

## BOOK REVIEW

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*Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*

By OUSMANE OUMAR KANE (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), ix + 282 pp. Price HB £29.95. EAN 978-0674050822.

In 1998 I was trying to get from Kaolack to Touba in Senegal. I asked a man at the bus stop which bus was going to Touba, but he didn't understand. For some reason I asked him again in Arabic, and he pointed me where I needed to go. That always surprised me. It shouldn't have. As Ousmane Kane proves ably in this book, 'Islam and the Arabic language are no more foreign in Africa than they are in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq' (pp. 207–8).

The grievance is old and still very valid: the study of Islam *qua* religion and *qua* Islamicate civilization remains Nile–Oxus centric, with the peripheries (more populous with Muslims and often more wealthy, powerful and creative than the 'centre') receiving limited attention from anyone but subject-area specialists. This injustice has been greatly ameliorated in the case of South Asia in recent decades, but the 'Islam in Africa' topic still lingers in the shadow of inattention. The very clumsiness of terms like 'Islam in Africa' reveals the pitfalls into which scholars of the Islamicate can fall (here I readily admit my own failings). Great blots of ignorance abound as colonial divisions and modern states lead our minds astray: What is this 'Bilad al-Sudan (Lands of the Blacks)' that authors mention? Isn't Sudan in eastern Africa? Is there another Sudan? It's both? But I thought those were two different conversations. . .

This book goes a long way towards addressing such ignorance. It identifies why many misunderstandings exist and does much to correct them. The colonization of North Africa and the Sahel region, and subsequent developments during the post-colonial period, often functioned to break apart existing social units, trade and knowledge systems and indigenous cosmopolitanisms. Muslim *vs.* traditional African religion and 'Arab' *vs.* 'black' were distinctions that predated colonialism, but the colonial project sharpened, deepened and super-loaded them with intense meaning and consequence. It added new distinctions like Anglophone *vs.* Francophone, 'Westernized' *vs.* 'traditional,' civilized *vs.* not.

Ousmane Kane's *Beyond Timbuktu* takes the reader back in time before the hardening and/or imposition of these lines. The book aims to explore 'West African cosmopolitanism' (p. 5) and to tell the story of the pre-colonial intellectual history of Islamic West Africa (i.e., the role of the 'production and transmission of knowledge in shaping state and society in West Africa', p. 18). It also offers a convincing argument that the Islamicate cosmopolitanism of West Africa, extending from Senegal to Nigeria to Marrakesh to Chad, is still alive and humming.

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The book's extended Prologue (more an introduction) sets forth the aims of the book and its place in the field. Chapter 1 consists of a lengthy survey of 'Timbuktu Studies', which the author defines as an 'inquiring into the intellectual history of Islam in Africa' (p. 22). Chapter 2 takes up 'The Growth and Political Economy of Islamic Scholarship in the Bilad al-Sudan', addressing how Islamicate culture arrived and developed in the region as well as its internal dynamics, links to trade, and the emergence of Arabic-script literary traditions. Chapter 3, on 'The Rise of Clerical Lineages in the Sahara and the Bilad al-Sudan', examines the primary schools of thought on how and when the Islamization of the region occurred as well as the main scholarly, evangelical and political-military trends that contributed to this. Chapter 4 looks at the curricula and cultures of Islamic knowledge transmission, touching on the major Islamic sciences and discussing which books and scholarly genealogies became salient in the region. Chapter 5 addresses some of the best-known topical knots in the Islamic West Africa discursive tradition, such as the issue of slavery-*cum*-race; and *takfir* and the justification for jihad. Chapter 6 looks at how the Islamic education system fared in the colonial period and has a particularly insightful discussion on how French colonial attitudes towards what was thought to be the 'superficial Islam' of West Africa shaped the impact of the colonial education system on Muslim families. Chapter 7 moves on to a survey of self-identifying Islamic centres of modern higher learning in the Sahel region, investigating the role of the Gulf states and, interestingly, Gadhafi's Libya, in funding and shaping them. Chapter 8 looks at some of the major trends in the Islamic public sphere in West Africa in the post-colonial period, such as the emergence of Boko Haram, increased conservatism, and the influence of Saudi proselytization. Chapter 9, 'Arabophones Triumphant', offers a surprising glimpse into how the Islamicate, Arabic-script medium of West African Muslim life continues to thrive alongside the post-colonial and secular nation-state via a variety of economic, cultural and religious links. The Epilogue is a must-read, continuing the present-day plunge into Islamicate West Africa through a glimpse at the religious and political economy of Kaolack, a centre of Islamic piety and learning in Senegal. The book also includes a very useful glossary of people, places, themes, movements and institutions in Islamicate West Africa.

*Beyond Timbuktu* is well-written, smooth and erudite, raising or drawing on the main veins of scholarship and topics of discussion without drowning the reader. The chapter following the prologue, on Timbuktu studies, disrupts this flow and feels somewhat out of place; but it will be a helpful literature review for anyone interested in further reading. The book has chapters that could be easily assigned to an undergraduate survey on the Islamic world (particularly chs. 2 and 3), and the book as a whole provides an excellent introduction for a higher-level course.

The thread that ties *Beyond Timbuktu* together is also what gives it its greatest charm: its touchstones are moments in the author's own life, from Qur'an school as a child to Francophone higher education and AC-doused feasts in Kaolack, a life that Kane uses to show the ways in which worlds that some might assume to be totally separate today weave in and out of each another with

surprising fluidity. It is also, by extension, a bridge back to the life of the author's grandfather, Shaykh al-Islam al-Hajj Ibrahim Niasse, a pillar of Islamic spirituality throughout that cosmopolitan world, whose routes and bonds of patronage and veneration his life seems to have contributed much to defining. And which his grandson lays out with learning and love.

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