
LOIMEIER, Roman. — *Muslim Societies in Africa. A Historical Anthropology*

Ousmane Kane



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LOIMEIER, Roman. — *Muslim Societies in Africa. A Historical Anthropology*. Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2013, 358 p., bibl.

- 1 For most of the twentieth century, the study of Islam in Africa was informed by the “area studies” framework, and thus tended to separate North Africa from Sub-Saharan Africa. At the turn of the twenty-first century, students of African Islam challenged the area studies paradigm and developed comprehensive approaches to the study of Islam in Africa by highlighting the interconnections between the different regions of Africa and between Africa and Muslim Asia. One major study from this new perspective is *The History of Islam in Africa*,¹ a collection of essays edited in 2000 by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels, to which two dozen leading scholars of the field contributed. *The History of Islam in Africa* covered all geographic regions of Muslim Africa and a variety of themes including history, scholarship, arts, talismans, etc.
- 2 In 2004, David Robinson authored *Muslim Societies in African History*,² which combined the study of important themes and select countries in North, East, and West Africa. In some of these countries, Muslims live as a majority (Senegal, Morocco) whereas in others, they live as minorities (Ethiopia and Uganda). The first volume has the larger geographic and thematic coverage, but is not a coherent monograph. The second is a concise text, which has the coherence of a single-authored book, but has limited geographic coverage. By contrast, *Muslim Societies in Africa* by Roman Loimeier combines the coherence of a single-authored book and comprehensively covers the geography of the African continent: North Africa, West Africa, Nubia, North Eastern Africa, the Sahara, the East African Coast and Southern Africa. It also offers a documented analysis of important themes, including the path of Islamization in various

regions, the interconnections between different regions, the *jihads'* movements, Islamic scholarship, slavery and the slave trade, colonialism, and Sufi orders.

- 3 The analysis of the interconnections between the different regions of Africa is one of the greatest strengths of the book. In chapter 3 of the book, entitled “The Sahara as a Connective Place,” Loimeier explains how regional complementarity was the driving force for trans-Saharan trade. From the nineteenth century on, the Bilad al-Sudan exchanged gold, ivory, hides, tanned leather, slaves, and gum Arabic for weapons, guns, gunpowder, armory, paper, books, glass in different forms, various types of textile spices, copperware, cowry shells, used as an important form of currency in the Bilad al-Sudan, and green tea and sugar. Likewise, chapter 10, entitled “The East African Coast,” explores the interconnections between Southern Arabia and East Africa, as well as the power relations between Arabs, the Swahili, Ethiopians, and the Portugese.
- 4 Even South Africa, which most of the discussions about Islam in Africa ignore, is covered here. Loimeier shows that Islam in South Africa has a long history. He highlights the history of Muslim minorities such as Indians and Cape Malays in South Africa.
- 5 Among the many themes addressed in the book, *jihad* is paramount. In the Western Sudan, where a substantial body of literature has been devoted to *jihad*, he allocates an entire chapter to the *jihads* while highlighting common themes and specificities. In West Africa, where Muslim clerics waged a series of *jihads* between seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, Samory Touré remains an exception. Unlike the leaders of earlier *jihads*, Touré was not a scholar. He never wrote any text and never sought to legitimize his wars or conquests in religious terms. Only after the consolidation of his empire did he cultivate Islamic culture as an ideological foundation of the state. In the chapters focussed on East Africa, Loimeier also addresses the issue of *jihad*, including in Ethiopia (the *jihad* of Imam Ahmed Grang), and in the Sudan, the *jihad* of the Mahdi who defeated the Anglo-Egyptian army and the Ethiopian army and then established an Islamic state.
- 6 The European encounter with Africa is also addressed throughout the book. The author shows how, from the fifteenth century, the rise of naval European—and especially Portuguese—powers, shifted the center of gravity of the trade from the Sahara to the Coast, thereby transforming interactions between Europeans and Muslims. The penultimate chapter, “Muslims under Colonial Rule,” analyzes in fine detail the impact of European colonial transformations in various African regions.
- 7 The book is clearly written and powerfully argued. In addition, it provides seventeen maps of different regions of Muslim Africa, as well as a table of statistics on education, and last but not least, a useful annotated bibliography. This book is outstanding in all respects. It will not only help experts and instructors to better understand this field, but will also admirably serve the general public with little knowledge of Muslim Africa and newcomers to the field of Islam in Africa.

NOTES

1. N. LEVTZION & R. POWELS (eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa*, Athens, Ohio University Press; Oxford, James Currey; Cape Town, David Philip, 2000.
2. D. ROBINSON, *Muslim Societies in African History*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004.