Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa by Ousmane Oumar Kane (review)

Ralph A. Austen

The Journal
of
Interdisciplinary History

→ For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/660271

Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa. By Ousmane Oumar Kane (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2016) 282 pp. $39.95

The subject of this book is broader—and more interdisciplinary—than its title suggests. For the precolonial era, Kane is largely concerned with intellectual history in the narrow sense of the written ideas of West African Muslim scholars in Timbuktu and elsewhere (especially the Western Sahara and Senegal), since such texts are the main evidence available for this period. However, even in this section, he provides considerable information about the economic base and market for such learning, its institutional form as well as, from the late seventeenth century onward, the involvement of some clerics in jihadist politics—that is, efforts to take over local states and make them conform to Islamic legal norms. Kane's treatment of such topics as slavery and warfare is largely focused upon their discussion by Muslim scholars rather than what happened on the ground, but he is, after all, only claiming to write an intellectual history. This half of the book is based primarily upon secondary sources, a literature that Kane knows well and is able to synthesize in a clear fashion. Moreover, he is learned enough in Arabic and Islamic sciences to present and comment authoritatively upon some of the key primary texts.

Once he enters the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Kane engages more in what he calls "the political sociology of Islam in West Africa" (178), making considerable use of his own research about Nigerian Islamic movements and Muslim institutions of higher education throughout tropical and southern Africa. This material is informative and insightful, as is his discussion of current conflicts between established Sufi Islam and various fundamentalist movements, including Boko Haram in Nigeria and the 2012 occupation of Timbuktu and northern Mali by North African jihadists.

Kane's account of African Islamic universities is particularly original, informed by sensitivity to the tensions between the use of Arabic and European languages. He also shows an exceptional understanding of the efforts to combine closed traditions of Islamic learning with the more open, inclusive, and cosmopolitan Western university systems that he perceives as setting the standard for modern academic life.[1] The analysis of this subject (as well as in his chapter on "Islam in the Post-colonial Public Sphere") considerably broadens the scope of intellectual history to include the ideologies emerging from disillusionment with the failures of secular modernization. The methodology, however, remains restricted to the study of institutions and politics rather than embracing a genuine sociology or ethnography of students and faculty at the new universities or participants in various West African Islamic movements

---

1   For a valuable series of case studies about this topic, see Mbaye Lo and Muhammed Haron (eds.), *Muslim Institutions of Higher Education in Postcolonial Africa* (Basingstoke, 2016).

or media networks. However, Kane cites a number of scholars who have undertaken such work.

The book begins with an account of Kane's own education in Senegal and France through a combination of secular institutions and the Muslim schools maintained by his mother, a daughter of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, a key figure in twentieth-century West African Sufi history. This autobiography, to which he returns periodically in later chapters, adds an appealing personal dimension to this work and helps to define Kane's own position as both a practitioner of the tradition that he studies and a sophisticated external observer of its development. Without being in any way polemical, his book is an attempt to promote respect among what Kane calls "Europhone intellectuals" for the long history of Islamic thought in Africa and to bring the "Arabophones" who carry on this heritage into the fold of modern learning. Regardless of whether his effort to overcome contemporary African conflicts succeeds, Kane has produced a valuable survey that should remain the classic reference in its field for some time to come.

Ralph A. Austen
University of Chicago

Beyond the State: The Colonial Medical Service in British Africa. Edited by Anna Greenwood (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016) 208 pp. $105.00

The goal of this edited collection is to bring "new eyes and new perspectives" to the study of the Colonial Medical Services (CMS) in British Africa (1). In doing so, the book broadens the conversation between colonial medical historians and scholars in religious studies, anthropology, and other fields, expanding our view of how colonial systems are shaped over time and inspiring us to think beyond traditional sources and categories. In her introduction, Greenwood argues that the CMS sought to portray itself as a white, male, and all-British institution; official archives reflect as much. Though acknowledging its often racist and self-serving policies "ultimately coloured by colonial self-interest" (14), Greenwood seeks to complicate the picture of a homogenous medical service, noting that the physicians were a mixed and "eclectic bunch" whose interactions with a diverse set of stakeholders in specific contexts gave shape to, and limited, specific policy ideas and interventions (9).

The seven chapters that follow, focusing mainly on the first half of the twentieth century, test this idea in various ways through case studies, primarily but not exclusively centered on eastern Africa. Greenwood contributes to two of these chapters. Her single-authored work about the Zanzibar Maternity Association demonstrates the direct and indirect ways by which British authorities sought to undermine the considerable influence of Arab and Indian community funders of the organization.