
Speaking to a group of students, faculty, and community members, Dr. Ware began by paraphrasing Malcolm X, "If a cat has kittens in an oven, you don't call them biscuits." These words would shape the theme of the lecture, as Dr. Ware sought to emphasize the importance of attending to the connection between the religious and educational history of African and African Americans in our search to come to a greater understanding of both cultures.

Dr. Ware traced the spread of Islam throughout the kingdoms of Sub-Saharan West Africa, and demonstrated how the religion influenced widespread literacy practices in the region through the institution of Qur’an schools.

One in every six of the world's Muslims is in Sub-Saharan Africa. But we don't tend to think of Islam when we think of Sub-Saharan Africa, and we don't tend to think of Sub-Saharan Africa when we think of Islam. And that was one of the things that I sought to address in *The Walking Qur'an* by focusing on the institution of Qur'an schools which were responsible for spreading Islam and spreading literacy skills throughout [...] Sub-Saharan West Africa.

Islam was first introduced to Sub-Saharan West Africa through the efforts of Arab traders and scholars. This cultural contact resulted in the conversion of many African people to Islam, as well as the establishment of Qur’an schools in West Africa through the efforts of African Islamic scholars. Dr. Ware elaborated on the type of teaching that still continues today in African Qur'an schools, such as the writing of religious verses on wooden boards. In these institutions literacy education is combined with religious practices that emphasize the embodiment of the Qur’an, a tenet of Islam that dates back to the foundation of the religion.

The goal in all of these schools was first and foremost [...] to inscribe the text of the Qur’an onto human beings itself [...] to remake the human beings as walking, living copies of the Qur’an. And this was done through memorization of the verses that were written down on those boards and [...] a set of bodily practices for transmitting the text, including licking the verses of off your slate board when you were done memorizing the lesson to literally bring it into your body.

This devotion to repeated replication and eventual memorization of the Qur’an allowed for the proliferation and survival of the religious text throughout the Americas after many Sub-Saharan West Africans were brought there as slaves.

You could strip them naked, put them in the hold of a slave ship, send them thousands of miles from where they grew up, but you could not take their knowledge from them. You could not take their books from them. They were the books.
Dr. Ware closed his lecture by discussing the religious and political struggles that occurred between clerics and scholars of Islam, and corrupt rulers within some West African kingdoms. By the 16th century many noblemen had begun to cooperate with European nations to funnel poor Africans into the transatlantic slave trade in exchange for weapons and goods. While many African Muslims fought to resist their efforts—and were often successful, though to varying degrees—most were eventually captured and sold as slaves themselves in retribution for conspiring against the nobility.

This ongoing conflict led to an exodus of knowledge from West Africa during this period, but it also allowed for fragmented literacy and religious practices to reach American shores, thereby ensuring that Qur’an schools and other facets of Islam would have a significant impact on African American culture.

Even for slaves in Georgia in the 1920s and the 1930s the physical practice of Islam by their parents and by their grandparents was something that was very vibrant in lived memory.

In his talk, Dr. Ware eloquently summarized the historical relationship between African and African American history as it relates to the practice of Islam, and did so in a way that portrayed the Muslim religion and its history in a positive and educational light—a perspective that we rarely receive in modern American news media. Dr. Ware’s insight into the subject was both edifying and engaging, and we are very fortunate to have had the opportunity to hear him speak at Wright State.

*Dr. Ware completed his undergraduate work at the University of Minnesota and received his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in 2004. He currently teaches students about Islamic practices in Africa and the history of African and African American peoples at both the University of Michigan and Northwestern University.*