
Lamin Sanneh, The Sanneh Institute, and the Pacifist Tradition of West African Islam

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The reflections in this special issue of *Anabaptist Witness* describe the encounter between two peacemaking traditions—one Mennonite and the other Murid—from the perspective of various participants. This article situates the Murid movement within a wider context of historical and contemporary indigenous expressions and traditions of Islam in West Africa that embody peacemaking and nonviolence. It does so by focusing on Lamin Sanneh’s scholarly inquiry into the pacifist tradition of West African Islam. Sanneh promoted a new narrative of Islam that was rooted in African cultures and traditions while remaining orthodox in its Islamic beliefs, both of which have challenged the dominant received narrative of jihadism promoted by many Western scholars.

This article then details some of the key activities and findings of a recent three-year research project (2022–2025) of The Sanneh Institute (TSI) into the pacifist tradition of West African Islam, a project for which I served as academic coordinator. Describing TSI’s project activities also serves to highlight my own journey with Murids as well as the important role and contribution of two Murid scholars—Cheikh Babou and Fallou Ngom, who served as key advisors to the project.

Lamin Sanneh and the Pacifist Tradition of West African Islam

Lamin Sanneh’s Scholarly Influence

Many who have undertaken courses in history, theology, missiology, and World Christianity have invariably read Lamin Sanneh (d. 2019), and in academic

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departments around the world, major works of his, such as *Translating the Message*, have become foundational. More broadly, Sanneh is known for teaching the history of Christianity and Islam in Africa and for being one of the architects of the now popular and widely known field of World Christianity. But Sanneh's earliest scholarly interest is lesser known; it focused on the enduring legacy and influence of the pacifist tradition of West African Islam, also known as the Suwarian tradition.¹

The Suwarian Pacifist Tradition as Counternarrative to Jihadism

Western Scholars' Lack of Access to Primary West African Sources

Sanneh's pursuit of the Suwarian tradition occurred at a time when the overwhelming majority of Western scholars were focusing on the jihad tradition. In the received colonial and postcolonial narratives of Islam in West Africa, the dominant focus had been the jihad movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,² and many Western scholars were presenting this jihadist tradition as orthodox and "normative" Islam.³

Part of the West's focus on militancy, conquest, and jihadism stems from the fact that Western scholars were unable to read sources written in African languages. These accounts by West African scholars, clerics, and religious leaders were written in languages such as Hausa, Mandinka, and Wolof. The sources contained local histories, clerical teachings, sermons, parables, and proverbs that recounted social and religious worlds that outsiders were not privy to.

Just as (if not more) important than the written sources, were the oral accounts—the "living library," as Cheikh Anta Babou refers to them—that were often the richest source of material.⁴ In the absence of an engagement with

1 Sheikh Al-Hajj Salim Suwari was a thirteenth-century West African Soninke *karamogo* (Islamic scholar) who focused on the responsibilities of Muslim minorities residing in a non-Muslim society. He formulated an important theological rationale for peaceful coexistence with the non-Muslim ruling classes, now referred to as the Suwarian tradition.

2 John Azumah, "Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 41, no. 4 (2017):363–69.

3 The few Western scholars who addressed the pacifist tradition in their works include Patrick Ryan, *Islam in Yorubaland: Imale* (1979); Robert Launay, *Beyond the Stream* (1992); Ivor Wilks, *The Juula and the Expansion of Islam* (2000); and David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (2004). A few others, mostly Western or Western-based African scholars, have done work on aspects of the Suwarian tradition, mainly from the anthropological and sociological perspective.

4 Cheikh Babou, "Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam," online public lecture, December 29, 2021, The Sanneh Institute.

all of these sources, the dominant narrative that emerged from, and was exported by, Western scholars was that of jihadism.

“Islam Noir”: Written Accounts of African Islam by African Intellectuals

A few African scholars in the twentieth century undertook studies that challenged the dominant jihadi narrative. They did so in large part because the depictions of Islam they read in formal educational settings did not reflect the Islam of their childhood and their home communities in West Africa. For example, the Malian Muslim scholar Amadou Hampaté Bâ (d. 1991) is one of a handful of Muslim scholars of repute in the past century who undertook exploratory work on the pacifist tradition of West African Islam and talked about the tradition appreciatively.⁵ In contrast to conquest and militancy, the expression of West African Islam that Bâ recounted was one of accommodation, interreligious harmony, and peaceful coexistence.

When written accounts of an African Islam did emerge from African intellectuals such as Bâ, they were quickly branded as “Islam noir” (or, black Islam) by Western scholars, and particularly among French intellectuals. The label “Islam noir” was pejorative, and it communicated that black Islam was nonorthodox, syncretistic, and inferior in nature because it comingled with African cultures and traditions. In contrast, however, Bâ used the term “Islam noir” positively and constructively, remarking, “In Africa, Islam has no color except the color of water; this is what explains its success: it [Islam] colors itself with the tints of the land and rocks.”⁶

For Bâ, “Islam noir” resulted from the encounter between the Suwarian tradition of his upbringing and his own Fulani culture and heritage. More to the point, West African Islam was neither a foreign import from Saudi Arabia—which would have been considered by the West as superior to African traditional religion—nor a syncretistic *mélange* of Islam and African traditional religion—which would have been considered inferior to non-African expressions of Islam. Instead, Bâ argued that the West African soil birthed a unique Islam that was not only faithful to Islamic teachings and traditions but also rooted in and reflective of African customs and traditions.

“Beyond Jihad”: Sanneh’s Research on the Spread of Islam Through Peaceful Means

Thus, at a time when the predominant narrative of West African Islam was focusing on the jihad tradition and during an era that was dismissive of “Islam noir,” Lamin Sanneh pursued his doctoral studies on the pacifist Jakhanke clerical

5 Amadou Hampaté Bâ and Gaetani Roger, *A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring life of Tierno Bokar* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008).

6 Vincent Monteil, *L’Islam noir* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), 41.

communities⁷ throughout the West African subregion. His doctoral studies were later updated and expanded in his seminal work, *Beyond Jihad* (2016).⁸ In *Beyond Jihad*, Sanneh documents the Suwarian tradition's principled disavowal of jihad and its eschewal of political patronage in favor of a pacifism that privileges religious diversity and prefers accommodation over and against absolutism and militarism.

Sanneh studied the Suwarian clerics, who had a huge influence on the Mandinka (of present-day Guinea, Gambia, Mali, and Senegal) and who adopted religious learning and teaching as a vocation. Sanneh argued that the pacifism espoused by the Jakhanke clerics firmly belonged to the orthodox Islamic tradition. The Muslim Mandinka and other neighboring tribes drew a distinction between a professional religious class, the warrior class, and the political class. The itinerant clerics created semi-autonomous centers to devote themselves to religious vocation. They sought to cultivate character traits and virtues such as humility, empathy, patience, reciprocity, cooperativeness, self-critique, and self-correction for a robust, sustained engagement between people of different religions.⁹

One of the hallmarks or distinct practices of the Jakhanke clerical class is that they kept the political class at arm's length, resisting the temptation to assume political office and avoiding direct interference and control by rulers. Sanneh argues that this apolitical stance was rooted in "principled disavowal of jihad as an instrument of religious and political change."¹⁰ In his autobiography, *Summoned from the Margin*, Sanneh says, "By education, scholarship, itinerancy and other religious activities the clerics pursued the path of *Islamization of society as opposed to that of the Islamization of the state. A clerical republic rather than a theocracy* is the object of their endeavor" (italics added).¹¹

The clerics, or the "vicars of the spiritual life," as Sanneh refers to them, believed that the Islamization of society could be met by peaceful means—namely, through instruction and persuasion, without the political coercion required

7 The Jakhanke clerics are a specialized group of Muslim scholars and educators in Guinea, Senegal, Gambia, and Mali, West Africa, known for their historical role in diffusing Islam and for their tradition of political neutrality and pacifism.

8 Lamin Sanneh, *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

9 See John Azumah, "Engaging the Pacifist Tradition of West African Islam for Transformation of Society," TSI (The Sannah Institute) Project Background Paper, accessed November 6, 2025, https://tsinet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Project-Background-Paper_TSI-1.pdf.

10 Lamin O. Sanneh, *The Jakhanke Muslim Clerics: A Religious and Historical Study of Islam in Senegambia* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 21.

11 Lamin O. Sanneh and Kelefa Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 220.

by the Islamization of the state. For the clerics, the latter approach would have fundamentally violated the moral nature of Islamic faith and teaching.¹²

In their pursuit of a clerical republic, they formed a pact with political leaders: Rulers would not enter the semi-autonomous religious centers except on a prearranged schedule and for the purpose of undertaking religious exercises. A famous saying attributed to the clerics summarizes well their apolitical stance: “*If the king asks us to build him a castle, we shall build him a castle. If he asks us to take up arms and go to war, we shall build him a castle. We are entirely at his disposal*” (italics added).¹³

Cross-Connections between Pacifist Islamic Traditions: The Jakhanke Clerics (Suwarian Tradition) and the Murids (Sufi Tradition)

A younger contemporary of Sanneh’s, Cheikh Anta Babou—who has pursued similar lines of inquiry as Sanneh and was present at the 2023 Anabaptist-Murid Conference—has focused his scholarship on the Murid movement and its founder, Shaykh Amadou Bamba.¹⁴ In his writings, Babou shows Shaykh Bamba’s connection to the Qadiriyya Sufi order.¹⁵ Sanneh, in his scholarly engagement of the Murids, makes a connection between the Jakhanke clerics and the Murids, showing a direct relational link between Karamokho Ba, the founder of the Jakhanke clerical center of Touba (Guinea), and Shaykh Bamba, the founder of the Muridiyya holy city of Touba (Senegal). Also linking these two groups together is Jonathan Bornman, who, in his doctoral dissertation on American Murids¹⁶ (which Babou supervised), suggests that Shaykh Amadu Bamba embraced the Suwarian pacifist tradition through the Jakhanke clerics. Bornman further traces the spiritual and intellectual influence of the Suwarian tradition on Shaykh

12 Sanneh and Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margins*, 199.

13 Sanneh and Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margins*, 200.

14 Cheikh Anta Mback Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal: 1853–1913* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007); Cheikh Anta Babou and Knibiehler Geneviève, *Le jihad de l’âme: Ahmadou Bamba et la fondation de la Mouridiyya au Senegal, 1853–1913* (Paris: Karthala, 2011); Cheikh Anta Mbacké Babou, *The Muridiyya on the Move: Islam, Migration, and Place Making*, First paperback ed., *New African histories* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2021).

15 The Qadiriyya are the oldest (mystic) Sufi order in Senegal. More broadly, the Qadiriyya are probably the oldest of the Muslim Sufi orders, founded by the Ḥanbali theologian Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (1078–1166) in Baghdad.

16 Jonathan Frederick Bornman, “American Murids: Muslim Proponents of Nonviolence Open Alternative Conversations about Islam, Jihad and Immigration” (PhD Diss., Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, United Kingdom, 2021).

Bamba by describing the practices of the Suwarian pacifist tradition as observed in the life of Shaykh Amadu Bamba and the early Murids.¹⁷

The Sanneh Institute and the Pacifist Tradition of West African Islam

Origins and Vision of The Sanneh Institute

The Sanneh Institute (TSI) was officially launched in February 2020 as an independent institution based in Accra, Ghana, named after the late Lamin Sanneh, the renowned Yale mission historian. Prof. John Azumah, the founder and Executive Director of TSI, is an academic mentee of Sanneh. TSI works in collaboration with the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Ghana with the primary purpose of resourcing and building capacities in research on issues and topics at the intersection of religion and society.

The vision of TSI is to offer scholarship as a tribute to God, with the religious and non-religious other within hearing distance for the transformation of society. At TSI, scholarship is a religious vocation, and at the heart of the institute's mission is raising a younger generation of religious leaders and scholars with theological humility and intellectual curiosity.

Research and engagement are at the center of who TSI is and what it does. One of the first projects the institute embarked on was Sanneh's pacifist tradition line of inquiry. Azumah remarks:

It took a scholarly giant like Lamin Sanneh to create a new narrative about Islam in West Africa. His scholarship laid the groundwork and paved the way for much more work to be done. We at TSI owe it to him to continue the work he started, but we also owe it to communities across West Africa, both Christian and Muslim, to tell the story of an Islam that embodies and espouses nonviolence, tolerance of the religious other, and hospitality as well as an Islam that often favors political neutrality.¹⁸

17 See Bornman, pages 46–53. Sanneh's twin pillars of the clerical vocation—namely, dispersion and opposition to war and politics. Sanneh further identifies a triad of clerical life: *al-qirā'ah* (Qur'an study), *al-barth* (farming), and *al-safar* (travel or itinerancy). He also describes Suware's devotion to pastoral circuits whose message focused on the “dual heritage of Jakhanke practice: pacifist commitment, and education and teaching as tools of renewal (*tajdid*). Activities that mark the Suwarian tradition include (1) dispersion, (2) opposition to war/pacifist commitment, (3) opposition to politics, (4) Qur'an study, (5) farming, (6) itinerancy, (7) education/teaching for renewal.” See chap. 2, Jonathan Frederick Bornman, “American Murids: Muslim Proponents of Nonviolence Open Alternative Conversations about Islam, Jihad and Immigration” (PhD Diss., Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, United Kingdom, 2021).

18 Interview conducted by Matthew Krabill with Prof. Azumah on July 10, 2025, in Accra, Ghana.

Three-year Grant: The Pacifist Tradition of West African Islam

In 2022, TSI was awarded a three-year grant from the Templeton Religion Trust (TRT) to study the pacifist tradition of West African Islam. The project, entitled “Engaging the Church, the Mosque and the Academy for the Transformation of West African Society,” sought to reassess the dominant received tradition of West African Islam—namely, that of militancy and jihadism—and interrogate its perceived status as the representation of normative Islam. The project challenged prevailing ideas about Islam and, in so doing, sought to create a new, counter-narrative about Islam that promotes the values of nonviolence, hospitality, and peacebuilding.

I served as the project’s academic coordinator, and Cheikh Babou and Fallou Ngom served as two of the key academic advisors. Both are Murids from Senegal and highly regarded academicians in their respective disciplinary fields.

Babou’s involvement in interfaith initiatives is evident in the supportive role he has played in TSI’s young life. He is a personal friend of Azumah’s and has been an invaluable source of relational support and counsel. In partnership with TSI, Babou gave a lecture at the Islamic University College in Ghana (2023) entitled “Re-imagining Daar Al-Islam: Muslim Minorities and the Question of Belonging.” Along with Azumah, he also co-edited the Sanneh festschrift entitled *Territoriality and Hospitality: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Langham, 2025).

Ngom also has been a good, faithful, and committed friend of TSI’s. He served as the principal academic supervisor for collecting and translating into local languages (Ajami, see below) works by leading clerics of the pacifist tradition. His academic interests focus on intellectual written histories of Africa, the interactions between African languages and non-African languages, the adaptations of Islam in Africa, and Ajami literatures in Africa and the diaspora. Ngom’s expertise in Ajami proved to be indispensable for our project in mapping, selecting, transcribing, and translating Ajami manuscripts from various West African languages into English.¹⁹ He coached me and my team with remarkable patience as we undertook a project that was beyond our own areas of expertise.

19 See Fallou Ngom, trans., *Beyond African Orality: The ‘Ajami Poetry of Sëriñ Mbay Jaxate* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2025); Fallou Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab world: The Odyssey of ‘Ajami and the Murīdiyya, Religion, Culture, and History Series* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016); Fallou Ngom, “West African Manuscripts in Arabic and African Languages and Digital Preservation,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: African History* (June 28, 2017): 1–28, <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-123>.

Convergence of the Templeton Religion Trust Project and Conversations with Murids

On a personal note, the TRT project came together at the same time as my discussions with Jonathan Bornman regarding a potential Mennonite-Murid encounter in Paris. I had known of Murids, but only superficially so, from the many years I lived in the Ivory Coast. Approximately 25 percent of residents in the Ivory Coast are foreign-born (the highest percentage of any country in Africa), and among them are many first-generation immigrant Senegalese as well as many others who have lived in the country for generations. Much of Senegalese culture is imbibed by Ivoirens—including Senegalese music—and the most famous Senegalese singer of the '80s and '90s was Youssou N'Dour, who himself is a Murid.²⁰

My first meaningful conversation with a Murid occurred online during COVID-19, with Jonathan's good friend Djiby Diagne. Following our first zoom conversation, Djiby graciously shared several books and articles with me, many of which were written by Cheikh Babou, including *Fighting the Greater Jihad* (2007).²¹ He also shared Fallou Ngom's *Muslims Beyond the Arab World* (2016).²² Soon thereafter, Babou published *Muridiyya on the Move* (2021),²³ which focused on Murid communities in West Africa and Paris (where I was then living), followed by the completion of Jonathan's dissertation, *American Murids* (2021). I took great interest in these works, as African migration and religious identity were also at the heart of my doctoral studies.

I devoured the literature Diagne shared with me and through it became quite captivated by the Murids on multiple levels. There were issues of historiography, of indigeneity and indigenous knowledge production, religious minorities, ethnoreligious identity, peacemaking and nonviolence, migration and religious identity, as well as obvious parallels with the Mennonite experience—all of which left me with more questions, a desire for more conversations, and a hope for more in-person encounters.

Thus, Jonathan's vision for an encounter between Mennonites and Murids, my conversations and new relationships with Murids in Paris, and my reading of Cheikh Babou's works on Shaykh Amadu Bamba converged with TSI's project

20 The lyrics of his 2004 album, *Egypt*, praised Murid Sufism. The album was well received among Western critics and audiences but stirred much controversy in Senegal as many believed it was inappropriate to incorporate Islam into popular music. The controversy even resulted in a two-year ban of the album in Senegal.

21 Cheikh Anta Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853–1913* (Ohio University Press, 2007).

22 Fallou Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of Ajami and the Muridiyya* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

23 Cheikh Anta Babou, *The Muridiyya on the Move: Islam, Migration, and Peace Making* (Ohio University Press, 2021).

on the pacifist tradition of Islam in West Africa. Given all of this, it would be an understatement to say that I counted it as an honor and privilege to then find myself working with two renowned senior Murid scholars on the pacifist tradition of West African Islam.

The TSI Project's Four Main Outputs

The TSI project's four main outputs were as follows (the first two will be discussed in more detail below):

1. Inquire into the pacifist tradition of West African Islam, including biographical studies of leading historical and contemporary clerics of the tradition.
2. Commission the collection and translation of works by leading clerics of the pacifist tradition in local languages (Ajami) and document their personal stories.
3. Convene regional gatherings of Muslim and Christian scholars for the purpose of reviewing curricula, syllabi, and textbooks in private Christian and Islamic schools and seminaries to enhance religious literacy.
4. Develop a network of Muslim and Christian academics for an ongoing scholarly study of themes of mutual interest and concern within Islam and Christianity in Africa.

Call for Proposals into the Pacifist Tradition of West African Islam

Building on Sanneh's work, TSI issued a "Call for Proposals into the Pacifist Tradition of West African Islam" (output #1). As an interdisciplinary and interfaith effort, the project was looking for research teams of two scholars each—one Muslim and one Christian—preferably from different disciplines. Twelve scholars total, both Muslims and Christians, were awarded grants. The collaborative research between Muslim and Christian scholars was meant to serve as a model of interreligious engagement in scholarship that is all too often missing in such projects.

The awardees' papers will be published in a newly launched TSI Press in spring 2026. Some of the topics include 1) the responses to and debates between Muslim scholars and contemporary militant groups in Northern Nigeria; 2) theologies of pacifist jihad in the works of select Nigerian shaykhs; 3) Muslim women prophetesses, gender roles, and peacemaking in contemporary Ivory Coast; 4) the pacifist tradition and the Ahmadiyya movement in West Africa; and 5) Islamic pacifism in the Muslim legal culture of Guinea-Bissau.

Call for Ajami Manuscripts on Islam and Peacebuilding in West Africa

TSI also issued a “Call for Ajami and Arabic Manuscripts on Islam and Peacebuilding in West Africa” (output #2). Ajami is an enriched form of Arabic script used for writing African languages. For centuries, scholars’ understanding of sub-Saharan Africa was derived from the written records of European colonialists, who propagated the notion that sub-Saharan Africans had no native written languages of their own. Contrary to this rather widely held and popular notion in the West, Fallou Ngom notes that “people in sub-Saharan Africa have used a written system derived from Arabic to record the details of their daily lives since at least the 10th century.”²⁴

Ajami traditions have existed virtually everywhere Islam has reached and flourished, from the Wolof and Mandinka societies in Senegambia to the Uyghur communities in China. Just as the Latin script traveled throughout the world with Christianity and was modified to write many languages, the Arabic script spread around the globe through Islam and was enriched to write the languages of non-Arab Muslims.²⁵

The materials that emerged in Ajami traditions represent an important and underexplored source of knowledge on Africa. They are rich and varied and encompass both religious and secular manuscripts. The religious materials include prayers; talismanic protective devices; didactic materials in poetry and prose; elegies; hagiographies; translations of works on Islamic metaphysics, jurisprudence, and Sufism; and translations of the Qur’an into African languages.²⁶

Of the manuscripts submitted in response to TSI’s call for Ajami manuscripts on Islam and peacebuilding in West Africa, several were selected for transcription and translation. A Hausa Ajami poem entitled “Nigeria: The Rich, Multi-Ethnic Nation” describes the challenges facing Nigerian citizens—including ethnic diversity, corruption, and political upheaval—and makes recommendations for creating a more peaceful and just society. Another manuscript written in Hausa Latin entitled “Women Clerics in the Sokoto Caliphate: 19th to 20th Centuries” highlights the important role women played in the intellectual life of the Sokoto Caliphate in Northern Nigeria, including their interpretations of the Qur’an, study and application of Islamic law, the transmission of Islamic knowledge

24 Lara Ehrlich, “Digitizing Ajami, a Centuries-Old African Script: BU Anthropologist Is Studying the Little-Known Written Language for New Insights Into African History and Culture,” Boston University, *The Brink*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2020/digitizing-ajami-african-written-language/>.

25 Fallou Ngom, “Islam and World Peace: Reflections of a Mandinka Ajami Scholar,” (forthcoming, TSI Press).

26 Fallou Ngom, “Ajami Sources and Knowledge Production about Africa in the 21st Century,” proceedings of the African Futures Conference, 2021, <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/j.2573-508X.2016.tb00015.x>.

through the establishment of schools, and the spiritual direction and moral support they provided to individuals and to the community.

In addition to the Ajami manuscripts, two other articles were commissioned to provide a thematic mapping of Ajami in West Africa and an overview of the state of scholarly and non-scholarly interactions with Ajami as it relates to the pacifist tradition of Islam in West Africa. The first of these papers, by Amidou Sanni, utilizes Nigeria as a representative of Anglophone West Africa and focuses on the Fulfulde, Hausa, Kanuri, Nupe, and Yoruba language traditions. The second paper, by Fallou Ngom, focuses on Francophone Africa and discusses three Ajami traditions, or schools of thought, each of which has its own Islamic center, distinct pedagogy, and scholars who represent and defend the school of thought. These schools include the Fuuta Jalon Ajami School, the Mandinka Ajami School, and the Wolof Ajami School.

Video Documentaries of Contemporary Clerics of the Pacifist Tradition

A third call for proposals (output #1) sought to identify the “Leading Contemporary Clerics of the Pacifist Tradition in West Africa” that espouse nonviolence and harmonious coexistence in a pluralistic context, take African cultures and realities seriously, and engage with these positively and constructively. These are clerics that promote or espouse peacemaking in their sermons, teachings, writings, leadership, activism, and interreligious and political engagements. For generations, clerics in the West African subregion have contributed significantly to an enduring legacy of a nonviolent and apolitical tradition of Islam in West Africa. These clerics through their lives, teaching, and works continue to play a central role in shaping the nature and trajectory of Islam in Africa.

By documenting the stories of contemporary leading clerics, this component of the project sought to promote a *lived* and *living* pacifist tradition of Islam through access to indigenous Muslim clerics that have been, and continue to be, overlooked by wider audiences. The video documentaries are primarily meant to be used in educational settings, in curriculum at the graduate and postgraduate level. When appropriate, they will also be made available on social media platforms, promoted in Christian and Muslim organizations, and diffused across nationwide media outlets.

The call resulted in the selection of three leading clerics, representing the countries of Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Nigeria.²⁷ Following are a few comments about the contribution of Shaykh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu, the cleric chosen from Ghana.

²⁷ Cheikh Babou recommended a leading Murid shaykh in Senegal, but due to the shaykh’s health issues, we were not able to undertake a project on him at this time.

Contributions of Shaykh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu

Assuming the Role of National Chief Imam: A Turning Point

Shaykh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu, now over 100 years old, is the leader of the Tijaniyya and National Chief Imam of the Muslim community in Ghana. Most Ghanaians would agree that Shaykh Sharubutu currently draws more admiration and garners more respect than any other religious or political personality in Ghana. Within Islam in Ghana, there are four main traditions: the Tijaniyya—which is the largest—Ahlus Sunna, Ahmadiyya, and the Shia. Historically, these four Muslims groups have been deeply divided along ideological lines, resulting in tension and even violent attacks against one another. However, the 1990s when Shaykh Sharubutu became the National Chief Imam marked a turning point for the unity of the Muslim community in Ghana and inspired hope for deeper Muslim ecumenism and collaboration.

Strengthening Interreligious Relations and Maintaining Political Neutrality

Shaykh Sharubutu has also played a pivotal role in strengthening interreligious relations, particularly through building bridges with the Christian community. The “peace architecture in Ghana” was established by the Christian ecumenical bodies, the Ahmadiyyas, and Shaykh Sharubutu. Shaykh Sharubutu has worked closely with the National Peace Council, and his counsel and advice has been, and continues to be, intentionally sought after on matters of national concern in times of economic and political crisis. Over the years, he has demonstrated an unequivocal commitment to political neutrality, choosing to uphold a basic principle—namely, recognizing, respecting, and supporting *the* political party in power. Thus, he fully recognizes and has been loyal to every president of Ghana.

Building Peace Between Christians and Muslims

Shaykh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu embodies the *lived* and *living* pacifist tradition of Islam in West Africa. Many of his public acts and gestures have proven to demonstrate his religious convictions and persistent commitment to peace-building between Muslims and Christians. His actions have repeatedly “ruffled feathers” in both Christian and Muslim communities. For instance, he was the superintendent of the Central Mosque in Accra, which shares a wall with one of Ghana’s most popular charismatic churches—the International Central Gospel Church (ICGC), led by renowned pastor Rev. Dr. Mensa Otabil. As one of their anniversary projects in 2011, the ICGC expressed their desire to renovate and paint the Central Mosque. When Shaykh Sharubutu warmly accepted the offer, a section of the Muslim community criticized him, with some asking for him to apologize for allowing a Christian church to fund the painting of the Central Mosque.

In defense of his action, Shaykh Sharubutu remarked:

I want after I am gone (dead) to leave a legacy of love, co-operation and goodwill between Christians and Muslims in this country. Besides, we are all descendants of Abraham and believe in one God. Furthermore, Christians pay for Muslims to go on the hajj (pilgrimage to Makka) each year; they give us food for our Ramadan fast; so what is the difference? This gesture will help us maintain the cohesion and peace of our nation and I don't regret it, nor do I owe anyone an apology.²⁸

Conclusion

In the midst of Western scholars predominately pointing to the jihadist tradition as representative of orthodox and normative Islam, Lamin Sanneh has paved new ground through his scholarly work in retrieving the pacifist tradition of West African Islam. In so doing, he has promoted a counternarrative to that of jihadism, shining the light of Islamic peace traditions on the militant narrative of Islamic conquest that has come to dominate and occupy the minds and hearts of so many. The Sanneh Institute has humbly contributed to these peace-promoting efforts and will continue to do so.

Including Sanneh's scholarship and TSI's work in this special issue of *Anabaptist Witness* is important in that it helps to situate the various authors' reflections on the encounter of two peacemaking peoples, the Murids and the Mennonites, within the wider context of Islamic peacemaking traditions. My hope is that these reflections—born from a “cry” for peace, as Cheikh Babou described the meeting in Taverny²⁹—will spur Mennonites around the world to learn about and engage with Muslims interested in, or seeking to follow, their own Islamic pacifist traditions. May this work also encourage Mennonites to not shy away from the Christian foundations of their own peacemaking tradition but instead to draw from the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus as well as the Anabaptist tradition as a meaningful way to engage and build relationships with Murid brothers and sisters.

28 Emmanuel Kwame Tettey, “Ghanaian Muslims in Search of a Representative Institution: The Legacy of Sheikh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu and Future Prospects,” *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 34, no. 2 (2023): 146.

29 See Jonathan Bornman's article in this issue of *Anabaptist Witness*: “Anabaptist-Murid Conference in Paris: November 23, 2025.”