Pragmatism in the Age of Jihad: The Precolonial State of Bundu

By Michael A. Gomez. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 252 pp.

Without doubt, Gomez has made a great contribution to the understanding of Islam in Bundu. Although a few works have been published on Islam in West Africa, Gomez's work is a valuable addition. The author begins by locating Bundu on the map of West Africa and explaining the scope of his research and the sources upon which he relies. Gomez attributes the success of Bundu as a state to its pragmatic policies, which, he alleges, were predetermined by its founders. By pragmatism he means:

> a policy in which the pursuit of commercial and agricultural advantage supersedes all other considerations, to the extent that alliances and rivalries with both neighboring polities and European powers are determined by economic expediency, and are subject to rapid and frequent realignment. (p. 2)

Compliance with this policy implies that the foreign and domestic affairs are not based on advancing the claims of Islam, but rather on promoting peaceful coexistence among all groups, be they Muslim or non-Muslim, in Bundu.

This book is designed for general readers. The author discusses major issues in Bundu and Senegambia before the imposition of colonial rule and administration. He analyzes critically the significant roles played by Almaamis (the imams) Malik Sy, Buba Malik, Maka Jiba, Amadi Gai, Bokar Saada, and Mamadu Lamine and provides a clear explanation of the Bundu state's gradual development from the sixteenth century until 1902. He also shows the French administration's insidious politics of divide and rule in St. Louis, Bakel, and Senegal, which was designed to weaken Bundu by instigating conflict between one imam and another and to control the trade in this area (pp. 95-97). Throughout his analysis, Gomez reiterates cautiously his thesis that Bundu's leaders were never interested in advancing Islam or establishing a strong Islamic state. Rather, they were "essentially concerned with preservation and commercial expansion of the state" (p. 99).

Toward the end of the book, he deals more with the leadership of Bokar Saada, who reigned for a long time despite the lack of popular support. Bokar Saada was a leader forced on Bundu by French administrators.

Gomez comments further on the attempts of both Al-Hajji Umar and Mamadu Lamine to introduce what he terms "militant" Islam into Bundu and its vicinity. Their attempts failed, for the Bundunke denounced any strict application of Islamic law. Gomez refuses to accept that the failure of both Al-Hajji Umar and Mamadu Lamine was inevitable due to the strained relationship between these Muslim jihadists and the colonialist French invaders who perceived their potential reforms as a threat to their stability in the area, which caused both the French and the British to oppose vigorously these two indigenous leaders.

In addition, Gomez provides a lucid picture of the daily social lives of the inhabitants of the Bundu state. He relates how they lived, married, governed themselves, applied their laws, operated their courts, and carried out orders of the courts. He elaborates on how they trained their military men, convened meetings, selected their successors, and raided one another. However, he does not give enough information about the treatment and role of women in Bundu in regard to the domestic, social, and political spheres. In order to enrich his work further, he has included eleven appendixes at the back that both outline the succession of Bundu's leaders and enumerate the treaties that the rulers concluded with the Europeans.

Perhaps some features can be inferred from Gomez's account of the Bundu state's history. First, before the arrival of the French, the state was populated primarily by the majority Muslim community, some members of which were literate in Arabic. All of their leaders, the Almaamis, were learned people, a fact that renders untenable the assumption that the French and British came to Africa to educate and civilize Africans.

Second, the author states that the practice of slave raiding was not uncommon among Africans, who were raiding and enslaving themselves before the advent of Islam in West Africa. Therefore, Islam was not responsible for the establishment of the slave trade, and such Muslim leaders as Amadi Gai and Bokar Saada, who raided neighboring Muslim cities, should be blamed for their greed and oppression. Despite the fact that the slave trade existed in West Africa, the way the slaves were treated by African masters differed greatly from their (mal)treatment by European masters. In Bundu, some slaves held key influential positions in the military and within the courts. Some were even advisors to the Almaamis (p. 149). In West Africa, slaves were allowed to work and earn enough money to buy their freedom, could learn and participate in the building of their society, and were occasionally promoted to royal status. They were not often dehumanized by their masters.

Third, the author points out how both the French and British administrators interfered in and influenced tribal wars by supplying weapons to both sides when tribes became involved in intertribal conflicts. This was done, he maintains, for the purpose of allowing the fighting tribes to weaken and kill one another. Although Bundu leaders signed treaties of mutual cooperation with the French and British in good faith, they were ignorant of the hidden agenda of the colonial invaders, whose primary purpose was

to conquer and plunder Africa of its natural resources. Striving to achieve these goals, both the British and the French employed everything in their possession to destabilize and destroy Bundu. To them, the ends justified any means, regardless of the degree of cruelty involved.

Furthermore, Gomez concludes emphatically that Bundu was a moderate Muslim state and power, that this pragmatic approach enabled it to prosper and to withstand upheaval in Senegambia for nearly two centuries, and that Bundu was perceived by both internal and external observers as a Muslim state (p. 180) despite its noncompliance with Islamic law. All of these assertions are questionable. The pragmatic approach did not provide Bundu with a stable state or great affluence, but rather subjected it to repeated invasion. Each group, whether local or foreign, had an interest in Bundu due to its commercial and strategic position. In reality, Bundu became a victim of raids and invasions launched by all those intent upon exploiting it. This pragmatic approach might also be responsible for the malpractices of its leaders, who were lax in their morals and had no specific rules to abide by or to check their behavior. As a result, Bundu's leaders were vulnerable to reformers' calls for revolution and to British and French exploitative interests.

In addition, the author's analysis suggests that the pursuit of economic development might be preferred to religious ideals, for Bundu prospered because it followed a pragmatic approach. This conclusion is untenable. We believe that African people need both economic stability and religious guardianship. Without a religious system of morals and a sense of belonging to and being accountable to God, moral values would be undermined. Consequently, the rich would treat the masses as commodities and objects of exploitation, as happened in Bundu. The Almaamis began to raid neighboring villages and captured slaves to work on their farms. The French and British bought slaves, packed them, and exported them to America and Europe for hard labor. In our view, the pursuit of wealth or economic development for its own sake often leads to exploitation, slavery, and oppression. Pragmatism—the pursuit of economic prosperity—amounts to a state of neutrality and lawlessness, where the drive to earn more and get more by all means determines how one relates to another. Economic prosperity deteriorates when there is the absence of strict law that protects the poor and checks the leaders' tendencies toward injustice. Therefore, contrary to Gomez's conclusion, we think that the downfall of the Bundu state was due to the so-called "pragmatic policies" that it followed.

Finally, there are several points of which the readers should be aware. First is the author's allegation that adhering to Islamic law often leads to destruction and oppression. Second is the assertion that the main incentive for supporting Bokar Saada, other than a fear of reprisal, was the spoils of war and oppression (p. 149). Third is the claim that many of the Almaamis did not adhering to the Islamic teachings and drank alcohol and had more than four wives (pp. 150-51). Why should the actions of these leaders be judged and assessed on the basis of Islamic laws when they made a delib-

erate decision to ignore Islamic laws in order to follow pragmatic policies? We consider such remarks uncritical and also wonder why he alleges that the enforcement of strict Islamic law would cause or lead to oppression. Perhaps adopting pragmatism actually caused the oppression and greed that led eventually to Bundu's weakness and downfall. In addition, Gomez's attempt to detail all historical events in Bundu and its vicinities leads to confusion. This work would have been more beneficial had the author concentrated on the major events only.

However, despite these shortcomings, this book is a must read for students of Islam in Africa. The author guides readers into the heart of events in Bundu and its vicinities. He portrays the French and British administrators as they really were before they took over and divided West Africa into pieces for their own interests. Nevertheless, with all these analyses, Gomez does not state explicitly where he belongs. Is he condemning foreign interference and the invasion of Bundu? Is he praising Bundu leaders despite their corruption and failure on several occasions? Is he warning against the application of Islamic law in West Africa in the future? Does describing a place as a Muslim land make it an Islamic state? Were such West African Muslim reformers as Al-Hajji Umar, Mamadu Lamine, and Uthman Dan Fodio striving to locate a Muslim land or struggling to establish an Islamic state where the law of God would prevail? What does Islamization mean to Gomez if Bundu's leaders deliberately rejected the application of Islamic law? Gomez offers hardly any answers. As a historian, he thinks facts must speak for themselves. Of course, they do not always do that—history is what historians make it.

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