

## A Muslim Peacemaker of the Twentieth Century - Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba

Amidst the heightened state of turmoil in the world today, associated with the apparent clash between Islamic and Western cultures, the life of one Muslim peacemaker warrants recognition - a Muslim saint who led a successful and completely nonviolent struggle for peace within the last century. His life of teaching, amidst 33 years of imprisonment was spent in western Africa, but his profound message is global and continues today in the vibrant tradition he transmitted.

Shaykh Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Habiballah, commonly known as Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba (1854 -1927) left an impressive collection of musical odes, litanies, poems and rich texts of spiritual and religious instruction. Bamba's writings can be placed in 7 categories, most of which are in rhyming meter: poetic verse and *adab* (spiritual etiquette); reminders of practices and Islamic orthodox principles; writings from exile; writings glorifying God and in praise of the Prophet\*; initiatic orisons, chants, and mystical chants; teaching lessons; and invocations. Bamba writes, "I came to teach, to infuse knowledge in the spirits of all desirous of avoiding the darkness (of ignorance)."<sup>1</sup> "The Saint's texts are both outwardly instructional and deeply esoteric. Attentive study is required to penetrate their secrets," as his followers aver and European scholars, such as Louis Massignon, have concluded.<sup>2</sup>

Bamba's sacred, literary and musical legacy remains for the most part untranslated into Western languages from Arabic and Wolof. The total number of works on Bamba in English are relatively few, even though, as David Robinson writes, Bamba became one of the outstanding poets and mystical leaders of the last 100 years.<sup>3</sup>

At least 41 of his works have been published, but it is said that much of his writing lies hidden and unedited. What has been published of his writings, for the most part, has been very simply presented on newsprint paper printed in Dakar, Casablanca and sometimes Tunis. There

---

<sup>1</sup> Fernand Dumont in Ba, Oumar (1982) *Ahmadou Bamba, Face aux Autorités Coloniales*, (1889- 1927), Abbeville, France: F. Paillart, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Massignon, Louis (1954) *Essai sur les origines lexique technique mystique musulmane* , p. 119, cited in Dumont 1975, p. 31; cited in Roberts, p. 167-168.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, David (2000) *Paths of Accommodation, Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880 - 1920*. Athens: Ohio University Press. p. 167.

are works in Arabic on Bamba; specialized studies in English that deal with the historical, sociological, economic and political impact of his movement, and there are devotional works, based on his struggle, miracles, and legendary accounts. Works in French include a biography by Fernand Dumont which deals with the spiritual life of Bamba; and letters sent between Bamba and the French colonial authorities presented by Oumar Ba. One of the most extensive studies in English has been masterfully done by Allen F. and Mary Nooter Roberts on the artistic culture which has developed around Bamba's legacy. Out of their years of research - which incorporates many dimensions of Bamba's life and teachings - also came an educational curriculum guide<sup>4</sup> and a lively museum exhibit touring the United States.<sup>5</sup>

In the expansive landscape and rich diversity of expression of Islam in Africa, the region of West Africa and Senegal, in particular, represents a unique flowering of the religion and an integrated expression of pure orthodoxy and classic mysticism. The spiritual tradition preserved and embodied by the great spiritual figures of this area has inspired and infused visual, musical, urban, economic, sociological, mystical and literary components within the culture with a unique form of spirituality. The societal cohesion and cultural development which formed, in particular, around the legacy of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba can surely be characterized as phenomenal.

Historically, the Islamization of West Africa occurred through trade, by the mystical orders, and the powerful influence of the founders of the prominent orders, particularly Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani (d.1166), Shaykh Ahmed al-Tijani (d.1815 ) and Shaykh al-Shadhili (d.1236). Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba - having been initiated into the three above-mentioned orders - founded a new order, the Muridiyyah, in 1883. Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, who stated that "My religion is the love of God," acknowledges his great spiritual heritage, and writes that he did nothing but retransmit in verse the unitary messages of the great number of spiritual masters before him, in particular: Al-Basri, Ibn al-'Arabi, al-Junayd, al-Hallaj, Ibn 'Atallah, Al-Qhazali, 'Abd al Qadir al-Jilani, all the way up to the more recent founders, propagators or renewers of the faith of the brotherhoods of North Africa such al-Zarruq, Ahmad al-Tijani, al-Sanusi, al-

---

<sup>4</sup> By Lyn Avins and Betsy D. Quick

<sup>5</sup> Roberts, Allen F. and Mary Nooter Roberts, (2003) *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History. See web site: [www.fmch.ucla.edu/passporttoparadise.htm](http://www.fmch.ucla.edu/passporttoparadise.htm) or: [www.fowler.ucla.edu/paradise/main001.htm](http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/paradise/main001.htm)

Shadhilli, and those of sub-Saharan Africa, such as Muhammad al-Yadali, Muhammad al-Daymani, or Mukhtar al-Kunti. In this land of saints and Sufi orders, nearly ninety percent of the population of Senegal are affiliated with either of the three major spiritual orders: the Muridiyyah,<sup>6</sup> the Tijaniyyah, or the Qadiriyya.

Against seemingly invincible odds, the Muridiyyah Sufi order today has achieved prominence in its popularity, political, economic power and influence. “The spread of this *tariqah* [Sufi order],” writes Spencer Trimingham, “must be regarded as the most powerful religious force in the Senegal.”<sup>7</sup>

Senegal is considered a model of African democracy,<sup>8</sup> and in the midst of Africa’s current turmoil, Senegal peacefully elected President Abdoulaye Wade, a *Murid*, in 2000.

“Mouridism is one of the most distinctive aspects of contemporary Senegalese social life. Indeed, it would be impossible to understand how the republic’s ‘brisk and vigorous democracy’ makes it ‘a beacon of hope ... in a troubled region’ without fully appreciating its most economically and politically influential Islamic movement. Mouridism links all secular and sacred activities. Senegal also has a long tradition of amicable and tolerant coexistence between the Muslim majority and the Christian ... and other religious minorities ... the country’s striking stability can be directly attributed to the unusual balance of power between the Senegalese government and the Mourides and other religious orders.”<sup>9</sup>

The value of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba’s legacy lies not only in its appeal to Senegalese but

---

<sup>6</sup> The word "*murid*" means "who is longing for" in Arabic and refers to the spiritual seeker. Muridiyya refers to the order of *Murids*.

<sup>7</sup> Trimingham, J. Spencer (1950) *Islam in West Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. op. cit. p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> Despite the extreme poverty and other severe repercussions of slavery, colonialism, gender and social inequalities still to be overcome in the country.

<sup>9</sup> Roberts op. cit. p. 24 referencing: National Public Radio, Reporting on President Bill Clinton’s visit to Senegal in April 1998; Wallis, William and Caswell, Nim (2000) “Beacon of Hope Shines Bright in a Troubled Region.” *Financial Times* Special supplement on Senegal November 13; Augustin Ndiaye (2002) “Une minorité confessionnelle dans l’Etat laïc: Point de vue d’un chrétien.” In *Le Sénégal contemporain*, ed. Momar-Coumba Diop, Paris: Editions Karthala p.606; and Biaya T.K. (1998) “Le pouvoir ethnique - concept, lieux de pouvoir et pratiques contre l’Etat dans la modernité africaine...” *Anthropologie et sociétés* v.22 n.1. p.105-35.

for those interested in the applied integral practice of Islam in society. Western perceptions of Islam usually do not include African models, but often consist of the Arab, East Asian, or Wahabi-style models within these, prevalent also in the manifestation of immigrant formulated settings for Islamic life and mosques in the West. The transplanted immigrant version of Islam devoid of its spiritual center, often becomes sterile and loses its inner dynamism and vibrancy for adaptation in Western society. Beyond the value of Bamba's life and teachings for specific ethnic groups, he is a reminder of the adaptability and universality of the religion to different cultures and peoples through its inner tradition.

The success of Muridism is an exception to what is often observed in the modern world: the abandonment, rejection and loss of this inner tradition, or even its betrayal and absence from the political, social and intellectual sphere.<sup>10</sup> The Murid influenced society of Senegal is evidence that the strength and vibrancy of this inner aspect of Islamic tradition, along with the social importance of mystical orders, helps to uphold the fabric of the society.

There has been a remarkable folk culture built around Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's legacy.<sup>11</sup> One can readily penetrate the popular literary, urban, music and visual dimensions to find the essence of his teachings, which testify to the power of authentic tradition to transform the heart and soul of people and society.

Further study into the contribution Bamba made in the cultural and spiritual revival of his people will demonstrate the significance his universal message and nonviolent struggle has for attaining peace in the world today.

*Michelle R. Kimball*  
*Santa Barbara, California*  
*February 2005*

---

<sup>10</sup> For insightful analyses on the importance of the inner tradition in the modern context see Lumbard, Joseph E. B. (Ed.) (2004) *Islam, Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars*. Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc.

<sup>11</sup> It is also true that corrupting influences inevitably play a role in the idealization and exploitation of the saint's powerful legacy. Though the shape this order has taken since the death of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba in 1927 has different forms, which include some deviation from his teachings, it is with the essential teachings of Bamba that we are concerned.