The southern border of The Gambia closely coincides with one of the major transition zones between the Sahelian, predominantly Muslim societies and the societies of the coastal forests of West Africa where Christianity and religious traditions of local origin have had more influence. The community of Kartong is located astride this political and religious frontier. As one enters town by road—there is but one entrance, as the road beyond town only leads to the unbridged river which marks the international boundary between The Gambia and Senegal—just a half dozen compounds into town one comes upon the main mosque on the left side of the road: concrete block construction with a whitewash skin, wooden shutters closed between prayer times, corrugated zinc sheets as roofing, loud speakers mounted on the top of modest minarets to broadcast the call to prayer. Continuing on through town, the road runs past the Catholic church made of similar materials, except that metal shutters cover glass pane windows and a bell replaces the loudspeaker.

These landmark structures located along the central axis of town proclaim one of the most important social dynamics of the community: despite the fact that this town of 2,500 people has residents from ten different ethnic groups, the Muslim–Christian divide is perhaps the most salient in daily life (Fig. 2.1).

As sacred landmarks, the main mosque and the Catholic church have all the appearances of durability, fixity, and stasis. This chapter argues, however, for a view that emphasizes the built environment as an accretion of social interactions, of tensions between groups, of compromises and accommodations. It is the tools and methodologies of cultural anthropology, rather than architectural history, that provide here the basis for analyzing the sacred sites, non-material structures, and unenclosed spaces within which the peoples of Kartong establish, construct, test, and perform their religious and ethnic identities. In this approach, the histories of places are embedded in today's social interactions rather than documentary evidence or the accretion of structural elements and technologies identified in the buildings themselves. This type of analysis is particularly useful in African contexts where the documentary record may be sparse, but it should be applicable more generally as a way of moving beyond concerns with refining the limits of periodization and defining trajectories of influence.1 Furthermore, it directs our attention away from single, discrete buildings and toward a consideration of landscapes of built and occupied places since people do not conduct their lives within

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1 This is not to say that a documentary history of African architecture is not possible. Within this sub-region alone, Peter Mark has examined at length the evolving practice of 'Portuguese' houses along the Senegambian coast (Peter Mark, 'Portuguese' Style and Luso-African Identity: Precolonial Senegambia, Sixteenth–Nineteenth Centuries [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002]); and Mark Hinchman has unearthed evidence from Goreé Island that sheds valuable light into the social processes of this entrepot of the slave trade (Mark Hinchman, “House and Household on Goreé, Senegal, 1758–1837.” Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 65 no. 2 (2006): 166–187). However, there are many architectural forms and practices for which documentary evidence is not available but whose study would be highly rewarding.
isolated structures but move and interact with a variety of places and spaces.²

Viewing buildings in the light of their current use and social meaning shows that they are, in fact, best seen as performances, ongoing processes of coming-into-being. Sacred structures are not time-bound and temporally defined by their completion at some point in the past, but gain their meaning through their regular use, maintenance, defense, or neglect.³ This processual perspective also applies to sites less obviously religious but nonetheless sacred, elements of a built environment that do not proclaim their status but are without doubt shaped by their denizens’ ethical sensibilities, codes of propriety, and cosmologies.⁴

² This sense of a social landscape is developed most notably by David William Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989).

³ Mark Hinchman comments directly on this point noting that “one of Western architecture’s greatest tropes, the permanence of buildings,… persists though all structures are vulnerable to the forces of nature and gravity, slowly decaying and requiring maintenance” (2006: 173). This finds particular expression with regard to European views of African architecture and the obsession with the distinction between construction en dur—‘hard’ structures of stone or masonry—as opposed to construction with more organic materials. (Mark Hinchman, “House and Household on Goreé, Senegal”).

⁴ Processualism in the field of cultural anthropology focuses on the processes of social (re)production, emphasizing the dynamic aspects through which the actions