

# *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* by Ousmane Kane

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Book review by Farah El-Sharif

Ousmane Kane's *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* is a pioneering overview of the history of knowledge production in Islamicate West Africa. The methodology Kane employs in the book can be summarized as being textually-supported by various Islamic and Western secondary and primary sources, supplemented by rich doses of theoretical commentary from a consciously personal perspective by a scholar who belongs to the region, but is an authority on the subject in the Western academy. Rather than having a continuous narrative thread, the book is multi-thematic and touches on various scopes and topics. The book proves that, despite an Orientalist academic fixation on manuscripts, Timbuktu "was only one of many centers of Islamic learning in precolonial West Africa" (17). *Beyond Timbuktu* is Kane's attempt to fill the vacuum which emerged from the disproportionate scholarly attention given to Timbuktu studies in approaches to Islamicate Africa, by shedding light on the plethora of other ways and centers of knowledge in West Africa. In that way, the book can be classified as a groundbreaking survey of the field of Islam in West Africa and points the areas of noticeable dearth in the field, and the many gaps that emergent scholarship has yet to fill.

The book begins with a prologue where Kane reflects on his own personal formation. He remarks that he is a product of both Qur'anic school and the French postcolonial educational system—which was seen as a status symbol to produce globally-minded African elites. Of particular interest is Kane's

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<sup>1</sup> <http://themuslim500.com/ousmane-kane-beyond-timbuktu-an-intellectual-history-of-muslim-west-africa>

reference to the personal and historical impact of his grandfather, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, the spiritual heir of the Tijaniyya Sufi order in West Africa, and one of the most influential spiritual leaders of millions of Muslim in West Africa and beyond in the 20th century. Due to multiple references to the Tijaniyya and other orders throughout the book, Kane succeeds in treating Sufism not as a fringe cultural phenomenon alongside orthodox Islam as is often done on secondary literature on Sufism and mystical practice, but as a feature that is integral and interwoven into the fabric of Islam in West Africa. Chapter One is a survey of European efforts to archive and collect manuscripts in Muslim West Africa and provides for a historical overview of the field of “Timbuktu Studies” as it has been approached historically by Western scholars. Chapter Two looks at the political and economic factors that led to the development of a notion of Islamic education and the breadth of methodologies of learning that “education” encompassed. In this chapter, Kane not only discusses the many different styles of Islamic scholarship, but highlights the factors of its development such as the book publication, the emergence of Ajami scripts (Arabic alphabets used for writing African languages) and the interchange of knowledge via pilgrimage. Chapter Three discusses the emergence of what Kane calls a Muslim West African “clerical class” with its own scholarly lineages and prestige. In Chapter Four, Kane focuses on notions of Islamic curricula and knowledge transmission. He credits the work of Bruce Hall and Charles Stewart for identifying a “core curriculum” in the larger West African Sahel, but goes beyond their hypothesis by breaking the areas of knowledge quite thoroughly. By deploying Talal Asad’s notion of Islam as a “discursive tradition”, Chapter Five analyzes efforts to define “an Islamic space of meaning” in Muslim West Africa, and broaches politically-charged themes such as slavery and jihād and the fixation of colonial knowledge power structures on these areas. Chapter Eight, “Islam in the Postcolonial Public Sphere” deploys a similar theoretical toolkit that seeks to dissect the meanings and power structures of secularism and modernity in postcolonial Muslim West Africa. Perhaps the most pervasive chapter in the book is the sixth one, as it focuses on the effects of the colonial encounter on Islamic education. It discusses the effects of the rise of secondary European education and bilingualism on Islamic education, which Kane concludes did not come to a halt in this period contrary to what is assumed in secondary literature. This time period was marked by a great inter-regional exchange of knowledge between scholars in

West Africa and those in North Africa and the Hijaz, signifying a sustained (rather than waning) focus on Islamic scholarship in the 20th century. Next, Kane discusses OIC-funded institutions of higher learning such as those of Say in Niger and Mbale Uganda and how such colleges yielded a high number of Arabophone African scholars. The term “Arabophone” is used continually throughout the text, and seems to imply a league of Arabic-speaking, “ideologically-minded” Middle East-oriented scholars, replete with the “isms” that were imported from the Arab east. Kane elaborates on this idea more fully in the book’s most contentious chapter, entitled “Arabophones Triumphant”. In it, he discusses the emergence of competing Islamic movements and ideologies in postcolonial West Africa. While he recognizes the preeminence of Sufi orders, he states that it was the Arabophones responsible for Islamization of certain groups eventually leading to a rise in Salafi-oriented groups like Boko Haram and al-Qā’ida. To what extent this hypothesis can be pushed is worth noting. Kane further treats the issue of Arabophones in his epilogue. He reminds readers that Arabic and Islam are not necessarily synonymous, and that Islam spread to Africa before any other continent. In concluding his work, Kane’s narrative form reminds readers that an absence of a bias is not only an impossibility, it should not necessarily tarnish one’s scholarship. All scholars possess a vantage point in the way they view and navigate their fields of research. In fine scholastic fashion, Kane is right to be transparent about his subjectivity, all while successfully giving enough attention to contending theories and views.

For a book this rich, a bibliography would have successfully served as a window into the corpus of the field. Additionally, words such as “neo-traditionalist” or “neo Sufi” went understandably undefined for brevity’s sake. In concluding the book, this work may leave the reader with a sense of overwhelming wonder: it covers a lot of ground in a relatively small space. It is a magnanimous feat, but that is testament to the dearth of the field of Islamicate West Africa, rather than the author’s over-ambition. In fact, Kane eruditely and bravely covers a wide array of themes, topics and regions, without losing sight of the overarching purpose of the book: to remind emergent scholars that there is a lot more work to be done, and many a ripe opportunity for specialization and growth in the field.

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