Islamization of Africa II: | Sept. 26

Rethinking the Spread of Islam: West Africa
Spread of Islam Into Africa: 7th-19th C.
Islam and Trade

“Islam and Trade in the Bilad al-Sudan, Tenth-Eleventh Century A.D.”

Michael Brett (1983)

Very important argument for ‘spread of Islam into Sahara/West Africa’:

- while focusing on ‘trade’, unlike most arguments, is not interested in trade-routes
- does not assume ‘Islam’ follows trade

Rather, explains why it does in terms of Islamic Law
Islam and Trade

Key Question:

What constitutes Islamic Law in context of trans-Saharan and sub-Saharan trade/settlement?

- Brett argues the connection between ‘Islam’ and ‘trade’ so often invoked in historical research was ‘law’
Islam and Trade

- merchants spent time in *bilad al-Sudan* (‘land of the blacks’)

- when they stayed there for very long periods and/or died there: issues arose around inheritance, credit/collection of debts.

- *qadis* (judges) and ‘jurists’ in North Africa called upon to issue *fatawa* (judgments)

- Islamic law began in this way to shape ‘sub-Saharan’ commerce and society
Islam and Trade

- system of jurists to assist in implementation of law in place by late 9th c.

- by early 11th c., litigation generated by ‘trans-Saharan’ affairs was normal

Brett:
- ‘trade’ does not, in itself ‘convert’ [as we saw in East Africa, Ethiopia]

- merchants’ needs determined by living outside dar al-Islam (‘land of Islam’), shape practice of Islam as it ‘moves into’ the Sudan
Brett presents two cases:

(I) Trader took goods on credit from North African merchant (*Ifriqiya*): intent to trade in Tadmakka

[see *Ibn Battuta, Additional Readings, ‘Walata’*]

- Islamic contract stipulated terms: profit sharing, when/where it would take place
- [instead of staying in tadmakka], trader continued on to Walata and then to major trans-Saharan terminus of Awdaghust *where he stayed 11 years*
- accumulated enough debts that local creditors demanded repayment
- North African merchant argued he should be included in ‘creditors’

*Case turned over to (Moroccan) Jurist for judgment.*
(II) Wealthy merchant (North African) died in Sudan (town in which death occurred not specified – thought to be Awdaghust):

- his family appointed someone to deal with his affairs (warehoused merchandise, contracts, local agreements)
- local Muslim community protested that person to do this should be the nazir: person appointed by region’s ‘King’ to be intermediary between non-Muslim State and local Muslim Community

Case referred to (same Moroccan) Jurist for judgment.
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Trans-Saharan Trade Centres involved in Cases 1 & 2
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What does Brett draw from each Case?
What is important to us?

Case I:
Jurist rejected claim of merchant based on “Islamic contract” (his argument) but supported on concept of “delayed repayment”: 
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- ruled that *bilad al-Sudan* was ‘not trustworthy’ and therefore any ‘Islamic contract’ that extended into the Sudan was not ‘good’

- merchant had entered into ‘risky’ contract for which he had to accept ‘risks’

- reasoning supports Fisher’s argument [“*Almoravids*”] that the Sahara and ‘lands beyond’ were considered as ‘physically and conceptually distant’ for Ifriqiya as for Egypt/Arabia
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**BUT:** Jurist determined key element was ‘repayment schedule’:

- trader agreed to timetable (and profit sharing irrespective of ‘where’) and had violated *that agreement*

- Merchant entitled to be ‘creditor’ amongst others in Awdaghust
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Gives idea of how West Africa was ‘seen’ in Muslim World (even from as close as North Africa) in early 11th century:

- also shows how Islam slowly became part of West African society through ‘trade’ issues, even when ‘Islamic’ contracts were not seen as being valid

- reinforces understanding that ‘trade’ was worth tremendous risk and Islamic Law was trying to (‘legitimately’) underpin risk
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Case 2:

Jurist supports claim of local Muslim community against family:

- *Malike law* argues that ANY state is better than none

- Muslims need to live within a state structure so that Islamic law (which governs Islamic life) can be exercised
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- system of appointing ‘Muslim intermediary (nazir)’ to negotiate, communicate between ‘state’ and ‘community’ well established

- not desirable but because Muslim traders found it necessary to live beyond dar al-islam, needed to be respected

- in this case, appointment of ‘pagan King’ (nazir) took precedence over family wishes
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Brett’s examples give clear understanding of linkage between notion of ‘necessity of a state/governance structure’ and successful spread of *sunni* Islam and Malike law (into West Africa):

- shaped Muslims’ acceptance of ‘negotiation’ and ‘compromise’ with West African states

- made it possible for Muslims to live ‘the good life’ (living the values of Islam) in ‘pagan’ lands
Islam and Trade

[Brett, citing the judgement]

“ It is the division established by the Arab conquest of Egypt and North Africa between countries where Muslims rule, and the Law of Islam prevails… and those where this state of affairs, divinely ordained for the good life, does not exist. Instead there is….opposition, a state in which the Law is not accepted…. For Muslims to venture into this region is perilous; they risk being unable to live according to the Law, thus falling into the same state of contravention [as the peoples of that land], which in their case is sin. Nevertheless they do so in order to trade, and it is the duty of the jurist to provide them as far as possible with the protection of the Law as they travel outside the lands where it can be properly enforced. …
Brett concludes that the growth trade and Islam south of the desert proves the success of this ‘system’: 

“[the] application of universal rules allowed the Muslim merchant to enter the particular society of West Africa with its multiplicity of customs and laws. For this it provided him with a recognized identity apart from the peoples with whom he traded. Thereby it gave rise to resident Muslim communities, which ipso facto formed part of this Sudanese society...The formation of distinct communities, and their insertion into the complicated pattern of West African society, all on the basis of the Islamic Law and its provisions for the conduct of daily life, were features which survived the transition to Islam as a religion of the Sudanese themselves”
Brett Raises two additional issues:

1. Conversion-
   - because the system gave a Muslim an ‘identity ‘apart’, he may have been ‘isolated’ locally: “this merchant’s Islam may have produced few converts”
   - this assumes ‘conversion’ was main way in which Islam ‘spread’
But Returning to Case (1):

- merchant “went to Tadmakka [as agreed by the contract], but then went on to Ghana and Awdaghust, where he married and had children, and stayed eleven years…”
Story suggests:

- Merchant settlers “married”: took local West Africans as wives (or possibly concubines)

- “had children”: who would have been raised Muslim

- process created ‘Muslim community’ which over time, added its own (Muslim) women as prospective wives available to merchants

- even if Merchant returned to North Africa after 11 years, clear that ‘family’ remained in Awdaghust

[worth comparing in several aspects to East Africa]
Islam and Trade

2. The Role of the State

- Brett raises question: “What happens when Muslims live in ‘pagan lands’ without a state?”

- Answer: “they had to create one”.

- eg. in Case (2): nazir allowed Muslims to ‘live the good life’ within the framework of ‘pagan state’
Islam and Trade

Leads him to ‘explain’, evaluate Almoravids [Sept 24 and below] in new ways:

- if Muslim scholars measured ‘being Muslim’ by the extent of the application of Islamic Law – which in turn required societal base of a ‘state’:

by definition, Saharan Sanhaja who lived by tribal custom and were lawless --were ‘pagan’, even though they considered themselves to be Muslim.
- then: Ibn Yasin launched *jihad* not to punish or to convert but to create Islamic State which would properly allow the application of ‘Law’ and thereby the possibility for Muslims to live ‘the good life’.
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Brett notes:

- after establishing ‘state’ in desert, Almoravids moved to attack Awdaghust (1053-54)

- according to Arabic texts, this was because: “Muslims here accepted the authority of the ‘pagan King of Ghana’”

- but following the logic of the North African jurist in his ruling (Case 2): *Ibn Yasin was wrong to see Awdaghust’s Muslims as living in sin*
Conclusion important:

- nature of Muslims’ relationships with ‘pagan’ regions/kings became moot with establishment between 11th and 15th centuries of series of Islamic states across West African desert-edge.

-BUT it re-emerged in late 18th and 19th centuries in (sub-Saharan) West Africa as jihads were launched against ‘less-then-fully-Muslim’ states –justifying themselves much as the Almoravids had centuries earlier.

[we will look at one of the most significant, Sokoto, in ‘Case Studies’]
The Almoravids, Ancient Ghana and ‘the conquest that never was’:

- text Brett cites [above] leads into ‘founding narrative’ of Islamization of West Africa

- (said that) following the sacking of Awdaghust, the Almoravids went on to ‘conquer’ the pagan state itself, Ancient Ghana, in 1076 and establish an Islamic state

- Islam came to West Africa ‘by the sword’
Ancient Ghana

Awdaghust: Trans-Saharan Commercial Centre

Kumbi Saleh: Capital of Ancient Ghana
‘Conquest that never was…’

- Pt. I ‘the written sources.
- Pt. II ‘the oral sources”


Possibly the most important (two-part) article for forcing historians to re-evaluate the history of Islam in West Africa, as well as the sources we use to write that history
‘Conquest that never was…’

Fisher: ‘the written sources” [Arabic accounts]

- contemporary written sources, late 11\textsuperscript{th} & 12\textsuperscript{th}
  centuries, were ‘silent’ on such a conquest

- one states only that “in 1076, Ghana became Muslim”

- first mention of ‘conquest’ was 14\textsuperscript{th} century account:
  three centuries later
Conrad: ‘the oral sources’ [local oral traditions]

- he examined ‘Sudanese’ oral traditions: legends, epics passed down through generations by *griots* [‘oral’ historians]

- in local traditions, name ‘Ghana’ not used: known rather as ‘Wagadu’ and ‘Kumbi’

- Wagadu founding tradition: ruin of the state associated with slaying of gigantic snake, Bida, whose severed head delivers a ‘curse’ on Wagadu
‘Conquest that never was…’

Some have argued this represents a critical historical ‘moment’:

- breaking with traditional, ancestral religion
- adopting of Islam

- equals overlay of ‘written’ sources and ‘conquest theory’

[eg Nehemia Levtzion, Ancient Ghana and Mali – classic text on subject]
Conrad rejects:

- cannot associate oral chronicle (‘legendary events) with written narrative (Islamic ‘dates’)

- worked with 17 versions of the legend:
  - few ‘oral’ (recorded by Conrad with local griots),
  - most written (few before 1900, most between 1900-25, 1950-75)
  -drawn from several different ethnic groups/regions

[presents methodological challenges similar to those encountered in East Africa]
‘Conquest that never was…’

Conrad concludes:

- oral record silent on any conquest, let alone specific ‘Islamic/Almoravid’ conquest

- destruction of Wagadu as ‘theme’ is present – even dominant, in many versions of legend
‘Conquest that never was…’

“All versions agree that a drought and ensuing famine were responsible for the ruin of the northern regions of Wagadu, and for the destruction of Kumbi [the capital]. That the Soninke [dominant ethnic group] of Wagadu were highly conscious of their dependence on adequate rainfall for the security and prosperity of their land is reaffirmed. As is common in foundation tales from semi-arid regions of west Africa, the traditional explanation of the founding of Wagadu emphasizes the importance of an abundant water supply…”

Conrad: the ‘momentous event’ that may be hidden in the metaphor of Bida bringing a curse upon the land was not the ‘curse’ of Islam but that of long-term drought
Conrad adds references to later written texts to support argument:

1. **1898 Sudan account** [written] in which it is recounted that a Soninke ancestor, Dinga, purchased the power to command rain

   - in late 19th century, his descendants were claiming to have inherited this power *for political reasons*
2. In 19th C. writings of jihad leader Northern Nigeria
[our Sokoto Case Study], there is reference to 17th century Timbuktu scholar, Ahmad Baba
[scholar important in Robinson’s discussion of ‘Slavery’; next week]:

[19th c Islamic leader] “If you ask whether the Muslims among the people of the Sudan accepted Islam through being conquered or whether they professed it voluntarily, I would say that the answer to this is as was stated by Shaykh Ahmad Baba …: ‘They accepted Islam without being conquered by anybody.’ In another place he said: ‘It appears from what Ibn Khaldun and others said that those who became Muslims from among the Sudanese did so voluntarily without being conquered by anybody’.
‘Conquest that never was…’

“The View From Awdaghust: war, trade and social change in the Southwestern Sahara…”

E. Ann McDougall (1985)

- by early 1980s, archaeological material available* on Awdaghust to add to the written accounts and oral literature

- also substantial anthropological work on ‘pastoralism’ in general

*[most had not yet been published; I was provided with original theses]
Main arguments:

1. Pastoralism:
   - Almoravids camel-raising nomads
   - unlikely to ‘settle’ in sahel environment like Ghana
   - animals could not live year-round in southern disease environment
   - at best ‘seasonal visitors’ (eg. to trade, raid)
‘Conquest that never was…’

2. Archaeological Evidence: Awdaghust site

- ‘settlement layers’ show ongoing occupation, no significant reduction in physical settlement until three-to-four centuries later

- some indication drying conditions over long-term meant city no longer sustainable: gradually shrunk, finally abandoned*

- archaeology supports the Conrad-Fisher ‘reading’ of oral and written records that indeed, ‘the conquest never was…’

[same evidence shows a ‘re-settlement’ of smaller dimensions in 17th c, part of new commercial growth in region]
Empire and Islam

Following decline state of Ghana: series of Islamic states rose across West African Sahel:

- Mali (direct successor, former province of Ghana) [13\textsuperscript{th} – 14\textsuperscript{th} C.]
- Songhay (following on Mali) [15\textsuperscript{th} -16\textsuperscript{th} C.]
- Kanem-Bornu [15\textsuperscript{th}]
- Hausaland (‘confederacy’ of states) [Muslim beginning 15\textsuperscript{th}-16\textsuperscript{th} C.]
Spread of Islam Into Africa:

Ancient Mali: successor to Ghana
Spread of Islam Into Africa:

**Songhay:**
Successor to Mali

**Hausaland, Kanem-Bornu**
[Northern Nigeria – Chad]

- still powerful in 19th century
Ibn Battuta, Mali and Islam

Ibn Battuta, Morocco
(1304 – 1368)

[Discussion Reading, Friday Sept. 28]