

ISLAM and the WEST AFRICAN NOVEL

The Politics
of Representation

Ahmed S. Bangura



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Preface

My Arab friends owed me an apology. It was the late 1980s, and I was pursuing graduate studies at the University of Alberta in Canada. There, for the first time, I met Muslim Arabs, who happened to be students.

No Arab had ever been seen in Rogbap, my village in Sierra Leone. In fact, the words "Islam" or "Muslim" were hardly used at Rogbap, just *olaneh*, believer. To be a Muslim was like having a head on one's shoulders, just a simple fact of life. But after I left my village I met many Arabs and Muslims—in books of history, literature, and literary criticism. In Canada I met Arabs for the first time. And they owed me an explanation.

Their ancestors, horsemen with curved swords, had stormed Africa, my homeland, ravaged the land, enslaved some of the people, and forcefully converted many others. Their crimes against Africa cried out for reparation.

Some of my undergraduate professors of literature convinced me of the great violence and intolerance that accompanied the advent of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. *Two Thousand Seasons* by Armah and *Bound to Violence* by Ouologuem featured prominently in our literature curriculum. Also, the works of Sembène Ousmane show what Islam is: a fatalistic religion, an opiate of the people, the explanation for the backwardness of African countries with a majority Muslim population.

As for those novels with no violent content, it was evidently because they did not have an Islamic theme. *The Radiance of the King* by Camara Laye was a Christian allegory. It did not matter that Camara Laye was, as I learned later, from a traditional Muslim background.

My Arab friends did not seek to defend the record of the Arabs in Africa. Before meeting me, most of them did not even know of a country called Sierra Leone. Their silence challenged the image of Arabs and Muslims that I had in my head. I was forced to revisit that image, its source, and its enduring influence on African letters and thought. That

exercise yielded this book. Perhaps I should have, as a friend suggested, given it the title *The Imam's Grandson Writes Back*.

I am grateful to the people whose support and assistance guided me through this undertaking. Among them are my wife, Fatima Maju; Stephen Arnold, George Lang, Anthony Purdy, and Nasrene Rahmieh of the University of Alberta; and David Skinner of the University of Santa Clara.

My thanks also go to the director and staff of the Center for Black Studies of the University of California at Santa Barbara, where I did part of the research for this book. I am equally grateful for the support and encouragement of my colleagues at the University of San Francisco.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
1 Introduction	1
2 Africa, Islam, and the Legacies of Colonialism	9
3 Islam and Africanist Literary Criticism	23
4 Critical (Mis)Readings of Sembène Ousmane	55
5 Taming Islam: Aminata Sow Fall	81
6 The Quest for Orthodoxy in Ibrahim Tahir's <i>The Last Imam</i>	107
7 Conclusion	131
<i>Glossary</i>	149
<i>Bibliography</i>	151
<i>Index</i>	165
<i>About the Book</i>	171

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Introduction

To those who still believe in the autotelic, self-sufficient, and self-referential character of the literary work, the imbroglio following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1989 must have come as a shock. The "word" decidedly intruded into the world. It unleashed an energy demanding the acknowledgment of the word's origin in the flesh (a real author). Then came the unambiguous if terrible choice between the destruction of the word and of the flesh from whose satanic sinews the word was believed to have originated. For many Muslims, including some of the very few who actually read the novel, this was an ultimatum to which Salman Rushdie has yet to respond satisfactorily.

At the center of this current problem is the question of representation, ideology, and the relationship between the literary and religious-political systems. To many Muslims *The Satanic Verses* constitutes an utterly negative representation of Islam. Moreover, this negative representation has been linked to the author's personal ideological hostility to Islam. Many Western readers have failed to understand that what appears to them an unwonted fanatical interpretation of a novel also concerns the issue of interpretation and its ideological character. Hence, the one good thing to have come out of this controversy may well be the revitalization of the debate on the "worldliness" of the literary system: the politics of textuality and representation, as well as the politics of interpretation.

This book examines the representation of Islam and Muslims in the sub-Saharan novel as well as in the critical discourse it has generated. I shall argue that the full gamut of unexamined opinion about Islam that flourished in Western Orientalist scholarship has been copied into

African(ist) europhone writings. These attitudes not only reflect a failure to account for the full complexity and heterogeneity of Islam and its history in sub-Saharan Africa, but they also lead to misreadings of novels with an Islamic subtext. The ideological character of the textualization of Islam in the novels and of the criticism the novels have generated forms the central thesis of my study.

African novelists have almost always defined their role as that of ideologues, of social visionaries with a clear vision of alternatives for the socio-economic and political rehabilitation of their peoples. Hence the novels, as I shall demonstrate, express at once the novelist's interpretation (representation) of social reality and articulate the writer's various alternatives for the overall reform of society. This paramountly important aspect of African poetics is what warrants the sociological framework of my book. How are the writers' politics articulated in their texts? And at what cost?

It is mainly in critical writing that one sees what may be termed an Africanist version of Orientalism. The body of criticism I examine here displays many of the stereotypes, clichés, and unexamined opinions about Islam that Edward Said (1979) has shown to characterize Western Orientalist discourse. These opinions are principally demonstrated in the way critics explain the nature of the conflicts and tensions in novels with an Islamic subtext.

It is the practice of much traditional criticism to explain these conflicts by "othering" Islam, by opposing it, for example, with African traditional wisdom or with materialist Marxism. Sometimes the conflict itself is overemphasized in a Manichean manner. I demonstrate that such explanations fail to contextualize the tensions or situate the questions discussed within an Islamic paradigm. This can be substantially explained by a failure or refusal to recognize the diversity in unity of Islam and the myriad voices that Islam can accommodate, and hence the possibility of conflict emanating from varying emphases and interpretations.

Moreover, such concepts as "Sufi Islam," "orthodox Islam," "revolutionary Islam," "Asharism," and "Mu'talizism" are used to provide explanation for attitudes and actions taken by characters in different social and historical contexts. This mode of analysis is problematical. Instead of situating Muslims and Muslim groups within particular socio-economic and historical contexts, cross-cultural categories are used as stable categories of analysis based on their implied ahistorical consistency. This is greatly responsible for the misrepresentative readings of novels with an Islamic subtext. My study is a call for more con-

text-specific, differentiated analysis of such novels. There are, however, many obvious traits of hostile ideology in critical writing on sub-Saharan African novels of the Islamic tradition. In his analysis of Sembène Ousmane's *O pays, mon beau peuple!* (1957), for example, Martin Bestman spends much time accusing Sembène Ousmane of being blind to the positive contribution of Christianity to Africa. He calls this *tricher avec le réel* (tampering with the facts). Some of the things Bestman would have very much liked to see Ousmane talk about in his novels include the Christian church's fight against slavery, witchcraft, and ritual human sacrifice. Bestman exhibits ignorance of Islamic morality by conceding that the Koran and the Bible teach people *à tendre l'autre joue*. When he comes to the subject of Islam proper, Bestman wholeheartedly agrees with what he perceives to be Ousmane's attitude toward Islam: that it is the greatest impediment to social progress.¹ Bestman's take exemplifies the ignorance of and ideological hostility to Islam in much traditional criticism in the African novel. One of the major tasks of my study is to unmask this critical practice and illustrate its attendant misrepresentation of Islam and misinterpretation of novels with an Islamic inspiration.

No single study that focuses on the imaginative responses to Islam by black African novelists has been done before. There have been articles on specific authors or a limited corpus of novels. Interestingly enough it is my reading of such studies, which in general display considerable ignorance about Islam and as such misrepresent it and provide misreadings of sub-Saharan African novels of the Islamic tradition, that awakened my interest in this field. I hope that my study will set the record straight and provide scholars with useful information regarding the history and sociology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa and a methodological framework for the study of African novels of an Islamic orientation. My study seeks to challenge some of the unexamined opinions about Islam that are carried over from Orientalism to African and Africanist literary and critical discourse, but my ambition is less to present the "truth" about Islam than to analyze in this discourse the rhetorical strategies of ideology hostile to Islam.

That the task of the study of the Islamic presence in Africa and in the African novel has fallen mainly into the hands of non-Muslims and non-Africans is not an inert factor. I am by no means arguing here for an insider's perspective. Such a perspective does not carry with it the guarantee of objectivity, and even some Muslim scholars produce very reductive studies of the kind produced by their non-Muslim colleagues. One must remember that beyond being a Muslim, the scholar has to

earn a livelihood by publishing in Western languages, in Western periodicals, for Western readers. (It must also be noted that there have been non-Muslim Western scholars who have provided much needed, if piecemeal, revisionist studies in this area.) I will examine all the manipulative messages that I can in literary and critical discourse so that I may expose in them traces of distorting ideological hostility.

The method of analysis used in this study fits the mold of approaches to literature and criticism that seek to restore the study of literature within the bounds of human affairs. I certainly understand Edward Said's doubts about the possibility of nonpolitical knowledge in the area of cultural studies: knowledge that is scholarly, impartial, and above partisan belief.² But the assumption of this study is that there is the possibility for scholarship that pays adequate attention to its object without transforming or deforming the object in the process. In short, I believe in scholarship that is sensitive to the complexity of its object.

My methodology is a hybrid. It draws on Edward Said's studies on Orientalism in general and Orientalism's Islamic component in particular. His theoretical observations on the relationship between the world, the text, and the critic are useful as well. So are recent revisionist studies on anthropological and cross-cultural discourse. Of special relevance are Gayatri Spivak's "politics of interpretation" (1987) and Tapalde Mohanty's insights (1984) on the use of cross-cultural concepts like "women" as a category of cross-cultural analysis. Mohanty's study is quite central to my discussion of the concept of the "Muslim woman." It will also be useful in my bid to debunk the use of such cross-cultural concepts as "Sufi Islam," "orthodox Islam," "militant Islam," and "passivist Islam" as models of reference in the explanation of attitudes and actions of people in different social and historical contexts. I also draw on Chantal Zabus's interesting analysis (1991) of linguistic differentiation in African fiction.

The corpus of novels to be analyzed includes Cheikh Hamidou Kane (1961), selections from the works of Sembène Ousmane and Aminata Sow Fall, Ahmadou Kourouma (1968), and Ibrahim Tahir (1984). Major critical works on these novels include Mohamadou Kane (1982) and Debra Boyd-Buggs (1986).

Sub-Saharan Africans are still largely Euro-illiterate and very few among the Euro-literate minority are actually interested in reading novels, so one can still legitimately ask the Sartre question: For whom does the African novelist write? To whose taste must the writer cater if there is a desire to be published and read at all? How do these variables affect

the way Islam is packaged in these novels? These questions are especially critical in my analysis of linguistic differentiation in Aminata Sow Fall's narratives.

Chapter 2 establishes the link between Western Orientalist scholarship on Islamic societies in the Near and Middle East, and Western colonial scholarship on Islam and Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa. The features of Orientalism as they are analyzed by Edward Said (1979) apply also to colonial scholarship on Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. Such scholarship has grossly distorted Islam because it was generally hostile to Islam, was politically motivated, ahistorical, and essentialist, analyzing Islam from a logic that was deliberately external to it. The inconsistencies in the image of Islam and of Muslims in this Africanist Orientalism are explained by the fact that European colonial perceptions of Islam had hardly anything to do with Islam as a system of beliefs but rather as a focus of resistance to European cultural and political hegemony. Beyond establishing a link between Orientalism and colonial scholarship on Muslim black Africa, the second chapter of this book anticipates the third chapter by demonstrating that the tenured distortions of Islam in contemporary European writing on Africa, especially in the criticism that pertains to sub-Saharan African novels of the Islamic tradition, have their origins in hostile colonial writings on Islam and African Muslims. Critics and writers, having in general no access to Islam except through colonialist writings, have simply copied their script from such writings.

Chapter 3 documents and analyzes the pattern of denial and ideological hostility to Islam in current European writing on Africa and in literary criticism on sub-Saharan African novels with an Islamic subtext. The writings of Wole Soyinka, Debra Boyd-Buggs, Pierrette Herzberger-Fofanah, and many other critics are analyzed to present the ideological hostility to Islam in their works, as well as their ignorance about the fundamentals of Islam and the history and sociology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. Debra Boyd-Buggs (1986) is selected for detailed scrutiny to assess the extent to which her ignorance about Islam has led to a misinterpretation of Islamic references in West African fiction, notably in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë*. The general features of traditional criticism of African novels by authors of the Muslim tradition are also examined. These features include hostility to Islam, essentialism, and an inadequate familiarity with the Islamic framework. The recurring stereotypes about Islam and Islamic history in black Africa that flourish in colonial and contemporary European

writing are revisited in light of recent revisionist studies on the subject such as those of René-Luc Moreau, Mervyn Hiskett, and Christopher Harrison. Chapter 3 concludes by acknowledging that there are a few recent critical articles that adopt mature, informed, and context-specific approaches to the study of the roles of Islam in contemporary African societies as these roles are put into text by African Muslim writers.

Sembène Ousmane, one of Africa's leading writers and film makers, is probably also one of Africa's most misunderstood artists. Chapter 4 examines some of the manifestations of the reasons for these misreadings of his works. It has been suggested, for example, that his Marxist ideological orientation is incompatible with Islam's alleged fatalistic ethos. Critics have thus been led by the assumption that Islam preaches resignation in the face of adversity to cast Ousmane, a proponent of personal and social responsibility, as an apostate. According to this approach, Ousmane consistently identifies Muslim characters in his fiction with the forces of reaction and defeatism. Chapter 4 illustrates by a thorough analysis of four of Sembène Ousmane's most studied novels that the approach defined above is reductive and does much violence to his complex narratives. Ousmane does not consistently identify Islam with fatalistic resignation, and in fact many of the positive characters in his fiction are shown to derive their progressive attitudes from their Islamic sensibilities. Critics who come up with the opposite conclusion, such as Patrick Corcoran, Martin Bestman, and Wole Soyinka, betray their ideological hostility to Islam in their discourse, a hostility that prevents them from seeing anything in African novels approximating a vindication of Islam's contributions to African culture. Chapter 4 is particularly interesting in that it shows how Soyinka's attitudes toward Islam, as they are analyzed in the preceding chapter, spill over into his critical writings.

Having examined the origins, varied manifestations, and consequences of the prejudices toward Islam in traditional African(ist) criticism, the last two major chapters of this book focus on examining how two Muslim African writers relate textually to their Islamic heritage. The fifth chapter, which is on Aminata Sow Fall, highlights the ambiguities of the African Muslim writers who see as part of their artistic vocation a European language articulation of the integrity of their culture in the European literary language.

Traditional criticism has unanimously cast Aminata Sow Fall as a promoter of Islam. An analysis of three of Sow Fall's novels illustrates that, on the contrary, there is a tendency in her fiction to present her eth-

nic heritage, while singularly muting the Islamic component of her culture. She does this by refusing to translate into French culturally bound Wolof objects and events, while she readily translates into French those aspects of Senegalese culture that are connected to the wider world of Islam. This wholesale "translation" of Islam has given misleading clues to critics in their interpretation of the concept of charity that motivates the plot, and constitutes the central theme of *La Grève des Bâttu*. It is also shown that the muting of Islam in the linguistic texture of Sow Fall's narratives is part of a general tendency to glorify *cosaan* (pre-Islamic Senegalese culture). This hardly squares with the conventional view that Sow Fall promotes Islam in her narratives.

If Aminata Sow Fall extols pre-Islamic African culture, Ibrahim Tahir, the northern Nigerian writer, is what one might call a literary Islamic fundamentalist. Chapter 6 examines his first and as yet only novel, *The Last Imam*. There is no place in this novel for the celebration of non-Islamic culture. In fact the words "Nigeria" and "Africa" are never mentioned in the entire novel. There is only one cursory reference to Nigeria's colonial history. Tahir's novel is the articulation of a nostalgia for the Sokoto Islamic state created in the early nineteenth century through the *jihad* of Usman Dan Fodio. The narrative perspective is unambiguously Islamic, and the narrative reads like a fictionalized exposition of Islamic doctrine and practice. Whereas a syncretistic ethos dominates in the works of Sow Fall, the accommodation to non-Islamic Fulani-Hausa cultural beliefs constitutes the major source of tension and conflict in Ibrahim Tahir's novel. The ideal is in a return not to ancestral practices, but to the strict observance of Islamic law, the *sharia*. I have dedicated a full chapter to *The Last Imam* not only because virtually no study has been done of it to date, but also because of what it tells us about the West African *tajdid* tradition and current religious conflicts in Nigeria. The quest for orthodoxy in *The Last Imam* also exposes the fallacy of one of the assumptions of the proponents of "Islam noir," which is that Islam as it is practiced in sub-Saharan Africa is comfortably accommodationist.

The concluding chapter summarizes the major questions raised in the study. There is a summary recapitulation of some of the more obvious distortions of Islam in the novels studied and the criticism that pertains to them. Based on the nature of these distortions, methodological guidelines are proposed for further study of sub-Saharan African novels of the Islamic tradition. As well, other areas of research along the lines of this work are suggested.

Notes

1. Martin Bestman, *Sembène Ousmane et L'Esthétique du roman négro-africain* (Sherbrooke, Canada: Naaman, 1981), 42.
2. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 10.

Africa, Islam, and the Legacies of Colonialism

It is our duty to study the Muslim society of our colonies in the minutest details. . . . It presupposes special studies of Islam which *the great Orientalists of France and of Europe* have now virtually succeeded in establishing. . . . [The study] will seem very attractive to many because of the scientific interest attached to it. But above all it is interesting for *political* and administrative reasons. It is almost impossible to administer an Islamic people wisely, if one does not understand its religious faith, its judicial system and its social organisation which are all intimately connected and are strongly influenced by the Coran and the prophetic tradition. It is this understanding of native society which, alone, will enable a peaceful and profound action on the minds of the people. It is, therefore, in this study . . . that we will find the surest bases and the most suitable directions for our Muslim policy.¹ (emphasis added)

Edward Said has written the most virulent attack to date on Western scholarship on the Muslim Orient.² However, it maintains an almost exclusive focus on the Near and Middle East, having virtually nothing to say about the reductive and essentialist portrayal of Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa elaborated in Western scholarship, notably in the colonial period (1860–1960). Moreover, since the appearance of Said's disquisition on the biases of European studies of Islam, scholars in the West have begun to realize their prejudices on the topic. As yet, however, very little has been written on the subject of Western scholarly distortions of Islam in black Africa.³ The policy statements of William Ponty, the French governor-general in Senegal (1907–1915), quoted at this chapter's beginning, establish a clear link between Orientalism and colonial scholarship on Islam and Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa.

Before opening a discussion of how Said's work has prepared the way for a study of Western distortions of Islam in Africa, a quick summary of Said's critique of Orientalism is in order. Albert Hourani provides a useful synopsis of Said's arguments.⁴ Said's criticism is built mainly on two interrelated lines, positing that Orientalists have misunderstood the Muslim Orient either due to prejudice or the tendency to interpret it in terms of the wrong categories, and that the work of the Orientalists has been too closely linked with the political interests of their countries (Hourani: 63). As well, from a methodological point of view, Western scholarship has tended to be essentialist in using the religious category to explain all the phenomena of Muslim societies and cultures (Hourani: 57). Finally, Said contends that Orientalist thought and scholarship have created a self-perpetuating body of "truths" about Islam and Oriental Muslim societies that have very little relation to the reality of the object studied, but have gained authority in intellectual and academic life.

Said's attack on Orientalism is to a large extent applicable to colonial scholarship on Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa. A very significant feature of this scholarship is indeed its political motivation; it was commissioned by the colonial administrations, which required Orientalists to be the guides of policymakers. Little wonder, then, that the most influential writers on African Islam were scholar-administrators, or at least those closely linked with the administration.

For example, the writer of the apology of British occupation of Northern Nigeria, *A Tropical Dependency* (1906), was no other than Flora Shaw, the colonial correspondent for the *London Times*, and subsequently, Lady Lugard, wife of Lord Lugard, the first high commissioner of the British protectorate of Nigeria. In her book, Lady Lugard argued that African Islam had lost its initial grandeur and had betrayed its own ideals. Britain could, therefore, no longer ignore its historic responsibility to take over.⁵

Likewise, Christiaan Snouck-Hurgronje and C-H. Becker, the most respected specialists on Islam in Holland and Germany, respectively, were both employed by their governments as advisers on Islamic policy. (The writings of Becker on Islam in East and West Africa contributed in a major way to the formulation of German public opinion about Islam.) In July 1938, for example, the Belgian government commissioned ethnologists from the University of Ghent to survey Islam in the Belgian Congo and disclose its secrets so that the administration could manage it more efficiently.⁶

The French did produce by far the most prodigious scholarship on Islam in Africa. This is at least partly due to the predominance of Muslims in the areas that came under French rule. The colonial practice of the French in commissioning scholars to examine the Islam in the territories that came under French control can already be observed in the studies produced in Algeria following French occupation. Shortly after the conquest of Algeria by the French in 1830, General Bugeaud felt the need to be well informed about his Muslim subjects and the nature of the society he was in the process of "pacifying." The bureaux Arabes were intended to be centers of research into Muslim society and to advise the colonial administration on how to deal with the native population. The tract on Sufi brotherhoods, *Marabouts et Khouan: Etude sur l'Islam en Algérie* (1884), was written by Louis Rinn, the head of the Native Affairs Department. Thirteen years later, Governor General Cambon initiated an official investigation into the state of Islam in Algeria. The outcome of this investigation was the publication of the seminal work of O. Depont and Xavier Coppolani, *Les Confréries religieuses musulmanes* (1897). Depont was himself a senior colonial administrator; Coppolani was a civil servant who later became civil commissioner in Mauritania, where he died at the hands of the people he thought he thoroughly understood.

One of the first works on Islam in West Africa, *De la Sénégambie Française* (1885), was written by officials of the imperial government, Frédéric Carrère and Paul Holle. The intention of this work, writes Mervyn Hiskett, was not only "to describe the customs and institutions of the Senegambian people but also to advocate certain views as to how French possessions in Senegambia ought to be governed" (Hiskett: 212).

Similarly, Robert Arnaud was commissioned in 1905 to investigate the state of Islam throughout the West African colonies and to draw up a manual of Muslim policy. The *Précis de politique musulmane* (1906) resulted from this investigation.

An anthology of works on African Islam by colonial administrators would be truly encyclopedic. François Clozel, Maurice Delafosse, Jules Brévié, and Paul Marty, to name a few, all adapted their writings for use by the colonial establishment they served. Paul Marty was certainly the most prodigious of them all during the period of World War I. And his writings contributed much to the shaping of French perceptions of Islam. He is probably best remembered for his invention of the concept of "Islam noir" to describe an Islam that owes its distinction to the wholesale adoption of pre-Islamic African customs.