

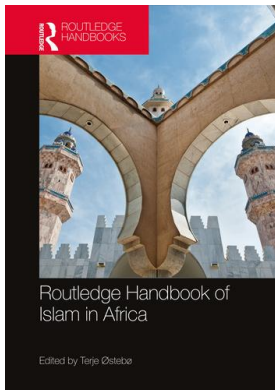
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### Islam and politics in Africa

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## 10

ISLAM AND POLITICS  
IN AFRICA

## Politics within and without the state

*Ahmed Ibrahim*

Islam is a sociocultural force that shapes its adherents' views of the world and their conduct in it. As such, it should not engender surprise that it also structures relations of power in Muslim societies. The assessment that it does not or should not can only become a taken-for-granted assumption as a result of a number of related stereotypes and misconceptions. That is to say, there are a number of widely held beliefs that add up to create the misconception that Islam in Africa is less political than Islam in other parts of the world. The first of these is that there are distinct spheres of social life and that each has its appropriate place. The proper place of the category of "religion" is said to be the private sphere thus making possible its separation from the public sphere and politics. Furthermore, the best and the ideal realization of the separation of religion and politics has been achieved in the West thanks to the legacy of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Christianity, Islam as a religion is viewed as thoroughly political and thus Muslim societies are thought to be incapable of separating religion and politics to their detriment. This characterization of Islam, however, is presumed to apply to Muslim societies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region) where orthodox and scriptural Islam is thought to reign. This presumed political nature of Islam is considered not to apply to Sub-Saharan Africa where Islam is seen as apolitical on account of it being "impure" as a result of mixing with African culture. Thus, the supposed apolitical nature of African Islam is not a celebrated achievement as is the case with the separation of politics and religion in the West. In fact, the apolitical nature of African Islam is more a mark of underdevelopment. This is in keeping with the Western tendency to deprive Africans of agency and history rendering Sub-Saharan Africa historically stagnant. That is to say, when Islam is the framework through which Africans become historical actors, it is presumed to be an un-African Islam. This chapter will address the historical roots of the general misconception of African Islam as apolitical as well as its continued manifestation under the Global War on Terror before undertaking a discussion of the various ways Islam has motivated and influenced the political lives and aspirations of African Muslims.

As stated above, Islam in Africa is thought to be distinctly apolitical and as a result more "tolerant" than other versions of Islam. The origin of this idea goes back to the colonial era. The colonizing European powers were keen to distinguish between potential collaborators and adversaries in their drive to pacify the continent. Partly informed by Europe's confrontational

history with Islam, Muslims were ideal candidates for the slot of the potential enemy.<sup>2</sup> European colonial powers also feared that African Muslims would be susceptible to calls for pan-Islamist unity emanating from places such as Turkey. It thus made political sense for conquering European powers to separate the vast African Muslim population that was now under its control from Muslims elsewhere. This led to the emergence of “*Islam noir*” or “Black Islam”<sup>3</sup> as something distinct from Islam outside of Sub-Saharan Africa. The emergence of the notion of “African Islam” is therefore itself an eminently political act; as Benjamin Soares and Rene Otayek point out, “it derives from European colonial attempts both to identify and cultivate tractable Muslim subjects in their Africa colonies” (2007, 3). In spite of its colonial roots, the idea of “African Islam” has informed academic analysis of African Muslim societies (Miles 2004; Cruise O’Brien 2003; Quinn and Quinn 2003; Evers Rosander and Westerlund 1997) as well as the popular perception of Islamic Africa. This idea of Islamic Africa has therefore had a lasting impact on the understanding of Islam’s place in African history as well as the contemporary understanding of African Muslim societies. This misconception remains popular despite critical scholarship (Diagne 2004; Kane 2016; Loimeier 2013; Saul 2006; Soares and Otayek 2007).

A central analytical consequence of the idea of “African Islam” has been the conventional dichotomous analysis of Islam in Africa. These dichotomies can take many shapes: traditional African/reformist Islam, Sufi/Wahhabi or Salafi Islam, local/transnational Islam, syncretic/scriptural or orthodox Islam (Soares and Otayek 2007). In all these binaries, the first is seen as the true expression of Islam in African. It is presumed that “traditional African Islam” is a mixture of Islam and African culture thereby resulting in a syncretic form of Islam. This “traditional African Islam” is so-called because it is said to be “localized” and “contextualized” (Evers Rosander 1997, 1). Sufi (*tariqa*, plural *tuuruq*) Islam is viewed as the true organizational manifestation of “traditional African Islam”, and the association of Sufism with “traditional African Islam” is made because elaborate Sufi practices, including saint veneration and tomb visitation, are approached by most commentators as somehow organically related to African cultures. It is, of course, well known that these Sufi rites are practiced by Sufi orders throughout the world and not just those in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition, and importantly, because of its syncretism, this so-called “traditional African Islam” is portrayed positively and thought to be tolerant of different practices in contrast to reformist Islam. Reformist Islam, on the contrary, has been associated with pan-Islamic movements or influences from the Middle East and North Africa, and has often been portrayed as posing a threat and a challenge to “traditional African Islam”. Reformist Islam is seen to be inspired by “Wahhabism” or interpretations and practices of Islam inspired by the eighteenth-century Arabian reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792). Reformist Islam is also closely linked with Salafism, a reformist movement partly inspired by the writings of the medieval Muslim jurist and theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), and which invokes the practices of “the pious ancestors” as a model which today’s Muslims should aspire to. Commentators often employ the categories of Wahhabi, Salafi, Islamist, and fundamentalist interchangeably, and reduce African Muslims’ efforts to change their own societies to imitations of Islam as practiced in the Arab world. African Muslim reform efforts are thus seen as anti-“African Islam” (Cruise O’Brien 2003). This is of course a simplification of the complex and changing practices of Islam and Islamic reform movements in Africa.

As mentioned above, a central theme informing the dichotomous analysis of Muslim societies in Africa is the ascription of African Islam with political quietism. This dichotomous approach then has the effect of delegitimizing any attempt on the part of African Muslims to change their religious practice or aspects of their life. Thus, essential to the work of this notion

is the political work it does, which is to undermine movements and discourses that are viewed as hostile to Western interests. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the idea of “African Islam” has found a new lease on life after the onset of the Global War on Terror. Beginning with the 1998 attacks on US embassies in East Africa and then with the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US, many scholars and policy makers began to focus on Islam in Africa. Countless studies warned that the weaknesses of African states, and their nonexistence in places like Somalia, would provide ideal spaces for the spread of radical Islam. The post-9/11 security concerns of the West have thus given a new impetus to the old and dichotomous approach to the study of Islam in Africa. These studies and commentaries continue to assert, often implicitly, that any sign of politics framed by religious discourse and practice on the part of African Muslims must be attributed to foreign influence.

To demonstrate how this approach undermines a serious study and understanding of Muslim politics in Africa, I want to briefly look at some scholarly commentary of a series of *sharia* courts that began to emerge in Mogadishu and southern Somalia after the disintegration of the central government in 1991. These sometimes unrelated *sharia* courts began to emerge when religious authorities and “traditional” elders established arbitration and adjudication centers to deal with the chaos following the fall of the Somali Republic. Since *sharia* structures of authority and discourse were integral to the formation and functioning of the centers, they became known as *sharia* courts. These courts arose and disappeared throughout the 1990s and 2000s in Mogadishu and its vicinity. A group of them, however, united and created an umbrella organization, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006 to confront the so-called Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism, an alliance of warlords backed by the US. The ICU quickly overpowered the warlords taking control of Mogadishu before beginning to expand to neighboring towns. This drew the attention of commentators as well as policy makers concerned about the security implications of the rise of the ICU. In December 2006, Ethiopia, with the backing of the US, invaded Mogadishu and disbanded the ICU. Much of the scholarly commentaries on the courts concluded that the version of *sharia* practiced by the courts was foreign to Somali society, and thus the emergence of the courts was rooted in the influence of foreign ideologies and networks.

In line with the general depiction of African Islam, the Somali *sharia* courts have been analyzed in terms of where they fit in the categories of “traditional African Islam” versus reformist, radical, or political Islam (these terms are used interchangeably, often in the same work). The courts are frequently depicted as a vehicle for the spread of reformist or political Islam (Le Sage 2004; Menkhaus 2005, 2006/2007; Rotberg 2005; de Waal 2004). These commentators contend that the *sharia* courts in Somalia emerged when fundamentalist clerics, influenced by foreign networks, took advantage of the vacuum of power and a vulnerable population, broken by years of pervasive violence and desperately desirous of law and order to impose their harsh and literal interpretation of the *sharia*. The appeal of this supposedly foreign Islam is explained away through the utilization of such tropes as the post-state collapse *vacuum* and the *vulnerable* society. Key to this argument is the distinction drawn between the scripture-based *sharia* and Somali customary law (*heer*). A report by a United Nations field mission describes the difference between custom and *sharia* law through how the *sharia* courts in Hiiran region in southern Somalia functioned:

They [the courts] are multi-clan in composition and have had considerable popular support; they have exercised the right to collect taxes, allocating revenues to pay for the running of the courts, provide small stipends to manage disputes, operate the prison, and maintain and control a shari’a militia estimated at 500 men. The courts

in Hiran base their deliberations on the Quran, but do not impose shari'a law – parties to a dispute are entitled to opt for traditional (blood money) compensation or shari'a.<sup>4</sup>

Here the opting for blood money compensation is said to be based on Somali “tradition” and not the *sharia*. However, as anyone with knowledge of the *sharia* knows, it is the *sharia* that gives the victim of bodily harm or his/her relatives the option of either seeking physical punishment of the perpetrator or opting for monetary compensation. That blood compensation has become a central feature of Somali customary practices does not take away that it is also *sharia* inspired. It is only because of the need to distinguish between African customs and the *sharia* on the part of the analyst that a Somali custom cannot also be seen as *sharia*. Revealingly, if one were to ask local *sharia* scholars or sheikhs about the difference between *sharia* and traditional Somali custom, they would deny that a difference exists between the two, as reported by Andre Le Sage: “*sharia* judges assert that there is no conflict between Islamic law and traditional Somali clan law (known in Somalia as *heer*). They state that Somali culture was fully integrated into Islam and thus no conflict was possible” (Le sage 2004, 136).<sup>5</sup> Despite the assertions of his informants, the above commentator suggests the Somali sheikhs are lying because none of them were members of Sufi brotherhoods. Given the popular assumption that Sufi brotherhoods are the preminent expression of “African Islam”, the author concludes that since none of the judges at the *sharia* courts identified themselves as members of Sufi brotherhoods, it must mean the *sharia* they practice is nontraditional.<sup>6</sup> The overall consequence of the conclusion that the rise of the *sharia* courts was due to foreign ideologies and networks is to deny the Somalis, and Africans in general, the aptitude to be sociopolitical actors actively engaged in political imaginaries through experimentations with forms of self-governance that are informed by a history that is deeply entangled with and informed by the Islamic tradition. It also denies us a deeper and historical understanding of one of the most interesting sociopolitical experiments in Somalia after the disintegration of the state.

This one case demonstrates most of the key arguments of this chapter: the interchangeability of the terms reformist/radical/Islamist, on one side, and traditional African Islam or African Islam/Sufi/syncretic, on the other side; that the assumption that the former is apolitical and innately African while the latter is foreign and political is untenable; that the rationale behind this dichotomous approach is thoroughly political in that it delegitimizes attempts on the part of African Muslims to structure their societies in accordance with what they see as the good life; and that this negation of the agency of African Muslims has parallels in the old European erasure of the agency and history of Africans. This, however, is not to say that there were no new intellectual, religious, and organizational currents originating outside of Somalia that came to exert some influence on developments in Somalia, including the rise of the courts. But the tendency by many commentators to simply attribute the rise of the courts to nefarious and conservative foreign, i.e., Middle Eastern influences that politicized and radicalized the supposedly “traditional” and tolerant “African Islam”, is wrong in many ways. It prevents us from undertaking an analysis of African Muslims that takes seriously dynamics internal to Africa. These include the millennium-old presence of Islam in some parts of Africa, the economic and political transformations and developments of the colonial and post colonial periods, massive urbanization, collapse of revolutionary post colonial ideals and projects, economic and political liberalization of the 1990s, and the securitization and surveillance of Muslims under the Global War on Terror. In the second half of this chapter, I will explore how some of these factors shaped the political history of Islam in Africa.

## Islam and politics in African history

Throughout history, the politics of African Muslim societies has been shaped by their religious practice and discourse. Similar to Soares and Otayek (2007), I think of politics beyond just the formal to include what these authors refer to as the informal or “everyday”. In my conception, this everyday politics is not simply the personal or the private, but encapsulates politics in spaces where the state has not monopolized the issue of social power and relations of power in contexts where the state has withered away or simply is not present – including politics in precolonial Muslim societies as well contemporary societies. In what follows, I provide a brief overview of how the relationship between politics and Islam played out in different contexts: precolonial, colonial era, and postcolonial.

### *Precolonial period*

Islam’s influence on the political in precolonial African Muslim societies has been well documented by the literature (Gomez 2018), though undertheorized.<sup>7</sup> I contend that religion in precolonial African Muslim societies was integral to the formation and legitimation of political power. I argue that religious authorities, mainly as a result of their *sharia*-based authority and role of mediating and settling disputes, were integral to the activity of governing societies that were decentralized and lacked hierarchical political offices. Islam, I thus argue, was foundational to governance and politics in the experience of precolonial African Muslims. The political history of two of the more thoroughly Islamized regions in Sub-Saharan Africa, West Africa excluding tropical West Africa and the East African coast (including the Horn), illustrate this point.

The more impressive state-building efforts in West Africa were led by Muslim leaders who claimed to be waging jihad (struggle) against corrupt leaders. Though jihad as a form of state-building existed in West Africa perhaps as early as the eleventh century, the jihadi movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were something of a departure from the dominant relationship of Islam to politics (Robinson 2000). The predominant pattern of religion and politics in the initial stages of Islam’s spread in West Africa prevented Muslim scholars from engaging in politics (Levtzion 2000). Their primary role, based on their administrative and business expertise as traders, was limited to providing service to rulers when needed. In the majority of cases, Muslims formed small trading communities that often lived separately from the larger societies where traditional African religions were practiced. Even in cases where African leaders ostensibly embraced Islam, Muslim religious authorities had little sway over how society was governed. This relationship between Islam and politics changed overtime. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, partly as a consequence of the spread of Islam to rural areas and the enslavement of Muslims (Ware 2015), there emerged clerics who denounced the corruptness of political leaders and the injustices of the existing regimes. In so doing, these leaders articulated the grievances of peasants and other sectors of society against the regimes of the day. This led to militant political movements led by Muslim clerics whose sustained efforts resulted in the formation of jihadi states during those two centuries. The most impressive must be the Sokoto Caliphate in Hausaland, in today’s northern Nigeria. Uthman dan Fodio, the founder of Sokoto Caliphate, put in place a sociopolitical, economic, and legal system modeled after the Muslim Caliphates of the Abbasid and Ottoman periods (Gomez 2018). The political system was built on the ethical-legal foundation of the *sharia* signifying the integral role of the *sharia* in precolonial political formations. The Sokoto Caliphate grew to become an impressive political order in precolonial Africa before it was defeated by the British in 1903. The Sokoto

Caliphate and other West African Jihadi states would have been impossible without the legitimation as well as the structure and principles of governing provided by Islam.

Another important example of Islam and politics in precolonial Africa took place in the Horn of Africa and on the East African coast. Beginning as early as the tenth century, a string of Muslim principalities and emirates formed along trade routes leading inland from Zeila on the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. These Muslim principalities were often engaged in a conflict with the expansionist Christian state of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), a conflict that reached its apex when the Muslims were united under the leadership of Imam Ahmed b. Ibrahim al-Ghazi of Harar (called Ahmed Gragh by the Ethiopians and Ahmed Gurey by the Somalis) in the sixteenth century. The political role of Islam and Muslim leaders was also evident in the formation of Muslim principalities in southern Somalia referred to as “pastoral polities” by Lee Cassenelli (1982): the Ajuraan Confederacy (1500–1700) and the Geledi Sultanate (1800–1840). In all these polities, Islam and Muslim leaders were crucial to providing the governance structure and the legitimation of political power. A similar history also transpired on the East African coast where mosques from as early as the ninth century have been discovered (Horton 2001). The spread of Islam on the east coast of Africa came as a result of the incorporation of East Africa into the world of the western Indian Ocean (Simpson and Kresse 2008). This led to the founding of city-states on the coast of East Africa, such as Sofala, Mombasa, Kilwa, and Mogadishu. The political structures of these city-states were based on Islamic principles and structures of governance. The leaders of these city-states were called Amirs and sultans who employed *wazirs* (ministers) and *qadis* (judges). It is my contention that Islam was integral to the formation of precolonial polities in African Muslim societies. Furthermore, I suggest that the authority invested in the practice and discourse of the *sharia* was key in legitimating political power.

### ***Islam under colonialism***

Two of the more important developments under colonialism in terms of demonstrating Islam and Muslim leaders’ political power as well as shaping the future of Muslim politics were the resistance put up by Muslim leaders and organizations, including Sufi orders, to colonialism, and the depoliticization of Islam by colonial powers. Contrary to the image of Sufi Islam in Africa as apolitical, some Sufi orders provided some of the fiercest resistance to European colonization in Africa (Martin 1976). As imposition of European colonization got underway, many Muslim leaders viewed it as their obligation to resist European rule. A good example of this is Muhammad Ahmed (Mahdi) of Sudan who proclaimed himself the Mahdi in 1881. He led a successful resistance to the Turko-Egyptian control over Sudan, which hired British General Charles George Gordon to govern Sudan, and established the Mahdist State which was finally defeated in 1898–1899. Another good example of a Muslim leader leading the resistance to European colonization was Muhammad Abdille Hassan of Somalia, labelled “the Mad Mullah” by the British, who from 1898 to 1920 led a strong resistance against British and Ethiopian incursion into Somali-inhabited territories in the Horn of Africa (Sheikh-Abdi 1993). The resistance of African Muslims to European colonization contradicts the conventional wisdom, stated above, that the so-called African Islam is apolitical and demonstrates the political role of Islam and Muslim leaders in African history.

This does not mean, of course, that many Muslim leaders and organizations were not politically quietist and even collaborative with the colonizing powers, especially when the overwhelming military superiority of the colonizers became evident. The Muslim resistance to European colonization failed to stem the tide of colonial rule and led, in many cases, to

cooperation with colonial authorities. New leaders of Sufi brotherhoods such as Amadu Bamba (d. 1927) of the Muridiyya Brotherhood in Senegal and Seydou Nourou Tall (d. 1980), a descendant of Hajj Umar Tal, of the Tijaniyya Brotherhood, cooperated with colonialism. These leaders presented themselves as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the believers. In the majority of cases brotherhoods lost this intermediary political role upon independence when European-educated elites took the helm of the state.

Another significant development under colonialism which would have a lasting impact on Islam and politics in Africa was the attempt at depoliticizing Islam by the colonial state. This effort was affected through curtailing the jurisdiction of the *sharia* by undertaking a series of steps meant to limit it to the sphere of the family, i.e., to privatize it. As many scholars have pointed out, the *sharia* as a lived tradition started going through momentous transformations beginning in the nineteenth century when the majority of Muslim societies came under the direct control of European powers, and continued under the postcolonial state. In general, the most important factors in these transformations were the codification of the *sharia*, the abolishing of *waqfs* (inalienable religious endowments), the delimiting of the jurisdiction of the *sharia*, and the introduction of modern law schools and Western style court systems. Prior to these “reforms” the *sharia* in the precolonial Islamic world was an entirely distinct entity from what it became under colonialism. Through these efforts the colonial and postcolonial state has irredeemably altered the world of the *sharia* (Hallaq 2009; Messick 1993). In the words of Talal Asad, the *sharia* in the precolonial world “is not ‘law’ in the modern understanding of that concept, not a system of legal doctrines backed by sovereign state power, but a tradition consisting of normative practice and commentary that includes (but is not exhausted) justiciable cases” (2015, 179). In other words, the *sharia* in precolonial Muslims societies was an ethical-legal tradition that attempted at approximating God’s will as revealed in the Qur’an and hadith (prophetic traditions). The *sharia* is thus not limited to the legal or justiciable cases. Furthermore, since the legal discourse we know as *sharia* is the result of the human interpretation of the revealed texts, there are only *sharia* opinions. This explains the pluralism of *sharia* positions on any matter. Because of the plurality of possible *sharia* opinions on any question, the *sharia* does not have the finality of modern law even though it is inspired by divine intent. The pluralism of the *sharia* was viewed as breeding chaos and arbitrary rulings by European colonial powers. Moreover, the individual-centered hermeneutic tradition of the *sharia* was a challenge to the modern state’s drive to centralize the administration of justice and take the power of legislation out of the hands of religious authorities. Codification of the *sharia* was therefore a necessary step in the process of centralization, a key feature of modern state power.

Another important step in transforming the world of the *sharia* and undercutting its political potentiality was, as noted, its privatization. The jurisdiction of the *sharia* was delimited to issues of personal status such as divorce and inheritance, i.e., the family.<sup>8</sup> Commercial as well as criminal law was taken outside the purview of the *sharia* and *sharia* authorities. The privatization of the *sharia* reflected the secular worldview that the appropriate place of religion was in the private sphere and not the public. As I mentioned above, the practice of the *sharia* and *sharia*-derived authority is integral to the formation of religio-political authority in Muslim societies. In restricting the ability of religious authorities to freely interpret and practice the *sharia* as well as limiting its jurisdiction to the family, the colonial state aimed at undercutting the public and political significance of Islam. This depoliticization of Islam was continued, with few exceptions, by the postcolonial state led by colonial educated elite. The depoliticization process would be challenged a few decades after independence, and not surprisingly, the role of the *sharia* in public life became the flashpoint in Muslim political activism.



### *Islam and politics in the postcolonial period*

The role of religion in public life continued to decrease in the immediate decades after colonialism due to the secular and nationalist governments that took power in many postcolonial African states. The inheritance and adoption of secular structures of governance by nationalist elites suppressed the public role of Islam and the political influence of Muslim leaders. The role of Muslim leaders was reduced to functioning as intermediaries between postcolonial secular states and their followers. Many secular leaders of postcolonial states relied on Muslim leaders and organizations to garner support and legitimacy. When they could not be co-opted by the secular order of the postcolonial state, Muslim authorities were viewed by the state with suspicion and they remained antagonistic to the secular order, viewing themselves as defenders of Islam (Kaba 2000). Part of the reasoning of postcolonial leaders in marginalizing Islam and Muslim leaders was the fear that religion would breed sectarianism and undermine the nation-building project of the postcolonial state – or that Muslim leaders would challenge the legitimacy of secular leaders and the secular order.

A good example of the utilization of Muslim leaders/organization by the postcolonial state and its secular politicians is Senegal. In Senegal, secular political leaders, like Leopold Sédar Senghor, found it necessary to seek the support of Sufi brotherhoods such as Muridiyya to buttress their political ambitions (Cruise O'Brien 1971). In Sudan, the major postcolonial parties were outgrowths of Muslim organizations, and the two largest parties following independence have their roots in Sufi orders: The Ummah Party supported by the Ansar (followers of Muhammad Ahmed, the Mahdi) and the Democratic Unionist Party backed by the Khatmiyyah (Salomon 2013). Muslim movements and Islamic concepts have been integral to the development of a centralized state and modern Sudanese politics. The centrality of Islam to politics in Sudan is revealed by the fact that Sudan is one of the few instances in the Sunni world where state-led and thorough Islamization of society was attempted (Salomon 2016).<sup>9</sup> With the exceptions of few instances, however, the general tendency in postcolonial Africa has been the sidelining of Islam and Muslim leaders from formal politics.

Islam has, however, reemerged as a political force beginning in the 1980s. The reemergence of Islam in the political arena was partly a reflection of a widespread reappearance of Islam in the public arena, sometimes referred to by its proponents as the Islamic Awakening (*al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*). It may help to categorize the political impact of the Islamic Awakening as indirect and direct. In terms of its indirect impact, the Islamic Awakening entailed the growth of Islamic discourse in the public arena as many Muslims consciously cultivated an “Islamic” lifestyle amid the growth of Islamic associations (Tayob 2012). The Islamic Awakening also led to the proliferation of reformist movements who condemned practices they saw as not strictly sanctioned by scripture. They denounced many of the practices of African Muslims as innovations (*bida*) that are therefore un-Islamic.<sup>10</sup> Among the practices reformists castigated were Sufi practices such as tomb visitations and saint veneration. These reformist efforts aimed at fellow Muslims sometimes turned violent. Many of the leaders of these reformist movements spent time in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the movements were also supported by Arab Gulf States as a way of countering communism and revolutionary leftist currents. This, however, should not lead us to view reformist movements in Africa simply as exports from the Middle East for they were as much responses to dynamics internal to Africa as they were influenced by outside forces. Though this aspect of the reformist effort was not directly aimed at the political establishment, it nevertheless influenced politics. It shaped politics through the cultivation of an ethical-political subject with specific affective and embodied sensibilities who then engaged in public life through these embodied sensibilities. Such cultivation of the self, some argue (Hirschkind 2006;

Mahmood 2005), shapes politics and the public life in so far as it shapes the reasoning, judgments, and responses of the subject.<sup>11</sup> This is one reason why piety movements have attracted scholarly attention and engendered a debate about the efficacy of ethical self-cultivation.<sup>12</sup>

A more direct impact of the Islamic Awakening has been its conflict with the state as reformists sometimes attempt at a takeover of the state. Activists whose efforts are aimed at influencing formal politics or capturing the state are often referred to in the literature as Islamists. The most intense flashpoint in the Islamist conflict with the state is over the place and role of *sharia*. Islamists argue that the state should adopt the *sharia* as the source of all legislation, rather than it being limited to the sphere of the family, thereby transforming the state into an “Islamic state”.<sup>13</sup> Islamists contend that given the dominance of the modern state over society, their goal of creating an Islamic society can be realized only through the possession and utilization of the instruments of the state. Islamist activists have not been shy to take up arms in their drive to establish an Islamic state. Their militancy and violence have garnered them the attention of the media though they are actually a minority in the entire range of contemporary Islamic political activism. It is ironic that the space where the attempt to depoliticize Islam was most exerted, the *sharia*, has now become the most intense flashpoint for its resurgence in the political.

Other reasons for the reemergence of Muslim political activism include the expansion of the public sphere after the economic and political liberalization of the 1990s. New spaces and opportunities to engage in politics have opened up for many African Muslims with the expansion of the public sphere. The impact on African Muslims of this opening has varied depending on the size of the Muslim population in the country. In Muslim majority countries, the expansion of the public sphere forced politicians to engage in political discourse through Islamic idioms to legitimize and augment their positions. A good example of this is Ahmed Sekou Toure of Guinea who, after initially suppressing Islamic organizations and castigating them as sectarian, began supporting them as well as presenting himself as a man of religion (Kaba 2000). The expansion of the public sphere has also increased the call for the implementation of the *sharia* as noted above. In such contexts, supporting the application of the *sharia* has become a politically convenient maneuver to gain popular support. The adoption of the *sharia* in over a dozen states in northern Nigeria is a good example of this (Kane 2003). Accordingly, and contrary to the secularization drive of the colonial and early postcolonial state to privatize the *sharia*, the *sharia* today generates the most intense Islamic political activism. In instances where Muslims make up a minority in a Christian-dominated state, *qadi* courts (as the courts dealing with personal status issues of Muslims are often called) have become crucial to the identity of the Muslim minority. This was the case of the *qadi* courts controversy in Kenya (Hirsch 1994; Seesemann 2006).

Interreligious conflict between Christians and Muslims is another flashpoint which generates Muslim political activism.<sup>14</sup> Among the reasons for this religious tension include (1) the spread of Pentecostalism throughout Africa and the simultaneous proliferation of Islamic activism in an era characterized by the widening of the public sphere and (2) competition over state-based resources and authority given the state's centrality to accumulation. Perhaps nowhere in the world do so many Muslims and Christians live in such close proximity, often in the same family, as in Africa. This has been a characteristic feature of religious pluralism in the past, but under the contemporary global conditions of politicized religion, the peaceful coexistence of different religious traditions is now generating conflicts.

### New lines of inquiry

No development has had as much impact on Muslim societies over the past two decades as has the Global War on Terror. Much has been written about how events in the wider world,

particularly religious practice and discourse originating from the Middle East, has influenced Muslim politics in Africa. While this will continue to engage scholars, a new field of research that is already attracting the attention of scholars and that will continue to generate new insights is how the Global War on Terror and all that comes with it influence politics of African Muslims. On the one hand, African states encouraged and supported by the West, particularly the US, have begun to view and target their Muslim populations as a security threat. The states' interaction with Muslims has become fraught with suspicion and has spawned the securitization and surveillance of Muslims (Østebø 2013). This is particularly sensitive and politically charged in states where Muslims are a minority. It leads to a sense of marginalization which influences Muslim politics in myriad of ways. Many of the scholars writing on the Global War on Terror and its manifold manifestations are not necessarily specialists on Islam. Nevertheless, their work may shed light on how the securitization and surveillance that targets Muslim communities will impact the way African Muslims organize and engage with the state (al-Bulushi 2019), as well as how historical grievances are remembered and rearticulated in terms of religious identity (Shivji 2019). Another important and related aspect of the War on Terror that will have a direct impact on the politics of African Muslims is the US State Department's attempt at promoting what it calls a "modern" form of Islam (Hurd 2015). Under the label of defending "religious freedom" the US State Department has made it a policy priority to encourage the "right" kind of religion. Directed mostly at Muslim societies, this policy divides religion into "good" and "bad" based on the potentiality of opposition to US interests (Mamdani 2004). It allocates funding to encourage "good" religion to triumph over "bad" religion. This very political intervention in the name of "reforming" religion will undoubtedly impact Muslim politics.

Another promising area of research on Islam and politics in Africa is the exploration of Islam and politics in contexts where the state has withered away or completely disintegrated. Given the weakening of the state in many African societies, the exploration of Islam and politics in such contexts will help us understand the kind of politics and structures of governance that the Islamic tradition in African Muslim societies might engender in a context where it is not shaped by the structures of the modern state. A good illustration of this is the *sharia* court movement in southern Somalia, particularly Mogadishu, mentioned earlier. As stated, these courts emerged in a context where the postcolonial state completely disintegrated<sup>15</sup> allowing the people to experiment with various forms of self-governance rooted in their traditions. The *sharia* courts were one, perhaps the most significant and fascinating one, of these experimentations in self-governance.<sup>16</sup> What they reveal, among other things, is the potential of the *sharia* as a tradition to provide a framework for an alternative structure of governance and perhaps a political future outside the model of the modern state. In their brief existence, the courts were a manifestation of an autonomous and neighborhood-based legal and political structure that directly responded to the needs of neighborhood/district residents. The various *sharia* courts in Mogadishu created channels of cooperation to address problems that exceeded their individual capacities, problems of jurisdiction, for example, without creating a hierarchical organization, until they were forced to do so by pressures brought upon them by the Global War on Terror. Whether the *sharia* courts would have continued to grow as a novel experiment in self-governance or not we will never know. But what we know is that during their short duration they provided a model of legal and political structure that is different from the dominant form of the modern state, and one that is deserving of serious study, I might add.

## Notes

- 1 In *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (1985) Marcel Gauchet contends that Christianity is the religion that made exit from religion possible.
- 2 European powers did not always view Islam unfavorably. Informed by theories of social evolution, Islam was sometimes viewed as a stage between civilization (Europe) and barbarism (Africa). Thus, Islam in Africa was seen by colonizing Europeans, particularly the French, as a step-up in the ladder of evolutionary progress, and therefore preferable to African traditional religions.
- 3 For more on *Islam noir* see Harrison (1988).
- 4 UNDOS, “Hiran Regional LAS Study: Executive Summary,” Nairobi: UNDP-Somalia (January 1999). Quoted in Le Sage (2004, 135).
- 5 The symbiosis between the *sharia* and local customs throughout Islamic history is well known: “Islamic law depended, in both theory and practice, on the cooperation of customary (*ada, ufi*) and royal law (*siyasa shar‘iyya*)” (Hallaq 2009, 368).
- 6 It might be worthwhile to consider how colonizing European powers made a distinction between the *sharia* or “Islamic law” and the customary practices of the colonized. Once this distinction was made, *sharia* came to be viewed as more threatening by colonial officials. Speaking of Dutch colonization of Southeast Asia, Hallaq addresses how Dutch legal experts and colonial officials viewed *adat* (what the Dutch considered local custom) in relation to *sharia*. It is very similar to how *heer* is viewed in relation to *sharia*. Speaking of one of these legal experts, Hallaq writes:

He also espoused the view that any attempt at weakening *adat* was nothing less than an invitation to open the floodgates to Islam, a religion seen by van Vollenhoven and many of his compatriots not only as a native political tool of unification, but as the very religion that had threatened Christendom for centuries. Furthermore, to side with *adat* was to promote secularism, the new religion of Europe.  
*Hallaq 2009, 393*
- 7 An example of this undertheorization is itself evident of the marginal role the history of African Muslim societies is given in terms of understanding Islam. Take, for instance, the well-known *sharia* scholar Hallaq who argues that in precolonial Muslim societies power or politics was separate from authority (2013). In making this argument Hallaq does not include the experience of African Muslim societies. One might wonder how it might have affected his theory had he included the precolonial history of African Muslims.
- 8 For more on family law in Sub-Saharan Africa, see Jeppie, Moosa, and Roberts (2010).
- 9 The state’s active attempt at spreading its Islamist ideology to the rest of Africa has not yet garnered enough attention from scholars of Islam in Africa with few exceptions (Ibrahim 2018).
- 10 It should be mentioned that the reformist accusation of *bida* is not specific to African Muslims. The notion of *bida* as a way of discrediting particular practices as un-Islamic has a long history in the Islamic tradition.
- 11 This is essentially what Hirschkind argues in *The Ethical Soundscape* (2006).
- 12 There are some (Marsden 2005; Schielke 2010) that critique the focus on ethical cultivation in the works of Mahmood and Hirschkind by arguing that their emphasis on ethical cultivation is all encompassing and leaves no room for the contradictions of everyday experience. Schielke argues:

moral subjectivity is a very important issue indeed, but there is a risk – especially when morality and piety come together – of favoring the complete, the consistent, and the perfect in a way that does not do justice to the complex and often contradictory nature of everyday experience.  
*2010, 25*
- 13 Hallaq (2013) contends that the call to create an “Islamic state” is itself an outcome of the transformations that the *sharia* underwent in modern society. These transformations have made the *sharia* resemble modern law making an “Islamic state” conceivable, but an entirely modern invention.
- 14 For more on Christian-Muslim relations in Africa see Soares (2006) and Desplat and Østebø (2013).
- 15 It was not just that the Somali state disintegrated, it was also the fact that the “international community”, for the most part, had left Somalia alone after the US-led Operation Restore Hope ended in disaster in 1993. This “abandonment” of Somalia lasted until the emergence of the *sharia* courts.
- 16 What one commentator has called “governance without government” (Menkhaus 2006/2007).

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