

Pathways of Paradise (Masalik al-Jinan)

Pathways of Paradise has been described by one scholar of the Muridiyya as Bamba's doctoral thesis on Sufism.¹ He began it in the early 1880s and it was finished—in all likelihood—before 1886–87, when he was around thirty years old. The book is reminiscent of some of his earlier didactic texts, like *The Path of Satisfying the Disciples in Questions of Etiquette (Nahj Qad al-Hajj)*² or *Gifts from the Holy One (Mawahib al-Qudus)*, which began as versified summaries and commentaries on texts that Bamba taught in his father's school. *Masalik*, however, also displays a more mature, independent authorial voice.

While it is no mere versification nor a simple commentary, it is important to keep in mind that the commentary (*sharh*), ought not be thought of as derivative or unoriginal. When an author writes a commentary on a particular text, what are they doing? They are first and foremost attempting to represent their own understanding of the text. This is usually rooted in transmitting many of the accompanying arguments, explanations, and clarifications that they received when learning the text in question with one or more teachers. Detailed commentaries are also opportunities for scholars to bring other works to bear on the question raised in the principal text. The citations and cross-references, especially for scholars who have often memorized many of the works that they study, begin to fly rapidly at this stage.

Unique, original works grow out of fertile intellectual grounding in the reading, writing, and teaching of commentaries. However, the etiquette of many scholars leads them to deny their own originality, representing all that they do as simple transmission of the tradition in a spirit of pious homage to earlier scholars. In *Pathways*, Bamba consistently points readers back to a previous work, *The Seal of Sufism*, by a Saharan scholar, Muhammad al-Yadali al-Daymani (1685–1752). This Shadhili scholar—and, indeed, the

Shadhiliya more broadly—has been largely overlooked by scholars of Sufism in West Africa.³ However, even a cursory examination of *The Seal of Sufism* alongside *Pathways of Paradise* reveals that while the structure and sequence of topics borrows heavily from Yadali, the analysis in Bamba's work makes it a thoughtful synthesis of the principles and practices of Sufism.

What I have translated here of *Masalik* are only succinct passages—brief excerpts—from a lengthy work. They were selected to provide a window onto Bamba's philosophy of Sufism as well as his exposition of the core practical elements of Sufism (fasting, litanies, *dhikr*, and others). The last section here, on created things, focuses on the four principal enemies of spiritual progress—the *nafs*, *shaytan*, *hawa*, and *dunya*—which, in Bamba's oral teaching, became a mnemonic device comprising the first letters of each noun: *na-sh-ha-du*. *Nashhadu*, meaning 'we bear witness' thus became a single word recalling Bamba's teachings on how to overcome obstacles on the path as he described them in *Masalik* and a number of other works.

This translation of portions of *Pathways* is rendered literally (though not always word for word) in prose, rather than in verse.

Introduction

(Verses 1–54)

I, Ahmad Mbacké, son of my shaikh, pray the Eternal Lord to place him in the highest heavens with all the sincere Muslims and all those who have achieved sincerity, Amen!⁴

Praise is for God, who demands from us sincerity in deed and respect for good conduct (*adab*), He who looks upon the hearts and their secrets, not that which is apparent. And blessings and peace upon He who will intercede for us in the Hereafter, He who is adorned with the virtues of rectitude and free of all imperiling vice, Muhammad, who shields us from sorrow, as well as upon his family, companions, and community (*umma*).

May whoever endures against Satan, the ego (*nafs*), and the passions (*hawa*) reach the Garden! And may whoever cleanses his spirit of vice (*'ayib*) gain His light and pleasure! And may whoever does not rely on created things be granted a return to God, the Real.

Know then, that the theology of oneness (*tawhid*) is divided into two sorts; there are two onenesses. The first is [merely] spoken, while the second is experienced (*'arqf*) undeniable, and unmistakable. The first is common and general, the second uncommon and specialized. Regarding the common variety we have already versified the work of al-Sanusi, the great grandson of

our Holy Lord's Messenger, God's peace, blessings, and pleasure upon him in greater measure than all the creatures in the Earth!⁵

But concerning the specialized sort, it will be the subject of this work. The ancestors have spilled much ink on this topic, and their books are full of secrets. Those like our shaykh al-Ghazali, the renovator, and the eminent Ibn 'Ata'-Allah (al-Iskandri 1259–1310). And like our enlightened shaykh Sidi Mukhtar al-Kunti, the pole and succor of creation.⁶ Such as our shaykh and his caliph, Muhammad [al-Kunti] supported in truth by the Lord of creation. Such as our shaykh the exegete of the Qur'an, Muhammad [al-Yadali] (1685–1752) pride of the Daymani, and others amongst the great shaykhs, may God gather us with them on the Day of Resurrection.

However their books, due to their great length, have been forsaken in this generation. So relying on the Best of Aids, I have elected to take up in verse the work of al-Yadali.⁷ In bringing together the collected writings of the ancients it is indeed, *The Seal of Sufism*.⁸

Thus I have composed a book of remedies for hearts that have been blemished by the passions, verses to fulfill the spiritual state of the beginners and the experienced alike provided they are free of envy. For the envious will neither profit from the benefits of a contemporary nor follow him. Nothing would please such people more than learning of his sudden death. May God protect us from the envious, the hateful, and the ingrates.

In this work I have revived the insights of the sciences to awaken the slumbering and give life to what the people have left as dead letter, hoping to gain the loftiest rewards for me and my elder brother al-Yadali. May all who set eyes on it, leaf through it, or read it remember us in their supplications. May whoever casts a glance upon it offer the servant's best prayers on our behalf. For prayers surely bring great rewards, benefiting the dead in their graves as well as the living.

I have entitled this book, *Pathways of Paradise*. In versifying the prose of al-Daymani, I have set to rhyme all that he mentioned in the *Seal of Sufism* and I have also drawn from his work *The Pure Gold* to complement and enhance it.⁹ I have also chosen on occasion to supplement these with references from other works such as *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (by Ghazali) and the *The Shield of the Aspirant* by our gracious shaykh (Sidi Mukhtar al-Kunti). Whenever I write "he said" without further specification, know that I am quoting the celebrated Ghazali, but with respect to other authors among the noble shaykhs I shall cite them by name. Whenever you see the phrase "I say," know that I am drawing inferences from their writings.

Thus everything in this book is authentic (*sahih*). Follow it with confidence! Do not turn away from it due to my lack of renown in this era, nor turn down its benefits because I am from among the blacks. The most honored servant with God is, without a doubt, the most reverent.¹⁰ And blackness of body signals neither weakness of mind nor lack of understanding. O wise one, do not abandon my verses, thinking that I do not practice what I preach. Do not give away God's favors by preferring only the ancients, as this breeds ignorance. For it happens that a man of a recent era knows secrets unknown to the ancients. "A shower may precede a deluge, but the advantage is with the deluge." You who doubt my verses, don't forget the hadith: "My community is like the rain."¹¹

(Verses 80–95)

According to the scholars ('ulama'), knowledge is divided into two sorts: exoteric (*zahir*) and esoteric (*batin*). Exoteric knowledge improves one's actions while esoteric knowledge heightens the spiritual states (*ahwal*). The first is known by the name of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), while the second is called Sufism (*tasawwuf*). Jurisprudence comes before Sufism as an obligation, for whoever neglects the first perishes in this world according to the judgment of the scholars. But whoever neglects the second will perish in the next world according to the Judgment of His Majesty. It is therefore incumbent upon the servant to bring them both together in order to obtain reward.

Whoever practices jurisprudence without Sufism is a degenerate, and lowest of the low. As for the one who does the opposite, he is a dishonorable heretic. But whoever combines jurisprudence with Sufism provides an excellent example to follow! This ruling comes from Imam Malik, may the mercy and pleasure of al-Malik (The Sovereign) be upon him.¹²

Know then, that knowledge and action (*'ilm wa 'amal*) lead the way to [eternal] happiness, so struggle earnestly in both, to refine all flaws and impurities (*tasfiya min kul 'ifatin wa fi al-tanqiya*).¹³ And hold fast to truthfulness and sincerity (*sidq wa ikhlas*) in order to develop your capacities and follow the sunna of the Choice one (*al-Mukhtar*), may the peace and blessings of the Creator (*al-Bari'*) be upon him and his family and companions and all who walk in their footsteps and follow where they lead!

Fasting

(Verses 224–66)

As for fasting, it is indeed among the best means of seeking God's pleasure

and bounty. For among the gates of the Garden there is one open only to those who fast, so strive earnestly! Malik, our Imam, would fast three days out of each month. For him this meant that thanks to God's multiplication of our good deeds, it was as if he fasted all the time.¹⁴ It is also beneficial to fast the following seven days of the year:

The 8th and 10th of Dhu-l-Hijja
 The 27th of Rajab
 The 3rd and 10th of Muharram
 The 25th of Dhu-l-Qi'da
 The 15th of Shaban

Whoever fasts these days shall have all that he desires. It is reported from the Pure Chosen Prophet (*nabi al-Mustafa*)—upon him the blessing of the One who guided and chose him—that the benefits of fasting these days cannot be counted. Endeavor to earn them! It is also considered beneficial to fast the whole month of Rajab, the first month [Muharram], the nine first days of Dhu-l-Hijja, and the whole month of Shaban, the eighth month.

But [the scholars] are unanimous in affirming the superiority of the day of 'Ashura, tenth day of the Muharram—along with its ninth day—for the rewards for them are greater. Fast them both your whole life long! Certain of its traditions were established by The Lord of Creation (*Sayyid al-An'am*) may the blessings of the Absolute (*al-Samad*) be upon him along with his family, companions, and all the rightly guided.

These include: the fast, the prayer, visits between relatives, bathing, alms, trimming the fingernails, applying *kuhl* (eye cosmetics), visiting the sick, *ziyara* (pious visits) to a scholar, and caressing the head of a Muslim orphan. *Surat al-ikhlas* should be recited 1000 times and a lavish and delectable meal should be prepared for one's family. It is reported that a bath on this day can keep away illness and that *kuhl*, applied on this day, can prevent blindness. As for lavishing a feast upon our kinfolk, it will only increase our provisions with permission of the Protecting Patron (*al-Wali*).

According to the knowledgeable, 'Ashura has special unique qualities: It was this day that our Lord accepted the repentance of the father of humankind, Adam, the first prophet. On this day, it is reported that Noah's Ark came to rest on Mount Judi, the sea parted for Moses, and Jesus was born. It is the day that Pharaoh was drowned, and the day that Jonas came forth from the belly of the fish with his repentance accepted by the

Magnanimous Forbearer (*al-Halim*). Likewise did Joseph emerge from the well and Abraham, the Friend of God, was saved from the fire kindled to incinerate him. Idris was raised to the Most High, as was God's Reverent Spirit, Jesus. On this day the Sacred House is dressed in its mantle, and on this day David was forgiven by God for any of his deeds—Peace and blessings upon all of them together!

Know that fasting is more than merely abstaining from food and drink; do not fool yourself! O How many there are who fast along with the people, but gain nothing from it but hunger. Fasting must engage all the limbs and organs, each of which must abstain from whatever might diminish the fast. Refrain from looking at forbidden things, from walking in their direction, from listening to them when they are said, or from speaking of them yourself. Turn away evil thoughts just as you turn away from food and drink. Do not stuff yourself before dawn, nor at sunset, for this diminishes your reward. Whoever fills his belly with food, floods it with drink, and sleeps deeply, behaves like an animal and thus loses much benefit, even risking perdition.

Some eat like cattle in *iftar* or *suhur*¹⁵ until their stomachs are encumbered and their hearts inhibited. Hampered from remembrance of God, they believe they have fasted but will gain nothing from it on the Day of Rising. May God preserve us from delusion and from all that brings us harm.

Litanies (*awrad*)

(Verses 267–85, 292–97)

If you are unaware of the significance of a litany (*wird*), know that its objective is momentous. Its role in the practice of the virtuous places it among the preeminent acts of piety. Its definition, according to the knowledgeable, is “an act of worship regularly performed at a given time.” The etymology is from *wurud*, which means to seek out a source of water or dig a well. Each litany invariably guides the aspirant to the Divine Presence (*Hadratillahi*), whether it be from ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani, Ahmad al-Tijani, or any other of the axial poles (*aqtab*) for they are all absolutely right. All call their aspirants with uprightness to obedience to the Lord of the Throne wherever they may be. So do not mock nor criticize any of them. Ever.

A *wird* can have its origin either in Revelation or in inspiration—the Lord of Peace grants these to whosoever He wills—Revelation for Prophets and inspiration for saints. They are based on the Revealed Book wherein they are dispersed, and in verified transmissions.

Each saint is forever tethered to one of the Messengers sent by the Real, the Unique. And whatever miracles might be manifested by a prophet can manifest as marvels for a saint.¹⁶ For the latter is heir of the former. The Prophets are the proofs of God for creation and the saints the confirmation of His truthfulness, His religion, and His authenticity. The Prophets of the Most High are safeguarded (*'usimu*), His saints, protected and honored. They are all defended by the Merciful as the knowers of God (*'arifin*) affirm. However, the safeguarding of the Prophets is necessary (*wajib*) unlike that of the saints.

The benefits of a *wird* are mocked only by the foolish or the envious, motivated by hatred and antipathy. How can one disdain a perpetual remembrance of God carried out consistently and continuously? Whoever was never taught conduct by a shaykh will face hardship, for without a rightly-guided shaykh, Satan will become his shaykh guiding him to perdition. So if laziness keeps you from practicing a litany, do not disparage them maliciously. If you are unable to go draw water from the well, (at least) don't keep others from drinking!

Remembrance (*dhikr*)

(Verses 299–316)

As for consistent *dhikr*, it is the greatest of all actions an aspirant can undertake. I say this openly without the slightest concern for the detractors. For whoever thinks otherwise, my response is: “do not argue with the People of the Book!” (Q 29:46) I say that whosoever abandons remembrance of God for remembrance of other than Him, has drowned. For how can they be forgetful or oblivious to the conscientious remembrance of the One who created and fashioned them? (*Dhikr*) is indeed a sign of *wilaya* [alliance with God, or sainthood] and abandoning it is the utmost error. May God make us among those who mention His names and contemplate them at all times!

A dispute arose among the guides (*mashayikh*) about whether to make *dhikr* quietly or aloud, with some preferring to make it quietly to avoid ostentation and encourage contemplative remembrance. Some have preferred instead to make it aloud so that others will hear and join in, for in such a case they would gain in one deed the reward of two, by having encouraged another in it. Each has its place in the remembrance of the Lord of Humanity, but none had yet found the middle path between them in the following words: “whoever fears ostentation, let him recite silently with gentleness because preserving the deed from danger requires meeting this

condition. As for one who does not fear ostentation due to their surety and purity, let them recite aloud to encourage others.” Such was the opinion of our shaykh, Mukhtar (al-Kunti), may the Creator be pleased with him.

Contemplative Reflection (*fikr*)

(Verses 409–13)

As for *fikr*, it is among the most precious of all things. [Ghazali] says in his *Ihya*—take note—indeed the finest fruit of the religion in this world is access to *maʿrifa* and intimacy (*uns*) with God acquired through remembering and knowing Him. *Intimacy* is acquired through persistent recollection (*dhikr*), while *knowing* is achieved through contemplation (*fikr*). It is related that an hour of contemplative reflection is better than a year of obedient worship.

(Verses 424–35)

ʿAbdullah ibn Abi Jamra al-Andalusi (d. 1276/77),¹⁷ stallion of the religion (*fahl al-din*)—may God be eternally pleased with him—affirmed that *fikr*, in its proper time, is the finest activity for those with faith. For we acquire knowledge (*ilm*) definitively only through contemplation with a comprehending mind (*bi fikrin bi dhihnin yaqilu*). It is generally agreed, dear brothers, that *faith* too is confirmed through it. Confirmed faith following from *fikr* is unlike intuitive faith (*al-iman bi dihatan*). The former is ideal; so be mindful! It is related that [a moment of *fikr*] is better than eons of worship from all of creation.

It is narrated that a contemplative person will realize strength of conviction; the Real will become apparent to them, and they will achieve certainty, purity, and stability. The force of your faith is only as great as the depth of your *fikr*.

So linger gazing into the mirror of secluded contemplation at any time. The Real will become evident to you my friend, for it was this (*fikr*) that brought God’s friend, Abraham, his certainty.¹⁸

(Verses 442–43, 450)

The best objects of contemplative reflection for a worshipper—it is transmitted—are the heavens and the earth. After that reflect on your bounties, for this increases you in love for the Benefactor (*al-Munʿim*). Gain knowledge, then reflect abundantly on the creation and its creatures, but not upon the Creator.¹⁹

Giving Charity and the Ties of the Womb

(Verses 460–72)

As for charity and pious spending (*infaq*), they bring together all that is good, as does whatever brings benefit—at any time—to the Muslims and blood relatives (*silat al-rahim*). It is said that on the Day of Reckoning when the narrow path will be extended over the hellfire and creatures fret in sorrow and anguish, a Herald will call, “Where are the people of service (*khidma*) to the Muslims?” They will respond, “here we are!” and will be immediately entered into the Garden without trial or tribulation (*bi ghayr mihna wa ghayr fitna*). Therefore serve them seeking the Face of God without complaint or complacency. Conceal from people all that might displease them, and reveal to them only goodness. Whoever comes to you seeking aid, give plentifully if you have the means. And do not hoard wealth out of fear of poverty, for it is He—Glorious and Exalted—who provided you with wealth. He will give it back to you if you spend it abundantly seeking His Face.

Reading the Qur’an and Related Matters

(*Tilawa wa ma yat’allaqa biha*)

(Verses 528–35)

As for the excellences of the Qur’an, Yadali offers a suggestion: “whoever longs for nearness to his Lord should recite the Qur’an and never neglect it.” I would add: whoever seeks the *Pleasure* (*ridwan*) of the Merciful, let them be steadfast *meditating* on the Qur’an!²⁰

Whether it be three *hizb* (sections of Qur’an of equal length, traditional division of Qur’an is into sixty such sections) each day that you are not traveling, attach yourself to the recitation of this Book! Do not abandon it, as do some students of the religious sciences. Some so-called Sufis claim that what they have is greater than it, but this is a false argument and a lie. Iblis has deceived them. Stay close to [the Book] for it is the source of all knowledge in this world.

On Sufism

(Verses 624–36)

I say that this contemporary generation ignores the science of Sufism and thus neglects its great benefits. Lackluster generation, they are unaware that it is a trail (*sabila*) leading to the Divine Presence, unaware that it is the best of arms on the Day of Disillusionment when the terrors arrive! They are unaware that it is the best of sciences [that] youths can spend their lives acquiring and propagating, unaware that it promotes uprightness and protects them from

blameworthiness. Some of them, in their diseased hearts, hold an unappeasable, insatiable hatred for it. Some decry it as exorbitance or exaggeration in the religion. Others disparage it out of sheer weariness, laziness, and lustfulness.

Some point to the Sufis and say: “there are the lost extremists of our religion,” though it is they who are lost. Some behave as though their ears are stuffed and they cannot hear the call. Some criticize Sufism intently, turning away from books written on the subject. They are unaware of the guidance therein for creation, and the evident benefits. But know that the sun has not disappeared from the sky, simply because the blind cannot find it with the eye!

(Verses 643–661)

How can one deny real and beneficial sciences encompassing the secrets of the people of good, which contain the qualities of the prophets, the righteous, and the saints? Whoever persists in such criticism and denial and dies without repenting of it risks dying and returning to face the justice of the Originator bathed in major sin without even being aware of it, so wake up! Indeed our shaykh [Muhammad al-Kuntî], the wise caliph, mentioned this in *Jannat al-Murid*, so read it. May the pleasure (*ridwan*) of God the Originator be upon him, the righteous reformers, and all the elect (*akhyar*)!

Let us turn then, to the term *tasawwuf* and its origin, which is highly contested. Between *sufa*, *saffa*, *suf*, and *safw*, there are partisans of each.²¹ Still others have put forward other ideas, grounded, in their view, in sound arguments. There are more than a thousand such views, but there is no reason to list them all here. The real *sufi* is a scholar who truly puts knowledge into action without transgression. To become such, one must be pure of faults, with a heart full of good thoughts.

Created Things

(Verses 662–77)

Hawa—Caprice

Know—and may God preserve us from peril and guide us in the path of salvation—that turning towards created things, following them, or concerning yourself with their affairs needlessly is an obstacle from drawing near to God. Caprice (*hawa*) and the accursed Satan are among these created things, and you must stand against them to remain upright. Your caprice must be mastered and guided by your intellect—not the other way around, for this brings God’s wrath. The believer is guided by reason, not caprice, to the Mercy of His Lord.

Shaytan

As for the Accursed One, we seek refuge in God from him and any other blameworthy transgressor. Satan is a warrior who will attack and engage in battle at any time; intransigent, he knows no rest. Each time you fell him, he rises again, more determined and dangerous than before. He has nothing else to do other than fight, relentlessly, against every worshipper, driving them to neglect pious deeds. If, courageously, you resist and seem to accomplish a pious deed, he pushes you to do it hastily and incompletely, thus covering it with blemishes. If you resist this, he pushes you to ostentation. If you oppose him still, with determination and scrupulousness he pushes you towards pride and thinking highly of yourself until you succumb to his attacks.

So be vigilant, ready to fight valiantly at all times. Never forget, in this combat, to arm yourself with remembrance of our Lord. [Satan] will whisper, but with *dhikr* you will remain sanctified (*muqadisa*). Seek refuge in your generous Lord; you will be sheltered from Satan's terrible scheming. The Shaytan is only a dog set upon you by your Master; don't be a fool, call out to the Master!

Verses (685–94)

Self: Ego–Soul (*nafs*)

Among [the created enemies] is your *nafs*, and this is the most dangerous of them all. Never give in to its desires, my friend, never gratify it; treat it with strictness and suspicion. Indeed the honor of a person is in measure with the woes and pains they inflict on their *nafs*. Be wise; struggle against your ego (*nafs*) by carrying out God's command and raising His Word high. Make your own continuous reckoning of your soul, and God will lighten His on the Day of Reckoning. Remind yourself of death at all times, and be always vigilant and wary of your *nafs*, like a person in the presence of a hungry lion. Such a person would be terrified at all times that the slightest lapse would put them at the lion's mercy. It is this kind of vigilance and care regarding the *nafs* that is of benefit to a person, for it keeps them running back to their Lord for help.

(Verses 695–722)

Worldliness (*dunya*)

Among [the enemies] is this lowly, worthless world, which is detestable in the eyes of a person of faith. Purify your worship by washing your hands of it, and detaching your heart from it. True asceticism is to not desire the world with your *heart* for the sake of the Eternal. Feel neither joy nor pain for

the gain or loss of any worldly thing. Lust for the things of this world is the cause—or at least the basis—of all moral peril, but people are unaware.

Dunya is the source of all evils, which is why the people of moral probity (*war'a*) flee from it.

Haram—Whatever is forbidden in it leads to expulsion, retribution, wrath, and veiling from the Merciful.

Shubha—Whatever is doubtful leads to reproach at the Resurrection as well as darkness, disputation, and denunciation.²²

Halal—Even acquiring whatever is permitted in order to flaunt or hoard it leads to reckoning and reprisal.

Acquisition out of desire leads—undeniably—to interrogation and imprisonment (in the afterlife). Acquire what is *halal* only for safekeeping, to vouchsafe it to the people, to withdraw in safety from them, and to safeguard the religion; therein is the best reward.²³

Sufficiency is better than both wealth and poverty. But know that a person with gratitude in wealth surpasses one who has patience in poverty.

When you take your meals, be like a person forced—by infirmity or necessity—to eat a corpse. Be a traveling stranger, imprisoned in this world, and do not lament its tragedies and tribulations.²⁴ Al-Yadali reminds us that all its *troubles*: poverty and malady, calamities and catastrophes—and all its *tragedies*: like deprivation, distress, and difficulty are a blessing from the Lord of Majesty unto His servant. For whoever misses out on them lives in this world inclining to it. Imagining it a garden, they dwell therein disdaining their meeting with God, and endlessly despising death. Adversity sends us rushing obediently back to our Majestic Lord.

The best of states, for the believing servant, is humility and being compelled to return to the Eternal. For he will see no power, support, purpose, or worth except in the Compassionate, the Singular and be (in this world) as a wanderer lost alone in the desert or drowning in the sea.

The worst of states is for someone to think themselves—or another human being—powerful based on their knowledge, condition, or deeds. The humiliation of sin and misfortune is better than a sense of power based on rectitude or virtue.