

Transaction Costs and Islam: Explaining Conversion in Africa

by

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The association between the expansion of trade and conversion to Islam has been noted all over the world. In this paper the author integrates the data from Africa with a transaction costs argument that helps explain the economic logic behind this oft-noted association. The author also considers the case of the recent conversion to Islam by the Orma of East Africa, which fits the general pattern for Africa. (JEL: L 14, O 17, A 14, P 4)

1. Introduction

Africa is remarkably fertile territory for examining religious conversion. There are hundreds of different cultural and social systems, almost all of which have been exposed to Islamic and/or Christian influences, and many of which have converted totally or in part. Some anthropologists and religious scholars have explained conversion or lack of it by looking at the compatibility of indigenous social systems, cosmologies, and ritual behaviors with those of the great proselytizing world religions, especially Islam and Christianity. In contrast, I argue in this paper that the evidence points more to the economic advantages of religious conversion. The empirical data in the paper are restricted to Islamic conversion on the African continent (which now accounts for about twenty-five percent of the population), and some new data from a case study of relatively recent conversion to Islam. Specifically, the case can be made that Islam provided important economic benefits to individuals through the institutional advan-

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tages it afforded in long-distance trade.¹ Economic benefits were of course not the only rewards associated with Islam conversion, nor did economics play a role in all instances of conversion. Further, Islam is merely one of many institutional structures which provide solutions for the institutional problems of trade, but until recent times, it was one of the most available and effective. I propose, therefore, that the economic issues in the African context explain many of the cases of conversion or lack of conversion, the timing of conversion, and the tendency for specific groups or classes of people within societies to convert. Furthermore, it can sometimes explain the preference for Islam over Christianity.

2. Theories of Religious Conversion

Some authors have argued the logic of specific conversions or lack thereof on the basis of cultural, cosmological, and social compatibility (RIGBY [1980], YENGOYAN [1993]). Such arguments have been made to explain why some societies have been so welcoming of Islam or Christianity, while others are uninterested. While there certainly are consistencies between aspects of indigenous African systems and Islam, it is also not difficult to make the opposite case for many societies that have embraced Islam. For example, while there is great variation across African social systems, one did find the following indigenous practices (all of which are inconsistent with Islamic tradition) in large numbers of societies that ultimately converted: matrilineal descent, prominence of women in the public/production arena, widespread use of alcohol in central cultural and social activities, polygyny rates exceeding the maximum Islamic rule of four wives, patrilineal inheritance that excludes women, primogeniture, ancestor worship at the cost of neglecting the deity, absence of divorce, sanctioned pre- and extra-marital sexual relations, and the consumption of blood and pork. Other characteristics of some African societies are not necessarily proscribed by Islam, but have been argued to be incompatible, for example, statelessness (TRIMINGHAM [1962]) and clan exogamy.

Given the vast number of societies in Africa that converted to Islam, in many cases in spite of arguably incompatible social and cultural systems, it makes sense to look elsewhere for an explanation. Turning the question around, one might ask what Islam had to offer that was *so* attractive that people adopted it *in spite* of the high social and cultural costs involved, such as abstinence from

¹ The author sees no contradiction here between her argument and that of KURAN [1997]. The important difference is the baseline. While Kuran compares Islamic economic institutions to those available in the modern West today and finds them wanting in comparison, I compare the institutions of Islam to those available in Africa in earlier historical periods and in remote areas today, where they continue to offer advantages over the alternatives.

alcohol and pre- and extra-marital sex, modification of inheritance systems, descent reckoning, and marriage systems. Such an explanation may exist in the benefits that Islam afforded for exchange, particularly long distance trade, and to those (such as juniors) who were not privileged under pre-existing systems.

The association between the spread of Islam and trade in Africa and elsewhere in the world has been so obvious that almost all scholars make note of it. It is hard to ignore the fact that in Africa, as elsewhere, it was long-distance traders themselves who did much of the converting, and Islam tended to follow the trade routes (GEERTZ [1968, 131], LEWIS [1980, 20], and TRIMINGHAM [1962]). Many scholars have given the association between trade and Islam center stage in their explanation for conversion (see in particular COHEN [1971], HISKETT [1984], LAST [1979], and LEWIS [1980]). However, these authors have not explicitly put the evidence together within a rational choice framework, consistent, for example, with a transaction costs argument. Interestingly, many other scholars completely neglect the economic implications of the connection. The ingenuity of the explanations which account for the association between Islam and trade, while ignoring the economics of trade, is remarkable. One of the most compelling and empirically sound is that of HORTON [1971], [1975].

Horton's thesis, which he refers to as the "Intellectualist Theory," begins with the observation that many indigenous African religious systems had a two-tier cosmology including both the lesser spirits and a supreme being. The lesser spirits were involved more with the local community, while the supreme being was involved more with the world as a whole. For societies with little involvement with the outside world, the lesser spirits got a lot more attention. According to Horton, as societies became drawn more into relations with the outside world, as for example when they became involved in long distance trade, the supreme being became much more significant to them. As exposure to Islam and Christianity often coincided with the increasing exposure to the outside world, these religions found fertile ground, as societies were in the process anyway of "groping toward a more elaborate definition of the supreme being" (HORTON [1975, 220]).

To support his thesis, Horton brings to bear many of the same data I shall use to support my argument. He provides considerable evidence to argue that where trade made inroads in Africa, conversion soon followed. Thus, he can account for the timing of conversion among societies long exposed to Islam. This represents a significant advance over cultural compatibility arguments that cannot account for the eventual conversion of long-resistant societies. What is more, in many cases Horton demonstrates that the societies with the most involvement in trade (often the centralized states of West Africa) had the highest rates of conversion, and further, that the individuals most involved in trade (elites and youths) were the first to convert. Indeed, the predictions of the economic thesis and Horton's thesis are so similar that it is difficult to differentiate the two; both predict increasing conversion with exposure to trade – one for economic benefit, and Horton's for "psychic" relief in the face of worldly

forces. One weakness of Horton's perspective, however, is its inability to predict conversion to Islam as opposed to Christianity. Both Islam and Christianity emphasize the supreme deity, and in many cases both were equally accessible. Horton's thesis also provides no explanation for the "supply" of religion, or rather, the motivation of the proselytizers. In the final section of the paper I shall present the evidence from a recent case study of Islamic conversion that helps us address these latter issues, and thus differentiate between Horton's thesis and the economic alternative. But before proceeding to the differences, I present a more detailed discussion of the economic argument.

3. The Advantages Islam Offered to Trade in West Africa

It is striking that throughout most of the history of Islamic expansion in Africa there were relatively few military or political conversions (LEVITZION [1979, 6]). Conversion to Islam was primarily voluntary. This is consistent with the argument that individuals found it in their interest to convert, and particularly in their economic interest to do so. Islam afforded many institutional advantages for trade. As COHEN [1971, 278] puts it "[Islam is a] blue-print of a politico-economic organization which has overcome the many basic technical problems of the trade. Indigenous traders become Moslems in order to partake in the moral community of other traders." Arguably, this in turn made trade more profitable and contributed to its expansion. HISKETT [1984, 82f.] describes the process of conversion among the Hausa this way.

"It was easier to trade and to travel as a Muslim than as a polytheist; the Muslim chief was disposed to give greater privileges to Muslims than to non-Muslims; it was more convenient to wear Islamic dress and conform to Islamic custom than to remain the odd man out when so many others were converting – these and many similar motives must have played their part in setting the trend towards adopting Islam. This is not to suggest that such conversions were insincere; there is not necessarily any conflict between sincerity and expediency."

Islam provided an immediate link to the commercial centers of North Africa and via them to the rest of the world. Islam brought a common language of trade (Arabic), a monetary system, an accounting system, and a legal code to adjudicate financial contracts and disputes. In social and legal terms, Islam provided a way of making outsiders, insiders. By providing a legal structure binding upon individuals of different ethnic groups with otherwise non-binding institutional structures, it greatly expanded the size of potential trading networks. All of the above provided an improved institutional structure in which trade could take place (see RODINSON [1973], and UDOVITCH [1970] for a detailed discussion of the advantage Islam had to offer for trade).

The fact that Islam was also a religion and not merely a set of secular institutions further reduced the transaction costs of exchange. Islam was a

powerful ideology with built-in sanctions which contributed to considerable self-enforcement of contracts. True believers had a non-material interest in holding to the terms of contracts even if the opportunity presented itself to shirk. All of this resulted in lower transaction costs associated with doing business among fellow Muslims, despite the enormous transportation and information costs involved, given the incredibly long distances and cultural barriers to be traversed across the Sahara and the rest of the continent.

Conservative estimates place the first contact between Islam and West Africa in the eighth century (CLARKE [1982, 8]). At this time Islam began expansion along the trans-Saharan trade routes from North Africa. Long-distance trade did not, however, begin with the Islamic expansion. The archaeological evidence from Timbuktu and Jenne is quite clear in establishing that long-distance trade in West Africa predated the arrival of Islam (Adria Laviolette, personal communication). This evidence is not inconsistent with the thesis that Islam facilitated the intensification of trade to a substantial degree. It is most likely that pre-Islamic trade was largely direct exchange (i.e. did not involve credit) and probably was not of sufficient volume to jeopardize subsistence if the trade was cut off. Both credit systems and dependence upon trade for subsistence would have necessitated more secure institutional structures to guarantee the trade than existed in West Africa at that time. It is exactly these benefits which Islam could provide, thus allowing the development of more intense trade, and levels of specialization heretofore not realized.

One can differentiate three periods of Islamic conversion in the history of West Africa. First is the conversion of North Africa in the seventh century. Much of this was a military conversion and beyond the concerns of this paper. Similarly, there were many Jihads, or Holy Wars, in the nineteenth century all across Africa. While one could make the argument that some of these military and political conversions also served mercantile interests (HORTON [1975, 387]) or were fought to keep trade routes open,² it is also likely that entirely different political and psychic interests may have been behind these conversions. This paper is restricted to an analysis of voluntary conversions, which took place on a massive scale over the whole of West Africa and many parts of East Africa, from the eleventh century.

It is significant that initially Islam spread in more complex societies – states and chiefdoms – and not in stateless societies. This is consistent with the thesis proposed here, because states and chiefdoms by definition have more surplus with which to trade than do stateless societies. They therefore stood to gain a

² TRIULZI [1975, 60] provides evidence of Jihads which served economic and trade purposes. Similarly, FUGLESTAD [1978] discusses the case of the Fulani Jihad. He interprets this as a dispute between the trading element and priest-chiefs for control of kingship. He argues that the King needed to get rid of priest-chiefs who competed with him for power and one solution was to declare a universal religion and convert all subjects so as to reduce the competition from the existing dualistic institutional structure.

great deal more from the benefits of trade. Not surprisingly, all of the north Sudan states (except the Mossi) adopted Islam early on and thereby strengthened their commercial links with North Africa (LEVIZION [1979, 210], TRIMINGHAM [1962, 37]). Commercial towns were especially attracted to Islam (TRIMINGHAM [1962, 31]). TRIULZI [1975, 59f.] describes this process of conversion as it developed among the Bertha region west of the Blue Nile.

"If the traders opened up the region commercially, they also brought a non-purchasable commodity, Islam, which was to assume an increasingly important role in local society. ... At first the traders, though openly professing their religion, refrained from making converts. They had come for trade only and 'they could not have time for marketing as well as preaching.' Yet, after they had settled for some time, the desire to educate their half-Bertha children and, one may add, to introduce the commercial aspect of the *Shari'a* code of law, created the need for fresh conversions."

Until the Jihads of the nineteenth century, few African societies underwent whole-scale conversion to Islam. Frequently it was only the rulers, the merchant classes, and the townspeople who converted, and not the vast majority of the populous (TRIMINGHAM [1962, 28], LEVIZION [1979, 207], CLARKE [1982, 28]). Given that the elite controlled the trade goods of the period (primarily gold, ivory, and slaves), it follows that they would have had the most to gain from conversion if Islam offered advantages for trade. Later, as trade involved more and more commoners and subsistence commodities, it is consistent with the economic perspective that more large-scale conversions of the populace would take place. This is indeed what occurred over much of Africa in the nineteenth century, as trade expanded downward in the social hierarchy and involved an ever expanding variety of commodities, including subsistence goods and not just luxury items.

There are many examples of societies which spread Islam and its financial institutions through a "commercial diaspora" across Africa (see GOODY [1954] on the Dyula, and COHEN [1969] on the Hausa). The Muslim Songhay dominated West African trade from the late fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Among other things, the Wangara, or Songhay merchants, spread the Songhay monetary system based upon gold and cowries throughout a very large area including Hausaland (LOVEJOY [1978, 181]).

Perhaps one of the most important institutions spread through the trading diaspora's was the Muslim *commenda*. *Commenda* arrangements allow for the use of long distance agents, and have elsewhere been documented to afford great efficiencies in exchange (see GREIF [1989]). The widespread use of the *commenda* for long-distance trade in West Africa greatly facilitated the intensification of trade by increasing specialization and relaxing the binding constraints of engaging in barter, or direct exchange of equivalently valued goods. PERINBAM [1980, 465f.] describes the manner in which *commenda* was practiced in Islamic communities.

"It enabled an investor or group of investors to entrust capital or merchandise to an agent-manager, who traded with it and returned the principal and previously agreed-upon share of profits to the investor. The agent received the remaining share of the profits as a reward for his time and labor... The *commenda*, which combined the advantages of an loan with those of partnership, was a contract which regulated the use of capital, trading skills, and labor for mutual profit."

The *commenda* and other Islamic credit systems were widely used and had a profound effect upon the level of trade in Africa. Citing two early sources, PERINBAM [1980, 464f.] describes the ease with which credit was managed among fellow Muslims in pre-colonial West Africa.

"If Valentim Fernandes is correct, credit was sometimes given for a year, without collateral, witnesses, or any written statement (FERNANDES [1938, 87]). DUBOIS [1897, 301 f.] reports that the period could sometimes be extended to two or three years, and if the jula never return 'it [was]... less by dishonesty than by wars and insecurity of routes.' If he died before meeting his debts, his relatives would honor them."

As credit contracts and partnerships such as the *commenda* facilitated the expansion of trade into new areas, long distance traders could no longer cope on their own and needed to leave behind their own agents who would deal on their behalf. Thus developed a chain of middlemen, with the pressure always building on those at the bottom of the chain to convert in order to move up in the chain. LAST [1979, 239f.] provides a clear illustration of how this process functioned.

"I suggest that if one draws a graph to show the growth of a trader's turnover for a number of years, there is a point on the graph where the size of the turnover is such that the trader must convert to Islam in order to maintain or increase the initial rate of growth. Hausa trade is essentially dependent on networks. Growth depends on the number of trading friends, not on the cheapness, necessarily, of one's wares and the number of new customers one can thus attract. 'Friends' are those to whom one gives goods on credit – in effect those to whom you can give capital. The more creditors one has, the greater the turnover – and the greater the profit to one's own creditors."

The amount of credit extended by some of these agents was considerable, and lends support to the argument that Islam provided a strong institutional framework that served to back up these contracts. For such a system to work, however, it was essential that people build "reputations" for trustworthiness and demonstrate that they were indeed true adherents to the faith upon which these institutions rested. Some means of demonstrating one's commitment to the institution, therefore, was beneficial in establishing a reputation. IANNACCONE's [1992] work on the role of high initiation costs applies here. The higher the costs paid for participation in the network, the more free-riders are excluded, thus reducing transaction costs for those who remain in good standing. In addition to prayer, the giving up of alcohol and fasting during Ramadan were

two clear symbols of commitment one could demonstrate on a regular basis. As the credit stakes grew, however, more might be demanded. LAST [1979, 241] provides an illustration of the manner in which one established such a reputation through pilgrimage.

“To mark his entry or, as often, to make his claim to entry into a bigger network, the trader is likely to go on the pilgrimage, an investment of at least \$200. Some of it may be recouped by profits from merchandise brought back from Mecca, but the \$200 can, I think, be seen as an investment with a good return; it is not so much conspicuous consumption but rather a kind of membership fee to an ostensibly religious club – but a club that controls a trader’s credit rating. Now that more and more traders can claim the title of *Alhaji* (pilgrim), further acts of piety like building mosques or funding others’ pilgrimages are required. Religious status, then is important in trade at other levels than merely that of the new convert who is starting to trade; it is seen not merely as the socially sanctioned goal that justified the accumulation of wealth, but also as the *cause* of the successful accumulation, and continued accumulation, of that wealth.”

One way of accessing the advantages which Islam offered to trade is to take a look at some examples of African trade in the absence of Islam. If the economic thesis is correct, one would predict that without Islam or some equivalently effective institutional structure, the transaction costs of exchange would be considerably higher. Credit would either be absent because the risks involved due to lack of institutional guarantees would make it prohibitively expensive, or the high costs of credit would add substantially to the costs of trade. In either case one would not expect trade to develop to nearly the levels realized where credit was extended at low cost, such as among the Muslim trading diaspora’s of West Africa.

4. African Trade Without the Institutions of Islam

Two examples, one from West Africa and one from East Africa, illustrate the problems of long-distance trade in the absence of Islamic institutions. NEWBURY [1972] discusses the use of credit in early nineteenth century West African trade. At the turn of the nineteenth century African coastal trade with Europe was booming. In his paper he discusses how trade was organized in Africa in the absence of banking institutions. The quantities of trade goods coming into the coastal ports increased considerably at this time (by factors of three to fifty) and resulted in the need for and development of new means to handle the increased volume. NEWBURY [1972, 82] argues that the standard ship-to-shore barter with immediate payment in kind was no longer adequate to cope. A variety of credit systems were developed with local African and European importers. Despite the fact that the European governments extended their consular jurisdiction over these ports specifically because large quantities of credit were now at stake, credit abuses still got out of hand and the courts were overrun with debt

litigation. The credit systems eventually became too costly to support and were replaced by the use of paid agents, a reflection that the transaction costs involved in credit extension were sufficiently high to cover the fees now necessitated by a new salaried class of middlemen.

The situation in East Africa was considerably different from that in West Africa, and given the fact that Islam never made serious inroads into the interior, it bears comparison. Relative to what was going on in West Africa, it is fair to say that in what are today Kenya and Tanzania there was limited interior penetration by either coastal traders or Islam until the 1820s. The lack of well organized state societies may certainly have played a part in the relatively low volume of trade. The fact that most of Kenya and Tanzania were originally bypassed by the Muslim traders even as they approached the further inland kingdoms of southern Ethiopia and Uganda is probably not accidental.

The relatively lower level of trade on the East African coast may also have stemmed from the fact that long-term credit became more available to the coastal Zanzibari merchants only in the 1820s and 1830s (ODED [1974, 26]). The availability of long-term credit almost certainly would have led to the expansion of trade, and may account for the timing of the first Arab inland trade in 1831 (ODED [1974, 25]). At this time the Ugandan empires were contacted and the King (Kabaka) of the Buganda was converted to Islam. The availability of easier credit would have increased the volume of trade well beyond what had been possible through barter exchange at the coast and resulted in the need to develop new sources of supply for trade goods. One of the major export items, ivory, was by this time growing scarce near the coast, and it now paid to develop more distant suppliers (ODED [1974, 27]). The choice of the Ugandan kingdoms over far nearer sources of ivory is explained both by the the low prices available there and the relative ease of dealing with a centralized authority rather than innumerable petty traders from stateless societies, which might have resulted in far higher transaction costs. BEACHEY [1967, 275] exactly makes this point in explaining why Uganda was a desirable source.

"Bargaining for ivory required infinite patience. In some countries, such as Buganda, Bunyoro and Ankole [three Ugandan kingdoms], the ivory trade was largely controlled by the ruler, with whom negotiations were carried on; one tusk of every pair belonged *de jure* to the king, who also possessed the right to purchase the remaining one. Ivory also fell into the ruler's hands in the form of tribute from subject states. The arrival of Basoga and Bakedi chiefs bearing rich presents of ivory was a common occurrence at Mutesa's court, as the first missionaries in Uganda observed. But in those tribes where the chiefly system was lacking, as among the Akamba, Akikuyu and Masai [all Kenyan peoples], the ivory, especially if it happened to be a very large tusk, was deemed to be the property of many, and the purchase of ivory was thus a long and tiresome process."

The failure of Muslims from the coast to convert large numbers of inland people in East Africa can be explained in part by the timing of trade expansion.

The push for inland trade in East Africa did not begin until relatively late, by which time Europeans had become a substantial force to be reckoned with and had imposed competing institutional structures.

In the brief period in the second half of the nineteenth century when Arabs began serious inland trade, yet prior to European domination by the turn of the century, we can observe the problems of trade in the absence of Islam. Most particularly, the caravans were forced to rely upon firepower rather than negotiation (ABIR [1968, 107]). KRAPF [1860, 364], writing of his travels in Ukambani in 1849 notes that "the Suahili traders, who in caravans from 600 to 1,000 men, strong, and mostly armed with muskets, venture into the countries of the Wakuafi and Masai to fetch ivory, but are often nearly all slain." The reliance upon firepower can be assumed to have added substantially to the costs of exchange. Given this as the alternative, one would expect conversion to a common institutional structure to have substantial benefits for all those interested in trade.

The most successful inland traders in Kenya during the nineteenth century were the non-Muslim Wakamba, who jealously guarded their trading monopolies with the interior Kenyan groups and tried to prevent the coastal peoples from directly trading with the interior. On first analysis the Wakamba would appear to provide an exception to the argument that Islam offered clear economic benefits in the form of institutions that facilitated trade. The Wakamba seem to have solved the problems of trade quite effectively without Islam, at least for a brief period.

The Wakamba managed to "compete" with the institutional advantages of Islam by use of a number of home-grown institutions which they adapted in true entrepreneurial spirit to the needs of trade. In this way they attempted to solve the same problems Islam solved for the Muslim traders. Wakamba political organization at this time was based upon an *utui* system of clustered homesteads with recognized leaders (*asili*). These units could also band together for defence or other purposes, and were frequently the basis for organizing trade caravans. In addition, these units facilitated the expansion of the Wakamba into new territories and communities along the trade routes (SPEAR [1981, 122], and LAMPHEAR [1970, 84]). Another common practice of the Wakamba was the use of blood brotherhood, which Wakamba caravans tried to establish with other *motui* at regular intervals all along the trade routes, thus affording safety and establishing trading partners. Tribute was also paid to serve the same purpose. The Wakamba also often employed women in trade, as they were considered less threatening by hostile peoples (LAMPHEAR [1970, 85]). All of these practices allowed the Wakamba to dominate much of the inland trading in what is today Kenya during the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Wakamba were so successful in their trade and became so saturated with exotic trade goods that by 1849 they would take payment only in livestock, and Krapf "placed them among the wealthiest tribes of Eastern Africa" (Krapf, cited in LAMPHEAR [1970, 90]). But it did not last. In the long run, Wakamba

institutions were incapable of solving the problems of long-distance trade. Tribute demands increased, caravans were raided by many neighboring groups, and in some cases actual warfare broke out. An indication of just how much the situation deteriorated comes from the fact that many Wakamba themselves turned to the raiding of caravans. LAMPHEAR [1970, 98] describes exactly how this once effective trading system eventually deteriorated.

"...the Kamba were beginning to encounter a variety of difficulties with commercial activity in the interior. The same mobile and independent *utui* system which had facilitated the development of Kamba commerce in the first place lacked the overriding unity and authority necessary for the development of an ordered country such as Kimweri's Shambala kingdom. As the century progressed there were indications that feuds and quarrels between the various areas of Ukamba were becoming more frequent. It seems that many of these feuds may have been engendered by commercial conflicts, for as early as 1849 Krapf could note that certain areas of Ukamba forbade other Kamba to trade in their countries and even sent their caravans down to the coast at different seasons so as not to clash *en route*. There are also indications that increasingly some Kamba began to abandon any pretence of legitimate trade, employing their *utui* organizations as highly efficient bands of robbers which would waylay bona fide caravans, killing their members, stealing their goods, conveying them the remaining distance to the coast, and selling them to the middleman villages. It is possible that whole areas of Ukamba may have given up trading for the easier, but just as lucrative, occupation of bandits."

Not all of the indigenous African solutions to long-distance trading were as short-lived as that of the Wakamba. The case can be made, however, that Islam was promoted by traders because it provided more effective economic institutions to guarantee trade than those afforded by many indigenous African societies. What is more, they were institutions that could be shared across ethnic boundaries. It is significant that the Wakamba were superseded by the Muslim Swahili, as the dominant caravan traders of Eastern Africa. Unlike the situation in West Africa, however, in East Africa the process was interrupted before it reached the point where the chain of conversion affected many interior societies with whom the Muslims were trading. This interruption occurred in the form of European Colonial presence at just about the time when Islam might have made serious inroads in the interior, as it had begun to do in Uganda.

Thus far, the evidence on the relationship between trade and conversion to Islam is consistent both with Horton's "Intellectualist Theory" based on the need for a new cosmology to deal more effectively with an ever expanding outside world, and the economic argument proposed here. I turn now to a final case study of conversion based in part upon my field research in East Africa, which reinforces the connection between Islam and trade already documented, and which also provides further evidence that is more consistent with an economic than a psychic theory of conversion.

5. *The Case of Orma Conversion to Islam*³

The Orma are a cattle-herding pastoral people best known among African historians as part of the fierce Oromo people who expanded from their ancestral base in southern Ethiopia beginning in the 1500s and ultimately reached as far south as Tanzania, sacking the coastal city-states of Malindi and Gedi en route. The Orma are that part of the Oromo group which is currently settled in Tana River and Lamu Districts, Kenya. The Orma have been exposed to Islam from at least the time of their arrival in Kenya (prior to 1634), and indeed, traded regularly with both Muslim Arabs and Muslim Somali; yet for their first three hundred years of residence in their current homeland the Orma did not convert to Islam. Suddenly, however, in the first half of the twentieth century, the Orma did convert to Islam, although ironically by this time they were subject to British rule and had significant contact with Christianity. An examination of the long period of resistance to Islam, their eventual rapid conversion, and the particulars of the actual conversion process allow us to differentiate between the economic explanation and Horton's psychic explanation.

5.1 *The History of Trade Among the Orma*

An economic explanation of the long resistance to conversion by the Orma does not hinge upon making the case that they were uninvolved in trade prior to conversion to Islam in the twentieth century, but rather, relates to the volume of trade and the nature of its organization, including the role of the centralized polity.

According to both early traveler's accounts and oral history gathered from Orma elders in 1978–81, the Orma had a loosely structured chiefship until the end of the last century. At that time they were decimated in fierce wars with their Maasai, Somali, and Wakamba neighbors, and many of their pre-existing institutions, including the chiefship, fell into disuse. The former political structure is important historically, for it played a key role in Orma trading relations prior to their defeat in warfare in the late 1860s.

Several early travelers specifically note the role of the Orma chief in trade. Some note that he was personally in control of all negotiations with outside traders (BRENNER [1868, 463], and YLVISAKER [1979, 26]). Many talk about the tribute which was exacted from the nearby hunter-gatherers in the form of one tusk for every elephant killed. Even a resident Omani sultan paid tribute to the Orma chief (BOTELER [1835, 394], OWEN [1833, 397], FISCHER [1876–1877, 350]). Further evidence of the degree of centralized control exerted by the Orma is found in the fact that they were able to prevent any entry by outsiders into their territory for purposes of trade right up to their conquest by the Maasai and the Somali in the 1860s.

³ This section is based upon field research with the Orma totaling forty-three months (1978–81, 1987, and brief visits in 1994 and 1996).

KRAPF [1845], quoted in SPEAR [1981, 140], provides the most detailed description of the actual way in which the Orma trade was carried out, at least for one area and one period in time. His description below is of Takaunga, the major southern trade center used by the Orma in the early nineteenth century.

"When the Sultan of the Gallas (as he is called by the Swahilis) makes his appearance at Takaongo every second or third year, he is accompanied by several hundreds of his savage followers, and he must be received in state and pomp by the governor of Takaongo, who meets him at the outskirts of the village under a salute of a large volume of firing from the Swahili musketry. When this has been accomplished, the Galla Majesty is placed on a new arm chair and carried by free-born Swahilis in procession through the streets, and at last deposited at an open and large place, where the Governor sits at his side and delivers the presents which consist of the chair (which the Sultan already occupies), of a slave, of a hundred clothes, or a quantity of Tobacco (which the Galla love more than silver and gold, and for which they will readily deliver up their cattle, their copal and their ivory) and some other petty articles. After the Sultan has received these presents, he returns them by giving the Governor a number of cattle and elephants'-teeth. After these transactions a cow is slaughtered by the Muhammedans, and a few bloody parts of the heart are eaten by the Swahilis and the Galla, who both swear in this manner and renew friendship and fidelity to each other. When all these ceremonies have been duly performed, the Galla soldiery is regaled with Tobacco, rice and other eatables. His sable Majesty remains then some ten or twenty days at Takaongo and its vicinity, during which time the Galla sell their goods and buy their commodities from the Swahilis."

Some of the trade goods used by the Orma in this exchange were acquired through their tributary relations with neighboring populations of hunters and gatherers and horticulturalists. The best source for a description of the tributary relationship between the Orma and their neighbors comes from NEW [1873], who visited Ormaland in 1866 just after the Orma had suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of the Maasai.

"They [the Pokomo] do a little trade, transporting grain, ivory, etc., to the coast, in exchange for cloth, wire, and beads. Some of them told us that they do not hunt so much as they would otherwise do, on account of the exactions of the Gallas, to whom they are tributary. They say that after their masters have taken what they deem to be their right, there is so little left that it does not pay for the trouble and cost of hunting and carriage. Naturally unwilling therefore that others should reap the rewards of their toil, they lay the spear aside, and seek profit in other ways" (p. 276).

"The Wasania are the subjects of the Gallas, but they indignantly resent the application to them of the term slave. The Gallas take from them a heavy per-centage on all fruits of their toil, which I believe it does not enter into their minds to refuse. They are therefore, at least, a subordinated race... On the flesh of the animals slain the hunters subsist; and with the proceeds of ivory, horn, etc., after they have paid the Gallas their tribute, they purchase clothing, ornaments, etc" (p. 278).

Further evidence of Orma centralization and strength sufficient to exact tribute comes from Boteler, who visited the area in 1823. BOTELER [1835, 394]

observed that the former Sultan of Pate, recently forced to move his headquarters to Orma territory, also paid an annual tribute to the Chief of the Orma for the privilege of trading in the area (see also SCHMIDT [1888, 133], cited in YLVISAKER [1979, 87]).

Finally, almost none of the early travelers to Orma territory failed to remark on the reputation of the Orma as "fierce" and/or "aloof" (see also the discussion of this issue by YLVISAKER [1979, 24]). Many note that caravans and Arab traders never went to the Orma, but rather had to wait for the Orma to bring their goods to them. NEW [1873, 161], the last observer to visit the Orma prior to their wars with the Somali, described the incredulity with which the Arabs greeted the news that he intended to visit the territory.

"...it is a remarkable fact that while the Arabs and Wasuahili had travelled over the whole of the country south of the Galla-land, and had established friendly relations with most of the tribes, not only along the coast but for hundreds of miles inland, yet up to the time of which I write [1866] none of their trading parties had ever ventured into the Galla-land, and they would have looked upon a proposition to do so as the act of a madman."

This "closure" of the territory by the Orma almost certainly would have retarded the development of trade, but it is also likely that it aided the chief in keeping a monopoly control on trade. One would guess, therefore, that the chief assumed he had more to gain by monopolizing a small trade, and keeping control of tributary relations, than by opening the territory to more competitive trade. Given that the primary export items of the Orma were large, e.g. ivory and cattle, it was easier for the chief to control trade and tributary relations in this way than it would have been if long-distance traders were allowed direct access to Orma suppliers.

5.2 Islam and Trade Among the Orma

It is clear that the Orma have long been exposed to Islam. Since the early 1600s they have bordered Muslim Arabs, Swahili, and Somali (who began conversion to Islam in the tenth century). This dates Orma contact with Islam to at least three hundred years prior to their conversion, and more likely as far back as the tenth or eleventh century in southern Ethiopia.

If the economic argument for the advantages of Islam for trade is correct, it remains to be explained why the Orma waited for three or more hundred years to convert. This is especially puzzling, as their neighbors the Somali converted centuries earlier. Any economic explanation must account for why it was in the interests of the Somali to convert, but not the Orma during the period prior to the twentieth century, but then came to be in the Orma's interest in this century.

There are a number of ways to reconcile the early Orma resistance to Islam with an economic explanation. First, it could be argued that the volume of trade in which the Orma were engaged was already at the desired level, albeit far

below what Islamic institutions could have facilitated. Second, because of the organization of Orma tributary relations with their subordinate neighbors, it is possible that they feared loss of control over this monopoly if they opened trade to the interior. Finally, one could argue that Orma institutional structures were relatively sophisticated and fulfilled many of the trade functions which Islam would have offered, at least at their then desired level of trade.

It is relatively easy to make the case that the level of trade in which the Orma engaged up to the twentieth century was not substantial, yet met their demands. One gets the distinct feeling while reading the early accounts of Ormland that the Orma were quite indifferent to trade – they could take it or leave it. They certainly did not go out of their way to facilitate it.⁴ This probably stemmed from the fact that they were relatively self-sufficient, and valued little that trade had to offer above what they already had and would have had to give up. Cattle pastoralism has been argued to yield sustained rates of return as high as fifteen percent per annum, for example, thus making the opportunity costs of cattle exchange quite high (FIELDER [1973]). The ivory trade, however, was an exception, all the more so if the Orma did not even need to devote time to its procurement, but could merely tax the hard work of their subordinate neighbors. As indicated above, because the Orma gained most of their ivory in tributary relations, a border trade which prevented direct access between their subservient suppliers and the Arab purchasers probably served them better than allowing Arabs direct access to the interior.

Evidence of Orma self-sufficiency and general indifference to trade goes back to their homeland in Ethiopia. ABIR [1970, 122] reports that the Galla were not used to trade when they overran Ethiopia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Consequently, although trade had been common in the Christian empires of Ethiopia prior to this time (and notably was dominated by Muslim traders from 1000), after the Galla expansion trade diminished on the Red Sea to a negligible level and stayed that way until the 1850s. Abir attributes this to the tendency of the Galla to raid. In their new home, the Orma seem to have maintained the same tradition, although the ivory trade was too lucrative a prospect to ignore. The flavor of their attitude toward trade, as well as the mechanics, is captured in the following account recorded along the Juba River (in current-day southwest Somalia) in 1844 (ARC ANGELO [1845, 279]).

“These [Somali] carry on a rather precarious trade with the Galli, who bring down from the interior ivory, bullocks, honey, and gee, (the gee has a very aromatic taste different from all of the other gee on the coast), which articles they exchange with the

⁴ Examples of Orma (Galla) interference with the caravan trade and refusal to permit traders of any sort into their territory abound in the literature. One such example reports that the Nyika at the beginning of the nineteenth century, who dominated the coastal-inland caravan trade until they were superseded by the Wakamba, tried to negotiate a treaty with the Galla in order to facilitate trade. The Galla refused to cooperate (GRAY and BIRMINGHAM [1970, 78]).

Somaules of Juba, for a coarse kind of cotton cloth, (made at Juba, Brara, Marka, and Mokadosha, and is of different degrees of fineness); also tobacco and sometimes even *spears*. This trade is frequently broken off in consequence of an attack of one party on the other, in which event (as it was on my arrival there) all trade is stopped, sometimes for a considerable time, and *querre à outrance* is proclaimed far and wide, for the Somaule and Galli are implacable enemies, with whom no treaty is considered binding longer than *necessary* to each; amity is never known to exist long between them, their trading with each other is only a case of necessity, more especially on the side of the Somaules, as without their trade with the Galli, they are completely destitute of even food."

While there has been an understandable tendency in the African historical literature to stress the extensive pre-colonial trade networks which existed in Africa, one must be careful not to obscure the *relative* differences in the level of trade across ethnic groups. One of the best indicators we have of the level of trade among the Orma comes from consideration of what they were importing. Cloth almost always figures most prominently, with tobacco a close second, and some reference to spears, beads, copper, iron, and other items used for ornamentation. Even today (ENSMINGER [1992]) expenditures by the Orma on cloth and ornaments are relatively negligible in comparison to their total wealth. Given that at least until the 1860s it was uncommon for any but Orma men to wear cloth (NEW [1873, 271]) and even by 1914 (WERNER [1914, 126]) women were still wearing skins as well as cloth, one has to question the level of trade in which the Orma were involved at this time.

Most scholars would agree that whatever the level of trade among the Orma, the Muslim Somali were far more so engaged. Indeed, the Somali were known all across northern Kenya for their long distance trading in the nineteenth century, over which they held a virtual monopoly (DALLEO [1975, 117]). Yet even with the tremendous involvement of the Somali in trade, DALLEO [1975] notes that the Somali who lived in the area bordering the Orma were also themselves relatively little involved in trade.

"The majority of Somali, however, especially those in the hinterland between the Daua and the Tana [directly bordering the Orma], remained nomads. Except for the occasional caravan they remained untouched by trade. Pastoralism remained the core of their economic system. Trade was a stronger factor in the areas near the Juba..." (p. 116).

"...trade in northern Kenya was precarious. During the last half of the 19th century the Ogaden gained control of the area along the Juba down to Kismayu, and frequently raided along the Tana. Somali trade in this area, when compared to Lugh, was more recent, less in volume, and included more Arab involvement" (p. 58).

Thus, while the Orma, and even more so, their Muslim neighbors the Somali, had some access to trade, and presumably could have had more had they so desired, it appears to be the case that they were little interested. Until trade

could offer some considerable inducement, it had relatively little appeal. Such inducement, I would argue, came for these pastoralists when drought and cattle diseases brought per capita herd sizes down to the point where they could no longer supply the necessary calories to the population without the added multiplication afforded by the conversion of meat to grain in the market.

The trading of food commodities, especially those upon which one is dependent for daily subsistence, involves risks of a totally different nature than those the Orma previously faced in their trade. Thus, while their institutions were adequate to handle the trade in ivory, which was "pennies from heaven," as it were, they might not have been adequate to handle trading in subsistence goods, which is greatly facilitated by the extension of credit. Given that nineteenth century Orma trade did not involve subsistence goods, and was of relatively low volume, conversion to Islam had less to offer them than was the case for other societies. Once it was necessary to increase trade beyond these levels, and given that the Orma institutional structure was by then also dismantled, the Orma may have found it more in their interest to convert.

The case could also be made that the Orma institutional structures were more sophisticated and centralized than those of the Somali. This being the case, one could argue that while the Somali needed Islam in order to overcome the institutional obstacles to trade in the nineteenth century, the Orma did not. The Orma appear by all accounts to have had a loosely centralized polity capable both of negotiating and enforcing treaties, and of exacting tribute from subject populations. The Somali, on the other hand, were far less centralized, and indeed were known (as they are today) for their internal divisiveness. It is perfectly conceivable that in addition to having more need of trade than the Orma, the Somali had more need of a unifying institutional structure to solve some of the problems of long distance trade.

5.3 The Effects of Wars With Maasai and Somali Upon Orma Institutions

The late nineteenth century brought changes to the Orma which completely altered their relations with the rest of the world, and arguably made Islam more attractive to them than it had previously been. The immediately precipitating causes of this change were devastating wars with the Maasai and the Somali, which nearly resulted in the annihilation of the Orma.

Beginning in the 1850s and intensifying in the 1860s, the Maasai made serious attacks upon the Orma from the south. New [1873] arrived in Orma territory right after one of the most devastating encounters with the Maasai in 1866, and his description of them already belies signs of a defeated people on the run. In all of his discussions with leaders and elders, the main issue upon their minds was whether or not the Europeans could aid them in some way to combat the threat of the Maasai. But the situation got much worse for the Orma shortly after New's departure. Apparently taking advantage of the weakened state of the Orma, the Omani Arabs of Lamu, who for some time had been attempting

to break the Orma alliance with an opposing Arab faction which challenged their control of trade on the mainland, took this moment to form an alliance with the Somali and encourage the latter to launch a massive attack upon the Orma. The resulting Orma-Somali war of 1867–69 led to the near destruction of the Orma as a people. While the Maasai continued their attacks from the south, the Orma were being hammered severely by the Somali from the north-east. Large numbers of Orma were captured by the Somali and sold into slavery. Others were taken as Somali clients, and their descendants are recognized today as member of a distinct ethnic group known as the Wardai.

During this prolonged period of insecurity, Orma social, economic, and political organization changed dramatically. Particularly destructive to social institutions was the scattering of the population due to the forced migration from their territory between the Juba and the Tana, and the decimation of their numbers.

The first indication we have that Orma institutions were under attack comes from New's visit in 1866, even before the war with the Somali. Based only upon their battles with the Maasai, he finds their leadership to be in a state of disarray at the time of his visit. He complains first (pp. 161 ff.) of having difficulty in ascertaining who the chief really was. Later they learned that "a *bonna'a fide* chief for the time being was wanting." The previous chief had died heroically in a battle with the Maasai, and "with him fell the good fortunes of the Gallas; they had never rallied since." Although New did eventually identify a standing chief, New considered him "effeminate," and ineffective.

The next indication we have of the status of Orma institutions comes from Werner, writing between 1913 and 1919 (see WERNER [1913a], [1913b], [1913c], [1913d], [1913e], [1914], [1915], [1919]), whose observations of the Orma and neighboring peoples were more scholarly than those of the explorers. While she goes into great detail about the Orma moiety, clan, age-grade, and chieftain systems, there are indications that these institutions were already in considerable disarray, as she got many conflicting and contradictory reports from different elders. Given the high level of her reporting, one is inclined to attribute the confusion to the Orma, rather than to inadequate research on her part. For example, in describing the chiefship, WERNER [1914, 134] notes that her account is accurate only "as far as I can make out," for the statements of her informant "were perplexing in the extreme and sometimes contradictory." With respect to the age-grade system (*gada*) WERNER [1914, 142] had similar difficulties, as the following discussion illustrates:

"According to one informant the *luyus* recur in cycles of seven; another said that there were eight, but without mention of their recurring, and repeated attempts to get the names enumerated landed us in hopeless confusion."

While it may be impossible to know exactly how long it took for the Orma institutional structure to disintegrate, I do know that elders between the ages

of sixty and eighty in 1980, claimed that the *gada* age grade system and the chiefship had not been practiced in their lifetimes. Given New's report, it seems reasonable to assume that the attacks by the Maasai precipitated the decline of Orma institutions, which were dealt a final blow by the Somali purge. I argue below that one of the reasons Islam was able to spread so rapidly among the Orma shortly after this time, was due to the institutional vacuum created by the demise of previous institutional structures.

5.4 Orma Conversion to Islam 1920–1940

Following the wars with the Maasai and the Somali there was a protracted period of instability and shifting for the Orma. For many years families lived in the Arab garrisons and Christian missions to escape further attack. Many Orma were also destitute, having lost all or most of their stock in the wars. Families were split up by migration and slave raiding. The Orma practiced a wide range of new strategies from begging to cultivation to pull themselves through these difficult years. However, by the early part of the twentieth century the Orma were beginning to repopulate their territory, were rebuilding herds, and had returned to a more cattle-based economy. Meanwhile, the British had established colonial rule in the area.

It was shortly after the repopulation of their remaining territory that the Orma began conversion to Islam. Reports of living Orma elders in 1980 indicate that most Orma converted between 1920 and 1940. By way of confirmation, we know that when New traveled among the Orma in 1866 the Orma were still practicing their indigenous religion. At the time of Werner's intensive studies of the Orma between 1913 and 1919, there is still no reference to Islamization among the Orma.

After the Orma defeat in the late 1860s by the Maasai and the Somali, they neither had the means, nor perhaps the will, to keep trade out of the area. However, the Arab Sultan still residing at Witu continued to hinder opposing Lamu Arab attempts to wrest control of trade on the mainland. Not being able to control the trade, the Sultan of Witu seems to have adopted the next best strategy, which was to live by banditry, sometimes using the Orma to disrupt the trade. Among other things, Witu became a refuge for debtors from Lamu and other areas on the coast, thus disrupting to some extent the credit networks of the coast (YLVISAKER [1979, 115, 123]). In many other ways also, the Sultan of Witu was going out of his way to limit trade in the area. He taxed trade to the point of discouraging it (YLVISAKER [1979, 139]), and when Peters visited the area in 1889, he was amazed to discover that there was no credit system (PETERS [1891], cited in YLVISAKER [1979, 146]). "To buy even a coconut took cash – nor any idea of caravan commerce with the interior. Porters were not forthcoming."

The trade situation took an even further turn for the worse when the British took over administration of the colony in 1895. The Government began by restricting the ivory trade and ending the tributary relations between the

hunters and gatherers and the Orma. YLVISAKER [1979, 172] discusses the situation of trade in the Tana area at the beginning of the twentieth century.

“Between 1905 and 1909 the ivory trade declined considerably... Oddly enough, the Tana River, which had twenty years before been considered a main artery of potential trade, became a neglected area. Beyond Kau, it could not be said ‘to be a factor in the existing trade of the country’ (AINSWORTH and HOLLIS’ [1909, 55] Report). The Commission of 1909 could not understand why the administration had not long before brought the Tana into the scope of the trade resources of the province. Instead of being a highway to the interior, it was a closed district.”

Shortly after this, between 1910 and 1920, trade began to increase substantially in the interior. Arab merchants from the coast began trading directly in the interior, and Orma cattle began moving to the coastal market. At just about this time, the Orma began to convert to Islam.

Prior to conversion, the Orma had considerable contact with both Islam and Christianity; many early converts to Islam actually grew up in Christian missionary compounds. The conversion period coincided with the opening of the district to interior trade. The proselytizers in the south were Arab traders. The Orma report that the Somali were not a model for conversion, as they were the traditional enemies of the Orma. In the Orma interior (the north) many Orma were converted by the first Orma trader (Shambaro), who was an agent for Arabs in the south and who was a recent immigrant to the north, having been converted in the south prior to moving northward in search of commercial opportunity. Members of the Wardai tribe (that is, the descendants of Orma who were captured by the Somali during the wars of the 1860s, and who continued to reside among them), were also involved in the northern conversions.

In addition to the fact that traders were much involved in the conversion process, we have other data on the relationship between Islam and trade among the Orma. The fact that the first Orma trader in the north was converted and minimally literate, had a significant effect upon the willingness of his Arab suppliers to extend him credit. The fact that he was literate meant that he could send written requests to his suppliers some hundreds of kilometers away rather than making the journey himself on each occasion. For many years in the early days of Islam, Maulid celebrations in the interior were held at this man's home, as there was no mosque. Until the 1980s, Islam was very much in evidence in all commercial transactions between Arab traders and their Muslim agents. Before cattle buyers were handed thousands of shillings to buy stock they had to swear their honesty on the Koran. This ritual demonstrates that the Arab traders believed that the Orma were sufficiently devout and sincere in their faith that it could serve as an ideological self-enforcement mechanism in financial transactions.

Many of these facts coincide with the general argument which has been made throughout the paper regarding the benefits Islam afforded for trade. However,

the fact that Islam facilitates trade says nothing of the actual motives of individuals who convert, unless they are themselves traders, or need to convert in order to get access to traders, for example, in order to secure credit. While the credit argument is an intriguing one, it has not been substantiated in discussions with the Orma. It was not possible to verify, for example, that Islamic converts deep in the interior were extended credit by fellow Orma while non-converts were denied. However, I am not aware of any cases where an Arab extended credit to a non-Muslim Orma.

As we found for the rest of Africa, the mere association between trade and conversion among the Orma also does not allow us to differentiate between the economic thesis and Horton's (that conversion occurred as a consequence of the psychic distress generated by the worldliness that came with trade). However, it would be particularly difficult in the case of the Orma to argue that trade brought them more contact with outside forces, thus increasing psychic distress, than they had experienced in their several hundred years of migration over thousands of miles of southern Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya. Horton would also not be able to account for why the Orma chose Islam over Christianity, while the economic argument points clearly in favor of Islam, as Muslims had dominated trade in the area for a millennium.

BRUCE [1982] reports an analogous case from West Africa among the Pyem of Nigeria. This population was also exposed to both Christianity and Islam. In the pre-colonial period Islam made in-roads as a result of its connection with trade. The pattern of conversions in the colonial era followed employment prospects, as people sought entry into skilled crafts and trades. The people associated with these skills were almost all adherents to either Christianity or Islam. Traditional subsistence was no longer an adequate form of livelihood, and the young, "turned to the strangers who could provide them with the relevant economic skills and the opportunities to exercise them. The strangers possessed a monopoly of these skills and it was only by addressing themselves to the 'strangers' that young Pyem could enter into the modern economy" (p. 231). Eventually, different professions became associated with one or the other of the major religions. This was reinforced by the apprentice system. As these identities shifted over time, in part because the Christians moved more from the trades to educated forms of employment, people sometimes changed their religious identity. BRUCE [1982, 237] sums up the experience as follows:

"Thus, three categories emerged: a 'modern Islamic' identity associated with trading and craft occupations, a 'modern Christian' identity associated with education and mission employment, and 'traditional' identity associated with pre-existing economic activities. A consequence of the redrawing of these categories was, given that most of the Pyem were engaging in trading or crafts occupations, that Islam gained ground more rapidly than Christianity and some of the early Christian converts fell away as their identities came to be incongruent with their occupational roles."

Bruce's example provides another explanation for the increased conversion to Islam that we also find associated with colonialism among the Orma. Rather than seeing conversion as a form of resistance or a reflection of psychic stress, it represents a response to a changing economic environment. Colonialism undermined the tradition economy at the same time that it provided some new economic opportunities. Also, in both the Pyem and the Orma cases, the British contributed to a decline in inter-tribal warfare. The more favorable climate for trade also increased the relative benefits of conversion to Islam.

One can only speculate about the significance of two other pieces of data in the Orma case – the fact that youths converted first, and the Wardai were central to the proselytizing effort in the north. Consistent with Bruce's argument above, it is youths who are most likely to be looking for new economic opportunities, which they may have associated with Islam. A political motive for the youth is also possible. Youths may have looked to the rich institutions of Islam to overthrow the gerontocracy of their elders (see BUNGER [1979] for a similar argument concerning conversion of the neighboring Pokomo). While earlier generations might have been tempted by such a move, during this period Orma institutions were relatively weak and probably incapable of mounting much resistance to challenges to their authority. Further, the material costs to the youth of offending their elders were relatively small at this time, as herd sizes were depleted following a severe rinderpest outbreak. It is also the case that the Orma were strong practitioners of primogeniture (exclusive inheritance by the senior son) prior to conversion, while Islamic law mandates equal inheritance for sons. Primogeniture is no longer practiced and sons remaining with their fathers to their death are now more likely to inherit equally. However, it is pure speculation to propose that this provided an incentive for the non-first born to convert.

Finally, the role of the Wardai in the Orma conversion is an intriguing one. Considerable legislation was passed by the British regarding territorial restrictions on the Wardai. In 1919 the British reaffirmed the boundary between the Orma and Somali at the Tana River, but allowed all Wardai who wished to cross over and join their Orma ancestors to do so. Few did so because a condition of their movement was that they leave their stock behind with their former patrons the Somali. By converting their Orma kin to Islam, however, the Wardai considerably facilitated their ability to slip back and forth with ease across the boundary between the two ethnic groups. Many fooled one anthropologist about their true ethnic identity, and undoubtedly they did the same with the British colonial authorities. Given the wild perturbations to which the ecologies of nomadic pastoral zones are vulnerable, the value of this flexibility should not be underrated. To this day, the Wardai manage to use their affiliation with both the Orma and the Somali to their advantage, moving into Somali territory when grazing is more available and vice versa.

6. Conclusions

One risk associated with the economic argument for conversion made in this paper, is the danger of slipping into a functionalist trap – thus imputing origin (or conversion) from benefit (lower transaction costs, for example). In order to avoid the functionalist trap, it is important to emphasize the points in the argument where agency and individual (as opposed to societal) incentives are at work, both for proselytizers and those submitting to conversion.

In the case of traders, it would appear to be well documented from numerous cases in Africa that the incentives to convert are considerable. In addition, traders themselves have an incentive to convert their agents and their customers. The larger the network of people under the common legal and moral institutions of Islam, the more predictable trade is and the more secure contracting becomes. This is perhaps best described in LAST's [1979] work above, but is also corroborated by the first Orma shopkeeper's experiences among his people.

I employ two further arguments of individual incentives which explain incidences of Orma conversion. One is the fact that young men appear to have led the way in conversion, much as has been documented for numerous other societies in East Africa. One possible explanation for this is that non-firstborn sons preferred Islamic inheritance laws to Orma law which favored primogeniture. Another is that youth saw in Islam a powerful institution that they might control and use to break the strong gerontocratic control of the elders. This tension continues today within the society. Why did the youth not attempt such a maneuver generations before during their long contact with Islam? The answer may have something to do with the general destruction of Orma institutions by the end of the last century that left the elders more vulnerable to such a "coup" than they had been before.

It is easy to impute a motive to the Wardai in their role as proselytizers among the Orma. By the 1920s Somali and Wardai grazing across the river was becoming overcrowded. By converting their distant kin the Orma to Islam, the Wardai greatly increased their status among the Orma, and better ensured their community links within Orma territory, thus affording these nomads a greater territory over which they could migrate.

Finally, there is a sense in which the society-wide economic benefits accrued through conversion to Islam are consistent with an actor-oriented perspective while still avoiding a functionalist critique. Assuming that the benefits described above in the form of reduced transaction costs associated with Islam are real, they may well make such societies more economically prosperous. Africa (until very recently) has been a labor-poor continent. Societies all across Africa have employed a number of techniques (including slavery by capture) to increase the size of their labor pool. In Africa and the world over, ethnic identity is a fluid concept, and African societies have long competed for members. If indeed Islam afforded economic benefits to societies, such groups may have

attracted followers at a greater rate than others, thus increasing the ranks of the converted.

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