Trade and the Spread of Islam in Africa

Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
October 2001

Multiple Trajectories of Islam in Africa
Islam had already spread into northern Africa by the mid-seventh century A.D., only a few decades after the prophet Muhammad moved with his followers from Mecca to Medina on the neighboring Arabian Peninsula (622 A.D./1 A.H.). The Arab conquest of Spain and the push of Arab armies as far as the Indus River culminated in an empire that stretched over three continents, a mere hundred years after the Prophet's death. Between the eighth and ninth centuries, Arab traders and travelers, then African clerics, began to spread the religion along the eastern coast of Africa and to the western and central Sudan (literally, "Land of Black people"), stimulating the development of urban communities. Given its negotiated, practical approach to different cultural situations, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider Islam in Africa in terms of its multiple histories rather then as a unified movement.

The first converts were the Sudanese merchants, followed by a few rulers and courtiers (Ghana in the eleventh century and Mali in the thirteenth century). The masses of rural peasants, however, remained little touched. In the eleventh century, the Almoravid intervention, led by a group of Berber nomads who were strict observers of Islamic law, gave the conversion process a new momentum in the Ghana empire and beyond. The spread of Islam throughout the African continent was neither simultaneous nor uniform, but followed a gradual and adaptive path. However, the only written documents at our disposal for the period under consideration derive from Arab sources (see, for instance, accounts by geographers al-Bakri and Ibn Battuta).

Islamic Influence on African Societies
Islamic political and aesthetic influences on African societies remain difficult to assess. In some capital cities, such as Ghana and Gao, the presence of Muslim merchants resulted in the establishment of mosques. The Malian king Mansa Musa (r. 1312–37) brought back from a pilgrimage to Mecca the architect al-Sahili, who is often credited with the creation of the Sudano-Sahelian building style. Musa's brother, Mansa Sulaiman, followed his path and encouraged the building of mosques, as well as the development of Islamic learning. Islam brought to Africa the art of writing and new techniques of weighting. The city of Timbuktu, for instance, flourished as a commercial and intellectual center, seemingly undisturbed by various upheavals. Timbuktu began as a Tuareg settlement, was soon integrated into the Mali empire, then was reclaimed by the Tuareg, and finally incorporated into the Songhai empire. In the sixteenth century, the majority of Muslim scholars in Timbuktu were of Sudanese origin. On the continent's eastern coast, Arabic vocabulary was absorbed into the Bantu languages to form the Swahili language. On the other hand, in many cases conversion for sub-Saharan Africans was probably a way to protect themselves against being sold into slavery, a flourishing trade between Lake Chad and the Mediterranean. For their rulers, who were not active proselytizers, conversion remained somewhat formal, a gesture perhaps aimed at gaining political support from the Arabs and facilitating commercial relationships. The strongest resistance to Islam seems to have emanated from the

Mossi and the Bamana, with the development of the Ségou kingdom. Eventually, sub-Saharan Africans developed their own brand of Islam, often referred to as "African Islam," with specific brotherhoods and practices.

Local Mixes of Islamic and African Aesthetics
Because of its resistance to the representation of people and animals, the nature of Islam's interaction with the visual arts in Africa was one in which Islamic forms were accommodated and adapted. Muslim clerics' literacy and esoteric powers drew scores of converts to Islam. Sub-Saharan Muslim clerics known as *marabouts* began fabricating amulets with Qur'anic verses, which came to displace indigenous talismans and medicinal packets. These amulets are featured in the design of many traditional African artifacts.

Islam also reinforced the African fondness for geometric design and the repetition of patterns in decorating the surface of textiles and crafted objects. Local weaving may have been transformed with the importation of North African weaving techniques.

Islam has also often existed side by side with representational traditions such as masquerading. Such practices have often been viewed as supplemental rather than oppositional to Islam, particularly when they are seen as effective or operating outside of the central concerns of the faith. An early example of this was noted by Ibn Battuta, the Maghribi scholar who visited Mali in 1352–53 and witnessed a masquerade performance at the royal court of its Muslim king. In many areas of Africa, the coexistence of Islam with representational art forms continues today. But although Islam has influenced a wide range of artistic practices in Africa since its introduction, monumental architecture is the best-preserved legacy of its early history on the continent. Mosques are the most important architectural examples of the tremendous aesthetic diversity generated by the interaction between African peoples and Islamic faith.

Citation
Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. "Trade and the Spread of Islam in Africa." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tsis/hd_tsis.htm (October 2001)

Further Reading
Bravmann, René A. *Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974.