The Masjid in Contemporary Islamic Africa

The masjid, fundamentally defined as a "place of prostration," is a concept that has long underscored Islamic approaches to spiritual space. Now in the contemporary period, Muslim populations across Africa are redeploying the masjid to navigate the murky waters of globalization and modernity through the development of emergent, progressive spaces that take form across a spectrum of cultural landscapes. Drawing from multiple disciplines and diverse case studies, this book uses the masjid to reflect on the shifting realities of Islamic communities as they engage in processes of sociopolitical and cultural transformation. Specifically, it focuses on how contemporary interpretations of the masjid have catalyzed the growth of forward-thinking, flexible environments that highlight how Muslim communities are developing unique solutions to the problem of performing identity within diverse contexts. In doing so, these spaces provide evidence that contemporary globalization processes and Islamic practice are not necessarily disparate.

Michelle Apotsos is Associate Professor in African Art History at Williams College, specializing in Afro-Islamic architectural sites and landscapes. She is the author of *Architecture, Islam, and Identity in West Africa: Lessons from Larabanga* (2016) and has published in various journals including *African Arts* and the *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*. She is also a member of the African Studies Association, the Arts Council of the African Studies Association, the Society of Architectural Historians, and the Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative based at MIT.

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Michelle Apotsos
Williams College, Massachusetts

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I dedicate this book to my family, whose love, life, and laughter probably made it take longer than it should have.

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Framing the Masjid in Contemporary Islamic Africa

This volume constitutes one of the first dedicated surveys of contemporary Islamic spiritual spaces in Africa, a topic whose breadth, complexity, and diversity requires an interpretive lens that not only addresses established architectural forms and traditions, but can also accommodate the emergent, liminal spaces of contemporary and, some might say, future-facing practice. To this end, this study utilizes the trans-Islamic spatial medium of the *masjid*, whose definition as a "place of prostration" can yield multiple spatial interpretations and thus constitutes a useful interrogative approach for the growing number of diverse, flexible, Islamic environments on the continent, each of which reflects the shifting realities of Muslim life and spiritual identity in the contemporary period. In exploring how contemporary masjids are taking form on the continent, this study also highlights how Muslim communities are developing unique solutions to the problem of performing identity within Africa's diverse contexts and navigating the murky waters of the contemporary condition through a purposeful renovation of Afro-Islamic spiritual space.

In exploring this topic, however, it is important to provide justification for its existence. In other words, why is a study of masjid space in Africa important, even crucial, to understanding Islam in the contemporary period? For one, this study engages in a revisionist dialogue that refutes previous studies of Islam in Africa as a fossilized movement on the periphery of the contemporary Islamic world. Within the context of this volume, Islam in Africa is positioned according to its reality as an active participant in contemporary global conversations about the faith. In doing so, this study frames Islam's spatial environment in Africa as one that favors the flexibility and adaptability in form and meaning, and the individuals who participate in the faith as intersectional beings who are both the authors of their own spirituality and able to project images of themselves, their history, and their spiritual identity into the world that is of their own manufacture.

The masjid, thus, acts as an important apparatus in this enterprise as a multi-tiered construct shaped by time and context, and thus a spatial "working through" of this history in terms of the ongoing identity projects of various communities around the continent, whose diverse and sometimes contested political, social, and cultural identities generate the fabric of everyday contemporary life and existence. As both the product and producer of such identities in these contexts, the masjid reflects and refracts the events, influences, and interruptions that constitute what it means to be a Muslim located within a particular space, time, and context, and subsequently becomes an archive of the dialogues, encounters, and interactions both past and ongoing that have occurred between multiple social, political, cultural, and spiritual contingents.

In addition, while masjid spaces obviously aren't specific to Africa, the diversity of the continent and the size and longevity of its Muslim population means that masjid spaces are equally varied and attuned to their particular contexts. Along these lines, increased access to technology, communication, transportation, and methods of mobility has generated new spaces that are in many ways challenging established ideas of what architecture can be in the contemporary period. Such spaces "carry within them a world of ... relationships," whose identity "creates some variety of Muslim space whenever they are present," to borrow from Barbara Metcalf (Metcalf 1996, 3). Thus, as spaces that increasingly exist as symbol, statement, object, sense-scape, process, text, intervention, and even nonspace, one could rightly question whether this study constitutes a study of architecture at all. As a "place of prostration," the masjid occupies any number of spatial realities with architecture constituting only one of the numerous spatial manifestations that a masjid can take. As such, beyond being merely a three-dimensional constructed space, the masjid also acts as a mode of organizing bodies in space and thus supports a fluid, adaptive mode of existence that shifts one's focus from iconic structural monuments that represent "large-scale explicative narratives of history and culture" toward sites that privilege "the contingent, the temporary, and the dynamic," spaces that focus on "processes rather than structures, on hybridity rather than consistency, on the quotidian as well as the extra-ordinary, on the periphery as well as the center, on reception as well as production" (Stieber 2003, 176). In doing so, the masjid becomes a space that is fundamentally generative and pluralistic, which in turn promotes a more inclusive view of the faith as not only a worldview, but a "system of action" (Elias 2012, 18).

Such realizations are particularly important when one considers the fact that the experience of Islam as a faith and a worldview is fundamentally

intersectional. In other words, individuals come to Islam and its spaces of practice/performance with different, overlapping perspectives and socioeconomic, political, and cultural positions. This is an important consideration with regard to the study of Islam in Africa given the diversity of Africa's Muslim community and the questions it raises about how space can be molded to fit their multidimensional contours. As sites defined by "everyday habits and behaviors, . . . environmental belief[s], attitudes, and practice, . . . social mobility, hybridity and identity," contemporary masjids function as a spatial extension of societies increasingly defined by "geopolitics and territorial imaginations" (Della Dora 2015). In addition, as geographic boundaries are more and more being recognized for the leaky, porous containers that they are, and contemporary ideas of identity are becoming progressively untethered to such artificially demarcated terrains, the reality of being Muslim itself is becoming acknowledged as a condition in which spirituality, class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, cultural identity, and more not only shape the contours of spiritual experience but also dictate how spiritual space is constructed, utilized, and subsequently interpreted as a mode of Muslim self-fashioning that enables the faithful to be the protagonists of their own centralized narrative.

As a representative mechanism, thus, masjids actively support diverse iterations of Islamic identity in Africa over time and space, but also evolve in response to the influences, ideologies, and interventions that continuously reshape the contours of Afro-Islamic identity and practice over time and space. And it is through these purposeful renovations of space that the masjid continues to represent and reaffirm a community's ability to engage in meaningful spiritual practice, identity, and performance over time.

In light of this, the case studies addressed in this volume focus on new, emergent masjid spaces in conjunction with historical sites as collective, active participants in broader "global" conversations and discussions occurring within the wider Muslim world. In addition, each case study speaks to the diverse modes through which Islam has been able to thrive in different areas of the continent over its 1500-year history, some located within perceived centers of Afro-Islamic history, belief, and practice, while others occupy peripheral spaces in society. Each, however, is privileged for their contribution to a holistic understanding of the shape of Islam as it has existed as a continental spiritual movement.

Another important note concerning the case studies surveyed in this volume is that rarely are the architects responsible for these spaces

addressed at length. Because masjid space is inherently generated through the prayer act rather than the construction of a dedicated space, the role of the architect is tangential to the function of the space. To this end, this volume redirects attention "from the design and construction of buildings to the question of how people use them, from production to consumption" (Vellinga 2011; in Verkaaik 2013, 11). While some might argue that the design and authorship of spatial elements fundamentally affect and control the performance of prayer, the fact remains that anyone who prays at a site becomes the architect of the space and it is because of this that these spaces, to quote Melanie van der Hoorn, "can embody the claims, hopes or frustrations of entire groups of people" (van der Hoorn 2009, 193).

By distributing the authorship role to multiple individuals and populations, this study privileges the layers of dialogue and negotiation that lay behind its associated meanings, pointing to the fact that "buildings may have different meanings or even 'lives' to different groups of people in different periods of time" (Verkaaik 2013, 11). Thus, the current focus on space tends less toward the meanings, messages, and definitions attached by the architect, commissioner, and critic, and more toward those systems of identity-making and meaning creation that occur in the interactive relationships that form between structure and user. Thus, the "identity" of space becomes less a fossilized tribute to artistic genius and more a result of encounters with inhabitants "who not only organize their spatial practices in response to them . . . but who also come to understand [space] as symbols of wider social order" (Jones 2011, 27).

Moving beyond discussions of architects and authors, though, another aspect of this study that needs to be addressed is the collective grouping of the case studies in this volume under the title *The Masjid in Contemporary Islamic Africa*. With regard to the qualifier "Islamic" and its oft-positioned synonym "Muslim," the fundamental difference between these two adjectival descriptors has been the subject of great debate. Scholars such as architectural historian Spahic Omer note that "Islamic" designates that which is judged to be the "epitome of the Islamic message, or a major portion of it" and "the spirit of Islam," whereas the descriptor "Muslim" refers to a "segment of life's spiritual paradigm" and a certain Islamic mentality that, in contrast to "Islamic," is inevitably informed by the flaws and faults of human nature (Omer 2008, 504–505). As such, a category such as "Muslim architecture" can be defined according to geographic, stylistic, or temporal parameters, whereas "Islamic architecture manifests the ethos and ideals of Islam" (Omer 2008, 505) in a way that is collective in its multidimensionality in

"facilitate[ing] Muslims' realization of the Islamic purpose and its div-
ine principles" (Omer 2008, 510). Thus, with regard to this study,
"Muslim" is used to describe a singular condition of being whereas
"Islamic" describes a collective spiritual worldview that acknowledges
all of its attendant sociopolitical, cultural, and economic components
and diversities.[1]

With regard to these interpretive methods, however, it should be
noted that the analyses and interrogative platforms in this volume are
those of an individual who identifies as female, Caucasian, non-
Muslim, CIS, heteronormative, and American, characteristics that
inevitably generate perspectives at odds with both established and
emerging schools of thought on this topic. As such, I have attempted
as much as I am able to let the spaces and the individuals who use them
speak for themselves and, to this end, it is my hope that this volume
effectively pushes forward the idea of masjid as a forward-thinking
flexible method of performing identity in the contemporary period
that incorporates traditional and nontraditional genres of Islamic
space as a catalyst in the fostering of thought-provoking ideas of what
a place of prostration can entail under different social, political, and
cultural conditions. Likewise, I hope this volume demonstrates how
these spaces are in conversation with multiple contexts, practices,
traditions, and histories across the world, supporting the idea that
"no identity is ever complete" (Baydar 2004, 20) and privileging the
fact that individuals are mobile in ways that push them to carry interior
spatial templates that they reproduce as needed. To quote Barbara
Metcalf, "people . . . seem to transcend sites completely, caught up in
global movements or proselytization and trade, so that they essentially
exclude the outside world to carry with them a world of ritual, relation-
ships, and symbols that create some variety of Muslim space wherever
they are present" (Metcalf 1996, 3). These individuals subsequently
generate "their own [spiritual spaces and] cartographies" by re-
envisioning and reproducing masjid space in new places and geographies
(Metcalf 1996, 4; 6–7).

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[1] Along these lines, this study does not differentiate between Saharan/sub-Saharan regions
given the fact that the divide is arbitrary from both an environmental and a geopolitical
standpoint. There is little notable difference in environmental ecology between the Sahara
and Sahelian regions, and the Sahara has never acted as an obstacle for the movement of
people, goods, and ideas back and forth across it. In actuality, the "boundary" of the
Sahara served as a strategic narrative for European colonial powers, who encouraged the
supposed divide between North and sub-Saharan Africa, and by extension established an
emergent Islamic space. This narrative effectively erased a long history of diverse Afro-
Islamic existence and exchange as a mode of generating oppositional hierarchies between
the two regions that enabled the European imperial regime to flourish.

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Thus, as a spatial language that articulates Muslim identity and a fluid blueprint through which Muslim identity can be indefinitely reproduced, the concept of the masjid as it is deployed in this volume re-imagines major themes surrounding definitions of Islamic architectural space in the contemporary period in Africa and the nature of "Islamic identity" as it is currently unfolding across diverse contexts.

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