

Book Review

Alex Thurston: *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching and Politics.*
Cambridge University Press, 2016. 286 pages,
including footnotes and index.

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Studies of Salafi and Wahhabi movements in West Africa since the 1990s have focused on tracing these movements' local origins in order to accentuate Africans' agency in contrast to the erroneous assumptions that these movements were imposed on "gullible" Africans by foreign Muslim missionaries.¹ These studies demonstrated that African Muslims were not passive recipients of Salafi ideas emanating from the Arab world; on the contrary, they actively participated in the production and diffusion of such knowledge to address specific local concerns; moreover, they meticulously reconstructed the Salafi message to appeal to local audiences. Such localization of the Salafi message accounts for its rapid

1 See for example, Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997); Barbara Cooper, *Marriage in Maradi: Gender and Culture in Hausa Society in Niger, 1909-89* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997); Ousmane Kane, *Muslim Modernity in Postcolonial Nigeria: A Study of the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Ousseina Alidou, *Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women and the Politics of Agency* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005); Marie Miran, *Islam, histoire et modernité en Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris: Karthala, 2006); Adeline Maquelier, *Women and Islamic Revival in a West African Town* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2009); Ousman Murzik Kobo, *Unveiling Modernity in Twentieth-Century West African Islamic Reforms, 1950-2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Abdulai Iddrisu, *Contesting Islam in Africa: Homegrown Wahhabism and Muslim Identity in Northern Ghana* (African World Series, 2012); Terje Ostebo, *Localizing Salafism: Religious Change among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

diffusion from the 1970s to the present. More recently, however, the historiography is shifting toward another aspect of agency; that is, the role that Africans played in producing Salafi knowledge in the Arab world itself, especially in Saudi Arabia.² Although this is open to debate, Saudi Arabia is often considered to be the cradle of contemporary Salafism, at least its Wahhabi variant. Alex Thurston's work on Salafism in Nigeria is an important contribution to this new trend that should be read alongside Chanfi Ahmed's book cited above. Thurston emphasises "not just localization, but also dialogical exchanges between localities," (p. 64) thus allowing the reader to appreciate the role of African scholars and students in the development of twentieth-century Salafiyya. The author's careful biographical analyses of the important twentieth-century Salafi scholars, including those from Nigeria, contribute significantly towards deepening our understanding of global Salafism more broadly, but its Nigerian expression in particular.

Equally revealing is the attention the book pays to the ambivalence of the Salafi discourse that contrasts Salafi-jihadists, such as Boko Haram, in contrast to mainstream Salafis who denounced violence. Unlike many studies of Salafiyya that emphasise its doctrinal contests with the Sufi brotherhoods, Thurston's monograph focuses on the raging internal debates within Salafiyya over the relationship between the Salafi canon and political violence. In doing so, the author draws attention to the erroneous depiction of the Salafi movement as static, monolithic and homogenous since the classical era. Such depiction overlooks the movement's shifting intellectual contours that culminate in the twentieth-century canon, as well as the activism of many Salafi leaders in Africa, who employ the Salafi canon to delegitimize the use of violence within their societies. A careful examination of internal debates about what constitutes an acceptable Salafi canon, allows the author to explain clearly why and how Boko Haram's leaders adopted violence in their struggles against the state, and why their adoption of violence does not accord with the mainstream Salafi canon. The author provides

2 Chanfi Ahmed, *West African Ulama and Salafism in Mecca and Medina: Jawab al-Ifriqi - The Response of the African* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

ample evidence to support the conclusion that although claiming to adhere to the canon, Boko Haram leaders distinguished themselves from mainstream Salafi by their selective appropriation and manipulation of the canon to justify violence against the Nigerian states and fellow Muslims who refused to subscribe to their brand of Salafism.

Couched in the analyses of the development of the contemporary Salafi canon, the book makes three fundamental arguments. First, Salafism is not inherently a violent religious movement; rather, Salafis are concerned about religious purity as they define it, although its radical message has also historically been hijacked by individuals and groups who erroneously consider violence to be the mechanism for change. Such jihad-inclined Salafis, including Boko Haram, often engage in selective appropriation of the canon to support their activism. Second, the author notes that contrary to a widespread assumption in the West, education in Saudi Arabia is not inherently radicalizing (p. 241). To support this provocative statement, the author draws examples of the foremost Nigerian Salafi preachers trained at the Islamic University of Medina, who were active and vocal preachers, but denounced violence completely. He contrasts these Saudi-trained scholars with the leaders of Boko Haram, who were not trained in Saudi Arabia, but developed their own narrow interpretation of the canon to advocate violence against the Nigerian state and their opponents among the mainstream Salafi. To support this argument further, the author examines the materials and structure of religious education offered to Africans in Saudi Arabian universities during the 1980s and 1990s, and concludes that the pedagogical materials and approaches do not lead to religious radicalization. Rather, African scholars are trained to engage with their opponents in intellectual debates and political activism by focusing on textual evidence rooted solely in the Qur'an and *aḥādīth* (the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad). The book's third and equally profound argument centers on examining the contributions of scholars from West Africa, who were living and teaching in Saudi Arabia. These highly respected indigenous West African scholars, the author demonstrates convincingly, contributed immensely towards formulating the twentieth-century Salafi canon and participated

in training scholars who returned to their societies to propagate Salafi ideas.³ Moreover, African Salafis, the author stresses, “not only participated in Saudi Arabian outreach to Africa, they also helped to theorize how to tailor the Kingdom’s approach to *da’wa* to the context of Africa [....]. Thus, what some scholars have described as the localization of Salafi ideas, occurred not just on the African terrain, but also inside Saudi Arabia itself.” (P. 67). Here, the author is careful to separate mainstream Salafiyya from its Wahhabi variant to underscore the global nature of mainstream Salafiyya, although neither the mainstream nor its Wahhabi variant is inherently prone to violent activism. The selection of Nigeria to explore the shifting contours of Salafi discourse and activism in Africa is strategic not only because of the size of the Muslim population in that country, but also because of the complexity of Nigeria’s religious politics, especially the rise of Boko Haram in that country.

The book also makes an important conceptual contribution to the study of Islam and Salafism in Africa. By carefully examining the genealogy of Salafi writings and activism that culminated in the twentieth-century Salafi canon, the author provides the framework for assessing the different Salafi expressions and the extent to which they adhere to what he sees as the core Salafi canon (discussed further below). The Salafi canon “represents the intersection of the institutional (in the form of resources at the Islamic University of Medina), the genealogical (in the form of personal links that connect canonizers to Salafi authorities), and the textual (in the form of texts authorized by the Salafi community).” (P. 35).

Description of the Content

The book is divided into three parts: Part I, titled “Salafism and Its Transmission,” comprises the first three chapters. Chapter 1 describes the formation of the Salafi canon and the “canonizers who helped to shape it.” Here the author presents one of the central arguments of the book, noting that “the Salafi view of history reflects a process of canonization

3 For details of the biographies of these West African scholars in the *jihaz*, see Chanfi Ahmed, *West African Ulama*.

that emphasises and reframes some elements of Salafis' intellectual genealogies while strategically downplaying the diverse origins of Salafi thought." Implicitly, since the classical era, the process of canonization inherently involves selective appropriation of texts to accommodate the needs of a specific Salafi community during a specific period. Chapter 2, "Africans and Saudi Arabia," explores one of the central themes of the book: the role of Africans in Saudi Arabia in the development and spread of Salafi ideas on the continent. It discusses how Salafis in Saudi Arabia helped the Kingdom's outreach to Africa since the founding of the Islamic University of Medina in 1961, noting that "African Salafis in Saudi Arabia helped theorize ways to co-opt African Muslims, and Saudi Arabia's local partners in Africa formed networks that helped recruit students." Chapter 3, "Nigerians in Medina," traces the intellectual trajectories of Nigerian Salafis, who studied in Medina between the 1980s and the 2000s, and returned home "committed to teaching the canon and using its authority to delegitimize rivals." (p. 25).

Part II is titled "The Canon in Action" and comprises Chapters 4, 5 and 6. It "discusses how the Nigerian graduates of Medina have deployed the canon in education, media, and politics." Chapter 4 presents an analysis of how Nigerian Salafi leaders transmit the canon to their students. Chapter 5 stresses the ways by which these Salafi leaders employed Qur'anic verses, *hadith* reports, and the canon to "address local and global political controversies," and Chapter 6 explores how the canon appears in religious debates between Nigerian Salafis and their local Muslim rivals, including young Sufi shaykhs and progressive Muslim intellectuals (p. 26).

Part III is titled "Boko Haram and the Canon" and comprises Chapters 7, 8 and 9. These three Chapters discuss how the canon emerged as the central theme in the struggles between Boko Haram and the graduates of Medina. Chapter 7 places Boko Haram's engagement with Salafism in a global comparative context, delineating its connections with the canon as well as its departure from it. Ideally, the author compares it with ISIS, noting their overlapping intellectual genealogies, while stressing their departure from mainstream Salafism. The chapter also presents an analysis of the difference between Boko Haram's founder, Muhammad

Yusuf (1970–2009), and his successor, Abubakar Shekau, to explain how both local and global contexts shaped their different approaches. The author notes that while Yusuf remained anchored in the Salafi canon, although deviating slightly from it to stress the illegality of the Nigerian state from the point of view of those who prefer a Shariah-dominated political system, Shekau departed from the canon, aligning his message with that of ISIS's founders. Thus, after Yusuf's demise, Boko Haram transitioned from radical Salafism to become a full-fledged jihadi movement comparable to ISIS. Chapter 8 explores how "mainstream" Nigerian Salafis invoked the Salafi canon in a bid to discredit Boko Haram's leaders. That chapter concludes by linking the struggles of Nigerian Salafi to control the canon, to similar struggles among other mainstream Salafi at the global level.

The last chapter focuses on the rise of Boko Haram, tracing its development from the preaching circles of the dominant Salafi movement. Here, the author provides evidence to support the conclusion that Boko Haram is an offshoot of the Nigerian Salafi movement that began in the late 1960s. However, in adopting violent jihad, Boko Haram distinguished itself from Nigeria's mainstream Salafis trained at the Islamic University of Medina. As the author noted clearly, the "graduates of Medina are now competing with Boko Haram to define Islam and its textual bases" (p. 4). This chapter thus answers one of the questions Westerners have been asking: why are Muslims not challenging violent extremism? The evidence here demonstrates that mainstream Salafis are at the forefront of the struggles against violent extremists, sometimes at the expense of their own lives.

Defining Salafism

One of the book's most important contributions to the study of the Salafi movement or movements across the world concerns its definition and typology: thus, what is Salafiyya and what is its theological genealogy? Thurston offers his definition of Salafism, grounding it in the context of the genealogy of the Salafi canon over a millennium, its strategies of proselytization, its ideology (*'aqīda*), its method of intellectual inquiries,

general antipathy toward Sufism, adoption of *ijtihad* (independent scholarly inquiry), and rejection of the four schools of jurisprudence.

For the author, twentieth-century Salafiyya is the outcome of a long process of canonization that includes various Muslim scholars from the ninth century through to the twentieth century, and involves a synthesis of religious materials produced by renowned Hanbali and non-Hanbali scholars and their students. The process of canonization is also supported by important institution of learning, such as the Islamic University of Medina that provided the intellectual framework for the process to flourish (p. 13). The scholars whose intellectual activism shaped the canon that formed the intellectual backbone of Nigerian Salafis included: the Albanian, al-Albani, the Saudi, Abdul Aziz Ibn Baz, the Indian, Siddiq Hasan Khan al-Qannuji (1832–90), the Saudi Ibn ‘Uthaymīn, and the Yamani, Muhammad ibn ‘Ali al-Shawkani (1760–1834). There were also a number of West African scholars teaching in Saudi Arabia, who contributed not only towards shaping the canon, but also, as mentioned earlier, helped Saudi Arabia to develop its outreach to Africa. The author also traces the paths of several Nigerian scholars, such as Shaykh Ja’far Mahmud Adam (1961/2–2007), Dr. Muhammad Sani ‘Umar Rijiyar Lemo (b. 1970) and Shaykh Abdulwahhab Abdullah (b. 1953), who studied in Medina during the 1980s and the 1990s. The Nigerian and other African students who mastered the canon returned to their societies to teach and to preach using those materials in debates with members of the Sufi brotherhoods as well as Boko Haram leaders.

Defining who is a Salafi is difficult for academics primarily because the term itself is contested by different groups who claim it as well as by those who are excluded from it. Thurston separates pre-modern Salafis, the “proto-Salafi,” from those he considers to be “fully Salafi.” Proto-Salafis are the scholars and activists “who held some but not all of the ideas contained in the Salafi intellectual package today.” These include many earlier generation (as well as contemporary) African Salafis who remained affiliated with one of the four Sunni schools of law (*madhhab*). “Fully Salafi” designates “those who are “anti-Ash’arī, anti-*madhhab*, and genealogically affiliated to a recognizably Salafi

canon.” (p 8.) “Fully Salafis” also reject violent jihad (p. 17). By rejecting violence and claiming to subscribe to none of the four main Sunni legal schools, many mainstream contemporary Nigerians, and by extension African Salafis (who call themselves *lā madhhab*), fall within the purview of “fully Salafis,” while other African Salafis who adhere to the Maliki jurisprudence dominant in West Africa are not “fully Salafis.” From this perspective, Saudi Salafis are not “fully Salafis” because the Wahhabi creed remains anchored to the Hanbali jurisprudence. But it is also clear from the process of canonization described in the book that the distinction between Wahhabism and mainstream Salafism is blurred by the pool of scholars, the canon, the institution, and the propagators of the canon, as well as the resources from which both movements draw.

While such typology is helpful in minimizing generalizations, it is also inherently problematic and runs the risk of academics being drawn into unresolvable intra-group contests concerning selective inclusion and exclusion of others. For example, what makes Muhammad Yusuf and Shekau less Salafi than others? Is their adoption of violence, in itself, enough to strip them of their Salafi identity? Who has the authority to demarcate the boundary of inclusion? Moreover, the definition does not fully escape from the entanglement of some global Salafiyya with Saudi Wahhabism, and the subtle, perhaps unconscious sympathy of many African Salafis with the Hanbali *madhhab*, as evidenced by their intellectual linkages with Hanbali scholars during their formative years and beyond. The difficulty is evident in the book itself, especially if one considers the scholars whom the author has cited as the most important canonizers, as well as the institutions that shaped the canon; all these have some connections with Saudi Arabia or its institutions, or the Hanbali jurisprudence. As the author asserts, the “canon converged in Medina and the undisputed figures remained Hanbali scholars...” Thus, the relationship cannot be considered to be peripheral. Can academics define, concretely a group independent of its members’ internal definition without running the risk of subscribing to one group’s definition while excluding those of others? The debates over who counts as a Salafi, and where to demarcate the boundaries of the Salafi canon, are constantly

being contested by Salafi communities around the world, culminating in the ambiguous classification, “Salafi al-qadīm” (old Salafi or proto-Salafi) and “Salafi al-jadīd” (neo-Salafis). The ambivalence is evident in the following “disclaimer”:

Perhaps it is simpler to talk not of three types of Salafism but of two: mainstream Salafis who are not involved in promoting aggressive jihad or working to carry it out, and Salafi-jihadis who are. At the same time, even the lines between jihadis and non-jihadis are blurred when it comes to the question of canons... Salafi-jihadis like Boko Haram and ISIS work hard to present their discourses as the latest and most authentic instance of continuity with the canon as they define it (p. 220).

As many scholars have found, defining precisely who is a full Salafi is a difficult task. Thurston probably recognizes the ambivalence of his typology as well.

Salafism in Nigeria supports the conclusion reached by many studies that Salafism remains a narrow interpretation of the larger Sunni scholarship, but only a few groups on its fringes subscribe to violent extremism. Thus, the author concludes:

If Salafism represents a narrowing of the broader world of Sunni Muslim scholarship, Salafi-jihadism [such as Boko Haram and ISIS] further narrows the Salafi canon, preserving only those elements that can legitimate a highly exclusivist, activist politics based on violent rejection of the secular state and any Muslims who disagree with aggressive jihad. [However] mainstream Salafis – those uninvolved in violence and unwilling to anathematize Muslim rulers – have invoked the canon in an effort to delegitimize jihadis. Mainstream Salafis argue that jihadis are ignorant of foundational scholarship and

that jihadis are unable to produce compelling textual evidence for their ideological stances (p. 242)

Some readers might wonder why the pioneering twentieth-century Salafis such as al-Afghānī and Rashīd Riḍā are excluded from the development of the canon. Is this because the author chose to centralize the canon on the Islamic University of Medina and its scholars since that is the main institution where most contemporary Nigerian Salafis received their education? Moreover, the salient relationship between contemporary African Salafis and Saudi institutions will be difficult to disaggregate, especially if one considers that many “mainstream” African Salafis continue to draw intellectual inspirations from Saudi scholars, and financial support from Saudi institutions and philanthropists.

The aforementioned difficulties notwithstanding, the arguments of *Salafism in Nigeria* are well-constructed with ample supporting evidence, and lucidly written. The analyses are also very detailed. It is a must-read for both academics and policy-makers eager to understand the complexity of religious authority in Africa, the evolution of global Salafism and its expression in Africa, the rise of Boko Haram, the impacts of Saudi education on African Salafis, and the contributions of Africans to the development of the Salafi creed in Saudi Arabia and within Africa. It is certainly a superb contribution to the broader study of Islam in Africa, and Nigeria in particular. I will use it in my graduate and undergraduate Islam in Africa classes.