

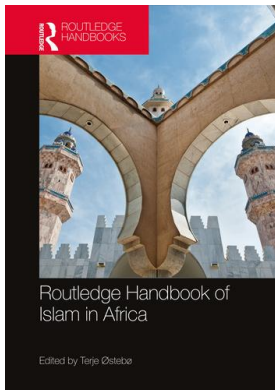
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# FAYDA-TIJANIYYA AND ISLAMIC REFORM IN TWENTIETH- AND TWENTY-FIRST- CENTURY AFRICA

*Ousman Murzik Kobo*

## Introduction

Since the mid-twentieth century, there has been a steady stream of academic publications on Islamic reform movements in Africa as part of an attempt to understand the historical, political, and sociological roots of what was emerging as a global resurgence of Islamism at the height of globalization and modernity. Two competing reform trends engaged in spiritual renewal while pursuing socioeconomic and cultural transformations: the Sufi brotherhoods that emphasized mystical orientations of Islam and insisted on preserving African Islamic traditions while pursuing modernity, and the various Salafi-inclined groups that appeared antithetical to Sufism as well as African Islamic traditions.

The generic term “Salafi” is employed here as a heuristic term defining the various groups that emerged during the twentieth century, claiming to be guided exclusively by the Prophet Muhammad’s “authentic” traditions, and denouncing any practices that they believed had no direct antecedents during the Prophet’s lifetime or those of the two generations after him. The various manifestations of this specific reform trend attracted significant academic attention primarily because of its self-acclaimed puritan message in contrast to an alleged Sufi stagnation, its openly anti-colonial stance at a time when some Sufi leaders had become entrenched patrons of colonial rule, its insistence on sociopolitical change that appealed to disenfranchised urban Muslims, and its selective appropriation of ideas of modernity to improve the conditions of Muslims (Kane 2003; Miran 2006; Østebø 2012; Kobo 2012; Loimeier 2018). The massive academic attention given to this variant of reform led researchers to associate it with the twentieth century, and in doing so, inadvertently downplayed a continuity in Sufi-led traditions of reform and renewal that had dominated the African Islamic landscape since at least the eleventh century C.E. The fact that some Sufi leaders of the twentieth century were equally critical of colonial rule and openly advocated for social change and spiritual renewal did not attract much academic attention until recently.

Fortunately, in the past decade or so, there appears to be a rebirth of the study of Sufism in the field of Islam in Africa that explores its resilience and vibrancy during the twentieth

century and beyond. The new academic attention toward understanding Sufism in Africa stems from the conspicuously massive popularity of Sufi religiosity in Africa and throughout the world (Babou 2007; Hanretta 2005; Seesemann 2011, 2015; Wright 2013, 2021; Hill 2010). Empirical observation seemed to suggest that the Salafis' intense, albeit variegated, polemical assault on the Sufi brotherhoods for several decades had failed to undermine the mass appeal of Sufism in many parts of the Muslim world. Rather, Sufi brotherhoods remained resilient and dynamic during the same period the Salafi movement gained traction. In West Africa, the focus of this chapter, the Tijaniyya and the Muridiyya, continued to attract followers in both rural and urban centers, and have maintained their dominance in ecumenical space such as leadership in the central mosques of many West African capital cities.

This chapter contributes to this new trend in the study of Islam in Africa. My objectives are twofold. Focusing on the Tijaniyya, especially the Fayda community founded by Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse, I offer some insights to explain the accelerated growth of Sufism during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The study of the Tijaniyya may offer empirical evidence to assess the Weberian-based prediction that religion, especially its popular expression, would fade away as modern scientific rationality takes hold. The resurgence of Sufism in many parts of the world confirms the conclusion that modernity rather facilitated the development and expansion of popular and legalistic religious practices, a phenomenon that has also been recorded with reference to the upsurge of Pentecostalism in Christianity. I illustrate that the Tijaniyya appropriated modern technology and other resources to expand its global scope in ways that has not received adequate academic attention. I also interrogate the notion of perpetual conflicts and competition between Sufi brotherhoods and Salafi-type organizations that has dominated academic research in the past couple of decades. Here, I suggest that academics pay attention to the dynamisms of these reforms that clearly indicate not only their profound engagements in competitions and conflicts, but also their pursuit of dialogues, accommodation, and cohabitation.

### **The Tijaniyya in the context of the Tariqat Muhammadiyya of the eighteenth century**

The Tijaniyya was one of several new Sufi orders that emerged throughout the Muslim world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in response to the intense scholarly debate regarding the “orthodoxy” of some prevailing Sufi practices. Although the denunciations of popular Sufi practices such as magic-making, hyper-veneration of the Prophet Muhammad and deceased Sufi saints, and visitations to the tombs of deceased saints to ask for their intercession, were not new in Islamic history, the denunciations of such popular Sufi expressions put forth by scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), were so profound they culminated in internal Sufi reforms that John Voll (2008) and others have described as neo-Sufi reformism.<sup>1</sup> These reforms produced a new tendency characterized by the founding of new *tariqas* (Sufi path/orders) named Tariqatul Muhammadiyya (the Muhammadan Path), to highlight their strict compliance with Prophet Muhammad's teachings. The various new orders that carry the descriptive name, the Muhammadan Paths, strategically established their *silsila* (chain of authoritative transmission of divine secrets) directly to Prophet Muhammad, thus bypassing well-established spiritual lineages that had historically connected adherents to the Prophet through a long chain of prominent spiritual authorities. This severance of the historical chain of transmission allowed the new orders to claim a new sense of Sufi orthodoxy centered on what they considered strict adherence to the *sharia* and the Prophet's authentic traditions, a claim that would be denied to them by many twentieth-century

Salafi-type scholars. The Tijaniyya was among these new Sufi groups that aimed at reviving Islam through the emphasis on the love of Prophet Muhammad and the complete imitations of his traditions (Sunna).<sup>2</sup>

There is ample literature on the history of the Tijaniyya and therefore I offer only a sketch of that history to provide some background to the discussions in this chapter. The founder of the Tijaniyya, Sheikh Ahmed b. Mahammad b. Mukhtar al-Tijani al-Hassani (1735–1815), was born in the southern Algerian town of Ain-Madi. A veritable descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, Sheikh Tijani was among the renowned scholars and mystics in northern Africa and the Hijaz. Although he had belonged to several Sufi orders, his affiliations with them ended in 1781 when he reported that the Prophet had appeared to him in a waking state and instructed him to create his own *tariqa*. Armed with a unique litany (*wird*) offered to him by the Prophet, Sheikh Tijani presented his new *tariqa*, which he named Tariqatul Muhammadiyya, and later the Tariqatul al-Tijaniyya, as a superior *tariqa* originating directly from the Prophet.<sup>3</sup> Tijani also announced his appointment to the rank of *qutb al-aqtab* (the Pole of the Poles) and *khatm al-Walayya al-Muhammadiyya* (or the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood), two pronouncements that placed the Sheikh above all other Muslim saints of his time. These claims generated tension between his followers and other northern African scholars, who considered Tijani's claims extravagant. These tensions, combined with frictions involving his followers and the Ottoman rulers of Algeria, led to his relocation to Fez (Morocco) in 1798. Fez was one of the reputable centers of Islamic scholarship in northern Africa, perhaps second only to the al-Azhar University in Egypt (Wright 2015a, 97). In Fez, the patronage of the King of Morocco, Maulay Suleyman, allowed the Tijaniyya to gain a firm root in its competition with the established brotherhoods in Morocco and other parts of northern Africa. By the early nineteenth century, it had spread to western Africa through Algerian and Mauritanian scholars and *shurafa* (veritable descendants of Prophet Muhammad). And by the first decade of the twentieth century, it had become a major *tariqa* in the Albanian provinces of the Ottoman Empire (Clayer 2009, 484), suggesting its expansion beyond Africa even during this formative stage.

The spread of the order in West Africa is often credited to the proselytism and jihad of al-Hajj Umar Tall (also al-Hajj Umar al-Futi, d. 1864). A scholar and mystic, Hajj Umar Tall had embarked on a jihad to create a Tijaniyya state, comparable to the Sokoto Caliphate founded by Sheikh Uthman dan Fodio in 1804 in today's northern Nigeria. However, his nascent empire disintegrated in 1864, when the French colluded with his enemies in a siege that ended his life. Two other major branches of the order emerged during the 1920s: the Hamawiyya and the Niassiyya (or Fayda). Both branches became independent of their Umarian root under new leaders: Cherif Ahmed Hamaullah (1883–1943) and Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse (1900–1975). It is noteworthy, as will be explained later, that the three offshoots of the Tijaniyya emerged under black West African scholars: al-Hajj Umar Tall was Fulani, Cherif Hamaullah's mother was Fulani, and Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse was Wolof.

Despite its initial success in expanding into other colonial territories including the British colony of the Gold Coast, the Hamawiyya stagnated during the first two decades of independence, and today only a fragment of its *zawiyas* (Sufi lodges) have remained. On the contrary, the Niassen-Fayda community, the subject of this chapter, continued to accelerate throughout Africa at the same time when the Salafi-type organizations were emerging, sometimes in response to the mass popularity of the Fayda movement. Thus, a discussion of the Fayda movement has to be placed in the context of its main adversary, local variants of Salafism, in the same way that the emergence of the Tijaniyya should be placed in the context of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' anti-Sufi polemics instigated partly by the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab as discussed earlier.

The African variants of Salafi-type reform emerged in many countries toward the end of European colonial rule, mostly as a result of local doctrinal disagreement over some aspects of Sufi practices. The momentous events of the anti-colonial nationalist struggles between the late 1940s and early 1960s, and the postcolonial states' openness to religious pluralism, provided an important historical context that accounts for their mass reception in urban centers of Africa as they collided with Sufi leaders (Kane 2003; Alidou 2005; Miran 2006; Østebø 2012; Kobo 2012; Iddirisu 2012; Dumbe 2013). Declaring Sufism an unorthodox innovation (*bida*) without antecedents in Prophet's time, these reforms engaged in bitter polemics with local Sufi scholars, often degenerating into violent confrontations. Their polemics resonated with the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and thus earning them the name "Wahhabis", sometimes used pejoratively. Similarly, their uncritical denunciation of Sufism as "impure" form of Islam also conveniently resonated with the erroneous but widespread colonial-orientalists' declaration of African Islam as replete with "superstition" and "magic", although this connection did not lead to any cooperation with European colonialism. It is worth noting that although in most cases Sub-Saharan African variants of Salafism developed independently of the Arab world, their subsequent mutations bore the influence of the Middle East and the Gulf States as illustrated in the 2015 special issue of the *Islamic Africa* journal on Salafism edited by Terje Østebø. Opportunities for free education in the Arab world, combined with financial support from Saudi-sponsored international philanthropies, boosted the growth of this new reform trend in Africa and other parts of the Muslim world, where they came to be associated with Saudi-styled Salafi or Wahhabi reformism.

Thus, during the twentieth century, the Sufi and Salafi reform trends dominated the African Islamic landscape. Although both variants claimed to reform and revitalize Islam as commanded by the Quranic injunction, *al-amr bil maruf wa nahi anilmunkar* (commanding the good and forbidding the wrong), each variant pursued different strategies and emphasized different interpretations of the Qur'an and the hadith. Loimeier summarizes these differences:

These Salafi-oriented movements of reform were united in their endeavours by the fact that they combined religious and doctrinal patterns of explanation with programmes of social reform that essentially tried to translate Islam into modern contexts. For the first time in the history of its Muslim societies, Sub-Saharan Africa thus saw the emergence of a tradition of reform that developed a distinct critique of saint veneration, Sufism and a number of local practices that were condemned as un-Islamic innovations (*bida*), superstition and magic. The new movements of reform criticised shrine pilgrimages (*ziyarat*), the dhikr and mawlid celebrations of the Sufis, their claims to spiritual superiority and the faith of the common believers in the power of the saints to intercede (*tawassul*).

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These polemics notwithstanding, there are some parallels between the two reform trends that are shaped primarily by the contexts of the twentieth century: the establishment of communities of followers in burgeoning urban centers, the attraction and energization of urban youth, the pursuit of education in the Arab world to augment educational credentials and spiritual authority, the acceptance of and productive engagement with the secular state,<sup>4</sup> the appropriation of ideas of modernity and the utilization of modern communication media to promote their messages, and an openness to doctrinal accommodation in light of new knowledge. As explained below, these shared strategies are particularly salient in the activities of the Salafi-inclined groups in West Africa and the Fayda communities founded by Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse.

## Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse and the Fayda Tijaniyya

Scholars of Islam in Africa have argued convincingly that the Tijaniyya has experienced accelerated growth since the twentieth century. The lynchpin of this extraordinary expansion is Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse and the community of Tijanis he founded in 1929 is known as Jama'at al-Faydat al-Tijaniyya (the Community of the Tijani Flood or the Community of the Divine Grace), shortened as Fayda, or Faila in Ghana and Nigeria. It is also known in the literature as Baye Niasse and Niassen-Tijaniyya. In this chapter, I use the term Fayda.<sup>5</sup> Sheikh Niasse's studied under his father, and by the young age of 29 he had mastered the materials that constituted the Islamic sciences, a learning process that was usually completed at an advanced age of 40 years or more (Hiskett 1980; Gray 1998; Kane 1998; Ryan 2000; Seesemann 2011, Wright 2013).

Around 1929/1930, Sheikh Niasse announced that he had been favored to be the embodiment of the Faydat al-Tijaniyya, defined as the massive effervescent or overflow of Divine Grace, which Sheikh Ahmed Tijani had predicted would attract a throng of followers to the Tijaniyya. Sheikh Ibrahim also claimed to be the *qutb zaman* (the spiritual head of his time) and the "fountainhead" through which Allah's mercy in the form of the Divine Flood would reach humanity. Sheikh Niasse also reformulated and simplified the Sufi mystical training that unveils the divine reality to the aspirant, called *tarbiyya*, and rendered it accessible to every Muslim regardless of age or gender in contrast to existing Sufi traditions of limiting such mystical training to matured adults (Hiskett 1980; Gray 1998; Kane 1989 Seesemann 2011; Wright 2014). For Niasse, as with other Sufis, there are two forms of knowledge, one acquired through learning the sacred texts, and the other experienced through exposure of the Divine in the course of mystical training. Niasse centered experiential knowledge of God at the core of religious knowledge. Experiential knowledge, he explained, not only allows a Muslim to understand their place in the cosmos but also helps them to appreciate the relevance of the sacred law and the purposes of the daily rituals. His emphasis on the relevance of experiential knowledge as an essential foundation for spiritual growth thus sought to break the barrier that had confined such knowledge to the domain of privileged elites. The two radical and energizing ideas of Fayda and *tarbiyya* attracted Muslims of all social and intellectual statuses, leading to the expansion of the nascent Fayda community. Sheikh Niasse traveled widely across West Africa between the 1940s and the 1960s to spread his teachings, and by the early 1960s, the community of Fayda had expanded beyond the Senegal-Mauritanian enclave, to Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, and Benin. In these new frontiers, he appointed numerous *muqaddams* (deputies and propagators of the order) and authorized them to initiate and guide adherents on the mystical path of *tarbiyya*.

The 1950s and early 1960s were thus pivotal in Sheikh Niasse's rise as a globally recognized Muslim scholar and mystic of African descent. In the larger Arab world, he visited Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. In 1961, he was received by the pan-African and pan-Arab leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, and during that highly publicized visit, he led the Friday prayer at al-Azhar Mosque, an extremely rare opportunity for foreign scholars, particularly a black scholar. Most observers thus noted that the Sheikh Niasse was probably the first black Muslim scholar to be accorded this honor. Perhaps even more important was his relationship with King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, whom he visited twice, and was in turn visited by the king in Medina Kaolack in 1961 (Kane 1989, 2003; Wright 2015b). King Faisal's visit to Medina Khaolack, the town founded by Sheikh Niasse in 1929, obviously further elevated the Sheikh's eminence among world Muslim leaders. For the King of Saudi Arabia to visit an African Sufi scholar in a remote African town certainly shows the high regard he harbored for

this scholar. In recognition of Sheikh Niasse's scholarship during the meeting that gave birth to the Muslim World League, Sheikh Shaloot of al-Azhar University nominated him to the position of the Deputy Chairman of the League, that is, second in command to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. Sheikh Niasse's global itinerary during the 1960s also included Asia: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, and China. He also later visited France and England, and probably other European countries as well. A careful examination of the breadth of his global recognition leads to the possible conclusion that no African Muslim scholar of the twentieth century had attained that level of recognition and reverence of the world's leading Muslim political figures.

Considering himself a Muslim leader at the time of the struggles to end colonial rule, Sheikh Niasse joined the anti-colonial struggles when other Muslim leaders were hesitant of such direct political engagements. As the embodiment of the Fayda and one of the most important leaders of the Tijaniyya in West Africa during the 1950s, he was in a position to shape the destiny of the *tariqa*; independence from colonial rule would lessen the restrictions on the mobility of religious leaders that had been the characteristic of colonial rule. In other words, independence was good for Africans, but even more so for African Muslims who had to bear the heaviest burden of colonial atrocities. Consequently, he established cordial relationships with important nationalist figures such as the pan-Africanist leader and the first president of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Sékou Touré (1922–1984) of Guinea, Modibo Keita (1915–1977) of Mali, and the premier of Nigeria, Amadu Bello (d. 1966).

Through these regional and global engagements, Sheikh Niasse acquired political capital that allowed him to participate in debates about nationalism, pan-Africanism, and pan-Islamism (Wright 2013), thus supporting Kwame Nkrumah's demand for immediate independence for Ghana at a time when Senegal and the rest of the Francophone territories (excluding Guinea) were reluctant to demand complete independence from France. Equally important, Sheikh Niasse's openness toward pan-Africanism augmented his credentials as an activist African Muslim leader. By combining an innovative spiritual teaching with transnational political engagements, he laid a strong foundation for the rapid expansion of the Tijaniyya. As it evolved, the Tijaniyya came to be identified by many African adherents as an African Sufi brotherhood; it emerged in Africa under a Sufi master born in southern Algeria, whose mother is believed to have black lineage, and by the 1960s, the erudite and charismatic Sheikh Niasse, a black African, had emerged as its undisputed leaders. His higher spirituality and intellectual capital, combined with the recognition he received from prominent Muslim political figures and scholars, further elevated not only his own prominence, but that of the *tariqa* as well. Many African Americans who were initiated into the *tariqa* probably found its "Africaness" a bit of a racial pride.

### **Spiritual authority and the globalization of the Fayda community**

This section examines the sources of spiritual authority in the Fayda Tijaniyya and how intellectual pedigree reinforced spiritual authority to enhance its mass appeal in local and global settings. The section also looks at how symbiotic relationships between popular and formal leadership helped to provide discipline and stability to Fayda communities. I define spiritual authority as the right to perform certain religious functions, including spiritual guardianship, outside of the formal ritualized functions. While popular expressions of piety and spiritual immersion are recognized within the Fayda community, piety and knowledge (both esoteric and exoteric) remained the foundational sources of spiritual authority, with lineage constituting additional criterion for the top echelon of the hierarchy, such as that of the *khalifa*. This is true for other branches of the Tijaniyya as well. Nonetheless, the Fayda Tijaniyya's leadership structure has some built-in mechanisms that shape patterns of accessibility to spiritual authority

to a broad segment of followers including women and those lacking extensive textual education. As explained below with reference to Ghanaian and Nigerian Fayda communities, these built-in mechanisms also provided a space for popular leadership, enabling it to interact with formal leadership structures in a hierarchical but symbiotic relationship. These flexible patterns of accessibility to spiritual authority, combined with the leaders' ability to appoint a limitless number of *muqaddams* and *muqaddamas* (female propagators and spiritual guides, see Hill *intra*), in contrast with other branches of the Tijaniyya that restricted such appointments, contributed enormously to a sense of belongingness that further facilitated the rapid growth of the Fayda Tijaniyya.

Although there were many sources of religious authority, modernity has added another element, formal university education, that further entrenched spiritual authority. Alexander Thurston describes the multiple sources of legitimization in the Fayda community as “polyvalent authority”, meaning the ways by which a “combination of hereditary authority, classical Islamic studies, and formal university degrees lead to the legitimization of spiritual authority and contributes to the success of transnational religious encounters” (Thurston 2018, 789). He demonstrates how modern university education in the Arab world – especially at al-Azhar University in Cairo, noted for its diverse curriculum and rigorous training – reinforced the intellectual credibility of Sheikh Niassé’s descendants and followers. Notable among these are his grandsons, the Cissé brothers – Imam Hassan Cissé (1945–2008), Imam Tijani Cissé, and Muhammad Mahy Cissé – who are credited with establishing and strengthening Fayda communities in the United States, Europe, and Asia. Thurston is thus right in noting that “educational pluralism is explicitly invoked as one of the elements that helps the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimiyya (Fayda Tijaniyya) serve a global constituency, including a substantial American following” (Thurston 2018, 800). From the perspective of many adherents of Fayda Tijaniyya in American, for example, university education, especially from al-Azhar University, obviously contributed to the spiritual and intellectual recognitions ascribed to the aforementioned scholars. These recognitions were further entrenched by the belief in the scholars’ embodiment of spiritual blessings and esoteric knowledge rooted in their blood connections with Sheikh Niassé, which they employ in guiding the spiritual growth of their followers and to improving their material conditions.

The relevance of al-Azhar and other Middle Eastern universities in bolstering the intellectual pedigree of African Sufi-inclined scholars is evident in the Fayda periphery as well. In West Africa, many Azharist (graduates of al-Azhar University) among Sheikh Niassé’s *muqaddams* became the lynchpins in propagating and defending the Fayda Tijaniyya. I cite the example of Mallam Abdulai Maikano (Jallo) in Ghana (d. 2005), whose intellectual contribution to the growth of the Fayda movement in Ghana and neighboring countries is gaining the attention of Western academics (Dumbe, Firdaws, and Zakariah 2017). After completing his studies at al-Azhar, Maikano spent a few years in Kaolack, where he studied under Sheikh Niassé before returning to Ghana as one of Niassé’s *muqaddams*. Maikano’s return coincided with the rise of Wahhabism in that country, which first emerged in response to Sheikh Niassé’s introduction of *tarbiyya* during his 1952 visit. Armed with his credentials and the prestige of his al-Azhar education and fluent Middle Eastern Arabic intonation, Maikano confronted the critiques of the Fayda for several decades. Before his death in 2005, Maikano had built a strong network of Niassen followers, especially among the youths in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, and Benin. If the earlier anti-Sufi scholars employed their training in the Arab world to mystify the less literate urban Muslims and attracted them to their fold, the Tijani scholars who were trained in the Arab world also employed their fluency in Middle Eastern Arabic intonations to defend the Tijaniyya and to endorse popular Fayda activities that attracted the youth. In the context of



the twentieth century, when reformism was characterized by intense competition between the Sufi brotherhoods and their Salafi opponents, modern religious academic credentials remained crucial in reinforcing spiritual authority.

### The Fayda community's search for gender parity

The bulk of the studies on Muslim women in Africa during the past couple of decades highlights the ways by which women claim their agency even in highly conservative and patriarchal societies, but within the perimeters of the *sharia* (Hutson 2001; Hanretta 2009; Bruzzi 2015; Alidou 2013; Madore and Gomez-Perez 2016; Hill 2010, 2018). From its onset in the early 1930s, the Fayda Tijaniyya initiated women of all ages and allowed them to participate in its public activities, including the group *dhikr*, although they had to sit in a separate space away from the men. Sheikh Niasse also encouraged the appointment of women to the position of *muqaddama* (female propagator) to enable them to guide their female and even male counterparts (Hutson 2001 Hill 2010; Wright 2013). Thus, although the recognition of women's agency derived primarily from this openness, it is also important to stress that they earned this recognition by acquiring knowledge and cultivating a sense of piety and communal leadership.

In her study of Fayda women leadership in Kano (Nigeria), Alaine Hutson describes the ways by which female members of the community gained spiritual authority as "patriarchal negotiation". She notes that in this process of negotiating authority in an overtly patriarchal community, women were able to "increase their spiritual authority and personal autonomy" without violating the formal and informal mechanisms by which such bargaining occurs (Hutson 2001, 1). The formal and informal mechanisms include regulatory requirements of the *sharia*. In other words, by demonstrating their ability to perform male functions, such as spiritual leadership, teaching, dispensing spiritual blessings (*baraka*), and offering advice to even male leaders, charismatic women of the community earned the recognition as a *saidat* (leader) regardless of age or lineage. Hutson's observations (see also Hill 2018) resonate with patterns in other parts of West Africa as well as the West African diaspora in Europe and the United States (see below). Yet, contrary to gender discourses in the West, women leaders in the Fayda movement, similar to their counterparts in the Salafi movement, consider themselves custodians of Islamic traditions enshrined in the *sharia*.

### The reproduction of indigenous political structures in Fayda communities

Patriarchal negotiation is also evident in the quasi decentralization of leadership structures of Fayda communities in Ghana and Nigeria, where members reproduced indigenous political structures that allowed them a voice in communal activities and in their relationship with scholarly elites and members of Sheikh Niasse's lineage. I describe this second layer of leadership as popular authority. The popular authority comprises the *Ra'is* (Arabic, chief or head of the community, usually a ceremonious position given to a respected elder of the community, to serve as the community's formal spokesperson), the *muqaddam* (responsible for spiritual matters), and *Sarkin Faila* (the chief or leader of *Faila*, responsible for mobilizing the youth for communal functions). *Faila* is the Hausa derivative of Fayda. These positions have female counterparts, including *Uwar Faila* (mother of the Fayda community), the female equivalence of the *Ra'is*. The female counterpart of the *Sarkin Faila* is *Magajiyar Faila*. With the exception of the *muqaddam*, appointment of the leaders at the popular level remains the responsibility

of members of the community and does not require the formal endorsement of the spiritual leader in Kaolack. The arrangements are reproduced in Hausa-speaking Ghanaian and Nigerian migrant communities in several cities in the United States and Europe, and probably in other parts of the world as well.<sup>6</sup>

The above reference to the appropriation of indigenous power structures into the Fayda community's leadership structures both at home and in the diaspora helps to illustrate not only the ways by which members of the Fayda communities express their sense of ownership and belongingness to a powerful transnational religious organization, but it also suggests that the Fayda is a socioreligious movement in which the relationship between the leaders and mass followers is symbiotic. In the diaspora, communal belongingness provides some social stability through collective support networks, thus mediating members' multiple identities as Muslims, migrants, Ghanaians or Nigerians, and West Africans. This sociological aspect of West African communities of Fayda provides further evidence of its resilience and growth in West Africa and beyond.

### A Sufi aesthetic turn?

The development and accessibility of print and audio technology, iconoclastic images in the form of paintings and photography, and internet and social media have given Sufi orders another formidable infrastructure for resilience and expansion. In this section, I draw some examples from the Tijaniyya to offer some insights into what may be described as an aesthetic turn in West African Sufi devotional praxis, although other Sufi brotherhoods, such as the Mouridiyya of Senegal, also exhibit these patterns. An examination of innovative and spiritually derived Sufi material culture further testifies to Sufis' appropriation of modernity to reinforce the aesthetic resonance of West African Sufi traditions.

### Aesthetic productions and consumption as spiritual gifts (*Hadaaya*)

Gift-giving (*takdim al-hadaaya* or *hadaaya*) constitutes an important aspect of Sufi-disciple relationship pervasive in the Tijaniyya. Equivalent to the Quranic notion of *sadaqa* (almsgiving) that allows a Muslim to earn spiritual rewards through generosity, the Sufi notion of *hadaaya* is a gift of material objects or services (including physical labor), offered in exchange for spiritual nourishment, spiritual blessing (*baraka*), or efficacious prayers for material success (Hanretta 2009; Soares 2005; Wright 2015b). But *hadaaya* does not always reflect a direct reciprocity, rather it may represent a sense of spiritual fulfilment or mystical illumination that comes with a profound feeling of expressive love, devotion, and admiration for a spiritual figure. The performance of *dhikr*, compositions of poetry and praise songs, and the productions and consumptions of aesthetic portraits of Sufi sheikhs all constitute forms of *hadaaya* that return values in the form of inner sense of satisfaction. It is from this perspective that I intend to explain the relevance of praise songs and iconoclastic images of Sheikh Niase and other Tijani sheikhs circulating widely across the world.

The Tijaniyya and the Muridiyya of Senegal offer excellent examples of the development of a modern music genre by contemporary West African Sufi brotherhoods (McLaughlin 1997, 2000). Blending modern acoustic music with indigenous drumming, famous musicians such as Youssou N'dour and Baba Maal, whose followers are spread across Europe and America, added devotional relics to their compositions in ways that demonstrate the appropriation of modernity to reinforce the efficacy of West African traditions of *hadaaya*, but coexisting with the older genre – *qasida*, *ishriniyya*, and *madih al-nabawi*.

The composition of praise and devotional poetry, *qasida* and *madih al-nabawi*, for glorifying the Prophet Muhammad have been subjects of a number of studies as referenced in Oludamini Ogunnaike's recent study (2020). My purpose here is to look at related but more contemporary developments that emerged under the Fayda movement. While devotional poetry in Arabic remains the privilege of those literate in Arabic, praise poetry in vernacular languages, primarily Hausa, allows those not fully literate in Arabic to compose and perform, making such poems accessible to the general population. A clear manifestation of the vernacular *madhu nabi* in West Africa is the *Zikirin Failah*. Mervin Hiskett (1980) explores the evolution of this West African genre of praise poetry and how it helped to connect followers of Sheikh Niasse throughout the region.

*Zikirin Faila* developed in Ghana and Nigeria during the 1950s when the Niassen Fayda revivalism was taking root. Composed by young Hausa speakers as a form of *qasida* devotional songs with a baseline refrain of *la-illaha-illah Lah*, the core recitation of Tijani *wird* and litany of the *tarbiyya*, *Zikirin Faila* emerged as a sanctified form of musical entertainment performed during life cycle events. Considered a sanctified entertainment, since it is centered on praising Allah or the Prophet Muhammad, *Zikirin Faila* soon replaced the existing Muslim musical entertainments – *bandiri*, *solo*, and *gumbe* – as these older entertainments came to be associated with profanity because of their sensual suggestiveness. Many of the performers had belonged to ensembles of the older genre, but their involvement in *Zikirin Faila* provided them with new, even powerful, reputations as embodiments of Sheikh Niasse's spiritual grace.

*Zikirin Faila* recitation adorns Fayda events, such as celebrations of the Prophet's birthday, in Hausa-speaking communities within West Africa and beyond, which constitutes one of the largest Fayda communities. As spiritually intense praise poetry derived mostly from Sheikh Niasse's poems, the ambiance of *Zikirin Faila* also serves as means of assessing a devotee's level of spiritual growth. I observed one *Zikirin Faila* event in which the leading performer, who composed the *dhikr* from one of Sheikh Niasse's poems, collapsed on the stage. But instead of attending to him, one of the supporting vocalists took the stage and continued from where the earlier performer had reached before collapsing. After a while, the performer recovered and joined the chorus. It was explained to me that the spiritual powers embedded in the words he recited elevated him to a level of spiritual illumination (*hadara*) beyond his capacity. As understood by its composers and performers, *Zikirin Faila* represented a gift to the sheikh, and the ability to successfully perform mystical poetry testifies to the devotee's readiness to be annihilated without publicly revealing one's absence from the mortal flesh. In this example, the mystical powers of the words overwhelmed the performer, inducing a temporary state of unconsciousness. Equally important, by providing the youth with a platform for socialization through mauled celebrations and other gatherings, *Zikirin Faila* remains one of the means by which the youths are attracted to Fayda.

### **Iconoclastic visual images**

Any visitor to a West African city cannot miss the presence of this genre of devotional artworks on public transports, billboards, on the walls of brick and mud houses, and in some cases, hanging around the necks of devotees, providing aesthetic consumption as well as a feeling of proximity to the sheikh (Roberts and Roberts 2000; Crowder 2015). But the production of these resources has also led to a burgeoning market that paves way for assessing Sufi resurgence in Africa and abroad.

During my research in Ghana in 2017, I was interested in finding out the uses and effects of iconoclasm in the development of personal spiritual illumination and how this in turn

contributed to the expansion and consolidation of Fayda community in Ghana. I was particularly interested in the production of these images as they relate to spiritual economy. I noticed that most of the widely sold portraits of Sheikh Niasse were based on a few photographs taken during his lifetime. And these images were not embellished with mystical elements to highlight the sheikh's vast miracles. I inquired from one of the artists in Accra, who noted that he had never succeeded in producing new images or adorning the existing ones with "mystical stuff", because "this man won't allow me to remake his image to suit my artistic style". He explained that he had made a few attempts to produce new images to offer his clients "something new" to expand his market but was unsuccessful as the images became blurred. The artist concluded that "this man is a true saint" because he defies false representation. It is worth noting that the artist self-identified as a born-again Christian of Pentecostal persuasion. Similarly, many of his clients were non-Muslims who believed in the sheikh's "miraculous" aura.

The production and "consumption" of images is controversial in Islam, a debate that is beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that while accepting the validity of Sufi music, poetry, and arts as effective media for expressing love for the Prophet Muhammad and Tijaniyya sheikhs, Fayda scholars also restrain their followers from transforming these resources into objects of worship. Similarly, the belief in miracles (*karamaat*) is central to Sufi praxis throughout history and members of Fayda constantly refer to Sheikh Niasse's miracles. Yet, as illustrated with the story of the Ghanaian artist, belief in the sheikh's miracles appear to transcend the boundaries of Fayda hagiography, making it difficult to control their uses. As such, whatever prevented this artist from swathing Niasse's images with unapproved mystical elements, that "miraculous" intervention, from the point of view of the believers, reaffirmed Fayda leaders' efforts in restricting unapproved production and consumption of the sheikh's iconic images that might verge on a grave sin – *shirk* (associating others with Allah).

### **Social media**

Contemporary social media technology has also profoundly contributed to the consolidation of Fayda communities. Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram, for example, have provided a robust infrastructure for mobilizing followers in an elaborate network across the world. Dozens of WhatsApp groups created by Fayda communities in many parts of the world contribute to fostering communal belongingness and unfettered allegiance to the Fayda movement. These varied groups are in turn connected with other groups, thus making it possible for many followers to stay connected not only with their groups, but also to the global Fayda community. Information about life cycle events (births, marriages, and funerals) are shared easily and request for *dua* (supplications) are shared globally. Local annual *mawlid al-nabi* (celebrations of Prophet Muhammad's birthday), are broadcast globally through Facebook, and video recordings are shared through WhatsApp and other sources. Various Tijaniyya websites also provide easy access to spiritual resources, including the correct methods of the prescribed daily rituals. Similarly, print media has also facilitated access to Sheikh Niasse's writings as well as those of other Tijani scholars. Today, many of his monographs have been translated and published by Fayda Books located in Atlanta, Georgia, suggesting not only the community's global presence, but also its engagements with modern technology. Yet these social media archives have also enabled academics affiliated with the movement to effectively protect the sheikh's legacy by ensuring that only verifiable information is circulated. Modern technology therefore brought Sheikh Niasse's followers into virtual proximity in ways that facilitate communal fraternity and intellectual exchanges regardless of physical locations.

### Sufi–Salafi coexistence

The bulk of the literature on twentieth-century Islamic reform in Africa often highlights doctrinal tensions and physical violence in the encounters between the Sufi brotherhoods and their Salafi opponents. Seldom do academics pay close attention to examining the internal dynamics of such polemics that sometimes provide a space for mutual accommodations and appropriations of pragmatic strategies crucial for promoting the stability of the local Muslim communities and for achieving the core objective of reform – obedience to the sacred law and maintaining accuracy in religious beliefs and practices. This final section provides some examples to illustrate the dynamism of these reforms, arguing that their polemics are never static. Moreover, the tensions resulting from aggressive proselytism are in some cases ameliorated by the desire to ensure intellectual objectivity and a shared sensitivity toward communal stability.

A critical element of such shifts toward mutual accommodations can be gleaned from the periodic deconstruction of the controversial concept of *takfir* by Salafi scholars, who recognized its limitations when launched against fellow Muslims. Owing to limited space, I will cite just two examples to illustrate the more recent trend. Sheikh Anas Tawfiq Ibrahim al-Bakri, a young scholar in Kumasi (Ghana), who has been the most virulent critic of the Tijaniyya in recent years, read one of Sheikh Niase's books. Surprised by the depth of the sheikh's knowledge and the validity of the sources he consulted to support Sufism and the Tijaniyya, Anas declared in a video that Sheikh Niase was unquestionably one of the greatest Muslim scholars of "our time". The video went viral and instigated intense debate among his followers, mostly the youth, some of whom declared him a "hypocrite". Incidentally, his father, Sheikh Tawfiq Ibrahim, a prominent Salafi scholar in Ghana, had also made similar statement in New York City a few months before his death in 2004, that is, after decades of declaring Tijanis infidels. Similarly, in one of his recent sermons, Mallam Suleiman Abubakr Mayshago, an outspoken critic of the Tijaniyya in Nigeria remarked that he and other Salafi-inclined scholars have been wrong in declaring Nigerian Tijanis infidels. He added:

I swear by Allah that only a fraction of the Tijanis, in fact, less than ten percent of them, can be considered to have deviated from the Prophet's Sunna. It is therefore a grievous error to declare all Tijanis non-Muslims. This statement is based on knowledge from authentic and undisputable sources. I admit my own error. May Allah forgive us.

*Mallam Mayshago, July 2020, recorded date unknown.  
My translation from Hausa*

Such reversal of the declaration of *takfir* against other Muslims is widespread in the trajectory of Salafi polemics primarily because Salafism, similar to Sufism, often undergoes internal intellectual debates aimed at ensuring doctrinal accuracy. For our purpose here, such shifts also reinforced the credibility of Sufism and bolstered its image. Yet, Sufi leaders also engage with internal corrections that inspire doctrinal coexistence.

Recognizing the validity of some of the criticism leveled against popular Sufi religiosity, Tijaniyya leaders in West Africa often restrain their followers from indulging in practices non-Tijanis find objectionable. Imam Hassan Cissé (d 2008), arguably the most active propagator of Fayda Tijaniyya after Sheikh Niase, is one example. Imam Cissé is widely known to have actively discouraged his followers from practices such as the mixing of the sexes during Fayda events and excessively exuberant adoration of Tijaniyya sheikhs that borders on anthropomorphism. His vigilance in ensuring that his followers always complied with the *sharia* earned

him the appellation *Sunna-Faila*, often expressed behind his back by recalcitrant followers for whom his restrictions implied accommodating Salafi/Wahhabi criticisms. In Ghana and Nigeria, *Sunna-Failah* is the phrase expressed disapprovingly against those who seemed to compromise loyalty to one's group.

Yet every Tijani scholar could claim to be *Sunna-Faila*, or Sufi-Salafi (*al-tasawwuf-al-Salafi*), if this means practicing Sufism in accordance with the Prophet's traditions. We recall that the Tijaniyya emerged from internal Sufi reform to ensure it conformed with strict orthodoxy. Sheikh Niase acknowledged some of the validities of the Salafis' argument, although he also pointed out their limitations, which derived from their narrow conception of the broader Islamic knowledge. He noted in an interview with the French scholar, J.P. Froelich in 1968:

As for those who follow the teachings of Muḥammad b. Abd al-Wahhab, they are following the letter of the Qur'an. Certainly, this is good. But we think that it is also necessary to know the meaning, as was done by Imam Malik, Abu Hanifa, Shafi'i, and Ahmed b. Hanbal (the founders of the four Sunni schools of Jurisprudence).

*Cited in Wright 2015a, 26*

In addition, Niase's declaration *ijtihad* (independent theological reasoning), his rejection of *taqlid* (blind imitation of received knowledge from the classical Muslim jurists), his adoption of *qabd* (folding the alms on the chest while standing in prayers) in contrast with the dominant West African position of *sadl* (relaxing the alms on one's sides) also resonated with Salafism, thus blurring some aspects of the division between the Tijaniyya and Salafism. From this perspective, Sufis tend to view Salafis' self-acclaimed ownership of the Prophet's traditions as pretentious.

In his study of Moroccan Sufism, Houston (2016) illustrates that some of the first generation Salafi modernists linked to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood practiced some form of Sufism and "considered their Salafi and Sufi commitments to be complimentary rather than contradictory" (1). These include Jamal al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949), and Sa'id Hawwa (d. 1989) (Houston 2016, 2). As Houston argues, Muhammad Rashid Rida (d.1935), who had begun his career as a Sufi, was an exception because he later denounced Sufism, and this denunciation reinforced the rigid split between Sufism and contemporary Salafism. The negative view of Sufism that emerged from the anti-Sufi discourse of Rashid Rida and his followers continued to define the central paradigm of Salafism in contrast with a centuries-old tradition in which many adherents of Salafism found relevance in Sufi praxis. Houston highlights this historical tendency of combining Salafism with Sufism in his biography of Abd al-Salam Yassine (d. 2012), the founder of the Moroccan Justice and Benevolence Association (Jama'at al-Adl wal-Ihsan). He notes:

Yassine too argued that the Salafi and Sufi elements of his thoughts functioned harmoniously by addressing the interior and exterior dimensions of Muslim life, all the while avoiding the extremes of exoteric legalism and esoteric mysticism. In many ways, Yassine, like al-Banna and Hawwa, stood in a tradition of reformist and activist Sufism which included Ahmed Sirhindi (d. 1624), Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762), Ahmed ibn Idris (d. 1837) and Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri (d. 1883), all of whom advocated a form of Sufism compatible with shari'a and prophetic hadith which sought religious and socio-political reform and renewal.

*Houston 2016, 2*

The openness toward accommodation and mutual theological influences demonstrates the profound vitality of African Islamic traditions of reform and renewal often overlooked by academics' penchant for conflicts and bifurcations. In the normative pursuit of spiritual perfection through accuracy in beliefs and practices, the two reform trends have appropriated each other's strategies and negotiated their doctrinal positions to improve the quality of their followers' practices. Such a perspective allows us to appreciate the dynamism of Africa's Islamic tradition of reform.

### Conclusion

This chapter examines the factors that account for the resilience of Sufi-inclined reform in Africa during the twentieth century and beyond. I address the unintended assumption in academic literature that the twentieth-century reformism belonged to the Salafi, with Sufi reformism being confined to the previous centuries. Focusing on the resurgence and accelerated growth of the Fayda Tijaniyya, this chapter suggests that Sufi reformism neither died with the nineteenth century nor did the Sufi brotherhoods remain trapped in ancient traditions. Rather, the Sufi brotherhoods, especially with reference to West Africa, maintained their ecumenical space during the twentieth century and beyond, by offering compelling arguments in favor of maintaining Islamic traditions while embracing innovative ideas. The case of the Fayda community of the Tijaniyya, evidently the fastest growing Sufi brotherhood in Africa, offers a good example to illustrate this resilience and enables us to conclude that African Muslims' traditions of reform and renewal cannot be demarcated by convenient academic chronology; Sufi traditions persisted and experienced internal revival, even as Salafi-type reformers embarked on aggressive proselytization to rid Islam of Sufi beliefs and practices.

I examined further the appropriation of modern technology to provide some evidence of how members of the Fayda Tijaniyya pragmatically combined tradition with modern technology to facilitate spirituality and to consolidate its community. Moreover, the transformation of Sufi music, lithography, and art into instruments of devotion in modern contexts provided additional examples of strategic blending of modernity and tradition that favored the Fayda community. The reference to the Fayda Tijaniyya's engagement with modern technology provides further evidence to illustrate Tijanis' successful competition with Salafi organizations in utilizing technology to advance their interests. While the Salafis believe that imitating the Prophet's normative lifestyle is the only acceptable means of demonstrating their love for the Prophet, the Sufis believe that the normative imitation is great but limiting. For them, the Prophet has to be celebrated ceaselessly through many channels, including composing, singing, and reciting praise poetry in his honor. As illustrated, adherents of the Tijaniyya feel energized by the Quranic commands: "Allah and His Angels send praises to the Prophet. Oh! Those of you who believe, praise him abundantly". Moreover, the pervasive use of iconoclasm and its relevance in creating social and mystical connections mirrors the material connections provided by social media and other forms of modern technology. One can therefore argue that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries represent an aesthetic turn in the history of West African Sufism, one that allows flamboyant devotion within the confines of the *sharia*.

I have also traced the sustained growth of the Fayda community to the pragmatic flexibility of its leadership structure. I illustrate that pragmatic flexibility and decentralization of spiritual authority allowed nonlineage members, women, and the youth to participate in decision making and to claim ownership of their communities, thus further reinforcing their commitments to the community's development. If the Salafi preachers had "liberated" urban

youth and unleashed their exuberant energy to defy established Muslim authorities during their heydays between the 1960s and the 1980s, Sheikh Niasse's liberating theology channeled the youth's energy inward to sustain tradition in a new environment that simultaneously constrained and liberated their religious and social behaviors, to ensure conformity with the *sharia*.

Furthermore, the global political insecurity at the end of the twentieth century also favored Sufi religiosity. For example, the global discomfort with the Salafi movements' extremism, which is often overgeneralized and exaggerated, opened a space for Sufi leaders to claim custodianship of peaceful expressions of Islam. This claim, which is accurate only in specific historical contexts, allowed Sufi leaders to entrench their dominance in local ecumenical spaces, while extending their influences to many parts of the world, including Europe and the United States. Pragmatically avoiding direct participation in politics (although they tend to do so discreetly), Sufism in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century gained global credibility as a pacifist Islamic orientation crucial for local and global stability. Yet, the obvious tensions between the Sufi brotherhoods and their Salafi-type opponents should not lead us to overlook areas of mutual intellectual cooperation and coexistence evidence in the ideas of Sufi-Salafi (*al-tasawwuf al-Salafi*) or *Sunna-Faila* (discussed in the last section). Ultimately, for Muslims, the historical relevance of a religious movement rests on its contributions to spiritual revitalization and renewal.

The twentieth century also foregrounds the relevance of modernity to Islamic reforms. Salafis gained authoritative intellectual space during the twentieth century by offering a compelling argument in favor of transforming Muslims' spiritual and cultural practices to accommodate modernity. By denouncing tradition as outdated and detrimental to Muslims' spiritual and socioeconomic advancement, they appealed to discontent and disenfranchised urban elites and legitimized the youth's defiance of established authorities rooted in traditional hierarchies. The Sufi brotherhoods, on the contrary, offered an alternative modernity by resuscitating tradition in a new context. This refashioning of tradition appealed to a broader segment of society yearning for the security of an established community under charismatic, even rigid authoritative leadership rooted in Sufism. The refashioned tradition also provided the youth with a unique space to develop and articulate their devotion-centered artistic skills, sometimes with the aid of modern technology.

## Notes

- 1 O'Fahey and Radtke have attempted to debunk the idea of neo-Sufism, although it still persists in the literature. Others, including Rüdiger Seesemann, find its ideas useful (Seesemann 2015, 279, 280).
- 2 Other northern African Sufi orders of the Tariqatul Muhammadiyya genre included the Sanusiyya, founded by Muhammad ibn Ali as-Senussi (1787–1859), and Idrisiyya, founded by Ahmad Ibn Idris al-Fasi (1760–1837).
- 3 The Tijaniyya litany (*wird*) consists of asking God's forgiveness (*istighfar*) asking Allah's forgiveness, invoking blessing on the Prophet (*salat ala l-nabi*), invoking Allah's blessings on the Prophet Muhammad, and declaring the oneness of God (*tahlil*), and declaring Allah's oneness.
- 4 Until the rise of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria and ISIS in the Sahel, neither of the two reforms sought to Islamize the postcolonial state.
- 5 I am grateful to Zachary Wright for suggesting that the current leadership of Sheikh Niasse's community in Kaolack is uncomfortable with any descriptive name that included Sheikh Niasse's name, thus erroneously suggesting he founded a new branch of the Tijaniyya. The Faydah suggests the emergence of a specific Tijaniyya community under his teachings rather than a branch of the tariqa.
- 6 Although my survey of these communities is yet to be completed, I have thus far identified 11 Faydah communities in the United States and Canada, and 15 across Europe.



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