BOOK REVIEW

Robert Launay, editor. *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. 323 pp. Contributors. Index. $35.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780253023025.

Islamic Education in Africa, edited by Robert Launay, addresses the emergence of new methods of teaching Islamic theology (*tawhid*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in Africa, within the framework of the recent broader spectrum of educational alternatives, which range from "classic" Islamic schools to secular public or private educational institutions. Only peripherally based on the juxtaposition of "traditionalists" versus "reformers" (256), the book goes beyond the essentializing and simplistic differentiation between a more mnemonic interiorization of the Quran in the past and the more recent interpretation and adaptation of Quranic principles today (29). It focuses rather on highlighting forms of hybridization between the two (264), or practices of "educational plurality" (286), where African pupils attend Quranic and secular schools simultaneously, as in Mozambique (114). In the introduction, Launay presents a bird's-eye view of different African contexts, demonstrating how colonial regimes displayed different attitudes toward education; "the British were happy to leave the task of educating Africans to the missionaries" (7), while the French were overtly hostile toward or mistrustful of religious education, be it run by the Catholic Church or by Islamic teachers.

The book is divided into four parts; the first, titled "The Classic Paradigm," introduces different types of Islamic education in West Africa and in Mauritania. The second part, "Institutional Transformations," reveals its strength in the diachronic perspective, rendering the development both of Western- and Islamic-based systems, which are rooted in the colonial (as in Mozambique) and post-colonial (as in DRC) periods. For example, the historical coexistence and co-development of colonial and Islamic schools are well-documented in the case of Zanzibar through official school documents and timetables. As for the decolonization period, Launay hints at how post-colonial African governments failed to decolonize knowledge, notwithstanding their significant economic and social investments in

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education (17). From the 1980s onwards, the restructuring of the public sector following the adoption of neoliberal policies opened up new educational alternatives for pupils in many African countries, causing, however, an "educational stratification by class" (2).

Recently, the alignment of some African areas with Gulf countries has come with Islamic reformist or revivalist movements, which are often inspired by Salafi and Wahabist ideologies and have a relevant impact on educational institutions, especially in Northern Nigeria (133). The founding of new types of Islamic schools is the subject of part three, "Innovations and Experiments," which provides a deep insight into the political implications of education in post-colonial states such as Senegal and Kenya.

The chapter on the life and career of Kenyan Mwalim Bi Swafiya Muhashamy-Said (b. 1935), who devoted her life to Islamic education, proves to be innovative, as it relies on a "social biography" (210) of a woman, showing how an individual history can build a vivid picture of the more general socio-political context. This chapter also offers proof of the progressively greater presence women are enjoying in recent Islamic educational movements. Other contributions resort to a "gender" angle to explain the pervasive impact of the vulgarization of Islamic knowledge and teachings in Africa, as seen in the chapters on Niger and West Africa.

The strength of the volume is its ability to overcome Western-based stereotypes, such as the representation of Quranic teaching as solely "rote memorization" (45) or "parrot talk" (6) and the perceived dichotomy between sub-Saharan, esoteric Islam (*Islam Noir*) and Arabic, rational Islam (176).

The subtitle actually recalls the juxtaposition of "boards," or the classic method of writing on paper and reciting the Quran until it is completely memorized, with "blackboards," or writing with chalk, an intrinsically impermanent and "modern" (Western) way of learning the sacred words and language of the holy scripts. The comparison is a rhetorical device intended to maintain the well-knit structure of the volume; however, it is seldom recalled throughout the book.

As the debate on the decolonization of education in Africa gains increasing importance in academia, *Islamic Education in Africa* is a thoughtful reflection that challenges Eurocentric knowledge on Islamic educational systems, harnessing a debate on alternative future landscapes for education and schooling in Africa.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Donaldson, Coleman. 2020. “The Role of Islam, Ajami Writings, and Educational Reform in Sulemaana Kantè’s N’Ko.” *African Studies Review*, 1–25. doi:10.1017/asr.2019.59.

Hellweg, Joseph. 2019. “Songs from the Hunters’ Qur’an: Dozo Music, Textuality, and Islam in Northwestern Côte d’Ivoire, from the Repertoire of Dramane Coulibaly.” *African Studies Review* 62 (1): 120–47. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.142.

Nobili, Mauro, and Mohamed Diagayeté. 2017. “The Manuscripts That Never Were: In Search of the Tārīkh Al-Fattāsh in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana.” *History in Africa* 44: 309–21. doi:10.1017/hia.2017.4.

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