

# BIOGRAPHIES

## Shaykh Hasan Cisse (1945-2008), Imam of the *Fayda Tijaniyya*

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Shaykh Hasan b. Ali Sisi, more often known by the French spelling *Cissé* (1945-2008, Senegal) was a prominent Muslim scholar, humanitarian activist and spiritual guide of the Tijaniyya Sufi order. He was the Imam of the Grand Mosque in Medina-Baye Kaolack, Senegal, a position for which he had been designated by his grandfather, *Shaykh al-Islam* Ibrahim Niassé (d. 1975). Shaykh Ibrahim was one of the most renowned Muslim leaders in twentieth-century Africa, with millions of followers throughout Africa and beyond. Starting from the early 1930s, he had guided a revivalist network of the Tijaniyya known as ‘community of the flood’ (*jama’at al fayda*), which had had a profound impact upon the transmission of religious knowledge (*‘ulum*) and mystical gnosis (*ma’rifah*) throughout the West African region.<sup>1</sup> Shaykh Hasan was the son of Sayyid Ali Cisse (d. 1981), who had been the friend and spiritual successor



(*khalifa*) of Shaykh Ibrahim, and Fatima Zahra Niassé, the eldest daughter of Shaykh Ibrahim.

The Cisse lineage is thought to be one of the oldest Muslim scholarly families in West Africa, tracing their descent from the first converts to Islam in the ancient kingdom of Ghana in the eleventh century. Oral traditions in the Saloum region of Senegal say that the *Kaya Magha* (‘King of Gold’) at the ancient Ghanaian capital of Kumbi Saleh, who had converted to Islam by the time

of the Almoravid expansion (1076), bore the name Cisse. This is not unlikely, since the original founder of the city was a certain Dyabe Sisse (or Cisse),

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the son of Dinga, from whom the oldest Mandinka lineages — Cisse, Kante, Sylla — trace descent.<sup>2</sup> With the conversion of Kaya Magha Cisse to Islam, the Cisse family has since come to be closely associated with Islamic scholarship in the vast areas of West Africa influenced by the

Soninke and Mandinka clerical traditions.

Muslim scholars bearing the name Cisse came to settle in the Saloum region of Senegal perhaps as early as the thirteenth or fourteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, the Cisse of the Saloum had become thoroughly Wolofized.<sup>3</sup> Andal Mbouri Cisse gained some fame as a religious scholar in the region, hosting recruits for the Jihad of Ma (Muhammad) Ba Diakhou (d. 1869) in the Saloum region. His son Biram (Ibrahim) Cisse continued the Jihad with Ma Ba's son, Saer Maty, before falling out with the latter and eventually being exiled by the French colonial authorities to Gabon. Here he met the well-known founder of the Muridiyya Sufi order, and symbol of Senegalese anti-colonial resistance, Amadou Bamba (d. 1927). Biram's grandson, Alassane (al-Hasan; d. 1922), was known as "Tafsir Hasan" for his expertise in Qur'anic exegesis. He became a disciple of al-Hajj Abd Allah Niasse (1845-1922), who had moved from the northern kingdom of Jolof to participate in the Jihad of Ma Ba Diakhou. Al-Hajj 'Abd Allah, who was the father of Shaykh Ibrahim, would establish a famous network of Islamic scholarship in the Sine-Saloum region.<sup>4</sup> Alassane helped found the town of Diossong, where his son Sayyid Ali was born in 1906. Sayyid Ali came to reside in the house of al-Hajj Abd Allah following the death of his father, and soon became the close friend of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse. When the latter established the town of Medina-Baye following his 1929 declaration of being the "bringer of the flood" (*sahib al-fayda*), Sayyid Ali followed him. As Shaykh Ibrahim's closest disciple, Sayyid Ali led the daily prayer in the grand mosque, supervised students in spiritual training (*tarbiya*), and taught Maliki jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Where another disciple, Ahmad Thiam, became known as "the school of Arabic grammar," Sayyid Ali became known as "the school of jurisprudence."

As a young boy, Shaykh Hasan was sent to Mauritania, where he memorized the Qur'an under the tutelage of the Rabbani family. He then returned to Medina-Baye to study the rest of the Islamic sciences (jurisprudence, exegesis, literature, Prophetic traditions, Sufism) under his grandfather

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and father, as well as under other renowned scholars and associates of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, such as Ahmad Thiam. Later on, Shaykh Hasan was sent by Shaykh Ibrahim to Cairo, along with several including many of his sons, to pursue higher education degrees at the personal invitation of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel-Nasser. He obtained a BA in Islamic Studies and Arabic Literature from 'Ayn Shams University, after which Shaykh Ibrahim sent him to London to learn English. Here, he completed his MA in English from the University of London, and went on to pursue a PhD in Islamic Studies at Northwestern University (Evanston, US). Upon the death of his father 'Ali in 1982, and before the completion of his PhD, Shaykh Hasan returned to Senegal to assume the imamate of the mosque in Medina-Baye.

During the life of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, the fame of Medina-Baye had grown into that of an international center of Islamic scholarship, regularly visited by scholars and students from many West African countries (especially Nigeria, Ghana and Mauritania).<sup>5</sup> Throughout the year, visitors were coming to receive the spiritual training (*tarbiya*) that had become the hallmark of the 'people of the Tijanifayda.' The rhythm of didactic and devotional activities was particularly intense every year during the two months of Ramadan and Rabi' al-Awwal, when the town was overflowing with visitors attending Shaykh Ibrahim's exegesis of the Qur'an (in the nights of Ramadan) and the communal celebrations dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad (in the nights of Rabi' al-Awwal). After the death of Shaykh Ibrahim in 1975, Medina-Bayehad remained the center of gravity for the growing network of his followers and associates. From a university student in Cairo, London and Chicago, to the new imam of the Grand-Mosque of Medina-Baye, Shaykh Hasan was opening a profoundly new phase in his life.

Gradually, in his new position at the center of an international network of scholarship, Shaykh Hasan's fame as an Islamic scholar spread beyond Senegal, while he continued to gather personal diplomas (*ijazat*) from famous traditional hadith

scholars such as Shaykh Yasin al-Fadani (d. 1990) of Indonesia and Shaykh Ahmad Muhammad ‘Abd al-Jawwad of Medina, Saudi Arabia. In all, Shaykh Hasan related that he had collected more than 600 *ijazat* from scholars around the world. In 2007, Azhar University in Egypt presented him with an honorary degree of “highest distinction.”

It was especially his reputation for engaging the Islamic scholarly tradition with pressing humanitarian concerns that earned him the admiration of several international humanitarian organizations. In 1988, he founded the African American Islamic Institute to promote education, health care, women’s rights and cultural exchange between the Muslims of Senegal and America. Many, particularly among the African-American community, had converted to Islam and become affiliated to the Tijaniyya during his earlier stay in Chicago and subsequent visits to New York, Detroit and Atlanta. After assuming the imamship of Medina-Baye, Shaykh Hasan continued to cultivate links with his American students.

The African American Islamic Institute has since received official recognition from the United Nations as an affiliated NGO, and has been successful in establishing clinics and schools in Senegal. Shaykh Hasan also worked closely with the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Rotary International to promote projects dealing with issues such as polio immunization, breast-feeding, childhood and adult literacy and campaigns against female circumcision. In 2005, his role as an Islamic scholar committed to humanitarian ideals occasioned his election as president of the Network of African Islamic Organizations for Population and Development.

Shaykh Hasan’s scholarly credentials, international visibility and spiritual inheritance from Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé made him one of the preeminent spokesmen of his time for the Tijani Sufi order. Continuing the mission of his grandfather, he was influential in spreading Islam and the Tijaniyya in Africa. In places such as Chad, Cameroon and South Africa, he is reported to have converted thousands. Aside from West African diaspora groups of disciples in Europe

and elsewhere, dispersed communities of Tijanis tracing their initiation through Shaykh Hasan have also emerged in Southeast Asia, Pakistan, Libya, the Middle East and the Caribbean. The birth and the expansion of a Tijani community in South Africa can also be traced back to his initiative.<sup>6</sup>

His routine teaching activities in Medina-Baye included giving exegesis of the Qur’an, explanation of Hadith collections, and teaching primary works of the Tijaniyya such as the *Jawahir al-Ma’ani* by ‘Ali Harazim Barada (of which he was said to possess the original manuscript inherited from his grandfather), the *Kitab-al Jami’* by Muhammad ibn al-Mishri (d. 1809) and Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé’s treatise titled *Kashif al-Ilbas*.<sup>7</sup> He also authored the *Kanz al-Masun* (2007), a collection of Shaykh Ibrahim’s supplications on which Shaykh Hasan provided commentary, and translated into English his grandfather’s first work, the poem *Ruhal-Adab*, which he published with extensive commentary as *The Spirit of Good Morals* (1998). He published a short biography of Shaykh Ibrahim called ‘Revivalist of the Sunnah’ (1984). Many of his speeches on Islamic and Sufi principles have been recorded or transcribed and made available online.

The life and career of Shaykh Hasan Cisse constitute a remarkable example of integration

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of traditional and modern knowledge by a West African Muslim scholar. The global reach of his network of disciples and associates challenges the notion that West African Sufism is mainly a ‘local’ manifestation of a ‘popular’ form of Islam.

Moreover, the ease with which Shaykh Hasan integrated humanitarian activism into both Islamic and Western-based institutions defies the simplistic notion of an inevitable ‘clash of civilizations.’ Shaykh Hasan’s sudden death in 2008 brought over two million mourners to his funeral in Medina-Baye Kaolack, Senegal. He has been succeeded by his younger brother and closest companion Shaykh Tijani Cisse.

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## Notes

- 1 The most important published monograph on Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse is Seesemann 2011. See also Kane 1997. On the concept of the Tijani *ḥayda*, see Brigaglia 2001.
- 2 Levtzion 1973; McKissack & McKissack 1994.
- 3 Klein 1968.
- 4 On Shaykh Abdallah Niasse, see Gray 1988.
- 5 On the case of Kano, see Kane 1989.
- 6 Molins Literas 2006.
- 7 Translated in English as *The Removal of Confusion Concerning the Flood of the Saintly Seal Aḥmad al-Tijānī*, translated by Muhtar Holland, Zachary Wright and Abdullahi El-Okene. Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010. For an analysis of the text, see Wright 2010.