

Ousmane Oumar Kane

Beyond Timbuktu. An intellectual history of Muslim West Africa. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2016. ix, 282 pp., index, notes. Hardback £29.95.

This book is a survey of Islamic learning and education in West Africa from the earliest beginnings until the present. It can thus be a useful introduction for students or others new to the field, but it will also be of benefit to Africanists who are not aware of the importance of Islamic learning for the continent, and for Islam scholars who think of sub-Saharan Africa as a distant and unimportant periphery. Following this overview, the book digs deeper into the challenges facing Islamic education in modern-day Islamic Africa, based on original research.

The discussion of the pre-colonial period focuses on what Kane calls “the political economy of scholarship”. He briefly refers to the dispute of whether the first propagators of Islam south of the Sahara were the merchants themselves, or dedicated scholars who followed the trade routes for the single purpose of proselytization. He concludes that it was most likely a combination of both. However, the establishment of Islamic scholarship required material support in the form of books and paper, and an important entry into its history is tracing the book trade as well as the local production of books in the region. In this respect, some scholars have identified specific Saharan or sub-Saharan calligraphic styles, and Arabic script was also used for a few local (*ajami*) languages.

Kane emphasizes the importance of locally produced Islamic works, as symbolized by the almost mythical importance now given to Timbuktu as a repository for Arabic manuscripts in Africa. But, as the title of the book indicates, the glaring flashlights focused on this city may put the many other similar centres of manuscript production in obscurity. There is also the danger that excessive hyperbole around “Timbuktu manuscripts” may misrepresent their actual importance as well as the function of Islamic learning there and elsewhere. Thus, if we are to call Timbuktu’s scholarly centres a “medieval African university”, we must (as for other medieval Islamic centres of learning) first define what we mean by “university”.

The book discusses the carriers of Islamic learning and their social and ethnic composition, giving weight to specific religious groups such as the Ibāḍīs, ethnic groups as the Fulani and Wolof, and social categories like the Dyula and the *zwāya* clans. As for the content and curriculum studied, it was legal studies that, alongside Quran, *ḥadīth* and *tawḥīd* (theology), were most central in West African Islamic scholarship. Also important were Sufi works that blend into *madh*, works in praise of the Prophet. This survey leads into a discussion of the

“discursive community”: how did the Muslims see themselves as a collective body?

There were different ways to cope with this. Kane describes his own childhood experience, coming from a leading religious family in Senegal. He did both systems full time, Europhone school during the day and religious schools in the evenings and all weekends. This strenuous double education which did not leave any free time for the students (no football!), was however not suitable for all. Other ways to give both a religious and a secular career-building education were therefore sought. This gave rise to what Kane calls a “hybrid” system that borrowed from Western pedagogy and taught the same subjects as the colonial schools, but used either Arabic exclusively or a mixture of Arabic and the colonial language and included religious instruction alongside the secular subjects. These are sometimes called the Arabophone schools, other names are Islamiyya, Franco-Arabe or *médersa* schools. Many of these schools were established by colonial authorities to ensure better control of the population. Still, the basic education model was imitated by many private Muslim actors, in particular after independence.

This model of mixed secular / religious schools has overcome some of the drawbacks of the traditional Quran schools. But some problems remain. Graduates from purely Arabophone schools may for example be excluded from employment opportunities, since they are unable to pass national graduation exams given in the European language, or they are seen as uncompetitive by employers seeking Europhone employees. Graduates from Arabophone schools also had a problem finding an avenue to advanced studies locally. Many of them instead went abroad to the Middle East, to Egypt, Libya, the Sudan and increasingly Saudi Arabia. While they came back with enhanced skills in Arabic, their reactions to their years abroad were mixed, Kane says. Some came back with strong anti-Arab attitudes, or dropped religion altogether, while others started to work for a “re-Islamization” of their home countries in line with ideas they had encountered in the Middle East.

Several Muslim countries are also actively supporting Islamic education in Africa, in particular Iran, leading in some cases to proselytization of Shi’ism among new groups. However, the teaching itself may be non-sectarian. Interestingly, the Iranian-backed Open University in Niamey primarily hires its teachers from the Saudi-financed Islamic University of Say.

Much of this information gives a fascinating overview over Islamic knowledge transmission in Africa, and Kane’s approach of using his personal experience as a framework makes for an easily read text. It is not always quite clear, however, who the targeted reader is. The earlier chapters appear as an overview, very useful for the newcomer. However, those readers may be discouraged by

the very first chapter, which gives an historiographical survey of research on Islam in West Africa, listing many names and publications, including the present journal. That constitutes an impressive survey to those with a background in this field, but is probably less fascinating for the absolute beginner, and Kane himself indicates that the casual reader may skip over it. Perhaps a different arrangement of the material would have been better. The last chapter is also less about intellectual history than a summary of the political situation in Timbuktu and of Boko Haram in Nigeria at the present.

Clearly, a survey covering such a large time span will also have some imprecisions that a reviewer can pick on. Thus, ‘Uqba b. Nāfi‘ was not reported to come anywhere near Kanem, stories say he conquered Kawar, still then far to the north (p. 44). The Kaossen rebellion in 1916 took place in Air in Niger, not on the Niger Bend (p. 189). On p. 46, we read that the Almoravid rule led to the “eradication of Kharijite Islam” (in the eleventh century) and on the following page that the Ibādīs traded across the desert “until the eighth century”. The latter must be a misprint, Ibādī trading activity was carried out *from* the eighth century, and lasted well into the medieval period, long after the fall of the Rustamid state in 909 AD. How much influence Ibādī *religion* had south of the desert after the Almoravid invasion is less clear, but it was probably not “eradicated” for quite some time after that, given that there were important Ibādī centres in the desert several centuries later.

In sum, however, this is a very good introduction to the field of Islamic knowledge production, past and present, in West Africa, containing in particular a survey of the nature of modern Islamic and Arabic education in the region which will be important for any scholar working in this field.

Knut S. Vikør

University of Bergen

knut.vikor@uib.no