



Islam in West Africa: Religion, Society and Politics to 1800

By Nehemia Levtzion. Aldershot, Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1994.

Islam in West Africa is a collection of nineteen essays written by Nehemia Levtzion between 1963 and 1993. The book is divided into five sections, dealing with different facets of the history and sociology of Islam in West Africa.

The first section focuses on the patterns, characteristics, and agents of the spread of Islam. The author offers an approach to the study of the process of that Islamization in West Africa that compares patterns of Islamization in medieval Mali and Songhay to patterns in the Volta basin from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. He also assesses the complex roles played by African chiefs and kings and slavery in the spread of Islam.

Section two focuses on the subject of Islam and West African politics from the medieval period to the early nineteenth century. Levtzion identifies two trends in African Islam: accommodation and militancy. Islam's early acceptance in West African societies was aided by the fact that Islam was initially seen as a supplement, and not as a substitute, to existing religious systems. Levtzion analyzes the dynamics of Islam in African states as accommodation gave way in time to tensions between the ruling authorities and Islamic scholars, calling for a radical restructuring of the state according to Islamic ideals. The tensions between the Muslim clerics of Timbuktu and the medieval Songhay rulers, and the ultimately adversarial relationship between Uthman dan Fodio and the Gobir leadership in eighteenth-century Hausaland, are singled out for sustained analysis.

The author distinguishes between *'ulama* who tended to support accommodation with the political authorities and those who remained largely independent and, over a period, called for the radical restructuring of their societies along Islamic ideals. He also explores the relationship between trade and Islamic

expansion. While later European sources emphasize the role of merchants in the propagation of Islam, local historiographers tend to play down their role. The author suggests explanations for these discrepancies.

Section three gives a detailed background to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Islamic revolutions, which forever altered the character of Islam in West Africa. Some of the factors that contributed to militant Islamic radicalism include the role of the pastoralists, the development of Muslim writings in the local languages, the impact of trade with the Europeans, the influence of the southern Sahara, and, perhaps most significantly, the rise of Sufi orders.

Much of our knowledge of ancient African history is based on Arabic sources. The last sections of the book provide critical reassessments and sometimes radical reevaluations of these texts. Subjects discussed in these sections include the cyclical patterns in the relationships of power between the desert nomads and the Sudanese states; the lack of sufficient evidence to ascertain the presence of Jewish traders in the Sahara and the Sudan in the Middle Ages; textual evidence on Islam in the southern Sahara before the Almoravid movement; the relationship between medieval Sudan and Mamluk Egypt; a reassessment of Arabic texts on ancient Mali and Ghana; and finally a report of the findings of Arabic manuscripts from Kumasi of the early nineteenth century, located at the library of Copenhagen.

Levtzion's book is a valuable addition to modern scholarship on Islam in West Africa. He has combined the skills and insights of an anthropologist, a historian, a historiographer, and a textual analyst to produce this discursive work. He proposes new ways of looking at the history of Islam in West Africa, including a rigorous, if sometimes tedious, re-examination of the Arabic sources.

The author argues, for example, that Sunni Ali, the Songhay predecessor of Askiya Muhammad, was not (contrary to conventional wisdom) an unqualified enemy of the Timbuktu *'ulama*. The sixteenth-century ruler of Songhay was simply responsive to the growing pattern of Islamic militancy in his kingdom. During his reign, the traditional pattern of accommodation between Muslims and chiefs was increasingly being challenged. Moreover, Sunni Ali was suspicious of the *'ulama's* friendship with the Tuaregs, who had just lost control of Timbuktu and continued to be a threat to the conquered territories of Songhay. Moreover, Levtzion argues, Sunni Ali persecuted only one group of the *'ulama* and cites the fiercest critic of Sunni Ali, al-Sadi, who conceded that "notwithstanding all the wrong and pains that sonni Ali (sic) inflicted upon the *'ulama*, he acknowledged their eminence and used to say: 'Without the *'ulama*, the world would be no good.' He did favors for other *'ulama* and respected them" (III: 339).

Levtzion's thesis on the cyclical patterns in the relationship between the medieval Sudanic states and the Berber dwellers of the desert is a revision of the traditional view, which emphasizes the dominant role of the desert nomads in their confrontation with Sudanic polities. His thesis may throw light on the current problems between the Tuareg Berbers and the Sudanic peoples of the modern nation-states of Mali and Niger.

Also significant is the author's re-examination of the perceived dichotomy between rural Islam and urban Islam. The former is usually considered to be more scholarly and orthodox, while the latter is associated with popular Islam. He demonstrates that, at least in the case of West Africa, such a dichotomy is viable only by picking up examples from the extremes. Perhaps the most com-

elling argument in favor of Levtzion's thesis is that rural Islam was the breeding ground for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *jihād* movements which emerged in the countryside and not in the cities.

The study makes many other valuable revisionist contributions to scholarship on Islam in West Africa, such as a new genealogy of the kings of Mali which is based on a correction of the standard European translation of Ibn Khaldun's Arabic text. Beyond such polemical aspects, Levtzion's book also has documentary value.

The detailed documentation of the intellectual, spiritual, and commercial relations between medieval Mamluk Egypt and West Africa is useful. Levtzion provides a list of fourteen scholars in Egypt, including Jalal al Din al Suyuti, with whom scholars from West Africa studied. He also gives information on West African Muslims who excelled as scholars and teachers in Egypt. The evidence for the contribution of Sufism to the West African *jihads* is also significant.

Levtzion's book is not without deficiencies. As a collection of essays written in the span of thirty years, its chapters lack structural and thematic continuity. There also is considerable repetition and overlapping. The reading experience thus becomes occasionally tedious. More careful revisions of the original articles might have minimized that problem and removed the invalid cross-references in the present text. Moreover, the specialist is likely to be more comfortable with Levtzion's thematic approach. The nonspecialist would be advised to read first more historically grounded studies like Mervyn Hiskett's two books on Islam in Africa: *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (1984) and *The Course of Islam in Africa* (1994). There are other objectionable elements in the study under review, such as Levtzion's reductionist translation of *jihād* as "literally, 'holy wars'" (IV: 96).

These observations cannot seriously detract from the value of Levtzion's work. His detailed study of the forces and men who championed the cause of political Islam in Africa from the eleventh to the early nineteenth centuries underscores the perennial patterns in the ever unfolding story of Islam. One can only hope for a sequel that examines West African Islam in our era of global Islamic resurgence.

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