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REVIEW ARTICLE

MUSLIM HISTORIES, AFRICAN SOCIETIES: THE VENTURE OF ISLAMIC STUDIES IN AFRICA*

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Muslim Societies in African History. By DAVID ROBINSON. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. xx + 220. £35/\$55 (ISBN 0-521-82627-6); £14.99/\$19, paperback (ISBN 0-521-53366-X).

The History of Islam in Africa. Edited by NEHEMIA LEVTZION and RANDALL L. POUWELS. Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2000. Pp. xii + 591. \$75 (ISBN 0-8214-1296-5); \$26.95, paperback (ISBN 0-8214-1297-3).

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WITH the publication of these two volumes, the historical study of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa has reached its maturity. Drawing on five decades of scholarship since the professionalization of African history, and the long traditions of Islamic and African studies before that, these works – one the first truly usable textbook survey of the field, the other the first comprehensive reference – are both a successful culmination of what has gone before and guides to the paths ahead. In some cases the authors' and editors' careers are virtually synonymous with the field as a whole, as with the late Nehemia Levtzion, and all are among the acknowledged authorities on their specialties. David Robinson, author of *Muslim Societies in African History*, is one of the few who have established themselves as authorities on both the precolonial and colonial periods, and his work is central to active debates in each subfield. The individual and collective stature of Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, editors of *The History of Islam in Africa*, along with that of the twenty-two other contributors, makes the authority of the volume unprecedented.

As a result, both works carry greater significance than the immediate uses to which they may be put. The volumes are, of course, intended to serve very particular purposes and it is primarily on the basis of how well they do so that they should be judged. At the same time, it is a testament to how truly definitive they are that they can also be profitably enlisted to help illuminate the current state of the field.

Robinson's *Muslim Societies*, the second installment in Cambridge's New Approaches to African History series of undergraduate texts, deserves to become a standard in courses on Islam in Africa or African religious history.¹ The book is comprehensive, clearly written and reflects an absolute mastery of current research on the field. Though the maps could be more helpful (all but one reproduced somewhat fuzzily from the old Fage and Verity atlas), over twenty expertly chosen illustrations add welcome visual content. Featuring many lengthy quotations, the book's case studies largely parallel the collection of primary sources that Robinson

* I would like to extend my gratitude to Richard Roberts, Thomas Spear, Ousman Kobo, Chris Chekuri, Sue O'Brien, the students of Stanford's seminar on the History of Islam in Africa and the *Journal's* anonymous reviewer.

¹ The reviewer had success 'field testing' it in an introductory survey on African Islam.

and Douglas Smith gathered together in 1979, and that text (recently back in print) along with Levtzion and Jay Spaulding's *Medieval West Africa* (a recent epitome of the classic Levtzion and Hopkins *Corpus*) would make natural companions. The excellent recommendations 'for further reading' at the end of each chapter will be helpful for stimulating undergraduate essays, and perhaps even for beginning graduate students. The fact that Robinson includes substantial discussions of North Africa in his analysis and gives near equal weight to East and West Africa will satisfy those committed to a 'continental' approach.

The one difficulty instructors are likely to encounter with *Muslim Societies* is, perhaps not coincidentally, also the book's greatest conceptual achievement. For rather than attempt to provide a coherent narrative of the development of 'African Islam', Robinson divides the book into two parts: the first offers a thematic and theoretical discussion that moves back and forth across the last 1,400 years; the second consists of a series of widely distributed case studies that, particularly for the sub-Saharan region, mostly focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These two principal sections are separated somewhat awkwardly by an otherwise useful chapter on 'Western views of Africa and Islam'.² The lack of overarching chronology or causal links between chapters may make it difficult for instructors to weave the book into general surveys designed around continuous sequential developments (and the scant attention paid to the period between 1000 and 1800 makes it particularly ill-suited for courses with an early focus). At the same time, however, it allows Robinson to engage debates on the 'Africanness' of Islam in Africa and to do justice to what he calls 'the great variety of Muslim space, practice, and community across the continent' (p. 124).

A common set of analytical motifs help to tie together the case studies, reducing the potential fragmentation of Robinson's approach. These motifs also enable him to incorporate some of the most sophisticated recent research on African Islam without resorting to cumbersome theoretical or historiographic digressions. Three of the themes that Robinson uses to add cohesion also exemplify current scholarly trends, and thus reveal something about the state of the field more generally. First, he identifies an ongoing 'dialogic' interplay between the Africanization of Islam and the Islamization of Africa; this interaction provides the explicit structure for the early chapters. Second, he posits a recurrent opposition between a tendency towards radicalism and militancy in African Islam and a countervailing 'Suwarian' tradition of tolerance and inclusion. Finally, and most innovatively, he emphasizes the ways African Muslims attempted to situate themselves within Islamic space and time by orchestrating or imagining ruptures with their surroundings, sometimes subtly through distinctive dress or abode, sometimes dramatically through emigration (*hijra*) or violent conflict.

The Africanization/Islamization dichotomy provides the book's most explicit theoretical framework. Robinson makes it clear that the growth of Muslim societies in Africa was not only a matter of individuals slowly transforming the culture and politics of their communities by adopting Islamic symbols or institutions, but also a process of transforming Islam to fit local needs. This dialogical model, though having its roots in observations originally made by Clifford Geertz, is today generally associated with the work of historian and theologian Lamin Sanneh.³

² Though undoubtedly unintentional, one of the notable effects of this placement is to historicize Orientalism and 'Western bias' in such a way as to detach Robinson's own summaries of Islamic institutions and African Islam from general critiques of Western scholarship.

³ Particularly Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll NY, 1989), and 'Translatability in Islam and in Christianity in

Sanneh's central metaphor for this dialogism is 'translation', and his approach has become the norm in studies of religious conversion more generally, having improved upon earlier discussions of religious 'syncretism' by sensitizing us to the contributions Africans have made to the broader religious traditions of Islam and Christianity themselves.⁴

However, by applying this model and its privileged metaphor of 'translation' to African Islam, Robinson signals an important break with the overall approach to African religious history laid out by Sanneh in *Translating the Message* and subsequent works. For Sanneh has sought to use the idea of translation to represent this process of dialogic adaptation because it allows him to make a distinction between Christianity – whose sacred texts have (he claims) been readily rendered in local languages – and Islam – in which the respect paid to Arabic has (supposedly) greatly restrained indigenization.⁵ Robinson's adoption of the translation metaphor thus partially refutes Sanneh, indicating instead that Islam has, indeed, been indigenized in Africa; while these two great monotheisms may differ in their modalities of incorporation, they have become equally 'African'. Though not a particularly controversial claim among specialists on Islamic Africa, it is important that this corrective is being made in a high-profile work such as this.

Robinson's adoption of the translation metaphor also offers distinct improvements over approaches to Islam that implicitly present African manifestations of the faith as deviations from an Arab norm. It is not, however, always clear what exactly Robinson means by either 'Islamization' or, even more problematically, 'Africanization'. He provides no definition of 'African', and since he does not seem to be advancing any kind of continental (or racial) essentialism, it is tempting to read 'African' as 'local'.⁶ Indeed, Robinson would appear to invite such a reading, frequently deploying formulae like 'pluralism ... [balanced by] aspirations of unity and ... common practice' (p. xviii), or the 'appropriation ... [of Islam by] particular societies' (p. 42), or, most succinctly, 'the processes of making the faith universal and local at the same time' (p. 201).

The problem with this reading, however, is that Robinson's illustrations of 'Africanization' do, in fact, seem to define coherent categories that cut across the case studies, immediately calling into question their particularity. He consistently draws our attention to the use of Islamic symbols to sacralize spaces or places (such as the creation of regional pilgrimage sites); to the investment of objects with spiritual power (such as amulets); and to the institutionalization of spiritual power in the form of lineages or other groups with divinely sanctioned authority. Robinson's focus on these comparative themes is not at all unusual – they have, after all, been standard features of studies of African Islam for decades.⁷ But none

Africa: a thematic approach', in Thomas D. Blakely, Walter E. A. van Beek and Dennis L. Thomson (eds.), *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression* (Portsmouth NH, 1994), 22–45. Robinson also finds some use for J. Spencer Trimingham's classic 'minority, court, majority' evolutionary sequence, though not, interestingly, for Humphrey Fisher's quarantine-mixture-reform model.

⁴ Though Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw have attempted to rehabilitate the idea of syncretism, their efforts do not seem to have had much of an effect. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (eds.), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London, 1994).

⁵ Sanneh, 'Translatability'.

⁶ This would at least free the book of such arresting assertions as the claim that Usuman dan Fodio's daughter, Nana Asma'u, 'had the wisdom to recognize the old patterns of islamization and africanization of Islam' when she appropriated the techniques, symbols and networks of Bori (p. 148).

⁷ E.g. 'Umar al-Naqar, *The Pilgrimage Tradition in West Africa: An Historical Study with Special Reference to the Nineteenth Century* (Khartoum, 1972); David Owusu-Ansah,

of them is any way unique to Africa.⁸ As Robinson himself is undoubtedly aware, the creation of local pilgrimage sites, the entrepreneurial production of amulets and other objects as religious commodities and the assimilation of religious 'charisma' into family networks or other 'bureaucracies' are features of the social use of Islam everywhere in the Muslim world – including the Middle East itself.⁹ What can it mean, then, to label these 'Africanizations'? What does it mean to call apparently universal phenomena 'local', or to see in such repeated motifs signs of diversity?

We can gain some insight into this apparent paradox if we note that most of these 'local' traditions are strong on practice and weak on ideational content. Or, more precisely, they are conspicuous in their ability to be represented as the result of the embedding of an intellectual and spiritual 'tradition' in particular practice, with the intellectual part coming from texts produced in the Middle East, and the practice always defined in terms of social function or local custom. Indicative is Robinson's approach to Sufism and the bonds formed between teacher and student: 'Scholarly and Sufi chains were often "intellectual" and "spiritual"', he concedes, 'but they functioned in the same way as the biological credentials' of claims to Sharifian status (p. 54). The use of scare quotes around 'intellectual' and 'spiritual' seems to indicate that while Robinson recognizes Sufism's role in Africans' religious lives, he feels that it is its social and political 'function' that should most concern historians – and that is most 'African'. Why do we continue to feel uncomfortable ascribing spiritual or intellectual meanings to African religious practices, but have no compunction about reducing them to their purported social functions? The potential for anachronism and Eurocentrism in this type of approach was noted over thirty years ago by Louis Brenner, and it is disappointing to see how little progress has been made towards moving beyond it.¹⁰

What is at stake here is not whether religious behavior can be redescribed in sociological terms; it is whether instrumentalist frameworks are capable of identifying meaningful causal factors and of historicizing the uses to which religion has been put. To choose an example from among Robinson's case studies: is not the most crucial challenge in writing about Buganda to explain why so many Ganda not only adopted two unfamiliar religions so rapidly, but also became so fervent in

Islamic Talismanic Tradition in Nineteenth Century Asante (Lewiston NY, 1991); C. C. Stewart and E. K. Stewart, *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania: A Case Study from the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1973).

⁸ Even the single major exception – the architecture of western Sudanic mosques – would seem better handled outside the 'Africanization' approach. As Jean Bourgeois has shown in his study of the various Great Mosques of Jenne, African Islamic architecture was often the product of intense rivalries, conflicts and negotiations that were all intra-African rather than between African and 'Islamic' paradigms (with, if anything, more input from French administrators than the Middle East). Bourgeois, 'The history of the great mosques of Djenné', *African Arts*, 20, 3 (May 1987), 54–66.

⁹ See, simply as an introduction: in South Asia, Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley, 1993), and 'The political and religious authority of the shrine of Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Punjab', in Barbara Metcalf (ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley, 1984), 333–56; in the Middle East, Toufic Fahd, *La divination arabe, études religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l'Islam* (Leiden, 1966); in Central Asia, Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1998). Most of the Anglophone literature on the subject in turn owes a debt to Ernest Gellner's updating of Max Weber in *Saints of the Atlas* (Chicago, 1969).

¹⁰ Louis Brenner, 'Separate realities: a review of literature on Sufism', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 5, 4 (1972), 637–58.

their beliefs that they were willing to be martyred for them? Robinson's explanation centers on the manipulations of elites and highlights the practical benefits of conversion; but it is not at all clear what the 'practical' benefits of martyrdom are. Would not an approach that risked taking up the matter of the failure of the state's intellectuals to come to terms with the rapid growth in the power of the Kabaka, or one that discussed the role of spiritual etiologies of social illness in Ganda political discourse be more satisfactory and also more likely to expose students to new ways of thinking?¹¹

The one apparently indigenous intellectual tradition as opposed to local practical adaptation that Robinson does investigate centers around the works of the sixteenth-century Mande teacher al-Hajj Salim Suwari and the tolerant, quietistic 'Suwarians' who took him as their inspiration. Noting that Suwari advised Muslims living in non-Muslim states to avoid proselytizing or forcing their beliefs on others, Robinson posits Suwarianism as a kind of foil (his second motif) to the tradition of militant *jihād* embodied by reformers like Usuman dan Fodio or al-Hajj 'Umar Tal. Robinson is to be praised for avoiding the *jihād*-centrism of much scholarship on Islam and he makes clear that of the many forms of *jihād*, the *jihād* of the sword was generally a last resort; as he notes, even dan Fodio made efforts to effect reform through other means before taking up arms. This rightly emphasizes the largely pragmatic attitude of African Muslims, of which the Suwarian approach serves as an archetype.¹²

Suwarianism has become an increasingly popular subject of investigation among specialists on African Islam, particularly those who focus on Islam's 'minority' modes in the forests of West Africa. Robinson's account avoids the two biggest pitfalls of the literature: he eschews the temptation to use Suwarianism as a *deus ex machina* whereby every 'failure' to wage *jihād* is explained by reference to the influence of Suwari, whether such influence is actually attested or not; and he avoids celebrating the Suwarian approach as a more 'politically correct' alternative to militancy. He points out, for example, that Muslims living in Asante justified illegal enslavement and the killing of other Muslims by reference to the Suwarian tradition.

Still, Robinson does not present Suwarianism and violent *jihād* as conceptual equals. From the outset, the *jihād* of the sword emerges as a religious ideal which could be modified by 'pragmatic' considerations as 'Muslim authorities adjusted to the complexities of the worlds in which they lived' (pp. 17–18). The need for *jihād* is thus ultimately understood as a conceptual, religious force, based on Muhammad's own practice and the archetypal distinction between the *dâr al-Islâm* and the *dâr al-harb* (or *kufr*), while tolerance, Suwarianism included, is contingent and ultimately political. Its intellectual content is nothing but 'a theological rationale for ... relations with non-Muslim ruling classes and subjects' (p. 56), while *jihād* is well grounded in the Islamic intellectual tradition, and thus provides the default attitude of any Muslim in a position to prosecute it.¹³

¹¹ For such efforts, see Christopher Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge, 1996), and Jean Brierley and Thomas Spear, 'Mutesa, the missionaries, and Christian conversion in Buganda', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 21, 4 (1988), 601–18. For a critique of the instrumentalist approach in general to what Crawford Young has called 'ethnicity and its analogues', see M. Crawford Young, 'The dialectics of cultural pluralism: concept and reality', in M. Crawford Young (ed.), *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?* (Madison, 1993), 3–35.

¹² This is all the more praiseworthy because Robinson is one of the recognized experts on the 'Umariyan *jihâdi* tradition and its aftermaths.

¹³ For an analogous distinction, see Michael Cook's treatment of the *amr bi 'l-ma'rûf*, the obligation to forbid wrong, which he identifies as an absolute and constant feature of

This is particularly problematic, given that Robinson's main examples of *jihād* in Africa are the socially conservative Sokoto Caliphate¹⁴ and the historical dead-end of Muhammad Ahmad and his caliph Abdullahi in Sudan, and that the twentieth-century 'success' he celebrates is the Murid order of Amadu Bamba, accommodationists who would have been at home among the Suwaris of nineteenth-century Asante.¹⁵ If *jihād* is religiously foundational and accommodation situationally political, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that reformist Islam, in its 'authentic' and intellectualist forms is atavistic and anti-modern, while its safe, 'modern' forms are pragmatic, culturally particularized and a step removed from Islamic 'high culture'. Such an impression could be avoided by paying closer attention to the intellectual roots of Suwari-style pragmatists – seeing them as a central feature of the Islamic tradition itself – along with a more balanced evaluation of both the accomplishments of militant reform and the wages of accommodation.¹⁶ Such an approach would also help scholars avoid the misleading distinction between the intellectual bases of the 'Islamic' tradition and the social pragmatics of African Muslims – the assumption that whatever is intellectual about a Muslim community in Africa comes from Islam, and whatever is practical, tolerant or 'distinctive' in Muslim practice comes from an immediate cultural or political context.

'Islamic thought', which can only be 'qualified' by pragmatism or a weak, situational respect for privacy. M. A. Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁴ Robinson expresses his respect for the leaders of the Sokoto *jihād* and their 'intelligent and thoroughgoing effort to establish a new kind of Muslim space' (pp. 147–8) and, *contra* the position taken recently by Mervyn Hiskett, he argues they 'would not have welcomed the violent conflicts among Muslims and Christians' in contemporary Nigeria, even if he does not exempt them from responsibility for these developments (p. 150). Compare Mervyn Hiskett's preface to the second edition of his *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio* (Evanston, 1994).

¹⁵ The dichotomy between the anachronistic 'resistance' of the *jihādi* tradition and the forward-looking realism of 'accommodators' is a key theme of Robinson's recent *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880 to 1920* (Athens OH, 2000).

¹⁶ Robinson neglects the many moments in which radical reform movements unleashed forces outside the control of the more legalistically inclined: the brief glimpse of a social revolution in Massina in 1818, thwarted by military elites to whom the 'tolerant' Kunta gave tacit support; the Hubbu revolt of slaves, poor farmers and disaffected Fulbe in the 1850s; the 'revolutionary' sentiments of many religious leaders involved in the Satiru revolts of Nigeria in 1906; or even the suggestion that the Sokoto Caliphate harbored radical leaders who favored an anti-slave trade policy. On Massina: William Allen Brown, 'The Caliphate of Hamdullahi, ca. 1818–1864: a study in African history and tradition' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1969), esp. 131, 216. On the Hubbu: Roger Botte, 'Revolte, pouvoir, religion: les Hubbu du Futa-Jalon (Guinée)', *Journal of African History*, 29 (1988), 391–413, esp. 406; Boubacar Barry, 'Crise politique et importance des révoltes populaires au Fouta-Djalon au XIXe siècle', *Africa Zamani (Afrika Zamani)*, 8–9 (1978), 51–61; and Ismaïl Barry, 'Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire de la Guinée: les Hubbu du Fitaba et les almami du Fouta' (DES, Kankan, 1971). On Satiru: Paul E. Lovejoy and J. S. Hogendorn, 'Revolutionary Mahdism and resistance to colonial rule in the Sokoto Caliphate, 1905–6', *Journal of African History*, 31, 2 (1990), 217–44. On the slave trade: Humphrey John Fisher, 'A Muslim William Wilberforce? The Sokoto jihād as anti-slavery crusade: an enquiry into historical causes', in Serge Daget (ed.), *De la traite à l'esclavage: actes du Colloque international sur la traite des Noirs, Nantes 1985* (Nantes, 1988), II, 537–55; and Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Islam, slavery, and political transformation in West Africa: constraints on the trans-Atlantic slave trade', *Outre-Mers*, 89, 336–7 (2002), 247–82.

But it will take more than a careful theoretical framework to enable us to free ourselves from such strictures – it will require moving away from a reliance on documents as our main sources. For the equation of serious religious thought with the Islamic ‘core’ traditions is itself substantiated by the textual practices of African Muslim intellectuals – particularly those literate in Arabic – and thus deeply embedded in the sources produced by such figures. The influence of such textual practices is very visible in the third motif of *Muslim Societies* and what I would argue is Robinson’s most exciting contribution to synthetic studies of African Islam: the idea that Islamization is often manifested in an attempt to carve out a distinctive Muslim space and time, to mark off Islam from Ignorance (*jahiliyya*). This occurs most dramatically through a literal or figurative act of emigration (*hijra*), but also through the creation of symbolic places, ritual moments or other kinds of demarcations. Robinson repeatedly points out that the creation of such ‘boundaries’ (which only become visible in the act of crossing them) was an explicit part of African Muslims’ rhetorical repertoire. This is clearly true,¹⁷ but we should think carefully about the implications of adopting the narrative structure of our sources as a major axis of our interpretive grid. For it is here that Robinson’s and Sanneh’s models reveal their common origin and shared limitations. Sanneh’s ideas, as he would freely acknowledge, draw on the fundamentally Christian idea of conversion, with its juxtaposition of a world-historical, sacred history with highly particularized (ideally individual) experience.¹⁸ That the literary tradition of African Muslims was itself informed by this same paradigm, and that the use of such explanatory ‘chronotopes’ is itself part of Islam’s monotheistic inheritance, is undoubtedly what makes Sanneh’s framework so apparently useful. But this usefulness is deceptive. Robinson’s almost exclusive reliance on texts by Muslims literate in Arabic or by literate Christians and the comparative neglect of oral history, traditions, archaeology or other sources (the one exception is an oral history of the Golden Stool) is problematic not only because it privileges the perspectives of the literate class, but because it means that the interpretive model and the sources share the same basic narrative structure – share the assumption that something called ‘Islamization’ took place.¹⁹ This produces a convergence that appears to confirm the model.²⁰

Most students will be uninterested in such problematics. They do, however, draw our attention to certain fundamental issues in the field itself that are worth thinking about more systematically. Indeed, it is a testament to how thoroughly Robinson embodies the state-of-the-art in African Islamicist scholarship that many of the strengths and weaknesses of his synthesis also appear, if less obviously,

¹⁷ For an overview, see Humphrey Fisher’s classic essay, ‘Liminality, hijra, and the city’, in Levtzion and Fisher (eds.), *Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa* (Boulder, 1987) (special edition of *Asian and African Studies*), 147–71.

¹⁸ Though the presentation of the model within putatively social scientific genealogies has obscured the fact, the archetypal event is the Pauline project of Christianizing the gentiles while de-Judaicizing Christianity. Sanneh himself even suggests as much: e.g. *Translating the Message*, esp. 22–48. That even at its origin the model mistakes a *project* for an *event* is indicative of its deeply teleological nature.

¹⁹ This emphasis is all the more surprising given the thorough use of oral materials in Robinson’s classic study of the Futa Toro, *Chiefs and Clerics: Abdul Bokar Kan and Futa Toro, 1853–1891* (Oxford, 1975), and his sophisticated parsing of sources in *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1985).

²⁰ J. D. Y. Peel has attempted to draw our attention to this problem in the context of missionary narratives of conversion. J. D. Y. Peel, ‘For who hath despised the day of small things? Missionary narratives and historical anthropology’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37, 3 (1995), 581–607.

in Levtzion and Pouwels's landmark reference work. Taken on its own terms, if *The History of Islam in Africa (HIA)* is somewhat less successful than *Muslim Societies*, this is perhaps only because its organizers set themselves a more challenging task: coordinating the efforts of twenty-four specialists into a single-volume *summa* would challenge even the most authoritarian editor. Although the text is perhaps too sophisticated and detailed for undergraduate use, a bit too perfunctory and expository for graduate training and only occasionally contains material that specialists cannot access elsewhere in more detailed form, there will be few who do not find it a useful reference, particularly for areas and topics outside their immediate expertise.

HIA consists of four unequal sections: two chapters on the 'introduction' of Islam into Africa, via northern and eastern routes respectively; eight chapters covering specific periods and areas in West Africa and the eastern Sudan; six chapters on the eastern arc from Asmara to Cape Town; and eight 'thematic' chapters on topics such as law, gender, Sufism and music. This structure was likely the best possible solution to the obvious organizational challenges of the material and accurately represents the distribution of specialization in the field, but it does come with certain costs. The separation of the themes from the narratives seems to have deprived certain of them of analytic heft, while the corresponding abstraction of the thematic chapters risks frequent anachronism. The chapter on modern Nigeria, for example, recounts wave after wave of institutional fission and religious conflict with little sense of underlying causes, perhaps because of a felt need to leave the complexities of Sufism, *jihād*, colonial policy, gender and *sharī'a* to others. These dangers notwithstanding, *HIA*'s coverage is exhaustive, and in this it will likely remain definitive for some time.

The geographic framing of the enterprise, as established by the first section, will undoubtedly inspire some second-guessing. Saharan specialists, for example, will be disappointed to see their region reduced to a 'gateway' between north and west, while champions of an Indian Ocean ecumene will receive support from M. N. Pearson's vision of an east coast 'littoral society' knit together by intrepid, non-African sailors, migrants and merchants – and, of course, 'traveling Arabic words'. Taken together, the essays create the unfortunate impression that 'Islamization' was continually driven by forces located outside the subcontinent, while Africa served as a kind of cul-de-sac (albeit a creative one). Never, in this section, are the directional arrows reversed to highlight interactions between these zones or the contributions of sub-Saharan Africans.

This initial stumble is somewhat offset by Pouwels's chapter which soberly restates the tenets of Africanist orthodoxy: that Swahili civilization emerged out of a fundamentally 'Bantu' cultural milieu, and that it drew influences from the Indo-Muslim world but also from neighbors in East Africa. This and the other regional and period syntheses are generally strong, though in a few places opportunities to update standard surveys seem to have been missed. Readers hoping for an advanced peek at the promised revision of *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, for example, will have to wait for the remaining authors to complete the work; Levtzion's overview of pre-1800 West Africa bears little trace either of the creative re-imagining of western Sudanic history undertaken by David Conrad and Susan and Roderick McIntosh, or of the more traditional efforts of scholars like John Hunwick, Chouki el Hamel and Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh to resituate the *bilād al-sūdān* in the context of a West African–Maghribian ecumene.²¹

²¹ E.g. David C. Conrad, 'A town called Dakajalan: the Sunjata tradition and the question of ancient Mali's capital', *Journal of African History*, 35, 3 (1994), 355–77; Roderick J. McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger: The Island of Gold* (London,

The overarching tone of all the chapters is one of orthodox political history, rarely reaching down into social or cultural questions. This limitation is perhaps best exemplified by David C. Sperling and Jose H. Kagabo's take on precolonial Buganda, which is even more instrumentalist and less interested in mass religion than Robinson's treatment of the same period discussed above. An oddly presentist and state-centered take on the eastern Sudan from the usually reliable John O. Voll will be useful largely to those seeking insight into the current conflicts in the Republic of Sudan.

Many other essays, while solid, add little to the already distinguished body of works of the contributors. We get cogent, definitive summaries from Robinson, Jean-Louis Triaud and many others beyond the capacity of this reviewer to evaluate fairly. Triaud issues an important corrective to the Senegalo-Mauritanian centrism of most scholarship on Islam in French West Africa (Robinson's *Paths of Accommodation* included), and highlights the darker sides of collaboration: the brutal suppression of many who continued to resist and the 'stagnation' of intellectual and spiritual life (though he is perhaps a bit too quick to sign the death warrant of 'traditional' religious elites). Edward Alpers presents an eminently useful synthesis of the often-neglected zone from Mozambique to Anglophone Central Africa. Robert C.-H. Shell covers the equally marginalized Muslims of South Africa from the seventeenth century to the present, without imposing a false sense of continuity on that long and diverse story. Lidwien Kapteijns's chapter appropriately reflects the current revisionist approach to the history of Muslims in the Horn of Africa, moving them from the position of static minorities in or 'rivals' of a normatively Christian Ethiopia to being active participants in the development of that region.

The two standouts among the surveys are by Ivor Wilks and Lansiné Kaba. In a section on the *juula*, Wilks gives his most sustained discussion yet of the Suwarian tradition, giving it greater specificity and precision than the cliché it has often become, and, by detaching it from demographic or socioeconomic determinism, positions it as a real intellectual current to be understood along side of, rather than in opposition to, other political and religious visions. Kaba's chapter on radicalism updates and broadens the scope of his classic study on *ahl al-Sunna* movements, fulfilling the promise of essays that have appeared gradually over the last two decades. His conclusion that recent reform movements, while part of a larger political world, need primarily to be understood in their varied local contexts, and that these contexts allow them to transcend the anti-Sufism or sectarianism of Yan Izala or Saudi-style reform, is already inspiring recent research.²² Taken together, these two essays provide one of the most nuanced descriptions of Islam in the Mande world yet available.

The thematic analyses of the last third of the volume promise to 'enrich and enliven' the strictly historical chapters, with varying success. Though its early promise to explain the 'gendered world' of African Islam quickly gives way to a more traditional contributionist history of Muslim women, Roberta Ann Dunbar's

1998); Susan Keech McIntosh, 'Pathways to complexity: an African perspective', in Susan Keech McIntosh (ed.), *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge, 1999); the contributions of Hunwick and others to Institut des Etudes Africaines, *Le Maroc et l'Afrique subsaharienne aux débuts des temps modernes* (Casablanca, 1995); Chouki el Hamel, *La vie intellectuelle islamique dans le Sahel ouest-africain, XVI-XIX siècles* (Paris, 2002); Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, *Eléments d'histoire de la Mauritanie* (Nouakchott, 1988).

²² For example, the forthcoming dissertation by Ousman Kobo on Islamic reform in Ghana and Burkina Faso.

otherwise excellent essay takes seriously women's social positions, their spiritual lives and their intellectual inspirations and legacies, while maintaining a balanced focus in terms of both geographic regions and social classes. Most heartening is her avoidance of the easy equations of women with popular culture with Africa with syncretism, as she observes that '[s]pirit possession, long viewed as elements of popular or marginal culture ... must now be viewed within a broader conceptualization of Islam that acknowledges it as an important spiritual expression by practicing Muslims' (p. 405). Here again, though, the trade-offs of the 'thematic' segregation are clear, as women make few appearances in the other chapters where we know their experiences to have made real impacts (e.g. law, Sufism, slavery, even the ways Arab geographers represented African Islam), and gender as an analytic concept is utterly absent from the rest of the book.

A similar problem besets Allan Christelow's overview of Islamic law, which otherwise marks an important step forward in the study of the subject. Christelow's overview provides a good illustration of the limitations of the tradition/adaptation approach to Islamic history. He imagines Islamic legal schools (*madhhabs*) as traditions that transform society and compete with one another, and in so doing reifies social institutions and obscures historical agency. He presents the differences in religious law from place to place and changes in law over time as the product of the adaptation of traditions to local circumstances, and thus confuses causes with effects and detaches law from other aspects of society. This detachment leads him, for example, to overlook the way the crucial changes in the nature of the state during the colonial period caused a profound shift in the meaning of law. Instead, he misleadingly juxtaposes a reified precolonial *shari'a* with a surprisingly essentialized 'traditional African' political culture.²³ When British and French officials 'recognized' the *shari'a* in certain parts of their colonial possessions, the nature of the state apparatus they brought with them arguably made this a revolutionary act; but Christelow presents it merely as the victory of 'authentic' Muslim culture over colonial fictions of African 'tradition'.

Knut S. Vikør, whose prior work puts him in an almost unique position to think critically about Sufis in North, West and East Africa, as well as about Sufism as both high and popular culture, as both font of ideas and sets of social institutions, has provided us with an equally mixed bag. Dividing his pages between a list of *tariqa*-specific micro-narratives²⁴ and a more helpful general analysis of matters like 'social background' and 'scholarship and piety', Vikør gives the unfortunate impression that Sufism's 'general' features can be separated from its actual manifestations, and that specific Sufi orders can be understood with little reference to social context or cultural meaning.

This last section does offer some real gems of analysis. David Owusu-Ansah's chapter, which updates his well-known study of Islamic amulets, makes important strides by linking Muslim uses of the supernatural not to syncretism or naïve instrumentalism, but rather to Steven Feierman's innovative work on the social basis of health and healing and Louis Brenner's Foucauldian idea that most premodern African religions operated in accordance with an underlying 'esoteric

²³ Research in the last few decades has made it clear that in most places the *shari'a* only crystallized in its modern form in the nineteenth century. Though Christelow is admirably quick to detach the African cases from the dominant narrative centering on Ottoman reforms, his analysis of colonial legal institutions could benefit from Ottomanists' study of the *étatisation* of *shari'a*. See, for example, Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, 1973 [1963]), and Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (Oxford, 1998).

²⁴ In a fashion reminiscent of Tringham's *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971).

episteme'. One can only lament that Owusu-Ansah's contribution is the shortest in the volume, with only eight pages of text. Writing in a similar vein, René Bravmann critiques the core-periphery approach to Islamic art – which from Trimingham on has been used to deprecate the cultural products of African Muslims – and appeals instead to the tradition of locally grounded cultural anthropology. Indeed, Bravmann reveals that some of the most important insights can be gained by taking a closer look at societies where 'African' forces have generally been thought to have dwarfed Islamic ones – such as in Yorubaland or among Dogon-speakers – and reminds us that the opposite is also sometimes true, as in the case of the mosques of the Swahili coast, taken for generations as self-evidently the product of Middle Eastern cultures.

On a more abstract level, the topics chosen for the thematic explorations strike a good balance between categories that emerge out of long-standing Islamic problematics (law, education, Sufism) and those that are more proper to the analyses of western academics (gender, art and material culture, music). The chapter on Islamic literature moves between the two ontological systems, but Kenneth W. Harrow generally privileges what European scholars would define as literary or imaginative works. Importantly this has come to take in oral materials, and the inclusion of Thomas Hale's comparison of the *Ta'rikh al-Sūdān* and the oral *Epic of Askia Mohammed*, Priscilla Starratt's work on Hausa oral tales and Amadou Hampâté Bâ's studies of Fulbe lore provide excellent illustrations of what is to be gained by eschewing Arabic-centrism. Similarly, Harrow's discussion of written works in Swahili and Somali helps establish that it is in the vernacular that the heart of African Islam lies. Unfortunately, Harrow's neglect of Arabic-language literature and 'contemporary' African-language works with Islamic themes (the Hausa material alone is vast) simply reinforces the distinctions between 'modern' and 'traditional' (and 'pure' and 'mixed' Islam) that he otherwise rightly questions, and serves to consign twentieth-century Arabic-language writings to the purview of Orientalism.

The value of these individual contributions aside, *HIA* is, of course, more than the sum of its parts; unfortunately, it is also quite a bit less. If *Muslim Societies* illustrates the lingering tensions between cultural anthropology and Islamic Studies, *HIA* reveals how unharmonious the marriage of Islamic Studies and African history remains. What nearly every essay in *HIA* shares is an assumption that its topic forms a self-evident, coherent terrain of inquiry that can be expressed by the formula 'Islam and X' where X is a geographic region, a time period, or some aspect of culture or society. In this sense, the fragmentation of essays like Christelow's or Vikør's is merely symptomatic of a problem that courses through the whole project. To detach phenomena like law, education and 'women' from one another as well as from any specific historical context is probably an inevitable result of detaching 'Islam' from other elements of society in the first place.

In general, cultural and social historians alike will be surprised that the major themes of African precolonial and, particularly, colonial history seem to have little explanatory power in the fourteen expository chapters. Few technologies of communication or transportation, phases of capitalist expansion, relations of dependency, changing social roles or (perhaps thankfully) 'alternative modernities' intrude upon the self-contained accounts of the transformation of religious institutions. Even slavery and the slave trade merit only a handful of sustained discussions (in the context of the lead-up to the Sudanese Mahdi, on plantations at Mombassa, in the Cape Colony, and as scattered references in Levtzion's treatment of pre-1800 western Sudan). Rather, contributors seem to have followed M. N. Pearson's unassailable logic: the slave trade, he insists, 'is hardly germane

to a discussion of the Indian Ocean and Islam in eastern Africa; just because many of the traders were Muslim, and some slaves were sold into Muslim areas, does not mean this was an “Islamic” trade’ (p. 39).

Perhaps unmoved by such confidence in the delimitability of their topic, a few authors do indeed reflect in a sustained fashion on what it can mean to talk about ‘Islamic X’. Those with a penchant for analyzing Islam sociologically may wonder why the two most insightful critical reflections come from an art historian (Bravmann) and a literary critic (Harrow). Similarly, Pouwels’s discussion of the Swahili does an exemplary job of treating pre-Islamic beliefs as providing an underlying intellectual framework rather than as syncretic survivals or bits of local ‘color’.

The neglect of such critical exploration on the part of the other contributors severely limits the impact the project is likely to have beyond specialists in the subfield. While the essays provide important details about prominent individual Muslims and about the development of certain positions, tendencies or political problematics, few authors take up the question of the ultimate significance of the Islamic tradition to African history or explain why the material should be of interest to historians working on ostensibly secular topics like labor, economic history or state formation. The metaphor of rupture and the creation of boundaries exemplified by the *hijra* that Robinson privileges in *Muslim Societies* thus threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Taken together, *Muslim Societies* and *Islam in Africa* make it clear that the study of African Islam has come to a turning point. Having established the empirical foundations for the study of Muslim communities in Africa, we must strive now to reintegrate the history of Islam in Africa into the social, cultural, political and above all intellectual history of Africa more generally.

It is to Robinson’s credit that what appear to be the most fruitful ways to accomplish this are also suggested by his book. In his conclusion, Robinson cites Louis Brenner’s discussions of ‘religious culture’ as an influence; but there is little that resembles ‘culture’ in *Muslim Societies*, at least in the sense of thick description or the analysis of symbolic systems. The more operative term here is ‘Muslim identity’, another idea that has figured in Louis Brenner’s work; but here too what is meant is something other than the existential struggles and creative self-fashioning that Brenner has charted. Rather, Robinson seems to use ‘identity’ to blur the line between purely instrumental analysis and an unspecified implication that more ‘psychological’ transformations might be involved in religious conversions or behaviors. This would seem to be the case with the slaves in Kumase who acquired ‘a Muslim identity and their freedom at the same time’ (p. 132) or the young pages in Buganda who gained prestige and power by becoming ‘Readers’ but who were then led into destructive competition with Christians as their ‘religious identity’ became ‘attached to the state, the ... king, and particular customs’ (pp. 158–64). In other cases, the concept seems more purely performative, so that when we are told that Kabaka Mutesa ‘saw Muslim identity as a crucial ingredient of his strategy’ the implication is that his profession of the faith was superficial and not a little manipulative (p. 158).

A sense of identity as performative is an important corrective to religious essentialism, and a desire to root religious behavior in a denser matrix of motives and representations than pure self-interest marks an improvement over more instrumentalist explanations. But as Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper have cautioned, unless such invocations are accompanied by explicit examination of what constitutes these motives and self-representations – what was it that the pages of Buganda saw in Islam that made them participate in a process with (ultimately) so few material benefits? – ‘identity’ risks becoming

a cliché.²⁵ Nonetheless, a more careful use of the term can help us build historical narratives that highlight the embeddedness of being Muslim in discourses about being Muslim.²⁶

In practical terms, this may mean walking away from the false dichotomy between Islam's high-culture textual tradition and its cultural refigurings at the periphery, between Islam's 'core practices' and its local inflections. We should think seriously about jettisoning long-standing debates about how Islam 'changed' Africa or 'was changed' by Africans, as if it were a thing. For the formula 'Islam here is different but it is still Islam' relies ultimately on an essentialism that is both contradicted by the available evidence and deeply Arab-centric. For recognizing that Islam has become an African religion must mean more than showing how it reproduces certain patterns of similar-to-yet-different-from Middle Eastern Islam. It must mean taking the religious beliefs of African Muslims seriously *as beliefs* fashioned in African social contexts, not merely as veneers of practice on top of an unchanging core.

Second, as Susan McIntosh has reminded us, the diversity of African states promises to make the continent the site of the development of exciting alternative models of social complexity, and we should make sure that the experiences of African Muslims past and present are part of that discussion.²⁷ In particular, we can liberate the long period between 1000 and 1800 from its service as the stage for the slow movement of 'Islamization' and see in it instead myriad examples of complex, contingent interactions between religion, power, authority and *longue durée* social structuration. Alongside this, we can now augment our analyses of Muslim networks and Sufi orders and Islamic states with tools derived from anthropological discussions of forms of accumulation that are not purely additive and thus not reducible to a simple social calculus. The popularity of Islamic medicines has long been noted, and we should follow Owusu-Ansah's advice and think about them in the context of the social bases of health and healing more generally. Other new possibilities, like the study of Islam and environment, are perhaps more distant on the horizon, but visible nonetheless. Building on the firm foundations laid by Robinson, Levtzion, Pouwels and others, such work will ensure that the study of the history of African Muslims remains in touch with what is most vital in the contemporary study of the African past.

²⁵ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, 'Beyond "identity"', *Theory and Society*, 29, 1 (2000), 1–47. Though Brubaker and Cooper's verdict on 'identity' is considerably less sanguine than my own, their critiques are best taken as a call to refine our usage of the term and to think more systematically about its utilities and inutilities.

²⁶ A useful model (including its double entendre) is John Richard Bowen, *Muslims through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society* (Princeton, 1993).

²⁷ McIntosh, 'Pathways to complexity'.