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Community, Contemporaneity, and Change in African Masjids

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A review of Michelle Moore Apotsos, *The Masjid in Contemporary Islamic Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, DOI: 10.1017/9781108573931.

The review offers readers a rare look at the contemporary trends and diversity in building traditions, community usages, and spiritual practices of African Muslims and their masjids. Challenging the conventional notion of the masjid as simply a place for prostration and prayer, Apotsos instead gives a novel interpretive approach by analyzing a range of masjids and their multifarious operational and symbolic functions among Muslim congregations in South Africa, Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal, and Tanzania.

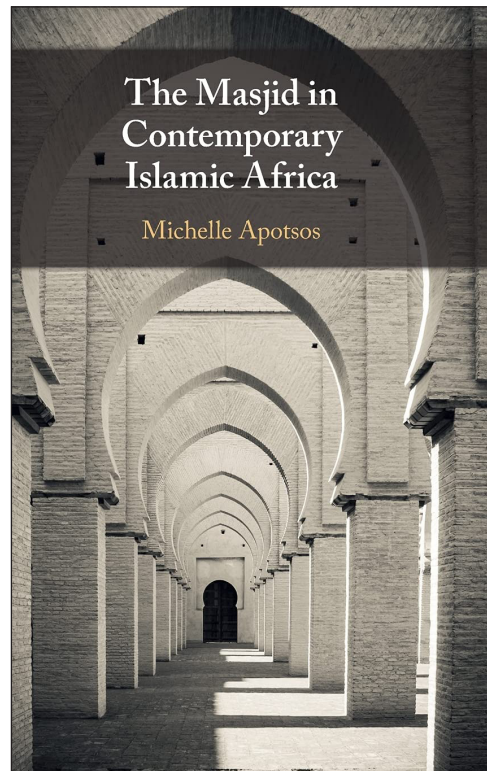
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One peculiar, provocative descriptor that recurs and starkly juts out in Michelle Apotsos' brilliant new publication, *The Masjid in Contemporary Islamic Africa* (2021), is 'fossilized'. At the outset, Apotsos justifiably takes umbrage at the antiquated nature of studies on Islamic architecture in Africa, which, in their dry, formalist preoccupations, have a propensity to essentialize and therefore petrify the manifold religious practices of Muslims in Africa, belying their prerogative of temporal and social change while neglecting to acknowledge the cross-cultural, shapeshifting dynamism that is at the heart of Islam's movement and myriad contextual iterations across the continent. Moreover, as Apotsos persuasively illustrates, these studies present African Muslims as marginal to or subservient objects of the faith-based transformations

that happen elsewhere in the world. Instead, she asserts the revisionist project that her work boldly undertakes, in underscoring the agentive spiritual identities of intersectional African Muslims and the ways in which their spatial practices physically and experientially reverberate throughout the global Islamic community.

Apotsos' project is in line with a refreshing new body of scholarship that challenges and ultimately dissolves the artificial 'Saharan'/'Sub-Saharan' divide, a racist colonial construct that continues to ideologically polarize the field of African studies. Taking cues from forerunners like Labelle Prussin or Udo Kultermann, but conscientiously deviating from these mid-20th-century studies, Apotsos is redefining Islamic architectural history in Africa not as some peripheral backwater to Islamic Arabia but as a subfield that needs to be understood rather in Afrocentric terms. Like recent exhibitions on the long-standing, dynamic networks of trans-Saharan trade, such as *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa* (Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 2019) and *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2020), Apotsos' exciting work fundamentally underscores the fluidity, translatability, and movement of faith practices and their spatial formations across the continent and shares intellectual affinities to current scholarship by Nancy Um and Prita Meier, who highlight transregional, cross-cultural exchange.



Working both with and against conventional understandings of mosques as ‘places of prostration’ (from the Arabic term), Apotsos reframes the interpretive scope of the masjid as a ‘trans-Islamic spatial medium’ (xi). To diversify our hermeneutical approaches to the masjid — in and of itself a locus of spirituality, a building typology, an institutional entity — Apotsos focuses on the specific question of how contemporary Muslim communities in Africa are reinventing the site and space of the masjid, while ‘developing unique solutions to the problem of performing identity’ (xi). Her methodological framework is dialogical and follows multidirectional pathways of influence, examining how the masjid

reflects and refracts the events, influences, and interruptions that constitute what it means to be a Muslim located within a particular space, time, and context, and subsequently becomes an archive of the dialogues, encounters, and interactions both past and ongoing that have occurred between multiple social, political, cultural, and spiritual contingents. (xii)

She is attentive to the distinctions across and between African Muslims — their perspectives and habitudes in varying contexts — and recognizes the role that their intersectional identities play in the construction and utilization of spiritual space and in the performativity of spiritual identity in and through spiritual space. With that in mind, Apotsos dwells less on formalist differences of architectural design and more on the ways in which contemporary African masjids are socially used and spatially transformed by the respective communities they serve.

To begin, Apotsos deftly illustrates the historical, religious, and conceptual complexity of the masjid itself. Ambiguity hovers over elements we might assume to be uniform in Islamic architecture. Take, for instance, the mihrab — the sacred niche situated in the qibla wall, orienting congregants toward Mecca — which, linguistically, actually may have Syriac, Hebrew, Ethiopic, or Pahlavi roots. Apotsos prompts us to ponder the presumed synonymousness between a mosque and a masjid — and the unofficial, unsanctified spaces in between where holy rituals and prayers may be practiced — pointing alternatively to the fact that the masjid ‘does not abide by structural boundaries or infrastructures’, though its defining feature is ‘the presence of a performing, ritualized body’ (5). Tracing the origins of the mosque to the Prophet Muhammad’s house, Apotsos lays out the multivalent uses of that space in 7th-century Arabia — as a meeting place, courtroom, shelter, classroom — and thus stresses that a mosque enables a range of activities beyond prostrating prayer. A masjid, by virtue of its being the locus of prayer, is mutable, movable, and ‘only loosely architectonic

in nature' (8). As such, prayer mats are ubiquitous, portable masjids in Islamic Africa and are an important character in Apotsos' story. In the span of a few pages in the introduction, Apotsos offers a broad yet precise overview of Islam's historical presence and movement throughout Africa as well as the political negotiations that the religion has faced and continues to contend with, in various local and global conditions. She emphasizes the intrinsic spirituality of quotidian spaces and their capacity to make meaning in the world through simple interactions:

these conversations are read not in the fossilized monumental mosque structures that decorate guidebooks and architectural history volumes, but emerge in the ephemeral spaces that proliferate in the nooks and crannies of urban spaces during prayer times, in the vehicles that zoom down urban streets, their Islamic decorations waving in the wind as they go, and even the forgotten, ruined spaces of history whose decay somehow still carries charge as a site of memory and performative spirituality. (17)

Some of the innumerable strengths of this book are its theoretical rigor and pliability. Chapter 1 explores notions of intersectionality, and the ways it manifests in the spatial text of the masjid. Here, Apotsos presents three case studies. First is the historical conditions that have excluded Muslim women from participating in masjid congregations in South Africa, and the interventions these women have made in creating spiritual spaces rooted in spiritual equity, like the Open Mosque in Cape Town. The second case study is an examination of the Al-Fitr Foundation, also in Cape Town, which hosts the continent's first LGBTIQ+ Muslim congregation, where faith can be practiced by an already disenfranchised queer Muslim community. The final case study is an investigation of how masjid spaces can be vectors for the destruction of identities, as in the militant attack by the extremist group, Ansar Dine, on Sufi sites in Timbuktu.

Chapter 2 wrestles with the question of contemporary masjids in Islamic Africa vis-à-vis ongoing debates in critical heritage studies, and how such spaces become discursive sites of political contestation and negotiation. Even as a concept grounded in notions of preservation and conservation, heritage is subject to continuous reinvention, which as a process mirrors the masjid's need to perpetually adapt to the communities it serves. Case studies in this chapter are manifold. For the holy city of Harar Jugol in Ethiopia, Apotsos explores the ways in which the masjid structures not just the performative social life of Harar's Muslims but the entire day-to-day functioning of the town. She also examines the legacy of the masjid at the site of New Gurna in Egypt, designed by the acclaimed 20th-century architect Hassan Fathy and his later

transnational application of that concept to a masjid educational center project called Dar al Islam, in Abiquiú, New Mexico. In the last study of the chapter, Apotsos looks at the National Mosque of Ghana in Accra, which received funding from the Turkish government and is built in a manner that echoes the Sultan Ahmed Mosque (Blue Mosque) of Istanbul. Collectively, these studies complexly highlight how notions of heritage can be exogenously transplanted.

Along the theme of preservation, chapter 3 considers the relationship between humanity and nature, and how masjids and Islamic communities are responding to environmental changes. Apotsos discusses the *kramats*, or shrines, surrounding Cape Town and found typically in and around natural formations such as mountains, beaches, or woods. Tanzania's first 'eco-mosque', situated on the fringes of Dar es Salaam, features as a paragon for ecologically friendly community living with a low environmental impact.

Mobility is the final theoretical lens through which the African masjid is read, in chapter 4. Apotsos dares to classify the transport vehicles of Dakar — the *car rapides* — as mobile masjids, due to their performative ornamentation and outward designation as vessels sanctifying their passengers. She probes into the marked but still liminal masjids in African airports, where travellers pray in a 'spiritual space-in-waiting, a mirror of the ephemeral spiritual needs of individual inhabitants in motion and thus existing in a state of constant destabilization' (26). Finally, she interrogates the digital, virtual masjids created by the Senegalese city of Touba, accessible to all beyond its geographical confines.

Taken together, Apotsos has assembled, based on extensive fieldwork, a formidable compilation of contemporary African masjids in their physical, conceptual, and socio-cultural manifestations. Architectural historians, Africanists, and Islamicists alike should assign this text in graduate seminars because it offers fresh perspectives on African Islamic spatial practices and built environments. And yet even as these masjids' material conditions will continue to change — along with their congregations and urban communities — the theoretical, intersectional questions Apotsos raises, of adaptability, heritage construction, sustainability, and mobility, will remain salient analytical criteria for years to come.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

