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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## ***The Walking Qur'an* and its Contribution to Historical Perspectives and History of Islam in Africa**

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| ABSTRACT

This paper explores the contribution of *the Walking Qur'an...*<sup>1</sup> by Rudolf Ware III to historical perspectives and studies of the history of Islam in Africa as drawn of wisdom from an intellectual, historical, and religious perspective as his methodology beautifully tries to explain the religion and its roots and differences. The author, through an ethnographic approach, reaches the bottom of what it means to be studying in Qur'an schools in West Africa and how these taalibes (students of knowledge) were an embodiment of Islamic knowledge and were propelled into becoming Walking Qur'an. The author primarily examined the Qur'an schools in Senegambia, a region in present day Mali in West Africa, to assert the importance of the rituals associated with the process of acquiring knowledge of the Qur'an. He also showed how the schools became a driving force to resist European enslavement of Muslim clerics and their students in the region and beyond. As a result, this paper argues that the book epitomizes both cultural and postcolonial historical perspectives in helping us understand the historiography of Islam in West Africa.

| KEYWORDS

Historical Perspective, Qur'an Schools, Embodied Knowledge, Enslavement, Core Text, Spiritual

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### **1. Introduction**

Historical perspectives help us understand historical works and give meanings as well. As a result, historians, both old and recent, have persisted in developing these perspectives either by expanding them with new perspectives or by strengthening aspects of established ones through their works. The journey of history as a professional discipline dates back to the nineteenth century with 'big' names and works such as Leopold Von Ranke's *The idealistic theory of historiography*,<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Rudolf Elton's *The Practice of History*<sup>3</sup>, The *Annales*<sup>4</sup> and their works and works of Foucault.<sup>5</sup> This journey has been a long one and rich with interesting and deep thoughts, though sometimes difficult to understand.

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1. R. T. Ware III. *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*. UNC Press Books, 2014.

2. L. Von Ranke, "The idealist theory of historiography," in *The Theory and Practice of History* (Indianapolis,1973), eds. G.G. Iggers and K. von Moltke, 25-59

3. G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Oxford, 2002), Ch. 1-2, with Afterword by Richard J. Evans.

4. The *Annales* is a group of historians associated with historiography developed by French historians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

5. An astute postmodern historian

It is important to note that whereas some works target specific models and perspectives to help us understand them, others implicitly explore the perspectives in their studies of communities and societies. Von Ranke, for instance, invites us to trace the formation of history as a discipline in the *idealistic theory of historiography*<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, Clifford Geertz's *Thick description: towards an interpretive theory of culture* enables us to see how anthropological works support our interpretation of histories of communities, their cultural endeavors, and systems.<sup>7</sup> But Judith Walkowitz's *Science and the séance: transgressions of gender and genre in late Victorian London*<sup>8</sup> touches on social history, feminist theory, and new historical perspectives through the story of Mrs. Weldon against the lunacy doctors in the 1870s to the 80s.

This paper takes a cue from works that do not specifically treat historical perspectives or models but use studies of individuals and communities to explore these models, like Walkowitz. The focus of this paper is *the Walking Qur'an* by Rudolf Ware III, an Africanist historian of Islam in Africa. I situate his work within historiographical work that connects cultural history and postcolonial history and assert its contribution to both historical perspectives and the history of Islam in Africa.

The field of history from the twentieth century has gone through many stages of development, beginning from political history to postmodern history. One cannot trace the history of this development without stating the unique contribution of the *Annales* 'school' and its scholars. The 'school' expanded our understanding of macro and micro histories. While early *Annales* historians such as Fernand Braudel focused on 'big histories' (macro), Later *Annales* like Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie shifted their perspective to a narrower study of societies (micro). Works of Jacques Le Goff and Le Roy Ladurie explored the history of 'mentalities'.<sup>9</sup> This kind of history concentrated on habits and contexts of what people did. Although the history of 'mentalities' is closer to intellectual history, the latter is interested in the personal thoughts of individuals and their intellectual contributions.

The history of 'mentalities' rather took cognizance of the many things people did at a deeper level of their uncommon sense. This kind of micro-history was the beginning of cultural history, which later took form in the works of anthropologists in the 1970s. These anthropologists contributed new models and approaches to explore and interpret the minute activities of people, which did not seem to make sense to others. Clifford Geertz, for instance, developed the 'thick description' approach in the 1970s as an ethnographic practice where the researcher concentrated not only on animate things but inanimate as well, giving interpretation about how those things meant and connected to humans.<sup>10</sup> Robert Darnton and others who used this perspective became influential in the 80s and the 90s. In accounts of the *Great Cat Massacre* in the 1970s,<sup>11</sup> Darnton explored the ideologies, beliefs, values, faiths, and mental thoughts of the people, helping us to understand the cultural aspects of their lives that may have been historically suppressed or forgotten.

Although Le Roy, Geertz, Darnton, and others may not have intended to project cultures of 'minorities', I argue that their works included inherent recognition of the identities of societies they studied. This acknowledgement of people's cultures later developed to become postcolonial history in the postmodern era. After all, in the views of Prasenjit Duara,<sup>12</sup> a feature of postcolonial history is to take an interest in using the discourse of identities to understand societies. In developing postcolonial history, Subaltern Studies emerged in the 80s, fostering new alternative histories to 'Eurocentric' historical paradigms that had engulfed the practice of history. The Subalterns produced histories of people originally neglected by giving them agency and restoring their identities. This

<sup>6</sup> L. Von Ranke, 1973

<sup>7</sup> C. Geertz, "Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 3-30.

<sup>8</sup> J. Walkowitz, "Science and the séance: transgressions of gender and genre in late Victorian London," *Representations* 22 (1988) 3-29.

<sup>9</sup> E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324* (London, 1978), Introduction, Ch. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> C. Geertz, 1973.

<sup>11</sup> R. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), Ch. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Duara, Prasenjit. "Postcolonial history." In *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* (2002): 417-431.

postcolonial critique influenced scholarly works in many places, including Africa. Thus, both cultural and postcolonial histories overlap in perspectives that make unknown people's experiences known and grant voices to marginalized societies. It is against this background that I situate *the Walking Qur'an*. On the one hand, it reveals important cultural practices of the Qur'an schools, which are hidden or overlooked among Muslims in West Africa, and interprets their practices that formed the foundation of their social fabric, while on the other, it argues for the recognition of 'black' Muslims experiences in the Senegambia and other places in West Africa as part of a mainstream Islamic worldview and not anti-orthodox as most Western scholars, as well as others, have stated.

Ware III achieves this objective by providing detailed practices of the Qur'an schools from the viewpoint of the practitioners, showing how their knowledge seeking dynamics, such as listening to the reading of the Qur'an and drinking its written and washed verses, sought to remake them as living replica of the Qur'an itself. The Muslim clerics, by this formula, transferred core texts of the Qur'an through rituals into the human body to shape them in the likes of Prophet Muhammad so they became bearers of the word of God. Although for Ware III, this method of 'embodied knowledge' acquisition may sound controversial to others, its history is its support. He traces the school's epistemology to expressions in classical Islamic frameworks of learning and knowledge seeking paradigms, showing how similar practices ensued between Muhammad and his companions.

Besides the practices of the schools, Ware III demonstrates the contributions of West African Muslims through the school to the symbol of Muslim identity, often marginalized in historiographical works. He notes that the schools echoed Muslim influence in the region and became powerful channels for African resistance to enslavement by Europeans. Furthermore, irrespective of changes in learning pedagogies by the French colonial administration, terming the Qur'an schools as 'traditional' to their 'modern' ones to undermine the embodied learning pattern, impoverished families among the Muslims kept the process alive by sending their children to the Qur'an schools to gain recognition and status. In other words, the schools served not only as a source of knowledge but also as a source of status and pride. By re-affirming West Africans' resistance towards marginalization either through methodologies of knowledge acquisition or opposition to enslavement, Ware III engages a postcolonial perspective into the narrative of the development of Islam in West Africa. This contribution of Ware III is appreciated if one traces the history of Islam in Africa.

It is important to note that Muslims' experience, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, was marginalized in the discussions on religion in Africa. It was not until the mid-twentieth century onwards that vigorous attempts were made to study the history of Islam and Muslim experiences in the regions. In the *historiography of Islam in West Africa*, Benjamin Soares<sup>13</sup> notes that the marginalization was not only caused by historians but also by anthropologists who began studies on religion in Africa. The anthropologists initially neglected the study of religion, in general, in sub-Saharan Africa. Those who later became interested were particularly concerned with what they termed "primitive", "tribal", "traditional religion," and in recent times, "African traditional religion (ATR)". Now, this has shifted to "Indigenous African religions". The anthropologists ascribed feminist spiritual orientations to Africans' religious experiences and described them in various ways. For Soares, the study of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa followed similar paradigms. Anthropologists studied Islam through the lens of imposed African religious models of spiritual possession or trance. Thus, spirit possession became the dominant feature that was attributed to both precolonial and postcolonial Muslim Africa. In *the Walking Qur'an*, Ware III<sup>14</sup> expands Soares views by arguing that the opening of female spheres of social and ritual authority into the development of Islam in Africa enforced the textual divide between textual Islam and corporeal spiritism. Ware III boldly states that the field was constructed as "though one cannot be an authentically African and authentically Muslim at the same time."<sup>15</sup>

Soares further indicates that from the 1960s to the 80s, scholars trained as orientalist and later historians of Africa dominated studies in Islam and Muslim communities in Africa. Initial studies within this period focused on the

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<sup>13</sup> B. Soares. "The historiography of Islam in West Africa: an anthropologist's view." *The Journal of African History* 55, no. 1 (2014): 27-36.

<sup>14</sup> R. Ware III, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

medieval West African ("Sudanese") states and empires from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. However, the discussion of these kingdoms generally followed oriental design, emphasizing stagnation and decline. Later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, attention shifted from these empires to reform, revival, and jihad. Murray Last's *The book in the Sokoto Caliphate*<sup>16</sup> and Marvin Hiskett's *Sword of Truth*<sup>17</sup> described Usman dan Fodio and his reform movement. The ambiance of reform movements intensified discussions on Sufism (the mystical traditions of Islam) in Africa and the significance of the Sufi orders. This trend saw significant work on Qadiriyyah and Tijaniyyah Sufi orders, among others, and their leaders. The Sufi Movements were analyzed as nascent nationalism, proto-political projects, social movements, and instances of progressive Islamization. Some West African communities related their Sufi leaders to the anti-colonial resistance figures. Some works also traced the intellectual backgrounds of scholars and individuals and their quest for knowledge. *The Walking Qur'an* provides practical situations where the Qur'an schools epitomized the aspirations of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa within this period and beyond.

Although several works have focused on Islamic education, most of them have not fully covered the cultural dimension of the schools in sub-Saharan Africa as treated by Ware III. Louis Brenner's influential work, *Controlling Knowledge*, explored some aspects of the Islamic schools in Mali, albeit as Soares explains, Brenner claimed 'traditional' schooling shifted from exoteric episteme associated with "hierarchy, secrecy, and chains of institution to rationalist episteme in 'modern' education that is egalitarian and open to all who enter."<sup>18</sup> Brenner treated the Qur'an schools and their practices as inferior, but Ware III restores its pride by arguing for the schools' attempt to preserve Islamic values and knowledge transmission in West Africa.

With this, Ware III shifts focus from dominant discussions on jihad and reform to the basic element of Muslim lives. The embodied knowledge practices between the clerics and their students in the Senegambian Qur'an schools gave meaning to both spiritual and physical manifestations of their conduct. Ware III's extensive use of sources brings to bear his understanding of limitations in individual sources used in reconstructing the African past. He supplements his three-year participant observations in his field work with fifty-two interviews, collecting data from practitioners of the schools. Other sources include autobiographical narratives, archival collections, newspapers, and four hundred scholarly studies. He traces the origin of the practices of the practical, personified, human embodied transmission of knowledge to the Maliki madhhab. He finds out that such embodied knowledge incorporates both spiritual awareness and practical knowledge. The students' acquisition of knowledge was not complete without physically experiencing it with their bodies. This involved sensory experience of hearing the recitation of the Qur'an; drinking washed written verses of the Qur'an, and physical discipline, including rewards and punishments. This was to allow students to recognize that *ilm* (knowledge) and *aml* (work) are inseparable. Ware III further critiques modern Islamic schools that emphasize knowledge of the text without embodied strategies, depriving students of the spiritual dimensions of the text. These details Ware III provides offer us the opportunity to see Geertz's "thick description" in practice in the postmodern history of Islam in West Africa.

Besides arguing for the practices of the Qur'an schools, Ware III shows how enslavement did not only involve persons but through academic work, West African Muslims' experiences were sometimes downgraded. He contests the use of labels such as 'Islam in Africa' and 'African Islam' to show the distinction between Islam and studies of sub-Saharan African Muslims. For Ware III, these terms are sometimes used to portray Islam as alien or external or Islamic practices in 'black African' societies as exotic and heterodox. On enslavement of people within this period, chapter three of *the Walking Qur'an*, entitled *The Book in Chains*, narrates the bitter experiences of enslaving Muslim clerics and their students and how the schools built up moral and militant opposition to the enslavement of Africans. Thus, Ware III does not only show details of the embodied practices of the Qur'an schools, which is absent from many works on studies of Islam in Africa but emphasizes the importance of the 'black African Muslims' experiences to the development of Islam in Africa.

<sup>16</sup> L. Murray. "The book in the Sokoto Caliphate." In the *the meanings of Timbuktu* (2008): 135-163.

<sup>17</sup> H. Mervyn. *The Sword of Truth: the life and times of the Shehu Usuman dan Fodio*. Oxford Univ Pr, 1973.

<sup>18</sup> L. Brenner *Controlling knowledge: Religion, power, and schooling in a West African Muslim society*. Indiana University Press, 2001. Pg. 34.

However, the book has received some critique from some scholars about its coverage, methodology, and inadequate details to back up some bold assertions. For instance, David Robinson asserts that Ware argued in much of the book that France's isolation and segregation of Senegambia and some other places of French West Africa left the practices of Islam in French West Africa in a "classical" pattern. This was different from the Mediterranean and some other places of Muslim societies, which were influenced by modern trends. For Robinson, Ware did not provide adequate details about what he meant by 'classical pattern' and its peculiarity to West Africa or Francophone West Africa.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the "*Walking Qur'an*" used as the title, which connected to the hadith reported by Aisha, the wife of Prophet Muhammad, did mean that the Prophet became the embodiment of the Qur'an through drinking, but it meant his actions were translation of the Qur'an. The phrase "*kaana khulquhuu al-Qur'aan*" or "His Character was the Qur'aan" in the hadith emphasizes the Prophet's application of the teachings of the Qur'an. This is the most classical perspective from the Prophet himself. Stories of drinking verses of the Qur'an were connected to healing methods, which are well contested and debated by scholars.

Irrespective of the critiques, the book does well in expanding our historical perspectives of cultural history and history from below.

## 2. Conclusion

This paper explored the contribution of Ware III's *The Walking Qur'an* to both cultural and postcolonial historical perspectives. As noted from the above discussion, its contribution to cultural history is derived from the description of 'embodied knowledge' procedures among West African Muslims in Senegambia prior to colonial rule. Although other works had focused on micro-history in their description of African Muslims, *the Walking Qur'an* examined detailed aspects of the lives of the Muslims, which had been taken for granted by many historians by offering basic practices that consolidated their ways of life and kept the communities going. Besides helping to understand how the communities acquired the knowledge of the Qur'an, it connects us to earlier works on Islam in Africa and the historical perspectives of Geertz, Darnton, and others whose works helped to expand cultural history. Furthermore, *the Walking Qur'an* forces us to refute tendencies of marginalizing experiences of Muslims in Africa, especially those in the sub-Saharan region. This postcolonial context recognized the contribution of the Qur'an schools in giving meaning to the training techniques of the Muslims and in their resistance to European enslavement in the region and beyond. What more can we say? The book's contribution both to historical perspective and studies on Islam in Africa cannot be over-emphasized.

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