



Programme Point Sud 2011-2012

Competition and Cooperation in African Religions: a Workshop on Concepts and Methods for the Critical Study of Religious Pluralism in Africa

27th February-5th March 2012

Point Sud, Bamako, Mali

Report

DFG

Competition and Cooperation in African Religions: a Workshop on Concepts and Methods for the Critical Study of Religious Pluralism in Africa

Organisers

Dr. Magnus Echter (Religious Studies), University Bayreuth

Dr. Franz Kogelmann (Islamic Studies), University Bayreuth

Dr. Eva Spies (Anthropology), Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

Dr. Asonzeh Ukah (Religious Studies), University Bayreuth

Themes and Objectives

Thirty academics participated in our workshop “Competition and Cooperation in African Religions” at Point Sud. The four organizers had invited six post-docs and selected 14 PhD students, one of whom did unfortunately not show up. This group was joined by six local scholars, three of whom work at Point Sud, and one member of the academic committee of Point Sud.

The composition of the group, with a 2:1 ratio of PhD students to post-docs/professors provided an ideal environment with regard to one of the central aims of our workshop, namely to provide young scholars with the opportunity to engage intensively with their senior colleagues in order to advance their conceptual and methodological grasp of the study of religions in Africa. The setup of the group also worked well with regard to the challenges of a bi-lingual workshop: thanks to the local participants the anglo- and francophone sections were evenly matched, and the large number of bi-lingual post docs ensured the smooth communications between the two sections.

Methodology and Results

On Monday February 27, after a welcome address by the co-director of Point Sud, Moussa Sissoko, and the organizers, we started the program with the keynotes of two invited post-docs: Michael Lambek (University of Toronto) developed the concept of inclusive pluralism of implicit religions as distinct from exclusive Abrahamic religions based on his research in Madagascar, and Benjamin Soares (African Studies Centre, Leiden) presented the heterogeneous field of religion in Mali by pointing out the neglected category of Dogon Muslims and the recent appearance of Rasta Sufis. Both presentations sparked lively discussions in both English and French so that the 90 minutes per time slot proved hardly enough. The last session of the day served to constitute the anglo- and francophone working groups which formed the framework for the discussion of the theoretical/methodological issues and the PhD projects in the following days.

On Tuesday February 28, we changed the program on short notice in order to accommodate the sociologist Hamidou Magassa (SERNES), who used the example of polygamy to discuss recent changes of the constitution and the Muslim engagement in the public sphere in Mali. This hands-on example for the religious legitimization of the judicial framework and its socio-cultural consequences led to a heated discussion of the ethical implications of the concept of religious pluralism.

Thereafter the organizers took central stage, Eva Spies used funeral rites in Madagascar to advocate conceptual pluralism for the study of religious pluralism, Asonzeh Ukah illustrated

the market model with Pentecostal migrant churches in South Africa, and Magnus Echtler called for the objectivation of the researcher. Due to the addition of the guest speaker and the extensive discussions – especially time consuming as all contributions were translated – we decided to drop some of the sessions dedicated to the discussions of the texts, and to move Amaka Ideh’s keynote to Thursday.

Wednesday February 29 started with Katrin Langewiesche’s (EHESS Marseille, University of Mainz) keynote on Christianity in Africa since the 1960s, which focussed on the transnational movements, not only of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, but also of African actors within the mainline churches.

The next session was dedicated to the discussion of some of the conceptual/methodological texts of the reader that all participants had received in advance. The Anglophone group concentrated on the insider-outsider problem; the lively discussion that developed was carried by the excellent examples from the research experience of the PhD students. The discussion in the francophone group concentrated on central concepts as pluralism, diversity, syncretism and anti-syncretism: The PhD students explained the terms to each other by referring not only to their own field of research but also to the situations in their home countries. In the afternoon we started with the discussion of the PhD projects in the working groups. All candidates had 15-20 minutes to present their projects and plenty of time to react to the questions and comments of the other participants. In these discussions, which formed one of the central elements of our workshop, the PhD students received feedback on their own work, and were able to benefit from the discussions of the others’ projects, as the individual projects often lead to the discussion of general problems with regard to questions of research design, ethnographic methodology, theoretical frame, etc. As these discussions took place in the francophone and anglophone workgroups, we closed the day with a joint plenary session, where the two groups informed each other about the day’s results.

On Thursday March 1, Amaka Ideh (St. Augustine University in Tanzania, Mwanza) advocated the use of quantitative methods for the study of religion in Africa in her keynote. Later in the day we went on our first research exercise. We prepared all these exercises in the working groups, and discussed them afterwards in a joint plenum. On Thursday we visited a catholic center for interreligious dialogue, managed by White Fathers, (*Centre Foi et Rencontre*) and the mosque of the chairman of *Association Malienne pour la paix et le salut* Imam Mahammadou Diallo, where we conducted expert interviews. In the following days we also visited the Friday *zikr* performance at the Zawiyya of the Tijaniyya-Hamawiyya brotherhood in Bamako (participant observation), and on Saturday we visited the *féticheur* Moustapha Diallo in Farabana (participant observation/expert interview). While these exercises could not provide serious in-depth training in research methods due to the size of our group, they nevertheless initiated intense discussions on methodological issues like the insider-outsider problem, the challenges of access to groups and individuals, the impact of the researchers in their different roles on the research situation, and the advantages and disadvantages of the various methods of data gathering. As such, the research exercises proved to be a valuable tool to achieve the goals of our workshop.

We spent the following days with research exercises and discussions of PhD projects. On Saturday March 3 Ramzi Ben Amara (University of Cape Town) used his keynote to describe the challenges and rewards of studying Islam in Nigeria and provide background information to the emergence of the Boko Haram movement whose violence challenges the Nigerian state currently, and on Sunday March 4 Esha Faki Mwinyihaji (Maseno University, Kenya) advocated three foci for the study of Islam in East Africa: media usage, gender questions, and

the multiple layers of conflict and cooperation both within Islam and within the wider socio-religious context.

The last day of the workshop, Monday March 5, we finished discussing the PhD projects before using a last joint plenum to ask all participants to provide feedback on our workshop and to share their ideas on the future of our research network. Two comments seem noteworthy here: first, there was overwhelmingly positive feedback on the use of French and English; even though translation was at times cumbersome, the effort was acknowledged, especially by francophone participants who had expected to be marginalized. And there was general agreement that this effort was decisive for the creation of one group and a positive atmosphere throughout the workshop. The second comment concerned the future of our academic network: many voiced the wish for a follow up workshop, and that wish was especially pronounced from some West African students whose universities had been rather dysfunctional during recent times.

The organization provided by Point Sud worked well. Kenyan Airways provided some excitement with lost luggage and a cancelled flight, but that could be dealt with by the organizers and Point Sud staff. And the food at Point Sud was really, really nice. However, there are two issues of organization that we want to address in our report.

The first is the problem of translation in a bi-lingual workshop. We had two Point Sud members who were responsible for translation (Issa Fofana and Drissa Tangara). While the two were very eager and helpful, they are not professional translators, and no experts in the study of religion. Thus, translation and therefore the bi-lingual workshop as a whole, only worked because many of the post-doc participants were bi-lingual, and quite a few of them were willing to translate in the discussions of the keynotes and the joint plenums. Without that input, our workshop would have disintegrated into two workshops, one French and the other one English.

The second issue is the research exercises. None of us organizers has research experience in Mali, and we sent suggestions for exercises to Point Sud in the hope that they would help us to organize them. That did not happen. Our research exercises worked because one of us travelled to Bamako five days before the workshop, and set up the exercises together with one of the post-doc guests with extensive research experience in Mali.

Sustainability of the Event

As already mentioned in our first proposal, a follow-up workshop will deal with the presentation of results of the PhD research projects and the preparation of a joint publication. Thus the follow-up workshop will take up the topic of the first: the question of religious pluralism in Africa between competition and cooperation. Based on the experience of the first workshop, where we presented and discussed different and in part opposing approaches for the study of religious pluralism, we now propose a plurality approach with regard to conceptual frames in order to better capture the multifaceted nature of encounters between different religious traditions (Spies 2012). As religious encounters take various forms and are studied on different levels of social interaction (individual, organizational etc.), a combination of different models of religious interaction seems to be better capable to accommodate the complexity of religious encounters, without levelling actors' perspectives and strategies.

However, the main novelty of the second workshop does not concern the topic but the objectives. While the first workshop included PhD students, who varied with regard to research experience, and aimed at discussing methodological and conceptual problems of the study of religious pluralism on a general level, the follow-up workshop takes us to the next stage of the production of academic knowledge: Its objective is to present and discuss

empirical studies of religious pluralism in Africa with a later joint publication in mind. The basic idea of this publication is to assemble empirical data and innovative conceptual approaches to test the commensurabilities and in-commensurabilities of empirical as well as theoretical perspectives.

Participants

Organizers

1. Dr. Echtler, Magnus Religious Studies, Bayreuth University, Germany
2. Dr. Kogelmann, Franz Islamic Studies, Bayreuth University, Germany
3. Dr. Spies, Eva Anthropology, Mainz University, Germany
4. Dr. Ukah, Asonzeh Religious Studies, Bayreuth University, Germany

Post-docs

5. Ben Amara, Ramzi Islamic Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa
6. Faki Mwinyihaji, Esha Islamic Studies, Maseno University, Kenya
7. Ideh, Amaka Linguistics, St Augustine University Mwanza, Tanzania
8. Lambek, Michael Anthropology, Toronto University, Canada
9. Langewiesche, Katrin Anthropology, EHESS Marseille and Mainz University, Germany
10. Soares, Benjamin Anthropology, Afrika-Studie Centrum Leiden, Netherlands

PhD students

11. Baiyewu, Timothy Bayreuth University, Germany
12. Binate, Issouf Cocody University Abidjan, Ivory Coast
13. Debele, Serawit Bayreuth University, Germany
14. Diop, Babacar Gaston Berges University, Senegal
15. Doffou, Pulcherie Bouaké University Abidjan, Ivory Coast
16. Gez, Yonathan Institut des Hautes Études internationales et du Développement, Geneva, Switzerland
17. Hartman, Becca University of Johannesburg, South Africa
18. Igwe, Leo Bayreuth University, Germany
19. Kopecka, Ziva Bayreuth University, Germany
20. Olsson, Hans Lund University, Sweden
21. Ravonison, Baholy Antananarivo University, Madagascar
22. Soares, Edio Institut des Hautes Études internationales et du Développement, Geneva, Switzerland
23. Wandera, Joseph St Pauls University, Kenya

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25. Doumbia, Bakary
26. Fofana, Issa
27. Tangara, Drissa

Mali academics

28. Diakon, Birama, Bamako University

29. Kansaye, Bouréma, Bamako University
30. Magassa, Hamidou, SERNES