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Muslim Societies in African History

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Review of *Muslim Societies in African History* by David Robinson.
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Muslim Societies in African History

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Comments

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David Robinson. *Muslim Societies in African History*. New Approaches to African History series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xx + 220 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Glossary. Index. \$55 Cloth, \$19 Paper.

In American academia, the study of Islamic cultures in Africa has long been the preserve of specialists. Published books and articles in the field have tended to assume a substantial level of background knowledge, while courses on the subject have generally been offered only at research universities and then, too, at advanced undergraduate or graduate levels. The publication of David Robinson's *Muslim Societies in Africa* suggests that this situation is changing. At a time when popular interest in global Islamic studies is growing, this book's arrival is welcome, particularly given its suitability as an undergraduate textbook.

Muslim Societies in Africa belongs to a new series on African history published by Cambridge University Press and intended for use by students in general African or world history courses. With its thirteen chapters (plus an introduction and conclusion), the book can function as a core text for a semester-long survey. The book uses easy language and assumes no prior knowledge of Islamic history. It provides recommendations for further reading at the end of each chapter, and a glossary of terms at the back of the book. By including North Africa within its purview, the book bridges the Saharan divide that so many scholars have traditionally (and regrettably) imputed to African history. Moreover, by noting the impact that the attacks of September 11th, 2001 had on the United States and global politics, the book implicitly registers the concerns that may be framing the worldviews of students as they enroll in an Islamic history class.

The book has three main parts. The first part provides historical background on early Islamic history and the tenets of Islamic belief, and explains how Islam was initially transmitted from Arabia into the African continent. The second part covers four general themes in African Islamic history, namely, Islamization (i.e., the spread and development of local Islam); Africanization (i.e., the indigenization of Islam); Islam and the slave trade; and Western views of Africa and Islam. The third part offers historical case studies of Morocco, Ethiopia, Ghana, Northern Nigeria, Uganda, Sudan, and Senegal. A chapter on the Cape Muslim community in South Africa would make an interesting addition if the author chooses to expand the book for a future edition.

The author occasionally adopts a chatty tone by posing rhetorical questions and using the first person singular (e.g., on page 109) in order to reach out to student readers. Historians may find these colloquialisms disconcerting. Nevertheless, the book has much to offer to scholarly audiences, too, because of the author's wide erudition as evinced by his ability to set the development of African Islam against the broad sweep of global Islamic history. Used in tandem with more specialized studies, such as *The History of Islam in Africa* (Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels, eds.; Ohio University Press, 2000), the book can provide scholars with a solid foundation of knowledge on the subject.

As a lucid and concise overview of major trends in African Islamic history, *Muslim Societies in Africa* will make an ideal undergraduate textbook as well as a useful reference for historians. Its debut signals that the African Islamic history may finally be moving beyond the realm of specialists and into the mainstream of undergraduate studies.

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