



Ahmadu Bamba's Qur'ānic Commentaries: Characteristics and Methodologies

*Ahmedü Bamba'nın Kur'an Tefsirleri:
Özellikler ve Yöntemler*

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Abstract

This article examines the Qur'anic exegesis of Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba Mbacke (d. 1927), founder of the *Murīdiyya* Sufi order, with a focus on his interpretive methodologies and the distinctive features that define his engagement with the Qur'ān. While Bamba is widely recognized for his spiritual authority, moral reformism, and socio-political legacy within colonial Senegal, his intellectual contributions to *tafsīr* have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. By situating his work within the broader context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century West African Islamic scholarship, the study explores how Bamba combined exoteric (*ẓāhirī*) and esoteric (*ishārī*) approaches to produce a synthesis of juridical precision, linguistic mastery, and mystical insight. Through an analysis of his writings, the article highlights his creative use of inherited exegetical traditions and his emphasis on spiritual transformation as a goal of Qur'anic understanding. It further examines the continuing influence of his *tafsīr* on *Murīd* thought and Senegalese Islam, underscoring Bamba's enduring contribution to the renewal of Qur'anic interpretation in the Islamic West.

Keywords: Ahmadu Bamba, *tafsīr*, Sufism, *Murīdiyya*, Senegal, West African Islam

Özet

Bu makale, Mürīdiyye sûfî tarikatının kurucusu olan Şeyh Ahmedü Bamba Mbacke'nin (ö. 1927) Kur'an tefsirini inceleyerek, onun yorumlama metodolojilerine ve Kur'an'a yaklaşımını tanımlayan ayırt edici

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özelliklere odaklanmaktadır. Ahmedü Bamba, sömürge dönemi Senegal’inde sahip olduğu mânevî otoritesi, ahlâkî reformculuğu ve sosyo-politik mirasıyla geniş ölçüde tanınmakla birlikte, tefsir alanındaki entelektüel katkıları, akademik ilgiden görece sınırlı biçimde nasibini almıştır. Bu çalışma, onun eserlerini 19. yüzyıl sonu ve 20. yüzyıl başı Batı Afrika İslam ilim geleneği bağlamında konumlandırarak, Bamba’nın zahirî ve işârî yaklaşımları birleştirerek fikhî titizlik, dilsel ustalık ve tasavvufî sezgiyi harmanlayan özgün bir sentez ne şekilde ortaya koyduğunu araştırmaktadır. Yazarın kaleme aldığı metinler üzerinden yapılan çözümlemeler, onun miras aldığı tefsir geleneklerini yaratıcı biçimde yeniden yorumladığını ve Kur’ân anlayışında ruhsal dönüşümü temel bir amaç olarak öne çıkardığını göstermektedir. Makale ayrıca, Bamba’nın tefsirinin Murîd düşüncesi ve Senegal İslamı üzerindeki kalıcı etkisini inceleyerek, onun İslamî Batı’daki Kur’ân yorum geleneğini yenilemedeki kalıcı katkısını vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ahmedü Bamba, tefsir, tasavvuf, Murîdiyye, Senegal, Batı Afrika İslamı

1. Introduction

From the earliest generations of Muslims, the interpretation of the Qur’ân (*tafsîr*) has stood at the heart of Islamic intellectual life. The Companions of the Prophet drew on their linguistic mastery, spiritual insight, and proximity to revelation to clarify its meanings. Their efforts, combined with the Prophet’s own explanations, laid the foundations for *tafsîr bi al-ma’tûr* (exegesis based on transmitted reports). Figures such as Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn Mas‘ūd, ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib, and Ubayy ibn Ka‘b shaped this tradition, which was later complemented by *tafsîr bi al-ra’y* (exegesis through reasoned opinion) under well-defined scholarly conditions.¹ In this period, another form of exegesis also appeared, known as *tafsîr bi al-ishāra* (esoteric interpretation). It was believed to be a special kind of knowledge granted by Allah to certain worshippers, and therefore not open to everyone.² Together, these approaches produced a vast exegetical heritage that became a cornerstone of the Islamic sciences.

Within this broader history, the Senegalese scholar and Sufi master Shaykh Ahmadu

Bamba Mbacke (d. 1927) represents a unique voice. Best known as the founder of the *Murîdiyya* order, Bamba was a jurist, theologian, linguist, traditionist, and exegete whose writings reflect a synthesis of scholarly rigor and spiritual depth. His intellectual legacy includes works on jurisprudence, theology, ḥadīth, linguistics, and an extensive corpus of Sufi poetry. Yet despite this breadth, scholarship on Bamba—especially in Western academia—has concentrated primarily on his spiritual authority, his role as a religious reformer, and the socio-political dimensions of the *Murîdiyya*. His contributions to Qur’ānic exegesis, by contrast, remain comparatively underexplored.

This article seeks to address that gap by examining Bamba’s *tafsîr*, with particular attention to his exegetical methodologies and their defining characteristics. It asks how Bamba positioned *tafsîr* within his intellectual project, how he engaged with earlier exegetical traditions, and how his Sufi orientation shaped his interpretive practices. By analyzing both his exoteric (*ẓāhirī*) and esoteric (*ishārī*) approaches, this study highlights the ways in which he combined conventional hermeneutical tools with Sufi inspiration, while remaining deeply embed-

1 See, Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Quran*, (Cairo: *al-Hay’at al-Miṣriyya al-‘amma lil Kitāb*, 1973), 4: 200-226.

2 See, Sahl ibn Abdullah al-Tustarī, *Tafsîr al-Quran al-‘Azīm*, (Cairo: *Dār al-Haram lil-Turath*, 2004), 76.

ded in the Senegalese scholarly context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The article proceeds in four stages. Chapter Two situates Bamba within his intellectual and historical environment, outlining his scholarly formation, key influences, and the Senegalese milieu of his time. Chapter Three examines his conception of *tafsīr*, his use of terminology, his relationship to earlier exegetes, and the epistemological sources he employed. Chapter Four focuses on his exegetical methodologies, particularly his use of literal and Sufi allegorical approaches, with examples from his writings. Chapter Five considers the impact of his *tafsīr* on his disciples, the *Murīdiyya* order, and Senegalese society, as well as its enduring legacy. The conclusion synthesizes these findings and underscores Bamba's contribution to renewing Qur'ānic exegesis in West Africa, while pointing toward avenues for comparative research between *Murīd tafsīr* and other exegetical traditions of the Islamic West.

2. Ahmadu Bamba: A Short Biography³

Ahmadu Bamba Mbacke, known as *Khadīm ar-Rasūl* (the Servant of the Messenger), is the founder of the *Murīdiyya* Sufi order in Senegal. This Islamic Sufi path emphasizes

faith, Islam, and spiritual excellence, urging devoted submission to God and stripping away worldly distractions, urging followers to seek God's pleasure after allegiance and guided behavior under a perfect mentor (*Shaykh Kāmil*).⁴ Bamba was born into a renowned religious and scholarly environment in the region of *Bawol* in central-western Senegal in 1853.⁵ He grew up immersed in Qur'ānic education and had substantial knowledge of *Sharī'a* sciences and language under his family's guidance. His thirst for knowledge led him on numerous journeys across the country to seek wisdom and experiences from scholars.⁶

Ahmadu Bamba began his educational activities as an assistant teacher in his father's school, where he displayed extraordinary teaching and writing skills, earning admiration, especially from his father, who eventually entrusted him with overseeing a significant portion of the school's administration and teaching.⁷ After the death of his father in 1883, Ahmadu Bamba began to chart his own independent spiritual path. He was initiated into the *Qādiriyya*, *Shādhiliyya*, and *Tijjāniyya* brotherhoods, practicing each for years and mastering their teachings, but ultimately found them insufficient to quench his spiritual thirst. Turning directly to God, he adopted the Qur'ān as his central *wird* and came to realize that true proximity to God could only be attained through the light of the Prophet Muhammad. His journey unfolded in three stages: engagement with Sufi orders, transcendence of their practices in favor of the

3 Primary sources for Ahmadu Bamba's Biography are:

a) Muhammad Abdullah Al-'Alawi, *Nafahāt al-Miskiyya fī al-Sīrati al-Mbakkīyya*, edited by Mohammed Bamba Drame-Abu Madyan Shu'ayb Thiaw, (Rabat: Dār al-Amān, 2019).

b) Muhammad al-Bashīr Mbacke, *Minan al-Bāqī al-Qadīm fī Sīrati al-Sheikh al-Khadīm*, edited by Dr. Muhammad Shakrun, (Cairo: Dar Al-Muqattam for Publishing and Distribution, 2017).

c) Muhammad al-Amīn Diop ad-Daghānī, *Irwaa'u an-Nadīm min 'Adhbi Ḥubbi al-Khadīm*, edited by a group of researchers, (Rabat: al-Ma'ārif al-Jadīda Printing Press, 2017).

d) Rawḍu al-Rayāḥīn, *al-Sheikh Ahmadu Bamba Mbacke Abdullah awa Khadīmu Rasūlihī*, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr for Printing and Publishing, 2022).

4 Muhammad al-Murtada Mbacke, *al-Murīdiyya al-haqīqa wa al-wāqī' wa āfāq al-mustaqbal*, (Rabat: al-Ma'ārif al-Jadīda Printing Press, 2011), 97.

5 Rawḍu, *Sheikh Ahmadu Bamba*, 19.

6 Ibid. 27.

7 See Cheikh Anta Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Amadu Bamba and the Founding of the Murīdiyya of Senegal, 1853–1913* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 54–55.

Qur'ān, and finally devotion to God through the Prophet. This represented a radical departure from the spiritual norms of his age, emphasizing imitation of the Prophet over loyalty to Sufi founders. Through this process he evolved from teacher to spiritual guide, laying the foundation of the *Murīdiyya*.⁸

Ahmadu Bamba gathered the students and said: "Let whoever has accompanied us for only learning (mere learning of knowledge) go where they wish, and seek what suits them. And whoever desires what we desire, let them hasten in our path and abide by our command." This declaration caused a significant stir among those deciding whether to stay or depart, eventually resulting in a select few remaining and becoming the initial nucleus of the *Murīdiyya* Sufi order.⁹

According to Ahmadu Bamba, the Prophet Muhammad instructed him: "Raise your companions through high determination (*al-himma*), not only teaching." Embracing this directive, Ahmadu Bamba pushed them to exert themselves through rigorous exercises, fasting, frequent remembrance of God, strict observance of purity, and seclusion from people, particularly women, surpassing others in their commitment.¹⁰

As groups responded to his call and rallied around him, it incited resentment among his detractors. This led to suspicions and allegations made to the French colonial authorities dominating the region then.¹¹ The French viewed him as a threat to their control. Nevertheless, Bamba's popularity provoked jealousy among traditional religious leaders, many of whom lost disciples to him and, as close collaborators of the French, seized every

opportunity to denounce him as subversive, thereby fueling colonial suspicions and hostility.¹² Conflicts ensued between Bamba and the colonial power, which resulted in his exile to Gabon from 1895 to 1902, then to Mauritania from 1903 to 1907, followed by a period in the area of Djolof in Senegal from 1907 to 1912, and eventually the house arrest in the city of Diourbel from 1912 until his passing in 1927. His body was laid to rest in his city, Touba, where his shrine became a renowned place of pilgrimage.¹³

Ahmadu Bamba's approach to Sufism was marked by a discerning engagement with its heritage, embracing what was beneficial while setting aside elements he found problematic. He grounded Sufi principles firmly in the Qur'ān and Sunna, reviving a practical and lived Sufism in Senegal while steering clear of abstract or overly philosophical interpretations.¹⁴ Bamba's writings consistently eschew reliance on *shaṭḥ*-style authorities, grounding Sufi concepts firmly within the purified *Sharī'a* and rejecting readings that may imply union (*ittiḥād*) or incarnation (*ḥulūl*). For example, in a *fatwā* he explains *al-fanā' az-zāhir* as remaining within the circle of *Sharī'a* and *al-fanā' al-bāṭin* as an inner stillness before the illuminated *ḥaqīqa*; he further distinguishes *al-Aḥadiyya* (removing everything from the heart except God) from *al-Wāḥidiyya* (removing attachment to anything other than God), and treats *al-Maḥw* as absence of concern except for Allah's reward

8 Ahmed Pirzada, *The Epistemology of Ahmadou Bamba* (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2003), 12-16.

9 ad-Daghānī, *Irwā' u an-nadīm*, 75.

10 Muhammad al-Bachir, *Minanu al-Bāqī al-adīm*, 63.

11 ad-Daghānī, *Irwā' u an-nadīm*, 109-111.

12 Pirzada, *The Epistemology of Ahmadou Bamba*, 16-17.

13 See, Oludamini Ogunnaike, "Learn, Live, Love: Ahmadu Bamba's Practical Epistemology and Pedagogy," 2015, 11-16, accessed September 7, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/16055702/Learn_Live_Love_Ahmadu_Bamba_s_Practical_Epistemology_and_Pedagogy

14 See Moustapha Diope al-Kokkiyyu, *al-'Umda fi naẓariyyati al-khidma* (Rabat: Maṭba'atu al-Ma'ārif al-Jadīda, 2019), 163; Muhammad Gallay Ndiaye, *Sheikh Ahmadu Bamba Sabīl as-Salām* (Rabat: Maṭba'at Ma'ārif al-Jadīda, 2011), 10.

rather than ontological absorption.¹⁵ These formulations illustrate a careful, selective engagement with the Sufi heritage that preserves devotional depth while avoiding heterodox implications.

Ahmadu Bamba's Sufi thought was shaped by a range of influential scholars and traditions, emphasizing practical application over theoretical speculation. Classical figures such as Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111), Sheikh Ahmad Zarrūq (d. 899/1493), Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), and 'Abdu-l-Wahhāb ash-Sha'rānī (d. 972/1565) provided him with profound spiritual and ethical insights that he later synthesized in his writings. His intellectual formation was also significantly influenced by the Kunta family of West Africa—especially Sheikh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntīyyu (d. 1226/1811) and his son Sheikh Muhammad al-Khalīfa al-Kuntīyyu (d. 1242/1826)—who offered him models of ethics, piety, and the practical implementation of Sufi principles, reflected in works like *Masālik al-jinān* and *Dūnaka yā maḥmūd*. Additionally, other Mauritanian scholars such as Sheikh Muhammad ibn al-Mukhtār al-Yadālī (d. 1165/1752), whose *Khātimat at-Taṣawwuf* Bamba versified, and Sheikh Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Ḥājī ash-Shinqīṭī (d. 1252/1836), whose treatise on manners and ethics informed Bamba's *Nahj qaḍā' al-ḥāj*, contributed key dimensions to his spiritual and intellectual legacy.¹⁶

3. Ahmadu Bamba and the Science of Tafsīr: Epistemology and Sources

Ahmadu Bamba consistently emphasized the pursuit of beneficial knowledge, encouraging his followers to travel widely in its pursuit for the sake of Allah. He clarified that knowledge is not uniform but exists in a hierarchy of importance: “The best of knowledge is the knowledge of *Tawḥīd*, then comes *Tafsīr* and the *Hadith*, and after them comes *Fiqh*, and after them the instruments like grammar.”¹⁷ For him, the noblest knowledge is *Tawḥīd*, since “the honor of knowledge is linked to the majesty of the known,” and nothing is greater than knowing Allah. After *Tawḥīd* comes *Tafsīr*, as the Qur'ān is the ultimate source of divine guidance. This is followed by *Hadith*, because of its direct link to the Prophet, and then *Fiqh*, which governs worship and practice, with the auxiliary sciences serving as supportive tools.¹⁸

This hierarchy provided the framework for Bamba's program of mass education, which he saw as essential to Muslim revival in the context of French colonial domination. The first discipline was theology (*‘ilm al-tawḥīd*), where he worked within the Ash'arite paradigm to offer Muslims a simple and accessible intellectual grounding in faith, free from divisive polemics. The next step was *Fiqh*, regulating acts of worship such as prayer, fasting, *zakāt*, and pilgrimage (*Establish prayer, give zakāt, and bow with those who bow*, al-Baqara 2/43). Advanced students were encouraged to study not only their own *madhhab* but also the rulings and methods of the other three Sunnī schools, thereby achieving both breadth and depth of understanding. Mastery of Arabic

15 See Ahmad Bamba Mbacke, *al-Majmu'atu aṣ-Ṣughra*, ed. the Khadimīyya Association for Researchers and Scholars, (Rabat: Dar al-Ma'arif al-Jadida Printing Press, 2018), 85.

16 See Khadim Cheikhouna Mbacke, “Ahmadu Bamba and the Preceding Sufi Heritage: Tracing the Intellectual Sources of Bamba's Sufi Writings,” *Journal of the Institute for Sufi Studies* 4, 1 (2025): 75-96.

17 Ahmadu Bamba Mbacke, *Masālik al-jinān*, ed. Rawḍu-r-Rayāḥīn (Rabat: Maṭba'at al-Ma'arif al-jadida, 2017), 66.

18 Shu'ayb Thiaw, “*ash-Sheikh al-Khadīm wa Tafsīr al-Quran*,” Shu'ayb Thiaw's blog, accessed April 18, 2025, <https://borommadyana.wordpress.com/2014/06/>.

was also essential, as it enabled direct engagement with the Qur'ān and Hadith, the two foundational sources of Islamic knowledge.¹⁹

Beyond these exoteric sciences, Bamba emphasized the necessity of *ma'rifa* (gnosis), transcending rational knowledge to reach trans-rational, spiritual insight. This higher stage of learning could not be attained through books alone but required the companionship of an enlightened teacher who would guide the seeker through the obstacles of ego, desire, Satan, and worldly distractions. The Qur'ān itself alludes to this layered knowledge: *And fear Allah, and Allah will teach you* (al-Baqara 2/282) and *And He taught Adam the names, all of them* (al-Baqara 2/31), indicating that true knowledge is both a divine gift and a process of purification. For Bamba, this wisdom-transmission between teacher and pupil was indispensable, as only through spiritual discipline under guidance could seekers move from intellectual understanding to lived realization.²⁰

In the preceding paragraphs, the importance of the science of *tafsīr* in Ahmadu Bamba's thought has been highlighted, as he placed it second in significance, immediately after the knowledge of *tawhīd*. Additionally, Bamba was known for dedicating himself to studying *tafsīr* books consistently, expressing his addiction to them both morning and evening until he became proficient. His Mauritanian disciple Sheikh Mohammad 'Abdullah al-'Alawī (d.1954) said, "Ahmadu Bamba memorized the Qur'ān with its seven readings and then studied various *tafāsīr*, delving deep into their meanings, thus showcasing his unparalleled expertise in the field."²¹ His dedication was not limited to reading interpretative books; he also prayed for Allah to

grant him understanding and mastery of the interpretation of His book. He said: "Grant me (O Allah) interpretation (*at-ta'wīl*) and explanation (*tafsīr*) and make them easy for me." He then emphasized that Allah had opened for him the door of knowledge and generosity in the field of *tafsīr*, saying: "He (Allah) taught me *at-ta'wīl* and *tafsīr*."²²

From these verses, we understand that Ahmadu Bamba was among the scholars who distinguished the term *tafsīr* (explanation) from *ta'wīl* (interpretation), a subtle issue discussed in the science of the principles of Qur'ānic exegesis. As Sheikh 'Abdullāh ibn Fūdī explains in the introduction to his *tafsīr Diyā' al-Ta'wīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl*, "*tafsīr* is the certainty that Allah intended a particular meaning by a word, which can only be affirmed through transmission from the Prophet, while *ta'wīl* is the preference for one possible meaning without absolute certainty, and Allah knows best."²³ Ahmadu Bamba manifested this God-given capacity in his poetry: "My Master has taught me the words,"²⁴ meaning the words of the Qur'ān. He also stated, "The One who revealed the Book interprets it for me."²⁵ Elsewhere he added, "He guides me to *ta'wīl* and *tafsīr* — the One who has made the difficult easy for me,"²⁶ invoking divine guidance in attaining true understanding.

Ahmadu Bamba regarded divine inspiration as a primary source for much of his exegesis: as his poems state, "He taught me *ta'wīl* and *tafsīr*," indicating that God Himself opened

19 See Pirzada, *The Epistemology of Ahmadou Bamba*, 192.

20 See Ibid. 193-194.

21 al-'Alawī, *Nafahāt al-Miskiyya*, 4.

22 Ahmadu Bamba, "*Qurānan 'Arabiyyan*," (Unpublished manuscript, private collection of Khadim Cheikhouna Mbacke, Senegal: Touba, nd.).

23 Sheikh 'Abdullāh ibn Fūdī, *Diyā' at-Ta'wīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl*, (Cairo: Matba'at al-Istiḳāma, 1961), 1: 7.

24 Rawdu ar-Rayāḥīn, *Dirāsāt Ḥawla-l-Murīdiyya*, 38.

25 Ibid.

26 Shu'ayb Thiaw, "*ash-Sheikh al-Khadīm wa Tafsīr al-Quran*," 4.

the doors of interpretive insight for him. This claim of heavenly impartation is illustrated in his collection *al-Majmū'atu aṣ-Ṣughrā*, where he gives intuitive renderings of several disconnected letters and surah names, for example, he said that Allah interpreted him (*Alif-Lām-Mīm*) as “I have bequeathed to you the Book,” “I taught you the Book,” and “I granted you the mastery of the Book”; He interpreted (*al-Baqara*) as revealing “the secret of beneficial knowledge” to him; and (*Luqmān*) as “I taught you wisdom”; and he renders (*Ṭā-Sīn-Mīm*) as “I purified you from whatever hinders you from My signs.”²⁷

At the same time, Bamba did not work in isolation: he frequently consulted and relied upon earlier *tafsīr* works, a practice visible across his letters, responses, and even his poetry, where he names or alludes to exegetical authorities. In short, his methodological stance combined claimed divinely granted insight with close engagement with the established corpus of Qur'ānic exegesis.

As Dr. Sam Bousso notes, “He devoted great care to studying the science of *tafsīr* and acquiring its books. Evidence of this is that, a few years ago, a copy of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* was found in which he had written the first half by his own hand, while his disciple Sheikh Ḥajj Sarīn Mbacke Bousso, may Allah be pleased with them both, wrote the second half.”²⁸ In addition, Ahmadu Bamba directly transmitted material from earlier *tafsīr* works without intermediaries, including *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz fī Tafsīr Kitāb Allah al-'Azīz* by Sheikh Muḥammad ibn al-Mukhtār ibn Muḥammad ibn Sa'īd ibn al-Mukhtār al-Yadālī ash-Shinqītī (d. 1165/1752), *Rūḥ al-Bayān* by Sheikh Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī Bursawī (d. 1137/1725), and *Madārik al-Tanzīl wa Ḥaqā'iq al-Ta'wīl* by Imam al-Nasafī (d. 710/1310). This direct

engagement with classical *tafsīr* texts is evident in several of his works preserved within *al-Majmū'atu al-Kubrā*.

In addition, among the remaining *tafsīr* works preserved in Ahmadu Bamba's library in the city of Touba (Dar al-Quddus) and in his library in Diourbel are the following: *Tāj at-Tafsīr li-Kalām al-Malik al-Kabīr* by Imam Muḥammad 'Uthmān ibn al-Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr al-Mīrghnī al-Mahjūb al-Makkī (d. 1267/1851); *Lubbāb al-Ta'wīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* by Imam 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Baghdādī al-Ṣūfī, known as al-Khāzin (d. 741/1340), with its famous *tafsīr* *Madārik al-Tanzīl wa Ḥaqā'iq al-Ta'wīl* by Imam Abū al-Barakāt 'Abdullāh ibn Aḥmad ibn Maḥmūd al-Nasafī (d. 710/1310); *al-Fawā'id al-Jamīla 'alā al-Āyāt al-Jalīla* by Sheikh Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Ṭalḥa al-Rajrājī al-Shushlūwī (d. 899/1494); *Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb* by Imam Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), along with the marginal *tafsīr* by the scholar Abū al-Mas'ūd, printed in 1888 in Egypt; and a manuscript of *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*.²⁹ The presence of these works in his library indicates the extensive availability of *tafsīr* sources to Ahmadu Bamba.

At the same time, while no Sufi Qur'ān commentaries are explicitly listed among Bamba's known library holdings, nor directly cited in his writings, a close reading of some of his *tafsīrs* suggests that he was also drawing—at least implicitly—on the insights of earlier esoteric commentators. Subtle resonances with works such as *Ḥaqā'iq al-Tafsīr* by Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān as-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm* by Sahl ibn 'Abd Allāh at-Tustarī (d. 283/896), and *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* by Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) point to his engagement with the Sufi hermeneutical tradition. Thus, while the exoteric

27 Mbacke, *al-Majmū'atu aṣ-Ṣughra*, 45.

28 Rawdu ar-Rayāhīn, *Dirāsāt Ḥawla-l-Murīdiyya*, 39.

29 Rawḍu, *Sheikh Ahmadu Bamba*, 455-456.

sources clearly dominate, the esoteric strand is not absent, and its influence becomes more apparent when we turn to Bamba's own *tafsīr ishārī*.

All these serve as a rich testament to Ahmadu Bamba's profound care for the science of *tafsīr*. However, there are some narrations that Bamba prohibited the interpretation of the Qur'ān. This can be explained by saying that Ahmadu Bamba's stance on interpreting the Qur'ān was not a blanket rejection of the study of the science of *tafsīr* but rather a caution against unqualified individuals interpreting the Qur'ān without the necessary qualifications, preventing the danger of interpreting the Qur'ān based on personal opinions or desires. This assertion is substantiated by the forthcoming examination of his *tafsīr* and reinforced by the historical fact that Sheikh Muhammad Dem, one of Ahmadu Bamba's early disciples, authored the oldest complete *tafsīr* in the Wolof language, titled "*Mawrid az-Zam'ān fī Tafsīri al-Quran*."³⁰

4. Ahmadu Bamba's *Tafsīr*: Key Themes and Methodologies

Ahmadu Bamba did not produce a standalone *tafsīr* book. Instead, his Qur'ānic commentaries are embedded within collections compiled by his disciples. These collections include works such as *al-Majmū'atu aṣ-Ṣughrā*, *al-Majmū'atu al-Kubrā*, *Silk al-Jawāhir*, *Jawāmi'u al-Kalim*, and *Majmū'atu Sheikh Mor Penda Lo*. These compilations contain a variety of Bamba's writings, including his *fatwās*, responses, advice, and letters to his followers. Over time, these writings have been carefully edited and organized into structured books, which facilitate the identification of specific genres and distinct themes within various chapters.

30 Rawdu ar-Rayāhīn, *Dirāsāt Hawla-l-Murīdiyya*, 39-40.

Ahmadu Bamba did not provide a comprehensive interpretation of the Qur'ān or offer commentary on every *sūra*. His *tafsīr* comprises commentaries on various verses of the Qur'ān, presented in a non-sequential manner. Ahmadu Bamba's interpretations were not composed with the explicit aim of creating a formal Qur'ānic commentary. Instead, they were primarily intended as educational tools during his teaching and preaching sessions with his disciples. This practical purpose is reflected in the fact that many of these commentaries were initially delivered in Wolof, a widely spoken local language in Senegal, before being translated into Arabic for preservation and broader dissemination.

Moreover, many of these commentaries are preceded by describing the circumstances in which they were delivered. For example, in the interpretation of the verse, *Wa huwa ma'akum aynamā kuntum* (and He [Allah] is with you wherever you are) (al-Hadid 57/4), the narrator says:

He also said after completing the '*Ishā*' prayer in the sanctuary, on the night of Sunday, the twelfth night of the blessed month of *Ṣafar* in the year 1337 *Hijrī* (1918 CE). 'He is with you wherever you are, with assistance and victory, so be with Him by obeying His command out of love and avoiding His prohibition out of dislike for it. Fear Allah wherever you may be; whatever is less and sufficient is better than what is abundant and distracting.'³¹

Ahmadu Bamba advocates that the Qur'ān possesses both exoteric and esoteric meanings. While no explicit statement from him confirms this belief, a careful examination of his *Tafsīr* reveals a dual approach to his interpretations. For instance, while interpreting the *Basmala*, he said:

The meaning of *Bismillah ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm*, according to the scholars, is as fol-

31 Ahmad Bamba, *al-Majmū'atu aṣ-Ṣughra*, 48.

lows: The “Bā” is for seeking assistance (.) “Allah” is the name denoting a specific entity associated with being the necessary existence deserving of all praises, indicating the necessity of existence. “*ar-Raḥmān*” is derived from “*raḥma*,” which signifies the softness of the heart and an inclination implying grace and benevolence. In this sense, it is impossible to attribute it to Him, and it is considered in relation to Him as caused by the near, which is the intention of goodness, and the distant, which is goodness. “*ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm*” in His case means the doer of good or the one intending goodness. The former conveys goodness through majestic bounties, while the latter conveys goodness through delicate favors.³²

In this quotation, Ahmadu Bamba is interpreting the verse the same way it used to be interpreted by the *tafsīr* scholars, as they focus on the apparent meaning of the verse. However, he carries on interpreting the verse in the *ishārī* way, only focusing on the inner meanings of it. He said:

It is narrated that the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, ‘*Īsā*, peace be upon him, was handed over to the scholars by his mother for education. The teacher said to him, ‘Say, ‘*Bismillah ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm*.’ ‘*Īsā*, peace be upon him, asked, ‘What is ‘*Bismillah ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm*’? The teacher replied, ‘I do not know.’ ‘*Īsā*, peace be upon him, said, ‘The ‘*Bā*’ is the splendor of Allah, the ‘*Sīn*’ is His attribute, the ‘*Mīm*’ is His dominion, and Allah is the God of all gods. ‘*ar-Raḥmān*’ signifies the mercy of this world, and ‘*ar-Raḥīm*’ is the mercy of the Hereafter.” Some knowledgeable individuals have said that all the content of the preceding scriptures is within the Qur’ān, all of it is within the *Fātiḥa*, and

all the *Fātiḥa* is within the *Basmala*. All the *Basmala* is encompassed under the dot beneath the letter ‘*Bā*’. It is a container of all the truths and subtleties.³³

These two excerpts are just samples of many verses Ahmadu Bamba interpreted using both methods. This means that even though Ahmadu Bamba’s *Tafsīr* generally fall under the genre of *at-tafsīr al-ishārī*, he recognized both *al-ishārī* and non-*ishārī* *tafsīr*.

A good definition of *at-tafsīr al-ishārī* (esoteric interpretation) is the type of interpretation embraced by Sufis, aiming to establish that the Qur’ān has both an exoteric and an esoteric meaning. The exoteric is what the mind naturally comprehends, while the esoteric is limited to a specific group. The understanding of this exclusive group is derived from divine inspiration that enlightens their insights, purportedly revealing direct spiritual knowledge. By adopting this form of interpretation, Sufis seek to purify souls, cleanse hearts, and encourage the cultivation of virtuous ethics.³⁴

Sufi scholars developed distinctive methods of *at-tafsīr al-ishārī*, often avoiding the term *tafsīr* reserved for exoteric interpretation. Abu Naṣr as-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) identified two principal Sufi methods: the method of understanding (*ṭarīq al-fahm*) and the method of allusion (*ṭarīq al-ishāra*). The method of understanding interprets verses meditatively, as in Abu Bakr al-Kattānī’s (d. 321/933) reading of “only the one who brings to God a sound heart,” which describes stages of spiritual annihilation while maintaining the verse’s original sense. The method of allusion, exemplified by Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī (d.

33 Ibid. 252.

34 See, Sahl ibn Abdullah at-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Quran al-Azim*, (Cairo: *Dār al-Haram lil-Turath*, 2004), 76; Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā wa ‘Ala al-Dawla al-Simnānī, *al-Ta’wīlāt al-Najmīyya fī al-Tafsīr al-Ishārī al-Ṣūfī*, (Beirut: *Dar al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyya*, 2009), 19.

32 Ahmad Bamba Mbacke, *Silk al-Jawāhir fī Akhbār as-Sarā’ir*, (written from the manuscript by Abdul Khadre cheikh Maymuna al-Kubrā, 2009), 247.

234/848?), draws far-reaching analogies, such as comparing gnosis (*ma'rifa*) entering the heart to a king seizing a village, which can be controversial because it moves beyond the literal text. Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) developed a related method called striking similitudes (*ḍarb al-mithāl*), linking the spiritual and physical worlds to explain scriptural events, such as Moses removing his shoes in the Holy Valley, symbolizing detachment from worldly and otherworldly concerns. While these Sufi methods generally align with permissible *at-tafsīr al-ishārī*, more contentious approaches exist, including Ibn 'Arabī's (d. 638/1240) allusive method, an-Nisābūrī (d. 850/1446) and al-Kāshānī's (d. 735/1335) esoteric interpretations, and al-Simnānī's (d. 736/1336) commentary on the seven inner senses, which are closer to philosophical exegesis than mainstream Sufi practice.³⁵

It is worth noting that when Ahmadu Bamba provides an exoteric interpretation of the meanings and expressions of the Qur'ān, his exegetical personality emerges in a remarkable way, to the extent that it is very difficult to claim that he borrowed such interpretations from any particular *tafsīr* work. Although his explanations do not depart from the general body of what other commentators have said regarding a given verse, he conveys them in his own distinctive and unique style. This is evident, as we saw in the first example from his interpretation of the *Basmala*, where such an explanation, in its precise wording, is not found in any other work.

By contrast, his Sufi interpretations, while bearing the mark of his pedagogical and mystical character, can at times be traced back to earlier Sufi commentators. For instance, in his mystical reading of the *Basmala*, when interpreting the letters *bā*, *sīn*, and *mīm*, he

35 See Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Quran in Classical Islam*, (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2006), 35-46.

states the very same explanation that Sahl at-Tustarī and al-Qushayrī had given in their *tafsīrs*.³⁶ This raises an important question: is such resemblance intentional, or is it merely a coincidence arising from the very nature of Sufi knowledge, since all draw from the same source?

Through the examination of Ahmadu Bamba's *tafsīr*, several key characteristics of his interpretive method can be identified:

- Ahmadu Bamba's commentary is not limited to mentioning the esoteric meanings alone; sometimes, he discusses apparent meanings and follows them with esoteric meanings. A concrete example of this is the previous interpretation of the *Basmala*.
- Limiting the interpretation of some few verses to mentioning their apparent meanings, such as his statement in the interpretation of the verse, *Faman 'afā wa aṣlahā fa-ajruhū 'alā Allah* (So whoever forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is with Allah) (ash-Shūrā 42/40):

The meaning is that whoever is wronged, (*wa 'afā*) then he refrains from retaliation despite having the capability to do so, either practically or in intention, (*wa aṣlahā*), meaning he improves his relationship with one who has wronged him in speech, action, or intention, (*fa-ajruhū*) meaning his reward in the state of forgiveness and reconciliation, (*'alā Allah*) the Exalted, meaning He will fulfill it for him on the Day of the ultimate reward.³⁷

Bamba's gloss on the verse illustrates his tendency, in some passages, to remain at the *ẓāhir* level while still delivering a morally

36 See at-Tustari, *Tafsīr al-Quran al-Azim*, 22; Abul-Qāsim Abdul Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt*, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Basyūnī, 3rd ed. (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-Āmma lil-Kitāb), 1: 44.

37 Shaykh Muhammad Sylla aṭ-Ṭayyibī, *Jawāmi'u al-Kalim*, ed. Shu'aib Kebe, (Dakar: ad-Dār as-Seneghāliyya li an-Nashr, 2017), 67.

charged, concrete reading. By parsing *wa 'afā, wa aṣḥaḥa, and fa-ajruhū 'alā Allāh* into discrete ethical capacities, restraint despite ability, active reconciliation, and eschatological recompense, he converts lexical exegesis into direct behavioral instruction. The terseness and practical orientation of this reading suggest a pedagogical aim: to inculcate specific dispositions in the listener rather than to pursue an exhaustive philological or mystical commentary. Methodologically, therefore, such succinct *ẓāhir* readings should be read as intentional didactic moves that coexist with his deeper *ishārī* treatments elsewhere.

In his interpretation of the verse, *O mankind, you are those in need of Allah, while Allah is the Free of need, the Praiseworthy* (al-Fāṭir 35/15), Bamba said: “Meaning, turn to Allah, the Self-Sufficient who does not need the servant, his words, or his deeds, and everything is in need of Him besides Him.”³⁸ This example, like the previous one, highlights Bamba’s focus on the apparent meaning of the verse while simultaneously embedding a subtle spiritual lesson. By emphasizing humanity’s total dependence on God, *that all creation is in need of Him while He is self-sufficient*, he translates the lexical meaning into a practical reminder of humility, reliance, and God-consciousness. The commentary remains concise, yet it conveys a clear ethical and devotional message, demonstrating Bamba’s ability to transform straightforward exegesis into actionable guidance for spiritual cultivation.

Another example is his commentary on Sūrat al-‘Aṣr, the narrator said:

Sheikh al-Khadim may God be pleased with him, in his exegesis of Sūrat al-‘Aṣr, on Thursday, the 20th of Rabī‘ al-Thānī, 1342 AH, shortly after finishing the Dhuhr prayer while he was in the mihrab,

said: ‘By the Time. Indeed, mankind...’ [al-‘Aṣr: 1], that is: the disbeliever, the sinful transgressor, the polytheist, ‘is surely in loss, except those who...’, i.e., but those who ‘have believed’ (that is: the believers), ‘and did...’ (that is: the Muslims), ‘righteous deeds’ (that is: the doers of good); for deeds are not truly righteous except with sincerity. ‘And they enjoin one another to the truth,’ meaning: they advise one another so as not to differ about it and so that the rod of discord will not weigh between them. ‘And they enjoin one another to patience,’ meaning: to perseverance in the truth; they are in gain.’³⁹

This concise exegesis highlights four interwoven themes of Sūrat al-‘Aṣr: faith, sincere righteous action, mutual exhortation to truth, and perseverance. Sheikh al-Khadim’s (Ahmadu Bamba) emphasis on *ikhhlās* (sincerity) reflects a classic spiritual concern that deeds are not truly righteous without purity of intention. His interpretation also underscores the communal dimension of salvation, warning against discord and urging mutual support in truth and patience. While he frames “mankind” as specifically the disbeliever or transgressor, many exegetes read the verse more universally, which strengthens the contrast with those who embody the four saving qualities.

- His *tafsīr*, in most cases, leans towards the inner meaning of the verse, and he often confines himself to it without explicitly mentioning the apparent meaning of the verses. This supports his inclination towards *at-tafsīr al-ishārī*, as seen in his commentary on the following verses:

In his interpretation of “*Alif-Lām-Mīm dhālika*,” he said:

The (*Alif*) points to the *Alif* in the word (Allah) and the (*Lām*) to the *Lām* in (*Ji-*

38 Ibid. 76.

39 Ahmad Bamba Mbacke, *al-Majmu’atu aṣ-Ṣughra*, 41.

brīl), and the (*Mīm*) to the *Mīm* in (Muhammad). (*dhā*/ that) points to the near, and the (*Lām*) to the far, indicating the secrets of the Qurʾān, meaning that (no one touches it except the purified), just as the sky seems close but is far away. Similarly, these letters, when looked at, make one think that their meaning is close, but their meanings are very distant, just as there are five hundred years between us and the worldly sky.⁴⁰

The symbolic interpretation of *Alif-Lām-Mīm* as alluding to Allah, Jibrīl, and Muhammad reflects a well-established *ishārī* tendency in early Sufi *tafsīr*. Both Sahl at-Tustarī⁴¹ and al-Qushayrī⁴² present this triadic association as a concise affirmation of the Qurʾān's divine origin and the sacred chain of revelation, from God, through Jibrīl, to the Prophet. Ahmadu Bamba follows this same exegetical lineage but develops it in a more expansive mystical key. Moving beyond the identification of the letters, he introduces a cosmological metaphor: just as the sky appears close while being in fact far beyond reach, so too the disjointed letters seem simple and near, yet their true meanings remain remote, accessible only to the purified. In this way, his *tafsīr* stands in continuity with earlier Sufi commentators while also distinguishing itself by layering esoteric imagery and a meditation on nearness and distance that deepens the spiritual dimension of the passage.

In his interpretation of the verse, *Indeed, when kings enter a city, they ruin it* (an-Naml 27/34), he said: “(Indeed, when kings) meaning the evils, (enter a city) meaning the heart, (they ruin it).”⁴³ Bamba's allegorical reading of the verse and the Sufi accounts of al-Qushayrī and as-Sulamī describe two complementary

facets of the same spiritual dynamic. Bamba presents a diagnostic image: the heart is vulnerable to invading evils that bring ruin. By contrast, the other commentators emphasize the remedial process in which praiseworthy qualities or the knowledge of God enter the heart, expelling vain desires and establishing obedience, remembrance, and constant orientation toward the Truth.⁴⁴ Read together they form a concise Sufi pedagogy—first to recognize the heart's susceptibility to corruption, then to cultivate inward qualities (*ʿilm*, *adab*, *ikhlaṣ*, *īmān*) that actively displace vice and produce lasting transformation.

In his interpretation of the verse, *And if Allah touches you with adversity, there is no remover of it except Him. And if He intends for you good, then there is no repeller of His bounty* (Yūnus 10/107), he said:

(And if Allah touches you with adversity, there is no remover of it except Him) meaning that no fear of any creature should drive you to sin because even if the punishment comes and you seek refuge in Allah, it does not prevent it. (And if He intends for you good, then there is no repeller of His bounty) and no fear of any creature should drive you to abandon obedience because, even if the bounty of Allah comes, nothing prevents it.⁴⁵

Another example of Bamba's *at-Tafsīr al-Ishārī* is his interpretation of the verse, *And, indeed, this is My straight path, so follow it, and do not follow other ways* (al-Anʿam 6/153), he said: “(the straight path) is *īmān* (faith), Islam, *ihsān* (excellence), (*al-wājib*) obligations, (*al-mandūb*) recommendations, and (*al-mubāḥ al-muṣliḥ*) permissible things that are beneficial. The (ways) are the forbid-

40 at-Tayyibī, *Jawāmiʿu al-Kalīm*, 62.

41 at-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Quran al-Azim*, 25.

42 al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-Ishārāt*, 1/53.

43 Shuʿayb Thiauw, “*ash-Sheikh al-Khadīm wa Tafsīr al-Quran*”.

44 See Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-Ishārāt*, 3: 37; Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān as-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-Tafsīr: Tafsīr*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2001), 2: 89.

45 Ahmad Bamba Mbacke, *al-Majmuʿatu aṣ-Ṣughra*, 44.

den, disliked, and frivolous matters, disbelief, immorality, and polytheism (*shirk*).⁴⁶

This interpretation illustrates Bamba's consistent application of *tafsīr al-ishārī*, emphasizing inner moral and spiritual realities over literal or historical readings. By understanding the "straight path" (*as-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) as encompassing faith (*īmān*), Islam, excellence (*ihsān*), obligations (*al-wājib*), recommended acts (*al-mandūb*), and beneficial permissible actions (*al-mubāḥ al-muṣliḥ*), he maps the Qur'ānic guidance directly onto a structured framework for ethical and spiritual cultivation. Conversely, the "other ways" are interpreted allegorically as forbidden or morally corrupt behaviors, disbelief, immorality, and polytheism, turning the verse into a vivid inner-exhortative lesson.

Finally, in his commentary on the verse, *And We did not create the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them except in truth* (al-Ḥijr 15/85), he said: "(The truth) is in obeying commands, avoiding prohibitions, and considering permissible things. The result of obedience is entering paradise, the result of avoidance is salvation from the fire, and the result of consideration is reaching the presence of Allah (*al-wuṣūl*), blessed and exalted."⁴⁷

In this *tafsīr*, Ahmadu Bamba continues his hallmark *tafsīr al-ishārī* approach by linking cosmological statements to ethical and spiritual realities. The verse, *And We did not create the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them except in truth* (al-Ḥijr 15/85) is read not merely as a cosmological fact but as a guide to practical and spiritual action. Bamba interprets "the truth" as encompassing obedience to divine commands, avoidance of prohibitions, and mind-

ful engagement with permissible actions. He then outlines the spiritual consequences of each: obedience leads to paradise, avoidance of sin ensures salvation from the Fire, and careful consideration of permissible actions facilitates proximity to God (*al-wuṣūl*), blessed and exalted. This reading reflects a consistent pattern in his *tafsīr*: external realities and Qur'ānic statements are interpreted through their inner ethical and mystical dimensions, offering the reader both guidance for conduct and insight into the ultimate spiritual objectives.

Following the examples from Ahmadu Bamba's *tafsīr al-ishārī*, it is clear that his interpretations serve both spiritual and educational purposes. The inner, esoteric meanings he draws guide the reader toward ethical cultivation, self-purification, and the development of virtues, while remaining grounded in the apparent, outward sense of the Qur'ānic text. This integration ensures that his commentary not only illuminates hidden spiritual truths but also provides practical moral instruction, demonstrating how *tafsīr al-ishārī* can function as a comprehensive pedagogy for nurturing both knowledge and character.

- Ahmadu Bamba frequently reinforces his *tafsīr* through cross-references to other Qur'ānic verses, highlighting both moral guidance and spiritual cultivation. In his commentary on *Flee to Allah* (adh-Dhāriyāt 51/50),⁴⁸ he explains that fleeing entails distancing oneself from the evil inclinations of the soul (Yūsuf 12/53)⁴⁹ and turning toward Allah's goodness (al-Hajj 22/77),⁵⁰ avoiding

46 at-Tayyibī, *Jawāmi' u al-Kalim*, 72.

47 Ahmad Bamba Mbacke, *al-Majmu'atu aṣ-Ṣughra*, 44.

48 *Flee unto God [from all that is false and evil]! Verily, I am a plain warner to you from Him!*)

49 *And yet, I am not trying to absolve myself: for, verily, man's inner self does incite [him] to evil.*

50 *O you who have attained to faith! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Sustainer [alone], and do good, so that you might attain to a happy state!*

misleading desires (Ṣād 38/26)⁵¹ and following divine teachings (al-Baqara 2/282),⁵² and resisting Satan's temptations while engaging in sincere worship (al-Hijr 15/42).⁵³ By weaving these verses together, Bamba provides a structured spiritual roadmap, guiding the believer in ethical self-discipline, inner purification, and devotion, showing how Qur'ānic guidance can be applied both educationally and spiritually in daily life.

- Bamba occasionally supports his interpretations with the sayings of the Prophet

51 We said: "O Dawood! We have made you a vicegerent in the earth, so rule among the people with justice and do not follow your own desires lest they mislead you from the Way of Allah. As for those who go astray from the Way of Allah, they shall surely have a severe punishment because of forgetting the Day of Reckoning.

52 O believers! When you deal with each other in lending for a fixed period of time, put it in writing. Let a scribe write it down with justice between the parties. The scribe, who is given the gift of literacy by Allah, should not refuse to write; he is under obligation to write. Let him who incurs the liability (debtor) dictate, fearing Allah his Rabb and not diminishing anything from the settlement. If the borrower is mentally unsound or weak or is unable to dictate himself, let the guardian of his interests dictate for him with justice. Let two witnesses from among you bear witness to all such documents, if two men cannot be found, then one man and two women of your choice should bear witness, so that if one of the women forgets anything the other may remind her. The witnesses must not refuse when they are called upon to do so. You must not be averse to writing (your contract) for a future period, whether it is a small matter or big. This action is more just for you in the sight of Allah, because it facilitates the establishment of evidence and is the best way to remove all doubts; but if it is a common commercial transaction concluded on the spot among yourselves, there is no blame on you if you do not put it in writing. You should have witnesses when you make commercial transactions. Let no harm be done to the scribe or witnesses; and if you do so, you shall be guilty of transgression. Fear Allah; it is Allah that teaches you and Allah has knowledge of everything.

53 You will not have any authority over My devotees except those misguided ones who follow you; Sheikh Mor Penda Lo, *Majmū'atun mushatamilatun 'alā ba'di ajwibati wa waṣāyā wa rasā'il li ash-Sheikh al-Khādīm*, ed. the Cultural and Research Committee of Sheikh Mor Penda Lo Foundation. (Touba: 2023), 45.

Muhammad. For example, in his commentary on the *Basmala*, he cites Abu Huraira's report that the Messenger of Allah said, *Bismillah ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm is the mother of the Qur'ān and the seven oft-repeated verses (as-sab' al-mathānī)*," and also refers to 'Īsā, peace be upon him, who explained: "The 'Bā' is the splendor of Allah, the 'Sīn' is His attribute, the 'Mīm' is His dominion, and Allah is the God of all gods. 'ar-Raḥman' signifies the mercy of this world, and 'ar-Raḥīm' is the mercy of the Hereafter. It is noteworthy that Bamba does not provide details regarding the chain of transmission (*isnād*) or the authenticity of these reports, yet he employs them to illuminate the spiritual and esoteric dimensions of the text, focusing on their pedagogical and moral significance rather than formal scholarly authentication.

5. The Impact of *Tafsīr* in Bamba's Thought

Ahmadu Bamba's use of *tafsīr* was never confined to intellectual commentary; it functioned as a living instrument of *tarbiya* (spiritual training) and *ta'līm* (education). For Bamba, explaining the Qur'ān was inseparable from guiding disciples toward inner purification, discipline, and moral excellence. His interpretations, whether exoteric or esoteric, consistently aimed to shape hearts and minds in alignment with the Qur'ān's message.

In this sense, *tafsīr* served a dual function: first, it transmitted knowledge of the divine text in clear and accessible terms, ensuring that disciples grasped the Qur'ān's legal and theological principles. Second, it unveiled the Qur'ān's esoteric dimensions, guiding disciples toward sincerity, self-restraint, and devotion. By integrating both dimensions, Bamba presented the Qur'ān as not merely a book of law and ritual, but as the founda-

tion for a comprehensive program of spiritual transformation.

His commentaries became not only a pedagogical tool but also a unifying cultural resource. They provided a framework for *Murīd* values of discipline, humility, and devotion to God, which remain deeply woven into Senegal's religious and social fabric. Thus, *tafsīr* functioned as both a means of internal *Murīd* formation and an external influence shaping broader Islamic practice in Senegal.

Bamba's *tafsīr* continues to live through the works of his disciples and successors, who adopted and expanded his method of linking exoteric clarity with esoteric depth. His approach persists in *Murīd* schools (*dāras*), communal study circles, and public teaching sessions, where the Qur'ān is interpreted not only for intellectual understanding but also for practical and spiritual guidance.

A vivid example of this continuation is found in Sheikh Muhammad Dem (d. 1967), one of Bamba's disciples in Diourbel. Dem authored *Mawrid az-Zamān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, the earliest complete *tafsīr* in the Wolof language. His dedication to the Qur'ān was expressed through the daily copying of one *ḥizb* of the Qur'ān by hand, completing a *muṣḥaf* every two months, which he presented to Bamba as a devotional gift (*ḥadiya*). This discipline doubled as spiritual training under Bamba's supervision, underscoring the Qur'ān's centrality in *Murīd* pedagogy.⁵⁴

After completing this formative period, Bamba encouraged Dem to resume teaching, leading to his lesson circles in Diourbel. His *tafsīr* emerged directly from these oral lessons: by the 1940s, students had begun collecting notes from his sessions, which

were eventually compiled into the comprehensive *Mawrid az-Zamān*. In this way, Dem extended Bamba's vision by making Qur'ānic exegesis accessible in Wolof, ensuring that the Qur'ān spoke directly to Senegalese audiences in their own language.⁵⁵

This example illustrates how *tafsīr*, within the *Murīdiyya*, is not merely academic commentary but an act of devotion, pedagogy, and cultural transmission. It also shows the organic way in which Bamba's embedded *tafsīr* was inherited, adapted, and localized by his disciples, thereby ensuring its survival as a living practice.

Today, *Murīd* scholars and institutions continue this legacy, emphasizing Qur'ānic commentary as the backbone of spiritual education. Bamba's interpretive model, weaving together apparent and inner meanings, supported by Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, remains a touchstone for contemporary *Murīd* exegesis. His *tafsīr* thus endures not only in textual form but in living communities that continue to embody its spirit in education, work, and worship.

6. Conclusion

Ahmadu Bamba's intellectual and spiritual project cannot be understood without recognizing the central role of the Qur'ān and its interpretation in his thought. His hierarchy of knowledge, beginning with *tawḥīd* as the noblest discipline, followed immediately by *tafsīr*, then *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, and the auxiliary sciences, reveals how foundational Qur'ānic exegesis was to his program of education and spiritual refinement. For him, *tafsīr* was not an abstract or peripheral science; it was second only to the direct knowledge of God, serving as the key through which all other disciplines gained coherence and purpose.

54 Jeremy Dell, "Unbraiding the Qu'ran: Wolofal and the Tafsīr Tradition of Senegambia," *Islamic Africa* 9, 1 (2018): 64–69, accessed September 12, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90021669>.

55 Ibid. 70.

Bamba's personal devotion to *tafsīr* was evident both in his extensive study of classical commentaries and in his insistence on divine inspiration as a source of understanding. He distinguished between *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*, acknowledging the balance between transmitted certainty and interpretive insight, and frequently affirmed that God Himself opened the doors of Qur'ānic meaning for him. This dual epistemology, rooted in both scholarship and divine illumination, allowed him to engage deeply with authoritative exegetical works such as *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, *Rūḥ al-Bayān*, and *Madārik al-Tanzīl*, while also articulating spiritually charged interpretations unique to his own experience. The presence of these texts in his libraries at Touba and Diourbel demonstrates the breadth of his engagement with the exegetical tradition, while his poetry and letters highlight the extent to which he claimed a God-given mastery of interpretation.

At the same time, Bamba did not compose a standalone *tafsīr*. His Qur'ānic commentaries are dispersed across collections such as *al-Majmū'atu aṣ-Ṣuḡhrā*, *al-Majmū'atu al-Kubrā*, *Silk al-Jawāhir*, and *Jawāmi'u al-Kalim*, which include legal opinions, spiritual advice, and correspondence. This embedded character reflects the living context of his exegesis: *tafsīr* arose organically in teaching sessions, sermons, or spiritual guidance, often delivered first in Wolof for accessibility before being preserved in Arabic. His interpretations were therefore less concerned with covering the Qur'ān systematically than with responding to the immediate educational and spiritual needs of his disciples.

The spiritual and educational dimensions of Bamba's *tafsīr* are especially striking. His exegesis consistently aimed at moral training, disciplining the ego, and orienting the heart toward God. Verses such as *Flee to Allah*

(adh-Dhāriyāt 51/50) were explained through intertextual references to other Qur'ānic passages, offering disciples practical guidance on resisting the soul, passion, and Satan. Other verses, such as *And He is with you wherever you are* (al-Hadid 57/4), became opportunities to emphasize presence with God through obedience and restraint. In this way, his *tafsīr* bridged the exoteric and esoteric: the outward meaning grounded disciples in orthodoxy, while the inner meaning trained them in sincerity and detachment.

This legacy extended well beyond his own writings. His disciples, most notably Sheikh Muhammad Dem, carried forward his exegetical vision. Dem's *Mawrid az-Zamān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, the earliest full *tafsīr* in Wolof, grew directly out of oral teaching circles in Diourbel, echoing the pedagogical methods of his sheikh. Such works ensured that *tafsīr* would remain a living tradition within the *Murīdiyya*, simultaneously preserving classical insights and making them accessible to Senegalese society in the vernacular.

In the end, the impact of *tafsīr* in Ahmadu Bamba's thought lies not only in his mastery of its sources or in his distinctive esoteric interpretations, but in the way he used it as a tool of mass education, spiritual refinement, and communal identity. By embedding exegesis in his broader program of *tarbiya*, Bamba transformed *tafsīr* into both an intellectual discipline and a practical method of shaping souls. For the *Murīdiyya* and Senegalese Islam more broadly, his example cemented the Qur'ān as the foundation of a holistic path that integrates theology, law, and spirituality. *tafsīr*, for Bamba, was thus not simply the interpretation of a sacred text, but the living transmission of divine guidance, a guidance that continues to animate his community and shape its religious ethos to this day.

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