



ZMO-Kolloquium Summer Term 2014

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Writing Boards and Blackboards: considerations on Islamic education in Africa

Lecture by **Prof. Robert Launay**

Venue:

Zentrum Moderner Orient
Kirchweg 33

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Writing boards and blackboards are emblematic of two different styles of education. Writing boards typify the classical system of Qur'anic education. Blackboards, which marked the expansion of "mass" education in Europe and the United States, came to embody colonial educational institutions. More recently, Muslim reformers have also adopted blackboards in attempts to "modernize" Islamic education. This paper takes three important considerations into account. First, writing boards and blackboards do not only symbolize different systems of education, but literally embody them, calling for different postures, different attitudes, different behaviors, inscribing different disciplinary projects on the bodies of pupils and different epistemic regimes. Second, analyses of colonial education have underemphasized the differences between British, French, and indeed Belgian and Portuguese education in Africa. While it may seem counterintuitive, the involvement of missionaries in colonial schooling had an important impact on the attitudes of colonial administrations to Islamic education. Third, it is essential to consider the constantly shifting field of educational alternatives, Islamic and otherwise, as a structured field, particularly in the present, where neoliberal policies of structural adjustment have obliged African governments to radically scale down the public sector and parents and pupils are reduced to shopping among educational alternatives in what appears, at least superficially, to be a free market.

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Robert Launay (PhD Cambridge 1976) is Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern University. He has conducted extensive field work in northern Côte d'Ivoire. He has published two monographs, *Traders Without Trade: Responses to change in two Dyula communities* (Cambridge University Press 1982) and *Beyond the Stream: Islam and society in a West African town* (University of California Press 1992). He is also working on the early history of anthropology, and has edited *Foundations of Anthropological Theory: From Classical Antiquity to Early Modern Europe* (Wiley-Blackwell 2010). He is currently editing a volume on Islamic education in Africa and working on a book manuscript, *Savages, Despots, and Romans*.