

Tamba M'Bayo, *Muslim Interpreters in Colonial Senegal, 1850-1920: Mediations of Knowledge and Power in the Lower and Middle Senegal River Valley*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016). pp. 234.

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In the conclusion of *Muslim Interpreters in Colonial Senegal, 1850-1920: Mediations of Knowledge and Power in the Lower and Middle Senegal River Valley* (2016), historian Tamba M'Bayo writes: "The purpose of this book is to bring Muslim interpreters/translators back to center stage of scholarship on colonial Senegal and French West Africa in general."<sup>1</sup> This quote synthesizes the importance of the history that M'Bayo has set out to uncover in his first book, which is richly packed with archival evidence and oral histories situated against a detailed historiographic backdrop. By the end of this book, readers will deeply understand what is truly at stake in moving Muslim interpreters "back to center stage."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Senegalese Muslim interpreters are centered as the main stars of this story. This reflects one of M'Bayo's main arguments: Scholars of Senegalese colonial history have too often overlooked the important role African intermediaries played in facilitating the daily interactions between French officials, African rulers, and local African civilians. In centering the history of interpreters, M'Bayo sets off to move past the collaborator/resistor paradigm that often identifies indigenous colonial interpreters and other intermediaries as traitors to the resistance cause. Instead, M'Bayo aims to locate these figures at the center of a complex matrix of cultural mediation between different actors in colonial Senegal. In this way, Senegalese Muslim interpreters become active historical agents who used knowledge gained through their daily interactions to navigate colonial systems of power.

Methodological interventions, such as the organization and chapter construction, flow seamlessly throughout M'Bayo's book, grounding us firmly in his ideologically innovative research. For example, in his introduction, M'Bayo alerts readers that he uses a combination of chronological and thematic organization to "avoid a teleological construct that overlooks overlapping and concurrent historical happenings."<sup>3</sup> He also often refers to his archival

research as “against the grain,” as he uses French colonial records to tell the story of Muslim interpreters who were often excluded from, or not explicitly named in, the papers in question.

As the French expanded their rule inland of the Senegal river valley, they realized how widespread the influence of Islam and the use of Arabic was in the region. Thus, they made Arabic the language of communication with African rulers, which is where M’Bayo’s protagonists enter the stage. In the first two chapters, M’Bayo uses colonial archives and oral histories from descendants of interpreters to construct a biographical history of four of the most influential Muslim interpreters during this time (Hamat Ndiaye Anne, Bou el Mogdad Seck, Mamadou Seck, and Faram Biram Lô). The second chapter focuses on a selection of lower-tier interpreters to display the heterogeneous nature of Muslim interpreters across class. The biographies of high- and low-profile Muslim interpreters serve as a point of reference throughout the rest of the book. In chapters three through five, we learn about the importance of indigenous Muslim interpreters in imperial expansion (chapter three), the role interpreters played during the largest resistance efforts before formal colonial rule, including aiding the French against the rise of resistance leaders such as al-Hajj Umar Tall and Amadu Bamba (chapter four), and the role interpreters played aiding the French to carry out their pacification strategy in Mauritania (chapter five). These chapters detail the complex choices made by interpreters as mediators between colonial power and colonial resistance.

M’Bayo situates his work in the period from 1850 to 1920 because, unlike most studies that associate the beginning of direct European colonial intervention immediately after the infamous scramble for Africa in 1885, the 1850s were “a watershed in the long *durée* of Senegal’s history.”<sup>4</sup> During this time before formal colonial rule, the French leadership tested out its “Islamic Policy,” established elite schools to train young translators, and developed its military strategy. All of these processes laid the foundation for the establishment of what is considered to be the formal colonial period, and Muslim interpreters often found themselves at the center of mediation on all matters of colonial expansion.

A key theme of M’Bayo’s book is mediations of knowledge and power. This theme is highlighted particularly well in

chapter 5, where M'Bayo tracks the collection of "knowledge" about Muslims through the work of French colonialists starting the mid-1800s. One notable example of this type of knowledge production is Alfred le Châtelier's study *L'Islam dans l'Afrique occidentale* (1899). Packed with racist myths about Africans and Islam, this book and others like it laid the ideological foundations of French policy in West Africa and served as a cornerstone for its political strategy. While Muslim interpreters undoubtedly played a role in the transmission and translation of such knowledge and often exhibited an undying commitment to the French cause, at times they felt ambivalent towards French Muslim policy in Senegal.

M'Bayo does a meticulous job of reading Senegalese colonial archives in his painting of intermediaries as liminal figures caught between local struggles and colonial powers. While M'Bayo notes the need for much more breadth of empirical research on these characters, it would have been interesting in this work to identify moments where interpreters actively resisted the colonial authorities who employed them. This would include another type of reading against the grain, such as some of the work that scholars have been doing to identify the purposeful misinterpretation and misguidance of indigenous interpreters as understood through the personal journal of French colonialist Michel Leiris in *Afrique Fantôme* (1934). Still, M'Bayo's success lies in his expert ability to piece together holes in colonial archives to tell a story that is critical to the understanding of Senegalese power relations under French colonial rule.

M'Bayo brilliantly shifts the location of Muslim interpreters from the margins to the center in his book, which contributes to work being done to expose the structural frailties of the French colonial state and the administrative panic and bureaucratic chaos that ensued from its first moments in Africa. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in complicating narratives of colonial Senegal, studying the role of intermediaries across global empires, and conceptualizing liminal figures caught between colonial power struggles.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tamba M'Bayo, *Muslim Interpreters in Colonial Senegal, 1850-1920: Mediations of Knowledge and Power in the Lower and Middle Senegal River Valley*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 162.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xvi.