

REINTERPRETING THE ROLE OF MUSLIMS IN THE WEST AFRICAN MIDDLE AGES

Mauro Nobili 

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

Recent research points to a renewed scholarly interest in the West African Middle Ages and the Sahelian imperial tradition. However, in these works only tangential attention is paid to the role of Muslims, and especially to clerical communities. This essay tackles theoretical and historiographical insights on the role of African Muslims in the era of the medieval empires and argues that the study of Islam in this region during the Middle Ages still suffers from undertheorizing. On the contrary, by using a ‘discursive approach’ scholars can unravel access to fascinating aspects of the history of West African Muslims and in particular to the crucial role played by clerical communities, who represented one node of the web of diffused authority which is characteristic of precolonial West African social and political structures.

Key Words

Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Niger, West Africa, Western Africa, Sahara, Islam, historiography, kingdoms and states, literacy, precolonial.

In an article published in this journal less than a decade ago, Richard Reid made the compelling case that ‘precolonial history is neither dead nor does it lack — by any stretch of the imagination — the potential to reach into new areas of enquiry.’¹ The number of studies that he presented in his article validated this argument. However, a striking absence in this scholarship is self-evident: the West African Middle Ages and the great ‘empires’ of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay are barely represented.² In the last two decades, very few works have been published (especially in the Anglophone world) on these topics, which in contrast had attracted so much attention in the 1960s and 1970s.³ The notable

1 R. Reid, ‘Past and presentism: the “precolonial” and the foreshortening of African history’, *The Journal of African History*, 52:2 (2011), 147.

2 The term ‘empire’ is here used, in accordance with the standards of the scholarship on West African Middle Ages, in spite of its problematic nature; for an analysis of the use of this term in Africanist literature, see M. Tymowski, ‘Use of the term “empire” in historical research on Africa: a comparative approach’, *Africa Zamani*, 11–12 (2003–4), 18–26. See also Hadrien Collet’s contribution to this forum, in which the very sequence Ghana-Mali-Songhay is questioned as a historiographic invention.

3 The Francophone academic world is more interested in the study of pre-1500 African history. For example, the journal *Afriques: Débats, méthodes et terrains d’histoire* (<https://journals.openedition.org/afriques>) has published several articles on medieval Africa, including some contributions in English. The recent works by Hadrien Collet that uncover new Arabic sources for the history of Medieval West Africa are particularly praiseworthy, see H. Collet, ‘Échos d’Arabie: le pèlerinage à la Mecque de Mansa Musa (724–725/1324–

exception is Paulo de Moraes Farias's masterpiece *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali*.⁴ The work of a historian who is perfectly at home with Arabic sources, oral traditions, and archaeological evidence, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions* uses epigraphic evidence to deconstruct the official narrative of the West African Middle Ages provided by the so-called Timbuktu chronicles.⁵ Moraes Farias demonstrates how the chronicles were constructed as political projects and then provides a new interpretation of the history of the Middle Niger and the Azawād between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries.⁶ More recent research seems to point to a renewed interest in the West African Middle Ages. The archaeological work of scholars such as Sam Nixon, who excavated the Saharan hub Essouk-Tadmakka, or Shoichiro Takezawa and Mamadou Cissé, who provide new insight on the medieval empires, have expanded our understanding on this phase of West African history.⁷ Michael Gomez's *African Dominion* approaches the history of these empires through new lenses such as the Black Atlantic, comparative studies of race and ethnicity,

1325) d'après des nouvelles sources', *History in Africa*, 46 (2019), 105–35; and H. Collet, 'Royal pilgrims from Takrūr according to 'Abdal-Qādir al-Jazīrī (12th–16th century)', *Islamic Africa*, 10:1–2 (2019), 181–203.

- 4 P. F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuāreg History* (Oxford, 2003).
- 5 By 'Timbuktu chronicles', scholars mean the seventeenth-century *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* by al-Sa'dī (d. after 1655–6) and the more problematic chronicle normally referred to as the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*. The first work exists in a reliable edition and French translation, see O. Houdas (ed. and trans.), *Tarikh es-Soudan par Abderrahman ben Abdallah ben 'Imran ben 'Amir es-Sa'di*, 2 Volumes (Paris, 1898–1900); most of its text is also translated into English in J. Hunwick (trans.), *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: al-Sa'di's Ta'rikh al-Sūdān down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents* (Leiden, 2003). Often considered to be a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century work that was subjected to later textual manipulation, the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* is in fact a nineteenth-century chronicle written by Nūh b. al-Ṭāhir (d. 1857–8), a Fulani scholar who served the Caliphate of Ḥamdallāhi (1818–62) and its founder, Aḥmad Lobbo; see M. Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph, and Renewer of the Faith: Aḥmad Lobbo, the Tārīkh al-fattāsh, and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa* (Cambridge, 2020). The apocryphal ascription of the chronicle to the sixteenth-century scholar Maḥmūd Ka'ti (d. 1593) is a nineteenth-century artifact, an attempt of the real author of the work to cover his forgery that has gone almost undetected by scholars, with the notable exception of N. Levtzion, 'A seventeenth-century chronicle by Ibn al-Mukhtār: a critical study of 'Ta'rikh al-Fattāsh', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 34:3 (1971), 571–93. However, Nūh b. al-Ṭāhir did not compose the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* from scratch, but produced it by substantially modifying an older chronicle, which I have named the 'Chronicle of Ibn al-Mukhtār', after the name of the author who wrote it during the second half of the seventeenth century. The Chronicle of Ibn al-Mukhtār does not exist in a reliable edition and its text is conflated with the nineteenth-century forged *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* in O. Houdas and M. Delafosse (eds. and trans.), *Tarikh el-fettach par Mahmoud Kati et l'un de ses petit fils ou Chronique du chercheur pour servir à l'histoire des villes, des armées et des principaux personnages du Tekrour* (Paris, 1913). With the generous support of a Scholarly Editions and Translations grant from the National Endowment for Humanities, I am currently preparing with Ali H. Diakité (Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Saint John's University) and Zachary Wright (Northwestern University in Qatar) a new critical edition and translation of the chronicle of Ibn al-Mukhtār and of the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*.
- 6 P. F. de Moraes Farias, 'Intellectual innovation and the reinvention of the Sahel: the seventeenth-century chronicles of Timbuktu', in S. Jeppie and S. Diagne (eds.), *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town, 2008), 95–109.
- 7 S. Nixon (ed.), *Essouk-Tadmekka: An Early Islamic Trans-Saharan Market Town* (Leiden, 2017); S. Takezawa and M. Cissé (eds.), *Sur les traces des grands empires: Recherches archéologiques au Mali* (Paris, 2017).

and gender.⁸ *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, a multidisciplinary volume curated by Kathleen B. Berzock that includes contributions from art historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians, looks at medieval West Africa from the vantage point of trans-Saharan studies.⁹ Finally, similar for the diversity of contributors and its focus on visual culture is Alisa LaGamma's edited collection *Sahel: Art and Empire on the Shores of the Sahara*.¹⁰

These works give only tangential attention to the role of Muslims in the West African imperial tradition of the Middle Ages. Indeed, very little has been done to rethink the early history of African Muslim communities in the region from a theoretical point of view. The study of 'Islam in Africa' as a subfield of African History has progressed substantially in the past decades by incorporating the 'discursive approach' developed in anthropology and history.¹¹ But there is a tendency towards presentism in these new works on African Muslims and very little research focuses on material prior to the colonial period, let alone on the Middle Ages.

In my contribution to this forum, I would like to share theoretical and historiographic insights into the early history of West African Muslim communities in the era of the medieval empires. I will argue that the study of Islam in this region during the Middle Ages still suffers from undertheorizing. This lack of theory can be seen in the resilience of the outdated 'transmission of Islam' model. Instead of revealing historical dynamics, this model obscures the history of local Muslim communities, made invisible until the outbreak of Islamic revolutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — a period seen as the actual completion of the process of Islamization. Challenging this approach and conceptualizing medieval 'Islam' in a discursive way allows scholars access to fascinating aspects of the history of West Africa and, to quote Sean Hanretta, 'can liberate the long period between 1000 to 1800 from its service as the stage for the slow movement of "Islamization" and see in it instead myriad examples of complex, contingent interactions between religion,

8 M. A. Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton, 2018). Gomez's book has, however, attracted a certain degree of criticism, mainly concerning the author's use of complex primary sources, such as the Timbuktu chronicles, and the face-value approach to oral narratives; see the reviews of *African Dominion* by S. Jeppie, *American Historical Review*, 124:2 (2019), 587–8; P. F. de Moraes Farias, *American Historical Review*, 124:2 (2019), 588–91; and A. Syed, *Islamic Africa*, 10:1–2 (2019) 225–7.

9 K. Berzock (ed.), *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa* (Princeton, 2019). This volume is the publication of the itinerant exhibition by the same name, organized and first displayed at the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 26 Jan. to 21 July 2019; see <https://caravansofgold.org>. A previous forum in this journal was devoted to scholarship on trans-Saharan Africa, see G. Lydon, 'Saharan oceans and bridges, barriers and divides in Africa's historiographical landscape', *The Journal of African History*, 56:1 (2015), 3–22; and B. Lecocq, 'Distant shores: a historiographic view on trans-Saharan space', *The Journal of African History*, 56:1 (2015), 23–36.

10 A. LaGamma (ed.), *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara* (New York, 2020). This is also an exhibition volume. The original exhibit took place at the Metropolitan Art Museum, 30 Jan. to 26 Oct. 2020; see <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2020/sahel-art-empire-sahara>.

11 See the previous forum in this journal 'Islam in sub-Saharan Africa', which includes J. Triaud, 'Giving a name to Islam south of the Sahara: an adventure in taxonomy', *The Journal of African History*, 55:1 (2014), 3–15; S. Reese, 'Islam in Africa/Africans in Islam', *The Journal of African History*, 55:1 (2014), 17–26; and B. Soares, 'The historiography of Islam in West Africa: an anthropologist's view', *The Journal of African History*, 55:1 (2014), 27–36.

power, authority and *longue durée* social structuration'.¹² One such example is the emergence within the West African medieval empires of local clerical communities. These communities included Muslim religious specialists literate in Arabic (with different degrees of advancement) who put their knowledge in the service of the community, often receiving compensation in return. There is indeed significant evidence that Muslim clerical communities played a crucial role in the history of these medieval empires, for they represented one node of the web of diffused authority which characterized precolonial West African social and political structures.

SILENCING THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES OF WEST AFRICAN MUSLIM CLERICS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Sometime in the mid-fifteenth century, a holy man from Timbuktu crossed a branch of the Niger River to purchase a ram to sacrifice on the day of *ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā* (the tenth day of the month of *Dhū al-ḥijja* of the Islamic calendar). As the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* recounts:

[He] walked on the water and his pupil followed him, since this seemed to him appropriate at the time — God alone knows why. The shaykh had already emerged on the other side, when the pupil reached the middle of the river and sank. The shaykh therefore shouted at him and stretched out his hand to rescue him. ‘What made you do that?’ he said, and the pupil replied, ‘When I saw what you did, I did the same.’ So the shaykh said to him, ‘How can you compare your foot to one that has never walked in disobedience to God?’¹³

This holy man was *modibbo* Muḥammad al-Kābarī.¹⁴ He was not just a righteous and pious man; he was a celebrated scholar, *qāḍī*, and the forefather of the ‘*ulamā*’ of Timbuktu during the city’s apogee. One of the few scholars who is remembered as *shaykh al-shuyūkh* (‘master of the masters’), Muḥammad al-Kābarī was associated with the teaching of Mālikī *fiqh* (jurisprudence). He also authored what seems to be the oldest existing work written by a West African scholar, *Bustān al-fawāʿid wa-l-manāfiʿ* (Garden of the Useful and Beneficent).¹⁵ The *Bustān* is mainly a collection of *fawāʿid* (sing. *fāʿida*), a term, which in Arabic simply means ‘utility’, that is used to refer to a set of different kinds of texts, most often of Qurʾānic origin, used to fashion, among other things, enchantments, supplications, amulets, or incantations. Muḥammad al-Kābarī was not a unique case in late medieval West Africa, as there were many other Muslim scholars who lived

12 S. Hanretta, ‘Muslim histories, African societies: the venture of Islamic studies in Africa’, *The Journal of African History*, 46:3 (2005), 49. Italics in original.

13 Translation in Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 70; compare to the Arabic version in Houdas, *Tārīkh es-Soudan II*, 48.

14 The honorific *modibbo* is a Fulfulde adaptation of the Arabic *muʿaddib* and means ‘educated person’ or ‘teacher’. See Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 104n14. A portrayal of Muḥammad al-Kābarī is in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, see Houdas, *Tārīkh es-Soudan II*, 47–50 (Arabic text); and Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 68–72.

15 J. O. Hunwick (comp.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume IV: The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa* (Leiden, 2003), 12, item 1. For an analysis of the *Bustān*, see Z. Wright, ‘The Islamic intellectual traditions of Sudanic Africa, with analysis of a fifteenth-century Timbuktu manuscript’, in F. Ngom, M. Kurfi, and T. Falola (eds.), *Handbook of Islam in Africa* (London, forthcoming). Rudolph Ware is currently working on a translation of this work; personal communication, 6 May 2019.

in the region since the spread of Islam. However, very little work has been conducted on the topic recently, with the exception of the late Lamin Sanneh's *Beyond Jihad*, in which the author revisits much of his earlier research on West African clericalism.¹⁶ Local scholars are also examined in the early chapters of Rudolph Ware's *The Walking Qur'an* and Zachary V. Wright's *Living Knowledge in West African Islam*.¹⁷ Why have such local scholars, who occupied such an important role in the fabric of medieval West African empires, not attracted more attention in recent years? I argue here that the historical experiences of these clerical communities — and more generally of West African Muslims during the Middle Ages, and in fact until the nineteenth century — have been silenced by the resilience of the old theory on the 'Islamization' of West Africa first introduced by Spencer J. Trimingham and modified by Humphrey J. Fisher and Nehemia Levtzion.¹⁸ This theory, as synthesized by Robert Launay, is based on the assumption that there are

three stages of Islamization: 'quarantine', where the presence of minority Muslim communities is tolerated, but these communities remain spatially and socially distinct from the majority; 'mixing', where rulers declare themselves to be Muslims, but where religious practices are a syncretic amalgam of Islam and of traditional African religions; and finally 'reform' in an attempt to purge Islam of such supposedly syncretic accretions.¹⁹

This model pushes the observer to assume that in the Middle Ages most Muslim communities in West Africa were composed of foreigners. For instance, nowhere in the eleventh-century *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* (The Book of Routes and Realms) by the Andalusian al-Bakrī (d. 1094) is there any reference that Muslims in the empire of Ghana were foreigners. On the contrary, the juxtaposition in al-Bakrī's text is not between Muslims and the indigenous people of the empire, but between those who had converted to Islam and those who followed the king's religion, indicating, as Ware punctually explains, 'that there were people of Ghana among the Muslims'.²⁰ Yet in recent literature it is still possible to read the assertion, expressed without any doubt, that during the tenth and eleventh century the inhabitants of Ghana living in Awdaghust 'were not Muslims' or that Mansa Mūsà in fourteenth-century Mali had to start a process of indigenizing Islam in order to 'redirect religious power and influence from the expatriate authorities'.²¹

16 L. Sanneh, *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam* (New York, 2016).

17 R. Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014), 77–110; Z. Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community of Ibrahim Niassé* (Leiden, 2015), 32–76.

18 J. Trimingham, *Islam in West Africa* (Oxford, 1959); N. Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (London, 1973); H. Fisher, 'Conversion reconsidered: some historical aspects of religious conversion in Black Africa', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 43:1 (1973), 27–40; H. Fisher, 'The juggernaut's apologia: conversion to Islam in Black Africa', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 55:2 (1985), 153–73; Sanneh, *Beyond Jihad*, 2. Several scholars have recently pointed to the lasting influence in the field of this theory; see B. Hall, 'Arguing for sovereignty in Songhay', *Afriques*, 4 (2013), 7–8; R. Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology* (Bloomington, 2013), 27; B. Peterson, *Islamization from Below: The Making of Muslim Communities in Rural French Sudan, 1880–1960* (New Haven, 2011), 8; and D. Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (Cambridge, 2011), 28.

19 R. Launay, *Beyond the Stream: Islam and Society in a West African Town* (Berkeley, 1992), 17.

20 Ware, *Walking Qur'an*, 86.

21 Gomez, *African Dominion*, 33, 212.

When local communities start interacting with ‘Islam’, embodied by foreign communities, the result is the development of syncretic practices that explicitly evoke sinister echoes of the concept of African Islam — or *Islam noir*, to say it in French colonial terminology, the discursive field in which this idea emerged.²² Although the paradigm of *Islam noir* is mainly outdated, its fixation on this alleged ‘syncretism’ is still visible in recent historiography. For example, Ware has critiqued works on spirit possession among West African Muslims as ‘carry[ing] out powerful subtexts of African resistance to supposedly alien Islamic cultural intrusions, resulting in an inordinate focus on syncretism’.²³ The persistent use of the concept of ‘nominal Muslims’, or cognate terms to refer to people who are Muslims but are deemed to perform religious practices and follow sets of beliefs that are other than ‘Islamic’, is another example of such an approach.²⁴ One scholar has even arrived to argue that the *lawḥ* — the wooden board extensively used as support for Qur’anic teaching — in fact ‘visualizes a dialogue between the religion of Muslim elites and popular forms of paganism’.²⁵

This model implies that the final stage of transmission of ‘Islam’, where allegedly ‘syncretic’ practices are purged among African societies, coincided with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Islamic revolutions, often simply described as *jihāds*, such as those led by Muslim scholars including ‘Uthmān b. Fūdī (d. 1818) and Aḥmad Lobbo (d. 1845), founders of the caliphates of Sokoto and Ḥamdallāhi respectively, and *al-ḥājj* ‘Umar (d. 1864). The most explicit apologia of this teleological approach comes from Levtzion, who states:

I could not . . . avoid making the distinction between different levels of practicing, and for that purpose have tried to follow the standards set by the ‘*ulamā*’ for what I call normative Islam. My perception of the process of Islamization is of a movement of individual and groups, departing from any form of traditional religion before its contact with Islam and following a line which ends with normative Islam. . . . It is impossible for us to weigh the quantitative terms what percentage of non-Islamic elements he carries with him in order to be able to place him exactly in the appropriate section on that line. But where we have enough evidence we may say that he has not yet gone

22 A full digression on the genesis of the idea that African Muslims practice a syncretic and degenerated version of Islam and a reflection on its persistence in contemporary discourses is outside the scope of this essay. It is sufficient to redirect the reader to the previous forum ‘Islam in sub-Saharan Africa’ and specifically to Triaud, ‘Giving a name to Islam’.

23 Ware, *Walking Qur’an*, 4.

24 A classic example of the use of ‘nominal’ Muslims is to be found in Levtzion’s description of West African rulers in the Middle Ages who are described as ‘neither real Muslims nor complete pagans’. Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, 190. Recent references to ‘nominal Muslims’ are to be found in Gomez’s portrayal of Sunjata Keita, see Gomez, *African Dominion*, 155; and in Mohammed B. Salau’s description of the rulers of the Hausa states before the establishment of the Sokoto state, see M. Salau, *Plantation Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate: A Historical and Comparative Study* (Rochester, 2018), 2.

25 A. Grib, ‘In-between the “elite” and the “pagan”: Qur’anic boards from West Africa’, *Manuscripta Orientalia*, 15:1 (2009), 22. On the importance and symbolic value of the wooden board in Islamic teaching, see A. Brigaglia, ‘*Fi lawḥin mahfūz*: towards a phenomenological analysis of the Quranic tablet’, in A. Brigaglia and M. Nobili (eds.) *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Manuscript Cultures in Muslim Sub-Saharan Africa* (Berlin, 2007), 69–102. The role of the Quranic tablet in Islamic education in sub-Saharan Africa is discussed in several contributions to R. Launay and R. Ware (eds.), *Islamic Education in Africa: Writing Boards and Blackboards* (Bloomington, 2016).

through the complete process. The conviction that the process should be completed is again not mine; it was manifested by the very occurrence of the *jihāds*.²⁶

This approach creates what Benjamin Soares has recently described as the ‘teleology’ of *jihād*: ‘Muslims somehow seem programmed to fight *jihad* as they put Islamic doctrine — apparently assumed to be relatively timeless and unchanging — into practice.’²⁷ A new, more nuanced approach to the study of African Muslim societies has developed in the past two decades that undermines this outdated but still influential model and allows an appreciation of ‘Islamization processes’ as occurring ‘within different temporalities and social contexts’.²⁸

TOWARD A DISCURSIVE APPROACH TO ISLAM IN THE WEST AFRICAN MIDDLE AGES

The ‘quarantine-mixing-reform/*jihād*’ model implies the existence of a reified, primordial, and ahistorical entity called ‘Islam’ (hence my use of quotation marks), which is assumed to have its natural dwelling in a loosely defined core, located (most of the time) in the Arabo-Persian world.²⁹ Against the belief in an ahistorical and essential ‘Islam’ and African syncretism, scholars today tend to approach ‘Islam’, in the words of Shahab Ahmed, as a ‘human and historical phenomenon’.³⁰ Indeed, as Launay brilliantly puts it, ‘Islam does not exist apart from the specific beliefs and practices of diverse individuals in particular communities at precise moments in historical time.’³¹ To make sense of the multiplicity of historical experiences of people who considered themselves Muslims, scholars of Muslim societies have started employing a discursive approach to their subject.

Islam as a ‘discursive tradition’ is a concept first employed by anthropologist Talal Asad.³² Borrowing from Alasdair MacIntyre the concept of ‘tradition’ and that of ‘discourse’ from Michel Foucault, Asad argues that:

A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a *past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a *future* (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a *present* (how it is linked to other practices, institutions and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses

26 N. Levtzion, ‘Patterns of Islamization in West Africa’, in D. McCall and N. Bennet (eds.), *Aspects of West African Islam* (Boston, 1971), 39.

27 B. Soares, ‘Historiography of Islam in West Africa’, 33.

28 Peterson, *Islamization from Below*, 3.

29 J. O. Voll, ‘Pensée 3: reconceptualizing the “regions” in “area studies”’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41:2 (2009), 196; Reese, ‘Islam in Africa’, 18.

30 S. Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, 2016), 5.

31 Launay, *Beyond the Stream*, 6.

32 T. Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC, 1986). For a discussion on Asad’s approach, see O. Anjum, ‘Islam as a discursive tradition: Talal Asad and his interlocutors’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 27:3 (2007), 656–72.

itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the past.³³

This ‘discursivity’, however, is not limited to textuality. It includes, quoting Scott S. Reese, ‘the very fabric of the cosmos and an ontology of creation’ as well as what Ware terms ‘a web of fully embodied encounters’.³⁴ This theorization is effectively explained by Roman Loimeier, who argues that:

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 Quran, the compilations of the sunna of the Prophet, as well as a large number of legal and theological texts. . . . This canon has always been interpreted and reinterpreted.³⁵

This dialogical process of interpretation and reinterpretation, as Reese remarks, is ‘dialogical — informed by the core texts but also locally produced — and situational — deployed as a response to local spiritual and social contexts’.³⁶

The discursive approach has benefitted the study of African Muslim societies immensely, as testified by a large scholarship on the topic published in the past two decades.³⁷ It has debunked the idea that African Muslim societies practiced a *sui generis* form of religion from a disconnected, remote, and marginal corner of the Islamic ecumene, leading scholars to abandon equations according to which ‘African religious culture[s] + Islam = syncretism’, while ‘Arab religious culture + Islam = Islam’.³⁸ Recentring African Muslims has, however, occurred mainly with studies regarding the present. Scholars have yet to benefit from this theoretical shift in regard to the West African Middle Ages.

As pointed out by Sanneh, the study of medieval African Muslim societies is still dominated by the transmission paradigm: ‘Many historical studies of religious conversion focus heavily on transmission in this external sense [i.e. an essentially alien and ahistorical “Islam” imported to West Africa by foreigners], reducing conversion to a mechanical process that overlooks the role of clerics in adapting Islam in their own societies.’³⁹ Putting to rest this paradigm, Moraes Farias posits that ‘[t]o describe this [process] as “the penetration of Islam” into the Sahel and South Sahara is a misinterpretation. It attributes a passive stance to the inhabitants of the two regions and overlooks their own historical agency in the appropriation of Islamic culture.’⁴⁰ As a direct consequence of the discursive turn, a renewed interest in the role of local communities, and especially of scholars, as those ‘*thinking* subjects’ — and I would add, borrowing from Ovamir Anum, also as *acting*

33 Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14. Italics in original.

34 S. Reese, *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839–1937* (Edinburgh, 2018), 9; Ware, *Walking Qur’an*, 77.

35 Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa*, 19.

36 Reese, ‘Islam in Africa’, 23.

37 S. Reese (ed.), *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa* (Leiden, 2004). Reese’s book is a manifesto for this new approach to the study of African Muslim societies.

38 Ware, *Walking Qur’an*, 22.

39 Sanneh, *Beyond Jihad*, 2.

40 P. F. de Moraes Farias, ‘Islam in the West African Sahel’, in LaGamma, *Sahel*, 111.

subjects — who reactualize the Islamic tradition will finally restore such agency to West African Muslims.⁴¹

BACK TO THE 'ORIGINS OF CLERICALISM'

Sources are scarce but explicit in pointing to the early emergence of clericalism in West Africa, starting from the eleventh century.⁴² For instance, the abovementioned al-Bakrī records that, at the court of Ghana '[t]he king's interpreters, the official in charge of his treasury and the majority of his ministers are Muslims', nowhere making reference to them being foreigners.⁴³ In the twelfth century another Andalusian, Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī (d. 1169–70), commented in his *Tuhfat al-albāb wa-nukhbat al-i'jāb* (The Gift from the Heart and Selection of Marvelous Things) that the people of the empire of Ghāna 'possess[ed] intelligence and understanding, and they [went] on the Pilgrimage to Mecca'.⁴⁴ If this reference only hints at clericalism and Islamic knowledge, surely the remarks of al-Sharīsī (d. 1222), Andalusian himself, on the famous *Maqāmāt* or Assemblies of al-Ḥarīrī (d. 1122) were more explicit. As al-Ḥarīrī rhymes the name of Farghāna (in today's Uzbekistan) with that of Ghana, which might have not been familiar to a general audience, al-Sharīsī explains to his reader what this latter place is and comments: 'Ghāna is the town of the kingdom of the Sūdān. Islam has spread among its inhabitants and there are schools there.'⁴⁵

Stronger evidence is available to make the case for the existence of distinctive clerical lineages at the time of the empire of Mali. Located in the southwestern part of the Middle Niger were two renowned centers of Islamic learning: Zāgha (modern day Dia, Mali) and Kābara (near Diarafabé, Mali). These two towns are mentioned by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1369) in the fourteenth century, and the inhabitants of the former are described as 'old in Islam'.⁴⁶ Dia and Kābara were centers for the dispersion of scholars that marked the spread of Islamic literate traditions in West Africa. This diaspora seems to have been prompted by trade but also by the abundance of scholars produced in these centers of learning as '[c]lerical families tended to produce far more religious scholars than one particular area could possibly require, and the mark of the social maturity of a scholar was

41 As Anjum writes: 'Rather than the "thick descriptions" of theatrical subjects who simply "behave" in accordance with the roles determined for them by either their material structure or culture, it is the arguments and discourses of the *thinking* subjects with their specific styles of reasoning couched in their historical and material context that become the focus of this analysis.' Anjum, 'Islam as a discursive tradition', 662. Italics in original.

42 The title of this section makes explicit reference to the classic study on the topic published in this journal by L. Sanneh, 'The origins of clericalism in West African Islam', *The Journal of African History*, 17:1 (1976), 49–72.

43 N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins (eds.), *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History before 1500* (Cambridge, 1981), 80. Nowhere is there any indication that these clerics were foreigners; see Ware, *Walking Qur'an*, 86.

44 Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 133.

45 *Ibid.* 153.

46 *Ibid.* 287. Another location, Zāgharī, most likely also located in the Middle Niger but north of Dia and Kābara, is mentioned by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa as inhabited by Ibādī Muslims. No further evidence is available on this center.

opening his own school [elsewhere].⁴⁷ Therefore, the increase of Muslim communities in West Africa can be also seen as the result of a scholarly diaspora emanating from earlier centers to new ones.

That the diaspora of the Diakhanke, initiated by *al-hājj* Sālim Suware sometime between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, emerged from Dia and spread from the inner Niger River delta westward to Senegambia, southward along the Upper Niger in the direction of the forest of today's Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, and eastward toward Hausaland is well documented. Sanneh's *Beyond Jihād* is its latest and most complete reconstruction.⁴⁸ Less is known about the scholarly diaspora from Kābara. However, this town seems to have been an important center of clericalism in the Middle Niger whose impact on the development of a local tradition of Islamic learning is encapsulated in the seventeenth-century *Tārīkh al-sūdān*'s claims that, along with the abovementioned Muḥammad al-Kābarī, more than thirty scholars from the town were buried in the cemetery of Timbuktu.⁴⁹

Another early clerical community that emerged at the time of the empire of Mali has escaped the attention of scholars: the 'tribe' (*qabīla*) of Quma. According to Ibn al-Mukhtār, at the time of Mansa Mūsā, the *qāḍī* of Mali — locally referred to at the time as *anfār* — could only be selected from among the Quma.⁵⁰ One of them who lived in the mid-seventeenth century, Muḥammad Quma, is cited several times by Ibn al-Mukhtār as 'knowledgeable in the stories of the ancients'.⁵¹

Compared to Mali, the landscape of the Songhay Empire is much better documented by the Timbuktu chronicles and also more complex due to the emergence of clerical lineages of Saharan origins, such as the Aqīts and the Anda Agh-Muḥammad families.⁵² However, the Middle Niger still occupies a prominent place in the intellectual history of the area, as it is home to two major clerical lineages. The first is the people of Mori Koyra, today associated with a town by the same name located near Diré.⁵³ The people of Mori Koyra,

47 Ware, *Walking Qur'an*, 84.

48 Ivor Wilks is another scholar who substantially contributed to the study of the Diakhanke diaspora. Of his vast scholarly production on the topic, see I. Wilks, 'The Juula and the expansion of Islam into the forest', in N. Levtzion and R. Pouwels (eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens, 2000), 93–115; and the autobiographical article, I. Wilks, 'Al-Hajj Salim Suware and the Suwaris: a search for sources', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 13 (2011), 1–79. Concerning the dates of *al-hājj* Sālim Suware, Wilks and Sanneh substantially disagree.

49 Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 69.

50 Houdas and Delafosse, *Tarikh el-fettach*, 60. On the chronicle of Ibn al-Mukhtār, see note 5 above.

51 *Ibid.* 56.

52 These families are extensively discussed in E. Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 1983).

53 Alternatively, Houdas and Delafosse suggest that Mori Koyra might be located near Gao; see Houdas and Delafosse, *Tarikh el-fettach*, 15n5. Gomez pays special attention to this lineage, see Gomez, *African Dominion*, 212–15, 258–63. However, the bulk of the information on this clerical lineage also comes from the work of Ibn al-Mukhtār and as such is available to scholars only in a problematic fashion. For example, the scholar Šāliḥ Jawara figures prominently in Gomez's work; Gomez, *African Dominion*, 202, 229–36, 260, 277, 286–8, 388. However, Šāliḥ Jawara is mainly a nineteenth-century invention. Apart from scanty information contained in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, he only appears in the chronicle of Ibn al-Mukhtār in one instance, as a scholar who died at the time of *Askiya* Muḥammad. Houdas and Delafosse, *Tarikh el-fettach*, 154.

descendants from one Mori Hawgāru who most likely lived in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, were close to the *askiyā* dynasty.⁵⁴ The second was the Baghayogho, a Jula family from Djenné who were descendants of Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd Baghayogho (d. 1594).⁵⁵ The Baghayogho maintained not only connections with their hometown in the inner Niger delta, where some of their members occupied the position of *qāḍī*, but also with Timbuktu, which had become the epicenter of West African Islamic scholarship by the mid-fifteenth-century and where the celebrated Aḥmad Bāba (d. 1627) studied under one Baghayogho.

The people of Dia and Kābara, the Quma lineage, the descendent of Mori Hawgāru, and the Baghayogho represent the early clerical communities known in West Africa from which later and better known traditions, such as that in Timbuktu, have benefitted.⁵⁶ I have elsewhere defined this phenomenon as the ‘southern factor’ in the history of clericalism and Islamic learning in West Africa in order to underline that such tradition first developed in the inner Niger delta and only later at the intersection between the Sahara and the Sahel.⁵⁷ Scholars from among these clerical communities surely deserve closer scrutiny, starting with the analysis of their writings.⁵⁸ However, I also argue that a focus on these communities of Muslim scholars reveals important historical dynamics of the West African empires in the Middle Ages and, ultimately, can shed new light on African pre-colonial history at large.

CONCLUSION: MUSLIM CLERICAL COMMUNITIES AND WEST AFRICAN MEDIEVAL EMPIRES

The role of clerical communities in the West African medieval empires has been the subject of several historical studies.⁵⁹ These studies framed the topic as the relationship between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ authorities, to use the words of John O. Hunwick.⁶⁰ Exemplary

54 The renowned emperor of Songhay *Askīyā* Muḥammad (d. 1538) even issued a chart of privilege to the descendants of Mori Hawgāro. J. Hunwick, ‘Studies in the *Ta’riḫ al-Fattāsh*, II: an alleged charter of privilege issued by *Askīyā* al-Ḥājj Muḥammad to the descendants of Mori Hawgāro’, *Sudanic Africa*, 3 (1992), 133–4.

55 On the Baghayogho, see J. Hunwick, ‘A contribution to the study of Islamic teaching traditions in West Africa: the career of Muhammad Baghayogho, 930/1523–4–1002/1594’, *Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara*, 4 (1990), 149–63; and A. Massing, ‘Baghayogho: a Soninke Muslim diaspora in the Mande world’, *Cahiers d’études Africaines*, 44:176 (2004), 887–922.

56 Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, lvii; Gomez, *African Dominion*, 212.

57 M. Nobili, ‘The written word: Islamic literacy and Arabic manuscripts in West Africa’, in Berzock, *Caravans of Gold*, 248.

58 For instance, none of the more than twenty works that are ascribed to members of the Baghayogho family dating back to the Songhay’s period have been studied so far; on these works see Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, 31–5.

59 Most notably, L. Kaba, ‘The pen, the sword, and the crown: Islam and revolution in Songhay reconsidered, 1464–1493’, *The Journal of African History*, 25:3 (1984), 241–56; J. Hunwick, *Shari’a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghīlī to the Questions of Askia al-Ḥājj Muḥammad* (London, 1985); C. Blum and H. J. Fisher, ‘Love for three oranges, or the *Askīyā*’s dilemma: the *Askīyā*, al-Maghīlī and Timbuktu, c. 1500 A.D.’, *The Journal of African History*, 34:1 (1993), 65–91; and Hall, ‘Arguing for sovereignty’.

60 I borrow from the historiography in that I am employing the dichotomy ‘religious vs. secular’, conscious of the anachronistic use of the concept of the ‘secular’, which is ‘the product of a unique post-Reformation history’.

of this approach was the academic diatribe between Hunwick and Gomez on the relations between Timbuktu (the foremost city of scholars) and Gao (the capital city) at the time of the Songhay Empire.⁶¹ At stake in this debate was the dependence or independence of the Muslim scholars of Timbuktu, i.e. the ‘religious’ authorities, and the Songhay rulers, the repository of ‘secular’ power. Gomez stressed the control exercised by the capital Gao over the wealthy trading center of Timbuktu by arguing that the need to generate revenues was the main objective of the Songhay Empire — their success in this endeavor suggests an effective control of the rulers over Timbuktu.⁶² Hunwick advanced a more nuanced approach that recognized the power of the city’s scholars to mitigate the centralized control of Gao and even to influence the decisions that were taken in the capital.⁶³

This scholarship has tremendously improved our knowledge of the medieval empire, but framing the relationship between Muslim clerical communities and rulers exclusively in terms of ‘religious’ versus ‘secular’ authority, or dependence versus independence, is partially misleading. I argue that this relationship must be understood in terms of the separation of spheres of authority and embodiment. As Wright points out, ‘Muslim clerical communities did not enter an empty West African social space.’⁶⁴ The separation of Muslim scholars from political power was the result of the clerics’ incorporation into local social structure characterized by the presence of endogamous groups, sometimes referred to as ‘castes’.⁶⁵ Tal Tamari points out that West African ‘castes form one of three social categories. The others are the “nobles” or “freeborn”, and the slaves.’⁶⁶ Muslim clerical communities eventually became one of these specialist groups, but with the capacity to incorporate new disciples within their ranks.⁶⁷ With other endogamous groups, however, clerics shared their exclusion from political power. As Tamari underlines, ‘[c]aste persons [we]re not allowed to exercise political power (except indirectly, as advisors to . . . nobles)’ — as in the case of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay.⁶⁸ As Ware points out, ‘the difference between “casted” people (griots, blacksmiths, leatherworkers, and so on) and [the] wellborn or nobles was understood to be an embodied distinction.’⁶⁹ Likewise, different spheres of authority were embodied in different groups, in a way that is not very different from the case of Saharan societies, divided between ‘scholarly lineages’ (*Zwāya* among the Arabs and *Ineslemen* among the Tuareg) and their warrior

T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), 28. For a more complete discussion on the applicability of these terms to precolonial Islamic West Africa, see Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph, and Renewer of the Faith*, 16–19.

61 M. Gomez, ‘Timbuktu under imperial Songhay: a reconsideration of autonomy’, *The Journal of African History*, 31:1 (1990), 5–24; J. Hunwick, ‘Secular power and religious authority in Muslim society: the case of Songhay’, *The Journal of African History*, 37:2 (1996), 175–94.

62 Gomez, ‘Timbuktu under imperial Songhay’, 24.

63 Hunwick, ‘Secular power and religious authority’, 193.

64 Wright, *Living Knowledge*, 64.

65 See Tamari’s excellent study on the topic. T. Tamari, *Les castes de l’Afrique occidentale: Artisans et musiciens endogames* (Nanterre, France, 1998).

66 T. Tamari, ‘The development of caste systems in West Africa’, *The Journal of African History*, 32:2 (1991), 223.

67 Ware, *Walking Qur’an*, 83.

68 Tamari, ‘Development of caste systems’, 237.

69 Ware, *Walking Qur’an*, 82.

counterparts.⁷⁰ In other words, clerical communities came to embody, in the eyes of Muslims and many non-Muslims alike, religious (Islamic) authority, while political power was in the hands of the Sisse and the Keita lineages in the case of Ghana and Mali or of the *sonni* and *askiyà* dynasties of Songhay.

Sanneh captures the normative position of West African clerical communities by stating that '[t]he clerics abjured political office for themselves and required rulers to recognize this clerical neutrality.'⁷¹ Their main activity was teaching and providing other religious services, along with farming and trading that allowed members of such communities to devote themselves to learning and scholarship. However this 'political neutrality' was far from being devoid of power. As Mahir Saul argues, the political situation of the West African savannah 'strains our imagination and our analytical vocabulary'.⁷² The social space inhabited by Muslim clerical communities was one of 'heterarchy', meaning 'the relations of elements [of complex society] to one another when they are unranked or when they possess the potential of being ranked in a number of different ways'.⁷³ In this situation 'Muslims [i.e. Muslim clerics] were generally neither rulers nor ruled: they constituted autonomous nuclei, perceived by others primarily as technical specialists, ready to offer their services, and valued and respected for that reason.'⁷⁴

They represented one of the 'multiple nodes of power' characteristic of the West African socio-political landscape.⁷⁵ The region was characterized by 'the coexistence of various social units, which are not of the same nature, but among which a strict equivalence is recognized — a big man's house here, a village confederation there, further up a man-of-arms of great renown living behind his fortified walls with his slave army, influential cleric-scholars, merchants turned military entrepreneurs'.⁷⁶ To this I would add, with Roderick J. McIntosh, 'kin groups, territorial units, voluntary or craft "sodalities," age-groups, occupational corporations, religious sects, or even individuals invoking older or reinvented sources of power such as witchcraft or other less freighted forms of occult authority'.⁷⁷ As this contribution has demonstrated, new research on early Muslim clerical communities will enrich our understanding of West African Islamic history, as well as our conceptualization of the great medieval empires.

By extension, this type of research into the early history of Islamic West Africa can also serve a larger audience of scholars, as the complex relationship between religious specialists and rulers is a common theme in African precolonial history in general, as Susan K. McIntosh highlights in her influential *Beyond Chiefdoms*.⁷⁸ Lastly, as communities of

70 See C. Stewart, 'Southern Saharan scholarship and the *Bilad al-Sudan*', *The Journal of African History*, 17:1 (1976), 73–93.

71 Sanneh, *Beyond Jihad*, 8.

72 M. Saul, 'Islam and West African anthropology', *Africa Today*, 53:1 (2006), 20.

73 C. Crumley, 'Heterarchy and the analysis of complex society', in R. Ehrenreich, C. Crumley, and J. Levy (eds.), *Heterarchy and the Analysis of Complex Societies* (Washington, DC, 1995); cited in R. J. McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger* (Malden, MA, 1998), 9n11.

74 Saul, 'Islam and West African anthropology', 20.

75 *Ibid.*

76 *Ibid.* 21.

77 McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger*, 7.

78 S. McIntosh (ed.), *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge, 2005), 15.

religious Muslim specialists have been conceptualized and described as ‘lineages’, what was the role of women in these groups? A look into the scholarship reveals here another void, i.e. the study of Muslim women as both commoners and scholars in the precolonial history of West Africa. This lack of scholarship is in sharp contrast to the emerging gendered approach to the study of contemporary Muslim communities in the region examined in the works of Ousseina D. Alidou, Barbara Cooper, Joseph Hill, and Adeline Masquelier.⁷⁹ Does the available evidence allow for similar studies of earlier times? Only a deeper engagement with the archive will answer this and several other questions on the social dynamics of Muslim West Africa in the Middle Ages. Thus, to paraphrase Reid’s quotation which opened this contribution, there is certainly ample potential for new research in precolonial West African history.

79 O. Alidou, *Engaging Modernity: Muslim Women and the Politics of Agency in Postcolonial Niger* (Madison, 2005); B. Cooper, *Marriage in Maradi: Gender and Culture in a Hausa Society in Niger, 1900–1989* (Portsmouth, NH, 1997); J. Hill, *Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal* (Toronto, 2018); A. Masquelier, *Women and Islamic Revival in a West African Town* (Bloomington, IN, 2009).