

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 4 No. 2, August 2020

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Mohamed Bakari. *The Sage of Moroni: The Intellectual Biography of Sayyid Omar Abdallah, a forgotten Muslim Public Intellectual*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 2019. 144 pp.
ASIN: B07JQXY3GT.

Reviewed by Hassan Juma Ndzovu, Moi University, Kenya.

The Sage of Moroni: The Intellectual Biography of Sayyid Omar Abdallah, a forgotten Muslim Public Intellectual is an admirable analysis of the intellectual memoirs of Sayyid Omar Abdalla (SOA) as a global scholar. Mohamed Bakari's book addresses the important question of reforming the religious educational system of Muslims in East Africa through a detailed study of SOA (1919-1988). The book argues that despite SOA's remarkable accomplishments as a scholar trained in both traditional Islamic knowledge and western oriented education, he was "the least studied [among] the leading ulama of the second half of the twentieth century in East Africa" (p.12). Consequently, the book is a timely endeavour in filling the scholarly gap that, presents SOA as an educationist, reformer, public intellectual, a civil servant, a philosopher, and a staunch Sufi adept. Thus, Bakari's main thesis argument is that SOA was "a low keyed, but influential Muslim reformer whose impact was to be more international than that of his contemporaries because he seemed to have formed a vision of some sort to reform Islam in East Africa but at the same time to retain those traditional aspects that gave it its distinctive outline" (p.2).

Placing him apart from his generation, SOA was privileged to study in both the religious and the secular educational systems. Like many Muslim children, SOA started his religious education among the local madrasahs in Zanzibar where he sat at the feet of different learned 'ulama of his time to receive instructions about his faith. Following the Hadhrami tradition, SOA was to embark on "the mandatory journey to the Hadhramaut" to advance his religious knowledge under renowned scholars, a choice considered significant in conferring the necessary prestige as an Islamic scholar (p14). On his secular academic journey, which also commenced in Zanzibar, it later took him to Makerere (Uganda) and SOAS (London) for post-secondary training, and ultimately to Oriel (Oxford) for college education. By the time he received the different scholarships to pursue his tertiary education, SOA was already a respected religious scholar credited to the intensive "mosque and madrasah curricula" that he was exposed to (p.2). This explains why throughout his life he recognized the significance of the local institutions in "the intellectual and spiritual development of Muslims." (p.116)

Without losing his Islamic identity, his academic sojourn in Uganda and Britain changed his intellectual orientation, resulting in his acknowledgment of the compatibility of rationalism and religion, which in his view is significant in expunging the blind faith phenomenon. In SOA's assessment both the secular and the religious knowledge are important for purposes of human development. Due to the regional politics of the time, in 1957 the colonial government established a Muslim Academy in Zanzibar, which "became a beacon of the new system of Islamic education for the whole of Eastern Africa", attracting "students from all over the region" (p.96). During his time as the principal at the Academy, SOA interpreted his position as a

prospect for training “a new generation of Muslim scholars who were both” familiar with the “modern subjects” and the “traditional Islamic scholarship” thereby “equipped to move their societies to higher levels” of development (p.4). Though taunted as a reformer, SOA’s “views on women remained conservative and traditional” as he did not use his influence in society to accord them any significant place in his educational reforms (p.94).

While in Zanzibar, SOA served in numerous capacities “as an educationist” and also a “member of the Zanzibar Legislative Assembly” (p.9). Following the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution, SOA together with other members of the Zanzibari’s elite was thrown into detention. Upon his release after four months incarceration, he went into self exile to his ancestral home, the Comoros. Paradoxically, despite his reputation, in “Comoro the society initially marginalized him” (p.10), until the coup by Ali Soileh that gave him some form of recognition through a political appointment as a Minister Plenipotentiary. After three years, Soileh’s government was removed from power and SOA subsequently moved to Saudi Arabia. The aftermath of the revolution in Comoros turned SOA into a ‘mobile’ scholar as he embarked into global trotting, giving mosque lectures upon invitations in East Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States of America.

SOA’s enduring legacy was his new approach in Qur’anic commentary, which incorporated scientific knowledge together with some aspects of Islamic and Western philosophy. Arguably, influenced by Imam al-Ghazali’s ideas, his approach to Qur’anic exegesis incorporated new methodology that had traditionally not been employed within the region. Perhaps due to his education and exposure to numerous cultures, SOA was able to establish a mutual balance “between faith and reason”, thereby preaching a form of Islam that embraces “tolerance, ecumenism and personal responsibility” (p.58). Because of his middle ground position, SOA was accepted by all, including “Christians or Muslims or followers of leftist ideologies” (p.95). With this societal acceptance, SOA took upon himself to champion for peaceful co-existence in the world, advocating the idea that there exists “convergence of civilizations rather than their inevitable conflict” as advanced by others (p.9). As a result, his contribution to the debate between the traditionalists and the Wahhabi’s initiated reforms saw him playing a critical “role in defending the traditional approaches to Islam and the legitimacy of mysticism as an integral part of Islamic intellectual legacy” (p.36).

Though the book is about SOA’s intellectual legacy, it also gives: (i) an illuminating and a critical perspective of other Islamic scholars like Sheikh Abdallah Saleh Farsy and Sheikh Alamin Ali Mazrui (pp.106-117); and (ii) a criticism of orientalist, Muslim scholars and politicians critical of certain aspects of Islam and Muslim societies (pp.62-89). On the book’s criticism of Muslim politicians and scholars, I find it to lack fair assessment and objectivity. For instance, the author’s application of the Oedipal complex to explain these Muslims’ life choices (i.e. marrying Europeans (p.78, p.83) or practicing monogamy (p.78)) is not convincing given the weakness of this theory. Despite SOA’s consciousness that there is much “that was reprehensible in Muslim societies” (p.94), the book appears to be harsh on those Muslims holding critical assessment of Muslim societies and certain Islamic institutions. In a seemingly contradiction, those Muslims who in the early 19th century received their education from the west, particularly France, are in the book’s consideration referred as manifesting “king-sized inferiority complex” (p.79). Such condemnation rendered the author to sound apologetic. One of the advices SOA bequeathed to his students and the younger generation was to be tolerant and “open-minded in their reception of ideas from various sources” and not to consider any group to have a monopoly of knowledge (p.114). The book’s biasness comes to the fore when giving a

positive analysis of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan leadership in Turkey (p.81), without also noting that under the AKP government, Islam is used as a tool to consolidate the power of Erdoğan's kleptocratic regime.

Despite the enormous strengths the book possesses, it is also characterized by numerous anomalies, which unconsciously failed to be noticed during the editorial process. I can only mention a few, and they include typos (p.16, p.18); spelling errors; footnote inaccuracies (pp.33-34, 37); very long sentences (p.20, 60, 76, 77, 78, 85, 86, 87, 93, 94, 95, 97, 101-101, 107, 109); lack of citations (pp.62-63, 75, 78, 80-134), missing pages on the hard copy (pp.38-39, 42-43, 117-124); duplication of pages (pp.125-132) and grammatical mistakes. Apart from the editorial errors, the other problem with the book is with the presentation where certain information that was supposed to appear earlier comes later in the tome. The book's treatment of themes has also been too casual such that, even before a discussion of a current point is exhausted, it jumps into a new one. Linked to presentation, the book quotes numerous letters in their entirety to bolster certain ideas (pp.28-29, 31, 32, 52-56, 90-91, 116). Here the author should have only quoted the important sections of the letters and analyze the motivations of the actors and the social and political consequences of these correspondences. Partly attributed to the structure of the book, there are a number of repetitions rendering them redundant (see p. 48, 50, 59-60, 63, 77, 85, 87, 88, 99, 113, 114, 115, 116, 126, 128, 134). Perhaps out of respect for SOA, the author sometimes makes unfounded generalization without showing convincing proof for the remarks. Lastly, the book mentions many personalities and it would be prudent to indicate in brackets a brief biodata of each one of them in the future revised edition of the monograph.

To wrap up, the book is an important contribution to African Studies and particularly those interested in the study of Islam in Africa, as they seek to pursue the themes of Islamic education and transmission of Islamic knowledge.

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ISSN 2575-6990