

Ousmane Oumar Kane. 2016. *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 282 pp.

Much ink has been spilled on Timbuktu's collections of rare Arabic manuscripts. The celebration of the historic Malian city in the popular imagination might have led to sheer fascination about the materiality of its so-called "magic scrolls." In *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*, Ousmane Kane takes the symbolism of the historic city as his point of departure as he charts the transformations of the Arabic-Islamic tradition of learning in the region and its enduring, multifaceted role today. Timbuktu's libraries have often been seen as the unique hard evidence of a long ignored pre-colonial African literary past. In fact, Kane argues, it was but one of a network of centers of Islamic learning that flourished in pre-colonial Africa before and indeed well after the old city's intellectual decline in the second half of the seventeenth century. *Beyond Timbuktu* is as much a careful overview of the contribution of African Muslims to the Islamic library as it is an exploration of the role of Islam in African societies, past and present. Drawing on a dense bibliography, it synthesizes rather creatively decades of interdisciplinary scholarship centered on the study of Islam in Africa in order to explore the relationship between Islamic knowledge and power over time. In contending that Islamic intellectual influence in the continent both preceded and survived the European one, Kane's ambition is to "turn the discussion of the African Library on its head" (p. 10). In so doing, he seeks to illuminate the role of Islamic scholars in "the production and transmission of knowledge and in shaping state and society relations" (p. 18). In a nod to Timbuktu's old mosque/university, Kane claims that such an approach is in line with what he calls a "Sankoré epistemology." The book has two dominant themes clearly outlined in the "prologue": first, the origin, content, and impact of the Islamic culture and knowledge in Africa; and second, the fate of the Islamic education system and the effects of its transformation on the postcolonial and contemporary public sphere in Islamic Africa. *Beyond Timbuktu*'s nine chapters cover two main threads. The first five chapters explore the Islamization of Africa and the development of Islamic knowledge on the continent. Kane surveys the journey of the Islamic literature produced over time by African Muslim communities. Arabic literacy and the jurisprudence of Muslim legal scholars, theological debates, and Sufis practices and beliefs shaped for centuries African Muslim societies in ways often ignored by scholars of Islam working on other areas. The continent went largely under the academic radar at least until the recent emergence of "Timbuktu studies", as Kane calls the academic study of Islamic intellectual life in Africa which reached its "zenith" only in the late twentieth century (Chapter 1). Kane shows how the conversion to Islam of large parts of West Africa gave way to a growing emphasis on pilgrimage to Mecca, comprehensive knowledge of the Qur'an, and advanced knowledge of Arabic. Such developments stimulated the spread of Islamic education, piety, and communal engagement on the continent (Chapter 2), especially at the hands of the "clerical lineages" which emerged in almost all the region's Muslim societies (Chapters 3). The core curriculum of Islamic knowledge taught in African centers of learning covered the entire spectrum of classical Islamic knowledge (Chapter 4). But close reading of the African Islamic archive leads Kane to argue that historians

failed to identify a number of writings concerned with Takfir (excommunication) slavery, jihad, Sharia, community building, etc. as “political” in nature (Chapter 5). The remaining four chapters discuss how, in spite of the repeated shocks to which they were subjected, especially under colonial rule, Islamic institutions of learning survived their increasing marginalization in postcolonial Africa and continued to attract scores of students (Chapter 6). Beginning from the 1980’s, the liberalization of the African education system as well as the efforts of oil-rich Arab and Muslim countries (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Libya) led to the creation of many Islamic universities. Kane offers here (Chapter 7) a fieldwork-based survey of the modern Islamic institutions of higher learning that mushroomed on the continent. Kane describes what one might call “the revenge” of the traditional Arabic-speaking elite in the wake of the so-called “democratization” of the African public sphere in the last decades of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that the Western-trained elite (termed here “Europhone elite”) inherited state apparatus and power in postcolonial Africa, Islamic intellectuals and graduates from Islamic education (termed here “Arabophones”) ultimately managed to make their voices heard in the postcolonial public sphere (Chapter 8). Kane shows then how various Islamic players including Sufis, reformists and jihadist groups challenged both the western “space of meaning” and the postcolonial state. Kane has the humility to concede that political scientists studying Islam in Africa, himself included, failed to predict the radicalization of important sections of African Islamists (Chapter 9). The “epilogue” of the book is an account of how most African Muslims today try to articulate modernity and tradition, science and religion, faith and reason, western, Arabic and indigenous epistemology etc. Therefore, Kane argues, Ali Mazrui’s notion of “Africa’s triple heritage” (indigenous, Arab, and western) is more relevant than ever. Yet, Kane laments the fragmentation of knowledge and education between European languages and Arabic and contends that this is a genuine challenge to the development of a solid education system in Africa. However, Kane does not give any suggestion as of how to overcome this central issue. With *Beyond Timbuktu*, Ousmane Kane provides a fresh look at the history of Africa as a major site of Islamic knowledge and Arabic literacy. A particular strength of this book is his close readings of a number of African Islamic writings and his first hand data and analysis on Islamic universities in today Africa. His effort is praiseworthy, especially as he attempts throughout the book to ascribe intellectual and spiritual meanings to religious life without disconnecting it from its social and political functions. Last but not least, Kane enlivens his book with insights from his own biography as the grandson of Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé, arguably the most influential Sufi leader in twentieth-century Africa. This author is clearly moving on very familiar ground, beyond his own position as a leading scholar of Islam in Africa.

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