
Reviewed by Roman Loimeier, Institut für Ethnologie, Theaterplatz 15, 37073 Göttingen, roman.loimeier@sowi.uni-goettingen.de

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Ousmane Kane’s “Beyond Timbuktu” is a remarkable account of Muslim West Africa’s intellectual history. His book is based on a wealth of both primary and secondary sources as well as the author’s expertise as an Arabist and a Historian. Ousmane Kane has not only worked on Muslim West Africa for more than thirty years, he has also grown up in at least two intellectual worlds: the world of Islamic education and the world of European and North American academe. He integrates his personal trajectory in these two different intellectual worlds in a very convincing way into his text.

In a prologue, he identifies himself as a Muslim Senegalese and global academic and charts the field of debate, namely the role and development of Islamic education in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times in Muslim West Africa. Chapter one introduces the reader into the (mostly) European colonial and post-colonial efforts to chart the vast field of Arabo-Islamic literature in Muslim West Africa, a field that is poignantly labelled “Timbuktu studies” due to the fact that Timbuktu has been a major centre of Islamic learning in the region for some centuries. As such, Timbuktu has fascinated Europeans for a long period of time and has informed European imaginations of Muslim West Africa to a considerable extent. Chapter two discusses the development of Islamic education in the region and shows how Islamic learning worked: schools, ink, paper, books and script are key terms for this chapter. The emergence of Muslim traditions of learning and the emergence of distinct lineages of scholarship in the region form the focus of the next chapter, before Kane expands on Islamic curricula and the transmission of knowledge in chapter four. Chapter five then delves into three major themes of Islamic learning in Muslim West Africa, namely the legitimacy of slavery, the legitimacy of jihad and the chronicling of (legitimate dynastic) history. These themes defined Muslim political economies of the region until colonial times. The colonial encounter and its effects
on Islamic education form the bulk of the next chapter which presents the emergence of a second (European) system of education and learning in Muslim West Africa. Kane stresses, however, that Arabo-Islamic education did not come to a standstill in this period: students from the region rather studied in increasing numbers in North African countries as well as in Saudi-Arabia and came to form a new elite of Arabophone intellectuals in their home countries. Chapter seven then focuses on the development of modern Islamic institutions of higher learning in the region in the post-independence period, in particular, the Islamic universities of Say (Niger) and Mbale (Uganda), but also numerous Islamic colleges that started to produce a growing number of Arabophone students since the 1960s. They were often unable to find employment in the modern job market. Their frustrations led them not only to demand (and to achieve) reforms in the established field of Islamic education in their respective home countries, they were also central to the formation of Islamic movements of reform in many West African countries since independence. While some of these movements of reform were still linked to the esoteric episteme, i.e. the Sufi orders, others represented Salafi-oriented groups and organizations such as Yan Izala-movement in Northern Nigeria. Chapter eight, “Arabophones Triumphant” departs in many ways from the pattern established in earlier chapters: this chapter is an account of the rise of radical jihadi-oriented groups in Northern Nigeria (Boko Haram) and Mali (such as al-Qāʿida). Although being highly informed and representing a very balanced analysis, this chapter has a focus on political rather than intellectual development. In his epilogue, Kane returns to his personal trajectory that may summarized in the words of a Moroccan religious scholar and a member of the Tijāniyya Sufi order, Ahmad Skirej: “Laysa fi-kutubin wa-dafāṭira ʿilmun innama ʿIlmu fi-ṣudūr al-rijaż” (Knowledge does not reside in books or notebooks, but in the chests of (pious) men, translation Ousmane Kane).

Despite being an authoritative and well argued account of the trajectories of Islamic learning in Muslim West Africa that deserves wide readership, the text is marred by a number of annoying problems. To Ousmane Kane’s credit, I would like to think that the publisher, Harvard University Press, has to be held accountable for these problems: first of all, the book contains no bibliography. Bibliographical reference and sources are hidden in the notes section of the book, and, thus, hard to find and to check. Second, the (vast) notes section that contains important additional information is plagued by numerous spelling mistakes (including
misspellings of Arabic terms), a clear sign that notes (and text) have not been proof-read at all or only in a very sloppy way. How can a publisher print such a text? Third, while some Arabic terms are put in italics, others are not, some expressions are put in brackets, while others are not. In addition, spelling is often inconsistent (al-Jaylani/al-Jilani etc.) and often simply wrong (Kisuani instead of Kisauni, al-dhahabl in stead of al-dhahab, etc.). Fourth, the text sticks to an extremely simplified transliteration of Arabic terms and essentially retains only the ‘ayn in some (but not all) terms as well as the hamza in “Qur’ān.” Such a practice is often excused by saying that experts of the Arabic language will know the proper transliteration anyway, while the “ignorant reader” wouldn’t know the difference. However, a book on Islamic traditions of learning and the intellectual history of Muslim West Africa should have set a much higher standard, in particular, when such a text is the first book to tackle such an important theme. The publisher should have insisted on the proper transliteration of Arabic terms and names, if only to show respect towards such traditions of learning and to exclude ambiguities in meaning.

Having said this, I would like to come to a number of other, smaller problems in the text that should also be addressed: although the title suggests that this text focuses on Muslim West Africa, i.e. the Sahelian and Sudanic belts of West Africa from the Atlantic to Lake Chad, the text often talks about “West Africa” in a very generalizing way as if all of West Africa forms part of “Muslim” West Africa. However, major parts of the region, in particular, those on the Guinea coast as well as the “Middle Belt” regions in contemporary Nigeria were raided by Muslim slave raiders and cannot look back on a (long) tradition of Islamic learning. In addition, Kane diverts from time to time into other traditions of Islamic learning in Africa, such as the Sudan and East Africa that do not really form part of West African Muslim intellectual traditions. Such generalizing tendencies equally surface in (problematic) terms such as “African Islam” or “Salafiyya/neo-Salafiyya” that are neither explained nor discussed, but still used in rather indiscriminate ways. Equally, “Western languages” are presented to have informed colonial and post-colonial trajectories of education. While French and English have certainly had lasting influence on many African societies since the late 19th century, Dutch, German, Swedish or Spanish have not played such a role. Kane’s tendency to generalize is also manifest in the way in which he pairs the terms “Arabophone” with “Europhone”, meaning speakers of Arabic
and speakers of European languages. The problem is of course that there is no language in Europe such as “Europaic” or “Europeanic” that is spoken by all Europeans and that correlates with Arabic as the language that is spoken by all Arabs. Although looking “sexy”, the pairing of “Arabophone” and “Europhone” does not really make sense. It would have been better to stick to established terms such as “Francophone” and/or “Anglophone”, when talking about “colonial languages” in Muslim West Africa. Last but not least, I would like to pick out the terms “clerics” and “clerisy” that are used by Kane to define and to describe the social group of Muslim religious scholars. Although Kane is not the first to do so, I still wonder why these terms are employed at all when discussing Muslim societies. Terms such as “cleric” are clearly Christian/European in origin and connotation, and in fact denote an “ordained minister of the Church of England” or a “group of persons who enter the service of the Church as deacons and thus become members of a clerisy”. Why not stick to the well established term ʿulamāʾ when talking about Muslim religious scholars, a term which is so much better linked with the term ʿilm (knowledge) and thus with Kane’s central theme. These problems and a number of still smaller issues aside, it has to be stressed that Kane’s book is highly inspiring and worth reading, and in fact, as Louis Brenner (School of Oriental and African Studies) has correctly remarked on the jacket of the book, it is a so far “unique overview of West African Muslim intellectual history”.

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