

Conference Reports

Conference on Islam in Africa: Global, Cultural and Historical Perspectives

Academic studies regarding “Islam in Africa” have increased at a rapid pace over the past few years. In the 1960s, works of Trimmingham and Lewis were among the few which dealt with the subject. Towards the end of the 1990s, one could select from a number of works; for example, one had a choice between Westurland and Brenner, Fischer and Stewart, Levtzion and Mazrui and others. This reflects to what extent the African continent and, in particular, Islam has attracted the attention of scholars who represent a variety of disciplines.

A similar group of scholars participated in the conference sponsored by the Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University SUNY, NY on “Islam in Africa” from April 19–22, 2001. This report reflects the overall program adopted by the conference and mentions some of the papers presented.

The conference began on Thursday, April 19, 2001. During the two hours Rene Laremont, the deputy director of the Institute, chaired the two public presentations by John Esposito and Ali Mazrui, respectively. Esposito’s topic for that evening was “Islam in a Global Perspective: A Wider View” and Mazrui’s was “Islam and Cultural Globalization in Africa.” Esposito covered several issues. He started his presentation with autobiographical notes about how he got involved with Islam and Muslims. He then examined the development of Islamic resurgence movements; highlighted global perceptions of Muslims and Islam; tackled the issue of the supposed Islamic “threat”; responded to Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* (*Foreign Affairs* 1993, and NY 1996); and reflected – in passing – upon Pipes’ harmful articles and *Newsweek*’s negative reports. He concluded with comments on the twin processes of “Islamization” and “kafirization” and briefly explained how they impacted upon the concepts of democracy, pluralism, and minorities.

In Ali Mazrui’s presentation, two types of globalization were pointed out: economic and cultural. The first type has deepened the divisions and

also caused the marginalization of societies. The second has penetrated and assimilated communities. For example, Christianized Africa was receptive to the process of westernization; and via this process “the world of the arts” became sacred to the Westerner. This proved that “art” became a form of idolatry that was prohibited by Islamic law. He further pointed out that the Taliban responded to the West by destroying that which the West considered sacred. The events in Afghanistan raised the questions as to what to retain and what to preserve. Mazrui, however, mentioned that the status of these structures in Africa was and is still viewed differently by the Muslims who reside there. The African artifacts such as the pyramids remained intact and were not seen as obstacles to their beliefs. He made reference to Muslim artists such as Ali Darwish and Ibrahim Nur Sharif who broke away from the traditional schools that excelled in calligraphy. Mazrui’s ability to relate and grapple with diverse issues also clearly demonstrated his deep understanding of and insight into the contemporary world. These two stimulating presentations began the conference on a positive note.

On Friday, April 20, the first session started with three parallel panels: “Literature as Social Commentary,” “Islam and Political Contestation,” and “Urbanism, Architecture, and Art.” The first of the three panels was addressed by Susan Ireland (Grinnell College), Abd-el-Kader Cheref (University of Oran), and Novian Whitsitt (Luther College). Susan gave an insightful input on the “Visions of Islam in Contemporary Algerian Fiction” written in French. Her paper failed to touch upon fiction texts in Arabic; she, however, acknowledged that she did not explore texts in Arabic because of lack of information. Whitsitt’s “Islamic Hausa Feminism and Kano Market Literature: Qur’anic Reinterpretation of Novels of Barbara Ramat Yakubu” led to stimulating debates because he raised the problematic issue surrounding the “reinterpretation of the Qur’an.”

In the second session the three parallel panels were: “Dialogue Among the Abrahamic Faiths;” “Islam, Africa and Identity;” and “Islamic Brotherhoods in Africa’s Experience.” The first three included the following panelists: Abdussamad Ahmad (Addis Ababa University); James Ndyabahika (Makerere University); Abdellah Larhmaid (Universite Mohamed V); and Lawrence Mbogoni (William Patterson University). Abdussamad focused on “Muslims of Gojjam: the Minority Muslims in the Christian Highlands of Ethiopia.” James highlighted the “Confrontation of Islam with Christianity in Uganda and the Enhancement of Dialogue Towards a Better Understanding.” Abdullah addressed “The Perceptions of Jizyah: Commerce and Religious

Identity in Goulmime, 1859-1893.” Lawrence outlined the “Christian Contact with Islam in German East Africa.”

After lunch, the three parallel panels highlighted the following topics: “When Muslims Are a Minority: Islam and the Social Order in Kenya,” “Political Islam and Social Change” and “Dialogue of Civilizations.” In the last panel, John Azumah, who is linked to the Henry Martyn Institute (India), presented “The Arabo-Islamic Dispensation and Africa: A Quest for Sustainable Inter-religious Dialogue.” He was followed by Reza Davari, head of the Iranian Academy of Sciences, who spoke about “What is Dialogue Among Civilizations and How Can it be Achieved?” Then Hakim Abderrezak and Francis Hutchins (Northwestern University) explored the notions of “Frenchness and Islam: Toward a New Muslim Identity?” Finally, University of Kentucky’s Jennifer Kopf analyzed “Rails and Chains: The Reification of Islam in German East Africa (1890–1914).”

Towards late afternoon, the following scholars participated in a roundtable discussion on “Islam, Africa and the Academy: Charting New Directions for the Study of Islam:” Professors Ali Mazrui, Sulayman Nyang, Edris Makward, Nehemia Levtzion, and Dr. Ousseina Alidou. The roundtable discussion led to an open debate in which the audience actively participated. The unfortunate part of the discussion was that it devoted too much time to what was taking place in the USA without giving sufficient attention to African scholarship and Islam. The absence of Francophone scholars was noted. In the evening, the keynote address was given by Howard University’s Sulayman Nyang, who explored the concept of “The Prophet Muhammad in the African Imagination” by analyzing the perceptions of the Prophet in West African literature.

“Islamic Revivalism and Society (in West Africa/Maghrib);” “The Text of Experience: Islam and African Historiography;” and “The Islamic Intellect: Intellectual Movements and Higher Education” were the themes highlighted in the fourth session. The panel that addressed the theme on Islamic Intellect only had two panelists; Dr. Y. G-M Lulat (SUNY), and Kai Kresse (SOAS). Dr. Y. G-M Lulat (SUNY) focused on the “Pre-Colonial Higher Education in Africa: The Islamic Contribution.” Kai Kresse addressed the issue of “Swahili Enlightenment: Sheikh Muhammad Kasim Mazrui’s Critique of Swahili Muslim Practices in the 1970s.”

The fifth session’s themes were: “The Supernatural: Popular Interpretations of Islam (in Morocco & Egypt),” “Islam between Globalization and Marginality,” “Woman and the Word: Language and Islam,” and “The Crescent over the Cape: Islam and South Africa.” During the afternoon session,

four panels took the floor. The themes were: "The Sudan: Civic Discourses and Unanswered Questions," "Islam and Egypt: Historical Contacts and Influences," "African Women and the West," and "The *Ummah* and the Planet: Islam and Globalization." In the last panel, the following panelists presented their papers: Edwin Gimode (Kenyatta University) reflected positively on "Globalization and the Construction of an Assertive Ummah in Kenyan Politics in the Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries." Parviz Morewedge (Binghamton University), whose philosophical discourse on "Islam and Africanity," attempted to find common ground between the two concepts in theory and practice. Finally, Nehemia Levtzion (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), whose paper "Islam in African and Global Contexts: Comparative Studies of Islam" was a reflection of his work over the years, particularly his recently co-edited *Islam in Africa* (2000).

In the second roundtable, the audience listened to the views of Professor Mazrui, Dr. Mamia Lazreg, and Dr. John Azumah on "Islam, Africa and the Dialogue of Civilizations." Azumah's valuable input, based upon his experience in the World Council of Churches, and Lazreg's forthright views on dialogue offered a good basis for a lively discussion and active contributions from the participants.

On the final day, there were only two sessions. During the seventh session there were two panels; the one theme was "Spread of Islam in Africa: Historical Perspectives," which had contributions on Mozambique, Nigeria, Niger and Senegal." In the panel where the theme "the Muezzin and the Media in Africa" was highlighted, the participants listened to Morocco's Rai music, and examined the use of the TV by Nigeria's Muslims as well as Southern Africa's Muslim print and electronic media. The final session had three parallel panels, namely, "The Muslim Muse: Islam and African Literature," "Islamic Governance (in Nigeria & Niger): Shari'ah and Democracy," and "Islam, Africa and Gender."

Despite the varying quality of papers presented, lively and stimulating debates ensued. The short breaks throughout the day allowed for interaction with the panelists, and this also gave many of the participants the opportunity to forge links and connections with scholars who have similar interests and are working on similar topics.

The downside was that there were too many parallel panels and presenters. The individual choice remained a problem for all participants as well as for the conference organizers. Another negative feature was the restricted time given to each panelist; this was indeed a headache for the organizers who had to coordinate presentations by more than 80 panelists.

From the conference's concluding discussions, it was resolved to organize three follow-up conferences in Africa: one in West Africa, another in East Africa and a third in Southern Africa.

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Report of Knowledge Management in Africa at the 1998 Conference

Knowledge management (KM) has become a buzzword in the 1990s and 2000s. It is a term that has been used in many contexts, including business, education, and government. The concept of KM is often defined as the process of capturing, organizing, and sharing knowledge within an organization. This process is essential for organizations to remain competitive in a rapidly changing world. The 1998 Conference on Knowledge Management in Africa was held in Gaborone, Botswana, and was the first of its kind in the continent. The conference was organized by the University of Botswana and was attended by over 100 participants from various African countries. The conference was a success and provided a platform for African scholars and practitioners to discuss the challenges and opportunities of KM in the African context.

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