

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 2 No. 1, April 2018

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-2-issue-1-april-2018/>

Fallou Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of 'Ajamī and the Murīdiyya*.

Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2016, 336 pp, ISBN: 9780190279868.

Reviewed by: Ariela Marcus-Sells, Elon University, NC, USA.

Four large Sufi organizations dominate the religious, social, and political life of contemporary Senegal: the Qādiriyya, the Tijāniyya, the Laayeen, and the Murīdiyya. The last of these, founded by Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba Mbakke (1853-1927) has already received significant scholarly attention. However, no previous works have explained how Murīds themselves understand the history of their organization and its iconic founder. Fallou Ngom's recent book, *Muslims beyond the Arab World*, provides this long-awaited emic perspective by addressing a rich body of sources historically marginalized within studies of African Muslim history: the 'Ajamī texts recorded in local languages using Arabic script. Working from the hagiographic, Wolof-'Ajamī works of Bamba's followers, Ngom lays out the story of the Murīdiyya's history and founding as presented by the Murīds and in doing so provides a useful corrective to several longstanding narratives about the growth of this movement.

In response to scholarship that has ignored or dismissed the theological and metaphysical foundations of the organization, chapter one offers a rich and refreshing description of what Ngom calls the Murīd "master narrative." This central trope draws on Sufi traditions about "the day of Alastu," the moment in pre-eternity when God summoned the spirits of all future human-beings and asked them to bear witness to His lordship. In the Murīd version of this story, Muhammad then preselected those who would follow him on earth, including Ahmadu Bamba. God then singled Bamba out as an emissary to the black race and charged him with a three-fold mission of intercession, mercy, and dual salvation (success in this world and the next) for humans and *jinn*. Finally, Bamba then selects his own future followers on earth. For the Murīds, then, the pledge of allegiance between a Sufi teacher and his followers serves as both a sign, and a reenactment, of these pre-destined and pre-eternal pledges.

And in response to scholarship that has consistently positioned the Murīdiyya in relationship to the French colonial administration, Ngom argues that hagiographic 'Ajamī sources present Bamba "not as a secular anti colonialist but as a master of ethics and a saint who had come to face and address systemic immorality, first among his fellow Muslims and then the local secular authority" (72). Chapter two thus discusses Ahmadu Bamba's pedagogical and ethical vision as elaborated at the beginning of his independent career (1883-1895). According to Murīd sources, this period marked a time of conflict with the "local Muslim intelligentsia and the traditional aristocratic rulers." Chapters three and four continue this theme, describing how 'Ajamī sources ascribe the conflict with French authorities that led to Bamba's exiles and house-arrests to the machinations of the descendants of local rulers. These chapters also explain how the hagiographies portray these periods as part of the larger narrative of Bamba's election and then

gradual unveiling as the greatest of the “Sufi saints.” According to this narrative, Bamba both knew, and accepted, the suffering he would endure at the hands of both local adversaries and French colonialists. This suffering honed his ethical principles and awareness and served as both the cause, and the proof, of his rise to “the summit of spiritual sainthood” (170).

At times, Ngom’s careful attention to the internal Murīd narrative does cause him to accept the claims of his sources too readily. For example, Murīd sources contain a clear rhetoric of equality that rejects a discourse of white, Arabic-speaking supremacy. However, in the place of this discourse, Bamba’s followers seem to have posited a Wolof, ethnolinguistic, religious nationalism. People speaking all languages and identifying as members of any ethnic group may find salvation through Bamba, as long as they are prepared to adopt Wolof cultural features such as “clothing, mannerisms, and shaving styles,” and learn enough of his language to access the oral or written texts that contain his teachings. While this message may sound like a call to justice on the border with Mauritania, it would sound very different in the Casamance. These moments remind us both that a rhetoric of tolerance does not result straightforwardly in actual inclusion and that all emic perspectives require some etic distance.

In addition to drawing from an impressive base of primary sources, *Muslims beyond the Arab World* continues two recent methodological and thematic trajectories in the study of Islam in West Africa. Ngom’s attention to how the colonial archive and Murīd hagiographies diverge in their presentation of the past self-consciously engages Sean Hanretta’s (2009) approach to the history of Yacoub Sylla and his followers in Côte d’Ivoire. Meanwhile, Ngom connects the Murīd presentation of Ahmadu Bamba as a distinctly black and distinctly African saint who rose to the pinnacle of Sufi sainthood to Bruce Hall’s (2011) work on the historical intersection of race and religion in the region.

But Ngom’s attempt to expand Robinson’s (2014, 2004) theory of the “Africanization” of Islam into the “‘Ajamization” of Islam does not truly engage Talal Asad’s (1986) definition of Islam as “a discursive tradition”. Ngom understands the “‘Ajamization” of Islam as the process by which Islam is “localized” and “enriched” by different linguistic and cultural traditions to make it more meaningful to local populations (19). The problem with this theory is that it claims to reject “syncretism” even as it accepts that theory’s underlying premise – that there exists a culturally disembedded Islam that can then be mixed with, situated within, or enriched by, a given culture. Both “Africanization” and “‘Ajamization” fail to recognize that Islam never exists outside of the Muslims who discursively produce it. Islam is always, already ‘Ajamized.

In sum, Ngom’s work not only corrects a longstanding gap in scholarship about a critical West African Sufi movement, but successfully argues that that lacuna only existed because of the marginalization of ‘Ajamī sources in the study of African history. Ngom rightly calls on scholars to devote more attention to ‘Ajamī texts and one of the many contributions of his book is the translation and publication of ‘Ajamī Murīd poems and prose texts in chapter five and the audio recordings available on the companion website of texts used throughout the work. These resources will allow instructors to integrate rich West African primary sources into their courses and even as *Muslims beyond the Arab World* allows scholars to more productively discuss the intersections between language, religion, and race in West African history.

Cited Works

- Asad, Talal. (1986) 2009. "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." Reprint, *Que Parle* 17.1: 1-30.
- Hall, Bruce S. 2011. *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 160-1960*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanretta, Sean. *Islam and Social Change in French West Africa: History of an Emancipatory Community*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Robinson, David. 2014. "Muslim Societies in West Africa: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives in Digital Form." *IA* 5(1): 103-121.
- . *Muslim Societies in African History*. 2004. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2018 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990