

# BOOK REVIEW

**Fallou Ngom. *Muslims Beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of 'Ajamī and the Murīdiyya*.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. xxiii + 306 pp. Timeline. Bibliography. Index. \$115.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-19-027986-8.

Researchers have written extensively on Islam and Sufi orders in Senegal, and within this plethora of writings on the subject, those on the Murīds dominate the research. However, Fallou Ngom's book *Muslims Beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of 'Ajamī and the Murīdiyya* approaches the Murīdiyya from a different point of view. In particular, he discusses internal sources of the Murīd Sufi order from an emics perspective, using hagiographic texts produced by Murīd scholars. Ngom argues that previous studies of the Murīds omit pertinent ideological, theological, and pedagogical aspects (151); they do not include the thoughts and writings of the founding Saint Ahmadu Bamba (1853–1927) in particular, or of Murīd scholars in general. Furthermore, Ngom notes that Murīd studies must be included in the tradition of Sufi studies and not limited to studies of Wolof traditions and culture (68).

Ngom bases his research on evidence from participatory observations in the Murīd and non-Murīd cities of Senegal in 2011 and 2014, where he attended religious ceremonies. He also conducted interviews with Murīds living in Senegal and the United States along with employing video and audio data. As a socio-anthropologist, he does not intend to re-write the history of the Murīdiyya but rather attempts to integrate hagiographic works as a serious source to consider in studying and analyzing the Murīdiyya. The author tirelessly goes back and forth between pre-existing historiography and hagiographic work unknown by researchers. He supports his arguments with a descriptive methodology interspersed with chronological facts, combining all in a more analytical framework. Ngom does not seem to doubt the credibility of the texts produced by the Murīds about themselves, even if the dating system of their works may cause problems for the historian (267n136). For the author, no research is perfect or complete; it only reflects the point of view of its author. With this consideration, Ngom breaks with the Weberian tradition of axiological neutrality and the distinction in social sciences between subjectivity and objectivity, to finally give voice to Murīd writers. His goal is to reflect Murīd episteme, to allow it to be finally comprehended by a larger audience, including academics.

Ngom structures his thesis by engaging three important themes in Sufi/Murīd studies: One, theodicy and forms of narration; two, Murīd literary production and theory of ‘Ajamization; and finally, tolerance, non-violence, and ethnic diversity. Ngom uses two forms of narration: first, a master narrative that describes the great Islamic, mystical, or intra-worldly deeds and sayings related to the life of Bamba, and second, the micro-narrative which allows us to account for the practical experiences of Murīd actors. These two forms of stories are related by prolific Murīd writers such as Sēriñ Mor Kayre, Samba Jaara Mbaay, Sēriñ Mbay Jaxate, and Musaa Ka. In their works, these writers emphasize that Bamba is above all the synthesis of all the saints, and then the synthesis of the Abrahamic saints such as Moses, Daniel, and Jesus (50, 137). Allah created the Prophet Muhammad on Covenant Day, *Yawm al-Lastu* (Qur’ān, Surah 7:172) while Adam and Eve were between water and clay. Their master Bamba was created on the same day, and after that, Allah created the Murīds and sealed the link between the master and the disciples (23, 172). According to Ngom, this master narrative is at the heart of the Murīd movement of having a credible *shaykh* to whom the disciples have pledged allegiance since *Al-Lastu*. According to Bamba’s hagiographers, the Murīdiyya began the Day of Al-Lastu, yet not with the French presence in Senegal (47) or with what sociologists describe as a Weberian patron-client relationship.

For Ngom, ‘Ajamization does not mean Africanization or syncretization of Islam but rather the localization of Islam in a specific time and space (19, 219), since Islam is multi-sited and plural. Once localized, ‘Ajamī becomes Wolofal in the Senegalese Wolof context. It is the Wolof language written with Arabic letters but with new orthographic elements made of consonants and vowels that do not exist in Arabic (248). ‘Ajamization is finally a movement of resistance to the Arabization of Islam (243–44). This rivalry between Murīds and other followers of local Sufi orders (Tijāniyya and Qādriyya) has propelled the development of ‘Ajamī in Senegal, including by Murīd women writers.

For educational purposes, the luminary Bamba founded Qur’ānic schools or *daaray alxuraan*, science schools or *daaray xam-xam*, and labor schools or *daaray tarbiyya*, which Ngom has dubbed as schools of ethics and spiritual vocation. Ngom adds a fourth dimension to the concept of schooling in Murīd and Senegalese Islamic literature: the *daara tasfiyya*, which is a school of re-socialization (94). In my view, it is another major innovation in West African Islamic studies. To disseminate the Murīdiyya, if we follow Musaa Ka, Bamba named six hundred and twenty-six *shaykhs* (94), daring even to revisit the caste system in Senegal by elevating caste members to noble positions. For Bamba, men and women are equal in terms of religious duties and service to the community or *khidma*, which means “service rendered” rather than “work,” as we usually describe the Murīd attitude towards the *marabout* and the work for his community.

The Murīd philosophy of non-violence is embedded in Sufi philosophy. Bamba suffered many hardships at the hands of the French, but once back

in his home country, he forgave them all. Ngom insists that Bamba has a great capacity for forgiveness (242). It would have been more interesting to elaborate a little on how the jihād of Maba Jaxu Ba in the Senegambian kingdoms where Bamba and his family traveled had in fact influenced the young Bamba. More succinctly, in which way did Maba's jihād help shape Bamba's framework of non-violent politics and religious toleration? It is often argued that Bamba's philosophy of non-violence is similar to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s political and moral philosophy. For Ngom, both have advocated equality among human beings, tolerance, diversity, social justice, and religious morality to achieve those goals.

Today, Senegal is a Wolophone nation, with 80 percent of Wolof speakers and many Muslims using 'Ajamī for religious and secular purposes. The strength of Ngom's book is in validating the literacy of Africans. I concur with the author that 'Ajamī production in traditional and modern African societies is still under-documented (246-47). All in all, the book makes the case for understanding the texts and writing of Bamba and his disciples as a contribution to Sufī literature. It deserves to be read and discussed by researchers in all of the social sciences, especially by those in anthropology and sociology as well as the humanities, ethnomusicology, philosophy, literature, linguistics, and history.

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### For more reading on this subject, see:

- Ngom, Fallou. 2009. "Aḥmadu Bamba's Pedagogy and the Development of 'Ajamī Literature." *African Studies Review* 52 (1): 99–123. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0156.
- Villalón, Leonardo A. 2004. "Senegal." *African Studies Review* 47 (2): 61–71. doi:10.1017/S0002020600030869.