

The geometric properties of Mandombe are succinctly described and, while Sarró echoes Wabeladio's claim that they constitute a major discovery, he does not dwell much on them. The system rests on standard geometric operations, also present in other writing systems and decorative art. Mandombe exploits these operations at an unprecedented level of systematicity. Although other scripts also make extensive use of rotation or mirror inversion (e.g. Evans's script for Cree), Mandombe turns these geometric operations into art forms.

Overall, this thoughtful book is a worthy addition to the literature on the origins of writing systems, and a moving tribute to a highly original mind.

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Erin Pettigrew, *Invoking the Invisible in the Sahara: Islam, Spiritual Mediation, and Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £90 – 978 1 009 22461 1). 2023, cclxviii + 368 pp.

This book by historian Erin Pettigrew is a welcome contribution to our understanding of esoteric practices – both authorized (*hijāb*) and 'unlawful' (*sihr*) – in the Saharan west and their close association with Islamic traditions that are deeply embedded in this region. Due to the complexities of the social landscape and the region's multifaceted history, Pettigrew's study draws primarily on ethnographic methods. This rapprochement between anthropology and history, already tested by others working in the region, is noteworthy. Although the region is often described as an important hub for written sources in Arabic, many interlocutors lack formal education, and access to written sources in this largely post-nomadic context is limited. Pettigrew's work is thus part of a shift to bridge disciplinary divides in order to analytically consider a complex African setting, while also making an important methodological statement.

The book efficiently covers the core topics of Islamic culture in this geographic context: the recognized schools of Islamic jurisprudence (notably the Maliki school), Sufism, reformist trends, and a multitude of scholars and authors who have defined the Sahara's broader incorporation into the wider Muslim world. The adherence to 'legitimate' Islamic traditions is here debated through another corpus of knowledge that has also significantly influenced lived experience in the Sahara, a corpus that, according to the author, has often been disregarded and 'denied a place in academic history writing – the "unbelieved," the "unseen," the "unknown," the "supernatural"' (p. 4). To incorporate these aspects into her project, Pettigrew defends the use of esoteric expertise as a fundamental marker in the definition of certain group identities, notably the *zwāya* (clerics) in the northern regions of the lower Senegal River and their Fulbe counterparts, the *torodbe*, who are dispersed along the broader western Sahel. The pivotal role played by such actors in education and in the quotidian management of Islamic rituals, combined with their command of esoteric knowledge, has deeply shaped the lives of Saharans. According to the author, it was not until the nineteenth century

that the acceptability of Islamic esoteric realms was effectively questioned (pp. 94–106) and the social criteria that justified the hereditary social roles of certain groups (through their familiarity with these ‘sciences’) were critically examined.

The book is divided into three main parts, each consisting of two chapters. In the first part, ‘Knowledge and authority in precolonial contexts’, the author starts by contextualizing the region’s history. A rich second part, ‘Rupture, consonance, and innovation in colonial and postcolonial Mauritania’, centres on the modern colonial and postcolonial periods (the twentieth century), debating the significance of *h̄jāb*-related Islamic practices for different forms of political leadership (from traditional Saharan rulers or emirs, to French colonial administrators, to leaders of independent Mauritania). Part II ends with a vivid analysis of a televised debate in Nouakchott on the merits and legality of *h̄jāb*. In the third part, ‘Articulating race, gender, and social difference through the esoteric sciences’, the author offers a chapter on *sell* (bloodsucking), a particularly nefarious Saharan practice that can be opposed only through the more benign *h̄jāb* (often labelled as ‘Islamic’). Through an examination of *sell*, Pettigrew gives an argument about ‘race, social hierarchy, and belonging’ (p. 197), connecting different esoteric practices to the region’s complex social terrain. This particularly well-researched section (pp. 187–221) brings together history with the biographies of various political figures and Islamic actors, drawing on both written and oral sources. Pettigrew concludes the book with an engaging case study of the Ahl Guennar community of south-western Mauritania. In contrast to the dichotomies that are regularly used to describe the different populations of this region (p. 279), the Ahl Guennar continue to grant an ‘in-between’ status to race, Islamic knowledge and esoteric expertise in the Sahara.

One significant theoretical intervention is the arguably provocative option not to debate, and barely even to mention, the *qabila* or ‘tribe’-associated mechanisms that often define social identities in the region (notably among its Hassaniyya-speaking groups). The challenges of engaging with such a topic in a post-orientalist world are understandable, following the protracted adoption of the *qabila* as the best-suited idiom for providing a social nexus and historical depth to Saharan social spheres. However, the author’s approach signals not only what might be interpreted as a prudent academic choice, but also what might herald important changes within the scholarship about this region.

Note: A Portuguese translation of this review is available with the online version.

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