

CONDITIONAL MOBILISATION: ISLAM, INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between Islamic traditions and social transformation in Africa, and advances three contributions. First, against both secularisation theory's treatment of religion as residual and essentialist accounts reading social outcomes directly from scripture, it proposes a *conditional mobilisation* framework in which the transformative potential of religious tradition is neither inherent nor absent but is activated, redirected or foreclosed through the interaction of interpretive content, institutional form and political opportunity structure. Second, it constructs, from a genealogy spanning Islamic and European sources, a unified definition of social transformation as *reconstitution*, specifying six constitutive elements and resolving three contradictions that existing usages inherit. Third, it argues that the internal pluralism of African Muslim communities, meaning the capacity of Sufi, reformist, Salafi and traditionalist currents to contest interpretation peacefully, is the most consistent protective condition against the capture of religious authority, and that its erosion through state bureaucratisation, armed conflict or the displacement of scholarly by media authority is the clearest available predictor of extremist ascendancy. Working across the Maghreb, the Sahel, the Horn, the Swahili littoral and Southern Africa, the article concludes that Islamic traditions in Africa are neither an inherent obstacle to nor an automatic guarantor of social transformation: their transformative capacity is realised under specifiable institutional conditions. Because systematic quantitative evidence on these institutions does not exist, the analysis is offered as a provisional theory-building exercise that specifies a framework, codes eleven cases against it, and states the conditions under which it would be disconfirmed.

Keywords: *Islam in Africa; social transformation; religious authority; maqāṣid al-sharī'a; Sufism; Salafism; internal pluralism; Islamic finance; peacebuilding; hybrid governance*

1. Introduction

This article asks a question that has proved unexpectedly difficult to answer well: under what conditions do religious traditions produce durable social transformation, and under what conditions do they obstruct it, capture it, or reduce it to symbol? It pursues that question through

the case of Islamic traditions in Africa, examined comparatively against the continent's other major religious frameworks. What follows sets out the problem the article addresses, the argument and contributions it advances, the methodological commitment that governs its treatment of a continent too often rendered singular, and the structure through which the analysis proceeds.

1.1 The Problem

Africa hosts one of the world's largest concentrations of Muslims, distributed across the Maghreb and the Nile Valley, the Sahelian belt, the Horn, the Swahili littoral of the Indian Ocean, and diasporic communities in Southern Africa. Islam has been present on the continent for over fourteen centuries, arriving within the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad through the migration of early Muslims to Aksum in present-day Ethiopia, and subsequently propagating through commerce, scholarship, conquest and Sufi mission across a landscape of extraordinary linguistic, ecological and political diversity (Levtzion & Pouwels, 2000; Robinson, 2004). This depth of presence carries an analytical implication that is frequently conceded in principle and then abandoned in practice: Islamic traditions in Africa are not a recent or external overlay upon otherwise African societies but an indigenised, internally contested and institutionally embedded component of African social, intellectual and political life (Loimeier, 2013; Kane, 2016).

Yet scholarship on the relationship between religion and social change in Africa has long oscillated between two unsatisfactory poles. On one side, modernisation and secularisation theory assumed that structural differentiation and rationalisation would progressively diminish the social salience of religion, licensing a treatment of Islamic institutions primarily as obstacles to be superseded on the path toward a modern social order (Rostow, 1960; for the critique, Casanova, 1994; Berger, 1999). On the other side, essentialist and civilisational accounts have treated Islam as a monolithic ideological system whose political and social implication may be read directly from its scriptural sources, without regard for historical context, interpretive plurality or institutional variation (Huntington, 1996; for the critique, Said, 1978; Asad, 1986). Neither approach withstands empirical scrutiny. The first cannot explain the manifest expansion rather than contraction of religious institutional authority across late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century Africa; the second cannot explain why societies drawing on substantially identical textual sources (Senegal and Somalia, Morocco and Sudan, Tanzania and northern Nigeria) have generated such radically divergent relationships between religious authority and social outcome.

1.2 Argument and Contribution

This article adopts a third position. It treats Islamic traditions in Africa as a living repertoire of ethical, juridical and spiritual resources that African Muslims actively interpret and deploy in response to the social predicaments of their time, and it argues that the transformative significance of that repertoire is *conditional*, determined not by doctrine in isolation but by the configuration of three variables: the interpretive content mobilised, the institutional form through which it is channelled, and the political and economic opportunity structure within which mobilisation occurs.

Three contributions follow. The first is theoretical: the specification of a conditional mobilisation framework (Section 4.4) that renders the religion–transformation relationship an empirical question amenable to comparative testing rather than a matter of a priori commitment. The second is conceptual: the construction, in Section 3, of a unified definition of social transformation as *reconstitution*, developed from a genealogy that draws on

Khaldūnian social science and the Islamic reformist tradition alongside the European lineages, and specified through six constitutive elements. The persistent under-definition of this concept, invoked constantly and defined rarely, has permitted a great deal of imprecise argument, and its remedy is a precondition of comparative work. Building the concept from Islamic as well as European sources is not a gesture of inclusion but a methodological requirement, since a study of Islamic traditions whose central concept was derived exclusively from European theory would reproduce the asymmetry it sets out to criticise. The third is substantive: the argument, in Section 7, that the internal pluralism of African Muslim communities constitutes the principal mechanism by which religious authority is held accountable, and therefore a decisive condition of transformative rather than extractive outcomes.

The status of these contributions requires statement at the outset. This article is a theory-building exercise, not a test. It specifies a framework, applies it systematically to eleven cases, and states what would disconfirm it, but the evidence available cannot establish the framework's validity, and Section 1.4 explains why. What is offered is a structured account that organises the existing qualitative record, generates propositions that later work can check, and identifies the specific evidence whose absence currently prevents that checking. Readers should treat the framework as a research instrument awaiting validation rather than as a finding, and Sections 9 and 11 return to what this status permits and forbids. This claim carries direct policy consequence, since it establishes that measures suppressing internal religious contestation in the name of countering extremism destroy the resource on which effective resistance to extremism depends.

1.3 The Heterogeneity Commitment

A continental analysis courts a specific and serious danger: the production of an “Africa” that exists nowhere and an “Islam” that no Muslim would recognise. This article treats the refusal of that flattening as a methodological obligation rather than a rhetorical gesture. Accordingly, the analysis attends throughout to four axes of heterogeneity. *Juridically*, African Islam is distributed across the Mālikī school dominant in the Maghreb and West Africa, the Shāfiʿī school dominant along the Swahili coast and in much of the Horn, the Ḥanafī school associated with Ottoman-influenced Egypt and Sudan, and Ibādī communities in the Mzab and Zanzibar — differences that generate materially divergent positions on custom, contract, evidence and family law (Hallaq, 2009; Levtzion & Pouwels, 2000). *Doctrinally and organisationally*, it spans Sufi ṭuruq of markedly different structure, reformist Salafi currents, Islamist political movements, quietist traditionalisms and state religious bureaucracies. *Historically*, the modalities of Islamisation differ fundamentally between conquest (the Maghreb), commerce (the Sahel and the Swahili coast), scholarly diffusion (the Sahelian empires), revolutionary reform (the nineteenth-century jihād states) and forced migration (the Cape). *Politically*, post-colonial settlements range from constitutional Islamic monarchy in Morocco through the militant secularism of Bourguiba's Tunisia, the negotiated Sufi–state accommodation of Senegal, the assertive secularism of Ethiopia, the federal ambiguity of Nigeria and the collapse and reconstitution of state authority in Somalia and Somaliland. Where the analysis generalises, it does so explicitly and with stated scope conditions.

1.4 Method, Evidence and Scope

This article proceeds as an interpretive and comparative synthesis of historical, political, economic, anthropological and juristic scholarship, rather than as a report of new primary empirical research. Because the article makes causal-sounding claims and speaks of testing and falsification, the inferential procedure warrants explicit statement.

Research design. The design is a structured, focused comparison in the sense specified by George and Bennett (2005). It is *structured* in that the same set of questions is put to every case: what interpretive content was mobilised, through what institutional form, within what political opportunity structure, and with what outcome assessed against the six criteria of Section 3.4. It is *focused* in that each case is examined only in respect of those four questions, and no attempt is made at comprehensive case histories, which the specialist literature cited throughout already supplies. The four questions are applied uniformly in Section 8 and their answers tabulated in Section 8.9, so that a reader may disagree with any individual scoring while still following the comparison.

Case selection. Selection is purposive and follows a most-similar logic where the evidence permits it and a diverse-case logic elsewhere (Lijphart, 1971; Gerring, 2007). Somalia and Somaliland constitute the most-similar pair, holding language, juristic school, clan organisation and doctrinal orientation approximately constant while varying institutional configuration; Morocco and Sudan constitute a second and weaker pair, holding religious-state fusion and closed political conditions constant while varying the basis of religious authority. The remaining cases were selected to span the range of the three explanatory variables rather than to represent the continent. Cases were not selected on the outcome variable, and two cases whose outcomes are unfavourable to the argument are retained and discussed in Section 10.1 rather than omitted: Kenya and Tanzania, where the model performs weakest, and Senegal, where the four conditioning factors are satisfied while the distributional criterion is not.

Inferential status. The article does not conduct hypothesis testing in the statistical sense, and language suggesting otherwise should be read accordingly. What Sections 8 and 10.1 perform is congruence analysis: the model specifies which configurations should produce which outcomes, and the cases are examined for whether the observed pattern is congruent with that specification or contradicts it. Congruence across eleven purposively selected cases establishes plausibility and survival, not confirmation, and the article says so in Section 10.1 rather than claiming more. The three falsification conditions stated there are offered so that the framework can be disconfirmed by subsequent work, which is the sense in which it is falsifiable.

Evidence base and its limits. The evidence is documentary and secondary: historical monographs, ethnographies, legal sourcebooks, and the case literature cited. Three consequences follow and constrain the claims made. First, the article can support claims about institutional configuration and about the direction of outcomes, but it cannot support claims about magnitude; no statement here should be read as asserting how much capability expansion occurred in any case. Second, systematic quantitative data on Islamic institutions in Africa are largely absent: there is no reliable continental estimate of *zakāt* flows, no census of *awqāf*, and no comparative outcome assessment of Islamic microfinance. The economic argument in Section 6.3 is therefore framed as a negative finding about the state of the evidence rather than as a positive finding about institutional performance. Third, the accountability mechanism identified in Section 7 is inferred from cross-case comparison rather than observed directly, and Section 9 states what would be required to observe it.

Scope conditions. The framework is specified for settings in which religious institutions possess independent social authority and the state does not monopolise religious interpretation. It is not specified for, and should not be extended to, settings of comprehensive state control of religious life, nor to diaspora contexts where the institutional configurations differ substantially from those examined here.

Terminological commitments. The article uses “Islamic traditions” in the plural, following Asad’s (1986) characterisation of Islam as a discursive tradition constituted by argument about

the proper form of practice rather than by a fixed doctrinal core. It uses “social transformation” in the specific sense constructed in Section 3, not as a loose synonym for development, modernisation or progress. Arabic terms are transliterated following a simplified system retaining ‘ayn, hamza, long-vowel macrons and subscript dots, applied consistently including within the titles of cited works; terms in common English usage appear without diacritics.

Positionality. Analysis of a religious tradition is never conducted from nowhere, and this article makes no claim to a vantage outside the debates it describes. It does not adjudicate between competing Islamic interpretive positions on their own theological terms, a task outside its competence and purpose, and where it assesses outcomes it does so against the evaluative standard specified in Section 3.4. Readers who reject that standard will reach different conclusions from the same evidence, and the standard is stated rather than assumed precisely so that such disagreement can be conducted clearly.

1.5 Structure

Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and identifies the heterogeneity problem as the field’s central methodological difficulty. Section 3 constructs the article’s definition of social transformation. Section 4 develops the theoretical framework and specifies the conditional mobilisation model. Section 5 traces the plural historical trajectories of African Islamisation. Section 6 examines five domains of transformation: governance, education, economy, peacebuilding, and gender and social justice. Section 7 examines the internal structure and contestation of Islamic religious authority. Section 8 presents regional case studies. Section 9 addresses critical tensions and the limits of the argument. Section 10 discusses the integrated framework, and Section 11 concludes.

2. Literature Review

Seven strands bear on this article’s question, distributed across development studies, African historiography, Islamic legal studies, political science, economics, gender studies and the sociology of religious authority, with limited cross-citation between them. Each is reviewed and then appraised, the appraisal specifying where the literature’s explanatory reach ends and what this article accordingly takes from it or declines. Two further subsections address the methodological problem common to all of them and draw together the resulting gap.

2.1 Religion and Development: From Secularisation to the Post-Secular Turn

Development studies emerged within a paradigm treating religion as residual. Modernisation theory’s stages of growth (Rostow, 1960) placed religious institutions at the traditional pole of a tradition–modernity dichotomy, producing what Ver Beek (2000) termed a development taboo so complete that project documentation in overwhelmingly religious societies did not refer to religious institutions at all. The position became untenable from the 1980s: Casanova (1994) distinguished the differentiation of social spheres, which had occurred, from the decline and privatisation of religion, which had not; Berger (1999) reversed his own position to describe a desecularising world in which Europe was the exception; Taylor (2007) reframed secularity as a shift in the conditions of belief; Habermas (2006) argued for translating religious reasons into public deliberation; and Asad (2003) argued that the secular is itself a historically produced formation universalised through colonial administration. In development practice, this produced an applied literature on faith-based organisations (Clarke & Jennings, 2008; Deneulin & Bano, 2009; ter Haar, 2011; Marshall & Van Saanen, 2007), of which Ellis and ter Haar (2004) is the most forceful: in much of Africa the religious imagination is the primary idiom of political thought, so analyses bracketing it misdescribe their object.

Critical appraisal. The post-secular turns corrected secularisation theory's empirical error and substituted a subtler one. Having rediscovered religion, the applied literature treats it as a stable category whose effects can be isolated and measured, which is the reification Asad's genealogy warns against. The faith-based-organisation literature is the symptom: well equipped to measure what religious organisations deliver, poorly equipped to analyse what religious authority is. A mosque that runs a clinic is legible to it; a mosque that adjudicates a land dispute or determines what counts as a legitimate claim is not. For African contexts, the deficiency is structural, since the religious/secular boundary the literature presupposes is precisely the boundary African normative orders do not observe. There is also a political economy here worth naming: much of this work was funded by agencies seeking implementing partners, and its categories bear that origin, hence the persistent instrumentalism that Ferguson (1994) and Escobar (1995) identified as development discourse's characteristic conversion of political questions into technical ones. This article therefore declines to treat religion as an independent variable acting upon an otherwise secular field, and treats religious meaning-making as internal to that field's constitution, a commitment with direct consequences for the model of Section 4.4.

2.2 The Historiography of Islam in Africa: Indigenisation, Not Importation

A mature historiography has established the depth and endogeneity of African Islamic institutions. The foundational syntheses of Levtzion and Pouwels (2000), Robinson (2004) and Loimeier (2013) trace Islamisation as regionally differentiated processes rather than a single diffusion event; Hiskett (1984) and Last (1967) established the West African and Sokoto historiographies; Hunwick (2003) documented Timbuktu and Songhay; and Kane (2016) recast the field by demonstrating the scale of a West African Arabic and Ajami intellectual tradition systematically underestimated by scholarship organised around oral-culture assumptions, with Jeppie and Diagne (2008) and Diagne (2016) treating the manuscript corpus as philosophy rather than archive. Regional historiographies developed in parallel: Pouwels (1987), Becker (2008) and Kresse (2007) on the Swahili coast and mainland Tanzania; Lewis (1961, 1998), Ahmed (2001) and Østebø (2012, 2020) on the Horn; Tayob (1999) and Esack (1997) on South African Islam; Robinson (2000) on accommodation with French colonial authority.

Critical appraisal. This is the field's strongest literature and its achievement is settled: the indigeneity of African Islamic institutions is no longer contestable. But its strength is the source of its limitation. Organised by region and period, with characteristically local explanatory ambitions, it has produced few propositions portable across cases. It explains precisely why Sokoto differed from the Swahili coast; it has largely declined to ask under what general conditions Islamic institutions produce which social outcomes. This is a defensible historiographical scepticism about abstraction rather than an oversight, but it carries a cost worth naming: because the historians have not generalised, the generalisations in circulation were produced by political scientists and policy analysts working with far thinner material, so the field's most confident continental claims rest on its weakest evidentiary base. A second limitation is periodisation, since the historiography thins markedly after independence, leaving the institutional transformations of the past half-century documented far less securely than the nineteenth century. This article treats the historiography as the empirical foundation for the comparative work the historians declined, and accepts the risk that abstraction sacrifices contextual density. The specific form that abstraction takes is the three-variable model of Section 4.4; the specific discipline imposed on it is the requirement, stated in Section 1.4, that the same four questions be put to every case.

2.3 The Maqāṣid Turn and Islamic Social Ethics

The classical theory of the higher objectives of the law, associated with al-Ghazālī and al-Shāṭibī, identified the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage and property as the purposes toward which specific rulings are ordered. Contemporary scholarship has extended it substantially: Auda (2008) reconstructs *maqāṣid* theory through systems analysis to incorporate development, human rights and social justice; Kamali (2008) traces its relationship to *maṣlaḥa* and juristic method; Hallaq (2009) situates it within the wider architecture of legal theory and cautions against detaching it from the juristic apparatus that gave it meaning; and An-Na'im (2008) argues that Islamic normativity is best secured by a state that does not enforce it, since coerced compliance voids obligation of its constitutive voluntariness.

Critical appraisal. Two weaknesses limit this literature's usefulness here, both deriving from a single characteristic: it is a normative literature frequently read as an empirical one. The first is a persistent slippage between demonstrating that a reformist reading is *textually available* and implying that it is *socially operative*. Auda's demonstration that *maqāṣid* reasoning can authorise a developmental jurisprudence is convincing on its own terms and establishes nothing about whether any African Muslim community has been persuaded, which institutions transmit such reasoning, or what happens when it meets entrenched juristic opinion. The second is geographical. The literature's centre of gravity is Middle Eastern, South Asian and diasporic; African juristic production, the Mālikī tradition of the Sahel and Maghreb, the Shāfi'ī tradition of the coast and the Ajami corpus Kane (2016) brought into view, is very nearly absent from it, and Auda's reconstruction cites virtually no African jurist. That absence is not merely an omission to regret but evidence about the contemporary distribution of authority within Islamic thought, bearing directly on Section 7's argument about whose interpretations are heard. This article uses *maqāṣid* as analytical vocabulary, since it is the vocabulary in which African Muslim reformers argue, while declining the literature's normative claims.

2.4 Political Science: Democratisation, Governance and Securitisation

Two concerns dominate: Islamic movements and democratisation, and radicalisation in the Sahel and the Horn. Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) supplied the durable framework, analysing Muslim politics as competition over the interpretation of symbols rather than the application of doctrine. Cruise O'Brien (1971) and Villalón (1995) established Senegalese Sufi-state relations as a distinctive accommodation; Paden (2005) documented Nigerian Muslim conflict-resolution capacities and Ostien (2007) the record of northern sharī'a implementation; Ndzovu (2014) and Oded (2000) traced Kenyan Muslim minority politics; and Kendhammer (2016) demonstrated that support for sharī'a implementation coexists with substantial commitment to democratic accountability. Against this, post-2001 scholarship examined Islamic actors primarily as security threats, a framing criticised by Mamdani (2004) and corrected by Thurston (2016, 2017, 2020), Sounaye (2016), Masquelier (2009) and Schulz (2012), who document everyday non-violent associational life and treat jihadist movements as historically specific political formations.

Critical appraisal. The securitisation critique is correct and has become formulaic: the observation that the field over-attends to violence is now made more often than the constructive alternative is executed, and increasingly functions as a credential offered at the outset and rarely carried through. The corrective literature carries its own less-acknowledged bias. In documenting the quiet and everyday, it tends toward the celebratory and proves reluctant to analyse the coercive, exclusionary and gerontocratic functions the same institutions perform. Religious institutions that mediate disputes also enforce conformity; networks that distribute welfare also police membership. A literature documenting only the first half of that sentence is

not more accurate than the securitised literature it corrects; it is inaccurate in the opposite direction, and its errors are harder to detect because they are politically congenial. Kendhammer's (2016) result deserves separate notice as the field's most under-exploited finding: if support for religious law and commitment to democratic accountability routinely coexist in the same respondents, the entire compatibility debate was misposed, treating as theoretical a question ordinary Muslims had settled practically. This article takes it as a premise rather than a conclusion, which is why Section 6.1 examines *how* Islamic political vocabulary is deployed rather than *whether* it can be.

2.5 Islamic Economics, Zakāt and Waqf

Chapra (1992) and Siddiqi (2004) articulated the normative case for an Islamic economic order oriented to distributive justice; Warde (2000) and Askari et al. (2010) documented the growth and structure of Islamic finance; Tripp (2006) analysed Islamic moral-economic thought as a response to capitalist modernity; Singer (2008) provided the historical treatment of charity in Islamic societies and Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan (2003) of transnational charitable networks and their securitisation. The most consequential critical intervention is Kuran's (2001, 2004, 2011), arguing that the classical *waqf*'s perpetuity and inflexibility, Islamic inheritance rules and the absence of corporate personality constrained capital accumulation and organisational development.

Critical appraisal. This literature is bifurcated in a way that leaves the developmental question unanswered from either side. A normative branch describes an Islamic economic order that has never existed, deriving its properties from textual sources and treating the gap between that order and observed practice as deviation to correct rather than data to explain. An empirical branch measures a financial sector that has converged substantially on conventional banking in economic substance while differing in legal form. Neither addresses whether Islamic economic institutions expand the capabilities of the poor, and the two rarely engage one another. Kuran's critique is the most serious challenge in the field and is generally answered by assertion, commonly by noting that his account is selective, which is true but insufficient, since selectivity must be answered with the omitted cases rather than the observation that they exist. Its African applicability is nonetheless uncertain for a reason his critics have not pressed: colonial expropriation and post-colonial nationalisation of *awqāf* severed the institutional continuity on which his path-dependence thesis depends, so the African record can neither confirm nor disconfirm it. The evidentiary situation is the most serious problem of all, and Section 6.3 states it plainly rather than repeating claims the evidence will not carry.

2.6 Gender, Agency and Islamic Feminism in Africa

The hermeneutical interventions of Wadud (1999), Barlas (2002) and Mir-Hosseini (2006) established the interpretive basis for egalitarian readings and, decisively, the distinction between *sharī'a* as divine ordinance and *fiqh* as human juristic production, a distinction with reformist implications since what is humanly produced may be humanly revised. Badran (2009) traced Islamic feminism's intellectual history; An-Na'im (2002) assembled the comparative documentation of family law in practice. African-focused scholarship has complicated any singular verdict: Mahmood (2005) demonstrated that participation in piety movements involves agency irreducible to resistance and compliance; Masquelier (2009), Alidou (2005), Cooper (1997) and Schulz (2012) documented Muslim women's engagements with revival, marriage, public authority and media across Niger, Nigeria and Mali; and Oyěwùmí (1997) challenged the transposition of Western gender categories onto Yorùbá social organisation.

Critical appraisal. This is analytically the most sophisticated literature in the field and politically the most fraught, and its difficulty is that its two strongest contributions pull against one another unresolved. The hermeneutical scholarship established the *sharīʿa/fiqh* distinction permanently, but it has been read as though establishing interpretive possibility settled social outcome, the identical slippage identified in 2.3 and for the same reason: a textual argument received as a sociological one. That an egalitarian reading is available says nothing about who holds the authority to make it stick. Mahmood's intervention is indispensable and has been over-applied, having been addressed to a specific failure, the reduction of pious women's agency to false consciousness, and extended into a general reluctance to evaluate the conditions under which women live. The extension does not follow: recognising that a woman's religious commitment is genuinely hers is compatible with observing that her legal capacity to divorce, inherit or retain custody is constrained. The field's discomfort with the second observation has produced work describing women's religious lives richly and their legal position thinly. What is missing is systematic comparative work on outcomes, and Section 6.5 accordingly holds three claims together rather than resolving the tension prematurely.

2.7 Religious Authority and Its Contestation

Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) established the frame, treating authority as a contested claim rather than a possessed status; Loimeier (2013) traces its institutional forms across African Muslim societies and Brenner (2001) the struggle over control of schooling in Mali; Kane (2003), Thurston (2016) and Østebø (2012) document reformist and Salafi challenges to established scholarly and Sufi authority in Nigeria and Ethiopia; Hirschkind (2006) and Schulz (2012) document the decoupling of authority from the institutions that formerly certified it. Westerlund and Rosander (1997) remains the most useful treatment of the Sufi-reformist encounter as sustained argument rather than simple displacement.

Critical appraisal. This is the field's most rapidly developing and least consolidated strand. Its central insight, that authority is claimed rather than held and must be continuously re-established before an audience competent to withhold recognition, is secure. What the literature has not done is connect authority *structure* to *accountability*, and thence to outcome. The media scholarship illustrates the deficiency: rich in description and thin in consequence, it documents meticulously that authority has been reconstituted and rarely asks what was lost in the reconstitution. The certification mechanisms displaced were not merely gatekeeping devices protecting incumbents, though they were also that; they were how a community could assess whether someone claiming to speak for the tradition had studied it. Treating their erosion as straightforwardly democratising answers a question about access without addressing one about reliability. A second gap is that contestation is described without its effects being theorised: that the four currents argue is well documented, whether the argument constrains any of them is not. Section 7 attempts that connection, and its vulnerability should be stated here, namely that the mechanism is inferred from cross-case comparison rather than measured directly.

2.8 The Heterogeneity Problem

Cutting across all seven strands is a difficulty the field has acknowledged more often than solved. Continental analyses produce claims about "Islam in Africa" holding for the Sahel but not the Swahili coast, or for state-centralised Morocco but not stateless Somalia; local analyses produce ethnographic precision at the cost of comparative yield. Four dimensions are consequential and carried explicitly through this article. *Juridical school* shapes the treatment of custom, evidence and family law, Mālikī accommodation of *ʿamal* having facilitated incorporation of African customary norms in ways differing materially from Shāfiʿī practice on the coast or Ibādī practice in Zanzibar and the Mزاب (Hallaq, 2009; Levtzion & Pouwels,

2000). *Organisational form* differentiates hierarchical *ṭuruq* such as the Muridiyya from the decentralised Qādiriyya, from network-based Salafi currents, and from state religious bureaucracies. *Modality of Islamisation* (conquest, commerce, scholarship, revolution, forced migration) shaped the relationship between religious and political authority in each region. *Colonial legal inheritance* produced sharply divergent post-colonial settlements (Robinson, 2000; Mamdani, 1996).

Critical appraisal. The field's characteristic response has been the disclaimer: an opening acknowledgement of diversity, followed by analysis proceeding as though it had not been made. Disclaimers are not method. The alternative frequently proposed, abandoning continental analysis for the ethnographic case, is not a solution either, since it does not answer the comparative questions that theory and policy require and merely relocates the problem to whoever aggregates the cases later, usually with less competence than the ethnographers possess. The response adopted here is to generalise at the level of *mechanism* rather than *outcome*, specifying the conditions under which configurations produce effects and treating variation as the object of explanation rather than as noise. A mechanism-level claim survives heterogeneity as an outcome-level claim does not, because it specifies its own scope conditions. This commitment is what Section 4.4 formalises and what makes the Somali comparison in Section 8.3 the article's decisive case: two societies sharing doctrine, language and clan structure diverge radically in outcome.

2.9 Synthesis and Gap

Four conclusions inform what follows. Islamic traditions in Africa are historically deep and institutionally embedded, which is settled and needs no further defence. Their social implications are mediated by interpretation, institutional form and political contestation, a proposition every strand above supports and none has formalised. The field exhibits a recurring analytical error across otherwise unrelated literatures, the treatment of textual or interpretive possibility as though it established social actuality, visible in the *maqāṣid* literature, the hermeneutical gender scholarship and normative Islamic economics alike. And the field lacks both a rigorous shared definition of the dependent concept and an empirical infrastructure adequate to comparative claims. Section 3 supplies the definitional work; Section 4 formalises the mediation proposition into a codeable model; Sections 6 to 8 apply it while refusing the possibility/actuality slippage; and Section 9 states what the evidence will not support.

3. Defining Social Transformation

The concept on which this article's entire analysis depends is used across the relevant literatures with a looseness that defeats comparison. This section therefore treats definition as substantive analytical work rather than preliminary housekeeping, and proceeds in four movements: an argument for why the definitional labour is necessary; a critical genealogy of the concept across nine intellectual lineages, two of them internal to Islamic thought; the construction of a unified definition specifying six constitutive elements; and the operationalisation of that definition across the five domains examined in Section 6.

3.1 The Case for Definitional Work

"Social transformation" is among the most frequently invoked and least frequently defined concepts in the literature on religion and social change. It is used variously as a synonym for development, as a euphemism for modernisation, as a marker of political commitment distinguishing the speaker from technocratic development discourse, and as a periodising label for large-scale historical rupture. This imprecision is not merely inelegant. It disables

comparison: if two studies of religious institutions employ incommensurable conceptions of the outcome they are examining, their findings cannot be aggregated, and the field cannot accumulate. This section therefore constructs a single working definition through a critical genealogy of the concept's principal sources.

3.2 Genealogy

Nine lineages inform the concept. They are set out beginning with the two that arise within Islamic intellectual history, not as a courtesy but because the earliest of them precedes the others by several centuries, and because a study of Islamic traditions that constructed its central concept exclusively from European social theory would enact the very asymmetry criticised in Section 2.3.

The Khaldūnian lineage. Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah* (1377/1967) established the earliest systematic science of social organisation, *ilm al-ʿumrān*, theorising the formation, consolidation and decay of polities through *aṣabiyya*, the solidarity binding a group and enabling it to establish authority, and through the sedentarisation and luxury that progressively erode it. Two contributions follow. The first is *endogenous decay*: social orders carry within themselves the tendency to dissolve, so that the maintenance of an order is continuous work rather than a default condition, and regression requires no external cause. The second is *cyclicity*: change is not a single passage from one condition to a superior one but a recurrent process of consolidation and erosion. Both stand directly against the modernisation lineage below, and the first diverges sharply from the externalist emphasis of the dependency lineage. Alatas (2014) has argued for the recovery of Khaldūnian analysis as a living sociological tradition rather than a historical curiosity; its North African provenance makes its absence from the literature surveyed in Section 2 the more remarkable.

The reformist-restorative lineage. Within Islamic intellectual history, *iṣlāḥ*, meaning repair or setting right, and *tajdīd*, renewal, name a recurrent pattern in which scholars and movements seek to restore a normative order held to have been corrupted, appealing to a standard understood as prior and recoverable rather than as yet to be achieved (Voll, 1983; Rahman, 1982). The Qur'ānic opposition between *fasād*, corruption in the land, and *ṣalāḥ*, soundness, supplies an evaluative frame internally rather than by importation. Three elements follow. *Restorative directionality*: transformation is oriented by a standard treated as recoverable, so that its agents understand themselves as repairing rather than inventing, an orientation none of the futural lineages below can represent. *Distributed obligation*: the duty of *ḥisba*, enjoining right and forbidding wrong, falls upon every capable member of the community rather than upon a vanguard, a party or a state, specifying an agency structure distinct from the class agent of the critical lineage, the individual agent of the capabilities lineage and the state agent of the modernisation lineage (Cook, 2000). *Fiduciary authority*: *amāna* frames authority as a trust held on behalf of others, making accountability internal to legitimate transformation rather than an external check upon it. To these the *maqāṣid* tradition adds a *preservation floor*, since the protected goods specify not what transformation should achieve but what it may not destroy in the achieving (Auda, 2008; Kamali, 2008).

The structural-historical lineage. Polanyi's (1944) account of the great transformation established the concept's most durable European meaning: a fundamental reordering of the relationship between economy and society, in which land, labour and money are converted into fictitious commodities and social protection responds through counter-movement. Polanyi's contribution is the insistence that transformation involves the reconstitution of the *terms* of social relation, not merely the redistribution of quantities within stable terms.

The modernisation lineage. Rostow (1960) and the structural-functionalist tradition construed transformation as movement along a determinate trajectory from traditional to modern social organisation, indexed by industrialisation, urbanisation, bureaucratic rationalisation and differentiation. This lineage supplies the element of *directionality*, since transformation is not mere change but change with a discernible vector, while its teleological, Eurocentric and unilinear commitments have been comprehensively and correctly rejected (Escobar, 1995; Mudimbe, 1988; Mbembe, 2001).

The critical and dependency lineage. Dependency theory and its African interlocutors located transformation in the restructuring of extractive relations between centre and periphery, insisting that apparent development at the periphery may reproduce underdevelopment. It supplies *distributional consequences*: change leaving structures of extraction intact is not transformation regardless of aggregate growth.

The capabilities lineage. Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) reconceived development as the expansion of substantive freedoms and the capabilities to exercise them, displacing income as the measure of progress. It supplies the criterion by which distributional consequence is assessed: what people are actually able to be and do.

The conflict-transformation lineage. Galtung (1969, 1996) distinguished direct, structural and cultural violence, and Lederach (1997) developed conflict transformation as the reconstitution of relationships and social structures generating conflict, as distinct from the settlement of disputes. This lineage supplies the element of *depth*: transformation addresses generative structures rather than manifest symptoms, and operates on the cultural and normative register as well as the institutional.

The decolonial lineage. Ngũgĩ (1986), Mudimbe (1988) and Mbembe (2001) established that the categories through which African social reality is described are themselves objects of struggle, and that transformation includes the reconstitution of epistemic authority. This lineage supplies the element of *normative contestation*: transformation is always transformation toward some vision of the good, and those visions are plural and contested rather than technically given.

The sociological-agency lineage. Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1977) established that structures are simultaneously the medium and the outcome of practice, so transformation requires theorising the relation between structural constraint and situated agency. Applied to religion, this yields the element termed *tradition-mediated agency*: inherited traditions are the principal repertoire through which actors authorise, resist or redirect structural change.

3.3 A Unified Definition: Transformation as Reconstitution

These lineages cannot simply be summed, because on three points they contradict one another. The modernisation and Khaldūnian lineages disagree over whether change is directional or cyclical. The reformist-restorative and decolonial lineages disagree over whether the normative standard lies behind or ahead. The capabilities and *maqāṣid* traditions disagree over whether the evaluative criterion is expansion or preservation. A definition that concatenated them would inherit all three contradictions, which is why the field's existing usages are either internally inconsistent or silently committed to one side.

The unification proposed here turns on a single term. *Reconstitution* carries both senses at once: to constitute again, which is restoration, and to constitute anew, which is transformation. Social orders are not stable objects that then change or fail to change; they are continuously reproduced, and that reproduction is always either reproduction of the same or reproduction

otherwise. On this account, transformation is not the interruption of a static condition but the redirection of a reconstitution already under way, and under way, as Ibn Khaldūn insisted, against a standing tendency toward dissolution.

So construed, the three contradictions resolve rather than being split. *Direction and cycle* are reconciled once directionality is understood as operating within a recurrence whose persistence is the very condition of the work: each generation reconstitutes, and the question is toward what. *Behind and ahead* are reconciled once the location of the standard is recognised as the substance of the contest rather than a premise settled before it: reformers who appeal to a recoverable past and reformers who appeal to an unrealised future are engaged in the same activity under rival descriptions, which is precisely what the African evidence in Sections 5 to 8 displays. *Expansion and preservation* are reconciled as ceiling and floor: transformation is measured by what it enlarges and disqualified by what it destroys in the enlarging.

The definition follows.

Social transformation is the durable reconstitution of the institutional arrangements, distributional patterns and normative imaginaries by which a society reproduces itself. It is the redirection of a reproduction already under way and sustained against that society's own tendency toward dissolution; it reaches the structures generating observed outcomes rather than the outcomes alone; it enlarges the effective capabilities of the least advantaged without destroying the goods that make any social order habitable; its direction is contested between rival locations of the good in a recoverable past or an unrealised future; and it is accomplished through obligations borne across the community and authority held as trust, by agents who mobilise inherited normative traditions to authorise, resist or redirect it.

Figure 1 sets out the derivation, showing what each family of lineages supplies, how the three contradictions are resolved at the point of synthesis, and which of the six resulting elements draw wholly or partly on the Islamic sources.

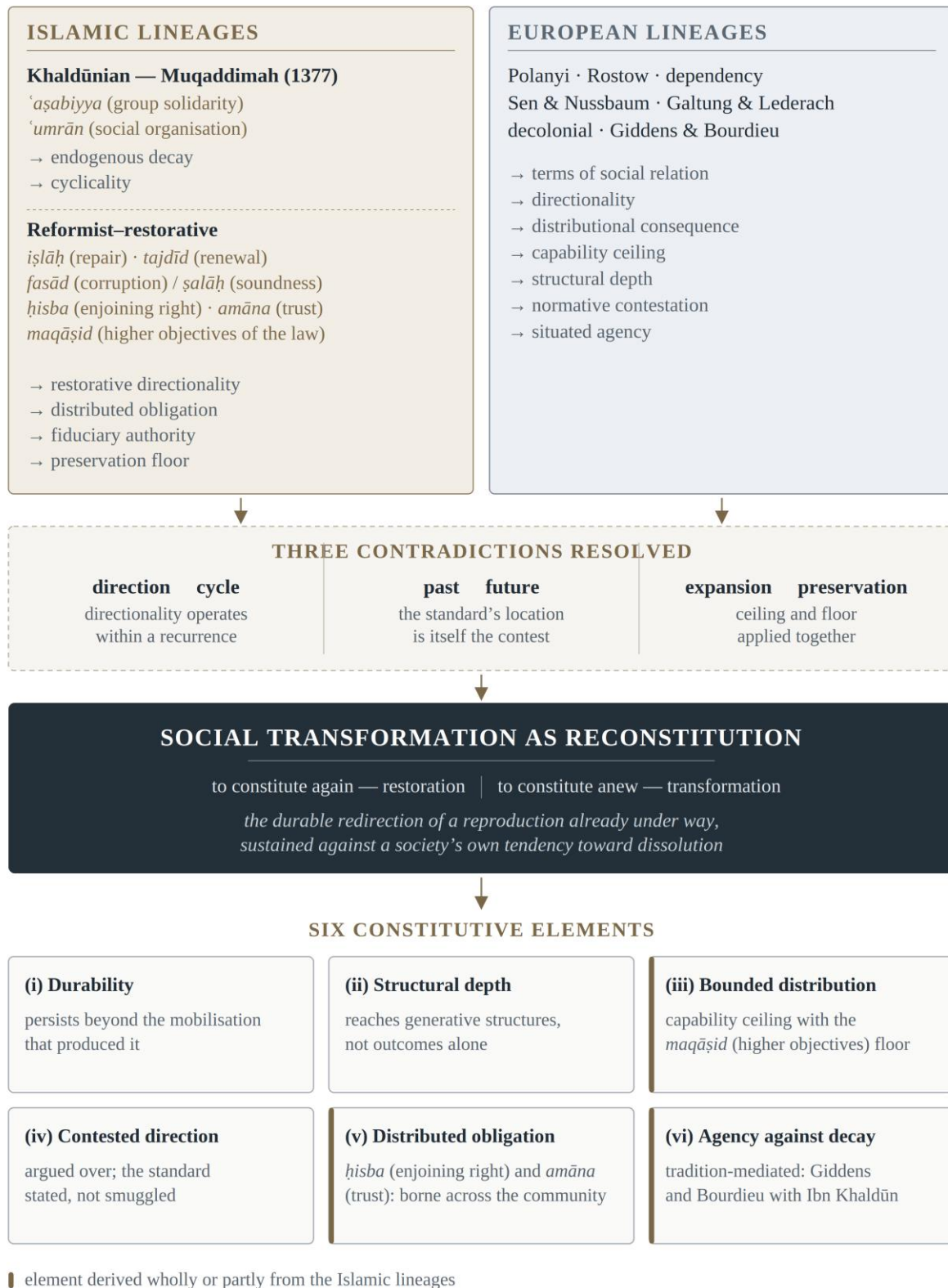


Figure 1. Social transformation as reconstitution: derivation of the definition from Islamic and European theoretical lineages. Elements marked with a rule at the left margin are derived wholly or partly from the Khaldūnian and reformist-restorative lineages.

Two features characterise this formulation. The concept is built from Islamic as well as European theoretical sources, rather than derived from the latter and applied to material drawn

from the former. And it specifies both a criterion of achievement and a constraint of preservation, where the capabilities and *maqāṣid* traditions each supply only one. The definition is nonetheless intended for general use rather than for Islamic contexts alone: nothing in it requires the analyst to hold the commitments of any tradition, only to recognise that the agents of transformation hold some.

3.4 The Six Constitutive Elements

The definition specifies six elements, each functioning as a criterion by which a candidate instance may be assessed. Three fuse contributions from Islamic and European lineages; one derives from the Islamic lineages alone.

(i) Durability. Transformation persists beyond the mobilisation that produced it, having been embedded in institutions, transmitted norms or altered expectations. A protest cycle that dissipates without institutional residue is mobilisation, not transformation. This criterion distinguishes the 2010–2011 Tunisian transition, which produced a constitution and a decade of contested but functioning pluralism, from episodes of religious mobilisation that altered nothing beyond their duration.

(ii) Structural depth. Transformation reconfigures generative structures (the rules, relationships and authority patterns that produce observed outcomes) rather than the outcomes alone. Distributing resources through an unaltered patronage architecture is redistribution; altering the architecture is transformation. Derived from Galtung and Lederach, this criterion distinguishes *zakāt* administered as elite almsgiving from *zakāt* institutionalised as an enforceable claim of the poor upon the wealthy.

(iii) Bounded distributional consequence. Transformation is assessed by two tests rather than one. It must enlarge the effective capabilities of the least advantaged, the ceiling supplied by Sen and Nussbaum; and it must not destroy, in the enlarging, the goods without which no social order is habitable, the floor supplied by the *maqāṣid* tradition's protected goods of life, intellect, lineage, property and the freedom to hold and contest belief. A reconfiguration expanding aggregate output while contracting the substantive freedoms of the marginalised fails the ceiling test; a reconfiguration expanding those freedoms by destroying the conditions of security, learning or belief fails the floor test. Both failures are common, and the lineages surveyed in Section 3.2 register only the first.

(iv) Contested directionality. Transformation has a direction, and that direction is argued over rather than technically given. The argument runs, characteristically, between those locating the standard in a recoverable past and those locating it in an unrealised future, and the analyst has no neutral vantage from which to adjudicate. Rigour therefore requires that the evaluative standard be stated rather than smuggled. In this article the standard is the bounded distributional criterion specified in (iii).

(v) Distributed obligation and fiduciary authority. Transformation is accomplished through obligations borne across the community rather than discharged by a vanguard, a party or a state on the community's behalf, and through authority understood as a trust held for others rather than as a possession. This element derives from *ḥisba* and *amāna* and has no equivalent in the European lineages, whose accounts of agency are consistently vested in a designated subject: the class, the individual, the developmental state. Its analytical consequence is that a transformation delivered to a population by an unaccountable agency fails the criterion however favourable its distributional outcome, which is why Section 8.6 classifies Sudan's state-administered Islamism as extractive rather than merely ineffective.

(vi) Tradition-mediated agency against decay. Transformation is accomplished by actors acting from within inherited normative traditions, whether religious, customary or ideological, which supply the vocabulary in which change is authorised or resisted, the networks through which mobilisation occurs, and the criteria by which outcomes are judged legitimate. It is undertaken, further, against a standing tendency toward dissolution, so that the maintenance of a transformation is itself continuous work and its reversal requires no external explanation. This element fuses Giddens and Bourdieu with Ibn Khaldūn, and it is the definition's principal contribution to the present study, since it makes the relationship between religious tradition and social transformation internal to the concept rather than an external association to be correlated. It also supplies the reason that Tunisia's post-2021 reversal, examined in Section 8.5, is intelligible within the framework rather than anomalous to it.

3.5 Operationalisation

The definition is operationalised across five domains, each examined in Section 6: *governance* (the rules by which authority is constituted, exercised and held accountable), *knowledge* (the institutions by which capability-relevant knowledge is produced and distributed), *economy* (the arrangements governing production, exchange and redistribution), *conflict* (the mechanisms by which disputes are managed and the structural conditions generating them addressed), and *social relations* (the norms governing membership, status and the distribution of recognition, with particular attention to gender). A candidate instance of transformation is assessed against the six criteria within one or more of these domains.

This definition is neither confessionally derived nor confessionally hostile. It is constructed to be usable by scholars working within Islamic and secular frameworks alike, which is a condition of its serviceability as a shared analytical instrument.

4. Theoretical Framework

The framework developed here draws on three bodies of theory (Islamic ethical and juristic concepts, the sociology of religious institutions, and African communitarian philosophy). It integrates them into a single explanatory model.

4.1 Islamic Ethical and Juristic Concepts

Islamic tradition supplies a dense repertoire of concepts bearing directly on the five domains specified above.

Maqāṣid al-sharīʿa, the higher objectives of the law, provides the tradition's most systematic framework for purposive ethical reasoning. Classically identified as the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage and property, the objectives have been substantially extended by contemporary scholarship to encompass human dignity, freedom, developmental capacity and distributive justice (Auda, 2008; Kamali, 2008). The framework's significance for social transformation lies in its provision of an internal warrant for reasoning from purpose rather than from precedent alone, and thus for legal and institutional adaptation that remains authoritatively Islamic.

ʿAdl (justice) and *iḥsān* (excellence, benevolence) function as the tradition's foundational ethical orientations, the first establishing a floor of obligation and the second an aspiration beyond it. *Shūrā* (consultation) supplies a participatory model of collective decision-making extensively invoked in contemporary debates on Islamic political legitimacy. *Amāna* (trust) frames authority as a fiduciary relationship rather than a possession, generating an internal basis for accountability claims. *Maṣlaḥa* (public interest) and *ʿurf* (custom) together provide

the juristic mechanisms by which local African normative practice has been incorporated into Islamic legal reasoning: the doctrinal basis, in effect, of Islam's indigenisation.

Zakāt (obligatory alms) and *ṣadaqa* (voluntary charity) institutionalise redistribution, with *zakāt* distinctive among religious giving traditions in being framed juridically as a *ḥaqq*, a right of the recipient, rather than as a discretionary gift of the donor, a framing whose implications for the enforceability of redistributive obligation are examined in Section 6.3. *Waqf* (endowment) provides the tradition's principal instrument for the perpetual dedication of assets to charitable purpose.

Iṣlāḥ (reform) and *tajdīd* (renewal) describe the recurring pattern by which scholars and movements have sought to revitalise practice in response to perceived decline, and constitute the tradition's own internal theory of transformation, a point insufficiently registered in the literature, which frequently treats Islamic tradition as static and modernity as the sole source of dynamism. Figure 2 sets out that internal theory in the form it takes within the tradition: not a passage from a worse condition to a better one, but a recurrent cycle in which a sound order decays from within, is recognised as corrupted, and is repaired against a standard held to be recoverable.

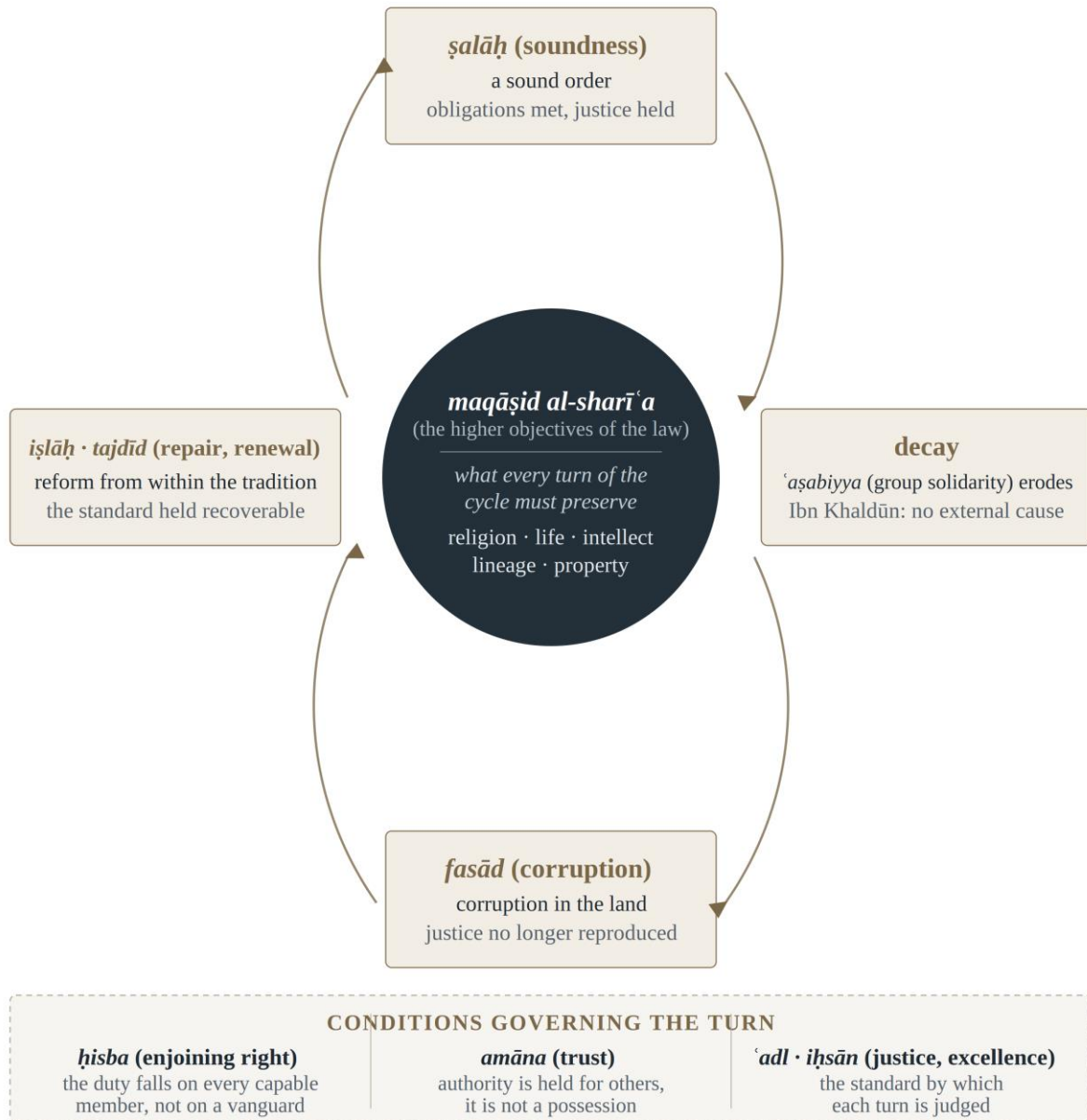


Figure 2. The Islamic conception of social transformation: the recurrent cycle of *ṣalāh*, decay, *fasād* and *iṣlāh*. The *maqāṣid* at the centre specify what each turn of the cycle must preserve; the conditions beneath specify who is obliged to act, on what terms authority is held, and by what standard the turn is judged.

These concepts do not determine outcomes. Their significance depends on who interprets them, through what institutions, under what political conditions, which is precisely the argument the model below formalises.

4.2 Religious Institutions as Social Infrastructure

The sociology of religion supplies a complementary institutional lens. Mosques, Qurʾānic schools, Sufi lodges, ṭarīqa networks and charitable foundations across Africa perform functions that in other settings are associated with state institutions: they educate, provide welfare, adjudicate disputes, allocate credit, and organise collective action. Treating them as social infrastructure rather than as sites of belief clarifies why Islamic institutions have frequently delivered social outcomes in contexts of weak, absent or predatory state capacity:

they possess pre-existing networks of trust, legitimate authority and resource mobilisation that formal institutions lack (Ellis & ter Haar, 2004; Loimeier, 2013).

Two refinements are necessary. First, infrastructural capacity is morally indeterminate: the same networks that deliver welfare can enforce exclusion, and the same authority that mediates conflict can suppress dissent. Second, the *structure* of religious infrastructure varies decisively. Hierarchically organised institutions with clear lines of authority can coordinate large-scale action but concentrate the risk of elite capture; decentralised networks resist capture but coordinate poorly. This variation is the second variable in the model below, and the internal structure of Islamic religious authority in Africa, which is polycentric, uncertified and contested, is examined at length in Section 7.

4.3 African Communitarian Thought

African philosophical traditions contribute an account of relationality and of personhood as constituted through community. Mbiti's (1969) formulation of corporate personhood and Menkiti's (1984) account of personhood as achieved rather than given establish the core claim: that a person is not a bearer of prior entitlements who subsequently enters relationship, but is constituted as a person through the discharge of relational obligation. Gyekye's (1997) moderate communitarianism is indispensable here because it forecloses the reading most often imposed on this tradition from outside, insisting that communal constitution does not subordinate individual rights to collective claim and that a communitarian anthropology can ground rather than dissolve them. Wiredu (1996) developed the associated account of consensual decision-making, and Metz (2011) has formalised Ubuntu into a moral theory capable of grounding human rights claims, with Tutu (1999) articulating its application to transitional justice.

This body of theory is more often invoked decoratively than used analytically, and it is worth stating precisely what work it does in the present framework. It does four things.

First, it explains indigenisation. The convergence between Islamic communal ethics and African relational personhood, both treating obligation as constitutive of moral standing rather than as a constraint upon a prior individual liberty, helps account for the depth and rapidity with which Islam was incorporated into African social forms rather than layered upon them. This is the philosophical counterpart to the juristic mechanism of *'urf* recognition described in 4.1, and it cautions decisively against treating African Islam as an extension of Arab religious culture.

Second, it supplies the anthropology underlying the fifth constitutive element of Section 3.4. That element, distributed obligation, was derived from *hisba*; but the duty to enjoin right and forbid wrong presupposes a subject already constituted through obligation to others, and it is African communitarian philosophy rather than Islamic jurisprudence that theorises that subject explicitly. The two traditions converge on a conception of agency that the European lineages of Section 3.2 do not supply, since those consistently vest agency in a designated subject standing over against the community: the class, the rights-bearing individual, the developmental state.

Third, it supplies institutional forms that appear in the analysis as instances of the model's second variable. Somali *xeer*, Kenyan *harambee*, elders' councils and age-set structures are not survivals awaiting displacement but functioning normative institutions, and they appear in Section 8 as constitutive components of the configurations examined, most consequentially in the Somaliland settlement where customary authority was incorporated into constitutional

structure through the Guurti. Section 6.6 examines their articulation with Islamic and statutory law as a stable plural legal field rather than a transitional condition.

Fourth, it identifies a tension internal to this article's own argument, and working that tension through yields the most consequential of the four uses. Section 7 contends that open contestation is the mechanism by which religious authority is held accountable. Consensual decision-making of the kind Wiredu (1996) describes appears to pursue an incompatible good, the preservation of communal cohesion, whose characteristic failure mode is the suppression of positions that cannot be accommodated. If African communitarian norms govern religious deliberation across much of the continent, the accountability argument would seem to require their displacement, which is an uncomfortable implication for a study insisting on the endogeneity of African normative resources.

The tension is real but narrower than it first appears, and the distinction that narrows it is Wiredu's own. Consensus in his account is not unanimity and does not require that dissent be abandoned; it requires that dissent be *heard* and that action proceed without the dissenting party being defeated or excluded. What the accountability mechanism of Section 7 requires is likewise not that any position prevail but that a claimant face informed challenge before an audience competent to assess it. Both therefore depend on the same underlying condition, namely that those with standing to speak can speak and be heard, and they differ only in what happens after the argument: contestation is indifferent to whether agreement follows, consensus procedure requires that action not proceed over the unheard.

What genuinely threatens the accountability mechanism is therefore not consensus as a procedure but the restriction of standing. Where the range of persons entitled to participate in deliberation is narrowed by age, sex or lineage, the consensus reached is a consensus of those permitted to speak, and the mechanism fails not because agreement was sought but because challenge was never available. This is the substantive critique of communitarian institutions, and it is why Gyekye's (1997) moderate communitarianism matters analytically rather than decoratively: by holding that communal constitution does not extinguish individual entitlement, it preserves precisely the standing on which both consensus and contestation depend, where a restricted communitarianism would not.

The upshot is that the accountability argument of Section 7 does not require displacing African communitarian norms; it requires the moderate rather than the restricted version of them, which is a position argued for within African philosophy on independent grounds. The unresolved remainder is empirical rather than conceptual, namely how far actual deliberative institutions across the cases examined approximate the moderate version. The gendered and gerontocratic distribution of standing within many of them suggests the answer is often unfavourable, and Section 6.5 pursues that question for gender specifically.

4.4 The Conditional Mobilisation Model

Integrating these strands, the article specifies a model in which the social-transformative outcome of religious mobilisation is a function of three variables.

Variable 1: Interpretive content (I). The substantive ethical and juristic reading being mobilised, ranging along a continuum from restrictive-literalist interpretations that treat received *fiqh* as fixed, through accommodationist readings that permit adaptation at the margins, to purposive-reformist interpretations that reason from *maqāṣid* toward substantive institutional change. Interpretive content determines the *direction* a mobilisation can take.

Variable 2: Institutional form (F). The organisational vehicle through which interpretation is channelled: informal moral suasion; mosque-based service provision; organised *ṭarīqa* networks; formalised religious bureaucracy; educational institutions; explicit political parties; or armed movement. Institutional form determines the *scale and durability* achievable, and shapes the accountability relations governing religious authority.

Variable 3: Political opportunity structure (P). The surrounding conditions: the strength or weakness of state institutions; the presence or absence of political pluralism and associational freedom; the degree of economic marginalisation of the relevant community; the existence of formal channels linking religious and state authority; and the degree of tolerance for internal religious diversity.

The model's central proposition is that transformative outcomes, in the sense specified by the six criteria of Section 3.4, require *conjunction* rather than any single sufficient condition:

Positive social transformation is most probable where purposive-reformist interpretation (I) is channelled through institutional forms possessing both coordinating capacity and internal accountability (F), within a political context offering formal channels of engagement, associational pluralism and tolerance for internal religious diversity (P). Where any one of these is absent, the transformative potential of the other two is systematically attenuated; where interpretation is restrictive, institutional form is unaccountable, and political context is closed, religious mobilisation reliably produces exclusionary or coercive outcomes.

Two properties of the model deserve emphasis. First, it is *symmetrical*: it explains regressive as well as progressive outcomes with the same variables, avoiding the apologetic asymmetry in which favourable outcomes are attributed to religion and unfavourable ones to context. Second, it is *falsifiable*: it generates the prediction that cases sharing doctrinal content but differing in institutional form and political context will diverge in outcome, and that cases differing doctrinally but converging institutionally and politically will converge in outcome. Sections 7 and 8 test this prediction against the internal structure of religious authority and against national cases respectively.

The model deliberately refuses both textualist determination, which treats doctrine as sufficient to explain outcome, and materialist reduction, which treats religion as epiphenomenal to underlying interest. Following the interpretive turn in religious studies, it treats religious meaning-making as social action with genuine causal significance, while insisting that such meaning-making is always situated within and constrained by particular institutional and material circumstances.

4.5 Coding the Variables

A model of this kind is only as disciplined as its coding rules, and three variables specified in prose invite the objection that their boundaries are porous and their application unfalsifiable. This subsection therefore establishes what distinguishes the variables from one another, states the levels of each and the indicator by which a case is assigned, sets out the decision rules governing boundary cases, and concludes by acknowledging the respect in which the variables are not fully independent.

What distinguishes the variables. The three are distinguished not by subject matter, since all three concern religion and politics, but by the object of which each is predicated. Interpretive content is a property of an argument: what is claimed, and by what justificatory route. Institutional form is a property of a vehicle: the organisation through which action is taken,

characterised by its capacity and its accountability relations. Political opportunity structure is a property of an environment: the conditions obtaining independently of the actor's own choices. A single empirical fact may therefore bear on more than one variable, and the question is never which variable a fact belongs to but which property of which object the fact reports.

Two tests operationalise this. The *object test* asks what the fact is predicated of: a claim, an organisation, or a set of surrounding conditions. The *counterfactual test* asks whether the feature could change while the other two held constant. If a Sufi *ṭarīqa* adopted purposive-reformist positions without altering its organisational structure or its relation to the state, the change would be in I alone; the fact that this is imaginable establishes that I and F are separable in the *ṭarīqa* case even though the same body exhibits both. Where the counterfactual is not imaginable, the coding has conflated two properties and must be redone.

Three worked boundary cases follow, chosen because each has been miscoded in the literature. A *Sufi ṭarīqa* is a vehicle (F: high coordinating capacity, moderate accountability through the possibility of transfer between orders) that also produces argument (I), and the two are coded separately, since *ṭuruq* of similar structure have adopted markedly different interpretive positions. A *state religious bureaucracy* is a vehicle for those acting through it and an environmental condition for those acting outside it, resolved by Rule 1 below. An *armed movement* is a vehicle whose accountability score is not merely low but structurally nil, since adherents cannot transfer without physical risk; this is coded as an F value rather than as evidence about I, and it is why Boko Haram and quietist Salafism, which share much interpretive content, receive opposite scores on F.

Interpretive content (I) takes three values, distinguished by what the actor does when received juristic opinion and present social need conflict. *Restrictive-literalist*: received *fiqh* is treated as fixed, and adaptation is classified as deviation. *Accommodationist*: adaptation is permitted at the margins through established juristic devices such as '*urf*, *maṣlaḥa* and necessity, without disturbing the received corpus. *Purposive-reformist*: reasoning proceeds from *maqāṣid* toward substantive institutional change, and the received corpus is treated as revisable in light of purpose. The indicator is the justificatory move made in public argument, not the substantive position reached, since actors reaching similar positions by different routes differ in what they can subsequently authorise.

Institutional form (F) takes values on two dimensions rather than one, because a single scale conflates properties that vary independently. *Coordinating capacity* is the ability to act at scale: to allocate resources, direct personnel, and sustain action beyond a single locality. *Internal accountability* is whether those subject to an authority can withdraw recognition from it, and whether that withdrawal imposes a cost. The indicator for the second is the existence of a functioning alternative to which adherents may transfer, since accountability without exit is nominal. The two dimensions yield four combinations, of which the analytically important contrast is between high capacity with low accountability, the configuration of state religious bureaucracies and armed movements alike, and high capacity with high accountability, the configuration the model associates with transformative outcomes.

Political opportunity structure (P) takes values on three dimensions. *Formal channels*: whether religious claims have a procedural route into policy with predictable outcomes. *Associational pluralism*: whether religious association, publication and public argument are permitted. *State determination of orthodoxy*: whether the state attempts to fix the interpretive content of religious authority, which is coded separately from the first two because states with open associational conditions may nonetheless promote a preferred theology.

Three decision rules govern the boundaries.

Rule 1: code from the position of the mobilising actor. The most common boundary difficulty concerns state religious institutions, which appear to belong simultaneously to F and to P. They are resolved by asking whose mobilisation is being analysed. A ministry of religious affairs is institutional form for the actors who mobilise through it and political opportunity structure for those who mobilise outside it. Morocco's 'ulamā' councils are therefore coded as F in the analysis of the *Mudawwana* reform and as P in any analysis of independent religious contestation in the same period.

Rule 2: code configurations, not countries. Where a single state contains actors mobilising through different institutional forms with different interpretive content, each configuration is coded separately. This is why Nigeria appears twice in Table 2, once for the shari'a implementation of the northern states and once for Boko Haram; treating the country as the unit would average two configurations that the model predicts will produce opposite outcomes.

Rule 3: code periods, not actors. Where interpretive content or political conditions change materially, the case is coded by period. Tunisia is coded for 2011–2021 and noted as reconfigured thereafter, and Ennahda's formal separation of preaching from political activity in 2016 is treated as a change in F rather than as evidence of insincerity in either period.

The coding applied under these rules is set out in Table 2 and can be disputed case by case. That is the intention: a reader who codes Senegal's *ṭuruq* as low rather than high on internal accountability, or Kenya as possessing formal channels, will reach different conclusions, and the disagreement will be locatable rather than diffuse.

Partial endogeneity. One limitation must be stated rather than concealed by the apparatus above. The variables are analytically distinguishable but not causally independent over time. Institutional form shapes which interpretations are produced, since a hierarchical order sustains readings that a dispersed network cannot; political conditions shape institutional form, since states determine what religious organisation is permissible; and sustained interpretive change eventually alters both. The model treats the three as independent inputs, which is defensible only for the coding of a configuration at a point in time and is not defensible as an account of how configurations arise. This article accordingly makes claims of the form *this configuration produced this outcome* and not of the form *this variable caused this configuration*. The dynamic question, how configurations form and reproduce, is a different research problem requiring longitudinal evidence the present design does not generate, and the falsification conditions in Section 10.1 are stated for the static claim only.

5. Historical Trajectories: The Plural Islamisations of Africa

The institutional forms Islamic authority assumed in Africa were durably shaped by the processes through which Islam became embedded, and the plural in this section's title is essential: there was no single Islamisation of Africa but a set of regionally distinct processes operating through different mechanisms over different timescales. That variation is the principal historical source of the institutional heterogeneity the model treats as explanatory, and it is summarised here only so far as the argument requires, the specialist literature cited supplying the detail.

Five modalities may be distinguished. Islam's African presence begins with *migration*: the flight of persecuted Muslims to the Christian kingdom of Aksum, remembered as the first *hijra*, which establishes that presence as coeval with the religion's foundation rather than as a later expansion (Erllich, 2007; Ahmed, 2001). North Africa was Islamised by *conquest* in the seventh

and eighth centuries, generating institutions of global significance at al-Qarawiyyīn and al-Azhar, alongside durable alternatives to the Sunni mainstream in the Ibādī communities of the Mزاب, and producing a comparatively close articulation of religious and state authority that distinguishes the Maghreb sharply from the Sahelian and Swahili patterns. The Sahel was Islamised through *commerce and scholarship*, Islam becoming established among ruling elites in Ghana by the eleventh century and deepening under Mali and Songhay, whose rulers patronised the centres of learning at Timbuktu, Jenné and Gao (Hunwick, 2003; Levtzion & Pouwels, 2000). The scholarly tradition this produced, in Arabic and in Ajami, constitutes one of the world's major and most systematically underestimated intellectual traditions (Kane, 2016; Jeppie & Diagne, 2008). The East African coast was Islamised through *maritime networks* from at least the eighth century, generating a Shāfi'ī and Swahili urban civilisation at Kilwa, Lamu, Mombasa and Zanzibar, with mainland Islamisation occurring later and from below rather than by elite conversion (Pouwels, 1987; Kresse, 2007; Becker, 2008). Southern Africa's communities were formed substantially through *forced migration* from South and Southeast Asia to the Cape, a tradition that later produced both a notable role in resistance to apartheid and, in Esack's (1997) hermeneutics of liberation and pluralism, one of Africa's most significant original contributions to global Islamic thought (Tayob, 1999).

Two consequences of this variation bear directly on the argument. The first concerns the autonomy of religious authority. Where Islamisation proceeded through commerce and scholarship, authority derived from scholarly reputation and network position rather than from state appointment, and remained correspondingly independent of political power. That independence was the structural precondition for the reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of which the most consequential, led by 'Uthmān dan Fodio from 1804, established the Sokoto Caliphate as one of the largest polities of nineteenth-century Africa (Last, 1967; Hiskett, 1984), while comparable movements in the Senegambia and the Middle Niger, and the later formation of the Qādiriyya, Tijāniyya and Muridiyya, established organisational forms still central to social life (Robinson, 2000; Babou, 2007). These movements illustrate the model in both directions: reformist interpretive content combined with high-capacity institutional form under political fragmentation produced transformation of the deepest kind, state formation itself, and the same conjunction produced substantial coercion, enslavement and the subordination of non-Muslim populations.

The second concerns the colonial reconfiguration of that autonomy. British indirect rule preserved and instrumentalised existing Islamic structures, converting autonomous religious authority into an administrative tier of the colonial state (Mamdani, 1996); French policy subordinated Islamic educational and legal institutions to secular administration while cultivating Sufi leaders as intermediaries, producing the Senegalese pattern of negotiated accommodation (Robinson, 2000). The divergence remains visible in the contrast between the sharī'a courts of northern Nigeria and the secular-republican order of Senegal, two societies with comparably deep Islamic institutional histories and radically different settlements. More consequentially for what follows, the colonial period inaugurated the bureaucratisation of religious authority, converting scholarly reputation into state-certified office. The accountability consequences of that conversion are the subject of Section 7.3.

Two conclusions follow. Islamic traditions in Africa possess deep indigenous institutional roots that long predate and substantially shaped African state formation; and the specific forms that authority assumed vary regionally in ways that generate correspondingly diverse patterns of engagement with social transformation.

6. Domains of Transformation

This section examines five domains through the common lens of the conditional mobilisation model, treating each as a site at which interpretive content, institutional form and political opportunity structure interact.

6.1 Governance and Constitutional Order

The relationship between Islamic traditions and political transformation spans a spectrum from explicitly Islamic statecraft to the diffuse influence of Islamic ethical vocabulary on secular constitutional politics.

Pre-colonial Islamic states developed administrative systems grounded in Islamic legal principles: structured judicial institutions, fiscal systems informed by *zakāt*, and an ethic of rulership accountable in principle to legal norms and scholarly oversight (Last, 1967). These precedents continue to inform contemporary debate, invoked by reformist and conservative actors alike.

In the contemporary period, *shūrā* has featured prominently in debates on the compatibility of Islamic political thought with democratic governance. Reformist scholars and civil society actors have drawn on *shūrā*, *amāna* and *maqāṣid*-based reasoning to argue for the religious legitimacy of participatory and accountable governance, contributing theological grounding to democratisation movements in Senegal, Tunisia and, more contentiously, Egypt and Sudan (Ghannouchi, 2022; Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996). Others contest this reading. The contestation itself illustrates the framework's central claim: Islamic political concepts do not determine a single outcome but constitute a shared vocabulary within which competing visions of legitimate governance are argued.

The implementation of sharī'a-based penal codes in twelve northern Nigerian states from 1999–2000 constitutes the most consequential recent instance. Proponents framed it as a vehicle for combating corruption, restoring moral order and delivering more accessible and locally legitimate justice than the existing system. Critics, including many northern Nigerian Muslims, pointed to inconsistent enforcement, disproportionate application to the poor and to women, and tension with constitutional guarantees (Ostien, 2007; Kendhammer, 2016). The Nigerian case is examined in full through the model in Section 8.1.

Beyond formal institutions, Muslim civil society organisations have participated in democratic mobilisation, election observation and anti-corruption advocacy, drawing on Islamic ethical vocabulary to legitimate these activities within their communities. Their prominence in Tunisia's transition, Senegalese civic life and Kenyan and Nigerian governance advocacy complicates narratives associating Islamic political engagement primarily with authoritarianism or extremism.

6.2 Knowledge and Education

Qur'ānic and traditional Islamic educational institutions constitute Africa's oldest continuously operating educational infrastructure. The *madrasa*, the *ḥalqa* and the West African *dāra* transmitted literacy, jurisprudence, theology, logic and Arabic across centuries and vast distances, sustaining a manuscript culture of considerable sophistication (Brenner, 2001; Launay, 2016; Kane, 2016).

Colonial and post-colonial education policy consistently misrecognised these institutions, classifying their graduates as illiterate because literacy was measured in European languages,

with substantial consequences for how African human capital has been assessed. Correcting that misrecognition is itself transformation in the epistemic register identified in Section 3.2.

Twentieth-century reform movements produced hybrid institutional forms: the *madrassa* reform movement across West Africa, integrating Islamic and secular curricula; the establishment of Islamic universities including the Islamic University in Uganda and Zanzibar University; and the incorporation of Islamic religious education within national curricula in Kenya, Tanzania and Nigeria. These developments illustrate institutional form as the operative variable: where reformist interpretation was channelled through institutions capable of certification and articulation with state systems, educational transformation followed; where it was not, reformist content remained confined to religious spheres.

Women's Islamic education has expanded substantially, through women's Qur'ānic study circles, female religious teachers (*mallamai*, *walimu*), and women's enrolment in Islamic higher education, generating a growing cohort of women with the textual competence required to participate authoritatively in interpretive debate, a development whose implications for gender relations are examined in 6.5.

6.3 Economy: Redistribution, Endowment and Finance

Zakāt institutionalises redistribution as an obligation rather than a discretion and, juridically distinctive, as a right of the recipient rather than a gift of the donor. Across African contexts its administration varies enormously, from informal local distribution through mosques, through voluntary organised collection by Islamic associations, to state-administered systems as in Sudan. The developmental significance of this variation is considerable: informal distribution maximises responsiveness and minimises administrative loss but cannot achieve scale or address structural poverty; state administration achieves scale but has repeatedly been captured for political purpose. Assessed against the criteria of Section 3.4, informally administered *zakāt* achieves distributional consequence without structural depth.

Waqf provides the tradition's instrument for perpetual charitable endowment, historically financing mosques, schools, hospitals, water infrastructure and support for the poor across Muslim Africa (Singer, 2008). Colonial administrations extensively expropriated or restructured *awqāf*, and post-colonial states frequently nationalised them, severing the institutional continuity on which their functioning depended. Contemporary revival efforts, including cash *waqf* and corporate *waqf* structures, attempt to restore the instrument's developmental function while addressing the rigidity Kuran (2001) identifies as its historical limitation.

Islamic banking and finance has expanded significantly across Africa, with substantial sectors in Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and Djibouti, and sovereign *ṣukūk* issuance by several states. The evidence on developmental impact is genuinely mixed. Proponents point to the extension of financial services to populations excluded by religious objection to interest, and to the risk-sharing structure of *muḍāraba* and *mushāraka* contracts. Critics observe that the sector has substantially converged on conventional banking in economic substance while differing in legal form, and that Islamic microfinance, despite considerable promise for populations underserved by conventional providers, remains small relative to need (Warde, 2000; Kuran, 2004; Tripp, 2006). Honest assessment requires acknowledging that the strongest claims made for Islamic finance's transformative potential remain, in the African context, insufficiently evidenced.

6.4 Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

Islamic traditions supply substantial resources for conflict transformation, and African Muslim institutions have deployed them extensively. *Ṣulḥ* (reconciliation) and *taḥkīm* (arbitration) provide juridically grounded procedures for dispute settlement emphasising restoration of relationship over determination of fault (Abu-Nimer, 2003). Sufi shaykhs have functioned as mediators across the Sahel and the Horn, drawing on authority independent of the state and on networks crossing the lines dividing parties. In Somali contexts, religious authority operates in complex articulation with *xeer* mediation, with '*ulamā*' participating in clan negotiation and Islamic norms supplying substantive standards applied through customary procedure (Le Sage, 2005; Lewis, 1998).

The countering of violent extremism has generated substantial engagement with Islamic religious actors, of markedly uneven quality. Where such engagement has been instrumental, recruiting religious authority to deliver security messaging, it has frequently damaged the credibility of participating scholars without measurable security benefit. Where it has supported the autonomous capacity of religious institutions to conduct their own theological argument, results have been more durable. This asymmetry follows directly from the model: religious authority's transformative capacity derives from its perceived autonomy, and instrumentalisation destroys the resource it seeks to use (Mamdani, 2004; Thurston, 2017).

Post-conflict contexts have seen Islamic institutions participate in transitional justice, reintegration and reconstruction, though the systematic evidence base remains thin relative to the scale of activity.

6.5 Gender and Social Justice

Gender constitutes the most contested terrain in this field, and the one on which analytical honesty is most demanding.

Three claims can be sustained simultaneously without contradiction. First, interpretations of Islamic law prevailing across much of Muslim Africa impose real constraints on women's legal status, particularly in family law — in provisions governing divorce, guardianship, testimony and inheritance — and these constraints have measurable consequences for women's capabilities as specified in Section 3.4 (An-Na'im, 2002). Second, Islamic textual and juristic resources have been mobilised by African Muslim women themselves to advance claims to education, economic participation, property and political voice, using the distinction between divinely ordained *sharī'a* and humanly produced *fiqh* to open received rulings to revision (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; Badran, 2009). Third, the relationship between religious norms and women's actual social position is mediated so heavily by class, education, urbanisation, customary practice and state law that religious doctrine alone predicts outcomes poorly. Women's positions differ markedly between Dakar and Kano, Tunis and Mogadishu, despite substantially shared doctrinal reference.

Two analytical cautions apply. Mahmood's (2005) demonstration that women's participation in piety movements involves agency irreducible to the categories of resistance and compliance requires that African Muslim women's religious commitments be analysed rather than assumed to be false consciousness. And Oyěwùmí's (1997) challenge to the transposition of Western gender categories onto African social organisation requires that the categories of analysis themselves be held open. Neither caution licenses indifference to documented constraint; both require that critique be conducted in terms recognisable to those whose lives are described.

The transformative trajectory most clearly evidenced is educational. The expansion of women's textual competence, the capacity to argue from sources rather than to petition those who can, alters the structure of interpretive authority itself, and constitutes transformation in the fullest sense specified in Section 3: durable, structurally deep, distributionally consequential, contested, and accomplished from within the tradition rather than against it.

The capability criterion and differential legal status. One question raised by this analysis cannot be deferred, since the article's evaluative standard appears to settle it in advance. If transformation is assessed by the expansion of capabilities for the least advantaged, and if family-law provisions establish differential legal capacity by sex, does it follow that any legal order containing such provisions automatically fails the criterion? Three considerations bear on the answer, and they do not all point the same way.

The first is that capability, in Sen's and Nussbaum's specification, concerns what a person is actually able to be and do, not what a legal text formally provides. Formal legal capacity is one determinant of substantive capability among several, and not always the dominant one. A woman with secure income, education and family support may exercise wider effective freedom under a formally unequal legal regime than a woman with none of these under a formally equal one, and the comparative evidence across Muslim Africa surveyed in Section 8 shows exactly this pattern of divergence between jurisdictions of similar doctrinal orientation. It follows that the capability criterion cannot be applied to legal texts at all. It applies to outcomes, and its application requires evidence about lives rather than inference from statutes.

The second consideration cuts the other way and is the stronger. Differential legal capacity is not merely one input among many; it is a determinant of the conditions under which all other inputs operate. A legal rule governing divorce, custody or inheritance does not simply subtract a quantum of freedom, it structures the bargaining position from which a woman negotiates every other aspect of her situation, and it does so most severely for those with fewest alternative resources, which is to say for precisely the least advantaged whose capabilities the criterion privileges. On this reading the first consideration proves less than it appears: the fact that education and income can offset formal disability is a statement about who can escape its effects, not a defence of the disability.

The third concerns the preservation floor introduced in Section 3.4. That element specifies goods no transformation may destroy, among them intellect and the freedom to hold and contest belief. A legal order restricting women's capacity to participate in the interpretation of the tradition that governs them fails the floor as well as the ceiling, since it withholds the very good, the exercise of intellect in matters of belief, that the floor was specified to protect. This is the sharpest form of the objection, and it is internal to the framework rather than imported into it.

The position this article takes is accordingly narrower than either of the available simplifications. It does not hold that differential legal status is compatible with the capability criterion; the second and third considerations indicate that it is not. It holds rather that the criterion is violated to a degree that varies with how the provisions are administered, what alternatives are available, and whether women can contest the interpretation, and that this variation is large enough to be the analytically interesting fact. The transformative significance of expanded textual competence lies precisely here: it does not remove the constraint, but it alters who is authorised to argue about it, and the framework of Section 7 predicts that constraints subject to informed internal contestation are the ones that change. Readers who hold that any differential provision disqualifies a legal order outright will find this too permissive, and the disagreement is real rather than terminological. It is registered here because

the standard was stated in Section 1.4 precisely so that disagreement with it could be conducted openly.

6.6 Legal Pluralism and the Articulation of Normative Orders

In few African jurisdictions does Islamic law operate alone. It operates within plural legal fields in which litigants select among forums, norms are borrowed across boundaries, and the authority of each order depends partly on its relationship to the others. The colonial period established the architecture: indirect rule preserved Islamic courts while confining their jurisdiction, typically to personal status, a restriction that severed Islamic law from the commercial, criminal and constitutional domains in which it had previously operated (Mamdani, 1996; Robinson, 2000). Post-colonial states largely inherited that settlement (Ndzovu, 2014; An-Na'im, 2002).

Three consequences follow. The first is *forum shopping*, which cuts both ways. Where women can select between customary, Islamic and statutory forums, Islamic law has in numerous documented contexts offered the more favourable option on inheritance, consent to marriage and maintenance, relative to customary orders recognising no female property claim at all. The transformative effect of Islamic law in such settings is real and is systematically obscured by analyses comparing Islamic provisions against statutory ideals rather than against the alternatives actually available. Where statutory reform has advanced beyond Islamic provision, the same availability preserves what reform sought to displace.

The second is *norm migration*. Somali practice illustrates it most clearly: *diya* compensation, Islamic in origin, is administered through clan structures according to *xeer* procedure, while *xeer* settlements are routinely validated in Islamic terms by participating '*ulamā*' (Lewis, 1998; Le Sage, 2005). Neither order is intact; each has been reconstituted through the encounter.

The third is *institutional competition for legitimacy*. Where state courts are slow, costly, distant or corrupt, religious and customary forums acquire caseload through comparative performance rather than doctrinal appeal. The brief ascendancy of the Islamic Courts Union rested substantially on this, as did support for *sharī'a* implementation in northern Nigeria, which Kendhammer (2016) shows was driven far more by expectations of accessible and uncorrupt adjudication than by commitment to particular penal provisions. The implication for the model is direct: where the political opportunity structure includes a failing state judiciary, religious legal institutions gain authority regardless of interpretive content, and what follows is determined by which interpretation occupies that authority.

Legal pluralism is therefore not a transitional condition preceding legal unification but the stable form of the African legal field. The practical question is not how normative orders may be consolidated but how their articulation may be rendered accountable and navigable by those subject to them.

7. Internal Pluralism and the Contestation of Religious Authority

The analysis to this point has treated institutional form as a variable without examining closely the internal structure of Islamic religious authority in Africa or the mechanisms by which that authority is constituted, transmitted and contested. This section supplies that examination. It argues that the internal pluralism of African Muslim communities, meaning the capacity of divergent currents to contest interpretation through peaceful scholarly and civic means, is not a weakness to be regretted nor a symptom of doctrinal confusion, but the principal mechanism by which religious authority is held accountable, and therefore a decisive condition of transformative rather than extractive outcomes. It sets out the structure of Islamic authority,

characterises the currents that contest it, examines three processes eroding the conditions of contestation, and specifies the circumstances under which internal pluralism fails.

7.1 The Structure of Islamic Religious Authority

Islamic religious authority in Africa is polycentric. There is no magisterium, no ordination, no central body competent to declare a reading illegitimate, and no institutional mechanism by which a scholar may be deprived of standing other than the withdrawal of communal recognition. Authority accrues instead through a combination of demonstrated scholarly competence, chains of transmission linking a scholar to recognised teachers, institutional position within a *madrassa*, mosque or *ṭarīqa*, and the acknowledgement of peers and following (Loimeier, 2013; Asad, 1986).

This structure has two consequences that run in opposite directions, and holding both is essential to the argument. It confers extraordinary resilience: because authority is distributed, it cannot be captured at a single point, and the suppression of any particular scholar or institution leaves the wider structure intact. Colonial administrations discovered this repeatedly, finding that the co-optation of identifiable religious leaders did not deliver control over religious discourse (Robinson, 2000). At the same time, precisely because no body can authoritatively exclude, the field remains open to claimants whose authority rests on assertion rather than recognition, which is the structural opening through which movements repudiated by the entire scholarly establishment nonetheless secure a following.

The juristic architecture reinforces this pluralism. The recognition of four Sunni schools as equally valid, the doctrine that a *mujtahid* who errs in good faith is nonetheless rewarded, and the extensive machinery of *ikhtilāf*, the systematic recording and preservation of scholarly disagreement, institutionalise difference within the tradition rather than treating it as deviation to be resolved (Hallaq, 2009). African Islamic scholarship inherited this architecture and extended it, with Mālikī accommodation of *ʿamal* and *ʿurf* permitting the incorporation of local normative practice to a degree that generated genuinely regional legal cultures.

7.2 Sufi, Reformist, Salafi and Traditionalist Currents

Contemporary African Islam is contested principally among four broad orientations, whose boundaries are considerably more porous than the taxonomy suggests.

Sufi orientations, organised through *ṭuruq* of markedly different structure, remain numerically dominant across much of West Africa and substantial parts of the Horn and the Nile Valley. Their authority rests on chains of spiritual transmission and on the personal standing of shaykhs, and their institutional forms range from the tightly hierarchical Muridiyya to the diffuse and multi-centred Tijāniyya (Cruise O'Brien, 1971; Babou, 2007; Soares, 2005). Their transformative repertoire is distinctive: capacity for coordinated economic action, credibility as mediators across political divides, and deep rural penetration.

Reformist currents seeking the purification of practice from what they identify as innovation have a long African history, encompassing the nineteenth-century jihād movements as much as twentieth-century organisations. Kane's (2003) study of Izala in northern Nigeria demonstrates that reformism's social programme has frequently been modernising in effect, promoting mass education including for women, opposing expensive customary marriage payments, and attacking the economic exactions associated with some Sufi structures, even where its theological idiom is restorationist.

Salafi currents, transnationally connected and textually oriented, expanded substantially from the late twentieth century, assisted by Gulf funding, scholarship provision and publishing. The critical finding of recent scholarship is that Salafi orientation does not entail militancy: Thurston (2016) demonstrates the predominantly quietist and scholarly character of Nigerian Salafism and its explicit contestation with jihadist claimants, and Østebø (2012) documents the localisation of Salafi practice among Oromo Muslims in ways that adapted rather than displaced existing social forms. Sounaye's (2016) work on Niger similarly documents reformist trajectories that are non-violent and civically engaged.

Traditionalist orientations, defending established local practice and the authority of inherited scholarly lineages, are the least studied of the four precisely because they are least disruptive, yet they represent the majority position in many communities and constitute the principal social ballast against rapid interpretive change in either direction.

The essential analytical point is that these currents *argue with one another*. The literature collected by Westerlund and Rosander (1997) documented the Sufi–reformist encounter as a sustained argument conducted through sermon, pamphlet, public debate and institutional competition. That argument is the accountability mechanism. Where it proceeds, claimants must justify themselves before an audience competent to assess the justification, and interpretations that cannot survive scrutiny are marginalised without coercion.

7.3 Bureaucratisation and the State Capture of Authority

The first of three processes eroding this mechanism is the conversion of scholarly authority into state office. Colonial administrations initiated it; post-colonial states extended it substantially, establishing supreme councils, ministries of religious affairs, state-appointed muftis and licensing regimes for preachers.

The developmental case for bureaucratisation is real. Morocco's Ministry of Ḥabous and Islamic Affairs, the '*ulamā*' councils and the state imam-training programme delivered the *Mudawwana* reform examined in Section 8.5, a substantive expansion of women's legal capability accomplished in explicitly Islamic terms, which no decentralised structure could have achieved (Zeghal, 2008). Coordination capacity is not nothing.

The cost is the severing of religious authority from the communal recognition that constituted it. A state-appointed scholar is accountable upward rather than outward, and the community understands this. The consequence is a documented and recurring pattern: official religious institutions lose credibility precisely in proportion to their proximity to the state, and the authority they vacate is claimed by actors whose principal asset is their evident independence. Ethiopia's 2011–2013 Muslim protest movement, mobilised against perceived state determination of the theological orientation of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, illustrates the dynamic with clarity: state attempts to fix interpretive content generate resistance framed as a defence of religious autonomy, politicising the domain the state sought to depoliticise (Østebø, 2020).

For the model specified in Section 4.4, bureaucratisation is therefore ambiguous rather than simply negative: it raises institutional coordinating capacity while lowering internal accountability, and its net effect depends on which constraint was binding.

7.4 Media and the Displacement of Scholarly Authority

The second erosive process is the reconstitution of religious publics through media. Cassette sermons, satellite broadcasting, and subsequently the internet and social platforms have

progressively decoupled religious authority from the institutions that certified it (Hirschkind, 2006; Schulz, 2012). A preacher with a transmitter and, latterly, a smartphone can address an audience larger than any *madrassa* graduate could reach, without having passed through the transmission chains that formerly constituted a claim to speak.

Two effects follow. The first is genuinely democratising: media access has enabled women, youth and scholars outside established lineages to enter interpretive debate from which institutional gatekeeping had excluded them, and Schulz (2012) documents Malian Muslim women's use of media to constitute new forms of religious public presence. The second is corrosive of accountability: dispersed audiences cannot assess scholarly competence as a congregation can, and the metrics determining reach (virality, confrontation, certainty) systematically disadvantage the qualified and provisional.

This displacement is the development that the institutional analysis developed in this article captures least adequately, and the deficiency is worth specifying rather than merely conceding, since the specification is itself the beginning of a research agenda.

The difficulty is that the framework's second variable, institutional form, was constructed for institutions with membership, location and succession. Mediated religious authority has none of these in the same sense. A satellite preacher has an audience rather than a congregation, a platform rather than a mosque, and no mechanism of succession at all; the categories that let us ask who holds a shaykh accountable do not straightforwardly apply. Three specific questions follow, and none can be answered from the evidence assembled here.

Does mediated authority substitute for institutional authority, or layer upon it? The literature has largely assumed substitution, but the alternative is at least as plausible: that audiences consume mediated preaching while continuing to seek adjudication, marriage and burial from local institutions, so that the two forms of authority govern different domains rather than competing for the same one. These possibilities have different implications for the accountability argument of Section 7.6, and distinguishing them requires audience-level rather than content-level evidence.

What replaces certification? If chains of transmission no longer establish who may speak, some other mechanism is performing that function, whether platform metrics, institutional affiliation displayed rather than exercised, or the endorsement of already-recognised scholars. Identifying which would establish whether mediated authority is unaccountable or accountable by different means.

Does mediation alter the content of interpretation, or only its distribution? The suggestion above that reach metrics favour certainty over jurisprudential care is an inference from the properties of the medium rather than a finding about what is said, and it may be wrong.

Answering these would require a research design this article does not employ: audience surveys establishing where different populations seek different kinds of religious guidance, content analysis comparing mediated and mosque-based preaching on the same questions, and network analysis of endorsement among mediated authorities. Until such work exists, the claims made here about media should be read as an account of what has changed structurally rather than as an assessment of its consequences, and the fourth conditioning factor identified in Section 10 should be understood as resting on evidence drawn from the pre-mediated configuration.

7.5 Generational and Spatial Divergence

The third process is demographic and spatial. Africa's Muslim populations are overwhelmingly young and rapidly urbanising, and both conditions weaken the transmission mechanisms on which traditional authority depended. Urban migration severs the relationship between a young Muslim and the scholarly lineage of their natal community; formal education in state schools competes with the *madrassa* for the years in which transmission formerly occurred; and labour-market frustration among educated urban youth generates receptivity to interpretations framing existing religious and political authority as compromised.

Masquelier (2009) documents the intergenerational tension this produces in Nigérien towns, and Kendhammer (2016) shows Nigerian Muslims negotiating religious and democratic commitments in terms their elders did not use. The pattern is not one of secularisation: religious commitment among African Muslim youth is generally strong. It is a reconfiguration of the authority to whom that commitment is owed.

7.6 Internal Pluralism as a Protective Condition

Drawing these strands together yields the section's central claim. Across the cases examined in Section 8, resilience against the capture of religious authority by exclusionary or violent movements correlates less with any doctrinal orientation than with the presence of a functioning ecosystem in which multiple currents contest interpretation publicly and non-violently.

The mechanism is specifiable. Where such an ecosystem exists, an extremist claimant faces immediate, informed and locally credible theological refutation from scholars whose standing the target audience already recognises. Recruitment must overcome that refutation. Where the ecosystem has been hollowed out, whether by state suppression of independent scholarship, by conflict that has killed or displaced scholars, by the discrediting of official religious institutions through excessive state proximity, or by the substitution of media reach for scholarly recognition, the claimant faces no such obstacle, and may present themselves as the sole authentic voice precisely because no competing voice retains credibility.

The Nigerian evidence is instructive: Boko Haram was repudiated by the overwhelming majority of northern Nigerian scholars, including Salafi scholars whose textual orientation it claimed to share, and that repudiation constrained its recruitment among the religiously educated even as state neglect and security-force abuse drove recruitment among the marginalised (Thurston, 2016, 2017). The Sahelian evidence points the same way: extremist capture proceeded furthest where the pre-existing scholarly ecosystem was weakest or most disrupted (Thurston, 2020).

Internal pluralism is therefore not a threat to Islamic religious authority. It is the condition of its accountability, and states or external actors that suppress it in the name of countering extremism systematically destroy the resource on which effective resistance to extremism depends.

7.7 Where Pluralism Fails

Intellectual honesty requires acknowledging the limits of this claim. Internal pluralism protects against capture; it does not by itself produce transformation. A vigorous scholarly ecosystem may sustain a stable equilibrium in which no current can advance substantive reform against the resistance of the others, a condition observable in several African contexts where reformist family-law proposals have been blocked not by state authority but by scholarly disagreement.

Nor is pluralism self-sustaining. It requires the political conditions specified in Section 4.4: associational freedom, tolerance of dissent, and the absence of state determination of orthodoxy. These are precisely the conditions that securitised counter-extremism policy has repeatedly eroded. The relationship between the third variable of the model and this section's mechanism is therefore mutually constitutive rather than merely additive: political pluralism sustains internal religious pluralism, which in turn supplies the accountability that makes religious authority safe to leave unregulated.

8. Regional Case Studies

The cases below were selected to maximise variation on the model's three variables. Each is analysed through the same framework, permitting structured comparison.

8.1 Nigeria: Federal Ambiguity and Symbolic Implementation

Nigeria contains one of the world's largest Muslim populations alongside a comparably large Christian population, distributed such that religious identity substantially overlaps regional and ethnic cleavage, a configuration Falola (1998) analyses as the structural basis of recurrent religious-political violence. The northern Islamic tradition inherits directly from the Sokoto Caliphate, with emirate structures preserved and instrumentalised under indirect rule and retained in modified form thereafter (Last, 1967; Mamdani, 1996).

The 1999–2000 extension of *shari'a* to criminal matters in twelve northern states produced neither the moral renewal its proponents promised nor the systematic persecution its critics feared. Ostien's (2007) documentary record and Kendhammer's (2016) ethnographic work converge on an assessment of substantial symbolic significance and limited institutional transformation: hudud penalties were pronounced rarely and executed almost never; *zakāt* boards were established with generally weak capacity; and popular support proved to be substantially support for improved governance and reduced corruption expressed in religious idiom, coexisting with strong commitment to democratic accountability. Read through the model: reformist interpretive content, high political salience, institutional forms lacking technical capacity and internal accountability, political context structured by federal ambiguity and electoral incentive, a configuration predicting symbolic rather than structural transformation.

The emergence of Boko Haram from the mid-2000s represents the model's negative pole: restrictive-exclusivist interpretation, an institutional form (armed movement) accountable to no scholarly community, in a political context of state neglect, security-force abuse and acute economic marginalisation in the north-east. Thurston (2017) demonstrates the movement's contingent political formation and its rejection by the overwhelming majority of northern Nigerian scholars, a rejection that itself illustrates the constraining function of an intact scholarly community.

Nigeria also hosts the continent's most developed interfaith peacebuilding infrastructure, including the Interfaith Mediation Centre and the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council, and Paden (2005) documents substantial Muslim civic conflict-resolution capacity operating below the threshold of national attention.

8.2 Senegal: The Accommodation Model

Senegal presents the continent's most-cited case of stable religious-political accommodation. The Sufi *ṭuruq*, principally the Muridiyya and the Tijāniyya, command the allegiance of the great majority of Senegalese Muslims and are organised hierarchically around lineages of

shaykhs with substantial economic and social authority (Cruise O'Brien, 1971; Villalón, 1995; Babou, 2007). The Muridiyya in particular developed an ethic of labour and a coordinated economic structure, historically centred on groundnut production and latterly on urban commerce and transnational trade networks.

The critical feature is institutional: religious authority is centralised enough to negotiate with the state, and the state has accommodated rather than sought to subordinate it, generating a durable settlement, sometimes characterised as a social contract, in which religious leaders deliver order and legitimation while the state respects religious autonomy and delivers material consideration. Senegal has maintained a formally secular constitution, has never experienced a military coup, and has effected multiple peaceful transfers of power.

The case's limitations require statement. The accommodation has been criticised for reproducing clientelist relations, for constraining the autonomy of *talibés*, and for the documented exploitation of children in some Qur'ānic schooling arrangements. Whether the settlement satisfies the structural-depth and distributional criteria of Section 3.4, as opposed to delivering stability without transformation, is genuinely contested, and the model's own logic suggests that high institutional centralisation delivers coordination at the cost of internal accountability.

8.3 Somalia and Somaliland: Divergence Under Shared Doctrine

The Somali cases constitute the most analytically valuable comparison available, since they hold ethnicity, language, clan structure and religious doctrine approximately constant while varying institutional configuration and political context.

Somali society articulates three normative orders: Islamic law, the customary legal order of *xeer*, and statutory law (Lewis, 1961, 1998; Le Sage, 2005). Following state collapse in 1991, southern Somalia experienced the fragmentation of religious authority, the entry of transnational Salafi currents, the brief ascendancy of the Islamic Courts Union, which delivered a documented improvement in public order through Islamic adjudication before its 2006 dissolution, and the subsequent emergence of al-Shabaab. Menkhaus (2007) documents the emergence of governance arrangements in the absence of government, with religious and customary institutions supplying adjudication and public order in varying combination.

Somaliland, by contrast, constructed a functioning political order through a sequence of clan conferences, most consequentially at Borama in 1993, that integrated customary elders into a bicameral legislature through the Guurti while establishing constitutional government (Bradbury, 2008; Renders, 2012; Walls, 2014). Religious authority operates within, rather than against, this hybrid settlement.

The comparison is decisive for the article's argument, and is analysed against the model's variables in Section 10.1. The Somaliland settlement also constitutes one of Africa's most instructive experiments in the integration of customary, religious and constitutional authority, with implications for hybrid governance design well beyond the Horn.

8.4 Kenya and Tanzania: Minority Positioning and Coastal Grievance

Kenya and Tanzania host substantial Muslim minorities, concentrated on the coast and in the north-east in Kenya and constituting a much larger share in Tanzania, including the overwhelmingly Muslim Zanzibar, within states whose national institutions have been dominated by non-Muslim populations. Both experience recurring contestation over the status

of *kadhi* courts, the recognition of Islamic family law, and the historical marginalisation of coastal regions (Oded, 2000; Ndzovu, 2014; Becker, 2008; Chande, 1998).

The Kenyan case demonstrates the securitisation dynamic with particular clarity: counter-terrorism operations following the 1998, 2013 and 2015 attacks generated documented abuses against coastal and Somali-Kenyan Muslim populations, and the resulting grievance has been credibly linked to radicalisation dynamics, the mechanism by which securitised response produces the threat it anticipates (Mamdani, 2004). Simultaneously, Kenyan Muslim civil society, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims and the coastal interfaith councils have engaged extensively in constitutional advocacy, electoral peace work and interreligious mediation. Tanzania's post-independence settlement, shaped by Nyerere's *ujamaa* and by the union with Zanzibar, produced a distinct pattern in which religious identity was subordinated to a national developmental project, a subordination that has eroded since liberalisation, with rising religious mobilisation on both Muslim and Christian sides.

8.5 Tunisia and Morocco: Two Routes to Institutional Settlement

Tunisia's post-2011 trajectory is significant chiefly for the decision of Ennahda's leadership to accept constitutional compromise, to relinquish power following the 2013 crisis, and to formally separate religious preaching from political activity in 2016. Ghannouchi's (2022) theorisation of public freedoms within an Islamic framework provides the intellectual apparatus for this position. The 2014 constitution's negotiated settlement on the relationship between Islam and the state, and the National Dialogue Quartet's mediation, produced the Arab world's most substantial democratic transition, subsequently and substantially reversed after 2021, a reversal that itself illustrates the model's insistence on political opportunity structure as a continuing rather than a one-off condition.

Morocco represents the alternative route: the institutional incorporation of religious authority within a monarchy claiming sharifian descent and the title *amīr al-mu'minīn*, with religious affairs administered through a state ministry, '*ulamā*' councils and a state programme of imam training extended to several African states. The 2004 *Mudawwana* family code reform is the most substantial instance of *maqāṣid*-informed legal transformation in contemporary Africa: substantially improving women's position in marriage, divorce and guardianship, and, critically, justified in explicitly Islamic terms rather than as a concession to external human rights pressure (Zeghal, 2008). The reform demonstrates the model's positive conjunction and its cost, examined in Section 10.1: the same centralisation that enabled reform forecloses independent religious contestation of state authority.

8.6 Sudan: Instrumentalisation and Its Consequences

Sudan offers the clearest case of the instrumentalisation of Islamic tradition for authoritarian purposes. The 1983 September Laws and the 1989–2019 Islamist-military regime deployed Islamic legal and institutional vocabulary, including state-administered *zakāt* and Islamic banking, in the service of a project that contributed materially to civil war, to the Darfur atrocities, and to the eventual secession of South Sudan (Warburg, 2003; El-Affendi, 1991; Mamdani, 2009). The execution of Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā in 1985 for apostasy, following his reformist reinterpretation of the Qur'ānic corpus, represents the suppression of internal Islamic critique in its starkest form.

The case is essential to the article's argument precisely because it is unfavourable. It demonstrates the model's symmetry: restrictive interpretation, institutional form fused with unaccountable state power, and a political context of closed pluralism produced exactly the

outcome the model predicts. It also demonstrates that Islamic institutional vocabulary confers no protection against capture: state-administered *zakāt* in Sudan functioned as fiscal extraction rather than redistribution, satisfying none of the criteria specified in Section 3.4.

8.7 Ethiopia: Minority Islam Under Shifting State Formations

Ethiopia's substantial Muslim population, historically subordinated under the imperial Christian state and formally equalised under the Derg and the post-1991 federal constitution, presents a case in which religious transformation is entangled with ethnic federalism and contested state formation (Erich, 2007; Østebø, 2012, 2020). The 2011–2013 Muslim protest movement, mobilised against perceived state interference in the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and the promotion of a particular theological orientation, illustrates a dynamic the model anticipates: state attempts to determine the interpretive content of religious authority generate resistance framed as a claim to religious autonomy, and thereby politicise a domain the state sought to depoliticise. The subsequent trajectory, entangled with Oromo nationalist mobilisation and the post-2018 political transition, demonstrates the difficulty of disaggregating religious from ethnic and regional claim-making.

8.8 Mali and Niger: Extremist Capture in Conditions of Institutional Collapse

The Sahelian cases represent the model's negative pole under conditions of institutional collapse rather than authoritarian capture. Mali's northern crisis from 2012, the subsequent expansion of jihadist movements across the Liptako-Gourma region, and the erosion of state presence across rural Niger and Burkina Faso have produced conditions in which armed movements supply adjudication, protection and predictable rule-application in the absence of the state (Thurston, 2020; Lecocq, 2010). Soares (2005) documents the prior configuration of religious authority in Malian towns, and Sounaye (2016) the Nigérien Izala movement's reformist-but-non-violent trajectory, demonstrating that reformist Salafi orientation does not entail militancy.

The Sahelian evidence supports the model's proposition regarding internal pluralism with particular force: extremist capture has proceeded furthest where the pre-existing scholarly ecosystem was weakest or had been disrupted, and has been most effectively resisted where Sufi, reformist and traditionalist currents retained the capacity to contest interpretation publicly. Internal religious pluralism functions, on this evidence, as a protective factor.

8.9 Comparative Summary

Table 2 scores the cases against the three variables of the model specified in Section 4.4 and against the transformation criteria of Section 3.4. The scoring is qualitative and interpretive rather than measured, and is offered to make the article's reasoning inspectable and contestable rather than to claim a precision the available evidence will not support.

Table 2. *Case configurations and outcomes*

Case	Interpretive content (I)	Institutional form (F)	Political opportunity (P)	Outcome
Nigeria, shari'a states	Reformist, contested	Weak capacity, low accountability	Federal ambiguity, electoral incentive	Symbolic

Case	Interpretive content (I)	Institutional form (F)	Political opportunity (P)	Outcome
Nigeria, Boko Haram	Restrictive-exclusivist	Armed, unaccountable	State neglect, security-force abuse	Regressive
Senegal	Accommodationist Sufi	Centralised, high coordination	Pluralist, formal channels	Stabilising, depth contested
Somaliland	Accommodationist, plural	Hybrid religious-customary-constitutional	Negotiated settlement, formal channels	Transformative
Somalia, south	Fragmented, contested	Fragmented, armed claimants	Collapsed state, no channels	Regressive
Kenya and Tanzania	Plural, minority-positioned	Associational, limited state access	Pluralist but securitised	Mixed
Tunisia	Purposive-reformist	Party-political, later separated	Open 2011–2021, closing after	Transformative, then reversed
Morocco	Purposive-reformist (<i>maqāṣid</i>)	Centralised state-religious	Elite-led, closed to contestation	Transformative, narrow base
Sudan, 1989–2019	Restrictive, instrumentalised	Fused with unaccountable state	Closed	Extractive
Ethiopia	Plural, contested by the state	State-directed council, low autonomy	Associational freedom, but state determination of orthodoxy	Mobilisation without settlement
Mali and Niger	Plural, ecosystem disrupted	Eroded scholarly institutions	State withdrawal, armed competition	Regressive

The outcome column records an aggregate judgement across the domains of Section 6; Section 10.1 disaggregates it by gender, where several readings change materially.

Read down any single column, no variable predicts outcome on its own. Restrictive interpretation appears in the regressive cases and, in modified form, in stable ones; centralised institutional form appears in both Senegal and Morocco with divergent depth; an open political context appears in both Tunisia and Kenya with divergent results. Only the configurations predict, which is the model's central claim and the reason it is stated as a conjunction rather than as a set of independent effects.

9. Critical Tensions and the Limits of the Argument

Intellectual honesty requires that the article's argument be tested against the evidence least favourable to it.

Internal contestation and the authority to speak. African Muslim communities are not unified, and the reformist scholarship on which much of Section 6's analysis draws does not command majority assent in many contexts. Analyses that treat progressive interpretations as authentically Islamic and conservative interpretations as distortion reproduce, in inverted form, the essentialism they criticise. The framework advanced here avoids this only by refusing to adjudicate authenticity and confining itself to the analysis of conditions and consequences.

Instrumentalisation. Sudan is not an aberration. Islamic vocabulary has been deployed to legitimate authoritarian rule, to suppress dissent and to justify violence in multiple African contexts, and the same is true of Christian vocabulary. Any framework claiming that religious traditions carry transformative potential must accept that the identical institutional resources (legitimacy, networks, mobilisational capacity) are equally available for extraction and coercion.

The gender critiques. The reconciliation offered in Section 6.5 will not satisfy those who hold that legal frameworks establishing differential status by sex are incompatible with the capability criterion of Section 3.4, regardless of interpretive strategy. This position is coherent and is held by many African Muslim women. The article responds that the criterion should be applied to outcomes rather than to doctrinal texts, and that the outcomes are empirically variable, but this response does not dissolve the tension, and should not be presented as doing so.

Securitisation and the framing of scholarship. The post-2001 research economy has directed substantial funding toward the study of African Muslim communities as sources of risk, distorting the evidence base by over-documenting violence and under-documenting ordinary institutional life. This article draws on that literature and is therefore partly shaped by its distortions.

The evidence base and the article's inferential status. Systematic quantitative data on Islamic institutions in Africa (the scale of *zakāt* flows, the number and enrolment of Qur'ānic schools, the caseload of *qāḍī* courts, the assets of *awqāf*) is fragmentary. The consequence is more fundamental than a caveat about particular claims, and is best stated directly: this article cannot establish that its framework is correct, and does not claim to. What a theory-building exercise can accomplish under these conditions is threefold. It can impose consistency on an existing qualitative record by requiring that the same questions be put to every case, which Section 1.4 specifies and Section 8.9 tabulates. It can generate propositions precise enough for later work to check, which the falsification conditions of Section 10.1 state. And it can identify the specific evidence whose absence prevents checking, which Section 10.2 lists as a research priority. What it cannot do is treat congruence across eleven purposively selected cases as confirmation, and no claim in this article should be read as doing so. This is a limitation of the field rather than of this article alone, but it constrains this article fully.

Generational and media transformation. The displacement of scholarly authority by media authority, through satellite television and latterly social media platforms, has altered the structure of religious authority in ways the institutional analysis developed here captures imperfectly. Schulz (2012) and Hirschkind (2006) document the reconstitution of religious publics through media; the implications for accountability structures, which the model treats as central, are substantial and insufficiently theorised.

Symmetry and evaluation. The framework is descriptively symmetrical, explaining regressive and progressive outcomes with the same three variables, while the assessment of those outcomes is normatively asymmetrical, treating capability expansion for the least advantaged as better than its contraction. A reader may reasonably ask whether these commitments are consistent. They are, because they operate at different levels: the model explains why a configuration produced the outcome it did, and the standard judges whether that outcome was good. Nothing in the explanation entails the evaluation, and the evaluation does no work in generating the explanation. The risk the objection correctly identifies is a practical one rather than a logical one, namely that an analyst who knows in advance which outcomes they approve of may unconsciously score the variables to fit. Section 8.9 exists partly to guard against this: by tabulating the scoring separately from the narrative, it allows a reader who disputes the evaluation to inspect whether the configurational reading was bent to serve it.

The normative standard. The assessment of outcomes throughout this article rests on the evaluative standard specified in Section 3.4, capability expansion for the least advantaged, which is one defensible standard among several. Readers working from a standard emphasising communal integrity, doctrinal fidelity or aggregate growth would reach different conclusions from the same evidence. The standard is stated rather than assumed so that the disagreement can be conducted openly.

10. Discussion: The Conditional Architecture of Transformation

Drawing the analysis together, four conditioning factors emerge as consistently associated with transformative rather than extractive or symbolic outcomes across the cases examined.

Credible and institutionally anchored religious leadership. Where religious authority derives from recognised scholarly competence and communal standing rather than from state appointment or armed force, it possesses the legitimacy required to authorise change and the accountability required to constrain abuse. Morocco's *Mudawwana* reform succeeded because it was articulated by authority recognised as religiously legitimate; Sudan's state-administered Islamism failed because it was not.

Formal institutional channels linking religious and political authority. Where such channels exist, as in Senegal's negotiated accommodation, Somaliland's Guurti and Morocco's *'ulamā'* councils, religious claims are processed through procedures with predictable outcomes. Where they are absent, religious mobilisation must occur outside institutional structure, with results ranging from marginalisation to armed contestation.

Political pluralism and associational freedom. Every case of substantive transformation examined here occurred in a context permitting association, argument and the public contestation of interpretation. Every case of capture occurred where that context was foreclosed. The relationship holds across cases differing widely in doctrinal orientation, from Sufi-dominated Senegal to Salafi-influenced northern Nigeria, which is strong evidence that it is a property of the political variable rather than of religious content.

Tolerance for internal religious diversity. The capacity of Sufi, reformist, Salafi and traditionalist orientations to coexist and contest interpretation through peaceful scholarly and civic means is strongly associated with resilience against extremist capture. Internal pluralism is not a threat to religious authority but a condition of its accountability.

Viewed comparatively, these four factors explain the divergence between Senegal's stable and economically productive Sufi-state accommodation and southern Somalia's fragmented and

violently contested landscape; between Somaliland's hybrid settlement and its southern neighbour's collapse; between Morocco's reformist family-law transformation and Sudan's coercive Islamisation. Both members of each pair draw on deep and genuinely African Islamic institutional traditions. They differ in the four conditions specified.

10.1 Reading the Conditions Against the Cases

The strength of this claim depends on whether the four factors do discriminate work across Table 2, and it is worth stating precisely where they do and where they do not.

The factors perform strongest on the paired comparisons. Somaliland and southern Somalia share doctrine, language, juristic school and clan structure, and differ on three of the four factors: Somaliland possesses institutional channels linking religious, customary and constitutional authority through the Borama settlement and the Guurti, retains a functioning scholarly ecosystem, and operates within a negotiated political order (Bradbury, 2008; Renders, 2012; Walls, 2014). Southern Somalia possesses none of these, and its outcome is correspondingly regressive (Menkhaus, 2007; Le Sage, 2005). Because the doctrinal variable is held effectively constant, this pairing carries more evidential weight than any other in the article.

Morocco and Sudan perform a second controlled function. Both fused religious authority with state power; both pursued explicitly Islamic legal projects; both operated under closed political conditions. They differ decisively on the first factor. Morocco's *Mudawwana* reform was articulated through '*ulamā*' councils and a monarchy whose religious legitimacy was independently recognised, and was justified in *maqāṣid* terms that religious scholars could contest on their own ground (Zeghal, 2008). Sudan's Islamism was articulated through a security apparatus whose religious authority derived from its control of the state, and its most consequential internal critic was executed (Warburg, 2003; El-Affendi, 1991). The outcomes diverge as the model predicts: substantive capability expansion in the first case, extraction in the second.

The factors perform weakest on Kenya and Tanzania, and this should be conceded rather than obscured. Both display a broadly pluralist political context, associational religious life and an intact scholarly ecosystem, yet outcomes are mixed rather than transformative. The model explains that the second factor is largely absent, since Muslim minorities lack formal channels into national institutions and the *kadhi* court question remains constitutionally unresolved (Ndzovu, 2014; Oded, 2000). That explanation is plausible but is not independently tested here, and an alternative account emphasising minority demographic position rather than institutional channel would fit the same evidence. The case therefore constrains rather than confirms the model.

Two further limits deserve statement. Tunisia demonstrates that the political variable is a continuing rather than a one-off condition: the same interpretive content and institutional form that produced a democratic settlement after 2011 produced no comparable outcome once the political context closed after 2021, which means the model predicts trajectories only for as long as the configuration holds. And Senegal shows that the four factors can be jointly satisfied while the transformation criteria of Section 3.4 are only partly met, since the accommodation delivers durability and institutional channels without clearly satisfying the distributional criterion (Cruise O'Brien, 1971; Villalón, 1995). Stability is not transformation, and the model does not currently distinguish the two as sharply as the definition in Section 3 requires.

The gender dimension of the case assessments. The outcome column of Table 2 records an aggregate judgement, and Section 6.5 establishes why that aggregation requires qualification. If differential legal capacity violates the bounded distributional criterion to a degree varying with administration, available alternatives and contestability, then the cases should be assessed on that dimension separately, and doing so changes several of the readings.

Morocco is the clearest positive and is strengthened by the disaggregation rather than weakened: The *Mudawwana* reform altered marriage, divorce and guardianship provisions in a direction the criterion registers, and did so through justification in *maqāṣid* terms that made the change contestable on religious grounds rather than imposed over them (Zeghal, 2008). Sudan is the clearest negative, since the same fusion of religious and state authority that produced extraction generally also foreclosed the internal contestation through which family-law provision might have been revised. Tunisia's assessment is unaffected in direction and reduced in magnitude, since its personal-status provisions predate the period examined.

Three assessments require more substantial revision. Somaliland is coded transformative on the aggregate, and the coding holds for the constitutional and conflict dimensions; but the hybrid settlement that produced it seated customary authority in the Guurti, and customary standing in Somali deliberation is distributed by age, lineage and sex in ways that Section 4.3 identifies as the restricted rather than the moderate form of communitarian norm. The settlement's achievement and its gender limitation have the same institutional source. Senegal, already noted as satisfying the conditioning factors while failing the distributional criterion, fails it more clearly when gender is separated, since the *ṭuruq*'s hierarchical structure concentrates interpretive standing among men. And Nigeria's *sharī'a* implementation, coded symbolic in aggregate, was not symbolic in its gendered application: enforcement fell disproportionately on women and the poor, which is a substantive rather than a symbolic outcome in the direction the criterion counts as regressive (Ostien, 2007).

Two implications follow. The first is that an aggregate outcome scoring can conceal divergence between dimensions, and Table 2 should be read as a summary of the configurational argument rather than as a complete assessment. The second is more consequential for the framework: the cases where gender assessment diverges most sharply from the aggregate are those where transformation was achieved through institutional forms with high coordinating capacity and restricted standing, which is precisely the configuration Section 7 identifies as vulnerable. The gender evidence therefore does not sit outside the model as an ethical qualification appended to it; it independently corroborates the accountability argument, since the cases that expand capabilities on one dimension while contracting them on another are the cases in which those affected lacked standing to contest.

What would disconfirm the model? Three observations would. A case in which purposive-reformist interpretation, accountable institutional form and open political context coincided and nonetheless produced extractive or exclusionary outcomes would falsify the conjunction. A case in which restrictive interpretation channelled through unaccountable institutions in a closed political context nonetheless produced durable capability expansion for the marginalised would falsify the symmetry claim. And a demonstration that internal religious pluralism was systematically higher in the settings where extremist capture proceeded furthest would falsify the argument of Section 7. None of the eleven cases examined here presents any of the three, but eleven purposively selected cases cannot establish that none exists, and the model should be regarded as surviving rather than as confirmed.

Three implications follow. For scholarship, the analysis directs attention away from doctrinal exegesis and toward comparative institutional research designs capable of isolating these

conditions, and toward the construction of the systematic evidence base whose absence Section 9 identifies. For policy, it suggests that external actors engaging Islamic institutions in Africa will achieve more durable outcomes by investing in the autonomous capacity and credibility of religious institutions than by treating religious actors as either uniformly suspect security risks or uniformly reliable delivery partners; and that engagement which compromises the perceived autonomy of religious authority destroys the resource it seeks to mobilise. For African religious communities themselves, the analysis underscores that the primary mechanism through which transformative potential is realised is internal: scholarship, institutional development, accountability structure and the maintenance of the internal pluralism within which interpretation is contested. Section 7 suggests, further, that the most consequential of these is the preservation of the conditions under which interpretation can be contested, since it is contestation, rather than any particular doctrinal settlement, that holds religious authority accountable and thereby keeps its transformative capacity available.

10.2 Operationalising the Implications by Actor

The implications above are stated at a level of generality that makes them difficult to act on, and the four conditioning factors permit something more specific. What follows differentiates by actor type, and states in each case the observable indicator by which the factor may be assessed and the intervention it recommends against as well as those it recommends.

For states with substantial Muslim populations. The relevant factor is the second, the presence of formal channels. The indicator is whether religious claims have a procedural route into policy with predictable outcomes: a functioning *kadhi* or *shari'a* court jurisdiction with settled appellate relations, statutory recognition of religious bodies with defined competences, or constitutional provision of the kind negotiated at Borama in 1993, where customary elders were seated in a second chamber with defined legislative competence rather than consulted informally. The Kenyan *kadhi* court provisions retained in the 2010 constitution illustrate the partial case: a route exists, but its jurisdictional boundaries remain contested, so claims enter the system without predictable outcomes. Where such routes are absent, the recommendation is to construct them; where present but captured, to restore their independence. The strong contrary recommendation follows from Section 7.3: states should not attempt to determine the interpretive content of religious authority, whether by appointing scholars aligned to a preferred theology, licensing preachers by orientation, or promoting one current against another. The Ethiopian protests of 2011–2013 and the credibility deficit of official religious institutions across the cases examined indicate that such attempts politicise what they intend to depoliticise.

For external and donor actors. The relevant factor is the first: credible and institutionally anchored leadership, and the operative constraint is that credibility is destroyed by the appearance of instrumentalisation. The indicator is whether a partner institution's authority would survive the withdrawal of external funding and public knowledge of the relationship. Where it would not, the partnership is extracting credibility rather than building capacity. The recommendation is to fund institutional infrastructure whose outputs the funder does not specify, and to accept that outcomes will not be attributable to the funder within a reporting cycle. Manuscript conservation of the kind undertaken for the Timbuktu collections is the clearest instance: it builds scholarly capacity and institutional standing, produces no attributable behavioural outcome, and would not survive a results framework requiring one. Endowed teaching posts, library acquisition budgets and institution-controlled curriculum development share the same profile. Message-delivery contracting sits at the opposite pole, and the evidence assembled in Sections 6.4 and 8 indicates it damages the credibility of participating scholars without measurable security benefit. The contrary recommendation is

that counter-messaging contracts with religious authorities should be discontinued, since the evidence assembled in Sections 6.4 and 8 indicates they damage the credibility of participating scholars without measurable security benefit.

For religious institutions. The relevant factor is the fourth, tolerance of internal diversity, and the argument of Section 7 implies a course that is uncomfortable for institutional leadership: the maintenance of rival currents' capacity to contest interpretation publicly is a condition of the institution's own accountability and of its resilience against extremist claimants. The indicator is whether disagreement is conducted through recognised scholarly channels or driven into private circulation. The public refutation of jihadist claims by Nigerian Salafi scholars, examined in Section 8.1, is the instructive case: it was effective precisely because it came from scholars whose textual orientation the target audience already respected, which no state body and no external actor could have supplied. Where the second obtains, the conditions that allow an unaccountable claimant to present himself as the sole authentic voice are being assembled. The related recommendation, following Section 7.4, is that institutions with scholarly standing but no mediated presence are ceding a domain in which the accountability mechanisms they rely upon do not currently operate.

For researchers. The relevant requirement is evidentiary rather than institutional, and it is specified in Section 9. The three most consequential gaps are the absence of any reliable estimate of *zakāt* flows at national scale, the absence of a census of *awqāf* holdings and their governance arrangements, and the absence of audience-level evidence on where populations seek religious guidance of different kinds. The first two are tractable through national survey instruments and registry work; the third requires the design set out in Section 7.4. Until these exist, claims about the developmental performance of Islamic economic institutions in Africa should be framed as hypotheses rather than findings, including in this article.

11. Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between Islamic traditions and social transformation across Africa, and has advanced three connected contributions.

Conceptually, it has constructed a unified definition of social transformation as *reconstitution*, built from a genealogy in which Khaldūnian social science and the Islamic reformist tradition of *iṣlāḥ* and *tajdīd* stand alongside the European lineages rather than beneath them. The definition specifies six constitutive elements and resolves three contradictions that existing usages inherit unresolved: between direction and cycle, between a standard located in a recoverable past and one located in an unrealised future, and between expansion and preservation as evaluative criteria. It is designed to be usable across confessional and secular research traditions, and thereby to permit the comparative accumulation the field currently lacks.

Theoretically, it has proposed a conditional mobilisation framework locating the transformative potential of religious tradition not in doctrine but in the interaction of interpretive content, institutional form and political opportunity structure. The framework is symmetrical, explaining regressive and progressive outcomes with the same variables, and falsifiable, generating testable predictions about divergence and convergence across cases. The Somali comparison, in which two societies sharing doctrine, language and clan organisation diverge radically in outcome, provides the framework's clearest empirical vindication.

Substantively, it has established that the internal pluralism of African Muslim communities constitutes the principal mechanism by which religious authority is held accountable, and has

specified the three processes currently eroding it: state bureaucratisation, the displacement of scholarly by media authority, and generational and spatial dislocation. This finding carries the article's sharpest policy implication, since it establishes that the suppression of internal religious contestation destroys the resource on which resistance to extremist capture depends.

Islamic traditions in Africa are therefore neither an obstacle to nor a guarantor of social transformation. They constitute a historically deep, institutionally embedded and internally plural resource whose transformative capacity is activated under specifiable conditions and foreclosed under others. Those conditions have been identified, and they are institutional and political rather than doctrinal, which is to say that they are amenable to deliberate construction.

The framework is offered as a research instrument rather than as a result. It organises a qualitative record that has accumulated without a common analytical vocabulary, states its coding rules so that its judgements can be disputed specifically, and specifies the observations that would show it to be wrong. Whether it survives contact with systematic evidence is a question this article cannot answer and has been written to make answerable. Future research would accordingly benefit from comparative investigation of the four conditioning factors identified in Section 10 and, more urgently, from the construction of the quantitative evidence base whose absence currently constrains the entire field. Such research would contribute not only to African studies and Islamic studies, but to the interdisciplinary study of religion and development, in which the African experience remains, relative to its scale and its analytical richness, substantially under-integrated into global scholarly debate.

For practitioners, the analysis yields a simple orientation with demanding implications: engagement with religious traditions in Africa supports social transformation when it treats African religious communities as bearers of sophisticated and internally contested intellectual traditions possessing genuine agency over their own reform, rather than as passive recipients of external programming or as undifferentiated risks to be managed. The historical record surveyed here, from the scholarly cities of the medieval Sahel to the reformist movements shaping contemporary governance, education and peacebuilding, offers substantial grounds for confidence in that agency. Recognising and reinforcing it, rather than substituting for it, is the central practical implication this article offers.

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Table 1. Glossary of terms

Term	Literally	What it means in this article
<i>sharī‘a</i>	the path	The divinely given moral and legal order as Muslims understand it. Crucially, it is not a written code that can be looked up; it is the ideal that human interpretation tries to reach.
<i>fiqh</i>	understanding	The body of law that human scholars have actually produced by interpreting the sources. The distinction from <i>sharī‘a</i> matters enormously: what humans made, humans can revise.
<i>maqāṣid al-sharī‘a</i>	the purposes of the path	The higher objectives the law is meant to serve — protecting religion, life, intellect, family and property. Reformers use it to argue from purpose rather than precedent: if a ruling no longer serves its purpose, the ruling is questionable.
<i>maṣlaḥa</i>	benefit	Public interest, as a recognised ground for legal reasoning.
<i>‘urf / ‘amal</i>	custom/practice	Established local practice, which Islamic law can absorb and treat as binding. This is the formal mechanism by which Islam became African rather than remaining foreign.
<i>iṣlāḥ</i>	repair	Setting right what has decayed. Closer to restoration than to reform in the modern progressive sense.
<i>tajdīd</i>	renewal	The periodic revival of religious practice believed to have grown lax. Together with <i>iṣlāḥ</i> it forms the tradition’s own theory of social change.
<i>fasād</i>	corruption	Corruption or ruin in the social order — the condition that <i>iṣlāḥ</i> responds to.
<i>ṣalāḥ</i>	soundness	The opposite of <i>fasād</i> : a social order functioning as it should.
<i>‘aṣabiyya</i>	group feeling	The solidarity binding a group tightly enough to act together and hold power. Ibn Khaldūn’s central concept: it builds states, then erodes as they grow comfortable.
<i>‘umrān</i>	civilisation	Social organisation as an object of systematic study — in effect, Ibn Khaldūn’s name for sociology, four centuries before the word existed.
<i>ḥisba</i>	accountability	The duty to encourage right conduct and discourage wrong. Its distinctive feature is that it falls on every capable member of the community, not on clergy or officials.
<i>amāna</i>	trust	Authority understood as something held on behalf of others and answerable to them, rather than owned. Comparable to fiduciary duty in English law.
<i>‘adl / iḥsān</i>	justice / excellence	The tradition’s twin ethical standards: <i>‘adl</i> sets the floor of what is owed, <i>iḥsān</i> the aspiration beyond it.
<i>shūrā</i>	consultation	Collective deliberation before a decision. Central to arguments that Islamic tradition supports participatory government.
<i>zakāt</i>	purification	The obligatory annual payment on wealth, one of the five pillars of Islam. Unlike almsgiving, it is framed in law as the recipient’s <i>right</i> , not the donor’s generosity — closer to a tax than to charity.
<i>ṣadaqa</i>	giving	Voluntary charity, over and above <i>zakāt</i> .
<i>ḥaqq</i>	right	An entitlement that can be claimed, as distinct from a favour that may be granted.

Term	Literally	What it means in this article
<i>waqf</i> <i>awqāf</i> (pl.)	detention	A permanent endowment: property locked away so its income funds a mosque, school, hospital or the poor in perpetuity. Broadly comparable to a charitable trust.
<i>ṣukūk</i>	certificates	Financial instruments structured to comply with the prohibition on interest; often described as Islamic bonds.
<i>muḍāraba</i> / <i>mushāraka</i>	partnership forms	Contracts in which financier and entrepreneur share profit and loss instead of charging interest.
<i>‘ulamā’</i>	the learned	Religious scholars. They hold no ordination and no formal office; their authority rests on recognised learning and can be withdrawn by the community.
<i>mujtahid</i>	one who strives	A scholar qualified to derive rulings independently from the sources.
<i>ikhtilāf</i>	difference	Recorded scholarly disagreement, preserved rather than resolved. Islamic legal tradition treats sustained disagreement as normal, not as a defect.
<i>qāḍī</i> (Swahili <i>kadhi</i>)	judge	A judge applying Islamic law, particularly in family matters.
<i>madrasa</i> / <i>ḥalqa</i> / <i>dāra</i>	school / circle / lodging	Institutions of Islamic learning: the formal school, the teaching circle, and the West African residential Qur’ānic school.
<i>ṭarīqa</i> (pl.) <i>ṭuruq</i>	way, path	A Sufi order — an organised spiritual brotherhood with a leader, a lineage and often substantial economic and political weight.
<i>jihād</i>	striving	Effort in the path of God. It covers personal moral struggle as well as armed conflict; in this article it refers to the nineteenth-century movements that founded states in West Africa.
<i>hijra</i>	migration	Departure from hostility to safety, after the Prophet’s move from Mecca to Medina. The first <i>hijra</i> was to Christian Ethiopia.
<i>ṣulḥ</i> / <i>taḥkīm</i>	settlement arbitration	/ Procedures for resolving disputes by restoring relationships rather than assigning blame.
<i>diya</i>	compensation	Payment made to an injured party or their kin in place of retaliation.
<i>Ajami</i>	foreign	African languages written in Arabic script — the medium of a large and long-overlooked written literature.
<i>xeer</i> (Somali)	custom	The Somali customary legal order, operating alongside Islamic and state law.
<i>harambee</i> (Swahili)	pulling together	Kenyan practice of collective self-help fundraising.