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Toward an Islamic Cultural Archive: Building a Collaborative Database of Islamic Learning in Africa

Summary

The overarching aim of this project is the establishment of a dynamic archive of Islamic culture in Africa based on innovative digital working formats, developed together with mostly Africa-based cooperation partners. Other than conventional research projects dealing with Islamic learning and education, this project takes a collaborative and multi-sited approach to academic knowledge production. It is based on the idea of creating a space for joint knowledge production between cooperation partners from Germany and Africa. As we take an interdisciplinary and multi-sited approach, the diverse composition of our project team is key. The four-year funding period will serve to test and refine the research approach and digital tools through focusing on those aspects of Islamic culture that revolve around religious learning in the widest sense. For the purpose of this project, we conceive of learning as processes where teachings and practices pertaining to Islam are conveyed; these may be found in formal education, but extend to many other settings and contexts. In addition, given the interconnectedness of learning networks, we include data on religious organizations and networks. If successful, we envision a long-term perspective for the project beyond the first funding period and include other realms of Islamic culture in Africa.

Key Questions, Methods, Concepts

We pursue our objective of creating a dynamic archive of Islamic culture through a total of eight interconnected case studies in five countries that revolve around a variety of questions pertaining to Islamic learning. In Tanzania, team member M. Mraja studies Islamic educational institutions and their networks in Tanzania; in Kenya, H. Ndzovu focuses on the teaching activities and religious sermons of Muslim women in Kenya while R. Seesemann collects data on the contents and practices of Islamic learning in formal educational institutions. B. Frede takes a comparative look at Islamic knowledge acquisition involving adults in urban contexts of Kenya and Mauritania. Also in Mauritania, F. Abdel Wahhabe seeks to understand processes of knowledge transmission in the context of the congregational performance of poetry in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. A. Seck takes an anthropological approach to initiatives, corpora and infrastructural frameworks of Islamic learning in Senegal where he widens the focus to

include “lived Islam” in the analysis. Last but not least, in Tunisia F. Kogelmann focuses on reforms of Islamic education and its sponsors, especially in state-controlled educational settings, while R. Ben Amara looks at Islamic learning from the perspective of sub-Saharan scholars and students of Islam who join Tunisian institutions.

All team members collect data in conjunction with their case studies and feed them into a joint database, maintained in the Cluster’s Digital Research Environment. Built to link diverse data sets, our common platform allows us to store different types of data, generate metadata through a systematic taxonomy, and connect data beyond language barriers. Most notably, our data description method links the data through multilayered and multilingual tags, as well as through comprehensive cross-references, thus constituting an innovative way of data handling that can benefit researchers in Islamic Studies as well as cultural and literary studies more broadly. On this basis we intend to eventually build a Wiki that makes our Islamic Cultural Archive accessible to a wider public.

Vision

Our growing relational database will make a significant contribution to the Cluster’s digital objectives. The same applies to the “African Alphabets of the Cluster”, an app developed under the leadership of project member U. Rebstock that provides smart phones and desktop PCs (Windows and iOS) with keyboards for all common African languages and scripts.

Building on a previous pilot scheme led by U. Rebstock at Albert-Ludwigs University Freiburg, we intend to make our archive available in the form of a Wiki, to be continuously

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An Islamic learning circle in the Blue Nile region, Sudan. (Photo: Rüdiger Seesemann)

expanded in collaboration with African academic partners. By including the latter's perspectives and approaches, the project will provide an avenue to relational and reflexive knowledge production about Islamic culture in Africa. The project's format is especially open to accommodate a variety of perspectives on Islamicity, where different views of what is to be considered "Islamic" are represented through tagging as well as in Wiki entries. Apart from foregrounding the reflexive nature of knowledge production, this approach is also particularly well suited to grasping the relational character of the various forms and directions Islamic learning takes in the settings under study.

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Contribution to the Cluster's Aims

The project contributes to the RS Learning by mapping ideas and practices as well as networks pertaining to Islamic education and scholarly culture in Africa. Our innovative approach to the collaborative collection, storage, and connectivity of research data will allow for synergies both within and beyond the RS Learning, with the potential of providing a blueprint for digital working formats in the Cluster as a whole. Further, our digital working methods will allow us to shed new light on the multiple, relational, and reflexive character of Islamic culture in Africa, thus helping to advance the Cluster's theoretical agenda.

A Qur'an teacher and his students, Khalwa Mabruka, Sudan (Photo: Rüdiger Seesemann)

Further Links / Key References

Project page: <https://www.africamultiple.uni-bayreuth.de/en/Research/1research-sections/learning/Toward-an-Islamic-Cultural-Archive/index.html>

More information about the African Alphabets of the Cluster:

<https://www.africamultiple.uni-bayreuth.de/en/AABC/index.html>