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Leiden**  
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Verhees, C.

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SEDET  
CACO VERHEES

# Political Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa

**On 28 and 29 October 2002, the conference 'Political Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa: Narratives, Itineraries and Networks' was organized by the research institute SEDET (Sociétés en développement dans l'espace et dans le temps) of the Université Paris 7 Denis Diderot. The objectives of the conference were to identify, analyse, and define the actors of political Islam in the different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, where Islam has often been referred to as an Islam of brotherhoods (*confréries*). In earlier research the Islam of the brotherhoods is often depicted as peaceful and non-political, whereas the reformist groups are said to be political in scope and often use violence. But how do these trends actually relate?**

Reformist groups do not always have a clear political agenda. They are first and foremost interested in purifying Islam from the traditional influences of the Sufi brotherhoods, like praying with a *chapelet* (chaplet), *maraboutage*, and the worship of saints. Some reformist groups, however, attract many brotherhood-affiliated members. Therefore, it seems that we should approach them as groups that react to and interact with each other and with the government. At the conference this was done from different angles. Bakary Sambe proposed to revisit the terrain of Islam in Senegal as it can no longer be understood in terms of this (simplified) dualism. The changes that took place in the last twenty years, the growing dynamics of the *confréries* that have not escaped modernization, the politicizing of the marabouts, and the external influence ask for a new approach, which – according to Sambe – should be interdisciplinary.

Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, who presented his research on political Islam in Nigeria between 1803 and 2003, suggested an economic reading of political Islam. According to him most political Islamist groups have primarily economic interests. Furthermore, he thinks Islam nowadays is not more political than it was 200 years ago, and therefore the political dimension should not be over-emphasized. Souley Hassane discussed the marketing of Islam. To illustrate this, he mentioned the *marabouts guérrisseurs*, religious agents who are paid for their services, and the dowry. In addition to the economic, marketing, and electoral dimensions, Rüdiger Seesemann proposed a new dimension: 'the quotidian dimension'. He sees the dichotomy of 'reformists' and 'brotherhoods' as another way of saying 'modern' and 'traditional', respectively, which is not a reflection of what is happening in the field. He also critiqued the division between little and great traditions. In order to understand how people perceive Islam and everything related to it, researchers should look at the debates that take place on a local level (in the little tradition), because it reveals more about the debates at the top level (in the great tradition). In other words, researchers should contextualize Islam on the level of everyday life.

The (partial) implementation of *shari'a* in various West African countries was the subject of a number of papers. In Nigeria some states have now put into practice criminal

law of the *shari'a*, and this has led to a storm of protest from Western states. Mukhtar Umar Bunza of the Usmanu Dan Fodiyo University of Nigeria focused on the influence of Iranian politics and ideology on political Islamic movements in Nigeria. While most Muslims in Nigeria would vote for implementation of the *shari'a*, the most extremist movement in Nigeria, Yan Shi'ah, is against it, because they believe true *shari'a* can only be realized after a successful jihad, after which the whole state will be an Islamic state. Thus, this group does not acknowledge the *shari'a* under a non-Islamic democratic government. Perouse de Montclos also argued that the *shari'a* can only be implemented in a Muslim state, affirming that *shari'a* legislation in Nigeria causes problems mostly related to two articles of the constitution: freedom of religion and freedom of movement. A Muslim who converts to Christianity in the north of Nigeria is sentenced to death. This conflicts with the article on freedom of religion. In the south of Nigeria there is the option to convert, but according to the freedom of movement a Christian should be allowed to settle in one of the Muslim states.

Several scholars focused on female Muslims. Fatou Sow, a Senegalese scholar and member of SEDET, warned of the resurgence of Islamist groups in Senegal. She is a feminist Muslim, and having fought all her life to free herself from a subordinate posi-

tion, she considers these reformist groups as a threat to the achievements of the feminist movement in Senegal. More women in West Africa are wearing the *hijab* nowadays, which she sees as depriving women of their liberty. For her, the reformist movements use a *discours d'enfermement*, and are only interested in controlling women's sexuality and fertility. In contrast, Cleo Cantone (SOAS, London), herself a converted Muslim – wearing a veil – spoke about the veil as an opportunity for women in Senegal to practise Islam in the public sphere, instead of always being confined to their homes. While in the mosques of the brotherhoods women are discouraged from entering the mosque, the newly built Sunni mosques all have a space for the women to pray as well as a room where they can receive Qur'anic lessons. Cantone therefore considered veiling a positive development, interpreting it as empowerment (see p. 29).

*The organizers of the conference hope the papers will be ready to be published at the end of 2003.*

*Caco Verhees is a Ph.D. candidate at the ISIM.  
E-mail: c.verhees@isim.nl*