

A Revisionist History of West Africa

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Describing how the *Qur'anic* school creates *taalibes* through the embodiment of knowledge, Ware offers a sharply revisionist history not only of West African Islamic education, but of the place of West Africans in the history of the Muslim world in general.

Reviewed: Rudolph T Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014

In a fascinating new account of the history of *taalibes* – students enrolled in the study of the traditional techniques of *Qur'anic* memorization and Islamic sciences, throughout the Senegambia¹ – Rudolph T. Ware offers a sharply revisionist history not only of West African Islamic education, but of the place of West Africans in the history of the Muslim world in general. Ware argues that since the onset of French colonialism in West Africa, colonial administrators, Islamic modernists, and today, international NGO workers have seen the *Qur'an* school with its emphasis on the rote learning of the Islamic scriptures, as a symbol of cultural backwardness, and an impediment to the formation of modern subjects capable of using their reason to navigate their world. Contrary to the assumptions of outsider observers, Ware argues that what many interpret as backwardness is an alternative epistemology of “embodied knowledge,” in which knowing is located in the body, denying the possibility of disembodied reason. In order to demonstrate how knowledge is embodied, Ware describes how the *Qur'anic* school creates *taalibes* by asking them to undertake *yar*, a word, which in Wolof, the primary language spoken in Senegal, has the dual meaning of education and the lash or physical discipline.² The purpose of *yar* is not only to teach students to comprehend the Quran and Arabic grammar, but also to fashion a moral subject worthy of imbibing the word of God. *Yar* transformed men into *Walking Qur'ans*.

The significance of the *Walking Qur'an*

¹ The term Senegambia refers to the region of West Africa that includes Senegal and Gambia and alludes to their close economic, social and cultural unities.

² Ware, *The Walking Qur'an* p. 42-43.

For centuries, West Africans have, according to Ware, understood the concept of the *Walking Qur'an* as emphasizing the connection between learning the text of the Holy Scriptures and disciplining the body.³ According to Ware, the aim of West African Qur'anic schooling was to transform the children of Adam into vessels worthy of receiving the Prophetic message.

In his third chapter, Ware argues that the continued enslavement of *Huffaz* (those who had committed the Quran to memory) provoked the Almaami 'Abdul Qadir (1776-1807), an Islamic scholar who became the ruler of Futa Toro, a kingdom along the banks of the Senegal River, to begin one of the largest and most successful campaigns against slavery on the African continent. According to Ware, the respect that the West African community showed men of piety played a pivotal role in galvanizing the Islamic community to oppose outrages such as the Atlantic slavery trade and in one of the books boldest claims to create an abolitionist movement with universal ambition, before the commonly recounted British abolitionist movement, which led to ban against the international slave trade in 1815. While historians of the British Empire have claimed the mantle of the universal or global for their own historical narratives, Islamic history and in particular African history is often regarded as concerning only the particular and the parochial. On the specifics of Ware's challenge to the traditional historiography of slavery and abolition in West Africa and the Islamic world in general, I will say more below.

Africa & the global history of ideas

First, it is necessary to describe the lacuna that Ware is attempting to fulfill by positioning his work squarely in a new tradition of African intellectual history that takes seriously Africa's unique impact on the global history of ideas. For a number of years now, scholars have complained that African history needed a new paradigm. During the 1990s, Africanists produced brilliant cultural histories, but Steven Feierman, one of the pioneers of the anthropological turn in African history, lamented in his 1999 essay, "Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories" that:

The studies of commodities (or of Christian sin) in one place, and then another, and then another can be aggregated only on the basis of their shared relationship to the relevant European category: they cannot be placed within a larger or more general African narrative. What is African inevitably appears in a form which is local and fragmented, and which has no greater depth than the time of colonial conquest, or the moment just before it.⁴

³ The phrase itself originates in reports that 'Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, replied when asked about her husband's character that "his character was the Qur'an" and that she then replied that "he was the Qur'an walking on the Earth", Ware, *The Walking Qur'an* p. 7.

⁴ Steven Feierman, "Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories," in ed. Victoria Bonnell, Lynn Hunt, and Richard Biernacki, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999): 184.

Similarly building off of the pioneering work of A. G. Hopkins in the 1970s, a generation of African historians, most notably Sara Berry, John Thornton and Paul Lovejoy, revolutionized the histories of agricultural change and African slavery. Yet the very assumptions of methodological individualism and rationality that allowed them to explain how economic institutions and exchanges worked across the continent, limited their imagination. African peasants, merchants or kings were imagined to inhabit the same epistemological universe of economizing reason as their European peers and even our contemporary society.

Ware takes up the methodological challenge of moving beyond economic rationalism, by attempting to trace how epistemological change occurred in an African society over the *longue duree*. Attempting to describe changes not only in how West Africans thought about what it meant to know but also what it meant to be human, Ware begins his account of the Senegambia with the 10th century introduction of Islam and continues his narrative until the present. Each chapter in Ware's book begins with a quotation from the Prophet Muhammad. The aphorisms that Ware includes reveal that his purpose is not purely to intervene in the historiography of African and Islamic history. Rather, Ware intends to argue, as he reveals in his conclusion, that the essence of Islam is preserved in West Africa. To this effect, he quotes the *Hadith* (saying of the Prophet Muhammad): "The people of the West will keep triumphantly following Truth until the Hour arrives"⁵. Ware often slips as a narrator between the voice of a Western trained social scientist and that of an insider to the Islamic community. Speaking as an insider, Ware interprets this *Hadith* to mean that the Prophet had foreseen that the truest form of Islam, faithfulness to the original revelation is preoccupation in internal arguments for legitimacy within the Muslim community, would be best preserved in West Africa. Repeating reasoning that circulates among the community of believers in the Senegambia, Ware relates why he believes that when the Prophet Muhammad said the West he must have meant West Africa. He recounts that "wherever the original Walking Qur'an [The Prophet Muhammad] was standing if and when he said 'people of the west,' the farthest west he himself could have walked before reaching an endless sea was the Cape Verde Peninsula, the site upon which Dakar was built."⁶

The Islam of the West & the embodiment of knowledge

Ware mentions this to bolster his argument that not only is the Islam practiced in West Africa today, particularly in its Qur'an schools, different from the one practiced throughout much of the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world; but that contrary to the common description of African Islam or *Islam Noir* (a term Ware particularly disdains) as a hybrid religion, that the Islam of the West is the closest survival to that practiced during the time of the Prophet.

⁵ Translated by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, collected by Imam Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi *Sahih Muslim Kitab Al-Imara* sunnah.com [<http://sunnah.com/search/?q=west>] accessed June 9, 2015 quoted in Ware, *The Walking Qur'an* p. 237.

⁶ Ware, *The Walking Qur'an* p 243.

For Ware, what is distinctive about the Islam of the West is the embodiment of knowledge. This embodiment is often visualized for him in traditions condemned by the Islamic reformists of the late 19th and 20th centuries, such as the rote memorization of the Qur'an, corporal punishment or students writing lessons on *alluwa*, a wooden writing board, and then drinking the ink, made from ground charcoal. These are all traditions that religious teachers in the Senegambia trace back to the time of the Prophet. Ware speculates of Qur'an school teachers that part of the reason they have resisted the introduction of pens and paper into their schools even today is "...perhaps they have understood that a simple material change, like writing with a mass-produced pen in a mass-produced notebook, could produce unanticipated changes in the way in which their students experienced learning and knowing."⁷

Ware posits that the Islamic world as a whole before the early Modern period, and some parts of West Africa today, believed that knowledge should not be alienated from the knower or even the body carrying that knowledge. The Cartesian belief in a division between the mind and the body is not, according to Ware, an inherently universal belief, but rather a culturally specific idea, globalized during the European age of empire and colonialism. In the Islamic world, Ware finds the strongest adherents to the Cartesian division between mind and body among the Salafis, and he points at both the Wahhabi religious establishment of Saudi Arabia, and commonly discussed figures in the history of political Islam such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida and Sayyid Qutub, as all being products of a modernized Islam, divorced from its own epistemological roots, as a faith based on embodied knowledge.⁸ By arguing that Islamist movements that are traditionally described as "modernist" or "fundamentalist" are actually innovators from the original Revelation, Ware is able to call their legitimacy into question among communities of believers. Ware believes that much of the violence perpetrated in the name of Islam is justified by a misinterpretation of the Islamic Scriptures caused by an over adherence to literalism.⁹

Ware, however, is undoubtedly on solid historical ground when he argues that throughout West Africa, and perhaps in much of the Islamic world, what constituted a valid store of knowledge was radically different than what it is today. Economic historians such as Ghislaine Lydon have noticed that the legal concepts that underline Western commercial

⁷ Ware, *The Walking Qur'an* p 235.

⁸ For biographical essays on the late 19th and early 20th century Islamic reformers Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida and their struggle to articulate an Islamic philosophy that was reconcilable with European cultural hegemony, see the classic work of Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and for the life and career of Sayyid Qutub and his exposure to a secular education, see the work of Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2007).

⁹ Here, Ware mostly likely overstates his case, as many recent studies of movements such as Al-Qaeda have emphasized the extent to which these groups are ecumenical in their embrace of a wide variety of Islamic traditions and often forbid discussions among their followers based on close readings of scholarly texts.

Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

transactions are not universal despite their seeming economic rationality. Lydon captures this idea with the phrase, “a paper economy of faith without faith in paper.”¹⁰ Lydon uses this phrase to articulate the principle that according to some scholars of the Maliki *madhhab* in West Africa, one of the five schools of Islamic jurisprudence, only human witnesses had standing in court not written documents. While Lydon describes the preservation of this legal practice as an historical curiosity in the face of economic efficiency of written contracts, Ware instead tells a story about the evolution of an Islamic tradition of ethics. Ware writes that the purpose of a traditional Qur’an school education was to prepare the human body, made only of ashes, to contain the words revealed to the Prophet. In the process, he goes beyond the portrayal by many economic historians of there being a curious absence in Islamic societies, exemplified by their refusal to fully adapt their legal cultures to the economically productive technology of the written contract. Rather than positing Islamic law’s reticence about the legal standing of written contracts as a lack when placed into comparison with the primacy of the written word in Western law, Ware demonstrates the ethical reasoning behind such a position. He argues that “‘*Ilm* (knowledge) was inseparable from ‘*amal* (practice). Understood in this way, knowledge could not be separated from the person of its possessor; it was personified—or—embodied—knowledge.”¹¹

For decades, Africanists have striven to write histories of Africa that could reach back into the past before European colonialism. Ware believes that he has succeeded where an earlier generation of Africanist failed, because instead of seeing Islam itself as an alien culture to be peeled away, he takes it as indigenous to the continent. “If Islam can finally come to be understood as an integral and authentic part of the African historical experience, then Islamic Africa will have a special role to play in the shaping of new macrohistories.”¹² Using Islam as an interpretive lens, Ware, a student of Feierman, believes that he has finally found a way to answer Feierman’s challenge to write macrohistories that are capable of placing Africa within world history on its own terms.

A revisionist account of the abolition of slavery

Ware puts forth a new reading of a limited source body in order to write a strongly revisionist account. He reverses the direction of causality, explaining that in the case of

¹⁰ Ghislaine Lydon, “A ‘Paper Economy of Faith’ without Faith in Paper: A Contribution to Understanding the Roots of Islamic Institutional Stagnation,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* (2009): http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/lydon/lydon_paper.pdf [accessed June 9, 2015]

¹¹ Ware, *Walking Quran* p 55; Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, “The Concept of Knowledge in Islam and Its Implications on the National System of Education in the Malaysian Context,” Ph.D diss., University of Chicago, 1988 and Rudolph Ware and Robert Launay, “Comment (ne pas) lire le Coran: logics de l’enseignement religieux au Senegal et en Cote d’Ivoire,” in *L’Islam: nouvel espace publique en Afrique*, ed. Gilles Holder, 127-45. Paris, Karthala, 2009 and William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹² Ware, *Walking Quran* p 35.

the abolition of the slave trade, British abolitionists were inspired by ‘Abd al-Qadir’s example, rather than portraying the Christian reformers as introducing notions of the immorality of slavery to the African continent. An earlier generation of scholars, while acknowledging the 18th century revolts against slavery in West Africa, had been content to argue that while the leaders of Islamic kingdoms increasingly attempted to abandon the enslavement of their own people, they continued to engage in the aggressive enslavement of other peoples, including Muslims living outside of the territory they controlled. Ware goes beyond that to argue that at least during the reign of *Almaani* (a religious and political leader) ‘Abd al-Qadir the prohibition against slavery was universal. The prohibition on slavery was built on the connection between the sacredness of Islamic scripture and the sacredness of the human body as the perfect container of that scripture. For West Africans, the image of a body in chains came to be analogous to the image of the Word of God in chains.

Whether Ware is right to read the prohibition against slavery during the final decades of the 18th and first decades of the 19th century as intended to have a universal scope, I believe will be an argument that scholars will have to debate long into the future. However, Ware’s lesser argument that Islam possessed within its own tradition as many, if not more resources with which to respond to the moral dilemma of slavery, I believe will ultimately be proven correct.

But, one wonders to what extent Ware’s participant engagement with the *Muridiyya and Tijaniyya*, two Sufi orders prominent in West Africa, fosters a lack of critical distance in his evocative writing. To what extent does the Qur’an schooling in Senegambia really offer a tradition of learning and foster an epistemology that is so different from those found elsewhere in the Islamic World or even universally? To what extent is his critique of Islamic modernism and the Salafists really the result of present-day tensions that Ware finds himself involved in? And finally, as more documents emerge, we will be forced to ask if his ground-breaking revisions of the accounts of the abolition of slavery in West Africa need to be revised.

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