

Article

Technologies of Self-Wrapping: Female Chanters in the Fayḍa Tijāniyya Sufi Community in Senegal

Joseph Hill 

Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2H4, Canada; joseph.hill@ualberta.ca

Abstract: The prevalent conception in many Muslim communities globally that women’s visibility must be minimized or attenuated in the presence of unrelated men profoundly shapes Muslim women’s relationship to visibility. Many Muslim women participate in and influence their communities through forms of “wrapping”—a semiotic act that covers and protects yet also identifies and displays. The concept of “wrapping” encompasses “veiling” yet moves beyond clichés of invisible and silenced Muslim women. In the Fayḍa Tijāniyya Sufi community in Senegal, female Sufi chanters were until recently practically unknown, largely due to the perception that a woman’s voice—like her body and social presence—is ‘*awra*, or something to be cloaked and protected. Since around 2009, however, female chanters have proliferated, some becoming online superstars and acting as formally appointed spiritual guides (*muqaddamas*). These women largely embrace the notion of a woman’s voice and body as ‘*awra*, yet they adopt various social and material technologies as “wrappers” that mediate their chanting before large audiences. Female chanters exemplify the dialectic in the Sufi tradition—between the flexibility associated with transcendent reality (*ḥaqīqa*) and the limits associated with divine law (*sharī‘a*)—which facilitates yet constrains adaptation to changing historical conditions.

Keywords: Sufism; gender; dhikr; shari‘a; mysticism; women; Senegal; Tijaniyya; Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse



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1. Introduction: Reconfiguring Performances of Wrapping

The prevalent conception in many Muslim communities globally that women’s visibility must be minimized or attenuated in the presence of unrelated men profoundly shapes Muslim women’s visibility. Norms of “enclosing” (Boddy 1989) women’s bodies, voices, and social presence take many forms, shaping and often limiting women’s participation in various spheres of life. However, Muslim women still participate in and influence their communities while using various forms of what we may call “wrapping”—or acts that cover and protect yet also identify and display (Hill 2018). The concept of “wrapping” encompasses bodily “veiling”, yet it seeks to move beyond the clichés of invisible and silenced Muslim women through emphasizing the diverse uses and effects of various forms of wrapping, which extend metaphorically far beyond bodily covering. For example, many Islamic authorities teach that a woman’s voice, like her body and social presence, is ‘*awra* (Arabic), or something to be cloaked and protected from public scrutiny (Hill 2018, chap. 6; Muazu 2022).

Following such teachings, in the Fayḍa Tijāniyya Sufi community in Senegal, female chanters (Wolof: *sikkarkat*, Arabic: *dhākirāt*) who publicly perform *dhikr* (Arabic; Wolof: *sikkar*)—Islamic phrases, texts, and poetry—were until recently practically unknown. Since around 2009, however, female Fayḍa chanters have proliferated, some of them becoming superstars. Some have been formally appointed spiritual guides (Arabic: *muqaddamas*) on

the Sufi path. Female chanters appear in numerous contexts, including as chant leaders in large gatherings, in studio-produced albums and video clips, on televised variety shows, and as guest singers in Sufi rap clips. Rather than adopting a liberal position that rejects gender distinction, these women largely embrace the notion of a woman's voice and body as *ʿawra*, yet they adopt various social and material technologies that serve as “wrappers”, facilitating their chanting before large audiences. Technologies of self-wrapping help them not only present themselves as pious Muslim women but also perform particularly gendered forms of authority and mystique, presenting themselves as icons of wrapped divine knowledge and inner (Arabic: *bāṭin*) truths.

This chapter explores how women combine innovative social and spatial arrangements with contextually specific applications of material technologies to make possible new roles while presenting these roles as harmonious with existing notions of feminine piety. My use of the term “technologies” in this context brings together approaches that emphasize the social embeddedness of “material technologies” (for example, [Horst and Miller 2006](#)) and approaches that describe innovative techniques of social action and change as “social technologies” ([Derksen et al. 2012](#)).

What is striking about women's visible emergence as leaders ([Hill 2018](#)) and as chanters in the Fayḍa community is the relative lack of controversy as they began to perform roles previously limited to men. Although some male leaders have begun to insist that the Fayḍa's founder Shaykh Ibrāhīm (1900–1975) forbade women from chanting publicly, female chanters and their appreciators insist they have found ways to reconcile their public performance with modest feminine piety. Many historical factors have facilitated this shift, including national and global trends encouraging women's equal participation in education, employment, and politics. However, Fayḍa community members tend not to interpret women's increasing participation in Islamic leadership and chant performance as resulting from liberal ideals of women's liberation. On the contrary, they usually describe these changes as an unfolding of timeless spiritual principles distinct from liberal Western notions of equality.

One important factor has been the introduction of numerous material technologies—from amplification systems used in live meetings and websites to social media applications such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook—which female chanters integrate into social technologies, or new methods for bringing about particular social consequences. The impact of new material technologies, far from deterministic, depends on how actors adopt these technologies in contextually specific ways to amplify, reconfigure, or challenge existing social practices. While a liberal feminist analysis might evaluate the effectiveness with which these women, as autonomous agents, resist patriarchy using technology's liberatory potential, I, instead, ask how reconfiguring material, social, and spiritual technologies in specific contexts changes social possibilities. Even where women resist certain constraints, following [Saba Mahmood \(2005\)](#), I understand pious Muslim women's agency as a capacity to act oriented toward desires, goals, and social relationships shaped by religious practices. This account insists on foregrounding women's own explanations of what they are doing.

Transformations such as women's increasing spiritual leadership and public *dhikr* performance complicate widespread perceptions, both among Muslims and outside observers, that gender norms in Islam derive from discursive interpretations of authoritative texts and that any changes therefore depend on either minimizing or explicitly reinterpreting these texts. This is not to deny the importance of textual interpretation in shaping accepted practice. Authoritative texts of the Tijāniyya, the Sufi path (Arabic: *ṭarīqa*) of which the Fayḍa is the largest branch worldwide, insist on upholding the *ẓāhir* (Arabic: outward) dictates of *sharīʿa* (Arabic: divine law) as gleaned from the Quran and other texts. However, as the Fayḍa has globalized and diversified amidst social transformations, adherents

invoke the longstanding Sufi approach of implementing *sharīʿa* differently under different circumstances in light of the transcendent *bāṭin* (Arabic: hidden or inner) nature of *ḥaqīqa* (Arabic: transcendent reality). The transcendent freedom opened up by *bāṭin/ḥaqīqa* is constantly tethered to the limitations imposed by *ẓāhir/sharīʿa*, understood in this context through the lens of Mālikī jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Furthermore, as Fayḍa adherents see Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse—whom they often call “Baay” (Wolof: Father)—as a complete scholar who understood, applied, and integrated *sharīʿa* and *ḥaqīqa* perfectly, they tend to take his pronouncements on both as definitive. Yet ongoing contestation surrounds how his teachings apply to new circumstances and who has the authority to settle such questions.

This article is divided into four main sections. First, I provide an ethnographic narrative that outlines women’s emergence as public performers of sung or chanted *dhikr* in the Senegalese Sufi soundscape. I then situate these performances in terms of teachings regarding women’s *dhikr* performance in Tijānī history. Third, I discuss more specifically how the Fayḍa Tijāniyya’s spiritual technologies of cultivating mystical knowledge articulate with social technologies to infuse material technologies with spiritual efficacy. I conclude with reflections on how these changes draw on Tijānī and broader Sufi notions of divine law (Arabic: *sharīʿa*) and transcendent reality (Arabic: *ḥaqīqa*) in the broader context of “legal-traditionalist” Sunni Islam.

The idea of spiritual realities that relativize, clarify, and even transcend jurists’ conceptions of *sharīʿa* is as old as Sufism. “Antinomian” tendencies in Sufism have controversially gone as far as to suggest that *sharīʿa* no longer applies from the perspective of transcendent reality (Karamustafa 2014). Contemporary progressive scholars, seeking flexible ways of applying Islamic precepts, have found inspiration in how earlier Sufi figures related *sharīʿa* questions to transcendent spiritual principles (Abou El Fadl 2006; Shaikh 2012; Safi 2018). While this article does not take a normative position on such questions, I suggest that, in legal-traditionalist Sufi contexts like that of the Fayḍa Tijāniyya, the flexibility allowed by invoking *ḥaqīqa* is always constrained by *sharīʿa*’s perceived immutability. Although traditionalist scholars recognize the inevitable diversity of opinions (Arabic: *khilāf*) resulting from scholars’ attempts to “reason with God” (Abou El Fadl 2014), they would probably find the notion that *sharīʿa* is a “radically egalitarian” field that anyone can “hack” at will (Ahmed 2018) to contradict the definition and ethos of *sharīʿa* as the revealed way of submitting to an eternal God. This especially characterizes movements like the Fayḍa Tijāniyya that promote the teachings of a founder as interpreted by classically educated—and largely male—elites perceived as the founder’s successors. For any new performance of norms to gain community acceptance, it must present itself as largely consistent with established teachings. Although reconciling new practices with tradition invariably involves discursive justification, it relies at least as much on “performative apologetics” (Hill 2016), performances that present certain practices as part of a pious persona that embodies correct Islamic teachings. That is, such performances are a form of embodied rhetoric that relies not just on “persuasion” but on the performer’s “identification” (Burke[1950] 1969) with an audience’s sense of Muslim propriety. Mystical teachings, experiences, and behaviors can contribute to sometimes surprising reversals of established practices, yet the result is subject to limits and conditions.

2. Women in Senegal’s Sacred Sufi Soundscape

Soon after arriving in Dakar for the first time in 1998, I often lay awake at night due to the sound of neighborhood chant meetings amplified over loudspeakers, sometimes until dawn. I soon became familiar with the distinctive chanting style of Senegal’s various Sufi groups. The persistent beat of *xiin* drums accompanied the high-pitched, full-throated, piercing unison of Baay Faal Murids. The measured but punchy rhythms of the a cappella

style of Tijānīs associated with the Sy family of Tivaouane echoed Moroccan Tijānī singing. Three years later, in 2001, I began research in Medina Baay, the Fayḍa Tijāniyya's spiritual center on the outskirts of the regional capital of Kaolack where I was immersed in this community's distinctive *dhikr* performance styles. Like the other groups, they alternated between repeating *lā ilāha illāʾLlāh*—"there is no divinity but Allah", a phrase also known as the *haylala*—and chanting Arabic poetry about the Prophet Muhammad—in this case, composed by Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse, who founded Medina Baay in 1932. Their style alternated between glacially slow and melismatic and almost frantic repetitions of the *haylala*. One common feature of all these groups' chant meetings was that they rarely, if ever, featured women's voices.

Since the Fayḍa Tijāniyya's early days in the 1930s, one distinguishing feature of its *dhikr* gatherings is that they have usually included at least as many women as men. Most other groups traditionally either excluded or marginalized women or had them hold separate meetings in enclosed spaces. This inclusivity stems from the Fayḍa Tijāniyya's unusually accelerated and universal process of spiritual education. Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse promised that anyone—man or woman, rich or poor, scholar or illiterate—could attain direct experiential knowledge of God through an accelerated form of *tarbiya*, or spiritual training (Hill 2007; Seesemann 2011; Wright 2015). During this process, an aspirant silently recites prescribed *adhkār* (pl. of *dhikr*) at set times of the day and night. Usually after around two to four weeks, initiates experience the annihilation of the self (Arabic: *fanāʾ al-naḥs*) and an opening (Arabic: *fath*) to God's all-encompassing reality. The Fayḍa's popularization of direct, mystical knowledge of God, elsewhere depicted as a lifelong pursuit of spiritual elites, is its distinctive characteristic. However, Shaykh Ibrāhīm emphasized that *tarbiya* was only the beginning of knowledge and that what truly distinguished his spiritual progeny was the unique knowledge that followed *tarbiya* during the lifelong "walk" (*sayr*) in God. Only someone who walked this path, he held, was a "man"—male or female ([Niasse] 1969, 1: 131)—who could fully comprehend how *sharīʿa* and *ḥaqīqa* formed a single whole. *Dhikr* gatherings are part of this ongoing spiritual procession.

In the early 2000s, I attended dozens of nighttime *dhikr* meetings organized by disciple associations (Wolof: *daayira*) in Kaolack and Dakar. Most attendees were young people who had recently gone through *tarbiya* (spiritual training), and in most cases, women outnumbered men. However, I rarely saw women leading *dhikr* performances. Indeed, I assumed that it would be difficult or impossible for a woman to do so, not just because of norms discouraging it but because these spatially segregated meetings placed women far away from the male chant leaders and, in some cases, their microphones. Only once in 2001, in a small neighborhood youth gathering near Medina Baay, did I see an exception when a young woman took the microphone to lead one song in call-and-response fashion.

When I returned in 2009 after a four-year absence, I was astonished to find that the biggest star of the Fayḍa *dhikr* meeting circuit was Aïda Faye whose voice I heard daily as a ringtone on many younger disciples' cell phones. I learned that a maternal grandson of Shaykh Ibrāhīm had recently appointed her as a *muqaddama*, although she refrained from acting as a spiritual guide until several years later. That year, I met Aïda Faye at a neighborhood *daayira* meeting where the young *muqaddama* Sayyida Seynabou Mbathe, a childhood friend, had invited her to lead *dhikr*. I was struck by the importance of the microphone in her *dhikr* performance, which allowed her to maintain a distinctly internal disposition, her head turned downward toward her body wrapped in a *malahfa* (Arabic, Mauritanian-style body wrap). Her eyes closed as if she were almost not present at all, her voice echoed throughout the neighborhood. I also became aware of Khady Ndiaye, who had started leading *dhikr* performance in regional meetings during the 1980s but who did

not become well known until recordings of her meetings circulated, first as cassette tapes in the early 2000s and then as impromptu YouTube videos in the 2010s.

On several occasions during the same year, while interviewing *muqaddams*, I found young female *daayira* members at *muqaddams*' houses learning the art of performing *dhikr* and memorizing the Fayḍa's repertoire of sung Arabic and Wolof poetry. One of these young women was Fatou Marame Bitèye, a younger sister of one of my research assistants. The *daayira*'s main *sikkarkat*, the wife of the *muqaddam* in charge of the local *daayira*, was teaching her Ibou Diouf's Wolof songs about Shaykh Ibrāhīm. Fatou Marame's powerful voice and mastery of Ibou Diouf's revered repertoire soon earned her a reputation beyond the *daayira*, and she has become a regular guest on television programs.

Since then, the number of famous female *dhikr* performers has exploded as the avenues through which they reach audiences have proliferated. Strikingly, nearly every time I have seen a woman performing *dhikr* for an audience, there has been some form of electronic mediation, whether an amplification system, a radio or television, or a cell phone video shared through social media. A growing number of television talk shows feature Islamic content, and many regularly feature female *dhikr* performers of Senegal's various Sufi communities, making female chanters familiar to the general Senegalese public. Senegal's main television stations broadcast the annual Salam Festival, initiated by legendary popular singer Youssou Ndour. Dedicated to presenting Senegal's diverse *dhikr* performance styles, it has prominently featured many female performers from various Qādirī, Murid, and Tijānī communities. Aïda Faye has been a regular star of this festival for many years, accompanied by backup singers divided into male and female sections. In contrast, Murid singer Ndèye Fatou Niang's all-female chorus is a reminder of Murid women's women-only chant meetings, which have only recently reached the general public through technological mediation.

Most Fayḍa *dhikr* performers make start out by performing in *daayira* meeting circuit. Fayḍa *daayiras* have proliferated in the Dakar region, growing from a few dozen in 2001 to over 500 in 2018, and each hosts meetings to which they invite up-and-coming *dhikr* leaders, to whom they often pay a small amount of money. Most *dhikr* leaders are men, but a growing number are women. Aïda Faye started out performing *dhikr* in her own *daayira*. In 2007, fellow *daayira* member and popular rapper Daddy Bibson brought her to public attention by having her sing the chorus in his Sufi song and video clip "Soldarou Baye" ("Soldier of Baye"). Later that year, she released her own popular YouTube video clip featuring a gentle keyboard and percussion accompaniment, "Delou ci Yalla" ("Return to God") (see [Ogunnaïke 2018](#) on the Sufi imagery in this video). She soon released a full album of similar *dhikr* songs incorporating Wolof and Arabic poetry. Aïda Faye and Khady Ndiaye continue to spend much of their time traveling with their gender-mixed groups of *sikkarkats* to lead *dhikr* at small and large gatherings throughout Senegal. During my 2018 trip to Senegal, I found that both Aïda Faye and Khady Ndiaye had formed their own *daayiras* and were spiritually guiding numerous young disciples. Like many male *dhikr* performers, their renown in this devotional activity had earned them a reputation as models of piety and charismatic possessors of spiritual knowledge.

Perhaps the most important facilitator of female *dhikr* performers' burgeoning popularity has been the advent of social media networks that allow millions of Fayḍa followers worldwide to share and comment on a range of video and audio recordings. Whereas amplification systems, which gained prominence during the 2000s, allowed a reserved person's voice to echo through a neighborhood, social media technologies allow a voice to echo around the world. Socially mediated recordings include informal cell phone videos made at home or in local meetings, coverage by conventional television and YouTube channels of major *mawlid*s (Arabic: celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad's birth; Wolof: *gàmmu*),

and glossy studio-produced albums and videos. In addition to Aïda Faye and Khady Ndiaye, female *dhikr* performers such as Awa Sarr, Khady Diaw, Astou Faye, and Fatou Marame Bitèye have appeared on national television and in numerous YouTube videos. A performance in a home, a small or large meeting, or on a television set can reverberate indefinitely between television, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, and back again. This, in turn, prompts further invitations to perform on television or in large meetings, recordings of which are then passed around.

Take, for example, the impromptu performance by Fatou Marame and fellow *daayira* member Astou Faye during their *daayira*'s visit to the tomb of the legendary Fayḍa Sufi poet Ibou Diouf, where they lead his call-and-response song “*Malakūtu kulli shay’in*.”¹ Unlike most public *dhikr* performances by women, this spontaneous performance was not originally amplified. Fatou Marame, her head concealed by a white prayer shawl and a pair of large sunglasses, recites lines of Diouf’s poetry, interspersed with a one-line chorus repeated by the women and men, who stand in a mostly gender-segregated space around Diouf’s tomb. Someone filmed the performance with their cell phone and shared it on social media. The YouTube channel of the Dakar-based Fayḍa organization MALBN picked it up in April 2018 and reposted it, after which it was shared virally on Facebook and WhatsApp, attracting nearly 164,000 views by early 2025. Many clips of female *dhikr* performers are shared on Kossi TV, a professionally produced YouTube channel initiated by a major female spiritual guide in Kaolack, Shaykha “Yaay” Nenne Caam.

Yet the material existence of these technologies does fully explain why something that was until recently unheard of—women singing *dhikr* at full volume and in front of a large and appreciative gender-mixed audience—became an everyday reality with little debate. Indeed, when asked, these *dhikr* performers and their admirers insist that these new performances conform to a continuous understanding of God’s law (*sharī’a*) and divine reality (*ḥaqīqa*).

While some progressive observers may interpret female *sikkarkats*’ actions as “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1987) or strategic use of dominant discourses and practices to undermine patriarchal authority (Gomm 1975; Echard 1991), I find it more productive to take seriously their own religiously informed explanations of what they are doing (c.f. Saba Mahmood 2005). Female *dhikr* performers are aware of and implicitly resist claims that they should not do what they are doing, but they also actively uphold a notion of a *sharī’a* that distinguishes between men’s and women’s roles, attributes, and responsibilities. They describe performing a God-given mission, which they strive to perform according to the outward demands of *sharī’a* informed by the inward unveilings of *ḥaqīqa*. They describe new material and spiritual technologies not as tools for circumventing *sharī’a* but, on the contrary, as divine unfoldings created to enable people to realize timeless *sharī’a* and *ḥaqīqa* in previously unimagined ways. While transcendent *ḥaqīqa* provides ways of relativizing *sharī’a*, the Fayḍa’s traditionalist practitioners still approach *sharī’a* as timeless and inseparable from *ḥaqīqa*, circumscribing how and to what extent one can change norms.

3. Wrapping Women’s Voices in Tijāniyya History

From its beginnings in 19th-century North Africa, the Tijāniyya Sufi order has formally involved women more than many other legal-traditionalist Sufi groups, or groups that aspire to realize *sharī’a* through the methods of traditional—in this case, Mālikī—jurisprudence (Arabic: *fiqh*). Yet women’s participation has still been muted and limited due to norms surrounding women’s visibility. The copious early Tijānī biographical literature (Al-‘Alawī al-Shinjī [1868] 2012; Sukayrij [1907] 1961; such as Sukayrij 1931) has entries for hundreds of saintly men but almost none for women. However, these biographical entries for men mention over a hundred women who were somehow con-

nected to those men. Rather than entirely exclude women, then, biographers found ways to wrap some women's stories inside the stories of men, sometimes depicting a woman as more distinguished than the man in question. Contemporary Tijānī scholar Muḥammad Rāḍī Kanūn [Ganūn] (2010) compiled descriptions of 102 of these women, many of them merely identified as sisters, mothers, wives, or daughters of some prominent Tijānī man. Others are described as saints of unsurpassed spiritual level who spoke wisdom to men, although Kanūn only explicitly identified nine as *muqaddamas* or *shaykhas*. We know that other women he mentions (Ruqayya Niasse for example) and many more that he does not mention were also *muqaddamas* and scholars.

According to early-20th-century Tijānī scholar Aḥmad Sukayrij, the primary justification for appointing *muqaddamas* was to represent a male leader in providing spiritual guidance to women in spaces separated from men (quoted in 'Atīqu 1971, pp. 51–52). The clearest example of this model is an early 20th-century Nigerian woman best known by her catchphrase “Allāhu Ḥayy” (“God is the Living”) ('Atīqu 1971; Hutson 1999, 2004; Muḥammad Rāḍī Kanūn [Ganūn] 2010, § 78), appointed by the male Nigerian leader of the Tijānī *zāwiya* (place of meeting and worship) in Medina, Saudi Arabia, to guide women. A rare woman known for providing spiritual instruction to men was the Mauritanian woman Khadija bint Muḥammadna, nicknamed “al-Qāri‘a” (the one who knocks), who tarried in Nigeria with her husband and adult children on her way to the pilgrimage in Mecca and spent the last years of her life in Medina, Saudi Arabia. Advanced in age and reputed to possess a level of Tijānī spiritual knowledge then unknown in Nigeria, she became the only woman listed in many prominent Nigerian Tijānī men's spiritual pedigrees (on her, see 'Atīqu 1943; Hutson 2004, p. 62; Muḥammad Rāḍī Kanūn [Ganūn] 2010, § 67). Still, men's primary pedigrees invariably only included men, and they described learning from her under a male authority's permission (see 'Atīqu 1943).

Certainly, we can largely attribute women's depictions—and lack thereof—in Islamic biographical literature to pervasive negative and hierarchical attitudes about women (Abdel-Latif 2020; Geissinger 2020). Yet, we can partly explain the same phenomenon as resulting more indirectly from tendencies to “wrap” pious women's presence in a semiotic display—or non-display—of protection and reserve. In his recently published oral Arabic-language Quranic commentary, Shaykh Ibrāhīm explicitly cites women's oblique depiction in texts as an example of the principle of decorously “covering” them. Commenting on Quran 4:1, he presents a grammatically direct reference to men and an indirect reference to women as illustrating the principle “that what is correct for women is to be covered” (*anna al-nisā'a ḥaqquhunna al-tasattur*) (Inyās [Niasse] al-Kawlahī n.d., vol. I, p. 358).

Even while extending the jurisprudential principle of women's bodily covering to other domains, Shaykh Ibrāhīm's writings repeatedly declare women's potential spiritual equality to men. He calls on “daughters”—ambiguously referring to his biological and spiritual progeny—to “compete to attain the heights, yet not in material things” (Niyās [Niasse] [1948] 1993, p. 115) and approves of transmitting to women spiritual knowledge often assumed to be reserved for men, for the true gnostic is “the man, whether female or male” ([Niasse] 1969, 1: 131).

This trope describing the spiritually elevated woman as a man goes back to the early days of Sufism when it justified mentioning certain exceptional women among the ranks of great men ('Aṭṭār [1230] 2009, p. 97; Tourage 2007, p. 173; 2012, pp. 3–4). However, Fayḍa Tijāniyya adherents—including female *sikkarkats*—commonly invoke it to celebrate how the Fayḍa Tijāniyya erased distinctions between men and women by making experiential knowledge of God equally available to both.

This universal promise of direct knowledge of God to all who sought it drew a disproportionate number of women to Shaykh Ibrāhīm during the Fayḍa's early days. My

interviews with elders suggested that women significantly outnumbered men during the Fayḍa's embattled early days. Shaykh Ibrāhīm encouraged girls' Islamic education far more than was typical of his contemporaries, and he formally appointed numerous women as *muqaddamas*, or female representatives authorized to act as spiritual guides. Most of these women never ended up acting as spiritual guides. The handful who did usually limited their leadership to other women and were little-known outside their immediate circle.

Although Shaykh Ibrāhīm generally did not assign women to speak or chant at religious events, he did invite female students to recite texts at programs at his Islamic institute in Kaolack and at the "conference" right before the annual Medina Baay *Mawlid* (*Gāmmu*) meeting. The only woman he assigned to speak during the *Mawlid* proper was his daughter Ruqayya.

Shaykh Ibrāhīm thus set a powerful but potentially ambiguous precedent by encouraging women's Islamic education, appointing women as spiritual leaders, and exceptionally having women speak in public, even while limiting their public visibility. Since around 2000, a growing number of Fayḍa women in Senegal have come to be recognized publicly as spiritual guides who lead mixed-gender disciple communities (Hill 2018). Although far more visible than the more muted handful of female spiritual guides during Shaykh Ibrāhīm's lifetime, these women similarly strive to reconcile their leadership with a performance of appropriately wrapped piety and spirituality.

In contrast to acting as a holy woman or spiritual guide, which may not require exposing oneself to public eyes and ears, performing *dhikr* in the Fayḍa's public gatherings involves potential contradictions. Many of my interlocutors mentioned the prevalent saying that "the woman's voice is *'awra*" (Hill 2018, chap. 6), a notion found in other parts of the Muslim world as well (see, for example, Muazu 2022). Several authoritative Tijānī manuals mention the teaching explicitly. The most widely read manual, *Bughyat al-Mustafid* ["Desiring the beneficial"], declares that a woman's "voice is *'awra*, and it may be temptation [*fitna*]" (Al-Sā'ih 1973, pp. 415–16; see Naẓīfī 1984, p. 211; Sukayrij [1900] n.d. for almost identical explanations). Accordingly, it instructs men to recite the group litany (*wazīfa*, lit. "assignment") aloud yet instructs women to recite it quietly enough that only someone sitting next to them can hear them. Shaykh Ibrāhīm applied this principle to religious gatherings more generally, with the few exceptions mentioned above.

Shaykh Ibrāhīm hints at a preference for women's silent *dhikr* recitation in a versified fatwa, or opinion in response to a question, explaining that men may recite *dhikr* aloud or silently while women's silent *dhikr* is sufficient ([Niasse] 1969, 1: 131). Several of my interviewees recounted that Shaykh Ibrāhīm appreciated his wives' and daughters' out-loud performance of *dhikr* at home but did not have women perform *dhikr* in front of non-relatives.

I have often heard Islamically educated people support this view with the saying "All of the woman is *'awra*" (*al-mar'atu kulluhā 'awra*). This saying seems to come from the most widely studied Mālikī *fiqh* text, *al-Mukhtaṣar* by 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Akhḍarī, which lists covering one's *'awra* among the conditions of prayer: "The man's *'awra* is everything between the navel and the knee; and all of the woman is *'awra* except the face and the palms." While the jurisprudential definition of "*'awra*" concerns the body, the extended sense of describing a woman's voice as *'awra* is ambiguously metaphorical, likening the potentially tempting power of women's voices to that of seeing their bodies (see Qur'an 33:32–33) without equating the two in *fiqh*. While certain details of traditional *fiqh*, such as instructing women to recite silently in prayer and not to recite the call to prayer, may suggest such caution concerning women's voices and bodies, there is no juridical prohibition on women speaking to unrelated men. Indeed, even pious Senegalese Tijānī women and men generally converse freely. To a large degree, the notion reflects an

ideal that pious and respectable women wrap themselves decorously in ways that suggest fortification against the public gaze. This ideal applies primarily in devotional settings and to women of a certain spiritual rank but less to women in the marketplace, schools, and government institutions.

The ambiguous juridical status of the saying that “a woman’s voice is ‘*awra*” may explain why many people described it to me as something “people say”, not denying it but often ambiguously mitigating it. Several explained that it only applied when a woman used her voice to tempt or incite bad actions. Aïda Faye and other female *sikkarkats* told me that participants in *dhikr* meetings no longer see men and women but only see God. Similarly, many cited Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s description of a woman who knows God as a “man”, suggesting that, as spiritual men, they were no longer subject to this rule. Shaykh Ibrāhīm himself sometimes spoke as if he took this equation very seriously, such as when he renamed a distinguished Mauritanian woman “‘Abdallāh wuld ‘Abdallāh”. Yet such honorary manhood is never absolute, and using it to bend *sharī‘a* prescriptions can be contentious.

After around a decade during which female *sikkarkats* saw little pushback, over the past few years, I have seen a small but growing number of male Fayḍa leaders condemn women’s public *dhikr* performance. In August 2024, a speech by Cheikh Ibrahim Cissé Jalaloudine, the son of Medina Baye’s acting imam, Shaykh Mahi Cissé, was widely—and generally positively—shared on Fayḍa adherents’ social media networks. Speaking at a night *dhikr* meeting, Cheikh Jalaloudine cited several sayings of Shaykh Ibrāhīm that suggested that he had forbidden women from publicly performing *dhikr* because he believed it violated *sharī‘a*.² Cheikh Jalaloudine insisted that *sharī‘a* does not change. As a follower of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse, he said, even if a thousand Islamic scholars disagreed, he would take the position of Shaykh Ibrāhīm. Not long after this speech was livestreamed, a longtime friend of mine in Medina Baye mentioned to me that his younger sister, a fan of Aïda Faye’s *dhikr* performance, had received *tarbiya* from her and joined her *daayira*. However, he quickly added, he was personally not a fan of Aïda Faye because he had learned that *sharī‘a* did not approve of women performing *dhikr* publicly.

In short, despite *dhikr* performers’ growing popularity and widespread perceptions that they have found ways to harmonize this new role with *sharī‘a*, they are beginning to face open criticism that this role will never harmonize with *sharī‘a*. However, the Fayḍa’s decentralized organization and internal diversity allow adherents a degree of freedom to choose whose opinion they wish to follow. Occasional ambivalence and critique, so far, seem not to have curtailed their success.

4. Material and Spiritual Technologies of Wrapping

Female *sikkarkats*’ social success depends on creatively integrating numerous social and material technologies through which they reconcile projecting their voices with pious self-wrapping. Various forms of wrapping serve as technologies that fulfill various purposes. Following Foucault’s discussion of “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1997), I understand technologies as tools that are not purely material but can involve bodily, spatial, and other aspects. Muslim women’s sartorial veiling can serve a range of practical purposes, such as providing “portable seclusion” (Papanek 1973, p. 295), facilitating women’s workplace participation, increasing their mobility, and freeing them from focusing on wardrobe and hair (Hoodfar 1997). However, as Saba Mahmood (2005) has argued, for many Muslim women, more important than the veil’s material uses is its use in cultivating pious ethical dispositions. My analysis, rather than distinguishing between more functional and more spiritually meaningful aspects of self-wrapping, approaches self-wrapping as a performative act in which pious self-presentation is inseparable from one’s self-cultivation

as a pious subject. Subjectivity in this sense is not something purely internal but is where one's social agency intersects with subjection to and response to various forces. Emerging technologies of self-wrapping subtly adapt and reconfigure material technologies, social spaces, and spiritual technologies of self-cultivation to allow women to play new roles in recognizably pious ways.

Material technologies integrate with the Fayḍa's spiritual technologies and broader Sufi spiritual practices. [Shahzad Bashir \(2011\)](#) describes access to the bodily presence of a saint as necessary for medieval Persian Sufis to receive a portion of that saint's spiritual gift. Because women were denied proximity to unrelated men, such relationships were only available to men or, occasionally, a saint's wife or daughter, who sometimes became heir to the saint's spiritual lineage. However, Bashir also distinguishes between a saint's "corporeal" or physical presence and his "corporeous" presence, which can appear in dreams and visions. Although segregation norms and negative attitudes have often resulted in excluding women from various aspects of Tijānī spiritual practice, in theory, Tijānī spiritual transmission is a spiritual technology that allows women to circumvent limitations on male–female proximity. When a disciple is inducted into the Tijānī *ṭarīqa* (Arabic: Sufi path or order) through receiving the *wird* (Arabic: obligatory daily litany) from an appointed representative (*muqaddam(a)*), she or he is considered a direct disciple of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī ([Petrone 2016](#)), who is spiritually present—and should be imagined as such—while one is reciting one's *wird*. One's spiritual progress on the path comes directly through the physically absent shaykh, not solely through sitting with a living shaykh. Tijānī treatises have established that women have always been eligible to attain any level of spiritual knowledge and to act as *muqaddamas* (for example [ʿAtīqu 1971](#)), as many women have done ([Muḥammad Rāḍī Kanūn \[Ganūn\] 2010](#)).

In the Fayḍa Tijāniyya, when a person undergoes *tarbiya*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse—and not the *muqaddam* nominally in charge—is similarly described as the agent of transformation. The *muqaddam* acts as a spiritual transmitter and guides the disciple by telling them which litanies to perform and asking questions to prompt and gauge spiritual progress. Yet the *tarbiya* process consists mostly of sitting alone and quietly reciting litanies while waiting for Allah—working through Shaykh Ibrāhīm—to open the doors of divine knowledge (Arabic: *maʿrifa*). In the past, disciples sometimes began their *tarbiya* through letters, and today, many disciples receive instructions for *tarbiya* over the phone, email, or WhatsApp while living on a different continent from their spiritual guide. Still, many insist that physical presence with one's *shaykh* is more effective. The Fayḍa's version of *tarbiya*, then, can be experienced as a spiritual technology for accessing Shaykh Ibrāhīm's spiritual knowledge directly without bodily proximity to the spiritual guide. After *tarbiya*, some spiritual progress can, in theory, continue to rely on daily meditation on litanies, although leaders say that further instruction from a *muqaddam* or *shaykh* on terminology is crucial for providing a conceptual scaffolding for understanding one's spiritual unveilings. By reducing the dependence on constant corporeal presence with a *shaykh*, these practices potentially remove barriers to women's access to spiritual knowledge.

The Fayḍa's popularization of *maʿrifa biʾllāh* (Arabic: direct knowledge of God) and the direct access it provides to Shaykh Ibrāhīm's presence through visions, dreams, and inspiration has led to innumerable "centers of charismatic authority" ([Hill 2007](#), p. 441) in the global Fayḍa network. Although outwardly subordinated to Medina Baay's central leadership, many operate largely autonomously through a direct spiritual connection to Shaykh Ibrāhīm. Many Fayḍa adherents narrate that Shaykh Ibrāhīm appeared to them in dreams and visions or that he inspires them or aligns events to facilitate a course of action ([Hill 2017](#)). To some degree, Shaykh Ibrāhīm's continual corporeous presence can circumvent corporeal proximity to a spiritual guide. This does not negate the benefits of

spending considerable time physically close to a major male shaykh, an option far more available to male disciples. However, a major male shaykh's most prominent spiritual heirs are usually not his constant companions but representatives who spread his influence elsewhere and only see him occasionally. Some of the best-known spiritual heirs of Shaykh Ibra Fall, the main deputy Shaykh Ibrāhīm tasked with giving *tarbiya* to women in the Fayḍa's early days, are women who received spiritual instruction from him but had to maintain a certain physical distance from him.³

Aïda Faye narrated her life to me as a process through which Shaykh Ibrāhīm led her into her role. Although he had told her grandmother while living that it was not yet time for women to perform *dhikr* publicly, he had shown her signs that that time had now come. Such signs of a divine plan provide a narrative counterweight to *sharī'a*-based critiques. If this was an unfolding of a divine plan, it relied not just on these spiritual telecommunication technologies—a metaphor I adopt from Fayḍa adherents—but also on material technologies that provide new forms of wrapping that facilitate pious public performances.

As mentioned above, I first saw a woman singing in a *dhikr* meeting at a youth *daayira* meeting held one night shortly after I arrived in Kaolack in 2001. It was one of only a few routine *daayira* meetings I attended that year that were amplified. Around 50 young women and men sat in separate sections on plastic woven mats stretched out in front of a family compound. Midway through the meeting, as a circle of young men holding microphones led *dhikr*, a young woman approached the edge of the men's mat and knelt silently on the bare ground for a minute or two. She wore a white dress and an ample, white prayer shawl that covered her head and upper body. Apparently, this had been prearranged, because the male *dhikr* leader passed a microphone, and audience members passed it on to the young woman. She began to sing one of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's poems powerfully, staring downward, while the men responded to each line of poetry with the chorus "*Ḥasbī bihī wa-bi'l-Ṭāhā, ḥasbī bi'l-Shaykh al-Tijānī*" ("Sufficient for me is He [Allah], and Ṭāhā [Muhammad], sufficient for me is Shaykh al-Tijānī"). After finishing the poem, she handed the microphone back and blended back into the women's section.

This would be the only *dhikr* performance by a woman I would see for several years. I later recognized in this performance several patterns that I would later see more often, starting in 2009 when I began to see Aïda Faye leading *dhikr* in many large meetings and, much more recently when I saw many female *sikkarkats'* performances disseminated on YouTube. Female *sikkarkats'* performances involve several forms of what one might call intentional "hypercorrection" (Labov 1973) that heighten their air of pious self-enclosure and, thus, counterbalance potentially negative perceptions to their full-throated voices' echoing out to a large audience. Although Senegalese women work in various domains and address parliament without being accused of impiety, female *dhikr* performers play a specifically Islamic role that requires combining a heightened level of wrapped piety with significant visibility and audibility. In short, the role appears to be an oxymoron.

The first pattern is that nearly every such performance I have seen has involved electronic mediation, from a simple microphone to many layers of social media circulation. In 2001, most *daayiras* rented amplification systems only for periodic larger events, such as a yearly *gammu*, and did not use amplification for weekly *dhikr* meetings. Over the next few years, many *daayiras* I visited raised money to buy amplification systems, which they used even in small weekly gatherings where hearing was not an issue. Amplification has many purposes beyond facilitating hearing. As in the Islamic meetings that Anne Rasmussen (2010) observed in Indonesia, effects like distortion contribute to an aesthetic that values complex aural textures. The volume was often cranked to distortion and combined with echo and reverb effects, making it difficult for me to understand speakers and appreciate chanters' vocal qualities. Amplification also advertises the *dhikr* event to

potential participants and recruits while declaring the presence of the group hosting it. Most importantly, for female performers, amplification effects wrap and embellish one's voice much as clothing does for the body. I often found it impossible to distinguish a male chanter's melismatic falsetto from a woman's chanting.

Amplification can stand in for the traditional role of an "animator" (Wolof: *jottalikat*).⁴ In Senegal, high social rank is traditionally associated with displaying a high degree of *kersa* (Wolof), literally "shame", often suggesting dignified reserve (Hill 2010). Although this principle applies to both men and women—as does the concept of *'awra*—high-status and pious women must show a particularly high standard of restraint and self-enclosure. To address audiences with dignified reserve, high-status people relay messages through a lower-status animator, perhaps a junior relative or a *géwal* (Wolof: griot or praise singer) (Hill 2018, chap. 6; see also Irvine 1989). Thus, a woman's reticence—like a man's—may suggest not powerlessness but the dignified reserve of one who can influence without raising one's voice. Even in gatherings I have attended where a woman was the most notable authority, if this woman addressed attendees at all, it was usually through an animator. For roles that an animator cannot relay like chanting or expressive forms of oratory, amplification and its effects can play similar mediating and embellishing roles. For female *sikkarkats*, such mediating technologies are not just convenient but can be indispensable.

Another common feature of female *sikkarkats*' self-presentation is that they tend to cover their bodies particularly rigorously while performing. When not performing, Khady Ndiaye and Aïda Faye wear ample and concealing clothing—such as a colorful dress and loosely wrapped prayer shawl—typical of pious *ṭarīqa*-affiliated women in Senegal. Yet when preparing to perform at a night gathering, both usually change into a Mauritanian-style *malahfa*—literally a "wrapper"—a long, colorful piece of fabric that more amply wraps the head and hides the body's contours (Figure 1). Senegalese Sufi women of a certain spiritual status have increasingly adopted the *malahfa* as a form of dress that conceals more than typical local dress yet avoids the anti-Sufi connotations of the Middle Eastern hijab or niqab. The *malahfa* is almost becoming a uniform for female *sikkarkats* who appear in *gāmmus* and YouTube videos. Alternatively, female *sikkarkats* may choose ample and concealing versions of locally prevalent pious attire. The same women typically do not wear the same clothing when not performing *dhikr*.



Figure 1. Khady Ndiaye (right) performing in 2014 wearing a Mauritanian-style Malahfa (wrapper) and sitting next to her brother (left). (Photograph by the author).

One potential obstacle to women's performance of *dhikr* in meetings is spatial segregation that typically leaves women far from male *dhikr* leaders. Although I initially assumed that this strict segregation might preclude the participation of female *sikkarkats*, female *dhikr* leaders have found numerous spatial arrangements to reconcile participation with some semblance of segregation. Where I have seen Khady Ndiaye and Aïda Faye performing with male and female backup chanters, sometimes the *dhikr* leaders' table has been placed at the border of the men's and women's sections, with the female chanters sitting on the side facing the women's section. More commonly, these women have simply sat at the table within the men's section, but they have sat at some remove from the men or have had a male relative or child sit as a buffer between them and the men.

At one unusual large *mawlid* meeting I watched on YouTube, the charismatic leader Baay Mouctar Ka sat in a cushioned chair at the edge of the men's section while his wife sat directly next to him at the edge of the women's section. When it came time to perform the daybreak prayer (*fajr*), she stood almost next to him, potentially appearing as if she were co-leading the prayer, although she was still technically within the women's segregated section and could also be construed as praying alongside women (Hill 2018, chap. 7). A group of young female *dhikr* performers also stood in the women's section to perform at that *mawlid* for several minutes, while most of the *dhikr* that night was performed by an all-male corps sitting around a table on the opposite side of the tent.

The group litanies (daily *wazīfa* [literally "assignment"]) and the Friday *ḥaḍra* [literally "divine presence"]) are usually performed with the men forming a closed circle as the women sit at some remove outside the circle. However, at Sayyida Seynabou Mbathie's *daayira*'s Friday litany, the men's circle was open, and Sayyida Seynabou sat at a small distance looking into the circle at the head of a group of female disciples. Instead of sitting at the center of the *qibla* side (the direction facing Mecca), where the male litany leader sits (in this case, her husband), she sat at the other end facing the *qibla*, her imposing presence potentially suggesting that she sat in the leading spot. After the litany, Aïda Faye sat next to Sayyida Seynabou while the male *sikkarkats* sat directly across from her in the men's section, all forming a slightly separated *sikkarkat* space straddling the women's and men's sections. Like the young woman I first saw performing *dhikr* in 2001, each of these instances subtly reconfigured conventional gender-segregated spatial arrangements, placing male and female *sikkarkats* reasonably close to one another or having separate groups that performed at different times.

Even more than amplifying and reconfiguring live meetings, the rise of female chant leaders has depended on broadcast and internet communication technologies that serve as both wrappers and vehicles to deliver women's voices and presence over long distances to innumerable listeners while preserving their corporeal absence. Radio was one of the first communication technologies to bring a range of voices into everyone's homes and workspaces, and stations like Walf (Walfadjri) FM regularly play recordings by female *sikkarkats*. Dorothea Schulz (2012) has described how female hosts of Islamic radio programs in Mali's newly liberalized broadcast sphere sometimes met skepticism concerning this disembodied voice's Islamic credentials. Yet skepticism is not the only consequence of technologically disembodimenting a woman's voice. A contrasting consequence is to bring her voice into people's homes and workplaces, arguably without violating norms of cover and proximity among male strangers. This is not to say that everyone approves of women's virtual presence; rather, communication technologies are "affordances" (Gibson 1966) that people integrate into diverse social technologies, in this case as wrappers that relay a woman's voice while attenuating her bodily presence.

More recently, the internet and social media platforms have made possible the viral circulation of female Fayḍa *sikkarkats*' performances, especially among the young people

who numerically predominate in Fayḍa activities in Senegal. Most of the young Senegalese Fayḍa adherents I have met since around 2010 have a smartphone and connect to social media daily. Most are members of several Fayḍa-affiliated WhatsApp and Telegram groups and follow numerous Fayḍa-themed YouTube Channels and public figures on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. In addition to attending religious events, these young people avidly follow social media and share links to various kinds of videos. Many Fayḍa-affiliated YouTube “TV” channels livestream major events and repost viral cell phone videos alongside religious programs they have recorded from mainstream Senegalese television stations. Many of these postings feature female *sikkarkats*. In this environment, we might call female *sikkarkats* an “electronically corporeal” presence in Fayḍa adherents’ daily lives. Most disciples who watch these videos, regardless of age, seem unconcerned with the idea that, until recently, women rarely chanted *dhikr* outside their households. Unlike live meetings and broadcast media, which depend heavily on corporate and household decision-making, cell phones provide individuals with almost unlimited choices with minimal censorship from family and authorities. Because of this freedom, I have observed people watching female *sikkarkats* on social media proportionally far more often than they appear in live *dhikr* meetings and television programs.

5. Sufism, Sharīʿa, and Flexibility

One might ask why, in a Sufi group that emphasizes the transcendence of all distinctions through experiencing the unity of all opposites in God, the question of women’s voices in public spaces is even an issue. In contrast to the many Sufi communities that downplay codified Islamic rules in favor of spiritual principles, the Fayḍa exemplifies a more widespread “legal traditionalist” trend in Sufism and Sunni Islam. Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s written works constantly remind his followers that their knowledge of God (*maʿrifa bi-Llaah*) and *ḥaqīqa* will only grow and be valid and useful if they follow *sharīʿa* by doing what God has commanded, avoiding what God has forbidden, and emulating the Prophet Muḥammad ([Niasse] 1969). Regardless of how ecstatic one’s inner experience of *ḥaqīqa* may be, departures from *sharīʿa* are only excused temporarily if unavoidable, for example, during a state (Arabic: *ḥāl*) of self-annihilation in God.⁵ While observing *sharīʿa* is a precondition of truly experiencing *ḥaqīqa*, the latter reveals *sharīʿa*’s deeper meanings and helps one discern when a higher priority might supersede a legitimate *sharīʿa* prescription.⁶ Fayḍa adherents I have spoken with agree on the importance of abiding by *sharīʿa*, but they vary widely in their willingness to make exceptions or question conventional interpretations.

Many researchers have suggested that African Sufis’ emphasis on spiritual realities that transcend lists of rules potentially contributes to a more flexible and egalitarian approach to Islam than the approaches of their more legalistic contemporaries. Christian Coulon (1988), while acknowledging Senegalese Sufi groups’ tendency to marginalize and exclude women, asks whether “mysticism, in erasing or modifying the difference between the sexes, points the way towards the acceptance of female authority in Islam” (Coulon 1988, p. 132; see also Coulon and Reveyrand 1990). While developments have falsified Coulon’s prediction that African women would find little attraction in strict reformist movements (Umar 2004; LeBlanc 2007; Masquelier 2009; Renne 2012; Augis 2012; Sounaye 2011; 2021; Janson 2014), mystical transcendence sometimes does, indeed, undermine and nuance gender norms and hierarchies.

Shaikh (2012) has highlighted in greater depth the potential flexibility of Sufi approaches, showing how the medieval Andalusian Sufi Ibn ʿArabī used Sufi metaphysical conceptions of God, gender, and human nature to challenge patriarchal interpretations of *sharīʿa*. Shaikh argues that, although Sufis have not escaped ambient misogynistic assumptions and patriarchal textual interpretations, “core Sufi assumptions are inherently critical of power

configurations that assert the superiority of particular human beings on any basis other than spiritual stature” (Shaikh 2012, 13). Thus, the Sufi tradition can both perpetuate historical inequalities and assert radical equality. Shaikh shows how Ibn ‘Arabī read Islamic texts subtly in light of mystical unveilings to question widespread interpretations of *sharī‘a*. Ibn ‘Arabī’s textual practice, then, is not an antinomian rejection of *sharī‘a* in favor of intuitive mystical experience but rather a demonstration that texts and *sharī‘a* are far more profound and malleable than rulebooks suggest (c.f. Abou El Fadl 2014).

Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s approach to understanding *sharī‘a* in terms of *ḥaqīqa* shows some similarities to that of Ibn ‘Arabī. Just as Ibn ‘Arabī’s esoteric writing on the divine unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujūd*) and departure from certain mainstream *fiqh* positions aroused controversy, Shaykh Ibrāhīm was criticized for popularizing similar concepts and somewhat loosening gender restrictions. Like Ibn ‘Arabī, Shaykh Ibrāhīm sought to reconcile knowledge received through the spiritual opening with Islam’s foundational texts while insisting that spiritual knowledge comes not from texts but through spiritual experience. His 1932 prose work *Kāshif al-Ilbās* (“The removal of confusion”, Niasse [1932] 2010)⁷ defends the orthodoxy of his approach to divine knowledge, copiously citing the Quran, hadith, and a wide range of Sufi texts, including Ibn ‘Arabī.

However, Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s approach to *sharī‘a* as something God-given—even if one’s application is flexible and informed by spiritual awareness—also reminds us that even an approach to Sufism that emphasizes the absolute dissolution of distinctions may not accompany an open-ended approach to redefining the particulars of *sharī‘a*. In a legal-traditionalist context, the literal meanings of texts like the Qur’ān, *ḥadīth* collections, *fiqh* manuals, and works of authoritative figures like Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse—even if they leave some leeway in their interpretation—continue to significantly constrain the ability of performative apologetics to “authorize” (Deeb 2006) new performances of piety. The imperative of tethering any change to unchanging divine law interpreted by qualified authorities counterbalances the ability of new material and social technologies to democratize religious practice by circumventing religious authorities. Although I have highlighted how women have used tradition—something they are committed to—in flexible ways to expand women’s access to public space and authority, such changes may not be unilinear and may not conform to “liberal” or “progressive” narratives (c.f. Saba Mahmood 2005).

I was reminded of the continued importance of a stable conception of *sharī‘a* when speaking to Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s daughter Shaykha Ruqayya Niasse (b. 1931), whose ambivalent response to my mention of Aïda Faye caught me off guard. Shaykha Ruqayya’s own son had appointed Aïda Faye as a *muqaddama*. As a young woman, Ruqayya was the only woman Shaykh Ibrāhīm assigned to speak at the annual Medina Baay *Mawlid* gathering, and she has traveled the globe to speak publicly about Islam with her father’s permission. She told me that *sharī‘a* did not approve of what Aïda Faye was doing because “*sharī‘a* does not like a woman’s voice to be very loud” (*sharī‘a bēggul baat u jigéen jēm ci kaw a kaw*). However, Shaykha Ruqayya told me, despite her reservations, she did not speak out against it because Aïda Faye was accomplishing a lot of good through calling people to God. Years earlier, Shaykha Ruqayya had told me how Shaykh Ibrāhīm had given her permission to speak to an audience of new converts in Sierra Leone because, if there was a sin in it, the good of preaching to them outweighed it. At the time, her story seemed to me to suggest a low threshold—a necessity (*ḍarūra*) outweighing the harm—for overriding an authorized *sharī‘a* prescription. Yet, her later comment suggested that she still took this prescription seriously and did not dismiss it as an inconvenience to explain away. In short, although female *sikkarkats* may carry out a mission that transcends gender, their authority to do so remains somewhat tenuous due to perceptions that their mission is perpetually on the edge of *sharī‘a*.

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Notes

- ¹ “Zikrs Ibou Diouf avec MALBN Fatou Mareme et Astou Faye. MALBN TV, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97CgBfo39Pw> (accessed on 31 January 2022).
- ² “Nuit du zikr Cheikh Baye Bitye animé par Cheikh Ibrahima Cissé Jalaloudin Cissé”, Dahira Fityanu Sheikhy, YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-0KN9kXXPk>) (accessed on 6 January 2025), 18: 42).
- ³ These include Yaye Nenné Thiam and Dienaba Guèye in Kaolack and Ndeye Maguète Niang in Dakar. This Shaykh Ibra Fall is not to be confused with the famous follower of Aḥmadu Bamba of the same name.
- ⁴ Here I am influenced by Erving Goffman (1981) similar use of the term “animator” for a speaker who may not be the author of a message.
- ⁵ This view is widespread among legal-traditionalist Sufis, and even the reputedly stringent scholar Ibn Taymiyya made an exception for uncontrollable spiritual states (Homerin 1985).
- ⁶ The Quran establishes that a particular need might take precedence over a general legal principle, for example in its declaration that eating pork is lawful if there is no alternative (Q 6: 145).
- ⁷ This is the published title of most editions. Ibrāhīm Mahmūd “Barham” Diop, Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s personal secretary, insists that the intended title is *Kāshif al-Albās* (the removal of confusions), as *ilbās* means the act of dressing someone

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