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Santen, J. van

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Islam and Public Life in Africa

The conference "Islam and Public Life in Africa" was convened by Abdulkader Tayob of the ISIM, in coordination with Karin Willemse of Erasmus University, Benjamin Soares of the African Studies Centre in Leiden, and José van Santen of Leiden University. It focused on Islamic discourses of marginal and dominant groups in various parts of Africa.

The conference aimed at building on previous meetings supported by ISIM dealing with cross-regional experiences of Muslim societies in different contexts. The various presenters confirmed that religious discourses are an inescapable facet of public life in Africa that reflects varying local and global social and political contexts.

In an early session dealing with publics, Goolam Vahed looked at Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa. He explained how the "rainbow nation" concept put forward by Nelson Mandela in the first decade of the post-apartheid era encouraged Muslim communities to seek their own identities and rights. He raised questions about who—in a still racist context—has control over Islam and whether young active Muslims are part of the older conservative forces, or whether they represent new forms of progress. Switching the context to Senegal, Cheikh Anta Babou examined the originally rural Murid movement as it adapted to urban landscapes, both at home and internationally in Dakar and Saint Louis. Roman Loimeier, with the expressive title "Sit Local, Think Global," described the *baraza*, a veranda or parlour for receiving visitors, of which a second meaning may also be council, reunion or assembly, in public spaces in Zanzibar. Though physically situated in the public space the *baraza* are in actuality only semi-public because they are defined by informal membership and not automatically open to everyone. Loimeier argued that "membership" of a *baraza* was the precondition for any convincing political programme.

The following session focused on types of reform. Shamil Jeppy and Mohammad Bakari highlighted reformist individuals, respectively Omar Abdullah, a Muslim humanist of the Comores, and Dr. Daoud Mall alias Joseph Perdu. The latter was a Baha'i missionary whose national identity though unknown, nevertheless, was considered an erudite and cosmopolitan Muslim intellectual preacher of Muslim modernism in South Africa. Both presentations, by demonstrating that single individuals can bring together diverse traditions of learning, raised awareness about how Islamic knowledge is promoted, who is allowed to produce such knowledge, and how discourses in particular regions are shaped. For his part, Hassan Mwakimako examined the social and political participation of Muslim women in Kenya. He showed how they entered the public sphere and contributed to the configuration of not just Muslim politics, but also national constitutional discourses through their participation in a process of constitutional review popularly known as *Bomas*.

In a subsequent session focused on conflict, Amidu Sanni presented a paper on "The Role of Youth in the Resurgence of Sharia in Nigeria." He showed how a campaign for the restoration of sharia authority in 1999 was mainly organized by youth from various associations and pressure groups, many of whom had agitated through violent means for sharia implementation. Hamza Mustafa Njozi examined other dimensions of conflict in his paper entitled, "Power and Public Policy in Tanzania from 1964-2004." He raised questions about how public policies addressed the "Islamic threat," and whether those policies actually served to deepen not only Muslim resentment and opposition towards the government, but historical discriminatory policies against Muslims as well.

The final session dealt with public communication. Cheikh Gueye examined the Muride brotherhood and convincingly argued that the New International Communication Technology (NICT) is, on the one hand, an instrument to integrate Touba as the "ideal" Muride city with the rest of the country, yet on the other hand it serves as a means for gaining broad-

On the occasion of the inaugural lecture of Professor Abdulkader Tayob as ISIM Chair at Radboud University Nijmegen, the ISIM held a conference from 11-12 September 2004 on "Islam and Public Life in Africa" in Berg en Dal, the Netherlands.

er international presence. The importance of NICTs in the Muride capital, and within the brotherhood, makes it a barometer of social change in Senegal. In another presentation, Hamadou Adama looked at how Islamic communication was institutionalized in post-colonial

Cameroon. As Cameroon had inherited a secular order from the former colonial powers, communication over the radio had to be conducted only in official languages. Adama described the tension between those Muslims who were educated in the schools of the colonizers and those who were trained in Islamic sciences in indigenous institutions. The latter were handicapped by their inability to communicate in European languages. In the 1990's the new Islamic organizations had to come up with radically different approaches in terms of how media could be positively used to serve Islamic interests and a wider Muslim community.

Most papers contradicted the often-expressed assumption that African Muslim politics follow models developed in Asia and the Middle East. The conference made it thus once more clear that the African public space is filled with multiple Islamic voices, cultural practices, and identities that are continuously influenced and (re) constructed by national and trans-national movements and various means of communication.

José van Santen is University Lecturer, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Leiden University.

E-mail: Santen@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

JOSÉ VAN SANTEN

NEW FELLOWS

The ISIM welcomes the following new visiting fellows:

Junior Fellows:

- **Na'eem Jeenah**
Political Islam in South Africa and its Contribution to the Discourse of a Fiqh of Minorities
15 January 2005 – 1 April 2005
- **Hameed Agberemi**
Islamism in Southern Nigeria
31 January 2005 – 1 April 2005
- **Saeid Golkar**
Roots of Islamists' Perception of America
1 February 2005 – 1 May 2005
- **Cristina Maria de Castro (CAPES Fellow)**
The Brazilian Muslim Community: A Study of its Identity towards the New World Reality
1 March 2005 – 1 September 2005
- **Eva Fachrun Nisa**
Politics, Religion, and Muslim Women's Identities: Niqâb and Islamic Fundamentalism in Western Europe
1 March 2005 – 30 April 2005

Senior Fellows:

- **Ali Saeidi**
The Development of Islamic Charities in Modern Iran
1 May 2005 – 1 August 2005
- **Wang Jinglie (KNAW/China Exchange Programme)**
Socio-religious Movements and Social Change in Muslim Societies
1 January 2005 – 1 June 2005
- **Dorothea Schultz**
Islamic Revival, Mass-Mediated Religiosity and the Moral Negotiation of Gender Relations in Urban Mali
1 February 2005 – 1 August 2005
- **Nahda Shehada.**
Iraqi Family Law under Shifting Conditions: Political Contestation and Legal Practices
1 March 2005 – 1 August 2005