



Michelle C. Johnson. *Remaking Islam in African Portugal: Lisbon - Mecca - Bissau.* Framing the Global Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. Illustrations. 212 pp. \$24.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-04977-3.

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Since the last decades of the twentieth century, studies on diasporas, migration, and identities on the move have steadily grown in the humanities, focusing on modern globalization and technological enhancements in communication and transports. In African studies, many researchers have discussed identity ruptures, continuities, and cultural reconstructions in transoceanic settings. In the disciplinary field of history, debates on this subject have facilitated a better understanding of the historicity of culture, showing how historical, geographical, and social circumstances need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. Such an approach unearths how African cultures retain their core elements within the diasporas and how circumstantial needs have contributed to reinventions in personal and collective ways of life. Perspectives on the exclusivity of cultural continuities or ruptures have created a platform for comprehending the extent to which diasporic cultures are contradictory.[1]

The historicity of cultures of peoples in contact zones is a theme that has also garnered anthropologists' attention. Regarding migration and religious identity studies, recent scholarship discusses how to become a Muslim in the diasporas, against the background of the different geographies of Islam. This approach has sought to escape

from the narrow framework of area studies, which has subsumed culture under space. More than pointing out continuities along multiple trajectories, researchers are interested in understanding how individuals refashion their religious identities and social relations in transnational contexts.[2] *Remaking Islam in African Portugal*, by Michelle C. Johnson, has grown out of this context, solidly anchored in the disciplinary field of cultural anthropology. Supported by ethnographic research carried out between 1996 and 2017, the author analyzes religious life of Mandinga Muslims who migrated from Guinea-Bissau and form part of the Guinea-Bissauan diaspora in Portugal. The book's main questions are: What does being a Muslim mean for Guinean immigrants in the diaspora? How do Mandinga men and women recreate their interpretations about religion and about themselves in a new place?

The book is the result of political and scientific circumstances. Johnson's initial goal was to study Mandinga Muslim communities in Guinea-Bissau, where she carried out her preliminary ethnographic fieldwork between 1996 and 1997. However, it was swept away by the winds of the country's politics. Shortly before her scheduled return to Bafatá-Oio, in northern Guinea-Bissau, the country became enveloped in an attempted milit-

ary coup, which triggered eleven months of civil war. Unable to continue her research in the field, Johnson spent time carrying out fieldwork in Lisbon with the established Mandinga community and newcomer refugees. Then, she reset her approach, dropping the study of Mandinga Muslim communities in their homeland. As a result, her research was transformed into a transnational investigation of religious identity and ritual practices of diasporic Mandinga Muslims.

From a theoretical viewpoint, Johnson's study is embedded in the anthropology of Islam and studies on religions in the context of migration. The author seeks to escape from the dichotomy between universalistic and particularistic perspectives of Islam as binary oppositions based on a unitary and global Islam, or many singular Islams segmented into strictly local cultures. Conducting a rereading of studies supported by ethnographic work, she argues that most Muslims oscillate between these two poles, often combining them in their daily practices. She states that ambiguities and contradictions about different meanings of being Muslim are lived in Muslim diasporas. This makes it impossible to frame the experiences of Mandinga Muslims in Lisbon in dichotomous pairs like orthodox Islam/popular Islam or global Islam/local Islam. On the contrary, aspects of Islamic globality and Mandinga customs coexist in everyday lives, reinforcing how religious expressions have become central in the production of transnational identities.

The book's arguments are based on theoretical premises supported by participant-observation, which was adopted as the main method of ethnographic fieldwork along with semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and life stories collected with the Mandinga communities in Lisbon, Bissau, and Bafatá-Oio. Different trips to Portugal and Guinea-Bissau were undertaken during the two decades that preceded the publication, enabling her research to mature. In the end, the work comprises transnational ethnographies

centered on the subjects and their everyday experiences in the form of case studies. Therefore, Johnson asserts that the knowledge produced in the course of her research grew out of her relationship with her interlocutors.

The book is organized in three sections: an introductory chapter, in which the research key points are listed; part 1, "Remaking Islam through Life-Course Rituals," comprising three chapters; and part 2, "Remaking Islam through Rituals beyond the Life Course," with two chapters and an epilogue. The introductory chapter, "Faith and Fieldwork in African Lisbon," introduces the reader to her hypothesis, which is then worked into the analysis of specific case studies in parts 1 and 2. The book's main point concerns the acknowledgment of how ways and meanings of being and recognizing oneself as Muslim change after migration from Guinea-Bissau to Portugal. Once in Europe, Mandinga Muslims maintain a more intense contact with Muslims from other parts of the *umma*, the global Islamic community, often referred to by them as "Arabs" from North Africa or the Middle East and "Indians" from South Asia. Hence, Mandinga Muslims cast new glances on their world that also reshape the way they perceive themselves.

In this exchange of meanings, the most important distinction Johnson makes is that of gender. Men, usually with a higher level of Quranic education and knowledge of the Arabic language than women, perceive their participation in mosque activities as evidence of their commitment to a global Islam. They usually seek references for their religious behavior in "Indian" and "Arab" Muslims. On the other hand, women often have a lower degree of formal education. Pressured by domestic responsibilities that prevent them from actively participating in the mosque's social life and sometimes limited by a lack of mobility in Lisbon, they feel excluded from the mosque. In this process, men imagine their participation in the Islamic world from external refer-

ences to their homeland. Women, on their side, turn their gaze to West Africa—be it Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, or Senegal—to refashion themselves as Muslims in the diaspora. Thus, women’s religious sociability often occurs in cultural clubs, where they produce new meanings about being Muslim in Portugal, as discussed by Johnson.

Parts 1 and 2 provide analytical density and empirical depth to these observations based on case studies. In part 1, Johnson looks at life-course rituals, such as the naming of children, handwriting rituals, circumcision of boys and girls, funerals, and post-burial rituals. These rituals shape people’s perceptions as belonging simultaneously to an ethnic group, the Mandinga, and to a religious community, that is, Islam. In chapters 2, 3, and 4, the conflicts and contradictions emerge of Mandingas in the diaspora. Rituals are presented as instances responsible for building community belonging. Nevertheless, they also clash with new perceptions about what being a Muslim should look like in a transnational setting due to contacts with Muslims from all over the world. Hence, this process gives rise to many anxieties in the diasporic community, alongside contradictions. Muslims who could be classified as traditionalists perceive rituals like handwriting through Quranic meanings as if they were reformists. Others, who could be classified as reformists, are unable to deny the effectiveness or importance of these rituals for Islam, even though they understand them in a traditional way, based on ethnic rather than religious heritage.

Johnson’s hypothesis, reinforced throughout the chapters, is that Guinea-Bissauan Muslims remake themselves and their religion in Lisbon through a process in which African customs and global Islam are not exclusive categories. On the contrary, they complement and overlap each other in creative tensions central to the constitution of Mandinga Muslim religious identity abroad. However, the process of refashioning oneself as a Muslim in diaspora differs between men and wo-

men. Mandinga men have better opportunities to present themselves before the Muslim community in Lisbon than Mandinga women. As Johnson warns, “many women complained that they did not have the opportunity to study Arabic, and when their husbands were praying or attending mosque, they were cooking and taking care of the children. As one woman in Portugal put it, ‘Mandinga women don’t have time to be good Muslims’” (p. 101). Johnson clarifies that “men have more free time for religious activities, such as prayer and Qur’anic study, and as I explained in the introduction of this book, they attend Friday prayer at Lisbon’s central mosque more frequently and with less harassment from ‘Arab’ and ‘Indian’ Muslims than do women. Men also travel and make the hajj more frequently than their female counterparts do. Considering this, men are more secure about their status as global Muslims and are wary of anything that might threaten this status” (p. 68).

This gendered tension can be seen in various contexts. For instance, the Mandinga Muslim community attributes different meanings to the ritual of boys’ and girls’ circumcision. Also, the opportunities men and women have to make their pilgrimage to Mecca, accomplishing the *Hajj*, are uneven. These rituals, discussed in part 2 of the book, have the potential to promote more engagement of Mandinga Muslims with the *umma* or, otherwise, to highlight the feeling of strangeness from other Muslims around the global community. In this part, the tensions between men’s and women’s perceptions about Islam, globalized perspectives, and African customs are discussed based on healing and divination rituals in Lisbon (chapter 5) and the *Hajj* ritual experience (chapter 6).

Again, the analysis of the production of meanings for religious practices is largely anchored in Johnson’s interlocutors’ experiences. They are often marked by contradictions produced in a creative tension between the maintenance of ethnic

identity and the search for a global religion or, on the contrary, the living of religion from ethnic references justified through Quranic reformist reinterpretations.

Johnson's contributions go beyond the disciplinary field of anthropology, revealing insights from other areas, especially history. Restricted to documental analysis—even if supported by oral, archaeological, and material texts—historians sometimes engage in discussions that could be of secondary relevance to the subjects they study. The controversy in African American studies on the dimensions of African cultures that would or would not have survived the trade in enslaved people across the Atlantic has, here, elements for reflection. Johnson's ethnography reveals that there are structural or conjectural innovations in cultural practices that are not relevant to subjects who live them. This is the case of replacing *munkoo*, a dish prepared with rice flour sweetened with honey or sugar, which marks, among other uses, the beginning of funeral rituals, after the shock of being informed about someone's death. In Guinea-Bissau, *munkoo* is made of rice and is central to the ritual. In Portugal, *munkoo* is usually the distribution of Maria biscuits, which are sweetened Spanish cookies made of wheat flour. When asked about the exchange, the interlocutors replied: "flour is flour" (p. 86).

The maintenance of traditional food naming in Portugal, permeating the funerary rite in both countries, dispenses with the objective continuity of the element with which this food is prepared (rice and wheat) and does not demand previous know-how to cook it. The historical study of African cultures in diaspora has much to gain from shifting its analytical emphasis to possibly identifiable meanings instead of the search for objective traits (a piece, a product, a ritual, particular knowledge or techniques) found in Africa and in places of the diaspora. Objective continuity does not necessarily mean the maintenance of the same social meaning. Otherwise, sharing the same meaning

may occur through different social and cultural practices, marked by substitution, innovation, or overlapping practices and raw materials. The search for meaning is more important than identifying its material support: externality is more flexible. After all, "flour is flour," even if Guinea-Bissau's *munkoo* is made from rice flour and Maria cookies are made from wheat flour.

Even so, studies like *Remaking Islam in African Portugal* would gain analytical density if they engaged with interdisciplinary dialogues. The Mandinga diasporas cutting across the Atlantic basin are ancient, as well as other Muslim diasporas from West Africa, particularly Wolof and Fulbe. The current networks linking people from Guinea-Bissau to Portugal are not exclusively a tributary of recent Portuguese colonialism, but of historical structures resulting from the trade in enslaved people. A deeper dialogue with previous Mandinga diasporas along the Atlantic basin or with Islamic diasporas from the greater Senegambia area to Portugal would have amplified the analysis.[3] This process offers long-term interpretations that, anchored in the study of concrete cases, would inform us about the historicity of socially embodied culture, under different framed conditions. Such an approach would be salutary for all the humanities' research fields.[4]

Although the author is well qualified to undertake this research, the work suffers from an endemic problem, common to most English-language publications on Portuguese-speaking settings: a lack of engagement with academic production available in the researched regions' official language. Although the subject discussed by Johnson permeates two Portuguese-speaking countries, and the language in which a large part of scientific knowledge is produced and communicated on them, the book practically fails to establish a dialogue with Portuguese-language publications. With the exception of an article by Fernando Luis Machado and a book by António Carreira, there is no debate with Portuguese-speaking academics.

The few Portuguese-speaking authors, like Carlos Lopes and Clara Carvalho, who have published on related topics regarding the country, are listed only if they have published in English. Many others who could bring contributions to the subject, anthropologists such as Eduardo Costa Dias and Wilson Trajano Filho, and the historian Patrícia Godinho Gomes, among them, are not considered.

Researchers from the global North, who retain the hegemony over the production of scientific discourse, need to recognize their peers located in regions considered peripheral and/or who publish in their national languages. If the academic policy that elected English as the language of science favors the widening of international dialogue, it also tends to limit the reach of knowledge in non-English-speaking societies. When deciding to publish their research in English, Portuguese-speaking researchers are faced with a difficult choice: either making their scholarship available to the global academy or engaging with the public of their national society. Therefore, publishing in Portuguese in Portuguese-speaking countries is an important political act to be recognized by peers who speak other idioms and who are dedicated to subjects crossed by Portuguese language. With a community made up of about 260 million speakers, the Portuguese language cannot and should not be neglected in scientific production.

Considering this aspect, it is also worth emphasizing the quality of writing, the fluidity of Johnson's text and her ability to produce a beautifully crafted narrative, with theoretical density, which makes for light and pleasant reading. It is a valuable book, well informed about the Mandinga Guinea-Bissauan culture, and firmly grounded in ethnographic research conducted in two countries little considered by mainstream transnational scholarship. It definitely provides a great contribution to knowledge about the Mandinga culture in the diaspora.

Notes

[1]. Alexandre Almeida Marcussi, *Diagonais do Afeto: Teorias do intercâmbio cultural nos estudos da diáspora africana* (São Paulo: Intermeios, 2016).

[2]. Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, eds., *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); María Del Mar Logroño Narbona, Paulo G. Pinto, and John Tofik Karam, *Crescent over Another Horizon: Islam in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latino USA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); and Fanny Longa Romero, "Islã, parentesco e ritual na irmandade religiosa Mouridiyya: Percursos da etnografia no contexto da imigração de africanos senegaleses no Brasil," in *A imigração senegalesa no Brasil e na Argentina: Múltiplos olhares*, ed. João Carlos Tedesco and Gisele Kleidermacher (Porto Alegre: EST Edições, 2017): 275-96.

[3]. On different forms of cultural transits in the African diasporas, see Vanicléia Silva Santos, "As Bolsas de Mandinga no espaço Atlântico: Século XVIII" (PhD diss., Departamento de História da Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade de São Paulo, 2008); Walter Hawthorne, *From Africa to Brazil: Culture, Identity, and an Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1830* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Thiago H. Mota, "Instrução islâmica na Senegâmbia e práticas de muçulmanos africanos em Portugal: Uma abordagem atlântica (séculos XVI e XVII)," *Estudos Históricos* 30, no. 60 (January-April 2017): 35-54.

[4]. For an example of anthropological work in this perspective, see Camila Pastor, *The Mexican Mahjar: Transnational Maronites, Jews, and Arabs under the French Mandate* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).

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