

# BOOK REVIEW

**Michelle C. Johnson. *Remaking Islam in African Portugal: Lisbon, Mecca, Bissau.***

Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2020. 212 pp. Note on Transcription. Bibliography. Index. \$24.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0253049773.

Michelle C. Johnson's *Remaking Islam in African Portugal* provides an interesting, well-researched, and captivating description of how Mandinga Muslim immigrants in Lisbon have refashioned their practices in a new environment and how they relate to their places of origin and to the world in general. Representing about two decades of multi-sited fieldwork research in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal, the book reveals some of the advantages long and intensive engagements with the object of study may produce. The argument of the book is succinctly put: "I argue that when Guinean Muslims leave their homeland and make their way to the European metropolis and the land of their former colonizer, they encounter a new version of Islam and a novel approach to religion more generally" (28).

The author's straightforward manner of approaching this argument is also commendable, as it allows an easy reading. The arc of the argumentation is organized around crucial life-course rituals in the lives of Mandinga Muslims, how these moments structure their ways of being, and how the same rituals are remade and adapted in the novel environment in the diaspora. Some of the rituals the book engages with, providing the empirical evidence for the chapters, are name-giving and hand-writing, initiation, male and female circumcision, death or funeral and postburial sacrifices, divination, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

One would assume that since the author's research was conducted over a long period of time, the author would have found a way to avoid the traps anthropologists have historically found themselves in. However, this is not necessarily the case. The first trap is assuming too much of an identification with the object of study: "Beyond an anchoring in the homeland, I shared with my interlocutors the experience of displacement, because like them, I was unable to return to Guinea-Bissau (as initially planned) during the war" (44). Comparing herself to Malinovsky, Johnson adds that her research "in Lisbon was research in Exile" (45).

The second trap is the difficulty of understanding Mandinga Muslims within a more complex social environment such as Portugal. It is the same difficulty Ulf Hannerz has famously discussed in reference to the transition from the rural to the urban world, marked by the times during which the countries anthropologists studied were becoming independent, from the 1960s onwards. What most anthropologists have done, Hannerz charges, was simply to follow their subjects from the village to the city without necessarily examining their conceptual tools. There is some of this in Johnson's book, where there is a strong inclination to preserve old distinctions and to rely on how things would work back home. Categories such as "Mandinga" and "Guinean" are for the most part taken for granted.

This is particularly relevant in the options the author chooses to discuss, especially two of the most divisive aspects of the Mandinga community in Lisbon, namely integration into Portuguese society and female circumcision. Even though Johnson admits that "some Guinean Muslim immigrants contend that African custom conflicts with their desire for integration in Lisbon's transnational Muslim community" (98), there is no further discussion of the ways in which such a desire for integration plays out in identity formation. The fact is that most of the subjects portrayed in the study, particularly those of the second generation who were born in Portugal, are Portuguese. They aspire to be fully integrated into Portuguese society, either by upholding their cultural difference or by being at odds with the cultural atavism they see in the ways of being of their predecessors. In those cases, Johnson for the most part takes the side of the elders and of tradition. Glimpses of this are shown in the ways in which Johnson resolves generational conflicts: "Such behavior is practically unimaginable in Guinea-Bissau and is highly reprimanded when it occurs. Frustrated and ashamed immigrant parents are quick to blame their children's obstinate behavior on the European educational system, which emphasizes critical and independent thought over deference and humility" (100).

The same mindset informs the discussion of the most controversial aspect of being a Mandinga Muslim in Lisbon, female circumcision, which does not fail to address more recent developments (the criminalization of the practice), but yet fails to provide a more nuanced view on the issues. To affirm that "Mandinga women remain overwhelmingly convinced that female circumcision is central to their identity as Mandinga persons and as Muslims" (145) does not capture the extent to which this topic is divisive. By portraying Mandinga men as less likely to have their daughters circumcised, it misses family dynamics, particularly in Africa. The upbringing of children is a matter left on the shoulders of women. This allows men to voice their opinion on their opposition to female circumcision without having to uphold such an opposition within their own families.

*Remaking Islam in African Portugal* certainly offers a unique ethnographic view into the ways in which Mandinga Muslims have refashioned their practices in the context of the diasporic world. However, by relying on

traditional forms of ethnographic description, the book fails to give the full picture of what it really means to be a Mandinga Muslim immigrant in Lisbon.

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