

The *Limitless Zawiya* and the *Infinite Library*. Rethinking the Epistemology of Contemporary Sufism and Digital Islamic Thought*

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Abstract: Contemporary Sufism has not been untouched by the digital revolution. Tradition and modernity intersect in the spiritual and esoteric practices of thousands of Muslims in an increasingly globalized world. This convergence has significantly transformed the epistemological and social foundations of these practices and those who engage in them. This paper examines the digital revolution’s impact on one of the most popular branches of globalized Sufism, the tariqa Tijaniyya, from 2000 to 2020, exploring how it has shaped doctrinal, social, and spiritual discourse in contemporary Sufism. The primary goal is to analyze the epistemological dynamics of digital Sufism in relation to traditional models and to assess how these changes influence its spiritual and intellectual practices. This study will employ an interdisciplinary methodology that combines physical and digital collaborative ethnography, symbolic hermeneutics, and philosophy of religion. The ontological turn in anthropology is a key consideration in the ethnographies presented in these texts and their subsequent analysis. The paper concludes that the tariqa Tijaniyya has not been isolated from the profound social transformations of

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the digital age. In response, it has adapted and redefined its traditional epistemic categories, presenting new challenges for senior scholars of the tariqa. Two emerging concepts—*the limitless zawiya* and *the infinite library*—represent the latest challenges to this traditional and esoteric practice, awaiting further exploration. The originality of this research lies in its potential to serve as a foundation for studies in other Islamic contexts, as well as for other religious or intellectual expressions with epistemic models grounded in the primacy of ritual, esotericism, and tradition.

Keywords: Anthropology of religion, digital religions, Islam, philosophy of religion, Sufism, Tijaniyya.

La zawiya ilimitada y la biblioteca infinita. Nuevas perspectivas sobre la epistemología del sufismo contemporáneo y del pensamiento islámico digital

Resumen: en un mundo cada vez más globalizado, el sufismo contemporáneo no ha sido ajeno a la revolución digital, de manera que la tradición y la actualidad han coincidido en las prácticas espirituales y esotéricas de miles de musulmanes. Como consecuencia de estas circunstancias, las bases sociales y epistemológicas de estas prácticas y de sus practicantes se han transformado de manera significativa. Este artículo analiza la revolución digital, en un periodo comprendido entre 2000 y 2020, en una de las ramas más populares del sufismo globalizado, la tariqa Tijaniyya, e indaga sobre el modo como ello ha modificado el discurso doctrinal, social y espiritual en el ámbito del sufismo contemporáneo. El objetivo principal del texto es analizar las dinámicas epistemológicas del sufismo digital en relación con los modelos tradicionales y la manera como afectan sus prácticas espirituales e intelectuales. Para este fin se emplea una metodología interdisciplinaria que combina la etnografía colaborativa digital y presencial con la hermenéutica simbólica y la filosofía de la religión. Asimismo, en las etnografías que se presentan aquí, y en su análisis posterior, se considera enfáticamente el giro ontológico de la antropología. El artículo concluye que la tariqa Tijaniyya no ha permanecido aislada de las profundas transformaciones sociales que han llegado con la sociedad digital. Es más, ha adaptado y replanteado sus categorías epistémicas tradicionales y, con ello, ha creado nuevos desafíos para los estudiosos de la tariqa. De esta forma, surge el bosquejo de dos conceptos que quedan a la espera de un desarrollo más profundo: la *zawiya ilimitada* y la *biblioteca infinita*, los cuales constituyen el desafío actual para una práctica tradicional y esotérica. La originalidad de esta investigación radica en su potencial para actuar como premisa para otros contextos islámicos, así como para otras manifestaciones religiosas o intelectuales que tengan un modelo epistémico basado en la primacía del ritual, lo esotérico y la tradición.

Palabras clave: antropología de la religión, filosofía de la religión, islam, religiones digitales, sufismo, Tijaniyya.

A *zawiya ilimitada* e a *biblioteca infinita*. Novas perspectivas sobre a epistemologia do sufismo contemporâneo e do pensamento islâmico digital

Resumo: em um mundo cada vez mais globalizado, o sufismo contemporâneo não deixou de ser afetado pela revolução digital, de modo que a tradição e a atualidade coincidiram nas práticas espirituais e esotéricas de milhares de muçulmanos. Como consequência dessas circunstâncias, as bases sociais e epistemológicas dessas práticas e de seus praticantes foram significativamente transformadas. Neste artigo, analisamos a revolução digital, no período entre 2000 e 2020, em um dos ramos mais populares do sufismo globalizado, a *tariqa Tijaniyya*, e exploramos como ela mudou o discurso doutrinário, social e espiritual no campo do sufismo contemporâneo. O principal objetivo do texto é analisar a dinâmica epistemológica do sufismo digital com relação aos modelos tradicionais e como eles afetam suas práticas espirituais e intelectuais. Para isso, é empregue metodologia interdisciplinar que combina etnografia digital e presencial colaborativa com hermenêutica simbólica e filosofia da religião. Além disso, as etnografias apresentadas aqui e sua análise subsequente consideram enfaticamente a virada ontológica na antropologia. O artigo conclui que a *tariqa Tijaniyya* não permaneceu isolada das profundas transformações sociais que vieram com a sociedade digital. Aliás, ela adaptou e repensou suas categorias epistêmicas tradicionais e, ao fazê-lo, criou desafios para os estudiosos da *tariqa*. Assim, surge o esboço de dois conceitos que aguardam maior desenvolvimento: a *zawiya ilimitada* e a *biblioteca infinita*, ambos constituindo o desafio atual a uma prática tradicional e esotérica. A originalidade desta pesquisa está em seu potencial de servir de premissa para outros contextos islâmicos, bem como para outras manifestações religiosas ou intelectuais que tenham um modelo epistêmico baseado na primazia do ritual, do esotérico e da tradição.

Palavras-chave: antropologia da religião, filosofia da religião, Islã, religiões digitais, sufismo, *Tijaniyya*.

Virtual environments have become dominant in the twenty-first century, extending into the religious sphere. The virtual has permeated the real (Romele 2020), transforming how we perceive knowledge and experience life itself. Internet culture and Information, Communication, and Technology Services (ICTs) with all their dynamism, have become a fundamental reality for several generations of the world's population—also shaping our religious and spiritual realities and practices. Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, though not solely due to it, many people

now engage in *e-religion* and *e-spirituality* (Karaflogka 2002), with both benefits and drawbacks: on one hand, immediacy, and access to unlimited knowledge; on the other, a lack of gradual progression on the spiritual path and a greater tendency toward doctrinal disputes and religious populism. These developments have sparked a revolution in the perception and practice of religion and spirituality.

Those in the fields of religious studies, anthropology, and philosophy have analyzed the consequences of the emergence of digitalization in our world. In fact, such scholars have been aware of the elaboration of their own religious discourse in cyberspace with its own characteristics that reconfigure the religious experience as we knew it, offering us a new *cyberspace topography* as explained Karaflogka (2014). Categories such as *amplification*—as suggested Hassan and Sutherland (2017)—and classic Baudrillard's *hyperreality* or *simulacra* (1981) have become mixed with the traditional religious concepts of orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and charisma, resulting in a new hermeneutics that we must apply to explore the transformations of the last thirty years. Today, we see Catholic priests who are YouTubers and Muslim *shaykhs* who use Instagram to transmit their doctrinal messages and sermons. The fields of philosophy and the social sciences broadly urge us to reconsider these concepts and categories to gain a deeper understanding of our society. Like so many other human experiences, religion is not exempt from such transformations and has progressively adapted to it. The years 2020 to at least 2022 during the global COVID-19 lockdowns marked a key moment in which the Internet, WhatsApp, FaceTime, and Zoom have become basic tools for communication and also for spiritual practice for millions of people around the globe.

The Muslim community has also been part of this digital revolution. Over twenty years ago, international affairs scholar Peter Mandaville warned of the significant transformation that the advent of ICTs would bring to Islamic religious knowledge, including a reshaping of Islamic authority and dominant voices (Mandaville 1999). Ten years after Mandaville's paper, ICTs have become consolidated in the global Islamic world as essential to the spiritual lives of Muslim believers, reshaping the Islamic *episteme* (Chawki 2010). All of Mandaville's predictions have become reality. Today we also witness a decentralization of voices and doctrinal messages, allowing Muslim believers to choose from a range of communicative platforms, ideologies, and discourses. Various Islamic schools and paths, from Wahhabism to Sufism, have established their own websites, Telegram channels, Instagram accounts, and YouTube channels to disseminate their teachings. Blog posts and IGTVs with greater visual and emotional impact, have long since replaced pamphlets and community newsletters.

The key element driving the consolidation of ICTs in Islam has been the rise of *Generation M*. Muslim Millennials—as Shelina Janmohamed (2016) describes them—who have played an essential role in embedding the digital world in the Islamic sphere through their interests and consumption patterns. They have also redefined the models of identity by globalizing them and expanding the space for

spiritual practice (Janmohamed 2016). Their digital repositories, cyberlibraries, YouTube channels, and use of chat groups have fostered encounters and exchanges that are reshaping the identities of these young Muslims. One outcome of these digital media is an *e-riḥla*, a virtual journey analogous to the classic *riḥla* (Netton 2012), now undertaken without the need to leave home. A *riḥla* is not merely a journey; it is a life-changing, transformative experience in which the person discovers the world (*dunya*) and a new spiritual way to understand it. Examples of this spiritual *riḥla* are found in the hagiographies of the great Andalusian Sufi Master Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240) and in the founder of the Tijāniyya tariqa, Ahmad Tijānī (1735-1815) (Ibn ‘Arabī, 2014; De Diego 2020), among many others throughout Islamic history. The Internet and social media provide Generation M with the opportunity to experience an *e-riḥla* from the privacy—and, indeed, the isolation—of their own rooms.

Among these practices, I am particularly interested in revisiting the concept of *e-Sufism*, as discussed by authors such as Duoignon (2020), Abu Sharif (2019), and Makhasin (2016), and in deciphering how it has become a significant practice, especially within the Western Islamic community. An abbreviation of “Electronic Sufism,” *e-Sufism* refers to the practice of Sufism in a virtual environment using ICTs and the digital world’s unique features, such as electronic communication and the virtualization of Sufi practice (De Diego González 2021, 199).

During these first two decades of the 21st century, I have observed how many Sufi paths (*ṭarīqa*) have embraced virtualization and adopted ICTs without significant discord among their leaders. Moreover, most contemporary Sufi leaders I have interviewed in recent years see these tools as having great potential for spreading Sufism and Islam.¹ However, critics of this trend focus more on the challenges of managing the esoteric aspects of Sufism—such as secrets, authorized litanies, and gnostic teachings—for certain students and the potential harm this could pose to the public image of the Tijāniyya itself (Interview with Ḥājj al- Mishry, Madrid 2018). Controversies and disputes stemming from doctrinal misunderstandings are common on social media. In all these ways and more, the rise of the Internet and social networks has profoundly impacted Sufism.

The *ṭarīqa* Tijāniyya, and specifically the *Fayḍa* community, have not been immune to this profound transformation. Founded by Ibrahim Niasse (1900-1975) in the 1930s, the *Fayḍa* community is now the most popular and powerful branch of the Tijāniyya. Its history, doctrine, and social impact have been extensively studied by scholars such as Hill (2007), Seesemann (2011), Wright (2015), and De Diego Gonzalez (2020), making it one of the most thoroughly researched Sufi paths of today. The *Fayḍa* is also among the most globalized branches of the Tijāniyya, with a significant presence in both West Africa and the diaspora (Kane 2011). The desire to engage with the contemporary world demonstrated by its founder, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, along with the open-mindedness of his successors and deputies,

1 Interviews with several deputies (*muqaddams*) from the Tijāniyya, the Naqshbandiyya and the ‘Alawiyya, 2018–2020.

has facilitated the incorporation of these technologies into Sufism and its mystical experience.

Although Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse did not live to witness the digital revolution, he oversaw and permitted the introduction of the first ICTs in the Tijāniyya, including radio, the telephone, and analogical recorders through Islamic *fatwas* (nonbinding legal opinions). In a previous book chapter titled *A New African Orality? Tijānī Sufism, Sacred Knowledge, and the ICTS in Post- Truth Times*, I discussed how ICTs have affected the spiritual practice of Tijāni Sufism in the twentieth century. These technological innovations helped expand the *ṭarīqa* while simultaneously reconfiguring the ontological and epistemic mechanisms—namely, the transmission and the legitimation of knowledge and sacred knowledge (*maʿrifa*)— thus creating a boundless community, a *limitless zāwiya*.

This paper analyzes the digital revolution within one of the most popular branches of globalized Sufism, the *ṭarīqa* Tijāniyya, from 2000 to 2020, examining how it has shaped doctrinal, social, and spiritual discourse in contemporary Sufism. The primary objective is to analyze and reconsider the epistemological dynamics of digital Sufism in relation to traditional models. To this end, concepts such as secrecy (*sirr*), divine knowledge (*maʿrifa*), spiritual ethics (*adāb*), and esoteric education (*tarbiya*) will be introduced and examined within this new digital context. Additionally, I aim to reflect on how these elements impact individuals and their implications for spiritual and intellectual practices in relation to traditional epistemic models. Methodologically, this paper takes a multifaceted approach, drawing on insights from anthropology, Islamology, and philosophy. I have previously addressed similar topics in this context.

The initial methodological approach combined traditional and digital ethnography, both conducted collaboratively (Lassiter 2005) and understood as a public act. The collaborators played a fundamental role in providing the researcher with access to, and insights into, the issues under examination. Fieldwork was conducted in Spain (during the 2010s), Senegal (2014, 2016, and 2017), and the United States (2013, 2017, and 2019), which were selected as the primary research locations. Participant observation and interviews with members of the *ṭarīqa* Tijāniyya (including shaykhs, senior scholars, and authorized muqaddams) served as key research methods. The interviews commenced with a theoretical framework; however, I allowed the participants to propose their own reflections in response to my inquiries. Digital ethnographies adhere to a similar methodology yet adapt to this scenario (Hine 2000; Hjort *et al.* 2017) by assuming virtuality. Primarily, the physical ethnography provided access to a substantial amount of digital material, including websites and social networking groups—either public or private—through invitations extended by the collaborating parties. In both physical and digital interviews, informed consent was obtained, and participants willingly engaged in the research. At all times, collaborators had the option to remain anonymous if they chose, two individuals exercised this option, while the others are identified by name. Only publicly available data and metadata,

accessible through search engines and repositories such as archive.org on the World Wide Web are presented.

At the intersection of anthropology and philosophy, it is essential to highlight the importance of the *onto-epistemic* approaches, such as the *ontological turn* in anthropology (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) or the more daring concept of *onto-epistemic apertures* (De la Cadena, Risør, and Feldman 2018). These approaches invite us to consider the phenomena under study not as mere representations as profound ontological realities that impact individuals' lived experiences. In a hybrid and intercultural research like this one, this perspective is fundamental to understanding complexities that go beyond simple cultural or social phenomenon. Through an ontological approach—whether termed the *ontological turn* or the *onto-epistemic aperture*—it becomes possible to temporarily set aside ethical judgments regarding the practices under consideration. Instead, these practices can be situated within the context of the subject's ontological reality, revealing their deeper significance. This approach has been integral to my construction of an ethnographic account in an environment where the primary reading is drawn from esotericism. Aligning with the ontological perspective, this study draws on symbolic hermeneutics, the philosophy of communication, and the philosophy of religion to explore issues pertaining to spiritual praxis and esoteric epistemology, examining their connection contemporary society and technology in a complementary manner.

The article is structured as follows: first an analysis of how social media has transformed the Sufism of the ṭarīqa Tijāniyya. Next, a discussion on the epistemological challenges that the Tijāniyya experience faces in its engagement with aspects of modernity and postmodernity. Finally, I introduce the concepts of *Limitless Zāwiya*, the *Infinite Library* and the *Absent Adab*.

How Social Media Has Transformed Ṭarīqa Tijāniyya

Tijāniyya is a contemporary religious phenomenon grounded in traditional Islam, both as an intellectual and religious framework. Founded at the end of the eighteenth century in Morocco, the *ṭarīqa* represents the intersection between the *episteme* of the traditional world and a new changing and globalized world. Its founder, Aḥmad Tijāni (1735-1815), was certain that the Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah had to be adhered to at both exoteric and esoteric epistemological levels (Wright 2015; De Diego Gonzalez 2020). However, this did not entail renouncing the everyday world. For Tijāni and his followers, sacred knowledge (*ma'rifa*) had to be integrated into their society. It was a matter of educating the disciples to strike a vital balance that would allow them to live in such a way that consciously embodied the Prophet Muhammad's Sunnah and pursued the ultimate reality of Allāh's reality (*ḥaqīqa*). Over generations, this balance between the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) aspects has evolved into a spiritual path for millions of Muslims.

The Tijāniyya's initial advantage was its geographical location in the Maghreb and West Africa—a classical hub of Islamic scholarship, rich in traditional knowledge and home to esteemed scholars and Saints (*awliyā'*). The *ṭarīqa* of Aḥmad Tijāni gained strong support from scholarly communities across regions from Morocco to Sudan. Its zeal for knowledge, the legitimacy granted by Shaykh Tijāni's own visionary experiences, and its expertise in esoteric sciences attracted numerous scholars and Sufi *shaykhs* who, fascinated by Tijāni's charisma, joined the movement (De Diego Gonzalez 2020).

Among all the Tijānis branches, the *Fayḍa* community stands out as exceptional. It is one of the most influential branches, with the largest number of followers. Founded by Ibrahim Niasse in the 1930s, this transnational community has disciples stretching from Morocco to all of West Africa, Egypt, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America, making it one of the most active in contemporary Sufism (Seesemann 2011). The core principle of the *Fayḍa* community remains straightforward: to facilitate spiritual openness (*fāth*) for anyone who seeks it, contributing to the creation of a better world (De Diego González 2020). The *Fayḍa* community not only excelled in utilizing the Islamic intellectual tradition, but also emerged as a vital institution of social and political values—promoting decolonization, Pan-Africanism, *alter-worldism*—for people in countries beginning the slow journey toward independence (Wright 2015). The charisma of Niasse and his senior disciples drew hundreds of thousands worldwide to the *ṭarīqa*, inspiring them to transcend their own national identities.

Unlike other Islamic leaders of his time, Niasse was forward-thinking, embracing a progressive attitude towards social and technological innovations. This outlook has been carried forward by his successors in the leadership of the *ṭarīqa*, including his sons, the Cissé family, and most of his *muqaddam* (deputies) who view modernity as a promising path by which to live and expand the *ṭarīqa*. I have dealt with this topic in a previous text (De Diego González 2021) in which I reflected on the impact of ICTs in the Tijāni *Fayḍa* community. Among the diaspora, these technologies have become essential for transmitting Tijāni religious teachings and preserving oral knowledge. For instance, a vast archive of Tijāni recordings remains to be studied, representing a crucial legacy of the *ṭarīqa*'s intellectual history.

The Internet revolution significantly impacted the *Fayḍa* community from the late 1990s into the early twenty-first century. The community's contemporary spiritual leaders and Imams of the Grand Mosque of Kaolack, Hassan Cissé (1945-2008) and his younger brother Shaykh Tijāni Cissé (b. 1955), experienced profound changes and challenges with the advent of the virtual world. This important positive transformation allowed followers to spread the *ṭarīqa* with some ease, to approach western audiences or to allow access to documents and doctrinal works. However, it also introduced a downside, as there was no longer institutional control over what was published, said, or read. This shift disrupted the principle of dominant discretion in the process of *tarbiya* (spiritual education). Without careful management

of information, anyone could access secret documents or other sensitive material stored in the Cloud. After all, certain knowledge is carefully guarded by *shaykhs* and *muqaddams*, intended only for initiated disciples on the Tijāni path.

The Tijāniyya, like Sufism and other spiritual paths, operates epistemologically through an initiatory learning scheme. Secrecy is essential for accessing the highest levels of the spiritual journey. This *episteme* assumes that knowledge is progressive and hierarchical, with information imparted to disciples as they advance through stages under the supervision of a *shaykh* (Wright 2015). It also requires the disciple's obedience and discipline towards the master, encouraging them to progress patiently and await divine reward. However, in the virtual world, immediacy prevails (De Diego González 2021). The emotional immediacy, intensity, and amplification that characterize social media (Hassan 2016) stand in contrast to the orthopraxical aspects of the spiritual path, which urges initiates to engage in struggle against the ego (*jihād al-nafs*). Additionally, there is always the risk of causing scandals and conflicts if *adāb* (spiritual ethics) is not maintained during Sufi training.

Over the past decade, the *Fayḍa* community has seen substantial growth on social media, not only in the West, but also within African-based communities, increasing the *ṭarīqa* visibility online. *Fayḍa* communities across platforms, from YouTube channels to Instagram accounts and Facebook profiles and groups (De Diego González 2021). In 2018, Mamadou Dodou Thiam even released a *Fayḍa*-specific social network called *Alfayda*, designed for both Apple² and Android³ devices. However, many of these platforms are personalistic, offering a view of the *Fayḍa* shaped by the vision of individual *shaykhs* or families. Moreover, these applications had a limited lifespan; as of March 2024, they are longer available.

An analysis of these social media efforts reveals a lack of a unified or consistent discourse, instead showcasing a diversity of voices. For example, some of this content is unprofessional or amateurish, often consisting of personal recordings or subjective opinions. In an interview that I conducted in the summer of 2016 in Medina Baye (Senegal), a prominent Senegalese *shaykh* lamented that he saw here a missed opportunity for the *ṭarīqa* to produce quality material for social media.⁴ In another interview, this time in Madrid, Spain, Ḥājj al-Mishry, a prominent Mauritanian *shaykh* and scholar, emphasized “the need to maintain an *adāb* (spiritual ethics) in social media as we would in real life,” (Interview with Ḥājj al-Mishry, Madrid, 2018) reflecting on the bitter disputes and polemics between Tijāniyya members on the Internet and on social media.

Despite the growing influence of *e-Sufism*, the traditional, physical practices remain the dominant mode within the Tijāniyya. However, the digital sphere is steadily gaining followers due to its convenience for accessing and sharing content, as well as facilitating the exchange of opinions. For example, charismatic and popular

2 <https://apps.apple.com/es/app/alfayda/id1441534400>. Accessed February 9, 2021.

3 <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=net.alfayda.android/>. Accessed February 9, 2021.

4 Notes from fieldwork in Medina Baye, July 2016. The interviewees prefer to remain anonymous.

shaykhs such Maḥy Cissé or Shaykh wuld Khairy have many disciples beyond their physical *zāwiya* and their own countries. This reflects the globalization of discipleship. Nevertheless, these *shaykhs* continue to preserve traditional methods of teaching, encompassing both esoteric and exoteric practices.

Another noteworthy development in the social transformations driven by social media—as I was able to observe during my digital fieldwork—is the progressive adoption of English as a *lingua franca* among younger members of the *Fayḍa* Tijāniyya community, especially in online environments. These English-speaking disciples increasingly favor English in their discourse to other traditional *Fayḍa* languages like French or Arabic.

A different profile of the average disciple is therefore emerging now at *Fayḍa* Tijāniyya with this new generation of young disciples and *muqaddams* who are typically well-educated, Muslim millennials, residing in the West, who seek traditional knowledge without rejecting the new contemporary world. A particularly well-known example is a group of young Muslim artists grounded in Tijāni's doctrines. They are called the *Baraka Boys* and have powerful activist presence on social media.⁵ But there is also a new generation of African disciples, Muslim Millennials, who are introducing ICTs in their contexts, are well connected with other disciples, and are reconfiguring the *ṭarīqa* and their own spiritual practices. This new generation of *tijānis*, born and raised in the virtual world, is reshaping the Tijāniyya, asking themselves about spiritual authority and the transmission of knowledge, and questioning the role of the secrecy in a world without it. Although it may seem that these are all sociological aspects, the most interesting issue lies with the problems and challenges that this virtual world creates in the epistemic and doctrinal framework of the *ṭarīqa* itself—a challenge that is not only present in the social sphere but also in aspects related to epistemology, metaphysics, and spiritual doctrine.

Blurring the *Zāhir* and the *Bāṭin*: Epistemological Problems in Light of Tijāni Doctrine

Social media possesses an ontological status distinct from traditional Sufi epistemologies. It is ontological in the sense that it creates realities. Its logic derives from its immediacy, its “apparent transparency,” which often leads to greater diffusion and viralization. In contrast, Sufism operates within a paradigm where the coexistence of the levels of *zāhir* (manifest) and *bāṭin* (hidden) plays a central role in shaping its epistemological framework.

The Sufi theory of knowledge holds that disciples must reach the highest states of divine knowledge (*maʿrifa*) through the transformative experience provided by the journey (*sulūk*), under the guidance of an experienced master (*murabbi*). This process, known as *tarbiya* (spiritual education), is central to Sufism. The Sufi tradition, particularly as articulated by Ibn ʿArabī, emphasizes that without a balance

5 <https://www.instagram.com/barakaboys/?hl=es>. Accessed November 18, 2024.

between the esoteric and the exoteric, disciples would be unable to undertake the *sulūk* necessary to truly know God (Ibn ‘Arabī 2014, 114–121). Likewise, the concept of secrets (*sirr*) is essential to progress, as divine knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) is not something that should be openly disclosed because of the risks it may entail for oneself or others (Ibn ‘Arabī 2014, 387–390). Since then, most Sufi *ṭarīqas* have adopted this approach to managing knowledge as a means of attaining divine knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) and ultimately drawing closer to God.

Ibrāhīm Niasse and the *Fayḍa* community simplified the concept of *tarbiya*, making it far more accessible than was traditionally the case within other branches of the Tijāniyya. It was no longer only for the chosen ones; Ibrāhīm Niasse opened the path to divine knowledge to anyone in need, democratizing *tarbiya*. This the “democratization” of the divine knowledge, which is deeply tied to the idea of social emancipation, became a cornerstone of *Fayḍa* doctrine (De Diego González 2020, 390–391). However, this inclusive approach has not shielded the *Fayḍa* community from criticism within Tijāniyya itself. Throughout my field work, I witnessed consistent critiques of the *Fayḍa* community and its deputies (*muqaddams*) from members of the Moroccan and Tivaoune tijāni communities. This criticism often centers on what is perceived as excessive permissiveness in the *tarbiya* and on the portrayal of Niasse as the sole custodian of the *Fayḍa* and his role as spiritual leader of the *ṭarīqa*. Furthermore, Shaykh Ibrāhīm wrote extensively in his defense, as documented in the literature (Seesemann 2011).

The Internet and the virtualization of Sufism interact with traditional practice in quite interesting ways. First, they provoke an authentic rethinking of the epistemological scheme of the *ṭarīqa*. The amplification of reality, the lack of secrecy, the absence of delays, immediacy, *simulacra*, and hyper-reality push the rethinking of the classical methodologies. Additionally, there is the cultural challenge in having the elder *shaykhs* deal with younger disciples, who often come from vastly different cultural contexts. This dynamic creates not only an epistemological challenge but also an “ethical problem,” a point to which I turn in the next section.

There is no doubt that in the Tijāni Internet sphere, the use of ICTs represents a continuation of a journey that began with the acceptance of these technologies as essential tools for promoting the spiritual path as a global option, as I previously explained (De Diego González 2021). The Tijāniyya, and especially the *Fayḍa* community, have accounts and profiles on all the major social networks. While most of the sites are privately managed by individuals, a significant portion is officially operated by representatives of the community. The Tijāniyya has not been conservative *per se* in adopting these contemporary options. However, many of these developments can appear as contradicting the traditional teachings that a disciple commits to when embarking on the path of Aḥmad Tijāni.

One significant epistemological issue posed by ICTs and social media relates to silence because silence (*ṣamut*), a central aspect in the Sufi experience. A disciple (*murīd*) should not tell anyone other than his master (*murabbi*) what he feels, what

he sees, what he experiences. This silence serves as protection against external opinions, which may align—or conflict—with their spiritual journey (*sulūk*). It is a deeply private and intimate process. Niasse himself emphasized this in his work *Rūḥ al-Adāb* (*The Spirit of Good Morals*), where he wrote “And give sincerity to fellow brothers or maintain silence keeping company of People of excellent morals among close relatives” (Niasse 2001a, 84).

This verse from one of Niasse’s key offers insight into how social media creates an epistemological problem within the doctrinal corpus of the Tijāniyya. Social media tends to amplify messages, encouraging individuals to publicly share their feelings and experiences, often revealing intimate aspects, either intentionally or unintentionally. In the digital space, the public sphere dominates the private, and hyper-stimulation of emotions is commonly accepted. This stands in stark contrast to Sufi practice, which emphasizes the need for disciples to control their emotions during spiritual training (*tarbiya*).

In Sufi tradition, a *majdhūb* is a person who has experienced *jadhba* (spiritual rapture) during their spiritual journey (*sulūk*). While western culture might interpret such a figure as a fool, the *majdhūb* holds a far more complex role within the Sufi doctrine. The Sufi tradition associates this role with a disciple who has been initiated but has not yet fully integrated the divine theophany within themselves. Lacking the ability to construct a coherent understanding of their experience of divine knowledge (*ma’rifa*), the *majdhūb* becomes overwhelmed. Unable to endure this state, they break their silence, often uttering nonsensical words or to exhibiting antisocial behaviour. Niasse himself describes this state in his work *Kāshif al-Ilbās* (Niasse 2001b) and in his book *Jawāhir al-Rasā’il*, where he criticizes such unschooled disciples. He notes that their unregulated rapture (*jadhb*) often leads to societal rejection and abandonment of the *sharī’a* (Niasse 2013).

This phenomenon is not recent; it has been traced back to classical figures such as Maṣnū al-Ḥallāj (858-922) who was sentenced to death for this behavior. But in our postmodern times a “cyber-*majdhūb*” represents a new threat to the *ṭarīqa*. The major problem that arises is, fundamentally, that the “cyber-*majdhūb*” is able to impact a wider public through social media than an individual could in earlier times, whether in a small town in Saloum-Saloum or in a medieval Islamic city.

The secret, and therefore the silence, is blurred to such an extent that people do not know what *ẓāhir* (exoteric) or *bāṭin* (esoteric) are, nor where the boundaries about what can and cannot be said actually lie. Disciples are faced with so many dilemmas and contradictions, and it seems that the master is unable to control and guide them. Disciples no longer focus on their own experience; rather, they are becoming absorbed in multiple readings, in the opinions of other people, or the influence of social media personalities. These influencers, often through stories of less than a minute, can redirect the perception and attention of the *murīd*. The traditional zeal (*ḥimma*) towards the *Shaykh* as a source of knowledge is now supplanted by the “popular Shaykh.” Here the quantity (of disciples, of fame, of

social representation) seems to overcome the quality; the most popular version wins over the audience, the one that is best able to navigate what Baudrillard calls *hyper-reality* and *simulacra* (Baudrillard 1981). Through spiritual marketing and adept use of social media a skilled disciple can establish themselves as an influential *shaykh* figure in cyberspace, often exerting influence that surpasses their actual spiritual maturity and standing (*maqām*).

In this context, the epistemological methodology of the *Fayḍa* Tijāniyya—based on individual spiritual experience and purification (*tazkiyya*)—collapses and becomes unviable. A Senegalese *murabbi* who has settled in Spain and who mentors virtual disciples, some of them Westerners, shared with me his personal experiences and perspectives on this matter:

It is very difficult to control a person who is doing *tarbiya* [spiritual education] remotely by phone or chat. The traditional way, the way that my father taught me, was to have him face to face, to subdue him with the gaze. By this way, the disciple was aware of who had authority because in the *tarbiya* process is when the *nafs* [ego] increase because when he unveils the first veil, he believes that he has all the knowledge, the real in his hands, and it is not like that... To be in distance demands more calls, more control, but also more confidence between us. Sometimes it is difficult... very difficult! Even some of my disciples who did *tarbiya* with me went to another *shaykh* because there were people who told them that their *fāth* [opening] would be much faster. (Interview with a *murabbi*, *Fayḍa* community, Zaragoza, Spain, June 2017)

This narrative tells me that beyond the fact that ICTs are a considerable challenge for the *murabbi* today, the globalization factor is also quite influential. Interestingly, despite this *murabbi* skepticism toward *e-Sufism* and *e-tarbiya*, he continuously used his cell phone throughout our conversation, frequently checking WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, with our discussion being interrupted multiple times by phone calls.

The problems of the *e-tarbiya* become evident as the disciple loses a critical component: physical presence before the *murabbi* (De Diego Gonzalez 2021). Knowledge is embodied (Wright 2015) by the individual and requires the proximity of the master, making the *baraka* (subtle energy) and his gaze essential elements of the process. However, in the *e-tarbiya*, everything is volatile, and *hyperreal*, resulting in an epistemic simulation that struggles to replicate the depth of an experience practiced for generations.

Nonetheless, *e-tarbiya* has emerged as a viable alternative for disciples living far from Medina Baye or other Tijāni centers, who seek guidance from a renowned *shaykh*. With only a cell phone and a computer, they can establish a virtual relationship with their *shaykh* and, potentially, connect with a community.

The *murabbi* in Zaragoza identified another great problem: that of immediacy. In social media, everything is immediate, instantaneous. Features, such as the “double check” in messaging services indicate when a message has been read,

fostering an expectation for immediate responses. Disciples often want answers immediately, placing themselves in control. Unlike traditional practices in Medina Baye, where disciples would wait at the *shaykh*'s door or engage in *khidma* (servitude) to better understand the sacrifices inherent in the spiritual journey, these disciples seek a “service,” grounded in immediacy, a transactional logic reflective of a post-capitalist mindset.

The *murabbi* also expressed concern over the symbolic threat posed by some of his disciples turning to “more popular *shaykhs*” to “reach for more.” This pursuit of “more” in a quantitative sense is diametrically opposed to a spiritual path of patience (*ṣabr*), valuing time and “tasting” (*dhawq*) the experience for a deep understanding of reality. Zachary Wright, citing a narration by Hassan Cissé, has documented a compelling warning by Ibrāhīm Niasse about the dangers of immediacy and the pressures of the “time-crunch”:

The community of Ibrāhīm Niasse was generally confronted with the speeding up of time, the “time-crunch,” now recognized as a fundamental characteristic of modernity—something to which Islamic pedagogy had to adapt. The statement, “In this time, there is no time,” seemed a generally accepted statement in Medina-Baye. Many Muslims no doubt found such a concept readily legible (if ominous), given the well-known narration from the Prophet, “The Last Hour will not come before time contracts, a year being like a month, a month like a week, a day like an hour, and an hour like the kindling of a fire.” Ibrāhīm Niasse believed that technological advancements had a role in speeding up time, and he predicted, “These technologies will one day bring about the End of Time.” (2015, 208)

In short, most *shaykhs* and *muqqadam* (*ṭarīqa* deputies) disapprove of the attitude of immediacy and the “time crunch.” They view it as the triumph of the ego (*nafs*), which they have worked so hard to control during their spiritual training. For most of them, “spiritual time” is an “eternal present,” a state in which one can deeply know Allah and live in accordance with the Sunna of His Prophet.

In contrast to these *shaykhs* and *muqqadam*, younger generations—often referred to as Generation M or Muslim Millennials—embrace the social network language as their own and strive to redefine how the Tijāniyya is lived and taught. Across the globe, many young disciples of the *Fayḍa*, who have completed their *tarbiya* and obtained the necessary permissions to teach (*idhn*), have adopted the logic of platforms like Instagram and Facebook. They craft narratives that merge marketing with spirituality, where ostentation often replaces humility. Populist messaging and claims of professional and personal success overshadow the traditional epistemological narratives of the *ṭarīqa*.

Increasingly, the idea that the *tarbiya* (spiritual training) empowers the material world (*dunya*) is more widespread than ever. Yet, despite these shifts, the *ṭarīqa*, the texts of the *Fayḍa*, and divine knowledge (*maʿrifa*), have achieved an unprecedented level of globalization, spanning from Senegal to the United States.

The *Fayḍa* community has fulfilled Niasse's dream of becoming a transnational, inclusive space for people who, in one way or another, seek Allah. The Tijāniyya has built an *infinite library* and a *limitless zāwiya* on the Internet, while simultaneously dealing with the problems of postmodernity and an *absent adāb*.

The *Limitless Zāwiya*, the *Infinite Library*, and the *Absent Adāb*

The *Fayḍa* community has always aimed to share its way of life to as many people as possible. From the beginning, Niasse understood that ṭarīqa was not an exclusive message for Wolofs or Arabs but a universal call, a universality inherent in the doctrines and teachings he developed. This vision gave rise to the idea that the grace of Allah would “flood” the earth—echoing the meaning of the Arabic word *Fayḍa*—, offering relief in a world rife with corruption, much like the Qur'anic story of Noah.

While the *Fayḍa* community has never explicitly rejected ICTs, there has been a consensus on preserving traditional educational methods and technologies to safeguard its heritage. Zachary Wright (2015) demonstrates how the epistemological foundations of ṭarīqa have been maintained while adapting certain elements to align with contemporary times. Though Niasse did not live to see the digital revolution, his descendants have embraced the digital world as a powerful tool for experiencing the ṭarīqa and creating a *limitless zāwiya*.

The concept of the *limitless zāwiya* emerges from the careful observation of social media and virtual communities. If Niasse's message was to unite Muslims around divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*) and a life aligned with prophetic norms, the Internet and ICTs have become powerful tools to fulfill that aspiration. Primarily using English as a *lingua franca*, the reach of the ṭarīqa has expanded exponentially, connecting a global audience not only with *shaykhs* but also with events such as the *Mawlid* in Medina Baye or the *Gamou* in Kossi, which are frequently streamed online.

Shaykhs like Maḥy Cissé—grandson of Ibrāhīm Niasse and spokesperson for the *Fayḍa* community—now have disciples and *muqaddam* in countries as far away from Senegal as Mexico and Brazil. While the challenges discussed earlier persist, many Tijānis view this globalization as a testament to the triumph of the ṭarīqa.⁶

Since the advent of the Internet, the *Fayḍa Tijāniyya* has benefited—mainly through its foreign disciples—from a dynamic online presence. This presence includes websites such as *Tijani.org*⁷ promoted by *shaykh* Fakhruddin Owaisi and Zachary Wright, *Noor ala Noor*;⁸ the blogs promoted by the Nigerian Ishmael Bakare, which

6 Notes from fieldwork in Medina Baye, July-August 2016.

7 <http://www.tijani.org>. Accessed November 18, 2024.

8 <https://web.archive.org/web/20191229030342/http://home.earthlink.net/~halimcisse/index.html>. Accessed November 18, 2024. and recovered thanks by archive.org

compile diverse and extensive information about the ṭarīqa;⁹ and the Spanish website *Tariqa Tijaniyya*,¹⁰ run by Miguel Angel Pérez, a Spanish convert to Islam.

On social networks, other formats have also emerged, such as a Yahoo mailing list called *Tijāniyyah*,¹¹ and, more recently, the private WhatsApp group called Tijaniyya Worldwide, which currently connects Tijānis over fifteen countries. These platforms, dedicated to discussion, learning, and debate, have been nurtured by the *Fayḍa* community and now form part of this *limitless zāwiya*.

Social media and that *limitless zāwiya* have enabled Tijānis from different countries to connect and collaborate, even without prior acquaintance. These platforms facilitate cooperative ventures and teaching initiatives. For diaspora communities and Western converts, this digital connectivity allows for meaningful engagement with *shaykh* thousands of kilometers away and access to resources that might otherwise be out of reach.

Just as the *limitless zāwiya* has been established, it is equally important to acknowledge that the Internet has created an *infinite library* for the Tijānis.

The *infinite library* is another symbolic space created through the World Wide Web. It contains gigabytes of unfiltered information that can be downloaded through websites such as archive.org or private repositories such as Google Drive or Dropbox. The Tijāniyya books, as material objects, are difficult to obtain and inaccessible in many parts of the World. These books, typically edited in Africa by individuals rather than publishing houses, can be hard to acquire without a local contact or travel to the region.

However, the ICTs have made all kinds of texts available to disciples and members of the ṭarīqa: from doctrinal classical manuscripts to poetry books or self-published pamphlets in Nigeria or Mauritania. Even rare, private material—such as audio recordings of important *shaykhs* of the Tijāniyya, like Niasse himself or his secretary Barham Diop—can now be found on platforms such as YouTube or in mp3 format.

Additionally, the *Fayḍa* graphic history is preserved in photos and videos shared by Niasse's family and disciples on social media. This rich content offers fascinating opportunities for research into the doctrinal material, its transmission, and its adaptation within the Tijāniyya (De Diego González 2021).

But, again, the issue of secrecy and the limits on the dissemination of content on social networks resurfaces. According to the leaders of the ṭarīqa, not all content should be made public. There is a certain part of the corpus that should be private, that must remain secret because of the topics it deals with. The subjects of esoteric sciences (*‘ilm al-asrār*), talismans, and amulets or divine knowledge (*maʿrifa*) should remain private and should not be consulted unless the correct permission (*idhn*) is obtained or under the supervision of a *shaykh* or authorized *muqaddam*.

9 <https://ismaheelbakare.wordpress.com>. Accessed November 24, 2024.

10 <https://www.tariqa-tijaniyya.es>. Accessed November 24, 2024.

11 <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/qutbulmakhtum>. Accessed September 17, 2021, no longer active.

However, once these materials are scanned and published on the Internet, control is lost. Similarly, the use of traditionally secret litanies (*adhkar*) or formulas is now beyond regulation. Traditionally, this knowledge was passed directly from master to disciple, emphasizing the strength of the transmission. This process also served as a marker of the disciple's spiritual progress—an aspect that is entirely diminished when knowledge is shared with the simple click of a WhatsApp send button.

As we can see, epistemological problems reappear, accompanied by a series of questions about the authority and management of intellectual heritage in ICTs, and the boundaries of accessible knowledge. The paradox lies in the fact that a computer-literate disciple, newly entering the *ṭarīqa* can access material far beyond their spiritual capacity, potentially distorting their understanding of the spiritual path. This once again brings to mind the words of Niasse: “in this time, there is no time” (Wright 2015, 208) emphasizing the importance of not rushing the process of spiritual development. According to Tijāni epistemology, true knowledge requires a spiritual path that is far removed from virtual and postmodern knowledge.

Finally, in contrast of the *limitless zāwiya* and the *infinite library*, there is the increasingly noticeable *absent adāb* on the Internet and on social networks. *Adāb* (spiritual ethics) is a central element in Sufism, particularly in the relationship between master and disciple (Petroni 2017), but it also extends to interactions with the everyday world. From the perspective of traditional scholars, *adāb* represents a continuous practice of embodying the Sunna in daily life, without interruption. As Ḥājj al-Mishry observed, “*adāb* is the business card of a Tijāni and possibly the first thing that a disciple must learn” (Interview with Ḥājj al-Mishry, Madrid, 2018).

However, social networks have disrupted this equilibrium, leading to a decline in courtesy and respect in interactions. The anonymity, immediacy, emotionality, and the power of writing without restriction erode *adāb*, causing it to fade and eventually disappear. The absence of the *shaykh* and his authority allows the disciple's ego to grow (*nafs*) in unhealthy ways, often leading to confrontations with other disciples.

In addition to the classic doctrinal disputes with the *salafiyya* that unfold online (a topic that warrants thorough study), the Tijāniyya has experienced internal conflict among its members on social media. One recurring issue—cyclically appearing on platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp—is the rivalry between two disciples seeking their *Shaykh's* attention and endorsement.

As the *murabbi* in Zaragoza explained to me, these disputes often begin when a disciple engages in “digital marketing” to highlight the virtues and benefits of their *Shaykh*, attracting new disciples to their circle, often without the shaykh's explicit approval. This, in turn, triggers resentment and anger among the disciples of another *shaykh*, leading to delegitimization or virtual conflicts. Such confrontations frequently revive old grudges or personal disputes—issues that senior *shaykhs* of the *ṭarīqa* would never allow or tolerate, but which disciples in the digital space consider necessary.¹²

12 Field work on the Internet and social media, 2016–2018.

Another example is the primacy given to the doctrinal opinions of some *muqaddams*, which, when expressed with excessive fervor in virtual spaces, can offend other Tijānis. While such behaviors are common on social networks when discussing politics or social issues, they are surprising us when the focus of communication is meant to be one's spiritual development.

It is striking that no senior *shaykh* of the ṭarīqa Tijāniyya has yet proposed a structured response to this complex situation, nor has an *e-adāb* or “virtual code of etiquette” been developed for Tijāni disciples. This lack of action appears to stem from the perception many senior scholars and *shaykhs* have of the Internet—as a distant, impersonal broadcasting tool rather than as part of the *limitless zāwiya*. This reflects a generational gap in understanding how the ṭarīqa could evolve into an *e-ṭarīqa*. This divide becomes evident when observing how Tijānis navigate and experience the virtual world.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the contemporary interaction between digital world and religion within the *Fayḍa* community, tracing its influence. As with all phenomena related to spirituality, the tension between modernity, tradition, and adaptation to a globalized and virtualized world is evident—particularly in a community deeply rooted in the pursuit of divine knowledge (*ma'rifa*). The Tijāniyya, like other spiritual traditions, is not immune to these transformations and challenges, which have brought both positive and negative effects to religious and spiritual practices across the globe.

In the context of Islam, the predictions and analyses of Peter Mandaville (1999) have become reality. We have seen how Generation M or Muslim Millennials have compelled a reevaluation of traditional epistemes and spiritual dynamics. For instance, they have redefined categories such as *riḥla* (travel), *majlis* (circle of knowledge), *tarbiya* (spiritual education), and many others adapting them to virtual contexts. However, key elements of the Sufi spiritual experience—such as silence, obedience, and patience—are much more challenging to virtualize. These foundational practices continue to find their proper place within the classical episteme.

The *Fayḍa* community has undergone a profound transformation in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, driven by the efforts of the Cissé family and the sons of Ibrāhīm Niasse. Guided by the advice of younger disciples, they have recognized the Internet as a valuable tool to promote and popularize their *ṭarīqa*. However, the digital revolution has also introduced challenges including shifts in communicative categories that pose potential threats to the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of the tradition.

This is because the Tijāni episteme relies heavily on traditional modes of communication and authority. Virtuality blurs epistemological concepts that govern the structure of knowing and experiencing the spiritual. It also prioritizes

quantitative measures over qualitative depth in the disciple's imagination. Moreover, the immediacy of virtuality fractures the sacred time essential for the training and the spiritual practice of the Tijāni disciple.

And, likewise, we can perceive an absence of *adāb* and an inability of seniors members of the *ṭarīqa* to effectively guide younger disciples. Indeed, one of the most notorious problems of recent years is the generational gap, which leaves older Tijāni deputies struggling to address questions from younger members about how to embody and practice the Tijāni way of life in the context of the World Wide Web. This dilemma raises broader questions within the fields of epistemology and the philosophy of religion, highlighting challenges that may also exist in other religions with esoteric dimensions.

Despite these challenges, the concepts of a *limitless zāwīya* and an *infinite library*—both symbolic representations—stand as unprecedented phenomena in the history of Sufism. Disciples around the world can learn and contemplate the Tijāni heritage and adapt it to the demands of modern times. This raises a profound question: Are we witnessing a new social and epistemological revolution in Sufism and, specifically, in the *ṭarīqa Tijāniyya*? Only the passage of time will reveal the answer. What remains certain is that the *Fayḍa* community is as active as ever, maintaining its mission to transform lives by facilitating the knowledge of Allah (*ma'rifa*) and reviving (*tajdīd*) the Sunna of His Prophet.

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