

Roman Loimeier (2013), *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, ISBN 978-0-253-00788-9, 376 pp.

Anthropologist Roman Loimeier's latest book offers a broad survey of Islam's evolution in Africa over the course of several centuries. By putting Islam squarely at the centre of the history of a continent that today houses one of the largest concentrations of Muslims in the world, the author seeks to correct what he calls the "periphery bias in the academic analysis of African Muslim societies" (ix). His stated aim in these pages is not to provide a comprehensive historical overview, but rather to focus on key regions and periods. In doing so he draws from scholarly publications in English, French and German rather than archival or other primary sources.

The key periods in question begin with Islam's penetration into the *bilad al-maghrib* (Africa's Mediterranean coastal regions) in the seventh century CE and end with European colonisation in the nineteenth century. The key regions include the eastern and western Sahel (often lumped together in these pages under the Arabic term *bilad al-sudan*, "land of the blacks"), Nubia, Ethiopia and the Horn, the East African coast, and the Cape of Good Hope. Precolonial polities such as Takrur, Mali, Gao, Kano, Darfur and Zanzibar receive considerable attention, while North Africa is given shorter shrift, although the book's third chapter, on the Sahara as "connective space", might render untenable any division of the continent into discrete North African and sub-Saharan zones. Alongside these key regions, the book's chapters explore topics including dynamics of Islamisation; jihad; and Muslims under European colonial rule (a subject approached through three case studies: the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Zanzibar, and the French concepts of *Islam arabe* and *Islam noir*).

Scattered throughout almost every chapter are text boxes on a wide range of topics related to but frequently distinct from the chapter's primary subject matter. Thus the chapter entitled "The Sahara as Connective Space" includes a box on Portuguese maritime innovations that eventually displaced much trans-Saharan trade; the chapter on Islamisation in the *bilad al-sudan* includes a box on the impact of European weaponry on internal African conflicts; the chapter on the East African coast includes a box on Madagascar (a largely non-Muslim society where, even in highland royal courts, the Malagasy language was written in Arabic script until the nineteenth century); and the chapter on Muslims on the Cape includes a box on the devastation wrought by smallpox and the

subsequent social upheaval among local Muslims. These boxes help the author map out connections and contrasts both within and across his regions of focus.

The book, while neither comprehensive in scope nor sweeping in perspective, is certainly encyclopaedic, conveying a rich stream of occasionally esoteric facts about trade networks, political leaders, battles, alliances, demographic shifts and religious scholars. Anyone who wades into this stream will be roused by some of its currents and eddies and unmoved by others. Readers especially interested in the role of Muslims in the Asante royal court, for example, may be less than keen to know the names of all imams to lead prayers at Cape Town's Awwal Mosque through 1912, and vice versa. Readers may be more or less fascinated by the career of Senegalese Sufi leader Amadou Bamba, the rise and fall of Omani control over the Indian Ocean, or the formation of the Funj tribal federation in sixteenth-century Sudan. But what do such cases have to do with each other? What, if anything, do Muslims in South Africa have in common with Muslims in Senegal, or Somalia? Does anything set them apart from Muslims in other parts of the world?

Loimeier's synthesis of historical accounts does not provide explicit answers to these questions, but it does offer suggestions. Certain themes recur throughout the book, across wide spans of historical time and geographic space. Among the most notable are commerce and its pivotal role in the establishment throughout the continent of Islam, which existed for generations as the religion of small minorities composed of merchants and political elites – "Islamic islands in an animist sea", to quote Richard Warms. In much of Africa, from the western Sahel to the East African interior, Islam became a majority faith only in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, a shift that often occurred in tandem with the success of Sufi brotherhoods. The spread of these brotherhoods in turn accompanied challenges to local social hierarchies and competitions for status, with Sufi rituals like the *dhikr* (an exercise in recitation and meditation) coming to be perceived as "a way to spiritual fulfilment that did not depend on literary accomplishment" (237).

Another recurring theme is the use of Islam by African elites as a means to lay claims to outside ancestry and thereby enhanced social status. For Saharan Imasigen (Berbers), these outside origins were said to come from Arabia. For the Songhay elites of precolonial Gao and Timbuktu, they were said to come from Morocco. Elites on the Swahili coast claimed descent from Oman or Persia. All these attempts to construct identities based on links to foreign powers can be understood as forerunners of the "strategies of extraversion" in late twentieth-century Af-

rica, as described so powerfully by Jean-François Bayart. Loimeier takes pains to illustrate the often surprising interconnections that took shape, particularly during the run-up to formal European colonisation: The first Quranic exegesis published in Afrikaans, for instance, appeared in 1863, two decades before the first Afrikaans Bible; later, Zanzibar's first telegraph cable, laid in 1879, linked the island not with the African mainland, but with Aden.

*Muslim Societies in Africa* avoids the temptation to idealise or demonise Africa's Muslims, to homogenise them, or to categorise them as either more or less orthodox than Muslims elsewhere. It will be an invaluable aid to scholars who study particular Muslim societies in Africa and who desire a broader understanding of Islam's influence on the continent as a whole.

- Bruce Whitehouse