



“Tradition, Spiritual Revival and the Horizon of Universality in the Teachings of Two African Sages: Ahmad al-‘Alawi (1869-1934) and Cerno Bokar (1875-1939).”

Bio:

Patrick Laude is Professor of Religious Studies at Georgetown University in Qatar. His scholarly work is in comparative religion with a focus on contemplative and metaphysical traditions. Professor Laude has authored a dozen books, including *Surrendering to the Self: Ramana Maharshi’s Message for the Present* (2021), *Keys to the Beyond: Frithjof Schuon’s Cross-traditional Language of Transcendence* (2020), and *Shimmering Mirrors: Reality and Appearance in Contemplative Metaphysics East and West* (2017). He has published over a hundred articles in scholarly journals. He has been a member of Georgetown faculty since 1991, first in Washington D.C. and in Doha since 2006.

Abstract:

This paper examines the teachings of Ahmad al Alawi and Cerno Bokar as two African Sufi sages who responded to colonial and reformist pressures through a revival of spiritual depth in Islam. It argues that their perspectives are grounded in the complementary principles of *faqr*, understood as humility and self-effacement, and *dhikr*, the remembrance of God, which shape both their thought and practice. Through these foundations, the paper highlights three shared orientations in their teachings: the renewal of tradition as a living reality, the importance of inward and esoteric understanding, and a universal outlook that transcends rigid religious boundaries, presenting a vision of Islam centered on spiritual realization and unity within diversity.

Text:

The Algerian Ahmad al-‘Alawi and the West African Cerno Bokar were contemporaries, and both met the challenges of French colonial presence and Islamic reformism. Cerno Bokar and Ahmad al-‘Alawi were known as eminent representatives of Islamic *tasawwuf*. Cerno Bokar was a *muqqadam* and teacher of the Tarīqah Tijaniyyah who swore allegiance to the Tijani *qutb* or spiritual pole Shaykh Hamallah in 1937, while Ahmad al-‘Alawī was the founder of the Tarīqah ‘Alawiyyah, a branch of the Shādhili order that spread throughout the Islamic world and beyond in the early years of the twentieth century. While the Shaykh al-‘Alawi had thousands of disciples throughout the world, Cerno Bokar lived an influential but unassuming life in Bandiagara, in Mali, the later years of which were marked by ostracization and relative isolation. As is widely known today Sufism is a spiritual and intellectual current within Islam which, from the dawn of the religion, has placed the emphasis on inner understanding, spiritual realization and ethical transformation. Accordingly, two of its most constant features have been the cultivation of inner poverty, humility, and self-effacement on the one hand, and on the other hand an emphasis on invocatory prayer such as is known in Islam as *dhikrullāh*. The two key notions of *faqr* and *dhikr* could indeed summarize Sufism as a lived reality. Let us add that even the intellectual dimensions of Sufism that are sometimes negatively contrasted with Sufi ethics and devotion, flow from an understanding of the *shahādah* that dispels the illusory ontological independence of man in *faqr* while affirming the metaphysical primacy of God in *dhikr*. Our argument is that the revivalist depth and vigour of both Sidi Ben ‘Alawiyah and Cerno Bokar stemmed from the two sources of *faqr* and *dhikr* as spiritual foundations of Islam, and that

they did so on both levels of understanding and practice. Moreover, should a distinction be made between the two sages, we would be tempted to see it in a relative preponderance of *dhikr* in the case of the Shaykh al ‘Alawi and a pre-eminence of *faqr* in the case of the Sage of Bandiagara, without they being exclusive of each other, quite to the contrary. Cerno Bokar’s humility and simplicity has been the primary hallmark of both Amadou Hampate Ba and Louis Brenner’s biographical accounts. He who refused to be considered a master, and would emphasize a Socrates like acknowledgement of ignorance, embodied the levelling down of individual and human pretensions that is so central to the spirit of Islam. His Sufism was one of human effacement as echoed in Abu Bakr al-Siddiq’s statement, “inability to realize is itself a realization.”¹ Witness to this spirit of humility, Cerno recognized Shaykh Hamallah as the pole of his time and submitted to him while affirming that “nothing is more dangerous in mysticism than to believe that one is superior to others.”² What strikes one about the Shaykh al-‘Alawi, by contrast, is a clear and explicit awareness of being a spiritual pole. This comes across, for example, in his *Diwan* where --in reference to the spiritual wine sung by ‘Umar Ibn al-Farid and other Sufis, he declares “Thus came I to pour It—nay, it is I that press It. Doth any other pour It in this age?” There could not be a more direct expression of the mastery of *dhikr*. We will therefore make use of *faqr* and *dhikr* as keys to sketch what we consider to be the three fundamental orientations of the spiritual message of these two sages, namely the defence and renewal of tradition, the inner and esoteric emphasis, and the universal horizon.

Tradition (*ad-Dīn wa al-Asl*)

Cerno Bokar considered tradition both in the singular and in the plural form. For him the word tradition refers first of all to the *Hanifiyyah* way and its manifestation as Islam, as well as to the various African autochthonous teachings and practices inherited through folklore

¹ Cadavid, 220.

² Brenner, 122.

and collective wisdom. In his pedagogical treatise *Mā ad-Dīn*, Cerno clearly identifies Islam as the essence of tradition as such: “from our father Adam until our Lord Muhammad, all have followed the same path: It is called Islam. It is the path of deliverance. It is the way of salvation, the Hanifiyya Way.”³ This is the Ancient or Primordial Religion, *ad-Dīn al-Khālīd* or *ad-Dīn al-Qayyim*, that has always been and will always be. In addition, the traditions, which are not necessarily explicitly religious, constitute a treasury of symbolic wisdom. In answer to a question concerning the attitude one should have toward them, Cerno affirms that “they constitute a goodly sum of the spiritual element arising from the decomposition of the spirit of those who have gone before us and who happily have not broken with God as we have done.”⁴ As it plainly appears, far from reading in history a progressive unfolding, Cerno, in the spirit of the Qur’ān and a number of *ahādīth*,⁵ makes it clear that the history of mankind is one of increasing forgetfulness of the Essential. Therefore, humility requires that humans acknowledge their vertical debt (*dīn*) toward the divinely bestowed tradition and their horizontal debt vis-à-vis the wisdom of ages. Even though he has been sometimes labelled a “modernist mystic,” on account of his supple intellect and broad curiosity of mind, the Shaykh al-‘Alawi was no less a traditionalist than Cerno Bokar. But for him also, as in Henry Corbin’s suggestive words, tradition “is a ceaselessly renewed inspiration, and not a funeral cortège or a register of conformist opinion.” For the Shaykh this living dimension of tradition is directly connected to its ultimate objective, which is remembrance of God. In his *Qawl al-ma’rūf* in response to a critic of Sufism, he writes: “laws have been revealed and rites have been instituted for the remembrance of God.”⁶ The Shaykh bases his interpretation on the Quranic verse prescribing to remember God at the *Mash’ar al-Haram* (2, 198), indicating that “it is the remembrance of God in this place that is aimed at, and not the place

³ Brenner, 188,

⁴ Brenner, 179.

⁵ i.e. “*khayru an-nās qarnī alladhī anā fīhim, thumma alladhīna yalawnahum thumma alladhīna yalawnahum wa ākhirūna arādhil*”

⁶ *Qawl*, 77.

itself.” For him, Tradition is nothing else than an all-encompassing system of prescriptions and proscriptions divinely intended to strengthen and deepen remembrance. It is in the logic of this reminding function of tradition that the Shaykh al-‘Alawi protests against religious indifference and rampant materialism when declaring “Islam complains to God, it is betrayed by its own. (...) Our coreligionists cannot even conserve what remains, in fact, of religious practices, to save them in this world and the next.(...) Indifference is everywhere! Only the degrees of this indifference are different.”⁷ He is particularly concerned by the spiritual destiny of the youth: “Our youth has plunged in this modern civilization that it thought to be licit, whereas it is perishable.” For him the challenge of modernity is not to be couched in the legal terms of the licit and the illicit, but in metaphysical terms: the unreal that claims to be real, the perishable that postures as eternal, forgetfulness that supplants remembrance.

Traditional authenticity is first and foremost a sense of metaphysical proportion, rather than a legal frame of mind, and true revivification cannot happen without a spiritual revolution rather than through formal reform. This is the reason why the Shaykh did not believe in most reformists, whom he considered deprived of any profound consciousness of the metaphysical roots of tradition. By contrast he puts his hope in the simple folks whom he sees –we are in the thirties, consciously or subconsciously penetrated by Islamic existential reflexes.

Esoterism (*al-Bātin*)

Louis Brenner has noted that “by the early twentieth century the leaders of the Tijaniyya were generally conservative, speaking to protect their social and political positions.” By contrast “Cerno Bokar’s attitude was relatively radical in that he clung tenaciously to the gnostic goals which he understood to be at the heart of the Tijaniyya.”⁸ The esoteric dimension of his teachings appears, formally, in numerology, but more profoundly perhaps in his teachings on degrees of inwardness and spiritual subtlety which are epitomized in his distinction between

⁷ 35.

⁸ Brenner, 107.

the three levels of faith, that is solid (*sulb*), liquid (*sā'il*) and gazeified (*ghāzī*), the two latter epitomizing two degrees of esoteric consciousness. Through these three degrees faith becomes as it were less and less human and more and more divine in its source, and therefore less individualized and impure in its manifestations. For Cerno, solid faith (*sulb*) adheres to the most formal aspects of the creed; as such, it is the necessary basis for reaching higher levels of faith, but it is also on its level that the ego may still largely affirm itself at the expense of *faqr*, as evidenced by the danger of self-righteousness. Cerno declares: “it is intransigent and hard like the stone from which I draw its name.”⁹ It is only on the liquid level (*sā'il*) that faith begins to lose its egotic rigidity and becomes “poor” and spiritual receptive. The water takes on the shape and colour of the recipient: “This faith, due to its subtle, liquid nature, is strong and undermines the faults of the soul, erodes the rocks of intolerance and spreads out, taking on a shape which is not fixed as in the case of *sulb* faith but borrows the form of its recipient.” On the gazeified level (*ghāzī*), there is “light without color.” This is the level of the highest *haqīqah*: the limits of the individual *qua* individual have been extinguished in the Spirit and the quintessence of religion has been reached. As for the Shaykh al-‘Alawī, he created the newspaper *Al-Balāgh al-Jazāiri* as an organ of religious revival in the spirit of his defence of tradition. According to Martin Lings “it was his means of preaching a renovation of Islam in all its aspects, not puritanically, as one who seeks to strip his religion of everything that goes beyond his understanding, but on the contrary seeking to safeguard its dimension of breadth and above all to restore what it had lost of its dimension of depth.”¹⁰ Thus, the Shaykh makes it clear that the inner message of Islam goes well beyond what is understood of this religion by most of its contemporary practitioners. For him, “religions are only a starting point” and, above them, lies the domain of what he calls the “doctrine” or the “means to reach God.” These means are essentially

⁹ Brenner, 171.

¹⁰ 108.

connected to the practice of *dhikrullāh*, together with supports such as meditation, spiritual retreats and keeping spiritual company. For the Shaykh, the *dhikr* is the means of access *par excellence* not only to the *bātin* of scriptures but also to *al-Bātin*, God as the Hidden. *Dhikr* is a *barzakh*, or an isthmus, between the world of manifestation and that of non-manifestation.

Universality (*al-‘Ālamiyyah*)

It could be said that the universality of Cerno stems from *faqr*, a sense of the limitations of the individual as such, and mankind as such. The epistemological modesty of Cerno originates in his sense of the incapacity of any given individual or group to embrace the whole truth. He states that “Faith and Truth, in that they are connected with God, are not the prerogatives of one individual, nor one race, nor even one country.”¹¹ To claim otherwise would be like stating that the sun shines only for my family. “God knows best” does not only mean human submission to God’s All-Knowledge but also, and above all, an attention not to impose one’s own limitations upon the divine un-limitedness. For Cerno, the recognition of the Divine Unity and Infiniteness in religions stems, by contrast, from an awareness of human limitations. These limitations are either natural, and as it were innocent, or --more dangerously-- a result of individualism and egoism. In his spiritual discourses he declares: “The mutual opposition of various believers emerge from certain [lower] human causes the origin of which is to be found in extreme racism, in the diversity of languages, and especially in the egoism which pushes each to seek and maintain an exclusiveness.”¹² By contrast, it appears that, for the Shaykh al-‘Alawi, universality flows less from a sense of the limitations of mankind than from the universality of *dhikr* as both divine reminder and human remembrance. In the wake of the Emir ‘Abdel-Kader al-Jazairi and the Akbari school the Shaykh asserts that both the flower “imagining God as perfume”¹³ and Aristotle conceiving

¹¹ Brenner, 165.

¹² Brenner, 158,

¹³ Recherches, 33.

“God as thinking itself eternally” are right. Each of them crystallizes a point of view on Reality, what Chittick renders as a “God of belief.” And it is in the same spirit of perspectivism --but not relativism, that he defends what one of his biographers call the “anagogic plurality” of the meanings of the *Qur’ān*. The divine richness, through its manifold theophanies, discloses itself in the various prophets and the various communities. Father Giacobetti, a *Père Blanc*, relates that when he met him in 1926 on a boat bringing him back to Algeria upon his return from the inauguration of the mosque of Paris, the Shaykh was preparing a book on convergences between Catholics and Muslims. This book was to gather verses that insist on the validity of Christianity and Judaism, and the positive description of Islam by past Christian authors. He entitled his commentary—unfortunately unfinished—*al-Bahr al-masjūr*,¹⁴ “the boiling ocean.” Commenting upon Quran 2:62

Lo! Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans—
whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right—surely their reward is
with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. (2:62)

the Shaykh draws the deduction (*istinbāt*) that “a man having faith in what is taught by Islam could be considered as belonging to the people of the Book, even if he does not accomplish the pious actions that must, in principle, accompany his faith.” He then draws the *ishāra* or spiritual allusion that one should “consider no one, be he a Muslim or an infidel (*kāfir*), pious or sinful, as being inferior to us, and this throughout our entire life.” Finally, he concludes that “all aforementioned traditional communities possess a genuine validity in Religion (*makāna fī l-Dīn*).” In conclusion, it is clear that, for both African sages, tradition is a necessary principle of renewal, being like a river flowing from the source. Inwardness, esoterism, *al-bātin*, is a spiritual imperative for there is no rejuvenation but from the heart, in the spirit of the *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm ad-dīn*. Finally, universality revitalizes religion by unveiling



unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity, *tawhīd* in *ikhtilāf* and *ikhtilāf* in *tawhīd*. These three dimensions of renewal are both founded and perfected in *faqr* and *dhikr*.