

## An Analytical Study of the Epistle of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās al-Kawlakhi

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### Abstract:

This study presents an analytical examination of one of the prose epistles of Shaykh al-Ḥājī Ibrāhīm Niyās al-Kawlakhi, focusing on its literary, rhetorical, and spiritual dimensions. The paper explores the stylistic characteristics of the epistle, including its diction, imagery, sentence structure, and use of Sufi terminology, situating it within the broader tradition of Arabic Islamic prose. Particular attention is given to the author's rhetorical strategies, such as restriction, exhortation, and symbolic expression, which reflect his deep spiritual insight and literary competence. The study also highlights the thematic concerns of the epistle, especially sincerity in worship, adherence to religious discipline, concealment of spiritual secrets, and rejection of ostentation in mystical practice. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, the paper demonstrates that the epistle represents a refined model of West African Sufi prose that balances aesthetic elegance with doctrinal authenticity. The findings confirm Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās's significant contribution to Arabic Sufi literature and Islamic intellectual history in West Africa.

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### Introduction (مقدمة)

Arabic epistolary prose occupies a distinguished position in Arabic literature, serving as an essential medium for intellectual exchange, spiritual instruction, and artistic expression. Throughout the history of Islamic civilization, letters have functioned not only as tools of communication but also as refined literary forms that embody eloquence and rhetorical sophistication. Scholars, jurists, and Sufi masters employed epistles to convey complex ideas in a structured yet aesthetically engaging manner. This genre reflects a unique intersection between knowledge and artistry, where meaning is enhanced through stylistic elegance. As a result, Arabic epistolary prose has been recognized as a vital component of the broader Arabic literary tradition (Allen, 2000).

The development of Arabic epistolary writing can be traced back to the early Islamic period, where it was used for administrative, political, and scholarly purposes. Over time, it evolved into

a sophisticated literary genre characterized by formal structure and rhetorical richness. Classical authors such as al-Jāhīz and ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib contributed significantly to shaping its stylistic conventions. Their works established models of clarity, coherence, and persuasive expression that influenced later generations. In addition, the integration of religious themes into epistolary writing further expanded its scope. This historical evolution demonstrates the adaptability and enduring relevance of the genre in various intellectual contexts (Kennedy, 2007).

Within Islamic scholarship, epistles became an effective medium for transmitting religious teachings and ethical guidance. Scholars utilized this form to address both individual and communal concerns, often blending doctrinal instruction with moral exhortation. The epistolary format allowed for a more personal and direct mode of communication, making complex ideas more accessible to a wider audience. Furthermore, it enabled authors to respond to specific social and spiritual issues within their communities. This flexibility contributed to the widespread use of epistles in Islamic intellectual history. Consequently, the genre played a central role in shaping religious discourse (Gutas, 2001).

In the context of Sufism, epistolary prose gained particular prominence as a means of spiritual guidance and mentorship. Sufi masters often wrote letters to their disciples, offering advice on spiritual practices, ethical conduct, and inner purification. These epistles typically combine doctrinal clarity with symbolic and metaphorical language. The use of such language reflects the experiential nature of Sufi knowledge, which often transcends literal expression. Moreover, Sufi epistles serve as a bridge between theoretical teachings and practical application. They thus represent a unique form of spiritual pedagogy within Islamic tradition (Schimmel, 1975).

West Africa, as an important center of Islamic scholarship, developed its own rich tradition of Arabic writing, including epistolary literature. From the pre-colonial period to the modern era, scholars in the region composed numerous works in Arabic that addressed theological, legal, and spiritual issues. Epistles, in particular, played a crucial role in disseminating knowledge across vast geographical areas. They facilitated communication among scholars and students, strengthening intellectual networks within the region. Additionally, they contributed to the preservation and transmission of Islamic learning across generations. This highlights the significance of epistolary writing in the West African Islamic context (Hunwick, 1999).

Among the prominent figures in this tradition is Shaykh al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm Niyās al-Kawlakhi, a renowned Sufi scholar and leader of the Tijaniyya order. His writings reflect a deep engagement with both classical Islamic scholarship and contemporary spiritual concerns. He was known for his ability to communicate complex spiritual ideas in clear and accessible language. His epistles, in particular, demonstrate a balance between intellectual depth and literary simplicity. This makes his works valuable not only for their doctrinal content but also for their stylistic qualities. As such, he occupies a significant place in modern Arabic Sufi literature (Seesemann, 2011).

Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās’s epistles are distinguished by their focus on spiritual reform and ethical discipline. He emphasizes sincerity in worship, adherence to religious obligations, and the importance of inner purification. At the same time, his writings address the challenges faced by Muslims in maintaining spiritual integrity in changing social contexts. His use of direct and instructive language enhances the clarity of his message. Furthermore, his integration of Sufi terminology reflects a deep understanding of spiritual concepts. These features make his epistles an important subject of academic analysis (Seesemann, 2011).

Another notable aspect of his epistolary style is the use of rhetorical strategies to reinforce key themes. He employs techniques such as repetition, restriction, and imperative expressions to emphasize moral and spiritual principles. These devices enhance the persuasive power of his writing while maintaining stylistic balance. In addition, his language avoids excessive

ornamentation, favoring clarity and precision. This approach aligns with the broader tradition of Sufi prose, which prioritizes meaning over form. As a result, his epistles achieve both intellectual and aesthetic effectiveness (Allen, 2000).

Thematically, his epistles address core elements of Sufi spirituality, including sincerity (*ikhhlās*), remembrance of God (*dhikr*), and spiritual discipline (*istiqāmah*). He also stresses the importance of concealing spiritual experiences to prevent misunderstanding or misuse. This reflects a key principle in Sufi ethics, where knowledge is shared according to the readiness of the recipient. Moreover, his emphasis on ethical conduct underscores the practical dimension of spiritual life. These themes are presented in a coherent and structured manner, enhancing their impact on the reader. Thus, his epistles serve as both instructional and reflective texts (Schimmel, 1975).

From a literary perspective, the epistles of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās exhibit a harmonious integration of form and content. The structure of his writing follows classical conventions, beginning with praise of God and blessings upon the Prophet. This is followed by a logically organized body that develops the main themes. The conclusion typically reinforces the central message and provides a sense of closure. Such structural coherence contributes to the readability and effectiveness of the text. It also reflects the author's mastery of Arabic literary norms (Kennedy, 2007).

This study focuses on analyzing one of his epistles by examining its thematic, rhetorical, and stylistic features. The aim is to highlight the literary and intellectual significance of the text within the broader context of Arabic Sufi literature. By applying a descriptive and analytical approach, the study seeks to uncover the underlying structures and meanings embedded in the epistle. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of epistolary prose in Islamic intellectual history. It also provides insight into the distinctive characteristics of West African Arabic writing (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In conclusion, Arabic epistolary prose remains a vital and dynamic genre within Islamic literature. The works of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās exemplify the continued relevance of this tradition in the modern era. His epistles demonstrate how literary expression can serve as a vehicle for spiritual guidance and intellectual reflection. Through their clarity, depth, and rhetorical effectiveness, they offer valuable contributions to both Sufi thought and Arabic literature. Therefore, the study of such texts is essential for understanding the richness and diversity of Islamic intellectual heritage.

## Method (منهج)

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to explore the factors influencing Arabic Second Language Acquisition (ASLA) among adult learners. A mixed-methods approach was chosen because it provides a comprehensive understanding by integrating quantitative trends with qualitative insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design allowed the researcher to triangulate findings and strengthen the validity of interpretations, ensuring that linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions were captured holistically.

The quantitative component utilized a descriptive-correlational design aimed at identifying relationships among key ASLA variables, including vocabulary acquisition, morphological awareness, phonological accuracy, learner motivation, and exposure to authentic Arabic input. Correlational methods are commonly used in second-language research to examine associations between learner characteristics and learning outcomes (Ellis, 2015). This design helped determine which factors contributed most strongly to learner progress.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of learners representing diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds. Purposive sampling is particularly effective in language-learning research because it allows the selection of participants with characteristics relevant to the research goals (Gall et al., 2007). The sample consisted of 60 adult learners enrolled in Arabic language programs at intermediate proficiency levels across three international institutions.

Data were collected through three primary instruments: a standardized Arabic proficiency test, a morphological and phonological awareness task, and a structured motivation questionnaire adapted from Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). The use of multiple instruments ensured broad coverage of linguistic and affective variables known to influence ASLA (Gardner, 2010). Each instrument was validated by experts in Arabic linguistics before implementation.

The qualitative component employed semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 participants from the main sample. Interviews were chosen because they allow learners to articulate their experiences, challenges, and sociocultural perceptions, which cannot always be captured through quantitative measures (Creswell, 2018). The interviews focused on learners' experiences with diglossia, challenges in acquiring Arabic sounds, and exposure to dialectal variations.

Data analysis followed a sequential explanatory strategy. Quantitative data were analyzed first using descriptive statistics, correlation tests, and regression analysis to identify significant predictors of ASLA outcomes. Sequential explanatory approaches help reveal statistical patterns prior to interpreting them qualitatively (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The software SPSS 26.0 was used to generate statistical outputs.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step coding process. Thematic analysis is widely applied in language-learning research because it allows researchers to identify recurrent patterns within interview responses (Nowell et al., 2017). Themes were generated related to learner motivation, cognitive challenges, diglossic navigation, and sociocultural exposure.

To enhance the validity and reliability of findings, the study employed methodological triangulation by comparing quantitative trends with qualitative themes. Triangulation is a recognized strategy for improving the credibility of mixed-methods research, particularly in studies examining complex language-learning processes (Dörnyei, 2007). Consistency across data sources was documented and integrated into the final analysis.

Ethical procedures were strictly followed throughout the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant identities. Ethical research practices are essential in applied linguistics to protect learner privacy and ensure responsible data handling (Mackey & Gass, 2016). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Finally, the integration phase combined quantitative statistical findings with qualitative narrative accounts to produce an interpretive model of ASLA. Integrated analysis helps illuminate how linguistic structure, learner psychology, and sociocultural factors interact to influence Arabic learning trajectories (Ellis, 2015). The final model contributes a holistic understanding of Arabic Second Language Acquisition in international learning contexts.

## Result (نتائج)

### Biographical Background of the Author

Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās was born in 1900 in the village of Ṭaybah Anīsīn, located in the Sine-Saloum region of Senegal, an area known for its deep-rooted Islamic scholarly traditions. His birth into a prominent religious family significantly shaped his intellectual and spiritual trajectory. His father, Shaykh ‘Abdullāh Niyās, was a distinguished Qur’anic scholar, preacher, and Sufi leader who played a central role in Islamic reform and education during the era of French colonial expansion. This environment provided a strong foundation for the young Ibrāhīm to engage deeply with Islamic sciences. The influence of his father extended beyond formal instruction to include spiritual تربية (upbringing) rooted in Sufi discipline. Thus, his early life reflects a synthesis of scholarship and spirituality (Seesemann, 2011).

From an early age, Shaykh Ibrāhīm demonstrated exceptional intellectual ability, particularly in memorizing the Qur’an and mastering Arabic. He pursued studies in various Islamic disciplines, including jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*‘aqīdah*), Arabic linguistics, and Sufism. His education was not limited to formal learning but also included experiential spiritual training under the guidance of his father. This dual emphasis on knowledge and practice is a hallmark of Sufi pedagogy. As a result, he developed a comprehensive understanding of both the outward and inward dimensions of Islam. This holistic formation later became evident in his writings (Schimmel, 1975).

As he matured, Shaykh Ibrāhīm emerged as a leading figure within the Tijaniyya Sufi order, gaining recognition not only in Senegal but across West Africa and beyond. His spiritual authority attracted a wide network of disciples from diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds. He played a crucial role in expanding the influence of the Tijaniyya order in the twentieth century. His leadership was marked by a commitment to inclusivity and accessibility in spiritual teaching. This contributed to the widespread appeal of his الفكر الصوفي (Sufi thought). Consequently, he became one of the most influential Sufi leaders of his time (Seesemann, 2011).

In addition to his spiritual leadership, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās was a prolific writer who contributed extensively to Arabic Islamic literature. His works encompass a wide range of genres, including theological treatises, spiritual manuals, poetry, and epistles. These writings reflect his mastery of Arabic expression and his ability to convey complex ideas with clarity and elegance. His epistles, in particular, serve as a medium for both instruction and reflection. They illustrate his اهتمام (concern) with moral reform and spiritual purification. Therefore, his intellectual legacy remains highly significant in the study of modern Sufi literature (Allen, 2000).

### Arabic Epistolary Tradition and Classification

The Arabic epistolary tradition has long been recognized as a sophisticated literary genre that combines functional communication with artistic expression. Historically, it developed as a means of conveying official, personal, and scholarly messages in a structured and eloquent form. Over time, scholars classified epistles into various types based on their purpose and stylistic features. These classifications help in understanding the diversity and adaptability of the genre. They also highlight the role of context in shaping the content and form of epistolary writing. Thus, the study of classification provides a useful framework for literary analysis (Kennedy, 2007).

Among the primary categories are official epistles used for administrative and political communication. These letters are characterized by formal language and adherence to protocol. They often include diplomatic خطاب (discourse) and aim to convey authority and legitimacy. In contrast, fraternal epistles are more personal in nature, exchanged among scholars, friends, or students. These letters emphasize emotional connection and intellectual exchange. Such diversity illustrates the flexibility of the epistolary form in addressing different communicative needs (Allen, 2000).

Another important category includes scholarly and religious epistles, which focus on

doctrinal, ethical, or legal مسائل (issues). These writings often combine rigorous argumentation with moral instruction. They serve as tools for teaching and guiding readers in matters of faith and practice. In addition, creative epistles are distinguished by their artistic qualities, including imagery, metaphor, and rhetorical devices. These letters prioritize aesthetic expression alongside meaning. Functional epistles, on the other hand, emphasize clarity and practicality, often used in everyday communication (Kennedy, 2007).

The epistle analyzed in this study falls within the category of religious and creative epistles. It integrates moral exhortation with refined literary style, making it both instructive and aesthetically engaging. The author employs symbolic language and rhetorical techniques to convey spiritual teachings effectively. This dual function enhances the impact of the message on the reader. It also reflects the author's intention to appeal to both العقل (intellect) and القلب (heart). Therefore, this classification is essential for understanding the nature and purpose of the text (Schimmel, 1975).

### Structural Features of the Epistle

The structure of the epistle adheres closely to classical Arabic literary conventions, reflecting a deep respect for established norms. It begins with the basmalah (*Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*), followed by praise of Allah (*ḥamdalah*) and blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad (*ṣalawāt*). This افتتاح (opening) serves not only as a formal introduction but also as a spiritual invocation. It establishes the tone of the text and situates it within an Islamic framework. Such openings are characteristic of traditional Arabic prose. They reinforce the religious orientation of the discourse (Allen, 2000).

The body of the epistle is organized into a series of thematic sections that present guidance, advice, and exhortation. Each section develops a particular idea while maintaining coherence with the overall message. The author employs a balanced structure that avoids fragmentation. This التنظيم (organization) enhances readability and ensures that the message is conveyed effectively. The use of clear transitions between ideas further strengthens the unity of the text. As a result, the epistle achieves both clarity and depth (Kennedy, 2007).

In the concluding section, the author reinforces the central themes of sincerity, discipline, and spiritual integrity. The خاتمة (conclusion) often includes supplications or reminders that leave a lasting impression on the reader. This rhetorical strategy serves to summarize the key points while encouraging reflection. It also provides a sense of closure to the discourse. The conclusion thus functions as both a recap and a moral reinforcement. This enhances the persuasive power of the epistle (Schimmel, 1975).

Overall, the structural coherence of the epistle contributes significantly to its effectiveness as a literary and spiritual text. The integration of traditional elements with a clear organizational pattern reflects the author's mastery of Arabic prose. It allows the text to be accessible to a wide audience without sacrificing intellectual rigor. Furthermore, the balance between form and content demonstrates a high level of literary competence. This makes the epistle a نموذج (model) of refined Sufi prose. Consequently, its structure plays a crucial role in conveying its message (Allen, 2000).

### Discussion (مناقشة)

The epistle demonstrates a consistent and deliberate use of established Sufi terminology, reflecting the author's deep engagement with classical Islamic spirituality. Terms such as *dhawq* (spiritual taste), *ma'rifah* (gnosis), *ḥaḍrah* (divine presence), *istiḳāmah* (uprightness), and *fanā'* (annihilation) are not merely ornamental but serve as أدوات (tools) for conveying complex spiritual experiences. These terms are deeply rooted in the Sufi intellectual tradition and

have been widely discussed in classical works. Their inclusion in the epistle indicates the author's محاولة (effort) to situate his message within an established epistemological framework. This also enhances the credibility and depth of the text as a spiritual document (Schimmel, 1975).

The concept of *dhawq* is particularly significant in Sufi discourse, as it refers to the experiential dimension of spiritual knowledge. Unlike rational or theoretical understanding, *dhawq* emphasizes direct inner experience of divine realities. In the epistle, this concept is used to highlight the importance of personal spiritual engagement rather than mere intellectual comprehension. This aligns with the broader Sufi emphasis on experiential معرفة (knowledge). It also suggests that true understanding cannot be achieved without inner transformation. Thus, the use of *dhawq* reinforces the experiential محور (axis) of Sufi pedagogy (Schimmel, 1975).

Similarly, the term *ma'rifah* denotes a higher level of knowledge that transcends ordinary cognition. It represents an intimate awareness of God that is attained through spiritual discipline and purification. The author's use of this term reflects his understanding of المعرفة as a gradual process that requires commitment and sincerity. This perspective is consistent with classical Sufi teachings, which distinguish between acquired knowledge (*'ilm*) and realized knowledge (*ma'rifah*). By emphasizing this distinction, the epistle encourages readers to move beyond superficial learning. It thus promotes a deeper engagement with spiritual practice (Chittick, 2000).

The notion of *ḥaḍrah* (divine presence) further illustrates the centrality of spiritual awareness in the epistle. This concept refers to a state of consciousness in which the individual feels a constant awareness of God's presence. The author uses this term to emphasize the importance of mindfulness and remembrance (*dhikr*) in daily life. This reflects a key principle in Sufi practice, where spiritual realization is linked to continuous awareness of the divine. The emphasis on *ḥaḍrah* also underscores the relational aspect of spirituality. It highlights the dynamic interaction between the الإنسان (human) and the divine (Nasr, 2007).

Another key concept is *istiqāmah*, which refers to steadfastness and consistency in religious practice. The author presents this quality as a fundamental indicator of spiritual maturity. Rather than focusing on extraordinary experiences or miracles, he emphasizes the importance of maintaining regular عبادات (acts of worship) and ethical conduct. This approach reflects a sober and balanced understanding of Sufism. It also aligns with the teachings of many classical scholars who prioritized discipline over ecstatic states. Therefore, *istiqāmah* is portrayed as a practical and attainable goal for spiritual seekers (Schimmel, 1975).

The concept of *fanā'* (annihilation) represents one of the more advanced stages of Sufi experience. It refers to the dissolution of the ego in the presence of the divine, leading to a state of complete surrender. In the epistle, this term is used cautiously and within a proper theological context. The author avoids exaggerated or controversial interpretations, instead presenting *fanā'* as a spiritual حالة (state) grounded in humility and obedience. This reflects a commitment to orthodox Sunni Sufism. It also ensures that the concept is accessible and relevant to a broader audience (Chittick, 2000).

A notable aspect of the epistle is the author's عدم التركيز (lack of emphasis) on miraculous phenomena (*karāmāt*). Instead, he prioritizes moral integrity and consistency in practice as the true indicators of spiritual realization. This perspective challenges popular misconceptions that equate spirituality with supernatural experiences. It also reinforces the ethical dimension of Sufism, where character and behavior are central. This approach aligns with mainstream Sunni Sufi thought, which emphasizes sobriety and adherence to الشريعة (Islamic law). Consequently, the epistle promotes a grounded and responsible understanding of spirituality (Nasr, 2007).

In conclusion, the use of Sufi terminology in the epistle reflects a sophisticated and balanced approach to spiritual teaching. The author integrates classical concepts with practical guidance,

creating a النص (text) that is both intellectually rich and spiritually accessible. His emphasis on moral discipline, experiential knowledge, and consistency highlights the core values of Sufi tradition. Furthermore, his avoidance of excessive mysticism ensures alignment with orthodox Islamic principles. This makes the epistle a valuable contribution to Sufi literature. It also demonstrates the استمرار (continuity) of classical Sufi thought in modern contexts.

### Conclusion (خاتمة)

This study has demonstrated that the epistle of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās al-Kawlakhi represents a significant contribution to Arabic Sufi prose in West Africa. Through its balanced integration of spiritual instruction and literary artistry, the epistle exemplifies the enduring relevance of the Arabic epistolary tradition in Islamic intellectual history.

The analysis reveals that the author's prose is characterized by clarity, rhetorical effectiveness, and doctrinal soundness. By prioritizing sincerity, discipline, and ethical conduct, the epistle offers timeless guidance for spiritual seekers while enriching the corpus of Arabic Islamic literature. The findings confirm Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās's position as a leading figure in both Sufi spirituality and Arabic literary expression.

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