Islam and the Public Sphere in Africa: Overcoming the Dichotomies

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Abstract

This essay provides an introduction to eight papers on the theme of Islam and the Public Sphere in Africa that resulted from two conferences organized by the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA) in 2007. The author argues that these papers challenge the dichotomous thinking that has characterized much of the recent literature on Islam and the related concepts of civil society, democratization, and the public sphere (for example, civil society versus political society, public sphere versus private sphere, religious norms versus secular norms, and political Islam versus non-political Islam). The papers problematize these dichotomies in both empirical and theoretical terms, while also illuminating the segmented and gendered nature of the public sphere and civil society, both of which are or could easily be riddled with contradictions, exclusions, discriminations, subtle pressures, coercion and physical violence. The essays reveal the state sphere to be more a field of complex interactions among different actors than a unified actor defined by its differentiation from the supposedly distinct civil society. Finally, and perhaps less controversially, the essays demonstrate the intricate linkages of the religious and the secular especially in the context of democratic politics in societies with a deeply religious electorate.

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Introduction

The essays in this series of working papers on Islam and Public Sphere in Africa originated from two conferences held in Dakar, Senegal and Evanston, IL, USA Both conferences were organized in 2007 by the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa (ISITA), a collaborative multidisciplinary research project located institutionally at the Program of African Studies of Northwestern University.[1] The original intent of the two meetings was to convene panels of experts to examine critically the roles of Islam in the general elections held in Senegal and Nigeria in 2007, but also to invite comparative analysis and reflections on other African countries with Muslim populations. This series of working papers represents a selection of essays from the two workshops, which contribute individually and collectively to the increasingly vast literature on Islam and Muslim societies in the politics and the public spheres of contemporary African states (Tayob 1999, O'Brien 2000, 2003; Launay and Soares 1999; Miles 2007; Piga 2002; Quinn 2003; Soares 2004; Soares and Otayek 2007).

In this introduction, I would like to highlight some key insights that the essays contribute by calling attention to their significant theoretical implications. In much of the recent literature on Islam and the related concepts of civil society, democratization, and public sphere, one confronts deeply entrenched dichotomies between, for example, the conceptions of civil society as different from political society, public sphere as distinct from private sphere, religious norms as different from secular norms, political Islam and non-political Islam, etc. One major contribution from the essays here is the problematization of these dichotomies in both empirical and theoretical terms, hopefully enriching the critical evaluations of these concepts (Fraser 1990; Ikelegbe 2001; Mah 2000). Another contribution is the illumination of the segmented and gendered nature of the public sphere and civil society, both of which are or could easily be riddled with contradictions, exclusions, discriminations, subtle pressures, coercion and physical violence, all of which combined expose the often romanticized liberal notions of civil society and public sphere as necessary elements of functioning democracy which provide spaces to rationally pursue more desirable forms of sociability free from the intrusion of state power. A third theme to which these working papers add significant insight is the explication of the complex interactions within the different and gendered segments of the civil society itself on the one hand, and between these gendered segments and the state sphere on the other hand. The essays also reveal the state sphere to be more a field of complex interactions among different actors than a unified actor defined by its differentiation from the supposedly distinct civil society (Salvatore and LeVine 2005). Finally, and perhaps less controversially, the essays demonstrate the intricate linkages of the religious and the secular especially in the context of democratic politics in societies with a deeply religious electorate.

Beginning with the entanglements of the secular and the religious, the essay by Souleymane B. Diagne offers very thoughtful reflections on the public controversies sparked by the President Wade's visit to his Mouride spiritual leader before whom he prostrated himself, as many Mouride disciples usually do. This act provoked Ousseynou Kane's op-ed essay titled *La République couchée* in the Senegalese daily newspaper *Wal Fadjri* (Tuesday, May 8, 2001), taking President Wade to task for demeaning the highest office of the secular Republic of Senegal by publicly prostrating before his spiritual mentor. Diagne reflects also on the growing concerns among Senegalese journalists over an increased blurring of the strict line separating their professional task to report critically on religious figures from the reverent obedience that religious disciples are expected to observe for their spiritual mentors. At issue

here is one of the dichotomies deeply entrenched in the prevalent understanding that the actions of public officials should be differentiated from their private (including religious) actions. But by tracing how at independence in 1962 the founding fathers of the secular Republic of Senegal, "the very Catholic Senghor and Dia, the pious Muslim," began what has since become the established patterns of interaction between elected officials and the religious leaders in country, Diagne shows how the founding fathers envisaged the inclusion of religion into their project of modernity since both Senghor and Dia were fundamentally convinced of the necessity of a secular state, and also "believed just as firmly that religious fervor was a cultural energy essential for achieving modernization and development." Of course, the subsequent evolution of the interaction of politics and religion may not have stayed true to the vision of the founding fathers, particularly in light of the apparently cozy compact between Senegalese politicians and religious leaders. Politicians have typically depended upon these leaders to dictate the bulk votes of their disciples *(ndigel)* for a particular candidate in exchange for access to state resources for the religious leaders if not necessarily for all of their disciples (Villalon, 1997). Nonetheless, this established pattern has been seriously challenged recently (Beck 2001).

It is significant that President Wade's public display of loyalty to his religious leader came in the campaigning context of general elections, which together with previous actions seen to be informed by his religious affiliation, combined to raise serious alarm especially among secular elites, and also among citizens belonging to different religious groups as reflected in the essay by Penda Mbow. Yet, whereas it is easy to demand that the modern state must be secular, it is not as easy to operate it along purely secular lines especially if the state is to cater effectively to a society comprising mainly religious individuals. It is even harder for politicians to win elections, and thereby gain the power of the modern secular state, if they do not utilize the powerful hold of religion on the electorate.

Conversely, religious actors can only ignore politics if they have no desire to see their normative agendas enacted in society. Moreover, there is a realistic risk that political exclusion of religious actors could lead to radicalization, whereas their political participation could at least minimize the chances of that radicalization by providing effective outlets for religious actors to pursue their agendas. Alexander Thurston's essay demonstrates that two Islamist organizations in Senegal, the Association d'Etudiants Musulmans de l'Université de Dakar (AEMUD) and the Dahiratoul Moustarchidine wal Moustarchidaty, could have introduced radical Islamism as a major political force during the turbulent crisis of the 1990s. However, that did not happen at least partly because of President Diouf's strategy of political inclusion that "allows meaningful dialogue with opposition leaders, the state's generally positive relations with Islamic movements, and the continuing strength of clientalist politics." Additionally, Diagne points to another potential advantage of allowing religious actors into the political arena, namely, using their moral and spiritual capital to exert wholesome influence on the politicians. Yet the interactions of the religious and the secular in the democratic politics of a secular republic are also fraught with risks and dangers that vindicate the wisdom of separating the two, even though such a separation in practice is hard to accomplish if not impossible altogether. The papers in this series lead to the insightful observation that since religion and politics are hardly separable in practice, theoretical analysis should be directed towards a more nuanced understanding of the linkages rather than simply asserting the liberal norm that religion should be excluded from politics, if not from the public sphere as well.

Taking the educational arena for the focus of her essay, Penda Mbow explores the religious/secular divide to highlight the imperative of separating the two, due to the potentially grave consequences of sectarianism. She identifies how the educational project of the modern secular state aspires to provide an education informed by "triple values of free, secular and compulsory." Yet, Senegalese society is "often governed by a religious code shared by the majority." Consistent with the electoral imperative of appealing to the religious sensibilities of

the electorate, Senegalese educational authorities had no option but to yield to the "urgent and recurring demand by a large proportion of Senegalese" for introduction of religious knowledge into the secular educational system. Additionally, Mbow reveals that the motivation for granting official recognition to religious education was to make it appear as if Senegal is making progress towards meeting the international expectation of providing education for all, and thereby obtaining by a "technical maneuver … an affirmation of national pride [of] inclusion on UNESCO's list of countries with chances of actually achieving education for all in 2010," first established in 1990 in Jomtien and reaffirmed in 2000 in Dakar. Thus in spite of its avowed secularism, the Senegalese state is not averse to taking advantage of acceding to the popular demands for religious education to project a positive image of meeting its international commitments. While justifiably apprehensive about the (mis)adventures of the secular state into religious education, Mbow still offers the insightful observation that "secularism must not be a concept that leaves religion and the State in an outdated ambivalence." The liberal ideological insistence on a purist dichotomy between the religious and secular can distort our understanding of the observably dynamic interactions between the two.

The provisions for secularism in the Senegalese constitution are succinctly analyzed in the essay by Abdoulaye Dièye, who highlights the three principles of secularism in the Senegalese constitution, namely: 1) neutrality of the State, 2) religious freedom, and 3) respect of pluralism. While all constitutional amendments have consistently retained secularism as an attribute of the republic, Dièye shows that authorities acting in the name of the secular republic cannot simply ignore the religious dimension, particularly in light of Article 22 providing for equal recognition of "religious and non-religious institutions and communities" as well as the state officials' practice of maintaining "normal relations with the different religious faiths." Additionally, Dièye emphasizes that since the Sufi brotherhoods are the dominant players in Senegalese politics, particularly during election season, politicians have sought to exploit extensively the religious influence of the brotherhoods, consequently weakening the principle of secularism and "leading to attempts to call it into question." One such attempt sought to remove "secularism" from the attributes of the republic in the context of constitutional review in 2001, but the attempt was defeated by the stronger outcry from the people, thereby demonstrating contestation as one mode of interaction between the secular and the religious. Thus from both the normative constitutional perspective and the imperative of electoral politics in Senegal, secularism can hardly mean a simple separation between two distinct domains that should never be mixed. We should, therefore, think of how to understand the complex interactions between the religious and the secular rather than insisting that they should always be separate. The essays here suggest possible ways to analyze prevalent reality for more accurate understanding, which in turn is helpful in devising more effective strategies of intervention.

In contrast to the situation in Senegal, the dynamics of the secular and the religious work differently in Nigeria though not without points of comparison (Agberemi 2005; Falola 1998; Kenny 1996; Ostien and Gamaliel 2002). Haruna Wakili's essay explores the active participation of *ulama* (Islamic religious scholars) in the campaigns of the 2007 elections in Nigeria, as well as the co-optation of some *ulama* by various political parties. As religious actors enter the political arena, they have to play by its operational imperatives; hence the Nigerian *ulama* become virtual politicians by campaigning for a particular candidate or political party, and receiving the spoils of political victory in the form of state patronage in cash or in kind. Alternatively, the *ulama* may suffer the harsh consequences of political defeat by forfeiting privileged access to state resources or falling into political oblivion. In fact, the *ulama* may even expose themselves to the political violence that has increasingly become a prominent feature of contemporary Nigerian politics—as evidenced by the recent spate of assassinations of some ulama in execution style closely resembling the assassination of prominent politicians. The moral hazard of participating in the neo-patrimonial politics of Nigeria and the realistic chance

of assassination are the clearly negative consequences of ulama's (mis)adventures into politics. But are there also positive consequences? To what extent are the *ulama* able to exert moral suasion on the politicians? Are the *ulama* able to bring the concerns of their followers to the attention of the elected politicians, thereby mediating between the political class and the electorate? These same questions are also raised in Diagne's reflections on the potentially positive impact of the marabout participation in Senegalese politics, expressed in the vivid metaphor of the religious actors as firefighters who come to the rescue when overheated political temperature erupts into conflagration.

In the Nigerian context, there is also the reverse case of politicians assuming the role of religious leaders, most evident in the case of Governor Sani Ahmed of Zamfara State who was the first to expand the scope of Islamic law in Nigeria since the return of the country to democratic politics in 1999. As Nigerian *ulama* were compelled to behave like politicians when they ventured into politics, Governor Ahmed also had to project the image of a religious leader even though he has never been one before. Again we can see clearly the blurring of the separation between the secular and the religious, which in the case of Zamfara State also appears in the recruitment of the *ulama* to serve in the bureaucratic agencies of the Zamfara State Government. This reveals another mode of interaction between the religious and secular, namely the penetration and counter-penetration of the state sphere by religious agents and of the civil sphere of religion by agents of the modern secular state.

By calling attention to the gendered nature of the public sphere, Hauwa Mahdi offers a very carefully nuanced analysis of the social, economic, political and religious forces for change of attitudes towards women's participation in Nigeria's public sphere. She shows how the seemingly simple act of a woman donning the *hijab* is fraught with serious consequences and radically different meanings from one context to another. She demonstrates that in the 1970s when Muslim women began to emerge from the supposedly private sphere of caring for the family at home to take employment in the bureaucratic agencies of the government, wearing the *hijab* was a liberating act that facilitated their navigation of the hitherto male dominated state sphere. But in the context of implementation of the expanded jurisdiction of the *shari'a* in the 2000s, the *hijab* was imposed by state power; hence it symbolizes something totally different: the state demands more obedience from women than from men.

Mahdi's insightful analysis raises interesting questions on the very notion of proper dressing for appearance in public--not only for women, but also for men. Formal and casual wear, ceremonial costume and everyday attire, dressing for work, reception, parties, and different social occasions are all indicators of the importance of wearing a particular outfit to meet unspoken but nevertheless important expectations of proper behavior in the public sphere. As Mahdi's illumination of the subtle social pressure and the not so subtle pressure of state power coercing women to wear the *hijab* reveals*,* we have to realize how the seemingly simple issue of dressing properly for an occasion may be saturated with all kinds of issues of morality, class status, gender discrimination, and the assertion of societal control and state power. This raises questions on the prevalent conceptions of civil society and the public sphere as spaces removed from state power: where does one draw the line between the respective spheres of the state and civil society? How does capillary power of both society and state assert itself in the habits of everyday life such as different manners of clothing, as well as into the domain of each other? Attempts to answer these questions must grapple not only with the gendered nature of both the state and the civil society sphere, but also with the apparently inevitable interdependence of both.

The gendered nature of the public sphere that Mahdi analyzed lucidly points yet again to the complex linkages connecting and separating the different sectors within the apparent homogeneity that has been assumed to characterize the civil society as one entity defined on the whole by its differentiation from the state. We can see similar crossing-over in the case of a Senegalese journalist operating as if she were a disciple of the religious leaders that she should

be critically and professionally covering, or when President Wade behaves in the manner that a humble disciple should before his marabout, or when the Nigerian *ulama* venture into partisan politics by campaigning for the election of a candidate or political party. The notion of distinctly dichotomous spheres defined by strict compliance with both explicit and implicit expectations of separating the religious from the secular seems overdue for critical re-examination. The anxieties, coercion and even violence that followed in the wake of these transgressions over the lines separating the supposedly distinct spheres indicate the gravity of the issues at stake.

An issue worth further analysis is the very segmented nature of the public sphere: how are the different segments created and their boundaries maintained? What forces separate and link the various segments? What are the acceptable modalities of the linkages and separations? Who has the power and authority to decide any contests over such issues? Obviously, it will be richly rewarding to examine further the interactivity among the various segments of the public sphere: the forms, trajectories, dynamics, consequences, and driving forces. The potential insights from such further examination can be seen in Fatima Harrak's essay showing how different segments of Moroccan society formed the coalition that successfully campaigned for the recent changes in the family code.

Apart from strengthening the case for explicit attention to the gendered aspects of the public sphere that Mahdi made convincingly, Harrak sheds additional light by her careful chronicling of the complicated and contested struggles waged politically, intellectually and religiously not only by women acting alone in their NGOs, but also by ordinary Moroccan men and women participating in street demonstrations and signing petitions, as well as religious elites writing books and fatwas for and against the legal reforms of the family code. It seems clear that without such a coalition drawing strength from the diverse sections of Moroccan civil society, the reform of the family law would have been more difficult if not impossible altogether. Equally important is the delicate mixing and balancing between traditional Maliki legal norms and secular norms grounded in the international discourses of human rights and gender equality. Harrak's essay reveals that the expression of the secular in the categories of the religious, and the justification of one by means of the other, made the reforms more realistic—perhaps to the chagrin of purists who would not countenance any mixing of the religious with the secular, or the public and the private. But adhering to such dichotomies is only possible at the pure ideological plane, or else it has to be coercively imposed against the veritable realities of everyday life of the vast majority of the people.

Whereas the essays on Senegal point to the secular-religious divide as the key fault-line, and the essays by Mahdi and Harrak underscore the centrality of the gender divide, Hassan Ndzovu highlights that in Kenya, the racial and ethnic divides have historically played more prominent roles than the religious-secular divide. Ndzovu documents the shifting contours of Kenyan politics as it has been persistently impacted by the changing constructions of the racialized identities of Arabs, Indians, Swahilis and other Africans, all of them Muslims yet consistently divided by their different political agendas and what each perceives as its distinct interests on account of its separate identity. In contrast to the other essays, Ndzovu directs our attention to the very important dynamics of majority-minority interactions. He shows that contrary to what commonsense may dictate (that as minorities, Kenyan Muslims may have good reasons to close ranks and pursue collectively the issues affecting all of them as minorities) the different segments comprising the Muslim minority community in Kenya have often pursued their respective political projects separately (Dowd 2003; Faulkner 2006; Loimeier 2007; Mwakimako 2007, 1995; Oded 2000, 2002), thus once again underscoring the imperative to analyze the public sphere not as a homogenous space into which an undifferentiated civil society enters to interact with the state equally understood as a unified actor. Together with Harrak's nuanced analysis of how the different parts of the Moroccan state (the King, the Prime Minister, and the Parliament) acted differently in the course of the

struggle for reform of the family code, Ndzovu's essay also shows that different agents and agencies of the Kenyan state (the Presidency, Members of Parliament, Local District Administrations and Security Operatives) colluded together—but only to later act separately to deny that collusion—to intervene to sustain the cleavages within the Muslim communities with a view to weakening the political impact of Muslims, thereby ensuring the re-election of former President Moi in the context of multi-party elections in the 1990s. Just as we need to have a differentiated understanding of the civil society and the public sphere, we also need to have an equally differentiated understanding of the state on behalf of which different agendas could be pursued by diverse actors each pursuing their separate interests.

Clearly, the working papers in this series will add to the growing empirical knowledge and theoretical analyses on the related phenomena and concepts of civil society, democratization, and the public sphere in both the African continent (Bokola 1999; Ejobowah 2001; Harbeson, Rothchild and Chazan 1994; Aiyede 2003; Zegeye and Harris 2003) and the Islamic world as well (Esposito and Burgat 2003; Salvatore 2007; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Salvatore and Eickelman 2004). I also hope that the essays have identified areas for further research, the most urgent of which seems to be more empirical studies of the various actors and groups who are claiming space in the public sphere so that we may gain a more nuanced understanding of their positions, rather than making assumptions about whether they are "secular" or "religious."

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