

The Archaeology of Islamisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Comparative Study

Timothy Insoll, Department of Archaeology, University of Manchester,
Tim.Insoll@manchester.ac.uk

Introduction

The archaeology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is remarkably diverse in relation to both its material components, geographical and chronological frameworks, and the life ways that were influenced by Islam, from settled and nomadic populations, peasants and kings, to merchants, farmers, warriors, and townspeople. Islamisation processes were equally varied involving, for example, trade, proselytisation, jihad, and prestige. Economically, new markets might be reached. Politically, the adoption of Arabic, of new forms of administration and of literacy could have a significant impact. Socially, material culture and ways of life could alter as manifest via diet and funerary practices, house types and settlement patterns. It is not possible to adequately summarize this diversity here (cf. Insoll 2003). Instead emphasis will be placed upon selectively considering the evidence so as to indicate what archaeology can tell us about Islamisation processes in Africa and to indicate the value and utility of archaeology for examining Islamisation.

Two regions will be the focus, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, and the Western Sahel (**Figure 1**). These reflect in environments, chronology, life ways, Islamisation processes, and material culture, the diversity just mentioned and are both regions where this author has completed significant archaeological fieldwork. Moreover, although Islamic archaeology might be the focus, it is necessary to stress two points. First, this forms part of African Iron Age archaeology and thus fits into the pre-existing archaeological context. Second, that because Muslims might be present from a certain point in time this does not imply that everyone was Muslim and a uniform suite of Islamic material culture appeared. On the contrary, the archaeology frequently reflects a continuing mosaic of different beliefs; Islamic, African indigenous religions, in Ethiopia, Christianity, and of dynamic historical and social processes.

Beyond, the two regions that are the focus, the archaeological study of Islamisation in sub-Saharan Africa, defined here as referring both to religious (cf. Levtzion 1979: 7) and cultural change (Insoll 2003), has varied significantly across the continent reflecting research interests, but also facilities and ease of working. The East African Coast (**Figure 1**), and until recent strife in the region precluded fieldwork, the western Sahel, are the two most thoroughly investigated areas. In comparison the Islamic archaeology of Ethiopia, and to a lesser extent the Nilotic Sudan (**Figure 1**), has been neglected, where archaeological priorities have been on different periods, materials, and traditions. This is evident in, for instance, the focus on prehistoric, pre-Christian and pre-Islamic complex societies in both Ethiopia and the Nilotic Sudan (cf. Edwards 2004; Finneran 2007). In contrast, the archaeology of the central Sudan as a whole remains underexplored, whilst the Islamic archaeology of the eastern and central African interior and of southern Africa is limited and late in date, and that of the Muslim communities of the West African Sudan and forest (**Figure 1**) needs further investigation.

The Social Dynamics of Conversion

Why and how people converted to Islam in sub-Saharan Africa has been the focus of study by anthropologists, historians, and religious studies specialists, but much less frequently by

archaeologists. Influential formative studies of conversion processes include those of Trimingham (1968), Fisher (1973, 1985) and R. Horton (1971, 1975, 1993). The first two emphasise phased patterns of conversion (**Table 1**), whereas Horton, whose model is largely concerned with Christianity but has been influential also in relation to Islam (cf. Insoll 2003: 31-32; Østebø 2012: 15-17), suggests a two-tiered structure to African cosmology involving microcosm (local spirits) and macrocosm (supreme being). For Islamisation (and Christianity) to succeed it was necessary for a breakdown in the microcosm and a corresponding growth in importance of the macrocosm. Elements of these models can occasionally help in interpreting the archaeology of Islamisation and Islamic conversion in sub-Saharan Africa, as is discussed below. However, beyond the sometime evocative language used, these models are too all encompassing to be applied effectively so as to explain Islamisation universally within such a diverse and complex area as sub-Saharan Africa.

Conversion Stage or Phase	Description
Germination (Trimingham 1968)	Preparatory contacts. Indigenous religions not unduly disturbed. Items of Islamic material culture such as dress and amulets adopted
Crisis (ibid)	Assimilation of elements of Muslim practice, e.g. dietary prohibitions and prayer, alongside continuation of indigenous religious practices
Reorientation (ibid)	Indigenous religious cults lose power and accompanying reorientation to Islam
Quarantine (Fisher 1973, 1985)	Islam confined to a specific group such as traders
Mixing (ibid)	Islamic conversion occurs and Islam mixed with indigenous beliefs and practices via syncretic processes
Reform (ibid)	Wave of Islamic reform occurs

Table 1. Stages or phases in African Islamic conversion proposed in Trimingham (1968) and Fisher (1973, 1985)

Of greater utility is a three-phase model invoking “inclusion”, “identification” and “displacement” developed by Eaton (1993) to explain conversion to Islam in Bengal. This is a model, as this author has described elsewhere (Insoll 2003: 29-30), which has utility in relation to thinking about sub-Saharan African Islamisation in particular contexts for it “allows for gradual religious change and, importantly, assimilation of older elements within the process as well” (ibid: 29). Besides recognising staggered chronologies, local cultural adaptations, and what could be described as syncretic processes, recent studies of Islamisation and conversion to Islam in sub-Saharan Africa by anthropologists and historians indicate an interpretive shift from a universal level to one emphasising regional or local context (e.g. Levzion and Pouwels 2000; Moraes Farias 2003; Kaplan 2004; Horton 2004; Østebø 2012). Generally though, archaeologists working on Islamic material in Africa south of the Sahara have still tended to neglect Islamisation and conversion to Islam in favour of questions surrounding chronology, trade, and urbanism, though this is beginning to change, as is considered below beginning with Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa

Islamic archaeology in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa has been neglected (Insoll 2003). In Ethiopia, for example, there are very few exceptions (e.g. Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2010, 2011), a reflection perhaps of the secondary status ascribed Ethiopian Islam more widely (Ahmed 1992: 15-16). As a correlate, reviews of Islam in Ethiopia tend to lack a material dimension (e.g. Trimingham 1952; Kapteijns 2000; Kaplan 2004; Loimeier 2013). This is an

omission of consequence as arguably Ethiopia and Eritrea were among the first areas of sub-Saharan Africa to be in contact with Islamic communities (Insoll 2003).

The Red Sea Coast. Building upon extensive pre-Islamic connections across the Red Sea (e.g. Phillipson 1998; Finneran 2007), historical records suggest close relations were maintained between the early Muslim community and Ethiopia (Kifleyesus 2006: 48). A group of the Prophet Muhammad's followers fleeing persecution in Mecca AD 615 who found asylum in the kingdom of Aksum (Lapidus 1988: 25; Kapteijns 2000: 228) provides probably the most famous example of this. Hadith also record that an Ethiopian, Bilal ibn Rabah was appointed as the first Muezzin by the Prophet Muhammad, and the Prophet's spear was a gift from the Ethiopian ruler (Power 2012: 95). Materially there is very little to indicate these early Islamic Ethiopian connections, reflecting in part the absence of relevant research (Insoll 2003: 45). Surveys have been completed in some areas, e.g. parts of Shoa (cf. Tilahun 1990) and Arabic funerary inscriptions have been the focus of research e.g. in Shoa, Quiha, and the Dahlak Islands in neighbouring Eritrea (e.g. Schneider 1967, 1969, 1970; Oman 1976; Insoll 2001).

The Dahlaks were one of the earliest Muslim centres of settlement in the region (**Figure 2**). "Abyssinian" pirates were recorded as having attacked Jeddah in 702-3 (Tedeschi 1969: 52), and as a reaction to this the islands were occupied in the early 8th century (all dates are AD unless otherwise specified) by Muslim naval forces. The islands then variously served as a place of exile and a major trade centre. Unfortunately, direct material correlation of this earliest Islamic period is lacking as the over 200 basalt Arabic funerary inscriptions recorded from the Dahlaks date from between 911 and 1539 (Oman 1974). The earliest Islamic archaeological chronology also remains unknown, pending excavation, though survey has found the remains of an extensive settlement, cisterns for water storage, and scatters of trade items of types widely found on the East African Indian Ocean and Red Sea coasts (Insoll 2001a, 2003). These include monochrome glass beads, Chinese celadon (green wares), blue and white wares, and white wares, and Islamic sgraffiato wares of 9th-12th centuries date and of Mesopotamian or Iranian provenance (cf. Insoll 2001a). Trade was the likely primary agent of Islamisation in the Dahlak Islands and on the neighbouring African Red Sea Coast (Insoll 2003; Power 2012).

Examples of key mainland trade centres that functioned as significant nodes for Islamisation, were Zeyla and Berbera on the Gulf of Aden in Somaliland (**Figure 2**). Yaqut mentions Zeyla as early as 891-2 (Pankhurst 1985: 54), and substantial settlement remains have been recorded in and around the town and on the neighbouring island of Saad Din (Curle 1937). Fauvelle-Aymar et al. (2011) have recently explored the archaeology of Zeyla with interesting results. The Qiblatayn mosque or so-called mosque "*avec deux mihrab*" (Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2011: 46) was test excavated - this name reflects the belief the mosque was aligned both to Mecca and Jerusalem thereby reflecting the prayer orientation of the earliest Muslims and was, according to oral tradition, one of the earliest mosques in sub-Saharan Africa (Mire 2015: 129). A second excavation was focused on the suspected location of an old pathway passing this and the other two main mosques in Zeyla. However, the earliest ceramic material recovered from the excavations was Yemeni "Mustard" or Black on Yellow wares of 13th-mid 14th centuries date. Fauvelle-Aymar et al. (2011: 63) suggest, based on this evidence and the historical sources, that the Islamisation of Zeyla was comparatively late, at the end of the 12th to the beginning of the 13th centuries. Though further surface survey at Zeyla recovered Turquoise glazed wares of 3rd-10th century date based on parallels elsewhere (González-Ruibal et al. 2015: 13), indicating that the Islamisation of Zeyla was likely earlier, but at a date as yet unknown.

The Ethiopian Highlands. Trade, allied with proselytisation, spread Islam into the Ethiopian interior (Insoll 2003: 58). Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch in their important studies (2010: 47, 2011: 19-21) have suggested that this was through two axes, initially from the 9th-10th centuries via the Dahlak Islands and Massawa to Shoa and second, from the 13th century via Zeyla and Berbera to Harar and onto the southern lakes region. An important exception to the absence of excavation of Islamic sites is provided by their work (cf. Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2010) at Nora, an abandoned town in northeast Shoa, linked with the more northerly trade route. Excavation was completed in the main mosque and radiocarbon dated to between the mid-12th to late 13th centuries (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2010: 36). The importance of this work lies in part in the fact that Nora was the first Islamic site in Ethiopia where excavation “*excède le cadre de simples repérages et sondages*” (Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2009-2010: 58).

Within Ethiopia, the southern Islamisation/trade route has also been the focus of recent archaeological investigation focused on the city of Harar and the nearby abandoned settlement of Harlaa (Insoll, Tesfaye, and Mahmoud 2014; Insoll, MacLean, and Engda in press) (**Figure 2**). The importance of Harar is indicated by its size and is reflected in the listing of the Old City as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The old city wall of Harar, the *djugel*, contains within it approximately 2000 houses, 82 mosques, and over 100 saints’ tombs and shrines, the result of significant urban development over many centuries and making it a focal point of sanctity (**Figure 3**). Harar has significant historical depth, however the origins of Harar are obscured by conflicting traditions. These range from it being founded by Arabs from the Hadramaut in the late 7th century (Azaïs and Chambard 1931: 3), to it being established by local people in the 10th century (Hecht 1987: 2), or even that it was a later foundation in the 16th century (Pankhurst 1985: 49). An alternative hypothesis distinguished in Harari local traditions is that the city had dual foundation dates (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2011: 23): the first described as occurring about the 10th century, and the second during the reign of Amir Nur (1552-1568) (*ibid.*).

Each theory holds different implications, not just for the foundations of the city, but for understanding the chronology of Islamic conversion and form of Islamisation processes throughout the region, and their links with trade networks for which Harar was also a hub. Harar connected the eastern Ethiopian highlands, arid lowlands, and the Gulf of Aden (cf. Wilding 1977; Braukämper 2004). Harar was also a centre of Islamic learning. As such it was sometimes colloquially referred to as the ‘Timbuktu’ of Ethiopia because of this status, and Harar was, and is, a major centre of Muslim pilgrimage. It was also a locus of proselytisation and a nucleus of Islamisation from an unconfirmed date, perhaps from the 12th century and the migration of Muslim Argobba into the region (Braukämper 2004: 108-109), or perhaps later in the 15th/16th centuries, a more likely date for its foundation, based on the currently available archaeological data.

Hamburti is the core area of early settlement in Harar; the explorer Richard Burton (1894: 40) described Gay Hamburti as “the historic rock upon which Saint Nur held converse with the prophet Khizr”. Within local tradition Hamburti is referred to as the ‘navel’ of Harar suggesting it is a significant location in the foundation history of the city. Two test excavations were completed in this area, one in a domestic compound and the other in the courtyard outside the former palace of one of the Amirs of Harar, Amir Abdur Shakur according to local informants, though this precise association remains unproven. A radiocarbon date of the mid-15th century was obtained from near the base of the sequence at the palace excavations. The other unit only provided modern material (Insoll, Tesfaye and Mahmoud 2014).

Excavation was also completed adjacent to the shrine of Amir Nur (d. 1567). Amir Nur, previously mentioned, and Shaikh Abadir (13th century), a notable scholar and influential in the “dissemination of Islam” (Østebø 2012: 50) are the two most revered saints in Harar (Trimingham 1952: 249), and their shrines the most important Muslim sites in the city. A sequence of Muslim burials was recorded (left in-situ, and other than their presence and orientation noted, undisturbed). A radiocarbon date of the mid-17th to early 19th centuries was obtained from the base of the excavation. This is significant as no inscriptions were found in the cemetery and the date indicates the shrine became a focus of burial some time after Amir Nur was interred at this location, but again provided no corroboration of an early foundation date for Harar. Evidence for participation in international trade was also minimal, comprising a sherd of white glazed pottery and a single green glass flask neck from the Palace site, and a sherd of blue and white ware from an undated iron-working site. Both the sherds and the glass are of likely Yemeni or Middle Eastern provenance.

Although archaeology is currently indicating that Harar was seemingly a late foundation, or potentially a re-foundation, i.e. post mid-15th century, Muslim communities existed at an earlier date elsewhere in the eastern highlands. At Harlaa, c. 40 km northwest of Harar, an extensive, at least partially Islamized trade centre has been recorded dated to between the 12th-13th centuries through radiocarbon samples and artefacts (Insoll, MacLean, and Engda in press). Six engraved Arabic stelae (Schneider 1969; Insoll, MacLean, and Engda in press) have also been recorded at Harlaa, four are undated, one bore the date of 657 AH (1259-1260 AD) (Bauden 2011: 296) and another the partial date of 44x (Schneider 1969: 340), calculated as 1048-1057 AD by Chekroun et al (2011: 79).

Two test excavations have been completed. One was in a ruined stone-built mosque and exposed the mihrab built of blocks of coralline limestone, possibly indicative of Red Sea architectural influences, and a white lime mortar and gravel floor (**Figure 4**). A radiocarbon date was obtained from the floor of the mid-12th to mid-13th centuries. Two niches were also found in the walls, one in the mihrab likely used for storing the Qur’an and the other next to the mihrab for the Imam to sit in whilst delivering a sermon according to local informants. The second excavation was in the settlement area and uncovered a wall and areas of stone floor. Two radiocarbon dates indicated occupation again spanned the mid-12th to mid-13th centuries.

In contrast to Harar extensive evidence for involvement in long distance trade was found in the settlement site, which is in the process of being analysed. It includes both Chinese (Celadon, white ware, possibly Qingbai), and Islamic ceramics (Black on Yellow or ‘Mustard’ wares as found at Zeyla [see above], unidentified green, black, and brown glazed wares) (**Figure 5**). Numerous glass vessel and bracelet fragments were also recorded. One bracelet fragment has raised polychrome glass drop decoration and is broadly comparable to glass bracelets from Zeyla site Z1 (cf. González-Ruibal et al. 2015: 13, 17), suggesting possible connections. The bead assemblage was particularly diverse both in the materials and forms represented including glass, carnelian, rock crystal, coral, and banded agate. The origins of this material are as yet unknown, but could include, besides the Chinese ceramics, Egypt and the Near East for the glass vessels, and some of the glass beads and glass bracelets, the Red Sea for the coral and some of the shell, elsewhere in East Africa for the rock crystal, western India for some of the carnelian beads, Yemen for some of the glazed pottery, e.g. ‘Mustard wares’ (cf. Bridgman 2009: 136-137), and some of the glass bracelets, and the Maldives for cowry shells (Insoll, MacLean, and Engda in press).

Further insight into trade connections and the potential areas of the Islamic World the inhabitants of Harlaa were indirectly connected with was provided by unstratified finds made by villagers during farming activities at the site (Insoll, MacLean, and Engda in press). This

included 3 whole silver coins, 10 clipped silver coins, and 2 bronze coins which preliminary reading indicates were mostly Ayyubid issues of the 12th-13th centuries (V.S. Curtis pers. comm. 15/9/15). A bronze Chinese coin was also recorded with the inscription “Kaiyuan tonbao” meaning, “circulating treasure of the new beginning” (Wilson and Flecker 2010: 38). These coins were issued from 621 AD (Tang dynasty) but remained in circulation for a considerable time afterwards (H. Wang pers. comm. 15/9/15; cf. Cribb and Potts 1996: 109, 112).

At Harlaa, the first ever analysis of faunal remains from an Islamic site in Ethiopia is also being completed by Veerle Linseele (Insoll and Linseele in preparation). Dietary remains, particularly from animals, can be critical in the material investigation of conversion to Islam through the presence or absence of indicators of Halal (permitted) diet and Haram (prohibited) species in the archaeological record (e.g. Insoll 1999: 96-9; Bangsgaard 2001; Smith 2005). Linseele’s analysis has indicated that domesticated animals dominate (Sheep/goat, cattle, chicken), with some marine fish species found, presumably indicating their trade from the Red Sea, c. 100 km northeast (Insoll and Linseele in preparation). Cut marks on some of the bones are also well preserved, which should permit the reconstruction of butchery patterns that might provide further evidence on Islamisation through comparison with faunal assemblages from other Islamic sites in better investigated areas of Africa and the Arabian peninsula (ibid). Overall, it is apparent that Islam was established in some urban contexts in highland Ethiopia by at least the mid-12th century, and this appears to have been linked with trade directed to the Red Sea and then into Indian Ocean networks.

The Nomadic Factor. Space precludes a detailed review of the Islamic archaeology elsewhere in the Horn of Africa (cf. Insoll 2003, chapter 2), but another facet of Islamisation evident in the region needs briefly exploring. This is the correlation between certain nomadic groups and early conversion to Islam that is sometimes apparent in parts of the Horn of Africa. Though the caveat needs adding that it is difficult to discuss this archaeologically, owing to a lack of research in sub-Saharan Africa in particular, the often-ephemeral imprint of nomad life upon the archaeological record (cf. Cribb 1991; Linseele 2013: 163), and the problems of drawing on recent pastoralist/nomad ethnography for interpreting the archaeological record (Szuchman 2009: 7).

Amongst the Somali, for instance, Islam of the Shafi’i school was already established by the 11th century AD (Lewis 1986; 1994: 140), but materially this is difficult to explore. Within Somalia relevant archaeological research has been limited, concentrated upon the coastal strip and key towns such as Mogadishu (e.g. Chittick 1982), and wholly absent for the past two decades. In contrast, in Somaliland archaeological research, albeit exploratory, is taking place at the coastal ports, as previously described, and also at abandoned stone towns linking the coast with the interior (e.g. Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2011; Mire 2015; González-Ruibal et al. 2015). Ultimately, these urban centres might contribute to understanding aspects of nomad Islamisation, but potentially more relevant are the large numbers of burial tumuli that have been recorded at various locations in Somaliland (cf. González-Ruibal et al. 2015: 23-27). These stone cairns are undated but have various forms including outer rectangular, oval, or circular stone perimeters, and the presence of stelae on two cairns allowed their identification as Islamic (ibid: 23), suggesting that Muslim burial rites were incorporated within pre-existing monument forms.

Other nomadic groups were later in converting to Islam, as with the Afar. A sultanate, Aussa, was established in the single fertile area in Afar territory on the Awash River in the 16th century (Thesiger 1998). But Afar Islam, as Lewis (1994: 172) noted, “has not yet acquired anything like as strong a hold over the nomadic population of Dankalia as it has among the

Somali”. Moreover, Lewis (1994: 172) has indicated how indigenous religious elements such as a “cult of the dead” persisted, as evident in grave monuments built in parts of the Danakil depression including ones that were finished with a line of upright stones indicating the deceased man’s victims (cf. Thesiger 1935: 10-11, 1998: 123; Nesbitt 1934: 77, 210-212). The spread of Islam amongst the Oromo was also a slow process, and though exposed to the religion certainly from the 15th century, “the pastoral Oromo on the whole retained their traditional religion” largely until the 19th century (Hassen 1994: 150). Hence there is a degree of correlation between nomad groups and early Islamic conversion, but it is not uniform and attempting to apply a phased model to Islamisation in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa does not work.

The Western Sahel

First Contacts and Nomads: Essuk/Tadmekka. In the Western Sahel phased conversion models are more applicable. According to the Arabic historical sources, the first Muslim contacts with the Western Sahel were by Kharijite, Ibadi merchants (Lewicki 1962, 1971). These began soon after the establishment of the Imamate of Tahert in Algeria in the late 8th century, with historical mentions of an envoy being sent from Tahert to the ruler of either Ghana or Gao between c. 823-872 (Lewicki 1971: 119). Trade would appear to have been the original impetus for contacts but in both Gao (Mali) and Tegdaoust (Mauritania, and probably the Awdaghust of the Arabic sources linked to the kingdom of Ghana [Robert 1970]), the archaeological evidence for such contacts is tenuous, amounting to a few sherds of glazed pottery (Insoll 2003: 215).

Essuk/Tadmekka in the Adrar des Iforas Mountains in northern Mali provides an exception to the absence of archaeological evidence for these early Islamic contacts (**Figure 6**). This town whose name was recorded by al-Bakrī as meaning “the Mecca-like” (Levtzion and Hopkins 2000: 85) was one of the earliest centres of Islam in West Africa. Excavation of Essuk/Tadmekka has transformed our understanding of life on the southern frontier of the Sahara with an occupation sequence uncovered dating from the mid-1st millennium AD to c. 1400 (Nixon 2009: 217). The first evidence for trans-Saharan trade associated with permanent architecture dates to the mid-8th century. From layers associated with this period Islamic vessel glass and three grains of wheat were found, the latter of great significance as possibly attesting commerce in staple cereals, with wheat of potential importance “to an Islamic diet” and as a luxury foodstuff (Nixon 2009: 251). A fragment of imported silk textile, unique archaeologically in West Africa, was also recovered, as were three fragments of coin moulds dated to c. AD 850-950, containing microscopic traces of gold, and probably used to make unstamped gold coin blanks that were then exported north of the Sahara (Nixon et al. 2011).

Although unequivocal evidence of the population being Muslim at Essuk/Tadmekka at this time is lacking, the likelihood is that at least some were Muslims. Whether they were Ibadi is also unknown, but Nixon (2009: 247) indicates that Ibadi groups were “significantly composed of Saharan Berbers” and that the Ibadi leader Abu Yazid was born at Essuk in the late 9th century of a trader and a slave (cf. Levtzion and Hopkins 2000: 154 cited in Nixon 2009: 244). Both points suggesting that in the formative period of Islamisation an Ibadi linkage is not improbable.

Essuk/Tadmekka has also provided abundant Arabic epigraphic evidence (Moraes Farias 1990, 2003). The inscriptions cover the period between c. AD 1013-1014 and 1387. One of these inscriptions (number 104) confirms the identification of the site as ancient Tadmekka (Moraes Farias 2003: cxxxiv), in making reference to “a market in conformity to (or: a longing

for) Bekka (or: Mecca)” (ibid: 87), i.e. making a comparison between Mecca and Essuk/Tadmekka and their respective valleys (Moraes Farias 2003: 88), as described by al-Bakrī. Other inscriptions provide important information on Islamisation, indicating that local Berber speakers were engraving the *shahada* (cf. inscription number 105 [Moraes Farias 2003: 89), or in recording the Muslim names of the engravers of inscriptions as on inscription number 110 signed by Muhammad, son of Sulayman in 547 AH (1152 AD) (ibid: 91).

This information on Islamisation, however, transcends the recording of Muslim names. Essuk/Tadmekka was a settlement connected with Sahelian Berber/Tuareg nomads, and Moraes Farias (2003: cxx) has described how part of the process of Islamisation was the “investment of Islamic meanings into spatial landmarks”. This, he argues (ibid), was achieved through Muslim converts familiarizing themselves with new markers of directionality centred on the *qibla*, and via engraving dates on stone. The latter producing “materialisations of axial time computed according to the Islamic calendar”. These processes had occurred by not later than the 11th century and Moraes Farias (2003: cxx) convincingly indicates how Islamisation of the landscape was facilitated by the predisposition of nomad pastoralist life to being existent in a “constant state of orientation” centred on knowledge of routes, pastures, and wells. With reorientation to Islamic directionality and time, cardinal points and perceptions of auspicious or inauspicious directions “would come to be defined by reference to the position of the person at prayer and the corpse in the tomb” (ibid). Moreover, Østebø (2012: 48) posits that mobility is a further factor in nomad Islamic conversion where “the movements of different nomadic groups created meeting points across spatial and cultural boundaries – facilitating the dissemination of the new faith”. Hence there can be, as at Essuk/Tadmekka, but need not always be, a strong linkage between nomads and early conversion to Islam.

Traders and Towns People: Gao. At Essuk/Tadmekka there is a decline evident archaeologically from c. 1050. Nixon (2009: 249) suggests that this might be due to the actions of the Almoravids in reducing the importance of both Essuk/Tadmekka and Tegdaoust/Awdaghost whilst establishing more direct links with southerly centres such as Gao. Such a scenario is feasible for at Gao there is extensive evidence both for trans-Saharan trade and Islamisation particularly from the 12th-13th centuries (Insoll 1996, 2000). Moreover, the archaeology indicates that conversion to Islam was gradual and not attributable to zealous hordes of Almoravid warriors as once thought (cf. Trimmingham 1962; Bovill 1968).

What we can see at Gao is increasing Islamisation over time. During the initial period of contact (c. tenth century) between Muslim merchants and the local inhabitants settlement at Gao followed a pattern of twin centres (Insoll 1997). Initially this separation at the sites of Gao Ancien and Gao-Saney, 7 km northeast of the city, was probably due to religious differences, but the persistence of dual settlements after Islam had spread to the inhabitants of Gao Ancien in the late 11th to early 12th centuries may have been attributable to security considerations, in particular the desirability of keeping nomads at a distance from Gao Ancien (Insoll 1996: 48). This pattern of double settlement, one for the Muslim merchants and their followers and the other for the local ruler and his people, was a common one in the ‘first-contact’ situation in this region where the two groups, Muslims and non-Muslims, met for the first time (Insoll 2001b). At Gao rapprochement gradually occurred and Gao-Saney ceased to be occupied c. 1100 (Cissé et al. 2013: 19).

Archaeology indicates that Gao was a multi-component urban centre (Insoll 1996, 2000). A central citadel was at Gao Ancien where stone buildings were constructed and abandoned (Takezawa and Cissé 2012: 831), prior to elaborate mud and fired-brick buildings being occupied in the 12th-13th centuries (Insoll 1996, 2000). These included the aisle of what appeared to be a sizeable mosque, attesting a Muslim community in Gao Ancien, part of a

house belonging to a rich merchant (Insoll 1996) (**Figure 7**), and part of an elite or royal residence (Cissé et al. 2013: 14). A fragment of window glass found, along with parts of drilled alabaster frames, suggests that the walls of some of the principal buildings in Gao Ancien were inset with glazed panels (Insoll 1998), perhaps similar to the palace of the king of Ghana described by al-Idrīsī as provided with glass windows (Levtzion and Hopkins 2000: 110). Gao Ancien was a mercantile settlement and likely location of the ruler.

Adjacent to Gao Ancien was another quarter, Gadei, that differed architecturally. Here buildings were constructed from liquid mud, or banco, and rather than using rectilinear plans, roundhouses were built, one of which was uncovered (Insoll 2000). It would appear that Gadei was an area of local settlement. Explicit indicators of Islamisation such as mosques and Muslim burials were not found in Gadei, though a large wooden bead from a set of prayer beads and a copper casing from what might have been a Muslim amulet were recorded (ibid). These suggest that some Muslims might have been present or that aspects of Islamic material culture were being adopted without, necessarily, conversion to Islam occurring.

The faunal remains recorded indicate the fact that not all the population of Gadei was Muslim. Ten identified faunal elements (bones) from dogs, interpreted as food refuse based on their association with other food remains (Stangroome 2000: 56) were present in levels dated to between the early/mid-11th and late 16th centuries, i.e. certainly after Islam was the dominant religion in Gao (Insoll 2003: 239). In contrast only two identifiable dog faunal elements were recorded in the evidently more Islamised quarter of Gao Ancien (Hutton MacDonald and MacDonald 1996: 125-126; Barrett-Jolley 2000). It is not known if these constituted food refuse. In other respects the faunal assemblages from Gadei and Gao Ancien were broadly comparable (Insoll 2003: 24), with both wild and domesticated species present (cf. Hutton MacDonald and Macdonald 1996; Barrett-Jolley 2000; Stangroome 2000).

The botanical remains recovered were not indicators of Islamisation in the same way as animal species for they were not subject to dietary prohibition (cf. Insoll 1999: 99-100), but were nonetheless informative. For example, a stone of *Phoenix dactylifera*, the date palm, recovered from Gadei exceeded the fruit length of the native wild *Phoenix reclinata*. This indicated either growth of dates in the region after the spread of *Phoenix dactylifera* south of the Sahara with trans-Saharan trade or the import of dates via the same networks (Fuller 2000: 30). Similarly, one complete and several partial cotton (*Gossypium* sp.) seeds and a small charred fragment of wool or hair cloth from Gadei (Fuller 2000: 32-35) attests the possession and likely wearing of fabrics. Cotton weaving is generally regarded as having diffused from East to West Africa during the Islamic period (Watson 1983 cited in Fuller 2000: 33). Hence, indirectly, these plant remains and textile fragments provide further evidence for participation in trade networks connected to the wider Muslim world.

A third area of occupation was at Gao-Saney, a site comprising a mound where settlement was dated to between 700 and 1100 (Cissé et al. 2013: 19) and a cemetery that has provided various inscribed Muslim tombstones (Flight 1981). The provenance of the marble and the style of epigraphy suggest that five of these gravestones were imported ready carved from the vicinity of Almería in southern Al-Andalus in the early twelfth century (Sauvaget 1950; Vire 1958; Moraes Farias 1990; 2003). The inscriptions seem to have served to proclaim Muslim identity for three of the kings commemorated, including two on imported Almerían stelae, were recent converts to Islam. This is shown by the successive adoption of the name of the Prophet and the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and ‘Umar (Flight n.d.: 1; Insoll 2003: 235). It is likely that rulers such as those at Gao were early converts to Islam, but seemingly, as Levtzion (2000: 66) has stressed they “adopted a middle position” between Islam and indigenous religion, patronizing Muslim religious specialists and indigenous shrines and their custodians.

The imported stelae from Gao-Saney attest the Almoravid links previously mentioned. At Gao, these were further indicated by architectural parallels discernible between the *alcazaba* in Almería and the fired-brick structures in Gao Ancien, (Insoll 2000: 24-25), green-glazed ceramics from both sites (ibid), and sherds of luster-ware pottery from Gao Ancien comparable to 12th century ceramics from Málaga (cf. Jenkins 1980: 339). Traders appear to have been the carriers of Islam in Gao, and trade was maintained between the Almoravids and Gao, with gold likely to have been a major commodity sent north across the Sahara. Analysis of the composition of the single gold bead recovered from Gao, at Gadei, reinforces the image of Almoravid connections for the gold precisely matched that of Almoravid gold dinars minted at Sijilmasa, Morocco, indicating West African ore was used, in all probability sourced via Gao (Guerra 2000: 153-54). Other commodities traded north across the Sahara included slaves, largely archaeologically invisible, and ivory (Insoll 1996, 2003).

Further Muslim cemeteries ringed Gao Ancien and have also proven informative on Islamisation. At Gorongobo, for instance, conclusive proof for local conversion to Islam by the early 13th century was provided by a funerary stele dated to 1210 and inscribed with the female Songhai name of either Buwy or Waybiya, dependent on the reading (Moraes Farias 2000: 157) (**Figure 8**). The Songhai remain the dominant ethno-linguistic group in Gao, and this indicates that Islam was becoming established amongst the local population of the town, beyond the circle of rulers.

Gradual Diffusion: Sedentary Agriculturalists. The archaeological record in Gao, as currently investigated, is largely mute from the start of the 14th century (Insoll 2003: 251). Thus based on archaeological sources, the focus here, it is not possible to make inferences about the spread of Islam in Gao itself, though south of Gao an Islamic ‘frontier’ appears to have existed (Insoll 2004: 100). Sites such as Egef-N-Tawaqqast and Bentiya (Kukiya) where Arabic funerary inscriptions dated to the 13th-15th centuries have been recorded (cf. Moraes Farias 1990: 105-106; Arazi 1999: 38-39) indicate that Islamisation extended to this point, but evidence for Islam dating from before the 15th century is seemingly lacking further south on the River Niger and adjacent areas in Mali and northern Niger. For example at the site of Birnin Lafiya, a settlement mound in the Dendi region of northern Benin, on the edge of the Songhai empire and the Hausa kingdoms, no evidence for the presence of Muslims was found in a sequence dated to between the 4th – 13th centuries AD (Haour et al. in press). Similarly, at Kissi in northeast Burkina Faso, in the hinterland of the eastern Niger Bend, no evidence for Islamisation was found in the settlement areas and cemeteries excavated and dated to between approximately the 2nd – 13th centuries (Magnavita 2015: 173).

Beyond the Gao region it is apparent that conversion to Islam and Islamisation of the bulk of the population of the Western Sahel, the sedentary agriculturalists – Bamana, Songhai, Senufo, Dogon, Mossi, Mande etc. – was a gradual and long drawn out process which in some contexts is still incomplete (e.g. Skinner 1964; Bravmann 1974; Glaze 1981; Stoller 1992; Levtzion 2000; Colleyn 2009). A process that had to yield to the need to incorporate or substitute indigenous religious beliefs and ritual practices tied to, for example, the ancestors and the land (e.g. Bravmann 1974; Zahan 1974; Glaze 1981; Rouch 1989; Insoll 1996; Levtzion 2000). Over time this changed with, following Robin Horton’s conversion model discussed previously, readjustment occurring from the primacy of the microcosm centred on local indigenous beliefs and ritual practices to that of the macrocosm of the Supreme Being – Allah – as conversion to Islam and Islamisation proceeded (Levtzion 2000: 65).

Elsewhere in the Western Sahel, archaeological investigation of sites relevant to considering Islamisation and postdating the 14th century has been limited. However, recent fieldwork in the Segou region of south-central Mali will, potentially, substantially increase our knowledge.

MacDonald's research is focusing on a range of different sites that are linked with the Bamana, Bozo, Soninke and Marka ethnolinguistic groups and predominantly dating from the 17th to 19th centuries (cf. MacDonald 2015: 134), a period, certainly at the latter end, when conversion to Islam was occurring (Levtzion 2000: 75-76).

Islamisation and Archaeology in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, and the Western Sahel: Tentative Comparisons

Comparing the archaeology of Islamisation in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa with the Western Sahel indicates both similarities and contrasts. Similarities exist in the material markers of Islam, the appearance of mosques, changes in diet (appearance of Halal slaughter, disappearance of Haram species), changes in burial (orientation, disappearance of gravegoods) and changes in domestic space (greater emphasis on privacy) (cf. Insoll 1999, 2003). Differences exist in the processes of Islamisation. Phased conversion to Islam – nomads, traders, rulers, townspeople, sedentary agriculturalists - is apparent archaeologically in the Sahel (e.g. Insoll 1996, 1999, 2000), whereas, as described, this is not evident in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Warfare seems also to have been of little significance as an agent of Islamic conversion in the Western Sahel until the 19th century Fulani jihads (cf. Levtzion 1986, 2000; R.S. Smith 1989). In contrast, it seems to have been a factor of consequence in Harar where warfare was another agent of Islamisation, alongside those previously described. For Harar was also the centre of the sultanate of Adal (Braukämper 2004: 29) and as such was the powerbase of Ahmed Gragn, the renowned Muslim leader who used it to launch a series of *Jihads* against the Christian Highlands, including Shoa in 1529, Amhara in 1531 and Tigre in 1535 (Erlich 1994: 31). Harar also differs from the Western Sahelian centres such as Gao and Timbuktu in other ways. It was a town that proved influential in the later conversion to Islam of certain groups, for by the end of the 18th century it was “the radiant centre for religious propagation among the Oromo” (Østebø 2012: 65). This must have included pastoralist Oromo (cf. Bartels 1990: 14-15; Hassen 1994: 150, 156), whereas in the Western Sahel nomads, e.g. Berbers/Tuaregs, were some of the earliest converts to Islam through exposure to Muslim dominated trade (Moraes Farias 2003), and were instrumental in bringing Islam to the urban context (Insoll 1996), as has been indicated.

Harar as *Madinat al-awliya*, “town of the Saints” (Braukämper 2004: 113) exerted influence on different socio-economic groups. Through this influential position it is broadly comparable to Sahelian centres such as Gao (Mali) where Islam was similarly diffused out from the urban population to agriculturalist groups in a long drawn out process involving trade, proselytisation, and incorporation and adaptation of pre-Islamic practices starting from the 9th century (Insoll 1996). But a further significant difference exists; Saints were of little significance in Gao, more so in Timbuktu (Levtzion 2000: 73; Saad 1983: 83-4, 110), but perhaps not to the extent of Harar where over 100 shrines have been recorded (Østebø 2012: 66), and where the incorporation and Islamisation of pre-Islamic shrines and associated veneration practices was also significant to the success of Islamisation in Harar (Braukämper 2004: 115-117), and more widely in Ethiopia (Kifleyesus 2006: 52) (**Figure 9**). In other respects there are similarities; Qadiriyyah Sufism was significant in Harar where it was introduced in the 15th century by Sherif Abu Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allah al’Aydarus (Lewis 1994: 141), and appeared also in Timbuktu in the 16th century, at approximately the same time as the Tijaniyya (Saad 1983: 72-73). Trade was of considerable significance in both areas in facilitating conversion to Islam, in terms of merchants functioning to open up routes and

communities for Muslim clerics who might accompany or follow the traders (Bartels 1990: 14; Levzion 2000: 68; Kaplan 2004). Thus there are points of similarity but also significant differences in comparing Islamisation and archaeology in the Horn of African and the Western Sahel.

Conclusions

The archaeology of Islamisation in sub-Saharan Africa is remarkably complex, and also reflective of continual processes of religious change and adaptation, as currently manifest through the growth of Salafism in parts of both Ethiopia (cf. Østebø 2012), and the Western Sahel (cf. Niezen 1990). Unfortunately furthering our understanding of both the processes and material culture involved is being restricted by politics and conflict restricting research in many key regions – Mali, northern Burkina Faso, Niger, northern Nigeria, western Sudan, large parts of Chad, Eritrea, Somalia – the list is long. Over time this will inevitably change and archaeological accessibility will hopefully once again be possible. This is vital for in the likelihood that no new or limited new historical sources will be found (possibly excluding epigraphy); archaeology offers the only means of learning about Islamisation in sub-Saharan Africa aside from the recent past. Archaeological research directions are also altering with less emphasis evident on cataloguing – potsherds or mosque forms for example – and more of a shift apparent to a concern with social processes, new forms of identities, and impacts linked with Islamisation as manifest through diet or changes in uses or relationships with architectural space. This too is vital in acknowledging that Islamisation in the past related to people, as it does in the present.

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Figure Captions

1. The subdivisions of the continent
2. Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, indicating some of the principal sites discussed
3. Muslim tombstone, Dahlak Kebir, Eritrea (photo. C. Spence)
4. The old city of Harar from the southeast (photo. T. Insoll)
5. The mosque excavated at Harlaa indicating the mihrab and adjacent niche (photo. T. Insoll)
6. Examples of imported ceramics from HAR 15 (B), top row, 1, Yemeni 'Mustard' ware, 3, 4, 5, Celadon (photo. T. Insoll)
7. The Western Sahel indicating the locations of some of the principal sites discussed
8. Part of a house excavated in Gao Ancien (photo. T. Insoll)
9. Funerary inscription from Gorongobo dated to 1210 (photo. T. Insoll)
10. The shrine of Amir Nur, Harar (photo. T. Insoll)