Politics of Religious Schooling: Christian and Muslim Engagements with Education in Africa

Introduction

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Abstract

In recent decades, religiously motivated schools have gained a new social and political presence and significance in many African countries. Although religious networks and organizations—Christian as well as Muslim—have played a central role in providing education in colonial and postcolonial settings, liberalization and privatization measures since the 1980s have opened up new opportunities for religious engagement at all educational levels. The contributions to this issue explore the implications of these recent transformations on Christian and Muslim investments in the educational domain. To do so, they examine these implications in view of reconfigurations of national and regional educational fields under the influence of colonial and postcolonial administrations. Furthermore, they address the multiple, often-contested meanings, practices, and institutional setups that have shaped and been constituted by, the field of 'religious schooling' in the context of both neoliberal reform measures and transnational religious renewal trends. Finally, they illustrate the need to adopt an increasingly comparative perspective in the analysis of religious education, and to understand how (internally differentiated) instances of Christian and Muslim education have developed historically in relation to each other.

Keywords

religious schooling; Christian and Muslim revival; Christian-Muslim relations; educational markets

Religion, Education, and Transnational Histories of Power and Discipline in Africa

In recent decades, religiously motivated schools have gained a new social and political presence and significance in many African countries. Although religious networks and organizations—Christian as well as Muslim—have played a central role in providing education in colonial and postcolonial settings, liberalization and privatization measures since the 1980s have opened up new

opportunities for religious engagement at all educational levels. The contributions to this issue explore the implications of these recent transformations on Christian and Muslim investments in the educational domain.

For a long time, anthropologists and sociologists have argued that education and schooling are instrumental to the way power and social status are established and distributed in societies worldwide (Collins 2009). During the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists posited a close connection between political economy, access to education, and the reproduction of social structure and cultural forms (ibid.). Language as well as other forms of cultural, economic, and social capital, they argued, were generated and transferred in schools, thus making educational institutions sites for the production of social inequality and class difference per se (ibid.; see also Bourdieu 2005).

From the 1990s onward, studies on education grew increasingly critical of such earlier approaches and argued that the Marxist focus on structure and class neglected dynamics of transformation and the experiences of diverse groups of actors (Collins 2009). A new strand of anthropological scholarship explored the formation of gender- and class-specific identities in specific educational settings, showing how the process of adopting or rejecting a particular identity may become decisive for a student's social standing and academic success (Stocker 2005). Although these studies shed light on the biographies, identities, and diverse engagements of students and teachers with educational structures, they were less effective in elucidating the larger dynamics of inequality and power that, according to Collins (2009), should remain central for anthropological studies of schooling. Thus of central import to studies of education is a consideration of the multidirectional configurations of 'productive power' (Foucault 1978) that shape subjectivities and biographies of individual actors over extended periods of time—not only at the intersection of micro- and macrolevels (ibid.), but increasingly also in transnational and religious settings (Stambach 2006, 2010).[1]

Anthropological studies of religion and education in sub-Saharan Africa have tended to pay limited attention to scholarly research on education in European, North American, and, though to a lesser extent, Latin American societies. Still, studies of religious engagements with education in Africa have often addressed similar concerns, especially with regard to issues of disciplining, power, and the production of inequalities in colonial and postcolonial states. They demonstrate the central role played by Christian missions in imposing European 'civilizing power' from the mid-nineteenth century onward by converting subjects at once to a new faith, and to the values and working ethic of capitalism (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1986; Meyer 1998; Pels 1999).

Education became central, for instance, in the Protestant missionary project of civilizing and disciplining colonial subjects by inculcating new norms of bodily habitus and self-control. In spite of the deeply equivocal implications of these civilizing efforts by missionaries, they did pave the ground for resistance and protest in subsequent decades (Comaroff and Comaroff 1986). In this way the Christian missionary project was instrumental to the spread of European norms and ideals but also to their contestation, by providing points of articulation between local communities and governing authorities in colonial settings (see also Gifford 2012).

Compared to the relatively recent role of Christian missionaries as 'agents of Western education in colonial Africa' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1986, 14), the 'civilizing' effects of institutions of Islamic learning have had a longer history in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa. In societies with a strong and long-standing Muslim presence (Levtzion and Pouwels 2000; Reichmuth 2000; Loimeier 2003, 2013), the transmission of Islamic knowledge was often closely tied to political and economic institutions and actors. As Copans (1989) and Villalón (1995, 1999) have argued for the case of Senegal, for instance, the thriving of certain Sufi orders and of their educational institutions was closely related to the emergence of the colonial and postcolonial political orders, and to religious entrepreneurs centrally involved in the colonial political economy. Moreover, prior to and during colonial rule, institutions of Islamic knowledge transmission were repeatedly subject to structural and pedagogical reform. In Mali, for instance, Islamic schooling evolved through a series of reform and counterreform initiatives that reflected the attempts of Muslim leaders and intellectuals to address the new requirements of the colonial regime and to carve out new niches for religious and political activism in the postcolonial state (Brenner and Sanankoua 1991; Brenner 2001; Schulz 2012a; for other areas of West Africa see also Reichmuth 2000; Loimeier 1997).

These different studies demonstrate the need to provide historically and locally specific accounts of the intertwining of different religious traditions, actors, and forms of proselytizing activities with educational activism, and to elucidate the cultural, political, and institutional dynamics in which these instances of religious educational engagement are embedded. As illustrated by Strayer's (1973) historical work on mission schools in Kenya, this perspective draws attention to the divergent ambitions, strategies, and resources mobilized by individual schools to exert influence and control over pupils who may become the targets as well as the subjects of conversion. The perspective also helps elucidate how different actors—students, teachers, and communities— challenge and reconfigure official educational polices that impose certain

standards of language use, of the content and scope of religious instruction, and, more broadly, of what constitutes 'adequate' education in a particular context (Strayer 1973, 329f.).

Also necessary are fine-grained analyses of the actors, social institutional context, and cultural resources that made it possible for religiously motivated schools to take root in African societies. For instance, as Reichmuth (2000), Brenner (2001), and Loimeier (2009) have shown for different West and East African Muslim societies in the colonial and postcolonial periods, the attractiveness of religiously oriented schools depends as much on the religious content provided in these schools as on the broader sociopolitical context, state-orchestrated educational policy, and a market of employment opportunities in which these schools are situated. Equally, Simpson's (1998, 2003) account of a Catholic mission school in Zambia demonstrates how in the wake of social and economic crisis students imagine themselves as a new social elite that has become increasingly critical of the state's failed promises of modernity. Some students and teachers become involved in renegotiating religious subjectivities and become engaged with the teachings and practices of revivalist (born-again) churches.

A final lacuna in the existing scholarship on Christian and Muslim schooling in Africa follows from scholars' tendency to ignore gender-specific dimensions of schooling policies, institutions, and practices. Studies of Muslim institutions of schooling and practices of knowledge transmission in and beyond Africa illustrate the great diversity of Muslim schooling institutions within and outside the field of state-regulated education (Grandin and Gaborieau 1997; Hamès 1997; Eickelman 2007; Zaman 2007). While these studies demonstrate that school institutions under the supervision of the state can create and reproduce differences among Muslims (e.g., Brenner 2001; Hefner 2007; Metcalf 2007), they pay relatively little attention to gender as an important mode of creating difference, and thus to gender-specific repercussions of state-regulated Muslim schooling. One way of addressing this lacunae is to account for the importance of both formalized (e.g., Miran 1998; LeBlanc 1999) and more informal (e.g., Schulz 2010a, 2012; Gomez-Perez 2011) structures through which female teachers and students engage in religious learning, thereby drawing on long-standing conventions of female Muslim erudition (Umar 2001; Boyd 1989; 2001; Boyd and Last 1985). On the side of Christian schools, Bastian (2000) shows how the Church Missionary Society in early twentieth-century Nigeria used schooling not only to structure the conversion process among young Igbo women but also to convey specific notions of gender, such as submissiveness toward future husbands as well as values surrounding marriage and reproduction in more general terms. Simpson (2007) argues that peer groups of young

men in a Catholic mission school in Zambia were fundamental for young men learning how 'to do sex and gender', not in a determinate way but rather as foundations of shifting and situated gender identities that men adjusted and readjusted over their life course.

The articles in this issue bring together these analytical perspectives by situating various forms of Christian and Muslim schooling within broader social, political, and economic transformations since the colonial period, and by addressing, though to different extents, possible gender-specific implications of these developments. They pay particular attention to institutional transformations that have shaped religious education over the last three decades in novel ways. Most notable about these changes are transformations in the state education sectors under the effects of neoliberal reform measures and a more palpable influence of transnational actors and institutions on educational dynamics at the national, regional, and local levels. The case studies also intimate that present-day articulations of religious norms and practices in Christian and Muslim schools reflect on new revivalist trends in Islam and Christianity that presently claim a novel, highly visible and audible presence in the public sphere (see Bayart 2000; Gifford 1998; Meyer 2004; Soares 2004; Schulz 2008, 2010b; Marshall 2009; Piot 2010, Dilger 2014). Although the four articles address these developments to different extents, they all prompt further reflection on the fact that these new revivalist trends and the educational initiatives that accompany them often emerge in plural religious settings in which Muslims, Christians, and practitioners of other religious traditions interact and compete with each other in their search for new souls and spheres of influence.

Transnational Development and the Inscription of 'Religious Schools' in Neoliberal Markets

Anthropological scholarship on the discourses and practices that have constituted the field of international development since the end of the Second World War have tended to focus on those areas of development in which actors contributed to the implementation of (international and national) developmental and political agendas informed by a secularist worldview (Ferguson 1994; Escobar 1995; Rottenburg 2009). Only recently have scholars started to address the role of religiously oriented organizations in the development sector (Brenner 1993; Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010). A major part of the debate on 'faith-based development' has been conducted within development studies, with a strong interest in facilitating greater cooperation between secular and

religiously oriented organizations in the areas of health, education, and poverty reduction (Berger 2003). Anthropologists and scholars of religious studies, on the other hand, have emphasized that to understand the interventions of religious organizations in the areas of conflict and peace building, governance, and social service provision, and their collaboration with European and North American organizations that promote secularist worldviews, greater attention should be paid to the visions, experiences, and practices of actors who operate in and shape these organizations (Ter Haar and Ellis 2006).

Authors also stress that the current success of religious organizations in the transnational development arena needs to be related to the broader processes of neoliberal restructuring and a related (partial) withdrawal of national governments from the areas of social services provision. These areas are now (partially) taken over by Christian as well as Muslim actors who offer structures of social and economic support, and articulate an idiom of moral and social renewal that appears as an attractive alternative to governmental institutions and rhetoric (Bornstein 2005; Schulz 2006, 2010a; Dilger 2009, 2014; Dilger, Burchardt, and van Dijk 2010; Salih 2004; Kaag 2007; Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010). Because of the shrinking capacities of the state to provide schooling for its young citizens—and the parallel pressure exerted by international organizations to guarantee universal access to education—a host of actors and organizations are currently moving into the educational field. Thus, along with the (partial) privatization of African educational sectors since the 1980s, a 'NGOisation' of the field of schooling (Fichtner 2012) has occurred; nongovernmental actors have become crucial for the functioning of the educational sector and other domains of social service provision.

As a result, we witness a diversification of the educational field with regard to the institutional and financial set-up and the agendas of newly founded schools. Whereas many of them, especially those with a religious background, operate on principles of charity and the promotion of the public good, they also partake in the struggle over resources, symbolic capital, and clients, and hence contribute to the commodification of education prompted by neoliberal reform processes since the mid-1980s.[2] Within these emerging educational markets, Christian and Muslim schools contribute to the formation of elite and middle-class identities (Schulz, this issue), of new social inequalities (Dilger, this issue), and to the growing integration of spiritual ideas and practices into a global economic order. While these new educational initiatives build on local histories of mission and development, they intertwine with recent transnational forms of financing and market competition, thus implicating children and their families in a globalizing logic of capital circulation and development and simultaneously prompting new tensions within local communities (Stambach, this issue). The resulting spiritual economies are often essential

for mediating between global, national, and local priorities and agendas; they define religiosity as the precondition for, rather than an impediment to, social and economic success (Rudnyckyj 2009; see also Marshall 2009; Schulz 2010b, 2012a).

Religious Revival and the Remaking of the Public Sphere

Apart from the diversification of educational sectors in the context of privatization and transnational development, the recent thriving of Christian and Muslim schools also needs to be understood against the backdrop of the sometimes intertwined histories of Christian and Islamic renewal movements. Over the last decades, these movements have gained new strength from their transnational 'extraversion' strategies, prompting new controversies on the value of religious education and the place of religion in the public sphere and politics (Bayart 2000; see Englund 2003; Meyer 2004; Schulz 2010a; see also Marshall-Fratani 1998).

Christian and Muslim renewal movements reach back into the precolonial and colonial periods (Loimeier 2003; Fields 1982; Seesemann 1999, 2002), with some of them being driven by external forces (Loimeier 2003). The return of Muslim intellectuals and activists from their extended stays in the *hejaz* and other areas of the Arab-speaking Muslim world since the late 1930s and again since the late 1970s led to a diversification of local and national fields of Muslim debate and often to a polarization of Muslim doctrinal positions (Skinner, this issue; Kresse 2003). Christian revivalist trends, in turn, were shaped by globally expanding Evangelical and neo-Pentecostal organizations; these organizations thrive on the rejection of 'tradition' and the past (Meyer 1998) and on the promise of financial and spiritual salvation (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002), and new opportunities for upward mobility to those unable to prosper in the male gerontocratic networks of established churches (Van Dijk 1992). This new generation of renewal movements bears some specific features.

One is their strong emphasis on personal responsibility and salvation and on the collective relevance of personal moral reform (Kresse 2003; Meyer 2004; Larkin and Meyer 2006; Schulz 2008; Masquelier 2009). Also characteristic of current religious renewal movements are the multiple forms of interaction, collaboration, and sometimes cooptation that supporters of religious renewal establish with the institutions and representatives of the state (e.g., Otayek 1993; Brenner 1993; Obadare 2006; Bornstein 2005; Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010; Schulz 2012a). Third, most present-day Christian and Muslim renewal trends capitalize substantially on the financial and infrastructural support of organizations that operate at a transnational level (e.g., Marshall-Fratani 1999;

Hearn 2002; Seesemann 2002, 2007; Kaag 2007; Dilger 2009; Stambach 2010).[3] Last but not least, the new public prominence of Christian and Muslim revivalist trends has been supported (though not prompted) by the liberalization of the media landscapes in many African states since the 1990s (Meyer and Moors 2006; Schulz 2012a). The adoption of new media technologies and formats by religious preachers has prompted new controversies among Muslim leaders and activists over proper religious practice and over gender-specific forms of authority (Schulz 2012b); it has also created new opportunities for public criticism of the political and religious leadership and the religious establishment (Schulz 2006). Pentecostal entrepreneurs, on the other hand, inventively rely on video and television to articulate equivocal visions of 'modernity' and to make room for new forms of religious experience, salvation, and community (Meyer 2003, Meyer 2006; de Witte 2003, 2009; Ukah 2006). These various processes by which religious idioms and networks have moved to the center stage of public attention prompt new public debate on 'morally acceptable' education and the values of religious learning.

Religious Schooling and the Politics of Christian-Muslim Relations

In the vast scholarship on Christianity and Islam in sub-Saharan Africa (for overviews see Loimeier 2013; Meyer 2004), there has been a tendency to treat Christians and Muslims as neatly identifiable groups and to explore their religious traditions, organizations, and practices along separate lines. Even with regard to societies where Muslims and Christians have lived together for a long time, scholars have tended to focus on one of these groups rather than studying their traditions, actors, and idioms as belonging to a shared field of religious practice.[4] Furthermore, even those studies that explore the dynamics of conversion in various parts of sub-Saharan focus mostly on the micropolitics of conversion to a specific faith or denomination, and not so much on the interreligious or interdenominational dynamics and power relations contained in these processes (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Becker 2008; but see Scharrer 2010).

   Only in recent years has this trend been reversed by work that, mostly from a religious studies or theological disciplinary perspective, has addressed the past and contemporary dynamics of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa. In an effort to explore the potential for interfaith dialogue, these studies discuss the political and socioeconomic processes that have generated new tensions between Christians and Muslims and severely restrict the chances of peace-building and conflict resolution efforts (e.g., Kukah 2007; Frederiks 2010). Still, as Soares (2006) maintains, these assessments of the possibilities of interfaith

dialogue often hinge on the questionable assumption that current tensions between Muslims and Christians are the outcome of a recent degeneration of once amicable and peaceful coexistence between these religious groups. To provide a more differentiated account of the historical dynamics of interfaith relations, it is necessary to take account of the 'boundary zone' between different religious groups, a zone constituted by mutual learning and appropriation processes (Larkin and Meyer 2006), and also through competition, conflict, and peaceful coexistence (Cooper 2006; Soares 2006). The great diversity of the practices and symbolic forms emerging in these boundary zones are illustrated by the ways in which Muslim and Christian renewal movements borrow from each other with respect to preaching formats and doctrinal argument (e.g., Ahmed 1992; Larkin 2008b); the diversity is also manifest in the 'bricolage' and fusion of Muslim and Christian beliefs and practices that, as illustrated by the 'Chrislam movement' in urban Nigeria, simultaneously serve to reassert distinct Muslim and Christian identities (Janson 2012).

With the exception of Dilger, the contributions to this special issue do not systematically explore recent instances of Christian and Muslim schooling in a comparative perspective. Still, all contributions sharpen our understanding of how the above-mentioned social, cultural, and political-economic transformations of the last decades have prompted Christians and Muslims to reflect on, and in some cases to stress, questions of religious identity and difference. To be sure, these processes are not entirely new. As Skinner shows for Muslims in Ghana, their present-day endeavor to promote Muslim schooling and thus sharpen the distinctiveness of Islamic education needs to be understood against the backdrop of long-term transformations in the field of Islamic learning transmission (see also Schulz, this issue). Still, all contributions draw attention to the national and transnational fields of religious activism in which religious schools presently thrive and offer new opportunities for building social capital and negotiating religious subjectivity (Stambach 2010, this issue; Dilger 2010, this issue). The contributions also demonstrate that a comparative perspective is needed to understand how recent initiatives of religious schooling reveal different opportunities for Christians and Muslims to build on transnational ties and resources, and to realize educational goals that ultimately aim at the transformation of wider socioeconomic and moral orders.

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Notes

1. Stambach (2006) maintains that (private) religion and (public) education were conventionally treated as separate domains in anthropological studies and social theory. She shows how religiously inflected education—in and outside of state institutions—has become integral to the formation of 'modern' political orders.

2. Beyond the formal domains of education, charitable and/or religious organizations have also become involved in the field of tutoring. This field represents a growing market in many African countries and reflects parents' need to make up for low-quality education provided at state schools through private investment in the educational success of their children (on Egypt see Hartmann 2008).

3. The new Charismatic movements, for instance, were influenced by the massive influx of North American missionaries in the shifting political contexts of the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas until the Second War the field of Protestant mission was still dominated by the 'mainline denominations', in the late 1980s Evangelical missionaries represented nine out of ten U.S. Protestant missionaries worldwide (Hearn 2002).

4. For a critique see Soares (2006); Larkin and Meyer (2006); Dilger (2010, 2014); Schulz (2012c).