



THE SANNEH INSTITUTE
Accra - Ghana

“Engaging the Pacifist Tradition of West African Islam for Transformation of Society”
Project Background Paper

Introduction

The Sanneh Institute (TSI) is an independent institution based in Accra, named after the late Lamin Sanneh, the renowned Yale mission historian. The Institute 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. TSI’s vision is to pursue scholarship as a tribute to God, with the religious and non-religious Other within hearing distance, for the transformation of society.

Africa is Notoriously Religious

Sub-Saharan Africa is both intensely religious and religiously plural, with Christianity, Islam, and Traditional African religions constituting the three most widely followed faiths, in that order. A renowned African theologian of the last century, John Mbiti of Kenya, famously said that “Africans are notoriously religious”. And during a visit to Africa in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI described the continent as “an immense spiritual ‘lung’ for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope.”¹ The intense religiosity of Africa is further evidenced in a 2016 *Afrobarometer* survey, which revealed that religious leaders are the most trusted figures in African societies, followed closely by traditional leaders.² The Mosque and the Church, along with religious and traditional rulers or chiefs, therefore continue to hold sway on African societies, exerting enormous influence over people’s minds and lives, including governance and its institutions. In times of personal and family crisis, the first point of call for most Africans is the priest, imam, or traditional ruler.

Despite the challenges of poverty and religiously inspired violence, there is a long history of religious tolerance and engagement in Sub-Sahara Africa. According to a recent Pew survey, “Large numbers of Africans actively participate in Christianity or Islam yet also believe in

¹ John L. Allen Jr., “To Bongos and Bass Guitar: Pope Calls Africa an ‘immense Spiritual lung’”, National Catholic Recorder, Oct. 2009. [Pope Calls Africa an 'immense spiritual lung'](#).

² [AFRO BAROMETER 2016 REPORT](#).



witchcraft, evil spirits, sacrifices to ancestors, traditional religious healers, reincarnation and other elements of traditional African religions.”³ In other words, even though large numbers of Africans claim to be Christians or Muslims, indigenous religious traditions, customs and rituals remain the substructure of their faiths. One explanation for this trend is that whereas Christianity and Islam tend to focus on life after death, there is a plethora of sophisticated African primal religions whose primary role is to provide for human well-being in the present as opposed to offering salvation in a future world. We want to explore the question as to how constructive scholarly engagement between the different religions in Africa can serve as a dynamic, prosocial force for good in the world, part of and even a source of solutions to the wide range of problems Africans face, like poverty and sickness?

The Pew survey also noted that Muslims and Christians generally hold favorable views of one another, and that sizable majorities believe that people of different faiths should be free to practice their religions. Countless individuals live in interfaith families and attend religious services other than their own for marriages and funerals. Many Muslims and Christians seek help from religious figures and healers of traditions other than their own and especially from traditional African religions. In other words, experientially, many if not most Africans participate in worship and religious practices other than their own. Significant minorities in the Pew survey say that their mosque or church works across religious lines to address community problems. Nevertheless, Pew rightly characterized Africa’s intense religiosity as one of both “tolerance and tension,” noting that African Christians and Muslims “acknowledge that they know relatively little about each other’s faith.” This interreligious illiteracy in a context of intense religiosity poses a serious challenge to social cohesion and human flourishing. On the other hand, as Sir John rhetorically quizzed, “When persons on fire for a great gospel compete lovingly to give their finest treasures to each other, will not everyone benefit?”.

Beyond tolerance and calls for peaceful co-existence within contemporary African context, this project shares in the philosophy of “Covenantal Pluralism” enunciated by Christopher Stewart, Chris Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover, which they define as follows:⁴

³ [Pew Survey: Tolerance and Tension](#).

⁴ W. Christopher Stewart, Chris Seiple, and Dennis R. Hoover, “Toward a Global Covenant of Peaceable Neighborhood: Introducing the Philosophy of Covenantal Pluralism,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2020): 1-17.



“A world of covenantal pluralism is characterized both by a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a culture of reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other—albeit without necessarily conceding equal veracity or moral equivalence to the beliefs and behaviors of others. The envisioned end-state is neither a thin-soup ecumenism nor vague syncretism, but rather a positive, practical, non-relativistic pluralism. It is a paradigm of civic fairness and human solidarity, a covenant of global neighborliness that is intended to bend but not break under the pressure of diversity.” (ibid)

The pacifist tradition of West African Islam provides the intellectual and philosophical framework and practical building blocks for envisioning covenantal pluralism in the African context that bends but does not break under the pressure of diversity.

The Pacifist Tradition of West African Islam

One of the issues identified from the feasibility study leading up to the founding of TSI, and which was of major scholarly interest to the late Prof. Sanneh, is the enduring legacy and influence of the pacifist tradition in West African Islam also known as the Suwarian tradition. At a time when the overwhelming majority of Western scholars were obsessed with the jihad tradition of Islam in West Africa, Sanneh pursued his doctoral studies on the pacifist Jakhanke clerical communities dotted around the West African sub-region.⁵ This study was later updated and expanded in his seminal work, *Beyond Jihad* (2016). In these works, Sanneh documented the Suwarian tradition’s principled disavowal of jihad and eschews political patronage in favor of pacifism that tolerates religious diversity and prefers accommodation over against absolutism and militarism.

The Suwarian clerics, who had a huge influence on the Mandinka, adopted religious learning and teaching as a vocation. It is known from sources of later periods that the Muslim Manding 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. Everywhere a sojourner, the cleric became a supplicant of local hospitality and goodwill. They kept the political class at arm’s length, resisted the temptation to assume political office, and avoided direct interference and control by rulers.

⁵ *The Jakhanke Muslim Clerics: A Religious and Historical Study of Islam in Senegambia* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989).



They “formed a pact with political leaders: rulers would not enter the centers except on prearranged schedule and for the purpose of undertaking religious exercises.” Sanneh states that the clerics adopted a “scrupulous and principled disavowal of jihad as an instrument of religious and political change.” Sanneh argued that the pacifism espoused by the Jakhanke clerics firmly belong to the orthodox Islamic tradition, a claim that, we hope will be dispassionately examined in the research projects.

While the pacifist tradition prefers religious diversity and freedom and seeks in its own way to cultivate the 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, it fell short at creating the enabling conditions of religious literacy articulated by Stewart, Seiple & Hoover in “Covenantal Pluralism.” The projects will build on and take the pacifist tradition further by intentionally addressing the issue of religious and inter-religious literacy among African Muslims and Christians.

The Malian Muslim mystic and scholar, Amadou Hampate Ba (d.1991), is one of a handful of Muslim scholars of repute in the last century who undertook exploratory work on the pacifist tradition of West African Islam (*A Spirit of Tolerance* (2008) and talked about the tradition appreciatively. A contemporary scholar is Cheikh Babou who has taken considerable pains to refute the caricatural depiction of Amadu Bamba’s teachings as virtually heterodox, stressing submission to the Shaykh and work on his behalf over and above knowledge of religious texts and even observance of ordinary ritual practice, prayer and fasting. Babou also places the significance of submission (*tarbiyya*) and work (*khidma*) within the context of Amadu Bamba’s broader pedagogical aims of disciplining the soul alongside—but not instead of—the mind. Babou quite rightly rejects a colonial tradition of attempts to use Bamba’s teachings as well as his career as the prime example of African exceptionalism in the Islamic domain.⁶

Many of the works on the tradition are by leading clerics in vernacular languages held in private collections and libraries. 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); David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (2004). A few others, mostly Western or Western based African

⁶ Babou, Cheikh Anta. —*Fighting the Greater Jihad : Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853-1913* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2007).



scholars have done work on aspects of the Suwarian tradition mainly from the anthropological and sociological perspective.

The Suwarian tradition faced a major challenge from the 19th century jihad movements which were inspired by works of one Abd al-Karim al-Maghîlî (d. 1505) of present-day Algeria. Al-Maghili was against *muwâlât*, namely maintaining friendly relations with non-Muslims. He cites a host of Qur’anic verses and Traditions and conclude that “every true believer must be severe against the unbelievers”, for “it is one of the signs of love for the Prophet ... that we should hate those who are hated by God or the Prophet and become hostile to those who are enemies of God and the Prophet”. Muslims who associate with non-Muslims are unbelievers by association, because “it is only a person who has no religion, sense and integrity that will bring an unbeliever near to himself or his family or put some of his wealth in his hands”. Jihad against pagans is obligatory on Muslim rulers and jihad against fellow Muslims who side with pagans is permissible.⁷ *Takfir* (declaring fellow Muslims unbelievers) and *Bid’a* (satanic innovation or syncretism) are the recurring themes of the Maghilian School of Thought. A vast majority of Western scholarship from the second half of the 20th century focused on the 19th century jihad movements, presenting the jihadists as reformers and the standard bearers of Islam. These scholars dismissed the non-violent, Suwarian tradition and its clerics as “corrupt”, “mixed” and “venal scholars”, and went on to idolize figures like Uthman Dan Fodio, and made their works widely accessible through translations.

Studies on leading clerics like Muhammad al-Kanemi (1776-1837) who led the intellectual opposition to the 19th century jihadists hardly exist, while many of the pacifist clerics at the time, unlike the jihadists, did not commit their ideas to writing in any systematic way.⁸ The works of the jihadists would therefore come to shape and dominate Islamic scholarship in West Africa with important consequences. After years of writing uncritically and approvingly of the militant jihad tradition of West African Islam, Mervyn Hiskett laments that “the absolutism of the jihadists has been in no way diminished by the passage of time.” On the contrary, he observes, the jihadist model continues to appeal to contemporary African Muslims, irrespective

⁷ John Hunwick, *Shari’a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghili to the Questions of Askia al-Hajj Muhammad – Edited and Translated with an Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford Univ. Press: 1985).

⁸ The only serious study which partly covers al-Kanemi, was by: Louis Brenner, *The Shehus of Kukawa: A History of the Al-Kanemi Dynasty of Bornu* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973).



of “whether the Muslims involved came to Islam as a result of the nineteenth century reformist ardor or were drawn in less spectacularly by slower influences during the colonial period.”⁹

The militant tradition was revived by the works and activism of Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi (d.1992) and his Izala Movement which overtime splintered into several Salafi factions one of which then birthed Boko Haram in the late 2000s.¹⁰ Since the rise of militant groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS and Boko Haram, scores of Muslim scholars, and leaders from South Asia to the Middle East and Africa have roundly and rightly condemned these groups as heretical death cults. Western scholars and Salafists who romanticized and invoked the jihadist tradition for legitimacy over the years, have all rejected contemporary jihadi groups as heretical. Obviously, scholars have imputed various motivations to the 19th century jihadists and more recent movements and groups such as Izala, Salafism or Boko Haram ranging from economic, political and sociological. However, the groups themselves have not shied from explicitly stating where they draw their inspiration and precedent from, namely history and religious texts.

Beyond Africa

A study of the pacifist tradition and its clerics could serve as a hermeneutical lens for delegitimizing contemporary militant groups and their ideologies, and for creating a more positive narrative for a robust and harmonious coexistence between people of all and no faith. Beyond opposition to militancy, the pacifist tradition in the words of one observer, “formulated a praxis of coexistence such as to enable the Juula to operate within lands of unbelief without prejudice to their distinctive Muslim identity, allowing them access to the material resources of this world without foregoing salvation in the next.”¹¹ A study of the pacifist tradition could also serve as an authentic Islamic model for Muslim minorities living in Western Europe and North America. The praxis formulated by the Suwarian tradition was done by a minority Muslim community surrounded by what J. S. Trimmingham called a “sea of paganism” to enable them to engage in a robust and meaningful way with the majority culture.

Tariq Ramadan is a leading contemporary Muslim scholar who has devoted his intellectual life to charting an authentic Islamic way of living for Muslim minorities in Europe.¹² Although

⁹ M. Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of Usman Dan Fodio* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1994), ix.

¹⁰ John Azumah, “Boko Haram in Retrospect”.

¹¹ Ivor Wilks, “The Juula,” 97-98.

¹² Tariq Ramadan, *The Quest for Meaning: Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).



Ramadan and many of his contemporaries seems unaware of the existence of the Suwarian tradition, the parallels between Ramadan's concept of *dar al-shahada*, or the "abode of witness", and that of the Suwarian tradition are striking. Unlike radical groups that call for hijra and jihad, Ramadan and the Suwarian tradition acknowledge the legitimacy of the minority situations and call on Muslims to cultivate lives of piety and faithfulness to the Islamic heritage as found in the Qur'an and Sunna, so that they can thrive spiritually in a context that might otherwise inhibit Muslim commitment. Indeed, the Suwarian tradition and Ramadan go further than mere Muslim self-preservation. In both approaches, Muslims in a minority situation are called upon to engage with their majority community, and to participate in its everyday life and culture to the extent that their Islamic morals might allow.¹³

Ghana presents an interesting model of what a *Covenantal Pluralism* could look like particularly with regard to a Muslim minority engaging robustly and constructively in the majority culture. Ghana's population is about seventy-percent Christian and about twenty-percent Muslim. During the last three decades of a democratic governance, the Muslim minority of Ghana which predominantly subscribes to the Suwarian tradition known in Ghana as the Wangara, has prominently and actively engaged in almost every sphere of Ghanaian public life. The National Chief Imam, Sheikh Osmanu Nuhu Sharabutu, has made constructive engagement with the majority Christian population his clerical duty.

In the past three years, despite widespread protestations from various quarters, the governing party in Ghana made good of its election promise to build a National Cathedral for the Christian community. One observer described the proposed cathedral as a "place where religion, democracy and local tradition are seamlessly and symbolically intertwined."¹⁴ Others voiced concerns about the state using tax-payers money to fund an edifice for the exclusive use of one religious community. When the controversy surrounding the cathedral threatened to throw a wedge between the Muslim and Christian communities, the National Chief Imam's office made a cash donation towards the building of the cathedral, arguing in effect that religion is too important for the state to ignore, and equally too important for the state to co-opt. This project will draw from the collective Ghanaian experiences of such robust, productive inter-religious engagement to leverage its outcomes.

¹³ Tariq Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim: A Study of Islamic Sources in the European Context* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1999).

¹⁴ ["Colossal cathedral plans divide Ghana and stir religious angst", in Financial Times.](#)



Lines of Inquiry for Proposals

This project is an advanced interdisciplinary inquiry by religious scholars with social scientists as conversation partners. Proposals should seek to explore the current state and influence of the Tijaniyya Sufi Order in West Africa which is clearly identified with the Suwarian Tradition. Researchers can also critically inquire into the wider Islamic theological and philosophical underpinnings of pacifism, which is pointed to but not explored in detail, in Sanneh's work. The polemical exchanges between the clerics and their co-religionist who waged war in the path of Allah in the 19th century, is another possible area for examination in light of current debates between militant groups and their opponents. Biographical studies of leading historical and contemporary clerics of the pacifist tradition as well as a focus on specific clerical communities in West Africa all fall within the scope of proposals.

The Suwarian tradition's historical eschewal of politics can also be examined in light of contemporary discussions on the separation between the church/mosque and the state in the context of increasingly liberal democracies in West Africa. Studies can also compare the Suwarian tradition to similar models and expressions of Islam which has accommodated and blended with indigenous traditions in other parts of the Muslim world such as Asia. Non-violent traditions in West African Islam may also be critically examined in light of the Maliki school of law which predominates in West Africa as well as other Schools of Law to assess the tradition's mainstream grounding. These lines of inquiry are examples and not meant to be exhaustive. Proposal on any angel of pacifism in West African Islam is welcome for consideration.

Project Objectives and Questions

This inquiry will contribute in important ways to a better and fuller understanding of the history of Islam in West Africa including the following:

- Reassess the received dominant narrative of West African Islam and interrogate its perceived status as the true representation of normative Islam
- Invite an inter-disciplinary study into the Suwarian tradition as a model for constructive engagement in a religiously pluralistic context
- Address the Pew finding of inter-religious illiteracy that is widespread among Africans and equip religious leaders to become religiously literate with a working understanding of one's own belief system, especially what it says about (engaging) persons outside that

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tradition; one's neighbor's moral, epistemological, and spiritual framework, and what that framework says about engaging the other

- Raise a new generation of Muslim and Christian scholars and leaders who embody the theological humility and intellectual curiosity Sir. John calls for
- Foster new attitudes by creating the enabling conditions for the cultivation of virtues such as humility, empathy, patience, and courage, combined with fairness, reciprocity, cooperativeness, self-critique, and self-correction.
- Launch a network of religious leaders who will model the above by engaging in collaborative work for non-violence and reconciliation

Conclusion

We believe that new lines of scholarly inquiry into the pacifist tradition of West African Islam is critical for creating a meta-narrative that envisions a praxis of covenantal pluralism that is inclusive of the exclusive. Religious differences are certainly evident between Christianity and Islam. We are nevertheless in full agreement with Sir. John that "if humility is the mother of invention" progress could be accelerated if religions encouraged enthusiasm for collaborative and interdisciplinary research over blind dogmatism and recitations of creeds. This project therefore seeks to create spaces for Muslim and Christian scholars and religious leaders to move beyond platitudes and pious calls for tolerance and peaceful co-existence, and to engage one another in constructive and productive scholarly study and exchanges. By focusing on the Suwarian tradition, we hope the studies will nurture the right conditions for multi-faith conversations among Muslims regarding harmonious relationships, peaceful communal coexistence, and collaborative engagement for the common good of society.

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