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Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2012

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- 1 Ousman Kobo's book is an excellent comparative study of the so-called Wahhabi movement in Burkina Faso and in Ghana. As Kobo acknowledges, the label "Wahhabi" is controversial, and the organizations in question now refer to themselves as "Ahl as-Sunna", "The people of the Sunna". However, the Sunni label is just as problematic, deliberately meant to imply that opponents of the movement are, at best, less than completely Islamic. By retaining the label "Wahhabi", Kobo also stresses the very real links between these groups and the Saudi Arabian state.
- 2 The strength of Kobo's monograph is, in the first place, his comparative approach, bridging neighboring Francophone and Anglophone countries with strong cultural similarities (at least as far as northern Ghana is concerned) and diverging colonial histories. Indeed, as Kobo shows, Wahhabi movements emerged quite independently in each country. (This is starkly different from the case of the Izala movement, a very similar Islamic movement that spread from Nigeria across the border to Niger). The similarities between the Burkinabe and the Ghanaian cases clearly represent a convergence of similar factors, and certainly not the intellectual colonization of either nation by the other. An emphasis on this convergence leads Kobo to focus very fruitfully on sociological and historically conjunctural factors which facilitated the spread of Wahhabi ideas, but which also ultimately limited its success.

- 3 Kobo adroitly adopts a long-term perspective to chart the rise and decline of the Wahhabis in both settings. He points out the paradox that the early impetus for Islamic reform under late colonial rule came from the Tijanis, the prime target of Wahhabi polemic: the Hammawiyya branch under the aegis of Boubacar Sawadogo at Rahmatoulaye in Burkina Faso, the Niassene Tijaniyya in Ghana. His discussion of the early, homegrown precursors of the Wahhabis in Ghana—Haj Yusuf Salih Afa Ajura in Tamale, Sheikh Adam Appiedu in Asante—is particularly illuminating, evidence that the ideas central to the Wahhabi critique were not simply an export from the Middle East, but a genuine response to the internal dynamics of African Islamic communities. But he also shows that the impact of these early initiatives remained limited without substantial Saudi support to a generation of Arabophone Islamic intellectuals from Burkina Faso and Ghana trained in Medina.
- 4 Ultimately, Kobo argues that the Wahhabi movement emerged out of a combination of three impulses for change: an internal West African dynamic of Islamic renewal; a Saudi commitment to use oil wealth to establish itself and its particular Islamic ideology at the center of the Muslim world; and an ideology of modernity linked to education which was a legacy of colonial rule, whether French or British. This combination generated a seemingly unlikely alliance between two groups: French- and British-trained Muslim elites, particularly civil servants; and a young generation of Arabophone scholars trained in Medina. Both groups sought to free themselves from what they perceived as outmoded gerontocratic hierarchies, whether kin groups or Sufi *turuq*. Kobo persuasively suggests that this alliance was both the strength and the fatal weakness of the Wahhabis. Wahhabi organizations were characterized by a double hierarchy, with civil servants controlling the administration and scholars the ideological apparatus. In the end, tensions between the two segments of the leadership determined the fault lines which were to cripple the organizations, if not tear them apart.
- 5 The critical issue was ideological purity, as embodied in the concept of *takfir*, “unbelief”. Were Tijanis and others whose ideas and practices diverged from those of the Wahhabis to be considered “unbelievers” beyond the Islamic pale, or should they be treated as fellow Muslims. Curiously, in Burkina Faso, civil servants uncomfortable with the rigidity of Arabophone scholars defected from the movement, whereas in Ghana, the scholars grew more tolerant while the administrators remained inflexible. Nevertheless, Kobo claims that the Wahhabis left an enduring impact, especially in the educational domain where they pioneered “modern” Islamic schooling to replace earlier paradigms of Qur’anic education.
- 6 Kobo’s book is remarkable in its combination of detailed accounts of the careers of African Islamic intellectuals with close and sensitive attention to the social contexts in which they developed their ideas and sought, successfully or not, to disseminate them. His parallel account of the Wahhabis in Burkina Faso and in Ghana is also a more than welcome approach, breaking down artificial barriers between scholarship on Francophone and Anglophone West Africa. He does not, perhaps, make full use of his two examples. His analysis is excellent in pointing out the ways in which independent Wahhabi organizations in both countries have often followed parallel trajectories. But, in the process, he tends to underplay and consequently does not really analyze significant differences. All told, this is a relatively minor shortcoming in what is, overall, a detailed, perceptive and nuanced account of Islamic reform in Africa.