Part 2: 
Islamization of Africa

September 22
Spread of Islam Into Africa: 7th-19th C.

Arab and Swahili traders spread Islam: 8th-19th centuries C.E.

Almoravids 11th C.

8th-12th centuries C.E.

Islam spread into North Africa beginning in 7th century C.E.

7th-15th centuries

12th-15th centuries C.E.

12th-15th centuries C.E.

Maasai alone and laborers from South Asia 17th & 19th centuries C.E.
Islam in North Africa and Ethiopia

Story of spread of Islam into North Africa and Ethiopia usually told as one of armies sweeping across land, establishing Caliphates

- dynasties rapidly ‘falling’ to more powerful armies

- took the names of family leaders (eg Umayyads, Abbassids, Fatimids, Almoravids…)

- mostly about movement of Arabs, not of Islam per se

- most sunni regimes, Fatimids (Egypt) Shia

- conquest is not necessarily conversion: describes government not people
Islam in North Africa and Ethiopia

Right: Within 100 years of Muhammad’s death, Islam had swept through most of the Middle East, right along the North African coast and into Spain, where it conquered the Visigoths and encountered the Franks. It had reached its greatest extent by about AD 850.
Islam in North Africa and Ethiopia

Islamic expansion *not* explained or reflected in Arab conquests:

- becoming Muslim is process

- varies with ethnic, cultural, economic, political context (as we saw in East Africa)

- our vision shaped by available/exploitable sources (eg archaeological, travellers accounts, material culture and so on)

- North African/Horn studies dominated by ‘textual’ sources, with political/religious bias and focus
Islam in North Africa and Ethiopia

- Complicating Robinson’s ‘gateway’ approach by looking at three ‘models’ of Islamization:

  Abyssina (Ethiopia) – special relationship with Muslims from Mohamed’s time

  North Africa – combination conquest and integration with Berber economics, culture, religion

  Almoravids – rise of religious movement similar to later ‘tariqa’; more about networking than conquest *per se*
Islam had special relationship with Horn and Christian kingdom Aksum:

- prior to *hijra*, Mohamed’s followers sought refuge with Christian King Aksum [see Modern Map Ethiopia, below]

- returned after 622, bearing gifts, support from King: consolidated relationship that protected Christians from future *jihad*

- important base for future commercial, scholarly, cultural relations

- Mohamed married returning refugee whose husband converted to Christianity in Aksum – symbolic and ‘real’ interconnectedness
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)  

Elsewhere (eg East Africa, Sahara) ‘networks’ primarily trade-based:

- in Horn settlements based on both agricultural and commerce, facilitated by access to Hijaz, Yemen, Red Sea trade

- spread quickly from coastal regions to interior where Christian kingdom of ‘Abyssinia’ located

- By 16th c, small Muslim kingdoms emerging in coastal hinterland, Muslim families moving into Christian communities

- Muslims of all beliefs spread out along shores of Red Sea – proximity to Mecca supported growth Islam
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

- Clerics trained in law and theology (many at University in Cairo) supported process

  – in some instances, proselytized among local Christians (not often the case in Africa)

- Gradually, coastal areas dominated by Muslims

- Christian kingdom ‘cut off’ from direct contact with Red Sea

- Muslim importance, wealth and power increased

[see Robinson, Map 1 p.29]
Ancient Kingdoms of Christians (Ethiopian Highlands) and Muslims (Coastal)

Also note southern “Galles” (Oromo)
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

- Muslim communities grew in number in Christian interior: spoke same languages, shared culture with Christian neighbours

- Because Christian state ‘protected’, Muslims external to Caliphate politics (rise and fall of major Islamic states)

- main ‘external’ influence Egypt: relations both with Christians (‘Copts’) and the succeeding Islamic states controlling Cairo (Fatimids, Mamluks, Ottomans…)

- Horn received scholars, clerics both Christian, Muslim

- Process of Islamization [quoting Robinson]: ‘was a local, internal process… by and large a successful one’.
[for more information, see Robinson’s ‘Ethiopia’ case study]
Learning of the Book: Egypt and Ethiopia
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

Successful … but not uncomplicated:

- by late 14th – early 15th centuries, divisions emerged among Muslims as to appropriate relations with “Christian” kingdom of Ethiopia:
  - attempt to dominate and make region into *dar al-islam*?
  - continue to co-exist, acknowledging Christian power?

- Emir of Harar often in conflict of larger Islamic ‘state’ (Adal)

- early 16th C, became ‘capital’

- issues not religious *per se* but political: only to some extent about enduring presence *Christian* power, more about rejecting *competing* power
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

Modern Map Ethiopia showing Harar and Ancient Axum

Old Town Harar

Street in Old Harar
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

- Early 16th century Ethiopian king requested assistance of Portuguese (now established on East African coast) against Muslim principalities

- But -- recognized danger of them as permanent allies, required them to leave

- Left open challenge to Islamic polities; Muslim leaders (especially Emir of Harar) took up challenge

- 1540s, Portuguese ‘recalled’ to support Christian Ethiopians for last time
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

Mid-to-late 1500s: series battles between Christian Ethiopian state and Harar

- leaders of each were killed on different occasions; capital cities sacked;

- eg. 1550-51 Harar burned by Abyssinians

- eg. 1576 Muslims conquered Abyssina, destroying churches, documents, taking women, children into slavery; many Christians converted

- story of woman who convinced Emir of Harar (Nur ibn Mujahid) to revenge death of former husband by giving herself to him as wife

- took title ‘Commander of the Faithful’, built wall around city: 4 meters high, 5 gates – still visible

- ultimately defeated but Emperor of Ethiopia also killed in battle
Old Town of Harar encircled by Nur’s fortifications
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

One of Five Gates leading to Old City

Street to market (old wall visible on right)
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

Same time, Muslims and Christians faced invasions from southern ‘Oromo’ [Galla] peoples:

- By 1567, taking over Harari lands, limiting power of Emir to city
- Became insignificant principality rather than powerful sultanate:

  “Inside their walls the Hararis maintained their own religion, language and commercial life, but outside they had lost all influence, the Oromo blocking the life-giving trade with Zeila [to the Red Sea and ultimately, Indian Ocean]. The walls built by Emir Nur as a defence against the Ethiopians were now Harar's sole protection against the Oromo.”

- Many Oromo later became Muslim but political conflict continued to dominate region
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

- Successor Emirs worked to attract Oromo-controlled commerce back to city – limited success

- internally constant series coups and counter-coups between different Emirs

- continued occasional attacks on Ethiopia in alliance with other ‘enemies’ of state, usually unsuccessful

- Harar’s Emirs negotiated certain ‘autonomy’ for region that persisted until mid-to-late 19th C
Islam in Ethiopia (‘the Horn’)

Significance of ‘Gateway through the Horn’:
- role of Indian Ocean/Red Sea Network that also played into East Africa important to economy of Muslim sultanates but ‘special relationship’ with Mohamed followers and Christian Aksum King key factor in shaping subsequent relations, settlements

- ‘process’ by which region became largely Muslim not principally nor primarily commercial

- led to different relationship with ‘indigenous’ peoples: Muslims lived among Christians, invited scholars, teachers, judges into community

- attempts to either dominate or ‘collaborate’ with Ethiopian Highlands state shaped ‘internal’ Muslim politics

- role of central city state Harar -- own interests, ‘radical’ Emirs – often at odds with larger Islamic state, interests
Islam in North Africa
Islam and North Africa

Across North Africa, what unifies historical study is combination early Arab conquest, gradual attraction Berbers to both Arab military and Islamic religion, and unevenness of sources

- referencing 1999 article “islamic Settlement in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula” (J L Boone, N L Benco) in *Annual Review of Anthropology*

- article emphasizing limitations of archaeological work:
  - few excavations
  - emphasis on Roman rather than Islamic era
  - predominance of French academic influence/politics
Islam and North Africa

Argues extant work shaped by interest in:

- Trans-Saharan trade (commodities, markets, change-over-time)

- patterns Arab settlement (not always shaped by trade, also by agricultural interests)

So: one finds that where trade is major interest, settlement oriented to major commercial markets; otherwise scattered well into hinterland
Islam and North Africa

Market orientation:

- markets and trade in hands of indigenous Berbers

- archaeology can trace where ‘Arabs’ settled vis-à-vis Berber quarters (architecture, tools, household utensils, presence of Mosques etc)

- can trace cultural exchange (with respect to material culture)

- can trace process of Islamization into Berber areas through building mosques

- limited evidence to date shows process ‘mixed’ with no clear pattern of cause
Islam and North Africa

Non-muslim Berbers continued to co-exist, especially in interior (Mountains, desert)

Muslim Berbers did not always ‘adapt’ fully to religion (eg Sanhaja, below), retaining loyalty to animist gods, transposing ritual of worship onto Islamic ‘saints’

Muslim Berbers also resisted full ‘Arabization’, for example using local ‘shrine’ architecture for Muslim saints, retaining Berber as language, dress, custom (music, literature, crafts etc)

Ibn Battuta: Berber, qadi, experienced many ‘forms’ of Islam in travels from formal ‘official’ Islam of cities to ascetics, marabouts of countryside, centrality of ‘tombs’ and associated medresa’s
Islam and North Africa

Not all Arab conquests sought out commercial cities:

- especially in Morocco and Algeria, found sites where Arab ‘conquerors’ (more likely the settlers who followed in the wake of conquest) colonized hinterland and interior

- introduced new agricultural interests: replaced Berber/coastal ‘culture’ of tree-agriculture (olives, citrus fruits) with grain growing, small-scale pastoralism of sheep, goats: modified Bedouin lifestyle

- invited graduate integration, ‘Berberization’ of Arab communities and ‘Islamization’ of Berber neighbours
Islam and North Africa

Only suggestive of alternative understanding of ‘spread of Islam’ but more consistent with critical factor than ‘conquest/conflict’ theory:

- apart from initial moves of ‘Arabs’ from Arabian peninsula into North Africa, most so-called ‘Islamic conquest’ was carried out, physically, by Berber warriors

- another part of ‘process’: Berbers attracted by ‘rewards’ of Arab armies and hierarchy

- not required to totally relinquish aspects of culture while benefitting from new political ‘masters’

- emergence of Almoravids is itself example of this ‘process’ in context of Saharan tribes (below)
Islam and North Africa

‘Typical’ example North African warrior:

Arab ?…

... Or Berber?
“Warriors of the Faith” (North Africa) – Berbers not Arabs
• **Tariq ibn Ziyad**

  Berber Muslim and Umayyad general who led the conquest of Visigothic Hispania in 711 under the orders of the Umayyad Caliph Al-Walid I.
Islam and North Africa

Problem: still limited in interpretation

- archaeology can show patterns, help describe

- less successful in answering historians’ question: why?

- but approach brings understanding of Islamization of North Africa more in line with how we’re seeking to understand it elsewhere in Africa (eg East, West, South)

- not meant to ignore/reject ‘traditional’ emphasis on Caliphate politics but to question further how helpful it is in social and cultural terms

- suggest we are trying to “Africanize” the approach to Islam in North Africa (and the Horn) that has hitherto remained closely tied to Middle Eastern perspectives
Islam and North Africa

Tunisia

Local Berber Shrine (above)

Shrine of Sidi Mhammed (right)
Islam and North Africa
Almoravids

Story of the Almoravids well known both to European and African history:

- in Europe, succeeded Umayyid dynasty in Spain (11th C.), known as ‘Moors’, left scholarly and architectural legacy

- in North Africa, especially Morocco, created capital out of Marrakesh, made it centre of scholarship, Koutoubia Mosque world reknown

- in Africa, understood as ‘origin’ of Islamization of West Africa (‘Conquest of Ghana’, see next day ‘Sahara, West Africa’)
Islam and North Africa

Almoravids

Koutoubia Mosque, Marrakesh (Morocco)
Islam and North Africa

11th Century:
- Saharan Sanhaja leader (Berber) made the hajj

- on return, visited with Islamic scholar in ‘Ifriqiyya’ (Tunisia)

- realized that his people were not ‘good’ Muslims

- returned to Sahara with cleric from Morocco (Abd Allah ibn Yasin) to help his people ‘turn from pre-Islamic habits and fully embrace Islam’

- some followed him, the Lamtuna clan resisted, rejected him

- returned to North Africa for ‘advice’
Islam and North Africa
Tunisia

Advice: return to the Sahara and launch *jihad*

- returned: offered resisters opportunity to fully convert, recognize him as leader

- sought ‘retreat’ [sometimes called ‘ribat’] with followers

- returned to desert and successfully defeated opposing tribes

- ultimately, launched holy war into West Africa and into Spain

[see also short account in ‘Additional Readings’]
Yusuf ibn Tashfin

Cousin of initial
Almoravid Leader,
third Emir of
Almoravid empire
in North Africa and Al-
Andalus
(Moorish Iberia/Spain).
Islam and North Africa

Story ‘fits’ with spread of Islam into North/West Africa ‘by the sword’: for many years, not challenged

- H J Fisher (‘additional reading’) and subsequently, others argued against paradigm with respect to specific aspects of ‘Almoravid Story’

- here, Fisher questions obsession with ‘ribat’ as physical place and/or holy war

- article reveals how historians in the field have approached history

- ability to ‘disagree’ derives from showing how others have (mis)used textual documentation
Islam and North Africa

Not local chronicles (as in East, West Africa) but accounts by Arab geographers (eg Ibn Battuta) and other scholars (such as those referred to in ‘Islam: empire of faith’ video)

- Ibn Battuta exception: most never visited places about which they wrote

- Arab sources mostly ‘compiled’, therefore as problematic as archaeological sites where ‘evidence’ has been spread through several temporal strata

- Scholar interpreting from 12\textsuperscript{th} century will ‘read’ texts from earlier centuries different from scholar writing in 14\textsuperscript{th} or 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries
Islam and North Africa

These observations central to Fisher’s critiqu of extant interpretations:

- looks at several issues and historians’ approaches (both contemporary and modern), in each case showing weaknesses

- even suggests that Paulo Farias’ somewhat radical analysis is still constrained by ‘traditional’ paradigm

- critical argument: *ribat* was neither a place nor a war – it was a religious network

- as argument, important: suggests a different process by which Islam became entrenched in Sahara (and by extension), West Africa
Islam and North Africa

His argument is largely linguistic (that is, he looks at how earlier Arab writers, writing at time of Almoravids, use the term *ribat*)

- concludes that it is only later writers who interpret term as ‘place’ or ‘war’ and that these interpretations reflect who they are and political situation when they’re writing NOT what 11th century writers were saying

- if right, this is earliest suggestion that Islam is spread through religious network (leader, scholarly legitimacy, followers, centres of learning) that will later become the ‘norm’: tariqa

- such networks later carry the name of their leader: in this case, those of the ‘ribat’ indirectly did exactly that -- ‘Almroavids’
Islam and North Africa

Fisher does not deny the role of conflict:

- argues it is primarily about leadership and competing power between Saharan clans/tribes

- in this case Sanhaja against Zenata

- competing clans among Sanhaja tribes

- under Ibn al-Yasin, one of those tribes claimed the right to be ‘truly Muslim’
Conclusions: will use Fisher’s conclusions (though not in his order) to speak to Abyssinia, North Africa and Almoravids

(1) *Hajj* used to integrate ‘centre and periphery’ (eg travels of Ibn al-Yasin and consequences for Western Sahara/Africa) – but Fisher points out that it was clear that for those who were of ‘the centre’ (Mecca, Cairo – perhaps even Ifriqiyya), Sahara and regions beyond were both physically and conceptually ‘distant’

“fantastic embroidery” shown in article but call for caution about what remains major source of information about all of North/West (and even the Horn of Africa, given orthodox perspective on region) needs to be heeded.
(2) Prototypes in Islamic History: Fisher draws our attention to both the ‘physical/real re-enactment’ of Islamic history and the ‘motif’ of said re-enactment

- Video ‘Islam: empire of faith’ showed how ‘real’ history of birth of Islam became enshrined in ‘ritual’ of being Muslim (the hajj etc)

- Fisher reminds us that in all subsequent histories of societies ‘becoming Muslim’ we see both: ‘real’ attempts to re-enact (eg Usman dan Fodio who we will meet in Case Study of Sokoto Caliphate) and ‘literary motifs’ -- those who wish to present history in ‘acceptable Islamic terms’ to their audience

- both ‘real’ and ‘reflective’ endeavors pose problems for historians
Here, I have suggested that role of paradigm ‘Islamic conquest by sword’ – accepted interpretation of North/West Africa – has shaped unquestioning acceptance of Almoravid Story to date.

Fisher addressed one aspect of that story: the ‘ribat’, arguing for its derivation from the *hijrah* part of the traditional story of Islam.

Point: we need to keep both observations in mind when interpreting *all* sources about Islamization in North/West Africa.
Islam and North Africa

(3) Tendency to overemphasize military action in story of Islamization.

- follows from above: Fisher refers to West Africa; more recent article allows us to extend analysis to North Africa)

- Fisher identifies another factor shaping modern historiography: politics

- as in ‘real past’, our contemporary profession reflects politics

- he notes Nigerian scholar who argues for complete dismissal of Arabic sources (and subsequent scholarship based on them)
Islam and North Africa

(4) Fisher’s first point is last but not least:

“The pattern of events described in this paper [article] is, if stripped to the bare essentials, a prototypical model of innumerable such interventions in the history of black Africa, up to and including today.”

This is a concept that we need to keep in mind throughout the course – what does he mean, and why is it so significant?