

ISLAM AND MUSLIM SOCIETIES IN AFRICA

BENJAMIN SOARES

Benjamin Soares, who joined UF in January 2017, specializes in the study of Islam and Muslim societies in Africa with particular emphasis on the social, political, and intellectual dimensions of Islamic religious life in West Africa from the late 19th century to the present. He has worked on several interconnected projects for which he has conducted research in Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Nigeria, and Sudan. In his research, he looks at changing modalities of religious expression and modes of belonging under colonial rule and in the postcolonial period. His approach to the study of Islam and Muslim societies is firmly grounded in an understanding of broader Islamic history and combines anthropological and historical approaches. He devotes considerable attention to Islam within the global context, including connections and exchanges African Muslims have with other regions—colonial powers, the Maghreb, Egypt, the Hijaz, and, in his latest research, Asia—and how these unfold over time. Such research has been by design and of necessity methodologically creative in the use of ethnography, oral history, and the close reading and analysis of textual sources, colonial archives, and various media.

In one of his research projects, he is taking a broad look at modalities of religious expression and their transformations in Mali. In this research project, he focuses on changing religious expression in a world characterized by greater mobility, marked increases in urban economic activities, formal education, and new forms of “modern” knowledge and governmentality since the early 20th century. Beginning with the spread of Islam among non-Muslims, the project reconstructs the careers of those with reputations as Muslim saints, who are largely credited with mass Islamization. In addition, he explores movements of Islamic “reform,” influenced by supra-local movements and intellectual currents, new forms of associational life,

including Islamic associations advocating ethical improvement and/or Islamist agendas, and the trajectories of various charismatic figures. However, he does not limit the focus to Islam. Indeed, he considers waves of the re-enchantment of non-Islamic “tradition,” including new charismatic non-Muslim religious figures, who have called themselves literally “pagan saints” and promise good health, wealth, and success to their predominantly Muslim followers and clients. A major objective of the project is to build analytical tools for understanding the relations between changing modalities of religious

expression, modes of belonging, and social imaginaries.

Some of his other projects focus on Muslim public intellectuals in Africa and Muslim-Christian encounters in West Africa. Among his recent publications are the co-edited volume *Muslim Youth and the 9/11 Generation* (2016) and “Studying Islam and Christianity in Africa: Moving beyond a Bifurcated Field.” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* (2016).

Benjamin Soares is professor of religion and director of the Center for Global Islamic Studies.

Muslim Youth and the 9/11 Generation

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