

*Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts*

OUSMANE OUMAR KANE, ED.

James Currey/Boydell &amp; Brewer Ltd, 2021, 489 pages.

Ousmane Oumar Kane, Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Professor of Contemporary Islamic Religion and Society at Harvard Divinity School and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, has edited a brilliant book entitled *Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts*. Professor Kane's genealogy and scholarship can be traced back to early Qur'anic and Arabic instruction from his mother. His grandfather is the famous Sufi Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, founder of a *Tijaniyya Tariqa* in Senegal, West Africa, with a global following of millions. The central thesis of Professor Kane's book is this: Islamic scholarship in Bilad al-Sudan (Land of the Blacks) was equal to that in other regions of the Ummah of Prophet (pbuh) such as Al-Azhar in Kemet (Egypt) and Medina in Saudi Arabia. The University of Sankore in Timbuktu, Mali, is an excellent example of universities in Bilad al-Sudan that were competitive with the aforementioned universities. As a matter of historical record, there was always a robust exchange of commodities, gold, salt, and ideas along the trade routes between the *Maghreb* (North Africa from Kemet to Morocco) and Bilad al-Sudan. The book rejects the false notion of an *Islam noir* of divinations, libation, and ancestral veneration in sub-Saharan Africa and authentic Al-Qur'an wa Sunnah Islam in centers of learning in other parts of the Muslim Ummah (p. 19).

Western orientalist place North Africa in the Middle East because it is a part of the Arabic-speaking linguistic community and Mediterranean Greco-Roman history. On the other hand, sub-Saharan Africa is separated from its classical Kemetic (ancient Egypt) and Islamic heritage and marginalized as Bilad al-Sudan (Black Africa). This cultural and historical alienation is problematic for Muslim Africa because Islam and the Arabic language have created more religious unity and cultural harmony than political disunity and social conflict. In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel asserted that sub-Saharan Africa had no history worthy of serious intellectual discourse (p. 2). This book is a cutting-edge project because it attempts to reconcile the dialectical tensions between Islamic Studies, African Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies. These three disciplines or area studies have compartmentalized the canon, epistemology, and paradigm of Islam,

Arabic, African culture and civilization and marginalized the universality of Islamic thought and civilization in the African cultural context (p. 412).

*Islamic Scholarship in Africa* is a major contribution to Professor Kane's project of building a new discipline at Harvard centered on the intellectual history of Islamic scholarship in sub-Saharan Africa or Bilad al-Sudan. It is divided into four parts: "History, Movement and Islamic Scholarship," "Textuality, Orality and Islamic Scholarship"; "Islamic Education"; "*Ajami*, Knowledge Transmission and Spirituality." These subjects have intellectual implications for core curriculum development of the new discipline. Thematically, the edited volume is the outgrowth of a series of international conferences and workshops of scholars convened during the years 2017–2019. In addition to the book overview introduction, each part has its own introduction that can serve as a road map to guide the reader through the scholarly landscape. Arabic religious and technical terms are used throughout the book; however, readers who are not familiar with all the Islamic terminology can refer to the glossary if definitions are needed. The book is accessible to scholars in the field as well as readers that are familiar or curious about the subject matter. There are 16 chapters arrayed across the four parts of the book. The 19 contributors included in the volume are erudite scholars in the Islamic sciences, Arabic, African languages indigenous to Bilad al-Sudan, and experts on their assigned topics. Each scholarly essay is worthy of an in-depth review; however, space will not permit this level of discussion. Therefore, representative samples will be selected from each of the four parts.

The Hajj or Pilgrimage to Mecca of Mansa Musa in 1324 CE and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X) in 1964 are well known in the literate world community. In part 1, Ousmane Oumar Kane has provided us with a fascinating narrative about the African Muslim presence in the Muslim Holy Land and the Hajj. The *Hajj* is a religious obligation for those Muslims that have the means and good health to do so. It is the fifth pillar of the Islamic faith. Kane points out that historically, "the *Hajj* was linked to the tradition of study (*rihla*) as most pilgrims were scholars who spent time in centres of learning along the way to and in the Holy Lands to study, acquire books and seek scholarly credentials" (p. 91). This historical observation demonstrates how the *Hajj* contributed to the development of Islamic institutions in Bilad al-Sudan. Muslims of African descent have been making the Hajj to Mecca for more than a thousand years. In the early years, they traveled by camels, horses, and walking. This arduous journey in search of blessings, knowledge

and salvation would take months if not years. Today, pilgrims travel by airplanes, ships, and air-conditioned buses and cars.

Part 2 engages the great debate about the issue of the oral tradition vs. written documents as a methodology for exchanging Islamic knowledge, beliefs, law, and practices. The chapters here also examine the role of *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) in the intergenerational transmissions of Islamic knowledge and wisdom in Bilad al-Sudan. *Tasawwuf* is often defined as Islamic mysticism. In Bilad al-Sudan, the spirituality of Sufism is practiced in unity and harmony with the *Sharia* of the *Maliki Madhhab* (legal school of thought). Thus, creating a balance between the internal path of *Tasawwuf* (mystical) and the external path of *Sharia* (rules of social conduct).

Part 3 is an analysis of Islamic education in Mauritania, Senegal, and Zanzibar. Prior to the infamous slave trade and colonialism, Muslims and Islamic religious, educational, and cultural institutions were well established in Central, East, North, and West Africa. For example, “al-Qarawiyyin founded in Fez (Morocco) in 859, al-Azhar in 988 in Cairo (Egypt) and al-Zaituna in 856” during the medieval period (p. 234). The mosque and madrasa were the spiritual anchors and cultural center of the city, town, and village. In order to undermine the social solidarity of the Muslims, colonial and missionary schools were constructed to convert the Africans to European culture and Christianity. Most Muslim parents refused to send their children to these schools because they did not want their children to leave Islam, assimilate into European culture, or become Christians (p. 303).

In the postcolonial period, Muslim countries and communities in Africa had to adapt their curricula and educational systems to meet the challenges and demands of development and modernization. In Zanzibar, “the goal of Islamic education in this period was not only to produce a knowledgeable Muslim, but also to produce a good person—with manners (*adabu*), moral conduct and self-restraint (*heshima*), and sound ‘sound judgement’ (*akili*) based on one’s knowledge of the Qur’an” (p. 244). In the diaspora, the parents of African Muslims are concerned about losing their children to crime, drugs, sexual immorality, and violence in the United States and Europe. Some of these parents have chosen to send their children back to the Motherland for Islamic education, a Muslim cultural environment and reunion with their relatives in Africa. Hannah Hoechner conducted research on Senegalese migrant children in Dakar in 2016. While the Islamic schools did provide an Islamic learning environment, discipline, and structure, some students did not know Wolof or French. They were used to

more freedom of expression in American schools, and their ability to score well on American standardized college entrance exams was limited.

Part 4 explores the phenomenon of Arabic language vs. *Ajami*. *Ajami* is the use of Arabic alphabets and phonetical notations to write indigenous African languages among the Hausa, Mandingo, Wolof, Swahili, and other Muslim ethnic groups. There are about 80 Muslim ethnic groups that employ this type of literacy as opposed to the Roman or Latin script.

*Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts* is an excellent contribution to an emerging discipline of Africana Muslim Studies. The book's Islamic discourse is more Africa-centered than Pan-African. It does not engage an examination of the African Muslim *ulama* from Bilad al-Sudan enslaved in the Western hemisphere, such as Omar Ibn Said (1770–1864) in North Carolina; Bilali Mohamed (1760–1857), Sapelo Island, Georgia; and Ibrahima Abdul Rahman Sori (1762–1829), Natchez, Mississippi. While it is true that the heartland of Islam and Muslims is Africa and Asia, the Ummah of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is international. Therefore, the Muslim diaspora should also be included in a global analysis of Islam and Muslims. The African Union, for example, has officially designated the African diaspora as the Sixth Region of Africa.

In conclusion, Professor Kane and his associates have introduced the canon, epistemology, and paradigm of a new discipline in higher education. It has the universality of Islam based on Al-Qur'an wa Sunnah and the unique particularity of the diversity of African cultures, civilizations, histories, and languages. The book can be used as a textbook, a reference, or for general reading, especially in the fields of Africana Studies, African Studies, Islamic Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies.

Amiri Yasin Al-Hadid  
Founder and CEO  
Great Debate Academy, LLC  
Nashville, TN

