

Religion, Centers, and Peripheries: Notes on West Africa and the Arabs

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Simeon Evstatiev. RELIGION, CENTERS, AND PERIPHERIES: NOTES ON WEST AFRICA AND THE ARABS

Abstract. This article is based on the introduction to the Religion and Culture Seminar of the Center for the Study of Religions, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. The seminar’s 2022–2023 interdisciplinary theme was “Center and Periphery in Religion and Society.” The text outlines the notion of *center and periphery* with the aim of framing a possible overall re-conceptualization, demonstrating why this notion remains highly relevant to our understanding of the intersection of religion and society. The analysis builds on preliminary notes on West Africa as an Islamic periphery to the Arab world. It then provides examples from the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The article argues that although a phenomenon looks peripheral from certain perspectives, this does not necessarily mean it is insignificant. In some cases, it might be more appropriate to speak of multiple interacting *centers and peripheries* rather than of one single center and a loose periphery.

Keywords: center and periphery, religion and society, Islam, West Africa, Arabs

Симеон Евстатиев. РЕЛИГИЯ, ЦЕНТРОВЕ И ПЕРИФЕРИИ: НЯКОИ БЕЛЕЖКИ ЗА ЗАПАДНА АФРИКА И АРАБИТЕ

Резюме. Статията се основава върху увода на автора към семинара „Религия и култура“ на Центъра за изследване на религиите в Софийския университет „Св. Климент Охридски“. Интердисциплинарната тема на семинара за академичната 2022–2023 г. е „Център и периферия в религията и обществото“. Текстът очертава идеята за *център и периферия* с цел да предложи възможна обща рамка, като покаже защо тази идея продължава да е значима за разбирането на пресечната точка между религията и обществото. Анализът се разгръща около някои предварителни бележки за Западна Африка като ислямска периферия на арабския свят. След това са представени и някои примери от Близкия изток и Източна Европа. Застъпена е тезата, че дори и в определен момент дадено явление да ни изглежда периферно от определена гледна точка, това не озна-

чава непременно, че то е незначително. В някои случаи се оказва по-уместно да говорим по-скоро за множествени *центрове и периферии* във взаимодействие, отколкото за един-единствен център и аморфна периферия с неясни очертания.

Ключови думи: център и периферия, религия и общество, ислям, Западна Африка, араби

Conceptual Research/Концептуално изследване

Introduction: The Shaping of an Idea

The present text builds on the introduction to the Religion and Culture Seminar of the Center for the Study of Religions (CSR), Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. The seminar's 2022–2023 theme was “Center and Periphery in Religion and Society.” What follows is not a case study presenting the results of research which has already been done but rather an inaugural outline of why the concept of *center and periphery* matters, fostering fruitful discussion with sometimes unexpected outcomes and parallels. The aim is to offer some preliminary notes on a possible reconceptualization by suggesting why the dichotomy *center versus periphery* should not be neglected as a toolkit relevant to understanding the intersection of religion and society.

The Religion and Culture Seminar was first launched by the Center for the Study of Religion, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, in the academic year 2009–2010. At the time, we delved into the intersection of normative religious text and sociocultural context, looking at how they interact and transform each other's meanings – mostly in Christianity and Islam, but also Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism (Evstatiev, 2011: 11–20). Subsequently, the Seminar has been occasionally continued under various programs, including a major international collaborative project on religion and the public sphere, as well as other events with colleagues from Bulgaria and abroad. In what we all hope is a post-COVID world, we were determined to re-start the Religion and Culture Seminar without delay, encouraged by the feedback we received throughout the past decade.

This coincided with my colleague Diana Mishkova's invitation to me to lead a seminar on Islam and other religions at the Centre for Advanced Study (CAS) in Sofia. We decided to combine the audiences of CSR and CAS by jointly re-starting the Religion and Culture Seminar. On 25 October 2022, the seminar was re-launched with a keynote lecture by distinguished anthropologist of the Middle East and Islam, Dale F. Eickelman of Dartmouth College (USA), with whom I had already started to work on the notion of *center and periphery* (Evstatiev and Eickelman, 2022: 27–48). Re-starting the seminar, I wanted it to have a new focus that would help us frame the discussion, following the model of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies in Princeton University. During my year at Princ-

eton, for example, the theme was “Belief and Unbelief,” and it fostered a series of fascinating discussions that changed many of my earlier views. From the time we founded the CSR at Sofia University in 2008, I envisioned it as a multidisciplinary platform, but my core identity as a scholar of the Arab world and Islam assumed a “hidden agenda” – I sought to mainstream the still “peripheral” Oriental studies, whose branches often looked to historians, philosophers, or social scientists as if based on a “secret language.” Over the course of time, I was additionally inspired by experience gained in the United States, Germany, Spain, Hungary, the Middle East, and elsewhere, together with my already more than 15 years of collaboration with CAS Sofia.

This is the context in which “Center and Periphery in Religion and Society” was chosen as the overall topic for at least the academic year 2022–2023. As noted also by Dale F. Eickelman (2023) in his article of the present *Philologia* issue, which is intrinsically inter-related with my own essay, from 28 February to 2 March 2023, we participated together in the international workshop *Centers and Peripheries in Morocco and the Social Sciences* organized by the Tangier American Legation Museum (TALIM) in Morocco, where we brought to the fore the plural usage of *centers and peripheries*. Shortly afterwards, in April 2023, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski supported our new pilot collaborative research on *Religion, Center, and Periphery: The Orient in Europe, Europe in the Orient* with which we seek to enter a new stage of our ongoing discussions on the multiplicity and crisscrossing of centers and peripheries. Why do we find the paradigm of *center and periphery* so important? The question matters, for we derive our academic identity not only from what we do, but also from what we do not do. And we cannot do everything.

West Africa as an Islamic Periphery of the Arabs

We often think of “one center” and a loose “periphery.” If we look at the cultural-spatial dimension of the concept in my own field of Arabic and Islamic studies, we shall see the proliferation of phrases such as “the central Arab zone of Islam” or “the central Islamic lands” (Holt, Lambton & Lewis, 1970). This is how the notion of “the Islamic periphery” (Mehmet, 1990: 20) has evolved to designate, as it happens, major Muslim majority countries such as Turkey and Malaysia with an enormous, undeniable contribution to Islamic history and civilization. The issue, however, gets even more intriguing if we do not look at Islam and its spread only in Asian and North African regions conventionally included in “the Orient.”

Let us take the case of sub-Saharan Africa, known in classical Arabic sources as “the country of the Blacks” (Bilād al-Sūdān) – a concept denoting the vast Sahara-Sahelian area south of the Maghreb, Libya, and Egypt between the Atlantic Ocean and the Red Sea. A particularly telling example is West Africa – the region south of the Sahara, located between the Atlantic Ocean and Lake Chad, which encom-

passes the Sahel (from Arabic *sāhil* – “coast,” “shore” of the desert) zone and huge areas of tropical forests and grasslands, much of which are connected by the Niger River. Muslim geographers and historians use the term “Western Sudan” (Bilād al-Sūdān al-Gharbī) to refer to this part of “the country of the Blacks,” often omitting the word “Western.” From at least the 14th century, the term Takrur (originally used in the 11th century to designate a city in Middle Senegal) was also used in the Orient, applied primarily to this western Islamized zone of Sudanese-Sahelian Africa, practically replacing the term Western Sudan. The “Sudan of the Arabs” refers not to the entire African continent, but only to that part of it from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, dominated by Muslim civilization (Triaud, 1997, IX: 752b).

The case of West Africa demonstrates that “centers” constantly shift, and the boundaries between them and their “peripheries” often blur. Within the century-long tradition of Oriental studies in Europe, it might be well understandable what has been meant by terms such as “the central Arab zone of Islam.” Today, Arabic-speaking Muslims are less than 20 percent of the followers of Islam, and only half of the Muslims on the African continent, who number 500 million in their entirety. Islam is not rooted only “from Morocco in the West” to “Iran in the East,” while Muslims do not speak only the classical “Islamic languages,” which Arabic, Persian, and (Ottoman)-Turkish were gradually recognized to be (Robinson, 2004: 198). The picture looks even more different if we consider that North Africa, as part of the “central Arab zone,” is home to roughly one-tenth of the world’s Muslims (164 million), while 273 million Muslims inhabit the vast areas of “Black Africa” south of the Sahara. Arabia proper (the Peninsula) has 60 million Muslims, while over 75 million Muslims live in Nigeria alone – probably more than in Iran – while the number of Muslims in Ethiopia is equal to that in Iraq (Ware, 2014: 17).

Considering the role of the local ‘Ajāmī (African languages using modified Arabic script) along with Arabic in sub-Saharan Africa, it is worth putting on the table the question of the existence of multiple centers of Islamic religion, learning, and society. The name ‘Ajāmī itself comes from the Arabic *‘ajam*, designating “unclear” or “incorrect” Arabic, as well as a non-Arab, alien person – initially Persian. In this sense, the Arabic *‘ajam* is similar to the Slavic, including Bulgarian, term *nemtsi* (“speechless,” “dumb”), meaning Germans. The adaptation of the Arabic script to the local African languages has been a gradual process, but even today, when Africans do not use Arabic directly, they continue to revere highly the ‘Ajāmī script, as it is an expression of their close relationship to the language in which the Qur’an was revealed (Hassane, 2008: 109–122). Some languages of this type have *‘ajam* in their name, such as *ki-Ajamiya* in Swahili or *aljamiado* in the Spanish of Al-Andalus (Ngom & Zito, 2013). Although the term also encompasses Persian, Pashtu, Urdu, and, historically, the literature of Muslim Spain in the local language, today it is mostly the literary traditions of various African peoples that are defined as ‘Ajāmī.

In much of sub-Saharan Africa, knowledge of the Qur'an and the classical Arabic textual tradition is the foundation of literacy in the respective languages using 'Ajamī script. The role of Arabic is thus comparable to that of Latin in medieval Europe – the language of the elite, highly respected due to its importance for understanding the Scripture and religious ritual, used in state administration, educational institutions, and intellectual activity (Hunwick, 2006: 53). Despite this clearly expressed linguistic subordination, the Arabic and Islamic faith have crisscrossed with local African cultural practice in a way that led to the reverse influence which Fallou Ngom (2016: 19) calls *'Ajamization of Islam'* to highlight the enrichment process, avoiding the controversies around concepts such as the “Africanization of Islam” and “syncretism.” Given the until recently understudied history of the great West African empires, such as Ancient Ghana, Mali, Songhay, or the Sokoto Caliphate, how a periphery turns into a center and vice versa is a major question that can help us deepen our understanding of how the intersection of religion and society works.

In classical academic parlance, we distinguish between “great” and “little” (or “folk”) religious traditions. In religions such as Christianity or Islam, the former term denotes the universal written codes of their scriptures while the latter signifies the “folk,” “syncretic” practices in local contexts. However, thinking of practices as insignificant decreases our ability to grasp “the middle ground” between the “big” normative codes and the manifestations of religions as “little” traditions” (Eickelman, 1982: 11). This is not to say that normative texts are not central, but that their centrality is “indigenized” in each context, however peripheral it might look to those conceiving of themselves as belonging to the center. Due to its “syncretism,” Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is usually seen as “peripheral” in relation to the normative “Arab Islam” (Østebø, 2022: 7). The rejection of the idea of an Islamic language other than Arabic was a strain on classical Islamic thought, implying that a non-Arab Muslim identity was not authentic.

In the early days of Islam, speaking “peripheral” languages like Persian was disapproved of by some, and this view was held by the distinguished religious scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) in later times. He believed that Arabic was “the symbol of Islam and Muslims” (*shi'ār al-Islām wa-ahlihi*) and that it was not desirable for people to habitually speak a language other than Arabic in everyday life, as it amounted to imitating non-Arabs. Ibn Taymiyya claimed that during the conquests, Muslims had tried to accustom natives to speaking Arabic, but in some regions such as Khurasan, Persian continued to be spoken alongside Arabic. In the 18th century, an eminent scholar from India, Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī (d. 1762), who claimed Arab descent, saw his Arab ancestry and language as sources of pride. In a testament he left for his children and friends, he stated that his family were “Arab people” whose ancestors had been exiled to Hindustan (Cook, 2014: 14–15).

In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the attitude of Muslims from the “central Arab zone of Islam” towards their “black” co-religionists as a “periphery” was adopted and prevailed for a long time the Western perceptions of “African Islam.” These perceptions are related to concepts such as the “Black Islam” (*Islam noir*) of French Orientalists from the colonial age (Østebø, 2022: 7), depicted with thick dividing lines as distinct from “Arab Islam” (Loimeier, 2013: 282–283). Unlike “African Islam,” “Arab Islam” thus represented orthodoxy and it is placed in the heart of the Islamic civilizational center, as religion in sub-Saharan Africa is inevitably “syncretic.” The scholar of Islam in Africa Rudolph Ware (2014: 22) notes ironically that exoticism and marginality of Islamic Africa dominate Western perceptions of Islam so much that for many observers they are subsumed under the following equations: African religious culture plus Islam equals syncretism, while only Arab religious culture plus Islam equals Islam. However, as the classical historian of Islam in West Africa Nehemia Levtzion (1979: 208) notes, “the Islamization of Africa became more successful because of the Africanization of Islam.”

It was still during the reign of Mansa Musa (1312–1337) when the significance of the Malian Empire went far beyond the regional scope of his state. Ambassadors of Mali were sent to Morocco, Egypt, and other countries, while the Malian capital was visited by Moroccan and Egyptian scholars. With his splendor and richness, Mansa Musa himself impressed the inhabitants of Mamluk Cairo he visited by him during his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, and the Egyptian chroniclers continued to discuss him in the next century. One architect born in Granada, Muslim Spain, Abū Ishāq al-Sāḥilī (d. 1346), built new mosques in Gao and Timbuktu as well as the imperial palace of the Malian ruler (Davidson, 2014: 43). Mansa Musa encouraged intellectual life in Timbuktu by sending Malian scholars to study in Fes, the ancient center of Islamic learning in Morocco. Even after the empire lost its magnificence after 1400 and no longer controlled Timbuktu, Jenne, and other major centers in the Sahel, Malians continued building effective structural relations of close cooperation between Islam and state authority. This intertwining of religion and statehood transformed politics in West Africa for centuries to come. The ambition to re-think and situate the region in a wider Muslim context played a key role in the shaping of this new model of West African statehood. Islam was established on a higher level in society and the state, which invoked new methods of government. That is why during the reign of Mansa Musa new Islamic courts were opened even though the old local courts continued to coexist alongside them, for the population had not embraced Islam yet. During this heyday, Mali achieved its greatest territorial expansion in West Africa, which “literally and figuratively enters the spatial and imaginary dimensions of Europe and the central Islamic lands” (Gomez, 2018: 92). Despite the long-lasting Arab paternalism, the former Islamic periphery in West Africa globalized, increasingly interacting with the Muslim centers in the Middle East and North Africa.

Other Trajectories in the Middle East and Eastern Europe

In some cases, multiple centers – even imagined and located in the past – compete for influence over a given “periphery.” Eastern Europe and the Middle East, however different they might be in their contemporary development, are contact zones of entanglement between two peripheries that interacted with the liberal West, but the Byzantine and (post)-Ottoman pasts continue to influence the political imagination of the Balkan peoples (Evstatiev and Eickelman 2022). Today, including by evoking such entangled pasts, the former Islamic peripheries outside the “central Arab zone” become increasingly dynamic, sometimes influencing the center itself. This is true also for the “internal peripheries” in the Arab world where, due to the ongoing fragmentation of religious authority, a new type of Muslim intellectual and activist may gain greater significance than the traditional religious scholars – the *‘ulamā’* (Evstatiev, 2012: 87–88). During the post-1989 revival of Islam among some Muslim communities in the Balkans, there are, on the other hand, at least three competing alien centers, in themselves non-homogenous – the Arab world, Turkey, and even Iran, not to mention some major transnational Muslim movements such as global Salafism (Evstatiev, 2022).

In other cases, major reform movements are initiated on the edge. The Ottoman Qāḍīzādeli movement, often defined as fundamentalist and revivalist, evolved from a passionately devout, markedly anti-mystical group of Muslim mosque preachers on the periphery of the Ottoman religious establishment – the *‘ulamā’* hierarchy known as *‘ilmīye*. Acquiring a reputation as rigorous and pious preachers among their supporters, but designated by their Sufī adversaries in some Ottoman sources as “people of bigotry,” the Qāḍīzādelis prevailed over their rivals in 17th-century Istanbul under the successive leadership of Qāḍīzāde Meḥmed Efendi (d. 1635), the Damascene by birth and education Uṣṭuvānī (d. 1661), and Vānī Meḥmed Efendi (d. 1684). They held a firm grip on Ottoman religious and public life during the reign of Sultan Murād IV, with his pursuit of piety, but began to be identified as “Qāḍīzādelis” during the height of their activities around 1061/1650–51 – a time coinciding with the reign of Sultan Meḥmed IV (Evstatiev, 2015: 221). Such developments indicate that what Richard Bulliet (2004: 140) calls “edge situations,” having parallels in other religions, are an “unusually creative” space, as Muslims in the center have few of the uncertainties of their co-religionists in the periphery, who are exposed to underlying ambiguities.

Until recently, many believed that religion belongs to the periphery of modernity, but as it turns out (with some notable exceptions such as Western Europe), this is not exactly the case. In fact, this is not the case at all, as religion, faith-based institutions, and identity matter not only in Muslim-majority countries. In the Religion and Culture Seminar of our Center for the Study of Religions, held on 27 January 2023, Ilia Iliev from the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Sofia University proposed a telling account of how the ancient Thracians

and their “mystique,” once marginal in the Bulgarian national imagination, gained a centrality in the Communist cosmology of the 1970s and 1980s, when the regime sought to marginalize the established religions of both the majority (Christianity) and minority (Islam) populations. The religious is thus not found only and exclusively in the comprehensive systems that we conventionally think of as religions, such as Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism.

Socialism, for example, is also part and parcel of Europe’s religious history, as brilliantly suggested by historian Gareth Stedman Jones (2010). Socialism in the early 19th century sought to be a replacement for the old religions, proposing a new “science”-based cosmology and a “new ethical code.” *The New Christianity* (a telling title in itself) is a work in which Saint-Simon confesses: “I am convinced that I myself am accomplishing a divine mission in summoning peoples and kings to the true spirit of Christianity” (Jones, 2010: 175). Socialism in its then “utopian” early form might have been peripheral, yet as we know, it eventually became a central grand narrative in modern history, with multiple faces and forms continuously competing with the old established religions.

Conclusion

The proposed conceptualization of *center and periphery* suggests that in social reality, we regularly face situations where multiple centers interact with various peripheries, which invites us to tentatively formulate three major implications for the intersection of religion and society. First, even though a phenomenon looks peripheral from certain perspectives, this does not necessarily mean that it is insignificant. Second, a better understanding of the process in which a periphery turns into a center and vice versa can help us deepen our understanding of how the intersection of religion and society works. Third, centers constantly shift, and the boundaries between them and their peripheries are often blurred, while influence is bi-directional and mutual rather than one-sided and fixed.

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