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Religion and Transformation in West Africa

Sulemana, H.M.

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Religion and Transformation in West Africa

The main objective of the conference was to explore the relationship between social and cultural institutions and religious practices in contemporary West African Societies. Twenty papers were presented covering a wide spectrum of topics and countries. The conference participants debated public policies, dress codes, sharia, and gender issues.

The first keynote address was delivered by Prof. J.K. Olupona who emphasized the need for a clear-cut methodology for the academic study of various religious traditions. He pointed out that thematic studies of religious traditions, rather than studies on particular faiths, would bring the field further. He also advocated that religious leaders play a role in not only bringing about a democratic renaissance in West Africa, but that they work towards sustaining these democracies. Desmond Tutu's role during the Apartheid and post-Apartheid political developments in South Africa served as a case in point. He emphasized the urgent need for religious leaders to be active in social issues such as corruption, indiscipline, abuse of power, and ensuring good governance and rule of law.

Abdulkader Tayob brought to the fore the need to distinguish between a scholar of religion and a religious leader in another keynote address. He was of the conviction that the two perform different roles in society. He made it explicitly clear that, as a scholar of religion, Desmond Tutu is not his role model. However, he was quick to add that most participants will disagree with him. He dwelt on the problem of Muslim representation in government. In Ghana for instance, there is always the problem of which body represents Muslims at the national political level. Currently, there is a struggle between the office of the national Chief Imam (spiritual leader) and the Federation of Muslim Councils, the legitimate mouthpiece for Sunni Muslims in dealings with the government. He further dealt with the emergence of Islamic reformist movements and the Islamic ideological debate about the

The African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR) held a three-day regional conference under the title, The Role of Religion in the Socio-Cultural Transformation of West African Sub-continent from the 5th-8th February 2004 in Ghana at the Ghana Institute for Management and Public Administration (GIMPA). Among the topics covered were: religion and the state; conflict and violence; religion in contestation; religion as a source of values; and the study of religion.

an attempt by university officials to curb the global renaissance of Islamic movements; especially after the introduction of sharia in Northern Nigeria since the reintroduction of democracy. This development was surprising to the Ghanaian participants because Ghanaian tertiary female students prefer western fashion, which is seen to be incompatible with the African culture. Yet, at the same time, there is also an upsurge of the use of the veil by Muslim female students in the tertiary institutions in Ghana.

The implementation, structures, and problems of sharia in Northern Nigeria generated a great deal of discussion (presentations by Mu-tasim Dawood and Lateef Mobolaji Adetona). Lateef argued that the sharia was becoming an issue in the Southwest especially among the Yoruba in Nigeria where independent sharia committees are emerging under the supervision of the Supreme Council for sharia. Eventually sharia law will be implemented at the federal level.

The conference was supported by the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) Leiden, the University of California, Davis and ICCO-Zest, the Netherlands. More than thirty scholars from the Netherlands, the United States, Britain, Nigeria, the Gambia, and Ghana, participated in the conference.

*Hajj Mumuni Sulemana, Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana.
The conference organizers plan to publish selected papers in an edited volume.*

HAJJ MUMUNI SULEMANA

ISIM POST-DOCTORAL FELLOWSHIPS

The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) invites applications for ISIM post-doctoral fellowships. The fellowships are available to scholars who have recently (within five years) obtained a Ph.D. degree in anthropology, sociology, religious studies, cultural studies or political science.

The ISIM conducts and promotes interdisciplinary research on contemporary social, political, cultural, and intellectual trends and movements in Muslim societies and communities. The ISIM welcomes research proposals which are informed particularly by a social science perspective and fit in with the research profile of the ISIM in general, or related to the specific research programmes of the ISIM Chairs. The current ISIM research programmes and projects include: Islam, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere; Muslim Cultural Politics; Debating Family Dynamics and

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ISIM, P.O. Box 11089
2301 EB Leiden, The Netherlands

Tel: +31-(0)71-527 7905
Fax: +31-(0)71-527 7906
E-mail: info@isim.nl
Website: <http://www.isim.nl>