Contested Religion

How does religiosity interrelate with morality and intellectual culture? The research unit Contested Religion takes this basic question that is at the heart of social life across the global south. Focusing on both contemporary and historical cases, the unit engages the ways in which religiosity is mobilised and invested in individual and collective life projects. How do both religiosity and knowledge inform and at the same time challenge political orders, eschatological aspirations, and moral norms? What forms, sites and agents of intellectual culture emerge within that context? Although engaging primarily Muslim contexts, the unit is particularly interested in the interactions between Muslims and their non-Muslim neighbours. Consequently, exclusionary politics, sectarianism, collaboration and strategic borrowing within and between groups and communities are important relational modalities, which the research unit analyses.

Research Projects

- Religion, Morality and Boko in West Africa: Students Training for a Good Life (Remoboko, Leibniz-Competition) Dr. Abdoulaye Sounaye, Head of Research Unit
- Religiosity and Higher Education at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, 1948–2010 (Remoboko, Leibniz-Competition) Adéjoké Rafiat Adétòrò
- Moral Quandaries: Religion and Modern Law in Egypt (VW-Mellon) Dr. Jeffrey Culang
- Indian Ocean Retrotopia on the Western Indian Littoral (DFG) Deepra Dandekar, PhD
- Preaching and Teaching: Religiosity, Knowledge and Performance on University Campuses in Niger and Nigeria (Remoboko, Leibniz-Competition) Vincent Favier
- Contested Knowledge, Sociality, and Religion: Intellectual Culture under Postcolonial Conditions on the Swahili Coast and Beyond Prof. Dr. Kai Kresse
- Religious Dynamics and the Interaction Between Religion and Secularity at Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey, Niger (Remoboko, Leibniz-Competition) Bello Adamou Mahamadou
- From Calabar to Berlin: Girls Trafficking from Nigeria to Europe and the Role of African Traditional Religion (ATR) (Thyssen) Rahina Muazu
- Bend over Arabic Manuscripts: South Asian Muslims, European Orientalism, and the Academic Study of Islam Dr. Maria-Magdalena Pruß
Contested Religion

Contested Knowledge, Sociality, and Religion: Intellectual Culture under Postcolonial Conditions on the Swahili Coast and Beyond

Kai Kresse

This project documents and analyses biographical pathways, social engagements, and communally related topical concerns in the trajectories of relevant influential figures (social leaders, activists, thinkers and teachers) in the Swahili region, who are largely identified, or identify themselves, as Muslim scholars or Islamic intellectuals. How are these agents embedded in society; by what means and actions do they gain recognition; and how do they gain and increase followers and influence (while committed to different ideological agendas, in terms of politics, Islamic reform, etc.)? These questions are pursued in a collaboration with academic and non-academic scholars from the region, and combining ethnography and archival research with close readings, interviews and dialogical exchanges with local interlocutors (in person and by social media). Thus by means of an ethnographic pathway that combines fieldwork methods with contextualising readings and interpretations of materials, this project engages in a new approach to the study of local intellectuals and public debate, and regional intellectual history and the intellectual practice of individual agents, as engrained in regional history and social experience. Hereby, attention to the dimensions of postcolonial experience more generally, as well as the specific political tensions between Muslims and the state – that play out differently in Kenya and Tanzania, also with a view to their wider transregional connections – is an important concern. The concrete initial focus is on handful of scholars from Lamu, on the Northern Swahili coast, with a view to pursuing contrasting case studies in a complementary consecutive phase.

Bend Over Arabic Manuscripts: South Asian Muslims, European Orientalism, and the Academic Study of Islam

Maria-Magdalena Prüß

This project focuses on systems of knowledge production with regard to Islam and the history of the Islamicate world in nineteenth and twentieth-century South Asia. It analyzes the contribution of local academics and institutions who were part of a colonial educational framework to the field of Islamic Studies from the mid-nineteenth century onward. A central theme is the engagement with European-type methods of the study of Islam and Orientalist scholarship. Instead of seeing local scholars as passive recipients of knowledge, though, the project sheds light on their active role in producing innovative research on Islam. It traces local intellectual discourses, analyses their broader social and cultural impact, and investigates scholarly networks between South Asia, Europe and the Middle East. By doing so, the project contributes to debates about modern Islamic thought, the impact of political ideologies on academic scholarship, and intellectual entanglements between South Asia, the Middle East and Europe.
Contested Religion

**Moral Quandaries: Religion and Modern Law in Egypt (VW-Mellon)**

Dr. Jeffrey Culang

As part of the apparatus of the centralising state, positivist law contrasted with established moral legal frameworks. Whereas these frameworks had focused on cultivating moral subjects bottom-up through communal structures, positivist law sought to discipline the individual top-down, eschewing questions of morality. This project traces the making of modern law through genealogies of five concepts essential to the nation-state system. Each case shows how translations and codification – by British and Egyptian officials and legislators, foreign missionaries, and everyday people amid the ascendance of international law – rearranged or confined moral lexicons and practices toward state-defined public order. This research sheds new light on the place of religion in public life both in Egypt and globally.

**Indian Ocean Retrotopia on the Western Indian Littoral (DFG)**

Deepra Dandekar, PhD

The DFG-funded project explores the story of Muslim identity, intellectual history, and claims to regional, ethno-linguistic belonging, in the contested domain of Hindu-dominated, postcolonial Maharashtra (Western India). Excluded from an imagined Muslim mainstream, in the post-Partition time-space of Hindu majoritarianism, especially after 1960, when Maharashtra was formed, Muslims in Maharashtra, allying with the poorest and lower-castes among Hindus, draw on rationalist-reformist intellectual trajectories, and a history of miracle-working Sufis from North India, and from across the Arabian Sea (Arabastan), who lie buried in Dargahs here, to articulate their religious belonging. Exploring evolving identities around being Muslim in a politically Marathi, Hindu-nationalist context, this project investigates Muslim religious institutions like Dargahs, and the intellectual ideas of Hamid Dalwai (1932-1977) as contested domains, constitutive of Marathi-Muslim identity(ies).

**From Calabar to Berlin: Girls Trafficking from Nigeria to Europe and the Role of African Traditional Religion (Thyssen)**

Rahina Muazu

This project focuses on the role of African Traditional Religion (ATR), priests, priestesses and shrines in women trafficking in Nigeria. It raises questions such as the role of secrecy in ATR and why and how ATR is used as an object of coercion to aid traffickers in holding young Nigerian girls and women in the long chain of slavery to Europe. The purpose of the project is to outline the gaps in the research on human trafficking and religion, and contribute new themes in the field that could enrich our perspective on human trafficking particularly in Nigeria and Germany. It covers the period from the 1980s that witnessed the first wave of women and girls leaving Nigeria on the promises of well-paid jobs in Europe. Fieldwork will be conducted in the cities of Calabar, Benin (Nigeria) and Berlin, Germany.
Contested Religion – Remoboko

Religion, Morality and Boko in West Africa: Students Training for a Good Life (Remoboko)

Dr. Abdoulaye Sounaye (Principal Investigator)

Remoboko examines religiosity and the ways in which it affects secular education (boko, in Hausa) in West Africa. It focuses on the presence, competition and conflict between secularism, Salafism and Pentecostalism on university campuses. How do students who seek a degree that would insure them a good life, resort to religion? Is this process signaling a de-secularization of academia? How can fostering critical abilities be reconciled with absolute certainties? How are these developments affecting campus regulations, social interactions, being a student, good Muslim or good Christian on campus? A key goal here is to understand the re-entanglement first, between religious traditions, and then, between the religious and the secular. Remoboko is a Leibniz Junior Research Group. It includes three PhDs and one postdoc. It is funded through May 2023.

Religiosity and Higher Education at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, 1948 – 2010

Adéjoké Rafiat Adétòrò

This project examines religiosity and higher education at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, within the context of (re)emergence of religious reformists on university campuses and their attempt to de-secularize higher education institutions. It puts forward a fundamental question of how the articulation of religious practices shapes the students’ experiences of campus life. More specifically, the study will interrogate how religion as a phenomenon evolved and the trajectories of its organisation in this setting. The project uses ethno-historical research methods and will also adopt a multidisciplinary approach to analyse and contextualise the research data.

Preaching and Teaching: Religiosity, Knowledge and Performance on University Campuses in Niger and Nigeria

Vincent Favier

This project focuses on religiosity among students and lecturers on the university campuses of Niamey, Niger, and Ibadan, Nigeria. It investigates how they live their religion, interact, and engage with the quest for and the production of knowledge. Salafi and Pentecostal formations largely present on both campuses display a particular understanding of knowledge. Approached as performances, religiously-framed discourses and bodily practices help create a corpus of knowledge – not only theological but also moral, social and political. How are these discourses, practices, and behaviors, affecting campus life, academic practice, and knowledge? The project includes also the production of an ethnographic film illustrating the observed phenomena.

Religious Dynamics and the Interaction Between Religion and Secularity at Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey, Niger

Bello Adamou Mahamadou

Religious diversity characterises the Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey, with Muslims (Salafi, Sufi, Shiites, Tablighi, etc.), Christians (Catholics, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, etc.), Baha’i, etc. coexisting on the same campus. This project focuses on the interactions between Salafis and Pentecostals. One of its goals is to understand how religion managed to acquire significance in campus life and the strategies religious organizations use to persuade students to embrace religious practice in a context until recently dominated by Marxism-Leninism. As a study of religiosity, the project will also examine how religion (mainly Salafism and Pentecostalism) interacts with secularity on campus.