



Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba

The Pen and the Canon: Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's Nonviolent Jihad

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Peace on the human plane is a consequence of making peace with God, with the Source of all peace ... Sufis refer to the state that results from the realization of the Divine as *Sulb-i kull*, or universal peace ... the interfaith power of Sufism and the inner peace that results from spiritual practice must always be valued first of all for itself and not for any other end. The person who is integrated within will integrate the immediate world about him or her. Like ripples that spread out over a pond, the inner peace of such people spreads to the society around them. It is such people who gradually transform and change the whole scene ... in creating concord and peace in the world around them.¹

Introduction

Shaykh Ahmed ibn Muhammad ibn Habiballah M'Backé (1854–1927) is affectionately known as Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba. He was indeed someone who was “integrated within,” and helped “transform and change the whole scene” around him. He emerged in Senegal in Western Africa between two devastating eras in the history of the country—the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the beginning of French colonial conquest. Both periods wrecked havoc on the structure of African culture, society and the collective consciousness of the citizens.² In the aftermath of slavery there came a new push by the French for the

¹ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (2004) “*Sufism and the Integration of the Inner and Outer Life of Man*” (The LM Singhvi Interfaith Lecture for the year 1999, Temenos Academy papers no. 21) London: Temenos Academy. p. 31.

² At the same time that the colonial impact was humiliating and oppressive in many respects to Africans, there were aspects and benefits which the French brought in the form of education, health care and technological development. Additionally Islam actually expanded under the French colonial period as the French found Muslims to be more “civilized” than animists and employed Muslims as government agents. The French removed the local kings from power, who were opponents of Islam, and they observed a stance of religious tolerance in spite of trying to impose the “superiority of French civilization.”

armed conquest of West African nations leading to the formation of “French West Africa”—a federation of eight colonial territories, Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan, (now Mali) French Guinea (now Guinea), Cote d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) Dahomey (now Benine and Niger).

With this also came the French “civilizing mission.” The French hoped to replace Muslim and African culture by the modern and “superior” French culture partly through the introduction of French education in Senegal and the decrease in the number of traditional Qur’anic schools.³ Equivalent rights and citizenship were extended to those who adopted French culture, language, and sometimes the donning of Western clothes. An agenda for the modernization, progressive political, territorial and cultural transformation of Senegal was in the making.

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba grew up often amidst the civil and political strife of the times. The societal destruction of that period is not unlike what we see in other war-torn Muslim African and Middle Eastern nations today whose citizens are desirous of solutions to restore harmony, prosperity, strength and national cohesion.

This state of affairs, in some instances, and in various regions in Senegal provoked fierce and militant opposition.⁴ Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, along with gifted contemporaries,⁵ however, took a different tack from the armed resisters, to revive and preserve African and traditional Islamic culture in the face of foreign onslaught.

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba’s life and teachings are exemplary for the modern and the Islamic world in particular in need of guidance to find a way out of a spiraling destruction due to violence and rigid literal religious interpretations of sacred texts by those who have lost access to the keys of the texts’ inner wisdom. Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba upheld authentic orthodox religious teachings while promoting spiritual and universal principles of divine unity and nonviolence. His quiet trans-

³ The imposition of the French language and the reformulation of traditional schools by the French were ways to make inroads to such societal change. The French colonialist project was not unlike the “civilizing mission” of the British in various parts of the world, especially in India in the nineteenth century.

⁴ Such as the military resistance of Ma Ba Diakhou Ba and Damel Lat Dior.

⁵ Senegalese Tijani leaders such as Sa’idu Nuru Tall, Malik Sy (1855–1922), Abdoulaye Niassé and Ibrahim Niassé (1900–1975), (also all quietistic), are just a few who were also influential in shaping the spiritual, political and social fabric of the society.

formative movement would have a remarkably lasting impact on the people and country of Senegal, and beyond.

One of his distinctive characteristics is that he managed to prevail in the face of the French colonial powers through seemingly insurmountable odds, trials, tribulations and assassination attempts, and all without the use of physical force, weapons or confrontation. Nor did he set out to resist the French. What is more mysterious is that he had a powerful influence *in absentia*. For the last 33 years of his life he was either imprisoned, in exile or under house arrest. It is not only his profound spirituality and adherence to divinely revealed principles that make him unique amongst so many of his time or any period in history, but that his teachings have profoundly endured. Today Senegal is infused with his presence and the principles he propounded in politics, society, religion and spirituality.

He stands in the ranks of the great proponents of the power of non-violence—figures like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi and Abdul Ghafar Khan, amongst others—for the positive effect he and his contemporaries had in helping to transform a society through peaceful means.

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's penetrating nonviolent approach and decades-long struggle with the French had a far-reaching influence in the peaceful religious, social and political transformation of the country.⁶ The people of Senegal today proudly uphold the principles of nonviolence and remain generally distant (and even repulsed) by fundamentalist threads of the religion more prominent in other parts of the world. The powerful impact of his and his contemporaries' non-violent efforts based on Islamic spiritual tenets, is evident today, in the authority (both spiritual and political) commanded by the three main spiritual (Sufi) orders (Qadiriyyah, Muridiyyah, and Tijaniyyah) with adherents amongst nearly all of the population. The Muridiyyah spiritual order, founded by Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, is perhaps the most visible within this West African society, though members of the Tijaniyyah Sufi order may be more numerous. Today, Muslim Sufi orders,

⁶ Senegal is one of the only West African nations to have escaped political and ethnic violence, and has sustained a functioning stable democracy since its independence in 1960. The Sufi orders are largely credited in scholarly works for their role in the maintenance of peace in Senegal. (E-mail correspondence comment from Cheikh Anta Babou on April 14, 2009).

are “an integral feature of Senegal’s stable and relatively democratic socio-political system.”⁷ The United States Institute of Peace, created by the US Congress, affirms that

Senegal is a vivid illustration that political Islam can be a constructive and a regime stabilizing force ... [and] has found a balance between a modernizing secular state and the Muslim tradition. Democracy co-exists with a religiously encouraged grassroots social conservatism ... Senegal’s Sufi groups became pillars for the governing authorities ... ⁸

This is in no small part a result of the efforts of the leaders of the spiritual orders to develop citizens through upholding sacred knowledge. The spiritual leaders are influential in part by the sheer numbers of followers who vote in elections. Abdoulaye Wade, the current democratically elected president of Senegal is a follower of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba and a member of the spiritual order he founded over a century ago.



Bamba’s nonviolent resistance to French imperialism was inspired by the spiritual tenets and the rich intellectual heritage of his forebears and the great Sufi saints whose texts he versified. Beyond the intellectual and spiritual legacy he inherited, his guidance ultimately came from the Islamic revelation, through the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 AD), and his own direct religious experience.

The spiritual values of Islam “have been traditionally cultivated and brought to fruition most effectively and most beautifully by the Sufis. And it is these spiritual values that infuse ethical norms—in whatever domain—with vivifying grace, the grace without which ... acts of heroism and nobility ... are scarcely conceivable.”⁹ Sufism embodies the inner wisdom of Islam and the attainment of inner peace. Only when inner peace is attained can outward peace be attained. Adherents of the Sufi

⁷ Villalón, Leonardo Alfonso, *Africa Today*: Volume 46, Number 3/4, Summer/Autumn 1999. The French, despite their persecutions, can be credited—due to many factors beyond the scope and focus of this article—with contributing directly or indirectly, to the spread of Islam in Senegal during the colonial period, and for laying the foundation for a “secular” form of government functioning in Senegal today.

⁸ Dickson, David (2005) “*Political Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*.” Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Special Report. p. 1 and p. 9.

⁹ Shah-Kazemi, Reza, “*From the spirituality of Jihad to the Ideology of Jihadism*” p. 20. expanded from “*Recollecting the Spirit of Jihad*,” in Lumbard, Joseph (2004) *Islam Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition*. IN: World Wisdom. p. 20.

way in Islam are united in a vision of peace that originates with God, in God, and from God. Any earthly attainment of peace, therefore, is a reflection of divine peace, the ultimate state the Sufi strives for.

Sufism is also referred to as *Ihsan*, one of the three foundational elements of the religion of Islam. It is defined as beauty or excellence (*ihsan*) in the purification of the soul (*tasawwuf*). Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba stressed the importance of both this inner and the outer dimension of religion. He writes in *The Illumination of Hearts*, that one must strive for perfection in the three ascending levels or foundational elements of Islam—*islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan*¹⁰—as they are the means to attain knowledge and proximity to God.¹¹ For Sufis the means to achieve such proximity is to engage in the methods and practices of *dhikrullah* or consciousness of the Divine Presence. Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba is remembered most in Senegal through the melodic chanting of his beautiful sacred litanies.



What is little understood or demonstrated in current interpretations of Islam is one of the core principles Bamba used in his stance with the French—his adherence to the “greater struggle” (*al-jihad al-akbar*) which is an Islamic concept of non-violence similar to the concept of “*satyagraha*” expounded and developed by Mohandas Gandhi, through his struggle against imperialist powers. Gandhi’s definition of “*satyagraha*” “holding on to the truth”—a soul force born of truth and love and for the one who arms himself with knowledge and an indomitable will, and who seeks to liquidate antagonisms, but not the antagonists themselves¹²—is akin to a description of the concept of the “greater

¹⁰ *islam* refers to the practice of the 5 pillars (affirmation of Divine unity and prophethood; ritual prayer; fasting; charitable tax; and pilgrimage) of Islam, and which includes adhering to the divine law (*shari’ab*); *Iman* is faith which incorporates theology (*kalam*) and the profession of divine unity (*tawhid*); *Ihsan* is beauty or excellence in the purification of the soul (*tasawwuf*).

¹¹ From Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba (1989) *Munawar al-sudur [L’Illumination des coeurs or The Illumination of Hearts]* in *Recueil de Poemes en Sciences Religieuses de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba*, (trans. Serigne Same Mbaye) volume 2 Casablanca, Morocco: Dar El Kitab. p. 164, 165 verse no. 12 and 13.

¹² See Easwaran, Eknath (1972) *Gandhi, the Man: The Story of his Transformation*. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press.

struggle” advanced in the Qur’an and Hadith or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and embodied in Bamba’s life struggle,

Goodness and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with something better:¹³ then the one who hated you will become your friend and intimate! And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint, none but persons of the greatest good fortune. (41:34)

Upon the return from the heroic victory of the outnumbered Muslims at the Battle of Badr, the Prophet Muhammad referred to the greatest physical battle fought by Muslims as the “lesser *jihad*.” (*al-jihad al-asghar*). When asked what the “greater *jihad*” (*al-jihad al-akbar*) was the Prophet replied, “It is the *jihad* (struggle) with one’s lower self” or the *jihad al-nafs*. The greater *jihad* defines Sufism as the methods and doctrine of the inner struggle for good to prevail over evil. “No *jihad* is more excellent than the *jihad* of the soul”¹⁴



Needless to say, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba’s form of Islam was different from contemporary Muslim puritanical reformists and those advocating militancy towards Western powers. During his lifetime, too, his method was clearly different from the previous *marabouts* (religious leaders) allied to the royal courts, other African reformists and of militant Islam, whose evolution was stopped by the French and (in the context of Senegal) the aristocratic warrior class (*tieddo*)¹⁵, and ultimately by the colonial dynamic.¹⁶

The rising Nonviolent Movement

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba came from a lineage of educators. A recurring vocation in his ancestral history was to build schools, towns and develop people through religious and spiritual teachings to achieve

¹³ This reminds us of the message in the New Testament, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Romans 12:21.

¹⁴ Saying of Imam ‘Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, cited in Amidi, ‘Abd al Wahid (2000) *Gburar al-Hikam* Qom: Ansariyan Publications. 1:208-211; and in Shah-Kazemi, Reza *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Traditional slave warriors.

¹⁶ Babou, Cheikh Anta (1997) “Autour de la gènese du Mouridisme,” in *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara* (November 1997) p. 37.

intellectual and spiritual advancement, character development, social harmony, and strength. He continued in this Islamic tradition of education of the whole being of the person and mastery of the spiritual life.

He was fully and distinctly committed to the resolution of conflict, and the restoration of peace and harmony of his country by nonviolent means alone, in contrast to other contemporaries who were also heroes of Islamic resistance against colonialists but who used force. Examples of the latter are Samba Lat Dior Diop, Samba Laope Fall, Daniel Samba Yaya, El-Hadj Umar Futiyyu Tall, Ahmadou Cheikh, Ma Ba Drakhu Ba (all of whom were killed by the French). And further afield in the nineteenth century in what is now Northern Nigeria 'Uthman dan Fodio (who was too early to fight against colonialists), Emir 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri of Algeria were militant heroes and also engaged in Sufism. Though Bamba and the great hero of Algerian independence, Shaykh Amir Abdul Qadir (1808-1883) did not meet, they shared many of the same characteristics, such as adherence to the Qadiriyya Sufi Order, heroic resistance to French colonial aggression, and medals of honor from the French. Both responded with impeccable behavior in the face of treachery, deceit and barbarity. Neither responded with vengefulness or fury, but with propriety and principled action. Both demonstrated magnanimity and unflinching adherence to Islamic principles.¹⁷ Emir Abdul Qadir saved the lives of 15,000 Christians before they would be attacked by Druze in Damascus, and Bamba would recruit help for the French in WWI. Neither showed bitterness, resentment or revenge towards their adversaries. They both wrote expositions of famous Sufi texts and commentaries on Ibn Arabi's texts. Both were vastly erudite. Neither one of these great figures would adhere to indiscriminate portrayal of the West as enemy or commit unjust acts against innocents. Both adhered to the "ontological imperative of mercy" that is the ineluctable concomitant of the Quranic message.¹⁸ Both were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice if necessary. Both promoted universal compassion as a key ingredient to remedy hard-heartedness. Both were champions of the truth and through their example reverse the notions of those who imagine that

¹⁷ From Reza Shah-Kazemi's description of Emir 'Abd al-Qadir in: Shah-Kazemi, Reza, *"From the spirituality of Jihad to the Ideology of Jihadism"* p. 20., expanded from *"Recollecting the Spirit of Jihad,"* in Lumbard, Joseph (2004) *Islam Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition*. IN: World Wisdom. p. 14.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 14.

“the principle of Islam is hardness, severity, extravagance and barbarity.” Both embodied the Qur’anic words: “Patience is beautiful, and God is the source of all succour.”¹⁹

Nonetheless, whatever the similarities between Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir and Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, they differed in important aspects of their careers. Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba did not set out to resist the French, nor did he attack the French militarily, nor did he have guerilla armies, as did the illustrious Shaykh Emir Abd al-Qadir. Ahmadou Bamba resolutely opted purely for the greater *jihad* and never wavered even when he faced intense French oppression and his disciples wanted to take up arms against the French. He believed quintessentially in the power of the *jihad al-nafs* and the power of spiritual education as a transforming force.²⁰

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba discussed the “weapons” of the greater jihad and specified what they were for each of the “enemies” of the soul in his poem, *The Keys to Paradise and the Bolts to the Doors of Hell (Mafatibu al-jinan wa magbaliq al-niran)*.²¹

He shared similarities with another great Algerian saint, Shaykh al-Alawi, (1869–1934) with whom he was a contemporary though they also did not meet. Both used writing and education as tools. Shaykh al-Alawi resisted the French with a peaceful strategy and did not engage in politics, though Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba was tied to the political scene. Shaykh al-Alawi and Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba criticized westernization, both at a symbolic level and at a practical level while encouraging certain benefits the French brought. Both were anchors of the spiritual tradition of Islam thereby creating an ambience that would make it harder for the French to make inroads into a mentality that remained inextricably rooted in the authentic religious tradition. Like Shaykh al-Alawi, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba did not engage in warfare, but he did manage to have a broad and profound political influence despite this fact.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 15. And Qur’an 12:18.

²⁰ From an e-mail comment by Cheikh Anta Babou, June 27, 2009. Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, who never traveled far outside of Senegal, may have known about Abdul Qadir who was much older than he, but does not appear to refer to the Algerian jihadist’s experience in his texts.

²¹ Bamba, Shaykh Ahmadou, (1989) “*Mafatibu-l jinan wa Maqaliqu-l niran*” [*Les Clefs du Paradis et les Verrous de L’Enfer* or *The Keys to Paradise and the Locks of Hell*] in *Recueil de Poemes en Sciences Religieuses de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba*, (trans. Serigne Same Mbaye) volume 2 Casablanca, Morocco: Dar El Kitab.

Despite these shared qualities with other Sufi saints, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba stands out in that nearly a century after his death, the country and people of Senegal are still using his and other Senegalese spiritual leaders' guidance in adhering to principles of nonviolence he espoused. It would be a challenge to find another nonviolent spiritual warrior of his caliber who achieved the level and influence he did in society and politics through the development of his innate spirituality which so helped shape the outer world and society.

He was also unique in that he was convinced *he* had a divine mandate not to harm, injure or kill any living creature, not even a scorpion or serpent, and that even if the Mahdi²² appeared today, he said, he would not join him in battle. That is how strong his conviction was!²³

Confrontation with the French and false accusations against Bamba

In spite of his nonviolent convictions, the French accused Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba of preparing to wage a military *jihad*²⁴ against the colonialist forces, due to the sheer numbers of people gathering around him and influenced by his spiritual teachings. The accusations by the French came without tangible evidence of any munitions. The French simply could not grasp why droves of people came to him (to acquire knowledge). They ascertained he was hiding caches of weapons as previous armed militants they had fought (and killed) had done. They sent out spies to his compounds to prove (always unsuccessfully) their

²² The Mahdi, according to some versions of Islamic eschatology, is the prophesied redeemer who will come before the Day of Resurrection. He will rid the world of error, injustice and tyranny alongside Jesus Christ.

²³ Spies sent by the French, such as Oumar Niang, informed French colonial administrator, Allys, that Bamba said he had made a covenant with God to never wage war, that he would not even kill a scorpion or a serpent, and that if the Mahdi had appeared today, he would not join him. The French dismissed this information. Babou, Cheikh Anta (2007) *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853–1913*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, pp. 145–146.

²⁴ Though the term *jihad* can be used to refer to a war or physical combat, the word for war in Arabic is *harb*. The full meaning of the term *jihad* implies striving to overcome evil by good. Military combat cannot be called a *jihad*, a lesser *jihad*, if it is not dictated by motives of a traditional order to establish peace, that is in submission to the cosmic and divine order. Warfare in the texts of the Mahabharata, for instance, can be seen as symbolic of the inner struggle, or outer warfare, as the warfare of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers. The symbolism of the outer warfare in the modern context cannot hold as an outer image of the inner struggle if motives are specific to special interests; and in the case of weapons of mass destruction, harmful to all of humanity.

claim. Previous militant resisters to the French were summarily killed.²⁵ The French contemplated and attempted the assassination of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, but were foiled in their attempts, and resorted to exile and imprisonment instead. His first exile to Gabon for seven years was considered the equivalent of a death sentence.

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba did not consider the armed fight a good option for many reasons. First of all, he believed that it was prohibited by the Prophet Muhammad in his farewell homily (in 632 AD) on Mount Arafat when he declared to Muslims that peoples' lives and property were sacred:

From now on don't shed blood anymore, for the blood and belongings of people are sacred, and bloodshed calls for bloodshed.²⁶

Take not Life which Allah hath made sacred ... Thus doth He command you, that ye may learn wisdom.²⁷

He also did not believe that anyone in his day, and by extension today, could rise to the level of the companions of the Prophet who were privileged to fight in the battle of Badr, since people today could not have the level of courage, integrity and sanctity that these men demonstrated by virtue of their physical and spiritual proximity to the Prophet Muhammad. War in the modern world cannot be equated with "war" in the days of the Prophet Muhammad when, at best, swords and bows and arrows were the arms. Even if physical combat were sanctioned, the level of mass destruction of modern day weapons make their use beyond the realm of what can be humanly and morally justifiable in Islam.

We ordain ... that if anyone slays a human being—unless it be for murder or for spreading corruption on earth—it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind. (Qur'an 5:32 Asad)

²⁵ Such as Lat-Dior Ngone Latyr Diopé, Samba Laope Fall, Daniel Samba Yaya, Al-Hajj Umar Futiyyu Tall, Ahmadou Cheikh, Maba Drakhu Ba, and Mamadou Lamine. Contrary to these, passive resistance was also used by Aline Sitowe Jaata, the queen of the Joola ethnic group of the southern part of Senegal known as Casamance, according to Fallou Ngom in: Ngom, Fallou (2002) "Linguistic Resistance in the Murid Speech Community in Senegal" *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, v.23 n.3. p. 217.

²⁶ An interpretation of a version of the Prophet's farewell address by Cheikh Darou Seck and commonly interpreted as such in Senegal by Murids. The farewell address was delivered in Dhul Hijjah, one of the 4 sacred months of Islam in which fighting is prohibited (2:217) and in which the Prophet delivered this message on the sanctity of life.

²⁷ Qur'an 6:151

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba was not against self-defense in appropriate circumstances, but fighting against the superior military might of the French, was not considered the wise or viable solution. He did not simply make a virtue out of necessity. His patience and nonviolent stance transcended a defeatist sentiment. He did not want his people to get involved in bloodshed because he believed that the fight truly worth fighting in this case was the one against the base soul and the vices we harbor within. His early experience of seeing his two acquaintances killed in cold blood for no reason by a local king, Lat Dior, was one of many in his life which helped shape his view of killing. The enemy within and not any external enemy was worth prevailing over.²⁸ He taught his disciples that the more one shows patience before hardships and trials, the closer to God one becomes.²⁹

The only weapons I will use to fight my enemies are the *qalam* (pen) and the ink that I use to write my *qasa'id* (poetic sacred litanies) in the glory of the Elected (the Prophet Muhammad).

The Canon and the Pen

May the divine revelation of certainty [the Qur'an] which descended upon the intercessor [Muhammad], be for me the shield against persecution and canons.³⁰

In a poignant moment, the French authorities—trying to intimidate Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba to quell his influence to garner a following – pointed to their canon, posturing their superior physical might, and perhaps indicating, too, the force they would later try to use against him, just as they had eliminated earlier adversaries. Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba then put his pen next to the large French cannon in Saint Louis and declared, “You say I am waging a *jihad*, and you are absolutely right. But my jihad is through knowledge and reverential awe (*‘ilm* and *taqwa*.)”³¹

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba stated in his poem, *Ya dha’l-Busharati* (O Source of Happiness), that the existence of God was sufficient for him

²⁸ And Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr affirms the Sufi principle to know oneself, “What greater need is there today than being able to see the other as ourselves and not as the enemy?” in *The Garden of Truth* (2007) NY: HarperCollins, p. 153.

²⁹ These views are similarly presented in: Seck, Cheikh Darou “Heroes of Faith Hero: Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba <http://www.myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=Cheikh_Bamba_SN_07>

³⁰ Bamba, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, *Jawartu* (“Passport to Paradise,”) verse 28.

³¹ 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.

against all armaments. As for those who would engage armaments and canons against him, he writes that they do so to their own dishonor. He insisted that God would assist him and “the creatures of the land and sea will follow me, and I will be beneficial to them without harming them.”

Trials and Tribulations

The history and details of his life are too numerous to mention in this short article, but through great adversity, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba managed to prevail over hardships, assassination attempts and deprivations in equatorial jungles to name a few episodes. To the dismay of the French, and after decades of imprisonment and exile, his following vastly increased. In the end he came to be honored even by his detractors, the French colonialists.³² He won the hearts and minds of his countrymen and women by embodying endearing and enduring values, with the power of his transmitted teachings. After all the persecution, imprisonment, exile, and assassination attempts on his life, Bamba stated, “I have forgiven all my enemies for the love of the One who protected me against them. I feel deep compassion for all my enemies. My heart is pure.”³³

He helped unite his people, but by way of their spiritual connection to the Divine, rather than by force, or rote learning.³⁴ This may be the key to why “Bamba became one of the outstanding poets and mystical leaders of the last 100 years.”³⁵

Unlike other means of resistance [military] against the colonial authority in Senegal, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba used his faith in God, deep knowledge of all aspects of Islam, and rootedness in African values as a means of struggle against French colonizers.³⁶

and

Of all the passive resistance against imperialism, Bamba's resistance can be said to have been the most successful in sub-Saharan Africa.³⁷

³² In 1919, Ahmadou Bamba is awarded France's “Legion of Honor” medal [for enlisting recruits for France in WWI].

³³ Dieye, Cheikh Abdoulaye (1989) “*Non-violence: The Vision of Sheikb Ahmadou Bamba*,” Mauritius: Eds. SSVMSAD, p. 39.

³⁴ Schools were set up that could accommodate those qualified for an advanced religious and spiritual education as well as those more suited to the work of business and agriculture.

³⁵ Robinson, David (2000) *Paths of Accommodation, Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880 - 1920*. Athens: Ohio University Press. p. 167.

³⁶ Ngom, Fallou (2002) “*Linguistic Resistance in the Murid Speech Community in Senegal*” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, v.23 n.3. p. 217 and 219.

³⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 217, 219.

Jihad of the Pen and Divinely Inspired Writing

If all the trees on earth were made into pens, and the ocean supplied the ink, augmented by seven more oceans, the words of God would not be exhausted.

(Qur’an 31:27)

From the time he completed his religious education Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba began to write prolifically. He continued despite spending the last three decades of his life in exile, prison or under house arrest. “Everyone agrees,” M. Fernand Dumont affirms, “Shaykh Bamba spent his whole life writing.”³⁸ The volume of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba’s work may well be greater than the 30,000 verses M.F. Dumont attributes to him.³⁹

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, who stated that “My religion is the love of God,” acknowledges his great spiritual heritage, and writes that he simply transmitted in verse the unitary messages of many of the eminent spiritual masters from many of the different spiritual orders before him, in particular: Hasan al-Basri, Abu’l-Qasim al-Junayd, Mansur al-Hallaj, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, Muhyi al-Din ibn al-Arabi, Abu’l-Hasan al-Shadhili, Ibn ‘Ata’allah al-Iskandari, all the way up to the more recent founders, propagators or renewers of the faith of the brotherhoods of North Africa such as Ahmad al-Zarruq, Ahmad al-Tijani, Abu ‘Abdallah Muhammad Al-Sanusi, and those of sub-Saharan Africa, such as Muhammad al-Yadali, Muhammad al-Daymani or Mukhtar al-Kunti.⁴⁰



Portrait of Sheikh Amadu Bamba composed of the holy names Allah and Mohammed, from the studio of Mor Gueye, 1998, after a photocopy of a calligram by an anonymous artist, in turn derived from a portrait of the saint by Assane Dione. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA.

³⁸ Dumont, Fernand (1975) *La Pensée religieuse de Ahmadou Bamba, fondateur du Mouridisme Senegalais*, Dakar-Abidjan: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines. p. 1

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ And also including authors such as Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani (922-996), Al-Qushayri [*Risalas*], Al-Sanusi, al-Maqqari (1591-1631) [“Nafh et-Tib” ou “Les Effluves agréables”] Sidi Halil [passages from *Précis*].

He learned and memorized books of these great Sufi Masters. His son, Shaykh Bachirou, reports that he heard from his brother, Mamadou Moustapha and his paternal uncle, Shaykh Massamba M'Backé that Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba told them that, in addition to his physical collection of books, he had retained by heart many texts from various disciplines including theology, mysticism, litanies, and Islamic law. It is not surprising, given his propensity for lyrical poetry, that he put his favorite and some of the greatest texts of Islam and Sufism to melodic rhyming verse.

Universal and Perennial Wisdom within the Particular Dispensation of Islam

In addition to his knowledge of the collected wisdom of earlier religious scholars, his contemporaries considered him a storehouse of knowledge on the Quran, Sunnah⁴¹ and exegesis.⁴² Though Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba taught within an Islamic context and never left Western Africa, many of his teachings on spiritual principles, proper conduct, responsibilities to God and creation are universally shared by all revealed traditions.⁴³ His universal message, like that of other Sufi saints such as Ibn 'Arabi, al-Hallaj, 'Attar and Rumi is based on the perennial wisdom underlying all spiritual traditions and engendered by his sound knowledge of Islam and his own spiritual vision.⁴⁴

Numerous manuscripts were found by his disciples who pulled them out of large trunks he brought back with him from his exiles. Also found were a collection of Qur'ans. It was said Bamba would transcribe one

⁴¹ The *Sunnah* refers to the recorded actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁴² Samb, Amar (1972) *Essai sur la contribution de Sénégal à la littérature d'expression arabe* Université de Lille III. Ifan-dakar, p. 436 (and from *Bienfaits des Eternels*)

⁴³ This is evident in his texts that parallel classical Hindu texts like those of Shankara (7th-8th century). This is not surprising since all spiritual paths meet in the sublime and mystical realm. Reading them side-by-side one could say that *The Keys to Paradise (Mafatihu al-Jinan)*, for example, and particularly the section on the four enemies of the soul expresses teachings in ways reminiscent of the work of Hindu saint, Shankara, on the methods to attain divine realization, expounded in *Crest Jewel of Discrimination (Viveka-Chadamani)*. There are major differences related to the time, place and people being addressed, nonetheless, the similarities of the teachings on spiritual discernment are remarkable.

⁴⁴ The Islamic interfaith vision inherent in the Quran is demonstrated in the popularity of the first Senegalese president who was a Christian, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and a popular president for 20 years in Senegal from Senegalese independence in 1960. Senegal is 95% Muslim.

Qur’an in a few days. He owned books of many Islamic disciplines available in his time.

The Revival of Islamic Wisdom using the Teachings of the Great Sufi Masters

We never change the state of a people until they change themselves.

(Qur’an 13:11)

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba never sought to reform people and society by compulsion. The holy inspired teachings of Islam and its inner tradition inspired and motivated a sincere change in the hearts and minds of the people through Bamba’s example, writings, teaching and inspired sacred litanies (*qasa’id*). His spiritual teachings and guidance became a transforming force and instrument for social change through the many schools he and his designated representatives founded. He knew that “to achieve enduring impact, the seeds of change must be sown in peoples’ heart and soul.”⁴⁵ Ahmadou Bamba’s emphasis on spiritual training (*tarbiyyah*, *tarqiyyah*, *tafsiyyah*) was a response to the educational and spiritual crisis that plagued his society.⁴⁶

The attempt to use Sufi doctrine as a tool for reform and to foster a new moral order was a shift from the perception of Sufism as a mostly esoteric intellectual tradition for ascetics disconnected from social reality.⁴⁷ It is also a departure from the perception of religion as narrowly defined by dogma alone. To use the powerful tool of religious and spiritual knowledge through a program of education was in line with his ancestral heritage dating back to his great grandfather, the erudite, Māram.

More than all of his ancestors, Bamba was deeply connected to the spiritual path and had been formally initiated into three Sufi orders (Shadhiliyyah, Qadiriyyah and Tijaniyyah). Though he was influenced by North African Sufism, he was associated in particular with the Qadiriyyah

⁴⁵ Babou, Cheikh Anta (2002) *Amadu Bamba and the Foundation fo the Muridiyya: The History and Development of a Muslim Brotherhood in Senegal, 1853-1927*, (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University) p. 322.

⁴⁶ That is the disorientation of society in part due to years of slavery, rote religious learning and the continued destruction of their culture with the influence of French colonialism. *Tarbiyyah* refers to spiritual training; *tarqiyyah* to further spiritual advancement; and *tafsiyyah* to even further spiritual purification)

⁴⁷ *Op cit.* Babou p. 321.

Sufi order through the lineage of Sidi Mukhtar al-Kunti, (1729–1811) until he founded his own Sufi order, the Muridiyyah in 1883.

All Sufi orders engage in the practice of *dhikrullah* or consciousness of the Divine Presence. Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's teachings are conveyed and remembered most by the melodic chanting of his divine litanies.

***Dhikrullah*—The Central Sufi Practice at the Core of Islam**

And dedicate yourself to the repetition of the divine names with the purification of your heart ... It will protect and bring peace.⁴⁸

The soul-transformative practice of Sufism and Islam, *Dhikrullah*⁴⁹ (remembrance of God), is meant to return one to one's primordial nature of peace. This practice in the form of prayer, writing and teaching became his vocation which is why he was able to convey a profound transformative message of peace emanating from his inner being. The practice of the remembrance of the One True Reality, is emphasized in all Sufi orders, in the Qur'an,⁵⁰ and performed through the canonical and traditional prayers, recitation of the Qur'an, the divine names enumerated in the Qur'an and sacred formulae. After these, Bamba's sacred and instructional litanies (*qasa'id*), are the predominant form of the practice of *dhikrullah* for Murids.⁵¹

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's writing was a means of remembrance and conveyance of the Divine word. These "writings" are mystical poems that are almost always sung. The practice of chanting the divine litanies

⁴⁸ Bamba, Shaykh Ahmadou, (1989) *Mafatih-Il-jinan wa Maqaliqu-l-niran [Les Clefs du Paradis et les Verrous de L'Enfer or The Keys to Paradise and the Locks of Hell]* in *Recueil de Poemes en Sciences Religieuses de Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba*, (trans. Serigne Same Mbaye) volume 2 Casablanca, Morocco: Dar El Kitab. [verse 142] English translation by Michelle R. Kimball. And in the section on the 4 enemies... "*Dhikrullah* combats *Shaytan*. That which imprisons *Shaytan* is the repetition of the Divine names, without distraction. That will protect and give peace. As for the weapon by which it attacks the worshiper, it is negligence [of *Dhikrullah*]." ["*Satan has gained mastery over them [liars] and has caused them to be oblivious of the remembrance of God.*" Qur'an 58:19]

⁴⁹ "*And the remembrance of Allah is greatest.*" [Qur'an 29:45] "*Those who believe, and whose hearts find their rest in the remembrance of Allah—for, verily, in the remembrance of Allah hearts do find their rest.*" [Qur'an 13:28]

⁵⁰ And From Bamba's *Masalik al-Jinan*, he writes, "La meilleure mention des Noms de Dieu (*dhikr*) est la lecture du Livre de Dieu (le Coran), avec compréhension et réflexion." verse 129.

⁵¹ A "murid" is a disciple in the Muridiyyah Sufi Order Ahmadou Bamba founded.

is part of the Sufi tradition of *sama'* or listening to divine music, and practiced by all Sufi orders. Listening to divinely inspired music and chanting reinforce a state of ecstasy and/or an elevated mystical state in the qualified seeker.

A Sufi master once said that the effect on the soul upon hearing one hour of a spiritual concert (*sama'*), when the soul is ready to hear its message, is equivalent to a thousand days of spiritual practice. Rumi, who was a great lover of music and very sensitive to its beauty, spoke of music as the vehicle for the expression of the deepest spiritual realities and would fall into an exalted spiritual state (*hal*) upon hearing just a few rhythms or melodies of music.⁵²

The continuous sound of his enchanted litanies resound 24 hours a day in the archotypically designed sacred city of Touba which he founded in west central Senegal.

Felicity in Bamba's Writings

He petitioned God to ensure that the verse he composed ...

be an eternal source of happiness for whomever would apply its knowledge ... and that it would lead the sincere aspirant to spiritual vision, and to the unveiling of profound secrets.⁵³

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba preserved and transmitted the inner tradition of Islam through these teachings, esoteric and practical, and by the versified texts of earlier Muslim intellectuals which he transformed into poetry.

Amar Samb writes that one of the first of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's texts was *The Gifts of the Most Holy (Mawabibu al-qudus)*. This was a versification of the well-known *Umm al-barabhin (The Demonstrative Proofs)* and *The Source of Trials* by Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad Al-Sanusi of Tlemcen (1437 - 1490).⁵⁴ This was so well received he then put *Bi-daya al-badaya* (Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *The Beginning of Guidance*) into verse which he entitled *Mulaiyyin as-sudur (The One who Illumines Hearts)*. These were followed with *Jadbbu al-sigbar (L'Attraction*

⁵² Nasr, Seyyed Hossein *The Garden of Truth*, p. 146.

⁵³ Bamba, Shaykh Ahmadou, *The Keys to Paradise* op.cit. (verse 178) Translation: M. R. Kimball.

⁵⁴ The Ash'ari theologian, born at Tlemcen, who studied under Abdur Rahman Sa'alibi in Algiers. He authored *Aqidat abl al-tawbid al-mukbrija minzulmat al-jabl wa ribqat al-taqlid, Umdat abl al-tawfiq wa'l-tasdid and Umm al-Barābin*. The last named was translated into German and French. The scholars of the Maghrib considered him the reviver of Islam, at the beginning of the 9th century A.H.

des enfants), *Jawbar an-Nafis (The Essence of the Precious)*. He versified Imam Abdur-Rahman Al-Akhdari's (of Algeria) texts of sacred law, *Kitab Al-'ibadah* also known as *Kitab Al-Akhdari*; 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani's (1070-1166) *Futub al-ghayb (Revelations of the Unseen.)*; and writings of Ahmad Zarruq (1442-1493), and others.

Spiritual Guidebooks

*And take a provision (with you) for the journey,
but the best of all provisions (tazawadu) is right conduct (taqwā).⁵⁵*
(Quran 2:197)

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba wrote many guidebooks. Inspired by the above verse he wrote one entitled, "Spiritual Provisions for Youth" (*Tazawadu al-sigbar*), to cover the basics of religion and important teachings from the best Islamic scholars. Here he instructs young people on what they need to bring with them to traverse the authentic spiritual path. His commentary upon this one verse consists of 308 rhyming verses based upon established wisdom regarding what a Muslim must know of his religion to better practice it, including: what he must understand pertaining to his obligations to God, to others, and to himself; his rights and the rights and principles that guided the Prophet in his conduct. Additionally he reviews the tenets of faith, angels, books, fundamental principles, ritual prayer, fasting; Islamic law regulated by the five schools; the individual, social, and community obligations (*mu'amalat*); Islamic virtues (*makarim al-akblaq*); and the devotional practices in the life of the Prophet, his Sunnah. Furthermore he describes the 3 elements of religion: faith (*iman*); submission (*islam*) and spiritual perfection (*ih-san*). His descriptions come from outward as well as inner knowledge. Included in the tenets of the Islamic faith (*iman*) is belief in angels, of which he writes ...

The Angels

Peace and blessings be upon them.

Belief in them is to affirm and at the same time be convinced that

Their existence is indisputable. They are preserved from all transgression.

They are living beings who do not excrete ...

⁵⁵ *Taqwa* may also be translated to mean "God-consciousness."

Because they are totally purified. Not a single one of them eats, peace be upon them, neither do they drink! But they are divine servants situated in eternal honor. Not a single one of them is capable of disobeying the Absolute.

Each one fulfills divine orders assigned to them. To me [Bamba] they brought assurances of joy.

Their Lord, the Subsistent, has created them out of light. This is unequivocal.

To celebrate the Glory of their Lord is their beverage. To sanctify God is their food. Sanctifying the name of God is their ultimate nourishment. There is no doubt about this!⁵⁶

Categories of his Writings

Fernand Dumont identifies seven categories of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba’s poetic writings: 1. *adab* (spiritual etiquette)⁵⁷; 2. reminders of practices and Islamic orthodox principles; 3. writings from exile; 4. writings glorifying God and in praise of the Prophet; 5. initiatic orisons, chants, and mystical chants; 6. teaching lessons; 7. and invocations.

The Keys to Paradise which Open the Gates to the Heights of Divine Realization

His poem, *The Keys to Paradise and the Bolts to the Doors of Hell (Mafatihu al-jinan wa magbaliq al-niran)*, consists of 188 rhyming verses in Arabic, outlining what he states is necessary for those who aspire to divine realization (*Wusul li-l-jalil*). As always, Bamba’s treatise presents the essence of much of the Islamic intellectual tradition, which came before in the writings of the great masters. His teaching style is

⁵⁶ Bamba, Shaykh Ahmadou, *Provisions for Youth (Tazawadu al-sigbar)* Translation, M. R. Kimball.

⁵⁷ *Adab* refers to courtesy and manners on the Path to God. For example to invoke the name of God before a meal. The teachings of the Qur’an; the *sunna*, the example of Muhammad; and the example of all of the other Prophets, form the basis for traditional Sufi *adab*—beautiful action in one’s form of behavior which creates the condition in one’s soul to ultimately be able to clearly reflect the qualities of God. Ibn ‘Arabi stated that Sufism is “to assume God’s character traits as one’s own,” and it has been said that all of Sufism is *adab (al-tasawwuf kullu-hu adab)*. The Prophet Muhammad said: “My Lord taught me refined manners,” and, “Good manners (*busn al-adab*) are a part of faith.” And Ibn ‘Ata’allah said: “Actions are lifeless forms, but the presence of an inner reality of sincerity within them is what endows them with life-giving Spirit.” Much of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba’s poetry informs the seeker in the proper *Adab* which also refers to proper behavior in all one’s relations and to God by following the Divine commands and prohibitions, according to the Quranic quote, “And keep to the limits set by God” [*wa ‘l-bafibuna li-bududi ‘llab - 9:112*]. In around 1050 CE, ‘Ali ibn Uthman al-Hujwiri wrote one of the most famous treatises on *adab* in his *Kashfal-Mahjub*.];

pure and direct in a rhyming Arabic euphony which truly cannot be translated to effect in English.

Practical Guidelines for Spiritual Union

Observe the ... principles which follow, since they constitute guidelines for spiritual union.

1. Avoid procrastination [in the delaying of payments, for example] and restrain your desires, because not a single action is realized unless you eliminate these two vices.
2. Devote oneself continually to the contemplation of the Divine. This leads to a happy outcome [after death]. Whoever abandons vain things, that are insignificant in the eyes of the Lord of the Universe, will be happy.
3. Formulate your intention before the execution of any action and distinguish between its advantages and any disadvantages.
4. Avoid conceiving of unhealthy ideas. Instead, attach yourself to nurturing good positive thoughts.⁵⁸

In *Keys to Paradise*, he further outlines the objectives one must begin with in the search for knowledge; the rules of proper conduct for the seeker; the conditions necessary for such conduct.

Objectives in the Search for Spiritual Knowledge

Have four objectives at the outset of your search for knowledge, in order to be upright and obtain God's blessing. (verse 35)

1. The first is to turn away from ignorance. [renunciation]
2. The second is to become useful to God, the Possessor of Majesty, creatures and creation. [by imparting knowledge which is the best act]
3. to revive the religious sciences [knowledge of true religion - through inner knowledge which gives life].
4. to apply the knowledge one has gained. [wisdom]⁵⁹

He then outlines the four enemies of the soul that one must subdue in the great struggle of the soul (*al-jihad al-akbar*) referring these to the numerical value, four, of the Arabic letter “*dal*,” according to the science of letters (*al-jafr*) in Arabic.

Bamba goes on to describe the necessity of observing the limits set by the divine law and the importance of respecting God's commandments and prohibitions. He explains the process of repentance, step-by-step,

⁵⁸ Bamba, Shaykh Ahmadou, *The Keys to Paradise* [beginning at verse 132] English translation by M. R. Kimball.

⁵⁹ Commentary: M.R. Kimball.

leaving no room for ambiguity.⁶⁰ He lists the specifics of what is prohibited in the behavior of the aspirant; how to preserve one’s bodily members (stomach, tongue, reproductive organs, feet, eyes, hands and ears) from error, and that “... the bodily members will witness against you tomorrow [on the Day of Accountability], (according to the wise ones);” six principle guidelines for spiritual union; principles of Sufism (*tasawwuf*); the veils of the soul [obstructions to divine realization] and their origins; three fundamental spiritual characteristics necessary for worship; sources of disobedience to God according to accounts of Biblical and Qur’anic figures; eight pillars of Sufism modeled after the qualities of Biblical and Qur’anic Prophets and saints as described by ‘Abd al Qadir al-Jilani in *Revelations of the Unseen (Futub al-ghayb)*. He always begins and ends with eloquent praises to God and blessings for the Prophet Muhammad. Bamba refers to himself as *Khadim al-Rasulullah*, servant of the Prophet of God.

Passport to Paradise

Another well-known masterpiece is the 1,553 verse treatise on mysticism entitled, *Masalik al-Jinan* (Pathways to Paradise).⁶¹

If the rich person is grateful to God, he is above the poor person who [with less choice] resigns himself to the love of God.

When you eat, carry yourself like a person who is forced to eat ... out of absolute necessity.

And be like a disgruntled traveler, in prison in this world, enduring life’s adversities, without ever complaining about the miseries of this world, such as poverty, illness, catastrophes, deceptions, hunger, and difficult circumstances, and all the other misfortunes that may afflict one. All of these consist of blessings from God, the Most High, for the benefit of his servants, said Al-Yadali.

So, he says, whoever is exempt is pleased with this world and it becomes his paradise in which he plays and recreates.

He comes to cowardly abhor the encounter with God and detests death.

[On the other hand] These adversities incline the worshipper to turn towards God and to reject the lower world.

⁶⁰ In modern times there is usually an ambiguous notion of what steps are required in forgiving but more importantly in asking God and others for forgiveness.

⁶¹ Written early in his career, this text consists of versifications of: *Kbatimat al-tasawwuf (The Seal of Sufism)* by Al-Yadali who he also refers to as Al-Deymani; and *Al-daba al-Ibriz (The Pure Gold) also of Al-Yadali; Ihya Ulum ad-Din (Enlivening Religious Knowledge); and Junat al Murid (The Shield of the Truth-Seeker)* by Sidi Mukhtar al Kunti.

The greatest state of a believer, who strives for God, is the state of humility in which he is forced to turn toward God.

Therefore this person has no other means than to rely upon the Merciful One.

While the traveler who is separated from God, is lost in the desert [inwardly], discouraged and alone, and is like one who is drowning alone and cannot see a way to save himself.⁶²

The essence of religion in poetry

Knowledge of prosody, *'arud*, which was used for centuries as a means of instruction in original compositions like Bamba's, is disappearing in the Islamic world. Bamba's chanted orisons are reminiscent of the recitation of the Quran. Bamba preserved the tradition of transmission of religious and spiritual teachings through rhyming chanted verse. The human voice can be viewed as a divine instrument for the eternal song emanating from the mystical heart of the universe. He captures the essence of the religion in poetic form in line with the African oral tradition which privileges the spoken, repeated, and intoned word in chant and thereby lends itself easily to remembrance. Where rhythm is the base of life, traditional values are transmitted well by rhythmic music and words. Out of his sound spiritual knowledge along with his proficiency in Arabic and knowledge of prosody emerges a euphony resounding in the daily sung recitation of his ever-popular litanies.

Acrostics

Ahmadou Bamba's acrostics consist of initials read vertically from verses of the Qur'an, a name of the Prophet Muhammad, the name Allah, or the Arabic alphabet.⁶³ Each letter of a Qur'anic verse becomes the first letter of a sequence of verses. This is meaningful for Muslims for whom the Divine Presence is felt to reside in the Qur'anic revelation and the symbolism of each letter—the "mysterious Presence which emanates from the whole of the Sacred Text ... no matter what part of the Qur'an one reads."⁶⁴ An entire sacred healing science making use of magic squares and sacred formulae developed through the use of his sacred verse, and verses from the Qur'an, are still current amongst his followers.

⁶² Bamba, Shaykh Ahmadou *Masalik al-Jinan* [verses 708-719] English translation by M. R. Kimball.

⁶³ Samb, Amar op.cit. p. 435.

⁶⁴ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (1994) *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World* Chicago: KAZI Publications Inc, p. 11.

In Praise of the Prophet Muhammad

Wa inaka la ‘ala kbuluqin ‘adbim

(And surely thou hast sublime morals, tu as les plus belles qualités)

(Qur’an, 68:4)

Muqadamat al-amdab fi mazayab al-miftab, [*Les prémices des éloges sur les merites de celui qui est la clef (Le Prophète)*], consists of 192 verses in which Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba likens God to “The Opener,”⁶⁵ and the Divine Messengers as the keys to the portals of Divine knowledge and realization. The Divine Messengers personify our original and primordial divine nature which is that of love and infinite goodness. Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba writes that this *qasidab* (litany) was written while in exile in the near-uninhabitable equatorial jungles of Gabon, while he was alone far away from a Muslim community. He is said to have written this in celebration of the Prophet’s birthday (*Mawlid*). That evening he went into retreat to write the verses in praise of the Prophet. This poem is written with the sixteen letters of the Qur’anic verse (68:4) above in which God describes the character, innate disposition and nature of the Prophet Muhammad. He composed a series of 12 verses with each of the 16 letters of this Qur’anic verse. Each of these 192 verses begins and end with the sequential letter from the verse.



For his disciples who had been robbed, banished, or killed, Bamba composed a poem in acrostics from the Qur’anic verse...

... those who were expelled from their homes and their property, while seeking Grace from Allah and His Good Pleasure, and aiding Allah and His messenger: such are indeed the truthful. (Quran 59:8)

Esoteric/Profound Secrets

Many of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba’s texts are highly esoteric, but they also consist of descriptions reminiscent of oral African (and Native American) teaching-stories with descriptions of the qualities of the

⁶⁵ The Opener (*al-fattab*) is a name of God mentioned in the Qur’an.

O our Sustainer!

Lay Thou open the truth between us and our people—

for Thou art the best of all to lay open the truth!

Al-A’raf 7:89, tr. Asad]

animal kingdom to impart the virtues the aspirant needs on his or her spiritual quest. He describes the conditions of good conduct and the qualities that are exemplified by the particular characteristics of different members of the animal kingdom: a cat, dog, lion, donkey, vulture, and pig. Animal symbols make the principle being taught easy to remember. “Maintain an average hunger like the lion [who lies low and waits for his prey till the proper moment].”⁶⁶

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's verses pack the basics of exoteric (practical and theological) and esoteric knowledge (spiritual and mystical) into small booklets, some printed only on newsprint with simple covers. These can be found sold along the street especially near mosques and all around the sacred city of Touba. Today, they are recited as litany by hundreds of thousands of people throughout Senegal.

In ... sub-Saharan Africa ... one can find Sufi poetry of great power that continues to move the souls of men and women and that remains an integral part of the culture of the people.⁶⁷

Mastery of the Arabic Language

Specialists in the study of the Arabic language and literature classify Bamba among the best Senegalese and non-Arabic-speaking African writers.⁶⁸ It is true, though, that there are many parochial dialects, and non-native speakers in Africa south of the Sahara, (especially the Western Sudan), who mix classical Arabic with Moroccan and Moorish dialects. There is definitely a West African Arabic style in Bamba's writings too, which may differ from the Middle Eastern style and which departs from purely classical Arabic.⁶⁹

Spiritual *Barakah* and Mystical Effect

Literally the size of a passport, one ode (*qasidab*), such as “*Jawartu*,” is felt by Murids to possess so strong a power or blessing (*barakah*) that it is considered a “Passport to Paradise”⁷⁰ by bringing one in contact with the inner dimension of truth. Additionally, disciples consider there

⁶⁶ Bamba, Shaykh Ahmadou, *Keys to Paradise*.

⁶⁷ Nasr, *The Garden of Truth*, p. 144.

⁶⁸ See for example, Amar Samb, *La contribution du Senegal a la litterature d'expression Arabe*.

⁶⁹ From e-mail correspondence with Cheikh Anta Babou in July 2006.

⁷⁰ Roberts, Allen F. op.cit. p. 24.

to be an active, even talismanic impact of Bamba’s written works, empowered through the arcane sciences that Murids call *asrar* (secrets).

Such poets provide not only knowledge of the path, in both its theoretical and practical aspects, but also an ‘alchemy’ that has the power to cure the ailments of the soul. Since most people are not given to the reading of metaphysical texts, Sufi poetry is also the means for the dissemination of the teachings of Sufism to the larger public. The Sufis have used beauty to adorn the expressions of the Truth, and they attract souls to the Truth through the beauty of the literary form in which it is dressed.⁷¹

The late French scholar of Islam and its history, Louis Massignon, and Bamba’s followers aver, that his writings require “attentive study ... to penetrate their secrets.”⁷² And devotees attest that through the repeated chanting of the *qasa'id* (litanies) the profound teachings enter the heart, soul and mind of the qualified seeker after truth.



After over a century of social, political and spiritual transformation, Senegal, today, is a democratic and relatively peaceful nation. Since its independence in 1960, it is one of the only West African nations to have escaped political and ethnic violence, and has sustained a functioning stable democracy. Senegal’s is a form of democracy which is informed greatly by the presence of the Sufi orders which play a role of guidance based on transcendent truth. The Sufi orders—keepers of the heart of the Islamic tradition—are largely credited in scholarly works for their role in the maintenance of peace in Senegal.⁷³ Many other individuals and groups contributed to the transformation, but Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba remains one of the most visible symbols for this revival. The general population remain committed to the spiritual principles of non-violence, and are generally averse to puritanical reformist encroachment particularly from non-African sources. The lasting impact he had on the cultural and spiritual revival of his people demonstrates the profound relevance of Islam’s inner tradition for sustainable peace and harmony in society, and attests to the strength of the nonviolent tradition in Islam. Senegal’s example through its spiritual heritage, lack of fundamental-

⁷¹ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (2007) op.cit. p. 143.

⁷² Massignon, Louis (1954) *Essai sur les origines lexique technique mystique musulmane*, p. 119, cited in Dumont 1975, p. 31; and cited in Roberts, p. 167-168.

⁷³ From a comment by Cheikh Anta Babou in E-mail correspondence. April 14, 2009.

ism and adherence to spiritual principles in society is also of extreme relevance in the dialogue on the threat of religious fundamentalism, and fresh possibilities for the peaceful upholding of truth and justice through spiritual virtue.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Thanks to Chiekh Anta Babou and Zachary Markwith for proofreading, and corrections.