An Invisible Religion?
Anthropology's Avoidance of Islam in Africa

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A prominent French anthropologist once confessed to me that his mentors had warned him against studying Muslims in West Africa. Muslims, he was told, were just not 'authentic' enough; 'authenticity', by that time, had euphemistically replaced 'primitiveness' without effacing what Johannes Fabian (1983) has called the denial of coevalness. Such an omission is indeed a glaring one. There are now over 200,000,000 Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, a very sizeable proportion of the entire population, especially (but hardly exclusively) in West Africa. This Islamic presence is in no way a recent phenomenon, but rather represents over a millennium of history. As it happened, the very period during which anthropologists began systematic programmes of field research in Africa was a time of unparalleled Islamic expansion. Anthropologists' failure to come to terms with Islam in Africa (and, in large measure, with Christianity as well) was hardly an accidental omission but rather, as my colleague admitted, a very deliberate policy.

Arguably, there existed a tacit partition of African realities among academicians, with anthropologists appropriating the study of 'authentic' Africans with genuinely 'traditional' religions while the study of African Muslims, those whose pristine authenticity had apparently been violated, was left to historians if not to 'Orientalists'.

Paradoxically, the earliest French anthropologists were not nearly so reluctant to acknowledge the existence and importance of Muslims and of Islam. The first self-consciously ethnographic studies of African cultures (as distinct from descriptive passages in explorers' narratives) were conducted by a cadre of scholar-administrators in the
early twentieth century. As administrators, they were concerned with acquiring first-hand practical knowledge about the peoples over whom they were attempting to rule, including Muslims. Disciplinary boundaries were in any case still relatively fluid, and the contributions of these scholars bridged linguistics, history and geography as well as ethnography. Admittedly, the quality of the work was extremely variable, and many of the administrators were dilettantes at best; others, most notably Maurice Delafosse, cannot be so easily dismissed. Delafosse began his African career in southern Côte d’Ivoire in the last decade of the nineteenth century, among the Agni and the Baule, simultaneously attempting to suppress a Baule revolt while publishing on the language, history and social organisation of the region. After his transfer to the less restive north of the colony, he published the first (and unquestionably the best) colonial monograph on the Senufo in a journal edited by the noted anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep. Although these early ethnographic works contain relatively few references to Islam and to Muslims, Delafosse was in fact thoroughly trained in Arabic, studying the language at the École des Langues Orientales under Octave Houdas, whose daughter he married. Later, he collaborated with Houdas on the translation of the Tarikh el-Fattach, the Timbuktu cleric Mahmud Kati’s seventeenth-century chronicle of the Songhai empire. This first-hand knowledge of Islamic historical sources was a critical element of Delafosse’s magnum opus, Haut-Sénégal-Niger (1912), a three-volume survey of the geography, history and anthropology of what is now Mali. Nor was Delafosse the only administrator/anthropologist to concern himself with Muslim peoples. Charles Monteil, for example, published a detailed study of the famous Muslim trading city of Djenne in 1903, before publishing ethnographic monographs about the Khassonke and the Bambara.

However, the French administration was not prepared to have its Muslim policy dictated by the ethnographic preoccupations of district administrators. Prior experiences in Algeria, where Islam had very definitely served to mobilise resistance to colonial rule, left the French perennially suspicious of, if not always antipathetic to, Islam. The administration kept virtually all Muslim clerics under surveillance, keeping files which were synthesised by Delafosse’s contemporary, Paul Marty, in a series of detailed studies on Islam in different French West African colonies. These studies among others led to the formulation of the idea that there existed an Islam noir, a specifically
Africanised variety of Islam, a dilution of the 'pure' (and more dangerous) religion with traditional African beliefs and practices. However comforting this illusion may have been for French administrators who felt that they no longer had to fret about the Islamic peril, it had disastrous consequences for the anthropological study of Islam in French colonial Africa. Once 'African Islam' could be reduced to its component parts - Arab Islam and African 'fetishism' - then the study of Islam could properly be left to Orientalists, leaving to anthropologists the task of decoding more 'authentically' African beliefs and practices.

In any case, the kind of anthropology practised by Delafosse and his cohort was doomed in the long run, a victim of attacks from all sides. Colonial authorities were increasingly impatient with district administrators who spent too much time pursuing academic inquiries rather than implementing administrative policy. At the same time, the growing professionalisation of academia in the context of universities increasingly relegated scholar-administrators to the status of dilettantes whose first-hand knowledge of the terrain could not quite make up for inadequate theoretical training. The Dakar-Djibouti Mission (1931–3) under the leadership of Marcel Griaule marked the eclipse of the era of scholar-administrators and the triumph of academic anthropology under the aegis of Griaule himself.

The Dakar-Djibouti Mission was Griaule's first encounter with the Dogon, who were to become the subject of his life's work. Griaule's approach was characterised by the quest for esoteric initiatory knowledge. In his Conversations with Ogotonelli (1970, [1948]) he describes a series of 33 sessions during which a Dogon elder gradually unfolded a vast mytho-cosmological system encompassing the key features of their esoteric knowledge. Griaule's students, notably Germaine Dieterlen and Dominique Zahan, set themselves to discovering and describing comparable systems among the neighbouring Bambara. It must be stressed that this was a profoundly humanistic project, an attempt to demonstrate that African systems of thought were by no means primitive and illogical, but on the contrary highly systematic, elaborate and sophisticated. But for this very reason, it was essential to the project to depict these systems as authentically African, uncontaminated by either European or Islamic influences. As Amselle (1998: Chapter 7) has aptly pointed out, such a presentation erases the impact of centuries of interaction between African Muslims and their non-Islamic neighbours, to the extent that
it is extremely difficult (and, more important, probably quite pointless) to attempt to disengage Islamic from pre-Islamic features of West African cosmologies. For example, one of Griaule’s sessions with Ogomemelli details Dogon ideas about the constellations of the zodiac. However, the zodiac is by no means a self-evident intellectual construct; rather, it is a Mesopotamian invention which was clearly diffused to West Africa along Muslim trade routes. What is more, Griaule’s system not only ignored the deeper interaction between Dogon and Islamic thought, but also the more recent history of the Dogon. In fact, the Dogon were allies of the jihadi leader al-Hajj Umar in his campaign against another Islamic state, the Fulbe empire of Macina. While the Umarian state made few deliberate attempts to convert the Dogon, Islam (and Christianity as well) were making significant inroads among the ‘pristine’ Dogon by the time Griaule was conducting his field research.

Ultimately, the Griauleist project portrayed African cosmologies as pristine works of art, to be contemplated and admired by European audiences. It was also profoundly idealist. To the extent that the physical realities of everyday life entered into Griaule’s account, it was as reflections of an underlying mythical system. Weaving, blacksmithing and even farming were depicted as deeply symbolic forms of activities, paralleling aspects of the primeval act of creation.

Contemporary British approaches to anthropology in Africa were, not surprisingly, more down to earth. Structural-functionalism was concerned with examining the properties of societies as quasi-organic functioning wholes, whose unwritten rules were effectively maintained by the ebb and flow of the everyday actions of groups and individuals. From such a perspective, ‘tribes without rulers’ constituted a particularly important theoretical challenge, an occasion to demonstrate how social order could be maintained in the absence of central authority. Accordingly, British anthropologists tended to focus on small-scale societies and the central role of the application of kinship norms. Ancestor cults best exemplified the operation of the system in the religious domain. Such small-scale societies were often in close (though not always amicable) contact with Muslims; the Nuer and the Tallensi both come to mind in this regard, but they were not to any extent Islamised. This is not to say that their religious systems, like that of the Dogon, may not have been influenced in fundamental ways by Islamic concepts and practices. However, unlike the French anthropologists who were concerned with the authentic
Africanity of the religions they studied, their British colleagues focused on the way in which religious systems operated and tended to bracket questions of origin. In any case, even when British anthropologists undertook the analysis of African state systems, most of the societies they described were located in southern Africa, remote from Islamic influences: Tswana (Schapera), Zulu and Lozi (Gluckman), Swazi (Kuper), Bemba (Richards). In West Africa, the work of Meyer Fortes among the Ashanti was almost exclusively confined to the domain of kinship. But even M. G. Smith’s study of Government in Zazzau (1960) – an Islamic emirate – pays relatively scant attention to Islam (listed in the index as ‘Muhammadan religion’!).

This is not to say that all structural-functionalists were ignorant of, much less oblivious to Islam. Indeed, Evans-Pritchard’s The Sanusi of Cyrenaica (1949) is perhaps the first anthropological monograph to concern itself centrally, not only with Muslims but with Islam as a religion. Admittedly, the title itself hardly betrays this concern to anyone previously unfamiliar with the Sanusiyya. The uninformed might easily be beguiled into imagining that the Sanusi of Cyrenaica are just another ‘tribe’ like the Nuer of southern Sudan. Instead, as Evans-Pritchard admittedly points out in the first sentence of the book, the Sanusiyya is a Sufi brotherhood, an explicitly religious Islamic organisation. Even so, Evans-Pritchard’s primary analytical focus was more social-structural, and in particular political, than religious. First, he sought to demonstrate how the Sanusi had managed to establish a trans-Saharan network of lodges strategically situated along lucrative trade routes in the interstices of tribal Bedouin society, whereby religious authorities attracted the loyalty of the desert nomads by mediating tribal conflicts. Second, he showed how these loyalties were effectively mobilised by the Sanusi in order to mount an extremely effective, if ultimately unsuccessful, resistance to the Italian occupation of Libya. In this way, his work on the Sanusi, like his study of the Nuer, examined the ways in which social order might be maintained in the absence of centralised governmental authority. Curiously enough, given Evans-Pritchard’s personal religious convictions and sensibilities, as evidenced in his monograph on Nuer Religion (1956), by and large Islam was treated as epiphenomenal in his Sanusi ethnography.

The work of S. F. Nadel in the Kingdom of Nupe constituted another outstanding exception to the structural-functionalists’ avoidance of Islam. After all, Nupe’s rulers had converted to Islam
even before the kingdom succumbed to the Sokoto jihad in the early
nineteenth century. Indeed, Nadel’s (1954) monograph Nupe Religion
included an entire chapter on ‘Islam in Nupe’. But this is also the last
chapter (except for the conclusion), the appendix to a fuller
discussion of ‘traditional’ religious beliefs and practices onto which
Islam, it would seem, had been grafted to produce a syncretic mix.

For obvious reasons, American anthropologists began to study
African cultures much later than their French and British colleagues;
simply put, the United States had no African colonies. On the other
hand, the theoretical focus on cultural diffusion which, thanks to
Franz Boas, had infused American anthropology might have seemed a
priori more amenable to the study of Islam in Africa than the French
quest for an authentically African cosmological system or the British
emphasis on the systematic functioning of relatively small-scale and
(apparently) self-contained societies. Indeed, it was this very issue of
cultural diffusion which attracted Boas’s student Melville Herskovits,
the pioneer of American anthropological interest in Africa. For
Herskovits, however, the diffusion of African culture to the New
World constituted the raison d’être for his African research, notably
his studies of the kingdom of Dahomey. The diffusion of Islamic ideas
to Africa was out of his purview. His student, Joseph Greenberg,
wrote an early monograph on Bori spirit cults among the Hausa
entitled The Influence of Islam on a Sudanese Religion (1946). However, as the
title suggests, Islam and ‘African religion’ are implicitly depicted as
independently constituted entities; Islam is presented as an external
influence, not as a constituent component of African religions per se.

All in all, French academic anthropology during the colonial
period, especially as practised by Griaule and his students, in its quest
for authentic and coherent African systems of thought, was least open
to the study of Islam and its impact in Africa. At best, Islamic ideas
were reconfigured in African terms to produce an Islam noir, a ‘black
Islam’, which was ostensibly as profoundly African as it was
superficially Islamic. At worst, Islam was frankly considered as a
menace, a threat to the integrity of the wonderful cosmologies
which, in their eyes, constituted works of art. However different the
projects of American cultural and British social anthropologies were,
neither was conceptually averse to taking Islam into account. Even
so, and as we have seen with some notable exceptions, Islam tended
to be peripheral to their understanding of African cultures and
societies.
Decolonisation had profound effects on the nature of anthropological understandings of Africa, whether British, French, American or, at long last, African. The fact that anthropologists began to show serious interest in Muslim societies, if not in Islam, must certainly count as one of the most unanticipated consequences. In the first place, decolonisation made it blatantly apparent that African societies, no matter how small-scale, were in no way self-contained. Of course, reading their work carefully, one realises that an earlier generation of Africanist anthropologists had never been unaware of the fact; the depiction of societies in equilibrium was arguably a heuristic device rather than a reflection of deeply held convictions. Be this as it may, the political ferment leading up to and following decolonisation rendered such heuristic fictions increasingly unconvincing, not to mention, as means of understanding present circumstances, irrelevant.

Perhaps because French colonial anthropology had been the most radically idealist, the most divorced from the day-to-day realities of African life, the pendulum was to swing most radically in France, where for a while Marxist materialism prevailed as a radical antidote to the errors of the past, political as well as intellectual. It may seem paradoxical that Marxist anthropologists might be attracted to the study of Muslim societies; arguably, from a Marxist perspective, religion would appear to be at best superstructural, at worst a form of false consciousness. (Some Marxist anthropologists resisted – at times tortuously – the temptation to succumb to such a mechanistic analysis of religion.) In fact, it was precisely their renewed attention to the economic ‘infrastructure’ of African societies that obliged French Marxist Africanists to engage with the study of Muslims. In fact, throughout the West African Sahelian and Sudanic zones, long-distance commerce had been firmly ensconced in the hands of Islamic trading networks. For example, Jean-Loup Amselle (1977) studied the Kooroko, a group who had originally been hereditary blacksmiths in the Wassulu region of Mali but who had managed in the course of the twentieth century to achieve dominant roles in the kola trade between Bamako and Bouake, in Côte d’Ivoire. Amselle devotes a chapter of his monograph to ‘Religious Ideology’, in which he discusses the underlying reasons why Kooroko have been attracted to an Islamic reform movement which was (misleadingly) labelled ‘Wahhabi’ by the French. Admittedly, the very terminology of ‘religious ideology’ suggests that Amsell’s concern was not to analyse
Islam on its own terms. However, the argument was not nearly as mechanistic as this may seem, and pointed to important ways in which the anthropological study of Islam in Africa might develop. In the first place, it is significant to note that Amselle chose to study a group whose 'modern' identity was entirely distinct from its traditional status, in economic and social as well as religious terms. Their traditional and hereditary occupation as smiths conditioned the nature of their interrelationship with neighbouring groups, whereas their entry into the ranks of the merchant élite necessitated a thoroughgoing transformation of social relationships with outsiders. Such a transformation, Amselle suggested, involved conversion to Islam in the first place (essential for anyone entering into that sector of the economy), but also a choice between competing Islamic trends. The intrinsic foreignness or Africanity of such Islamic trends was simply not an issue, nor was Islam depicted as a unitary, much less unified, body of doctrine.

Such theoretical and empirical interest in African merchant communities was not necessarily restricted to anthropologists who were either French or Marxist. The theoretical orientations of Anglo-Saxon anthropologists during the colonial period had in no way excluded a concern with economic relations. Admittedly, the depiction of societies or cultures as relatively self-contained tended to draw attention away from groups such as merchants, whose livelihoods depended precisely on bridging disparate social or cultural entities. Even so, when these anthropologists began to pay serious attention to Muslim merchants, this represented a readjustment of focus rather than, as in France, a radical change of approach. For example, Abner Cohen (1969) described the community of Hausa migrants in Ibadan, detailing the practices by which they maintained their monopolies over the long-distance trades in cattle and in kola. Cohen was particularly interested in the maintenance of ethnic boundaries, in the ways in which Hausa immigrants demarcated themselves from the Yoruba majority in the town as a means of maintaining their ethnic monopoly over certain sectors of the economy. As a matter of fact, the Yoruba community included large numbers of Muslims as well as Christians, and so Islam in itself did not distinguish one ethnic community from the other. As a result, Cohen argued, Hausa in Ibadan affiliated themselves with the Tijaniyya, a particular Sufi brotherhood, in this way perpetuating the boundary between their community and Yoruba Muslims. Cohen’s argument, though not
framed in Marxist terms, offered a similar kind of argument: economic relations (in this case the preservation of a strategic trade monopoly) dictated the preservation of a specific ethnic boundary, which was in turn reflected by Sufi brotherhood affiliations. One way or the other, religion in general and Islam in particular were in large measure depicted as epiphenomenal.

My first monograph on the Dyula of Côte d’Ivoire (Launay 1982) was virtually the inverse of the scenario that Amselle had detailed for the Kooroko. I studied a population that had enjoyed a regional trade monopoly in the nineteenth century, which it had lost in the course of the twentieth, and indeed which (for the most part at least) rejected the ‘Wahhabi’ ideology of reform as adamantly as the Kooroko espoused it. Like Cohen, I was concerned with the complex (though not straightforwardly epiphenomenal) relationship between Islamic practice and ethnic identity.

Not all of this mini-surge of anthropological interest in Islam in Africa focused exclusively on merchant communities. Jean Copans (1980), notably, studied the role of the Murid brotherhood in the organisation of peanut production in Senegal. Jack Goody’s interest in Islam was not as intimately related to the study of a particular society as it was to the broader understanding of West Africa as a region and indeed of its place within broader global systems. Very broadly, he proposed a model of West African Sudanic state systems in terms of ‘estates’: an aristocratic warrior cavalry; a Muslim estate of merchants and clerics; commoners; and slaves. The characterisation of hierarchy in terms of ‘estates’ rather than ‘classes’ was deliberate. For Goody, in pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, the prevalence of horticulture as opposed to plod agriculture precluded the development of class differences based on the ownership of means of production. Conversely, the nature of state systems depended more integrally on means of destruction – horses in the grasslands as opposed to guns in the forest zones where, because of tsetse, horses could not survive. At the same time, Goody’s interest in literacy and writing systems led him to focus on the impact of Islamic writing on neighbouring, non-Muslim societies (Goody 1968), simultaneously challenging the notions that so-called traditional African religions were impervious to outside influences as well as the suggestion that the use of Arabic writing for ‘magical’ purposes was in any way an Africanisation of Islam, a characteristic of Islam noir rather than of Islam throughout the Muslim world.
Admittedly, all of these studies focused on ‘Muslim societies’ (or at least societies with important Muslim minorities) rather than on ‘Islam’ per se. But it was difficult to engage in the ethnographic description and analysis of these Muslim societies without paying substantial attention to religious issues, especially when — as was very often the case — these issues were controversial and absorbed the attention of the people in question. Most important, they represented a clear theoretical departure (more explicitly in the case of French, rather than Anglo-Saxon, ethnographies) from their immediate colonial predecessors. The willingness to engage with Islam was symptomatic of more general (and no doubt more important) shifts. First, they challenged the salience of the quest for African ‘authenticity’. The realm of religion and cosmology was the prima facie location of any such ‘authenticity’; the domains of kinship, political organisation, or economics were intrinsically more amenable to sociological inquiry and as such less culturally specific. Second, they expanded the scope of inquiry from relatively small-scaled and seemingly self-contained social units to focus instead on wider regional fields of interaction. Obviously, Muslim societies in Africa could not by their very nature be self-contained; they were part of the Muslim world, one which extended beyond continental, much less regional borders. Last and, I would argue, most importantly, they focused close theoretical attention on historical processes. They rejected the heuristic utility of apparently timeless synchronic analysis. On the contrary, the very questions which focused their attention revolved around the analysis of concrete historical changes in the societies which they studied. Obviously, none of these developments was in any way specific to the anthropology of Muslim societies in Africa, but it is fair to say that those studied not only reflected but indeed epitomised general changes in the discipline as a whole.

Paradoxically, the search for ‘authenticity’ so central to colonial anthropology was occasionally echoed by certain European-trained African scholars who employed such an ideology in a different political and social context. For example, Sinali Coulibaly’s generally excellent study of the Senufo peasantry of northern Côte d’Ivoire uses colonial ethnographic sources to draw a sharp contrast between the Senufo and their Muslim neighbours, ‘les Dioula, antithèse du Sénoufo (the Dyula, antithesis of the Senufo)’ (Coulibaly 1978: 54). By drawing such a sharp contrast between ‘traditional’ peasants and Muslim
traders, Coulibaly was not so much advocating ethnic exclusiveness but instead reacting to the Islamisation of much of the Senufo population, a blurring of the very distinctions at the heart of his argument. In a very different vein, recent political rhetoric in a divided Côte d’Ivoire is evidence of the persistence of colonial anthropological discourses of ‘authenticity’ and their use as ideologies of ethnic exclusion.

In any case, a full-blown anthropology of Islam began to emerge outside of Africanist circles. Its inception was heralded by Clifford Geertz’s *Islam Observed* (1968), whose title aggressively called attention to the fact that Islam was its focus of study, as opposed to earlier works such as Evans-Pritchard’s study of the Sanusi or, for that matter, Geertz’s previous work on Java, whose titles only implied their Islamic emphases to cognoscenti. Until then, anthropologists had (if only tacitly) left the study of Islam as a religion to ‘Orientalist’ experts. I certainly cannot assert that anthropologists in general, much less Geertz in particular, have entirely freed themselves of the epistemological failings of ‘Orientalism’. Even so, Geertz’s willingness to assert that anthropology had something distinctive to add to the study of Islam as a religion was, at the time, a daring move. His tactic was to contrast Islam in Morocco and in Indonesia which ‘both incline toward Mecca but ... bow in opposite directions (ibid.: 4)’. This is not the place to evaluate Geertz’s contribution in the light of his numerous critics. However debatable his conclusions, he very definitely set an agenda for the anthropological study of Islam: the analysis of variation in Islamic belief and practice over space and time as well as within Muslim communities, especially given the tremendous ideological emphasis within Islam on its quintessential oneness. Not surprisingly, in the wake of Geertz’s work, Morocco and Indonesia became the privileged sites for anthropologists (most especially from the United States) interested in Islam.

Africanist anthropologists were relatively slow to respond to the call. The very first contribution was a strikingly original if rather atypical book, El Zein’s (1974) study of Islam in Lamu, Kenya. Labelling itself a structural analysis, the book makes more specific reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss than to Geertz, while its Malinowskian emphasis on myth as sociological charter also calls to mind Edmund Leach’s approach. El Zein’s analysis is centered on a process squarely situated in the history of Lamu, the supplanting of the traditional Swahili élite, the Wangwana, by sharifs from
Hadramaut (modern Yemen) in the early twentieth century. He contrasts Wangwana and Hadrami interpretations of the myths of creation as well as the ways in which mythical constructs are anchored in ritual performances in Wangwana as opposed to Hadrami mosques. The kind of structuralist analysis which El Zein employs has admittedly tended to fall out of fashion. This in no way detracts from the importance of his focus on differences in discourse (though not necessarily in doctrine!) and practice (especially ritual) between different segments of a single Islamic community in Africa, analysed diachronically and not simply synchronically. Unfortunately, El Zein’s study remained unique for at least a decade, at least as far as sub-Saharan Africa is concerned. More recently, anthropologists have begun to focus again on Islamic diversity in historical and political-economic perspective within the confines of local communities, for example the town of Korhogo in Côte d’Ivoire (Launay 1992) or Nioro du Sahel in Mali (Soares, in press).

The anthropology of Islam has also led to a systematic re-evaluation of the boundary between Islam and ‘traditional’ religion in Africa. In particular, cults of spirit possession – once considered the hallmark of pre-Islamic religious survivals in Muslim societies and of the essential syncretism of ‘African Islam’ – have now been placed squarely within their Islamic context. In particular, the zar cults of Sudan and Somalia have been the focus of several detailed studies which place them securely within the orbit of Islamic discourse and practice, even if certain Muslims dismiss them as un-Islamic. Adopting a somewhat different approach, Lambeck (1993) includes spirit possession within a wider umbrella of different forms of Islamic knowledge in Mayotte, alongside divination and Koranic instruction. (Studies of spirit possession in West African Muslim societies have, alas, not always demonstrated the same level of sophistication, and still tend to treat the phenomenon as non- if not anti-Islamic.) In a very different vein, Shaw’s remarkable study (2002) of ritual ideology and practice among the Temne of Sierra Leone, among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, shows how profoundly religious beliefs and practices, especially divination, were moulded by centuries of the slave trade. Specifically, she examines the historical circumstances in which Islamic systems of divination have been incorporated into Temne religious preoccupations with safety and closure as a response to predatory incursions and political instability.
All in all, the paradigm shift – from the colonial focus on ‘authentically’ African small-scale (only apparently!), self-contained societies frozen in time to post-colonial emphases on broader interrelated units, adapting to shifts in regional, national and global political economies in historical time before, during and after the colonial period – has obviously changed the ways in which anthropologists have taken Islam into account. Instead of being seen as an external, if not disruptive, factor in African societies, it has finally been acknowledged as a complex, differentiated and historically changing, but also integral, aspect of African realities. However, it remains true that the anthropology of Islam in Africa is largely in the hands of outsiders, scholars who are neither African nor Muslim. There are, fortunately, outstanding exceptions: Kagabo’s (1988) study of Muslim minorities in Rwanda, and Ibrahim’s (1994) depiction of the tension between folk performance and shari‘ah-mindedness among the Rubatab of Sudan.

I suspect that this relative paucity of African voices is due to the fact that anthropology as a discipline was so slow to engage with Islam (or, for that matter, with Christianity), especially in Africa. The study of Islam in Africa was, for a long time, largely the preserve of historians. Consequently, a whole generation of Muslim African academics who received their training after the end of colonial rule gravitated, as a matter of course, to the discipline that had engaged long and constructively with Islam in Africa rather than to a discipline that, for so long, had chosen to ignore the importance of the Islamic presence. There is a distinguished and rapidly growing cadre of African Muslim historians – Muhammad Sani Umar, Ousmane Kane, Abdel Wedoud ould Cheikh, Ibrahima Sall, Cheikh Babou Anta M’Backe, Bintou Sanankoua to name only a few. Given the scarce resources available to academics in Africa, it is hardly surprising that historians have continued to dominate the study of Islam as an area of specialisation. One can only hope that, in time, a similarly Africanised anthropology of Islam will emerge.

Notes

1 Levitzion and Pouwels (2000) provide an excellent overview of the sweep of the history of Islam in Africa.
2 For a detailed historical study of this cadre, see Sibeud 2002.
3 The collected papers in Amselle and Sibeud 1998 provide a detailed assessment of Delafosse’s career.
4. Weiskel 1980 (especially pp. 112–22) gives a thorough and critical account of Delafosse's conduct as an administrator, while noting that 'Delafosse's publications on the Baule provide the foundation for any serious inquiry into Baule pre-colonial history and social organisation' (p. 257).

5. See Launay 1998 on Delafosse’s Senufo ethnography.


7. For recent and radically different evaluations of Griaule’s contributions, see Clifford 1983, Van Beek 1991.

8. I am indebted to Jack Goody for this point.


10. See, for example, his description of ‘The Over-Kingdom of Gonja’ (Goody 1967).

11. Indeed, Edward Said (1978: 326) explicitly cited Geertz’s work in Orientalism as an example of scholarly work on Islam that had managed to escape the intellectual hegemony of the Orientalist tradition.

12. At the same time, the anthropological study of Islam in Morocco and in Egypt began to flourish; see, for example, Gilsenan 1973, Eickelman 1976.


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