In 1987, at the age of 17, I spent one year as an exchange student in Kenya’s third largest city, Kisumu, on the shores of Lake Victoria. Before I left Sweden, one of my high school teachers called on my parents, begging them to stop me. The reason? AIDS. In Kenya, at that time, there was little talk about the disease. Condoms were available, but not easily so. The situation has definitely changed. Nowadays HIV/AIDS is on everyone’s lips and many different brands of condoms are being sold at the local supermarkets in Kisumu, just beside the counter, alongside with those sweets that you pick up just because they are there. HIV/AIDS today, unlike 20 years ago, forms part of the system of reference in everyday conversation in Kisumu, also among the city’s local Muslim minority.

According to several studies, the Nyanza province, in which Kisumu is the main urban centre, is one of the most heavily affected by HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, and hence in the world. A significant gender gap is noted: prevalence is higher among women than among men. Although the situation appears to have improved in the recent ten-year period, the figures of HIV-prevalence are still high (Hargreaves et al. 2002; Glynn et al. 2004; CBS 2004: 223; Prince, this volume). This is well known locally.

The fieldwork on which the following is based was conducted in five periods between the years 2003 and 2006, within the framework of the project *Islamic education and social development* financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).\(^1\) I here outline

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\(^1\) I did participant observations of activities within the context of IRE in six public and private primary- and secondary schools, conducted interviews with all the teachers of IRE in Kisumu town (in total 12) and with 15 secondary school students, and finally
the discourse on HIV/AIDS within the context of the school subject of Islamic Religious Education (IRE). In this, the focus is not primarily on Muslim views on the virus in any general sense, but on how Islam is construed, and what relevance the discourse on HIV/AIDS has for the continuous construction of a Muslim identity in the local context, and in relation to modernity.

_Islam and modernity. A few remarks_

Muslim reformulations of Islam in relation to modernity have been ongoing since roughly the mid-19th century and have had a strong focus on how to accommodate social, technological, economic and political change with religious ‘authenticity’ (see e.g. Merad 1978; Hourani 1983; Shahin 1995; Rippin 2005: 175–199). _Ijtihad_ , ‘effort’, i.e. (in the modern understanding) the search for answers to emerging issues in the primary sources of the religious tradition, the Qur’an and the Sunna, has been, and still is, an important catch word. The call for a return to the Islam of the ‘the pious forefathers’, _as-salaf as-sālih_, i.e. the first generations of Muslims, has also contained a call for ‘purification’ of tradition, a rejection of religious innovations, _bida_, and of perceived irrational superstitions. The questioning of traditional religious authority has been inherent in the sidestepping, in parts or in totality, of the interpretational legacy of the _'ulama_ in history, in favour of an _ad fontes_ approach. New actors have emerged as interpreters of the religious tradition, questioning the monopoly of the _'ulama_, which has resulted in a ‘fragmentation of sacred authority’ (Eickelman & Piscatori 2004: 70). Reformist though, in this sense, characterised by reflexivity in relation to the notion of tradition and ‘authenticity’, is but one response to modernity. It takes on diverse forms, such as Islamist

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collected data through a small questionnaire that was distributed to Muslim students in six secondary schools in March 2006. 137 students answered the questionnaire. Apart from these three sources of data, information was gained also from informal conversations with teachers and students in and outside the school context, as well as through my continuous and close interaction with members the Muslim community in Kisumu.

2 This modern, mostly positive use of the term (among Muslims as well as non-Muslim scholars supportive of religious reform) should be clearly separated from its traditional use in an Islamic legal context. Knut Vikør deems _ijtihad_ “probably the most misused concept in the discussion on Islamic law” (Vikør 2005: 53).