The Journal of African History
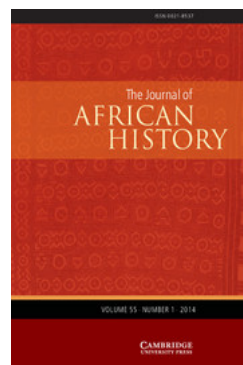
ISLAM IN AFRICA/AFRICANS AND ISLAM

Scott S. Reese

How to cite this article:
Scott S. Reese (2014). ISLAM IN AFRICA/AFRICANS AND ISLAM . The Journal of African History, 55, pp 17-26 doi:10.1017/S0021853713000807

Request Permissions : Click here

JAH Forum

ISLAM IN AFRICA/AFRICANS AND ISLAM*

Scott S. Reese
Northern Arizona University

Abstract

This essay discusses some of the recent trends in the scholarship on Islam and Africa that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the historical relationship between African Muslims and the global *ecumene* of believers. Rather than looking at the faith as an insular African phenomenon, this piece examines the links between Africans and the wider community of believers across space and time. Such an approach has important ramifications for our understanding of the dynamics of Islam. However, it also challenges many of the assumptions underpinning the geographic area studies paradigm that has dominated the academy since the Second World War. This essay suggests the adoption of a more fluid approach to scholarly inquiry that reimagines our largely continental attachment to regions in favor of a more intellectually agile methodology where the scope of inquiry is determined less by geographic boundaries and more by the questions we seek to answer.

It is not unreasonable to argue that the histories of Islam and the African continent have been inextricably, and intimately, linked since the inception of the faith in the seventh century CE. Bilal, a former African slave, was among the Prophet's earliest followers and is regarded by tradition as the first Muezzin (the individual responsible for calling believers to prayer). Indeed, the medieval kings of Mali, the Keitas, traced their lineage to him as well as such semi-mythical luminaries as Alexander the Great (a.k.a. *dhu al-qarnayn*) – another culture hero of early Islamic writing who is regarded as something of a proto-Muslim.[1] During the critical early days of the faith, the Christian King of Aksum – ancient Ethiopia – famously offered refuge to the Prophet's most socially exposed followers in the face of Meccan oppression. Yet, until relatively recently, there has been a tendency within the realm of African studies in general and African history in particular, to treat the Islamic religion as practiced on the continent as virtually *sui generis*, and by and large removed from the global community of believers. This is not a notion that has historically occurred to many African Muslims who have always viewed themselves – to

---

1 D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (rev. edn, Harlow, UK, 2006).

one degree or another – as members of a far larger spiritual community. Fortunately, it is a construct that is also coming under increasing scrutiny by Western-trained academics.

This brief essay, in part, aims to discuss some of the recent trends in the scholarship on Islam and Africa that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the historical relationship between African Muslims and the global *ecumene* of believers. Rather than emphasizing difference, much of the scholarship of the last 15 years or so has actively sought to explore the spiritual, social, economic, and political ties African Muslims have maintained with their non-African brethren over time and across space. One result of this is the emergence of a picture of a global community in which African Muslims have played an integral role from the early foundations of the faith down to the present. More importantly this work has begun to recast our understanding of the wider Islamic world.

The traditional study of Islam in the Western academy has emphasized the dominance of the so-called Arabo-Persian 'Islamicate' center. Under this model, cultural and spiritual ideals spread outward to the large communities of Muslims in Africa and Asia who inhabited the margins. As mere 'receptors' of Arabo-Persian learning, Muslim societies in this supposed periphery were regarded as either stagnant – if not decadent – copies of the 'pure' faith or wholly localized phenomena whose evolution owed more to local historical, environmental, and cultural factors in the form of pre-Islamic 'custom' than their Arabian roots.

As Jean-Louis Triaud points out in his contribution to this *Forum*, this is a characterization of Islam in Africa that had its genesis in the French colonial concept of *islam noir* or 'Black Islam'. But, we need to note, this notion of an 'African Islam' is one that was also largely embraced by earlier generations of Africanist historians. In their view, as I have noted elsewhere, rather than a negative, 'the uniquely African character of the Faith was a testament to the strength and vitality of African social and cultural systems that resisted the imposition of foreign belief structures'.[2] In light of the continent's all too recent colonial past, the impulse to portray Islam as a preserve of African identity and site of resistance to foreign domination is understandable. Over the past two decades, scholarship has begun to take a different turn that looks to place the faith of African Muslims squarely within the context of the global community of believers.

This shift began more than twenty years ago with Robert Launay's path-breaking book *Beyond the Stream*, a work that has informed the research of a generation of scholars. A study of Islam among the Dyula in the neighborhood of Koko, Cote d'Ivoire, Launay was among the first to argue that the 'traditional' scholarly approach to Islam in Africa was unsatisfactory. The 'neat theoretical dichotomy' that many scholars drew between 'a universal Islam on the one hand', and a multitude of 'local Islams' on the other was, he noted, both intellectually problematic for academics and theologically unacceptable to Muslims. The challenge, he wrote, was 'to find a framework in which to analyze the relationship between this single, global entity, Islam and the multiple entities that are the religious beliefs and practices of Muslims in specific communities at specific moments in history'.[3]

2 S. S. Reese, 'Islam in Africa: challenging the perceived wisdom', in S. S. Reese (ed.), *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa* (Leiden, 2004), 1.

3 R. Launay, *Beyond the Stream: Islam and Society in a West African Town* (Berkeley, CA, 1992), 5–6.

Following Launay's lead, scholars have approached this problem on two fronts. First, historians and anthropologists have begun to explore African Muslim communities as nodes within a complex web of Islamic relationships that stretch across the globe. In addition to economic connections, illustrated by the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean trades, African Muslims have played an active role in the creation of multidirectional flows of knowledge that crisscross Islamic space. Second, scholars have increasingly come to recognize African Muslim engagement with what Talal Asad termed the Islamic 'discursive tradition'.[4] Islam, Asad and an increasing number of scholars argue, should be viewed as a historically evolving set of discourses that draw on a broad canon of learning, which includes certain foundational texts (including the Qur'an and the Hadith) and broad paradigms of knowledge that Muslims utilize to 'articulate meaningful formulations of the problems and possibilities of the present …'.[5] In other words, rather than a set of static texts and ideas, the Islamic canon constitutes a living body of knowledge continuously employed and interpreted by the believers of a particular place and time to provide guidance and solutions to the problems of their day.

As such, rather than practitioners of an idiosyncratic and syncretic 'African Islam', Muslims in Africa emerge as intimately linked to a global faith and community of believers across both space and time. Not surprisingly, such a fluid approach to the relationship of Muslims to both the faith and one another has, as we shall see, important ramifications for our understanding of the dynamics of Islam. A somewhat unexpected consequence of this work, however, has been to challenge many of the assumptions inherent in the geographic area studies paradigm that has dominated academic inquiry since the end of the Second World War.

CONNECTIVITY OF THE FAITH ACROSS SPACE

The physical connection of African Muslims to the wider community of believers is historically rooted in several overlapping dynamics. African believers point to the act of travel for economic and spiritual gain as the connective tissue that binds them historically to the *umma*. More recently, movement and connectivity have also been shaped by the political and economic consequences of colonial and postcolonial realities.

Travel, of course, is a trope deeply embedded in Islamic tradition. Seventh-century Mecca was a commercial society whose lifeblood was sustained by the long-distance caravan trade with the Levant and Fertile Crescent. Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad famously enjoined his followers to 'seek knowledge unto the gates of China'. Pointing to their inclusion in the Qur'an and the Sunna (the sayings and practices) of the Prophet as rationale, African Muslims have eagerly engaged in both these activities.

The role of the faith in the emergence of the commercial empires of the medieval Western Sudan and the Swahili trading cities of East Africa is by now so well established that it is common knowledge not only among African and Islamic historians but nearly any university undergraduate who has taken a world history course. Survey texts of Islamic and

———

4   T. Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C., 1986).
5   A. M. Masquelier, *Women and Islamic Revival in a West African Town* (Bloomington, IN, 2009), 25.

world history highlight Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 as a prime example of the piety and wealth that connected Africa's Muslims to the centers of Islam during the Middle Ages.[6] However, as recent work by historians such as Ghislaine Lydon amply demonstrates, such connections were neither rare nor the sole preserve of elites such as the Malian king. In her book *On Trans-Saharan Trails*, Lydon details the existence of a lively book trade between the Western Sudan and Morocco in which Sahelian scholars organized special trips to the markets of Fez and Marrakech in order to fill their collections with the latest works on jurisprudence, Qur'anic exegesis, mysticism, and theology.[7] Many others, of course, regularly travelled far afield for lengthy periods in pursuit of Islamic learning and spiritual growth. Whether to study at the feet of a renowned Sufi *shaykh*, take an *ijaza* (permission to transmit teachings) from a celebrated scholar in Cairo or Tunis, or make the pilgrimage to Mecca, West African Muslims were not alone in their peripatetic search for knowledge. Swahili and Somali *ulama* from East Africa were similarly common fixtures in the shrines of the holy cities of the Hijaz, as well as the lecture halls of al-Azhar in Cairo and the mosques of Tarim in southern Arabia.[8]

African Muslims have also been sought out as teachers and experts in the Islamic sciences. For example, in the eighteenth century, the famed Indian scholar Murtada al-Zabidi maintained extensive epistolary relationships with a number of scholars from the Western Sudan, from whom he sought constant advice. Most notably this included Jibril bin Umar, an early teacher of Uthman dan Fodiyo, founder of the nineteenth-century Sokoto caliphate. Moving in the other direction, the Sudanese Shaykh, Ahmad Surkitti, is remembered as an important reformist figure in Indonesia during the early twentieth century.[9]

European colonialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was undeniably a destructive social, political, and economic force. However, one of the great ironies of European empire is that far from disrupting this connectivity among believers, imperial rule in many ways enhanced it. The Dutch East India Company introduced the faith to the southern tip of the continent in the seventeenth century when it began to send troublesome royals, *ulama'*, and other political prisoners from their South east Asian island colonies into exile in its colony in the Western Cape. These exiles, along with a fair number of slaves, would form the nucleus of the Cape Malay Muslim community. British colonization of Natal and the Eastern Cape in the nineteenth century precipitated the development of a large South Asian Muslim population brought to South Africa largely as a result of

---

6   For example, see I. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (2n edn, Cambridge, 2002); and R. Bulliet *et al.*, *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History, Volume. I: To 1550* (5th edn, Boston, 2009). Indeed, Mansa Musa was recently declared to be the 'wealthiest person in human history'. 'Meet Mansa Musa I of Mali – the richest human being in all history', *The Independent* (London), 16 Oct. 2012.

7   G. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge, 2009), 99–102.

8   A. K. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860–1925* (London, 2003); S. S. Reese, *Renewers of the Age: Holy Men and Social Discourse in Colonial Benaadir* (Leiden, 2008).

9   A. I. Abushouk, 'An African scholar in the Netherlands East Indies: al-Shaykh Ahmad Surkitti (1876–1943) and his life, thoughts, and reforms', *Islamic Africa*, 2:2 (2011), 23–50; S. Reichmuth, 'Murtadā al-Zabīdī (1732–91) and the Africans: Islamic discourse and scholarly networks in the late eighteenth century', in Reese, *The Transmission of Learning*, 121–53.

imperial labor policies.[10] While European empires contributed to the physical expansion of Muslim communities, the development of increasingly rapid and cheap means of communication and transportation brought ever-increasing numbers of believers and potential believers into contact with one another physically and intellectually.

With the emergence of European empires in the nineteenth century, a limited number of African Muslims sought to place themselves beyond the political authority of non-believers by undertaking *hijrah* or a voluntary exile in the Hijaz.[11] Far more Muslims, however, including Africans, took advantage of the networks created by empire to produce a more horizontally integrated community of believers that transcended the barriers of geography. The nineteenth century gave rise to what Nile Green and James Gelvin refer to as 'the age of steam and print'.[12] Advances in steamship technology from the 1850s, along with the opening of the Suez Canal after 1869, rapidly increased the mobility of Muslims across the various European oceanic empires. The number of Muslims travelling on the *hajj* during the second half of the century increased exponentially, with more believers taking part in the pilgrimage to Mecca than at any other time in the history of the faith.[13] Equally important were advances in print technology – particularly the invention of the lithographic steam press – that revolutionized the accessibility of knowledge among Muslims.[14]

In recent years, a great deal of research has focused on the proliferation of Islamic texts and knowledge that accompanied the development of cheap lithographic printing. Most of this has centered on the impact of print in either the Arabic-speaking lands of the Middle East or Persianate South Asia.[15] African Muslims, however, were no less avid consumers of print. By the early twentieth century, religious texts printed in Cairo and Bombay were readily available in the coastal towns of East Africa, as were reformist newspapers such as Rashid Rida's *al-Manar*. The local production of printed matter – in eastern Africa at any rate – was initially limited. The Sultan of Zanzibar, for instance, maintained an official press to print both official state publications as well as Ibadhi religious texts.[16] However,

10 K. Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge, 2009) for the Cape Colony and G. Vahed, 'Constructions of community and identity among Indians in colonial Natal, 1860–1910: the role of the *Muharram* Festival', *The Journal of African History*, **43**:1 (2002), 77–93 as well as; N. Green, 'The dilemmas of the pious biographer: missionary Islam and the oceanic hagiography', *Journal of Religious History*, **34**:4 (2010), 383–97, for Natal and the Eastern Cape.

11 A. C. Ahmed, 'The migration (Hijrah) of Muslim scholars from West Africa to Mekka and Medina after colonisation', unpublished seminar paper delivered at the Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, Germany, 3 Dec. 2009.

12 J. Gelvin and N. Green (eds.), *Global Islam in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley, CA, 2014).

13 E. Tagliacozzo, 'Hajj in the time of cholera: pilgrim ships and contagion from southeast Asia to the Red Sea', in Gelvin and Green (eds.), *Global Islam*, 103–20; and M. C. Low, 'Empire and the Hajj: pilgrims, plagues, and pan-Islam under British surveillance, 1865–1908' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, **40**:2 (2008), 269–90.

14 J. R. I. Cole, 'Printing and urban Islam in the Mediterranean world, 1890–1920', in L. T. Fawaz and C. A. Bayly, (eds.), *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York, 2002), 344–64.

15 See, for example, Cole, *Ibid*.; N. Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge, 2011); and F. Robinson, 'Technology and religious change: Islam and the impact of print', *Modern Asian Studies*, **27**:1 (1993), 229–51.

16 P. Sadgrove, 'From Wādī Mīzāb to Unguja: Zanzibar's scholarly links', in Reese (ed.), *The Transmission of Learning*, 184–211.

African scholars developed a robust tradition of not only importing 'classical' and new works from centers of learning such as Cairo but publishing their own.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Muslim scholars in East Africa in particular, were producing a small but steady stream of religious texts and periodicals. These works ranged from dense theological works such as the Somali 'alim Abdullahi al-Qutbi's *al-Majmu'a al-Mubaraka* to Shaykh al-Amin al-Mazrui's popular newspaper *al-Islah* (Reform) and were concerned with matters ranging from language politics and local practice to broader reformist issues such as the application of *shari'a* and *kafa'a* (the requirement that Muslim women marry only men of their own rank or higher). As such, they reveal a great deal about matters of concern to local Muslim communities but also their engagement with issues facing the much wider community of believers.[17]

Engagement between African Muslims and their coreligionists throughout the world continues today. Increasing numbers of African Muslim students obtain degrees from institutions of Islamic higher learning in the Middle East and Asia. Many of these graduates return home seeking to spread the latest trends in scripturalist reform, which often puts them at odds with other elements of society.[18] At the same time, new media including the internet and satellite television disseminate ideas more quickly and to more Muslims than ever before. All of this has resulted in an increasingly integrated global community of believers. However, it has not resulted in a flattening of religious discourse and belief with scriptural reformists sweeping all others from the sphere of public spirituality. Instead, it has resulted in a resurgence of multiple discourses, particularly those with a Sufi or mystical orientation.[19] One reason for this is the resilience of the Islamic discursive tradition.

CONNECTIONS ACROSS TIME: INTERPRETATIONS OF A LIVING FAITH

Africa's believers are connected to their fellow Muslims not only through physical interactions but also via their religion's foundational texts (the Qur'an, Hadith, and Sunna of the Prophet among others) and the discursive tradition of interpretation that maintains Islam as a living faith. In his brief, but influential work, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Talal Asad suggested that rather than approaching Islam as a static set of beliefs, it should be viewed and explored as a malleable and inherently adaptable 'discursive tradition'.[20] This approach is one that has gained increasing currency among Islamic studies scholars in recent years, including many Africanists.[21] As Roman Loimeier notes

---

17 Reese, *Renewers of the Age*, esp. ch. 5; N. Matthews, 'Imagining Arab communities: colonialism, Islamic reform and Arab identity in Mombasa Kenya, 1897–1933', *Islamic Africa*, 4:2 (2013).

18 O. Kobo, *Unveiling Modernity in Twentieth-Century West African Islamic Reforms* (Leiden, 2012); T. Østebø, *Localising Salafism: Religious Change among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia* (Leiden, 2011).

19 Y. Dumbe, 'The Salafi praxis of constructing religious identity in Africa: a comparative perspective of the growth of the movements in Accra and Cape Town', *Islamic Africa*, 2: 2 (2011), 87–116.

20 Asad, *Anthropology of Islam*.

21 Most notable among non-Africa works are M. Cooke and B. B. Lawrence (eds.), *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005); S. Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford, CA, 2009); and M. Q. Zaman, 'The scope and limits of Islamic cosmopolitanism and the discursive language of the "Ulama"', in Cooke and Lawrence (eds.), *Muslim Networks*, 84–104.

in his study of Islamic learning in Zanzibar, 'Islam should be visualized as a great pool or corpus of texts, of interpretations of texts, of prescriptions concerning the faith and/or everyday life, of shared rituals, norms and values, as well as teaching traditions', that are 'based on a number of basic texts such as the Quran, the Sunna of the Prophet', as well as other legal and theological texts.[22] Rather than constituting a rigid, stagnant, body of knowledge, however, every Muslim community is involved in a process of continuous reinterpretation of this canon that ultimately enables them, in the words of Adeline Masquelier, 'to respond to the conditions of a changing world'.[23] It is this discursive resilience that enables Islam – and indeed any living religion – to retain its relevance as a social and moral guide at any given point in time.

Discursive traditions, both written texts and local customs, have become an increasingly common rubric for the study of religious and social dynamics within Muslim communities across the continent, especially amongst anthropologists and religious studies scholars. Of particular interest has been the role of tradition in mediating the challenges presented by scripturalist reform as well as by the self-consciously secular postcolonial state. Loimeier's *Between Social Skills and Marketable Skills*, for instance, explores the evolutionary nature of tradition in Islamic learning in Zanzibar in its encounter with both the colonial state and postcolonial religious reform. In her book, *Women and Islamic Revival in a West African Town*, Masquelier looks at how women in rural Niger adapt to new notions of piety and propriety by drawing on 'old' beliefs regarding dress, modesty, and cosmology; whilst Abdulkader Tayob's *Islam in South Africa* demonstrates the way local *imams* maintain the relevance of the holy scripture in post-Apartheid South Africa by 're-citing' the Qur'an in weekly sermons in an effort to relate scriptural teachings to new contexts and realities.[24]

It is important to keep in mind that the discursive creation of religious knowledge is an intricate process that is intellectual, but not limited to the written or the Arabic language. It is dialogical – informed by the core texts but locally produced – and situational – deployed as a response to local spiritual and social contexts.[25] One of the best examples of the conscious use of the discursive tradition to affect changes driven largely by local circumstance and demand may be that of Nana Asma'u (1793–1864), daughter of the nineteenth-century Fulani scholar and reformist Shehu Uthman dan Fodiyo. Educated by her father in the various Islamic religious sciences, Asma'u occupied a key place in the ruling circle of the Sokoto caliphate founded by her father. In particular, she sought to guide women towards meaningful spiritual and social lives through her original Arabic and Fulani poetry that drew on classical Islamic learning and the mystical teachings of figures such as Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200). Invoking the memory of the Prophet Muhammad's favorite wife Aisha, poems such as her *Lamentations for*

---

22 R. Loimeier, *Between Social Skills and Marketable Skills: The Politics of Islamic Education in 20th Century Zanzibar* (Leiden, 2009), 2.

23 Masquelier, *Women and Islamic Revival*, 24.

24 Loimeier, *Between Social Skills and Marketable Skills*; Masquelier, *Women and Islamic Revival*; A. Tayob, *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams, and Sermons* (Gainesville, FL, 1999).

25 I would like to thank one of the four anonymous reviewers of this piece for this especially useful insight into the interplay between the global and the local within the discursive tradition.

Aisha extoll the virtues and character of women throughout the history of the faith who are worthy of imitation when confronting contemporary challenges. Similarly, *The Path of Truth*, recalling the Sunna or example of the Prophet Muhammad, reminds listeners (male and female) of their obligations to society as good Muslims. Far from a quietest scholar, Nana Asma'u's teachings were disseminated throughout Fulani and Hausa society via her own corps of female Qur'anic teachers, known as *jajis*, who transmitted the shaykha's written works through an oral medium.[26]

The discursive tradition certainly links African Muslims to their own locally contextualized pasts. More importantly, focusing upon it enables us to see how African Muslims relate to and utilize the core texts of the faith and moves us beyond 'problematic distinctions between "orthodox" and "folk" Islam'.[27] Asad's approach allows us to recognize how local interpretations of Islam connect believers across time to the foundational texts and teachings of the faith. But it also helps us understand how they connect across space as local discourses and interpretations ultimately interact with others via multidirectional flows of knowledge. African believers, as we have seen in the preceding section, have mingled regularly with their coreligionists for centuries. Whether it is a Malian Hadith scholar in Mecca or an Indian Tablighi missionary in the Western Cape, Muslims have shared their interpretations of the Islamic tradition across various ethnic and geographic boundaries since the inception of the faith. While such exchanges have on occasion given rise to tensions, they more importantly reveal the variety of belief across the *umma*. Although all Muslims in all places may not necessarily accept the entirety of these practices as constituting 'correct belief', this variety encompasses a range within which all can recognize elements of Islamic discourse.

TOWARDS A NEW ARCHITECTURE OF AREA STUDIES

The notion that the community of Muslim believers is interconnected via complex webs of physical and intellectual interaction that cut across both space and time creates an interesting problem for traditional geographic area studies as it is currently conceived. Since the 1950s, the Western academy has tended to examine Muslim societies largely within the geographic contours created by the area studies paradigm. With the Arab world occupying the center, scholars of Islam have traditionally focused their energies within narrow geographic bands such as the Middle East, South Asia, or Africa in relative isolation.

The area studies model, at its best, revolutionized our understanding of the globe. However, the persistent historical interactions of Muslims across these boundaries should give the academic community pause and cause us to reflect on the unquestioned utility of that model. The area studies paradigm has, in fact, come under increasing scrutiny since the mid-1990s. In particular, critics such as Martin Lewis and Karen Wigan in their book *The Myth of Continents*, have argued that the arbitrary, and above all rigid, boundaries

---

26 A comprehensive examination of the literary legacy of Nana Asma'u can be found in the underappreciated work by B. B. Mack and J. Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe* (Bloomington, IN, 2000).

27 Masquelier, *Women and Islamic Revival*, 9.

of region – largely the legacy of European colonialism and Cold War geopolitics – while illuminating in some respects have tended to stifle critical inquiry in others.[28] This is certainly the case with regard to the study of Islam. The exploration of Islam within the confines of its African context has taught us a great deal. However, by studying it in relative isolation we may have inadvertently constructed a bounded African faith that obscures a greater complexity. This is not to say that African Muslim societies are not unique and intellectually rich in their own right, but rather that they exist as an integral part of a much larger whole. The artificial disjuncture scholars have created between African Islam and the larger currents of the faith is indicative of the need for a more flexible approach to geographic area studies.

The regions of area studies, as they have developed, can and should continue to be regarded as the core of intellectual inquiry. Indeed, the training of scholars with relevant language skills and in-depth cultural knowledge is critical to developing a better understanding of the world. But, as John Voll recently noted, we would do well to question an approach that treats 'areas' as *a priori* separate or discrete 'civilizations' rather than 'interacting and diverse sets of human experiences that historically have influenced and shaped each other'.[29]

Arjun Appadurai, in a 2001 essay in the journal *Public Culture*, noted one of the fundamental difficulties with the current approach is the tendency to mistakenly view regions such as Africa, the Middle East, or South and Southeast Asia as relatively 'permanent associations between space, territory and cultural organization' that have 'more or less durable historical boundaries'.[30] A more productive line may be to view geographic areas as 'initial contexts for themes that generate variable geographies', rather than topographic, cultural, and social givens that helps lead us to a 'new architecture' of area studies.[31] The redrawing of traditional geographies is already becoming increasingly common. Lydon's work on the trans-Saharan book trade and Rüdiger Seesemann's research on the Tijanniyya in Senegal have made great strides in erasing the largely artificial line that divides the Sahel from the North African littoral.[32] Anne Bang's study of Zanzibar places local intellectual traditions soundly within the religious milieu of the nineteenth-century Hadramaut, while Jeremy Prestholdt's, *Domesticating the World*, connects East African Muslims to the wider currents of global economic history during the same period.[33] Finally, from a different direction, a recent article in this journal by Green explores the construction of East Africa as an Indian Muslim space from the vantage point of an early twentieth-century Urdu travel account.[34]

---

28 M. W. Lewis and K. Wigan, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, CA, 1997).
29 J. O. Voll, 'Pensée 3: Reconceptualizing the "regions" in "area studies" ', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41:2 (2009), 196–7.
30 A. Appadurai, 'Grassroots globalization and the research imagination', *Public Culture*, 12:1 (2001), 1–19.
31 *Ibid*. 7.
32 Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*; R. Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival* (Oxford, 2011).
33 Bang, *Sufis of the Sea*; J. Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley, CA, 2008).
34 N. Green, 'Africa in Indian ink: Urdu articulations of Indian settlement in East Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 53:2 (2012), 131–50.

As these works demonstrate, rather than abandoning the model altogether, it is possible, even desirable, to exchange our long established bounded methodologies for approaches, which encourage academics to move across our traditional frontiers. It is particularly necessary to look for ways to reimagine the largely continental attachment we have to regions in favor of more intellectually agile approaches where the scope of intellectual inquiry is determined less by geographic boundaries and more by the questions we seek to answer. The study of Islam in Africa offers that opportunity. The Islamic faith is undeniably grounded in African society but equally connected to a much broader global community. By exploring linkages that transcend geography, we raise the possibility of gaining not only greater understanding but of discovering new questions.