

ISLAMIZATION FROM BELOW

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BRIAN J. PETERSON

Islamization from Below

THE MAKING OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN
RURAL FRENCH SUDAN, 1880–1960

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PREFACE

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This book moves chronologically from the late nineteenth century to independence in 1960. In terms of formal periodization, I divide the book into the following epochs: wars of Samori (1882–93), postconquest and early colonialism (1893–1905), era of slave emancipation (1905–14), interwar years (1919–40), and postwar, which I use exclusively as a shorthand reference to the period after the Second World War. The book emphasizes the ways in which historical transformations were characterized by different social temporalities and varying rates of change. As a result, although there were important discontinuities and eventful turning points, my focus is on long-run trends and multigenerational social processes that spanned periods and are difficult to compartmentalize in epochs.

The book's arguments proceed in the following manner. Chapter 1 sketches the religious and political landscape of the nineteenth century, while locating southern French Sudan, and in particular the district of Buguni, within the context of the internal slave trade, African state building, and the spread of Islam. Once the religious habitus has been properly situated, the chapter focuses on the late nineteenth century, when the region became a battleground in wars of enslavement. From 1882 to 1893, Samori Touré, the leader of a Muslim state, occupied the region for economic and political advantage, while using jihad to justify enslavement and to create unity

across his culturally variegated internal empire. In the aftermath of French conquest and Samori's defeat, tens of thousands of refugees streamed back into the region. Chapter 2 looks at the experiences of refugee returnees, exploring the various social, environmental, and religious dimensions of the reintegration process. It seeks to frame these changes within the political and economic contexts of early colonial rule. On the religious front, although the district of Buguni was considered fetishist at this time, the administration kept an eye on Muslim traders and notables. I establish the French administration's rather haphazard Muslim policy but also emphasize how the mass dispersal of people resulted in widespread social mixing. In the postconquest era there was a resurgence of *bamanaya*, which, benefiting from the French peace, was recast in more translocal forms.

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between slave emancipation and the spread of Islam. Following the abolition decree of 1905, hundreds of thousands of slaves left their masters in a mass exodus and returned to their homelands across the French Sudan. One of the largest destinations of returning slaves was the district of Buguni. Owing to the size of this social group, freed slaves, some of whom had embraced Islam while in slavery, were important agents in the transfer of Muslim practices to rural areas. After examining the exodus and shifts in the political economy, I discuss administrative developments, the chieftaincy, and French policy vis-à-vis Muslims. I end by reconstructing the formation of early Muslim communities and exploring changes in rural religious practices.

Chapters 4 and 5 serve to establish underlying material and political conditions from the 1920s to the 1950s. Some of the most far-reaching social transformations had their origins in the interwar period, as colonial rule forced permanent shifts in subsistence practices and rural social relations. Chapter 4 tells the story of how Africans dealt with the everyday demands of colonialism. It begins with an overview of changes and continuities in colonial governance. Then, it assesses the impact of forced labor, violence, and compulsory cotton production on rural communities. It ends by examining labor migration and gender relations. Chapter 5 delves deeper into the subject of social change. It starts by looking at the war effort on the African home front during the Second World War and proceeds with a discussion of labor migration and emerging intergenerational tensions and conflicts. It strives to link these developments to transformations in marriage practices and agriculture.

After establishing changes in nonreligious domains of social life, I return to religious transformations. Chapter 6 looks at the broader cultural contexts of migration and the role of social networks. Building on arguments in chapter 5, I show how this era of greater mobility and individualism was characterized by the appropriation of new cultural styles, ideas, and forms of material culture that served as important generational markers of difference. At the same time, as many of the commercial networks were in Muslim hands, taking on an external Muslim identity was often necessary in finding work. Later, upon returning to their villages with prayer, migrant workers added their numbers to the growing Muslim communities. This chapter extends the analysis of local social pressures, discussing the role of public ceremonies and the colonial census. I end by exploring the Islamization of the colonial chieftaincy.

Chapter 7 discusses the processes through which Islamic identities and practices were elaborated in local communities. It charts the emergence of Muslim communities, as local leaders held public prayer, set up Qur'anic schools, and supervised the building of mosques. Although Arabic literacy was still rather restricted in southern French Sudan, holy men translated passages from the Qur'an and *hadith* into local dialects of Bamanankan, resulting in forms of indigenized Islamic thought and practice known as *kankònòla*. This chapter draws considerably on the biographies of local imams and holy men, whose experiences in rural Qur'anic schools illuminate wider social contexts of religious change. I show how the religious habitus was being transformed in the postwar era, and how local holy men grew in popularity as rural peoples incorporated alternative healing, divination, and rainmaking practices into local repertoires. Concomitantly, public pressures to abandon indigenous practices mounted, even leading to religious violence. In time, as indigenous religious institutions and leaders disappeared from public view, Muslim figures filled the void, cultivating ties with renowned Sufi shaykhs of the Qadiriyya order. What emerged was a very heterodox Islamic sphere, as strains of Qadiriyya and unaffiliated Sufism intermingled with non-Muslim practices. The chapter ends by exploring the influence of Muslim reform movements in Buguni.

NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

I make frequent reference to various French, Bamanankan, Arabic, and Wolof words and names derived from oral histories and archival documents.

For the sake of simplicity and clarity I have opted for English translations, except in cases where the original term is commonly understood, such as *imam*, or where there is no easy translation, as with *bamanaya*. In many cases, I have elected to use Anglicized spellings to facilitate pronunciation. For example, the French “ou” is replaced by “u,” as in the place-names Sudan, Wasulu, and Buguni. But in reference to patronyms and in the use of terms like *marabout* that have found their way into the Anglophone scholarly lexicon, I have kept the French versions. The reader should be aware that Bamanankan plurals have the letter “w” at the end. Non-English terms are italicized only in their first citation. All translations quoted in the text and footnotes are my own, unless I have indicated otherwise.

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The making of this book has taken place against the backdrop of disparate localities in Mali, France, and the United States. It was researched in rural villages of southern Mali, and in the archives of Kuluba, Mali, and Aix-en-Provence, France; and it was written primarily in New York City. It has also been the product of networks of support, intellectual influence, personal encouragement, and collaboration. Through my peregrinations and the book's permutations, I have accumulated a number of debts.

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of *African History* 49 (2008), and “Slave Emancipation, Trans-local Social Processes and the Spread of Islam in French Colonial Buguni (Southern Mali), 1893–1914,” *Journal of African History* 45 (2004), have been substantially reworked and rewritten for portions of chapters 1 and 3. Themes from my article “Quantifying Conversion: A Note on the Colonial Census and Religious Change in Postwar Southern Mali,” *History in Africa* 29 (2002), have been elaborated upon in the section entitled “Making Muslims: Conversion and the Colonial Census” in chapter 6.

Finally, close to home, I thank my father, my mother, Larry, and Barb, as well as Vince and Anne. Special thanks also to Thomas Farber for his much-needed perspective and advice on writing. And most of all I am grateful to my wife, Andrea Camuto, who supported this project in innumerable ways, including a twelve-month stint in Mali. I have been blessed by her patience, intelligence, and sense of adventure.

ABBREVIATIONS

ANM:	Archives Nationales, Koulouba, Mali
ANS:	Archives Nationales, Dakar, Senegal
AOF:	L'Afrique Occidentale Française
CAOM:	Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France
CdC:	Commandant de Cercle
CEA:	<i>Cahiers d'Études Africaines</i>
CHEAM:	Centre des Hautes Études d'Administration Musulmane
CSSH:	<i>Comparative Studies in Society and History</i>
FR:	Fiche de Renseignements
GG:	Governor-General
HSN:	Haut-Sénégal-Niger
IJAHS:	<i>International Journal of African Historical Studies</i>
JAH:	<i>Journal of African History</i>
LG:	Lieutenant-Governor
PSP:	Parti Progressiste Soundanais
RA:	Rapport Agricole
RP:	Rapport Politique
RE:	Rapport Economique
SF:	Soudan Français
US-RDA:	Union Soudanais-Rassemblement Démocratique Africain

INTRODUCTION

After the Second World War, a strident Muslim preacher, Bakari Koné, raided *bamana* religious sites around his village of Diaka in rural French Sudan. In a lurid demonstration of Islam's supremacy, he then publicly burned sacred objects and masks. While most rural holy men took a more quietist approach to proselytization, Koné's unexpectedly iconoclastic acts represented an open challenge to the village elders. Not since the wars of Samori of the late nineteenth century had anyone desecrated local sites so overtly. It was sheer sacrilege.¹

According to oral traditions, in response the head of the indigenous *kòmò* power society quickly dispatched his most loyal henchmen to reassert religious control in the village. As a host of villagers looked on, the men chopped down the preacher's fruit trees in a symbolic affront. It was a simple warning shot. But Bakari redoubled his efforts and persevered in leading public prayer, his followers proudly chanting the shahada, or the Muslim profession of faith. "He was not afraid of anything," said his sister. "He would fight until his opinion prevailed."² There were reprisals. First, the traditionalists used sorcery, but this failed. Then they recruited an assassin from a neighboring village to eliminate the preacher by using *koroté*, or poison. This too failed. None of the old ways seemed to be working. In the meantime, Bakari's power continued to grow, as he withstood the most powerful magic the *kòmò* could muster. In the end, the ranks of

young Muslims came to the preacher's aid in a public show of force the elders could not ignore.

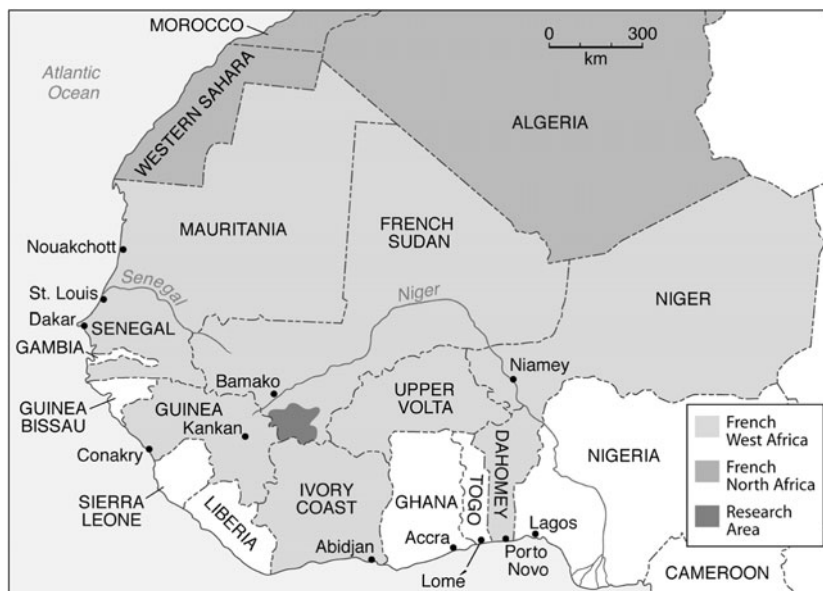
Such local events were religious turning points in the community, marking the "coming of Islam" in village hagiographies. However, even as these stories often emphasize the acts of heroic individuals, preachers, and saints, they also hint at deeper, translocal social processes. Elsewhere, across rural French Sudan, the religious landscape was changing in the postwar era as Muslims established themselves firmly in the majority after years of hiding their religious practices. Village mosques were being built, Qur'anic education was spreading, Sufi holy men were growing in popularity, and forms of colonial governmentality were reconfiguring the political bases of religious belonging. On rare occasion, religious conflicts erupted, resulting in attacks on sacred sites and intercommunal violence. In these circumstances, figures such as preacher Koné from Diaka seemed to confirm what colonial officials had long feared: that a Pan-Islamist fifth column of virulent agitators with ties to Salafi reform movements in Cairo would forcefully convert the masses and lead a broad-based holy war (*jihad*) against the French empire in Africa. However, most rural holy men had no ties to Arab reformists, had never even heard of the Muslim Brotherhood. They focused their energies on providing religious services to peasants, such as rainmaking ceremonies, divination, healing, and on leading community religious rituals. Rather than troublemakers from out of town, they were homegrown products of grassroots and multigenerational processes of religious change.

Years before Bakari Koné's father had been a migrant worker in Guinea, where he learned Islamic prayer. "My father went to work in Guinea, to find money and return, and that is how he came back with prayer," said Mariame Koné. "Later he took his first son and sent him to Qur'anic school in Segu."³ As in many localities, these first-generation Muslims invested in their futures by acquiring forms of Islamic knowledge and sending their sons away to Qur'anic school.⁴ But what Diaka and other village histories also illustrate is that migrant workers traveling back and forth between their villages in the hinterland and destinations in Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Guinea were embracing Islam and joining nascent Muslim communities in their rural homelands. They were not pioneers. Rather, they followed in the footsteps of freed slaves, colonial soldiers,

and other mobile social groups who, a generation before, had similarly introduced prayer into their villages.

These social and religious changes deepened with each new generation, eventually leading to the emergence of village imams and holy men who were instrumental in the making of Muslim communities. In this way, Islamization was a gradual process that unfolded in an uneven manner across the region. The transformation of the religious habitus occurred over many decades as individuals and communities adopted new ritual practices and slowly drifted in the direction of Islam.⁵ Eventually, when Muslims became more dominant and claimed positions of power, minority-held traditionalist views and practices lost their influence and retreated from public view. *Bamanaya*, or indigenous religious practices, became something shameful; and sacred sites, rituals, and institutions, such as the *kòmò* and *jò* societies, were abandoned. Rather than dramatic and openly confrontational wars of maneuver in the form of iconoclasm and street battles, in most localities events such as the building of a mosque or the holding of public prayer served as definitive turning points after more subtle positional wars had been won.⁶ These local processes were further shaped by shifts in power relations. As rural areas became more thoroughly administered state-spaces after the Second World War, the relationship between religious identity and state power changed.⁷ In a kind of looping effect within the context of the colonial census, villagers sorted themselves into discrete religious categories and made public declarations of faith, thus opening the door to future possibilities of personhood while objectifying religious change within the community.⁸

In this book, I tell the story of how one important but neglected region in France's vast colonial empire became Muslim over an eighty-year period. As a story that was reproduced in many rural localities across the world, it was one of the grand narratives of the twentieth century and part of larger transregional processes through which Islam emerged as the religion of the majority.⁹ But more than just a religious history, this book situates Islamization processes within different temporalities and social contexts, such as the aftermath of slavery, changing patterns of mobility, and agricultural transformations. Focusing primarily on the colonial era, I examine the impact and unintended consequences of French rule in the rural district of Buguni in southern French Sudan, while exploring the ambiguous relationship between empire and religious



Map 1. French West Africa and Research Area.

difference. Moving beyond colonial discourse and policy, this book uses rural microhistorical and regional units of analysis to assess processes of grassroots religious change.

In its imperial forms and expressions of power, French colonialism did not represent a monolithic crusade against Islam. As early as the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt in 1798, the French empire-state fashioned itself as something of a “Muslim power.”¹⁰ In West Africa and the Maghreb, the colonial state cultivated useful alliances with Muslim leaders and built its structures and methods of governance on certain indigenous logics and institutions. In some cases, it even subsidized pilgrimage to Mecca and the construction of Qur’anic schools and mosques.¹¹ However, as we shall see, in the district of Buguni and other regions deemed “fetishist,” the administration often fought hard to prevent or at least slow the expansion of Islam. Although the colonial state pursued more or less pragmatic policies aimed at preventing rebellion and maintaining order, it routinely bolstered the authority and power of fetishist chiefs, while monitoring and arresting Muslim notables.¹² It also pursued a policy of containment, preventing the extension of Arabic literacy and foreign Arab influence and even demolishing unauthorized mosques and

Qur'anic schools, all in the interest of protecting colonial subjects from the social breakdown that would result from mass conversion.¹³

In certain ways, such state actions reflected the radical secularism of the French Third Republic, particularly after the separation of church and state in 1905, which unleashed disputes even among colonial administrators and Christian missionaries.¹⁴ However, the fight against the spread of Islam followed rather different political contours and fluctuating sets of imperial interests through phases of conquest, consolidation, retreat, restoration, and decolonization. It also reflected profound discursive continuities. As the French saw it, Pan-Islamism, with its links to reformist Islam and anticolonial nationalism, represented an imminent threat to the very existence of the empire-state. But even as the colonial state simultaneously sought to modernize and preserve African societies, it initiated shifts in the political economy and deployed new forms of political rationality and governance that fundamentally reshaped social relations. The state may have succeeded, partially at least, in forcing Africans to pay taxes, produce cash crops, and provide forced labor. But it failed as a cultural project of control. In its heavily diluted "civilizing mission," rather than making peasants into Frenchmen or preserving Africans as fetishists, it inadvertently produced Muslim subjects.¹⁵

In the precolonial era, the cultural gradient reflected different configurations. Ideas, practices, and information traveled from cores to peripheries in correlation with state expansion, trade, warfare, and the topographical friction of distance. As in the case of East Africa, where Islam was confined to Indian Ocean coastal trade towns for many centuries before making inroads into the hinterland, Muslims in West Africa were concentrated along commercial arteries stretching from the Saharan fringe to the Atlantic coast.¹⁶ A major difference was the existence of large Islamic states in the interior of West Africa. But outside of Muslim state-spaces and networks, most agrarian people remained adherent to traditional religions. Not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did Islam make much progress in these out-of-the-way rural areas, particularly among decentralized societies.

One of the unexplored conundrums of the colonial era in Africa is that it ushered in a more rapid expansion of Islam than during the previous one thousand years.¹⁷ Scholars have long commented on this process, while also examining Islamic institutions, Muslim notables,

and changing forms of authority under colonialism. Still, very little is known about the expansion of Islam among ordinary people during the colonial era.¹⁸ What accounted for such processes of religious change? Why did Islamization occur at a much greater rate under French colonial rule? What sorts of people converted, and why and how? How did the meaning of being Muslim change over time as different generations and different social groups embraced practices and beliefs associated with Islam? How was the expansion of Islam tied to changes in rural life introduced by colonialism? What does the case of southern French Sudan reveal about the broader relationships between French empire and religious difference?

In seeking to answer these questions, this book provides a new perspective on Islamization, which I use as a covering term to describe religious transformations occurring in specific historical, social, and cultural contexts leading to the emergence of Muslim majorities. In contrast to the extant literature on Islam in West Africa, which focuses mainly on Muslim elites, precolonial states, trade, jihad movements, and the large Sufi brotherhoods, I examine the grass-roots spread of Islam among rural peoples. Although Islamization has certainly been linked to precolonial state expansion, Muslim chiefs and kings were rarely able to forcibly convert people in decentralized societies. Thus, a central premise of my book is that there are limitations to models that restrict the agency of religious change to elites and states and that embrace jihad-centric explanations.¹⁹ In the case of southern French Sudan, as I argue, the expansion of Islam owed its success to the many thousands of slaves, migrant workers, former soldiers, farmers, and rural preachers who gradually and usually peacefully adopted the new religion. Focusing on the colonial district of Buguni, I demonstrate how such social actors were important agents in the transmission of Islamic religious culture in its diverse forms and practices to previously non-Muslim rural regions.²⁰ Rather than embracing class-based explanations, however, this book assesses the various modes of entry of Muslim prayer into communities across the entire social field. I explore the dialectical manner in which processes of Islamization reflected shifting social bases of religious power and authority, and how in turn these transformations undergirded the efforts of chiefs and holy men to shape emergent forms of public religious expression and belonging.

CONVERSION RECONSIDERED: ON METHOD AND THEORY

Conceptualizing processes of Islamization as conversion, in the sense of individuals or whole communities moving unambiguously across clear religious boundaries after carefully weighing doctrinal differences, simplifies a rather multistranded, long-term cultural process. As Jonathon Glassman has remarked, "It would be more useful to recognize that the impact of Islam manifested itself in a wide spectrum of behaviors, ranging from conventionally defined conversion at one end to passive curiosity at the other."²¹ I will address the limitations of certain analytic categories and modify existing explanatory frameworks to fit African social realities. To begin, I turn to the rich body of literature on Christianity in colonial Africa, which has provided some of the most sophisticated studies of conversion.²² In this vein, Jean and John Comaroff pose two important questions that serve as conceptual starting points for this discussion: how well does *conversion* embrace the "highly variable, usually gradual, often implicit, and demonstrably 'syncretic' manner in which social identities, cultural styles, and ritual practices" were transformed through the encounter with world religions? and does the concept capture "the complex dialectic of invasion and riposte, of challenge and resistance" so characteristic of such historical transformations? In essence, the Comaroffs question the very utility of the foundational Pauline model of conversion and demonstrate how *conversion* tends to conflate individual religious experience and wider cultural transformations. The word also reifies the notion that people rationally chose among belief systems without consideration of the social contexts in which these supposed choices were made.²³ Similarly, J. D. Y. Peel has argued that it is difficult to use the concept without extending certain "theological or phenomenological assumptions of a Euro-Christian and Protestant background to historical and cultural settings where they do not apply." Peel also states that given the "interiority of the experience of conversion," the concept is not particularly valuable in exploring "large-scale processes of religious change where we have little or no evidence about the inner states of the individuals concerned."²⁴ For these reasons, and given the paucity of contemporaneous sources on "inner states" of consciousness, I am moving away from conversion and adopting a more gradualist approach based on practice rather than cosmology. Echoing Peel, I think it makes little sense to extend "theological or phenomenological assumptions"

of the Islamic normative tradition to settings where Muslim rituals and practices were only loosely integrated into the religious habitus, and usually in an incremental and piecemeal manner. Although there were likely changes in religious imagination, as Muslims embraced supralocal forms of identification through expanding networks and greater mobility and imagined belonging to a more universal Muslim *umma*, “doing prayer” did not necessarily constitute a complete overhaul of one’s mental and moral framework.

I realize that this perspective contrasts with Robin Horton’s influential model of a two-tier cosmological framework. Horton emphasizes the ways in which conversion to world religions entailed a cognitive adjustment to what he described as an “increase in social scale.”²⁵ In other words, as individuals and communities were incorporated into larger social orders, there was an inevitable dissolution of local microcosmic boundaries that served to push people to embrace more universalistic religious orientations. Conversion, then, constituted a movement from the microcosm of the small community, with its more or less bounded world of lesser spirits, to the macrocosm of larger, or higher, gods. Certainly, the “social scale” was expanding, and people were being exposed to new ideas, knowledge, and information. However, as scholars have pointed out, Horton’s rather “mentalistic” theory, with its focus on “preexisting thought patterns” and internal influences, tends to neglect the sorts of external political and structural factors that determined the shape of this larger social order in the first place.²⁶ Indeed, Peel has argued that Horton’s theory “does not treat colonialism as a necessary condition of conversion [and] discounts the common view that colonial power was the main factor inducing conversion.”²⁷ For these reasons and others one needs to look elsewhere for explanatory or conceptual devices.

There is little sustained focus on the subject of conversion to Islam in the historiography of West Africa.²⁸ Historians have examined the expansion of Islam in studies of precolonial states and trade, and scholars have advanced models with sequences of typical stages. Yet such models, for example, those proposed by Spencer Trimingham and Humphrey Fisher, tend to be too linear and teleological to embrace the diversity of forms and complex shifts of cultural processes. Furthermore, the underlying social logics and political conditions that shaped religious change under colonialism were very different.²⁹

In one of the more noteworthy efforts to propose an interpretive framework for understanding processes of Islamization in French West Africa, the anthropologists Robert Launay and Benjamin Soares argue that colonial rule, by establishing greater peace and security, led to the formation of what they call an “Islamic sphere,” or a Muslim space conceptually separate from particular social affiliations such as ethnicity, kin, and slave status. The appearance of this Islamic sphere was linked to changes in the political economy and to the “removal of restrictions” on the movement of people and commodities.³⁰ While the framework of Launay and Soares is a provocative and useful one, there is room for revision. First, with their emphasis on the personalization of religious authority, which came with the erosion of old ethnic religious identities, their analysis of the spatial expansion of Islam depends on a rather general notion of diffuse mobility driving religious change. My book elaborates on their thesis, but it pluralizes the paths to Islam through its focus on mobile social groups like slaves, migrant workers, soldiers, and rural holy men. Certainly, as the French projected their power outward from colonial capitals through so-called distance-demolishing technologies such as roads, railroads, bridges, telegraph, and telephone, the friction of distance governing the spread of social and cultural influences was considerably reduced.³¹ But given the relative weakness of the colonial state and the uneven penetration of roads into rural hinterland areas, there were enormous differences between localities in terms of economic integration and the corresponding regional cultural gradients.³² Still, the pace and regularity of mobility quickened as commercial activity and social transactions increased, so that even where markets failed to expand, migrant workers took the initiative by going on foot in the absence of roads.³³ At the same time, while there was a “freer circulation of goods and people,” forms of coercion were also common and must be taken into consideration.³⁴ Second, I explore the dynamics of religious change in the countryside, a subject that falls outside the purview of Launay’s and Soares’s framework, while developing a rural microhistorical perspective. This approach helps to demonstrate the heterogeneity of translocal processes of religious change across regions and within villages and families. A final modification is the incorporation of non-Muslim religious practices, which are largely excluded from the conceptualization of an Islamic sphere.³⁵

Sufi brotherhoods like the Muridiyya, Tijaniyya, Qadiriyya, and Hamawiyya have been at the center of research on Islam in Africa.³⁶ These Sufi orders have played important roles in driving religious change. But with their greater historical visibility, characterized by identifiable leaders and institutional structures, and relatively richer documentary sources, they have largely obscured more inchoate forms of rural Islam.³⁷ A distinctive urban bias in the historiography has led scholars to tacitly reinforce the notion that Islam trickled down to peasant communities. This is not surprising. Islam has been primarily an urban religion that spread through trade networks, although I would not want to unduly dichotomize urban and rural life-worlds.³⁸ The apparent marginalization of rural areas and of grass-roots processes of religious change from regional Islamic history has come at a cost. In the twentieth century the expansion of Islam has been most active in precisely these regions.

With respect to the colonial period, historians like David Robinson, Louis Brenner, Christopher Harrison, and Jean-Louis Triaud have deepened scholars' understanding of France's policies toward Islam and shed light on the many forms of accommodation in French relationships with Muslim leaders and institutions. Yet in following the discursive contours of French policy and ethnographic knowledge they have inadvertently reproduced certain colonial views and categories.³⁹ Most important, the continuing attention to Sufi leaders, hierarchies, and formal institutions has resulted in an unintended scholarly blind spot. Indeed, just as colonial officials and ethnographers were unable to see decentralized forms of rural Islam, owing to the lack of recognizable Muslim institutional features, contemporary historians have tended to neglect rural areas, where Sufism was often unaffiliated and loosely organized.⁴⁰ This bias has begun to change. For example, more recent works by James Searing and Cheikh Anta Babou on colonial Senegal have revisited the expansion of the Muridiyya and situated these developments within the contexts of widespread social change and slave emancipation. Both of these studies, though, and most others posit large Sufi brotherhoods as their main units of analysis and end their coverage before the First World War.⁴¹ My book builds on this rich body of research by grounding the analysis in rural religious life. It also shifts the geographical focus to the French Sudan, which has been much less studied than Senegal and Nigeria, and extends the temporal boundaries to include the entire

colonial period. And it makes the question of Islamization, which has been treated only peripherally, its main subject.⁴²

Beyond Africa, the subject of conversion to Islam and the growth of individual Muslim communities has been unsatisfactorily studied. Most works examine societies that were already Muslim and thus reveal very little about how they came into being. Conversion to Islam in the “old Islamic lands” of the Near East, according to one leading scholar, remains “one of the most poorly examined fields in Islamic studies.”⁴³ Scholars working on Islamization processes in Central and South Asia have similarly noted the paucity of works on conversion.⁴⁴ One of the rare exceptions is the remarkable study on Bengal by Richard Eaton, which links the movement of agrarian frontiers to religious change and conceptualizes Islamization as a process which proceeded “so gradually as to be nearly imperceptible.” Indeed, of the many conversion models, Eaton’s approach is perhaps the most useful, as it allows room for both local cultural dynamics and long-term change. In Eaton’s account, which emphasizes cosmological shifts, processes of Islamization span five centuries and reflect medieval and early modern political and social conditions, whereas I suggest that while such processes were certainly gradual, the pace of change could be considerably greater under colonialism with its widespread mobility and twentieth-century forms of governmentality. Furthermore, I draw attention to the ways in which presumed stages of Islamization, such as inclusion, identification, and displacement, often overlapped spatially and temporally. Although change was a constant, there was no strict evolutionary progression of typical forms, even within small communities.⁴⁵

In order to enrich readers’ understanding of conversion and to move away from linear models, I have drawn on certain theoretical tools. First of all, as I have suggested, conversion often amounted to a gradual drifting, to adopt a term from the recent philosophy of rational choice. As Edna Ullmann-Margalit has explained, at one end of the spectrum there could be abrupt discontinuities, as people opted to change their future selves through “life-transforming” and “core-affecting” decisions. And in some instances there was a powerful negation of one’s previous life, as in the case of preachers burning sacred objects. There might also be technical or nominal conversions, perhaps in the interest of economic opportunity. But in assessing long-term religious change, it makes more sense

to view such processes as drifting rather than opting. Ullmann-Margalit describes the drifting person as someone who “carries on with the business of his or her life, making incremental, stepwise decisions,” and for whom “only in retrospect” can it be seen “how a particular series of such incremental steps—or in particular one step among them—had been all-important in transforming the future shape of their life.”⁴⁶ In this book, I will be emphasizing how individuals and communities embraced different practices and identities in a piecemeal fashion without necessarily having a systematic understanding of the different cultural logics that new religious practices represented. People did not convert blindly; rather, they constantly strove for a sense of religious belonging and social affiliation in changing circumstances.

As a conceptual counterweight to the subjectivism of personal conversion narratives and the excesses of rational decision theory, I have also had recourse to the idea of *habitus* developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.⁴⁷ Although Bourdieu has used a variety of formulations to describe this concept, I will work with a composite definition. *Habitus* is a system of durable, transposable, and embodied dispositions and practices which integrate past experiences and function as the generative basis of practices and representations.⁴⁸ Certainly, the analytic utility of *habitus* is situationally specific; it depends on particular social contexts and historical circumstances. But, as Craig Calhoun has observed, *habitus* is most useful in undifferentiated societies, in which normative rules are less explicit and social relations are characterized by direct, interpersonal ties rather than by impersonal institutions. It is therefore a more processual conception of culture, one which emphasizes repertoires of strategies rather than cultural rules and practice rather than discourse.⁴⁹

To further clarify, *habitus* is durable in that it is overwhelmingly the product of early socialization; the unconscious internalization and embodiment of external structures during childhood plays a profoundly formative role. As Bourdieu explains, “The child imitates not ‘models’ but other people’s actions . . . children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult, a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with a tone of voice, a style of speech . . . schemes are able to pass from practice to practice without going through discourse or consciousness.”⁵⁰ An individual or

collective habitus is also transposable in that people carry sets of practices and dispositions with them into different contexts and new settings.⁵¹ As James Clifford has suggested in his theorization of transnational cultural processes, habitus is uniquely suited for studying migrants, diasporas, and traveling cultures.⁵² The concept can be useful even in contexts characterized by experiences of dislocation and rupture. Thus, rather than being fragmented by history, the habitus of the locality feeds on and incorporates experiences of displacement and war. Along these lines, Rosalind Shaw has employed habitus in drawing attention to the ways in which cultural practices, memory, ritual, and bodily techniques have been reproduced and transformed since the era of the slave trade in Sierra Leone. Shaw emphasizes how habitus does not constitute “a closed cycle of repetitive change” by showing how it continually integrates historical events and processes.⁵³

In my book, habitus is a tool for conceptually linking micro and macro levels of analysis and for examining the tensions between local cultural institutions and even the most disruptive processes, such as war, refugee flight, enslavement, colonial conquest, and so forth. I use habitus to highlight continuity in times of change and to conceptualize Islamization as gradual processes of localization of Islam. Even as people began praying and embracing Muslim forms of religious life, the generative cultural grammar, as it were, remained rooted in *bamanaya*. For the concept to be most useful, one needs to incorporate more agency and structural pliability in the face of rapid social change. Furthermore, by placing greater emphasis on the emergence of new social and religious imaginaries and on the roles of social networks and transfers of knowledge and information, it will be possible to situate changes in the religious habitus within wider translocal cultural contexts.

Building on the aforementioned works and concepts, this book emphasizes how Islamization was a gradual, dialectical process, one characterized by forms of cultural translation and identity negotiations within wider social fields.⁵⁴ I will show how changing sets of practices and the trajectories of meaning tied to them underpinned the dialogical processes through which Islam engaged, complemented, and gradually supplanted indigenous religious institutions and practices. I attempt to illustrate how religious transformations were the historical products of accumulated strands of minor social adjustments, changing practices, and political shifts, all worked out in community and translocal settings.

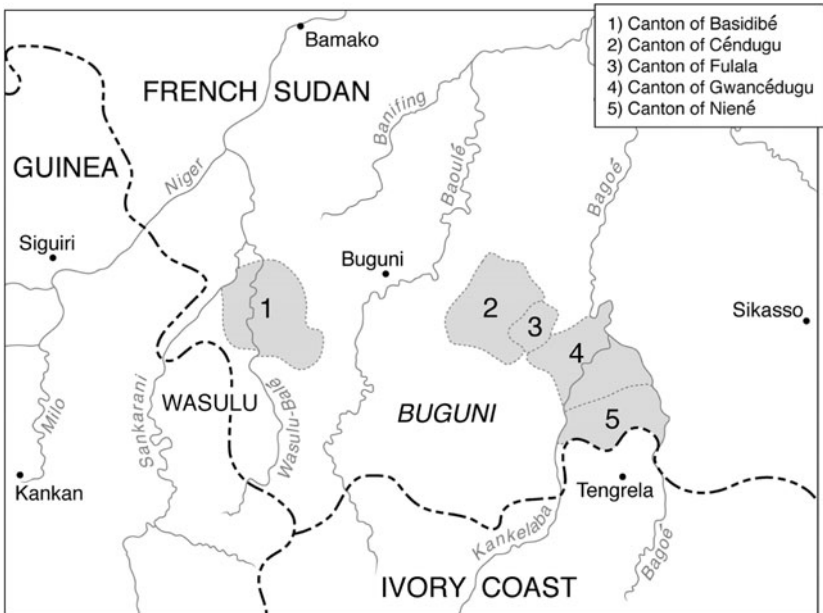
A SENSE OF PLACE

My book is based largely on fieldwork I conducted in rural villages and roadside trade towns in the former colonial district of Buguni. This district covered thirty-four thousand square kilometers, or roughly the equivalent of Connecticut and Massachusetts combined; its smallest administrative unit was the canton. Over the span of sixty-seven years of French rule, the cantons fluctuated in size and number as a result of amalgamation, redistricting, and political reforms. In 1912 there were 52 cantons. On the eve of independence in 1960, the number had shrunk to 36. Overall, the district comprised 837 villages with a population of 247,189 in 1957. Within this context, my most intensive fieldwork site was the former canton of Fulala, which had a land area of one thousand square kilometers. Fulala had a population density of just four people per square kilometer, so its 5,175 inhabitants were spread very thinly over the land.⁵⁵ This former canton provided much of the microhistorical data I use in this book.

Methodologically, the microhistory approach has allowed me to probe many of the complexities of communities, social networks, and individual lives. It has also served to retrieve forms of human agency and complexity normally hidden within categories and processes.⁵⁶ As the French historian Jacques Revel explains, “[The] most elementary experience, that of the small group, even the individual, is the most clarifying—because it is the most complex and because it is inscribed in the largest number of different contexts. . . . [Each] historical actor participates, directly or indirectly, in processes . . . of variable dimensions and levels, from the most local to the most global.”⁵⁷ Yet to properly contextualize the microhistory, and in order to avoid seeing general patterns through a more or less bounded and myopic lens, it has been imperative to employ other observational scales.⁵⁸ In addition to Fulala, I draw on fieldwork conducted in the former cantons of Céndugu, Basidibé, Gwancédugu, and Niené. Among these comparative cases, Céndugu and Basidibé were two of the most populous cantons in the district, and both are situated along major colonial roads. Basidibé was located in Wasulu, near the district’s western border with Guinea, and was exposed to labor migration, trade, and Islamization long before other cantons that appear in this book. In contrast, Niené was more remote, located at the district’s frontier along the border with Ivory Coast. Its lack of all-weather roads and bridges meant that Niené was isolated during the rainy season and as a result slow to

embrace both migration and Islam. It was also the only ethnically Senoufo canton in the district. Finally, Fulala was rather ordinary, located in the middle of southern Mali. It was not incredibly remote, but given the poor condition of dirt roads and its location sixty kilometers off the main road it was not easily accessible and therefore infrequently visited by colonial officials. It was average in land area but reportedly one of the poorest in natural and human resources. Along with Céndugu and Gwancédugu, it was one of the regions that suffered the worst predation and enslavement in the late nineteenth-century wars.

In terms of the physical landscape, the region is part of a vast peneplain and savanna-woodland transition zone that stretches from eastern Guinea to central Mali. Although flat, this red-soil plain is interspersed with lightly undulating hills and valleys as well as numerous rivers and streams.⁵⁹ In 1894, one colonial official described the area as “in general a flat land, lightly wooded, and crossed by numerous watercourses. . . . There are quite a number of isolated hills, but not seeming to have any general direction.”⁶⁰ In short, it is the ordinary savanna, with dusty harmattan winds in the dry season and verdant fields and trees after the rains come.



Map 2. Research Area in Southern Mali.

While this vast savanna plain unifies the region, south-north rivers, including the Baoulé, Sankarani, Wasulu-Balé, Bagoé, and Kankelaba, divide it. As natural boundaries, these parallel rivers have served as important cultural and linguistic boundaries, resulting in east-west cultural gradations and diversity.⁶¹ Human geography and settlement patterns also responded to variations in local topography, ecology, and soil type. Generally speaking, because of the lack of organic material these soils tend to be low in fertility and rather sensitive to erosion. In fact, much of the wider region is covered by a thin, gravelly, dry soil called *fuga*, which is characteristically unsuitable for farming.⁶² As we shall see, added to these natural structures, the region has been prone to agricultural disruption by devastating droughts, disease, and other environmental events. This has produced small-scale decentralized societies inured to uncertainty.

A NOTE ON SOURCES, MEMORY, AND ORALITY

At first glance, the former district of Buguni would seem unsuited for writing local Islamic histories. There are no internal Arabic manuscripts, as the vast majority of village imams under colonialism were nonliterate. Despite the growing scriptural authority of the Qur'an, literacy was restricted to magical and ritual contexts. These days, some religious figures can read in Arabic, and they possess copies of the Qur'an and certain foundational religious texts. But their libraries are small and contain no contemporaneous accounts from the colonial era. Furthermore, deemed an animist or fetishist zone, Buguni was largely excluded from the colonial ethnography of Islam. In fact, Paul Marty, in his four-volume study of Islam in the French Sudan, *Études sur l'Islam et les Tribus du Soudan*, ignored the region altogether.⁶³ The only in-depth colonial ethnographic work on religion in Buguni, dating from 1954, focuses on non-Muslim religious institutions and practices.⁶⁴

There are French archival documents, which are indispensable in getting a bird's-eye view of the colonial landscape. I have drawn on such materials from archives in Bamako, Dakar, and Aix-en-Provence. Fortunately, the annual and monthly political reports produced by various *commandants* of the district of Buguni are nearly complete for the entire period from 1893 to 1959. These include detailed statements from census tours at the canton level, inspection tours, and modest ethnographic missions. Agricultural reports and economic reports have

also been instrumental in my piecing together of the region's agrarian history. For reconstructing chieftaincy histories and local political changes, I have drawn on personnel records. In order to situate the case of Buguni within wider political contexts and to establish a more empirewide perspective, I have used circulars and special reports on a range of topics produced at higher levels in the colonial government. There are no missionary diaries or letters from the region and no memoirs of Muslim converts from the colonial period. There is one memoir by a former French commandant, Maurice Méker, but it largely reproduces material from the archives and contains only scant detail on African social life.⁶⁵ There are a few surviving letters written by literate African functionaries, but most archival documents were written by Frenchmen.

Although these written sources are crucial in establishing chronologies, different temporalities, and discursive formations, colonial reporting was always characterized by certain "epistemic habits" that served to distort the processes and events being described.⁶⁶ In the district of Buguni and the wider French Sudan, this was particularly the case with respect to Islam, which constantly stirred fears of Pan-Islamic jihad in the colonial imagination. Furthermore, as I have noted, with their focus on identifiable Sufi leaders, brotherhoods, and hierarchies, officials routinely dismissed more inchoate forms of rural Islam. And their faith in the concept of *Islam Noir*, a sort of essentialized "black Islam" that was more superficial, docile, and governable, led them to ignore local, grass-roots processes and politics of religious change.⁶⁷ This does not mean that colonial officials could not also be astute observers; it was in their interest to keep accurate records, to prevent rebellion, and to govern efficiently. But they could not escape the political interests of the colonial state and even their own mental habits. For this reason their policies and understandings of African societies were often flawed. Moreover, even as the state's intelligence tentacles reached further into rural areas, the census tours and palavers that produced such information were conducted very infrequently. This means that even the most detailed reports provide only snapshots of social change. Still, these brief glimpses, separated by intervals of a decade or more, form important historical baselines from which to measure transformations. Furthermore, as Luise White has observed, archival documents can be used to contextualize and explain the words of informants, while affording crucial starting points for venturing into oral historical research.⁶⁸

I tack between archival and oral sources, using one set of data to coax more out of the other, generating insights and identifying areas of tension, disagreement, and overlap. For example, working in the archives in Bamako, I read in a colonial census report from 1951 on the canton of Fulala that Tenemakana had a “real mosque” and an authorized Qur’anic school. I also discovered that a man named Kojugu Suntura from the village of N’Golobala had been a central figure in the spread of Islam in Fulala.⁶⁹ Around the same time, I read in another census report from 1912 that there were “around fifty Muslims” in the canton. They belonged to the Qadiriyya and practiced its rituals, but they did not have a Qur’anic school and maintained no organizational links to a particular Sufi *muqaddam*, or official deputy, authorized to initiate people into the order.⁷⁰ In short, a span of almost forty years separated the first mention of Muslims in the small canton and the emergence of the mosque and Qur’anic school of Tenemakana. Armed with this knowledge that Islam had been around much longer than normative declarations would suggest, I sought out the village imam of Tenemakana, whose testimony was the first to suggest that freed slaves, among whom Kojugu Suntura was one of the most important, had returned to their homelands “with prayer” during the era of slave emancipation.⁷¹

Most of my informants were elderly Muslim men and women born in the 1920s and 1930s, and so their experiences and memories were generationally specific.⁷² Interviews dealt with a wide range of nonreligious topics, including farming, slavery, marriage, colonialism, the chieftaincy, village foundation narratives, and so forth. And this allowed me to situate religious change within multiple social contexts. The fact that most informants were at least nominally Muslims meant that in exploring the dialectical relationship between old and new, testimonies could be rather value laden and even teleological. For Muslim elders, Islamization was something to be celebrated. It represented Islam’s superiority and the triumph of God’s will as well as the movement of their community away from the era of *jahiliyya*, or ignorance. Along the perceived continuum from barbarism to civilization, with all of its dichotomous values, Muslim elders saw the public emergence and dominance of Islam and the related shunting aside of bamanaya as a sign of distinct progress. For many, the question of how Islam was introduced into their village or how people became Muslim was rather uncomplicated and required

no explanation beyond, "It was Allah who did that" or "It was Allah who brought us prayer." Hence in my early fieldwork I often encountered cursory responses to such inquiries. In popular understandings, the supposed arrival of Islam was a fairly straightforward result of the "descent of the Qur'an" and its inevitable spread. It was predestined, as elders commonly stated. Anything else in this world was just the minor detail of people struggling on the straight path. There was also a tendency to reduce Islamization processes to the proselytization efforts of particular rural Sufi saints and preachers, even in cases in which the particular saint in question, such as Muhammad Fanta-Mady Sharif of Kankan, never actually set foot in a given locality. Thus, there were strong hagiographical dimensions to local oral traditions which elevated the role of Sufi saints over that of traders, chiefs, migrants, and so forth. Furthermore, for informants, "the coming of Islam" was read retrospectively: they thought about Islam today and then tried to remember when things started looking like they do now. They referred to local turning points, when Islam became the religion of the majority. For example, an informant would cite the moment when, suddenly, it was socially acceptable to pray publicly or when the village mosque was built or when the first village imam was designated. Therefore, the beginnings of Islamic prayer in a village were obscured by normative declarations. And since most of the villages were not nominally Muslim until after the Second World War, the religious changes anterior to this time were often invisible. Eventually, however, and through repeated interviews, informants offered clues that there was something more to the village just-so stories. Through conversations with former migrant workers and the descendants of slaves as well as religious specialists, I learned that people had started praying long before mosques were built and public Muslim rituals were performed.

Many elderly informants were reluctant to admit engaging in non-Muslim practices, given the generalized silence and shame (*mâlôya*) attached to such subjects. But I interviewed bamana traditionalists, such as blacksmiths and hunters, and running through their testimonies are rueful counterdiscourses of discontent. On occasion, elders gave voice to concerns over the consequences of religious change. They stated that in neglecting their old ways they had betrayed local spirits and lost their connection to the vital forces that enable fertility and rain. The result was a fragmented religious landscape. One elder, Amadou Sidibé, said, "The

abandonment of our 'old ways' led to the breakup and fragmentation of this region. The people no longer feared. When Islam came, everyone abandoned the 'old ways' of our fathers and of our grandfathers. Now we know neither our front nor our back. We have become wanderers."⁷³ Namakoro Bamba went even further, stating that Muslim leaders in the community had led people astray. He argued passionately, "The decline of bamanaya was the work of the *mori* [Muslim holy man]. But they have not put people on the right path. When you yourself are not correct, you cannot tell others to be correct. . . . Now the beliefs have become numerous, and we are neither in the house nor in the bush, that is the situation."⁷⁴ Even nominally Muslim elders expressed regret about religious changes. Reflecting local understandings and perceptions of environmental change, they stated that recent drought conditions had resulted from the abandonment of old ways. Hawa Diallo, an elderly Muslim woman in Tenemakana, sorrowfully said, "Before, there was no shortage of rain, not at all. When the drought raged, raged, raged in Tenemakana, the elders went to visit the patriarch ancestor [*cémò*]. They decided to go perform a libation ceremony to the ancestor . . . then the rains fell. So what has caused this shortage of rain? All of our 'old ways' have been abandoned."⁷⁵ Her husband, Broulaye Doumbia, added, "Everything that you worship, will worship you in return. There was a stream here, when we worshiped it, the people would fish and the rain fell. Each time that there was a shortage of water, the people went to do the libation ceremonies and the rain would fall. . . . Presently, we worship only Allah in the world. But in the past, we did not think of Allah, we only did offerings to the power objects, to the spirits. These practices were our religion. Now we have abandoned them."⁷⁶

As these divergent views of Islamization suggest, the oral accounts used in this book do not represent an authentic and unified African voice. There were always intravillage, intercommunal, and lineage-based differences and conflicting accounts, particularly with respect to oral traditions, upon which the first three chapters of this book are based. Oral traditions, as such, are mainly personal or family traditions and in some cases village accounts in wider circulation. They are categorically from the past "beyond the present generation" rather than life histories.⁷⁷ Oral traditions have evolved over time and been influenced by new forms of national and transnational media as well as by migration, urbanization, and changing