

Seminar Report

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From 18 to 20 April 2001 a number of scholars from Africa, Europe and the United States convened at the ISIM to present papers for the seminar on 'Muslim Communities, Globalization, and Identities in Africa'. The event ended an ISIM atelier that had commenced in February 2001 with four scholars: José van Santen (Leiden), Karin Willemse (Rotterdam), Cheikh Guèye (Dakar) and Shamil Jeppie (Cape Town).*

During the week-long meeting of the atelier in February, the four-member working group discussed various theoretical and methodological questions that could further enrich their own study of Muslim communities in Africa. This resulted in an exchange of ideas and debates on the uses of self-reflexivity (while also being self-reflexive), the role of memory, transnationalism and the meanings of space, and new ways of presenting academic research. The diverse regional and disciplinary orientations of the individual members enabled discussions that were both revealing and animated.

From this first week together the group arrived at four themes that they considered to serve as a basis for the subsequent seminar with a larger group of scholars. The themes were as follows: spatial and imaginary frontiers, the public sphere, identities, and texts and/in contexts. These were addressed in terms of current processes of globalization, the latter term being problematized as well. Within each theme a number of more detailed issues were enumerated. To address these issues invitations

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were sent out to an international panel of speakers for the April seminar.

Given the limited time – from the end of February to the middle of April – in which the seminar was to be organized, it still managed to bring together a distinguished selection of both younger and senior scholars. Under the theme of the 'public sphere' speakers addressed, for example, the place of African Islamic scholarship (O'Fahey, Northwestern/Bergen) or attempted a phenomenological reading of Islam in Senegal (Oumar Sy, Dakar). Hussein Ahmed (Addis Ababa) delivered a paper which looked at the development of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Ethiopia. The lives of women students at the University of Ngaoundere were presented through the medium of film by Habi (Tromso).

Film was the medium for three presentations during the seminar. In the session under the theme of 'identities' a video on the Baye Fall sect within the Mouride *tariqa* in Senegal was shown by Tshikala Biaya (Addis Ababa). This theme was also more or less directly addressed in the papers of three other speakers. Karim Dahou (ENDA-Dakar) compared reformism and Islam-state relations in Algeria, Senegal and Nigeria, while Nafissatou Tall (Nouakchott-Mauritania) focused on Qur'anic texts favouring the position of women in Islam. Adeline Masquelier (New Orleans) analysed the impact of the arrival of a new

'preacher', Malam Awal, in a small town in Niger.

Under the theme of 'texts and/in contexts' there was an analysis and performance of Somali women's poetry in colonial and post-colonial contexts (Lidwien Kapteijns, Wellesley College) and a compelling film about a Muslim capitalist in Cameroun (produced by Lisbet Holtedahl, Tromso/Ngaoundere).

The papers under the theme of 'spatial and imaginary frontiers' dealt largely with the recent history and impact of the Mouride *tariqa* (Cheikh Babou, Michigan) in its place of origin, Senegal, and beyond in places like Marseille, Tenerife, and New York. Papers dealt with the role of Mouride women traders (Eva Rosander, Uppsala), innovative ways of making financial transfers between countries by members of the *tariqa* (Mansour Tall, Dakar), and the transformation of religious practice in the context of migration (Sophie Bava, EHES, Marseille). Gendered frontiers were considered in the case of the relations between master and disciple in the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya *tariqas* in Mauritania (Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, Metz/Nouakchott). The concluding paper was presented by Ousmane Kane (Yale/St Louis, Senegal), who addressed the question of the relations between *tariqas* and the state in West Africa. He examined the long history of relations between these formations and showed how important the *tariqas* have

been for the state, especially in Senegal, while also pointing out that several *tariqas* with West African origins have found roots in the United States. He ended with a plea for more studies on reformism and African Muslim communities, and asked a more general question about the discourses in which Islam in Africa is conceived. The language of analysis needs to more closely reflect the realities of the actors, Kane argued.

The seminar produced a great deal of insight into modern African Muslim communities. It also exposed the areas that are in need of more research. Both the atelier and the seminar, however, were exploratory and created opportunities for discussion about the state of the field. Future research activities of the ISIM will certainly include a focus on Africa.

Note

* See the ISIM website and *ISIM Newsletter*, 6, p.6 for an outline of the atelier.

This report was jointly produced by Karen Willemse, Shamil Jeppie, José van Santen, and Cheikh Guèye.

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