

The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa

Rudolph Ware III

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With the introduction of new educational systems in the Muslim world during the late-eighteenth through the early-twentieth century, many Muslims and non-Muslims became critical of traditional pedagogical methods. In particular, the image of Qur'an schools in West Africa are often criticized for their "backward" forms of education and commonly perceived as places where children simply parrot Qur'anic verses without much understanding. These institutions have largely been abandoned and replaced by modern and secular schooling systems. In his *The Walking Qur'an*, Rudolph Ware argues that Qur'an schools have survived in places like West Africa. By studying them, he seeks to historicize this once-paradigmatic approach to knowledge. Along with shedding light on Islamic knowledge, Ware attempts to move beyond race by placing Africans at the center of Islamic studies. Such an attempt is

welcome, given the rarity of in-depth studies on Islamic history in West Africa. In so doing he makes a welcome contribution to both Islamic and African studies, while simultaneously examining the boundaries between the two.

Ware attempts to make sense of Qur'an schooling in Africa and the philosophy of knowledge it represents and seeks to reproduce. *The Walking Qur'an* distinguishes itself from other works by not only trying to understand the Qur'an schooling system, but also to understand and shed light on the system's implicit theory of knowledge. The teacher-student relationship is of utmost importance in traditional Islamic pedagogy, for knowledge is never to be obtained solely through books but is to be transmitted through teachers as well. The rise of the printing press in the Muslim world as well as modern instructional methods introduced through the university system contrasts sharply with the traditional highly didactic mode of learning. Consequently, it was not important what students studied as much as under which teachers they studied. This teacher-student relationship allows students to learn from the teachers' state of being. They will be in the teacher's company for long periods of time, not only learning but also serving and absorbing the latter's characteristics. Such a relationship instills a love for the teacher, who is assumed to embody the etiquette of scholarship. The teacher thus provides a model of scholarly etiquette and instills a sense of love and reverence for the scholarly class.

By shedding light on the epistemology of the Qur'an schools in West Africa, *The Walking Qur'an* explains why this relationship was crucial to preserving traditional Islamic learning. This mode of learning stems from the notion of linking oneself back to the Prophet. Qur'an and hadith scholars insisted on the student's having an *ijāzah* (license) through a connected *isnād* for reasons of authenticity and for authority. In contrast to simply reading a book, students were left with the impression of being responsible for continuing this chain to the next generation.

As the title notes, Ware seeks to present an understanding of what it means to embody and internalize knowledge. It is not only Qur'anic memorization that takes place in these institutions, but the internalization and even ingestion of Qur'anic verses. The book's title is taken from a hadith in which A'isha describes the Prophet as "the walking Qur'an." In this sense, the Prophet was both a vessel that transmitted intellectual knowledge and a person whose inner and outer being were filled by the Qur'an until he embodied it completely.

The book is divided into five chapters that tell the story of Qur'anic learning and embodiment of Islamic knowledge in West Africa. Chapter 1 explores

the schools' philosophy of knowledge. Carrying the Qur'an inside one's mind and manifesting it through deeds are inexorably linked. Those who become a *ḥāmīl* (holder) or a *ḥāfiẓ* (memorizer or protector) of the Qur'an are expected to internalize its meaning until it penetrates their innermost being, which, in turn, changes their external actions. This means that learning is something far more than memorizing texts; it is, in fact, a holistic spiritual exercise that shapes the students into walking Qur'ans in their own right. Given the rarity of studies on transmission and embodiment of knowledge in Islam, this chapter is perhaps the book's greatest contribution. It is through this prism that the following chapters refract the last 1,000 years of Senegambian history.

Chapter 2 examines how West Africa was untouched by the early conquests of Islam. In other words, African scholars were the vectors of Islamization in Africa. Ware demonstrates how they spread Islam through education. Chapter 3 explores how Qur'an teachers were impacted by slavery and enslavement, and states that both they and their students led revolutionary movements that helped challenge and eventually abolish slavery. Chapter 4 analyzes how these teachers were remade after the formal end of slavery and how the Qur'an institutions helped them reclaim themselves. This also led to the rise of many Sufi paths and teachings in an effort to recover the soul. Chapter 5 discusses how the isolation of "Islam Noir" helped safeguard classical approaches to Islamic knowledge in Senegal from the "instrumentalization" of Muslim schools that touched other parts of the Muslim world.

Ware argues that "the stubborn relevance of classical ways of learning and teaching Islam in much of Africa and the relative neglect (or invisibility) of such schooling in much of the Arab world are revealing. Those interested in Islamic knowledge, I suggest, should be paying more attention to Africa than we usually do" (p. 38). Although many usually associate orthodox Islam with the Arab world, he rejects such a notion and argues that West African Muslim societies have preserved classical Islamic teachings through the Qur'an institutions and traditional teaching methods. While it is true that some reformers in the Arab world opposed traditionalist learning methods, such as Muhammad Abduh, who reformed al-Azhar, the idea that classical ways of learning were completely sidelined there and only properly preserved in West Africa is not very convincing. Moreover, the author does not provide enough evidence to support this claim. In contrast, we find that classical learning methods in Qur'an schools, as well as traditionalist scholars, have always existed in the Arab world, just as they have in West Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and other parts of the Muslim world.

At times, especially in the introduction, the layout and amount of details provided seem more appropriate for a dissertation. It also suffers from some generalizations. Nevertheless, *The Walking Qur'an* makes an excellent and needed contribution to understanding classical Islamic learning methods. Islamic studies is commonly looked at as one subject among many others; however, Ware brings to light how many Muslims perceive knowledge as an embodied holistic experience rather than as an intellectual exercise. *The Walking Qur'an* makes a distinct contribution to Islamic epistemology, and I highly recommend it to those interested in classical Islamic pedagogical methods, Islamic history, and African history.

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