

HISTORY MATTERS

The Impact of Informal Mentorship: A Tribute to Professor William Brown

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When I arrived in Madison for my graduate studies in African History, I expected Professor William (Bill) Brown, the specialist on Islam in West Africa, to serve as my advisor. As the only Black faculty in the African history subfield and an expert in the region and subject I was interested in, it seemed a natural fit. I was deeply disappointed when I learned that he was not training graduate students and lamented this lost opportunity. But as I reflected on my academic training after graduation and assessed my experiences, it occurred to me that Brown had more of an impact on my training than I had at first appreciated. While his mentorship was informal, garnered mostly from private conversations, he persistently and bluntly exposed me to those historical materials and subjects he considered intellectually invigorating and timely. With this realization, I wrote the following in the Preface of my 2012 book:

I began my graduate education without the slightest idea of what precisely I was going to study.... In a conversation with the historian, the late Professor William Brown during my second semester, he realized how ignorant I was of the history of Islam in general and that of Africa in particular. One day, noticing that I was discussing historical events out of context, he remarked mockingly: ‘you seem very perceptive!’ He then wrote down the titles of four books that I ‘must’ read in the following order: Jamil Abun Nasr’s *The Tijaniyya: A Sufi Order in the Modern World*; David Robinson’s *The Holy War of Umar Tal*; B. G. Martin’s *Muslim Brotherhoods in 19th Century Africa* (the 1976 edition); and Lansine Kaba’s *The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa*. It turned out that these books constituted a perfect selection and well-ordered for my gradual entry into the field.¹

Any discussion of Brown’s methodological contributions to the development of West African Islamic history must include his pedagogical contributions, including his mentorship of graduate students. This area of Brown’s legacy might seem limited, given his reluctance to officially advise graduate students during the time that I was in Madison. Yet Brown’s informal mentorship made a profound contribution. We often fail to recognize or acknowledge the effects of such an informal approach to training students. I took only two courses with Bill Brown: an undergraduate survey on the history of West Africa and a graduate course on the history of Islam in West Africa. Both courses enlightened me on the history of a region in which I would claim to specialize. His greatest impact, however, can be traced to my conversations with him on a wide range of topics, some historical and some general. Such mentorship was, for me, what I would call a ‘student-friend’

¹O. Kobo, *Unveiling Modernity in Twentieth-Century West African Islamic Reforms* (Leiden, 2012), xxv.



relationship, one not constrained by formal guidelines, but sufficiently porous and unguided to open up the world to a student the mentor also considers 'a friend'. I believe some of my fellow graduate students in the West African Islamic history subfield who studied at UW-Madison during the late 1990s would share some of my observations; I am certain I was not his only 'student-friend'. His openness to hold conversations with us anywhere on campus allowed us to extract some knowledge from his vast expertise, often in subtle ways.

While obviously uninterested in formal advising responsibilities, Brown was quite receptive to students' needs and was generous with his time, once you found a way around the wall that insulated him from graduate students. To my understanding, that wall consisted of his outward projection of toughness, his seemingly unapproachable disposition, his excessive, perhaps even unrealistic demand that students demonstrate impeccable excellence, and his readiness to openly rebuke students. Looking back, some of us found value in his ways of doing things, which I associated with an old-fashioned Qur'anic school pedagogy and the social hierarchy that defined the relationship between students and teachers in that paradigm. I would suggest that, during his research, Professor Brown may have internalized some of the intellectual culture and approach to teaching of West African Muslim scholars and teachers. I was comfortable with this tradition of informal learning because I grew up in a family where every encounter with an adult provided an opportunity for learning. In any case, fellow students and I developed strategies for engaging with Brown to acquire the knowledge he embodied. Retrospectively, that strategy was not overly complex because once you had demonstrated your seriousness, he was open and generous with his time; he actually loved to converse with students.

For my part, I learned to be submissive in the old-fashioned format of student-teacher relationship common in West African intellectual culture; I was comfortable doing this. I engaged in conversations with him on any topic and allowed him to share whatever subject of history he found profoundly interesting. These ranged from specific episodes in Islamic and African histories, the academic politics of Egyptology, and even the history of Black migrations to the Pacific Rim. He shared his unique perspective on the genealogy of racism across time and space. All these conversations had long-term effects on the ways I approach my African history courses.

I considered it my responsibility to reach out and to engage with Brown. But his office hours were sporadic and I therefore ran after him wherever I had questions to ask. Every spot thus turned into a learning space: the huge walkway between Memorial Library and the University Book Store, the front of a nightclub on State Street, the corridors and stairways of the humanities building, and the entrance to the Wisconsin Historical Society all served as learning spaces where I engaged Brown in conversation and solicited answers to my historical questions. He always obliged graciously.

In both formal and informal pedagogical spaces, Bill Brown was always rigorous and sharp in his observations; he did not shy away from rebuking me when he felt I deserved it. In several conversations, he emphasized the need for a robust analytical approach to issues concerning Muslims and Islam, and stressed the need to be aware of the ways current events that appeared to resonate with historical parallels were actually unique. While I believed I was doing my best to apply critical insights in my analyses, I often missed something.

One afternoon I spotted Brown outside the Wisconsin Historical Society on the way to his office in the humanities building. I hurried toward him. He was hugging a portable backpack and carrying a bunch of books and papers which he was clearly struggling to keep from scattering. I offered to help with the excess load and to walk with him to the office. He graciously obliged. On our way, he asked me if I had read al-Sa'dī's *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* and al-Ka'ti's *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, two key sources for West African Islamic history. They were on my reading list but I had yet to look at them. He realized my ignorance and quickly changed the subject without allowing me to expose myself. At his office he grabbed a piece of paper and wrote down the titles, along with those of other primary sources, and with a kind admonition warned me that I would not be successful in the field if I did

not master those books. He advised that although the library had copies, those books were worthy of investment. Indeed, I obtained my own copies, which I still have on my shelves. But I did not, at first, 'master' them as advised, because I considered them reference materials, not argumentative texts to be 'mastered' as such. I was wrong. During the oral portion of my comprehensive examination, Brown asked a question about another text whose title he had jotted down for me, al-Bakri's geography, and its impact on West African historiography. I fumbled! Quietly giggling, he appeared to enjoy my embarrassment at having failed to take him seriously a few semesters earlier. I stared at him nervously. I knew I was doomed. But he instead complimented me for having answered his other difficult questions very well.

In fact, that was the second time I had disappointed him and escaped unscathed. During my master's thesis defense the year before, he openly expressed his irritation at my 'carelessness' because I had written that northern Africa was Arabized by people from the Arabian peninsula. He chastised me for lacking a nuanced understanding of Berber cultural resilience. I embraced the correction and hoped it would not be held against me at that pivotal moment in my academic training. I did, of course, pass the MA defense and afterwards we had a long conversation about this episode. Although it seemed to me at the time to be a bit trivial to debate whether northern Africa was Arabized or not, I came to understand that he wanted to direct my attention to the nationalist paradigm in the historiography and the way it had produced a story of Berber continuity, a story with significant political consequences.

I was apprehensive, then, that I might make another mistake during my dissertation defense, with perhaps a more dire consequence. At the time I felt lucky that Brown was unable to participate in my dissertation defense. But in fact he read the dissertation and was happy with my approach; I needed that final compliment to take with me into the world of academia.

Bill Brown's generosity with his time and his (eventually) approachable disposition allowed me to tease out of him, in informal exchanges, the benefits of the formal mentorship he had declined to provide to some of us. Of course, with the equally rigorous training of Florence Bernault and Thomas Spear, along with other Africanists at the University of Wisconsin, I received the best training any student could expect. However, because my research interest aligned with his, I had always felt I missed something by not working directly with Brown. Seeing now the larger picture has helped me acknowledge that informal mentorship is as important in academic training as formal supervision. Whatever the reasons for Brown's reluctance in the 1990s to officially advise graduate students, many of us found ways to benefit from his vast knowledge. In my case, his friendliness and his willingness to hold conversations anywhere on campus allowed me, indeed, us, to learn as much from him as we perhaps would have from formal mentorship. Moreover, his candid comments and even his vivid expressions of irritation when we made mistakes not only demonstrated that he truly cared, they added to our own pedagogical approaches. I remain grateful for Brown's openness and his rigor, and I believe some of my colleagues share that appreciation.