

Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa

Ousmane Oumar Kane. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Review by James S. Wright
San Diego State University

Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa consists of nine chapters and an epilogue that includes notes, a glossary, acknowledgements, and an index. As a young child in Senegal, author Ousmane Oumar Kane “pursued Islamic and Western education simultaneously,” including full-time Qur’anic memorization, in the morning, evening, and on weekends (p. 3). He holds an MPhil, PhD from the Institute d’études politiques de Paris and is the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Professor of Contemporary Islamic Religion and Society at the Harvard Divinity School. Dr. Kane was also an associate professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. His research interests include colonization’s impact on Islamic societies and Muslim globalization.

Beyond Timbuktu is an intriguing analysis of how West African Muslim intellectuals, through various schools of thought, crafted an Islamic epistemology conducive to their lived experiences, along with dynamic pedagogical strategies of scholarship, teaching, and learning that extended for centuries and transcended beyond the region.

Pre-colonial Timbuktu is perhaps most famous for the legend of the ruler Mansa Musa, who reigned from 1312-1337. His legend is most noted by historians for his famous hajj in 1324. On his way to Makka, Mansa Musa stopped in Cairo, where his entourage and display of wealth became the talk of legend. A fourteenth-century European map of West Africa contains his picture. Some historians suggest that the European *scramble* for Africa was propelled by these tales. Kane reminds us that fourteenth-century West Africa was a global supplier of gold to the major economies from what is known today as Morocco to Central Asia and into China.

Besides this extravagant display of wealth “was a landmark in the arrival of books and Muslim scholars in Sudanic Africa” (p. 51). Timbuktu, along with its vast wealth with extensive libraries, was an Islamic hub for learning and scholarship. Kane describes West Africa as much more central to Islam and the

spread of Islamic knowledge and science than had been previously known or discussed in both Islamic academic and western academic discourse, scholarship, and teaching.

So why is this history so marginal in Islamic discourses and western academic discourse and scholarship on Africa? Kane tells us that there is a bridge, not a barrier, between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. I critically engage this question by focusing on the Arabic term *Bilād al-Sudān* (The land of Black People), which refers to the land south of North Africa stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea – a derogatory term coined by Arab writers during the precolonial, medieval Islamic era. However, the term was appropriated “as a badge of greatness, in much the same way as has happened to the term ‘negro’” (p. 41).

Kane seeks to reallocate sub-Saharan Africa’s contributions to knowledge production in Islam. Such contributions include the introduction of paper, the book trade, and the formation and transformation of the educational system. So much information has been unearthed by experts on Islam and Muslim societies that “enable[s] us to bring the Islamic history of the Bilad al-Sudan to the contemporary debate on the production of knowledge in and on Africa and to the study of Islamic ideas” (p. 42).

The impact of colonization on Africa is a well-documented phenomenon. But what is less documented is the impact that medieval, precolonial Islamic Africa had on African and Islamic civilization, culture, knowledge production, and dissemination. This is not to suggest that African Muslim engagement with its Arab religious cohabitants was not hostile. Medieval Arab writers’ derogatory “instrument of authorization” over the darker skinned sub-Saharan Muslims is indicative of a problematic anti-blackness that predates European and colonial engagement with Africa (p. 41). Notwithstanding, precolonial African Muslims were thriving: spiritually, culturally and intellectually. This is evident in the historical accounts of knowledge production and dissemination occurring at Timbuktu. Moreover, its scholars were learned, well-traveled, and among “the highest intellectual authorities of their time. Many Timbuktu scholars possessed personal libraries of hundreds or thousands of books” (p. 12).

In spite of Northern African and Arab Muslim anti-blackness sentiments toward sub-Saharan African Muslims, there were no Islamic theological or systemic impediments imposed upon Africans. Kane refutes colonial discourses and narratives that seek to equate this North African and Arab anti-blackness to European colonizers. Furthermore, Kane refutes the essentialist arguments of Pan Africanists and Eurocentrists who claim that Islam equally contributed to African enslavement and oppression and the stagnation of African development. His arguments are crafted through a *life history* account along with his own personal

life stories of his formative years to which he stated, “I grew up navigating easily between ethnic, racial, cultural, and epistemological boundaries” (p. 5).

Kane distinguishes between the three groups anti-blackness attitudes. Whereas North African and Arab Muslims’ anti-blackness was immaterial, European engagement and colonization was material; it provoked an epistemic shift with transformative economic consequences. “The colonial powers saw the occupation of Africa as a means of promoting their economic interests while pursuing their so-called humanitarian mission” (p. 203).

Beyond Timbuktu is couched in Kane’s personal stories and centered around his tribe and family’s life history. However, the book offers some important historical analysis of contemporary anti-blackness in many Muslim societies toward African and other darker colored people, both Muslim and non-Muslim. This anti-blackness is not a result of Arab and North African engagements with European and/or the effects of European colonization, for Kane locates that in the medieval precolonial Islamic era. Nonetheless, precolonial anti-blackness was neither ontological nor epistemological, for it did not structurally and systemically impede African development and prosperity. On the contrary, European colonization and engagement with Africa was ontological and epistemological, which helped the colonizers implement structures and systems to not only reverse the development of African civilizations and societies, but also helped rewrite and whitewash Africa’s entire history and global significance.