

## *Research Africa Reviews* Vol. 3 No. 1, April 2019

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

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-3-issue-1-april-2019/>

Michelle R. Kimball, *Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba: A Peacemaker for Our Time*. Publisher: The Other Press Sdn, 2018. 400 pp. ISBN: 9670957206.

Reviewed by: Youssef J. Carter, Harvard University.

Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké (1853-1927) is considered one of the foremost Sufi Saints throughout Muslim West Africa and beyond. He initiated the Muridiyya Tariqa, a Sufi Order which boasts a global membership of millions of Muslim followers, in late nineteenth-century Senegal and forecasted the establishment of the holy city of Touba, which is a site for an annual pilgrimage (*magal*) to commemorate Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's consecration to sainthood during his exile. While he, and his image, are well-known to African audiences and many in a broader capacity by virtue of his admirers, intimate details of his life story are less known. Indeed, the vast intellectual tradition and expansive spiritual philosophies that arise out of Muslim West Africa are still being uncovered, which is why the task of sharing his story to the world is an important one.

In line with other works on Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba, Michelle Kimball's biography of 'Serigne Touba' interprets his life story as an example of resistance to French colonial power in African historical context. Yet, as Kimball informs her readers, Shaykh Bamba's support of nonviolence was animated from within and less motivated by political factors on the ground. He placed utmost importance on *tarbiyya* (spiritual education) as a means to train the self and his ethos is a counter-narrative to the currently prevailing misconception that the religion of Islam necessitates violence, or that its spread throughout the Sahel and sub-Saharan African region was through forced conversion. Through a detailed rendering of his preoccupation with spiritual growth and expansion, Kimball illustrates how Shaykh Bamba's refusal to engage in armed resistance places him in a similar category with luminaries and non-violence leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In this manner, Kimball's biography of Shaykh Bamba goes further in framing his role as a peacemaker like that of Cheikh Anta Babou, who also composed a biography of the Shaykh more than a decade prior. As Bamba set in motion Senegal's Murid movement, the French colonial machine perceived his acclaim as a threat due to their assumptions that his movement was merely a strategy for building a front for armed resistance to an expanding colonial authority.

In reading Kimball's biography of Shaykh Bamba, I particularly appreciated her attentiveness to the conditions in which his early life took place. The author provides her readers with an understanding of the political and economic environment that surely contributed to Bamba's development. Yet Kimball also takes seriously the need to provide a historical analysis of his religious training as well as a genealogy of the spiritual expertise of his forebears. Kimball, for example, recounts how Shaykh Bamba's mother, Mame Diarra Bousso, is considered a saint in her own right and was an expert regarding knowledge of the Qur'an and Islamic law. So beloved and admired is she by disciples of Shaykh Bamba that there is an additional pilgrimage to her burial site in Porokhan, and her image, as the author tells us, is steadily growing in popularity as a

signpost for blessings (*baraka*). Further, pilgrims who visit Mame Diarra do so with the belief that pointing their supplications in her direction results in more immediate effects, more so than her saintly son. Additionally, Bamba's father, Momar Anta Sali, was a jurist and educator who was initiated into the Qadiri Sufi Order. With both parents fully immersed in the realm of *tassawuf*, the Islamic science of spiritual expansion, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba was reared in a tradition of pious devotion.

In this regard, Kimball's writing about Shaykh Bamba is not like the celebratory monographs of old that were founded upon constructions of great men who were self-made. It becomes clear that the author wants her readers to consider how Shaykh Bamba carried forward a tradition of piety and reflection that he inherited from his family in an environment of deep knowledge, interpreting an Islamic corpus of higher ethical truth as one that forbade the shedding of blood. A growing colonial intrusion by the French that resulted in the rupture of native sovereignty by itself would have certainly called for armed resistance on the part of Muslims to protect their lands and property. However, Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba seemingly had a vision of resistance that operated inwardly. Insofar as the French did not explicitly inhibit the free practice of Islam, his people could be free to concern themselves with the more important task of perfecting their souls. This is not merely a story of the choice to freely give up the material world in order to gain the otherworldly. Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's stance of nonviolence in the face of colonization represents a calculation and a process of decision-making in which certain practicalities regarding the lack of adequate means with which to initiate an armed revolution were also considered. More importantly, however, Bamba's inclination toward peace is tied to his revolution of a different kind—one comprised of sublime patience and fortitude in the wake of tribulation and the recognition that power is not in the body, but rather emanates from the soul, after it is bestowed from above. Michelle Kimball invites us to reconsider how we define revolution. In telling Shaykh Bamba's story, she invites us to reflect on the question of where freedom begins. And where world peace begins. We might therefore reflect on the following: "...Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves" (Qur'an 13: 11).

While I do not have substantial critiques to share regarding Kimball's work, I will admit that reading her text left me with a desire for a more detailed view of her sources. It seems that her approach placed an emphasis on sharing the sources through her bibliography, save for the several endnotes at the conclusion of each chapter. There were some salient block quotes and poetic explications to which I would personally prefer to have direct access. Kimball explains in her preface that she draws from colonial archives, reprints of Shaykh Bamba's writings, and that she consults Cheikh Anta Babou's biography of Shaykh Bamba, which is entitled "Fighting the Greater Jihad" (2007). However, it is unclear exactly where Kimball has attained quite intimate details of Bamba's life at a number of points in her text, but this would be less opaque with more attention to citations. Considering the dearth of sources on Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba in English, the author might consider walking her readers through a literature review in future editions that more fully explains how this text draws from non-English sources and provides a fuller conception of how those writers perceived Bamba's impact. On the other hand, my sense is that Kimball's biography of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba is not solely meant for academic consumption. The writing successfully balances rigor with accessibility and results in a text from which a wide array of readers, both novice and seasoned, can gain benefit. The fifteen chapters are brief, and my sense is that this was a conscious choice on the part of the author to provide a manner of reading that is quite digestible.

Secondly, Kimball's recounting of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's life reveals tensions with the French colonial regime as well as with local chieftains who enjoyed power before the expansion of colonial authority. Unlike Cheikh Anta Babou, who reveals the manner in which there were also tensions within the Muridiyya organizational structure (particularly within Bamba's own family), Kimball includes no room for internal rifts in the movement. While her project is to focus intently on the life of Shaykh Bamba and less on his family dynamics, it is important to consider how fissures amongst his family and within the movement tell us something valuable about the particular historical development of the Muridiyya. As Cheikh Anta Babou asserts, "...the Murid tariqa is not a homogeneous organization with a linear and conflict-free history in which everybody has agreed about everything, as most of the literature on the Murids would lead us to believe. To be sure, there is a hegemonic and apparently consensual master narrative of the history of the Muridiyya, but alongside this narrative, there are also muted but important dissonant, undercurrent historiographies that have developed in the interstices and fault lines of Murid history. From the tariqa's inception, Amadu Bamba faced the hostility of some members of his family and fellow Muslim teachers, and the organization he founded was riddled by conflicts between competing factions that struggled to earn his confidence and build their own power bases in hopes of taking control after his death" (Babou 2007: 10).

There is much that the world can gain from a deeper engagement with the West African Islamic intellectual tradition. This will be impossible without a concerted effort to uncover its riches. Following Ousmane Kane, we must look beyond Timbuktu. Paul Lovejoy, Rudolph Bilal Ware, and Michael Gomez, for example, point to the manner in which we must conceive of anticolonial African revolution as a broader dialogue that takes place throughout the past few centuries on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Kimball's approach is to complement the sociological and the historical development of Sufism in West Africa and beyond with its spiritual legacies. An additional benefit to the structure of her text is in the choice by the author to include some English translation (in addition to its original Arabic) of Shaykh Ahmadou Bamba's poetry in which he venerates the Prophet Muhammad. Western readers have been introduced to the writings of Sufi poets in Middle Eastern and South Asian context, but lesser known are the works of African Sufi writers. With their recently published "Jihad of the Pen: The Sufi Literature of West Africa" (2018), scholars such as Rudolph Bilal Ware, Zachary Wright, and Amir Syed have contributed to undoing this imbalance, yet, as Kimball's text suggests, much more has to be done to remedy this.

### **Research Africa**

Copyright © 2019 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.