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Focus:  
The Life and Legacy of Lamin Sanneh  
(The Gambia)



A publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

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A Publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*  
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The *Journal of African Christian Biography* was launched in 2016 to complement and make stories from the on-line *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* ([www.DACB.org](http://www.DACB.org)) more readily accessible and immediately useful in African congregations and classrooms. Now published quarterly, with all issues available on line, the intent of the *JACB* is to promote the research, publication, and use of African Christian biography within Africa by serving as an academically credible but publicly accessible source of information on Christianity across the continent. Content will always include biographies already available in the database itself, but original contributions related to African Christian biography or to African church history are also welcome. While the policy of the *DACB* itself has been to restrict biographical content to subjects who are deceased, the *JACB* plans to include interviews with select living African church leaders and academics. All editorial correspondence should be directed to: [jjbonk@bu.edu](mailto:jjbonk@bu.edu) and [joacb@bu.edu](mailto:joacb@bu.edu).

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**Cover image:** Thank you to Priscilla Dunn, daughter of Gabriel Leonard Allen, *DACB* Advisor, for the photo of a traditional Gambian cloth, with the colors of the national flag. Thank you also to Overseas Ministries Study Center for the use of the photo of Lamin Sanneh from their website.

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## Introduction: A DACB Tribute to Lamin Sanneh By Michèle Miller Sigg

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* is dedicated to remembering the life and work of Lamin Sanneh (1942-2019). His support of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* was invaluable and meaningful from the very beginning of the project. The tributes collected here are the memories of friends, family, and scholars—several of them pioneers, like Sanneh himself, in the work of missionary translation and World Christianity.

First, DACB Director Jonathan Bonk remembers Sanneh as a longtime friend with whom he shared many a conversation over tea and coffee in the warm kitchen of the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut. A member of the inaugural Advisory Council and later on the Executive Committee, Sanneh offered crucial insight and support during the formative years of the DACB in the context of the OMSC, the project's first home base. The second tribute, by Andrew Walls, highlights Sanneh's role in the founding and leadership of the Yale-Edinburgh group and the influence of his scholarship in the study of Christianity and Islam in Africa.

Next, the transcript of an Interfaith Memorial Service offers remembrances of family, schoolmates, and friends from the Gambia, the land of Sanneh's birth. Advisory Council member and fellow Gambian Gabriel Allen was an organizer of the service that was held on the fortieth day after his death.

John Watters offers a fitting perspective, as someone who served for 48 years with Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International in Cameroon and Nigeria, on the repercussions of Sanneh's legacy for missionaries in the field of biblical translation. Francis Anekwe Oborji, professor at the Pontifical Urbaniana University and founder of the International Association of Catholic Missiologists, shows the importance of Sanneh's theological thought on scholarship from an African and world Christianity perspective. David Bratt, editor and publisher of two of Sanneh's books, provides a snapshot of the stunning effect that his translation theory had on a particular graduate student. Sanneh's "surprising assertions" would soon cause a ripple effect throughout the academic world—in the field of history and beyond.

This issue also features four biographies written by Lamin Sanneh—three drawn from his book *Abolitionists Abroad* (Harvard University Press, 2009) and one written for the *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Mission* (Eerdmans, 1998), edited by Gerald Anderson. African Studies librarian Beth Restrick has compiled a brief selected bibliography of Sanneh's work, focusing primarily on the last twenty years. This was not an easy task because Sanneh's last updated CV

dates from 2004, according to Michael Glerup who worked closely with him on several projects, including the Center for Early African Christianity (<https://www.earlyafricanchristianity.com/>). To help fill the fifteen year gap in Sanneh's CV, Glerup gave the following information:

He was appointed by John Paul II to serve on the Pontifical Commission of the Historical Sciences at the Vatican and by Pope Benedict XVI to the Pontifical Commission on Religious Relations with Muslims. He is an elected life member of the Council on Foreign Relations. (...) He is editor of the multi-volume Oxford Studies in World Christianity series. In 2011, he received the Marianist Award for his teaching and scholarship from the University of Dayton. He directs the Religious Freedom and Society in Africa Project as a program of the World Christianity Initiative at Yale (WCI).<sup>1</sup>

Lamin Sanneh left us at the "height of his considerable powers," as his friend Andrew Walls put it. His funeral was held on January 12 in Marquand Chapel at the Yale Divinity School. In an email to DACB Advisors on January 15, Dana Robert (Executive Committee) wrote:

Esther Acolatse, Michele Sigg, and I all attended Lamin Sanneh's funeral. The chapel was full, and the service was very moving. We were so happy it was live streamed and that others got to share in the occasion. The reception afterward took place in the refectory of the divinity school. We will all miss his graciousness and wisdom. (...) There are many projects including the DACB that will miss him terribly. But as Andrew Walls wrote to me, quoting Charles Wesley, "God buries his workmen, but carries on His work."<sup>2</sup>

The best way to honor the memory of Lamin Sanneh who has inspired so many as a friend, a scholar, a mentor, and a pioneer is to continue the work that he began. If he were here, he no doubt would agree, with one of his wide grins.

### **Michèle Miller Sigg**

DACB Associate Director

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<sup>1</sup> Email from Glerup to Sigg, dated 3/26/19.

<sup>2</sup> Email from Robert to Sigg, dated 1/15/19.

## A Friend's Tribute:

### Remembering Lamin Sanneh

By Jonathan J. Bonk

Lamin Sanneh was born on MacCarthy Island in the River Gambia on May 22, 1942. He died on January 6, 2019 in New Haven, Connecticut.

With Lamin Sanneh's departure the *DACB* has lost one of its most steadfast supporters, a close personal friend and advisor who was closely associated with the enterprise since its humble beginnings in August 1995. I first met Lamin in 1979 at the University of Aberdeen, where I was studying under Andrew Walls. Lamin, recently graduated from the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) at London University with a PhD in Islamic History, had been recruited by Walls to fill a gap in the Department of Religious Studies. To Lamin's surprise, a year after arriving he was "invited" to teach the required seminar on Christianity as a World Religion. He was too polite to decline ... and the rest is history. He was gripped by the phenomenon of contemporary Christianity as a primarily non-Western religion. He became one of the best informed and most trusted interpreters of world Christianity and Islam of his generation. As comfortable with some of Islam's most gifted intellectuals as he was with Christians in the upper echelons of ecclesiology and academia, his deeply informed understanding of and appreciation for both faiths combined with his modesty and his eloquence to make him a unique and much sought-after voice in an era more characterized by reductionist polarizations than by deep understanding. Physically, he was an imposing, dignified figure; intellectually, he was even more impressive. These qualities were combined with deep personal modesty and a willingness to listen carefully to what others had to say.

A committed Christian, Lamin understood and appreciated his Muslim roots. His last major book—*Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam* (OUP 2016)—had, he told me over Turkish lunch, left him intellectually and physically exhausted. It was, he thought, his magnum opus, and he doubted that he would attempt another intellectual exercise of such magnitude.

Born into an ancient Mandinka chiefly dynasty—the eldest son of his father's second wife—he attended a Qur'anic school where his training included memorizing the Qur'an in Arabic, the language for Muslim worship and prayer. He was then among a group of bright students selected to take their secondary education in a government school modeled on Western lines. As he relates in his

autobiography, *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African* (Eerdmans, 2012), it was in Banjul, as he was completing his secondary education that his recurring questions about Jesus culminated in his conversion to Christianity. Lamin went on to earn graduate degrees from the University of Birmingham, England (MA), and the University of London (PhD). He held faculty appointments at the University of Ghana (1975-1978), the University of Aberdeen (1978-1981), Harvard University (1981-1989), and Yale University (1989–2019).

His conversion occurred as western colonial nations were ceding control of the continent. He would later observe that unbeknownst to him at the time, he was part of a massive movement to Christianity that—contrary to Western “expert” predictions—swept across the continent during the last half of the twentieth century and into the twenty first. As Christianity lost its grip throughout its rapidly secularizing old heartlands, it found a home in the non-western world, especially in Africa. This counter-intuitive phenomenon featured prominently in Sanneh’s understanding of Christianity as a *world* religion, rather than as simply the religious apparatus employed in European domination of weaker peoples.

He authored, edited, or co-edited twenty books and hundreds of scholarly articles and chapters. The books that most clearly encapsulate his subversion of standard twentieth century academic bias about Christian foreign mission include *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis, 1989; 13<sup>th</sup> printing 2002; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2009), *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Eerdmans, 2003; trans. into German, 2013), and *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford, 2008).

With his colleague and close friend, Andrew F. Walls, he founded and co-hosted the Yale-Edinburgh Group on the History of the Missionary Movement and World Christianity, whose inaugural meeting at Yale in March of 1992 featured dozens of academics presenting papers on the theme of “From Christendom to World Christianity.” This informal “gathering of friends,” as Lamin often described it—alternating year-about between the University of Edinburgh and Yale University—was one of the few venues in which scholars of mission history and world Christianity could meet to share their own scholarship and interact with the ideas and research of others in the field (<http://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/Yale-Edinburgh/>).

It would be difficult to overestimate the impact that this annual meeting has had and will continue to have on the discipline itself and on the scholarly men and women who populate it. One of my favorite experiences for many years was his summation at the end of each annual two and a half day marathon—in



which he inevitably sat in the front row deep in thought, with his eyes closed—Lamin would provide an eloquent verbatim summary of the event, respectfully referencing every presentation and its author, knitting the disparate pieces together into a picture that was better than we knew!

While his contributions to mission studies are manifold, perhaps his most enduring legacy may well prove to be his challenge to Western academic misconstrual of the role and impact of Christian mission on non-Western cultures. As a convert himself—a Muslim, an African, and an intellectual—he saw as few could that Christianity in non-Western settings was much more than simply a religious manifestation of earlier Western imperial attempts at colonial economic, military, and political hegemony. On the contrary, he showed that thanks to missionary insistence that God’s revelation in Christ gave no primacy to any particular language—even Jesus’ own words come to us as translation into a language he did not speak—the scriptures must be translated into vernacular languages, necessarily employing indigenous cultural metaphors and symbols as linguistic bearers of transcendental truth every bit as legitimate as any European or middle-eastern language. This translation principle, embedded at the very heart of a faith built on the history and doctrine of the human incarnation of God in Christ—laid the foundations for the cultural self-respect, dignity and self-determination that resulted in the casting aside of foreign colonial regimes and the dynamic preservation of indigenous cultures and languages.

The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* serves as one among myriad tributes to his perspicacity, his wisdom, and his encouragement. How blessed we are to have known him! And now our friend, colleague, and mentor—called from the margin to become a central figure in shaping how we his intellectual heirs have come to think about our faith in the modern world—has returned to his beloved Center, in whom we live and move and have our being.

### **Jonathan Bonk**

Director, *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

Editor, *Journal of African Christian Biography*

Research Professor, Boston University

# Tribute of a Colleague and Co-Founder

By Andrew Walls

All members of this network will have learned with deep sorrow of the passing, while still at the height of his considerable powers, of Professor Lamin Sanneh. With the sorrow there is mingled thanksgiving for a scholarly life of immense value and significance, likely to be ongoing in its influence.

For those attending the Yale-Edinburgh conferences he was an ever-present figure, overseeing the Yale end of operations from our very first conference in 1992. In the academic concerns at the heart of the activities of both network and conferences, the historical study of Christian missions and of World Christianity, his influence has been immense; indeed, he is one of the architects of the discourse as we now know it. As scholar he has added to the sum of our knowledge, transformed understanding with illuminating comparisons, and widened debate by insights from different disciplines. He has done what few of us achieve: he has changed the way people think on important matters (consider, for instance the widespread effect of his little book *Translating the Message*).

He has advanced the study of both Christianity and Islam in Africa with major works, always; he has also advanced understanding between Christians and Muslims in active relationships.

He has been an architect in another sense: his promotion of knowledge and understanding has never been a matter simply for the study or library. The issue of Christianity in contemporary African society occupied him constantly, and his vision and energy were displayed in the remarkable series of conferences he organized in various African locations. It is good that he lived to see the development at the University of Ghana which now bears his name and can give some of his ideas institutional form. The major monograph series, Oxford Studies in World Christianity represents another stream of his creative energies that will no doubt continue to flow.

Visionary, man of faith, scholar, teacher, writer, architect, motivator, networker, dear friend and pillar of our fellowship – let us give thanks for the life and work of Lamin Sanneh, remembering his widow Sandra, his children and grandchildren, and all those who will miss him most.

*(Email notification to Yale-Edinburgh Group, dated 1/8/19)*

## **Andrew Walls**

Professor Emeritus

Co-Founder, Yale-Edinburgh Group

Interfaith Memorial Service in Honor of the Life and Work of  
an Outstanding Historian, Islamic and Christian Scholar, and  
Son of the Soil, A Gambian American,  
Professor Lamin Sanneh

February 14, 2019  
Kanifing, The Gambia

## Introduction

On February 14, 2019, the fortieth day after the demise of Professor Lamin Sanneh, an Interfaith Memorial Service was held in his honor at the Eburnjan Theatre, Kanifing, the Gambia. The service was organized on behalf of the Nyancho Sanneh Family in the Gambia, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, and the United States of America by Rev. Engr. Gabriel Leonard Allen, Hon. Lawyer Fafa Edriss Mbai, Mr. Sammy Davis, Mr. James David, and Mrs. Mary Moore-Wright.

Rev. Allen, as the MC of the event, gave the introductory address. Rev. Allen is an Advisory Council member of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, a member of ScholarLeader International, and a member of the Sanneh Institute. The opening Muslim prayer was said by Deputy Imam of Bakau Mamakoto Mosque, Alhaji Ebrima Sanneh, and closing Christian prayers were led by the Reverend Father Peter Lopez, representing the Roman Catholic Bishop of Banjul (the Most Reverend Gabriel Mendy SSP).

Rev. Allen opened with background information on Lamin Sanneh. Here is a short excerpt:

Lamin never stopped to remind his audiences, worldwide, that he was a Kabou *Nyancho* (Prince) who was born into a Muslim polygamous family. (...) In contrast with many of my elder brothers and sisters here present who will be giving testimonies of enduring acquaintances, I am a latecomer to knowing Lamin. (...) Barely two months ago, from December 10 to 12, 2018, we were together at the ScholarLeaders International convocation on “The Church, The Mosque and The Academy” at Peduase in the Eastern Region of Ghana. At this conference, ScholarLeaders International launched an institute in Lamin’s honor, the Sanneh Institute. This will be hosted at the University of Ghana – Legon, and it will be devoted to research studies

in religion for society. In our part of West Africa, a learned cleric is usually called a *karamokho*, while a very learned teacher is termed *karamokho-ba*. Consequently, our subject ought to be addressed henceforth as the Professor *Karamokhoba* Lamin Sanneh.

The remainder of the service was devoted to personal testimonies from family members, friends, and schoolmates, many details of which are not in Lamin's autobiography. Radio Presenter Sola Mahoney, son of Gambian historian Asi Florence Mahoney, read autobiography excerpts. The audience also viewed video clips of two interviews and two lectures given by Lamin.

What follows are the texts of the tributes given during the service. The original texts have largely been preserved but some have been shortened.<sup>3</sup>

### **Tribute by Mr. Musa Sanneh, his Brother**

Good evening to you all. I would like to thank you, on behalf of the Sanneh family, for honoring our invitation to this Interfaith Memorial Service.

Lamin was born and raised in Janjangburah (Georgetown). Sanneh Kunda was a large compound in terms of the size of the family. Like every child in the town, the urge to go to school was strong in the family, and Lamin and his half-brother were enrolled eventually.

Payment of school fees was a token by our present standards but hard to come by in the 1950s. With our father away in Bathurst (now Banjul) in the Colonial Civil Service as a driver at the State House, the onus fell on our poor mother to foot the bill. Lamin told me, in subsequent years, how our mother and grandmother struggled to meet his educational demands. Henceforth, he was courageous and determined to pursue his educational career, uninterrupted, here in the Gambia, in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. But our mother and grandmother did not live to witness his achievements.

Despite all the modernity in him and, by extension, around him, there was still understanding and immense demonstration of respect and fraternal love in him for the core norms and values of his cultural background. I can still recall the encounter between him and an irate family member over the issue of his conversion to Christianity and his usual polite response that religion is a private matter between someone and his Creator.

Widely known for his tolerance and pacifistic disposition, I cannot remember his involvement in any physical violent fights. So, therefore, by his

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<sup>3</sup> The text of the introduction was excerpted from Rev. Allen's presentation.

example I was advised to remain steadfast against fighting under all circumstances. This was not cowardice, but common sense required me to keep out of trouble always. On one sad occasion, one of his unsuccessful contemporaries, acting out of malice because of Lamin's success in the entrance examination to Armitage Secondary School, came from behind him, lifted him high in the air and dropped him on the ground. Lamin sustained multiple fractures to his left hand. Though it healed, it remained deformed for life. For two months he stayed out of Armitage School and the Principal, Mr. M. D. Sallah, was a regular visitor to our home. Mr. Sallah came in the late afternoon with his white cow tail, whisking away flies, if there were any.

Back at school, Lamin quickly caught up with his classmates, reinforcing the saying that a Genius can even survive in a desert.

Lamin is a historian *par excellence*, imbued with deep understanding and appreciation of the evolution of revolutionary ideas and social skills that continue to impact positively on our human endeavors and general well-being.

Indeed, it goes without saying that Lamin, whose brothers and sisters fondly called him *Mala*, short for *Malamin*, had touched the lives of many members of the family at some point, in immense measure, in material and financial terms. What is more, he inspired and facilitated my educational pursuits towards the attainment of higher heights. I remain profoundly grateful and appreciative of the noble part he played that contributed, eventually, to the growth and development of my teaching career.

We are missing him already, but his memory as a pillar of support in the family as well as his international stature as a scholar and teacher will continue to live and resonate for generations yet unborn.

He is survived by his wife Sandra, his son Kelefa and daughter Sia Manta. They are aware of this important Memorial Service in honor of Lamin, and wish they could be here to be part of it. So thank you, everyone, for being here to celebrate Lamin's life.

### **Mr. Musa Sanneh**

Lamin's Brother, Janjangburah (Georgetown) Sanneh family

### **Tribute by Mrs. Mary Moore-Wright, a "Sister"**

I last spoke to Lamin on Sunday, December 23, 1018 at about 8 pm (GMT), wishing him a Merry Christmas in advance. During our discussions, he informed me that he was busy making preparations to host a family get-together of about ten persons. This was the last time we spoke.

Lamin came to live with us, at my mother's (Grandma Cecilia Moore) home on Allen Street, Bathurst (now Banjul), the Gambia, in the late 1950s – early 1960s. This was after Mr. Terry Isles, his former teacher and mentor, handed him over to my mother. He was like a son in our home on Allen Street.

Lamin was obedient, calm and very religious. Grandma Cecilia's devotion as a Class Leader and regular worshipper must also have made a deep impression upon him in that he was soon incorporated into our regular family prayer life.

My consolation goes to Sandra his widow, their children Kelefa and Sia, and the grandchildren. I still recall when Lamin brought Kelefa to our home on Thompson Street, in Banjul, for my first meeting with Kelefa.

May God Almighty have mercy upon Lamin and may his soul rest in perfect peace.

**Mrs. Mary Wright , nee Moore,**  
usually called “Baby” by all, including Lamin.  
Member of the Interfaith Organizing Group

### **Tribute by Hon. Lawyer Fafa Edrissa Mbai, an old Schoolmate and Friend**

From 1955, when I met Lamin at Armitage School, I knew him as a brother and a friend: generous and understanding. Presumably it is as a brother and a friend that I pay this tribute to his memory, and I do so willingly, and sadly too because he died so suddenly and too soon. And I remain proud of his friendship, his warmth, and his embracing sense of moving ahead together.

At Armitage, Lamin was a distinguished student and a firebrand, and provocative debater with great intelligence, wit, and humor. He was a first class orator and an outstanding cheerleader in sports. He was also editor of the School Magazine and President of the Debating Society longer than any other Armitage School boy at the time. In his final year, he sat for the Cambridge School Certificate Examination—among the first to do so—and won a prize in the English Language paper.

Our teachers at Armitage gave us a fascinating insight into the joy of scholarship. This is not the ability to quote the Wolof philosopher, Kocci Barma, or the hero of Manding, Sundiata Keita, or the jihadist, Sheikh Omar Taal of Futa Toro. It is not the ability to know the periphrastic conjunction, or solve the

Pythagorean Theorem, or understand the principles of heat, light and sound, or verify the mystery of quadratic equations. These are all most important, but they do not indicate true academic scholarship. They do not make for a dynamic social order. Creativity, emulation, initiative, and intellectual rigor are the earmarks of scholarship.

We are very grateful to Armitage School for helping to mold our outlook at the formative stage of our intellectual and physical development. It was there, along the Tumani Fatty Road, that we learned the wonders of the earth as an object in space and as an object for investigation. It was there before the Njelo forest that our bodies were made beautiful as temples to house the intellectual currents to be generated after our school days.

The emphasis at Armitage has always been the development of the human mind and the improvement of moral and spiritual discipline without which, intellectual discipline—the main concern of modern education—would be meaningless. The objective at our dear old school has always been to produce responsible and conscientious citizens who would be well aware of their rights and conscious of their duties—while remaining attached to the community, loyal to its values, and integrated in its social system.

When we proudly passed out of Armitage some 58 years ago, the question we were asked was: “Has Armitage failed you?” The determination we made and the promise we gave was to one day make Armitage proud of us also. There are innumerable practical examples before us, for in spite of the limitations of the academic training that the school had offered in the past, its alumni have distinguished themselves in all walks of life: education, medicine, law, politics, and academia.

In his final year at Armitage, Lamin passed the Gambia Civil Service Entrance Examination with distinction and was employed for a time at the office of the Financial Secretary. He resigned his job after two years to return to school in 1960 when he enrolled at the Gambia High School in Banjul.

His intention in returning to school was to complete work for university matriculation for which he subsequently passed examinations at the University of London Ordinary and Advanced Levels of the General Certificate of Education in two-and-a-half years. During his time at The Gambia High School he continued with his interest in literary activities, history, and community life. He edited the school literary magazine and also founded the Debating Society. It could be said of Lamin even at this early point in his academic career that he showed signs of intellectual flair, with an interest in ideas, and their connections.

Lamin Sanneh had a deep interest in the intellectual and religious aspects of human history, in the facts and mystery of human existence, and in the

forces and resources that promote and shape human community. He was a scholars' scholar, a kind of indispensable historical midwife, curator, and editor of manuscripts, director of other men's research, and an innovator *par excellence*. But even to describe him this way is to do him less than justice. Here was a man whose life bore out the adage that truth is stranger than fiction—stranger, and richer, more terrifying, more hopeful, and more exciting.

In recognition of his profound scholarship and outstanding contribution to the study of history and the religious factor in man's life, the Armitage School Alumni Association in 1992 established the **Professor Lamin Sanneh Foundation** so that his great example shall be a source of great inspiration to present and future generation of Gambian students, in particular, and of African scholars, in general. He was a distinguished son of Africa, far above the ordinary levels of excellence.

We feel in common with the rest of the world and especially his wife Sandra, and their son, Kelefa and daughter Sia Manta, their uncles: Musa and Lamin, and all the good people of Janjangbureh, and all those who were privileged with his gracious acquaintance, a desolation of the spirit and a sense of despair and loss at the sudden passing of our dear old schoolmate and friend, Professor Lamin Sanneh.

*Lux perpetua luceat ei.* May light perpetual shine upon him. Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted [Matthew 5:4]. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. [Matthew 5:8].

And at the going down of the sun and in the morning, we shall remember our dear old friend and mate, Professor Lamin Sanneh.

### **Hon. Lawyer FaFa Edrissa Mbai**

Former Attorney General & Minister of Justice, Republic of The Gambia (1982, 1994), Schoolmate & Friend to Lamin, and Member of the Interfaith Organizing Group

### **A Tribute and Methodist Call by Mr. Sammy Davis**

As today marks the 40<sup>th</sup> Day since the demise of Professor Lamin O. Sanneh, we have therefore gathered here today to celebrate the life of an outstanding individual. Suffice to say, Lamin was truly an academic intellectual with an enormous capacity for scholarly orientation. He was an eloquent and gifted speaker, which has made everyone to be attracted by his brilliance. From all that has been said of him this evening, one can surmise that Lamin was indeed outstanding.



Lamin was a great friend of mine as well as James Davies (Babs). I got to know him during his stay with Mr. Terry Isles, a British History teacher at the Gambia High School. Terry would bring Lamin to Wesley Methodist Church as well as to other church activities and programs. This was how I got my connection with Lamin. His interactions with the youth of the church, including myself, had a profound influence on Lamin. It will be apt for me to say that this must have been the beginning of his inclination towards Christianity.

Terry had been having discussions on Christianity at home which led to Lamin's training, lecturing, and counseling on the rudiments of Christianity by the Reverend John S. Naylor (1959 – 1966) who was, at the time, the Chairman and General Superintendent of the Methodist Church, Gambia District. These sessions were the precursor to Lamin's conversion to Christianity. His conversion ceremony took place at the Wesley Methodist Church on a Sunday evening. Although I cannot put a finger on the date and year, yet, I was present at that service. It was indeed a solemn one. At the conclusion of the service, Lamin was positioned at the main entrance of the church, whereby the congregation congratulated him very warmly as they filed out, to which Lamin acknowledged the congratulatory handshakes with his characteristic broad smile!

Henceforth, Lamin O. Sanneh became a good practicing Christian, and this sealed our friendship to greater heights. We, the youths of the church at the time, were filled with awe at the instant way Lamin embraced his new religious dispensation. He fitted himself well within the Methodist circle and every youth club and guild session became a common place for him.

For us, the young people in our poverty in knowing the Bible very well, Lamin Sanneh made many young people rich (including myself), based on his clear thoughts and positive arguments on the Bible and on Christianity at large.

I socialized a lot with Lamin, the brilliant, down to earth and humble man, during our youthful days. We enjoyed many meals together at my home, as well as enjoying the *Toubab* (Whiteman) type of meals and soft drinks at Terry Isles' apartment.

Let me sum up my description of Lamin: God planted a seed. He watered it. It sprouted and grew. Later, it became a big tree that bore fruit, and everyone enjoyed the fruits of that tree. May his soul rest in peace.

### **Mr. Sammy Davis**

Methodist Fully-Accredited Local Preacher

A Friend in Bathurst (Banjul) since Youth, and Member of the Interfaith Organizing Group

## Closing Remarks by Mr. James Davies

[Let us also put our hands together for our *Jalibas* (Musicians) of this evening: Jali Mamadou Suso on the Kora, Jali Mawdo Suso on Balafong, and Jali Nali Mbye as griot vocalist.] Thank you to all the organizers, coordinators, and building managers.

Professor Lamin Sanneh was truly a recognized international figure with distinguished academic achievements who through toil and sweat became an outstanding professor. This brings to mind a poem I learned in school. I quote:

The heights that great men reached and kept,  
Were not attained by sudden flight;  
But whilst their companions slept,  
Were toiling through the night

I am equally reminded of a text by the Methodist hymn writer, William George Tarrant (1853 – 1928):

Now praise we great and famous men,  
The fathers named in story.  
And praise the Lord, who now as then  
Reveals in man His glory.

In peace their sacred ashes rest,  
Fulfilled their days endeavor;  
They blessed the earth, and they were blessed  
Of God and man, forever.

[MHB 896, verses 1 and 6]

For me, L. O. S. was a life-long old friend. We were members of the Methodist Youth Club at Dobson Street in Banjul, and also at the Senior Guild. We both worked at the Treasury Department, then at Wellington Street in Banjul, while our brother, FaFa Mbai was an auditor with the Audit Department next door. It was therefore surprise! surprise! when Lamin Sanneh terminated his working career with the Government of the Gambia and returned to school at the Gambia High School sixth form, now called the Gambia Senior and Secondary School, which is located by the Arch 22 at the entrance of the city of Banjul. He had a

vision in mind that he pursued with zeal and enthusiasm. Indeed, Professor Lamin O. Sanneh ended his life as a brilliant scholar and a genius whose academic activities portrayed his wide range of interests. As we take leave of a brother, friend, and colleague, I say “sleep on,” for you have made us very proud as Gambians, and may the Good Lord grant you ETERNAL REST IN PEACE. On this note, I say thanks once again to you all for coming.

**Mr. James Davies**

A Friend and Colleague since youth; and member of the Interfaith Organizing Group.

## A Bible Translator's Tribute:

### Celebrating the Life of Professor Lamin Sanneh: Missions, Bible translation, and the Vernacular

By John R. Watters<sup>4</sup>

On Sunday, January 6, 2019, Professor Lamin Sanneh of Yale University passed away at the age of 76. He grew up in humble circumstances along the Gambia River in West Africa in an Islamic community, yet he died as a Christian associated with one of the most prestigious institutions of learning in the West, Yale University. He was the D. Willis James Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, Professor of History at Yale University, and Director of the Project on Religious Freedom and Society in Africa at the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale.

He was an extraordinarily gifted African scholar. He became a leading historian in the study of World Christianity, missions, and the little understood place of the local vernacular in Bible translation and its cultural implications. He provided a radical revision of and challenge to the received understanding among professional historians as to the role of Western missions, particularly in Africa.<sup>5</sup>

The goal of this tribute is to highlight the enormous contribution that Lamin Sanneh made to our understanding of the Bible translation enterprise. The particular audience for this tribute are those involved one way or another in the Bible translation movement. To set the context, I will track his development

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<sup>4</sup> This tribute is republished here with permission from SIL International Communications. The author has served with Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International for 48 years. He served as linguist-exegete in the Ejagham New Testament translation program in Cameroon and Nigeria, and assisted in Bible translation in various other ways over the past 48 years. He first met Lamin Sanneh in 1996 and crossed paths with him multiple times over the next twenty-two years in various venues. He has a B.A. in History from the University of California, Berkeley, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Linguistics from UCLA.

<sup>5</sup> Eulogies by close friends can be found at:

[https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/january/lamin-sanneh-died-world-christianity-islam-africa-yale.html?utm\\_source=ctweekly-html&utm\\_medium=Newsletter&utm\\_term=9946729&utm\\_content=629134097&utm\\_campaign=email](https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/january/lamin-sanneh-died-world-christianity-islam-africa-yale.html?utm_source=ctweekly-html&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=9946729&utm_content=629134097&utm_campaign=email)

In addition, Jonathan Bonk, the Project Director of the Dictionary of African Christian Biography, promises a full tribute in the future.

from childhood to his conversion followed by the period of his intellectual development in various university-level study programs. This context should deepen the reader's appreciation for the insight that Sanneh brought to the Bible translation ministry. Much of what I present here I took from his autobiography *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012).

## **Childhood, Conversion, and Baptism: From Spiritual Struggle to Peace**

Lamin Sanneh was born into the world of the Mandinka in the Republic of the Gambia in West Africa. He was the son of a Mandinka chief. It was an Islamic context with regard to family and community. No Christian witness existed nearby. However, when he and other bright children went off to secondary school, mission school alternatives were available, though Sanneh only attended government schools.

He carried himself with a confident humility and gentleness. He was not self-promoting in contrast to what he would often find in the academic world of the West. He was also courageous, willing to question the received wisdom of the day when he perceived the given wisdom to be wrongheaded. He was a man of peace serving between the Islamic and Christian worlds in Africa.

Growing up in an Islamic context and family, he gained a strong *theocentric orientation to life*. As he wrote, he “learned to honor God.”<sup>6</sup> This orientation never left him. He also grew up in an *African community*, with its sense of group solidarity and the importance of the group over the individual. As he wrote, “In the world in which I grew up, individual thoughts and feelings had a marginal role.”<sup>7</sup>

At the school of Qur’anic instruction for children, Arabic was clearly the language for faith and worship. It was sacred and treated as absolute, while the vernacular, Mandinka, was treated as not being worthy for matters of faith or worship or prayer. His response to the Islamic context was to become a pious child.

Sanneh proved to be religiously precocious as a child. He would say that religion was his first awakening thought, wondering about the mystery of the universe. He wondered about the Muslim teacher and his devotion to the Qur’anic text, about the five daily prayers, and about what really pleased God. These questions led to moral inquiry about the meaning of God, a moral life, and

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<sup>6</sup> Lamin O. Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 103.

<sup>7</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 56.

God's self-revelation. He first heard about Jesus in the Qur'an and was intrigued with how God "rescued" Jesus from the cross. He wondered about suffering and about Jesus.

These thoughts pursued him throughout secondary school. Near the completion of secondary school, he gained employment in Banjul, the capital of the Gambia. The questions about Jesus, suffering, and pleasing God continued and he pondered them at length. One day, taking a stroll along the seaside, he was compelled "to follow Jesus as the crucified and risen One."<sup>8</sup> On reaching home, he fell to his "knees in prayer to Jesus, pleading, imploring, begging for God to forgive me, to accept me, to reach me, to help me – everything a child looks for."<sup>9</sup> The "sense of struggle, fear, and anxiety vanished." He felt a "release and freedom, infused with a sense of utter, serene peace. I could speak about it only in terms of new life, of being born again."<sup>10</sup> He explained to a friend that he was not "abandoning Islam, but ... [I] had learned as a Muslim to honor God, and now I wanted to love God. Islam had not repelled me; only the Gospel had attracted me."<sup>11</sup> For some time he sought baptism without success. Finally, in June 1961, a Methodist missionary agreed to baptize him.

Sanneh now realized he needed to learn about Christianity. In seeking to satisfy this need, he demonstrated that he was researcher at heart and he would find books to be his best resource. In fact, he came to love books. Most of his classmates abandoned reading after secondary school, treating it as a child's activity. Sanneh by contrast found his way to the British Council Library. He read books from a variety of authors, from Bertrand Russell to C. S. Lewis. His critical and theocentric mind could appreciate the brilliance of Russell but also sense the contradictions in his philosophy of life and ethics. Lewis became a sage counselor for him and a crucial voice about matters of Christian faith. At some point, he even wondered if he should be a missionary to his own people, the Mandinka. Just before graduating from the Gambia High School, he traveled to Germany at the invitation of an American traveler that he met in Banjul. In Germany, he could see "Christian decline all around," but it became "clear that the study of religion should determine the contribution I might make in life."<sup>12</sup>

Worthy of note is that Sanneh had become a Christian in the era when African colonies were beginning to gain their political independence. The common wisdom in the world of academia in the West at the time was that once

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<sup>8</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 102.

<sup>9</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 102.

<sup>10</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 102.

<sup>11</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 103.

<sup>12</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 119.

European colonial powers liberated their African colonies, any Christian Africans would abandon their Christian religion, a religion imposed on them by the colonial powers and Western cultural imperialists—or so academics thought. No one could foresee that the opposite would happen. Hundreds of millions of Africans would become Christians in the next six decades. Sanneh was an early convert in this mass movement to Christianity.

Sanneh, now on a trajectory to grow in his understanding of his Christian faith and where it fit in the larger world, was about to pursue university education in the West. He would be entering a world where most university professors were not theocentric, where individualism had replaced social solidarity, and where Christianity came in more varieties than the Catholic and Methodist churches found in Banjul. In addition, the Protestant churches in the USA for the most part had not resolved the question of race, many participating in racism either intentionally or unwittingly, and often compromised by political commitments that were treated as equal to or even as surpassing the commitment to the Triune God. Thus, he would discover a domesticated Christianity, American style. Sanneh would have to process these matters for the next fifty years of his life while still carrying within him the orientation and values of his upbringing in the Gambia.

### **Off to the USA, Europe, and the Middle East: A Season of Intellectual Development**

Sanneh obtained a scholarship to study in the USA and arrived in August 1963. Civil rights, the Viet Nam War, and Free Speech were all issues in American society and on campuses. Concerns for the environment were embryonic but being raised and the Peace Corps started operations. He began his studies in Virginia at a mostly black college and finished the last three years in New York. Throughout these years, he wanted to find a church home, a faith community where he was accepted, but it was a struggle. At university, he received his bachelor's degree in History even though he was disappointed in his thesis on the abolitionist movement of the eighteenth century. In the process, he learned that he was fascinated with “issues of movement and change in society,” that is, with history. He also learned that his strong interest in religion was not only a matter of theology but also of history. The study of the two, religion and history, were compatible areas of learning.

For a person who considered being a missionary to his own people, and even more seriously wanted to study theology as the next step in his faith journey, these two options never received support from others. Therefore, he began

searching for what to do next. No one in the Gambia was asking him to return, so he looked elsewhere, such as to Asia, with possibilities of studying Japanese or Chinese history. However, a trusted friend recommended that he should engage in Islamic Studies because of his knowledge of Arabic. Wanting to study theology but discouraged by others at every turn, he now could combine the study of religion with the study of history in the study of African Islam. He would never have selected this area for graduate research earlier, but ironically and providentially, his major contribution to our understanding of Christian history would flow from this field of study.

To pursue such studies, Sanneh set out to improve his Arabic and begin researching African Islam. He traveled to Nigeria and then Britain. Among his developing findings were that colonial administrations favored Muslims by controlling or minimizing missionary influence and supporting Muslim institutions. Christian missions had to struggle against both the colonial administrations and indigenous Muslim hostility until independence came. Sanneh had seen such action in the Gambia. He also found it in Nigeria and Sudan. Therefore, as colonies gained independence a major obstacle to Christian missions, namely the colonial administration, disappeared. The reality of this phenomenon challenged the Western academic assumption that colonial institutions imposed Christian faith on the people of Africa. In reality, the colonial administrations were trying to block missions.

To complete his fact-finding he traveled to Beirut in the summer of 1968, just after the Six Day War. He concluded his travel with a period of service in Nigeria to engage with Christians in their dialogue with Muslims. The result was that in the spring of 1971 he enrolled in the PhD program at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. Another result of this period is that Sanneh developed a set of professional friends in the guild of historical research that would sustain him over the coming years. One particular significant point of interest in his research in Africa was the presence and history of a Muslim pacifist movement, in which they were committed to tolerance and the peaceful rather than the coercive establishment of an Islamic society. He completed his PhD in 1974 and followed it with lecture appointments in Britain, Sierra Leone, and Ghana.

### **The Scandal of the Vernacular: “God” in Indigenous Language**

In September 1978, Lamin Sanneh and his wife moved to Aberdeen, Scotland. Sanneh had accepted the university’s offer of an academic position. It was here that he gained Andrew Walls as a close colleague and developed an enduring



friendship with Jonathan Bonk. He arrived in Aberdeen with his specialization in Islam and the history of Islam in Africa and expected to be teaching on Islam. However, the department also needed someone to teach about African Christianity. The person who normally taught the subject was on sabbatical. Sanneh was initially reluctant to teach the course, but he relented.

As he prepared for the course, he said that the material on Christian missions “stumped” him. In Islam, the use of Arabic for God’s revelation was absolute, the language of the founder was central to worship, and God was only known by one name. In contrast, the Christian missions’ material testified to a different phenomenon. Christian missions translated their revelation, the Bible, into the local vernacular, the local language. They even used the local word for “God.” They did not bother themselves with the language of the founder. Muslims would never even think of doing such a thing. Sanneh says he was dumbfounded.

The assumptions he carried with him from his intimate knowledge of Islam and from his education in the guild of Western historians had no conceptual space for such an activity. By translating the Christian Scriptures, as Sanneh saw it, missions were “ceding strategic ground to the vernacular.”<sup>13</sup> The local language and local culture became the interpretive context for knowledge of the Christian God. The process relativized the original languages of the Scripture texts, as well as the language of its founder. Faith and worship did not depend on one language at the foundation of the religion. As Sanneh summarized his finding: “Christianity is a form of indigenous empowerment by virtue of the vernacular translation.”<sup>14</sup>

This phenomenon immediately called into question the received wisdom of Western historians who were committed to the claim that Western missions were a form of cultural imperialism. Instead, as Sanneh discovered, Western missions actually pursued a form of cultural affirmation. Sanneh recognized that he had a choice: caution or courage. He could either remain silent or face the guild of historians with the shocking truth that “ethnic self-preservation” had an advocate in the phenomenon of Bible translation. The implication was that this activity was hardly a form of cultural imperialism, but a form of upholding local languages and cultures. Of course, some of those historians who would not move from their assumptions on missions could move the discussion from language to the fact that the content of the translation was

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<sup>13</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 217.

<sup>14</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 217.

imperialistic. Yet, as Sanneh recognized, who else esteemed the local vernaculars around the world to such an extent? The rhetorical answer was “no one.”

In the next year, British politics and economics began to undermine the welfare of British universities, so Sanneh ended up taking a position at Harvard University and its Center for the Study of World Religions. This proved providential. Sanneh’s Harvard colleagues were open to the thesis he was developing about the vernacular and Christian missions. It was all the encouragement he needed. Aberdeen was the “origin and stimulus” but Harvard was “the catalyst for the idea that native tongues launched and accompanied the Christian movement through its history.”<sup>15</sup> Koine Greek was an example to which C. S. Lewis had pointed him. In contrast, Muslims do not translate the Qur’an. Worship, devotion, and witness do not depend on the vernacular, only on Arabic. Any translation of the Qur’an is viewed as a commentary. It is not inspired or sacred text whereas for Christians the translated text, such as Scripture in English, is canonical.<sup>16</sup>

For those involved in Bible translation it is common to refer to the motivation for translation as making the text “understandable” for the intended audience. However, as Sanneh notes, the use of the vernacular not only has a utilitarian basis but also is of divine significance since the text carries the universal message of the good news in Jesus Christ. In addition, Bible translation often leads to other affirmations of the status and worth of the vernacular and therefore the peoples speaking those languages. Many of these affirmations come in the form of a material impact. Sanneh summarized the material impact of this positive orientation to the vernacular: “The most tangible expressions of this vernacular impulse are the orthographies, grammars, dictionaries, and other linguistic tools the Western missionary movement created to constitute the most detailed, systematic, and extensive cultural stocktaking of the world’s languages ever undertaken.”<sup>17</sup>

This would include the other benefits such as literacy and educational materials, and social benefits such as recognition by government institutions as a “real” language. In addition, the expansion of Scripture engagement and the

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<sup>15</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 222.

<sup>16</sup> For example, at the dedication of the Ejagham New Testament where I was involved in December 1997 the Director of the Cameroon Bible Society held up a copy of the New Testament and exclaimed in a loud voice, “This is the Word of God for the Ejagham people.” He had strongly affirmed the canonical status of the Ejagham New Testament. Of course, every Sunday morning churchgoers affirm the canonical status of the vernacular translations of the Bible into English, Spanish, German, French, Chinese, etc.

<sup>17</sup> Sanneh, *Summoned*, 225.

ethno-arts only increased access to the vernacular through multiple forms of media (print, audio, video, electronic, and storying) and various vernacular forms such as music, dance, and drama. Many of the contributions of this kind are represented in SIL International's *Ethnologue* with its listing of over 7,000 languages and the SIL Bibliography containing tens of thousands of articles and materials concerning these languages.

Eventually, Sanneh published his thesis and research in *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (1989, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2009). The thrust of the book was that Western Christianity resulted from a similar process of vernacular translations similar to what is happening today in non-Western contexts.

### **Conceptualizing the Growth of the World Christian Movement**

Another conceptual space that Sanneh helped develop was that concerning the growth of the worldwide Christian movement. Again, the Western academic world seemed unaware of what was happening outside the West. They only focused on Christianity in the West, and many were celebrating its demise in the post-Christian West. However, beyond the Western world, the two-thirds world was the arena of a growing Christian population, particularly in Africa and Asia. It was the developing of a post-Western Christian world. It was "post-Western" in that the colonial powers were no longer in control of Africa and Asia and Christianity did not come with colonial power but now came only with its truth claims, and where the local name for God is used instead of one from the dominant language. He described this phenomenon in *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (2008).

After a couple years at Harvard, Yale University invited Sanneh to take the Chair of World Christianity. He accepted. The remainder of his career was at Yale University and Yale Divinity School. Three important consequences of Sanneh's insights remain today. First, Sanneh reported, "missionary translation has now become a familiar topic in many academic fields," with one strange exception – it has not entered the world of academic theology. Second, Sanneh's insights have affirmed and buoyed those involved in Bible translation. They were committed to their service and its utilitarian rationale, and Sanneh provided even greater socio-historical support for their service. Third, the University of Ghana, Accra, has agreed to house an institute focused on the study of religion and society in Africa. They named it the Sanneh Institute. Therefore, Sanneh's life will continue blessing others in multiple ways.

Lamin Sanneh experienced a life filled with irony. He learned to honor God through the Islamic piety of his youth but came to love God through his conversion to Christianity. He gained a PhD in African Islamic history as a Christian but it opened the door for him to become a leader in the study of world Christianity. He recognized the absolute nature of Arabic in Islamic revelation but demonstrated to the world that Christian missions favored the vernacular because Christian revelation could be canonical in any language. Western historians trained him to accept the assumption that Christian missions was a matter of cultural imperialism but he proceeded to teach them that Christian missions involved the affirmation of the local culture and language. He grew up along the banks of an African river in humble circumstances but spent most of his adult life as a professor at one of the most prestigious institutions in the world, Yale University. Sanneh recognized the incongruities of his life. He sensed that the progression in his life was more than the conscious choices he made but were a witness to the loving hand of God carrying him through his life.

Many will greatly miss him. His reputation and influence will likely increase over the coming years, as his insights and wisdom become more widely known. While we mourn the loss of Lamin Sanneh, one for whom being at home in the family and in a faith community was of a high existential and metaphorical value, we can celebrate with him that he has now experienced his final homecoming into the presence of the God he loved.

### **John R. Watters**

Special Advisor to the Executive Director, past President of SIL International and Wycliffe Bible Translators International, and also former Africa Area Director for SIL International.

28 January 2019

### **Suggested reading:**

Sanneh, Lamin. *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam*. 1 edition. New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2016. (Author's note: See the review of *Beyond Jihad* by John Azumah in the *IBMR* journal, 41.4, 2017. Azumah is from Ghana and also a Muslim background Christian, Professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, USA.)

———. *Disciples of All Nations : Pillars of World Christianity*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

- . *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.
- . *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.
- . *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003.

## An African Scholar's Tribute:

### Lamin Sanneh, A Foremost African Theologian from the Gambia: His Theological Thoughts from an African Perspective

By Francis Anekwe Oborji

The purpose of this present tribute is to highlight the African dimension of Lamin Sanneh's writings and theological thought.<sup>18</sup> Although, he worked at the center of the international stage in the world of academia, Sanneh always wrote and lectured from an African perspective and context. Africa remained the animating spirit of his theological writing and engagements until death snatched him away.

#### **Christianity and Islam**

Lamin Sanneh was born into a Muslim family and attended Qur'anic school in his native Gambia in West Africa. Later he converted to Christianity, first as a Methodist then as a Catholic. He studied on four continents and specialized in many areas. He also travelled widely, spoke many languages, and interacted with different cultures. All these experiences helped to shape his worldview. His theological perspective, reflected in his writings, covers two major areas, namely the relationship between Christianity and Islam and the study of World Christianity and Missions. His writing highlighted the place of Africa in the emerging world Christian movement in an increasingly globalizing world. He wrote for post-colonial and post-modernity Africa.

Sanneh's theological outlook includes an ecumenical and inter-religious dimension. He ardently advocated for the timely acceptance of cultural plurality that he considered a fact of humanity's historical and religious experience. He called for mutual respect and co-existence between adherents of different world religions. His writings represent the efforts of an African theologian who wanted to show how Christianity and Islam could live side by side with the religious traditions and cultures of African people, in a spirit of dialogue, respect, mutual enrichment, encounter, and tolerance.

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<sup>18</sup> This paper is a shorter version of a tribute to Lamin Sanneh available online in PDF format at <https://dacb.org/memories/sanneh-lamin/>.

## The Translatability of the Gospel

Sanneh wrote extensively about the translatability of the Gospel into African culture. He contends that the translatability of the Gospel into local cultures and languages is something unique to Christianity in contrast with other world religions. For example, because Allah used Arabic to speak to the prophet Mohammed, Arabic is considered the only sacred language in Islam. Therefore, when the Qur'an is translated into other languages it loses its sacred character. This argument explained why Christianity made more inroads in those places in Africa where traditional religion was strongest but very little progress where Islam had been planted during the Arab invasions of the continent:

Africans best responded to Christianity where the indigenous religions were strongest, not weakest, suggesting a degree of indigenous compatibility with the gospel, and an implicit conflict with colonial priorities... Muslim expansion and growth, which occurred, were most impressive in areas where the indigenous religions, particularly as organized cults, had been vanquished or else subjugated, and where local populations had either lost or vaguely remembered their name for God. For this reason, colonialism as a secularizing force helped to advance Muslim gains in Africa. The end of colonial rule inhibited the expansion of Islam in Africa, whereas the opposite seems to have happened with Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

Speaking further on the importance of African local languages in spreading the Gospel, he wrote:

Christianity has felt so congenial in English, Italian, German, French, Spanish, Russian, and so on, that we forget it wasn't always so, or we inexcusably deny that the religion might feel equally congenial in other languages, such as Amharic, Geez, Arabic, Coptic, Tamil, Korean, Chinese, Swahili, Shona, Twi, Igbo, Wolof, Yoruba, and Zulu. Our cultural chauvinism makes us overlook Christianity's vernacular character.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 105. See also chapter three of his *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

## Africa and the Southward Shift of World Christianity

Sanneh argues for the significance of Africa in the new southward shift in the global Christian landscape that has been transformed by new centers of Christianity in the southern continents. He adds that the growth of Christianity in the Global South does not mean a displacement of the “old centers” of the faith. It also does not mean a redefinition of the missionary concept. Rather it confirms that, in the history of Christian mission, faith travels through the missionary movement of believing communities:

When the Christian faith first traveled from Jerusalem to Athens, North Africa and then to Rome, none of the previous centers was displaced by the new ones. And none of the new centers was considered inferior to the “old centers” of Christianity. Each encounter was, rather, a manifestation of how the evangelizing church was fulfilling its mission in the world. Indeed each encounter was a demonstration of Christianity’s universal appeal. Moreover, none of the centers, “old” or “new,” considers itself the sole bearer of the Christian mission. Each center sees itself as a full participant in the evangelizing mission of the church.<sup>21</sup>

Seen from this perspective, the new southward shift is not a matter of concern but instead represents the triumph of the universal expansion and adaptability of Christianity to all peoples in the world. These qualities enabled Christianity to break the cultural barriers of its former domestication in the northern hemisphere to create missionary resurgence and renewal that transformed the religion into a world faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sanneh believes there is much to be gained by respecting this historical missionary paradigm.

However, Sanneh underlines the limitations of the concept of mission as one-way traffic, from the West to the rest of the world. In fact, this was his critique of the idea of Christendom advanced at the Edinburgh 1910 Missionary Conference. He makes the case most forcefully in connection to African experience:

African Christianity has not been a bitterly fought religion: there have been no ecclesiastical courts condemning unbelievers, heretics, and witches to death, no bloody battles of doctrine and polity, no territorial

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<sup>21</sup> Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 36ff.



aggrandizement by churches; no jihads against infidels, no fatwas against women, no amputations, lynchings, ostracism, penalties, or public condemnation of doctrinal differences or dissent. The lines of Christian profession have not been etched in the blood of enemies. To that extent at least African Christianity has diverged strikingly from sixteenth and seventeenth-century Christendom.<sup>22</sup>

### **Mission: From Everywhere to Everywhere**

This is the perspective from which Sanneh advances his basic argument on the intercultural process in the history of Christian mission. In the first place, he acknowledges that statistical weight has moved Africa firmly into the Christian orbit in recent years. But we should bear in mind that from its origins Christianity was marked by serial retreat and advance as an intercultural process. Bethlehem and Jerusalem were superseded by Antioch and Athens, while Egypt and Carthage soon gave place to Rome. Rival centers multiplied the chances of further contraction and expansion. Then it was the turn of the North Atlantic world to inherit the mantle before the next momentous phase brought the religion to the southern hemisphere, with Africa representing the most recent continental shift. Sanneh writes:

These developments went beyond merely adding more names to the book; they had to do with cultural shifts, with changing the books themselves. This serial feature of the history of Christianity is largely hidden from people in the West now living in a post-Christian culture. Even in Africa itself the churches were caught unprepared, and are scarcely able to cope with the elementary issue of absorbing new members, let alone with deeper issues of formation and training.<sup>23</sup>

The point here is that the concept of Christendom—“mission as one way-traffic”—imprisons the study of non-Western Christianity within a Western theological framework and thus impoverishes the understanding of its nature and significance. It entrenches the notion of Christian missionary movement as a movement from the “old Christendom” (the West) to the so-called “non-Christian lands” (mission territories). It is possible that the experience of

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<sup>22</sup> Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, 36-37.

Christendom predisposes Westerners to think of religious phenomena in terms of permanent centers and structures of unilateral control.

These were some of the strands in contemporary missiological thinking that Lamin Sanneh discussed so masterfully from an African perspective in his writings. They all constitute the strength of his scholarship and his contribution to Mission Studies, World Christianity, and Islam.

## **Conclusion**

Lamin Sanneh was an African scholar who sought to reclaim his cultural and religious identity from the legacy of colonialism, and to contribute to an African renaissance in theological and missiological scholarship. To overcome the African identity crisis, his work focused on rediscovering the riches of Black Africa's religious and cultural traditions after over five hundred years of colonial domination by Arab and Western powers. Although sometimes colleagues may have viewed his work through the lens of Western scholarship, Sanneh's scholarly contribution to World Christianity, Islam, and Missions, was deeply African.

As an African Muslim, then a Christian convert, Sanneh entered into dialogue with his African reality and background. Out of his religious experience and journey, he grappled with the question of where his people belong in the increasingly globalizing pluralistic world that encompasses different religions, cultures, and philosophies of life.

During his thirty-year tenure at Yale Divinity School as well as his work at the University of London and on two Pontifical Commissions, Sanneh brought World Christianity and the African presence to the forefront, drawing a global network of researchers and friends into his areas of scholarship and inter-religious engagement.

My condolences go out to his widow, Sandra Sanneh, their son Kelefa, and daughter Sia, as well as to his numerous friends and students in the world of academia and the sciences. With the demise of Lamin Sanneh, Africa has lost one of the greatest scholars and theologians of our time. May God receive his good soul and strengthen the family he left behind. Adieu Professor Lamin Sanneh!

## **Francis Anekwe Oborji**

Professor Ordinarius of Contextual Theology and Inculturation at the Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome, and Founding Executive Secretary of the International Association of Catholic Missiologists (IACM).

## An Editor's Tribute:

### Remembering Lamin Sanneh

By David Bratt

Lamin Sanneh touched many lives—and changed many minds.

When I was a graduate student, the cafeteria in Yale's Hall of Graduate Studies was usually full of jaded grad students having jaded conversations about reading lists, professors, and the undergraduates we were supposed to help inspire. But one day, almost thirty years ago, was different enough to stand out in my memory.

One of my tablemates, a student in African Studies, had just come from a class taught by an African professor who'd shaken up her worldview. She'd previously learned a lot of standard negative stories about the impact of Christianity on the developing world: Western imperialism, cultural arrogance, and all manner of harm. But on this day, she heard a more complicated story. She heard that Christian missionaries, through their translation of the Bible into local languages, had actually been agents of cultural *preservation*—had elevated, not denigrated, local cultures by working with vernacular languages. This was in sharp contrast, the professor said, to Islam, which treated local languages—and, by extension, local cultures—as unworthy to be vessels of the divine. And he could back up his surprising assertions with a personal story: he had been raised Muslim, but had converted to Christianity. She'd never heard anything like what he had to say, and she couldn't stop talking about it.

That was the first I'd heard of Lamin Sanneh and his remarkable story. It wouldn't be the last.

Scholars of world Christianity know well Lamin's impressive catalog of contributions to the field, and we at Eerdmans are proud to be the publisher of two of them: *Whose Religion in Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* and *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African*. They are both rich in insight and well worth reading, but I am especially fond of the latter, which I was privileged to edit. It is the story of his astonishing life: raised on the banks of the Gambia River, inspired by a chance encounter with Helen Keller's autobiography, stunned by the death of his mother at an early age, inclined to do battle with Christianity as a pious Muslim, yet nagged by its truth claims and eventually falling to his knees as a Christian convert. He went on to be educated on four continents and ended his life as the D. Willis James Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale.

Conversion, however, is not the end of Lamin's story with religion. Having converted from Islam to Christianity, he never lost his deep and profound respect for the religion of his upbringing. The zeal of a convert often brings with it contempt for the faith left behind, but not so with Lamin. He never lost his appreciation for how seriously his education in Islam encouraged him to take matters of faith, and he never lost his ability to cherish the insights of the religion of his ancestors. Here was someone who could be firm in his own beliefs while respecting and appreciating those who disagreed with him and wanted him to come back to Islam. He *loved* them, and that fact shone through in his scholarship.

We developed a good friendship while I served as his editor, and we stayed in regular touch thereafter, sharing meals in Grand Rapids, New Haven, and other places along the way. I will miss him. He was always as warm and engaging with me as he was brilliant and insightful—no small thing to say. I heard from him just a month before he died, and I am still having trouble believing that I will not hear from him again.

Lamin died on Epiphany—as his friend and colleague Dana Robert put it, “a fitting day to meet his Lord.” Since Lamin became Roman Catholic, we might say in Latin: *Requiescat in Pace*. Given his insights into Christianity and the vernacular, it seems appropriate to write in his native Mandinka: *Alamaa laa jaŋo sooneyaa la*. But given his absolute mastery of the English language, in which he wrote so prolifically, so insightfully, and so beautifully, it might be most fitting to say simply: *May he rest in peace*.

**David Bratt**

Executive Editor

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## Biographies by Lamin Sanneh in the DACB

Earlier this year, shortly after the sad news of Lamin Sanneh's death, I instructed my Boston University undergraduate research assistant to extract from his book *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Harvard University Press, 1999) biographies for publication in this commemorative issue of the *JACB*. The three figures presented here, Thomas Peters, Paul Cuffee, and David George, freed slaves in America during the Revolutionary War period, played pioneering roles as political and religious leaders on both continents. For Sanneh, they were important bridge figures between Africa and the fledgling United States, representing the inextricable family connection between Africans from the homeland and diaspora Africans in North America.

### **Michèle Miller Sigg**

Associate Director, DACB

Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Boston University

### **Thomas Peters**

**1740 to June 25, 1792**

**Methodist**

**Sierra Leone**

### **The Pioneer who Moved Antislavery to Africa**

Thomas Peters was an escaped slave who fought on the side of the British during the American Revolutionary War to win his freedom. He played a leading role in facilitating the return of his fellow freed slaves to Africa. After the war, the activities of Peters inspired a ferment for liberation and stirred up a new hope by rejuvenating the idea of taking anti-slavery to Africa.

Peters had fled in 1776 from his master and joined the British, lured by the promise of freedom. Twice wounded in battle, he survived the war and then went with his wife to settle in Nova Scotia. Arriving in London in 1791, he bore the grievances of Nova Scotian blacks who felt cheated on the promises made them by the British. Peters became an instant London celebrity and was warmly

received by Granville Sharp and his fellow reformers.<sup>24</sup> “His eloquence, his passion, his spirit, made him the rage of the newspaper world, and the latest fashionable craze, and the nearest object of philanthropy.”<sup>25</sup>

## Early Life

Thomas Peters was born in the 1740s in Nigeria as an Egba Yoruba. He was kidnapped in 1760 and sold to a French slave ship, the *Henri Quatre*. Peters arrived in French Louisiana and, soon after, his French master sold him to an Englishman. By 1770, he had been sold again, this time to William Campbell, a Scots-man in Wilmington, North Carolina, the seat of New Hanover County, where Peters learned his trade as a millwright. The war approached Wilmington early in 1776, and it was evacuated in February of that year. In order to effect his freedom, Peters joined the British side of the war and enlisted in the regiment of the Black Pioneers. He was present at a British bombardment of Charleston in the summer of 1776, and was with the British when they moved north to take Philadelphia at the end of 1777. At the end of the war, he and other blacks were taken to New York City in preparation for their shipment to Nova Scotia.<sup>26</sup>

## Life in Canada and the London Petition

In Canada, where freedom proved no less elusive, Peters reasoned that he and his people “would have to look beyond the governor and his surveyors to complete their escape from slavery and to achieve the independence they sought.”<sup>27</sup> Peters organized a petition<sup>28</sup> among the blacks of St. John, New Brunswick, and Digby,

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<sup>24</sup> According to Walker, “On hearing Thomas Peters’ story he [Granville Sharp] took up their cause. He gave his support to the petition, arranged for its presentation to Secretary of State Henry Dundas, and introduced Peters to an influential group of merchants, bankers, and politicians. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (Toronto: Longman Group Limited and Dalhousie University Press, 1976), 96.

<sup>25</sup> Captain F. W. Butt-Thompson, *Sierra Leone in History and Tradition* (London: H. F. and G. Witherby, 1926), 93-94.

<sup>26</sup> Gary B. Nash, “Thomas Peters: Millwright and Deliverer,” in David G. Sweet and Gary B. Nash, eds., *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 69-85.

<sup>27</sup> Walker, *Black Loyalists*, 32. Cited in Nash, “Thomas Peters,” 78.

<sup>28</sup> Recalling Peters’s arrival to Canada, Walker recalls that “[Peters] had assumed a leadership position among the Digby-area blacks, organizing their first petition for lands

Nova Scotia, and carried it personally to London for the secretary of state for foreign affairs, William W. Granville.<sup>29</sup> The petition described the harsh conditions of blacks in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, asking for an urgent plan to remedy the situation. The position of the blacks in Canada, which had been described three years earlier (in 1788) as desperate, with most of them “without Clothing” and numbers of them “destitute of the necessities of Life” and facing “the most keen Distress” with the winter cold<sup>30</sup>, had only grown worse and more alarming. The choice was between finding arable land in Canada, which was unlikely, or else emigrating elsewhere for the purpose. The petition brought immediate action, with the secretary of state initiating inquiries in Canada and asking that either the blacks be provided with useful land or else enabled to emigrate to Sierra Leone. The directors of the newly formed Sierra Leone Company accepted Peters’ petition and “concurred in applying to His Majesty’s Ministers for a passage for [the blacks] at the expense of government, and having obtained a favourable answer to their application, they immediately availed themselves at the services of Lieut. Clarkson, who very handsomely offered to go to Nova Scotia, in order to make the necessary proposals, and to superintend the collecting and bringing over such free blacks to Sierra Leone, as might be willing to emigrate.”<sup>31</sup> The British government, what John Quincy Adams termed “our old Grandam Britain,” it was agreed, would bear the cost of such emigration.

### Migration to Sierra Leone

Encouraged, Peters returned to Nova Scotia with plans to organize the blacks for transportation to Sierra Leone, against a good deal of opposition from both blacks and whites, it turned out.<sup>32</sup> The blacks were afraid of undertaking the hazards of

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in August 1784 and taking charge of the distribution of provisions later that year.” Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to meeting William W. Granville, Wilson states that “In London, he [also] made his way to General Sir Henry Clinton, his old chief, and through Clinton met Sharp, Wilberforce, and the Clarksons.” Wilson, *John Clarkson and the African Adventure* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1980), 54.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, *Black Loyalists*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> *Report of the Sierra Leone Company* (London 1794), 5. Cited also in Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, vol. 1, 54-55.

<sup>32</sup> Apart from the verbal abuses, Wilson shares that “Peters had even been physically attacked by a white man at Digby, but he had responded with great dignity, refusing to prosecute as the man was drunk.” Wilson, *John Clarkson*, 69.

a journey to a continent whence they or their forebears had been taken and sold into slavery, while the whites feared that emigration would deplete a source of cheap black labor.<sup>33</sup> But nothing could stop the venture now. In August 1791, proceedings were set in motion to screen potential Nova Scotian black emigrants to Sierra Leone. John Clarkson, the younger brother of Thomas Clarkson, was chosen as agent for this task, and Peters became his indefatigable assistant.

Peters himself took personal responsibility in rounding up candidates for the enterprise.<sup>34</sup> Finally, on 15 January 1792 the freedom armada of sixteen ships spread sail. The whole enterprise had cost nearly £9,600, and carried 1996 individuals.<sup>35</sup>

### Arrival and Life in Sierra Leone

Two months later the party landed, haggard and buffeted by disease and weather. Sixty-five had died at sea and another hundred were too ill to disembark. But there was no mistaking the symbolic significance of the feat just accomplished. Here is one description of the landing scene in which Thomas Peters played a leading role:

Their pastors<sup>36</sup> led them ashore, singing a hymn of praise.... Like the Children of Israel which were come out again out of the captivity they rejoiced before the Lord, who brought them from bondage to the land of their forefathers. When all had arrived, the whole colony assembled in worship, to proclaim to the.... continent whence they or their forebears had been carried in chains-

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<sup>33</sup> These feelings of disarray that were induced by the project were exploited by local figures. According to Wilson, "The official inquiries into Peter's charges were cursory, especially in New Brunswick where Governor Carleton simply retorted that Peters spoke for none of the blacks in his province, who were uniformly well paid and satisfied." Wilson, *John Clarkson*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> In the words of Wilson: "Thomas Peters had sailed ahead of Clarkson to bring news of his London triumph to the blacks who had sent him on his risky pilgrimage. At St. John, New Brunswick, and at Annapolis in Nova Scotia, Peters would assemble the families who meant to go to Sierra Leone and bring them to Halifax where Clarkson would fit out the ships to carry them to the West Coast of Africa." Wilson, *John Clarkson*, 57.

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, *John Clarkson*, 72.

<sup>36</sup> Peter's voyage facilitated the emergence of Christianity within Sierra Leone. As a result, Wilson details that "Whole congregations of the Baptist, Methodist, and Countess of Huntingdon persuasion chose to go." Wilson, *John Clarkson*, 72.



“The day of Jubilee is come;  
Return ye ransomed sinners home.”<sup>37</sup>

Peters was ill with fever at a time of landfall, but he rejoiced openly at their safe arrival and the prospects that lay before them. He recovered early enough for his compatriots to elect<sup>38</sup> him their speaker-general.<sup>39</sup> He soon fell out of favor with his people, however, and was found hatching a plot to overthrow authority. Warned in advance, Clarkson called a public meeting of the settlers and before them threatened Peters as a mutineer. Peters was then accused of embezzling money owed to two orphans.<sup>40</sup> In the subsequent trial before a jury, Peters was found guilty, made to give up the money, and censored severely. He made to mend his ways, attended the nightly prayer meetings punctiliously, and testified regularly. Clarkson, disinclined to ignore an early warning, also showed up, determined to neutralize whatever remained of Peters’ influence. Disheartened by Clarkson’s growing stature among the settlers, Peters made a final desperate gamble: he challenged the people at a public meeting to decide between him and Clarkson, and was devastated when no one moved in his direction.<sup>41</sup> “Isolated, threatened, sick at heart, Peters fell ill with the prevailing fever, and in the night of the 25th-26th of June [1792] he died.”<sup>42</sup> His cloudy ending, however, did little to diminish his achievements as a pioneer and symbol of freedom.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> C. Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 41.

<sup>38</sup> As stated by Wilson, “132 of the settlers, including the respectable David George and others whom Clarkson knew would not support a coup against him, signed a statement naming Peters as their spokesman.” Wilson, *John Clarkson*, 94.

<sup>39</sup> In order to understand Peter’s position within the government, we must first understand its structure. Wilson explains that “The first thing to be said of the government of which Clarkson was, nominally, head, was that it provided no office for Thomas Peters, or any other black. On the usual assumption of European imperialism, the blacks would labour and the whites would rule. The company regulations, liberal for the time, did, however, authorize blacks to serve on juries and act as peace officers.” Wilson, *John Clarkson*, 84.

<sup>40</sup> Peters’s actions deeply affected his image within the community. According to Walker, “His defence, that the money he took was owing to him by the deceased settler, was not accepted by the all-black jury, and he was sentenced to receive a public reprimand and to restore the property to the widow.” Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, 151.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson states that “James Strand perceived that Peters’s pride was injured when Clarkson replaced him in the hearts of the blacks.” Wilson, *John Clarkson*, 95.

<sup>42</sup> Fyfe, *History*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson describes the events following Peters’s death: “Although coffins had been banned to conserve lumber, Clarkson granted the necessary pine boards for him and saw that his

Lamin Sanneh

**Source:**

Sanneh, L. *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

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widow had linen for his shroud and candles and drink for his wake. Workmen were given the day off to attend the funeral of the now legendary man. No other black leader was ever to pose a similar threat to early white rule." Wilson, *John Clarkson*, 97.

**Paul Cuffee**  
**1759 to 1817**  
**Quaker**  
**Sierra Leone**

Paul Cuffee was the engineer of the return migration of Africans to Africa from the Americas.

**Introduction and Early Life**

Religion and personal industry would make a successful combination in the person of Paul Cuffee, an African American Quaker from New Bedford and Westport, Massachusetts. Freed by his conscience-stricken Quaker master, Paul Cuffee (often spelled “Kofi,” hence of Ashanti ancestry) was born under the name Slocum in 1759 in Dartmouth, Bristol County, Massachusetts, the youngest of seven brothers and sisters. His father was of African descent, his mother a native Indian, probably of the Wampanoag tribe. The name Cuffee (or Cuffe) was adopted by the family in about 1778.<sup>44</sup> He received instruction early and by the age of thirteen was able to read and write. At sixteen, he entered the whaling trade, his first voyage taking him to the Gulf of Mexico and a second to the West Indies.

When the American War of Independence broke out, he was on a whaling trip and was captured by the British and held in remand for three months in New York. After his release, he gave up whaling and took uncharacteristically to agriculture in Westport. With life at sea still casting a spell on him, he gave in and built a boat with the help of a brother, David, to trade with towns on the Connecticut coast. That and several subsequent events ended in failure, with Paul lucky on several occasions to escape capture by pirates. The end of the war found Paul still keen to pursue a career at sea. He fitted out an 18-ton boat to trade in codfish, and that laid the foundation for his future business success.<sup>45</sup> Assisted by

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<sup>44</sup> According to George Salvador, “The Slocum family of the Elizabeth Islands [Paul Cuffe’s father’s former slave owners] objected to Cuffe using their surnames for his children. In time, the children, except for one of the girls dropped the slave name of Slocum and used the given name of their father as their family name.” George Salvador, *Paul Cuffe, The Black Yankee, 1759-1817* (New Bedford, MA: Reynolds-DeWalt Printing, Inc., 1969), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Salvador offers additional details: “Later, with a new eighteen ton boat, he sailed from Westport to George’s Banks off Cape Cod for a cargo of codfish. This venture proved to be profitable, and it became an important foundation for an extensive and lucrative fishing

his wife's brother, he took again to whaling, making frequent trips to Newfoundland. He returned to Westport from these whaling trips and then went on to Philadelphia, where he exchanged his cargo of oil and bone for bolts and iron, with which he built a new 69-ton vessel, the *Ranger*. He ranged up and down the eastern seaboard and ran a particularly profitable venture in Virginia trading in corn. With success assured, Paul took on the maritime world and in 1800 commissioned a larger, 162-ton vessel, the *Hero*, which on one of its voyages rounded the Cape of Good Hope, a hint of things to come. In 1806, he fitted out two ships, one a 268-ton vessel, the *Alpha*, which traveled from Wilmington and Savannah to Gottenburg, Sweden, eventually returning to Philadelphia. In the other, the *Traveller*, he owned three-fourths of interest. It was with this vessel that he crossed the Atlantic to Freetown, about which more later.

With the profits from his whaling business, Paul led an effort to establish a school for blacks in Westport, eventually building one from his own funds and offering it to the community. He was convinced that education offered the route to self-improvement for blacks, and he dedicated himself to promoting the cause.

## Religious Life

This brings us to Paul Cuffee's religious background. His parents are recorded as having been regular attendants at the Westport meeting of Friends, where they would have been told that the revelation of the Divine Principle could enlighten "the soul of every man."<sup>46</sup> Paul himself joined the Friends in 1808<sup>47</sup>, in what accounts describe as a sincere and faithful profession of faith.<sup>48</sup> In the pithy words

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industry from Westport to George's Banks. This industry continued to prosper for a considerable time and was a major source of income for Westport." Salvador, *Paul Cuffee*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Lamont D. Thomas, *Rise to be a People: A Biography of Paul Cuffee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 37.

<sup>47</sup> Salvador's account explains the origins of Cuffee's Quaker faith: "Rotch, an ardent Quaker, became a principal financial supporter of the Friends Academy in New Bedford and also its first president in 1811. As a resolute Quaker, it is not surprising to find that he became an ardent abolitionist in New England. Paul Cuffee's dealing with Rotch and the eminent Quaker merchants of Philadelphia to whom Rotch had introduced him led Cuffee to investigate the Quaker faith. In 1808, he became a member of the Friends Meeting at Acoaxet, Westport." Salvador, *Paul Cuffee*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> Salvador gives further details of Cuffee's devoted faith: "Cuffee became a faithful and devout Quaker. His letters constantly instructed his friends in the ways of Christ, and the

of his biographer, Paul “was considerate of little folks, for he presented them with Bibles and good counsel and endeavored to set before them an example of righteous conduct.”<sup>49</sup>

In line with his religious interest, Paul strove for broader participation for blacks in the affairs of state and society, using his own personal advantages for the purpose. He and a brother, John, sent a petition to the General Court of Massachusetts Bay, on 10 February 1780, asking for the extension of franchise rights to blacks as the logical corollary to the fight for independence, in which blacks joined. Their petition argued for consistency of principle in that regard and for the need to change the situation for blacks,

Having no vote or Influence in the Election of those that Tax us yet many of our Colour (as is well known) have Cherfully [sic] Entered the field of Battle in the defense of the Common Cause and that (as we conceive) against a similar Exertion of Power (in Regard to taxation) too well known to need a Recital in this place.<sup>50</sup>

The petition as an extra political remedy has a long history, going back at least to the 1628 *Petition of Right*, in which Charles I assented to the declaration of rights and liberties of the people as presented to him by Parliament. In that form the petition was a branch of patronage and addressed as such to the ruler as superior authority, whatever material qualifications might have been implied in concessions granted in the entreaty or supplication. In the words addressed to Archbishop Ussher by Michael Robarts of Jesus College, Oxford, he was “a petitioner to your grace for favour.”<sup>51</sup> As used by the blacks, both in America and in West Africa, the petition thrived as a bill of grievance, an appeal to assert rights and seek remedies deemed just and proper. It expressed the individual rights of the petitioners and fit with the Puritan doctrine of the divine right of personhood, which, as Milton put it, held that we “are made in the image and resemblance of God.” In this view the petition<sup>52</sup> was not merely appeasement or propitiation of

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greatest beneficence he could offer one was ‘the reward of life everlasting in Christ.’ His zeal for his faith was unmistakable, and it gave him strength and courage.” Salvador, *Paul Cuffee*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Noble Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” *Journal of Negro History*, 8 (April 1923), 160.

<sup>50</sup> Massachusetts Archives, Yale University Library, vol. 186, 134-136. Cited also in Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” 162.

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Seaver, *Puritan Lectureships*, 136.

<sup>52</sup> It was the American blacks who in West Africa employed the principle of the political petition on a regular and sustained scale, with James Wise and Samuel Brown among the

superior authority, but a tool of justice.<sup>53</sup>

## Travels to Africa and Europe

Paul Cuffee had in 1808 expressed an interest in doing something tangible to help improve conditions in Africa, by which time a settlement had been established in Freetown. Zachary Macaulay, the governor, had written on behalf of the African Institution, an antislavery organization, to encourage him.<sup>54</sup> On 27 December 1810 he set out for West Africa from Philadelphia, where he had gone from Westport. After he arrived in Freetown the following year, he visited Governor Columbine, a girls' school, and a Methodist service and went to Bullom to meet Old King George, whom he regaled with Quaker materials and some choice advice about the abhorrence of slavery and the need to adopt a sober, industrious life. In his meetings with local chiefs, Cuffee was careful to observe the rules of court etiquette but not to leave himself open to chiefly demands. In one case he noted dryly that the gray-headed grave chief he met was not content of the courtesies extended to him, comprised mainly of religious materials and

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most accomplished and polished at that epistolary art. (The petition of both James Wise and Samuel Brown can be found in the MMS Archives, box 279.) Wise, for example, combined, legalistic sophistication with literary flair, reporting accurately on settler demands, carefully sifting the unreliable from the trustworthy in the petition, pointing out the legal hazards of dealing with a chapel trustee who was attorney also held a brief to the dispute, and ending with a warning couched in understatement: if you give in "there will be room for vainglory." (Letter of James Wise to Rev. John Beecham, 17 May 1833.) Both Wise and Brown, among others, were prominent in resisting official attempts at asserting control over the settlers. The petition as a regular medium of communication became, in the context of political agitation, an outlet and a conduit for grievances, and thus an important documentary source of historical issues, attitudes, concerns, and major actors. (The authorities in Freetown proscribed the petition. Robert Purdie, the colony's secretary, published a public notice on 20 December 1814, saying it had been illegal and forbidden under English law since 1664 to make use of the petition, with sanctions reserved for offenders. Robert Purdie, "Notice," Freetown, 20 December 1814, Public Record Office, London, CO 267/40.) James Wise was active early in the process, for the missionary John Huddleston was writing in February of 1822 of Wise being a leader of the Young Turk faction determined to oust the missionaries from control.

<sup>53</sup> "In spite of the reference to the American Revolution, the General Court rejected their petition." Salvador, *Paul Cuffee*, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Macaulay's letter can be found in Rosalind Cobb Wiggins, ed., *Captain Paul Cuffee's Logs and Letters, 1808-1817: A Black Quaker's "Voice from within the Veil"* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1996), 84-85.

ethical advice, and was delaying his departure till he got some rum. “I Served Him With Victuals But it a peared [sic] that there Was rum Wanting but none Was given.”<sup>55</sup> Cuffee’s official reception by the governor was cool, and he was not allowed to land “6 bales of India goods,” for fear of competing with local trade. The governor also discouraged Cuffee from making contact with the Nova Scotian settlers whom he said he found “the most troublesome.” There were 982 of them at the time.

Invitations to visit London from William Allen and William Wilberforce had reached Cuffee. To prepare for that he gathered views in the colony on the slavery question and composed a petition with the title “Epistle from the Society of Sierra Leone, in Africa, to the Saints and Faithful Brethren in Christ” and took it with him to London. In July 1811, he arrived in England in his ship the *Traveller*, making landfall at Liverpool. One of his first tasks was to help obtain the release of a slave named Aaron Richards, with a petition on the matter to the Board of Admiralty established under the terms of the 1807 act abolishing the slave trade. He was able to draw on the support of Thomas Clarkson. In London, he visited Wilberforce in the company of William Allen and subsequently went to Parliament. He also met Zachary Macaulay, since retired as governor of Sierra Leone. He had occasion to meet William Bootell, a slave trader, who invited Cuffee to his lodgings, and Captain Pane, another slave trader. The African Institution, whose president was the duke of Gloucester and whose directors included Wilberforce and Allen, convened a meeting to which Cuffee was invited. When he left to return to Freetown in September 1811, he carried with him the views of the African Institution. He reached Freetown in November of that year.<sup>56</sup>

Cuffee’s intention in going to West Africa was to establish a trading base at the source for the slave trade and, with others, to work from there to undermine the slave traffic. He also wished to use the transatlantic link between America and West Africa to bring that about: tropical produce, obtained through scientific cultivation, would be carried in ships owned by blacks to America, and the profits used to establish more African Americans in West Africa, and so the cycle would be repeated. But the authorities in Sierra Leone saw this plan as unacceptable encroachment on their economic interests and blocked it.<sup>57</sup> Charles MacCarthy (soon to be governor of the colony), for example, reported on Cuffee’s arrival to

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<sup>55</sup> Wiggins, *Captain Paul Cuffe*, 108.

<sup>56</sup> Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” 174-181.

<sup>57</sup> In the words of Thomas, “No one, including Cuffe, thought it unusual that prominent Britishers could benefit financially from slave labor while espousing a policy of humanitarianism towards Africans.” Thomas, *Rise*, 57.

Freetown, saying Cuffee was “permitted to sell every article except some tobacco and naval stores which would have proved prejudicial to the British trade, for these he found a market at a short distance from this colony.”<sup>58</sup> On his trip back to Freetown from England Cuffee offered passage to a missionary of the British Methodist Church as well as to three schoolteachers. They all made it to Freetown. Before returning to America, Cuffee helped found the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone<sup>59</sup> and later wrote to its secretary, James Wise, “I instruct thee to endeavor that she, the Friendly Society, may not give up her commercial pursuits for that is the greatest outlet to her national advancement. I foresee this to be the means of improving both your country and nation.”<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile Cuffee set out for the United States on 4 April 1813, arriving after a fifty-four-day voyage. Thomas Clarkson, in a notice of 28 January 1814, referred to Cuffee’s Friendly Society, saying it existed “to devise means of disposing of [the settlers’] produce on the most advantageous terms, and of promoting habits of industry among each other. This association continues but,” he urged, “it cannot carry its useful plans into execution, without assistance from England.”<sup>61</sup> Cuffee arrived in America, and his fame followed him.

His ship had brought British cargo with it, which was in contravention of existing embargo laws. Cuffee negotiated on the matter, meeting President Madison in Washington for the purpose.<sup>62</sup> He was made an exception.<sup>63</sup>

## Ideals and Advocacy

Cuffee continued to make representation on the issue of slavery, challenging what

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<sup>58</sup> Letter of Charles MacCarthy, 31 May 1816, Public Record Office, London, CO 267/42.

<sup>59</sup> According to Thomas, “Policies were formally established: a monthly meeting, a written record, and an official title, the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone.” Thomas, *Rise*, 68.

<sup>60</sup> Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” 2014. Also Wiggins, *Cuffe’s Logs*, 441-442.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Clarkson, “Society for the Purpose of Encouraging the Black Settlers at Sierra Leone, and the Natives of Africa Generally, in the Cultivation of their soil, and by the sale of their produce,” 28 January 1814, Public Record Office, London, CO 267/41.

<sup>62</sup> Harris notes that “Thus, this black man from Westport, Massachusetts, became the first Negro known to have been both entertained as a guest by the President of the United States and received in his official residence. . . . In later years, Cuffe’s experience with President Madison took on the aura of folklore. Abolitionists seized upon the meeting as proof that the black man’s intellectual equality with the white man.” Sheldon H. Harris, *Paul Cuffe: Black America and the African Return* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 58.

<sup>63</sup> Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” 184.



he called “enlightened Methodists,” for example, how they could fail to see the evil of making merchandise of a brother. He took the message to the New York Methodist Conference. The theme had been set forth in the “Epistle of the Society of Sierra Leone,” which demanded that the saints held in bondage be liberated, that blacks be freed of “the galding [galling] chain of slavery, that they may be liberated and enjoy liberty that God has granted unto all his faithful Saints.”<sup>64</sup> Among the signatories were James Wise, Moses Wilkinson, Joseph Brown, and John Ellis.

A study of his letter to William Allen in London shows that Cuffee was thinking very much in the language of the new society. He spoke about the place religion occupied in Freetown, mentioning that four meetings are held on Sunday and two on other days. He said there were two Methodist churches, one Baptist, and one without denominational affiliation, which was run by “an old woman, Mila Baxton who keeps at her dwelling house.”<sup>65</sup> He described the measures taken for poor relief, with an organization convening for the purpose once every month, with people appointed to take responsibility for those needing care. A general meeting was held every six months.

Cuffee then went into detail about the necessity of a sober life, and how the habit of regular meetings would promote “all good and laudable institutions . . . and increase your temporal and spiritual welfare.” He harped on the theme of sobriety, steadfastness, and faithfulness, so that the community would be served by good examples in all things, “doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly.”<sup>66</sup> He admonished against “following bad company and drinking of spirituous liquors” and against “idleness, and encouraged [all] to be industrious, for this is good to cultivate the mind, and may you be good examples therein yourselves.” Those who work and serve should be “brought up to industry; may their minds be cultivated for the redemption of the food seed, which is promised to all who seek after it.”<sup>67</sup> He returned to an address he gave to free people of color in Philadelphia in 1796. “They are advised to attend to religion, to get an elementary education, teach their children useful trades, use no spirituous liquors, avoid frolicking and idleness, have marriage legally performed, lay up their earning, and to be honest and to behave themselves.”<sup>68</sup> Idleness was the great Puritan vice, and so it remained for Cuffee and the brethren. The importance of setting a useful, industrious example was remarked on by a traveling Quaker

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<sup>64</sup> Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” 189. Also Wiggins, *Cuffe’s Logs*, 116-117.

<sup>65</sup> Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” 190.

<sup>66</sup> Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” 192. This is a reference to Micah 6:8.

<sup>67</sup> Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” 192. Wiggins, *Cuffe’s Logs*, 234.

<sup>68</sup> Sherwood, “Paul Cuffe,” 192.

minister, Stephen Grellett, who reported from Liverpool at the time of Cuffee's visit there, describing Cuffee as "a black man, owner and master of a vessel . . . He is a member of our Society . . . The whole of his crew is black also. This together with the cleanliness of his vessel, and the excellent order prevailing onboard, has excited very general attention. It has, I believe, opened the minds of many in tender feelings toward the poor suffering Africans who, they see, are men like themselves, capable of becoming like Paul Cuffee, valuable and useful members of both civil and religious Society."<sup>69</sup> Thus, for the blacks, idleness was not just a personal vice, the mark of a fallen man, but a matter of social organization and economic enterprise.

### **Continued Travels to Africa**

In a memorial he addressed to the U.S. president and Congress in June 1813, Cuffee made clear he wished to see established in Africa a model society based on new foundation altogether. The fundamental rule to be established in Africa would be the rule of equity and justice, requiring the cessation of the trade in slaves. A new society in Africa thus conceived would require raising a new foundation conducive to producing wholesome and practical fruit. What they needed in Sierra Leone, Cuffee pleaded, was a sawmill, a millwright, a plow, and a wagon on which to haul loads so that people would not have to carry loads on their heads. He pledged to Congress that he would commit his own resources to promote the improvement and civilization of Africa and help avert from its people the curse which the slave trade had brought. He would lay before the American public a challenge "in the expectation that persons of reputation would feel sufficiently interested to visit Africa, and endeavor to promote habits of industry, sobriety, and frugality among the natives of that country."<sup>70</sup>

On 7 January 1814 the memorial was presented to Congress on Cuffee's behalf and referred to the Committee on Commerce and Manufacturing by the Speaker of the House. The Senate passed a resolution authorizing the president of the United States to allow Cuffee to leave for West Africa with a cargo of goods, but the measure was rejected by a majority in a final vote in the House on the grounds that it would let British goods elude the blockade imposed by Congress. A similar request in London was turned down as too risky given the current state of navigation laws still dealing with the consequences of the Anglo-American War of 1812 and the Napoleonic Wars.

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<sup>69</sup> Wiggins, *Cuffee's Logs*, 128.

<sup>70</sup> Sherwood, "Paul Cuffee," 195-196, Wiggins, *Cuffee's Logs*, 252-253, 434-435.

Cuffee would not be stopped, however, and with the help of Quakers in Westport, he fitted out the *Traveller* again and set sail in November 1815. The *Traveller* was carrying a cargo of tobacco, soap, candles, naval stores, flour, iron to build a sawmill, a wagon, grindstones, nails, glass, and a plow. There were thirty-eight passengers, eighteen heads of family, and twenty children, common laborers who wished to till the soil. On board was a Perry Locke, a licensed Methodist preacher, “with a hard voice for a preacher,” commented Cuffee delicately. (Cuffee reminded Locke in Freetown that Locke had complained in America of being deprived of his liberties and was again murmuring because he was called upon to serve as a juror. “Go and fill thy seat and do as well as thou canst,” Cuffee told him.)<sup>71</sup> Another passenger was Anthony Survance, a native of Senegal, who had been sold to the French in Saint Domingo and who escaped to Philadelphia during the Revolution. He learned to read and write and studied navigation, though, in spite of his effort, life at sea ill-suited him because of his susceptibility to seasickness. Cuffee did not think he would make a good mariner. He joined the voyage at his own expense with hopes of making it eventually to his home in Senegal.

The party dropped anchor in Freetown on 3 February 1816, much of the crew by then weary from the journey and Cuffee himself beset afterward with landing difficulties. He was required to pay heavy customs duties for his goods. It was not going to be the profitable venture he had hoped for, but for consolation he met Governor MacCarthy and the chief justice, who both received him cordially. Yet nothing could hide the fact that Cuffee had ceased being a welcome visitor to Sierra Leone. William Allen was at first mystified by the change, puzzled as to why a person of such exemplary character, industry, and self-effacing demeanor as Cuffee should be vilified in Sierra Leone. He noted in his diary on 27 December 1813: “Much taken up, day after day, with examining witnesses on the State of Sierra Leone . . . I feel it a duty to stand by the poor black settlers--they have few to take their part.”<sup>72</sup> At long last, he said, he found the reason for the antipathy to Cuffee. “I think we shall be able to prove,” he wrote in 1814, “that the principal thing attended to by the white people of Sierra Leone, at least by many of them, has been getting money, and that in the shortest way. The mystery of poor Paul Cuffee’s ill usage is now unravelled.”<sup>73</sup>

In Cuffee’s own estimation, economic motives alone were not sufficient to justify the high risks of investing in Africa, though he admitted that “trifling

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<sup>71</sup> Wiggins, *Cuffee’s Logs*, 434.

<sup>72</sup> William Allen, *William Allen*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Henry Longstreth, 1847), 134.

<sup>73</sup> Allen, *William Allen*, 138. Also Wiggins, *Cuffee’s Logs*, 180.

trade” would be necessary to make long-term involvement viable. Rather, he felt that the slave trade was a great stumbling block to the claims of full humanity to which everyone was entitled, including slaves. He realized, too, that the old power structures in Africa depended too profoundly on the slave trade to cooperate in its destruction. But so also were the European commercial interests. “It appeared to him in a very clear light of view” that the efforts being made to raise a productive class of Africans were being undermined by their heavy debts to European traders. “I had to encourage them to exert themselves on their own behalf and become their own shippers and importers that they may be able to employ their own citizens for at present their colony is stript of their young men for as soon as they are discharged from school they have no business to go into and they enter on board foreigners so the Colony in Continually stript of her popularation [sic].” It was an acute social analysis from which chieftaincy rule emerged no less culpable. “I May also add further that in conversing with the African chiefs that it was with great reluctance they gave up on the slave trade saying it made them poor and they Could not git things as they used to git when they traded in slaves.”<sup>74</sup> Thus the profit motive in trade and the corrupt nature of chieftaincy office had to be remedied by the new ethics and politics of antislavery and antistructure.

### **Support for African Colonization**

Cuffee would not travel again to Africa. Instead he devoted his energies to the cause of American colonization directed to Africa. Robert S. Finley, a Presbyterian minister from New Jersey and later president of the University of Georgia, had been rallying public opinion for a settlement for free blacks in Africa. He made contact with Cuffee, writing “The great desire of those whose minds are impressed with the subject is to give opportunity to the free people of color to rise to their proper level and at the same time to provide a powerful means of putting an end to the slave trade, and sending civilization and Christianity to Africa.”<sup>75</sup> Finley’s entreaty resulted in the founding of the American Colonization Society in 1816. Cuffee advised the society to look outside Freetown, probably wishing to avoid conflict with the authorities there.

Another figure of national importance who approached Cuffee for advice and counsel was Samuel J. Mills. Mills is credited with founding the American Bible Society as well as the American Board of Commissioners for

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<sup>74</sup> Wiggins, *Cuffee’s Logs*, 342.

<sup>75</sup> Sherwood, “Paul Cuffee,” 213.

Foreign Missions, two organizations that would become pillars of the new society Cuffee and his friends were promoting in Africa. When Mills wrote to Cuffee desiring to know the conditions of life in Africa, Cuffee described to him what he observed of the slave trade and the need to patrol the continent's coastline to discourage the traffic in slaves. He called to Mills's attention and to that of Finley the work of the African Institution.

The Friendly Society, which had meant so much to Cuffee, was starved of the goods it needed from America and went into rapid decline. But Cuffee would have agreed with the sentiment, offered here in a hard sell, that, as a correspondent expressed it, good behavior tied to honest, diligent industry ("in which a few horses would be an assistance") in Africa would likely be rewarded "with yams, cassada [sic], plantains, fowls, wild hogs, deer, ducks, goats, sheep, cattle, dish in abundance, and many other articles, good running water, large oysters."<sup>76</sup> Cuffee himself died on 27 July 1817, a much accomplished figure in the new world and European understanding of the new society that was being created in Africa.<sup>77</sup>

## Legacy

In a memorial notice of the board of managers of the American Colonization Society, Paul Cuffee was recognized for his clear and strong judgment, his informed opinion, his commitment and dedication, and the hands-on experience he had of life in West Africa. The tribute to him ended with the point that any future engagement with Africa would have to be based on partnership of an uncommon order, one in which fact and knowledge would replace prejudice and aspersion, an order that must be evaluated in terms of its "usefulness to the native Africans and their descendants in this country."<sup>78</sup>

Cuffee's public exertions and personal industry as well as his proven contacts with Africa and with philanthropic bodies concerned with the continent were a powerful stimulus for the awakening of the social and humanitarian impulse in America. New England papers, for instance, cited him as proof that overseas outreach was viable, an idea that the Haystack Prayer meeting in 1806

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<sup>76</sup> *Second Annual Report of the American Colonization Society*, 153. Cited in Sherwood, "Paul Cuffe," 218.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas notes that "On August 27 Cuffe summoned his family and "bid all farewell" in the presence of the Lord. 'It was as broken a time as was ever known amongst us,' recounted John, his early mentor and loyal brother." Thomas, *Rise*, 118.

<sup>78</sup> *First Annual Report of the American Colonization Society*, 5. Cited in Sherwood, "Paul Cuffe," 220.

in Williamstown, Massachusetts, which galvanized America's missionary resolve, had helped to keep before the attention and sensibility of the public

Lamin Sanneh

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David George  
1740 to 1810  
Baptist  
Sierra Leone

**A Pioneer Baptist Preacher in Sierra Leone**

David George was a significant figure in the religious history of his people. He was born in Essex County, Virginia, in about 1742, of parents John and Judith, who were brought out of Africa in bonds. He had four brothers and four sisters all born into slavery like himself. In an autobiographical piece published in a contemporary journal, he said he remembered as a slave boy fetching water and carding cotton, and then going into the field to farm Indian corn and tobacco until he was nineteen. He recalled many instances of violence against his family. His brother tried to run away and received five hundred lashes when caught. "They washed his [raw] back with salt and water, and whipped it in, as well as rubbed it in with a rag; and then directly sent him to work in pulling off the suckers on tobacco. I also have been whipped many a time on my naked skin, and sometimes till the blood has run down over my waistband; but the greatest grief I then had was to see them whip my mother, and to hear her, on her knees, begging for mercy."<sup>79</sup> His master's cruelty drove George to run away, and eventually he passed into the ownership of George Galphin at Silver Bluff, South Carolina.<sup>80</sup> He described his life there as that of a spiritual profligate: "I used to drink, but not steal; did not fear hell, was without knowledge [of good and evil]...lived a bad life, and had no serious thoughts about my soul," until one day Cyrus, a black preacher, confronted him with the Gospel. His conscience awakened, and he went through a "dark night of the soul," about which he testified thus (with his emphasis):

I saw myself a mass of sin. I could not read and had no scriptures. I did not think of Adam and Eve's sin, but *I* was sin. I felt my *own* plague;

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<sup>79</sup> "An Account of the Life of Mr. David George, from Sierra Leone in Africa, Given by Himself in a Conversation with Brother Rippon of London, and Brother Pearce of Birmingham," in *The Annual Baptist Register for 1790, 1791, 1792, and Part of 1793*, ed. John Rippon, 473.

<sup>80</sup> For a discussion of George at Silver Bluff, see also Walter H. Brooks, "The Priority of the Silver Bluff Church and Its Promoters," *Journal of Negro History*, 7 (1922), 172-196.



and I was so overcome that I could not wait upon my master. I told him *I was ill*...I felt myself at the disposal of Sovereign mercy. At last, in prayer to God I began to think that he would deliver me, but I did not know how. Soon after I saw that I could not be saved by any of my own doings, but that it must be by God's mercy- that my sins had crucified Christ; and now the Lord took away my distress...Soon after I heard brother George Liele preach...When it was ended, I went to him and told him I was so; That I was weary and heavy laden; and that the grace of God had given me rest. Indeed his whole discourse seemed for me...I was appointed to the office of an Elder and received instruction from Brother Palmer how to conduct myself...Then I got a spelling book and began to read...I used to go to the little children to teach me a,b,c. They would give a lesson, which I tried to learn, and then I would go to them again, and ask them if I was right? The reading so ran in my mind, that I think I learned in my sleep as really as when I was awake; and now I can read the Bible, so that what I have in my heart, I can see again in the Scripture.<sup>81</sup>

George was eventually baptized by Brother Palmer, presumed to be the Reverend Wait Palmer, a Connecticut New Light preacher in the mold of Samuel Hopkins.<sup>82</sup> George lived in Savannah, Georgia, until the British took the town and his master fled. George eventually made his way to Charleston, where he lived for two years.<sup>83</sup> When the British decided to evacuate Charleston, he was given the opportunity to leave for Nova Scotia, which he took.<sup>84</sup> After twenty-two days of passage, he arrived in Halifax in 1782 just before Christmas. After six months of enforced idleness, he was allowed to move to Shelburne, where his wish to minister to the blacks of the town was opposed by the whites living there. "I began to sing the first night, in the woods, at a camp, for there were no houses

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<sup>81</sup> George, "Account of the Life," 475-476.

<sup>82</sup> See also, Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 109.

<sup>83</sup> Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 2006), 108.

<sup>84</sup> According to George himself, "When the English were going to evacuate Charlestown, they advised me to go to Halifax in Nova Scotia, and gave the few Black people and it may be as many as two hundred (200) white people, their passage for nothing. We, were twenty-two (22) days on the passage, and used very ill on board. When we came off Halifax, I got leave to go ashore." George, "Account of the Life," 477.

then built...The Black people came far and near, it was so new to them.”<sup>85</sup>

Earlier George had been active in religious pioneering, working side by side with George Liele, a black Baptist pastor who went out as a missionary to Jamaica and the Bahamas. George had become a regular pastor of the Silver Bluff Church, constituted in about 1775. He was also instrumental in setting up another branch of the Baptist church in Savannah in 1777. A man already softened by religious itinerancy and ad hoc opportunity, he extended his activities to Nova Scotia<sup>86</sup> (where Liele kept in touch with him).<sup>87</sup>

## Life in Canada

It turned out that Canada was to prove no less testing. No sooner had he set foot in Nova Scotia than George set in motion plans to build a meeting house.<sup>88</sup> He preached his first sermon at a spot cleared for the purpose before the building was finished, so eager was he to get to the point, as it were. “I was so overjoyed,” he confessed, “with having an opportunity once more of preaching the Word of God that after I had given out the hymn I could not speak for tears.” To his disappointment and further surprise, he found obstacles to his religious work when the town of Shelburne reacted negatively to news that he had baptized whites. A gang of forty to fifty strapping fellows, disbanded soldiers, marched menacingly to George’s house and overturned it, threatening worse fate for the meetinghouse should he persist. Uncowed, David George would stand amid the ruins and at the appointed time hold forth on the Word, “till they came one night

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<sup>85</sup> George Liele, “An Account of Several Baptist Churches, Consisting Chiefly of Negro Slaves: Particularly of One at Kingston, in *Jamaica*, and Another *Savannah* in Georgia,” in *The Annual Baptist Register for 1790, 1791, 1792, and Part of 1793*, ed. John Rippon, 332-337.

<sup>86</sup> Time and time again, George proved to be a man of his religion within his communities. According to Winks, “In 1790, David George exhorted his Nova Scotian brethren to pray and to learn: God, and their own knowledge, would help them, for the white man would not.” Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 362.

<sup>87</sup> George Liele, “An Account,” 332-337.

<sup>88</sup> George recalled that “I now formed the church with us six, and administered the Lord’s supper before it was finished. They went on with the building, and appointed a time every other week to hear experiences. A few months after I baptized nine more, and the congregation was much increased. The worldly Blacks, as well as the members of the Church, assisted in cutting timber in the woods, and in getting shingles, and we used to give a few coppers to buy nails. We were increasing all the winter, and baptized almost every month.” George, “Account of the Life,” 479.

and stood before the pulpit and swore how they would treat me if I preached again.”<sup>89</sup>

Such a fate did overtake him when one Sunday an angry mob stormed the meeting house, whipped David George, and ran him out of town, where he sought refuge in outlying swamps. Under cover of darkness, George crept back into town to gather his family and to move to Birchtown, stalked by white opposition and black restiveness. The hostilities followed him there, where the blacks now joined the opposition. He was forced down the river back to Shelburne, which he reached even though “the boat was frozen, [and] we took whip-saws and cut away the ice.” His former meetinghouse in Shelburne had meanwhile been converted into a tavern (said the tavern keeper, “The old Negro wanted to make a heaven of this place, but I’ll make a hell of it”), but it seems adversity refined the man. Under his unflagging leadership, the faithful gathered for worship and prayer, their numbers rising through the One who gives the increase. His exploits brought him to the attention of the British authorities in Canada; the governor’s private secretary, Jonathan Odell, issued him a preacher’s license, and David George personally invited the governor himself to come and witness a baptism.

It was on such a preaching tour that George suffered an accident, when his ship was blown off course and George, having no adequate clothing, suffered severe frostbite in both legs up to his knees.<sup>90</sup> He had to be carried ashore when he returned to Shelburne. His travels were severely curtailed thereafter, though in preaching he continued to enjoy undiminished powers. One of George’s parishioners testified to the preacher’s eloquence, saying that when George began praying he was so astir with the spirit that “many tears like Brooks” ran “down his cheeks desiring me to call upon that worthy name that was like Ointment pour’d down upon the Assembly- My Soul as upon the mount Zion, and I saw whosoever worked Righteousness accepted by him.”<sup>91</sup>

## The Sierra Leone Migration

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<sup>89</sup> George, “Account of the Life,” 480.

<sup>90</sup> As Schama explains, “When they finally docked at Shelburne he tried to walk, but collapsed and lay on the ground until someone from the church was sent for and he could be carried home. “Afterwards, when I could walk a little, I wanted to speak of the Lord’s goodness, and the brethren made a wooden sledge and drew me to Meeting.”” Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 243

<sup>91</sup> Cited in Anthony Kirk-Greene, “David George: The Nova Scotian Experience,” *Sierra Leone Studies*, n.s., 14 (December 1960), 106.

By 1791, many Nova Scotian blacks had begun to entertain the idea of migrating to a new home overseas. Thomas Peters, an escaped slave who lived in Nova Scotia following the Revolutionary War, was a key figure in creating this longed-for colony in the African continent. Citing harsh living conditions and unfair land distribution in his Canadian home, Peters journeyed to London in an attempt to petition for his cause and gain the necessary funding. Following months of negotiations, Peters' petition proved successful, gaining complete financial support from Great Britain. With the assistance of British naval officer John Clarkson, Peters quickly rushed back to Nova Scotia and began recruiting members to accompany him on the colonization of what is now known as Sierra Leone.

By the time he was introduced to the Sierra Leone settlement idea, George had been living in fear of his life, or else of a rapid slide into economic servitude. Emigration to Sierra Leone as an explicit religious experiment he would have found attractive on grounds of principle alone, but when it coincided with arguments of personal safety, it was irresistible. George had been presiding at a religious meeting when John Clarkson found him. Clarkson admitted: "I never remembered to have heard the Psalms sung so charmingly in my life before"; according to Clarkson, seeing George in action convinced him that no business or person of rank was capable of deterring "him from offering up his praises to his Creator."<sup>92</sup> Clarkson made him, along with Thomas Peters and John Ball, supervisors of the evacuation and expedition. George signed up his own family of six, and forty-nine of his flock also joined him.<sup>93</sup> Together, they would follow Clarkson, "an unlikely white Pied Piper across the sea to the coasts of Africa," as one historian put it.<sup>94</sup>

A few more details may be added here concerning the state of the colonies prior to departure. Clarkson had undertaken a rapid survey of the conditions of blacks in Nova Scotia soon after arriving in the province. Appalled by what he saw, he turned from a neutral agent into an ardent propagandist. He promised himself "not to sport with the (Negroes') destiny," which he saw in a religious light.<sup>95</sup> When news reached Nova Scotia that the Sierra Leone Company was having difficulties with the chiefs, in particular with King Jimmy, calling into doubt the wisdom of setting out with a fresh batch of settlers, Clarkson, who was dining at Government House, bluntly denied the reports and cut short the

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<sup>92</sup> Kirk-Greene, "David George," 110-111.

<sup>93</sup> As Winks details, "David George helped organize the Birchtown Negroes into companies." Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 71.

<sup>94</sup> Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 60.

<sup>95</sup> Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 67.

governor with a lecture on duty. “The conversation dropped by the Governor’s pushing about a bottle.”<sup>96</sup> Thus, singlehandedly, and by means deliberate and dubious, Clarkson moved to overcome official as well as popular opposition to the settlement scheme, and in that his greatest allies were the black religious pioneers.

After a passage of seven weeks “in which we had very stormy weather,” they made landfall in Freetown in March 1792, with the high mountain, at some distance from Freetown, its peak blending with the clouds, appeared like a shifting mass to them. The settlers lost no time showing why they came, with George again stirring with the abounding energy of the entrepreneur. As he later wrote, “I preached the first Lord’s Day (it was a blessed time) under a sail, and so I did for several weeks after. We then erected a hovel for a meeting-house, which is made of posts put into the ground, and poles over our heads, which are covered with grass.”<sup>97</sup> George represented the general sense among the settlers of following ancient Israelite precedent, and they went ashore to the center of Freetown, singing,

Awake and sing the song  
Of Moses and the Lamb;  
Wake every heart and tongue,  
To praise the Saviour’s name.

An inventory of the skills and trade represented by the settlers shows perhaps the exaggerated faith in the limited means at their disposal, but it reveals, nevertheless, the bold outlines of the experiment to found a new society on African soil. The lists classify 12 as “qualified for particular trades,” trades that fell into thirty-odd categories, including sawyers, carpenters, coopers, shoemakers, smiths, butchers, bricklayers, cooks, fishermen, tailors, weavers, and one each of a brewer, sail maker, and pressing the limits of inclusiveness, chimney sweep. The roll included 127 described as “labourers acquainted with all tropical production,”<sup>98</sup> but 41 listed as “porters at wharfs and general labourers.”<sup>99</sup>

There were 385 men and 825 women and children, a number that includes children born to the settlers since the embarkation from Nova Scotia.

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<sup>96</sup> Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 68.

<sup>97</sup> George, “Account of the Life,” 483.

<sup>98</sup> R. R. Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey of the British Colonial Empire*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1948-1953, repr. Fairfield, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, 1977), vol. 1, 67.

<sup>99</sup> Kirk-Greene, “David George,” 115.

Up to April 1792, 55 men (roughly 14 percent) and 57 women and children (7 percent) had died. The first rainy season brought wide-spread illness, with about 800 blacks laid up at one time and with Europeans far more vulnerable to the tropical fever. In the first few months, the mortality rate was quite high according to official reports. One such report announced that “of the 1190 free blacks embarked at Halifax in January, 1792, the following is a return of the deaths up to the 2d of September, 1792, which in the men and women have been principally old and inform, and many of those who died on shore were landed in a diseased state. On their passage 35 men, 18 women, 7 boys and 5 girls: total 65. Since their arrival, 28 men, 28 women, 21 boys, and 22 girls: total 99. General total 164.”<sup>100</sup>

Of a different order but of equally lamentable gravity were the reports that some of the Nova Scotians left the colony to form alliances with neighboring chiefs and to engage in the slave trade. Zachary Macaulay, governor in August 1797, noted faintheartedly that “the Settlers were gradually contracting a more friendly disposition to the Slave Trade. At this moment,” he testified, “there are two in the Rio Nunez, and three in the Rio Pongo, who are actually engaged in it; to say nothing of the number who, without carrying on a Slave Trade on their own account, are employed in the service of Slave-traders, and thus are aiding and abetting in carrying it on.”<sup>101</sup>

In June of 1794, an insurrection broke out among the settlers, but it was put down without bloodshed, and six of the ringleaders were arrested and sent to England for trial. Then in September 1794, renegade French Jacobins attacked the settlement, causing widespread destruction to property. For protection, the government proposed what it called a Scheme of Premiums to encourage the settlers to move up into the mountains, where conditions for agriculture were also believed to be better. There were few takers. In September 1800, a new and most serious insurrection by the settlers threatened to overwhelm the colony. It was suppressed by the strategic landing of a large number of Maroons<sup>102</sup> with a military escort. Two of the insurgents were killed,

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<sup>100</sup> Cited in Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, vol. 1, 69. However, about a year later there was a dramatic improvement, at any rate enough to lead the company’s attending physician, Dr. Winterbottom, to assure the directors in October 1793 that the settlers “appear now to be so well accustomed to the climate that there is little reason to apprehend any great mortality among them.”

<sup>101</sup> Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, vol. 1, 73, n. 4.

<sup>102</sup> Maroons were descendants of slaves who fled to the mountains of Jamaica after the armies of Oliver Cromwell took the island and drove off the Spaniards in 1655. See

thirty-five taken prisoner, of whom three were executed and thirty-two banished. A number of insurgents also abandoned the colony and melted into the native population beyond.<sup>103</sup>

These are not the sort of events it takes to build a new Jerusalem, though if the settlement survived the drama and trauma of its early trials it would be entitled to a claim no less confident. As it was, the settlers had enough mettle to wish to defy the odds. History, in terms of proven practice or the advantages of personal circumstance, was not on their side, and many were the naysayers. With their sense of commitment, however, the settlers would invest themselves in the cause they felt worth promoting, whatever the risks and however precarious the future.

### **Leadership in Sierra Leone**

George, who quite naturally exchanged the role of preacher for that of political pioneer, gathered the concerns of the settlers and made representation before the authorities, who had rather specific ideas about what was in the best interest of the settlers. Zachary Macaulay, who had succeeded to the governorship of the colony in 1794, had little rapport with George, which may have colored his journal entries. In any case, George appeared as a defender of settler interest, and especially of what George called their “religious rights.” The officials for their part were inclined to impute motives of republican conspiracy to settler restlessness, so fresh in their minds was the recent revolt of the American colonies against the Crown. “America” in colonial circles represented new world insubordination, and accordingly, care was taken to scotch any ideas of republican sympathy. But such care did little to diminish the social power of a redeemed, emancipated, and industrious black community now permanently ensconced on the continent of its origin.

David George continued to demonstrate the fact by pressing on the religious and political fronts at the same time<sup>104</sup>, arguing that his people’s status before God as carrying no stigma had its earthly counterpart in liberty without prejudice. On George’s visit to London in 1793, the colony chaplain, Melville Horne, sent a letter of introduction with him to John Newton, as well as to other

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Richard Price, ed. *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, 3d ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>103</sup> Kuczynski, *Demographic Survey*, vol. 1, 73.

<sup>104</sup> According to Winks, George continued to advocate their religion even throughout political turmoil: “The preachers, especially George, counselled resignation and more prayer.” Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 75

well-known philanthropists. Newton (1725-1807), a hymn wright, perhaps most famous for “Amazing Grace,” had been a slave dealer on the West African coast until he underwent a dramatic conversion experience.<sup>105</sup> On his London trip, George carried a petition on settler grievances<sup>106</sup> and made contact with what Horne’s letter described as “Christians of all denominations,” as well as with the Baptists, trying to stir up interest for the cause in West Africa. When he returned to Sierra Leone, he wrote to his English friends words of encouragement garnished with exhortation. “I want to know,” he persisted, “how religion flourishes in London.” In the same letter, he sounded a theme that might be considered the hallmark of faith in the personal enterprise the settlers brought with them to West Africa. “I am very glad to tell you,” he confided, “that the work of God revives here among our people, and I hope it will begin among the NATIVES OF AFRICA.” In his view, the work of God revived the work of social rehabilitation and moral reform, with blacks at the helm, and God’s spirit thus permeated the entire outlook of these settlers. Brought low by enslavement, broken by removal, and then stripped of any chance of personal recovery by the vagaries of multiple ownership, the settlers saw in the whole enterprise something of a second chance, which, if it worked out, would create a useful precedent for the rest of Africa.

David George remained in Freetown for the rest of his life, preaching the Lord’s word and scorning efforts against the ruling Sierra Leone Company. He died in 1810 at the age of 67.

Lamin Sanneh

### Source:

Sanneh, L. *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West*

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<sup>105</sup> John Newton, *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade* (London, 1788). Excerpted as “A Reformed Slave Trader’s Regrets,” in David Northrup, ed., *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath, 1994), 80-89. For a theological study of Newton, see D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Newton was not an antislavery activist: he merely regretted his personal role in the cruelties of the trade.

<sup>106</sup> Schama provides the following explanation for the petition that David George carried to London: “[The] petition addressed Henry Thornton, Thomas Clarkson, and the rest of the directors, asking them to return their governor [John Clarkson] to them and setting out in their own words just what he had meant, what he had done, and what he had given.” Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings*, 361.



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This biography, uploaded in 2019, was excerpted, adapted, and enlarged from Lamin Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) by Mylene Oyarzabal, a student researcher in the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) at Boston University, under the supervision of Dr. Michèle Sigg, DACB Associate Director.

**George, David**  
**1742-1810**  
**Baptist**  
**Sierra Leone**

David George was an early African American promoter of mission. With energy and dedication, George urged the importance of mission at a time when Protestant Christianity was far from committed to it and when the organizational basis for mission was virtually nonexistent. With indomitable will and a preparedness to take risk that was born of faith, he became leader of the outreach to Africa that opened a new chapter in the modern history of the continent.

George was born to slave parents on a plantation in Essex County, Virginia. At an early age he ran away but soon after passed into the hands of a new master in South Carolina. He converted to evangelical Christianity and became a colleague of the black preacher George Liele, a veteran missionary to Jamaica and the Bahamas. When the American Revolutionary War broke out in 1776, George joined the British side and in 1782 was demobilized with other black loyalists to Nova Scotia, Canada, where he continued his preaching activity. He impressed the British authorities with his leadership qualities, and he was appointed a leader of an expedition to repatriate the black loyalists to West Africa. They made landfall in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in March 1792, the commencement of what the English evangelical cause, led by William Wilberforce, termed “a Christian experiment.” It established in tropical Africa a bridgehead from where the trade in slaves could be attacked and the rest of the continent reached for the gospel.

In Freetown George combined the roles of preacher, community leader, official representative with the British authorities, humanitarian campaigner against the slave trade, and lightning rod for missionary awakening among Baptists in England, where he visited in 1793. He and William Carey were thus active at about the same time, though George by then had accumulated an abundance of field experience. By the time of George’s death in Freetown the cause was virtually assured-this was four years after the Williamstown (Massachusetts) Haystack Prayer Meeting, an event that lit the American missionary impulse. The success of the Sierra Leone “Christian experiment,” in which George’s hand was so prominent, led to the abolition of the slave trade and the peaceful, economic mobilization of Africa for commerce, civilization, and Christianity.

Lamin Sanneh

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## Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa

Compiled by Beth Restrick, Head, BU African Studies Library

Sanneh, Lamin O. and Akintunde E. Akinade. *A New Day: Essays on World Christianity in Honor of Lamin Sanneh*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010. \$98.70. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) ISBN 978-1433104565; 1433104563

**Description:** The unprecedented resurgence, renewal, and rebirth of twenty-first century Christianity in postcolonial societies, such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America, calls for new insights, methodologies, and paradigms since the West can no longer be regarded as the sole citadel and cradle of the Christian faith. The Christian message has been reshaped and re-appropriated in different contexts and cultures and, through this cross-cultural transmission and transformation, it has become a world religion. Contextualizing the Christian faith also entails decolonizing its theology, precepts, and dogma. These efforts continue to engender new initiatives and efforts in the intercultural, inter-confessional, intercontinental, and interreligious dimensions of world Christianity.

*A New Day* is a collection of essays in honor of Lamin Sanneh, one of the most adamant advocates and apostles of the radical change in the face of Christianity in the twenty-first century. The essays in this book by recognized scholars deal with issues, themes, and perspectives that are important for understanding Christianity as a world religious movement. (Amazon.com)

Becker, Felicitas; Joel Cabrita; Marie Rodet. *Religion, Media, and Marginality in Modern Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2017. \$65.55. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) ISBN: 978-0821423035; 0821423037

**Description:** In recent years, anthropologists, historians, and others have been drawn to study the profuse and creative usages of digital media by religious movements. At the same time, scholars of Christian Africa have long been concerned with the history of textual culture, the politics of Bible translation, and the status of the vernacular in Christianity. Students of Islam in Africa have similarly examined politics of knowledge, the transmission of learning in written form, and the influence of new media. Until now, however, these arenas—Christianity and Islam, digital media and “old” media—have been studied separately. (Publisher’s Summary)



Pratt, Douglas. *Christian Engagement with Islam: Ecumenical Journeys since 1910*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017. \$98.53. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) ISBN: 9789004338012; 9004338012

**Description:** Why did the Christian Church, in the twentieth century, engage in dialogue with Islam? What has been the ecumenical experience? What is happening now? Such questions underlie Douglas Pratt's *Christian Engagement with Islam: Ecumenical Journeys since 1910*. Pratt charts recent Christian (WCC and Vatican) engagement with Islam up to the early 21st century and examines the ecumenical initiatives of Africa's PROCMURA, "Building Bridges," and the German "Christian-Muslim Theological Forum," together with responses to the 2007 "Common Word" letter.

Between them, Islam and Christianity represent over half the earth's population. Their history of interaction, positive and negative, impacts widely still today. Contentious issues remain real enough, yet the story and ongoing reality of contemporary Christian-Muslim engagement is both exciting and encouraging. (Abstract)

Mustapha, Abdul Raufu. *Creed & Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations & Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2018. \$13.17 (pbk), \$68.24 (hard). [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) ISBN 9781847011060; 1847011063; 9781847011428; 184701142X

**Description:** Nigerian society has long been perceived as divided along religious lines, between Muslims and Christians, but alongside this there is an equally important polarization within the Muslim population in beliefs, rituals and sectarian allegiance. This important book highlights the important issue of intra-Muslim pluralism and conflict in Nigeria. Conflicting interpretations of texts and contexts have led to fragmentation within northern Nigerian Islam, and different Islamic sects have often resorted to violence against each other in pursuit of "the right path." The doctrinal justification of violence was first perfected against other Muslim groups, before being extended to non-Muslims: conflict between Muslim groups therefore preceded the violence between Muslims and Christians. It will be impossible to manage the relationship between the latter, without addressing the schisms within the Muslim community itself.

Refuting a "clash of civilizations" between Muslims and Christians, the authors of this new study highlight the multiplicity of Muslim and Christian groups contending for influence and relevance, and the doctrinal, political, and

historical drivers of conflict and violence between and within them. They analyze three of the most contentious issues: the conflicts in Jos; the Boko Haram insurgency; and the challenges of legal pluralism posed by the declaration of full Sharia law in 12 Muslim majority states. Finally, they suggest appropriate and effective policy responses at local, national and international levels, discussing the importance of informal institutions as avenues for peace-building and the complementarities between local and national dynamics in the search for peace. (Amazon.com)

### **Open Access – Dissertations**

Ngodji, Martin. “**The applicability of the translatability and interpretation theory of Sanneh and Bediako: the case of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in northern Namibia.**” University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg. Thesis (Ph.D.) 2010. <http://hdl.handle.net/10413/624>

### **Abstract**

This thesis contends that the translatability and interpretation theories are what allow the Bible and its message to be accepted by and relevant to all people in the world, including those in the northern belt of Namibia, among Ovawambo and Okavango communities. This thesis deals with the applicability of the translatability theories in the process of the translation of the Bible into Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama and Rukwangali, a project undertaken by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN). The thesis starts with the introduction, which shows how the work was carried out, and its objectives are described in chapter one. Chapter two deals with the translatability and interpretation theories of the Bible as represented by Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako. Lamin Sanneh (1989) and Kwame Bediako (1997) speak of the translatability theory of the Bible and of Christianity as a whole, which allows everyone to speak of the wonderful work of God in his/her own tongue. Translatability is the theoretical framework of this thesis. The theory aims at translating the Bible from one language to another, and goes further to include the social sphere of the person. The translatability theory is what makes the translation process in any vernacular language relevant and acceptable. The translatability theory not only includes the language, but also the cultural aspects of the people.

Barnes, Jonathan Spencer. *Partnership in Christian Mission: A History of the Protestant Missionary Movement.* University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg. Thesis (PhD) 2010. <http://hdl.handle.net/10413/487>

## **Abstract**

Despite the fact that partnership has been a pronounced goal in ecumenical relationships for over eighty years, the realization of mutuality, solidarity, and *koinonia* has, even until present times, proven to be illusive. This fact raises a number of questions. First, why is this so? What were the historical antecedents that led to the concept of partnership? What were the original secular and religious contexts in which the term partnership was used, and how has its meaning been understood and contested over time? And secondly, what can we learn from this history? Are there any problematic issues or themes that repeatedly appear in the narrative, causing churches to continually fall short in these relationships?

In seeking to answer these questions, this thesis will trace the history of ecumenical partnerships from its antecedents, found in the beginning of the modern Protestant missionary movement, through to current times, focusing on the relationships between churches historically involved in the International Missionary Council (IMC) and, after 1961 when the IMC integrated with the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME). Importantly, Lamin Sanneh's typology of churches as either Global (the churches of the North or Western world, also formerly known as "sending" or "older" churches) or World (the churches of the South and East, formerly known as "receiving" or "younger" churches) will be the lens used to understand these ecumenical relationships. Using this typology, each of the chapters that form the main body of this research focuses on a different era of history and will follow a similar pattern. The first section of each chapter serves to situate the church's partnership discourse in its secular setting, paying special attention to issues pertaining to North/South political and economic power, as well as how power has been contested. The remainder of each chapter will trace the ecumenical history of partnership, focusing especially on the discussions and findings of world ecumenical mission meetings, starting with The Ecumenical Conference on Foreign Missions in New York in 1900. While the main emphasis will be on these ecumenical meetings and their findings, attention will also be given to individuals and events that played significant roles in the development of the understanding and practice of partnership. Significantly, at the conclusion of each chapter four prominent themes or issues will be traced which continually reappear in the narrative and make partnership difficult to realize. When reviewing this history, it is evident that the term partnership was a product of colonial times and therefore captive to colonial and, later, neocolonial interpretations. However, it is also clear that from the very beginnings of the

modern Protestant missionary movement some church and missionary leaders, from both the Global and World churches, have sought to ground partnership in Biblical, egalitarian, and liberationist understandings. While this can serve to encourage those involved in partnership today, the historical analysis also shows plainly four key themes or issues that continually make the attainment of equitable relationships impossible to realize; namely, the home base, humanitarianism and development, authority, and rhetoric and reality. It is clear that the differences in worldviews, as described by Sanneh's typology, have had and continue to have detrimental effects on the relationships between the churches of Global and World Christianity. Given this history, it is asserted in this thesis that for ecumenical partnerships to have any chance of overcoming these issues, the churches of Global Christianity must stop seeing mission as expansion and lose the desire to remake others in their image; in short, they must become, in their worldview and ethos, World churches.



**Lamin Sanneh (1942-2019)**



The **DACB** is collecting biographies of

## **MUSICIANS, ARTISTS, WOMEN.**

Musicians, artists, and women play an essential role in giving voice to African Christianity in its many local expressions.

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