

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE EXEGETICAL LITERATURE (*TAFĀSĪR*) OF
'ABD ALLĀH B. FŪDĪ AND IBRĀHĪM NIASSE¹

By

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Abstract

This article is a critical introduction to two important exegetical literature by two West African scholars: the *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* of 'AbdAllāh b. Fūdī (c. 1766-1829) and *Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr li'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm* of Ibrāhīm Niasse (c. 1900-1975). These scholars and their scholarly contributions to the Islamic intellectual history of West Africa represent two of the most popular and widely recognized authoritative traditions in Islamic Africa – one from one of the "founding fathers" of the Sokoto Caliphate and the other from the *ḥayda Tijāniyya* of the Tijāniyya Sufi order.

Key Words: Qur'an, *Tafsīr*, Islam, Muslim, West Africa

INTRODUCTION

Literary works of Muslim scholars from West Africa have largely been relegated to the periphery of Islamic and Arabic studies. For example, in the field of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), most academic works have focussed on Middle Eastern, North African, Indo-Pak and Iranian scholarship. Given the neglect of the contributions of West African intellectual figures, this article is a contribution to the field by way of introduction of two important exegetical literatures (*tafsīr*) by two West African Muslim namely the *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* of 'AbdAllāh b. Fūdī (Fodio) (c. 1766-1829) and *Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr li'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm* of Ibrāhīm Niasse (c. 1900-1975). The scholars lived between the 18th and 20th centuries in Nigeria and Senegal respectively.

¹A large part of this article is extracted from the MA Thesis this author submitted titled *An Analytical and Comparative Study of Jews in the Qur'an in Two West African Tafsīrs*, University of Johannesburg, South Africa (2015)

The selection of these scholars and their works is due to the understanding that their works represent two of the most popular and widely recognized authoritative traditions in Islamic Africa – one from one of the "founding fathers" of the Sokoto Caliphate and the other from the *fayḍa Tijāniyya* (the prediction by the founder of the Tijāniyya Sufi order that many people will join the order through a person considered as the divine flood) (Brigaglia, 2009: 335–361).² It could be argued that virtually a large majority of West African Muslims hold one or both of these traditions in high esteem as they represent two peaks in Islamic learning, spirituality and political thought. The *tafsīr* of Ibn Fodio could be categorized under the genre of *tafsīr* known as *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* (exegesis via tradition/narrations) while the *tafsīr* of Niassa is more likely to be classified in the category of *tafsīr* genre known as the *tafsīr bi'l-ishāra* (allegorical exegesis).

THE GENRES OF TAFSĪR

Tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr/riwāya: This genre of *tafsīr* is the most common kind of *tafsīr*. Farid Esack describes this as “the bedrock of what is viewed as orthodox exegesis and represents the most commonly accepted mode of transmission” (2005: 131). The word *ma'thūr* is from the root *'-th-r* where the word *athar* is derived from. And *athar* in the Arabic language means a report, transmission, quote, among others (Wehr, 1976: 3–4). It is usually used to refer to Ḥadīth. For example, if it is said that a statement or report (*ḥadīth*) is *ma'thūr*, it means such a statement is *manqūl* (transmitted or reported – from *n-q-l*). However, in the science of *tafsīr*, it relates to the transmission/report (*naql*) of speech from God in the Qur'an, from the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad, his Companions and the immediately succeeding generation (*tābi'īn*) ('Abd al-Mawjūd et al in al-Zamakhsharī, 1998: 79).

² Different writers use different spellings for the last names of the two scholars including Ibn Fodio, Ibn Fūdī (Arabic), Ibn Foduye and Ibn Fodiyo for 'AbdAllāh b. Fodio and Niass, Niassa and Inyās for Ibrāhīm Niassa. However, the commonly used ones are Fodio and Niassa. They are the ones used in this article.

The narrations in the genre of *tafsīrbi`l-ma`thūr* assumes that there is a body of literature from the Prophet's tradition, the statements of his Companions and their Successors which were handed down from one generation to another without being altered by the discernment, reason, selection or rejection of the transmitters (Esack, 2005: 131). It is important to note that this genre of exegesis did not, as often assumed, start with Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310) although his *tafsīr* is the most widely known of this genre. Rather it started with earlier scholars such as Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161), Yazīd b. Hārūn (d. 117), Sufyān b. `Uyayna (d. 198) among others. However, no other exegesis in this genre of *tafsīr* has reached the level of "authenticity" like the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī titled *Jāmi` al-bayān`anta`wīl al-Qur`ān* (Esack, 2005: 131). This genre of *tafsīr* looks at the different modes of recitation (*qirā`āt*), Arabic rhetoric (*bayān*), linguistic meanings (*lughā*), occasions of revelation (*asbābal-nuzūl*), abrogation and the abrogated (*al-nāsikhwa`l-mansūkh*) among others. Ibn Fodio's commentary belongs to this category of exegesis.

Tafsīrbi`l-ishāra: This genre of *tafsīr* is based on the esoteric interpretations of the Qur'an. It is common among the Sufis. The Sufis, widely claim that the Qur'an "has a deeper and more inward meaning" which is available only through mystical knowledge/intuition (*ma`rifā*) (Esack, 2005: 134). This genre is characterized by its focus on metaphysical and philosophical ideas as well as eschatology and spiritual experiences and struggles (ibid).

However, this genre of *tafsīr* faced a great deal of criticism from different scholars of exegesis before it later became accepted as one of the dominant form of "orthodox" exegesis. It is worth noting that, its acceptance into "orthodoxy" is however not free from conditions such as: its interpretation must not contradict the supposedly 'clear meanings' of the verses of the Qur'an; and that it avoids issues relating to creed and legal rulings in the Qur'an (Qadhi, 1999: 335).

Despite these conditions, some scholars do not accept it as exegesis. Prominent examples of this kind of *tafāsīr* include the *Rūḥ al-Bayān* by Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī (d. 1725) and *Tafsīr al-Tustarī* by Sahl al-Tustarī (c. 818–896). The *tafāsīr* of Niassa belongs to this genre of exegesis.

In the following sections, I discuss the biographies of Ibn Fodio and Niassa: the times and places of their births and origin, education, their impact, works and roles they played in the history of Islamic West Africa. I also introduce their *tafāsīr*, works that were influential in their exegetical thought, some of their features among others.

BIOGRAPHY OF ABŪ MUḤAMMAD ‘ABD ALLĀH B. MUḤAMMAD FODIO

Fodio in Fulfulde is used as a title to address learned people and it also means ‘a learned person’ or ‘jurist’ (Ibn Fodio, n.d., 8).³ Ibn Fodio is known by the emblematic nickname of *al-Ustādh* (the teacher) (cf. al-Ajṭal, n.d., 9). Unlike his brother, ‘Uthmān Dan Fodio (d. 1817), Ibn Fodio is not known by honorific names and titles. He was born to a Fulani family in the Northwest of today’s Nigeria. It is reported that the Fulanis of the family of Ibn Fodio originally came from the area called Futa-Toro in present day Senegal to the Hausa lands of Nigeria (ibid).⁴ There are several theories regarding the origin of the Fulani people. In his *Īdā‘ al-Nusūkh* (*The Repository of Texts*), Ibn Fodio records that the Fulanis are the descendants of African Christians of the Roman Empire (n.d., 10). The Fulanis are also reported to be descended from ‘Uqba b. ‘Āmir (d. 58/678). Ibn ‘Āmir was reported to have married the daughter of the king of a tribe of African Christians after his embrace of Islam (al-Ajṭal, n.d., 9-10; Ibn Fodio, n.d., 10). It is from this union the Fulani tribe emerged (Ibn Fodio n.d., 10). Al-Ajṭal records another tradition that claims

³ Fodio was the honorific of the father of Abdullah b. Fodio. He mentions this in his *Īdā‘ al-Nusūkh* (n.d., 8).

⁴ Due to political and social developments in that part of the world, the “Fulbes” (Fulanis) had to migrate. It is reported that in the fourteenth century, immigrant “Fulbes” reached the Hausa lands and that in the sixteenth century, there was substantial number of them in the Hausa lands (cf. Abubakar, 1977:29).

that the Fulanis are from the Children of Israel (*banīlsrā'īl*) (al-Ajṭal, n.d., 9-10).⁵ Muḥammad Bello's *Infāq al-maysūr* complicates this origin by the lacking specificity of the person of the 'Uqba: 'Uqba b. 'Āmir, or 'Uqba b. Yāsir or 'Uqba b. Nāfi'.

Ibn Fodio started studying at an early age under the tutelage of his father. At the age of thirteen, he became a student under the guidance and tutelage of his older brother, 'Uthmān, who mentored him in different sciences of Islam and influenced his views on politics. He also studied under his mother and maternal grandmother, both of whom were from a scholarly family (Ibn Fodio, n.d., 4). In the introduction to *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl*, Abū Bakr Maḥmūd, the biographer of Ibn Fodio, says he studied Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Ḥadīth (prophetic traditions), poetry (*shī'r*), Arabic prosody ('*arūd* and *qawāfi'*), principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), Arabic grammar (*naḥw*), Arabic rhetoric (*balāgha*), and morphology (*ṣarf*) under the tutelage of his brother (Ibn Fodio, n.d., 4; al-Ajṭal, n.d., 11). However, the most important teacher in the later part of Ibn Fodio's life as a student was Jibrīl b. 'Umar who taught both 'Uthmān and Ibn Fodio and had a very significant influence in the lives of the two scholars (al-Ajṭal, n.d.:13). It was from Ibn 'Umar that Ibn Fodio and 'Uthmān acquired their revolutionary fervour (Bugaje, 1980: 6). Ibn Fodio was an *Ash'arī* by creed.⁶ He was Mālikīn

⁵ This is mentioned by al-Ajṭal (n.d., 9) and Abu Bakr Maḥmūd (the biographer of Ibn Fodio in his *tafsīr*) (n.d., 3) without providing reference. The former, however, bases his reference on the latter. On the other hand, Ibn Fodio does not mention this in his *Īdā' al-Nusūkh*.

⁶ One of the major schools of scholastic Sunni theology, it takes its name from its founder Abū Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (c. 260/873-330/941), a former proponent of Mu'tazilite theology. al-Ash'arī was a student of one of the staunchest scholars of the Mu'tazilite school, Abū Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 303/915). al-Ash'arī is reported to have turned against the Mu'tazilite school after seeing the Prophet Muhammad in his dream (Nasr, 2006: 124). He developed a theology that uses reason in defense of tenets of the Islamic faith and "yet remained loyal to the dicta of revelation while making use of dialectic" (ibid., 124-125). Al-Ash'arī sought to create a balance between the Mu'tazilite "rationalists" who subjected revelation to reason and those who were considered the "externalists" that rejected the place of reason completely and applied external meanings in their interpretations of the Qur'an and Ḥadīth (ibid). He debated the Mu'tazilites on their five principles (*uṣūl al-khamsa*) which are the issues of unity (*al-tawḥīd*), justice (*al-'adl*), commanding good and forbidding evil (*al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'l-nahy 'an al-munkar*), the promise and the threat (*al-wa'd wa'l-wā'id*) and the in-between position of a Muslim who commits a sin (*al-manzilabayna al-manzilatayn*) (Watt, 1985: 48-52; Nasr, 2006: 122-123). A major point of contention between the Ash'arītes and the Mu'tazilites was the issue of the createdness of the Qur'an. While the former believed that the Qur'an is uncreated

jurisprudence.⁷ And a *Qādirīn* the Islamic spiritual tradition (*taṣawwuf*).⁸ He was indeed a scholar par excellence who excelled in all the major Islamic disciplines and could be said to be well-versed in knowledge.

Ibn Fodio is said to have authored over a hundred works – some published and others still in manuscript form. He wrote on various Islamic sciences such as Arabic grammar (*naḥw*) and poetry, Qur’anic exegesis, and politics. Among his books are *al-Baḥr* (a thousand-verse poem showing its excellence/superiority over the poem written by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī on grammar), *al-Ḥiṣn al-Raṣīn*, *Miftāḥli’l-Tafsīr* (a versified introduction to the study of Qur’anic exegesis

and eternal and that the ink with and paper on which it was written were created, the latter held the contrary view. al-Ash‘arī believed that the Qur’an is the speech of God which is an attribute of Him just like other attributes but distinct in some sense from God’s essence. Mu‘tazilites, however, dismiss the claim that there are other attributes of apart from the unity of God (God’s Absolute Unicity). They claim that attributes such as seeing, hearing, speaking which are attributed to God have no reality of their own and that these attributes are all in one, in the Divine Essence (Watt, 1985: 66; Nasr, 2006: 122-125). Cf. Watt (1985) and Nasr (2006).

⁷ One of the four Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence named after Malik b. Anas (d. 179), who was also known as the *Imām* of *dār al-Hijra* (home of the Prophet’s emigration) and *Imām* of Medina (Cf. Schacht, 1991: 262-265). The jurisprudential theory and rulings of the school are largely based on the actions of the people of Medina (*‘amalahl al-Madina*). Many of these rulings are derived from the rulings passed down by famous Medinan scholars known as the seven jurists (*fuqahā al-sab‘*) among whom were Sa‘īd b. Musayyib (d. 93), ‘Urwa b. Zubayr (d. 94), Abū Bakr b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 94). Like other Sunni schools of jurisprudence, the Maliki doctrine is based on the Qur’an, *Sunna* and *Ijmā‘* (consensus). However, the *Sunna* for Malik is not only the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad but also constitutes that of the Companions. The *Ijmā‘* on the other hand is based on the consensus of the Muslims particularly the unanimous practise of the people of Medina (which is the *‘amal*) (Cottart, 1991: 278-279). For Malik, the *ḥadīth* in some cases is given lesser authority when it conflicts with the *‘amal* of the people of Medina (ibid). And personal judgement (*ra’y*) could be introduced when the *ijmā‘* cannot provide answer to a question. However, this (*ra’y*) is only applied as long as the procedure does not conflict or harm public interest/good (*maslaḥa*) (ibid). The spread of the Maliki School in West Africa was through the Almoravid conquest of the Takrūr (Futa Toro) down to Ghana and other parts of the Sūdān. Many Muslims in the black African states such as Nigeria, Chad, Senegal and Mali follow Maliki jurisprudence (Cottart, 1991: 281).

⁸ The Qādirī order is the earliest Sufī order to appear in form of a *ṭarīqa* (pl. *ṭuruq*). It was founded by ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (c. 1077-1166), a Ḥanbalī scholar. Al-Jīlānī was born at Nīf in Persia but lived and died in Baghdad, Iraq. He was called the Rose of Baghdad (Shah 1968: 126). It is claimed that his order is an offshoot of the *ṭarīqa* of Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd al-Baḥdādī (d. 910) (Stoddart and Nicholson 1998: 39-41). His *ṭarīqa* has spread all over the world and is influential in many parts of the Muslim world (Schimmel, 1975: 244). It is reported that the order was introduced to the Far West (*al-Maghrib al-Aqṣā*) through AbūMadyān al-Ghawth (d. 594/1198). The order is said to have branched into different branches such as the Bakkā’iyya-Kuntiyya and the Fāḍiliyya. The former branch peaked with Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1226/1811) which later extended through his students from the Southern Shinqīt (in Mauritania) to the *bilād al-Sūdān* (al-Naḥwīn.d., 132-134). The *ṭarīqa* was arguably the only *ṭarīqa* in the *Bilād al-Sūdān* before the emergence of other Sufī orders such as the Tijāniyya and Murīdiyya. Annemarie Schimmel writes that it had “a decisive influence in the Islamization of West Africa” (1975: 248). Many of the reform movements’ scholars such as al-Kuntī and the “founding fathers” of the Sokoto caliphate were affiliated to the *ṭarīqa*. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ‘Abdallah Baṭrān titles al-Kuntī as the founding father of the Qādirīyya order in West Africa (1971: 2).

based on the *al-Itqānfi'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* and the *al-Nuqāya-* of al-Suyūṭī). He also wrote commentaries on many books in various genres such as the book on creed titled *al-'Aqīda al-Wuṣṭā* of Muḥammad b. Yusūf al-Sanūsī (d. 1490). It is claimed that he wrote books on every Islamic discipline – either in the form of prose, poetry, commentary or marginal notes (Maḥmūd in Ibn Fodio, n.d., 5). In the field of *tafsīr*, Ibn Fodio writes that he studied the entire Qur'an under his brother 'Uthmān from the first chapter of the Qur'an (*Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* – The Opening) to the last chapter (*Sūrat al-Nās*– The People) (ibid).

He has two *tafāsīr* to his credit: a longer one called *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl* and a shorter one, titled *Kifāyat al-Du'afā' al-Sūdān*. The *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl* is mostly recognized in West Africa such as in Nigeria, Senegal, Mauritania, and widely read in scholarly and religious circles during the month of Ramaḍān. However, despite the significance of these *tafāsīr*, they have not received much scholarly attention. This is because scholarly works on Ibn Fodio have mostly been confined to his political thought and military campaigns. The intellectual dimensions of his oeuvre, such as his exegeses (*tafāsīr*) have largely been neglected. Furthermore, the legacy of Ibn Fodio's older brother, 'Uthmān, has overshadowed the former's life and work, relegating 'AbdAllāh to the periphery of contemporary scholarship.

Maḥmūd cites the *Infāq al-maysūr* of Muhammad Bello (d. 1837) in describing Ibn Fodio as the vizier of his brother ('Uthmān) and the closest to him (cited in Ibn Fodio, n.d., 4; al-Ajṭaln.d., 11). Together with his brother, Ibn Fodio played a very significant role in the founding of the Sokoto caliphate⁹ of Northern Nigeria. They both engaged in the reform movements and military

⁹ The Sokoto caliphate was established by 'Uthmān ḍān Fodio, and supported by his brother and son, Ibn Fodio and Muḥammad Bello respectively among others. This was accomplished through several military expeditions (*jihād*) which swept across many parts of the northern states of Nigeria. Several reasons led to these military expeditions such as 'Uthmān's desire to propagate pristine Islam in the territories of Bawa, the King of Gobir (*SarkinGobir*) where 'Uthmān lived (Hiskett, 1957: 563). Furthermore, 'Uthman and his followers wanted to rid the Sūdān of what were regarded as reprehensible innovations and corruptions amongst the leadership of the region, such as levying taxes forbidden by the *sharī'a* and practicing pre-Islamic Hausa rites of kingship. Some 'Ulamā' were also said to be

expeditions of the 18th century that swept across the *Bilād al-Sūdān* (lit. ‘lands of the Blacks’ – West Africa)¹⁰ (al-Ajṭal, n.d., 11-12). Ibn Fodio is considered as one of the “founding fathers” of the Sokoto caliphate (Weiss, 2002: 178-179).

ABDULLAHI IBN FODIO’S BIRTH

Abdullahi Ibn Fodio was born in the town of Marnona, a few kilometres from the present Sokoto town, North-western Nigeria in 1766.¹¹ He lived during a time of general insecurity in the *Bilād al-Sūdān*. This was largely due to the destruction that resulted from the collapse of the Songhai Empire and the Moroccan and Portuguese sacking of the town of Timbuktu. Usman Bugaje summarises this period (17th – 18th centuries) as characterized by:

.... interstate warfare with its effect on security, commerce and learning. The resulting chaotic and desperate situation gave a receding paganism a chance to resurface leading to syncretism, stagnation and in the absence of the *sharia*, oppression by the rulers. In Hausa-land the situation in the 17th and 18th centuries appear to be even worse. The Hausa states were plunged into inter-state internecine warfare with its devastating effects on the economy and learning. Pagan beliefs and practices in the face of a growing ignorance was fostering syncretism and weakening the moral fibre of the society. In the circumstances the rulers found it easy to trample upon the *sharia* and impose all sort of taxes and unleash a reign of terror (cited in Dan Fuduye, 1998: 21).

involved in unIslamic activities with the leaders of Gobir. For example, after the death of Bawa, his son, Yunfa, the king of Gobir (who was a former student of ‘Uthmān in the latter’s day as a teacher in the court of the Sultan of Gobir) is said to have opposed the views of ‘Uthmān and ordered women to take off their veils and prohibited men from covering their turbans. Yunfa’s fear that ‘Uthmān and his group were gaining more power and authority led him to plot to assassinate ‘Uthmān. This led to the migration of ‘Uthmān and his followers to a place outside Gobir. It is reported that some groups of people in the Sūdān who were also harassed by Tuaregs in the Sūdān joined forces with ‘Uthmān and his followers (cf. Milsome, 1968: 1-35). Several battles ensued between ‘Uthmān and Yunfa, the king of Gobir. ‘Uthmān and his group won these battles and succeeded in establishing a “state” based on Islamic governance. As Cottart puts it that during this period, theocratic monarchies were established following victories by reformist and revivalist scholars such as ‘Uthmān leading to the establishment of the empire of Sokoto among other states in West Africa (1999: 281).

¹⁰*Bilād al-Sūdān* is translated a ‘lands of the blacks’ and, in some cases, ‘the Hausa lands’. Hausa lands have often been referred to by 19th century Sokoto writers as *Bilād al-Hausiyya* and sometimes *al-Hausiyya al-Sudāniyya*. For example, ‘Abd al-Qādir b. al-Muṣṭafā titled his book *Ba‘ḍ Akhbār Hādhihi al-Bilād Hausiyya al-Sudāniyya*. Sometimes the words *Hausiyya* and *Sudāniyya* are used interchangeably. In a work of ‘Uthmāndan Fodio titled *Nasā’ih al-Umma al-Muhammadiyya li Bayān al-Firaq al-Shayṭāniyya aallatī Zaharat fī Bilādīnā al-Sudāniyya*, it shows the word *bilād al-Sūdān* used to describe the Hausa lands.

¹¹ See Mukhtar Umar Bunza, *Gwandu Emirate: The Domain of Abdullahi Fodiyo Since 1805*, GEDA: Amal Press, Kaduna, 2016, p. 77.

In addition to the problems mentioned by Bugaje, the persecution that led to the migration of the community of ‘Uthmān and, of course, Ibn Fodio, also led to the military campaigns which eventually resulted to the theocratic governance in northern Nigeria mentioned above. Ibn Fodio accompanied his brother, ‘Uthmān, in their revivalist and reformist movement and participated in many military expeditions to put an end to what was regarded as pagan beliefs and the corruption that existed among the Islamic clerics (*malams*), irreligious practises, unjust leadership of the leader/ruler (*sarakuna*) of Gobir and what they regarded as reprehensible innovations in *Bilād al-Sūdān* (Shagari and Boyd, 1978: 5). Many people from different races and classes joined ‘Uthmān and Ibn Fodio for the cause in which they fought (Shagari and Boyd, 1978: 5; al-Ajtāl, n.d., 13), a cause which spread far and wide to different West African cities (particularly in the Northwestern parts of Nigeria).

ABDULLAHI IBN FODIO AND *TAFSĪR*

In the field of *tafsīr*, Ibn Fodio completed two *tafāsīr*, i.e. *Ḍiyā’ al-Ta’wīl fī Ma’ānī al-Tanzīl* roughly translated as “the light of interpretation in the meanings of revelation” and *Kifāyat al-Du’āfā’ al-Sūdān*. The title of the former which is part focus of this article could have been influenced by the *tafsīr*, *Lubāb al-Ta’wīl fī Ma’ānī al-Tanzīl* (the core of inner/symbolic interpretation in the meanings of revelation) of the Sufi scholar ‘Alā al-Dīn ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Baghdādī (d. 741/1340) known as al-Khāzin. However, the only difference in the two titles is the use of *Lubāb* (core/essence) and *Ḍiyā’* (light) by al-Khāzin and Ibn Fodio respectively. Ibn Fodio makes several references to the *tafsīr* of al-Khāzin in his *Ḍiyā’ al-Ta’wīl*. The *Ḍiyā’ al-Ta’wīl* is the first complete commentary, comprising four volumes, on the Qur’an written by a scholar. And according to Andrea Brigaglia, it is the most important work of Qur’anic exegesis

to have emerged from West Africa (Brigaglia, 2009:13) and widely regarded as Ibn Fodio's magnum opus. The *Kifāyat al-Du'afā'* as Brigaglia puts it "is meant at popularizing the essentials of the exegetical traditions for a wider public" (ibid).

In his introduction, Ibn Fodio mentions that he decided to write the *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīlas* the need for the *tafsīr* from some interested people (students) became increasingly apparent to him. The need for it, he claims, was their quest in understanding the book of God (the Qur'an) by relying on the correct opinions/interpretations, while being aware of the variant styles or modes of recitation of the Qur'an (Maḥmūd in Ibn Fodio, n.d., 7). Perhaps there were recitations regarded by Ibn Fodio as unacceptable in vogue and his followers wanted to clearly differentiate between those and what they regarded as authentic variant modes of recitation and writing. Ibn Fodio also says that he was urged to write the *tafsīr* to provide an understanding of jurisprudential rulings derived from the Qur'an based on the Mālikī School of jurisprudence.¹² Also the *Warsh* style of recitation as narrated by Nāfi',¹³ and practises of the people in the *bilād al-Sūdān*.

In his *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl*, Ibn Fodio demonstrates his expertise in the science of *tafsīr*. He identifies the fine points of the Arabic language, mentions the positions of several prominent earlier

¹² Ibn Fodio is implying that he was asked by some of the students of his community to write a commentary of the Qur'an by explaining the jurisprudential rulings (*aḥkām*) of the verses of the Qur'an related to law. The rulings on issues of law based on the Mālikī school which is the law practised by the people of West Africa. Commentaries such as the *Aḥkām al-Qur'an* of Qādī Abū Bakr al-'Arabī (d. 468/1076) are commentaries largely dedicated to jurisprudential rulings of some verses of the Qur'an. His *tafsīr* on the issue of law is mostly based on the rulings of the Mālikī School.

¹³ In the science of Qur'anic recitation (*qirā'āt*), two styles of recitation are reported to have been transmitted by Nāfi' b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Na'īm (d. 169). These are *Warsh* and *Qālūn*. These two styles of recitation were further transmitted by 'Uthmān b. Sa'īd al-Quṭbī (c. 110- 197) and 'Isā b. Minā al-Zarqī (c. 120-220) respectively. These recitations were commonly recited in Medina hence they were taken up and spread by many adherents of the Maliki School of jurisprudence. Presently, the recitations are read by North and West Africans. The *Qālūn* is commonly read and recited in Tunisia and Libya and *Warsh* in Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and most West African countries such as Senegal, Mali and Nigeria. There are other styles of recitations as well that are reported to have been transmitted by different scholars such as the *Khalaf* by Ḥamza b. Ḥabīb al-Kūfī (d. 156/772), the *al-Laythby* 'Alī b. Ḥamza al-Kisā'ī (d. 189/804) among others. These recitations are based on the narration that the Qur'an is revealed in seven modes (*ahruf*) (cf. Ibn Anas, n.d., 201; al-Zarkashī, 1980: 237).

scholars of *tafsīr*, points out the different variant readings of the Qur'an and pays attention to legal issues in the Qur'an as well as the proper method of reading it (Zahradeen, 1976: 275). Ibn Fodio includes in the *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl* the dominant opinions of the Mālikī School of jurisprudence and in some cases, opinions from other schools (Gwandu, 2004: 5). The *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl*, however, has gained more recognition than the *Kifāyat al-Ḍu'afā'*. Zahradeen and Gwandu suggest that the *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl* was written for the educated and advanced students (1976: 275; 2004: 5).

In his article, *The Influence of Tafsīr al-Jalālayn on Some Notable Nigerian Mufasssīrūn*, (2000) Sulaiman Musa says that some Nigerian scholars are of the opinion that the *tafsīr* works of other Nigerian 'ulamā' are merely extractions from the sixteenth-century concise exegetical work popularly known as *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* written by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 1459) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505)¹⁴ (Musa, 2000: 325). This assertion could include the *tafsīr* of Ibn Fodio. The *Jalālayn* indeed had a great impact in the tradition of exegesis in West Africa and as Brigaglia puts it, was "the source that enjoyed universal recognition as the 'authentic', essential core of *tafsīr*," (Brigaglia, 2009: 345). Ibn Fodio's interaction with the works of al-Suyūṭī shows in his versification and commentaries on some of the latter's works in the field of *tafsīr* and Arabic grammar such as *al-Itqān* and *al-Baḥr* and how they possibly had an impact on him. On the other hand, as Zahradeen, points out, the *Ḍiyā' al-Ta'wīl* was based on other works of exegesis apart from the *Jalālayn*. He mentions other *tafsīr* such as the *Ghāyat al-Amānī* of al-Kurānī (d. 893/1488), the *Jawāhir al-Ḥisān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'an* of al-Tha'ālibī (d. 875/1470), the *Muḥarrar al-Wajīz fī Tafsīr al-Kitāb al-Azīz* of Ibn 'Aṭīyya (d. 546/1151), the *Aḥkām al-Qur'an* of

¹⁴ The *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* was authored by al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī. The former, a teacher of the latter, started the commentary then passed away. However, his student, al-Suyūṭī continued from where he stopped finishing the commentary to the last chapter (*Sūrat al-Nās*). It is for this reason the *tafsīr* is called commentary of the two *Jalāls* (*Jalālayn*). The *tafsīr* is known for its easy accessibility due to its concise size and language style.

Abū Bakr b. al-‘Arabī (d. 468/1076) (1976:275).¹⁵The *Ḍiyā’ al-Ta’wīl* of Ibn Fodio is undoubtedly a model for many scholars and students of Qur’anic studies.¹⁶Brigaglia includes it among many of the texts in the field of *tafsīr* often quoted and consulted by scholars of oral *tafsīr* performance in the region (Brigaglia, 2009: 359).¹⁷ In Zahardeen’s words, “the contribution of ‘AbdAllāh to *tafsīr* was highly esteemed by the ‘ulamā’ in Hausaland and this was transmitted to later generations” (1976: 276).

BIOGRAPHY OF IBRAHIM NIASSE

Niasse, a celebrated Sufi scholar, was born in the year 1900 to the family of ‘AbdAllāh Niasse (c. 1845-1922) in the small town of Kosi, not far from the city of Kaolack in Senegal. He was known by many sobriquets among which are ‘Shaykh al-Islam’, ‘Baye’, ‘Barhama’, ‘Mawlānā’ and ‘AbūIshāq’.¹⁸Niasse, however, is more known by the title ‘*Shaykh al-Islam*’ (Seesemann, 2011: 1–49).

Niasse was born at the time when most North and West African countries (Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal, etc.) were French colonies and the colonialist’ projects in most parts of Africa were at their peak. Niasse started his early studies of Islam under the tutelage of his father

¹⁵ John Hunwick mentions the *Lubāb al-Ta’wīl fi Ma’ānī al-Tanzīl* of al-Khāzin, *Anwār al-Tanzīl* (Lights of Revelation) of al-Bayḏāwī (d. 700/1301), the *Tashīl li ‘Ulūm al-Tanzīl* of Ibn Juzayy al-Kalbī (d. 741/1340) among others as commentaries that are found in the libraries of West African scholars (2001: 32).

¹⁶ According to Brigaglia the unpublished *tafsīr*, *Tanwīr al-Janān fi Tabwīb Ḍiyā’ al-Ta’wīl li-Ibrāz Jawāhir al-Qur’ān* of Muḥammad al-Nāṣir Kabara (c. 1912-1996) is largely based on the *tafsīr* of Ibn Fodio. Hunwick writes that copies of the *Ḍiyā’ al-Ta’wīl* have been found in libraries in different parts of North and West Africa such as Morocco, Ivory Coast, etc. (2001: 32).

¹⁷ The *Ḍiyā’ al-Ta’wīl* is read in many parts of West Africa such as Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Mauritania during the month of Ramaḏān. In this author’s experience in Mauritania, reading any *tafsīr* in Ramaḏān other than the *Ḍiyā’ al-Ta’wīl* is considered as leaving the widely practised tradition (*mukhālafatal-‘āda*).

¹⁸ ‘*Shaykh al-Islam*’ is a title mostly reserved for very knowledgeable scholars, ‘*Baye*’ means father in Wolof and ‘*Mawlānā*’ means ‘our master’. The latter is also used to address Muslim scholars, especially Sufi shaykhs. In the Indo-Pak context, it is used for graduates from traditional Islamic seminaries. As for the name AbūIshāq, this is because the Qur’anic Ibrahim (Abraham) was the father of Ishāq (Isaac) and Arabs address their fellow men by nicknaming them with the name of their first son prefixed by Abu (which means father). Thus ‘Ibrahim’ becomes ‘AbūIshāq’.

‘AbdAllāh, (d. 1922) who was a revered scholar.¹⁹ At an early age, Niasse memorized the Qur’an and studied the major sciences of Islamic disciplines under the tutelage of his father. Niasse was a Mālikī²⁰ in jurisprudence, an *Ash‘arī* in creed²¹ and a Tijānī in spiritual practice. He practised agriculture in the early stages of his life and lived from its proceeds.

Niasse was from the Wolof people of Senegal, a language largely spoken by many in Senegal and was very fluent in Arabic. His knowledge of Arabic was not limited to his fluency or oratory, as is evident from his scholarly works in different sciences such as Sufism and poetry, among others. Niasse started writing from the early age of twenty. Among the books he authored are the *al-Dawāwīn al-Sitt*, *Maqāmāt al-Dīn al-Thalāth*, *Kāshif al-Ilbas‘anFayḍat al-KhatmAbī al-‘Abbās*. In the *Kāshif al-Ilbās*, Niasse gives a comprehensive justification for his claim as the possessor of the Divine Flood (*Ṣāhib al-Fayḍa*) of the Tijāniyya²² *ṭarīqa*.²² al-Tijānī, eponym of the order reportedly predicted about the *fayḍa*.²³

NIASSE AND *TAFSĪR*

¹⁹ Another scholar who had a great impact in the life of Niasse was Ahmad Sukayrij, whom Niasse first met in 1936 during his first visit to Morocco. Brigaglia notes that, “Sukayrij was the main source of authority in the *ṭarīqa* of Shaykh Ibrāhīm’s father, al-Ḥājj ‘AbdAllāh Niasse” and that “Sukayrij was a *qāḍī* and a Sufi, and was widely considered as the foremost spiritual authority of the Tijāniyya in the early twentieth century” (cf. Brigaglia, 2009: 338).

²⁰ Niasse did however oppose some Maliki predominant (*mashhūr*) rulings such as putting of the hands by the side (*sadl*) during prayer but rather supports the hands on the chest (*qabḍ*) (cf. Niasse, n.d.; Seesemann, 2011: 358) This issue caused much disagreement between his followers and the Qādiris in Nigeria with scholars from both groups writing books on this issue.

²¹ Niasse also disagreed with some metaphorical descriptions of the “place” of God by Ash‘arī scholars who interpret “God’s being everywhere” to mean “God is everywhere by His knowledge”. Niasse sees it in the opposite. (cf. Cisse, 2007: 207–220).

²² The term *fayḍais* is a technical term used by scholars and practitioners of Sufism. It is literally translated as ‘flood’. Seesemann says that, “The full spectrum of its meaning can hardly be summarized in a few words. *Fayḍa* can signify “flood,” “deluge,” “overflowing,” “overabundance,” “flow of grace,” or “emanation,” to list only some of the possible translations” (2011: 1).

²³ This prediction by Aḥmad al-Tijānī is mentioned by Seesemann, in his *The Divine Flood, Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival* where al-Tijānī is reported to have said “A flood shall come upon my companions, so that the people will enter our path in throngs” (ibid).

Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm of Niasse is roughly translated as “in the meadows of the glorious Qurʾan”, and was first published in the year 2010, 35 years after his demise.²⁴ This was the last *tafsīr* of Niasse and the only one in Arabic. The original *tafsīr* was an oral audition which was recorded by the students of Niasse (Brigaglia, 2013:256).²⁵ The published *tafsīr*, which comprises six (6) medium-sized volumes is from fifty-six (56) recorded ‘lessons’ of Niasse with his students. According to Brigaglia, this probably means that the “original *tafsīr* was delivered in 56 daily sessions, i.e. over two lunar months” (2013: 256). The *tafsīr* of Niasse was initially performed (orally)²⁶ in Wolof, his mother tongue. However, as the circle of followers of Niasse started increasing from the Arabic-speaking tribes of Mauritania to other traditional literate elites from countries such as Nigeria, Ghana and Chad, among others, it became common for Niasse to perform his oral *tafsīr* in Arabic (ibid). One of the prominent disciples of Niasse, Muḥammad Ould Muḥammad ‘AbdAllāh with the assistance of Aḥmad b. ‘AbdAllāh and Baye b. Aḥmad decided to transcribe the *tafsīr* after many of the recorded *tafsīr* classes became scattered in the hands of the *khulafāʾ* (those authorized to deputize for him) and senior companions of Niasse who also recorded the *tafsīr* classes. This transcription, according to Ould Muḥammad, as mentioned in the introduction of *Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr*, became necessary for various reasons such as: 1) the fear of losing the *tafsīr* of Niasse; 2) making it easily accessible to the public and for their public usage; and 3) because it was obvious that at the time the whole idea of transcription

²⁴Since its first publication in the later part of 2010, the academic work done on it are Abubakar Abdulkadir’s MA dissertation - *An Analytical and Comparative Study of Jews in the Qurʾan in Two West African Tafsīrs*, University of Johannesburg (2015) and Andrea Brigaglia’s (2013) review of it together with the Radd al-Adhḥān of Abū Bakr Gumi (d. 1992). More works are emerging on it.

²⁵ Attempts were made in the past to publish some of the audio recorded *tafsīr* of Niasse by his followers such as ‘Uthmān al-Fallātī. According to Brigaglia, a collection was published by the title *al-Ḥikam al-Quṭbiyya al-Ma’khūdhamin al-Qalam al-Sirinbiyya* (the Sainly Aphorisms Taken from the Pen of al-Sirinbiyya), is about 19 pages long. This publication includes *The Opening (Sūrat al-Fātiha)* and the last three chapters of the Qurʾan. It is an esoteric commentary of the Qurʾan (Brigaglia, 2009: 355).

²⁶ The performance of *tafsīr* of the Qurʾan is done by way of commenting/explaining verses of the Qurʾan orally. See below for oral exegesis.

of the *tafsīr* was conceived, Niasse was not in a state of good health (Ould Muḥammad in Niasse, 2010: 18).

Ould Muḥammad says that most of the *tafsīr* of Niasse is based on his knowledge (meaning his original interpretation). However, he would look through the *Jalālayn* which was always in his hand during the *tafsīr* classes. Ould Muḥammad claims that Niasse only looked through the *Jalālayn* when he was running out of time –close to the time for the sunset prayer– because he was either fasting [and wanting to terminate his fast] or feared not to displace the appointed time for the ‘lesson’ (Niasse, 2010: 18). Brigaglia asserts that this is also confirmed based on oral reports, most likely from the students of Niasse, that he (Niasse) used to “hold and read a copy of the *Jalālayn* during his oral exegesis” (2013: 258).

Based on some of the quotations in some of Niasse’s works as well as the *tafsīr* manuscripts found in his personal library, Brigaglia suggests that there are three other main *tafsīr* sources of reference of Niasse apart from the *Tafsīral-Jalālayn*. These are: 1) the Sufi *tafsīr*, *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz* of the Mauritanian Muḥammad al-Yadālī (d. 1753); 2) the *tafsīr*, *Rūḥ al-Bayān* of Ismā’īl Ḥaqqī (d. 1725); and 3) the *Hāshiya* of Aḥmad al-Šawī (d. 1825), the Egyptian Sufi and Mālikī Jurist (Brigaglia, 2009:21– 22). Other sources of his quotes are found in the literature works of Sufis such as the Moroccan Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 1493) and Egyptian Abū al-Faḍl b. ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309) (ibid).

Niasse’s methodology in his *tafsīr* is not any different from that of many earlier *tafsīr* (especially the esoteric ones). He elaborates – in some case - on the meanings of different words in the Qur’an, explains different opinions on various subjects, narrates from different prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*), stories of the Prophets (*qiṣaṣ*) and quotes from Sufi and Arabic poems. Brigaglia describes the *tafsīr* as follows:

Shaykh Ibrāhīm's exegesis was punctuated with metaphysical and cosmological themes. Reference was often made to the symbolic architecture of the Qur'ān, through references to the doctrine of numbers. The underlying idea was that God's creation is disseminated with marks linking mundane and ultra-mundane realities, encoded in numbers of which the Qur'ān is the ultimate key (2009: 355).

An example of how the concept of encoded numbers is utilized in the *tafsīr* of Niasse, is provided by Brigaglia in relation to the number 5. He writes:

In the realm of macrocosmic reality number 5 corresponds to the five 'presences' (*ḥaḍarāt*) or stratified realms of cosmic existence, that provide the architecture for the flood of spiritual knowledge to the disciple as it is conceptualized in the process of *tarbiya* (Sufi training) (ibid).

From the above quotation from Brigaglia, it could be concluded that Niasse's *tafsīr* belongs to the genre of *tafsīr* called the allegorical commentary of the Qur'an (*tafsīr bi'l-ishāra*) which, as described above, focuses on the esoteric and 'hidden meanings' of the Qur'an. Apart from this, it is important to note that oral *tafsīr* performance²⁷ (which is common in West Africa) of this Senegalese scholar played a vital and decisive role in Niasse's early life as a scholar (Brigaglia, 2009: 354). In 1929, Niasse established a public teaching (oral performance) of *tafsīr* in his small village of Kosi, for his followers: a move that caused problems between him and his older brother, Muhammad who was the *Khalīfa* (successor) of their father.²⁸ This model of *tafsīr* also became widespread among the followers of Niasse in Nigeria through the Salgawa scholars (family of Salga). According to Brigaglia, this was likely to be a suggestion made by Niasse to

²⁷ Oral exegesis (*masutaḥsīr* in Hausa) is common in West Africa especially in the month of Ramaḍān. Students, disciples and lovers of scholars gather either in a mosque or the house of a scholar who then do an oral commentary of the Qur'an. In most cases, a person who has memorized the Qur'an made to recite verses of the Qur'an loudly and this recitation is then followed by the commentary of a scholar. These oral exegeses are mostly done in local African languages where the laypersons (*awwām*) are given access to understanding the 'meaning' of the Qur'an from a scholarly commentary. Some scholars use this as a platform to attack the ideologies of opposing scholars. That was the case, for example in Nigeria, where scholars such as Abū Bakr Gumi (d. 1992), 'Umar Sanda Idris (d. 2004) and Ṭahir Uthmān Bauchi entered the media arena (radio) to perform oral exegesis, use the avenue as a doctrinal polemic register, promoting their doctrinal inclinations and counteracting the views of opponents (cf. Brigaglia, 2007: 173-210).

²⁸ Cf. Brigaglia's (2009: 354) for where he discussed briefly the incidence between Niasse and his brother, Muhammad on the issue of oral *tafsīr*.

some of his Nigerian students who studied with him in Kaolack before returning to Nigeria (2009: 353-354). Niasse's *stafsīr* is indeed a useful model for scholars and students not only in Senegal and Nigeria, but also in many other parts of the world, especially where the Community of the Flood (*Jamā'a al-Fayḍa*) is found.

CONCLUSION

This article introduced us to the lives and Qur'anic exegesis of 'AbdAllāh b. Fūdī and IbrāhīmNiasse, two West African Muslim scholars whose contributions to the region's Islamic intellectual thought continue to have significant influence in the lives of Muslims. It discussed the reasons that necessitated their *tafāsīr*, the works they influenced their commentaries and some of the features in them. This critical introduction is a contribution to the academic field of Qur'anic exegesis of the region (and by extension the broader field of Arabic and Islamic studies).