

MERVYN HISKETT
1920—1994

Mervyn Hiskett died early on the morning of 11th June 1994 after a long and courageous battle with cancer. Symbolic, perhaps, of his life of scholarship devoted to the study of the history and culture of a Muslim people—the Hausa—the day of his death was the first day of a new Muslim year: 1 Muḥarram 1415. Mervyn was born at St. Albans on 20 May 1920 and attended school in the same town. During World War II he served in the British army, first as a non-commissioned officer in the Army Physical Training Corps and then as a commissioned officer in the Parachute Regiment. After the war he served in mandated Palestine, 1946-47. He retained a lifelong keenness for physical fitness, combining his role as Vice-Principal of the School for Arabic Studies, Kano, in the 1950s with a role as physical education instructor, and jogging regularly long before it became a fashionable fad (he was the last person to indulge in fads).

After demobilization in 1947 he attended the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, where he obtained a B.A. in Arabic. It was after this that he embarked on a career in northern Nigeria, an area that was to be the focus of most of his research over the next forty years. He began to publish a steady stream of articles containing Arabic, and later Hausa, texts with translation and commentary which continue to be the principal scholarly editions of the works concerned. Although his translation of the book of ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad [Abdullahi dʿan Fodio], *Tazyīn al-waraqāt*, was rather harshly reviewed in a journal published in Nigeria, no other scholar (either inside or outside Nigeria) has attempted a revision. It remains one of the most accessible of the Sokoto *jihād* texts and one of those that best captures both the militant ideology and the literary taste of the times.

In a second phase of his career Mervyn turned his attention to the Hausa literary tradition, especially that of the *ajami* literature.

As early as 1964 he had published an edition of the ‘Song of Bagauda’ and in 1967 a translation of the novel *Shaihu Umar* by the late Federal Prime Minister Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa appeared and was subsequently reprinted several times, most recently in New York (1989, with a new introduction by Beverly Mack). His study of Hausa Islamic literature blossomed into a Ph.D. dissertation in 1969, subsequently published in 1974 as *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse*. As his appended publications list shows, he made many more contributions in this field, and this does not take account of a number of Ph.D. theses that he supervised both at S.O.A.S. and during his service at the Usman Danfodio University in Sokoto.

A third strand in his scholarly life—and a major one—began to take shape in the 1970s. Beginning with *The Sword of Truth* in 1973 he published a series of books and articles that dealt with Islamic themes, especially with education, Islamic values and institutions. *The Sword of Truth* became a classic for its ‘inside view’ of the state-building movement of Shaykh ‘Uthmān b. Fūdī (Dan Fodio) built firmly around the writings of the movement’s protagonists. Later Mervyn developed more sympathy for the losers as he began in the late 1980s to become concerned with what he saw as a growing intolerance to diversity among contemporary Muslim thinkers (both Nigerian and otherwise). In a preface to a new edition of *The Sword of Truth* which appeared only two months before his death, he took to task certain younger Nigerian Muslim scholars whom he saw as advocating a return to the harsh judgemental dichotomies associated with the nineteenth century *jihāds*.

In 1984 he published another book that has become a standard introduction to the field, *The Development of Islam in West Africa*, a detailed and carefully researched study of Muslim political and social institutions and intellectual life over the past millenium enlivened by telling quotations from Arabic and Hausa sources and spiced, in its later pages, with comments reflective of Mervyn’s own Nigerian experience. An even broader study of Islam in Africa was in press at the time of his death—*The Course of Islam in Africa* (expected imminently from Edinburgh University Press)—while his 1993 *Some to Mecca Turn to Pray*

dealt, after a long and lucid introduction on Islamic history and civilization, with the growth of Islam in Britain and what he saw as the dangers of bi-culturalism.

Mervyn's right of centre political views and his slightly brusque manner did not endear him to all his colleagues. But those who knew him well admired him as a man with the courage of his own convictions and also as a warm-hearted person with a cheery cynicism and a robust sense of humour that unfolded easily over pints of beer. He believed that the 'long walk into a dark night' was just that, and he faced the pain of his illness and its inevitable conclusion with true stoicism. His spirit and his scholarship will live on, both through his many publications and through the gift of books, manuscripts and papers that he generously willed to the Melville Herskovits Library of Africana of Northwestern University. The 'Hiskett Collection' will certainly be a resource for future generations of scholars.

Allah shi ji kansa.

John O. Hunwick

Mervyn Hiskett:

a bibliography of his published academic writings

Compiled by Graham Furniss

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