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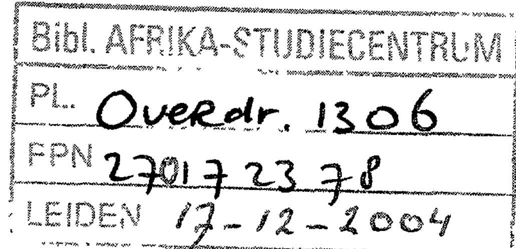

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In this paper, I consider the interpretation of and the ethnographic production about Islam and Muslim societies, particularly in Africa. The Orientalist 'doctrine' of an unchanging and timeless Islam has long been shown to be inadequate for understanding the obvious diversity and complexity within and between Muslim societies. However, the limitations of certain anthropological studies—notably, their almost exclusive focus on local context and cultures to which they sometimes attribute different 'Islams' (e.g., African Islam)—have not been critically examined to the same degree. I argue that one must study Islam as a discursive tradition at the intersection of the local and the supralocal, including broader scriptural traditions of Islam. Drawing on ethnographic and historical research on Islamic law in West Africa, I show how Muslims in Mali participate in the supralocal discourses of Islam and some of the ways in which local and regional history and culture shape their participation in these discourses.

KEYWORDS: Anthropology, Islam, Orientalism, law, Africa

Introduction

In the last few pages of *Orientalism*, Edward Said singled out the anthropologist Clifford Geertz for special commendation, noting that his 'interest in Islam is discrete and concrete enough to be animated by the specific societies and problems he studies and not by the rituals, preconceptions, and doctrines of Orientalism' (Said 1978:326). More than twenty years later, the claim that Geertz is somehow a post- or anti-Orientalist scholar is perhaps jarring to most anthropologists and other social scientists interested in the study of Islam and Muslim societies.[1] Geertz's *Islam Observed*, published in 1968 (and to which Said presumably refers), was the first in a series of anthropological texts concerned with Muslim societies written in the wake of decolonisation. If Geertz's book was a timely attempt to compare Moroccan and

Indonesian culture through the lens of Islam, as many have noted, Geertz's preoccupation in much of his research has been with local culture.[2] This attention to local culture has generally come at the expense of attention to the supralocal, the translocal, and the configurations of power within and across communities.[3] In other words, Geertz's approach ignores precisely some of the most important features of Islam, not only as a global religion, but also as a 'discursive tradition' (Asad 1986) that ought to be of central concern to anthropologists, other social scientists, as well as historians.

Although scholars have identified some of the pitfalls of focusing so singularly on local culture in Geertzian fashion, particularly from a political economy perspective (e.g., Roseberry 1989), it is worth considering some of the inherent problems in such an approach to the study of Islam and Muslim societies.[4] Participant observation fieldwork in anthropology clearly promotes attention to the local, that is, to the kind of 'data' one gleans during fieldwork living in a small face-to-face community of one sort or another. The fact that most anthropologists trained today do not conduct fieldwork in such communities in no way diminishes the lure of such idealised field sites and the exploration of the local. Focusing so closely on local culture, Islam as an object of study seems to become, from the perspective of the analyst, a plural phenomenon.[5] Thus, it almost seems to follow that scholars would attach ethnic and geographic qualifiers to Islam, speaking and writing about various Islams.[6] For example, in *Moroccan Islam*, Eickelman (1976; cf. 1987) wrote about Islam in a particular town in Morocco and then ventured to claim that what he described—Moroccan Islam—was applicable elsewhere in Morocco, though no doubt different from Islam further afield. Similarly, others have written about what they have called African, Javanese, South Asian, Turkish, and even Chinese Islam. By focusing our attention on the diversity in beliefs and practices among Muslims, such writers arguably contest the Orientalist view of Islam and Muslim societies as basically timeless and unchanging. This is not, however, necessarily the case. In certain studies, there is an assumption—occasionally an explicit claim—that such Islams are on the periphery and, therefore, different from the Islam existing in some purer form elsewhere in time and/or in space, generally the presumed centre of the Islamic world, the Arab Middle East. Increasingly, scholars, including former proponents of the Islams approach such as Eickelman (1987), have called this perspective into question. This is not to suggest, however, that such an approach has been completely abandoned.

It is perhaps in French scholarship that the plural Islams approach has been furthest developed and its limitations most apparent, for example, in the notion of *Islam noir*—Black or African Islam—in West Africa.[7] During the colonial period, the French, for obvious geopolitical reasons, sought to keep African Muslims isolated from other variants of Islam and Muslims in North Africa and the Middle East and the bogeys of pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism, and nationalism. French colonial administrators claimed that Islam in West Africa

was different from Islam elsewhere in the Muslim world, a more debased form due to African 'animist' accretions. In an effort to keep West Africans beyond the influence of other Muslims, the French sought to exploit such differences, promoting what they called *Islam noir* that was localised and distinct from *Islam blanc* (White Islam), as practised elsewhere.[8] The French elevated a quiescent Muslim establishment that they promoted as the guardians of orthodoxy of this *Islam noir*. Not surprisingly, African Muslims—even members of the colonial authorised establishment—did not claim that they were practising Black Islam or West African Islam.[9] As Launay (1992) has recently argued, to talk about Islam in the plural is to make what amounts to a theologically questionable assertion from the point of view of most Muslims who assert the existence of one—true—Islam despite the incredible and often acknowledged diversity in beliefs and practices among Muslims across space and time. To assert the existence of multiple Islams is something that outside analysts should simply not be doing (ibid.). This is not to preclude the possibility that some people in some places might state that they practice, say, Javanese or African American Islam. But first of all this needs to be demonstrated and not simply asserted. If, to follow Geertz (and Malinowski before him) one should write from the native's point of view, then, clearly, social scientists (and especially anthropologists) should not write unreflectively about multiple Islams, African or otherwise.

Despite such compelling critiques of the Islams approach, it is an approach that is by no means out of scholarly fashion, especially in studies of Africa. Vincent Monteil's study of *Islam noir*, which first appeared in 1964, has gone through several editions, and was translated into English in the 1980s, continues to be cited about Islam in Africa. In a recent edited volume, *African Islam and Islam in Africa* (Evers Rosander and Westerlund 1997), the editors make the distinction between 'African Islam' and 'Islam', a presumably more authentic version, their central framing device. Evers Rosander writes in the introduction that 'African Islam' is basically those '"localized" forms which are found particularly in Sufi contexts. African Islam has frequently been depicted as culturally as well as religiously flexible and accommodating' (Rosander 1997:1). She explains that '"Islam in Africa" ... designate[s] Islamist tendencies, which could also be called reformist/activist tendencies. Their aims are to "purify" African Islam from local or indigenous African ideas and practices as well as from Western influences' (ibid.). I can note that these definitions would be offensive to many African Muslims I know whose conceptions and practices of Islam are not tied directly to Sufism. The definitions would be equally offensive to African Sufis I know who are aware that their practices of Sufism are not necessarily exclusively African. In any case, such an approach, wittingly or unwittingly, reproduces the Orientalist 'doctrines' about a timeless Islam—rigid and militant—coming from outside Africa, against which certain persons—either outside observers or other interested social actors—measure local or regional variants, in this case, African

Islam that is supposedly more flexible.

How then does one go about the anthropological study of Islam? If Islam is a unitary phenomenon, how does one deal with the obvious diversity and complexity within and between Muslim societies? To give a partial answer to these questions I turn to some of my ethnographic and historical research in West Africa to point to the connections and tensions between the local and supralocal in Islamic discourses and practices in a particular setting.

During my field research in western Mali, ordinary people—all of whom are Muslims—frequently told me that many, if not most, inhabitants in the region were of 'slave' status, that is, descendants of people who were slaves at some point in the past.[10] Such local knowledge is consonant with French colonial demographic data; early twentieth century estimates of the slave-status population in the region range from around 40% to as high as 60% of the total population in some places.[11] After the French conquest, the long process of the renegotiation of relations between slave and free was accelerated, a process that is still not yet complete, as the following discussion of the inscription of Islamic law suggests. Leading up to and after the formal abolition of slavery by the French early in this century, many slaves simply moved away—though not always very far away—from those who claimed to own them. Despite formal abolition, the distinction between 'slave' and 'free' continues to be an important feature of the social landscape. Because the region of my research remains in many ways like a small face-to-face community, most people are aware of the hereditary social status of others in the area.

Post-colonial Mali, like its colonial predecessor, is a secular (*laïc*) state. Since Malian law does not recognise slavery, all citizens are at least in theory equal. Most descendants of former slaves in the region generally assert both their 'free' status and identities as Muslims. Many Muslims of 'free' status, including most Muslim clerics, however, claim that former slaves in the region were never formally freed by their owners and, according to Islamic legal precepts, they and their descendants remain the property of their owners. This is said to be the case even though their owners might be untraceable. In this interpretation of Islamic law,[12] such people and their descendants remain slaves. In other words, this interpretation legitimates the social distinction between 'free' and 'slave'. As for the many descendants of servile status people, the ambiguity that surrounds their status persists, shaping, if not determining mechanically, their engagement in the local social field and frequently in the broader society. Indeed, some servile status people who consider themselves 'free' Muslims nonetheless frequently follow—consciously or not—certain Islamic legal codes proscribed for slaves.

One of my friends, a Bamana woman of hereditary slave status, whom I will call Mariama, was considerably bothered by my questions about status. She told me that hereditary status—slave or free—was now largely irrelevant. She said that money now determined one's status. Here, she stopped to recite the lyrics of a popular song by a Malian singer who points out that today the

person with money is noble or free. In other words, those without money are effectively slaves. I should note that such an ideology is consonant with Mariama's own self-fashioning as a hardworking and thrifty Muslim woman, who follows the precepts of Islam, particularly regular ritual daily prayer and alms-giving, hardly the makings of a particularistic African Islam. At the time of my fieldwork, having accumulated considerable capital through wage labour, retail trade, and income from rental properties, Mariama was one of the most prosperous women in the area. Her own economic status, however, did not erase her hereditary status, at least from the perspective of Islamic law, or, perhaps more accurately, the way it is locally interpreted.

Several years ago Mariama's husband became very ill and died. As a widow, she immediately went into a period of 'mourning' during which she did not leave her family's home and only wore old clothes for a set period of time. These were their 'customs', she explained, and she could not fail to follow them even though she had been a salaried worker at the time. An anthropologist concerned with local culture might just stop at what seem to be these local, possibly 'ethnic' or regional practices for widows. An approach that treats Islam as a discursive tradition that relates to the broader scriptural tradition of Islam is, however, crucial here. Indeed, the length of the woman's 'customary' period of mourning—two months and five days—follows the legal precepts specified for women of slave status. According to the legal texts of the Maliki school of jurisprudence used in this region, that is the amount of time for *'idda* (Arabic), the period of retreat during which a new marriage cannot be contracted, a widowed *slave* woman should respect (see, for example, the tenth-century text by al-Qayrawani 1975:194ff.; Juynboll 1953). The legal texts specify that this period is half that for free women. How Mariama's ancestors actually learned these 'rules' is not clear, possibly unknowable. At some point, slaves learned these rules that come from the traditions of Islamic jurisprudence transmitted in Islamic texts in which such rules are listed and, apparently, implemented in practice and transmitted to others. In fact, all adult women here can articulate these rules for widows. Despite Mariama's assertions that she is free, she and many other women like her continue to follow such Islamic legal precepts, which clearly index them as not free.

Although an older style Orientalist might have ended the analysis with the exegesis of the relevant Islamic texts, the anthropologist, needs to be equally concerned with the diversity—read local culture—that exists not only within but also across Muslim societies. Indeed, there are certain practices surrounding widowhood in the region that are clearly not described in any of the relevant scholarly texts. For example, during the period of mourning, some widows wear their dead husbands' clothing, and those widows reluctant to don those clothes might be compelled to do so. The same Islamic legal texts used here note that widows in 'mourning' (Arabic, *ihdad*) must refrain from ornamentation in their dress and grooming (see al-Qayrawani 1975:ibid.). I saw widows in 'free' clerical families wearing dark clothes, as the texts indicate is

permitted. Their period of retreat lasts four months and ten days (*Qur'an* ii:234), that is, twice the length of that of slave women. In any case, many ordinary Muslim widows do wear their husbands' clothes, even if some first tailored the clothes to fit them properly, as Mariama herself did. If previous Orientalist scholarship might have ignored or sometimes even denigrated these practices, asserting that they were not part of Islam,[13] it would be equally mistaken to take such practices as a sign of a local, even regional, African Islam as some anthropologists might have it.[14] To the contrary, we need to recognise that some rather critical *Islamic* concepts—here *'idda*, *ihdad*, related to widowhood—have been locally implemented and interpreted. If the actual length of the period of the retreat (*'idda*) follows the legal texts rather closely, the practice of wearing the husband's clothes during mourning (*ihdad*) diverges from the text. Although exactly how the latter practice arose might never be clear, wearing the husband's clothes indexes the kind of change women must have learned was required of them as widows according to the law.

A well-known Muslim cleric explained to me that members of a family had come to him for advice concerning a woman in their family who had recently been widowed. In keeping with what they knew to be 'custom', they insisted that she wear her dead husband's clothes for the period of mourning. The widow had vehemently refused, and they sought this respected cleric's opinion. The cleric told them that nowhere in Islamic law is it an obligation for a widow to wear her dead husband's clothes. The 'custom' was, therefore, not enforceable from the standpoint of Islamic law (and I would qualify his reading of the law). Pointing to Islamic law, he instructed the men that the widow simply had to dress without ornamentation during the period of mourning. It was perfectly acceptable that some women might wear the husband's clothes—such a practice was not considered un-Islamic.

As I have tried to suggest in this brief example, Muslims in West Africa, that is, those living on the so-called periphery of the Islamic world, participate in the supralocal discourses of Islam—anthropological attempts to study local contexts and cultures notwithstanding. Attention to local and specific societies, what Said seemed to appreciate in Geertz's work, should not make anthropologists lose sight of the fact that such Muslims have long participated in such discourses, including the scriptural traditions of Islam.[15] Muslims in this part of West Africa acknowledge such categories as 'free' and 'slave' from the scriptural traditions, and they practice certain rules for the behavior of those people of such categories. At the same time, it is clear that local and regional culture and history shape participation in these discourses. Many descendants of slaves vehemently deny their status as slaves, all the while that women who are descendants of slaves follow the rules proscribed for widows of slave status. The practice of wearing the dead husband's clothes seems to be a local, perhaps even a much more widespread, interpretation of the scriptural traditions of Islam.

In closing, I want to stress that in order to reach a post-Orientalist point,

scholars of Islam and of Muslim societies—and not just anthropologists—have to acknowledge the limitations of studying Islam as a local, if not explicitly plural phenomenon. We need to examine Islamic discourses and practices at the intersection of the local, the supralocal, and the translocal. Clearly, power must figure in any such analyses. Only in this way can we begin to understand Islam in different contexts and some of the different ways of being Muslim.

Notes

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1. In his subsequent reconsideration of Orientalism, Said unambiguously repudiated the work of Geertz, pointing to 'the standard disciplinary rationalisations and self-congratulatory clichés about hermeneutic circles' offered by Clifford Geertz' (Said 1985:5). It is nonetheless striking that Said does not explicitly address the issue of Geertz's study of Islam and its possible relationship to Orientalism.
2. In *Islam Observed*, Geertz's main concern is with contrasting overall religious styles in Morocco and Indonesia, two countries where the overwhelming majority is Muslim. If it is laudatory from an anthropological perspective to pay attention to how one religion, Islam, takes various forms in two very distant countries, in his study, Geertz arguably reified and homogenised centuries of Moroccan and Indonesian history into enduring cultural styles or forms, what he calls 'maraboutism' or the cult of saints in the case of Morocco. In this way, Geertz reproduces the Orientalist image of a timeless, unchanging Orient, drawing quite heavily from Orientalist and colonial sources and notions to construct his contrasting cultural styles.
3. It is interesting to note that recent discussions of so-called transnationalism (e.g., Appadurai 1990) devote little attention to religion and Islam in particular (cf. van der Veer 1994).
4. For reviews of the literature on the anthropology of Islam, see Asad (1986); Eickelman (1982, 1987); Abu-Lughod (1989); Launay (1992, 1998); Bowen (1993); Soares (1997); and Starrett (1997).
5. This was the perspective el-Zein (1977) adopted.
6. Asad (1986) has critiqued the multiple Islams approach perhaps most forcefully.
7. Other French colonialist notions include Berber Islam, Maghrebi Islam, and so forth.
8. For a French colonial example, see André (1924). For a discussion of the colonial notion of *Islam noir*, see Harrison (1988:93-182) and Launay and Soares (1999).
9. Cf. The Nation of Islam and Black Muslims.
10. This includes periods from the mid- to late nineteenth century to the recent past, thus from the pre-colonial period through French colonial rule into the post-

colonial period.

11. The estimate of 40% is from Klein (1987:52). The estimate of 60%—with no explanation as to how the percentage was determined—comes from French archival sources. Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France, 75 APOM 8/11, Letter Lt.-Gov. HSN to Gov.-Gen. Dakar, Bamako, 2 July 1918. See also Soares (1997).
12. It is perhaps more accurate to say Islamic jurisprudence (Arabic, *fiqh*).
13. In other cases, they may even have declared that certain people who called themselves Muslims were not or only 'lax' Muslims.
14. See Messick's discussion (1993:182-3) of 'custom' and the grounding of Islamic law in local settings which has important implications for an anthropology of Islam and Muslim societies.
15. See also Bowen (1993) and Soares (1996, 1997).

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