

Introduction: Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

ZULFIKAR HIRJI

Raking the Soil: Islam and the Qur'an in Africa

THE QUR'AN's presence on Africa's soil dates back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). Muslim historians record that in the year 616, the Prophet instructed around one hundred of his supporters to leave Mecca and undertake an emigration (*hijra*) to seek refuge across the Red Sea in the Christian kingdom of Aksum (an area that included much of present-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia) in the face of persecution by the Prophet's Meccan opponents.¹ The kingdom's ruler, known as the Negus (*al-najāshī*), whom the Prophet and the inhabitants of Mecca were likely to have been familiar with through trading contacts and political alliances, had provided sanctuary to a handful of the Prophet's followers the year before.² He thus extended his welcome to the new émigrés. Sometime later, a Meccan delegation travelled to Aksum to seek retribution for losses they had incurred in battles with the Prophet and his followers. They demanded that the Negus return the émigrés to Mecca. The Negus asked the Prophet's followers to respond to the charges. The Prophet's cousin, Ja'far b. Abī Tālib (d. 629), was amongst the group and pleaded their case. He spoke about the Prophet's message and recited verses from *Sūrat Maryam* (Q. 19). The Negus and members of his court were so moved by what they heard that they wept profusely. As a result, the Negus rejected the Meccan claims and vowed to protect and shelter the émigrés.

This episode in Islam's early history marks the Horn of Africa as the first place outside the Arabian Peninsula where verses from the Qur'an were recited. It would be a few decades before the Qur'an was compiled into a fixed official codex (*muṣḥaf*). It would be more decades still before the words of the Qur'an and the message of Islam would be heard in other parts of Africa. But it would be centuries before the histories of Africa's Muslims were told. In the annals of Muslim historians, the first *hijra* became subsidiary to the Hijra of 622 when the Prophet and his followers fled from Mecca to Yathrib (later Medina). Thereafter, following the movements of the Prophet and his successors, the *mise en scène* of Muslim and Western accounts of Islam's history would be set northwest and east of Arabia.

Islam was introduced on a larger scale to the continent of Africa via Egypt in the 630s during the era of the early Muslim conquests. It then spread throughout the continent by a number of means including conquest, trade, migration and conversion. Owing to Muslim dynastic ambitions, the lands of northern Africa were among the very first places on the continent to fully embrace Islam. However, there was a Muslim presence in most regions of sub-Saharan Africa from the second/eighth century onwards.³ Within a few centuries, there were substantial Muslim populations throughout the region. Dynasties such as the Almoravids in the western Sahel (r. 431/1040–541/1147) and the Kilwa Sultanate on the East African coast (r. fourth/tenth–seventh/thirteenth centuries) ruled under the banner of Islam. From that period until the present, Islam has been an important feature in sub-Saharan Africa's landscape. Today, many countries in the region have sizable Muslim populations. In 2010, Muslims constituted more than thirty per cent of sub-Saharan Africa's overall population, and one third of the world's estimated Muslim population.⁴ Relative to the length of Islam's presence in the region and the ubiquity, growth and diversity of Muslim communities therein, Western scholarship of Islam and Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa has been, until recently, fairly limited.⁵

Scholars from various disciplines trace this dearth of knowledge back to the age of European imperialism and its late nineteenth

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

century 'Scramble for Africa', an enterprise in which European imperial powers rapidly divided up Africa between themselves through conquest and colonisation.⁶ At this time the Western European imagination, based on the accounts and reports of explorers, missionaries and academics, among others, conceived of Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, as a Dark Continent populated with primitives who possessed no history and lived outside of civilisation.⁷ When these perceptions became part of European colonial policy and colonial scholarship, they created an intellectual and cultural legacy that also reshaped the histories, mental maps and self-understanding of their colonial subjects.⁸ European Christian missionaries and colonial agents carried out some of the earliest studies of the languages and customs of sub-Saharan African peoples, including 'African Muslims'. To them, the 'Muhammadans' were competitors in their mission to 'civilise' and 'tame' the African 'race'. For example, the first Swahili translation of the Qur'an was written by Canon Godfrey Dale (d. 1941), the head of the Anglo-Catholic University Mission to Central Africa in Zanzibar, in order to educate local Christian teachers about Islam in their vernacular language, advance Christian polemics against Islam and win converts.⁹ Predictably, Dale's translation, which in addition to its mistakes and polemical commentary did not include the original Arabic, created a firestorm amongst local Muslims. It set off a decades-long debate between Muslims in the region regarding the usefulness and translatability of the Qur'an into vernacular languages and set the tone for Muslim-Christian relations in the region that reverberates in coastal East Africa even today.¹⁰ To take an example from West Africa, in the second half of the nineteenth century, at a Christian missionary school in Senegal's then capital of Saint Louis, the French Governor Louis Faidherbe (d. 1889) set out to mould the thinking of young Muslims by providing them with a secular French education – to which he felt they would be more receptive – rather than an overtly Christian one.¹¹ Faidherbe's actions were not benign. The French colonial administration conceived of the Sahara as a religious fence between the authentic Moorish Islam (*islam maure*) of North Africa and the inferior and animist Black Islam (*islam noir*) south of the Sahara.¹²

In Senegal, the French conceived of *islam maure* as a potent threat to their broader political ambitions in the region and *islam noir* as inherently weak and easily subdued. Thus, Faidherbe's policies were steeped in the French racial politics of the period with its undertones of scientific racism, a group of pseudoscientific theories in which race categories and racist ideas are given credence by measuring and classifying human populations according to phenotypical traits. Indeed, his legatees, like Paul Marty (d. 1938), a colonial scholar-administrator based in Dakar who wrote several works on Islam in West Africa, explicitly articulated their aim at 'taming' (*apprivoisement*) the practitioners of Black Islam.¹³ As Rudolph Ware has argued, over the long-term, the French colonial implementation of the racially underpinned concept of *islam noir* which aimed to isolate communities from developments and influences in other parts of the Islamic world, paradoxically preserved aspects of locally conceptualised traditions of Muslim self-understandings and ways of knowing and being in West Africa.¹⁴ This legacy continues to have an impact on the formal and informal religious institutions through which these traditions of knowledge were imparted, particularly Qur'an schools.

Western scholarship on Africa became more properly established in the European academy between the 1930s and 1960s. Building on the work of colonial scholars, universities in England and Germany began to research and teach a few of the many hundreds of languages of sub-Saharan Africa, such as Swahili, Hausa, Nuer and Zulu, and the literature, art and culture of the region became the subjects of scholarly interest for a range of disciplines. These scholarly activities paled in significance to the impact that the imposition of European languages and schooling had on the formation of all African colonial subjects and the advancement of their intellectual and artistic heritages. Imperial plundering, which resulted in the depositing of objects and manuscripts of so-called primitive peoples into the archives and museum collections of European institutions, also stripped communities of their heritage. Initially collected to show the 'progress of mankind' and the superiority of the European races, imperial booty became the subject matter of different scholarly fields. However, despite this growth in

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

certain fields, such as anthropology, scholars of Africa avoided the study of Islam and Muslims in Africa in order to focus on the more 'authentic' Africans.¹⁵ In this nativist discourse, Islam, and Arab Islam in particular, was regarded as a colonising force that had overrun indigenous African traditions. As Ware, drawing on the work of Robert Launay has cogently put it, 'The field has been constructed as though one cannot be authentically African and authentically Muslim at the same time.'¹⁶

In cases where the study of 'Islam in Africa' was taken up, scholars such as J. Spencer Trimingham,¹⁷ writing in the 1960s, continued to express many of the same colonial prejudices in their assessments of Africa's Muslim communities. They continued to contrast the forms and expressions of Islam in African contexts with those of the more 'orthodox' Islam in the 'central Islamic lands' of the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁸ Such claims, by extension, suggested that the expressions of sub-Saharan Africa's Muslim communities were intellectually inferior owing to their virtual isolation from the major centres of Islamic learning in the north. This resulted in limited scholarly study of the intellectual labours of indigenous Muslim scholars.¹⁹

While this was happening in the European context, intellectuals from different parts of sub-Saharan Africa, including academics, writers and filmmakers, also produced scholarship on Africa in the 1960s; they offered a range of local perspectives on Islam as part of an emerging strident discourse of African nationalism and independence.²⁰ Some of these intellectuals, such as the Côte d'Ivoirian novelist Ahmadou Kourouma (d. 2003), discussed the tensions within and between Africa's indigenous religious expressions and locally articulated Islamic beliefs in the advent of independence from European colonial rule.²¹ Others, such as the Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène (d. 2007) in his film *Ceddo* (1977), offered a critique of official Islam in Senegal and its tendencies towards mimicry and claims of indigeneity and authenticity.²² Other scholars, such as the Kenyan-born Ali A. Mazrui (d. 2014), proposed that Islam, Christianity (and Western colonialism) and the African ancestral culture were a set of cultural resources that Africans could use and critique in creative ways in their struggle for

self-determination.²³ Mazrui's 'triple-heritage' thesis (made into a BBC television series titled *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* in the 1980s) was pilloried by Wole Soyinka (b. 1934), a Nigerian writer of Yoruba descent, who wrote that Mazrui's thesis 'payed lip service to African deities' and 'ended up being just another expensive propaganda for the racial-religious superiority of seductive superstitions imported into, or forced down the throat of the African continent'.²⁴ The debate between Mazrui and Soyinka continues to be raked over in academic and intellectual circles today, indicating the extent to which Islam's historical and contemporary place in Africa remains part of a live debate.²⁵

Mazrui's 'triple-heritage' salvo shows a tendency amongst scholars and intellectuals to offer up grand narratives or continental rubrics about Islam in Africa.²⁶ In recent scholarship, the most prevalent are: 1) the continued idea that wherever you find Islam in Africa it is so-called African Islam or Africanised Islam, meaning that religious expressions of Muslims on African soil have visible hallmarks of indigenous African religions; and 2) the double-barrelled terminology African Islam/Islam in Africa, the first half of which refers to forms of indigenous Islam that are closely tied to Sufi groups or ideas, and the second half of which refers to forms of Islamic expression that are tied to Islamist reform movements.²⁷ While such frameworks may have some heuristic value, in each case where they are applied they require careful definition and judicious application, and abandoning when the data does not fit. But, more importantly, it is hard to imagine that such overarching frameworks can adequately account for the immense historical and contemporary diversity of Islamic expressions in sub-Saharan Africa, let alone the entire continent.

In an attempt to grapple with the immense plurality of Islam in Africa and its relationships with Islam elsewhere, Roman Loimeier has proposed an approach that takes up Talal Asad's proposition that 'Islam was a set of discursive traditions' which comprise a set of founding discourses such as the Qur'an and Hadith, a set of discursive practices such as contestation and re-articulation, as well as a range of social institutions and social actors such as Qur'an transmitters and interpreters – all integral to

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

the formation and perpetuation of the Islamic tradition.²⁸ Loimeier suggests:

In order to explain this paradoxical notion of unity within diversity we should visualize Islam as a great pool or corpus of texts, of prescriptions concerning the faith and/or everyday life, of shared rituals and festivals, of norms and values, as well as teaching traditions that were based on a number of key texts such as the Qur'an, the compilations of the sunna of the Prophet, as well as a large number of legal and theological texts.²⁹

Loimeier rightly expands Asad's definition of 'discursivity' and 'texts' to include 'core sites such as Mecca and Medina', 'core icons and symbols', 'calligraphic representation', representations of saints, and specific 'amulets and visualizations', among other expressions.³⁰

My own gloss on Loimeier's proposition³¹ is that understandings of Islam in Africa and elsewhere can best be gleaned through an examination of what people do with Loimeier's expanded sense of Asad's 'discursive tradition': how they engage with it and select from it; what they add to it or subtract from it; how they relate it to historical and contemporaneous sociopolitical realities; how they debate and contest interpretations of it; and how they preserve it and transmit it from one generation to the next. Thus, it may not be sufficient to identify what goes into making the Islamic tradition in a locality or a region, it is also important to identify what people on the ground choose to select from their tradition at any given historical moment and critically examine why they are making these selections. Such a methodology allows an understanding of Islam and Muslim societies to be unearthed from below.

The proposed methodology also calls for a case-based approach that requires multiple studies to be undertaken before old or new paradigms are employed to explain what is a very diverse and complex set of experiences. Indeed, recent scholarship being produced in a range of disciplines, as exemplified in the present volume of case studies, provides a more nuanced understanding about the historical and contemporary diversity, depth of thought and creativity amongst Muslims in Africa, and the local formation and development of Islam in different parts of the region. However,

Zulfikar Hirji

some of the old prejudices persist in many academic disciplines. In the field of art history, for example, Karin Ådahl's introduction to *Islamic Art and Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa* (1995) makes this explicit when she asks:

How then should the limits for what is Islamic art be set? With the perspective of an art historian dealing mainly with classical Islamic art, I find it hard to accept a tribal mask as an Islamic art object in spite of its justification in rituals which have been assimilated into the African Islamic society from pagan practices.³²

John Picton has offered a rejoinder to Ådahl's question by stating: 'Writing a history of art in West Africa without due reference to Islam would be about as sensible as trying to consider European art history in the absence of Christianity.'³³ As evidenced by Ruba Kana'an's study in this volume, which shows how a talismanic shirt from West Africa is comparable to the tradition of inscribed garments produced by Muslims in Iran, India and Turkey, the study of Islamic art and material culture in Africa, as with other scholarly disciplines, is increasingly cognisant of the extent to which Muslims in Africa, like Muslims everywhere, including in the Middle East, have evolved the Islamic tradition in ways and forms that are distinctive but are also readily comparable to other parts of the Muslim world and, at times, part of a shared tradition.

One of the most tangible forms of the Islamic tradition that Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa share with Muslims elsewhere is its manuscript culture. Until recently, the scholarly study of Islamic manuscripts in sub-Saharan Africa has been limited owing to an overdetermined focus on oral traditions as well as limited access to the region's rich and diverse manuscript tradition.³⁴ This situation has led to the neglect of Muslim manuscript traditions, and there now is an urgent need for their preservation and for critical scholarship on the Islamic manuscript culture of sub-Saharan Africa. In this regard, the digitisation and preservation of an archive of approximately 130 nineteenth- and early twentieth-century manuscripts from the Riyadhha Mosque College in Lamu,³⁵ and the efforts to digitise Arabic manuscripts in the collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University are but two recent

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

examples of efforts to preserve such traditions. The most notable efforts have been made in the numerous private manuscript libraries of Muslims in West Africa, particularly in Djenné and Timbuktu in Mali.³⁶ On the one hand, the content and survival of these private repositories challenge the prejudices about Islam and Muslims in the region, particularly their allegedly limited written literacy, and the extent to which such communities were isolated from religious networks and scholarly ideas in adjacent regions of the Middle East and the Mediterranean. On the other hand, the coexistence of these scholarly text-based traditions alongside aural/oral, artistic and performance-based expressions of Islamic ideas and imaginaries provide evidence of the dexterity that Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa have employed in conveying their existential and spiritual concerns.

Indeed, all of this scholarly activity has become more urgent in recent years owing to physical threats posed to these libraries and traditions of learning by Muslims belonging to groups with a very different orientation to those who have for centuries nurtured these cultures of learning. Abdel Kader Haidara, Director of the Mamma Haidara Memorial Library in Timbuktu, has noted this threat.³⁷ His library houses one of the oldest manuscript collections in Timbuktu. This collection comprises one of the more than four hundred private manuscript collections in that country. The contents of many of these libraries – which were founded in the mid-tenth/mid-sixteenth century – were kept safe from French colonial authorities, to whom they allegedly were being sold for display in French museums, by protectors who buried them beneath the soil. These manuscripts have only resurfaced in the last few decades after changes in the region's political climate. The Mamma Haidara collection contains some 22,000 manuscripts and 8,500 printed books. The oldest manuscript in the collection is a copy of the *al-Muwaṭṭa'* of Mālik b. Anas, copied in the year 467/1074. The library contains around 800 copies of the Qur'an, 220 works of Qur'anic commentary (*tafsīr*) and 350 manuscripts related to Qur'anic sciences. The oldest Qur'anic manuscript in the collection dates to 532/1138 and is likely to have been produced in al-Andalus. Since 2012, the contents of many of the private libraries of Timbuktu

Zulfikar Hirji

have been under threat from militant Islamists who have attempted to capture territory in northern Mali. This threat prompted Mr Haidara and others to smuggle their manuscript collections out of Timbuktu to safer climes in Bamako and other parts of West Africa, often at great personal risk. The commitment and resolve of West African Muslim communities and intellectuals such as Mr Haidara to preserve West Africa's Islamic heritage requires recognition as well as partnership and support from scholarly communities, among others. The decision to include an account of this recent episode in Timbuktu's history here is aimed at drawing attention to this important chapter in the contemporary histories of Islamic learning in sub-Saharan Africa and its implications for scholars and others concerned with world heritage.

Lines in the Sand: The Study of the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

Critical scholarship of the Qur'an in sub-Saharan Africa has been limited. The reasons for this gap may mirror what has been described in the previous section and what Scott Reese neatly sums up as the two central assumptions that have created a lacunae in scholarship on Islamic learning in Africa: 1) that 'the religious nature of a text a priori deprives it of any historical value'; and 2) that 'religious intellectuals and institutions of African Islam are somehow frozen in time'.³⁸ What is true with regard to the study of Islamic learning in Africa may be doubly so for the study of the Qur'an. Here, too, there may be assumptions that the Qur'an is a static, fixed and formulaic text whose study might yield little in terms of knowledge about the particular society in which it is used. There may also be assumptions that the Qur'an is *just* a text that is bound between two covers, subject to rote memorisation and mimetic repetition under the scrutiny of a strict scholar (*'alim*). It may also be that the ubiquity of the Qur'an makes it a somewhat banal subject of close study. Perhaps other reasons are that the study of the Qur'an in Africa, and perhaps any tradition expressed or written in Arabic, is perceived as not providing an understanding of the 'authentic' African. Or, the reasons may be altogether more

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

benign: for some scholars, it may just have been that physical manuscripts of the Qur'an and associated literature such as commentaries, particularly from premodern contexts, have been unavailable or out of reach; or that the complex and multiple language skills required to undertake such studies were beyond the abilities of even the most dedicated of scholars.

While these reasons, among others, may account for the general state of the field, they also provide a rationale for the publication of the present volume and its twin aims:

- 1) to open up new discourses about Islam and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa through an examination of how Muslims in this geographical and sociocultural context engage with the Qur'an;
- 2) to open up new discourses about the Qur'an through an examination of how Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa engage with it.

But publishing a book of studies on the Qur'an in sub-Saharan Africa means heeding the field's complex and fraught history. This means avoiding the aforementioned assumptions and prejudices by explaining the volume's title, which uses the nomenclature 'sub-Saharan Africa'. In this volume, the term is used only to reflect a conscious decision to select case studies from geographic areas south of the Sahara – a decision that was made to draw attention to parts of Africa that have been very much underrepresented in the broader literature on Islam and Muslims in Africa. In no way does this nomenclature suggest some sort of putative division between these two Africas, nor does it suggest any foregone assessment of the types of Islamic expression amongst Muslims living south of the Sahara.³⁹ While this volume has attempted to be comprehensive in terms of its coverage of all the diverse places where Muslims reside in sub-Saharan Africa, this has not always been possible because of the dearth of studies specifically focused on Muslim engagements with the Qur'an in a number of these locations. As a result, the volume does not include, for example, studies from Ethiopia, Sudan, Malawi, Mozambique or South Africa. Hence, this volume should be taken as a first step towards a more comprehensive study of

Zulfikar Hirji

the Qur'an in sub-Saharan Africa, rather than as the definitive last word.

The next task then is to explain the word 'Qur'an' as it emerges from the volume's case studies. Covering a period from the twelfth/eighteenth century to the early twenty-first century and a variety of geographical locations in West and East Africa, including Burkina Faso, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Tanzania, the volume's case studies individually and collectively attest to the Qur'an being more than a book between two covers. The studies use different frameworks and methodological approaches from the academic disciplines of philology, historiography, anthropology and art history to reference a variety of media and modalities that Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, like elsewhere, have used and continue to use in their engagements with the Qur'an. These include manuscripts; commentaries; translations; recitations and invocations; music and poetry; magic squares and symbolic repertoire; scripts, designs and decorations; religious acts and ritual practices; medicinal and curative acts; textiles, ink, paper, and wooden boards; spaces of education, healing and prayer, as well as spaces of dreams and spirit worlds. Defined, then, through Muslim approaches to it, the Qur'an (in its fullest sense) is a rather complex subject. It moves as a whole and in parts, in letter and deed, and in thought and inspiration through multiple discursive networks and social actors who, in turn, move within and between diverse local, regional, trans-regional and trans-dimensional spaces that are constantly in the making over multiple generations. Thus, this sheer complexity requires a prismatic lens that is best achieved through a multidisciplinary approach, such as the one embraced in this volume.

In sum, while the geographical marker of 'sub-Saharan Africa' is used in the title of this volume, the presumed bounds of land, sea and air are rendered rather feeble barriers when viewed against the unboundedness of the physical, intellectual, creative, sociopolitical, metaphorical and spiritual spaces into which the volume's diverse Muslims who engage with the Qur'an take us. This (re)orientation recalls Alfred Korzybski's oft-cited aphorism: 'a map is not the territory'.⁴⁰

Gathering the Texts: A Summary of the Case Studies

Four broadly defined and overlapping themes emerge from the volume's case studies: 1) interpretation; 2) embodiment; 3) gendered knowledge; and 4) transmission. The first of these, 'interpretation', concerns the formal and informal processes that Muslims use to make God's Word understood. The contributions of Dmitry Bondarev (chapter 2) and Tal Tamari (chapter 3) provide examples of the exegetical production of *tafsīr* (synchronous, often interlinear commentary on the Qur'anic Arabic text) in historical and contemporary contexts. Bondarev's study compares the variety of Arabic *tafsīrs* inscribed on four Qur'an manuscripts dating from the eleventh/seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, from the Borno Empire in northeast Nigeria. Bondarev shows that Borno's scholars turned to multiple classical Arabic *tafsīrs* to help them elucidate the meaning of the Qur'an. Among these commentaries were the Sunni *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, composed by the Cairo-based scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) and his student Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), as well as some lesser-known *tafsīrs* from the scholarly Sufi tradition, including *Ḥaqa'iq al-tafsīr*, the commentary of the Nishapuri exegete Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021). This rich and diverse Arabic-language material was not only copied into each of the Borno Qur'an manuscripts but it coexisted with interlinear annotations and commentaries in Old Kanembu, a Nilo-Saharan language that developed in the area of Lake Chad. Hence, such manuscripts may indicate the dexterous polyglot capacities of the scribes that lived and worked in this region in the premodern period or suggest different historical phases of their local exegetical tradition. Whichever the case may be, it definitely reflects a keen awareness of, and access to, the exegetical traditions in the broader Muslim world. It also indicates that Borno scholars produced their own original commentaries in the vernacular of their region. As such, through Bondarev's forensic lexicography, we see the fingerprints of an interpretative community of scribes and scholars who, through their multilingual interplay of commentary, translation, annotation and citation, gathered around the Qur'an to make meaning out of God's Word.

The metaphor of gathering around the Qur'anic text takes on a real-time spoken dimension in Tamari's study of a 1992 audio recording of an orally delivered *tafsīr* of *Sūrat al-Raḥmān* (Q. 55) by a Manding-speaking scholar from the Segou region of central Mali. In this case, the scholar, who is of prominent lineage and well-versed in classical Arabic *tafsīr* traditions, attempts to comment on the sura's meaning for an audience of his students through what Tamari calls 'translational reading'. This process involves paraphrasing and translating the Qur'anic Arabic text into Manding, a Niger-Congo language spoken throughout southern Mali and adjacent countries, as well as using other lexical and inter-linguistic strategies including words from a specialised Arabic-Manding lexicon called Bamana, and loanwords from Arabic and French. The scholar also uses affective modes of performance-style interlocation, such as repetition and onomatopoeia, which indicate the embodied nature of the translational process in which the meaning of the words is given physical form through gesticulation and vocal stresses. The scholar is thus an earnest religious bricoleur who draws from and mingles a range of languages and lexical resources to make abstract Qur'anic ideas, such as the unity of God (*tawḥīd*), concrete and intelligible to non-Arabic speakers. In so doing, the scholar casts his own *tafsīr* into the discursive arena and adds to Borno's discursive tradition. Tamari notes that while oral *tafsīr* sessions are recalled to have taken place in the region since before the colonial period, in modern times this tradition competes with printed copies of *tafsīrs* circulating in the market, including ones in Bamana and other vernaculars. However, whereas the printed *tafsīrs* preserve the ubiquitous physical separation between the Qur'anic text and vernacular commentary, the oral *tafsīr* has the advantage of retaining a more fluid intertextuality which may account for its continued appeal in teaching-learning contexts.

The contributions by Farouk Topan (chapter 4), Gerard van de Bruinhorst (chapter 5) and Adeline Masquelier (chapter 8) concern acts of Qur'anic translation and interpretation in the context of intra-Muslim contestations. Topan's study focuses on Swahili-language translations of the Qur'an produced in East Africa by Mubarak Ahmad (d. 2001), Abdullah Saleh al-Farsy (d. 1982) and

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

Ali Muhsin al-Barwani (d. 2006) during the twentieth century and shows the extent to which each of the three translations reflects the 'history, culture, ethnicity, the aspirations of the translator and of his community', among other aspects of the translators' context. A shared characteristic of these three translations is that each of their authors seeks to present their translation as authoritative and appeal to local Swahili-speaking audiences by contesting translation(s) that preceded it, as a whole or in part. As such, Topan's cases make plain that translating the Qur'an is not a prosaic exercise, but a creative endeavour which can be historicised and through which we can witness long-standing and emerging intra-communal contestations, among other debates.

Bruinhorst's study examines a recent (2003) electronically published interlinear Swahili Qur'an translation and *tafsīr* by Ali Jumaa Mayunga (b. 1947), a Tanzanian Muslim convert to Twelver Shi'ism, and its reception. Here, the local scholar uses Qur'anic commentary to present his own conversion journey. He also draws comparisons between Islamic history and contemporary Tanzanian politics. Bruinhorst notes a particularly charged example of the scholar's comparison between the oppression of the Shi'a under Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān (d. 60/680), the Umayyad governor of Syria, and the anti-Muslim policies of Julius Nyerere (d. 1999), the former president of Tanzania. This exegetical strategy of blending politics with religion, according to Bruinhorst, was highly contested by the scholar's local audience. In their view, owing to the region's history of contested Swahili Qur'an translations, it was preferable for translations to be free of 'explanatory footnotes and introductions' so as to mirror the ahistorical canonical feel of the Qur'an in its original Qur'anic Arabic. In response, the Shi'i scholar defends his decision by drawing on a sermon of Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989), the former supreme leader of Iran. While both Qur'an and history form part of a single seamless discourse, the opposition to this work and contemporary trends in East Africa favours an ahistorical approach to Qur'an translations that strips the fingerprint of the scholar from the translation.

Interpretations of the Qur'an are also the subject of Masquelier's study of Islamic prayer practices amongst Hausa-speaking

communities in Niger's southern town of Dogondoutchi in the late 1990s. In this case, anti-Sufi Izala reformists sought to correct the obligatory prayer (Hausa, *salla*) practices of Sufi-oriented traditionalist Muslims in Dogondoutchi and eradicate their forms of Islamic expression, including meditative prayer (Hausa, *zikri*), devotional singing (Hausa, *ishiriniyya*) and recitations of the opening chapter of the Qur'an (Hausa, *salat al-fatih*). In charting the discourse between the two sides and their leaders, Masquelier provides insight into the multiple ways that authoritative knowledge of the Qur'an and the ability to accurately read the text was used by both sides to prove their claims and the superiority of their understanding of the revelation. Unlike the Izala, who focus primarily on exposition of the Qur'anic text and following a very strict bodily regime of prayer postures, the traditionalist Muslims added other more embodied and sensory forms to their repertoire of religious knowing, including visualising the text and repetitious or melodious chanting of Islamic prayer such as *salat al-fatih*. From their perspective, such practices provided 'bliss' and 'pleasure' that encouraged the growth of an 'inner spirituality'. It is important to recall that Masquelier notes that such forms of Islam do not negate the Qur'anic text, which all parties in the debates agreed was the foundation of Islam; rather, the aim of Dogondoutchi's traditionalists is to get at the Qur'an's essence.

Ryan Skinner's study (chapter 6) of the contemporary music scene in Mali's capital Bamako evidences similar tensions between Qur'anic embodiment as a way of Islamic knowing and a more textual approach to God's Word. Skinner examines the manner in which Malian popular musicians interpolate Qur'anic content, phrases, formulae and selected words into the lyrics of their songs to 'interpellate' (i.e. bring into being) an 'Islamic voice' and produce moral subjects. Such processes are what Skinner calls 'a poetics of recognition' through which local participants in the music, both performers and audiences, co-construct a moral space of interaction. While not the kind of oral *tafsir* space discussed by Tamari, the musical performances that Skinner describes also exhibit code-switching between Arabic and Bamana, and repeatedly interpolated Qur'anic content. As Skinner notes, in Malian contexts the Qur'anic

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

content in the music serves to reaffirm identity and belonging and mark particular ways of being Muslim, but when the music with its Qur'anic content moves into the global arena, it can suffer from 'misrecognition' and be contested and regarded as 'unorthodox' or against Islam. Skinner's study provides several illustrations of the responses of Mali's musicians to these claims, including Toumani Diabaté (b. 1965), who defend their use of the 'poetic voice of Islam' and 'Qur'anic interpolation'.

Ruba Kana'an (chapter 7) examines a late-twentieth century talismanic shirt from Burkina Faso which is heavily inscribed with Qur'anic content, including selected Qur'anic verses (*āyas*), the ninety-nine names of God (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), the names of prophets and other Islamic formulae. Kana'an argues that the shirt, like its many other counterparts in West Africa and other parts of the Islamic world, including Sultanate and Mughal India, Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran, embodies the Qur'an as one iteration of the Islamic tradition of 'talismanic' shirt-making. Muslims in many places used such inscribed shirts to protect the wearer from harm. Such garments were part of a long-standing and widely spread Islamic apotropaic tradition of bodily care and healing through the invocation, ingestion and application of Qur'anic material. Kana'an also discusses the way in which Western scholars of Islam, particularly art historians, have often over-determined the 'Africanness' and 'locality' of such talismanic objects, primarily attributing the cultural production of such garments to the 'magic' and 'animistic' beliefs of the diverse African religious landscape rather than seeing them as part and parcel of the Muslim world view. As such, Kana'an adds Western art historians to Skinner's global arena of 'religious orthodoxies', who through a 'politics of misrecognition' have wrongly presented the cultural expressions of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa as entirely anomalous to that of Muslims elsewhere.

As with Kana'an's talismanic shirt, the healing and protective words of the Qur'an are central to Kjersti Larsen's ethnographic study (chapter 9) of the different ways in which the words of the Qur'an are regarded as 'medicine' (Swahili, *dawa*) amongst some Muslim female and male residents of Zanzibar Town, the capital

city of Zanzibar, Tanzania. Here, speaking the Qur'an or enacting its truths are believed to materialise a force that can protect and heal. This is true in all aspects of life, not just in the space of ritual practice. This idea of 'utterance' is comparable to Skinner's study, in which the Islamic moral subject is interpellated through acts of Qur'anic interpolation. It is for this reason that Larsen's informants move through their daily lives invoking Qur'anic words, phrases and ideas at every turn. Such actions not only dissolve distinctions between the social and the ritual, they also allow some informants access to the world of spirits, which is considered an important part of the Qur'anic world view in Zanzibar, as it is elsewhere in the Muslim world. One of Larsen's female interlocutors attributed her unique knowledge of the hidden meanings of the Qur'an to Muslim spirits from Arabia, with whom she became acquainted through the regular practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and undertaking pious deeds. Over time, she believes, the spirits transmitted this special Qur'anic knowledge to her, which eventually allowed her to become recognised as a religious authority in Zanzibar in arenas that are usually dominated by men. As such, Larsen's study hints at the final two themes of gender and knowledge transmission that are explored fully in the remaining studies of the volume.

In Susan Rasmussen's study (chapter 10) of gender, altered states, and local cultural representations of Islam among the Tuareg (Kel Tamajaq) living in the rural Aïr mountains of Niger, marabouts (Tamajaq, *ineslemen*) – local diviners who are also Islamic religious scholars – interpret the dreams of their female clients. Rasmussen's ethnographic study shows how the Qur'anic world view that speaks of the world of spirits (*djinn*s) is uniquely articulated and expressed amongst the Tuareg. Additionally, Rasmussen provides examples of how verses from the Qur'an are used to divine cases of possession or spirit visitation and as a 'force of mediation and reconciliation' in a richly elaborated case about a woman who was potentially possessed. She argues that amongst the Tuareg, indigenous systems of knowing and those derived from Islam work in 'a productive tension' rather than a neat binary opposition between 'folk' and 'scriptural' religion. By extension, women are not, in Rasmussen's

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

view, more likely to opt out of normative Islamic religious practices or feel deprived of access to the Qur'an. As in Larsen's case study, the woman who was almost possessed achieved equilibrium through embracing these Islamic practices and using them to her advantage.

Joseph Hill's study (chapter 11) provides another example of how women in Islamic contexts move past assigned gender roles. Hill's study examines the life of Shaykha Maryam Niasse (b. 1932), the daughter of the Tijānī Sufi Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1975). She resides in Senegal and acts as an Islamic leader and teacher. While such women are widely recognised as Qur'an teachers, internationally influential Islamic authorities, channels of their father's divine blessing (*baraka*), their formal appointment as Sufi spiritual guides who regularly induct male and female disciples into the Sufi order is far less widely known. Hill casts his attention to Shaykha Maryam's daily life and the way she expertly mediates her ascribed gender role by asserting her knowledge and mastery of the Qur'an. What is also notable in Hill's study is Shaykha Maryam's use of an esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an to argue that gender distinctions are this-worldly (*zāhir*), and thus present her authority as transmitter of religious knowledge and spiritual truths as equivalent to or even surpassing that of a man. As Hill suggests, paradoxically, the 'largely hidden and informal' feminine forms of piety in this Sufi context are often viewed as being of the highest and most legitimate order, thereby heightening the Shaykha's religious authority.

Andrea Brigaglia's study (chapter 12) of the wooden tablet (Hausa, *allo*; *al-lawh* being the Arabic equivalent) historically used throughout the Muslim world for the teaching of the Qur'an, and still adopted in most traditional West African Qur'anic schools, brings together themes of transmission of knowledge with the concept of embodiment. Brigaglia's study focuses on the role of the *allo* in the first stages of traditional Islamic education in Hausaland (northern Nigeria) and on the symbolism associated with it. Far from being a mere substitute for paper as a support of learning before the latter became easily (and cheaply) available in the region, Brigaglia shows how the *allo* is seen as an indispensable

support for writing down the Qur'an as the students move through the various stages of their religious education. The study also discusses the anthropomorphism of the different physical shapes taken by the *allo* through the different stages of traditional Qur'anic studies. As with Kana'an's study of a West African 'talismanic' shirt, Brigaglia also argues that the *allo*'s material form and aesthetic are deeply grounded in Islamic theological concepts rather than being examples of syncretism with local 'pagan' ideas. Further pursuing this line of reasoning, Brigaglia discusses how the *allo* is also an object that embodies a complex network of Islamic knowledge and symbolic meanings – what Brigaglia calls 'embodied epistemology'. Ultimately, the *allo* allows the student to conceive of their learning as the re-enactment (and not only the transmission) of the original process through which the Word of God was revealed: the 'descent' (*nuzūl*) of the archetypal, eternal Qur'an from the heavenly 'preserved tablet' (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) to the Prophet Muhammad.

My own study (chapter 13), which concludes the volume, examines the historical or stylistic relationships between three illuminated Qur'an manuscripts produced at the town of Siyu on Pate Island in the Lamu archipelago between the twelfth/eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I argue that the manuscripts, which are currently located in Los Angeles, London and Muscat, provide evidence that there was a distinctive and sophisticated scribal tradition on the East African coast located at Siyu before the nineteenth century. Thus, in connection to the theme of transmission, the study of the Siyu Qur'an manuscripts raises questions about the historical formation and development of this scribal tradition, its connections to other manuscript production centres in the region and beyond, and its relationship with locally produced Swahili-language manuscripts in Arabic script. Finally, like the Hausa *allo* discussed by Brigaglia, the talismanic shirt from Burkina Faso in Kana'an's study and the Borno manuscripts examined by Bondarev, the Siyu Qur'ans are treated here not just as physical objects that house the text of the Qur'an, but as examples of 'material religion' out of which the histories of the people who engaged with the Qur'an can be read, felt and imagined.⁴¹

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

In sum, the twelve studies in this volume provide a range of methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks that allow us to begin to understand the plurality of engagements that Muslims from diverse communities of interpretation and from different parts of sub-Saharan Africa have had with the Qur'an. These studies also add to the growing scholarship on Muslim approaches to this scripture. But they are also indicative of the many landscapes, in Africa and elsewhere, where the Qur'an and Islam feature yet remain to be studied. Undoubtedly, the fruits of all such endeavours will make for a richer harvest.

NOTES

- 1 Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sirat Rasūl Allāh, with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 150–51.
- 2 E. van Donzel, 'al-Nadjāshī', *EI²*, vol., VII, pp. 862–4.
- 3 See various chapters in Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, eds, *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens, OH, 2000).
- 4 'The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050. Sub-Saharan Africa', Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/sub-saharan-africa/>.
- 5 Scott S. Reese, 'Islam in Africa: Challenging the Perceived Wisdom', in idem, ed., *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa* (Leiden, 2004), pp. 1–14; René Otayek and Benjamin F. Soares, 'Introduction: Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa', in Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek, eds, *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa* (New York, 2007), pp. 2–3.
- 6 See Mahir Şaul, 'Islam and West African Anthropology', *Africa Today* 53 (2006), pp. 3–33.
- 7 Lucy Jarosz, 'Constructing the Dark Continent: Metaphor as Geographic Representation of Africa', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 74, no. 2 (1992), pp. 105–15.
- 8 Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 1–48.
- 9 Justo Lacunza Balda, 'Translations of the Quran into Swahili, and Contemporary Islamic Revival in East Africa', in David Westerlund and Eva Evers Rosander, eds, *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (London, 1997), p. 97.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 99ff. See also, Roman Loimeier, 'Translating the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa: Dynamics and Disputes', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35, no. 4 (2005), pp. 403–23.
- 11 Christopher Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860–1960* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 11–12.
- 12 Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*, pp. 41–2.

Zulfikar Hirji

- 13 Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa*, pp. 105–6; Şaul, 'Islam and West African Anthropology', pp. 6–7.
- 14 Rudolph T. Ware III, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014), pp. 19ff.
- 15 Robert Launay, 'An Invisible Religion? Anthropology's Avoidance of Islam in Africa', in Mwenda Ntarangwi, David Mills and Mustafa Babiker, eds, *African Anthropologies: History, Critique and Practice* (Dakar, 2006), pp. 188–203.
- 16 Ware, *The Walking Qur'an*, p. 5.
- 17 J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in West Africa* (Oxford, 1959); idem, *Islam in East Africa* (Oxford, 1964).
- 18 Reese, 'Islam in Africa', p. 1; Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 8–9.
- 19 J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Influence of Islam upon Africa* (London, 1968), pp. 2–3.
- 20 Toyin Falola, *Nationalism and African Intellectuals* (Rochester, NY, 2004).
- 21 Kenneth W. Harrow, 'Islamic Literature in Africa', in Levtzion and Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa*, pp. 537–8; Ahmadou Kourouma, *Les Soleils des indépendances* (Montreal, 1968).
- 22 David Murphy, *Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 31–2; Ousmane Sembène, *Ceddo* (Senegal, 1977).
- 23 Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Boston, MA, 1986), p. 21.
- 24 Wole Soyinka, 'Religion and Human Rights', *Index on Censorship* 17, no. 5 (1988), p. 88.
- 25 Ousmane Kane, 'Arabophones Triumphant: Timbuktu under Islamic Rule', in idem, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), pp. 178–99.
- 26 Roman Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology* (Bloomington, IN, 2013), pp. 11–34.
- 27 David Westerlund and Eva Evers Rosander, eds, *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists* (London, 1997); Otayek and Soares, 'Introduction', pp. 3–5; Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 34. See Lamin Sanneh's *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam* (Oxford, 2016) which challenges dichotomous approaches that posit Islam in Africa as an imposed Arab import through jihad or a sub-standard African adaptation through syncretism.
- 28 Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC, 1986), p. 14.
- 29 Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa*, p. 18.
- 30 Ibid., pp. 18–21.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Karin Ådahl, 'Islamic Art in Sub-Saharan Africa: Towards a Definition', in Karin Ådahl and Berit Sahlström, eds, *Islamic Art and Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Uppsala, 1995), p. 18. See also René A. Bravmann's response to Ådahl in René A. Bravmann, 'Islamic Art and Material Culture in Africa', in Levtzion and Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa*, pp. 489–518; the quote is taken from pp. 490–91.
- 33 John Picton, 'Keeping the Faith: Islam and West African Art History in the Nineteenth Century', in Doris Behrens-Abouseif and Stephen Vernoit, eds,

Approaching the Qur'an in Sub-Saharan Africa

- Islamic Art in the 19th Century: Tradition, Innovation, and Eclecticism* (Leiden, 2006), p. 195.
- 34 Mauro Nobili, 'Introduction: African History and Islamic Manuscript Cultures', in Andrea Brigaglia and Mauro Nobili, eds, *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Berlin, 2017), pp. 3–4.
- 35 'The Manuscripts of the Riyadh Mosque of Lamu, Kenya (EAP466)', Endangered Archives Programme, British Library, <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP466>.
- 36 Tombouctou Manuscripts Project, <https://www.tombouctoumanuscripts.org>; Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, eds, *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town, 2008); See also Alessandro Gori et al., *A Handlist of the Manuscripts in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Vol. II: The Arabic Materials of the Ethiopian Islamic Tradition* (Eugene, Oregon, 2014).
- 37 Haidara commented on this in his keynote speech at the conference 'Approaches to the Qur'an in sub-Saharan Africa', 20–21 May 2011, Toronto, organised by York University (Toronto) and the Institute of Ismaili Studies (London).
- 38 Reese, 'Islam in Africa', p. 3.
- 39 It is the intention of the Institute of Ismaili Studies to convene a conference on 'Approaches to the Qur'an in the Maghreb', and to publish its proceedings.
- 40 Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, 4th edn (Brooklyn, NY, 1958), p. 58.
- 41 See S. Brent Plate, 'Material Religion: An Introduction', in idem, ed., *Key Terms in Material Religion* (London, 2015), pp. 4–5.