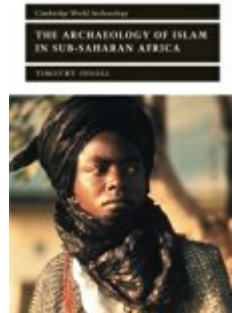


Timothy Insoll. *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xv + 470 pp. \$46.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-65702-0.



Reviewed by David Robinson

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Timothy Insoll has put together a remarkable study that will take its place alongside Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwells's *A History of Islam in Africa* (2000) as a major work of reference on the foundations and development of Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Based on considerable experience of archeological research of his own, in West and East Africa, and a thorough reading of the archeological and historical literature, Insoll is able to give invaluable statements of synthesis and commentary on the major issues, all the while recognizing the continuing development of the field that will alter his own findings in time. It is the first continental synthesis (without the northern tier of countries) of the archeological findings in relation to Islam. It also has the virtue of taking seriously the traditional African religious practices that preceded and accompanied the processes of islamisation, and avoiding any negative stigma on the various combinations of Islamic and non-Islamic practices that accompanied islamisation. The text is accompanied by a good set of maps, excellent photographs, and boxes in which he highlights subjects of particular interest.

The major chapters deal with the Horn of Africa, the Nilotic Sudan, the East African coast and islands, the West African Sahel, the central Sudan, the West African Sudan and forest, and the interior of eastern, central and southern Africa. They represent a rough chronological order of the onset of an Islamic presence. For example, the first regional chapter (chapter 2) on Ethiopia and Eritrea deals with the links across the straits and Red Sea in pre-Islamic times, as well as the traditions about the "Abyssinian" *hijra* that preceded the Medinan one that marks the Islamic calendar, and the less well attested tradition of the conversion to Islam of an Aksumite emperor. In each chapter he makes a good argument for his regional divisions, without exaggerating any cultural cohesion and with appreciation for the diversity of expression. He often comes up to the period of European conquest, so that he deals with the Mahdi of the Sudan in chapter 3 and with Rabiḥ in chapter 6.

A very fine introduction sets the stage and the methodology for this ambitious project. Insoll reviews the institutions and patterns which interest

archeologists and historians, beginning with the mosque and other architectural forms, but going on to questions of burial, diet, dress, and calligraphy. He gives a critical review of the mainly historical literature on islamisation and conversion, including the three-fold formulas adopted by Trimingham and Fisher, and the two-level division suggested by Robin Horton. He finds all of these patterns wanting, and tends to use insight from a study of Bengal completed by R. M. Eaton, involving processes called inclusion, identification, and displacement.[1] Ultimately he recognizes that no pattern can be applied over such an enormous area or indeed in any one of his seven regional chapters. He does place a deserved emphasis on trade and the example of Muslim merchant communities in the early stages of Islamic presence, and the role of literacy. He adopts a broad and simple definition of Islamic identity, citing Nehemia Levtzion in his 1979 volume on *Conversion to Islam*: "I accept as Muslim every individual who regards himself [themselves] as Muslim." [2]

The richest archeological evidence and the most extensive discussion of it relate to the East African coast. Insoll can here draw on his own work as well as that of colleagues. Having dealt with Mogadishu in the preceding chapter on the Horn of Africa, he concentrates here on the northern coast, corresponding mostly to Kenya and especially the Lamu archipelago for the early period, then the southern coast with an emphasis on Kilwa, and finally the islands as far as the Comoros. He supports the African orientation for the birth of the Swahili culture and language, without opting for any particular formulation of it. He makes useful distinctions between the trading links to the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and finally India, and casts some light on the slave trade into the Abbasid heartlands and the Zanj revolt.

The chapter on the Western Sahel has similar time depth and refinement. Insoll compares the analogy often invoked between ocean and desert,

and finds it useful to a limited extent. No culture comparable to the Swahili emerges, and he emphasizes a distinction between the areas west and east of the Niger Buckle. He looks at the material on Gao very closely, for the earlier periods, and Timbuktu, for the later, but he also examines the evidence from Tegdaost or Awdaghost and from the Tuareg-dominated zones to the northeast. He draws on the rich and deep historical literature available for the region, much of which is translated in Nehemia Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins's *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (1981), but counsels against overemphasizing the opinions of accounts compiled by outsiders to the region and its values. He places due emphasis on the relation of Muslims to the major states of the region, and their service as clerics and counselors (Mali appears in chapter 7), and the appropriation of Islam by the ruling classes.

Chapter 3 on the Nilotic Sudan gives considerable attention to the struggle of Muslims and Christians in Nubia and to the evidence from Darfur. Chapter 6 on the central Sudan teases out insights from the materials on Kanem and Bornu and adjacent areas, makes some contrasts with the stronger survivals of traditional religious practices in Bagirmi, and then moves over to the Hausa evidence. There he places more emphasis on cavalry, warfare, and slaving than in most other parts of the volume, but not to the detriment of trade and peaceful islamisation. In chapter 7 on the West African Sudan and forest, he privileges the north-south corridor extending from Mali down to the gold-producing areas of the Akan, and develops the idea of a "popularizing of Islam" in which Muslim and traditional practices are in easy coexistence. He deals with several of the military jihads at the end of this section. Chapter 8 deals with the interior of eastern, central and southern Africa. Insoll searches for evidence of Islam and islamisation, while reviewing the basic archeological data on such centers as Zimbabwe, and does not find very much evidence. But he gives useful treatment of the Muslims of the Cape,

under the leadership of exiles from the Dutch holdings in Indonesia and Malaysia, the Yao of Malawi and Mozambique, and the interesting experiments with islamisation at the Buganda court in the late 19th century.

Insoll has provided an invaluable study of Islam and archeology that will serve as a benchmark for years to come. He rejects simplifications or overall formulas, but is willing to advance sound and nuanced judgements in particular situations of islamisation, and plays a very useful role in setting out research agendas for the future. Without ignoring the role of the military jihad and external forces in the spread of the faith, he tends to place the emphasis upon trade and internal developments. This book is a must for libraries and serious scholars of Islam, Africa and archeology.

Notes

[1]. Richard Maxwell Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[2]. Nehemia Levtzion, ed. *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), p. 216.

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