literature on women’s own understanding of their fertility into a broader sociopolitical framework is laudable, and the book succeeds in making a case for why this is relevant and necessary. However, including more data on Hadendowa accommodation or adaptation to their contemporary urban situation would help the reader to understand the draw of “traditional” practices to address their current vulnerability more fully.

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Two ghosts hover over Sean Hanretta’s Islam and Social Change in French West Africa. They are the traces of two men who died in obscure circumstances in French provinces or borderlands in the opening years of the Second World War, one a refugee, the other a prisoner. The Marxism of the iconoclastic Jewish critic Walter Benjamin was every bit as fundamentally heterodox as Shaykh Ahmed Hamallah’s particular path within the Tijaniyya, at least within the doctrines of the moment. Although one would be hard pressed to think of what else the two men might have had in common, each in their own way produced a clutch of powerful ideas that resonated with brilliant and ambitious disciples.

Few historians of Islam—or indeed of Africa—owe as much to Benjamin as Hanretta does. By the same token, perhaps none of the other West African shaykhs who rose to prominence in the twentieth century had a relationship with his own spiritual master that was simultaneously as intense and as idiosyncratic as that between Hamallah and Yacouba Sylla, whose teachings and the community they engendered are at the core of this book. Every bit as iconoclastic as his spiritual master, Yacouba Sylla never claimed to figure among the ulema of the Western Sahel. He simply rejected some of their teachings, especially around the question of marriage and dowries, while seeking to mitigate the inequalities that then characterized Sahelian societies. In the 1920s and ’30s this message generated controversy, but it won him a following of ex-slaves and others of low social status, among whom figured more women than men. Claiming a unique
and direct relationship with Hamallah, himself a controversial figure and the object of colonial repression, Sylla invoked the ire of his elders and his preaching helped provoke communal violence, most notably in the Mauritanian town of Kaedi in 1930. Exiled to the Côte d’Ivoire by the French administration, he would build a new community of Muslims there. In the Sahel, Sylla had received the gift of Hamallah’s blessing, a gift he believed his shaykh had in turn received from Ahmad al-Tijani and, therefore, from the Prophet himself. In the Ivorian town of Gagnoa, he passed that gift along, transforming it into the basis of a tightly knit, ostensibly egalitarian, virtually endogamous, and aggressively entrepreneurial community of Muslims with its geographic base in the southern Côte d’Ivoire. Adapting to exile, Sylla and his followers left the Sahel behind. Even if Soninke remains the ritual language of Yacouba Sylla’s community, the shaykh’s relations with prominent members of the Hamawiyya in Nioro-du-Sahel were tense, and the Côte d’Ivoire became his home. In the immediate post-war years, he began to build a strong relationship with the planter, politician, and future president Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Until the shaykh’s death in 1988, his worldly fortunes rose with that of his adopted country. This story, in its broad outlines, occupies most of parts 1 and 3 of Hanretta’s book. Contrasting the colonial library, broadly construed, with a view of “History in the Zâwiya,” part 2 asks how we can know what we think we do, and how we might begin to interpret it.

In a work that braids intellectual and social history, Hanretta argues for a “weak” contextualization that displaces colonial rule from the center of historical analysis, adopting in its place a “longue durée” view of the arc of West African Muslim history. For Hanretta, inscribing Yacouba Sylla within that long arc means loosening the interpretive bonds that tie him and his community to a certain colonial moment and to a particular political economy. The gambit is clear. Hanretta builds on Benjamin’s trenchant critiques of a once-prevalent form of historicism to offer a defense of history-writing as a humanistic exercise, one in which (crudely put) neither structure nor agency is determinant. This approach requires simultaneously and rigorously understanding Yacouba Sylla’s community both on its own terms and as representative of something larger. Welcome as it is, it is not without risks. Let me suggest two. First, it is hard to avoid the impression that modernity and its variants may be a more significant category to the historian and his theorist than to the adepts and their shaykh. Second, Sylla’s apparent disinterest in the work of the ulema, which bordered