

BOOK REVIEW

Zachary Valentine Wright. *Realizing Islam: The Tijaniyya in North Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Muslim World*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 326 pp. Map. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-4696-6082-0.

In Europhone scholarship, the long eighteenth century (variously referred to as the “Age of Reason,” “The Enlightenment,” and the “Age of Revolutions”) is often regarded as the foundation of the analytical category of “modernity.” As the site of many modern “myths of origin,” this period of Western European history is thus often studied through the lens of present political and ideological concerns, and the same is true of much scholarship, both Europhone and Arabophone, about Muslim societies, scholars, and movements of this period. As the era that immediately preceded and then witnessed the earliest incursions of colonial conquest and domination by European powers and the rise of various Salafī reform movements, the study of the Islamic world in the eighteenth century has long been colored by presentist ideological agendas seeking to explain “what went wrong” in the Islamic world that allowed or even necessitated European conquest and domination. These narratives of Islamic intellectual decline and decadence have been challenged, if not overturned, by numerous scholarly works over the past decade (e.g., Khaled El-Rouayheb’s *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* [Cambridge University Press, 2015] and Ahmad Dallal’s *Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Thought* [University of North Carolina Press, 2018]).

However, in *Realizing Islam*, Zachary Wright considers the long eighteenth century from the perspective of the tradition of the Tijāniyya, which has been the most popular Sufi order on the African continent for the past century. Seen through this lens, the eighteenth century appears as an era in which various Islamic scholarly, spiritual, and esoteric currents of “verification” (*taḥqīq*) culminated in the emergence of the “paradigmatic sainthood” (142) of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (1737–1815/1150–1230 AH) and his “Muḥammadan Way.”

Drawing on an impressive archive of oral and textual sources (many previously unexamined in Europhone scholarship), as well as secondary literature in Arabic, French, and English, *Realizing Islam* fills what has been a rather embarrassing lacuna in the fields of the history of Islam in Africa and the history of Sufism, as well as African and Islamic intellectual history more broadly: the origins of what is currently one of the most popular Muslim movements in the world that has generated its own subfield of “Tijani studies.” The result of nearly two decades of research on the Tijāniyya and the life and legacy of its founder, this book updates and significantly expands upon Wright’s 2005 Master’s thesis, “On the Path of the Prophet: Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī and the Ṭarīqa al-Muḥammadiya.” It provides important correctives to the monographs of Abun-Nasr (*The Tijaniyya: A Sufi Order in the Modern World* [Oxford University Press, 1965]) and Adnani (*La Tijāniyya, 1781–1881: Les origines d’une confrérie religieuse au Maghreb* [Marsam, 2007]), which, despite their merits, suffer from several historical inaccuracies, decontextualization of primary sources, and unfortunate, racially-charged analyses to “to substantiate an apparent narrative of Tijānī heterodoxy” (10). Wright’s work, conversely, convincingly demonstrates the generally receptive context of the dynamic intellectual, spiritual, and cultural milieu in which Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī and the Tijāniyya emerged.

The first chapter of *Realizing Islam* is a sweeping summary of prominent trends and networks of intellectual and spiritual exchange in the long eighteenth century, from sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa to the Middle East to South and even Southeast Asia. Through a careful consideration of primary and secondary sources on Sufi scholarship of the period, Wright reconstructs a vibrant intellectual milieu in which an emphasis upon *tahqīq* (“verification”) spurred translocal debates about and developments in spiritual training, jurisprudence, ḥadīth, theology, esoteric sciences, and more. Among many important and original contributions, this chapter highlights the significant connections linking scholars and movements in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa with West African and Saharan scholars, illustrating the important role the latter played therein, and the ways in which earlier Islamic scholarship and spirituality in West African centers such as Timbuktu anticipated developments that would become increasingly important in the eighteenth century. These convergences between West African traditions of scholarship and piety and those emanating from the early community of Tijānī scholars is invoked to explain the widespread adoption of the Tijāniyya in the region. Outlining these various and varied intellectual/spiritual currents provides the necessary contextualization for the intellectual biography of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī, which is the subject of Chapter Two.

Relying on the testimonials of Tijānī disciples and autograph manuscripts, as well as a few external (i.e., non-Tijānī) sources, this chapter presents al-Tijānī as a consummate scholar and master/“verifier” of many Islamic sciences, including Sufism. It traces his intellectual and spiritual development and influences, outlining his unique legal methodology on the controversies surrounding sugar, slavery, and smoking (59–61), his

approach to the central theological and Sufi concern of *tawḥīd* (the doctrine of Divine unity), his method, rules of etiquette, and litanies of spiritual training, and the cosmology and traditions in which they took shape. The result is a brief but detailed and richly contextualized scholarly biography that cuts through some of the obfuscations created by later polemical exchanges. As Wright concludes, al-Tijānī's "emergence as a prominent Muslim scholar within the vibrant eighteenth century would not have been possible without demonstrated scholarly capacity in a variety of fields of Islamic learning" (209).

Chapter Three presents Aḥmad al-Tijānī's "understanding of the human condition as an expression of 'Islamic humanism'" (101), revealing the "actualization of humanity" through following the example of, and attaining spiritual closeness with, the Prophet Muḥammad as the central thread of al-Tijānī's thought and practice. Contextualizing the visionary encounters of al-Tijānī and his disciples with the Prophet within the history of similar accounts of earlier Sufis, Wright explores how these encounters were an important aspect of the project of "verification" (*taḥqīq*) of the Islamic sciences as well as the "actualization" (also *taḥqīq*) of the almost unimaginably transcendent human potential, most fully embodied in the person of the Prophet Muḥammad. One important aspect of this "actualization of the human potential" was the recognition and respect for the humanity of all people, believers or not. This account is particularly important, as it outlines one of the main traditions through which African Muslims articulated and cultivated their humanity in the face of the dehumanizing practices and discourses of the slave trade and other colonial and neo-colonial formations.

Chapter Four discusses the history of the Sufi doctrine of the "Seal of Muḥammadan Sainthood" and al-Tijānī's original contributions to this tradition of hagiology, along with the context, importance, and precise meaning of his claim to be the seal of Muḥammadan sanctity, correcting several mischaracterizations in previous scholarship on the topic. Chapter Five turns to the characterization, in Tijānī and other sources, of the socio-political climate of eighteenth-century Ottoman North Africa in particular, and the Muslim world in general, as one of individual and social "corruption" compensated for by "Divine Mercy," particularly the mercy of the Tijāniyya, as a "short-cut" (204) to spiritual realization and blessing (*baraka*), based on the "way of gratitude" (198–206). This chapter includes several fascinating discussions of al-Tijānī's life and activities in Fez, including a brief discussion of women in the early Tijānī community (204), al-Tijānī's enjoyment of music (196), liberality in feeding guests (one famous disciple claimed to have first come to al-Tijānī because of the good food offered at his residence [203]), reception and significant influence among the scholars of Fez (184–192), and relationship with the Moroccan Sultan, Mawlay Sulaymān (192–197).

The work's conclusion helpfully reviews the main points of earlier chapters, illustrating how al-Tijānī confounds many of the characterizations of "later frameworks that fail to comprehend the broader intellectual trends of the period and the contributions of some of its most notable scholars" (208).

Al-Tijānī was not a prolific author, but his oral commentaries, teaching, and spiritual instruction have proved immensely influential across a variety of disciplines, and he, like most other prominent scholars of the period, was deeply committed to a Sufi reform project grounded in Islamic law, Qur'an, and ḥadīth, and profoundly informed by “direct connection with the living spiritual presence of the Prophet Muḥammad” (210). After a brief discussion of al-Tijānī's legacy and the recent history of the Tijāniyya and its spread throughout West Africa and around the world, Wright concludes by summarizing the main themes and arguments of the work: “From the perspective of followers of the Tijāniyya, then, the eighteenth century may appear as a sort of bridge between the Islamic tradition and the modern age. Scholars such as Aḥmad al-Tijānī saw themselves as verifying the essential truths of the inherited Muslim intellectual legacy and bequeathing it again to subsequent generations. Such scholars no doubt hoped that later Muslims, despite living in an age of insecurity and corruption, would find in their efforts a revived appreciation and connection to the beauty of Islam” (216).

A landmark study, *Realizing Islam* is characterized by a rare combination of appreciation for both historical detail and the metaphysical subtleties of Sufi doctrine, and the prose is simultaneously accessible and profound. While certain translation choices and the utility of the book's use of exogenous analytic categories such as “the eighteenth century” (as opposed to the twelfth or thirteenth century Hijri) or “religious identity” could be debated, there is no question that Wright's work constitutes a significant and important intervention in the fields of Islamic intellectual history, the history of Islam in Africa, and Sufi studies, taking its place alongside works such as Rüdiger Seesemann's *The Divine Flood*, Cheikh Anta Babou's *Fighting the Greater Jihad*, Vincent Cornell's *Realm of the Saint*, R.S. O'Fahey's *Enigmatic Saint*, and Claude Addas' *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, which all use Sufi biographical and hagiographical material to construct compelling and nuanced intellectual and social histories surrounding their subjects. Wright makes a compelling case for his methodology in handling so-called hagiographical or “internal” sources in the book's introduction (14), and while this history of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī and the Tijāniyya is predominantly influenced by the perspective and tradition of Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé (d. 1975) and his successors, Wright has done an admirable job drawing on a wide array of sources, supporting his conclusions thoroughly with documentary evidence, and frequently acknowledging alternative interpretations and accounts where they exist. *Realizing Islam* will doubtlessly serve as a foundation and model for many future studies of African and Islamic intellectual history.

Oludamini Ogunnaike 
 University of Virginia
 Charlottesville, Virginia
 oo4qw@virginia.edu

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Harrow, Kenneth W. 1987. "The Power and the Word: L'Aventure Ambiguë and The Wedding of Zein." *African Studies Review* 30 (1): 63–78. doi:10.2307/524504.
- Mahmud, Sakah Saidu. 2004. "Nigeria." *African Studies Review* 47 (2): 83–95. doi:10.1017/S0002020600030882.
- Villalón, Leonardo A. 2004. "Senegal." *African Studies Review* 47 (2): 61–71. doi:10.1017/S0002020600030869.