BOOK REVIEW


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In The Divine Flood, Rüdiger Seesemann presents a multifaceted biography of the Senegalese shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (1900–1975) and his branch of the Tijani Sufi path,¹ the Jama’āt al-fayda, or Community of the Divine Flood. Niasse, among the most influential Muslim leaders of 20th century West Africa, articulated some of the principal pedagogies of the Ṭarīqat al-Tijaniyya and transformed it into a global movement. Seesemann traces the development of the fayda in its formative years up to the mid 20th century, complementing recent studies by Zachary Wright and Ousmane Kane on the history of the Tijaniyya in the 19th and late 20th centuries respectively. His study, which explores the junctures between doctrine and social movement, is a valuable contribution to the literature on Sufism and Islamic revivalism, and will appeal to students of both religious studies and history.

Seesemann convincingly challenges earlier treatments of the Tijaniyya and West African Sufism, which characterized Sufi networks as retrogressive vestiges of “traditional” or “popular” Islam. He seeks to analyse the Jama’āt al-fayda on its own terms, and regards it as an intellectual and social movement founded in an elaborate metaphysics, and forged through a “dynamic interplay among leaders, followers, and opponents” (Seeseman 2011, 230).

Reflecting the more recent scholarly tradition of Carl Ernst and Arthur Buehler on the history, practices, and self-perception of Sufi networks,

1. The Tijani path traces its origins to the Maghrebi Sufi Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815).
Seesemann engages a wide array of primary source material produced within the Tijaniyya tradition. These include oral and written hagiographies, poetry, published letters, and treatises on Sufi doctrine, supplemented by colonial archival material. He exposes these sources to critical scrutiny, skillfully addressing many of the challenges which historians face in employing such primary texts as historical sources. For example, from oral accounts he extracts both historical details and perspectives of adherents, to address larger questions relating to the development of the movement and how it built its legitimacy.

*The Divine Flood* is structured in five thematic chapters. The opening two chapters introduce Niasse’s education and early career, and provide a theoretical discussion on *fayda* and *tarbiya*, or spiritual training, the two pivotal and interdependent concepts that buttressed Niasse’s movement.

Seesemann first explores the term *fayda*, or flood, its intellectual genealogy, and relation to Sufi concepts including manifestation (*tajallī*) in ibn Arabi’s cosmology. It is noteworthy that *fayda* is employed by the Tijaniyya in much the same way as renewal (*tajdīd*) is used within contemporary Sufi traditions elsewhere in the Muslim world, particularly the Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiya. Both terms have eschatological implications and refer to a moment or process of cosmic revival in Islamic history, spurring debates regarding when the revival would take place, and what form it would take.

Seesemann’s examination of *tarbiya*, the precise method of spiritual training that Niasse had pioneered, provides a useful model for studying the connection between esoteric Sufi practices and social movements. Seesemann meticulously interprets the structure of arguments and references to earlier works in Niasse’s own writings on *tarbiya*, compared to other methods prevalent in West Africa, to understand how Niasse viewed his own status in the broader Sufi tradition, and why the members of the *fayda* perceived his training method to be superior to others. Niasse, he explains, systematized stages of the mystical experience, and provided spiritual training to “ordinary Muslims” who were able to partake in the mystical path previously reserved for the spiritual elite. He concludes that this was a major factor in generating a mass movement.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace the development of Niasse’s early Sufi community at the new settlement of Medina Baye in Senegal, and its gradual expansion throughout West Africa. Seesemann explores the impact of socio-economic variables, intellectual debates, and Niasse’s declara-
tion of his own sainthood on the development of the fayda. In Chapter 5, he employs travel accounts to trace the extension of the movement to other parts of Africa, and the process by which Niasse was popularly recognized as the supreme saint of the time (Ghawth al-Zamān). The narrative ends at 1951, the year of Niasse’s historic public visit to Kano, Nigeria, regarded by his followers as the point from where the fayda rapidly spread worldwide. The epilogue provides glimpses into Niasse’s subsequent career as a global Muslim leader, and the transnational expansion of the Divine Flood.

In these latter chapters, Seesemann, echoing Cheik Anta Babou in his study of Amadou Bamba, argues for a more complex understanding of the success of the Jama’āt al-fayda that considers social, political, and economic factors, in unison with other variables including experiential factors cited by members of the movement. He points out that the fayda’s transcendence of gender and class divisions—for example, Niasse appointed women as deputies—together with Niasse’s innovative spiritual training methods, contributed to the spread of the movement. He further stresses that debates with other Sufi traditions regarding doctrinal matters like the Vision of God (ru’ya) were critical in defining the contours of the fayda and building social cohesion among Niasse’s followers.

Throughout his analysis, Seesemann dismantles dichotomies that originate in Orientalist scholarship including notions of Islam noir versus orthodox Islam, scriptural versus popular Islam, ‘ulama’ versus Sufis, and reformist Sufism versus popular Sufism. Seesemann emphasizes that Niasse transcended each of these categorizations. He was at once a popular mystic, an internationally recognized scholar carrying the title of shaykh al-Islam, and an international activist, as President of the Islamic World Congress in 1967. Seesemann further calls into question the popular narrative of the “decline” of Sufism in the modern era by drawing attention to Niasse’s active contribution to scholarly discourses, his engagement of a range of Sufi doctrines and epistemologies, and the vitality of the fayda.

Ultimately, The Divine Flood will pave the way for comparative works on Sufi revivalist movements throughout the Muslim world, allowing readers to gain a fuller understanding of how certain movements, like the fayda, flourished and withstood external pressures. However, Seesemann’s narrative could have benefited from further historical context and a more thorough exploration of how the movement adapted to
the challenges of modernity. For example, it would be useful to better understand the Jama’āt al-fayda’s evolving relationship with colonial authorities and the early rise of Wahhabism in West Africa. It is also unclear how the fayda shared space with other Sufi networks contending for spiritual influence in West Africa, particularly the Muridiyya, who played a major role in shaping 20th century Senegal.