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Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman and His Reflections on the Tijaniyya Sufi Order: A Study Based on His Manuscripts

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Abstract

This study inquires the intellectual and spiritual legacy of Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman, a prominent scholar and saint of the *Tijaniyya* Sufi order in southwest Ethiopia, with the objective of examining how his writings contributed to the localization and reinterpretation of *Tijaniyya* teachings in the Gibe region. Drawing on field documentation conducted between 2023 and 2024, it employs a combined philological and historical methodology to analyze the Arabic manuscripts attributed to him, particularly *Awṛād al-Tijani*, *Tanbīh al-Anām*, and *Manzūma al-Tijaniyya*. Thus, the findings reveal that Sheikh Mahmud articulated a distinctly indigenous understanding of *Tijani* ethics, remembrance (*dhikr*), and knowledge (*‘ilm*), creatively translating a global Sufi tradition into local idioms of worship, instruction, and healing. His corpus illustrates how imported doctrinal forms were transformed into a living moral philosophy suited to the multilingual and devotional landscape of the Gibe States, while situating his writings within broader networks of African Islamic manuscript culture and illustrating the region as a site of sustained indigenous intellectual creativity.

Keywords: Tijaniyya Sufi Order, Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman, Arabic Manuscripts, Gibe Region and Islamic Intellectual History.

1. Introduction

Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman holds a distinctive place in the history of Islam in southwestern part of Ethiopia as an indigenous scholar in whom deep textual learning and spiritual charisma came

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together. Active during the early twentieth century across the regions of Jimma, Dedo, Wellega (Gimbi), Assosa (Benishangul), and Agaro, he served both as a respected Qur'ānic teacher and as a practitioner of herbal and traditional medicine, earning a reputation that spread widely throughout the Gibe States¹. He belonged to the *Tijaniyya* Sufi order founded by the Algerian scholar Ahmad al-Tijani (1737-1815) which emphasized structured remembrance of God, moral refinement, and the pursuit of divine closeness through knowledge and disciplined practice.² By the nineteenth century, *Tijani* teachings had reached different regions of Ethiopia through Sudan and Harar, where they encountered long-established local traditions of Islamic scholarship and healing.³

Within this intellectual and spiritual landscape, Sheikh Mahmud's scholarly formation implies both continuity with earlier traditions and creative adaptation to new currents. His teaching blended the memorization techniques of *khalwa* schools (traditional Qur'ānic study circles) with the structured litanies central to *Tijani* devotional practice. He wrote for communities that valued oral transmission as deeply as written authority, moving fluidly between the two. His poems, prayers, and short treatises were regularly recited in *halaqāt* (learning circles) and during *dhikr* gatherings (ritual remembrance of God), where the act of reading became an experience of sound, rhythm, and collective devotion. This fusion of text and voice illustrates what scholars describe as "embodied literacy," a mode of learning in which knowledge is validated through recitation, cadence, and breath.⁴

Thus, this article approaches Sheikh Mahmud's texts not merely as devotional handbooks but as literary works that convey

¹ Informant: Abdulkерim Abbaagaru.

² O'Brien, D. B. (1971). The Mourides of Senegal: The Political and Economic Organization of an Islamic Brotherhood. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *Islam observed: Religious development in Morocco and Indonesia* (pp. 59–97).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Ware, R. T. (2014). *The walking Qur'an: Islamic education, embodied knowledge, and history in West Africa*. The University of North Carolina Press.

a sympathetic and multidimensional perspective on the *Tijaniyya* path. It takes up two guiding questions: first, how his writings interpret and subtly reshape the *Tijaniyya* path, and second, what they reveal about the encounter between a global Sufi tradition and the intellectual rhythms of Ethiopian Muslim life. Here is a clearer and simpler version while keeping the meaning intact. Examining these questions helps the study rethink how the Gibe region fits into the larger story of Islamic scholarship in Africa. Instead of seeing southwestern Ethiopia as a far-off place that simply received teachings from the neighboring regions, the analysis shows it as an active center of learning where local languages, teaching traditions, and devotional practices interacted with wider Sufi ideas to create rich and diverse forms of religious expression. By doing so, the article draws overdue attention to the content of manuscripts and a regional scholarly heritage that has long been overlooked, yet continues to appraise contemporary understandings of Islamic learning, identity, and cultural memory in Ethiopia.

2. Contextualizing the Tijaniyya and Ethiopian Sufism

Scholarly attention to the *Tijaniyya* Sufi order has largely focused on West African centers such as Fez in Morocco, Kaolack in Senegal, and Kano in Nigeria, where influential and charismatic scholars established enduring networks of learning, spiritual authority, and communal guidance.⁵ Ousmane describes this tradition as an “infrastructure of knowledge,” connecting manuscripts, teachers, and disciples across linguistic and geographic boundaries.⁶ Building on this, Roman and Joseph show how the *Tijaniyya* skillfully adapted its teachings on *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) and *tazkiyah* (moral renewal to suit the social, cultural, and political) realities of different African societies, all while maintaining a sense of spiritual unity across regions.⁷ These studies show the order’s remarkable flexibility,

⁵ Wright, Z. V. (2015). *Living knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi community of Ibrahim Niasse*. Brill.

⁶ Kane, O. (2016). *Beyond Timbuktu: An intellectual history of Muslim West Africa*. Harvard University Press.

⁷ Loimeier, R. (2013). *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology*. Indiana University Press.

demonstrating how it preserved core theological principles while simultaneously embracing local languages, customs, and modes of expression, thus allowing Sufi practice to resonate meaningfully with diverse communities.

In Ethiopia, research on Sufism has traditionally concentrated on northern centers such as Harar, Wollo, and Shewa, where Arabic literary production flourished and became a central feature of religious and intellectual life. Pioneering scholarship by Hussein Ahmed revealed that Sufi movements in these regions were active agents of revival rather than passive recipients of imported orthodoxy.⁸ Additionally, Ahmed's⁹ studies of Harari Arabic writing further unveil an intricate intellectual culture that blended African and Islamic sensibilities, while Ricci's¹⁰ concept of the "Arabic cosmopolis" provides a glimpse for understanding how texts circulated across languages and regions, shaping new Muslim publics and scholarly networks.

Despite the valuable contributions of previous scholarship, the southwestern highlands have largely remained on the margins of Ethiopian Islamic historiography. The Gibe States namely Jimma, Gera, Gomma, Limmu, and Guma were historically vibrant centers of trade, learning, and Sufi practice, yet their manuscript heritage and religious institutions remain understudied. Figures such as Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman, who actively embodied and transmitted the *Tijaniyya* tradition in this region, are remembered primarily through oral memory, stressing the importance of preserving and analyzing his manuscripts. Such study not only documents his unique contributions but also illuminates how the Gibe States functioned as a dynamic space where local traditions and global Sufi ideas intersected, producing distinct and enduring forms of religious and intellectual expression.

⁸ Hussein Ahmed, (2001). *Islam in nineteenth-century Wallo, Ethiopia: Revival, reform and reaction*. Brill.

⁹ Ficquet, E., Ahmed Hassen Omer, & Thomas, O. (Eds.). (2016). *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in movement: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. Tsehai Publishers & Distributors.

¹⁰ Ricci, R. (2011). *Islam translated: Literature, conversion, and the Arabic cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. University of Chicago Press

Within this context, Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman emerges as a central figure in the spiritual and intellectual life of the Gibe States during the early twentieth century. Renowned both as a Qur'ānic teacher and a practitioner of herbal and traditional medicine, he combined textual scholarship with a captivating presence that drew students and devotees across Jimma, Gera, Gomma, Limmu, and Agaro. Moreover, his surviving manuscripts written in Arabic and Afan Oromo '*Ajami* include works such as *Awṛād al-Tijani*, *Tanbīh al-Anām*, and *Manzūma al-Tijaniyya*, which together reveal a thoughtful and sympathetic engagement with *Tijaniyya* teachings. Far from being mere manuals of devotion, these texts articulate a multidimensional vision of ethics, remembrance (*dhikr*), and knowledge (*ilm*), translating global Sufi ideas into forms that resonated with local languages, pedagogical practices, and spiritual needs. Studying Sheikh Mahmud's manuscripts thus shows not only his personal contributions but also the broader intellectual vigor of the southwestern highlands, signifying that the Gibe region was a lively arena where African and Islamic traditions converged to produce indigenous and persistent religious expressions.

Recent scholarship in Islamic manuscript studies further reveals the dual nature of the handwritten book as both an intellectual product and a spiritual instrument. In African Sufi contexts, the act of copying a text can itself be devotional, with ink and paper serving as conduits of *baraka* (blessing). This perspective is particularly helpful for Sheikh Mahmud's corpus, which often includes personal prayers, colophons invoking divine protection, and notes marking communal recitation, effectively transforming his manuscripts into a "living archive" renewed through reading, touch, and sound. To achieve this, the study adopts a descriptive approach and fieldwork was conducted between 2023 and 2024 in Jimma, Dedo, Welega, Assosa, and Agaro locations closely linked to Sheikh Mahmud's teaching, burial, and the preservation of his manuscripts. Data were gathered through direct examination of privately held manuscripts, interviews with custodians, and observation of devotional practices at his *qubba* (tomb or shrine), allowing for a complete reconstruction of his intellectual, spiritual, and social influence.

3. Insights into Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman and His Literary Legacy

3.1. A Short Biographical Sketch of the Author (Sheikh Mahmud)

Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman was born in the late nineteenth century in the Gibe region, a time marked by profound political shifts and vibrant religious activity.¹¹



Illustration 1: Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman (Jimma, mid-20th century)

Photo: family archive

According to oral histories, he came from a respected lineage of Qur'ānic teachers who were known not only for their mastery of traditional Islamic education and literary production but also for their expertise in herbal and traditional healing.¹² His early education followed the established *khalwa* tradition, beginning with the memorization of the Qur'ān and progressing to Arabic grammar and moral instruction, all under the close guidance of his teachers. Among the most influential were Sheikh Abdulhakim of Jiren and Sheikh Widad of Dedo, both of whom

¹¹ Hussein, F. (2020). Philological inquiry of selected Arabic manuscript of Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman/Abba Mechaa Abbāa Waaji/(1911-1976) (master's thesis). Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

¹² Informant: Sheik Nasir Abba Wari.

shaped his intellectual foundation and instilled in him a commitment to disciplined study and spiritual refinement.¹³

As a young indigenous scholar, Sheikh Mahmud came into contact with the nearby teachers who traveled between Harar, Sudan, and the western Ethiopian frontier.¹⁴ Through these encounters he was first introduced to the writings of Ahmad al-Tijani and his disciples, whose emphasis on remembrance (*dhikr*) and sincerity aligned closely with his own devotional temperament. His formal initiation into the *Tijaniyya* was later carried out by Sheikh Ahmad Umar, who not only granted him recognition but also wrote him a letter shortly before his death in 1943 (1363 H) declaring Sheikh Mahmud his successor in the *Ṭarīqa al-Tijāniyya*.¹⁵ The discipline he inherited placed knowledge at the center of spiritual purification. Sheikh Mahmud integrated Qur'ānic exegesis with classical Sufi manuals, developing lessons that blended scriptural thought with mystical insight. His teaching style encouraged dialogue, poetry, and public recitation practices that connected intellectual training with the transformative power of shared vocal expression.

Moreover, Sheikh Mahmud's renowned extended far beyond textual scholarship. He was widely recognized as a healer (*ṭabīb rūḥānī*), drawing on both herbal knowledge and Qur'ānic verses to address physical and spiritual sicknesses.¹⁶ People from Jimma and surrounding districts visited him for guidance on illnesses, family disputes, and moral dilemmas. His manuscripts often contain marginal prayers for protection, instructions for healing amulets, and personal invocations, illustrating how erudition and charisma worked together in his daily practice. For him, intellectual mastery and the ability to mediate divine grace were inseparable.

Besides, writing in Arabic and Afan Oromo *Ajami*, Sheikh Mahmud represented the bilingual reality of Muslim communities

¹³ Raya, N. (2023). Heritages and their conservation in the Gibe region (Southwest Ethiopia): A history, ca. 1800-1980 (Master's thesis). Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia.

¹⁴ Minako Ishihara (1995) Report on the islamic religious activities and Folk belief in Jimma area, PhD Thesis, Tokyo University

¹⁵ Supra note 12.

¹⁶ Informant: Million Tigestu.

in the Gibe region. Arabic connected his writings to the wider Islamic world and carried doctrinal authority, while *Ajami* offered a direct and intimate mode of teaching for ordinary believers. His *Manzūma al-Tijaniyya* captures this duality; a rhythmic poem that renders diverse theological ideas memorable through familiar sounds and vernacular expression. This alternation between languages implies an intellectual philosophy grounded in accessibility knowledge should reach the people without losing its sacred depth. By the mid-twentieth century, Sufi *ṭuruq* (order) such as the *Tijaniyya* had spread widely through networks of disciples who established rural *zāwiya*-like learning circles in Jimma, Gera, and Limmu.¹⁷ Sheikh Mahmud's home in Jimma served simultaneously as a classroom, mediation space, and informal clinic. After his passing, his tomb became a *qubba* (a site visited by pilgrims seeking blessing or *Baraka*) and spiritual guidance, and a testament to the enduring influence of his teachings.

Three of Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman's most important surviving manuscripts offer a clear space into the extent of his intellectual and spiritual contributions. *Al-Mīnhāj al-Ṣawāb* (The Path of Rightfulness) presents a theological and Sufi roadmap that both explains and defends the principles of the *Tijaniyya* order while delineating the ethical and devotional practices expected of its followers. His *Alfiyat al-Difā' 'an Khātim al-Awliyā'* (A Thousand Verses in Defense of the Seal of Saints) is a substantial didactic poem that affirms the legitimacy of sainthood, the authority of Sufi masters, and the spiritual hierarchy integral to the *Tijani* tradition. Complementing these is *Bulḡat al-Muhtāj fī Naẓm Dūrat al-Tāj* (The Sufficiency of the Seeker in Versifying the Pearl of the Crown), a poetic commentary that explains the meanings and functions of *Tijani* litanies, guiding disciples through the rhythms and disciplines of daily remembrance.

Altogether, these works reveal a scholar deeply devoted to safeguarding traditional Islamic teachings, nurturing his students, and strengthening the literary life of Jimma. They also show his ability to move gracefully between prose and poetry, allowing him to communicate diverse ideas in ways that were both

¹⁷ Supra note 8.

memorable and spiritually conveying. Even today, inside the quiet walls of his qubba, these manuscripts continue to be read aloud, copied by hand, and passed from teacher to student turning the shrine into a living archive where past and present meet through vocal expression, touch, and devotion.

3.2. Interpreting Sheikh Mahmud's Manuscripts and His Literary Reflections on the Tijaniyya

In this section, we will examine three core manuscripts through which Sheikh Mahmud articulated his reflections on the *Tijaniyya* mainly *Awṛād al-Tijānī*, an Arabic collection of daily litanies with phonetic glosses; *Tanbīh al-Anām*, a bilingual Arabic-Afan Oromo Ajami treatise offering moral guidance; and *Manẓūma al-Tijānīyya*, an *Ajami* didactic poem summarizing *Tijani* ethical teachings. These texts were selected for their provenance, thematic coherence, and relatively good preservation. Their codicological features including ink, pagination, and marginal annotations were carefully documented to understand scribal traditions and possible lines of diffusions. The analysis itself combined close philological reading, tracing vocabulary, orthography, and intertextual echoes with foundational *Tijani* works such as *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*; literary interpretation, attending to metaphor, rhythm, and rhetorical form; and historical contextualization, situating the manuscripts within the educational and devotional networks of the Gibe States and their wider links to the proximate regions such as Harar and Sudan. Oral testimonies from students and custodians further illuminated how these works functioned in practice whether recited in group *dhikr*, used in healing, or memorized in instructional settings. Together, these textual and ethnographic insights allow for a multidimensional interpretation that recognizes the manuscripts not only as literary objects but also as living components of local religious tradition.

These three basic manuscripts lighten Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman's synthesis of doctrine, language, and local spirituality, and they reveal different aspects of his intellectual personality, his attention to ritual order, moral reasoning, and poetic expression, and show how he localized *Tijani* teachings within the religious life of the Jimma community in particular.

3.2.1. The manuscript of *Awṛād al-Tijānī* (Daily Litanies)

This manuscript preserves the core *Tijani* litany while adapting it to communal recitation practices in Jimma. Marginal notes include phonetic clues, breathing marks, and rhythmic indicators, suggesting that *dhikr* was envisioned not merely as an individual devotion but as a collective aesthetic discipline. The text opens with a formula of divine praise and proceeds through structured invocations of the Prophet, angels, and saints. Additionally, Sheikh Mahmud's annotations stress punctual recitation at dawn and sunset, resonating Qur'ānic cycles of worship and aligning devotional practice with the agrarian rhythms of the Gibe highlands. In this form, *dhikr* becomes a social machinery of synchronization a way of uniting dispersed believers through shared sound, tempo, and intention. The litanies continue to resonate in gatherings at his *qubba*, where memory and melody sustain the manuscript's meaning.¹⁸



Illustration 2.
Sample of
Sheikh
Mahmud's
Awṛād al-Tijānī
manuscript,
folio 9.

¹⁸ Informant: Nejib Raya.

3.2.2. The manuscript of *Tanbīh al-Anām* (Moral Guidance).

Among the surviving manuscripts, *Tanbīh al-Anām* stands out for its bilingual composition and ethical depth. By alternating between Arabic exposition and Afan Oromo *Ajami* translation, it creates a pedagogical bridge between learned and ordinary audiences. One passage from the Sheikh's copy reads:

Transliteration:

Yā ibnā Ādam, i 'lam anna qalbaka bayna iṣba 'ayni min aṣābi 'ar-Rahmān, yuqallibuhu kayfa yashā'; fa-tahhirhu bi-dhikr Allāh dā' iman.

Translation:

“O child of Adam, know that your heart lies between two fingers of the Merciful; He turns it as He wills. Therefore, purify it through constant remembrance of God.”

Beneath this verse, the *Ajami* commentary renders the message in rhythmic Afan Oromo, encouraging *sabar* (steadfastness) and *ikhhlās* (sincerity). The juxtaposition implies Sheikh Mahmud's commitment to moral bilingualism and the belief that ethical truths must circulate in every language capable of carrying them.



Illustration 3.
Sheikh
Mahmud's
*Tanbīh al-
Anām*
manuscript,
folio 4.

The treatise continually links personal purification to social harmony, using parables of merchants, neighbors, and family life to domesticate classical Sufi ethics within the moral world of the Gibe region.¹⁹ Its closing folios compose supplications written in red ink visual reminders that ethical reflection is inseparable from prayer.

3.2.3. The manuscript of *Manzūma al-Tijānīyya* (Didactic Poem)

The *Manzūma* extracts *Tijani* metaphysics into poetic form. Composed in Afan Oromo *Ajami* couplets, it weaves praise of God with exhortations to humility, gratitude, and constant remembrance. Its beat reflects the rhythm of *dhikr*, illustrating how Sheikh Mahmud used verse as a form of performative theology. The recurring refrain blends supplication and melody, allowing worshippers to internalize doctrine through sound.

“*Rabbi nuura qalbii kee nuu kenni*”

(“O Lord, grant us the light of Your heart”)

By transforming metaphysical concepts into song, the poem makes esoteric learning emotionally accessible. It thus occupies a middle ground between scholarship and devotion what local reciters still call *barnoota qalbii*, “knowledge of the heart.”²⁰

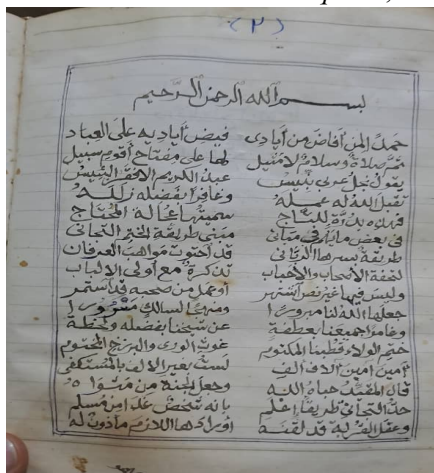


Illustration 4.
Sample of Sheikh
Mahmud’s *Bulghat al-
Muhtāj*: *Naẓm al-Durra wa-
l-Tāj* Manuscript, folio 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid*

3.3. Core Themes and Intellectual Motifs in the Text

Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman's manuscripts reveal a richly intermingled set of themes that demonstrate his understanding of Islamic doctrine, moral cultivation, and the spiritual life of his community. At the heart of his writings is the centrality of *dhikr*, the remembrance of God, which he portrays not merely as a ritual exercise but as the fundamental rhythm that animates both individual and communal life. In his words, "the heart that forgets is a body without life,"²¹ suggesting that spiritual mindfulness is inseparable from vitality itself. *Dhikr*, in Sheikh Mahmud's vision, is performative and social; it synchronizes the hearts of believers, creating an audible and embodied expression of faith that bridges private devotion and collective piety. Through annotations, phonetic guides, and prescribed timings, he cultivates a practice in which the repetition of sacred words becomes both a meditative discipline and a means of harmonizing community life.

The second point that follows this devotional focus is the persistent link he draws between knowledge and ethics.²² Learning is framed as moral labor, and intellectual mastery alone is insufficient if it does not cultivate humility and ethical awareness. Sheikh Mahmud cautions against pride in scholarship, describing it as the subtlest form of ignorance, and emphasizes that genuine knowledge manifests in virtuous conduct and compassionate engagement with others. This ethical dimension shows a pedagogy that integrates the cognitive and the moral, indicating that education in the Sufi context is inseparable from character formation.

A third major motif is healing and intercession, which manifests through the integration of Qur'ānic verses, herbal remedies, and amuletic inscriptions.²³ In these texts, spiritual and physical well-being are intertwined, and the act of healing becomes an extension of divine compassion rather than a deviation from orthodox practice. By combining textual knowledge with local medicinal practices and ritualized

²¹ The manuscript of *Manzūma al-Tijānīyya* (Didactic Poem), chapter one, p.8

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

intercession, Sheikh Mahmud constructs a holistic vision in which the scholar, healer, and spiritual guide are inseparable roles.



Illustration 5: sample of hand written manuscript of Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman

Moreover, linguistically, the manuscripts demonstrate an intentional and creative code-switching between Arabic and Afan Oromo *Ajami*. In fact, Arabic establishes a connection to the broader Islamic intellectual world and asserts doctrinal legitimacy, while *Ajami* localizes knowledge, making teachings accessible and resonant for the community. This bilingual approach shows a deliberate vernacularization of sacred knowledge; spiritual truths are translated, adapted, and transmitted in ways that speak directly to a lived reality. Thus, it exemplifies the broader patterns of African Sufi textual cultures, where global religious ideas are refracted through local languages, poetic forms, and social practices, creating texts that are both intellectually rigorous and deeply rooted in everyday devotion. Through these intertwined motifs remembrance, ethical cultivation, and healing; Sheikh Mahmud's manuscripts articulate

a vision of religious life that is simultaneously doctrinally grounded, morally instructive, and socially engaged. They disclose a scholar attuned to both the spiritual and practical needs of his community, crafting texts that function as guides for the heart, the mind, and the body alike.

3.4. The Intellectual and Spiritual Legacy of Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman

Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman's pedagogical influence continues to resonate through the *madrasa* networks established by his disciples. An oral testimony shows a teaching method that combined rigorous memorization with reflective dialogue, prioritizing comprehension over rote recitation.²⁴ His balanced curriculum encompassing grammar, Qur'ānic commentary, ethics, and poetry set a local standard for Islamic schooling in southwest Ethiopia. Even today, teachers trained within his lineage recite portions of his *Manzūma* to introduce moral lessons, attesting to the enduring imprint of his educational philosophy on curriculum design.²⁵

The Sheikh's tomb near Jimma functions as both a sacred and intellectual space. Pilgrims visit to seek *baraka*, while students come to copy manuscripts or receive *ijaza* from current custodians.²⁶ Within its modest structure, the manuscripts are preserved in wooden chests, forming a vernacular archive maintained through devotion. The recitation of *Awṛād al-Tijānī* during commemorations transforms the shrine into a living library, where memory and rhythm substitute for formal cataloguing, and reading becomes an act of worship. This material and performative continuity between shrine, school, and text blurs conventional boundaries between religion and scholarship. In addition to this, the *qubba* exemplifies what might be called an "acoustic archive," a repository of knowledge preserved through repetition, rhythm, and communal engagement rather than print.

Despite its geographical peripherality, Sheikh Mahmud's community maintained vibrant connections to broader *Tijani* networks stretching from Harar to Sudan and West Africa.

²⁴ Informant: Sheik Mohammed.

²⁵ Supra note 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Correspondence and oral testimonies attest to the circulation of prayer manuals and the regular visits of itinerant sheikhs, addressing an active network of scholarly and devotional exchange.²⁷ While Sheikh Mahmud's recension of the *wird al-Tijānī* remains faithful to Sudanese exemplars, it bears unique inflections shaped by the Afan Oromo *Ajami* literary tradition. Such adaptations illustrate that the manuscript culture of the Gibe highlands was not a passive conduit but an active participant in trans-African Islamic intellectual networks, weaving local creativity into broader currents of Sufi learning.

Besides, Sheikh Mahmud's dual role as scholar and healer exemplifies a distinctly Ethiopian articulation of Sufi epistemology. In his understanding, disease reflects both physical imbalance and spiritual unrest, making scriptural recitation an integral component of therapy. Students recall that he required mastery of specific Qur'ānic verses before teaching herbal formulations, forging a direct link between revelation and the natural world. His notebooks juxtapose *Suras* Qur'ānic verses) with local plant names, revealing an integrated worldview in which knowledge, compassion, and healing are inseparable. This holistic approach anticipates contemporary discourses on indigenous medicine and spirituality, while remaining firmly rooted in traditional Islamic cosmology.

Conceptually, Sheikh Mahmud's work embodies a synthesis of scholastic rationalism and experiential mysticism. Reason is not rejected but directed toward ethical transformation. The manuscripts themselves alternating prose and verse, doctrine and prayer show a deliberate interaction between mind and heart. Through this careful balance, he constructed what might be termed a "Gibe theology of nearness" the conviction that proximity to the Divine is attained through disciplined intellect and a purified, responsive heart alike.

4. Conclusion

This study has traced the intellectual and spiritual legacy of Sheikh Mahmud Suleiman through both his manuscripts and their living reception. He emerges as a figure who embodies the

²⁷ Supra note 8.

inseparable unity of scholarship and sanctity characteristic of the *Tijaniyya* tradition in south western part of Ethiopia. His manuscripts most notably *Tanbīh al-Anām* demonstrate how Sufi metaphysics were skillfully rendered into Afan Oromo dialects without sacrificing theological precision. Thus, the analysis reveals that his corpus functioned on multiple levels mainly as scripture, as a pedagogical curriculum, and as a moral compass guiding both heart and conduct.

Furthermore, the research repositions the Gibe region as a vibrant literary and spiritual hub within Ethiopian Islam. Far from a marginal periphery, it was an active node in the global *Tijani* network, where diverse texts were indigenized through performance, translation, and local pedagogical practices. This perspective challenges traditional centre-periphery models that emphasize northern Ethiopia and unveils the significant contributions of southern manuscript cultures to Africa's broader Islamic intellectual history. The study also addresses the importance of integrating philology, ethnography, and oral history in manuscript research. Written texts alone cannot convey the sonic, rhythmic, and performative dimensions that give these manuscripts their enduring vitality. To understand the *Tijaniyya* in Ethiopia is to listen as much as to read to observe disciples as they chant, copy, and embody Sheikh Mahmud's words, transforming textual knowledge into lived devotion.

Future work should prioritize cataloguing and translating the complete corpus of Sheikh Mahmud's manuscripts, examining linguistic variations across copies, and identifying parallels with Harari and Sudanese *Tijani* traditions. Digitization initiatives could both preserve fragile materials and expand access for both Ethiopian and foreign scholars. Comparative studies with other African Sufi centers would further make known shared patterns of vernacular theology, manuscript culture, and devotional practice, locating Sheikh Mahmud's legacy within a broader continental and transnational framework.

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