

The Center for Global Islamic Studies at the University of Florida presents

A Workshop on
Media and “Public” Islam in Africa

January 23–24, 2020 | 404, Grinter Hall, University of Florida

This workshop attends to the processes by which religion is made public by/through media in Africa. In Africa certain “old” media (e.g., print and radio) remain very important for religious expression. However, the recent media revolution and technological advancement in the wake of media deregulation with a broadened range of media forms, including new media has opened up unprecedented opportunities for religious publicity. At the same time, it has also created spaces where new actors – preachers, activists, ordinary Muslims – engage and experiment with and consume various “old” and “new” religious and non-religious media. Such media can quite often be sites of public debate, contestation, and transformation. While different religious actors and movements use media to mobilize and promote diverse modes of religious publicness that form boundaries and encourage strict adherence to a particular tradition, the same media can also provide opportunities for publics to continue to interact across or outside those boundaries. In this way, religious publicity not only helps to draw boundaries but can also shift or even collapse them. This happens across different religious traditions. Considering the complexity of systems of media and religious publicity, scholars from the social sciences and humanities will focus on the ways in which religious actors and Muslims in particular are using media in public life. We will focus on cases about media and public Islam in Africa, as well as other traditions for comparative reflection.

This workshop has been made possible through a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation Initiative on Religion and International Affairs. It has been cosponsored by UF’s Center for African Studies and the Department of Religion.

PROGRAM

Thursday, January 23, 2020

17:00 – 18:30 Keynote:
From the Excess to the Apocalyptic: Media and the Production of Religious Surplus in Africa | **Asonzeh Ukah** (University of Cape Town)

Friday, January 24, 2020

9:30 – 10:00 *Coffee break*

10:00 – 10:15 *Introduction: Media and “Public” Islam in Africa and Elsewhere* |
Benjamin Soares and **Musa Ibrahim** (UF)

10:15 – 10:45 *Branding Sufism for the Middle Class: Mass Media and ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud’s Sufi Da’wa in Post-Socialist Egypt* - | **Hatsuki Aishima** (National Museum of Ethnology, Japan)

Chair: **Victoria Bernal**

10:45 – 11:15 *Embracing and Denouncing the “Mecca Uniform” in Nigerian Newsprint, 1950s-1970s* | **Sara Katz** (Loyola University, New Orleans)

Chair: **Victoria Bernal**

Coffee Break

11:30 – 12:00 *Public Islam in Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso: a comparative overview of the use of media by Muslims since the 1970s* | **Frédéric Madore** (UF)

Chair: **Adib El Habib Bencherif**

12:00 – 12:30 *Tablighīs on YouTube: The Case of Mawlānā Ṭāriq Jamīl* | **Ali Altaf Mian** (UF)

Chair: **Adib El Habib Bencherif**

12:30 – 13:00 *Nigerian video film phenomenon and ‘Public’ representation of Islam* | **Musa Ibrahim** (UF)

Chair: **Mosunmola Omowunmi Adejo**

Lunch Break

14:15 – 15:00 Concluding discussion moderated by **Musa Ibrahim & Benjamin Soares**

Coffee Break

15:30 – 17:00 *Baraza at the Center of African Studies*

Cityspaces, Mediascapes, and Diaspora: (Post)colonial Imaginaries of Asmara | **Victoria Bernal** (UC Irvine)

Abstracts

From the Excess to the Apocalyptic: Media and the Production of Religious Surplus in Africa | **Asonzeh Ukah** (University of Cape Town)

Arguably the most profound change taking place in Africa is neither political nor economic but socioreligious. In the last three decades following the liberalisation and deregulation of the media market, media have lent themselves to a new regime of religious identity never before witnessed. The real "Africa Rising" narrative is not how or about Africa and Africans being economically better off during this period but how Africans have mobilised a new array of media forms and platforms to perform and rearticulate both self and the sacred in ways that both astonish and intrigue, educate and frighten, enrapt and disconcert, mobilise and demoralise. The intersection of new forms of being religious and media has produced both sacred surplus and extreme or excessive religiosity that are reshaping our understanding of the continent, religion and media in the 21st century. A different way of being religious and being in the world, even if from the fringes, is slowly but readily assuming a degree of discernible prominence in different parts of Africa. In this paper, examples will be drawn from southern Africa where a new crop of religious entrepreneurs has emerged deftly mobilising the media in new ways to re(de)fine the contours of sacred surplus in rapidly shifting sociocultural, economic, and political contexts.

Branding Sufism for the Middle Class: Mass Media and 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud's Sufi Da'wa in Post-Socialist Egypt | **Hatsuki Aishima** (National Museum of Ethnology, Japan)

In this paper, I argue that 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud (1910-1978) succeeded in branding Sufism as cultural knowledge essential for Egyptian middle classes through his tactful employment of mass media in his Sufi *da'wa* (call, invitation). He is a French-trained scholar of Sufism who was appointed by Anwar al-Sadat to the Grand Imam of al-Azhar Mosque-University (1973-78). Until today, Egyptian national media call him "the Father of Modern Sufism" because he published more than fifty titles on Sufism for non-specialist readership. I examine 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud's writings on Sufism as his Sufi *da'wa* efforts to improve the general public's understanding of this spiritual tradition in Islam. In the 1960s and the 70s when public figures refrained from disclosing their affiliations to Sufi orders due to negative images attached to Sufism, Mahmud expressed his strong admirations for his Sufi masters in his writings and radio lectures. He presented legendary Sufis such as al-Muhasibi or al-Ghazali as "cultured individuals (*muthaqqafun*)" in order to appease the taste of educated Egyptians who aspire for the status of middle class. He is remembered as "al-Ghazali in the twentieth century" for succeeding in establishing a genre within Sufism literature that are accessible for educated yet non-specialist readership.

Embracing and Denouncing the "Mecca Uniform" in Nigerian Newsprint, 1950s-1970s | **Sara Katz** (Loyola University, New Orleans)

Nigerian Muslims have undertaken the hajj for centuries. As Nigeria approached independence in the 1950s, Muslims began to think about this practice in the new terms of an interfaith nation, and debated the future shape of the hajj in the Nigerian press. At the same time, Muslim politicians began to publicly don the so-called "Mecca uniform," the white robe (thawb) and black cord ('iqāl) common to Saudi Arabia. While Nigerian pilgrims had worn these garments for decades, their conspicuous adoption by the political elite was novel. This sartorial linkage between politicians and the East was amplified by photos and commentary circulating nationally in the press, and generated a mix of admiration and concern. Within roughly a decade, politicians would cease their official use the Mecca uniform as the press became saturated with outsized stories of "corrupt" pilgrims engaged in smuggling and other crimes. This was not the end of the Mecca uniform's public life, however, as others— particularly women—continued to employ it in self-fashioned public images, such as obituary notices.

Public Islam in Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso: a comparative overview of the use of media by Muslims since the 1970s | **Frédéric Madore** (UF)

The growing security threats hanging over Burkina Faso with the surge of jihadi attacks have suggested a recent Islamic radicalization in the country. However, these concerns conveyed by the media and an increasing number of studies have overshadowed the significant changes that have been taking place in the Muslim community since the departure of President Blaise Compaoré in October 2014. While intergenerational tensions have remained latent throughout the 1990s and 2000s, many young Muslims, following the uprising, have openly criticized their elders for their collaboration with the former regime. Youth's contestation of the established hierarchy and leadership thereby led to major transformations in the Federation of Islamic Associations of Burkina Faso (*Fédération des Associations Islamiques du Burkina* [FAIB]). Young French-speaking Muslims have been at the forefront by promoting Islam as a civil religion through new forms of civic engagement and entrepreneurial actions.

Tablighīs on YouTube: The Case of Mawlānā Ṭāriq Jamīl | **Ali Atlaf Mian** (UF)

I critically examine the YouTube presence of the Tablighī Jamā'at, the largest Muslim missionary organization in South Asia that has a significant presence in Africa as well. I take as my case study the prolific YouTube activity of the Pakistani Tablighī preacher-theologian Mawlānā Ṭāriq Jamīl. I connect my analyses of his videos to four broader themes that have analytical purchase at the intersection of Islamic studies and new media studies: modes of perception, politics of gender, sources of authority, and institutional transformation. The proliferated use of YouTube by Tablighī Jamā'at members coincides with a global split of the movement into two factions. It is therefore important to study how their YouTube presence is slowly transforming the group's internal organizational structure as well as their sources of religious authority. Moreover, their YouTube videos portray an all-male public space, whereas in actual reality, women's Tablighī groups actively undertake missions and study circles. Mawlānā Ṭāriq Jamīl appears not only on his YouTube channel, but also makes cameo appearances on Pakistani news media, bringing his "religion is good character" message to a set of fora beyond the influence of other senior "elders." While his authority does not go undisputed, the politics of religious discourse in Pakistan make it hard to criticize one who teaches "good character," shuns theological polemics, and condemns sectarianism. The endless citation of the preacher-theologian's "advice clips" and "blessings" on mainstream media is slowly positing him as the "public" face of Islam in the Pakistani national imaginary.

Nigerian video film phenomenon and 'Public' representation of Islam | **Musa Ibrahim** (UF)

Following media liberalization, different categories of Nigerians embraced video culture. While religious institutions and individuals adopt it as part of their means of communication, the video phenomenon contributes to the emergence of Nigerian popular cinema. It is an industry that produces movies in various local languages and according to the diverse cultures of the people living in different regions. In northern Nigeria, where the majority of the population is Muslim and sharia censorship was enforced, filmmakers were 'necessitated' to mediate Islam in the local movies. Some of them adapt parables in the Qur'an, perform the texts, and transmit them through the eyes of cameras. Through cinematography, the filmmakers perform and represent the 'spiritual' and 'the imagined' in their own ways of imagining and imaging and share such with the Muslim public. In this paper, I examine how media practice of representing 'Islam' within the popular video culture by different categories of Muslims not only symbolizes new forms of convergence between media and Islam but how that triggers contestations about religious practices, styles, and influences authority among Muslim in northern Nigeria.