

7

European Colonization and the Transformation of Islamic Education

The second half of the nineteenth century was a turning point in the history of Africa and that of Islam in Africa, as well as that of the Islamic scholarly tradition. Europeans had been present in the region for three centuries but they had been limited to the coastal areas. In 1880, they hardly occupied more than a tenth of the total landmass of the continent. Two decades later, all Africa had been conquered, except for Ethiopia, Liberia and Morocco – and this last was occupied in 1912. The pre-colonial African states (both Islamized and not) were all overcome by the military supremacy of the Westerners.

The interpretations of colonization inspired by the colonial library presented the European imperial project as consistent, emphasizing the notion that it was conceived to liberate the colonized peoples from the traditions in which they were imprisoned and to lead them towards modernity. This kind of interpretation has been challenged by an abundant literature produced in the former colonies after their independence. Described as post-colonial studies, this literature has challenged numerous assumptions about modernity and European imperialism.

According to certain thinkers of the post-colonial school, the construction of modernity did not originate in the West from whence it was to be exported to the rest of the world by the Westerners. It was the culmination of a period of intense interaction and strong interconnections between the West and the rest of the world, which was therefore a partner in the construction of modernity (Chakrabarty 1999:104). The corollary was that the colonial state was not a monolithic entity, but was composed of individuals and forces that sometimes diverged in their approach and were often carried out on an ad hoc basis. When the state did not dispose of the necessary human and material resources to implement its policy, it was often changed, in response to the agency of colonized people.

This brings us to another fundamental assumption of the post-colonial school, that of the capacity of the dominated to influence a relationship of domination. The colonized were not passive subjects, but political actors. Their agency sometimes went in the opposite direction to that desired by the Europeans, who lacked the means of opposing them. Action by the colonized could even make the colonial state change its initial project. The different usages of Islam by the colonized peoples of sub-Saharan Africa in the colonial period show the resources possessed by the 'subaltern in a subordination situation'. In addition, there were mahdist movements, which formed part of a deeply rooted tradition and which tried to struggle against the colonial order and subvert it through violence. These movements were often repressed. But there were other, much more subtle ones that negotiated forms of compromise with the colonizer while continuing to pursue their own objectives. This was the orientation of the political establishment of the marabouts who, in French West Africa, succeeded in imposing themselves as the principal partners of the colonial state. A good illustration was the Muslim Societies in West Africa project, under colonial domination, which organized two international conferences and published two reference works on the question (Robinson and Triaud 1997; Triaud and Robinson 2000). It showed how the maraboutic political establishment in French West Africa was able to take advantage of the opportunities provided by colonial peace to consolidate its economic, social and intellectual base. Not only did the marabouts continue to proselytize on behalf of Islam and their brotherhood, they also intensified their efforts to promote the Arabic language.

The educational system established by the colonial state and the missionaries, the chief purveyors of modern education, promoted European languages to the detriment of Arabic after the conquest of Africa. Writing in African languages was encouraged in certain regions, but Latin characters were preferred to the Arabic ones, so that the two systems of transcribing African languages co-existed: one in the Arabic script mainly used by non-Europhone readers and the other in the Latin script. The growth of literacy in Western languages and the use of the Latin script did not cause a decline of the Islamic scholarly tradition, but its transformation and the diversification of the networks for training Muslim scholars. These transformations, without eliminating the initial system, promoted the emergence of new categories of Arabists. These were the graduates of modernized Arabic teaching and those trained in universities and other institutions of higher learning in the Arab-Islamic world. Like their predecessors, these Arabists were to take part in politics. The sections that follow analyze the transformations of the Islamic educational system, the emergence of these intellectuals and their political discourse.