

Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa.

By Ousmane Oumar Kane. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. ix, 282. \$39.95.)

Reviewed for the *The Historian*

Ousmane Kane has written an overview of Muslim intellectual history in West Africa from its earliest traces to the current day. This is an explicitly intellectual history, focused much more than other works on Islam in Africa, on the production and reproduction of Islamic knowledge. Kane focuses on how West Africans have participated in the wider discursive tradition of Islam while at the same time producing a literature addressed to particular contemporary concerns at different times. He discusses important themes in the pre-colonial Muslim West African literature such as relations with non-Muslims, slavery, and the role of Islam in statecraft, and in the colonial and post-colonial context, issues of modernity, education, Islamist reform, and violent transnational extremism. Paying slightly more attention to the pre-colonial period, Kane devotes the first five chapters to explaining the ethnohistorical development of clerical groups and networks that became the pillars of Islamic knowledge dissemination, production and reproduction in West Africa. This includes a chapter which details the 'core curriculum' followed by students on their path to become Muslim scholars, and a chapter on the discursive tradition particular to West Africa. The last four chapters of the book to explain how Islamic education was challenged and undermined by colonial rule, but also how modernizing Islamic educational institutions have expanded and changed the intellectual worldview of many West African Muslims. In part these changes are the result of the fact that support and sponsorship from Muslim countries and organizations outside of West Africa has played such an important role in shaping institutional development over the last fifty years or so. And this in turn has helped to shift the shape of the intellectual field of West African Islam along the lines found in other parts of the Muslim world, with an ascendant modernist and/or Islamist trajectory. The final chapter discusses the rise of violent jihadist groups such as Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb in Northern Mali since the turn of the twenty-first century.

Despite all the changes in Muslim intellectual culture described in his book, Kane prefers to highlight the enduring consistency that undergirds Islamic knowledge production in West Africa over time. One way in which he does this is by using his own life as an example of how Muslim West Africans could achieve highly sophisticated levels of knowledge through participation in both the traditional Arabophone Muslim education and the secular Europhone state system. As a grandson of the famous Senegalese Tijani Sufi leader Ibrahim Niassé (d.1975), Kane followed a traditional Islamic education which required the development of advanced knowledge of Arabic. He also simultaneously went to secular French-language schools in Senegal, eventually culminating in a Ph.D. in France. After teaching in Senegal at the beginning of his academic career, Kane has spent the last fifteen years teaching at Columbia and Harvard. The book makes clear that for many, this clash between Western secular education and world view on the one hand, and the more embodied form of Islamic education carried out in Arabic and in West African languages on the other hand, was disorienting and alienating. Yet in the person of Kane himself, at least as he describes his path in this book, it need not be. Furthermore, Kane argues that West African Muslim scholars continue to be recognized experts in esoteric Islamic sciences, and that despite the challenges to it, Sufi-inflected knowledge is still central to the Muslim intellectual tradition. If anything, Kane presents the differences between

West Africans educated by Arabic and Muslim schools, and those educated in European-language secular schools, as intellectually superficial and based more on differential access to jobs and patronage. He offers a somewhat optimistic view of this at the end, as he describes the ways in which, in Senegal at least, there has been some convergence between French-language state schools which now offer courses on Islam, and instruction in Arabic, and the Arabic-language Muslim schools which teach French and have moved to include secular subjects in their curriculums.

This is a very valuable book which provides an excellent entry point for students interested in the history of Islam in Africa, but also includes many things that specialists will find useful. It is a rare book that works both as an introduction to a field, and as a serious contribution to that field for specialists.

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