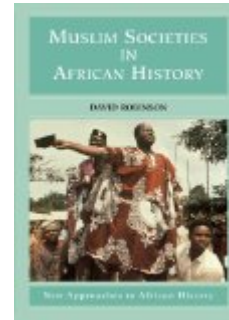


David Robinson. *Muslim Societies in African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 220 S. \$22.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-53366-9.



Reviewed by Achim von Oppen

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (November, 2006)

Understanding Islam in Africa has been, for outside observers, even more challenging than understanding Islam in general. In a transcontinental historical perspective, Muslim Africa has often been considered as largely irrelevant for mainstream Islam, either because its faith was considered as “africanised”, something very particular and syncretic, or because Africa was considered as a mere object of externally-induced “islamisation”. While exposing the fallacies – and the history – of these stereotypes to a limited extent (chapter 6), this book as a whole is concerned with the partial truth of both of these views. The history of Islam in Africa is presented as very much part of the history of Islam in general while being, at the same time, strongly influenced by the agency of Africans themselves. This book may therefore teach lessons of importance even beyond the continent.

Those who teach history face a problem of adequate text book material on the topic of Islam in Africa. General overviews for undergraduate students and interested non-specialists are scarce. Only a small number of more or less wide-ranging

scholarly collections exist whose individual contributions are often still too specialist and not consistent enough to provide an introductory overview. In recent literature, the most outstanding case in point is undoubtedly the voluminous *History of Islam in Africa*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels (Athens, Oxford, Cape Town 2000). In contrast, David Robinson, the renowned historian of Islamic and francophone Africa at Michigan State University, has endeavoured to provide a slim and more coherent overview that synthesizes a substantial amount of scholarly debates on the subject for a wider audience.

This remarkable book clearly emerged in dialogue with the collection mentioned above (to which Robinson contributed a chapter). Apart from volume and audience, the two books do differ significantly, firstly with regard to their regional and secondly to their thematic scope. With regard to the first, Robinson consistently argues for an inclusion of North Africa with its history of intense transsaharan relations, while Levtzion and Pouwels restrict themselves to the sub-saha-

ran part of the continent. They include, in turn, Muslim minorities in the southeast and in the south of the continent, areas which Robinson largely neglects. His own emphasis is clearly on the north-west and to some extent on the north-east – i.e. on those parts of Africa where Islam has developed in somewhat closer communication with the Arab and Ottoman heartlands of Islam. It is surprising in this context that only a few pages are devoted to one of the longest-established interfaces in this communication, the Swahili coast. Apart from Robinson's personal research experience, this seems to be due to the organisation of his book, which is more thematic than regional.

The book starts with a concise introduction for non-specialists to the history and institutions of Islam in general. The first two chapters also outline key tropes of religious discourse and practice that crop up repeatedly in the spread of Islam in Africa. The second part discusses four general issues in the history of Islam in Africa. Two of them address the connected themes of "Islamisation" and "Africanisation", respectively, as mentioned above. While the former deals with the question of historical "stages" and with the two main "gateways" of Islamic advance in Africa, the latter mentions a number of mechanisms and strategies by which Africans have appropriated Islam, or "created Muslim spaces", as the author puts it, in the course of their history. The other two general issues are more explicitly linked to European discourses about Islam in Africa. The history of the slave trade not only affected many African Muslims as both victims and agents, but later also became an important discursive device by Europeans against Islam in Africa. In this context, interesting glimpses are provided on the intense debates about the legitimacy of trading slaves, especially Muslims, that have taken place also within Africa itself. Finally, western stereotypes of Africa and Islam are outlined in their interaction with European practices of expansion, especially in the colonial context. Much of this chapter does not distinguish much between

stereotypes of Islam in general and of Africa in particular, but important hints on the role of both Islamic and African studies in the creation of such stereotypes are given.

In the third part of his book, Robinson presents seven case studies on countries selected according to societal constellations in which the history of Islam in Africa took place. Here, a new question becomes prominent that so far has only loomed in the background: the relationship between Muslims and different kinds of Non-Muslims. The two first cases provide long-term perspectives on societies in which Islam has been established for more than a millenium, due to early and intense communication with the Arab world, and in which Muslims have always been either an overwhelming majority (Morocco) or a significant minority (Ethiopia).

The next pair of cases takes us to West Africa between the 18th and 19th centuries, i.e. to significant developments within what is often simply lumped under "precolonial period". Here, the Asante Empire in today's Ghana is visited with its small but economically significant diaspora of Jula-speaking Muslim traders, and their adaptation to a powerful environment of "pagan" religiosity. A very different case is Hausaland (today mainly northern Nigeria), an early islamized region in which Uthman dan Fodio launched the first of a series of "Jihads" for religious renewal and intensification.

Following this, two case studies are presented on struggles about Islam in the late 19th century period of transition to European colonial rule, both setting an agenda for interreligious conflict throughout the 20th century. The kingdom of Buganda illustrates the competition between Islamisation and Christianisation in the context of Swahili long-distance trade and British colonial encroachment. The Mahdist movement of Sudan, in turn, is examined as a – remarkably successful – form of religious motivated resistance against

competing Ottoman and European imperialisms and modernisations.

The seventh and final case study, in contrast, examines the much more peaceful ways of coping with colonial rule and commodification by a newly emerging Sufi order in 20th century Senegal, the Murids of Amadu Mbamba Backe. This is a fascinating story, although a following-up of developments into the post-colonial period, here as in some of the other case studies, would have still added to its value.

All these chapters include illustrations and extracts from primary sources which lend some colour and detail to an account which is unavoidably very condensed. Both textual and visual illustrations, however, would need some contextualisation if they were to actually add to understanding. For instance, a number of illustrations from early European travel accounts are reproduced without comment on the hidden discourses these may contain. Of particular value, on the other hand, are the well-commented "Further Reading" sections that are appended to each chapter.

With its combination of general chapters, regional case studies and bibliographical information, the book is highly recommendable as an introduction for non-specialist readers. It offers a good overview of the wide range of facets relevant to its theme. This theme, however, is perhaps not ideally described by the book's title. Robinson acknowledges it to Nehemia Levtzion (p. viii), quoting him as having suggested once that this would have been a better title for his and Pouwels' *History of Islam in Africa* (cited above). Levtzion was probably right, and one might add that the latter title, in turn, would have suited Robinson's book much better than "Muslim Societies in African History". "This book is about how Islam has 'become indigenous' to Africa", he writes (p. 198), and in fact he situates his book much more in debates about the history of Islam in general and in Africa in particular than in those about the history of African societies as a

whole, both Muslim and non-Muslim. It is deplorable that these two fields are still so relatively distinct in academic enquiry: The field of Islamic studies, on the one hand, with its focus on religious discourses and practices across the continents, and African history, on the other, with its emphasis on societal processes and interactions in a more comprehensive, albeit often regionalist, perspective. Robinson's book is clearly situated more in the former than in the latter field. It does provide a very instructive introduction for historians of Africa on how Islam took root in that continent. It does not, however, contribute much to overcoming the gap between these two fields.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Achim von Oppen. Review of Robinson, David. *Muslim Societies in African History*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=18982>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.