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Islam and Power in the Twentieth Century

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Recommended Citation

Sharkey, H. J. (2001). Islam and Power in the Twentieth Century. *African Studies Review*, 44 (3), 73-78.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/525594>

Reviewed Works: *The Arab-African and Islamic Worlds: Interdisciplinary Studies* by R. Kevin Lacey, Ralph M. Coury; *Prayer Has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger* by Adeline Masquelier; *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* by Louis Brenner
At the time of publication, author Heather J. Sharkey was associated with Trinity College. Currently, she is a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Disciplines

African History | History of Religion | Islamic World and Near East History | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

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ISLAM AND POWER IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

R. Kevin Lacey and Ralph M. Coury, eds. *The Arab-African & Islamic Worlds: Interdisciplinary Studies*. New York: Peter Lang, 2000. xxiv + 334 pp. Bibliographies. Index. \$29.95. Paper.

Adeline Masquelier. *Prayer Has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. xx + 348 pp. Map. Glossary. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$64.95. Cloth. \$21.95. Paper.

Louis Brenner. *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. xv + 343 pp. Acronyms. Maps. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95. Cloth.

Worried about the potential of Islamic movements for organizing anti-colonial protest, European colonial regimes in Africa sought to control or at least subdue Muslim expression in the first half of the twentieth century. They devised policies to conciliate or co-opt Muslim leaders, to play Muslim communities against each other, and in some cases, to thwart the spread of Islam among practitioners of local religions. Yet, far from containing Islam in Africa, colonial regimes unwittingly helped to spread it, by providing conditions for the peaceful exchange of commodities, people, and ideas across wide distances. By the mid-twentieth century, Islam had expanded dramatically through waves of conversions, in communities from Senegal to Tanzania. Islam was even beginning to spread in western Europe, as North African Muslims set out on labor migrations to France that would lead, in time, to the growth of large Muslim minorities in the former colonial metropolises.

Three new books bring nuanced analyses to the evolution of African Islamic cultures amidst the rapid social changes of the twentieth century: *The Arab-African & Islamic Worlds: Interdisciplinary Studies*, edited by R. Kevin Lacey and Ralph M. Coury; *Prayer Has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger*, by Adeline Masquelier; and *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society*, by Louis Brenner. Two general points emerge from readings of these works. First, Islamic cultures are not homogeneous, nor do their members share uniform ideologies and agendas. African Muslims in the twentieth century have held varied and at times conflicting opinions about Islamic practice and politics and about local customs. Second, decolonization did not bring an end to the state's contentious relations with Islam, even in Muslim-majority countries where Muslim politicians gained control. On the contrary, postcolonial regimes north and south of the Sahara have tried to maintain their hegemony (much like their colonial predecessors) by suppressing, manipulating, or co-opting Islamic movements, parties, and unions -- organizations that pose a challenge precisely because of their ability to mobilize large groups.

The Arab-African & Islamic Worlds: Interdisciplinary Studies is a collection of seventeen essays drawn from a conference held at Binghamton University in 1998 on "Aspects of Contemporary North Africa". Its editors, R. Kevin Lacey and Ralph M. Coury, define North Africa as the region stretching from Mauritania and Western Sahara to Egypt and the Sudan, although most of the volume deals with Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

A few of the collection's essays consider the strained relations of postcolonial states to Islamist movements which have issued calls for a stronger Muslim political order. They consider the popular appeal of these Islamist movements as well as their political exclusion, and speculate on their potential role in the development of democracy (assuming the future relaxation of authoritarian regimes). The case of Algeria stands out starkly; there, the state's nullification of victories by the FIS (Front Islamique du Salut) in elections of 1990-91, followed by its suppression of Islamist parties, led to a decade of violence and killings that involved both militias and civilians.

Several essays in *The Arab-African & Islamic Worlds* underline the importance of literature, films, and music to political cultures and identities. Two debate the role of Western novels and movies in confirming Orientalist stereotypes of Islamic cultures; a third examines the acclaimed Tunisian film, *Les silences du palais*, as a vehicle for historical social criticism; and a fourth shows how Algeria's decade of strife has galvanized novelists as social critics. A few address issues of literature and literacy as they affect North African women, particularly with regard to female intellectuals who have variously tried to overcome patriarchal constraints, whether by challenging men's interpretations of Islam or by assuming roles (for example, that of the Arabic novelist) that men continue to dominate. Two essays discuss aspects of musical culture, in one case through the adherents of a particular Sufi order, for whom devotional singing finds applications in healing, meditation, and celebration; and in another, through the vibrant Algerian music known as Ra• which has reached out to youths disillusioned with the government and Islamist groups alike.

The continuing impact of colonialism is another recurrent theme in *The Arab-African & Islamic Worlds*. One essay -- the sole work here on North Africa east of Tunisia -- scrutinizes colonial legacies in the context of the Sudanese civil war, and weighs the cultural and historical baggage behind the apparent (and often misleading) split of the country into North/South, Arab/African, and Muslim/Christian halves. A few consider the shadows that France has cast on the Maghreb, for example, by inserting French as a language of learned discourse, or by maintaining neo-colonial interests and a wary sense of turf (thereby leading countries like the United States to pursue regional foreign policies with caution). Two essays explore the history of Berbers in light of French colonial attempts to cultivate sharper distinctions between them and the region's "Arabs". The French may have failed to reify a Berber nationalism in their day, but today, a Berber or "Amazigh" nationalism may be in the making, forming not so much on the ground in the rural Berber heartlands as among urban and at times globally dispersed communities that are often connected through the internet. Current attempts to develop a Berber print language are also contributing to this incipient nationalism. Finally, one essay examines the case of the "Beurs": second-generation, French-born Maghrebi Muslims, who are struggling to identify the terms of their citizenship in the face of discrimination or economic marginality within France itself.

Adeline Masquelier's *Prayer Has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power, and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger* is not explicitly a book about Muslim culture, and yet the local dynamics of Islam are central to its study. Masquelier is an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in Dogondoutchi, a Hausa-speaking community in the Arewa region of southwest Niger, in the late 1980s. She examines the local faith practices of bori, spirit possession ceremonies led by male and female devotees who try to intercede on behalf of individuals or the community to avert hardships, placate malevolent forces, and ensure fertility, health, or success. In the second half of the twentieth century, as Nig_riens increasingly converted to Islam or chose to follow Islam more rigorously, the religion of bori lost some ground. This, at least, is the perception of its leaders, who lament the progressive abandonment of spirit conciliation practices among a younger generation, as well as the increasing economic prominence and local dominance of the Muslim merchant class. In the words of a bori medium, who associated the increasingly conspicuous practices of Muslims with the loss of older ways, "Prayer has spoiled everything" -- hence the book's title.

Masquelier points out that bori flourished in precolonial times among men and women who had fled to the Arewa region to escape from wars and enslavement. It prospered, in other words, in the midst of social crisis. Islam, by contrast, flourished in colonial peacetime, in tandem with urbanization, long-distance labor migration, and the decline of the extended family. Islam offered new transregional networks and communities that appealed especially to the displaced or the upwardly mobile (some of whom aspired to be like the _volu_s, the colonial French-language-educated elite). In Masquelier's view, however, Islam's economic appeal has been the most attractive. She writes, "Because it favored the principle of private property and encouraged the accumulation of wealth, the Koranic message was more compatible with market individualism. Islam thus expanded at the expense of pre-Islamic practices centered around notions of kin-based production and community" (60). She adds, "Today the social veneer provided by Islam is a crucial element in successful trading. Only those who openly profess allegiance to the Prophet will see doors open up before them; only those who enjoy visibility and conspicuously parade at the mosque for the Friday prayer will be able to establish the network of relationships needed to practice commerce on a large scale" (215-16). Meanwhile, as Muslim men especially have become stricter about following orthodox Islam, many have promoted seclusion among their wives, thereby making it more difficult for women -- traditionally the more likely to seek solace through bori -- to attend possession ceremonies.

Will bori disappear as Islam expands, particularly as zealous and vocal reformists call for greater Muslim vigor? It seems more likely, judging from Arewa culture past and present, that bori and Islam will continue to evolve together, and retain a long-standing syncretistic relationship. Examples of the hybrid local Muslim culture are many. For example, bori devotees in the late 1980s bore Muslim names, and some even went on pilgrimage to Mecca, while their foundational myths traced the birth of the spirits to "Hawa" (Arabic for Eve), "betray[ing] the far-reaching influence of Islam on indigenous cosmology" (52). Meanwhile, even those who were following a more "orthodox" Islam and who claimed to reject bori as backward or sinful, occasionally resorted to its ceremonies in times of crisis, as they coped with illness, death, or some other personal challenge. The cultures of bori and Islam may also continue to co-exist while operating along divisions of gender, class, and region -- with women, the economically marginal, and the rural remaining more likely to consult the spirits than men, the affluent, and the urban (who may rotate more in the sphere of the mosque).

Prayer Has Spoiled Everything makes a valuable contribution to the small but substantial literature on bori as practiced in various parts of Africa. With its attention to bori as a living and changing religion that has responded to social developments, it can appeal to historians and anthropologists alike. From the perspective of Islamic studies, the book offers fascinating insights into a rural and small-town society in transition between local and

transnational Muslim practice.

In *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society*, Louis Brenner examines the history, politics, and impact of modern Islamic education in colonial and postcolonial Mali, a country where Islam has burgeoned. Whereas a minority of the country's population professed Islam at the start of the twentieth century, more than 70% were Muslims by the century's end. Public spaces offered proof of the religion's growth and prominence. For example, having had one Friday congregational mosque in 1968, Bamako alone boasted forty-one in 1986, along with over two hundred smaller district mosques -- many of these funded by donations from oil-rich Arab states.

The growth of Islam was not a legacy that French colonial authorities wanted to leave in their West African territories. They encouraged neither the development of Islamic education, nor the forging of contacts with the Arab Middle East. In a few elite schools, the French tried to cultivate West African Muslim boys to serve the colonial state and to appreciate French values. Hence their dismay in the late 1940s when a few young Muslim scholars from French West Africa, including graduates of al-Azhar in Cairo and returnees from the Hijaz, tried to set up a group of modern Arabic-medium Islamic schools or *m_dersas*, in Kayes, Segou, and Bamako. These schools differed from traditional Qur'an schools in several important respects, hence their description as "modern" or new. Gone were the informal study circles of the older Muslim shaykhs. Instruction took place, instead, in purpose-built structures, that is, in schools with classrooms and desks, while students attended classes in designated time-slots, with a schedule that included some new subjects such as physical education. The inspiration for this format came not only from colonial government schools, but also and in some cases more importantly, from the modern institutions of Cairo. Significantly, the Islam of these new schools was not a local Islam of Sufism, but rather leaned toward the more legalistic, text-based, reformist Islam that "Salafi" intellectuals in Egypt and Arabia were discussing. For this last reason alone, the Islamic *m_dersas* in Mali earned the mistrust or enmity of many traditional Qur'an teachers, who perceived their methods and ideas as a threat to local customs.

French colonial authorities, and the Malian postcolonial authorities who followed, alternately ignored and meddled in the Islamic *m_dersas*. The French ignored them by classifying them as Qur'an schools so that they would not qualify for government subventions (thereby forcing them to rely wholly on student fees for funding). At the same time, the French meddled by protesting when they taught "too much" Arabic, despite refusing to allow them to teach the French language. Postcolonial governments continued to ignore the Islamic *m_dersas*, partly because national budgets were small (and shrinking), and because government leaders, though Muslim themselves, were mildly or vehemently secularist. This neglect notwithstanding, self-funded Islamic *m_dersas* were able to multiply in urban areas after independence in 1960, drawing in the children of rural migrants, eighty percent of whom were illiterate. Their social impact was far-reaching: by 1980, the *m_dersas* were training up to 25% of Malian primary school students (the substantial majority of whom were males). However, reversing its apathy, the postcolonial state in the 1980s began to intervene in the *m_dersas*, under pressure from American, French, and Canadian aid programs, by trying to incorporate them into the national school system. These measures caused unease among both secularists, who feared this official rapprochement with Islamic organizations, and *m_dersa* educators, who worried that the required changes would threaten the Islamic schools' autonomy and purpose, by forcing them to drop Islamic subjects and add secular ones to meet standardized national guidelines.

Controlling Knowledge is more than a study of schools. It is a dense, complex, and theoretically informed history that illuminates two compelling basic points: first, that knowledge is power; and second, that the battle to provide, define, or gain access to an education takes many ideological forms.

All three of these recent works testify powerfully to the diversity and local religious plurality that characterize contemporary Muslim societies. While it is well-known that relations between European colonial rulers and practicing colonized Muslims were often strained, these books add to the evidence. At the same time, they shed light on an area that is still little charted, by revealing the tensions and power plays that have arisen among Muslims and between Muslim individuals and their governments in the postcolonial period.

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