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Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa

Ousmane Oumar Kane

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. ix + 282 pp.

Academic and non-academic works that deal with the role of Islam in West Africa have multiplied at an impressive rate over the last few years and they generally revolve around two main paradigms: the dire security situation in some parts of West Africa and the centrality of Timbuktu as an ancient site of Islamic learning. In *Beyond Timbuktu*, Ousmane Oumar Kane offers a survey of the existing scholarship on West African Islam and he compellingly demonstrates that the extraordinary richness of Timbuktu's intellectual heritage represents not an exception, but rather, the norm across the region. Kane also bridges the often bifurcated history of Islam in North and West Africa, focusing on local sources that had for long been overlooked in the existing literature. Kane points out that he wrote *Beyond Timbuktu* in order to help "Europhone intellectuals" (208) appreciate the rich diversity of Muslim religious life in West Africa. An argumentative thrust underpins his narrative, moreover: Kane claims that an "esoteric episteme" (204) framed precolonial Islam, and that this episteme has survived because many West African Muslims continue to believe that religious knowledge should be obtained from a teacher who embodies this knowledge, and not simply from books.

The first half of *Beyond Timbuktu* deals with precolonial Islam. Kane first addresses the emphasis on Timbuktu in the existing studies, which is due to the presence of thousands of ancient manuscripts in this city, and he then offers an exhaustive list of similar collections in many other parts of West Africa. The second chapter covers early Islamic history, the process of Islamization, and the spread of Islamic books along trans-Saharan trade routes. In the third chapter, Kane claims that a "relative fluidity" characterized "precolonial racial and ethnic identities" (62) in West Africa and he describes the region's main ethnic groups, including the Ibadi and Sanhaja Berbers, the Wangara, Zawayya, and Fulbe, as well as the Wolof speakers in Senegambia. In examining how these groups contributed to the Islamization of West Africa, Kane identifies two influential models: al-Hajj Salim Suwari's relatively non-violent method of encouraging trade and slow conversion, and Awbek b. Aschfaghu's violent eschatological, which often led to warfare (64). The fourth chapter deals with the Islamic curriculum, which included talismanic sciences and African lexicology in addition to the traditional religious disciplines. And, in the fifth chapter, Kane analyzes the ways in which West African Muslims defined the Islamic community and how their definitions inflected both local conflicts and religious decrees on the practice of slavery.

From the sixth chapter, *Beyond Timbuktu* turns to the colonial and post-colonial history of West African Islam. Kane stresses that the epistemic break with premodern Islam occurred with the introduction of a competing educational system during the colonial era. Similarly, a linguistic shift took place as an increasing number of West African students learned European languages instead of Arabic, in addition to being discouraged from speaking their local languages. In the seventh chapter, Kane focuses on (among other institutions) the Islamic universities of Say in Niger and Mbale in Uganda. Relying on interviews conducted during his visits to these universities, Kane explains that they represent an attempt to move away from the secular model and to preserve Arabic as a language of instruction. At the same time, Kane observes, most such universities and colleges remain dependent on funding from the Gulf countries, lack in research opportunities, and are thus generally marginalized. The eighth chapter traces the rise of Islam in the post-colonial public sphere due to the liberalization of media and the resulting intensification of the challenge to secularism in West Africa. Finally, the last chapter details some of the most recent developments and the rising importance of “Arabophones” in the context of a fragile security situation in the region (199).

Beyond Timbuktu contains an admirable combination of synthesis, historiographical innovation, and new arguments. Kane has successfully shown that a broader approach to the study of West African Islam—one that overcomes the parochial limits of what he calls “Timbuktu studies” (21)—has the potential to uncover the myriad of international connections and networks that produced a religious tradition with both a deeply entrenched local character and multiple and longstanding links to religious developments in the rest of the Muslim world. Kane demonstrates, more specifically, that a reliance on the French imperial distinction between Islam in West and in North Africa has obscured a long history of cultural and intellectual exchanges between these two regions. Kane also provides an interesting and enlightening account of his own experience in the European and local educational systems, the importance of Islamic learning in his family, as well as his visits to the modern Islamic universities. This personal narrative lends strength to his wider argument about the persistence of premodern epistemic forms and the fluidity of local and regional identities.

At the same time, a significant portion of *Beyond Timbuktu* is devoted to simply listing manuscript collections and names of scholars and ethnic groups who shaped West African Islam. At times, this laudable attempt to inventory and cover as much ground as possible comes at the price of describing more fully the depth of local intellectual traditions and theological debates. To be sure, Kane has studied a wide range of ideas about the role of religion in local conflicts, but the emergence of the “esoteric episteme” as the defining feature of premodern Islam in West Africa remains insufficiently examined in *Beyond Timbuktu*. Moreover, some of Kane’s more categorical statements warrant further analysis. For instance, he argues that the local “population did not trust colonial schools in any shape or form” in French West Africa (129) and that “[i]n colonial Mauritania, Arabs never trusted Western education” (206). It is not fully clear what evidence could be used to defend such strong claims.

These smaller issues notwithstanding, *Beyond Timbuktu* remains an impressive work. Kane has described the wider historical background that shaped West African Islam over

multiple centuries, and he has proven that the history of Islamic learning in Timbuktu falls within a much larger pattern of extensive religious networks, wide-ranging cultural exchanges, intensive study of classical Islamic texts, and remarkable erudition. *Beyond Timbuktu* will thus undoubtedly become an important reference for those interested in West African Islam, and it could serve as an excellent introductory text for undergraduate courses in the same field.

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Islamic Law and Muslim Same-Sex Unions

Junaid Jahangir and Hussein Abdullatif
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. 269 pp.

In *Islamic Law and Muslim Same-Sex Unions*, Junaid Jahangir and Hussein Abdullatif methodically construct the argument that Islamic traditions and principles are not universally opposed to same-sex unions. Analyzing commonly cited Qur'anic passages, hadith literature and jurisprudential rulings, the authors explore the varied and subtle arguments within their historical contexts, and in doing so, correct misconceptions held by many Muslims that homosexuality is theologically and historically condemned in Islam. Backed by academic Islamic traditions (Sunni and Shi'i are both considered in this text) and by their understanding that the Qur'an seeks to secure human rights and dignity for all, the authors create a book by and for believing Muslims (ix). The interplay of traditional sources and modern circumstances creates a pathway forward for Muslims who may believe that being queer and being Muslim is impossible. Anyone interested in examining the current Islamic discourse on sexualities, sexual orientation and gender can use this text as an example of progressive Muslim thought that claims its heritage on the basis of well-researched Islamic tradition.

The authors guide readers through the literature arguing against homosexuality and, like scholars before them, illustrate that injunctions against homosexual activities have been conflated with deeds such as highway robbery and other "evil deeds in your assemblies" (29:29). They conclude that "no Qur'anic verse . . . directly addresses same-sex relationships" (11). Passages such as those retelling the story of Lut condemn exploitative and violent sex, rather than loving, sexual intimacy, which, as the authors argue, is the basis of establishing same-sex unions within the Islamic traditions. Other arguments, such as linking same-sex intimacy to pedophilia or forced sex has more to do with notions of regulated gender roles than it does with what the Qur'an or other sources endorse. It is the supposed submissiveness of a male allowing himself to be penetrated by another male that is most abhorrent, since men are not "designed" by God to be submissive or the "receiver" but rather to be the aggressor, the dominant, the penetrator (38). Nowhere in this formula is there room for sexual intimacy to be understood as anything other than penetration by the penis, and everywhere in this formula is the fear of loss of male power. One key to understanding homophobia in Islam is, then, to question why and how gender binaries are understood and reinforced in these efforts to ascribe sex as penetration by the penis alone. Even the fact that