A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ISLAM IN ERITREA

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The study of Islam in Eritrea—the faith of approximately half of the country’s population—is still in its infancy. Similar to other fields of scholarly inquiry regarding Eritrea, research on the history of Islam in the region has become more feasible only since the early 1990s as the newly independent state became accessible to researchers, both locally-based and foreign. It is therefore pressing that new written sources and specific case studies on Eritrea’s Muslim societies and institutions see the light of day in order to add new layers to our understanding of the development of Islam in Eritrea and its role in Eritrean history. This survey sketches an

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account of the history of Islam in the territory that became known as “Eritrea” in 1890; it especially covers the period from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the turn of the twenty first. It is intended to serve as a brief introduction to a hitherto poorly covered subject that would, hopefully, stimulate more research into specific periods, themes and questions. The survey is organized chronologically and is based on an assorted combination of known and untapped sources, some of which I have recently collected in Eritrea and in Italy.

Both from a spatial and political perspective, the Eritrean region may be perceived as an historical meeting point of several “frontiers” situated between the Red Sea and the facing Arabian Peninsula, the Sudanese Nile valley, and the northern Ethiopian highlands over which it partly extends. Accordingly, the history of Islam in the area has been markedly shaped by political, economic, migratory and religious developments in all these spheres and by their impact on the region and its inhabitants. In a very real sense Eritrea’s heterogeneous Muslim societies reflect this kaleidoscopic historical configuration: they belong to different ethnic groups; speak a variety of Semitic, Cushitic and Nilo-Saharan languages; practice various modes of production, and are socially and politically organized in diverse ways. More importantly, for our purposes, Muslim societies in Eritrea have adopted Islam in distinctive periods and in different ways, and have appropriated Muslim beliefs and practices in varying modes and intensities. For example, from one specific perspective, the historical layering of these influences is quite neatly exemplified by the regional distribution of the madhāhib (sing. madhhab, Islamic