EDITORIAL

Andrea Brigaglia and Mohamed Mraja

As the readers will immediately notice, the name of the Review has been changed to ARIA (Annual Review of Islam in Africa) and the scope of this year's issue has been widened to include the rest of the African continent. While the geographical scope has been shifted, the Review still keeps its traditional make-up, and the current editors wish to inherit the legacy of those who have contributed to the past issues of ARIA – a multi-disciplinary legacy defined by a plural approach to the very concept of "religion".

Almost one out of every two Africans is a Muslim, and the role of Islam in orientating and shaping choices, cultural representations, idioms and social practices of the peoples of Africa is significant in many ways – occasionally in a tragically conspicuous way, like the recent *Boko Haram* crisis in Nigeria. Through ARIA we hope to highlight fragments of the diverse, changing, and ongoing encounter of Africans with Islam. ARIA is intended to provide an academic frame to debate and understand where the Muslims of the Continent are moving – and the answers may point to many, even contradictory, directions at the same time.

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In line with its strong interest in current issues – though in no way the only one, as the present is always shaped by the past and people's visions for the future often determine the way they look at the past – this issue of ARIA features a special section on the *Boko Haram* crisis that exploded in Northern Nigeria in late July 2009, leaving an estimated seven hundred people dead. The two featured articles, though offering profoundly different perspectives, point to the power of Islam as an idiom of dissent in contemporary Northern Nigerian society. Murray Last's paper puts the incident in the historical perspective of a series of Islamic movements of protest in the region. The article compares the movement of Mohammed Yusuf with not only its most well-known and revered antecedent, the early 19th century *Jihad* of Usman dan Fodio, but also with the movement led by one of the most deprecated figures of the recent history of the country, the movement of the itinerant Qur'anic teacher Muhammad Marwa Maitatsine. Identifying a recurrent trajectory in the development of the relations between Nigerian Islamic movements of protest and the political establishment that underlies all these episodes, the author formulates a thought-provoking hypothesis, i.e. that the difference between all these Islamic movements is more in the degree of their success/failure (the nineteenth century reformer succeeded in overthrowing the establishment, and he became the local model of the virtuous leader; Maitatsine and Mohammed Yusuf have been crushed by the establishment, and are rejected by the collective memory, which rushes to condemn them as a paradigm of evil "extremism") rather than in the content of their political project.

Kyari Tijani writes from the point of view of a Nigerian leftist intellectual, and looks at the incident as a symptom of the failure of the modern Nigerian State. Tijani, however, asserts that the *Boko Haram* sect, though sharing certain postures of the progressive Nigerian intellectuals' critique of the Nigerian political elite, was ultimately a failure (and thereby a lesson, a much needed "wake-up call") itself.

The theme of Islam as an idiom of dissent in Northern Nigeria is taken up again by Andrea Brigaglia and Fauziyya Fiji. Their paper, in the section on Literature, translates and analyses a Nigerian Sufi pop song that mocks the institution of the police seen as an essential part of the *boko* ("modern") system of government. Literature also feature prominently in this volume in at least two other articles: the first, by Devarakshanam Govinden, invites to the reading of a recently published anthology of the correspondence between Zuleikha Mayat and the South African activist Ahmed Kathrada, exchanged during the time the latter was incarcerated by the Apartheid regime and filled with a sense of nostalgia and hope; the second, by Mohamed Mraja, highlights the role of poetry in the literary and religious works of Shaykh Abdallah Farsy, a theme neglected in previous scholarship on this major East African Islamic reformer, preacher and writer. Notwithstanding his critique to some of the 'local' paradigms of Islamic legitimacy, Farsy's use of Swahili poetry shows how he was well anchored in the East African Islamic cultural space.

East Africa is also the focus of the opening article of the section on social issues, in which Joseph Wandera looks at Islamic street preaching in contemporary urban Kenya, and illustrates how the worldview of Kenyan preachers is shaped by the themes enjoined by the globalized discourses of the virtual 'Umma' of the twenty-first century but, at the same time, also reflects the peculiar position of the Kenyan Muslim population, defined by the (real and/or perceived) threats of marginalization that Kenyan Muslims face from the secular State and from the influential Christian public opinion of the country. But the Muslim public sphere is moulded by internal debates over the correctness of Muslim practices as much as it is shaped by the engagement with other religious communities. This is shown by two articles focused on Cape Town's Islamic space, both pointing to the multiplicity of ideas and agendas that circulate within it. The first, by Yunus Dumbe, looks at the diffusion of Salafism in the religious space of the Cape, and argues that, even in the absence of an organized Salafi movement, Salafi's discourses have been able to get a foothold in the region, changing to a certain extent common perceptions about Sufism. The second, by Nina Hoel, takes a critical look at the ways 'Islamic' notions about sexuality and the relation between the genders control the choices of South African Muslim women, but also points out how Muslim women, in turn, challenge established norms of proper marital conduct by using an 'Islamic' counter-discourse on sexuality.

The section on Islam and Society continues with a paper by Francesco Leccese illustrating how, through the use of modern information technology and an idiom that adapts the Islamic/Sufi message to the cultural space of the West, a traditional Sufi order of Sudanese origin has been able to succeed in recruiting a large European followership. Finally, Muhammad Khalid Sayed reflects on his personal experience as a South African student of Arabic in Damascus. His reflective paper highlights the plurality of religious collective identities as the major aspect of the classical civilisation of the Middle East whose legacy – contrary to mass-mediatic representations of a society supposedly moulded upon totalitarian, absolutist ideas of religious identity – can still be experienced by a foreign student in the Syrian capital.

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While opened by a special focus on a dramatic current event, this issue of ARIA is closed by an excursion into the written sources that help the historian reconstruct the past. The articles by Sarah Jappie and Mauro Nobili introduce the reader to two precious and previously under-researched collections of manuscripts: the Afrikaans sources in Arabic script that document the history and the daily lives of the Muslims in the Cape, and a colonial collection of Arabic manuscripts from the upper Niger valley (today's Mali) preserved in Paris, respectively. While contemporary Muslims in the Continent construct and live their modern-day stories according to the challenges of their cultural environments, much, of the histories of Islam in Africa, still awaits to be investigated and written.