

Introduction

Muslim presence and zongos in Asante

The *tasbīh* (Islamic prayer beads) are a frequent sight in the zongos. Their designation derives from the Arabic *sabaha*, which translates as praise or worship, and they are commonly used as a technical aide in the worship of God. Muhammad, who considers himself a Sunna, albeit not a ‘strong’ one, takes his *tasbīh* for every *ṣalāt* (the five daily Islamic prayers) to recite it after the prayer. Malam Hamidou, his younger brother, is critical of this. As an Islamic scholar (*malam*) of the reformist Sunna, he is not opposed to his brother’s worship of God, but he perceives his using a *tasbīh* as *bid’a* (an illegitimate innovation in the religion of Islam). The prophet used the finger bones of his right hand to keep track of his recitations, and Muslims should emulate him in every detail of his worship without adding anything. Usman, a *malam* of the Tijaniyya Sufi order, another major Islamic group in the zongos, does not share this assessment. For him, the *tasbīh* are part and parcel of the Islamic tradition, as they do not go against the Qur’an or the *Sunna* (the prophetic tradition), and as Muslims throughout the world and throughout history have used them in their worship – so he does so in his *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) to keep track of his recitations. The Tijaniyya also wear the *tasbīh* as a marker of their hierarchical status and use them in their *tarbiya* (training), the ‘spiritual training’ of an adept by a *malam* who instructs one in bodily techniques and recitations that should allow one to reach *ma’rifa* (gnosis or unification with the divine) – *in shā’ Allāh*. Malam Hamidou finds both usages repugnant. For him, all Muslims are the same before God and not ranked in hierarchical ‘levels’, and the idea of unification with the divine is not only impossible but *kufr* (disbelief) for him. Ali, a *malam* who considers himself ‘just Muslim’ (*nkramo*), presented yet another usage of the *tasbīh* to me. He employs it for divinations: he prays over it on the ground, has the person requesting the divination pick it up and give it to him, and then counts the beads while reciting a specific prayer. The remaining beads allow him to establish the house of jinn to be dealt with to settle the matter at hand; he works with an oracle of eight houses and he needs to discover which of the eight is involved in order to deal with the jinn accordingly. Again, we find Malam Hamidou opposed to such things. In his view, this is soothsaying and *kufr*; furthermore, for him, this dealing with the jinn amounts to *shirk* (joining others to Allah in worship). The *tasbīh*, a common Islamic item, is thus not only put to various (non-)usages by the people of the zongo; they also make different senses of it and value it in different ways.

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Tracing the various usages and conceptualisations of a small thing like a *tasbīh* among the people of the zongo, one faces an irreducible diversity of Islamic practices, conceptions, and imaginaries. In this book, I describe and discuss phenomena like this one as I encountered them in Kokote Zongo in 2011 and 2012 to convey an impression of the Islamic lifeworld of this ward and of the irreducible diversity of Islam within it. I trace these phenomena and the divergent senses the people of the zongo make of them in their interrelations – Max Weber’s *Sinnzusammenhänge* (correlations of meaning(s)) (Weber 1972 [1921]) – to come to an ‘explanatory understanding’ (Weber 1972 [1921]: 4; Schütz 1993 [1932]) of this diversity. As I have shown for the *tasbīh* and as I argue in this book, there is no single understanding of Islam among the people of the zongo. Islam is neither uniform nor pre-given to its adherents, but emerges from their varying engagements with and implementations of the Islamic tradition, which is (re)made in the process. The people of the zongo ground this process in reference to the Qur’an and the *Summa*. On this ground, they conceive of their practices, conceptions, and imaginaries as Islamic and render them part and parcel of the Islamic tradition. This is anything but straightforward or unanimously agreed upon. The ways in which people make sense of and with this tradition are as diverse as they are contested and basically open, but they are not unfounded. Islam, as lived by the people of the zongo, is marked by a substantial diversity that gives rise to contestations and argumentation, rendering it what Talal Asad has suggested can be thought of as a ‘discursive tradition’ (Asad 1986). The diversity of Islam in the zongos and the ongoing debates about this are the focus of this ethnography.

As stated by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, anthropology studies large issues in small places (Hylland Eriksen 2001 [1995]; cf. Geertz 2000 [1973]). The wider issue this book addresses is ‘Islam’ – not ‘as it is’ (quite simply, there is no such thing as an ‘Islam’, however conceived) but as an empirically grounded reflection of our academic renderings of this religion. The book suggests some ways in which to come to terms with the irreducible diversity of Islam one finds not only in ‘small places’ such as Kokote Zongo but among Muslims across the globe and throughout history. One should start from this diversity as lived by Muslims in their daily and not-so-daily lives, not to come to an abstract generalisation regarding Islam, but to trace the senses they make of and with their religion. This process both informs and is informed by their lifeworld (Schütz and Luckmann 2003). Accordingly, Islam as lived by its adherents should be considered in its context and against its historical background. Let us therefore turn to the ‘small place’ of this

ethnography, Kokote Zongo, a Muslim ward in Asante, and its major Islamic groups before we move on to the 'larger' theoretical issues.

Kokote Zongo lies on the western outskirts of Offinso, an Asante town of 60,000 inhabitants about 20 miles north of Kumase, the regional capital (Figure 1). Kokote Zongo is Offinso's biggest zongo and home to about 5,200 people. It was founded in 1929 and quickly grew into a hub for the regional kola trade, attracting migrants from various West African backgrounds. In relation to the Asante, the people of the zongo find themselves strangers in the local setting. Furthermore, they are also strangers to each other, as they come from different backgrounds. The people of Kokote Zongo identify as members of 19 ethnic groups and speak more than 25 languages in their interactions, the older generations using Hausa as a lingua franca, the younger ones Asante Twi. Their religion provides these otherwise quite heterogeneous people with a common ground and shared values. As Muslims, they relate to each other, intermarry, and participate in each other's lives. And they find themselves a religious minority in the region, where Muslims make up 16 per cent of the population (Ghana Statistical Service 2013c). The Asante are virtually all Christians, with only about 1 per cent Muslims. Like other zongos in the region, Kokote Zongo is thus a distinctly Muslim community in a predominantly Christian town.

The people of the zongo live Islam in their daily and not-so-daily lives – that is, in their daily routines and flows but also when these are interrupted by joyful or unhappy events. Islam permeates their lifeworld and, in turn, is informed by it. The people of the zongo engage with and implement the Islamic tradition in disparate ways, which provides a common ground for their divergent religious conceptions, practices, and imaginaries. In their varied engagements with and implementations of this tradition, the people of the zongo constantly (re)make it in an open but not ungrounded process, which opens up not only an irreducible diversity but also an ongoing discourse. This discourse is founded on the basic Islamic scriptures – the Qur'an¹ and the *Summa* – which provide common points of reference and also serve as an acknowledged ground for the legitimation of religious and moral claims. However, the people of the zongo differ in their readings and interpretations and put forward a variety of claims or arguments. They differ in their Islamic conceptions,

¹ During fieldwork, I worked with a copy of the Qur'an published by the King Fahd Complex in Medina. I received it as *ṣadaqa* from Sheikh Abdul Rahim, 'head' and founder of the *Nur ul-Amen* Islamic School in Kumase. The booklet contains the Arabic original and an English translation; I found it quite useful, as I could hand it over to my interlocutors to find their quotations. This is a Wahhabi-oriented translation, but I found it met with broad approval.

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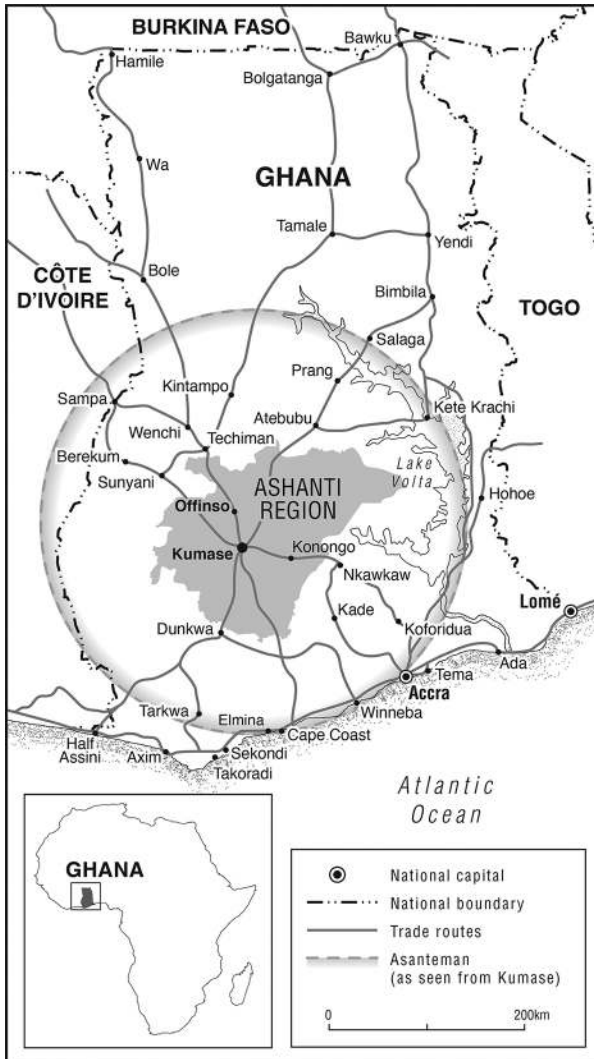


Figure 1 *Map of Ghana and Asante.*

This is based on maps in the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection at the University of Texas. The map shows the contours of the Ghanaian nation and its Ashanti Region sub-region. However, the historic *Asanteman* (Asante dominion), which is also depicted on this map, was defined less in terms of territory than of sovereignty over people and land. This had to be constantly re-established through public events including the periodical *adae* or the annual *odwira*, which centred on Kumase and the person of the *Asantehene*. The circle in this map attempts to depict the centralised orchestration of time and people; this mattered more to the *Asanteman* than its historically shifting and rather fuzzy territorial boundaries (cf. Berry 2001; McCaskie 1995; Wilks 1993).

practices, and imaginaries, and these have changed over time. Nonetheless, they consider themselves and acknowledge each other as Sunni Muslims (*nkramo*) and thus form a Sunni community.²

Throughout the history of this Sunni community and its changing Islamic field, various Islamic groups have emerged and have struggled for, held, and lost Islamic hegemony. Since the 1950s, the Tijaniyya³ and the Sunna have acted as the main antagonists, but this struggle has been taking place within a wider Muslim community whose main protagonists have, at times, also formed an *nkramo* group to pronounce common interests in these ongoing contestations. Furthermore, these groups defy easy or neat classifications.⁴ They all perceive and present themselves as *nkramo*, and they share a history of mutual relations, struggles, (dis)entanglements, and demarcations, while their membership has fluctuated and changed, with many of the ‘ordinary’ *nkramo* following *malams* of different groups simultaneously. Thus, while the people of the zongo are well aware of this struggle and the pronounced differences between these groups, only some of them identify as ‘strong’ (i.e. exclusive) adherents of one of the groups; most consider themselves *nkramo* or ‘just Muslims’.

Nkramo is an inclusive label applied by and to all Sunni Muslims in the region. Among the *malams*, I found this designation frequently further qualified as Tijaniyya or Sunna, but a considerable number of them also insisted on being ‘just’ *nkramo*. The *nkramo* have not formed an organisational body, nor do they speak with a unified or representative voice. As Sunni Muslims, they base their religious tenets and practices on Sunni readings of and engagements with the Qur’an and the *Sunna*. The *nkramo* do not follow the Tijaniyya in their Sufi tenets and practices, and especially not in their specific offices, which they perceive as superfluous. They criticise the Sunna for their ‘literalist’ or ‘too strict’ reading of the Qur’an and the *Sunna* and do not agree with their critiques of locally established Islamic practices and readings of the scriptures. According to Hussain, a leading *nkramo malam* from Kokote Zongo,

² The Ahmadiyya and Shi’a, who are also present in Ghana, were not referred to as *nkramo*. Accordingly, the people of the zongo frequently saw them as non-Muslims. A prayer behind a member of these groups is not considered valid, religious scholars of these groups do not have a prominent say in ongoing debates, and their tenets and practices are not considered to be in accordance with established readings of the Qur’an and the *Sunna*.

³ I stick to their self-designation; *Tijānī* is the common Arabic designation.

⁴ I refer to them as groups as they rally around and promote a common interest within their wider Islamic community. The different groups share common tenets and Islamic *Sinnzusammenhänge*, but they are not – or not necessarily – organised and institutionalised as distinct associations.

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the Tijaniyya and the Sunna are both ‘sects’, while he, as an *nkramo*, is ‘just a Muslim’. According to him, the *nkramo* adhere to and uphold the correct reading and implementation of the scriptures of Islam, as they have learned them from their ancestors who were, after all, *nkramo* themselves. Accordingly, the *nkramo* commonly refer to the long history of Muslim presence in the region and to the Islamic tradition of their *nananom* (ancestors) as the background to their tenets and practices, such as funeral prayers or the manufacture of amulets, which have been there ‘for a long time’ (*akye*).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Tijaniyya established itself as a major Islamic group in the zongos besides the Qadiriyya, whom they eventually supplanted. The Tijaniyya Sufi order was founded in late eighteenth-century Morocco by Ahmad Tijani (Abun-Nasr 1965; Seesemann 2011; Triaud and Robinson 2000; Wright 2005), who claimed to be the only intermediary with the prophet Muhammad, thereby refuting the claims of other sheikhs, and to have had direct contact with the prophet in a waking state thanks to his constant *dhikr*. The Tijaniyya uphold that the prophet has revealed two of their most cherished prayers to their founder: the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* (prayer of the opener) and the *jawharat al-kamāl* (jewel of perfection). Shortly after the order’s foundation in Fez, Muhammad al-Hafiz brought the *ṭarīqa at-Tijaniyya* (path of the Tijaniyya) to Mauritania (Frede 2011; Vikor 2000: 451). In the 1850s, the Tijani sheikh and scholar al-Hajj Umar Taal waged a *jihād* in the wider region and spread the Tijaniyya across West Africa (Frede 2011; Hiskett 1994; Loimeier 2013: 119–21; Martin 1986: 284; Robinson 2000: 140–3; Seesemann 2010; 2011; Vikor 2000: 451–3). In the twentieth century, Ibrahim Niassé, a sheikh from Senegal, claimed to be the bringer of the *ḥayḍa* (emanation, flood) of God’s blessings and initiated a reform movement within the order, attracting millions of new members to it.⁵ While the Tijaniyya have lost much influence in their country of origin (Triaud 2000: 10–11), they are one of the largest and most influential Muslim orders in sub-Saharan Africa, where they have over 100 million adherents (Wright 2010: 112).⁶ The Tijaniyya are a hierarchical Sufi order whose members are trained in ‘spiritual’ practices

⁵ The specific tenets and practices of the *ḥayḍa* movement and its history are discussed in Brigaglia (2000), Frede (2011), Hill (2007), Seesemann (2009; 2010; 2011), Soares (2005), Triaud and Robinson (2000), and Wright (2005; 2010; 2015). For the history of the Tijaniyya in Ghana, see Bari (2009a; 2009b), Dumbe (2013), Hiskett (1980), Ibrahim (2002), Iddrisu (2005; 2009), Martin (1986), Ryan (1996; 2000), and Stewart (1965).

⁶ Zachary Wright takes this estimation from a speech by Sheikh Hassan Cissé, the former leader of the order.

to gain insights into or revelations of the divine – God willing. As a Sufi order with branches all over West Africa and around the globe, the *ṭarīqa at-Tijaniyya* is neither a unified nor a homogeneous movement but, as suggested by Jean-Louis Triaud, ‘rather a shared heritage of readings and rites, a strong identifying reference, a social network made from multiple webs’ (Triaud 2000: 14).

As elsewhere, the Tijaniyya in Ghana refer to Ahmad Tijani as their founding father and to his teachings of the Qur’an and *Sunna* as their basis. Their common designation and self-reference is ‘Tijaniyya’, which is why I stick to this term here. Most of them further present themselves as *faiḥ* (a local rendering of the term *fayḍa*), adherents of the teachings of Ibrahim Niasse, whose portrait is omnipresent in the local Islamic landscape – worn as an amulet, printed on clothes, as a sticker on cars, or as a poster on a wall. According to my Tijaniyya interlocutors, their group differs from the others due to several traits and practices. Their incessant *istighfār* (seeking of forgiveness) and *dhikr* (the remembrance of God in prayers, litanies, or meditation) eventually allow them to enter *ma’rifā* (gnosis or a state of unification with the divine) – God willing. The Tijaniyya are hierarchically ordered into *muqaddam* (guide) and *murīd* (adept), the former initiating the latter into the *ṭarīqa at-Tijaniyya* and instructing them in *dhikr*. This instruction is part of the *tarbiya* (training), the ‘spiritual’ training of the Tijaniyya, and initiation into the ranks of *‘ilm* (Islamic knowledge) is hierarchical. What precisely these terms mean and entail is contested, but they provide a common ground to which the Tijaniyya relate in their practices and statements. The Ghanaian Tijaniyya have not formed an institutional body. They assemble in personal networks under their sheikh and *muqaddam*, which are by no means exclusive, as one can follow several sheikhs at the same time. However, while they have not formed an organisational body, the Tijaniyya view themselves as a coherent order, acknowledge each other as members of the *ṭarīqa*, and approve of Sheikh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu as their ‘national chief imam’. In the mid-twentieth century, the Tijaniyya became the hegemonic Islamic group in the zongos and left deep traces in the Islamic practices, conceptions, and imaginaries encountered in these wards today, such as the central value of the *ṣalāt al-fātiḥ* in Islamic rituals. Yet, since the 1970s, they have come under open attack by the reformist Sunna and many of these practices have been ardently contested.

The Sunna emerged in Ghana in the 1940s. They advocate strict adherence to the scriptures with a positivistic reading and implementation. From the outset, they campaigned against the Tijaniyya, but their numbers remained small and adherence limited to a few cities. This

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changed in the 1970s, when numerous scholars returned from their Islamic studies in the Middle East, set up Islamic schools, and held sermons to spread their reformist tenets.⁷ These scholars were mainly Salafi- or Wahhabi-oriented in their outlook and teachings, as they had studied under such scholars in the Middle East.⁸ In their sermons, they campaigned against what they perceived as *bid'a* in established Islamic conceptions, practices, and imaginaries, and they advocated a positivist reliance on the scriptures, stressing *ijtihād* (individual, independent reasoning) over *taqlīd* (imitation or following).⁹ These reformers are commonly referred to and present themselves as ‘Sunna’. When I sat with Malam Hamidou, one of Kokote Zongo’s Sunna *malams*, the following conversation developed:

I asked him if the Sunna were rather Wahhabi- or Salafi-oriented. He returned the question, asking me what I implied by this – wasn’t he ‘just a Sunna’? When I added that Islamic groups like his were frequently referred to as Wahhabi or Salafi, he interrogated what I meant by these designations. As a *malam*, he is fluent in Arabic, and the term *salaf* (ancestor) was well known to him, but he did not understand what I was implying by using it in a question like this. I replied that the Wahhabi are usually considered adherents of the teachings of Abd al-Wahhab, who lived in the eighteenth century on the Arabian Peninsula, and that the term Salafi refers to the ancestors of Islam – the prophet and his companions. Following this explanation, Malam Hamidou opted for the second designation – Salafi – as the Sunna do not follow any scholar but the teachings of the prophet and his tradition, the *Sunna*, from which their name derives.

Accordingly, I use here their common (self-)designation, and refer to this reformist movement as Sunna.

Since the 1990s, the Sunna have formed an organisational body with different branches and levels of leadership – the *Ahl us-Sunna wal Jama’ah* (Dumbe 2013: 62–7; Kobo 2012: 292). They provide the other ‘national chief imam’, al-Hajj Umar Ibrahim, and refuse to follow Sheikh Nuhu Sharubutu. Like the *nkramo* and the Tijaniyya, the Sunna base their religious tenets and practices on Sunni readings of and

⁷ For more on the initial Muslim reformists in Ghana, see Dumbe (2013), Iddrisu (2009), Kobo (2009; 2012), and Owusu (2010). On the momentum of the reformist movement, which Dumbe labels as Salafi and Kobo as Wahhabi, see Bari (2009a; 2009b), Dumbe (2013), Hiskett (1980), Kobo (2009; 2012), and Samwini (2006). For a history of Islamic reform in West Africa, see Kaba (1974), Kane (1999), and Loimeier (2003b; 2010; 2013).

⁸ For a concise summary of Salafi/Wahhabi tenets, see Østebø (2012: 24–8); for an extensive discussion, see Haj (2009) and Meijer (2009). Saba Mahmood discusses the political context in which these tenets gained momentum in the Middle East (Mahmood 2006).

⁹ See Haj (2009: 9, *passim*) for a discussion of these terms in regard to Islamic reform.

engagements with the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. Yet, these groups diverge in central aspects of their readings and tenets. As reformists, the *Sunna* critique the *nkramo* and the Tijaniyya for what they perceive as *bid'a* in their teachings and practices, as they do not consider that these derive from the scriptures in a 'straight' or positive way. They propagate a 'scriptural' Islam in distinction to the 'scriptural-cum-spiritual' Islam upheld by the *nkramo* and the Tijaniyya. Accordingly, they fiercely criticise the 'spiritual' tenets and practices of the latter.¹⁰

These groups vie for religious hegemony in the zongos, and their debates inform the Islamic discourse in these wards. However, most of the people of the zongo consider themselves 'just Muslims' and participate as such in these debates – at times forming an *nkramo* group of their own. While the *Sunna* and the Tijaniyya are renowned for taking 'strong' positions, the *nkramo* tend to navigate and reconcile the differences in pragmatic ways. In these debates, all participants draw on a shared Islamic tradition and history, while they expound divergent readings and understandings of them. The history of Muslim presence in Asante has thus never been unchanging or static. Islam in the zongos has been and is a diverse and contested phenomenon. This diversity is informed by a long history and fuels various debates. In these, the people of the zongo relate to and make sense of their religion, which thereby also informs their lives in the zongo.

The anthropology of Islam

This ethnography is about 'everyday' Islam (Schielke and Debevec 2012) in its diversity as lived by the people of the zongo. As seen for the *tasbīh*, 'everyday religion' is far more diverse than the unifying label 'Islam' suggests. 'Islam is one,' as my interlocutors have frequently remarked, but one encounters an immense diversity of religious conceptions, practices, and imaginaries among its adherents. Robert Launay has framed this conundrum as 'The One and the Many' in his *Beyond the Stream* (Launay 2004 [1992]). He and others suggest that one should start from this diversity in one's descriptions and analyses of Islam as lived by its adherents and from which one traces their arguments and reasoning, thereby considering Islam as a 'discursive tradition' (Asad 1986). The anthropology of Islam faces the challenge of how to reconcile the universal appeal of the religion and its scriptures with the manifest diversity of its conceptions and practices among and within Muslim communities in

¹⁰ Adherents of all groups employ the terms 'scriptural' and 'spiritual'.

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various contexts – a challenge faced by Muslims themselves (Bowen 1993: 7; 1998; Digard 1978; Hirji 2010; Launay 1998). One way of attempting to solve this has been by compartmentalising Islam into central and peripheral regional varieties, such as ‘African Islam’, whereby the latter deviate from the ‘original’ centre of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa (Abu-Lughod 1989).¹¹ Others have suggested studying the adaptations of a ‘universal’ Islam to specific local contexts or ‘folk’ traditions, or considering Islam not as one universal religion but as different cultural *islams*. Yet another approach, and the one followed here, is to consider Islam in its diversity as engaged with and lived by Muslims themselves.

The imperial divide-and-conquer approach has been to compartmentalise Islam as distinct varieties. The notion of an alleged ‘African Islam’ or *islam noir* emerged under colonial rule and haunts us to this day (Evers Rosander 1997; Quinn and Quinn 2003; Soyinka 2012; Tayob 2008).¹² As a deviation, ‘African Islam’ is assumed to be syncretic, ‘spiritual’, accommodating, heterodox, and Sufi-oriented, while its ‘original’ Arab counterpart is presented as purist, ‘scriptural’, militant, orthodox, and reform-oriented (Launay and Soares 1999: 502–4; Loimeier 2013: 1; Otayek and Soares 2007: 3–4; Seesemann 2002). But this distinction does not hold, as there is no such a thing as an ‘African Islam’ (Launay 2006; Loimeier 2002; 2003a; Seesemann 2002). First and foremost, this was a colonial imagination and misrepresentation (Launay and Soares 1999: 503; Seesemann 2002). Second, the supposedly unifying ‘African’ lacks any stable ground: Africa and the history of Islam within it are far too diverse to be subsumed under a single label – even tentatively (Levtzion and Pouwels 2000; Loimeier 2002; 2003a; 2013: 18). Third, we know of several local, ‘African’, Islamic reform movements and traditions of reform (Frede 2011; Kresse 2003; Loimeier 2003b: 238, 258; 2010; Seesemann 2011). Thus, the fact that there is Islam in Africa makes this continent simply part of the so-called Islamic world and Islam a part of Africa (Saul 2006; Soares 2000; 2007b).

I doubt that the idea of a Muslim centre in the Middle East from which the periphery derives or deviates – a notion partially upheld by Muslims themselves (Kresse 2009) – is of any descriptive or analytical value. This is not to deny that the Middle East is more than merely Islam’s

¹¹ For a critique of the ‘Orientalism’ that goes hand in hand with such regionalisms, see Said (1978; 1985).

¹² This is not to say that these authors are colonialists or sympathetic to colonial ideology. The notion of an ‘African Islam’ remains pervasive even among sharp critics of colonialism and its aftermaths.