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Islam Tropical Project

Triaud, J.

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Sub-Saharan Africa
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Islam Tropical Project

The programme 'Islam Tropical' of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (MSH) was set up to facilitate international co-operation and exchange between English and French-speaking African, European and American scholars for the development of research on Islam in the countries south of the Sahara. Conceived of, at an international round table discussion held in Paris in December 1983, by leading specialists on sub-Saharan Islam drawn from the three continents, it was only by the end of the 1980's that the programme was included in the general research programme of the Ministry of Research on what is termed in French as 'Islam périphérique'. Discussed in the journal 'Islam Tropical' published by the MSH, the project received its final go-ahead when its chief French representative, Jean-Louis Triaud was nominated to his post at the University of Provence, Aix I in 1992. This laid the foundation for the collaboration between the MSH and the researchers on this project.

The principal co-ordinators of the Islam Tropical project are Louis Brenner of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) London; Constant Hamès of the Centre national des Recherches Scientifiques (CNRS); Ousmane Kane of the University of Saint-Louis, Senegal; David Robinson of the Department of History, Michigan State University; and Jean-Louis Triaud of the University of Provence, Aix I.

Under the rubrique of this programme, scholars from abroad have been invited, and specialized seminars have been organized around their visits to facilitate research and exchange of ideas.

Research

From 1982-'92, this programme functioned in synergy with the weekly seminar on 'Islam and societies south of the Sahara' of the M.Phil programme on the History of Africa of the Universities of Paris I and II. These were largely conducted by Henri Moniot of the University of Paris VII, Jean-Louis Triaud who at the time was also attached to the University of Paris VII, Constant Hamès of the CNRS and Ousmane Kane of the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques (FNSP).

After the nominations, in 1992, of Jean-Louis Triaud to the University of Provence, Aix I, and Ousmane Kane to the University of Saint-Louis in Senegal, fresh guidelines for conducting workshops and conferences and publications were formulated. Most of the members within the international framework of the project were to participate in a quadrennial programme on Islam under colonial domination in French Africa. This programme was co-convened by David Robinson and Jean-Louis Triaud, and received financial aid from the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington. A workshop on this was convened in July 1993 at the Maison Suger under the auspices of the MSH. The first of its two international conferences was held in Aix-en-Provence in September 1994, and the second in 1995. The outcome was the publication of 'Le temps des marabouts: Itinéraires et stratégies islamiques en Afrique occidentale (1880-1960)' (Paris, Karthala, 583 pages) in 1997.

As far as publications are concerned, pooling together their international collaborative efforts

and research experience, the co-ordinators liaised with the publications division of the CNRS and the MSH, to bring out a bi-lingual (French and English) specialized annual issue on 'Islam et sociétés au sud du Sahara', of which volume 12 is currently under preparation. The journal publishes material on both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on Islamic trends and phenomena as well as the transmission of Islamic knowledge in the countries south of the Sahara.

It has recently been decided that the journal, which by 1992 had gained a respectable circulation and prestige, henceforth be published under the collaborative aegis of the MSH, Paris; the Institut d'Histoire Comparée des Civilisations (IHCC), Aix-en-Provence and the Institut de Recherche sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman (IREMAM), Aix-en-Provence.

In addition, Ousman Kane and Jean-Louis Triaud have taken the initiative to publish some of the articles dating from the origin of the journal in a new form: with a fresh introductory chapter and incorporating new data. Their aim is to make this publication, with its documentation and analyses on contemporary African Muslims, accessible to a larger audience. The book, jointly published by IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence, and Karthala and MSH, Paris, entitled 'Islam et islamisme au sud du Sahara' is currently in press.

Collaboration

In the beginning, the project was largely characterized by the predominance of historians. With the inclusion of sociologists and

political scientists within the framework, contemporary issues in the study of Islam have also provided new impetus for research.

Many members of the project collaborate with the Programme de Recherches Interdisciplinaires (PRI) of the CNRS-EHESS entitled 'La transmission du savoir dans le monde musulman périphérique'; as well as with a research group, financed by the CNRS, MSH, EHESS and the Institut Français de Recherche Scientifique pour le Développement en Coopération (formerly known as ORSTOM), tracing the life and work of the Senegalese historian Musa Kamara. ◆

*Director: Professor Jean-Louis Triaud
Département d'Histoire
Université de Provence
29 Avenue Robert Schuman
13621 Aix-en-Provence Cédex
France
Telephone: (33-4) 42 95 32 76
Telefax: (33-4) 42 20 89 39
E-mail: jlt@newsup.univ-mrs.fr*