



SYMPOSIUM

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES, TRANSMISSION AND LITERACIES IN AFRICA, THE MIDDLE EAST, AND CENTRAL ASIA

July 19-20, 2022

Between June 1 and July 15, 2022, the African and Middle Eastern Division (AMED) hosted seven renowned scholars in the AMED Reading Room, each for a two-week research residency. During their residencies, the scholars used the Library's collection to conduct in-depth research on a self-selected topic in relation to religious studies in the division's responsible geographic areas. These topics range from food cultures and art in religion, religious beliefs in the context of slavery and colonialism, comparisons of religious minorities, to religious freedom in constitutional systems. These presentations feature finding from the scholars' research residencies.

The residencies and symposium are part of the Exploring Challenging Conversations project generously funded by a planning grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. for the purpose of enhancing public awareness of cross-regional and intercultural religious understanding in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and their global diaspora.

Session 1 - Religious Practices across Time and Space

[In the Footsteps of Omar ibn Said, a Muslim Slave from Fuuta Tooro](#)

By Prof. Mamaramé Seck, Associate professor at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN), University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar

Introduction by Lanisa Kitchiner, Ph.D., Chief, African and Middle Eastern Division

[Sharing a Table: Commensality in Middle Eastern and North African Cookbooks](#)

by Prof. Heather Sharkey, Chair, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania

Introduction by Muhannad Salhi, Ph.D. Arab World Specialist, Near East Section

[The Druze and the Kurds: Two Complex Minority Models in a Complex Region](#)

By Prof. Ori Z. Soltes, Teaching Professor, Center for Jewish Civilization, Walsh School for Foreign Service, Georgetown University

Introduction by Hiran Dinavari, Iranian World Specialist, Near East Section

Session 2 - Pathways of Religious Transmission from Ancient to Modern Times

[Morphing Magi: The LOC Menologium in Dialogue with Seventeenth-Century Depictions of the Adoration of the Magi](#)

By Whitney A. Kite, Ph.D. Candidate, Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University

Introduction by Khatchig Mouradian, Ph.D., Armenian & Georgian Area Specialist, Near East Section

The Bamum Traditional Religion at the Crossroads of Islam and Christianity (Recording forthcoming)

By Abdoulaye Laziz Nchare, Ph.D., Linguistics-Anthropology and Translator, St. John's University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Introduction by Edward Miner, Ph.D., Head, African Section

Session 3 - Religious Literacies and Their Meanings Today

[Conversion in Context: Rethinking Religious Change in Colonial Western Kenya](#)

By Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton, Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of Virginia

Introduction by Edward Miner, Ph.D. Head, African Section

[Secular Africa? Making Sense of the Interplay Between Secular Constitutions and Religious Citizens](#)

By Jacques Berlinerblau, Rabbi Harold S. White Chair in Jewish Civilization, Center for Jewish Civilization, Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

Introduction by Edward Miner, Ph.D., Head, African Section

Speaker Biography



Jacques Berlinerblau

Jacques Berlinerblau is currently the Rabbi Harold White Professor of Jewish Civilization at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. Berlinerblau has published on a wide variety of issues ranging from secularism, to religion and politics, to Jewish-American fiction, to African-American and Jewish-American relations, to American higher education. He has published thirty-five scholarly articles and ten books. The latter include: *How to Be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom*

(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt); *Secularism on the Edge* (Palgrave; co-edited with Sarah Fainberg and Aurora Nou); *Thumpin' It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics* (Westminster John Knox); *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* (Cambridge University Press); *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibility of American Intellectuals* (Rutgers University Press). His 2017 book was *Campus Confidential: How College Works, or Doesn't, for Professors, Parents, and Students* (Melville House).

In 2021-2022 he will release three scholarly books. The first is *The Philip Roth We Don't Know: Sex, Race and Autobiography* (University of Virginia Press). The second is *Secularism: The Basics* (Routledge). The third, co-authored with Professor Terrence Johnson, is *Blacks and Jews in America: An Invitation to Dialogue* (Georgetown University Press). Berlinerblau has written for, appeared on, or had his work discussed in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, *Salon*, *The Guardian*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *NPR*, *Tablet*, *Commentary*, *The Forward*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Haaretz*, *Canadian Broadcast Network*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Al-Jazeera*, *PBS*, *MSNBC*, *CBS*, *CBC*, *TF1*, *AFP*, and *CNN*.



Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton

Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton is an associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. She is the author of *Women of Fire and Spirit: History, Faith and Gender in Roho Religion in Western Kenya* and is currently completing a manuscript on Islam in Western Kenya during the colonial period. Cynthia's scholarship concentrates on the interaction between indigenous religions and the two major missionary traditions embraced by Africans: Christianity and Islam. Her course offerings reflect this tripartite focus, too, as they seek to do justice to the traditions of Africa as vital systems of thought and praxis that are today largely sustained, revived, and transformed within Christian and Muslim contexts. She also offers thematic and comparative courses in the study of religion and is interested in theory and method in the history of religions.



Whitney A. Kite

Whitney Kite is a PhD candidate at Columbia University, where she specializes on Armenian art and architecture. Her dissertation explores the connections between medieval Armenian monasteries and their local topography. Her master's thesis, "The Madonna's Magic Carpet: The Construction of Presence in an Armenian Tympanum Relief" was awarded the 2020 graduate student essay award by the International Center of Medieval Art. Prior to her doctoral work, Whitney received an MA in art history from Tufts University and a BA in biological anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania. Her research has been generously supported by the Medieval Academy of America, the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, the Claudia Rattazzi Papka Memorial Fund, the Dr. Paula Gerson Fund, Casa Muraro, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.



Abdoulaye Laziz Nchare

Dr. Abdoulaye Laziz Nchare is a theoretical and a field linguist actively invested in Linguistics-Anthropology and ethnography research. He is a bilingual lecturer at St. John's University. He came to New York University in 2006 with the McCracken Fellowship to complete his Ph.D. research in linguistics in 2012. He worked on African Origin Database for this post-graduate research at St. John's University. His current research interests evolve around comparative grammar, languages and cultures of Africa, African writing systems and literacy, sociolinguistics and language acquisition experiments and multilingualism. The goal of his entire research enterprise is to apply the lessons of the rise and fall of relevant African civilizations to modern problems of the world economic system. He has taught linguistic anthropology courses and French courses at the Department of Modern languages at St. John's University and the

Department of linguistics at Montclair State University (New Jersey).



Mamaramé Seck

Dr. Mamaramé Seck is a PhD holder in linguistics with concentration in discourse analysis. Among his research interests are the Wolof language and culture, Senegalese society and culture, Islamic discourses in West Africa and the functions of Sufi oral discourse in the practice of Islam in Senegal, in particular the socialization of the Sufi disciple and his relationship with the shaykh.

Dr. Seck has published books and book chapters among which *Youssou Ndour: A Cultural Icon and Leader in Social Advocacy* (Peter Lang Publishers, 2020), *Narratives as Muslim Practice in Senegal* (Peter Lang Publishers 2013). He is also the author of an Intermediate Wolof textbook, *Nanu Dègg Wolof*, published with the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC) at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

After teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel for six years, Dr. Mamaramé Seck joined IFAN (Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire) at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, Senegal, where he serves as researcher in the Département de Langues et Civilisation, precisely in the laboratory of linguistics. He is currently the curator of The Historical Museum of Senegal in Gorée.

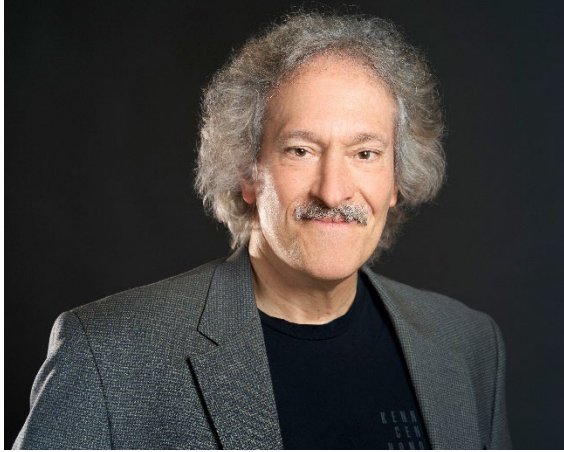
Dr. Seck's current research focuses on the narrative about Omar Ibn Said, a Muslim slave from Fouta Toro, in the Senegal river valley.



Heather Sharkey

Heather J. Sharkey is Professor and Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Pennsylvania, where she teaches Middle Eastern and North African history, and where received the Charles Ludwig Distinguished Teaching Award from the College of Arts and Sciences. She previously taught at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Trinity College in Connecticut. She was a Visiting Professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris during the 2012-13 year. She holds degrees from Yale (Anthropology, BA, *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa), the University of Durham (Middle Eastern Studies, MPhil), and Princeton (History, PhD). She has won fellowships

including the Marshall, Fulbright-Hays, and Carnegie. She is the author of *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* (University of California Press 2003); *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton University Press 2008); and *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press 2017). She has edited *Cultural Conversions: Unexpected Consequences of Christian Missionary Encounters in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia* (Syracuse University Press 2013); with Mehmet Ali Doğan, *American Missionaries in the Modern Middle East: Foundational Encounters* (University of Utah Press, 2011); and with Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Changing Terrain of Religious Freedom* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).



Ori Z. Soltes

Ori Z. Soltes teaches in Georgetown University's Center for Jewish Civilization across disciplines, from art history and theology to philosophy and political history. He is the former Director and Curator of the B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, and has curated more than 90 exhibitions there and in other venues across the country and overseas. He is also the author of over 300 books, articles, exhibition catalogues, and essays on diverse topics.

Among his recent books are *Our Sacred Signs: How Jewish, Christian and Muslim Art Draw from the Same Source*; *Searching for Oneness: Mysticism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*; *Untangling the Web: Why the Middle East is a Mess and Always Has Been*; *Growing Up Jewish in India: Synagogues, Customs, and Communities from the Bene Israel to the Art of Siona Benjamin*; *God and the Goalposts: A Brief History of Sports, Religion, Politics, War, and Art*, and *Identity, Art, and Migration*.

Abstracts

(In alphabetical order of author last name)

Secular Africa? Making Sense of the Interplay Between Secular Constitutions and Religious Citizens

Jacques Berlinerblau

Twenty-eight of Africa's fifty-four nations possess constitutions whose edicts regarding proper relations between government and religion/s may be described as "secular." While this intriguing fact is known to many scholars of Africa, it is rarely considered by journalists, policy analysts and even those who study political secularism. All of which raises an important geopolitical data point for further scrutiny: more than half of the countries in the world's most youthful, religious, and likely soon-to-be most populous continent are, *in theory*, wed to formally secular structures of governance.

In our presentation we begin by defining the "constitutionally secular African nation state." From there we proceed to interrogate a paradox: constitutionally secular states in Africa, wed to the principle of "separation of church and state" don't actually seem to separate religion from politics. Quite the contrary, in many instances governments openly embrace religious symbols, favor certain religious groups, and meddle in religious affairs. Conversely, religious groups routinely mobilize for politics, often with great success. We try to explain this paradox by reference to prevailing scholarship on political secularism and theories of state fragility.

Conversion in Context: Rethinking religious change in colonial Western Kenya

Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton

This paper discusses the little-known "Mohamedan movement" that emerged near Mumias in Western Kenya in 1926. According to administrative records, leaders of this proselytizing effort proclaimed that the Last Days were at hand and that God's deliverer would soon appear to exterminate all non-Muslims, especially the Europeans. Challenging standard models of anti-colonial movements, I argue that this movement should be seen as part of a diffuse, persistent undercurrent of indigenous discourse and practice that transcended ethnic and creedal boundaries. I make the case that there existed throughout parts of East Africa a longstanding religious "option" characterized by belief in mobile spiritual entities; the use of consecrated water for healing and protection; and the "preaching safari," whereby adepts traveled the countryside disseminating their particular dispensation and/or medicine. This flexible, multi-pronged indigenous option shaped the way missionary religions—Islam and Christianity alike—initially gained a foothold throughout the region.

Morphing Magi: The LOC Lectionary in Dialogue with Seventeenth-Century Depictions of the Adoration of the Magi

Whitney A. Kite

The Library of Congress (LOC) Lectionary (Call no. BX 127.A2 A7 1600z; MS Orien Nr. East 6004) is one of the gems of the LOC Collection of Armenian Rarities. The partial manuscript, consisting of six large folios with sumptuous illuminations, dates to the seventeenth century. The incipit pages and marginal illustrations replicate earlier medieval Armenian styles, while the two full-page illuminations of the Adoration of the Magi and the Resurrection incorporate early modern motifs, drawing upon images circulating in European prints. Of particular interest is the inclusion of a magus with a crowned turban, a rarity in Armenian illuminations. In earlier periods, a variety of headgear ranging from Crusader crowns to red fezzes were used in

representations of the three kings. However, the use of a crowned turban finds echoes in images across Europe and the Mediterranean around the seventeenth century, where the motif is often used to signify an Ottoman ruler. The turbaned magus may also be a subtle reference to seventeenth-century European depictions of the magi, which employed North African models for Balthasar. Following a brief discussion of the manuscript as a whole, this presentation will focus on the Adoration of the Magi illumination, situating this image among the changing depictions of magi in medieval Armenian manuscripts, and conclude with the implications of the choice of clothing and complexion in the LOC lectionary.

The Bamum Traditional Religion at the Crossroad of Islam and Western Colonial Past

Abdoulaye Laziz Nchare

This study examines how the Bamum traditional religion “*nwet nkwate*” survived the terrible legacy of French colonial administration that exhibits prejudiced interpretations of African indigenous religious practices and cultures. Many years before colonial powers such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom brought European languages and the romance script to Africa, the Arabic scripts were used by many Sub-saharan Africans. The Bamum kingdom is a rare place where historical records suggest a local writing system that was different from the romance and Arabic script. Between 1895 and 1902, Sultan Ibrahim Njoya designed the Bamum script called “A-ka-u-ku”, inspired by a dream teaching him how to invent an original indigenous writing system. It was later used as a communication tool in Njoya’s administration and schools. Bamum were therefore able to keep the record of not only their history, but also had a unique tool for its elite to rule upon the common and illiterate people within the community. Using the conflict theory perspective, our linguistic analysis of the Bamum grammar offers a new way of examining moral dichotomies in French so-called “civilizing mission” such as “good-evil”, “faithful-unfaithful”, “civilized-uncivilized”. It is our ambition to demonstrate that the concept of divinity in Bamum ontology embodies a repertory of symbols that have a cultural significance not always easy to disentangle by Western scholars. Thus, one crucial area of this research endeavor will be the Bamum iconography.

In the Footsteps of Omar ibn Said, a Muslim Slave from Fuuta Tooro

Mamaramé Seck

This article has a dual purpose. First, it explores the origins of Muslim slave Omar ibn Said from in the Fuuta Toro as described in his autobiography, dated 1831, and in his other writings. Second, it poses the question of the sharing of Omar’s heritage with the populations of Fuuta.

Indeed, the autobiography of the Muslim slave Omar ibn Said was recently presented to the scientific community by the Library of Congress in the United States in 2017. The rediscovery of this fifteen-page manuscript, restoring biographical elements of Omar ibn Said, has attracted the interest of very different actors on both sides of the Atlantic. It would be the only manuscript, preserved in the United States, written in *Ajami* Arabic, by the hand of a slave, originating from the region of Fuuta Toro, in Senegal, in the 19th century. It provides information on the history of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery practices in Fuuta Tooro and the United States. It also reports on the religious, intellectual, and political history of the Middle Valley of the Senegal River.

There are certainly works on the American trajectory of Omar ibn Said (Parramore 1973; 1974; Robinson 1973; Alryyes 2011; Sarr 2014). However, few studies have focused on his life before slavery, his intellectual journey, and the conditions of his captivity. In addition, there is also the question of the symbolic return of his complete unpublished work to Africa, to be shared with his people of origin.

A ten-day trip to Fuuta Toro and beyond allowed us to show Omar’s manuscripts to Imams and Arabic and Pulaar speakers and translators and to conduct interviews with the goal to identify his home village.

As a result, Coppe Mangay, a village located in Fuuta Toro, between the Senegal and Doue rivers was identified as the closest place to what Omar has described in his texts to be his hometown.

This article will contribute to the enrichment of knowledge on the African origins of black Muslim slaves. In addition, it launches the debate on the sharing of former slaves' heritage with the African continent with a view to the reconciliation of African Americans with the land of their ancestors.

Sharing a Table: Commensality in Middle Eastern and North African Cookbooks

Heather J. Sharkey

The Library of Congress holds cookbooks from all over the world, written in dozens of languages. Many focus on cuisines and foodways of the Middle East and North Africa and come from authors who were born or lived there, or whose parents or grandparents originated in the region.

For historians, anthropologists, and other scholars, these cookbooks offer rich insights. Many testify to migrations that brought Middle Eastern and North African people into North America, Europe, and beyond from the late nineteenth century onwards. Others attest to the fascination that the region has held as the birthplace of civilizations and religions, especially Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Authors often express clear intentions for their cookbooks, and these are worth studying, too. They cite, for example, the desire to preserve familial and cultural traditions, raise funds through book sales for charity, or promote understanding amid regional conflict. Others state an aim of surveying and celebrating the region's culinary heritage, within and across ethnic, national, and religious or sectarian lines. Many authors take special pride in claiming that the region's food is exceptionally healthy.

In this paper, I will discuss how Middle Eastern and North African cookbooks, and particular dishes within them, can contribute to religious literacy: an awareness of, and respect for, distinctions and commonalities rooted in religious cultures. On the one hand, these cookbooks sometimes illuminate Muslim, Christian, and Jewish particularities by linking foods to holidays and dietary practices, including patterns of fasting. On the other hand, and more frequently, these cookbooks affirm universal values, such as the deep love of family, while emphasizing hospitality, and sharing food with neighbors and strangers, as a cardinal and definitive value of all Middle Eastern and North African peoples. I will argue that we can understand this value in terms of the concept of "commensality": a word that means being at the same table and eating together, with literal and metaphorical implications for collective respect for religious diversity.

The Druze and the Kurds: Two Complex Minority Models in a Complex Region

Ori Z Soltes

The most salient truth regarding the Middle East is that it is a complex tapestry woven of religion, politics, ethnicity, nationalism, and economics criss-crossed with confusing definitions, conflicting aspirations, and constant interferences. Moreover, each of these threads is itself complicated and intensely nuanced. And this has been so for several thousand years; specific terms and specific modes of identity shift at times, but the overall reality remains unchanged.

Among these, the Druze and the Kurds are often noted but rarely considered in depth. The one primarily offers a religious self-definition, the other an ethnic one. Both groups, however, share the condition of being minorities embedded in and othered by the majority populations among whom they dwell—their populations extending across various boundaries (the Druze mainly in Israel, Lebanon, and Syria; the Kurds mainly in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey) that have been shaped in the last century. My intention is to use my two weeks of research at LOC to begin (it will constitute only a beginning) an in-depth study of these two populations to produce a document, ultimately, that will reflect on the Druze and the Kurds as two important and different—both exceedingly complex—populations.

My purpose is threefold: to offer a sense of their respective self-definition complexities; to use that sense to underscore how unfathomably complex the region is, overall; to ask whether the specific and varied ways

in which these two groups have functioned within the region and its majority groups can offer further insights into the problems and solutions endemic to the Middle East.

* * * * *