

# ISLAM IN AFRICA IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

BENJAMIN SOARES AND BENEDIKT PONTZEN

Since the fall of 2018, Benjamin Soares has been directing a three-year multi-disciplinary project, “Islam in Africa in Global Context,” funded through a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation’s Initiative on Religion in International Affairs to the University of Florida. The project is carried out by the Center for Global Islamic Studies in conjunction with the Center for African Studies. The main objectives are to deepen knowledge of Islam in Africa, challenge scholars of Islam working on other geographic areas to engage more fully with scholarship on Africa, and strengthen the study and understanding of Islam in the US, as well as in non-US institutions of higher education especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to helping to consolidate UF’s standing as a leading hub for the study of Islam in Africa, the project will also support non-US-based scholars, institutions, and higher education, particularly in Africa, through the training and mentoring of scholars. It will also facilitate long term international exchanges and networks. During the first year, the thematic focus will be lived Islam in Africa in a comparative context in a series of events, including a workshop in October, a symposium, and summer institute.

Benjamin Soares and Benedikt Pontzen, the project’s first post-doctoral associate, convened “Muslim Youths and Lived Islam in Africa and Beyond” as the first workshop of the project. On October 18-19, 2018, workshop participants explored and discussed approaches to the study of Muslim youths in Africa and beyond. One of the key questions was how Muslim youths understand and practice their religion in different contexts. Given the great diversity of ways in which Muslim youths live their region, the participants agreed one cannot reduce lived Islam to a single reading, nor, for that matter, can one consider either “youth” or understandings of Islam as fixed. The

papers and discussions therefore aimed at exploring the complexity of Muslim youths’ ways of being Muslim in a variety of settings.

In the workshop keynote, Filippo Osella (University of Sussex) showed how lived Islam cannot be adequately studied in isolation. As he argued, Islam in Kerala in South India cannot be considered apart from its complex history and internal differences, local, translocal, and global networks, as well as the actual encounters with non-Muslim Others. Accordingly, Islam is lived at the interstices of the everyday and people’s various experiences. The subsequent paper presentations continued with this line of thinking through case studies of lived Islam among Muslim youths in Africa. Kae Amo (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris) described how since the 1980s Muslim students have gained wide visibility on university campuses in Senegal due to shifting corporeal and spatial practices through which their presence on campus is enacted. Mamadou Bodian (West African Research Center, Dakar), using a comparative approach, argued that over the last few decades Muslim students have reclaimed public space on campuses across the francophone Sahel. Frédéric Madore (University of Florida) presented on Islamic organizations in Burkina Faso that have re-fashioned themselves and the public sphere by devising new forms of civic engagement and entrepreneurship over the last few years. Musa Ibrahim (Bayero University, Kano) explained how the emergence of popular movie culture has not only propelled but partaken in ongoing debates on “correct” Islamic norms and practices. Focusing on Islamic schools in Zanzibar and their Omani textbooks, Kimberly Wortmann (Wake Forest University) showed how the textbooks familiarize Zanzibari youths with Omani culture and norms while the youths in turn translate and mediate these according to their own language and

experiences. The workshop was concluded with a lecture by Benjamin Soares (University of Florida). He argued that lived Islam in Nigeria cannot be studied without taking religious plurality and the mutual influences between Muslims and non-Muslims into account.

As all of these studies with the diversity of their topics and approaches helped to show, the ways in which Muslim youths live their religion are complex and cannot be premised on und erstandings of Islam as unchanging. There was a consensus that one needs more such rich empirical studies as well as comparative reflection in order to develop better analytical language to do justice to the complexity of lived Islam among Muslim youths. Such discussions will continue in future project activities in this and the coming two years.

*Benjamin Soares is director of the Center for Global Islamic Studies and professor in the Department of Religion. Benedikt Pontzen is a Luce Foundation postdoctoral fellow in the Center for Global Islamic Studies and the Center for African Studies.*

