

Research Fellow

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Research Project Title

African Islam: Evolution, Networks and Impacts of Social Change

Project Overview

African Islam: Evolution, Networks and Impacts of Social Change seeks to explore the process of Islamisation marked by the strong presence of the Sufi brotherhoods in Sub-Saharan Africa. His research aims to explore the evolution of Islamised African society through factors that are not necessarily religious, that do not follow global Islamic norms, and that are able to preserve indigenous characteristics in spite of their interactions with the rest of the Muslim world.

The most important element of his research project will be its focus on Sufi brotherhoods, which represent the most important defence against fundamentalism in Senegal. In addition to these factors, the project will take the recent evolutions due to the effects of globalisation into account. It will argue that globalisation has not lessened the importance of the religious domain, but in fact has made it even more complex. The project aims to demonstrate that in Africa, perhaps more than anywhere else, the Islamic tendency (in whatever form it manifests itself) is a challenge to the very roots of the African way of being, community life and behaviour.

If one conducts a brief survey of Islamic studies in Europe, and even within Muslim contexts, it can be seen that Sub-Saharan Africa and the evolution of Islam within it is not a very well researched field. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Islam is practiced by millions of Africans with varied traditions and interpretations of the religion. Interestingly, the region has seen more than 1000 years of Islamic practice without any serious conflict between it and local social frameworks. African Islam (or 'Black Islam' as it is called within French academia) and its evolution and change are not considered seriously within the field of modern Islamic studies, despite the fact that its adaptation to local cultures remains the most important factor in making African Islam very peaceful.

The mass adoption of Islam in Africa began with the arrival of the Muslim Sufi brotherhoods (*turuq*) in the nineteenth century. At that time, African Sub-Saharan countries were mostly colonised by European powers. Sambe argues that within this context, the adoption of Islam *en masse* can be understood as a reaction or an opposition to the colonial system, which sought to destroy the existing African political and social organisations. Sambe's research will attempt to explain why,

in many African societies, Islam represented a framework through which to oppose the colonial system.

Some scholars in this field cite an entire series of factors that show a degree of cultural and sociological proximity between Islam and African cultures. However, there is not yet substantial research which can explain the phenomena of African mass adoption of Islam during the colonial period, a point that Sambe's research project seeks to address.

During the colonial period, Islam offered African societies a new framework for political, social and cultural interaction. Solidarity and respect for charismatic chiefs are generally two main characteristics of African cultures. The adoption of Islam offered African societies a new solidarity within the Muslim community, replacing the village and tribal solidarities without changing the habits of day-to-day life of the group. The long cohabitation of Islam with traditional cultures has also had an effect on local cultures. For example, there has been an interaction between African languages and Arabic. The language of the Qur'an has imparted a richness of expression and vocabulary within existing African languages and dialects, providing an opportunity to express more abstract realities.

In addition to this, the need for charismatic leaders and to be organised in a group can help explain the successful experience of Muslim Sufi brotherhoods in Sub-Saharan Africa. The peaceful characteristics of these organisations and their mystical educational method provide a key to understanding the widespread adoption of Islam in many African societies. As can be seen through their vitality and flexibility, there is no doubt that for African Muslims in Senegal, Islam and local traditions are in no way opposed. Importantly, in the case of Senegal, Islam is not considered a religion which has been imported from the outside.

Sambe's research will study how Islamic society in Senegal, while strongly connected to the Arab world, remains sheltered from violence and extremism despite the re-emergence in some societies of violent political movements that use Islamic symbols. Despite the Wahhabi influence and the development of new Salafi movements, Islam in Senegal remains peaceful and incorporated within local cultural systems.

Sambe's research is based largely on fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2005 in Senegal consisting of meetings with religious leaders and Islamic associations. His findings seek to help to provide an understanding of the process of change in this society and better anchor his research in lived realities. In addition to fieldwork, largely neglected Arabic sources will inform Sambe's research project.