

Conclusion

The Prophet, the Qur'an, and Islamic Ethics

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Nun.

By the pen, and what they trace.

You are not insane, by your Lord's grace.

And indeed for you, a reward forever

For you are indeed, atop great character

(Qur'an, Sura al-Qala 68:1–5).

The Prophet Muhammad, bearer of the Qur'an, holds a lofty ontological status in Islam. He is a human being, but his very being is sacred.¹ He is the mediating instrument responsible for transmitting to the world what Muslims believe to be God's verbatim speech.² And as such, he is the source, embodied example, and center of contemplation for Muslim approaches to knowing God.³ For fourteen centuries, the traditional religious sciences (*'ulum al-din*) have grappled with the meaning of this one man's life.⁴ Countless volumes have sought to come to terms with his legacy. Collections of records (*hadith*) about his life and times, his words and deeds, his virtues and miracles are essential to Muslim jurists, theologians, and historians alike.⁵ Scholars have penned countless volumes trying to *know* the Book, the God that sent it, and the man who brought it.⁶ They have poured out their ink—and the letter “*nun*,” which opens the Chapter of The Pen is often likened to an inkwell—trying to understand the man who inscribed God's final revealed Book onto the tablet of history.

Knowing—indeed loving—the Prophet is also the very core of the traditional religious science known as Sufism.⁷ For in envisioning, enacting, and embodying his example (*sunna*), Muslims seek to cultivate *ethical excellence* and draw near to God.⁸ And if *ethics* are at the heart of Sufism—and its

wellsprings, the Qur'an and the *sunna*—then Sufi values are not only metaphysical but also political.⁹

While this essay will not sketch the political history of Sufism in the region, it is important to get a sense of the sheer demographic significance of Sufism in West Africa. Pew Research Center surveys on Muslim identity are one index of this. Sub-Saharan Africa in general—and West Africa in particular—holds the distinction of being the “Sufi-est” place on earth:

Identification with Sufism is highest in sub-Saharan Africa. In 11 of 15 countries surveyed in the region, a quarter or more Muslims say they belong to a Sufi order, including Senegal, where 92% say they belong to a brotherhood. [Outside of sub-Saharan Africa] Only in Bangladesh (26%), Russia (19%), Tajikistan (18%), Pakistan (17%), Malaysia (17%), Albania (13%) and Uzbekistan (11%) do more than one-in-ten Muslims identify with a Sufi brotherhood.

The importance of this is patent. Of countries surveyed by Pew, the top nine countries for Sufi self-identification are all in sub-Saharan West Africa (Senegal 92, Chad 55, Cameroon 48, Niger 47, Liberia 4, Guinea Bissau 40, Ghana 37, Nigeria 37, DR Congo 29). In Senegal, one in ten Muslims *do not* self identify with a *tariqa* whereas in the rest of the world, one in ten Muslims self identify *with* a *tariqa* in only seven countries! West Africa is indeed the promised land of the Sufis.¹⁰

The overwhelming success of Sufism in West Africa is due, in large part, to the efforts of the four scholars under translation in this volume. Over a two-hundred-year span, the ideas of ‘Uthman Dan Fodio, ‘Umar Tal, Ahmadu Bamba, and Ibrahim Niassé made history.¹¹ Their respective oeuvres are, in a real sense, not only soulful journals of their individual spiritual journeys but also windows onto the history of Sufism in West Africa and beyond. Each began his public intellectual life around the age of twenty, gaining notoriety through preaching, teaching, and especially *writing*. In this conclusion, my own “Jihad of the Pen,” I aim to draw the reader’s attention to three interrelated themes: The Prophet, the Qur’an, and Islamic Ethics.¹² In doing so, I take an approach informed as much by the traditional religious sciences themselves as by the academic disciplines of religious studies, anthropology, philosophy, and history. The goal is to understand and then employ the internal discourse of these Sufi scholars, especially concerning the relationship between ethics and spirituality.¹³

These visionaries changed the course of material history by struggling (*jihad*) for purity of body and soul, liberty of heart and spirit. To do so, they focused—in their intellectual, devotional, and social practice—on Islamic ethics, morality, and character. They focused, in a word, on *akhlaq*. *Khuluq* (character, characteristic, trait of character) and its plural *akhlaq* are an axial meeting place of the spiritual and societal interests of the Sufi folk. *Khuluq* is a bisecting plane where heavenly and earthly concerns converge, the meeting space of the creation and the command (*khalq* and *amr*).

Character is the core of the Qur'an. In the opening verses of the Chapter of The Pen, which serve as the epigraph for this conclusion, the person of the Prophet and the purpose of the Revelation itself meet in a meditation on *character*. According to reports, when the very first revelation came to this unlettered man in the form of a waking vision proclaiming him as God's Messenger and commanding him to recite the Words of a Lord "who taught by the Pen," he feared that he was possessed or had gone mad. Khadija, the Prophet's first wife and one of the most important intellectuals in the early Muslim community, reassured him, eventually helping to convince him that he had seen an angel, not a devil. The proof, she reasoned, was his character: "God will never disgrace you! By God, you keep ties of kin, you speak the truth, you bear others' burdens, you aid the poor, you are generous to guests, and you help the suffering."¹⁴

'Aisha, who was married to the Prophet after Khadija had passed away, eventually became one of the most important intellectuals in the Sunni community after the Prophet's own passing.¹⁵ She too described the Prophet's character as inseparable from the Revelation itself. When asked about the Prophet's *character* (*khuluq*) by a Muslim who had not known him in life she responded with a question: "Don't you read the Qur'an?" When the man affirmed that he did, her reply left him speechless: "The character of God's Envoy *was* the Qur'an."¹⁶ It is reported that even the Prophet himself identified with the essence of his mission: "Indeed I was sent only to perfect character (*akhlaq*)."¹⁷

This concluding essay, then, is an emic exploration of West African Sufi thought on the essence of the Envoy, the significance of Scripture, and the meaning of morality. These three interconnected themes are the substance of the scholarly struggle in African Sufism, I would argue, because they are the bedrock of Islam itself. Here, I seek to excavate their internal logic and use it to unearth insights for the study of society, religion, and ethics. Because an investigation rooted in the writings of erudite scholars can easily become

more scriptural than sociological, I want to begin by imploring scholars of culture, philosophy, and the social sciences at large not to ignore this volume! My hope is that by carefully thinking along with scholars that transformed the lives of millions of West Africans, together we can uncover understandings that benefit not only scholars of Islam, religion, and intellectual history but humanity as a whole.

Ethics, Sanctity, and Society

For historically related reasons, many modern Islamic movements, as well as the academic discipline of orientalism, have focused on Islam as a rigid system of rules and practices over ethics and principles. Influenced by the stereotypically Semitic legalism that orientalism attributes to Islam, the religion seems to prioritize rituals over morals.¹⁸ Such a depiction can hardly ring true to students of the African Islamic tradition, where Sufi institutions have helped to keep *character* at the heart of the faith.

The outer forms of a religion, like any system of signification and practice—nationalism, capitalism, secular humanism, or the social sciences, for instance—lose all meaning when divorced from their moral core. “If rituals are regarded as more important than ethics,” writes Fallou Ngom, “then religion in its ritual, legal, and cultural expressions cuts off its roots, becoming irrational, immoral, and fundamentally inhuman.” In his fine book on African vernaculars (linguistic, textual, and cultural) in the spread of the Muridiyya Sufi order, Ngom develops a compelling argument about the centrality of *character training* in Ahmadu Bamba’s movement, particularly in a chapter entitled “Ethics over Ritual”:

[He taught] that Islam and the *sunna* are meant to foster model ethical virtues and to empower all human hearts so that they might achieve . . . dual salvation [material success in this life and paradise in the afterlife]. Bamba emphasized the opportunity for dual salvation, the betterment of society, and spiritual illumination, and he believed that ethics [morality] was the prerequisite. He believed that ethical conduct is the optimal spiritual investment and a source of enduring success, and that unethical conduct is a bad spiritual investment and source of enduring failure in this life and the hereafter.¹⁹

Of course, this linking of sainthood with spiritual and social success is not limited to the Muridiyya. In his groundbreaking study, *Divine Flood*,

Rüdiger Seesemann highlights similar themes in the popular poetry of Niasse's movement, the *jama'at al-fayda*: "They put the emphasis on the more tangible consequences of being affiliated with Ibrahim Niasse: the protection from evil, the prospect of eternal bliss, and good fortune in this world and the next."²⁰ So what, then, is the link between sanctity, spirituality, and success in both abodes? The answer is, of course, *character*.

In this volume, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse transmits this classic definition of Sufism: "It is the entrance into every *sublime character trait* and the escape from every base characteristic."²¹ Though it is now usually glossed as "Islamic Mysticism," this *science of character* was a core discipline in Islamic curricula throughout the Muslim world before the twentieth century, and it remains central to Islamic knowledge transmission in Africa. Here, Sufism still plays its historical role in religious study: to complement and complete other knowledges, by cleansing the heart of the knower.

Amity and Alliance

Sufism thus prepares the aspirant to become an agent of social transformation through sanctification and spiritual illumination. The Qur'an itself mediates this preparation. As I noted in a previous work, each place where the Qur'an uses the formula, 'God loves,' followed immediately by a direct object, that object refers to someone who exemplifies excellent traits of character.²² The Qur'an says that God loves: *the just, the pure, the patient, the repentant, the reliant, the reverent, and the excellent* (the people of *ihsan*).

We will return to these seven character traits below; here, I want simply to stress that seen from this standpoint, Sufism is the effort to enter the ranks of God's beloved allies through character training. In his magisterial exegesis of the Qur'an, Shaykh Ibrahim says precisely this: "whoever adorns himself with a trait of character which the Qur'an has praised is among the *awliya'*."²³ *Walaya* (or *wilaya*) is sometimes translated as saintliness, "friendship" with God, or nearness to Him. But these connotations are only part of its Qur'anic denotation: "*alliance*." Properly speaking, the *awliya'* are perhaps best described neither as 'saints' nor 'friends,' but rather as *allies*. In ordinary English usage, allies are, of course, not necessarily equals or partners, but rather are connected in help, aid, and support. The contemporary Jakhanke scholar,²⁴ Imam Fodé Dramé, puts it this way:

The word *waliyy* (ally) is both the name of God Himself and of His ally. An ally is someone who works for you or with you. The one who

works with you is closer and dearer to you than the one who works for you. You may certainly like what the one who works *for* you does, but you may not like him as a person above and beyond what he does.²⁵

Here, Dramé is alluding to the superior station of the one whom God loves because of their character. God may love a deed, like prayer (and accept it) but not necessarily *love* the one who performs it. Character, on the other hand, is something that is beloved of God. The ultimate goal of ethical behavior in Sufism is to become the beloved of God, for what can be better than God's love?

‘Uthman Dan Fodio, in work presented in this volume, helps us to conceive of the place of this discipline of love in the broader Islamic tradition: “the relationship of Sufism to the religion is like the relationship of the spirit to the body, because it is the station of spiritual excellence (*maqam al-ihsan*).”²⁶ The shehu is referring to the well-known Hadith of Gabriel, wherein the Prophet Muhammad and many of his most illustrious disciples are visited by what appears to be a stranger who asks about *islam* (submission), *iman* (faith), and *ihsan* (spiritual excellence).²⁷ Sitting knee to knee with this “stranger,” the Prophet answers his questions, and the companions are astonished that having questioned him, the man would have the nerve to confirm his answers by saying “you have spoken truth.” When the man left, the Prophet revealed to his companions that the stranger was none other than the Angel Gabriel himself, primary transmitter of the Qur’an.

Ihsan and Intention

Sufis often describe *tasawwuf* as the science of *ihsan*, noting mere external submission (*islam*) or even belief (*iman*) leaves religion incomplete according to the Hadith of Gabriel. *Ihsan*, which can also be more simply translated as “goodness,” is required to complete and perfect religious practice. The Prophet’s definition of *ihsan* in that *hadith* designates the objective of the discipline: “worshipping God as if you see Him, for if you don’t see Him, He does see you.”

The science of goodness and spiritual excellence (*ihsan*) is also the science of character, for they are mutually constitutive: excellent conduct is both a cause and symptom of a heart seeking constant awareness of the divine presence in deed (*islam*), thought (*iman*), and intention (*ihsan*). That purity of

intention is all but synonymous with *ikhlas*, sincerity, in the sense that action in this state is undertaken only for God. As Dan Fodio puts it in *The Book of Distinction*: “the real objective and advantage of Sufism is that it devotes the heart singularly to God.”²⁸

Character refinement opens onto spiritual realization as the human being purifies itself through good conduct and sincere faith, returning back to its innate natural disposition (*fitra*).²⁹ In this original state of being molded by God, the Originator (*al-Fatir*), with His own two hands (Q 38:75) and animated by the Holy Spirit the aspirant becomes cognizant of God's presence in everything, including the human vessel itself.³⁰ *So when I have fashioned him and breathed into him from My Spirit, then fall down before him prostrate* (Q 15:29, 38:72).

As the body, soul, and heart are returned to that original state in relation to the Spirit, one becomes constantly aware of God's presence—“seeing” Him in everything and at all times. And this is the precious link between the two facets of Sufism sketched in the shehu's *Book of Distinction*: the ethical and the spiritual. At this stage, the definition of *ihsan* becomes clear: worshipping God with scrupulous care “as if you see Him” becomes—as the *hadith* is often glossed in Wolof—worshipping God “while seeing Him.” The Sufis sometimes reduce this to a simple sequential progression in order to facilitate understanding, which in this context could be read as follows: first purification, then beautification, and finally Divine Manifestation.

Seeing God

Seen from within, all the religious sciences of Islam have the same basic subject. They seek to make sense of a massive irruption of Divine knowledge—the Qur'an—from the unseen world into the basic fabric of the material world. This revelatory experience tore open the world's veil of irreality, which was shrouding humanity in darkness, revealing a final message of prophecy for the children of Eve and Adam. What makes Sufism a unique brand of knowledge is that the *knowing* it seeks to capture is divine and direct, experiential and immediate. In this it differs sharply from simple sensory materialism or abstract analytical understanding. In principle, this superior direct knowledge permits better worship of God. A refrain often sung in Wolof to punctuate Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé's Arabic poetry makes this point explicit: *Soo ko xamoo, noo ko jammoo?* “If you don't know Him, how can you worship Him?”

Taste, sight, and experience

In *Pathways of Paradise* (excerpted in this volume) Ahmadu Bamba outlines the difference between exoteric and esoteric knowledge of God: “Unicity (*tawhid*) is divided into two sorts; there are two ‘onenesses.’ The first is spoken, while the second is experienced, undeniable, and unmistakable. The first is common and general, the second uncommon and specialized.” For many Sufis, this unique, uncommon, and unmistakable experiential knowledge has been discussed and mediated in reference to *dhawq*, taste.³¹ This is a conventional Sufi gloss on *maʿrifa* (divine gnosis) because taste is not easily subjected to discursive analysis.

Try describing the taste of a fresh, ripe mango—for example—to someone who has never tasted one, and you will exhaust your analogies, comparisons, and descriptive adjectives without capturing the experience. While the exoteric sciences of religion (especially law and theology) try to explain who God is and what He wants through words—analytical reasoning, analogy, descriptive adjectives—surely none of these *words* are capable of encompassing knowledge of God. Say: “*If the sea were ink for my Lord’s Words, surely the sea would run out before my Lord’s Words, even if We brought its like as reinforcement*” (Q 18:109). *If all the earth’s trees were pens and the sea [ink] with seven more seas to reinforce it, God’s Words would not be depleted* (Q 31:27).

While the scholars translated here certainly wrote extensively, they did not merely deplete their words. As Ibrahim Niasse reminds us, with reference to tasting, “this science we mention is not mere wagging of the tongue. Its contents are tastings (*adhwaq*) and experiences (*wijdan*). It cannot be acquired through talking or written texts, but can only be received directly from the tasters (*ahl al-adhwaq*).”³² The approach of the Sufis is to say: “stop talking about the taste of mangoes and taste a mango!”

If *tasting* is indescribable, *seeing* is undeniable. In this volume—and in West Africa more broadly, I think—the principal framing of spiritual experiences is not in terms of taste, but rather in terms of vision. This focus on vision of the divine is likely rooted—at least in part—in the Hadith of Gabriel, which links *ihsan* with seeing God; however, it is also consistent with a kind of direct and practical West African approach to spirituality. A Wolof expression captures this sensibility nicely: *bët mooy gëm* (“seeing is believing”).

The face of God

Seeing God, it must be acknowledged, is a notion that many modern Muslims might consider absurd or even blasphemous. Yet the scholars in this volume—and, indeed, the West African Sufi tradition as a whole—seldom

disputed the possibility of such vision, only where and how it occurs. The question, "Is it possible to see God?" was once posed directly to a famous and erudite scholar of the Muridiyya Sufi order, Shaykh Sam Mbaye, in the question-and-answer session of a Wolof-language conference in a working-class Dakar suburb in September 1995. His response captures this notion:

Oh yes indeed! Yes. God can be seen. Our Lord can be seen. Our Lord can be seen. Our Lord can be seen! He is seen in different ways. Those fortunate enough to go to the Garden will see Him the last day. . . . The first time they see Him there, they will not recognize Him because He will appear in a form they do not know. When He says to them, "Here I am, I am your Lord," they will ask to be shielded from Him. The second time, He will come in a form recognizable to all. Everyone will prostrate. *The first time, it will only have been the 'arifun billahi (the knowers of God) that recognized Him.*³³

Most Muslim scholars through time have agreed that God will most certainly be seen during the Resurrection. They interpret Qur'anic verses like "*Faces, that day, will be radiant, gazing upon their Lord*" (Q 75:22–23) and *hadith* reports such as "Indeed you will see your Lord as clearly as you see the full moon at night" as affirmations of basic fact.³⁴ Traditional accounts of the Prophet's explanations of this final visionary experience with the divine essence stress that it is a form of satisfaction beyond any of the delights of the Gardens of Eden.

God will say to the people of Paradise: "Are ye well pleased?" And they will say: "How should we not be well pleased, O Lord, inasmuch [as] Thou hast given us that Thou hast not given to any of thy creatures else?" Then He will say: "Shall I not give you better than that?" and they will say: "What thing, O Lord, is better?" and He will say: "I will let down upon you my *Ridwan*."³⁵

Ridwan, God's pleasure, can then be understood as a kind of experiential place where the contented soul can be lost in contemplative gazing upon the divine essence. This is often formally equated with the Face of God (*Wajhullahi*) mentioned by the Qur'an.³⁶

The description here is attributed to 'Abd al-Aziz al-Dabbagh, the seventeenth-century Moroccan Sufi, whose thought has had a clear and profound

impact on the development of Sufism in West Africa through its extensive citation in *The Book of Lances* by al-Hajj ‘Umar Tal:

Direct vision of God—the Mighty and Majestic—for those who possess it is more precious and more pleasant, more lofty and more excellent, than every other delight the mind can imagine. The people of this paradise do not want to leave it to go to any of the other paradises, just as the dwellers in Paradise don’t want to leave it to go into the world. . . . Because beholding God the Sublime contains more pleasure than all the delights in Paradise. It includes what’s in Paradise as well as the addition of something more. Moreover, the pleasure of those who experience it is pleasure of the spirit, whereas the pleasure of those other than the people of this paradise is pleasure of their eternal bodies.³⁷

This, then, is the unimaginable highest form of bliss: a kind of pleasure that exceeds even those that can be enjoyed by undying resurrected bodies in the Gardens of Eden. So the reward for goodness (*ihsan*), worshipping “God as if you see Him,” is that you *will* see Him. To return to the theme of love with which we opened, the result of obtaining God’s *love* through ethical striving in this world is His *pleasure* in this world and the next. *And is the reward for ihsan other than Ihsan?* (Q 55:60).

But for many West African Sufis, this vision of the divine is clearly possible not only in the hereafter, but also in the here and now. The Murid Shaykh Sam Mbaye again helps us delve into the topic of seeing God before death:

Our Lord—Blessed and Exalted is He—unveils himself to his slave proportional to the latter’s rank. You heard me say moments ago that our master Ahmad bin Hanbal [d. 855] reported having seen our Lord in a dream. One can, therefore, see Him in a dream and if you see Him in a dream everything that He tells you is real, and He reveals secrets.³⁸

‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Dabbagh again provides useful context; here, he was asked about “seeing God” in everything, not only in dreams:

How can the eternal (*al-Qadim*) be seen in the contingent (*al-hadith*), since God is elevated above indwelling (*hulul*) and union (*ittihad*)? . . . He answered: “These are people who because of the power of their knowledge (*‘irfan*)—God be pleased with them—perceive His actions

in fashioned things and created beings. There is absolutely no created thing that does not contain the actions of God Most High, without indwelling or union.

'Abd al-Qadir Jaza'iri, who was both the leader of the Algerian resistance to French occupation in the 1830s and the greatest nineteenth-century disciple of Ibn 'Arabi, broaches this same issue of the presence of the infinite essence manifesting in a finite vessel in his *magnum opus*, *The Book of Waystations (Kitab al-Mawaqif)*:³⁹

Allah is the name of the rank which brings together all of the names relative to the Essence, the attributes, the acts of majesty, beauty, and perfection. . . . He reunites the opposites and in Him, the *Eternal* manifests itself in the form of the *contingent* as said the Messenger, "I saw my Lord in the form of a beardless youth with curly hair, upon his face a veil of gold, upon his feet, sandals." *But at this degree too the contingent manifests in the form of the Eternal*, as the Messenger also said: "God created Adam in His image" or "in the image of the Merciful," according to the two narrations.

Mirrors, moons, and metaphysics

The cluster of *hadiths* cited here by Jaza'iri, all of which are well known (if sometimes controversial) in the Islamic scholarly tradition, brings the traits of the divine into human scale and scope. The Qur'an speaks of God fashioning the human being in the finest form, *Surely We have created the human in the best mould* (Q 95:4), and the Prophetic traditions clarify that the human being is somehow cast in the image of God himself. Moreover, it is narrated that the Prophet (and many Muslims since) have seen God manifest in human form in a dream. All this harkens back to the special, intimate relationship of the human being with the divine essence. In other words, while Dabbagh answers that the Eternal can be seen in the contingent by the knowers because God is always there, the presence of the Eternal in the human being goes beyond this—not simply, as I mentioned before, because of the molding with the hands and the breathing of the Spirit—but *because the very physical form of the human being functions in some subtle way as a mirror for the metaphysical form of the divine essence*.

Shaykh Ibrahim Niase captures this dynamic in elegant poetic form in the *The Removal of Confusion*, translated by Zachary Wright in Part 4 of this volume:

Likewise, when the Real, Glorious and Exalted is He, manifests in the heart of His believing servant, the servant will see Him with the eye of his heart. He will witness Him with his sight, without incarnation, partialness, connection, or separation. A clear indication of this is provided in the following poem:

My Beloved graciously manifested Himself
What a great honor He has shown me

Making Himself known to me, until I became certain
That I am seeing Him overtly, without illusion

And in every state I see Him continuously
On the mountain of my heart, where He speaks to me

In this embrace, there is no union
And no separation, exalted is He from either of these

How is it possible for the like of me to contain the like of Him?
How can the tiny star be compared to the full moon?

But it happened that I saw Him in the purity of my inner being
There I saw Perfection, too mighty and exalted to be partitioned

Just as the full moon shows its face
In the still pond, although it shines high in the heavens.

This recalls the *hadith* mentioned above: “Indeed you will see your Lord, as clearly as you see the full moon at night.” Shaykh Ibrahim’s poetic exposition of divine manifestation makes it clear that it is the *heart* that is capable of this kind of vision of God. But it must first be cleansed of tarnish and finely polished—through character training and *tarbiya*—in order to serve as the “still pond” in which “the full moon shows its face.”

Reflections of the heart

The *heart*. Not the *mind*. In fact, the Qur’an never once refers to the mind as an independently existent entity. The words *dhihn* (mind) and *‘aql* (reason or intellect) never appear as nouns in the Qur’an. Sufi shaykhs are sometimes

referred to as “heart doctors” in that they treat illnesses of the heart. “Heart disease” is, according to the Qur'an itself, a major obstacle to human beings receiving, understanding, and accepting the Prophet's message.⁴⁰

Thus, the problem of Divine manifestation is posed here as a question of the presence of the Eternal in the contingent, the Uncreated in the created, the Metaphysical in the physical. Another way of phrasing this—which highlights the limits of rationality—is in terms of God's absolute transcendence and utter imminence. Such is the terminology usually employed by 'Abd al-Qadir Jaza'iri: “The God that reconciles transcendence (*tanzih*) and immanence (*tashbih*) is He whom the messengers commanded us to know. *Yet reason can recognize no such God. Reason's god is another absolutely transcendent god that accepts no quality of immanence.*”⁴¹

Like Jaza'iri, the authors translated in this volume certainly focus a great deal of attention on the heart, with little attention to the god of modern rationalism, the mind. Human reason, it would seem, may be just another veil to be torn down on the way to the Return. The terms “mind,” “reason,” and intellect appear roughly a dozen times each in this volume, whereas there are more than one hundred references to the heart. This focus mirrors that of the Qur'an itself, which refers to the heart (*qalb*) no less than 132 times; the bosom that contains it (*sadr*) 44 times; and its ardent, burning flame (*fu'ad*) 16 times. As noted above, the Qur'an does not use the noun *'aql*; it does, however, use *'aqala* as a verb. However, the organ responsible for intellection is the heart, not the “mind.”

The Qur'an, visionary experience, and remembrance of God

The Qur'an is at the heart of Sufism, and only the heart can receive the Qur'an. God's Word is overwhelming. “*Had We sent this Qur'an down upon a mountain, you would have seen it fall humbled, rent asunder by fear of God!*” (Q 59:21). Mountains (and also sometimes rocks) are directly likened to hearts in a handful of places in the Qur'an,⁴² and rocks as hearts appear in the guise of metaphors, similes, and analogies throughout the Qur'an. The power that splits the mountain—but can be received in the human heart—is God's verbatim speech. The Word has intrinsic power since God creates *through* speech. *When He decrees a matter He has only to say unto a thing “Be” and it is* (Q 2:117, 3:47, 19:35, and 40:68).⁴³ Therefore, the Qur'an contains the substance of which “reality” itself is composed. There is, however, another kind of divine speech among the sacred traditions of the Muslims. A Hadith Qudsi—or Holy saying—may be best described as a Prophetic paraphrase of divine speech. It

is non-Qur’anic speech uttered by the Prophet in order to capture a divine inspiration. Among the most famous such sayings is the following: “Neither My heavens nor my earth contain Me, but I am contained in the *heart* of my believing servant.”

Sufi poetry—especially in West Africa—is best understood as poetic and allegorical commentary on God’s Word—especially the Qur’an itself—so it is not surprising to hear echoes of the Qur’anic focus on the heart in the verses of the Sufis, like those quoted above by Shaykh Ibrahim:

And in every state I see Him continuously
on the mountain of my heart, where He speaks to me.

More than simply divine speech, the revelation of the Qur’an is the ultimate visionary experience. Shaykh Ibrahim’s lines recall Moses on the Mount receiving The Word, and asking to go from *hearing* God to *seeing* Him. Here again, the image of the *mountain* crumbling before the power of God’s self-disclosure returns: *And when Moses arrived at Our appointed time and his Lord spoke to him, he said, “My Lord, show me, that I may gaze upon You.” He said, “You shall not see Me, but gaze at the mountain, if it stays in place, then you shall see me.” But when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain, the mountain was flattened and Moses fainted (Q 7:143).*

This episode is the subject of extensive commentary by ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri, who interprets it in the light of the teachings of his spiritual forefather, Ibn ‘Arabi, who unequivocally affirmed the possibility of seeing God. “When the Real—Exalted is He—manifested His theophany to the mountain and to Moses, the mountain could not endure it and Moses could not withstand it, for the mountain was flattened and ‘*Moses fainted*,’ bodily and spiritually. . . . But it is certain that Moses—peace be upon him—saw. Otherwise he wouldn’t have fainted.”⁴⁴

Intimate witness

So, if God has spoken before and been seen by others, what is the nature of the Prophet’s distinction? He is the recipient of God’s most perfect self-disclosure to His creation. This is not only because the Qur’an is the final book, wherein guidance is detailed, but also because the Prophet has an unmediated encounter with the divine essence, witnessing his Lord, and he is able to withstand it. As Bamba sings in “Gifts of the Benefactor in Praise of the Intercessor”:

He gained his glory on the midnight journey, not in fantasy but in
 the flesh
 Glory to the Lord, whose beloved drew near, at night, in innocence
 at His behest

Once purified, he made the journey, bringing joy to the Prophetic /
 assembly
 The trustworthy traveled, with trusted guide, on trusty steed, to
 peaks of purity.⁴⁵

This encounter, in which God brings the Prophet near to him (with Gabriel and al-Buraq as guide and steed, respectively, for parts of the journey) is described in *hadith* literature as well as in the Qur'an itself. In the Chapter of The Star, the intimacy of this witnessing is emphasized:⁴⁶ *He approached and descended. And was at a distance of two bow lengths or nearer. And He revealed to His servant, what He revealed* (Q 53:8–10). The term *shahid* is often translated as 'martyr,' but those slain in the path of God are only one kind of witness. The Prophet is God's ultimate witness.

Shaykh Tijani Cissé, grandson of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and the imam of the latter's mosque in Kaolack, Senegal, commented on this verse in conversation in striking, provocative terms: "It was two lengths, *or less*. And if it was *less*, then only One Essence was there!"⁴⁷ While Cissé was *not doctrinally fusing* the Prophet's essence with that of God, his point was that this was nearness admitting no distance, blurring the line between subject and object.

The heart did not belie what it saw (Q 53:11). The Prophet's perfected heart can withstand what the mountain cannot. He sees without collapsing or looking away. *His gaze did not waver, nor did it transgress. He certainly saw of his Lord's greatest signs* (Q 53:17–8). That unwavering gaze was conditioned by a truthful heart, free of transgression, and capable of receiving the *ayat*—which means signs, but also verses, of the Book.

The Recitation as Remembrance

Dhikr, remembrance of God, puts the aspirant on the path of purification. In principle, any kind of *dhikr*, especially God's names, recited consistently will help to purify and strengthen the heart, but litanies (*awrad*), as Bamba reminds us in *Pathways of Paradise*, "are based on the Revealed Book wherein they are dispersed, and in verified transmissions." *And We have certainly facilitated the*

Qur'an for dhikr, so will any remember? (Q 54:40). And here, perhaps, is the underlying logic of having regular litanies that are rooted in the Qur'anic text: using God's verbatim speech conditions the aspirant to follow the Prophet in his ascent, receiving the signs and drawing near to God. *Has the time not come for the hearts of the believers to be humbled in remembrance of God and what has been revealed of the Truth?* (Q 57:16).

But none of this can be separated from personal striving to achieve uprightness and avoid transgression against one's fellow human beings. In other words, there is no spiritual journey without ethical struggle. Bamba expounds upon all of these themes together in a single passage in *Pathways of Paradise*, quoted here at length:

If you are unaware of the significance of a *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” . . . 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.*

Who God bless, no man curse. The allies are thus blessed by God who takes a personal interest in their affairs out of His love for their fine traits of *character* which have become inseparable from their very person—mingling, as it were, with their flesh and blood. Thus, Bamba (*So neither mock nor criticize them, ever*) and all the other scholars in this volume unanimously remind us that anyone who opposes God's ally opposes God Himself. A widespread *hadith* collection—that of Yahya al-Nawawi (d. 1277)—contains the following Hadith Qudsi, wherein God warns unequivocally, “*I will indeed declare war on whoever takes my ally as an enemy.*”⁴⁸

Muslim lore is thus replete with references to the terrible fates that befell enemies of the *awliya'*. One of the earliest such stories to be recorded in West Africa concerns the great fifteenth-century polymath Modibo Muhammad al-Kabari, a brilliant dark-skinned African scholar who attracted students from as far away as the Arabian Peninsula to study with him in Timbuktu. He apparently attracted jealousy as well:

“This divinely favored shaykh was the locus of many extraordinary manifestations of divine grace. Here is an account of one of them. A certain scholar of Marrakesh gossiped about him, taking liberties with his tongue, even calling him “al-Kafiri” [non-believer]. Now this scholar was a man of far-reaching influence, who was looked on with great favor by men in authority and *shurafa*, to whom he would recite the *Sahih* of Bukhari during Ramadan. God afflicted him with elephantiasis (*judham*).”

More important even than this kind of miraculous protection is divine inspiration, which, Bamba reminds us, is ultimately the source for Prophets and saints alike: “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 (*awliya*).”

Revelation ends with Muhammad. He is “the opener of what was closed, and the seal of what came before,” as he is described in *salat al-fatih*, the blessing of the opener. We will revisit below this widespread formula for blessing the Prophet; here, I want simply to highlight the fact that his earthly life and death—and especially the period of the Qur'an's revelation (610–632)—*reopened* the period of divine revelation that had ended with Jesus, the penultimate Prophet in Islam, and *sealed* the time of revealed books and revealed law.

Inspiration (*ilham*), on the other hand, is, like God Himself, unending. God manifests Himself and provides instruction to His beloved allies, as He wishes. Imam Fodé Dramé noted this in a 2016 Princeton University lecture. In it, he quotes a Prophetic tradition: “nothing will remain of prophethood except for the glad tidings (*mubashirat*).” When asked “what are the glad tidings?” the Prophet responded: “righteous visions” (*al-ru'ya al-saliha*).⁴⁹ This term, which is often glossed as “true visions” or “the true visions of the righteous,” is also mentioned in a number of Prophetic traditions as comprising 1/46th (and sometimes other fractions) of prophethood itself.⁵⁰

The Qur'an, too, elaborates on this theme of glad tidings reaching righteous believers (not only Prophets), saying of them that angels will descend to them declaring: “*Fear not, grieve not, but receive the glad tidings of the Garden that you are promised. We are your allies in this world and the Hereafter*” (Q 41:30–31).⁵¹ The *awliya*' fear not, neither do they grieve, and as righteous allies of God they have His Heavenly Host as allies, and they garner glad tidings. Among these are gifts of angelic protection, as well as divine guidance in dreams and visions.

The scholarly corpus of the great nineteenth-century Tijani scholar al-Hajj ‘Umar Tal, translated in this volume by Amir Syed, contains numerous accounts of visionary experiences and powerful arguments that need to be taken seriously. His library, which was confiscated from his son and successor when the French colonized what is now Mali, contains over 4,100 manuscripts in all the fields of the Islamic sciences.⁵² Many of them deal with esoteric knowledge in general and visions in particular. In his master work on Sufism, *The Book of Lances*, Tal relates his own dreams and dreams that others had about him, and he develops powerful arguments that unveilings need to be taken seriously as sources of *knowledge*. Here, in a passage from *The Book of Lances* not fully translated in this volume, he transmits a citation from Sha’rani clarifying his position:

No one makes light of what he sees in the state of sleep, except the ignorant, because everything the believer sees consists of God’s revelation on the tongue of the angel of inspiration. Since he is incapable of bearing the burdens of revelation in the state of wakefulness, and of hearing it directly from the angel, it comes to him in the state of sleep, which is the common ground, because the general rule is that it relates to spirituality not the physical body. It is a known fact that the spirits are akin to the angels, and the angel is capable of hearing the speech of the Lord of Truth without any intermediary.⁵³

But such spiritual visions, he warns us, are not ends in themselves. When taken out of proportion, they become distractions on the spiritual path:

Inclining to unveilings and miracles stems from the passions and desires of the *nafs*. Thus whoever intentionally seeks them—and focuses his remembrance on them—is counted among the deluded. Even if he is inclined towards these things without intention, there still remains the danger of being enticed by them.⁵⁴

If spiritual experiences take precedence over God, then God has been forgotten instead of remembered—and the basic purpose of humanity is *dhikr* (remembrance of God). In a technical sense, *dhikr* almost always means invocations of God or repetition of His names. The names relate to attributes, and the attributes are tied to words that God uses to describe Himself in the Qur’an. However, since the words, the names, and the attributes are

all—in some sense—His Speech, reciting remembrances does not simply have a mental effect, creating reflection upon an idea, but rather they unlock a concealed reality hidden in the power of God's Word itself, allowing that Word to take root as a reality in the heart.

These realities are at least partially related to the Islamic science of letters, *ilm al-huruf*, and Islamic numerology. Each letter of the Arabic alphabet has particular qualities, as a letter, and corresponds as well to a numerical value. What is true of the individual letters is true of the words of which they are composed, and thus of each name as well.⁵⁵ Some numbers also have certain benefits in and of themselves, distinct from their association with particular names. The point in all of this is that the number of recitations in remembrance *matters*. In a gathering of American aspirants, the contemporary Senegalese Tijani shaykh and scholar Mahi Cissé was once questioned about whether it really matters to stick to a prescribed number of litanies: “isn't all *dhikr* good, in any number?” “Of course,” he replied, before likening the numbers of a litany to the teeth of a key. If a locksmith wants to cut a key to open a lock, it must have the correct number of teeth.⁵⁶

While the general nature of this kind of knowledge is often contained in Sufi writings, its operational details are not meant for everyone. Thus, there is a tension and dialectic between the manifest and the hidden, public and private, seen and unseen. In this volume, both 'Umar Tal and Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse quote an aphorism, “The chests of the liberated are the graves of secrets” (*Sudur al-ahrar qubur al-asrar*).

Dhikr, then, is to call upon names that correspond to attributes, words, and secrets that are existent realities encompassed by the divine essence. All this ties back to the Qur'an itself as a particular kind of divine self disclosure—as Imam Fodé Dramé reminds us in the introduction to his book, *The 99 Names of Allah*:

The significance of this commentary on the names of Allah lies in the fact that understanding the meaning of these names is essential to understanding the Qur'an itself. Imam al-Shafi'i, one of the founders of the four schools of Islamic Jurisprudence, is quoted as saying, “Whatever the *umma* [the nation] says is merely a commentary on the tradition of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and whatever the traditions of the Prophet say is merely a commentary on the Qur'an, and whatever the Qur'an says, it is a mere commentary on the excellent names of Allah.” The implication of this statement is that the Qur'an itself is an exegesis of the

names of Allah. Any casual glance at the Qur'an confirms this view, for every page of it contains a number of God's names.⁵⁷

While the names, their meanings, their *talismanic* qualities, and the Qur'an itself are all extremely important, they cannot, by themselves, lead the aspirant to the divine presence. There is a proverb in Wolof, *nit nit ay garabam* ("people are people's medicine"). Because God chose to make the children of Eve His regents in the creation and the keepers of His doors in the afterlife, people need people. His Prophets, according to tradition, number 124,000 souls sent to every branch of the human family with glad tidings and warnings. Of these, 313 Messengers brought a discrete oral teaching or revealed book. And of these, five are distinguished for their resolve: Noah; Abraham; Moses; Jesus; and Muhammad, the final envoy. *And We have not sent you except to all of humanity, bearing glad tidings and warnings. But most of the people do not know* (Q 34:28).

Portraits of the Prophet

If the revelation of the Qur'an is the archetypal rupture in the veil between the unseen and the seen, the epicenter of that irruption was the Prophet himself.⁵⁸ With secrets bursting forth (*inshaqqa*) and the light breaking on the horizon (*infalaga*), a new age of knowledge dawned. This conception is salient in the very first lines of the *salat al-Mashishiya*, often described as the only surviving text authored by the medieval Moroccan Sufi 'Abd al-Salam ibn Mashish (d. 1227):

O God, blessings on him from whom
The secrets erupted
And the lights irrupted
And in whom realities ascend
And on whom Adam's knowledges descend.

'Abd al-Salam ibn Mashish al-'Alami was one of the principal teachers of Abu Hasan al-Shadhili, and in these two one could argue that a new day dawned in the history of Sufism.⁵⁹ The place of the Prophet in the pietistic practice of West African Sufis could almost be read as an extended commentary on the singular blessing of Ibn Mashish.⁶⁰

Ibn Mashish may never have founded a *tariqa*, but his student did.⁶¹ Al-Shadhili is the eponym of a large and widespread Sufi path, the Shadhiliya.

Beyond his own *tariqa*, he is widely credited by Sufi thinkers with reviving the path of *shukr* (thankfulness or gratitude) and making it prevail over the path of *zuhd* (asceticism).⁶² The former is understood as being a more rapid and less fraught path, in part because it keeps the aspirant from the illusion that they reach God through their deeds rather than because of His Mercy, generosity, and divine favor.

The Shadhiliya is yet to receive its due in the historiography on Islam in West Africa.⁶³ Scholars connected to the Shadhiliya-Nasiriya of Morocco seem to have been of foundational importance in the southwestern Sahara (contemporary Mauritania) as early as the seventeenth century.⁶⁴ One Shadhili scholar in particular, Muhammad al-Yadali (1685–1753), was particularly influential. Al-Yadali penned two extraordinary works, *The Seal of Sufism* and *Pure Gold in the Exegesis of the Book of Almighty God*, which have been widely engaged by the authors studied in this volume.⁶⁵ But most fundamentally, because all its authors take for granted the superiority of the path of thankfulness, Shadhili's influence is hiding in plain sight on almost every page of *Jihad of the Pen*.

The way of *shukr*

In *The Sciences of Behavior*, translated by 'Aisha Bewley in this volume, for example, 'Uthman Dan Fodio warns of the risks of conceit (*'ujb*) in related terms. Here, the danger is one of being deluded by one's own worship:

He acts as if it belonged to him. However, it is all God's blessing to him and he has no inherent right to it. . . . The truth is that you, your movements, and all of your attributes are part of God's creation and invention. You did not act when you acted, and you did not pray when you prayed, and "you did not throw when you threw. God threw" (Q 17:82). Therefore, the worshipper's conceit about his worship has no meaning. It is the same with the beautiful person's conceit about his beauty, and the conceit of the wealthy man about his riches and liberality. You suppose that the action is achieved by your own power, but where does your power come from? Action is only possible by your existence and by the existence of your knowledge, will, power, and the rest of the causes of your actions. All that is from God, not from you. . . . He is the One who created power and then gave power to the will, set causes in motion, distributed obstacles, and facilitated action. One of the marvels is that you can be conceited about yourself, and yet you do not wonder at the generosity of God.⁶⁶

In this volume, it is the Tijani authors, ‘Umar Tal and Ibrahim Niasse, who explicitly address gratitude versus self-denial (*shukr* versus *riyada*). Tal—citing, engaging, and elaborating on earlier Sufi thinkers—reminds us, “the journey of the former is that of the hearts (*al-qulub*) while the journey of the latter is the journey of the bodies (*al-abdan*).” Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse quotes the founder of the Tijaniyya himself, Ahmad bin al-Tijani, expanding on the indispensable benefits of the former especially in his day and time: “gratitude is God’s gateway, and the gate nearest to Him. That is why Satan sits next to it. . . . In this age, whoever does not enter through the gate of gratitude does not enter at all.”⁶⁷

The Prophet is, in a manner of speaking, the guardian of the Gate of Gratitude. For what greater object of *appreciation* could there be than the Prophet himself? For this reason, the Sufi way of thankfulness puts the Prophet at the center of spiritual life. Again, this can be found clearly in the blessing of Ibn Mashish: “O God, make the Supreme Veil the life of my spirit, and his spirit the secret of my reality.”

This centrality of the Prophet in spiritual practice is everywhere in this volume, but nowhere is it more apparent than in the Tijaniyya. The Tijani daily office and litanies, as well as their weekly remembrances (*wazifa*, *awrad*, and *dhikr*) are all punctuated by hundreds of blessings of the Prophet, especially using the *salat al-fatih*. The “prayer of the opener” is a widespread supplication used in many Sufi circles, but which is particularly associated with the Tijaniyya due to its ubiquity in Tijani devotions:

O God! Blessings on our master Muhammad
 The opener of what was closed
 The seal of what came before
 Champion of Truth by Truth
 And the guide to Your Straight Path
 And on His family in measure with his eminent status.

Salat al-fatih draws its initial wording from a prayer formula attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib in a number of early works on *hadith*, *tafsir*, and blessing the Prophet and his family.⁶⁸ ‘Ali, the Prophet’s young cousin and the first male to accept Islam, is extremely significant in Sufi piety. His significance is due in large part to his status as *ahl al-bayt*, part of the Prophet’s household, and indeed a reference to the Prophet’s family closes the blessing. All living descendants of the Prophet are the offspring of ‘Ali’s marriage to the Prophet’s daughter,

Fatima. Fatima is extremely significant in her own right; Sufi thinkers (almost unanimously) recognize her as the first supreme saint in Islam.

If the overall form and meaning of *salat al-fatih* seem to come from 'Ali, the precise formula as it is conventionally used is attributed to an Egyptian Sufi scholar, Muhammad al-Bakri (d. 1585). In one account, al-Bakri finished writing out numerous copies of Jazuli's (d. 1465) *Dala'il Khayrat*, a widely used collection of prayers on the Prophet. The number of copies he had written varies, according to the account, from 70 to 700 to several thousand. After completing this act of devotion, he saw the Prophet in a dream and was informed that a single recitation of *salat al-fatih* earned more blessing than all the handwritten copies of *Dala'il Khayrat*.

Witnessing the Witness

A discussion of the overall history of blessing the Prophet, *tasliya*, is beyond the scope of this essay.⁶⁹ I do, however, wish to tie the persistent practice of blessing the Prophet to visionary experiences. And the best way to do so is to return once again to 'Umar Tal, who warned us against getting lost in visions in Part 2 of this volume by reminding us that the Tijani way "is based on gratitude and love. The people [of it] are not occupied with desiring matters that do not directly help them give their full attention to God."⁷⁰ While recentering us on the way of gratitude and warning against visions as distractions, Tal nonetheless attributes great importance (as we saw above) to visions. *Especially visions of the Prophet*. Even the section headings in his introduction to *The Book of Lances* show this:

This section is concerned with informing the brethren that the *awliya'* behold the Prophet—*God's blessings & peace upon him*—in a state of wakefulness and that he—*God's blessings & peace upon him*—is present at every meeting or place he wishes, with his body and his spirit. He moves freely and travels wherever he will, in the countries of the earth and in the heavenly kingdom, and he is the shape he was in before his death, with no part of him being altered. He is invisible, just as the angels are invisible despite their being alive in their bodies. If God wishes to let a servant behold him, He removes the veil from him in his physical form.⁷¹

Tal cites a number of earlier authorities in order to establish this point directly, beginning with Sha'rani's (d. 1565) *Lawaqih al-anwar al-qudsiyya fi bayan al-'uhud al-Muhammadiyya*, a book on *adab* whose title can be translated

as *Pollinations of Holy Illuminations in Clarification of Muhammadan Conventions*.⁷² The citation here is drawn from Tal's transmission of that text:

If you make frequent practice of sending blessings and peace upon him—God bless him and give him peace—perhaps you will attain to the station of witnessing him. . . . That is the procedure . . . of the shaykhs of the era. None of them ever stops sending prayers upon God's messenger—God bless him and give him peace—to make a frequent practice of it and *cleanse himself of sin*, so that he may commune with him in a state of wakefulness at any moment he wishes.

Sha'rani's reminder—transmitted by Tal—is that one must be striving to remove flaws and impurities in order to see the Prophet, but that this has to be accompanied by copious *tasliya*. Sha'rani mentions specifically the experience of a Tunisian visionary: “Shaykh Ahmad al-Zawawi told me that when he failed to achieve the experience of communion with the Prophet . . . he devoted himself with assiduous perseverance to sending prayers upon the Prophet . . . for one whole year, sending prayers upon him 50,000 times each and every day.”

When combined with moral striving, that kind of devotional praxis makes the Prophet an existent reality—a vision of the heart—for the people of *dhikr* and *salawat*. But Zawawi's own words again make it clear that the ethical and the spiritual are inseparable. Here he is explaining a *hadith*, in which the Prophet explains that anyone who sees him in a vision genuinely has seen him because Satan cannot take his form:

By my saying, “Whoever has seen me has seen me truly,” I meant my body and my soul properly speaking, because my form only differs in regard to the purity of heart of the seer. So if it is pure and refined, then my form impresses itself in the mirror of his heart according to what is in it of perfection. And if there is a cloud in him, this cloud veils him from me, and the concealment is of this cloud, not me, *because I cannot be concealed. Rather, I continue in my perfection*.⁷³

The Prophet is always right there. You just have to be prepared, morally and spiritually, to see him. *Tasliya* is the key to seeing him, but to paraphrase Imam Fodé Dramé, “it must be accompanied by ethical striving that would make you into someone that the Prophet would want to see.”⁷⁴

This state of profound attachment, moreover, need not be diminished by death. Shaykh Musa Kamara—one of the most accomplished polymaths of the early twentieth century, and a historian of the Senegambia region—makes this point explicitly. First, he states that anyone who makes 1,000 *salawat* per day will eventually see the inimitable Prophet, in truth. Then he relates two famous episodes of disinterment: those of the eighteenth-century scholar and anti-slavery revolutionary ‘Abd al-Qadir Kane, and of one of al-Hajj ‘Umar’s sons about a century later. First, an account of the burial, post-reinterment, of Imam ‘Abd al-Qadir, which occurred 37 days after his first burial:

People who attended the ceremony claimed that sweat rolled down his face, that his whole body was supple and damp and as they had found one of his arms and one of his legs bent, they stretched it without difficulty, and that his hair seemed to be oiled and combed. One of the attendees returned to the tomb some days later and reported, “By God, the fragrance of musk wafted from his tomb and perfumed my nostrils!”⁷⁵

Ahmad al-Kabir, son of ‘Umar Tal, had been buried for more than five months when he was disinterred and reburied. Here is Kamara’s description:

Then they took the body out of its tomb to find that it had neither changed nor decomposed. . . . This intact state of the body is a sign of a precious, stunning favor that God can sometimes bestow upon certain saints. Sometimes He deprives others of it in spite of the esteem they enjoy of God Most High.⁷⁶

Kamara preferred not to explain their intact state with reference to them having died as martyrs. *Say not of those slain in the path of God “they are dead.” Rather they are alive, though you do not realize (Q 2:154).* Instead, he attributed the miracle to their abundant *salawat*. For the one who reaches this continuous state of *tasliya* and dies in it:

The Earth will not corrode his body . . . when the affection that one carries for the Prophet attaches itself to the tiniest fibers of the heart of a man, each of his limbs is imbued and each drop of his sweat is saturated, it is as if the Prophet was infused in him, thus the poet affirms:

I am Him that I love and the one I love has become me. We are two souls living in a single body.

If you see Him, you see me. And if you see me, you see us both.

Thus the Earth is forbidden from altering the body of the Prophet and this particular blessing even reaches the one who loves Him.⁷⁷

The explanation here is not martyrdom, but rather the continuous leading to a kind of full embodiment of the Prophet. Perhaps this is what Ibn Mashish meant by making the Prophet “the life of my spirit and his spirit the secret of my reality.”

An excellent example

This loftiest of spiritual stations, that of the final Prophet who comes and goes as he pleases in death and whom the earth cannot consume, is manifested simply in his earthly life as a human being. Say “*I am only a human like you, to whom has been revealed that your god is One God. So whoever would hope for the meeting with his Lord, let him do righteous deeds and not associate anyone in the worship of his Lord*” (Q 18:110). No matter how lofty his spiritual station, the Qur’an makes it abundantly clear that Muhammad is no object of worship and no partner of God: *It is not for a human that God should give him the Book and judgment and prophethood and then he would say to the people “be worshippers of me instead of God”* (Q 3:79).

So who was Muhammad? The question takes us back to Dan Fodio, who saw the Prophet in a vision during dark days of political turmoil and was girded by him with the Sword of Truth. It takes us back to ‘Umar Tal, whose own jihad of the sword did not seem to mean as much to him as the 3,000-verse acrostic poem, *The Vessel of Happiness*, that serves as the final testament of his love for the Prophet. It takes us back through Ibrahim Niasse, whose tears of love became pearls of praise, to Ahmadu Bamba, who spent the last twenty-five years of his life on a poetic odyssey of devotion to the Messenger. Their answer to the question: ‘Who was Muhammad?’ is the echo of Shadhili and his master, Ibn Mashish, “none of us fully fathom him, whether past or future.”

In their wonder and perplexity with the Prophet as the secret of their reality, the authors in this volume (and the Sufi tradition as a whole) tended to cling to one answer: whatever else he meant to them, Muhammad was the

model to be imitated. Not for spiritual inspiration alone, but also practical emulation. *Truly for you the Messenger has been an excellent example for one whose hope is in God and the Last Day, and remembers God abundantly* (Q 33:21).

All of the scholars in this volume remembered God abundantly and emulated closely that excellent example (*uswa hasana*) in its inner and outer details—and none more than ‘Uthman Dan Fodio. The shehu’s spiritual experiences, his emigration, his defensive jihad all took place along a timeline that closely followed events in the life of the Prophet, and Dan Fodio himself became aware of this pattern when he reached the age of spiritual maturity and wrote about it (using the Arabic script to write his native language as many Africans have):

The attributes of Muhammad cannot be achieved in their entirety; the support which he received, with its scent have I been scented.
He is our *Imam*, we will never go astray, the year I was made a branch of him;
thus was I made aware of my resemblance to him.⁷⁸

Not everyone can be like the shehu. Having one’s biography intentionally and unintentionally shaped to mirror the life of the Prophet is exceptional. However, all can strive to resemble the Prophet in character, and that is the beginning, middle, and end of Sufism because it keeps the aspirant engaged with the life of the spirit and the life of society at the same time.

This work continues in today’s West African Sufi communities. Shaykh Tijani Cissé, the imam of Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé’s mosque in Kaolack, made the Prophet’s character the centerpiece of an international address on *social* cooperation in 2011. His intervention helps us to reconnect the Prophet’s cosmic function with the social function of ethics:

Intelligent folk concur on the excellence of good character, gentleness, and good companionship. . . . Since [the Prophet] was sent to perfect the noble traits of good character and it was his Lord who refined his manners, we find him the best of mankind in manner, the most perfect of character, the most beautiful in keeping company. . . . There is no good character trait except that the Messenger acquired the most bountiful share of it. His companions described the excellence of character in numerous narrations. For example, ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib said, “The Messenger of God had the most generous heart of all humanity. He

was the most truthful in speaking among people. He was the gentlest of them in nature, and the most noble in companionship.” His excellent character was clearly manifest in his relations with his companions, for he used to answer the invitation of any who invited him, and he used to accept the gift offered to him and then similarly requite the giver. So he [was] used to unite them, and not divide them.

Here, then, is another link between the science of Sufism and the cultivation of a societal model. By manifesting excellent traits of character, human beings learn to live with one another in unity and love rather than with dissension and bitterness. But character, as we discussed at the beginning of this essay, is understood by the people of *dhikr* as the key to success in both abodes—the here and the hereafter.

Shaykh Tijani Cissé’s exposition highlights the fact that *hadith* literature shows that the Prophet not only modeled character in his deeds but also exhorted people to it with words so that they would understand its central importance. In closing his discussion of the question, Cissé weaves together a number of traditions about the Prophet’s character; these stress the final, spiritual (rather than social) benefits that result from ethics:

The Prophet [peace and blessings upon him] said, “I am the guarantor of a house in the heights of Paradise built for the one who beautifies his character.” And he [peace and blessings upon him] said, “The most beloved of you to me, and the one who will sit closest to me on the Day of Judgment is the one with the best character.” And he [peace and blessings upon him] said, “There is nothing heavier than good character in the weighing of a believer on the Day of Judgment . . .” and in another narration: “The one who possesses good character will attain a rank above the one who prayed and fasted.” [He] [peace and blessings upon him] also said: “The most complete in his faith is the one with the best character, and the best of you is the one who is best to his family.” And in another narration, the wording is “the best of you are those who are best to their womenfolk. It has also been narrated from him [peace and blessings upon him]: “The most *beloved* to God of His servants are the best of them in character.”⁷⁹

In fact, nowhere does the Qur’an clearly and explicitly say that God loves anything other than human beings. Each and every time that the

Qur'an says God loves (*Allah yuhib*) followed immediately by a direct object, that object is a collective noun referring to people with one of seven traits of character:⁸⁰

tawba tahara taqwa ihsan sabr qist tawakkul
repentance purity reverence excellence patience justice reliance

I mentioned above that 'A'isha is reported as saying that the Prophet's character was the Qur'an. In another narration she says, "He was the Qur'an walking upon the earth." This was an ontological statement of the man as the embodiment of the Book, to be sure, but it was uttered in response to a question about the Prophet's *character*. God pronounced His love for these seven traits of character in the Book, just as He pronounced His love for the Prophet's character by bestowing the final Book on him.

The Penultimate Word: The Prophet and the Pen

In an earlier work, I posed a rhetorical question: "if a picture is worth a thousand words, how many words for he who cannot be pictured?"⁸¹ The answer—whether from Dan Fodio; Tal; Niase; or, here, Bamba—is obvious: "*all of them.*" Most Muslims consider images of the Prophet Muhammad to be formally forbidden by Islamic law.⁸² So the artistic edifice erected to the Seal of Prophets is composed of words, not bricks and mortar. The Portrait of the Prophet is drawn with ink, rather than paint.

Praise welled in me, and flowed profitably, ending disgrace and
 difficulty.

Praise is my profit, my edifice and achievement, this I declare
 definitively.

But I have failed to reach my goal. I cannot equal in praise, the
 Nobles of old.

My ink seeps away, burning heart in a daze, the Deputies' guide, I
 cannot extol.

For how can *I* sing His praises, when even the Sages, lack such ability?
 So I call all servants to my pillar, though they needn't abandon home
 or country.

The image is striking: an inkpot toppled over; the *fu'ad*, the heart's ardent flame, blazing. A legend of the Sufis also plays with the image of the heat boiling over in the heart of the poet who cannot find adequate words to praise the Prophet. Shaykh Hisham Kabbani recounted it in a keynote address for a conference on Islamic poetry at the University of Michigan.⁸³ In the story, a Naqshbandi shaykh is traveling with hundreds of his disciples along the Nile River. When they arise for the morning prayer, they are unable to get water for their ablutions because the Nile is boiling! The shaykh finds a man sitting on the banks of the river with a foot dangling in the waters of the Nile, composing a poem; however, he is trapped between the lines, repeating over and over again, "the sum of their knowledge of him is that he is human." Shaykh Hisham explains: "From the intensity and heat of the love that was in his heart, the river was boiling."⁸⁴ Then the man had a vision; the Prophet came to him and said, "finish the verse," and then gave him the rhyme that freed him: "and he is the best of all of God's creation."⁸⁵

The man, of course, was Muhammad bin Sa'id al-Busiri (d. 1296), and the poem was the *Qasidat al-Burda* (The Poem of the Mantle). If the Prophetic devotional tradition of West Africa could be described as an extended commentary on the Mashishiya, then the whole panegyric tradition of Islam could be described as a riff on the themes established in Busiri's *Burda*. Chief among them, of course, were undying love for the Prophet and utter bewilderment in trying to grasp his ultimate significance.

All of this returns us to where we began this essay—with a reflection on the ontological and cosmological status of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic thought. And Busiri is the place to start; like the visionary poets in *Jihad of the Pen*, Busiri's persistent praise of the Prophet opened him up to "righteous visions" of the beloved. "The Poem of the Mantle" takes its name from one such vision, described here by Busiri himself:

I was suddenly paralysed [sic] down one side of my body by a stroke. I decided to compose this ode, the Burdah. I hoped that it would be a means unto Allah, by which he would cure me. So I recited it again and again, weeping, praying, and petitioning God. I fell asleep, and in a dream, I saw the Blessed Prophet (peace be upon him). He moved his noble hand across my face, and placed his cloak upon me. When I awoke, I found that I had recovered my health.⁸⁶

It is telling that Dan Fodio, Tal, Bamba, and Niasse all ended their careers largely (or exclusively) writing praise poetry for the Messenger of God. The final chapters in their journals of the soul were dedicated to Muhammad. In this, they were following in Busiri's footsteps, and answering his call:

Put aside what the Christians have claimed of their Prophet
Then pronounce what you wish in praise of Him, and be wise

And attribute to his essence what you wish of nobility
And ascribe to his worth whatever greatness you wish

For indeed the superiority of God's Messenger has
No limit which a speaker can articulate vocally.⁸⁷

Putting aside the sin of assigning Muhammad a share of divinity, they followed Busiri's injunction and sought the best words they could find to explain what the Messenger of God meant to them and to us. And it had to be poetry, for here how could prose ever suffice to express such love? They spilled the last of their ink trying to paint verbal portraits of the Prophet.

But the primordial *Burda* was not the poem written by Busiri but that composed by Ka'b bin Zuhayr, a poet who had been a bitter enemy of the Prophet and Islam in the early years of the religion. His story helps to draw us closer to the conclusion of this essay on the jihad of the pen, the Prophet, the Qur'an, and Islamic ethics. The Prophet's state in Medina was becoming formidable and was in periods of hot and cold war with Mecca. Under wartime conventions, Ka'b's slanderous speech had made his life forfeit.

Ka'b's *Burda* is full of the fear of death. He laments the stories that have been spread about him. He trembles before the might of the Prophet and ponders the fate of those who dare to stand against him.⁸⁸ Like pharaoh, Ka'b submitted when faced with the overwhelming power of God.

The Messenger is—indeed—a light to illuminate
Sword of God—unsheathed—of finest Indian make.

Unlike the pharaoh who tormented Moses, however, Ka'b submitted voluntarily before the Word came due, hoping in—even counting on—the Prophet's mercy:

They say the Messenger of God has threatened me.
But from God's Messenger, one hopes for clemency.

In the end, Ka'b came to the Prophet in disguise before revealing his identity and reciting his poem. It came to be called "The Poem of the Mantle" because the Prophet took the cloak off his back and laid it upon Ka'b. This poem still has special significance among many Muslims precisely because it was uttered directly to the Prophet, who approved of it *personally*. Moreover, with the poetic ode, Ka'b asked for forgiveness of God and the Messenger *in his presence*, and whatever he was bearing of sin and wrongdoing was forgiven. Shaykh Hisham Kabbani has emphasized, both in speeches and in writing, the Prophet's intercessory function in seeking forgiveness *on behalf* of human beings. They must seek forgiveness in the *presence* of the Messenger.

The Fayda Tijaniyya of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse and the arm of the Naqshbandi Sufi order that branches out from Shaykh Nazim Haqqani are likely the world's largest contemporary Sufi movements. The Naqshbaniyya–Haqqaniyya also has a significant following in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Shaykh Hisham Kabbani has tens of millions of disciples worldwide and many tens of thousands in sub-Saharan Africa.⁸⁹ He also helped—as a teenager—facilitate a meeting between Shaykh Nazim and Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. The two men, according to accounts that they both left, loved one another upon first meeting and cherished the memory. Beyond this, however, an important reason for the Naqshbandi appeal in Africa is that it openly and intently focuses devotional piety on *the person of the Prophet*.

Shaykh Hisham's focus on the presence of the Prophet as the condition for forgiveness helps us to understand Ka'b, and the poetic conventions translated throughout this volume. His conclusion springs from contemplative meditation on a verse of the Qur'an: "*If only they had, when they wronged their souls, come to you and asked God's forgiveness—and the Messenger asked forgiveness for them—they would surely have found God Accepting, Compassionate*" (Q 4:64).⁹⁰ Ka'b's plea establishes the redemptive function of Qasida in the Islamic tradition. The plea made in the Prophet's presence is better (and it can still be made in his presence in dreams and visions) and the one he makes on your behalf is better still, given the esteem and love that God has for him.

While the poems in this volume—and, indeed, in the whole Afro-Islamic poetic tradition—may be inspired more by erasure in the beauty of the Messenger than fear of his majestic traits, they nonetheless preserve this profound desire to repent in the presence of the Messenger. Thus, even consummate

scholars of unimpeachable moral rectitude, like Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, authored lines like these to the Pure Chosen Prophet (*al-nabi al-Mustafa*):

O Messenger of Allah! See this inattentive servant burdened with sin
And besides you there is nothing to seek

There has not come a servant like I so full of crimes
To visit your tomb, no matter from what time or community

Those of my generation have matured, but my faults have increased
What calamity! For disobedience and old age to have been combined

And what catastrophic disobedience, remaining protected and covered
in favors
While committing sins, however small

If the time were to bear what this servant is carrying
All the vast expanses would have become dark with sin and oppression

O my Lord! Forgive me and guide my heart to love
Him whom You love, the chosen one of all the nations

Him by whom You guide all species of Your creation
Him by whom You raise the flag of Islam and smash the idols

Increase this servant in noble knowledge
Stand him in the presence of Mustafa, so he may greet the chosen one.

Poetically hurling your self-scarred soul at the foot of the Prophet—throwing yourself on his mercy—is, cosmically speaking, as good a bet now as it was for Ka'b. While the majestic Prophet—the unsheathed sword praised by Ka'b—is not absent from the Qur'an, his mercy (like that of God) prevails upon his wrath. *There has indeed come to you a Messenger from among yourselves. To him, what you suffer is awful. He cares about you, and is kind and merciful to the believers* (Q 9:128).

This verse stresses the Prophet's deep sympathy for the plight of believing people, who were suffering oppression and fear of death when these verses were revealed. But elsewhere, the Qur'an makes clear that the Prophet has

been sent to all humanity (Q 34:28) and as a universal expression of God's Mercy: *And We have not sent you except as mercy to the worlds* (Q 21:107).

The Ultimate Word: The Pen and the Sword

In today's world, many do not see the Prophet as a mercy. They see in him (perhaps as Ka'b first did) only a sword. Some of these claim Islam as their religion and seek to make themselves into martyrs when what the Qur'an actually calls for is *witnesses*. Contemporary "jihadist" ideologies falsify the past, caricature the Prophet, and mock the Qur'an. They seem to forget that the Book names God as the Merciful, the Compassionate. But the Qur'an also makes it clear that God's mercy is all-encompassing: *My Mercy encompasses all things* (Q 7:156). The name, al-Rahman, the Merciful, is more frequently used than any other as proxy for God's personal name, Allah, in the Qur'an. For these (and other) reasons, classical Islamic theology sometimes refers to "the Merciful" as God's *comprehensive* name (*ism jam'*)—in contradistinction to the name of His Essence (*ism dhat*). The idea, in a manner of speaking, is that God's mercy encompasses even God Himself.

So-called "jihadists" deny with their deeds that the Prophet was a merciful man sent by a merciful God. It is no coincidence that *all* such groups are vehemently anti-Sufi. They condemn virtually all the doctrines and practices outlined in this essay, thoughts and deeds that have made life meaningful for millions of West Africans. Curiously, most so-called "fundamentalists" even condemn the routine recitation of God's names, *dhikr*—like al-Rahman, a staple of many litanies. One wonders whether these "fundamentalists" even read the Qur'an! For it contains stern warnings for those who abandon *dhikr*, thereby forgetting that God is Merciful, and thus becoming merciless devils themselves: *And whoever is blind to remembrance of the Merciful, We appoint for him a devil as a constant companion. And indeed the devils avert them from the path while they think themselves guided* (Q 43:36–37).

Sometimes even scholars in this volume, like 'Uthman Dan Fodio and 'Umar Tal, who felt compelled by circumstances to fight, are portrayed as precursors of "jihadist" ideology. In other works, I discuss some of the historiographical problems with the idea of "jihad" in West Africa.⁹¹ Here I want simply to offer a few closing examples of how the jihad of the soul has predominated over the jihad of the sword in the region.

Shaykh Musa Kamara, one among many West African scholars who were sharply critical of irresponsible violence, once wrote a work (c. 1922) entitled, "Most Lovers of jihad after the Prophets wanted to make names for

themselves and dominion in the land and were not concerned with God's servants who died in jihad." In it, he excoriated what he saw as the excesses of militaristic interpretations of Islam, but he made a specific point of fully absolving 'Umar Tal, whom he believed had never intended to wage war but was forced into defensive combat by belligerent opponents.⁹² Many scholars have made similar interpretations of 'Uthman Dan Fodio's struggle against the rulers of Gobir and the other Hausa city-states.

Scholars like Ahmadu Bamba have made their opposition to political violence more open and direct. The Muridiyya observe a philosophy of total non-violence, believing that the era of spilling blood is over. Bamba's basic position—alluded to in this volume—is that the wars fought by the Prophet were not only defensive (rather than aggressive) but also *expiatory*. They absolved later generations from fighting except to prevent the extinction of the Muslim community. A similar position was held by Cerno Bokar Salif Tal, a grandson of the famous warrior-poet, al-Hajj 'Umar. He once said that the only jihad he knows is the jihad of the soul. As for the jihad of the sword, "it is the mutual killing to which the children of Adam submit one another in the name of God whom they pretend to love very much, but whom they worship poorly by destroying part of His work."⁹³

An Arabic proverb proclaims, "the ink of the scholar is better than the blood of the martyr." Though likely not a *hadith*, the saying was nonetheless widespread in the world of the traditional Islamic sciences. In West Africa, such thinking was foundational, and the pacifism of people like Musa Kamara, Ahmadu Bamba, and Cerno Bokar is rightly seen as a return to the sensibilities of West Africa's first Muslims. The early conquests that spread Arab rule to North Africa did not reach sub-Saharan Africa, where more than one in six of the world's Muslims now reside. Here, scholars spread the faith, demonstrating that indeed, "the pen is mightier than the sword."

So who was Muhammad? While some see in the Prophet only a sword, he can be understood—recalling this chapter's Qur'anic epigraph—as the Pen. Unlettered though he was, he was unquestionably the stylus that inscribed the Book onto this created world. He was the *Qalam* that traced the *Qur'an*. But a doctrine of the Sufis, explored by the scholars in this volume in prose and poetry, is that all of creation was cast from the Muhammadan light.⁹⁴ This doctrine has its evidence, rationale, and proponents; however, according to *hadith* quoted in Tirmidhi's (d. 892) *Tafsir* the Prophet said, "Indeed the first thing created by God was the Pen. God told it to write, so it wrote whatever will be, forever."

In other narrations, there is more detail added. The Pen is commanded to write, and it replies, “what shall I write,” twice before finally writing—upon the third command. In a striking parallel, *hadiths* of the first revelation narrate that the Angel Gabriel embraced the Prophet three times, squeezing him with great force and commanding him to read.⁹⁵ His answer, when literally *pressed* twice into recitation, was “I am not of the readers.” When the angel clutched him a third time, he answered, “What shall I read?” Then came the answer:

*Recite in the name of your Lord who created,
Created man from a clinging clot
Recite! And your Lord is Most Generous
Who taught by the Pen
Taught man what he knew not
(Q 96: 1–5).*

Is it a simple coincidence that the very first revelation, the first words of the Qur’an—the visionary experience that started it all—began with a reference to teaching *by the Pen*? Perhaps the doctrine of the Muhammadan light and the Prophet as Primordial Pen are not so different after all. The instrument that God uses to teach humanity the Qur’an is the Prophet, so in a cosmic sense why should he not also be the primordial created entity, created by al-Rahman, the Merciful God, before humanity itself? *Al-Rahman, taught Qur’an, created man, and taught him eloquence* (Q 55:1–4).

Is it too much to suggest that the Qur’an’s first words are a veiled reference to its final Prophet? If not, then the Pen mentioned in the first revelation and invoked in Chapter 68—accompanied by the image of an inkwell and a portrait of the Prophet’s character—is none other than the Muhammad himself. It is fitting, then, that in Africa and beyond, so many journeys of the soul and jihads of the pen culminated in praise of the Ultimate Pen: Muhammad, Messenger of God—peace be upon him.