
its being.816 If a non-initiate can be likened to a person locked in a room with a few small
windows, initiation unlocks the door and allows the person to go outside and look around. It
gives the initiate the spiritual power (aṣe in Ifa, fayd or walāyah/ wilāyah in Tijani Sufism) to
open the door and transcend the limits of his or her “everyday” self.

Thus in both traditions, initiation is described not as an end, but rather as a beginning
(as even the English word “initiation” suggests). Interestingly, both traditions contain sayings
that describe initiation as a never-ending process. The journey of knowledge in both traditions
is endless, “from cradle to the grave” and beyond. Since both the object of knowledge (the
Real (al-Haqq)/ the Muḥammadan Reality (al-haqīqah Muḥammadiyyah) in Tijani Sufism
and Olodumare/Ọrunmila in Ifa) is infinite and is identified with the knowing subject, the
journey of knowledge is boundless “on both sides” in both traditions.

Initiation and the daily, weekly and annual rites of both traditions are both described
as establishing an intimate relationship and communication/communion with these Divine
realities. As a result, both traditions are extremely dynamic because of the continued
“vertical” connection with these sources of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Tijani Shuyukh and

816 Compare with this description of the Eleusian mysteries from the Introduction to Hadot’s Philosophy as a
Way of Life, “Indeed, recalling the importance of the mysteries of Eleusis in the history of ancient thought, Hadot
reminds us of the famous sentence attributed to Aristotle that the initiates of Eleusis do not learn anything, but
they experience a certain impression or emotion. The initiate did not learn his other-worldly fate at Eleusis, but
lived this supra-individual life of the other world. The “true secret of Eleusis is therefore this very experience,
this moment when one plunges into the completely other, this discovery of an unknown dimension of existence.”
(Hadot, Pierre, and Arnold I. Davidson. Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to
disciples report regularly seeing the Prophet, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijani, and Shaykh Ibrahim in dreams and visions, and babalawo consult with Ifa multiple times a day. As mentioned above, these intimate interactions are made possible by the “putting,” “making,” or “actualizing” of these realities within the initiate. In both of these traditions, you can’t really or directly know something or someone that is not inside of you, so in Ifa (and oriṣa traditions in general) the oriṣa are “made” and “put” inside of the initiate, enabling him or her to interact with their physical shrines and metaphysical presences. In the Tijani Sufism of Shaykh Ibrahim, the 
*talqīn* or “implantation” of the general *wird* and the special *award* (litaneis) of *tarbiyah* transmit the flux of light and knowledge (*fayḍ*) from shaykh to disciple, actualizing the initiate’s inner connection (*rāḥiṭah*) to and ultimately identity with Shaykh Ibrahim, Shaykh Tijani, the Prophet, and ultimately, God. Without this connection or transmission, one is not authorized to perform the rites of the Tijāniyyah; similarly, without this “implantation” of Ifa (or other oriṣa) one is not authorized to perform the rites of Ifa (or other oriṣa). This provides another perspective from which we can understand that the modes of knowing cultivated in both traditions are akin to the intimate way in which one knows another person—as a part of oneself—not as an object, but rather intersubjectively, or ultimately, as a part of one’s own knowing subject.

While the symbolic logics that structure and animate the largely non-discursive (even when linguistic) rituals of these traditions will be discussed in the next section (and have been discussed extensively in the previous chapters), a note is in order here about the role that discursive, conceptual thought plays in the ritual processes of realization in Ifa and Tijani Sufism.
The role of conceptual/discursive thought in realization

Fikr (thought) leads to dhikr (remembrance/invocation), from dhikr combined with fikr a hundred good thoughts (afkār) arise

-Jāmī

The rituals of Ifa and Tijani Sufism are not only spiritual and physical exercises, they also shape the inner realities (inu/okan and nafs/qalb/’aql) from which thought (ero and fikr) emerge. But what role do concepts and speculative thought play in these ritual processes of realization? Both traditions set forward not only a program of ritual exercises to be performed, but both also elaborate a doctrine or doctrines, a set of concepts to be learned, as well as defining a hermeneutics, a means of interpreting and making sense of oneself and the surrounding world. While these doctrines (which are described in detail in the previous chapters) are not usually taught to non-initiates, they can be learned and understood, to a certain extent, without participating in the traditions themselves. However, in both traditions, these doctrines are verified and transcended through the direct realizations experienced in initiation (igbodu and tarbiyah) and afterwards.

The doctrines of Ifa and Tijani Sufism thus serve as a kind of “map” of the cosmos and self, of Reality as such, pointing out the best means of navigating through the different levels and aspects of existence and beyond. The practice and rituals of the Odu and festivals of Ifa, and the Qur’an, ḥadīth, and writings, poetry, and oral instruction of Sufi masters profoundly shape the imaginations and minds of devotees, providing them with a wealth of concepts, images, and symbols to both contemplate and think with throughout their lives.

These concepts and ideas serve as motivation and reminders, provide a basic sense of “what’s going on,” orient practitioners’ intentions (a key component of ritual practice in both traditions), answer questions, remove doubts and false certainties, and eliminate errors and
habits of thinking that inhibit realization, replacing them with those that anticipate and facilitate realization and spiritual maturity. These concepts and ideas are not considered to be speculative, but are rather understood to be “inspired”: coming directly from God, the founder of the tradition, or the realized masters of the traditions (i.e., the wisdom of the “ancestors”). These concepts, insights, and means of interpretation, are thus understood to both come from and lead back to the Divine Truth that is considered as both origin and goal for both traditions. Thus it is important to distinguish between these traditional “inspired” concepts of Ifa and Tijani Sufism, and the everyday “made-up” or speculative concepts that have a merely mental or more commonplace origin. The former come from and lead beyond concepts, while the latter lead only to more concepts.

The supraformal Truth (al-Ḥaqq) of Sufism or the Divine Word (ọrọ) of Ifa take on a wide variety of forms in the minds of babalawo and Sufis, and because thought or the inner life (inu) is regarded as the origin or father of one’s outward behaviours in both traditions, eliminating false patterns of thought, false stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others, is considered just as, if not more, important than eliminating or curbing wrong or false behaviours. In both traditions, adepts are first introduced to these “inspired” concepts, which gradually come to replace other concepts and patterns of thought, and through the combination of study and practice, these “inspired” concepts become something more—

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817 This distinction between “inspired” and “speculative” concepts can be derived from the following verses of the Qur’an, These are nothing but names which you have devised, - you and your fathers, - for which God has sent down no authority. They follow nothing but conjecture and what their own souls desire! ... They have no knowledge thereof. They follow but conjecture, and conjecture can never take the place of the Truth (53:23 and 28) and the notion in Ifa that just as some actions have more aṣe (effective power, authority, Divine sanction) than others, some thoughts have more aṣe than others. Olodumare and the Oriṣa are behind oninure “the one who has a good inu (mind/inner reality),” as the previously-cited verse of Odu Ofun Otura says, “The liar casts the kola, and it is blocked/opaque. The oath-breaker casts the kola, and does not yield a clear choice. A good person (oninure) casts the kola and it is clearly befitting.”
“lights” that transform the very being of the initiate, further illuminating other concepts and practices. For both traditions, “real” thinking seems to begin after initiation.

To draw on an example from the world of Oriṣa spirituality, this mental transformation can be likened to the dances practiced by oloriṣa seeking to become possessed by their Oriṣa. As the dancer’s steps become more and more like that of the oriṣa, the oriṣa eventually possesses the dancer, whose steps are now perfected under the divine control of the oriṣa. Within the tradition of Ifa, thinking (ironu) seems to function in a similar way: proper thinking leads to understanding, which leads to right action, which leads back to proper thinking. As the previously cited verse from Odu Eji-Ogbe illustrates:

\[
\begin{align*}
Bi ojumo ba mọ & \\
A kii ya ogbẹri bi ojo ana & \\
Difa fun Koimo & \\
Ti n ronu bi oon ti ma ṣe ohun ti o ẹlẹ ni ana si & \\
O ronu titi, ti o sun & \\
Ni igbati oju mọ, ti oye la & \\
Koimo wa mọ eyi to oon o ṣe dandan & \\
\end{align*}
\]

“If a new day dawns
We must not return to yesterday’s foolishness”
Performed Ifa divination for “I don’t know” (Koimo)
Who was pondering whether he should do the thing that he did yesterday
He thought and thought, until he fell asleep
When the next day dawned, his understanding (oye) opened
“I don’t know” came to know the thing he should do with certainty (dandan)

Within the Tijani tradition, Shaykh Ibrahim’s commentary on the verse If you love God, then follow me, and God will love you illustrates this point in similar fashion:

The following of the Prophet through all of one’s words and actions is the most elevated means (wastlah) that the servant can take to arrive at the presence of God… Whoever follows the prophet finds the love of God, and when God loves his servant, He is him. “My servant does not cease to draw near to me through supererogatory works until I love him, and when I love him, I am him.”

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818 Although in some traditions, babalawo are initiated as young children and many Tijānī shuyukh give tarbiyah to people who have only a basic understanding of Islamic and Sufi doctrine, so this process is less gradual in these cases.

The full ḥadīth cited in this passage reads, “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, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks,” to which one could easily add “the thinking with which he thinks.”

Shaykh Ibrahim appears to do so himself in the previously quoted passage in which he defines different kinds of “thought” or mental activity:

Thought (khāṭir) is what descends on the heart either with the acts of meditation (fikr) or not. The real thought (al-khāṭir al-ḥaqīqī) is the thought united with God when the slave ceases to exist and his being is annihilated so that nothing remains except the thought which roams, freed from its restrictions, wherever it wants.

All people draw near, subject to their state
But we are unfettered by its limitations, as it is [for us] a mirage

Reflection (fikrah) is among the actions of the slave, the journey of his heart either in his Lord or in himself, and both are sources of great benefit, because if you reflect upon God and upon the beauty of His Attributes and Actions, you will necessarily long for Him and draw near to him by the means of those actions of the limbs which bring you near to Him. And if you reflect upon your soul and its wretchedness, you will necessarily flee from it, and the flight from it is the flight to God by the means of those actions of the limbs which draw you near to Him. This is reflection. Insight (‘ibrah) is the benefit obtained by reflection, and it is that when something occurs to your vision (baṣar), large or small, of potential significance, you discover its meaning. And likewise, a thought is something that occurs to your mind (bāl), large or small. By this you know that thought (khāṭir) is what is from God to you, reflection (fikrah) is what goes from you to God, and insight (‘ibrah) is the effect of both of them and their result (nafṭah). And God’s it is to show the way (16:9)

For Shaykh Ibrahim, “real thought” only takes place after annihilation, and it is interesting to note in this regard that he used to comment upon and teach some of the intellectual classics of Sufi literature, such as Ibn ʿAṭā Llāh’s Ḥikam, to his disciples after they had completed their tarbiyah. This emphasizes the continued role and importance of

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820 Ibn ʿArabi writes, “For when He is invoked, He is invoked through Him. And through Him, He is reflected upon and conceived of. He is the rational faculty of the rational thinkers, the reflection of the reflectors, the invocation of the invokers, the proof of the provers. Were He to come out of a thing, it would cease to be. And were He to be within a thing, it would cease to be.” (Sufi Path of Knowledge, 381).

discursive thought even after tarbiyah, when joined with spiritual realization. For the disciples of Shaykh Ibrahim, tarbiyah marks the beginning, and not the end, of “real thought.”

Thus, in both Tijani Sufism and Ifa, conceptual or discursive thought plays an essential role as the activity of a person’s inner reality (\textit{inu/}ọ\textit{kan} in Ifa and \textit{nafs/galb/}ˈ\textit{aq}l in Sufism). Given that the goal of both traditions is to establish a total and radical transformation of one’s being, all aspects of one’s being, including the mind, must be engaged and involved. This engagement takes the form of the “inspired” concepts of the doctrines embedded in the orature and literature of the traditions, whose theoretical understanding and contemplation, when combined with ritual practice (this contemplation is itself a form of ritual practice) facilitates the deeper, existential realization and verification of these doctrines. In his \textit{Ringstones of Wisdom}, Ibn ‘Arabi explains the function and transformation of these beliefs or “concepts”:

Regarding the Selfhood, some slaves judge, in their belief, that God is such and such, and when the covering is removed they see the form of what they believe which is true, and they believe in it. Then the knot is undone and the belief disappears, and becomes a knowledge through witnessing. After this sharpening of sight, dull vision shall not return.\textsuperscript{822}

In both traditions, the ideas we have about ourselves, who we are and what we can become, strongly determine our development during life and after death.\textsuperscript{823} This is particularly true of the “revealed” or “inspired” concept of self, \textit{ori}, in Ifa, which bears some similarity to the concept of \textit{ˈayn thābitah} (immutable entity, identity or essence) in Sufism.

\textit{The Eternal Self (Ori/ ‘ayn)}

“All life, however long and complicated it may be, actually consists of a single moment— the moment when a man knows forever more who he is.”

- Jorge Luis Borges

\textsuperscript{822} \textit{Ringstones of Wisdom}, 133.

\textsuperscript{823} Rumi writes, “You are this very thought brother, the rest of you is bones and sinew. If your thought is a rose, you’re a rose garden, but if it’s a thorn, you’re firewood.” \textit{(Mathnawi} Book II, v 277-8).
“A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz”

“The essence of all sciences is only this: that you know who you are/will be on the Day of Resurrection.”
-Rumi
*Mathnavī III*, verse 2654

To briefly summarize the reality of *ori* described in the previous chapters, the *ori-inu* (inner head) is chosen by each person in heaven before coming to the world. This choice (*ipin*) comprises everything that the person will ever do, experience, and become, and is often glossed as “destiny” or “fate.” On the way down to the world, people pass beneath the tree of forgetfulness and forget their destinies, but they can still commune and communicate with them through Ifa divination and by worshipping and “feeding” their *ori-inu* (inner heads, destinies), which also serve as a kind of guardian angel, muse, and spiritual double. At the apex of their initiation ceremony, babalowo encounter their own *ori-inu* and the *aṣẹ* of this choice of destiny (*ipin*) in the *igbdou*. As Wenger summarizes:

> Ori is that part of one’s complex identity which is an imperishable part of God… Ori is a part of God, Olodumare, in His quality as the Creator, in which capacity he is called Ẹlẹda; but he is also our very own self. From this, our ourself, depends not only our fate, but our active participation in our fate. Ceremonially we address Ori as “Ori mi Ẹlẹda mi,” “My Ori, my creator!”

Awo Faniyi further elaborates:

> Orunmila is the witness of the choice of destiny (*eleyeri-ipin*) while Odu is the sacred power (*aṣẹ*) of that choice of destiny (*ipin*). This choice of destiny is the thing that Olodumare has chosen for each and every creature (*eda*) coming into the world; this destiny is one’s inner head (*ori inu*). The sacred power of the choice of destiny (*aṣẹ ipin*), Odu, is the choice that one made while coming into the world, it is everything that one will or should do, and everything that one will not or should not do… when you see Odu, you meet everything that you left behind on the way down to the world at the tree of forgetfulness (*igi igbagbe)*.

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s work, and Sufi traditions (such as the Tijani) that are heavily influenced by it, the *‘ayn thābitah*, or immutable entity/identity or essence of a person or

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825 Awo Faniyi, interview with the author, November 27, 2013, Ile-Ifẹ, Nigeria. Yoruba. Awo Faniyi then quoted a lengthy verse of Ifa from Odu Otura Iwori in which Orunmila is told to use Odu as the power (*aṣẹ*) of all of his decisions (*ipin*) in life, even down to what he should eat and drink.
thing plays a remarkably similar role. Drawing inspiration from Qur’anic verses such as And Our word unto a thing, when We intend it, is only that We say unto it: Be! And it is (Kun fayakūn). (16:40) and But His command, when He intendeth a thing, is only that He says unto it: Be! and it is (Kun fayakūn) (36:82). Ibn ‘Arabi explains that these “things” or “entities” (‘ayān) are in God’s Knowledge before He creates them or the world, and that He only gives them existence in the forms they have chosen or determined for themselves. In the Ringstones of Wisdom, he writes:

He does not determine our properties except through us. Or rather, we determine our own properties. Or rather, we determine our own properties through ourselves, though within Him. Hence he says, To God belongs the conclusive argument (6:149) that is against those who are veiled, those who will say to the Real, “Why didst Thou do to us such and such, which did not conform to our desires?” Then The shank, which is what is unveiled to the gnostics here, shall be uncovered (68:42) 826 They will see that the Real did not do to them what they claimed He did, since everything derived from themselves. He knew them only in keeping with their actual situation. Hence their argument is nullified and the conclusive argument remains with God….

The Divine Will becomes connected only to a single thing. Will is a relationship which follows knowledge, while knowledge is a relationship that follows the object of knowledge. The object of knowledge is you and your states (aḥwāl). Knowledge displays no effect within the object of knowledge. On the contrary, the object of knowledge displays its effects in knowledge. The object gives to knowledge what it actually is in itself…. None of us there is but has a known station (37:164) This “known station” is what you are in your immutability. Through it you have become manifest in your existence, that is, if it is affirmed that you have existence. If it is affirmed that existence belongs to the Real and not to you, then without doubt you determine the properties within the Being of the Real. If it is affirmed that you are an existent thing, then again without doubt the property belongs to you. Even though the Real determines the property, He only effuses [fāḍa] existence upon you, and you determine your own property. Hence you should praise none but yourself and blame none but yourself. For the Real only praise remains for effusing existence, since that belongs to Him, not to you. 827

That is, our immutable identities, what we are in God’s eternal knowledge of us and all of our states (aḥwāl), everything that we are, will be, and will happen to us, determines God’s Knowledge of us. All God does is bring us into existence. So in a sense, we “choose” to be what we are, and then God gives us existence in the form we have chosen or determined. However, it is important to remember that all of this takes place in Divinis, in God (‘inda

826 This Qur’anic idiom means something akin to “girding the loins” or “preparing for a difficult task, trial, tribulation, or terror.”
827 Sufi Path of Knowledge, p. 299.
Allāh), so the “we” that chooses or determines our immutable identities, is none other than the Divine We. In fact, this act of determination is elsewhere described as the first “entification” or “determination” (al-ta‘ayyun al-awwal) of Divine Essence (al-Dhāt).\(^{828}\) In the same work Ibn ‘Arabi explains, “All He does is emanate existence upon you, and the determination is yours and is over you.”\(^{829}\) That is, you determine what God existentiates through what you are in your immutable entity, and the Divine Essence determines this immutable entity through its own determination in Itself or self-disclosure to Itself (called Most Holy Effusion (al-fāyḍ al-aqdas) or the Self-disclosure of the invisible (al-tajallī al-ghayb), which are synonyms for “the first entification (al-ta‘ayyun al-awwal)). Then through a second determination or self-disclosure called the “Breath of the All-Merciful” (nafas al-Raḥmān) or the “Holy Effusion” (al-fāyḍ al-muqaddas), God brings the hidden realities of the immutable entities, and thus all of creation, into existence. This whole process is often likened to a person speaking: first you form the words you want to say in your mind, where they are inaudible, then you externalize and enunciate these words on your breath through your vocal chords and mouth, and they become audible.

All of this is strikingly similar to the way in which ori is described in the Yoruba context. Wenger’s definition of ori, “that part of one’s complex identity which is an imperishable part of God,” could just as well apply to the immutable entity (‘ayn thābitah) of Sufism. Moreover, as one of Hallen’s collaborators explained, “it (‘emī) chooses what it will come to do…So also it [ori] is the act of the self [‘emī] when it is with the supreme deity

\(^{828}\) This is also known as the Most Holy Effusion (al-fāyḍ al-aqdas) and the Self-disclosure of the invisible (al-tajallī al-ghayb) discussed in Chapter 3.

\(^{829}\) Ringstones of Wisdom, 63.
Furthermore, the oniṣegùn interviewed by Hallen also described ori in the following ways, “It is the person who has chosen for himself or herself what he or she has come to do on earth…The Supreme Deity (Ọlorun) merely says that it should be so [the àṣe]; “Destiny is everything that the person will do on earth. The self (’emí) chooses all the things that the person will do, without leaving anything aside.”; “All the things we do on earth are according to our destiny (ipin). If a person behaves (ṣe) badly, this is what their destiny (ipin) wishes. This [destiny] is what has been created (ṣe) along with them.”

Thus the choice (ipin) of ori is like the determination of the immutable entities (’ayān thābitah), and the creative power of Olodumare (aṣe) that “says that it should be so” is like the creative or existentiating command of “Be!” (Kun!), the effusion of existence through the “Breath of the All-Merciful” (nafas al-Raḥmān) or the “Holy Effusion” (al-fayḍ al-muqaddas). But the similarities do not end here.

Just as the ori is worshipped as a “personal god” or “personal aspect of divinity,” the immutable entity (also called “preparedness” (isti’dād)), although not consciously worshipped as such, determines each person’s object of worship. Ibn ‘Arabi explains:

830 Barry, The Good, the Bad, the Beautiful, 52.

831 Ibid, 52-53.

832 These perspectives also present an interesting resolution to the fate vs. free will debate. In ori, human will (choice) is not separate from Divine will (fate), hence the paradox of the heavenly “choice of fate.” A person always has choice, but she has already made this choice in divinis, in illo tempore (‘inda Allāh or fi Azāl in Arabic, nigba naa in Yoruba). But this time is not “before,” in the historical past, but rather, “above,” in the eternal present of myth and ritual; so, conversely, a person’s fate is sealed, but he himself seals it every time he makes a decision. The choice of ori in heaven is the archetype and source of all the choices a person will ever make in life, and this human choice is not other than the divine choice. We are ultimately not other than our ori, and through our ori, we are not other than Olodumare, and so our choices, all of our exercises of free will, is not other than our fate. It is only when we leave the unity of eternity and are plunged into the world of time and multiplicity that these aspects seem contradictory and paradoxical, as in a verse of Odu Ika-Ofun “a kiinlè, a yan èdá. A dàyà tān, ojù nkan gbogbo wa. Èda ose e pada lọọ yan ominiran. Ayafi bi a taye wa—We knelt (in heaven) and chose our destinies, but when we arrived on earth, we became impatient/troubled. We cannot go back and choose another creation/destiny, unless we return to the world again.” Because we are not other than God, our choice (free will) is not other than God’s (fate). From this perspective, we are what we choose to be, and we choose to be what we are.
The Real becomes manifest in the measure of the preparedness of the slave…for the slave becomes manifest to the Real in the measure of the form within which the Real self-discloses to him…. God has two self-disclosures: an invisible self-disclosure and a visible self-disclosure. From the disclosure of the invisible He grants the preparedness of the heart. This is the self-disclosure of the Essence, whose reality is the invisible, and is the Selfhood… When this preparedness is actualized in it—that is, in the heart—He discloses Himself to it through a self-disclosure of the visible in the realm of the visible, and it sees Him. It is manifest in the form of what was disclosed to it, as we have already said. He, Most High, grants it the preparedness in His Saying, \textit{He granteth everything its creation} (20:50).

He then lifts the veil from between Himself and His servant, who then sees Him in the form of what He believes. It is identical with what he believes. Neither the heart nor the eye ever witness anything but the form of what one believes concerning the Real. The Real of what is believed is that whose form is encompassed by the heart. The eye only sees the Real of belief…. The identity of the form that discloses itself is the identity of the form that receives that self-disclosure.

That is, the “god of belief,” the god that is worshipped, is defined by and identical to the form of the “preparedness of the heart,” which is identical to the form of the immutable entity in which the servant presents him or herself to the Real. In simpler, more poetic language, “Every creature has a face turned to God, which is also the Face of God turned to that creature, bestowing being upon that creature.”

Thus what one is \textit{in God}, one’s immutable entity or the preparedness of one’s heart, determines how God appears \textit{in and to one}, and thus the form in which one believes in and worships God. This individual aspect of divinity is often referred to as one’s \textit{rabb} or Lord. Thus, from Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective, everyone worships his or her own immutable essence (‘\textit{ayn thābitah}). What distinguishes the Knowers (‘\textit{ārifūn}) from others is that they have a special preparedness which makes their hearts infinitely flexible and receptive to the Real in all of its forms of manifestation or self-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{The Ringstones of Wisdom}, 127-8.
\item Thus from this perspective, the Qur’anic testimony, \textit{Our Lord (rabb) is God (Allāh)} (41:30) is not a mere tautology or profession of faith in a particular divinity, but rather since the All-Comprehensive \textit{Allāh} names the Divine Essence, this testimony only truly belongs to the Knowers, whose object of worship is the Real in and of itself, the Divine Essence in Itself and all of its manifestations. In Ifa, this would be roughly equivalent to saying “my ori is Olodumare.”
\end{itemize}
disclosure (tajalliyāt). It is in them that the Real knows itself most fully, whereas in others It only knows Itself partially. Similarly, Sowande attributes the difference between Oriṣa and ordinary human beings to their Ori, “the definition of Oriṣa… ‘Awọn ẹ̀niti Ori ṣa da yato si awọn ẹ̀legbẹ̀ rẹ iyoku,’ namely, ‘he whom Ori has created in a manner different to that in which his contemporaries have been created.’ Such a person has an added something which makes him stand out among his fellows….“

Using of Ibn ‘Arabi’s symbol of the mirror of non-Being to represent the “heart-preparednesses” or “immutable entities” (‘ayān) of the world, in which the Real contemplates its own reflection, Shabistarī Shabistarī summarizes:

Not-Being is the mirror, the world the reflection, and man Is as the reflected eye of The unseen Person. 
You are that reflected eye, and He the light of the eye, 
In that eye, His eye sees His own eye.837

This description is particularly powerful as the word for “eye” in Arabic, “‘ayn”, is the same word used to refer to the immutable entity or essence, “‘ayn thābit.” Similarly, Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “Man is in relation to the Real, what the pupil (insān means both “pupil” and “man” in Arabic) is in relation to the eye, through which vision occurs.”838 Extending this metaphor, when the Real gazes at itself in the mirror of the immutable entities (‘ayān), man is like the reflected eye, and the Knowers among them are like the pupil of this eye—the point that contains everything else in the mirror. It is the source of vision, and thus, the reflection.

This bears strong similarities to Susanne Wenger’s description, “Ori is He [Èleđa] in us, through Ori everything is imperishably part of His sanctity and thus divine…God’s own

836 Sowande, Ifa: guide, Counsellor, and Friend of our Forefathers, 43-44.
837 Gulshan-i Raz, 15.
838 The Ringstones of Wisdom, 6.
archetypal self is imperceptible, remote to mortal mind, but is utterly intimate—the very nucleus of all and everything, of all that is created individually…” Moreover, the encounter with the realities of ori and one’s immutable entity during initiation in Ifa and Tijani Sufism also contain some fascinating similarities. One disciple described the fath or opening experienced during tarbiyah as:

*Fath* is the process of being conscious that you have no limits, and you can only keep discovering, and discovering, and finding out, and destroying walls and discovering the true interaction between things...Fath al-akbar (the greatest opening or enlightenment) is when you discover who you really are, everything about you, what you have come into the world to do, what will happen to you, how you will live and die, everything that Allah will do with you, and so after that, you will not be afraid or worrying…

Ibn ‘Arabi similarly describes this realization, relating it to the Knower’s immutable entity (‘ayn):

Among them is one who knows that God’s knowledge of him, in all of his states, is what he is in his identity’s state of immutability prior to its existence, and he knows that the Real grants him nothing but what the knowledge of his identity grants Him, which is what he is in his state of immutability. He knows from whence God’s knowledge of Him is realized. There is no category of the Folk of God more exalted or more unveiled than this category….for he knows what is contained in God’s knowledge of him…through the unveiling to him of his immutable identity and the infinite transitions of the states it encounters…. as concerns his knowledge of himself, he is at the degree of God’s knowledge of him, because what is received comes from a single source [his immutable identity (‘ayn al-thābit)].

This is remarkably similar to Awo Faniyi’s description of the encounter with Odu in the igbodu:

The sacred power of the choice of destiny (aṣẹ ipin), Odu, is the choice that one made while coming into the world, it everything that one will or should do, and everything that one will not or should not do... when you see Odu, you meet everything that you left behind on the way down to the world at the tree of forgetfulness (igi igbagbe).

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841 Ringstones of Wisdom, 23.

842 Awo Faniyi, interview with the author, November 27, 2013, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Yoruba. Awo Faniyi then quoted a lengthy verse of Ifa from Odu Otura Iwori in which Orumila is told to use Odu as the power (aṣẹ) of all of his decisions (ipin) in life, even down to what he should eat and drink.
Thus encountering and knowing one’s ori (imọri) in Ifa, seems remarkably similar to the description of knowing one’s immutable entity (‘ayn thābit) in Sufism. Odu, the aṣe of the choice of ori, is like the “Kun fayakūn,” the “Holy Effusion” (al-fayḍ al-muqaddas) or the breath of the all-Merciful (nafas al-Rahmān) that existentiates these heavenly or Divine potentialities into worldly actualities. In Ifa, all knowledge (both igbagbọ and imọ) is not only founded upon, but is also contained in imọri (direct knowledge of one’s ori) since all of these forms of knowledge and the experiences which they came from are contained in one’s ori. Similarly, Ibn ‘Arabi explains that everything that one experiences or comes to know is nothing other than one’s identity (‘ayn).

Even if this knowledge appears to be different or distinct from oneself it is only as an image one sees in a polished surface is different from oneself: this image may appear different in different places because of the different nature of the surfaces, but it is still identical with the figure who casts the reflection. Ibn ‘Arabi writes “In the case of any man of unveiling who witnesses a form that gives him knowledge he had not hitherto possessed and bestows [upon] him a thing he had not previously held in his grasp, this form is his identity and naught else. From the tree of his soul, he harvests the fruit of his knowledge.”

Knowing one’s ori and knowing one’s ‘ayn are both described as the deepest form of self-knowing possible, as both are defined as knowing one’s “eternal self,” or knowing oneself as God knows one, which is ultimately identical to how one knows God. Moreover, this mode of self-knowing is defined as the epistemological foundation of all other modes of

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843 One of the truly remarkable things about the mythological perspective of Ifa is that it can explain similar realities in a manner that is comparatively simpler and more direct. What takes Ibn ‘Arabi and other Sufis writers paragraphs of prose to explain, Ifa accomplishes in a short story or two. However, Sufi authors often achieve a similar kind of symbolic concision and power in their poetry.

844 Ringstones of Wisdom, 33.
knowing, which, from a certain perspective, are nothing other than it. In both traditions it
seems that “he who knows himself, knows his Lord” and that “the fruit of this [and all]
knowledge is harvested from the tree of this self.”

The Goal (of no Goal)

However, this “goal” of self-knowledge is not a fixed target—it is not a static object or
station that is attained once and for all, but is rather a dynamic mode of being. In the eternity
of heaven (orun) or the Divine Essence (al-Dhāt or Aḥadiyyah), the ori and the ‘ayān are
“fixed” or “static” (thābitah), but in the world of time and becoming, they manifest as the
fluid, perpetually changing states and conditions of the heart (qalb) or inner reality (inu) of
the Sufi Knower (‘Ārif) or babalawo. Both Ifa and Tijani Sufism present a variety of “goals”
as the raison d’être of their respective traditions—moral, epistemological, and soteriological
ends to which their adherents aspire: “mending the world,” “knowing the Truth,” “knowing
oneself,” “knowing God,” “cultivating good character,” “having a good life and afterlife,” etc.
However, in both traditions, all of these diverse goals are united in the goal of following the
example of / becoming like the founder of the tradition: Ṣrunmila through one’s Odu for
babalawo, the Prophet Muḥammad through Shaykh Aḥmad Tijani through Shaykh Ibrahim
for Tijanis. This goal is simultaneously described as unattainable (no babalawo can attain the
rank of Ṣrunmila, no Tijani can surpass Shaykh Ibrahim or Shaykh Aḥmad Tijani or the
Prophet) and ever-present, since these founding figures are understood to be identical to the
innermost realities of their followers in a certain respect. Thus becoming a sage, becoming

845 This concept of a “heavenly self” which is at once destiny, guardian angel, muse, and source and goal of
knowledge is not limited to Ifa and Sufism but has close counterparts in Greek (daimon), Roman (genius), Igbo,
Akan, and Zoroastrian mythology and philosophy. See my article “Myth and the Secret of Destiny: Mircea
Eliade’s Creative Hermeneutics and the Yorùbá Concept of Ori.” Journal of Comparative Theology 1(3) (April
2012) p. 4-42.
like the all-knowing founder of the tradition, is no ordinary goal. Perhaps these contradictions can be better understood by examining the ways in which these traditions describe these perfected modes of being and knowing.

In a speech, Shaykh Tijani ‘Ali Cissé described the perfect Knowers (‘Ārifūn), by referring to the classical Sufi tradition:

Junayd was asked about the saying of Dhū’l Nūn al-Miṣrī describing the gnostic [Ārif biLāh], “he was here but now he has gone.” Junayd replied, “One spiritual state does not hold the gnostic back from another spiritual state, and one spiritual station does not veil him from changing stations. Thus he is with the people of every place just as they are, he experiences whatever they experience, and he speaks their language so that they might benefit by his speech.”

And later he explains that this dynamic mode of knowing is only possible through entirely disinterested, “goal-less” Love, “Love is the attachment of the heart to the exalted Divine Essence, enamored with Him for His sake, not for any other purpose. This is not the case except for the perfected gnostics. May Allah make us among them by his blessing.”

Similarly, (as quoted above) when asked what he wanted, Shaykh Ibrahim said (echoing Abu Yazīd), “I want to not want.” Ibn ‘Arabi similarly describes this state of human perfection as the “station of no-station” (maqām lā maqām), and identifies it with the Prophet Muḥammad, calling those who have attained it “Muḥammadans.” This highest class of knowers are those who have undone all of the “knots of belief,” who have transcended the “gods created in belief,” and through the infinite flexibility of their hearts, come to recognize God in His Essence and in every single one of His self-disclosures. They are those who know Reality in Its inscrutable Essence and in Its infinite self-portraits in the beliefs of others. These Muḥammadans do not hold a particular kind of belief about God or Reality, but rather have

846 Cheikh Tijānī ‘Alī Cissé. What the Knowers of Allah have said about the Knowledge of Allah, 20.
847 Ibid, 91.
transcended the limitations of all beliefs by becoming infinitely receptive to all of them.

Taking the image contained in the aphorism, “the water takes on the colour of its vessel,” the vessels of these Muḥammadans have transcended all limited colours by becoming transparent like water, capable of taking on any colour. They have taken on the colour/dye of the Real (the water) itself as alluded to in the Qur’anic verse, The colour/dye of Allāh, and who is more beautiful than Allāh in colouring/dyeing? (2:138). Ibn ‘Arabi explains, “The perfect human being stands in the station of the name ‘God’ (Allāh) amongst the divine names. He is nondelimited, but he speaks only in a mode that is delimited by the situation.” Elsewhere he elaborates, explaining this “goal-less” and dynamic “station of no station:"

The highest of all human beings are those who have no station. The reason for this is that the stations determine the properties of those who stand within them, but without doubt, the highest of all groups themselves determine the properties. They are not determined by properties. They are the divine ones, since the Real is identical with them and He is the strongest of those who determine properties (95:8).

This belongs to no human being except the Muḥammadans….Hence the possessors of stations are those whose aspirations have become limited to certain goals and ends. When they reach those goals, they find in their hearts other, new goals, and these goals which they have reached become the beginning stages for other goals. Hence the goals determine their properties, since they seek them, and such is their situation forever.

But the Muḥammadan has no such property and witnesses no goal. His vastness is the vastness of the Real, and the Real has no goal in Himself which His Being [or Finding/Consciousness] might ultimately reach. The Real is witnessed by the Muḥammadan, so he has no ultimate goal in his witnessing. But other than the Muḥammadan witnesses his own possibility. Hence he stands in a state or station which, in his eyes, may come to an end, or change, or cease to exist. He sees this as the ultimate goal of knowledge of God…. [But] the Muḥammadan has no ultimate goal in mind which he might reach.

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848 The context of this verse is also relevant, Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered. And if they believe in the like of that which ye believe, then are they rightly guided. But if they turn away, then are they in schism, and God will suffice thee against them. He is the Hearer, the Knower. The colour of God (Allāh), and who is more beautiful than God (Allāh) in colour? Say (unto the People of the Scripture): Dispute ye with us concerning Allah when He is our Lord and your Lord? Ours are our works and yours your works. We look to Him alone (2:136-9).

849 Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 174.

850 Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 367-7.
Thus, the Muḥammadan does not hold a static belief or concept of Reality, nor does he or she reside in a particular station of enlightenment or attainment, but rather these most perfect of Knowers perpetually transform with and perfectly respond to “every breath, moment, and state.” As Shaykh Ibrahim writes, “Allah may manifest in a tree, but the next moment, this manifestation may move to another tree, or something else. The manifestation of Allah are constantly evolving and never at a standstill…Allah says in the Qur’an, *You see the mountains you deem to be solid, but they are moving like clouds* (27:88).”

A similar notion can be seen within the descriptions Ifa gives of Ḍrunmila, one of whose praise names is *Afedefeyo*, “Fluent-in-every-language.” Through divination and the symbolic language of the Odu, Ḍrunmila speaks the language of everyone who comes to him, according to the conditions of the moment or state—this is the function and goal of the best of babalawo. Moreover, in one Odu, Ḍrunmila is described as “having no bones,” and another Odu describes the mythical figure of Setilu who introduced Ifa divination to the Yoruba as, “a Nupe man without bones in his body,” while some babalawo gloss another one of Ḍrunmila’s titles, *Agbọnniregun* as “the wise man with no bones.” This description of Ḍrunmila as “boneless,” can be interpreted as referring to the fluid, dynamic, and supra-formal nature of his knowledge, and Ḍrunmila himself. One can also say that his speaking every language is a function of his embodiment of perfect knowledge, which implies possessing exactly what every situation requires and allows him to perform the sacred function of the perfect oracle.

Similarly, some babalawo gloss the name *Olodumare* as a contraction of *Olo odu ọṣumare*, “the owner of the mystery/pot/womb of the rainbow serpent,” or “Olodu-Ikoko ti

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南通ＯＳＵＭＡＲＥ” meaning – “the owner of the pot that lights the rainbow,” and in some Odu, Ṓrunmila his closely associated with ṒＳＵＭＡＲＥ, the oriṣa of the rainbow, who is sometimes represented as a serpent eating its own tail (like the Greek ounuboros). One verse of Odu Ṓṣ-Ωgbẹ describes Ṓrunmila as the child of ṒＳＵＭＡＲＥ, the rainbow, while other verses describe Ẹla (understood as the heavenly aspect of Ṓrunmila) as a pure, unseen light, from which the differentiated lights of the rainbow, ṒＳＵＭＡＲＥ, emerges. The union of all colours in the rainbow and the “numinous light” of Ẹla/ современнia, as well as the circularity of the rainbow serpent, ṒＳＵＭＡＲＥ, recall this highest form of knowledge which Ibn ‘Arabi describes as bewilderment (hayrah), because it is perpetually transforming and all-inclusive:

That is the bewilderment [hayrah] of the Muḥammadan "Lord, increase me in bewilderment in you . . ." For the bewildered one has a round [dawr] and a circular motion around the axis which he never leaves. But the master of the long path tends away from what he aims for seeking what he is already in. A master of fantasies which are his goal, he has a "from" and a "to" and what is between them. But the master of the circular movement has no starting point that "from" should take him over and no goal that he should be ruled by "to." He has the more complete existence and is given the totality of the words and wisdoms.854

In the same work he concludes, “Now guidance is that man should be guided to bewilderment, and know that the affair is bewilderment and that bewilderment is unrest and motion, and that motion is life, without stillness and so without death, and is existence without non-existence.”855

Ẹṣu, the oriṣa of perpetual transformation and bewilderment par excellence, is perhaps the clearest representative of this principle in Ifa. Ẹṣu is variously described as Ṓrunmila’s best friend and partner-in-crime, as his son (in the form of the important Odu Ṓṣ-Ọtura) with Ṓṣun, as his initiate, and as his co-eternal deity. But in all of these different myths, Ẹṣu is

853 Washington, Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts, 42.
855 Ringstones of Wisdom, 256.
intimately related toỌrunmila and Ifa divination, and appears at the top of the divining trays of babalawo (opọn Ifa). In the orature of Ifa, Eshu is described by the following oriki which indicate his embodiment of paradox: A sọtun-ṣosi-lai ni tiju, “he who belongs to two opposing camps without shame” and the colourful:

Eshu turns right into wrong, wrong into right.  
When he is angry, he hits a stone until it bleeds.  
When he is angry, he sits on the skin of an ant.  
When he is angry, he weeps tears of blood.

Eshu slept in the house—  
But the house was too small for him.  
Eshu slept on the verandah—  
But the verandah was too small for him  
Eshu slept in a nut—  
At last he could stretch himself out.  
Eshu walked through the groundnut farm.  
The tuft of his hair was just visible.  
If it had not been for his huge size  
He would not have been visible at all  
Lying down, his head hits the roof:  
Standing up, he cannot look into the cooking pot.  
He throws a stone today  
And kills a bird yesterday!\textsuperscript{856}

Eshu’s infinite capacity for transformation, to take on seemingly contradictory forms and functions bewilders those around him. In one of his most famous myths, Eshu walks in between two life-long friends wearing a hat that is red on one side and black on the other. The friends began to argue over the colour of the hat of the man who had just passed by them and even came to blows. In some versions of the myth, Eshu comes back and reveals the foolishness of their argument, but in most, he just laughs. In these respects, Eshu is akin to the Muḥammadan who can take on any form of belief, but is bound by none of them. His transcendence of forms through his immanent, perpetual transformation through them reflects Olodumare’s absolute transcendence of form, just as the Muḥammadan’s perpetual transformation through stations is what makes him “stand in relation to the stations in the

\textsuperscript{856} Beier and Gbadamosi, \textit{Yoruba poetry}, 15.
position to which the name *Allah* stands in relations to the other Divine Names.” Moreover, Eṣu is described as *Onitumo,* “the interpreter” or “translator,” which according to one possible etymology (*itumo = titu + imọ*) can mean, “one who loosens knowledge (*imọ*).”

Similarly, Ibn ‘Arabi points out that the root of the Arabic theological term for belief (*i’tiqād*) literally means “to tie a knot,” and so he interprets each belief as a “knot” tied in undelimited Reality. The Muḥammadans are those who are able to loosen and untie all of these knots, passing fluidly between any and appreciating all of these beliefs or “knots in the fabric of the reality,” the diverse forms in which the Real presents Itself to them. Thus, the perfect man or Muhammadan is a *barzakh,* a liminal figure simultaneously separating and uniting, the Real and all the forms of cosmos. Likewise, Eṣu, the liminal figure of the Yoruba spiritual universe, the oriṣa of the crossroads who sits in the doorway, is the one who, along with Ṣrunmila, serves as the messenger and translator (“loosener of knowledge”) between Olodumare and His creation.

On the divining tray, Eṣu is often joined by the chameleon (*Agẹmọ*), whose ability to take on the colour of his surroundings and see in all directions at once, as well as his infinitely spiraling tail, all suggest the same symbolism. Moreover, the chameleon frequently appears in the Odu Ifa as a messenger or servant of Olodumare, Ṣrunmila, or Oriṣanla (who is commonly a stand-in for Olodumare in myths), the god of white cloth. In a verse from Odu Ogbe-Yẹku, Oriṣanla gets into a dispute with Olokun, the goddess of the seas, over who should rule the land. They decide to settle their dispute by seeing who has more cloth.

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857 Thus Henry Louis Gates, Jr., inspired by Ọṣoyinka, uses the term *Eṣu tunjumaalo* “one who unravels the knots [or riddles] of Eṣu” to describe his project in The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11. Some of the similarities between Eṣu and the Greek messenger-god Hermes, who gave his name to the word *hermeneutics,* the process of interpretation, are also suggested in this work.

858 See Chittick, Imginal Worlds, 152-4.
Ọrunmila performs divination for Oriṣanla and tells him to treat his servant, chameleon (agemo) well, since he will be the key to his victory. At the appointed time, instead of going out to meet Olokun himself, Oriṣanla sends chameleon to lay in wait for her in the bushes. Every time Olokun comes out with a new bundle of colourful cloth, chameleon would snatch it away with his quick tongue. After this happened several times, Olokun realized what was happening, but by this point, chameleon had more clothes than her, so she gave up declaring, “Oriṣanla, you must surely be the ruler of the land! If I cannot defeat the apprentice, how could I ever defeat the master?”

In this myth, the supraformal wisdom that transcends colour, represented by Oriṣanla, the god of white cloth, is able to take on and demonstrate its superiority to the multiple forms of manifest knowledge, perspectives, or beliefs, represented by Olokun, the goddess of the boundless seas and her vast collection of colourful cloth. This is achieved through the mediation of Agemo who, like Ṣrunmila, like the Muḥammadan, is capable of taking on any cloth, any color, any form. As the “witness of creation” and “second to Olodumare” Ṣrunmila is understood to comprehend all of the Oriṣa, indeed everything in creation. Hence, he is praised as:

\[
A-mọ-i-ku \\
Olọwa Ayere \\
Agiri ile-Ilogbọn \\
Oluwa mi: amọimat\]
\[A ko mọ ọ tan kosè \]

859 Araba of Modakẹke, interview with the author, December 2, 2013. Yoruba. See also African Language Program at Harvard University, last accessed, May 13, 2015, <http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/12-ogbe-y-ku>.

860 Or leaving aside any notion of superiority, this story mirrors the relationship between the Transcendent Real (Oriṣanla), the cosmos in its infinite diversity (Olokun and her many cloths) and the Muḥammadan/Perfect Man (insān al-kāmil), the barzakh between them (Agemo) who can take on all of the forms of the cosmos, and in doing so, actually exhausts or “defeats” her. Similarly, the Perfect Man, in achieving this infinite flexibility, in a certain sense, exhausts and transcends the infinite play of manifest existence.
"A ba mọ tan iba ṣe ọke\textsuperscript{861}\)

He who knows you never dies
Lord, the unopposable king
Perfect in the house of wisdom
My Lord, whose knowledge is without end
Not knowing you fully, we [our lives] are in vain
If we could but know you in full, all would be well

Thus the position of Ọrunmila and the babalawo compared to the other Oriṣa, is like that of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Muḥammadans compared to the other prophets and messengers. Ibn ʿArabi writes:

The perfect friend calls upon God in every station and tongue, but the messengers—who are many—stop with that which was revealed to them. What has been revealed to one of them may not have been revealed to another. But the Muḥammadan gathers together through his level every call that has been dispersed among the messengers. Hence he is non-delimited because he calls with every tongue. For he is commanded to have faith in the messengers and that which was sent down to them [Qur’ān 2:136]. So the Muḥammadan friend does not stop with a specific revelation….\textsuperscript{862}

Likewise, the babalawo know and can communicate with and on behalf of all of the Oriṣa, they can “call with every tongue” and understand from every perspective.

In general, Ifa has less of a “salvific,” soteriological, or even explicit goal-based orientation than Tijani Sufism. Outwardly, babalawo study and practice Ifa in order for their lives to run smoothly, so they do not run afoul of their destinies (ori). Inwardly, they do so because the study and practice of Ifa is simply the performance of their destinies (ori).

However, as seen above, in some of its deepest formulations, Tijani Sufism similarly advocates a “goal of no goal”: there is nowhere to arrive since we are all already there, or the goal is to give up all of one’s goals.\textsuperscript{863} As Shaykh Ibrahim writes, “whoever wants nothing

\textsuperscript{861} Epega, \textit{The Sacred Ifa Oracle}, xi-xii.

\textsuperscript{862} \textit{Sufi Path of Knowledge}, 377-8.

\textsuperscript{863} As alluded to in the phrases, “If I want, I want to not want; for whatever the Willer (al-Murūd) wills, that is what I want,” and “the reality of repentance (tawbah) is the absence of repentance (tawbah)” or the “repentance from repentance (tawbah min tawbah),” and “the incapacity to attain realization is itself realization,” and the description of \textit{ma’rifah} as the “utmost degree of ignorance,” and Shaykh Tijānī’s statement that “the reality of oneness (tawḥīd) is not perceived, because as long as you continue to speak, you exist and God exists, and so
except what God wants, he is a true servant of God. The Knower (‘Ārif) is he who has left his
own desires for the desire of the Real.”

**Why Practice?**

Here we come to a variation of the question famously asked by the founder of one of
the major schools of Japanese Zen Buddhism, Dogen (d. 1253), “if all beings are inherently
enlightened, the why do the enlightened beings work so hard to attain enlightenment and keep
practicing after they have attained it?” The Tijani tradition offers a number of answers to this
question. Firstly, according to Shaykh Tijani and Shaykh Ibrahim the intention or foundation
of the acts of worship should be one of disinterested *shukr* or gratitude, not out of any desire
to attain anything, even spiritual enlightenment (*fath*). Shaykh Ibrahim derides this functional
approach to spiritual practice as “a depravity of the depravities of the *nafs* (ego) that one
should worship and invoke God with the expectation of obtaining by that, the
opening/enlightenment (*fath*).” Instead he advocates that God be worshipped simply “for
His own sake,” that is, one should simply worship God because He is who He is, and we are
who we are, and by virtue of this, one accepts and is pleased with whatever God grants one.
Elsewhere, Shaykh Ibrahim says that one should ask “Allah for Allah”:

864 Niasse, *Jawāhir al-Rasā’il* vol. 1, 6. Similarly Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī is recorded as saying “the disciple must
strive towards these two goals: [First] to prefer God to everything else. God must be for him the principal and the
end of his desires so that not one single instant of his life be dedicated to another, because to look to another is to
find self-interest or squandering. [And second] to devote himself completely to God, free from all bonds,
completely and mysteriously united to Him in body, soul, spirit, and heart, in such a manner that not one particle
of the being is a stranger to God. The disciple will give himself over completely to this goal, detached from all
passion. Like this, he will stand before God, in the total renunciation of his whole being, in order to accomplish
an act of pure adoration and satisfaction of divine laws, without expecting the slightest advantage. He will not
despair of God’s mercy nor will he pridefully err in believing himself full of good qualities.” (qtd. in *On the Path
of the Prophet*, 120). Note here that the two goals are really the same, and that is to abandon all of one’s goals
for God.

865 *Jawāhir al-Rasā’il* vol 1, 24.
The only thing that can truly satisfy the servant of Allah is the possession of Allah Himself. May Allah grant us His Person. May Allah give us Himself. Indeed Allah has promised this to those of us who request it. As humans, our needs are certainly exceptional. We need nothing less than Allah Himself. Other living things are not even aware of the existence of such a need or desire, so their hearts are at rest. The one who is awake—whose heart’s eye is open—becomes enraptured by the beauty of Allah’s Countenance and longs for nothing else. Allah said, I created man and made him weak.” This weakness is the individual’s admiration, his love, and longing for Allah, which creates in him an infinite need for Him. What is left for the people of knowledge? We want only Allah.866

However, even this desire is to be abandoned or is subsumed in desiring only what God desires. As Shaykh al-Shādhilī put it, “nothing removes man further from God than desire for union with Him.” If God desires the feeling of distance or the apparent absence of ma’rifah and realization, then, paradoxically, this is what the true Knower desires.867

Fakhruddin ‘Iraqi, a student of Ibn ‘Arabi’s successor, Qunawī, expresses this point beautifully:

The lover’s duty: to accept what the Friend [God] approves, even if it be nothing but remoteness and separation. And in fact, this is usually the case, for He wants us to seek refuge from His cruelty in Love; “Hellfire is a whip to drive God’s people to God” perhaps alludes to something of the sort. The lover must like his own exile and submit to separation, finding his habit in the line: “I want Union with Him, He wants separation for me—So I abandon my desire to His.” He likes separation not in itself but only because the Beloved likes it. “all the Beloved does is lovable.” So what can the poor lover do? What can he say except, “Searching for separation, yearning for Union, I am free of both: Thy love suffices.”

Or rather, he must savor separation more than Union, enjoy remoteness better than nearness—if he knows the Friend desires it. In fact, remoteness has a greater intimacy than nearness, and separation more than Union. After all, in nearness and Union the lover is merely qualified by his own desires, while in exile and separation he is qualified by the will of the Beloved: “A thousand times sweeter than Union / I find this separation you have desired / In Union, I am the servant of self, in separation my Master’s slave; / I would rather be busy with the Friend, whatever the situation, than with myself.” If a lover who is qualified by the Beloved’s attributes likes remoteness, he will thereby have loved the Beloved. The extreme reach of union is found in the very exile of remoteness—but how few understand! Know then that the cause of the lover’s remoteness is his own attributes—but that these attributes are the Beloved Himself.868

866 Niasse, Pearls of the Divine Flood, 98. Similarly Ibn ‘Arabi writes, “The knower is he who worships God for God, while other than the knower worships God for what he hopes for from God—the shares of his soul in the worship.” (Chittick, Self-Disclosure of God, 374).

867 Sidi Mohamed Kane, interview with the author, April, 4, 2014. Dakar, Senegal. French.

868 Chittick, Divine Flashes, 116.
This point, that the apparent distance from God is actually a form of nearness to Him, since God is both the Outward (al-Ẓāhir) and the Inward (al-Bāṭin), and even the seeming veils of ignorance are nothing other than His self-disclosures of Himself to Himself,\(^{869}\) points to another response of the Tijani tradition to Dogen’s question: namely, the union of practice (sulūk) and realization (taḥqīq / wuṣūl). Ultimately, the attainment of maʿrifah is really just God revealing Himself to Himself through Himself, and so, ultimately, there is no separation between the process of acquiring maʿrifah and the maʿrifah itself. Furthermore, from this perspective, there is no distinction between the process of coming to Know, the Knower, the Knowledge, and the Known. All are God. As ‘Iraqi says poetically, “When I clutched at His skirt, I found His hand inside my sleeve.”\(^{870}\) Shaykh Ibrahim alludes to this “union of practice and realization” in the following passages:

Remembrance/invocation (dhikr) is the beginning of sanctity, the beginning and the end of sanctity, there is remembrance/invocation at the beginning and at the end always. The end is always in the beginning, where the beginning is, there too is the end. If the beginning is correct, the end will also be correct. Our beginning is “there is no god but He,” “there is no god but You,” and “there is no god but I.” God, to Him you are returning, while you say, “there is no god but God.”\(^{871}\)

and

You don’t will unless God, the Lord of the worlds, so wills (81:29). So he travels a path that combines establishing that which is appropriate and that which errs... He stands in his outward aspect, in the religious laws of Islam, and it is the appropriate speech of wisdom in the physical world. But all the while, inwardly he has no movement and no stillness, and no action, and this is appropriate to the speech of the Divine Will in terms of faith and certainty and Knowledge. So he conforms himself to the commands of God for God, from God, by God, and no movement or stillness remains for him except by the command of God, for God, and by God.... before being enraptured, wayfaring (sulūk) is a veil, and after, it is a perfection.

\(^{869}\) Ibn ‘Arabi famously wrote, “So glory be to Him who veils Himself in His manifestation and becomes manifest in His veil! No eye witnesses anything other than He, and no veils are lifted from Him” (Chittick, Sufi Path of Knowledge, 129). Similarly, Ibn ‘Aṭā Lāh’s Aphorisms 15 and 164-5 read, “That which shows you the existence of His Omnipotence is that He veiled you from Himself by what has no existence alongside of Him” and “The Truth is only veiled from you due to its extremity of closeness to you. It is only veiled due to the intensity of its manifestation and It is only hidden from sight due to the splendour of Its Light.”

\(^{870}\) Chittick, Divine Flashes, 117.

\(^{871}\) Jawāhir al-Rasāʾil vol I., 56-69.

\(^{872}\) Ibid, 81.
Once the veil of individual existence and effort has been lifted and the disciple realizes that all his efforts are from God and towards God, his practice or wayfaring ceases to be a veil and becomes a perfection. This suggests a third response to Dogen’s question: that practice is simply the outward expression of inward realization. If one has inwardly realized the “station of no station” of the Muḥammadan, then one’s outward actions will simply be those of the sunnah (example) and sharī’ah (law and way) of the Prophet. From this perspective, the practices of Islam and Sufism are just the manifestation of this ideal mode of being in the plane of outward actions. As the previously quoted Sufi saying attributed to the Prophet asserts, “The Shari’ah is my speech, the Ṭarīqah is my acts and the Haqīqah is my state.”

Thus one could say that before realization, one prays to achieve annihilation (fanāʾ) in God and the Prophet, and afterwards, in baqāʾ, God and the Prophet pray through one, and one realizes that this was the case all along. As Rumi famously wrote, “For years I knocked at the door, but when it finally opened, I found I had been knocking from the inside!”

While questions such as these are more foreign to the climate of Ifa, certain verses of the Odu Ifa can be read as alluding to similar points, such as this one from Odu Ọkanran-Oturupọn, “It is through learning Ifa that one understands Ifa. It is by missing one’s way that one becomes acquainted with the way. It is the road that one has not walked before that makes one wander here and there.” The previously cited verses from Odu Ogbe-Atẹ (and others) on the perpetuity or renewal of initiation though practice also can be interpreted in this light:

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874 Shaykh Ibrahim also comments on the verse of the Qur’an: *Worship your Lord until certainty comes to you*, “‘certainty’ here is ‘death,’ not as some of the Sufis without a foot in the sharī’ah say, that man worships his Lord until he finds certainty and then he leaves aside worship. Rather worship only stops with death. Certainty here means death, not only direct witnessing (mushāhadah).” (Niasse, *Fi Riyāḍ al-tafsīr* vol. 3, p. 269)

Now, if I have completed my initiation
I will renew my initiation
The taboos that have been given to me
I will accept
I have been initiated
I will renew my initiation

Remembering that Ifa initiation involves a profound moment of “realization” in the
initiates’ encounter with his own ori, this initiatory realization is then prolonged through
practice, by living out one’s ori or destiny.

Thus both traditions appear to claim that if you follow in the footsteps of the founders
of the tradition (Ọrunmila for Ifa, the Prophet Muḥammad, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijani, and
Shaykh Ibrahim for Tijani Sufism), you will attain a kind of infinitely dynamic mode of being
in which Reality (Olodumare / al-Ḥaqq) reveals itself and yourself to you in an equally
dynamic, kaleidoscope of perpetually shifting perspectives.

Thus it is from the “perspective of no perspective” of this ideal mode of being, the
founders and realized masters of Sufism and Ifa elaborate theories of metaphysics,
cosmology, and anthropology: descriptions of the metacosm (Divine Reality), macrocosm
(the world(s)), and microcosm (the self) that are intimately related to the “Book” (Kitāb, the
Qur’an in Tijani Sufism) or “Word” (ọrọ)” (and/or the “archetypes” of the Odu Ifa) that
contain and describe all three.

Metaphysics/Cosmology/Anthropology

In this “thoanthropocosmic” perspective that characterizes both Ifa and Tijani
Sufism, there is a close symbolic relationship, and even identity, between God, man, the
cosmos, and the Divine “Word” or “Book” that describes and provides the key to
understanding these realities and the relationships between them. As Awo Faniyi explained,
“man is a small world, everything in the world, all the powers of the world exist inside him,”
and similarly, in his commentary on the previously cited Qur’anic verse “*We will show them
our signs in the horizons and in themselves...*” (41:53), Shaykh Ibrahim writes, “There are
some who say man is a small world (microcosm), but in reality, he is the large world
(macrocosm) since all the worlds are contained in him.”876 In the same vein, all the babalawo
I interviewed affirmed that all knowledge and every thing is in, and was created through, the
Odu of Ifa, while Shaykh Ibrahim quotes the verse, *We have left nothing out in the Book*
(6:38), to demonstrate that the Qur’an similarly contains all knowledge of every thing.877

From the “perspective of no perspective” described above, God, the Self, the world,
and the Divine Word/Book appear as so many reflections of the same ineffable reality, as
different perspectives or windows onto that which is both Being and Consciousness, that
which is at once knowledge, knower, and known. Thus the different levels or aspects of the
self/consciousness described in both traditions (*inu-ode* in Ifa and *Bāṭin-Ẓāhir* (amongst
others) in Tijani Sufism) correspond to levels of reality, and to levels of meaning,
interpretation and understanding of the Odu Ifa and the Qur’an. In this way, learning the Odu
Ifa or the Qur’an grants one a better understanding of God, oneself, and the world, knowing
God grants one an understanding of oneself, the world, and Odu Ifa/ the Qur’an, and so on,
through all the other possible permutations. As Andrew Apter notes, “the "levels" of
knowledge in Yoruba ritual are in fact infinitely deep and polyvocal, grounded in the

876 Niasse, *Fi Riyāḍ al-tafsīr* vol. 5 p. 250-1. Cf. Ibn ‘Aṭa’īllāh’s *Ḥikam* # 246 , “The cosmos is large in respect
to your body, but it is not large in respect to your soul.”

hermeneutical axiom: ‘Secret surpasses secret, secret can swallow secret completely’ \[Awo j'owo lo, awo le gb'owo mi tori tori\].

In both traditions, this multi-dimensional reality is synthesized into something akin to what Ibn ‘Arabi calls “The Perfect Man” (Insān al-Kāmil), the fullness of the realization of the unity of God, Self, cosmos, and Divine Word/Book. In Ifa this “Perfect Man” is Ṭrunmila / ᴇlā who is identified with the Odu of Ifa, with the entire world, with the orì or innermost self of babalawo, and from a certain perspective, with Olodumare (given that he possesses all of the knowledge of Olodumare). In Tijani Sufism, this “Perfect Man” is the Muḥammadān Reality (al-haqqah Muḥammadīyyah) and its manifestations in the persons of the Prophet, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, and Shaykh Ibrahim.

Shaykh Ibrahim describes this reality, “in a Ḥadīth Qudsī, Allah says, ‘If not for you, O Muhammad, I would not have brought forth the creation. I created you for Myself and I created the rest of creation for you…All of creation—believers and nonbelievers, the heavens and the earth—came from his light and his light came from Allah.”

According to another Ḥadīth qudsī (only found in Sufi sources), God says, “Man is my secret and I am his secret.” Similarly, in a narrative of Eji Ogbe, Olodumare creates the world for, at the request of, and through the Odu of, Ṭrunmila. When the babalawo memorize and internalize the Odu, which are like the “alphabet” of existence, they acquire impọ ijinle (“deep knowledge”); like Ṭrunmila, they acquire the principal knowledge of God, the world, and the

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878 Andrew Apter, ""Que Faire?" Reconsidering Inventions of Africa." Critical Inquiry (19)1, 100.
879 Niasse, Pearls of the Divine Flood, 82.
self, and can “read” them at will. Ọrunmila became Ọrunmila by eating Igba Iwa (calabash of wisdom/existence/character) and acquiring all of Olodumare’s knowledge. He found this calabash by using his feet to search for it in the waters of the river separating heaven and earth, which, remembering the symbolic meaning of feet/legs (ẹsẹ) in Ifa as struggle or effort, can be understood as the internal, hidden struggle through ritual practice and contemplation to achieve wisdom. This struggle takes place beneath the surface of the ever-changing river of the inner self (ini), which is the boundary between the world (aye) and heaven (orun).

When babalawo similarly acquire the Igba Iwa through internalization of the Odu, through initiation in the igbodu, they become like Ọrunmila and can see and know like him. Similarly, when Tijanis acquire ma’rifah through internalizing the Qur’an, through tarbiyah, they become annihilated in the Prophet and both know and know like him. Then from these “perspectives of no perspective” the sages of Ifa and Tijani Sufism describe these realities through the elaborate and intricately connected descriptions and accounts of Metaphysics/Theology (What is Real?/Who is God?), Cosmology (What is the world?), Psychology/Anthropology (Who am I?/What is man?), usually through interpretation of the descriptions already contained in the Odu or the Qur’an and ḥadīth (which are themselves understood to be accounts coming from this central reality of the Muḥammadan Reality or Ọrunmila). As Shabistaḏi writes, describing these intimate connections from the perspective of Sufism:

Then the Truth will then grant you whatsoever you ask,  
And show you all things as they really are.  
To him, whose soul attains the beatific vision,  
The universe is the book of The Truth Most High.  
Accidents are its vowels, and substance its consonants,  
And grades of creatures its verses and pauses.  
Therein every world is a special chapter,  
One the chapter Fāṭiḥah, another Ikhlāṣ  
Of this book the first verse is the Universal Intellect,
The ritual nature and function of these inspired descriptions and revealed accounts (which can take on and involve all kinds of forms: poems, songs, prayers, physical positions and disposition, as well as written and oral texts in Tijani Sufism as well as dances, music, sculpture, and complicated ritual procedures in Ifa) is of the utmost importance. They are not merely meant to describe or represent reality, but are meant to symbolize and be used ritually to lead initiates back to the profound reality from which they both come. The Odu of Ifa, their signs, verses, rituals, implements and oriki of Ṣùrunmila, are all identified with Ifa/Ṣùrunmila/Ẹla (that is why they are all called Ifa), and are understood to come from and lead back to him. Similarly, the Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ, the Qur’an, and the various rites and rituals of Islam are identified with, and understood as coming from and leading back to the Muḥammadan Reality, and this identity is “proved” through various numerical and other symbolisms and correspondences. In the words of Ifa, these “inspired descriptions” are meant to “bring heaven down to the world” and “take the world back to heaven.”

*Aṣe/Barakah*

As a result, these descriptions are understood to vehicle the presence and power of the Divine. Telling certain Ifa narratives, even in English, is believed to have ritual consequences ranging form angering the Oriṣa to spoiling shrines, driving away or attracting certain

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882 *Gulshan-i Raz*, 21. Shaykh Ibrahīm constructs a similar comparison between the physical parts and faculties of man and various aspects of the cosmos, see Niasse, Ṣī ṭiyāḍ al-ṭafsīr vol. 5 p. 251-2.

883 As mentioned above, this implies a theory of language that differs markedly from structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics. This theory of language is not based on a logic of difference, of an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, but rather one of symbolism, of the ontological continuities that exist between the domains of metacosm, microcosm, macrocosm, and language. The ineffable Real reveals itself in and as these different domains, creating a vast network of symbolic correspondences that can be discovered, not invented, by those who “have eyes to see.”
influences. Reciting verses of Ifa in Yoruba is believed to be even more potent, and certain verses can put people into a trance, others are used to sacrifice animals without touching them, while others are used to assist in childbirth, and babalawo are careful not to recite them around pregnant women for fear of inducing labor. Interestingly, with various traditions of Sufism (including those found in West Africa), these same functions are also shared by certain verses of the Qur’an and other Islamic talismanic preparations.\(^{884}\) Many Tijanis carry copies of Shaykh Ibrahim’s book *The Removal of Confusion* with them as protection when traveling, as many Muslims do with the Qur’an. In Ifa, the markings of the Odu and the camwood powder in which Odu are pressed are used for a variety of purposes including protection, blessing, healing, destroying enemies, etc. and are an essential part of many of the sacrifices prescribed by Ifa divination.

This presence and power that animates this kind of ritual is known as *aṣe* in Ifa (and in Yoruba more generally). *Aṣe* is understood as the power of the presence of Olodumare (*agbara odo Olodumare*), the Divine sanction or creative power that brings things to pass. Thus “*Aṣe*” is the refrain repeated during prayers, and is used to translate the Christian “Amen” and the Islamic “*Amīn*.”\(^{885}\) This is very similar to the concept of *barakah* in Sufism, and Islam in general, which is generally understood as an aspect or manifestation of God’s presence associated with a person, place, or tangible thing. Different people and places have different degrees and kinds of *barakah*, as Shaykh Ibrahim explains, “in reality Allah is

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\(^{885}\) In this sense, *aṣe* combines the concepts of the power of disposal (*taṣrif*) granted to the greatest Sufi masters, and that of *barakah*, as explained above.
everywhere, but His manifestations vary in degrees from one place to another. Olodumare flows through everything in the cosmos through *aṣẹ*, and God’s manifestation of Himself in every place and thing grants them their *barakah*. It is this *aṣẹ* or *barakah* that is the domain or subject of the various esoteric or occult sciences of Ifa and Tijani Sufism that manipulate combinations of actions, words, objects, flora and fauna, etc. in order to achieve a particular effect in the soul, and/or in the world. The flows of *aṣẹ* and *barakah* are both governed by the intricate symbolic relationships between Divine Reality, the world, the self, and the Divine Word/Book, often in the form of letters, words, numbers, shapes, and elements of the natural world.

However, the sciences of symbolic correspondence associated with both traditions can and are used for baser purposes such as acquiring power, or even hurting, seducing, and killing people. However, this “dark side” of both traditions appears to be contemporarily most commonly used to acquire wealth. In Nigeria, politicians are particularly known to patronize these “dark arts,” known as *oogun ika*, “wicked medicine” in Yoruba. However, both Tijani Shuyukh and babalawo view such disciplines as being “outside” of their tradition and strongly condemn their use in no uncertain terms. For example, in a an interview with the Nigerian newspaper, *Punch*, the popular Araba of Oṣogbo, Yemi Ẹ̀bùiṣẹ̀, answers the following blunt question:

**Reporter:** Have you killed anybody with your charms before?

**Ẹ̀bùiṣẹ̀:** Why will I kill anybody? I don’t do that, I have never killed anybody and I will never kill. You see, Babalawo don’t kill. Although Babalawo have an immense power, they are capable of doing so many things, but killing is against the rules in this religion. There are things that are forbidden here. It is wrong to blame killings on the doorstep of Babalawo. Those involved in killing may be *oloogun-ika* [those who use “wicked medicine”]. Babalawo are priests, just like you have Catholic priests, Imams. We don’t use Ifa divination and sacrifice to kill. Sacrifices are offered for atonement, for healing of diverse diseases and ailments. But all the religions have some parts they can use to do evil things. There are

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portions like that used by some wicked Muslims and also the Seven Books of Moses are used by some Christians to do evil. All the religions have positive and their negatives uses.\(^{887}\)

Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī and Shaykh Ibrahim were even more strict when it came to the use of these *asrār* (secrets), even for seemingly “laudable” ends, forbidding their use in virtually all cases, save for those complete Knowers whose individual wills have been completely surrendered to the Divine. In a letter to a disciple who had figured out an elaborate “secret”—a complicated diagram believed to have great power—and sent it to him, Shaykh Ibrahim wrote,

As for those who occupy themselves with the esoteric sciences (ʿulūm al-sirr), which Shaykh al-Tijānī, described as sciences of evil (ʿulūm al-sharr), they would arrogate this diagram to themselves, drawing it for people seeking the ephemeral things of this world. This is like selling the religion for the world. I forbid myself and I forbid you to draw this for anybody. I do not give permission for this, and I do not give permission, verily I do not give permission!\(^{888}\)

*Modernity/The Nature of the Contemporary Time*

Both Tijani Sufism and Ifa seem to have a “Tale of Two Cities” evaluation of the contemporary situation: “it is the best times, it is the worst of times.” Both traditions have a generally conservative view of history/time: the world (and the people in it) were at its best when it was closest to God/Heaven, and this closeness was at its greatest in the mythical time after creation, of the earliest ancestors, and during the time of the founders of the tradition (the Prophet / ʿRunmila and the Oriṣas). Thus, each generation is generally thought to be superior to the one that follows it, being closer to the source or origin. However, within Ifa, the more cyclical, mythical understanding of time, implies that, from a certain perspective,

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one never leaves this mythical time. However, the Yoruba saying *Aye l’a ba ‘Fa, aye l’a ba ‘mole, ọsan gangan ni ‘gbagbọ wole de.* “We met Ifa when we came to the world. We met Islam when we came to the world. It was at noon that Christianity arrived on the scene,” alludes to the fact that many babalawo regard the colonial encounter as a kind of unprecedented qualitative change in (and descent into) time. In the Islamic tradition, this general decline is interrupted by periods of renewal (*tajdüd*); in fact, Islam describes itself as a renewal of the original religion of Adam. Similarly, Shaykh ʿAḥmad Tijani and Shaykh Ibrahim presented themselves and their spiritual traditions as “renewers,” reversing the general decline of history.

The followers of Shaykh Ibrahim commonly described the present time as one of “corruption” and “the greatest spiritual difficulty,” conditions that are compensated for by the *fayḍah* of Shaykh Ibrahim. Because of this “flood of *maʿrifah,*” however, the present time was also often described as a time of renewal, as “the best time in the history of mankind after the Prophet’s time.” Disciples cited the dearth of spiritual guidance, the difficulties of practicing Islam in a world that is no longer of its making, the religious and political

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889 See the discussion of time in Chapter 4.

890 The following verse of the Qur’an *You are the best community that has been raised up for mankind* (3:110) and hadith are often cited in this regard, “The best of you are my generation, then those that follow them and then those that follow them”; “My community is like the rain, for it is not known whether the best is in its first part or its last,” and “Verily God sends to this community at the head of every century, a renewer of its religion.” (see *Removal of Confusion*, 11-2 & 62).

891 It should be noted that these perspectives on time and history differ markedly from the nearly ubiquitous assumptions of “the march of progress” and “development” that characterize so much of Western thought post-Hegel, and undergird contemporary parlance such as “the wrong/right side of history,” and triumphalist pronouncements like Fukuyama’s “End of History.”

892 This and the general concept of the *fayḍah* come from the following saying of Shaykh ʿAḥmad Tijānī, “A *fayḍah* will come upon my companions, so people will enter our spiritual path group upon group. This *fayḍah* will come when people are in their utmost state of distress and hardship.” (see Sayyid ʿAlī Cissé, Shaykh Tijānī Cissé, and Shaykh Hassan Cissé, *The Removal of Confusion: Concerning the Flood of the Saintly Seal Ahmad Al-Tijānī : A Translation of the Kāshif Al-Ilbās ‘an Fāyḍa Al-khatm Abī Al-ʿAbbās.* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), 59.
oppression of the colonial and post-colonial states around the world as the difficult conditions for which the *Fayḍah* is a compensation.

The 20th century explosion of technology and technical knowledge was often described as the complement or sign (*ayah*) or even result of the *fayḍah*’s explosion of mystical knowledge. Many of these explanations took the following form, “Before it took you years of hard travelling to make ḥājj, to go to Mecca and come back, now you can fly there in a plane in a few hours. That is a sign (*ayat*) for what Shaykh Ibrahim brought. Before, it would take you years of hard work and discipline to attain *ma’rifah*, now with the *taribyah* of Shaykh Ibrahim people arrive in a few weeks, days, or even hours.” Nevertheless, the ambivalence of this “acceleration of time” was also recognized, with several disciples commenting, “in this time, there is no time.” Shaykh Ibrahim is even reported as saying that, “These technologies will one day bring about the End of Time.”

Nevertheless, many Tijani disciples in Dakar pointed out to another condition of post-colonial Senegal that gave many young disciples ample time for spiritual practice: unemployment. One disciple half-jokingly told me, “There are no jobs, no good work for people with degrees, so you have nothing better to do, why not try tarbiyah and spend all your time with your *kurus* (prayer beads), going to *gammus*, etc. It doesn’t cost much and it’s not like you have anything better to do, you can only drink so much tea and play so much football and watch so many movies.” Shaykh Ibrahim’s branch of the Tijāniyyah is also especially

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893 Several disciples and a few shuyukh made statements similar to “all of these recent discoveries in science and technology, they are just the outward results of the inward discoveries of the Knowers.”


popular amongst urban youth in Senegal in large part due to the rapid and direct access to ma’rifah that tarbiyah promises and the resulting “democratization” of mystical knowledge: a young disciple with no formal training in Arabic or the Islamic sciences can be considered “senior” to, or a “more advanced” Knower (‘Ārif) than, an elder who has studied and practiced for years, but has not gone through tarbiyah. Several popular musicians, such as the hip-hop act, Daara J, are disciples of the Tijani Shaykh Mamour Insa, and their lyrics are peppered with references to him, Shaykh Ibrahim, tarbiyah, and ma’rifah.

Several shuyukh described the difficulties presented by the encounter with Western education and ideologies. One Mauritanian shaykh told me how he had stopped praying and was a committed secular, Marxist revolutionary until he read Shaykh Ibrahim’s Removal of Confusion, while others described their interest in modern French philosophy, especially existentialism, Marxism, and négritude. All of these shuyukh described their coming to Shaykh Ibrahim’s tradition as a “return.” Ustadh Barham Diop described these people as “the generation of people who went abroad to France to be educated, but came back to their tradition,” and this encounter is perhaps most fully described in Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s Ambiguous Adventure.

Shuyukh and disciples more commonly complained of the difficulties caused by modern, Salafi and Salafi-inspired movements and propaganda, which they claimed led to misunderstandings of Sufism, the Tijāniyyah, Shaykh Ibrahim, and even Islam in general. These misunderstandings were characterized as being “modern,” and as coming from those

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who have little contact with or grounding in “tradition,” and who were thus stuck on the outward surface of things (al-Ẓāhir). However, shuyukh do not seem to advise disciples to avoid modern, Western education, or technology but rather encourage engagement with it. According to his son, Muḥammad al-Makkī (who studied in Egypt), Shaykh Ibrahim was initially reluctant to send his children to study abroad in the Middle East, because he feared they would be negatively-influenced by the growing Salafi presence there, but eventually decided they would be fine and sent many of his children, disciples, and grandchildren to study the Islamic Sciences, Arabic literature, and modern disciplines abroad in Egypt, Morocco, France and the United States. Shaykh Muḥammad al-Makkī also explained to me that Shaykh Ibrahim was always keen to learn about and use the latest technologies, such as radio and cassette-recorders, in order to spread his message, and to help his disciples, and the tradition, adapt to the changing times.900

For the Tijani disciples I interviewed, modernity was characterized by a dominance of the outward (al-Ẓāhir), the acceleration of time, changes in lifestyle and labor, and encounters with Western, and Western-influenced ideologies. These extraordinary challenges were met with the extraordinary occurrence of the fayḍah and the adaptations to spiritual training and religious education brought by and through Shaykh Ibrahim and his community.901

Babalawo also seemed to bemoan the current state of affairs, using the English word “modernism” to describe a Western-influenced mode of life, education, religious practice and outlook that, in the words of the Araba of Modakekê, “makes people greedy and stupid” and

901 For a detailed discussion of these adaptations see Wright, Living Knowledge, 192-210.
“not serious.” Virtually all of the babalawo complained that there are no babalawo living today who could compare with those of the past few generations, and in the Araba’s words, “the real babalawo are getting old and dying, and the young ones, very few of them are serious.” Western education and the new modes of life and thought it facilitates, coupled with the demonization of Ifa by evangelical Christians and some Muslims have made life more difficult for babalawo, and have made the already arduous process of becoming a babalawo even less appealing to potential apprentices. As the Araba explained, “There is only one God, and that God is the same God that sent Qrunmila and sent Musulumi [the Prophet of Islam] into the world. But many Muslims [and Christians], they don’t have that understanding, and because of this modernism, people just believe that, ‘no what I’m doing should be the best.’ This is a big problem for many people today.”

Moreover, babalawo complained that this “greed and stupidity” of “modernism” had corrupted many of their own ranks, and produced a bumper crop of charlatans who deceive and fleece people. The babalawo whom I interviewed characterized the contemporary time as one of extreme confusion and disarray, a break down of the normal order, in which the life of a righteous babalawo is much more difficult than that of careless and corrupt babalawo or impostors. Moreover, the proliferation, prominence and notoriety of these impostors and corrupt babalawo, combined with the denunciation of Ifa by Christians and Muslims, has seriously eroded the support for and respect of babalawo amongst the general populace, especially in urban areas.

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903 Ibid.

The dwindling community support for babalawo and other *oloriṣa* is a substantial threat to their traditions, as many of their important rituals require substantial communal investment and support. As Ulli Beier noted:

Yoruba religion is in a serious crisis, because the great priests are dying and are not being replaced…. In the old days there was always someone to take over his position. One might not have been trained or educated for it. But when chosen one answered the vocation. Nowadays the death of such a man is a great calamity, because they may be no one to take over his function. The *orisha* must change with the times. He must adapt to new situations. But because of the tremendously brutal impact of the West on this culture, because of the suddenness of the attack, the *orisha* has hardly had time to adjust…

Many of the finest *olorisha* have not been able to make this adjustment. A man like Layi Olosun, the sensitive priest of Oshun in Oshogbo… all his life was a preparation for the office he now holds. All the ritual he has been going through was a preparation for the ‘mystic transformation’ that should be the climax of his life and the real function. Now he often cannot perform this sacred duty: not because he is not good enough or strong enough, but because he lacks the community behind him to support him and to carry him along.

However, the growing influx of foreigners coming to Nigeria to learn about and be initiated into Ifa has brought significant support, money, and prestige to the babalawo. This has led some Nigerians to re-evaluate their opinion of Ifa. Independently, however, many younger Nigerians, feeling dissatisfied with post-colonial modernity and what they perceive as the inherent racism of secular, Christian, and Muslim traditions have turned to Ifa and other Oriṣa traditions as a “return” to an “authentic, African” spiritual tradition. The Araba even told me about reports across Yorubaland from babalawo and Muslim non-babalawo that “Ọrunmila has been telling people that he is coming back. In dreams he is telling them this. He is coming back amongst his followers, not physically, but spiritually. That is why so many people are coming from all over the world to learn Ifa, it is Ọrunmila inside of them that is making them want to study Ifa. Ọrunmila is coming back and they are coming back to Ifa.”

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906 Araba of Modakẹkẹ, interview with the author, April 11, 2014. Yoruba.
Although outside the scope of the current project, Ifa also contains several fascinating critiques of colonial modernity, usually in the form of describing Europeans and their “belief,” Christianity (igbagbo). In one such narrative from Odu Eji Ogbe, white people (oyinbo) are described as omo asogun dere or “the children of those who transformed Ogun into an idol.” In the Yoruba pantheon, Ogun is the voracious god of war, iron, technology, and progress. He is often described as clearing the brush with his iron cutlass, and he is so violently ravenous that he can consume anything placed before him, even his friends and family. While this highly evocative description is deserving of further attention, it seems that in the early experience with Europeans, the sages of Ifa recognized the violent, technologically-fueled worship of progress and described it in the language of “making Ogun become an idol.”

Being a babalawo was and is a full-time profession for most practitioners, but the exigencies of contemporary Nigerian life, and/or their own proclivities and destinies have led some babalawo to take “day jobs” as professors, bank clerks, artists, businessmen, etc. This is, however, considered neither normative nor ideal. While being a Sufi Shaykh was seldom considered a profession in and of itself, many shuyukh in Western Africa traditionally earned their living through serving as the Imam of a mosque, as Qādis and/or fāqihs (judges and/or jurists), scholars and teachers of the Qur’an, Arabic, or other Islamic sciences, as doctors and “occult specialists,” and/or as traders and farmers. Many shuyukh in the pre-colonial period performed all of these professions at once. However, the spiritual leadership of some Sufi

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908 I owe this insight to Ayodeji Ogunnaike.

909 As the previously cited verse from Odu Ìrẹtọ Meji says, “The one who is the messenger of Òleđumare/ The king’s messenger does not go to the farm/ The king’s messenger does not go to the river/ If I am the messenger of Ifa/ I will be happy.”
shuyukh was combined with political and economic leadership so that, by virtue of their status as a shaykh, many Sufi masters were also the founders and heads of sizeable polities and networks of people. The demands of these functions often precluded them from having a separate “job,” and the contributions of their followers provided for their expenses. In contemporary times, shaykhs of the Fayḍah seem to roughly fall into one of three categories, with regards to their professional lives: The first group makes their living as government officials, professors, businessmen, administrators, shopkeepers, etc., and their status as a shaykh may not be immediately apparent. The second group makes their living teaching Qur’an or other Islamic sciences, or as occult specialists, and while their professional work may overlap with their role as spiritual master (they may have students who are also disciples), these roles are largely distinct and their identity as a shaykh may or may not be public. The third group makes their living as shuyukh, they devote themselves full-time to the spiritual training of disciples, spreading the Ṭarīqah, giving large public lectures at gammus, appearing on television and radio, and writing, editing, and publishing works on the doctrines and history of Tijāniyyah and Shaykh Ibrahim. The work of this third group is supported by their disciples, followers and devotees, and sometimes by grants from governments and international organizations.

Thus, both traditions explicitly recognize a similar set of challenges of colonial and (post)colonial modernity, but both traditions, especially the Tijanis of the Fayḍah, also emphasize the unique advantages of this latest dispensation. It is the “worst of times” in terms of the physical, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual assault of modernity and its associated ideologies, but it is also the “best of times”—due to the increased connectivity and ease (in certain domains) that characterize modernity, and the special conditions of the Fayḍah in
Tijani Sufism. I doubt many babalawo would refer to the current situation as “the best of times,” but the rumoured “spiritual return of Ọrunmila” in Ifa and the increased numbers of people from around the world coming to Nigeria for initiation are regarded as something of a compensation for many babalawo. Both traditions have creatively adapted to the rapidly changing conditions of contemporary times, in order to provide their initiates access to the “timeless truths” which are their foundation and raison d’être. As such, I believe these traditions have much to offer contemporary academic traditions as they move into a new period of closer contact and connection with non-Western intellectual traditions.

**Comparison with Contemporary Academic Perspectives**

Fool that He is! For he seeks the blazing sun
By the dim light of a torch in the desert
-Maḥmūd Shabistarī

\[
\text{Aye l’}a \text{ ba ‘Fa} \\
\text{Aye l’}a \text{ ba ‘mole} \\
\text{osan gangan ni ‘gbagbo wole de}
\]

We met Ifa when we came to the world
We met Islam when we came to the world
It was at noon that Christianity arrived on the scene
-Yoruba proverb

There are two kinds of intelligence.
One is like that acquired by a child at school,
from books and teachers, new ideas and memorization.
Your intelligence may become superior to others,
but retaining all that knowledge is a heavy load.…

910 While there are numerous other important and interesting dimensions of comparison to be explored between these two traditions, (such as comparing the concepts of iwa and adab/akhlāq, the “sacred feminine” in both traditions, and the pairing of Ọrunmila-Eṣu and Muḥammad-Iblīs, etc.) these will have to wait for future studies. Furthermore, while the above discussion suggests possible influences of Islam upon Ifa and of indigenous African traditions and worldviews upon Tijānī Sufism, such a discussion is outside of the scope of this project. Still, I hope this work will be a useful resource to the intrepid scholar who takes up this important work. Aside from the possible influences of Islam on Ifa mentioned above, several disciples in Senegal told me that they believed in reincarnation (a doctrine officially rejected by the vast majority of schools of Sufi thought and Islamic theology), some told me that Shaykh Ibrahim was the reincarnation of the Prophet Muḥammad, and some even explained that they knew who they were in their former lives and that they had lived with Shaykh Ahmad Tijānī and before that, with the Prophet. Most likely, these statements are a different formulation of the trans-historical spiritual relationships and identities between the disciples, Sufi masters, and the Prophet discussed in the previous chapters, but I believe it is likely that these particular formulations are influenced by the traditional Wolof, Serër, and Fulani cosmologies in which reincarnation featured prominently, as it does in traditional Yoruba worldviews.
As discussed in the first chapter of this work, the theories and worldviews that form a kind of “unarticulated consensus” of most contemporary academic discussions differ significantly from those of Ifa and Tijani Sufism. Moreover, these differences cannot merely be reduced to these traditions having different histories, in different places—such a reduction would ignore and subsume the self-proclaimed transhistorical or eternal dimensions of Ifa and Sufism into the post-Christian historicism that characterizes so much of modern academic thought. Moreover, many of the points upon which Ifa and Tijani Sufism (not to mention other Oriṣa traditions, or other Sufi orders, or other non-Western spiritual/intellectual traditions, and pre-modern Western spiritual/intellectual traditions) appear to agree, are precisely those points wherein they diverge from or disagree with the Western Academy.

Many studies that have sought to compare traditional Islamic or indigenous African thought with contemporary Western thought have sought to emphasize the similarities between Western and non-Western traditions, usually in the hopes of winning recognition and validation of these traditions as rising to the level of “serious thought” or “philosophy,” or, more modestly, to demonstrate the “rationality” of these traditions. The more avant-garde works of anthropology have often compared and domesticated the “exotic conceptions” of African thought with the latest trends in postmodern theory, again, often in an attempt to

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911 For example, E. E. Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* and the works of Fazlur Rahman and Hossein Ziai on the Islamic intellectual tradition.
achieve recognition for these African or Islamic traditions.\footnote{For example, see Amherd’s \textit{Reciting Ifa} and Ebrahim Moosa’s \textit{Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination}, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Notable exceptions to these trends include the work of Rowland Abiodun, and, to a certain extent, that of Helen Verran (Verran, Helen. 2001. \textit{Science and an African Logic}. Chicago: University of Chicago Press). The latter’s work compares Yoruba and contemporary Western mathematico-linguistic concepts.} However, in this section, I will take a different approach. I intend to focus on those points where Ifa and Tijani Sufism appear to agree with each other, and disagree with prevailing trends in contemporary academic theory and practice, in order to highlight some limitations of contemporary academic approaches and the ways in which I think the traditions of Ifa and Tijani Sufism can be useful not only in critiquing these limitations, but also in moving beyond them.

\textit{Theoria vs. Theory}

First and foremost, contemporary academic discussions and works are based on the application and development of “theories,” whereas Ifa and Sufism are concerned with the cultivation of what could be (and in the West, once was) called \textit{theoria}—a blissful mode of being, knowing, and contemplating reality in its fullness. The former goal is merely mental and theoretical, whereas the latter, while including the mental, is more encompassing and existential. In his introduction to Hadot’s \textit{Philosophy as a Way of Life}, Davidson explains this distinction with reference to Aristotle:

\begin{quote}
It is perhaps Aristotle whom we are most tempted to think of as a pure theoretician…. [But] Aristotle's philosophy is a philosophy of \textit{theoria}, “this Aristotelian \textit{theoria} is nevertheless not purely theoretical in the modern sense of the word.” For Aristotle, to dedicate oneself to philosophy is to choose a \textit{bios}, a way of life, that is the best realization of those capacities that are essential to being human. The \textit{bios theoretikos}, the life of contemplation [which modern translations reduce to “a life of the mind”], is a way of life that is also the realization of our supreme happiness, an activity that contains the purest pleasures! Even scientific research on the entities of nature is not proposed by Aristotel as an end in itself, but as “a particular way of carrying out ‘the philosophical life,’ one of the possible practical realizations of the Aristotelian prescription for happiness, the life devoted to the activity of the intellect [\textit{nous}].” Moreover, the life of the intellect is a participation in the divine way of life, it is the actualization of the divine in the human, and it requires inner transformation and personal \textit{askesis}. And it is a way of life that is, in one sense of the term, practical, since Aristotle says that those thoughts are practical not only that calculate the results of action, but which are
\end{quote}
"contemplation and reasoning, that have their end in themselves and take themselves as object." This life of theoria is thus not opposed to the practical, since it is a life of philosophy lived and practiced; it is precisely the "exercise of a life."  

In the same work, Hadot further differentiates theoria from theory using the example of Porphyry:

In the same context, Porphyry insists strongly on the importance of spiritual exercises. The contemplation (theoria) which brings happiness, he tells us, does not consist in the accumulation of discourse and abstract teachings, even if their subject is true Being. Rather, we must make sure our studies are accompanied by an effort to make these teachings become "nature and life" within us.  

These fundamentally distinct goals can and have been described in different ways: in St. Augustine’s distinction of scientia (rational knowledge) and sapientia (“tasting” or experiential wisdom); in Hadot’s works as “discourse about philosophy” (the overwhelming majority of contemporary academic philosophy) vs. “Philosophy” (in the Classical sense of the term); in later Islamic philosophy as “knowledge by representation” (‘ilm al-ḥuşūlī) vs. “knowledge by presence” (‘ilm al-ḥudūrī); in Sufism as ‘ilm or dirāyah (theoretical knowledge) vs. ma’rifah or dhawq (taste), and although distinct, this even bears some relationship to the distinctions between igbagbo, imo, and imo ijinle (deep knowledge) in the context of Ifa. All of these traditions privilege the latter over the former. In the Buddhist tradition, this distinction is made through the poetic image of “the finger pointing at the moon.” The following verse of Oturupon Meji can also be interpreted as alluding to this

913 Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, 29.

914 Ibid, 100.

915 I believe this clear-cut distinction is absent in Ifa because of the relatively recent encounter of Ifa with this perspective of “theory,” whereas Islam and the Ancient Greek Philosophers were more familiar with this sophistic perspective. It is also significant in this regard that the term for the modern, European version of Christianity/Secular modernity which the babalawo encountered was called igbagbo. I suspect that had the Yoruba first encountered the Christianity of a St. Augustine or Origen or even that of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, it would not have been called igbagbo.
The Sufi tradition also provides us with several rich illustrations of the distinction between the merely theoretical and existential approaches to knowledge and reality, and the inescapable primacy of the latter. In the epigram to this section, Shabistarī compares those who seek to understand reality through discursive reasoning alone to one who “seeks the blazing sun by the dim light of a torch in the desert.” The early Sufi Abu Bakr Wāsiṭī remarked, “If someone says, ‘I recognized God through the evidence,’ ask him how he recognized the evidence.” But perhaps this is most clearly seen in the example of the Sufi discussion of “learning” vs. “being” the secret “Greatest Name of God.” This Name is not something that one acquires or discovers through research, thinking, or asking someone to finally reveal it, because it is not just an ordinary “name” of sounds and letters that one can find in a book or hear someone whisper to you. Rather, it is identical to your very being, as Fakhruddin ‘Iraqi writes:


917 Chittick, *The Unveiling of the Mysteries*, 295.
O seeker of the Greatest Name
Do you wish to know it now, for certain?
Then find the key which unlocks the world
Which opens the seal of the talisman
And when at last you’ve unlocked the lid
You’ll find that you yourself are that Name,
That all is related to you
Both manifest meaning and secret Word
The Name which is the essence of the Named
If this is what you find, then carry on
—if not, don’t take yourself too seriously.\(^{918}\)

The theoretical approach that characterizes contemporary academic work is very useful in its place, but it has its limits, and implicitly relies upon (both historically and epistemologically) a very different approach to knowledge, which has very different goals.

It is important to remember this distinction when studying traditions such as Ifa and Sufism, so as to not reduce them to mere sets of doctrines, theories, and ideas, interpreting them as some kind of “indigenous,” attempt to theorize like modern academics. Moreover, even when recognizing this distinction, and the fact that these traditions constitute a “way of life,” it is important not to subject this \textit{theoria}, the mode of knowing and being of these traditions, to a theory that denies anything beyond its own scope. That is, when presented with a “finger pointing at the moon,” scholars should not, on the basis of theories that deny the existence of anything above the trees, reduce the tradition in question to “the finger,” and go about their business constructing an elaborate anatomical representation. To paraphrase a poem quoted by Shaykh Ibrahim, “If you have not seen the newborn crescent moon, at least \textit{listen} to those who claim to have seen it.” For example, one cannot reduce the tradition of Ifa to its observable practices and doctrines, but must also find a way to take seriously, and seriously consider, its metaphysical or inner (\textit{inu}) dimensions that lie outside of the scope of modern theories of reality, history, language, etc.

\(^{918}\) Chittick, \textit{Divine Flashes}, 53-4.
Furthermore, this distinction between the *theoria* of traditions such as Ifa and Sufism and the theory of contemporary Western philosophy and academia presents a potentially constructive challenge to the way in which we do academic work. In his wonderful book, *Empty Words*, philosopher Jay Garfield begins one of his chapters with what he calls “Snapshots from a Philosopher’s Travel Album,” quotes from his Tibetan colleagues and students he encountered during his work in cross-cultural philosophy:

If Western philosophers don’t think that philosophy can lead to liberation from cyclic existence, why do they do it? 
*A question asked by dozens of Tibetan students and colleagues and students*

But of course the point of all of this is to attain enlightenment. Otherwise philosophy would be just for fun.

*rje Tsong khapa, Drang nge legs bshad snying po, commenting on the motivation for philosophical analysis*

I am worried that these students are just getting religious indoctrination. I mean, they are learning Buddhism, right. And aren't most of the teachers monks?

*A dean of a small Western secular college at which the works of Aquinas, Augustine, Farabi, and Maimonides are taught in philosophy classes, in response to a proposal that students have an opportunity to study Buddhist philosophy at a Tibetan university*

I can understand why you have come to India to study Buddhist philosophy. For our tradition is indeed deep and vast. But I frankly don't see what we have to learn from you. For Western philosophy is very superficial and addresses no important questions.

*The Ven. Gen Lobzang Gyatso, director of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, in response to an offer of lectures on Western philosophy at his college.*

Similarly, it would be difficult for many contemporary academics not to recognize ourselves and our colleagues in Ibn ‘Arabi’s scathing critique of “those who nowadays speak about philosophy” and rely solely on reason’s “speculative power:”

In other words, the intellect cannot discover this knowledge independently by its own speculative power. Hence the revealed scriptures came down with it, and the tongues of the messengers and prophets spoke about it; then the men of intellect came to know that there were certain things concerning the knowledge of God in which they were deficient and which the messengers completed for them.

I do not mean by "men of intellect" those who nowadays speak about philosophy. I only mean those who followed the path of the prophets. In other words, they busied themselves with their own souls and with ascetic discipline, inner striving, spiritual retreats, and preparing

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themselves for that which enters in upon the heart from the celestial world when the heart is purified, that which has been revealed to the celestial spheres. These are the ones I mean by "men of intellect." As for those who busy themselves with chatter, talk, and debate, employing their reflective powers to analyze the words in which the first principles were revealed, they are completely oblivious of the affair undertaken by those great men. The likes of those who are among us today have no worth in the eyes of any man of intellect. For they mock religion, show contempt for God's servants, and have reverence only for those who share the same rank as themselves. Their hearts have been overcome by love for the affairs of this world and the search for position and leadership. So God has abased them, just as they have abased knowledge. He has scorned them and derided them, letting them have access to the doors of the ignorant—the kings and the leaders. So the kings and the leaders also abase them….

We have met very few truly intelligent men. They are those who have the greatest knowledge of God's messengers, follow most carefully the prescriptions of Muḥammad, and are most concerned with their preservation…. they are aware of the knowledge about Himself that God gives only to his servants—the prophets and those who follow them—through the special divine effusion that is outside ordinary learning and that cannot be acquired through study and effort or reached by the intellect's own reflective powers.

I saw one of the great ones among them [i.e., Averroës]. He recognized the knowledge that God had opened up to me without rational speculation or reading, but through a spiritual retreat in which I had been alone with God, even though I had not been seeking such knowledge. He said, "Praise belongs to God, that I should have lived in a time in which I saw 'one whom God has given mercy from Him and has taught him knowledge preceding from Him'" (Qur'an 18:65).

While I am not suggesting that Western philosophy has “nothing to offer” or that Western universities should all be turned into monasteries, ashrams, Ifa temples, and Sufi zawiyahs, I am arguing that Western academics (like Averroës) should recognize and respect these other traditions, and that Western universities should create a space for these traditions to be taught on their own terms, especially given the role that the Western Academy has played in destroying and marginalizing many of these traditions, even in their lands of origin. More immediately, the work of our colleagues in more theoria-oriented traditions should give us pause in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the “grant-and-paper mill” to reflect on why

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920 Averroës, Ibn Rushd, although best-known in the West as a philosopher and interpreter of Aristotle, was and is best known in the Muslim world, especially the Maghreb, as a great fāqih (legal scholar) and it is in this respect that Ibn ‘Arabi refers to him here.

921 Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 135-6.

922 If the Academy can accommodate “mainstream” liberal political theorists as well as Marxist revolutionaries writing and working as such, why not babalawo and shuyukh?
we are doing what we are doing, and what kind of effect we hope our work has on our readers, students, colleagues, and perhaps most importantly, ourselves.

I believe academic work, especially philosophy, the study of religion, and the humanities can and should combine dhawq (taste) and dirāyah (theoretical knowledge). While I personally know many practicing Sufis and oloriṣa in academia, the vast majority of them feel constrained to write and deliver lectures like secular post-Protestants, even though this does not appear to be the way they think and speak outside of these academic performances. Our works can and should be more than maps or representations, they should also be invitations to new ways of seeing and being in the world. This does not mean lapsing into a kind of apologist or dogmatic confessionalism or abandoning the enterprise of critical enquiry. On the contrary, as I hope the previous chapters have demonstrated, the “radical openness” and the “two-eyed” approach of combining reason and imagination advocated and demonstrated by Ibn ‘Arabi’s theories is in no way incompatible with critical acumen, and can even sharpen it.

In short, I argue that traditions such as Ifa and Tijani Sufism invite us to make our scholarly work about more than bringing new facts and data to light, but also about helping our readers and students reappraise, rediscover, and love “old truths” (perhaps even the “truths” of their “selves”). As Hadot wrote:

Vauvenargues said, “A truly new and truly original book would be one which made people love old truths.” It is my hope that I have been "truly new and truly original" in this sense, since my goal has indeed been to make people love a few old truths. Old truths: ... there are some truths whose meaning will never be exhausted by the generations of man. It is not that they are difficult; on the contrary, they are often extremely simple. Often, they even appear to be banal. Yet for their meaning to be understood, these truths must be lived, and constantly re-

923 While this is true of everyone to a certain extent—everyone performs in a professional setting—it is much more true (and, one could argue, oppressive) for those people who have been profoundly formed by traditions that neither seriously form nor inform the structures and discourse of contemporary academia.
experienced. Each generation must take up...the task of learning to read and to re-read these “old truths.”

Some of these “old truths” which I believe Ifa and Tijani Sufism can help us love and live again include the identity between knowledge and being and the concomitant “wisdom of the body,” the importance of ritual and community in intellectual work, and finally, the understanding that Reality (like Nature or the Self) is not a passive object of inquiry, but rather an active subject that reveals and conceals Itself through Its own will.

As the previous chapters demonstrate, both Ifa and Sufism posit an identity, on the highest or most profound level, between knowledge and being. The most direct and trustworthy form of knowledge is self-knowledge, and in this self-knowledge there is no separation between knower, known, and knowledge, thus the knowledge must be identical with the being of the knower (which is just another way of saying the knower him or herself) and the known (God / the Self). Both traditions posit a kind of loss of this primordial knowledge through the descent into the world of becoming, bodies, and time. Within Ifa this is symbolized by passing under the “tree of forgetfulness” (igi igbagbe) or “crossing the river between heaven and earth,” and Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī similarly writes, “The spirit [rūḥ] of every human being has been created initially endowed with a conscience and a perfect knowledge of God. An intense degradation then follows, by biological contact with the corporeal substance; and this soul becomes ignorant, losing its original memory.” Thus the process of recovering this knowledge is akin to remembering, to Plato’s anamnesis, and the

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926 Incidentally, Plato concludes *The Republic* with a remarkably similar account of man’s “choice of destiny” and forgetting of it after drinking from the “river of forgetfulness (Lethe)” on his way into the world. See “The Myth of Er” in Book X of Benjamin Jowett, *Plato's the Republic*, (New York: Modern Library, 1941).
masters of these traditions serve as “philosophical midwives,” to borrow another metaphor from Plato, to bring out, rear, and cultivate this knowledge within their charges. Certain modes of thought and behaviour are more conducive to (or stem from) forgetfulness than the remembrance and self-knowledge which is the goal of these traditions, and so the practice of virtue is inseparable from the acquisition of this knowledge. In fact, one could even say that this knowledge is both the foundation and fruit of lived virtue. Since knowledge and being are ultimately one, true modes of knowledge imply and are identical with true modes of being (virtue), uniting epistemology, ontology, and ethics.\textsuperscript{927}

\textit{Importance of Ritual}

An important concomitant of the identity of knowing and being in these traditions: the importance of ritual practice in acquiring or cultivating knowledge. As the previous chapters demonstrate, ritual practice is an essential component of the acquisition and expression of knowledge in both Tijani Sufism and Ifa; since both are founded on a kind of self-knowledge that is identical with a mode of being, ritual exercises that transform the mode of being of the knowing subject are central to these traditions. But one does not have to be a babalawo or Tijani to appreciate the epistemological power and importance of ritual. The way in which we live, the rituals we perform (consciously or not), profoundly influence the way we experience and understand ourselves and the world. Rare indeed are the articles or books or classes that change the way we see the world as profoundly as falling in love, having a child, witnessing tragedy, or even traveling and living in a different society. I can’t help but wonder how

\textsuperscript{927} This is very different from contemporary academic approaches to knowledge: one can be a total jerk and a brilliant physicist, sociologist, scholar of religion, or philosopher.
different Kant’s life and thought would have been had he gotten out of Prussia and worked as a sailor for a few years, seeing the world and living with different kinds of people.

Reflecting on Ifa and Tijani Sufism, we as academics should take stock of the way in which the rituals and experiences of our lives affect our and our colleagues’ work and intentionally try to use this immense epistemological power in order to make our work better. What rituals can we perform, what experiences can we seek out, for ourselves or for our students, to give us a better understanding of our subject matter and maybe even ourselves?

As one would expect, the anthropological literature is very rich in this regard. For example, the work of Paul Stoller on magic, spirituality, and healing amongst the Sonraï in Niger and Robert Rozenthal’s work on contemporary Chisti Sufis in the Indian Subcontinent clearly illustrates how transformative ritual experiences encountered during research can lead scholars to rethink their own personal theoretical and metaphysical assumptions, as well as those of their professional practice.\(^{928}\)

These examples also illustrate the inherently social nature of the process of acquiring and producing knowledge. Our socialization can and does profoundly influence what and how we know. Even with the legacy of the hermetically sealed Cartesian/ Kantian subject, and the often isolated and isolating nature of academic work (especially in the humanities), socialization and discussion remain an important cornerstone of academic training. However, this is even more true of Ifa and Sufism where communal practice and interpersonal relationships (some of which are metaphysical) are an integral part of the acquisition of knowledge. Given the epistemic power of social interaction, the Academy could greatly

benefit from conferences, courses, symposia, and even casual conversations with representatives of these and other traditions. I believe that contemporary philosophers and scholars of religion should spend some time in the context of another intellectual tradition, even if only for a short time. A couple of weeks living and interacting with one’s counterparts in a Tibetan monastery, or Sufi zawiyah, or meetings of babalawo is bound to make one see the world differently, or at least make one less smug. Such interactions and encounters can and have been crucial in revealing and subjecting to inquiry many of the Academy’s most hidden assumptions and biases. As Goethe pointed out, “A man who does not know a foreign language is ignorant of his own.”

**The Real as an Active Teacher**

One of the most pervasive, and pernicious, of these assumptions that goes all the way back to Kant (and/or Descartes), is that the object of knowledge, *qua* external object, is a passive object of inquiry. While scientists may poetically speak about patterns or data “revealing themselves,” in reality, the way scientists treat the *res existans* of Nature (whether particles, protozoa, plants, pigs, or human bodies) is as a passive, inert object that can and should be manipulated at will until we can “dig up” or “get out” the data we are looking for. Across the campus lawn, in the humanities, with the “death of the author,” texts, even once-sacred ones, are deconstructed, historicized, pulled apart, read into and from every perspective except that of the tradition to which it belongs (with certain glowing exceptions). In between, the social sciences have the unique burden of directly dealing with fellow human subjects as objects of knowledge. But while the colonial and racist horrors of previous generations of social science research have made researchers more aware and conscious of the dangers of dehumanizing and objectifying the people and societies they study, the increasingly
quantitative nature of the field (under the influence of the models from the “harder” sciences) is moving its disciplines away from intersubjective encounter to a more “scientific” relationship of researcher and data. These dynamics aside, the philosophical assumptions that serve as the foundations of the theories of these fields generally posit a kind of naïve realism in which the objects of knowledge are inert and passive vis-à-vis the researcher/theorist, or a Kantian position wherein the object of inquiry must conform to the knowing subject, and not the other way around. In these perspectives, the objects of knowledge are usually mere things, concepts, or representations, and seldom, if ever, knowing, active subjects in their own right.

However, Ifa and Tijani Sufism present us with radically different perspectives in which the Real or Olodumare and Ọrunmila are actively involved in the human quest to achieve knowledge of them. As conscious, knowing subjects themselves, God/the Real, the Prophet, the Qur’an and Olodumare, Ọrunmila, and the Odu of Ifa conceal and reveal themselves to their would-be knowers. As 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.

Or as Rumi more poetically explains:

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

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930 From Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, 273. Similarly Amadou Hampaté Bâ quotes his teacher, the Tijānī Shaykh Tierno Bokar as saying, “If you wish to know who I am, if you wish me to teach you what I know, cease for a while to be what you are and forget what you know.”
Similarly, the Araba had to ask the Odu Ofun Meji’s permission and propitiate it with sacrifices before he could teach me its verses. Moreover, in both of these traditions, through pleasing or propitiating the desired object of knowledge, by becoming like it and drawing near to it, one eventually comes to recognize that it is not other than oneself, and that this “object” is actually a subject knowing itself through one. This knowledge is not conceptual, and so one never arrives at a perfect “theory of everything” or comes to possess ultimate knowledge, but rather, ultimate knowledge (or the ultimate Knower) comes to possess one. In the words of the ḥadīth, “The Real becomes one’s hearing, sight, hand foot, and tongue.” Or as the Araba said, “Ọrunmila will come out of your mouth and speak, and what you say will be true.”931 The sought seeks the seeker until their union effaces this distinction, revealing the single reality behind both, and then reaffirming the relative reality of this distinction.

Such perspectives are worthy of consideration, especially by scholars of religion, art and culture. The way a tradition, a people, or a culture present themselves to us often says a great deal about us and our relationship with the object of our study, but this relationship has two sides; that is, it is not entirely up to us. Thus the “responsive reverence” and service that Rumi recommends for would-be readers of the Qur’an seems as good a description of responsible/responsive scholarship and issues of agency as any I’ve come across in the anthropological literature.

*(Post)Colonial (Post)Modernity*

Despite contemporary academics’ deep ambivalence towards the related Enlightenment and Imperialist projects, especially those in the fields of anthropology and area studies, the dogma of progress still runs deep in academia, and apologists for Western

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931 Araba of Modakẹ, interview with the author, November 14, 2013. Modakẹ, Nigeria.
modernity, whether subtle (such as Charles Taylor\textsuperscript{932}) or less so (such as Steven Pinker and Jared Diamond\textsuperscript{933}) are largely well-received and even lauded. Moreover, one can almost excuse Fukuyama for his triumphalist “end of history” hypothesis: virtually every human being in the world now lives under the rule of a modern nation-state, participates in a capitalist economy, has received or been exposed to some form of Western-style education, and the crusaders of “development” have devoted their significant resources to ensuring that everyone can become assimilated into these new (post)colonial modes of life, leisure, labor, and learning. The remarkable economic, political, and military dominance of this (post)colonial (post)modernity is only matched by its seeming intellectual dominance. Thanks to international schools, brain drain, the prestige of European and American institutions of higher learning, and the somewhat successful colonial enterprise to destroy the authority of non-Western intellectual traditions, many of the best and the brightest (and wealthiest) young students from around the world now receive remarkably similar formal intellectual formations, regardless of their cultural or religious background. Moreover, this intellectual formation of the elites often has a kind of trickle-down influence on their societies. And so Margaret Thatcher’s Borg-like ultimatum, “there is no alternative,” seems inescapable. It seems as if the different “languages of thought” represented by the world’s different intellectual traditions, like the diverse political and economic structures that supported them, will become mere “accents” of the universal language of Western reason and liberal democracy.


However, studying traditions such as Ifa and Tijani Sufism reveals that far from going the way of the dinosaur, these traditions, like West African clothing, have adapted and in some cases even thrived in this new environment, spreading across the continent and the world. Moreover, much of the interest in these two traditions is driven by those one would assume least likely to embrace such traditions (at least according to the perspective outlined above): members of the African diaspora in the Caribbean, North and South America, as well as many Europeans and Euro-Americans in the case of Ifa, and educated, urban youth in Senegal and the African diaspora in Europe and North America in the case of Tijani Sufism. These traditions are not going anywhere, and their continued resilience poses a unique intellectual challenge to the totalizing narrative outlined above, not only because they continue to exist, but because these traditions actively articulate their own theories of history, progress, and knowledge in which they are not relics of a bygone age clinging to the periphery of modernity, but are rather in the center of the spiritual and intellectual movements that are subtly, but powerfully shaping the world.

These different perspectives on knowledge also direct us to reconsider those perspectives that were repressed and occluded in the West’s own intellectual history such as neo-Platonic, medieval Scholastic, Christian and Jewish mystical and kabbalistic traditions, etc. These perspectives give us a very different view on the “inevitable march of progress and knowledge,” and they, along with traditions of Islamic, Chinese, Indian and Buddhist philosophy, and traditions such as Ifa, will undoubtedly become more important as the enthusiasm for and confidence in the (post)colonial, (post)modern, neo-liberal project fades. Just because the military and economic machinery that supports and defends modern academic institutions is more powerful than those of other intellectual traditions does not
mean that our ideas are better, more profound, or more true. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore this fact.

Finally, in reflecting on the ways in which Ifa and Sufism differ so markedly from the intellectual traditions of the academy – all the metaphysics, the rituals, the spirits, the poetry, the seemingly impossibly lofty claims of knowledge and certainty – one is reminded of Aesop’s cautionary cautionary tale of the fox who could not reach the grapes and so declared them sour. We must be careful not to fall into the trap of “in the name of wisdom, vilifying one’s neighbour’s wisdom to console oneself—or to take one’s revenge—for not having found it oneself.”

**Conclusion**

Ifa and Tijani Sufism represent different and distinct approaches to knowledge and knowing that are compelling, sophisticated, and dynamic in their own right. In Tijani Sufism, disciples acquire Knowledge (*ma* ṛifah) by undergoing an initiatory process called tarbiyah, which leads to a profound shift in their perception and understanding of the self, the world, and God. They experience the radical unity (*tawḥīd*) of the Divine Reality, and then “come back” to themselves and the world of multiplicity, which they now see with new eyes, as manifestations of reflections of this single Divine Reality. Thus, they are known as Knowers by God (‘Ārif biLlāh), for it is ultimately God who does the knowing though them. This marks but the beginning of an endless spiritual/intellectual journey whose goal is the infinitely receptive mode of being and exemplified by the Prophet, Shaykh Aḥmad Tijānī, and Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse.

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In Ifa, babalawo acquire “deep knowledge” (*imo ijinle*) by memorizing verses from all of the sacred 256 Odu. During their initiation in the “grove of mystery” (*igbodu*), they encounter their innermost self and destiny (*ori*) and are given the power (*aṣẹ*) to fulfill it. This initiation is but the beginning of a lifelong journey of knowledge through the cultivation of character, practice of divination, and contemplation of the Odu. The goal of this practice is the being/character (*iwa*) and knowledge of Ṣrùnmlà, hailed as “My Lord, whose knowledge is without end. Not knowing you fully, we [our lives] are in vain. If we could but know you in full, all would be well.”

Like the philosophy of Western antiquity, Ifa and Sufism are at once ways of knowing and transformative ways of life. Hadot’s description of ancient philosophy is remarkably applicable to both traditions: “Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual’s way of being. Thus philosophy was a way of life, both in its exercise and effort to achieve wisdom, and in its goal, wisdom itself. For real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way.”[^935] But even more than these similarities, what is perhaps of greatest interest to Western-educated readers is the fact that Ifa and Tijani Sufism represent a markedly different perspective on knowledge and knowing than that in which we have been trained. While similar perspectives can also be found within the Western tradition (in Ancient Greek, Roman, and medieval neo-Platonic and Christian philosophy) as Hadot points out, we have to get beyond the Enlightenment caricatures of these traditions in order to better understand them, the intellectual heritage of the West, and similar traditions from other civilizations. The racist and triumphalist ideologies of the Enlightenment rendered not only ancient and classical

philosophy, but also the philosophical and intellectual traditions of other civilizations, opaque and unintelligible. Difference from the newly-defined “rational” and “enlightened” modes of thinking and being was interpreted as lack and imperfection, and the spectre of this unfortunate legacy still haunts us today.

However, in the contemporary academy, we can also approach and understand difference not as a defect or lack in the other, but as an abundance, a plenitude that can not only reveal our own shortcomings, but help to transcend them as well. However, the traditions of Tijani Sufism and Ifa do not exist solely as a resource for Western scholars, rather their goal is to cultivate ideal modes of knowing and being in their initiates, and to “mend the world.” Approaching these traditions and their representatives as teachers and colleagues is much more productive than approaching them as intellectually passive informants or sources of ethnographic or historical “data,” as I hope the current work demonstrates. Nevertheless, the careful study of Ifa and Tijani Sufism can serve as powerful correctives to the “colonial hangover” that continues to cloud much of our thinking by revealing our assumptions and illustrating alternative approaches to knowledge. Much of the troublesome heritage of the Enlightenment came from the elevation of an immanent, particular mode of knowing and being (that of rational, white, post-Christian, rich, 18th century (or future) men from Northern Europe) to a transcendent, universal standard of knowledge. From the perspective of Ifa, Enlightenment thinkers have tried to put themselves in the place of Ọrunmila. And from the perspective of Sufism, they put themselves in the place of God, or more specifically, they confused their particular, limited “station” with the transcendent “station of no station” (maqām lā-maqām). However, both Ifa and Tijani Sufism outline specific programs of practice and thought that claim to be able to lead initiates to the realization of this “station of
no station,” which is not a particular perspective or theory, but rather a mode of being characterized by the ability to take on, accept, and recognize the validity and limitations of every partial perspective. Within both Ifa and Sufism, you never fully come to know God and the Prophet or Olodumare and Ọrunmila, but rather these transcendent figures come to know themselves through and in you.

Thus Ifa and Tijani Sufism present us with a wisdom that is both timeless and timely in a world where knowledge is increasingly externalized and many wars are fought and lives are ruined due to the resulting inability to recognize the validity of others’ perspectives, and the limitations of one’s own. So in conclusion, we can only add our voice to the prayers of the masters of these traditions:

“What we beg for from God is this: that He preserve all His servants from a belief which goes no further than imitation and pretence…”

ḥaqq al-qadrihi wa’l miqdarahi ‘l-azīm
In accordance with the truth of His rank and His tremendous degree

Aboru, Aboye,
May our sacrifice reach heaven, May our sacrifice be accepted,
Aboye, Aboṣiṣe
May our sacrifice be accepted and allow our intentions to come to pass.

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Appendix A to Chapter 3: The Spirit of Good Manners (Ruḥ al-Adab)

In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate

1. Ibrahim the son of al-Ḥājj ʿabd Allāh, our glowing moon, says:
2. After having started with the name of God and then rendering all praise to Him, the Possessor of Great Glory and Majesty
3. A piece of advice from me to my brothers: hold fast to the way (Ṭarīqah) of [Shaykh] al-Tijānī
4. A way of pure grace and satisfaction, established upon the Sunnah (example of the Prophet) and the Qur'an.
5. Adhere to that which is obligatory for those of the Way [the obligatory wîrd], by this, assuredly, are benefits obtained.
6. But you will not profit by merely taking this Way, unless you perpetually seek righteousness,
7. Fulfilling its prescribed conditions and upholding its exemplary manners (adab),
8. Respecting all of its people, especially the elite, to them be obedient.
9. When you begin to perform the wîrd, observe the proper manners (adab) to the extent of your ability,
10. Observing these manners (adab) outwardly and inwardly, by this is one elevated to high places
11. And seek the presence [by visualizing] your Shaykh al-Murabbī (spiritual master/trainer), and likewise, his own Shaykh, without any doubt.
12. Maintain presence and serenity, likewise seclusion is helpful [in achieving this goal].
13. Seek an experienced master of sound advice, perfect in Knowledge (ʿIrūf), a righteous leader;
14. Put yourself in his hands without hesitation, and always be [before him/her] like a corpse [in the hands of the washer] and soon you will be aware.
15. Do not oppose him, even if his opinion seems wrong, but always a follower be.
16. The mistake of the shaykh is more correct and proper than the aspirant’s, for he who reasons
17. Do not turn to anyone other than him in the world, but be [with him/her] as if there were no world
18. For the aspirant has nothing other than this Saint [his shaykh or Shaykh Tijānī], with the Prophet and his Lord Most High.
19. As long as other than them remains in a heart, it will not obtain Knowledge of the Master, I say with full certainty.
20. Be with the Shaykh at all times, from this you will benefit, and be a steadfast lover so that you will succeed.
21. To the extent that you love him, you will receive his [spiritual] support, the [Sufi] folk have said
22. Spend of your possessions, new and old, in seeking his satisfaction, and respond quickly to his indications, then you will do right.
23. Be pleased with your shaykh even if he makes you cry, because he has guided you to goodness
24. Be mindful of the time [literally, “the moments”], and be warned that you will suffer the trial of loss.
25. So when you see the manifestation of Beauty (Jamāl), do not exceed the bounds, and be content with the manifestation of Majesty (Jalāl)
26. For all these are matters of God’s unfolding, too exalted is He to be blamed for what He unfolds.
27. Do not be anguished when you face the afflictions of creation, for this you were created.
28. He makes the affliction flow through them (creatures) so that you will not rely on them, but rather depend on our Lord
29. So if you are afflicted with hardship and difficulties, persevere patiently, for relief and happiness will come to you presently.
30. For after every night comes the day, and after every hardship comes ease
31. Rather, after every hardship, comes a double ease, as Muṣṭafā (The Prophet) of ʿAdnan related.
32. If you know that, then you will always be satisfied with God’s judgment, which always prevails
33. Whenever you make a request and are deprived [of it], He knows its harm [for you] while you do not
34. He repels what is harmful out of His Kindness, so do not accuse our God and thus be forsaken.
35. Were man to know who The Merciful (al-Rahmān) is, he would laughingly embrace affliction
36. Do not seek glory from creation without being glorified by the King [of creation], no, never.
37. Do not be pleased with the blessings with which you have been blessed, but rather be pleased with He who blesses, if you reason.
38. For every blessing will fade without he who bestows it, for He endures for all time.
39. Do not scorn any Muslim and do not mention people’s faults, for [the same] faults could be seen from you.
40. Many a man with only two rags for clothing, if he were to swear by the Lord, He will accept his oath, as has been narrated.
41. Do not harm a Muslim even if harm repeatedly comes from his hands, but be forbearing.
42. For these creatures are the servants of God, so, my brother, do not harm the servants of God.
43. And you would not be pleased with one who harmed your servant, even if he had done wrong, so fear your Lord.
44. Accustom yourself to sadness and the remembrance of death, do not forget it, nor likewise the questioning of the dead.
45. You must put learning first, so be firm in [your knowledge of] the Divine Law.
46. For knowledge, by my life, is the leader of actions, as was narrated from Ṭaḥa, the best of Messengers.
47. Obtain the knowledge of four things, you traveler, the first of which is the Knowledge (ʿirfān) of the Lord, the Master,
48. The second is to know that on which the acts of worship depend, that you may realize/verify [them],
49. Third is the Knowledge (ʿirfān) of the states of the soul: its deceptions, tricks, and schemes,
50. The soul has its fault, the heart has its fault, and the spirit has its fault, of this, there is no doubt,
51. And Adab, [knowledge of] adab is the fourth, o traveller, it is the door for every traveller.
52. Be mindfully humble and modest, for you will not be abased by your modesty.
53. ‘Ilm (knowledge), Ghinā (wealth), and khisb (fertility) carry the low accent [the kasrah, indicating the short “i” sound, which all of these words share].
54. While jahl (ignorance), faqr (poverty), and jadb (infertility) carry the high accent [the fathah, indicating the short “a” sound which all of these words share].
55. This is a sign for you, if you would consider [it], so recognize [it] with what you have been inspired.
56. Floods do not settle atop mountains, nor on trees in disregard [of their heights].
57. Do not be satisfied with yourself, nor fear, nor trust in other than the Lord, but disregard all other than Him.
58. Do not be arrogant, oh my brother, nor envy, nor show off, but rather focus
59. Pride, whether from knowledge or lineage or companionship, or acts of obedience, entangles one
60. An act of disobedience that leads to humility is better, while an act of obedience that leads to pride is worse.
61. You will never be free of these faults, unless you keep company with a Shaykh who is a Knower.
62. So hold fast to the protection of the Shaykhs if you want to attain a lofty height.
63. The best Shaykh of all time, absolutely is our Imām Tijānī, the possessor of virtue,
64. The intermediary (barzakh) and foundation for every Knower, for them he is the flowing fountain and the sun.
65. And the best of all the Ways, by consensus, is his Way, without any dispute,
66. And it is impossible to combine it with another, he who accepts this (combining this path) is ruined by it in the End (The Day of Judgment)
67. He has lied and fabricated falsehoods against the Lord Majestic; verily I say that this wirād [daily litany or literally, “drinking place,” referring to the Ṭarīqah] is great.
68. Adhere to the litanies (adhkar) of this wirād, if you do, I swear by my life, you will be guided to the arrival (wuṣūl)
69. [Among these litanies are] ḥizb at-tadharru’, Šalāt al-Fātiḥ, and likewise Allahumma ‘alayka [mu ’awallī] opens [the way],
70. And others apart from these, possessed by the great men (rijāl), the people of this Ṭarīqah, if you are given permission
71. However, their secrets are obtained through hard work, not by laziness or flattering/outsmarting men,
72. But rather through strict adherence to what they grant and sincerely following what they say.
73. Do not prefer speaking with friends to sitting with him (the Shaykh), oh, you annihilated one.
74. If [you ignore this rule] then don’t aspire to obtain their secrets, for secrets are not obtained out in the open/in public.
75. But rather, spend most of your time with him (the Shaykh), and you may succeed in obtaining your desires from him.
76. You may even succeed in learning from him] through spiritual contagion, and this has been established by the great men (rijāl), so be aware.
77. Whoever does not attain Knowledge of the Merciful (ma'rifah al-Rahmān) his life has been spent in waste for all time.
78. [God says] I created these creations in order to worship me; “to worship me” means “to know me.”
79. Do not slacken in your effort to acquire Knowledge (‘irfān), then you will see the wonders of the closeness of the Merciful.
80. He is manifest in everything, upon everything, near everything, and before it, and after it, forevermore.
81. So if you desire increase in faith, sincerely repent, and follow it with excellence (iḥsān)
82. Don’t hate a Muslim, or get angry, except for the defiling of the refined law.
83. Adhere to the night vigil and maintain a hungry stomach. Eating of lawfully-earned food is also counted [as a means of increasing faith].
84. Offer advice to brothers or maintain silence, keep the company of the people of virtue amongst your relations.
85. A man belongs to the religion of his close companion, if righteous, then he will be righteous, even if he is unintelligent.
86. Remember the Scales, and the unrolling of the Scrolls, and the perpetual grief of Hell.
87. Among them is al-musabba’āt in the morning and evening, repeating the words of the Adhān is also beneficial.
88. Various kinds of litanies (adhkār) have been passed down in the way (madhhab): our prayer upon the exalted rank [of the Prophet].
89. The prayer of glorification (Ṣalāt al-tasbīḥ) and glorification (al-tasbīḥ), and pondering the Qur’an, take this method.
90. Praying two rak‘āts in secret and taking steps towards mosques expiate sins.
91. And counting the waves of the sea, contemplatively, and shaking the hands of brothers, seize this opportunity.
92. A person’s completing the fast of Ramadan, and making vigils during its nights erases his sins.
93. Performing Ḥājj and ‘Umrah and giving alms in secret, from lawful wealth, what a blessed bargain that is!
94. Teaching children and prayer in congregation, all of these have been mentioned in the books.
95. And the following are diseases that harden the heart: love of leadership is the most serious defect, Mockery, backbiting, sitting with bad company, shamelessness, slander, and ill-intent.
96. Likewise, the passions of the soul should not be followed, and in worldly affairs, abstain without following after them.
97. Close your eyes to people’s faults and, as much as possible, pay them no attention.
98. And never take an oath without qualifying it with the Divine Will [saying “Insha’Allah”] when you make the oath.
99. Here ends the advice for the brothers, in summary form, in accordance with the [nature of] the people of today
100. In the year 42, after 1300 [1342 AH/1923-24 C.E.].
101. I named this poem, “The Spirit of Manners” (Rūḥ al-Adab) because of what it contains of wisdom and manners,
102. Seeking the pardon of the people of intellect, and singing the words of a precocious youth
103. And make it purely for the your noble sake, O Lord, O Subtle (al-Laṭīf), the Merciful, the Compassionate.
104. Do not be dissuaded from memorizing this poem, because of my being a young man in a non-Arab land.
113. For God appoints with His favor whomsoever He wills, and God is the Possessor of Magnificent Favor and He Who Wills (Al-Murīd).

114. As said in this important regard, the servant of ṬaHa, the Mālikī, Ahmad [Bamba]:

115. Blackness of body does not render one dull and slow of understanding.

116. O Lord, O Lord, by the exalted rank of the Guide (the Prophet), protect us from the evil of every enemy.

117. Bestow upon us the perfection of Knowledge and every desirable thing, by the best of the descendants of ‘Adnān (the Prophet).

118. And cover our faults with your beautiful covering, and overcome our enemies with Your majestic overcoming.

119. And praise be to God who granted me the ability to compose poems easily, what a wonderful Lord is He.

120. Then blessings and salutations of peace be upon the Chosen Prophet, the best of mankind

121. And upon him, and his family, and pious companions, as long as every patient one succeeds in attaining Knowledge.
Appendix B to Chapter 3: The Mauritanian Sermon

Taqwā (mindfulness) is the key to all requests for the servant, the worldly of your requests and the otherworldly, outwardly and inwardly. The first thing required of the believing servant is to know knowledge, and taqwā is the key to knowledge. God, Most High says, *Be mindful of God and God will teach you, God is of every thing knowing* (2:282). The first thing required of man is knowledge. So whoever desires knowledge, let him be mindful of God. As Imam Shafi’ī has said in this regard:

I complained to Wakī’ 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

Taqwā is conforming to the commands and avoiding the prohibitions outwardly and inwardly. I say taqwā is avoiding leaving what God has made obligatory for you and avoiding doing what God has prohibited…Taqwā is requesting wilāyah (sainthood), it is the servant requesting to be among the friends (awliyā’) of God. As God said, *The friends of God neither fear nor do they grieve, [and they are] those who believe and are mindful*” (10:62-63) Abū Ḥanīfah has said about this, “If the knowers (’ulamā’) and the doers (’āmilūn) are not the friends of God, then God has no friends.” Whosoever believes in God and conforms to the commands and avoids the prohibitions, he is among the friends of God who neither fear nor do they grieve, those who neither fear in this life, nor grieve in the next…. The Messenger of God was asked, “who are those who neither fear nor grieve?” The noble Messenger said, “They are people from among the sons of people who are gathered in the Essence of God, they sit together in God, they visit each other in God, they are those who neither fear nor do they grieve. Servants, they are neither prophets nor martyrs, yet the prophets and martyrs envy them for their closeness to the Real on they Day of Resurrection.”

Love in God is a mighty thing, and I swear to you that I love you for God’s sake, as I swear to you that you love me for God’s sake. God will shade servants on that day when there will be no shade but His shade, He will shade seven [kinds of] servants from all the servants under the shadow of His Throne: a just leader, a young man who grows up obeying God, a person whose heart is attached to the mosque from when he leaves the mosque until when he returns, a man who refuses the call of a beautiful woman of noble birth when she offers herself to him, saying “I fear God,” a man who invokes God alone and his eyes overflow with tears, a person who gives charity and hides it so that his left hand knows not what his right hand has given, and the seventh are two people who love each other in God—this [seventh kind of servant] is the easiest of the categories to achieve, and yet it the best of them. “A man is with whom he loves.” Whoever loves a people will be gathered with them [on the day of resurrection], as the Messenger of God said, “A man is with whom he loves.” I testify that I love the Messenger of God, and I love Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, and we, praise be to God, love them. We love these men and we are sure that they are not among the people of the fire. And this is my hope and our hope for our souls as we love one another. Taqwā (mindfulness) is the key to the Garden, and the Garden is for those who are mindful, and taqwā is salvation from the fire….

All that we seek in this world and the next, and in religion also is taqwā. So I urge you and I urge myself to practice taqwā in secret and in public. It is conforming to the commands and avoiding the prohibitions outwardly and inwardly. God Most High says, “Be mindful of God and seek a means of access (wasīlah) to Him’ (5:35). If you desire taqwā,

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937 A ḥadīth of the Prophet, al-Tirmīdī 5017.
there’s no way except through a wasīlah (means of access) that connects you to pure taqwā. The wasīlahs mentioned in the Qur'an are three: following the prophet, dhikr (invocation/remembrance), and keeping company with the Knowers.

1) Following the example of prophet in all speech and action, this is a wasīlah which connects the servant to God Most High. Say, if you love God, then follow me, and God will love you (3:31), and the Noble Messenger said, “If you love God, then follow me.” And whoever follows the Messenger in all of His actions and words, the result is that God loves this servant. And it is said in another hadīth [the hadīth of nawāfīl], “When I love him, I am him.” If God loves a servant, then He is his hearing and seeing and tongue and hand and leg, and this is the beginning of sanctity (wilāyah), and this is the main wasīlah (means of access).

2) The second Qur’anic wasīlah is the invocation (dhikr) of God, seeking only his face. God Most High said, Restrain yourself with those who call to their Lord morning and evening seeking His face (18:28), [that is] keep yourself with the people who invoke God in the morning and the evening, seeking only his face. This is a wasīlah that connects the servant to God.

3) Keeping company with a Knower by God (‘ārif biLlāh). The Most High says, follow the way of he who turns towards Me (31:15). And one who turns towards God in all of his states, he is a Knower by God (‘ārif biLlāh) and there is nothing for him except God. The one who keeps company with him will also find him a means of access (wasīlah) to connect him to God.

The world (Kawn), in reality, there is nothing in it except for God, [this is true for both] the universe and man. Man wants union with God, but between him and God there is a veil. And this veil is only the world. If he persists in dhikr (invocation/remembrance), with presence of his heart with God, the veils of this world are lifted from him and he arrives at God. And this world becomes like a mirage in sandy deserts, which the thirsty man mistakes for water, until when he arrives he doesn’t find anything, but he finds God with him (24:39).

Ibn ‘Arabi says:

Whoever sees creation as a mirage has been elevated beyond the veils

The first thing a complete shaykh does with a disciple who desires to meet God is busy him with dhikr (invocation/remembrance) until he arrives at the presence of God, and that is the way of fanā’ (annihilation). Because insofar as the servant has not been annihilated in the Essence of God, his faith (imān) is not complete. For whatever remains is a veil, and thus there is a kind of punishment/torment attached to the servant. The Most High says, Verily, from their Lord, that day, they will be veiled, then they will enter Hell (83:15). For so long as there is a veil, there is torment. And if he continues in the invocation of God (dhikruLlāh), then he will be annihilated. There are three kinds of fanā’: Annihilation in the Acts (fanā’ fī al-af‘āl), Annihilation in the Attributes (fanā’ fī al-Šifāt), and Annihilation in the Essence (fanā’ fī al-Dhāt). As for the annihilation in the acts, many believers reach this station. And whoever knows that there is no doer of actions except God, that is the completion of his annihilation in actions—he knows that there is no doer except God, and there are many believers among the common believers who have arrived at this station.

I teach students in grammar lessons, the grammarians say “In reality the doer (al-fā‘il) is God,” and metaphorically, the one who gives existence to the action, and technically, the

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938 This references the common Sufi idea, expressed by many disciples, that people who are veiled in this life are in hell, and do not realize it until after they die.

939 This same idea is found in the previously-cited letter form Ibn ‘Arabi to Fakhr ad-Din al-Rāzī as well as Ibn ‘Ajība’s commentary on the famous grammar text, al-Ajrūmiyyah.
one on whom the action relies completely, and all of these are God.”… Whoever knows that there is no doer but God, then he is annihilated in the actions, in the presence of the actions, and has found part of faith (Imān). And when he is annihilated in the Attributes, he rises from this station (maqām) as well. And the Attributes of God are well known amongst us, all of us have read about them in the introductory books of theology: Power, Will, Knowledge, Life, Hearing, Sight, and Speech. And when we leave these attributes to God, we arrive at annihilation in the Attributes. And we know that there is no power but God’s, no will but God’s, no life but God’s, no knowledge but God’s, no hearing but God’s, no sight but God’s, and no speech but God’s. Whoever recognizes this also finds annihilation in the Attributes. And if he continues, he finds annihilation in the Essence; everything flees from him until nothing remains but God. The tongue of his state says

Nothing remains but God, and nothing other than Him

To this nothing is connected, and nothing is separated

Also, we have the statement of oneness (tawḥīd), “There is no god but God” (La ilāha illā Allāh). But this statement has a shell and a kernel and a kernel of the kernel. The shell of general tawḥīd is found in the Qur’an, God, there is no god but He (2:255). That is the truth of one who is absent from God, because God is not absent, but rather it is only you who are absent. So if the spiritual journeying continues towards God, he will arrive at the station of being present with God, and he will address Him as he does during prayer, You alone we worship and on You we rely, guide us along the straight path (1:5-6)—he has arrived at the station of “there is no God but You.” And this is also related in the Qur’an, There is no god but You (21:87). And if he continues to progress until he is annihilated in the essence, he won’t find any invocation (dhikr) except, “There is no god but I.” “There is no god but I” is also related in the Qur’an (21:27), but it is strange for a person to hear his brother say, “There is no god but I,” he may think that this person is claiming divinity for himself, but it is only The Real speaking with his tongue. So he hears the speech as if he is hearing it from him, but he is not the speaker. Similarly, God spoke to Moses through the tongue of a tree [saying] Verily, I am God (20:14). If God is able to speak through the tongue of a tree saying, “Verily, I am God,” then He is certainly capable of saying through the tongue of an Adamite, “Verily, I am God.” If he attains this annihilation, the servant Knows (‘arafa) that there is no thing but God. And here we have the pure oneness (tawḥīd) which is the goal of the spiritual heroes (rījāl).

Shaykh Tijānī says in Jawāhir al-Ma’ānī, “the reality of oneness (tawḥīd) is not perceived, because as long as you continue to speak, you exist and God exists, and so there are two, and then where is the oneness (tawḥīd)? There is no oneness (tawḥīd) except when it is for God, by God, and to God. The servant has no entrance to this, and no exit from it.” This is only valid for the way of annihilation. For this reason, the Knowers, their first concern for a seeker is that he finds annihilation in God, then after that he ascends until he arrives at the Shaykh, because he is an attribute of God. The goal of these two annihilations is that the

940. This is probably another verse of Ibn ‘Arabi’s, as he quotes it in his Ringstones of Wisdom, 83. Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse also quotes this verse in his Remover From Confusion in the context of a longer quotation of Shaykh Tijānī from Jawāhir al-Ma’ānī (see Niasse, Removal of Confusion, 122).

941. As previously noted, this recalls the fatally famous saying of Ḥallāj, Anā al-Ḥaqq, “I am the Truth,” and Māhmūd Shabistārī’s poetic commentary upon it,

If saying “I am the Truth” was permissible for the bush
Why is it not in the mouth of a good man [Ḥallāj]?
Every man whose heart is pure from doubt
Knows for sure that there is no Being but One
Only “the Truth” can say “I am.”

(Shabistārī Gulshan-i Rāz v.445-47)
servant will return to this station [annihilation in the attributes], for if he has not met the Messenger of God and the Shaykh, then he will not know what comes after. So if he continues in this way, he will return to witnessing the existents, [but] he will see the existence as non-existent and existent at the same time. And an example of this is what we see in the cinema. Whoever amongst you, of the Knowers, has not seen a movie, I would love for you to see it even once, for you will witness a thing that is non-existent (mafaqūd) and yet is existent (mawjūd). For if it were not existent, you would not see it; but it is in reality, not existent. All existents (everything in existence) are just like a movie.942 You witness a thing existing and not existing. And you are like this in your existence: you do good and you know that you are not doing anything, and you avoid bad things and you know that you are not doing anything. God is the one who is the agent.

After that the heart of the seeker proceeds through the unseen, and he is neither awake nor asleep while he witness the unseen in which there is no thing until he is drawn (attracted) a second time, and he returns to God, he knows with certainty that there is nothing but God, not in a state of annihilation, or drunkenness, or rapture, but while being completely awake (aware). He knows there is nothing but God and he perceives things as they are,943 and he puts every created thing in its place, in which God placed it. And he knows that he is nothing. He exalts things, while not considering them existent; and he fears things, without considering them existent, and he loves things without considering them existent. And he acquires all good actions, he prays, and he fasts, and he makes hajj, and he tells the truth and he spends his money. And all of that is out of good manners (adab) to God, while he knows that there is nothing there. And if the servant arrives at this, he is connected to God by a real connection—he doesn’t do anything except for God.

As long as the servant doesn’t find this, perhaps he does something and thinks that he is the one who has done it, and even if he does it with God in mind, if he doesn’t do it for God’s sake—if he moves or does some good deed, but not for the sake of God, or he avoids doing bad things out of fear of being criticized for them—this is not worship. So therefore, the servant is one who is in need of being connected to God with a strong connection so that his actions, all of them, are acts that draw him nearer to God, in omission or in action...everything is for God, and in this regard, the Qur’an says, **They are only ordered to worship God, sincere to Him in religion** (98:5) God commanded us to worship Him, but all with the condition of sincerity (ikhlās). And sincerity is taking everything other than the Real out of one’s actions. And your self, even your self, you take yourself out of this action and the action is performed by God, for God and towards God. Thus the Qur’an says, **You alone we worship, and on You alone we rely.** (1:5) “You alone we worship,” this is the station of the common, “on You alone we rely,” this is the station of the elite. And the elite of the elite, they will not say anything. And the prayer (Ṣalāt) is the strongest connection that connects the servant to God, and we are obliged to contemplate in prayer.

The prayer (Ṣalāt) all of it is drawing near to and worship of God. The greatest recitation of the Qur’an is always praise with meditation and recitation and humble awareness of God in all the movements [of the tongue] and silences. He says, **We did not create man and jinn except to worship** (51:56) Ibn ʿAbbās said this means “except to Know.” Because the actions of one who is not a Knower may not be worship of God...

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942 This is similar to Ibn ʿArabiʾs comment on shadow plays “Do you not see the one who sets up the image on the screen, He sets it up only so that the viewer will realize the knowledge of wujūd’s actual situation,. The viewer sees numerous forms whose movements activities, and properties belong to one entity that has none of this. What brings these things into existence, making them move and stand still between us and Him, is the screen that is set up. It is the separating limit between us and him, through which distinction occurs.” (Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 60)

943 cf. ḥadīth: “God show me things as they really are”
I advise you—as I began—to be mindful of God in secret and in public and being aware of Him with every breath. These are the two characteristics of everyone—those about whom you have heard and those about whom you have not heard—from among the people of goodness: they only find through mindfulness of God and awareness of Him. Mindfulness is conforming to commands and avoiding the prohibitions. Being aware of God is the servant being connected to God always, as if he witnesses God as the confirmed truthful one [the Prophet] said, “That you worship God as if you see Him, for if you don’t see Him, then He sees you.”

Man worships God and calls to mind the majesty of God until he sees Him, and if he is not, then he sees Him. And if he has not arrived at this station, he calls to mind the intensity of God’s awareness of the totality of the servant. Thus he knows that if he himself does not see God, then God Himself sees him always. This is the lesser awareness and both of them are good. When he knows that God is aware of him at every moment of his life, everything that he does and does not do is within God’s view. If you want to do something bad and you know that there is a great man watching you, you would consider him, and you would definitely leave aside that action. Everything bad you intended to do, you hate him to see any of the bad things you wanted to do so you would leave that bad action, so what if you consider that God is aware each action you intend, and He is greater. God is greater (Allāhu Akbar)…

The Ṭarīqah Tijāniyyah is thus: Asking forgiveness (istighfār), prayers on the prophet (salāt al-nabī)—the door to God Most High—and “there is no god but God.” The invocation (dhikr) “there is no god but God” has three intended meanings, as I said before—the shell, kernel, and the kernel of the kernel. The shell of “there is no god but God” is “there is nothing worshipped in reality except Him”—this is the station of the generality (al-‘āmah). Whereas in the truth of those heading toward the goal “there is no god but God” is “there is no goal in reality but God,” and in the truth of those who have arrived, “there is no god but God” is “there is nothing in reality except God.” The first is the possessor of “there is no god but He,” the second is the possessor of “there is no god but You,” the third is the possessor of “there is no god but I.” And likewise for he who invokes God “Allāh, Allāh” as I have heard you say. So the remembrance/invocation (dhikr) of God is the key to sanctity (wilāyah). Remembrance/invocation is the beginning of sanctity, the beginning and the end of sanctity, there is remembrance/invocation (dhikr) at the beginning and at the end always. The end is always in the beginning, where the beginning is, there too is the end. If the beginning is correct, the end will also be correct. Our beginning is “there is no god but He,” “there is no god but You,” and “there is no god but I.” God, to Him you are returning, while you say, “There is no god but God, the Most High”…. 

944 This is a quotation from the famous ḥadīth of Gabriel, which will be discussed in further detail later.

945 The Arabic of the last phrase of this ḥadīth can be parsed in two ways: “if you do not see Him” or “if you are not, [then] you see Him.” This latter interpretation has been interpreted by Sufis throughout the centuries as referring to the noetic aspect of fanā’, annihilation in God. The only way to see God is to be annihilated in God, since only God sees God. See Ibn ʿArabi’s Kitāb al-fanāʾ fi ’l Mushāhādah. Similarly, Shaykh Ibrahim also wrote the following verses of poetry “and this [prayer] is incumbent on you, so bow down in humility. / Indeed you will achieve the nearness and purity/ There, you shall see Him, or He shall see you, so do not exist!” from Dīwān Sayr al-Qalb.

946 Niassé, Jawahir al-Rasāʾil II, 56-69
Appendix C to Chapter 3: The Three Stations of Religion (Maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth)

In the Name of God the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate
The blessings of God and peace upon our Lord Muḥammad and his family and companions

All praise to God, the Peace, the Believer, the Doer of Beauty (Muḥsin), He is the King (al-Mālik), the Cause and Acceptor of Repentance (al-Tawwāb), the Compassionate (al-Rahīm), the Watcher (al-Raqīb), the Guardian (al-Muḥaymin), and greetings of peace upon the straight path (al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm), the conscientious (al-taqī), the pure (al-naqī), the truthful (al-sādiq), the purely devoted (al-mukhlīs), he who is perfumed by a magnificent character, the overseer (al-murāqīb), the witness (al-mushāhid), the source of the most perfect divine knowledge, the slave and the master to whom is attributed the attributes of the Supreme Master. May the complete favor (riḍwān) of God be on the helper of the Truth by the Truth, the guide along the straight path, and upon his family in accordance with the reality of his rank and his tremendous degree.

I came upon your noble letter and sound speech, o you beloved … ‘Umar ibn Mālik…, and I came upon your question regarding the three stations of religion and their stages, and the reality of these descriptions. And you have mentioned that the Sayyid, the Knower (‘Ārif bīLāh), ‘Ubaydah ibn Anbūjah has discussed this in the Mizāb, but that after a long study of it, you didn’t find anything convincing, so I will respond to you from what occurs to my mind…

And he said: “There is no god but God” (Lā ilāha illā Allāh) makes up the three stations of religion: Islām, and Iḥsān, and Iḥṣān. And Islām (Submission) is saying “There is no god but God”, Iḥān (Faith) is knowing “There is no god but God”, and Iḥsān (Excellence) is the flowing of “There is no god but God” through the appropriate channels, and it is that which is said in a spiritual state, and the speech is God’s. It is the noble word, the word of repentance (tawbāh), the word of mindfulness (taqwā), the word of excellence (iḥsān), the word of unity (tawḥīd), the word of goodness (tawbah). It has three levels, the first of which is the level of Islām (Submission) and it is establishing the appropriate speech and wisdom in the earthly plane (Hadrah al-Nasūr). The second level is the knowledge of it (“There is no god but God”), and it is the station of Iḥān (Faith). The third level is that which is the speech of God, and this is the station of Iḥsān (Excellence). And these stations vary (from one point of view) and they don’t vary insofar as they all revolve around “There is no god but God.”

But as for their own distinct stages, the first stage of Islām is tawbāh (repentance), and it is to abandon being ungrateful for (kufr)947 blessings. For each blessing, the blessed should thank and acknowledge the bestower of blessing, and the opposite of thankfulness is kufr (ungratefulness). And the Sufi scholars say, it [repentance] is leaving behind every base trait for every resplendent trait. I say that in the case of the masses, the base [trait] is abandoning the obligatory and committing the forbidden (ḥarām) acts, and in the case of the elite, it is leaving the approved (mustahabb) acts and committing disliked (makrūh) acts, and in the case of the elite of the elite, it is turning away from the [Divine] Presence, and this is forgetfulness. And this repentance (tawbāh) [of the elite of the elite] is the reality of repentance (tawbāh), because its reality is slaying of the nafs (carnal soul/ego) as God says, Repent unto your Creator and slay your selves (2:54). It is not seen, and it is not seeing your soul as really having any state or station, and that is repentance from repentance (tawbāh min tawbāh).

Verily God loves the repenters (2:222).

947 The root k-f-r literally means to cover over, and kufr, often translated as disbelief, is contrasted to imān, faith or belief.
The second stage is integrity (istiqāmah), and it is traveling along the straight path (ṣirāt al-mustaqīm) in ten qualities which God has numbered in Surah al-An'ām Say: Come, I will recite unto you which your Lord hath made a sacred duty for you: That ye ascribe no thing as partner unto Him and that ye do good to parents, and that ye slay not your children because of penury - We provide for you and for them - and that ye draw not nigh to lewd things whether open or concealed. And that ye slay not the life which God hath made sacred, save in the course of justice. This He hath command you, in order that ye may discern. And approach not the wealth of the orphan save with that which is better, till he reach maturity. Give full measure and full weight, in justice. We task not any soul beyond its scope. And if ye give your word, do justice thereunto, even though it be (against) a kinsman; and fulfill the covenant of God. This He commandeth you that haply ye may remember. And (He commandeth you, saying): This is My straight path, so follow it. (6:151-3). The straight path is thus described, meaning that it is the appropriate actions that characterize it. The first of these is not associating anything with God, and the lack of ingratitude (kufr), and not killing a soul which God has forbidden, and not killing children out of fear of poverty, and leaving lewdness, apparent and hidden, etc.

And integrity (istiqāmah) is being established on the straight path, and this is the integrity of the masses. And the integrity (istiqāmah) of the elite is traveling on the straight path which is the Messenger of God (pbuh), annihilation in him, loving him, and adopting his character outwardly and inwardly, and remembering and invoking blessings on and praying for him fervently and constantly—this is integrity. And the integrity (istiqāmah) of the elite of the elite is that there remains neither reticence nor grief, as God says, Those who say: ‘Our Lord is God,’ and afterward have integrity, the angels descend upon them, saying: ‘Fear not, nor grieve, but hear good tidings of the paradise which ye are promised.’ (41:30)

And the third stage [of İslām] is mindfulness (taqwā), and it is conforming to the commands (of God) and distancing oneself from His prohibitions outwardly and inwardly, in secret and openly. It is the greater part of integrity in so far as the commands are obligatory, recommended, prohibited, and forbidden, and the like. Conforming to the commands absolutely and avoiding the prohibitions absolutely, this is the mindfulness (taqwā) of the masses. And for the elite, it is that they remember Him, and do not forget Him; and thank Him and do not disbelieve in Him, and they obey Him, and do not disobey Him. God says, O you who believe, be mindful of God as he should be minded (3:102), and this is the level of the elite. Likewise God says, so be mindful of God as best you can (64:16) and this is the level of the common. And the mindfulness (taqwā) of the elite of the elite is the absence of any thoughts other than God in the mind, even for a moment. As the Knower (al-`Ārif) said:

If a desire other than you
Occurred to my mind inadvertently
I would consider it
As my apostasy.948

But this is the state of the Knower (`Ārif) and the station of the unique, comprehensive (al-fard al-Jāmi’) Pole (Quḥ), and this is the versification of the speech of his state. However, that state is not necessary for the Knower (`Ārif) and this mindfulness (taqwā) is what is alluded to in God’s saying, “Very God loves the mindful (mustaqqīn)” (3:76).

The second station of religion is the level of Faith (Imān). Its first stage is sincerity (ṣidq) and it is righteous action out of obedience for God’s sake; God says, It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in God and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and giveth wealth, for His sake, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to

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948 A verse of the Egyptian Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235)
The third [level of Imān] is serenity (al-Ṭamā’īnāh). It is stillness of the heart by God, independence through God, and certainty by God, in that nothing remains of the heart’s turning towards what benefits the soul or harms it. Rather it casts itself, peacefully, in the hands of God. The tongue of this state says, “My God, on you I rely.” This is serenity (al-Ṭamā’īnāh) and none posses it except for the elite. And the serenity of the elite is their certain knowledge that God alone exists, so there is no repose except in Him, and no return except to Him, and He says, “O you serene soul, return to your Lord” (75:2).

The third station of the stations of religion is Iḥsān (excellence/perfection/beauty). Its first stage is observing (muraqqabah), and it is being perpetually present with God, and knowing that He is aware of the totality of the servant. This fact never leaves his mind because he sees the reality from behind a fine veil, and he understands with the understanding of taste.

The possessor of this station may speak in such a way that one who hasn’t attained perfect discrimination may think that he has arrived [at the end of the spiritual path], but he has not [yet] arrived. Rather, he sees the reality from behind a fine veil, and he understands knowledge with the comprehension of tasting, not direct witnessing (mushāhada). This is the observing (muraqqabah) of the elite before direct witnessing. And the observing (muraqqabah) after direct witnessing (mushāhada) is the observing (muraqqabah) of the elite of the elite.

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949 This was the title of the first caliph and close friend of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, as well as a Qur’anic category of the best of the saints, second only to the Prophets and Messengers as described in (4:69) And he who obeys God and the Messenger, they are with those whom God has favored: the prophets, the sincere (ṣiddiqīn), the martyrs, and the righteous. What lovely company.
And the observing (muraqbah) of the breaths is a station among the stations of the spiritual heroes (rijāl), and it is the result of Knowledge (ma’rifah).

The second stage (of Ḱhān) is direct witnessing (mushāhādah), and it is vision of the Truth/the Real (al-Haqq) by the Truth/the Real as it is without doubt or uncertainty or fantasy. There only remains the Truth by the Truth, in the Truth, and not one hair of the slave remains in existence. None arrive at this station except that he has been annihilated from his soul and from other and otherness, and on the tongue of this state it is said:

Nothing remains except God
Not even a single thing other than Him
To this nothing is connected
Nor is anything separated

As here there is no name, no description, and no limit. This vision occurs without any “how” or “definition” or “unification” or “direction” or “comparison” or “beginning” or “union” or “separation.” There is no invocation (dhikr) or invoker (dhākir) or invoked (madhkūr). The Truth has come and the false has vanished, verily the falsehood is ever vanishing” (17:81). And this level is close to that of the opening/enlightenment (fath), but what comes before this is not the opening, it is the door to Knowledge (ma’rifah), but it is not Knowledge (ma’rifah). Every Knower (‘Arif) is open (has achieved fath/spiritual enlightenment), but the opposite is not true.

The third stage [of Ḱhān] is Knowledge (ma’rifah), and it is the spirit being deeply rooted and firmly established in the presence of direct witnessing with complete annihilation and subsistence through God. So the knower (al-‘Arif) among the Sufis is he who sees the other/the essence, that is, he witnesses the Truth (al-Haqq) in the other. For me, the Knower (al-‘Arif) is he who is annihilated in the Essence once, and in the Attribute twice or three times, and annihilated in the Name once. He confirms the existence of these three realities, and he confirms the Names by the Name. And this stage is extremely difficult to reach (literally, It tears livers to shreds, and neither wealth nor children are of any avail in obtaining this). The possessor of this station is perfectly awake and aware of God and His wisdom and His commandments, and satisfied with the unfolding of His decrees. For the one who is perfectly satisfied and is satisfying, it is appropriate that he address his soul with the saying, Enter

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950 The breaths (anfās) is a technical term in Sufism which simultaneously alludes to the verbal creative act through which God perpetually recreates the cosmos (The Breath of the Merciful nafās al-Rahmān) and the subtle states of the most accomplished Sufis who are perpetually aware of their (and the entire cosmos’) reabsorption and recreation through these breaths. In his Sufi lexicon, Ibn ‘Ajībah writes, “al-Qushayri says, by breath (nafās) the Sufis mean the repose which hearts find in the subtle emanations of the unseen. Someone who is granted breaths is at a higher level than someone granted a state (kāl) or a moment (waqt). We could say that the one granted moments is at the beginning [of the way], the one granted breaths is at its end, and the one granted states is intermediary, [or that] ‘moments’ are for people of the heart, ‘states’ are for people of the spirit, and ‘breaths’ for people of the innermost being (sūr). A breath, then, is more delicate than a moment. Keeping moments from being wasted is for devotees and ascetics, keeping breaths from being wasted is for gnostics who have reached the goal, and making use of states is for aspirants.” (Ibn ‘Abija, The Book of Ascension to the Essential Truths of Sufism: A Lexicon of Sufic Terminology (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2012), 64-5)

951 While this term literally means “men,” it does not refer to gender, but rather significant spiritual achievement. ‘Attar famously wrote that on the Day of Judgment, God will call for the men (al-rijāl) to stand forth, and the first to step forward will be Mary, the mother of Jesus.

952 Cf. Ibn ‘Arabi Faṣṣ Ismā’īl see The Ringstones of Wisdom, 83.
among my servants, enter into My garden (89:29-30). And Knowledge (ma‘rifah) is the last of the stations of religion and repentance (tawbah) is its first. However, the reality of repentance (tawbah) is the absence of repentance (tawbah) and that is only achieved through Knowledge (ma‘rifah). In this regard, our Shaykh, the Seal, al-Tijānī (may God be pleased with him and us) used to say that, “By God, I have not reached the station of repentance (tawbah).” He, may God be pleased with him, meant that he had repented from seeing repentance (tawbah). So long as the slave regards himself as repentant (in tawbah), he has not reached the station of repentance (tawbah).

This concludes the summary explanation of the stages, and if we were to continue with this, it would require a whole book. As discussed above, the reality of the stations are Islam, Imān, and Ihsān. Islam is saying “There is no god but God” (La ilāha illā Liāh), and Imān is so know there is no god but God! (47:19), and Ihsān is “Say: ‘Allāh’ [and leave them to their vain prattle]” (6:91) or Say: He is God, the Unique, God the Eternally Independent, He neither begets nor is begotten, and there is not one like unto Him (112) and [And we strike examples for mankind] but none will grasp their meaning save the wise (29:43).

These are the nine stages of religion, and if you meditate upon them you will find the essence of the stations in the realities, and that they correspond to the nine Presences (Ḥadrāt), and they are the same. For if you enter the Divine pre-Eternal Presence (Ḥadrāt Azaliyah), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī]; and if you arrive at the Muhammadan Presence (Ḥadrāt Muḥammadiyyah), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī]; and if you arrive at the Ahmadi Presence (Ḥadrāt Ahmadiyyah), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī], and so the Presences are nine: three within three, just as the stages [of religion] are nine: three within three. The presence of the shaykh is the station of Islam, the presence of the Messenger is the station of Imān, and the Presence of God is the station of Ihsān, And verily unto your Lord is the final end. (53:42)

Appendix:

The reality of repentance from repentance (tawbah min tawbah) is: Verily God is the Acceptor of repentance (at-Tawwāb) the Compassionate (9:104).

The reality of integrity (istiqāmah) is baqā‘ (subsistence) after jamā‘ (annihilation), “Verily, God ordains what He wills.” The reality of mindfulness (taqwā) is not thinking of anything other than God even for a moment, Verily, God is the Truth (22:62).

The reality of sincerity (ṣidq) is single-mindedness (singleness of orientation) towards Him, Everything perishes, save His Face (28:88); To Him is whatever is in the Heavens and in the Earth, do not all things return unto Him? (42:53); His is the Kingdom and His is the Praise (64:1).

The reality of serenity (jamā‘nīnah) is that you do not wish for the cessation of what is, nor the existence of what is not. And God knows, while you do not know. (16:64). He is not questioned about what He does. (21:23).

The reality of observing (murāqabah) is the perpetual attachment of the heart to God. Verily your Lord is ever watchful (89:14). And thou (Muhammad) art not occupied with any business and thou recitest not a Lecture from this (Scripture), and ye (mankind) perform no act, but We are Witness of you when ye are engaged therein (10:61); It is We who created man, and we know what his soul whispers to him, and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein (50:16); there is no secret meeting of three, but He is their fourth, nor of five, but He is their sixth, nor of less than that or more, but He is with them wheresoever they may be. (58:7)

953 The full context is this verse is, O you serene soul, return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing, enter thou amongst my servants, enter into My garden (89:29-30)

954 At-Tawwāb can mean both the one who causes or accepts repentance.
The reality of direct witnessing (mushāhadah) is the true vision of the Truth (al-Haqq). To God belong the East and the West, so wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God (2:115)

The reality of Knowledge (maʿrifah) is witnessing the Essential Perfection, There is nothing like unto Him (42:11)

This concludes what I have received from the One who inspired it, ... All praise is due to God in all cases, and the blessings and peace of God upon our Lord Muḥammad and upon his family and companions.\footnote{Niasse, \textit{Maqāmāt al-Dīn al-Thalāth} in \textit{Saʿādah al-Anām} (Cairo: al-Sharikat al-Dawliyyah 1427 A.H. / 2006), 123-130.}