



**Thiago Henrique Motta.** *Portugueses e Muçulmanos na Senegâmbia: História e Representações do Islã na África (c. 1570-1625)*. Curitiba: Editora Prismas, 2016. 339 pp. BRL 58.00, ISBN 978-85-550-7266-6.

**Reviewed by** Toby O. Green (Department of History/Kings College London)

**Published on** H-Luso-Africa (July, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Philip J. Havik (Instituto de Higiene e Medicina Tropical (IHMT))

## Representations of Islam in West Africa

One of the huge transformations in the field of pre-colonial African history over the past decade has been the entry of a significant number of excellent scholars based in Brazil into debates which had hitherto been centered largely in the Anglo-American academy. This has led to several important changes of emphasis, not least in the growth of south-south Atlantic studies, where in the field of Angolan history it is increasingly unsustainable to engage in the study without proper engagement with the Brazilian literature.

As with most historiographies, this shift has tended to be focused initially on the regions where Brazil has most historical connection, especially Angola, and in the northeast of Brazil in the Costa da Mina (Dahomey and the Yoruba coast). This is one of the things which marks out Thiago Mota's new book on Senegambia as presenting a new direction in Africanist history produced in Brazil. Senegambia was not a region with many historical ties to Brazil (beyond Maranhão), and Mota's book shows that a new generation of historians there are seeking to diversify the historiographical engagement of Africanists beyond regions tied to Brazil, and into areas of more generalized academic interest.

*Portugueses e Muçulmanos na Senegâmbia* certainly tackles an important, and understudied theme. As Mota writes in his introduction, the historical study of Islam in West Africa has generally been related to the era of the great states, and especially Songhay, and then to

the wave of reformist revolutionary movements that got underway from the second half of the eighteenth century, especially in Massina, Sokoto, and related areas. However, as Mota acutely notes, this debate leaves out an important phase in these changes, from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, when Atlantic and Sahelian trading systems interacted and overlapped in important ways in Senegambia. Studying these interactions in detail may well, as he suggests in this book, offer new insights into the transformations which subsequently were so important to West African histories.

Mota's book is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter looks at Islam as a symbol of alterity in medieval Europe; the second looks at groundings of representations and ideas concerning Africa and Africans in medieval Europe, to the fifteenth century; the third looks at the emergence of Luso-African identities in Senegambia; the fourth, at the way in which the two worldviews met through the interactions of Jesuits and itinerant merchant-scholars, the *bexerins* or marabouts; and the final one at the Islamization of Senegambia through to the seventeenth century. Mota succeeds in showing a deep level of Islamization in the region by the end of the book, with pilgrimages to the sites of Islamic holy men, Qur'anic schools, the economic importance of the kola nut trade in this region long prior to the Hausa kola trade studied by Paul Lovejoy, pilgrimages to Mecca, and key features of Islamic life such as prayer and charity all

clearly present by 1625.

Several important questions emerge in consequence of Mota's analysis, which offer—as he himself notes in his conclusion—a starting point rather than definitive conclusions. Mota's final chapter on Islamization is connected closely in his analysis to the expansion of the Fula state of Futa Tooro on the north bank of the Senegal, and the growth of Manding trade networks in Senegambia (Mandinguization). On this analysis, the political and economic consolidation which went with the rise of long-distance trade (both trans-Saharan and transatlantic) helped to structure the consolidation of Islamic structures within Senegambia.

And yet this is a consequence of long-distance trade which is often poorly studied, certainly for Senegambia. As Mota notes Islamic traders were usually scholars (*bexerins*), thus there certainly is a connection which he is right to point out. As he states: “[In both cases] the first groups to adhere to Islam were the traders” (p. 200). Atlantic histories touching on West Africa tend to emphasize the exchange of material goods, and the slave trade, while touching only rarely on the connections of these material trades to structures of belief. The related rise of both Islam and trade revealed in this book by Mota suggests rather that historians need to take greater account of belief structures and religion as these related to material transformations in West Africa in this period.

A further point of interest is the relationship between Catholic Portuguese and Islamic trans-Saharan traders in Senegambia. Mota's sources are three quite well-known published and printed chronicles by André Álvares da Almada, Manuel Álvares, and André Donelha, and the many different representations of Islamic traders and societies which he shows emerge in these texts. Yet the representations here did not build from nothing; as Mota discusses in the first two chapters, they built from a long-standing tradition of the view of the Muslim as “the other,” and of representations of Africa and Africans, dating back to medieval Portugal. What Mota attempts here is to recast our understanding of mutual discoveries in a historical way, showing the way that textual and

artistic representations are not merely artifacts in themselves, but in fact structured the ways in which historical interactions then occurred.

Mota's theoretical construction is also important to this work. Coming out of the well-developed social science schools of Brazil, he takes a very acute theoretical lens to these questions, grounded in empirical observations of change. This is an approach which works well. By looking at the different facets of interaction, and at the question of representations of the other as they structured reality, Mota moves beyond a monolithic recasting of history as “Catholic Portuguese” against “Islamic others.” He shows well how the interactions of individuals, and the ideas and realities which conditioned these, are vital to understanding the transformations which occurred.

Mota's use of the three well-known chronicles mentioned above to develop these ideas is salutary. The fact that he is able to excavate so much content on Islam from published and easily available sources, and thus inaugurate almost completely a new field of research, shows just how much work there still is to do in this area. As he states in the concluding lines to his book, he has only even begun to scratch the surface: “Altogether, the period between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries continues to be little known, almost a mystery, which the present research wishes to cast some light upon. There is a lot to be known about the Qur'anic schools, the commercial networks of the *bexerins* between the coast and the interior, the social and architectural space of the mosques, the development of *aljamiada* writing—fascinating issues which we could not analyze in depth in these pages” (p. 322).

Although somewhat limited by the availability of international texts and archives to a young academic in Brazil, Mota nevertheless pioneers a new study. And with future years, I am sure more rounded and deeper engagement with oral and other sources will emerge. *Portugueses e Muçulmanos na Senegâmbia* thus introduces an important new voice to the historiography of Senegambia.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-luso-africa>

**Citation:** Toby O. Green. Review of Motta, Thiago Henrique, *Portugueses e Muçulmanos na Senegâmbia: História e Representações do Islã na África (c. 1570-1625)*. H-Luso-Africa, H-Net Reviews. July, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49801>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.