
Ousman Kobo’s book is a comparative history of Wahhabi movements in Burkina Faso¹ and Ghana² from their origins in the late colonial period through their expansion, decline, and later transformation in the first fifty years of independence. In the footsteps of Lansiné Kaba’s pioneering study,³ the author uses the term “Wahhabism” in a nonreified and neutral sense, against the narrow and derogative inflection given by some local detractors. Kobo refers to Wahhabism to broadly name a new turn in Islamic reform in the decisive context of West Africa’s sociopolitical transformations in the mid- to late twentieth century. Going beyond generic conceptualizations, *Unveiling Modernity in Twentieth-Century West African Islamic Reforms* offers thickly descriptive and diachronic analyses of a number of Wahhabi-inclined leaders and organizations in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso (with a focus on Mossi society) as well as in Tamale, Kumasi, and Accra. Through these case studies, the book sheds light on West African Wahhabis’ plural yet congruous quest for spiritual purity and social reform as they imagined and tried to implement it locally.

Two main themes run through the book. The first emphasizes the local, indigenous origins of Wahhabi reformism in its West African version, contrary to the view that it was a mere translation of contemporary Middle Eastern influences. Wahhabi ideas actually emerged from impassioned local religious contestations over Islamic orthodoxy and specifically Sufi rituals, paving the way for the rise of separate, Sunna-oriented communities.

¹ Haute Volta until 1984.
² Gold Coast before 1957.
In Burkina Faso from 1963, three Muslim intellectuals—Muhammad Malik Sana, Sayouba Ouédraogo, and later Aboubacar Kanonzoe—were the first to publicly condemn some practices of the local Hamawiyya-Tijaniyya. Kanonzoe explained that they went from being disciples of Sheikh Boubacar Sawodogo to becoming students of the Prophet Muhammad (of note, the book offers a substantial treatment of the little known yet influential figure of Sheikh Sawodogo of the Rahmatoulaye branch of the Hamawiyya, with emphasis on his avoidance approach toward French colonial authorities).

In Ghana, Kobo dates the earliest emergence of Wahhabi-inclined ideas to the early 1950s and the agency of two local (and up to now hardly studied) religious entrepreneurs. In Tamale, then capital of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, the scholar Yussif Afajura rejected the tarbiyya as un-Islamic. The tarbiyya was a Tijani litany said to enable one to see God, introduced into the region after the Senegalese Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse’s historic 1952 visit to Ghana. Afajura then consolidated a community of “rejecters” around what became a major madrasa, both known as Ambariyya. In Kumasi, the lead reformist was an original figure: the Asante Adam Appiedu, another major educational entrepreneur of postcolonial Ghanaian Islam. From the 1970s in Burkina as in Ghana, these local reformist leaders and movements moved closer to the Arab-Islamic world and in turn evolved in ways more consubstantial to mainstream Wahhabi dogma and practice.

The book’s second main theme is an examination of its Wahhabis’ ambivalent engagement vis-à-vis modernity. Kobo revisits the scholarly debates on Western, Islamic, and alternative modernities and contributes to the literature by taking the “modernity talk” of West African Wahhabis seriously. He demonstrates that Wahhabis’ triple heritage—African, Islamic, and (colonial) European—mingled to create a distinctive modernist style of West African Islamic reform. As Kobo writes: “in spite of cultural differences, the rest is in the West and the West is in the rest . . . This empirically visible human interaction, albeit culturally contingent, cannot be repressed by ideologically-driven notions of cultural impropriety” (xxxiii).

*Unveiling Modernity* emphasizes the fact that in both Burkina Faso and Ghana, secularly educated Muslims, fluent in French or in English, played a decisive role within the first nationwide Wahhabi associations: the 1974 *Mouvement Sunnite de Haute Volta* (later *du Burkina Faso*), and the 1972 Islamic Research and Reformation Center, founded by Hajj Umar Ibrahim in Accra. To a large extent, it was the association of Islamic and secularly trained scholars which made the Wahhabi style of reform attractive to a growing public in West Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, and contributed,