

# Divine Whispers: Unraveling the Enigma of the Sufi “Yan Hakika” Movement in West Africa

*İlâhî Fisiltilar: Batı Afrika’daki ‘Yan Hakika’ Hareketinin Gizemini Çözmek*

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## Abstract

In the vibrant heart of West African Sufism, an enigmatic force stirs—the Yan Hakika movement, emerging from the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimiyya Sufi order in Nigeria. Imagine self-proclaimed spiritual guides declaring, “I am God,” and whispering that “everything and everyone is a shimmering reflection of the Divine,” echoing the metaphysical depths of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (Oneness of Being). This study explores how such radical claims disrupt notions of religious authenticity, spark fierce debates on social cohesion, and reshape communal bonds. Drawing on songs, interviews, historical letters, and responses from mainstream Tijaniyya and Sunni voices, it traces the raw tension between spiritual daring and doctrinal boundaries. In a world where faith evolves amid modernity, Yan Hakika provokes both ecstatic awakenings and heated controversy—inviting reflection on the dance between sacred innovation and enduring orthodoxy. Ultimately, this article offers a lens on the interplay between tradition and transformation in the pursuit of spiritual truth in contemporary West African Islam.

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**Keywords:** Sufism, authenticity, religious authority, West Africa, Wahdat al-Wujūd.

## Özet

Batı Afrika tasavvufunun dinamik kalbinde esrarengiz bir kırıdanmaya sebebiyet veren ‘Yan Hakika’ hareketi, Nijerya’daki Ticâniyye-İbrâhimîyye yolundan neşet eden bir harekettir. Hareket içinde, kendini mânevi rehber ilan ederek ‘Ene’l-Hak’ iddiasında bulunanların, âlemdeki herşeyin Hakk’ın göz kamaştırıcı bir tecellisi olduğu yönündeki beyanlarını, İbnü’l-‘Arabî’nin vahdet-i vücûd düşüncesinin metafizik boyutları üzerine inşa ettikleri düşünülebilir. Ancak bu çalışma, böylesi radikal iddiaların, ‘hakîkî din’ kavramını nasıl altüst ettiğini, sosyal birlik ve beraberlik hakkındaki hararetli tartışmaları nasıl tetiklediğini ve toplumsal bağları nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğini ele almaktadır. Çalışma aynı zamanda şarkilar, röportajlar, mektuplar ile ana akım Ticânî ve Sünî çevrelerden gelen tepkiler üzerinden ‘mânevî cüretkârlık’ ve doktrine bağlı sınırlar arasındaki gerilimi incelemektedir. Yan Hakika hareketi, inancın, modernizmin ortasında gelişmeye çalıştığı bir dönemde, bir yandan vecdî uyanişları tahrik ederken diğer yandan hararetli tartışmaları tetikleyerek bid’at ile gelenek arasındaki kadîm ihtilaf üzerine tefekkür etmeye imkan tanımaktadır. Son olarak bu çalışma, çağdaş Batı Afrika İslam düşüncesindeki hakikat arayışında gelenek ile değişim arasındaki etkileşime bir bakış açısı getirmeyi hedeflemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tasavvuf, özgünlük, dinî otorite, Batı Afrika, vahdet-i vücûd

## 1. Introduction

Amidst the bustling city of Kano, Nigeria, a startling claim echoes through some Sufi circles: “I am God” and “Everything and Everyone is God.” This audacious declaration, uttered by self-proclaimed divine figures within the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimîyya Sufi order, has sent waves through the religious fabric of Nigeria and West Africa in general. The Tijaniyya Sufi order,<sup>1</sup> with its emphasis on personal spiritual development and communal bonds, has particularly flourished in West Africa<sup>2</sup> and Nigeria in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> The Tijaniyya Sufi order traces its roots to Ahmad al Tijâni (d. 1815), founder of Tijaniyya Sufi Order.

<sup>2</sup> Rüdiger Seesemann, “Sufism in West Africa,” *Religion Compass* 4, 10 (2010): 606-614.

Among the numerous branches of the Tijaniyya Sufi order, the Yan Hakika<sup>3</sup> movement stands out for its controversial claims of divine authority. The Yan Hakika claim to be the true followers of Ibrahim Niasse.<sup>4</sup> However, they are regarded as a heretical group by mainstream Tijaniyya members and Sunni Muslims<sup>5</sup> in Nigeria. Originating within the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimiyya Sufi Order, the Yan Hakika group asserts unique divine insights and authority, challenging traditional Islamic interpretations and the roles of Sufi leaders and adherents. Central to their ideology is the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (Oneness of Being and Unity of Existence), as highlighted by Ibn al-‘Arabī, which posits that all existence is a manifestation of the Divine.<sup>6</sup> As noted by Isa,<sup>7</sup> the Yan Hakika group believes that there is no distinction between the existence of God and the world and therefore everything and everybody is a manifestation of the Divine.

The emergence of these divine claims raises profound questions about the nature of spiritual leadership and the boundaries of religious interpretation. Are these claims a natural evolution of Sufi thought, or do they represent a radical departure from Sufi principles? How do these self-proclaimed divine-figure group constructs and communicates their authority, and how are their claims perceived by their followers and the broader Muslim and Sufi community?

In religious studies, the concept of authenticity is pivotal. It shapes our understanding of religious practices, beliefs, and their legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> Authenticity claims often serve as socio-rhetorical techniques to construct group identity in the face of changing social interests.<sup>9</sup>

Understanding the impact of Yan Hakika’s claims on the authenticity of religious practices and social dynamics within their communities is crucial for comprehending contemporary Islam in West Africa. By systematically analyzing the construction, communication, and perception of

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<sup>3</sup> Yan Hakika is a Hausa (one of the widely spoken languages in West Africa) phrase which literally means “People of Reality or Truth”. “They derive their name from one of the doctrines of Tijaniyya Sufi order known as *haqīqa*, divine reality.” Kabiru Haruna Isa, “A History of ‘Yan Hakika, a Revisionist Islamic Group in Northern Nigeria,” *Africa* 92, 5 (2022): 780-797.

<sup>4</sup> Ibrahim Niasse (1900-1975) was a Senegalese Sufi mystic and the founder of the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimiyya, a subsect of Tijaniyya Sufi Order, and was pivotal for the spread of the Sufi Order in West Africa.

<sup>5</sup> Isa, “A History of ‘Yan Hakika,” 780.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam: An Annotated Translation of "The Bezels of Wisdom"*, trans. and annotated by R. W. J. Austin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Isa, “A History of ‘Yan Hakika,” 784.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis F. Carter, *The Issue of Authenticity in the Study of Religions* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon “The Jargon of Authenticity and the Study of Religion,” *Religion and Theology* 8, 3-4 (2001): 229-252.

these claims, this study seeks to unveil their implications for religious and social structures. The main question guiding this research is: How do Yan Hakika claims of divine authority in West Africa impact the authenticity of religious practices within their communities?

To conduct this study, I performed a textual analysis of religious texts, interviews, and songs by Yan Hakika leaders and adherents. This was complemented by a review of secondary literature, including academic works on Sufism, authenticity, and divine authority. This approach allowed me to combine insights from primary sources with secondary perspectives, ensuring a holistic understanding of the subject matter.

While previous scholarship, such as Isa's work<sup>10</sup> provides a detailed historical account of the movement's origins and key figures, this research extends beyond that foundation by focusing on the contemporary implications of Yan Hakika's divine claims for religious authenticity and social cohesion. Isa's work emphasizes the group's revisionist theology and its conflicts with mainstream Tijaniyya in the 20th century, but it does not deeply explore how these claims are constructed and perceived in the digital age through songs, interviews, and online media. Nor does it theorize authenticity using classical Sufi epistemologies, such as those drawn from Ibn al-‘Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam* or Ibrahim Niasse's *Kāshif al-Ilbās*. By integrating primary sources like recent interviews and songs with these Sufi frameworks, this study achieves a nuanced analysis of how Yan Hakika reshapes spiritual authority today, highlighting the ongoing tension between innovation and tradition in ways that Isa's historical focus does not fully address.

Through this exploration, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the authenticity of religious experiences and the evolving nature of Sufi practices in West Africa. Ultimately, this paper posits that the claims made by Yan Hakika not only redefine the contours of spiritual authority in West Africa, but also reshape the socio-religious landscape.

To fully appreciate the contemporary dynamics of the Yan Hakika movement, it is necessary to dig into the historical roots and evolution of the Tijaniyya Sufi Order, which forms the background for these developments.

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<sup>10</sup> Kabiru Haruna Isa, “A History of Yan Hakika, a Revisionist Islamic Group in Northern Nigeria,” *Africa* 92, 5 (2022): 780–797.

## 2. Historical Roots and Evolution of the Tijaniyya Sufi Order

The Tijaniyya Sufi order has become a dominant force to be reckoned with. Annemarie Schimmel's (d. 2003) landmark work, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, highlights the broad historical and spiritual contexts of Sufism and provides insights into its various manifestations.<sup>11</sup> According to Rudiger Seesemann, Sufism in West Africa has been marked by a mix of local traditions and Islamic teachings, leading to unique practices and interpretations within the region.<sup>12</sup> This blend of local and Islamic elements has fostered a rich, diverse spiritual tradition that continues to evolve.

The Tijaniyya Sufi order gained significant following in West Africa in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly through the efforts of various leaders like Ibrahim Niasse who adapted its teachings to local contexts. As Seesemann points out, the Tijaniyya has played a crucial role in shaping Islamic identity and spiritual practice in West Africa, where it continues to exert great influence today.<sup>13</sup> Jamil Abu'n-Nasr's influential work provides a detailed historical account of the Tijaniyya's development and its adaptation to modern contexts.<sup>14</sup> This background is crucial for understanding the emergence of the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimiyya branch and, subsequently, the Yan Hakika movement. With this historical context in place, we can now look at the specific origins and development of the Yan Hakika movement.

## 3. History of Yan Hakika

Yan Hakika derive their name from the Tijaniyya doctrine of *haqīqa*, which signifies divine reality. Ibrahim Niasse, the spiritual leader whom this movement claims to follow, embodied both the sacred law (*sharī'a*) and the divine essence (*haqīqa*), positioning himself as a guide to the Sufi way.<sup>15</sup> The Tijaniyya tradition differentiates between two types of knowledge: *bāṭin* (esoteric knowledge) and *zāhir* (exoteric knowledge). *Zāhir* encompasses the knowledge a spiritual seeker (*murid*) acquires through a teacher to fulfill religious duties,<sup>16</sup> while *bāṭin* focuses on the purification of the soul, fostering spiritual growth, and shielding oneself from negative traits such as arrogance, hypocrisy, superiority complex, and lies. As stated earlier,

<sup>11</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Seesemann, "Sufism in West Africa," 606-614.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities of Grace: The Sufi Brotherhoods in Islamic Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 148-156.

<sup>15</sup> Zachary Wright, Muhtar Holland, and Abdullahi El-Okene, *The Removal of Confusion Concerning the Flood of the Saintly Seal Ahmad al-Tijani: A Translation of Kashif al-Ilbas of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Yasir A. Quadri, "The Tijaniyya in Nigeria: A Case Study," (PhD diss., University of Ibadan, 1981).

Yan Hakika consider themselves genuine followers of the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimiyya Sufi order and observe several of the order's rituals. However, they reportedly engage in behaviors that contradict the Islamic law like alcoholism, promiscuity, and engaging in illicit sexual behaviors.<sup>17</sup>

Yan Hakika in Kano emerged in the early 1960s and saw leaders like Malam Abdallahi Ja'afaru and Malam Jibrilu and their followers engaging in practices deemed 'un-Islamic' under the guise of the Tijaniyya Sufi order.<sup>18</sup> Reports indicated that Ja'afaru's followers abandoned Islamic rites, such as prayers, after undergoing certain spiritual practices called *tarbiya* (spiritual nurturing or training). Ja'afaru instructed them to perform *dhikr* (the remembrance of God through repetitive invocation of divine names and attributes) instead of obligatory prayers, justifying this with the *āyah* from the Qur'ān, which states that "remembrance of God indeed is the greatest."<sup>19</sup> The issues raised and the constant complaints about Ja'afaru and his followers' behavior led mainstream Tijaniyya members to address this delicate and religiously sensitive matter. Ja'afaru's actions were reported to the spiritual leader, Ibrahim Niasse, who responded with a letter dated 24 February 1961, addressed to his companions (the Salgawa scholars) in Kano, Nigeria. The letter reads as follows:

Recall that immediately after I sent you the first letter, I got wind of the activities of Abdallahi Ja'afaru whom I tried several times to put on the right path, but he insisted on suiting himself, following the dictates of Satan and going after his fancies and venal interests. Probably God has not destined him to prosper/attain divine bliss. I therefore revoke his *ijāza* (license) to initiate others into *tarīqa* (The Tijaniyya Sufi path) and guide their spiritual training. With regard to Jibrilu, if he wishes good for himself and is also ready to maintain our friendship, he should relate closely with our companions and follow in their footsteps. Religion belongs to God; it is not to be practiced with laxity or manipulated for personal gain, or any other fantasy for that matter. It consists of a minor and major *jihād* (a struggle to promote Islam and to purify one's soul, respectively). Anything short of this is a road to perdition. So, if this man [Jibrilu] is not willing to comply with my admonishing, then drive him away from you, and he too stands unauthorized. I have henceforth forsaken him...<sup>20</sup>

The letter reveals that Ibrahim Niasse made several attempts to guide Abdallahi Ja'afaru onto what he considered the authentic or true spiritual path. Despite these efforts, Ja'afaru continued

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<sup>17</sup> Isa, "A History of 'Yan Hakika,'" 786.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Q 29:45.

<sup>20</sup> Isa, "A History of 'Yan Hakika,'" 787.

to follow his own desires and interests, which Niasse describes as being influenced by Satan. This persistent deviation from orthodox practices and the core spiritual principles of the Tijaniyya order led Niasse to take a firm stance. The revocation of Ja’afaru’s *ijāza* is a powerful statement of disapproval. By removing Ja’afaru’s authority, Niasse not only isolates him, but also protects the integrity of the Tijaniyya teachings from what he perceives as corrupt influences. This action by Ibrahim Niasse is a definitive move to isolate Yan Hakika teachings from the core principles of the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimiyya order. It highlights Niasse’s commitment to maintaining doctrinal purity and his readiness to take decisive measures against those who deviate from the established path. The letter also emphasizes the need for sincere and authentic religious practice, devoid of personal gain or laxity. This serves as a critique of the Yan Hakika practices, which he perceives as manipulated for personal interests.

The revocation of Abdallah Ja’afaru’s *ijāza* and public hostility, compelled Ja’afaru and some of his followers to relocate from Kano, Nigeria to Kumasi in Ghana. Ja’afaru held strongly to his beliefs and activities even in Ghana. News of their activities spread within the Muslim community in Kumasi, Ghana, ultimately leading to their expulsion from Ghana.<sup>21</sup>

Ja’afaru’s actions demonstrate his unwavering belief in his ideology and his refusal to renounce it. Although Ja’afaru’s migration to Ghana in 1961 facilitated the spread of his ideology beyond northern Nigeria, it faded from the religious public sphere in Kano until the second decade of the twenty-first century, when young Tijānī singers began making divine claims in their songs that the Muslim public viewed as blasphemous.<sup>22</sup> Understanding the historical trajectory of Yan Hakika leads us to explore the broader concept of divine authority in Sufism, which forms the theological foundation of their divine claims.

#### 4. Divine Authority in Sufism

In Sufism, divine authority, or *wilāya*, is considered a divine gift bestowed upon certain individuals who achieve a high level of spiritual purity and closeness to God. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s influential work, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, explores the metaphysical foundations of divine authority and the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujūd*<sup>23</sup> (Oneness of Being and Unity of Existence). This concept posits that all existence is a manifestation of the Divine, and those who attain a deep

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 788

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, 1980.

understanding of this unity are regarded as possessing divine authority. This authority not only legitimizes their spiritual leadership, but also their ability to guide and influence their followers. Schimmel's research further elucidates how spiritual authority is perceived and operationalized within various Sufi orders.<sup>24</sup>

The Tijaniyya order, like other Sufi movements, is characterized by the belief in a lineage of spiritual authority that is distinct from traditional religious hierarchies. This has sparked differing views on what counts as divine authority within the Tijaniyya order. The Yan Hakika movement's ideology, is rooted in the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī's concept of *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (Oneness of Being and Unity of Existence).<sup>25</sup> This belief system by the Yan Hakika movement challenges traditional Islamic interpretations and has significant implications for the authenticity of religious practices within their communities.

This article's focus on Yan Hakika is positioned to contribute to a deeper understanding of how these movements actualize claims of divine authority and how such claims resonate with broader discourses around authenticity in religious practice.

Moreover, while foundational texts by scholars like Schimmel, Seesemann and Isa mentioned above provide historical context and theoretical frameworks on divine authority in Sufism, this study will delve into how Yan Hakika's claims of divine authority are constructed, communicated, and perceived in today's digital age, where information dissemination and religious teachings are increasingly mediated through new technologies.

Furthermore, by investigating the intersection between historical practices of Tijaniyya Sufi order and the innovation brought forth by Yan Hakika, this research highlights the fluidity of spiritual authority in a rapidly changing world. In doing so, it fills a critical gap in understanding how Sufi orders like the Tijaniyya are adapting to or resisting contemporary divine claims of legitimacy.

As we dig deeper into Yan Hakika's theological claims, it is crucial to analyze the broader concept of authenticity in religious practices and leadership, a central theme in understanding their impact. Drawing from classical Sufi thought, authenticity in faith can be understood

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<sup>24</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Isa, "A History of 'Yan Hakika,'" 780.

through the lens of *haqīqa* (divine reality), as articulated by Ibn al-‘Arabī in *Fusūs al-Hikam*, where genuine spiritual experience aligns with the unveiling of divine unity, transcending mere outward observance (*zāhir*) to inner realization (*bātin*). This Sufi epistemology emphasizes that true authenticity emerges from *ma‘arifa* (gnosis or experiential knowledge of God), achieved through *tarbiya* (spiritual training), rather than institutional validation alone. In this framework, Yan Hakika’s claims of divine embodiment reflect an extreme interpretation of *Wahdat al-Wujūd*, where the seeker becomes a mirror of the Divine, but this risks antinomianism if it neglects *sharī‘a* (sacred law), as warned in Niasse’s *Kāshif al-Ilbās*. Such perspectives allow us to unpack self-proclaimed authority not as a departure from tradition, but as a contested extension of Sufi metaphysics, where authenticity is measured by the balance between *fana’* (annihilation of the self) and *baqā’* (subsistence in God).

This Sufi-centered approach to authenticity reveals a fundamental paradox: the tension between tradition and innovation. Leaders like those in Yan Hakika navigate claims to *wilāya* (sainthood) by emphasizing personal *ma‘arifa*, yet this often clashes with the communal safeguards of *tarīqa*, as seen in Niasse’s revocation of Ja’afaru’s *ijāza*. By using these classical concepts as a foundation, my analysis shows that authenticity in Sufi practices is not fixed but constantly shaped by the dynamic relationship between hidden spiritual knowledge and shared community traditions.

Having established this framework for authenticity rooted in Sufi epistemology, I now turn to how Yan Hakika leaders craft their divine claims and community narratives, which are pivotal in shaping their followers’ beliefs and practices.

## 5. Crafting Divinity: Formulating Theological Claims

At the heart of the Yan Hakika movement lies a rich tradition of storytelling that infuses spiritual teachings with meaning and authority. Such stories are often drawn from Islamic texts, local folklore, and the mystical traditions of Sufism. The members and leaders of Yan Hakika utilize narratives not only to assert their divine status, but also to cultivate community identity and reinforce individual beliefs. This section explores how these practices are manifested through religious texts, teachings, and charismatic leadership, demonstrating the potent role of storytelling in shaping the religious landscape of West African Sufism. Building on this, these divine claims and narratives do not exist in isolation; they have sparked significant controversies and reactions within the broader Islamic context, which I will examine next.

## 6. The Practices, Claims, and Social Impact of Yan Hakika

The narratives constructed by Yan Hakika leaders have a profound impact on community dynamics and individual beliefs. The communal retelling of these stories facilitates a shared identity, wherein followers come to see themselves as part of a larger divine mission. Hiskett's analysis of the debates surrounding theology and mysticism in Muslim West Africa underscores the importance of these narratives in defining and defending the group's unique theological stance.<sup>26</sup> This is particularly relevant given that some doctrines of the Tijaniyya can lead, though not necessarily, to forms of pantheism and antinomianism, where orthodox Islamic practices may be neglected in favor of the remembrance and chanting of the names of God (*dhikr*) and litany of the order (*wird*).<sup>27</sup>

Also, religious texts, teachings, and practices form the backbone of these narratives. The *Kāshif al-Ilbās* by Ibrahim Niasse is particularly influential, as it provides a comprehensive guide to the spiritual journey within the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimiyya order. Niasse's teachings emphasize the importance of direct personal experience of the divine and the importance of spiritual training or nurturing (*tarbiya*),<sup>28</sup> which Yan Hakika leaders and members leverage to substantiate their divine claims. By aligning their narratives with the respected teachings of Niasse and other Tijaniyya authorities, they enhance their legitimacy and credibility within the community.

Moreover, spiritual training (*tarbiyya*) and charismatic leadership is vital in reinforcing divine claims and community narratives within the Yan Hakika movement. Yan Hakika leaders, through their charismatic presence and rigorous spiritual training, embody the principles and teachings they espouse. This charismatic authority, coupled with a disciplined approach to spiritual training, ensures that their followers not only accept, but also internalize these narratives. Seesemann brilliantly explains the objective of the doctrine of 'tarbiya' in Tijaniyya Sufi order below:

According to Seesemann:

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<sup>26</sup> Mervyn Hiskett, "The 'Community of Grace' and Its Opponents, the 'Rejectors': A Debate about Theology and Mysticism in Muslim West Africa with Special Reference to Its Hausa Expression," *African Language Studies*, 17 (1980): 99–140.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Wright, Holland, and El-Okene, *The Removal of Confusion*, 2009.

The objective of spiritual training (*tarbiya*) is thus to cleanse the evil-commanding soul (*al-nafs al-ammara*; see Qur’ān 12:53) of all negative influences, up to the point where it becomes the perfect soul (*al-nafs kāmila*). The latter stage ideally culminates in the temporary annihilation (*fanā’i*) of the ego, which prepares the aspirant for mystical union with the divine. This moment is described as *wuṣūl* (arrival), *waṣl* (union), or *fath* (illumination), and is equivalent to attaining cognizance or spiritual knowledge of God, *ma’arifa* in Arabic. We can tentatively define *tarbiya* as spiritual training dispensed by a qualified *shaykh* or spiritual master, based on a set of rules, meant to guide the aspirant during the journey (*sulūk*, literally means wayfaring) on the Sufi path, with the aim of purifying one’s self and achieving mystical union with and experiential knowledge of God.<sup>29</sup>

Through a combination of mystical teachings, personal experiences gained through spiritual training or nurturing (*tarbiya*), and charismatic authority, these leaders create a compelling and resonant narrative that shapes the beliefs and practices of their communities. This quest for spiritual authenticity not only reinforces the leaders’ authority, but also transforms the collective identity of their followers, positioning them as active participants in a divine narrative that shapes their understanding of faith in the contemporary context. As Seesemann notes in *The Divine Flood*, this dynamic process is central to the spiritual revival movements within the Tijaniyya order and illustrates the enduring power of narrative in religious life.<sup>30</sup> To illustrate these narratives in action, let us examine specific stories, songs, and controversies from Yan Hakika, which reveal how divine claims are woven into everyday spiritual expression.

## 7. Analysis of Specific Narratives, Utterances and Controversies of Yan Hakika

The Yan Hakika movement is rich with captivating narratives that exemplify the interplay of divine claims, communal identity, and spiritual authority. These stories are not just tales of faith but are powerful tools used by the movement’s leaders to assert their divine authority and spiritual legitimacy. Here, I delve into some of the most intriguing songs and controversies surrounding Yan Hakika, offering a window into the unique world of this Sufi group.

The use of songs (in Hausa language) is a significant aspect of the Yan Hakika movement. Ismail and Rabiu Takalafiya were the most notable singers, as highlighted by Isa,<sup>31</sup> who composed songs praising the ‘divine virtues’ of Ibrahim Niasse. The prelude to one of Ismail’s compositions is as follows:

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<sup>29</sup> Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Isa, “A History of ‘Yan Hakika,’” 789.

Allahu la’ilaha ilallahu Shehu Barhama,  
Shehu ba kai Haifa ba, Haihuwarka karya ne,  
Lam yalid wa lam yulad ya ke Shehu Barhama

**English Translation:**

Allah, there is no deity but Allah, O Shehu Barhama,<sup>32</sup>  
Shehu, you are not born, your birth is false,  
He does not beget, nor is He begotten, O Shehu Barhama.

The song depicts Ibrahim Niasse as a divine entity, attributing essential divine characteristics to him, suggesting that he was neither born nor does he give birth<sup>33</sup> in the conventional human manner. In 2013, Takalafiya composed other provocative songs, such as “Barhama nake bautawa, dan shi ya halicce ni” (I worship Barhama because he created me) and Baba uban Allah Inyassi (Niasse, the father of God).<sup>34</sup> These songs, particularly the second one, caused a momentous public turmoil, resulting in the arrest of the singer by the Kano State Censorship Board on May 31, 2013.<sup>35</sup> Despite the public backlash, the Yan Hakika members continued to perform and listen to the song privately to reach a state of spiritual ecstasy.<sup>36</sup>

The Yan Hakika movement also uses songs to assert their divine claims and reinforce the spiritual authority of their current leaders and themselves. One such song, sung in the presence of Shehu Dan Anty, the current leader of Yan Hakika in Kano, encapsulates the deep veneration and divine attributes ascribed to him. The song<sup>37</sup> goes as follows:

Allah Allah ne Allah Allah ne.  
Na che Shehu na Dan Anty She ma Allah ne.  
Na che Shehu Dan Anty she ma Allah ne.  
Koowa Allah ne, Ne ma Allah ne.  
Allah Allah ne Allah Allah ne.

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<sup>32</sup> *Shehu Barhama* is Ibrahim Niasse (d.1975) as described in the footnote section earlier.

<sup>33</sup> This is an attribute of the Almighty God that no human possesses.

<sup>34</sup> A. U. Adamu, “Profaning the Sacred in Tijaniyya Sufi Songs in Kano,” in *Kano: The State, Society and Economy*, edited by M. A. Isa et al., 123-145, (Kano: Trans West Africa Limited, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Isa, “A History of ‘Yan Hakika,” 789.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Muslim Ummah TV, “Inna lillahi wa’inna ilaihir raji’un Kafircin ‘yan Hakika kara bayyana yake. Allah ka tsare mu,” YouTube, November 14, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gKUPXWNXjQ>.

### English Translation

Allah is Allah, Allah is Allah.  
I say Shehu Dan Anty, he is also Allah.  
I say Shehu Dan Anty, he is also Allah.  
Everyone is Allah, I am also Allah.  
Allah is Allah, Allah is Allah.

This song underscores the belief that Shehu Dan Anty (the current leader of Yan Hakika) embodies divine qualities, paralleling the divine essence of God. This song's narrative also echoes the broader theological claims of the Yan Hakika movement, rooted in the concept of *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (Oneness of Being), where the divine presence is seen in all creation. By using such evocative and controversial songs, the Yan Hakika leaders reinforce their spiritual authority and draw a clear line between their beliefs and those of mainstream Tijaniyya Sufi Order.

Another particularly powerful element of the Yan Hakika narrative is their use of a *hadith qudsi*:<sup>38</sup> “Allah said, ‘Whoever shows enmity to a friend of Mine, I shall be at war with him. My servant draws not near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have enjoined upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks...’”<sup>39</sup>

This quote emphasizes the intimate relationship and profound connection between the Almighty God and His devout servants, suggesting that when a person reaches a certain level of piety and devotion, their actions and senses are guided by divine will and are that of the “Divine”. This serves as a powerful validation for the Yan Hakika leaders’ claims of divine authority and spiritual guidance.

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<sup>38</sup> *Hadith Qudsi* are sacred sayings of Prophet Muhammad, believed to be divine revelations from Allah, communicated through Muhammad.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari*, (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Salafiyya, 1930), 34041, XI: 6502.

In an interview titled “Shehu Dan Anty Responds to Those Who Say He’s Not Tijaniyya - Live!” on the Qibla FM channel,<sup>40</sup> provides a clear illustration of the controversies surrounding the Yan Hakika movement and its current leader, Dan Anty. In this live session, Dan Anty addresses various allegations and criticisms, particularly those questioning his affiliation with the Tijaniyya Sufi order and the practices of his followers. One of the most contentious claims made by Dan Anty in the interview is his defense of the consumption of alcohol which is forbidden in Islamic law and promiscuity among his followers. He argues that their spiritual practices and the pursuit of divine reality (*haqīqa*) transcend conventional religious prohibitions.<sup>41</sup> He emphasizes the spiritual freedom and divine connection experienced by the Yan Hakika, which, he claims, elevates them above ordinary moral constraints. This stance has been met with strong opposition from traditional Islamic and Sufi scholars who view it as a blatant violation of Islamic law (*sharī'a*). These claims have sparked significant backlash from the broader Muslim community, prompting us to consider the controversies and reactions in the wider Islamic context.

## 8. Controversies and Reactions: The Broader Islamic Context

### 8.1. Interaction with Established Islamic Beliefs

At the heart of Yan Hakika’s controversial stance is their interpretation of key Islamic doctrines such as *haqīqa* (divine reality) and their unique application of concepts like *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (Unity of Being). While mainstream Islam distinguishes between the Creator and creation, emphasizing God’s absolute transcendence, Yan Hakika blurs these lines. By attributing divine attributes to human leaders like Ibrahim Niasse and the members of Yan Hakika, they challenge the fundamental Islamic tenet of *tawhīd*.<sup>42</sup>

This shift in the source of religious authority raises provocative questions about the nature of knowledge and authority in Islam. Proponents of Yan Hakika argue that personal encounters with the divine offer an authentic path to faith that transcends conventional or orthodox

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<sup>40</sup> Qibla FM, “Shehu Dan Anty Responds to Those Who Say He’s Not Tijaniyya - Live!”, Facebook, July 4, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/qiblafm/videos/shehu-dan-anty-responds-to-those-who-say-hes-not-tijaniyya-live/138569801628309/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> *Tawhīd* is a fundamental belief in the oneness of God, essential in Islam.

scholarly boundaries.<sup>43</sup> However, this perspective has sparked resistance from traditional leaders who view the movement's claims as an affront to established Islamic tenets, potentially leading followers astray and causing fragmentation within the Tijaniyya Sufi community.

This theological innovation often leads to practices perceived as antinomian, such as neglecting the five daily prayers and fasting in the month of *Ramadan* in favor of *dhikr* (remembrance of God). The traditional Islamic community views these practices as undermining the foundational pillars of the faith, causing friction with established religious norms.

## 8.2. Responses from Traditional Religious Leaders

Traditional Islamic leaders have responded to Yan Hakika's claims with strong disapproval and corrective measures. In the 1960s, the letter of Ibrahim Niasse quoted earlier above, in which he revoked Abdallah Ja'afaru's *ijāza* is a prime example of an authoritative response aimed at curbing the spread of what he viewed as deviant practices. This action illustrates the broader pattern of resistance from established religious authorities, who seek to preserve Tijaniyya doctrinal purity and maintain religious cohesion.

In recent times, the reaction from traditional Islamic leaders to the Yan Hakika movement has been multifaceted, ranging from condemnation to attempts at dialogue. Many Muslim clerics such as Tahir Osman Bauchi and Abdul Jabbar Kabara<sup>44</sup> have publicly denounced the movement, labeling it as heretical and warning their congregations against engaging with its teachings. This resistance is often framed as a protective measure designed to preserve the integrity of Islamic and mainstream Tijaniyya belief and practice. By rallying against what they perceive as misinterpretations of Islamic and Sufi teachings, traditional leaders aim to reinforce their own authority and maintain the status quo in religious and Sufi practices.

In addition to outright rejection, some traditional scholars like Abdallah Shaban<sup>45</sup> have sought to engage with Yan Hakika's claims through theological debate. This approach is rooted in a belief that addressing the movement's narratives and teachings can lead to a constructive

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<sup>43</sup> Qibla FM, "Shehu Dan Anty Responds to Those Who Say He's Not Tijaniyya - Live!" Facebook, July 4, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/qiblafm/videos/shehu-dan-anty-responds-to-those-who-say-hes-not-tijaniyya-live/138569801628309/>.

<sup>44</sup> Tahir Osman Bauchi is a highly influential leader of the Tijaniyya Sufi order, with a large following. Abdul Jabbar Kabara is a prominent leader of the Qadiriyya Ashabul Kafi Sufi movement in Nigeria.

<sup>45</sup> Abdallah Shaban is a mainstream Tijaniyya scholar from Ghana.

discussion about the nature of spirituality and authenticity in the Tijaniyya Sufi context. However, debates like the one between Dan Anty, the current leader of Yan Hakika, and Abdallah Shaban<sup>46</sup> reveal deep-seated divisions and differing visions of faith, as traditional scholars emphasize adherence to established Islamic jurisprudence and orthodoxy, while Yan Hakika proponents champion a more personal, experiential, and innovative approach to spirituality.

Reflecting on these controversies and reactions, it becomes evident that the Yan Hakika movement has far-reaching implications for our understanding of spiritual authenticity and authority, as explored through the lens of classical Sufi thought.

## 9. Conclusion: Reflections on Spiritual Authenticity and Authority

This research into the Yan Hakika movement provides valuable insights into how their claims of divine authority influence the authenticity of religious practices within their communities in West Africa. Central to this exploration has been the assertion made by Yan Hakika leaders and members of being “God” and asserting that “everyone and everything is God.” These claims challenge established norms and traditional interpretations of Islamic authority, prompting a re-evaluation of authenticity in religious practices, where personal experiences of spirituality gain prominence alongside conventional scholarly authority.

Yan Hakika’s claims shift authenticity from *sharī'a*-adherence to *ma'rifa* (gnosis), leading to antinomian consequences—ecstasy for followers, heresy for critics. They redefine authority experientially, challenging norms but eroding cohesion.

Aspect	Mainstream Tijaniyya	Yan Hakika
Authenticity	<i>Sharī'a + Ḥaqīqa</i>	<i>Ma'rifa/Ḥaqīqa</i> primacy
Prayer	Obligatory (5x daily)	Optional post- <i>tarbiya</i>
Authority	Shaykh lineage/ <i>Ijāza</i>	Personal divine embodiment
Practice	<i>Wird/Dhikr + Law</i>	Ecstatic songs, antinomianism
Niasse	Sufi Shaykh	God incarnate
Prohibitions	Alcohol/Fornication ( <i>zīnā</i> ) forbidden	Permissible in gnosis

<sup>46</sup> Qibla FM, “Sh Dan Anty vs Sh Abdallah Shaban - Haqiqa And Tijaniyya Debate On Qibla FM,” YouTube video, 2:03:15, July 23, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hI\\_QZBI7Fgw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hI_QZBI7Fgw).

**Table 1: Divergences in Authenticity & Practice – Mainstream Tijaniyya vs. Yan Hakika<sup>47</sup>**

As Table 1 illustrates, these shifts—from *shari'a*-bound rituals to *ma'rifa*-driven transcendence—fundamentally redefine spiritual authority, elevating personal gnosis over communal norms and igniting a profound tension between ecstatic innovation and doctrinal resistance in West African Sufism.

Reflecting on the research question, it is evident that Yan Hakika's claims significantly impact religious practices within their communities. The movement cultivates an inclusive environment where personal spirituality thrives, attracting individuals who may feel disconnected from traditional practices. However, this growth also engenders tensions with established religious authorities, as traditional Sufi and Islamic scholars assert their roles in maintaining communal norms and preserving the integrity of Tijaniyya teachings. This dialectic creates a dynamic social landscape characterized by both innovation and resistance, where ongoing dialogues shape the future of religious expression.

The findings demonstrate that while Yan Hakika's claims forge a distinct spiritual identity for its followers, they also provoke significant controversy and opposition, disrupting social cohesion within the broader Islamic and Tijaniyya Sufi community. Limited to secondary sources such as online interviews, devotional songs, and textual analyses, this study offers a preliminary exploration of Yan Hakika's dynamics, laying a foundation for understanding their impact on spiritual authenticity. Future research will address these constraints through ethnographic fieldwork, engaging directly with adherents to examine lived rituals, personal narratives, and communal practices. Such an approach promises richer insights into how Yan Hakika negotiates authenticity, potentially informing global debates on Sufi innovation and the evolving nature of religious authority.

To sum up, Yan Hakika represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the Islamic community. The movement's bold assertions and practices test the boundaries of Sufi orthodoxy, prompting a vigorous defense of traditional values while fostering dialogue about

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<sup>47</sup> Derived from Yan Hakika devotional songs (e.g., Takalafiya/Ismail) and interviews with current leader Shehu Dan Anty (On Qibla FM, 2021).

spiritual legitimacy. By highlighting the interplay of personal belief, experiential knowledge (*ma’arifa*), and communal norms, Yan Hakika exemplifies the perpetual quest for authenticity in a modern context. Integrating these reflections into the broader framework of Sufi thought enhances our understanding of the delicate balance between tradition and innovation, offering a lens into the profound questions of faith, authority, and identity in a rapidly evolving religious world.

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