HISTORIES OF RELIGION IN AFRICA*

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Introductory

This lecture explores some of the questions that have arisen out of my past research and which I hope will inform my future research. These questions concern certain received conceptual and analytical frameworks that are employed in the study of religion in Africa, and how they affect the historical study of religion. Thus the title of the lecture, ‘Histories of Religion in Africa’. I speak of ‘histories’ in the plural because my own research has led me to the conclusion that the historicity of religion can most effectively be evoked by focusing on the inherent heterogeneity and pluralism of religious concept and practice which is evident in virtually every social context. But when I speak of ‘religion’ in the singular I am in fact raising a question because, somewhat paradoxically, it seems that the historical analysis of religious pluralism requires a frame of reference that transcends the conceptual constraints imposed by an approach to the study of ‘religions’ (in the plural) as separate, self-contained systems or ‘world views’.

Of course, many persons, especially Christians and Muslims in Africa, justifiably see the religions to which they adhere as cohesive and exclusive self-contained systems. At the same time, however, one is fully aware that neither ‘Christianity’ nor ‘Islam’ is in itself an analytical concept; neither concept can act as a point of reference for identifying and analyzing the actual diversity and variation of what social actors might perceive or experience as Christian or as Islamic in any specific context. Despite the analytic weaknesses of these systemic concepts of religion, they have been readily applied by many researchers to the study of indigenous religion in Africa, usually in the form of ethnically-defined ‘religions’, although there is little evidence to suggest that participants in these religious practices in the past perceived them as
exclusive, self-contained religions. In fact, most African languages do not seem in the past to have included a word that can convincingly be translated into English as ‘religion’.

My interest in these questions is specifically historiographical: how can one approach the historical study of both Islam (which has been the focus of most of my research) and indigenous African religious concept and practice within a single conceptual and analytical framework?

This lecture is an attempt to describe how this problematic has evolved out of my own research and to conclude with a few reflections about how one might go forward from here. I propose to approach this task through the presentation of three brief histories (in reality, little more than thematic outlines) drawn from my own research into Islamic religious culture in Africa. Islamic religious culture is a concept with which I began to experiment several years ago as a means of displacing and challenging normative notions of ‘Islam’ as analytical frames of reference (Brenner, In press, b and c). I was looking for a way to identify and analyze within a single conceptual framework the many variations in how Muslims have understood, practised and expressed their religion, for a way to go beyond the dichotomy which prevails in so much scholarship between ‘established Islam’ and ‘popular Islam’. Islamic religious culture is a much broader and more inclusive conceptual frame of reference than ‘Islam’ and includes all cultural manifestations and social or political institutions that are defined as Islamic by Muslims themselves in any given social context. A history of Islamic religious culture would aim to locate socially and to relativize all doctrinal claims by Muslims, whatever their scholarly attainments, about what is or is not ‘properly Islamic’.

The first of these three outline histories is constructed around the life and career of a single individual and is designed to illustrate some of the various ways in which Muslims have organized themselves socially and politically in West Africa; the second is a kind of pedagogical history which focuses on the transformations undergone by a written religious text when it is introduced into a non-literate milieu; and the third explores the history of a specific religious practice: a form of Muslim divination. Each therefore falls within the confines of Islamic religious culture, but the focus of the histories moves from doctrinal and political issues about what constitutes a ‘proper’ Muslim society, to a widely distributed popular form of religious practice that many Muslims over the centuries have refused to accept as being Islamic at all and which, as we shall see, has been adopted and adapted by many non-Muslim religious experts.
1. *A socio-political history*

The first history is constructed around the figure of Shaikh ‘Uthman dan Fodio, renowned Islamic scholar and leader of a *jihad*, or Muslim holy war, which during the first decade of the nineteenth century politically, socially and religiously transformed much of what is today northern Nigeria and immediately adjacent territories. Indeed, the success of this movement ramified throughout much of West Africa in subsequent decades, inspiring several other important *jihad* and attempts to establish Muslim states.

Much of the historiography concerning this *jihad* seems to start from the assumption that the state that resulted from it, the Sokoto Caliphate (see Map 1), was the ideal form of Muslim polity for which all learned scholars longed and, by implication, that all other forms of socio-political formation were felt by Muslim scholars to fall short of this ideal. My own reading of the available evidence, however, leads to the very different conclusion that the state was only one socio-political option among several that Muslims had constructed and doctrinally endorsed in the region. The aim of this brief outline history, therefore, is to explore Shaikh ‘Uthman’s life story as a means of describing some of these variations in Islamic socio-political organization which Muslims produced in West Africa.

The term ‘Islamic socio-political organization’ refers to a polity or social formation that is legitimized with reference to allegedly Islamic principles. I insert the word ‘allegedly’ because the political interpretation of doctrinal principles was often the subject of contestation among

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Map 1. West Africa
Muslims. Islamically-based claims to political legitimacy inevitably rely on references to fundamental Islamic principles, which in turn rely on a demonstrable command of Islamic knowledge by recognized religious experts. But such claims also rest on local social and political conditions, and indeed on varying social and political strategies, thus producing a wide range of different forms of Islamic socio-political organization.

The dynastic Muslim state was one form of Islamic socio-political organization which had existed in West Africa from as early as the eleventh century in Kanem-Borno, and subsequently in the empires of Mali and Songhay. Shaikh 'Uthman was born and grew up in the Hausa kingdom of Gobir, in the predominantly Hausa-speaking region of what is today northwest Nigeria and neighbouring parts of Niger. Gobir was ruled by a dynastic family that had converted to Islam several centuries earlier, and it was of course accepted by many Muslims as a 'Muslim state'. Virtually all persons holding political office in Gobir, as well as a sizable proportion of the population, would have considered themselves to be Muslim. However, political tension often existed in this kind of Muslim state between the dynastic 'rulers' and the Muslim scholars ('ulama) who were called upon to advise them and to legitimate their rule in Islamic terms.

Shaikh 'Uthman's career illustrates some of the political and social tensions between rulers and scholars that prevailed in many dynastic states. He spent some period of time teaching young members of the royal family and was therefore associated to some degree with the Gobir court. At the same time, his early reformist preaching focused on his claims that Islamic practice in Gobir was unacceptably 'mixed' with non-Islamic and prohibited practices and behaviours. Eventually, a following began to form around him of Muslim scholars and students who endorsed his teachings and criticisms. As this community grew, and the Gobir leadership felt increasingly threatened, sporadic conflicts eventually led to war, which Shaikh 'Uthman legitimated as a jihad by accusing the Gobir rulers of apostacy for having attacked his own 'true' Muslim community.2

This brief resumé of the origins of the jihad is accurate enough in itself, but it obscures other complexities of the situation. Shaikh 'Uthman was a member of a toorodbe lineage.3 The toorodbe were a sub-group of the Fulani or Fulbe ethnic group which originated in the Senegal river valley; Shaikh 'Uthman's family, like many other toorodbe, had migrated into Gobir some generations earlier. The toorodbe represent a form of Islamic socio-political organization which differs significantly from the
And political power; the latter lineages sebbe Muslim, to religious another: Muslim, hassan Maures military only should and existed and exchange upon to services; of Islamic the dyula peoples further south, there were the Muslim mory lineages and the tun tigi ruling lineages (Launay 1982). In both these latter cases, members of the ruling lineages tended themselves to be Muslim, but according to many scholars they were not ‘good’ Muslims because they often flouted many of the basic tenets of Islam. The tun tigi, for example, were reputed to be both hard fighters and hard drinkers who rarely even prayed!

Muslim and ruling/warrior lineages therefore complemented one another: the Muslims in effect bought a certain degree of autonomy and military protection from the rulers in exchange for blessings and religious protection that they provided, and the Muslims also agreed to offer their religious endorsement of the established political order. And this complementary relationship was supported by doctrinal arguments, the best documented being those of al-Hajj Salim Suware, a Dyula scholar of the fifteenth century who held the view that Muslims should avoid all participation in politics because political power served only to corrupt religion (Wilks 1968; Sanneh 1989).

‘Muslim lineages’ seem to have emerged as forms of Islamic socio-political organization in contexts that were deeply informed by lineage ideologies and where the regional political economy was organized as a collection of various hereditary occupation groups (Tamari 1991, 1997). In this context, ‘Islam’ functioned almost as a kind of hereditary craft, the expert practitioners of which provided various religious services such as prayer, divination, healing, teaching, etc, to both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. And like other hereditary occupation groups,
the Muslim lineages constituted semi-autonomous polities with their own social structures, systems of production and reproduction, while occupying a specific niche in the wider political economy.

Shaikh ‘Uthman grew up and was educated in the social and ideological environment of a Muslim lineage, although he seems to have given himself over more to classical Islamic scholarship than to the Muslim healing arts. In addition, like most Muslim scholars of his time, he was also a committed Sufi. At this period of time Sufism, usually referred to in English as Islamic mysticism, was almost exclusively limited to an elite of religious scholars whose spiritual persona was seen to be an essential complement to their scholarly expertise. Sufi devotionalism was intended to bring inner spiritual benefits that could also be manifested socially in the form of predictive dreams and visions and by the performance of miracles. Much of the success of Shaikh ‘Uthman’s leadership must be attributed to the popular perception of him as a ‘saint’ who was blessed with such visions and miracles. Indeed, central to his efforts to legitimate his *jihad* was a vision in which the Prophet and ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (founder of the Qadiriyya Sufi order) appeared to him and presented him with the Sword of Truth as a symbol of his religious authority (Hiskett 1973).

In the later eighteenth century, the nature of West African Sufism had begun to change. Under the leadership of Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti, then resident in the central Sahara north of Timbuktu, Sufi practice was being transformed from a type of personal devotionalism limited largely to the scholarly elite into a popularly-based Sufi order whose members saw themselves as belonging to a self-conscious corporate group. Al-Mukhtar, himself a member of a Muslim lineage, was successfully building a new kind of Islamic socio-political organization based not on inherited status but on spiritual submission to himself as a Sufi shaikh. At least in theory, his branch of the Qadiriyya Sufi order was an open community of Muslims which all Muslims were invited to join voluntarily; one was not recruited into the Qadiriyya by force of arms. In other words, this Sufi order developed a new version of the a-political ideology of the Muslim lineages (Brenner 1988).

In the late eighteenth century, Shaikh ‘Uthman submitted to the Sufi spiritual authority of Sidi al-Mukhtar, and one wonders to what extent at that time he may have wished to emulate al-Mukhtar’s Sufi project. He certainly identified himself as a Qadiri Sufi and attempted to base some of the solidarity of his reformist movement on Sufi submission to his own spiritual leadership. And like al-Mukhtar, he was seeking to build a new kind of Muslim community that might transcend the con-
strains of the Muslim lineage. But social, political and economic conditions in Gobir were quite different from those in the Sahara. ‘Uthman found himself drawn into a political and military conflict from which his community emerged victorious, but the Islamic socio-political organization that was put in place took the form of a state which had been established through the use of force and in which legitimacy was founded, not in spiritual submission to a Sufi shaikh, but in legal submission to the interpretations of the scholars who had seized political power for themselves.

I must now conclude this first history, but I hope the point has been made that the socio-political landscape in West Africa was diverse and complex, which in turn produced equally diverse doctrinal responses from Muslims. I also wanted to suggest that Shaikh ‘Uthman seems to have been confronted with numerous political and doctrinal choices as he moved toward jihad, which in my view may not have been so inevitable as many researchers have suggested.

2. A pedagogical history

We must now move to our second history, which is very different from the first, although not completely unrelated to it. It focuses on the history of a very brief theological text written in the fifteenth century by the North African scholar Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Sanusi and entitled al-‘Aqida as-sughra, (The Lesser Creed).6 The ‘Aqida was one of several major works on tawhid (the theology of the unity of God) written by al-Sanusi, and it became an integral part of the classical religious studies curriculum in north and west Africa. Al-Sanusi was widely recognized as a great scholar and mystic, and it was his success in combining theology with mysticism that seems to account for the widespread influence of this particular text in West Africa.

The ‘Aqida as-sughra falls within the field of scholastic theology, kalam, which aims to confirm religious beliefs by means of logical proofs and reasoning. The text contends that rational judgment is limited to three categories: the necessary, the impossible and the contingent, and that it is a canonical obligation for every able Muslim to know that which is necessary, impossible or contingent with respect to God and his prophets. Having elaborated these points, the text concludes with the affirmation that the shahada, the Muslim profession of faith, ‘There is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God’, contains within it all the theological principles explained in the ‘Aqida, and asserts that ‘the intelligent person’ should recite the shahada:
... frequently while calling to mind the articles of faith that they contain in a manner that they and their meaning penetrate his flesh and blood. Then, if God wills, he will discover, their boundless secrets and wonders. (Muhammad b. Yusuf, 1896: 10; 17).

The popularity of this text no doubt resided in part in the fact that it was a kind of short course for acquiring knowledge of the basic principles of Islam, plus a prescription for gaining mystical insight. It is a good example of the mixture of intellectual learning and personal devotionalism that characterized concepts of Islamic knowledge in Africa. Numerous commentaries were written on this text, and some scholars rendered its contents into verse as an aid to easier memorization. I wish to present here some examples of how the text was transformed when it was introduced into social contexts where Islamic religious knowledge was transmitted orally in languages other than Arabic.

I first came into contact with the 'Aqida as-sughra through one of its distant descendants, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. 'What is religion?' (Bà 1980: 211).
This diagram is a rather formalized representation of a mnemonic device invented by Ceerno Bokar Saalif Taal in Bandiagara, Mali, in the 1930s that he designed to assist in the teaching of basic Islamic principles to non-literate Muslims and recent converts to Islam. The teaching that accompanied this diagram was transmitted orally in Fulfulde, the language of the Fulani or Fulbe, of whom the toorodbe of Shaikh ‘Uthman were a sub-group. The teaching took the form of a kind of Muslim catechism, a series of questions and answers, related in the form of a story about a prospective Dogon convert who comes to a Muslim teacher to learn about Islam. Each question and answer is represented by a dot or line drawn in the sand of the teacher’s courtyard, as represented in the diagram. The name of the teaching comes from the first question posed: ‘What is religion?’; the answer to which is ‘Religion is a path’.

The first few questions and answers make the point that Islam, the true path to salvation, is constructed on three pillars: (A) Islam, submission to God, (B) iman, faith, and (C) ihsan, faultless conduct. After explaining the basic elements of these three pillars, the teacher then moves to a discussion of the shahada, which is described as knowledge in God: ‘What one can know in God is not tangible. One can know three states of God: (A14) that which is necessary for Him, (A15) that which is impossible for Him, (A16) and that which is contingent for Him. The teacher then lists 25 necessary and 25 impossible attributes of God (D and E 1-25), for example, existence versus non-existence, anteriority versus having a beginning, etc. He subsequently names 16 necessary and 16 impossible attributes of the prophets and one’s faith in them. The teaching ends with the statement that ‘Whoever does not possess knowledge of the hidden teaching of the double formula of the profession of faith (the shahada) articulates it without effect. And whoever articulates it without effect is not a believer, and the unbeliever is not on the way toward salvation’ (Brenner 1984: 192).

Clearly, this teaching shares a number of features with the ‘Aqida as-sughra of al-Sanusi. Ceerno Bokar, however, does not seem to have been inspired to invent his catechistic teaching directly from al-Sanusi’s text, but from translations and commentaries on it in the Fulfulde language known as kabbe. Kabbe is the Fulfulde translation of the plural form of ‘aqida (‘aqi‘id). All of the documented kabbe texts are oral, although evidence exists to suggest that some may have been written as early as the seventeenth century in Fulfulde using Arabic script (Brenner 1984: 81). The kabbe texts may have originated as Fulfulde translations and commentaries on the ‘Aqida as-sughra for use in Muslim religious schools,
but, by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *kabbe* had become an almost totally oral teaching. Although the recorded texts vary considerably in specific content, they are all clearly based on the *'Aqida as-sughra* and include the assertions that intelligent judgment is divided into three parts, the necessary, the impossible and the contingent, that all Muslims are required to know the necessary, impossible and contingent attributes of God and of the prophets, because 'This knowledge [of *tawhid*] enables the competent adult to become a believer who is certain of his belief and whose heart can see into his religion'.

The original purpose of the *kabbe* texts was pedagogical, and they were popular among Fulfulde-speakers throughout West Africa, the practice having been documented in Futa Jallon, the Masina region of Mali, in Burkina Faso, and in northern Nigeria and Niger (see Map 1). But in some areas these recitations became the basis of a kind of sectarian Muslim practice. These practitioners of *kabbe*, the *kabbenkoobe* as they came to be called, were convinced that only those who memorized these texts were ‘true believers’. Only they were allowed to recite their prayers in full or were qualified to perform the ritual slaughter of animals. Nor were young men allowed to marry until they memorized the texts.

Shaikh 'Uthman was a persistent critic of this practice, and he wrote a number of treatises against the *kabbenkoobe* (Brenner 1987). He did not oppose the tenets of al-Sanusi’s text, but the use to which it had been put in defining one’s status as a Muslim on the basis of memorizing a particular text. In Shaikh 'Uthman’s view, a person became a Muslim by sincerely professing his or her faith in the words of the *sha-hada*; after that, the nature and quality of an individual Muslim’s belief was between himself or herself and God. He further argued that ordinary Muslims were not required to learn the creeds and their proofs, which for the most part, he alleged, they could not understand. These criticisms conform with the objectives of Shaikh ‘Uthman’s own project, but what is more intriguing, in the light of the first history that I presented, would be to explore the social contexts that nurtured the production of the oral *kabbe* texts and their associated practices. It seems unlikely that the sectarian practices of the *kabbenkoobe* would have emerged in a community of literate scholars who had access to the original Arabic text. Perhaps the *kabbenkoobe* were descendants of slaves who had been integrated into Fulfulde-speaking communities, or perhaps they were Fulbe who had been recently converted to Islam, and who had not been given access to Muslim learning and who were attempting to develop their own form of Islamic socio-political organization.
We cannot follow up these lines of enquiry here, although it seems more than likely that further research into the social composition of the kabbenkoobe communities would help one to understand more fully the development of their sectarian practices. However, the point of this brief history is not to explore the social history of the kabbenkoobe, but to give an example of how Muslim teachings are transformed depending on the social contexts in which they are transmitted, and how such transformations can provoke doctrinal debate.

3. A history of religious practice: divination

We must now move to our third history, which focuses on a form of divination known in Arabic as khatt ar-raml, or sand writing, the precise origins of which are unknown but whose spread in sub-Saharan Africa was associated with the classic manual on the practice written by Abu 'Abdallah al-Zanati in the thirteenth century.9

Certain Muslim scholars have consistently challenged the Islamic legitimacy of khatt ar-raml despite the efforts of its practitioners to prove otherwise by citing certain hadith (traditions of the Prophet) and even verses from the Qur'an. My concern here is not with disputes about its legitimacy; the fact is that khatt ar-raml was practised by Muslims and was clearly identified both by its practitioners and its clients as being a Muslim form of divination.

Khatt ar-raml, or sand writing, acquired this name because the divining knowledge associated with it is based on signs comprised of marks made in sand which has been smoothed level on a tray specifically designed for this use. And khatt ar-raml lends itself well to historical enquiry because the formal properties of its sixteen divination signs make it easily recognizable and therefore relatively easy to trace across time and space.

The signs are tetragrams consisting of four elements of one or two dots. The system of signs is shown in Figure 2 'at rest'; each of the sixteen different signs is shown residing in one of sixteen 'houses'. Both the signs and the houses have specific names and are associated with a wide range of referents, for example: male or female, good or bad associations, the four elements of air, earth, fire and water, the cardinal points of the compass, the signs of the Zodiac, days of the week, months of the year, numbers, letters of the alphabet, parts of the body, planets, colours, and finally prophets or Muslim caliphs. During a consultation, signs are produced by a random system of generation which also distributes them among the sixteen 'houses', and the resulting
interpretation is determined by the configuration of which signs fall in which houses.

The presence of khatt ar-raml has been documented in virtually every region of Africa where Muslims have penetrated in the past; examples of this widespread diffusion in time and space are illustrated in Map 2. The activities of Muslim diviners were not limited to Muslim societies; Muslim diviners were present in the Mutapa court (Zimbabwe) in the seventeenth century (Map 2, ref. 6), and in the court of Abomey (Danxome) as early as the eighteenth century (Map 2, ref. 8). Nor was the influence of khatt ar-raml limited only to Africa; al-Zanati's text, or versions of it, were translated into Latin, Greek, and even Provençal, and khatt ar-raml was popular in parts of Europe until at least the seventeenth century, where it came to be known as geomancy (Map 2, ref. 3).

In its literate versions, khatt ar-raml retained a high degree of consistency as it spread across such vast spaces, at least in its formal structures and the names and basic meanings given to its signs and houses. (See Fig. 3 for a selected comparative list of the names of the signs.) However, in certain regions of Africa the practice was adapted by local religious experts to conform more directly with local religious concept and practice. Perhaps the most extensively documented example of this
kind of adaptation is that of *sikidy* in Madagascar (Map 2, ref. 4). The word *sikidy* is derived from the Arabic *shakl*, or sign; the practice was first recorded in Madagascar in the seventeenth century, by which time it had already been fully adapted to local Islamic religious culture. For example, in some variations of *sikidy*, the signs are composed with seeds rather than with marks in sand. The names of the signs and houses have been transposed into various Malagasy languages and their interpretations have been adapted to local cultural referents (see Fig. 3); *sikidy* texts have been composed in Malagasy languages using Arabic script (Beaujard 1988). More significantly, *sikidy* is often used in conjunction with the manufacture of protective amulets and also as a means...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sign</th>
<th>khatt ar-raml (Maupoil 1943b: 5-6)</th>
<th>dion soutun (Sissoko 1936: 253)</th>
<th>cien (Kassibo 1992: 551ff)</th>
<th>sikidy (Vérin and Rajaonarimanana 1991: 64)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>al-kausaj one with small beard</td>
<td>Sidjou</td>
<td>Janfa</td>
<td>Alikasajy charm; mourning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>al-dahka laughter</td>
<td>Adama</td>
<td>Adama</td>
<td>Alahijana woman; death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>al-'ataba al-dakhila inner threshold</td>
<td>Mahamadi</td>
<td>Maleju the Mahdi</td>
<td>Alakaosy child; evil thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>al-bayad whiteness</td>
<td>Albayalou</td>
<td>Albayada whiteness</td>
<td>Alabiavo water spirit; joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>al-tariq path, road</td>
<td>Tarika</td>
<td>Tariki</td>
<td>Taraiky emaciation; path, road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>al-qabd al-kharj outward grasp</td>
<td>Kala-Zan</td>
<td>N'gansa suffering</td>
<td>Adalo chief or child; tears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>al-humra redness</td>
<td>Amara</td>
<td>Lumara son-in-law</td>
<td>Alahamora diviner; crowd, mob; grief, trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>al-mankus reversed</td>
<td>Almankeursi</td>
<td>Mankussi death</td>
<td>Alikisy earth; auspicious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>al-nasr al-kharj outward victory</td>
<td>Kala</td>
<td>Kalalaw the Prophet;</td>
<td>Alahasady food; anger, wrath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>al-thaqafa refinement</td>
<td>Téréméssé, Dianfa-Almami</td>
<td>Mansa Solomani power</td>
<td>Alokola house; food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>al-ijtima' meeting, union</td>
<td>N'Fali, Badara-Sadia</td>
<td>Badara Ali protector</td>
<td>Alatsimay slave; evil thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>al-nasr al-dakhil inward victory</td>
<td>Anabi-Nouhoun</td>
<td>Nunkoro adversity</td>
<td>Adabara High adversity; God; most sacred</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of mediation between clients and their ancestors who continue to play a significant role in local religious practice despite the continued advance of Islamic religious practice in the region.

In the Mande cultural zone in West Africa (primarily present-day Mali, Map 2, ref. 5) *khatt ar-raml* has given rise over the centuries to several different forms of non-Muslim geomancy variously named in local languages and dialects with words which mean sand or earth. In a recent article, Bréhima Kassibo, a Malian anthropologist, has explored the various transformations which have taken place as this form of geomancy has moved into a non-literate, non-Muslim cultural environment. In all the examples studied by Kassibo, the formal aspects of the practice, that is the forms of the signs and houses and even the methods of deriving and manipulating them, have remained largely unchanged from the classical model of al-Zanati, although their practitioners claim them to be of non-Muslim origin. For example, the system of geomancy practiced in Mali called *dion soutoun* is said to have been introduced locally by two diviners who were initiated into its practice by a *jinni* (Sissoko 1936). The formal structure and operations of *dion soutoun* are precisely the same as in the classical Muslim system, although the names of the signs and of the houses have been changed (see Fig. 3), and the interpretative catalogue has been modified as the system has been adapted to the new cultural and religious context.

A similar pattern of adaptation has been identified amongst the

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**Figure 3. Comparative list of the names of signs and their meanings.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sign</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>khatt ar-raml</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Maupoil 1943b: 5-6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dion soutoun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Sissoko 1936: 253)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>sikidy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Vérin and Rajaonarimanana 1991: 64)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| 13 | *al-‘ataba* |
| 14 | *nagy al-khadd* |
| 15 | *al-qabd al-dakhil* |
| 16 | *al-jama’a* |

- *al-‘ataba*: Laonsina, El-Hussain
- *nagy al-khadd*: Djiné Moussa, Ganian
- *al-qabd al-dakhil*: Ansoumane
- *al-jama’a*: Sike

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sign</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laonsina, El-Hussain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lusiné twins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karija slave; cool speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tontigi man of knowledge, initiate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alakarabo robbers, rogues; misfortune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mori Zumani learned Muslim money; misfortune unhappiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamati Moussa abundance; end of captivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asombola abundance</td>
</tr>
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In the Mande cultural zone in West Africa (primarily present-day Mali, Map 2, ref. 5) *khatt ar-raml* has given rise over the centuries to several different forms of non-Muslim geomancy variously named in local languages and dialects with words which mean sand or earth. In a recent article, Bréhima Kassibo, a Malian anthropologist, has explored the various transformations which have taken place as this form of geomancy has moved into a non-literate, non-Muslim cultural environment. In all the examples studied by Kassibo, the formal aspects of the practice, that is the forms of the signs and houses and even the methods of deriving and manipulating them, have remained largely unchanged from the classical model of al-Zanati, although their practitioners claim them to be of non-Muslim origin. For example, the system of geomancy practiced in Mali called *dion soutoun* is said to have been introduced locally by two diviners who were initiated into its practice by a *jinni* (Sissoko 1936). The formal structure and operations of *dion soutoun* are precisely the same as in the classical Muslim system, although the names of the signs and of the houses have been changed (see Fig. 3), and the interpretative catalogue has been modified as the system has been adapted to the new cultural and religious context.

A similar pattern of adaptation has been identified amongst the
Shona-speaking peoples of central Africa. In a pair of recent articles in this journal, Wim van Binsbergen has argued that the Shona four-tablet divination system known as hakata was influenced at some stage in its development from contact with khatt ar-raml, or perhaps with sikidy (van Binsbergen 1995, 1996). He argues that this contact and influence may well have taken place among religious experts associated with the Mutapa court as early as the seventeenth century.

As illustrated in Fig. 4, each of the four tablets used in hakata divination has different features and names that distinguish it from the others. When they are cast during a divination session, they can form any one of sixteen possible configurations depending on which tablets fall face up or face down. Van Binsbergen has demonstrated that the meanings associated with certain of these configurations conform with those of certain of the signs of khatt ar-raml.

If these three examples demonstrate that khatt ar-raml has been adapted and transformed for use in non-Muslim societies, historians would like to know more about precisely how these processes of adaptation came about. Here, the work of Kassibo represents an important advance in several ways. According to him, the religious expertise and efficacy of diviners in the Mande zone depended on their relationship with the various invisible forces and entities with which they were in ritual contact. He has shown that divination and its related esoteric knowledges and practices were transmitted by initiatic means through networks of religious experts and their apprentices. Ample evidence certainly exists to demonstrate that khatt ar-raml and other Muslim esoteric sciences were transmitted in secret and were never publicly proclaimed to be part of the religious studies curriculum; indeed, Muslim practitioners rarely named the person or persons from whom they learned these practices. But Kassibo has shown that these knowledges were shared among both Muslim and non-Muslim religious experts, whose cooperation and mutual influence has been much greater in the past than many researchers have supposed. Kassibo's analysis leads to the hypothesis that khatt ar-raml was introduced and adapted into non-Muslim societies through the purposeful agency of religious experts.

Figure 4. Schematic representation of the Shona four-tablet system (van Binsbergen 1996: 11).
His description of the various esoteric and initiatic dimensions of geomancy in Mali also bears a striking similarity to the practice of Ifá divination among the Yoruba-speaking peoples in southwestern Nigeria. The formal structure of Ifá is very reminiscent of khatt ar-raml, with the slight variation that the signs of Ifá take the form of double tetragrams, as illustrated in Figure 5.

The method for determining signs is different: a divining chain or a set of sixteen palm nuts is used in Ifá, although the signs are marked with the fingers on divining boards covered with special powder, which is certainly reminiscent of the tray of sand or dust used in khatt ar-raml. There are sixteen basic signs in Ifá, as shown in Fig. 5, in which the two tetragrams are identical. However, there are in fact a total of 16 times 16 or 256 signs since the signs can also be asymmetrical when the two tetragrams produced by the divination procedure are not the same, which is most often the case, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Despite these variations, the formal aspects of the Ifá signs strongly
suggest some kind of influence from *khatt ar-raml* or one of its non-Muslim derivatives early in its historical development.

Whatever its precise origins, *Ifa* divination became fully integrated into the local culture, having become one of the most prestigious and influential religious institutions in the region; its vast interpretative catalogue, consisting of the numerous oral texts which are associated with each of the 256 signs, as well as their associated symbols, meanings and sacrifices are fully consonant with local society and cultural expression.

Robin Horton has argued that *Ifa* developed into a major religious institution in the city of Ile Ife, capital of a major kingdom prior to the fifteenth century, from where a religious association of diviners directed and controlled *Ifa* practice (Horton 1979). From this centre (Map 2, ref. 7), the practice of *Ifa* has spread well beyond the Yoruba language culture zone, to the Igbo to the east, the Nupe in the north and the Fon and Ewe to the west. Among these derived forms of *Ifa*, the history and practice of *Fa* among the Fon-speaking peoples of present-day Bénin has been the most thoroughly studied (Map 2, ref. 8).

*Fa* provides an interesting comparison with the situation studied by Kassibo among the Mande: the transformation of a 'classical' system of divination when it is adapted to a new cultural milieu. Bernard Maupoil's detailed study of *Fa* (1943a), undertaken in the 1930s, provides valuable insights into the process of how religious experts share their knowledge across supposed cultural and religious boundaries. *Fa* was brought to the Fon by *Ifa* diviners and has in most ways remained very close to its classical model. The divining procedures and much of the ritual paraphernalia are virtually identical; the names of the signs are also identical except that their pronunciation varies according to the Fon language. However, the content of the interpretive catalogue became localized as it evolved in a Fon-speaking milieu.

*Ifa* therefore seems to have been transformed into *Fa* through a process of apprenticeship and initiation into esoteric knowledges from master practitioners to novices and apprentices. These diviners were bound together, even if sometimes rather loosely, in a religious associ-
ation in which they shared certain ritual duties; *Ijá* and *Fa* diviners were also priests who were required to serve the deities of *Ijá* and *Fa*. Exchange of knowledge was central to the functions of this association, as seems to have been the case among the Muslim *sikády* diviners of Madagascar, and, according to my reading of Kassibo, between Muslim and non-Muslim diviners in the Mande cultural zone, although these latter networks may have been much less formal in structure.

However, there was another context in which the exchange of expert religious knowledge seems to have been much more focused and intense: in the courts of royal and chiefly personages. The success of *Ijá* divination among the Fon-speaking peoples was no doubt reinforced by the policy of the King of Danxome that required all the most qualified and able religious experts in the country to reside in the capital of Abomey. Foreign religious experts captured in warfare, including Muslim clerics and practitioners of *khatt ar-raml*, were brought to Abomey where their services were often co-opted by the state. The placing of religious experts from different backgrounds in close social proximity encouraged the exchange of knowledge among them, as is evidenced by the example of Gedegbe, chief diviner at the court of Abomey from the late nineteenth century, and Maupoil's most valuable informant about the practice of *Fa* divination.

Gedegbe, who was of Yoruba parentage, grew up in Abomey in the home of his uncle who was himself a respected diviner. Gedegbe claimed to have obtained much of his knowledge of *Fa* from the leading practitioners of the city who visited his uncle socially as well as professionally. When he became a court diviner, he was placed in contact with the leading religious experts who frequented and served the court. He not only advanced to the highest initiatic levels of *Fa*, he also entered various other priesthoods and seems to have been keen to acquire a wide range of religious knowledges. For example, he was also initiated into a form of divination associated with astrology known as *gede* (Maupoil 1943a: 250ff), which although related to *Fa* also included various rituals in which prayers were addressed to Muslim figures. Significantly, he was also personally responsible for convincing the King of Danxome to purchase and import to Abomey from Ile Ife one of the most sacred and powerful deities and associated ritual practices of *Ijá*, known as *Igbà odù* (Maupoil 1943a: 86-7).

Gedegbe's career illustrates how religious knowledge and practice could circulate among willing and well-placed religious experts, and how this process of exchange could be intensified in the environment of a royal court, such as at Abomey. His example suggests how religious
experts at the courts of Ile Ife or Mutapa might have acquired and begun to adapt *khatt ar-raml* or a related form of divination to local religious and cultural contexts giving rise to the forms of divination which came to be known as *Ifá* and *hakata*.

**Conclusion**

This brief overview of *khatt ar-raml* and some of its derivative forms of divination concludes my three histories, which I hope have given a taste of the extraordinary diversity of religious expression contained within the vast field of Islamic religious culture. Each has illustrated how religious concept and practice are constantly being transformed in relationship to social and political circumstances. Although these histories have been presented thematically and in a manner that emphasizes the internal coherence of each of them, the fact is that if one examines them in a specific social or regional context, all their constituent elements seem to be interrelated in a kind of seamless web of social, religious, political and cultural relationships.

For example, the practice of *khatt ar-raml* in West Africa was nurtured and developed, not exclusively but most intensively and effectively, within those Muslim lineages whose male members, in addition to their mastery of classical Islamic studies, also trained in the Muslim healing and esoteric sciences. This was because they derived much of their livelihood from providing healing services to both Muslim and non-Muslim clients.

But the doctrinal acceptance and social prestige of divination and other esoteric healing sciences has varied with time and place. For example, Shaikh ‘Uthman condemned many of these practices which he claimed transgressed the limits of Islamic doctrine, although of course his condemnations served more to marginalize than to eliminate them. In other words, doctrinal condemnation does not necessarily cause a religious practice to disappear. For the historian, such condemnation documents the presence of the condemned religious practices; what the historian of religion should not do is to allow such doctrinal condemnations to render certain religious practices invisible for analytical purposes! After all, Shaikh ‘Uthman was committed to his own socio-political project, in the pursuit of which he condemned as non-Muslim many persons, such as the rulers of Gobir, and many practices, such as the sectarian recitations of the *kabbenkoobe*. And it is both sobering and illustrative of the historiographical problematic being addressed here to recall that today in late twentieth-century Nigeria, there are
many Muslims who doctrinally condemn Sufism as a non-Islamic and illicit innovation, the same Sufism that constituted one of the essential elements of Shaikh ‘Uthman’s Islam.

But if the condemnation of religious difference was a central theme in the history of religion in northern Nigeria in the early nineteenth century, the case seems to have been quite different among the Yoruba- and Fon-speaking peoples further south, where a kind of religious complementarity prevailed. Here the state sought to benefit from religious expertise regardless of its origins, and the religious experts themselves were quite prepared to cross supposed religious and cultural boundaries in their search to expand and deepen their own esoteric knowledge and powers. A similar situation seems to have prevailed in the Mande culture zone, which according to Bréhima Kassibo explains why so many Islamic cultural features can be identified in the major non-Muslim initiation associations of the region. These examples suggest that religious experts did not necessarily conceptualize their own knowledge as being contained within bounded cultural or religious systems.

These examples also illustrate that neither ethnically-based notions of religion nor analytical distinctions based on a dichotomy between Muslim and non-Muslim provide a useful starting point for the historical study of religion. Such normative conceptualizations cannot account historically either for internal disputes among Muslims, or for how and why religious experts from different backgrounds exchange esoteric religious knowledge among themselves, where neither the transmitter nor receiver of knowledge seems to be constrained by notions of cultural or religious difference or boundary.

And so I return to my original questions about how best to develop historiographical approaches to this wide and complex array of religious concept and practice. Such questions can be answered effectively and convincingly only through the process of actual research, but my own inclination is to approach the study of religion from the ground up, as it were, by focusing research on a specific social context or region in Africa, defined not ethically but geographically. One would then produce a kind of socio-religious topography of the selected region by identifying firstly the religious activities that take place within it, and then determining which individuals and social groups participate in which religious activities. This may not be an easy task, given the nature of the historical evidence which is available in much of Africa, but it is essential to locate religious practice socially if one is to understand its history. The study of religious history in the selected region would then be an analysis of conflictual, cooperative and complementary interactions
among religious experts, among individuals and social groups acting in the religious field, as well as among religious concepts and practices.

There still remains the thorny question of how to define 'religion' for the purposes of this exercise. Since my aims are specifically historiographical, I am not seeking any kind of essentialist, experiential or even philosophical definition. I am looking for a broadly inclusive concept (similar in this respect to the concept of Islamic religious culture) designed simply to identify religious concept and practice in a given social context. For my purposes, then, I would define religion as the field of cultural expression that focuses specifically on communication and relationship between human beings and those (usually) unseen spiritual entities and/or forces that they believe affect their lives. This is a very useful definition for my purposes, since it brings into consideration many activities that other definitions of religion might exclude.

As I suggested at the beginning of this lecture, these proposals are offered more as questions than hypotheses. They will need to be honed in the context of actual research, but they do illustrate the problematic I have in mind when I speak of 'Histories of Religion in Africa', and this is the kind of project that I would like to inaugurate in future stages of my research.

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1. This interpretation is evident in virtually all Nigerian Muslim assessments. See for example, Sulaiman 1986, but also see Hiskett 1973 and 1984, and Fisher 1973. The most authoritative treatment of the *jihad* and the Caliphate is still Last 1967, based largely upon internal Arabic documentation.

2. For a discussion of the gradual evolution of Shaikh ‘Uthman’s militancy, see Brenner 1987.


5. ‘Abdullah b. Muhammad 1963, includes a description of Shaikh ‘Uthman’s training in the classics of Islamic religious studies.

6. For a biography of al-Sanusi and a discussion of the content and influence of his work, see Benchebeb 1995.

7. Descriptions of this teaching can be found in Bâ and Cardaire 1957, Bâ 1980, and in Brenner 1984.

8. Quoted from an oral version of *kabbe* entitled *Kabbe tawidi*, Fulfulde recitation recorded in Tera *cercle*, Niger, by Boubou Hama, a copy of which is deposited in CELTHO, Niamey, Niger.

9. *Hulul al-ashkat* [Explanations of the signs], but also known by other titles; see Fahd 1966: 201-2 and 1978: 1129. The earliest systematic critique of *khatt ar-raml* seems to have been written by Ibn Khalduin, I, 226ff. See also Brenner, In press, a.

10. For accounts of Ifâ, see Abimbola 1976, and Bascom 1969.