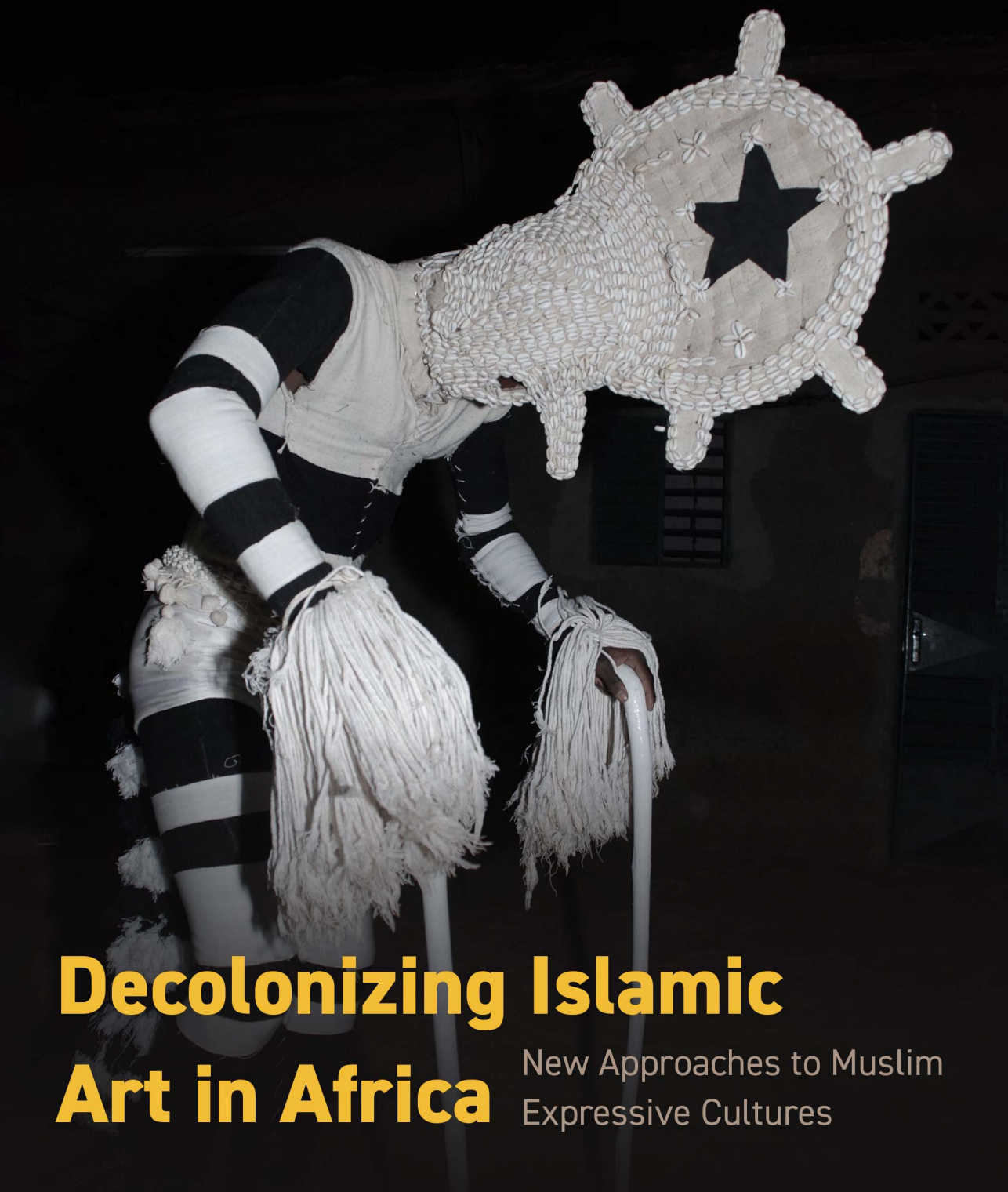
Edited by
Ashley Miller

Part of the Critical Studies in Architecture of the Middle East series



Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa

New Approaches to Muslim Expressive Cultures

Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa

New Approaches to Muslim Expressive Cultures

Edited by
Ashley Miller

intellect
Bristol, UK / Chicago, USA

Contents

Introduction

Un-Disciplining African Muslim Expressive Cultures

Ashley Miller

The authors of this book examine the status of Muslim visual and expressive cultures in the wake of decolonization in Africa. They ask, in the years leading up to and following struggles for independence from colonial regimes across the continent, how was 'Islamic art' mobilized, interpreted, transformed, or even erased in relation to projects of nation-building, articulations of modernism and modernity, and new cultural and religious identities emerging across Africa and its diaspora? They explore the different tactics through which diverse actors – artists, architects, political leaders, museum professionals, religious practitioners, and others – approached the social and conceptual structures previously upheld by colonial regimes. And, they consider the consequences of such processes of negotiation for the visual, spatial, and intellectual parameters framing Muslim institutions, practices, and identities in post-colonial Africa. Taking a long view, contributors also address the ongoing reverberations of these twentieth-century histories within representations, misrepresentations, and iterations of Muslim cultures and identities in Africa today.

Central to our project are two objectives: first, to elucidate African agency within global and local histories of Muslim cultural and artistic production and, second, to understand the generative role of Islamic thought, practice, and expression in forging post-colonial African modernities. Important interventions into the study of Islamic arts in Africa have taken place over the last several decades.[1] Work published on the subject, however, most commonly appears as an exceptional chapter in a textbook broadly addressing African or Islamic art and architecture, for example, or as a focused monograph devoted to a particular region, medium, or case study. Although still few in number, recent art exhibitions dedicated to the history of Islam in Africa indicate growing scholarly and popular interest in understanding the African continent's dynamic relationship with the global religion of Islam; they have also resulted in associated publications that bring together for the first time the research of specialists in the arts and cultures of Muslim Africa working across disciplines.[2] These contributions, though, primarily focus on the early modern and medieval periods and privilege the monumental works of architecture or precious objects that align with the traditional parameters of the Islamic art canon.

At the same time, growing scholarship reframing entrenched Eurocentric histories of modernism has begun to elucidate the central place of artists and audiences based in Africa and the Arab world within global histories of twentieth-century modern art-making.[3] Nevertheless, even where the work of African Muslim artists is addressed in the emerging art-historical subfields of 'African' and 'Arab' modernisms, it is typically contextualized within narratives elucidating the transnational articulation of avant-garde movements such as surrealism or

abstraction and is focused on a limited range of media, primarily painting and other so-called 'fine arts'. The role of Islam specifically is often sidelined in the stories that are told about African Muslim modernist artists within these frameworks.[4] Simultaneously, the contributions of those actors whose work and careers do not align with the current parameters of 'global modernism' or the 'global contemporary' – conceptual and commercial frameworks that still privilege elite artists who have been able to leverage social and creative networks supported by the international art market – continue to be left out of the history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art altogether.[5]

In response, this volume specifically homes in on the relationship of Islam to conceptions of modernity and contemporaneity in Africa as expressed through diverse artistic and creative practices. In doing so, its authors aim to broaden our understanding of the African continent's dynamic relationships with Islam and Muslim culture during the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As much as in the medieval and early modern eras, the last century and a half has been a period marked by global interest in Africa's material and intellectual resources, the transformation of cultural and political identities across the Africa continent, and the active participation of Muslim Africans in new transregional and transcontinental religious, political, and cultural communities.[6] In particular, the early post-colonial era was a critical moment not only of political transition but also of cultural and artistic reassessment that brought heightened attention to the inequities expressed in colonial arts infrastructures and that compelled artists, culture-makers, and activists across the African continent to seek revolution. Islam – as a set of beliefs and religious practices, as a source of identity, and as a driver of culture – played an important role in these widespread endeavours. Many of the works of art, architectures, performances, and other expressive forms we examine in this volume shed light on the specific motivations inspiring leaders and citizens of newly independent African nations to mobilize notions of a shared Islamic heritage in the forging of post-colonial national and personal identities. At the same time, nationalist claims to Islamic or African heritage often denied space for a plurality of identities and expressions. Authors in this volume thus also look to architectural and artistic projects that rejected such nationalist narratives, whether through instances of cross-cultural and cross-regional artistic collaborations or through alternative formulations of heritage and identity.

Extending our analysis into the twenty-first century, we further ask: What are the specific catalysts for and consequences of ongoing transformations in the expression of Islam in Africa today? To this end, authors also present case studies that seek to understand how shifts in demographics, relationships among Muslims and non-Muslims, and the forces of urbanization and globalization have impacted the practice and expression of Islam in diverse African communities over the last decades. They explore how expressive forms including personal adornment, practices of masquerade, and creative engagements with the urban environment reveal and help to articulate new realities, create a sense of belonging, or make claims over shared pasts. And, specifically, they consider how Islam serves as a 'creative catalyst' (see Homann's chapter in this volume) for adapting to these new realities. Attention to this long history compels us to take seriously the social, political, and personal exigencies that have

shaped and have been transformed through Muslim creative expression in Africa. The contributors to this volume insist that readers understand Islam and its expressive cultures not as retrograde or marginal societal features in Africa but rather as phenomena that have been and continue to be central to articulations of self, community, and culture for many Africans across the continent and its diaspora.

(Re)locating African Muslim Expression in and beyond the History of Art

The place of Islam on the African continent and the role of African people in creating, defining, and transforming Islamic practices, thought, and modes of expression remain under-examined areas of research. As addressed throughout this volume, these lacunae in prevalent approaches to global histories of Islam and common understandings of religious and cultural life in Africa are in many ways products of colonial-era epistemologies and the regimes of power they supported. Critical historiography is thus integral to our present endeavour to recentre the stories and interventions of African and Muslim actors within narratives of modern and contemporary expression, and the case studies featured in each chapter compel us to interrogate colonial-era paradigms still shaping the subfields of Islamic and African art history. In this sense, the objectives of our volume intersect with a rising number of publications that query and seek to correct myths impacting the study and prevalent conceptions of 'Islamic' art.[7] Notably, however, Muslim histories and expressive cultures of Africa – and sub-Saharan Africa in particular – play little, if any, role in these important studies that aim to broaden the conceptual, geographical, and social parameters of the field.[8]

The striking underrepresentation of Muslim African arts and expressive cultures in art-historical scholarly production is above all rooted in racist ideas and ideologies undergirding the colonial occupation of the African continent – and the still-unfolding consequences of this devastating history. Among the most powerful constructions reinforced through colonialist designs for the continent, and still persisting today, was an imagined inherent difference between Africans residing north and south of the Sahara Desert. Despite deep histories of interconnection among communities of African Muslims across regions and with Muslims beyond the continent – a phenomenon that, as Scott Reese notes, was ironically bolstered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the technologies and social networks supported by colonial regimes that strove to partition and control Muslim actors in Africa – this North–South division was critical to colonial governance and propaganda of the early twentieth century.[9] French colonial thought in particular expressed this divide not only as a cultural and historical distinction upheld by the natural 'barrier' of the desert but, above all, as a racial – and therefore intellectual – disparity between 'White' and 'Black' Africa.[10]

The discipline of art history has been deeply implicated in and shaped by these racist colonial constructs. European scholarship informed by and informing the colonial 'Saharan Divide'[11] associated the practice and material cultures of Islam in North Africa with an Arabocentric history of Islam that viewed culture and thought as emanating from the Middle East to peripheries

in Africa and East Asia. Colonialist scholarship represented Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand, as idiosyncratic and disconnected from 'authentic' Islamic culture and faith. A geographic area-studies model dominant in many academic settings since the Cold War has continued to reinforce these imagined distinctions by assigning the study of sub-Saharan Africa and the so-called MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region to different departments, institutions, and networks of scholars. The sub-fields of 'African' and 'Islamic' art carry with them distinct yet intersecting historiographies that, studied together, reveal the pernicious inconsistencies, misrepresentations, and oversights that have led to the academic marginalization of African Muslim histories; and yet, as a result of this persisting (neo)colonial framework within the history of art as in other disciplines, these historiographies are today rarely examined together.[12]

Both 'Islamic art' and 'African art' arose as fields of study and parameters for collecting in the late-nineteenth through early-twentieth centuries, as European regimes increasingly lay claim to territories and resources in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. In the context of competition among France, Britain, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire over access to and influence in the modern Muslim world at the turn of the nineteenth century, 'Islamic art' came to be defined in accordance with the changing political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as developing international tastes for the artistic and cultural products of these regions.[13] The grand narrative of Islamic art that emerged within this environment privileged a body of monumental architectural works and precious portable objects created under the patronage of medieval Islamic dynasties; early scholarship and exhibitions thus validated the arts of the Muslim world through their affinity to Europe's own artistic and architectural masterpieces while conceptually distancing them from the contemporary societies over which Europe's colonial entities strove to assert power. Within this framework, African Muslim material cultures beyond a set of limited examples from medieval Egypt and the Maghrib did not easily align with the values of the discipline. Limited early-twentieth-century research into the Islamic architectures of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, while attending to a few key monumental structures such as the Great Mosque in Djenné and the mosques of Timbuktu, generally attributed these works to the expertise of 'foreign' scholars and architects imported from the Middle East by way of North Africa.[14]

Above all, as expressed in colonial constructions of the Saharan Divide, the absence of sub-Saharan Africa in prevailing narratives of 'Islamic art' was a consequence of racist conceptions of the cultural and intellectual inferiority of 'Black Africa'. The early study of 'African art', on the other hand, focused solely on cultures and societies based in sub-Saharan Africa; the subfield of African art history thereby reflects a different set of values and interests rooted in Europe's colonizing plans for these more southern regions.[15] Colonialist thinkers and the scholars they influenced conceptually relocated North Africa to the Arab world and its arts to the history of Islam's 'great' Middle Eastern and Asian dynasties; in contrast, they viewed Africa south of the Sahara Desert as an isolated and timeless place, the cultural products of which represented rudimentary belief systems, passively inherited traditions, or spontaneous expressions without intellectual grounding. The gradual incorporation of Africa's material

cultures into the purview of art historical investigation only began with the validation of a limited corpus of objects – primarily carved wood, figurative sculptures, and select elements of masks – appreciated by European and American artists and collectors in the early twentieth century for their visual affinity to modernist ideals of pure form and 'primitive' expression.[16] Despite major transformations in art-historical approaches to studying expressive cultures of Africa in recent decades, the ideological and aesthetics-driven privileging of primitivity as an inherent and desired quality of 'African' art still broadly impacts the shape of the field, with important consequences for the study of Islamic arts in Africa. For example, the persistent valuing of 'authenticity' in African art[17] – where, in most cases, authenticity is a slippery concept employed as a euphemism for primitivity and non-agency – relegates African Muslim expressive and material cultures to the margins; in this context, Islam is again presented as a foreign import into Africa and its influence in Africa's arts, as corrupting or exceptional.

In approaching these biases, we do not intend in this volume to present a cohesive narrative or rewriting of the history of Islamic art in Africa; nor is it our project to simply 'expand' the art historical canon. Instead, we offer case studies that elucidate and challenge the spatial, temporal, and material qualities of African Muslim creative expression as traditionally represented in Euro-American-centric academies. The constructions of difference that describe the cultural landscapes of Africa and the Muslim world according to divisions of colonial administrative units and essentializing notions of race, religion, and ethnic identity present walls that, in reality, have never existed functionally. Imagined boundaries and borders, however, have been essential to the authority enacted in such gatekeeping, not only for colonial powers but also for anti-colonial nationalist discourse in the twentieth century and structures of academic expertise based in the area studies model. Alternatively, we aim to emphasize the porousness and, in some cases, non-existence of such boundaries. Bringing together case studies that engage West Africa (Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mauritania), East Africa (Kenya, Zanzibar), North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Egypt), and the African diaspora (Cuba, France), our study importantly also facilitates conversation among scholars whose work is typically supported by disparate academic communities typically aligned with entrenched geographical imaginaries.

Indeed, in addition to the racist constructions preserved through the geopolitical contours of art history's subfields, the study of Africa's Muslim expressive cultures continues to be impeded by resistance to and difficulties encountered by researchers and scholars attempting to work across subfields and disciplines. This book perhaps noticeably brings together an unusual combination of objects, modes of expression, and actors. By unusual, I mean that the categories of 'things' under study – and, importantly, their makers as well – are rarely considered to have any relevance in relation to each other according to our disciplinary structures and the lines of inquiry they typically support. As our volume will hopefully demonstrate, however, in reality the combination is not so extraordinary. Rather, it provides insight into the multiple identities, practices, experiences, and ideas that African and Muslim artists and actors navigate, even as they sometimes actively themselves reinforce and (re)produce delineations among fluid categories of making and belonging.

As inherently multivocal and multivalent – as well as often portable and mutable – objects and cultural works can help us see beyond the superficial boundaries and privileged epistemologies through which (neo)colonial ideologies and scholarship attempt to order the world.[18] To permit them to do so, however, we must be open to a flexible scholarly framework that invites multi-disciplinarity and reflexivity; allowing objects to 'speak' furthermore requires us to step back from our assumptions about *which* objects are worthy of telling a story. What characterizes this book, then, is our privileging of human experience as its central organizing theme: at the heart of each chapter is the question of how African *people* engage or have engaged with Islam through creative expression. Beginning with this line of inquiry – rather than with a corpus of objects already reified in the history of 'Islamic' or 'African' art – diverse practices, histories, and experiences of the material and visual world come to the fore as integral components of these human stories; and, accordingly, the chapters' authors bring with them expertise and interests shaped by multiple disciplines with unique methodologies for investigating expressive cultures.

The study of Islamic art in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Africa necessarily engages problems and histories central to the subfields of 'African', 'Islamic', and 'modern' art and visual culture. Recent scholarship arising within each of these traditional subject areas has played a central role in elucidating and challenging biased structures of thought and representation pervading art history as a discipline; nevertheless, there are few venues that facilitate interaction and scholarly exchange across these subfields. In response, *Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa* presents work by researchers whose scholarship engages all three art historical subfields. Importantly, the authors further engage issues and methodologies rooted in their diverse disciplinary backgrounds as specialists in architecture, anthropology, religious studies, urban studies, and the history of art and visual culture, thereby also bringing into conversation interdisciplinary approaches to theorizing de-/postcoloniality in relation to questions of space, materiality, visuality, cultural representation, and identity. As such, although the project of decolonizing *art histories* of African Muslim expressive cultures serves as a binding framework for the volume, this approach is intended to highlight the predominance of art history's material and intellectual biases in (mis)representations of 'Islamic art' in Africa, as well as to argue for the necessity of critiquing the discipline's approach not only internally but through interdisciplinary dialogue. Ultimately, the decolonization of knowledge production through and about African and Muslim creative expression – as well as any cultural and human experience – requires a will to 'un-discipline' our scholarly approaches and relationships.

Organization of Chapters

While all of the chapters resonate with each other in complex ways, they are thematically organized to emphasize major conceptual and methodological issues at stake in decolonizing the study of African and Muslim arts and expression. Part 1, 'Beyond Borders: African (and)

Muslim Objects as "Relational Loci"', interrogates the constructed nature of geopolitical, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries by focusing on contestations over identity, culture, and space on the Swahili Coast of East Africa. Part 2, 'Disobedient Media: Reclaiming African Muslim Expressive Cultures', addresses the fraught delineation and hierarchization of creative practices, as well as the possibilities entailed in acknowledging multiple conceptions of knowledge production and ownership. Authors in both sections analyse material, visual, and embodied expression as constitutive elements of Islamic practice and knowledge and as conduits of representation that often enrich, exceed, or complicate written language-based narratives and ideologies. In this way, the chapters contribute an additional perspective to recent important work on African and African diasporic interventions in Islamic thought, activism, and history during the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries, much of which has focused primarily on systems of writing, religious scholarship, personal biography, and histories of political engagement.[19]

While the first half of the book emphasizes objects and expressive practices more commonly studied by researchers based in the social sciences, from masquerades to bodily adornment, the second half turns to media that have long served as touchstones of art historical inquiry: painting and architecture. In addition to demonstrating how African and Muslim artists actively participated in formulating artistic discourses and practices in transnational modernist communities, these chapters also highlight the limits of predominant narratives of artistic modernism. Part 3, 'Mobilizing Heritage: Painting Postcolonial Identities', explores how modern and contemporary artists based in Africa and the African diaspora have activated diverse conceptions of religious practice, art, history, and identity while experimenting with the possibilities of the painted surface. Finally, Part 4, 'Undisciplined Constructions: Relocating "Islamic" Architecture in Africa', considers how cultural, religious, and personal meaning is generated through the built environment. The chapters furthermore explore how processes of making and interpreting architecture in post-Independence Africa and its diaspora often disrupted imagined binaries, among Muslim and non-Muslim, 'modern' and 'traditional', colonial and post-colonial, here and elsewhere.

Beyond Borders

It is no accident that the book begins with a pairing of essays focusing on Africa's eastern coast, a region of the world whose inhabitants are often understood to reside at the margins, the edge, or, alternatively, the crossroads of multiple imagined geographies and disciplinary categories. In her study of architecture and domestic consumption in Swahili port cities, Prita Meier suggests that 'things, houses, and even people on the Swahili coast are relational loci, brimming with all sorts of different cultural traditions that cannot be traced back to one place or society – even when they *look* distinctly "Middle Eastern" or "foreign" [and] [i]t is for this reason that [t]he Swahili coast asks us to reconsider where Africa, Asia, and Europe begin and end'.[20] Recent scholarship has productively analysed the histories and material cultures of the inhabitants of the Swahili Coast through the lens of an 'Indian Ocean' community not bound

by land-based geographies.[21] At the same time, as Meier also points out[22] and as the authors in this first section explore, the perceived cultural and geographical fluidity of the region has also often supported arguments that the people and things inhabiting this space are neither 'African' nor 'Arab', always belonging at the margins of both cultural ideals.

Zulfikar Hirji investigates in his chapter how colonial-era epistemologies and practices of collection reinforced this false Arab/African dichotomy through the physical and, ultimately, intellectual 'dispersal' of East African material culture across locations, disciplines, and institutions. To do so, he examines the divergent trajectories of objects associated with the Sultanate of Witu, the last independent Swahili-Muslim state on the East African coast. Noting the uneven presence and frequent misrepresentation of pre-colonial Swahili material culture in institutional collections of both African and Islamic art today, he traces this current state of affairs to complex histories of colonial knowledge production, embarking upon a meticulous examination of the texts, personal relationships, and political contexts that shaped the colonial and post-colonial lives of Swahili Muslim objects. While Hirji examines the physical dispersal of material things to illuminate the contradictory systems of thought and representation that have impacted their position within disciplinary structures and institutions today, Michelle Apotsos traces the life of a set of *immovable* objects to elaborate how communities and identities have been negotiated around and through interventions into the built environment in which they are situated. She demonstrates how successive political leaders on the Swahili Coast, and in Zanzibar in particular, over the last centuries have shaped and interpreted architecture and urban space to enact power and social hierarchy locally and to express belonging to transregional communities and spaces, as part of the *ummah* and/or as players in a global economy. She critiques the mechanisms through which British colonial imaginaries reduced the complex life and meaning of Zanzibar's Stone Town to an orientalist fantasy space, a phenomenon laying the groundwork for the post-colonial 'heritagization' of Stone Town; at the same time, she presents an optimistic view of this built environment as a site of cultural resilience and continuity for its local stakeholders.

Hirji's and Apotsos's analyses of the complex networks of global and local consumption and interaction that have impacted conceptions of 'Muslim-ness' and 'African-ness' along the East African coast thus set the stage for our deconstruction of these terms as they have been claimed, rejected, and reinterpreted by artmakers, consumers, scholars, and others. They also introduce important themes that extend throughout this volume, including how individuals and communities position themselves in relation to multiple cultural ideas and ideals, how they engage the visual and material world to do so, and the processes of representation entailed in asserting claims of ownership over specific sites, forms of expression, and identities. Many of the chapters in this book indeed explore how these activities 'on the ground' are impacted by and, in turn, shape the constructed geographies through which political regimes, scholars, artists, and others conceptualize the boundaries of and relationships among elements in the shifting kaleidoscope of global cultural and artistic expression.

Disobedient Media

One of the aims of this volume is, in fact, to problematize imagined hierarchies among expressive forms, as reinforced in predominant art historical representations of African and Islamic arts. Bringing together studies of architecture, painting, the written word, performance, masquerading, bodily adornment, and practices of collection and display, our juxtaposition of case studies invites readers to encounter resonances and dynamic cross-pollination among different media and within very different contexts of Muslim expression in Africa. Our aim is not to collapse 'African Muslim expressive culture' into a reified or homogenous category but rather, by presenting these diverse studies together, to privilege African Muslim experiences and interventions as our central organizing theme over arbitrary material distinctions that threaten to obscure 'non-conforming' modes of expression.

As Allen Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts' chapter insists, questioning the value and significance – as well as the agency – academies attribute to certain kinds of 'things' and, by extension, *people* is essential to a decolonial study of the Muslim arts of Africa. They draw upon literary theorist Walter Mignolo's argument that decolonization implies 'epistemic disobedience'[23] to present a methodology for interpreting expressive acts and meaningful objects by taking seriously the philosophical and religious truths of their makers and practitioners. They argue in particular that those 'wishing to speak with and for sub-Saharan Muslim persons and communities must "disobey" oft-taken-for-granted colonial "wisdoms" by looking to and respecting local understandings of how the world works' (see Roberts and Roberts, this volume, 87). A recognition of the agency of objects and material things themselves – a glinting blade, reed stalks, the *qalam* ('pen') – guides the authors' engagement with the beliefs of their interlocutors, suggesting that extending our notions of agency to the natural, material, and supernatural world is also a critical element in the 'disobedience' they propose. This chapter and the others in Part 2 together address an underlying problem at stake in the project of disrupting Eurocentric and (neo)colonial notions of knowledge production and authority: who has the right to access and know certain kinds of information and who should determine these privileges?

Cynthia Becker's essay further explores the problems of legibility and access through an analysis of the photographic series *Amazigh* (2017) by contemporary artist Safaa Mazirh. As the primary subject of her own photographs, Mazirh creates multi-layered complex palimpsests that critique previous colonial-era efforts to record women's bodies, confront the condemnation of tattooing in contemporary Moroccan society, and present tattooing as a 'subversive archive' through which tattooed women can (re)claim ownership over their own embodied histories. Becker examines how the artist herself confronts and creates in spite of lacunae in the documentation of tattoo practices, whether generated by the constraints of colonial epistemologies, conservative religious interpretations, or the interests of tattooed subjects themselves.

Turning to a different form of embodied expression not typically included in studies of 'Islamic art', Lisa Homann analyses the performance of a nocturnal masquerade known as *Lo Gbe*. She demonstrates how the evolving practice of *Lo Gbe* has provided a context for Zara Muslims in Burkina Faso to navigate and assert a constellation of identities within a multiethnic

and multireligious environment. In her chapter, Homann challenges the ways that scholars typically approach specific kinds of 'objects', arguing that *Lo Gbe* is both determined by and generative of the social and material contours of a transforming urban landscape. Her analysis thus confronts perceived distinctions between the built environment and embodied performance, compelling us to view these elements as necessarily intertwined through processes of religious and cultural meaning-making. The chapter also points us to the problem of fixed notions of 'indigeneity' that often describe Muslim practices and culture in African communities as 'foreign', demonstrating the simultaneous mutability and situatedness of identity, as well as the entanglement of Muslim and non-Muslim life and actors in this particular West African space.

Mobilizing Heritage

Among the powerful conceptual binaries with which many artists based in twentieth-century Africa – as well as those who study their work – have contended is the perceived distinction between the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. It is indeed crucial to recognize how conceptions of 'tradition' and the 'traditional' were wielded by colonial regimes in the subjugation of non-European people, as well as the impact of these realities on understandings of the material and expressive cultures of Africa. At the same time, the process of (re)locating the 'traditional' in art and culture was also essential to acts of reclamation and self-identification by many African artists and activists who strove to engender ruptures with colonial ideals and structures of art- and culture-making in the wake of independence. Indeed, understanding and claiming the past through processes of heritagization and other creative acts are activities that have been deeply entangled in projects of modernization and self-presentation across localities.[24]

The chapters in Part 3 of this volume look to the creative processes by which modernist artists in post-colonial Africa have reimagined visual and spiritual elements of Islam to express their own positions as creators and individuals. While these three case studies speak to the artists' shared interest in engaging ideals of Islamic heritage and practice, they also reveal that conceptions of this heritage are far from monolithic and serve very different purposes for each artist as they have navigated the unique social, political, and personal contexts in which they work. Examining the artistic practices of three generations of artists working in Mauritania since the 1950s, Mark Delancey explores the distinct ways that they have employed Islamic text and calligraphy in their paintings. As his chapter narrates, through his interviews with artists as well as others engaged in the teaching and production of calligraphy in Mauritania, Delancey learned that the use of Arabic and other scripts in modern and contemporary painting often indicates a complex engagement with Mauritania's past: evoking historical confrontations among nomadic Arabic tribes and *Amazigh* peoples in the region, striving to express belonging with an Arab-Islamic identity shared across the Maghrib, or responding to the interests and demands of the commercial market.

While the artists in Delancey's study grapple with their own regionality and the complexities and contradictions it entails, Alex Seggerman's and Holiday Powers' chapters explore how artists engaged Islamic thought and visual culture as interlocutors in artistic movements and communities spanning geographical regions. Seggerman compares the work of Egyptian painter

Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar (1925–1966) to the art of other post-surrealist painters with roots in Africa, including Wifredo Lam (Cuban, 1902–1982) and Ibrahim El-Salahi (Sudanese, b. 1930) to analyse how each incorporated mystical religious content into their painting. Without ignoring the specificity of the religious ideas of each and their important connections to specific localities and notions of heritage, she elucidates how commonalities in their practices demonstrate a shared interest in confronting the legacies of colonialism and religion through painting.

Islamic thought likewise plays a complex role in the abstract paintings of the Moroccan artist Mohammad Melehi (1936–2020), which Powers examines in her chapter. She focuses on a series of square-based abstractions painted by the artist in the 1960s, demonstrating that the series engages not only with local Islamic traditions of *zellij* tilework in Morocco, but also references the hard-edge abstraction Melehi encountered during his sojourn in New York in the early 1960s, IBM punch cards, cybernetics, and spiritual connections between Sufi Islam and Zen Buddhism. She thereby complicates common nation-based narratives about the reclamation of 'precolonial' Islamic arts by post-colonial artists of the Maghrib, arguing that Islamic art as a cultural heritage was mobilized by Melehi within a larger project that sought universalism by ultimately transcending national and religious belonging.

Undisciplined Constructions

The fourth and final section of the volume continues to elaborate how works of art – and, here, architecture specifically – created in post-colonial Africa and its diaspora at once activated conceptions of Islam and its visual cultures while simultaneously disrupting the social and material parameters by which 'Islamic' art is typically contained, whether in histories of art or by the political regimes that have sought to define Africa's cultural identities. Architecture has served as an important site for state articulations of identity under both colonial and post-colonial regimes. Colonial regimes in Africa translated and reinterpreted specific structures and vernacular practices into architectonic emblems of colonized societies, encompassing generalized and strategic representations of those communities they aimed to control.[25] Many newly independent regimes across Africa in the second half of the twentieth century likewise turned to architecture as a mode of defining and displaying national identity.[26] These projects often imply neatly defined identities, projecting the political aims and desires of the ruling party. While attention to architecture and the built environment is not confined to this final section of the book, it is here that the authors approach head-on the problems entailed in understanding architecture in relation to African Muslim identity and culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Emma Chubb and Jacobé Huet explore the important place of architecture in colonial and post-colonial state identity projects in Morocco and Algeria, while at the same time focusing on case studies that challenge the distinct cultural categories officially expressed in these projects. Focusing on the early years of independence in North Africa, Chubb looks to architecture in Morocco to interrogate the personal and professional relationships entailed in a series of state-funded architectural projects. The chapter reveals how these projects not only disrupted perceived categories of artmaking through collaborations among modernist painters and architects

but also challenged social and cultural distinctions – between activist and state, colonizer and colonized, Muslim and non-Muslim – understood to be crucial to the project of decolonization in Morocco. In doing so, she emphasizes the instability, which itself has often been generative, of the cultural ideals driving both political and artistic representation in post-colonial Morocco.

In the final chapter of the book, Huet encourages us to look beyond perceived geographical and formal boundaries of 'Islamic' architecture to instead focus on the multifaceted ways in which Muslim, African, and diasporic actors inhabit and activate meaningful spaces and structures. She thereby challenges the methods – from the primary sources we employ to the interlocutors we engage – by which scholars typically interpret architecture. Rather than privileging the words and intentions of builders and their critics, she asks: what if we focus on the experiences of users and inhabitants to understand how architecture's meaning is shaped across time and space? This is a particularly novel intervention in studying what have become icons of modernist architecture. In her reading of housing projects known as the *grands ensembles*, sponsored by the French government in Algeria and France between the 1950s and 1970s, Huet turns from official rhetoric employed to explain the form and purpose of these buildings to explore the memories and experiences of their residents, a methodology in part inspired by and explored through the work of artist and former *grand ensemble* resident Kader Attia (b. 1970). Bringing together collage and architecture, oral and written sources, past and present experiences, her project moves across space, time, and media in a way that pushes against the grain of standard architectural histories.

Together, these final chapters examine how individuals and works of art traverse and sometimes obfuscate national and cultural borders even at moments when clearly defining and redefining those borders is politically exigent. In particular, they address the often ignored cross-Mediterranean collaborations and exchanges contributing to the articulation of 'Islamic' art and architecture in post-Independence North Africa; these relationships disrupt and complicate ideals of cultural and religious uniformity promulgated by the leaders of Muslim-majority nations like Morocco and Algeria in the second half of the twentieth century. They also challenge notions of a strict rupture between colonial and post-colonial regimes and experiences, instead evidencing what Chubb in this volume refers to as the 'messiness' of post-colonial transitions, as well as the difficulty encountered in attempting to disentangle the colonial structures of thought and categorization sometimes reproduced in the very projects that sought to break from these ideals.[27]

'Decolonizing' Islamic Art in Africa

In his recent book *What Is African Art?*, Peter Probst writes that 'a defining feature of the decolonial agenda is its heterogeneity, or rather its multivalences as being a demand, a vision, an epistemological critique, and a stance of resistance and defiance all at once' and suggests that this multivalency 'reflects the long and varied semantic shadow that starts looming when one begins to talk about "African art"'.[28] Underlying our project is likewise the recognition that processes of conceptualizing 'African' and 'Islamic' art – as fields of study and of action – in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have necessarily entailed the constant defining, redefining,

problematizing, and reclaiming of these categories. The words comprising the main title of this book – 'Islam', 'art', and 'Africa' – are all loaded terms that provoke their deconstruction; indeed, the title's initiating verb, 'decolonizing', describes a process that today has come to represent a collective effort to reject, break down, and deconstruct the colonial scaffolding in part built up through the efficacy of such generalizing concepts. And yet, it is critical to recall that these same terms have also been claimed and contested in diverse contexts of self-identification and expression by individuals and communities subjected to colonial violences themselves. Understanding how contemporary issues of semantics are entangled with, and at times overshadow, these complex histories is critical not only to scholars seeking to decolonize their disciplines 'from within' but also to those engaged in producing new expressive and representational frameworks as artists, museum and arts professionals, and activists.

Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa is thus built upon the premise that it is imperative not only to challenge colonial paradigms from a contemporary perspective but also to understand the complex histories through which such paradigms have been perpetuated, transformed, or rejected through the actions and expressions of actors involved in decolonization processes 'on the ground'. Following Anthony King's insistence that studies engaged in postcolonial critique attend to the 'critical importance of the presence, or absence of *local*, Indigenous perceptions of "postcoloniality", what is implied by it, and who has the power to control it', our project likewise asserts that the work of reimagining existing global structures of knowledge production and exchange must begin with careful attention to specific histories of colonization and decolonization in different communities and regions of the world.[29] Thus, in bridging our theoretical concerns about the colonialist perspectives still embedded in our disciplines with research into the strategies employed by diverse actors living, working, and creating in the wake of political independence, we aim to enrich a genealogy of decolonization efforts rooted not in recent endeavours in Euro-American self-critique but rather in the actions and interventions of individuals positioned in or identifying with the 'post-colony' itself, then and now.

Indeed, while colonialism and its broadcasting of Eurocentric ideals weigh heavily on the fields of African and Islamic art, non-European actors living and working within colonial and post-colonial societies have never been passive observers. As evidence, the regime changes of the mid-twentieth century that transformed life across the African continent also incited the upheaval of existing infrastructures, conceptual frameworks, and claims to authority and ownership entailed in colonial representations of African and Islamic art. Engaging with these histories, contributors to this volume examine the complex ways in which Africans creatively expressed their relationship to Islam in the early years of decolonization and the impact of their interventions in the representation of African and Islamic art as fields of study and practice. They draw our attention to contemporary expressions of Muslim belief, practice, and identity in Africa, compelling us to ask what 'decolonizing Islamic art in Africa' might mean for practicing Muslims, artists, and other actors based in Africa and its diaspora today. By taking seriously the diverse pathways and perspectives through which individuals express complex notions of culture, identity, and belonging, the authors of this book explore methodologies for studying Muslim expression in Africa that emphasize cultural dynamism and individual

agency. It is above all through the recognition of these indisputable elements of the human experience, rather than through the deconstruction or reclamation of slippery terms, that decolonial agendas will gain their strongest traction.

Notes

1 See, among others: Labelle Prussin, 'The Architecture of Islam in West Africa', *African Arts* 1.2 (Winter 1968): 32–74 and *African Nomadic Architecture: Space, Place, and Gender* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); René Bravmann, *Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Raymond R. Silverman, 'Drinking the Word of God', in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer and Sarah Adams, 117–23 (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of African Art, 2007) and 'Red Gold: Things Made of Copper, Bronze, and Brass', in *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*, ed. Kathleen Bickford Berzock (Evanston, Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University; Princeton, in association with Princeton University Press, 2019), 257–68; Allen F. Roberts, Mary N. Roberts, Gassia Armenian, and Ousmane Guèye, *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003); Michelle Apotsos, *Architecture, Islam, and Identity in West Africa: Lessons from Larabanga* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016) and *The Masjid in Contemporary Islamic Africa* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Prita Meier, *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

2 Kathleen Bickford Berzock, ed, *Caravans of Gold*; Alisa LaGamma, ed, *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020); Yannick Lintz et al., eds, *Le Maroc médiéval: un empire de l'Afrique à l'Espagne* (Paris: Hazan; Louvre éditions, 2014).

3 Although individual contributions are too extensive to list here, two edited volumes published as addendums to existing textbooks evidence widespread interest in reevaluating the relationship of modernism to 'African' and 'Islamic' art: Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà, eds, *A Companion to Modern African Art* (Chichester; Wiley Blackwell, 2013); and Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoglu, eds, *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2017).

4 Notable exceptions include the work of Salah M. Hassan and Alex Dika Seggerman, including: lbrahim Salahi, Salah M. Hassan, and Sarah Adams, eds, *Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist* (Long Island City and Seattle: Museum for African Art; distributed by University of Washington Press, 2012); and Alex Dika Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt between the Islamic and the Contemporary* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

5 Cf. Sussan Babaie, 'Voices of Authority: Locating the "Modern" in "Islamic" Arts', *Getty Research Journal* 3 (2011): 134–35.

6 A number of historians have produced important studies of Muslim networks across and beyond Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including: Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, ed, *Bridges Across the Sahara: Social, Economic and Cultural Impact of the Trans-Sahara Trade during the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Western Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); James McDougall and Judith Scheele, eds, *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); James L. Gelvin and Nile Green, eds, *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

7 See, for example: Onur Öztürk, Xenia Gazi, and Sam Bowker, eds, *Deconstructing the Myths of Islamic Art* (New York: Routledge, 2022); Wendy M. K. Shaw, *What is 'Islamic' Art? Between Religion and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jenny Norton-Wright, ed, *Curating Islamic Art Worldwide: From Malacca to Manchester* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); and Moya Carey and Margaret S. Graves, eds, *Journal of Art Historiography* (Special Issue: 'Islamic Art Historiography') 6 (2012).

8 A noted exception is Cleo Cantone's chapter, 'Deconstructing the Myths and Mysteries of the Mosque', in Özturk et al., *Deconstructing the Myths of Islamic Art*, 15–27.

9 Scott S. Reese, 'Islam in Africa/Africans and Islam', *The Journal of African History* 55.1 (2014): 17–26.

10 Jean-Louis Triaud, 'Giving A Name to Islam South of the Sahara: An Adventure in Taxonomy', *The Journal of African History* 55.1 (2014): 3–15. It should be noted that the racialization of Islam and racial delineation of regions and communities in Africa are also strategies that have been employed in the service of other political and religious programmes beyond the French colonial realm, including in the context of certain anti-colonial movements and agendas of self-definition. For further discussion of constructions of race in relation to Islam in Africa see, among others: Zain Abdullah, 'Negotiating Identities: A History of Islamization in Black West Africa', *Journal of Islamic Law & Culture* 10.1 (April 2008): 5–17; Eve Troutt-Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egyptian Nationalists and the Mastery of the Sudan, 1875-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); John Hunwick and Eve Troutt-Powell, eds, *The Same But Different: Documents on African Slavery in the Islamic Mediterranean (19th-20th Centuries)* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Press, Inc., 2002); Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Cynthia Becker, *Blackness in Morocco: Gnawa Identity through Music and Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

11 I borrow the term from Samuel Anderson's essay, 'From Algiers to Timbuktu: Multi-Local Research in Colonial History Across the Saharan Divide', *History in Africa* 49 (2022): 277–99.

12 Prita Meier touches upon these intersections in her essay, 'Authenticity and its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter and African and Middle Eastern Art History', *The Arab Studies Journal* 18.1 (2010), 12–45.

13 Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, 'The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field', *The Art Bulletin* 85.1 (March 2003), 152–84; David J. Roxburgh, 'Au Bonheur des Amateurs: Collecting and Exhibiting Islamic Art, *c*.1880-1910', *Ars Orientalist* (Special Issue: Exhibiting the Middle East: Collections and Perceptions of Islamic Art) 30 (2000): 9–38; Margaret S. Graves, 'Feeling Uncomfortable in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012): 1–27.

14 On the fraught history of assigning authorship and ownership to Islamic architecture in West Africa, for example, see: Suzan B. Aradeon, 'Al-Sahili: The Historian's Myth of Architectural Technology Transfer from North Africa', *Journal des Africanistes* 59.1 (1989): 99–131; and Jean-Louis Bourgeois, 'The History of the Great Mosques of Djenné', *African Arts* 20.3 (1987): 54–92.

15 Peter Probst has noted the surprising absence of a scholarly publication outlining the full development of African art studies as a field. Probst, *What Is African Art?: A Short History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022). Exceptions may be, to some extent, Suzanne Preston Blier, 'Enduring Myths of African Art', in *Africa: The Art of a Continent, 100 Works of Beauty and Power*, ed. Blier (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 26–32; and, as Probst remarks, Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, 'African Visual Cultures', in *Modern African History*, ed. John Parker and Richard Reid (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 438–49.

16 Christopher B. Steiner, 'The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness: Fashioning the Canon of African Art', in *Art History and its Institution*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London: Routledge 2002), 132–45; Henry Louis Gates Jr., 'Europe, Africa, and the Uncanny', in *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, ed. Tom Phillips (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 27–30.

17 Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, 'African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow', *African Arts* 25.2 (April 1992): 40–53, 96–97.

18 Cf. Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1998); Annabel Cooper, Lachy Paterson, and Angela Wanhalla, eds, *The Lives of Colonial Objects* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2015); Ruth B. Phillips, 'Materiality and Cultural Translation: Indigenous Arts, Colonial Exchange, and Postcolonial Perspectives', in *Cultural Histories of the Material World*, ed. Peter N. Miller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 134–43; Christian Jil R. Benitz and Anita Lundberg, 'Tropical Materialisms: Toward Decolonial Poetics, Practices, and Possibilities', *ETropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics* (Special Issue: Tropical Materialisms: Poetics, Practices, Possibilities) 21.2 (2022), 1–20, https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.2.2022.3929.

19 See, for example: Rudolph T. Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Fallou Ngom, *Muslims Beyond the Arab World: The Odyssey of 'Ajamī and the Murīdiyya* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Mauro Nobili, *Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith: Aḥmad Lobbo, the Tārīkh al-fattāsh and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Zain Abdullah, *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). It should also be noted that in this body of literature, West Africans are the predominant subjects and interlocutors.

20 Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*, 10.

21 For example, see essays in Prita Meier and Allyson Purpura, eds, *World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean* (exhibition catalog) (Champaign, IL: Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion, 2018).
22 Meier, *Swahili Port Cities*, 10.
23 Walter D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought, and De-Colonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26.7–8 (2009): 1–23.
24 Virginie Rey, 'Traditionalizing the Modern: Tunisia's Living Museums', *Arena Journal* 44 (2015): 115–34; and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
25 Steven Nelson, *From Cameroon to Paris: Mousgoum Architecture In and Out of Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Patricia A. Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Itohan Osayimwese, *Colonialism and Modern Architecture in Germany* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).
26 Manuel Herz et al., ed, *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence, Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia* (Zurich: Park Books, 2015); Cleo Cantone, *Making and Remaking Mosques in Senegal* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012); Jennifer Roberson, 'The Changing Face of Morocco under King Hassan II', *Mediterranean Studies* 22.1 (2014): 57–87.
27 Cf. Abidin Kusno, 'Rethinking the Nation', *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446201756; and Kusno, *The Appearances of Memory: Mnemonic Practices of Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
28 Probst, *What Is African Art?*, 224.
29 Anthony King, *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, Identity* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 61.