

Islam, Democracy, and Public Life in South Africa and in France

During 3-5 September 2007, scholars associated with University of Witwatersrand's Department of Anthropology and key members of the Johannesburg-based Institute of French Studies in South Africa explored ways to engage South African and French scholars in forms of cooperation. To address this event's focus, "Muslim Cultures in South Africa and France," the organizers brought along the School of Social Sciences and Humanities (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) and the Institut d'Etudes de l'Islam et des Societes du Monde Musulman (Ecole des Hautes en Sciences Sociales [EHESS]) to partner with them.

The theme, "Islam, Democracy, and Public Life in South Africa and in France," identified three basic objectives: to re-imagine Islam as an object of academic enquiry, explore the epistemological dimensions of the study of Islam, and foster scientific networks. The organizers highlighted a key question: "How do Muslims employ their religion to explain and clarify their position and role in public life in South Africa and France?" and identified three focus areas: The Status of Minority Religions: The Case of Islam; Religious Identity - Political Identity; and Trans-nationalism/regionalism.

The "Southern Africa" panel, chaired by Aurelia Wa Kabwe-Segatti (French Institute of South Africa [IFAS]), consisted of Alan Thorold's (University of Melbourne) "Malawi and the Revival of Sufism," Samadia Sadouni's (Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research [WISER]) "Muslim Communities in South Africa," Liazzat Bonate's (Eduardo Mondlane University) "Leadership of Islam in Mozambique," and Eric Germain's (EHESS) "Inter-ethnic Muslim Dialogue in South Africa." Sadouni examined such crucial concepts as religious minorities and extracted examples from both countries. Thorold, who analyzed Sufism's revival in Malawi, relied on the work of Ernest Gellner. Some participants, however, argued that his ideas have been surpassed by more informed theoretical scholarship. Bonate reflected upon the differences that played out within northern Mozambique's Muslim communities vis-à-vis the government. Germain, who explored early Cape Muslim social history, provocatively argued that much could be learned from this community's make-up and attitude. As expected, he was criticized for sketching a romantic picture.

The "Media and Power" panel, chaired by Eric Worby, featured Gabeba Baderoon's (post-doctoral fellow, Penn State University's Africana Research Center) "Islam and the Media in South Africa." She traced how Islam and

Muslims were represented, from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, in paintings, writings, apartheid media, and popular culture texts. Imraan Buccus (editor, *Al-Qalam*), who co-authored a paper with Muhammed Haron (University of Botswana), reflected upon “The Muslim Media: The Case of *Al-Qalam* in South Africa” and talked about its substantial input on socio-political transformation. Benjamin Soares (researcher, Leiden University’s Afrika Studiecentrum) presented “Islam and the Media in Mali” by extracting ethnographic material to deliberate upon Mali’s changing modalities of religious expression and modes of belonging. Muhammed Haron provided an overview of “Islam, Media, and Power in Southern Africa” and demonstrated how the *Mail & Guardian*, a southern African weekly, has mediated information about Islam and Muslims since 9/11.

The day’s proceedings ended with Abdul-Kader Tayob’s (University of Cape Town) keynote lecture on “Muslim Politics in South Africa: The Dominance of the Conservatives” and Director Philippe Faucon’s film “Samia.” Tayob identified four sites of Muslim politics, among them the formation of political parties (e.g., the Islamic Party and the Africa Muslim Party) and public engagement in the media, and argued that current opportunities may be attributed mainly to the enabling environment granted by the democratic government since 1994.

The following day’s panels discussed “Religious Identity - Political Identities: Post-Islamism in Question.” The first panel, chaired by Rehana Ebrahim-Vally, addressed “Changing Muslim Identities: The Cases of South Africa and France.” François Burgat (National Centre for Scientific Research [CNRS] and Institut de Recherches et d’Etudes sur le Monde Arabe et Musulman [IREMAM]) presented “The Reference to Islam in the French Public Debate: The Case of the 2007 French Presidential Election.” He highlighted how Islam was still associated with the “other,” critically interrogated how Islam and Muslims were perceived, and showed how fake Muslim elites were used to identify France’s adversaries and security risks. The political narrative pertaining to elections and other social outcomes was indeed very different when Lubna Nadvi (University of KwaZulu Natal) discussed the “South African Muslims and Political Engagement in a Post-Apartheid Context: A Case Study of Durban.” She stated that South African Muslims’ core identity was religion and that the spaces created in the post-apartheid period offered opportunities. She was followed by Moegsien Hendricks, a Muslim gay rights activist (The Inner Circle, Johannesburg) who spoke about “Sexual Diversity, Islam, and Constitutionalism in Post-Apartheid South Africa.” He outlined the group’s difficulties in gaining recognition and acceptance. However, he neither clarified the position of

effeminate individuals within the Muslim community nor indicated the organization's numerical strength and representivity.

The "Women, Islam, and Political Identities" panel papers were delivered by Na'eem Jeenah (Freedom of Expression Institute, Johannesburg), "Muslim Women, Islamic Feminisms, and Politics in South Africa"; Sindre Bangstad (International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, Leiden University), "It Is All In Allah's Hands: Tracing Transformations of Islamic Marriages through the Narratives of Cape Muslim Women in Polygynous Marriages"; and Fariba Adelkhan's (CNRS/CERI/FNSP), "Islamophobia and the Malaise in Anthropology: To be Veiled or not to be Veiled in Iran," which discussed the over-politicized "veil" issue and revealed existing misunderstandings within the respective antagonistic spheres of society and the state. Bangstad, until recently a researcher at Leiden University, analyzed the stories of a select sample of Muslim women from underprivileged Cape Town communities who were involved in polygynous relationships. Jeenah's paper, partially based upon his published article on Islamic feminism, noted the contribution of Muslim women in politics that somewhat opened the way for Muslim feminists to continue their struggle in the 1990s.

The third panel, chaired by Samadia Sadouni, pursued similar debates. Cynthia Kros' (University of the Witwatersrand) "*Laïcité*: Ideological Straightjacket or Irreplaceable Principles of Democracy" discussed the image of *laïcité* and outlined the debates regarding the hijab that ignited the debates. Her paper was well received by the French scholars, who felt that more South African scholars should probe notions of Occidentalism. Sa'diyya Shaikh (University of Cape Town) also addressed this debate in her "Islam, Veiling, and Feminism," noting the theoretical debates that had been generated in the South on issues of culture and representation. She also focused on how Muslim women's bodies have become contested sites of sexuality and agency, using examples from Iran and France, respectively.

The evening's keynote lecture was given by self-confessed Orientalist Marc Gaborieau (emeritus research professor, CNRS; professor, EHESS). His lecture, "South Asian Muslim Diasporas and Transnational Movements: Tablighi Jama'at and Jama'at-i Islami," led to some robust discussions. Next came Akiedah Mohamed's "Malawian Kiss," a documentary about a Cape Town Muslim whose Malawian Muslim businessman husband had died after contracting HIV/Aids. The following day, Farid Esack (professor, Harvard University) tackled HIV/Aids in his "Islam = AIDS - Convergences between Islamophobia and Muslim Stigmatization of Persons Living with AIDS." He examined the congruence between Islamophobia in Western Europe and America and Muslim attitudes toward infected individuals.

The final day's focus area was trans-nationalism/regionalism. Germain introduced Amila Buturovic (York University, Canada), who spoke about "Grave Zones: Islam, Identity, and War Memorials in Bosnia-Herzegovina." South Africans could readily identify with this issue, for something similar has been debated in the post-apartheid era. Jocelyne Cesari (CNRS and Harvard University) touched passionately on "Transnationalism, Islam, and Modernity: Islam in the West." She stressed the significance of transnational factors in integrating Muslims in the West and concluded by talking about a new narrative of modernity articulated by Muslims living in the West. René Otayek (director, Centre d'Etude d'Afrique Noire), a specialist on African Islam, expounded upon "Islam and Transnationalism in Africa" and stated that Islam in Africa has been deeply affected by globalization and that religious flows are in line with this dynamic process.

Immediately after lunch, most of the participants engaged in the "Studying (of) Islam from a Social Science Perspective" roundtable. During the closing session and in conversation with presenters and others, there was a general consensus that the debates and discussions stemming from the twenty-four presentations had been robust and highly stimulating.

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