

ARABIC WRITERS OF FRANCOPHONE ANCESTRY: FOCUS ON SHAYKH IBRAHIM 'AL-KAWLAKHĪ 'AS- SINIGHĀLĪ (1900-1975)

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Abstract

Shaykh Ibrahim 'al-Kawlahkī 'as-Sinighālī was a well-known Arabic scholar and Tijāniyyah leader in Senegal. It is quite impossible to classify his activities into only the Tijāniyyah *Sūfi* brotherhood or Islamic proselytization for which he became famous, because he contributed significantly to intellectual *Jihād* which culminated into the production of his voluminous Arabic literary works. He became a prominent figure in sub-Saharan Africa through the Tijāniyyah activities. A good number of works have been written on these activities while acute dearth of attention to his literary productions remains observable. This paper looked beyond his activities as a *Sūfi* by exploring his contribution to Arabic scholarship in Senegal and beyond. The paper drew the attention of researchers to a seemingly obscure aspect of his life. It revealed that the Shaykh combined Sufism effectively with literary production. Information obtained from the study could be a veritable tool in the efforts to identify and assess the Arabic scholars of Francophone provenance who have contributed significantly to Arabic literary activities in West Africa

Keywords: 'al-Kawlahkī ', Francophone, Senegal, *Sūfi*, Tijāniyyah.

1. Introduction

The great West African Arabic scholar and Tijāniyyah leader of Francophone ancestry, Shaykh Ibrahim 'al-Kawlahkī 'as-Sinighālī (1900–1975) has left indelible marks on the diffusion of Arabic scholarship and Tijāniyyah *Sūfi* brotherhood in West Africa. He is variously known as Ibrahima Niase in French literature, in Wolof, he is known as Ibrayima Ŋas and he is addressed in Arabic sources as Shaykh 'al-'Islām 'al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm ibn 'al-Ḥājj 'Abdullāh at-Tijānī al-Kawlahkī. The sobriquet-Shaykh will be used frequently in referring to him in this paper. A Senegalese major leader of the Tijāniyyah *Sūfi* order of Islam in West Africa, whenever this Shaykh is mentioned, what readily comes to mind is his role as a Tijāniyyah leader of Francophone ancestry. Little attention is given to the fact that this Shaykh was a prolific writer with many literary works in Arabic.

The paper attempts to draw our attention beyond his activities as an Islamic preacher and leader of a *Sūfi* order in Islam, by projecting an 'obscure' aspect of his activities. The need to fill this vacuum serves as catalyst for the production of this paper. The Shaykh speaks Wolof as his mother tongue and French as the official language of Senegal. One of the catalysts for this paper is the proficiency of this Shaykh in Arabic which resulted in the production of his

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enviable works in Arabic language. Various motifs stimulated his engagement in literary production and these actually facilitated his cultivation of various literary genres. Samples of these writings are listed with appropriate introductions, under the various thematic classifications to which they belong, in this paper.

Folorunso (2021, p. 40) has drawn our attention to the borrowing and usage of Arabic lexical items by French speakers and writers in Francophone countries of West Africa. Specifically, he identifies the use of some Arabic words and expressions by two Francophone African writers, Sembène Ousmane and Ahmadou Kourouma, in two novels of each of them, respectively. He posits that words and expressions from the Arabic language are integrated in *Le Mandat* and *Xala* of Sembène Ousmane as well as *Allah n'est pas obligé* and *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* of Ahmadou Kourouma. While attempting to justify why these writers adopt this style of code-switching and code-mixing in their works, he observes that:

The major reason for adopting this style might be that they want to identify themselves with their immediate publics which are the Muslim communities of the Wolof in Senegal for Sembène Ousmane and of the Malinke in Ivory Coast for Ahmadou Kourouma. Secondly, it might be a way of breaking away from the conventional way of writing throughout in the French language to show their freedom of expression in their own peculiar manner as free citizens of their independent States (Folorunso, 2021, pp. 43-44).

Whatever might be the reason for the employment of code-switching and code-mixing in their works, the fact remains that Arabic is not alien in Francophone countries of West Africa and its usage is not restricted to the scholars of Arabic language in this region.

2. Literature Review

2.1. His Birth and Parentage

Shaykh Ibrahim 'al-Kawlahī 'as-Sinighālī was born in 1900 in the village of Tayba Niasse (spelled Taïba Niassène in French), a village founded by his father between the Senegalese city of Kawlah (spelled Kaolach in French and English) and the border of Gambia, he was the son of Alhaji Abdullah (1840–1922), the main representative of the Tijānī *Sūfī* Order, in the Saloum region at the beginning of the twentieth century. Encyclopædia Britannica (2012) describes Kawlah as a city in west-central Senegal. It lies on the right bank of the Saloum River, southeast of Dakar. An ocean and river port, it is one of the nation's largest communities and a trade and processing centre for locally produced peanuts and salt. It is linked by rail with Guinguinéo and the Dakar-Niger railway. It is also the hub of the road network that serves both the southern and eastern parts of Senegal. Kawlah is the centre of one major branch of the Tijāniyyah order of Islam, whose great mosque of Shaykh Ibrahim 'al-Kawlahī 'as-Sinighālī is just outside the town (Encyclopædia Britannica).

2.2. Educational Career of the Shaykh

The Shaykh started learning the Qur'ān under the tutelage of his father from whom he received his Arabic/Islamic education as well as his initiation into the Tijāniyyah order of Islam. Busoeri (2008, p. 282) describes his father as a sound scholar of Arabic studies and a proprietor of a standard Arabic/Islamic institute from where many erudite scholars, including the Shaykh, have received sound training. Shittu (2012, p. 12) informs us that the Shaykh was known right from his youth as a scholar among his peers because he displayed an endearing enthusiasm to study. He began Qur'ānic learning under the tutelage of his father. Afterward, he was taken to a renowned teacher– Mukhtār Anjor for further studies. Relying on *Kāshif al-ilbās 'an faydat al-khatm Abi 'l-Abbās* of the Shaykh, Busoeri (2008, p. 283) informs us about the teachers of

this Shaykh, including Shaykh Sharīf ‘Abdullah ‘al-‘Alawī, a Mauritanian. Busoeri (2008, p. 282) mentions some others who could be seen as his spiritual leaders, who had impacted significantly on him in Tijāniyyah and not in Arabo-Islamic scholarship. Just like he acquired proficiency in Arabic, the Shaykh has been described as a polyglot who spoke French as well, as observable in the following;

Shaykh Ibrahim was asked to focus more on Arabic studies by his father. However due to his quest for knowledge, he extended his passion into learning French from his friend Jahbti who lived in Kawlakh. When his father got wind of this new found passion, he was sternly rebuked for drifting after which he discontinued the study. However, on a fateful day, his father received a mail in French language and Shaykh was called to read the letter; he did it successfully to his father’s amazement. Thereafter, he was given the permission to continue his studies in French language but surprisingly, he politely declined saying: “I will rather stick to your first instruction” (Shittu, 2012, p. 12)

2.3. As a Tijāniyyah Leader

The introduction of the Tijāniyyah order to West Africa can be credited to the activities of Al-hājj ‘Umar bn Said ‘al-Fūtī (1794-1864). This Shaykh(Al-hājj ‘Umar bn Said ‘al-Fūtī (1794-1864)) was initiated into the Tijāniyyah and was appointed the *Khalīfah* of the Sudan. Before leaving Makkah where he was initiated (again) during his pilgrimage to Makkah (1826-1828), he got his *Ijāzah* (Licence) where it was stated by Muhammad Al-Ghālī, a Moroccan and the representative of the Tijāniyyah in Hijaz that: “Umar was authorized to give instructions in the Tijāniyyah to whoever asks of it among Muslims, young or old, obedient or rebellious, man or woman, slave or free” (Martin,1976, p. 98). By implication, Al-hājj ‘Umar bn Said ‘al-Fūtī was a predecessor to the Shaykh in both Tijāniyyah and Arabo-Islamic scholarship in Senegalese region.

During his early years, the Shaykh relocated with his father from the village of Tayba Niase a village founded by his father to the city of Kawlakh. After his father's death in 1922, the Shaykh's elder brother, Muhammad became his father's Khalifah (successor). Although the Shaykh never claimed to be his father's successor, he gained a large number of disciples, and tensions arose between his disciples and those of his elder brother, Muhammad. In 1929, the youthful Shaykh Ibrāhīm announced that he had been given the Key to Secrets of Divine Knowledge, and thus became the *Khalīfa* of Shaykh Tijānī in the Tijāniyyah Order, and sequel to these tensions, he had to relocate with his disciples to a new place. He set out with a small group of his closest disciples to find a new place and they established a new *Zāwiya* in ‘al-Madīnah ‘al-Jadīdah, a village that was later incorporated into the growing city of Kawlakh

According to Olaniyi (2016, p. 225), the emergence of the Shaykh Ibrahim as the spiritual successor of Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani led to the global spread of the Tijāniyyah. In 1930, the Tijāniyyah became consolidated in Senegal when the Shaykh relocated his base from the city of Kawlakh to the outskirts of the city at ‘al-Madīnah ‘al-Jadīdah. In the new settlement, the Shaykh established a community of followers based on pristine Islamic injunctions. He established a Central Mosque at ‘al-Madīnah ‘al-Jadīdah which served the purposes of observance of obligatory prayers and recitation of Tijāniyyah litanies.

The fame and influence of this Shaykh grew rapidly across the globe and particularly in Nigeria. By the 1930s and 1940s, according to Olaniyi (2016, p. 225) the growth of Tijāniyyah had claimed several influential personalities in northern Nigeria. In the 1930s, Emir of Kano, Abdullahi Bayero submitted to the supreme spiritual authority of the Shaykh, describing him as the “saviour of the age”. He made several visits to Nigeria and these visits generated wild enthusiasm and tremendous increase in the membership of Tijāniyyah.

He was one of the earliest West African leaders with wide connections throughout the Islamic world. He was a founding member of the Muslim World League based in Mecca, where he served as the Vice President of the Muslim World League with Faisal as President. He also served as Vice-President of the World Muslim Congress based in Karachi, Pakistan, for a number of years. He was also a member of the Academy of Islamic Research at al- Azhar University (Hunwick, 2003, pp. 280).

3. Methodology

This paper employed historical, sociological and ideological approaches to assess and appraise the common features of the Arabic works of Shaykh Ibrahim 'al-Kawlahī 'as-Sinighālī . Purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the specimen of their epilogues and prologues. The paper examined the predisposing factors as well as the extent of the religious influence. The study derived information primarily from consultation of relevant literature. This method was adopted because of its reliance on extant sound submissions, which served as background to our analyses in this paper. The method is not empirical, it requires no instruments for data collection and it is not such that is verifiable by means of scientific experimentation. For the reliability and validity of the sources, we ensured the authenticity of every literature consulted.

4. Results

4.1. His Literary Contributions

It is quite impossible to deal justly with his works within the limit of an academic work of this nature. It is however, apposite to allude to few of them as we can see under the classification of his works as done in this paper. A perusal of the themes of his writings shows the importance of each of the works which are targeted at specific issues of social and religious significance. With more than a hundred literary productions through the medium of Arabic, most of which have received deserved scholarly attention, Shaykh has definitely cut a niche for himself as a pride of Africa amongst the literati who have left indelible marks through their contributions to the renaissance of *belles-lettres* in Africa. A testimony to his versatility and erudition in the language is his contribution to various issues of religious, social and political significance. He also ventured into language pedagogy and one of his contributions in this regard is *Kitāb al-taṣrīf*, a prescribed text on Arabic morphology for Arabic institutes in Senegal and environs.

Shaykh Ibrahim was an erudite scholar and a prolific writer. As many as over a hundred works written in Arabic have been attributed to him on various subjects including jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), Arabic language and literature, Sufism (*Tasawwuf*), panegyrics, travelogue, the life history of the prophet (*Sīrah*), and so on (vide: Hunwick,2003, pp. 279-301). He was a poet of high repute who produced many anthologies. A consideration of the motifs of his literary contributions shows his acculturation with the literary tradition in West Africa where the Arabic literati have cultivated various genres in their literary production.

Few of his writings have been mentioned and classified below as evidence of his high taste for the cultivation of Arabic literature. It is apposite to note that the factor of space limitation will prevent us from reviewing each of the works and this could be a fertile ground for further research on this Senegalese Arabic scholar.

(a) *Defense of Tijāniyyah*

His motifs for writing were multifarious. As a Tijāniyyah leader, he wrote to explain the basic tenets of the *Tarīqah* (Religious fraternity) and to defend them. Abdul-Azeez (2016, p. 415) notes that Sufism is a branch of Islamic knowledge and teachings. However, some theologians of Islam have come with hard knock on it, condemning it as *bid'ah* (innovation) which should not be encouraged and that it should even be removed completely in the annals of Islam. The Shaykh authored a good number of works in defence of a number of issues raised against the practices of the Tijāniyyah. Some of his works in this respect are listed below:

- (i). *al-Bayān wa'l-tabyīn fi 'l-Tijāniyya wa'l-Tijāniyyīn,*
- (ii). *al-Fayda al-jāriya fi ma'āni al-Islam wa'l-tarīqa al-Tijāniyya,*
- (iii). *Ifādat al-murīd fi 'l-jawāb 'alā as'ilat Muhammad b. Muhammad*
- (iv). *Ijābat fatwā fi tahāfut al-sufiyya,*
- (v). *Kāshif al-ilbās 'an faydat al-khatm Abi 'l-Abbās,* a standard text of this Shaykh on Tijāniyyah, described by Wright (2010:109) as his *magnum opus*.
- (vi). *Majmu' thalātha majālis sunniyya ma'thūra 'an khulafā' murshid al-sālikīn wa-murabbī al-murīdīn al-qutb al-rabbānī wa'l-'ārif 'al-samadānī Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijānī,*
- (vii). *Mukhtārāt fī sīrah wa-manāqib shaykhinā wa-sayyidinā Abi'l 'Abbās Ahmad al-Tijānī, al-Nūr al-rabbānī fī sīrat Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijānī,*
- (viii). *Rawd al-muhibbīn fi madh sayyid al-'ārifīn,*
- (ix). *Tanbīh al-adhkiyā' fī kawn al-shaykh al-Tijānī khātim al-awliyā'*

(b) *Defense of Personal Opinion*

He also wrote to answer questions which were put to him by the antagonists of Islamic tenets or to defend his own views as evidenced in his *Raf' al-malām 'an man rafa'a wa-qabada iqtidā' an li-sayyid al-anām*, which he wrote to defend his views on *Qabd* (folding of arms in prayer) and raising hands in different postures in the prayer (Shittu, 2012, p. 12).

(c) *Apostolic Encomia/Panegyrics*

We are beholden to Abdullah (2004, p. 375), while assessing the panegyric and elegy genres in the Arabic poetry of the 19th and 20th centuries in Senegal and Nigeria, on the classification of the poetic genres in the Arabic literary space in West Africa as follows:

West African Arabic poetry included two poetic genres: lyrical (*al-shi'r al-ghinā'ī*) and didactic (*al-shi'r al-talīmī*). Lyrical poetry represents the majority of poems. This genre also includes a wide range of forms, from panegyric (*al-madīh*) to elegy (*al-rithā'*). Its types include pride (*al-fakhr*), description (*al-wasf*), love (*al-ghazal*), fortitude (*al-hamāsah*), militantism (*shi'r al-jihād*), complaint and nostalgia (*al-shakwā wa al-hanīn*), occasional poetry (*shi'r al-munāsabāt*), and encomiastic verse praising the Prophet Muhammad (*al-madā'ih al-nabawiyyah*).

Hiskett (1975, p. 43) informs us that the origin of the composition of panegyrics can be traced to the days of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Writing in the same vein, Yahya (1997, p. 12) states that though the origin of panegyrics on Prophet Muhammad dates back to the days of the Prophet himself, it did not develop into an independent genre of Arabic literature with its own motifs and class of exponents, until about seven centuries later. It is significant to note that encomiastic works in praise of the Prophet Muhammad (*al-madā'ih al-nabawiyyah*) dominate the writings of the Shaykh. Of his works on this genre are:

- (i). *al-Fayd al-Ahmadī fī 'l-mawlid al-Muhammadī,*
- (ii). *Kanz al-'arīfīn fī madh sayyid al-awwalīn wa 'l-'ākhīrīn,*
- (iii). *al-Majmū'a al-kāmila li-a'māl al-mawlid al-nabawī,*
- (iv). *Majmū' qasā'id al-mawlid al-nabawī,*
- (v). *Manāsik al-widād fī madh khayr al-'ibād,*
- (vi). *Nujum al-hudā fī kawn nabīyyinā afdal man da'ā ilā 'llāh wa-hadā,*
- (vii). *Nur al-basar fī madh sayyid al-bashar,*
- (viii). *Nur al-haqq fī madh alladhī jā' bi'l-sidq,*
- (ix). *Nuzhat al-asmā' wa'l-afkār fī madh al-Amīn wa-ma'āni 'l-Mukhtār*
- (x). *Shifā' al-asqām fī madh Sayyid al-anām*

(e). *Language Pedagogy*

Kitāb al-taṣrīf (The Book of Arabic morphology) is one of the writings of the Shaykh on language pedagogy. It is a book commonly used as prescribed or recommended text for Arabic morphology in Arabic schools throughout Senegal and across the Francophone West African countries. This problem of non availability of suitable textbooks to teach Arabic language to non-Arabs is not peculiar to Senegal. Folorunsho and Iyanda (2020:100) observe that non-availability of suitable textbooks constitutes a serious problem confronting foreign languages learning even in Nigeria. The available textbooks are mostly of foreign authorship written to teach the languages in the first instance to the native speakers of the languages. The Shaykh wrote this book in response to the dearth of suitable Arabic textbooks for effective teaching of Arabic language in Senegal. The work shows diversity in the literary production of the Shaykh.

(f). *Travelogue*

According to Shittu (2013, p. 1), travelogue or travel literature typically records the experiences of an author touring a place for the pleasure of travel. Such literature may be cross-cultural or transnational in focus, or may involve travel to different regions within the same country. Furthermore, it is seen as a document which reveals the traveller's own interests and the purposes behind his travels, in addition to being a record of what he witnesses in the different lands he visited (Shittu,2013, p. 1).Travelogues are therefore collections of practical data about the countries the travellers visit and records of individual events, feelings, emotions, fears, and exceptional changes in dignified prose which inclines to moody artistry that depends on the writer's own viewpoint(Al-Da'mi,1986, p. 135& Humood,2002, p. 2)

The Shaykh developed a transnational charisma within and beyond the West African borders through his evangelical tours and teachings. The travels of the Shaykh to different parts of the world are well documented in his literary productions, mostly in verses. Some of these works are listed here as samples:

Majmū' rihalāt al-shaykh Ibrāhīm

- (i) *Nayl al-mafāz bi'l-'awd ilā 'l-Hijāz*
- (ii) *al-Rihla al-Gannāriyya wa 'l-Kumāshiyya*
- (iii) *Nafahāt al-Malik al-Ghanī fī 'l-siyāha fī ard Bamakū wa-Kunākiri*
- (iv) *Nass al-kalīma allatī alqāhā Ibrāhīm Niyās fī ard Marrākish fī 'l-haflat allati uqīmat fī ihdā' qā'at Jāmi'at al-Qarawīyyīn bi-munāsabat dhikrā taṣīsihā*
- (v) *al-Rihla al-Hijāziyya al-ulā*

(g). *Response to Attacks on Islam*

Of his responses to attacks on Islam is his *Ifriqiyyā li'l-Ifriqiyyīn* (Africa for the Africans). Hunwick (2003, p. 284) describes his *Ifriqiyyā li'l-Ifriqiyyīn* as a rejoinder or response to an article by Archbishop Lefebvre of Dakar which appeared in *La France catholique* of 19 December 1959, attacking Islam and African nationalism. African leaders and freedom fighters under the chairmanship of Gamal Abd al-Nasser of Egypt entrusted the publishing of this book to Shaykh Muhammad al-Awwal a Nigerian disciple of the Shaykh. Abdul-Azeez (2016, p. 407) informs us that Shaykh Muhammad al-Awwal met the Shaykh in the early 50s, and moved to him for further training and guidance in the Tijāniyyah *Sūfī* order. In 1956, he was granted *al-Ijāzah al-Mutlaqah al-Kubrah* (that is authority to operate freely in the affairs of Tijāniyyah), having been made a *Muqaddam* (leader) in the first day of meeting the Shaykh.

(h). *Others*

The Shaykh contributed significantly to other genres, including *Fiqh* (jurisprudence). Of his writings on this genre are *Baḥṭh fī thubūt ru'yat al-hilāl* (on the question of sighting the new moon to mark the beginning of a month (especially Ramadān), *Hadīqat al-anwār fī-mā ihtawā 'alayhi qawā'id al-Islām min al-hikam wa'l-asrār*, *Irshād al-sārīn ilā 'adam al-hārīn* on the question as to whether or not *zakāt* has to be paid on groundnut and *Kashf al-ghumma fī raf' mirā' ulamā' al-umma fī ikhtilāfihim fī- 'l ahilla*, a treatise on the question of establishing agreed dates for the beginning and end of Ramadān.

On *Tawassul* (intercession), he authored *Miftāh al-nasr fī 'l-tawassul bi'l-dhikr*

(poem of intercession through the chapters of the Qur'ān and *Miftāh rahmat al-Rahīm fī 't-tawassul bi-bi'smi 'llāhi ar-Rahmān ar-Rahīm*. He also wrote on general admonition as evidenced in his *Da'wah ilā wahdat al-muslimīn fī 's-Sinighāl*

5. Discussion

5.1. *Literary Appraisal of his Writings*

His works are not only in verses but also in prose. These works reveal the depth of erudition of this scholar and his mastery of the Arabic language, in spite of the fact that French was his mother tongue. An appraisal of the works revealed the mastery of Arabic by Shaykh as well as his commendable discursive ability.

The works fulfill the modern day styles of writing, as applicable to the Arabic works of West African provenance. The subject matter of style is central to Arabic literary production no matter the time or clime to which it is affiliated. In fact, the whole Arabic literary tradition from the classical to the modern times is circumscribed by what could be described as eclecticism. A cursory reading of Arabic literary writings of the Shaykh accentuates this assertion. It is apposite to note the imbrication of his literary works with religious themes. In other words, his Arabic works feature a strong predilection and preference for styles that are embedded in Islamic religious tradition, law and lore.

His writings are free from obscure words and complex constructions. The works portray the Shaykh as possessing a rich repository of vocabularies in Arabic. The reason for this is not far-fetched; the Shaykh had enough exposure to linguistic sciences. The works are free from unnecessary rhetorical embellishments. Another reason that could be given for the simplicity which characterizes his writings is the consciousness of the Shaykh that his works are didactic and this dictates the need to get his ideas across to the audience without hindrance.

6. Conclusion

This study has attempted filling what it perceived as a vacuum in documenting the life of Shaykh Ibrahim ʿal-Kawlahī ʿas-Sinighālī. It focused the literary productions of this Shaykh, an aspect of his life that has not been significantly addressed. The Shaykh was an erudite scholar and a prolific writer. As many as over a hundred works written in Arabic, on various genres, have been attributed to him on various subjects; including jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), Arabic language and literature, Sufism (*Tasawwuf*), panegyrics, travelogue and the life history of the prophet (*Sīrah*). It is instructive for contemporary researchers on Arabic writings of Francophone authorship, to make further research on the Shaykh's other literary productions that are not listed in this study. This will further expose more of the literary inputs of the Shaykh to the English audience as we have rightly done in this work. Also, thematic as well as the stylistic study of these works are viable areas for further research on this prolific Arabic scholar of Francophone ancestry.

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