

REVIEW ESSAY

"What Have Cassettes to do with Christianity? Instagram with Islam?"

KEN CHITWOOD

Rosalind I. J. Hackett and Benjamin F. Soares (eds.). 2014. *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Introduction

Perusing the Facebook group "United in Islam in South Africa" one finds a variety of posts that might catch one's attention. From agriculturally informed exhortations, to charity, to the posting of events in Tshwane/Pretoria, to quotes of Ibn Taymiyyah and other sources the posts on the page are wide in range, source, and influence—some yielding likes and comments, others sitting silent on the page. One particularly popular post called for *du'a* (non-obligatory prayer) to be made for rain in the Gauteng province including Johannesburg. On several days a woman began by saying "*Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem*" ("in the name of Allah, most Gracious, most Merciful") expressing *shukr* (thanks) and calling for *rakaats* (units of prayer) in grateful response. The other most popular post on the page shows Syrian refugees seeking asylum in Europe. Here, on Facebook, in the digital borderlands, the global and local are meeting as South African Muslims interact with Muslims from across the globe and share media, meditations, and methods of piety online with "likes" and "comments" the affirmations in place of vocal *takbirs* (informal expressions of faith with the acclamation, "Allahu akbar" or "God is great"). The petitions and posts on the page are predicated by both global concerns and local conditions. As such, this short vignette and case can serve well as a piquing entrée into the digital and electronic media world, which is part of a large religious, social, economic, and political patchwork across Africa.

As intimated by the case above Africa's religious media scene is rapidly evolving and constantly engaging. The book *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa* seeks to cast a critical eye on this area of study and "focus on the diverse religious transformations being generated by the explosion of media technologies—both old and new—across Africa" (p. 5). It is the contention of this review that this text is a helpful primer on the historical and contemporary ways that media—old and new, print and digital—have shaped, are shaped by, and continue to shape religion in Africa. While there are attendant weaknesses with the sheer breadth of the collection and areas for further research, this text serves well as an introductory

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anthology of current research in the field and across a wide geographic, socio-cultural, and religious array focusing on key themes and transformations that help make sense of its varied contributions.

Main Thesis and Outline

One of the overarching messages of this work is that political liberalization led to the deregulation of media fields and thus religious leaders, activists, and netroots were able to appropriate radio, television, newspapers, magazines, computer mediated technologies (CMCs), and mobile phone networks for their own purposes. These purposes ranged from gaining public recognition in a contested religious marketplace, advocating and promoting inter-religious dialogue, and strengthening and expanding their constituencies. It must be said, at the same time, that media have also been utilized to ostracize the religious “other” and curtail the effect of other communities, which in different places and different ways led to tension, conflict, and explicit violence. This multidisciplinary volume engaging scholars from media studies, religion, anthropology, history, and others illustrates how media are never neutral vehicles of expression and analyzes the mutual imbrications of media and religion during times of rapid technological and social change in various places throughout Africa.

Principally, the multiple entries explore the transformation of religion that is predicated by the thickened field of media production and reception throughout Africa. There are eight transformations highlighted by these contributions: (1) changes of religion, processes of conversion and reconversion; (2) change *in* religion and its attendant values, behaviors, practices, styles, attitudes, expressive modes, voices, and authority; (3) the creation of more space for multiple religious actors’ engagement; (4) the rise of new religious publics; (5) the creation of new religious spaces by entrepreneurs; (6) the creation of new religious debates; (7) change in the configurations between different religious groups, new and mainstream; (8) changes in state and/or popular recognition of religious groups (pp. 5-7). All of these transformations are charted through old and new media and various religious groups, but with particular focus on Christians, Muslims, and indigenous religion and how various religions, governments, individuals, and institutions are navigating and “balancing freedom of expression and freedom of religion and belief” (p. 2)

The book is divided into three parts. Part one primarily deals with “old” media such as Islamic radio in coastal Kenya (chap. 1), the Islamic printing market in Mali (chap. 2), media and Muslim movements in Nigeria (chap. 3), and the creation of Muslim community radio stations in two provinces of South Africa (chap. 4). Interestingly, editors Rosalind I. J. Hackett and Benjamin F. Soares posit that old media in Africa are more associated with Muslims than Christians, sidelining Christian missionary print and radio as part of a colonial construct and therefore not “African” as such. *This* seems a significant slight of media that are of serious import for not only Christians in Africa, but Muslims and indigenous practitioners as well. While I understand the desire to deal with “African” media missionary endeavors and media production, even from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, should still be considered as a core aspect of the African religious media context.

Part two focuses on the appropriation of “new” media in African religious contexts and by religious actors. The contributors take up everything from popular film and the visuality of miracles in West Africa (chap. 5) to Arab satellite channels as new players in the North African media world (chap. 9) to the expansion of Pentecostalism via web presence throughout sub-Saharan Africa (chap. 8). All the while, this second part starts to move the reader to consider not only entertainment and community engagement but also the potential strain this puts on religiously diverse regions, countries, and states. Part three picks up on this narrative and explicates how media are engaged in processes of inter-religious exchange, tension, and competition in “African mediascapes” (p. 10). Here, “African traditional religion” (chap. 11) and “Zulu *sangoma* religion” (chap. 15) stand out next to discussions of hybrid Gospel music in Nigeria (chap. 12) and the digital landscapes of Muslim apologetics and *da’wa* in Ethiopia (chap. 14). Throughout, the influence of foreign and outside media actors is evident, while concomitantly the engagement of African media beyond its own borders is hinted at as well, and even explicitly examined in the final chapter. This brings us full circle back to the introduction where we saw how Facebook became a place of global exchange betwixt and between South African Muslims, the global *umma*, and other interlocutors present on the page.

Analysis

Rather than dealing with the vast array of concerns, contexts, and cases in this collection I will instead focus my analysis on this theme of the global and local in dialectic tension and co-creative connection. First, I will take up the theme of continuity and rupture both in terms of media and processes of global exchange. Second, I will discuss the importance of focusing on specific localities and their respective contexts to more fully understand the role of media in a global age. Third, I will highlight how it is paramount, especially when dealing with marginalized fields such as religion in Africa, to move beyond parochial analyses and consider the global impact of such studies. Finally, I will close by making comparative notes between the research in this work and comparing that to new avenues in research of digital media in Africa and elsewhere.

While Bruno Latour argued that “we have never been modern” it might be worth stipulating that, “we have always been global,” at least in some sense.¹ Furthermore, it is important to point out that the production, and reception, of media has always been an important part of religion and its development. These themes of continuity and rupture are present in multiple entries, specifically in the first part of the book. Discussing media and religious movements such as the modernist reformers the Yan Izala and their leader Abubakar Gumi in Nigeria, Brian Larkin makes the point that we must appreciate individual movements not as part of some “homogenous blocs,” but rather as “heteroglossic assemblages” made up of local and global discourses, historical dynamics and contemporary responses and adaptations (p. 67). Whether the movements were from the turn of the twentieth century, mid-century manifestations, or organizations that arose as a new millennium dawned, all have drawn on global media discourses and deployed local media strategies to communicate and expand. Likewise, Larkin makes this same point in regards to Sufism and the internal diversity of particular orders, old and new, global and local. He writes that “the language of rupture fails to

capture this internal complexity" (p. 77). Thus, both religious media and movements in Africa must be appreciated from a *longue-durée* perspective and in the dynamic nexus of exchange of exchange, both globally and locally and in the midst of multiple discourses within and without.

The importance of focusing on local dynamics is reiterated by Muhammed Haron who analyzes Muslim community radio stations in Cape Town and Johannesburg. To understand these radio stations' shared characteristics, even as he delineates their differences, Haron situates both in the post-apartheid world of deregulation, freedom of religion and communication, and the value placed on formerly marginalized voices in the new democratic social order (p. 94). The stations' features and strategies could not be understood without awareness of this post-apartheid state of affairs. Furthermore, Johannes Merz strengthens the case for a local conceptualization of religious media and their affect in Africa by arguing that the success of the visualization of video technology and popular film in West Africa is predicated upon notions of explicitly African culture and experience (pp. 99ff.). Both of these contributors make clear that this is not solely the story of foreign media invading African space and taking on meaning according to global consultations, but the situatedness and success of religious media is predicated upon, and even rooted in, the local dynamics in which it emerges or is introduced.

Analyses of religious media in Africa, however, cannot be limited to their impact on religion, culture, and politics in Africa alone. Engaged in the global exchange of ideas, finances, and materials African media also has worldwide reach and consequence. Indeed, African religious media are part and parcel of the dialectics of exchange between the local and the global in multiple religious manifestations and systems including Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religion. Whether it is the interchange between Arab businessmen and satellite television owners and religious elites and traditional players in North Africa (chap. 9) or the dominion theology that inspires Pentecostal ministries to take up residence online in order to spread the Gospel message throughout the globe (chap. 7) or even clever strategies of a chameleon-like *sangoma* in South Africa to fuse his Zulu neo-shamanism with global conversations of the paranormal via the internet, DVDs, and television religious media in Africa is not limited in its transformative power to the geographic boundaries of the continent. Instead, religious media are acting as a connective expanse, or "third space," where African religious modalities are transcreative contact with other global movements, actors, institutions, and ideas. As Samson A. Bezabeh wrote concerning Ethiopian Muslims in this collection, "[l]iving in the twenty-first century, where existence is not limited by state boundaries but also affected by events in digital landscapes" (p. 281) it becomes increasingly salient to seek to understand religion through media new and/or old, global and/or local, digital and/or physically mediated (cf. pp. 187, 194ff, 272-75).

In comparing this work to other literature on the same, or at least similar, topics, a few more relevant points of critique come to mind. First, as Rosalind Hackett has written elsewhere, paying attention to auditory media moves interpretation of media away from Western aesthetics of textual and visual biases.² This volume introduces music, radio sounds, and other soundscapes into the mix of media studies in sub-Saharan Africa and invites other researchers

to explore the possibilities of such auditory fields (beyond simply music) as rich spaces for research in religion.

Furthermore, as did Dorothea Schulz's ethnography *Muslims and New Media in West Africa* this volume paid due attention to the interaction of new media with gender, economics, and religious practice and authority.³ This line of inquiry helps researchers in the field of religion and media move beyond the tendency to look at congregations and institutions and instead to pay attention to broader religious experiences as they are embedded in the life practices, sense experiences, and everyday embodied interactions of religious personages.

Indeed, the sort of analysis and awareness offered in this text invites researchers to conceive of "religion as a practice of mediation" and to see, along with Birgit Meyer, "how access to new media gives rise to new practices of media and how these practices stem from and impinge on changing power relations, between followers and leaders, as well as between politics and religion."⁴ This even intimates as to how, as Ebrahim Moosa wrote, technology is already embedded in contemporary religious thought and practice and that media and technology are not antithetical to religious sensibilities and subjectivities.⁵ However, even with this acknowledgement the authors were careful to still delineate that there are still contours of power, issues of control, and contestation of authenticity and authority to consider when researching the intersection and interplay of religion with, against, and even "as" new media in a global age.

If there were any weak points to this study it is the lack of investigation of how digital religious media are shaping, and being shaped by, digital media. As Heidi A. Campbell wrote, "rather than being an alternative social space for a few, digital technology becomes an important platform extending and altering religious practice for many."⁶ While, as the authors of this volume concede, access to digital religious practices may be limited in sub-Saharan Africa, they are extant and expanding. Investigating and exploring how ritual, identity, community, authority, authenticity, and even religion itself are transformed by, and transforming, digital culture in hybridized and fluid forms would not only help researchers track religious change, but also assist in the apperception of religious past and present as well — perhaps in new ways hitherto not thought of or unforeseen. This could also provide an ample proving ground for the practical considerations of "digital ethnography" and other hybrid methodologies, which are often required or prove more fruitful in exploring the "third spaces" where religion and digital culture meet.

Conclusion

Even with the omission of the digital technology dimension, this collection of essays concerning new media and religious transformation in Africa is both wide and deep in its appreciation of the central roles that media and religion play in the contemporary world. Readers would do well to pay attention to the individual contributions as they seek to perceive the many ways religious media are shaping global and local politics, socio-culture, economics, and spirituality. Furthermore, as discussed above, this text also serves as a more than sufficient springboard for one's further research along the same lines, whether that be in Africa or somewhere else around the globe.

One particular area that is available for further research and is not significantly examined in this text is how media allow and advance opportunities for the transcending of religious boundaries and spaces. For example, when an individual can watch whatever preacher or teacher they want from anywhere in the world (Pentecostal preachers, Saudi sheikhs) and taxis can act as mobile churches blaring Gospel music and Pentecostal preaching individuals cannot avoid religious media in many senses, whereas in the past individuals had to go in search of media for their own purposes. As with the case of the hybrid musical styles of *Senwele Jesu* (pp. 227-44) modern religious media have moved from the library to the city streets, from the masjid to the cafe. Everyone can sit, stand, talk, and be part of a marketplace of competing religious media, which can lead to religious change, code-switching, and potentially conflict. Indeed, this impact even bleeds beyond the boundaries of African nations as now “radio and television broadcasts” are widely available leading to the distribution of media “to much wider viewing and listening communities in Africa and in the diaspora” (p. 3). While it is important to note the continuity of presence, and significance, of religious media in Africa it is also poignant to point out the prolific nature and proliferation of religious media in diverse African religious public spheres made up of competing global and local, Christian, Muslim, and indigenous sound, video, print, and technoscapes. This is just one example of the multiple avenues of research that emerge from this timely work and evidence of how rich a field of study the realm of religious media in Africa can be and already, in many ways, is.

Notes

- 1 Latour 1991, p. 1.
- 2 Hackett 2011.
- 3 Schulz 2012.
- 4 Meyer 2006, p. 290.
- 5 Moosa 2016.
- 6 Campbell 2013, p. 1.

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