Rudolph T. Ware III


Rudolph Ware has written a most insightful and stimulating book about the preservation of Islamic values and knowledge-transmission in West Africa. The principal purpose of his study, as articulated in his Introduction, is “to highlight and historicize an embodied approach to knowledge that was once paradigmatic but now thrives in few Muslim societies. It is ironic – considering the racial and spatial logics at work – that many of these societies are far from Arabia in the African West” (29). In this quest he highlights the distinction between ‘Islam in Africa’ and ‘African Islam’ and argues persuasively that many scholars have fostered an inaccurate description of the qualities of Islam in West African communities. His analysis is based on a wide variety of sources, including – most importantly – “autobiographical narratives, and archival accounts of dozens of students who grew up in Senegambian Qurʾān schools during the twentieth century” (p. 41), and supplemented by Arabic texts about education, his three years as a participant observer, fifty-two interviews, seven archival collections, newspapers published in Senegal, and more than four hundred scholarly studies. Furthermore, because of his extensive linguistic skills, he translated all of the documents used to support his scholarship. The book is well illustrated by four maps and thirteen fine photographs by the author.

In the first chapter Ware illustrates the intimate relationship between the ‘embodiment’ of the Qurʾān and the reception of its knowledge, that is to say, a person does not fully ‘know’ the Qurʾān without experiencing it physically: “Knowledge had a powerful allure for many students, often sparked by the sensory experience of hearing the Qurʾān recited” (52). He provides many examples of physical techniques (joyful, uncomfortable, even painful) used by teachers to experience the texts. Through physical discipline, rewards and the model provided by teachers, students came to embody knowledge and to understand the importance of behaving in a righteous manner: “ʿIlm was inseparable from ʿamal” (55). He traces the origin of embodiment and modelling in West Africa to the introduction of the Mālikī madhhab: “Mālikī teaching came to stress practical, personified, human, embodied example in the transmission of knowledge” (56). Such embodiment is the key to the incorporation and transmission of both spiritual awareness and practical knowledge. After developing this thesis Professor Ware criticizes the development of disembodied education found in modern Islamic schools in which deep knowledge of the texts and ability to use reason to understand them unfortunately
are absent, as evidenced by Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian Islamist who had no classical Islamic training: “The classical tradition seeks to produce human beings who embody within their persons certain core ideas and ideals and consequently are capable of improvisation. In spite of stereotypes, reason, discourse, and debate were always encouraged – after certain essentials were mastered” (72).

In chapters two through five Ware examines the development of Islamic education from about 1000 C.E. to the present with the view of explaining the continuity of the classical tradition in the daara educational system (Qurʾān schools), and how ‘modern’ schools – both private and state – introduce dis-embodied education. In chapter two he describes the establishment of a clerical class – a clerisy – which “Armed with reed pens, wooden slate boards, and the Book they carried within their bodies ... brought Islam to sub-Saharan West Africa” (78). Muhammad, “The original Walking Qurʾān ... was not only the exemplar of teaching and preaching but also the embodiment of spiritual leadership, supernatural power, and even healing ability. All of these facets of religious authority came to be embodied within the clerical lineages of West Africa, and all were tied to the Qurʾān” (79). The clerical lineages developed and promoted the Mālikī ideals of education and service – and rejected violence – to spread Islam throughout West Africa (87ff.). The relatively peaceful, symbiotic relationship between cleric and ruler eroded with the intensification of the Atlantic trade introduced by European agents. Enslavement of Muslims – the ‘Walking Qurʾān’ – greatly offended the clerical class and set in motion violent resistance, which is described in chapter three, “The Book in Chains.” Some Muslim rulers and clerical families became the principal moral and militant opponents to the enslavement of Africans in Senegal, and a few Islamic states were places of refuge for escaped or freed slaves. At the end of the chapter Ware returns to the career of Amadu Bamba Mbakke as an example of the scholar/teacher who promotes the classical model of education and service: “Instead of attempting a jihad of the sword, he turned toward a new Sufi pedagogy to effect a jihad of the soul.... Bamba represents not a novelty but a return to what had long been the normative clerical posture of pious distance from power” (156).

In chapters four and five the analysis turns to the self-conscious undermining of the embodied process of learning by both French colonial and independent Senegal administrations. Official policies and programs systematically attempted to introduce French pedagogy and bureaucratic centralization into state and private education with the aim of creating an administrative cadre and a dominance of the ‘modern’ over the ‘traditional’ population. As Ware demonstrates, impoverished families tended to send their children to Qurʾān