

Summer 2010

# Review of: Islam, Ethics, Revolt: Politics and Piety in Francophone West African and Maghreb Narrative

Christopher Wise

Western Washington University, [christopher.wise@wwu.edu](mailto:christopher.wise@wwu.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Wise, Christopher, "Review of: Islam, Ethics, Revolt: Politics and Piety in Francophone West African and Maghreb Narrative" (2010).  
*English Faculty and Staff Publications*. 2.  
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as a metaphorical locus for loyalty and stability" (106). In order to maintain this view, he must downplay evidence to the contrary, such as Stella's musings on the generations of women who went almost mad searching for meaning in the drawing-room clocks. Walshe reads this merely as demonstrating "the one drawback to this house of peace, loyalty and safety in a time of war and of suspicion" (107). Walshe's chapters are the most poorly edited of the volume, the whole of which could have used another round of copyediting, and include three misspelled characters' names. This brief and careless treatment is inadequate for three of Bowen's most critically acclaimed novels.

In Walshe's second contribution he discusses *The Little Girls* for one and a half pages before moving on to *Eva Trout*, though *Eva Trout* is the focus of O'Toole's chapter. Since *A World of Love* also receives its own chapter, anyone glancing at the table of contents would conclude erroneously that *A World of Love* and *Eva Trout* are considered Bowen's most important novels. Other oddities in the collection's structure are the presence of two articles about ghosts and haunting in Bowen's short stories and of two articles about Bowen's reception and place in literary criticism. A more coherent structure with emphasis on the major novels would have made this collection more useful to Bowen scholars and to students in courses on Bowen, British women's modernism, or Anglo-Irish literature.

MAREN LINETT

*Purdue University*



**Donald R. Wehrs. *Islam, Ethics, Revolt: Politics and Piety in Francophone West African and Maghreb Narrative*. Lanham: Lexington, 2008. 209 pp.**

The texts gathered in Donald Wehrs's *Islam, Ethics, Revolt: Politics and Piety in Francophone West African and Maghreb Narrative* originate from two distinct zones, the Sahel and the Maghreb, which are comprised of Arab, Berber, and Black peoples, many of whom are Muslim and all of whom were colonized by the French. All of the novels assembled in this study were written in French. This book therefore assumes the homogeneity of writers from these different regions on the basis of their shared Islamic heritages and experiences of French colonization. It tends to elide cultural differences

that may not seem significant to readers in Western academe but are certainly significant to those who inhabit these regions, especially those who live in the Sahel. The history of Arabic slavery and racism in Northwest Africa has indelibly marked relations between Muslims who live on both shores of the Sahara: for instance, this history continues to impact relations between Mouride and Tidjaniya Muslims in Senegal, the former who are often suspicious of the latter's historical links to the Arab world. Long before the French colonized Northwest Africa, the Pasha of Fez destroyed the "black" Songhay Dynasty of the Askiyas, despite their shared Islamic heritage. Yet, even before this catastrophic event, the Askiyas had already instituted the enslavement of many indigenous Sahelian groups, largely on the basis of their non-Arab blood lineage. While there is certainly a case to be made for a common history linking Maghrebian and Sahelian Muslims, differences between these zones are not insignificant. In fact, scholars of the Sahel like Jean Rouch, Paul Stoller, and Thomas Hale often describe Arabo-Islam as a relatively superficial overlay on an intact and thriving culture, which they refer to as "deep Sahelian culture."

This cultural aquifer differentiates the Islamic world of black West Africa from other Islamic zones, including the Arab-Berber culture of the Maghreb, which should also not be conflated with the Levant, Egypt, and Nubia. The resilience of ancient cultural beliefs along the Upper Niger Delta complicates Wehrs's argument that Muslims on both shores of the Sahara are equally hostile to pre-Islamic and "pagan" cultural influences. As a case in point, it is not coincidental that Wahhabi interpretations of the Qur'an—and the militant extremism that tend to accompany them—have not enjoyed much success in Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, and so on. Even Islamic militants like al hajj Umar Tall appear heretical from the "orthodox" and iconoclastic perspective that Wehrs assumes is evenly distributed throughout Northwest Africa. In short, Wehrs has not sufficiently reflected on historical and cultural differences between the Maghreb and Sahel. What his study lacks is consideration of pre-Islamic civilization in West Africa as something other than a merely "pagan" civilization, a homogenizing catachresis that is often evoked by Wehrs. This is not to say that Wehrs is oblivious to non-Islamic influences. In his reading of *Ouologuem*, for instance, Wehrs makes the case that *Ouologuem* harkens to a pre-Islamic "Dogon ethics" in his critique of Islam's historical abuse in Northern Mali, but Wehrs does not ask why the very notion of a "Dogon ethics" is finally inappropriate. (This is a question that Barbara Hoffman has addressed in her recent book, *Griots at War*, but those who have studied the *nyamakala* have long discussed it.)

Similarly, Wehrs draws extensively from the Lithuanian and Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in his efforts to explicate the novels of Northwest African writers, but he seldom mentions actual Islamic thinkers from these regions like al hajj Umar Tall, Sheikh Amadou Bamba, Thierno Bokar Tall, and Amadou Hampâté Bâ. The neglect of such writers cannot be due to the fact that their texts are unavailable in English and French, but in order to render the novelists under consideration more accessible to Wehrs's Western-based and theoretically informed audience. However, if Wehrs had more frequently consulted the texts of such local figures, it would have undermined his argument regarding the shared iconoclastic tendencies of those authors whom he studies. Wehr's efforts to recuperate such novelists within religious traditions that are exclusively Abrahamic is therefore misplaced. Levinas, for instance, is unabashedly Abrahamic and hardly shy about asserting religious doctrines of Jewish exceptionalism. Wehrs alludes to this when he cites Levinas's dogmatic view that, "Israel is the name . . . of *any* people that has submitted to the Law, non-Jewish as well as Jewish" (11). However, it remains to be asked to what extent Levinas also belongs to an ancient tradition that long predates the advent of the Abrahamic faiths, but that also encompasses the living and "pagan" religious traditions of Northwest Africa? For those who hail from this older civilization, Israel is merely the name for one more indigenous tribe, albeit one that absconded some sixty years ago. It is hardly a suitable marker for every single ethnic group in Africa that practices tribal cutting. In fact, the Ancient Egyptians practiced circumcision for thousands of years before the Abrahamic dispensation.

Wehrs's book nonetheless has a great deal to recommend it, and he is to be commended for his indefatigable efforts in addressing a topic of such importance, scope, and complexity. For those who are unfamiliar with the novels that he brings together, Wehrs's study also has the virtue of making accessible material that might otherwise seem hopelessly foreign to all but indigenous Northwest African readers and African Studies specialists. While such readers are sure to be dissatisfied with Wehrs's extensive reliance on Levinas in explicating the texts of influential Muslim figures like Ouologuem, Camara Laye, and Cheikh Hamidou Kane, the Western-based reader will certainly appreciate the hard work that has gone into making these difficult novels more comprehensible to them. Wehrs does an especially fine job in his readings of Mariama Bâ and Assia Djebar, sensitively probing issues that are both urgent and widely misconstrued. Wehrs is also very much on target with his criticisms of those Western academics who ignore

the impact of Islam in favor of popular themes (such as hybridity, marginality, postmodernity, and sisterhood) that have little to do with the actual lives of those who live in Northwest Africa. Wehrs rightly reminds his readers that "the difficulty that Western academic postcolonial discourse has had in hearing the evocation of Islamic ethical discourse within fiction from Muslim socio-political contexts reflects in part Western mis- or non-recognition of Islam as a *distinctive matrix of discourses*" (240). He identifies and demonstrates the relevance of many of the most essential terms of this Islamic "matrix of discourses" such as *jahiliyya*, *dar al-harb*, *shirk*, and *fitna*. Similarly Wehrs shows how Islamic conceptions of self throughout both the Magreb and the Sahel clash with the Cartesian individualism of the West. Wehrs observes that the Muslims of Northwest Africa tend to view the rational individual of Descartes as yet another variety of paganism that Islam eschews in preference for more participatory and other-directed concepts of self. His argument is certainly valid, although it remains to be said that many of the West African traditions that he construes as "pagan" are also hostile to Neo-Cartesian notions of self, but not necessarily because those who affirm them are iconoclastic Muslims or adherents to any variety of Abrahamic religion.

CHRISTOPHER WISE

*Western Washington University*

