

The New York Times

Lamin Sanneh, Scholar of Islam and Christianity, Dies at 76

By **Katharine Q. Seelye**

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Lamin Sanneh, who was born into poverty in a tiny river town in Gambia and became a world-renowned scholar of Christianity and Islam, providing key insights into how each religion took hold in West Africa, died on Jan. 6 in New Haven. He was 76.

His son, Kelefa, said the cause was complications of a stroke.

Dr. Sanneh was born a Muslim but converted to Christianity as a teenager and became a practicing Roman Catholic, giving him experience in both Islam and Christianity and an unusual perspective for a scholar of religion.

Even more striking, he alone of his large rural family managed to migrate across continents and attend prominent universities. He ended up as a professor at Yale University, where he taught for 30 years. He was the D. Willis James professor of missions and world Christianity at Yale Divinity School and a professor of history at Yale.

His memoir, “Summoned From the Margin: Homecoming of an African” (2012), relates how, even as a youth, he was consumed with theological questions about the nature of God and human suffering; that passion led to his religious conversion and academic career.

“He was at the vanguard of the movement to study Christianity as a global religious tradition — one with deep roots in Africa and with communities of immense diversity around the world,” David N. Hempton, dean of Harvard Divinity School, said in a statement. Dr. Sanneh taught history of religion there from 1981 to 1989.

The author or editor of more than 20 books and more than 200 articles, Dr. Sanneh focused most recently on the history of Islam in Africa; one of his last books, “Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam” (2016), explored Islam’s spread in the region and argued that it had been adopted because of peaceful traditions and not, as previous historians had said, primarily because of military conquest.

Dr. Joel Carpenter, director of the Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., and a longtime friend, said that “Beyond Jihad” was the most important of Dr. Sanneh’s many books on Islam and “had an electrifying effect.”



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Summoned *from the* Margin

HOMECOMING OF AN AFRICAN

Lamin Sanneh

Foreword by KELEFA SANNEH

"By studying intently a part of the Islamic world that had been neglected, he had this understanding," Dr. Carpenter said in a telephone interview. "Muslims wanted to see their religion as one of peace, not necessarily as one of struggle."

One of Dr. Sanneh's most important works on Christianity was "Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture" (1989), in which he examined how Christianity became a world religion.

He ascribed its success to the power of missionaries, who, in his view, had been adept at fitting in with local cultures and had not been fronts for colonial interests, as others have argued.

In addition, he noted, missionaries conveyed Christianity in the indigenous language of each culture, allowing people to adapt their own customs to it. Thus Christianity was perceived as preserving local cultures rather than destroying them.

Rowan Williams, a former archbishop of Canterbury, has said that Dr. Sanneh was "probably the most significant theologian of mission in the English-speaking world today."

He was a champion of cross-cultural exchange, writing much about the relationship between Islam and Christianity. But his scholarship extended to other topics as well. His "Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa" (1999), for example, recounts how freed slaves sought to attack the slave trade at its source — African chiefs, who were capturing and selling people.

Last year, a new research institute in Dr. Sanneh's name was announced for the advanced study of religion and society in Africa. The Sanneh Institute is to be headquartered at the University of Ghana, in Accra.

In an online tribute after Dr. Sanneh's death, the Rev. Dr. Esther E. Acolatse, associate professor of pastoral theology and intercultural studies at Knox College at the University of Toronto, wrote, "When I asked how he found time to write so much, he simply said: 'Because I'm afraid one day I'll be asked by God to give account of how I have used my time. I want to be able to bear up under the question.' "

Lamin Ousman Sanneh was born on May 24, 1942, in Gambia in the town of Janjanbureh (formerly Georgetown) on the island of Janjanbureh (formerly MacCarthy Island).

The island was a former British colonial outpost in the Gambia River, about 125 miles upstream from the Atlantic Ocean. Settled by Methodist missionaries, the island had been a refuge for escaped slaves and for Muslims fleeing religious oppression . Its history would influence young Lamin, who, when he left Islam, first became a Methodist.

His father, Ousman Sanneh, who was descended from African royalty, was an administrator for the provincial government, but the family was poor. His mother, Fatoumatta Sidibeh, who was one of Ousman's two wives, traded produce and textiles in the local marketplace. Lamin was one of 11 children in the family.

Curious and intellectually restless, he was inspired by Helen Keller's autobiography, "The Story of My Life" (1903), which taught him that education and faith could help overcome physical and personal hardships. "I made the mental journey out of my world long before I made the physical journey," he wrote in his memoir.

He gained entry at 5 to the Armitage High School, a competitive government-run Islamic boarding school on his island. He excelled there, but by the time he graduated, his family had broken up. He found a job in the capital, Banjul, where he converted to Christianity despite the reluctance of any Christian church to baptize him.

After winning a scholarship for African students to attend college in the United States, he started at a historically black college in Virginia, which he declined to name in his memoir because, he said, he had a bad experience while there. He had arrived in the midst of the civil rights movement and said in interviews that he had been a target of "bigotry, hatred and divisiveness." He quickly transferred to Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., graduating with a bachelor's degree in history in 1967.

He then moved to England, where he earned a master's from the University of Birmingham and a doctorate in Islamic history from the University of London. He held teaching posts at the University of Ghana, the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, Harvard Divinity School and, since

1989, Yale Divinity School. He was a naturalized United States citizen.

Dr. Sanneh was on an endless quest for knowledge. “He always described himself as a thorn in the side of his teachers and imams and professors — he just had so many questions,” his daughter, Sia Sanneh, said, and he was grateful for mentors who encouraged his curiosity. “He wasn’t from a place where you questioned doctrines and teachings.”

He served on multiple boards and was the recipient of numerous honors. He was appointed by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI to serve on Vatican committees.

In addition to his son, Kelefa Sanneh, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and a former pop music critic for *The New York Times*, and his daughter, a senior attorney at the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit organization, Dr. Sanneh is survived by his wife, Sandra Sanneh, a senior lecturer at Yale who teaches Zulu, one of the official languages of South Africa; five brothers, Moussa, Kebba, Malik, Lamin and Amadou; and two sisters, Mariama Jawo and Sajo Sanneh.

Correction: Jan. 14, 2019

An earlier version of this obituary referred incorrectly to Rowan Williams, who was quoted as calling Dr. Sanneh “probably the most significant theologian of mission in the English-speaking world today.” While he was the archbishop of Canterbury when he made that statement, he has not held that position since 2012.

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