

**CHANGING SOCIAL IDENTITY
WITH THE SPREAD OF ISLAM
ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

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SYNCRETISM, TIME, AND IDENTITY: ISLAMIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN WEST AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks a brief introduction to the research this author has been completing in the West African state of Mali over the course of the past decade. However, what is presented is not intended to be a fieldwork report, as the primary results have already been published extensively elsewhere.¹ Rather, the focus is upon presenting the relevance of these results within their wider context, both in West Africa, and to a lesser extent, sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.²

That the archaeological study of Islam should involve more than a focus upon the explicit indicators of the religion, for example, mosques, inscriptions, and artwork, should now be regarded as commonplace. The influence of religion can be all-encompassing and can potentially influence all aspects of life, including diet, dress, domestic architecture, landscape, and settlement form.³ This statement obviously does not apply to Islam alone but can be applicable to many other religions as well.⁴

Yet the potential of religion as a primary structuring agent for the archaeological record is often ignored. Two factors can be suggested for the reticence in recognizing religion as a potential superstructure into which all other aspects of life might be placed. Firstly, it can be suggested, a problem lies with the term “religion” itself. Archaeologists appear frightened of using it as a descriptive device, and hence recourse is made to “ritual” where such material is considered, “ritual” being the archaeologists’ favorite catchall category for “odd” or otherwise not understood behavior.⁵ Hence the implications of “religion” as a term appears little understood, be it in application to Islam or otherwise. But besides the definitional conundrum that it generates — when is archaeological material “religious” as opposed to “ritual” in nature, for example — it can be further suggested that the frequent absence of religion in archaeological interpretation, certainly as an all-inclusive structuring agent, is also perhaps a reflection of many

1. Timothy Insoll, *Islam, Archaeology and History, A Complex Relationship: The Gao Region (Mali) ca. AD 900–1250* (Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology 39; British Archaeological Reports, International Series 647; Oxford, 1996); idem, *Urbanism, Archaeology and Trade: Further Observations on the Gao Region (Mali): The 1996 Fieldseason Results* (British Archaeological Reports, International Series 829; Oxford, 2000); idem, “The Archaeology of Post Medieval Timbuktu,” *Sahara* 13 (2002): 7–22.

2. See also Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge, 2003).

3. Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam* (Oxford, 1999).

4. See Timothy Insoll, editor, *Archaeology and World Religion* (London, 2001).

5. Timothy Insoll, *Archaeology, Ritual, Religion* (London, 2004).

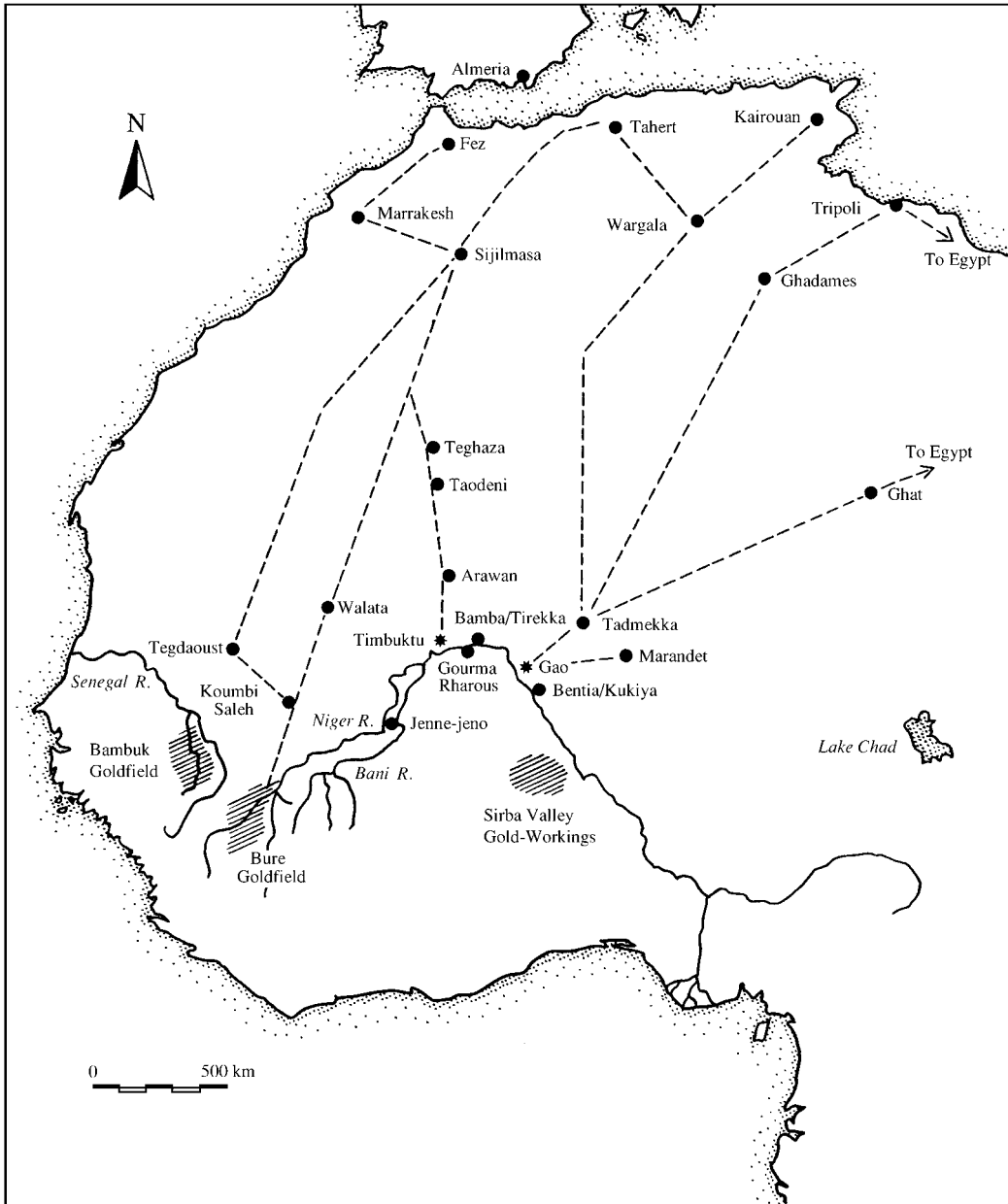


Figure 5.1. The Location of Gao (and Other Centers) in West Africa

archaeologists' worldview themselves; often largely a secular one. Hence in turn this might be projected onto the past, even if inappropriate.

Thus with regard to Islamic archaeology, the resulting interpretation might acknowledge religion, Islam, as significant but reduce its importance to the types of overtly "religious" material culture already described, rather than providing the holistic examination that Islamic belief and practice frequently demand. In support of this one need only draw upon the frequently cited maxim, "Islam is more than a religion but a way of life." Recovery of the latter was precisely the focus of the archaeological research completed in Mali: the potential impact of Islam as a struc-

turing agent for all facets of life, but with the allied aims of also assessing, largely via archaeological evidence, how Islam has helped in the creation of overall social identity in this region, and crucially, fused with African traditional religions in a syncretic process to create African Islam(s).

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Archaeological excavations and survey have been focused upon Gao, a major city on the bend of the Niger River in the Sahel region in the east of Mali, and to a lesser extent, the city of Timbuktu, situated some 10 km north of the Niger River on the fringe of the Sahara Desert (fig. 5.1). Both cities were extensively involved in trans-Saharan trade in what would be called in European contexts, the medieval period, but is more correctly referred to in African contexts as the Middle and Late Iron Age. For reasons of descriptive simplicity the term “medieval” will be used here.

SETTLEMENT

Whereas Timbuktu is a name familiar to many, perhaps as a synonym for the remote and mysterious, even if they are unsure whether it is a real place and where exactly it is located, Gao is little known outside of West Africa. However, in terms of historical importance it can be argued that Gao is much more significant than Timbuktu, being the capital of the Songhai empire, the last of the three great medieval West African empires of Ghana (ca. eighth–eleventh centuries C.E), Mali (twelfth–fourteenth centuries C.E), and Songhai (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries C.E). Yet the origins of Gao predate its high point under the Songhai empire. It seems in fact to have been founded in the sixth–seventh centuries C.E, thus before Muslim merchants and missionaries began to reach the Western Sahel, a process beginning in the late eighth century when historical sources record contacts between the Ibadi imamate of Tahert (in modern Algeria) and Gao.⁶

Consequently the city was indigenously founded, probably by what are best termed the proto-Songhai,⁷ contrary to earlier interpretations that might have seen innovations such as urbanism as externally derived from North Africa, and transmitted across the Sahara via Muslim traders.⁸ This notion of indigenous origins is a factor of importance in reconsidering the whole concept of Islamic identity in the region, in its indigenous nature, or rather how Islam was indigenously adapted to fit local requirements; it is seemingly a crucial element in the initial acceptance of Islam not only in this region, but in a pattern certainly mirrored through much else of sub-Saharan Africa as well.⁹

At Gao, archaeological evidence for conversion to Islam prior to about the beginning of the tenth century is absent. Thereafter there is an increase in archaeological evidence attesting to contacts with the Muslim world. Items such as glazed pottery, glass vessels, glass beads, and

6. T. Lewicki, “Part 1: The Ibádi Community at Basra and the Origins of the Ibádite States in Arabia and North Africa, Seventh–Ninth Centuries. Part 2: The Ibádites in North Africa and the Sudan to the Fourteenth Century,” *Cahiers d’Histoire Mondiale* 13 (1971): 51–130.

7. Insoll, *Islam, Archaeology and History*.

8. See, for example, Raymond Mauny, *Tableau géographique de l’Ouest africain au Moyen Age, d’après les Sources écrites, la tradition et l’archéologie* (Mémoires de l’Institut français d’Afrique noire 61; Dakar, 1961).

9. Insoll, *Sub-Saharan Africa*.

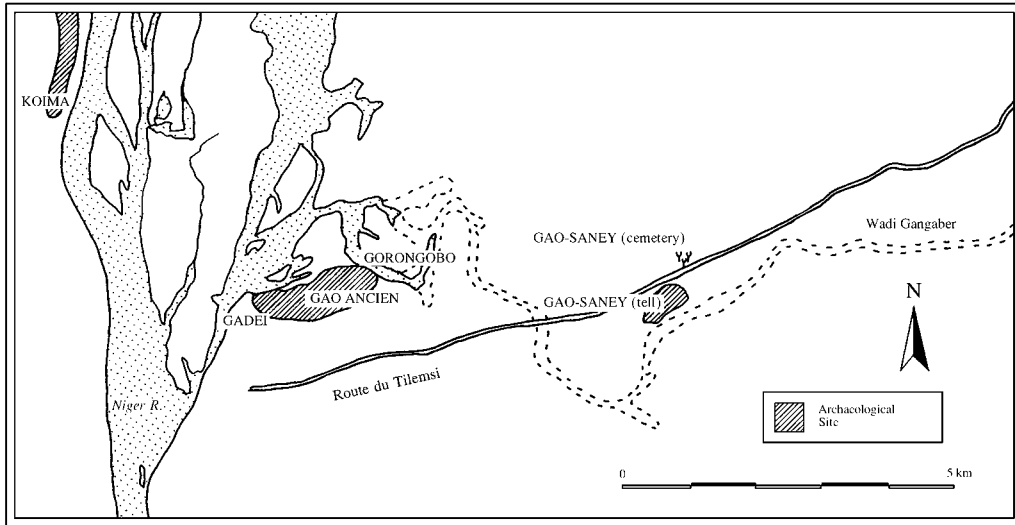


Figure 5.2. Settlement Structure at Gao

brass metalwork, goods obtained via Muslim controlled trans-Saharan trade directed through North Africa and Egypt are all found at sites such as Gao.¹⁰ Secondly, the first direct evidence for the presence of Muslims in the Western Sahel is found after this date; evidence already mentioned such as mosques, Muslim burials, and the remains of domestic structures that might have been built according to Muslim social requirements.¹¹

Initially, settlement at Gao appears to have been separated; Muslims at the tell site of Gao-Saney, non-Muslims at Gao proper, specifically at the sites of Gadei and Gao Ancien placed some 7 km away from Gao-Saney and situated close to the Niger River (figs. 5.2–3). But the existence of dual settlements persisted after Islam had spread to the inhabitants of Gao Ancien in the late eleventh–twelfth centuries and was possibly due to security concerns — keeping potential nomad raiders at a distance from Gao Ancien, certainly a factor of later consequence.¹²

TRADE

A reason for these safety concerns would have been, conceivably, protecting wealth gained through trans-Saharan trade. Trade was the agency, as noted, by which Islam was initially transferred to the Western Sahel, either by the merchants themselves or by missionaries accompanying, preceding, or following them. A wide range of evidence has been recovered from the excavations at Gao attesting to the operation of this trade, the bulk of which is from Gao Ancien. Besides allowing an insight into potential trade partners with which the merchants of Gao were connected on the other side of the Sahara, this evidence also indicates that the trade seems to have been far removed from a colonial-type system run by groups of North African merchants. Because, as with much of the other evidence recovered, it reinforces the picture of the indigenous nature of the city, its control, and its operation.

10. Insoll, *Islam, Archaeology and History*; idem, "Islamic Glass from Gao, Mali," *Journal of Glass Studies* 40 (1998): 77–88; idem, *Urbanism*.

11. See Insoll, *Archaeology of Islam*.

12. Timothy Insoll, "Iron Age Gao: An Archaeological Contribution," *Journal of African History* 38/1 (1997): 1–30.



Figure 5.3. A View of the Niger River from Gao. Photograph by T. Insoll

Possibly the most spectacular evidence for the export trade found was a cache of over fifty hippopotamus tusks uncovered in a context dated to the mid-ninth century in Gao Ancien. The hypothesis has been advanced that these tusks represent a consignment of ivory placed on beams within the pit in which they were found, and which was awaiting shipment to the ivory workshops of North Africa but was never sent for reasons that remain unclear.¹³ A substantial ivory trade certainly existed between West and North Africa but is little mentioned in the Arabic sources, possibly due to disapproval from more orthodox Muslims, who likewise condemned the use of feathers, horns, hoofs, or tusks derived from animals that were not ritually slaughtered.¹⁴ For example, the North African jurist Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani (d. 996) specifically mentions that the use of elephant's tusk is expressly disapproved.¹⁵ Nevertheless, large quantities of ivory were certainly used in the workshops of the Maghreb, Islamic Spain, and Egypt.

Evidence for the extensive gold trade that is recorded in the Arabic historical sources is more elusive, which is not surprising considering its ease of recyclability as a material of enduring value. In Gadei a small gold bead was found, while the discovery on the surface at Gao Ancien of a gold *mithqal* coin of North African origin dating from 952–975 has been reported.¹⁶ Equally, evidence for the historically documented slave trade has also proven elusive. Much

13. Timothy Insoll, "A Cache of Hippopotamus Ivory at Gao, Mali, and a Hypothesis of its Use," *Antiquity* 69 (1995): 327–36.

14. Nehemiah Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, translated by J. F. P. Hopkins (Fontes Historiae Africanae, Series Arabica 4; Cambridge, 1980), p. 55.

15. John O. Hunwick, "Comment by John Hunwick," *Saharan Studies Association Newsletter* 2 (1994): 11.

16. J. Latruffe, "Au Sujet d'une Piece d'Or Millénaire Trouvée à Gao," *Notes Africaines* 60 (1953): 102–03.

more abundantly testified are items sourced from North Africa, the Near East, and in certain instances, even further afield. These include glass and glazed pottery, primarily recovered from Gao Ancien and dating from the eleventh to twelfth centuries.¹⁷ Other trade commodities found include hundreds of glass beads, carnelian beads, cowry shells, and brass ingots (fig. 5.4), the latter a material not produced in sub-Saharan Africa and hence a good indicator of long-distance trade.

Overall, the picture of trade, though skewed in favor of more durable commodities for obvious reasons of archaeological survival, is broadly in agreement with that recorded in the Arabic historical sources.¹⁸ If this evidence were to be considered on its own or solely in association with the fired-brick architectural tradition recorded in Gao Ancien, then it might be suggested that Gao was a colonial entrepot run purely to satisfy the requirements of a presumably foreign elite. However, the approach that has been adopted here, that is, treating Gao in its entirety and maximizing what can be gained from all aspects of the archaeological record, indicates that such a premise is flawed, as noted earlier. This was, admittedly, a trade controlled by elites, as might be expected in the capital of what was to become the Songhai empire, but one controlled by a local elite, many of whom had converted to Islam.

INSCRIPTIONS

Initially, Muslim merchants appear to have occupied Gao-Saney, a site complex comprising a tell and associated Muslim cemeteries and tombs, which has not been as intensively investigated as Gao Ancien.¹⁹ The first direct evidence for the presence of Muslims in this region was found here and consists of various inscribed Muslim tombstones that date from ca. 1100–1300. Five of these stelae found at Gao-Saney were imported ready-carved from Muslim Spain in the early twelfth century. These bear both names and dates, and the marble used seems to be from the vicinity of Almeria on the southern Spanish coast.²⁰

Yet besides providing further evidence for the operation of trans-Saharan trade between Gao and Almoravid-controlled Spain, these imported stelae also indicate that they were used for purposes other than commemorating the dead because they seem also to have been used to proclaim the new found faith of Islam. We can discern this as three of the kings commemorated on the stelae in the cemetery at Gao-Saney, including two of the imported Spanish examples, were recent converts to Islam. Their new identity, and indeed their piety, were clearly shown by successively adopting the name of the Prophet and of the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr and Umar.²¹

17. Insoll, *Islam, Archaeology and History*.

18. See Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*.

19. C. Flight, "Gao 1972: First Interim Report: A Preliminary Investigation of the Cemetery at Sané," *West African Journal of Archaeology* 5 (1975): 81–90; idem, "Gao 1974: Second Interim Report. Excavations in the Cemetery at Sané" (Birmingham [manuscript on file, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham], 1978); idem, "Gao 1978: Third Interim Report: Further Excavations at Sané" (Birmingham [manuscript on file, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham], 1979).

20. Jean Sauvaget, "Les épitaphes royales de Gao," *Bulletin de l'Institut français de l'Afrique noire* 12 (1950): 418–40; M. M. Vire, "Notes sur trois épitaphes royales de Gao," *Bulletin de l'Institut français de l'Afrique noire, Series B* 20 (1958): 368–76; P. F. de Moraes Farias, "The Oldest Extant Writing in West Africa: Medieval epigraphs from Issuk, Saney, and Egef-n–Tawaqqast (Mali)," *Journal des Africanistes* 60 (1990): 65–113.

21. C. Flight, "Thoughts on the Cemetery at Sané" (Birmingham [unpublished paper from the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham], n. d.), p. b:1.



Figure 5.4. A Selection of Imported Trade Goods Recovered Predominantly from Gao Ancien.
 Photograph by T. Insoll

Neither were stelae confined to Gao-Saney. Gao Ancien was also ringed with Muslim cemeteries, and the inscriptions recovered from these have also provided important information on Islamization processes within the region. At one of the cemeteries, Gorongobo, to the northwest of Gao Ancien, several Muslim tombstones inscribed in Arabic and dating from between 1130 and 1306 were recorded. One tombstone dated to 1210 appears to bear the female Songhai names of either Waybiya or Buwy, depending on the reading. This is of significance as it is first and foremost a Muslim tombstone, bearing a local name, and female as well, and conclusive proof for local conversion to Islam by the early thirteenth century.²² This further supports the interpretation proposed earlier that we are witnessing indigenous control of trade; trade adapted to suit a local elite many of whom were Muslim.

This “indigenization” of Islam was also apparent in various other aspects of the archaeological evidence recovered; evidence, moreover, indicating that the impact of Islam was being felt to varying degrees in many aspects of life. The archaeology indicates a picture of complexity, as evident in the internal and intra-site patterning, reflecting the fact that what was being recovered was the residue of both past communities and individuals with varying degrees of adherence to Islam, or even none at all. Thus this reconstructed picture differs somewhat from the types of broad brush approach adopted historically, which might in passing describe Gao as Muslim by the eleventh century, but in so doing fail to recognize the inherent complexity therein.

22. P. F. de Moraes Farias, “Appendix 2. The Inscriptions from Gorongobo,” in Insoll, *Urbanism*, pp. 156–59.

ARCHITECTURE

The architecture uncovered, for instance, was representative of these distinctions; a picture of “domestic” Gadei as opposed to “cosmopolitan” Gao Ancien could be reconstructed. In the former, part of a roundhouse built of liquid mud (or banco) was uncovered dating from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries.²³ This type of structure is so far absent in Gao Ancien, where buildings universally employed the right angle and are of fired brick, stone, and mudbrick.²⁴ Whether the presence of the roundhouse can be associated with the persistence of traditional religion in this quarter is unclear (and unlikely). But such a question can be posited, as in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa there appears to be a correlation between roundhouses and traditional religion, and square or rectangular houses and Islam. Bearing in mind the important caveat that such generalizations inevitably find exceptions to religious explanation, Muslims can live in roundhouses and non-Muslims in architecture employing right angles!

Yet the architecture in Gao Ancien differed considerably, and in style (but not materials), was much more reminiscent of the type of structures encountered at other trade centers in the Western Sahel, such as Tegdaoust and Koumbi Saleh,²⁵ which were predominantly Muslim. A large mosque with a fired-brick *mīhrāb* was previously recorded within Gao Ancien,²⁶ while our more recent excavations uncovered part of a palace or rich merchant’s house also built of fired brick (fig. 5.5). Elements of this structure, an aisle, might have been part of another mosque. The remains of a substantial stone-built wall and gatehouse might have once encircled the central citadel, also dating from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries.²⁷ Such features were lacking in Gadei, again reinforcing this picture of complexity.

PERSONAL POSSESSIONS AND DIET

Within the area of the roundhouse described above, objects with Muslim associations potentially suggest syncretic processes were in operation or that simple architectural correlations and religious types are flawed, as they probably are. For example, a large wooden bead from a set of prayer beads (what is sometimes erroneously referred to as a Muslim “rosary”) was recovered from a context dated to between the mid-eleventh and fourteenth centuries.²⁸ Similarly, and also from Gadei, the remains of what appear to have been an amulet cover were found, a copper casing containing the remains of fibrous matter that might have been the Muslim prayer or invocation contained therein.

23. Insoll, *Urbanism*, pp. 15–17.

24. Insoll, *Islam, Archaeology and History*.

25. Jean Devisse, Abdallah O. Babacar, et al., *Tegdaoust*, Volume 3: *Recherches sur Aoudaghost: Campagnes 1960–1965, enquêtes générales* (Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations 25; Paris, 1983); Jean Polet, *Tegdaoust*, Volume 4: *Fouille d’un quartier de Tegdaoust (Mauritanie orientale)* (Paris, 1985); Sophie Berthier, *Recherches archéologiques sur la capitale de l’empire de Ghana: Étude d’un secteur d’habitat à Koumbi*

Saleh, Mauritanie: Campagnes II–III–IV–V, (1975/1976–1980/1981) (Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology 41; British Archaeological Reports, International Series 680; Oxford, 1997).

26. Raymond Mauny, “Notes d’archéologie au sujet de Gao,” *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’Afrique noire, Series B* (1951) 13: 837–52.

27. Insoll, *Islam, Archaeology and History*; idem, *Urbanism*.

28. B. Roy, “The Beads,” in Insoll, *Urbanism*, p. 106.



Figure 5.5. The Palace or Rich Merchant's House. Photograph by T. Insoll

Dietary patterns also differed across and between the sites as represented by aspects of the faunal and botanical remains recovered. A varied picture of resource exploitation was indicated by the faunal remains from Gadei, with both wild and domesticated species present. Of especial interest was the presence of dog remains in contexts dated between the early/mid eleventh and late sixteenth centuries, that is, certainly after Islam was the majority religion in the city. This was interpreted as food refuse owing to the context in which it was found²⁹ and suggests that a mixed community was resident in Gadei, both Muslim and non-Muslim, or alternatively, Muslims who continued to eat species forbidden under Islamic dietary law.³⁰ By contrast, dog remains were lacking in Gao Ancien, perhaps to be expected in this evidently more Islamized quarter. Otherwise, the patterns manifest in the species present are broadly comparable to those at Gadei, with both wild and domestic specimens found.

Besides the mammals, fish, shellfish, and birds indicated that a variety of environments were being exploited. Fish and shellfish, though little differentiated between Gao Ancien and Gadei, were obtained from streams, from main channels of the Niger River, pools on the floodplain, fast and slow flowing water, and swampy and reed-filled environments.³¹ The picture obtained from the botanical remains recovered from Gadei and Gao Ancien was also broadly similar, samples largely coming from the later occupation levels and providing evidence for rice, dates, local fruits such as the jujube, along with pearl millet, watermelon, and cotton.³² In terms of connections with Islam, these are indirect, but cotton is generally regarded as an introduction

29. C. Stangroome, "The Faunal Remains from Gadei," in Insoll, *Urbanism*, p. 56.

30. See Insoll, *Archaeology of Islam*.

31. Nicky Milner, "The Marine and Freshwater Molluscs," in Insoll, *Urbanism*, pp. 36–38; H. Cook,

"The Fish Bones from Gadei," in Insoll, *Urbanism*, pp. 38–44.

32. Dorian Q. Fuller, "The Botanical Remains," in Insoll, *Urbanism*, pp. 28–35.

in the Islamic period, that is, after the tenth century,³³ whereas Ziziphus, or jujube stones, are known to have been later used as a raw material in the production of Islamic prayer beads.³⁴

Interestingly, on the basis of the cooking equipment found in Gadei and Gao Ancien such as utilitarian pottery, stove fragments, and strainers, MacLean³⁵ suggests that a “wet” cuisine was preferred in Gao, and that kitchen mobility, a characteristic of Songhai cooking today, was also a factor several hundred years ago.³⁶ From this evidence it has been possible to reconstruct something of the resultant cuisine, and it appears that many of the bones were subjected to “heavy” chopping, possibly indicating boiling as a cooking method. In other words, this evidence appears to suggest that the maintenance of traditional African cuisine was being upheld, though the diet was largely structured by Islamic law. Again, another indicator of indigenous adaptation of elements of Islamic belief and practice is seemingly apparent in the archaeological record.

SYNCRETISM, TIME, AND IDENTITY

This provides a convenient juncture to return to a brief consideration of the creation and maintenance of Islamic identity both in the Gao region and in its wider context. A key concept that has already been mentioned as of importance here is syncretism. This is the blending or fusing of different religious traditions or elements that can emerge as a practical mechanism for reconciling time, for instance. Although sometimes condemned as a contentious term implying “inauthenticity” or “contamination,”³⁷ for our purposes in considering religion as change, “syncretism” is preferable to alternatives such as “creolize” or “hybridize.”

The need for syncretic process to reconcile time reckoning can take many forms; for example, an agriculturally aligned seasonal system must confront and integrate with a very different religious system.³⁸ This can occur by conversion to Islam with the imposition of a new calendar, “arranged, without intercalation, to be independent not only of the old Arabian lunar year but especially of all solar reckoning which was traditionally linked to the structures of agricultural society and religion.”³⁹ If agriculture is really a “ritual revealed by the gods or culture heroes,”⁴⁰ then the abandonment of associated seasonal, temporal, and ancestral frameworks will be difficult, or alternatively adjustments might be made to allow the continuation of old and new combined.

This would appear to be what occurred with conversion to Islam in the Sahel region of West Africa where it is possible to suggest a model of phased conversion allied with syncretic adaptation based in part on the archaeological data just presented.⁴¹ Within this region the earliest converts to Islam would seem to have been the nomadic populations, precipitated in part through their early exposure to Muslims by acting as their guides in trans-Saharan trade. Equally, the

33. Andrew M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World: The Diffusion of Crops and Farming Techniques, 700–1100* (Cambridge, 1983).

34. Fuller, “Botanical Remains,” p. 30.

35. M. R. MacLean, “The Locally Manufactured Pottery,” in Insoll, *Urbanism*, p. 77.

36. M. R. MacLean and Timothy Insoll, “The Social Context of Food Technology in Iron Age Gao, Mali,” *World Archaeology* 31 (1999): 78–92.

37. Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, “Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism,” in *Syncretism/Anti Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, edited

by Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (London, 1994), p. 1.

38. Insoll, *Archaeology, Ritual, Religion*.

39. F. Denny, “Islamic Ritual: Perspectives and Theories,” in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, edited by Richard C. Martin (Tucson, 1985), p. 71.

40. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated from the French by Willard R. Trask (New York, 1959), p. 96.

41. Insoll, *Islam, Archaeology and History*; idem, *Urbanism*.

ease with which they converted is not solely explained by notions of familiarity but also, perhaps, through the lesser degree of upheaval involved in nomadic conversion than that suffered by agriculturalists, for instance.⁴² Hence factors such as the ease of worship that Islam enjoys would have been significant, allied with a potential by lesser importance ascribed to physical ties to the land, and in turn to the degree of ancestral significance lent to the land as well. In other words, the bonds were more easily broken and syncretic mechanisms reconciling the old and the new were not so essential.

This would certainly seem to be mirrored within the site patterning evident in parts of the Gao region. For example, a map of Muslim cemeteries in the Niger Bend was prepared by de Gironcourt.⁴³ It is apparent from this map that the majority of the cemeteries containing Muslim inscriptions are to be found clustered along the Niger River, predominantly along the left bank, as well as along the Tilemsi Valley running north from Gao, and to a lesser extent the paleo-tributaries of the Niger River.⁴⁴ This cemetery patterning appears to follow the main axes of communication and of trade, that is, those that run through nomad territory,⁴⁵ and could indicate both mortality rates among merchants and other Muslim travelers and that nomads were among the first to convert to Islam in this region. As the data presented in the map are “raw” data, a mix of early and more recent material, this must remain a hypothesis.

The second group to convert to Islam within the Western Sahel seems to have been elements of the urban population, and again a practical explanation can be proposed to account for this. Specifically, that they might have benefited from preferable trade conditions with Muslim co-religionists, or alternatively that Islam had an appeal within the urban environment through its ability to provide cohesiveness due to the notion of community (*ummah*) that underpins it. This is a factor of potential significance in overcoming ethnic differences that were perhaps more manifest in towns, settlements with a predilection to throw together a variety of different ethnic, social, and other groups.⁴⁶ Such an interpretation would appear to be supported within Gao, however, these urban centers were amorphous forms that attract and release elements of their populations all the time. Their population, theoretically at least, could be forever altering, even if their core remains the same. This means that both within West Africa, and throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, the ascription “Muslim city” may be tenuous at best. Islamic practice in urban centers such as Gao does not seem to have depended on the development of syncretic mechanisms to reconcile the old with the new, at least it was not quite such a pressing concern in this context, as it was for the third group to be considered, the sedentary agriculturalists.

The last group to convert to Islam in parts of West Africa were the bulk of the population, the sedentary agriculturalists, and within this context the notion of syncretism is vital. This apparent tardiness in conversion may be interpreted as related to conceptual changes described above, that is, the collision of different calendrical and temporal systems which, more than prescribing when crops might be sown or harvested, provided the whole structural framework connected with the lynchpin of African traditional religions, the importance of the ancestors.⁴⁷ Ancestral bonds and frameworks linking men to the land were negotiated primarily through

42. See, for example, Nehemiah Levtzion, “Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa: An Introductory Essay,” *Asian and African Studies* 20 (1986): 7–26.

43. Georges R. de Gironcourt, *Missions de Gironcourt en Afrique occidentale, 1908/1909–1911/1912: Documents scientifiques* (Paris, 1920), p. 161.

44. Insoll, *Islam, Archaeology and History*, p. 13.

45. It is unlikely to be unduly influenced by de Gironcourt’s survey methodology, as his coverage of the area was very thorough.

46. See Insoll, *Sub-Saharan Africa*.

47. See, for example, John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London, 1975); Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, 1976).

structured relationships, “whether with other living people, or with the spirits of the dead, or with animals, or with cleared land, or with the bush.”⁴⁸ These were beliefs manifest through what Ranger terms “cults,” as in the maintenance of cults of the land, for example. The existence of the whole ancestral framework of belief and associated practices meant that conversion to Islam broke with or altered the balance that sustained the conceptual system, as Rene Bravmann⁴⁹ argues.

Hence, even though Islam might be well established within the urban environment at centers such as Gao and among nomad groups in the surrounding region, its impact within the remainder of the rural environment was frequently minimal even several hundred years later. This can be indicated archaeologically in various ways, as in the persistence of non-Muslim burial practices, such as the continuation of a tradition of urn burial in a contracted position accompanied by grave goods such as iron bracelets and ankle rings⁵⁰ found at the site of Toguere Doupwil in the Inland Niger River Delta area of Mali, farther west along the Niger River. This was evidence dated to the fifteenth century, and thus long after conversion to Islam had occurred in urban centers such as Timbuktu, which is closer to the Inland Niger River Delta than Gao. Similarly, the continuation of production of anthropomorphic and figural terra-cotta statuettes, contrary to Islamic proscription on the replication of figurative imagery, is found up to and even beyond a similar date. At the urban center of Jenne-jeno, for example, also in the same region of Mali, over seventy animal or human representations have been recovered; the function is interpreted in various ways, including for protection, and in “ancestor worship.”⁵¹ However, these interpretations are based upon ethnography, oral tradition, and parallels with material from elsewhere in the region.

Where conversion did take place, syncretism of Islamic and traditional religions frequently occurred, seemingly as a mechanism for reconciling issues such as the collision of frameworks of time and their associated implications for conceptions of land, its links with people and ancestors, issues of possession, fertility, and the like. Although relevant archaeological data are still sparse for the Western Sahel from the fourteenth century onwards, large-scale conversion amongst sedentary agriculturists seems to have been limited until more recently. In some instances it occurred only after the collapse of the great states such as Songhai. As Levtzion notes,⁵² when the great states disappeared and the urban foundation of the religion crumbled in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this meant that Muslims moved into the countryside, “and won adherents among peasants and fishermen, who had hardly been influenced by Islam before.”

Again if we consider the Gao region, though it has to be acknowledged that the data are sparse, these general interpretations are ostensibly supported. Various settlements south of Gao, for example, sent various commodities up the Niger River, the most important of which was gold obtained from the Sirba Valley in Niger.⁵³ Close to this place an Islamic “frontier” appears

48. T. O. Ranger, “African Traditional Religions,” in *The Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religions*, edited by Stewart Sutherland and Peter Clarke (London, 1991), p. 109.

49. René A. Bravmann, *Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa* (African Studies Series 11; Cambridge, 1974).

50. Rogier Bedaux, “Mali,” *Nyame Akuma* 8 (1976): 41.

51. R. J. McIntosh and S. K. McIntosh, “Terracotta Statuettes from Mali,” *African Arts* 12/2 (1979): 52.

52. Nehemiah Levtzion, “Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa: An Introductory Essay,” *Asian and African Studies* 20 (1986): 15.

53. See Jean Devisse, “L’Or,” in *Vallées du Niger*, edited by Jean Devisse (Paris, 1993), pp. 344–57.

to have existed,⁵⁴ indicated by sites such as Bentiya (Kukiya) and Egef-N-Tawaqqast, sites where Arabic funerary inscriptions dating from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries have also been recorded.⁵⁵ Evidence for Islam dating from before the fifteenth century is lacking farther south of this point, both direct, such as mosques and burials, and indirect, such as trade goods sourced from the Muslim World.⁵⁶ Even close to Gao, an early center of Islam with its mosques, Muslim burials, even rectangular architecture, survey evidence⁵⁷ is rare or late in date, excluding that interpreted as nomad associated, as already described. This is a pattern that appears to be repeated elsewhere in the region, but the overall absence of archaeological research outside of the main urban centers limits what can be inferred from this sort of evidence.

CONCLUSIONS

Although hampered by a lack of archaeological research in general in the Western Sahel (and throughout West Africa), and certainly outside the major historical urban centers such as Gao and Timbuktu, archaeological patterning of some social interest can be seen. The complexity redefines organization of urban composition and trade for acceptance of and adherence to Islam, and the impact of Islam upon social identity.

Conversion to Islam by the inhabitants of Gao occurs, and in a far from uniform process, and is structured by socio-economic affiliation, whether nomads, city-dwellers, or sedentary agriculturalists. Equally this did not entail a whole-scale abandonment of older traditions or traditional religions, as with the tardiness evident in Islamic conversion amongst the sedentary agriculturalists; likewise social aspects like continuing adherence to traditional cuisines and diets, as might be expected. The latter is more unexpected in having greater fundamental implications in terms of breaking, rather than merely stretching, Islamic religious requirements.

This should certainly not come as a surprise. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa the agency of syncretism has been adopted as a mechanism to reconcile Islam with older traditions in an ongoing process of reconstructing social and religious identities. We as archaeologists are privileged to be able to gain an insight into such processes at work and thus should strive to maximize both recovery and interpretation from the rich archaeological record that Islamic sites frequently yield. In so doing we can more fully assess the notion of changing social identities across the geographical diversity that is the Islamic world.

54. John O. Hunwick, *Shari‘a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghīlī to the Questions of Askia al-Ḥājj Muḥammad* (London, 1985).

55. Farias, “Oldest Extant Writing,” pp. 105–06; N. Arazi, “An Archaeological Survey in the Songhay Heartland of Mali,” *Nyame Akuma* 52 (1999): 38–39.

56. Insoll, *Sub-Saharan Africa*.

57. S. Dawa, “Inventaire des sites archéologiques dans le cercle de Gao: Mémoire de fin d’études.” (Ph.D. diss., École Normale Supérieure de Bamako, 1985); Insoll, *Islam, Archaeology and History*, pp. 11–15; Arazi, “Archaeological Survey,” p. 36.

