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Ousman Murzik Kobo. *Unveiling Modernity in the Twentieth Century West African Islamic Reforms.* LEIDEN: E.J. BRILL, 2012. 424 pp. ISBN: 900423313X and ISBN 9789004233133

Reviewed by Yunus Dumbe, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana.

The theme of Islamic reform has attracted a lot of scholarly attention in recent times. Ousman Kobo's book is a contribution to this literature analyzing the genesis of Islamic reform movements in Burkina Faso and Ghana respectively. The book is timely and adds to the stock of texts that discusses the Islamic reform in movements in West Africa. Central to Kobo's analysis was that the colonized people appropriated the cultural and material discourse to reinforce local struggles against the remnants of colonialism and to extricate themselves from perceived sacrilegious and obsolete cultural practices. In the view of the author, the success in this struggle by the Wahhabi reformers in its early phase was connected to the pivotal role played by the emerging Muslim elites who were equipped with European languages and bureaucratic skills (p.318).

This book has attracted interesting scholarly reviews from experts such as Loimeier (2013), Wright (2014), Miran-Guyon (2015) and Launay (2015) whose area of specialization is African Islamic reform. These reviewers highlighted the outstanding dimensions the book offers and the groundbreaking method adopted by the author to examine modern Islamic reform movements in both Ghana and Burkina Faso. *Unveiling Modernity*, in the perspective of Miran-Guyon (2015) and Launay (2015), contains unique biographical studies of previously understudied Islamic movements of these countries and thus revealed many unknown communities (Wright 2014) contrasted the previous scholarly bias which is premised on the view that modern Islamic reform movements originate at the centre of Muslim world and resonate in the peripheries with Kobo's masterpiece which places local African context at the centre. Launay (2015) in his review argues that the originality of the book is reflected in the centrality of the ideas which the Wahhabi reformers propagated which were not simply an export from the Middle East, but a genuine response to the internal dynamics of African Islamic communities.

The comparative approach adopted in its analyses has bridged the political divide and the artificial barriers on scholarship of the respective Anglophone and Francophone countries, which originally share strong cultural ties in the case of northern Ghana (Miran-Guyon 2015 and Launay 2015). Loimeier (2012) framed the title of his review as "Phenomenology of Islamic Reform," and he argued that Kobo's analysis of Wahhabi reform movements is based on his thorough knowledge of local sources and numerous conversations with Muslim scholars of

different orientations which offered insight into local dynamics of reform. The analyses presented in the mentioned reviews highlighted the overall strength of the book in diverse ways. I offer to contribute to this debate by highlighting other relevant issues worthy of academic interest. My argument is that while this book offers a rare insight on the dynamic of Islamic movements in both countries, the methodological approach it adopted has limited the analysis it offers especially in the case of Ghanaian Wahhabi experience.

The book is structured in four parts of nine chapters. However, for the sake of brevity, I comment on some of the salient issues which have attracted my interest. The book analyzed British and French policy towards Islam, Muslim movements, and Muslim education. The author provided a biographical analysis of Boubacar Sawodogo (1883-1946) which highlighted his attitude towards coexistence with the French, in contrast to the widely held theories of accommodation of Muslim leaders with the colonial regimes. By coexistence, the author argues for peaceful cohabitation between the French and Muslim leaders, albeit in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and antagonism. Conspicuously missing, however, in his analysis in this chapter on Ghana was the biography of Alhaj Umar bin Abibakar Krake al-Salaghawi (1854-1934) who lived in Salaga, a town in the British Northern Territories and, later settled in Keta Krachi, a town in the Germans controlled Togoland. Krake al-Salaghawi was regarded as a *de facto* Muslim scholar during the colonial period (Stewart 1965; Iddris 1996).

Since the author's approach was a comparative analysis, an examination of the background of these two personalities' attitude to the colonial policies on Muslims will have afforded his readers with insight if the theory of coexistence was relevant in the context of the two countries. The author further examines the factors that aided the rapid growth of Wahhabi organizations in 1970s and 1980s which he argues were interconnected with historical, cultural, socio-economic and political factors. He demonstrated how the growth of the Sunnite Movement in Burkina Faso was as a result of its growing transnational connection with the Arab world, its expansion of madrasah education and mosques activities as well as opportunities it offered for elected members as executives among others.

Similarly, the historical incident the author attributed to the masses' interest in Umar Ibrahim's (the first Ghanaian graduate from Saudi Arabia) Salafi discourse in Ghana was the polarized social tension between the Muslim leaders and the youth on the accountability of Islamic centers. This view might, however, represent a marginal theme in the Muslims social space especially in the context of 20th century's modernity. What partly accounted for the masses interest Ibrahim's Salafi discourse was the considerable transformation that Muslim communities were undergoing on social and economic issues with the emergence of youth clubs such as Zumunchi, Zumunta (fraternity), Anwaaye (enlightened ladies) and Goumbe (entertainment club). The activities of these clubs affected the religious character of the communities which attracted the attention of the 'Ulama beginning from 1940s prior to the rise of Umar Ibrahim. Some of the founding members of the Islamic Research and Reformation Centre (IRRC) especially the Western educated elites, like Mijinma Sumana Saly, the first Director and Abdulai Barou, the Deputy Director, were the architects of these social clubs but became less enthused and embraced Ibrahim's Salafi agenda.

Again, his theory of political marginalization of Muslims by the postcolonial regime led by Nkrumah (p.224) is the least plausible argument which accounted for the attraction of the

nascent Wahhabi ideology propagated by Ibrahim in Accra to the masses. In contrast, Dumbe (2013) biographical analysis of the background of the Western educated elites who embraced Wahhabi movement in Ghana showed that they played a central role in Nkrumah's regime as political functionaries prior to the founding of the IRRC.

The outstanding contribution of this book is related to the argument the author put forward that West African Wahhabism was a confluence of Western modernity, Islamic modernity (Salafi) and locally constructed modernity. In his view, the origin of ideas of modernity in the West African and Middle Eastern tradition of reform was driven by changes in West African Muslim societies as a result of the impact of Western secular education on Muslim societies. This, he argues, Wahhabi leaders appropriated Western concepts for struggles against colonial policies that eroded Muslims' influence (p.240). This view is Euro-centric since it largely underrated the ability of the 'Ulama to independently articulate their strand of Islamic modernity. This is evident in the backgrounds and biographies of the local 'Ulama including Umar Ibrahim who were not in touch with Western education and ideas.

Methodologically, Kobo depended on oral sources at the expense of archives, which have, to a large degree, affected the accuracy of his narrations. One weakness of the oral interviews is the question of reliability when it contradicts with available facts and archives especially regarding events which had occurred in the last four decades (1970-2012) of which his informants might not accurately have recollected. These have produced to some extent a set of inaccuracies and misrepresentations of issues in the book. For instance, his narration of the events leading to the disintegration of the IRRC (p.289) does not lend credence to the available archives. The movement did not necessarily disintegrate because of doctrinal controversy with the Tijaniyya, as his informants claimed, but it was torn between two power blocs; that is, the Western educated executives on one hand, and the 'Ulama on the other hand (Dumbe et al 2017). Other historical inaccuracies were reflected in the founding of the IRRC (p.226) and the Ahlus-Sunnah movement (p.298). For his reliance on oral sources alone, the author left out an important religious bloc, the Islamic Research Youth Organization that was founded in 1972. This youth wing promoted Salafi modernity in the postcolonial period by linking the youth and the Muslim community as whole with opportunities in the Ghanaian secular milieu.

In spite of these shortcomings, this book is extremely relevant because it contributes to our knowledge as regards the extent to which secular ideas promoted by the Western educated were relevant in Muslim leadership structures which aims at promoting efficiency and its usefulness in the political sphere. Furthermore, the book is useful for higher institutions of learning. Other scholars can build on this by exploring the Salafi resurgence from the historical perspective and the transformations that these movements have undergone in modern Ghana.

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