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Review of *Muslims Beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of ‘Ajamī and the Muṛīdiyya* by Fallou Ngom

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MUSLIMS BEYOND THE ARAB WORLD

THE ODYSSEY OF ‘AJAMĪ AND THE MURĪDIYYA

By Fallou Ngom. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp xxiii + 306. Cloth, \$99.00

Simultaneously ignored and championed, any publication that seriously investigates Ajami—the penning of West African languages in the Arabic script—is noteworthy in and of itself. The culmination of years of work, Ngom’s book is an in-depth look at “read, recited and chanted” Wolof-language texts that circulate within the Murīdiyya. Founded by Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba (1853-1927), this Sufi brotherhood of the Senegambia region has been extensively researched by a range of authors. Ngom’s treatment echoes that of Cheikh Babou (e.g., *RSR* 35:135) by aiming to “capture the trajectory and doctrine” of the brotherhood as understood by Bamba’s own disciples. To do so, he makes the important contribution of drawing primarily on a catalogue of Wolof Ajami sources that he has collected and documented for years. For Ngom, these texts reveal numerous facets that are critical to understanding the Murīdiyya today: 1) a master-narrative of Bamba’s primordial mission; 2) his ethics-centered pedagogy; and 3) his tradition of elevating local African virtues into devotional obligations. Rich quotes from a range of Wolof-language authors and texts ground this analysis that unfolds across a chronological treatment of Bamba’s life. Ngom’s larger argument is that Murids’ writing of Wolof in Arabic script points to a localization and enrichment of Islam that he calls “‘Ajamization.” Surprisingly given this potentially controversial coinage and the book’s primary focus, readers may

feel that what we call Ajami is not actually given its full due. There is, for instance, no typesetting or linguistic treatment of Wolof Ajami texts. Ngom repeatedly highlights the documents as part of “music-derived literacy”, but what does this concretely mean in schooling or the daily lives of Murids? Nonetheless, the book is essential reading for advanced scholars of the Murīdiyya or Islam in Africa and it will be key to the scholar who constructs the *regional* “odyssey of ‘Ajamī”—that is, the sociohistorical emergence of West African vernacular language literacy in Muslim contexts.

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