INTRODUCTION: POPULAR ISLAM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICA

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The term 'popular Islam' at once suggests denial or fragmentation within the Great Tradition or 'orthodoxy' in Islam as well as a degree of hostility on the part of those Islamicists and Muslims whose understanding of the oneness of God extends to the indivisibility of His Community. Social scientists may be expected to embrace the notion with more enthusiasm, being accustomed to observing Islam 'from below', but legitimate disquiet follows after plumbing the analytical shallows implicit in simple attributions of 'popular-ness' to matters of causation, motivation or ideology. Yet, with that said, few students of Islam in Africa cannot cite examples of belief or practice that represent 'popular Islam', and most would agree that this frequently bears some relation to the dramatic expansion of Islam during this century in Africa. These were some of the considerations that lay behind the selection of the theme 'Popular Islam in Twentieth-Century Africa' for a two-day symposium held at the University of Illinois in April 1984.

Five of the papers presented at that meeting – by Louis Brenner and Murray Last, Mbye Cham, Lidwien Kapteijns, Paul Lubeck and Gabriel Warburg – are published with an essay by Abdullahi Osman El-Tom in this issue. Our contributions fall into three, not mutually exclusive, categories:

(i) anti-establishment, political movements in Muslim societies which are articulated in an Islamic mode;
(ii) cultural expressions of Islamic identity, also with political implications but not overtly so (and in the papers here all linked with issues of literacy or with literature); and
(iii) the rather more elusive, dynamic process wherein notions of 'popular' and 'establishment' may change places over time, and/or a symbiotic relationship between 'popular' and 'establishment' practice serves to reinforce each.

A common effort in all the essays has been to avoid the time-honoured orientalist's dilemma of conflict between idealist postulates and actual practice in the communities under study. Perhaps the chief heuristic value in the notion of 'popular Islam' lies in the distance it demands that students of Islam maintain from the perspective of the Muslim scholars, the 'ulama, whose vision generally defines the parameters for discussions of Islam in society. Beyond this implicit agreement by our contributors, only one essay tackles a definition of 'popular Islam'. Brenner and Last place the notion in opposition to the practices and beliefs of the 'ulama, implying the incorporation of doctrinally aberrant views and activities of the Arabic illiterate. The simplicity and efficacy of the popular Islam concept is then questioned and found wanting. Other contributors have worked from rather less rigorous formulations of popular Islam.

It is in the political arena that 'popular Islam' seems to have its least ambiguous applications: almost any organized activity in Muslim societies that is anti-establishment claims its authority is rooted in Islam. At the same time, such activity easily and most fruitfully lends itself to comparative analysis with anti-establishment behaviour external to Islamic political cultures, and once stripped...
of an Islamic ideology the notion of 'popular Islam' becomes both rather less and more than the sum of its parts. Paul Lubeck’s essay in this collection illustrates this in his analysis of the material basis of the 'Yan Tatsine movement in Kano. One of the dramatic features of our literature on precolonial Muslim communities in Africa is the reluctance by writers to accept either class or gender as significant features on the social horizon of these communities. Lubeck’s contribution stands in bold relief against such treatments of northern Nigeria, for he seeks to move beyond an explanation of the 'Yan Tatsine movement as a popular, millennial Islamic ideology. His focus is on a description of the preconditions to the Kano bloodletting in 1980–81, which he sees as a result of a growing contradiction between the casual wage labour market, provided by Koranic students, and the economic, political and social transformations of Kano, intensified by the petroleum boom of the 1970s. What emerged, according to Lubeck, was a lumpenproletariat, grounded in a redundant Islamic educational system, particularly amenable to the anti-materialist message of Maitatsine, and a movement that revealed a clear class antagonism.

Class analysis is clearly one way to demystify 'popular Islam', and it is a feature of Lidwien Kapteijns’s interpretation of a series of revolts in Dar Fur and Wadai at the close of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries. But these prophetic movements which adopted the idiom of Mahdism also raise questions about the ideology of protest against oppression that is firmly embedded within the Islamic tradition. A series of prophet-led revolts, many of them millenarian, started with Abu Jummayza’s 1888 rebellion against extractions levied on the western Sudanese provinces by the Mahdist armies and led on, between 1892 and 1927, to resistance to French and British administrations and their agents. A direct causal link with the Mahdist tradition is missing, but British perceptions of the revolts as 'neo-Mahdist' in inspiration and the residual Mahdist legacy in the region clearly connect them with previous acts of political rebellion against extractions by established authorities, whether foreign or domestic. Prophet-led revolts against Islamic authority were not uncommon across Sudanic Africa during the nineteenth century; what is noteworthy as these movements continue into the twentieth century, now turned against infidel rule, is their conscious reference to Mahdism, long after the demise of the Mahdist state in the Sudan. The Islamic consciousness that is thus articulated in these popular revolts during the first quarter of the century (and which surfaces in 'Yan Tatsine) recalls Thomas Hodgkin’s (1980) characterization of the radical tradition in Islam, always at the disposal of an oppressed people and with a ready ideology capable of galvanizing mass movements.

It is the contemporary political reality of this possibility and efforts to counter it that forms the subject of Gabriel Warburg’s essay on Numayri’s efforts to manipulate Islamic interests in Sudanese politics. Warburg takes issue with the notion of an Islamic resurgence in recent Sudanese politics, arguing rather that Numayri presided over a brief (1969–77) and abortive attempt to secularize his political base before capitulating to the Ansar, representing the legacy of the Mahdiyya, the urban-based Khartoum order and the Muslim Brotherhood. This 'nationalization’ of Islam, as Warburg characterizes the ongoing process since 1977, brought both reconciliations and ruptures in relations between government and the leaders of these movements, but it demonstrates that Numayri’s political survival hinged upon the backing of a quorum of these forces. Here, 'popular
Islam’ is equated with the fundamentalist bent of constituencies not co-opted into the coalition of interests that make up the government, and the popular issue is the very orthodox one of Islamic law (shari’a), its rigorous or compromised applications, and its role in the constitution of the state. The shari’a becomes a metaphor for political interests and the identity of subcultures, not unlike the shari’a debates during the Nigerian constitution drafting in the late 1970s.

The range of issues encompassed within these essays on political ramifications of ‘popular Islam’—class consciousness articulated in an Islamic idiom, pan-Islamic sentiments born of millennial, Mahdist-style protest, and efforts by the state to co-opt Islamic reform movements—in no way confines our theme to theologically aberrant views (unless defined as such by the state). ‘Popular Islam’ in these contributions is simply a political expression of an oppressed group articulated in an Islamic mode. In the second set of essays, which deal with cultural expressions that draw inspiration from the Islamic tradition, no such tidy formulation is evident. ‘Popular Islam’ in these contributions means practices and beliefs that stand apart from the norms of behaviour as sanctioned by the ‘ulama for particular communities. Students of the Great Tradition would point to a wide spectrum on which behaviour in particular locales rests, once that practice and belief are compared with the norms functioning elsewhere in the Islamic world, or with an idealized notion of Islamic practice founded in historic times. The genius of Islam lies in part in its receptivity and ability to incorporate diverse esoteric practices during the process of Islamization. This is readily apparent in sub-Saharan Africa where Islam in this century has spread more rapidly than in any comparable period in the past. Yet therein also lies an inherent tension that has made the problem of defining a Muslim central to the concerns of Islamic scholars and reformers throughout the history of Islam. This tension surfaces in matters as diverse as theology (classically, the uses and abuses of Sufism and the Sufi orders), art and music (two scarcely studied but potentially rich sources for our understanding of Islam in its African setting), the function of Arabic literacy and languages of religious instruction, and medicine (often allied to the study of mysticism in the Islamic sciences).

These last two aspects of ‘popular Islam’ in a cultural context are central to Abdullahi Osman El-Tom’s essay on Berti erasure. The Berti of northern Dar Fur have long been Islamized and Arabized yet retain a strong allegiance to non-Islamic cults and practices. Religious leaders of villages are those who have memorized the Koran and, among other things, are known for the efficacy of their medicines which consist of Koranic verses written, then washed off slates and drunk by their clients. It is the meaning of these ‘erasures’ that El-Tom explores in the work of Berti fakis whose assigned meanings of Koranic texts have been little contaminated by the Great Tradition. Indeed, the views of Berti scholars and those of Koranic scholars in the classical tradition are entirely incompatible with respect to the meaning of some verses. El-Tom is describing a practice that represents orthodoxy in the Berti context (and, indeed, is widespread in many other Islamic communities) yet is clearly aberrant, at least as regards interpretations of particular passages, in the literate mainstream of Islam. El-Tom also reminds us of the potential for supernatural power in the Word in societies where Arabic literacy, however defined, is limited, a fact that has proved an important adjunct to the influence of Muslim holy men in many parts of Africa.
The theme of Arabic literacy and languages of religious instruction is continued in the essay by Louis Brenner and Murray Last, who focus their attention on recent translations of the Koran into Hausa and Fulfulde and the implications of these works for religious instruction in Nigeria and Mali. They trace the development of a method of teaching classical texts in Fulfulde that was widespread in the nineteenth century in West Africa, aimed at religious teaching for the illiterate in Arabic, and they describe the transformation of Hausa from a language external to the religious community at Sokoto to a language of religious instruction, then of political administration during the colonial era. Against this background the recent translation of the Koran into Hausa, despite classical prohibitions against rendering Allah’s word into another form, is seen as ‘the inevitable result of a long process’ which has met with apparently little opposition. By contrast, French educational efforts to suppress local languages and to treat Arabic as a secondary language of instruction have resulted in French and Arabic as mediums of religious teaching in Mali. The analogous recent publication of a Fulfulde Koran (translated from a French version), far from being a controversial development, holds little relevance to a literate public for whom Fulfulde is no longer a primary language of religious instruction. Brenner and Last identify ‘popular Islam’, we have seen, by its practitioners who are illiterate in Arabic, yet in the light of complex transformations that have taken place in the languages of religion in Nigeria and Mali (and continue to play a role in educational reform movements in Mali) they find the concept holds little analytical or conceptual value.

Finally Mbye Cham shifts our attention from analyses of language and its religious function to literature and its images of Islam in Senegalese society. Cham lays out a spectrum of attitudes from traditionalists to apostates expressed in Wolof and French literature and film which portray Islamic institutions with reverence, satire and ridicule. His is our only portrayal of popular views of Islam from the perspective of creative writers within a Muslim society, and reminds us that humour and respectful irreverence are important ingredients in popular attitudes towards Muslim holy men whose severe self image is frequently accepted unquestioningly by outside observers. Few sources more succinctly address a sociology of Islam in Senegal than the literature with which Cham deals, revealing at once the contradictions and the cultural unity of Senegalese society. Cham is careful to point out that with the exception of his ‘apostate’ (Sembene) those writers who go on the attack do not question Islam but rather satirize Islamic institutions or charlatans masquerading as holy men. The ‘popular Islam’ that is condemned by these writers is practice that abuses the ideology underlying the cultural unity of Senegal.

There is a final twist to the ‘popular Islam’ theme that is explicitly or implicitly treated in a number of these articles, and that is the process of incorporation or rejection we see at work in many Islamic societies, as practice once outside the pale of establishment circles is absorbed into common use and vice versa. ‘Popular’, like establishment, Islam, as illustrated in Warburg’s contribution on the recent political history of Sudan, may be an extremely transient label, especially in political arenas. This is not simply a one-way process. Lubeck has described the alienation of one group of believers who had long occupied a revered and functional place in the religious and economic system of Kano. Kapteijns implies the reverse, as onetime adherents of the prophetic movements in Dar Fur and
Wadai became absorbed into a labour market benefiting among others the Mahdi's son. In matters cultural, the process of incorporation and rejection of aberrant practice tends to be more subtle, as demonstrated by the changing roles of Fulfulde and Hausa as languages of religious teaching in Brenner and Last's article. But definitions of aberrant practice, as seen in El-Tom's contribution or the range of literary views surveyed by Cham, are quite as capable of change as is the practice itself. Several years ago I interrupted an animated conversation in my Mauritanian shaikh's receiving room between the shaikh and one of his Gambian students, en route home for a vacation. Recapitulating the legal problem he had just solved for the lad, Shaikh Haroun explained that the fellow wished a legal opinion on the permissibility of chasing monkeys, a pastime enjoyed by him and his age-mates. Lowering his voice and with a glance to assure our privacy, the shaikh confided, 'The Prophet didn't say much about monkeys.' With the stroke of a pen, so to speak, a leisure-time activity had become canonized, and a cultural practice had been received within the permissible mainstream of an Islamic community in Gambia. The example may be frivolous, but the dynamic process of incorporation is well illustrated whereby 'aberrant' practice is redefined and sanctioned by the Word.

Finally something should be said about a misleading dichotomy that may be implicit in notions of 'popular' and 'establishment' Islam. Students of Islam have a penchant for analysing in twos, pairings, tidy dichotomies that pit desert against town, rural against urban, mystics against men of letters, pre-Islamic against Islamic. Ioan Lewis has recently drawn attention to the symbiotic relationships that appear to function between cults often labelled 'pre-Islamic' and mainstream Islamic practice, pointing out '... a continuous process of reactive counter-diffusion in which, as the spirit of Islam flows in one direction, other spirits return the compliment' (Lewis, 1983). This is a notion not addressed in these essays but which deserves our attention; just as the incorporation and rejection processes suggest that 'popular Islam' may most usefully be seen as a phase in a dynamic process, so too 'popular' practice and belief serve to define and legitimate the literate mainstream. This is a dialectical relationship which, studied as such, promises a more comprehensive understanding of the politics and sociology of Islamic communities and the processes of Islamization than can be gleaned from separate analyses of 'popular' and 'establishment' Islam. Gellner, writing on the disciplinary divisions that have traditionally influenced Western scholarship on Islam, suggests:

The time has come to re-assert the thesis of homogeneity [of Muslim civilization], not so much as a thesis, but as a problem. For all the indisputable diversity, the remarkable thing is the extent to which Muslim societies resemble each other. [Gellner, 1981: 99]

The same needs to be repeated with respect to the stratified nature of studies on Islam within select societies; students of the literate mainstream in African Islam will be impressed by analogies their work shares with themes in the essays that follow. If there is a single conclusion to be drawn from these contributions, it is the need for an integration of the types of approaches to the study of Islam demonstrated here with the work of Islamicists.
NOTES

1 As to disciplinary perspectives on this theme, Gellner's observation deserves repeating in full: 'Orientalists are at home with texts. Anthropologists are at home in villages. The natural consequence is that the former tend to see Islam from above, the latter from below. I remember an anthropologist specializing in a Muslim country telling me of his first encounter with an elderly and distinguished Islamicist. The old scholar observed that the Koran was interpreted differently in various parts of the Muslim world. The young anthropologist remarked that this was indeed obvious. "Obvious? Obvious?" expostulated the older man angrily. "It took years of careful research to establish it!" ' (Gellner, 1981: 99).

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REFERENCES