

Archaeology and the reconstruction of religious identity in Africa (and beyond)

Timothy Insoll

*School of Art History and Archaeology,
University of Manchester*

Abstract

In John Alexander's (1979) paper, "The Archaeological Recognition of Religion: The Examples of Islam in Africa and the Urnfield in Europe" a comparative perspective is used to examine the notion of religious identity and its archaeological recognition. Since the publication of this paper new insights have been gained into both the spread and recognition of religions through archaeological study, and the negotiation of religious identities via material culture. Using evidence from recent archaeological fieldwork completed in Bahrain, West Africa, and India, the present paper will assess what advances have been made in the archaeological study of both world religions - Islam, and to a lesser extent Hinduism, and traditional religions in these areas. A comparative perspective will be employed, and the legacy of John Alexander's theoretical and methodological contribution to this area of study evaluated.

Introduction

In John Alexander's (1979) inspiring paper, "The Archaeological Recognition of Religion: The Examples of Islam in Africa and the Urnfield in Europe", a comparative perspective is used to examine the notion of religious identity and its archaeological recognition. Since the publication of this paper new insights have been gained into both the spread and recognition of religions through archaeological study, and the negotiation of religious identities via material culture (Renfrew 1994, Insoll 1999a, 1999b, 2001a, 2004). Although John Alexander would be very unlikely to pin his allegiance to a particular theoretical agenda, it can be stated that his contribution towards the development of a considered approach to the archaeological study of religion has been profound, though largely unacknowledged. Hence, it is hoped that the present contribution goes some way toward rectifying this situation through 'deconstructing' his seminal paper on religion in terms of its insights into the archaeology of religions, and how this fits both with contemporary research trends and future research directions primarily, but not exclusively, with reference to Africa.

'Deconstructing' the archaeological recognition of religion

A key contribution of the paper lies in recognising the overall absence of dedicated archaeological approaches to religion, it being “often the last resort of troubled archaeological fieldworkers” (Alexander 1979: 215). This, to set it within its epistemological context, is over a decade before the first recognised conference focussing upon the archaeology of ritual and religion, “Sacred and Profane” (Garwood *et al.* 1991), over five years before Renfrew’s review of the ‘Archaeology of “Cult”’ (Renfrew 1985), and fifteen years before the same author’s overall consideration of the archaeology of religion (Renfrew 1994). Besides the general recognition of the absence of archaeological approaches to religion, Alexander (*ibid*) also signals the definitional weakness of cognate terms such as ‘cult’ if applied to what is best described as ‘religion’. This highlights an issue of semantic consequence in assessing the whole notion of how ‘religion’ has been perceived and described by archaeologists.

These are issues that this author has recently considered, and the mis-definition of religion would seem to be a feature of archaeological interpretation across the spectrum of the discipline regardless of theoretical affiliation (Insoll 2004). Within the confines of this contribution it is neither practical nor indeed relevant to undertake a detailed review, though the point stands that ‘*Homo Secularisus*’, i.e. the outlook of the mass of modern (western) archaeologists, might not deem religion important and hence omit it from their archaeological vocabulary and interpretation, Alexander (1979) recognises the potential for the all-pervasive nature of religion and its influence upon material culture. This is key, for it is now recognised as important that many elements of life, above and beyond the usually considered domains of sacred sites and burial, can be structured by religion, and can be archaeologically recognisable as such (see for example Hubert 1994). This is not in the sense of some form of idealistic religious “totality” as might be generated by Mircea Eliade (1969), such as, for example, the mythical total religious immersion of all people in all time juxtaposed against the predominantly secular historical “time that kills” (Horia 1969: 387-8), but rather, by way of contemporary analogy, how all aspects of Islamic material culture can be structured by religion (Insoll 1999a), as is explored by Alexander (1979).

If we look further into the possible reasons behind the absence of religion in archaeological discourse, fault can be projected further back in time to the nature of the foundations upon which archaeology, like much else of western intellectual activity, rests — i.e. rationality, and the resulting desire for definition, classification, and categorisation which has been so eloquently exposed by Michel Foucault (1977, 1985). This was primarily the result of the modes of thought developed during the Enlightenment, described by Mautner (1997: 167) as “characterised by belief in progress, expected to be achieved by a self-reliant use of reason, and by rejection of traditionalism, obscurantism and authoritarianism” (and see Cassirer 1951). These are all intellectual factors which have had a profound impact upon how religion and, importantly, interpretations of past religion have been conceptualised by western academics. Yet much of the archaeological evidence for religion was formed according to different intellectual frameworks and conceptions. Rationality, classification, the stressing of individuality, are not necessarily appropriate structuring criteria for assessing the archaeology of religions, especially if we want to strive for a fuller understanding of past meanings. Within this frame of reference a cogent point is again made by Alexander (1979: 215) concerning the “difficulty of recognising

and explaining irrational behaviour (except to believers)”, which both refers to irrationality, and by implication the reverse, rationality, as well as introducing the concept of belief, all further key concerns within the archaeological study of religion.

The legacy of rationality has already been briefly considered, but belief has not. This is a component of religion, often forgotten, at least by archaeologists, who tend to separate their study of such phenomena from any association with mental or emotive states which ‘belief’ might evoke (see for example Tarlow 2000 for a useful overview). Alternatively, belief, if acknowledged, is taken as a given whose meaning is both understood and quantifiable. However, this is something of a fallacy for ‘Belief’ has been described by Needham (1972: 4) as seen as, ‘a word of as little ambiguity as “spear” or “cow”’, when in reality, ‘more than two hundred years of masterly philosophical application have provided no clear and substantial understanding of the notion of belief’ (*ibid.*: 61).

Nonetheless, the recognition of both belief and faith, as Alexander (1979) acknowledges, is vital. But this said, a faith-based or believer’s perspective in approaching the archaeology of religion too often leads to an emphasis on establishing ‘proof’ (Insoll 2001b). This sets up a dichotomy, supposed objective rationality or believer’s emotion, neither of which is a useful framework from which to appreciate the archaeology of religion. However, Alexander has isolated an area of debate with which archaeologists are now beginning to engage.

This, in turn, leads to a further important element underpinning Alexander’s paper, namely, that in his comparative construct he recognises a human element. This is achieved through acknowledging the distinction between communal and personal elements within religious practice. Here again, though one does not want to ascribe to Alexander’s ideas labels he would not use, it can be suggested that he is pre-emptive in recognising the importance of agency, long before it became fashionable in archaeology (Dobres and Robb 2000), outside its home in the social sciences (Giddens 1979, 1984). Moreover, before moving on to consider the case study, it is also necessary to recognise that Alexander, in juxtaposing the problems of archaeological investigation of religions in both literate and prehistoric contexts, acknowledges the complexities of different types of religions. This is not achieved through using definitions generated by historians or anthropologists of religion (Bowie 2000), but rather through building his discussion and analysis from the archaeologist’s viewpoint, one based primarily, upon material culture; in other words, the archaeological recognition of religion for archaeologists.

The example of Islam in Africa

In appreciation of Alexander’s contribution to the archaeological recognition of religion, his example of Islam in Africa will be returned to here, again in light of recent research (Insoll 1996, 2003). Firstly, it is worth noting that he recognises many of the main features which have now been shown to constitute an archaeology of Islam (Alexander 1979: 216-221), both in general (Insoll 1999a), and in sub-Saharan Africa (Insoll 2003). These include the material signatures of personal and collective rituals (mosques, shrines, burials), domestic behaviour and architecture (housing and town plans), arts and calligraphy, *jihad*, food taboos, and even the ‘lesser’ items of an archaeology of Islam such as amulets and other personal possessions. But religions are more than just checklists or suites of material culture (Lane 2001: 150). The importance of syncretism as an agent of crucial importance within both the spread of religions and the development of religious identity

is recognised in the reference to “the wide zone around Islamic territories where there had been only partial adoption of Islam” (Alexander 1979: 226).

This, rather than the ‘fingerprinting’ of Islamic material culture, is now proving to be the guiding agenda of research on the spread of Islam and its recognition through the archaeological record and material culture in general. The notion of syncretism and varying rates of adoption of Islam are being explored in, for instance, the Banda islands of Indonesia (Lape 2000), Bengal (Eaton 1993), the Gao region of Mali (Insoll 1996, 2000), and on the East African coast (Horton and Middleton 2000). Both the ideas underpinning these processes and the processes themselves have been explored by this author elsewhere (Insoll 2003: 29-34). The primary point arising from this work is that complexity must be accorded its due place; complexity both in the reasons which can be suggested to explain why people converted to Islam, and in the models which can be advanced to explain this phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. Partly because generalisations are often over-ruled by the fact that religion is very much an individual experience (Geertz 1968). Ultimately we are attempting to set a course between what Van Beek and Blakely (1994: 3) describe as the “Scylla of universal categorization (ethnocentrism in disguise) and the Charybdis of extreme relativism”.

Conversion to Islam in the Gao region of Mali, for example, can be explored with reference to a model based in part on archaeological data postulating phased conversion allied with syncretic adaptation (Insoll 1996, 2000). Within this region the earliest converts to Islam would seem to have been the nomadic populations, consequent, in part, upon their early exposure to Islam through acting as guides to Muslims engaged in trans-Saharan trade. However, the ease with which they converted is not solely explained by notions of familiarity but also, perhaps, because the degree of upheaval involved in nomadic conversion is less pronounced than that suffered by agriculturalists, for instance (see for example Levtzion 1986). Hence factors such as the ease of worship which Islam enjoys would have been significant, allied with a potential lesser importance ascribed to physical ties to the land, and in turn to the degree of ancestral significance lent the land. In other words, the bonds were more easily broken and syncretic mechanisms reconciling the old and the new were not so essential.

The second group to convert to Islam within this region, and indeed throughout the Western Sahel, would seem to have been certain of the urban population, and again a practical explanation can be proposed to account for this. Specifically, they might have benefited from preferable trade conditions with Muslim co-religionists (Brett 1983), or, alternatively, the appeal of Islam within the urban environment was through its ability to provide cohesiveness due to the notion of community (*ummah*) which underpins it. This is a factor of potential significance in overcoming ethnic differences which were perhaps more manifest in towns, through the likely proximity of a variety of different ethnic, social, and other groups (see Insoll 2003). Again, the development of syncretic mechanisms to reconcile the old with the new appears not to have been a pressing concern.

It is apparent that the last group to convert to Islam in this region were the sedentary agriculturalists, forming the bulk of the population. Here, a feasible interpretation to explain this apparent tardiness in conversion would seem to be related to the collision of different calendrical and temporal systems, which more than just prescribing when crops might be sown or harvested, provided the whole framework by which being was structured. Linked to this were the concepts about the ancestors, something already referred to as of

potentially lesser significance for nomads in the region. Ancestral bonds and frameworks linking human and land were negotiated primarily through the construct of relationships, “whether with other living people, or with the spirits of the dead, or with animals, or with cleared land, or with the bush” (Ranger 1991: 109). These were in turn manifest through what Ranger (*ibid*) terms “cults”, as in the maintenance of cults of the land, for example. The existence of the ancestral framework of belief and its associated practices meant that breaking with or altering the balance which it sustained through conversion to Islam might have been an immensely difficult conceptual undertaking, as Bravmann (1974) has argued. 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; perhaps owing to the imposition of a new calendar associated with Islam, a calendar described by Denny (1985: 71) as “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”. Moreover, the associated implications for conceptions of land, its links with people and ancestors, issues of ownership, fertility, and the like, also have to be considered as pertinent factors for the development of syncretic traditions as well.

Although this model has been developed to fit within the context of the exploration of the acceptance of Islam in an area of West Africa, the notions of syncretism, phasing, and adaptation are recurring features within conversion processes elsewhere, though how they are configured varies and is far from universal. Reference has already been made to Eaton’s (1993) work exploring conversion to Islam from Hinduism in Bengal. Here, he makes the important point that the term ‘conversion’ is difficult to apply for “it ordinarily connotes a sudden and total transformation in which a prior religious identity is wholly rejected and replaced by a new one” (*ibid*: 269). In Bengal, as in West Africa, this is patently not the case. Change occurs slowly and Eaton suggests three phases by which it takes place (*ibid*); “inclusion”, “identification” and “displacement”. This model allows for gradual religious change, and importantly, assimilation of older elements within the process, and is thus broadly comparable to the processes of Islamic conversion in much of sub-Saharan Africa, being long drawn out, and inclusive of older elements.

Lape (2000) has recently also developed a ‘staggered’ model to help explain the processes of conversion to Islam in the Banda Islands of eastern Indonesia. Here, he suggests “that the process of Islamization took several centuries, and remained incomplete at least into the early sixteenth century” (*ibid*: 145). Moreover, he sets these processes within a three-stage conversion framework invoking notions of ‘quarantine’, ‘mixing’, and ‘reform’, and in so doing draws upon models discussed by this author in an African context (Insoll 1996). The net result of his research is to reiterate the complexity of religious identity(ies) and their archaeological recognition.

Regardless of attempts to unravel the complexities of possible syncretism and conversion processes, the overriding necessity is for recognition that the notion of ‘conversion’ from one religious form to another does not adequately define what usually occurs. These difficulties are voiced by Ray (1976: 184) when he states that, “it would be misleading to speak of the process of Islamization as a process of ‘conversion’ from African belief to orthodox Islamic religion. A gradual blending took place between African and Islamic elements, making a new configuration which assumed different forms in different areas”. Of course, both ‘Africa’ and ‘Islam’ can equally be easily replaced by other descriptive

referents of either religious or geographical attribution and the point remains the same.

We have to recognise that religions as autonomous, rigidly bounded units do not necessarily exist. Rigid categories of diagnostic criteria such as those that differentiate 'world' or 'traditional' religions on the basis of a checklist of attributes are frequently dubious (see Shaw 1990 for critique), as often are those used to define individual religions therein. Again these are ideas which this author has explored elsewhere (Insoll 2004). Ultimately, people think they need classificatory categories (Foucault 1970, 1977), but it could be argued that people have been lazy and hence such classificatory categories have survived for such a long time. Moreover, this obsession with categorization denies what Barnes (1997:11) aptly defines as "bi-religiosity", taken by this author to mean the simultaneous co-existence of religious traditions within the individual. We perhaps need within our archaeology of religions to explore more fully the notions of syncretism and religious dualism, of multiple elements comfortably co-existing, and in so doing defying neat categorization. 'Queer archaeology' (Dowson 2000) can be extended into the domain of the archaeological study of religions if it helps us to acknowledge complexity and the "other". The prevailing desire for classification can be wholly inappropriate. In this instance, and in relation to the primary case study just considered, the question can be raised as to where the boundaries of Islam cease and those of African traditional religions begin.

Often the definitions of religious forms used by archaeologists would appear to be a reflection of the classificatory conundrum which Needham (1975: 365) refers to as the presumption of the existence of monothetic classes of social facts when in reality they are polythetic. Archaeology offers an ideal way of reassessing categorization (Insoll forthcoming), and a way of cracking the preoccupation with religious classification and categories might be to consider what Barnes (1997: 13) describes as Wittgenstein's theory of "family resemblances" (1953), which has been translated, in turn, into the methodology of "polythetic classification" (Needham 1975). Although it is inadvisable to make the mistake of promoting this as a panacea for understanding the complex character of religions, its utility lies in identifying overlapping similarities/resemblances rather than "monotypic" (Barnes 1997: 13) features. Hence, archaeology and material culture could and should be used, for example, to assess where the boundaries, if any, between African traditional religions and Islam exist, rather than presuming immediately that a clear cut distinction is already in place before the earth is broken or a text consulted.

Conclusions

Although the ideas contained within this paper are by their nature tentative, it is hoped that they serve to indicate, as John Alexander has previously done, that the archaeology of religion is the 'poor cousin' of our disciplinary interests. Alexander's paper has served to isolate many of the relevant research themes which are now of interest within the archaeology of Islam, and within the broader field of the archaeology of religion. His willingness to adopt a comparative cross-cultural and temporal perspective should be commended as the only way to begin to approach the 'big' metaphysical questions such as the archaeological recognition of religion. In an era of increasing research specialisation where we build geographical or temporal walls around our little pieces of expertise such a breadth of vision should be recognised.

References

- Alexander, J. 1979. 'The archaeological recognition of religion: The examples of Islam in Africa and 'Urnfields' in Europe', in B. Burnham and J. Kingsbury (eds), *Space, Hierarchy and Settlement*, pp. 215-28. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, BAR S59
- Alexander, J. 1993. 'The salt industries of West Africa: a preliminary study', in T. Shaw, P. Sinclair, B. Andah, and A. Okpoko (eds), *The Archaeology of Africa*, pp. 652-57. London: Routledge.
- Alexander, J. 2001. 'Islam, archaeology and slavery in Africa', *World Archaeology* 33: 44-60.
- Barnes, S. 1997. 'The Many Faces of Ogun', in S. Barnes (ed.), *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, pp. 1-26. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bowie, F. 2000. *The Anthropology of Religion*. Oxford: Blackwells.
- Bravmann, R. 1974. *Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brett, M. 1983. 'Islam and Trade in the Bilad al-Sudan, 10th - 11th Century AD', *Journal of African History* 24: 431-40.
- Cassirer, E. 1951. *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Denny, F. 1985. 'Islamic ritual: perspectives and theories', in R.C. Martin (ed.), *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, pp. 63-77. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Dobres, M-A. and Robb, J. 2000. *Agency in Archaeology*. London: Routledge.
- Dowson, T. 2000. 'Why Queer Archaeology? An Introduction'. *World Archaeology* 32: 161-5.
- Eaton, R.M. 1993. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eliade, M. 1969. *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. 1970 (2002). *The Order of Things*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Power/Knowledge*. London: Harvester Press.
- Foucault, M. 1985. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock.
- Garwood, P., D. Jennings, R. Skeates, and J. Toms (eds). 1991. *Sacred and Profane*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- Geertz, C. 1968. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Giddens, A. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Giddens, A. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Horia, V. 1969. 'The Forest as Mandala', in J.M. Kitagawa and C.H. Long (eds), *Myths and Symbols: Studies in Honour of Mircea Eliade*, pp. 387-95. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Horton, M. and J. Middleton. 2000. *The Swahili*. Oxford: Blackwells.
- Hubert, J. 1994. 'Sacred Beliefs and Beliefs of Sacredness', in D. Carmichael, J. Hubert, B. Reeves, and A. Schanche (eds), *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places*, pp. 9-19. London: Routledge. (One World Archaeology Series.)
- Insoll, T. 1996. *Islam, Archaeology and History: Gao Region (Mali), ca. AD 900-1250*. Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, BAR S647.
- _____. 1999a. *The Archaeology of Islam*. Oxford: Blackwells.
- _____. (ed). 1999b. *Case Studies in Archaeology and World Religion: The Proceedings of the*

- Cambridge Conference. Oxford: Archaeopress, BAR S755.
- _____. (with other contributions). 2000. *Urbanism, Archaeology and Trade: Further Observations on the Gao Region (Mali). The 1996 Fieldseason Results*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, BAR S829.
- _____. (ed). 2001a. *Archaeology and World Religion*. London: Routledge.
- _____. 2001b. 'Introduction: The Archaeology of World Religion', in T. Insoll (ed), *Archaeology and World Religion*, pp. 1-32. London: Routledge.
- _____. 2003. *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 2004. *Archaeology, Ritual, Religion*. London: Routledge.
- _____. (forthcoming). *Archaeology: The Conceptual Challenge*.
- Lane, P. 2001. 'The Archaeology of Christianity in Global Perspective', in T. Insoll (ed), *Archaeology and World Religion*, pp.148-81. London: Routledge.
- Lape, P. 2000. 'Political dynamics and religious change in the late Pre-Colonial Banda Islands, Indonesia', *World Archaeology* 32: 138-55.
- Levtzion, N. 1986. 'Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa. an introductory essay', *Asian and African Studies* 20: 7-26.
- Mautner, T. 1997. *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Penguin.
- Needham, R. 1972. *Belief, Language and Experience*. Oxford: Blackwells.
- _____. 1975. 'Polythetic Classification', *Man* 10: 349-69.
- Ranger, T. 1991. 'African Traditional Religions', in S. Sutherland and P. Clarke (eds), *The Study of Religion: Traditional and New Religion*, pp. 106-14. London: Routledge.
- Ray, B.C. 1976. *African Religions*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Renfrew, C. 1985. *The Archaeology of Cult*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- _____. 1994. 'The Archaeology of Religion', in C. Renfrew and E. Zubrow (eds), *The Ancient Mind*, pp. 47-54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shaw, R. 1990. 'The Invention of 'African Traditional Religion'', *Religion* 20: 339-53.
- Tarlow, S. 2000. 'Emotion in Archaeology', *Current Anthropology* 41: 713-46.
- Van Beek, W. and T. Blakely. 1994. 'Introduction', in T. Blakely, W. Van Beek, and D. Thomson (eds), *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression*, pp. 1-20. London: James Currey.
- Wittgenstein, L. (transl. G.M. Anscombe). 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwells.