

# GOVERNING RELIGIOUS MULTIPLICITY

## The Ambivalence of Christian-Muslim Public Presences in Post-colonial Tanzania

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**Abstract:** In post-colonial Tanzania, efforts to govern the relations between Christianity and Islam—the country’s largest religions—have been impacted by the growing potential for conflict between and among diverse strands of the two faiths from the mid-1990s onward. They have also been shaped by the highly unequal relations between various Christian and Muslim actors and the Tanzanian government in the context of globalization. This article describes how the governance of religious multiplicity in Tanzania has affected the domains of transnational development, the registration of new religious bodies, and the regulation of religious instruction in schools. It argues that a comprehensive understanding of ‘lived religion’ needs to focus on the way in which religious multiplicities are molded as socio-cultural realities through a wide range of governing interventions.

**Keywords:** Christian and Muslim life-worlds, comparative perspective, governance, post-colonial Tanzania, public spaces, religious multiplicity

Religious diversity and difference have gained a new public presence in Tanzania since the 1990s. In particular, individuals and organizations from the former mission churches and the neo-Pentecostal and Muslim ‘revivalist’ fields have established new educational institutions.<sup>1</sup> These combine secular education with instruction in moral values and have expanded Tanzania’s educational marketplace significantly (Dilger 2017; Dohrn 2014; Stambach 2010). Simultaneously, these recent educational interventions—along with some Muslim and Christian revivalist actors’ health-related initiatives (Dilger 2014) and other socio-political measures (Loimeier 2007)—have become embedded in the more comprehensive transformation of Tanzania’s cityscapes through multiple



religious materialities, practices, and aspirations. The various dynamics of ‘claiming territory’ (Dilger 2014) that these configurations engender not only evoke among the involved actors a new sense of affective possibility to mold public space according to their own aspirations. They also arouse sensations of uncertainty and competition among a wide range of local, national, and transnational stakeholders in the country’s “religiously super-diverse” (Becci et al. 2017: 79) cityscapes, where these various dynamics have become most palpable (Dilger 2017: 518).

In this text, I describe how the growing material and immaterial public presences of Christian and Muslim actors in Tanzania has been co-shaped by governing bodies’ efforts to ‘order’ Tanzania’s highly diverse religious life-worlds.<sup>2</sup> I show that this process of ‘ordering’ (cf. Benda-Beckmann and Pirie 2007), which aims to (re)gain control over the complexities and volatilities of multi-religious configurations in public and institutional settings, occurs especially on the level of national and transnational governance, and often in irregular and ambivalent ways. I also demonstrate that the governing of religious multiplicity in Tanzania has to be understood with regard to the country’s post-colonial histories of Christianity and Islam, which have shaped religious actors’ unequal structural positions toward the state and transnational governing bodies up to the present day.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, I argue that the comparative study of Christian and Muslim life-worlds—which so far has mainly explored individual encounters, experiences, and practices—should also address the complex processes of “politics and power” (Soares 2016: 679) that configure various religious traditions in relation to each other as distinct public and societal realities. I suggest that the study of religious multiplicity in public settings should focus not only on the convergences and divergences of these processes, but also on how religious material and immaterial presences are produced and regulated in public spaces under specific socio-political conditions (cf. Altglas and Wood 2018: 27) and in often highly unequal ways.

## **Between Facilitation and Containment: ‘Ordering’ Religious Multiplicity in Tanzania**

The public presence of different religious groups and their ideological aspirations in post-colonial Tanzania are governed primarily through national and transnational interventions that foster—or contain and regulate—the country’s multiplicity of religious practices, desires, and institutional configurations. From the mid-1980s onward, structural reforms and market liberalization measures, driven heavily by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, led to a growing presence of religious voices, practices, and actors, especially in

the cities. In Dar es Salaam, media engagement (Ng'atigwa 2013: 150), activist involvement (Loimeier 2007), and the formation of civil society initiatives (Dilger 2014) enhanced the omnipresence of a wide range of Christian and Muslim im/materialities beyond the two religions' historically established strands. At the same time, these dynamics also instigated tension and conflict across the two religious fields (Wijisen and Mfumbusa 2004) and within them (Dilger 2014: 56; Loimeier 2007), thus revealing the growing ambivalence of Tanzania's deregulated multi-religious landscapes. In subsequent years, the national government's approach to ordering has oscillated between the facilitation of religious diversity, on the one hand, and the maintenance and restoration of this multiplicity's internal equilibrium for the sake of 'national cohesion' (Ng'atigwa 2013), on the other.

Following Tanzania's transition to a multi-party democracy in 1995, government approaches to ordering religious multiplicity in public spaces have focused explicitly on the egalitarian treatment of Islam and Christianity. In line with the former socialist Ujamaa ('familyhood', 'community' in Kiswahili) ideology, governments have evoked the value of national unity and claimed to counteract any form of discrimination based on religious, ethnic, or social difference. In the field of inter-religious relations, such efforts have become manifest in the careful balancing of the public appearance of government representatives at Christian and Muslim events, as well as the strict observance of the presidents' alternating religious affiliations since 1995. Furthermore, religious neutrality in post-independent Tanzania has motivated the decision not to include 'religion' as a category in the national census "on the grounds that [statistics on religious affiliation] were politically sensitive and could undermine national unity and security" (Ndaluka 2012: 2). However, while the Tanzanian state has sought to establish order by not interfering in the religious field at all, it was exactly these politics of neutrality that sparked strong criticism—especially from revivalist Sunni groups. With regard to the aspect of religious demographics, for instance, they accused the government of hiding the 'true' numbers of Muslims in the country (Loimeier 2007: 148–149).

The Tanzanian governments' claim of being 'religiously neutral' has been subverted further by some of the political interventions undertaken in the multi-religious field since the 1990s. In 1992, the former mission churches' position was strengthened by establishing the Christian Social Services Commission (CSSC) as part of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Tanzanian state and international development organizations. Since then, the CSSC has facilitated the implementation of educational and health-related initiatives, and it has simultaneously become the target of Muslim revivalists calling out the state's alleged religious bias. From the 2000s onward, (trans-)national development interventions were partly more neutral with regard to religious organizations.<sup>4</sup> However, the Christian schools have especially

benefited from World Bank-funded programs aimed at establishing universal access to primary and secondary schooling since then. These programs have effectuated the rapid scaling up of the state education sector and the steep decline of its overall quality, while simultaneously stimulating a boom in the new Christian schools, which had not been the original target of the World Bank programs (Dilger 2013).

The hierarchies within this newly configured educational market are clearly reflected in the annual school rankings of the Tanzania National Institute of Education. Christian schools in particular have figured disproportionately high in the secondary level rankings since the early 2010s, thereby surpassing both government schools and the even weaker Islamic schools.<sup>5</sup> However, the emerging picture is not as straightforward as it may seem at first sight, as the schools of the Turkish Sufi-inspired Gülen movement have ranked at the very top for many years (Dohrn 2014: 242). Furthermore, the newly established hierarchies in the educational marketplace are closely entwined with the dynamics of social stratification since most Christian schools depend in part on very high fees, thereby subverting the CSSC's state-supported agenda of serving "the poor" (Dilger 2013: 455).

The unequal effects of governing Tanzania's multi-religious fields have also become palpable with regard to the state's power to (de)register civil society organizations. Historically, this concerns especially the dissolution of the East African Muslim Welfare Society (EAMWS)<sup>6</sup> and its replacement by the state in 1968 with BAKWATA. Muslim revivalists still claim that this incidence has become emblematic of the post-colonial state's alleged discrimination against Muslims, and they accuse BAKWATA of being a government organization (Loimeier 2007: 141–143). Such sentiments of injustice have been exacerbated by Muslim activist perceptions of state politics in the wake of 9/11 and the bomb attacks on the US embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi in 1998. However, although several Muslim (especially revivalist) organizations became subject to state scrutiny during these years, and have partly suffered due to the throttling of funds from Kuwait and the Arab world since then, they are not the exclusive target of government checks.

My survey of records from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) and registration books from the Registration Insolvency and Trusteeship Agency showed that between 1980 and 2009 there was indeed a significantly higher number of registered Christian organizations compared to Muslim ones (1,286 Christian versus 696 Muslim). However, there was also a noticeable difference in the number of rejected or revoked religious organizations in the years 2000–2002: 2 Muslim organizations compared to 24 Christian ones. Furthermore, it was especially Christian organizations whose registration process was marked 'open' in the MoHA books after 1999 (397 Christian versus 28 Muslim until 2009), thereby hinting at their continued vetting through the MoHA. Most of these open case

files originated from the neo-Pentecostal spectrum, whose organizations were often scrutinized due to their international networks and funding flows, as well as the concerns of MoHA employees that not all of them were ‘real’. The results of my survey thus contradicted the Muslim revivalist claims that they were exposed to state scrutiny more rigidly than Christian actors and groups.

Finally, the governing of religious diversity applies to the topic of religious instruction in Tanzania’s public and private schools. The teaching of *dini* (religion) on all educational levels in both sectors may involve singing, praying, or learning from the religious scriptures in faith-segregated groups. In addition, religious instruction on the secondary level is taught especially in faith-oriented schools through the subjects of Islamic Knowledge, Bible Knowledge (O-Level), and Divinity (A-Level). In all these instances, there exists no state-approved curriculum for these subjects, which are examined through the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA).

In 2005, the Ministry of Education and Culture announced the standardization of religious instruction and the introduction of an additional, compulsory subject entitled Religion and Ethics. In the same year, the Ministry led a study tour to Uganda for Tanzanian representatives, where a curriculum of teaching religion and ethics had been introduced earlier. In 2008, the Tanzania Institute of Education released two guidelines for the preparation of syllabi for religious education drafted by Christian and Muslim representatives. However, Muslim revivalists complained heavily that throughout this process the “Islamic side” had been represented exclusively by BAKWATA. They also claimed that the inclusion of ethics in religious instruction would “mix up” the writings of the Bible and Qur’an, and that religious instruction would become an “academic” subject—like, for instance, geography—instead of allowing for “teaching religion” and “faith in God.” Against the background of this ongoing dispute, I asked an employee of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training in 2010 how exams for religious instruction were prepared *without* a binding curriculum. She shrugged and said: “Even the employees of NECTA say, ‘We are just doing it.’”

## Perspectives

States in the Global South have often been regarded—both in academic research and politics—as a “source of instability” (Benda-Beckmann and Pirie 2007: 2), thereby echoing the image of the “weak or retreating state” (ibid.: 4) in the context of neo-liberal reform processes (ibid.: 5). In contrast to such a scenario, various state agents in Tanzania have in fact taken center stage in accommodating religious multiplicity in public and institutional settings from the 1990s onward—partly under the pressure of, partly in close alliance with,

civil society and transnational development organizations. Despite the state's claim to be religiously neutral in such interventions, today's multi-religious institutional and ideological public landscapes are shaped by inter- and intra-religious inequalities and affective tensions that are tied closely to the long-standing post-colonial histories of Christianity and Islam in the country. They are also molded by inner-African and transcontinental connections and flows of resources that have diversified both the Christian and Muslim presences in public life (Dilger 2013; Stambach 2010), as well as the way that the Tanzanian state has regulated emerging multi-religious configurations in public spaces, from the 1990s onward.

In conclusion, the Tanzanian case shows that the comparative focus on the governing of Christian and Muslim presences in public settings reveals partly diverging and partly similar trajectories of how these different and internally diverse religious traditions have become distinct social and institutional realities. It also exposes a complicated history of religious difference-cum-inequality in the country in which hierarchies and dynamics of marginalization between and within the two religions are not always unequivocal—for example, with regard to the prominent position of a Muslim (i.e., the Gülen-inspired) school network in the annual school rankings, or the MoHA's reluctance to register new Pentecostal organizations after 1999. Furthermore, state representatives are struggling with uncertainties, too, when they attempt to 'order' religious instruction in public and private schools.

In all these regards, the comparative perspective highlights the open-endedness of such governing processes, as well as the necessity to address the dynamics of mis/trust and ambivalence and how they are experienced and enacted in everyday life-worlds. Taken together, these various dynamics will certainly affect the outcomes of 'ordering' in the future. The comparative approach also points to the significant potential that the study of religious multiplicity has with regard to the analysis of individual experiences and practices as well as the ordering of religious public presences on different political and institutional levels. By taking diverging religious positionings in public settings as entry points "to understand the social world at large" (Altvogel and Wood 2018: 27), we can arrive at a broad understanding of "lived religions" (Soares 2016: 691) in their mutual entwinement with societal and political processes of power and inequality in an interconnected world.

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## Notes

1. Muslim revivalist groups in Tanzania differentiate themselves from BAKWATA, the National Muslim Council of Tanzania (see below), and include reform-oriented Ansar al-Sunna groups (Loimeier 2007: 143).
2. In Tanzania, Christianity and Islam—along with the omnipresent ‘traditional’ religions—are estimated to represent a third of the population each, although these numbers are contested.
3. For the colonial histories of Christian-Muslim encounters and socio-religious inequalities in contemporary Tanzania, see Dilger (2013, 2014).
4. For the area of HIV/AIDS, see Dilger (2009: 92–93). While Christian organizations benefited more from the increasingly available funds, there were also attempts by international development actors to involve Muslim organizations like BAKWATA in the fight against the epidemic.
5. In 2010, Christian schools represented 41.5 percent of Tanzania’s 200 top-performing secondary schools, whereas Islamic schools represented only 3.5 percent. Christian and Islamic schools constitute 9 to 20 percent of all secondary schools in the country, with significantly fewer Islamic than Christian schools.
6. The EAMWS was established in 1945 and offered social services especially for Muslims of ‘Asian origin’.

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