

Report from:

The organizing team of the Summer School
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International Summer School**(Re-)Configurations of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa:****A Summer School on Islamic Practices, Imaginations, Groups, and
Actors in the African Context**

(Berlin, August 12th – August 17th 2013)

The Muslim presence in Sub-Saharan Africa has a long and varied history. African Muslims have long taken part in the making of local social relations and habitats, creating institutions, and relating to other religious groups. People, ideas, and materials have traveled within, to, and from Africa, leaving their marks in various forms and contexts. Although African Muslims are active members of the global *umma*, Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa has often been subjugated to an alleged 'African experience'. The global *umma* as well as the local context, to which Muslims in Sub-Saharan Africa both belong, form a 'glocalized' field of religious and socio-cultural practice. To address and critically discuss these dynamics was the aim of the international summer school, which took place from August 12th until August 17th 2013 at the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies.

The summer school was organized by doctoral students Barbara Ogbone, Benedikt Pontzen, Dauda Abubakar, Hanna Nieber, Jasmin Mahazi, Kristina Dohrn and Murtala Ibrahim and aimed at bringing together scholars from various disciplines and institutions who conduct research on Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa. It was also designed to foster further collaboration with the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies which also has a considerable number of PhD students working on Islam in Africa. A first collaborative workshop had been held in this regard at FU Berlin in June 2011 on the topic of "Transforming Social Orders in African Muslim Contexts: (Re)constructions of Identities, Institutions, Movements, Markets". Due to a generous co-funding by the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies (BGSMS), the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies

(BIGSAS) and the Center for International Cooperation of the Freie Universität Berlin (CIC), the summer school was able to finance the participation of five PhD candidates from several African countries.

Based on an open call for papers, the summer school included a selection of 19 contributions from doctoral students from the Universität Bayreuth (Germany), Freie Universität Berlin (Germany), the University of Pennsylvania (USA), Harvard University (USA), the University of Basel (Switzerland), Obafemi Awolowo University (Nigeria), University of Jos (Nigeria), the University of Ghana, Moi University (Kenya), Kagumo Teachers` Training College (Kenya) and the University of Western Cape (South Africa). The applicants came from a wide range of academic disciplines (anthropology, philosophy and history as well as religious, Islamic and literary studies) and were selected by criteria set by the organizing team, such as quality of the paper abstract and overall application, field research area and topical fit with the call for papers.

Prof. Hansjörg Dilger (BGSMCS) and Prof. Rüdiger Seesemann (BIGSAS) supported and supervised this graduate students` initiative as academic advisors and were involved in all phases of planning and organization of the summer school. They also officially inaugurated the summer school and provided input and advise throughout the week. The program was set up in a way to provide for different forms of learning and included paper presentations by PhD students, input and discussion of readings by senior lecturers, a publishing strategies workshop, a public outreach event and the visit of an Africa-oriented Muslim organization in Berlin.

Panels

The PhD participants presented papers based on their on-going research projects. The papers were grouped in seven research panels with the following themes:

- *`Traditional Islamic Institutions in Practice`*
- *`Muslim Schools – Schooling Muslims`*
- *`The Aesthetics of Sound and the City`*
- *`Performing Piety`*
- *`Female Engagement with Islamic Practices`*
- *`Scholarly Traditions` Islamic Healing and Medicine`.*

The panel themes reflected the main concern of the summer school, which was to draw attention to the way in which Sub-Saharan African Muslims are actively involved in the ongoing transformations of their social, economic, and political spheres which in turn have profound effects on specific Islamic practices (see list of papers below).

Thematic Lectures

Furthermore, the summer school participants benefited greatly from the input of senior scholars who not only chaired the respective panels, but some of whom also gave thematic lectures in the morning sessions. These lectures were preceded by readings assigned to the participants, and followed by lively and stimulating discussions.

Among the lecturers were Prof. Benjamin Soares (Afrika-Studiecentrum in Leiden, The Netherlands; lecture: *Islam after the Ethical Turn*), Prof. Roman Loimeier (University of Göttingen; lecture: *The Anthropology of Islam debate in the African context*) and Prof. Rüdiger Seesemann (University of Bayreuth; lecture: *Theories and Practices of Islamic Knowledge*). The lectures by these internationally distinguished specialists on various Muslim societies and practices in Sub-Saharan Africa also provided an impulse for the main points of interest along with bones of contention throughout the summer school discussions.

One of the main questions addressed and debated in both the lectures and subsequent discussions was how to critically assess the possibilities and the limits of an academic approach to the study of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa. For too long, research of and in Muslim communities had been influenced by the Protestant bias of the researchers, which describes, interprets and analyzes Islamic practices through a binary opposition, such as the simplistic notions of “esoteric peaceful Sufis” versus “rationalistic radical reformers”, or “non-scripturalists” versus “scripturalists”. Overcoming these binaries was already advocated by Talal Asad (1986) with his concept of Islam as a discursive tradition, which until today showed only slow adaptation. It was a shared opinion of the participants that a Muslim society can most adequately be described and analyzed if Islam is regarded as practice and/or as a local discursive tradition, and when one attends to the societies` (under research) own categories of distinction, i.e., to emic distinctions and qualifiers which are rooted in local contexts and which are bound in time.

In that respect, the summer school was a major success insofar that most of the presented papers showed that the previously dominant binary opposition was in the process of being overcome by a “practice turn” which brought together philological and anthropological perspectives in studying practice and scripture, not as separate entities but as intrinsically and substantially intertwined with each other. The success of overcoming these binary concepts is not least because such a dichotomy was simply not reflective of the empirical reality within the Sub-Saharan African Muslim societies under research.

The summer school also demonstrated that it is important to critically reflect on long-established concepts in the study of Muslim societies, such as the concept of “piety”. The current lack of research on the “cultivation of piety” among Muslim societies (especially in Africa) not only reflects an apparent misconception of the term, but also that the focus on this concept doesn’t seem to lead further in the study of Muslim societies. Finally, the papers presented at the summer school suggest that the close intertwining of the religious field with economic processes and market dynamics in particular societies might become a focus research area for the future.

Accompanying activities during the Summer School

The summer school format was not only supplemented by excursions to spots of Islamic African Networks in Berlin, a sight-seeing tour, a joint dinner and an informal get-together, but also by small group meetings at which a group of two to three junior scholars had the privilege to scholarly interact in a more personal way with one senior scholar.

The summer school participants furthermore benefited enormously from a workshop on publishing strategies which was offered by Prof. Birgit Meyer (University of Utrecht and editor of the journal *Material Religion*) who provided practical guidelines and advice for successful publication.

An outreach event offered the opportunity for summer school participants to interact with an interested public in a discussion after an open lecture on “*The Emergence of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria: Christian Understanding and Responses*” by Prof. Umar H.D. Danfulani (University of Jos). The public lecture event took place at the *Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung* in Berlin-Mitte.

Conclusion

The strong and highly positive resonance that this summer school received (from junior as well as senior scholars) showed that an event like this is the right approach to achieve academic excellence in the study of Muslim societies in Sub-Saharan Africa. To raise the standards of international scientific research on Muslim societies, the participants found it very useful to reflect on how high quality empirical ethnographic material can be collected. Thereby a lively exchange between scholars of various parts of the world, looking at common themes from different disciplinary and regional angles helped to overcome the debates on exogenous (“Western”) versus indigenous (“African”) understandings of the subject matter. This would not only imply the attempt to move the marginalized topic of Muslim societies of Sub-Saharan Africa to the center of research, but also foster a close dialogue between scholars from the African continent and their colleagues from European, US American, and other (mostly) “Western” settings.

Thus, our collective outlook for the coming year is to organize a follow-up summer school of a similar kind – which should focus on the academic (and equally interdisciplinary) approach to the study of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa, preferably with a focus on method and theory. Ideally, a next year`s summer school should take place at the University of Jos in Nigeria, offering the opportunity for more participation of scholars from Africa. A highly positive meeting was arranged in this regard during the course of the summer school between Prof. Bongardt, Vice-President for Teaching at Freie Universität, Prof. Danfulani (University of Jos) and Prof. Dilger (Freie Universität Berlin) in which they discussed opportunities for future collaboration between the two universities.