Introduction: Religion and Masculinities in Africa

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At a time when born-again Christianity and reformist Islam are among the fastest-growing religious traditions in present-day Africa, more attention needs to be paid to religion as a crucial factor in the dynamic process of constructing, challenging, and transforming gendered identities. So far few studies have addressed issues of gender beyond the all-too-popular focus on Christian and Muslim women who ‘resist’ the dominant patriarchal order or for that matter ‘liberate’ themselves from the yoke of ‘conservative’ gender ideologies articulated by Christian and Muslim communities in sub-Saharan Africa. This special issue seeks to make up for the biased representations of the interplay between constructions of gender identities and religious practices and understandings that have been generated by conventional research preoccupations, agendas, and concepts. Specifically, the contributions bring together three lines of exploration that Africanist research has tended to treat separately. These are first, the study of gender; second, masculinity studies; and third, the study of religious reformist trends that over the last decades have shaped discourses within Christian and Muslim communities, and also at the interface between Christianity and Islam.1

As Miescher, Manuh, and Cole argue in their pioneering volume Africa after Gender? gender has become one of the most dynamic areas of Africanist research today (2007). Replacing women’s studies and feminist approaches, the study of gender and gender relations gained popularity in the 1980s, emphasizing the difference between biological sex and culturally constructed notions of masculinity and femininity (see Cornwall 2005; Ouzgane and Morrell 2005). Nevertheless, within African Studies gender has long been equated with women.
We fell into a similar pitfall during our workshop *Reconfiguring Gender Relations in Muslim Africa*, which we organized in 2006 at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), in Leiden, the Netherlands. This collection of essays is the result of the workshop *Religion and Masculinities in Africa* that we organized in September 2014 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, with the purpose of moving beyond our earlier tendency to study gender relations from the perspective of women. We sought to address how changes in the meanings of gender and in religious discourse and practice affect both Christian and Muslim men in sub-Saharan Africa.

The contributions draw on insights generated by masculinity studies (e.g., Kimmel 1987; Connell 1995; Berger, Wallis, and Watson 1995) that, from the 1990s onwards, influenced anthropological research and theorizing (e.g., Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Morell 2001; Lindsay and Miescher 2003; Miescher 2005; Ouzgane and Morrell 2005; Uchendu 2008). As a result, African male actors were no longer treated as the unmarked ‘default option’ but were explored as ‘engendered and engendering persons’ (Gutmann 1997), a conception that opened up possibilities to account for substantial differences between male actors, with regard to experiences, practices, and their respective understandings of what it means to be a man. Over the past decade pioneering work at the interface of gender theory and masculinity studies has illustrated the constructed character of binary conceptions of gender identity. Drawing on Butler’s (1990) work, new approaches to gender as performance posit the malleable, historically and socially contingent, and ‘constructed’ nature of male and female identity ‘performances’.

In spite of these valuable developments, masculinity studies still suffer from the tendency to theorize masculinity by drawing on empirical data from Europe, North America, and Australia, while paying little attention to the variety of men’s practices and subjectivities in African societies (but see Morrell 1998, 2001; Reid and Walker 2005). The few exceptions to this trend are studies on masculinity in South Africa, which offer a somewhat-skewed portrayal of masculinity ideals insofar as they are largely preoccupied with the relationship between masculinity and (sexual) violence exerted on women (Morell 2001). The contributions to this special issue move beyond the ‘compartmentalization’ (Broqua and Doquet 2013, ii–iii) of masculinity studies and expand the regional focus of Africanist masculinity studies beyond South Africa. Our emphasis is on how masculinity is discursively shaped and enacted in a Christian-majority setting (Zambia) and Muslim-majority settings (The Gambia, Mali), as well as settings with a more or less equal division between Christians and Muslims (Nigeria and Tanzania).