

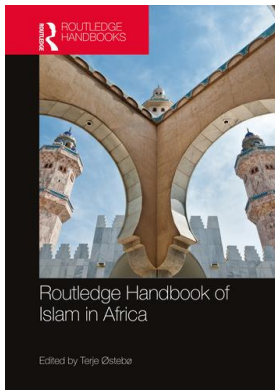
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9

ISLAM AND THE QUESTION OF GENDER

Joseph Hill

Introduction

Gender has become a vast area of inquiry in the field of Islam in Africa whose multiple strands of academic research can only be summarily outlined in a single chapter. The same could not have been said two or three decades ago, when discussions of women or gender remained rare in the field. A century ago, colonial accounts fixated on politically influential – and potentially subversive – male Islamic leaders, and postcolonial academic accounts widely defined Islam in Africa as a sphere of men (Frede 2020). After 1975, the year designated by the United Nations as “International Women’s Year”, discussions of women’s empowerment became prevalent globally (Meron Zeleke 2013). Such discussions widely construed traditional culture – especially Islam – as a primary obstacle to women’s empowerment. Although researchers wrote prolifically on Middle Eastern and South Asian Muslim women during this time, African Muslim women remained marginal to both Islamic Studies and to African Studies (Masquelier 2009, 25–26). However, since the first decade of the twenty-first century, a proliferation of studies has proposed more subtle ways of thinking about African women and Islam. A smaller yet growing literature has also examined other gender-related issues, including changing conceptions of masculinity and African Muslims who do not conform to dominant gender and sexual norms.

This chapter traces the development of several central lines of inquiry. I first outline a broad shift from an “Islamic determinist” (Bernal 1994, 37) approach that views Islam as a transhistoric and essentially misogynistic religious system to depictions of Islam as a dynamic “discursive tradition” (Asad 1986), one in which gender roles are interpreted in multiple and contested ways. I then look at three areas of research concerning Muslim women. The first is the question of women’s widespread marginalization from “official” Islam and the tendency of many Muslim women throughout Africa – as elsewhere – to gravitate toward ostensibly heterodox practices such as spirit possession. The second area, in contrast, focuses on female authorities in Sufi movements. The third looks at women’s activism in strict “reformist” movements that many commentators assume are too patriarchal to accommodate women’s agency. After discussing these three themes related to women, I discuss studies of gender and Islam in Africa that have expanded beyond women. A growing scholarship on men and masculinities has shown that Muslims’ norms of masculinity are not timeless or monolithic but are changing and contested. Finally, I discuss emerging studies of sexual and gender diversity

in African Muslim communities, which examine locally specific gender categories as well as Muslims who align with global LGBTQ+ discourses.

Recent research explores gender as a central dimension of every Muslim's experience, even if there is no single Islamic experience or doctrine of gender. However, I seek here not only to demonstrate the diversity of interpretations and practices of Islam but also to show how certain threads are pervasive, yet are woven into very different fabrics in different contexts. For example, women's widespread association with motherhood and practices of bodily and social "self-wrapping" (Hill 2018) do not have predetermined social consequences but are reimagined in very different ways in different contexts.

Islam as monolith versus Islam as dynamic tradition

In the Sub-Saharan African context, researchers and activists continue to debate the degree to which questions of gender justice can and should be framed in terms of Islam as opposed to universalistic human rights principles. Partly influenced by anthropological studies of women in the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 1990, 2013; Mahmood 2005), many academic approaches have shifted away from assuming the primacy of liberal categories such as "empowerment" and "liberation". Instead, they have prioritized understanding Muslim women's and men's diverse lives and concerns.

Several feminist scholars commenting on Islam in Africa beginning in the 1990s drew inspiration from Fatima Mernissi's ([1975] 1987) early analysis of Islam's largely detrimental effects on women. This trend is exemplified by the works of Barbara Callaway on Nigeria and Lucy Creevey on Senegal (Callaway 1987; Creevey 1991, 1996; Callaway and Creevey 1994). Although both authors recognize that Muslim women's status varies greatly in different contexts, they suggest that these differences derive from the degree of "strictness" with which Muslim authorities have applied Islamic prescriptions. Like Mernissi, Callaway and Creevey (1994) cite verses to show that the Qur'an prescribes a secondary and domestic status for women. Although Creevey describes Sufism as less rigid than "orthodox" Islam (a questionable opposition), she considers it worse for women in some ways:

If traditional Muslim law sees women as subordinate to their husbands, fathers, and other male relatives and under the authority of the latter, the brotherhoods in Senegal go further: women count for nothing officially. Women may not be members in brotherhoods or hold any positions within them at all.

Creevey 1991, 362; see also Cruise O'Brien 1971, 85–86

As we will see below, the reality on the ground is much more complex. Like Callaway and Creevey, many engaged African feminists have expressed little hope for working for women's empowerment within Islamic idioms and have instead advocated secular, liberal education (Imam 1994; Sow 2003; Bop 2005).

These feminist approaches paint a picture that has significant validity: as actually implemented in Africa, Islam has often excluded women from Islamic learning and leadership, reduced their official influence in public matters, and defined them as dependent and submissive wards of their fathers or husbands. Yet these approaches tend to treat Islam as a historically invariable system whose oppression against women varies proportionately to its degree of implementation. They tell us little about how actual Muslim women experience and understand Islam. It remains unclear how Callaway and Creevey reconcile their mentions of female Islamic leaders with their claims that Sufi orders (*turuq*, sing. *tariqa*) categorically exclude women's participation.

More recently, many researchers have approached Islam as a dynamic “discursive tradition” (Asad 1986), one whose teachings, meanings, and prescriptions refer to a shared past but are subject to ongoing contestation and change. Teachings surrounding men’s and women’s proper roles and qualities invoke the same texts, especially the Qur’an and hadith, lending a degree of resemblance to teachings of opposing Islamic movements. Yet these teachings can be understood and implemented in strikingly different ways in different contexts.

This heightened attention to Islam’s diversity does not negate the existence of widespread patterns in gender attitudes and practices in the Muslim world or of the powerful belief that there is a single “Islamic position” or “Islamic system” that defines ideal gender roles and relationships. Observers in many parts of Africa have noted that, in general, girls and women historically had either no access to Islamic education or far less than boys (Brenner 2001, 234–235; Mack 2008; Ware 2014, 173–176; Launay 2016, 12; Tamari 2016). Until recently, relatively few African women were recognized as Islamic authorities or teachers. Numerous teachings, for example, that women’s voices and personages were *awra*, or something to be protected from being revealed outside the immediate family, meant that the very performance of piety ruled out visible leadership (Hill 2018, chap. 6). This necessity of properly veiling pious women from public view extended to (not) mentioning them in texts, such that even when a Mauritanian woman became a respected Islamic scholar, she would likely be erased from spiritual and pedagogical pedigrees (Frede 2014).

Relatively excluded from formal Islamic education and ritual practice, women have often been construed as less “orthodox” than men and more likely to be involved in ostensibly heterodox spiritual practices. In many Muslim communities in Africa, women predominate in spirit possession and other debatably Muslim practices. All this would seem to justify J. Spencer Trimingham’s generalization about Islam throughout Africa of “men being Muslims and women pagans” (Trimingham 1980, 46). Or, as Mette Bovin states it, “Men are the custodians of Islamic and Arabic culture” while “women ... have preserved many pre-Islamic cultural traits” and engage in “hidden protest against both Islamic and male dominance” (Bovin 1983, 89).

Yet the reality on the ground is far too complex to encapsulate in such stark binary oppositions. As Roberta Ann Dunbar asks rhetorically in her synthesis “Muslim Women in African History”, does the fact that men dominate official Islamic institutions and ideologies “mean – as it has so often been portrayed – that women’s experience is any less Islamic”? (Dunbar 2000, 397). While Dunbar was referring primarily to women who engage in practices like spirit possession, her question applies equally well to female Islamic leaders and scholars, whose authority seems always to be shaped and, in some ways, challenged by gender norms.

Marginal women, stigmatized practices

One of the earliest and most documented areas of study on African Muslim women is that of spirit possession rituals. Mainstream Islamic authorities uniformly deem such rituals as not properly Islamic, not because they disbelieve in spirit possession but because they preach that spirits must be exorcised, not accommodated, through rituals. Although spirit possession cults in many places predate the introduction of Islam, spirits are often rebranded as *jinn*, a kind of unseen being mentioned in the Qur’an (Boddy 1989; Masquelier 2001; Østebø 2014). This assimilation process somewhat resembles the “diabolization” of spirits in colonial Christian churches (Meyer 1999, 1998; Lindhardt 2014). However, spirits remain relevant to Muslim men and women of various ideological currents today, not as pre-Islamic holdovers but as deeply gendered mediators of rapid social change.

Spirit possession practices provide women and other marginalized people with socially meaningful community and mechanisms to address various needs. The relatively few males who participate in such rituals are often socially marginal, and in some cases they are or are assumed to be homosexuals (Murray 1997a, 224; Gaudio 2009). For decades, the dominant academic explanation was that women in African Muslim communities used spirit possession as a tool – successfully or not – to respond to patriarchal Islamic oppression. Many studies saw spirit possession as an un-Islamic act of resistance against patriarchal Islamic domination, or as Ioan M. Lewis famously put it, as “thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex” ([1971] 2003, 26). Some concluded that this resistance project ultimately failed and reinforced oppressive gender norms (Gomm 1975; Echard 1991). Others approached possession as a psychodynamic response to oppression that was not entirely consciously motivated (Bourguignon 1976). Although spirit possession practices certainly do all these things, explaining them in terms of binary oppositions – women versus patriarchy, pre-Islamic versus Islamic, resistance versus complicity – is problematic for many reasons, one of which is that the essential opposition between men/Islam and women/spirit possession fails to hold up.

Although Muslim men typically condemn possession practices, many of them tacitly accommodate them or even, as Lewis stated in an updated formulation, engage in “vicarious participation” (Lewis 1986, 106). Studies of communities throughout Africa have observed that the gendered opposition between male Islamic orthodoxy and female spirit possession often looks more like a “division of labor” than an “ideological division between two competing and opposed gendered paradigms, ideologies, or ... closed gendered worlds” (Lambek 1993, 63; cf. Rasmussen 1995, 84; Boddy 1989, 140). In a recently Islamized Hausa-speaking area of Niger, *bori* spirit possession is part of the religious repertoire even of many pious Muslim women who have undertaken pilgrimage to Mecca (Masquelier 2001).

Spirit possession has been incorporated into modern Islamic practices in multiple ways, although it overwhelmingly remains associated with women and questionable orthodoxy. Female followers of Sheikh Siraj Muhammad in Ethiopia have integrated *zar* possession practice into Sufi rituals at the sheikh’s burial shrine, whose custodian is the sheikh’s daughter (Meron Zeleke 2013). However, rather than defending the practice in response to Salafi condemnation, the community’s male Sufi leaders simply argue that women cannot be expected to be as rational as men. This displacement of unorthodoxy onto women allows male Sufi leaders to present women’s possession as a foil for their own orthodoxy. At another Ethiopian Sufi shrine, a *hadra* is performed in order to persuade spirits to leave their hosts (Østebø 2014). Local Salafis critique these rituals not because they consider them ineffective but because they prescribe exorcism techniques involving Qur’an recitation. For these Salafis, the reenactment and retelling of *jinn* exorcism underline the success of their mission, echoing the “complete break with the past” (Meyer 1998) that Ghanaian Pentecostals reenact through “deliverance” from heathen demons.

Conerly Casey (2008) observed a similar process in Northern Nigeria, where Yan Izala (Salafi) reformists use “prophetic medicine” to exorcise *bori* spirits and convert them to Islam. In 1995, Casey (2017) recounts, a possession trance epidemic swept Northern Nigeria, leading 600 schoolgirls to show signs of spirit possession and to perform dance moves from Bollywood movies. Yan Izala figures blamed not pre-Islamic tradition but modern Bollywood culture, whose catchy rhythms had attracted the *bori* spirits.

Although spirit possession on the Swahili coast has sometimes been identified with Muslim women’s marginalization from and resistance to official Islam (Strobel 1979), for the Swahilis’ poorer, non-Muslim Giriama neighbors, the same *jinn* have ironically come to represent

Muslims' power. Some non-Muslim Giriama women tell of possession by Muslim spirits who force them to convert to Islam (McIntosh 2009).

Women's authority in Sufi communities

A more recent area of research has sought not just to problematize the opposition between women and Islam but to show how many African women have explicitly aligned themselves with Islamic authority, acting as Islamic teachers, scholars, activists, and spiritual guides. Many of these women have been part of Sufi communities that have historically predominated throughout much of Muslim Africa. Although the distinction between "Sufi" and "reformist" is more one of convenience than one of analytical clarity, many Muslims today perceive themselves as being on one or the other side of such a divide. As mentioned above, it has been common for researchers to claim that women are formally excluded from participation in Sufi orders. Although leaders of the Murid Sufi order in Senegal sometimes state this as their official position, numerous studies have shown that Murid women participate in various ways. They form their own religious associations, organize women-only pilgrimages, and contribute financially to leaders and projects (Evers Rosander 1998, 2003, 2004; Buggenhagen 2008, 2009). As discussed below, some daughters of important male Murid sheikhs have become important leaders in their own right. Although Tijani groups have not always fully included women, the order's rules have never excluded them from membership or leadership. Even where women lack formal authority, their support for a movement or withdrawal of that support can spell that movement's success or failure, as Adeline Masquelier (2009) showed of a short-lived Sufi movement in Niger. Although focusing on formal leaders can lead to overlooking the many women who influence informally (Augis 2014), studying why and how certain women come to exercise formal authority can illuminate the contours, dynamics, and limits of broader gender norms.

In contrast to men, women's authority is quasi-universally construed in explicitly gendered terms, for example, as an extension of and metaphor for their mothering roles (Hill 2014), as an expedient for keeping women properly segregated, and as a specialization in women's issues. Recent studies of female Islamic authorities have sought to understand how prevalent norms both constrain and enable particular performances of authority (Frede and Hill 2014). Even where there is talk of transcending womanhood or gender altogether, there seems to be no such thing as an unambiguous "honorary man", as women's authority is always constructed through gendered tropes, performances, and norms (Hill 2018, 145).

This principle applies to Nana Asma'u (1793–1864), the female African Islamic authority who drew the earliest and most extensive academic attention (Boyd and Last 1985; Boyd 1989; Mack and Boyd 2000, 2013; Mack 2014; Hutson 2019). The daughter of Uthman dan Fodio (1754–1817), a Qadiri sheikh and the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate in Northern Nigeria, Nana Asma'u was an Islamic scholar and prolific writer who dedicated herself primarily to women's Islamic education. She was also politically influential in the caliphate after her father's death. Nana Asma'u is unique among female Islamic figures in Africa of her time – and perhaps in the Muslim world – in the quantity and quality of her literary output and in her social influence. Her Hausa and Fulfulde works were used by her organization of female teachers, Yan Taru ("the Associates"), to educate the caliphate's women in Islamic practice. Yet she also wrote on political matters, for example, urging the "destruction" of Sokoto's enemies at a time when Sokoto's leaders were perceived as weak (Nana Asma'u 1997, 206–210). Muslim women in and around Nigeria continue to cite Nana Asma'u as an inspirational foremother (Mack

2004; Alidou 2005; Mack and Boyd 2013), and women in Nigeria and America affiliated with Sokoto's Qadiri leadership have recently founded modern chapters of Yan Taru dedicated to education and charity (Mack and Boyd 2013, chap. 6). However, Ware (2017, 355) has argued that her role in mass enslavement of women complicates her status as role model for women's empowerment.

As unique as she was, Nana Asma'u was far from the first or the last female West Africa Islamic scholar. Her sister Khadija translated the voluminous Maliki jurisprudence reference *Mukhtasar* of Khalil into Fulfulde (Mack 2008, 167). In Futa Toro in the Senegal River Valley, where Uthman dan Fodio was born, many women from scholarly families had pursued an Islamic education for centuries. Among the neighboring Zwaya (Arabic- and Berber-speaking scholarly lineages in Mauritania), since long before Nana Asma'u, many women have studied Islam at home with relatives, and some have taught Islamic texts to men and have been reputed for their saintliness and *baraka* (Frede 2014; Stewart 1973, 24–29). Colonial administrator Paul Marty observed that Zwaya women taught boys and girls the Qur'an on behalf of their husbands and that the practice had been adopted in St. Louis in northern Senegal (1917, 2, 50–51). Women were especially known for studying *sira*, or the life of the Prophet Muhammad (Fortier 2016), a topic on which some contemporary Mauritanian women have written books (Frede 2014).

An area where women's roles have only recently been discussed extensively is that of spiritual leadership within the Sufi orders. Studies that have mentioned scholarly or saintly women in Africa have seldom spelled out the degree to which these women could formally perform the same roles as male Sufi spiritual guides. There remains a need for further research on whether and how women's authority is constructed differently from that of men and on the limits of women's authority in various groups. Some Senegalese women who are described as “marabout”, a term that can designate male Sufi leaders, perform divination and healing but are not known as spiritual guides in a *tariqa* (Gemmeke 2008).

Perhaps the first African woman to be discussed extensively in the literature as a specifically Sufi leader is Sokhna Magat Diop of the Baay Faal suborder of the Senegalese Muridiyya *tariqa* (Coulon 1988; Coulon and Reveyrand 1990; Reveyrand-Coulon 1993). Christian Coulon describes her role unambiguously as “the only Senegalese woman in charge of a Muslim religious community. She even has the title of Shaikh in the Mouride brotherhood, where she leads one of the ‘sections’ created by her father Abdoulaye Iyakhine” (1988, 125). Like male leaders, she initiates disciples, appoints representatives, is recognized as a local intermediary by the government, and inherited her father's *baraka* as any son would.

Sokhna Magat exemplifies how norms of pious femininity shape a woman's authoritative persona. Whereas male authorities preside over various rituals and have some visible public presence, she conforms to the ideal of the reclusive Muslim woman who minimizes her visibility. She engages in frequent *khalwa* (spiritual retreat), speaks quietly and discretely, and rarely leaves her home. She delegates ceremonial functions to her sons and other male representatives. Far from reducing her authority, all of this contributes to her mystique as someone connected to the invisible divine. Coulon asks: “Could it be that mysticism, in erasing or modifying the difference between the sexes, points the way towards the acceptance of female authority in Islam?” (1988, 132).

Although some female Sufi leaders in Africa suggest a positive answer to this question (Hill 2018), Sokhna Magat Diop's authority is more contested than Coulon and Odile Coulon-Reveyrand suggest. Male Murid leaders have told me that women cannot be sheikhs or transmit religious leadership to their sons or daughters, and Charlotte Pezeril (2008) quotes a Murid leader who insisted that this applied to Sokhna Magat Diop. It remains to be studied whether

Diop's followers will successfully challenge the *tariqa's* rules and establish her daughter as her successor as some have suggested they would (Coulon and Reveyrand 1990, 21). Others have observed disciples visiting female descendants of Ahmadu Bamba seeking *baraka* and sometimes professing their loyalty (Wolof: *jébbalu*, Arabic: *bay'a*) to them (e.g., Buggenhagen 2009). Yet to what extent these women challenge men's historical monopoly on formal Murid authority remains unclear.

The formal status of women as spiritual guides is far clearer in the case of the Tijaniyya, which included women as followers and authorities from the beginning. The Tijaniyya was founded by Sheikh Ahmed al-Tijani (1737–1815) in Algeria and Morocco. After spreading to Mauritania, it took hold throughout Sudanic Africa, where it became the most populous and widely dispersed *tariqa*. Women may become formal disciples in the Tijaniyya, practice all its individual and group litanies, and represent the *tariqa* as *muqaddamas* (female *tariqa* representatives). Indeed, many Tijani communities have faced accusations that they attract too many women, encourage them to leave their husbands, and involve them in mixed-sex gatherings where improper interactions happen between men and women. One example is the community of the Tijani figure Yacouba Silla during the 1930s in Kaédi, Mauritania, in the Senegal River Valley (Hanretta 2009, chap. 6). Silla began his mission after a vision of Fatima and at first mostly recruited women. For ex-slave women, Silla's austere teachings provided a way to overcome social stigma. When French colonial authorities feared insubordination and deported many men of the community, women became responsible for perpetuating the community. At the same time in Kaolack, Senegal, Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse (1900–1975) was forming the Fayda Tijaniyya movement. As it gained popularity in Senegal and Mauritania, its detractors condemned the fact that men and women attended the same gatherings – albeit in different sections – and alleged that, when copresent men and women entered states of divine rapture, they engaged in untoward behaviors (Seesemann 2011, chap. 4).

The Fayda, which has attracted millions of adherents throughout West Africa and beyond (Seesemann 2011), is the Tijani branch in which women's authority is most visible today. Although many Tijani spiritual lineages do not appoint female representatives, the widespread perception that the Fayda branch introduced the idea of appointing them is not entirely accurate. In Mauritania, women of the Tijani lineage founded by Muhammad al-Hafiz are as likely to act as scholars and spiritual guides as are women in the Fayda branch (Frede 2014). The Tijani biographical literature describes many women from North and West Africa as scholars, clairvoyants, and saints, and men sometimes approached them for spiritual instruction (Kanun 2010). Many twentieth-century Tijani women in Nigeria, as well as some of Nigerian origin living in Medina, Saudi Arabia, were appointed to offer spiritual guidance to fellow women within women's segregated spaces (Hutson 1999, 2004; Kanun 2010).

Still, female authorities have become particularly numerous and visible in the Fayda movement. The Fayda's popularization of mystical knowledge of God made it attractive to diverse people, including women, young people, and people with little Islamic education. Outside Mauritania, Tijani women who have openly exercised religious authority have been overwhelmingly of the Fayda branch. In Kano, numerous Fayda women run schools for girls and act as formally appointed spiritual guides (*muqaddamas*) for women. Some of these women are daughters of male Nigerian Islamic teachers (Hutson 1999), while others are daughters and granddaughters of Sheikh Ibrahim Niasse (Hutson 2004). In Niger, Sheikh Ibrahim's daughter Umm al-Khayri Niasse (b. 1941) married her father's representative there and founded several Islamic schools and a vast women's religious and development organization. In Senegal, Sheikha Ruqayya Niasse (b. 1932) (Hill 2018, chap. 6) may be the first African woman to publish books in Arabic, and both she and her sister Sheikha Maryam Niasse (1932–2020) (Hill 2013, 2019)

founded several large Islamic schools. These women are also authorized Tijani *muqaddamas* who spiritually guide disciples and appoint representatives (Hill 2010, 2018). Like the contemporary Tijani *muqaddama*-teachers Ousseina Alidou (2005) has discussed in Niger, they present themselves as spiritual mothers (Hill 2010, 2014, 2019).

One major transformation of Fayda women's leadership has happened since around 2000 in Dakar, where a growing number of *muqaddamas* who have no scholarly credentials or pedigree act openly as spiritual guides for men and women. These "new *muqaddamas*" (Hill 2018) are primarily responsible for giving spiritual instruction (*tarbiya*) to young men and women who have poured into the Fayda movement as it has become a mass youth movement. They operate with the support of the Fayda's central leadership and act as charismatic leaders for large groups of disciples. These women play conventionally male roles yet do so in ways that highlight resonances between spiritual leadership and conventionally feminine roles and qualities.

Some recent studies have also discussed female leaders and saints in the Horn of Africa (Bruzzi 2017; Bruzzi and Meron Zeleke 2015; Ishihara 2010, 2013). When Sayyid Hashim al-Mirghani, the major *khalifa* of the Khatmiyya *tariqa* in Eritrea, died in 1901, he left no sons but left two daughters: Sitti Maryam and Sitti al-Alawiyya (d. 1940). Despite opposition to women's leadership from certain sheikhs of the *tariqa* and from colonial Italian officials, Sitti Maryam became the *khalifa* of the *tariqa* in Ethiopia and Sitti al-Alawiyya became the *khalifa* in Eritrea, becoming the publicly recognized face of their respective countries' dominant *tariqa*. This gave them important political roles as mediators between disciples, rival sheikhs, and colonial authorities. Silvia Bruzzi reports that Sitti al-Alawiyya led supererogatory – although not obligatory – prayers in her home (2017, 52), an extremely unusual activity for a woman in a community that professes adherence to traditional jurisprudence. Also unusual was Sitti al-Alawiyya's controversial appointment of *khalifas*, suggesting that she considered herself not just an heir but a transmitter of her forbearers' *baraka* and authority (2017, 51). Male rivals condemned this performance of typically male roles as a violation of *sharia*.

Women's leadership and sainthood in Sufi contexts always seem ambiguous. On the one hand, these women are actively involved in Islamic pursuits, can decisively influence female and male followers and sometimes political authorities, and may rival any male contemporary in saintly reputation. On the other hand, women who become publicly established as *khalifas* and *sheikhas* always seem to face whispers – or shouts – that they can or should never perform the same roles that men do, as well as claims that they are intrinsically less orthodox than their male counterparts. Most of the female Muslim saints discussed in the literature are known less for their Islamic learning than for their clairvoyance and healing power, and many are viewed as marginally Islamic. There are similar male figures, although far fewer women have had the opportunity to become scholars. We know of several illiterate female saints who converted from Christianity and became known for their asceticism and miraculous healing powers, including a contemporary example in the Gambia (Janson 2006) and an early twentieth-century one in Ethiopia whose burial shrine is now a pilgrimage site for Muslims and Christians (Ishihara 2010, 2013). Both cases involve rituals that are condemned by certain Muslims as unorthodox.

Women and Islamic reform

In many parts of Africa, the Sufi *туруq* that once dominated Islamic leadership have lost ground to modern "reformist" movements, whose allegedly literal reading of the Qur'an and hadith defines many prevalent Islamic practices as contrary to Islamic teachings. These movements were introduced to Africa during the first half of the twentieth century and have gained prominence

since the 1970s (Loimeier 2003, 2013, 2016). Young men who had studied in the Middle East introduced reformist ideas to Muslim Africa, drawing especially on Salafi and modernist interpretations, and for some time these movements attracted mostly other young men. Some earlier scholars suggested that women participate more easily in the “popular Islam” of Sufi communities than in more “orthodox” or “fundamentalist” versions of Islam (Trimingham 1971, 18; Coulon 1988, 118). However, a broad range of more recent studies have demonstrated otherwise. As Islamic movements have proliferated in an increasingly competitive Islamic sphere, “women’s commitment to a movement depends less on how ‘liberal’ its attitudes are toward them than on the degree to which it assumes their moral agency and actively involves them in religious life” (Hill 2010, 380).

Many reform-minded Islamic movements in Africa derive to some degree from the current known broadly as Salafism, with roots in Saudi Arabia, even if many do not use the term. The more centrally organized Tablighi Jama’at, centered in India (discussed in the following section), has also gained ground in some areas. Both currents are male-dominated and unapologetically patriarchal, yet both also attract a committed following among women, many of whom have pursued Western-style education and who might have chosen more ostensibly “liberated” lives. Feminist writers have lamented the paradox of “fundamentalist” women who seemingly support their own oppression in an apparent display of “false consciousness” (for a critique of such perspectives, see Mahmood 2005; Janson 2014, 218). However, far from mere pawns of patriarchy, these women actively shape their lives and thrive within such movements.

Like Sufi groups, reformist groups typically place men in general leadership positions and teach that women should be submissive to husbands while focusing on the home and children and limiting their visibility outside the home. As in Sufi groups, women’s leadership is usually limited to fellow women. Across Africa, Salafi-oriented movements have particularly appealed to upwardly mobile young men. In addition to providing them with business networks and employment opportunities, reformist movements condemn local practices such as lavish weddings and child-naming ceremonies, which divert resources into women’s reciprocity networks (Masquelier 2009, chap. 3; Loimeier 2016). Although many Sufi leaders oppose such life cycle festivities (see, e.g., Buggenhagen 2011, 2012, 202), only reformists effectively abolish them.

However, numerous recent studies have shown that a growing number of women attribute their attachment to strict reformist movements precisely to the sense of discipline and dignity these movements’ ethical practices make possible. Reform movements provide these women with avenues for self-cultivation and social influence, even if within a women-only sphere. Some university-educated Gambian women seek Tablighi husbands because “such men are believed to be ‘serious’ and to take ‘good care’ of their wives” (Janson 2014, 181). One irony of such movements is that their emphasis on properly *concealing* women’s bodies through distinctive clothing has made women the most *visible* manifestations of Islamic reform (LeBlanc 2000; Masquelier 2009; Renne 2013, 2018).

In contrast to local Islamic education traditions, reformists throughout Africa preach that women need a proper Islamic education to help them educate the next generation of Muslims (Loimeier 2016). For example, the Yan Izala movement, which began in Nigeria during the 1970s and then spread to neighboring countries, emerged as a champion of women’s education, which Nigeria’s traditional Sufi-oriented establishment almost completely neglected at the time (Loimeier 1997). Yan Izala built dozens of Islamic schools for children and adults, including many married women. Its emphasis on women’s education and participation brought the movement “a great number of female followers” (1997, 232) and compelled Sufi-oriented groups to take women’s education more seriously (1997, 251).

Women are not just passive followers in such movements but play important roles as social influencers, activists, publicly visible models of piety, and media commentators. Rank-and-file women are crucial to how such movements organize themselves, recruit members, and integrate into local communities (on Burkina Faso, see Madore and Gomez-Perez 2016). As Erin Augis (2014) has pointed out, researchers' focus on male-dominated public manifestations of the "Sounith" (Sunni reformist) movement had underestimated the vitality of this movement through overlooking private spaces where many women exert influence. Augis provides the example of a Sounith hair stylist in Dakar who spreads Islamic teachings through a women-only hair salon she operates inside her home.

Not all reformist organizations are male-dominated. Women in many parts of Africa have independently formed their own Islamic associations, NGOs, and schools. Women began forming Muslim women's associations in Mali in 1958, partly influenced by men but also by women who had themselves undertaken pilgrimage to Mecca (Sanankoua 1991). Today, Malian women's local "learning groups" proliferate, calling women to "return to proper Muslim practice" (Schulz 2008). Women in these groups narrate their conversion to become truly "Muslim women", implicitly defining those engaged in "traditional" Islamic practices as Muslims in name only (Schulz 2008, 2011, 2012b). Many of the women who initiate and lead these groups have "modern" credentials – political connections, economic privilege, "Western" education, and connections to reform movements abroad. These groups teach the "obligation for women to become a more public (or publicized) example of moral excellence" through modeling Middle Eastern-inspired pious dress, behavior, and ritual practice as part of the movement's preaching (*dawa*) (Schulz 2008, 29). In this way, Dorothea Schulz argues, these groups depart from "the traditional relegation of female religiosity and devotional practices to an intimate, secluded, domestic space" (2008, 29), even while outwardly preaching women's submissiveness and domesticity.

In Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire during the 1990s, Marie-Nathalie LeBlanc observed the proliferation of neighborhood Islamic youth associations that promoted an "Arabized" version of Islam – one that we might term as Salafi – that opposed both Western modernity and local Islamic practices (LeBlanc 1999). Although young men officially initiated and led the associations, young women sometimes pushed their brothers to form them and remained highly active. The most active women as leaders and students in Arabic classes were those with an advanced secular Francophone education (LeBlanc 2007). For these young women, whose age and education disqualified them from the "traditional marriage market", participating in Islamic associations facilitated marriage prospects. Just as importantly, embracing reformist discourses on wifely submissiveness, motherhood, and modesty allowed them to reconcile their advanced education with prevalent ideals of women as mothers and wives. Since 2000, Ivorian women have transformed their Islamic associations into dozens of Islamic NGOs involved in women-oriented "education, poverty reduction, and sanitary and health-related initiatives" (LeBlanc 2014, 186). Even while preaching pious feminine submissiveness and docility, LeBlanc argues, these women are not mere "objects of religious regulation" but are "agents of religious transformation" who have shaped the development agenda (2014, 189).

The liberalization of radio and television across Africa in the 1990s and early 2000s, followed by internet and cell phone social media platforms, created opportunities for women of various currents¹ to reach far beyond local groups of women, often without leaving their homes or mixing with men. Several female reformist preachers have become prominent in Burkina Faso and Senegal, addressing a female audience with issues relevant to them (Gomez-Perez and Ba 2015; Gomez-Perez 2018). The legitimacy of women's use of such technologies to place themselves virtually in public remains contentious. Discussing reformist Malian female Islamic

radio personalities, Schulz (2012a) has argued that some listeners are skeptical of “disembodied” female radio preachers, as Islamic knowledge traditionally was considered valid only when transmitted through in-person relationships (although it is not clear that these listeners are as skeptical of male radio preachers). However, technological mediation such as microphones and YouTube channels can act as a “wrapper” that allows a woman to speak openly to a large audience while maintaining an appropriate distance from her public (Hill 2018, chap. 6). The result is ambiguous and up for debate: even if certain listeners – especially those of competing Islamic currents – may question an unseen female radio personality’s credentials, the same woman might have little to no audience at all without technological mediation.

Despite widespread images of Islamic reformists locking women up at home, ideals of the homemaking mother and wife are balanced by invocations of Islamic foremothers who worked, which reformist women sometimes use to justify their work outside the home (Augis 2005, 324–325). The point of these studies is not to argue that official doctrines of women’s submissiveness mask an actual practice of women’s liberation. Rather, they suggest that similar reformist discourses can translate into diverse social outcomes, and that women’s agency and self-realization are not synonymous with liberation as understood in Western secular discourse (Mahmood 2005).

For the sake of brevity, I have chosen to focus on women’s participation in discrete Sufi and reformist movements, although these categories are often indistinct, and many Muslims do not align themselves with a particular current. A growing number of women throughout Africa have founded Islamic schools (Alidou 2013), become media personalities (Sounaye 2020, or otherwise become influential figures for a broader Muslim audience, regardless of personal affiliation in a movement or lack thereof.

Pious masculinities and everyday Islam

The question of men and masculinity has been even more ignored than women’s lives and points of view. This claim may sound strange, as men’s points of view have long been taken for granted as the unmarked Islamic position. Yet it is precisely this taken-for-grantedness that has left in place an implicit assumption of an Islamic masculinity – misogynistic, authoritarian, conservative, and determined by timeless texts. In the introduction to the edited volume *Islamic Masculinities* (2006a), Lahoucine Ouzgane (2006b) argues for the need to move the study of gender and Islam beyond the study of women. Although it overlooks Sub-Saharan Africa, Ouzgane’s volume shows how what it means to be a Muslim man has been understood differently in different times and places. Africanists have since complicated how they understand Islamic masculinity through looking at several key areas, often focusing on younger Muslim men. One area is men in Islamic piety movements, which are widely assumed to promote toxic masculinity but in practice have complex effects on men’s attitudes toward masculinity and women. Another area has been the more numerous Muslim men who strongly identify as Muslims even if they do not participate in any Islamic movement or seek to exemplify normative piety. A third area has been adherents of Sufi movements who consider themselves serious Muslims and may even act as religious authorities yet who reimagine Muslim masculinity as part of “cool” contemporary youth culture.

As mentioned above, the India-based Tablighi Jama’at preaching movement is male-centric and teaches a puritanical form of Islam. It prescribes women’s seclusion in the home, encourages women to cover their faces and bodies with a *burqa* or *niqab*, and preaches wives’ unquestioning submission to their husbands. Yet its effects on gender relations are complex. Tablighi men intentionally cultivate a “softer” form of patriarchy. Those who have studied the movement

elsewhere have described how the movement teaches men to be humbler and more soft-spoken and has led them to learn to perform conventionally “feminine” tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes while on preaching tours (Metcalf 2000; Siddiqi 2012). Women are sometimes involved in proselytizing activities (Sikand 1999), and many women describe the movement’s gender norms as liberating (Ali 2011).

Researchers of the Tablighi movement in Africa have made similar observations (Wario 2012; Janson 2014). In Kenya, for example, the movement’s teachings and preaching activities lead husbands to see themselves not as dictators but as counsellors who must listen to their wives and exercise household headship through sincerely considering the family’s interests (Wario 2012). This softer patriarchy resembles that of Pentecostal movements that have simultaneously proliferated in Africa and elsewhere (van Klinken 2011; Santos 2012). During preaching tours, men may be away for up to four months at a time, often leaving their wives as temporary heads of household. During that time, the traveling men cook, clean, and do laundry, drawing stares as they haggle amongst the women in the vegetables market (Wario 2012, 247). In the Gambia, groups of women often join their husbands on preaching tours, although they remain segregated in indoor spaces (Janson 2014).

Some anthropologists of Muslim societies, partly in response to the attention given to Islamic piety movements in the wake of Saba Mahmood’s influential work *Politics of Piety* (2005), have contributed to what might be called a “post-piety turn”. These anthropologists have discussed everyday experiences of being Muslim among those who may not conform to norms of piety (e.g., Schielke 2009; Schielke and Debevec 2012). Examining why so many Muslims in Burkina Faso do not pray yet define “Muslim” as someone who performs ritual prayer, Liza Debevec (2012) describes a range of factors that people say make prayer a practical or logical impossibility. Although young men and women both described themselves as postponing prayer for a later life phase, explanations and expectations were gendered. Whereas young men’s lack of prayer was seldom questioned, household members often pressured young women to pray. Talk of postponement, Debevec argues, allows young Muslims to reconcile hegemonic Islamic ideals with complex realities perceived to make those ideals unattainable.

Writing on young men in Niger, Masquelier (2010, 2019) has more explicitly linked questions of everyday Islam with changing notions of masculinity in a global age. Masquelier argues that many young men deeply value their “religious identity” as Muslims without performing normative behaviors of “religiosity” (Masquelier 2010, 226). Although a minority have joined Islamic reform movements, most approach Islam less as a set of rules and rituals than as an ethical language for understanding themselves and the world. Young men’s ambivalent relationship with Islamic piety is reflected in their involvement in hip-hop culture, whose aggressive masculinity and music are widely perceived as un-Islamic. They admit that hip-hop might transgress Islam’s technical rules yet insist that, at a deeper level, its social justice approach is deeply Islamic (Masquelier 2019, chap. 4). Although these young men do not see “following rules” as essential to being Muslim, many asserted that they would practice Islam more seriously once they married and had children.

Young Fayda Tijaniyya adherents in Senegal describe a much less ambivalent relationship between hip-hop and Islam (Hill 2016, 2017). Since 2000, rappers have been a major force in recruiting young men into the movement. In contrast to the Nigerien rappers mentioned by Masquelier, who rarely rap about Islam, many Fayda artists rap extensively about Islam and Sufi knowledge. Reimagining hip-hop as an Islamic practice, these rappers promote a contemporary performance of Muslim masculinity that is not so much ambivalent as “bivalent” (Woolard 1998) – simultaneously part of cosmopolitan hip-hop culture and of a “Muslim cool” (Khabeer 2016) masculinity. Soares (2010) has also shown how young men in Mali – nicknamed “Rasta

Sufis” – fashion new ways of being explicitly Islamic and cool, neither postponing Islamic practice nor espousing the literalism of modern reformists.

These recent studies on African Muslims’ masculinities show that Islam does not predetermine gender roles. Yet they also suggest the hegemonic notion that there is an ideal Islamic masculinity, even if Muslims disagree about what it might entail, and even if the person describing such a masculinity acknowledges that he may not (yet) embody it.

Sexual and gender variance

A smaller yet growing area of research has concerned people whose gender and sexual practices and identities deviate from heterosexual norms. There are widespread perceptions among Muslims and non-Muslims that Muslim societies have always rejected male-on-male sex and other nonheteronormative practices as forbidden and even punishable offenses. However, many studies have demonstrated that, at least before the twentieth century, such practices were common among males of all classes in numerous parts of the Muslim world, even if they were officially considered forbidden (Murray and Roscoe 1997). Very little is said about females’ alternative sexual practices (Murray 1997c).² Some Islamic legal rulings prescribe the death penalty for same-sex sexual activities, yet this penalty is not mentioned in the Qur’an or hadith and has rarely been applied in Islamic history. Nearly everywhere at least from Morocco to South Asia, there was a “will not to know” about the widespread fact of male-on-male sex (Murray 1997b). The emerging literature I will discuss here demonstrates the same “will not to know” in many parts of Muslim Africa, at least until recently. As elsewhere, a combination of colonialism, global capitalism, and modern Islamic revivalism has led to a growing tendency to treat private lives as a matter of public concern. The globalization of LGBTQ+ rights movements has been met among Muslim African communities with claims that the West is promoting homosexuality as a plot to reduce Muslims morally and demographically. Ironically, earlier Western tropes of the degenerate Muslim homosexual have been replaced by Westerners’ stereotypes of the intolerant Muslim homophobe and by Muslims’ myths of Westerners’ importing unfamiliar homosexuality to Muslims.

In many parts of Africa, certain politicians and Islamic authorities have made efforts to combat the perceived rise of homosexuality, often on the grounds that such things are foreign to Muslims and Africa (see Ndzovu 2016 on Kenya; Gaudio 2009 on Northern Nigeria; M’Baye 2013; Bop 2008 on Senegal). However, while the notion of homosexuals or transgendered people as identity categories that demand equal rights is indeed new, gender and sexual diversity has been documented throughout Muslim Africa.

Perhaps the most in-depth study of a recognized sexual/gender minority in Muslim Africa is Rudolf Gaudio’s (2009) monograph on the *yan daudu*, Hausa-speaking men in Kano State in Northern Nigeria. Marked by effeminate mannerisms and dress, they specialize in specific kinds of work, including performing sex work, managing women’s sex work, matchmaking, cooking, cleaning, and entertaining at bars. Gaudio describes getting to know Hajiya Asabe, whose title refers to a respectable woman who has done the pilgrimage, which Hajiya Asabe has done multiple times. Gaudio professes surprise at realizing the sincerity of Hajiya Asabe’s commitment to Islam despite his self-description as a prostitute (*karuwa*) and his admission that “Muslims do [the forbidden ‘deed’ of male-on-male sex] ... more than anyone!” (2). Many *yan daudu* participate in *bori* spirit possession rituals as noninitiates (Besmer 1983). Although *yan daudu*’s roles had long been socially recognized, Gaudio found in the 1990s that most *yan daudu* had faced harassment and violence from police and hooligans, and their treatment grew worse after the establishment of *sharia* penal code in the North in 2000.

Nonheteronormative gender practices have also received scholarly attention in Senegal. Since at least the late nineteenth century, the term *góor-jigéen* (man–woman) designated lower-status males who resembled women in their dress and social roles and who had transactional sex with conventionally masculine men. Although Islamic authorities in principle condemned them, many *góor-jigéen* played appreciated social roles. Many were assistants to independently wealthy women (*diriyaanke*), for whom they acted as social go-betweens, confidants, and entertainers. Like casted clients such as griots (from which many *góor-jigéen* hailed), they were tasked with organizing and cooking for naming ceremonies and weddings (Broqua 2017). Recently, the term *góor-jigéen* has been re-signified as a pejorative term for “homosexual” or, more broadly, any other gender–nonconforming male (Broqua 2017). In 2008, following press reports of an alleged gay marriage, there was a police crackdown, and some Islamic organizations mobilized to eradicate homosexuality, which they described as a Western plot to destroy Muslim societies (Bop 2008; M’Baye 2013). Ironically, while *góor-jigéen* was originally an accepted social category that European observers found quaint, it is now commonly described as an import from the West. Today, males involved in same–sex practices detest the term *góor-jigéen* and usually call themselves either *yoos* – those who play the penetrative role and consider themselves normative men – or *ibbi* – those who are penetrated and tend to have a somewhat feminine self–presentation (Niang et al. 2003; M’Baye 2013). Some *ibbi* remain part of wealthy Muslim women’s entourage and perform functions that *góor-jigéen* did a century ago (Niang et al. 2003, 506–507; Bop 2008). Yet these roles seem tenuous as private life becomes an object of social surveillance and identity politics and Muslims face growing pressure to renounce “the will not to know”.

LGBTQ+ Muslim activism has perhaps been most apparent in South Africa, where Muslims are a small but well–established minority. This minority status, along with South Africa’s secular constitution that guarantees equality for all gender and sexual identities, contributes to the ability of progressive Muslim groups to create spaces for LGBTQ+ Muslims. South Africa is unusual in having an explicitly Islamic support group for LGBTQ+ people. In 1998, progressive Muslims founded Al-Fitra Foundation, later renamed the Inner Circle, which provides an alternative space for prayer, meditation, talks, and communal *dhikr* practice (Kugle 2005). The group’s spiritual leader, Muhsin Hendricks, worked as an imam before coming out as gay, and since then he has worked as an advocate for LGBTQ+ issues, reinterpreting the Qur’an and hadith in anti–patriarchal and LGBTQ+–affirming ways. While advocates like Hendricks call for open recognition of the validity of LGBTQ+ people’s identities and sexual lives, the “will not to know” approach remains widespread among South African Muslims. One study found that “virtually all interviewees, including those in same–sex relationships, agreed that Islam condemns same–sex practices”; however, “more nuanced and less rigid practices towards those known to or suspected of being involved in same–sex relationships within the Muslim community” (Bonthuys and Erlank 2012, 279) were also found. Although such attitudes stop short of recognizing LGBTQ+ people as social equals as gender justice advocates demand, they illustrate that Muslims’ attitudes are more complex than a decontextualized list of beliefs might suggest.

Conclusion

The study of gender in Muslim African contexts has been a politically fraught area, one in which the main question – whether spoken or unspoken – has often been whether, how, and to what degree Islam oppresses women and others who are not conventionally heterosexual males. A challenge faced by more recent scholarship has been to shift the terms of debate away

from facile assumptions without playing the role of either apologist or polemicist. This task has seen most success where the focus has been on understanding people as complex actors who are both limited and enabled by prevalent Islamic norms in conversation with local and global economic, political, and discursive conditions. The growing tendency to de-essentialize Islam, women, and gender does not mean that there is no room for critique or political engagement concerning issues of gender and Islam (Gruenbaum 2001). Rather, there is a need to move beyond missions like “saving Muslim women” (Abu-Lughod 2013) and instead to seek to understand how Muslims understand their own complex struggles. Any attempt at critique or intervention must be framed in more egalitarian terms of solidarity with communities rather than imposing alien categories and goals. Although the field of gender and Islam in Africa has grown considerably, researchers are just beginning to understand the past and present dynamism and diversity contained within this field.

Notes

- 1 On Fayda Tijaniyya women performers’ online presence, see Hill (2018, chap. 6) and Ogunnaike (2018). Soares (2016) has discussed another Malian woman – one born in Saudi Arabia to a Salafi family – who established herself as a preacher and esoteric specialist through her radio program.
- 2 In addition to historical studies demonstrating the presence of gender- and sexually variant practices and identities, some progressive Muslim commentators have reanalyzed Islamic texts to argue for explicitly accepting such practices and identities (e.g., S.S. al-Haq Kugle 2010; Jahangir and Abdullatif 2016).

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