



# Stéphane Pradines: Historic mosques in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Timbuktu to Zanzibar

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## Review

*Historic Mosques in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Timbuktu to Zanzibar* is foremost a correctional effort. Within its opening pages, Stéphane Pradines delivers his rationale with clarity. Do not be fooled by the striking images adorning its pages; this is not a coffee table curiosity, but instead a tome of scholastic rigor, composed such that each highlighted mosque is contextualized within its respective socio-political setting and broader historical movements. This is a work that seeks to synthesize the current state of archaeological knowledge regarding Muslim prayer spaces within sub-Saharan Africa, specifically those architectural traditions predating European colonization, an endeavor that reflects the comparatively recent maturation of Islamic archaeology in most of the regions featured. Pradines correctly recognized the need for a compendium of this nature but are his lofty goals realized in these 350 pages?

Approaching each of the three core chapters briefly, let us start at the beginning. In Chapter 1, Pradines introduces the mosques of the Sahel and Western Africa collectively as the “Mosques of the Niger Valleys.” The preliminary, robust discussion foregrounding the central architectural descriptions will be welcomed by non-specialists of West African

Islamic history, myself included. However, this foray draws into focus the limits of this volume, namely the architectural emphasis precludes the careful historical overview necessitated by an expansive and frequently changing socio-political landscape of the Sahel, and it falls upon the reader to fill in the gaps when the book gives too little or assumes too much. Once beyond this historical background, the author enters a brief exploration of Islamization in West Africa. Pradines proposes a four-phased model of Islamization for the “Niger Valleys,” with each step based on a series of regional, fluctuating Islamic sectarian alignments, a hypothesis not wholly dissimilar to that proposed for eastern Africa later in the book. The model central to this conversation is woefully unconvincing, a symptom of the inadequate space allotted to substantiating the hypothesis. Presently, I am skeptical that such a marked and clearly articulated material culture arose region-wide in response to shifts in Islamic sectarian alignment, often slow and incomplete processes. That said, it was not the author’s intention to fully explore the specifics but instead provide contextualization. Following this, the chapter delves into the discussion of the various earthen mosque building traditions of the Sahel, regionally segmented with consideration given to dynastic affiliation and chronology. The descriptive components of the techniques and the architectural outcomes are comprehensive, and, in many cases, paired with fantastic full-color photographs or plans. While not every element is listed or explained, a hypothetical metric that would be truly

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tedious to achieve, what is presented is of important utility to historians and archaeologists alike. Framing the architectural segments are succinct overviews of archaeological investigations for most of the mosques discussed in this book. Within these sections, Pradines offers an expanded historical setting, elaborates upon significant architectural features, and provides other miscellaneous musings. I cannot speak to the accuracy of the interpretive commentaries dispersed with little preamble between the observational registers, but I do question the delivery and antagonistic manner of some.

Chapter 2 examines the “Mosques from the Horn of Africa to the Valleys of the Nile.” The brevity of this discussion, according to the author, is a consequence of the nascent state of Islamic archaeology in the Horn of Africa, or its “neglected history” (p. 115). This, however, does not mean regional mosque traditions are completely unknown. The mosques of Nora receive an investigative treatment consistent with those found in the previous segment. The page space allotted to Nora’s architecture is perhaps more reflective of the author’s personal archaeological journeys than any concrete measure of what is known, as is the case for much of the volume. The remainder of the chapter favors historical summary over archaeological or architectural exposition, unlike the preceding Sahelian and subsequent eastern African sections. Chapter 2 is somewhat defined by what is missing. The mosques investigated by Timothy Insoll at Harlaa and Harar (*cf.* Insoll & Zekaria, 2019) were only briefly described and included no plan, a curious oversight that ran counter to Pradines’ stated scope. Along this same line of critique, the unspoken decision to prioritize enclosed architectural spaces noticeably detracts from the chapter’s coverage, as it resultantly excluded any representation of the expanding catalog of outline mosques thought to have been built by nomads and pilgrims (*cf.* de Torres Rodriguez, 2022). Transregional nomadic groups serve a recurrent role in the Islamization trajectory described by Pradines in Chapter 1 but are left distinctly diminished here.

Chapter 3 considers “The Mosques of the Indian Ocean Coast.” The Islamic material culture of the eastern African coast has received more archaeological investigation than other African regions, with the exception of Nubia. It is within this context that my personal expertise lies, and it is here I had the most significant divergence of opinion from the

author. Pradines relates a relatively diffusionist understanding of the development of the Swahili Coast, a stretch of the East African littoral extending from southern Somalia to central Mozambique, including the Comoros and northern Madagascar (p. 146). Within the interpretative paragraphs of this chapter, Pradines relies too heavily on generalized analogy, paired, in more than one occasion, with chronologically discordant European accounts (p. 232), to articulate the provenance of the minutiae of eastern African mosque traditions. The reader would be forgiven for leaving this chapter with the impression that the Swahili cultural sphere produced little in the way of distinctive building traditions, instead owing much of their architectural repertoire to their Indian Ocean trading partners and Arabo-Persian counterparts residing in Islamic socio-religious cores. What the author offers is a hotly debated theory that—while not without merit as Islam is not wholly endemic to the regions covered in this book (the Horn of Africa excluded)—does carry with it some troublesome baggage. Pradines traces the inspiration for Swahili Islam and its material components with a seemingly restorative intent, attacking post-colonial, Afrocentric interpretations (p. 148–150). Pradines favors colonization as the prime Islamizing pathway, with seventh-century Omani settlers acting as the foundational seed, succeeded by a series of migrations of various other Muslim sects, a model not well supported by the archaeological record, even with recent genetic revelations taken into account (*cf.* Brielle et al., 2023). I was further disappointed by the lack of meaningful examination of Madagascar, whose mosques at Antsoheribory, Kingany, Langany, and Mahilaka fit within the book’s scope. This again seems to be a decision reflective of Pradines’ personal history of fieldwork, recurrently obvious in the book’s coverage, or lack thereof. It is within this final core chapter that the inspiration for this book is most acutely visible, that being Peter Garlake’s *The Early Islamic Architecture of the East African Coast* (1966), and that is not a fault. The praise handed to Chapter 1’s architectural discussion is equally relevant here.

Returning now to the question posed in the opening paragraph, does Pradines achieve his goals in this book? In practice, the breakneck pace at which each region is covered leaves the work feeling like an architectural gazetteer, and the reader is given little space to digest the string of events detailed within.

This critique is not meant to slight Pradines; this book excels as a collection of architectural data arranged with historical and spatial sensitivity. What the volume lacks, at times, is a clear audience. The technical descriptions of mosques, their construction, adornment, and varying functions are frequently too dense for the layperson, and the relentless pace of delivery impacts its potential as an architectural reference text. Nevertheless, it is within the descriptive moments that Pradines' composition shines. Secondary to the main architectural conversation is a scattering of surprisingly personal criticisms which lack clear justification or substantiation, troublesome phraseology, and an essentialist take on Islamic manifestation that is not particularly dissimilar to those proposed by the cultural historians of yesteryear. These portions of the text gave me pause. Ultimately, while I might disagree with the aforementioned elements, I do recommend *Historic Mosques in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Timbuktu to Zanzibar* and applaud Pradines for coherently compiling and synthesizing a body of work spanning a continent, successfully surpassing similar volumes in scope and content.

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