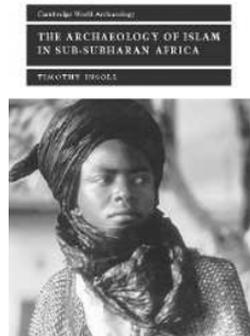

BOOK REVIEW



The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa. By *Timothy Insoll*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 486 pp., 125 illustrations. ISBN 0-521-65702-4 (paperback), 0-521-65171-9 (hardback). Price £ 27.00 (paperback), £ 70.00 (hardback).

Archaeological and Historical Views of African Islam

The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa is a wide-ranging, continent-wide review dealing with the archaeological manifestations of Islam in their myriad of expressions. Aside from an introductory chapter and a brief conclusion, the organization of the book is primarily regional, successively moving through Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa to the Nilotic Sudan, the East African Coast, the Western Sahel, the Central Sudan, the West African Sudan and, finally, the African interior. Insoll's objective is to explore the distinctive character of Islam in Africa and to "...provide an introduction to the richness and diversity of Islamic material culture in sub-Saharan Africa in all its many forms, from mosques and tombs through to trade goods" (p. 1). In actuality, the book is wider in scope, the introductory material of the individual chapters including discussions of geographical and climatic background, as well as the regional cultural histories of the various areas considered. This coverage, combined with an assessable writing style and useful illustrations, make the work one of the best continent-wide surveys available on African archaeology, which should deservedly find space on the bookshelves of all Africanist archaeologists.

Insoll advocates a multi-source approach, drawing on documentary sources and oral traditions, as well as archaeological data (pp. 3-4). His own work has demonstrated the utility of holding these various sources in tension. Archaeological data can provide a useful assessment of documentary sources and the models presented by historians. The interpretation of Niani, the erstwhile capital of ancient Mali located in what is

now the Republic of Guinea, is examined in terms of its fit with Ibn Battuta's oft quoted description of the capital of Mali (pp. 320-324). The contesting interpretations of the documentary source material and the potential of archaeology to investigate other possible candidates such as Dakajalan in the modern Republic of Mali (e.g. CONRAD 1994) highlight the problems inherent in document-driven archaeology and the methodological potential of the multisource approach Insoll advocates. As Insoll concludes, the data from Niani are significant regardless of whether or not this is the capital of Mansa Musa.

Given the geographical, temporal and cultural scope of the phenomena discussed, some material is necessarily only treated in brief. The discussion of the social dynamics of conversion, primarily examined in the opening chapter, is six and a half pages long. Additional sites, finds or studies might always be incorporated given unlimited space. For example, in terms of the initial spread of Islam in West Africa, reference might have been made to the excavations at *Qsar-es-Seghir*, Morocco (e.g. REDMAN 1983, 1986). While not in sub-Saharan Africa, the site is one of the most thoroughly excavated Islamic sites on the continent. Many of the objects represented — the architecture, features and extensive trade materials, as well as the sociocultural phenomena and aspects of Islamic expansion — provide some useful parallels with other areas. The synthesis undertaken by Insoll in the regional chapters is somewhat limited and largely cultural historical in perspective, focusing on what happened when and the relevant Islamic archaeological features present. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that Islam has received limited attention from an archaeo-

logical standpoint. It is, in fact, also fair to say that archaeological data in general is fragmentary and incomplete for many of the areas and time periods considered. The volume goes a long way to redress these lacunae.

The most unsatisfying aspect of this volume is its lack of engagement with some of the historical literature that would provide a better context for the various archaeological materials presented and the sociocultural transformations of which they were part. While Insoll problematizes the methodological strengths and limitations of varying sources of archaeological, documentary and oral evidence, the discussions of the various regions often start with a framework provided by scant documentary sources and oral traditions that would be better treated as topics for archaeological evaluation rather than as givens.

In his opening overview, Insoll provides a brief assessment of the classic works by historians such as TRIMINGHAM (1968), LEWIS (1969), CUOQ (1975), and FROELICH (1962). As he observes, these works, now somewhat dated, do not incorporate archaeological data and, most importantly, principally view Islam as the source of external influence and innovation in an area perceived as peripheral to the Islamic world (pp. 8-9). These works are certainly in need of a fresh look. It is also true that Islamic expansion and trade have continued to be principally seen as a source of external stimuli. However, more recent treatments by historians, as well as some archaeologists, have offered much more dynamic views of the social processes incorporated in the spread of Islam and its intersection with African indigene. This move away from pan-continental syntheses to the study of more specific subject areas and regions (p. 10) is precisely the type of fine-grained analyses needed to evaluate the cultural contexts against which the archaeology of Islam is set.

Insoll's consideration of the spread of Islam in the West African Sudan and forest areas could have usefully referred to, and perhaps critiqued, George BROOKS 1993 volume *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630*, much of which deals with the spread of the islamized Mande in the Upper Guinea coast and hinterland, and the associated movement of secret societies, Mande governance, and other social institutions. BROOK'S synthesis affords a dynamic picture of the spread of Islam, including trade, proselytizing, and the evidence of the impor-

tance of jihad in conversion, particularly among the non-Islamic groups of the savanna margin. BROOKS presents a chronological framework for these developments that could benefit from archaeological assessment.

There are now fairly extensive historical and, to a lesser extent, archaeological data on the Islamic groups in the sudanic zone of West and Central Africa and their expansion and interaction with non-Islamic populations, including detailed, annotated translations of Arabic source material (e.g. ALMADA c.1594/1984; MORRISON 1982; KANE & ROBINSON 1984; LEVTZION 1985; ROBINSON 1985; BOULÈGUE 1987; LEVTZION & POWELS 2000). These data afford a more nuanced view of the expansion of Islam into West Africa and the myriad of forms represented. A case in point is Scott MACEACHERN'S (1993) archaeological study of Wandala-*Montagnard* interactions in eastern Cameroon. The acephalous, pagan *montagnards* occupy the mountainous Mandara massif of northern Cameroon, encircled by state-level, Islamic Wandala polities. Historically, the *montagnards* were raided for slaves by the Wangara and have historically been seen only as an undifferentiated mass, peripheral to the state. Yet, as MACEACHERN shows, this relationship is more complex than it seems at first. Rather than powerless receptors, the *montagnards* maintained their independence, manipulated some resources (such as iron), and intricately interconnected with the Wandala in a socioeconomic network. Viewed in this manner, the *montagnards* emerge as part of a wider system, not simply a marginalized periphery. Archaeologically, the material record and changing settlement patterns support *montagnard* claims that they formerly occupied portions of the plains now dominated by the Wandala, as well as the evidence of ongoing trade relations.

Similar comments concerning the social context of Islam and local populations can be made with regard to the other regions surveyed. In East Africa, the growing literature on the intersection of Islam and indigenous cultures of the Swahili coast (e.g. MIDDLETON 1992; ALLEN 1993; KUSIMBA 1999) could have been more fully referenced. The impressive monuments, tombs and accompanying artifacts found at the Arab-associated sites on the East African coast led to an early focus on the role of external Arab traders in the development of coastal trading enclaves and the emergence of Swahili culture (e.g. KIRKMAN 1954; CHITTICK 1974). Yet, the somewhat narrow scope of early work has been well recognized, and the indigenous reaction, the incorpo-