

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 1 No. 2 pp.08-11, September 2017

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Ousmane Oumar Kane: *Beyond Timbuktu. An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 282 pp. ISBN 9780674050822.

Reviewed by Rüdiger Seesemann, professor, University of Bayreuth, Germany,

ruediger.seesemann@uni-bayreuth.de

Over the past two decades, the study of Islam in Africa has made tremendous advances compared to the state of the field in the early 1990s. The appearance of several synthetic accounts in recent years, such as the monographs by David Robinson¹ and Roman Loimeier² signal a certain degree of maturity that the field has now reached, a development that is further attested by Ousmane Kane's *Beyond Timbuktu*, the work under review.

The extent of the advances in the field can be measured by identifying Kane's major concern, which is not any more about proving that Africa is indeed a continent with a history, nor about proving that African Muslims, just as Muslims elsewhere, also have an intellectual tradition worthy of the name. Rather, Kane seeks to show that there is a rich Islamic heritage that has not been given the place it deserves in African Studies, because its proponents were not "europhone" and hence their voices remained absent from intellectual debates conducted in European languages. The project Kane brings to fruition in *Beyond Timbuktu* actually began much earlier, as attested in his book *Intellectuels non europhones* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2003). Its objective is to portray the Islamic heritage as an integral part of the "African library", which rests on different epistemological premises than the "expanded library" (Mudimbe) of African europhone intellectuals, as the latter is an extension of the colonial library in the sense that it "operates in the same Western epistemological order" (9).

As indicated in the title, the book builds and expands on what Kane refers to as "Timbuktu Studies", a branch of the study of Islam in Africa concerned with intellectual history based on the literary production of West African Muslims; and this was epitomized by the vast manuscript holdings in the Malian town of Timbuktu, which have been brought to the attention of wider academic and non-academic publics through the efforts of scholars such as the late John Hunwick and Shamil Jeppie. Kane directs the focus of his inquiry to the contours of Muslim intellectual life in West Africa as it unfolded from the eleventh century onwards up to the most recent emergence of militant Islamic movements in Nigeria and Mali, which even threatened the rich intellectual heritage preserved in Timbuktu in the latter case.

The nine chapters of the book are ordered in a chronological sequence, and they are framed by a prologue and an epilogue, where Kane interweaves his analysis with personal accounts of his experience as a scion of a renowned Muslim scholarly family from Senegal. Building on his own encounters with what Ali Mazrui has called Africa's triple heritage (African, Islamic, and Western), he sets out to narrate the history of Islamic intellectual life, starting with an overview of Timbuktu Studies (chapter 1) and subsequently covering the beginnings of Islamic scholarship in West Africa (chapter 2), the clerical groups that were instrumental in teaching and spreading Islam (chapter 3), the curriculum taught in settings of Islamic learning prior to colonization (chapter 4), the creation of an Islamic space of meaning as reflected in debates over slavery, jihad, and dynastic rule (chapter 5), the trajectories of

Islamic education under colonial rule (chapter 6), the emergence of Islamic universities in Africa since the late 1980s (chapter 7), Islam and the public sphere in the postcolonial period (chapter 8), and finally the recent developments in Nigeria (the introduction of sharia-based penal codes in several northern states, the rise of the militant Boko Haram movement) and Northern Mali (the short-lived Islamic State of Azawad; chapter 9).

Chapters one to six offer a very coherent overview of the intellectual trajectory of Muslims in the region called Bilad al-Sudan (“the land of the blacks”) by late medieval Arab geographers, which roughly corresponds to what is today referred to as the Sahel. Here, Kane brings the Islamic intellectual tradition to life; and he connects it skillfully to West African Islamic history, drawing on a wide array of primary sources and offering an incisive synthesis of the secondary literature. However, the narrative somewhat loses its track and also its traction in the course of chapter 6. This is partly due to the switch from an analytical, synthetic perspective to an “account of events”-style starting in chapter seven, and partly to the rather loose application of the designation “arabophone Muslims” to those West Africans who embarked on studying at institutions of higher education in Arab countries during the colonial period and after.

According to Kane, the experience of studying abroad “has created two very different attitudes among graduates when they return to their home countries” (137). Some, he asserts, returned as “anti-Arab” and even “abandoned practicing the Islamic religion altogether”, because of the low level of religious commitment and the racial prejudice they experienced in their host countries, whereas the others, “those who acquire an in-depth knowledge of Arabic and Islamic culture and have been exposed to Islamist ideas, preach a re-Islamization either of society or the state upon their return” (138). This rather indiscriminate characterization of the growing group of West African returnees is carried further when Kane continues to speak of “the Islamic intellectual tradition” (sic, in the singular) throughout the last three chapters, which mainly revolve around the impact of arabophone Muslims in higher Islamic education, in the public sphere, and ultimately in the rise of Islamic militancy, the subject of chapter nine, evocatively titled “Arabophones triumphant”.

Perhaps the idea that underlies Kane’s narrative here (which, at times, displays a subtle teleological innuendo, suggesting a linear development of “the Islamic intellectual tradition”) is related to his claim that “a look at nineteenth-century revivalist movements reveals striking similarities between old and new Islamism” (106; see also p.111). Without problematizing the term “Islamism”, Kane sees a continuity between the nineteenth-century West African jihads led by the likes of Osman dan Fodio or Umar Tall and the militant Islamic movements of the twenty-first century. While it is accurate that arabophone Muslim reformers are not the only ones involved in past and present projects aimed at the Islamization of state and society, some more differentiation would have been helpful here. The arguments used by dan Fodio and modern jihad movements in order to declare a Muslim government as the legitimate target of a jihad might be coined in the same terms and appear to follow a similar logic, but they do not share the same intellectual genealogy and are not derived from the same jurisprudential framework, nor are their arguments inscribed in the same context.

Paying more attention to different intellectual genealogies would have also allowed for a more nuanced picture of the trajectories of arabophone Muslims. For instance, reference could have been made to the efforts of Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé (d.1975), the author’s maternal grandfather repeatedly invoked in the book, to establish a relationship with al-Azhar University in Cairo and to send young Senegalese Muslims, including many of his own sons, to Egypt and Morocco in order to pursue higher Islamic education there. In Kane’s account, arabophone Muslims primarily appear as a counter-élite to the state or the “traditional” religious establishment, for whom making space for Islam was often equivalent to working for their economic survival. Given the dominance of this theme in chapters seven (the only one where Kane presents new research, also including East Africa) and eight, the focus on

intellectual history gets lost, and the opportunity to highlight the variety of intellectual agendas pursued by West African arabophone Muslims is missed.³ Chapter nine does little to dispel the vague feeling that frustrated arabophone Muslims are the driving force behind rampant radicalization in some parts of West Africa, even though it would not have been difficult to show that this radicalization is less connected to the language they use (in fact, Arabic is not the only idiom that is relevant here), but rather to the ideology they espouse.

Fortunately, the epilogue brings the main narrative of the book back on track. Kane engages once more with questions of epistemology and emphasizes the resilience of the intellectual pattern that has been so influential in West Africa up to the colonial period. Referring to Louis Brenner's distinction between the "esoteric" and the "rationalistic" paradigm, developed on the basis of his research on Islamic schooling in twentieth-century Mali,⁴ Kane argues that nowadays "the majority of Muslims easily navigate between the esoteric and the rational episteme" (204), and thus "embrace the coexistence and tension between different paradigms of knowledge" (206). In this way, they are able to both preserve and transform their Islamic heritage even as they are part of an entangled, globalized world and negotiate (different) Islamic, African, and Western identities.

It should not go unmentioned that readers with an academic interest in Islam in Africa will probably feel underwhelmed by the book's back matter. Bibliographical references are only included in the notes and not listed in a separate bibliography. The index frequently fails to break entries down into sub-entries and is therefore of little use for readers searching names, places, or terms occurring frequently. Who would go through thirty page references to Mauritania when searching for specific information about, say, Islamic schooling or slavery in this region? Similarly, little care has been spent on the glossary, which is far from comprehensive when it comes to technical terms, but also lists a number of persons selected on the basis of non-transparent criteria along with brief biographical information. Under the entry "Zawaya" in the glossary the reader learns that they are an "ethnic group", which is a serious misinformation. Kane's (or the publisher's) choice to stick to a simplified transliteration might serve the europhone-only audience well, but is not becoming of a book on Islamic intellectual life that otherwise sets a high standard of scholarship. Sloppy proofreading constitutes another drawback.

Nonetheless, with its analytical focus on the Islamic "African library", Ousmane Kane's insightful synthesis of the state of the art in the study of West Africa's Islamic intellectual history will serve as an excellent reference for students and scholars alike. Hopefully *Beyond Timbuktu* will achieve its purpose of bringing this rich library to the attention of a wider europhone public.

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Muslim Societies in African History*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

² *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology*, Indiana University Press, 2013; *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

³ An excellent example for such a nuanced analysis of “returnees” is Alexander Thurston, *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, which appeared after the book under review.

⁴ Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge. Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society*, Indiana University Press, 2001.