

## BOOK REVIEW

Yahya Sseremba. *America and the Production of Islamic Truth in Uganda*. New York: Routledge, 2023. 216 pp. \$136.00. Hardback. ISBN: 9781032412085.

Postcolonial scholarship is undergoing a conceptual crisis on the discourse of colonialism, with a number of scholars emphasizing African agency in colonial modernity and others even suggesting that decolonization is a grandiose project. In attempting to rewrite the history of colonialism, an emerging scholarship further claims that premodern societies were also colonial. Colonialism is thus fashioned not only as modern and Western but also premodern and non-Western. This claim to a universal character of colonialism results from a translation of every form of power as colonial, and therefore misconstruing any form of social or political domination as colonialism. The universalization of colonial modernity is then recast as a question on the relevance of the contemporary decolonization project, conceiving it as yet another racializing consciousness. In fact, these postcolonial thinkers often invite us to shift our focus away from the legacy of the modern West because it shares no ideological difference from its non-Western other but to rather locate the problem of the postcolonial states in the African elite who have failed democracy.

Yahya Sseremba's *America and the Production of Islamic Truth* is a writing back against the vindication of the modern West in the political crisis of the post-colony. He examines the postcolonial state in Africa and the world to emphasize Western modernity's remaking of the world we have inherited through fashioning both traditional and religious customs of the colonized world. Focusing on Uganda and the Muslim minority question, Sseremba observes how America is completing the work of the British colonial state in inventing Islam. He contends that the British colonial state corrupted the Shari'ah, created Mohammedan law and fashioned Muslim homelands but had failed to comprehensively reshape the Kabalaza (the "informal school") from where Islamic religious education was conducted and teachers and preachers of Islam also trained. The survival of the Kabalaza enabled Muslims to continue interpreting Islam according to their circumstances even in the postcolonial era. In postcolonial Uganda, the Kabalaza continued expanding into the Madrasa (the formal school) which also remained a target of state scrutiny. The modern state has always thought of Madrasas as sites of indoctrination with extremist, intolerant, and terrorist ideas. The aftermath of the 9/11 attack on America produced a more comprehensive anti-Islam agenda through the ideology of the war on terror. The US-led war on terror in which America imagines itself as exorcising Islam of violence amplified the fear of the Madrasa and thus activated a Madrasa education reform.

The Madrasa education reform is a complementary strategy to the modern state violence against Muslim subjects, and it is part of a larger Islamic Reform Project under the auspices of the US Department of State. Sseremba observes the persistent attempt to create a state-controlled central authority to preside over the Islamic and Quranic schools, standardize the Madrasa curricular and eliminate the purported extremist content. Islamic scriptures are the target of the truth-making machine of the state which seeks to invent a uniform curriculum for all Madrasas. The US Department of State co-opts Muslim agency in the process of gathering information justifying state intervention in Islamic education. Uganda's Muslim Center for Justice and Law (MCJL) is one of the supporters of having all Madrasas under the superintendence of the Ugandan Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC). The Islamic Reform Project produces an Islam whose proselytizer is the modern state and civil society. America is transforming Muslim authorities into missionaries of the modern state. If postcolonial African governments have struggled to effectively govern Muslim subjects, they have found a harmonizing corridor in the American factory of Islamic truth. The modern state is convinced that reforming Islamic education would do what violence is failing to do, which is to buy consent of subjectivity. The modern state imagines that with reforming Islamic education, the Muslim subjects no longer have to be continually bombed into submitting to state power but they can actually be brought up as governable and self-governing subjects for an even longer period of time. If colonial powers of yesteryears principally coerced societies, the American empire also rides on building consent from the dominated. The dominated are especially turned into obedient fashioners of truths about their traditions.

Sseremba in fact decries the conscription of Muslim agency into the modernist epistemes that seek to monopolize power in a sense that reproduces the colonial logics of governance. He illustrates how some of the reforms in Islamic thought such as those propounded in the ideas of Muslim thinkers like Muhammad Iqbal of Pakistan or Hashim Kamali of Malaysia are also conscripted in modern colonial epistemes. Even Muslim thinkers who are critical of Western modernity are locked in the imagination of the modern state which monopolizes the authority to make, interpret, and enforce law. (177). When Sheikh Muhammad Ahmed Kisuule, one of Uganda's most nuanced traditional-leaning Islamic scholars proposes the establishment of a central authority in charge of producing Islamic teachers and preachers, he is rearticulating the monopolizing logic of colonial modernity. It is the colonial state that often sought to dominate society through centralizing and monopolizing every authority. Sseremba reminds us that Islam is a diverse tradition, shifting with contexts and embodying the coherence of contradictions in its praxis. He emphasizes that "the logic of the modern state which requires a uniform interpretation of the law, could not harmonize with Islamic law, which can accommodate multiple interpretations of the law on a single issue" (178). The attempt to freeze the Islamic tradition through centralizing Islamic thought and jurisprudence is an attempt to invent a doctrinaire Islam.

The modern Western world has never quenched the thirst to colonize the rest of the world. However, Sseremba's book is a scholarly expose on the subtle

manifestations of twenty-first century colonial power. The book evolves as a blend of academic interventions on decolonization. Sseremba navigates decolonization as a praxis, a methodology, and even a style of writing. He makes a most critical observation that epistemic decolonization has to be in tandem with political decolonization since ideas and institutions shape and reshape each other. Sseremba develops the concept of an African-rooted universal as a flagship for decolonization. The African-rooted universal entails producing thought that embodies “the hallmark of Africa without being reducible to Africa” (162). It is this African-rooted universal that aids Sseremba to overcome the popular binaries in knowledge production and reflect on global Islamic reform from the Ugandan and African experience. In a world that is often a meeting place of ideas and identities, the African-rooted universal is an antidote to the rising nativism that has largely captured the decolonization movement. We hope that Sseremba is writing a sequel in which he expounds the concept of an African-rooted universal that so far promises to fundamentally redefine the decolonization struggle. Given that the book reveals the possible conscription into the epistemology of colonial modernity, Sseremba shall have done us well to most critically highlight a methodology of arriving at the right African-rooted universal in the contemporary world in any given context.

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