

REVIEWS

HARROW, Kenneth W. (ed.), *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, Portsmouth, NH and London, Heinemann and James Currey, series Studies in African Literature, 1991, xii. 332 pp., \$ 17.50, 0-85255-528-8

By its focus on Islamic idioms and attitudes towards Islam in sub-Saharan African literature, there is no doubt that this book is an important first effort to fill a gap in the bibliography of African literary studies. However, the editor's caveat that it does not aim at exhaustive coverage (p. xii) hardly prepares the reader for some of its more baffling omissions. The result is a rather unbalanced overview of the subject. But it is to be welcomed that not only contemporary literature, but also films and traditional literary genres, are discussed in the volume.

The bulk of the work falls into two sections, one on East Africa (four papers) and the other on West Africa (eight papers). In addition, each of these sections is introduced by a paper on the history of Islam in the respective region, by J. Spaulding (East Africa) and D. Robinson (West Africa). A final section, under the heading 'Comparative Approaches', contains three papers: the first (L. J. Johnson's) is entirely devoted to West Africa, while the third (by G. Lang) examines 'Orientalism' in Europhone African writing, with a strong West African (mostly Francophone) bias. Only one paper in the section, by K. W. Harrow, bridges over the West Africa/East Africa divide, by comparing *Šūfī* idioms in Camara Laye, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, and Tayeb Salih.

In his very stimulating Introduction, Harrow helpfully brings together the highlights of the other contributions. He also shapes conceptual, frameworks for approaching 'Islam(s) in African literature'. He criticises views which he describes as 'Orientalist', which present Islam as a given, and its history in Africa as one of implantation, and which assume the maintenance or eventual restoration of a monolithic Islamic identity brought from outside ready-made. Against this he stresses historical and cultural variation, both in what was brought from outside (legalism, *Šūfīsm*, etc.) and in what has developed in sub-Saharan Africa itself as Islam

grew in, and with, African tradition. In spite of this variation it remains legitimate, as Harrow points out, to speak of 'an African Islamic culture and literature' as an overarching identity. Hence his plea is for approaches to literature informed by an awareness of history (including the impact of colonialism), and able to grasp diversity in unity and change in permanence in ranges of texts and cultural idioms.

In practice, such approaches must continuously avoid not only 'Orientalist' stereotypes, but also a number of other recurrent modern stereotypes. Among these are African neo-traditionalist notions of Islam as an invading force, which supposedly remains alien to 'authentic' Africa; the opposed African notion of a natural harmony between 'Islam' and 'African tradition'; and the label 'nominal Islam' often levelled, by colonial and later observers, at cultural syntheses established by those also decried, as 'mixers', by reform-minded African Muslims. Here the opposition is not simply that established by Harrow (p. 8) between 'the Orientalist bias' and 'the native perspective'. Rather, it is an opposition between modern African discourses. These are discourses of power, and Harrow (pp. 4-5) makes the necessary point that forms of representation are forms of actual, or attempted, exercise of power. The most far-reaching thrust of this point is in the attention it directs not only to conflicts between Islamic and other representations, but also to the clashes (and creative tensions) occurring within the sphere of sub-Saharan Islamic discourses itself. Among these discourses are contemporary Islamist critiques of both Muslim and other aspects of the African heritage. These critiques are now an important part of the environment in which literature and film are produced in many parts of the continent. Yet they rate only brief consideration in the book (most of it in Spaulding's contribution on historical context, p. 36, but see also M. B. Cham's paper, p. 163, and E. Makward's, p. 199). This gap in the volume reflects another of its weaknesses, namely insufficient attention to new Muslim writing in either European or African languages. Thus the revival of the Muslim ethos in the works of recent writers like Ibrahim Tahir and Zaynab Alkali is merely noted in the Introduction (p. 7) without being examined elsewhere in the book. The Senegalese Muslim writer Aminata Sow-Fall is discussed (M. B. Cham's paper, pp. 168-71), but her latest book, published in 1987, is left out.

In the section on East Africa, Spaulding's paper provides a com-

pact and insightful survey of the patterns of the history of Islam in the region and grounds them on earlier patterns dating back to the Hellenistic age. I. N. Shariff offers 'a panoramic view of the Islamic themes in Swahili literature, and of the literary forms in which these are presented'. He emphasises the strength of the Swahili tradition of oral secular literature, parallel to the devotional tradition enshrined in manuscripts. A strong sense of continuity in transformation emerges from his consideration of the traditional *utenzi*, or *utendi*, genre of epic and narrative poetry, which has produced classics like the nineteenth-century *Utendi wa Mwona Kupona*, and which now figures prominently in electoral rallies. Ann Biersteker proceeds to a close and revealing textual analysis of precisely the *Utendi wa Mwona Kupona*, 'the only poem by a woman which is considered a canonical text in the Swahili literary tradition'. This is an exciting paper. By means of four alternative, 'sometimes apparently contradictory, yet ultimately complementary', readings, Biersteker brings out the dense literariness of the poem, its ironical subversion of its own overt theme of wifely virtue, and its glorification of language as a power accessible to the politically powerless.

A. J. Ahmed moves the focus onto Somali literature. Most interestingly, he analyses the competition over control of the word between alternative discourses, those of the *shaykh* and the poet, both of whom are feared for their power to cast curses, and can encourage clannic wars or, on the contrary, act as mediators in the re-establishment of peace. At the same time, by transcending clannic divisions, both traditions lend cohesion to Somali culture. Sonia Ghattas-Soliman discusses the Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih and his *Season of Migration to the North*. In her reading, Salih's telling of the fate of his heroine Hosna bint Mahmoud is a 'denunciation of hypocrisy and authority in the name of Islam', i.e. a critique of lived ideology and concrete gender relations legitimised by reference to Islam, from the standpoint of Islam's own ethical ideals. Thus the reading brings out one of the most productive tensions within modern African cultures. In addition, Ghattas-Soliman's wider discussion of Islam in relation to gender relations is, in itself, a significant example of contemporary attempts, by women, to re-examine and reappropriate the Islamic heritage by cutting through the layers of conventional interpretation accumulated over the centuries by patriarchal ideologies.

Robinson contributes to the West African section a historical introduction as bold, and as thought-provoking, as Spaulding's East African counterpart. (In fact, these two historical papers are among the very best in the volume). The most surprising gap, as regards the papers dealing with West African literature and film, is the total absence of Nigeria (except for references to Soyinka). There is nothing on Hausa literature and other literature produced in the north of the country, or on the genres explored by contemporary Muslim Yorùbá authors writing in Arabic (*Shaykh* Ādam al-Ilūrī, Muṣṭafā Zaghlūl, and others). By contrast, Senegalese authors receive a large amount of well-deserved attention. Songhay texts are also discussed, in a paper by T. H. Hale. He explores the tension between what he describes as two 'systems of belief', Songhay and Islamic, by comparing two forms of narrative which, in his view, respectively belong to each of those 'systems'. Hence the Islamic perspective of the old and chronologically multi-layered Timbuktu chronicles, and the dynamic interpretive tradition(s) built on them, are contrasted by Hale with the no less dynamic tradition of Songhay oral narratives. Drawing on the works of Stoller and Olkes, Hale suggests that the oral narratives reflect the survival of 'a pre-Islamic perspective on the world beyond the real', which has a cultural identity easy to distinguish from its Islamic counterpart, and which displays a tenacious willingness to resist Islam. Thought-provoking as his analysis is, nevertheless in this paper he seems to exaggerate the independence of, and the distance between, the two perspectives, especially when he interprets a local proverb as meaning that 'one cannot embrace both systems of belief, Songhay and Islamic, and expect to reach one's goal in this life or the next'. A similar exaggeration occurs in passages where he appears, by definition, to exclude Islam from what may be categorised as authentically 'Songhay'. The oral narrative about *Askiya* Muḥammad, which he recorded in 1980-81, is after all described by him (p. 138) as 'a syncretic portrait of two systems of belief'. Arguably, while Hale has successfully distanced himself from 'Orientalism', he has come too close to the neo-traditionalist stereotypes we have already referred to, and has moved away from the more balanced views expressed in his own recent book about the subject.

The two following papers, by G. Asfar and Denise Asfar, adopt a stance very different from Hale's. The first examines the ideas of

the late Amadou Hampâté Ba on the encounter of Islam and African religions, and his conviction that this was 'a fusion, and not a clash' (p. 142), following from his postulate that the principles underlying each tradition anticipated those of the other. The second paper volunteers support for Hampâté Ba's opinions, through a discussion of *Kaidara*, his version of a Fulani initiation narrative. Both papers are well-informed and stimulating. They make clear that reciprocally selective affinities between Islam and traditional African ideas are an important theme for research and discussion. But notions of a pre-existent harmony between the two sides may be deemed grossly unfair to both. They sweep under the mat the cultural work invested by each side in the exploration of potentially intertranslatable idioms, and in the rapprochement of distinct frames of reference. And, as it happens, the active social production of coexistence and synthesis (as in Hampâté Ba's own life and works) is, by far, more interesting than any predetermined harmony could ever be.

The four papers by M. B. Cham, E. Makward, Debra Boyd-Buggs, and I. C. Tcheho, are centred on Senegal. Cham discusses traditional poetry combining Arabic with Wolof verses, or using exclusively one of these languages, and then moves on to the consideration of folk stories, the work of Birago Diop (1948, 1958, 1963), and novels and films. Islam pervades the life of the Senegalese, which at the same time has incorporated a wide range of other ideological references and political experiences, extending to Marxist militancy. Hence the range of attitudes towards Islam within the country is also wide, wider perhaps than in any other West African country. Cham uses this spectrum of attitudes as the basis for a typology grouping films and literary works in several categories, also distinguished by language and genre: 'traditional promoters [of Islam]', 'modern promoters', 'irreverents', 'iconoclasts', and 'the apostate'—a category devised solely for Sembène Ousmane. This categorisation has heuristic merit: the bitter accounts of Qur'anic education by the 'iconoclasts' Mahama Traoré and Amar Samb are indeed very different from the depiction of it by the 'modern promoter' Cheikh Hamidou Kane. But, needless to say, the categories sometimes overlap. Traoré states that his target is not Islamic religion as such, but its manipulation for oppressive purposes. The work of Aminata Sow-Fall, who is classified as a 'modern promoter', can be perceived as having aims

not so different from Traoré's—her *La grève des battus* opposes the ethical principles of Islam to its often corrupt practice in Senegal, and thus may be also compared with Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, discussed earlier in the book by Ghattas-Soliman. Sembène is said to stand alone in Senegal on account of his radical critique of Islam, which Cham finds only comparable to the negative assessments put forward by the non-Senegalese writers Ayi Kwei Armah, and Chancellor Williams. But in his paper Edris Makward argues for an important distinction between Armah and Sembène: he sees the latter's bold attack on Islam not as a sweeping condemnation and exorcism, but rather as a surgical strike aimed at particular myths in popular culture, which mystify power hierarchies and engender political passivity. (And, of course, Sembène's attack has no racial, anti-Arab, overtones). Makward is one of the few contributors to discuss Europhone African literature published after 1980 (Sembène Ousmane's *Le dernier de l'empire*, 1981). In the next paper, Debra Boyd-Buggs further adds to our understanding of attitudes to Islam in Senegalese literature by examining the reasons why 'Mouridism itself comes under attack by most of the novelists who address it, even by those writers who profess to be Mouride', though the Mouride founder Cheikh Amadou Bamba is glorified. She is another of the few contributors who examine post-1980 literature (works by Mame Seck Mbacké and Ibrahima Sèye). Closing this series of contributions on Senegal, I. C. Tcheho takes a close look at selected tales of Birago Diop, a writer earlier fitted by Cham into his 'irreverents' category. It is shown that 'positive and negative images of Islam are interwoven' in the tales, suggesting that 'its integration into West Africa is rather problematic'. This picture of a problematic encounter between Islam and West Africa is contrasted by Tcheho, in his concluding remarks, with Amadou Hampâté Ba's harmonious image of the same encounter. The last contribution to the section on West Africa is by E. Sellin. It is a short but subtle paper on aspects of Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir*. It perceptively exemplifies, from Laye's text, some of the ways in which Islamic cultural idioms, 'unself-consciously', in a 'matter-of-fact' way, have in so many cases become a framework for rituals dating back to pre-Islamic times, and also for the day-to-day life of modern Africans.

In the final section of the book, L. A. Johnson writes on 'Crescent and Consciousness: Islamic Orthodoxies and the West African

Novel'. He boldly seizes by the horns the concept of *takhlīṭ* ('mixing', 'dual allegiance'). In West Africa, this concept is historically associated with *jihād* of the sword, and with nineteenth-century reformist efforts to expurgate 'paganism' from societies in which Islam had become the dominant mode of identity. But it is also germane to contemporary cultural struggles against modern, 'Western', influences perceived as a return of *jāhiliya* (pre-Islamic, 'pagan', ignorance) and syncretism. Johnson appropriates the concept, once freed of its condemnatory connotations, and turns it into a tool of literary criticism. For him, the hallmarks of many Europhone West African novels emerging from Muslim backgrounds are 'dual consciousness' and 'divided allegiance', expressed within the wider trend, shared by writers from Christian backgrounds, 'to present religious phenomena primarily in terms of their contribution to crises of allegiance and identity' (p. 240). He sees this as best illustrated by Camara Laye's works, but as also at work in the psychology of Hamidou Kane's 'Sufi dilemmas' (pp. 242, 249, 251). Johnson's focus is on syncretism of Islamic and other traditional African cultural modes, and he suggests that it is the tension between polar opposites ('conflicting demands', p. 242) within this synthesis that can erupt into violent rejection, as in the case of Yambo Ouologuem's *Le devoir de la violence*. An empathy with the various forms and degrees of *takhlīṭ* phenomena is, no doubt, a rewarding approach not only to the reading of many modern West African works, but also, more generally, to the understanding of West African history and present culture. And, rightly, Johnson does not claim that it is the key to all conflicts being written about, in our day, by African Muslims.

Kenneth Harrow's paper contains a long, yet totally absorbing, comparison of Camara Laye's *Le regard du roi* (1954), Tayeb Salih's *The Wedding of Zein* (1978), and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë* (1961). Harrow convincingly identifies the *Ṣūfī* framework of the three texts and the ultimate identity of their vision. All three works culminate in an ecstatic overcoming of contradictions, which at the same time marks the horizon that cannot be transcended by the novelist's word. The last contributor to the book is G. Lang. He comments on the undeniable fact that 'a peculiar blindness to Islamic thought' and its variety continues to afflict many non-African, but also many African, observers.

We must be grateful for this pioneer book. It has many merits—

including a useful bibliography—and its faults probably reflect the usual difficulties in producing a volume out of a conference. But publications following its lead should be more balanced in their geographical coverage, more attentive to texts in Arabic and African languages, and more inclined to discussing post-1980 literary productions.

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NORRIS, H. T., *Sufi Mystics of the Niger Desert*, London/New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, xxxi, 180 pp., plates, illustrations, maps, \$59.00, 0 19 826538 7

What Muslim sources call *tasawwuf* is better known as Sufism to the West, a name that entered Western discourse from about 1820 A.D. Sufism may be defined as a system of religious teachings concerned with the cultivation under guidance of personal transformation and inner virtue, and centered on the Qur'an and Hadith. *Tasawwuf*, especially the early forms of it, represented mystical thought and practice in which discipline, renunciation, purification and concentrated devotion were indispensable methods for the realization of spiritual emancipation and unity with God. However, 'mysticism' is a poor translation for *tasawwuf*, since the latter has little of the sense of the material repudiation and subjective individualist primacy of the former. Consequently we use it *faute de mieux*.

What is clear about Sufi groups in Africa is precisely their this-worldly orientation, the idea that virtue has the world for combat and reward, so that criticism of the world is only preparatory to possessing it. Pachomian monasticism seldom took root in Islam, and almost never in Muslim Africa. The Sufi mystics of the Niger desert are no exception, as the book under review makes clear.

Several themes crop up in the book that are the mainstay of the Sufi enterprise. One is the theme of personalities, robust figures that attract a following and extend their branches over wide areas, such as Shaykh Ahmad al-Yamani, Ahmad al-Burnawi, described as 'a mystic and an ascetic', and Shaykh Sidi Mahmud al-