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Robert G Launay (Ed.). *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 336 pp. Year: 2016. ISBN: 978-0-253-02318-6.

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During January 2018 in an online AFD Research Department publication titled *A Question of Development*, Rohen d'Aiglepierre, Hamidou Dia and Clothilde Hugon co-authored a short research paper that raised a rhetorical question: 'Can Arabo-Islamic Education in Sub-Saharan Africa be ignored?'¹ Based on their research's survey, they argued that Africa's Muslim education system, which is strikingly diverse, has generally been ignored. They opined that all stakeholders in and beyond Africa should give this system such as the Qur'anic schools the necessary attention it deserves when they consult and dialogue about educating the people of the continent.

Although these researchers are indeed correct in advocating this position they seem to have overlooked, after having scanned through their brief bibliography, Robert Launay's invaluable *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*. Launay, a Northwestern University anthropologist who pursued West African ethnographic studies, brought together a diverse set of scholars who contributed to this edited volume that addressed a very critical sector of education on the continent. Though the text's main focus was on 'Islamic Education in Africa', its sub-title gave stress to the metaphor 'Writing Boards and Blackboards'; one that referred to two different but complementary disseminating styles of 'Muslim education'.

While one, however, appreciates Launay's use of the phrase 'Islamic education', this reviewer opines that the employment of 'Islamic', as a descriptive word, conveys the notion of a one-dimensional, inflexible educational system; that means, that it only opts for a singular approach. This reviewer like a few others such as Farid Panjwani wish to argue that the use of the word 'Muslim' should be considered a better and a more appropriate qualifier in the context; the term 'Muslim education', the argument goes, reflects that the system does not contain a particular method but it is one that is multi-dimensional. Put alternatively, by using the concept 'Muslim', instead of using the descriptive expression 'Islamic' and disregarding their respective theological meanings contains an inherent assortment of approaches that exists among Africa's dissimilar Muslim communities. Perhaps one should hastily add that the idea put forward here still does not seem so convincing when one looks at the publication of other works such as Holger Daun & Reza Arjmand's co-edited *Handbook of Islamic Education* (Cham: Springer International Publishing,

¹ Report is accessible in this link: <https://www.afd.fr/sites/afd/files/2018-01/arabo-islamic-education-sub-saharian-africa.pdf>.

2018) and Abdullah Sahin's *New Directions in Islamic Education Pedagogy and Identity Formation* (Markfield: Kube Publishing, 2013) that persist on the use of this phrase.

Notwithstanding setting these debatable thoughts aside, Launay's volume consists of fifteen case studies that cover educational practices that surfaced in a variety of Muslim communities. All of these practices take place in various countries in sub-Saharan African states. Even this review picks on a selected number of chapters to assess, it will incorporate each one to show the breath and coverage of Launay's informative volume. He introduced the text with a fairly comprehensive overview in which he emphasized that the two themes, namely 'Writing boards' and 'blackboards' remain "emblematic of two radically different styles of education." He went on to explain that, "Writing boards typify the centuries-old classical system of Qur'anic education (while the) ... Blackboards ... embody colonial institutions of education: state secular schools, of course, but also mission schools that proliferated in British..." After Launay offered an edifying insight, he divided the chapters into three thematic groups; the first set addressed 'The Classical Paradigm', the second tackled 'Institutional Transformation' and the third 'Innovations and Experiments'.

Under the first theme he slotted in Tal Tamari's 'Styles of Islamic Education: Perspectives from Mali, Guinea, and The Gambia' (Chapter Two). In this chapter, she summarized her field work that was conducted mainly in Mali but that also included Guinea and The Gambia respectively. Like her matching publications, she highlighted the features that were common to the miscellaneous Manding-speaking communities who were spread across a wide geographical region. Apart from having reflected on the study programs and a range of other issues, Tamari did not unpack the contents of one of the prescribed texts to illustrate what exactly was dealt with by the teacher. It was too observed that when Tamari reflected on the economic conditions, she did not factor in the notion of *baraka* that is by and large viewed as an invisible incentive within the Muslim madrasa or Qur'anic school system.

Remaining in West Africa, Corinne Fortier, who wrote Chapter Three in French and here in she analyzed the Qur'anic education system that functioned in the Mauritanian Moorish society. Fortier spoke about 'Orality and the Transmission of Qur'anic knowledge in Mauritania' and her research revealed that the term 'Quranic school' is somewhat inappropriate in this nomadic society; she added that the same applied to other concepts such as *kuttāb*. Though these terms were and are still widely used across that region, she expressed her discomfort with them. Nevertheless, she mentioned that in *Hassāniyya* - the Moorish dialect, which also refers to a particular ethnic group, reference is made to the learner who studied his/her *yagra lawhū* (that is, writing board). This is an educational device that was and continues to be used as the 'central tool of instruction' regionally. She concluded her chapter by highlighting the difference between Western and Muslim education; in the latter, she underlined, the pivotal relationship between writing and orality that involved the 'art of memory'. It seems that she drew all her samples that focused on the boy-child and one would like to have read about the education of the girl-child; is she also taught the art of the memory and, if so, by whom, where and when?

Shifting to the fourth chapter under the first thematic group Muhammad Sani Umar took a close look at 'Islamic Education and the Intellectual Pedigree of Al-Hajj Umar Falke'. Umar explored some of the educational and intellectual aspects that are associated with West Africa's

Muslim communities; though very superficially since his chapter's main purpose was a critical assessment of Umar Falke's (1893–1962) *Mafākhir al-Jīl al-Kirām wa Tarājim al-'Ulamā' wa al-'Awliyā' al-A'lām*. Besides having traced this author's educational and intellectual lineage in the genres of biographical dictionaries (*tarājim*), hagiography (*manāqib*), and hierarchy/ranking of scholars (*tabaqāt*), one would like Umar (not Falke) to have provided a more detailed background so that one could have had a better appreciation of Falke's contribution. Nevertheless, Umar opined that analyzing the mentioned dimensions should enhance one's understanding of various practices of Muslim learning; particularly those that focused on the master–disciple reading of texts via which core curricula were and are still followed and through which certificates were and are still issued. He highlighted that West African intellectual networks not only connect Muslim learning and scholarship on different edifying levels but through diverse educational pathways.

Moving to the second set of essays that fall under the theme: 'Institutional Transformations', Launey slotted in Liazzate Bonate's essay on 'Divergent Patterns of Islamic Education in Northern Mozambique: Qur'anic Schools in Angoche' (Chapter Five). Bonate examined these schools since they were widespread in Northern Mozambique's city of Angoche; she undertook fieldwork and extracted important archival sources to support her arguments. She concretely argued that Angoche's schools reflected 'a range of divergent conceptions that have resulted from the influences of the colonial and postcolonial contexts and local, national, and transnational relations of power.' In the section where she listed the various madrasas that were and are still operational, one would like her to have illustrated to what extent some of these leaned towards the South Asian Brelvi School as opposed to and that was rather different from the Southwest Asian Wahhabi School.

Alex Thurston reflected critically on 'Colonial Control, Nigerian Agency, Arab Outreach, and Islamic Education in Northern Nigeria, 1900-1966' (Chapter Six). He demonstrated to what extent Nigeria's policy makers and educational planners extracted educational models from the Arab world (e.g. Sudan) and transplanted these to Nigeria. Though these exchanges and transplantation of ideas were not new in Northern Nigeria, he showed that one could observe the gradual forging of trans-local religious ties by the itinerant scholars; learned individuals who belonged to diverse communities such as the Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri. These scholars spontaneously socialized and instinctively interacted with Tuareg and Arab teachers. These educational structures were then slowly forced to give way to fresh and more formal educational connections that developed during the colonial era between regions such as Northern Nigeria and the broader Muslim world. Apart from these developments during the closing years of the colonial era, the forged educational ties with countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been in existent for many decades but it seems that when Saudi Arabia's economy began to flourish by the 1960s its political leadership reached out to some African Muslim communities and need not have been as a result of intra-Arab politics as Thurston argued.

Roman Loimeier's 'Muslim scholars, Organic Intellectuals and the Development of Islamic Education in Zanzibar in the 20th Century' (Chapter Seven) underscored the religious scholars and teachers' roles in developing the Muslim education system in Zanzibar throughout the 20th century. He specifically concentrated on the relationship that developed between the scholar networks and administrations of the British Protectorate and Zanzibar Sultanate (circa 1900-1964) respectively and Zanzibar's Revolutionary Government (circa since 1964). Different

educational structures were witnessed during the latter period as compared to the earlier. While the chapter's focus was understandable one would like to have read about post 1960 developments up until the beginning of the new millennium so that one can view the development on a broad canvas.

The developments, however, in East Africa were somewhat related to the 'The New Muslim Public School (that emerged) in the Democratic Republic of Congo' that was studied and investigated by Ashley Leinweber in the Eight Chapter. She argued that in this country there is indeed a lack of scholarly work on its Muslim minority. She cited Young's early texts (1966, 1969) that portrayed a marginalized community politically and educationally. She expressed the view that rapid changes have taken place and that this community mobilized their resources to develop 'a plethora of associations'; these associations concentrated on spiritual matters as well as developmental goals to help transform the community. She stated that they basically pursued models that were developed by other religious organizations. It is assumed that Leinweber had a challenging task in writing up this chapter because of the lack of research material; but in spite of that one would want Leinweber to have identified some of the main figures that were driving Muslim educational processes and to have shared ideas about the influences that exist among some of the associations that he mentioned.

The third theme's attention focused on 'Innovations and Experiments' and in this section four chapters appeared. Cheikh Anta Babou's investigated 'The al-Azhar School Network (that is about): A Murid Experiment in Islamic Modernism' (Chapter Nine); this Senegal located experiment came about as a result of two developments. Babou said that the first was the French educational model's influence on the Qur'anic schools' teachers; and the other was the intensification of communication across the Muslim world that even included far-flung Senegal. Like others, these groups and communities' conceptualization of Islamic knowledge and its transmission were automatically affected. He made reference to Shaykh Murtalla Mbakke, one of the Muridiyyah spiritual leaders who saw to the establishment of the Al-Azhar institute and the eventual formation of an important intellectual network. Even though Babou mentioned that the institute represented 'Islamic modernism', he did not clearly spell out what this meant and how it deeply impacted upon the society that Shaykh Mbakke and his successors represented.

Babou's essay was complemented by Ousseina D. Alidou's interesting essay on 'Mwalim Bi Swafiya Muhashamy-Said: (who was) A Pioneer of the Integrated (Madrassa) Curriculum in Kenya and Beyond' (Chapter Ten). Alidou concentrated on an aspect of Muslim education that has rarely been given attention and hence Alidou's limited list of references. It should, however, be mentioned that while Mwalim Bi Swafiya Muhashamy-Said's contribution was rather unique within that region, similar examples were witnessed in Southern Africa where early Muslim childhood education has become a significant area of focus. In any case, the argument set forth by Alidou's essay emphasized that Kenya like other countries that had been influenced by British colonialism inherited an educational system that maintained a distinction between religious and secular schools. However, the process of globalization affected them and as a consequence the question of modernity caused them to creatively come up with alternative which was 'the modernized integrated madrasa curriculum'; one that fused the learning of Islam with secular subjects pioneered within the Kenyan setting by Mwalim Bi Swafiya Muhashamy-Said.

Thereafter Rüdiger Seesemann reflected on the ‘Changes in Islamic Knowledge Practices in 20th-Century Kenya’; herein he pointed to the challenges that were encountered in the dissemination and practice of Islamic knowledge. As a result of modernization, he declared that Muslims reacted in various ways to their educational institutions’ devaluation; one that questioned their pedagogical methods and long-established ‘traditional’ curriculum. Seesemann referred to various Muslim scholars who responded to seeking religious rather than secular education and at the outset raised a few important questions such as whether the Muslim education offers useful knowledge. In reply to these questions he used Kenya as a case study since it provides interesting examples of developments in this sector; even though, Seesemann argued, Kenya has been viewed by some as being on the margins. One would not regard Kenya or the East coast of Africa as an isolated area since it has been part of the extended Muslim world for many generations. Be that as it may, Seesemann reflected on the development by using Madrasa Al-Ghanna’ Al-Islamiyya as a sample study. He, however, placed it within the broader Hadrami ‘Alawiyya tradition that was influential along the coast.

From Africa’s east coast the editor moved westwards and included Abdoulaye Sounaye’s chapter that zoomed in on ‘Walking to the *Makaranta*: Production, Circulation, and Transmission of Islamic Learning in Urban Niger.’ He, like Launay and others, approached his study anthropologically and he demonstrated the nature of learning in a traditional environment. He expressed the opinion that in contemporary Niger the acquisition of higher learning within Muslim society such as Niger has been considered empowering and transformative. Sounaye’s essay concentrated much of his attention on The Quartier Abidjan’s Women’s *makaranta* that may be described as an informal learning space or communal learning centres.

In the final thematic part titled ‘Plural Possibilities?’ Launay included three more essays. The first was Launay’s co-authored text with Rudolph T. Ware III and it posed a rhetorical anthropologically approached question: ‘How (Not) to Read the Quran? (and, this was followed with a discussion regarding the,) Logics of Islamic Education in Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire.’ In their study that compared the Muslim education system in two countries, they witnessed boys (and often girls) seated in a circle with their writing boards in hand and during this time they chanted Quranic passages. They observed how the master stood in the middle of the circle with a rod that was used to literally strike the head of a pupil who recited incorrectly. The method that was adopted by this master was to assist in the pupil memorizing verses and chapters from the sacred text both melodically and melodiously. They are definitely correct in stating that these pedagogical practices, which were observed for generations in West African Muslim educational circles that were considered archaic, were gradually being replaced by contemporary methods embraced by emerging Franco-Arab schools in which the whiteboards featured prominently.

In the penultimate essay Ben Soares zoomed in on the ‘New Muslim Public Figures in West Africa’ (Chapter Fourteen) and herein he assessed the changing roles and influences of selected popular figures who were essentially public intellectuals. These figures (one Senegalese and two Malians) were the ones who spoke and wrote about Islam as a way of life; and they publicly advocated the pursuance of Islam a middle pathway across and even beyond the continent. Soares stressed that when assessing their contributions towards Muslim reform one has to place them within their geographical/ communal contexts to appreciate their inputs. And this edited text ended off with Noah Butler’s essay that examined the notion of ‘Collapsed Pluralities: (that

scrutinized) Islamic Education, Learning, and Creativity in Niger'. Through this study, Butler revealed to what extent Niger's Muslim communities made choices about Muslim education in a changing environment. Besides Butler's critical assessment about the realities of knowledge acquisition and actual fears that accompany the educational process of instruction, he showed how these issues tackled the ideological dimensions of Niger's educational system; one that consisted of the Quranic School, the *madrassa*, the Franco-Arab school, and the secular school where one could observe the contrasting styles of the transmission of knowledge. This is a development witnessed in different parts of the African continent where Muslim education has been undergoing radical changes.

To wrap up, we may argue that Launey has indeed succeeded to bring 'Muslim education' on the continent into focus; each of the contributions covered different dimensions and aspects that are not only informative but very instructive. Despite this reviewer's concerns regarding the phrase as well as other minor nitpickings regarding some of the issues pin-pointed in some chapters, we cannot overlook the fact that he has produced an important volume; that should be read by educationists who specialized in Africa's traditional and emerging educational systems, and a text that would be of value to Islamic studies' specialists.

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