
This monograph offers an engaging reconstruction of the adoption and practice of Islam among villagers in southeastern Tanzania from the end of the nineteenth century to the present, focusing on “relationships between the coast and the countryside from the rural end” (9). The author accounts for villagers’ conversion to Islam by tracing processes of simultaneous forms of religious change, the transmission and acquisition of knowledge, and the adoption of new identities and changing social relations in a post-abolitionary context. Situating these processes within a changing political and economic framework, she provides a historical background to Islamic practices, reform movements, education, gender relations, and Muslims’ relations to political authorities in present times. With individual chapters discussing these themes partly chronologically and partly thematically, this monograph appeals to a diverse, interdisciplinary audience: those interested in a regional history of southeastern Tanzania and in understanding processes of Islamization and social relations in Muslim societies more generally, and those trying to gain insight into the interaction between the interior and the East African coast within the context of wider Indian Ocean networks.

The author has drawn on a wide range of sources to offer an account which focuses on local actors within a trans-local framework. She conducted hundreds of interviews over a period of seven years to generate answers to her main research questions, such as how villagers in southeastern Tanzania adopted Islam during the first half of the twentieth century, and which individual needs they pursued by converting or adding new religious elements to existing ones. Her focus on oral history, which allows her to suggest how the actors experienced the adoption of Islam and how their reasons and choices of incorporating Islam changed during the twentieth century, is convincingly complemented by governmental and missionary records, and a wide range of secondary sources.

Becker’s primary sources lead her to highlight the local relevance of Islam to maintaining and improving social relations. She argues that when individuals adopted new religious forms, they bargained for creating new power constellations between genders and generations, whereby she stresses the actors’ conscious decisions about which elements and forms
of Islam to adopt. Throughout the volume, the author highlights the compatibility of maintaining established practices and introducing religious change. The realms of healing and reconciliation, in which Islamic forms complemented existing practices rather than radically replaced them, constitute examples of historical continuity, whereas the construction of Quranic schools and mosques created new foci of social life, representing a break from precolonial practice (82).

The author starts her account by pointing to the previously ignored paradox that in her region of study, conversion to Islam increased during the initially German and then British colonial period, and thus after the peak of Omani influence from Zanzibar and the collapse of long-distance trade (4–5). She explains this peculiarity by pointing to two interacting processes: the adoption of Islam by non-Muslims in rural areas and the spread of Sufi orders in and their focus on urban areas which already featured a Muslim population (5–6). Drawing on her vast body of interviews, she argues that the adaptability or “polyvalence” of Islam enabled its continuous appeal to villagers in southeastern Tanzania. She demonstrates that after 1920 exclusive, hierarchical forms of Islam, tied to slavery and the long-distance trade, shifted to inclusive, egalitarian ones. In the interwar period, the appeal of Islam changed from enabling struggle for citizenship and socioeconomic participation to becoming a “ritual and intellectual experiment” (83), broadening one’s worldview. Facilitated by shifting power relations during colonial rule, the actors had changed by the 1930s, when rural Muslims were “ordinary villagers rather than big men” (68). She thus provides new evidence for the argument developed by Jonathon Glassman in his study on the Mrima coast that changing power relations (initiated, for instance, by the collapse of the long-distance trade and colonial rule) could be redressed by changing religious practices, such as by incorporating Islamic ones.

Given the ambitious chronological and thematic scope of this monograph, the conclusion offers a welcome reminder of some of the main themes and arguments developed by the author: the relationship between religious ritual and negotiations of social relations; the dichotomy between the knowledgeable and the ignorant manifest in Islamic thought; gender and intergenerational relations; the distribution of religious affiliations; town-countryside relations and by extension local and global Islam; Islamic modernity and the Ansar Sunna, as well as Islamic radicalism. On a conceptual level, Becker contributes to the increasingly prolific literature on modernity in Africa. Her work shows that in the 1930s the appeal of the