

## CHAPTER I

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**THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ISLAM IN  
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: AN INTRODUCTION****Aims and objectives**

This volume aims to examine the archaeology of Islam in Africa south of the Sahara. Yet this simple statement masks a great deal of complexity, for it suggests that the archaeology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is the residue of one uniform faith from the Cape to Timbuktu. This, however, is not the case: great diversity is evident, and although key recurring elements might be preserved (as are discussed in some detail below) African Islam has been subject to historical process. Such historical process was described by Ray (1976:176) as ‘a history of several phases and types of religion . . . a history of developing orthodoxy and of developing synthesis . . . the result was not a confused syncretism, but a variety of new religious and cultural syntheses which bear the unique character of sub-Saharan Islam’. The importance of this paraphrased quote is that it emphasises the plural character of Islamic development within Africa – one Islam as structured by the requirements of faith (see below), but numerous local interpretations thereof once the core prerequisites were fulfilled.

This multiple interpretation has resulted in the creation of the archaeological record that is the focus of this study; its further aims are to provide an introduction to the richness and diversity of Islamic material culture in sub-Saharan Africa in all its many forms, from mosques and tombs through to trade goods – beads, glazed pottery and glass. Such monuments and archaeological material are found across the continent from the fringes of the Sahara in the north to the shores of the Indian Ocean in the far south. This is also an archaeological record which has been neglected to date as regards an attempt at synthesis. This is perhaps somewhat unsurprising, as Africa south of the Sahara is a vast area, frequently more dissimilar than similar and only, in many respects, unified for the purposes of this study by its geographical borders, i.e. the fact that it is bounded to the north by the barrier of the Sahara and on its other sides by ocean. Yet, conversely, it is equally surprising that the archaeology of Islam has never been considered in great detail – for the impact of Islam has been of fundamental importance in much of the continent, and has been felt on many fronts, not only ideologically, but also economically and socially. This is important, for as Brenner (1993a:59) notes, the creation of identity, both Muslim and non-Muslim (the latter also a subject with which this volume

is concerned), 'are formulated through the appropriation and reassertment of various elements or building blocks which may be religiously significant, but are also socially, politically and economically motivated'. The archaeology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is thus not only the residue of explicitly religious process; for, to quote an oft-cited phrase, Islam must be seen as more than a religion, it is a way of life, with all the attendant material culture implications which such a statement implies.

This is because the study of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is not merely of religion – it provides a point of entry into the study of other institutional systems, allowing a consideration of concomitant changes in, for example, society, economy and politics. Therefore, along with the introduction of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa there are many changes in the material record in the continent south of the Sahara, and in many respects the archaeology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is really the archaeology of sub-Saharan Africa in the last millennium, the effects were so widespread and profound. Given these changes in sub-Saharan Africa in the last millennium, we are allowed a focus on what changed and thus must consider, to an extent, the nature of the societies and belief systems prior to Islam, and also how these survived in whole or in part and in a variety of associations with Islam.

Yet manifestations of Islamisation might be various. Within religious belief there might be a shift in emphasis from a pantheon of deities to a more immediate relationship with a single God. Economically, local trade networks could be tied into the Muslim world economy. Socially, material changes might be manifest in house types, settlement patterns, diet and funerary customs. Politically, the adoption of Arabic, of literacy and of new forms of administration could result in great change. These possibilities for change are manifold, and various aspects of this process can be traced in the archaeological record. But equally, as will be considered below, the presence of a Muslim or Muslim community might leave only an ephemeral material imprint (Insoll 1999a). Complexity, both in process and in the concepts that are to be explored in this volume, has to be recognised from the outset. This is something also remarked upon by Mervyn Hiskett (1994:184) in a study of the history of Islam in Africa, who likens the process of studying Islam in the continent to looking through a kaleidoscope, whereby 'no sooner does one pattern emerge than a thought, a forgotten factor or a sudden reservation intervenes and the whole pattern changes'.

Complexity acknowledged, it has also to be recognised that we are concerned with several key processes which it is useful to define at the outset. Critical among these is a term already used, 'Islamisation', which according to Levtzion (1979c:7) refers to religious change, though it is useful for our purposes here to use the term to refer both to religious and the frequently accompanying cultural change. This, perhaps, is of lesser importance with reference to Levtzion's research focus, that of historical sources and process, but needs to be admitted

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where the focus rests upon material culture as well. A second and differing term is 'Islamism', which according to Rosander (1997:4) is focused upon *shari'ah* (Islamic law), with Islamists conceiving 'of Islam as an ideology, a total mode of life'. Islamism as defined by Rosander, and as considered here, refers to the reform of African Islam, something which has occurred periodically (especially more recently), with as its stated aim the 'purification' of African Islam 'from local or indigenous African ideas and practices as well as from Western influences' (Rosander 1997:1). A further term to be encountered is 'Arabisation', which is in fact of little relevance outside a few contexts in the continent south of the Sahara. Arabisation literally refers to the Arabising of society – culturally, ethnically or ideologically – and is of importance in parts of the Nilotic Sudan as we will see in chapter 3, and in areas of the East African coast, as described in chapter 4. Similarly, the terms 'orthodox', 'popular' or 'syncretic' will be utilised with reference to religious practice. These are considered at greater length at the end of this chapter.

Thus having considered something of the aims and objectives of this study it is also worthwhile considering how these are going to be fulfilled. Essentially, a multi-source approach has to be adopted in evaluating the archaeology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, as each of the available sources of evidence has its limitations. Archaeological evidence devoid of the supporting interpretative props of historical sources, when they are available, can appear dry and lifeless. Fortunately for the purposes of interpreting the archaeology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa the relevant historical source documents, written primarily in Arabic, are increasingly available in translation, facilitating their wider circulation and utilisation (see for example Freeman-Grenville 1962; Cuoq 1975b; Levtzion and Hopkins 1981; Hamdun and King 1994; and the 'bio-bibliographical' volumes edited by Hunwick and O'Fahey 1994, 1995, 1998), a trend which it is hoped will continue. Where the Arabic sources leave frequent gaps, in central Africa, for example, early explorers', travellers', and missionaries' accounts can be exploited, while oral history can also prove extremely useful in tracing Islamisation across the continent. However, as with archaeological interpretation devoid of supporting sources, the use of historical sources in isolation is not unproblematical. The sources might provide us with the basic chronological framework of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, yet we must also turn to archaeology to begin to reconstruct the diverse social, political and economic effects of conversion to Islam, and the direct and indirect impact of the religion upon the peoples of the continent south of the Sahara. The archaeology of Islam is here foregrounded because, as in other forms of historical archaeology, there is the possibility that what we can learn from material culture not only complements and supplements the historical record, but also may contradict what we think we know from history.

A certain interdependence of sources is therefore evident, and the historical and archaeological evidence is also supplemented by anthropological,

ethnographic, linguistic and architectural data. As Levtzion (1979c:5) notes, many sources exist for studying the processes of conversion to Islam: historical texts, inscriptions, names, and even dreams (for this latter unusual source of evidence see Jedrej and Shaw 1992) – the whole conspiring to enrich our understanding of the archaeology of Islam in Africa south of the Sahara. For it is with people that we are concerned and with dynamic ongoing processes of religious conversion. This adoption of a multi-source approach is made more essential as the processes we are observing in the archaeological record, the spread and acceptance of Islam, are very much alive and ongoing today in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, a multi-source approach is necessary as it is somewhat presumptuous to assume ‘that any *one* discipline will provide a universal key to unlock all the secrets of religion(s)’ (Sutherland 1991:32). These are issues which this author has considered elsewhere (Insoll 2001), where it was suggested that the multi-source umbrella offered by approaches such as those encompassed within the history of religions (see Sharpe 1986) might be a useful methodological step forward for archaeological approaches to complex phenomena such as Islam, in recognising diversity, and in approaching the material sympathetically.

### Geographical and temporal frameworks

The establishment of a methodological framework is a necessary step in approaching the diverse material incorporated within this study. A geographical division of the material has also proven essential, and for the purposes of discussion the continent south of the Sahara has been divided into seven regions. These are: Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa; the eastern or Nilotic Sudan (the modern republic of this name); the East African coast; the western Sahel; the central Sudan (Sudan here refers to the vegetation belt); the West African Sudan (as before) and forest; and finally, east-central and southern Africa (**figure 1.1**). Undeniably, any such division is in certain respects unsuitable, and its use does not mean that each region was a self-contained and isolated entity, as the archaeology testifies to the various contacts that took place over vast distances across the continent. These regions were frequently interconnected, as will become apparent.

This pattern of geographical progression was chosen in approaching the material as it broadly follows the chronological pattern of the initial spread of Islam, a process which begins on the Red Sea coast and in Nubia, the former area the earliest zone of Muslim contact from the very beginnings of Islam in the seventh century (and considered in chapters 2 and 3). By the late eighth to early ninth centuries Islam had spread to parts of the East African coast (for simplicity the CE (Common Era), BCE (Before Common Era) dating system has been adopted, and all dates are CE unless otherwise specified), and almost contemporaneously in the late ninth to early tenth centuries to the western Sahel.

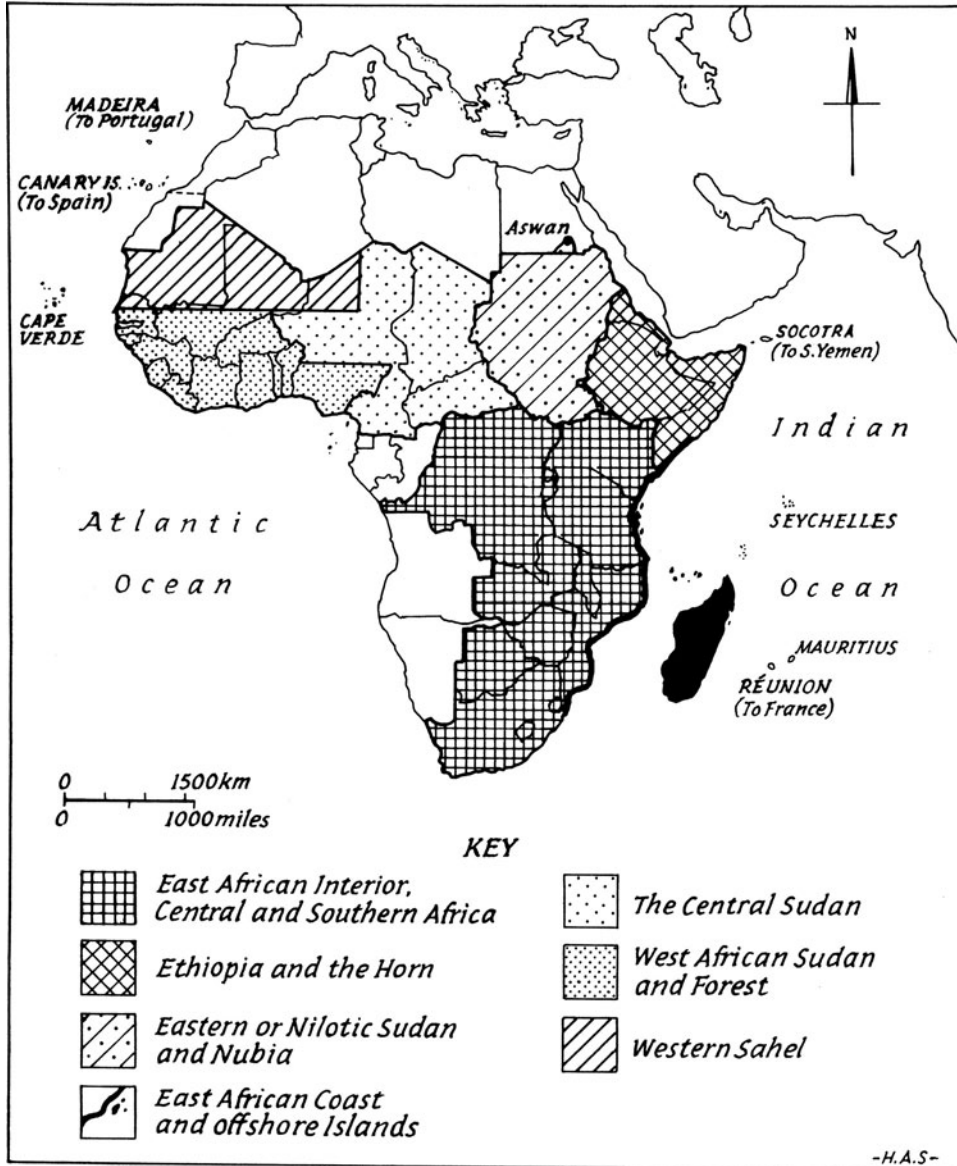


Figure 1.1 The subdivisions of the continent

Subsequently, in the eleventh century, the first tangible evidence for Islamisation is found in the central Sudan, while in the West African Sudan and forest this evidence dates from the twelfth century. Finally, on the other side of the continent, in east-central and southern Africa, the spread of Islam was much later, dating from the mid-seventeenth century in parts of the Cape, but elsewhere largely from the nineteenth century. Discussion commences with

Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, for it encompasses part of the Red Sea coast, the importance of which during the early Islamic period has already been referred to, but also because the connections between Ethiopia and parts of Arabia have a substantial pre-Islamic history.

It must also be noted here that reduction to a simple chronological framework such as that just provided is unacceptable, and it has to be realised that dynamic processes of Islamic conversion were incorporated within this historical process. Equally, the notion that a uniform suite of Muslim material culture was laid out in each of the geographical regions from the date just defined must be dismissed. On the contrary, the pattern that exists can be likened to a mosaic with some pieces the residue of Muslim communities, others followers of traditional religion, or perhaps of another world religion such as Christianity, all possibly coexisting and, with regard to the first two, frequently intermixing. For example, the western Sahel from the tenth century, the date of the earliest archaeological evidence for the presence of Muslims, cannot be thought of as completely Muslim at that point in time; it was a mosaic of different religious elements. Even today it cannot be argued that it is wholly Muslim. We are observing the residue of long-drawn-out processes rather than of a 'single act of conversion' (Levtzion 1979c:21).

The archaeology of Islam in each of the regions just defined is also a continuation of the Iron Age archaeology. It is not suddenly separated out by dint of being created by Muslims or Muslim communities. Thus this study slots into the pre-existing archaeological context, as only in a few rare instances could it be thought of as the archaeology of foreign imposition, it is African Iron Age archaeology. The pre-Islamic background was crucial in dictating the degree of Islamisation, the types of relationship entered into with Muslims by non-Muslims, the rate of Islamic conversion, and the impact of Islam upon the various societies that existed. Hence to neglect material pre-dating the arrival of Islam as unnecessary permits only an incomplete understanding of subsequent developments. However, it must also be acknowledged that this study must by its very nature privilege the Islamic element in the archaeological record, and also undeniably more so with regard to the 'religious' element of this material culture – though having said this, this study should be considered as part of the series in which it is conceived, other studies considering the non-Muslim context in much greater detail. Similarly, this study is also concerned with the residue of an African religion, Islam being as much an African religion as are traditional religions (this is considered below). For the undenied success of Islam in Africa was because 'it appropriated and had been appropriated' (Eaton 1993:303) by Africans (**figure 1.2**). The quote just used in fact refers to processes of Islamic conversion in Bengal, but it applies equally to the African situation. Islam in Africa is African Islam, albeit of diverse character, and this is reflected in the archaeology.



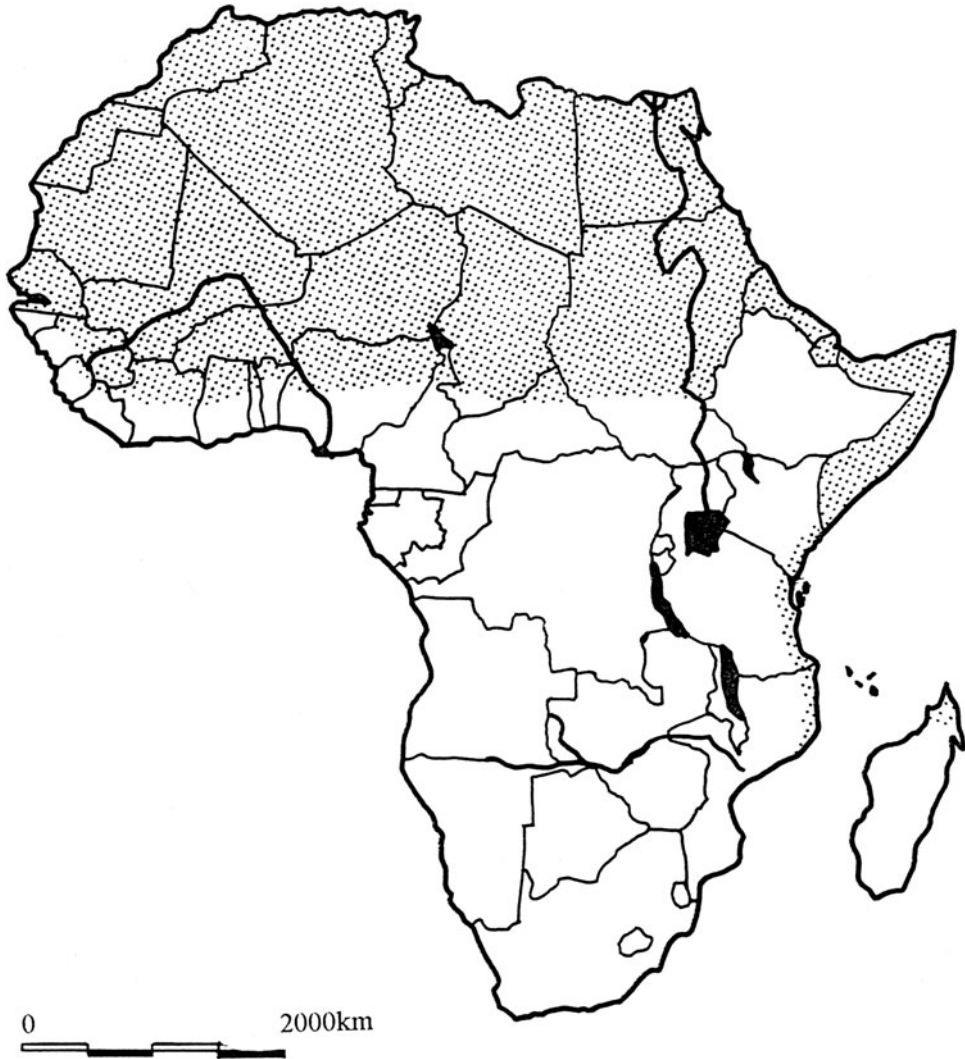


Figure 1.2 Areas in which Muslims predominate in Africa today

### A history of research

This study should also be placed within the context of past research, where it has already been noted that a synthesis of the archaeology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa does not exist. A similar situation pertains to relevant anthropological studies: much excellent and detailed research has been completed (see for example Goody 1971b; Holy 1991; Mitchell 1956), but no overall review exists, in part due to the difficulty in compiling such a volume or volumes. The nature of the anthropological evidence perhaps precludes its viable summary, in comparison to archaeological or historical data. Alternatively, this

might be due to the fact that, to quote Morris, anthropology texts 'largely focus on the religion of tribal cultures and seem to place an undue emphasis on its more exotic aspects' (1987:2). So-called tribal religions are split up into phenomena – myth, witchcraft, magic etc. – whereas in contrast, as Morris also notes (1987:3), world religions are treated according to a quite different theoretical framework whereby they are classified as discrete and distinct entities, such as 'Buddhism' or 'Islam', with these classifications provided by historians rather than anthropologists. Besides this synthetic archaeological and anthropological lacuna (other than a basic introductory article on the archaeology by this author: see Insoll 1996a), the literature on Islam in Africa is vast, and only a selective consideration can be supplied here, focusing upon more widely available works.

In general, the relevant study of Islam in Africa at a regional or continental level has predominantly been one of historical synthesis and survey with attention paid to archaeological evidence, if at all, only in passing. Spencer Trimingham could be regarded as the doyen of such approaches, certainly as regards Anglophone scholarship, with his series of detailed regional studies of Islam in Africa (1949, 1952, 1959, 1962, 1964), along with one continental overview (1968). These are still invaluable sources as starter works for orienting oneself with regional developments and the 'classical' texts of scholarship on Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. However, it should be borne in mind that these are also dated in content, and old-fashioned in style and approaches. Trimingham perceives Africa as marginal to the Islamic world, evident in comments such as 'the adoption of Islam brought little change in the capacity of Africans to control the conditions of their existence for they were in touch but in a peripheral way with the developed civilizations of other Islamic peoples' (1968:1–2). This is the opposite of the implicit premise in this study that Africa was an integral part of the Muslim world. Trimingham also speaks of the spread of Islam as if it is a depersonalised amorphous entity 'penetrating' (1968:37) the continent. No allowance for the individual is given, and though group dynamics are obviously significant in the conversion process, individual decision making cannot be excluded either.

Further, what could be termed 'old-fashioned' studies of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa (in English), are provided by the volumes *Islam in Tropical Africa* edited by I. M. Lewis (1966, 1980b), and *Islam in Africa* edited by J. Kritzeck and W. H. Lewis (1969). Yet these cannot be criticised in the same way as Trimingham's work. Lewis's volume, for example, is a landmark study, admittedly not so much for the series of regional historical surveys of Islam in Africa that are provided, but rather for the introductory study by Lewis (1980a) which considers in detail the factors underpinning conversion to Islam and the interplay between Islam and traditional religions. Francophone equivalents (this emphasis on English and French literature reflects the author's linguistic capabilities,



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not the complete literature on Islam in Africa) of these general historical syntheses are provided by the volumes written by, among others, J. C. Froelich (1962) and Joseph Cuoq (1975a). Cuoq's volume differs from those just described in that although he employs a similar pan-continental emphasis, a gazetteer-type format is utilised in an attempt to place Muslims 'dans leur communauté concrète actuelle' (1975a:8). Similarly, dated regional syntheses in French, comparable to those already noted for Trimmingham, also exist, but these are usually more circumscribed in geographical focus or subject (see for example Marty 1917; Chailley et al. 1962; Monteil 1964). The latter study is certainly still of interest in drawing together a number of strands including a history of Islamisation in West Africa imaginatively entitled 'les Fétiches ont Tremblé', and a reference to Shehu Ahmadu's comment on hearing the Bambara guns during the opening of his *jihād* in Masina in 1818 (Fisher and Rowland 1971:220; see chapter 7).

A general observation that can be drawn from comparing Anglophone and Francophone studies of Islam in Africa is, continental syntheses aside, that the regional focus very much reflects spheres of interest and colonial subdivisions. Colonial process is also sometimes manifest much more overtly in the archaeology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa through the interpretations proposed by archaeologists of the colonial period. These are issues which will be reviewed in the following chapters, but as Robertshaw (1990:93) notes in a general context, 'many of the theories that buttressed colonial ideology have been overturned and replaced by models emphasising indigenous innovation and development'. Within Francophone West Africa, for example, the origins of the great 'medieval' empires, which were among the first polities to be exposed to Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, were sought outside Africa. Individuals such as Maurice Delafosse (1922) argued that Ghana was 'founded and ruled by Judeo-Syrians from the fourth to eighth centuries AD' (de Barros 1990:161), and foreign origins were sought, be they of 'Jews, Yemenites, Arabs' (Holl 1990:300). Colonial focus in this region was upon the capitals of the empires, sites that could be tied to Arab texts, and the civilising effects of Islam were promoted. Holl (1996:193) describes how French colonial scholarship served to provide data up the chain of command, allowing those at the top to use this for grand interpretation 'of the historical precedence and superiority of white people over black natives, thus reinforcing their *mission civilisatrice*'.

The excesses of these Delafosse-type interpretations might have been diluted over the subsequent years of colonisation in West Africa, but notions of backward locals and innovative foreigners persisted, frequently tied to a civilising Islamic input. The influential French archaeologist Raymond Mauny (1961:390), for instance, drew parallels between settlements such as Koumbi Saleh, the reputed capital of the empire of Ghana, and the neighbouring trade centre of Tegdaoust, also in Mauritania, and the manner in

which European cities were superimposed next to the medinas of the colonial Maghreb. Consciously or subconsciously, archaeologists of the colonial period were thereby justifying their own presence. Colonisation had occurred before, thus they were only continuing a long tradition. Similar processes are evident elsewhere in the continent – on the East African coast, for example (see chapter 4). In general there was, as Trigger (1989:138) succinctly notes, ‘a significant but complex relationship between archaeology and the colonial setting in which it was practiced in Africa’. But such processes of colonial justification can hardly be said to be unique to the interpretation of Islamic archaeological remains in Africa, or indeed to African archaeology in general. Chakrabarti (1997) has recently reviewed such processes with regard to Indian archaeology, while in a more general context such issues have been examined by Kohl and Fawcett (1995), Stone and Molyneaux (1994) and Pels (1997).

More recently, a wealth of excellent studies of Islam in Africa have been written. These, however, seem to have changed in focus in comparison to earlier works, with emphasis now upon specific subject areas or regions, rather than a pan-continental emphasis. Exceptions are provided by Mervyn Hiskett’s (1994) historical survey of Islam in Africa, which follows a traditional vein of scholarship, and which is drawn upon in the following pages, and the similar but much larger study by Levtzion and Pouwels (2000), which is likewise a useful volume. More characteristic of contemporary scholarship are studies such as Brenner’s (1993c) edited volume looking at Muslim identity in sub-Saharan Africa. Brenner also reviews various relevant contemporary currents in scholarship, where he notes (1993b:12) that, importantly, African Muslims are now organising their own conferences on Islam in Africa such as that held in Abuja (Nigeria) in 1989. These, he argues, are creating a vision of Africa as unified through Islam which will ultimately ‘become increasingly competitive with the other “Africas” which are projected in the African discourse’, the geo-political Africa of pan-Africanists, the Africa of the diaspora, and of ‘Black Africa’ (1993b:17). Again this notion of multiple voices is not unique to scholarship on Islam in Africa, but its recognition shows that scholarship on the subject has come of age.

Such more nuanced approaches are also manifest in other recent studies. Rosander and Westerlund (1997), for example, consider, as the title of their edited collection implies, the concepts of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ within African Islam, encapsulated in the ongoing conflict between the processes of Islamism and popular religious tradition. Conversion processes have also been the focus of some attention, most notably by Nehemia Levtzion (1979a, Levtzion and Fisher 1986), and again by Sanneh (1997), while debate has also been recently initiated over the nature of African Islam. Ross (in press), for instance, has criticised the ‘persistent tendency in the authoritative literature to view Africa as being outside of normative Islam’. What exactly is normative