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Michelle R. Kimball, *SHAYKH AHMADOU BAMBA: A Peacemaker for Our Time*, Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press Sdn. Bhd. 2018.

Reviewer: Imtiyaz Yusuf. ISTAC, International Islamic University Malaysia

I first heard about Ahmadou Bamba (ca. 1850-1927) thirty-two years ago through the 9-part BBC television series titled *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* presented by the doyen of Africa and Islam studies, the late Professor Ali Mazrui. The series, which was produced in 1986 was also published in the form of a book. In the program number 3 titled NEW GODS, Dr. Ali Mazrui commented:

In Senegal, there is another Mecca for the Muslims. African Muslims make pilgrimages there to see Amadu Bamba's tomb. Amadu Bamba worked to make Islamic boarding schools where there was instruction in the Koran, and an emphasis on agricultural production.²

And the name of Ahmadu Bamba has remained in my mind until today. I always wanted to learn more about him. Thanks to Michelle Kimball for this excellent book on Ahmadou Bamba, it is one of the few works on Bamba. I have learned a lot from it, so my hearty congratulations to the author. The good thing about the book is that its chapters are short, crisp and well written, not drowning the reader into a collapsing sleep!

This is a much-needed book in our times, when Islam is treated negatively in the media where the Muslim advocates of peace like Bamba and others have been side lined or purposely ignored.

I agree with Michelle Kimball that Ahmadou Bamba was indeed a peacemaker of our times. As a man of the 19th – 20th centuries, he stands among the peace-oriented restorers of religion not only in Islam but also other religions. I equate Ahmadou Bamba's

² “The Africans: A Triple Heritage (DVD Video, 1986) [WorldCat.Org],” accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.worldcat.org/title/africans-a-triple-heritage/oclc/71297263>.

movement for religion and peace which continues to exist dynamically until today in Senegal along with that of Simon Kimbangu – a Christian peace maker from Congo; Swami Vivekanda of Rama Krishna Mission in India and Maha Ghosananda, a highly revered Cambodian Buddhist monk who in 1992 led the first nationwide Dhammayietra in Dhammayietra – a peace march pilgrimage across Cambodia as an effort to restore the hope and spirit of the Cambodian people after the communist ravage made by the Khmer Rouge regime.

The *Muridiyya Tariqah* founded by Ahmadou Bamba is in a strong position today playing a central role in the political and economic affairs of Senegal. It is central to the peanuts based agro-economics of the country and also in the business sector of Dakar, the capital city. From its anchor in the center of the peanut basin the Murids have spread into virtually every agricultural zone of western Senegal and developed a reputation as productive peanut farmers. It had cordial relations with the post-independence regime of Leopold Senghor, a Roman Catholic President of Senegal.

Ahmadou Bamba was a saintly person, a poet and preserver of Islamic culture from French influences. Though exiled twice, he chose the path of perseverance and also wise cooperation with his opponents, the colonial French regime. He adopted the strategy of cooperation and resistance as when needed. Give and take, no one wins all in a conflict.

The Muslim Africa of 18th – 20th centuries witnessed several Muslim reformist movements, which were Sufi oriented with some of them engaged in war against the Western colonizers, such as the Tijaniyyah and the Mahdi of Sudan.

Ahmadou Bamba preferred a middle path which would not compromise on Islamic spirituality and culture, while also opting for cooperation if it was of benefit to the community. He traced this line of operation from the example of the Prophet in Medina – **ميثاق المدينة**, *Mīthāq al-Madīnah*) – the constitution of Medina in which the Prophet entered into contract with the different religious groups. Thereby, laying the model for the basis of a multi-religious Islamic polity in Medina, in which *qital* – fighting opposition was the last resort. The Prophet's polity of Madina was not a jihadist state.

Bamba was an ardent practitioner of Prophet Muhammad's model; he called himself *Khadim Rasul Allah* (Servant of the Prophet of God); he expressed in the form of poetry in praise of the Prophet whose verses were adaptations from the Qur'ān and also the *qasdaid* or odes which the followers of the *Muridiyya Tariqah* recite until today.

I was also very much impressed to learn about the non-violent method of Ahmadou Bamba amidst a violent environment as an integral part of Islamic spiritual and social order. I also learned that he combined *Haqiqah* and *Tariqah* not only as a spiritual movement, but also in socio-economic pattern whereby the *Muridiyya Tariqah* flourished and is the backbone of the peanut economy and also the democratic system of contemporary Senegal. Several of the recent presidents of Senegal belong to the *Muridiyya Tariqah* – which has struck a balance between religious spirituality, governance, economic sustainability and democracy – a lacking feature of majority of Muslim countries.

This success is founded on what Michelle Kimball describes as the essential features of the Ahmadou Bamba's teaching and practices of:

1. zero tolerance of nepotism and slavery;
2. practicing of religious spirituality and discipline from street to state house;
3. respect for democratic political principles of equality, fraternity and interreligious coexistence;
4. respect for hard work as part of Muslim community development in the shape of profiting peanut economy; this disproves Max Weber and Marx's theory that Asian and African political economies are feudal and incapable of developing into flourish democratic economic model.

The life example of Ahmadou Bamba, who was exiled twice in his life by the French on the instigation of his local opponents out of rivalry and jealousy, showed that Islam is a multi-dimensional world view which integrates the religious, the economic, the political, the socio-cultural, the legal and the aesthetical dimensions of life into real praxis. And this is proven by the success of Senegal in the past and today.

Islam in Senegal is highly Sufistic and not engrossed in Sunni-Shia contentions. This Ahmadou Bamba model of polity as shown in the book is a syncretic one. However, there is one issue which will raise alarm from some Muslim circles when it is reported that:

1. Bamba had a vision of the angel Gabriel who confirmed his mission to seek God and spread the faith and in founding the new village of Touba (tauba, “repentance”) which is the location of his tomb and place of annual “grand magal” event when thousands of Senegalese visit the tomb to obtain blessing and is viewed as a *hajj* for those who are economically unable to make the hajj to Mecca (p. 269).
2. And the second question will be how much of the syncretism that characterizes Muridiyya can be identified with the overall Islamic community?

My second comment is made from the fact that in the world-wide Muslim ummah, which is divided into 7 Cultural – Linguistic Zones of the Muslim World, all is not monolithic; there is also the presence of several sub-cultures among them:

1. The Arab Middle East including non-Arabic regions such as Iran, Turkey, Kurdistan and Afghanistan.
2. Africa – the Maghreb or North Africa, West Africa and East Africa.
3. Central Asia – comprising of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.
4. South Asia – Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka.
5. Southeast Asia – Indo-Malay Archipelago and mainland Southeast Asia.
6. China – Hui and Uighur.
7. Balkan – Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania.
8. Muslim Diaspora in Europe and North America.

Coming from Africa I have a problem with the term ‘Black Africa,’ because we the Africans, having gone through the worst brunt of colonialism, do not distinguish ourselves along the lines of race – skin color. I find such distinction also made by Prof. Nasr’s in his books on Islam. I am not comfortable with this. It is better to make

distinction between Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa or by geographic zones.

I am very much grateful to Michelle Kimball for writing this book, which for me a dream book come true. I have been waiting for to read and learn about Ahmadou Bamba for some thirty years now. I congratulate her for the excellent work. I am sure it will be read with much interest in today's times when Islam is much blamed for violence. Michelle Kimball successfully presents the main face of Islam as that of Peace in both realistic and practical ways through the life story of one of the great saints of Islam viz., Ahmadou Bamba. It was indeed a pleasure to read and comment on this book. It is a must read for specialized and general readers who want to learn more about Islam in Africa and the path of peace as laid down in the teaching of Islam in theory and practice.

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