During the week-long meeting of the atelier in February, the four-member working group discussed various theoretical and methodological questions that could further enrich their own study of Muslim communities in Africa. This resulted in an exchange of ideas and debates on the uses of self-reflexivity (while also being self-reflexive), the role of memory, transnationalism and the meanings of space, and new ways of presenting academic research. The diverse regional and disciplinary orientations of the individual members enabled discussions that were both revealing and animated.

From this first week together the group arrived at four themes that they considered to serve as a basis for the subsequent seminar with a larger group of scholars. The themes were as follows: spatial and imaginary frontiers, the public sphere, identities, and texts and contexts. These were addressed in terms of current processes of globalization, the latter term being problematic as well. Within each theme a number of more detailed issues were enumerated. To address these issues invitations were sent out to an international panel of speakers for the April seminar.

Given the limited time – from the end of February to the middle of April – in which the seminar was to be organized, it still managed to bring together a distinguished selection of both younger and senior scholars. Under the theme of the ‘public sphere’ speakers addressed, for example, the place of African Islamic scholarship (O’Fahey, Northwestern/Bergen) or attempted a phenomenological reading of Islam in Senegal (Oumar Sy, Dakar). Hussein Ahmed (Addis Ababa) delivered a paper which looked at the development of the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Ethiopia. The lives of women students at the University of Ngaoundere were presented through the medium of film by Hab (Tromso).

Film was the medium for three presentations during the seminar. In the session under the theme of ‘identities’ a video on the Baye Fall sect within the Mouride tariqa in Senegal was shown by Tshikala Biaya (Addis Ababa). This theme was also more or less directly addressed in the papers of three other speakers. Karim Dahou (ENDA-Dakar) compared reformism and Islam-state relations in Algeria, Senegal and Nigeria, while Nafsibou Tall (Nouakchott-Mauritania) focused on Qur’anic texts favouring the position of women in Islam. Adeline Masquelier (New Orleans) analysed the impact of the arrival of a new ‘preacher’, Malam Awal, in a small town in Niger.

Under the theme of ‘texts and contexts’ there was an analysis and performance of Somali women’s poetry in colonial and post-colonial contexts (Lisbet Holtedahl, Tromso/Ngaoundere) and the language of analysis needs to more closely reflect the realities of the actors, Kane argued.

The seminar produced a great deal of insight into modern African Muslim communities. It also exposed the areas that are in need of more research. Both the atelier and the seminar, however, were exploratory and created opportunities for discussion about the state of the field. Future research activities of the ISIM will certainly include a focus on Africa.

Note

The report was jointly produced by Karen Willemse, Shamil Jeppie, Jos van Santen, and Cheikh Guéye.

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